

~ King and Country ~

by Zee and Windstar

Disclaimer: Lesbians. That is all

Seriously, you know who we are and what we write. This is a story in the Blood and Honor Universe. You will not find Torrin or Luna. You will find what was going on in the desert and the lands past the desert next to the impassable mountains shortly after Torrin and Luna drove back the southern invaders. I do recommend reading the other stories in this Universe; it might help a little. But I think this story can stand on its own.

As always...this whole Universe is Windstar's fault; she merely dragged me along for the ride.

Thank you to our beta reader Packer and the folks on our yahoo group and Bev!

P.S. No, the sequel to The Secret Histories of Vampires is not finished yet

Feedback makes us happy: Zeeamy@gmail.com or Adarkbow@yahoo.com

The Duke limped down the hall, as his hip, damaged by a fall in his youth, was now prone to go stiff and painful in old age, especially once the world turned cold. His once fine, gold hair was nearly gone, leaving a bald plate. He had no complaints about his life. The day to day operations of the land was left in the capable hands of his daughter. He mainly ate, slept, and spent time with his mistress. Opening the doors to the throne room, his eyes came to rest on his one regret and felt the guilt burn deep in his gut.

Sitting in the flickering shadows created by the candles now burning low, Duke Richard's pale gold eyes found his daughter. Her face was held in a bittersweet memory as the fingers of her right hand rubbed the thin, worn material of a hanky faded yellow with age. Her pale gold-green eyes stared out an open window, and he knew she was remembering a different cool fall night when the moon hung full and low. He saw the moment she realized she wasn't alone, as her hand twitched toward her saber while the hanky disappeared into a pocket. As it vanished, so did the open look on her face. It was an awful metamorphosis, into a cold mask. This person he did not know, although it was his fault she had been created.

Hard eyes took him in, and he felt himself dismissed and weak and useless.

"Richard, was there something you wanted?"

He winced. She never called him father anymore. "Do I have to want something? Perhaps I just wanted to spend some time with my little ray of sunshine." It had been his pet name for her growing up because her hair had been the perfect mix of red and blonde color to mimic the morning sunrise. Not even a flicker, nothing, her face remained walled up and closed.

"Do you have to want something? No, however, it is usually the case when someone is looking for me. And really, Richard, when was the last time we spent time together as a happy family?" She sneered at him.

"Do not speak to me that way." He tried to conquer her with an authoritarian tone, but she instead let out a cold bark of a laugh.

"I am the Duke now, Richard, not you. I can speak in any tone I wish to you." She paused looking him over "So what rips you away from the warmth of your mistress's embrace."

He closed his eyes, so far gone was his little laughing girl who had been full of such warmth and kindness.

"Really, Richard, is that a look of disappointment? Are you ashamed of the way I run my land?"

He heard the emphasis on 'my' and his jaw clenched. "You ungrateful upstart. By my grace you have this land..."

She laughed again a cold sound to go with her cold look. Standing, she unsheathed her saber; a wicked blade she had returned with from the King's war in the desert state of Katturast. In the blink of an eye, it rested against the pulsing artery in his throat. "You forget yourself, old man. It is by my grace I let you live. It was by my grace I returned just in time to squash a peasant rebellion, a rebellion, mind you, that was right outside these doors screaming for your blood. So I'd watch that mouth of yours or perhaps my grace will forget itself."

How he longed to grab his own sword and beat a lesson into her, but knew it was no use. In his heart he knew he had no one but himself to blame. He had loved his daughter dearly, but he had been a lousy father. Rules, discipline, and proper behavior had held more importance in his eyes than simple love and affection. When his daughter had been a child, it had been easy. But as she had taken steps into adulthood, it had become harder. She had taunted his rules at every turn, questioning his treatment of the peasants and common folk, questioning his laws, the King's laws, and she debated for their rights. Oh how they had fought and argued. He had tried at each resistance to break her, to mold her into the perfect model of the ruling class. He'd had her confined to her rooms, once he'd had her whipped, and at another offense he sent her away to the King's Court. Now, he had finally gotten what he had wanted all those years ago, and it was heartbreaking to see. He missed the innocent child that had called him father even when she was speaking out against one of his rulings. Tiredly, he rubbed his face. He had no one but himself to blame.

"You're right, Duke Hunter, I continue to exist due to your grace."

She nodded and re-sheathed her blade. "Now that we have established that there are no longer pleasantries to be had between us...was there something you wanted?"

"No, I guess not."

He turned and left, for a moment wanting to confess his sin to his daughter, to help ease his conscience, but he was at his very being a coward, and knew she would slice him open the moment the words left his lips. He didn't want to die.

#####3

Hunter watched her father limp out of the room, glad to see him go. She hated his sad eyes and the way they would flare with guilt. At one time he had been her everything, larger than life. Now, he was a disgusting old man who held no pretension of fidelity to her mother's memory. Of course, the mistress had been around long enough to give her a half-brother only five years younger than herself. Ah the sordid lives of the ruling class. She returned to the throne, a small, simple version of the King's own throne. It showed her connection and loyalty to the Crown. Pouring a glass of wine, she sipped the red liquid and returned her gaze out the window. Unconsciously, her right hand retrieved the worn cloth from her breast pocket.

"Catherine?" Silence was her only answer.

"Catherine?" More anxious this time. Still, the sweet sound of her lover did not answer her.

"Catherine, please answer me. If this is a joke it's not funny."

Frantically, she searched the clearing. There was no sign of her love. Frantically, her mind tried to come up with a reasonable answer why she wouldn't be here. They always met here, away from the prying eyes of their families, where she could have something simple and wonderful without her father's stern discipline. Catherine would read her poems of love, and they would talk about their future: They would leave here and the shadow of her father's Dukedom, she would show Catherine the world, and they would travel and have adventures. In this place they would lie on the ground sharing sweet touches and kisses until the dawn threatened their hideaway.

Terrified something had happened to her lover, she ran through the trees into the vineyards, to Catherine's father's house. Fear for her love nearly caused her to run up to the door and loudly knock, but then a noise from behind the house stopped her. Quietly, she snuck to the back of the house and what she saw made her heart break. Catherine in the arms of another. A woman with long, blonde hair pulled back, wearing leather trousers and a black, billowing shirt twirled her Catherine around. Catherine's head was thrown back, her dark hair streaming out, and she was laughing and looking at the woman the way she was only supposed to look at Hunter. Then the blonde took Catherine in a kiss.

Her heart broke and anger erupted at the same time. Without thought, she pulled her sword and charged the traitors to her heart.

"Take your hands off of her."

The woman placed Catherine on the ground, "Why, if it isn't the Duke's whelp. Such righteous anger, so like your father."

"Catherine, when you weren't in our place I grew worried. I'm glad I arrived just in time." Hope still remained grimly holding on to the broken pieces.

"Hunter, I forgot. Royia has been telling me about her adventures."

"Forgot? Royia?"

"Let me introduce myself...I am Royia, bandit extraordinaire."

"Catherine, please step away from this piece of filth."

"Hunter, I will do no such thing. Stop treating me like a piece of property."

"But...but...I..."

"I told you she would not understand. She is of the ruling class, she does not understand the struggles of the simple folk, such as ourselves."

Sneering at the bandit, "And I hope I never do."

A small gasp, "Hunter...how could you, I thought we felt the same way."

"What...Cat..." Everything was suddenly so out of control.

"Go, Catherine, grab your things and come with me. I will take you away from this place and show you the world."

"By Korgon, you will not." Rage boiled over and her sword struck out at the bandit.

"Hunter, please..." Catherine's words fell on deaf ears.

Their blades struck and they traded blows back and forth, but Royia was more skilled and her blade pierced Hunter's shoulder. Then, with a quick kick, she was sent down the hill. Tumbling, she came to rest in the shadow of an oak tree.

Distantly she heard Catherine shout her name and Royia's smug voice telling her love that she had gone running, no doubt, home to daddy. The last thing she heard was the sound of horse hooves trailing away. In the morning, when she regained consciousness, she left her heart at the bottom of the oak tree she had come to rest against. Bloody and bruised, she vowed never to give in to the laughable notion of love and its traitorous promises. She vowed never to trust the fickle nature of women with the most intimate parts of herself. And...she vowed to see Royia and Catherine's heads on pike.

She sipped more wine and tore her memory away, ashamed she realized there were tears on her cheeks, and silently cursed the power of memory. She wiped her face and placed the handkerchief back into a pocket hiding away the initials CL.

Hunter finished the glass of wine and set it down. With steady steps she rose and went to the open window. As she shut it, a cruel smile lit her features as her gaze landed on the manor gate. One half of her vow had been answered.

The wind blew, rattling the window shutters and the main gate. Behind that noise was the dim sound of bones striking together.

#####3

Hunter stared, bored, at the Overseer of her vineyards. The man was a bore, a greedy bore, and she was well aware that he was lining his pockets with her money. She allowed it, for now. In another year his son would return from school...and his father would pay. Yes, he would prove a healthy example and the son would watch and hopefully learn what happened to those who thought her kind or a fool. If he was smart, the son would learn from the father's example.

She cursed, again, Antonio Lanza, the previous Overseer, for his involvement in the rebellion. She had gutted him on her sword, for a moment imagining it was Catherine, but in a blink, the body was back to that of Catherine's father Antonio. He had been a fantastic Overseer, nobody understood the grape or the wine making process like Antonio. Too bad he had not understood loyalty. Perhaps it was a family trait?

Barely looking up, she responded to his request for more money to fight an insect problem. "No, there will be no more money. I'd advise you to find out what happened to the money I gave you two months ago. It was more than enough to deal with the blight, and now this problem. You know, it seems to me you seem to be having an awful lot of problems tending to my land. Perhaps I should look to somebody new to do what you cannot."

"No, my liege... I will take a look at the books again. It must be a mistake in the record keeping."

Looking up, she graced the man with a thin smile. "I'm sure." For good measure she stroked the handle of her saber. The man nearly fell over himself to leave the room.

Hunter returned back to her reports. Idly, she wondered what life would have been like had she abdicated like she had once planned. She imagined that had her hopes and dreams grown and flourished instead of withering and dying, she would be happily wandering the land telling tales at inns and bars. Now, she was slowly being killed by paperwork and a land full of people who, for some reason, could never all be happy at the same time.

The cool wind blew in through the cracked shutter, bringing with it the smell of rain and earth. Fall, how she hated fall. The peasants prepared for harvest and for the coming Festival of Bachra. Soon, the Goddess of the Underworld, Bachra, would rise from her haven under the earth and bring the killing frosts and snows. The festival marked her growing presence in the world before the stillness of winter, and it thanked her for her patience in allowing the harvest to come in. Then, in the spring, the Goddess Thanla would come, bringing about re-birth in the world.

As the harvest grew near, Hunter would give a prayer to Korgon that it would again be plentiful.

A hand moved behind her, but before it could land, it was grabbed in a strong grip. The dark-haired young man winced and tried to get his hand loose.

"Stephen, what have I told you about sneaking up on me?"

"Not to."

"Very good."

Stephen gave a goofy grin, "But I got close this time."

Hunter glanced up with a snort. "Yes you did. I didn't hear you until you entered my room."

The young man's face fell. "How do you do that?"

"Spend several days trapped in a cave in the desert and see if your hearing doesn't improve."

Stephen grinned. He had heard this story many times; it was a favorite of any traveling minstrel who wandered through their lands. His sister, the Hero of the Katturast War, she who had single-handedly snuck into the Pasha's lair and slit his throat. However, he knew the real story, and it was far less glamorous than the one the minstrels spun.

Hunter stared at her half-brother who, even at 25, retained a boyish look about him. His smile was full of impish good humor, and his face held a certain look of innocence. His eyes were the gold color of their father's, while his hair was dark like his mother's. It didn't matter to her that he was her half-brother; they had been close growing up, and remained close now. She trusted him more than anyone and had shown this by making him Captain of her guard.

"So how goes the paperwork?"

"Boring."

He gave a sly grin, "Well, I have some news that is decidedly not boring."

"Really. And why doesn't that make me feel relieved?"

"Because you are the wise ruler of our land."

"Out with it, Stephen." She gave him a glare.

Unphased, he grinned back. "A messenger from King Math has come."

"And what did this messenger bring?"

"Officially: One letter of invitation to the Princess' Ball." He held aloft a letter sealed with the King's symbol. "Unofficially: There was another message to be delivered in private to you. Are you in private?"

"As private as my life ever gets." She took the letters without too much difficulty. Stephen tried to hold them outside her reach but she merely stepped on his foot, and while he was leaping around in pain cursing her name, she picked the letters off the ground and sat back down. With her ceremonial dagger she cut them open. Even a letter from the King must be opened with care in case of a trap. One never knew when they would fall out of favor.

Frowning, she read the official letter first.

"Anything exciting?"

"Depends."

"On what."

"If one wants to prance around at some lame ball in hopes that the King's daughter may find you an attractive mate."

"Oh..."

"Shit," she finished for him.

"The King is looking to marry her off."

"Looks like."

"Do we have to go?"

"This invitation is not optional. Unless we want the King and his army camped out in the Vineyards."

"It's not like you're a chick magnet. I think the nuns get more action than you do."

Laughing, she replied, "Little brother, in politics: love, attraction, and good looks hardly matter. Marriage is all about a good match. For a chance to enter into the line for the throne what is one willing to give back in return? So, little brother, what can the bloodlines of Hunter Del Cor give to the throne?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but for the first time I am really happy to be a bastard."

She sneered smacking him on the head, "That means nothing. The King's own father was a bastard who took the throne by sheer force from his brother."

Eyes wide, Stephen took a step back from his sister, "Really? Hunter, I would..."

"You'd what? You wouldn't overthrow me if you could and take the Dukedom for yourself?"

For a moment Stephen thought his life was over, and then the cold face in front of him broke and the sister he knew emerged.

"I know, Stephen. I love you dearly, but if I thought for a moment that you would betray me, you would not be here."

Warning received, he nodded vigorously, his shaggy hair swaying.

"So why would the Del Cor line make a good political match?" Hunter sat back in her chair and propped her feet up on the desk.

His mind set to the puzzle, Stephen sat down on the footstool and looked up at his sister in thought. "Well, for better or for worse, you are the Hero of Katturast. Our lands are wealthy, we continuously turn a profit, we control a major port city that links trade between the lands of the desert and the lands of King Math."

Hunter smiled in pride at his quick mind, "Very good."

"But you're a woman and unable to give or produce heirs. Plus, there's that whole vow of chastity you seem to have taken."

"Thank Korgon. However, I have a half brother whom I could put in for a wager at the throne."

Stephen's eyes grew wide, "You wouldn't."

"Relax." She smiled at him. However, that smile did very little to gain his trust in the matter.

Slowly, Hunter opened the second letter. Stephen watched her face for a reaction, but when it remained closed, he knew it wasn't good.

"Come on, Hunter, what is it?"

"Nothing." She crumpled the paper up and threw it into the fire.

"It can't be too bad, especially not for you...the Hero of the Desert War. The mighty Hunter Del Cor who tamed a fierce Rock Tiger and keeps it as a pet..."

"Stephen. It isn't anything important."

He rolled his gold eyes, "Don't give me that crap, and don't start treating me like I'm stupid. A, your face remained so neutral when you read it, and B, you threw it into the fire."

"The King has an assignment for me. He wants me to deal with a small problem he is having."

"Having with what? What problem?"

"The puppet government he set up after the Pasha's death is having a hard time setting up reform. There is quite a bit of dissent, and a few gangs of bandits have sprung up, nipping at Lord Robert's heels."

"And King Math wants us to do what exactly?"

"He wants the Hero of Katturast to go in and fix everything?"

"He wants you to go back into the desert...that bastard."

"Careful," she warned. "Do not say such things about our King."

Stephen looked away rebuked, but still angry. The King was a bastard, a greedy, monstrous bastard, yet Hunter had sworn him fealty when taking over the Dukedom, and she took that oath seriously. Yet anyone with a brain could see that King Math was not worth the loyalty she gave him.

"So we're going to the desert."

"Perhaps, but we have a Ball to attend to first. The King and I will speak on the matter then." She sat back pretending to be deep in thought. Then casually she began, "So, brother, now that the letters are out of the way, care to fill me in on that hickey on your neck."

#####3

Peacefully, Hunter ambled through her private garden, her guard remaining behind standing at the entrance. No one accompanied her here. It was the one true place where she could be alone, not that Stephen or her guards were happy about it. She had designed it herself, and it reminded her of the desert. Red, gold, and black sands swirled around rocks and thorny shrubbery. As she passed by a large, red boulder, a small compact form launched at her from its top. A broken purr was her only warning that the attack was coming.

Stepping back, she caught the form. Surprised black eyes looked up at her. With a warm laugh, she scratched the warm fur under her hands. Black eyes became languid and closed to half-mast in pleasure.

"Such a spoiled boy." Gently, she set him down in the sand. He gave an almost silent yowl in protest.

"Did you have a good day, roaming around and lording over your territory here in the garden?"

He flicked an ear at her question. Declining to respond, he rolled over onto his back, exposing the soft scales on his stomach and batting at her booted feet to get her to start scratching. She eyed him for a moment, taking pleasure in his basic trust in her to take care of him and give him comfort. Then she bent down and started rubbing his stomach. She was intimately familiar with the fact that the scales on an adult Rock Tiger were hard as steel and nearly impossible to cut through. However, as she was discovering with Titan, as a youth the tiger's scales were soft, probably due to the fact the cub's body was still developing. She was flying blind; to her knowledge, she was the first person to have such a beast as a pet. They were fierce and lived in remote regions in the desert; not much was known about them.

Separated from her company during a sand storm, she had taken refuge in a cave, too late learning how dangerous that act had been. The sand had blown over, trapping her and burying the entrance. Exploring the cave, she found a small pool of water and a dead mother tiger and three cubs, probably killed over the water in the cave. What had been strong enough to kill a mother tiger defending her cubs, she had no idea, and was in no hurry to meet it. Then a small noise had attracted her to the pile of the dead, and under the bodies she had found Titan. For the two weeks she had been trapped, Titan had helped keep the insanity at bay. Finally, another storm had come through and blown the sand in another direction, and they had made a run for freedom. He had followed, and Hunter had been unwilling to leave him behind.

That had been six years ago, and she suspected that tigers had a longer life span than anyone she knew. Titan was still a youth, but large paws gave clues to what his true size may one day be. The first year she had hidden him in her saddle bags, he had been that small. Today, he wound around her legs nearly the size of one of the castle's hunting hounds, but he still had not grown into his feet.

In a silence that was occasionally broken up by Titan's rusty purr, they walked around the sandy garden. She had fallen in love with the desert and its dangerous beauty, so she had brought a part of it back with her. Plus, the desert never experienced fall or the touch of Bachra's cold fingers bringing frost and snow. With no fall, there were no memories of love's betrayal. It was silly to blame a season on melancholy, but fall was the season of betrayers and of the deceitful. Bandits rode to make up for their laziness during the rest of the seasons, thieves stole to make the winter more comfortable, and merchants lined their pockets taking advantage of those seeking last minute supplies to help them through the cold. Fall was laced heavily with the traitorous breath of Korgon's son Belhamas, the god to the dishonest, the dark son who thought he could steal his father's throne in the sky. Korgon threw down his traitorous son, down into the ground, down into the realm of mortals where he corrupted those weak of will and faith. In the desert, cold winter rains never came, nor did the rotting smell of leaves and vegetation. For a moment in the desert campaign, she could pretend all she knew was the life of a soldier in the King's Army.

Her mood returning dark, she kicked a small rock across the sand. Titan sped off after it, the webbing between his toes allowing him extra speed and mobility on the sand. In a stunning leap, he tackled the rock, chewing on it for a moment, until he grew bored then bounded back over to his human.

"Time for bed."

He cocked his head, listening, and then flattened his ears.

"Don't give me that look, mister. I know you want to play, but now is the time for all good rulers to go to bed. If we're lucky, there will be no immediate emergencies in the morning and we can sleep in. He batted at her foot.

"Yeah, I don't believe it will happen either."

#####3

Kneeling in front of the altar, she let her mind focus on her oaths. "Ryuu, Goddess of Honor, Goddess of Vengeance, your humble servant begs your favor. Watch over my lands and my people." She placed the sweet smelling grapes from the vine in the fire. They hissed and popped, and sweet smoke drifted from the fire. "I give you this, a piece of myself, for I am only as worthy as the land I rule. Bless me with your favor, for I am but your humble servant. The words I speak are yours; they drip with your truth. My sword arm is yours; it reaps in judgment of your honor and your vengeance. My heart is filled with your love as I try to uphold my vows to you, my King, and Country."

She sat back on her heels, her chin resting on her chest. It was quiet in the temple, but no one but herself used this one. The sweet smoke scented the room, and she drifted, enjoying the solitude. The relaxed expression faded into a frown as she recognized the limping gait of her father approaching from behind. Letting out a breath of air, she stood and faced her father not bothering to hide her annoyance at being interrupted. "Can I trust you not to spark another rebellion while Stephen and I are gone?"

"Hunter, I am not a child. I am perfectly capable of stepping in from time to time while both my children are away."

She leveled a glare at him, "Right. You did so well before I came along. Do I need to remind you the peasants were building a scaffolding to hang you on when I showed up."

"Hunter, enough. I can handle the day to day stuff while you are gone."

"Alright, but you should know I have given authority to Bernard to kill you at the slightest hint you are trying to betray me, or damage my land."

"Hunter, do you think that little of me and my word."

Her eyes flicked to him and then she strode off to the stable. "Yes," was all she said in parting.

Her booted feet crunched on the frost-covered ground as she made her way to the stables. As she approached, she caught the flicker of movement, and slowing her steps, she peered into the stables. Her face grew cold; there was no misinterpretation of what she saw...Stephen in an intimate embrace with Cara Lanza. At Catherine's betrayal, her first impulse was to lash out at the one who had hurt her. In her rage, she wanted to burn the Lanza house and hang all of

Catherine's family. Hunter had been afraid of herself and her rage, and instead, before she could do anything rash, she had joined the King's war in the desert. She was gone for seven years and returned home to find the betrayal of another Lanza, Antonio. As tempted as she was to run Mimi and Cara through as well, she had stilled her hand. Mimi was only following her husband's will, and Cara was a youth. So instead, she had stripped them of all lands and title. Mimi - she had sent to work in the laundries of the manor, and Cara - she had apprenticed to the manor healer. Now, again, she wished for the foresight to have gone with her previous desires. Rage bubbled and steamed just under the surface of her skin and her hand wrapped around her saber.

Just as she was about to kick the door open, Cara whispered something into Stephen's ear and ran out the other entrance. Stephen hastily straightened his clothes and went back to preparing the horses. Stiffly, she removed her hand, the indentation of the pommel pressed into her skin. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and walked in.

Startled, Stephen juggled the saddle bags.

"I'm surprised to see you up so early."

He shrugged, "I, um, you know."

"No, I don't know."

"Well, I get to go to the King's Court today."

"Really, and I thought it might have something to do with the strumpet who gave you that hickey."

Hunter missed the dark look that passed over Stephen's face.

"Don't say things like that."

A cold bark of laughter came out. "Don't what? For Korgon's sake, Stephen, sleep with the girl, get your jollies, but don't fall in love with her. All you are is a convenient way for this whore to get a step up in life."

Hunter didn't see the blow, but she felt it just before it hit. Instincts caused muscles to trigger without conscious thought. The open palm was blocked by her own, causing the stables to echo with the sound of skin slapping skin. Then without pause, the fingers tightened together in a rigid knife-hand and stuck forward, her arm following the line of Stephen's arm, up and slammed into his throat. Coughing and choking, he staggered back, hands coming up as if to block another strike.

Hunter froze. Part of her was ashamed for her attack on Stephen, but another part was dismayed that he would attempt to strike her. Quietly, she said, "Stephen, I'm sorry, but you know better."

He nodded, but his eyes watched her warily.

As gently as she could, she approached. "Come on, let me see." She removed his finger so she could take a look.

"I'm sorry. You'll have a nice bruise there for a few days."

"I'm sorry too, but..."

She remained quiet, letting him speak.

"Don't you ever speak that way of a woman I am seeing."

"You're right. Who you see is your business, but don't make it mine. Don't get her pregnant, and don't ask for permission to marry."

He gasped at her.

"I'll do whatever I damn well please. Unlike you, not all of us are content to spend our lives married to land and title."

"I will not tolerate bastards, Stephen, unlike father, and you are mine to give away in marriage to whomever I feel is suitable. We are nobles, ideals of love do not apply to us."

"So now the truth of how you feel about me really comes out!" he screamed, hurt by her comments.

Hunter's eyes gentled, "Stephen, no, that's not what I meant." She grabbed him in a hug even as he tried to push her away. "I love you more than any one person in this land, and how you came to be matters little to me, but I will not have any children for the land, so yours will be in line to take the Dukedom. I want no question of their worth. Do you understand me?"

He nodded into her shoulder.

"Good. Now, can we put this bitterness behind us?"

"For now," he mumbled into her shirt.

Breaking apart, she could see the hurt clearly still in his eyes, and she sighed, hoping time would heal this rift.

"Finish getting ready. I need to go round up Titan and we can be off."

"Must you bring that pest?"

"Titan isn't a pest."

"Yes he is. He gets into everything, scares the horses, and the men."

"Yes, but we are walking into the Dragon's den. Titan helps keep most of the lackeys from trying to leech on to me."

"Well, he keeps trying to use them as chew toys."

They began to giggle, remembering the Ambassador from Del Matros.

Once all the men were gathered and supplies packed, they headed out of the manor, to the trade docks at Liztra. As they exited the main gate, the wind blew and the hollow thump of old bones striking together caught the men's attention.

"Hunter, how long are you going to keep those things up?"

"Until they rot and fall off."

"I think bandits get the idea what happens to them if you catch them. This one seemed almost personal; the others you at least let their family's claim after a time. Her screaming kept the whole manor up for days."

Hunter grinned in remembrance, causing the guards to look back to the road with interest, while shivers traveled up their skin.

"I know."

"My Duke."

Hunter looked up from the harvest reports, "Yes."

"We have caught the bandit that has been plundering the trade road."

"Really?"

"Yes. She is in the dungeon."

"Excellent, just the diversion I needed." She grabbed her saber from where it rested on the table.

Walking down the steps, she heard a woman cursing. Entering the room, Hunter could not stop the evil grin from splitting her face.

The woman's bloody and bruised face stared defiantly back at Hunter. "I will never tell you anything."

"Oh, Royia, I don't want you to speak."

The bandit's sneer fell at Hunter's cool tone.

"Then what do you want of me. Perhaps a bargain?"

"No, I think not. Royia, I want you to give me your pain. I want you to scream."

As Hunter stepped forward more clearly into the candle light, Royia got a confident look on her face. "Ah, the Duke's whelp."

"Actually, it's Duke now."

"Even better for me. Let us make a deal - you let me go and I'll tell you what became of your lady love."

In one smooth motion, Hunter's saber flashed out and gave a single slice on Royia's chest.

"W-w-what was that?"

"Three more and you'll be dead. You have three more days left of life, days in which you will scream for me. Then in three days, I will take your heart just like you took mine."

Hunter turned to leave.

"Your love..." the woman laughed despite her pain, "what a naïve fool. I gave her sweet promises of showing her my world. I gave her honey-coated words of passion and adventure, and she lapped them from my lips. In the end, she gave me that most valued prize and I made her a woman. Then, with the game over, I sold her into slavery."

Hunter turned to the guard. "Our guest looks tired. Heat the chair and make her sit until she passes out."

The guard paled but did as he was told. He pulled a metal chair out into the room and lit a fire under the base; the spikes on the back and the seat began to turn red.

"Royia, looks like I only need vengeance against you, for Catherine's seems to be more fitting than anything I could contrive. Please enjoy your stay." She left the room as two guards unshackled the struggling bandit. As she started up the stairs, the screaming started. 'Ah, revenge. It's not as cold or unsatisfying as the poets say.'

#####3

The travel to the docks passed uneventfully, but Hunter was aware of the strain that now existed between Stephen and her. Stephen was an adult, and she should let him make his own mistakes. How far she could allow him to go she didn't know, when she had the concerns of her lands to consider. However, the bloodline of Lanza could not be trusted; they had proven that time and time again.

As they approached the docks, a cool wind whipped around making the water slap noisily against the wood. Titan gave a yowl of distaste.

"You and me both, buddy."

"You talk to that thing as if you two understood each other."

She glared at the guardsman, "Are you implying I don't?"

He started to laugh in response, but trailed off when her face remained impassive. "I-I-I meant no disrespect, Duke, er..."

Internally, she was laughing at his stumbling.

"Hunter, stop terrifying the guards. I'm trying to get them to come up with another nickname for you besides 'cold bitch'."

The guards' eyes roamed in fear between the siblings.

"Cold Bitch, huh? Remember, gentlemen, that's Duke Cold Bitch to you." With that, she increased her gait to the ship.

"Was that a joke?"

"Yes, gentlemen, remember this day well, the Duke made a joke."

They boarded the ship with little trouble, and Hunter stood on the bow of the ship. Titan curled up at her feet and every once in awhile he would give a yowl of discomfort as a cold breeze would ruffle his fur.

"My Grace."

Hunter turned to the Captain, the wind blowing her hair into her face. It lashed at her face.
"Captain."

"We are getting another party settled then we will be on our way."

"Another party?"

The Captain paused, "Yes, a representative from the desert state, a, Calif."

"Really?" This was interesting. "Do you know why he is here?"

"He is representing Lord Robert at the Princess's Ball."

"Thank you."

The Captain knew he had been dismissed, and with a short bow, walked off.

"An odd coincidence, don't you think, Titan."

He growled and hissed at the water.

"Come on, let's get you settled in my cabin, and try not to get sick on the sheets this time."

His tufted ears bent and he yowled pitifully as the boat bobbed up and down. Hunter reached down and picked him up, she didn't feel so hot herself.

#####3

A light knock on her cabin door awoke Hunter. Her first instinct was to go for her saber, and then her next instinct was to put her head between her knees and try to ride through the stomach cramping.

"Hunter?"

"Go away, Stephen."

"Oh, um, dinner's ready."

"Bastard..."

Stephen gave a tiny chuckle as the sound of retching was heard through the door. It was petty, but he felt better. Whistling, he walked to the dining area.

Hunter fumbled for the clasp to the small window in the room, finally getting it open and the fresh air helped her feel a little better. She fell limply back to the bed. Titan gave a weak growl and tried to gnaw on her fingers but gave up after it took too much energy.

She dozed fitfully for a couple more hours, and then finally made herself get up and empty the bucket.

"Come on, lazy bones, you'll feel better if we go up on the deck." Titan eyed her warily, and she scratched the dark fur on his neck. He limply got up, butted his head into her chest, and she picked him up. "Such a spoiled boy." He gave a rusty purr in response.

The port side of the ship was deserted and she set Titan down then leaned against the thick wood railing. Titan got up on his hind legs next to her, his snout coming to the top of the rail and it quivered taking in the new smells.

Hearing footsteps behind her, her hand reached for the saber, only to come up empty. She cursed herself for being foolish

"Ah, the missing dinner guest."

The voice was heavily accented, with the flourishing R rolling that came with the desert tongue.

Hunter twisted her head slightly, taking in the voice speaking to her. He wasn't a tall man, which was unusual for a desert tribesman, wearing the loose-flowing robes, and had a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. His blue eyes gave away that his heritage was at least not fully that of the desert. Following him were three women dressed in veils and not much else.

"I didn't know I was missing."

"Oh yes, I was nearly giddy that I was going to meet the Hero of Katturast."

Internally, she groaned, "I find once people meet me they are disappointed."

"Well, I did think you would be taller."

"Yeah, I get that a lot too."

As he took a step forward, Titan growled a low, deep sound, which Hunter wouldn't be surprised if it shook his entire body, and placed his body in front of hers.

The man stopped and blinked fearfully, saying what she caught to be a prayer.

"I had heard rumors that you had tamed one of the desert's beasts, but I never imagined that they would be true."

"Well, most rumors tend to be that way, however, that one is true." She slowly bent down, not taking her eyes from whom she assumed to be the mysterious Caliph. She grabbed Titan's muzzle. "Down." She then released it and stood back up, the Tiger slinking to her side and lying down, but his black eyes never leaving the foreign party's movements.

"Amazing." The man stepped forward, the women following. "May I pet him?"

"Not if you want your hand back."

The Caliph stiffened.

"He's tame, but not that tame."

"Warning understood."

She nodded then turned back to the sea. She made no move to be sociable when he came to stand next to her.

"I am Caliph Mathew. I rule the northern tribes."

"That is an oddly eastern name for a desert man."

"My father tells me our line originally came from the east."

"That would explain it, I suppose."

He laughed, "Your men said you were a woman of few words."

"I suppose they also said I was a cold bitch."

"Well, yes, but they respect you, and follow you without question. That is a rare trait for a ruler."

"I try to be worthy of my people and my land."

"I have heard of your lands. Lord Robert serves a fine wine from your providence. I have a hard time imagining a place without sand and sun."

"From the way your harem is dressed, I can tell."

The man laughed again, "You think me cruel to show off my women so?"

Hunter merely gave him an annoyed flicker.

"The women dress how they please. I suspected they wanted to feel desirable for so many foreign men and women. Their pleasure is their's alone to dictate. If they desire my attention, they will let me know. But I do keep them around to feed my own self importance. Don't they make me seem important and all they do is stand idly by me?"

She gave a grin at that.

"It was not my impression of how women were treated in the desert lands."

"Ah, but all you saw was the Pasha and his court. He was a cruel man, truly a beast hiding under a man's skin."

Hunter shuddered remembering some of the things she had seen while hiding in the Pasha's palace.

"I see you know about some of his pastimes."

"Yes, and I wish I didn't."

"Lord Robert may be a puppet for your King, but he is not a monster."

Hunter nodded, but in her mind she knew that Robert was a fool.

"Well, the women signal to me that they grow cold. Tomorrow I have convinced the Captain to let my women dance at dinner, please join us. Plus, I would enjoy more time to talk at you, perhaps hear the tale of how you became a hero."

"Just find a minstrel, they'll be happy to tell you all about it."

"Ah, but sometimes the truth is far different than the fiction they tell."

Hunter gave a genuine laugh at that, "Perhaps."

"Until tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

As they walked off, the tallest of the three women paused. There was nothing about her that was special, her hair was dark like the other women's, and her skin dark. The veil shielded her eyes as with most of her face. Hunter turned her head to the woman, briefly wondering what the woman saw when she looked at her; probably some ghostly pale, short, foreign woman badly in need to either cut her hair or grow it out.

As Hunter started to open her mouth, the woman turned and walked away, following the others. Hunter closed her mouth, not real sure what she would have said anyways. The woman was beautiful: female curves with a hint of muscles under the skin, and the sight that greeted her eyes as she walked away made Hunter regret her vow to never take another lover. Well, at least she wasn't seasick anymore.

The next evening Hunter was bravely trying to get her boots on so she could attend dinner. "There will be dancing girls, Titan. I can do this, by Korgon I can dress myself!"

The Tiger gave no response and instead curled into a ball.

A knock sounded at her door, "Come in."

Stephen slowly opened the door. "Good, you're up..." Just as the words came out of his mouth, the ship rocked and Hunter jumped on one foot for a moment before falling over onto her bed.

"Kind of up. Are you going to try and make it to dinner?"

"Yes, and hopefully I won't puke at the smell of food and make an ass of myself."

"The Caliph is an interesting man."

"Yes he is." Finally getting her boot on, she looked up at Stephen. He looked nervous.

"Is there something I should know? Are we in any danger?" Her tone serious.

"What? No. We're fine. I, um, about yesterday morning...there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

Hunter closed her eyes, not wanting to get into it again with Stephen over a Lanza. "Stephen, whatever it is, it can wait until this stress is behind us. Okay?"

"Okay. But you promise we can talk."

"Yes. I'll even tie down my sword hand because something tells me I won't be happy about this conversation."

He gave a nervous smile back. "It won't be that bad."

She didn't believe him.

With Stephen's help she managed to make it to the dining area. The table and chairs had been taken away and lush rugs and pillows had been set up.

"My Duke, Stephen, isn't this wonderful!" one of her guardsmen crowed as he was being fed by a harem girl.

Hunter frowned. While she enjoyed the relaxed styles of the desert, she wasn't sure she liked the hedonistic scene she saw before her.

"Stephen, how many girls did this Caliph bring with him? And where did all this come from?" she whispered to her brother.

"I don't know."

"Get me the Captain. And make sure three of our men are sober and guarding the ship. From what I can see, the sailors are already well into their cups."

"Surely nothing bad..." He went silent at Hunter's dark look.

"Do you want to take that chance?"

"No."

"Good answer."

Stephen subtly helped her over to a set of pillows.

"Duke!" a cheerful voice bellowed. "Come join me," the Caliph gestured for her to join him.

"Do you..."

"I can manage, Stephen. Thank you."

"No problem. Just don't puke on him."

"Get out of here," she mocked growled at him.

Schooling her features, she approached the Caliph hoping that the ship didn't suddenly dip or rock. Easing herself down onto the soft pillows, she let out a quiet sigh.

"Your fierce protector is not with you tonight."

"No, Titan doesn't like to travel on the water."

"Yes, as with most creatures of the desert we lust for water, but too much can make us ill."

She laughed, "True." Cautiously, she picked up a cracker with some unknown spread on it.

"It is the fruit of the flowering cactus, quite good."

She took a small bite. Pleased, she took another. "Where did all this come from?"

"Well, I wanted to show my thanks to the Captain for taking us at the last minute. We got held up by bandits near the border and we would have arrived too late by land. The rugs and the pillows are part of a larger tribute from Lord Robert to the Eastern King."

"Won't he be offended that it's been used?"

"My dear Duke, ten-to-one, he'll never even look at this, and all this beauty will be locked away and never seen until several generations have come and gone, and then some Princeling will stumble upon it."

She nodded; it was probably true. "So these bandits, a common problem?"

"Well, many tribes are unhappy with some foreign Lord trying to tell them what to do."

"But you're loyal."

"Yes, but I was intimately familiar with the last Pasha's cruelty."

There was something niggling at the back of her mind, but before she could press the Caliph, musicians she had not noticed began to play.

"Sit back, my friend, and enjoy the delights of my harem."

The women were quite good, and all the men and the few female guards were very entranced by their dancing. Hunter's eyes took it all in, waiting for some sort of deception to occur.

"You are too tense, relax," he laughed, clapping her on the back. She nearly sprayed wine everywhere.

Coughing, she glared at him. He merely smiled back unrepentant. Her eyes returned to the women dancing. Oddly none of the men tried to touch them unless prompted by the dancer. Watching the hips shake with the rhythm of the music, an uncomfortable feeling was storing up in the pit of her stomach. She wondered if she was going to be sick again, but this sensation felt different from nausea.

"Don't you think it's odd that the men are being so respectful?"

The Caliph eyed her, surprised.

"What?"

"They do this because you are here."

"What?"

"Don't tell me this surprises you? They are afraid of your disappointment in them or worse...your wrath. You are a mystery to me. You are fiercely loyal to King and country, and you expect the same of any who serve you in any capacity. Your rage at those that betray you is legendary."

"Why is this a mystery? I do my duty."

"No, my friend, you are duty."

Hunter was puzzled by this, but had no time to dwell, as two women approached where they sat.

They approached like castle hounds, proud and secure in their superiority to their prey. Movements were lithe and fluid, and Hunter found herself mesmerized by the sway of their hips and the way shadow and light played out on their dark skin in the candlelight. As the women began to dance, Hunter's mouth grew dry, and for the first time the powerful Duke was very unsure of herself.

"My little desert cactus is quite taken with you."

"I-I-I can see that."

"Surely you have sampled some of our desert delights before, when you were a soldier."

"N-n-no, I, um, didn't."

"A pity."

Her hand was taken in the woman's and she found it warm, and for a moment she was fascinated with the contrast of her pale flesh intertwined with the woman's dark skin. Then her hand was placed on the woman's toned stomach and she gasped. She tried to take her hand back, but the woman followed, moving closer into her to keep the contact. Looking up into the veiled face, she could see nothing.

"They only show their faces, when they take a mate. It is something they save for love alone."

She turned her head to the Caliph, her hand staying in contact, each relaxation and contraction of the stomach muscles causing a shiver to shoot down her spine. "B-but don't you own them?"

"Owning is subjective. They allow me to use their bodies if they desire me, but if they find one they wish to take as a mate, they may leave me: if I approve."

The woman lowered her body into Hunter's lap, and for a moment, she thought she might hyperventilate. Dimly she was aware of some her men cheering her on.

Long, delicate fingers traced her face...eyebrows, nose, chin, lips, and ears. As a finger caressed her ear, Hunter shuddered. Her eyelids became heavy, and like Titan, she wanted to purr. Now she understood why he would whore himself to get his ears rubbed.

She wanted something, but what exactly eluded her. It felt like her body was straining against her need for control. In the clarity of a moment, she knew she could give in to this want or she could resist. Want led to chaos; she could not take the uncertainty of chaos in her being. Hunter grabbed the hand, and looking into the veiled face, she whispered, "I'm sorry, but I can't." She removed the woman from her lap and fled as quickly from the room as she could without actually looking like she was running away.

She leaned over the railing, letting the cool spray cool her flesh while her boiling thoughts cooled as well.

"Duke Hunter, I meant no disrespect."

"And none was interpreted. My body is not mine to give to frivolous pleasures." She turned, looking at the Caliph. His blue eyes shifted nervously and the flesh on his frame trembled, and she knew that he was wondering if he would be experiencing some of her legendary cruelty.

"Have you heard of our Goddess Ryuu?"

She could see him searching his memory.

"No, I have not."

"She is the virgin Goddess, the eternal promise she gave to a lover. She waits for his return, but he died hunting a great serpent. So she takes no other, still honoring her promise to him. She is

the Goddess of Honor, of lovers, and oddly, of warriors. However, if honor is broken, she becomes the Goddess of Vengeance."

"I don't follow."

"I am her servant. I made her a promise: that for her help my body was hers."

"I'm guessing since she is a virgin Goddess, that all who follow her and serve her must either be virgins or take a vow of chastity."

"Correct. My body belongs to the Goddess, and my heart and soul to country and King. I have nothing left to give."

"I feel pity for you, my friend. The gods of the desert are not so cruel, then again, life can be short and deadly in the desert."

Hunter nodded in agreement.

"Please do not feel angry at my dear cactus, she did not know."

"Of course not, I would not blame her. It was somewhat flattering to have a woman find me attractive."

He laughed, "Many find you attractive. You are a beautiful woman, and its not just your land and wealth that make you so."

"No, it is normally my wealth that makes anyone notice me," she answered back matter of factly.

"What a sad world you live in, my friend. If all is well, I will return."

She waved him off, turning back to the sea.

Hunter fumbled with the catch at the back of the dress, but couldn't stop her lips from seeking out the soft flesh under an ear to kiss.

"Are you sure?"

"Hunter, it's not like you can get me pregnant."

"I know. I just want it to be perfect. Somehow it's less than perfect fumbling around in the woods."

Catherine laughed, a golden sound to Hunter's ears. "Hunter, as long as my first time is with you, it will be perfect anytime, anyplace."

Hunter swallowed nervously, "Are you sure?"

Catherine turned in her arms, kissing her soundly until Hunter forgot everything but the feel of Catherine's lips. Then it was Catherine's hands that became busy. Her coat was unbuttoned and the shirt ripped out of her trousers; hands hot with desire burned when they came to rest on her belly.

Gasping for air, she felt her body tremble, and she felt scared and exhilarated all at the same time.

"Your skin feels divine. Why do you tremble?"

"I don't know, it's not like I've done this before." She gave a nervous laugh.

"If the town's people only knew how the mighty Duke's daughter trembled at my touch. They would see you for the lamb that you are."

"Catherine, no offense, but this a private moment. I'm not sharing it with anybody." Catherine smiled sweetly up at Hunter and they shared another hungry kiss.

The snapping of a branch nearby broke them apart.

Gasping for breath, Hunter looked frantically about.

"What was that?" Catherine whispered, fearfully.

"Nothing, just a night animal."

"Go look."

"Cat, I'm sure it's nothing."

"Please."

She had found the broken branch, and the imprint of a foot.

"Do you think they saw us?"

"Catherine, even if they had, it would have been too dark to know who they were seeing."

"I can't anymore, not tonight. Do you hate me?"

"No, love. We will do it when it's right."

She gave Hunter a watery smile in relief and kissed her lips tenderly. "I love you so much."

"And I you. I'll walk you home."

#####3

King Math's castle rose large over the landscape, but looming even more impressive was the impassible mountain range behind it. Although it couldn't have been that impassible since their ancestors had crossed it. The tall grasses were turning yellow in response to winter's presence closing in. The horses' breaths puffed out in white clouds. Behind her party, the Caliph's party trailed with pack animals bearing the King's tribute from the desert. Titan trotted close to her horse, his ears alert as he glared at the castle. Birds cried out from the grass, but he remained close to her.

As they traveled up the path, a horn sounded and guards greeted them as they passed under the open gate.

"Duke Del Cor, right on time."

Laughing, she dismounted her horse, "Captain Garrith, did you really expect anything less of me?"

"Of you...never." They clasped forearms in greeting. "You seem to have gained quite the entourage."

"Ah, Garrith, meet Lord Robert's representative from the desert, Caliph Mathew."

The Caliph grinned his friendly grin and shook Garrith's hand.

"I bring tribute to the King of the East."

Garrith gestured and servants came to unload the pack animals. "Caliph, it is an honor. I'm sure you would like a chance to rest and clean up before tonight's activities."

"Yes, thank you."

#####3

Dressed in the colors of Del Cor, purples and blacks, Hunter, Stephen, and her guards entered the ball room. It was a feast of color and movement. Jugglers juggled flaming torches and clubs, acrobats tumbled, and minstrels sang and told stories.

She whispered to Stephen, "The men have all eaten?"

"Yes, they know better. They will not partake of any food or drink, and keep an eye out for anything suspicious."

"Good." She nodded and the guards melted into the crowd.

"No Titan."

"Too much stimulation. I left him in my room."

"I bet a week of mucking stables he finds a way to show up and cause a scene."

She laughed, "Little brother, I'm counting on it."

Stephen grumbled then pasted a smile on his face as they entered the fray. They made a beeline for where the King sat drinking on his throne, a young girl lounging on his lap, her heavy lidded eyes speaking of drugs.

Hunter squeezed Stephen's arm in warning when she noticed his jaw tighten.

They presented themselves at the foot of the King's stage, both bowing until the King told them to rise.

"Duke of Del Cor, so nice of you to join us on this festive day."

"Nothing could have kept me away."

"Good to hear. I see you still allow your bastard brother to live, how generous of you. You know, some might interpret that as weakness."

"Some could interpret however they wanted. All I ask is loyalty and those that give it are rewarded."

"Such a trusting view."

"Those who have broken my trust, decorate the pikes on my manor wall."

The King eyed her carefully, and Hunter fought to keep the shudder of disgust at bay. With one hand, he grabbed a goblet while the other was hidden under the girl's skirt. A figure dressed all in black that she knew only as the King's advisor stepped up and spoke in the King's ear. He nodded and the figure stepped back into the shadows.

"I am lucky to have such a Duke loyal to me. Tell me, do you still hold promise with the Goddess Ryuu."

"Yes, she still holds my vow."

He shrugged and wine glistened like blood in his beard, and for a moment Hunter got the picture of a wild animal in her mind's eye.

"A pity, although her blessing was most welcome during my campaign in the desert. You might have made a good match for my daughter. Perhaps your bastard brother."

Stephen stiffened then his face turned red with anger.

"I see he has other ideas. Is my daughter not good enough for you, bastard?"

Without thought, she backhand Stephen, not looking at him. "I'm sorry for any disrespect presented by my brother. Whatever my King wills, so it will be done."

He eyed her for a moment, "Yes, my will. Your unwavering loyalty to the crown is refreshing. However, my advisor questions your loyalty. Seems that she's gone and had a vision."

"A vision?" Hunter questioned, uncertain where the King was leading.

"Yes, a vision. She tells me in this vision, you bring about my downfall. How do you respond to this?"

Hunter could feel sweat drip down the curve of her spine, and all around them had gone quiet. "I would say, my King, that visions are tricky things. One never really knows the nature of things until they have come to pass."

The King's face broke into a smile, and laughter bellowed out. "Very good, my Duke. This is exactly what I told her. But I tell you this, Del Cor, if it had been anyone but you, their head would have met with my blade."

She nodded, the warning had been received.

The King laughed again, his eyes becoming glazed, "You hear that, my other Dukes. Your chances of marrying my daughter went up; the line of Del Cor keeps her oath to the Goddess."

A drunken cheer went up.

As they walked away, Hunter let out a breath. Still, her hands shook.

"Ow. Did you have to hit me so hard?"

"Don't you dare question me," she hissed back. "Your stunt nearly got us killed."

Stephen hung his head, "I'm sorry. It's just that... I...he treated me like a thing."

"Stephen, get this through your head, we are all things for the King's pleasure. We live and die at his whim."

"I...yes, I understand. I'm sorry."

Now that they were far enough away, she looked at him. "And I'm sorry for hitting you, but you left me with very little options to deal with the situation. Do you realize how close we came to dying?"

He hung his head.

"Come now, let us mingle in the Dragon's den."

She grabbed a glass and sniffed the wine before taking a drink. She would not put it past the King to drug everybody's wine. She studied the Caliph, who was again flanked by only three women, and if she wasn't mistaken, it was the same three as before. She also hadn't failed to notice how he had left the rest behind at the ship. That act sent warning bells off in her head.

A hand reached out and grabbed her arm, spinning her on to the dance floor, and she had been well aware of who it was. "Princess, you know better than to startle one of your King's humble soldiers."

The young woman whose hair shined like corn silk giggled innocently. "My Duke, humble you may be, but you are much more than a soldier." Hunter twirled the woman to the music. Coming together breast to breast, blue eyes looked up at Hunter hungrily, and then the look became innocence, and lashes were batted.

"You know, if you didn't insist on that silly rule of chastity, I would choose you as my consort. You're much more interesting than the others. Such a mystery." The last was said in a breathy whisper on Hunter's neck. She felt her neck break out in goose flesh.

"Ah, I see you are not all stone. I do effect you."

"Of course, my Princess, but, alas, it can not be," she said with mock sadness.

"Do not mock me, Duke."

"Never."

"Perhaps we could meet later in a more private setting. Trust me. I could make you forget all about your oath to that silly Goddess."

"I don't doubt that, but I cannot." She dipped the young woman and looked into blue eyes.

"You fear my father?"

"Who in their right mind wouldn't?"

"True, but he will be drugged out of his mind by midnight. He is never the wiser to my after hour parties."

Slowly, Hunter raised the Princess back up until they stood eyes to forehead. "Be that as it may, I still cannot."

The Princess huffed and swatted Hunter's arm. "Why must you make simple things so difficult?"

"A talent."

"You could have any man or woman you wanted, my Duke, yet you live the sexual life of a poster cleric, why?"

"Whys are never easy, and this one happens to be none of your business. But since you shall continue to pester me, I shall tell you this: Men excite me not in the slightest, they are good friends but nothing more to me, and women I simply loath."

"What a lonely life you lead, my Duke."

Hunter breathed out a breath in frustration, "Yes, I seem to be getting that a lot lately."

"Well, if you ever feel like being naughty, I would be more than happy to show you the delights of the flesh and female body." With an impish look, the Princess stood on her toes and kissed Hunter lightly on the lips then took off for another possible conquest.

Stunned by what had transpired, Hunter stood for a moment collecting her thoughts, until a hand slapped her on the back. "Ah, women, they always want that which is out of reach."

"Could you not do that, my dear Caliph, my internal organs are still bruised from when you did that last night."

He merely laughed at her glare.

"Your King...he sure knows how to throw a party."

"From what I understand, it's something he prides himself on."

"Is it just me or is his advisor a little...creepy."

"No, the advisor is creepy. From what I understand, the King returned with her after a campaign to subdue the barbarians to the north. I don't really know that much about her."

"She doesn't like you, my friend."

"What?"

"Oh yes. She pokes her head out of the shadows to glare at you from time to time."

"Really?"

"Yes, watch."

She turned her head so she could catch the throne out of the corner of her eye. After a moment, a head covered in black cloth hiding all features came out of the shadows and appeared to be looking around.

"I'll be."

"I'd keep tabs on that one..." The ground gave a violent shudder, cutting off the Caliph's comment.

"What was that?" she asked. All around her, the party had come to a halt.

The ground vibrated again and then a deafening roar sent a chill up her spine. "What is that? Guards!" Something large crashed into the large doors. To Hunter's horror, the wood began to bend inwards. "Quit standing..." The splitting of wood silenced the rest of her comment. The ground shook again and Hunter was thrown to her knees.

With a scream, the wooden doors burst inward. Hunter stood coughing in the dust and debris, and taking a moment to gather her wits, she grabbed her saber and turned to the door. '*By Korgon.*' She paused, turning cold with fear as a monster stood in the frame of the broken door. Its bluish-green scales shimmered in the light as its talons, as large as a man's arm, gripped the stone floor, leaving deep score marks, while flame-red eyes darted around the room. It opened a fanged mouth, giving out another deafening roar.

"Raithnar..." she heard the Caliph whisper in horror.

"What?"

"It-it-it's Raithnar, a fierce demon. From our legends, it is said he guards the halls of the dead, torturing those who were evil in life."

"So you're saying the desert gods are attacking us?"

"I do not know! I never really believed in the tales and legends of our gods."

The beast stepped forward, howling, and the King's guards sprang to attack, only to be knocked back or crushed under the beast's feet. As it cleared the door, men in black clothing streamed into the hall from behind it.

Cries of attack rang out. All around Hunter was chaos. People screaming and dying. Quickly, it became apparent that the beast would have to be stopped, as it was creating an unfair advantage for the invading army. She desperately looked around for the Caliph, and unable to find him, she found one of his harem girls.

"How do you kill it?"

When the girl didn't answer, Hunter shook her, "I don't have time for games! What do your tales say of banishing this Raithnar?"

The voice was barely above a whisper. "Nothing but the Golden Sun Serpent can call his pet back."

"Fantastic. I guess we do this the hard way."

Grabbing a poleax as one of the figures in black tried to stab her, she slammed it back into his ribs. And as he released the weapon, she sent it flying up, smashing the attacker in the face.

"Thank you," she said politely to the man who had just given her a new weapon.

"You can't...it would be suicide."

Hunter turned to the Harem girl, "I'm a soldier...King and country before myself."

"Good luck."

She nodded then proceeded, even though the 'Good luck' sounded more like a 'you're insane', to cut a path to the demon.

"Stephen, get me some fucking archers. Have them aim for the soft tissue, eyes, nose, and its mouth when it opens it to do that frilling nasty roar of his."

Stephen nodded, stabbing his attacker then turning to carry out Hunter's orders.

Hunter looked for the King, and seeing him ducking out a side entrance, she gritted her teeth in anger. 'What kind of leader leaves his people in danger?' But she knew what kind, and he was her King.

She blocked and parried, thrust and slashed, and then Titan was at her side, his muzzle darkened with blood. He watched her back, and many turned away at the sight of the beast, looking for easier prey to kill.

"Garrieth, get your men to cover the archers." The large man nodded and followed her without question.

The first volley of arrows had little or no effect. Eyeing the large chain attached to the wall that was used to lower the lighting sconces, she hoped it would hold her weight, but she was out of options. Dropping the heavy ax, she leapt for the chain and began to climb. Titan yowled at her and circled below as she climbed. The metal was cool in her palms. Detached, she observed the battle below, seeing one of her guards crushed under the monster's feet and felt a flicker of sadness. The guard had been one of her personal guards growing up, and she knew the woman's family by name. The metal of the sconces was hot compared to the chain and slick with melted wax, and she feared for a moment she would lose her hold and fall. Gripping tighter, the wax parted, giving way to her fingers. Swaying gravity called her body down as she began to propel herself back and forth. She was high enough, she just needed a large enough arc or it would be a quick ending to her life.

Shutting her mind off, she stopped contemplating the insanity of her actions and let go.

There is a certain freedom in falling, giving the illusion of flight, of being cut loose from the bonds of the world. With a jarring thud that rattled her teeth, she landed on the demon's snout. Not pausing for breath or thought, her saber was out and plunged into the beast's eye. It screamed and she screamed as well, but she kept going forward until her hand and upper arm were covered in milky whiteness and where it touched her flesh it burned as if she were holding her arm in a blacksmith's forge.

Light began to pour out from its scales, growing brighter. She could swear it looked like the beast was coming apart. Cracks appeared on its flesh, and where the cracks were, more light poured out. Suddenly, it broke apart into fine sand, and she fell a little ways. Then a fierce wind cycloned her around and around while the fine sand became like tiny razors on her skin. Dizzily, she was standing on the ground, the monster gone, and all around her was fine, greenish sand. Blinking in wonder, she dazedly looked around. She looked at her hand, expecting to see the flesh blackened and burnt, but it looked unburned, and tiny red cuts crisscrossed her arms.

"You bitch! My eye!" In the doorway stood a man in flowing black robes, one hand clutching at his eye as blood streamed out from under the palm and down his face like dark tears.

Confusion and puzzlement could wait to be dissected later. With a flick of a wrist, an invader was cut down as she moved forward. The robed man hissed a string of words in the desert tongue then held out a hand, his fingers spread wide. Another wind sprang up, knocking Hunter and some of the guards back. Hunter slammed into a stonewall, crumbling down to the ground as soon as the wind died away.

"Hunter... I mean, my Duke, are you okay?"

She blinked at Stephen. "No, Stephen, I think I'm decidedly not alright."

He laughed, "Guess we can start calling you demon slayer now."

"Please don't. Can you take my saber out of my hand, I can't seem to get my fingers to work? Oh, and a healer would be nice."

Stephen bit his lip in worry.

Titan happily padded up and rested his head on his human's leg, yowling when his ears weren't scratched.

#####3

Hunter stared at the King, surprised to see him so lucid.

"I want whoever attacked me and took the Princess found. I want their heads gracing my castle walls."

She just nodded and sucked in a breath as the healer wrapped her ribs.

"Since this attack obviously is by a desert faction, we will concentrate our efforts there. Duke Del Cor will head there with her men, and with Lord Robert's help, start looking for these marauders." The King's bloodshot eyes stared everyone down in the room. "Does anyone have any questions?"

Hunter did, *'Why did it have to be her?'*, but she remained silent.

"Good. Now everyone leave me but Hunter."

She stared at Math with pain-filled eyes, "Yes, my King?"

"What the hell happened in there?"

'Like you would know, you coward.' "Desert magic," she responded simply.

"That's fairy tale stuff."

"A thirty foot demon marched into your hall and killed a lot of good men. Does that seem like a fairy tale to you?"

"What do they want the Princess for?"

"I don't know, my King, but I will do my best to find out."

"Del Cor, you know the price of failure?"

"As it has been since I joined your army, my life is yours."

He stared at her then nodded and left.

A moment later, there was another knock, "Come in."

The door opened and the Caliph entered. "Good, you are okay."

"Well, that's subjective. A few busted ribs, sprained wrist, and cuts and scrapes. What brings you?"

"I am headed out, I need to return with a report to Lord Robert as soon as possible. I just wanted to see you and make sure you were well."

"Thank you. Tell Lord Robert to expect me within the week."

"I will."

The door closed, and left alone, she fell back onto the bed. Cursing, she had meant to ask the Caliph about practitioners of desert magic. She would just have to wait until she arrived at Lord Robert's palace. Her eyes drifted closed and she quickly fell into a troubled sleep.

Hunter stared at the dark-haired girl, simply entranced by the girl's essence. She was touring the vineyards with her father and Antonio, her father's overseer. However, the secrets of the grape held little appeal for Hunter.

"Hunter!"

"Papa?"

Quickly, the Duke smacked her on the side of the head. "Pay attention. Wine is our blood, without it the Del Cor lands are nothing."

"Yes, Papa." But still, she watched the girl. Her hair was dark and her eyes gray, like storm clouds rolling off the ocean. She laughed with the other workers as she picked grapes from the vines. Her body wasn't bowed under the weight of her work, and seemed to be above her work even while bending to the task.

Hunter nodded at all the right places and made nonsensical replies so her father and Antonio would think she was paying attention. As soon as they stepped into his office to discuss business, Hunter scrambled into the vines. Gathering her courage, she quietly approached.

"Pardon me."

Startled, the girl dropped her basket. Then looked at Hunter, upset. "Look what you made me do, you troll," the girl snapped.

"I...I...I'm sorry. I didn't mean... Here, let me help." Quickly, Hunter knelt down and picked up the bruised fruit.

The girl stared at the young noble in surprise, but then knelt as well to help. "You shouldn't do that. Nobles don't get their hands messy."

Hunter laughed, "Well, it looks like I do. Really, it's no problem. It was my fault after all."

"Are you sure you're related to Duke Richard?"

Hunter paused and looked to the girl, who was now looking back at her in horror, and laughed again.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

"No, it's okay. Actually, it's a good trait for the girl I was going to ask out. She has to be able to be honest with me."

"Ask me out, huh?" The girl eyed Hunter thoughtfully.

"Um, yes. Miss..." Hunter blinked in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I don't even know your name."

The girl stood up with the basket . "Catherine Lanza."

Hunter held out her hand, "Hunter Del Cor." Taking Catherine's hand, she kissed it lightly on the top before releasing it, happy with the way Catherine blushed at the action. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Catherine. Are you Antonio's daughter?"

"Yes."

"Lovely. Catherine, I was wondering if you would like to take a walk with me?"

"What kind of walk did you have in mind?"

"Right now just a walk."

"And later?" Catherine countered.

"And maybe someday it could be a lover's walk."

"So sure are you of you and me?"

"Of me, yes. Of you... I'm sure I'm going to need to convince you."

"Hunter!" her father bellowed out, ruining the mood.

"Father?"

"Hunter, you will be Duke someday, act like it."

"Yes, Father."

"I'm sorry. I need to go," she whispered to the girl.

"Hunter, I...a walk would be lovely."

Hunter grinned from ear to ear, and with a new vigor in her step, she ran back to her father's side. Even when he cuffed her soundly on the head, the grin didn't fall.

King and Country

Part 2 The Desert

When Ketan received the blessing of her womanhood, she was taken out into the desert where their tribal witch lived. As they approached, the old woman's shadow could be seen dancing around the desert, highlighted by a bright orange fire. At an unseen line the others stopped, and she went on alone, closer and closer until her blue-gray eyes beheld the naked woman whose brown, sagging breasts swayed to her chaotic dancing rhythm as she swayed around the fire. Unsure, she stopped, her own shadow swaying around in the desert. After a moment of uncertainty, she cleared her throat to speak.

"Mama Yas..." The fire bolt streaked out of the fire long and lean, a long, snake-like tail following behind, sizzling the cool night air. It circled her, and Ketan thought it might be sniffing her, and then it swam away from her, streaking through the night leaving its burning ghost trail as the only lingering clue to where it had once been. It circled around the witch and then crammed itself down her open mouth.

Fright kept Ketan rooted. Surely, her brain thought, the old mother would be killed. But after a moment, she saw that this was not the case. The old woman stood tall and strong, her eyes lit now with an eerie, orange light. The mouth opened again, revealing a few scattered teeth and a voice much too large to fit inside. Mama Yasbyn bellowed out into the night. It seemed to come from the bones of the earth, shaking its way up until it rattled the sky. "Ketan," it said then the fiery orange eyes focused on her.

"Ketan, daughter of the sand, blood of the Fire Dancers, you come before me on the aftermath of your first blood, a holy and sacred event that marks you a woman. As all before have done, now you stand before me to hear my wisdom. Instead of wisdom I give you prophecy. I give you the convoluted glimpse of your future. No mother's life, no life of a simple herdsman's wife shall you bare. Your hands will grow rough and strong from wielding the blade. You shall dance in the fire and give it the offering of your enemies' blood. Your love will be a hero with no heart, your path shall be long, and only once ties to the land are gone shall love be returned."

As each word bellowed out, Ketan felt them like a blow. What had she done to deserve such a fate? For a woman to give up marriage and motherhood, that was unheard of. Worse...she was doomed to love someone who could never love her back, as the only time ties to land were gone was in death. So in death would this hero love her in return.

Wailing in anguish, Ketan fled, running deep into the inky night that held the land captive.

#####3

Her ribs still ached as she swayed with the movement of the horse, and right now she felt as if she would never heal.

Breaking for the hottest part of the day, they were lucky to have found a water well. Scraggly plant-life gave away the position of the small well where around the rocky lip warm, clean water splashed out.

She rested in the thin shade of a bush, laughing as she watched Titan stream across the sand hot in pursuit of a small lizard. She was glad for Titan's presence. She had decided to send Stephen home to oversee her lands, since she did not trust her father not to piss off the commoners and start another riot. She missed Stephen, not trusting another to her protection. But since the King had given her, her orders, she had felt an almost overwhelming sense of doom dogging at her heels. Trusting her gut, she sent Stephen home.

A throat cleared nearby, and she turned her head, the piercing sunlight stabbing at her eyes, and she had to squint. "Yes, Henri?" she asked in a bored tone. Hunter had not been happy with the King's order that Captain Henri and his flank of fifteen men join her and her men. Henri was supposed to follow her orders in the search for the bandits and the Princess, but so far the man had yet to listen to anything she said, and now his flank was down to thirteen men, well, twelve; Craigsten was insane, his brain fried by the heat. Perhaps it was because she was a woman, or a Duke, or maybe it was both.

As soon as they had reached the burnt, parched earth that signaled the start of the desert, she had ordered her men to strip and stow their armor. Only a fool wore the metal in the cooking heat. Henri had shouted to his men to disregard her orders, for they were the King's men and wore their armor with pride no matter where they were.

"Your funeral," was all she had said.

Next, he had called her weak and lazy for calling a halt during the hottest part of the day. But she had smiled coldly and told him to go on ahead if he and his men did not want to stop, that she and her men would catch up. Henri had laughed at her and told her that he and his men were the best, that he would see her again at Lord Robert's. She had said nothing, only turned to her men and ordered them to rest.

Five hours later, as the air started to cool when the Sun God snaked his way into the earthly embrace of his lover Geas, she and her men found Henri and his flank of over-baked men: two dead in the saddle and one insane, his brain baked inside his head. After that they all took a break at the hottest part of the day.

Still, the man sneered at her, trying to look proud and masculine as his body roasted and cooked in the metal armor he wore, and his exposed skin turned red and blistered.

The man cleared his throat again, bringing Hunter out of her thoughts. "We are almost to Lord Robert's."

She said nothing, her eyes going back to Titan as he scrambled over a rock and began to dig at its base as the lizard disappeared.

Henri's face turned dark at being ignored. "I said..."

"I heard what you said. What I can't fathom is why you are stating something to me that I already know."

The man's face turned purple and his mouth opened and shut a few times. "How dare you!"

In a flash Hunter was on her feet, sword drawn, its tip resting lightly against the man's throat. Henri blinked. She had moved so quickly it must have been the sun blurring his vision.

"How dare I? You forget that once we are at the palace you and your men are under my orders. I have allowed you your foolish pride, even though it has cost three good men, because technically, you are your own man until we are at Lord Robert's."

He paled.

"These men have no use for two leaders, and I will not tolerate backstabbing. So we can settle this pissing contest here or you can bow down into the sand and acknowledge my leadership."

Titan, having heard the dark tone of his human's voice, walked stealthily over the burning sands. With slit eyes, he circled the prey, smelling both fear and anger.

Henri reached for his sword, anger and pride blinding his commonsense, until the guttural growl of an animal pierced his brain. Then he saw the Sand Tiger's lips pulled back, exposing gleaming white fangs, and his hand stilled. And with only the conviction that this "Hero" would get what she deserved, he fell to his knees.

In a strangled voice he said, "I and my men serve as your will until the Princess is found or the King orders change."

Hunter gave the briefest of pauses at his wording. "Rise, Henri. We have bandits to catch and a Princess to save. You and your men get out of that armor until we take up patrols for the Princess. The desert is a harsh mistress, and if you do not bow to her laws, she will eat you alive."

Happily, the men of Henri's flank removed their armor.

The old Pasha's palace, now Lord Robert's, rose out of the desert, the white marble out of place in the golden sand. Hunter doubted that Lord Robert had enough imagination to recreate the horrors the old Pasha had loved in his palace. Horns sounded at their approach, but the gate remained closed.

"Who desires entrance to Lord Robert's home?"

"Duke Hunter of Del Cor, with a message from King Math."

Cries of open the gate were heard, and soon, the metal gate began to groan and open.

Dismounting, Hunter and her troops entered. A red-faced, panting Lord Robert ran down the stairs to meet her, his clothes disheveled and straining against his large gut.

"Duke Hunter, what a surprise..."

"Surprise? I sent your Caliph back with a message to expect me within the week."

"Caliph Josef has not returned from the Princess' ball."

"Josef? The man I spoke to was Mathew."

Robert's face became pale, "I-I-I have no Caliph serving me named Mathew."

Hunter closed her eyes, some of her abstract feelings falling into place.

"But you know of a Mathew, perhaps a bandit or tribesman who objects to your presence here."

"Yes, and he objects loudly."

"Time appears shorter than even I knew. We have much to discuss."

"It appears so. Erik will show you and your troops to rooms you may use. After you refresh yourself come to my private chambers and you can get me up to speed on what has occurred."

Hunter nodded, handing Robert the King's Scroll, and followed Erik. As she turned a corner, she caught Henri stepping out of an embrace with Lord Robert. That did not cause her to pause, as the two men were probably long time friends, but it was the action of Henri handing Robert a scroll that did.

She bit her lip then hurried to catch up with Erik. It could be anything, everything, or nothing.

Later, with the desert sand and dust washed off her body, Hunter and Titan strolled into Robert's chambers. Robert was a good man, albeit a stupid man; the gods had not blessed him with the gift of original thought. That was why most likely he had been assigned to rule the desert by King Math. The man could only follow what the King told him, as it would never even enter into Robert's thoughts that he could raise the tribes of the desert together and tell the King to piss off.

Robert sat with his men-at-arms, the palace chancellor, and Henri. She frowned at the pale look on Robert's face and the smug look on Henri's that vanished as soon as he realized she was there.

Wiping sweat from his jowls, Robert spoke softly, "I have read the King's message, most disturbing. You feel this magic user has returned to the desert with the King's daughter?"

"Yes. I especially believe this now that Mathew's true nature has come to light."

"I see. Of course my troops are at your disposal. Tell me what you need and it shall be done."

"Thank you." She sipped the water before her while her other hand fell down to scratch Titan's ears. For a minute her mind flickered to the harem girl and the pleasure she had received from

that act. A moment of sadness was felt, since if she ever met the harem girl again, she would have to kill her.

"An impressive creature he is turning out to be. The last time I saw him he was no bigger than a house cat. May I?"

"Only if you don't mind losing a finger or two," Henri replied waspishly.

Robert snatched his fingers away, "How is it he is tame around you, Duke Hunter?"

"We have an understanding. I feed him and scratch his ears, and he leaves my limbs where they are."

"I see."

"Now tell me what you know of Mathew."

#####3

Still asleep, Hunter twisted around, pulling the dagger unsheathed from under her pillow, only to freeze at the feel of cold steal against her breastbone.

"Please put the dagger down."

"How did you get in here?"

"The dagger first."

Hunter calculated the risks.

"If I wanted you dead you would be."

Hunter dropped the dagger into the waiting palm. Surprised, she felt the sword pull back. The woman was dressed from head to toe in black, complete with a black mask over the face. Two blue-gray eyes flashed out, taking in her and the room. She knew it was a woman by the shape of the body and the swagger of the hips. Men could not do that sort of swagger.

"I'm surprised that Hunter Del Cor, Hero of Katturast and now slayer of legendary demons, sleeps naked. I would have thought that would make you feel exposed and weak."

Hunter shrugged, "It is a luxury I sample when I feel relatively safe. Let this be a lesson to me."

"Yes. Not that I mind, but if you want, you may put on a sleep shirt."

Nakedness did not bother Hunter that much. Grabbing a cotton shift, she slid it carefully over her head, wincing at her stiff muscles.

"I thought a hero of the desert war would be more scarred. You only have the one on your shoulder."

"Yes, the only battle I ever lost."

"Really? Now I'm intrigued."

"So am I. Was there something you wanted or did you just come by to chat."

"As lovely as a chat would be, I have come by this evening to tell you your life is in danger."

"Yes, it appears that there are some pesky bandits out to cause all sorts of trouble."

"We didn't take the Princess. I will admit that was our intention that evening, but it seems that we were not the only ones. Someone acted before we could."

"Tell me where the Princess is!"

"I cannot tell you where she is, but I can tell you where she is not."

Hunter's temper was near breaking, and her hands clenched into fists.

"You're so cute when you get angry. The vein pulses under your right eye, giving you a slight tick. Very sexy in a conquering hero sort of way."

Hunter growled, only to be pulled up short by the return of the blade against her chest.

"Temper, temper... Always rushing in."

"Fine. Where isn't the Princess?"

"As far as my sources tell me, she is nowhere in the desert."

"Liar! That magician was clearly of desert origin."

"Fugit was banished years ago for practicing the dark arts of demon summoning. He was banished to the south, to the lands of the barbarians."

A broken cough turned blue-gray eyes from Hunter. As Titan leaped, Hunter kicked the sword from the bandit's hands. They flowed in action and reaction. The woman in black ducked under Titan's leap, throwing a fine powder into the tiger's face. Titan fell, sneezing and rubbing his face. Then she continued forward, ducking into a roll and then coming up with her lost sword. Hunter grabbed for her saber.

With a violent slash they crossed swords.

"The Old Pasha's blade; many had wondered what had happened to it."

With a shove they broke apart.

"I took it. So?"

They crossed blades again, the metal shrieking against each other.

"It is said it was formed from a tear from the Golden Sun Serpent; whoever wields it wields the Serpent's grief."

"I care very little for your desert gods."

"We don't worship gods like you, but this one seems to be fond of you."

"Will you shut up and die already!" Angrily, Hunter's slashes became heavy and crude.

The woman in black hooked a sitting stool with her foot and kicked it up into Hunter's face. Ducking, Hunter came up just in time to block the strike. Off balance, she staggered back, tripping over the stool. The mystery woman followed her down, pinning her to the floor with her and Hunter's swords.

Hunter was not ready to die, but faced the outcome as bravely as she could. Closing her eyes, she exposed her neck, hoping for a clean kill. Instead, warm lips found hers. Shocked, she didn't move, and then the weight on top of her was gone. Sitting up, she saw the woman standing in the open widow.

"As I said, you are very cute when you are angry, but beautiful when you give up control." Then the woman was gone.

In a rage, Hunter stood up and smashed the stool into small pieces before going to check on Titan.

#####3

Hunter stared at the pommel of her saber, which was in the shape of a serpent overlaid with gold and had a ruby for an eye. Beautifully crafted, she idly ran her thumb over it and her thoughts returned to the mystery woman. Anger welled up and her hands trembled with containing it. A week she and her men had scoured the desert following every lead on the bandit leader Mathew. Every turn had come up empty, and frustration and anger were becoming her constant companions.

"Jonathan, call the men in. We will return to Robert's palace. They deserve a rest, and I can rotate them with some fresh men and mounts."

They returned as the sun sank away and darkness enveloped the land into her. Tired and dusty, she bid her men a good rest. Most were still in good spirits; some, she had noticed, were shooting her glances when they thought she could not see. They were angry, mistrustful glances, and while the detail into the burning lands was not one of luxury, she could not see what she had personally done. True, she pushed them hard, but no harder than she pushed herself. Henri had managed to make himself absent almost everyday in their search. With a sigh, she handed off her horse to the stable boy, and with a whistle to Titan, made her way to her room to change.

The palace seemed deserted as she walked the halls to Robert's dining chamber. The guard saw her and quickly opened the door. "My Lord, Duke Hunter has returned."

She nodded to the guard as she entered.

"My Duke, please join us."

Hunter nodded her head at Robert, his advisors, and the ever missing Henri. "Thank you."

"Any news?"

"They seem to have just vanished. I don't understand it."

"Perhaps you weren't the best man for this job after all," Henri sneered at her, causing Robert and his advisors to look decidedly uncomfortable.

Hunter let it go, the tightening around her golden-green eyes the only clue to her anger.

"More of this magic?" Robert asked cautiously.

She shrugged, "Perhaps."

Henri snorted. "Magic is a thing for children's stories. No wonder you can't find them, Duke Del Cor."

As the man went for another drink, he found his arm pinned by a slim dagger that was suddenly piercing his shirtsleeve, trapping it to the table, while his face was gripped in steel-like hands. Staring up, he found his slate-gray eyes held by flaming green.

"I believe you swore an oath to me, Henri, and if there is one thing I can not stand, it is betrayal. Your words betray me and I can not allow that," she whispered coldly for his ears alone to hear.

A bead of sweat made its way down the sun burnt man's temple to his jaw, his alcohol-laden brain striving to say anything it could to push him away from this moment of eminent danger.

"I'm sorry, Duke Hunter. I have had too much to drink this evening, and talk of magic, well, it is a bit silly."

Her right hand released his face while the left continued its crushing hold. It crossed over and grabbed the dagger, and with a twist, the dagger was free. Henri swallowed nervously, his eyes darting from the blade to her impassive face, where he could read neither salvation or damnation in it.

"Magic or not, I stood on a demon's nose and saw good men die crushed under its clawed feet. I plunged my blade into its eye and watched it turn back into sand. Where were you, Henri, when that beast attacked your King's castle?" the question was left hanging, and he flushed in anger knowing he had subtly been called a coward.

He said nothing, and she smiled that cold smile, a knowing smile, and he hated her so much it burned him from the inside out.

"Tomorrow, Henri, be ready with the troops. We are going out to hunt bandits and magicians."

He nodded silently, and she slipped the dagger away as she released his face. She stood away from the table as everyone released a breath they did not know they had been holding. "I am suddenly not hungry, Robert."

As she strode from the room, Robert looked uneasily to his old friend Henri. "Henri, you must not provoke her, it can lead to nothing good."

Henri rubbed his face and drank a deep, long drink before trusting himself to speak. "She can not be everything the stories say."

"No, my friend, she is all that and more. I do not know what happened in this palace, but I do know that she emerged alone with that sword and the Pasha's head. Not one man of the Pasha's army would touch her. They took one look at the head, blood dripping from the neck stump, and fell to their knees. She ended a twenty year war...and she did it all by herself."

Henri slammed the rest of his drink, relishing the way the alcohol burned. "I bet the Pasha was already dead when she found him, but that matter's not. Soon, she will fall from her golden pedestal."

Robert looked away, "I am the King's man. His will is my will," was all he said in response, uttering the words of loyalty.

"We are all the King's men," Henri said, staggering up from the table.

#####3

Hunter paused as she entered her rooms, and sighed as she spied Titan lying with his head in someone's lap, his eyes closed in ecstasy as his ears were rubbed. She sighed and continued on into the room as if the stranger wasn't there. She removed her sword, resting it on a mostly empty weapons rack, tossing the dagger onto the pillow of her bed. She walked around the tiger and the

woman and poured cool water from the pitcher into the basin and leaned over it, cupping the water then splashing it on her face and hands.

"I told you your life was in danger, and here I find you still in the demon's den."

"Demon is a subjective thing," Hunter responded. She could have called Titan's actions traitorous, but Titan was his own being. She had never presumed to own him. Still, there was a smattering of jealousy in her breast at the tiger allowing another so close to him.

The bandit woman laughed, seeing the expression in the Duke's face. "Don't worry, his honor was not easily bought. It took almost an entire goat to get me in the room."

Hunter gave a wry smile and noticed the way Titan's gluttonous belly bulged. And then realizing what she was doing, she wiped the smile from her face. Again ignoring the couple on the floor, she moved to the bed and began removing her boots.

"I have spent a week racing down rumors of your existence, and here I find the very thing I've been hunting in my very room," Hunter said wryly. She removed her left boot, letting the leather slide down her calf muscle and finally off.

"I would say that was time wasted. I have told you the Princess is not here. Your time would be better spent hunting elsewhere," the woman replied looking up at the Duke, her dark eyes narrowing in frustration.

Hunter removed her right boot along the cloth wrappings from her feet and then spent a moment wiggling her toes. "I have very little reason to believe what you say. You are a bandit."

"Who says I am bandit?" the woman questioned, moving Titan's head from her lap, where the Sand Tiger gave a quiet yowl of protest. She stood up in a single fluid movement, her blue-gray eyes lighting on Hunter's with a challenging look.

"You sneak into my room, you wear all black, and you admitted to planning the abduction of the Princess," Hunter ticked off the reasons on her right hand.

The bandit rolled her eyes, "Semantics. You Easterners say we are bandits. Here among our people and our lands we are called freedom fighters."

"Surely you can not tell me you prefer the reign of the last Pasha to Lord Robert."

It was the briefest of movements, but Hunter caught it: a shudder, a muscle memory created from fear and terror.

"No, Robert is a passable ruler, but if that was as far as it went, we of the desert would be happy. But your King Math is little better than the Pasha. When the King visits, young women are plucked from their tribes and never heard from again."

Hunter said nothing, but in her head she remembered the young girl sitting on the King's lap at the Princess' ball.

"You were our Hero too when you took the Pasha's head. Could you not be it again?"

Hunter's face turned dark. "You ask for treason!" her voice barked. She looked to the woman but found her room empty. "Damn her."

#####3

Again Hunter sat on horseback, three villages searched and nothing, no clues, no hints, only stony silence. In the tribesmen's eyes she could almost see the accusations. 'Where is my daughter? Where is my niece, my wife...' The bandit woman's voice whispered in her head, *"When the King visits young women are plucked from their tribes and never heard from again."*

The Golden Sun Serpent was clawing his way to the hottest part of the day, and she lifted fingers to her lips and let out a piercing whistle. Her eyes found Titan and watched the curious cub while the men began to regroup.

Titan was sniffing around a small cluster of red rock. "What have you found, my friend, another lizard?"

He turned back toward her black eyes, seeking her out. He gave a happy yowl and ran back to her, sand spraying out in a fan pattern. Her horse nickered worriedly and tried to shy away from the happy tiger. Holding her horse steady, Titan stretched up, placing his paws on her leg. Hunter scratched his ears.

"Yeah, boy, I'm happy to be here too. I'd be happier if we could find these damn bandits."

Titan just gave a rusty purr in response.

As the men fell back into line, she noticed four were missing. "Jonathan, where is Henri?"

"He took a few men to question that village not far from here."

Hunter frowned. They had already been to that village, and despite the growling accusations that Henri had hurled at the townspeople, she had found nothing to suggest that they were hiding bandits. She bit her lip and wheeled her horse around. "Jonathan, take the men back. I will be there shortly with our tardy brethren." Some of the men laughed, knowing how their Duke took disobedience.

She urged the stout desert horse over the sandy dunes, its legs sinking into the hot sand. Titan streaked after them, easily keeping pace. In the distance she could see the black spec of a village. Most tribes in the desert were nomadic, moving from watering hole to watering hole, depending on the season. This tribe was no different, only recently setting up their temporary home here. As

she raced closer, goats bleated and scattered in different directions. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small, still form of what was probably the goat tender lying on the brown earth.

She thundered into the temporary town square, hearing the frantic yelling. She found Henri standing before the town elder while two of his men held the man's arms, a third brandishing a sword, keeping the town's folk at bay.

"Captain Henri, what is going on here?" she shouted as she pulled her mount to a stop. The man paused and she could see the bloodied riding crop held loosely in one hand.

"I am just doing a more thorough questioning job," the man barked out.

Her eyes scanned the village. There were others like the goat herder lying limp on the desert floor. Terrified eyes looked on at them. "Did you not understand me when I ordered us to move on?"

Henri stood up and gave a gesture to the men holding the town elder. With a shove, the man was left to fall to the ground.

Henri sneered, "Oh, I understood you. I just chose to ignore you. You were too soft on these desert filth, so I decided to come back and give them a real questioning."

"Henri, you have gone too far. I will see you stripped of rank and privileges."

The man laughed as Hunter drew her sword, causing rage to cloud her to anything else.

"Duke Del Cor, you are so predictable. I've been playing you since we left the King's castle, and you, like the honorable hero that you are, fell right into line." Henri raised the bloodied whip, and from behind the line of fearfully huddled women and children, archers appeared.

"This is treason!"

"No, Hunter, this is duty. I am, after all, the King's man." As the crop started to fall, Hunter pivoted and ran for her horse. As arrows started to fall, the makeshift town whirled into chaos. People ran to wherever they thought they could find escape. Hunter's horse bolted and Hunter chastised herself; she should have just gone for Henri so the man could have joined her in death.

She screamed in pain and surprise as the first arrow caught her in the calf, piercing through the hard leather of her boots. The next arrow hit her thigh and she fell, her leg giving out on her. The dusty earth released a small, dirty cloud as she fell, slamming into the ground. The dirt was warm and rough under the skin of her cheek.

Soft, padding steps alerted Hunter to Titan's arrival, and she tried to turn over but only made it to her side. The Sand Tiger roared in anger and charged the nearest cluster of archers.

"Titan, no!"

The tiger sprang at the closet man, large claws ripping through the bow and into the flesh of the archer. Titan was knocked down, but he shook himself off and let out a shrieking roar that caused the men to start and scramble away in fear. An arrow struck the Tiger as it started to launch itself again.

"Titan." Fear at the tiger's fall overpowered everything else. She scrambled over the sand to his side, ignoring the pain in her leg. "Henri! I will kill you, even if I have to come back from Bachra's realm to do it!"

"I don't doubt that, Hunter," Henri said, suddenly by her side. He kicked at her but she grabbed his leg and twisted it, bringing him down. She continued to twist. Wanting to hear the groaning and snapping of bones, she ignored his cries of pain.

Brandishing the riding crop, he struck out at her, hitting her hands and arms. But it was only when he got her in face that she let go. And then leveling himself with his hands, he kicked back, catching her in the temple with his foot.

Darkness spiraled over her sight.

#####3

Her eyes opened as the sun ripped through the clouds veins, tearing them open and letting the blood-red rays burst across the sky. Pain was the only thing letting her know she was still a part of the world. Sitting up, she stared at her leg, where the arrows jutted out like accusing fingers shaming her with her own failure. With a deep breath to settle her nerves, she reached down and snapped the shafts. Hissing in pain, her upper body fell back into the sand with a quiet thump. Stars swam on the inside of her eyelids, and when the pain finally became somewhat manageable, she dared to open her eyes again.

All around her were the unmoving bodies of the tribe's people. Slaughtered, they lay where they had fallen, no one left to bury or mourn them. She would remember and try to avenge them, but she would not mourn. Henri's blood would be offered to the desert for the children she had lost today. Vengeance was the only thing she could give these people. Crawling to a broken tent, she grabbed two slender poles that had been broken and attempted to splint her leg, giving it support that it would not give her on its own anymore. Ripping the heavy cloth, she felt the Sun Serpent's rays begin to touch down on the earth, calling the flies and the carrion birds to the flesh of the newly dead.

She forced herself up onto her feet, and for a moment, she swayed and black spots appeared in front of her eyes. Then she was moving forward, step after laborious step. She paused at the body of Titan, his ribs moving to show that he still lived, that he still took air into his lungs.

Titan held in her weakening arms, Hunter walked out into the desert. Bodies had been pushed into the well, poisoning it with their death. They could not stay in this place, but she had no hope of finding help out in the shifting sand and heat of the desert. Still, she moved forward step after step, entering the warming sands where the very air she drew into her lungs burned.

King and Country

Part 3 Underworld

She was dead, she had to be; her body was soaring above the clouds, and the ground moved beneath her. The trees, mountains, and desert sand were all tiny blotches of color as her body twisted and turned. Being dead wasn't bad. Never had she felt so much freedom as she did right now at this moment, with the wind rushing past her face and the sun warming her skin. Her mouth opened and she laughed, soaring higher.

Then the sun changed, coiling into the body of a great golden serpent. It opened its mouth and Hunter watched in horror as she flew closer and closer, unable to stop. It swallowed her whole, and the heat of the serpent's belly burned her until her skin became ash and nothing was left of her but her screams.

#####3

A small pot was set on a stone ledge and the top carefully unscrewed. A pungent odor akin to curdled milk wafted out. From a darkened corner in the room, a weak yowl of protest was lodged against the smell.

Amused gray eyes lifted, scanning the direction the noise had come from. "I know it smells bad, but that's how we know it works. Have you ever had medicine that smelled or tasted good?" she asked.

A disgruntled sigh from the dark was her only answer.

Returning to the task at hand, long, slender fingers thickened with calluses from sword work and the dark skin nicked with various pale scars that crisscrossed like a fine spider's web gently pulled down a fine linen cloth. It was a cloth spun by healers for victims of the Sun Serpent's fire. Skin burned and blistered would be too sensitive for most sheets, but this was special; fine and soft, it would cause no discomfort. Kings had murdered for the secret of its making, proving, oddly enough, a good night's sleep was worth more than gold.

Unconsciously, she bit her lip in worry, seeing how the skin was no longer blistered. Now, the blisters had opened or gone away, leaving raw, red skin, or in some cases, open sores that oozed. It was such a massive shock to the system, having the skin fried and then split open, making it ripe for disease. Yet the Duke was looking much better than the red, collapsed figure she had found in the desert heat.

"Stubborn to the last," she said softly. "If you had only waited, my men and I were only two hours away, so much of your pain and suffering could have been lessened."

She scooped up a handful of the awful smelling ointment and began to gently slather it on the worst of the open blisters. The woman moaned and muscles in her arms and legs twitched for a second before going still once more.

"What do you dream, mighty hero of Katturast?" she wondered. Her mind returned to the horror of the village. It had been years since such blood shed had been seen, not since the war between King Math and the Pasha had ended with the Pasha's death. When word had come to them about carrion birds darkening the skies to the south, they had scoffed. But then with her own eyes she had seen it. The birds circled in the sky like a dark storm cloud in an endless sea of crystal blue. She had immediately gathered a flank of women and took off, but it was too late; all that greeted them was death. None were alive but one small, wailing baby protected by her mother's body. The rest were bloated by the heat and covered with flies and the birds that fought amongst each other, snapping up red ribbons of flesh.

