

~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Disclaimer: This is going to be a long story. The longest that either of us have ever written. So if you want a little PWP, you might want to look elsewhere. This story will have violence, sex between consenting adults who just happen to be female, and a few swear words. In Canada this would get you a rating somewhere around 13+, but I think it would get an R rating in the States. We crave feedback. Please send any constructive criticism or just a note to say hi, to: zeewriter@yahoo.com, adarkbow@yahoo.com

Zee: Welcome to a little ditty we like to call Blood and Honor it only consumed Windy and my lives for over a year. This is purely Windstars fault, i bare the blame of saying "sure no problem. Sounds like a neat concept, lets start writing." One should just say no and not let problems follow. That being said this has been a lot of fun and this universe we have created has only spawned more stories that sit in our heads waiting to be told. I hope you enjoy.

Windstar: When Zee says that this story consumed our lives for a year, she isn't lying. We've been writing this monster together for nearly twelve months now. It has been completed, but we've given our poor beta reader, Claudia, fits with the sheer number of pages she has to go through. A big thanks to her for her never ending help! We'll post the novel in parts as its beta'd. I hope you all enjoy it.

Prologue **~ Book of Exodus**

Contained in these pages is the story of our People The story of our Beginning, our birth. The story of our Exodus from slavery to freedom. This story is our History and our Future.

In the beginning, we were slaves. This is good for us to know. For now, this knowledge can prevent us from ever falling back into those dark, cruel times...

Blood coursed down her face from where the foreman had hit her and she cowered in the dirt as he taunted her. She didn't have a name, none of them did. There were too many of them. Slaves not used for breeding purposes were just considered as work animals.

She felt the loose dirt move around her and knew he was coming towards her again. As she curled into a ball, she threw her arms over her head for protection as the blows resumed. Pain blurred and faded away into numbness, as did the names and curses he hurled at her.

When darkness came, the other work slaves were herded back into the pens. They refused to look at the fallen woman and gave her motionless body a wide berth. The heavy clouds that had been threatening to burst finally did and the rain fell hard. The cold liquid slid down the curves of unmoving flesh and blended in with the blood and dirt to create a red mud that flowed off the

body to the ground.

"My poor child." The words whispered into her consciousness like the weak light of a torch wavering in a breeze.

Weakly, she raised her head, peering into the rain-filled darkness. At first, she thought she had dreamed the words. Then she saw Her. Emerging from the darkness and glowing with a pale white light, the woman walked slowly towards her. Even though the rain fell in torrents around Her, the beautiful white robes were untouched by rain or mud. Gracefully, the woman knelt next to the cowering woman in the mud.

"My poor child. I have come to bring you and your sisters to freedom."

Looking through swollen eyes, she tried to speak but coughed up dirt and blood instead. Finally she croaked out a single word, "Freedom?" The word tasted funny on her tongue. Fear filled her chest. What trick was this to dangle such an illusive, hopeful thing in front of her? A cruel joke, perhaps?

A strangled laugh that sounded closer to a sob burst out of her and she spit out, "There is no such thing as freedom."

"You're right, my sweet one. There isn't any in this land for you or the rest of my children." Deep sadness seeped into the glowing woman's voice. Then gentle hands helped the beaten slave up to her knees. "But there is freedom elsewhere. Far from this land of Men and their Gods."

Desperately, she tried to shield herself against the woman's words, but they flowed through the thick walls she had created for survival, and hope began to spread inside her breast, her numbed heart feeling unfamiliar warmth.

"Freedom," she said, tasting the strange word again.

Where the glowing woman's hands had touched the slave, the injuries that had been inflicted on her, both old and new, healed. By the time the slave was helped to her feet, the last of the wounds from the foreman's fists were gone, disappearing as if they had never existed in the first place. Wiping a thumb across a newly healed lip, the woman smiled.

The Goddess's pale white light illuminated the darkness around them, making even the rain seemed warmer as it fell on the slave's bare shoulders.

"Would you be willing to lead your Sisters from this place to a place where they shall never fear a man's anger or follow his orders again?" Her voice held a wisp of a promise. "It is a long, hard road. But if you travel it, I will help you as much as I am allowed."

Hope burned brighter in her heart and for a moment, as she looked deeply into the strange Goddess's shining eyes, she found herself lost in a swirling vortex. Pulling away with a gasp, she

shivered and just as quickly, her mind slid away from the secrets too complex for a mortal's mind. She bowed her head. "I am, my Lady. I will do my best to lead them away from this place. I put my services in your hands."

Those gentle hands once more touched the slave, this time tracing a perfect circle on her forehead. The skin inside the circle lightened and became silver-colored. "Then you are my first Priestess. I will name you Selene."

She breathed in a quick breath and tears prickled her eyes, she had been given a name. "Selene." She spoke the name in wonder. "Thank you, my lady. Thank you for such an honor. I'll try to never let you down. Ever."

With a soft smile at her words, the glowing lady gave her a small push towards the slave pens. "Now go, free your Sisters. The foreman and his guards are playing dice. They will not notice that you are gone for hours. Go quickly and follow the moon."

The clouds above them began to dissipate as quickly as they had formed, revealing a full moon hanging low over the eastern horizon. As the first of the moon's rays struck her, the glowing woman disappeared, leaving Selene alone in the muddy courtyard.

Some were afraid. Some doubted Selene's words. But others, their skin a map of bruises and wounds, took her words to heart and felt not fear in their hearts, but hope. Gathering their last bit of courage, they fled the slave pens and followed the moon...

Freedom's Passage: From the first book of The Book of Exodus in the Queen's Castle.

A Brief History

Selene and those who had followed her in the Exodus, as it became known, traveled far from the lands of Men. They crossed the continent traversing lakes, swamps, thick forests and fiercely jutting mountain ranges, to reach a place where no human had been before.

One group stopped in the South giving into the warmer and more fertile lands. They founded towns, cities, and eventually nations that gradually grew in power until they rivaled the most powerful of the nations of Men.

Worship of other Gods and Goddesses arose in these places.

Others straggled northward. Those tribes followed the way of the Moon Goddess. The Northern People never truly stopped wandering, they were, for the most part, nomadic, and few had any use for such things as cities and towns. The original descendants of Selene's line ruled from the High Queen's city, governing the diverse Northern tribes in accordance with the wishes of the Moon Goddess. Until, during a waning moon, the last of the High Queens was assassinated on

her throne leaving the Northern clans leaderless for many seasons.

The itinerant tribes were roughly divided into four clans, offspring of the original families who had chosen to stay in the wild North.

The clans of Water followed the currents in the mighty ocean, it was even rumored that some were born with gills and fins. They were sailors and traders, experts at navigating the ocean.

The Fire clans were fierce and bloodthirsty. They traveled in the harshest parts of the upper northern climate, building up their strength. They had even tamed the fierce Alcens, a large shaggy relative to the deer with two sharp spiraling horns that sprouted out of its forehead. The fiercest of the Northern warriors came from this tribe, and it was said that the Goddess blessed each of them with the soul of a warrior upon their birth.

The artists were from the Air clans. They were less nomadic than their sister tribes, tending to stay in the ruins of the Queen's castle, but often members of this clan traveled to the other clans to spread news or to give a performance.

The last of the four Northern clans was the Earth tribe. They lived in the pass that separated the North from the Southlands, and unlike the other tribes, they had taken the duty of guarding the North and the way to the Queen's castle. To do this, the Clan of Earth had built the Castle *Abnoa* and resided in the more temperate forests surrounding the Castle. Many of the clan were Rangers, living outside the Castle walls and in the woods. Uncountable moons and seasons passed and yet, there was never a need for the Castle's Warriors. However, the Earth clan still persisted in their duty for they believed the Goddess entrusted them to protect the others and they would be needed someday.

Generations passed peacefully, until one day, rumblings came from the South of a new leader. Gossip spread into the North of her dark, underhanded ways, and how the Southern tribes fell under her sway. Some whispered she was the bastard child of the Goddess of War, while others whispered even darker rumors, that she was a child of the Mistress of Shadows.

When the Ambassadors and traders from the South stopped coming to the North, the leader of Abnoa sent Rangers south to find if there was any truth to these dark rumors. Some returned, others didn't and before the Clan of Earth knew it, they had a Southern army marching towards their lands. Attempting to ambush the Southern army before they could reach the Castle itself, the head of the Castle's Warriors marched a troop southward.

It failed and the Southern army, with its hired mercenaries, pushed through the Clan of Earth's lands, slaughtering all who tried to stop them.

With the death of the head Warrior, those left behind did the best they could to prepare to defend the Castle. All of the non-combatants Rangers were sent north to hide, fleeing from the Castle long before the army came within striking distance.

The remaining women of the Castle waited. As the Southern force crept closer, their spirits fell and a dark cloud of despair settled over Abnoa.

Chapter 1

"When the light of the dawn crests that ridge, the enemy will charge our position. And we will defend it to the last woman!"

A roar loud enough for the Goddesses to hear came from the crowd of Rangers gathered on the stone walls protecting the Castle.

"We shall make them pay dearly for every inch of our lands taken. The fields shall run red with their blood!"