Then Daniel, the best tracker they had, spotted the footsteps leading from the village and the blood that was burnt into the sand alongside. If not for Daniel, Duke Hunter would be but food for the desert.

She massaged the ointment into the reddened flesh of the woman's right hand, being careful of a small, oozing blister. Done, she wiped her hands and put the lid on the jar.

A soft yowl came from her feet and she looked down at the skinny beast. The Duke's pet, an impressive legend, was skin and bones, his ribs nearly countable through his furry sides. When first brought to their stronghold, the Duke and the tiger had been separated, the tiger having been sent to a cage to be watched on by the healer they used for their horses. He had stopped eating, lying limply in his cage barely able to snarl when Thomas tried to tend to his wounds, Thomas each time yelling that the best thing for such a vile creature would be to kill it.

She had stepped in finally. Titan had managed to get a good swing at Thomas, breaking the skin with his claws. She had found the animal healer beating the tiger in a rage and stepped in. Despite protests, she put all care of the animal on her shoulders and had the large desert cat moved into Hunter's room without the cage. The animal had sniffed around then plopped down at Hunter's feet, purring happily. The healing process for both seemed to go faster then.

The tiger seemed to tolerate her presence better each day. She looked down into the tiger's eyes and held out a hand, which he sniffed then made a face. "Yeah, yeah, I get the hint. I'm still stinky."

Weakly, the tiger crawled up on the bed and made a nest at Hunter's feet, a furry chin resting on a shin and its eyes never leaving Ketan's face.

"I'm doing my best. She just doesn't want to wake up yet."

The tiger sighed and gave the leg he was on a little head butt. Hunter gave a whimper then her breathing evened back out.

"Watch over her. I'll be back this evening," she said softly before getting up.

The tiger just yawned.

#####3

It was two more days before Hunter woke up. As she swam towards consciousness, the pain her body was feeling screamed through her until she had gone above and beyond her pain threshold. There were other vague sensory details coming to her brain, but all of it was swept away by the pain. A rusty scream burst out on vocal chords that had not been used in a while. She thrashed around, unaware of the voice trying to soothe her. Twisting to the side, she heaved the meager contents of her stomach onto the floor and passed out again.

The limp body was caught before the face could meet the stone floor.

Ketan eased the limp body back onto the bed, her lip curling in distaste as she stared at her vomit-covered feet. She looked to the foot of the bed and to the cat that, she was nearly certain, was laughing at her. "Some help you are," she muttered before leaving the room.

A few minutes later the heavy, woolen cloth was pulled aside and she re-entered the room, clay jug in hand. She set down a small wooden cup and poured the liquid, which had a greenish tint to it, from the jug into it. Cup in hand, she sat on the bed next to Hunter's sweating head and gently lifted the woman up. The cup was lifted to dry lips, but the woman would not drink.

"You know, Hunter, nothing can be easy with you. It always has to be a big production," she groused, setting the cup down and dipping a finger into it. She ran the wet finger around the dry lips until they parted and then she went back to the cup, lifting it and pouring a drizzle of the medicated cactus juice down the unconscious woman's throat.

"There," she said, wiping Hunter's chin. "If you try to wake up again, it shouldn't hurt so much."

She re-arranged the Duke back onto the bed and stared hopefully, but those strange colored golden-green eyes stayed closed. "Oh yes, it's never easy with you," she said with a sigh.

Hours later, Hunter's mind attempted another trip into consciousness. The pain was still there only muted, so it was at a barely tolerable level. She hadn't felt this bad since she'd been separated from her troop in the desert and had to survive on her own for weeks. She had been sunburned, dehydrated, and scrubbed raw by the sand-coated wind, yet she had lived and knew today would be no different.

She stared at the ceiling, not having the energy to do much more than keep her eyes open. She kind of imagined that the realm of the dead would be more dark and spooky, and that she'd feel no pain. She was feeling pain, so she must not be dead. While she laid there staring at the grayish blob she assumed to be a ceiling, she tried to sort through all her memories. Where was she? What had happened?

She laid in the bed concentrating on her breathing as she sorted through her memories. Her thoughts were jumbled, but two things she remembered clearly: Henri had betrayed her, and she wasn't certain why she was alive.

There was rustling by the mouth of the small cave when the woman, covered in the long robes of her people, ducked inside. Gray eyes spotted the movement of the woman on the pile of blankets, where the fine linen cloth had been laid out on and the burned woman on top of that.

"Awake again, are we, hero of Katturast?"

A bloody haunch of goat was unceremoniously dropped in front of Titan, followed by a short laugh as the sand cat started ripping pieces off it.

Hunter was startled. She hadn't even heard the woman come in. She gritted her teeth as she jumped. "Awake, awake is good. Means I'm not dead," she rasped out.

"Not yet," the woman corrected her, beginning to undo the long length of elaborately stitched fabric that hid her face from the Sun Serpent's fire as he crossed the sky. "You were too stubborn to die."

"It's a talent." Hunter mentally readied herself and tried to sit up.

Titan stopped gnawing on the goat leg and gave a yowl of concern.

"Stubborn woman!" Ketan cursed, tossing aside her headdress and moving quickly to catch Hunter before she fainted or threw up or both, again. "The Sun Serpent's burns do not heal quickly."

At the touch of the woman's hands on her burnt body, Hunter bit her lip, to prevent herself from screaming, biting it so hard her teeth broke the skin and a trickle of blood went down her chin. "What do you care?" she croaked out. "I won't talk. I won't betray my lands."

"Fine. Don't talk," the desert woman sighed, easing her back down onto the soft fabric. Shaking her head in annoyance, Ketan picked up the small pot she'd dropped earlier. "I need to put salve on your wounds. Try not to make it worse?"

"No problem there," Hunter murmured. She eyed the woman, trying to appear unaffected, but inside she was nervous about what was in the small pot.

"I know it smells bad," the woman said, pushing her robes up over well defined arms to scoop out some of the pungent smelling ointment. "It draws the fire out of your skin." She focused on starting to apply it to the red and blistered skin.

Hunter wanted to struggle. Being helpless and surrounded by enemies wasn't sitting well with her. But the truth was that she was already exhausted, her injuries too severe. "Titan?" she asked.

At his name, the Sand Tiger's ears perked up and he made his way to the bed. He was skin and bones practically, but doing better every day. He put his front paws on the bed and lifted himself up to look at his friend.

Hunter's face changed, relief physically washing over it, and she smiled as much as she was able, a lifting at the corners of her mouth.

"Stop moving," the desert woman admonished, giving the desert cat a gentle push out of her way. "See? She's awake. Now go eat." Ketan muttered something under her breath and continued her work, carefully applying the salve across the woman's chest and then up her neck and face.

Wiping the last little bit across Hunter's forehead, trying to be as gentle as she could, Ketan sat down next to the injured woman. "Do you think you could eat a little? I have some soup that would help you heal."

"As long as it's not poisoned or drugged then yes," she grumbled out. This whole situation was putting her out of sorts.

"Why would I poison you after spending days keeping you from dying?" the desert woman asked, reaching across the small space to pull closer a small clay urn, which was still slightly warm from when she'd gotten it from the village elder earlier. "Do you now believe me, that your life was in danger?"

Hunter didn't say anything at first. She watched Titan as he ate his meat without a care in the world. "My life is always in danger. I am the hero of Katturast and a noble," she whispered out, her throat raw from what little talking she'd done.

"A cold life then," Ketan responded, hushing her when she saw Hunter start to answer. "No talking. The sand hurt your throat." She carefully raised the small gourd to Hunter's lips. "Drink slowly."

Hunter drank slowly, letting the water coat her tongue before swallowing. She did this several times, annoyed the woman would treat her as a raw recruit seeing her first tour in the desert.

Gray eyes watched her with amusement, as if Ketan knew how annoyed Hunter was becoming. "Sleep. You can be angry at me when you wake again," she stated, taking back the now almost empty gourd. The medicine in the soup would ensure a long sleep for the recovering woman.

"You're very annoying," Hunter murmured then yawned. Her eyes narrowed as she finished the yawn, and glared at the gray-eyed woman as she realized she'd been drugged.

Then her eyes fluttered closed and she dozed off.

"I only promised you I wouldn't poison you," Ketan whispered, pulling the fine fabric higher up the woman to keep her warm through the cold desert night.

Titan looked up from his meal, licking his bloody muzzle and staring at the woman near his friend, his eyes cool and deadly, predator's eyes. But then he returned his attention to his meal.

"We should have let the desert take her," a man's voice, talking low but forcefully from outside the cave's mouth, said. "She will bring ruin to us."

"You don't know that," Ketan's voice answered. "She is honorable. Even Mathew agrees."

"Mathew does not rule here."

"Neither do you," Ketan answered, anger creeping into her voice.

He was leaning against the cool stone of the cave wall, waiting for his sister. "Seriously, Ketan, why did you bring her here?"

"Maybe because it wasn't her time to die." She looked back at him stubbornly. "Bayyan, let this be. She will not stay here long."

He stared at her hard. Life had been hard before, when the Pasha had risen up and tried to create an empire in the desert out of blood. And while he hadn't agreed with the all the man's sick ideas, it was nice to feel empowered as a man, instead of second class. He had minor magics within him, but if he ever used them, it was punishable by death. This more than anything had made him bitter. If he'd been born a woman it wouldn't matter.

"I'll let it be for now. But if she does one thing to put us in harm's way, I'll make a point of it."

"And by the firestorm, a Sand Tiger, it attacked Thomas, and you just let it roam free."

"She won't be here long enough to do anything." She touched his arm, once again wondering where that laughing boy who had snuck out of their parent's tent to ride across the dark lit desert with her had gone. "It was dying. No matter what she may have done, the Sand Tiger is wild. How would you feel to be put in that cage?"

"I don't have answers for you, sister, but they don't belong here." He turned and left. The only thing that kept his resentment at bay was the fact that his sister had no magic.

Ketan watched him walk down the small side passage of the underground caves the tribe was using as one of its temporary camps. Only when the light from his torch had faded into the darkness did she let out the soft sigh she'd been holding. Turning, she ducked through the small opening that led to the chamber she'd claimed as her own.

Mathew was waiting for her.

"You know the problem with being Malkia's cousin is you get asked to do all sorts of stupid things." He lifted a baked clay cup filled with some wine he had stolen off the ship.

"I thought you would be off enjoying time with your harem?" Ketan shot back, reaching over to steal one of those bottles. She moved to the back of the chamber, looking in on her guest to make sure she was still asleep and that Titan was still curled up and purring.

He snickered. "Oh, I thought a couple of times they were going to grab and twist. I think the only thing that saved me was that it was my aunt's idea I play the Calif. King Math is terribly patriarchal. His thoughts and notions of our world come from his interactions with the Pasha and Katturast." He chuckled. "He has no idea how our world works and how vast the desert is."

She laughed, sinking down onto one of the pillows that she brought with her from campsite to campsite. "I'm amazed none of the women decided to play with those soldiers. The Malkia must have been very specific with her wishes." Even the least of those dancers had at least a spark of magic within, as did almost all of the desert women. Ketan grimaced and uncorked the bottle.

Well, not all of them.

"She was very specific with me. I can only imagine what she said to them." He held out his cup to her and grinned as she filled it. "Bayyan giving you problems?"

She saluted him with her cup and sipped it, making a face at the wine. "I still don't see why you like these outlander wines. They're too bitter." She languidly relaxed back against the pillow, considering him. "Bayyan is as bitter as the wine. I miss the days when he would smile."

"He loves you though, there is that. But can you blame him? If he had been born female he would be able to use the magic inside him. But because he's male, it's forbidden; it's like a limb left to wither and die. Now all he is, is good breeding stock to be married off because most likely he'll produce children with magic."

"He will bring honor to our family," she agreed, finding her little prized bottle of desert honey and adding a small, carefully measured dab to the wine. "Much better."

Mathew sipped his wine and gestured at their guest. "So will she live?"

Ketan followed his gesture, watching the even rise and fall of Hunter's chest under the valuable special blanket. "Yes. The Sun Serpent burned her badly, but she is stubborn. I've used all of the salve that the wise woman had and could make for me, but she'll live." She looked back at him, curious. "Bayyan isn't the only one worried about her being here, is he?"

"No. But they aren't without cause. While I might respect her, she is duty and loyalty. King Math is a disgusting creature. I think only the Pasha rivaled him. Yet she is loyal to this man, his dog."

"Perhaps." She looked back at the sleeping woman. "I don't believe she's evil. I would have left her to the sands if I thought she was."

"Oh, I didn't say she was evil. She's honorable to the point of it being painful, and annoying." He made a face. "Tiako was throwing herself at her, and she threw up some lame excuse that her

patron goddess enforces chastity. How sad is that? Who follows a god or goddess who denies pleasure?" He snorted disgust.

Ketan very carefully hid her smile behind her mug. "Tiako throws herself at a lot of people." There was a little more of an edge to her words than she'd intended. "Who knows why outlanders follow their gods," she hurriedly continued. None of the people worshiped gods, the entire idea strange to them.

"Well..." he pointed up, "there's the Golden Sun Serpent. But to my knowledge, he hasn't asked for anything."

"That's different." She used her foot to kick a small pebble at him. "What will you tell the Malkia?"

"For now nothing. There's nothing to tell." He took another sip and looked over at the hero and Sand Tiger. "Why do you think King Math seeks to kill his hero? The people love her, from what little interaction I had with them."

"Maybe that is why." She shrugged, not caring particularly why the Insane King, as he was often called by the desert people, did anything he did. "Why try building his forts on desert sand?" She shook her head at that folly.

"I've never understood that. You can only live where water springs and the springs come and go waning with the seasons. But let them build their stone houses; the desert will take them back. Plus, it makes it easy to find them."

She laughed. "True. The sands will sweep them away." There was only one certainty in the desert, and that was the sands would not be denied. She emptied her cup, setting it aside. "I should rest. I think I will need my strength to deal with my guest."

He nodded. "I will leave you." He stood up and weaved a bit, and then stopped and turned around. "I know that look, Ketan. You feel something for our hero there. Throw those feelings away. She's a cold one."

He turned back around and bounced off a wall before making his way out.

"There's no look," she called after him, annoyed that he'd called her on her earlier lapse. "No look at all."

#####3

Hunter was awake, had been for nearly an hour now, but she patiently laid on the pallet. First, she had been just letting her body wake up. Then she was doing an inventory of her body, of her pains and aches. Overall, it could have been worse. She was still weak, but strength would come. Now, she was lightly meditating, mainly reflecting over what she knew or thought she knew.

She knew that Henri had betrayed her. Not surprising. The why was a little more murky. Was it because she was a woman? She had power? She was the King's hero? Those all related back to jealousy.

The King couldn't have had a hand in things, because that would delay in finding the Princess. He would have her killed once the Princess was returned. The advisor was more than likely, if she really believed her prophecy: that she, Hunter, would betray the King. However, the bandits threw a quirk into her thoughts, because they said they didn't have the Princess.

She made a face, and then made a painful face as her original face pulled at her burned and healing flesh.

Slowly, she sat up, listening to her body, resting when it told her to. But she eventually made it up, and looking around, she spied a stone shelf with a water bowl for washing and a small mirror. She shuffled over to it and peered into the polished surface. She was, as she had suspected, hideous.

Hunter was a big enough person to admit a vanity about her looks. She ran a hand through the stubble of hair growing back on the top of her head. "Was it really necessary to cut my hair?" she asked no one.

"Yes. It was," Ketan replied from the area she'd slept in, not far from the hole that let out into the rest of the caverns beyond. She'd woken up as Hunter had shuffled to her feet and considered telling the other woman to lay back down, but immediately figured the outlander wouldn't appreciate that.

Hunter scowled. "Of course it was, because I was rather fond of it." She turned slowly, her eyes finding the woman and glared, because realistically, that was about all she could manage.

A good ass kicking would have to wait.

"I do not appreciate being drugged, having my hair cut off, being helpless, and being naked while being helpless." She was quite aware she was only being covered by a thin sheet, and while it might be a very comfortable sheet, it was very thin. It did nothing to make her feel safe.

Getting up into a cross-legged position, the desert woman watched her patiently, waiting for the outburst to end. When it seemed to be the end, she rose to her feet. "Your clothes would make the burns worse. What you are wearing now is worth more than a king's ransom."

She pointed out.

"Your hair was cut because we had to use something of yours for a sacrifice to the spirits of fire. And I drugged you because you needed sleep." Gray eyes might have sparkled a little bit in amusement, but the darker skinned woman kept her face as impassive as she could. Well aware of how prickly warriors could get.

Tiredly, Hunter swayed but made her way back to the bed in shuffling steps. "I don't believe in your spirits, why would they want a sacrifice from me?"

Ketan snorted, moving a little closer in case her guest was to suddenly topple over.

"What do they care if you believe in them? The spirits of fire helped draw the fire out of your skin. Without a sacrifice they would not have helped." Or worse, they would have extracted their own sacrifice: burns more horrible than the ones that still covered the woman's body.

Hunter shrugged, all out of logically counter-arguments. She sat down heavily on the bed and winced as she felt a blister pop. "I don't think I was burned this bad last time I was trapped in the desert," she mumbled. Of course, last time she'd found a cave.

"You've survived twice in the desert?" Ketan asked, curious, as she moved to a simple clay pot and prepared some water for them.

"Yes. I fought in the King's army against the Pasha," she said, watching the woman pour water into a pot.

"I knew that. We all know the story of how you killed the Pasha. Even the youngest know the story of the Hero of Katturast. I didn't know you had already been bitten by the Sun Serpent's fire."

Mint was crushed into the water and she brought the bowl over to the bedside. "Lay down. I must change your bandages." There would be no more salve until the wise woman could find more ingredients for it.

Hunter laughed bitterly. "That's all it is, a story. Nothing glamorous in taking a man's life. The story gets better every year."

"Outlander storytellers are the same as ours, then?" Ketan smiled, carefully removing the light blanket so that she could start cleaning the burns. Some of the blisters had burst, and she tried to be careful not to hurt Hunter any further.

Hunter closed her eyes and tried very hard not to feel ashamed of her weakness, but she could not treat her own burns, since some of them were in places she couldn't even reach on her back.

"The wise woman says you will live," Ketan said quietly, carefully working. "Some of the burns may leave scars though. The Serpent tried very hard to kill you. He wasn't lying," she said, a bit sharper than she wished.

There was no doubt that the body she was bathing was that of a warrior: muscled, whipcord strong, and well built. Once again the pale skin fascinated Ketan, where it wasn't red and burned. "There." She set aside the bowl, careful not to waste even a drop of the precious water. "Rest. I will see about getting food. Have you ever had our food? I know some believe it to be too spicy."

Hunter laid on her stomach, her eyes closed, not having the energy to open them. "I have not. When last I was here, the desert people didn't exactly welcome us. I ate soldier's rations."

"Then I'll get you something mild. We can burn your mouth when you are feeling better."

The bowl was put back in its place. The water would be used for something else. Nothing could be wasted. "Is there anything else you need?" Ketan asked, fetching her wrappings and sword.

"The Princess?" Hunter mumbled.

"She isn't here." Ketan's voice sounded a little muffled as she wrapped the brightly colored cloth around her head and face. Once ready, she hesitated. "Hunter," using her guest's name for the first time, "there are those who are not happy that you are my guest. While in my home you are safe, but it wouldn't be wise to leave here until you are stronger. As you say, Hero of Katturast." Ketan slipped through the fissure in the rock and out into the caves beyond.

Hunter opened an eye and looked at Titan. As if knowing he was being watched, one of the Sand Tiger's eyes opened, looking back at Hunter. "Some help you are," Hunter grumbled.

Titan just yawned and closed his eyes.

#####3

"I can tell she's going to be a lot of fun when she's healed," Ketan muttered, tugging on her wrap to make sure it was in place. The dust in the main cave was enough to necessitate the face wrap.

Holes bored by the endless scouring of the wind and sand let sunlight stream in from the outside, illuminating the interior of the cave. Far inside, she could hear a lone voice singing, and closer by, the laughter and chatter of a group of scouts preparing to go out into the desert.

There would be no scouting parties or raiding the foreign King's army for her until she was no longer guarding her guest.

Quickly, she passed through the larger part of the cave, listening to the wind whip about outside. The wind spirits were unsettled today, and Ketan wondered if a great storm was coming. One of the larger side passages was for the makeshift camp's kitchen. Once inside, she loosened her head wrap and set about gathering food for herself and her guest.

From behind the woman came the sound of footsteps. "So, Ketan, how does the Insane King's dog do?" The voice held no warmth. The woman speaking looked harmless, but her eyes were empty of any warmth. "Please tell me her wounds were too much for her." Another woman and man behind the first snickered.

"She survives wounds that would kill even the strongest warrior," Ketan answered, spooning a pulpy mixture of meat and vegetables onto one plate, topping it with a still warm flat bread. Turning, she eyed the three, knowing them well. "Zakiyah, she is my guest," she said, warningly.

"She is a murderer! You've heard the reports. By the Serpent's balls, you saw that village," Zakiyah spat out.

"I saw it," Ketan agreed. "I also saw the wounds on the villagers. They weren't made by her sword."

"No, but they were made by her men. You think just because she 'supposedly'," Zakiyah made a face letting Ketan know how likely she thought Hunter a hero, "killed the Pasha, that makes her our ally? It just makes her a murderer."

Ketan picked up the two plates, not wanting to get into an argument here, alone with these three. Nothing good could come of it. "She is my guest until she is healed. That still means something. Unless Malkia says otherwise?"

When all she got in return were dark looks, she nodded. "I didn't think so."

"Once she's healed, you can't protect her. We'll see what kind of hero she really is," the woman barked out, taking a step towards Ketan, glowering.

"Zakiyah, I thought you and the other's were out hunting," Bayyan said, stepping into the makeshift kitchen, his body relaxed, only his clenched fists giving him away. "You know, Daniel brought back two Giant Grassjumpers yesterday, which has you beat."

The woman backed down slowly and grinned at Baaytan. "Can't have a man beating me. Come on, let's show Daniel why we're hunters." The trio slunk out of the cave.

Ketan let out a breath slowly. That could have gone badly. "Thank you, brother."

The man said nothing, silent for a moment. "I don't like her, sister. Remember that if she tries to barter for me to join her harem," he said quietly as he started to restock the poor kitchen.

"Her family is powerful, but shifty. Too many sand witches in their blood." She watched him, still holding the two dishes. "I thought you were going hunting today?"

"She likes that I have magic; thinks it will give her powerful children. She's a bitch. Besides, I have always looked after my baby sister. I will not stop now just because she no longer needs me to scare off the monsters in the dark." He looked up at her, an innocent look on his face. "Really? I could have sworn I was supposed to go hunting tomorrow."

She smiled. "Yes, tomorrow. That must be it." Starting towards the entryway, she paused next to him, talking quietly. "You always were good at chasing away monsters."

He shrugged, his face morphing back into its permanent scowl.

For a moment, though, he was the older brother she remembered from when they were children. Sadly she touched his shoulder and left him alone in the kitchen.

#####3

Hunter was sitting on top of a large wind-carved rock. Her surroundings were still, so still nothing moved: no wind, no animals, even the sun was unmoving in the sky. She waited, looking around the sea of sand around her, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did, she slowly stood, happy there was no pain. She looked at her hands and found them to be darkly tan, but missing the red and peeling skin.

Frowning in thought, she let her golden-green eyes sweep around her one more time before turning around to make her way off the rock.

He was standing behind her, she hadn't sensed him at all. Startled, she jumped and lost her footing.

The old man frowned then smiled, white teeth gleaming out through a gray mustache and beard badly in need of trimming. "It's only a dream. So let go and fall, it would do you some good."

She scowled as her arms windmilled wildly as she fought to maintain her balance.

The old man sighed then reached out with his staff and pushed her gently in the stomach. Hunter fell into the sand below. Spitting sand out of her mouth, Hunter sat up and wiped her face.

"See, I told you you'd be fine."

"You pushed me," she said sharply, not happy in the slightest.

"You know, Hunter, for one so young you are incredibly uptight. I think you might even shit diamonds soon if you don't relax. Besides, you need a push now and then, or you'd continue to act like a horse's ass with blinders."

Hunter stood up, indignant, "I don't have to take this from a dream!" and started marching off into the sand.

"Well..." the old man hedged, suddenly right by Hunter's side, "you're having a dream. However, I'm not part of that dream. But your mind is so rigid it's the only way I can get in touch with you, that and the herbs that woman gave you relax you, which is saying a lot about their potency."

"I'm having a hallucination. I'm killing that woman and all her bandit buddies, I swear by..."

He hit her in the stomach with his staff again. "You will do no such thing! She's helping you, and if you weren't such a stubborn ass, you'd see things that were so obvious a three year old could see them. Not everyone is out to disappoint you," he scolded her.

Hunter said nothing, just continued to stride forward in the sand, fuming. Finally, she stopped, not looking at the old man next to her. "What do you want?"

"I want things I can't ever have. My time is growing shorter. As the days pass, we get closer and closer to the Dragon of Night awakening, and when that happens I will be no more. I want these lands and these people to be safe, and for that to happen I need you to choose the land or the King, because the two are not the same."

"You are asking me to be a traitor! The King is the land, I cannot pick one without taking the mantle of a traitor. You ask too much."

They stood side by side, staring into the silent landscape.

"No, Hunter, I'm asking you to be a hero. I'm asking you for once in your life to be happy and do the right thing," he replied, breaking the silence.

"I was a hero once, by accident, look where it got me."

"I know, Hunter. I know the truth. I know you and Titan crawled out of that cave in the desert half mad with hunger and thirst. I know you walked through the night and just as dawn was entering the world, you came upon the Pasha's palace. I know you snuck inside past a sleeping guard and hid, making a nest in the rafters of a storeroom. I know you woke up because the Pasha had dragged some poor slave girl into the very storeroom you were hiding in and proceeded to do things to her you still don't want to think about. I know you were too scared to do anything to help and by accident the board under you broke and sent you tumbling down on top of the Pasha. I know everything that happened from that point is a blur and that when it was over you were standing, the Sword of the Sun Serpent in your hand, blood coating the blade, and the Pasha's neck cut to the point it was attached only by a thread of skin. All these things I know. I know you have driven yourself harder since then to be worthy of the word they anointed you with, 'hero'."

He turned and looked at her sadly. "You don't need to be worthy, Hunter, because you are."

"You don't know me!" she hissed out angry. "If you really knew me you'd see that hate that eats me alive, the anger and violence that begs to be let out! I am not a hero. Heroes don't hold grudges, heroes don't want to find their first love and ram a dagger into their hearts. Heroes don't blindly follow a Goddess of Honor and Chastity because they think it will make them a better person. They do it because it's the..."

"...Right thing to do," he finished for her. "But isn't that why you did all those things, why you kept your half-brother alive and made him your right-hand?" He held up a hand to prevent her arguments. "Don't say anything now. Take the time while you heal, to reflect and relax. If you truly listen, you will find the answers you seek."

Hunter frowned at that. "That makes no sense." She turned and the old man was gone.

"Just great!" she shouted, stomping her feet as much as one could stomp their feet in sand. Then the sands opened up and she was falling into blackness.

#####3

Ketan sat near her guest, watching her sleep and considering why she'd rescued the woman. At the time, seeing her laid out upon the sands, red and bleeding, she honestly hadn't even considered leaving her there to die.

She should have left the outlander to the mercy of the desert sands. The others of her tribe would have agreed, saying that she would have at least given nourishment back to the desert. But instead, here she was, an outcast already for being a woman with no magical ability, nursing back the Hero of Katturast. It was a disaster waiting to happen. "I hope your mistress appreciates this," she said quietly to the resting Sand Tiger.

Hunter woke with a shout, her arms failing about trying to dig her way out of the sand. Phantom memories from her dream.

Quickly, Ketan shifted closer, not quite touching the wounded woman. "You are safe. You were riding on the night mare."

Hunter froze at the sound of the voice then gathered her wits. She rolled the words over in her head then chuckled. "Safe is relative. Saved from the desert by people we are at war with. Does that seem safe to you?"

"You are safe for now, in here." The desert woman sat back, letting her hands drop to her side. "I promise."

Hunter tensed, forcing her body to work with her, and rolled herself over. With an intensely serious look on her face, she stared at the other woman. "I will take your promise then, and hold you to it," she said, finally.

Gray eyes stared intently down at the other woman for a long moment before Ketan nodded solemnly. "Upon my family's honor, I swear it." There was no greater promise that she could give. Her brother would have been horrified to hear her give it.

Hunter extended a sunburned hand. "I am Hunter Del Cor."

Ketan studied the hand then remembered the outlander tradition, and reached out to grab it, careful to avoid the worst of the blisters. "I am Ketan, of the Al-Aviva, daughter of Sa'diyah."

"Nice to meet you, Ketan." Her grip did not loosen. "One more thing. You were the bandit in my rooms, weren't you?"

While Ketan's face stayed still, her eyes widened just a little at that. "What bandit?" she asked, thinking quickly.

"Don't start being dishonest with me so soon. Most people take longer to disappoint me." Hunter's eyes took in the widening of Ketan's gray ones. "You held a sword to my throat and warned me of danger. I had plenty of time to stare into your eyes, well imagining my own death soon to come. You broke into the palace and pulled a sword on me. Why would I believe you? And how would you know I was in danger, unless, of course, you were working with Henri?" Hunter tried to believe she'd let Ketan pull away, but truth was, she didn't have her strength back.

"Henri?" Ketan looked back at her blankly and shook her head. "Stubborn as your reputation." Rising, she fetched the food that she'd returned with and set it to her side. "I heard the whispers of those plotting against you while the others danced. Amazing how distracting the veil dance can be."

"Veil dance?" Hunter's cheeks turned slightly more red. "Ah, Mathew's women, yes, very distracting." At least she had the satisfaction of being right to be paranoid of the charming desert Calif.

Ketan spooned some of the green mush that she'd brought from the kitchen onto the flat bread and offered it to Hunter. "Tiako was dancing for you alone that night. She's considered an expert dancer."

Tiredly, Hunter took the bread then uncomfortably looked at it. "Um, could you help me sit up a bit," she asked, finally.

Making sure to keep the blanket around her for modesty, Ketan helped the other woman into a sitting position. A couple of pillows piled behind her kept her that way. "You didn't like her dancing?" Ketan asked, surprised.

"No, no, she was very good. They were all good." Hunter nibbled at the food, remembering too well all the unfamiliar emotions the dance had evoked and having to flee out onto deck of the boat.

Ketan stared at her curiously. She wanted to ask, but it would have pushed the bounds of conversation to do so. Instead, she scooped up some of her own food and started to eat the spicy dish.

"Um, you weren't one of the dancers?" Hunter doubted it, she would have noticed the hands calloused to hold a sword. But she wasn't so sure. The outfits they had worn had been distracting, which in hindsight had been the point.

"No. I'm not as skilled a dancer as the Veiled One's." Ketan sighed in contentment at the spicy food. "I had other duties that night."

Hunter nodded. "I'm getting the impression that everything my culture has learned about the desert people is wrong. Tell me the truth: the Pasha was the exception to the rules, wasn't he?" It was little things that had been in the back of her mind coming forward since meeting Mathew and Ketan.

The desert woman finished chewing before she answered. "Do you mean the exception in that he was a man, or that he was evil?" There was no doubt he had been an evil person.

Hunter paused, thinking. She gave a little shudder as she remembered some of the things she saw in the palace.

"He was beyond evil." She chewed thoughtful. "When my people first trekked into the sands, we met the Pasha and his subjects, the tribesmen under his rule. I'm not sure what happened; there was a treaty and then someone broke it and we went to war. Now, while my people don't exactly uphold women, they do not treat them like the objects for lust and disposal that the Pasha did. You are not an object; you have a warrior's hands."

"I chose the path of the warrior," Ketan answered simply. "The Pasha was an abomination, a man corrupted by magic that had twisted him. He gathered others like him to his side. Malkia refused his demands and war came to us as well. We were all happy to hear he had died at your hands."

Hunter nodded. Ketan hadn't really answered her question, but she could infer what wasn't said. "I was happy to kill him."

"I'm happy to have you as a guest," Ketan answered, grinning a little and picking up a bit of her food with the flat bread and offering it to the woman. "Try some true desert cooking." Her look dared the other woman to try it.

Hunter tried to look unimpressed as she leaned forward and bit into the bread. She chewed slowly and forced herself to continue to do so even as her tastebuds exploded. Calmly, she swallowed and said, "I hate you," holding out her hand for water, only for Ketan to push the water away, grinning.

"Water will not help." She instead offered the rest of the flat bread.

Hunter took the flatbread, chewing it frantically. "You're trying to burn me from the inside," she accused.

"It's said the heat in the food serves to toughen the body to the fire of the desert," Ketan laughed, finally offering the gourd of water to the sweating woman.

Hunter sipped the water. "Glad I could amuse you."

"Many things amuse me," Ketan retorted, scooping up another bit of food.

Hunter leaned back against the pillows and slowly let herself relax. It wasn't a total relaxation; the situation still had her on edge. "All this searching and it never occurred to me to look for underground caves." She could have kicked herself, such an obvious answer, and one she should have thought of, considering caves like this had saved her life. "The land provides if you care for it and tend it. The desert is a harsher mistress, brutal and cares little for weakness and disobedience." She smiled a little. Perhaps that is why she was so fond of it. "My lands are lush

and green, fertile like you would not believe. I grow some of the best grapes for wine that you will not find anywhere else. The winters are wet, and a chill wind blows, causing ice and on occasion snow."

The dark-haired desert dweller shook her head. "Ice. Snow." They were abstract concepts to her, only heard through outrageous stories told around a fire in the middle of the night. "Water flows across the surface of the land there?"

"When it rains it can. It drips from the leaves, across the flesh of the fruit, and then into the soil. Too much, though, brings rot and mudslides. Water can kill just as well as the desert heat. Winter brings the worst out in people, and the cold wet causes wet lung disease. So you see, there are drawbacks no matter where you live."

Hunter had her eyes closed, envisioning the rains and her vineyards, and felt nothing for it. She was not homesick at all.

"I can hardly imagine it." Ketan shook her head again before starting to gather up the dishes. "Too much water can kill. That would never happen here. Here, we fight for water, kill because of it."

"Not so different. People kill and die for power no matter where you are," Hunter said with a yawn. She opened her eyes and reached out a hand. Titan came over and sniffed it then butted his head into her palm.

"Your guardian," Ketan joked from the other side of the room, scouring the simple bowls with sand.

Hunter gave a brief smile at that. "We're not fond of too much water, are we?" she asked the big animal, remembering how seasick they had gotten on the boat trip the castle.

"The boat," Ketan laughed, remembering the boat trip she'd been on with Mathew. "I had not known people could turn that color green."

Hunter made a face and buried her face into her pillow. "How could you not? All that bouncing up and down," her words muffled by the fabric.

"I found it amazing. So much water that large, wooden buildings can float upon it." she said, flipping her robes aside as she crouched back down on her pillows.

"I guess you would."

They were silent for a while. Not able to take it any longer, Hunter finally broke the silence. "I need to, where can I..." She hated being this weak and needing help.

"Where can you..?" Ketan looked at her as blankly as she could manage.

"I have to um...pee."

Ketan bit the inside of her lip, keeping her face as straight as possible. "Well, before, you just sort of let it out." It was entirely too precious seeing the look on the face of the Hero of Katturast.

Hunter's jaw clenched, and she did her best to rein in her temper. "If you aren't going to be helpful, I will just go look for a spot," she said in clipped tones.

The robed woman sighed. "They take away your sense of humor when you become a hero, I see." She rose to her feet. "You can either use a pot or I can bring you to the area we use."

"No, my sense of humor was lost the moment I became Duke; it's a requirement of the title." Hunter tried to lighten her tone, but the joke was sad, even to her ears, and decided not to try and be funny again. She wasn't any good at being civil.

Judging her guest too weak, and too proud to say it, Ketan went to fetch the chipped pot that was set aside for this purpose. "Then you should give it away, if it makes you unhappy."

Hunter smiled bitterly. Once, that had been her goal. "It's not that easy. It's like trying to convince people I'm not a hero, you can't give that title away either."

"Then leave. Go somewhere you are happy." It seemed easy enough to Ketan, but she allowed that nothing about her guest was easy. "Here." She slid the pot closer. "Do you need help?"

Hunter looked at the pot. "You have to be kidding?" She sighed. "You're not kidding. No, I can do this."

It wasn't the worst moment of Hunter's life, but it was in the top five. "Okay. You can come back in now," she rasped out. "Ryuu," she prayed, "give me strength, and show me the path out of this insanity."

"Is that the name of your god?" Ketan ducked into the cave. "If you're tired, just tell me. I don't get to talk to outlanders often. Some of the others are jealous that I get to hear about what is going on beyond the desert."

"Things don't change, just the scenery, I think. Yes, Ryuu is my patron Goddess. I pledged myself to her service." Hunter laid back down, wincing as her skin pulled, some of it cracking and flaking off.

"The wise woman will come later. Maybe she will have more salve for your skin," Ketan said, noticing the wince on her guest's face. "I'll let you rest for now." *'Time enough for questions later,'* she thought.

Hunter yawned and rolled over, pulling the sheet up her body.

#####3

Henri knew he didn't have anything to be worried about, but still, he was concerned. He had led the men out to the ravaged village where he and his men had killed Hunter.

Only, there was no sign of Hunter, and all of the villagers had been buried.

Still, he had no reason to worry. The bandits must have just buried her with the others. But that didn't convince the sinking feeling in his gut. Her men glared at him suspiciously. Weeks had gone by and he was going to have to report to the King and the advisor. Without a body, he was nervous what the advisor would do to him.

He wheeled his horse around and kicked it into a gallop back to the palace. Tomorrow he would head back to civilization and away from here. Once more he convinced himself there was no way she could have survived.

#####3

Hunter was bored. She'd been bored for a week. Now that she was mending and getting her strength back, it was worse. "Where the hell is Ketan?" she mumbled darkly at Titan.

"This is stupid. I'm the hero of Katturast, and a Duke on top of that. I'm going to go look for her." She stood up and started looking around for clothes.

Dressed in a baggy shirt and really baggy pants, and ignoring a look from Titan, she walked out of Ketan's room.

She wished she had her sword, no doubt one of the bandits had it as a trophy. She sneered a little at that. The pain was a dull ache and heat no longer radiated off her flesh. More amazing was the fact that her skin had healed without too much scarring, only the arrow wounds leaving their lasting marks.

Somewhere ahead of her, the clang of metal on metal echoed through the underground caverns. Laughter accompanied the sound along with voices calling comments and insults back and forth.

The cave was cool, but the upward slant of the main tunnel let her know that coolness was an illusion of depth. She started up the tunnel, grinning at the pleasant pull on her muscles. She followed the noise, the temperature rising but not uncomfortably so.

At the main mouth of the cave a small ring of people had gathered to watch the two fighters. It was late in the day and the mouth gave enough shadow to keep the people watching relatively cool. Both fighters were dressed in the long, flowing robes of the desert style, although Ketan's opponent was obviously male. Sun glinted off the wickedly curved blades as they clashed together. Ketan's laughter echoed up into the cave as she blocked a slash and attacked.

Hunter paused at the cave opening. The dance of swords was beautiful, both fighters obviously skilled warriors. She let her eyes drift from the dance to the desert around them. The sun was setting, bringing the desert to life. The colors of the rocks and sand seemed richer and deeper,

and she inhaled deeply. Feeling a pressure against her leg, she reached down and scratched Titan's head.

Another shape, a woman by the hint of form under the robes, turned to look back at Hunter. Rising from her perch she came closer, stopping when the Sand Tiger growled. "Ketan's guest is alive after all."

Hunter held herself still, uncertain where this was going to lead, but Titan's growl wasn't a good sign. "Yes, very much alive."

"It is not often that we host an outlander." The woman's voice did not make it seem like a good thing that they were hosting one now.

Hunter looked at the woman, her face impassive. "The honor is all mine." Subtly, she let her stance shift, one foot going back, closing her stance, taking her vital organs out of line of a direct attack, and lowering her center of gravity.

The woman laughed as she watched Hunter shift her stance. "We are not barbarians like your people. We do not attack our guests." She paused, walking around the two, careful to stay away from the Sand Tiger and its mistress. "You won't always be our guest though."

Hunter scratched Titan's ears. "That went well, I think."

Out on the sands, Ketan whirled, her robes billowing out and hiding the flash of her sword. In the instant that her opponent tried to focus again, she had the point of the blade at his throat. Clapping and calls of excitement came from the small gathering around them as Ketan laughed.

"Well done, Ajmal!" Clapping him on the shoulder, she faltered, her eyes finally spotting Hunter near the cave mouth. Quickly, she slipped away from the next match that was about to begin, and eyes watching the stranger's eyes, started towards her.

"Are you well?" she asked, casting a nervous look over her shoulder to make sure the others were all watching the two fighters who had now begun their match.

"Well enough. You're very good, although you have a tendency to lead with your right shoulder right before you attack."

"I do?" Ketan eyes blinked in surprise. The wrap that would have hidden the lower part of her face and filter the sand from the air she breathed was hanging loose, baring her face. "No one's told me that before."

"Yes you do. You're lucky no one's noticed before, although you don't do it all the time, just most of it. Find me a sword and I'll prove it."

The desert woman laughed then hurriedly tried to shepherd Hunter into the cave when curious eyes turned to look at them from below. "Come, you should rest, not fight." She wasn't sure she wanted to cross swords with the strong Duke.

Hunter sighed. "I don't want to go back inside. I've rested enough."

Staying where they were wasn't a good idea, so Ketan made a snap decision. "Come walk with me then. There is something that you may enjoy seeing. It's deeper in the cave, if you are sure you are well enough to walk that far." She mentally crossed her fingers that the Duke wasn't going to see through her attempt to get her to follow.

"I'm fine to walk anywhere you can." Hunter's chin might have even jutted out a bit in defiance.

"If you are sure." Ketan quickly turned her head, hiding the victorious look in her eyes. "This way." She unwound her head wrap as they entered the cave. Now that the wind spirits were not stirring up the desert sand, it was easy to breath.

"You're very pretty, why do you hide your face?" Hunter asked as she followed, curious about the face covering. She did really see the men doing it, well, at least Mathew.

"Tradition," Ketan answered, keeping her pace slow. Despite what the other woman claimed about being better, she was still healing. "I'm not a Veiled One, but I'm not a family head yet either. Besides, it helps filter out the dust when the air spirits whip up the sand."

"What's a veiled one? You mentioned them before."

"Those who can control the elements. Women who can command magic wear a veil in public. They claim the veils protect them from vengeful spirits." Ketan flashed a smile over her shoulder at her guest and the cat that prowled alongside her. "I think it just lets them act mysterious."

Hunter usually wasn't this talkative; all she could think of was that boredom was taking its toll. "Hmm, you're probably right. The King's advisor clothed from head to toe in black makes her seem more impressive than she really is."

"She's the one who hates you?" Ketan asked, having to turn sideways to squeeze through a normal space. The openings in the cave walls above them that let in light from the outside were getting fewer, and the cave was growing darker.

"I guess so. How did you know that?" Hunter had to twist a little bit to get through because she was smaller, although her shoulders were broader.

"Mathew is not the only one who saw the way she watched you." It got a little bit tighter before once again opening up. The floor was no longer sand here, so far away from the cave opening. It seemed perfectly dark, but that was only for as long as it took their eyes to adjust.

"I forget you were there. I don't know why she hates me. That's the first time we've been in the same space." There was the vision, but if the King had dismissed it, so should the advisor, the King's word was law.

Thousands of tiny crystals in the ceiling above them glowed, providing just enough illumination to see by. An unfamiliar sound came from not far away...water dripping steadily into a pool.

"Careful, there are rocks," Ketan said instead, stepping around one of the small boulders towards the sound of dripping. "Maybe she is the reason Henri tried to kill you."

"You seem to know more about my life than I do at the moment." Which was very annoying. "I smell water."

"Very good." Ketan smiled in the darkness.

A little further, winding their way through the littered rocks, and they were at the side of the small pool. It wasn't much, only a few feet across. "Water is life," Ketan whispered reverently as she knelt by the side of the small pool, sipping from her cupped hand.

Hunter followed, but was easily bypassed by Titan, who scrambled to the water's edge and drank.

Hunter sat down on a rock next to the edge, not thirsty. All it did was make her wish for a bath.

Ketan laughed silently, her eyes adjusting enough to the darkness that she could see the frantic lapping cat. "Why do you call him Titan?"

"Because it's his name," she shrugged, looking uncomfortable for a moment, and then decided to tell the story. Who would Ketan tell? Nobody from her lands would let her get close enough before killing her.

"I got separated from my troop in a sand storm. I stumbled around and fell into a cave, and then found a mother Sand Tiger killed near a pool of water, much like this one. Her cubs had perished of thirst, all but him."

She cleared her throat and fidgeted for a moment. "The storm blocked the entrance with a mountain of sand. We were trapped for weeks, just me and him, the tiny pool and my rations. I think I went insane for a while, and during that time he told me his name was Titan, and to stop calling him kitty."

Ketan stared at her in the dark, fingers idly tracing patterns in the cool water while the Sand Tiger, Titan she reminded herself to call him, lay stretched out contentedly nearby. When it was clear that was all Hunter was saying, Ketan shook her head. "That's amazing, although...you're not a very good storyteller."

Hunter laughed. "Good thing I didn't run off, then, to become one."

"How are bards going to sing about your life if you don't tell them better stories?" Ketan flicked her fingertips at the Duke, sending a few drops flying.

"They do just fine without me." She reached up and wiped one of the drops off her cheek with a finger then stuck it in her mouth, sucking the moisture off.

Ketan sat up straighter. "You laughed. Amazing. So, the great Duke Hunter can laugh!" What was she doing, teasing this foreigner who wanted to leave as soon as she could, who was probably an enemy to her tribe?

Hunter looked irritated. "Trust me, you haven't seen Duke Hunter yet. But if you want me to, I can slip into noble role."

"No. You're Duke of nothing here." Ketan rose from her crouch. So much for the small hint of a normal moment between them. "We should go back."

#####3

Henri sat ramrod straight, and had been doing so for almost three hours now. Sweat had collected under his arms and the small of his back, staining his shirt, but he dared not move. She could be watching, a force even more threatening than the King, his advisor. He'd seen what she'd done to the whores cast off from the King's bed, how she had drained them, or worse if they were blonde. Why her hatred of those with fair hair, he didn't know, and didn't care.

She was the true power behind the throne. She ruled through the King, and he and a select few knew it. King Math was nothing more than a puppet. She kept him high on drugs, kept his ego inflated, and supplied him with beautiful and often very young women and girls. Henri had only felt a brief moment of disgust, but the taste of power she had let him have had washed those feelings away. He was completely loyal to her now, and the King only through lipservice, because in truth, she was the King. That didn't stop him from being afraid of her.

The door was finally opened by two rather androgynous people at each door. Their heads were shaved, bodies whip thin, and were clothed in black, baggy clothes giving no hint to gender. Gender didn't matter anymore for them, for they were the advisor's puppets.

The one on the right opened his mouth and said in a hollow, cavernous voice, "You will be seen now."

Henri coughed and cleared his throat then stood, trying to cool his rising fear.

The room was dark lit by scattered torches that sputtered against the darkness. The King sat on a throne of polished wood, his eyes glazed and unfocused, his hair greasy and tangled. To his right, the advisor stood, covered from head to toe in black.

Henri approached, his heart thudding in his chest, each beat seeming to tell him to flee. The only other time he'd been this scared was when he had been at the end of Duke Hunter's sword. Her eyes had seemed to see the whole of him, and in an instant strip him to the bone as if she knew his every flaw and weakness. If that had been true, she would have run him through. Her honor was her weakness, and her loyalty to the King had stayed her hand when it should have run him through.

Finally, he was at the bottom of the three steps that led up to the throne and he kneeled, head bowed nearly to the floor.

There was whispering and the King grunted and seemed to wake from a dream. "Henri? Why are you here?"

"Do not bother yourself with this lowly man, my Lord. I will deal with it. You have far more important things that weigh on your mind," the advisor said in a quiet, slippery voice. "Drink your wine."

"Yes, yes. My big day is coming," he muttered, downing his wine and going back to seeing things only he could see.

"Stand, Henri."

Henri stood, his knees shaking.

Under the covering, she smiled. "Your fear of me is delightfully tasty, Henri. Have you done as the King and I have requested?"

He swallowed. "Yes. I lured her away from her troops and she fell into my trap. I left her and the tiger full of arrows in the desert, a feast for the carrion birds."

She nodded. "When you left her, was she dead?"

"Of course."

"You cut her head off? Removed her heart?"

Henri blinked and stammered, "Ah, uh, well, no, but if the arrows failed, the desert sun would have finished the job."

A slight narrowing of the advisor's eyes was his only warning. She raised her hand and he was suddenly lifted back and slammed into the wall. The air left his lungs in a whoosh. Gasping and wheezing, he blinked, trying to gather his wits. "Mistress?" he cried out.

She walked slowly down the steps towards him. With her other hand she made a clawing motion and his shirt was sliced open, long gashes appearing on his chest weeping blood. "You do not fully understand the threat she poses. You do not understand what her bloodline is capable of."

Her bloodline is always doing the impossible, a thorn in my side. In a dream I saw her blood awaken the Silver Dragon, leads the blood of Keshet to my heart, stopping it, and kills the King, feeding his head to a golden dragon. All impossible things. All things one person should not be able to do. And if I die what do you think she'll do to you, a lackey, a nothing?"

He grimaced, well aware of what she would do to him. "She has to be dead. No one could survive what we did to her," he gasped out, panicking.

"Let us find out then, shall we?" She pulled a knife from her robes and lifted it up, digging it slightly into one of the cuts and coating it with his blood. "Bring me the Sphere of Elements!"

The two slaves brought a small, clear glass sphere, occasionally flaring red, green, blue, or yellow as they grunted and strained to move the small object to their Mistress.

Once it was in front of her, she wiped the knife on the surface. "Wind, take the offering of life and do this task for me." The sphere flashed yellow and the blood was gone. "Find in the depth of the desert Hunter Del Cor for me. Show me her corpse." All around them wind suddenly gusted, tugging at clothes and hair, sounding like a screaming petulant child then it was gone.

"What, by Bacchra's realm, was that?" Henri croaked out.

"That was desert magic, or what you all here refer to as child tales."

Henri swallowed, even more scared.

They waited in silence, Henri hanging on the wall, blood dripping down staining his pants and the floor.

Finally, the wind was back, a swirling dust devil spiralling back into the sphere. It flashed yellow and then went clear. Inside the sphere objects began to appear and the advisor and Henri stared into its depths. There was sand, the desert, then rocks, an opening in the rocks into darkness. Then Hunter appeared, sleeping on a pallet looking anything but dead. The elemental seemed to study the woman before the view turned, taking in a growling and snarling Sand Tiger. There was no sound, but the anger was very clear in the animal's body. Then the view switched to a very alive and awake Hunter, her golden-green eyes looking annoyed as they bore into the the wind elemental.

Then Hunter reached out, grabbing the elemental and saying some words that couldn't be understood. Suddenly, the elemental was hurtling back over the sands, back to its mistress.

"That was unexpected. She rebuffed my pet." Her gaze looked up at Henri.

Henri desperately did not want to be the center of her attention.

"Looks like you've failed me, Henri."

He gulped, his mind switching into overdrive, grasping at thoughts and ideas, anything to save his life.

"Wait, this can work!" he screamed as she lifted the knife.

She paused.

"She's a traitor."

"What?"

"She was obviously staying with those desert tribesmen. Everyone knows she loves the desert. She built a garden, a desert garden in her manor. She's helping them. If we spread word that she's betrayed us, that she's working with the enemy, we have a new war in the desert. We have more sacrifices. Think of all those women we could bring to you full of desert magics. Also, we'd have everyone who could stop us, out in the desert to stop the Traitor of King Math's Kingdom."

The advisor lowered the knife. "Desperation suits you, Henri," she said in a coldly, cheerful voice. She waved her hand and he fell heavily to the floor.

#####3

Hunter awoke instantly to Titan's growls. Her eyes opened and took in the hazy form, which had the vague form of a many headed snake, floating near her. Wind tugged at her hair and skin. She sat up and its attention returned to her, the snake heads hissing, and Hunter's eyes narrowed in annoyance. Angry, she reached out, grabbing the central head and body. "I don't have time for your petty desert magics. Be gone," she said in her most commanding tone, and tossed the wind elemental away like trash. In a puff it disappeared.

She looked at the tiger, whose ruff was still up. "I agree. These stupid little pranks are getting annoying." Yawning, she laid back down.

The last couple of days had been filled with wind kicking sand up into her eyes, fires exploding near her face or turning into demonic beasts, and other minor annoyances. All fun at her expense, and she was getting tired of it.

So far she felt she had done a remarkable job reining in her temper.

From just outside the small room, Ketan stared through the opening at Hunter. She'd been about to try and find a Veiled One to deal with the wind elemental when the outlander had simply grabbed it and tossed it away. Stunned, she stood where she was, gray eyes wide as she watched the woman lay back down. No outlander could command an elemental. It just wasn't possible. Was it? Finally, she shook herself and ducked in through the low entrance. "I brought water," she announced, still eyeing Hunter oddly.

Titan, still on edge, gave a yowl in surprise at the unannounced entrance, jumping to his feet. Hunter's lips tightened into a thin line. After a moment, she sat up, running a hand through her short hair. She opened her mouth then thought better of the sharp comments that wanted to come out and closed her mouth, silently reaching for the water.

Ketan silently handed over the clay urn, watching as the other woman drank. "So..." she started then paused, not sure how to continue. "You feel all right?"

"I'm fine!" Hunter snapped. Then felt bad because Ketan really had been a good host, and as far as Hunter could tell, had nothing to do with the pranks being played on her. "Um, thank you for the water," she said gently.

The desert woman smiled a little. "You're welcome." There was no doubt that Hunter's time as her guest was coming to an end. She'd never seen anyone heal so quickly. Even with all the salves the wise woman had used, it was impressive. "Your rest was uneventful, then?" Ketan sat down cross-legged nearby.

"Just another prank." She unconsciously rubbed a scab on her chin caused by the spark of another prank. "I understand they're not happy with me being here. Actually, there's a lot I don't understand. You don't treat me like a prisoner, but the other's have made it clear they'd like a moment alone to 'talk' to me. I even get the idea you're going to let me go once I'm all better." Although she fully expected Ketan's fellow bandits to be waiting for her when that happened.

"They see you as a threat," Ketan said softly, picking up a worn boot and idly fiddling with the leather. How could she explain the distrust her people had of anyone not from the sands? "What sort of prank?"

"A monster made of wind. It's gone now." She sipped her water and reached out to Titan. He crept over to her, his tail big and fluffy. To soothe him, she scratched his ears.

Gray eyes peered up from under loose dark hair, Ketan's head cloth wrapped around her shoulders. "Did you make it go away?" She was pretty sure she'd just completely failed in making that question sound casual.

Hunter's eyes narrowed, and she studied Ketan for a long moment before answering, "Yes. After facing the Raithnor, it really wasn't something to be scared of."

"How did you make it go away?" Ketan gave up trying to seem uninterested, and met those devastating eyes, watching them darken slightly.

"I don't know. I shoved my hand into it. It worked with that other magician when he created that demon!" she snapped defensively.

Ketan's eyes widened a little. "What other magician?" she asked carefully, wanting to make certain she understood.

"Don't you people talk to each other? Mathew told me his name, Fudgit or something. When you...they...whoever stole the Princess, he created that monster out of wind and sand. I remember I stabbed it in the eye, and when it came apart into sand, he was holding a hand over his own eye. They were linked. My memories are vague. I was in a lot of pain."

Hunter stood up. She wanted out of here. She suddenly felt trapped and panicky. She wanted her sword, and to be out of the caves. Remembering that monster and the good people she'd lost at the King's castle sat heavily on her.

"Fugit was banished from here years ago." Ketan stood in one flowing motion, watching the other woman with intent gray eyes. "That is twice, then, that you've turned away magic with your touch."

"Look, Ketan, I thank you for your caring for me while I was hurt, but I think it's time I left. I have responsibilities...a Princess to find. While your people may not have her, people who can do your magic can." She ignored Ketan's statement. Ignored it because she had no answer for it.

Gray eyes continued to watch the other woman prowl, for that was what she was doing, prowling the edges of the small cave. No wonder Hunter got along so well with the Sand Tiger, she was half cat herself.

"We don't have the Princess," Ketan repeated, again, for what had to be the hundredth time. "But maybe I can help you find out who does."

Hunter stopped moving and looked at Ketan, judging the truth of her words. "What do you propose?"

"I help you find your Princess." Ketan lip's quirked in amusement. She was pretty sure she'd just said that.

Hunter rolled her eyes. "And how are you going to do that?"

"Take you to one of the Veiled One's who can..." Ketan frowned a little, searching for the right words, "see upon the wind." Yes, that was close.

Shoulders relaxed for the first time, because finally something was moving forward. "Okay."

"Okay?" The desert woman looked surprised. She'd expected more arguing for some reason.

"It's a start. And I want my sword back."

"Not until we've left here." There was no way she was going to let Hunter carry a sword around the cave. That would just invite trouble.

"Everyone else has a weapon. Plus, it's my sword," she reasoned. Not that she really needed one. Fighting inside the cave was not wise, for there wasn't room to really swing a sword.

"No." Ketan crossed her arms, adopting a pose her mother had often used on her and her brother as children.

"Look, am I a prisoner or not? Because if I'm not, as you say, a prisoner, then I think, in good faith, you should give me my sword back. Unless, of course, someone's using it as a trophy."

She looked at Ketan suspiciously, who laughed, "No one is wearing it as a trophy. I can only imagine the bloodbath that would follow if you saw them wearing it. But you're not getting it back until we leave." She'd have to talk to her brother, quickly, and the others.

Hunter frowned, "It's a formality, really. I was just being polite." Then, in a blur of movement, she was standing next to Ketan, the woman's own dagger at her throat. A blessing from the Goddess. For until the moment she joined the army and pledged herself to Ryuu, she had been good. But with the Goddess' blessing, she had become amazing.

"This is how you repay someone who saved your life?" Ketan asked, holding herself still as she felt the metal pressed against her skin.

"Well, just think of it as role reversal. If I remember correctly, we've been here before." She smiled. "Only this time I'm awake."

"And not naked," Ketan couldn't resist adding.

"And I'm not kissing you." Hunter eased the dagger back then flipped it around in her hand, handing it back to its owner. "I wasn't going to hurt you, just show you I've been polite. I could have stolen people's weapons dozens of times over already. You're very lax when you think someone is weak. Wounded animals are the most dangerous."

"I never thought you were weak." Carefully, Ketan took back the dagger, watching the outlander for any signs of movement. "If I give you back your sword, it will only cause bloodshed."

Hunter sighed. "I promise not to hurt anybody."

"You can't promise for other people."

Hunter gritted her teeth. "Fine. No sword." But the next person who played a prank on her, was getting a broken limb.

"No sword until we leave," Ketan corrected, letting out a little breath. Getting Hunter Del Cor to change her mind was a hard and dangerous task. "I'll need to make arrangements for us to leave."

"Can I do anything to help?" Anything to do something other than stare at walls and deal with people's attitude towards her.

Ketan considered the other woman, a small smile tugging her lips as she had a thought. "Are you good with animals?"

"Good enough."

"Great." Ketan smiled. "There's something you can help with, then." It would also keep the other woman busy and out of the way while Ketan talked to the others.

"Great," Hunter said, smiling back, wondering if she was going to regret this.

King and Country

Part 4

The Veiled Ones

As a foul smelling liquid splattered across her face. Hunter knew she was going to do more than regret her words. The ugliest animal she had ever seen made a noise then trotted forward, nearly taking Hunter off her feet.

Thankfully the three beasts were tethered together. Unfortunately, the creatures were tethered together. So when the lead animal decided to get going, the others decided that was a good idea. The worst thing was that she couldn't take the time to wipe the spit off her face, because she was using her entire body to make the creature do what she wanted, and that was to stand still until Ketan got back.

She could feel the liquid run down the collar of her shirt. "Titan, could you do something?"

The Sand Tiger looked at her then at the beasts, his ears lying flat, and slunk behind a rock.

Someone laughed from not too far away. "What a sight, the Hero of Katturast, undone by a camel," the old woman cackled, her wrinkled face bared to the elements as she watched Hunter struggle with the three beasts.

"I...am...not...UNDONE," she growled out. "And I never claimed to be a hero."

"Perhaps, but that is what you are known as." With a grunt, the old woman sat down on a small slab of sandstone, sighing in relief when she was off her feet.

The lead animal stopped and its head swung around, its beady little eyes looking at her, and she knew it was getting ready to spit. "What, by Korgon's balls, do you think you're going to do? And what kind of animal spits to protect itself?" Frustrated, she swung out and smacked it on the nose.

The old woman cackled.

The animal gave a bellow, and for a moment, Hunter was certain nothing good was going to happen. But then, the animal settled down, blinking at her.

Hunter blinked in surprise. "So that's why you have that ring in your nose." Reaching out, she snagged the ring and the animal docilely followed wherever she moved.

"Similar to some humans you know, aren't they?" the old woman asked, watching with obvious amusement.

Hunter's eyes narrowed, and she looked at the old woman, almost certain that was a dig at her. She decided just to be silent. She was hot and sweaty from dealing with the beasts, and Ryuu only knew what was dripping down her front.

With almost malicious aforethought, the old woman pulled out a small gourd, tipping it back to enjoy the cool liquid inside. "Ahh...I always thought the spring here had some of the freshest water in the desert. Don't you think?"

The blonde woman's jaw clenched, but she didn't say anything, well used to the cruel pranks Ketan's people got a delight out of doing to her. "It was very good," she said crisply.

Drinking her fill, the old woman tossed the still half-full gourd towards the sweating woman, having pity on her. "The others think she is insane to volunteer to go with you. They're debating if they should try to stop her."

Cautiously, Hunter bent down and retrieved it. "Good. They should stop her, not that I don't think she can't handle herself. But she's going to isolate herself even more from her people for helping me. When it's over, will they take her back? Or if my King orders me to march back here for all of your heads, you know I will do my duty."

She carefully took a swallow of the water then dampened her fingertips and tried to wash the spit off her face without wasting water.

"Duty..." The old woman leaned back on the rock, enjoying the sunlight heating her old bones. "How different your concept is from ours of that word." She opened one eye, watching Hunter. "What do you care if Ketan isolates herself from us?"

Hunter was silent for a moment as she tried to figure out why she cared. "She's been kind to me, saved my life. Why, I'm not sure, since it's obvious the other's don't want me here."

"They're scared of you. Scared that your King's men will bring another war to us. The Pasha nearly drove us from the desert once. They think you'll drive us from it again," the old woman cackled. "A hero with no heart," she muttered, shaking her head, and then spoke louder. "Ketan has never walked a simple path. Perhaps her path is to lead you for a while."

"I have a heart," Hunter said defensively. "If I didn't I would have killed you all the first time someone made the fire blowup in my face."

"If you were un-hurt and had your sword, would you really have done nothing?" The old woman's eyes seemed to glow for a second from within.

"I didn't kill those people. I didn't even order my men to do it. I questioned them looking for you." She marched forward, forgetting about the beasts. "And when I found you I would have questioned you too. Probably more aggressively, since someone had broken into my rooms twice. But I would have discovered you didn't have the Princess either and I would have let you go. I don't kill without reason!"

"Your reasons," the old woman said evenly, looking up into the eyes of the outlander who stood over her. "You stand here, in the desert, among us, but you don't see." The old woman's voice was sad.

Hunter had no idea what it was with these desert people and their ability to get under her skin. She took a deep breath and said, "Don't pity me," and then turned around to see the stupid, ugly beasts running off. "Fuck!" she shouted, and then ran after them.

"It's not you I pity, outlander," the old woman said quietly, watching her chase after the camels.

#####3

"You want to do what?" Mathew asked, not certain he heard right.

"Mathew, listen to me. I need to do this. You said it yourself, she is honorable. She can help us." Ketan stood, pleading with the man. Outside the kitchen area, the rest of the tribe was gathered, pretending not to listen in. "I want to bring her to see the Veiled Ones."

"Ketan, you're insane. She can not be allowed to see them. What if she decided they're some sort of threat to her King or people? Yes, she's honorable, but only to her own kind first; we are a distant second." He sat down, rubbing his face, frantically thinking. He did want to allow this, but if he was wrong to trust Ketan, then he would be regulated back to the Queen's court to be another pretty boy waiting for marriage.

She moved closer, touching his shoulder. "You have to trust me on this, Mathew. Have I ever let you down?"

He reached up and clasped her hand. "No, you haven't, but there are more than just your needs to consider here." He let go of her hand and rubbed his nose.

"This isn't only about my needs." She narrowed her eyes. "She can help us. I know she can. It's worth the risk. You know her King could make war upon us if he wished."

He sighed. "I know, I know. I'm scared to be wrong about this. But I cannot deny all this has the taste of destiny on it. Go with your heartless warrior and find us a miracle. Already we are noticing an increase of the Insane King's troops."

Ketan staggered a little at his phrasing, his words sounding entirely too close to those of the desert witch she'd visited those years ago upon becoming a woman. "Stay safe." She offered him her arm in a warrior's grip. "Find easy shade and fresh water."

"We are going to retreat back to the main camp before the next full moon. Look for us there." He reached out and grabbed her hand. "If this all goes wrong, you have to marry me and take me away from the court, because that will be where I'll have to suffer," he teased.

"You know the desert witch said I'd never marry." She smiled. "But if it all goes wrong, I'll find you and take you away from the court. Tell Malkia it was all my idea."

"Trust me, I will." He let go, hoping it wasn't the last time he saw her.

#####3

"I thought you said you got along well with animals?" Ketan called out, climbing up the sand dune to where Hunter was with the three camels. She was dragging several large packs, which were heavy enough to leave deep drag marks in the shifting sands, along behind her.

"I let my guard down and they ran off," Hunter admitted sheepishly. "How was I to know they were so stupid they'd run off into the desert?"

"They're smarter than we are. They know they don't want to go where we want them to." Ketan grimaced, pulling the bundles the last few feet. "Supplies. Help me get them on the camels?"

"Okay." Hunter eyed the bundles and reluctantly let go of the nose ring. She was even sweatier now than before, after running after the animals in the sand and heat.

There were three bundles, most of the weight due to clay pots with the all important water inside them. A system of straps and ropes kept the loads balanced across the backs of the camels, between their two humps. It took a couple of nose smacks to get the camels to behave, but they managed.

"Where is your sand...er...Titan?" Ketan asked, tightening a strap.

"He, likes these animals as much as I do, but he can hide and I cannot." Hunter replied.

Finished with the camels Ketan hid a smile and reached into a pack and produced a piece of fabric handing it to the Duke.

Hunter grabbed it and looked at it, frowning as she turned the fabric a bit. "What is it?"

"Something to protect you from the Golden Sun Serpent," Ketan answered.

"That still doesn't answer my question. It's fabric, what do I do with it?" Hunter retorted, looking over at Ketan.

"You wear it," Ketan answered, playfully. "Here. Let me show you." She moved closer, taking the fabric from Hunter's hands.

"Okay." Hunter let her take the fabric.

"Like this," Ketan said, her voice quieter as she moved closer to the warrior. "It protects your skin, but is loose enough to keep you from getting too hot. This end you tuck around your face to cover your mouth and nose, to protect them from the sand." Quickly, Ketan stepped back, Mathew's choice of words still on her mind.

Hunter was still for a moment, perceiving an odd feeling she had no words for. "Um, thank you." The head covering was mildly claustrophobic, but she'd get use to it.

"Make sure to shade your eyes. The Serpent's rays will blind you if you're not careful." They wouldn't travel during the worst of the day, but even as his time in the sky faded, the Serpent could still be vicious.

"Yes. Can I have my sword back now?"

"I don't know if I should trust you with it," Ketan grumbled, unhooking the sheath from her pack and offering it over.

"Either you trust me or you don't at this point." Hunter fitted the scabbard back onto its spot on her waist belt.

"Do you trust me?" Ketan looped a rope through the ring on the lead camel's nose and started deeper into the desert.

Hunter was silent for a long time, searching herself for an honest answer. "Yes, I do," she said quietly. So far, Ketan had been true to her word.

The desert woman looked over her shoulder quickly at that, gray eyes surprised behind the desert wrap she wore. "I trust you too," she admitted, just as quietly. "Come, we have far to go."

Hunter nodded while her mind worked on the quandary her life was currently in.

#####3

"Another day's travel and we'll be inside the Sea of Fire," Ketan remarked, wetting her lips on one of the precious jugs of water before passing it to Hunter. They were resting in the shadow of one of the large sandstone's that dotted this part of the desert. Here, on the edge of the great sands, there was still life. Caves, rocks, and even plants still dotted the ever shifting sands. Deeper into the desert, that would all change.

Hunter took the jug and took a mouthful, holding it in her mouth for a moment, savoring it. She stared out into the sand and rock, enjoying the colors, its danger. She swallowed then took a smaller sip before cupping her hand and pouring a small amount in her palm for Titan. The Sand Tiger's ears perked up and he padded over, sniffing her palm a moment before his rough tongue

lapped up the liquid. She did it a second time then handed it back to Ketan, chuckling at Titan's scowl.

Gray eyes watched with interest at the interplay between the two. The Sand Tiger was almost as big a mystery as his mistress to Ketan.

Hunter wondered again at the wisdom of her actions. She should report in. Her men would be worried, and Henri needed to pay desperately for his actions towards her. But there was a chance to track down the kidnappers of the Princess, and if she didn't jump, it was possible it would be gone and she would be left chasing ghosts in the desert.

Her first duty was her mission for the Princess, vengeance would come after honor. Hunter scratched Titan's ears and looked over at Ketan, quirking an eyebrow in question at the look she was getting. "Question?" she asked softly.

"You're different than I expected," Ketan answered, evasively, as she capped the jug and returned it to her pack. She'd refill it later from one of the larger jugs strapped to the three camels. "You seemed angry all the time when I met you on the ship, and then at your King's palace. Here, you're more..." the desert woman trailed off, making a vague gesture with her hands.

Studying the shadows thrown across the sand by the rocks they hid behind, Ketan calculated how much longer they should rest before setting out again. Nearby, one of the camels gave a grunt as it competed with his brother for some of the sparse, thorny shrubs.

Hunter felt uncomfortable at Ketan's words. She was angry all the time, a gift from Catherine. Being Duke had made her paranoid, and cold on top of that.

"There is a certain amount of freedom in being a soldier. No thought but to follow command," she replied.

She got up and moved a little ways away from Ketan and unsheathed her sword from its scabbard. She moved slowly in a pattern of moves, stretching muscles that had not been used in a while as well as getting used to the looser clothes that Ketan had given her.

The other woman grinned, pulling out a small bag and breaking apart a piece of the flat bread that her people ate at nearly every meal. Undoing her head cloth, she chewed it, watching Hunter move with a sudden flash of envy. She was obviously a great warrior, her movements fluid and lethal. "You enjoy being a soldier?" she asked after a while, just to keep out the silence. It was easy enough to go mad in the desert sun without adding in loneliness.

Hunter ended the move in a low crouch, one leg stretched out in front of her while the other was bent, the gleaming sword held out perfectly still. While it looked good, Hunter was sweating from the strain; her injuries had been severe.

"I don't dislike it," she said after pondering the question seriously for a moment. A brief smile flickered over her lips, remembering her childhood dream to be a bard, living free from the responsibilities of her father's titles and lands.

"You don't dislike it?" Ketan repeated, eyebrows raised. "That doesn't mean you like it. Since I already know you don't like being a Duke, what do you like?"

Instead of answering, Hunter asked back, "Do you like being a warrior? I saw you a couple of times working out with your fellow bandits. You're quite good." She stood up slowly and sheathed her sword then started stretching out her muscles.

"I'm one of the best in my tribe," Ketan said, defensively. "I like the dance of the blade." That wasn't really an answer, and she knew it.

Hunter smiled. "Well, pick up your sword, then, and let's dance. I need a good practice. I've gone soft while recovering."

"I wouldn't want to hurt you, you are still recovering." Ketan smiled, rising from where she sat cross-legged to pick up her curved blade

"Generous, but I'm certain I can take care of myself. Come on, you've already beaten me once. I'm sure you have nothing to worry about." Her smile got bigger as she saw Ketan rise.

"I had an advantage then. You were naked and got tangled up with Titan." Ketan swung the scimitar back and forth, feeling her shoulders loosen up and her smile getting wider. This was fun.

It was on the tip of Hunter's tongue to ask why Ketan had kissed her, but the words wouldn't come, and she let it go. "Well, now we are more even. I even appear to be dressed." She unsheathed her sword again and took up a relaxed stance. "Plus, this is all in fun, just to help me get back in shape."

"Of course it is." Ketan's smile got a little bit vicious. Unlike her match the day before at the caves, she attacked swiftly and without the customary bow and testing of one's abilities. She'd already crossed swords once with Hunter, and there was no doubt that the other woman was an expert with her sword. She had no fear of accidentally wounding the other woman, so she attacked with everything, letting out a war cry as she did.

Hunter tried to ignore the way Ketan would sometimes drop her right shoulder right before a vicious string of attacks and just enjoy a good fight with a good opponent. Finally, the perfectionist in her couldn't take it. Once again the shoulder dropped, giving away Ketan's intentions, and Hunter moved swiftly. She grabbed Ketan's wrist, holding the sword, and then spun her body into Ketan's, her back flush with the woman's front, preventing any movement. "Stop. Don't move. Just breath."

"What are you doing?!" Ketan jerked in surprise, only to remain right where she was, remembering, again, how strong Hunter was.

Hunter sheathed her sword then reached across her body and touched Ketan's shoulder. "Do you feel that? Do you see that? It tells me your intentions as loudly as if you were shouting them."

Ketan was rigid in her arms, furious about so easily having been immobilized by this outlander. There was another feeling there, similar to the one that had taken over when she'd fought a then naked Hunter back at the King's castle. "Remove your hands from me."

Hunter didn't move for a second, as she pondered what to do. She was hot and sweaty, and the heat from where their bodies touched was almost uncomfortable. She reflected this was the most intimate contact she'd had in years. She took a deep breath and let go, letting her hands fall to her sides and stepping away from Ketan. Anger was palpable from the way the woman held her body. "I meant no disrespect."

Ketan whirled on her, eyes fierce. "How dare you?" she snarled, skin hot where she'd been pressed up against the other woman. Anger was a much easier emotion to deal with than the other one, so she focused on it.

Hunter looked at her calmly. "How dare I...what? Speak the truth?"

That stung more than it probably should have, but Ketan didn't pay attention to that inconvenient fact. Instead, she stepped towards the arrogant woman, jabbing a finger at her. "How dare you grab me! I'm not some lowly servant back at your Dukedom, or whatever it is, that you can do with as you wish."

Hunter was insulted. "I have never done what you are implying, nor have I abused anybody in my employ without just cause."

"We've all heard how nobles rule their lands in your King's kingdom," Ketan shot back, crossing her arms over her chest, all thoughts of physically sparring forgotten for now. "Take what you want, I believe is what happens. Just like your King and his penchant for desert girls."

The Duke was hurt. Apparently Ketan did view her as the others had. Jaw clenched, Hunter said nothing, there was nothing she could say. She'd heard rumors, seen the young women with the King, and though disgusted by it, did nothing. But she was not like that. She turned slightly and barked out. "Titan, no!" The Sand Tiger was crouched silently behind Ketan, ready to strike.

The Tiger looked at its human, confused, but uncoiled from its pounce and walked back to the shade with stiff legs.

Startled, Ketan sidestepped, eyes taking in the crouched tiger and then back to his mistress. She'd made things worse, but there was no way to take back those words now. "We should go. The Sun Serpent has almost done his ride across the sky." What did she care about what an arrogant outlander thought of her? She almost believed it.

Hunter looked away until she got her hurt feelings under control then looked back. "Why does it matter? I am no better than the King, so perhaps we should part ways now. I will take my beast and return to my people." She refastened her head covering and started back to the camels.

"And do what, send the King's men here, raid us until there is nothing left to raid? No." Ketan stood proudly, eyes flashing again. "The Veiled One's will know where your Princess is kept. Then you can go," she stated, as if she could stop Hunter if she really wanted to leave.

"I'm not angry," Hunter said, swinging up onto the camel trying not to wince. "Hurry up, let us find your veiled ones and then you can be rid of me before I can rape and pillage your children."

"Yes, I can see how not angry you are," Ketan called, mounting her own camel and making sure the spare one was still lashed to the lead. "Outlander," she said under her breath, getting them moving out into the still hot day.

#####3

Hunter was kneeling in the sand waiting for their mid-day break to be over. She was praying to her Goddess, which was better than the angry silence that existed. It reinforced Hunter's belief that the only one who wouldn't disappoint her was herself. She was nursing her hurt, letting it curl around her heart creating a wall.

Ketan, for her part, had gathered a small amount of brush together and lit a very small fire. She'd been happy to find some of the long, waxy grass growing behind the boulder they were using for shade. The grass smoked as she tossed a leaf one at a time onto the fire, wafting the smoke over her, almost as if she were bathing in it.

"You should try this. Amalek is rare this time of year," she called out, finally. The silence between them was almost a physical thing this day.

The wind was picking up, tugging at Hunter's hair while sand picked up and slapped into her face or against her skin. One eye opened, debated, and then she asked, curious, "What is Amalek?"

Ketan very nearly sighed with relief. Even outright hostility was better than the strained silence. "Amalek," she held up a bunch of the long, waxy-looking grass. "Its smoke kills the sand fleas." She pulled up her robe, wafting as much smoke over the fabric as she could, and then over her long, dark hair.

It was better than nothing. What she really wanted was a nice cool bath. Hunter stood up with a finale prayer to Ryu and made her way over to the fire.

"Like this," Ketan showed her, tossing a few long strands on the fire and immediately using her hands to wave the smoke towards her.

It smelled awful, but it wasn't the worst thing Hunter's nose had smelled. She threw on a small handful and tried to step in the way of the smoke. She coughed and rubbed a hand briskly through her short hair.

Ketan turned a laugh into a cough, ducking behind her own long hair as she tried to get as much smoke into it as possible. Sand fleas were nasty little things, causing raised welts wherever they happened to attach themselves.

Titan looked on amused, well protected with his dense fur and scales.

"I don't suppose the veiled ones will have a bathtub?"

"I don't know," Ketan admitted, using her fingers to comb through the long hair. She almost envied Hunter's short crop, but it wouldn't be right for her to cut her hair.

Hunter took off the loose fitting top and shook it out. She held it out into the smoke trying to coat it in the oily fumes, leaving her in her undershirt, the only piece of clothing that she had that was actually hers.

"Pity. I would love a bath. But I suppose it's a silly question, after all, we are in a desert."

"Maybe they do. If anyone in the desert other than Malkia would have enough water to do that, it would be the Veiled Ones." Ketan discreetly watched the other woman out of the corner of her eye.

The grass burned out and Hunter brought the top to her nose, sniffing, debating to do another handful. Good enough, she put the top back on.

"How much farther 'til we reach them?" Hunter asked, sitting down against the boulder.

"Maybe five days, maybe less," Ketan shrugged, sitting back on her heels and watching the last of the small fire burn itself out. "Who can say with the Veiled Ones?"

"You do know where they are?" Hunter asked, concerned by that response.

"Roughly." Ketan stood up, belting on her sword, the wind whipping around her ankles.

Frowning, the desert woman tucked the loose fabric around her face, eyes narrowing a little as she watched a dust devil whip up out in the desert, spinning loose sand up into the air then dying away just as quickly.

Hunter sighed. Of course she just sat down, so they were going to get up again. "Time to get moving?" The wind kicked up some sand and Hunter winced as it got in her eye.

"Hmmm?" Ketan said, not really paying attention. She was looking up into the sky, puzzled. Behind them, the camels started to let out loud grunts, huffing as they pulled on their ropes,

agitated. Concerned, Ketan turned and swiftly started to climb the sandstone boulder, eager to see from the top.

Titan growled, standing up, his ears laid flat against his skull.

Quickly, the desert woman climbed the twelve foot tall boulder, coming to a crouch at the top, gray eyes widening as she stared out into the horizon. "By the Ancients!" she cried out, stunned at what she saw.

Instinctively, Hunter grabbed her sword and ran over to Ketan. "What is it?"

The entire horizon was dark brown, a swirling mass of sand that was rushing across the desert towards the lone boulder she stood on. The front edges whirled and wreathed, almost as if the entire thing was one living thing.

"Sand storm!" Ketan yelled, horrified.

There was no time to do anything but jump down off the boulder. The storm was upon them in an instant, far faster than any natural storm could have moved. Sand filled the air as the wind scoured them with its brutal gusts.

Ketan screamed, the sound lost in the wind as something dark and hard slammed into her head.

#####3

Pale eyelashes fluttered against dark skin then opened, revealing confused greenish-gold eyes. It was dark and suffocatingly warm. She inhaled and choked as she breathed in sand. Legs and torso were pinned by weight moving only slightly, coarse sand scraping against flesh. Panicking, Hunter began to thrash, realizing she was buried alive under the flesh of the desert. Logic inserted itself and she calmed. Taking another breath, she breathed in and spat out, waiting for gravity to tell her which way was down. Her hands were in front, luckily, making a pocket of air.

The spit fell back, smacking her cheek, and she started to dig her way up and out.

The sun was setting as her head popped out and she gulped great lungfuls of air, sweat cooling on her body as she knelt next to the hole she had dug out of. Her eyes gazed around the world around her, and found it much changed.

Gone were all the markers Ketan had pointed out, swept clean of their presence in this place.

She staggered to her feet, jaw clenched in pain as she felt some of her ribs grate against each other. Her face covering was gone, and one sleeve had been ripped away. She swallowed, throat dry and painful, and started to look around her for the camels, Titan, and Ketan.

Feet followed a spiraling path from her exit hole from the womb in the desert. She circled around and around in bigger and bigger circles looking for signs that she was not alone. She came to a

rise and found the camels, dead, tangled together in a mass of lumpy fur and meat. Making her way down the sand dune towards them, one raised its head and gave a mournful noise. Hunter smiled in relief. It was a beautiful noise, giving her hope. She ran faster and slid the rest of the way down the sand to the beast.

Struggling to rise, the ropes and tethers of its dead brothers held it bound. With her sword, Hunter made quick work of the bindings, freeing the beast. For once, the creature seemed happy to see her, and stood still and close while Hunter checked the other beasts for supplies. She nearly wept when she saw most of the containers of water were broken. She was able to salvage two, and strapped them to the living beast. She scavenged a few other things from the dead and gave to the living before continuing on. It was dark now, and she was shivering in the cold. Once the sun set in the desert, the temperature dropped rapidly.

Leading the beast, she forced her feet forward, left foot, right foot, and repeat. Up a sand dune and down again. Up and she paused, looking at what appeared to be a small cluster of rocks only. She swore it had moved. Cautiously, she made her way down the sandy slope. The rocks had moved. Looking very much like Titan sitting up.

"Titan?"

Silence, and then her answer was a "Yowr." That sounded loud in the silence of the desert at night. Hunter let go of the camel and raced over to him.

He butted his head into her stomach and she ignored the pain. Running her hands over his fur and scratching his back, she laughed a frantic, joyful sound that died the moment she looked over next to him and saw the still unmoving form of Ketan.

Thankfully the camel had not run off this time. They had a weak fire of scrub kindling Ketan had kept in one of the packs. Hunter stirred a small pot of fatty broth that she was trying to cook on the fire.

Her eyes drifted over to Ketan again. She had done the best she could with the limited knowledge of healing she possessed. While she had followed the arts of war, one could not exist in such an environment of death and disease without learning the counterpoints of health and life. She had learned some things but what she hadn't learned was very apparent. Ketan was alive, unconscious, but alive. Something, probably a rock, had smashed into the back of her head. There had been dried blood caked with sand around an indentation. Hunter had cleaned it the best she could, but was worried about the swelling and the way the woman remained unconscious.

She had checked the rest of the woman as well, finding no other immediate injuries in need of attention. There were older scars, proof that Ketan's life had not been easy or free of strife. Hunter knew that with a head injury there was chance of damage to the neck and the spinal chord. She found her armor bag on her dead camel and looted the neck piece. It had been hard, but in the end left the rest of her armor to the desert; they could not handle the extra weight. She tore off her other sleeve and gave the piece of metal additional padding on the inside and buckled

it around the woman's neck, giving her support and brace for the upcoming travel they would have to do.

She had also taken the time to bind her ribs the best she could with a piece of fabric; not the best solution, but it would work in a pinch.

The animal fat had melted into the water and was simmering in the spices. Hunter took it off the heat, letting it cool down. Carefully, she lifted Ketan and nestled the head in the crook of one arm then spooned some of the broth to Ketan's lips. "Come on. Just a little bit. I promise, it's not great but it will help. Your body needs fuel to heal."

Most of it ended up on Ketan's front while a little bit was actually swallowed in reflex. The metal of the armor was cool against her skin, and in the light looked oddly like a collar. Hunter grinned, knowing Ketan would kick her ass for even thinking such thoughts. The woman was far too independent to ever be collared by anybody. "Looks like an outlander collared you, though," Hunter murmured softly.

She sipped some of the broth and thought about going back and cutting up some of the dead camel for dinner, but found she had no energy to follow through. Shivering, she placed Ketan next to the fire then wrapped herself around the woman's other side, protecting her from the elements as much as she was able. "This doesn't mean I like you," she cautioned the unconscious woman. "I'm just paying you back for helping me."

#####3

For the first two days they traveled in silence, Ketan strapped to the camel while Hunter and Titan walked ahead, leading the beast. Hunter had no idea where to go. The first morning she looked at Titan and asked him, 'Which way?' The tiger just seemed to look at her and sigh, but then started walking and she followed.

On the third day of following Titan, Hunter began to talk in desperation to keep her mind off her thirst and hunger. She drank and ate sparingly, not knowing when they would find water or food again.

As they traveled, Hunter told Ketan about growing up with her father, about her mother's death when she was only ten, giving birth to a brother she would never know, the baby having died four days later. She told her about finding out about Stephen and her father's mistress, and her loss of faith in her father. Finally, she talked about Catherine, her betrayal, the fight with the bandit Royia, and her revenge years later. After that she was silent for a day, her mood dark in remembrance of her fickle girlfriend.

There were hills in the distance, rocky stone rising up now breaking the skyline. This was where Titan seemed to be leading them. They were thin now...her, the camel, Ketan, and Titan. Her and Titan were not as hungry as yesterday because the tiger had managed to catch a rabbit, but even that had been weak fare. The camel's hump was small, almost gone, and Hunter was certain this was not a good thing.

As the days passed, the hills got bigger as they got closer, and the Duke started to speak again, this time talking about the war and the horrors she had seen, especially in the Pasha's palace. "I should have stayed and helped that girl. I mean, he was dead after all and he'd done such horrible things to her. But there was so much blood, I was drenched in it. That's something you don't realize when people talk about the glory in war, about how much blood there is in a single death...about how personal it is to watch life leave another person's body.

'So I ran, ran with that golden sword in my hand and became a hero. But I left that woman to deal with the horror I'd left behind. I'd say that makes me a coward not a hero."

She sighed and looked up to Ketan, who was still unconscious strapped to the camel. "I know you don't like me much, but I do wish you'd wake up." Hunter was well aware the longer Ketan was unconscious the less the woman's chances were of ever waking up.

The next day they were in the hills and Hunter discovered they weren't hills, per say, but a canyon cut into the belly of the desert. They descended a path into the canyon, and the relief from the sun was an amazing feeling to Hunter. The lower they went the walls rose, defusing the light, creating shade. The camel balked, squealing in terror, and

Hunter grabbed the frayed lead rope trying to control the animal.

Looking around now at the cliff-like walls, she noticed dozens and dozens of cave mouths carved into them. Looking out and down at them were Sand Tigers, young cubs at their feet, and Hunter swallowed. They'd found some sort of breeding or birthing ground for the tigers.

She glared at Titan. "A hell of a time for you to remember your family."

But there was nothing to do but move forward, skin crawling. An hour later, the stress of all the predators was too much for the camel and its heart gave out, making the camel collapse into the hard packed dirt. Hunter's voice cursed, echoing around them. Thankfully Ketan was okay. Frustrated to the point of tears, Hunter made camp trying to figure out what, by Korgon's balls, were they going to do now.

#####3

The next morning Hunter constructed a makeshift sled from the camel's saddle, flipped upside down with the top down and the bottom up, and had strapped Ketan to it. They needed water. There was only half a ceramic container left, but the plants inside the canyon were green, hinting at water somewhere. She removed her top tunic, rolled it up, and placed it around Ketan's head for extra stabilization.

She grimaced and stared at the contraption of leather bits she had made then lifted it up and slipped her arms into it and fastened the buckles. The Sand Tigers were getting closer; she could sense them waiting and watching, the dead camel too much a temptation. Hunter was not going to push what luck they'd had so far.

They had to find water. That was the driving force that kept her moving. She needed to get them all to water. Ketan had a fever infection from her less than stellar healing skills.

Leather bit into her arms, rubbing the skin until it bled. But she kept moving. Everyone depended on her and she wouldn't let them down. Her ribs ached with every breath, and time had no meaning.

Her eyes were closed as she continued to move forward, hauling Ketan with her. Titan was somewhere up ahead. She stumbled over a rock and collapsed heavily to her knees, crying out. For a moment she stayed where she had fallen before opening an eye. Then with a gasp, the other one opened, and both went wide in panic. Heart racing in her chest, her right hand grasped her sword hilt.

A dragon lay curled around a small pond of water.

The need for water won out. She unbuckled the harness and left Ketan, staggering forward. The beast's eyes never opened, and as she got closer, she realized that it had been carved out of the mountain side, its body covered in dirt, dust, and bird feces, which was a shame since it had been beautifully done, no detail forgotten or left out. It came out of the hill, curving around the pond, most of its body hidden by the water or buried in the cliff face.

Titan was at her side pressing into her leg, and she reached down, touching his head. "We're going to be okay," she said in a hoarse, croaking voice as she sheathed her sword.

Scrambling back to Ketan, she unstrapped the woman from the sled and carried her to the water's edge. There, she eased Ketan's fever-scorched body into the water as she sat at the very edge, Ketan's head in her lap.

She was vaguely aware of Titan lapping at the water next to her, drinking his fill. Her eyes were closed, relief flooding her very core.