Another cry rose from the crowd, filling the night air with energy. The bonfires blazing in the Castle's courtyard sent burning embers spiraling into the air behind them. Despite, or perhaps because of the invading army that would roll over them in the morning, the gathering held a festive feel to it. Rangers who had not seen each other since their naming ceremonies greeted each other like long lost sisters.

Song and dance filled the night air and bodies swept through the darkness in a blur of flesh and armor. The shadows were filled with those desperate to make the most of what might be their last night.

The leader moved through it all, detached from the women she would command come the morning. She called out to them, often stopping to chat and encourage them, but she never stayed long. Endlessly and restlessly, she prowled the courtyard and walls of the Castle.

Across from the Castle, beyond the open, empty plain that skirted the gray, stone walls, the Southern army camped among the trees. So sure of their victory, wine, as well as other indulgences, flowed generously. Nestled next to the army's camp, the Mercenary band hired by the Southern Leader rested. There was no merry making in this camp, only combat planning. Winning battles were never a sure thing; sometimes the one with the bigger army didn't win. These fighters were veterans of bloodshed and the horrible face of war. Some talked quietly while others slept. One, however, had crept through the trees to the edge of the woods and with gray eyes straining, silently watched the castle. The figure stood motionless, taking in the reflected gleams of light off the stones from the Castle fires and the shouts of celebration. Quiet breathing streamed out white in the cold night air.

Torrin wondered what was the point in this last gasp of joy by the Northerners. Tomorrow would come too soon and both sides would meet in a bloody clash. Most, if not all, of their friends, sisters and mothers would be lost.

Squinting up at the battlements, Torrin thought she saw a figure highlighted in the faint light of the sliver moon. Focusing on the wall, the figure became sharper against the night sky. With a cruel smile, she drew her bow back. 'So easy' she thought, and then she paused, letting the bowstring relax. She might be a mercenary, but even in that, there was honor and a code to be followed. She was not being paid for her services until the dawn came. There would be no money in this kill. She watched the figure move away. Part of her was sad to be here again, but she also found it somewhat fitting.

She would help destroy this place of childhood pain.

Following on the coat tails of a night filled with tension and pre-battle anxiety, the dawn came far too soon. None of the warriors in the Castle had really drunk that much during the night, knowing fully what was to come. Few had slept much and it was with grumbles and many halfhearted jests that they willingly climbed up to the battlements as the false dawn lit the east. They had weeks to accept the fate awaiting them this day.

Archers bent their bows, tested strings, and prepared arrows. Blade mistresses drew daggers, and short swords. Others drew wicked, long swords, twirling the edged weapons in the cold predawn air. The leader stood upon the battlements above the main gate, adrenaline coursing through her body, and her sword weighing heavily in her calloused hand.

She tried to quiet her thoughts but they surfaced anyway. 'How did I failed my people?' Then another popped in. 'A last stand.' Followed by another. 'Was this all I can offer them? One last glorious battle?'

In the forest surrounding the Castle, another group of fighters were getting ready. The Southern warriors grumbled a bit, regretting indulging the night before, but all were restless. This easy assault was not worth their time and they wanted it over quickly.

The Mercenaries stood lined up in a flanking position to the left of the main forces. Even in war there was a class system. They were the mongrels not to be seen with the honorable, purebred warriors. And like flea-bitten curs, they would sneak around to the back and attack from there.

Expressionless gray eyes watched the Southerners as they primped and preened like giant, metallic Birds of Paradise. She snorted, and then returned to checking her own gear. Her heavy pack, as well as her bow and arrows, was stowed away in the mercenary cache not far from the main camp. For today's task of villainy, they would need to travel swift and light. Weight would be an enemy. She checked her sword and then her light armor. Retightening the leather strap to her left grieve, she stood and looked at her leader.

The Mercenary leader was short, squat woman with muscles to spare. Her nose was crooked and a multitude of scars were proudly displayed. In a gravelly voice Rya growled out to her Hawks, "

'kay, ladies, we've been paid good money here to help these prancing nannies win today. So while those honorable folks are storming the front, we'll be sneaking in the back way and opening that gate. We've gone over the plans repeatedly, but if anyone is the slight bit unsure of them, speak up now." Rya's brown eyes traveled to the faces of each one of her Hawks trying to find something that would show weakness. Happy at what she saw, she nodded at them.

The women of the mercenary band nodded back. Their faces now slipping into blank masks.

Standing in line with her Pack, Torrin's mask slipped on and her mind focused on the upcoming battle. A hand on her shoulder startled her and she swung her fist. With a barely audible smack, flesh met flesh and her fist was caught in a vise-like grip. Her flashing gray eyes met the muddy browns of her leader.

"Torrin, you going to be okay?" Rya asked, eyeing the shorter woman critically as she leaned into Torrin so their conversation would remain private.

Torrin nodded, her gray eyes frosting at the inquiry.

Rya squeezed her hand harder. "No. I need to know you can do this. This was your home, once. I won't have any screw ups on this."

Torrin's eyes became even colder. "Yes, it *was* my home. Once. But not anymore."

The leader nodded, contented with the answer, and then motioned for the band to move out before the main body.

From her perch on the Castle battlements, Luna watched as shapes began to appear out of the trees. The enemy was advancing towards the Castle in a wide line, outnumbering her warriors by at least forty-to-one. In the dim light, she could just make out the large war machines being moved down the road behind the first lines. 'If only the first ambush had been successful on these Southern monsters. If only winter had come more quickly. If only there were more of her people.' There were so many missed chances.

Her people were better equipped for the winter and perhaps the bitter cold of the north would have driven out these invaders. But instead, the weather had stayed mild, only now beginning to grow cold.

"Here they come!" The shout came from down the parapet.

"Hold your fire!" She yelled in response, unsheathing but not yet raising her sword.

Because of the first failed ambush, they were short on arrows as well as warriors. It was one of the reasons that Luna had decided against using a bow in the coming engagement.

In a moment heavy with anticipation, everything seemed to slow down: the first rays of sunlight sweeping over the besieged castle, the black and silver flags snapping in the brisk morning breeze, banners proudly defiant in the face of the avalanche of gold and blue flags carried by the invading army. The Castle warriors tensed, held by a thin thread woven between the moment of non-action and action.

Luna's grip tightened on her sword, fingers flexing as she closed her eyes and savored the feel of the sunlight on her skin. How often had she taken such things for granted before, she wondered and then she had no time for such thoughts as the first rain of arrows from the invaders swept across the Castle fortifications.

Like Vladlin's deadly hounds of war, the mercenaries, in three packs of ten, swept silently over the ground. The trees hid their approach until suddenly, there were no more trees in front of them. For a moment, they paused in the shadows of the mighty pines, waiting for the signal. It wasn't long before the horns sounded. The war had started. Moving furtively, they blended in where they could and moved quickly where they could not. As each one reached the rough stones of the Castle's foundations, they snapped climbing claws on their hands and feet with quick practiced movements.

Anyone could be a crude and rough mercenary living on the glut of battle and death. But to be a mercenary under Rya was to be more than a paid killing machine. Those who served under her were graceful, efficient and yet, extremely deadly. They were Rya's Hawks and they were the best.

The mercenaries went unnoticed by the warriors stationed on the Castle walls. Their attentions were focused on the war machines and the swarms of enemy approaching the walls with ropes and ladders. A storm of arrows took down a handful of Luna's already depleted supply of warriors and she gritted her teeth in fury. Steadily the army moved closer until they crossed an invisible line in her mind.

"FIRE!" Luna yelled, thrusting up her sword to signal her archers.

This was where her people excelled ... archery. Every arrow found its mark, with every shot bringing down an enemy. She wished that she had more arrows and archers. From the imposing stone walls, her warriors could have bled this army so dry that they could have never taken the Castle. They didn't though and even as her warriors dropped foe after foe, the first of the massive siege towers pushed into place against the walls. The top flipped down to reveal row upon row of warriors within who jumped out onto the walls. Suddenly everything was chaos, blades, blood and bodies falling.

Torrin hung from her metal claws embedded into the slanting stone overhang, feet dangling into

the air and waited for the guard to pass. Then with her shoulder muscles bulging, she powered her way up over the wall. With a soft metallic clink, she landed on the ramparts. The guard in front of her turned sharply at the noise and she saw the mouth opening to give the alarm. Torrin buried the claws of her right hand into the guard's throat, silencing any warnings. She helped the guard softly to the ground and then removed the claws, absently wiped the blood off them before storing them in a small pocket. Pulling out a dagger and her sword, she cautiously followed her hunting pack down the stones steps.

Battle fighting is repetitious - block, strike, cut, stab, dodge, and back to block. There was a part of Torrin that hid deep inside of her mind, horrified at the life she had chosen, but another part hungered for it, shutting all feelings down in order to feast off this horrible dance between life and death. Blood splattered on the stone as her sword cut into another soldier. They weren't people. They were just things that got into her way. Torrin didn't think about anything else other than the slicing movements of her sword and the path leading to the gate. She didn't think about how she had once called this her home. She didn't think about members of her immediate clan being on the receiving end of her sword. The only family she wanted now was her mercenary band. Here, in this place, she had been a bastard. Here, her dark hair and short height had been the constant reminder of her birth mother's infidelity. Here, she had been nothing. Blindly swinging her sword, she continued to move towards her goal.

Luna's blade moved in a blur. Her body reacted without thought from long, engrained practice. Thrust, block, and slash. The front of her armor covering dripped with other people's blood as she cut her way through the bodies in front of her. Her Warriors rallied to her side, driving enemy after enemy from the ramparts, and sending them to their deaths below. Incredibly, she could feel victory on their side. They just might be able to drive the enemy back from the castle! As she raised her sword, she screamed out her defiance and rushed towards another knot of incoming enemy soldiers.

The Warrior's blood-spattered blonde hair looked copper in the sun's rays. Her People's chain mail wasn't as high quality as the armor of the Southerners, but the thick animal hides they wore over them for warmth added protection. Still, many of her sisters fell to the weapons of the enemy. Luna's voice was raw from screaming as her people dropped. Her Warriors screamed right along with her as they fought and died.

A shrill whistle that could be mistaken for the cry of a hawk caught Torrin's attention, and she quickly moved to seek out Rya. Back to back, they twirled their swords keeping the enemy at bay.

"Where's the gatehouse?" Rya yelled.

"On the other side of this throng of Northerners," Torrin hollered back.

"Fine. Get ready to fly!" With another shrill whistle, three other mercenaries came to fight at their

side. As soon as Rya saw an opening, she bent down and Torrin placed her booted foot into Rya's palm. Quickly, the leader stood, her muscles bulging, and shot Torrin into the air over the heads of the enemy warriors. She flew in a graceful arc, twisting her body as she landed crouched on her feet, sword at the ready.

It was only by chance that Luna glanced down into the courtyard below. It took her a moment to realize what was happening, but by then, it was too late. A group of enemy fighters had made their way into the courtyard. How had they gotten there? Had the walls been breached? It didn't matter. Luna battled her way towards the nearest stairs to the courtyard. She yelled an alarm, hoping desperately to salvage the day's efforts, "Enemy in the courtyard! The enemy is in the courtyard!"

Others heard her call and tried to force their way down the stairs as well, but the remaining enemy on the battlements slowed their progress.

Torrin was on her feet and sprinting for the gatehouse, ignoring the cries from behind her. An arrow pierced the unprotected flesh of her arm. She gave out a small cry, but channeled the pain and kept moving faster. More arrows came raining down on her, but it was too late, she could taste victory.

As her hand touched the latch, Torrin ducked, catching the sound of a sword stroke behind her. With a loud "thunk", metal embedded itself into the wood of the door above her head. Flipping her own sword in her hand, Torrin stabbed backwards. Her sword met resistance but after a moment, pushed through it. Not stopping to watch the woman die, she crashed into the gate room leaving her sword hilt hanging out of the body. Massive pulleys with ropes and chains wrapped around them filled the room. Smiling, she untied a knotted rope and pulled one of the larger handles downwards. The room began to shake as the chains and ropes started to unwind. Faster and faster they unraveled until, with a loud boom, the gate crashed open.

Luna was still screaming for someone to shoot the small dark-haired woman when the front gate fell and a tide of Southern warriors burst through it. Relentless and contemptuous, they brushed aside the few defenders they found in the courtyard. In that moment, she knew the Castle was lost but she didn't care. With a scream she led the charge down the stairs towards the fresh mass of enemy.

Once in the courtyard, Luna managed to kill a good number of Southerners before a warrior slashed her side open. Gasping in pain, she barely deflected the next stroke, but the impact of the two blades loosened her grip. The long sword tumbled from fingers too weak to hold it. With a hand on her wounded side and blood leaking between her fingers, she went down to her knees, struggling to breathe as she fell. Her eyes closed as she asked the Goddess to forgive her for her failure.

In a last, violent clash, the Northern warriors made their final stand. But outnumbered, exhausted and with most of them wounded, it didn't last long. Against the flood of fresh enemies, all were swiftly cut down.

From inside the gate room, Torrin heard the army storm into the Castle. A small part of her told her that she should care and be ashamed of what she had done to her place of birth, but she couldn't feel anything. Her part was done; the gate was opened. Numbly, she broke the arrow shaft in her arm off, making a mental note to have the healer dig the tip out. The sounds of battle were winding down. In an hour or so, her purse would be full and the mercenaries would move on to the next war where she would fight again.

She exited the gatehouse, pulling her sword out of the dead woman and cleaned it as she glanced around for the Hawks. She spotted the women easily, although, most people would fail to see them hiding in the shadows, out of view. But she had an advantage since she knew where to look.

As she moved quickly to rejoin them, Torrin noticed the leader of the Southern army striding into view, her armor shiny and clean, untouched by the day's horrors. Torrin snorted in disgust, but she was not surprise as she had heard many unflattering things about the South's new ruler.

Quiet as wraiths, Rya's Hawks moved out of the way of the Southern warriors and watched the pillaging and plunder of the Castle. Feeling a squeeze to her uninjured arm, Torrin looked back at her leader.

"If there are any family mementos you want to keep, go and retrieve them now before the snakes make their nests," Rya said quietly.

For a moment she hesitated, unsure, as painful recollections flashed through her mind, but then she reluctantly nodded. Torrin wordlessly slipped away from the Pack. With help from old memories guiding her through the twists and turns of the hallways, she found her way into the belly of the Castle. She traversed the unlit hallway that led to a small section of Abnoa reserved for the families of the Castle's Advisors.

She contemplated the plain solid wooden door in front of her and took a deep, ragged breath in an effort to handle her distressed composure. Slowly she opened the door to where she once lived. It had never felt like a home to her. Instead, it was a place of sadness, hurt and shame.

As she gazed around the room, she wondered what she was looking for. Above the fireplace was a family portrait. Four figures were painted on it: her birthmother Tyra, with her light blonde hair and solemn gray eyes, her mother's partner Quinn, whose cold blue eyes even seemed to judge her from the canvas and finally her two older sisters, Rhian and Tasha. She, of course, was not in the painting. Quinn wouldn't allow for it saying she really wasn't family. She remembered where she had hidden during the sitting, not letting anyone see her tears because her mother hadn't corrected Quinn.

Moving past the picture and toward the living quarters, she paused for a moment at her mother's

door, and then slipped inside. Looking around, she noticed the old fiddle her mother had played laying on a table. When she had gotten old enough, her mother showed her how to hold it. This was one of the few, happy memories she had. She would sit in this room learning to play, sharing the love of music with her mother. But as usual, when she found out about the lessons, Quinn had taken that joy away by forbidding her to touch the instrument. Now, in defiance, she lovingly tucked it under her arm. As she turned to leave, something caught her eye. There, sitting on the pine-hewn dresser was the silver torque of her mother's family.

For a curious moment, she found she could not stand the thought of a Southerner handling it. Fingers touching the delicate silver engravings, she traced the carving in the shape of a dragon breathing blue fire. She had loved this piece. She wondered why her mother had left it. Without realizing it, she tucked it in her pocket along with her climbing claws as she softly closed the door and went to join her Pack.

Strong arms grabbed Luna's shoulders, shaking her to consciousness and then yanked her to her feet. She bit her lip to stop from crying out in pain as they forced her to stand. All around her she smelled death, her sisters dead on the cobbled courtyard. Blood stained the stones red. Another shake cleared her thoughts as the women shifted behind her as a shorter Southerner entered the courtyard, the morning light glinting off her clean armor.

"Khelin," Luna croaked, barely recognizing her own hoarse voice.

The shorter woman smiled, her teeth gleaming white in the sunlight. Her expression reminded Luna of a snake slithering through the grass.

"Miss me, love?"

The women holding her up snickered.

Khelin's fist caught the unaware Luna on the side of her face, breaking her nose and driving the taller woman to her knees once more. Blood spurted out and spilled down her face like a crimson waterfall.

As her own blood choked and gagged her, the laughing women on each side of her hauled her back up onto her feet. She gasped for breath and watched through pain-filled eyes as her Warrior sisters were stripped bare, dragged outside like kindling, and tossed into a mass grave. Then focusing on Khelin's smirking face, Luna did the only thing she could; she spat. Her blood and saliva dribbled down the Southern leader's dark-skinned chin. Luna smirked, enjoying the stunned expression on Khelin's face. For all of two heartbeats.

The shock turned to fury and the first punch landed swiftly. The warriors that had been holding her up dropped her to the ground and added their kicks to the punches. She faded in and out of awareness as the beating went on until she forgot everything and felt only the pain. Then cruel

hands grabbed and stripped her of her armor, weapons, and most of her clothes. Semi-conscious, they dragged her up the stairs coated in her sisters' blood to the top of the parapet. There, they tied her around one of the pendant masts, limbs stretched out, her hands bound behind her, for all to see. Exposed to the elements in the ancient torture of her own People only added to her humiliation.

Strong fingers grab her chin and force her to look down into angry brown eyes. "Where did your people go? Where are they?" Khelin demanded, her voice as harsh as the northern wind that whipped around them.

Luna managed a sneer and whispered between teeth red with blood, "...never find them." A punch to her ribs would have doubled her over if she hadn't been tied to the flagstaff. The Southerners had already run up their own colors on the poles, tossing the Northern flags onto fires.