She blinked, eyes opening. She was alone at the pond's cool shore.

"Sad, isn't it?" a voice said behind her.

"What?" She turned and saw the old man, who was staring at the dragon.

"It's beautiful. I've never seen so much artistry."

He sighed and shook his head sadly.

"She lost so much; a lover, her daughter, she just gave into despair and curled up and went to sleep. The elders use her now."

Hunter blinked, confused, "The sculptor?"

He laughed, but even that was a sad sound. "No, the dragon. You need to wake her up, her punishment has been paid in full ten times over."

"What? Who are you and why can't you ever make any sense!" she snapped.

His head cocked to the side. "Never mind that. You need to wake up, you and yours are in danger," he snapped.

Hunter inhaled loudly, her eyes snapping open. She was aware of Titan's growls and the sound of feet, a lot of feet. She eased Ketan's head off her lap, leaving it on the sandy shore of the pond. She stood and turned, drawing her sword. There were a dozen of them, more women than men, but all impressively armed.

"Surrender, defiler of the Pond of Wisdom!" a woman barked at her.

"Defiler of what? Look, this is just a misunderstanding. I didn't know it was the pond of anything. We needed help and water. I just saw it."

"Shut up, outlander, and throw down your weapon!" They advanced closer, arrogance written all over their faces.

"I'd feel better if you put yours down first."

"Captain, she's attacked one of our people," a man said, pointing at Ketan's still body.

Hunter turned, "What? No. I was trying to help..." She shut up as spear was stabbed at her and dodged.

She was too tired to put up much of a struggle, but her anger and frustration at the last couple of days gave her a temporary edge. Then, there was Titan, an unexpected surprise to the guards.

They were doing well, keeping them at bay, when out of the corner of her eye she noticed Ketan slip down into the water. Abandoning her fight, she turned and dove for the woman just as her body slipped under the water. She followed her in, and for a moment she saw nothing, and then things became clear and she realized that the statue of the dragon was perfectly carved in the water as it was out of it, and there was a small crack, a wound in its side.

Her hand found Ketan's and she pulled them both out with a gasp as her head broke the surface of the water. Sensing something to her right, Hunter turned and looked just in time to see a spear butt come at her face. Then it was nothing but darkness.

#####3

The first thing she noticed was that her mouth tasted like she had swallowed a sand dune or two. Blearily, she opened her eyes, groaning a little at the light that was coming in from somewhere nearby.

Ketan swallowed past the grimy taste in her mouth and coughed, immediately regretting both actions. "Hunter?" she mumbled, licking dry lips as she tried to figure out where she was.

There were voices. "She's healing so quickly now, do you think..."

"No, I don't. She's young and healthy. Worry more about getting her to wake up than the..."

The voice paused.

"Dear me, did she speak?"

There were footsteps and shadows loomed over her. "Are you with us, dear?"

The shadows were nice, they kept out the light. "What happened?" Her eyes were still trying to focus on the shapes over her; they were just bleary shadows for now.

"Get the water," one of the shadows said to the other.

"We're not really sure what happened. You've taken a blow to the back of the head," the voice continued.

They'd been in the Sea of Fire, Ketan thought fuzzily.

"Here, Fatima," a voice whispered.

"Alright, my assistant and I are going to sit you up then I will hand you some water. Can you handle it?" the voice asked kindly.

"Water," Ketan croaked, her body demanding it.

"Yes, but sip it."

Hands reached under her arms and gently lifted her up against soft pillows. Then a cool cup was placed into her hands.

She whimpered in pleasure as the cool liquid quenched the desert of her mouth as it slid down her throat. It took a force of will to stop her from greedily drinking it all. Weakly rubbing at her eyes cleared them enough to see the two women who were helping her upright.

"Where am I?" Ketan managed to ask, between sips. Light streamed in through carved rock windows nearby, painfully bright to her eyes.

"You are at the Arcane home of the Magi, teachers of the Veiled Ones. You were found, as I have been told, in the pool of Wisdom," the older of the two women said calmly.

"I heard an outlander tried to drown you," the younger eager looking woman said.

Memory rushed back and Ketan started, jerking upright, only to groan as the world swayed crazily around her. Clenching her eyes tight, she took slow breaths until the world stopped spinning. "Hunter...is she all right?" The sand storm, she remembered the sand storm rushing up on them.

The older, matronly-looking woman shoved her hands into the pockets of her robe and sighed. "Marianne, you may go finish your report on the healing properties of Dog Wort root."

The younger woman looked at the older one blankly, "But I don't have a report..."

"You do now. Now go."

The older woman sighed and turned back to her patient. "How about we try some broth?"

Leaning back on the pillows, Ketan sipped more water, starting to take in the room around her. Everything seemed to have been carved from red and dark rock, even the raised platform she was sitting up on. Other than the old woman and the young woman who had just left, there was no one else around. Ketan's stomach rumbled in answer before she could.

"Broth would be nice, thank you. Is Hunter all right though? There was a sand storm. I remember it coming..." she trailed off, her memories ending there.

The older woman hesitated, "You were found with another, I'm not sure her name. I'll be right back with some broth."

"You mentioned an outlander drowning me?" Ketan called, worried now by that hesitation.

"They found you in the Pool of Wisdom, the outlander over you. She claimed to be helping you." The woman was fidgeting even more, clearly uncomfortable.

Ketan watched the old woman, a slow frown forming as she tried to figure out what could have happened. She'd never heard of this Pool of Wisdom, but that wasn't strange, all the Veiled Ones took their oaths of silence seriously. Although, now that she thought about it, Ketan wondered why the old woman wasn't wearing a veil right then.

"She must have brought me here," she decided, trying to sit up a bit more, "across the Sea of Fire. She must have saved me from the sand storm."

The older woman sighed and seemed to make a decision. She came forward and pulled up a stool next to her patient.

"If she did help you, you'll need your strength. Everything seemed to be going fine. They were questioning her informally; seemed you slipped into the pool while the guards and her were fighting. You were unconscious and would have drowned had she not stopped what she was doing and run to your aid. In the middle of a fight I think that shows a certain amount of care.

During the questioning though, something happened, as worse a thing as any that could...she went berserk and tried to kill the lover of the Captain of the Magi Guards."

"She'd never do that without reason," Ketan argued, worry in her voice. She'd already decided to trust what the old woman said, but it was hard to imagine Hunter going insane and trying to kill for no reason. "I need to see her," she decided, trying to get up, only to have her legs betray her and fall back against the pillows.

"I shouldn't have said anything. You need to get better then we'll see if we can help your friend."

"I am better," she said, knowing it a lie as she said it and flushing a little under the old woman's look. "I don't know your name to thank you for your hospitality." It was awkward trying to thank someone for healing you without knowing their name.

"I am Fatima, head Teacher of the healing arts. Not blessed, as you've noticed, to wear a veil." The woman gave Ketan a through once over, "Broth and then we'll see if your friend can have visitors."

Since she had no choice, Ketan nodded. "Thank you, Fatima, for your healing. I am Ketan."

"I am glad you are well enough to be difficult." The older woman smiled and then got up.

"You obviously do not know Hunter if you think I am difficult."

"I have not been blessed to tend her wounds, no." Fatima smiled then exited Ketan's room.

Closing her eyes, Ketan leaned back on the pillows. She'd just rest for a moment then she'd make them take her to Hunter and find out what the strange outlander had done to get herself into trouble this time.

A moment later, she was asleep.

#####3

There was a dark-haired woman standing outside the cell that held Hunter, her skin not dark enough to be a true daughter of the desert. Her blue eyes were rimmed red and unshed tears were pooled in there depths. "We were children, how many times can I say I'm sorry. I'll talk to Bahadur, I'll tell her..."

"What will you tell her, what a whore you are or a lying traitor?" The voice was cold, cutting cruelly through the air. "It runs in your family, you know? I ended up beheading your father, and your little sister just spreads her legs open for Stephen. Not your fault, I guess; it's just bad breeding." Hunter didn't know why she was being so cruel, but she couldn't stop herself from saying the words that just tumbled out of her lips. Once said though, she did not feel the satisfaction she had dreamt she would feel at their uttering.

The woman held a hand to her mouth as if to stop the sobs, but they came and tears fell from her eyes. Sobbing, she ran from the cell, bumping into Ketan. "I'm sorry. I wasn't..." the woman stuttered out before fleeing.

"Hello..." Ketan trailed off, turning to watch the sobbing woman flee down the dimly lit pathway. The old woman had brought her down through seemingly endless stairs cut into the rock of the desert, to where they were holding Hunter.

She'd caught the end of the outlander's words and wondered at the coldness to them. "Hunter?" She moved forwards slowly, the world tended to tilt if she moved her head too fast.

"Go away!" Hunter barked out. "I've had enough questioning."

Hunter was thankful that she was short, as she could sit on the floor with her back against the wall and stretch out. If she'd been taller, that would have been impossible.

"I'm not here to question you." Ketan leaned against the solid metal grate that covered the entry to the cave-like hole of a jail cell. Far behind her she could hear the old woman's voice saying something to the woman who had just fled away from Hunter.

"Ketan?"

"Hunter," she leaned her head against the cool metal, enjoying the feel of it against her forehead, "you weren't trying to drown me, were you?"

"What do you think?" Hunter snapped back, the flood of relief she had felt at hearing Ketan's voice disappearing when she heard the question. She sighed. "I know you don't like me, Ketan, but they are misunderstanding what they saw at that pool of water."

"That's what I told Fatima," Ketan laughed a little. "Apparently, though, they're willing to accept that. They're a little upset you tried to strangle the Captain of the guards' lover to death with your hands though."

Hunter was silent for a long while. "She deserves worse," the three words finally rasped out, breaking the silence heavy with unsaid hurt.

A hint of a memory, or maybe a dream, Ketan wasn't sure, kept her from asking more. "Thank you, for saving me. I remember the sand storm, but nothing after that."

"It was a brutal thing. I don't think I've ever seen one so fierce." There was a rattling of chain, and Hunter shifted and squirmed, making her way to the grate. Shuffling on her knees, she winced as she scraped open a wound on one.

Once at the grate, she held out her fingers, coming through the openings and brushing Ketan's forehead. She smiled. "I wanted to make sure you were real. You had a head injury, and you were unconscious for so long I was worried."

Ketan smiled, brushing those fingers with her own. "It was strong magic. Someone summoned that storm to stop us." Gray eyes went wide as she saw the chains, usually reserved for a common criminal or murderer, they had put the Duke of Del Cor into. "They chained you!"

Hunter barked out a laugh. She was in piss poor condition. There was a bruise running down her face from her temple, if the throbbing there was any indication. Gaunt and thin, her ribs were visible, and there were sores on her arms from the leather straps she had made to help her haul Ketan.

"It's the least of my worries. They're probably being kind since I did try to strangle the Captain's whor...er girlfriend."

Gray eyes flashed. "You saved me from the Sea of Fire." Ketan lifted her chin, another thought occurring. "Where is Titan?" She had no authority here, but by the Elementals, the Veiled Ones were going to listen to her.

"I think he ran off. I have hope that he did. I don't know." Wearily, Hunter let her head rest against the metal.

Ketan was quiet for a bit, simply watching the exhausted looking woman. "Did they do this?" she asked quietly, reaching a finger through the bars to touch the massive bruise that was swelling part of the outlander's face.

"Yes, but to be fair, they thought I was defiling their pool." She let her eyes close for a moment, enjoying the kind touch.

Voices came down the corridor, one of them Fatima's, causing Ketan to withdraw her fingers. "I'll get you out," she promised, not sure how but she would.

Hunter's greenish-golden eyes opened and she smiled. "And here I thought you didn't like me."

"Don't you start thinking otherwise," Ketan whispered in return, white teeth flashing a smile in the darkness. She sobered though, talking quickly now as people came closer. "Don't try to kill anyone else?" She tried to make it a command, but it came out more like a plea.

Hunter forced a smile back, "Take the fun out of everything, but I'll try." She was well aware that she wasn't in any shape to do much. Her knee jerk reaction to seeing Catherine had been the last of her reserves.

Again, Ketan brushed her fingers across Hunter's, which were curled around the iron bars, before she pushed back, turning to face the small group of people walking towards them. The only one she recognized was Fatima.

The other two were strangers to her. One of them moved like a warrior, a sword similar to the one Ketan used hanging at her side. It was the other one that caught Ketan's attention though.

The elaborate silk veils she wore covering her face denoted her as a Veiled One. Anger surged inside Ketan, overwhelming any sense of awe at one of the mistresses of the elementals.

"Do we now starve and abuse those who survive the Sea of Fire?"

Fatima sighed, having hoped for a better beginning to the moment.

"We treat murderers like the scum that they are," the warrior barked out. Her eyes blazing with the challenge issued by Ketan's words, she stepped forward, almost toe to toe with the other woman.

"She's murdered no one," Ketan answered, stepping up to the challenge, eyes intent on the other woman's, and close enough to see the Captain's seal that was emblazoned across the other woman's robes. "The Hero of Katturast deserves more respect than being beaten and chained!"

"Some hero, attacking an unarmed woman offering water," the woman sneered, her face easily giving away what she thought about Hunter.

"Now, everyone calm down," Fatima tried to interject.

"Hush, healer."

Everyone stopped, even Ketan, at the Veiled One's voice. A hand covered with dark lines tattooed into the skin in an intricate pattern reached out and touched the warrior on the arm.

"Captain." Just that was enough to get the warrior to back up and give the Veiled One space to move to where she could see Hunter.

"You are Hunter, Duke of Del Cor, the Sword of your King?"

Ketan stiffened a little, worried about where this was going and how bad it could get when it got there.

"I am," Hunter said quietly, looking out through the grate.

"Why did you attack Catherine?" Behind the Magi, Ketan and the Guard Captain continued sparring with their glares.

"That is personal between me and Catherine," Hunter answered.

"You will stay here until you can be trusted not to attack her again," the Veiled One decided, turning away. Ketan opened her mouth to argue, just as Fatima did as well. "But," the Magi continued, "Fatima will see to your wounds."

The Captain's face turned red in anger and her fists clenched. "You're just going too...she tried to murder..." she sputtered, unable to form a sentence.

"You are free to bring your objections in front of the Elders," the Veiled One said, tone suddenly hard. "But know that they are unlikely to change my decision."

The woman nodded her head, "You are wise, but right now I cannot see the wisdom in this." She took a breath to calm herself.

"Come with me, Zia. Leave one of your trusted here to watch the outlander," the Veiled One said, her voice gentle again. For the briefest of instants, Ketan could have sworn that a small wind had whirled around the Magi's feet, but it was gone now.

Zia nodded and followed the woman out.

Ketan sighed and looked to Hunter. "I'll find out how to get you out of here. Fatima's very talented as a healer though, better than I am. She probably won't even shave your head for an offering." It was a weak joke, she knew it, but it was all she could think of.

"That's a relief. I just got this to grow back," Hunter joked back.

A rather young looking man, who would never rise to any rank, came into the room. He bowed at Fatima, "I have the cell key."

Ketan moved aside so that the healer could open the small cell door.

"Sit," the old woman waved Hunter further into the cell. "Fetch food and water, Kasib." The young boy bowed and hurried off back the way he'd come. Ketan stood near the entry, watching intently.

Fatima wrinkled her nose. "You stink, hero."

With an offended look, Hunter replied, "Most people reserve judgment until after at least one dance."

"Let no one say you don't have a sense of humor, strange as it may be," Ketan snickered.

Fatima chuckled as she bent over to unlock the shackles on Hunter's wrists. That done, she started her inspection of the woman's injuries. It could be worse, but it wasn't good. Sand-caked lacerations on the woman's arms were infected and hot to the touch, though the bruise on her face was minor. "I can count your ribs," she tsked.

The young man came back with the requested items.

"Ah, excellent." She took them from him and gave them to Ketan. "Make her eat, slowly, and make sure she doesn't escape while Kasib helps me with my healing supplies.

The young man blinked. "Fatima, I was told..."

"...To help me, now help."

Ketan smiled at the helpless look on the boy's face as she moved to sit beside Hunter, waiting for the healer to go fetch her healing supplies, young man in tow behind her. Picking up the water, she poured some for the outlander, offering the stoneware mug to her.

"You didn't tell me what happened after the sand storm hit." Telling the story would help keep Hunter from eating and drinking too fast, and Ketan really wanted to know what had happened.

Hunter sipped the water with an obscene moan, oblivious to the noise she was making. "That is the best water I think I've had."

Gray eyes followed an errant drop of water that had escaped Hunter's lips down her chin. Shaking herself out of it, Ketan reminded herself to focus. "The food looks good, too. Tell me the story of our trip here." The memory of her stolen kiss back in the King's palace flashed through her mind again.

"I dug myself out of the sand and found one of our camels alive, and then I found you and Titan. Or rather, I think Titan found you and waited for me."

She looked longingly at the food. "Can I have a small piece, of...is that bread?"

"Flat bread." Ketan pulled off a chunk and dipped it into the thick, green sauce that had come in a bowl with it, her own mouth watering at the fresh food. "It shouldn't be too hot for your delicate mouth," Ketan teased as she offered it.

Hunter gave her an annoyed look but leaned forward, taking the offered piece with her lips, the smell making her stomach rumble.

Finished chewing, she continued. "You were unconscious. I took care of you the best I could, and then we headed out in a direction. I had no idea where to go."

Silently, Ketan offered her some of the water, listening intently.

"We traveled, everything blurring together, until we came to hills that were actually the start of the canyon, an odd thing in the middle of nowhere, but there was relief from the sun. Also, apparently it is a breeding ground for Sand Tigers. Neat little trick during birthing season. Everyone would stay away from here, and in general, why would you travel to a place where Sand Tigers mate and give birth, doesn't sound safe."

"There aren't many who make the trip to see the Veiled Ones. They usually come to the tribes, not the other way around." Ketan took back the empty cup and offered, in return, some more bread and sauce.

She paused, taking more bread, and licking dry lips she continued. "The trip was too much, and with all the stress of all those predators around, the camel died, just collapsed. I thought I was

going to cry. Anyway, we kept moving forward, knew there had to be water, and there was only one source, which happened to be their sacred pool." She sighed. "You know the rest."

Ketan shook her head. "You have a new title then: Hero of the Sea of Fire. You saved my life, thank you." Among her people, the saving of one's life was a connection that would last forever. She wondered, again, if such things could apply to an outlander.

Hunter shrugged uncomfortable. "You saved my life, it was only right."

The sound of jars clanking together was heard long before Fatima and her helper showed up.

"Just returning the favor then?" Ketan asked, a little disappointed as the clanking sound grew closer.

"Yes, no, I don't know," Hunter said flustered. "I knew I could not leave you."

"Then I prefer my version. Just wait until I tell the story to others; it will get even more impressive," Ketan teased, offering the last of the bread and sauce.

Hunter sighed at that; just what she needed, another overblown story of her greatness. She took the bread between her lips, mumbling an apology as her lips brushed Ketan's fingertips. Her arms hurt so much the fact she had enough in her to try to strangle Catherine was surprising.

Gray eyes darkened, staring at the fingertips that Hunter's lips had just inadvertently brushed. She was saved from what would have rapidly turned into an awkward moment by Fatima and the her young helper arriving.

"Good boy, put everything down over there," the old woman pointed, nodding in approval when she saw the empty plate and almost empty water pitcher.

He quickly did as instructed.

Hunter looked at the woman uneasily, wondering how much the next few moments were going to hurt.

"Good, now off with you," she shooed the boy out of the cell. "Rest easy, Hero of Katturast," the old woman cackled, seeing the uneasy look. "I am skilled at my art. If you fear for your safety, Ketan can stay to keep you company."

"I wasn't worried, and Ketan can stay if she wants." She looked at the woman next to her. "It's nice to have a semi friendly face," she admitted. It was nice, but after the blowup while sparring, she wasn't certain how fondly Ketan viewed her.

"I wouldn't want to have it said that I leave my rescuer to her fate alone." Ketan's lips quirked. There was still a tension between them, but she didn't wish ill to Hunter.

"Fine, you can help." Fatima directed, carefully starting to clean the wounds left by the chains and from the attack at the pool.

"I think the cuts on my arms are infected." Hunter tried to look at the scabbed-over cuts from the leather, only to have the older woman tap her on the nose.

"Hold still."

Hunter grumbled but didn't move.

"You can't always be the one ordering people around," Ketan grinned, handing Fatima whatever she asked for.

Fatima turned her attention to the scabs, which were hot and puffy, giving clear signs to the infection. "Now, hero, how did you get these?" Fatima wondered as she lanced one, making a face as puss burst out of it. "Water please."

Dutifully, Ketan held up the bowl of pure water, wincing as she got a look at the wound.

The healer rinsed the wound clean then started on the other one, happy to see it wasn't as bad. "These aren't from a fight, more as if something rubbed into the skin."

Ketan looked up from behind the healer, a puzzled look on her face as she waited for Hunter to explain.

Hunter would have fidgeted, but was trying hard not to move. "Ah, the camel died and Ketan wasn't moving, so I made a sled with the saddle off the camel to make it easier to move her," Hunter said quietly.

Fatima had to think about it for a bit, "Ah, so you made yourself the camel; a fitting resemblance."

"You dragged me across the desert?" Ketan's voice had an odd sound to it.

"Well, not all of it...hey, I do not spit on people!" Hunter said indignant.

Fatima hid her smile as she put cream into the leather burns.

"You dragged me across the desert using a harness you made from the back of the last camel?" Ketan repeated, just to make sure she had that right.

This time Hunter did fidget, only to get another smack on her nose. "Ow! Um, just a very small portion of it. We were already in the canyon at that point."

"So you dragged me past the colony of Sand Tigers." Ketan's voice had gone oddly flat as she stared unbelievably at Hunter, absently holding the water for Fatima.

"Well, the camel did that then died. They didn't attack or anything, and I was really out of options because we were out of water and food, but I knew there had to be water nearby because the plants were green." Hunter shrugged then cried out as Fatima manipulated her ribs.

"Aha, I knew you had a broken one! Take off your shirt," the old woman said.

Hunter blinked. "Do I get dinner first?"

Ketan gave a strangled laugh at that. "You dragged me with a rib broken."

"Cheeky, I might grow to like you, Hero," Fatima said with a grin, helping the outlander get her shirt off. "Ketan, there's a clean shift over in that pile, can you get that please?"

Making another strangled noise as she caught sight of the mass of black and blue wounds that covered Hunter's chest, Ketan went to find the shirt.

There was a large purpled and black bruise on Hunter's side. Fatima mashed up a poultice and placed it over the bruised area.

Hunter made a face at the sensation of the sticky, wet mass against her skin.

Fatima smiled and wrapped a cloth around Hunter's torso to keep it in place. "There, nothing that rest and food won't cure." She held out a hand for the shift.

"How did you get that?" Ketan found herself asking, handing over the loose cotton shirt that Fatima had brought down.

"I woke up after the sand storm. I think I got hit with a rock or something," Hunter said stoically.

"Oh, of course," Ketan said, faintly.

Fatima gave an unhappy look to Hunter. "I'm not happy about this. I would prefer to have you in my area to heal, but regardless, this is the situation. I will be back to check on you tomorrow."

"So will I," the gray-eyed woman said firmly as she stood up. By then she'd get her roiling emotions under control, surely.

Once outside the cell, the older woman motioned for the young man to pick up her supplies, which he quickly gathered up, as she locked the grate.

Hunter nodded and gave a yawn. "In the morrow then. I'm not going anywhere."

"Rest." Ketan lingered by the grate for a moment, watching Hunter. Then, frowning, she shook her head and left her alone.

"Your friend is an odd one," Fatima said conversationally, "and someone I would probably want at my back in times of trouble."

"She's remarkable," Ketan answered, the frown deepening. "She pulled me across the desert, through a nest of Sand Tigers, and fought off the guards of the Veiled Ones before saving me from drowning."

"A good friend indeed then. How long have you known each other?" the older woman asked as they carefully made their way up the stairs.

"Not long." It hadn't been more than a moon since she'd first met Hunter onboard the ship, had it? "It's not fair for someone to be that good at what she does," Ketan grumbled, finally realizing what had been bothering her. The need to vent was overwhelming.

"She's better than I am with a sword, and she noticed things about my stance that no one else has! She even banished an air spirit when we were back in the caves. My entire childhood I wanted to become a desert witch, or maybe even a Veiled One, but then this, this...outlander undoes everything!"

"Lovers, then? I know it's not popular to take outlanders as lovers, but look at Mathew, and the Captain of the guard, it happens." Fatima grinned at the outburst.

"What?" Ketan yelled, drawing looks from the guards at the top of the stairs. "We aren't lovers!" She went red realizing she'd just yelled that out. "She's annoying." Ketan resorted to grumbling again.

Fatima patted Ketan's shoulder. "She is very annoying. Most warriors are. But perhaps instead of being jealous, you should examine why you are jealous and let it go. Seems to me she has a lot to teach if someone is willing to listen."

"I'm a warrior," Ketan mumbled, following along behind the old woman.

"Uh huh, I know, dear."

#####3

The next day found Ketan returning to the underground hole where they had banished Hunter to. There was a permanent guard now at the top of the stairs, but the young woman did little more than glare at her when she asked to see the prisoner. She'd spent the morning poking around the cliff dwellings that made up the home of the Veiled Ones. There had been plenty of places she'd been politely, but firmly, told to stay out of, but she'd gotten to wander through impressive stairs, corridors, and huge vaulted rooms, all carved straight from the red-hued stone of the cliffs. She'd seen no sign of Titan, and although she'd tried to make her way back to the sacred pool to search for him, she'd been told only Elders were allowed there. So, in frustration, she'd turned around and gone to see how the Duke was doing.

"Hunter?" she called as she got closer to the bars, not willing to startle the person who had been her guest.

Hunter frowned then slowly roused herself from meditation, nothing more than that for her to do in the tiny cell. She was hungry, although she had gotten water and a thin soup of some sort.

In desperation, she was trying meditation to clear her mind, since her anger had gotten her in this mess. By reacting in rage to the shock of seeing Catherine, she had given the woman power over her, and that was not a good thing.

"Ketan?" she said after a moment.

"Who else?" the desert woman quipped, coming up to the bars and waiting for her eyes to adjust to the gloom inside. "How do you feel?"

Hunter sat up and popped her back, "Better. I can breath without it hurting. Although, a bath would be nice."

"I thought you already took one in the sacred pool of wisdom?" Ketan grinned, undoing her head band so that Hunter could see her face.

Hunter moved slowly to the grate and peered through her fingers resting on the cool metal. "Well, I tried, your friends didn't let me enjoy it," she joked back. She'd been doing that since the walk through the desert, joking, trying to make everything less serious than it was. Perhaps she had been sun touched, or here, where nobody cared who she was, she was finally relaxing.

"You must be feeling better, your wit is coming back." The desert woman sat down, folding her legs beneath her. "I'm supposed to meet their Elders soon. They won't tell me when though."

"Well, I'd appreciate if you could put a good word in for me. I know we had words before, but I didn't point out your telltale for spite. I did it because..." to say she cared would be odd, but she did in her own way, "because it could save your life."

Gray eyes met Hunter's, and for a long moment Ketan said nothing, simply studied the other woman. "I'm sorry I got upset," she said, finally, her voice barely a whisper. "It's hard for me to know you're better at the sword than I am."

"There's always somebody better. The point is to learn what you can, 'cause if you don't, you die." To be a warrior was to live and die by the sword. If you didn't take the chance to learn when your life wasn't on the line, then the next time battle came, your pride could kill you.

"So easy for you to say that." Ketan lifted her chin, defiant again. "I've trained my entire life to be the best. Then, the first outlander I come across can best me. Not only best me, but take away my sword as if it was nothing!" It took a second for Ketan to realize she'd said that last part a bit loudly. A slow breath brought her back under control. "Pride is a hard thing sometimes."

"No, pride is easy, being humble is hard," Hunter mumbled softly. "I don't know what you want me to say. I'm not sorry." She sat back, dejected. There would be no truce, no friendship, then.

"Are you always so difficult?" Ketan sighed, reaching out to touch one of those strong, calloused fingers that still held onto the iron bar. "I just apologized for being angry at you." What else did this outlander want from her?

Hunter frowned. "Did you? It was lost in you being angry, then." Her gaze traveled to where their fingers touched, her skin not as dark as Ketan's. She blinked. Other than Stephen, no one had touched her, for friendship or reassurance in...a long time.

"Silly woman. I thought you'd already figured out that all in my tribe have tempers. There's a reason we produce the most fire elementals for the Veiled Ones." Ketan casually let her fingers slide away. "I apologize for getting mad with you. Satisfied?"

Hunter missed those fingers. Feeling silly, she leaned her head against the metal. "I am satisfied for now. When I am free you can make it up to me, by sparring with me."

Both eyebrows rose in surprise at that. "Are you sure you want that? We didn't do so well last time."

"Then we'll need to do better." She was silent for a while then asked, "What's the worst that they'll do to me?"

"Stake you out in the middle of the Sea of Fire, naked, for the Serpent of Fire to devour." It was a bad way to die, slow and agonizing. Ketan had seen it twice, both times for murderers.

"That would be ironic then...to survive it once, only to die there in the end."

In her mind, Ketan imagined Hunter's corpse stretched out, red and blistered from the blasting heat. "No," gray eyes narrowed, "that is not going to happen. They might exile you, but then you could go home."

Hunter smiled sadly. "I cannot go home until I find the Princess; failure is not acceptable."

"Then we'll petition them to find out where the Princess is first." Ketan had no idea how one did that, but surely Fatima would help them find out.

"If the worse happens, I want you to have my sword. That bitch Catherine and her lover are not worthy of it. I'm positive the Captain of the Guard has it now."

If Ketan had not been on the other side of the bars from Hunter, she would have flinched away from the naked hatred in those blue eyes as the woman said her former lover's name. "I'll find it for you." That should be easy enough to do tonight. She already had plans for a midnight stroll through the cliff dwellings that had been so well guarded during the daylight. "She hurt you that much, this Catherine?"

"Yes. I'm trying to work past it, but it was a bit of a shock to find her alive and happy." Hunter's fingers were white where she was unconsciously gripping the metal bars tightly.

Raising her hand, Ketan once again dared touch the outlander's skin, trying to give some sort of solace. "Do not harm yourself, Fatima would be upset if she had to fix your fingers as well as everything else."

Green eyes snapped open, looking at Ketan, shocked at the touch. "The Captain's lover and I have a past," she said quietly, the words slipping past her lips. "We were teenagers in love, or at least I thought we were." She mistook Ketan's stillness for shock and chuckled. "Yes, even the mighty Duke Del Cor was in love once. I was even going to abdicate my title for her."

Ketan smiled softly. "It is hard to imagine you in love." The smile widened a little as she imagined Hunter trying to impress the girl. "What happened?"

"She taught me hearts are fickle things. A bandit with pretty tales came, and she ran off with her." She paused then said, "The first time we met you asked me about the only scar I had then. It was from the bandit's sword. I caught them together and we fought. The bandit stabbed me then kicked me down a hill. I was knocked unconscious on a tree."

The desert woman's fingers tightened a little on Hunter's at that, and Ketan shook her head. "First love should be a beautiful thing. I'm sorry yours was not." Sternly, Ketan told herself not to picture Hunter sleeping naked again. That had been an interesting night, finding the Duke of Del Cor spread out naked on her bed.

"Perhaps first love should be. A few days after that, I pledged my service to the Goddess Ryuu, and then joined the army." She shrugged and looked uncomfortable, but she didn't move her fingers from Ketan's.

"You're virgin Goddess." Ketan let her fingers fall, once again reminded of why she'd tried to give up any fantasy of Hunter. "Do you pray to her often?"

"I pray before battle or when I am conflicted. I find it soothing."

"I should go and see if I can find these Elders." Ketan smiled to show there was no anger.

Hunter moved away from the grate, sitting back into the depths of the cell. "Whatever happens, Ketan, it was an honor to have met you."

"It was an honor to meet you to, Hunter, Duke of Del Cor." Ketan rose up from her sitting position. "But nothing is going to happen to you," she pledged.

Hunter smiled, but didn't say anything. She doubted it, not the way her luck was going.

#####3

Not liking it one little bit, Ketan unstrapped her sword and eyed the guard who had told her she would not be allowed to enter the chamber beyond armed. That sword had not been outside her view in more years than she could remember. "You know that this is my ancestral birthright. I would never stop hunting someone who harmed it."

The guard nodded her understanding. "It is the rules. No one can come before the Elders armed, even the guards. All must be humble and pure of heart," she said with a soft voice.

Grimacing, Ketan took a breath and forced herself to hand over the sword. Then she completely removed her headdress, having been told that all must go bare of head before the Elders, to show how humble they were. The entire thing seemed to be set up to reinforce the fact that she was not a Veiled One, not one of the powerful elementalists.

Feeling naked without the comforting weight at her side, she entered the hall beyond. Despite her resolve to demand Hunter's release, the desert woman stumbled to a stop, eyes wide, as she took in the soaring hall inside. Like all the rest of the Veiled Ones place, it was carved from the sandstone.

Soaring buttresses curved up to a huge piece of quartz embedded at the apex of the dome above, through which the desert sunlight streamed. It was awe-inspiring, and not a little overwhelming. Swallowing, Ketan started walking once again towards the raised platform near the center of the dome, where six women sat in a half circle.

It was easy enough to pick out which of the Elders were which. The four Elemental masters wore elaborate silk robes and headdresses that showed off their element. The Blade Mistress wore thick armored clothing with a rare metal breastplate shining for effect. Opposite her sat the head healer, her simple gown in contrast to those around her.

The Veiled Ones faces were completely hidden, although Ketan could see their eyes as she stopped in front of them and sank to her knees on the cushion set there for her to rest upon.

One of the four Veiled Ones spoke, the face coverings making it hard to tell which one. "You are here to speak on behalf of the outlander?"

"Yes." Ketan kept her voice respectful. One did not cross a Veiled One without expecting unpleasant consequences. "She saved my life from the Sea of Fire, I owe her a debt." Ketan couldn't be sure this far away, but she thought that question came from the Air Mistress. "She was half mad from days spent under the gaze of the Fire Serpent. Helping her could stop another war, but if you choose to leave her where she is, she is useless."

The four women nodded.

"We have all heard of the Hero of Katturast, the woman who single-handedly marched into the Pasha's Palace of Katturast and took his head. She is a figure of mystery, her myth is of violence, and it follows her. To release her could bring war," another spoke.

Ketan lifted her head, frowning. "Their King's daughter was kidnapped and she is charged with finding her. If she does not return with the Princess, the King will surely send his army to find her, believing we took her. Duke Del Cor can stop that if we help her."

The Mistress of Blades spoke finally, her words crisp. "She attempted to murder on Zia's lover. I don't care how sun sick she was; to just let her go would be a slap in the face to our guards."

"Then banish her from here," Ketan pleaded. "But give her help before you do." Certainly they could see the wisdom in that? "If she does not succeed war will come."

"The Pasha never ruled. He was a tainted male who thought he was better than his station. The old queen coddled him, let him think we would teach him to use his magic. He fled halfway across the desert to be a King. And he gave the other insane King something to fight. I'd say your Duke did us a great disservice in killing the Pasha."

Ketan gaped at the four Veiled Ones, almost sure that the fire mistress had said that. The voice sounded so very familiar, but she was too shocked to think about that right now. "A disservice?" she said, mystified by how someone could think such idiocy. "How many of us disappeared into Katturast? How many of the bones of our sisters whiten the desert sands?"

"Enough!" an elderly voice snapped out. "I hear spite and guilt coating the words in this room, because one woman did what we could not. She slayed the demon we created. She did our dirty work for us..." the woman in the blue veil paused for effect, "whether we wanted her to or not. She did what we should have, what we turned a blind eye to."

The woman stepped forward, away from the others. "The woman should be let go and sent from here. To keep her slows the movement of destiny." She held up a hand as it looked like the mistress of Blades would speak. "Have either you or Zia asked why, out of everyone, the Duke attacked poor, timid Catherine, who is, as I recall, an outlander as well?"

"They were lovers," Ketan spoke, hope in her voice. "Catherine hurt Hunter, deeply. She reacted, confused and surprised, seeing Catherine after the fight at the Pool of Wisdom." Gray eyes flicked to the Blade Mistress. That was another thing she owed the guards for.

The Elder of Water cackled, "I knew our Duke was not heartless! You owe me, Aamina," The Veiled One gloated at the Mistress of Blades.

The Blade Mistress just gave a pained expression at the words.

"Will you help her find the Princess?" Now seemed like a good time to ask Ketan.

"Yes. But first I want Catherine and Hunter brought here before us. I will have no more violence over broken hearts. If your Duke will not let it go then we will not help."

The other Veiled Ones did not look happy; it was something in their posture, for their faces were covered.

Ketan was with them too. She didn't think that was going to work well, as she remembered the look in Hunter's eyes when she talked about Catherine.

"Thank you." She'd just have to talk to Hunter first and hope the other woman would be reasonable.

The elder nodded. "We will meet again at the hottest part of the day. Until then, the Duke will stay as she is."

"As you wish." Ketan bowed her head, staying that way as the Elders stood and began to file out. She raised her head just enough to peek after their backs were turned, watching the Fire Elemental Mistress and wondering.

#####3

"Hunter!" Ketan hurried down the hallway, past the guard who was idly polishing her blade, and towards the cell that the outlander was still a prisoner in.

Hunter's face appeared pressed against the metal. "Well, it must be bad, you've hardly been gone."

"It's not bad." She undid her head scarf, grinning. "It's not great, but it's not bad. They agreed to help you find your Princess." The grin dipped just a touch. "With one condition."

"That would be?"

Letting out a breath, Ketan brushed a hand through her dark hair. "They want you and Catherine brought in front of them."

Hunter frowned, unhappy. Her past with Catherine was private. "I see. I suppose attacking her again would be bad," she tried to make light of it.

"Deadly." Ketan leaned against the bars, watching the Duke intently. "They'll refuse to help you and probably banish you if you attack her."

"I was kidding." Hunter moved away from the bars. "I will behave if it will get me going in the right direction."

"You will?" There was just a little hint of doubt in Ketan's voice. She'd expected more of an argument on that point.

Hunter nodded, running a hand through greasy hair, which was longer now, growing back from being cut. "I have no choice. To not do what is needed is a weakness. I have an opportunity to see my duty through, to waste it would be childish."

"So duty triumphs over even this?" Why that surprised her, Ketan wasn't sure. From everything she'd seen, Hunter was defined by her duty.

Hunter stared at Ketan carefully through the metal, looking for a moment like a very caged beast. "Duty gave me a reason to not die when it felt like nothing would ease the emptiness inside, when it would be better just to take a knife and end things." She swallowed, her gaze darting away. "I've had a lot of time to think, something that normally leads to brooding, but I've come to a conclusion: to give into rage now proves she still matters in my life, when she shouldn't matter at all."

"Of course she should matter! She was your lover and betrayed you. You can't just lock away your feelings and pretend they don't exist." If she didn't know better, she would have thought all outlanders were insane.

"So what...you want me to try and strangle her again?" Hunter looked at Ketan confused.

Groaning, Ketan rubbed her forehead. Impossible, this entire situation was impossible. "No. Just be civil and prove you won't try to kill her again." Why was she even trying?

With a sigh, Hunter groaned. "That's what I just said, only not with so few words." She leaned back into the shadows of her cell, leaning against the cool stone. "You're frustrating, Ketan."

"Argh!" Ketan threw up her hands and turned away. "I'll let you be, since I'm so frustrating."

The duke watched the antics, a little hurt; she didn't see what she'd done that was so bad. She let her eyes close. Sleep made the time pass, made her forget she was dirty and hungry.

#####3

The room that Ketan had been given to sleep in was small, but it was cool during the day and warm enough at night to be comfortable. That was about all the desert fighter had hoped for when she'd first been released from Fatima's care. Today, she took all of her things from that temporary room with her to Hunter's judgment, even though she knew she'd have to leave her weapons at the door to the hall. She wasn't sure she'd have a chance to go back to fetch them if something went wrong, no matter how much Hunter swore she'd behave.

Hopefully the Elders would show Hunter where the Princess was and who had kidnapped her from the palace.

"I always dreamed that I'd have a daughter who would travel these halls. Little did I think I would end up with a void for a daughter, and a son with the talent he can never use." The voice was cool, but tinged with familiarity.

Ketan slowed to a stop, spotting the figure waiting near the doors to the hall. Instead of the expected guard, she recognized the Fire Mistress from before. "Mother." She knew the voice had sounded familiar.

"Daughter. You bring us trouble with your outlander. The elementals tremble. You've torn the fabric of destiny and I do not think anyone will thank you for it."

For a moment, Ketan was a young girl again, a disappointment to her mother as she again failed to control the elements. "I'm trying to stop death from coming to our tribe. You're an Elder now?"

"I've been summoned to fill in. Desta has fallen ill. If she recovers then I will return to the tribe. If she does not then I will take over the mantle of fire." She undid the face covering. She was smaller and slimmer than her daughter. Sadly, Ebele saw a lot of Ketan's father in her daughter.

Mimicking her mother's movements, Ketan undid her face covering as well, facing the smaller, older woman. "You should bring Bayyan here. He'd be happier."

The woman made a face at that, as if she had bitten into something bitter. "You know that's forbidden. The males caused our exile, so forever shall the magic be denied them."

It was an old argument between them, and Ketan bowed her head, tired of it. "I'm glad you're well," she said instead. Their last meeting had been less than pleasant, but Ketan always hoped the next one would go better.

"Thank you." Her mother wavered for a moment then asked. "Is she the one, the heartless warrior that you are cursed to love? Is this why you pursue this madness?"

Gray eyes clouded over at her mother's words, and Ketan could only shake her head. "I don't know," she whispered, unsure. "You know how inaccurate the desert witch's prophecies can be." Raising her chin, she eyed her mother defiantly. "I know it's the right thing to do."

Ebele studied her daughter's face for a moment. "I hope for your sake it is." Whatever else she might have said was interrupted by the clank of chains as Hunter was brought up the stairs.

Was that a threat? Ketan frowned, studying her mother's face for any indication. She was about to ask what she meant, when Hunter was brought up, four guards surrounding her. "You have an honor guard, Duke of Del Cor." She called on impulse, ignoring the glares from the guards and the look her mother shot her.

For a moment it looked as if Hunter would ignore her, then the woman turned her head, looking tired. "I'm very honored by the attention." She spoke softly, wincing as she was jerked forward.

Ketan felt herself bristle in anger at the shape foreigner was in. Even with Fatima's care, it was obvious that Hunter wasn't doing well. "Where did the Sand Tiger that was with her go?" she asked her mother, watching them herd Hunter into the hall.

The older woman blinked in surprise at the question then began to re-fasten her face covering. "There was no Sand Tiger, just you two."

"Titan must be somewhere nearby," Ketan whispered to herself, wondering where the Sand Tiger had gone off to. Giving up her sword to one of Hunter's guards, she followed after her mother.

The other Elders were there, soon joined by Ketan's mother. Then, on one side stood Zia, standing protectively near Catherine, and the Blade Mistress looked up, glaring at Hunter.

Ignoring the look she was sure her mother was sending her way, Ketan walked over to stand near Hunter, gray eyes challenging the two guards who remained to stop her.

Hunter looked over, surprised, but then looked forward again.

The Elder of the Water elementals stood and everyone stared at her in deference; she was one of the last diviners of the most precious of resources to the desert tribes, water.

"Hunter Del Cor. You are an outlander amongst us and you attacked one of our own. Why?"

Ketan tensed a little, wondering for the first time how it was that Catherine had come to stay with the Veiled Ones.

"That is between Catherine and myself," Hunter said stubbornly, her chin jutting out just a bit.

Catherine seemed nervous, her gaze darting frequently to Hunter's form, but her body leaned towards Zia, seeking comfort.

There were ugly, fading bruises around her neck, ugly realities of what had transpired, while Ketan was unconscious.

"It ceased to be between you when you tried to kill her." The elder's voice hardened. "You will explain yourself if you wish our help."

"Please, Hunter," Ketan whispered, daring to speak up.

"Why must I be the one to speak, I'm not the one who destroyed a heart and promises? I'm not the silly girl who ran off with only the pretty words of a bandit for a reassurance!" she barked out. "Let her traitorous lips find words to ease the silence." The Duke was breathing hard, agitated.

Catherine paled on the other side of the room and shrank into her lover. For a minute the Captain of the Guard looked shocked, but finally raised a hand and placed it in comfort on Catherine's back.

Ketan closed her eyes, sighing. Yes, that was exactly why she'd gone to Hunter's cell to talk to her before this.

"Is she always like this?" The Water Mistress looked from Ketan to Catherine, a little at a loss as to how to keep things from getting worse.

"Umm..." Ketan froze, trying to think of an answer that wouldn't cause something bad.

Catherine opened her mouth then hesitated. "No. She used to be rather sweet, and read poetry."

"You read poetry?" Ketan swung around to stare at Hunter in surprise.

The Duke's face turned red in embarrassment.

"Enough of this!" Ketan's mother snapped, annoyed at how off track things were becoming.

"Catherine, is what the outlander says true? Did you betray her?"

"In a sense. We were kids, hormonal teenagers; we said all sorts of things to each other. Then one day I was scared that all I would ever know would be the vineyards of Del Cor. I was a peasant. My father had told me that Hunter's father would banish me to the castle once he found out about us. I got scared and jumped at Royia's words." Her gaze fell to the floor. "Whatever Hunter feels I've done to her, she should let it go, I've paid ten-times over," she whispered quietly.

"Hunter Del Cor?" the Water Elder asked, expectantly.

When Hunter didn't say anything, Ketan reached over and nudged her none too subtly.

Hunter sighed. "I caught her sneaking away in the middle of the night. Her bandit lover attacked me, we traded sword blows and she kicked me and I fell down a hill and knocked myself silly on a tree. My sweet Catherine then, instead of checking on me, rides off into the night. I'm sorry if I've held on to some anger over the years. It was not my intention of being a bad guest, but I was a bit out of it having trudged through the desert with very little water."

Ketan almost believed her, except for the slight twitch in her left eye when she said she was sorry about holding onto her anger over the years.

"Sisters, are you satisfied?" The Water Elder looked to the other Elders, getting a bored nod from the Wind and Earth Mistresses. Ketan's mother hesitated, but slowly nodded in agreement.

"Your actions are not excusable. Violence against one of our own is very serious no matter how aggravated by the emotions of young love. Duke Hunter Del Cor...you do not know the history of what befell Catherine, but whatever revenge you seek, let it go, she has paid it ten-times over." The Elder looked around. "But considering the horrible emotional outbursts I think we all wish we didn't remember from our youth, we will let this pass if Catherine agrees. Catherine?"

Timidly, Catherine looked around, Zia tensing at her side. "I will forgive her this, because finally we are even. She's hurt me like I hurt her."

Hunter grew tense at this, but said nothing, her jawing clenching. She did not want Catherine's forgiveness.

"You'll help Hunter then?" Ketan asked quickly, before Hunter could say something that would make things worse.

The Elder of Water gave Ketan a stern look . "Very well. My ruling is that Hunter is to be released into the care of Ketan. Once she has healed and has direction of where to go next, she will be banished from the valley."

The gray-eyed woman let out a slow breath of relief. "Thank you, Elders." Ketan bowed to them.

Zia did not look happy, and Catherine tried to get Hunter's eyes, but Hunter would not look at anyone.

"For today then, everyone is dismissed," one of the Elders said loudly, and people began to exit.

Hunter finally looked around and raised her chained hands, shaking them a bit, "Could someone..." But the guards ignored her.

Ketan stayed bowed over, waiting until the last of the Elders had left before standing again. "That could have been bad." She looked over at the chained outlander.

"No, you mean it could have been worse; it was already bad," Hunter said softly.

"It could have been very bad," Ketan amended, moving over to grab the chains. "Key?" she demanded of the nearest guard.

The guard smiled and handed it too her. "She's all yours. Don't have too much fun." They quickly left, now relieved of their duty.

"I never realized how annoying people here are," Ketan grumbled, fumbling with the chains until they fell off Hunter's wrists. "We should get you to Fatima."

Hunter rubbed her wrists. "I'm sorry. I thought I could control my temper."

Undoing her head wrap, Ketan studied the other woman. "I actually thought you'd get angrier than you did." She frowned a little, taking in the tired look in the other woman's eyes. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I would like a bath, and to sleep on something other than rock. I'm sure after those two things I will be much better." Hunter hesitated for a moment then clasped Ketan's hand in both of her's. "Thank you. Ah - I - You did not have to stand by me in all this."

Ketan smiled, a swift, wide expression that made her look younger than her years as she squeezed Hunter's hands in return. "I don't know about a bath, but I can promise you a bed to sleep in. Let's go see Fatima first though, all right?"

Hunter sighed but nodded.

#####3

"Hunter!" Ketan came to a sliding stop inside the healer's chambers, neatly avoiding running over the old woman as she did so. "Hunter?" she called again, voice light and laughing. "Where is she, Fatima? I found something she's going to like."

Fatima had promptly made the outlander eat a full meal and sent her to sleep the instant she'd seen her after the Elders decision. Fatima's eyebrows rose in question. "She's over there lying on one of the tables."

"Still asleep?" Ketan quieted a little. "Is she sick?"

"No, dear heart. Just worn out. A cell is not a good place to sleep and recover after just dragging yourself and a friend through the desert."

"Do you think I could wake her up?" Ketan sounded hopeful. "She's going to like the surprise I have. I promise I won't get her more tired."

"Yes, go ahead. She's not at death's door or anything."

"Thank you, Fatima, for everything." Impulsively, Ketan gave the older woman a hug. Then, leaving her standing there bemused, she moved over to crouch in front of Hunter's face. Taking a moment, she simply watched the other woman sleep, marveling at how much more relaxed she seemed like this. Gone was the constant tension that seemed to define the swordswoman.

"Hunter?" she whispered, reaching up to run a hand through the other woman's hair, indulging herself for an instant.

Hunter's face scrunched up and a hand came up, flicking at her ear.

Laughing quietly, Ketan did it again.

Hunter gave a snort and her eyes cracked open, "Ketan?" Things were blurry, but she was pretty certain that was a Ketan.

"Who else?" Ketan smiled. "Wake up, sleepy one."

Hunter gave a huge yawn and her hand came down automatically to scratch Titan's head, only he wasn't there. A sad look flickered over her face then she slowly sat up.

"I have a surprise for you." Ketan stepped back, watching through amused eyes as Hunter stretched.

"I hope it's good one."

She finished stretching and gave a wince as her ribs protested what she'd just done.

"You'll have to decide that." Standing up, Ketan bounced on the balls of her feet, waiting for Hunter.

Figuring this was something she had to get up for, Hunter slid off the sleeping table and on to her feet. "Lead on."

"Did you sleep well?" Ketan was in a fine mood as she waved goodbye to Fatima as they left the healing area.

"The best I've had since I slept with you." She blushed as her brain caught up to the words. "We slept together, in the same space." That wasn't any better.

Ketan's laughter echoed off the sandstone walls as she led the way through the mostly empty corridors towards the surprise. "Come on, old woman, do you always move this slowly?"

Hunter made a face at Ketan's back but kept up just fine.

They headed deeper and deeper into the cliff dwelling until only the occasional hole drilled into the stone above them let in light. "I think you'll like it." This section was obviously rarely used, the floors covered by a layer of sand that was deep in some sections.

"You keep saying that, but I have yet to see what this It, is."

Ketan flashed a smile over her shoulder, white teeth bright in the semi-darkness. Ever deeper they went until Ketan slowed from her jog in front of a door carved from the same red stone as the rest of the hallway and rooms. The sand in front of it was disturbed by a pair of footprints, showing her recent trek here.

With a grunt, she put her shoulder to the door and slowly shoved it open.

"That is what 'it' is," she pointed through the half opened door. Beyond was a natural cavern, steps cut into the stone down to the perfectly still surface of water below. An entire lake stretched out in the cool dampness, seeming to glow from within an eerie blue and green.

Hunter was quiet in surprise for a long moment then asked, "We're not going to get in trouble if we touch the water, are we?"

"No one's been here in a long time." Ketan stood aside, smiling proudly. "I'll stand guard if you want."

Hunter laughed, "You don't have to do that. I'm willing to share. The pond is plenty big enough for two." She started down to the water, breathing in deep the smell of wet coolness of the water.

"This has to be the most water in the entire desert," Ketan said, following along behind her and almost slipping on the unfamiliar slick steps covered with moss.

Hunter nodded, "It's the most I've seen in a long time." Once at the edge of water and rock, she pulled her shirt over her head and began to unwind the cloth that Fatima had wrapped tightly around her ribs. Once that was done, she began to work on the ties of her pants. The slippers on her feet had already been kicked off on to the pile of her shirt.

Ketan's eyes took in the well-muscled bare back that was revealed under those clothes. It was getting harder to remember that Hunter was an outlander and not a friend who she could be attracted to. "How deep do you think it is?" she forced the question, trying to keep her mind on other things as she looked at the pool of water, Hunter still in her peripheral vision.

In the dim light of the glowing moss that clung to the moist rock, Hunter looked at the water, but it was hard to tell. "I'm not certain," she replied, and then started to walk into the water. It was cool but not cold, and it felt wonderful. In the distance near the rock wall she could see plants glowing under the surface of the water, but it didn't mean anything towards depth.

A few feet out and it sloped quickly up to her waist, and then she was treading water in a few more steps. "Deep enough," she uttered then ducked under, disappearing.

On the shore, Ketan moved down the stone steps to the edge of the water and crouched there. Fascinated, she reached out and let the cool water slip through her fingers. This was the most water she'd seen, had even dreamed there ever could be, in the desert. No wonder her people venerated the Veiled Ones. To have this much water at their disposal was another sign of their power. After a few moments passed and there was no sign of Hunter, she started to worry, scanning the gently rippling surface for signs of the other woman.

Hunter swam until her lungs started to ache and then she headed back up to the surface. It was really deep. An underground spring hidden deep underground was her guess. Breaking the surface, she gasped for breath and wiped water from her eyes as her legs kicked to keep her afloat. She looked over to where Ketan was. "Come on in, it's perfect," she said happily.

Gray eyes widened. "I'll just watch from here," she said, a little nervously.

Hunter was a little surprised by that. "What's wrong?" She'd never heard Ketan be uncertain about anything.

Ketan eyed the water. "I don't know how to not drown." She made a vague hand gesture at the water and the swimming Hunter, not sure what to even call what the outlander was doing.

"Ah," Hunter said, and swam closer until she could touch the bottom. She thought for a moment then asked, "If you could, would you want to come in the water?"

"It looks interesting," Ketan hedged, not really sure what water all over her body would feel like.

"Okay then, I need you to get naked...er...well, take off as many clothes as you feel comfortable with and then walk out to me. I promise not to let you drown." She thought about what she said. "If you're okay with that."

There were a lot of reasons that Ketan should have said no to that plan. Instead, she found herself slowly unwinding the rest of her head wrap then undoing her robes to pile them next to where Hunter's clothes lay on the moss. Feeling daring, she even undid her under clothes and left them on the shore as well. She wasn't going to appear afraid in front of an outlander, after all, she reasoned as she tentatively took a step into the water. The feeling was weird and pleasant at the same time as she slowly inched her way deeper. "Oh." She blinked in surprise as water lapped up over her waist, and she shivered a little at the unexpected coolness.

"You're doing fine," Hunter said reassuringly, although she couldn't imagine not knowing how to swim or the feel of water all over her.

"You do this all the time at your home?" Ketan asked, wondering, as she inched forward until the water lapped at her shoulders.

For the first time Hunter realized that Ketan was taller than she was, "Um, not all the time, but it's quicker to travel by boat on the rivers, so its good to know how to swim if you fall overboard."

"The boat was fun," Ketan agreed, experimentally ducking under the water like Hunter had before, only to come up spitting water and shaking her head to get water out of her ears and nose.

Hunter smiled at that then quickly hid it. "When you put your face in the water you need to hold your breath, like in a sandstorm."

Giving the other woman a dark look for her not so quickly hidden smile, Ketan tried it again. This time was better, although she still came up quickly, shaking her head and sending water flying around her. "This would be nice after a day in the Sea of Fire," she decided, moving closer to Hunter so she could see the other woman's expressions better in the dim light.

"A nice soak in the tub is great after any hard day." It was funny, the little things she missed, but hadn't even realized were important to her.

"Tub?" Ketan looked puzzled for a second. "Oh. Like the water fountains at your King's palace?"

"Kind of, only smaller, for one or two people, and it's private," Hunter informed, although she was well aware other Dukes had much larger ones for several guests to share at the same time.

Ketan tilted her head to one side, considering the idea and the feel of the water on her skin right now. "Better than a smoke bath," she decided, smiling suddenly and flicking water at Hunter's face with her fingertips.

Hunter smiled and wiped her face. "Much better. I'm not certain how a smoke bath gets your hair clean."

"It doesn't," Ketan admitted with a shrug, enjoying the feel of the water so much she did it again just to experience it. "There are other ways, but this is much more pleasant," she decided, ducking under again to wet her dark hair.

Hunter laughed then moved behind Ketan. "You've never had your hair washed. You, my friend, are missing out." She reached out and turned Ketan forward as she turned to see what Hunter was doing. "I'm not going to hurt you, relax."

Ketan tensed at first, not sure what Hunter was doing. Then those strong fingers began stroking her scalp and she felt her knees buckle a little at the sensation.

Hunter reached up and undid the leather tie that somehow kept Ketan's hair tied up in an elaborate knot. "Do you tie up because you're a warrior or is it a more practical desert thing?" she asked as Ketan's hair fell loose. She scooped some water, wetting the hair, which looked almost blue-black in the low lighting, and then started to work her fingers through the hair. She alternated between rubbing her fingers through the strands to massage Ketan's scalp.

"Desert thing," Ketan groaned, leaning as far back as she could to let Hunter do whatever magic it was that she was doing with her fingers. "No wonder you keep asking for a bath," she whimpered a little.

Hunter chuckled. "I never really thought about them until I wandered through your desert."

"Now I'm going to be thinking about them, too," Ketan chuckled, which turned into another groan of pleasure as Hunter's fingers started massaging her scalp again. "Oh, that feels good."

"It's hard to imagine you've never had one before. My earliest memory is of my mother chasing me down to take a bath. I had, of course, fallen into a mud puddle and then probably rolled through something horribly stinky."

Ketan laughed at the mental image, hard picturing Hunter as anything other than a full grown adult, sword in hand. "We wash with a moist cloth, if there is water to spare," she sighed, eyes half closed as she enjoyed the washing. "My mother told us stories when we were young about the Water Elementalists and how they could find water anywhere in the desert. The tribes used to have enough water to do anything they wanted back then."

"These Elementalists don't exist anymore?" Hunter had once been skeptical of the desert magics, but it was harder now.

It was so very easy to talk to Hunter when they were like this that Ketan found herself saying more than she should have to an outlander. "They exist. Most of the women in the tribes have at least a little talent. The Veiled Ones are masters at a specific Element. You saw the different Elders and which elements they can control." She sighed as Hunter's fingers worked loose a knot of hair and began massaging again. "The water elementalists are the most revered out of all, but they keep disappearing. There aren't many left now. Used to be each tribe had there own, but now I think most are here in the cliffs."

"The men, do they not have magic? Is it something passed down in the matriarchal line?"
Curious how much they had wronged from interaction with one man. A dangerous, insane man.

Ketan stiffened a little. "It's forbidden for them to have magic." She thought again of her brother.

Then again, how many judged them on the actions of their King. Hunter froze for moment. Something was wrong with that statement. Her hands started moving again, this time massaging Ketan's neck. "How can they control if they have magic or not? Perhaps it's better to say they are forbidden to use it, and that's a silly thing. How many of your men might have the ability to find water and only pride prevents you from saving yourself from dying of thirst?"

"And that, Duke Hunter, are words of heresy," came an amused voice from the mossy bank, startling them both.

It was really hard to stay concentrated on the conversation when Hunter's hands were now massaging her neck. Ketan let her head drop forward, moaning as those strong fingers found tense spots, only to jerk in surprise at the voice nearby. She spun so fast that Ketan's feet slipped out from under her and she went under the water for a moment. Panicking, she thrashed about until Hunter grabbed her arm and hauled her back up to gasp a breath of air.

Green eyes widened in panic at the voice. She hadn't heard anybody. Then she whirled in panic to grab Ketan, who had slipped down into the water. "Hey, it's okay." She wiped water out of Ketan's face, studying it to make sure the other woman was okay. "I promised I wouldn't let you drown, it's okay."

Coughing, Ketan nodded. She'd reflexively taken in a breath of air when she slipped and she spent a few seconds coughing before she could talk again.

The Duke looked over, glaring at the elderly woman sitting on the bank. She had dark skin and white hair, so white it almost glowed in the dark chamber.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to disrupt such a private moment, but it's a rarity anyone even remembers this place exists anymore."

"Elder?" Ketan gasped, half in amazement that the woman wore no veil in front of them, half because she was still coughing up water.

At the words, Hunter realized they were naked, and parts of her body that really hadn't ever been touched by anybody but herself were intimately pressed against Ketan. She could feel her cheeks blushing. "I, we, we were...Ketan had never had a bath before." It was an inane thing to say.

"It's fun," Ketan chimed in, then looked over at Hunter and went red as she realized what the other woman was thinking. "Not like that!"

The Elder laughed, "I'm sure she probably hasn't, Duke. It was nice of you to show her how it's done," the woman couldn't help teasing. This was a far different woman than the one who had stood before her in chains.

Hunter was getting whiplash, her head turning from the bank back to Ketan. "Not like what?"

"Ahhh..." Ketan stammered something about needing clothes as she tried to get up the slick embankment. "Not fun like...other things."

"Other things, what?" Hunter swallowed as she watched Ketan emerge, water dripping off her body. It was a beautiful body, the Duke had to admit, and for a warrior there were only a few scars, and a spectacular ass that had nothing to do with being a warrior, but Hunter couldn't avoid the thought now that it was exposed. Her eyes frantically darted away and then back. Damn the old woman. She had been doing a great job of not noticing such things until she'd opened her mouth.

She swallowed again and her eyes darted to the old woman's, who just grinned at her.

"Other things a follower of your goddess doesn't do," Ketan grumbled, snatching up her robe and putting that on without the usual undergarments, so eager was she to avoid being naked in front of an Elder.

The Elder's white eyebrow hitched at this. "That is a pity, Duke. Those are some of the best things in life."

Hunter blushed, again and started making her way to the shore.

"You may call me Isra, since you have now swam in my temple and teaching hall. It would have been nice if you'd managed to give me a sacrifice, the elementals so love raw emotions."

Ketan was certain her face was going to burst into flames. "You're temple?" she asked, weakly, and sat down on the steps, gray eyes huge. "I'm so sorry, I didn't...I mean, it was empty, no one..." she trailed off miserably.

The Elder looked sad for a moment. "That's true. No one comes anymore because no one has the talent. There's no one for me to teach."

"Isra, please don't be mad at Hunter. I'm the one who found your temple and told her it was all right to bathe in it." Crossing an Elder was usually a bad thing as far as Ketan was aware.

Hunter ran a hand roughly through her short hair, happy for once it was short, and stepped carefully into the baggy style of desert pants. "No, it's my fault. If I hadn't have wanted a bath so badly, she wouldn't have gone looking for something."

Despite herself, Ketan couldn't help sneaking glimpses at Hunter as the woman emerged from the water and let it sluice down her naked body. '*A pity,*' she thought again, '*that Hunter worships*

her virgin goddess. How much she would like to show the outlander one of the veil dances. Suddenly remembering they had an audience, she blushed again, turning to find the Elder smiling at her.

The elder waved them off. "No, really, it was nice that somebody finally came and worshiped in their own way. The elemental in the pool appreciated the company."

Hunter paused in pulling the shirt over her head and looked back out over the water, her mind imagining a beast like the one created from sand in the King's castle.

"Then thank you again for allowing Hunter her freedom," Ketan said, giving the elder a bow then wiping water from her face as it dripped from her still wet hair.

"Yes, well, remember she's your charge now. You are responsible for her behavior while she is still within our halls." She looked at the Duke, who had finished dressing. "You need to let go of things that happened when you were a child. You do not understand the horrors that Catherine has experienced because of that decision so many years ago. I suggest you let it go and purge it from your heart. If you cannot, there will never be room for healthier emotions."

The duke frowned but did not fire back with anger, she merely held her tongue and nodded. Shyly, she walked closer to Ketan, holding out the leather strip that had held her hair. "Do you want me to re-do your hair?"

Ketan hesitated for the space of a breath, well aware of the Elder's eyes upon them. Wordlessly, she turned her back to Hunter, offering her hair for Hunter's attention. "Will the wind mistress help find the missing Princess?"

"She will. We will do the search in two days time. Since we don't have an object of this Princess to help locate her, the Elder of Wind will need to meditate and make preparation for the search."

Ketan smiled, looking over her shoulder at the Duke. "See? I told you that they could help."

Hunter gathered up the wet, dark strands and carefully re-did the knot she'd undone. "Yes, you spoke true. Thank you."

"I haven't lied to you yet." Gray eyes studied Hunter's, before Ketan turned back to look at the Elder, touching the knot that her hair was back in.

Curious, she eyed the old woman. "There are all sorts of talk among the tribes, but I'm curious, Elder, why do you think there are so few Water Elementarists now?"

The elder hummed in thought. "That, child, I do not know for certain. The Pasha, it is rumored, had a way of locating them, and it made him very powerful. But since his death, no more than a handful have come forward with the talent, maybe one a year for the six years, and four of them died in their sleep."

"Have you tested any of the boys and men?" Hunter asked, nearly flinching at the sharp look each woman gave her.

"It's forbidden, Hunter," Ketan said, simply. That was the way her world had always been.

"So you would cut off your nose to spite your face." It made no sense.

Gray eyes narrowed. "Do we tell you what to do with your Dukedom, or whatever it is that you come from? This is the way it has always been, ever since we were exiled to the sands for their crimes. The Pasha and his kind used magic. You saw how it twisted him and what happened after." Ketan would have thought that Hunter, out of anyone, would know that. Still, her brother's face flashed in her mind's eye, and she didn't sound as certain of herself as she wished.

Hunter went very still, for a moment that scene in the Pasha's palace flashing in her mind, and she paled. "I am well aware of the Pasha's cruelty, more so than anyone else here." Her hand reached for the sword that was not at her side. "You're dying, and unless you adapt, the sands will eat you."

Ketan lifted her chin a little, surprised by Hunter's use of an old tribal saying. "And you care about what happens to us?" She studied the other woman's face carefully, not sure what the answer to that question would be. Both of them had almost forgotten that the Elder was still there, watching with interest.

The Elder's eyes glittered. "Your words show just what an outlander you are..."

Hunter cut her off. "Yes, thank you, I don't belong here, you've all made that very clear. I will tell you, in my world women are not warriors. I had to fight and claw for everything I have, to prove myself better in every way. I was expected to be a good marriage prospect so some man could come in and rule with my title. So you'll excuse me if I identify more with your men than with your women." She took a breath and looked at Ketan. "And I care about you. I thought dragging you through the desert would have proven that." Her piece said, she marched past both of them.

In the stillness of her leaving, Ketan's lips crept upwards into a grin as she watched Hunter's retreating form. There was, as her people would have said, a fire that burned within the other woman. "Not as cold as she wishes we saw her," she whispered to herself.

The blond stomped angrily down the halls until she realized she had no idea where she was going. "And this is what happens when your brain falls into your pants." She was blaming this on all the things she refused to acknowledge about the way a very naked Ketan had made her feel.

The Elder blew out a breath. "No. I think she was cold, and now she is thawing, and what she sees waking up inside is a stranger."

Ketan rose gracefully from her sitting position and bowed to the Elder. "I should find her before she wanders too far. Thank you for allowing us to use your pool, Elder."

"Anytime, Ketan. Feel free to come back here. Perhaps you'll make an offering eventually," the Elder said with a teasing look

"Yes, I'm sure my mother would love that," Ketan replied, archly, as she took her leave. Hurrying to catch up to the Duke, "Hunter, wait!"

Hunter heard Ketan's voice and paused, looking back. She tried really hard not to look relieved.

"You're going the wrong way," Ketan smiled, pointing the other way.

"Um..." she rubbed her cheek. "Thanks," she said finally.

"You're welcome." Ketan couldn't stop smiling as she held her bundled-up head cloth and undergarments. "It's nice to know you care."

Hunter fidgeted. "I shouldn't, it's dangerous...to care." This was dangerous territory, treading on a lot of things she had pledged to honor; her King, her Goddess, and oddly, though the land wouldn't care, for as the old man in her delirium had said the land and the King were in conflict.

"Dangerous for us, or for you?" Ketan asked, although she knew the answer. "Don't worry, I won't share your secret." She sent her a sly smile. "Want to go try to find Titan tomorrow?"

"Secret? There's no secret." There was only one secret: this weird power Ketan seemed to be developing over her. "Um...Titian, yes, that would be great." Yes, she was Duke Del Cor, men would piss in fear of her, and now she could barely make a sentence.

"I'm sure he isn't far away. He wouldn't go far away from you." Ketan led the way back the way they had come.

She should probably pray for guidance as soon as she could, or strength, or ice to throw in her pants. She hadn't felt this awkward since she was a...teenager. "Well..." she started then stopped to clear her throat. "Well, he's not exactly a pet. We just have an understanding."

"He's your tribe. Don't worry, you don't have to explain it to me." Ketan's teeth flashed again in that quick smile of hers. "He will watch out for you and you watch out for him."

Hunter smiled an easy smile. "Yes, something like that. I trust him better than I do most people."

"I can't imagine you trusting many people. Your brother maybe?" Ketan wondered how far Hunter would let this conversation go.

"I love Stephen, but I have to be careful. He may be a bastard, but he could be used against me. Technically he could take my title and lands if he was motivated enough. Someday he might." She knew a lot of people would back him in a power struggle; her inability to bend beyond honor and duty made people nervous.

"Yet you sent him back home while you come out here searching for your Princess?" That showed a level of trust, Ketan thought.

"Better than my father," she said curtly.

"I never knew my father," Ketan volunteered. "Mother says I remind her a lot of him. I don't think she means that as a good thing." She tried to make that last part light hearted, but doubted she did.

"Well then, your father was a good man. He would have been proud. I think my father wishes I weren't quite so competent. Of course, if I wasn't, he'd be dead," she chuckled, remembering coming home to the uprising building a gallows on the front lawn.

"You saved him?" Ketan looked sideways at the other woman, wondering at the odd chuckle.

"Yes. Apparently, some of his rulings hadn't been all that popular with the lower casts. They had him locked in his rooms while they tried to break it down. Some of the others were making a gallows to hang him. Then I came home from the war, tired, cranky, and sunburned."

"So you saved his life and became Duke?" Ketan could easily picture the other woman doing that because her honor demanded it.

"Yes, and he's never forgiven me. That's okay, I've never forgiven him either."

That was a strange thing to say. "Forgiven him for what?"

"I love Stephen, but he's my half brother."

Ketan gave her a puzzled look.

Hunter sighed. "He's five years younger than I am. My mother died when I was ten."

"Ah. Your father was not faithful." Yes, she could see why Hunter wouldn't be able to forgive that.

"Well, that and he was a horrible Duke. The man listened to every toady and the land went to shit."

"I imagine you don't do that." Ketan smothered a smile. "You wouldn't listen to anyone whom you didn't respect."

"Of course not." She paused. That wasn't true, she didn't respect the King, but he was the King.

"Do you miss it," Ketan kept walking, "being back there?"

The shorter woman was quiet for a moment. "It's my home. There are things about it I miss, but I won't lie, I don't miss the politics and responsibilities of being Duke." Of course, it didn't explain her private garden that reflected the desert, her private sanctuary.

There was an answer to that, but Ketan had told her that before, and the Duke hadn't liked it much. "We should get you back to Fatima. She wants you to rest more. Tomorrow we can look for Titan." And the day after that, the Wind Mistress would help them, if she could, and they would be gone from here. If she was lucky, Ketan might even avoid seeing her mother again.

Hunter's stomach answered for her, making the blonde woman flush a little. "Food might be good as well."

"Food too," Ketan announced, grinning as they made it back into more often used pathways.

#####3

Fatima looked at them as they came into her rooms. "Are you hurt?" she asked from where she sat in front of a fire mending a shirt.

"No." Ketan could feel the faint amount of moisture still left in her hair already evaporating in the dry air. She blushed a little as she realized she was still carrying her bundled headdress and underclothes. "Just hungry."

Fatima gave a smile as she eyed the clothes in Ketan's hands. "Showing the outlander the sites?" She laughed as the younger woman blushed.

Hunter frowned, certain she was missing something.

"Fatima..." Ketan shook her head; not the healer also. "We met the Water Elder." There was a changing screen nearby, and she stepped behind it to rearrange her clothes.

"Your rooms are down the hall with the blue doors. Remember the Duke is your responsibility while you are in the Halls of Learning, so she must stay with you at all times. Not a hardship, since many of our younger students would take it up for you. It appears our resident outlander is setting off tiny crushes as rumors of her wild ways get better with every telling."

Hunter was utterly perplexed. "They do know I tried to strangle somebody?"

"Ah, my dear Duke, you didn't really mean it. She broke your heart. And I hear tell that you have dreamy, kind eyes." Fatima chuckled.

"That probably only makes them more curious," Ketan ground her teeth, tugging on her headdress. Fantastic, she was going to be sharing a room with Hunter. She'd been hoping for more time away from those bright green eyes.

Hunter just looked more and more uncomfortable at Fatima's words.

Stepping back around the thin screen, wearing all her clothes again, Ketan wondered if the old woman was getting a perverse kind of pleasure out of all this. "Is there food we can take with us?"

"If you can wait just a moment, I will take you to the dining hall." Fatima chuckled; this she couldn't wait for, all those teenagers with their emotions would swoon.

"The dining hall?" The younger desert woman didn't like the sound of that, and judging from Hunter's expression, neither did the outlander. "There's nothing here we could have?" she asked, hopefully.

"Child, this is a healer's room, food makes a mess. People don't like messes when I'm healing them." Fatima studied her stitching and decided it was good enough.

"Of course," Ketan sighed, knowing a lost cause when she saw it, and resigned herself to dealing with whatever lay in the dinning hall. She didn't have any idea how many people they were likely to meet. "Hunter, put your head cloth on. It might help."

"Okay." Hunter looked at the cloth in her hands and started trying to decipher what went were.

"Don't worry, I'm sure the cooks can give you a plate to go," the healer said, standing up.

That was something at least. Ketan moved forward, and before she realized she was doing it, she'd taken the cloth out of the outlander's hands and started to wind it around her head in the customary way. It was a strangely intimate thing to do, and Ketan forced herself to focus on what she was doing. "Like this." Her voice sounded a little weird.

"I don't know why I have such a hard time with it. It's just a piece of cloth, like putting on a uniform." The blonde sighed.

Ketan bit her lip to keep from smiling as she drew the last piece tight and let her hand rest on Hunter's shoulder before stepping away. "There." Too bad those bright green eyes would give her away instantly.

"If you're all done," Fatima said, pulling her door open.

"So, where do you get the wood for the doors?" Hunter asked as they exited.

Yes, that was a good question. Ketan looked at Fatima curiously at that, following behind the other two.

"We have water here. Thanks to the Elder of Water. You probably don't remember much, but just north of us, in the valley, is a small grove of hardy trees. Only two are cut a year for any of our needs. Doors are considered a luxury."

"A status symbol to intimidate your desert dwelling tribes people who only have cloth tents for privacy, if that," Hunter said, seeing through the ruse for what it was. "This whole place is built to intimidate."

Ketan's eyebrows rose at that. Enough water for trees? But then again, Hunter and her had just swam in an entire pool of water. "It works," Ketan spoke up. She wouldn't be entirely sorry to not stay here much longer, even if there was a place to swim.

Fatima didn't argue Hunter's point. "They are the Elders, the most powerful Elementalists."

"Only because they drink from the pool," Hunter murmured, not aware of what she had said.

Fatima stiffened but didn't say anything.

"What pool?" The passageways were getting larger, more impressive as they went. The entire thing made Ketan a little nervous, the imposing sandstone towering over them. A reminder of the power of the Veiled Ones.

"Hmm?" Hunter said, her gaze moving to Ketan's.

"Pool. You said something about a pool, what pool?"

"I...uh, I did..." She was cut off by Fatima.

"That is foolishness, that their powers come from a pool."

Hunter bristled, not liking how Fatima cut her off. It had been on the tip of her tongue, something important; if only she could grasp it if she wasn't so focused on the answer.

Ketan eyed the two of them oddly. What was it that made Fatima worried? She'd seen the look in the healer's eyes. There'd been a bit of fear in them.

Hunter lessened her stride to walk next to Ketan, now uncertain if she could fully trust the healer.

The older woman pretended not to notice.

The opening to the dining hall was guarded on each side by huge statues carved in relief out of the sandstone: two women, one with a sword raised high, the other a Veiled One with all four elements represented around her. They were beautifully detailed, Ketan had to admit. Each ten foot tall statue was carved down to the last little detail. She'd stumbled across them the day before, but they'd been so imposing she'd decided to continue exploring elsewhere.

Inside were long, low tables, again carved out of the sandstone. Only a small cluster of them were occupied, students, and what Ketan supposed were young Veiled Ones sitting on cushions eating. Everyone paused as Fatima led them in, all of them turning to watch. "So much for the headdress," Ketan sighed.

Hunter looked around, ignoring the cluster of students. "Do we sit and they bring us food, or do we get it ourselves?" she asked, uncertain.

Ketan shrugged and looked at Fatima, as she had no idea.

"Only the Elders are served at the high table, the rest fetch their own meal," Fatima said, heading to a small, open archway.

As they passed the table, some of the younger girls giggled while others looked at Hunter hungrily.

"Oh joy, the Elders." Maybe Ketan would get lucky and the Elders wouldn't eat here tonight.

Hunter pretended not to notice. This was almost as bad as when she had to dance with the Princess.

Ketan did notice and glared at the one's close enough to see. Some of them, the younger ones, flinched away from that look. The older ones simply watched her, eyes intent as they studied the desert swordswoman.

The cooks and cook assistants were nice enough. Hunter sat down at a table and looked at her food curiously, wondering if it would melt her tongue in her mouth.

"Try the brown beans and the white fungus," Ketan advised, interpreting that look as she undid the wrap around her mouth so that she could eat.

"It won't hurt me, will it?" She tentatively used a piece of flatbread to scoop up some food.

"A little pain makes it taste better," Ketan winked, then grimaced as she realized what she'd just done and focused on her food.

Hunter froze for a minute, not expecting that, and then nibbled carefully at her food. There was some heat to it, but not unbearable.

It wasn't as bad as Ketan had feared. They were getting their share of stares, but no one was actually bothering them. "Tell the chefs that they do good work," Ketan said to Fatima, trying to eat as quickly as she could to get them out of there.

"I will pass it on," the older woman said, once again relaxed and cheerful.

Two of the older students got up from the table and headed to theirs.

Hunter stiffened, feeling them behind her, and she nearly shot out of her seat when one of them touched her shoulder.

"Damn," Ketan whispered, seeing them coming as well.

"You're Duke Del Cor, the Hero. You saved us all from the Pasha. It's an honor to meet such a fierce warrior."

Hunter swallowed nervously. Normally, she had no problem dealing with such things, but that was normally in her own kingdom, not in one where most of the people with swords were already mad at her.

Ketan's fingers eased away from the hilt of her sword. She hadn't even realized she'd inched them closer to it.

"Thank you, but most of it's just storytelling. I'm not really that much of a hero. I was there with an entire battalion of other soldiers."

"And modest," the other girl cooed. "Perhaps you could join us for drinks after our evening studies? Oh, your eyes are beautiful. I've never seen anyone with green eyes before."

Ketan's head jerked up, and she stared at the two young women.

Hunter had a hard time keeping up as the girls bounced from topic to topic. "I don't think that would be...yes, I'm very flattered...I really don't think..."

"Hunter needs rest. She was hurt crossing the sands." Not the full truth, but Ketan thought it would do. "She's on a quest." That should keep them twittering.

This only made the girls fawn and offer healing services. Hunter glared over the table at Ketan, mouthing, "Not helping."

Ketan smiled back, suddenly amused by the entire thing.

"Girls! Leave the outlander alone! Apparently, she is a devotee to some virgin Goddess and takes a vow of chastity as such. So I would say you are wasting your time," an older Veiled One with a red head covering barked out.

Hunter flushed and wondered why it bothered her so much when the Elder said it like that.

One of the girl's giggled. "Does that mean you're a virgin?"

Having had quite enough, Hunter grabbed her plate and stormed off.

Fatima was staring at her plate, biting her lip not to laugh at the whole scene.

Ketan sighed and set aside her mostly eaten food, rising to her feet, amusement gone. "I see how well you treat your guests here." She gave the two a dismissive glance, turning her back on them to start after the outlander.

Ketan's mother looked at her daughter as she passed her, which only made Ketan wince. Now she'd publicly leapt to the defense of an outlander twice in front of her mother. She hadn't even noticed when the Elders had come in to eat. She should have been paying more attention to them, not watching Hunter eat.

"Hunter," she called out as soon as she was out of the messhall, cursing at how fast the other woman could move, "wait!"

Back ramrod straight, Hunter stomped down the hall. She heard her name and at first didn't stop, but then paused, waiting. She refused to turn around as she waited, her green eyes flashing in anger staring down the hallway.

"Don't listen to them. They're unbloodied," Ketan used the vulgar term for someone who had not had their first moon blood, "taught to believe they are better than all because they will become Veiled Ones." She got close enough to touch the other woman's arm.

"I'm not threatened by them or their words. It was either leave or get thrown into the dungeon again. I did not invite them to invade my personal space; it was making me twitchy." It was a half truth, and she knew it. The Elder had made her Goddess and her choices seem childish.

"We wouldn't want that." Ketan's hand dropped away and she let Hunter have her lie. "Let's rest then, and tomorrow we'll find your sand cat."

Hunter winced internally as Ketan let her hand drop. "I don't mind if you do it, because, well..." she struggled for the words, "we have survived so much already...together." She said it hesitantly, her posture relaxing as she caught up to Ketan.

"I know you prefer your own space though." Ketan frowned, at herself more than anything. Why was it that she found herself touching Hunter so very often these past few days. "You'll tell me if I get to be annoying like them?" She stabbed a finger back down the hallway the way they'd come.

"I doubt you can be that annoying. You'd have to have been born with a sense of entitlement," Hunter responded.

"No, my mother made sure I didn't have that," Ketan answered as lightly as she could, trying to figure out where exactly the room that Fatima had promised them was.

Past the healer's rooms was another, although instead of a true door this one was barred from the hallway by a tightly stretched piece of hide. "No wood door for us." She wasn't too surprised.

"Well, it is blue," Hunter said, pointing to a door down the hall as she carefully held her plate of half-eaten food in the other.

"Very blue," Ketan agreed. *'What a splendid way to make sure everyone knew what room they were in,'* she thought privately. The animal hide had been dyed a bright blue that would be hard

to miss even in the dimness of the halls at night. She undid the pegs holding it to the side and held it open for Hunter.

The woman quickly entered, blinking. "I forget you have no wood, really," she murmured, seeing the sitting pillows then the sleeping pad not far away.

"No water, no wood," Ketan agreed, frowning at the tarp after she'd pegged it back into place over the opening. She had no such thing back at the caves she'd nursed Hunter back to health, but she felt more exposed here.

Looking around, Hunter located three different spy holes where someone could watch or listen. Slowly, she picked a seat and carefully sat down. "I'm sorry, Ketan. I did not mean to put you in such an awkward position with your own people."

Ketan smiled, poking through the cushions to make sure there wasn't something unpleasant in any of them. She was starting to get a little paranoid in this place. "These aren't my people. My people don't stay in one place, rotting in a cliff cut off from the life of the desert."

Hunter chuckled and leaned sideways on the cushions, nibbling at her food and looking at Ketan. "Well, it would seem, then, our people have some things in common. People of importance like to lock themselves away." And she was one of those people, although, happily out here she had forgotten, if only for a moment.

With a huff of annoyance, the desert woman undid her sword from her waist and flopped bonelessly down into the pile of pillows next to Hunter, laying it on the floor next to her. "I'm getting tired of sitting in one place, I think. I want to be out in the desert with no walls around me."

"It is freeing. But how do you make a home if you never stop moving?" Hunter asked as she took a bite of the flat bread.

"Home is who you're with, not a place," Ketan said matter-of-factly, arranging herself on the pillows and yawning. "I rather enjoy traveling with you."

Green eyes looked at her as if she was insane. "I nearly got you killed."

"True. But I get to travel the desert with the Hero of Katturast," she teased. "The bards will sing about this for generations to come."

Hunter groaned and threw her hands over her face. "At least no one has said they 'expected you would be taller'."

"Don't worry, the bards will make you taller." Ketan had to laugh at the look on the other woman's face. It was too much, and she curled up on her side, laughing more every time she looked at Hunter's expression.

Hunter removed her hands as a thought struck her, her green eyes glinting with mischief. "That's okay. You'll end up as Ketan - my trusty sidekick." She smirked at that.

Laughter died away and Ketan sat up, staring at her. "What?" She shook her head. "No. nonono. That's...I mean, they wouldn't..." But they would and she knew it. She stared at Hunter, horrified.

Hunter started laughing at that look. "Oh, come on," she wheezed out trying to breathe, "it can't be that horrible." At Ketan's look, she howled with laughter.

"You...you...outlander!" Ketan pretended to fume. Picking up a pillow, she smacked the side of the laughing woman with it.

That just made Hunter laugh harder, tears leaking out her eyes. "That's all you got? You call me an outlander. Could be worse...I could be the sidekick."

"You are the sidekick!" Ketan pronounced, laughter in her voice though, as she picked up the pillow and attacked in earnest. It had been years since her and Bayyan had fought with pillows, but she dredged up the skills easily enough to pummel the laughing woman.

Hunter grabbed her own pillow and blocked. "I'm the hero, I can't be the sidekick." She shielded a few more strikes before attacking back.

"Argh! I'll show you who's the hero!" This commenced the strangest sparring match Ketan had ever had. They used the pillows almost like swords, baiting and blocking each other, dancing around the pile of pillows and sleeping mats, laughing as they lunged at one another.

Hunter was doing well until she stepped between two of the sitting pillows and trapped her foot, tripping herself up. As Ketan lunged, she was unable to move quickly out of the way and they fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Laughing, Hunter said, "I surrender."

"Do you?" Ketan laughed from above her, hands pinning her arms to the pillows and floor, gray eyes that more blue than gray at the moment, enjoying the simple joy. That look changed, slowly, as she became aware that she was lying on top of the other woman, pressed firmly against her, pinning her there.

Hunter gulped suddenly, the change in the room very palpable, and the outlander was feeling those odd emotions that were sharper than when she had felt them on the boat with the dancers. She licked her lips and said, "I do." 'I do' what, she wasn't certain, but if it involved more than kissing then she should probably stop. But the way she was feeling, she was pretty certain she wanted more than kissing.

Ketan licked her lips. Her head wrappings had been knocked aside long before by a well aimed pillow blow. "Then I guess I get to claim the spoils," she whispered, eyes focused on Hunter's lips as she leaned in. She wanted to test and see if those lips were as pleasant to kiss as she remembered.

It had been a long time since she'd kissed anyone. Even with Stephen, she only shared hugs. The last kiss she'd had was with Catherine. The thought of Catherine made her tense, but then Ketan's lips were on hers, and they were warm and real, not a ghostly memory that haunted her.

It was beautiful and terrifying all at the same moment.

Ketan's eyes had closed somewhere along the way, she wasn't sure when. Hunter's lips were warm and very pleasant, just like she remembered, although this time was so very much better, since last time the other woman had been stunned. Now, her lips moved in answer, a fact that thrilled Ketan to no end. And she pressed her body closer, lost to the world around them.

As Ketan's lips started to lift, the release of pressure of skin against skin was like the dam broke inside Hunter, releasing all the passion she had sought to lock away inside herself so she'd never be lead astray again by foolish emotion.

Her hands locked around the desert woman, pulling her back down, her lips remembering how to kiss, and once upon a time she'd been quite good at it. One hand spread out against Ketan's back under her upper robes, feeling the heat of her skin and the way muscles slid under smooth skin. Her other hand rested against the back of Ketan's neck, her fingertips making random patterns.

The kissing was good. Actually, the kissing was very, very good. The hands stroking her back were even better, and Ketan blindly pushed a pillow that was annoying her out of the way, so that she could press closer to the body beneath hers. She whimpered a little into the kiss, not breaking it, as Hunter's calloused fingers worked their way under her clothes to touch the skin of her back. She'd had a moment back there where she'd almost pulled away, worried about Hunter's reaction to the kiss. That moment evaporated with the blonde woman's enthusiastic response.

They kissed for a while, changing between sloppy wet kisses and dainty ones, hands in motion mapping curves and planes of bodies. Deep inside the Duke a dam had broken, unleashing all her desires to be close to another person, to not be alone. Part of her realized what she had been denying herself, but as those wants grew out of control, panic bubbled in her system. Blinking and panting, she looked up at the other woman, tempted to nibble at Ketan's now extremely red lips. For the first time she really wasn't certain how to act, how to be, or what to say.

When the kissing stopped, Ketan blinked, opening her eyes for the first time since they'd started whatever had just happened. It took a moment for her to focus, and when she did, she swallowed at the look the Duke was giving her. Green eyes were dark with passion, and Ketan had to control herself to avoid dipping her head and starting the kissing all over again. "You have to stop looking at me like that," she whispered, voice hoarse with desire, "unless you want to start again." The last was with a hopeful note. Hunter hadn't thrown her off after all, or slapped her, or something else equally as painful.

Hunter cleared her throat. "I don't know. It's been such a long time...and I'm pretty certain I don't have the heart to give you what you need and deserve." She leaned forward, and then realizing

what she was doing stood up, creating space. Space was safe, space allowed her to keep her honor, her vows. "You make it very easy to forget who I am."

"Is that such an awful thing?" Ketan asked quietly from where she stayed sitting now on the pillows and watching the other woman pace.