"We'll see what you think in a few hours. Feels like it will be a cold day, doesn't it, Luna?" the Southern leader spat before storming away with her lieutenants. The tall blonde was left strung up on the battlements, her broken body exposed to the biting cold wind as the first cold day of winter arrived.

They left her suspended throughout the day, her breaths coming in gurgling rasps, her ripped side and joints aching and with a high-pitched whine in her throbbing head. The bitter wind tugged at her torn and bloodied body but the sun was warmer than Khelin had expected and Luna survived in a dazed state, passing in and out of consciousness.

The Southern leader returned often, rousing her with slaps or punches, trying to force Luna to tell her where the rest of the Northern people had gone. Luna never said another word.

Khelin, her armor long since removed and replaced by expensive silk robes, came again just after the sun had set. It had been a clear day, without a cloud in the sky and it appeared the night was going to be the same.

"It's going to freeze tonight, Luna. This is your last chance to tell me."

Luna gave her a bloody smile, wishing she had some spit left.

Khelin looked intently at her for a long time. "Too bad. You were fun in bed." She traced a finger along a swollen cheek, smiled faintly, and then turned away, leaving the Northern commander to her hanging death on top of the walls.

Below in the courtyard, the Hawks stood silently in the shadows as Khelin and Rya talked in the fading light. They frowned, shifting for their weapons as their Mercenary leader became angry. Around them, everyone stilled. While they may look down on the Mercenaries' status, nobody really wanted to incur their wrath.

Moments stretched out and then Rya finally smiled as a large purse was pressed into her hands. Laughing, she came over to her pack, "Lazy- assed Southerners. They want us to track down the rest of the people from the Castle."

Torrin frowned, as well as others of the Pack. They rarely attacked innocents, and then, it was only in the course of a battle. To purposely track down those who were not warriors was beneath their honor.

"I tried to explain to the high and mighty one that we don't do that, but then she reached a money amount I couldn't say no to. If some of you would rather sit this one out, there will be no penalty." Rya nodded to them, then left to let her Pack think it over.

Night fell and from inside the Castle, the sounds of revelry could be heard. Drunken laughter echoed against the stones and shadows created from fires made bizarre and grotesque shapes. The Hawks sat around their fire drinking quietly and telling tales, each one boasting of some great feat in battle.

The longer Torrin stayed inside the castle, the more restless she became. She wanted to be moving on, away from this place, away from the dark memories. She could still hear the taunts echoing in some places when she walked by them. She scratched at the bandage on her arm, and frowned as another Southern lout walked by, proclaiming her greatness and how she, single handedly, was responsible for the day's victory. Torrin was use to the Armies they worked for never thanking them, but the arrogance of Khelin's troops was too much to bear. Without a word to the others, she slipped into the shadows and went up to the ramparts to find solitude.

As she sat on top of a ledge, her feet dangling into space, she quietly tuned her mother's fiddle. Then, as she had often done as a child, she played a mournful tune for the stars above.

"I know that song." The words were barely above a whisper of a sigh, but in the quiet of the night, they were loud enough for Torrin to hear. The words seemed to come from the shadows on her right.

Surprised, Torrin cursed herself for not being more aware. She slowly stilled the bow on the strings. "I don't see how you could. It's from my mother's clan." Then she cursed herself even more for revealing that much about herself.

There was a stunned silence followed by a low, wheezing voice, "I know you. You're Tyra's youngest daughter, aren't you?"

Quickly, Torrin gathered her things to leave. Then for a moment, she hesitated and gave a small humorless laugh. "Actually, I'm the child Tyra never had."

The cold air had slowed her bleeding and most of her body was so numb, Luna couldn't feel the pain. It would be only a matter of time before she would succumb to the cold. The thought held no fear for her; she looked forward to meeting her sisters in the halls of their ancestors.

Her right eye was swollen shut, but she managed to force her left one open enough so she could see the small woman lit by the moonlight. Her teeth were still chattering, so she knew she had a while left. It was when you stopped shivering that the cold killed you.

"I remember when you disappeared. Everyone went looking for you." Luna coughed and then continued hoarsely, "Tyra searched the longest."

Torrin peered into the dark trying to get a good look at the mystery woman talking to her. Her breath caught when she saw her hanging on the pole. No matter how she felt about her home and her people, no warrior honorable in battle should be left to die in such a way. This was a death for a traitor or for a coward.

Then as Luna's words penetrated her thoughts, she went still, although part of her screamed at her to flee, another part grew very angry. "You lie! Nobody searched for me. Nobody cared about me at all."

"Your elder sister..." A long pause as Luna lost her train of thought, and then with visible effort, she got it back on track. "Your elder sister, Tasha, she went looking too." The tall blonde licked bloodied lips, her body convulsing in shivers, "No sign." Her mind wandered back to that time, "We found no sign."

Frustration burned in her gut. Torrin had come up here to get away from her past and now found herself arguing with a ghost from there. She peered at the woman again, but still didn't know who she was.

Vehemently, she hissed back, "Tasha? Tasha's the reason I left. She was always getting out of trouble by claiming it was my fault. She had been messing with the new sword Quinn had gotten her for Guard training. She swung it in a big circle and caught Quinn's family crest. Knocked it right off the wall and shattered it. She told Quinn it was my fault." Eyes darkening at the memory, "I still have the scars on my back from that beating. It was then that I decided I had enough of being the scapegoat and left. Of course you found no sign. Do you really think the bastard who was always looking for a place to hide from the bullies wouldn't know how to disappear?"

Luna's lips moved but no sound came out as she tried to whisper something. Licking her lips she forced her one good eye open and tried to focus again on Torrin. "Quinn..." Her voice trailed off and she lost consciousness.

"What? Quinn what? Dammit, you can't just go prying into my life, make me think about things I've try to bury and then die before giving me answers." She fumbled with her cloak, took it off and then wrapped it around the still body. She knew this was another bad idea, but she pulled out a water skin and held it to the cracked lips. Torrin kept her senses on high alert knowing that if any of Khelin's troops found her with the prisoner, it would not be a good thing.

Luna suddenly coughed, her left eye fluttering open at the taste of water and the warmth of the cloak around her. She drank greedily taking in as much water and tried to absorb as much heat as possible.

"Quinn's dead," she managed to say after she'd swallowed as much water as she could tolerate.

Stunned, Torrin stood. "She's what? Nothing could kill..." Hearing the woman sputter, she pulled back the skin before she accidentally drowned her. "And my mother?"

Luna either didn't hear the question or didn't want to answer it. Instead, her gaze drifted towards the large burial pit that Khelin's warriors had tossed the bodies into. "Quinn tried to ambush the Army, on the road," Luna managed to say, her head sagging, her strength almost depleted.

The stealthy tread of booted feet on stairs alerted Torrin to her dangerous situation. "I'm sorry," she whispered taking her cloak back. She reached inside the pocket, grabbed the hand claws and dropped over the side. She speared the softer stone with the claws and jerked to a stop, suspended in space. She bit off a scream of pain as she forgot about the wound in her arm.

Luna nearly cried out as the warm cloak was removed. Then she realized why as Khelin slid out of the darkness and faced her, a malicious smile on her face. "Oh, my, my, you're still alive."

Luna shuddered and not just because of the cold. Khelin's smile widened. "Oh and you know what's going on around you. This is better than I could have expected."

Her smile turned even darker. "I have a present for you," the Southern leader said in a stage whisper, flicking her hands down towards the courtyard where the Southern warriors were building something. "I've decided that leaving you up here all alone isn't very entertaining."

Khelin's lieutenants laughed and nudged each other.

"So I'm going to make you the night's entertainment. Isn't that great?" Khelin traced a finger up Luna's chest. With a smile, she dug her fingertips into the deep cut in Luna's side, ripping it open again. Luna screamed in pain as Khelin laughed. Still giggling, she touched her red fingertips to her lips.

"Just wanted to make sure you can still feel pain." Then she turned and left, going to get another glass of wine and to make certain the pyre that her warriors were setting up was done to her liking.

From her position hanging on the outside of the wall, Torrin listened with trained ears until she heard Khelin's steps fade away. With a small grunt, she heaved herself back over the side. Her left arm trembled and the white bandaged was stained red. As she stared down at the courtyard below, she felt something sick inside her gut. And the Southern warriors called the mercenaries 'savages' because they demanded payment for fighting. This humiliation and torturing of a

respected warrior was the true savagery. She and her Pack would never do anything like this, not even for a hefty amount.

She paused and wondered about that train of thought. Hadn't Rya just taken money to hunt down those who were not warriors who had fled before the battle? So maybe there was always a price.

For a moment, she thought about saving the woman. She frowned in disgust. She was a Mercenary. She had sworn an oath that said her Pack, her leader, and the value of money was above all else in this world. No good deed could be given without a transaction. Mercenaries could not be selfless. Her family was the Hawks and to do such a thing would be betrayal of her oath to them and the Mercenary Guild. They would never welcome her again.

She turned back to the woman tied on the pole and softly asked, "Tell me this. Where is my mother? Did she go home to her clan or is she with the others that fled from the castle?"

Luna was silent as her fogged-covered brain processed the words. Then she struggled to answer, "I... I don't know. It's possible she returned to her clan. But its more than likely she is with the others from the Castle."

Torrin bit her lip, her loyalties torn. Her mind raced to follow her scattered thoughts as she tried to figure out the puzzle of her future. She should risk everything to find her mother. But to give up her vows and oath to the Mercenaries would mean banishment from the only family that had accepted her as one of them. There had to be a middle ground. "What can you pay me?" she whispered suddenly, surprising herself as much as the bound woman. "If I free you and get you to safety, what can you pay me? I can't do this from the goodness of my heart. Remember, I'm a mercenary. Giving assistance can only come from money or a trade of something valuable."

Luna watched the shorter woman stare down into the courtyard behind her. The tall warrior couldn't see what Khelin's people were doing, but she could guess easily enough. For a moment, the warrior's words made no sense to her. Then, they penetrated the fog of hurt and pain that surrounded her, and for the first time since the invaders had come, a small spark of hope ignited in the Northerner's chest. "So, what's your price?"

Torrin licked dry lips, calculating the risk involved. "Well, I'm going to have to spirit you out from under the nose of the whole damn Southern Army."

Luna gave a coughing chuckle, her head bowed. For a moment, she said nothing, then with wet, gurgling snort, "I offer you the treasure that Khelin is seeking."

Torrin whipped her head around. "All this bloodshed? This is for a treasure?" This shouldn't have surprised her. She had been in enough battles and wars to know what people would kill each other for. "Who knew the Northern barbarians had anything so valuable."

"Valuable?" Luna wondered, as she lost focus of her thoughts for a moment. Then it came back to her and she whispered, "Yes, a treasure. You can have it if you help me escape."

The shorter woman bit her lip, deep in thought. Time was ticking down; soon the guards would be coming for the prisoner. If she was going to act, it would have to be now or else she might as well just return to the camp below.

In a blur of motion, her dagger sliced through the air cutting the cords that held the woman. She grabbed the cold flesh and eased the taller woman down to the ground. As gently as she could, she rubbed the warrior's hands and arms trying to get the blood to flow again. She let the woman sit for a moment as she began to mentally prepare for what needed to be done. Pulling a coin with a hawk stamped on its face out of her pocket, she made two quick slashes in the stone and then set the coin on them. She turned to the near-dead woman and asked, "Can you hold onto me?"

"I'll try." She gasped, trying to stay alert, but the pain from the hits to her head made it difficult. Although the tall blonde's arms no longer worked properly, she did her best to wrap them around the shorter woman. The warrior bit her lip hard enough to taste blood again as her body cried out in pain from the movements.

Torrin growled in frustration, "If you can't, you're going to fall to your death." She pulled her cloak off. Quickly, she twisted it until it resembled a rope. Then, she tied it around their bodies hoping it would help some.

Luna needed all the help she could get. Her tightly bounded hands now felt like large blocks of ice. Clumsily, she held onto the shorter woman, focusing all of her rapidly fading strength into that one action.

Climbing claws in place, Torrin gave a brief prayer to the Mistress of Shadows for her injured arm to hold, and then slid over the Castle wall.

Silently moving down the rock fortification, she focused on crawling slowly and carefully, hands and feet stabbed repeatedly into the stones. She ignored the pain in her arm and the sweat that poured down her back. She just concentrated on the placement of her hands and feet. The dark-haired woman hoped the warrior would be able to move a little on her own once they hit the ground.

The climb down lasted an eternity to Luna. Even though it was Torrin that was keeping them from falling, Luna felt as if her entire body was on fire from the effort of hanging on. The Warrior's strength failed her just before they got to the base of the barrier. She slipped through the makeshift rope and limply fell the ten feet to the ground below, landing a dozen feet away from the wall. The blonde gasped in agony and struggled for her breath.

Above them, on the top of the castle buttresses, a commotion broke out when she was spotted. The bright moonlight gave the few sentries on duty more than enough light to see Luna's fall. The cry rang out, "The prisoner is escaping!"

Torrin gritted her teeth, next time she would pray for wings. For a moment she hesitated, it wasn't to late to go back and pretend she had never taken this path. She mentally shook her head. No, that wasn't right and she knew it. The contract had been made and she would honor it. She pushed away from the wall, easily falling the 10 feet removing her claws on the way down, rolled back up to her feet and ran to the fallen woman's side. Torrin knew they were sitting ducks for anyone with a bow. "Quickly," she urged.

Weakly, Luna struggled to stand up, but was barely able to move her arms. Only with Torrin's help did the wounded warrior get on her feet and with her arm draped over Torrin's shoulder, managed a staggering walk towards the dark forest. In the open, under the full moon, they were as good as dead, but among the trees, they had a chance.

Behind them the castle was in an uproar. Crowds of people were rushing up onto the castle walkways, yelling and pointing to where the two women were moving towards the trees. The profuse celebration drinking slowed their response, but still, it was only a matter of minutes before Khelin started yelling for the gate to be opened and began assembling her warriors for pursuit.

The gate of the castle drew open with a rattled clank of chains. Inside the courtyard, Khelin bullied her drunken warriors out into the cold winter night, shouting at them "Bring me that bitch! Bring her back!"

Torrin growled at the activity, but said nothing. Instead, she focused on getting them into the darkness. Her breaths came in rapid, white puffs. Luna struggled to keep up with her. Even with Torrin's support, it was hard to stay on her feet. The path they were following made it even more difficult for her. They were passing through the area where the Southerners had charged, and the ground was littered with their dead. Bodies that they had to detour around.

Above them, the first faint wisps of clouds began to drift in front of the bright moonlight, spreading darkness just as the first arrows began to whiz through the air around them.

"Snow," Luna panted as she hobbled forward. "It's going to snow."

"Goody," Torrin mumbled.

She hated snow. Snow reminded her of her childhood. This place. She should have sat this campaign out. Rya said she would have understood if she wanted to pass on it. But no, she said, she didn't want to let her Pack down. Dark shadows of the pines loomed in front of them, and Torrin let out a breath in relief. Suddenly, just inside the line of trees, she pulled the taller woman to her and fell down to the ground as several arrows passed overhead.

Spent from the desperate rush toward the tree line, Luna flopped over on her back and focused on trying to breath. When she was pretty sure she wasn't going to pass out, the warrior struggled to sit back up. "Khelin will be coming after us."

Torrin stood up and after a moment of thought, unfurled her cloak and placed it on the barely conscious woman. The cloak was better than nothing, but it wouldn't keep the wounded woman very warm.

"We need to keep moving. If we can make it to the where the army camped last night, we might be able to find some discarded clothes that we can use."

"I don't know if I can," Luna confessed, as she tried to get back up to her feet. The wound in her side was bleeding freely again and she was starting to feel dizzy and lightheaded. Even though the cold was helping to keep the bleeding and swelling down, everything was painful for her, even breathing.

Torrin scowled, "You can't die. You owe me a treasure. So get up and get moving." She barked the last as a command. But she frowned, knowing the woman was on her last reserve. "You can either try or be that bitch's plaything. So what is it going to be?" she asked, holding out a hand.

"I won't be taken alive back to her," Luna replied, a quiet determination in her voice as she took Torrin's outstretched hand. Torrin hid a smile of admiration for the warrior's resolve as she helped her up.

The warrior concentrated on one thing at a time. First, she struggled to her feet. Then, it was the placement of one foot in front of the other. Even though the sounds of pursuit were growing closer, she blocked them out, forcing her abused body to move.

Torrin already had her mind whirling back to her childhood memories trying to remember all her old hiding places. She would often run out into the woods to escape Quinn, her sisters, or the other children of the Castle.

"Not far from here is a burrow covered in a thicket of briar and thorns. However, if you know the right place, there's an entrance to it, but it's hard to see. In the dark, there's no way these half drunk soldiers can find it. I'll help you there, then I'll go lay down a false trail and try to get you some clothes as well." She wrapped an arm around the woman's waist and led them deeper into the trees.

Luna really had no choice but to trust the woman. Instead of worrying about something she couldn't change, she bobbed her head in a slight nod of agreement. As they traveled deeper into the dark forest, the bitter cold wind started to kick up the dead leaves around them. Clouds boiled overhead, obscuring even the faint light provided by the full moon and stars. Wet, full flakes of snow began to dance through the air upon the gusting wind.

"Blizzard," Luna panted. All her senses warned her of the pending blizzard.

"Even better. The snow will do a better job of hiding our tracks than I could. But you still need food, clothes, and probably medical attention." She paused looking around to the right, "Almost

there, hang in there."

Luna grunted something that might or might not have been a response to Torrin's words. The snow would also hopefully cover up the blood trail she was leaving behind.

She moved them down one small hill and before they climbed another slight rise, they came to low spot between the hills covered with briars. It was still dangerous and dark looking but as a child, she had sat watching coyote pups crawl in and out of the thicket.

With the northern winter upon them, the coyotes would have moved on to warmer climates and better food runs. She slowly lowered Luna to the ground in front of the opening. The mercenary doubted the woman was strong enough to wander off, but she cautioned her anyway, "Wait here, I need to make sure no large animals are using it as a den."