Hunter rolled the question around in her head, instead of giving into the knee-jerk response that wanted to pour out of her lips. "Without my vows and honor, I think I would unravel, and underneath you would find a very ugly woman slightly better than a thug. If I did not keep my current promises then I would not be the woman you are attracted to." She could forsake everything: her King, her country, but for what, lips that made Catherine's kisses disappear from memory? But was that worth exile from everything she had known?

Ketan bowed her head, hiding the pained look that crossed her face behind hair that had come loose. She was terrified that maybe the witch had been right all those years ago. She was destined to love a cold woman, one who would not return her feelings. "No," she whispered to herself. Then louder, "You would lose too much. I understand."

So be it. The kiss was a mistake; she'd try to lock it away. A memory just to pull out and hold dear when she was alone in the dark.

Looking at Ketan framed in the candlelight of the darkening room, Hunter realized what a horrible woman she really was, to give up such a gift that was being offered. "You'll find someone better than me to give your passion and love to, and they'll deserve it."

Gray eyes glared up at Hunter through dark hair, annoyed at being told what to do. "I get no choice in this decision?"

Hunter looked away, unable to meet those eyes. "I...I don't know what you want me to say." She shuffled nervously, very much out of her depth; battle, war, command decisions, matters of life and death, and shouting out orders to be obeyed she could do. Matters of the heart were apparently beyond her.

Ketan sighed and dropped her eyes. What else could she have expected? It was obvious that Hunter was out of her depth here, and Ketan shook her head, annoyed at herself. "I want you to succeed in your quest." Beyond that, she had no right to ask for anything else.

Surprised to have the matter drop, Hunter turned her head and looked at Ketan. She briefly wondered if she should say she was sorry once again, but decided it was best to not say anything.

"But," Ketan glanced up through her dark hair at Hunter, "but I still get a choice."

"There are always choices. I think most of your brethren would say saving me was not a good one," she tried to joke, slowly sitting down.

Ketan didn't smile, "Probably." She flopped back on the pillows, resting there. "I'm going to sleep," she announced, although she was pretty sure she couldn't just will herself to sleep after that kiss.

"Okay," Hunter said, unsure. "Do you want me to do something, go somewhere?"

"No, you're still recovering, and I'm responsible for you. No going anywhere without me. Sidekick, remember?" She tried out a smile, not sure she managed it. Flopping back, she closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

Hunter nodded then crawled to the sleep pad in the corner of the room. She undid her boots, setting them neatly on the floor, followed by the head covering and her shirt, leaving her in her undershirt and pants. Everything folded and stacked neatly, she laid down staring at the ceiling.

For the first time in a long time, she felt lonely.

#####3

Things had been strained between them when they woke up in the morning. Ketan had spent most of the night lying still, staring up at the ceiling above and trying to wall away the attraction she'd felt for the outlander. She was pretty sure she failed. Awkwardly, they'd gotten ready in the morning and started walking.

The morning had been awkward, at least in Hunter's opinion. Now, she felt at a loss on how to act, somehow conflicted between wanting Ketan's attention and wanting it elsewhere.

"I would have never guessed the entrance was there," she said just to say something as they hiked the nearly invisible trail out into the canyon.

"Kind of the point." Ketan didn't really mean to snap, and she grimaced at herself. This wasn't Hunter's fault, she shouldn't take it out on her. Wait, yes it was her fault. "Where do you think Titan would go?" She glanced over her shoulder, making sure they weren't being followed.

"Food and water. He'd stay near those. I'm nervous about the other tigers. I'm not certain about how they interact. Plus, it looks like they had young, but it was vague. I was really dehydrated." She winced at Ketan's tone, apparently they weren't okay. She would need to spend some time in prayer and perhaps even a purging to settle herself. She had given into desire, and this was the outcome.

"Water?" Ketan sounded thoughtful as they started walking down the dry canyon floor. "Not much out of the cliff side," she looked over at the other woman, "except for that water pool you desecrated."

"Actually, that was you. I put you in the water to bring down your fever," Hunter pointed out.

"Oh great, something else my mother can be upset about. I desecrated their favorite swimming pool." She grinned, the tension easing a little between them.

Hunter nodded, easing a little bit. "It's also the last place I saw Titan."

"Sounds like a good place to start." Ketan wanted to see this pool of wisdom anyway.

They followed the trail around and then came to the pool. The dragon was still there, silent and still.

"Oh..." Ketan blinked, not having thought the statue was that big. It towered over the pool, curled around almost the entire circumference of the large pool of still blue water. She moved around in front of it, staring up at the dragon's face. "It looks sad."

Hunter stared at it, something tugging at her memory, but she couldn't quite grasp. "It's given up," Hunter responded. "An odd decoration for a pool that is the seat of wisdom."

"Defeat." Ketan nodded slowly. Yes, that was a better word to fit the almost despondent expression on the massive creature's face. "The sculptor who carved this was amazing." Every scale, every crease in the rock skin was represented. If half of the dragon wasn't merged into the solid cliff face, she would have thought it was merely sleeping there.

Not much was left to reflect the brief scuffle that had taken place. A shredded, hardened leather shield showed proof Titan had been here. She picked it up, examining it.

While Hunter studied the shield, Ketan moved closer. The rim of the pool was defined by the dragon's tail, and she crouched down next to it, running her fingers along the polished rock. It wasn't quite sandstone, she noticed, almost the same color but far too smooth. Something in the water caught her attention and she leaned closer to peer downwards, blinking as she realized she couldn't see the bottom through the crystal clear water.

"It goes down for a long way," she whispered, talking loud seeming wrong in this place. Idly, she traced her fingers through the water, surprised again by how cold it was.

"Then aren't you glad I choose to jump in after you when you slipped into the pool, rather than continuing to fight?" Hunter let the shield drop and looked for tracks or anything to show which way Titan may have gone.

"Thank you," Ketan looked up and over at the outlander, her voice sincere behind her head wrap, "for everything you did."

Hunter shrugged, looking embarrassed. "You would have done the same. I didn't drag you across the Sea of Fire alone. I just kept the Fire Serpent from devouring you." Ketan dipped her hand deeper into the water, amazed at how cold it felt.

"I've seen him, I think, in dreams, and he looks nothing like a serpent, just an old man with time and guilt weighing him down. Odd that my own Goddess has never seen fit to visit me, yet your one savage god does." She was turned, watching Ketan from the rocky rise, the sun shining behind her.

"That's a great honor," Ketan answered when she overcame her surprise. She'd never heard of an outlander ever being given a vision before. "When did you see him?" Raising a hand, she shielded her eyes, peering up at the shadowy form of the other woman.

"Delirious from his burns in your bandit hideout, and again here, at the pool, delirious once more from the sun." She started moving again, restless to move. There was something about the dragon that was bothering her.

"When we become adults, all children are sent to survive alone in the desert until we are blessed with a vision. Then we seek out a desert witch so that our future can be told to us by that vision." Ketan let the cold water slide off numb fingers, watching the drops fall one by one onto the glassy surface. "Maybe we should find you a desert witch." She looked up, taken again by the expression on the dragon's face.

"What did you see in your future, fame, power, women throwing themselves at you? The quiet life of a poet?" Hunter asked as she bent down to examine a paw print in the dirt.

"No," Ketan whispered, rising to her feet. She reached up, pressing her palm against the sun-warmed dragon's snout, wishing that the artist hadn't been quite so good at capturing such a forsaken expression. "We should go further, where you saw the Sand Tigers nesting."

"As you wish." Hunter stood up and started down the trail. The paw prints had been leading this way, she was happy to note.

"The guards would have kept him from getting inside the cliff." Ketan followed after her, stopping a little ways down and casting one last look back at the dragon, then hurrying to keep up.

"There is something about the dragon, something important. But it's vague, like a dream," Hunter said, seeing Ketan's fleeting look back down to the pond.

"The water, it's cold, numbing even," the desert woman added, starting to scan the sides of the canyon walls for signs of Sand Tigers.

They passed the saddle Hunter had used to haul Ketan away from the dead camel. Animals had chewed on it, and it looked like it was now a den. "Up a little ways, I think, we should find the remains of the camel and then the home of the tigers."

Ketan paused, studying the saddle and trying to imagine how Hunter had dragged her across the desert using it. Again, she felt that tingle of annoyance at how good the other woman was,

tempered this time by a surge of sadness that her feelings for the outlander would never be returned.

Shaking her head at the mauled over saddle, she moved on, catching up the other woman. "Can you call him?"

"I can." Hunter paused, looking around, and then shouted, "Titan!" Her voice echoed, twisting down, and bouncing off the walls.

From the canyon walls furry heads poked out of caves, staring at them with curious golden heads.

Hunter swallowed, nervous to be the center of attention for so many predators. "Perhaps that wasn't the best idea."

"That's a lot of Sand Tigers," Ketan whispered, hand slipping to hold onto the hilt of her sword for comfort. The Veiled Ones still hadn't given Hunter back her sword.

"Yes. I didn't realize that they get so big." Some of the mothers were huge, at least what Hunter could see. "I don't think Titan's mother was so big." She paused, looking around. "What do they eat?" She got that the water was the draw for the birthing Sand Tigers, but where did they get food. Baring the camel she had left as sacrifice, its bones glittering on the path ahead, stripped of all meat.

"There are always wild camels and some truly impressive lizards. They hunt some of the poisonous snakes as well." She was sure they ate other things, but no one outside of the desert witches knew much about them.

Hunter moved forward carefully, watching for any signs of aggression. "Titan," she said again, only quieter.

Quietly, Ketan trailed along behind her, unnerved by the glittering eyes staring down on them from the caves that were dug into the cliff faces on either side of them. There was always something frightening by an animal that considered you potential food.

Some of the large mothers came further out of their caves, and the Duke could see how their underbelly scales gleamed, hard, like stone protecting them.

She wasn't scared, only respectfully cautious. Then, she was aware of an animal trailing them, slinking along the rocks, hidden in the shadows.

"Any sign of him?"

"I'm not certain." She wasn't certain Titan would be okay. Somehow she knew that this place was for the females, where they came to give birth in safety before venturing out into the harsh desert landscape. Titan was a male, and it was very possible they had attacked him or driven him off.

"They don't seem angry." Ketan kept her voice level, careful not to yell as they continued on. None of the large tigers staring down at them seemed to be upset by them being there, but there was a watchfulness to the resting tigers that gave no doubt that they were predators.

Then she heard the broken rusty purr and caught, out of the corner of her eye, a shadow breaking away from the rocks. She turned and braced herself as she was bowled over. "Found him," she muttered through a mouthful of sand and dirt.

Ketan had her sword half out of the sheath by the time she realized it wasn't a real attack. Laughing, she leaned back against a nearby boulder, watching the two of them wrestle on the dry canyon floor. "Don't you mean, he found you?"

Hunter laughed and pushed Titan away, wiping dirt off her face.

Smiling at that laugh, Ketan relaxed. "He missed you."

Titan flopped over next to Hunter, and she reached over, scratching his exposed belly. "Goof, I missed you too."

"I don't think the Veiled Ones will want you to bring him back into the cliff." Although Ketan was willing to try if the blonde really wanted to try.

Hunter looked up at Ketan, the smile falling from her face. She sighed. "You're probably right."

"But we can try if you want," Ketan hurried to say, not wanting that smile to go away.

Sensing distress, Titan got up and head-butted his human friend then went to Ketan, rubbing his head into her hand.

"Hi, Titan." Ketan smiled, rubbing his hard scales. "I missed you too, big guy."

"No," the blonde said. "If something goes wrong, again, I do not want him hurt for my mistake in judgment." She watched Titan with Ketan, jealous he could be so free with affection. "Could we, um, could we spend the day with him, before heading back?"

Ketan smiled at the normally so certain Hunter sounding so pleading. "Of course. We can hunt down food and make a lunch out here."

"Thank you." She got up, brushing herself off, and clicked her tongue against her teeth. "Come on, little man, let us show off what a good hunter you are."

The Sand Tiger's ears perked up at Hunter's words.

"Wait, are you going to make me do the cooking?" Ketan mock complained, getting up as well.

"Well, he doesn't have thumbs, so we don't want him doing it," Hunter joked.

"Funny," the dark-haired woman grumbled, trying hard to keep her voice from showing amusement.

"I can cook if you want, but I have to warn you, the army taught me everything I know about cooking." Hunter reached down, scratching Titan's ears before looking back up at Ketan, their hands almost touching on the cat's dune-colored fur.

For a moment Ketan's fingers brushed along Hunter's, and she slowly smiled, shivering a little. Yes, she'd done such a great job of putting away her desire for the outlander. "Go hunt then. I'll meet you further down the canyon, and then we can see about teaching you how to cook."

The blonde-haired woman went still for a second, as their fingers touched. A test of faith? A crisis of purpose? She wasn't certain what she should do about it. Then she remembered her hands around Catherine's throat. That was what love and desire meant...hurt, anger, and loneliness. She never wanted to be a monster to Ketan, and the best way to do that was to never go there. She snatched her hand away.

"I don't know, that will be a hard task. We will return shortly."

"Hunt well," Ketan called after them, a traditional saying, and wondered at the spark of hurt that Hunter's abrupt withdrawal had caused.

#####3

Hunter wasn't certain she had learned anything about cooking. She and Titan had found a few lizards half Titan's size, and after a few comedic moments, she learned that not only were they fast, they also spat a venom. Luckily she had gotten her hand up in time, where the venom had struck the back of her hand not her face. She would remember that there was a reason for the head and face covering.

Titan actually got the kill while Hunter was busy scrubbing her hand with sand. Sheepishly, she returned to where they had left Ketan. "Titan got us a lizard."

The Dark-haired woman looked up from the small pile of brush she'd gotten together into a very small fire pit. It didn't take much to cook in the heat of the desert anyway. "Titan did?" the desert woman teased.

Titan laid down in the shade next to the humans, his ears alert, but other than that he was relaxed and pleased with the hunt.

Hunter looked guilty for a moment, and then showed Ketan her hand, "Apparently they spit."

"Ah, yes, they do." Ketan rose from her crouch to look at the fingers. "Does your skin tingle?" she asked, a little worried.

"It burns a little bit. I scrubbed it with sand." She could see that the skin was red and blistered slightly.

Ketan relaxed. "You won't die then." Those with tingling usually stopped breathing soon afterwards. Dropping Hunter's hand, she started to rummage through the herbs she'd managed to scrounge from near the water pool for use. One of them she stripped the broad waxy leaves off and popped into her mouth, chewing. They tasted horrible and she was sure the grimace on her face made that obvious. "Here," she said, or tried to with a mouth full of leaves. Taking out the sticky wad, she smiled lightly at Hunter's expression. "Put this on it."

Hunter did her best to hide her grimace, but took the pulp of plant root and squashed it over her hand. "Thanks."

"The wise women and desert witches have better things, but that will keep the burning from spreading." Ketan squatted down next to the fire again, stripping thin, long cactus leaves to use to wrap the lizard in. "Cut its head off, that's where the poison is."

Focused on her task, Ketan used one hand to un-sheath the sword and offer it over to Hunter. Only when she'd done that did she realize she was showing a level of trust she should never have given an outlander. Startled gray eyes looked up from where she was crouched, cactus leaves in one hand, outstretched sword in the other, watching Hunter take her sword from her.

Hunter took the sword with care, showing respect to a fellow warrior.

Ketan swallowed and looked away first, going back to stripping the cactus leaves. "That sword has been passed from mother to daughter through my family for almost ten generations."

In quick, efficient movements, Hunter beheaded the lizard and cut out the heart and liver, tossing them to Titan. It had, after all, been his kill.

"It is a good sword. I'm surprised your mother gave it to you. It sounded as if, if she was not happy with your decision to be a warrior." She cleaned the blade and handed it back, handle first.

"She wasn't. But it's tradition, so she had no say. Besides, she doesn't know how to use it." Carefully, Ketan took back the blade, pausing to admire the workmanship on the hilt. It had always entranced her as a child. "While I do." Gray eyes narrowed at Hunter and she sheathed the blade. "Although some seem to think I need practice." The lizard was bundled into the cactus leaves and set to start baking next to the small fire.

"A good tool should always live out its purpose. To have it sit gathering dust and rust would be a shame." Hunter thought about ignoring the dig. "You do, you're good, but everyone can improve." *'There,'* she thought, *'that was tactful.'*

"How well put, Duke Del Cor." Ketan leaned back on her hands, studying the other woman. "Is that how you survive your King's court?"

Hunter wasn't certain where this was going. "I survive by not going, unless ordered to."

"But you survive when you do go, like the night of the Princess's ball." Ketan's lips twitched a bit. "I hadn't realized until then that you could dance."

"My father made me learn when I was a child. Royalty are big on fancy, boring balls, where they show off their offspring in hopes of making good matches." Hunter really didn't have anything against dancing itself, the balls were just tedious.

Ketan's lips curled up further, developing into almost a full grin at that. "A pity your dancing is so stiff and proper."

Green eyes narrowed. "I've been told I'm a rather good dancer." ...Especially by the Princess she needed to find.

The dark-haired woman shrugged, leaning up to edge the wrapped lizard closer to the fire and flip it over to keep from burning. "I'm simply telling you what I saw. You know, you're good, but everyone can improve."

Hunter gave a tight-lipped smile, annoyed to have her words thrown back at her.

The other woman chuckled quietly. "We shall have a feast for lunch, thanks to Titan." Ketan wasn't sure why, but she was rather enjoying annoying the outlander... today more than most days. Pulling out the smoking wrappings, she peeled back the leaves to reveal the cooked lizard within, offering Hunter a stick to pick at the meat with.

"Traitor," Hunter whispered at the great cat, but took the cooked lizard. She unwrapped the cactus skin and poked at the cooked meat, letting it cool.

"Only right you should get some too, Titan." Pulling off the full, thick tail, she offered it to the Sand Tiger, rubbing his fur at the place where it joined his belly scales.

Titan happily took the tail and laid down next to Ketan, gnawing at it.

'If only his mistress was so easily pleased,' Ketan thought, chewing on her own portion. "When the Air Elder helps you, will you want to leave immediately to find your Princess?" She'd teased the outlander again later.

"Of course." She nibbled at the meat. "Your people were there to kidnap her as well. What would you have done with her?" Hunter asked curious.

That was an interesting question. Ketan frowned in thought at it. "What would I have done with her? I would have used her to insure her King never comes into the desert again, that he abandons his support for Lord Robert and leaves us be."

"So you don't know what the goal was of your mission, that's just what you would have done?" Hunter nodded and turned her attention back to her food.

"How many times do I have to tell you we weren't there to kidnap your Princess?" Ketan huffed, taking another bite. "I know what the goal of my mission was, and it wasn't that. And I should just answer that because you asked it?"

"Well, you brought it up, so didn't you want me to ask? If it helps, you can ask me a question." Hunter stretched out on the ground, her foot flexing out to poke Titan.

The tiger jumped and glared at her.

Ketan snorted, stretching out as well and enjoying the shade they were sitting in. The heat wasn't so bad here, it was almost pleasant. The dying fire gave off just enough smoke to drive away the worst of the desert insects that would normally have come seeking such fresh blood. "Any question?"

"Sure," Hunter said, feeling relaxed.

"Are you a virgin?" Ketan looked over at her, judging her reaction.

The duke went still. She hadn't expected that. Finally, she said, "Yes."

Ketan nodded and lay back on the sand, putting her head covering under her head to cushion it from the sand.

Hunter frowned. "That's it?" She had expected a comment, something.

"Did you want me to make a joke, or to ask why you and Catherine never went that far?"

"Um, well...I guess not. Why did you want to know?"

"It explains things," Ketan answered, vaguely.

Hunter frowned, feeling defensive, "Explains what?"

Ketan gave her that mysterious smile. "Why your body responded so well to our kissing, but you didn't."

Hunter blushed at that, unable to prevent it. "I've kissed before, told I was quite good at it." She took a breath, trying to calm her emotions. There was probably a Goddess prayer she needed to recite, but she couldn't remember it.

"You are good at it." Ketan grinned. "But we could prove it again if you wanted?" she flirted, not able to stop herself.

Now that they'd gone there Hunter, could almost taste Ketan's lips again, and she felt heat bubble up inside her; desire. Desire was destroyer of honor, it made one sacrifice duty for the pursuit of pleasure, it made people forsake what was right just so they could experience that pleasure again.

The silence drew on and Ketan sighed, closing her eyes. "Sorry." She wasn't sure if she was really apologizing to Hunter or to herself. "I shouldn't say things like that to you. You've made your position clear."

Ketan looked oddly vulnerable at that moment, When she closed her eyes, everything was reflected on her face in that second, and Hunter was lost. She was in love, something she had sworn never to do. She moved without thought and was next to Ketan, touching her face. "I am sorry to cause you pain. I would like to be...I..." Ketan did make her forget everything, even words apparently.

"Shhh," Ketan whispered, returning the touch, and just briefly brushing her lips against Hunter's cheek. "I won't hurt you." She tried to make the blonde woman believe her.

"You say that now." But she didn't move away. "So tell me...what was your mission?" she asked, stretching out next to the other woman on the ground.

Ketan shifted, adjusting to the presence pressed up next to her. It wasn't bad, she inched a little closer and smiled, not bad at all. "I was spying on you, of course." Ketan grinned.

"Me?" Hunter was confused.

"The King sends out a special invitation for the Hero of Katturast to come to a special gathering...at the same time that Lord Robert is trying to prove his loyalty? Yes, you, well, you and everyone else at the same time."

"He was looking for a proper match for his daughter," Hunter said with chuckle. "Nothing terribly exciting."

"Oh..." Ketan looked sideways, "was that the only reason you were there?"

Green eyes looked away. "The King wanted to talk to me about leading a group of soldiers back into the desert to deal with bandits. At least, that's what his letter said." Hunter felt a sharp pain in her chest when she realized Ketan was a bandit, and that if the Princess hadn't been stolen that she might have killed her.

"Bandits." Ketan's mouth twisted a little at that word, as if she'd tasted something rancid. "Is that what he calls us?"

"Yes, although I'm sure the King imagined his bandits a little more male. But there were rumors of a Calif who was causing problems for Robert, a Mathew."

Suddenly finding the sand very fascinating, Ketan pushed it about with her fingers, making little valleys and such. "Mathew. Sounds like a common name among outlanders." Gray eyes peeked up at the other woman to judge her expression.

Hunter smiled, "Odd, isn't that young man I thought was leading your group when we met, wasn't he named Mathew, although he has very blue eyes, which is something I've noticed you don't have a lot of in the desert?" And when King Math, a bastard in every sense of the word, wrested control of the Kingdom from his father, wasn't it rumored that some of the royal family escaped to the desert?

The dark-haired woman let out a sigh. "They were worried that you'd figure it out. I told them you hadn't seen Mathew after we rescued you from the desert sands. That's the second time I've underestimated you." She shook her head, annoyed at that.

"I didn't see him. He did a good job avoiding me. But the caves echo." The blonde shrugged.

They were lying on the ground touching lightly, the curve of her front against Ketan's side, something she hadn't done since reading Catherine poetry, and she wondered what Ketan saw in her. Women and men had flirted with her, but it was more in terms of gaining power, or a game to see if they could make her break her vows. But Ketan could not gain any of those things from her.

"He's been like a brother to me. I..." she smiled hopefully at Hunter, "I try to keep him from doing anything stupid, or getting hurt." Ketan's breath caught, suddenly realizing where Hunter's eyes were staring. She licked her lips, wondering if she could get away with kissing the outlander again or not.

Hesitantly, Hunter lifted her arm and rested her hand on Ketan's hip.

"Would you have listened to him if he had told you the truth, or would you turned him over to your King?" Ketan asked, softly, reaching over her hand to touch Hunter's arm, her breath hitching. They were getting into dangerous territory again, this could only end up with her being hurt.

Hunter thought over her words, while her eyes watched Ketan's hand touch her arm. This closeness, intimacy, it was not easy, she wore it awkwardly. "I don't know. I would like to think so, but you're right, I probably would have turned him in."

"He is special, you're right. My people do not often listen to males, as you've noticed." Gray eyes watched, entranced, as she brushed her fingertips along Hunter's exposed skin and goose bumps trailed after it. "We could not afford giving him to your King like that."

"Yet he came. He has to be careful, because of the Pasha, your people will see another man who can gather followers," she said, not really aware of the words before they came tumbling out. She was more focused on the feelings going on, sparked by the connection of flesh, of Ketan's fingertips on her arm.

"Yes." Ketan shifted closer, entranced by the expression on Hunter's face. "He could be dangerous if he wanted." There was no doubt of that. "We keep him away from the Veiled Ones as well," she whispered, focused on Hunter's lips.

The blonde woman blinked, almost missing the words, stunned by the brief touch of Ketan's lips against hers. "Why? And I'm not good at everything."

"Do you know how hard I've fought, practiced, my entire life to be the best with my sword, then you just take it away like it was nothing?" Ketan shook her head, still a little upset at that. "And..." she hesitated but pressed on, "you can dismiss elementals, that's a power that no one I know has, not even the Veiled Ones. They can control them, but it isn't the same."

"I'm sorry. I'm not a teacher, I've never had students. My words were careless, it was..." it had been driving her nuts once she saw Ketan's tell, but she curbed her words, "was an area I saw for improvement, and could save your life." She didn't know what to make of the elemental thing, since to her knowledge, they did not have such things in her lands.

Gray eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun as Ketan resisted the urge to laugh at how carefully Hunter was shaping her words. "I know that, now." She leaned closer again, just one more kiss she promised herself.

"But you're still upset with me..." her words cut off with Ketan's lips on hers.

"Only a little," was the answered whispered against her lips. Then Ketan was pressing Hunter back down against the sand, exploring her lips. It was so hard not to push further, to try and see how far Hunter would let her go. This kiss was just as good as the kisses they'd shared last night. Did that mean it wasn't just a fluke? Breaking away before she couldn't stop herself, Ketan gasped, leaning her head against Hunter's shoulder. "I think we can add another thing to the list of things you do well, kissing."

Hunter leaned back, letting out a shaky breath. "Um, I think you're really good at it."

The desert woman smiled against Hunter's shoulder at those shy words. It was hard to keep the two people in her mind, the Duke of Del Cor and then this new one she'd begun to get to know, the one she suspected or hoped was the real Hunter. "We should be getting back," she said at last, getting embarrassed as she realized how long she'd laid like that, draped over the outlander's body.

"Okay, um, yeah, okay." Everything she was feeling was pretty new, some of it scary things she hadn't felt since Catherine.

"Will he be all right?" Ketan nodded to the Sand Tiger that was stretched out, bathing in the last rays of the sun.

Hunter stood up, brushing sand out of interesting places. Titan got up looking at her, and she could see the question in his face. She crouched back down, letting her forehead rest against his.

"It will be okay. Just a few more days and we'll be on our way again." She looked back up at Ketan. "He's been fine this long, another day or two won't hurt."

"Just another day," the other woman agreed, drawing up her head covering and waiting for Hunter. Were things going to be strange between them again tonight? ...she wondered.

They headed back, with Titan trailing behind for a while, until they got too close to the pond, and then he disappeared like a shadow in direct sunlight.

"There's something that bothers me about that statue," Hunter said to say something. She should do something, talk, use words, recite bad poetry, there were rules and structure for what they were doing. Of course, there were rules and punishment for what they were doing, to her King, Country, and her Goddess.

As they passed it, Ketan stared at the dragon sculpture, still amazed by the way the artist, or artists, had carved it out of the sandstone around the still pond. Nodding in agreement, Ketan pulled her eyes away from the face. "It looks sad."

"She does." Hunter was silent for a second. "Do your people have a dragon they worship, or stories about dragons? It seems so random. The all-father, Korgon, takes form of a great Black Dragon, as does his traitorous son in culture."

"She does?" Ketan stopped, turning to study the statue behind them. "I guess it does look like a she." Smiling faintly, the desert woman turned and started walking again. "We tell stories of Korgon, but he is not worshipped here." Ketan hesitated, not sure how much to say. "None of your gods have been kind to us."

"Like my people?" She gave a sad smile.

"Some have been nicer than others. Caliph Robert isn't too bad, considering the alternatives." She carefully didn't say anything about the man Hunter called King.

"Lord Robert isn't smart enough to have ambition, or to be mean. He does the best he can. Could have been worse, King Math could have sent me."

Ketan tried to picture that, failing at first, until she remembered it wouldn't have been Hunter they would have dealt with, but Duke Del Cor. Then she shivered at the thought of what that would have brought. "What would you have done, if you had been sent here?"

Hunter considered it as they stepped into the hidden entrance to the Veiled Ones. "I would have done as commanded by the King; brought peace and unified the tribes under his rule." She chuckled, drawing a glare from the guard.

That chuckle did nothing to alleviate Ketan's unease. "How?" she whispered.

"It wouldn't have worked. The cultures are too different. We build structures that don't move, that withstand weather and time. To merge them too would bring blood until we ground you down and finally forced the circle to fit unto the square hole." She sighed. "Then I would no longer be a hero." She would be the monster she was certain crept just under her skin.

"You'd always be the Hero of Katturast." Ketan shook off the crawling of her skin and glared at one of the passing young women who'd tormented Hunter yesterday. "We'd just be your enemies."

Hunter knew they could still be enemies. Even though she was certain they had not taken the Princess, it didn't mean another faction in the desert hadn't, and she wasn't certain the King could tell the difference. "I just do my duty, Ketan, that is all."

"Duty." Ketan held open the flap to their room, studying Hunter intently. "Don't you mean obedience?"

"Yes," Hunter replied without thought.

Ketan frowned, following her in. "They're not the same."

"Yes, they are." Hunter sat down on the pillows.

"No. They aren't." Ketan paced. "They really aren't. Obedience is what you demand from your dogs."

Hunter gave a bitter smile. "I hear your fellow tribe mates, and the others, they call me the King's Dog. It's true, Ketan, I am." She didn't know how to explain to Ketan that without the rules, the structure, and the rituals of loyalty that she was nothing more than a thug, a murdering bandit. She needed those things to help her give her world meaning, to give her a moral compass, even if her King was a drug addicted bastard.

"But..." Ketan started and stopped when someone banged against the tarp stretched across the opening to their room.

Giving the outlander a look that promised her they weren't done with that particular topic, Ketan undid the tarp and held it aside for the small procession that had gathered outside. The Elemental Mistress of Air and two of her students brushed past her without a glance. Fatima patted her on the arm as she came inside and went to check on her patient.

"Welcome," Ketan muttered, staying near the door to stay out of the way of what was coming.

"Outlander..." the Mistress of Air didn't quite sneer through her veil as she settled across from Hunter on the pillows. Her students remained standing behind her.

Hunter tensed, looking to Ketan. She let out a breath, looking back to the woman overfilled with her self importance. "Person I don't know sneering at me," Hunter said, stretching out on the

pillows, her training as a royal taking over. She looked up, unconcerned. They could play who was the bigger bitch.

Dark eyes peered out at Hunter from behind the veil, crow's feet showing around the edges of her eyes giving a hint at her age. The two students shifted, clearly horrified by the disrespect shown to a Veiled One. Ketan was too, but she hid it better, leaning back against the wall next to the door.

The Veiled One sat still, shocked Ketan thought by the unexpected reaction. "How dare you insult me? Do you know the powers I command?"

"Not impressed. All those powers yet you didn't stop the Pasha, I did. You sat back and let him do all those horrible things. Let it be someone else's problem," Hunter sneered back.

One of the two students, Ketan wasn't sure which, gasped in horror. Ketan herself had to force herself to stay still or betray her own shock. The Veiled One rocked backwards, as if Hunter had physically slapped her. No one, Ketan was willing to bet, had ever talked to her like that before. "You..." the Veiled One's voice was strangled, and bits of dust began to blow around her, swirling in unseen air vortexes. Visibly, she forced herself back under control. "Let us finish this quickly," she spat.

"Let's..." Hunter said as if the whole thing was amusing to her. "Do you need anything from me?"

"Blood." A flick of her wrist and one of the students approached with a small, golden bowl and a sharp looking obsidian knife. Ketan started, half rising from her spot at the wall at that. *Blood magic?* She frowned a little.

Hunter sat up and held up one arm, pulling back the sleeve, and then held out her bare arm. "You're elementals are hungry then?"

"I have to help you find this Princess, but I do not have to pay the price for it," the Veiled One snarled, grabbing Hunter's arm and taking hold of the knife.

Ketan took a half step forward then stopped, uncertain. She hadn't known Elders used blood magic.

Hunter held out her hand. "I will feed your demons, but I will not let you touch me with a knife. How much do you need?"

An unpleasant chuckle from the Veiled One at that, and she handed Hunter the knife. "Enough to coat the bottom of the bowl."

"Very well." Hunter took the knife and made a quick cut at her wrist. Blood quickly dripped down into the bowl. Once the bowl was coated, she pressed her fingers to the cut.

The Veiled One leaned forward, staring down into the depths of the bowl intently. "Think of your Princess," she demanded, voice harsh. Little bits of wind tugged at the edges of her veils, swirling around her.

Hunter sat back and concentrated on the Princess, the last memory of the young woman dancing and flirting with her

The Veiled One grunted, whispering words under her breath. Wisps of crimson smoke began to curl up out of the bowl of blood, swaying back and forth in the air like a snake raising its head.

From her spot by the door, Ketan swallowed, the hair on her skin standing on end as she watched.

The Elder breathed deep of the vapors then leaned back, still whispering her words. The wind was no longer just around her, but around all of them. Small gusts tugging at them all as the wind swirled around the small room. "Go. Seek!" the Elder commanded, gesturing to the door. In one blast, the wind swept past Ketan, out the door, and disappeared, leaving only silence behind it.

"There, outlander," the elder sneered. "Soon we will have your answer."

"Can't wait," Hunter said dryly. After a moment, where everyone stood awkwardly, Hunter asked, "So what do you do for your people...lord over them and let their fear feed your sense of self-importance? Do you help them in any way?"

Ketan gasped, which she was sure the two students would have, except they were too stunned to do anything but stare at Hunter wide-eyed in shock. The Elder reared back, eyes dangerous though. "We protect them from you and your kind!"

"Then why didn't you?"

"We did," the Elder snarled. "Your slime does not rule our desert."

Hunter wasn't angry or upset, just curious at how inbred these women had become with their over-inflated sense of self-importance. "We rule a portion of it, or do you just not care about those tribes."

Ketan trembled, hands clenched tightly at her side as she stared at the two women. She couldn't think of anything to say or do to stop what was happening. To stop it from becoming a complete disaster.

For her part, the Elder snorted, settling more comfortably on the pillows to wait for her elementals to return with the information she wanted. "You believe you rule it, we disagree."

Ketan frowned, not sure how the Elder could disagree with Lord Robert and his castle.

Hunter nodded. "So you don't care about them. You didn't help them with the Pasha, and you don't help them now."

"I don't have to defend our plans to you, outlander. You and yours are the reason for all this suffering in the first place." The Elder had managed to keep her voice under control this time, although it was still laced with fury. "You and your insane King."

"No, I'm pretty certain it's your fault. You created the Pasha, by refusing to acknowledge men have magic, and giving the proper training. So he stole an entire magical force and out-thought you all. He then proceeded to visit horror upon horror on any woman of magical talent." All the horrors she had seen in the palace were reflected in her eyes, for a moment.

"How dare you!" Ketan swallowed, mouth dry at the edge of pure malice in the Elder's voice. "How dare you say such blasphemous things, outlander!" The Elder rose to her feet, eyes blazing with hatred. Even the two students stepped away, eyes wide as they stared at the personal wind devils that were starting to spin up around the Elder.

Hunter took a deep breath and released it. "You make judgments about my King, but I see a group who is as equally corrupted as my King by power."

Blood and death were coming, Ketan was certain of it. The worst part, though, was that she wasn't sure whose side she was on. That hesitation paused her, keeping her near the door, hand on the hilt of her sword, staring back and forth at the Elder and Hunter. A choice, she had to make a choice.

Hunter reached out her hand, a few drops of blood splattering the pillows. "Oh stop it." Her hand made a slicing motion and the two tornados hissed and shrank away, sputtering into nothing, and Hunter sat back on the pillows.

"How..." the Elder started to ask, and then stopped. Very slowly, she turned to stare at the door, past Ketan, who could see the confusion that suddenly was in those dark orbs. "That's not right," the Elder whispered, almost to herself.

"Elder?" one of the student's asked, hesitantly, uncertain.

Ketan was about to ask the same thing, when she heard it: a low howling that grew louder with every passing breath. It reminded her, she thought, of those last few seconds she remembered before the sandstorm had swept upon them in the Sea of Fire.

"Are you done..." Hunter cut off. There was a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, like a poison seeping into the air, the earth. Quickly, she stood, hand reaching for a sword that wasn't there. "What is it?" she shouted.

"Demon," the Elder had time to say. Then the door blasted open with such force that it tore the fabric from the wall.

Fatima, who had sat quietly by during the drama, let out a yell of warning, although a warning to do what, Ketan wasn't sure. Her sword came out and sliced through nothing but air. There was nothing there, but yet, there was. It was the strangest thing, a creature bound together by wind. She'd never seen anything like it, and judging by the horrified screaming of one of the students, neither had they.

Then the thing slammed into her and she went flying sideways, tumbling past Hunter.

"Ketan!" Hunter shouted, fear coating her throat as the woman was shoved past her. Rage bloomed in her chest, thick and dark. She gave a scream of anger and rushed forward unthinkingly, shoving her hand deep into the air creature's chest.

What happened next shouldn't have been possible. Ketan, half rising from where she'd tumbled to a stop, stared in wide-eyed surprise as the creature simply dissolved around Hunter's fist. Within the space of two heartbeats, there was nothing left but dust drifting to the ground at her feet. The Elder, the two students, and Fatima stared at her as well.

The magic hurt as it dissipated into the environment. She was a grounding rod for elementals that had been jammed together to create the demon that had attacked them.

Hunter's legs collapsed and she landed hard on her knees, panting hard. It felt as if she had been struck by lightning.

"Careful. Breathe, that's it." Fatima was by her side, with Ketan just a step behind her on the other. "Breathe," the healer said in her calm voice, hand on Hunter's back.

Behind them, the Elder was starting to talk, screech actually, but Ketan didn't give a shit at the moment. She was focused on making sure Hunter was all right.

"What was that? What happened? Ketan?" Hunter tried to turn her head to make sure the other woman was okay.

"I'm here." Her entire side hurt, but she was still there. She was going to have

some spectacular bruises though.

"Stop moving," Fatima said sternly, peering into Hunter's eyes then making her breathe slowly for her. "You seem fine. How do you feel?" the old woman pronounced, finally.

"...Like I've been struck by lightning. I'm guessing, not that I actually know." Hunter reached out for Ketan, calming when her hand touched Ketan's arm.

The desert woman leaned against her side, as discreetly as she could, favoring the side away from Hunter, and waited while Fatima made sure that the outlander wasn't going to die on them.

"You're coming with me. Both of you," Fatima finally declared, standing up.

Behind them, the Elder continued to say things, not screeching anymore though. Ketan continued ignoring her voice though.

Hunter struggled to her feet. "It didn't feel like this the last time." The blonde woman did finally make it to her feet.

"Last time?" the Elder nearly screamed behind them.

Ketan winced and slipped an arm around Hunter's waist, although she wasn't sure who was supporting whom.

"Elder..." Fatima's voice cut through the yelling, and the healer turned, leading the way out of the room.

Hunter was oddly docile, letting herself be lead away. "Will someone tell me what happened? And did we find the Princess?" Please, let them have found the Princess so she could get out of this shithole.

"I don't know," Ketan whispered, in answer to both of the questions, as they limped down the hall after the old woman. She really wished she did though.

#####3

Fugit was breathing hard, sweat cooling on his brow and making the fabric of his shirt stick to his skin. Corrupting the elemental and turning it back on its master had cost him a lot. His limbs trembled with the strain that much expenditure of magic had cost him. He walked over to a piece of cloth that covered over a sphere and pulled it off, showing off what appeared to be a polished piece of metal. He wiped bloody hands on the metal and it started to glow.

Behind him on the sandy floor of the cave, two men where dead, their throats cut open, but the blood was all gone, not a drop on the ground, all of it having gone to feed his demon, and then he had forced it to infect the peeping wind elemental sent by a Veiled One, he could guess, and then he had turned it back on its owner.

"What?" a voice hissed out of the sphere.

"We have a problem. The Veiled Ones are looking. I can't keep the Princess any longer. I will bring her back."

"It's too soon, we have to wait for the moon Goddess to hide her face before the ritual can take place."

"I can't keep her, here. Someone is looking for her out here in the desert, and they found me. They were powerful enough to deconstruct my elemental. I'm drained. It will take weeks for me to get my energy back."

There was silence, and he stood nervously, waiting. Not much else he could do.

"Bring her back. I will send troops to meet you. We cannot risk the Princess being saved. Start your return," the voice finally said, angry.

#####3

"Ow!" Ketan whined, glaring at the old healer, who ignored her with the practice of long years and continued wrapping the thin strips of fabric around Ketan's chest.

"Ow I said!" Ketan repeated as Fatima did it again.

"You're a warrior," the healer answered, tightening the strap again and making Ketan grit her teeth, "be tough."

"Be tough? I'll show you being...OW!" Ketan glared at the old woman, certain she'd done that on purpose. Fatima simply gave her a bland look then turned towards her other patient, whom she'd ordered to lay down on the sleeping mat.

Hunter was lying on a mat, dozing. It was a struggle to open her eyes, but she was glad that Ketan was making noise, which meant she was okay.

Fatima laid a hand on the outlander's forehead, frowning briefly and shaking her head. "Silly woman. Doing something like that when she's already tired."

Ketan watched, worriedly, as she pulled on her robe again. "Is she all right?"

The healer spared her a glance and snorted, "Yes, rest, she just needs rest. As do you, although your ribs will probably make that difficult."

"I'll be all right," Ketan grumbled. She wanted her to be tough, fine, she'd show the healer tough. Standing up, she winced, and carefully did not look at Fatima as she moved to sit down next to Hunter. After a moment's hesitation, she reached up and took the other woman's hand, glaring at Fatima and daring her to say something.

Hunter's eyes fluttered open. "All better?" She squeezed the hand holding hers.

"All better." Ketan smiled, ignoring the ache across the left side of her chest. Fatima had assured her the bones were just bruised and would heal perfectly fine. That didn't stop them from hurting though. "You scared me. How do you feel?"

"Tired. I didn't mean to scare you. But the situation was a bit unusual. What was that thing? That wasn't the little dust devils and fire thingies your people normally throw at me to annoy my day."

"No it wasn't." Ketan smiled, remembering that. She suddenly wished, more than anything, that they were back at the caves with her tribe, where she knew they were safe. "It was a demon, summoned from the winds."

"I had to take it apart, find the thread that bound it to physical form and unravel it." And it had hurt, a lot. Shoving her hand into it had felt like shoving her hand into a lightening storm.

Ketan swallowed, staring into Hunter's eyes intently. "How did you know how to do that?" she whispered.

"Just do. Can't explain it. How do they make them appear? Can they explain that?"

"My mother tried once." Ketan's eyes narrowed at the memory. "They can't explain it any better than you can." She brushed blonde hair out of Hunter's eyes. "Sleep. I'll keep watch."

Hunter nodded and let her eyes close. "That thing was polluted, dark," she murmured.

"Yes," Ketan whispered in agreement. Once she was sure that Hunter was asleep, she settled back down against the mat, her back to Hunter, eyes towards the door, her sword settled across her lap, and ignored Fatima's outraged look.

That was twice that they'd been attacked by wind elementals, Ketan wasn't going to take a chance.

#####3

Ketan had managed to stay awake long enough to see Fatima lock the door to the room. Then she'd lost it somewhere during the long night, half sprawled onto Hunter's sleeping mat. The next thing she realized it was morning, and she was blinking sleepily at the outlander.

"Morning?" she whispered, blinking a little. "Sore," she grimaced, stretching to unkink her side. "How about you?"

"I'm much better. But I didn't get shoved by a demon."

"And I didn't stick my hand in one," Ketan replied, grinning and pressing her cheek into Hunter's hand, smiling a little.

There was a tense feeling in the air, trouble, or at least that was what Hunter was sensing, but for now they were alone, and it was quiet.

"I think that's the second time someone's tried to kill us," Ketan whispered, as if afraid to say it out loud.

Hunter quirked her head in question, but didn't move her hand, letting the warmth of Ketan's skin seep into hers. "What was the first time?"

"The sand storm," Ketan sighed, closing her eyes and leaning a bit closer so that her head touched the blonde's.

"I thought those occurred naturally? That was magic?" Hunter hadn't seen the magic. Normally she could see the thread that gave them form, which was like when she fought, being able to see her opponent's flaw and to strike. She couldn't give it words, but she could just see them.

"It was too fast." Ketan shook her head. "The sand storm came up too quickly to be natural. I could feel the magic brush against me. Couldn't you?"

Hunter thought back for a moment. "No. But honestly, it was too fast and I was too scared. I'd been in one before and almost died." It wasn't as hard as she had thought to admit she had been scared,

"You were scared?" Slowly, Ketan smiled. "I didn't think you ever got scared." Then she sobered and nodded. "That's twice a wind elemental has tried to kill us. Someone with a lot of power."

"And a lot of blood. Your elementals like to be fed." Hunter shrugged. "Not often, but I too can get scared on occasion."

"Death magic." Ketan's voice got quiet. "It would take a life to raise the sand storms like that." She shuddered, wishing she knew who their enemy truly was.

"Maybe your Veiled One learned something." She wasn't holding out hope on that.

"Maybe." Ketan sounded just as doubtful. "And even if she did, do you really think she'd tell us after all that?"

"They gave their word. They did not promise to like me, they just promised to help me," Hunter replied.

That was true, Ketan allowed, and nodded her head slowly. "They promised." That would hold some weight with them. "The Water Mistress could help us?"

"She does seem to hold the most weight." Hunter sighed, frustrated because she was unable to follow their conversation, because she was being overwhelmed with desire to be closer to Ketan. This was why romance, attraction, was bad, it made one lose focus.

Watching the way Hunter's eyes darkened as they looked down at her lips, Ketan smiled slowly and leaned closer. "You're a hero again. You killed the demon," she whispered, brushing her lips against Hunter's and thrilling at it.

"That was self-serving, hero's aren't self-serving," Hunter murmured against Ketan's lips before giving into the kiss and pulling Ketan down on top of her.

"So say you." Hunter's voice had gone all breathy as Ketan settled in on top of her. "I must be crushing you." She shivered, though, as the other woman's hands wandered across her back, careful of her wounded side.

"I also say you have your own magic, because I can't stop wanting this, despite my vows." Her fingertips trailed along the edges of the bandage wrapped around Ketan's ribs.

"H-how far do your vows allow you to go?" Ketan's voice hitched as she felt those fingers move. She wanted, really wanted, desperately wanted, to feel Hunter's skin against hers.

Hunter paused and let her head rest against the mat, thinking. It was a slippery slope, semantics of words and meaning.

Gray eyes, dark with desire, watched her struggle with the question.

"I have to remain chaste, which...I guess...means I can do anything to you that you want. You'll have to wait until I can return to the Temple of Ryuu and revoke my vows." She swallowed nervously, because to stay with Ketan she would have to revoke more than that.

The body on top of hers stiffened in surprise. "You'd do that? Revoke your vows?"

"When this is all over and if we still feel the same way, then yes, I will." And that was insanity talking. Part of her was horrified at the words she was speaking, but part of her was serious. She was happiest in the desert. She had taken some home with her and made a garden, after all.

"Then we'll have to find your Princess fast." Ketan stood up, ignoring the ache and the urge to crawl back where she'd just been. "Let's go find the Elders."

"Huh..." At the abrupt change, Hunter could just blink.

Ketan held out her hand, eyes sparkling, "Because it's either that or I'm going to try to take your clothes off." There was only so much kissing she could do without the promise of anything else.

"Oh, okay." Hunter reached out, taking Ketan's hand.

"Okay I can take your clothes off?" Ketan nearly whimpered, taking Hunter's hand in hers.

"No, but I could take yours off." Hunter wasn't certain who was talking, because it couldn't have been her. She pulled Ketan back down onto her lap, latching her lips back to Ketan's.

"Wha..." Ketan started to ask, only to be thoroughly silenced by Hunter's lips. She instantly relaxed into the kiss, once again amazed by how talented the other woman was at this, for all her insecurities about anything further. "No," she whispered, when she could talk again, "not unless I get to see you too." That was fair, she figured, although she really wanted to do something more proactive right now.

Breathing heavily, Hunter rested her head against Ketan's shoulder. "We should do something...else."

Fingers slid dangerously close to Hunter's breasts, and Ketan nodded quickly as she tried to resist temptation, even though she was sure she was failing. "We should go find the Elders."

Hunter sucked in a breath at the touch. "We should," she agreed, but her hands fought with the fabric of Ketan's shirt, trying to get under to return the favor.

Ketan had to bite her lip to keep from moaning in pleasure as those hands found their way under the fabric to bare skin. "No fair," she managed to whisper, or plea, she wasn't sure which, and pulled Hunter's loose as well so that she could find the warm skin beneath.

Hunter forgotten how nice this could be. But even with Catherine, it hadn't been like this. It was similar, but so very different.

Ketan was making little noises in the back of her throat as she finally got to touch the skin she'd seen when they'd gone swimming. *'Touching,'* she thought as she nipped at Hunter's lower lip, *'is so very much better than seeing.'* Although seeing and touching would be fantastic, which would require clothes to be removed. She started setting about doing just that. She'd just managed to get part of Hunter's shirt undone when raised voices outside the door made her pause.

Hunter groaned, rational thought having melted and dripped into her pants. Her shirt was up over her breasts when Ketan stopped. Hunter whimpered, her brain trying to re-engage.

"Shhh..." Ketan whispered, eyes widening as she heard what sounded like her mother's voice raised in anger and Fatima's in response. "Uh oh." She sat up so quickly her head swam for a moment, staring at the door.

"Uh oh? Uh oh! We almost die and you say uh oh?" Hunter's anger died when she saw that Ketan's face had gone pale. "Hey, hey..." She sat up and wrapped her hands around the woman's waist, giving her support. "Take a breath."

But Ketan was frantically pulling down on Hunter's shirt, eyes wide and frantic. "No, we have to..." Whatever she had been about to say ended when the simple wooden door slammed open with enough force that it cracked against the stone wall behind it.

"There she is!" the first guard into the room yelled, followed by a half dozen more and her mother behind them. Fatima was behind them all, clearly upset and shaking as Ketan's mother shoved past her.

"Get her off my daughter!"

Ketan opened her mouth to say that she was the one on Hunter, but one of the guards, she wasn't sure which, grabbed her first and pulled her sideways off Hunter's lap.

The Elemental Mistress of Fire gave her daughter one long, disgusted look then turned back towards the outlander on the sleeping mat.

Hunter growled, her green eyes going more gold with anger, and kicked out with a foot, hitting the woman's knee. The guard who'd grabbed Ketan screamed and dropped to the ground as her kneecap snapped. Then Hunter lashed out with her other foot, catching the woman in her chin, snapping her head back.

That left four guards, who stepped back, spears raised, and Ketan's mother, who stared down at her, enraged. "Try it again, outlander." Outside in the hallway, another group of guards waited for the word.

"Mother!" Ketan raised herself up, stepping around a groaning guard. "What are you doing?" But her mother ignored her, staring still at Hunter.

The blonde rolled to her left and came up on her feet. "What's the meaning of this? You are breaking your word," she spat in disgust.

"No we aren't. You'll come with us to see the Air Mistress, and she will tell you what she learned. As promised." They couldn't see her wintry smile behind the veils, but the coldness in her voice reflected it.

"Mother..." Ketan started again, wondering if she could reach her sword where it lay propped up against the sleeping mat.

"Be quiet, Ketan," her mother snapped, still not looking at her. "You've always been a disappointment. Now you've become a disgrace as well."

The words hurt, and Ketan stumbled, face white, as she tried to think of something, anything to make this stop.

"Don't talk to her that way! You callous bitch, she is trying to prevent a war and you just cut her down!"

"She's obviously allowed herself to be swayed by an outlander." The veiled one gestured at the hall. "Time to leave, outlander."

"Mother?" Ketan whispered, eyes wide and face pale as she watched. The Veiled One paused, turning to glance at her daughter and the blonde woman that she'd found her with. There was little doubt about what the two of them had been doing on the sleeping mat.

"Don't call me that."

Ketan could feel her eyes water with unshed tears .

"No. I'm not going with you," Hunter said.

"You have no choice," the Veiled One nodded to the surrounding guards. "Come with me to find out where your Princess is, or stay here and die. Either way, it does not matter to me."

Hunter was still, her energy coiled, ready to propel her. She looked at Ketan and then the guards, weighing options. She could get to the sword and kill them all, but would Ketan forgive her for killing her mother.

"Make your choice," the Veiled One demanded, eyes fairly alight with malicious glee. If Hunter chose to fight, she would see the outlander burn before her eyes.

Hunter smiled. "Just try and burn me, witch."

Again there was the impression of a cold smile. "You might not burn. But others will. Would that bother you, outlander?" She didn't, quite, look towards Ketan, but the nearest guards shifted uneasily in their armor.

Hunter's smile turned into a dark, malicious smile, reading clearly what the woman was thinking in her eyes. "The love for your people knows no bounds." She let the energy uncoil. "Fine, let's go."

"Good, after you," the Fire Mistress gestured to the hall.

Ketan took a step forward, only to be blocked by two of the guards. "Wait, you can't just take her. I'm going too!"

"Make sure she does not leave here," Ketan heard her mother say to the nearest guards as she followed after Hunter.

"Can I have a moment with your daughter?" She sighed, at the woman's cold look. "Please?"

"I owe you nothing." But those cold eyes thawed a little as she looked to where the guards were keeping Ketan away from her sword. "One moment and that is all."

She wouldn't say thank you.

She brushed past the guards to Ketan's side. "You okay?"

Wordlessly, the other woman shook her head, not sure of anything but the fact that if she opened her mouth, she might scream, or cry, either would be bad.

Hunter hugged her, an odd sensation of closeness, but nice. "Get out if you can. I'll meet you by the dragon," she whispered in Ketan's ear. Ketan's mother was danger and half-truths, she could taste it on the air with every word the woman spoke.

"Be careful," Ketan whispered back, holding tight onto Hunter until the guards pushed her away, forcibly.

"Your moment is over," the Veiled One snapped. "Come now."

Hunter nodded.

"You will never see her again," the Fire Mistress whispered as they started out the doors.

"I was aware of that the moment you came in the room," Hunter said neutrally.

"Good that you know what is coming, then," the Elder responded as the guards formed a circle around Hunter and led the way down the hall. Behind them were yells as Ketan tried to follow and was stopped by a spearbutt, but to the stomach.

Hunter didn't know exactly what was coming, but she had a pretty good idea. "Can't wait," she said calmly.

There was a sound, almost like a dark echo of Ketan's laugh from behind her, but other than that, the Elder didn't say anything else as they continued to walk. They didn't head towards the elaborate chambers that the Elders had met Hunter in before. Instead, they headed deeper into the cliff, away from the well-traveled hallways and into the darker passages.

After several minutes of walking, the first two guards pushed open the twin doors set ahead of them and revealed the narrow dark room inside. A fire already burned in several braziers, providing the only light. The Mistress of Air was already there, surrounded by several more guards, awaiting Hunter's arrival.

To one side the Captain of the Guard stood, smiling coldly as she watched Hunter escorted into the room. Of the other Elders there was no sign.

Hunter followed. There was a choice, there was always a choice to be made. There really wasn't a good choice yet. "Elder of Air, I'm glad to see you're doing well." That was good start.

The Elder stared at Hunter, eyes still wide behind the Veils she wore. She refused to acknowledge the greeting though. "Sit and I will fulfill the promise."

Hunter sat, ignoring everyone but the woman in front of her. "I appreciate that." Her shoulders itched, having all the guards at her back.

Quietly, Zia stalked along behind them, the Captain of the Guards obviously enjoying the moment.

"The one you seek is to the west of here, among the tall desert dunes. She is not far from the place with the painted rocks." The Elder's tone took on that of one half asleep as she talked. "She is bound by more than simple ropes, by the man who holds her there. He is powerful, but he is not his own master." The Elder's voice caught at that. "That is all I can tell you," she said, tiredly.

"I thank you. That is more than I had before." She stood and gave a nod of respect to the woman, who had finally done something she found worth respecting.

"The promise has been kept," Ketan's mother said, coldly.

"Yes, it has." The outlander stood patiently, waiting for the other shoe to drop. "Now I will leave and you will never see me again, as agreed."

"No." Surprisingly, it was the Air Mistress who spoke up. "No, you will tell us how you defeated the Elemental demon before."

Hunter smiled coldly. "That was not part of the agreement."

"It is now," Zia spoke up, drawing the long, curved blade at her side. The Fire Mistress nodded in agreement as the rest of the guards tensed.

Hunter's lips twitched, changing the smile to one that held humor. "I don't know." The smile slid away into a cold mask. People were always the same, giving honor and promises and then going back on their words. Always disappointing her with lies.

"Then you won't be leaving until we find out," the Fire Mistress said, nodding at her. "Take her." The guards surged forward at the command, spears ready.

"You betrayed me today. I won't forget that." The outlander held up her hands, palms out, not resisting as the guards surged forward. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction of fighting.

"Bind her," the Fire Mistress demanded, obviously unhappy that Hunter hadn't resisted. She could have used that resistance to explain a sudden death to the other Elders. "Bind her tightly and take her to the room that's been prepared."

Hunter closed her hands into fists and lowered her hands down in front of her waist. She clenched her fisted hands over and over again, but didn't resist as they grabbed her.

"Good," Ketan's mother announced, surveying the work as they trussed up the outlander. "Very good," she nearly purred. She followed behind them, ignoring the worried look that the other Elder was giving her as they walked away. "Now, outlander, time to find out how you dismissed an Elemental. No outlander should have that power."

"Why would they care?" Hunter asked. As she relaxed, the flesh in her hands, which she had pumped up with blood clenching her fists, was starting to relax, reducing in size and making the tie grow loose against her skin.

"They'll want to know where my dau...where Ketan is, of course." The last of the ropes were bound, and the Veiled One nodded to the guards. Most of them left, leaving behind Zia and just a couple of others to stand watch by the door.

"So you're going to kill your own daughter?" She wasn't surprised. "How power and ego have corrupted your soul," Hunter said with disgust.

"I have no daughter." The Elder leaned close, gray eyes that were so similar to her daughter's, bright behind her veil. "We need to know how you do what you did. Whatever it takes." She stood up again, voice normal. "Zia, make sure that the others keep Isra occupied. The Water Mistresses always were too weak-willed to do what needed to be done."

"Zia? How do you sleep at night?" Hunter asked seriously.

For a split second there was an almost haunted look on the Guard Captain's face, but it disappeared quickly enough. She turned, ignoring the woman stretched out on the table behind her and quickly left.

"Be back soon, outlander," the Elder promised, entirely too eager to begin whatever it was. She would fetch the other Elders and be back to begin her investigation.

Hunter took a deep breath and closed her eyes, letting out a breath, "Be seeing you," she said to the Elder of Fire.

#####3

The guards stood, spears crossed, in front of the doorway, not bothered by the glares the woman was shooting their way.

Catherine came running up to the guards. "Quick, quick!" she gasped urgently, almost out of breath. "Zia needs your help; she's gotten loose." As the guards looked at each other, confused, she shouted again. "Hurry!"

The two guards looked at one another, puzzled at why Catherine would be the one to come fetch them.

"You mean the outlander?" the guard on the right asked, frowning.

Behind them, Ketan rose silently to her feet from the pillows and started stalking forwards, lightly on the balls of her feet.

"Of course the outlander! You can't let her get loose; she'll try to kill me again."

"We're under strict orders to stay here," The guard on the left reasoned, looking a little confused though.

Her eyes darted to Ketan, pleading for her to do something, before looking back at the guards. They weren't the smartest people in the world, she discovered in her time there. The Elders had weeded out the smart ones. She loved Zia, but the woman was like a bulldog on occasion.

Ever so quietly, Ketan picked up one of the heavy copper bowls that Fatima used to pour water in. She met Catherine's eyes for a brief second and smiled. The first guard, suddenly noticing Catherine looking behind her, started to turn around just as Ketan brought around the bowl with enough strength to bounce it off the guard's head.

The guard went down bonelessly, her head leaving a dent in the bottom of the copper bowl.

Catherine quickly pushed the other guard as she was turning to look behind her, knocking the woman off balance.

"Hey!" the remaining guard shouted, trying to bring up her spear. But Ketan was there by then, and she slammed the bowl into the startled guard's head, snapping her head back against the wall, and she, too, fell to the floor. "I hope I didn't kill them," Ketan muttered, grabbing a spear off the floor.

"Does it matter they're going to kill you, and probably Hunter? Your mother's obsessed with why Hunter can disarm her precious elementals." Catherine looked back out the doorway, checking the hallway. "You have to get out of here. No one but the Elders and some of the guards know what's going on. If we hurry, we can get you out of here."

"Thank you," Ketan said, feeling infinitely better as she stood up, holding the spear, and eyeing Catherine oddly. "What? My mother wouldn't...she wouldn't..." 'But maybe,' Ketan thought, feeling sick, 'she would.' "Where's Hunter?" she asked instead.

Catherine started down the hallway. "Hunter will save herself, she always does, I hope. She's somewhere with your mother. I don't know where."

"No. I'm not leaving without her." The spear was awkward in her hands, but they'd taken her sword away when they'd dragged a complaining Fatima away.

"It must be a warrior thing," Catherine huffed. She pulled out a bag from behind a pillar. "Here," she said, handing the bag of supplies and Hunter's sword to the woman.

"Thank you. I don't know why you're doing this, but thank you." She knew Hunter had told her to flee, but she should help the outlander if she could. "Can't you tell me where she is?"

Catherine looked at the other woman, frustrated. "I just told you, I don't know! But if you're strong enough to take on the Elders of Wind and Fire, by all means, go storming off."

"Both of them?" Ketan's eyes widened. How could Hunter hope to survive against two Elders? "Where's Zia? Maybe she can..." She could what? Ketan couldn't even say.

"I'll work on my lover, she's a good person. She's like Hunter. She takes her duty seriously. But if I can get to the Elder of Water and talk to her, she can talk to Zia. The Elder of Water would not put up with this. She will help." She hoped, there were no guarantees.

"If you see Hunter..." Ketan fumbled, not sure how much she should say. "Tell her I'll wait where she told me to wait." But if the outlander wasn't by the dragon statue by morning, Ketan was coming back for her.

"If you see Hunter...tell her...tell her...I'm sorry for what happened between us, but I'm happy with Zia, so happy that I have no regrets. And she should try living life with no regrets as well." Catherine shook her head. "Come on, we're wasting time with this."

"Thank you, Catherine." Not giving the other woman a chance to reject, Ketan pulled her into a tight hug, whispering, "I know you're an outlander, but I don't care. I'll always think of you as a sister." Then she let go. "Go. I can find my own way out. Go find Isra."

Catherine looked shocked for a moment then nodded and took off.

#####3

The wall opposite the doorway where they'd stationed guards outside to keep anyone from seeing Hunter started to make noises. It wasn't much at first, just light, scratching sounds, like sand sliding inside the sandstone. It grew louder though, into an almost grinding noise that could be easily heard inside the torture chamber. After maybe five minutes of that, the sound stopped, just as abruptly as it had begun, only to be replaced by the muffled sound of a voice cursing from inside the wall. Slowly, ever so slowly, the wall swung outwards, revealing a hidden passage within.

Still cursing under her breath, Zia looked around, relaxing a little when she saw that Hunter was still alone. "I'm going to really regret this," she muttered, drawing a blade and starting towards the woman on the table.

Eyelids popped open and worried green eyes looked around. Hunter frowned and tensed, seeing Zia. "This is a little low, isn't it, killing me when I'm bound?"

Zia stopped next to the table, long, thin blade in hand, and stared down at the outlander, her face a confused mix of emotions. "I should kill you. End it all right here." The idea had merit to it, but Catherine had made her promise. Face twisting into a scowl, she started cutting away the bindings.

Confused, Hunter didn't say anything, until her hands were free. She sat up and looked at the Captain of the Guard. "Why aren't you?"

"I promised Catherine I wouldn't," Zia snarled, cutting through the ropes that held Hunter's legs down.

Hunter opened her mouth then found she had nothing to say to that. Legs free, she stood up and asked, "You love her enough to go against the Elders?" although she was surprised Catherine would want her saved at all, considering how she had treated the woman since their meeting again.

"Of course." Zia gave Hunter a disbelieving look. "I would do anything for her. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you don't love anyone enough to say that." The last of the ropes were gathered up and she tossed them into the brazier to burst into flames on the coals inside. Let the Elders figure that one out. "Come. They'll be back soon."

Hunter followed. "You love her enough to betray your honor, your duty?" Even though Hunter knew the Elder of Fire was acting out of hubris and fear for her position of power, killing her own daughter moved into the realm of cruelty.

"Does this look like my duty to you? My honor?" Zia gestured angrily at the table. "There's no other use for that than to torture someone. None. I knew it the second they pulled you in here. I thought..." she stopped and shook her head, looking again at the door, "I thought they were just going to imprison you."

The outlander chewed on the other woman's words. The dream she'd had with the strange man who may or may not be their Sun Serpent...Duty to her King and Duty to the Land were not the same, is what he had argued.

"Hurry now, if they find us here..." Zia shrugged, certain she didn't have to explain it to Hunter.

"Right behind you."

"Fantastic," Zia grumbled, not entirely happy about that. It took both of them to swing the section of wall back into place, the grit from the sand making it difficult to move. Once closed, there was no light, only the walls of the small, thin tunnel to lead them away from the room. "Catherine said to tell you that Ketan is free and she will wait for you where you told her to meet."

"Thank you. How do we get me out? And will you get into trouble?" Hunter asked, rubbing her wrists.

"Would it matter to you if I did?" Zia couldn't quite keep the edge from her voice as they kept walking, hunched over now as the ceiling lowered.

"If it didn't matter, I wouldn't have asked," she snapped back. "Look, I know you think the worst of me, but you're helping me now, and I am grateful."

"Be careful, Duke Del Cor. I might actually find you someone I could think of as honorable." The guard captain laughed quietly in the darkness. "I'll show you the way. I can't lead you out of here, there will be too many questions as it is. I'll show you where to go, though, then you're on your own."

"Fair enough."

They walked down the tunnel that smelled musty and where dust crawled into their mouths and nose, making Hunter struggle not to sneeze.

"Here," Zia said, shoving against another section of wall, this one lower than the first. It slid out, grudgingly, but it slid out. Bright light flooded into the hidden tunnel, blinding them both for a moment. "Go to the end of the hallway, turn left, and then left again. You'll see the outside by then. There will be guards, but you'll have to sneak by them."

Hunter nodded and took off without a look back. She'd already said her thanks, and time was important.

Behind her, the hidden wall ground its way back into place, leaving only a dead end to the short hallway that Hunter sprinted down.

#####3

The guards were yelling behind her, and Hunter made the decision to jump out the window to the canyon floor. It wasn't that far, she reasoned, and much quicker than going for the stairs.

She squeezed her shoulders through the rocky opening and jumped. She hit the floor, rolled, and came back up to her feet. Limping, she took off running.

She heard the whistling scream of arrows and started zig-zagging, dodging the first two, but the third struck her shoulder, and she stumbled forward with the impact and a startled shout.

The path thankfully turned, taking her out of the line of sight. Reaching up with her other hand, she touched her shoulder. Just the tip of the arrow emerged from under her collar bone. She hissed but kept moving, her hand red with blood.

Happily, she saw the pond of wisdom and the dragon statue, but no Ketan. She rounded the pond and stopped, breathing heavily, resting her bloodied hand on the dragon statue. "Ketan?" Her limbs were starting to shake with shock and exhaustion. "Ketan?"

"Hunter!" Ketan quickly emerged from the shadows she'd hidden in, leaving the pile of things where they were to grab the other woman's side and help her. "I'm here. I'm here." She hissed in surprise as she touched the arrow shaft protruding from the woman's back. "Oh no, no, no," Ketan whispered, over and over, leading Hunter to the small hiding spot.

"It's okay. I'm okay. It missed everything vital." Although it would have been better if she hadn't been hit at all.

"No, you're not okay. You have an arrow coming out of your back!" Ketan hissed, worried more than she should have been for an outlander. "How far behind you are they?" She worked quickly, tearing cloth to try and bind the wound. No time to remove the arrow here.

"I jumped out a window. They have to get down two flights of stairs, unless any of them followed me out."

"Hold still, it's going to hurt." Ketan apologized, then broke the shaft, trying not to hurt Hunter too badly as she did. The arrowhead stayed where it was, for now.

Hunter gritted her teeth and bit back a scream.

"Sorry!" Ketan hissed, worriedly. Why was she always hurting this woman? "Here. Quickly, there isn't much time." She pressed Hunter's sword into her hand then continued tying the makeshift bandage in place around the wound.

Hunter smiled and gripped her sword, welcoming back an old friend. She took a deep breath, wincing. It was manageable. "I'm good, we need to leave."

"Liar," Ketan whispered in response to the first part, gathering up the few other things quickly. "Here. I filled our water skins." The water had been cold, but it had tasted so very good, and she'd drunk her fill waiting for Hunter.

Hunter smiled. "Apparently, I'm not a good liar." She lifted the skin and took a sip before latching the stopper. She strapped her sword to her waist.

"We need to go." Ketan stood, ready to bolt, to leave as quickly as she could run away from the shadows that filled this place.

Hunter nodded and took off down the path.

They ran, quickly and surely through the washed-out canyon as fast as their feet could carry them. The darkness hid them in shadows most of the time, although the moon rising in the distance would shorten those shadows soon. "Titan should be close," Ketan huffed, stretching her legs to eat up the distance as fast as she could.

Hunter nodded, conserving her breath. Sweat was slick on her back, and pain radiated through her left side.

"Soon. We can stop soon," Ketan promised, hoping she wasn't lying. The outlander was most probably on the edge of collapsing with pain from the wound as they ran.

They were waiting for them at the end of the gorge, close to the small caves that the Sand Tigers used. Ketan would never have seen them in the darkness if it hadn't been for Titan. The Sand Tiger reared up behind one of the hunched-over figures, latching onto his neck and shaking as hard as he could. The resulting screaming ruined their ambush, but there was still four of them, and Hunter was wounded.

"Crap," Hunter said, breathing heavily, and reached for her sword, pulling it silently out of the sheath.

"Kill the outlander!" one of the ambushers yelled, harsh and high. The four rushed at them, long, curved blades flashing in the moonlight.

"Crap," Ketan agreed, swinging her sword free. Letting loose with her tribe's war scream, she met the closest of them head on.

It was heartening to see that Hunter had such a profound experience on these people, that killing her would be their battle cry. She raised her own sword, gritting her teeth as the arrow shaft ground against bone and muscle.

"You're going to die, outlander," one of them hissed in the darkness, her voice harsh with panting as she traded blows with the wounded woman. Her panting changed to an incredulous grunt as Hunter's sword flicked through her belly then out her side, leaving her to trip over her own entrails.

It was hard to fight at night with only the shift of shadows and the labored breaths of your opponents to go by. A blade's edge came close enough to Ketan's head that she felt it slice a piece of her head wrap off. She parried, slashing out with her own sword and feeling it sink through flesh. There was no time to see how badly she'd hit her opponent though, the other was upon her and she had no breath to call to Hunter.

Hunter pushed the pain away, pulling herself together. She turned, meeting the next opponent, instantly seeing the flaw in their sword work. In a few blocks and some footwork, the woman overextended and Hunter moved slightly, grabbing the wrist and breaking it, and then slammed her hilt into the woman's face once and then once more until her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell to the ground. Sweat was making Hunter's grip loose, and she turned to the final guard...and froze.

The air was suddenly thick with magic, and Hunter turned back to the trail behind them. The dark sky was lit up with bright oranges and yellows.

"What is it?" Ketan asked, panting. Her second opponent lay unconscious nearby, her head bleeding from where it had been kicked into a boulder. "Oh," she gasped, watching the far canyon they'd just escaped from light up with what looked like flames. "We should go. Fast."

"Will it stop if we run away?" Hunter asked, planting her feet to brace herself, drawing energy, grounding her.

"No. But we'd live a little longer." Ketan swallowed, realizing they weren't running. Nearby, she could hear Titan's low growl from near the guard he'd just mauled.

"Go. I'll follow shortly." *'Or slow it down and die.'* But she kept that thought to herself. "I hate your mother."

"I know." Ketan stepped up close to the blonde woman. "I'm not really fond of her right now either." She tested the heft of her blade, sighing. "Sure we couldn't run a bit before the dying?" The flames were getting closer. She had a good idea what was coming around the furthest bend in the canyon though.

"Go," Hunter said again.

"Go where?" Ketan retorted. The flames were close enough now that they were reflecting off the nearest canyon walls.

"Through the valley and west, towards the painted rocks. Your Elders at least kept their word about telling me where the Princess was." The creature of flame down the path looked vaguely bird-like.

"Of course they did. They promised," Ketan said, absently, gray eyes wide as she saw the flame creature coming towards them. "I didn't know my mother was powerful enough to summon one of those."

"This might take some work." It was big, and she swallowed, her eyes searching for the thread that bound it to physical form.

"You can stop it, right?" Ketan hoped.

Hunter turned her head a fraction of an inch. "Yes, but I'd feel better if you were out of the range of its flames. So would you listen to me for a change and go."

"I'm not really good at listening to what people want me to do." Ketan managed to flash a smile at Hunter.

Hunter sighed, frustrated, and ran forward so the flames couldn't reach Titan or Ketan. The elemental of flame screamed, but seemed to pause, confused to have a human run at it.

"Wait for me!" Ketan yelled after her, sprinting to try and catch up to the fast moving woman.

Hunter saw it, the thread pulsing purple and dark, angry, stretching back to the canyon walls to Ketan's mother.

She rolled her eyes, annoyed that Ketan was following. What was the woman trying to do, get herself burned to a crisp?

"Where is it?" Ketan yelled, paling as she realized how big the thing was as they got closer to it. "What do you need to do?"

"I need you to go the other direction!" the outlander shouted angrily. She focused back on the elemental, nearly missing the thread. She skidded to a halt, gathered her will, and then lashed out.

The creature shrieked and broke apart, and then the wind slammed down the valley, picking up Hunter and Ketan and slamming them back into the rocky walls.

Hunter groaned. She should have expected the Elder of Wind. She wasn't certain if it had been a trap, but regardless, it had been effective

"That was fun," Ketan moaned when she could breathe again, rolling onto her side and scrabbling up to her feet. "Hunter?"

Hunter couldn't get her legs under her. That big of an elemental had probably been feeding off the death of several people and had wiped out her energy. She gasped for breath and blinked open her eyes, staring at the rapidly gathering dust devils.

"We have to go," Ketan said, feeling like she'd said that a lot recently. Grabbing Hunter's arm, she pulled the woman upright, slinging her arm over her shoulders. "I've got you."

Hunter just gasped and sucked in a breath of pain. "We can't out run them." ...Especially if Ketan was supporting her.

"We have to." Titan was up on his feet again, growling near them. "Come on, Hunter, we can do this. I know you can do this. Help me do this." She pulled at the shorter woman, trying to get them moving faster.

Hunter tried to get her legs under her. It took a second but she got her legs to work.

"Faster. Faster," Ketan kept chanting, half carrying Hunter as they ran, stumbled, down the canyon, Titan keeping pace with them half seen in the shadows. They weren't going to make it to the desert. She could hear the whirling winds gaining on them, so close now that the sand was pelting their legs as they ran. "I'm sorry!" She had to yell to be heard over the rushing wind "I should never have brought you here!"

Hunter grunted and tried to focus her will to try and take one of the windstorms out. But before she could turn and unleash it, she was picked up, sand and rocks scraping her skin, and slammed into something, and then it was dark.

"Hunter!" Ketan yelled, throwing herself after the woman. The wind had ripped her right out of her arms, but she managed to grab onto one of the outlander's legs, hugging it tightly. The wind roared around them, impossibly loud.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, the words swallowed by the maelstrom around them. Then there was darkness, sudden and complete.

#####3

King and Country

Part 5: Ryuu

Hunter coughed and sat up, groaning. She reached up and bit off a scream as she moved her damaged shoulder.

"Careful. You are hurt," a soft voice said in the darkness, strangely accented. Hands touched her stomach, holding her in place. "Do not move, it will only make the injury worse."

Hunter was too tired to be suspicious. "Ketan?" she asked, trying to blink grit and sand out of her vision.

"No. Not Ketan." The hands moved, gently touching the wound on Hunter's shoulder. "Your friend is nearby, as is the Sand Tiger." Some of the words were said in an almost archaic tongue, but the meaning was clear.

Hunter nodded and relaxed back against the ground. Finally, she got her eyes opened and looked up. "Who are you?" she croaked out.

"A friend." The word was strange though, the one she used for friend. It meant more than just friend, it had other meanings. "Rest. You've all been injured. I will take you somewhere safe."

Hunter nodded and let her head relaxed, and closed her eyes.

"Sleep," the voice said, whispered in her thoughts as well as in her ears.

#####3

Hunter woke up again later. It was warm, she could feel the heat licking the air currents, but didn't feel any sun on her skin.

"Here," the same voice from before said, pressing something cool to Hunter's lips. "Somewhere safe," the voice said quietly, pulling back the cup of water. "Here." Slender hands wiped her face with a wet cloth.

Green eyes finally opened, taking in the woman before her. The outlines were fuzzy, but she looked like an outlander like herself, only there was something weird with her hair. "Who are you?" It was odd, to feel safe when so much was out of her control at the moment. But she did feel safe. She tried to reach out a hand to touch the hair but winced and decided to leave the hand where it was.

"A friend," the woman answered, watching her intently. There was a rough stone ceiling above their heads. There was light coming in from somewhere nearby, enough to see by. "How do you feel?"

"Tired, sore, a little feverish. You know, friend is a vague term." She looked around, spotting what might have been Ketan.

The Sand Tiger came over to the odd woman and butted its head into her hand.

"Not to me." The woman leaned closer, eyes glinting in the light. "Friend isn't a vague term. What about your shoulder?"

"It's still sore, but there's no mind-numbing pain, although that could be hiding under all the other aches and pains." She groaned and slowly sat up, resting against the cool, dirt wall.

Looking around, she saw a decent camp set-up, as well as Titan getting his ears scratched by the silver-haired woman, and Ketan sleeping, her face scratched and bruised but she seemed fine.

Slender hands abandoned Titan to help Hunter sit up further, and then tugged aside the shirt to see the puckered red wound, which was all that was left of the arrow wound. "It looks well enough. The fever should pass."

Hunter looked down and her forehead wrinkled in confusion. "How long have I been out?"

"A day." The silver-haired woman leaned back, lips twisted upwards in a small smile. "Your friend is well also, although she will sleep a little longer."

"Ahh...alright. That's a little odd, since I could have sworn there was an arrow in it." She stared a little harder at the woman. "YOU'RE not one of those creepy Magi?"

"No." The lips turned up further into a full smile. "No I'm not. I have some small skills healing, though." The woman tilted her head, watching as Titan curled up next to Hunter with a huff of pleasure. "What's your name?"

"Hunter...Hunter Del Cor," she said, petting Titan's fur. "And this fellow here is Titan, and that's Ketan."

"Well met, Hunter Del Cor." The silver-haired woman's smile faded. "Why were the elementalists trying to kill you?"

"I have that effect on a lot of people lately," Hunter said with a chuckle and then a wince.

"Just your personality, then?" Silver-rimmed irises glinted with amusement. "I've had that effect on people before as well." She rose from Hunter's side, going to check on her other guest. "Your wife is one of them though; there must be a story behind that."

"Wife? Oh no, there's been a mistake, I guess an honest one. But we're not married." She swallowed.

"Oh." The healer grimaced. "I'm sorry. Partner? Is there a different word for it now?"

"No, she's just helping me. On my quest." Hunter was feeling slightly uncomfortable.

The silver-haired woman looked confused for a moment. "My apology. I was certain..." She shook her head, focusing on wiping the damp cloth across Ketan's face. "She called for you."

"We've been through a lot." She sighed, "It's complicated." She scooted over to the silver-haired woman and Ketan. Gently, she picked up Ketan's hand and held it in hers. "She's alright?"

"A rock hit her head." The healer brushed back dark hair to reveal the small, angry scar that was forming there. "It took more healing than your arrow wound, that's why she is still asleep."

Hunter nodded. "Thank you then, ah, Friend." Her thumb rubbed slowly back and forth over the back of Ketan's hand. This was her fault, all of this, because she had forsaken her vows. Desire had clouded her judgment, made her miss things and put them in danger.

"Ryuu," the silver-haired woman muttered, leaning in to critically study the wound on Ketan's head. "You can call me Ryuu."

Hunter went white, the blood draining from her face, "As in the Goddess of Honor and Vengeance, among other things, Ryuu?" She swallowed thickly.

Ryuu's hand froze, an inch away from Ketan's face, and she slowly turned to look at Hunter, astonishment on her face. "What?" she asked, faintly.

Hunter stared at the woman, and seeing her confused look, let out a breath. "Ah ha... just a coincidence, then." She let out a breath. "My people worship several gods, Korgon, Balamas, and Ryuu; among others. Ryuu, in my culture, is the Goddess of Honor and Vengeance. It is said she was a Virgin Goddess who waits for the return of her missing lover, and to this day keeps her vow of chastity. She honors those who follow her with skills and luck in battle."

Ryuu's throat worked, but no words came out until she turned to focus on the still sleeping Ketan. "I had not heard that before," she said truthfully. "Virgin Goddess you said? What lover is it that she is waiting for?"

"Ah..." Hunter frowned. "I don't know, the Priestess never said."

"Priestess?" Ryuu's voice sounded strange. "I see. How many priestesses are there?"

"Not a lot, the vow of Chastity isn't for the weak. Um, last time I visited the main temple there were six."

"Vow of Chastity?" Ryuu coughed. "Of course. Because she is the virgin Goddess?"

"Um, yes. Of course, I guess if her lover returns, that would change." And then the whole point and worship of the Goddess would have changed, and that was a puzzling thought.

"Of course," Ryuu echoed faintly, rising from her spot by Ketan. "Your friend should wake soon. I'll return shortly. There are things I need to check upon."

Hunter shook her thoughts away. "Okay, be careful." She turned her attention down to Ketan, reaching out to gently touch the scar on her head.

It wasn't long before Ketan's eyelids fluttered then weakly opened and she groaned. "Hunter?" she whimpered at the bright light, trying to focus on the figure leaning over her.

"Hey, hey, careful. Close your eyes for a moment and get your bearings," Hunter said softly

Gray eyes closed and she sighed, relieved. "You're here. I had the strangest dreams. There was someone else, and we were flying, I think." She frowned, trying to remember. Her eyes snapped open an instant later though. "You were hurt! The arrow wound!"

"Shhhh. I'm better now." Hunter laid down next to Ketan. "We got picked up and tossed by the dust demon, which is why you thought we were flying." She stroked Ketan's head.

"I remember now." Ketan's eyes closed. "My head hurts," she whispered, wishing she hadn't tried to sit up a moment ago.

"We seem to have made an unusual friend. She saved and healed us."

Hunter shifted enough for Ketan to get a look at what was left of the wound on her shoulder.

With a gasp of surprise, the other woman reached out, slipping her fingers under the fabric on the outlander's shoulders and tracing her fingers across the red scar. "It looks like it's weeks old. I've never seen a healer able to do that, have you?" She reached her other hand up to touch the small scar across her own forehead.

Hunter shook her head. "No. But I've never seen people bend elements to do their will, either."

Titan came over, feeling left out, and curled around Ketan's feet resting his head on her ankle, looking at her with warm, golden-brown eyes.

"I can't explain it, but I...I trust her. I feel safe."

"You, who thought I had kidnapped you when I rescued you from burning to death in the desert, feel safe with her?" Both of Ketan's eyebrows shot up in surprise, even as she reached down to absently rub Titan behind an expressive ear.

Hunter flushed in embarrassment and anger. "I can't explain it," she huffed. "She reminds me of my mother, kind of." She shrugged and looked away, realizing how odd an explanation it was, because her mother had green eyes like hers and blonde hair as well, nothing like the silver hair and intensively silvery-blue eyes of their rescuer. She drew idle patterns on the dirt floor, unsure what to say.

It was an oddly endearing look on the normally stoic woman, and Ketan couldn't resist reaching out to take Hunter's hand and pull her close enough to kiss.

"Just your traveling companion?" the accented voice came from the mouth of the small cave, full of laughter as Ryu grinned at the two of them.

Hunter stiffened, feeling more out of sorts than she had since the whole thing had been put into crazy motion with the Princess's abduction. She did pull away, not missing the look of hurt on

Ketan's face, making her feel even more unsettled. "We're working on more, but I'm having issues," she murmured, getting up and storming out of the cave, right into the blinding sun.

Titan gave a big yawn at the outburst, and laid down, content on Ketan's ankle, not worried; his human would figure things out sooner or later. He looked at the silver-haired woman sleepily.

Ketan sighed as she watched Hunter storm away. "I wish she wouldn't do that every time I kiss her," she mumbled then realized that the strange healer was still watching her. "Oh. I mean, hello. Thank you for...er...whatever it is you did to get us here." She realized she didn't really know where here was at the moment. Or where the woman had come from and how she'd gotten them away from the Elders. "Who are you?" Ketan asked, finally, as she stared at the stranger, mouth open for a moment. She'd never met someone with silver hair like that. It almost shined in the sunlight, not at all like the hair old people got.

The woman crossed the space between them and knelt down, checking once more the wound at Ketan's temple. "I am a friend. You can call me Ry." She nodded to herself. That name would do for now, since her full name seemed to cause Hunter some problems. "Now, how did you and your...partner, come to be at the attention of several elemental attacks?"

Hunter was right, Ketan thought idly as she relaxed under Ry's touch. After only a few words, she felt like she could trust the stranger, wanted to trust her even. She'd been distracted by the silver hair, which was the only reason she could have missed the silver-rimmed eyes in front of her. It made for a strange look to one who was used to dark hair and eyes, except for Hunter's, of course.

"Partner?" She smiled, then forced the smile to die as she realized what she was doing. Somehow, the desert woman found herself telling the story of what had happened, not even thinking of why it might be a bad idea. "...and then Hunter ran at the fire demon, killing it somehow. She can dismiss them, which is why the Elders were so upset, I think. Then the Elder of the Air summoned those wind elementals, and that's the last thing I remember." She paused, gratefully taking some of the water that Ry offered her. "How did you get us away from there?"

Ry lowered the cup. "Not too much, until we are sure there is nothing to fear from your head wound." She sat back, reflecting on what she had heard. "Well, that was certainly more information than your partner gave me. Not really big on chatting, is she?" She smiled to show that she was teasing. "We escaped because I have some magic of my own."

"Are you an Elder?" No, that couldn't be right, Ketan would have noticed someone like this if she'd been in the cliffs. "A desert witch?" she asked again, more tentatively. Desert witches could be powerful, but many of them were a little bit insane.

Ry gave a mysterious smile. "No. I'm someone like Hunter. I have my own magic that makes your Elders and Witches itch with uncertainty. You must not let Hunter fall prey to them again. They won't ever understand how she does what she does, and in the end they'll bleed her for their magic."

"I won't," Ketan promised, earnestly. "I should never have brought her there. I thought they could help. They should have helped more than they did, but they didn't trust her. And then, when they found out she could do what she does, they hated her. My mother..." Ketan choked, it finally hitting her what had happened. Her mother had tried to kill her and Hunter. "She tried to kill us," she whispered, horrified.

Ryuu reached out and clasped her arm, giving comfort. "Shh, it's okay. You're safe now. As for your mother, I'm sorry, you deserve better, but sometimes the family you make is better than the family you are born with. I should know, my father is a horrible bastard."

"Sorry." Ketan wiped at her eyes, embarrassed to cry in front of someone who was practically a stranger. "Hunter would tell you all this, I'm sure, but she's a woman of few words, usually."

"I've noticed. Do you want some more water?" Ryuu turned to grab the cup to give the woman some privacy to get her emotions under control

"She's talented. The best with a sword I've ever seen," the desert woman defended her friend.

Ryuu smiled wistfully, "I have no doubt. Sometimes being a master of arms is more than skill and luck, it's something you're born to." She held up the water cup to Ketan.

Greedily, Ketan drank more, easing the dryness in her throat. Only when she'd drained the cup did she look oddly at the other woman, confused. "What do you mean? I'm a good swordswoman too," she said, defensively again.

"Of that I have no doubt. It bothers you she's so good with a sword, doesn't it?"

"No," Ketan said, maybe a little too quickly, and flushed. "I'm working on it," she mumbled, embarrassed. "She's just, really, really good."

"You need to resolve that or you'll never really love her. Of course, Hunter has a lot more to resolve. She's got the emotional maturity of a ten year old."

Ketan froze. "Love her?" she said, faintly. "I didn't say I loved her."

"My mistake, then," Ryuu said with a smile.

"I should go make sure Hunter is all right." Ketan needed to get outside. She'd had enough of caves for a while.

"Okay," the silver-haired woman said pleasantly, and stood up, holding out a hand to help Ketan up.

Thankfully Ketan's legs cooperated, holding her upright when she took a shaky step. "Thank you, for helping us."

"My pleasure."

Titan gave a yowl of protest as his pillow moved.

"Sorry, buddy." Ketan rubbed his head, grinning as he rearranged himself on the sleeping space she'd just abandoned and curled up again. "I'll be right back." Then she ducked out before any more talk of being in love with an outlander could come up again. "Hunter?" she called, carefully stepping out of the cave mouth, still a bit shaky.

Hunter was on the other side of the cave mouth in the sparse shade, kneeling in the sand. She had tried praying, but that hadn't worked. Now, she was trying to calm her thoughts.

"Do you want me to come back later?" the dark-haired woman paused in her approach, seeing what Hunter was doing.

Hunter's eyes cracked open, and she looked up at Ketan miserably. "I don't think I can do this. This thing between us." She looked back down. "I tried." And nearly got them killed.

"What?" Ketan froze again for the second time that day. "Why?" she managed to ask, wishing her head didn't hurt so she could focus. Her stomach clenched in sudden fear.

Hunter refused to look at Ketan. "I just can't."