Luna couldn't have argued with her even if she had wanted to. Stars danced in front of the injured warrior's eyes and she curled around the aching gash in her side, trying to stop the pain. Her world seemed to only be made up of endless cold and hurt. She whimpered when the warm body that had been holding her left to go check the burrow.

Torrin crouched down and searched around in the darkness until she found the opening, the only place in the briars and thicket an evergreen flourished. On her hands and knees, she pushed the fragrant fronds aside and squeezed inside. She didn't remember it being so small, but she supposed she had gotten larger since the last time she had used it. She carefully listened for sounds, but sensed only the dark; there was no soft breathing of another living thing.

Assured it was safe, she wiggled the rest of the way inside, moving bones and rocks out of her way. After clearing a patch, Torrin gathered a few small twigs, pulled out her flint, and a few tries later, had a small, feeble fire going. Just enough for light, nothing more. As she looked around, she confirmed what she already knew; other than herself, there was nothing else in here. Letting the wispy fire continue to smolder, she squeezed back out and returned to the warrior.

Luna lay curled up on her side where Torrin had left her, the dark cloak draped over her still form. Only the rapid, shallow rise and fall of her chest gave any hint that she was still alive. The snow was beginning to come down harder, filling the air with large, wet flakes that stuck to everything they touched. Luna was already coated with them.

Lightly shaking her, Torrin spoke quietly, "Come on. I've got a place for you to rest. You've just got to get in there. It will be a tight fit, just think small thoughts. For a Northern barbarian that shouldn't be so hard."

The blonde managed a feeble grin at the joke as she crawled towards Torrin. There was only a little room inside the small depression, but at least it was protected from the elements. Luna collapsed as soon as she was inside, drawing her legs up into a fetal position and tried to still the chills that shook her body.

Her teeth were chattering so hard she feared that Khelin herself might hear them. It was only then that she realized she could no longer hear the sounds of their pursuers. The snow had dampened the noise.

Torrin followed her in shortly after, draping the cloak over the woman and depositing her stuff on the ground.

"If you keep feeding the fire, you can use it as heat. But don't add too much, the light might give us away." Then she left again.

The blonde lay on the ground, blue eyes opened wide, staring at the small fire as she trembled with cold. One trembling hand reached out from under the cloak to pick up a twig. Her hand was shaking so badly she completely missed hitting the fire with it. It took two more attempts before she managed to feed the fire. After scooting as close to the flames' warmth as she dared, the blonde's eyes finally fluttered shut. The day's injuries claimed her as she fell unconscious, swept into the darkness of her mind.

Torrin moved silently over the ground. Unlike the others out on the snowy field, she had the advantage of being familiar with the landscape. Happily, she noted, none of the forces were looking in the area of the burrow. Unfortunately, though, they were searching the road and in the direction of last night's base camp.

She made her way to the encampment quickly, sliding through and between the trees, and once, up in them as troops passed below her. By now, the cold and wet had crept through her light fighting gear and she was anxious to find heavier, dry clothing.

As she approached the camp, Torrin circled around it until she came to the mercenary's cache. Removing the snowy branches that had covered it, she found her heavy pack, bow and arrows. She thought about leaving a note for Rya, but figured her message left at the Castle would be enough. Shrugging the pack onto her shoulders, she entered the abandoned base camp for more supplies.

Seething with fury at the possibility of her plaything escaping from her, Khelin lashed out at her warriors. The insane leader screamed and threatened them to search faster and farther for the fugitive prisoner. "I wanted to watch her roast! And if she doesn't, one of you will take her place!" she screeched into the blowing snow and howling wind.

The snow kept falling, harder and harder, until the air was white with it and the ground completely covered. Still the snow continued to fall, whipping through the air on the gusts of wind that roared through the forest. Faced with the fury of the blizzard and with some of her warriors having gotten lost, Khelin was finally forced to draw back into the Castle.

Rya stood on the rampart, watching the chaos in the forest below. Behind her stood all of her Hawks, except one. Wet flakes hissed as they landed on the torch she carried. She turned around and searched the area where the prisoner had been bound. A flash of gold reflected back at her. Bending over, she picked up the coin and saw the markings scratched into the stone face below it.

For a moment, she frowned, and then her mouth broke into a wide grin. Damn, her little bird had guts. She'd gone and pissed off the whole Southern army. Rya hoped the pay was worth it. Pocketing the coin, she gestured for the Hawks to return to their warm fire.

Torrin grumbled as the snow fell harder; it stuck to her hair and clothes. With her teeth chattering, she stood for a moment in front of the briars, trying to judge the rate of snowfall. It would only take minutes for her tracks to be erased. She shoved her heavy pack inside the burrow and then followed after it. The warmth of the den pleasantly surprised her.

Inside the burrow, Luna laid unconscious next to the tiny fire. Her body shook and her teeth chattered as the wounds she had taken earlier in the day finally began to make themselves known. Her skin was covered in a thin sheen of sweat and her breathing was rapid and shallow.

Torrin frowned as snow melted in her hair. Feeding a few more twigs into the fire, she unpacked her bedroll. Placing it on the ground, she then unpacked the sparse medical supplies and clothes she had taken and laid them next to it. "Come on. I can't have you sick on me. We have an army looking for us." She dragged the shaking woman onto the blankets.

"Momma?" Luna whispered weakly, eyes fluttering open, then slipping closed again as she settled back on the bedroll.

Torrin chuckled. It came out loudly before she could bite it off. For a moment, her belly shook as she fought kept her laughter silent.

Wiping the tears out of her eyes, she reflected how good that moment of amusement had felt. "I am most definitely not your mother." Then she pulled out her water skin and helped Luna sit up, "Here, drink. You're probably dehydrated."

Luna managed to rise a little and but only remained sitting up by leaning heavily against Torrin. The water helped rouse her from her dazed state and she drank greedily from the water skin. The injured woman also covetously soaked up the body heat granted her from being held by the smaller dark-haired woman.

"How are you feeling?" Torrin asked quietly. She set the skin down and grabbed hold of the medical supplies. She leaned over carefully, so not to disturb the woman too much, and removed the blood-soaked cloak. Torrin stared at the gaping wound in the Northerner's side. Picking up and opening a vial, she dumped some of the contents on a clean cloth. Cautiously, and as gently

as she could manage, she began to clean the deep gash.

"I fought a major battle, I have a hole in my side, and was left hanging outside, naked, for a whole day." Warily, she closed her eyes. "I feel great," the warrior muttered, wincing as Torrin scrubbed the gap in her side.

"I should charge more," Torrin muttered as she placed a bandage on the wound. It probably needed to be stitched, but at the moment, she didn't have steady enough hands to do it. In the morning, if it still looked bad, she would attempt it.

Easing out from under the woman, she gently laid her back down and looked at her. Torrin's eyes stopped on the face, scanning it closely. She was about her age; blonde and blue-eyed like so many other Northerners. She searched her memory but she still came up with a blank on who she might be. Which, in a way was good, since it meant this woman had not been one of her tormentors while growing up.

Forcing her eyes off the Warrior's face, she looked over the body for other wounds that needed attention. Her hands and feet were marked with ugly bruises, but she was happy to see that the skin wasn't blue, indicating that the circulation was okay.

Torrin covered her with a clean cloak.

With fatigue rapidly drawing her down into its sleepy embrace, Luna struggled to remain awake just a bit longer. "My name is Luna, daughter of Mezzarna and Fengold," she whispered through cracked lips. Her blue eyes opened into tiny slits so she could watch the mercenary's face.

"Well, Luna, daughter of Mezzarna and Fengold, it's very nice to meet you," Torrin said, still racking her brain for a memory of those names. Still, nothing came to mind. She decided they must have been Rangers living in the forest.

"It's nice to meet you, Torrin, daughter of Tyra and Quinn," Luna whispered again, closing her eyes as she slipped into sleep.

Turning away, Torrin threw a few more twigs into the fire, "Actually, it would just be 'daughter of Tyra'." She cleared her throat, "So, should we try to get clothes on you or do you prefer to sleep naked?" She turned back and gazed at the sleeping woman, wrapped only in her thick traveling cloak. She blinked, "Well, naked it is."

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Disclaimer: This is going to be a long story. The longest that either of us have ever written. So if you want a little PWP, you might want to look elsewhere. This story will have violence, sex between consenting adults who just happen to be female, and a few swear words. In Canada this would get you a rating somewhere around 13+, but I think it would get an R rating in the States. We crave feedback. Please send any constructive criticism or just a note to say hi, to: zeewriter@yahoo.com, adarkbow@yahoo.com

Chapter 2

Prologue

In the Beginning there was Thanla, the Earth Mother, and Kuthus, the Sky Father.

After a time, they had a son whom they called Korgon.

He was their first-born and was doted upon by both mother and father. After a time, he begged for playthings and his parents created humans for him. Korgon enjoyed their attention, and would appear to them in the shape of a horrible black dragon, demanding their worship. He became known as The Dragon God, feared by even his own followers.

Time passed. Thanla and Kuthus had other children but every time they created playthings for them, Korgon would command his people to destroy what his siblings held dear. He hated his brothers and sisters. He hated that he was not the only offspring anymore.

The other Gods complained to their parents about Korgon but Thanla and Kuthus just nodded and said they would talk to him. But, nothing ever changed. Eventually, Korgon decided he should be the One Supreme God and murdered his parents and banished most of his siblings from the lands he ruled.

The exiled Gods and Goddesses found themselves weak and with out any power. At a loss, they looked to their eldest sister for guidance. She was a tall woman with silver hair who ruled the moon and the stars, holding very little interest in the affairs of the earth. But after a time, she grew weary of her siblings' complaints. She told them she would do what she could and that they must be patient. For the first time, she peered in on her brother's lands and was disgusted and shocked at what she saw. And for the first time, after looking at the poor creatures he so mistreated, the Goddess knew pity and decided to intervene.

A woman being beaten down into the earth caught her attention. This woman, despite all the horrors that Korgon's priests visited upon her, had yet to be broken. Down to her last breaths, she still resisted and the Goddess knew for the first time, pride. Thus it was that Selene became her first Chosen.

Chapter 2

With a gasp, Luna woke up to a world gone silent.

Her dreams had been filled with fire, blood and death mixed with a bitter cold. Shuddering with the horror of them, it took the Warrior a few moments to remember where she was and what had happened. The small fire that Torrin had lit had gone out sometime during the night. Cautiously, she shifted, trying to examine the space that she was in without waking the Mercenary. The snowfall had created a roof in the brambles above them, shutting out all light except for a small opening where they had crawled in. Even that was only a few hands across. Thankfully, it had stayed open or they might have suffocated during the night.

It was warmer in the little den than she'd thought possible, but she was still glad for the bedroll and traveling cloak wrapped around her. Tentatively, the Warrior touched the side of her body, probing the sword wound. The skin around it felt hot and dry to the touch, while the wound itself was still sticky. Luna sighed quietly, stretching out on the bedroll as best she could. Her muscles ached, not surprisingly, considering what her body had gone through the day before.

For the first time since the previous dawn, she allowed her mind to reflect on what had happened.

Abnoa Castle had been taken. Now, nothing stood between the Southern Army and the Queen's City. When spring arrived, Khelin would be able to lead the army into the heart of the northern tribes and wipe them out, one by one. It was a stark and horrible reality awaiting the North. And it was her fault.

Turning her head to the side, she swallowed against the ache in her throat. She was all that remained of the Warriors, her tribe. Sadness infected her soul; all those dead and yet here she was, alive. She shouldn't be. She had been given the leadership over the Warriors; she should have fallen with her sisters.

I betrayed their trust. Not only did I fail them, I live while my sisters died.

The blonde turned her head to the side, disgraced by the memories of the day before.

After a moment, she pushed the thoughts away and looked around. With only dim light streaming in through the small air hole, Luna couldn't tell what part of the day it was. But it was just enough glow for her to make out her companion in the small hideaway. The sight of the woman next to her only served to underline her dishonor; she had made a deal with a mercenary. A wave of agony washed over her as she pulled the recently scabbed over wound in her side when she tried to sit up. With a gasp of pain, she curled around the wound, squeezing her eyes tightly shut.

Blissfully unaware of the suffering and internal conflict going on with Luna, Torrin softly snored

away. Her arm was thrown over her eyes, exposing the mark of the Mistress of Shadows branded into her shoulder. A picture of a snake wrapped around sword. As cold air took over the space that had been occupied by Luna's body, Torrin frowned in her sleep. Squirming slightly with discomfort, she cracked an eye, looking around her. Not seeing any immediate danger she was slow to wake. She sensed dim lighting, cold air, and silence. Sadly, it wasn't a dream; she really was back in the North.

Hearing Luna's moans, Torrin sat up abruptly. As she leaned over her, she gently touched the woman's back to let her know that she was there. "Shhhh, what's wrong?" Her voice was thick with sleep and she blinked rapidly as she took stock of their hiding place. She noted the dead fire and the blanket of snow above them.

"Nothing," Luna lied, taking a deep shuddering breath, "nothing." This time her voice was as calm and devoid of emotion as the Warrior could make it. "My parent's place isn't far from here. We could make it if the snow storm has died down," she said, trying to force the conversation onto safer ground.

Torrin frowned at the obvious lie, but thought better of pushing her. There was no point in caring. Luna was only a client. After she led the woman to safety, they would part. She doubted an honorable warrior like Luna would even want to remember this moment of weakness in her life.

"Fine, that sounds like a good plan. Let me check on the storm." She turned away from the Warrior and fumbled with putting on a heavier tunic over her sleep shirt. She crawled over to the small opening and peeked outside. It was white, blindingly white outside. Snow still fell, but not as heavily as the night before. They had been lucky that the winds had kept the snow from building up in drifts. At least they wouldn't have to dig themselves out. Crawling outside a bit more, she looked up at the sky. She wasn't positive, but she thought another storm was coming, maybe by nightfall.

She pulled herself back inside shaking the snow off and brushing her hands roughly through her snow-laden hair. As she sent the wet drops flying on to the bedrolls, she spoke, "I think we can risk moving on."

Not looking over at her, Luna nodded in understanding. She was busily trying to figure out a way to wrap the bedding around her torn and sore feet.

This is the second time you have humiliated me, Khelin. The next time we meet, I will kill you.

Luna looked over at the Mercenary, peering through dirty and tangled blonde hair. "Do you have a dagger?" she said slowly, holding out a hand to Torrin.

"Oh, um, yeah." Looking at the warrior suspiciously, Torrin asked, "Why?"

"I need boots." Luna motioned towards the bedroll she had just slept on.

"Oh, well I got you clothing..." Looking around the enclosure, she found them still piled where she had left them last night, "but I guess I forgot boots."

Luna picked up the clothing, thankful to have more than just the cloak to keep her warm. A small teasing grin formed on the Warrior's face as she looked back at Torrin. "What? You're afraid to give me a dagger?"

Torrin glared back. "Of you? Hardly. The dagger is under my side of the bedroll." Torrin wasn't going to feel guilty for questioning her, Luna was a warrior too, and she would understand paranoia...hopefully.

With a soft snort, Luna reached under Torrin's blankets, arching an eyebrow as she pulled the long dagger out. With a glance towards Torrin, she started cutting up her bedroll.

"The winter snows have finally come. That should keep Khelin and her army stuck at Abnoa for the winter." Using her teeth she helped tear thin strips of cloth off, to use for binding, then kept talking. "We can rest at my parent's place. Then, when I'm healed we can go North, to the Queen's City."

Wincing as she twisted the wrong way, the taller woman started wrapping cloth around her feet as makeshift boots.

"Hold still," Torrin grumbled as she leaned over to help make the boots. "Just so you know, I'm adding a new bedroll to your tab." As she grabbed the cloth, she muttered something under her breath about the 'sheer stubbornness of Northern barbarians'.

Relieved not to be twisting her side, but determined not to show it, Luna let Torrin help. The blonde was worried about how tired that simple act had made her. "Don't worry, the treasure will pay for it," Luna sighed then closed her eyes against a small wave of dizziness.

"It better." Torrin tried to make her voice sound gruff, but she was worried. She could see how much simple actions were hurting the tall warrior.

"There, all done," she gently patted the bundled foot. "I'm not positive, but I believe another storm is coming in, so we should probably get going. I'm worried about the wound on your side. Do your parents have a medical supplies?"

Luna stared at the Mercenary that had just helped wrap up her feet. In that moment it was hard to believe that this small, dark-haired woman was a Southern Mercenary.

"We'd better be going then," Luna said quietly, studying Torrin's face intently.

Torrin's gray eyes slid away, uncomfortable with the scrutiny. "Yeah, we better get going."

She moved over to her pack and started repacking for the hike out. She paused when she reached for her bow.

"How are your hands?"

"Fine." Luna tugged on her makeshift boots, trying to make them as comfortable as possible. Her feet were going to hurt enough as it was. Satisfied the boots were as comfortable as she could make them, the Warrior set about doing something to keep her long hair out of her face. Disgusted with the dried blood tangles, she gave up combing it without a bath first.

"Why?" The blue-eyed blonde asked as she used a scrap of leftover cloth to tie it back.

Torrin warred with indecision. Finally, she gave in to common sense and shoved the bow and the quiver of arrows at the woman. Luna would be better suited having it since Northerners were lethal with the weapon.

Luna stared at the bow thrust at her. Her fingers trembled slightly as she reached towards it, and then clenched them into fists. She shook her head, leaving the bow in Torrin's hands.

"I don't use a bow anymore," and if there was a strained tone to her voice, Luna told herself it was just because she was wounded.

"What do you mean, you don't use the bow? Torrin asked incredulously. You're a northern type barbarian. You folks pop out of the womb with one of those things in your hand."

Luna's eyes darkened and her face went completely still. "I just don't. Let's get moving." She scooted over to the opening, forcing her way outside.

Torrin clenched her fist in frustration. "Fine," she spat.

She reached over to her pack and the bow and arrows. Leaning over her things, she grumbled to herself, "Should have left her stubborn ass tied up. I must have been suffering from a bout of insanity when I agreed to this."