"What does that mean?" Ketan demanded, worried that she couldn't get Hunter to even look at her. "I know you care about me, Hunter, I could feel that in your kisses. Didn't you?"

"I did. I do." Her shoulders slumped. "But I lose my focus. I knew we were in trouble and I ignored it. For what? Some kisses and groping!"

"You're blaming all of that because we kissed?" Ketan stared at her astonished.

"No, I'm blaming myself for losing my way!" Hunter shouted.

The other woman froze, suddenly wishing she had brought her head wrap outside with her so she could hide her expression. "You can find a different way!" Ketan argued, the sinking sensation in her stomach worsening as she noticed the stubborn set of Hunter's jaw.

"I'm sorry, but no more weakness or we won't survive." Hunter turned her back on Ketan, trying to pray yet again.

"Weakness?" Ketan yelled. "Love isn't a weakness!"

Hunter clenched her jaw and ignored the few tears that leaked out of her eyes and down her cheeks. It was worse than when Catherine had betrayed her and left.

When all she got was silence, Ketan's shoulders slumped. "It's not weakness," she whispered, wiping at her eyes again. Silently again, she turned and hobbled back towards the cave.

#####3

They were marching west thru the sand evening heat, as it dissipated as the sun set. The travel hadn't been too bad. Somehow, Ry always knew where a cave or water oasis was. They had been very lucky.

Tension in the group was high, between Hunter and Ketan, making conversation tense and minimal. Ryu wanted to smack them both around.

Ketan tried, for the seventh time that day, to talk to Hunter. For the seventh time that day she failed to come up with anything to talk to her about other than the obvious, and Hunter had made it clear she didn't want to talk about that. So instead, she kicked at the nearest patch of sand and grumbled.

Titan's ears perked up and he tensed, and Hunter paused, sneaking another look at Ketan, wondering if she was giving up like father had, or betraying what they had like Catherine had? But she didn't know, and she wasn't feeling any more focused.

Titan crouched down, his belly scales smoothly sliding against the sand.

"What do you sense?" Hunter asked, stilling and looking around.

"That you're ignoring me," Ketan muttered from the other side of Ry, staring away from both of them.

An ear flick was the Sand Tiger's only response. Hunter stiffened.

The tiger slowly moved forward, and Hunter looked at Ryu. "What's on the other side of these dunes?" The woman eerily seemed to know every water hole.

"A small oasis." Ry watched her with interest. "Two small springs, next to each other. Some boulders around it and grass."

Ketan looked down at Titan then up at the sand dune in front of them. "We're not alone here?" she guessed, not quite talking to Hunter or Ry, more like between the two of them.

Hunter gave her a dark look, but crawled up to join her. Inching closer, she looked up over the edge. There were animals and people milling around the small oasis, the animals grazing on the small patches of grass. "Not alone," she agreed.

Then, with a wicked grin at Hunter, Ketan stood up on the dune, and cupping her hands around her mouth, she called out. "Look at all the thieves!"

Hunter looked at Ketan in horror and reached up, pulling her down. "What are you doing?"

Ketan laughed, watching the nearest of the figures come running towards her voice. "Ugly thieves at that!" she yelled, managing to get up to her knees despite Hunter's tugging. She pulled out of Hunter's grip, half running half jumping down the opposite side of the sand dune. Three of the figures raced to meet her at the bottom, yelling their own curses at her as they came.

"Camel thief!" one yelled, a snarl on what could be seen of her weathered face.

"Dishonorable cur!" a man yelled in agreement, while the third simply saved her breath to beat the other two to the bottom of the dune.

Ketan and the lead figure came together in a shower of sand and laughter, clutching one another in a tight hug.

"Yesmin!" Ketan laughed, hugging the older woman tight. "What are you doing out here? Aren't you supposed to be raiding to the north?"

The older woman made an obscene gesture, causing the other two, who had caught up to her, to laugh as well. "Ketan, when have I ever done what I've been told to do?"

"Malkia isn't going to be happy with you ignoring her orders."

Yesmin unwrapped her head scarf, brown eyes alight with amusement. "Malkia knows what she can do with her orders." Grabbing Ketan's shoulder, she eyed the young woman critically. "By the sands, girl, what have you been doing? You look horrible!"

Ketan shrugged, feeling foolish. "I had an adventure," she turned, pointing up the sand dune to where Titan and Hunter were hiding, "with some unusual friends. Be nice to them, Yesmin, they saved my life, twice now."

The matriarch raised both eyebrows in surprise at that, but said nothing as Ketan called out. "It's all right. They're friends! Come down!"

Hunter scowled, irritated. It was obvious that Ketan knew these people, apparently one of them very well if the body language was anything to go by. One woman was standing very, very close to Ketan.

She turned, looking at Ryu, "Apparently it's safe, Ketan knows them."

The silver-haired woman nodded, not looking particularly surprised as she sat down on the sand. "Go ahead. I'll catch up with you both later. There are things I want to look into."

Hunter frowned at the odd response. "You'll be okay?" It was a desert, but Ryu seemed to know it pretty well, they hadn't suffered.

"I'll be fine. Thank you." Ryu smiled and reached out to touch Hunter's hand. "Do not worry about me. Perhaps you and Ketan could talk while I'm gone?"

"There's nothing to talk about," Hunter said tersely.

"I see." Ryu's hand dropped and she looked at the blonde woman sadly. "Go, they're waiting for you."

Down below, Ketan was gesturing again for the trio up on the sand dune to come meet her friends. A few other desert people had come to gather around her, and she was obviously talking, excited.

"My outlander values and her desert values don't mesh," she said, stiffly, before turning to walk down the dune, the sand sucking on every foot step.

Titan ran easily down the hill, and butted his head into Ketan, eyeing all the people around her warily. He growled low, his voice warning everyone the woman was part of his pack, and he would protect her.

Ketan was in the middle of laughing at something one of the others said about Titan and turned, flashing a bright smile at the approaching Hunter. "...and that is Hunter Del Cor, Hero of Katturast!" There were some gasps of surprise around her, making the smile widen even further. "Hunter, let me introduce you to some of the worst thieves in the desert." The older woman near her tried to smack her, but Titan's growl stopped that. "This is Yesmin, matriarch of the tribe. Her companion, Talik," she nodded to the quiet man who stood nearby. "And..." she turned, hesitating just a split second, "her daughter Ayana."

Hunter nodded respectfully. "An honor to meet you all." She paused for a second then asked, "Are you really thieves?"

There was a moment of silence, and then all of the gathered people erupted into laughter.

"Yes."

"No!"

"Maybe?" came the answers back at her.

Ketan rolled her eyes. "Ignore them," she said, slipping her arm out of Ayana's grip to reach for Hunter's, which she stopped the second she realized what she had been about to do.

Titan eased the awkward moment by headbutting her hand, looking for an ear scratch, which Ketan gladly provided.

"We have to have a feast!" Yesmin announced, to the cheers of everyone within hearing range. "Ketan is here and so is the Hero of Katturast!"

Hunter looked embarrassed, but at least no one had expected her to be taller. "I'm really not a hero," she said, but nobody was listening.

#####3

Ayana smiled at her friend. "What interesting times you live in?" It had been a long time since last their paths crossed, but her family was one that preferred living on the fringe of society. Her parents had a close partnership, which was rare, and most of the other tribes frowned on her father having so much say in the tribe's welfare. Plus he had a small bit of magic, which he used. It wasn't much, but it helped them find water for the herd.

Ketan smiled in response, distance and time having dulled her memory of how beautiful Ayana was. Dark, curly hair framed a beautiful face with hazel eyes that seemed to glow from within. If she'd been at Malkia's court, she would have been a Veil Dancer. "I told you I wanted to find a way to help the tribes."

All around them, Ayana's family was preparing for the feast. One of the precious desert rams had been slaughtered, and a cooking pit was being built.

"And this hero is it?" She looked over at the brooding woman. "You'll have to forgive me, my friend, but she seems...smaller than the stories suggest."

Apparently some of the other warriors in the tribe thought so as well, many sizing her up, and some had requested battle matches.

It was hard, but somehow, Ketan managed not to laugh. "Don't say that. She's touchy about her height." She looked across to where Hunter sat, Titan sprawled out at her side. "She's very honorable." There was a note of wistfulness there.

Hunter was annoyed. Ketan had just, just left her to fawn over some woman, and if one more person felt her bicep, she was going to...to...do something. She sighed and snuck a look at Ketan. Ketan's dark eyes caught her looking and she quickly looked away.

"You look like a woman who needs a drink," Yesmin announced, appearing at Hunter's side and seating herself on a nearby boulder without asking for permission. "Here," she offered the outlander one of two clay cups she had brought with her.

"Thank you." Hunter took a sip then coughed. "Wasn't expecting that."

"Strong, isn't it?" Yesmin agreed, crow's feet showing at the corners of her eyes as she grinned and drank her own.

Ayana grinned. "I sense a story in the tone of your voice."

"An amazing story," Ketan agreed, settling in to get comfortable and starting at the beginning. She'd put it all to words before, when she'd told Ry about everything that happened. This time

she smoothed out some of the rougher spots and left a few details out altogether, like the bit about her mother, as she started to recount everything that had happened. People stopped working to listen in, and soon, there was a crowd around her and Ayana.

Ayana started to play with her friend's hair, braiding it as was their tradition every time they caught up.

"Ketan has always been a good storyteller," Yesmin commented, watching Hunter watch the crowd gathering around to listen.

Hunter frowned and looked away from Ketan to Yesmin, "Do I want to know what I'm drinking?"

"Not really." Yesmin raised her mug to salute the other woman then took another sip. "We also use it to cleanse wounds."

Hunter nearly spat out what was in her mouth, but managed to swallow.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to the taste soon enough," the older woman laughed, leaning back to enjoy the tale that Ketan was weaving.

It was nice feeling Ayana's hands running through her hair, and Ketan found herself embellishing the story, just a little bit. She purposefully avoided thinking about the time Hunter had washed her hair, and how much nicer that had felt. "And then Hunter banished the fire demon!" she finished with a flourish, grinning at the clapping and incredulous comments about the Elders.

"I'm sorry your mother did that to you. That's awful! She's always been a scheming desert witch," Ayana spat out.

"Just because she threw you out of my room that one time, doesn't mean she's a desert witch." Ketan smiled fondly.

Ayana laughed and ducked her head down so her lips grazed Ketan's ear. "True. Your mother was never fond of me. So are you single or still with what's her name...Haifa?"

"Hafiza." Ketan shivered from the touch. It had always been fun with Ayana, but her eyes flicked towards Hunter. For the briefest of instants, green eyes met hers and then looked away deliberately. "But maybe we shouldn't..." she trailed off, not sure how to call their occasional relationship.

"They've always been good friends, ever since they were young." Yesmin nodded to her daughter and Ketan, with their heads bent towards one another. "Someday soon they'll have to commit to one another or end it."

"Oh," Hunter said darkly, "I didn't realize that they were together." The outlander was feeling uncomfortable and angry with every whispered word and touch the two across from them shared.

"Occasionally," Yesmin sighed, shaking her head. "Ketan's mother considers us below her station in life. We wouldn't be a good match, she thinks. I don't care. Ketan has been like a daughter to me for years now already."

"Ketan is special, she deserves someone who can make her happy," she bit out, taking a sip out of the cup, wincing.

As the light faded, several of the tribe set fire in the fire pit, the flames lighting up the area around them. Another couple brought out some instruments, and started to play the long, reed instruments as the feast started.

"Yes she is," Yesmin answered, slowly, her eyes watching Hunter's face. "Your Princess...do you believe the Air Elder, that she's further to the west of here, near the great rocks?"

Hunter nodded. "They kept their word, and once that was over, they changed the rules. I believe she told the truth." She shrugged, "It's the only thing I have."

The matriarch leaned forward, eyes shadowed in the flickering light of the flames. "We do not go to that place. Bad things seem to happen there. We tried to get the Veiled Ones to send someone to investigate, but you know how useful that was."

Ayana, smiled. "We shouldn't what?" She laughed at Ketan when the woman's skin darkened slightly. "Come on, it's just fun, it's not like I want a commitment. I'm single, you're single. Work off some energy and then have breakfast." She nipped Ketan's ear lightly with her teeth.

She really wanted to go along with work off energy. Working off energy sounded very fun at the moment, and Ayana's lips were making her tremble just by brushing against her ear, and then the teasing nip of teeth made her painfully aroused. "Maybe. After the feast?" Ketan didn't know what else to say, couldn't think when Ayana was doing that.

"You could ask her to dance, you know," Yesmin said finally, after it was clear where Hunter's attention was.

Hunter looked back at Ketan. "I don't know..." She saw Ketan's dark skin flush and Ayana whisper more words. "I don't think I'm what she wants." She stood up, angry at everything. "I need to..." run away, "clear my head."

Ketan's eyes drifted closed a bit as Ayana's tongue traced her earlobe, and her body screamed at her to take the beautiful woman up on her offer, until she saw Hunter get up and practically flee into the darkness. "I'll be back," she hastily promised, ignoring the words of protest from behind her as she stood up and followed Hunter. She smiled, nervously, at Yesmin, who was giving her a pointed look that she couldn't quite decipher as she passed the matriarch.

Ayana sighed. "Okay, but you're sleeping with me tonight."

"Hunter?" Ketan stopped once she was back out in the desert, away from the spring. How did the outlander move so quickly when she wanted to? "I know you're out here somewhere."

"Why are you out here?" Hunter's voice snapped. "YOUR friend is missing you, I'm sure." She stepped out of the darkness, still sipping out of the cup Yesmin had given her.

The tone of voice stopped Ketan for an instant. This wasn't the Hunter she was used to. This sounded more like the Duke of Del Cor again. "Why are you out here hiding?" Ketan demanded instead of answering.

"I'm not hiding. I just wasn't interested in the free show you and your friend were giving," she said snidely.

"I wasn't giving anyone a show." Ketan's eyes narrowed. Ayana had been flirting, but nothing outrageous either. "A little jealous maybe?"

"No," Hunter denied. "That would imply a level of intimacy that we can't have."

"Not can't, won't. Won't have because you will not allow it!" Days of silence between them came all rushing back, and Ketan let it get the better of her. "So you don't get to be angry at Ayana because she's doing something you should be able to!"

"Like you care, didn't take you long to spread your legs for someone else," Hunter said nastily.

Ketan took a step back, the anger replaced by hurt. "Fine," she whispered, straightening her shoulders. "Sleep out here in the cold, Duke." She wouldn't cry, not in front of Hunter. Determined, she turned her back on the outlander and started back towards the fire and the sounds of laughter and music.

Hunter winced the moment it came out of her mouth. "Ketan. I'm sorry, that was uncalled for," she said to Ketan's retreating back.

"That went well," Ryuu remarked from nearby, casually sitting on the sand as if she'd been there the entire time.

Hunter jumped and looked over at Ryuu. "I suppose you've been there the whole time," she snapped, to cover her embarrassment for being an ass.

"Most of it." Ryuu stretched out, laying down on her back so that she could stare up at the night sky above. Behind them laughter and music continued, the feast well and truly getting under way. "You should go join them."

Hunter shrugged. "Not really feeling friendly." ...Especially since she just pissed off the only friend she had.

She sat down next to the other woman and took another sip of the horrible concoction, certain her insides were getting purified by the burn.

"That stuff will kill you," Ry's voice floated up from the ground next to Hunter. "There's one thing you can say about the desert, the stars are beautiful here."

Hunter looked up and unconsciously smiled. "Yes they are. I missed them when I went back, after the war."

"What war?"

Hunter laughed, and then the laughter trickled down and stopped when she realized Ryuu wasn't joking.

Silver eyes stared up at her in the darkness, puzzled. "I've been away for a long time," Ryuu offered in something of an explanation.

"Um, my country butts up against the desert, and a horrible, vile man took control of a part of the desert near my lands. My King and him did not get along. So we went to war. I joined the army and went to war for eight years," she summed up the best she could.

"Who won?"

"Everyone, I think. The Pasha did horrible, depraved things to the women of the desert tribes, and my king got a foothold in the desert." Although she wasn't certain the Pasha's palace was a prize.

Ryuu was silent at that, staring up at the night. "Moonrise," she said at last, seeing the top sliver of the moon beginning to peak over the horizon. "There will always be wars. Always be hatred and fear of those who are different. Love shelters you from that, gives you strength when everything else is gone. It isn't a gift to be thrown away lightly."

"I'm doing what's best. Love made me lose focus, nearly got us killed. I betrayed my vows, I passed boundaries I shouldn't have, I knew I was breaking them. But the promise of desire was overwhelming, made me weak."

"What boundaries?" the other woman asked, genuinely curious.

"I'm a disciple of Ryuu. I have taken vows to reject physical pleasure, to stay as chaste as my goddess. In return, I am given gifts as a warrior. We passed certain physical boundaries. I shouldn't have even allowed us to kiss," she lamented, but felt oddly uncomfortable as if she were talking to one of her parents about sex.

Silver eyes glinted up out of the darkness, curious, although Ryuu ignored the part about the kissing. "So this Ryuu gives you gifts to become a better warrior? What gifts?"

"Don't get me wrong. I was a decent sword swinger, my father hired the best to teach me, but once I pledged myself at the temple..." She paused, taking a swallow out of her almost empty cup. "Once the ritual at the temple was complete and I went off to fight a war in the desert, it was like I could see my opponent's weakness, clear as the sun at noon. It's the same thing with the elementals. I can see their weakness; it's like a thread that binds them into a physical form. It takes some energy, but I can cut it. Like with a human opponent, I can just see that they're dropping a shoulder, or they always look where they're going to strike, or that they lead with their right foot before they do a certain attack. I just know."

Ryuu sat up, crouching closer to the other woman, and studied her carefully with eyes that almost seemed to glow in the moonlight. "And what do you see when you look at me?" she asked, quietly.

"Huh?" Hunter turned her head, looking at the other woman. "What? Nothing. We're not fighting."

"Do we have to be for you to see something?" A silver eyebrow arched.

"Yes, no, I'm not sure. That's normally how it works, but I'm not looking for flaws in my everyday interactions." This conversation had gotten weird, but it was better than going back and watching Ketan and that thing attached to her face.

"Then fight me." Ryuu stood, smiling. "I learned from...a dear friend who was very good at fighting. She'd be depressed if I didn't find out flaws in my stance." That wasn't the entire truth, but it was close.

Hunter's mouth dropped open in surprise. "You want me to...are you nuts?"

Ryuu tilted her head to one side, seriously considering the question. "I don't think so. Come on, stand up and fight me. I want to know what you'd see." The sounds of the party were still strong behind them.

Hunter stood up slowly, a little wobbly, as she normally didn't drink. Drinking lead to a loss of control, and in her world, control was everything. She sighed and unbuckled her sword belt. Carefully laying her sword to the side, she held up her fists. "Okay, we'll spar. I'll warn you, I'm pretty good. I hope your friend was a good teacher."

A fist snapped up to catch Hunter on the side of the head, just a light tap, but it still connected, and Ry danced backwards with a laugh. "She was the best."

Hunter reached up too slow to swat it away. "I see," she said with a frown.

"I think you would have gotten along. Two silent warrior types." Laughter still lined her voice.

Hunter shook her head to somehow clear it of the alcohol she had drank and then did a few feints, testing Ry's responses.

"Actually," Ry kept talking as she ducked back and slid around the feints, "she was more annoying than you, and she always had a sarcastic remark ready. Maybe you have her beat in the brooding area, and that's saying a lot."

Hunter kept moving around, testing Ry's responses. "I prefer being quiet, that way when I do say something, my people tend to listen, because they know I mean it." There, she saw it. "You loved her, your friend."

The smile dimmed, and Ry nodded in the darkness, "Desperately," which nearly let Hunter connect a foot to her side. She was quiet for the next few moments as she tried to keep away. "Is that all?" she asked, finally, feeling her muscles warm up from the exercise.

"No." Hunter danced in, taking a blow to her shoulder so she could land a touching blow to Ry's stomach. "Where is your lover now? Did something happen?"

All this was just proving Hunter's point. At the mention of this mysterious lover, Ry's concentration had gone, proving to Hunter what she had already known about falling in love.

"I had to leave her, and then she..." Ry huffed as she tried to kick at Hunter's legs, impressed as the woman jumped over her leg without pause, "she was captured by her father."

"Seems like parents are assholes all over. Ketan's mother tried to kill her and us me as...I'm not sure, but I'm sure I wouldn't have liked it." There she went getting distracted by Ketan and images of Ketan and Ayana intertwined together, and she took a fist to her chin.

"Upset about Ketan in the arms of another?" Ryuu pushed her attacks.

Hunter shook her head, trying to clear it. "Yes...no...she deserves someone other than me," she floundered, trying to concentrate back on their sparring match.

"Someone better than the Hero of Katturast?"

"I'm not a Hero! I was...just lucky." Suddenly, all the openings were gone. Sure, there were a few places that looked like openings, but they were traps, her instincts arguing with what her eyes saw.

"Hero, lucky soldier, usually the same thing, don't you think?" Ryuu's voice sounded different in the darkness as they danced around one another.

She tried some more feints, trying to get an opening. "Your lover was very good." She tried another tact to get an opening.

"She's the best," the voice was a whisper.

"Why don't you save her from her father," Hunter continued, "if you love her so much?"

There was silence at that, only the light breaths and flashes of silver hair as they traded blows. "I can't." Ry's voice was anguished, and she abruptly stopped, dropping her hands. "Enough."

Hunter lowered her fists and unclenched them. "I'm sorry. I was out of line."

"You did what I asked. You found my weakness." Ryuu's voice sounded normal

again. "Was that the only one?"

"Yes, you were toying with me the rest of the time. It took me a while to figure it out. If we did not know each other and met as strangers on the battlefield, in honesty, my life would be yours." She bowed her head in deferment to a superior warrior. "Your lover was, indeed, the best. I hope someday she is free so I may learn from her." She felt almost as if Ry was protected by armor she could not see, that was her gut feeling.

"Someday if she is free, I think, she would like that." Ryuu smiled, touching Hunter's arm. "The feast is ending. You should sleep." Indeed, the sounds of music had stopped behind them, and only a few remained around the glowing embers of the cooking pit, talking quietly.

"I will stay here and watch the stars. I was out of line and should take my punishment. She bade me to sleep in the cold. I think that is fair punishment for my words, for they were very cold," Hunter reasoned, although knowing she really didn't want to go back and face Ketan and her new lover. Torn between what she felt was best and what heart wanted to do.

Titan's shadowed form appeared out of the dark and wound himself around his human, sniffing her and looking at Ryuu in question.

"Watch over your pack, Titan," Ryuu said in answer, words sad. She'd failed again to get Hunter to stop being self destructive. Turning to leave, she paused. "You think that I would have beaten you in battle, but I'm not so certain of that. Sleep well, Hunter Del Cor."

"Sleep well, Ry." It was easier than calling her Ryuu, which just crept her out that that someone had been named for her Goddess. Again she wondered if perhaps Ryuu wasn't her patron Goddess toying with her.

#####3

Ayana got up from the fire tugging her friend up. "She's not coming back," she said with a sigh, knowing her evening was not going to be as fun as she had hoped.

Feeling sick to her stomach, Ketan let herself get pulled to her feet, still looking hopefully out into the night. She'd known Hunter wouldn't come, but a part of her had hoped she was wrong. "I know."

"You two had...no, have a thing?" she asked, softly wrapping a comforting arm around Ketan and leading her to her tent. Ketan was fun and always a good time in bed, but more important

than sex was the fact that they were friends, and that friendship would always come first. Didn't mean it wasn't hard. Her family's life made it hard for her to find dates as well as sexual partners.

"Yes, no, I don't know," Ketan finished, miserably. "I kissed her, we kissed, but that was it. Now she's different. I thought we had a thing." She gladly curled up with Ayana, craving the comfort after Hunter's hurtful words.

"She's a fool. A sexy, brooding warrior fool, who must not have a heart, to turn down my friend. I can try and knock some sense into her?" she offered.

Ketan giggled at that mental image and buried her face in the side of her friend's shoulder. "How would you do that?"

"I'd figure something out." Then relented, "Okay, so she'd probably hand me my butt." She was quiet for a moment, rubbing Ketan's head.

"I really like her," Ketan whispered, relaxing slowly.

"I'm so sorry. Again, she is a pig-headed fool," Ayana bit out. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Don't hate me?" Ketan raised her head, eyes worried as she looked at her friend. "I didn't...I mean...I don't want this to hurt you."

Ayana laughed. "Ketan, we are friends, beyond anything else we are friends. The sex is fun, don't get me wrong, but it was just an extension of our friendship and our loneliness."

"Then let me sleep here tonight with you?" She didn't want to go back to the knowing eyes of the others by the fire.

"Of course, my friend. I can make some of those groans that make you shiver, so a little jealousy can be a good thing," she teased.

Ketan laughed and sat up to get out of her robes so that she could sleep. "I don't think she'd hear you from in here."

Ayana continued to stroke Ketan's head and hair. "Fine, go to sleep. You're not alone tonight, my friend."

With a sigh of contentment, Ketan settled in to do just that.

#####3

Hunter was stiff with cold as the sun rose, one side warm where Titan had been sleeping. She got to her feet and made her way back to camp. Titan got up lazily and stretched, and then started to

follow her as she brushed sand out of her hair and off her face. Her mouth had an awful residue in it, no doubt from the alcohol she'd been drinking.

"Good morning," Yesmin called from near the small pit where a much smaller fire was burning. Silently, she offered the warrior a cup of something steaming.

Hunter looked at the cup hesitantly, "Not more alcohol, I hope."

"No," the older woman chuckled. "Something to help with the aftereffects."

"Ah, much thanks, then." Hunter took the cup and straightened up, sipping the contents. A noise to her left got her attention, and she turned to see Ketan emerge, stretching, from a tent followed by Ayana. She nearly choked on her drink, but swallowed it, feeling like she swallowed a rock.

If Yesmin noticed the reaction, she didn't show it. Rising from her seat, she nodded to the outlander and wandered towards some of the other tribe's people who were starting to rouse themselves. Ketan leaned closer to Ayana, saying something that Hunter couldn't hear, going the way that Ayana pointed.

Spotting the outlander looking at her, Ayana smiled tightly and started to walk towards her, shoulders squared.

Hunter frowned, but held her ground, "Morning."

"Hunter," Ayana responded, picking up her own cup of steaming liquid from the big pot next to the pit. "Sleep well?" she asked, innocently.

"Well enough, that anyone can when they've had too much to drink," she replied cautiously.

"Must have been cold, sleeping out there alone," Ayana continued, perching on one of the boulders to watch Hunter with knowing eyes over the rim of her cup.

"I had Titan," she said, not raising to the bait.

"Oh. The Sand Tiger? Is he what you gave up a chance with Ketan for?" Ayana managed to look and sound innocent as she asked it.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "My reasons are none of your business."

"They are if they hurt a friend of mine." Ayana refused to be cowed.

"Doesn't seem like you had any trouble swooping in to fix things?" Hunter growled back.

Ayana slowly licked her lips. "She is a delicious lover."

Hunter lost it, her arm came back and around and her fist smashed into Ayana's jaw. Only at the last second did her conscious mind catch up to what she was doing, and she pulled it, but it was too late.

Ayana tumbled off the rock with a muffled oof to land on her ass in the sand, staring up at Hunter with wide eyes. "I knew it! That cold exterior is just for show. You do like her!" She rubbed her aching jaw, glad nothing was broken.

Hunter was quickly there, hauling the younger woman up, their faces inched apart. "Of course I like her. And she deserves better than you, if you're going to flaunt her personal life in front of the whole world and brag about it," she said, her voice quiet, but the anger was there crackling the surface of her words.

"Then fight for her, outlander," Ayana yelped, frightened by this woman who had grabbed onto her. All around them she could see her family reaching for weapons, ready to intercede. Her mother was there too, and she was relieved when the Matron shook her head, stopping them from making it worse. "You're a fool if you turn her away!"

The tension in the air was so thick Hunter could almost taste it, and she eased back, letting Ayana get her feet under her. "My world is not your world. I can't fight for something that is forbidden to me. So yes, I am a fool, and it hurts," she spat out, shoving Ayana away from her. She turned back to the fire and sat down, ignoring everyone, her eyes staying fixed on Yesmin's hands as they made breakfast.

Slowly, the people around her dispersed, leaving the warrior to stare into the small fire by her own. Eventually Yesmin approached, two simple leather packs in her hand that she offered the outlander. "You will need supplies to reach the place you are seeking."

Hunter looked up and tried to force a smile. "Thank you."

"I'm not doing this for you," Yesmin said, but she sat down near the blonde woman anyway. "If I had my way Ketan would stay with us. I tried to talk her out of going with you this morning, but she wouldn't listen to me, said she had to help you."

Hunter wasn't surprised. She'd probably not made the best impression hitting the woman's daughter. "I have tried many times to talk Ketan out of following me. She refuses to listen. I will do my best to keep her from harm," she promised.

"I don't understand you, outlander," the matriarch said, rising to her feet again when it was apparent that was all that Hunter was going to say. "But I hope you succeed in your quest."

Hunter nodded and finished her drink. She stood up, grabbing the packs, and looked for Ketan. They should go before the day was lost to the heat.

Ketan was walking back towards the camp, leading a set of restive camels on hemp ropes, telling a story as she walked to the small group of children that were following her much more eagerly

than the camels. Ayana was moving to meet her well before she reached the edge of the oasis. The two hugged tight before Ayana stepped aside, glaring at Hunter.

"Look at what Yesmin gave us. No more walking for us!" Ketan smiled, feeling better this morning than the night before.

Hunter's gaze drifted between the two women before focusing on Ketan. "You know, you've done more than enough. You could stay here with...with your, uh, friend." She tried really hard to not show her distaste of Ketan's friend.

The smile faded, replaced by a scowl as Ketan tossed one of the ropes at Hunter. "I'm leaving. You can follow if you want to."

Hunter's expression cracked into a smile. "I have the packs with food and water that Yesmin gave us. How far are you going to get?"

The gray-eyed woman turned and started out of the encampment, calling over her shoulder. "Titan, Ry, and I should be fine. But you're welcome to tag along." She paused to wave goodbye to Ayana and the others of her tribe.

Hunter laughed at that. "Stubborn as a mule." She picked up the rope, and with a warning at the stupid looking beast to not sneeze on her, took off after Ketan.

#####3

As was their routine lately, they traveled in tense silence, with Ry looking amused and Titan, being a tiger, didn't care. Hunter sighed, wishing she knew what to say to break the tension.

Ketan shielded her eyes against the sun by pulling the flap of her head wrap out a bit, judging how much longer they had until full darkness. Now was the best time to travel in the desert, just before sundown or just before sunrise. "So why did you hit Ayana?" Ketan asked suddenly.

"Um, I..." Hunter blinked, not certain what to say. "What did she tell you?" she hedged, not really wanting to lose the first conversation they'd had since the failed one this morning.

"Nothing. She wouldn't tell me anything about the impressive mark on her jaw. No one else would have hit her though."

Hunter found that surprising. There had to be more people than just her that wanted to hit the annoying woman. "Could I tell you it was between your friend and myself, and get away with it?" she asked.

"What do you think?" Ketan answered, keeping her camel alongside Hunter's.

"No chance that is going to happen," she replied with a sigh. Silent for a moment, she unconsciously bit her lip trying to figure out how to respond. "She came over this morning and deliberately tried to push my buttons." *'And succeeded.'*

"What?" Ketan turned in her saddle, confused. "Ayana did?" She had trouble seeing the gentle woman trying to antagonize anyone.

Hunter bristled, feeling defensive. "Yes, she did, and when she was disrespectful of your relationship, I hit her." She nudged her camel to move at a faster pace so she wouldn't have to see the disbelief in Ketan's eyes that she knew would be there.

"Wait..." Ketan swore behind her, spurring her own camel onwards so she could catch up. "You hit her to defend my honor?"

"Yes," Hunter replied, sitting stiff and tall in the saddle. She refused to look at Ketan.

"You protected my honor against Ayana?" Ketan was making small choking sounds as she tried to stop herself from laughing.

Hunter's shoulders got even stiffer, if possible, at the sound. "I'm sorry, next time I'll just ignore it. Apparently you like it when your bed partner tells anyone who'll listen how great in bed you are."

It was really hard, but Ketan managed to stop herself from laughing out loud as she realized how upset Hunter was getting. "Thank you," she said finally, when she was sure she wasn't in danger of laughing anymore. "But, just so you know, we only slept last night, nothing more."

It made Hunter feel better, it really did, and then she felt odd that such news would make her happy, relieved. "It's not my business."

"It could be," Ketan said, before she could stop herself. "Sorry," she said quickly. "I'll stop pushing you."

Just when Hunter didn't think she could feel any shittier, she reached over and placed a hand on Ketan's. "I'm sorry. I led you on, I thought..." She hadn't been thinking that had been the problem. "I'm sorry I hit your friend. Yesmin seemed hopeful that you would commit to each other some day." And those were bitter words to say.

"Yesmin's been hoping that ever since we had our first blood within a week of one another," Ketan snorted, irritated by how happy she'd just been that Hunter had touched her. She had to figure out a way around this chastity thing the other woman was adamant about.

Noticing how discreetly Ryuu had kept farther ahead of them, she shook her head. "I won't push you." *'For now,'* she thought.

Hunter nodded, thankful, because it was hard. The temptation of Ketan, and her lips, and other forbidden desires was hard to control. "Thank you." She squeezed Ketan's hand before taking it back. "How far to this painted rock?" she asked, to turn the subject to something more manageable.

"Two days from here. Ayana told me that they've avoided it. Apparently bad things have happened around it." Ketan, too, was happy for the diversion. "I hope your Princess is there." She also hoped the princess was still alive.

"Me too. It will be nice to have a conclusion to all this madness." She hesitated then admitted, "The best thing about this has been meeting you."

It was good, Ketan thought, that the head wrapping hid the tears that sprung to her eyes at that. "It's been good meeting you too," she managed, when her voice wasn't going to crack anymore.

#####3

"Where do you think she keeps disappearing to?" Ketan asked, idly, as they rode the camels. Far off in the distance, she could just barely make out the shapes of the painted rocks that they were heading towards. The rocks had grown in size all day since the morning. Even from this distance, she could see the brilliant red and white bands across the towering rock pillars that gave them their names.

"I don't know. I should be suspicious, but she's been extremely helpful. Perhaps she needs privacy to do her magic so we can find the next water hole," Hunter joked.

"I thought she was a Sand Witch when I first met her." Ketan grinned across at her friend, glad that they were back to something approaching an easy banter. Things were still a little strained, but at least they were talking.

"She's something, magical, it's like she's protected. We sparred the other night, no holes. She tried to let me think she had some, but it was a lie." She wasn't mad, maybe a little in awe.

"You sparred with her?" Ketan turned to look at Hunter, interested in this new information. "Did you win?"

"By default; she stopped the fight," Hunter said with a shrug. "But I would have lost."

That was unnerving, and Ketan frowned, turning to look forward again. "I didn't even know she could fight. I assumed she was just a healer or wise woman." That was something she'd have to think about.

"Perhaps your desert magic protects her in battle?" Hunter suggested.

"She isn't from the desert." Ketan was certain of that. "I know she seems to know where each watering hole or oasis is, but she's not from the desert."

"She's a mystery. We were talking, she had a lover, with an evil father. The father hid the lover away somewhere. It's sad, she wouldn't go into much detail."

Before Ketan could ask more questions, the object of their conversation came into view. "Of course I'm not from the desert," Ry called as she stood, waiting around the next sand dune, her camel despondently laying in the sand next to her, waiting. "You should both come see this." She smiled. "And you too, Titan."

Hunter flushed and gave Ketan a guilty look.

"Good hearing, too," the desert warrior muttered, urging her camel forward to see what the silver-haired woman had found.

"I think your Princess might be on the move," Ry said as soon as Hunter had gotten close enough so that she didn't have to yell. She pointed to the sets of tracks in the sand near where she stood.

Hunter's camel followed Ketan's with little urging. Then Hunter sat up, looking backwards. The tracks seemed to come from the rocks. Then she looked forward into the desert. "Think the show and tell with the Elder of Air spooked them?"

"They guessed you were coming," Ketan agreed, frowning. A chase through the desert was never fun.

"They're heading back towards your homeland, I would bet," Ry said, squatting down next to the tracks and studying them. "Several camels, maybe even a dozen."

Hunter sighed and grimaced in frustration. "What is going on?" she asked, wondering why they were heading away.

"I told you it wasn't one of us who kidnapped her." Ketan didn't sound too happy about it though. She really didn't want to leave the desert.

"And I told you I believed you. Although I can't believe you were there to spy on me though?"

"It was fun." She undid her mouth scarf so Hunter could see her wicked smile.

"Until that huge lizard made of sand crashed the party," Hunter laughed, remembering how she'd just climbed up the chain to the lights then attacked the thing. Stupid thing to do.

Ketan's laughter slowed then stopped when she realized Ry was watching them both with an interested look on her face. Flushing a little, she redid her head scarf.

"You think there's any need to check the painted rocks?" Hunter asked both Ry and Ketan.

Ry simply lifted an eyebrow, still watching Ketan with an entirely too knowing look.

"We'd lose time if we did," Ketan answered, trying to ignore Ry for now. "We could lose the tracks if another storm comes."

"Okay, let's follow the tracks." Hunter studied them, but wasn't used to reading tracks in the sand. "How old?" she asked Ketan.

With the oddest sensation that Ry already knew what she was about to say, Ketan hopped down off her camel to study the tracks closer. "This morning," she said at last, looking up in time to see Ry give her a wink of approval.

"Okay, not too bad. There's still hope," Hunter said with a smile at Ketan.

"There's always hope." Ketan stood up, gray eyes suddenly intent on Hunter, talking about something completely different.

Hunter nodded, although she wasn't certain they were talking about the same thing. "Alright then." She urged her camel forward, following the tracks.

#####3

"They must be riding those camels hard to keep up this pace," Ketan grumbled the next day. They'd ridden throughout the night, trying to close the distance on the group ahead of them. They'd succeeded in whittling down the lead to a few hours, but a full night of riding hadn't improved Ketan's mood.

"How long can the camels keep up with the pace they're setting before they drop?" Hunter asked, trying to withhold a yawn.

"Not too much longer." Ketan frowned, knowing their own camels were getting as tired as their riders.

"Your kidnappers might be using extra camels to switch off to," Ry called, patting her own camel's neck.

Hunter sighed. "We do what we can, but not at the risk of our own health. It would do us no good to catch them yet be too tired to fight back."

"You're counseling us on patience, then?" Ry asked, voice level as she kept riding.

Ketan blinked, looking over at Hunter in surprise as well. She'd thought the woman would drive the camels into the ground to get to her Princess.

"It's not like they're going to get away. Not with this clear a trail." She looked over at the other two. "What?" she said in response to the disbelieving looks she was getting.

"Nothing," Ketan answered a little too quickly. Ry's chuckle made her flush.

They found something that would kind of substitute for shade in the form of a stand of tall cactuses that Ry had, once again, found for them. While the silver-haired woman disappeared to do whatever it was she did, Ketan used her sword to cut off parts of one of the cactus. "See, it tastes horrible, but you can drink it if you have to."

Hunter looked skeptical. "I'll keep that in mind if I'm stuck in the desert." She thought about her words then her face cracked into a grin and she chuckled.

Ketan rolled her eyes. "Yes, for that mystical day when you're stuck in the desert." The camels at least enjoyed it, and she tossed the piece to them.

"Fine. Don't be like that. I'll try a piece." Hunter leaned back against the sand and held out a hand for a piece of cactus.

Hiding her surprise, Ketan cut another piece and offered it to her, watching with interest to see if she was going to actually try it.

Hunter put the small piece in her mouth and chewed, liquid pouring out of the small piece. It was...was very earthy tasting. She made a face but ate the piece. "Tasty," she squeaked out.

"Tasty?" Ketan was having a hard time not laughing at the expression on Hunter's face. Having pity, she picked up a water skin and offered it to the woman. "Here."

Hunter waved her off. "No, I'm fine. Not something I'd eat on a regular basis, but handy to know when I'm in trouble."

"See, all sorts of useful things I can teach you," Ketan quipped.

Hunter gave an easy smile. "I've already learned a lot." Her tanned cheeks, dusted

lightly with red, held a smile as she remembered some of those things. "So, shall we see what Yesmin packed for dinner?"

#####3

The next evening they found the dead camels, four of them, lying out in the baking sun, right along the path they had been traveling. The vultures circling above had given them ample warning that something had died. Ketan frowned at the sight. The animals were tied together, in something like a rough circle, the throats of each slashed open, and the blood drained away into the desert sands. "More blood magic," she gritted her teeth.

"But magic takes time and ritual, so hopefully it brings us closer to them," Hunter reasoned, although she wasn't certain what they had done the magic for. She studied the area looking for a sign of what had been created. "That's a lot of blood." And that meant a big elemental.

"Their blood was used for something evil," Ry spoke up suddenly. Ketan could see her silver eyes wide, almost anguished looking. "We should go around it, wide around it." Ketan didn't like this place. She also didn't like the fact that none of the vultures had actually descended to peck at the rotting meat.

Hunter looked at the others then at the scene before them. She wasn't happy about the time it would cost them, but Ry hadn't led them astray yet. "As you wish."

"Good." Ry sounded as relieved as Ketan felt. Turning their animals, they started to cut across the desert in a circle around the dead camels.

Hunter snorted, "I'm a reasonable person. Not happy about losing time, but I can listen to others." Sometimes she had to wonder what others thought of her. Green eyes studied the sands in front of them. Something was bothering her. There was something off with the dead camels, well, more than the obvious.

Ketan and Ry shared a look at that, which thankfully, Hunter didn't seem to catch. "We know," Ketan said, finally, although her voice was edged with a bit of skepticism that probably didn't help matters.

"Not that your willingness to avoid the blood seems to have helped us," Ry said, dryly, pointing ahead of them.

Hunter grunted, looking back at the women behind her, glaring. Then it came to her. The camels had been posed, not ritual. The ritual had been done and then moved onto the path...to divert them.

"Back! Move back!" she shouted, trying to get her camel to move, the beast choosing that moment to be stubborn.

Ry was pointing ahead of them, at a dark shadow where no shadow should have been. Something was forming up out of the ground, growing in size as it did. Dark red blood welled up out of the earth, coalescing into a roughly humanoid shape that rippled with wind across its surface.

With a sick feeling, Ketan looked behind them at the camels, confirming that the dark red sand that had been around the camels was now pristine again, as if no blood had ever dropped upon it.

"Blood and Wind?" She wasn't sure what kind of elementalist could do such a thing.

"Fuck," Hunter said in horror at the thing rising in front of them. The camel panicked, and in its hurry to escape, dislodged Hunter, who fell with a groan into the sands.

"Hunter!" Ketan yelled, trying to get her own camel to move to grab Hunter, which was hard considering her own camel was panicking, wanting nothing to do with the blood thing that was flowing towards them across the sands. "Ry!" But the silver-haired woman was having her own trouble, finally giving up and jumping down off her camel.

Hunter shook her head, stunned by the fall, and started to back up, crab-walking backwards as quickly as she could from the thing. She couldn't focus. Of all the things she'd seen in her life, this was the most horrific.

It made a horrible sucking sound as it slid towards Hunter. The hole in its vaguely humanoid face that would have been a mouth opened wider as it reached a fist out towards Hunter.

"Damn it!" Ketan swore, half leaping, half falling off her camel, the beast useless as it was panicked. Rolling, she came up not far from Hunter, sword freeing from her side.

"Hunter, where's its weakness?" She didn't want to get close to this thing.

"What? I...I...don't know." It was hard to focus, the congealing blood distracting, its slick surface making it hard to see what she needed. "Focus!" Hunter yelled, ducking under a splayed fist that splattered against the sand next to her.

Exactly as she'd feared, Ketan's sword passed straight through the blood creature, doing nothing. "Ry?" But the silver-haired woman was staring at the creature, and not doing anything else that Ketan could tell.

Slowly, Hunter calmed her breathing, her palm wrapping around her sword, and looked deep into the creation, the thread of magic woven around others, intertwining deep inside the creature. She focused then sent her will out, slashing, severing only one of the threads.

The creature staggered, its left side losing form.

"Good!" Ketan yelled, using her sword to relieve the creature of its one remaining arm, which regrew, but slowly this time. "Do it again?" she pleaded, seeing that part of it was still standing. She was getting really tired of dodging blood.

Ry was suddenly kneeling next to Hunter, a hand clasping the other woman's shoulder. "The last thread will be difficult to break," she whispered. "You'll have to look deeper."

It hurt, so exhausting, to dredge up her will to do it again. She focused, looking. "I can't see it."

"There." Ry's face was next to Hunter's, silver eyes staring at the creature that was wildly lashing out at Ketan as the desert woman lunged and slashed at it. "You must look deeper. You're only seeing things on the surface. Don't force it, you have to relax, let your mind wander."

"A little help here!" Ketan yelled, nearly losing her arm as the creature wrenched her sword free from her grasp and sent it tumbling.

Hunter's gaze blurred, relaxing with Ry's words. "I see it." She gathered her will and sent it slashing out. It hurt, hurt so much Hunter screamed.

#####3

"Wake up, Hunter Del Cor," the voice coaxed her back from the darkness that her mind had fled to.

Hunter's eyes shot open and she tried to sit up. Panicking, her hand reached for her sword.

"There you are." Ry sat back, giving her room to become aware of where she was.

"What happened to the creature?"

Ketan had no such compulsion, and she lunged past Ry, grabbing Hunter into a hug. "You killed it...well, I guess you killed it. Not sure if things like that can die, but you destroyed it." Ketan knew she was babbling, but didn't care as she held onto the outlander.

Hunter dazedly let Ketan hug her. "Good...good...it's gone," she mumbled as her hands went around Ketan, hugging her back. She let her forehead rest against Ketan's shoulder. "You two okay?"

"Yes," Ketan mumbled against Hunter's shoulder. "In need of another swimming lesson but fine."

Ry leaned back, face inscrutable as she watched the two of them. Titan lay nearby, grooming himself, having nearly been trampled by the camels.

"The question is, how are you feeling?" Ry responded, finally.

"My head feels like it's trying to split open."

"You did something that should not have been possible for you to do." Silver eyes flicked to Ketan and then back to Hunter. "Perhaps we should talk later?"

Slowly, Ketan's arms loosened around Hunter and she frowned, looking back and forth, puzzled.

"I did what you asked me to do," Hunter snapped back.

"Yes. You did." Ry said slowly. "But you shouldn't have been able to."

Ketan was starting to frown as well now. "What are you talking about?"

"Hunter shouldn't have been able to dismiss this one. It wasn't an elemental, not like you think of them, Ketan. Even though you did manage it, Hunter, it nearly broke your mind doing it."

Ry's silver eyes were unreadable, and Ketan's hand squeezed Hunter's when she said that. "And you let her do that anyway?" Ketan demanded, upset.

"Ryuu. Ketan. Stop it. It's over and done with. Let's not waste our energy on this," Hunter croaked out.

Ketan eyed the silver-haired woman darkly, but nodded.

Ryuu, for her part, gave a graceful bow and rose to her feet. "I'll see about finding the camels. You should rest."

Hunter nodded and let her eyes close. "Tired," she murmured.

"Sleep," Ketan whispered, settling in next to Hunter to keep guard. Titan, on the other side, stretched then yawned as well.

#####3

The next day found them on the trail again. Thankfully, there had been little wind the night before, and the tracks were plain in the beating sunlight as they continued to try and make up the time they had lost. Ketan had hovered near Hunter for most of the morning, until Ry managed to get the young woman to ride ahead and scout the path with Titan.

Only when Ketan was far enough ahead did Ryuu speak. "You should be careful how you use your talent. You nearly died this time."

"I'm doing what I must to keep us alive."

"I'm not arguing that point." Ry grinned a little. "Just telling you to be careful. Your mind isn't used to using that gift, and it could easily be broken by using it too often or against too strong a foe."

Hunter nodded. "I've been using it a lot out here. It seems to be the only thing that stops this desert magic. I haven't had proper rest. It hurts inside, like an overused muscle." It was hard to admit weakness.

The silver-haired woman stared out at the desert stretching in front of them, eyes distant. "It wasn't always this big...the desert," she mused, considering her words. "There was once plenty of water that fed the earth here. A great change happened, driving the water far below the surface. Magic still lingers here, touching all who live here, whether they know it or not." She looked over at Hunter, curious. "But you aren't from the desert, are you?"

"No. I am what they call an outlander." She pointed ahead of them to the mountain range that looked small now, but got bigger everyday. "My people live in the shadow of the mountain. We have fertile fields and water. My lands have vineyards, and I make the best wine."

Ryuu gave her a strange look at that. "The best wine?" She sounded a little dubious. "What about your parents, are any of them from the desert?" she asked, deciding to stick with the topic at hand before Ketan returned.

Hunter thought about that for a moment as they swayed with the camels' rolling gait. "It's possible. I have found that my people and the desert people have come together and sired

children." Matthew came to mind, with his blue eyes. "But my green eyes are pretty unique. I've never seen anyone but my mother who had them."

Whatever Ryuu's next question was going to be ended with Ketan's return. "Titan caught dinner, a huge desert lizard," she called, grinning as she waited for them to get closer. "He wasn't sure what to do with it at first, but he caught it."

Hunter laughed. "He's getting bigger. Do you remember the size of some of those tigers in the canyon?"

"You're going to have fun when he decides to tackle you when he gets that big." Ketan smiled easily, picturing that in her mind. The trick was to keep herself from wanting to touch Hunter.

Hunter smiled sadly. "When he gets that big, it may be time for him to be a Sand Tiger in the desert without me." Too much bigger, and Titan would not fit into her society.

"You'd just give him up that easily?"

Hunter looked offended. "He's not a pet. He's a wild creature, this is his home. I've just been a surrogate pack."

"So again you'll decide what's best?" Ketan grimaced. Judging by Ry's amused look, she'd just completely failed in pretending everything was just fine.

Hunter sighed. "I didn't say it would be easy, and that it won't hurt."

"But you'll force him away because you think it's best." Gray eyes darkened with anger, and Ketan had to turn away to avoid shouting something unpleasant. "I'll get what we can use from the lizard."

"I think we weren't talking about Titan," Hunter said sadly.

"You think?" Ry looked at her amused.

Hunter rolled her eyes. "I guess we're stopping for dinner."

#####3

It was tense again, between them, and Ry's amused glances weren't helping her mood.

They plodded through the sand, and Hunter was sick of the never ending desert and the heat. Her head was pounding with a headache that wouldn't go away.

Ahead of them, Ketan yanked on the rope to pull her camel to a stop. The beasts were generally unhelpful in a mean and sometimes spiteful way, but of all the commands they were given, stopping was one they generally followed. "I think we have a problem," she called back. Ever

since the day before, she'd taken to scouting ahead, not wanting to be near Hunter to make things worse.

"Of course we do," Hunter muttered under her breath. "What's the problem?"

Ketan pointed ahead of her. "The tracks stopped."

"That would be a problem," Hunter agreed. She stood up in her stirrups, looking around.

"The wind blew them away, but only from here forward." Ketan would have found that odd before meeting Hunter. Now, it was a simple fact. The camel shifted nervously under her. "That's more than a little odd. I don't like this."

Ry leaned closer, sniffing the air.

"What do you want to do?" Ketan asked, turned to look at Hunter, and curious to see what she wanted to do.

The desert was still, the sun glaring off the white sands. It aggravated Hunter's headache, the sun stabbing into her skull. "Let's move back a bit. It feels like trap." She sat back down on her camel, pulling the leads to turn the stupid beast around.

"Wait." Ryuu stood up in her saddle, squinting into the distance. "They're coming."

Hunter paused, clenching the leads to halt her camel's movements. "Coming where?" she asked, looking around.

"This way, back the way they came." Ry sat back down, looking back at Hunter with a strangely sad expression. "If you intend to attack them, I cannot help you."

"What? But why not?" Ketan frowned.

Ry watched Hunter even while she answered Ketan. "I cannot get involved in your fight."

"Of course not!" Hunter spat angry, her headache not helping her mood. "You hide every time we meet up with other people." She turned back, facing the vanished tracks and unsheathing her sword.

"I'm sorry. I wish..." Ryuu sighed, not finishing the thought. "Watch out for the one you're seeking; he's more powerful than any Elder you're used to," she said to Ketan, urging her camel to turn around and head away.

Ketan watched her go, looking over at Hunter, confused. "You said she could fight. She isn't just a healer, so why is she walking away?"

"Damn it!" Hunter glared at Ketan. "I don't know!" she snapped. She looked out over the gleaming sands, squinting, looking for what Ry had seen.

Ketan flinched back from the angry woman. Quietly, she unsheathed her own sword, wondering when things had gotten so confusing. "There," Ketan said, finally, lifting her arm to point through the shimmering heat mirages. A single file line of camels appeared in the distance, heading slowly towards them.

Hunter moved her camel to stand in the way they would come and waited. There was no place to hide, so they couldn't do an ambush. The only thing they could do was wait.

"This isn't wise." Ketan looked around nervously. "We could wait for dark, or maybe follow them?"

"They'll be on us in minutes, where would we hide? We can't erase our tracks unless you have a wind elemental in your pocket. Besides, he knows we're here. I bet he's known we were following them from the moment we defeated his demon." She wasn't positive the camel train wasn't an illusion, since there was still something odd about the tracks that just disappeared.

The entire scene seemed surreal to Ketan, waiting there for the approaching enemy. "We're outnumbered." Although...she frowned, suddenly sitting up a bit in her saddle like Ry had done, trying to focus through the heat waves. There was something strange about the camels.

"I know." She licked her lips, debating a retreat. The camels dipped below sight for a moment then reemerged not far ahead of them. "They're riderless!" Ketan yelled, a horrible feeling sinking into the pit of her stomach.

Hunter whirled her camel around. "Retre..." Something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention: a shimmering of a sand dune not far to their left. As she saw it, she became aware of a sound, a hum, like a hundred angry bees. She urged her camel forward, charging the sand, hoping that she hadn't gone sunsick and was attacking sand dunes.

She hated the way the camel ran, bouncing her around. Hunter missed her horse. As she got close, the sand exploded out, blinding her, but she had seen them, figures in the sand, and she swung her saber, smiling as it hit flesh, slowing the swing for a moment until it passed through.

The sand dune shimmered then disappeared like the illusion it was. The people hiding in it reared, surprised that they'd been seen, and then gave a war cry similar to the one that Ketan had used before. The war cry turned into a scream of pain from one of them as Hunter's sword cut him down.

"Hunter!" Ketan yelled in warning as one of them raised a heavy looking crossbow to point at the woman. Desperately, Ketan kicked her camel into an ungainly looking gallop, screaming as she brandished her sword.

The intimidation was enough to force the woman to flinch, the bolt lancing into Hunter's camel instead of Hunter herself. The animal gave a gurgling moan and collapsed in midst ride, tumbling and sending Hunter flying.

Hunter was aware of things in a vague way: she heard the twang of the crossbow bolt and heard the gurgling moan of her camel. Knowing she was going to get crushed, she frantically tried to get off the beast before it collapsed. She hit the sand, her eyes streaming tears as her body tried to wash the grains from her eyes, and her sword was knocked from her grasp. She blurrily looked around trying to get her bearings quickly.

"Aren't you the ambitious one." The man's voice was hoarse, gravelly, like his throat had been damaged at one time. "Duke Del Cor," his foot came up, kicking her in the side to send her tumbling aside, "you came all the way out here to die, isn't that amusing?" he chuckled, to himself.

Behind them was screaming and the sounds of blades hitting.

"You're not the first to assume that," she grunted, rolling with the kick, getting that much closer to her sword. She scrambled, her hand wrapping around the hilt.

"Do you think you can defeat me with a sword?" Again that low laugh, and he pushed back his hood, revealing a bald head upon which intricate tattoos had been inked, painstakingly. Behind him Ketan crouched, blood leaking from a cut to her left arm, snarling at the robed people facing her. Titan stood at her side, fur bristling as he growled low in his chest.

"It's a start," she replied, moving her body into a defensive posture. "I defeated your dragon of sand and your creature of blood. I think I'm doing pretty good so far."

"Two shadows of my true power. Poor Hunter, who doesn't even know why she's going to die." His smile was that of a dead person, skin pulled tight over white teeth. Sand started to crawl around from his feet, rippling towards Hunter while the wind around them whirled. "Poor Hunter," he laughed, arms spread.

"Where's the Princess?" she demanded, gathering her will and lashing it out, dismembering the wind elementals. A drop of blood dripped out of her nose, landing on her upper lip, and her headache throbbed behind her eyes.

For every one that she killed, two emerged, until the air was rippling with them, and still he laughed. "Too late, Hunter. Too late to save her. She's gone somewhere not even you can find her."

"Hunter!" Ketan yelled, ducking under a blow as she tried to fight her way past the guards to get to Hunter's side. There were too many of them though, and she wasn't good enough to fight her way through them, even with Titan at her side.

Sand and wind cut at Hunter, drawing blood. Finally, she screamed and her legs gave out, and she clutched her head as blood ran freely from her nose, and she gasped for breath.

The man walked closer, his elementals clearing before him. "My name is Fugit. I'm going to make my mistress very happy by killing you and your friend." He gave that horrible rictus smile again, raising an arm to point at her. "The wind and sand will leave nothing but your bones behind."

Hunter groaned and tried to lift her sword as she staggered to her feet, refusing to give up. But she had pushed her body too hard.

Finally, Ketan managed to kill the last of the guards, Titan hamstringing him beforehand, too slow though, too slow to get to Hunter in time. She was screaming, she realized, dimly. It was like a nightmare come to life; no matter how fast she moved, it was too slow. The bald man was still laughing, even as she watched the sand and wind whirl together into a malicious entity and strike down on Hunter, ripping at her.

The roaring, though, wasn't just in Ketan's ears or even from the wind. It was coming from above them, drawing closer. She gaped, open mouthed, as she stared above. The bald man stopped laughing and the elementals hesitated, stopping in their attack on Hunter.

It was large, bigger than Ketan's mind could comprehend at first. Its wings blocked out the sun, throwing the area around them into shadow. "Dragon," she whispered, eyes wide at the sunlight shining off silver scales.

The bald man didn't whisper it, he screamed it, urging his elementals upwards to fight the descending creature. They didn't have a chance. The dragon battered through them as if they didn't exist. Its landing sent everyone tumbling, the wind from its wings tossing them aside.

The wind from the dragon knocked Hunter back down into the sand. *'It looks like the dragon from the pond,'* she thought idly.

"Fugit," the dragon spoke, her voice echoing across the sands and inside the minds of everyone there.

The bald man was still screaming, clawing at his head. "Tell her what she wants to know," the dragon demanded, a long claw pinning the man to the sand as he tried to scramble away.

"Nooooo!" Fugit screamed, trying to rise, only to find a foot long claw pushing him back into the sand, with just enough force to make him bleed a little. "Tell her!" the dragon demanded.

Hunter rose and pushed herself to her knees, swaying.

"She's with my mistress," Fugit gasped, eyes wild, hands wrapped around the long claw, trying to keep it from pushing deeper. He looked pleadingly to Hunter. "Let me live, I'll tell you everything."

Hunter coughed and tried to get her bearings. He was lying. He might tell them, but he'd try and kill them the moment he got a chance. "Who is your mistress?" she asked.

"Spare my life and I'll tell you!" he wailed, squirming as the claw pressed inexorably deeper.

"Tell her what she wants to know!" the dragon demanded again.

Ketan managed to get to her knees, holding her head.

Hunter forced herself to crawl forward under the dragon, and dragged herself up to him, reaching out and latching a hand to his head. "Tell me. And you can have a quick death, pain free. But you can't live. You'll kill me and mine the moment our guard is down. I haven't forgotten my people you killed with your beast of sand and wind."

"My Mistress," he gasped, hands slackening around the claw, "her true name is hidden. She rules the kingdom that you come from, from the shadows." He twitched then as the claw drove deep through his chest, crushing the ribcage and then withdrawing.

Ketan levered herself back up to her feet so that she could walk, unsteadily, towards Hunter and the dragon. She paused to pick up her sword, hesitating as Titan approached the large beast without fear and butted his head against a scale-covered flank.

The dragon swung her head so that silver eyes stared down at Hunter. "You have your answers."

Hunter felt a cold chill pass through her at his words, corruption and betrayal in her lands, not a foreign threat but one hidden at home. She nodded, caught in those silver eyes. She had her answer.

"Thank you," Ketan called, moving around to stand behind Hunter, sword pointing at the sand, "for helping." Then gasped as the dragon shape shimmered in front of her. She'd never seen clouds form so close to the surface in the desert, but within moments, they were surrounded by white. Worried, Ketan stepped forward, taking hold of Hunter's arm to make sure she was still there. It didn't last long. The white mist blew away within moments, disappearing as suddenly as it had come.

Instead of the dragon, though, a woman stood where it had been, watching them with knowing silver eyes.

Ketan stiffened, her grip tightening on Hunter's arm.

Hunter stiffened, shocked. "You are Ryuu," she said, anguished. Her Goddess had seen her at her worst, nearly breaking all her vows. She had been an arrogant fool, but it was so clear now: the Lover who had gone missing, the fighting skill with no weakness.

"Oh." Ketan's eyes widened a little further in understanding. "But...you're the dragon by the pool of wisdom."

"I'm both," Ryuu said, calmly, although she was watching Hunter with something like worry. "Hunter, I am Ryuu, but I'm not the Goddess that you worship. I'm not a full Goddess, not like that."

"What? What are you saying? Korgon, Balahmas, Bachra?" Her mind was feeling fuzzy as all the teachings she'd grown up with swarmed in her head.

"Hunter, I'm not saying anything about them." Ryuu looked a little more alarmed now.

Ketan could feel Hunter's body tremble where she touched it. "Are you hurt?" she asked, worried that she'd been physically hurt in the fight.

"You're a Goddess, but not my Goddess. So, who have I been worshipping? Who have I pledged my life to?" Hunter's voice was hollow in her ears, and she was vaguely aware of Ketan next to her.

"Hunter, maybe we should..." Ketan started, only to have Hunter yank her arm free from her grip.

Ryuu winced, looking pained at the questions. "I can't answer those questions. I shouldn't have even interfered when I did. I should have left you to your own fight."

"But you did interfere! And I think I deserve an answer!" She was shouting. Her entire world and cultural identity were swirling around in her head, crumbling apart as her logical mind found holes in all that she'd been taught. She'd never seen a god, just blindly followed a King who was a drug addict as well as had a taste for young girls. She had sold out what was right because her priests and gods, said it was wrong to question the King.

Ryuu's eyes flashed for a second. "I don't know." There was a hint of the dragon's voice in hers again, echoing in both of their minds. "I don't know who you've been worshipping, Hunter Del Cor."

"Are there any other Goddesses named Ryuu?"

Ryuu caught Ketan's eye for a moment then looked back at Hunter, slowly shaking her head, unwilling to answer. "No."

Hunter couldn't handle the answer; it was too much for her brain, and she shut down.

"Hunter!" Ketan shouted, only barely reaching her in time to catch the outlander before she hit the sand.

#####3

Hunter was vaguely aware of things around her, as she would drift in and out of consciousness. She was aware of someone bathing her face, another time someone sang, and another someone

was feeding her broth. She couldn't muster the strength to open her eyes. She was paralyzed, her mind swirling with images from her life. Her entire culture was a lie; the gods they worshipped could have cared less about them. A life spent in sacrifice and honor was a life spent as a lie, as the King's thug. She was, as she had always suspected, not a hero.

Titan trotted into the tense and quiet camp and dropped the skinny rabbit at Ketan's feet, proud of his kill.

"Good boy." Ketan, eyes drawn and tired, rubbed his neck, smiling wanly at what would become their dinner that night. "She'll get better, Titan." She looked back down at Hunter, once again picking up the other woman's hand. "She has to."

Titan gave a rasping broken purr and laid down at Hunter's side, and started cleaning his great paws of blood.

Once again Hunter didn't respond, and Ketan felt her despair return. "Can't you heal her like you did with her shoulder?" she demanded, looking up at the silver-haired woman who sat not far away, watching them. She hadn't spoken much to Ryuu since Hunter had collapsed, angry at her for hurting the outlander.

Ryuu's gaze went to Hunter and then to Ketan. "I could try, but in the end it might do more harm. She's not physically hurt, there's nothing to cure. Whatever ails her is in her mind. She needs to work through it on her own." The woman replied quietly, certain she had destroyed Hunter more than any blade with her words. She had destroyed the foundation on which Hunter had been raised, a wound much more deadly.

"Why did you have to tell her? You could have just flown away. She would have just thought you were her Goddess and would have just thought she was blessed." Ketan knew she should be thankful Ryuu had stopped Fugit from killing them, but she couldn't manage to be anything but upset.

"Because she asked, and I can't deny knowledge to those who ask. Because she already knew, deep down. She's always known, but it's easier not to question. For her I put us all at risk. It's forbidden for me to interfere in the lives of humans, to influence them beyond their own choices. My mother says that by granting a choice to those who would worship us, only the most faithful will follow, because they come knowing this is what they want. There are now only two times where I was unable to heed this wisdom, because my heart would not let me. Saving Hunter was that second time." The woman looked sad sitting at the edge of the flickering light from the campfire.

The sadness in her voice drained the anger from Ketan, and she bowed her head. Without anger there was only fear for Hunter. "When was the first?" she asked, finally, for something to fill the silence and for something to keep her mind off the woman lying still next to her.

"My lover was stabbed with an evil sword. It was made of shadows, shadows harvested from a gallows room, filled with evil and filth of all that had died there. Vladis was strong and beautiful,

always a quick comment on her lips, a sparkle in her eye, but never flinched at doing what was right. I broke my oath to save her." She gave a bittersweet smile. "No, saving her didn't break my oath, because she's a half-god, so not technically human. But I tore apart the woman who would take her life. That crossed a line."

Ketan looked uncertain. "I don't understand. You killed someone, but you only killed to protect Vladis, your lover. You crossed some rule by doing that?" Gray eyes narrowed with interest. "Is that why you were the statue?"

Ryuu shook her head sadly. "I could have just taken Vladis, taken her to get healed, but instead, I killed the woman attacking her and changed the course history. I wasn't a statue. I was just deeply asleep. After so many decades of being exiled, of losing so much, I just wanted to rest and let the world move on around me."

"What happened to your lover?"

"Her father. I don't think he killed her, but I can't sense her anywhere. I hope...I have hope."

"I'm sorry." Ketan looked up at the other woman. "But...why did you wake up, then?"

She nodded her head at Hunter. "Her blood woke me up. She smeared it on me as she passed." Blood of her blood, she had awakened like a mother bear to protect her young.

"Hunter's blood is special?" Ketan's lips quirked a little. "I guess everything about her is special." That wasn't surprising to Ketan. She looked back down to the silent woman, brushing blonde hair out of her face.

Ryuu just looked at Hunter fondly. "Very special," she murmured.

"Is there any way to bring her back, to wake her up?" Ketan studied Hunter's face, searching for any hint of reaction to their presence.

"Talk to her, give her a reason to wake up. Just because she's comatose doesn't mean she can't hear us." Ryuu got up, wiping sand off her clothes. "I should go scout the area and make sure an old friend didn't feel what I did."

From her expression, Ketan didn't want to know who that old friend was. Instead, she shifted closer to Hunter's head so that she could talk. "You have to wake up, Hunter. Your Princess is getting further away every moment we wait here." She hesitated. "Titan misses you. I miss you too. I know you don't...well, that you think I'm not...we're not..." Giving a growl of frustration, she moved on. "Please come back." Ketan leaned down, pressing a kiss to Hunter's temple.

#####3

Hunter slowly opened her eyes, blinked, and looked around. It was dark and the low-banked camp fire was giving off limited light, but she was aware of a form curled around her, and

another form curled at her feet. Words rattled around in her head: someone needed her, that was what the voice had said. She looked at the woman next to her but couldn't make sense of what she was seeing. She should know her, know all of this, but her thoughts were jumbled, bits and pieces flashing through her head. She relaxed again and closed her eyes.

#####3

Groggily, Ketan opened her eyes and immediately closed them with a groan at the light from the sunrise. Four days of standing watch over Hunter, four days of hoping that she'd wake up. Sitting up, she brushed grime out of her eyes, blinking to check on the outlander.

"Maybe we should cut your hair again and use it as a sacrifice." Ryu had talked her out of it yesterday, but she was getting desperate.

Hunter became aware of movement next to her, and unconsciously reached out, afraid of being left alone. Her hand wrapped around Ketan's arm.

It took Ketan a moment to realize that Hunter had moved. She was staring down at the hand on her arm still half asleep, confused. "Hunter?" she barely whispered, afraid she was dreaming. "Hunter?"

Hunter's eyes opened, and her grip tightened. "Don't...leave me," she rasped out.

"Hunter!" Ketan yelled, grabbing her tightly. "You're all right!" She hugged her tighter. "You're all right."

Hunter didn't say anything, but hugged Ketan back. It was comforting, familiar. The shouting had scared her, set her teeth on edge.

"I didn't even have to cut your hair this time." Ketan knew she was smiling like an idiot, but she didn't care as she leaned back to see Hunter's face. Cupping Hunter's face in both hands, she smiled wider. "You're all right though. You really, really scared us. How do you feel?"

Titan had lifted his head to watch, purring as he saw his human moving.

Hunter wasn't certain how she felt. She felt a lot of things: scared, confused, angry, guilty; the last one didn't make any sense. She looked at the woman in front of her. "Ketan," she blurted out, and then kissed her, because that was what she wanted to do when she looked at Ketan.

Ketan had been about to call out to Ryu, but she promptly forgot about that as Hunter kissed her. It was a thorough kiss, and she found her eyes closing without thought as she eagerly returned it. Only when Hunter's lips left hers did she blink in confusion. "What?" Ketan asked, dazed. "I thought...no kissing anymore."

Hunter looked back equally confused. "I remember us kissing. I wanted to kiss you."

"Kissing is good." Ketan's smile faltered a little. "But you told me there wouldn't be any more kissing. Do you remember?" That was a little worrying.

Hunter winced as memories assaulted her, and she reached up with a shaky hand to rub her head. "Yes, no..." She was silent for a moment, looking everywhere but at Ketan, and then she said, "It's hazy."

"Hey. It's all right. You had a bad time." She took Hunter's free hand in hers, squeezing it reassuringly. "Do you want me to get Ryuu?"

"No!" It came unthinking out of her mouth. Ryuu had hurt her, it was unclear, but the feeling was overwhelming.

"Okay. No Ryuu," Ketan said quickly. She cautiously pulled her into an embrace. "Is this all right?" she asked quietly.

"It's confusing...my thoughts...jumbled..." she stammered out. She had lost something, a deep part of her.

"Just rest," Ketan whispered, shifting around so that she could hold Hunter. "It'll get better." She hoped.

It was comforting being held in Ketan's arms, and Hunter knew it wasn't something she normally allowed. "I'm not who I thought I was," she murmured, and those words made no sense.

"You're still Hunter," Ketan answered, resting her chin on Hunter's shoulder as the other woman rested against her. "I'm still your friend, and Titan's still your pack."

Hunter nodded. "Those are solid truths." But who she was, that was unknown; she was a lie. "I thought to uphold honor and duty to the point I became blind. I believed in lies until I became a lie myself."

"You're not a lie. You're still the Hero of Katturast."

Bits and pieces were clicking together in her head. Hunter gave a sad laugh at Ketan's words. "I fell. I was hiding from the Pasha and the board I was hiding on broke and I fell on top of him."

The dark-haired woman's fingers stilled at that, but soon started rubbing soothing circles on Hunter's stomach again. "It doesn't matter, don't you know that? We call you the Hero of Katturast because you stopped the Pasha. It doesn't matter if you accidentally dropped a sword on him."

Hunter sighed at the touch. "Thank you."

#####3

Hunter woke up, the cold of the desert seeping into her skin.

"Hunter's acting different," Ketan said, without preamble, as she crouched down next to where Ryuu was watching the desert sun start to set. The colors were glorious, but Ketan was too worried to notice. "Are you sure she didn't hurt her head?"

Silver eyes reflected the small camp fire and watched as Hunter emerged. Ryuu made no move to get up though, or said anything. She was uncertain of her reception by this woman.

Hunter quietly moved over to the fire and slowly eased down, sitting in the sand across from Ryuu. They were both silent as Hunter watched the stars, her breath streaming in and out. Finally, she said, "I'm not angry."

"Are you sure?" Ryuu asked, voice carefully neutral.

Sensing the conversation was more between Hunter and Ryuu Ketan got up with a squeeze to Hunter's shoulder and returned to the tent.

"Yes. Do any of the gods listen when my people ask?" That was the thing she wondered, how alone were they in the world? The people of the desert at least had their elementals to connect them to the world around them.

Ryuu leaned forward so that Hunter could see her face in the fire, expression intent. "The gods listen. Some of them even care about what happens here. Others use people as puppets to do their bidding. But above all, they listen, I can promise you that."

"Good," she said, simply.

Ryuu blinked then nodded and leaned back. "Their names though...I think the names have changed since last I was awake."

"Yours didn't. Somehow you became special to my culture's religion."

"What of Vladis? Does her name survive in your land?"

"Never heard of her," Hunter admitted.

The other woman sighed softly. "I'm sorry, Vladis," she whispered, looking back down at the flames. "Perhaps the Northerners still remember her name."

"Northerners? The desert tribes?" she asked, uncertain.

Ryuu chuckled. "No." Shifting closer, she used her finger to draw in the sand between them, close enough to the fire to see. "These are your lands, this to the north of it is the desert. It's much bigger than it used to be in my time. Further north of this is another land, where only

women live, and even further north of there is a land of snow and ice. I used to live there, generations ago now, I think." She smiled sadly.

"Only women?" Hunter was silent for a moment then she hesitantly asked, "How do they...um...children?"

The silver-haired woman laughed. "The priestesses there are able to..." she glanced at Hunter slyly, "facilitate things between lovers."

"Ah, okay," Hunter said, uncomfortable. "Doesn't sound very romantic."

Ryuu blinked in surprise, "Why not?"

"Well, shouldn't certain things be private? Having a priestess help, seems invasive, but..." she hedged, "people will always find a way to continue, so I guess forsaking privacy to conceive a child is understandable."

"It's their way," Ryuu said, amused to hear that from someone who had apparently been chaste her entire life. "Tell me about this Princess?"

"She's the Princess. She's opinionated, vibrant, nothing like her father, she really likes to have a good time, and is a relentless flirt," Hunter replied, her gaze shifting between the Goddess and the stars.

"Why do you think she was kidnapped?"

"Now, I don't know. At first I thought the desert people did that in reaction to being occupied. Everything lead here, and now it leads back home."

"Someone wanted you to think it was them, then?" Ryuu watched Hunter.

"Looks like it, but I'm not certain who could have organized all this. Fugit was an exiled desert magician with powers I don't even recognize. That takes power and connections only the King could have."

"Does the name Laurel mean anything to you?"

Hunter shook her head.

Ryuu picked up a small stick, using it to push around a few embers in the fire. "She's evil. The servant of one of the dark Goddesses, who I had hoped had died by now. Apparently not." She looked over at Hunter. "I sensed her power in Fugit. She must be involved in the kidnapping."

"So somewhere inside my lands is this woman, corrupting. But why the Princess, why take her?" More questions again.

"I don't know," Ryuu admitted, reluctantly. "It's not often I say that." She was quiet again, considering. "I should leave you both. There are things I should find out before I can help you." She looked over at Hunter. "If you would like my help?"

Hunter laughed. "I would be a fool to reject the help of a Goddess."

"Stop calling me a Goddess." Ryuu sounded a little annoyed. "I'm not a Goddess. I'm..." she paused, considering her words, "just the daughter of one who no longer talks to her."

Hunter got up and looked at Ryuu. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself, or you can go back to being a statue, a self-pitying statue." She turned and headed back to the tent before stopping and turning around looking at Ryuu once again. "Oh, just so you know, I'm revoking my status as a faithful follower and soldier of honor." That said, she entered the tent.

Ketan opened one eye, looking confused and disoriented at being woken up. "Is that Ry laughing outside?"

"Yes, that's Ryuu."

"Oh good. She's crazy," Ketan mumbled, turning over onto her side and closing her eyes again.

Hunter laughed. "No, she's a Goddess. I was just letting her know I wasn't going to worship her anymore."

Ketan opened an eye and looked at her again. "No more chastity vows?"

She crept next to Ketan and looked down at the reclined woman, "Apparently not."

Both eyes opened and Ketan smiled, "Really?" She shifted over for Hunter to lay down. ...

"It's true." Hunter laid down next to Ketan and placed a kiss under the woman's ear.

Ketan shivered, waking up completely at the touch. "I swear, Hunter, if you're just saying that to tease me, I will have a desert witch curse you."

Hunter didn't say anything, just placed a kiss to Ketan's jaw then to her chin, and finally her lips.

The kiss was everything Ketan remembered, and she melted into it, mouth opening with a groan as she slid her hands up Hunter's back to run them through Hunter's blonde hair. She wanted this, desperately wanted it. She could feel Hunter's body shiver as she touched her, could feel the outlander's heart race against her own as the kiss deepened even further.

Someone whimpered and Ketan wasn't sure which of them it was as Hunter pressed even closer. Their legs scissored together, and she gasped as she felt Hunter's hips press against hers. It was so very good. Hunter had never kissed her like this, or been so forward. That thought caused her to pull back, gasping for breath, "Wait." It was hard to focus, but something was wrong.

The sensations were overwhelming, fingertips sliding through Hunter's hair created delightful tension against her scalp. Then she slid closer to Ketan's body, the press of hips not quite urgent, but it was heading there. The word came crashing into her consciousness like cold water, "Wait?"

Hunter pulled back, looking like she'd been slapped.

"Just for a minute." Ketan licked her lips, staring at Hunter's lips in the dim light. She could give in to everything right now; take Hunter and make love to her all night long. But...but there was something wrong. "Why now?" She was proud her voice didn't waver too much.

"What? I thought you wanted this." Hunter was having a hard time getting her thoughts out of her pants.

"I do," Ketan said, quickly. "I really, really do." She squirmed, feeling Hunter press between her legs. Oh how she really wanted Hunter naked and pressing against her. "But you didn't."

"I didn't, because I thought we were being punished for violating my vows to my Goddess. My Goddess, as it turns out, is a fake, as is most of my culture," she said tensely, mood very much ruined. She slowly sat up and backed off Ketan's body. She felt lost, and for the moment, being physically connected to someone had made her feel grounded, made her belong somewhere.

Ketan sat up, refusing to let Hunter get too far away, and wrapped her arms around the other woman's tense shoulders. Resting her cheek on the woman's strong back, she considered her words. "I don't want to take advantage of you." That was close, she tried again. "You almost died, we both almost just died. Things changed, but that doesn't mean your vows mean any less to you."

"But the vows were created as a lie. Go ask Ryuu, she can tell you her views on chastity."

Ketan sighed, closing her eyes. "That doesn't change the fact that you believed in them."

Hunter sighed and closed her eyes. "This isn't your tactful way of telling me you've changed your mind?"

"I don't want to ruin this," Ketan hurried on, continuing when she felt Hunter stiffen. "You're important to me now. I don't want to hurt you by doing something you might regret tomorrow."

Hunter nodded and relaxed into Ketan's body. "You send mixed signals, you know. You push and push when you don't get your way, and then when you do, you pull back." It wasn't spiteful, just an observation.

The other woman was silent for a moment, enjoying the closeness. "You're the most annoying woman I know." Ketan smiled, feeling Hunter shift in surprise. "You're assuming that I know what I want all the time."

Hunter slowly smiled. "My mistake."

"Yes it is." Ketan smiled as well, feeling the other woman relax against her. "But do you know what I want right now?"

"No. Reading minds isn't one of my talents," Hunter joked.

"Too bad, it would make things easier." Letting go, Ketan stretched back out on the mat. "What I really want is to hold you for the rest of the night." She raised an eyebrow in challenge. "How's that sound to you?"

"It sounds good. Sounds wonderful." Hunter laid down next to Ketan, resting her head on the woman's shoulder.

Ketan wrapped her arm around Hunter, pressing a little closer to enjoy the sensation. She might not sleep anymore before morning, but it certainly felt good.

#####3

Part 6 - Back to the Beginning

There was a sharp inhale of breath in the dark, and then a figure came tottering out of the blackness, hands on her chest, rubbing. The androgynous servants were there, sensing their mistress' distress. They helped her into the weak light of the torches, which seemed to give off a greasy smoke; tallow made of human fat would do that. They eased her over to the overripe cushions and sat her down, and waited for their next command.

The advisor sat rubbing her chest. "Fugit is dead," she said in disbelief. Her brightest son, so full of magic he surpassed the women and moved beyond raw elementals into the dark aspects of death. She had found him as a boy, abused and full of anger. He had gone to the Elders and shown them what he could do, that his magic was greater than any of their current female students, and they had thrown Fugit out, stripping him of his clothes and water, afraid to have a man so powerful, and sent him naked into the desert to die. But she had found him and taught him what they would not, and he had been her loyal pet. Fugit had found the man who would be the Pasha. The Pasha had been blessed with magic, though only a weak amount, but he had been blessed with rage at his tribal sisters, who had power and magic while he would be nothing but breeding stock.

The desert women had made it easy for her, given her a subclass of people to exploit, and she had, beautifully. She had given the Pasha a sphere much like the one she possessed, only with this one he could locate women with certain magically abilities, and he culled any with the magic of water in their veins. He found them young and abused them with his own potent rage until they were nothing but shells. Slowly, she was killing the desert women then she would move on to the Horse Riders, then the south, and finally the north. She would rule that which she should have ruled centuries ago, but Selene had thrown her away for a smith, and her place as Queen of the North had been given to another.

Yes, Fugit's death was sad, to a part of her. He had been almost like a son. But he'd been right, it seemed, to return the Princess. So all was not lost. On the next night where nothing but blackness hung in the sky they would do the ritual, and even the gods would tremble at her feet.

Still absently rubbing her chest, she said. "Bring me Henri. There's a problem and I want it stopped before it gets out of control." One of the servants got up and left.

She knew Hunter was involved. She should have killed her as a baby, but that bloodline had been quiet for so long, breeding nothing but spoiled Princes. Who knew something worthwhile would spill from their loins? She could see now every wrong turn she'd taken in dealing with Hunter. But most of all, she should have kept Hunter here, stifled in the castle under her thumb instead of sending her out into the desert on a fool's errand to die. In the end, she knew she'd find Hunter responsible for Fugit's death. Her own saving grace was that she knew Hunter was not the heir to the southern throne, and it was foretold that her death would only come from the heir to Morgan and Keshet's blood.

She heard footsteps as Henri came to her side in a rush then dropped to his knees, silent.

She looked at the so-called King, disgusted, but then he couldn't see her

expression under the fabric she wore. "We have a problem," she said, finally.

#####3

Ketan woke up, surprised that she'd managed to sleep at all with Hunter's warm body pressed up against hers. She yawned, stretching and enjoying the sensation of waking up slowly. Then she sat up, a little confused as she realized that warmth was no longer next to her. Carefully, she crawled out of the tent, squinting into the morning light and seeing Hunter near the fire. Fear made her throat dry. Had Hunter decided the entire thing was a bad idea already? "Morning," she managed, her voice a little uncertain.

Hunter looked up from the fire she had just got going again, after it had died down to coals. "Morning," she said, smiling. "I found eggs." She hadn't cooked them yet.

"Oh." Ketan blinked. "You're going to cook them?" She raised an eyebrow, teasing.

"That was the idea. Smartass." She turned her attention back to the fire.

The momentary panic forgotten, Ketan sat down nearby, looking around. "Where's Ryuu?"

"She left. She had to go take care of some things."

Gray eyes widened a little in surprise at that, but she hesitated to ask any questions that would upset Hunter.

Hunter put a smooth, flat stone next to the fire, letting it heat up. After a little while, she kicked it out with her foot, leaving it next to the fire, and then cracked the eggs on the stone, letting them fry. "I think we have some trail bread in the packs."

A bit of rummaging produced the bread, one of which Ketan offered to Titan when she thought Hunter wasn't looking. "Found them." She eyed Hunter, trying to guess the other woman's mood. "Is she coming back?"

"I don't know. I think if she can she will." Hunter looked at Ketan, not liking how uncertain she was acting. "Come here?" she asked, looking at the other woman.

A slow smile spreading over her face, Ketan moved close. "Yes?"

Hunter leaned over and kissed Ketan's lips.

Ketan smiled even brighter, wrapping her arms around Hunter's waist. "Good. It wasn't a dream."

"You have interesting dreams, I bet," Hunter said, smiling and wrapping her arms around Ketan.

"Sometimes they're very vivid." She waggled her eyebrows, slipping closer. "So where do we go now?" The tracks were all gone, and there was no way to track the path Fugit had taken.

"We go to my lands, and we try to figure out what is going on."

"I've only been outside of the desert once," Ketan was forced to point out, nuzzling her lips against Hunter's throat.

Hunter's breath hitched at that. "Well, you'll be with me. I have my own dukedom."

"You're going to be Duke Del Cor again," Ketan said, sadly.

"I've always been Duke Del Cor, that's never stopped," Hunter replied, looking questioningly at Ketan, uncertain where that had come from.

"No. You've been Hunter." Ketan leaned back, meeting Hunter's eyes. "But that's going to change."

Hunter was quiet for a moment, thinking about what Ketan had said. Her gaze met the woman's gray eyes. "I guess I can be two people, but is the Duke such a horrible person you can't love her as well."

Ketan's eyebrows rose at the use of the word love. "Certain of yourself, aren't you?"

The Duke blushed bright red, even over her sunburned face. "I, uh, meant..." she stammered, feeling incredibly foolish.

"Don't worry," Ketan laced her hands behind Hunter's neck and pulled her down into a kiss, "I'm sure I'll like both of you."

#####3

The desert was changing. At first, the changes had been slow, barely noticeable. Now, they were becoming more dramatic.

Sand was giving way to more and more vegetation, and the Golden Sun Serpent's sting wasn't quite so sharp either.

Hunter looked worriedly at Ketan. "You...don't have to come with me." At Ketan's sharp look, she quickly backpedaled. "I want you to, I really do. But you seem uncertain."

"I just keep forgetting how very green everything looks." Ketan had to keep herself from jerking every time something moved nearby. "So much life." She looked back at Hunter, urging her camel to catch up. "We should let the camels go."

Hunter nodded sadly; the stubborn creatures had grown on her.

"We could get horses though?" Ketan looked hopeful. She'd never ridden one of those before.

"There's a dock village ahead. We can reach it in a day or so by foot. We can book passage close to my home, and get horses from my stables if you want." They didn't have any money to purchase from a merchant.

"Oh." Ketan looked a little hesitant. "That means a boat. A boat on water?" She wasn't so sure she liked that idea so much.

"Yes." Hunter turned a little green at the thought of a boat ride.

"Can there be swimming again?" Ketan asked, slyly, remembering Hunter's naked back and the feel of her fingers as they washed her hair.

Hunter chuckled, "Yes, there can be more swimming. Wait until you see my bathing room."

"A bathing room?" Ketan's eyes nearly lit up at the idea. "We should get moving then." She kicked her feet into the camel's side, getting it into an ungainly gallop.

Hunter nodded and quickly followed behind the woman, unable to wipe the grin off her face.

#####3

"We're going to go on that?" Ketan eyed the thing that Hunter had called a barge, not entirely thrilled with the idea of riding upon it. "The animals stay on the barge with us?"

"Unless you want to release them to return to the desert," Hunter said patiently.

Ketan hesitated, petting the nearest of the two camels, considering the idea and ignoring the looks she was getting from the few people around them. "They'd probably like it better than going on the barge." Then she'd be the only one from the desert going.

"It's up to you. You understand them better than I. If you think they'll survive well then we can bring them."

Ketan sighed, standing. "No. Let them go." They'd find their way back to the desert eventually. She still wasn't so certain about the idea of a barge; it didn't look as safe as the ship that they'd taken to the King's castle had. "If this thing kills us, I'm going to really be upset with you," she whispered, watching the man who owned it take a swig of something from a jug.

"We'll be fine. I promise." Hunter gave her a reassuring squeeze to her arm. Then she started undoing the halter and ropes on the camel, freeing the creature.

"You promise," Ketan grumbled, undoing the other camel and sighing as she watched the two of them take off down the road away from the dock and small buildings clustered around it on the river bank.

"I do." Hunter held out her arm for Ketan to help her board the barge. They didn't have money for a more luxurious boat ride.

"At least we get to sleep under the stars," Ketan smiled, not that Hunter could see it under the head wrap. She knew that was attracting attention, but she didn't care.

"Ready then?" the old man groaned as he got to his feet. "You'll work to earn your passage, as we agreed," he reminded them. "Don't work and you'll both swim the rest of the way." He punctuated it with a spit over the side.

"Charming. Yes, we'll work as agreed," Hunter replied, but she wasn't liking the looks that Ketan was getting from some of the others.

"Get rowing, then," the old man grunted, yelling for the shore hands to toss the plank they'd used to cross onto the barge aside.

"Rowing?" Ketan asked, quietly, as she eyed the long, wooden poles.

"Yes. Be thankful they don't have whips." She slid into the worn wooden bench, grabbing the oar.

"Whips?" Ketan sat down next to her, gingerly copying the other woman's action. "Never mind." She had a good idea.

"Just match the rhythm of the drum beat," Hunter said calmly, but she was feeling sweat break out on her forehead, and her stomach was rolling.

The rhythm wasn't hard to follow, although Ketan had to stop to wrap her hands up, which earned her yells from the other rowers, some of them unpleasant enough to have her grit her teeth. "How nice that your men are allowed to act like that," she grumbled, looking sideways at Hunter, and pausing when she noticed the outlander's pallor. "Are you all right?"

Hunter gritted her teeth and nodded. She really wanted to lunge forward and protect Ketan's honor from the extremely suggestive comment from the man two seats ahead of them.

"Just to be clear, he's allowed to say things like that?" Ketan grunted. Hauling on the oar was a completely different exercise than she was used to.

"Fuck no," Hunter grunted out before standing up and surging forward, where she promptly vomited on the man. It was the best she could do at the moment.

#####3

That evening, when the barge had been tied up at the edge of the river bank, Ketan collapsed next to the spot Hunter had chosen to rest on the bank, aching. "The men are staying away from us now," she pointed out at last, an arm over her eyes and laughing. "Probably because they don't want to get vomit on them again."

"Good," Hunter said with a grunt and raised a shaking hand to her hair to move her bangs out of her eyes. Her color was better, but she wasn't certain about eating anything.

"Mathew forgot to mention that you were sick on the boat." Ketan propped herself up to study the other woman. "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded. "I get water sick. Traveling by boat always makes me sick to my stomach." She looked down, embarrassed, the Hero of Katturast had just vomited all over most of the rowing crew.

"I'll keep your secret." Ketan lowered her head, not sure if it was the threat of more vomit or Titan who had stayed nearby, growling low in his throat anytime any of the men had even looked at the two women. Whichever it was, no one had made any comments during the full day of rowing. Catching a whiff of herself, she wrinkled her nose. "We smell horrible."

"We do," Hunter agreed. She looked up, gauging the amount of daylight left. She stood up, ignoring the sharp looks the others threw their way. It would be nice to wash the smell of vomit off of her. "Come on, let's see what we can do about that."

Ketan rose as well, glaring right back at the nearest of the quiet rowers, glad to put a bit more space between them as she followed Hunter. "Not near these men?" she asked, hopefully.

"Unless you're talking about a smoke bath." But now that she knew what a bath felt like, she wasn't sure she could stand not enjoying it with the wide river right next to them.

Hunter made a face back at Ketan. "No. Let's move up the bank. We're bound to find a pool off the river, where the water is still." And cold, from winter run off.

"You're the guide now." Ketan smiled, undoing her head wrappings now that they were further away from the strangers.

It took them a while to find the right place with privacy of the trees and several leafy bushes. They were far from the camp of barge workers and the few travelers on the barge.

The river had cut back deep into the bank and then a couple of trees had fallen, cutting it off even more, but not completely. "I think this will work," Hunter said with a nod.

"Is it deep?" Ketan asked, eyeing it a little hesitantly. While the thought of bathing was making her very aware of how grimy she felt, she was well aware that she couldn't swim.

"Doubtful," Hunter said, sitting on a rock and slipping off her boots. They had seen better days.

"We look well worn." Ketan's words echoing her thoughts as the desert woman started to undress as well.

Hunter smiled and pulled off her shirt then leaned over, dunking it in the water, washing off the residue of vomit. She looked down and frowned. Her skin was ghostly white where it had not been touched by the sun. There were scars now, thick angry ones where Henri's arrows had pierced her flesh, and the sun had burned deep into the tissue.

"I promise good food, a nice bed, and a warm bath, when we get to my manor."

Not entirely sure what the manor part meant, the desert woman just smiled encouragingly. "Until we find word about your Princess, then we'll be traveling again. I admit I'm a little tired of traveling though." The last of the clothes were stripped off and Ketan stretched, enjoying the way Hunter's eyes followed her. "Bath time?"

"Huh, uh, yeah, bath time." Hunter cleared her throat and stood up.

"Join me?" Gray eyes danced with mischief as she lowered herself, slowly and carefully, into the water until it topped her breasts.

Shaggy blond hair bobbed up and down, then she undid the baggy desert pants, letting them pool at her feet.

Ketan watched silently, eyes dark as she took in Hunter's body again. In parts her skin was dark enough to almost be a desert dweller now, but in others she was still as white as any outlander.

Hunter stepped out of the pants then waded into the water, which was cold, and she shivered then tripped over a rock, stubbing her toe. "Korgon's balls!" she yelped out, nearly falling over.

Ketan laughed, clamping a hand over her mouth to stop in case any of the rowers was close enough to hear. "It's cold. I probably should have warned you." She'd been distracted by Hunter getting naked though

"I'm fine," Hunter said, sitting down next to Ketan. On the upside, she was so cold she couldn't feel her stubbed toe, and her stomach wasn't upset.

"I'll help make it feel better." Ketan waggled an eyebrow. "For a price."

"For a price? And what would be payment enough?" Hunter asked, curious.

"A hair wash?" Ketan asked, her eagerness killing any chance she had at acting seductive.

Hunter laughed at the look, "Addictive?"

"No." The other woman squirmed a little. "Please?"

"Okay. Lean back, against my side," she said after a moment of working out the logistics. It wasn't like she hadn't done this before. "Just like that," she said encouragingly as Ketan adjusted next to her in the water. "A little bit more." She cupped her hands and brought them up full of water, releasing it over the black hair, which turned even darker with water.

Ketan sighed, going almost boneless with pleasure as she leaned back against the warm body behind her. "Oh yesssssss..." she purred.

Hunter swallowed and tried to focus, looking down the line of Ketan's body. It was erotically hidden and exposed, playing hide and seek with Hunter's gaze.

"You're good at that," Ketan sighed, head falling back onto Hunter's shoulder. "Do you want me to do you?" She turned her head a little, lightly pressing a kiss to skin covered by goose bumps.

"Mmmmm," Hunter said, bringing up another handful of water to Ketan's hair and started working her fingers through, massaging the scalp.

If possible, Ketan went even more limp in pleasure at that, pressing against Hunter. "Your talents are wasted as a Duke," she groaned.

"Thank you. I think," Hunter said, trying hard to stay focused.

Ketan turned, eyes intent on something more than a mere hair wash as she bent down slightly for a kiss. She wanted this, desperately, and the heat of her body made her forget the water temperature.

Behind them, the water began to slowly swirl in the center of the pond, drawing in on itself in a small whirlpool.

Hunter swallowed again, but started to lean forward then went still, gaze fixed behind Ketan.

It took a second for Ketan to realize the other woman had gone still. "I'm sorry." She pulled back, eyes wide as she thought she'd gone over the limit. "I didn't want...I mean..." She stuttered to a stop, realizing that the blonde woman was looking behind her. "What?"

"I'm not certain. But we might be in trouble. Something in the water." She wrapped an arm around Ketan, carefully not hampering any arm movement but to help pull her away.

"Things live in the water?" She knew that of course. Ketan had heard outrageous stories of huge beasts that lived in things called oceans. But to know it and encounter one was a different thing.

"Yeah, though this isn't a living thing, more of a magical thing," Hunter whispered in Ketan's ear.

The water surged upwards, forming a column that reached almost six feet above the water surface. Ketan turned, eyes widening as she saw the elemental form in front of her. "Water elemental," she whispered back, suddenly realizing that their swords were back on the bank.

Hunter tensed the muscle's in her arm, at the same time gathering her will to unravel the elemental.

The surface of the column solidified, glinting like it was solid ice. "Again you're naked. Together. This is starting to become a pattern." The old Water Mistress' face grinned at them from the ice surface. "Yes, Hunter Del Cor." The woman's smile widened as Ketan sank down in the water until it was above her shoulders. "I'm glad you didn't destroy my water elemental before I could speak to you."

"Why should I trust you? So far, your fellow sisters of Fire and Air have tried to kill us," Hunter snapped.

Isra shook her head sadly. "I promise you, Hunter, I knew nothing about what they tried to do to you. I sent my elemental to you so that I could apologize for it, once I found out."

"Okay," Hunter said, not certain what to say.

"We are not all as you think," the Elder stressed. "I will do what I can to help you in your quest. Fatima sends her best wishes as well, and will aid me as she can." The Elder's gaze switched to Ketan, the sad look deepening. "I'm sorry, you must believe me I knew nothing of what your mother..." pausing as Ketan shook her head vigorously.

"Don't say it," Ketan said. "I don't have a mother anymore."

Hunter tightened her arm, which had been loosening around Ketan's waist, in comfort.

Isra sighed, but didn't say anything else about it. "Try not to destroy any of my messengers in the future."

Hunter nodded. "Sorry, it wasn't personal. You showed us great kindness."

"At least one of you did," Ketan muttered under her breath, angry.

Unthinking, Hunter leaned forward, kissing Ketan's shoulder. "Let it go. She can't touch you here."

"Well..." Isra sounded like she was trying to keep herself from smiling, "I'll leave you both in good hands." She gave a wink at Hunter then the water elemental collapsed in on itself in a splash of water.

"Um, sorry, I probably shouldn't have done that in front of one of your Elders," an embarrassed Hunter said, blushing.

"She's never going to let it go now." Ketan grinned. "I like you blushing. It's a different look for you." She shivered a little. "Is all the water in your lands so cold though?"

"In spring it is. It's full of the snow melt off from the mountains." At Ketan's confused look. "Snow, is, ah...snow." It was harder to explain than she'd thought. "When it gets really cold rain freezes, becoming snow." There, that should do it.

"Freezes." Ketan stared at her blankly. "It's cold, can we get out?"

"Yes, of course," Hunter said, getting up, the mood now truly gone, not that she was certain what to do once they went beyond kissing. Sure she knew, in randy stories told by fellow soldiers. But actual experience, she didn't have any.

A splash of water followed Hunter out of the pond, with Ketan following quickly after it before Hunter decided to retaliate. "We get to keep bathing together when we get to your manor?"

"If you want. I promise the water will be warmer at the manor." Because she could have it heated. She lifted up her wet tunic and pulled it on over her head.

Ketan raised an eyebrow, watching with interest until Hunter's chest was covered. "I'll hold you to that promise."

#####3

A very thankful barge crew watched the two women walk down the path away from the dock at the end of the second day.

Hunter was still a little green, but she had managed not to throw up on anyone.

"I've decided I like the big ship better." Rubbing sore arms, Ketan did not give in to the urge to curse the vile oarsman they had shared the rowing with.

Hunter turned a little more green at the words. "I can do without any boat."

Titan gave a noise of agreement. The cat didn't look much better than Hunter.

Deciding to have mercy, Ketan didn't say anything else about boats or water. "Where are we?"

"On the edge of my lands." She pointed ahead of them. "You can see the top of my manor."

"Are they going to be upset with me being here?" Ketan hesitated, seeing the top of the roof that Hunter was pointing at. It didn't look much smaller than the King's castle from what she could see from there. She frowned, looking over at the blonde. "Are they going to be upset you're back without the Princess?"

"No." Hunter looked at her funny. She ruled here, her people would do what she said. "The King might be upset. I haven't returned with his daughter." Actually, that was putting it lightly; the King might throw her in the dungeon.

Ketan made a face at the thought of the King. "So he might attack?" She smiled a little, touching the hilt of her sword, imagining the stories told about her if she managed to kill the King.

"No, the King will not attack here." The King would merely summon her when he found out she was back.

"Oh." Ketan sighed a little, looking around with curiosity. "This is where you grew up?" The woods were thick and lush, taller trees than she'd even imagined had existed before. Everywhere she looked there was life. "I'm having trouble picturing you as a child, running around, terrorizing people."

"Because I didn't." Hunter's father would have, and did, beat her for acting that way.

"Oh," Ketan said, again, looking at Hunter oddly. "You didn't run around through the trees? You didn't play robbers and try to steal camels from the other kids?"

"No." Hunter sighed, thinking that sounded like fun. "I learned to read and write, math, languages, dancing, policy, and proper behavior."

Again, gray eyes looked over at Hunter oddly. "But you had friends, right?" Ketan paused, staring out at a small field filled with white and black horse-like creatures before hurrying to catch up to Hunter.

"Stephen..." And Catherine, whom she wisely didn't bring up. "Most of the other children were royal children, and we met with our parents to see if a good match could be made." It was more like a breeding program than a childhood.

"Did your parents find one for you?" Ketan didn't like where this was going. "A good match?"

"My father was in negotiation with a couple of families to make a good match. I had other ideas. I met Catherine and I was going to leave with her. I was going to be a bard and we would travel around and..." She laughed. "It seems really simplistic now."

"No," Ketan said quickly "No, it sounds nice. It sounds very nice." She smiled slyly over at Hunter. "Although I'm not that sad that you aren't with Catherine right now."

Hunter coughed, realizing that bringing up Catherine might not be a good thing. "Well, that didn't work out. And I joined the temple of Ryu then joined the army. Both of which pissed off my father."

"So you turned into a rebel." Ketan nodded, following her as the roof of the manor got closer. "And then a hero," she teased.

"I suppose," Hunter agreed, although then she came home and took up the mantle of Duke from her father, not much of a rebel anymore.

Whatever teasing Ketan was about to give her about her childhood ended when they came on top of the small rise before the manor, and she stopped in the middle of the path, staring. "You rule over all of that?"

"From the dock to the orchards to the vineyards. The most plentiful lands in the kingdom."

"Of course they are," Ketan mumbled, shaking her head at the size of it.

They paused as a horn sounded. They had been spotted from the watch tower.

Hunter stood still as the gates opened and four horsemen came galloping down the hill towards them on the road. She shed all nervousness, held her head up high, and wrapped herself around the fact that she was the Duke and ruled here. She had no idea what had changed since she had been gone. Her father could have done something stupid, or there could have been a coup with a fellow Duke. The possibilities were endless in politics and power.

Beside her, Ketan split her attention between watching the approaching horsemen and the Duke of Del Cor. The change in Hunter's expression and stance were powerful, and the desert woman knew she wasn't standing next to Hunter anymore. *'This,'* she thought, *'will make for an interesting trip.'* Once again she wondered how these people would react when they saw their Duke dressed as one of the desert folk, although Hunter had undone her head wrap.

The horsemen didn't draw their sabers, and the Duke took that as a good sign. She was happy Ketan didn't move or flinch. It had to be unsettling being in lands so different from her own. The horses surrounded them, dark eyes peering down at them from the shadows of helms.

Hunter grabbed her sword and drew it out, and grasping the blade in her palm, she held it straight up. At first the horsemen stiffened, but at seeing the pommel and the Golden Dragon on it, they relaxed and a cry went up.

"The Duke! The Duke has returned!"

"Good thing we got your sword back," Ketan said, quietly enough to not be overheard as the horsemen drew closer.

The one in the lead swung down out of his saddle, and before the horse had even come to a stop, slid to a stop not far away from the Duke. With an easy bow to the Duke he went to his knee.

"Duke Del Cor, we feared you lost in the desert!"

"No, Francis, only misled." She knew his name, knew the name of everyone who was under her leadership. She reached out and grasped his arm in welcome. His eyes went wide with the gesture, but he straightened up with pride.

"It is good you've returned," another, a woman, said.

But Hunter held up a hand, silencing any gossip. She would learn the state of affairs soon enough. "Why are we standing around? My guest and I need a bath and food. My guest needs warmer clothes before she freezes to death. Go! Let the bells ring and the wine be uncorked."

The lead man looked a little worried as he stood there, hesitating.

Ketan didn't miss the worried looks the other three guards shared at Hunter's words.

"Perhaps we could bring you to the inn first, my Duke?" the man said, finally.

Hunter sheathed her sword and pushed past the man. "What has my father done now?" she growled out, stomping down the hill. "And no, I am not staying at an inn. I fucking live here! I'm staying in my rooms!" she shouted out.

"Of course, Duke Del Cor," Francis quickly answered, looking even more uncertain if that was possible. "It's just that..." He had to hurry to keep pace with Hunter, almost tripping over Ketan as he did so. "It's just that you've been declared dead for weeks now."

The female guard nudged her horse into a walk near them, the other two male guards forming up behind them. "It's true, Duke Del Cor," she called. "The King himself sent word."

"Well, I'm not dead. I wasn't dead the last time he nearly got himself lynched by an angry mob. Please tell me that there are not peasants standing around in an angry mob with torches and pitchforks this time?"

"No, Duke!" the man answered, a touch too quickly Ketan thought, wondering what they were about to walk into.

Hunter never slowed down. She marched up to the gate and shouted, "I, Hunter Del Cor your Duke, order this gate opened...NOW!" It was a tone that gave many a raw recruit nightmares.

Ketan made sure to stay behind her, intent on not getting herself shot with an arrow by mistake. It was interesting watching Hunter in her element, especially the way the men and women inside the gate jumped to attention and feverishly started to open the heavy wooden door for her.

When it was open enough for her to squeeze through, she marched into the courtyard, more than aware it was designed to be a deathtrap for invaders. "Father! Stephen!" she shouted.

"Duke..."

Ketan once again had to sidestep as the guard who had accompanied them inside tried to keep up with Hunter.

"Your brother..." He trailed off miserably, clearly wishing someone else had ridden out to find out that the Duke was not as dead as the King had proclaimed.

"Yes, Francis," she said calmly, giving him her full attention.

He stiffened to attention, eyes darting towards Ketan. "Perhaps I should report the situation to you when your guest has been shown to her quarters?"

A small crowd of guards and onlookers had begun to form in the courtyard, all wide-eyed in astonishment as they saw their Duke back from the dead.

"My guest will be staying with me in my quarters." As soon as she said it, she knew it was the wrong thing to say.

The crowd went a little quiet at that, then the buzz of speculation started again, louder this time. Ketan froze, staring at the back of Hunter's head.

Francis faltered again. "Your father is currently residing in your quarters," he managed, after a moment.

Hunter would ignore the misstep for now. "Where is my brother, whom I left in charge?"

Ketan had to give the man credit, she would have at least winced at Hunter's tone. Instead, the guard stood ramrod straight, staring ahead, slightly above Hunter's right shoulder. "Your brother was banished, along with some of the townsfolk."

"Well fuck," she muttered. "That gods damned weasel." She took a deep breath. "Send someone out to un-banish them. And you five with me." She started through the courtyard to the huge, double wooden doors on the other side. She was going to throw her father into the dungeon.

If he had been a better man, a man worthy of respect, the manor guards and soldiers would have killed her on the spot to protect him, but they didn't. They fell right into line under her words.

Since she hadn't been told to stay where she was, not that she probably would have listened to such an order, Ketan followed along behind the group of guards. She carefully kept her hand away from the sword at her side, as accidents had a way of happening around people who were nervous, but she stayed close enough to keep an eye on Hunter.

Who knew what kind of madness existed around so many outlanders?

The two guards standing outside of Hunter's old room watched the group of people coming towards them with concern and dawning confusion. "Duke?" one of them asked, looking at Francis worriedly.

"Out of the way or I'll gut you for treason." Hunter's words were clipped and precise.

They didn't linger long. Both of them stepped aside, watching her pass with confusion that only grew when they saw Ketan bringing up the back of the group.

Hunter burst through the door. "I told you what would happen if you tried to take over!" she shouted, unconcerned her father was naked and in bed with a much younger woman.

"What is this? Guards, guards...Hunter?" The old Duke was confused. "But you were dead...the, the, the King said..."

"And you went against my wishes. You banished Stephen. Stephen...your own son," she ranted as she pulled the young woman from what had once been her bed, and threw her out the door.

Ketan slammed the door shut in the young woman's face when she got up and started back towards the room.

"Hunter!" her father tried to admonish.

"No, get dressed and get out. Delia and Connor will escort you back to your room and stand guard. You are confined to your rooms until I deem you are not a threat." Her

father opened his mouth to argue, and she added, "Understand?"

Robert sighed, and with as much dignity as he could muster, got dressed. "Like you, I am the King's man. I was only doing as commanded. Remember that."

Hunter was silent for a moment, her mouth pursed into a taut line. "Francis, you and the others clear his things out of here and get someone to change the sheets." Her voice was more subdued now.

"Yes, Duke," he answered, quickly moving to do as she commanded while the two other guards escorted her half dressed father from the room, half dragging him when he stumbled.

"How does it feel to be dead?" Ketan asked, watching the two guards carrying the last of the old man's belongings out with them.

"It would be more freeing if my father wasn't so incompetent," Hunter said, sitting down with sort of a bemused look on her face.

Reaching over, Ketan closed the door, leaving the two of them alone again. "No mob this time though." She walked around the bed, reaching down to test its surface.

"I wouldn't, not until the servants come and strip the sheets and replace them," Hunter said in warning.

The other woman jerked her hand back, shaking it. "Eww..." That wasn't something she really wanted to touch, Hunter was right. "Your King seemed eager to declare you dead."

"I've been missing for over a month. I should have sent a messenger," she muttered. "Henri is the King's soldier, and he left me for dead. For all I know he told the King your people murdered me." Her mood was quickly souring.

"Hmm..." the desert woman answered, unwrapping her head scarf and setting it aside on a piece of impressive looking furniture that was made of a king's ransom worth of wood. She moved closer, into Hunter's personal space, a small smile playing around her lips. "So I'll be sleeping in your room, will I?"

Hunter groaned, remembering her words and her subjects' shocked expressions. "Yes, you will. Although I shouldn't have blurted that out to everyone." She had no idea how that would affect her in the eyes of her people.

"You didn't even want to ask me about that first?" Ketan stepped a little closer, gray eyes focused on Hunter's face.

Hunter bit her lip, stopping another groan. Finally, she looked up. "You can have your own room. If you want." It would probably be better.

"I didn't say that." Ketan's smile widened, and she stepped closer until she was almost touching Hunter, clothes just brushing. "You still haven't asked me," she whispered.

Hunter looked up, squinting at Ketan. "Do you want to stay with me, here in my rooms?" she asked after a moment of judging Ketan's mood.

Ketan leaned in, kissing the blonde woman then pulling back with a smile. "Yes. See how easy that was." She winked.

"Easier than I thought," Hunter mumbled. Then she sat up straight as the doors

opened and a young man and woman, dressed in the clothes of servants, entered. They paused, looking at the two women uncomfortably.

Hunter got up and moved them away from the bed. "If you could change the sheets out, and have someone start the bath."

They didn't speak, but nodded, and started on their tasks.

Ketan stepped back, eyeing the entire scene uncertainly. Servants...she didn't know how to deal with, so she let Hunter be the Duke.

The female disappeared into another room, and there came several odd noises: grinding, groaning, and then the sound of water running.

Since Hunter didn't seem in a hurry to yell at anyone, Ketan drifted that way, curious to see what was making all the water sounds. "What is that!?" she yelped, gray eyes wide as she stared into the separate room.

In efficient moves the bed was stripped and the sheets changed with fresh sheets. "Are my clothes still here?"

The young man nodded. "Lord Robert had just started to move his things in. Most of your things are here."

She nodded then made her way over to Ketan. "That is the bathroom."

"Bathroom?" Ketan's gray eyes widened. "I heard stories about the ones that the King has. Is this like those?"

Hunter had heard about the King's bathtub as well, and his orgies. "No! I mean...no, I'm the only one who's been in this tub," she replied, not wanting to think about what her father had been up to, and that was too hard in here. She hid a shudder at those thoughts.

"The only one?" Ketan smiled, going in to examine the thing Hunter had called a tub. "Is that a Duke rule?" She really wanted to try out the tub.

The tub wasn't a small thing, big enough for four people, and Hunter had always thought it a bit much. But she was only the most recent Duke here. "Um, no, I'm probably the only Duke who's had that rule."

Ketan turned, smile hopefully. "Is that rule for everyone?"

"Well, for you I'll make an exception," Hunter said, pushing Ketan into the space and shutting the door behind her, realizing it was going to be the biggest piece of gossip going around the manor.

"Am I not supposed to be bathing with you?" Ketan teased as Hunter shut the door between them and the servants. "They already know I'm expected to sleep with you." Her grin grew larger. "Perhaps they'll think I'm the spoils of war, a trophy you've brought back from a raid into the desert?"

Hunter frowned at that, finding it distasteful. "You don't really think that, do you?" She knew her subjects were more thrown by the fact that she'd always been so chaste, and had never had anyone share her bed or her bath. Now she'd brought back some strange woman, skin dark from the desert sun? Others had perhaps brought back new and exotic slaves from the war in the desert, but not her. She'd brought back the desert itself, and a Sand Tiger. Titan was probably very happily sleeping on his rock in the garden.

"No. I don't think that." The desert woman leaned against the wall, watching with interest as the water in the bath started to get higher. "But it is going to be fun teasing you about it." Judging the water to be high enough to enjoy, she started to disrobe, suddenly eager to get out of the travel-stained clothes that they'd lived in since the fight with Fugit.

Hunter went over to the piping that came out of the ceiling and turned a large metal wheel until the hot water stopped. Up on the roof was a large rain catch, which was used to hold the water and heat it by burning wood. When the bath was finished, a drain was opened inside the tub to let the water run out. The water would then travel down more pipes into the garden. Nothing was wasted. She pushed the pipe out of the way and the metal ground against metal until it was again resting next to the wall. Turning, she watched Ketan disrobe, realizing that she was an easy mark for Ketan to wind up. And she didn't really mind that much because it was Ketan. "You're beautiful, you know." The words were blurted out, and she wasn't certain who was surprised more, her or Ketan.

The other woman paused, half naked, to stare at Hunter, a warm feeling growing in her chest at Hunter's words. Still watching Hunter, she finished disrobing, leaving the stained clothes where they fell to pad naked across the bathroom floor to where Hunter stood. "Thank you," she whispered, pressing her lips in a chaste kiss against Hunter's lips. "You can be charming when you let yourself." Then she slipped out of the outlander's arms and into the bath, hissing in pleasure as she lowered herself into the hot water. "The sands can take me now," she groaned in happiness. "No wonder you kept going on about a bath when we first got you. This feels soooo nice."

Hunter smiled and folded her clothes, setting them on the floor. "A hot bath after a long day is very nice," she agreed. Her bath was a simple thing; she had heard of grander ones. Hers was made of treated wood sunk into the floor. It fit them easily, and there was room for a third, she mused, but considering she didn't know what to do with one woman, let alone a second, she would stick with just being a couple. She leaned back, closing her eyes. "I'm glad I can make you happy," she stated, considering her homecoming had been filled with more drama than she'd been expecting.

Ketan sighed in pleasure, and feeling impish, reached out with one foot to stroke Hunter's leg. She laughed when the result was the other woman jerking in surprise then flushing from more than just the heat of the water.

"What are you going to do with your father?"

The question gave Hunter something to focus on other than her own desires. She looked sad for a moment. She may not like him, but he was her father. "I don't know. He's a worthless human being, but he's my father. When I was growing up he couldn't do any wrong. I was his shadow. When I got older, it's when the blinders of youth came off and I saw what a flawed and miserable person he was. But I don't think I can kill him, especially if he was only doing as was ordered by the King."

Most would have killed the old Duke as they took power, but she knew he really didn't want to be Duke; he was happy being pampered like a pet. "Although if anything has happened to Stephen, I can't make any promises about his safety."

"You love your brother." It wasn't a question, more of an observation. When Hunter continued to look sad, Ketan took things into her own hands and shifted until she was next to the other woman. "Let me wash your hair?" That had been her favorite part the prior two times they had bathed, and she wanted to try it now, with the added pleasure of hot water.

Hunter blinked at the change of topic, but nodded. She leaned forward and reached over the side of the tub, her mis-matched flesh with darkly tan flesh patchworked with pale white exposed, as she had to get up on her knees to reach the cup she was trying to grab. Finally successful, she sank back down into the tub and handed Ketan the plain wooden cup with a small bar of plain soap inside. "It's what I use to wash my hair. It helps."

It didn't take much convincing for Ketan to get Hunter's back towards her. Experimenting with the soap, she started to work on Hunter's hair, using the cup to rinse. "You're beautiful too," she said at last, knowing she was jumping from topic to topic, but not really caring. "Your skin is almost as dark as mine in places." She admired a few of the whiter skin patches as she worked on Hunter's blonde hair. "I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to meet your brother at the King's palace. If he's anything like you, he'll be fine."

Hunter purred like a Sand Tiger as her hair was washed, her eyes nearly closed. "Stephen wants to be like me, but he's nicer, a little slower to pick up on things, and he really wants to please," she murmured, not censoring her thoughts as they passed her lips, almost completely relaxed.

"Nicer than you?" Ketan teased, enjoying seeing this relaxed side of Hunter. It was in stark contrast to the Duke, who had been shouting orders only a short time ago. Quietly, she continued washing the blonde hair, having to work in places to get snags and knots free. "I take it back. I don't think you're nearly as dark skinned as I am. You're just covered in dust and blood."

Hunter shrugged, but didn't move, even as Ketan worked out a nasty tangle in her hair. "I think I lived in the bath after the first time I came back," she chuckled, remembering Titan, as a kitten, had fallen into the tub with her. He'd looked so indignant about getting soaked. She'd lived in her rooms and the bath for a week after her return, and sorting out her father. It had been a shock to be home. Everything was so different. There was the cold and the wet, then the noise of a manor full of people, and then she had to learn to stop looking for direct threats that came in war and the indirect threats of politics.

The knot untangled, she sighed and leaned back against Ketan's body, enjoying the low simmer of desire that awakened in her body at the press of naked flesh against hers. She wasn't quite as ready as she had pretended to be in the desert. Why she had pushed herself, she wasn't certain. Perhaps wanting to prove something or wanting to connect. She had been feeling very disconnected from whom she thought she was after Ryuu's revelations. She wanted Ketan, but it would probably be a slow process having to tear down barriers she had been keeping up for years to train herself to ignore desire and wants. It was nice though, the feeling of Ketan behind her, strong muscles supporting her under smooth flesh. She wasn't dead, desire was there, and she would figure out what to do with it. Her body already had some ideas of its own, the brain would follow. "You feel good," she murmured.

"That's a good sign," Ketan whispered, pressing a kiss against the warm skin of Hunter's neck. "I know you're not ready for more." That didn't mean that she wasn't almost painfully aroused right now. A bath in a cold pond would have maybe been a good idea. "But when you're ready..." She let the words hang there, sucking on Hunter's earlobe and trying to control the urge to reach around and stroke slick skin.

Hunter shivered and sucked in a breath. "I, uh, want to be ready." She sighed. "So much has happened in such a quick time." It made her mind whirl if she thought about the last few months.

"And you're not ready," Ketan finished. "I'm not going anywhere. We're not even done with your quest yet." She forced herself to sound cheerful. "Just find the Princess and then you're mine though."

The Duke heard the change in Ketan's tone. She sat up and turned around, putting a hand on either side of Ketan's head, gripping the warm, steaming wood. "I appreciated you being patient with me even when I thought I was ready for what I wasn't. It doesn't mean we don't have to do nothing." She leaned forward, enjoying how their warm, slick skin melded together, and did her best to thoroughly kiss Ketan.

"Nothing?" Ketan gasped, eyes dilated with desire as she felt naked skin press against her own, the gasp ending when Hunter kissed her. It was a much more thorough kiss than Hunter had

given before, and for the first time, Ketan let the other woman lead. "You're killing me," she gasped, arching up against her.

"Should I stop?" Hunter asked against Ketan's lips.

Gray eyes snapped open, "Only if you want to get hurt."

Hunter just smiled and went back to kissing Ketan some more. Tasting Ketan's lips was intoxicating.

Then the door to the bathroom crashed open. "Hunter! You're bac...busy, oh Korgon's balls." Stephen turned bright red.

Hunter looked up from Ketan, "Out. Get out and wait in my study."

"I can't believe this," Ketan whimpered. She'd just managed to get Hunter to sit up on her lap and was trying to encourage even closer contact. "Your brother," she groaned, slipping lower in the tub to hide more skin under the water.

Stephen relaxed a little bit at Hunter's tune. That sounded like his sister. He did, however, hastily retreat.

"Yes, that would be Stephen." Hunter leaned back off of Ketan's lap and stood up.

Ketan watched, mouth open a little as water ran down off Hunter's body, and she whimpered a little.

For a moment Hunter was tempted to stay, almost trapped in the desire she saw reflected in Ketan's eyes. "You're not making this easy," she almost groaned.

"I'm not making this easy?" Ketan gave a choked laugh. "You better go. Before I try to take you, right now." She wasn't really joking, either.

"Okay. You're right. I'll get us some clothes." Hunter climbed out of the tub, her skin covered in goose bumps.

"Us?" Ketan turned to watch, appreciating the view. "Do I have to go meet your brother right now?"

"No, but I thought you'd like clean clothes when you got out." Hunter entered her rooms and searched through her closet, not certain she had anything that would fit Ketan.

"Please!" The thought of putting on her dirty clothes again, made her shudder in revulsion.

Hunter returned a few moments later wearing a thicker winter tunic and breeches. She set some clothes on the floor near the tub then brought a towel over next to the tub. "To dry you off," she

said, setting it down. Leaning over, she gave Ketan a light kiss. "Please don't leave my rooms. I'm not certain what's going on yet."

"No leaving the room." Ketan smiled. "Trust me."

"Thank you," Hunter said. Being gracious was easier than she thought. "I'll be back soon. Do you want me to start the fire?"

"Fire?" Ketan blinked then nodded, remembering all the trees that grew around here. "Yes." That sounded interesting. "Go, be happy with your brother."

"Thank you." Hunter gave another kiss to Ketan's temple then left.

With another sigh of contentment, Ketan sank down into the water. "She said thank you." She smiled. "Twice!" Then dunked under the water to wash her own hair.

#####3

Hunter came into her study feeling awkward, which was new. She had never felt awkward in her inner sanctum.

Stephen stood stiffly near the bookshelf, arms crossed over his chest. "Hunter." He smiled tightly, through a scraggly beard and ragged hair.

"Stephen." He'd looked better before she left. "I've missed you," she started.

"You look good for a dead woman." He relaxed a little. "Welcome back, Duke Del Cor."

"I never claimed to be dead," she said with a smile.

"True." He uncrossed his arms and moved over to give her an awkward hug. "I really am glad you're alive."

"I'm glad to be alive. You've looked better, what happened? When I left you were returning here to be in charge. Father is not...please tell me the vineyards haven't been burned down."

"No." He laughed. "No burning of the vineyards." He winced a little. "Well, the King sent word that you were dead and appointed dear old dad as Duke. I protested. He took that as well as usual and..." Stephen looked away, mumbling something.

"What was that?" Hunter asked.

He grimaced, shifting awkwardly. "He tried to forbid me to get married."

Hunter made a face and sat down at her desk. "I told you to have fun but not get her pregnant. Our lives are not our own. We are breed for proper marriages."

"I didn't get her pregnant!" He looked away, angry. "I love her."

She pulled out a bottle of amber liquid, pulled off the top of the decanter, and poured herself a healthy shot. "Love is not a luxury we are allowed. Remember our talk before I left. The King will marry you off to make a good match." Her words slapped her in the face. Once she rejected Ryu, she would be open to be married off. She groaned. Ketan would kill her.

"No he won't." He lifted his head, defiant, but certain on that point.

"What? What have you done?"

He met her eyes. "I got married."

She poured another drink then one for Stephen, sliding it across the desk to him.

"Catherine's little sister?"

"Yes." He took the glass, glad his hand wasn't shaking as he took a healthy mouthful. "She wouldn't come inside, was too afraid of you."

"Her sister is alive and well, in love with the captain of the guard in some desert city." Hunter took another drink, and poured another one. She lifted this one in his direction, "Congratulations."

"Do you mean that?" He was watching her oddly. "This isn't really the reaction I expected."

She raised an eyebrow. "You just caught me naked making out with another woman in my bath. I really can't point fingers."

"True." He hesitated. "Does that mean we have your blessing?"

"Why not? Yes, you have my blessing. The King could object."

"He's not the one I was really worried about." Now he really was looking at Hunter oddly. "Are you all right?"

"No. I didn't find the Princess, and I followed a false trail into the desert where Henri, the King's man, tried to kill me. Actually, a lot of people have tried to kill me. Anyway, I've found out that the Goddess Ryu, hadn't even heard of our people. I've been a chaste virgin for no reason because she doesn't care, and I've fallen in love. So no, I'm not okay."

"Oh." He picked up the glass again and drained it of the fiery liquid inside, coughing as he finished it. "And you and this...um...woman in the bath..?"

"She's being very patient with me, but we're working on it." She took another drink, sipping this time. "But probably the lands of Del Cor will not be the favored of the King much longer."

"You know how I feel about him." He looked at her cautiously. "That's a lot of things to have happened to you." Licking his lips, he rubbed a hand along a scruffy beard. "You know, there are rumors about what those desert witches can do."

"What are those?" Hunter asked, taking another sip, looking at her brother.

"Playing with the minds of their enemies." He met her eyes again. "Making them do things they wouldn't normally."

"I could say the same about your wife, leading you around with your dick." She laughed at his red-faced outrage.

"That's different. I wanted to marry her before we left to see the King. I even tried to talk to you about it then. But you've never wanted anyone since Ca..." He stopped just in time from saying the hated name.

"Uh huh. Well, if Ketan is doing mind control, it's the same thing only without the dick." She snorted at his look and nearly choked as alcohol burned the inside of her nose.

"You seem more relaxed." He wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Yeah, well, when this is over, I probably won't be Duke anymore. So you and your new wife better be ready to take care of my land."

"Now I know you're not feeling well." Stephen looked at her worriedly. "You're the Duke. I'm the bastard son. I don't see that changing."

"I don't have the Princess. How long do you think I'll stay Duke?" Even though she was certain someone close to the King had put this all in motion now.

"Hunter, you're the most loyal Duke the King has! He'd be crazy to remove you. Besides, do you really think he'd put me in charge?" Her brother shook his head. "Not likely. So I guess we just better find the Princess before he finds out you're back."

Hunter sighed. "Stephen, pull your head out of your ass. There is no we. I'll probably be exiled or something, and I'm not taking you down with me or letting my lands fall to someone else. So are you going to take over for me or not?" She was trying really hard not to yell, and took another sip of her drink.

"No. Of course I'm not taking over from you!" He glared at her. "You're the Duke. You're the one all of the guards follow and love."

"Then you have your work cut out for you. What do you do while I'm out being a good little soldier for the King, sit around and twiddle your thumbs?"

He flushed red at that. "Of course not." He hadn't exactly taken a lot of initiative though.

Hunter rubbed her head. Stephen really wasn't getting it. This was a serious situation, one that may wipe-out the Del Cor line. "Think about what I'm saying, please. If father takes over again, I'm not certain he won't start a rebellion."

"He almost did this time," Stephen admitted, reluctantly. "But then you showed up." That had certainly stopped anything from happening. "Hunter, I don't want to be Duke."

"Stephen, you're telling me this now. I've been grooming you to take over for years. I'm not having any children, obviously." She finished her drink and looked over at her half-brother.

"I tried to tell you," he fidgeted, "but you're hard to talk to when you don't want to hear something. Besides, I thought I had more time. You were doing good as the Duke."

Hunter rubbed her face and got up. "I need sleep. I've been a long time in the desert. We'll talk more. Talk it over with your new wife, think on it. You're royalty, you can't just walk away. It makes people nervous."

"All right." He could promise her that at least. "I want you to be nice too, Hunter. She's a good person, despite what her sister did to you."

"I'll be good. Remember to tell her, her sister is alive and fine." She hugged him.

"She'll be happy." He hugged her back. "Get some rest, you look like shit."

He opened the door to the study, blinking in surprise as he saw Ketan leaning against the opposite wall, waiting. "Oh. I mean, hello." She nodded in response, dressed in the clothes that Hunter had given her, which were a little short on her taller frame, sword still belted to her side.

Stephen gave her a curious glance as he passed, but said nothing else.

"These clothes feel strange," Ketan said, entering once Stephen had taken his leave. They were much different than what she was used to, and she almost felt naked without her head wrap.

Hunter looked over with a frown. "I thought I asked you to stay in my rooms?" She was certain Ketan had agreed to that without arguing.

"You did?" Ketan's innocent look was ruined by her grin as she walked over to perch on the edge of the desk.

"Yes, I believe I did." Hunter sat down behind the desk. "I'll get someone to make you some clothes that fit. But you're warm enough. The manor can get drafty at times."

"They're warmer than what I had. Thank you." Gray eyes studied Hunter. "Are you all right?"

"Stephen got married while I was gone. That was a bit of a shock." Although not really. She'd known the two of them were fooling around.

"Congratulations. That means you'll have a sister." Ketan paused, seeing the expression on Hunter's face. "Who did he marry?"

"Catherine's sister, whom I'm pretty certain wasn't on the short list of women for my brother to be married off to." It had been assumed, for years, ever since she had taken the oath to Ryuu, since she would never bear children to inherit, that Stephen would. This could be a disaster.

"I thought men weren't married off in your culture?"

Hunter laughed. She couldn't help it. It took a while to get herself under control. Still snickering, she poured another drink. "Royalty is different. Everyone is an in to power, and proper matches make powerful families. Stephen's children would take the throne of Del Cor, when I am dead. It was assumed I would never marry, and never have children, since I had pledged myself to Ryuu." She sipped her drink. "So even if men don't get married off, they get their wives picked out for them. Trust me, a laundry maid would not be a top choice."

"If her sister is any indication, Stephen's wife must be more than a simple maid." Ketan stood up, offering her hand to Hunter. "You're tired. We should rest before the troubles of tomorrow come."

"Such a pessimist. Tomorrow could be a good day." It vaguely occurred to Hunter she'd gotten drunk while talking to Stephen. She put the top back on the bottle then grabbed Ketan's hand.

"True." Ketan smiled, helping Hunter to her feet. "But it's definitely going to be an interesting day." She steadied Hunter when the other woman swayed a little. "And you need rest. Besides, I'll need to go see my new sister also. What's her name?"

"Her name is Lara...no Cara. Cara," she said again, certain.

"Cara." Ketan nodded, pulling the other woman towards the door. "Sleep first though?"

"Yes, sleep," Hunter agreed. "You want a drink?"

Ketan looked over her shoulder at Hunter with an amused look. "I think you've had enough for both of us."

Hunter shrugged. "I've been stressed; it was a stressful homecoming."

"I know." Reaching the door, Ketan opened it, pulling an unresisting Hunter out into the hallway and towards her rooms. "You deserve rest. We can worry about the rest tomorrow."

"Yeah," Hunter agreed, feeling mellow.

Ignoring the looks they were getting from anyone they passed in the hall, the desert woman led Hunter back to her rooms, closing the door behind them with a smirk at the startled guard outside it. "They all seem so surprised to see me," she laughed, pulling Hunter towards the bedroom.

"Well, I've never entertained a guest in my bedroom before," Hunter said, pulling away from Ketan and pulling her tunic over her head and kicking off her boots as she looked around for her sleep shirt.

"It has nothing to do with the fact that I'm from the desert, then?" Ketan undid her own clothes, tossing them aside and leaving herself naked. "Do you have to?" she asked, gesturing towards the sleeping clothes.

Hunter turned and looked at Ketan, her eyes going wide. "Ah, no...you might get cold. It's cooler here than in the desert."

"You'd keep me warm though." The dark haired woman smiled, lifting up the covers and sliding under them. The bed felt odd after sleeping on mats all her life.

"I'll certainly do my best." Hunter slipped out of the breeches and gathered up the clothes, folding them and putting them on a chair. She came over to the bed and got under the covers, smiling. She had missed these little things. A bed, a bath, and wine.

"See. It's easy." Ketan's voice shook a little as she slid closer, swallowing dryly as she found warm skin under the covers. "Just to sleep," she promised, suddenly not sure if she could sleep.

Hunter grinned, leaned over Ketan, and blew out the long, burning candle, leaving them bathed in the light of the dying fire from the fireplace.

"That was just mean," the other woman whispered, shifting even closer so that she could press her entire frame up against the outlander's. "Just to sleep," she promised, again, herself more than Hunter, fingers spreading across Hunter's stomach, just resting there.

"What?" Hunter said, looking over at Ketan, trying to control her stomach muscles, but they fluttered under the touch.

"You know what." Ketan pressed a kiss against her temple, pausing to breathe in the scent that was uniquely Hunter's. "Sleep."

Hunter yawned, relaxing against Ketan's body, her eyes drifting close.

"Rest," Ketan whispered, shifting a little closer and feeling her own body relax slowly. She didn't think she'd be able to sleep, but the next thing she realized, her eyes were fluttering closed.

#####3

Hunter was awake before sunrise. The fire had died out and the room was very chilly. Normally she would be up and dressed and looking over correspondence or meeting with her guards, or other important day to day matters. Not today. Today she was content to watch Ketan sleep. She really studied the woman, not certain she'd done that before.

Her skin was dark, darker than anyone in her lands, and that was why people stared. Her hair, now washed, wasn't just dark black...it was so black it shone blue in certain light. Ketan was an exotic beauty and would catch many an eye. Then there were the other attributes that she'd only been lucky enough to see, and no one else. It was tempting to reach out and lower the furs and the sheet to look at that body, but she knew the cold would wake Ketan up. It was tempting. She tried to act like she had no worries and doubts, but this was very new territory for her. She didn't have a lot of experience being naked with another person. It was scary to be this vulnerable with another person, to let them see all of you. She let out a breath.

"Why is it so cold outside the blankets?" Ketan murmured, still more than half asleep as she snuggled closer to Hunter, seeking out her warmth.

"The fire burned out. It's always cold until the sun rises. You want me to go get the fire going again?" she asked.

"No." That would involve cold air when Hunter got out of the bed. Instead, Ketan wrapped herself around Hunter, burying her face in the crook of the other woman's neck and humming in contentment.

"Ah, okay." Hunter shivered as skin slid against skin. Her hands came around, holding Ketan, all her good thoughts fleeing.

"It's still dark," the desert woman whispered. "Do we have to get up?"

"No. I'm just normally up at this time," Hunter replied, her voice becoming raspy.

Gray eyes opened as Ketan felt Hunter's fingers move against the skin of her back. "Hunter..." she growled a warning, not sure she could keep being good if the other woman did that.

Hunter flexed her fingers, stilling them. "Sorry, I'm having a hard time...I've never been in this situation." She flushed, still somewhat embarrassed by her lack of experience. "I like touching you."

"I like touching you too. I'm sure that's pretty obvious." Ketan raised herself up onto her elbows so she could see the Duke's outline in the faint pre-dawn light. "But I promised to behave until you were ready." She leaned in, intending only a light kiss, but it got away from her and it turned into something more until she pulled back, gasping. "But you're making it so very hard."

"Sorry, but if it helps, this is a good move in getting me ready," Hunter panted back, letting her hands explore Ketan's body, amazed at how the desert woman's body felt.

"It is?" Ketan's lips curled into a smile, and set about kissing her way across Hunter's neck.

"Soft, but I can feel your muscles underneath, you're holding back." She shivered at the kisses, and goose bumps broke out over her skin.

"Mmmm..." Ketan hummed in pleasure, returning to that spot, loving the way the body beneath hers squirmed, doing wonderful things where they touched. "We should stop," she gasped at last, when she felt Hunter's hips press up against hers.

Her body really thought that was a bad idea. It was overwhelmed with feelings she'd never really experienced, and they were just getting stronger. "Stop?" She nodded and tried to still her body.

"You're killing me," Ketan whispered. There was no way she wanted to stop this. She wanted it to become as good as she knew it could be. But she'd promised. With a muttered curse, she flung back the blankets and got out into the cold, cursing more as she shivered.

Hunter was still for a moment in shock, then got her emotions under control. She got out of the bed, finding it extremely cold having spent so much time in the desert. She quickly walked over to the fireplace, stirred up the coals, and laid more wood, starting a fire.

Grabbing some of the covers and wrapping them around herself like a cloak, Ketan padded along behind her, shivering. "Does it get colder than this?"

"It can," Hunter replied from the fireplace. "Not too much colder. Sometimes there are frosts. If they happen too early in the growing season, they can kill the grapes. But overall this isn't too cold compared to other lands higher in the mountains." She stood and opened a finely detailed wardrobe door that showed her doing something heroic. She quickly dressed then went to the door. Looking at the guard, she sized him up.

"Get me some winter clothes around your size." At her gaping look, she shouted, "Hurry!"

"Is that how you get people to do what you want?" Ketan grinned, staying close to the fire, huddling in the blankets.

Hunter came back into the room. "Well, sometimes you have to jump start them. Trust me. If I asked nicely, that would just confuse them."

"I'm glad I've got you tricked into being nice to me." Ketan moved closer, wrapping the blanket around them both, and sighing in pleasure as she absorbed some of Hunter's body heat.

"I'm sorry, I should have gotten us food and clothes that fit you last night." Hunter had been off-kilter thanks to her father, Stephen, and well, Ketan. Lust, love, or whatever it was that she was feeling took a lot out of a person and made their concentration shit.

"You're doing good so far." Ketan rested her head against Hunter's, sighing in pleasure. "How long are we staying?"

"Probably only a couple of days, or until the King hears I've returned without his daughter and he summons me. I'm hoping I can straighten out my lands. I have the feeling I'm not coming back to them." That wasn't a sad thing. She'd been thinking more and more about exiling herself to the desert with Ketan, and it was a very appealing notion.

"I'm sorry." Ketan's arms tightened around her waist. It was nice with the covers wrapped around them. "The bards never mention how hard a quest can be."

"...Especially when it's not a quest but a fool's errand. However, it did lead me to you." ... Which was incredibly sappy, and she winced the moment it came out of her mouth.

"You are a sweet talker," Ketan laughed, stepping away when someone knocked on the outside door of the rooms.

"Let me get that." Hunter quickly went to the door opening, looking at the young guard. "Thank you, David." She took the clothes he handed her. "Will you let the kitchen know I'll be taking breakfast in my study and to have enough for two." David nodded and she shut the door.

"Here we go, although since these are men's clothes, and you're a woman, you'll need a belt." She hummed softly as she looked through her wardrobe for a belt.

"Fur?" Ketan eyed the clothes with interest.

"You'll be warm. And the fur is attached with ties to the undertunic so you can take it off once it gets warm out." Hunter turned, looking at the clothes, and put back the black belt, settling instead for a brown leather one. "There you go."

Letting go of her blanket cloak, the desert woman shivered and hurriedly reached for the clothes, only to be confronted by the ties along the shirt. "How?" This wasn't anything like the robes she was used to wearing.

Hunter smiled then pointed to the bed. "Sit. Now hold your hands up." She slid the shirt over Ketan's arms and down her body. "These ties tighten it. These ties hold the fur to the shirt. If you undo them, the furs will come off," she explained, tightening the ties up the chest to the throat. The fur was a soft beaver pelt, so common in this area near the river.

Ketan's lips twisted in amusement at the role reversal. "Can I leave your rooms today?" The clothes were nice and warm, much better than hers for this cool weather.

"Yes. I'll have a meeting with the Captain of the Guard and my chief advisor. I'll make them aware of who you are and that you have full access to wherever you want to be."

"I hope Ryuu or the Elder find out something before your King does."

"That would be nice, but more than likely, we'll have to rely on ourselves." Hunter sat on a chair and pulled on her boots. "Breakfast?"

"Breakfast," Ketan agreed, standing up and running her hands down the fur. "How does it look?" The clothes felt strange on her, warm, but strange.

Hunter blinked and really looked at Ketan. The clothes were more form-fitting than the shapeless desert dress. She swallowed, looking for words. "Good. Very good."

"See, you are a charmer." The dark haired woman kissed Hunter, careful not to get drawn into a deeper kiss that would test her resolve. "Breakfast, and then I'm going to go find my new sister."

Hunter rolled her eyes but stood up. "She was working as the healer's assistant. I don't know what she's doing now that's she's married my brother."

"I'll find her. She deserves to hear about how Catherine saved our lives."

Hunter grunted and opened the door, leading them to her office.

#####3

"Are you Cara?"

The woman working on cleaning a set of silver plates nearly jumped through the ceiling when Ketan appeared next to her. Wide blue eyes stared up at Ketan, and Cara's mouth opened in a silent O of surprise.

When that seemed like all the response Ketan was going to get, she asked again. "Are you Cara?"

"Uh...umm...yes?" The woman looked panicked.

Ketan lunged forward, pulling the woman into a hug even as she shrieked. "Well met, sister." Holding onto her shoulders, she leaned back, smiling at the stunned looking woman. "You look like your sister."

"Catherine?"

"Yes."

"You met her?" The stunned look was disappearing, replaced by an eagerness.

"She saved my life. Hunter's also."

"Catherine did?"

"Oh yes." Ketan looped her arm through Cara's and pulled her away from the work she'd been doing. "Come, let's find this garden of Hunter's and I'll tell you all about it."

"You called me sister?" The smaller woman looked confused.

"That's because you are. After Catherine saved me, I named her a blood sister, which makes you my sister as well."

"Oh."

Ketan looked at her as she led the way. "Unless you have a problem with me being from the desert?"

"What?" Blue eyes widened. "Oh! No, it's not that. I just...I was so used to being all alone, my family was all gone. Now I'm married, and Stephen told me yesterday that my sister was alive, and now I have two sisters. It's, confusing."

"Well, let's walk and I will tell you all about your sister."

In a daze, Cara lead them towards the desert garden that everyone knew about yet no one entered. "My sister is really alive?" she asked as she pushed the doors open.

It was an open courtyard, and the sun was starting to edge its way into the yard, barely starting to burn off the coldness of the morning.

"Yes she's..." Ketan paused, staring out into the garden beyond...except, it wasn't a garden, it was the desert, recreated and brought into the courtyard.

"Oh, Hunter," Ketan whispered, shaking her head. "Yes, she's alive. And in love, with the Captain of the Guard for the Veiled Ones."

"Why hasn't she contacted us? Mother cried herself to sleep the first year she was gone. We knew they were seeing each other, her and Hunter. They'd share looks and disappear. When she was gone one night, I knew, we knew they'd done something to her. Her father wasn't going to sit back and let his daughter marry a commoner." She spat the last part, having no love for Lord Robert.

"Here, come sit." Ketan guided her to one of the rock benches. "When she left here, she was tricked by a thief into going with her, and then she sold your sister into slavery. I don't think she could get word to you, not until she was saved. Now...it would be hard to get word to you here."

Cara paled, listening to the words. "Is that really what happened? My father thought that Robert had her killed, that's why he...he did what he did." Her father had been so angry with the disappearance of his eldest, that he'd joined a rebellion, although it hadn't been hard. Robert's laws had gotten worse as the man had gotten older.

"I know." Ketan took her hand, patting her arm. "I'm sorry. This has caused misery between both families." She would love to find the woman who had sold Catherine into slavery.

She had hated Hunter as well, since she'd come back to murder her father and made her and her mother little more than slaves. "I love Stephen, but it's not easy knowing that Hunter is his sister. She's cold and cruel, nothing like Stephen."

"Ah." Ketan understood vendettas; they were popular among some of the desert tribes. "She isn't really cold or cruel, she just thinks she has to be to get people to follow her and be a good Duke. Has she really been so cruel to you and the others?"

"She beheaded my father," Cara spat out. But deep down it wasn't true. Well, Hunter had killed him, but she'd come home to the manor on fire and her father leading a rebellion. Still, it was easier to blame Hunter. "And if she hadn't been sneaking off to see my sister, Catherine wouldn't have run off."

Ketan hadn't known about her father, and she winced at the knowledge, but kept going. "She wouldn't have done that without a reason. As for your sister, Hunter loved your sister. She thought Catherine had abandoned her, and it hurt her, badly, Cara. That's why she keeps everyone away, I think. The coldness, it's to keep people from getting close enough to hurt her again by leaving."

Cara sniffled and wiped tears out of her eyes. "Stephen says the same thing, that the coldness is just a way to keep everyone away. But I've never seen the Duke he sees. She wouldn't have let us get married. I know that." She stopped speaking as Titan poked his head out around a rock and swallowed, going even more pale. She'd assumed the great cat was with the Duke for Ketan to suggest coming in the garden.

Titan crouched down, belly low to the ground, and stalked Ketan. He'd not seen his playmate for a while.

"Titan," Ketan grinned, watching him slowly stalk towards them, "I thought you'd be sleeping all day. He's a lot like his pack mate, charming on the inside." It was quite funny to watch him stalk her while he pretended she couldn't see him. "You are married now though. Will you try to get to know the Duke? We'll be leaving soon, Cara, and if you refuse, I'd understand, but it would make Stephen happy if you'd try." It would make Ketan happy too.

"Of course I will, for Stephen. I don't want Hunter to have the satisfaction of being right about me." She said it almost defiantly.

Titan sprang, attacking Ketan's foot, and Cara gave a small scream, jumping away from the cat.

Not quite what Ketan had been hoping for, but she was too busy reaching down to rub both sides of Titan's face. "Don't worry," she said quickly, for Cara's sake.

The scream pulled Titan up short, and his ears went back, confused, and his eyes darted back and forth. He calmed a bit at Ketan's reassuring touch.

"See?" Ketan ruffed up Titan's fur. "He's gentle." Holding out a free hand for Cara, "Come say hello?"

Cara shook her head no, but sat back down, seeing that Ketan had the beast under control. "I wouldn't have agreed to come in here if I'd thought he would be here. Normally he's with the Duke." She swallowed, but tried to calm her trembling.

"Sorry, Titan, you just startled her." Ketan kept up her soothing petting of his fur, getting a low, rumbling purr. He'd grown since his time in the desert, she realized, sitting back down next to Cara. "He won't hurt you, I promise."

Cara nodded, but didn't look like she believed her. "I-I've never seen anyone else but the Duke pet him."

"He likes it." Ketan stretched out her legs, still getting used to seeing them in pants. "They live in groups in the desert. I think he views Hunter as a pack mate."

"That would make sense." Cara was quiet for a moment then cleared her throat. "Thank you for talking to me about my sister. Maybe someday I can see her again, and her...ah...lover."

Ketan grinned at the other woman. "Maybe." She didn't think that likely, but stranger things had happened recently.

#####3

Hunter was wandering around the manor looking for Ketan when, finally, it occurred to her to check the garden. She opened the gate and wandered inside. "Ketan?" She was slightly grumpy from meeting with everyone and explaining Ketan's presence.

"Hunter," Ketan called from deeper in the garden, stretched out on a flat rock that was positioned to look like it jutted up out of the sand, surrounded by desert plants.

Hunter followed the voice, her booted feet crunching on the sand and rock. "I see you're day went well." Hunter was at the top of the rock lording over everything she could see.

The day had warmed up as Hunter had predicted, and the wet, cool fog had burned off to blue sky.

The desert woman opened one eye a crack, just enough to see Hunter, and yawned. Titan lay sleeping on the rock, beside her, and she'd indulged in a nap after Cara had left. "It was rough," she agreed.

"I can tell." Hunter moved over to them and sat down.

Ketan shifted closer, rubbing her hand up and down Hunter's back as she sensed the other woman's mood. "What happened?"

"Nothing, just the joys of being in charge. Meeting after meeting." She really wasn't happy the King had come in and overruled her measures and stripped everything she had set into place while she was gone.

Tugging on her arm, Ketan urged the woman to lay down on the rock. "Any news about the Princess?"

"There's been no news. If she'd been returned, I'm sure there would have been a huge announcement," Hunter said with a sigh, stretching out next to Ketan.

"We need to find information then," Ketan reasoned, propping herself up on one elbow and using her free hand to rub circles on Hunter's stomach. The other woman was still too stressed and stiff. "Who in your kingdom hates the King enough to take his daughter?"

"No one, officially. Politically there are a few families who probably feel they are more true blood to the throne. The King's father was a bastard son, who took the throne and killed his father, exiling his half-brother to the desert. So who knows, someone out there in the desert may be closer to the throne than the King himself." She relaxed at the touch.

Ketan was silent for a bit at that, trying to think of alternatives. Finally she sighed and shook her head. "Maybe we're wrong? Maybe they didn't kidnap her because they hate the King. Is she special in any other way?"

"For having the most orgies in a single night," Hunter muttered. The Princess was all about having a good time. Her father was healthy and she had years until she would take the throne. "Um, nothing I can think of," she said hastily.

Ketan blinked, not sure she wanted to know what Hunter meant by her muttered words. Sighing, she focused on rubbing the Duke's stomach, which she seemed to like. "If this were the desert, I'd know how to help you. If one of Malkia's daughters had been taken we'd know where to start, who to talk to first. Here..." she shook her head. "I'm not of much use to you."

Hunter closed her eyes and stretched out. "What do we know," she murmured. "That Fugit, now dead, came in and kidnapped a Princess, took her to the desert, and then brought her back to a mystery person...no...lady, I believe he said it was a lady."

"His mistress, I think he called her," Ketan added, frowning. "He said she ruled the kingdom that you came from. But that can't be right, your King rules it."

"Yes, he does. I don't think there's any woman who has any level of power except for myself and the Princess. I was searching for her and she was kidnapped. I think we can rule each other out." Hunter was nearly dozing and her mind was just sort of flowing with ideas.

"So who else?" Ketan kept up her gentle rubbing, enjoying the effect she was having on the Duke.

"Uh..." Hunter drew a blank for a moment, "the advisor, is rumored to be female. I've never seen her when she wasn't covered from head to toe."

The desert woman shook her head; that wasn't much to go on. "Would anyone know if she was female? I mean, besides the King?"

"I don't know. I can put out some inquiries." And by that she meant use a spy.

That was something they could do. Ketan wondered what else they could do. For now she couldn't figure out anything. So instead, she kept up her attention on Hunter's stomach, enjoying the play of muscles beneath her fingers. "You brought a piece of the desert home with you."

"Mmmm..." Hunter said in a nonsensical yes.

"I knew you liked the desert," Ketan whispered, watching Hunter's eyes slip shut.

"I do. Nice memories. Memories where I am just a simple soldier, not a hero, not in charge of people and land," Hunter replied.

"Then come back to the desert with me," Ketan asked, eagerly. "Your King doesn't want you to be Duke, he put your father in charge. Why keep looking for the Princess?"

That was unexpected, and Hunter's eyes popped open. "You saw what Fugit could do, and the Princess is in the clutches of the person who trained him. I can't just leave that. And I can't leave my lands to be ruined and the people trampled on by my father. If Stephen pulls his head out of his ass and wants to take over, I would happily leave."

"I had to try." Ketan smiled briefly, wishing she could just take Hunter away from the responsibilities that made her the Duke. "I know you won't abandon what you see as your duty. I just don't understand your loyalty to a King that hasn't done anything to earn that loyalty."

"Well, technically, the King owns all the land, and we, his vassals, are given portions of this land to rule over. We pledge loyalty and we get to be more important than everyone else. Every Duke, when they take charge of their lands, must present themselves to the King and pledge loyalty to the King and lands," Hunter explained. "Yes, the ritual is that the King and the Land are one and the same. If he is a good and just ruler, the land is healthy, bountiful. When King Math's father took the throne, he said he did it because it was right for the land. We were in a fierce drought, and it is said that the moment he beheaded his father the skies opened up and it rained, proving that the gods were behind him." It was a story, and Hunter wasn't certain how much she believed, especially now that she had met Ryuu.

"Your gods are still strange to me," Ketan said, shifting closer so that she could press her side against Hunter's. "Even after meeting Ryuu." She turned her head sideways, studying the woman so close to her. "Do you still think she's a god?"

"Anyone else you know that can turn into a silver dragon, who isn't a god?" Hunter asked, closing her eyes again and enjoying a moment of peace with her two favorite people, well, person and cat.

"She looked so sad as a statue," Ketan whispered, resting her cheek against Hunter's shoulder and sighing in pleasure.

"She did," Hunter agreed, letting one arm wrap around Ketan, hugging her tighter to her body. She knew that she should not be standing still, that there was a lot to be done. All paths of thought seemed to lead to a traitor inside the King's Court, and to expose the traitor would be hard. There was a chance she could be hung for treason. But there were already treasonous thoughts in her heart.

There was no god-like proof of a blizzard in summer or a drought to point fingers that the King was not fit to rule, but she could not get the image of the young girl sitting on the King's lap out of her head. An image that very much reminded her of the Pasha. They were hard thoughts to handle, for Hunter had lived and breathed for honor, and her word was to the King, and he possessed the honor of her promise to serve. It was unsettling to see who she thought she was unravel, no thanks to Ryuu's revelation.

Ketan jerked a little, realizing she'd managed to doze off a little. The sun had almost completely set and the garden was dark again. She shivered, the air cooling rapidly now that the Fire Serpent had set. "Food and fire," she mumbled, yawning and reaching up to give a kiss to Hunter's lips.

Hunter smiled sleepily into the kiss, and her green-eyes blinked open. "Huh?" she said intelligently.

"We fell asleep." Ketan slipped over on top of Hunter, shivering as she burrowed into the other woman's warmth.

Automatically, Hunter opened her arms and wrapped them around Ketan. "Amazing, nobody leaves me alone this long without there being something important I have to see to." The fog was coming in, sinking in low over the valley, chilling everything. "Let's get you inside," she said quietly, knowing Ketan was not used to the wet fog.

"Fire?" Ketan looked hopeful, not sure she wanted to get up now that she had a nice, warm body pillow.

"Of course, can't have you catching a cold," Hunter agreed, sitting up. She smiled and brushed dark hair out of Ketan's face and gently kissed her lips. She was lucky there was no doubt, considering all she'd put Ketan through. For a moment, she wanted to grab the woman's hand and run all the way back to the desert. That was the only way they would have a happy ending. But she let the moment go, because if she didn't find the heart of corruption in her lands, no one would. And in her bones she felt that if she did nothing, all the lands would pay, not just hers.

Ketan mumbled something about other ways to warm herself, but she got up.

Hunter blushed at that, but bravely said, "Perhaps you can show me those other ways later tonight."

The desert woman stopped half down from the stone, staring up at Hunter with a surprised look. "Really?" she asked, oh so very hopefully.

Hunter fidgeted under the look, but nodded. "I'm not promising to uh..." her mind searched for some of the phrases she had overheard, "rock your boat or blow your geyser or anything." Hunter was certain bedroom activities weren't in her skill set. Actually, she was kind of wishing now she hadn't been so brave. The way that Ketan was looking at her, that was a lot to live up too. She swallowed nervously.

Something that sounded a lot like a muffled giggle came out of Ketan's mouth, but she managed to somehow stop from laughing. Instead, she took a deep breath and reached out to offer her hand to the suddenly pale looking woman. "How about we see how we do after food?"

Hunter nodded, certain that if she spoke, her voice would crack like a young boy's coming into adulthood.

Holding onto Hunter's hand Ketan helped her down off the rock, leaving Titan to stretch and yawn behind them. "You can breathe, Hunter," she whispered.

Hunter made a face at that. "I am breathing. It's just...it seems to mean a lot to you...and..." She wasn't so certain that once they did go that far, all fancy ego talk aside, that she wouldn't be a disappointment and Ketan would be looking elsewhere. Kissing was fine, great in fact, and she knew she could do that well.

The other woman stopped just before the door into the castle, pulling Hunter to a stop as she did. "Hunter," Ketan waited until she was certain the outlander was looking at her, as she didn't want any misunderstandings on this, "I don't want to pressure you into something you don't want. I'm not here with you just because I want to, as you put it, rock your boat." She couldn't help smiling as she said it.

Hunter blushed, hating having a limited vocabulary in this area. "I know, because if that's all you wanted, you would have left several attacks ago. I-I-I just don't want to disappoint you." She had overheard plenty of men in the castle bragging to their friends how good they were in bed, only to hear the other side, where in truth his bedmate had found him quite lacking.

Gray eyes softened and Ketan leaned in, kissing Hunter gently on the mouth. "You're sweet." Another kiss, deeper this time, until they were both breathing heavily, and she licked her lips. "And you're good at everything you do, remember?"

Hunter just nodded dumbly after the kiss and followed Ketan. "I don't think anyone's called me sweet before," she murmured.

"Get used to it." Seeing the arched eyebrow, Ketan hurriedly continued. "When you're not being the Duke of course."

"Of course," Hunter said with a smile, and led them inside.

Her advisor, Bernard, was there, seemingly having come out of thin air. "Dinner for two again?" His eye drifted to Ketan for a moment, his gaze neutral, just sizing her up, before returning to the Duke.

Hunter nodded. "In my rooms please, and have the fire lit. Also, tomorrow, send the seamstress, Ketan will need clothes for our lands."

Bernard nodded, and was gone, a last curious look at the new thing the Duke had brought back from the desert.

"I don't think he likes me," Ketan mumbled, certain she liked him just as much. "What does he do?"

"He's my advisor, and of course he doesn't like you, you're more important than he is. Nobody used to be more important than him. He runs the manor, makes sure people get paid, that I make all my appointments, and remembers important things like making sure that all our records are up to date. Honestly, I don't run the lands, he does. I just make the final decisions and get the assassination attempts."

Gray eyes widened, and Ketan looked over at Hunter. "Assassination attempts? How many attempts?"

Hunter waved it off as if it was nothing. "A couple, ten maybe. Far less than my father."

Ketan made a strange sound again, this one sounding more choked than the last one. "Ten?" she whispered, shaking her head. "Even Malkia's court isn't that brutal."

"Well, honestly, only three have happened since I became Duke, the others were when I was a child." It was a way of life for royalty.

Assassination attempts on a child! Ketan eyed the hallway around them with more suspicion than she had before.

They were making their way slowly up to her rooms, Hunter knowing the trick of slowing her steps so everything would be ready when they got there. Finally, they reached her rooms and she opened the door and sniffed. "Smells like wild boar this evening, with potatoes and bread."

"And a fire," Ketan announced gleefully as she shed the top of her fur-lined shirt and went to enjoy the fire. The rug in front of said fire had possibilities, and she was determined to remember it later that evening, if things progressed in that direction.

"Of course, I can't have you freezing." Hunter surveyed the room, finding everything to her liking. The shutters were closed, the bed turned down with fresh linen, and the small table in the corner of the room was laden with food. She frowned at the table and went over, starting to pull it over closer to the fire.

"Do you need help?" The desert woman didn't move any closer though, rotating slowly, bathing in the heat coming off the fire with enjoyment.

"No, I got it," Hunter grunted, stopping for a moment to move the glass bottle of wine before it toppled and broke, and then finished pulling the table to the position she wanted.. "There you go, now you'll be warm while you eat." She went back, grabbing the wine and sitting down, pouring herself a cup.

Ketan watched her with a small smile. "Thank you." She wondered if Hunter normally rearranged her furniture for guests. No, she doubted the Duke had many guests, other than assassins, of course. "It smells good, whatever it is." She said, sitting and eyeing the full table happily.

"Did you want wine?" Hunter asked, bottle in hand.

"I don't know." Ketan wasn't sure what outlander wine tasted like. At Hunter's questioning look, she shrugged a little. "Mathew warned us not to drink anything other than water at the King's palace."

"It's alcoholic, so if you're not use to it..." Hunter wavered, wanting to show off what her lands were famous for against making Ketan sick. "How about a small taster? Some people can get hit rather hard by the fermented grapes." She poured just a swallow or two into a cup for Ketan and passed it over.

Ketan sniffed, closing her eyes as she took a deep breath of the fruity scent. "It smells good." She took a sip, nodding in approval as she did. "Tastes even better." Wordlessly, she held out the cup for more.

Hunter beamed at that, and poured a little bit more into the cup before she started dishing up the thick slices of boar meat that was covered in a mushroom sauce, and then added roasted potatoes on to the plate. She dished up a plate for Ketan before serving herself.

"Do you hunt these things, these boars?" The meat smelled delicious, and just as the wine had, tasted even better. Ketan hummed in approval, her stomach reminding her how long the journey in the desert had been with little to eat.

"On occasion, it's been a long time since I went on a hunt." Those were days before she was Duke.

"I'd like to go with you." Ketan sobered, remembering why they were there, and she looked down at the dish. "After we find your Princess, of course." There weren't many chances of that.

"Of course, but I'd love to take you on a hunt." Hunter nervously played with her food, aware that if she wanted to make a life with Ketan, there were certain things she needed to do and hadn't done them, "Um...tomorrow..." she said hesitantly as she rolled a potato around on her plate.

The tone of Hunter's voice caused the other woman to look up, watching her curiously, "Tomorrow?"

Here Ketan was thinking of bedding the woman and Hunter hadn't even tried to do any of the rituals of intent. "I was wondering if you would like to take a walk."

Gray eyes blinked. "You want to take a walk?"

"Yeah...it's important." Although rituals of binding were described as male and female roles, she could come up with something in this case. Hunter looked up, blushing. "It's a lover's walk."

"I'm guessing it's more than just a walk?" Ketan teased, enjoying the ability to get Hunter to blush more.

"Yes, well, yes. In my culture, when a young man shows interest, true interest in a marriage, he will invite the young woman on a lover's walk to show that he will be a good match." Hunter cleared her throat nervously. "I'm not certain there is anything in the ritual for two women, but I will try the best I can." Her face was getting more red, she could feel the heat.

"Interest in marriage?" Ketan blinked, the fork dropping from her fingers in surprise. "Are you proposing a marriage to me?" Gray eyes were wide as she stared at Hunter.

Green eyes looked at the fork to Ketan's face then back at the fork, and wished to be anywhere other than in this spot at the moment. Hunter cleared her throat and took a swallow of wine before continuing. "Maybe, in the future. This shows my intent to be faithful and show how I am a good match."

"You..." Ketan started and stopped, blinking. "I mean..." she stuttered a little, stopping again when Hunter's words sank in. "Oh..." The desert woman nodded. "How long a walk is it?"

"I don't know," Hunter murmured. This was going even worse than she imagined, plus she'd never paid attention to the ritual. Perhaps that was why Catherine had left so easily; she'd never followed through with her promise of the walk.

Realizing the effect her uncertainty was having on the Duke, Ketan reached across the table, taking Hunter's hand in hers. "All right," she said, pushing aside all doubts and making a decision. "I'll walk with you."

"You can say no. I won't force you to do the walk, if you're not sure...about us," Hunter said, to give the desert woman an out.

"Hunter," Ketan smiled, "I said yes."

Hunter blinked and looked over at Ketan. "Ah...good. I never realized it was important to me...to prove I was worthy to be a good mate. I've never really thought I would do the ritual with anyone."

Ketan arched an eyebrow. "Do you know the ritual?"

Hunter looked down at her food. "No, not really," she sighed. She was going to have to have one of those annoying heart to hearts with her father.

"Does it have to be a specific walk? Because we just walked through most of the Sea of Fire together, through which you saved my life, several times. I think that proves you worthy to be a good mate."

"I don't know. Again, I never paid attention. I kept promising Catherine I would talk to my father about it, and I never..." She stopped talking when she realized she'd brought her ex into the conversation. "Yeah, I'll check the library."

"All right." Ketan hid her smile by taking a bite of the delicious food, before a thought made her stop and eye Hunter again. "Does that mean we can't be...umm...intimate until after this walk?" If she said they had to be chaste, she was going to be upset.

"I don't think so," Hunter said, more relaxed now that the conversation was over.

"Good." Ketan's smile turned sly as her eyes traced Hunter's figure. "Very good." She had plans after all.

Hunter swallowed, feeling like she was on a plate to be devoured, and reached for her wine.

When the boar was finished and the wine had been drunk, Ketan got up from her chair and moved closer to Hunter. The other woman had paused, hand halfway extended towards some other delicacy on the table top, when the dark-haired woman had decided she'd been patient enough. Green eyes widened in something close to fear when she moved up beside Hunter's chair, and Ketan wondered if the other woman thought she was going to attack her. "Do you know how to dance?" she asked, holding out her own hand to Hunter.

"Yes, most royalty are taught at a young age, so we perform well at balls." Hunter swallowed, but reached out, taking Ketan's hand.

Ketan's mouth went dry as Hunter's hand slipped into her own. It felt good there, and her fingers curled around the calloused hand without conscious thought. "Not that kind of dance," she said, her voice lower, pulling Hunter away from the table. "Not dancing for others, dancing for ourselves."

Hunter shivered a little at the lowered voice. "Uh, no, no, I can't say that I've ever danced just for myself." She was suddenly standing very close to Ketan, and Hunter could feel her own pulse speed up, jumping in her throat.

"Good," the desert woman nearly purred, pulling Hunter's body flush against hers. She could feel the slightly shorter woman shiver, and that only made her press them closer together. They fit well, she noticed again. There was no music, of course, but that didn't matter. She swayed them back and forth to the rhythm of their breathing, the swaying becoming slower and more purposeful dancing. "It's like sparring," Ketan whispered against a still sunburned earlobe, "move and react."

This was certainly not like any sparring she'd done before. Still, it was intoxicating sinking into the sensations that Ketan had created around them. It was warm, and Hunter's skin was over sensitized where their bodies touched and moved against each other. Teasing because the touch was not direct, the barrier of clothing hinting at greater sensations to be had. Her head rested on Ketan's shoulder, and all Hunter could smell was Ketan's scent all around.

Desire used to scare Hunter. It meant a loss of control, a loss of self, but now, as fear gave way to desire, she tried to welcome it as it burned hot through her nervous system, flaring nerve endings. She could do this, maybe not all of it tonight, but she could do this, and the world wouldn't end. Feeling bold, she pressed a kiss to Ketan's neck, the flesh warm under her lips. Then she kissed another piece of flesh then another.

Her dancing partner drew in a quick breath of surprise at the kiss. Tilting her head, Ketan exposed more of her neck to Hunter's lips, making a small sound in the back of her throat in pleasure at the feeling of the blonde's lips on her skin. Finally, after so long of thinking that this was impossible, she surrendered to the feel of Hunter's body eagerly. When sharp teeth grazed her neck, she nearly fell as her knees buckled a little. Giving up any pretense that this was anything other than seduction, Ketan brought one hand up to tangle in the back of Hunter's shorter hair, holding her in place as she explored the other woman's lips, and tongue, and mouth, nipping and sucking, indulging herself.

Hunter moaned into the kiss, and gave up on trying to dance. She started pushing Ketan back towards the bed, her hands fumbling with the belt at the woman's waist. She wanted them naked without the excuse of bathing. It was time to own this part of her, and honestly, she wanted to be naked with an equally naked Ketan.

"Are you sure?" Ketan gasped, hands suddenly busy trying to get Hunter's clothes off as well. She'd actually intended on dancing for at least a little bit, but judging by the look in those green eyes of Hunter's, there was no stopping now. Still, she felt bound to ask. If they stopped halfway through, she thought she might die.

"I'm sure right now I want to be naked with you, and I'd really like a chance to explore your body with the intent on giving you pleasure." Hunter understood that there was a give and take to the whole sex thing, but she still had a few insecurities. She was hopeful that given a chance to explore this with Ketan, they would go away. She pushed Ketan back to the bed, hopping around

for a moment in a hurry to get her boots off. Then with her eyes devouring Ketan, she pulled off the tunic and breeches.

Ketan swallowed dryly again, staring up at Hunter as she undressed. Somewhere along the way, she wasn't sure where, she'd forgotten that she was the one who was supposed to be seducing Hunter. "So beautiful," she whimpered, pushing off her own pants, squirming out of them since she forgot to undo the belt, and tossing them aside. Eagerly, she held out her hands, urging Hunter closer.

Hunter had to fight back her natural desire to take control; she wasn't certain how she could be in control of something she didn't fully understand. The desire in Ketan's eyes made her confident, and she moved forward to the edge of the bed. She let her hands trail up Ketan's sides, touching the plane of flesh that hid trembling muscles. It was breathtaking; she was doing this to Ketan. She was making the woman tremble, making her weak. She slid up the bed, straddling the darker woman, their flesh contrasting next to each other...dark and light.

"I was supposed to seduce you," Ketan moaned, arching up into Hunter's body, hissing in pleasure as their bodies touched. This was so much better than dancing with clothes on. Sliding her hands up Hunter's back, she ran them lightly down her back, enjoying the way muscles twitched beneath her fingertips.

"I'm a control freak, and it's only worse when I'm home," Hunter murmured before lowering her head, kissing Ketan's breastbone then trailing her kisses to the right over the top of the breast. The handful of times they'd been naked together she'd been too self-conscious to touch the woman's breasts. She gave a chaste kiss to the tip of the nipple and then looked up, "Is this okay?"

"Oh yes..." Ketan squirmed, hooking a leg up around Hunter's then flipping Hunter over onto her back, placing her on top. "Like this," she whispered, lowering her head and starting to press kisses along Hunter's breast, smiling as the nipple hardened, which she began to worship with her tongue. "See?" she teased.

Hunter's eyes closed and her head jerked back into the bed, a barely audible whine coming from her throat as her hips jerked up into Ketan.

"Stop me if I hurt you," Ketan whispered, moving over to give the other just as much attention. Ketan didn't know how far Hunter would let her go.

If Hunter would have been able to think, she would have tried to take control back, but she couldn't think. She nodded and one hand came up, tangling into thick, dark hair, fingertips flexing into Ketan's scalp.

The dark-haired woman smiled against Hunter's skin at that. Her hands stroked along Hunter's side, enjoying the chance to touch.

Parts of Hunter's body that had never wanted attention before were aching for it now. Her other hand came down, tugging at Ketan's chin, bringing her lips up to hers. Kissing was something she was confident in. Kissing was something she was very good at.

Ketan forgot her plans to draw every delicious sound that she could from Hunter. Instead, she abandoned herself into the kiss, deepening it.

Grinning, Hunter flipped them back over. "Ah, ah. This is about me getting comfortable doing this." She moved off Ketan's body, lying to the side, and continued to kiss Ketan's lips, switching between deep kisses and gentle nibbles. Her hand began to wander, exploring flesh and mapping Ketan's body.

"Are you always going to be this competitive?" Ketan gasped between kisses. Hunter's fingers were going entirely too slowly, and she tried to urge her lower, smelling their arousal.

"Probably," Hunter said into an ear before she rested her head on a shoulder to see how Ketan's body reacted to her touch. Her hands drifted lower, although pausing, enjoying the way Ketan's stomach muscles jumped and twitched under her fingertips. It was a powerful feeling.

"Beautiful," she breathed out. Ketan was dark, with sleek muscled lines.

"Please." Ketan spread her legs wider, trying to urge those teasing fingers lower still. She was beyond trying to take control again, as the sensations of Hunter so close and touching her were overwhelming.

Fingers finally moved lower into the V of Ketan's leg, and Hunter swallowed, and froze slightly. Warm, wet heat met her fingers, and she fumbled uncertainly, confidence lessening as she had a vague idea what she should be doing. Face turning red and feeling foolish, Hunter opened her mouth to ask something, anything, but nothing came out.

Gray eyes opened and the desert woman realized what the problem was from the expression on the other woman's face. "Like this," Ketan whispered, sliding her hand down to tangle their fingers together and demonstrate. Her eyes slid shut despite her desire to watch Hunter's expression.

Hunter's eyes went wide with wonder as she touched Ketan intimately. "I had no idea it would feel like this," she breathed out.

"Oh!" Ketan bucked up into the touch, not coherent anymore as she begged and whimpered. "Feels good," she agreed.

Hunter quickly figured out what Ketan liked, with the woman helping by showing her. She was panting with Ketan, her stomach clenching as desire blossomed, her pulse pounding as she watched what she was doing to Ketan. She was doing this...she was giving Ketan pleasure.

Hunter's uncertainty vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Whatever else Hunter was, she learned quickly.

Ketan's body went rigid then gray eyes opened as she stared at Hunter through the tremors that left her boneless in Hunter's arms. "Very good," she said hoarsely.

Hunter held Ketan gently, kissing Ketan's cheek, neck, and shoulder, whatever was close to her lips. "It was amazing, you felt...I have no words."

"And you were going to stay chaste?" Ketan answered, humming with pleasure. That had been so very nice. "Is that..." she paused, searching Hunter's face. "Do you want..?" She hesitated again, not sure how to ask what Hunter wanted.

Hunter squirmed, feeling like she was on fire, but still ducked her head, hiding it against Ketan's shoulder and nodded. "Something, I feel...it's painful," she murmured. To the best of her knowledge, her lower anatomy had never felt like this.

"I'm sorry." Ketan whispered, her apology ruined by the amused look that went with it. She wasn't going to tease, not much though, Hunter's naked body pressing against hers distracted her from that course much too quickly for teasing. They both needed for Ketan to touch her, so she obliged. She went slowly, kissing Hunter thoroughly as her hands slid down soft skin to ever so lightly move between her thighs. "Like this?" she whispered, mouth moving to a breast.

Hunter's mind was too far gone at the touches to call her on the amused look. Part of her tensed another relaxed, her instinct driving her to be in control of every situation, drowning in her body's primitive need to let go and give in. She gasped at the feather light touch between her thighs, the touch teasing and hinting at promises to be fulfilled. Finally, Hunter broke. "Yes," she pleaded, "like that." If she would have been fully aware, she wouldn't have recognized her voice.

Shifting, Ketan slid a thigh between Hunter's, wanting to be closer, if that was at all possible, to her lover. The obvious desire in the outlander's voice made her ache with need all over again, and she was done teasing. Her fingers slid across Hunter's wetness, seeking those places that would cause her to gasp in pleasure. She didn't enter her, knowing Hunter was a virgin, and not sure she wanted to take that from her.

Hunter was so aroused it was painful, and every touch just intensified everything. She gasped and bucked her hips up into Ketan's fingers and thigh, her muscles quivering and tensing, seeking something so close yet eluded her. Sweat slicked her skin, and the closer she got to release, a little whine started at the back of her throat, which would have horrified Hunter if she was aware she was doing it.

"So beautiful," Ketan whispered, voice low, as she moved from one breast to the other, amazed at how wet Hunter was. There would be no doubt in the morning of what had happened in the Duke's bed the night before. Suddenly, just touching her wasn't enough, and Ketan pushed Hunter's legs wider, sliding between them and down. She needed to taste to see for herself. If their future was uncertain, then she would take whatever she could get now.

The sudden halting to the activity, especially when she was so close to finding what her body was looking for, was jarring, particularly with the switching of body placement. "What are you

doing?" Hunter's frazzled brain wasn't getting it. "Did I do something..." Her question cut off. "Oh..." She got it. Her body arched at the first touch of Ketan's tongue on her most intimate of places, every muscle suddenly out of her control, a hand tangled in Ketan's dark hair. The whine was quickly back, giving way to a hoarse scream as she shattered.

Ketan rode out the storm, holding onto Hunter then moving up her body when the other woman collapsed on the bed. Licking her lips, she smiled, enjoying the lingering taste as she draped herself over the half unconscious woman's side and simply held onto her, feeling completely relaxed for the first time since she'd met Hunter in the desert. She could hear Hunter's racing heart slow along with her breathing, and she idly traced patterns on the light skin below her, enjoying the contrast between her darker skin and Hunter's.

"Are you all right?" she asked, finally, hoping she hadn't pushed Hunter too far.

Hunter's mind slowly re-grouped, and after a long couple of minutes, she was able to answer Ketan. "I had no idea. I have no words to properly describe how it felt, wonderful, amazing seem dim half truths to explain." It was addicting, already she could feel herself wanting to experience it again, but her body was exhausted.

"I like that I'm your first," Ketan whispered, reaching down and pulling the blankets up around them. Even after their vigorous exercise, the air was chilly, and she had no intention of waking up freezing.

She was cuddled around the other woman, something Hunter never really saw herself doing, ever. She raised an eyebrow at the comment. "That's asinine. How does that make me feel knowing I'm not yours." She remembered that little friend of Ketan's they'd met in the desert, suddenly not feeling all that horrible about punching her.

"Oh hush." Ketan pressed a kiss to her lips. "There's the Hunter I know." She almost said loved, but caught herself, refusing to ruin the moment. "None of them were you, which makes me wish I had waited so that we could experience everything for the first time together." She yawned, wondering if the heart to heart talks could wait for the morning.

Hunter giggled a bit at the thought of them both being clueless and fumbling around in the dark for hours.

Gray eyes snapped open. "Did you just giggle?"

"I'm too tired to give a full out laugh," Hunter explained with a yawn. Ketan's had been infectious.

"You're secret's safe with me," Ketan whispered, shifting closer and drawing the blankets around them tighter. Sleeping naked with Hunter...another thing she'd never thought she'd get to experience.

Hunter rolled on her side snuggling into Ketan, and with the hand resting on the woman's belly, slowly rubbed it in soothing circles. It seemed to work on her. "Go to sleep, 'cause I'm probably going to want to have sex later, because I want to do it again now." ... Which was probable, now that she realized what she said was terribly unromantic, but the little taste Ketan had given her left her wanting more.

Ketan did a little tired giggle of her own. "Good." She yawned again and closed her eyes, relaxing into the gentle stomach petting that sent her to sleep before she'd even realized she'd closed her eyes.

#####3

Blurry-eyed Hunter got up the next morning and stumbled around, stirring the coals back to life. She had woken up during the night and by kissing, touching, and stroking parts of Ketan's body had woken the other woman up. She was sore, sore in places that had never really been sore. Once the fire was going, she stretched a little bit and padded to the bathroom to get a nice hot bath going. She was sticky and sore, and a nice soak would go a long way towards making her feel more human, maybe followed by other things...like breakfast. She gave an evil grin. Yes, breakfast was exactly what she was thinking about.

"I've awoken a demon," Ketan mock groaned from the bed, seeing the look on Hunter's face. "Now you'll try to chain me to your bed to keep me as a personal harem slave." She tried to sit up, grimacing as she moved sensitive parts, and looked at the bed in the light of day. She'd been right, there was no way to miss what had happened in the bed last night.

Hunter knew Ketan was joking, but the harem slave crack made her mind jump to that girl in the Pasha's palace, and she frowned, feeling that guilt again for just leaving the girl there. "I'm going to run a hot bath. Join me when you feel up to moving," she said, entering the bathroom.

"All right." Ketan blinked, not sure what had just happened as she tried to get her mind to wake up. Uh oh, was Hunter regretting last night? Cautiously, the dark-haired woman stood and walked towards the sound of running water, deciding against putting on anything. Hunter was already in the bath by the time she made it to the room, and the desert woman paused at the door, enjoying the sight while she could.

"Are you upset about last night?" she asked at last, not able to keep the worry from her voice.

Green eyes popped open in surprise at the question. "No," she said hurriedly. "Why would you think that? I only woke you up twice to repeat it." Her face went pale. "Did I do something wrong?" She knew it, she was going to be one of those guys, the ones who looked good but was awful in bed.

"What?" Ketan blinked, moving over to sit at the side of the bath. "No, you didn't do something wrong. You were amazing! Didn't you figure that out when I was screaming your name that second time?"

"I assumed...well, you seem to be having a good time...then you came in here and started asking questions, and I thought that maybe I shouldn't assume it was good for you," Hunter babbled nervously, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Ketan closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then leaned in to kiss Hunter thoroughly to stop the babbling. "There," she whispered, having ended up in the bath sitting half across a naked Hunter's lap, "much better. I was worried you were regretting what we did."

Hunter's arms came up automatically to hold her. "No, no regrets."

"Why did you look upset?"

"What?" Hunter blinked, trying to get her mind back to the question. "Oh," her face looked sour. "It was the harem slave comment. I know you were joking, but it took my mind back to the Pasha's palace."

"Oh." Ketan's good mood died a little at that. She'd heard stories about what had happened inside that place. "I wish we'd burned it to the ground before Lord Robert got there," she muttered, leaning against Hunter and hissing a little as hot water got into some of the scratches on her back.

Somehow, it never occurred to Hunter in her highly compartmental mind that when she stayed with Lord Robert she was sleeping where the Pasha could have; it seemed nothing like the palace she had seen that first time. For a moment she thought she might be sick. "I wish we would have too." She rested her chin on Ketan's shoulder.

"Some of the tribes wanted to. They were already moving to gut the place when Maklia ordered them not to." Ketan sighed. She'd been on the move too.

"I don't even know what happened to those women. I may have killed him, but I didn't even stay to help them get on with their lives." She had been going into shock, everything was a blur until she was half way back to her lands to report to the King, the Pasha's head in her saddle bag.

"We rescued some. They'd fled out into the desert. Mathew and Catherine aren't the only outlanders living among my people." Shifting off Hunter's legs, Ketan lowered herself, carefully, into the hot water. "You did more than anyone else could have done, Hunter. You killed him, and it doesn't matter if that was an accident or not, you did it, not anyone else. You're still a hero."

Hunter sighed, knowing she was right, but still she doubted. "Let's just say harem slaves is a sore point."

"No harem slave jokes, I promise." She'd make sure to avoid those in the future. "Wash my hair?" Ketan asked, telling herself she didn't just sound pleading.

Hunter smiled. "Of course." She reached over the side, grabbing the small cup and the small dish of sweet smelling liquid that was used on the hair. She filled the cup with water and tilted Ketan's head back, rinsing the hair, and started massaging the soap into the hair.

Ketan sighed, happily leaning into the touch. More than anything else, she thought she'd miss baths when she went back to the desert. "You know..." She grinned, sliding a hand up Hunter's conveniently naked leg to her thigh, "I wonder what it's like making love in water."

"Ah...I have no idea." Hunter's voice hitched and went up.

"None?" Ketan slid a hand further up, stroking. "We should make sure you have at least a little idea."

"Oh..." Hunter said, only the 'Oh' came out a moan. "Yes, we should," she agreed. She would have agreed to just about anything right now.

Thankfully, it was a large tub, which made it easier to stretch Hunter's legs out further, then Ketan brought her other hand up around to tease a breast. "Repeatedly," she whispered before taking an earlobe between her teeth. She'd never made love in water before; it seemed decadent to the desert woman.

Hunter melted into the water under Ketan's touch, and it was almost humorous that she been thinking she was too sore.

Now, she didn't care.

#####3

Hunter was feeling...relaxed, a tad bit lazy, and a little sore. It was now early afternoon and she had done nothing. Well, that wasn't true. But she hadn't done anything that was for King and country. All morning she had ignored the duties of ruling.

Everything she was feeling was in direct conflict to how she had lived her life up to last night; everything and everyone had fallen to the wayside of duty and honor. Being selfish and self-centered was a very weird feeling. Now she was thinking too much, and she was feeling guilty for being so lazy.

Hunter fidgeted in bed next to a sleeping Ketan, uncertain how long they had been asleep. Yes, after a life in service to others, these feelings were very new and unsettling. She hoped that in time her thoughts would settle and her mind would have space to think of other things. Even right now she was thinking about touching Ketan; waking her with caresses and kisses, remembering what they had done in the bath and then again in the bed. Not one thought in her head was about honor and duty, nothing in there about a missing Princess who may not even be alive, or who may be alive but suffering at the hands of a mad woman.

She sat up, the sheet pooling in her lap, and eased out of bed without waking Ketan. She took a breath, letting it fill up her lungs and then let it out. She did that three times, centering herself before getting dressed. She needed to talk to her father. She would not treat Ketan like a whore or some mistress to be hidden away and used. Of course, there was always the possibility the King would not approve a joining, regardless of her intentions. Actually, that was a very likely outcome, especially if someone near the King was trying to start a war between them and the desert. That was the only reason she could come up with for kidnapping the Princess...to start a war, although a dead Princess would be an even better catalyst to start a war.

She cleared her throat, and tried to make her hair look like she hadn't recently been doing what she'd been doing, and exited her rooms. The guards were at the end of the hallway, and she blushed as they tried very hard not to look at her, although a small not embarrassed part of herself was happy they respected her enough to try and give her privacy.

"Duke, would you like one of us to stay behind...for your...guest?"

She appreciated his tact. "No, that won't be..." She thought about Ketan asleep, beautiful and vulnerable. "That would be nice, Jacob."

He nodded his head and gestured for the other guard to stay as he fell into line following Hunter.

It wasn't a long walk to her father's rooms, and she nodded for the two guards there to move out of the way.

"I trust he's alone?" she asked, not wanting her mood ruined.

"Yes, Duke."

She opened the doors without knocking and entered.

Richard blinked drowsily from the overstuffed chair, where he was sipping his second glass of wine of the day. Being exiled to his rooms left him very little to do to fill the hours of the day. "Here to just finish me off?" he spat, seeing her. "Ungrateful child. All of this I built up and gave to you..." he rambled angrily.

She bit her tongue and let him go on for a moment.

"...and you keep me around as a pet, some sort of conversation piece. Look at the old worthless man..."

She sighed, having enough of his self-pity. "Maybe you're right, I should have just killed you when I took the throne. All the other Dukes do it when they do a coup, our history is full of the stories," she stated calmly, walking over and sitting in the chair next to his and poured a glass of wine.

Richard blinked at his daughter. The tone wasn't as cold as he was used to.

And she continued, "I don't know what you mean about building up this great Dukedom. You didn't build it up. In fact, it was mother's. You were a petty second noble's son married off to make a good match. Grandfather built these lands up, which explains a lot, as you don't know anything about grapes."

"I tried, damn it!" he barked out, then sighed. "I know I've been a great disappointment to you and a great many other people, but I always did try. And I loved you, despite what you may think of me."

Hunter downed the glass and poured another one, the talk becoming uncomfortable.

"So was there a certain shortcoming you wanted to discuss?" he asked.

"Maybe later. I was hoping for one of those father/daughter talks we never got around to having because I hated you."

He perked up. This was new, but he didn't say anything, well aware of any false move where he could well end up wearing Hunter's sword.

Hunter was silent for a while, her green eyes searching her cup for the words. Suddenly, her words pierced the silence. "So what does one do during a Lover's Walk?"

Of everything they could have talked about, this was not something he was expecting. "I thought you were a follower of Ryuu."

"Yeah, about that...I've met Ryuu, and she's never heard of us."

Richard didn't know how to respond to that. Hunter had been a believer of the gods. He'd never really given them much stock, and now it look as though he was right, sort of. "Oh." He cleared his throat, buying some time. "So I take it you've met someone and you want to make it official?" Hunter got a dreamy look on her face, and Richard was very uncomfortable with the idea of his daughter having sex. He cleared his throat and took a nice long drink to give himself more time. "Well, it's a woman, I assume."

Hunter nodded.

"Well, it shouldn't be to hard to make this work." He was actually well aware, as being a second son, he had taken over his wife's lands, so he had actually done the female's role in the walk. His older brother had never let him hear the end of it. "Lover walks are used to show how you'll be a good match and a good provider. This young lady, you will take her on a tour of your holdings, provide her gifts that you've made, like a skin of a bear or boar from a hunt, a skin of wine, a necklace...stuff like that. It's important that you've made them or they are gifts from your lands, showing that through your wisdom these things flourish. Then you end the walk at a holy place, a temple or some such thing, and trade words of intent. And until you are joined, you may not take another to bed. You must be faithful and monogamous to the one you have done the Walk with."

"That must have been hard for you." It slipped out, and Hunter saw the pained look on her father's face. "I'm sorry."

"It was, actually. I didn't want to marry your mother. I grew to love her as a friend. But don't have any illusions that we loved each other, because we didn't. After you were born and our duty to each other was done, we had our flings with others. I don't want to rip your mother down off the pedestal you've put her on."

Hunter downed the rest of her wine and stood. "I will be leaving soon to the castle. I don't think I'll be returning. I don't want to return. Let Stephen and his new wife rule. Support them, because I think someone very close to the King plots to cause a war we do not need. Support Stephen. Please honor everything I have given to these lands."

Richard was stunned into silence. This was more honesty than they had ever shared, and he didn't know what to say. "I hired that bandit to seduce Catherine away from you," he blurted out, and suddenly felt so much better.

"What?"

"She wasn't suppose to kidnap her. You were just supposed to find them together. I knew you two were planning on leaving the kingdom."

Hunter's right eye started ticking, and for a moment she wanted to kill him. She stood up and Richard flinched. "I should kill you. It would be my right to kill you. At least for all the horrors that Catherine has endured for your selfishness." But she couldn't. There were dozens of times before she should have ended his miserable life and she hadn't. "But I'm not going to. As fucked up as it sounds, if you hadn't done it, I would never have found Ketan, and she makes me far happier than Catherine ever did."

Richard still barely dared to breath.

"But if I was you, I'd stay in these rooms until I leave here and out of my way." She stormed out. "Jacob!" she growled out, slamming the door shut behind her.

The guard saluted.

"Gather the troops, we are training until dusk."

#####3

Ketan sat on top of one of the low stone walls that circled the castle, watching with interest as Hunter led her warriors through drill after drill until they were on the verge of collapse and then forced them to spar with her. Where she got the seemingly never ending energy to keep going long after even her best warriors were stumbling in exhaustion, was a mystery to the desert warrior.

Then again, there was a lot about the Duke of Del Cor that was still a mystery to her. But she enjoyed mysteries. Her smile grew larger as she considered some parts of the strong willed woman that weren't mysteries to her anymore. The pleasant after sex ache had accompanied her all day as she'd roamed the castle, amused by the guard who had ever so politely informed her that he was to make sure nothing bad happened to her.

She might not have been as good with a blade as Hunter, but Ketan felt certain she could give any of the Duke's warriors a hard time if she chose to...which she hadn't. She'd been a good little guest, behaving herself remarkably well, she thought.

"Judging by your smile, I'm guessing you've managed to get her to stop being chaste."

Ketan nearly fell off the wall in surprise, twisting in shock to see Ryuu standing next to her as if she'd been there the entire time.

Ryuu reached out and placed a steadying hand on Ketan's shoulder, fairly certain she would have to deal with an unhappy Hunter if Ketan fell. She looked out over the wall and down into the training grounds with interest. "Energetic thing, isn't she?" She smiled bitter sweetly as Hunter reminded her so strongly of Vladlis. At the moment, the pain nearly made her legs give out.

Getting over the shock of having someone appear next to her without ever sensing her approach, Ketan nodded, eyes straying back out to the practice field, where Hunter was currently working through her frustrations on an unfortunate man who'd apparently done something wrong. "She makes me tired just watching her, and I walked through most of the desert with her. Did you find out anything about her Princess?"

Ryuu hesitated. She'd given some thought to the Princess, but most of her energy had been focused on finding Vladlis. Of her lover, there was no sign. In her thoughts, where she should be, was only darkness. So the daughter of war was not dead, but someone had placed a barrier around them, separating them.

"I did not find her. Some dark thing is blocking most of the magic...eating it." It was as close as she could describe what was happening. "Hunter's kingdom is choking in corruption that seeps into the very fabric of being here, tainting everything. Here, it's not so bad, but it spreads out darkly from the castle nestled in the mountains. I would guess she's there because my eyes cannot see inside, unless she's dead, then you best be talking to my aunt, that is her realm."

"If she's dead then there is nothing we can do for her." Ketan shrugged. You could not live in the desert and not be familiar with death, a close companion. "But the castle in the mountains sounds like her King's palace." It would be ironic, she thought, if the Princess, whom Hunter had traveled across the desert to find, had gone back to the palace she'd started out from. A yell brought her attention back to the field, and she watched Hunter start to show the gathered warriors a move with her blade. "They all look ready to collapse, except for her."

"Yes, they do. Poor people, they didn't piss her off, yet they have to deal with the consequence." Ryuu's eyes narrowed looking at Hunter. "She's capable of a lot of things most mortals cannot do."

Ketan raised an eyebrow and looked over at the dragon in a woman's form, grinning. "Did you only just figure that out? She's special."

Ryuu raised an eyebrow, "My interests in her don't run the same way as yours." She leaned over, looking intently at Hunter, her mind going over the brief time they had spent together. "She woke me up, do you know how?" Ryuu's mind was trying to think back; to waking from decades of slumber had been confusing. There was an urgency to protect...why Hunter? Somehow, she knew it was Hunter who had woken her, not Ketan.

Gray eyes sharpened with interest and Ketan wished she could understand the expression on Ryuu's face better. "No. I thought it was the Veiled Ones who had woken you up when they summoned all those elementals near you."

"No, it wasn't their blood magic that woke me. They've been there for years wallowing in their self-importance." She paused, thinking. "I woke and it was overwhelming. But there was an overwhelming urge to protect..."

Her child. She closed her eyes in pain. It had been so long since she had thought of her little girl. She had been beautiful, with Vladlis' blond hair and pale green eyes that had reminded her of spring. A fight with Laurel, always fighting with Laurel, her other aunt's psychotic pet, exiled to the same place. There had been an accident, something, time was making it vague. During the fight, Hala had fallen into a river and been swept away. Laurel had stopped her from following, and when it was over, it was too late.

A painful memory. She turned away, to wipe a tear away and get her composer together.

Alarmed, Ketan touched her shoulder, eyes wide at the suddenly teary-eyed Ryuu. "What is it?"

"It's okay, just bad memories." Ryuu composed herself.

How did one try to comfort a...Ketan blinked, what was Ryuu anyway? "What are you?" she blurted out.

Ryuu laughed at that. "I'm the daughter of gods."

"Oh." Ketan blinked. That was hard to answer. "You're not upset that none of my people worship any of the gods, are you?"

"No, your people made that decision centuries ago during the exodus. Your people punished themselves, but pushed the boundaries of their existence by forming bonds with raw forces of nature." Her attention went back to Hunter, remembering something she'd forgotten. "How common are green eyes here?" She hadn't seen anyone else with green eyes.

Ketan followed her gaze back towards Hunter, shrugging. "Not very?" She hadn't seen any others, but she hadn't been in these lands long, either. There was a thought niggling in her brain. "They're common in the far north with my mother's people, but only her Priestesses are blessed with them. She must be almost done, not many of her warriors are still standing, if you want to ask her?" She wondered how much longer Hunter would go before she let the rest of them go.

Ryuu was suddenly uncertain, "Maybe. Why is she on this tear, I would have thought you wore her out?"

Ketan felt herself go red. "We..." She coughed. "I mean..." She swallowed then smiled at the memory of the bathtub. "I tried my best." Then she blinked and frowned as the question finally registered. "Do you think she's upset?"

"I think the poor soldier she's yelling at thinks she's upset. I think you'd make a lot of new friends if you went down there and distracted her from whatever has her so moved."

"I didn't want to interrupt her when she was being the Duke." But Ryuu was right, she was really grinding them into the ground. Hopping down off the wall, she looked back up at the silver-haired woman. "Are you leaving again?"

Ryuu looked uncertain. "There's someone I desperately need to find. I've missed her so much...but I will say hello."

With one last look to make sure that the silver-haired woman wasn't going to disappear just as easily as she'd shown up, Ketan started to walk across the trampled field to where Hunter was giving one of her soldiers a verbal lashing. She frowned. Ryuu was right. Hunter was in a bad mood. Had she started to regret what they'd done the night before?

Hunter felt a person approach, which everyone knew not to do when she was training with her troops, and whirled to give them a good talking down to. The angry expression on her face melted away once she realized who it was.

Ketan smoothed away her frown, arching an eyebrow in amusement as she walked closer. "Are you almost done tormenting your guards?"

The men and women still standing, breathing hard, felt bad for the newcomer, but were thankful for the distraction, as they waited for the outburst to come.

Hunter sheathed her sword, a smile tugging at her lips as Ketan walked closer. Of course Ketan would brave her foul mood. "I'm not tormenting, I'm building character." She wiped sweat off her brow, her nostrils flaring a bit as her nose caught the smell of the other woman. She was going to run her troops until dusk, but now other ideas seemed more pleasant

The troops shifted uncomfortably. This was something they'd never seen before. Sure, many had given or recieved such a look in their lifetime, but never had this look come from their Duke.

"Building character?" Ketan looked at her dubiously, and then leaned sideways so she could look at the group of thirty or so men and women, most of which looked ready to collapse. "Is that the same thing as torturing them?"

Hunter asked. "Am I torturing you?"

All thirty men and woman automatically shouted, "No, Duke Hunter."

Hunter waved a hand. "We're done for the day, you all did well."

With muffled groans, the guards filtered out, most looking gratefully at Ketan.

The desert woman just looked at Hunter, eyes dancing with amusement. "You were torturing them."

"Maybe a little," Hunter hedged.

Moving closer, Ketan dared to lean in for a kiss once the last of the soldiers had started to trudge home. "If you're still upset, I'm sure we could work out your energy some other way," she whispered, suggestively.

"How'd you know I was upset?" Hunter asked, hands resting gently on Ketan's sides.

"Because you were beating them up." Ketan gave her a quick smile. "That, and Ryuu asked why you were in such a bad mood." She nodded behind her, back towards the stone wall she'd been sitting on with the silver-haired woman.

Hunter looked over Ketan's shoulder, spying the silver-haired woman watching them. She gave a tentative wave.

"So why are you upset?" Ketan didn't think it had to do with what they'd done last night, not with the way Hunter's body had relaxed against hers when she'd kissed her.

"My talk with my father. It went okay for a moment then it went downhill." And she could feel herself getting worked up again.

... Which caused Ketan to lean in and kiss her again, thoroughly this time, to distract Hunter from whatever had caused her to frown again. She took her time about it, nipping at Hunter's lower lip. She pulled away, both of them breathing heavily as she did. "Tell me later?" They were still standing in the middle of a field after all.

Hunter nodded dumbly. "Okay," she agreed.

"Ryuu said she wanted to say hello." Sliding her hand down Hunter's arm, Ketan laced their fingers together, liking the way they fit, and tugged her towards the low stone wall.

Hunter let Ketan lead her over to Ryuu. "Are you done with that mysterious thing you were doing so mysteriously?" Hunter asked.

"Maybe." Ryuu's smile was waning as she hopped down off the wall, eyes shadowed. "Before you ask, I didn't find any sign of the Princess either."

"But she thinks she might be hidden in the castle. The one for your King," Ketan supplied, not letting go of her hand.

Hunter sighed. She had let her guards go too early.

Ryuu smiled sadly. "Yes, I thought you would love to know that." Her gaze strayed to their hands and the shadowed look in her eyes lightened. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm alright." Hunter's voice made that questionable though. "I can't wait for this thing with the Princess to be all over with. I hope she's okay." Although in the back of her mind she was worried that perhaps she was fretting over a dead woman.

"I wasn't asking about that." Ryuu nodded towards their hands.

Realizing what she was talking about, Ketan flushed, but she didn't let go of Hunter's hand.

"Oh, that..." Hunter blushed to her hairline.

"Yes, that." Ryuu touched her cheek, a fleeting touch. "I have to go. I'll see you both again soon."

"You're leaving?" Hunter blurted out, not sure if she felt irritated or sad.

"Not far," Ryuu smiled, nodding to both of them as she stepped back. "I'll see you both before you leave here."

"I just felt like my mom checked in on me," Hunter muttered.

"She cares about you," Ketan answered, watching as silver hair disappeared into the nearby orchard.

"Mmm..." Hunter said, turning to look at Ketan. "So, about all this energy I have..."

Laughing, Ketan took her hand and pulled her towards the manor. "Let's go work it out."

#####3

"I'm going to miss this when we have to go."

They hadn't made it to the bed before Ketan had started to strip Hunter out of her sweaty clothes. They'd made love there, right inside the door, then again in the bathroom when she'd tried to get clean, and then twice more on the way to the bed. After that everything had gotten hazy, blurred together in one long night of flesh.

"Please tell me you're tired now?"

Hunter sighed, panting heavily next to Ketan on the bed, still warm even as sweat cooled and dried on her body. "Yeah, I'm tired," she said her voice hoarse.

"Thank the elements," Ketan nearly whimpered. She wasn't sure she could have gone through another round so quickly.

"I'm sorry, I've always had a lot of energy to burn." Hunter rolled over then moved so her head was at the foot of the bed. She gently took one of Ketan's feet in her hands and started to massage it.

Whatever the other woman had been about to say died in a low groan of approval as Hunter's talented hands found the best spots. "Your skills are wasted as Duke," Ketan groaned again as Hunter switched to the other foot.

Hunter smiled at the response. "I would still like to go for a walk tomorrow...if, you still would like to?" She kept her voice steady, but couldn't look at Ketan's face.

"Yes." But then again, Ketan would have agreed to anything at that point. A moment later, she looked up, realizing there was some strange inflection in Hunter's voice. "What kind of walk?"

"The Lover's Walk, I mentioned last night at dinner." Before they'd been sidetracked by sex.

"Lovers Walk." Ketan blinked, her mind suddenly catching up to the conversation. So they were actually doing it. "What happens after we take the walk?"

"We end at some holy place and exchange vows of intent or promises for making a future together." She hadn't worked that one out exactly.

"Oh." Gray eyes studied her. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

Hunter was silent for a moment, then said, "That's my long term goal, yes."

"Oh," Ketan repeated. "I'd like that." It was completely insane. Hunter was an outlander, a Duke at that! "You're not going to try to become chaste again, right?" she asked, wanting to make sure about that point.

Hunter raised an eyebrow, "You're obsessed with my chastity, you know that."

Gray eyes narrowed and Ketan started to crawl towards Hunter, stalking her. "You made me suffer across the entire desert! I'm just making sure you're not going to do that again." She pushed Hunter down onto the bed, straddling her. "Because if you do, after this amazing sex, I'm going to have to hurt you."

Hunter laughed, green eyes dancing as Ketan straddled her. "Amazing, huh?" Her ego puffed up a bit.

"Amazing," the other woman agreed, leaning in, amazed she had enough energy to be considering what she was considering. "Actually," she pressed against naked flesh, sliding, "maybe you should show me again."

"Again? Now, who has too much energy?" Hunter smiled as she wrapped her arms around Ketan's toned back, letting her fingers sink into the muscles there.

"I just needed a little break," Ketan grinned, lowering herself down for a long, open kiss.

#####3

Hunter awoke, not certain what had woken her. She blinked and rolled over, looking at the slowly dying fire.

Sitting up, she got up out of bed and silently moved over to her wardrobe, pulling out a clean tunic and breeches.

She dressed and exited her room, moving to her study. It wasn't unusual for her to have problems sleeping, but it seemed odd tonight, especially after what Ketan had done to her earlier.

The door to the balcony outside the study was open, swinging ever so slowly with the slight breeze coming in through the open doorway. Outside, the moon lit the area in a cloudless sky, with countless stars shining to keep it company.

Hunter frowned at the open window, but moved over, starting the fire. She stood up, brushing her hands off. "Would you like a drink?" she asked, turning around, her eyes peering into the shadows of her study.

"Thank you." Ryu stepped forward from the shadows, smiling slightly. "Sorry I woke you."

Hunter moved over to her desk and filled two glasses with amber liquid. She sat down and pushed a glass towards Ryu. She lifted her own glass and took a sip. "What can I help you with?"

"Have you always had green eyes?" Taking the glass, the silver-haired woman sat down in one of the rather comfortable chairs, watching Hunter over the rim of the glass as she sipped.

"Yes, a gift from my mother," she said, taking another sip, "Makes me a true Del Cor. All the Del Cor's have had green eyes."

"All of you." Ryuu's gaze turned curious. "How far back?"

Hunter blinked. "I'm not certain. We can go down to the library. There are portraits of all the Del Cors."

"Maybe later." Ryuu would make certain to look before she left. For now, she kept watching Hunter, thoughtfully. "You sure you're all right? Things have changed a lot for you."

"They've changed for the better, I think, I hope. I really do love Ketan, something I didn't think I'd feel ever again." She took another sip. "I hope I'm changing for the better, but time will tell."

A silver eyebrow arched in surprise. "Have you told her that, that you love her?"

She would no longer be the King's Dog, that was certain. Hunter raised a matching eyebrow, "No, although I have asked her to do a Lover's Walk tomorrow." ... Which she thought sort of said she loved Ketan, without, actually saying it.

"That would probably mean more to her if she knew what that meant." Ryuu sipped again, enjoying the taste. "There are other forces at work around you now, Hunter. You've brought attention to yourself."

"Not surprising. The Princess was taken by an insider, someone close to the King. Probably to start a war." Hunter took another sip.

Ryuu laughed. "Not what I meant by other forces. I'm talking above the level of mortals."

"Mmmm, that." Hunter was unconcerned.

The silver-haired woman gave her a strange look. "That, is important. You have to understand, Hunter, you're now part of a story that's been playing out for generations before you were born."

"Ryuu, I can only do my best, to do what I think is right. To be the hero that everyone seems to think I am. To do what is right sometimes you have to stand up to higher powers, Gods, controllers of elementals, and kick them right between the legs."

For just a second, Ryuu gave her a proud smile, and then it was gone. She stood up, setting aside the empty glass. "I'll see you again, Hunter Del Cor. My role in this isn't finished yet."

"Finish your drink, Ryuu. The world still turns regardless of how mysteriously you dash from here to there. So relax and finish your drink." Hunter propped her feet up on her desk and took another sip.

"I did." But she reached over and poured another glass for herself. "I should leave though. Just by being here I could attract even more attention to you." But she sat back down, stretching.

"I'm a mere mortal, my time here will be a blink of your eye. So humor me. Despite how little I know you, I'm fond of you." She smiled sadly. "You remind me of my mother, and you should take that as an honor."

"I do," Ryuu answered, serious. "Thank you. Tell me about her?"

Hunter sipped her drink. "She died when I was ten, so my memories are probably colored with my age. She was beautiful, intelligent, a whirl of energy, she would read me stories, and play games."

"Was she as energetic as you are?" Ryuu cradled the glass between her fingers, watching the light reflect through the cut glass.

"You'd have to ask my father, but I think so. I don't remember her ever sitting still. My father is more about taking it easy and enjoying the more sedate side of life's pleasure."

"You still miss her." It wasn't a question. "I would have liked to meet your mother, I think."

"She would have liked you. You have the same dry sense of humor." Hunter finished her drink.

"Would she have liked your bed companion?" Ryuu gestured behind them, back towards the bedchamber and the sleeping desert woman.

"According to my father, neither one of them could have thrown stones on that, but I would like to think my mother would be happy that I was happy."

"It's important to children what their mothers think of them," Ryuu said quietly, studying the amber liquid intently.

"To a point, but then there's a point where you become an adult, and realize happiness is something you can only give yourself. Because then you wallow in their issues and their problems." She should know, she'd spent a lifetime dealing with her father's shortcomings.

Silver eyes flicked up to study Hunter intently. "You have a streak of wisdom in you, Hunter. Don't forget it later when things get harder."

"I'll do my best." Drink finished, she stood. "I have to admit, you're not what I imagined a god would be like."

"I'm not a god." Ryuu's smile was back. "I'm not even a little god. I'm just Ryuu, trying to make up for an old mistake."

"Don't start lying now. You just haven't figured out what you're the god of yet." Hunter stared hard at Ryu and then cracked a smile. "You're the Goddess of Fools, because the biggest fools of all are heroes; they do something even though logic says otherwise."

"Then I guess I'd be your Goddess." Ryu stood as well, snickering. "Although I think Ketan might take some offense to that." She set aside the now empty glass. "Go join the woman you love."

Hunter nodded and clapped a hand on Ryu's shoulder before leaving her study.

"Watch the shadows, Hunter," Ryu's soft voice followed after her.

#####3

Hunter was up early. She bathed in cold water as not to wake Ketan, and dressed. She had a lot to do today, and was nervous, and she wasn't certain why she was nervous. The Lover's Walk was a formality, and she was sure Ketan wouldn't reject her, but in the back of her mind, the insecurities she never listened to were clamoring loudly.

She set a note on the bed next to Ketan and slipped out of her rooms to prepare for the day.

"Duke!" one of her guards called from down the hall, hurrying towards her. His face bore the faint beginnings of a black and blue mark from their training the day previous. The faint markings didn't improve the look of concern on his face as he walked quickly towards her.

She paused and waited for him to catch up to her. "Gregory?" she asked, waiting for him to report.

"Sorry to disturb you this morning," Gregory came to attention, "but the messenger would not wait." He glanced towards her bedroom, glad he hadn't had to wake the Duke up for this. "There's a messenger from the King waiting for you, he just arrived."

Hunter sighed and ran a weary hand over her face. She didn't need this today of all days. It wasn't unexpected, but she had just hoped for more time. "Very well." She reversed her direction, heading to the Great Hall.

"He demanded to speak with you immediately or I would have had him wait until you were awake," Gregory explained, hurrying behind her.

The messenger was staring up at one of the tapestries depicting the Del Cor family crest that hung in the main hall. He was dressed in the King's tabard, royal purple with white, and turned as Hunter entered, a diplomatic smile already pasted on his face.

"Duke Del Cor. Well met."

Hunter sat in the largest chair and waved at the messenger to sit. "Well met," she responded automatically. "Would you like refreshment?" she asked, waving over a servant who was well prepared with a clay jug of sweet wine and slices of cold meat.

"No, thank you. The King ordered me to present you with this message as soon as I had arrived and to await your answer before returning immediately." He produced a small scroll case, the end bearing the mark of the royal seal in wax, and offered it to her.

Hunter took the message, slipping a finger between the edges of paper, and slid her finger along, breaking the wax. She unrolled the paper and read the message, her face giving away nothing. Then she balled it up and threw it into the fire.

"I was hoping for more time to recover, but I will leave for the castle tomorrow at first light," she said clearly.

"The King will be pleased." The messenger looked relieved as he said it, since the King had a habit of doing away with messengers who came back with something he didn't want to hear. "I would request a fresh mount for the ride back, if possible?"

"Of course, I will see that you are given a skin of fresh water as well. Safe travels," she responded, nodding her head at him as he stood and bowed.

Her fingers tapped an unconscious rhythm against the smooth, polished wooden arms of the chair she was sitting in, thinking. She wouldn't bother asking Ketan to go back to the desert and wait, knowing it wouldn't do any good. But she wasn't fooling herself, there was a very real chance they could die.

With those happy thoughts, she stood and exited the hall. If her fate was to be cut so short, it would be best to enjoy the few moments of true happiness she'd ever known.

#####3

"Do you always sneak out of bed so early?" Ketan asked from where she was leaning against the wall not far away from the doors to the Great Hall. She'd woken to an empty bed and had decided to see where her lover had wandered off to.

"No," Hunter said with a slow smile that transformed her face, "only when I have important things to do."

"Important things with a King's messenger?" Ketan pushed off from the wall, moving closer, returning the smile.

Hunter waved that off, "That wasn't important, that was politics. I got up to prepare for our walk."

Ketan's smile widened at that. "Our walk." She liked the sound of that. "Where are we walking then?" she asked, sliding her arms around Hunter's waist, not caring about the nearby guards.

Hunter smiled and stood up on her toes to kiss Ketan's temple. While they did not have to be chaste, there could be nothing sexual until the ritual was over. "We will be walking my lands. I will basically try to impress you with my wealth and strength."

"You already have." Ketan licked her lips. "You could take me back to your room and impress me in other ways though?" She looked hopeful.

Hunter looked sheepish, "Um, I can't...we can't until the walk is finished. One must have a pure heart to see and clearly evaluate that we would be a good match, and it can't be tainted by lust. I promise to make it up to you this evening though."

"We can't?" Ketan's smile slowly grew at the flustered woman's expression. "We can't do what?"

Hunter blushed, "Um...sex. We can't do that, until after the walk."

Bending down a little bit, the desert woman kissed Hunter then whispered, "Hunter Del Cor, you're cute when you turn red."

The Duke in question cleared her throat. "Um, how about you head back upstairs and I'll have breakfast sent up. And I can finish getting everything ready."

Ketan sighed and stepped away. "If we can't make love until we do this walk, then we better hurry. I'll see you upstairs." Walking backwards, she watched the Duke. "Soon." Then whirling on her feet, she kept walking back towards the Duke's rooms. "Thank you for the new clothes!" she called, enjoying the warmer clothing.

"Uh huh," Hunter murmured, watching the other woman walk away.

Discreetly, Gregory cleared his throat next to her.

"Yes?" She turned to look at the guard.

He looked apologetic. "Your brother is waiting to see you."

Damn it! She'd never get the ritual done. "Okay, bring him here." She turned around and walked back into the Great Hall.

"Gregory, will you have breakfast sent up to my rooms?"

"Of course, Duke." He bowed and left, going to carry out her will.

Stephen looked a lot better than the last time he'd been in the Duke's presence. A shave, a good bath, and fresh clothes had done wonders. "Hunter, I heard a King's messenger had come," he said by way of greeting as he entered the Great Hall.

"Yes, I have been summoned to the castle. I'll have to answer for why I have not found his daughter." She gestured for him to have seat.

He paled a little and sat. "So soon? I thought you'd have more time before he knew you were here."

"I did too, although now I have to answer for why I didn't come right away."

"Oh." He winced at that. "Can I help somehow?"

"Have you made up your mind about taking over. Father, won't object. He might even be helpful." She studied his face.

Stephen looked skeptical at that. "He'd be helpful?" He sighed. "You're my sister, I know half-sister, but that doesn't matter, you're still my only real family. I'll do it for you. But..." he held up a hand, "not forever. It's an awful job! I'd like to have my own family, you know, without assassination attempts."

She laughed. "That might not be an option, Stephen. There is a very real chance I'll not be coming back."

"No." He glared at her. "Don't you dare just give up like that! You're smarter than he is." No need to specify who the he was.

"Watch your language, you never know who's listening." The only way the King knew she was back, was a spy, or an informant.

"I don't care." But he did lower his voice and looked around a little worriedly. "But don't make me promise to be Duke forever. I don't want to be."

"Regardless that might be true, but there are dark magics swirling around this. So know there is a chance I will not be coming back." She hesitated. "Um, we can discuss this later. I need to get ready." She nervously tapped her fingers on her arm rests.

"Ready?" He looked surprised. "Ready for what? Did I miss something?"

"I'm taking Ketan on a walk." She cleared her throat nervously. "A Lover's Walk."

He stared at her, jaw opening and then closing as no words made their way out. Finally, he cleared his throat and rubbed his jaw. "That's...surprising." On a lot of levels. "You sure she isn't tricking you into this?"

"No, if anything, we've been tricking ourselves. I've met a god, and she's never heard of us."

A blank look was his answer to that. "You met a god? You sure you weren't in the desert too long? That sun does strange things to people."

She waved off his comments. "Regardless, I know what I'm doing, and I have a walk to go set up." She got up and paused, seeing his concerned look. "Stephen, she saved my life, she's seen me at my worst, and she still wants me."

"Right." He stood up as well. "Go do your walk, but don't you dare die and leave me the Duke."

#####3

"Why can't you just tell me about this walk we're going on?" Ketan was really enjoying the ability to torture Hunter over this entire walk thing. It was adorable the way the stern Duke would turn red when trying to explain it.

Hunter sighed for the tenth time as she led them out of the manor, Titan at their heels. "I have told you about it. I show off what a good mate I'll be and you decide whether or not you accept me."

"Can't I just accept you now?" Ketan had to work to keep laughter out of her voice at the disgruntled look on Hunter's face. "You said we have to leave tomorrow, so we should make use of your bed while we can."

Again Hunter sighed, "I, yes, that would be great. But this is important to me, and in my culture it's a ritual that binds us, as much as it doesn't make sense to you."

"I know." Ketan took her hand, laughing. "But it is fun to tease you."

They were past the guards now, so Hunter didn't have to suffer their confused and sometimes knowing looks. She led them into the forest, which was now mostly free of any predators, most of them having moved with the game to warmer climates when winter came, and only now would their migrations be leading them back. She was thankful her holdings weren't that big.

She shook her head. She was so nervous she was an easy mark, and tried to rein in her temper. "The clothes do look very nice on you. Ediku, she was nice to you, I hope? She can be short with people."

"I'm too tall." Ketan grumbled, remembering the earlier session with the seamstress. "She had to lengthen all her garments. But she was nice. She made sure that all of them are warm enough to keep me from freezing." She smiled shyly over at Hunter. "You didn't have to tell her to make so many different outfits. I've never needed more than two or maybe three."

Hunter looked sheepish, "I just wanted to do something nice," she mumbled.

"Can we bring them all with us?" Ketan looked around with interest as they started through a part of the orchard. "It would be a waste if I never got to wear them." Her smile turned sly again. "Some of them would be very nice to wear for you."

Hunter led them through the forest. "Um, so I'm not really sure how this works, but this is part of my lands. The forest spills over into the Dukedom of Del Finold, but there's no physical boundary, although we argue that it's the river, and they argue that it's the edge of the woods. But for the most part we leave each other alone." They moved through the great trees and Hunter told a few stories from her childhood, until they reached a clearing. In the clearing, on a rock, was a black cloak made from the fur of a great wolf.

"What's that?" Ketan asked, impressed by the size of the cloak. There were stories of wolves in the desert, although they never went far enough in to compete with the Sand Tigers. But this one would have given a Sand Tiger a run for its money in size.

Hunter walked over and ran her fingers through it. "It's a wolf pelt. The first winter I returned from the war, a wolf started attacking people around the two small villages in my holdings, as well as a few visitors to the manor. That is not normal behavior as a whole. Some whispers started to circulate that it was the angry spirit of Lanza, Catherine's father." She paused, realizing she would have to explain. "While I was away at war, he started a rebellion against my father. I returned to find them building a gallows for him in the clear spot in front of the Manor. I killed him."

"I know. Cara told me." Ketan reached out to touch the fur as well.

Hunter cleared her throat. "Anyway, I couldn't let rumors fly out of control or have my people hurt, so I went out hunting for it. It took me weeks, weeks of stalking through the cold rain and slush, until I found the beast. I could go on and on about the epic battle, but I'll spare you. I think it was insane. The wolf had huge front canines larger than most wolves; the roots had spread up into his nose. I think it was just in pain to the point it stopped acting like a wolf."

"You kept it from killing anyone else and you kept its fur in memory of it?" Ketan smiled, a little more in love with the Hero of Katturast. "

"Well...someone turned its pelt into a cloak for me, and I kept it." She really didn't know who, maybe Bernard or Stephen. Reaching over, she picked it up off the rock and held it open for Ketan. "It's my gift to you. Hopefully it shows that I will be a good protector...when you need protecting."

Ketan's mouth opened in a silent gasp of surprise. "It's..." she stopped, watching Hunter's eyes as she held the cloak open. Biting back her objections that it was too much,

she slipped it on, feeling Hunter's hands on her shoulders through the thick fur. "It's beautiful," she said instead.

"Thank you," Hunter said, having seen the objection in Ketan's eyes. She stepped back and looked at her. "It makes you look rather fierce." Then she stepped forward and kissed her lightly on the cheek before encircling an arm with hers and started walking again.

"Fierce." Ketan liked the sound of that. "It will make all of my tribe jealous, not that I could wear such a warm cloak in the desert, well, maybe on the coldest of nights." She pressed closer to the warm body next to her. "Where are we going now? More orchards?"

"Yes. We will be leaving the forest and I'll be showing off the vineyards." The heart of her lands, giving all who lived within prestige. The finest wines came from her soil.

Gray eyes watched her as they walked through the early afternoon. "You're proud of these lands." It wasn't really a question. "These are your family lands. Are you sure you want to leave them?" No one in the desert claimed ownership over lands, how could you claim to own a sand dune, so she hadn't considered a link between Hunter and this place, but it was there.

"I'm proud of them, because it's a job well done. I stay because the people here depend on me, and I am not cruel without reasons they can understand. I will miss them if I leave, because it is home, and I'll worry someone is ruining this place, but I can leave and make a new home with you."

Ketan swallowed, stopping them so she could pull the Duke into a tight embrace. "I don't want to take you away from your family. We could..." she trailed off, shaking her head, not certain what they could do. It kept hitting her how very different their two worlds were.

"We'll make it work, don't fear." Hunter returned the embrace.

"All right." Ketan kissed her, needing the reassurance before she pulled back. "Sorry. Just got a little worried." Forcing a smile, she tugged on Hunter's hand. "Lead on?"

Hunter nodded and led them to the edge of the woods. The ground sloped down and the earth was tilled and brown, with workers busy checking the ground and brown twisted vines that looked dead.

"They don't look like much now, but soon, they'll wake up from their sleep of Winter's kiss and blossom." She led them through the vines, many of the workers looking up. Hunter waved and the workers quickly looked back down looking busy.

"They're all watching us," Ketan whispered, glad to be holding onto Hunter's arm as they walked along the row after row of vines. "This must make an amazing number of grapes!" she remarked, surprised at how many vines there were stretched out in neat rows.

"Yes, all of it used for wine. There are two other vineyards and they are by the two villages that are on my land. We don't actually keep most of the wine. We trade for other goods with other Dukes who have farms. Some of the villagers keep small plots of lands that they garden for themselves." Hunter didn't really care. She knew some of the other Dukes would have taxed

them for the crops they produced, but they didn't really produce much. Plus her fellow Dukes were always willing to trade for her wine.

She took them through the vineyards around the vats where they stomped and crushed the grapes, to the Overseer's house. She led them inside, happy to see her instructions had been followed. Lunch was prepared, as well as a bottle of her best wine. It had been bottled from the harvest the year her mother had died. Something so sweet to come from that bitter time.

"Lunch, to highlight some of the meager fare hunted or produced from my lands." Hunter went over and pulled out a chair.

"Meager?" Ketan teased, eyeing the bounty that had been spread out on the table in front of them. "I hope you don't think I can eat all of that." She took the offered chair, charmed by the way Hunter was paying such close attention to her. It was an interesting feeling, and she thought she understood why the women had their mates do this Lover's Walk. "What's your favorite?"

"I actually like the cornbread muffins. The cook of the manor has a small patch of corn outside the manor." She smiled and opened the wine, pouring them both a small glass each. "The lamb stew isn't bad, either." Hunter handed Ketan a glass and sat down, taking a sip. "I don't have anything to give you other than this meal. But I guess this would represent the wealth of my lands." She shrugged, looking slightly embarrassed.

"It's amazing," Ketan reached over, taking Hunter's hand until she could get those green eyes to look at her, "that you're responsible for making sure that all of this is produced, and that you take care of the people who work for you. It's amazing," she said, trying to get Hunter to look less embarrassed. "This is more than an entire tribe in the desert can claim! The wine alone, Hunter..." she trailed off, using her free hand to take a sip and smile. "It's amazing. No wonder you believe so fiercely in the land."

Hunter smiled. "Thank you." She stood back up, and fighting off embarrassment again, she had nearly forgotten her manners. She quickly made up a plate with a little bit of everything for Ketan and then one for herself. "We have a small mill to grind grains to make corn meal and flour, and a couple of small flocks of sheep and goats." She shrugged, not certain what to say as she broke open a muffin and smeared butter on it. Nibbling, she thought about Ketan's comments about the land. "There are old, darker tales. They say that when we were savages scrapping a living from these lands, the tribal leaders would be sacrificed to appease the lands when there was drought or famine. That the land would have to be appeased in blood for transgressions of the leader." She swallowed, wondering why she had brought it up, as it wasn't a nice little tale. "Thankfully we know better now."

Ketan ate slowly, enjoying the taste of each of the different flavors. "Nothing as hot as we served you in the desert," she noted, though, still enjoying the combination of such different textures and tastes than she was used to, especially the thing that Hunter had called corn bread. She loved that one, and ate every little crumb she had on her plate. "There was a tale in the desert, of a time before, when the tribes would select a person to bear the responsibility for everyone, and they'd be sacrificed to the elements to ensure another year of life."

"Sounds very similar," Hunter said, although she wasn't certain some in the desert had stopped sacrificing. "I think perhaps your hot spices need a hot climate to grow. I do not know of anything in our diet here that burns like your food. But I can ask if you are missing it." She wanted to give Ketan things that were hers too, not just overwhelm her with her culture.

"It's nice, but so is this." Ketan surreptitiously slid a piece of meat under the table to where Titan was lying nearby. "Don't worry about making the cooks do something they don't want to. You ate all our foods without complaining, much."

Gently, Titan took the piece of meat, gulping it down, and then sniffed the fingers looking for more.

Still trying to be discreet, Ketan rubbed the cat's head with her fingertips and smiled at Hunter.

"As you wish, but they want to do anything that would make me happy, and right now, if you're happy, I'm happy." Hunter took another small sip of wine.

"There are other ways to make me happy." The smile turned sly. "Did you enjoy the desert food?"

"I did, after I got use to it. It does have a bite, but after awhile, you grow to like the bite." Hunter smiled back.

"So you like bite?" Ketan liked this kind of conversation. "I just realized, I never got to give you a veil dance."

"No you didn't. Although, I thought you didn't do those?" Hunter fished a large lamb bone out of the stew, gave it to Titan then wiped her hands. The Sand Tiger took it and happily curled up, crunching on it.

"I'm not as good at it as some." Ketan snorted as she watched Titan switch sides in favor of the bone. "I'll just have to let you tell me how good I am." She watched the Sand Tiger gnaw away on the bone. "I'm going to miss this when we leave. Not being in constant danger."

"Yes, the King's castle will certainly not lack for danger."

"What do you think he'll do?"

"Have me seized at the gate, throw me in the jail, and then have me beheaded. That's sort of the worst case scenario."

"What?" Ketan's eyes widened. "And we're going there willingly? Why would you just accept that?"

"I'm not accepting that, you asked what he would do, not what I would do," Hunter said, taking another sip. She debated refilling her glass.

"Oh..." the dark-haired woman let out a sigh of relief. "Good. So what are you going to do?"

"I haven't figured that out yet. I was hoping my spy would have returned from the castle. But I don't plan to just roll over and die."

"I'm very glad to hear that." She'd been worried that Hunter's loyalty, misplaced, she thought, to the King would lead her to surrender right into his grasp. Full at last, Ketan sat back in the chair watching Hunter with a slight smile.

Hunter set down her glass and looked back. "Let me know when you're ready to move on. There are only two more places we need to go to."

"We can go now, but you've already impressed me." Ketan stood, curious to see what else the outlander had set up.

"Okay." Hunter stood up then reached over, tickling Titan's ears.

Ketan laughed at his disgruntled expression. "Spoiled cat." But he got up and followed along after them.

Hunter led them out of the building. "Under the building is a small series of tunnels, and we store the casks of wine in them. The tunnels keep the wine at the right temperature while the wine ages." She led them away from the house towards the manor. "Would you leave the desert to live here?" she asked curiously.

Ketan considered the land around them. "I'd try for you," She took Hunter's hand again, "but I'd always be an outsider here. Would you leave here to live in the desert?"

"Yes. I love the desert. I missed it after the war. It has a deadly beauty and fierce simplicity that I've grown to admire."

Ketan smiled knowingly. "I know. I've seen your garden."

"Oh, um, yes. It's my sanctuary, most people don't enter because of Titan."

"I made Cara show me where it was." She hurried on before Hunter could get mad. "It was my idea, not hers. I wanted to see where Titan stays, and I'd heard it was beautiful."

"Thank you," Hunter said simply. She led them up behind the manor, where the small stable was housed close but far enough away to bother the manor with the smell. She entered the stable, and knew the two stable boys and the stable master were nearby but out of sight as she had asked to give her privacy. "We aren't famous for our horses, but we have a few." She led them inside and opened a stall door. Inside was a short, stocky horse with a white coat dappled with gray spots.

"Less temperamental than camels." Ketan offered her hand to one, grinning as he huffed at her hand, hopeful for a treat. "There's a reason some tribes try to steal horses as often as they can."

"She is yours. She is the grand-daughter of Honor. Honor was the horse that saw me through the war. She saved my life time and time again, and when we were separated in a sand storm, she survived and made her way home. Smarter than most people. Her daughter here seems to show the same intelligence, and has the makings of a fine warhorse. She's my gift to you, I suppose, to show you that I want you protected even when I may not be around to give aid." Hunter became silent, watching Ketan and the white dappled mare.

"Hunter..." Ketan started and stopped, seeing the hopeful expression on her face. How could she refuse such a gift? Instead, she gave the horse one more scratch on her neck and turned to pull the Duke into an embrace. She had no words, so she tried to express her feelings in another way, holding Hunter's body tight and kissing her passionately, kissing until they were both gasping for air. "Thank you," she whispered, finally, hands roaming Hunter's back as she wondered if she could get her naked on one of the bales of hay.

It was hard and tempting not to stop, but Hunter knew they only had one more stop. She grasped Ketan's hands. "Hold that thought. We only have one more stop," she said breathlessly.

"But I want to thank you," Ketan whispered, trying to get closer again.

Hunter moved backwards. "That's great, it really is, and I want to be thanked, but we aren't alone, and I really can't until after the next stop." This sucked. Judging by the look in Ketan's eyes, it would be quite the thank you.

Ketan sighed, realizing that Hunter was serious about this next stop. "Where are we going?" She'd just have to make sure to thank Hunter later, thoroughly.

Hunter coughed and eyed Ketan warily, "Back to the manor." She stepped forward, stroking the mare's side. "You can name her. I never got around to it. She's been 'horse' for a while now. But she is broken and rides well.

"Back to your rooms?" Ketan asked, hopefully, taking Hunter's hand in hers again. "I'll think of a name after I ride her. It should be a name she likes."

"Sounds good." Hunter turned, holding out an arm. "Last stop, then we can retire to my rooms. I promise."

"I'm holding you to that." Ketan licked her lips, not even trying to contain the happy grin as she followed the Duke.

Hunter laughed as she led Ketan out of the stables. "I'm counting on it." She led them slowly around the manor, thinking about the last step and what she would say. They entered through the main gate, the guards looking bemused, but Hunter didn't notice.

The desert woman gave them a little wave with her free hand, not caring about the way they looked at them either.

Hunter took Ketan to her desert garden. "The last part is to be done in a holy place; this is the holiest place I can think of now that my illusions of Ryuu have been dashed."

"She's still a goddess." Ketan wasn't sure what to do to fill the empty place that was left in Hunter's heart since that revelation. "Does it matter if the way you worshiped her wasn't something she knew?" The idea that the last part needed a holy place, though, made Ketan nervous with energy.

The sun was setting, lighting the sky up in reds and oranges. On a flat rock in the garden was a candle, two clear glass wine glasses, and the bottle of wine they had shared earlier.

"True, she is still a Goddess, but this place is holy to me. It brings me peace and soothes my soul on rough days."

"Then it's holy," Ketan agreed, letting the issue drop for now as she followed after Hunter towards the flat rock.

Hunter grabbed a steel and flint and struck it until some wood shaving caught on fire, and then she lit the candle. She then poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Ketan. "Don't drink yet."

"All right." Gray eyes watched her curiously as Hunter continued preparing.

Hunter cleared her throat. "Now we share words from our soul. Um," she hesitated, nervous, "Ketan, I have no experience with this. I thought for the longest time that I would never want this. Apparently I had to go out to the desert to find someone to wake my heart up. Thank you for that. I pledge my heart to you, it shall never waver, and to you it will always be loyal. My strength will always protect you...if you should ever need it." She smiled, knowing Ketan was more than capable of taking care of herself. "My wealth, my lands, I will share equally with you, because you are my equal. I pledge this before the gods."

Ketan swallowed, surprised by the intensity of the words and the way that Hunter had pledged them to her. "I..." she paused, searching for the words she wanted to say. "I don't care about your lands, or your wealth, or anything else you have. I only want you, not because you're a Duke, or an outlander, but because you're Hunter. I know you don't think of yourself as a hero, but you are to me."

Hunter smiled and held out her cup then held out her empty hand for Ketan's cup.

"Now we drink from each other's cup."

Ketan quickly picked up the cup, offering it to Hunter.

Hunter took the cup and took a drink.

She took Hunter's cup, waiting for a nod of approval before she drank as well.

Off the flat stone, she picked up a silver chain. Hanging on the chain was a piece of metal shaped like a shield, which had been scorched black, and the inset on the front were purple gems that looked like grapes. "This is my last gift, my family crest. Our colors are black and purple, and grape is what gives us purpose, tying us to the lands."

"I don't have anything to give you though." Ketan stared in awe at the workmanship that had gone into making the crest.

"We will go to the desert and I will participate in whatever rituals your people do when they take a mate. I promise," Hunter said. "It's not that impressive. I made that when I was a youth, although Victor helped me set the jewels."

"It's perfect." Ketan lightly touched the surface with her fingertips then smiled tremulously at the Duke. "Put it on me?" Even she could see the meaning behind a gesture like this.

"As you wish." Hunter undid the clasp and reached around Ketan's front, so the shield rested over Ketan's heart, and then attached the clasp in the back.

Swallowing against the ache in her throat, Ketan held the other woman tight in an embrace. "You're stuck with me now," she managed to whisper, ashamed at the sudden tears that were threatening.

"Don't cry. I thought this was happy," Hunter said, holding Ketan tightly.

"This is happy," Ketan laughed, pressing her face against Hunter's neck.

"Okay," Hunter said, confused, but if Ketan insisted she was happy, she wouldn't argue.

The other woman's shoulders shook in a silent laugh at the obvious confused tone of voice, and Ketan pulled back, wiping at her eyes. "Is that the end of the Walk?"

"Yes," Hunter replied. "I promise I won't make you walk any more."

"Don't make promises you can't keep. We're leaving tomorrow, after all." Ketan got up though, offering her hand to Hunter, eyes hooded. "But that means I get to do what I've been thinking about all day."

Hunter took Ketan's hand and let herself be dragged out of the garden. "And what have you been thinking about all day?"

The desert woman looked over her shoulder at the Duke, a mischievous smile in place. "I think I'll have to just show you."

#####3

Hunter was breathing heavily, and her mind wasn't up to the task of thinking about anything too in-depth. The room was cool, and the sky, visible through the cracked window shutter was black, showing night had firmly settled in.

"That was the best thank you I've ever received. It wasn't necessary, but it was exquisite all the same," she murmured out as her hands ran random patterns on Ketan's skin. Part of her was aware that Ketan looked very pleased with herself, and Hunter admitted the woman should.

"Exquisite? I like the sound of that," Ketan nearly purred, moving up to curl up next to the blonde woman, a leg thrown possessively over her thighs. Blindly, she fumbled for the thick blankets, pulling them up over them as well. "I wanted the last night here to be as memorable as the last afternoon," she murmured, touching the necklace that she'd refused to take off even when she'd been stripped naked.

"This whole time will be memorable, but we will have all the time in the world to make memories when all of this is over." Hunter didn't shiver this time when the necklace brushed against her skin, as the metal had soaked up the heat from their bodies. She still did not have a plan for the King's castle. They needed a third person, one who could go with Ketan and spy around the castle. Ketan would draw too much attention alone. Hunter herself would be too busy justifying her accusations against a traitor in the King's court.

"We will," the desert woman agreed, but her voice shook a little around the edges, betraying her doubt. Regardless, she held onto Hunter tight, not wanting to let go and unwilling to miss a single moment. Unfortunately, her body betrayed her eventually, and she fell asleep, still holding tight to the Duke.

Hunter's thoughts slowed and she, too, gave in to sleep. ...

#####3

Hunter awoke near dawn, stomach growling. She had not eaten since their lunch yesterday, and she blushed a little as a memory came to her. Well, she hadn't eaten food. She had a little time, but still no plan came to mind. Eventually she squirmed out of Ketan's grasp and rose from the bed, shrugging into a robe and opening the door. "Have food and sweet grape juice brought up. Please?"

The guard nodded, and she shut the door.

Turning, she got a goofy look on her face just watching Ketan sleep.

"You're going to have to stop staring at her like that if you want to avoid your King knowing what you've been doing with a desert warrior," the amused voice came from the nearby open door to Hunter's study. Ryu leaned against the bookcase inside, smiling at the genuine happiness on the Duke's face. "She is beautiful," the silver-haired woman agreed, "if a bit exotic for most around here, I would think."

Hunter's smile turned into a frown. She had heard the rumors that the King's tastes had turned to young women from the desert. "Unfortunately, the King may look at her the same way, and I'll have to kill him." And that didn't bother her as much as it might have a few months ago. "How are you, Ryu, any new information for me?"

An eyebrow arched at Hunter's tone of voice. "I'm not your spy, Hunter. I realize you're still upset with me for not being your Goddess, but try to remember I'm not your servant."

Hunter sighed. "I didn't mean it like that. I meant it like...do you have any new information. And I know you're not a servant. It's very hard to forget the fact you can turn into a dragon. But don't expect me to treat you like a god, because you've made it clear that's not how you want to be treated. So make up your mind." Hunter moved to her wardrobe, not in the mood to deal with a Goddess with hurt feelings, when it was very likely she might die in a few days.

The other eyebrow joined the first one in being raised as Ryu watched the other woman prowl. "How about we try friends for now?" She cast a glance at the still sleeping woman on the bed, and then back at Hunter. "And as your friend, I'm recommending you avoid the King's palace. Go back to the desert, Hunter. Have babies with Ketan, raise a family, and live until you're old enough to see grandchildren. Or even better, I'll bring you even further north. You can travel through new lands, see new things. But avoid the King's palace."

Hunter carefully picked out her traveling clothes. "I can't...because this darkness you see coming from the King's castle, if I don't stop it, who will? What is the point of running away to the desert when someone wants to cause a war between my lands and Ketan's?" She set aside clothes of purple and black and then looked at Ryu, "I stopped one war by luck, and I will do it again if I must."

"Heroes! You're all the same," Ryu said, her voice oddly approving as she moved closer to Hunter. "You're going into danger, and no matter how much I've tried to pierce the darkness over that place, I haven't been able to. I'm coming with you. Someone has to keep Ketan from rushing in to save you."

"Okay, but we need to do something about your hair; it stands out too much, like

my green eyes," Hunter said calmly, looking over at Ryu.

"You could make it brown," Ketan groaned from the bed, cracking an eye open to see the two who were having a conversation in front of her.

Hunter's attention shifted to the bed. "Morning, beautiful." She approached the bed, sitting next to Ketan. "Ryu is going to join us."

"Brown?" Ryu demanded behind them, pulling on a lock of hair to eye it. "Brown?" she asked again, wrinkling her nose.

"So I guessed." Ketan yawned then slid her hands behind Hunter's head to draw her down into a kiss. "We have to get up?" She didn't like that idea. Up meant getting dressed.

"It is a very common color," Hunter interjected.

"Brown? I look like a brown hair kind of person?" Ryuu continued.

Ketan groaned and buried her face in Hunter's chest.

"No, you look like a silvered hair kind of person, but that's kind of noticeable. So brown it is. Can you just make it change with your godly powers, or should I call for an herbalist."

"Do I look like a chameleon?" The silver-haired woman looked like she was reconsidering the entire trip.

"I'll summon the herbalist," Hunter said, kissing Ketan's cheek.

"And food?" Ketan whispered, hopefully.

"Already on its way," she said, getting up and moving to the door.

"My hero," the desert woman smiled, snuggling back down into the blankets to await the arrival of the food.

"I'll find your herbalist on my own. I'll find you both later." Ryuu gave Hunter another amused look and slipped out the door without opening it too wide.

"That was interesting," Hunter said, looking out into the hallway at the shocked guard, waving at him to let him know everything was okay, and then shut the door.

"Why is she coming with us?" Now that they were alone and the door was closed, Ketan got up out of the bed naked and started to consider what outfits to bring with her.

"Because she wants to," Hunter said, watching Ketan move.

"Of course..." Ketan paused, sensing eyes on her, and turned to arch an eyebrow at Hunter, still gloriously naked. "Yes?" she smiled, still a little tender from the night before.

"Just enjoying the view. It's a very nice view," Hunter stated.

"Keep looking at me like that and we aren't going anywhere anytime soon." Calloused fingers touched the sole piece of jewelry still around her neck, reassuring herself that it hadn't been a dream.

Hunter smiled and undid the tie of her robe. "We can surely spare a moment."

Licking her lips, Ketan moved closer. "A moment then." It wouldn't take long, considering how suddenly aroused she was by the tantalizing view of flesh under that robe. A hint of breasts, a shadow between thighs...

"Yes, a moment." Hunter let herself be pushed back onto the bed.

"It's going to be a long moment," Ketan whispered, pushing her down onto the bed and covering her body with her own, lips meeting hungrily.

It was more like two long moments before there was a tentative knock on the door to the rooms from the outside guard.

"Sh-sh-should I answer the door?" Hunter asked, uncertain if they were done. She was actually feeling drained, something that her troops had never been able to do.

"It better be food," Ketan panted, still licking her lips from the taste of Hunter on them.

"Probably." Hunter rolled over Ketan, pausing briefly on top of Ketan to kiss her deeply and pinch a nipple before rolling off and grabbing her robe.

The other woman groaned after her, hastily pulling a sheet up over herself for cover before Hunter opened the door. "That was the best morning I've ever had."

"Me too." Hunter opened the door, took the platter of food, and took it over to the table before returning to the door for the jug of sweet grape juice. She thanked the servant and shut the door.

"But we have to go, don't we?" The door closed again, Ketan came out from under the sheet and grabbed something to wear. It was still chilly for her.

"Yes. Well, I have learned I can't make you do anything. But I have to go. Because if I don't try to stop this, who will?"

"Don't try to stop me from coming with you then." Ketan snagged something tasty looking from the table top, humming in pleasure as she ate.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Hunter said with a smile. She sat down at the table. "Juice?"

"Of what?" Ketan looked curious as she pulled a chair over as close to Hunter's as she could. This, she decided as she leaned into Hunter's side, was perfect.

"Sweet grape juice. No alcohol, I promise," Hunter said holding up the jug.

...Which Ketan proceeded to pour a full cup of for herself and do significant damage to the food that had been laid out in front of her. They'd forgotten about dinner sometime during the lovemaking the night before.

Hunter nibbled at the food. "I think I have a plan. It's not a very good one, I'll admit that."

"A plan is good." Ketan finished the last bite.

"Basically, I turn myself over to the King to argue my case that someone close to the King kidnapped the Princess, while you and Ryuu sneak around looking for clues and hopefully the Princess." She snuck a look at Ketan, who was staring at her in growing horror.

"What? That's not a plan! That's suicide."

"Well...um...you have any thoughts?"

"No, I don't have a better idea, but that's a horrible idea. There has to be some plan we can come up with that doesn't involve just handing you over to someone who will probably just kill you." Ketan frowned, no longer hungry. "What if we just sneak into the place? We could look around, try to find the Princess, and then sneak out without anyone knowing?"

"In order to do that, we need a distraction. You can't just sneak into the castle, especially when the traitor to the throne knows I'm back. Trust me. I'm not planning on getting killed. There are certain courtesies that have to be followed before the King can just cut off my head." Hunter sat back, popping a piece of cold meat into her mouth and chewing.

"You're going to trust your life to courtesies?" Ketan eyed her, only a little mollified by that. Seeing that the Duke wasn't about to change her opinion, at least not right then and there, Ketan sighed. She'd just have to work on getting a better plan put together before they made it to the castle. "At least we'll have a dragon on our side."

"I'm not really trusting my life to them. I just know it will prevent quick action. And if the advisor is the one we are after, she'll be there, which means her rooms will be open for inspection. And we will have a dragon on our side," Hunter agreed that was a good thing.

There wasn't much left of the breakfast, but Ketan was loath to get up and actually start on their journey. It had been nice to stay in one place for more than a day, and she had to admit that Hunter's lands were beautiful, if alien to her. "I'll miss this place, more than I thought," she admitted, finally, getting up and offering her hand to Hunter, pulling the Duke into an embrace just for the chance to feel her body against hers again.

Hunter beamed. "I'm so happy you like my lands, that means a lot to me." She wrapped her arms around Ketan and held her tight. Sadly, they could not stay. She wished they could, because for the first time in a long time, she was loath to leave her lands for reasons other than the headache of trying to outmaneuver her father's ambitions.

"We should go," Ketan whispered at last, lips pressing a kiss to Hunter's temple. She nuzzled her face against blonde hair then forced herself to let go. "Maybe we can come back, someday?" It wasn't likely, she knew that, but it was worth a chance.

"Someday," Hunter agreed. Who knew what the future held? "I want you to know. This is the happiest I've been in...sometime. I almost feel like a different person."

"You are different." Ketan's smile was bright. "But that's all right. I'm different since I met you too." Reluctantly, she moved away. "Help me figure out how to pack all these new clothes?"

#####3

Stephen stood near Hunter, watching as the little party got itself ready to leave. They had the best horses that the stables could give and enough provisions to see them to the King's castle and halfway back if they wanted. Still, Hunter's brother was understandably nervous as he watched Hunter prepare to leave.

The entirety of the guard was there as well, lining the sides of the courtyard and the road leading from it, paying honor to the Duke they had served for many years now.

"Be careful," he said at last, catching Hunter's eye as she finished checking her saddle.

"Always, little brother. Remember what I've taught you, and treat your wife well." She was silent for a moment then quietly said, "There's no shame in running, if it means saving your life and the lives of those you love." It was a shame she didn't listen to her own advice, although Hunter really didn't have any doubts that she could stop whatever was going to happen.

"I always remember your lessons." He glanced to where the desert woman was apparently having a conversation with her horse, and then over to the new person, with the dark brown hair, he'd never met before. "Are you sure you don't want some guards to go with you?"

Hunter smiled. "Yanni and Rachelle will meet me on the path just before we enter the King's lands." The smile faltered, concerned that the two young women would not return from this, but she had explained the risks. "They will stand at my side while Ketan and Ryu search for the Princess."

"Decoys." Stephen nodded in understanding. He smiled tightly, nodding upwards towards one of the upper balconies. "Someone didn't want to come mingle with the commoners." Her father leaned against the railing, watching them. "As long as we're talking about not killing people..." Stephen raised his hand, waving to someone hiding at the edge of the courtyard.

Hesitantly, Cara stepped out from the kitchen and carried a bundle over to the two of them. "Duke," she curtsied, nervous in front of Hunter.

From the other side, Ketan watched with interest.

Hunter swallowed. "Cara," she said neutrally. She really wasn't certain how one addressed the daughter of someone you had beheaded. Not that it bothered her before, but now it did.

Hands shaking a little, the woman offered her package to the Duke. "I..." she stopped, freezing as the words abandoned her, and she just stared up at Hunter, eyes wide.

Hunter looked at Stephen, alarmed. "I didn't do anything."

Flushing red, Cara offered the package, trying again. "Lady Ketan said you were nicer than I thought and to try to get to know you. I'm sorry we won't get that chance." Her hands were still shaking. "But I thought...you could...you would like these?"

Hunter smiled and gently took the package from Cara's shaking hands. "Thank you." She cleared her throat then said, "Stephen is lucky to have found you."

'There,' she thought proudly, 'it was a nice statement.'

Having apparently exhausted her courage, Cara moved behind Stephen, holding onto his hand tightly. Hunter's brother smiled at his sister, pleased she'd even tried to be nice. Hugging her with his free arm, he whispered, "Thank you." Then let go, ignoring the way his eyes watered a little at the moment. "Ride safely, Hunter Del Cor!" His call was taken up by all those present, the courtyard thundering with the salute.

Hunter mounted her horse and looked to Ryuu and Ketan to see if they were ready to move.

It was different than riding a camel, a lot less spitting involved, but Ketan was mounted as was the now brown-haired Ryuu.

Hunter nodded then started her horse, moving at a walk so she could wave to everyone and give Ketan a few moments to get used to her new horse before they hit a gallop.

"They love you." Ketan had to practically yell it to be heard over the commotion as they passed through the ranks of guards, servants, and even villagers who had come to see her go.

And the gods only knew why, as she wasn't the easiest person to deal with. Hunter smiled and nodded. "I try to be a good leader."

Ketan gave her a look. "This the fastest that these things go?" She patted the neck of her horse.

Hunter smiled. "No. Are you ready to start moving?"

"Before they start throwing flowers at you," Ketan teased. They were nearly through the throng though, and Titan had emerged without mauling anyone, either, which was good.

"Once the crowd thins, hold on," Hunter said vaguely. Then they were through the people and Hunter tapped her heels to her horse's side, and he shot off, changing from a walk to a gallop.

"What?" Ketan started to ask then let out a whoop of surprise as she felt muscles under her tense and then they were flying down the road after Hunter. "

I like it!" Ketan yelled, the rolling motion much easier to adapt to than the slightly awkward gait of camels.

Hunter laughed, but knew they could not keep this pace up, as it would be dangerous for the horses. But for the time being, they would enjoy the sensation.

#####3

"I think her name will be Sabba," Ketan announced, patting the horse's neck, once they'd slowed to a walk to let the horses recover from the rolling gallop they'd just been put through. It was impressive how fast down the road they had flown, and Ketan was still grinning from the feeling of speed.

"Sabba," Hunter repeated, rolling the name around on her tongue. "Does it mean anything?"

"Swift wind." Ketan patted the horse's neck again, earning a flick of the mare's ears in response. "I'm guessing we should get used to Ryu disappearing like that?" One moment the silver-haired woman had been with them, and the next they were alone with Titan on the road.

"Yes, it seems to be her usual way of being. Although if she's still gone tonight when we make camp, I won't complain," Hunter said with a smile that was just short of a leer.

"I've unleashed a monster upon the world," Ketan teased, urging Sabba closer so that they could talk without yelling. "I'll just have to make certain you're no threat to anyone else," she added, with an answering leer.

Hunter laughed, "That you will," enjoying at least for the moment that she was able to ignore the certain doom that was at the end of the road.

"How far is it?" Ketan gestured to the idyllic looking road ahead of them.

"It's faster by boat up the river, but I do not want to show up weak from sea sickness. So it's two days of hard riding or three if you take your time."

"Three days then." Ketan would savor the time. Who knew when they would be able to enjoy it again after they reached the palace? "You were nice to Cara."

Hunter made a face. "I'm trying, not to be such a bitch to everyone. It just still seems odd that she would fall in love with the brother of the woman who murdered her father."

"Love is blind, I think is the saying." Ketan shrugged. "Your brother is like you: honorable, dedicated, smart, and annoying. I'm sure she saw all that."

"Maybe."

"You don't trust her?"

Hunter shrugged. "I just don't think if I was in her shoes I would do the same."

Gray eyes studied her lover. "But you forgave Catherine."

And the irony was not lost on her about that. A bitter smile stretched out on her face. "In the end I should have begged forgiveness."

Ketan gave her a strange look at that. "Why should you have begged forgiveness? She's the one who broke your heart."

"My father knew about us. He hired Royia to prove how fickle love is, although he swears she wasn't supposed to kidnap her. Shows how well my father thinks things through. He merely wanted to spare my feelings the pain of being in love with someone below our station."

Ketan stopped Sabba, urging the horse to turn back the way they had just come, a grim look on her face.

"What are you doing?" Hunter shouted, turning her horse around as well.

"Your father put my blood sister through years of slavery and broke your heart! Since he is the father of the one I love, I won't cut out his balls while he's staked out for the Sun Serpent to feast upon. But I'm going to hurt him!" Ketan's eyes blazed with anger at the bastard who would cause such pain on two people she cared for. Honor demanded he pay for that!

Hunter urged her horse into a gallop and easily caught up to Ketan, grabbing the halter and stopping both horses. "Ketan, not now." The words were just short of a command. "If you murder him, it would make things harder right now." She nearly shuddered to think about an outsider killing a noble.

"He hurt you!" Ketan growled. "He sold Catherine into slavery! Cara thought her sister dead, and her father went insane with grief, blaming it on you! That's why he tried to revolt against you. It all leads back to that decision, Hunter, can't you see?"

"I know I love you, and I'm humbled right now, because nobody has ever thought I needed to be stood up for. But if you kill him right now you just give the advisor more power to slow us down or throw me right into prison for not revenging my father's murder with your blood."

The anger died out as Ketan slowly smiled. "You love me?"

Hunter looked irritated. "Of course I love you, what do you think I was doing yesterday. I was showing you."

"I know, it's just...nice to hear it." Ketan flushed a little. "I got carried away for a minute there." A deep breath and she nodded. "I wasn't going to kill him, just hurt him," mumbling, "a lot."

"Mmmhmmm," Hunter said, releasing the bridle, not really believing her. She was probably wrong to be turned on from Ketan's overprotective outburst, and she took a deep breath to settle herself.

"I'm good now." Ketan cast one last look back towards the castle. "I'm still upset with your father though."

"As am I." But that wasn't anything new. "Again, remember, if he hadn't been him, then we probably would have never met."

"And I'm in debt to him about that, but I still blame him for everything you've been put through." Ketan sighed and let Hunter turn them back around to head towards the King's castle. "It's wrong that he isn't punished for what he did."

"He lives a life he doesn't want, one where he wants to be the hero, the romantic lead, the powerful leader, and finds he is nothing but a doddering old man who is disdained by his own children, and his life spared not for love but pity. What sadder fate would you have me give him?"

"When you put it like that..." Ketan shuddered a little, considering what such a life would be like. "He has been punished for his past." She did feel pity for him at that.

Titan huffed and got up from where he'd sat down at the beginning of the discussion the two had started.

#####3

Nightfall found Ketan very grateful for the thick wolf pelt cloak that Hunter had given her, as well as the warm travel clothes. Hunter kept telling her the coldest days were behind them and summer was on the way, but the desert dweller didn't know if she believed her. It was entirely too cold when the Fire Serpent left the sky. "Rhyuu didn't come back," she said at last, huddled in front of the small fire they'd started, Titan's warmth along one side, Hunter on the other. It was as close to a pleasant evening as she suspected they were going to get considering their destination.

"No, she's probably off doing what gods who aren't really gods do," Hunter sighed. "I admit it drives me nuts every time she just disappears. I really believe she wants to help, I just don't know how she's doing it." She leaned her head against Ketan, grumpy that more than likely they were not having sex. If Ketan's shivering was any indication, it was a big no.

"Let me see if we have some rope and I can make an impromptu tent," Hunter muttered, getting up and checking the packs. Happily there was some rope, as well as some canvas. Finding a young sapling, she jumped, grabbing the trunk up high and then letting her weight bend it over. She wrestled with the tree and the rope. It was probably humorous, as for a second the tree almost won. Finally, she got the rope tied and knotted around the tree trunk, and then the other end of the rope tied to the trunk of an older sturdy tree. With the sapling bent over, she set cloth

on the ground under it then draped the second cloth over the top. She used rocks to draw it down tight over the sapling, creating a tent. Breathing hard, Hunter was pleased with herself. She hadn't gotten smacked in the face this time.

"Impressive," Ketan grinned through her shivering, and applauded the acrobatics that had just been put on in front of her. She should have helped Hunter, but it had been enjoyable to be able to simply watch the other woman move. There was a pleasure in watching that well-toned body move in the fire light.

Hunter turned with a smile and gave a little bow for the applause. She went over and hauled the packs over to the tent after checking the horses. The animals would be fine. She unstrapped the bedrolls and started to make a nest inside the tent.

"I agree. She's trying to help us, and I know it's frustrating to not understand how she's helping us." Ketan paused. "But are you all right with her coming with us?" She still wasn't sure Hunter was over the shock of her Goddess never having heard of her worshipers.

"I hear what you really want to ask. You're concerned about the world-shattering revelation she made. Life is too short, really, to get caught up in all that. I've moved on. I'm not sure how she became a part of our pantheon of gods, but it's not her fault we made her something she's not. I'm just glad she seems to use her god-like ways for good, or at least in our favor."

"I'll take our favor for now." Ketan came to her feet, stepping close and using an embrace as an excuse to press up against Hunter's warm body. "I think that's enough talk about Ryu though," she whispered, using lips to tease the Duke's ear and neck. "I think I have an idea how to stay warm."

Titan looked annoyed. He was going to have to wait to crawl into the tent for warmth; his belly scales let him cool off, not retain heat.

Hunter's legs went a little wobbly. "Oh" she moaned. "I think I would like to hear more about your ideas on how to stay warm."

"Just hear?" Ketan teased, her fingers untying laces and pulling aside clothes as she pushed Hunter back into the small tent. Their cloak and blankets would be enough to keep them warm together, she thought. Besides, she wanted to feel Hunter's naked body against her own, and to forget about where they were going. "I think I can do more than just tell you," the dark-haired woman purred, fingers sliding up under Hunter's shirt.

Her recently awoken sex drive, really wouldn't be denied, and Hunter really didn't want to stop. There was always a chance there would be no tomorrows despite her best efforts.

"Are you sure it's not too cold for you?" Hunter asked, enjoying the look of want and desire shining in Ketan's eyes. It made her feel powerful in a way she hadn't felt before. She let her fingers trail over Ketan's legs and up her sides.

"Not anymore." Ketan shivered from something completely other than the chill in the air. Maybe the cold weather had a benefit after all. Then she was undoing the last of Hunter's clothes and went to work making certain the other woman didn't get cold.

Hunter chuckled as Ketan fell forward on to her. "I think I knew I was in trouble the first time you kissed me. The sword was a big clue," she murmured into Ketan's lips as they traded sloppy open mouth kisses. She could feel sweat slipping down her skin, allowing their skin to more easily slide against each other.

"Your sword or my sword?" Ketan laughed, squirming out of her travel pants and kicking them aside, hoping they didn't land in the fire. The cloak she kept on, as it was warm and acted like a blanket.

"I've never been so humiliated. Of course, I had been asleep when you broke into my room." Once Ketan was naked, except for the cloak, Hunter reached out, pulling her back down. The wolf fur was an interesting sensation against her skin, almost tickling.

"It was fun. Creeping into the bedroom of the Hero of Katturast. I was going to play a trick on you." Ketan sucked in a breath as naked legs tangled together. "But then you were all naked and so very beautiful. How come you were beautiful?" she whispered, hands trailing up to cup a breast.

"I don't know," Hunter murmured, returning the favor, and let her hands trail up

Ketan's sides to dusky nipples. "A trick, yet you warned me my life was in danger."

"You deserved to be warned." Ketan's voice was sounding strange as Hunter's hands did wonderful things, and she paused to kiss the blonde. "Titan nearly scared the life out of me though." She moved, smiling wider as she dragged the necklace across Hunter's chest. "I don't think I'll ever take this off."

Hunter shivered as the metal scraped lightly across her skin. "I'm glad. I had no idea you'd be so enamored of something I'd made as a teenager."

"It marks me as yours." Ketan undulated her hips against Hunter's, smile widening at the gasp that evoked. "I think I like that idea." She knew she liked that idea, but she was definitely going to enjoy teasing Hunter about it. "Warm enough?" she asked, kissing exposed flesh.

"More than warm enough, but let's make sure you're warm." The only warning was the tightening of her ab muscles, and then she rolled them over so she was on top.

Ketan let out a surprised yelp then she was on the bottom, staring up at a naked Hunter. The view was excellent. "You're right, you should make sure I'm really warm." She licked her lips, enjoying this play. "I can't believe you drew your sword on me when I was in your bedroom," referring again to their first meeting.

"You broke into my room, you were wearing a mask, and I was asleep...naked, of course I drew my weapon. I didn't even know who you were." Hunter sat up, her thighs on either side of Ketan's waist, and she grinned a little. "I think this is the first time I've been on top. And they say I have control issues."

"You do have control issues, Duuuukkkkkee," Ketan drew out the title with a teasing drawl, her hands sliding up Hunter's chest to cup breasts that were so close yet so far away. "But that's all right, I won't tell." She couldn't stop moving her hips, didn't even try. "So vicious you were, naked with your sword."

Hunter was breathing heavier, and it was becoming harder to keep her concentration, but she tried. She wanted to drag it out; they had tonight and tomorrow night, and then who knew. "You have a new title then: Tamer of Duke Hunter," she huffed out, falling forward so her hands supported her weight on either side of Ketan's head. Her hair, longer now, fell forward, tickling the dark skin below it.

"Does the title come with some sort of bonus?" Ketan wasn't sure how much longer she could keep this up; the teasing was such pleasant agony. "Your hair's grown back, almost." She ran her fingers through it, enjoying the feel of the longer strands against her skin.

"I guess it could come with perks. What kind of perks were you thinking?" Hunter ducked her head down, asking softly in Ketan's ear. Her muscles were tensed and tight, holding herself back, but her self-control was not iron tight. Her hips slowly pressed back into Ketan's, creating a friction that sent shivers up her spine, but still, she held back, drawing the moment as far as she could.

Ketan whimpered, trying to press up into that delicious friction and groaning in torment when Hunter denied her. "You. I want you," she broke at last, not able to keep the teasing up anymore. "Please?" She wasn't above begging.

Hunter nipped at the earlobe next to her mouth then whispered, "You have me." It was a promise. She sat back up, watching Ketan spread out under her, and for a moment wanted to cry. She was beautiful: heat and passion. But then she spared Ketan from waiting anymore. She slid down her body and spread Ketan's legs, and kneeling between them, she picked up one leg and brushed her lips against the taut muscle of Ketan's calf. "It seems to me you've given me this particular pleasure many times, yet I've selfishly never returned the favor." She didn't expect an answer instead kissed her way up the leg and then placed it on her shoulder.

It was a good thing Hunter didn't expect an answer, because what came from Ketan's lips didn't, in any way, resemble coherent thoughts. There were words, but they were strung together almost randomly as she tried to urge Hunter upwards, achingly aware of every place she touched and pressed her lips to.

Hunter repeated the actions with the other leg, and then brought her face down, blowing out a teasing breath over the wet and heated flesh that greeted her. Then she moved forward. She was awkward at first, uncertain what she was doing, but a few insistent tugs on her hair gave her a

clue as to when something was liked or not liked. Finally, she stopped teasing and drew Ketan's clit into her mouth while pressing two fingers inside, moaning as the hot, slick walls pulsed around her fingers.

Ketan had never been shy about lovemaking, and she had no reason to start now as she wordlessly taught Hunter what she liked. It didn't take the other woman long. Let it never be said the Duke was a slow learner. When she moved inside her, Ketan eyes sprang open and her entire body tensed under Hunter, arching up into her touch as Ketan screamed in pleasure. When the intense sensations had passed, she collapsed again, boneless and gasping for breath. "What..." she licked her lips "You learn fast," she said at last, still catching her breath.

"You have to, to be a Duke," Hunter said, resting her head on a muscled thigh, ego well boosted. Her body was tense, and she took her breaths carefully. Her desire was strung so tight in her body it was painful, but she said nothing, happy to watch Ketan recover from what she had done. Hunter had no witty comeback, she simply nodded and followed the direction of Ketan's hand, which ended with Hunter splayed out on her back, Ketan happily draped across her, with the thick pelt cloak on top of them both.

"I wish we could just stay here," she whispered, licking her fingers clean with relish.

Hunter just lazily blinked at her and nodded. They were words, and she should understand them, but she hadn't quite recovered from being so thoroughly ravished.

Ketan smiled, kissing Hunter lazily and snuggling in to sleep.

Titan got up and moved over to the edge of the tent, settling down now that the two humans had stopped moving around so much.

#####3

Hunter blinked open her eyes, and slowly, the world around her came into focus. She was surprised to find it was light out, as it was rare she slept this late.

It was warm inside the makeshift tent and she was loath to move, but the world would keep on moving around them regardless.

Titan was gone, probably off hunting some poor woodland creature.

"Couldn't we just stay like this?" Ketan whispered, her voice hoarse with sleep as she felt Hunter stir.

"No, bad things will happen regardless," Hunter replied, turning her head so the words were whispered into dark hair.

The desert woman sighed. She'd been awake for a while, trying to memorize the sensations of holding her lover, the feel of flesh against flesh, the scent of their lovemaking still clinging to

them. She'd feared the coming morning, wishing again and again that there was more time. Instead of arguing, she shifted so she could see those beautiful green eyes. "I love you."

Hunter's thoughts paused and she froze, every bit of her. Now she knew what Ketan had felt yesterday. "I...uh...I love you too."

A wide smile spread across Ketan's face, and she lightly kissed the other woman. "Then I guess we better go." She'd just have to make sure there were more mornings like this.

"Yes," Hunter said a bit sadly. "Last night," she fumbled, looking for words, it had been intense for her, "I felt...very connected to you."

"Me too," Ketan answered simply, pressing a kiss to a bare shoulder then very reluctantly crawling up out of the small tent. Everything in her wanted her to stay where she was, and she ached with the urge to crawl back into that warmth. "Being responsible is really annoying," she grumbled.

"Yes, it has its down side." Although the perks were a huge manor and land. Hunter got up, looking around. "Um, what did you do with my traveling breeches?"

Lips twitching with a suppressed smile, Ketan pointed at the breeches hanging from one of the tree branches.

Hunter laughed. It was just so, so ridiculous she had to.

Snorting with amusement, Ketan shook her head and gathered her own clothes. "I already miss your bath."

"I'm sure it misses us too." Hunter slowly got up and pulled the blanket and cloak aside. "Warm enough?" she asked

"Not as warm as last night." Ketan winked at her, pulling on the traveling clothes and taking back the black cloak, amused again at how closely the dark fur matched her dark hair.

"No, I imagine not," Hunter said, getting up and striding over to get her breeches out of the tree.

Titan watched, amused, as he crunched on the remains of the rabbit he had caught.

"Are we passing through another Duke's lands today?" Ketan asked, curious.

"Yes, Del Nican. Not a bad fellow, a bit of a drunk. He has a lot of forest lands big on timber and wood products." Hunter explained, pulling on her breeches then started looking for her tunic.

"Will we meet any of them?" Drawing on the soft, fur-lined boots that Hunter had given her, Ketan stretched then belted on her scimitar, the great curved sword still marking her as coming from the desert.

"No, not really. As long as we stay on the main road, we won't have to play politics," Hunter explained, pulling her tunic over her head, her boots were easier.

Leaning against one of the trees, Ketan watched with interest as the Duke got dressed. "Maybe Ryuu will come back today."

"Perhaps, I think she wants to give us privacy to enjoy our time together." They'd probably been very obvious about their desire to get each other naked.

Ketan flushed a little, moving away now that the show was over, to see to her horse. "Maybe she'll give us some privacy tonight again."

"I'll talk to her about it if she does show up," Hunter promised. There was no way she'd deny herself, especially if it might be their last night together.

"I can't wait to hear that talk," Ketan teased again, helping Hunter load their things on the horses.

"Yes, I imagine it will be like having a talk about sex with my mother, if she were still alive." Ryuu just had that effect on her.

With one last longing look at the bare remnants of their tent from the night before, Ketan mounted up onto Sabba, patting the mare's neck as she stomped a hoof, anxious to get going. "Then I'll hope night comes soon," she called, waiting for Hunter.

Hunter grunted as she untied the rope that held the sapling down and nearly got lifted off, as the tree tried to right itself.

"Careful," Ketan laughed, "I'm not sure I'm ready to watch you fly."

Hunter shook the rope loose then let the sapling go, moving quickly out of the way. "I'm not ready to go flying either." She looked around the camp site. "I think we're ready to move on."

"Then we should go, Hero of Katturast!" Ketan let out a yell of happiness and let Sabba take off, the horse moving smoothly into a gallop down the road.

"Show off," Hunter said, but a big smile broke out over her face as she urged her own horse to follow.

#####3

Late afternoon found Ketan humming a traveling song as they passed between the shadows of trees spread across the road. They'd seen one other person on the road since that morning, a lone trader who had been heading towards the Del Cor dukedom. Other than that, it had just been the three of them, counting Titan, something she appreciated, especially since their lunch time had turned into something more than just a stop for something to eat. Ketan found herself smiling, again, at that.

"We should stop again, to find a camp site, soon," Ketan called, camping the last thing on her mind at the moment.

"It's still early, why would we..." At the seductive look Ketan threw over her shoulder, Hunter got the clue. "Oh, um...yes, we should stop when we find a nice secluded spot."

"Very secluded," Ketan emphasized. If they would be getting to the king's castle tomorrow, she wanted Hunter to herself all night. Eager to find a place to stop, Ketan pointed ahead, "How about there?" The road wound steeply down the side of a hill into an even darker thicket of trees. They'd certainly be hidden among the trees there.

Titan prowled in and out of the forest alongside of them, always hunting.

Hunter slowed her horse as she came alongside Ketan. "Looks promising," she said. Standing up in the stirrups, she leaned over to kiss Ketan, freezing her lips inches from Ketan's. She felt as if she was being watched.

"What?" Ketan opened her eyes, confused why she wasn't being kissed.

"Something's not right," Hunter whispered then finished the move to give Ketan a light peck to the lips.

"What's not right?" Ketan looked around, seeing nothing that looked different or out of place.

"We're being watched, I think." The path curved around, and the rest of it was hidden by old trees.

"Not by Ryuu?" Ketan didn't think that was likely, even as she asked it. Carefully, she edged her horse forward, not liking the sitting and waiting.

"No, not Ryuu." Hunter gave another kiss to those lips then sat back down. "Yes, a good spot to make camp," she said to fill the quiet, her eyes watching Titan, his fur up and he had a scent. "But perhaps we should travel a little further while we still have daylight?"

"I guess if we have to." Ketan answered, trying to sound as disappointed as she could. Her eyes were constantly scanning the area around them. It was unnerving to not be able to tell where an attack would come from in these foreign lands. The shadows of the trees? The tree tops themselves? Or did outlanders use other more clever means of hiding and laying in wait for prey?

Titan's gaze finally fixated on the tree to their left.

Hunter nodded at the tree, and then turned her mount as if to travel down the road. She breathed out slowly, her gaze unfocusing to find what was hidden.

One of the nearby trees shifted sideways, and then, with gathering momentum, toppled sideways. Hunter opened her mouth to say something, she wasn't sure what, when she caught sight of the road. The dust seemed to dance across its surface. In the trees a winch squealed as a line ran through it, and then the entire road in front of them erupted upwards in a tangled mass of netting, taking anything in its path with it.

From near the same tree that had fallen, a scream started up just as Ketan caught sight of a pouncing Titan. "Too early, you idiots!" a voice yelled from nearby, but Ketan was too busy trying not to get thrown by a suddenly freaked-out Sabba to notice where. Apparently Titan had ruined their surprise.

Hunter struggled with her horse as it fought its head, wanting to run.

Another horse length and they would have been up in the netting, horses and all, and Ketan didn't like to imagine what that would have been like. "Get them!" the voice yelled again, and the woods around them erupted with ambushers rushing at the two women on horse back.

Hunter heard the growling cough of Titan, and drew her own sword as she got her horse under control. Her eyes took on a murderous look as she spotted Henri. "Henri! What did I tell you I'd do to you the next time we met!" She owed him.

"Time for you to die, Hunter Del Cor!" the man screamed, shoving another slightly less willing man towards them. "Kill her! Twenty gold for the one who takes her head!"

Ketan laughed, drawing her blade and decapitating the first pathetic excuse for a fighter that got near her. "These aren't warriors, Hunter, they're vermin!" she yelled.

Hunter ignored everyone, easily kicking them out of the way to get to Henri, still remembering his laughing face as he shot her full of arrows.

Eyes bulging in sudden panic, Henri fell over himself backwards, fumbling at his belt to grab the hunting horn that he was carrying. Desperately he blew on it, calling twice before Hunter's charge had him leaping behind a tree to save his head.

"Come on, you coward, face me," she howled, slashing some fool's throat open when he tried to attack her.

Two more rushed at the Duke, greed for the twenty gold they were promised driving them on. A few of the petty thieves turned and ran, seeing that they were little more than fodder for the two well-trained warriors.

"I don't think so, Hunter," Henri sneered, ducking behind another tree to avoid her as she tried to get around to him. "I think I'll just stay here and watch the show."

"Hunter..." Ketan yelled, pointing with her sword, "we have company!"

Unlike the previous rag tagged group that had come after them, the riders coming at them now were obviously well seasoned soldiers. As well they should be, they were among the best in the King's cavalry. Two groups came in answer to Henri's call, one from each side of the road, thundering towards them.

Hunter pulled her horse up sharply and turned its head, taking her back to Ketan's side. They would not survive this divided. She wished for a bow or a lance. "We could try and lose them in the trees," Hunter suggested.

Henri was screaming instructions that Ketan doubted the approaching riders could hear over the thunder of hooves. "I go where you go," Ketan smiled, twirling her blade, ready to follow.

Hunter smiled and nodded. Heels into her horse's side sent her forward into the thick foliage. She could hear them following behind as she wove them through the branches and brush, her mind furiously thinking. "Keep riding!" she shouted at Ketan, even as she reached up, catching a low hanging branch.

She was lifted out of the saddle, and her weight then brought her and the branch down so her feet barely touched the ground. As the first couple of riders came riding her down, she released the branch and the three horses reared up, frightened. The branch actually caught one of the riders in the face, knocking them off the horse, unconscious.

She pulled her blade and stabbed up, avoiding the hooves of the rearing beast, the metal slipping between the rider's armor.

The armored man fell from horseback, screaming weakly as the blade sank home in his flesh. Another of the riders swung at Hunter, forcing her back a step as he tried to then trample her under the hooves of his war horse. The third was still trying to calm his animal, but his intent was clear by the way he was gripping the long lance in his hands.

Two more riders burst past them, intent on chasing down Ketan.

"Keep riding," the desert woman grumbled, urging Sabba into a long circle so she could get back to where Hunter was. She wasn't about to just leave the Duke to face the rest of the cavalry alone.

Titan sprang from where he had been stalking, ripping a man from his saddle. The tiger's jaws instinctively went to the man's neck and bit down, crushing his spine even through the metal protection he wore around his neck.

Hunter danced away from the attacks, racing into the trees playing a dangerous game of tag.

The remaining rider hesitated, suddenly alone. That only lasted a few seconds though, as more riders had managed to crash through the forest, and once again they were off after Hunter.

"Get her! Forty gold and the King's favor for whoever brings me her head!" Henri's screaming was drawing closer as he finally reached where his own horse had been hidden.

"Run, Sabba. Run!" Ketan was bent over the horse's neck, yelling encouragements as she hung on for dear life. The horse truly was a wind through the trees, blurring through them. She let the horse run where it would, trusting in its instincts as they made a large circle back towards where Hunter had been.

"AHHH!" Ketan's scream was ripped out of her in surprise as the horse's legs tensed under her and they were suddenly flying over the edge of a decent size ravine. A stream had cut its way through the ancient bedrock, leaving a ten foot gap of nearly sheer rock in the forest floor. Sabba cleared the fissure easily.

The two riders behind them, laden down with heavy armor and on heavier horses, did not.

Hunter was like a hound with a scent. Her eyes narrowed as she heard Henri's voice, and she circled around to kill the man. The horses were not helping the men looking for her. In fact, they were having troubles in the thick woods.

"Leaving so soon, Henri," she breathed out harshly, her sword pointed at his breastbone. "Let us see how good you are without your traps, but know that I will have your head," she growled out the last part.

"You're dead, Hunter, you just don't know it yet!" He made to grab for his sword, stopping when she pushed the tip a little deeper into his chest, just nicking the skin.

"Who sent you? I know you didn't come up with this idea by yourself." Each word was punctuated with a jab to his chest.

He yelled in pain, feeling blood trickle down his chest. "She has more power than you could ever imagine."

"Who is she?" Hunter yelled. "The advisor?" She saw it in his eyes. "Why? Why all of this?"

"Because it's her will!" he screamed, flinching as the move pressed the tip just a little deeper into his skin. Something behind her caused him to smile slowly. "But you'll never find out why."

She didn't turn, instead, she stepped forward, sword circling out and around as she grabbed him and brought him in front of her as a living shield.

The three unmounted cavalry soldiers paused at that then resumed their steady walk towards her. They moved slow and cautiously, keeping an eye out for the Sand Tiger, who had already taken down two more of their number.

"It doesn't matter, Hunter, they'll still kill you," Henri gasped, grimacing as she pressed the sword closer to him.

Hunter laughed. "Three, there's only three of you? This isn't even hard. This will be your legacy, Henri. Betrayal of the Kingdom, and the worst swordsman ever," Hunter spat out.

"Three of the best of the King's army. Even Duke Del Cor will have problems with those odds," one of the three answered as they spread out, moving to flank Hunter.

Somewhere in the distance, yelling was coming closer, Ketan yelling Hunter's name as she rode fast.

"The King's army?" Hunter whispered stunned. The King wanted her dead, but Henri just admitted he was working for the advisor.

"Why?" she asked the men. "I have done nothing to warrant this attack. The King himself sent for me," she demanded.

"Your death is all the King requires of you," a second said, sword held at the ready as he moved closer.

"Don't you see, Hunter? You're already dead!" Henri squirmed, trying to get loose of her grip.

The betrayal cut deep. Ties to everything she had known and stood for were now gone. Gone was duty and honor for the King and Country that had no use for her.

"Hunter!" Ketan yelled, closer still.

She barely heard it though. "I guess you can now see what I am like without the trappings of honor and loyalty." She said the words deathly quiet, and drew the blade of her sword across Henri's throat, letting the man drop. Her green eyes blazing darkly.

The three soldiers barely acknowledged the dying man at her feet. They drew closer, within sword range of her, paused, taking in her stance, and then, almost as one, they were so well coordinated, the three attacked, swords slashing out at her.

Hunter saw every attack before the men knew they were going to do them. She was moving well before a sword could come anywhere near her. The first man she kicked in the knee, dropping him into the downward slash of the second man while she blocked a strike from the third.

It was a horrible dance of death with whirling blades and blood. In the end, it was her and one last man. She stopped mid swing and stood up, smiling. He looked at her, confused for a second, only to be tackled in the next moment by a furious Sand Tiger.

"Hunter!" Sabba crashed into the forest, Ketan clinging to her neck. She took in the bodies strewn around Hunter and Titan with a glance, not surprised anymore by Hunter's abilities. "We have to go. There's more coming!"

Hunter nodded, off kilter, feeling angry and shocked.

"Hunter..." Ketan pulled the horse to a stop near her lover, shocked by the expression on the Duke's face. "Hunter..." she said quieter, waiting for her to look up. "We have to go," she said again, quieter, and held out her hand. "Please?"

Hunter nodded again and reached up, taking Ketan's hand. "What happened to my horse?" It was an inane comment.

"He'll find us. Or he'll go back to the manor." Ketan pulled, helping Hunter swing up behind her on to Sabba's back. She had to make Hunter hold onto her waist. "Run, Sabba," she urged, letting the horse once again decide her own way, slower now with two riders.

#####3

Ketan kept an eye on Hunter, worried by the other woman's silence on the entire ride through the woods. They hadn't stopped until Hunter was completely lost, not even sure where she was going anymore. She had been trusting Sabba to find her way until they had finally stopped by a small stream to let the horse rest.

"Are you hurt?"

"No," Hunter said tersely. She was still fuming. How dare the King treat her as a traitor. She had given up so much for King and Country to have him send men out to kill her like a bandit in the road.

Making sure that Sabba kept walking so she didn't get over heated, Ketan said nothing for a bit, still keeping an eye on the Duke. "What now?" she asked finally.

"We find a safe place to make camp and regroup. This changes the plan." Now she needed a new plan.

The desert woman nearly sagged with relief. Thank the Elements that Hunter didn't want to keep going with the old plan. "That's a good start." Better than she'd come up with so far. "Will Sabba be alright to carry us both?"

"Not for a long distance. It will be too much for her," Hunter replied.

"So we walk?" Ketan was fine with that. She stroked the horse's neck. "Good girl," she whispered, patting her. "Which way?" Since Sabba kept trying to drink, not answering, Ketan looked to the Duke, smiling a little. "I don't know how you keep track of where you're going. All this green looks the same."

#####3

By night they'd found a place, a small overhang of rocks in the middle of another forest. Ketan had lost track of how many they'd passed through by then. The fire was small, but she crowded as close to it as she could, soaking in the heat. "No sign of Ryu yet. I hope she's all right." Titan

had hunted down a deer, which they had roasting slowly on the fire. Ketan's mouth watered at the thought of food after the long run and the fighting earlier.

"Me too," Hunter grumbled, tossing a rock angrily into the trees. She was still seething about having her own King turn on her. "I killed my fellow soldiers. For what? They were good men, only following orders." She wanted to blame Henri, but the King's soldiers could only be sent out by the King himself.

"Hunter, you did what you had to. You can't blame yourself for what happened." Gray eyes narrowed. "Orders from your King?"

"Those men are the King's private guards, the best of the best. They can only be sent out on the King's orders," she explained.

Ketan stared at her then looked back down at the venison. "I suppose that answers the question of if your King wants you dead."

And that made Hunter want to scream, to shout her rage to the night sky. She settled for kicking a rock, but inside she was still angry. "I've given up so much of my life for these lands, how can he...how dare he..." she sputtered.

"Hunter..." Ketan abandoned the meat, moving to kneel by Hunter's side, "if he has done this, if he's betrayed you, then he is the one without honor. This man, king, whatever, he isn't the land." It was hard to put her ideas into words.

Hunter slid to her knees, crumbling, resting her head against Ketan, crying. She had lost her god, and now she had lost everything else that had made her who she was.

"It's not who you are," Ketan whispered again and again, holding on to her tight. "You served your land, not him." She could only guess how adrift Hunter must feel.

"But they're one and the same." That was the teaching, and to separate them was hard to wrap her mind around.

"Why?" Ketan held onto her shoulders, willing her to meet her eyes. "Why must they be the same? Maklia is not the desert, the desert is not Maklia. No matter what she says, it isn't, we all know that."

Hunter wiped her eyes, and nodded. "I feel lost," she admitted.

"We know who's your enemy now, Hunter. We know where he is, what he's doing. We can stop him and her."

Hunter nodded and let her head sink back down so it rested on Ketan's stomach. "Yes, you're right. We do know." It was hard, though, to pull her mind out of the depression that was tugging at her thoughts.

"I don't know how that helps, but it must help somehow." Ketan reached out one arm, stretching so that she could pull the venison off the fire before it burned more.

"It does." Hunter released her hold on Ketan and sat back on the ground, wiping her face, slightly embarrassed she'd broken down into tears.

Silently, Ketan cut pieces of meat off and offered it to Hunter with a hopeful look. "Here, eat first, and then we can rest? We'll figure it out in the morning."

Hunter nodded, taking the meat.

Titan's ears perked up and he silently padded over to Ketan, looking at her hopefully.

Not being particularly sneaky about it, Ketan slipped pieces of meat over to the Sand Tiger, earning herself a tongue swipe to her hand. "I'll keep watch," she promised, doing her best to avoid looking as worried as she was.

Hunter nodded. "I'm sorry, this wasn't how I was planning to spend our night." She nibbled on the hot meat, forcing herself to eat even though she was not hungry.

"We're still alive. We're still all right." Ketan shifted closer so she could lean against Hunter's reassuring warmth. "I love you. That's all that matters."

Hunter nodded, leaning over and kissing Ketan's cheek. "I love you too." And they were still alive; now they needed a new plan.

#####3

Hunter was furiously pacing in the clearing. She was on watch, letting Ketan get some rest, the woman having stood on watch half the night. Her mind was furiously working to come up with a new plan. One plan was to go to war with her own King, but her small fiefdom would be crushed under the weight of the rest of the kingdom. A second plan would be to sneak into the castle and see what could be found. In five days there would be no moon, which would be a good time to try. But what would they do, where would they hide for five days?

"Deep thoughts." Ryu prodded the small remnants of the fire, getting a bit more flames out of the embers. Silver eyes glinted eerily in the light as the brown-haired woman looked up. "Are you all right?"

Hunter looked up, her steps slowing then stopping. "No, I'm not." And she felt like crying again. "I've been betrayed and it cuts more deeply than Catherine or finding out you weren't my god."

"Hmmm," Ryu hummed, looking down again at the small flames, coaxing them into burning a little brighter. "You must have had an idea that this might happen."

A deep breath was let out as Hunter sat next to the fire. "No. I never thought the King would try to kill me. I had begun to think that the advisor may set some pitfalls in my way. I'm almost positive she is the shadowy figure behind all this."

"Tell me about her?" Ryuu kept her voice low, aware that Ketan was sleeping nearby.

"Hmmm, I've never spoken to her one on one. She always wears black from head to toe, even her face is covered." Hunter was silent for a moment thinking. "Before I was sent to the desert she told the King she had a vision I would betray him, but the King dismissed it."

"Well, then you won't know anything until you spy on her." Silver eyes glinted in the light. "That is what you're planning on doing, spy on her in the castle to see if she has your Princess, if she's behind all of this?"

"Yes. In five days the moon will hide her face, and it will be easier to sneak into the castle on that night."

"That will be too late." Ryuu stood up, dusting off her hands. "I could get you in earlier than that."

"Too late. Too late for what?" Hunter asked, looking up at Ryuu.

"Too late to stop what's coming. Whatever it is, it won't wait until the new moon. It could all be over by then."

"If you don't know what it is, how do you know it will be too late to stop it? You are not making any sense." Hunter stared at Ryuu, the fingers of her right hand tapping against her thigh.

"I can't say." Seeing the irritation in the Duke's face, Ryuu held up a hand. "I can't say because I don't know how to tell you. There's a change coming, and it's coming quickly. Whatever it is, it's centered around you. But the new moon will be too late."

Hunter sighed, annoyed. "Okay then. I guess we should get inside as soon as possible."

Ryuu smiled. "Good. I'll be back soon. You should prepare yourselves."

"Prepare, how? For what?"

"For your trip," Ryuu laughed.

"You're being vague on purpose," Hunter said, eyes narrowing.

Laughter was her only answer as the other woman disappeared into the darkness among the trees.

Hunter felt a little better, but not much. Ryuu was helping, and that was something. She stood up, stretching, and started pacing again, her thoughts windmilling around in her head.

#####3

The sky was starting to lighten and it was cold, as the night had stolen most of the day's heat away. Her mind was focused. Hunter had spent hours letting her thoughts spiral out of control, but now, now that was over. She did not have the luxury of a meltdown. Too many needed her, especially the woman sleeping not far from her in the makeshift tent they had constructed for the night.

The Duke breathed out a breath and it streamed out as it occurred to her that she was an idiot. Quietly, she walked over to the tent and nudged Titan with her foot. The tiger looked up at her unhappily.

"Your turn for guard duty." The tiger seemed to make a face but understood the word guard and slowly, with a cat's dignity, got up, stretching, and slunk out into the pre-dawn world, letting Hunter into the tent. Hunter sat, taking off her boots, and then snuck under the blankets with Ketan.

Sleepily, Ketan snuggled closer, pulling the thick cloaks they were using as blankets around them both as she did. "Hmmm...you're cold. Is it time to get up?" she mumbled, half asleep.

"No, we're waiting for Ryuu. She has a plan," Hunter murmured into Ketan's thick hair. She breathed in, enjoying Ketan's scent. She smelled of home, if Hunter were to try and give it words.

"Ryuu came back?" Ketan managed to ask between yawns and sliding her warm hands up beneath Hunter's shirt, trying to warm the other woman.

"Yes, we talked briefly." What they talked about was vanishing from her mind as Ketan's fingers slid over her skin. She leaned forward, kissing the hollow of Ketan's throat. The pulse was slow and steady, comforting.

"Mmmm," Ketan hummed in appreciation, gray eyes opening at the touch of lips, and she smiled. "I'm guessing you don't feel like going back to sleep?"

"Not yet. As cheesy as it may sound, this may be the last time we have to ourselves in a while. I'd like to take advantage of the beautiful woman sleeping in my tent."

"Such a honey-coated tongue you have," Ketan teased, pushing the outlander onto her back so she could maneuver on top of her under the warm cloaks. Nimble fingers began to undo clothing. "What if I want to take advantage of you?"

Hunter smiled and relaxed into the touch, compliantly letting Ketan remove her clothes. "I think I would like that."

Making a show of tossing Hunter's shirt aside before she quickly pulled the warm blankets over them again, Ketan laughed in the near darkness. Her fingers spread out, traced across Hunter's

skin. "I think I would like that too," she whispered, bending down so she could kiss Hunter, slowly and deeply, taking her time.

Hunter could have imagined it, but she thought her toes curled with that kiss. "Mmmm," she hummed into the kiss, enjoying it.

"Maybe not honey-coated, but you do taste good," Ketan whispered when she finally pulled back, lips tingling. If this was to be their last time together before the king's palace, she was going to enjoy every moment. Her touches were slow and patient, seeking to prolong the enjoyment, not end it quickly.

Hunter was covered in sweat, her heart pounded in her chest, and her breaths came in pants. She had no idea how long Ketan had been torturing her, the pleasure almost painful. "Please," she begged.

"Soon," Ketan gasped, her own breathing ragged. Touching Hunter was addictive, something she never wanted to stop. She didn't want to torture though. With as much control as she could manage, she slid her finger down between Hunter's legs, following swiftly with her lips.

The muscles in Hunter's thighs tensed and her feet pressed down, lifting her hips just a bit. "Yes, oh, yes," her voice nearly a sob.

"Now," Ketan might have said, but she wasn't really certain if she said it out loud or just thought it. Hunter was so wet and ready, and it didn't take much to slide one then two fingers into her, lips and tongue busy tasting and stroking as well.

Somehow Hunter was still aware in the back of her mind she couldn't be loud, and rolled her head to the side, burying it in a cloak and muffling her cries as she came. It was like the sun rising inside her bones, all heat and light.

Licking her lips and humming in pleasure, Ketan climbed up the trembling body next to hers, sliding her arms around Hunter and holding her tight. "Perfect," she whispered, pressing a chaste kiss to Hunter's neck as the other woman recovered.

"Ugh," was the only coherent thing Hunter could manage to say.

Ketan's shoulders shook with laughter and she squeezed tight.

Hunter gave her a sloppy kiss on her neck, but other than that, was content to lie there enjoying her after sex stupor.

#####3

"I thought I told you to prepare yourselves?" an amused voice startled Ketan out of the sleep she hadn't even realized she'd fallen into.

"Go away," Hunter mumbled. "I haven't had a chance to return the favor."

"Too bad." Footsteps came closer. "I made breakfast, but we have to leave soon."

Ketan groaned, opening her eyes and wondering if she could throw something at Ryu to make her go away.

"I'm sorry," Hunter said, cracking open her eyes. "I'll have to owe you."

"That means living through whatever's about to happen," Ketan said, expression serious.

"I never had any intention of dying," Hunter countered, looking back at Ketan with serious green eyes.

"I'm holding you to that," Ketan whispered.

"Good. Now that you have that out of the way, we really do need to get going before sunrise." Ryu tossed a bundle of clothes at them, effectively ending the moment.

Hunter rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mom."

Ketan's eyebrows went up in surprise as the Goddess suddenly went a little red and turned away, hurrying back to the small fire where Titan was already dosing.

"We'll finish this later," the dark-haired woman promised, grabbing the clothes that had been tossed at them and squirming around under the cloaks trying to get dressed without getting out into the cold air.

"I have no doubt," Hunter purred out, trying to be seductive, but then just ended up laughing at herself.

"We have to get going," Ryu called again from the fire as Ketan started laughing as well.

"Yes, Mom," the desert woman called back, snickering as she got up.

#####3

"We're going to die!" Ketan yelled, again, eyes closed as tight as she could get them, face buried against Hunter's back. The world below them flew past, literally, as the silver dragon kept climbing higher and higher. She had no idea how Titan was handling being cradled in one of the dragon's claws, she only knew how tight she was holding onto Hunter's waist. "We're going to die!" she repeated.

If the silver dragon heard her scream, she gave no sign of it, long wings beating the cold air around them.

Hunter had no words. She'd never imagined this would be possible. It was horrifying yet exciting at the same time. She would never forget this moment as long as she lived.

"Tell me when it's over," Ketan whimpered, quickly shutting the one eye she'd opened to see if it had gotten any better. She couldn't even make out individual trees below them anymore.

Hunter nodded and reached a hand around, touching Ketan's leg in a comforting manner. "It will be fine," she said, finally.

"Are you both all right?" Ryuu's voice echoed through their thoughts as the dragon banked slightly to the right and continued flying, racing the coming sunrise. "Are you too cold?"

It took a moment, but Hunter got over her shock at Ryuu's voice in her head, and tentatively tried to talk back. "We're fine, just scared. We weren't born with wings, you know."

"I'm sorry." Ryuu answered, sorry that they didn't have wings, not that they'd been scared. The dragon banked a little bit more, careful not to tilt too far to one side. "We will be there soon. I'll provide a distraction to get you inside, then you will be on your own until I can join you."

It was terrifying and exciting, and it created a longing for something Hunter never realized that she wanted. Her eyes stung, but she looked all around her at the world that moved with such speed below them. This was freedom, there were no ties up here to bind one to anything. This is what she had looked for all her life.

Ketan's hand gripping almost painfully at her hip brought her back. Almost. Ketan was also something she had been searching for, without knowing, and she would forgo dreams of flight to stay grounded at the woman's side.

"I had no idea," she said to Ryuu.

"Amazing, isn't it? It's something that burns in the blood." Before either of them could comment on that, the dragon swung again, the claw that wasn't holding Titan pointing out ahead of them. *"There,"* the dragon's voice echoed in their minds. *"Do you see it, your King's castle?"*

Even Ketan risked a peek around Hunter's shoulder at that, spotting the lights burning in the early morning gloom. They looked so small from up here, but there were many lights even this early in the morning.

"Be ready. You will need to get off quickly as I distract them."

"How are you going to distract them?" Ketan yelled into the wind.

"By being me!" Laughter echoed in their minds as the dragon started to dive towards those lights, losing height frighteningly fast. The ground rushed towards them as she dove, wings folding in as she arched down out of the sky. Ketan was screaming, she was vaguely aware, as the dragon dove.

With a roar that shattered the early morning calm, Ryuu flared her wings and swept across the tree tops then up over the castle's outer walls.

"Now!" Ryuu shouted into Hunter and Ketan's minds, claws grabbing onto the top of one of the many towers, even as the courtyard's bellow erupted into chaos as she roared again.

They scrambled, not even prepared themselves for what Ryuu had done, scrambling through the tower window, Titan's frightened scrambling leaving deep gouge marks in the softer stone.

Blinking dazedly, Hunter didn't even really remember the frantic dive through the narrow window.

"I really wish she would have told us what she was doing," Ketan grumbled from where she lay splayed out on the stone floor next to Hunter.

Outside, the dragon roared again and leapt into the air. The entire stone tower shuddered as her weight came free from its roof. The shouting and chaos in the courtyard below was reaching a panicky tone as the dragon was briefly spotted before once again climbing into the sky above.

Hunter shook her head, clearing it, and then rose to her feet. "That would have been nice." She brushed herself off then offered a hand to help Ketan up. Looking around, it seemed as if they were in a forgotten storage room.

"I'm really happy to be on the ground again," the desert woman muttered, checking her sword then pulling the hood of her cloak up over her head. It wasn't the same as the head dress she would normally have worn on a raid, but it was close enough. "Where to now? I don't even know which tower we're in."

Hunter leaned back against the stonewall and looked out the window. "We're in the east tower. We need to get down to the lower levels. The advisor's study and rooms are supposed to be below, near the dungeons."

"Of course," Ketan smiled, picking her way through the jumbled crates and forgotten knickknacks that had been stored in the top of the tower. "Why is it always near the dungeons?"

Hunter looked over perplexed. "You've done this before?" She crouched down, checking Titan. The tiger growled grumpily then soothed under Hunter's touch, rubbing his face into her hand.

"Sneak around the King's Palace?" Ketan flashed a smile at Hunter as she found the door and cautiously tested it to see if the handle was unlocked. "I snuck into your room, remember?"

"Yes, but I didn't sleep near the dungeons." Hunter made a face at the thought of that then gave a quizzical look, asking without words if the door was locked.

Titan's fur was still raised slightly, but he followed them, crouched down, still very unhappy about the recent experience he'd had to suffer.

"I never said you were the only one I visited that night," Ketan whispered then went quiet as she pulled up on the simple latch. The door opened inwards just enough for her to peer out. "Stairs," she barely whispered. "Empty." The door swung open further, enough for her to slip out into the bare stone stairs that spiraled downwards.

Hunter frowned at that as she and Titan followed behind. She opened her mouth then closed it, trying to ignore the jealousy she was feeling. Normally she had no problem being a good soldier, but her jealousy was making it very hard. Finally, she whispered out, "Who else were you sneaking off to see?"

Ketan paused, one foot on the stairs, and turned to look at Hunter, an eyebrow raised. "Are you jealous?" she snickered quietly, then remembered where they were and went quiet again. "Shouldn't we talk about this later?" she whispered.

Hunter was quiet for a moment, thinking about it. "Fine, but I'm not going to forget about this." Now she was very unsettled and grumpy. Quietly seething, she followed Ketan down the stairs.

Ketan looked over her shoulder, gray eyes widening as she saw the expression on Hunter's face. "You're serious?" This wasn't the place for this, but Hunter looked more than just a little jealous. Grumbling under her breath, she tested the first door they came to, glad to see it let into what looked like an unused bed chamber. Grabbing Hunter's hand, she tugged her inside, closing the door after a still upset Titan entered. "You think I went and saw other women who were sleeping naked?" She kept her voice low.

"I don't know. Did you? I mean, you obviously have more experience with...um...dating, than I do." Ketan's little friend in the desert was proof of that; at least she'd gotten to punch what's her name.

Ketan stared at her, pushing off her hood to reveal gray eyes gone wide in shock. "You think I..." she paused, eyes narrowing dangerously. "Do you think I've been going after women other than you?" Keeping her voice low was hard, since she really wanted to yell at the stupid woman in front of her.

Titan sat on his haunches and yawned, looking back and forth between the two women.

"Well, you brought it up and the statement bothered me, and made me feel insecure and jealous." It was hard to admit, but it was the truth, and Hunter realized her best bet to keep her relationship intact at the moment.

Ketan sighed, the anger draining away in the face of truth. "I've only had one other lover, and you punched her when you met her. There's no one else. I wasn't sneaking around the castle going from woman to woman." It hurt a little that Hunter would have even thought that. "Other than you, I was also supposed to search the dungeons and see if any of the missing tribe people were there."

"I didn't punch her very hard," Hunter said defensively. "Only one? But you're you, I would have thought you'd have women and men fighting for your attention." Hunter nodded in thought. "Well, works out for me, less bloodshed." She'd pledged herself to Ketan, and she wasn't giving that up without a fight, so this just made things easy.

Ketan rolled grey eyes and stepped closer, kissing the outlander slowly, trying to put into it how very much she loved her. "We have to work on your insecurity issues, my love," the dark-haired desert woman whispered. "Can we keep searching for the Princess now? Just remember, you owe me, Duke Del Cor," Ketan whispered, pulling away reluctantly. Shaking her head at the insanity, she pulled up her hood again and checked the door.

Hunter just nodded, not up to forming words yet.

Cracking open the door, Ketan made sure the stairs were still empty and edged out onto them. The chaos outside was dying down now, as not as many shouts were heard anymore. "How far down?" she whispered, starting to slip down the stairs, ears straining for any sound of anyone else coming up.

Hunter tried to remember how far up they were when Ryuu had landed and tossed them off. "Uh, we're almost to the main floor then we have to find the set that goes down." Although the King's rooms would be up in the north tower, it would be so easy to slip inside and slit his traitorous throat. For the first time ever she had thoughts of treachery, and they tasted good. She checked her darker desires...Princess first then the King.

Ketan was tempted to let Hunter lead, but she was more familiar with sneaking around than the Duke. Nodding, she continued down the stairs, letting out a shaky breath of thanks as they reached the bottom door without encountering anyone else. Cracking open the door, her eyes widened suddenly and she eased it closed immediately. Holding up two fingers, she pointed at the door.

Hunter frowned, uneasy with the thought of killing guards who were only doing what they thought was right. It wasn't their fault. But she gripped her sword, knowing what they had to do.

Ketan paused, considering her lover. Hefting her own curved blade, she used her free hand to point at the hilt instead of the blade. It was more risky to not kill them, but she wasn't sure Hunter would like herself if she killed them.

Hunter nodded her understanding then pointed to herself and to the left, letting Ketan know she would handle the one to their left.

With a nod of understanding, Ketan grabbed the door latch. Meeting Hunter's green eyes, she smiled. She'd asked for an adventure after all. Seeing the Duke nod, she yanked the door open, blade up and the hilt coming down at the startled guard's head, even as she cleared the doorway.

Hunter followed quickly behind, her free arm going up over his throat so his chin rested on her elbow. The muscle flexed and pulled him down so she could get her hilt to his temple as well as blocking the air so he could not yell for help.

She eased the man down and quickly took off his boots. One sock she stuffed into his mouth, while the other she used to tie his hands behind his back. She checked his nose, happy to find he was still breathing.

Ketan had the other man trussed up, using his belt instead and part of his shirt to stuff in his mouth. "In there?" she nodded at the door behind them, knowing they didn't have long now.

Hunter nodded, but she was uneasy. It felt almost too easy, only two guards.

The two guards were stuffed into the first room off the stairs, and Ketan eased down the hallway, skin crawling at the thought of how exposed they were. There, she finally spotted the entrance to the dungeons, her steps slowing even further when she realized there wasn't anyone guarding it. It was too easy, and she looked over her shoulder at Hunter worriedly. There had been guards here the last time she'd tried to get down those dark stairs.

The fire in the metal scones on the walls seemed to dance as they crept down the hallway. Hunter froze then forced herself to keep moving; there was no breeze here. The flames should not be moving. "Faster," she whispered as she picked up her own pace.

Everything in Ketan urged her to turn back, go back the way they had come. Instead, she moved faster, racing down the hall to the dark shadow-filled stairway that descended.

One by one the fire in those scones flared and seemed to jump out of their metal containers and slowly joined together, creating a huge monster of flame. It roared at them, spewing fire.

Titan beat them all to the stairs.

"A fire elemental?" Ketan yelled, surprised to see something like that here, among the outlanders. She was only a few steps behind Titan though, racing down the stairs, almost falling down them.

Hunter didn't say anything. She paused on the first step down and turned. Gathering herself, she looked deep inside the creature, seeing that the ties anchored it here, and unleashed her will, severing the magical bindings and releasing the creature back to the elements. She staggered back and fell a couple of steps as a headache exploded in her skull. Ketan's sure grip on her arm kept her from a painful fate at the bottom of those dark steps.

"Ryuu said to be careful doing that," the desert woman hissed, holding onto the swaying woman to keep her from tumbling all the way down the stairs. "So much for them not knowing we're here." Titan was down ahead, and she concentrated on getting Hunter down the stairs, following the Sand Tiger.

Hunter leaned heavily on Ketan. "I know she said to be careful, but do you know a better way to stop those things?" Hunter was all for suggestions. She was just thankful she didn't have a bloody nose this time.

"Running?" It wasn't much of a suggestion, but it really was all that Ketan had as she supported Hunter down the stairs, fully expecting someone at the bottom. When there wasn't, she looked around suspiciously. "Where is everyone?"

Hunter bit her tongue to silence a groan as she leaned against the stone wall for a moment to get her thoughts together. "I don't know. Maybe they're all chasing a dragon," she said, finally, once her thoughts were back together.

The Duke really didn't look all that stable. "Stay here," Ketan whispered, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek. "I'll look for the entrance to the advisor's chambers."

Hunter wanted to argue but didn't. She looked at Titan and pointed to Ketan. The tiger looked indignant but got up, following the other woman.

The dark-haired woman crept along the curiously empty dungeon. The last time she had come down here it had been full of petty thieves and others who had dared to insult the King, along with a few desert tribes people. Now it was eerily empty, and the silence was worse than confronting guards.

Titan was the one who finally found the small cell that looked like the rest, but didn't quite smell as bad or have as much filth on the ground.

Looking carefully, Ketan could see the way the back wall could swing inwards. Patting the tiger's head in praise, she hurried back to where Hunter was still propped up against the wall. "You don't look too good," she whispered, taking the Duke's arm again.

"It wasn't just one elemental, it was several being forced to work together to make the larger elemental. I had to cut all their physical forms."

"Can you fight?" Ketan asked worriedly as she guided the outlander to the cell with the secret door.

"Yeah. I'm feeling better already." And she was, the headache was subsiding. "Remind me to talk to Ryu about that sometime. I'm not even certain what it is that I do."

"She'll probably just answer you with one of her cryptic sayings," the desert warrior whispered, going quiet as she found one of the stones in the wall that was looser than the rest. Pushing against it hard, something clicked inside the wall and a four foot section swung inwards. Suddenly, they could hear a low chanting coming from somewhere inside.

"Interesting," Hunter murmured as the wall swung away.

"No wonder prisoners don't get released very often," Ketan whispered back, trying to see in the darkness ahead of them. Cautiously, she stepped through the secret door, sword point leading the way. The walls around her were natural, not carved by the hands of people, at least.

There were many voices chanting ahead.

"Oh, chanting can't be good." She couldn't make out the words, but still, the sound of it made Hunter's skin crawl.

There was a large part of Ketan's brain screaming at her that it was too easy, too simple to get this far. It had to be a trap. But they couldn't leave, not without the Princess. Hunter's honor wouldn't let her, and Ketan knew better than to argue again. Instead, she crouched down, trying to sink into the darkness of the natural tunnel and inch forward, eyes wide and ears straining.

Titan growled, a low sound that seemed to echo loudly in the tunnel. He smelled darkness and danger. His eyes were made for night hunting, and he spotted the woman in the shadows flickering at the other end.

Hunter frowned and turned her head slightly to check their rear. There was nothing.

Ketan froze, not seeing what the tiger did, but trusting his instincts.

"Hunter?" she whispered the question, not seeing anything. But she could hear Titan's rumbling next to her.

"I don't see anything," Hunter whispered back, but the hairs were standing up on the back of her neck. She moved forward, sword ready. *'Move forward and get out of this place.'*

It was the oddest thing. Before her a woman's shape seemed to peel out of the darkness, becoming form and function, one hand was outstretched while the other clasped an orb. "That pesky dragon made me move up my time-table, and it might have all failed. But now I have you, Hunter, and to think I almost had you executed."

"Hunter!" Ketan yelled, trying to keep her feet under her due the winds slamming her up against the side of the tunnel, pinning her there.

"Your friends aren't invited to this party, Hunter," the woman cackled, pointing the orb at the two of them. The stones moved, swallowing up both Ketan and Titan, sealing over Ketan's voice in mid-scream. "Better, don't you think?"

Hunter couldn't breath, for all the wind blowing in her face; it was hard to get a breath. Then it was gone, and she was dumped to the floor below. "Ketan?" Hunter was on her feet, eyes scanning the walls. Glaring, she turned her gaze back to the advisor. Gathering her will, she lashed out, not at the woman, but at the orb in her hand.

"Where are they?" Hunter shouted as the orb cracked and a thin line of blood trickled from her nose. She sagged now that the encounter was over for the moment, her adrenaline leaving her, making her feel tired and worn. She wiped her upper lip, coming away with blood. "Ryu, guide me," she said unconsciously out of habit. She checked the wall where Titan and Ketan had been and found nothing. With a bone-weary sigh, she started forward out of the tunnel.

There was a sharp sting to the back of her neck and all she had time for was a muttered curse before she was unconscious.

#####3

It was completely dark, so dark that at first she thought she'd gone blind or had her eyes covered. Ketan had only experienced darkness so thoroughly once before, when she was young and had gone too far into one of the deep desert caves. At first she'd panicked, which had lasted right until she'd slammed off of what felt like a rough stone wall. Titan found her while she'd been feeling to see if her nose was bleeding, and she'd wrapped her arms around him with a cry of relief. At least she wasn't alone, wherever it was they were.

"We have to find Hunter," she whispered into his fur, getting up and holding onto him while her body tried to figure out if it wanted to fall over again.

In such all consuming dark, Titan couldn't see either, but he had his ears and he had his nose. The place smelled of wet, rotted corpses, and death, death that was not clean or natural, but of a sickening decay that ate away at everything killing you slowly before you realized you were dead. He rubbed his head against his human mate's, happy to have at least one of them with him. They had thumbs and were much better with doors and gripping things.

Ketan put her foot into something wet and slimy, and she was suddenly glad she couldn't see whatever it was that had made such a sickening sound when she'd stepped on it. "Can you see the way out, Titan?" She shook what felt like a rib cage off her foot, shuddering.

He lifted his head, sniffing, looking for a breeze. There were several, and he had to sort them, choosing his best options. His brain narrowed it down to two that might be exits and entrances.

He turned to the right, following the breeze that carried the sharp stink of human sweat. Crossing in front of Ketan, he tapped his tail against her stomach, not happy with her grabbing his tail but knowing she was like a newly birthed kit.

Blind and helpless, she needed something to hold on to or she'd be lost forever, and he needed her to open the door when they found it.

"Sorry, Titan," Ketan murmured, feeling his fur puff up a bit as she held onto his tail, and stumbled along behind him. There were more disgusting things to step in, and she felt wet slickness against the thick boots she'd been wearing. She wished she could have gone back to look for her sword, but she didn't dare lose her handhold on the Sand Tiger.

Titan led them to the smooth side of a wall and the breeze came from above. He gave a yowl of annoyance, his tail flicking angrily from Ketan's grasp, and he rose up on

his hind legs, his front paws landing on the wall, his claws unsheathed, scoring the stone. He stood taller than Ketan on his hind legs, and he sniffed. The door was above them.

Feeling up the side of his body, Ketan had to stand on tiptoes to touch the door that he was pushing against with his head. "Good boy," she praised, relieved that there actually was an exit from this sightless hell. The smell of rotting flesh was everywhere around them now, and she had to breathe through her mouth, trying not to gag on the smell. She couldn't get her fingertips into the thin space between the door and the rocks around it.

Grimacing in distaste, she bent down, rooting around until she found something that might work. "Forgive me," she whispered to the unknown corpse, and pulled hard on the bone she'd found, one of the ones in the leg. Shattering it against the stone wall, she leaned up again, using the thin end to start prying open the trap door.

Titan's ears cocked back, registering the sound of tiny, clawed feet scrambling on stone. The tiger dropped to the ground, his fur rising along his back...rats. Big ones from the sound.

"Crap," Ketan grunted as she heard closer rustling and Titan's low growl. Trying to work faster, she forced the bone into the space, cursing as it broke and she had to try again.

From above, the sound of a metal bolt being drawn back was heard, and then the wooden trap door was flung open. "I swear I left you alone for thirty minutes," came Ryuu's quiet tones.

"They were a long thirty minutes." Ketan squinted into the sudden light then scrambled up through the opening.

With the infusion of light, the rats stopped, scurrying back into the blacker parts of the shadows. But Titan could see their bloated, diseased bodies and red eyes, and he growled a warning to them. Then he yelped as a strong hand grabbed him by the ruff of his neck and lifted him out. Instinctively, he went limp.

Ryuu grunted with the tiger's weight, but hauled him up. Rolling to the side of the trapdoor, the tiger was released and he ended up sprawled over her. The two regarded each other in a surprised silence, and for a moment neither felt the grace and power of being a god or a tiger.

"Have you seen Hunter?" Ketan asked, trying to avoid laughing at the matching looks of surprise.

Titan was the first to act, scrambling off the woman and retreating a little to groom himself.

"She's not with you?" This was not good.

"No. There was a woman, with an orb?" Ketan frowned, things got blurry around then. "I think the stones swallowed Titan and me."

Ryuu frowned at that and stood, shutting the door. "I picked up your panicked thoughts, but Hunter's always been muted to me. I can't sense her at all." She wiped her hands and looked Ketan over. The woman appeared unharmed.

"We weren't panicked." Ketan stepped away from the trap door as something inside banged against it. "Not much, I mean," She amended. "Maybe Titan can find her?" She needed a sword. Then she was going to take that sword and cut the orb woman's head off with it. Yes, she decided that she liked that plan.

"Tell me about this woman with the orb?" Ryuu asked, and made her way to the only door in the room, which led out into a dark tunnel.

Ketan frowned as she tried to remember, picking up a hefty looking rock to use as a weapon for now. "Titan could see her before we could. She came out of the shadows, I think. It was hard to watch her, and I think she made the rocks move. Even the most powerful Earth Elemental master couldn't have done that."

"Out of the shadows?" Not good indeed. But more and more, it was making sense why the corruption inside this castle was blocked from her view.

"That means something to you?" Ketan traded the rock in for a bigger one.

"North of here, beyond the Plains of Drakemore in the Southern Kingdom," she grinned at the irony. "I know they call themselves the Southern Kingdom, but there are even more south than them. A limited worldview. In this Kingdom there are several gods that vie for power and attention. There is a Goddess of dark thoughts and dark deeds. Her chosen are assassins that can creep in and out of the shadows at will." There were no guards as they moved along the tunnel, which meant that Laurel was on her final, last desperate gambit for power. "This Goddess's first Chosen was a hate-filled woman named Laurel. The Goddess of Shadows did something when she made her first chosen, I don't know what, but Laurel has been alive since the exodus."

Ketan sighed. "This is why the desert tribes avoid the gods; it always turns out badly."

The amount of knowledge and power the woman had time to accumulate was scary, if Ryuu dwelled on it too much. "You avoid the gods because your forbears lost faith in the promised lands the Moon Goddess foretold, and made the choice to settle in the desert. Their pride kept them from the gods. Instead, they thought they could bend the elements to their wills, but even that came at a price. Your people have to give them blood, and the more blood the stronger the elemental gives you favor." She stopped and pointed back at the pit. "That pit back there is the dark corruption that awaits anyone with talent and a thirst for power. That pit, I would guess, is filled with the bodies sacrificed to Laurel's elementals."

Ketan swallowed, uncomfortable with that direct answer. She looked away, her mother's hate-filled gaze popping to mind. "It's our way." She hurried to keep up. "What does she want with Hunter?"

Ryuu sighed sadly. "Laurel and I fought once before. She sought to steal some of my godhood, for herself. I was weak when she caught me, recently given birth to a beautiful girl. I named her Vlais, in honor of her Muayana. She had blonde white hair and green eyes."

Ketan stumbled, surprised. "You have a daughter?"

Ryuu's eyes misted over, and she cleared her throat. "She took Vlais. I tried to stop her, and in the fight Vlais fell into a river, and I thought she drowned. Laurel escaped and I retreated into sleep, too depressed to do anything else. I slept until Hunter woke me, because her blood called to me. It called to me because she is of my blood."

It wasn't quite as shocking as it would have been if Ketan didn't know Hunter. "That explains how good she is at...well...almost everything." They both went silent to make sure the tunnels ahead were empty. Somewhere far ahead of them, there was chanting again. "What is she going to do?"

"I don't know. I do know we've pushed her into rushing. It's too soon. I get the feeling of urgency. But the end goal is hidden from me," Ryuu admitted. "First things first. You need a weapon." Ryuu closed her eyes and focused, and deep inside the North, in a forgotten armory, she plucked a sword, drawing it through time and space to her hand.

"Nice trick," Ketan whispered. It was either just accept things as they came or curl up into a ball somewhere. "Nice sword," she whispered again, taking the offered sword, impressed by its perfect balance and the faint markings along the side that glowed faintly. The rock was dropped without a second thought.

"That it is. It belonged to the Daughter of War. It should serve you well." Ryuu looked at the blade almost wistfully, passed down from Captain of the Guard through the ages until jealousy and treachery had made it a forgotten artifact in a dusty armory.

They moved as quickly as they could deeper into the tunnels, towards the sound of chanting. It was loud enough now that Ketan could make out words, but they weren't in any tongue she recognized. "What are they saying?" She barely breathed the words as the first flickering of torchlight became visible.

Ryuu had her head cocked to the side, listening. "A lot of nonsense words and something about raising the firstborn of the God of Night." She huffed out a breath. "There is no God of Night," she explained. "There is a Goddess of the Moon and a Goddess of Death, both of which can be loosely interpreted to God of Night. I'm the first and only born of the Moon, and Death has no children."

"So it's all pointless?" Ketan didn't sound so sure of that as she crawled forward to peer around the corner, down into the brightly lit chamber beyond.

There were dozens of people gathered around a hole in the floor chanting. Built to the side of the hole was a raised platform much like a hangman's gallows, where ten bodies were hanging from their arms. Six were still struggling, four hung limp and lifeless, hilts of daggers protruding from their ribs.

"Hunter's King is there," Ketan whispered, fingers tightening around the hilt of her new sword as she spotted the man standing near the hanging bodies.

"All of you have sacrificed someone you love for this cause, for this chance at ultimate power," came a chilled and hollow voice. "We have had to rush, losing the ascension of the darkest night, and that will weaken the ritual. But we have a gift! Blood Kin to the Godling D'Spar himself should give us the boost we have lost."

Confused by the words, Ketan glanced over her shoulder at Ryuu, a questioning look on her face. Next to her she could feel Titan tense, all his muscles ready to spring.

The King laughed out, "And you wanted me to kill her! Looks like I was right." Bits of gore and blood glistened in his beard, hair, and off his clothes.

The advisor gave a tight smile. She gestured and two servants brought a weakly struggling Hunter up the stairs.

Ketan grunted at the sight of her lover and the obvious beating she'd taken. Nostrils flared as she looked around for a way down that would let her get close to the advisor.

Ryuu's eyes widened in understanding. "She's going to raise the dead. They think they're getting his godly energy, but she's raising him from the dead." She cursed the tight tunnel and how it confined her to this form. "Stop them. We must stop them," she hissed out.

"We'll stop them," Ketan hissed, slinging herself up over the edge of the tunnel and down onto the floor below. There were a lot of them between her and Hunter, and no time to do something clever. "Del Cor!" she yelled, the unfamiliar sword swinging in her hands to take the head off the nearest dark-robed figure.

Hunter stared around her. On the platform was Matthew and Ketan's brother, his group must have been caught out in the desert, and the Princess, gaunt and thin but alive, her eyes darting down below to the King. All lies, a false trail to nowhere, bread crumbs left to keep her busy and out of the way. "Traitors, all of you, a poison to this land. May my blood cleanse this place of you," she spat out.

Her head shot up with the shout of 'Del Cor', and she smiled as her eyes searched out Ketan. Then she gasped in pain; she would have screamed, but she could not draw breath. Looking down, eyes widened, she saw the dagger in her chest.

For just a moment green eyes met gray, and Ketan smiled, happy to have found her love again. Then things slowed to a crawl as she saw the advisor step forward, a dagger in hand and cold smile in place, and plunge it into Hunter's chest. "NOOOOO!" she screamed, cutting through two more of the acolytes in her way as she tried desperately to get to her love.

Beside her Titan roared, a much more impressive sound than it had once been, filling the small chamber as he clawed his own bloody path towards his human.

"I will not be cheated in my final hour again," the Advisor hissed. "It has been said that you have no heart, now it is proven true." She pulled the dagger out and blood sprayed out into the air, and then she pushed Hunter into the pit.

The once Duke of Del Cor landed on a pile of bones, a figure laid out in final rest. Blood pumped out, coating the bones and pooling under her body.

"NOOO!" Ketan screamed again, tears blurring her vision as she tried to fight faster, to somehow reach Hunter before it was too late, even though she knew it was too late the moment the dagger had hit home.

On the pile of bones that she had fallen onto, Hunter's vision went dark, and then she was suddenly standing beside her own body. She felt detached from the fighting around her, from everything that was happening as she watched a person who did not exist move closer.

Hunter saw the woman with the raven-colored hair standing next to her body. Saw her look at her with sad, fathomless eyes. Hunter knew this woman could take her away from the pain. But the woman merely bent down and placed a kiss on her cheek, "I mark you for you are god-born, and true death comes in days not seconds for us. You may still die, and I will take you from mortal suffering, or you may live. I mark you so I will know the next time we meet." Then she was gone to tend to other souls of the slain.

Ryuu was next to Ketan. "Laurel!" she cried out, and the advisor flinched at her true name. "You will pay for this."

"Why should I pay?" the advisor cried out. "You're the one who interfered to save your lover. None of us would be here, in this timeline, if you hadn't moved the line of fate. She was meant to die, and Kia should have killed me and my puppet Queen a decade or so later. But no, you played the part you were not meant to play," the advisor sneered, raising her hands, dagger still in them. "Your brother is waking!" She started towards the remaining living sacrifices.

Ketan flinched, the sword of an acolyte suddenly getting close enough to draw blood before her own sword took his head off. It was like riding the night mare in her dreams...for every one she killed, there seemed to be two more between her and Hunter.

The floor shook, and a tortured moan echoed through the room. Everyone in the room stopped and looked around.

"What is that?" Ketan yelled, her free hand going to her ear as the moan happened again, louder this time.

"Tell me, Ryuu, have you missed your brother. He misses you, still holds a grudge from the first time you killed him. Did you know that while you were distracted fighting him, that's when the God of War reined in his daughter? The exact moment you struck the killing blow is when he finally collared her and hid her away as punishment for defying him." Laurel measured her words carefully so each one would strike a blow.

Looking around worriedly, Ketan paused, seeing the horrified expression on Ryuu's face. "What is she talking about?" Something very bad was coming, she could feel it in her stomach.

From inside the pit, the bones shook themselves free of the stone and dirt.

The King looked around, confused. "What's going on? We're supposed to get his power, not bring him back to life!" Some of the remaining acolytes broke at that, running screaming.

"I lied, you drunken fool," the advisor said with a sneer.

"She's woken him up. But the ritual is flawed, so he's not really alive or dead. He is just as he is only now able to control his consciousness and his body, such that it is."

"Him?" Ketan grabbed Ryuu's shoulder, shaking her. "Who is he? No more riddles, Ryuu. I need to know how to get to Hunter!"

From inside the pit, a dragon made of bone shook itself and reached up, grabbing the lip of the hole and pulling himself up.

"My half-brother, D'Spar, first son of Korgon and some poor mortal slave woman, commander of the First Kingdom army that marched over the Impassible Mountain range to destroy the women of the Exodus. We fought over the plains and I wounded him. He must have made it back this far when he retreated then died from his wounds," Ryuu answered, looking pale for a god.

"How do we kill him?" Ketan couldn't see Hunter's body anymore, but she had to be somewhere down there, near that skeleton of a dragon, made from still, rotting bones and flesh. It was an image that would drive you mad if you looked too long.

"He's not alive or dead. I don't know, this hasn't really come up before! I'll change to my dragon form, it will be tight in here, and lead him away from the pit. You need to free them and get out of here."

"Not without Hunter!" Ketan yelled, ducking under a stray bone and sprinting for the pillars that the Princess was still strapped to. She'd either get Hunter back or kill the one Ryuu had called Laurel. Preferably, both.

The godling once known as D'Spar, child of Korgon, leader of the armies of the First Kingdom, handsome and athletic, was now a mass of rotting flesh and glimmering white bones. He rose out of the pit roaring with anger at all who were living around him and tore into the closest mortal. The man screamed as boney claws sliced through him.

"Ryuu!" Ketan screamed, ducking under part of a man's body that went flying past her. Her sword scraped along the bone of the undead dragon's claws, doing little as she tried to get around him.

There was a responding roar, and the undead dragon's head turned towards the sound, dark, hollow eyes seeming to gleam with hate, and the beast surged out of the pit towards the silver dragon that filled the area Ryuu had just been standing in.

Frightened and confused, the mortals ran like rats off a sinking ship, but had nowhere really to flee to.

The chaos was good, giving Ketan an opening, finally. She leapt over a snarling Titan, using him to block an acolyte, and up onto the sacrificial platform. She'd lost track of Laurel, but the Princess was still there. "Hi, Princess, we're here to rescue you," she bit out, slashing at the ropes that tied the young woman to the pole. "Good luck!" she yelled, still moving to the next one that was still alive.

Everything in her screamed to go to Hunter, but she couldn't just leave these people here, helpless. "Mathew! Bayyan!" Her sword went to work again, cutting through their bonds. She'd find out how they'd ended up here later.

"Ketan?" her brother said the moment the gag was worked out of his mouth. "How?"

"Later, Bayyan. Mathew, free the others!" She freed the last bond holding her brother and grabbed his arm. "Did you see where Hunter went?"

"Questions later," Matthew said, rubbing his arms to get the feeling back. "We need to find a way out of here. I'm pretty certain I don't want to be between two dragons."

Bayyan nodded at both of them. "I'm sorry, sister, she was thrown into the pit."

"Get out of here, all of you!" Ketan yelled, hugging her brother swiftly and then Mathew before running for the pit. She'd find Hunter, one way or the other, but she wasn't leaving here without her. She hoped that they could hear her over the roaring that filled the cavern, shaking the rocks around them. Pieces of the ceiling above were starting to come loose as the dragons fought, crashing down onto the floor below, adding to the chaos.

At the bottom of the pit, pale and lifeless, hidden under debris, was Hunter's body.

"No," Ketan whispered, sliding and falling through the bones and other body parts to slide to stop next to Hunter. She was dimly aware of the battle raging above her between the dragons, but

she didn't care. If she paid attention, she'd panic even more. "Don't you dare be dead, Del Cor," she tried to command, the effect ruined by trembling in her voice as she reached Hunter's side. "Hunter?" Carefully, she pushed aside the debris, revealing the Duke.

There was no answer, only silence. A terrible silence that seemed to swallow up even the sounds of the dragons.

"Tears for the fallen. Does it hurt to see her like this? Love only betrays and lies, it takes everything away. So in truth you should thank me, for I spared you an even greater pain in the long run," Laurel's voice hissed out from where she stood at the top of the pit looking down on the scene.

"You..." Ketan turned gray eyes so dark they looked black. "You did this." Her free hand found the hilt of the knife and pulled. The long, thin blade came free disturbingly easily, with little blood. "I'm going to kill you." There was a half formed plan in her mind to somehow trade Laurel's life for Hunter's. Either way though, the bitch was going to die.

"Really, and you without magic of your own, how will you do that when I can do this." She raised her left palm out over the pit, which seemed to glow for a second, and then all the blood began to run together, forming a monster very similar to those they had fought in the desert.

"I'll rip your throat out with my teeth if I have to!" Ketan yelled, cursing as she slashed at the blood monster then sprinting away from it as it reformed behind her. "Bayyan!" she yelled.

"Ketan!" her brother answered, still looking somewhat dazed. He blanched when he saw the creature she was fighting. "Fuck, fuck fuck," he muttered then looked around for a weapon.

"Not a sword!" Ketan yelled, slashing again with just as much result. "Your magic! Use the elements!"

"Right, magic." He looked around, not knowing how, but knowing he had to.

Ketan slipped on a bone and nearly went down. The monster was right there, and for a second, she thought she would be joining Hunter sooner than she'd planned. Then Titan was there, claws and teeth rending at the blood monster, buying her the time to get up on her feet again. "Bayyan!" she yelled again.

"Come on, you stupid things, I know you're there. Look at all this blood to be had, the room is nearly flooded with it." He could see them in the torches that flickered and swayed in the room. "I need you! Do something!" On the last word, his voice seemed to change and the fire in the torches leapt from the wood and began to intertwine, spinning together until they formed a humanoid creature of flames. Bayyan's forehead was dotted with sweat. "Look, see, see all that blood, it's all for you."

Laurel swiveled around, her eyes narrowing at the young man. "Impressive, but untrained." She shouted at the few remaining underlings, "Stop him!"

The elemental of flame streaked down upon the creature of blood, a fist slamming through the middle of the fluid. A horrible stench filled the area as well as the sound of sizzling.

Burning blood was another one of those scents that Ketan would rather have never smelled again. Leaving the elemental to fight the blood creature, Ketan started after Laurel again. All around them larger pieces of the ceiling were starting to tumble down.

"Mathew," she yelled at the man who was helping the Princess, "help Bayyan!" A piece of roof slammed into the platform, showering them all with splinters. With a leap, she was up on the platform, slashing at the woman who had killed Hunter. Laurel was as quick as a viper, her sword wickedly fast, and Ketan knew she wasn't going to last long against her. Hunter might have been able to. Ketan didn't care. She'd kill Laurel or die trying.

Behind them the two dragons fought. Now that she was out of the pit, Ketan could see the two struggling. Silver scales flashed as Ryuwhipped around, striking at the bone dragon, who in return slashed at the silver dragon's side, leaving great bleeding wounds behind. Both of them roared, striking at one another with enough force to make the walls shudder. Cracks spread across the ceiling above, forming thin cobweb designs that linked up to one another in the center.

Ketan's eyes widened as she realized that the glowing she saw between those cracks was the sunrise above. "Run!" she screamed, or she thought she screamed. Even Laurel's face twisted into fear as the center of the roof finally let loose and crashed down. Tons of earth and rock tumbled down onto the cavern floor below.

Things seemed to slow as the sun's rays shown down through the hole, illuminating those who had been fighting in the shadowy cavern.

The rays of golden sunlight seemed to brighten as more and more of the horrible room was illuminated, some of the things inside the room having existed only in shadows. These things screamed as their life-forces were extinguished.

Still brighter and brighter the sunlight got until all mortals were blinded and the world was nothing but searing light, and time stopped. Everything paused, the world coming to a stop.

Then light faded to its normal morning glory, and standing in the room was an old man, his hair and beard long and white, and he clutched a staff for support. "I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this," he muttered somewhat absently.

His eyes took in the room, his countenance etched with a sense of finality and acceptance. Death and dying, Laurel had been doing dark deeds for so long the very ground was tainted and the land cried out for healing. He had put things in motion, but it had been too little too late. Hunter had put into motion the very thing he had hoped to stop. He moved past Ketan and Laurel, frozen in battle, and looked into the pit. His tragic hero had taken too long to sever ties to King and Country; her loyalty and honor blinding her to the things that had to be done.

He glanced across the room at D'Spar and Ryu, both looking at him. "D'Spar, leave your sister alone," he snapped.

Rotted scaled lips and bone pulled back and the undead dragon husked out a word on stale dead air, "Father."

"Father," Ryu said as well, the word sounding loud in the perfectly still room.

The two dragons released one another, suspiciously moving apart from one another.

The old man stared at them both and approached. "D'Spar, you've been feeding that witch forbidden knowledge in hopes of regaining your life. But creation doesn't work like that. Look at yourself, dead flesh given life, you're still not alive. Is that what you want? To give back life one must forsake theirs freely. Even the gods are not above the power of the infinite."

The silver dragon limped aside, watching the two of them closely. She truly didn't know what D'Spar would do. She wouldn't put it past her brother to attack them both now that her father had arrived.

The undead dragon's head seemed to lower. "I just wanted another chance to show you I was worthy, Father, to finish my task."

The old man reached out and touched a hand to the rotted snout. "You were always worthy, son, but I am incapable of telling you such things. Or at least the other me. But I can tell you proudly there was never anyone who matched your keen mind and military tactics in the First Kingdom." Then he pulled his hand away, tugging as if he had grabbed something off of the D'Spar. The undead dragon shook, and the baleful light in its eyes went out and the bones collapsed back into the ground.

Ryu's tail twitched as she watched her brother return to the death that had claimed him so long ago.

The Goddess of Death was there, hand out to take D'Spar's spark of divine. "I wondered if I'd ever be back for him. The witch fed him souls prolonging what should have occurred long ago."

The old man handed it to her. "Sister," he said respectfully.

"Korgon," she said neutrally. "I had heard the rumors, but I didn't think it was possible."

"Two faces," Ryu whispered, watching her aunt move, noting the souls she had taken recently, and more importantly, those that she had not.

He shrugged tiredly. "I... He left such lasting marks on all of you I thought it best to stay away. I am, after all, not even a third his strength." He looked over at Ryu and smiled sadly. "In a way. I am what Korgon cannot even stand to face, himself. No creature is wholly good or evil, but now Korgon is. I am all that was good in him."

Limping forwards, Ryuu shifted, and was once again the silver-haired woman as she hugged her father. "I missed you, Father." She had not even known he was still alive, this part of her father that was descent and honorable.

"I've watched over all of my children the best I could, but mostly you. What he... I did to your mother was horrible. In the aftermath, I was created to get rid of that voice telling him what he had done was wrong."

"I know," Ryuu smiled sadly, taking one limping step back. "I always knew you existed within him." She looked to where her aunt had just been then back to her father. "Mother hasn't talked to me in a long time now. I need to fix what I did."

To one side of them the fathomless eyes of the Goddess of Death watched them expressionlessly.

He laughed, "You're doing better than me. She's never talked to me at all." He reached out to hug her then grew uncertain and settled for patting her on the arm. "I got to meet you, at least. I've watched over your children the best I could. Stole your daughter away from the witch and got her somewhere safe. But when I returned, it was too late, you had succumbed to your depression."

"My daughter?" Ryuu whispered, swallowing against the sob. "You saved my daughter from Laurel?" She closed her eyes, smiling in gratitude. "If Vladis was here, she'd be as thankful as I am to you."

He smiled then it tumbled from his face. "Hunter was the last of your blood. I'm sorry. I gave her all the clues to stopping the problem, but she was so stubborn."

"She gets that from her mother," Ryuu smiled sadly, looking towards the pit that held her great-great-great granddaughter's body. "Aunt didn't come for her, she's not dead yet?"

"Like D'Spar hoped, there can be hope for her as well," he said with a wince of pain, and he became pale for a second.

Silver eyes searched his face and she touched his arm. "What hope is there?"

"She might be given her life back. Rules are different for the god-born."

"It is true." The Goddess of Death supplied in her quiet tone. "But a life for a life is the rule of the infinite, and a willing life, or your granddaughter will be the same as D'Spar."

"Mine then," Ryuu lifted her head. "She would not be here if I had not brought her. I'm responsible for her life." Perhaps that would finally allow her to atone for her meddling, and maybe, somewhere, she'd finally be with Vladis again.

The Sun Serpent shook his head. "I cannot allow that. Besides, my time is short, my free will tied to my other-half's continued sleep. Once he wakes, I will be nothing more than a ghost overwhelmed again."

A coal black eyebrow twitched up in question as the Goddess of Death moved closer. "If you are going where I think you are, you leave him with nothing good, no conscience to temper his dark urges."

"He's waking?" Ryuu's eyes widened at the idea. "How?"

He looked from his daughter to his sister god. "The spell, it was flawed, was it not?"

"Yes," Ryuu sighed, seeing where this was going. "There was much more energy than Laurel expected with Hunter's death. She never was good at using magic like this."

"Yes, I sensed a ripple, you sensed it too. Laurel was not very specific about which dragon of night, and both terms have been used on Korgon and his so," the Goddess of Death supplied, her head cocked to the side as she regarded the bloodless Duke Hunter in the pit. "So shall I take her? She is many years removed from her godly heritage; the body will not last like D'Spar's."

The silver-haired woman touched her father's arm, sadly. "No, not yet, Aunt. Her time is not done. There are things she must help Ketan do in the desert."

"Then I will give up my life to avoid retreating into nothingness once more," the Sun Serpent said. "Best to choose my time."

Bowing her head, Ryuu closed her eyes. "I would have liked to learn from you. It would have been nice to know the good part of my father." There would be no doubt after this; there would only be darkness left inside of Korgon.

"I would have liked that. In the desert there is a tower hidden from the sight of Gods and Mortals alike. I have learned to blend the magic of the Elements with my own powers. This tends to confuse anyone looking at it. In it you will find my diaries that I have written in my short existence as a separate consciousness from Korgon. Perhaps that will help you know my memory." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. In that kiss he gave her the knowledge on how to find the tower, as well as his power of the Sun. "You shall take my place doing as you have always done, lighting up the darkness. Only you will not just be doing it with your wisdom."

Ryuu staggered, eyes wide, as she stared at him. Her mind trembled as new knowledge and power flooded through it. That had been a gift beyond anything she'd ever received. "Father..." she trailed off, not sure what to say. Instead, she hugged him tightly once again. "I will miss you," she whispered, letting go only when her aunt moved closer.

The Goddess of Death led him down into the pit next to Hunter. "Few know this is possible, and it's probably best it remains that way." She looked at the man that was her brother yet not. "I wish he would have embraced you. I would have liked to have known the Korgon that might have been."

The Sun Serpent smiled. "If that was true, none of us would be here. This world would be a far different place."

"A better place, I think," Ryuu called out, staying by the lip of the pit, not willing to move closer while her aunt worked.

Death nodded and opened her arms to hug him. As they embraced, he jumped slightly as if startled, and then went limp. The Goddess of Death gently lowered him to the floor.

"Where will he go?" Ryuu asked, watching as he was laid out. "What is there for the gods when we die?" She'd always wanted to ask.

The Goddess of Death, sometimes known as Bacahra, sometimes as Mot, and in other kingdoms as Morana, smiled mysteriously. "Where will he go, I am not certain, since he is only a half without the rest of Korgon. Some of us return to the cauldron of life where mother and father dipped their hands into the Unknowing Infinite and molded us all and breathed life into us. Some of us are reborn with lessons still left to be learned."

"Then perhaps one day I will talk with him again." She could hope. "He's put me in direct opposition of Korgon," she said quietly, watching as Death laid his body out next to Hunter and arranged them both.

Death nodded, "That he has, although Korgon has always hated you, a female birthed from his seed. He had hoped for a male to usurp your mother for the moon, and then he would own the night in terror." She knelt next to Hunter and looked up at Ryuu, "She will be weak for days if not months."

"Ketan will watch over her and nurse her back to health." Now, even more than before, Ryuu would not be able to stay with the two of them, no matter how much she wanted to. "Aunt..." she said, before Death could begin. "Do you think mother will ever forgive me?"

"It occurs to me we have never had a proper introduction. Call me Morana. It is the better of all the names the mortals have given me. And I think she would be a fool not to. Death's children are all stillborn, so if she will not forgive you, I will take you as my own."

That brought a small smile to Ryuu's lips, and she bowed slightly in Morana's direction. "Thank you. For everything." She wondered if Hunter and Ketan would realize how much they would be indebted to her father and aunt.

Morana slammed her hand palm down onto Hunter's chest. Hunter's body shook and was enveloped in a white glow. After long minutes, her mouth opened in a scream as her bodily rapidly reproduced the blood that was lost and her heart began to pump.

"Will I see you again?" Ryuu asked, knowing that time would start again soon. Even the gods could not stop time for long.

"I'm sure. They say death is always closer than you think. But jokes aside, I hope we do."

Time started again, seamless to those who had been frozen, but to those who moved through it, it was nauseating.

"I'm going to kill you!" Ketan snarled, pressing her attack faster, regardless of the nicks and cuts she was accumulating from Laurel's attacks. The best she could hope for was a mutual death, but she'd settle for that if she could.

Fending her off, Laurel looked around, distracted. Something had changed. The magic used made her skin tingle. It had been powerful. Something world-shaping had happened.

She spotted D'Spar, back again to being a rotting corpse, and Ryuu nowhere in sight. Laurel had not lived so long without knowing when to retreat. She hissed and stumbled back as Ketan's sword cut her arm. The fabric and skin parted and the blood that fell was dark as rust. She retreated away from Ketan, trying to make space.

"Only the blood of the Southern Queen can kill me, it was foretold, until Ryuu ruined it with her interference to save her lover. Shattering time and what might have been. You, a lowly desert rat, shall not be the end of me." She summoned the wind to blow Ketan back.

The dust and sand blinded Ketan briefly as she stumbled back a step or two, shielding her eyes. When she could blink her eyes clear, Laurel was gone, leaving the desert warrior to scream in frustration.

It was only then, as she turned to demand Bayyan and Mathew help her chase down Laurel, that she realized things had shifted. Titan was bounding down into the pit of bones, purring so loud she could hear him, which was when she noticed that the bone dragon was gone, along with the silver dragon.

Ryuu stood inside the pit, leaning paler than usual, against the side.

Laurel's puppets all looked around, wide-eyed and lost now that she was gone, uncertain. The King finally roused himself, "Guards! Guards! Round up all these..." His words cut off as Hunter dragged herself from the pit looking, ghostly pale and covered in blood, Titan at her side.

"Hunter," Ketan whispered, the sword dropping from her fingers as she started to move, then run, towards her love. "Hunter!" She grabbed the woman, hugging her desperately tightly.

"Gently," Hunter whispered out, her very skin seeming to hurt.

"Sorry!" Ketan gasped, pulling back so that she wasn't crushing Hunter, but holding onto her. "You were dead...I saw...weren't you dead?" Ketan asked, confused, looking over to Ryuu then back to Hunter.

Ryuu shook her head in such a way that could only be taken as not now.

"I love you so much, Ketan, but don't take this the wrong way when I say I never want to talk about what happened. Ever." She held back a shudder.

Meeting Ryuu's eyes over Hunter's shoulder, Ketan nodded and turned. Holding onto Hunter's arm, she helped the woman up over the rim of the pit and onto the remnants of the platform.

"You're dead," the King said, his throat swallowing nervously.

Mathew, still holding onto the Princess's arm, led her closer, bowing to Hunter in greeting as he did. Bayyan lurked behind them, not certain what to do.

Hunter pulled away from Ketan's grip and moved forward, in her hand the very dagger that killed her. She moved with shambling steps until she was toe to toe with King Math. "You are a mass of disease in these lands. You have sacrificed your family and your honor for power that no mortal should have. I invoke the mantle of the Winter King so we may have spring and rebirth."

King Math paled, his eyes looking around for anyone to help him, but the others not seriously wounded from the fight had all snuck away while attention was focused elsewhere.

Ketan followed behind Hunter, scooping up her sword from where it had fallen, just in case her love needed help, but doubting she would.

"It was the witch, she put a spell on me!" He looked to his daughter. "Please, you must..." He cut off as the blade pierced his throat, and Hunter's shaky hands slit it open.

"So the King returns to the lands that he has taken," Hunter said dully, the blade falling from her fingers. "Ketan?" she croaked out, feeling her legs give.

"I have you." Ketan grabbed her from behind, lowering her slowly to the floor. "Rest," she whispered, kissing the pale forehead. "We can take care of the rest."

"Can't believe I missed the whole fight," Hunter whispered, her eyes fluttering shut.

#####3

Hunter woke slowly, her body tentative about being conscious. Her body was one big dull ache. Even her eyelashes hurt. "Water," she croaked, hopefully.

"Water," Ketan whispered, coming awake with a start and reaching for the pitcher that was next to the bed. Carefully, she helped Hunter sit up a little and pressed the cup to her lips. "Drink slowly," she whispered, smiling a little as she recognized when she'd said the same thing before. "We've come full circle, me nursing you back to health."

Hunter tried to glare, but it hurt her eyeballs. "Rub it in," she said once she had enough. Gently, she was eased back down on to the bed. Weakly she rubbed the gunk out of her eyes then smiled up at Ketan. "So was the fight exciting?" She was still annoyed she'd missed the whole thing.

"Not at all," Ketan laughed, settling in next to Hunter on the huge bed and pressing close. She didn't want to let the other woman out of her sight. "The usual, screaming, dragons fighting, the roof collapsing in on us, me almost killing Laurel." Well, the last was a bit of an exaggeration.

"Laurel?"

"The advisor." Ketan fussed over Hunter, tucking the blankets around her.

Hunter gave an amused smile at the fussing. "Well, that was more than I did to her."

"She's still out there somewhere," Ketan grumbled, stopping herself when she realized what she was doing.

"Well, she's not here, so for now let us rest and rejuvenate, and dwell on her at a later time. Okay?" Hunter was happy to be here with Ketan. In a blink of an eye all of this could have been gone, and this was a present and future she almost never had.

"Okay." Ketan's worried look melted, and she buried her face against Hunter's neck, eyes suspiciously wet. "I nearly lost you," she whispered, an arm snaking across Hunter's waist to hold tight.

Hunter didn't say anything, merely wrapped her arms around Ketan and hugged her. They stayed like this for a while. Hunter kissed Ketan's dark hair. "Are you okay?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Ketan let out a slow breath, not about to move if she could help it. "You were dead. I tried to get to you, but she killed you. I saw her put the dagger in your heart, and there wasn't anything I could do." The tears wouldn't be denied this time.

"Yes, but I don't remember any of that," Hunter lied. "You had to witness it all. So I think it's all right if I make sure you're okay." Hunter ran her hand through Ketan's dark hair.

Drying her face against the fabric of Hunter's shirt, Ketan nodded. "I'm better now. Ryuu wouldn't tell me what happened. She was being all mysterious again, but she swears you'll be fine with enough rest."

"I don't think she can. I think it's something mere mortals such as we shouldn't know. I'm just happy they let me come back to you."

Ketan raised her head, tear-streaked gray eyes puzzled. "Do you remember it?"

Hunter's green eyes darted away. "A little. A woman was there. She marked me, said there was a chance it wasn't my time and that she would come back for me."

"One of your gods?" Ketan didn't really care, as long as it resulted in Hunter coming back. She smiled, an old memory coming back to her. "The desert witch was right, I did fall in love with a hero with no heart."

"Hmmm," Hunter looked at Ketan. "You never mentioned that before."

Ketan shrugged a little, embarrassed. "I didn't want to think about what it meant. She said my love wouldn't be returned until the ties of land are gone, which didn't make any sense at all at the time." She made a face. "I hate prophecies. They're always vague."

"Yes, although the advisor had a dream I killed the King. Although I'm pretty certain she lied to get me out of the way." She shrugged. "But it still came true."

Ketan nodded, laying her head back down again. "You should rest. Stephen sent word. He's coming here. Word's spread throughout the kingdom about what happened. The Princess wanted to talk to you, but I shoved her outside, so I'm certain she'll be back soon also."

Hunter laughed at that. "I don't think anyone has ever shoved the Princess. Wish I would have seen it."

"She tried to slap me," Ketan smiled, "which was funny. But I think she's worried you want to take her father's crown."

"It's a legitimate worry." In the same position Hunter would think the same.

"Are you?" Ketan sounded a little worried by the idea.

"Hmmm, Queen Hunter. Has a certain royal appeal to it," she teased then chuckled. "No, I don't want this place."

Ketan sagged with relief. "Don't say things like that!" She swatted Hunter's arm, careful not to hit too hard. She shuddered at the thought of being tied to the castle and the things Hunter would have to put up with if she were Queen.

"I'll talk to her and we'll work out something that will sit well with the Kingdom." She yawned, "but not today."

"Good. Then we go home?" Ketan asked, hoping Hunter was still thinking the same thing.

"Yes, Stephen will be pissed that I've left him in charge. And your mother will probably try and kill me again. But it will be nice to be home."

"You'd get bored if it was easy," Ketan whispered, drawing the blankets a bit higher up over them both. "Sleep, my love." She pressed a kiss to Hunter's temple.

Hunter nodded and yawned again.

#####3

"You look better than the last time I saw you," Ryu said from her position at the side of Hunter's bed.

Sleepy green eyes opened and Hunter looked around. It was daylight, but the same day or the next, she didn't know. Ketan was gone, but it was recent, as the space next to her was warm. "I'm not certain that would be hard to do."

"It isn't," Ryu agreed, touching hair that had started to change from silver to blonde. "But I am glad that you are still with us." She smiled at the space next to Hunter. "It's hard to see you alone these days."

"I find that I rather like not being alone." She stared at Ryu for a moment. "I heard all of it, you know. She didn't take my soul, spirit, or whatever. She left it trapped in my body, so I was a helpless observer." She was quiet for a moment. "When did you know I was your great-great-granddaughter?" That was the hardest moment of her life, knowing she was dead, knowing that she'd never touch or hold Ketan again, and knowing her love was in danger.

The dragon in a woman's body smiled sadly. "I wasn't certain until after we left the desert. Only the blood of my blood could have awakened me from that sleep. You don't look much like my daughter did, but you have her mother's stubbornness."

Hunter laughed. "I'm certainly not as subtle as you are."

"That isn't a bad thing. Sometimes there is such a thing as being too subtle. What else did you hear while you were dead but not dead?"

"I know that man was Korgon, but not. I didn't really understand that. And that he gave up his life for mine. Then things blur out to the pain of being brought back to life." She shuddered at the single most horrible experience of her life. Perhaps being born had been that painful, but she had no memory of that.

"He was all that existed of the goodness that was once inside of Korgon." Ryu leaned closer, silver eyes intent. "Korgon is waking again, which means things will change. There are more storms coming, although I don't know what shape they will take yet."

Hunter was silent again. "Korgon isn't the god we think of him here, is he?"

"No." Ryu smiled dryly. "Do you know anything of the lands that are west and south of here?"

"No. Just the desert and the tribes, and even then, I've found out we didn't really even know them at all."

"A long time ago, generations ago, there was an exodus from the lands of men, as they were called. These lands were ruled by the Korgon, a black dragon who desired that all worship him. The desert tribes are descended from those who lost faith in that exodus. The rest went further north, and are still there in lands that none here have even heard of. Your people are descended

from those that the Korgon sent to enslave those who had fled his domain. He was injured in that great war, and until now, has been sleeping through the ages, healing."

Hunter took a moment to digest what she'd been told. "So is it bad I'm descended from those men?"

"No." Ryuu's smile was bright this time. "You are what you are, Hunter. It is not bad or good, just history now. My point is that the Korgon will want to rule everything again, and his followers still rule the lands that your ancestors fled from."

Hunter nodded. "Good. So we prepare for war from a god who has yet to wake up. Can we find this god while he sleeps and kill him and stop this war before it begins?"

"I don't think so." Ryuu looked away, thinking. "It may take generations for him to fully wake again, or he may wake tomorrow. These things are hard to judge. Look at how long I slept in the form of a statue."

Hunter nodded. "Good, because my heart is tired of war. I would like to make a life with Ketan, and that will be a struggle, I am sure."

"She will keep you busy, I'm sure of that." Ryuu smiled again, and leaned closer, kissing Hunter's forehead as a mother for a child. "My blessing upon you both. Live long and fruitful lives, Hunter del Cor."

"Thank you. Will I see you again?"

"Someday." Ryuu stood. "I have many things to attend to before I can see my own love again."

Hunter sat up and stood, happy to see she wasn't shaking, and hugged Ryuu. "Good luck with finding her, and thank you."

"We're family, there's nothing to thank me for." Ryuu returned the hug then stepped away. "Say goodbye to Ketan for me." With that, she walked to the balcony and leapt, disappearing from view.

"Show off," Hunter said with a laugh as she sat back down on the bed.

#####3

"You certain about this? We don't have to meet with them. We could just leave, let them sort this all out." Ketan batted aside Hunter's hands, again, to continue her task of dressing the former Duke.

Hunter thought she did a really good job of not rolling her eyes as Ketan swatted her hands away, yet again. She held back a comment that would have gotten her smacked, and gave in to Ketan mothering her.

"I know you want to see Stephen," Ketan continued, giving Hunter a look. "But we can just tell that Princess, or whatever she is now, to go away."

She sighed. "She's a Queen now, and you're just pissy 'cause she's eyeing Bayyan, and he's eyeing her back. Besides, Queen Amber and I have come to an agreement. I think you'll be quite pleased." Hunter knew Ketan had been really unhappy with the closed door meetings her and the still rather flirty young Queen had been having.

"I trust you." Ketan tied on the sword belt, adjusting it until it hung just so on her lover's hips, not quite resisting the temptation to indulge in a caress.

"I don't trust..." she made another face, "Queen Amber though." The fact Bayyan was shamelessly flirting with her was almost as irritating as the fact that the new Queen took every opportunity to try to flirt with Hunter.

"Don't be too mad at her. Her father gave her no attention, so she's learned to get it any way she can. Besides, my heart and body belong to you." She gave Ketan the most intense kiss she was capable at the moment. She was still rather weak, although she could now walk a fair way without tiring, which went a long way towards soothing the desert woman's feelings. She smiled as they separated.

"I'm glad you know that." Her smile widened. "I'm glad you're feeling better. Maybe the next time I show you how much I love you, I won't have to do all the work," she teased, helping Hunter to her feet.

Hunter's face turned red. "I didn't mean to fall asleep," she muttered.

"I know." Gray eyes sparkled with amusement as she held onto Hunter's arm, supporting her to the door. "I'm still going to tease you about it for a long time."

Hunter did roll her eyes this time.

As they opened the door, the two guards outside stood to attention and saluted. Hunter just nodded her head at them and started down the hallway.

"Still a hero," Ketan whispered, enjoying the ability to tease her lover about the renewed status.

Hunter sighed again. "Yes, I single-handedly saved the Princess from the evil advisor who killed the King. Apparently I was amazing," she grumbled, because she had been dead for the whole fight. "Where did you find my sword?" Her hand absently stroked the golden dragon hilt.

The amused look died and Ketan shook her head. "In the advisor's rooms, along with many other things that I made certain they took outside and burned."

Hunter didn't ask. She didn't want to know.

Another set of guards saluted as Hunter approached, opening the doors to the sitting room beyond.

"Hunter!" Stephen jumped to his feet from the table he'd been sitting at, cheerfully hugging her as she got closer. "You're up and walking."

Hunter looked pained as he hugged her. "Stephen, yes, hi," she said through gritted teeth, and hid it the moment he let go, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

Ketan subtly increased her support, leading Hunter to the nearest chair. She'd warned Stephen that his sister wasn't well yet, but apparently he'd forgotten that little talk.

"Cara sends her regards. She wanted to come, but I managed to convince her she didn't want to deal with traveling." He lowered his voice. "I didn't really want her to be exposed to the castle, even if the King is dead."

"I don't blame you, brother," Hunter said quietly, as the new Queen looked at them from across the table. She didn't look upset, more amused.

Ketan moved to sit next to her, giving Bayyan a nudge as she passed near the chair he was sitting in. She didn't know how he'd gotten involved in all this, but he certainly seemed to be smiling more than he had since they'd been children.

Hunter knew that Amber would be a good Queen in time. She was still young and had thought she had several more years to play before the mantle of responsibility would be thrown at her. They'd had several talks about who to trust for advice, as well as what they should do since the botched raising of a dead godling and the death of King Math.

Several of the Dukes were at the table looking uncomfortable and uncertain, and Hunter felt sorry for a few of them.

The Queen nodded at them all, and raised a hand for silence.

"It is now common knowledge through the lands about the horrible events that took place a few weeks ago. We have scrambled to punish those responsible for the betrayal of the King and worked with the advisor to perpetuate such horrible acts. I have taken the throne as the next and only heir. My first act is to end the war with the Desert Tribes, as they are as much a victim of the advisor as we. To help with this, Duke Hunter will be replacing Lord Robert in the desert and will be acting as our Ambassador to the Desert Tribes. After she is settled in her new position, we will be supporting her in any way she needs to open up trade talks and good will with these tribes."

Ketan's eyes darted sideways, narrowing a little. So that was the secret that Hunter had refused to tell her about. She had to bite her cheek to keep from smiling; it was a perfect excuse to get Hunter to stay in the desert.

"Because of Hunter's new position, Stephen will become the new Duke of Del Cor and will pledge fealty in a ceremony to be held tomorrow. I know this is quick, but I will not let there be any time for people to wallow in sloth and indecision. Anyone care to argue?"

The question was asked innocently, but all the guards' hands went to their blades. Nobody missed the action.

Silence was the only answer.

"Good, now that is all settled. Bayyan from the desert tribes will be staying as Ambassador of the Desert Tribes, as appointed by the Caliph Mathew."

"Thank you, Queen Amber, for allowing him to stay in your court," Mathew said from his own spot further down the table. Ketan caught his eye, an eyebrow raising slightly. Mathew simply smiled back in return, obviously enjoying his role in helping her brother stay.

The Queen gave an evil grin. "Well, on a trial basis...he may not be up for the challenge."

Bayyan made an indignant face, most of the Dukes just looked at each other, and Hunter realized the Princess now Queen hadn't changed all that much.

"You'll always be welcome home, brother, if you don't live up to your expectations here." Ketan couldn't resist twisting the knife a little bit. Smiling at his resulting glare.

"Thank you, dear sister," he replied. "But I will do my best to uphold the family honor."

While the other dukes began to ask questions, Ketan leaned in closer to Hunter. "Does this mean you have to spend all your time in that terrible castle of Lord Robert's?"

Having met their mother, it wouldn't be that hard. "Hmmm? Sorry," Hunter said, distracted of thoughts of Ketan's mother.

"That monstrosity of stone in the desert, are you going to be expected to live there all the time?" Ketan whispered.

"Well, my office will be there, but I'll have to spend lots and lots of time out meeting with the various tribes. I'm sure I'll never be there."

"Good answer, Lord Hunter." Ketan leaned back, a satisfied smile on her face. She caught the Queen's eye and gave a small seated bow. They might not like one another, but she had to admit she owed the woman for letting Hunter go.

"My Queen, if we are finished, I will leave you to answer the Dukes' questions, as this has exhausted me," Hunter said above the din of the uneasy men dressed in their finery at the table.

"Go, Lord Hunter. Perhaps I'll come visit you in the desert." She smiled, to the horror of many of the Dukes around the table top. Ketan nearly choked at the idea of what chaos the young Queen could cause.

"I can't wait," Hunter said with a faked bright smile, and let Ketan help her up from the table.

Only once they were free from the room did Ketan groan out loud. "That would be a disaster! Did you see the faces of the other Dukes when she said that?" She held onto Hunter's arm, unobtrusively supporting her on the way back to their rooms and Titan.

"She won't. She likes ruffling people, keeping them off-balance. The older Dukes are in big trouble. After dealing with King Math for so long, they won't know what hit them."

"I almost feel sorry for them, and Bayyan." Ketan glanced sideways at Hunter. "So that was your big surprise?"

"Yes it was. I was disappointed. I thought you'd be more surprised. You didn't even raise an eyebrow."

"I'd hoped," Ketan admitted, quietly, "that you'd found a way to stay in the desert. It's where you belong, and where Titan belongs too. I..." She stopped, turning Hunter to face her. "It was a good surprise. A very good surprise." Ignoring the guards and anyone else in the hall, she held Hunter up while kissing her, slowly and carefully, but with as much love as she could express.

"Mmmmm..." Hunter purred into the kiss. "I'm glad, but you've taken my legs with that kiss, and you really need to help me to our rooms."

"As you wish, M'lord." Ketan smiled again, rather enjoying the ideas of what she could do with that phrase. Carefully, she helped Hunter towards their rooms to rest.

"I was thinking maybe we'd skip the party, all that formal wear makes my skin itch, and maybe start making our way to the desert. We'll have to go slow, I'm still weak, you know."

"Which is why Stephen brought our horses from where we'd left them." It had been a small miracle they'd still been in the same area where Ryu had taken them from. "And, you're not that weak anymore." For a while, she'd been so weak that it had scared Ketan into thinking she would die, again.

"Such a smart woman," Hunter said with a smile.

"Very," Ketan agreed, with a smile. "I'm glad I still have my horse. Someone special gave her to me." She had other ideas as to how the new Lord of the Desert castle could show her appreciation.

"I have a question about life in your tribes," Hunter said, remembering a conversation she had with Mathew the other day.

"What?" They passed through the doors to Hunter's rooms, which the guards closed behind them. Titan lay where they'd left him, lounging in the sun coming in through the balcony door.

"So we really haven't talked about living arrangements, or bonding rituals of your culture. Matthew was quite informative the other night while you were spending time with your brother. Um..." Hunter hesitated, uncertain how to ask. "You're not expecting a harem, are you?" She really didn't like the idea of sharing Ketan with another woman or man. She got that they were a female empowered society, and men had smaller roles revolving mostly around breeding and child care. Matthew was an exception, she was finding.

"Only a small one." Ketan struggled to keep her face straight as she helped Hunter sit down on the side of the bed. "Maybe just two or three other wives." Her lips twitched, despite her biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing at Hunter's expression.

"It will be a hard life, but I think I'll manage," Hunter said with a grin as she realized Ketan had been playing with her.

"You better." Ketan nuzzled her love's neck, enjoying the ability to be close. "I did do that Lover's Walk with you after all," she whispered, pushing Hunter back onto the bed.

"That you did; means you're stuck with me. Although now I won't have a fancy manor and all that wine."

"Good thing we know someone who can ship us wine," Ketan laughed, pulling up Hunter's shirt. "And you'll have a big castle in the desert. We'll work on the rest." The shirt was unlaced and pushed aside, revealing Ketan's goal. "Don't you dare fall asleep on me again," she whispered, eyes laughing as she lowered her head.

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you?" Hunter asked with the start of a pout.

Ketan slid her tongue up one breast, enjoying the instant reaction she got from that, and just barely grazed her lips against Hunter's. "Never," she whispered.

Hunter shivered slightly, remembering, "Yes, we almost lost each other. So let's not dwell on that, and instead celebrate our second chance."

Ketan nodded shakily. She lowered herself down, covering that scar with her body. "Don't ever do that to me again." She kissed her, reassuring herself that Hunter was there, alive and whole.

Like she had planned on that in the first place, but Hunter kept that to herself. "I won't. I promise from now on we'll live very sedate lives and herd goats or something."

Ketan's shoulders shook with laughter at that. "Love, life with you will be anything but sedate. Don't promise something you can't give." Another kiss and she shook her head. "I think you're doing entirely too much talking." Nimble fingers started undoing laces that she'd just a short while ago done up while dressing Hunter.

"But I'm not sleeping." Hunter gave a squeal as Ketan's fingers switched from unlacing to tickling.

The End

Again feedback makes us happy: Zeeamy@gmail.com or Adarkbow@yahoo.com

[Windstar's and Zee's Scrolls](#)
[Index Page](#)