It wasn't as cold out as Luna had feared. Although, making a quick scan of the sky and taking a few sniffs of the wind, she decided Torrin was right. Another storm *was* on the way and would probably hit them by nightfall.

The Northerner took a deep breath and immediately winced as she pulled apart the skin of the raw wound in her side.

Dammit! I keep forgetting about that.

After a bit of rummaging around the brush, the warrior managed to find a decent enough stick to use as a cane.

She called back to the hollow. "We better go if we want to make the cabin by nightfall." Luna held no illusions about how fast she could move with her feet in the condition they were in.

The snowstorm had transformed the area around them, turning the pine forest into a world of white. Luna stilled, remembering how she loved the first snowfall of the year as a child. There had always been snowball fights and forts to build. More than a foot of snow had fallen overnight and by the scent on the wind, more was soon on its way.

Torrin grunted, pushing the pack and then herself out of the hideout and into the snow. Standing up, she brushed the flakes off and slung the pack over her back.

She shoved the dagger into Luna's hands. "I hope you'll at least take this and use it if we get in a tight spot."

The dagger shoved into her bare hands startled the warrior from her reminiscences and she scowled at being caught daydreaming.

"I'll think of something, if it comes to that," Luna muttered darkly. After a quick glance about to orient herself, she mumbled, "It's this way" and started to limp northward.

Torrin said nothing and walked next to the taller woman. She grimaced as she tried to make her way across the snow. She knew there was a trick to walking in snow, but it had been too long ago for her. Even with her thinking light thoughts, she still sunk into the drifts causing her to stumble every once in awhile.

She hated being cold. Cold air snuck inside her nose freezing it. Snow was still falling, covering her clothes falling against the skin and melting down her back. Her mood became darker as they traveled and she tried to keep thoughts of her mother and the treasure in her mind.

Even the slow pace set by Torrin began to wear out Luna. Every step became torture to her wounded feet, and the gap in her side burned with the exertion. If she hadn't been injured and exhausted, the trip through the forest might have been pleasant for her. She had often traveled through this very path from the Castle to her parents' home. This time, though, she couldn't wait for it to be over. The Warrior could only pray to the Moon Goddess that she would have the strength to make it.

Several hours after they had left their hiding place, and having exchanged only one or two words the entire time, Luna sat down heavily on an uprooted tree. Her breath came in harsh pants, making small clouds in the cold air. "I have to..." Luna took a deep breath, "take a break."

Torrin stopped, saying nothing, knowing that Luna would not appreciate any comments. Warriors were funny like that.

"You want some..." Oops, she almost had done it, asking if Luna wanted 'help'. "Um, water?" she finished lamely. Torrin stood awkwardly shifting in the snow looking at the tall pine behind them.

Luna glanced up sharply at the Mercenary, her breathing starting to slow down. She kept a hand pressed against the wound in her side. Suspiciously she slowly nodded her head, not sure what it was that Torrin had almost asked, but certain it wasn't water.

Torrin handed her the water skin. "How much farther?" she asked noticing that the snow was picking up a little. She hoped it wasn't much more. She wasn't relishing the idea of carrying the exhausted, taller woman.

Thankfully, the blonde took the water skin, swallowing several gulps of water before wiping off her mouth with the sleeve of her purloined shirt. Wordlessly, Luna pointed ahead of them towards a small hill that seemed to rise upwards. She, too, had noticed the snow beginning to thicken, but she just had to rest. Her feet were now in constant agony.

"How come you left?" She found herself asking the Mercenary in her usual 'subtle' fashion. The question had been bugging her all day.

"Left what?" Torrin echoed, not really paying attention as she took the skin and tilted her head back for a drink.

Luna watched her closely, again noticing the strong resemblance between the woman and the Castle musician, Tyra. "Why did you leave the Castle? Why did you leave your tribe?"

Torrin choked on the water. Coughing, she spit the excess into the snow. "Isn't it obvious? Look at me."

"You were still born into the tribe," Luna said stubbornly, as if that fact settled all arguments or disagreements about where Torrin should have been. As far as she was concerned, it didn't matter what Torrin looked like. So what if she was smaller than any other member of the tribe? Had dark hair, gray eyes and darker skin? She was still the daughter of Tyra of the Air Clan, and by birth, a member of the Earth Clan.

"So, I was born in Abnoa. Everybody, each day of my life let me know that I didn't belong there," Torrin nearly growled. She didn't like thinking about why she had left, and she didn't like to remember her life at Abnoa. In the ten years she had been gone, she had tried her hardest to forget she had Northern blood.

"Perhaps, but you are still a Northerner," Luna's face twisted into a mockery of a smile, "or a barbarian, as the Southerners call us. Come on, it isn't far."

The Warrior forced herself to her feet, leaning heavily on her cane and set off towards the hill. The wind was beginning to pick up, sucking the heat from them both.

"Yeah, I know I'm still part barbarian. Every time I spend too much time in the sun of the south, my skin reminds me of it," Torrin replied, shaking her head to clear out the dark memories. Then she gave a small smile and said, "Great. I'm glad we're almost there because I'd hate to have to carry your ass the rest of the way" as she started to trudge up the hill.

Luna simply smiled and shook her head, too tired to spare any more breath on banter. Instead, she focused on setting one foot in front of another up the hillside.

The cabin wasn't visible until they were practically on top of it. It was cleverly tucked away in the pine trees, built into the side of the hill itself. The snow had covered the sod roof, leaving only a faint outline of it behind. No smoke rose from the simple chimney and the porch had a thick layer of pristine snow on it.

Torrin shifted from foot to foot waiting for the other woman to catch up. The air had a heavy weight to it and it was unusually silent. But after 10 years in the Southern plains, she was more used to noisy marketplaces and crowded towns. She had forgotten how isolated the Northern clans were from each other. As Luna crested the hill, she turned towards her and asked, "So, your folks around?"

Ignoring Torrin's question, the warrior cleared a path to the front door through the drifts of snow.

"Home," Luna said simply, moving down from the top of the hill to the simple wooden porch. The flurries of snow that had pestered them all afternoon were steadily turning into a raging storm as the wind picked up once again. "Come on, let's get inside." After unlatching the door, she shoved it open, revealing the darkness inside the cabin. It wasn't much. A sitting room, a small kitchen area, and two bedrooms that were actually tunnels dug into the side of the hill.

Following Luna inside, the Mercenary asked again. "So, are your folks around?"

Luna shook off her makeshift boots outside the door, shutting it behind them both to keep out the wind and snow. The oil lamp was right where the warrior had left it the last time she had been here. Soon she had the light lit, illuminating the small sitting room. Blue eyes avoided Torrin as she headed towards the small kitchen. "They're dead."

"Oh...I'm...um, this is a real nice place." Torrin shut her mouth before she could add anything else that sounded so stupid.

She set her pack down and shook the snow off her clothes the best she could. Quietly, she followed behind Luna. "I'd like to take a look at that wound in your side. It needs to be drained and cleaned again, maybe even stitched. I would have last night but I wasn't in any shape to be sewing anybody up."

Luna grunted and pulled out the dried rations wrapped in bundles from underneath the washbasin. A thin layer of dust covered everything, paying silent testimony to how long it had

been since she had been here. A few movements got the dried wood in the stove burning and water set upon it to boil. "Here," Luna offered a ration bundle to Torrin, "I'd rather have you poking around in my side when you've had something to eat. Can you light a fire in the fireplace?" tilting her head towards the fireplace in the main sitting room.

Torrin floundered at the request, feeling slightly bewildered. By the Moon, what was she doing here? She was... she was insane! She'd been stricken by a bout of noble-ism, run off from the Hawks with half-dead warrior on just the promise of treasure and ... "What? Oh... fire, yeah, I can do that." She stepped forward taking the offered ration bundle. "Uh, thanks," and then shuffled back out of the kitchen still wondering about her sanity. Taking deep breaths to center herself, she muttered as she poked and prodded the fireplace. She added more wood and kindling and then leaned inside of it to check the flue.

Blue eyes watched her leave, glad for the respite from more questions. Quickly, she gathered up a few things, set a pot to boil water for soup, and made a mental note that they would need to visit the nearby well soon. Only when Luna was certain that the Mercenary was still busy with the fireplace, did she crumble against the roughhewn table. Closing her eyes, she struggled to keep her buried feelings from taking control. She had cried enough when they had died. She would not cry again for something she could not change.

Just as the fire began warming the cabin, the tall Warrior emerged into the sitting room with two mugs of tea.

"Here," handing Torrin a mug. Wincing, she sat down in the chair that Fengold had made for her when she was young. Now that they had arrived safely at the cabin, she was at a loss as to what to say or how to act around the Mercenary.

Briefly tearing her eyes away from the dancing flames, Torrin took the mug without comment. Sipping it slowly, she sat for a while longer, but soon began to fidget. It was too quiet for her. Just the stillness and the quiet popping of the fire, no sounds of loud drunken women, nickering of horses or quiet conversations among her Pack mates.

She waited a moment for Luna to say something to end the silence, but soon gave up. "So, that wound in your side... I should... ah, are there any medical supplies here? I have some, but not a lot." Dammit! She was a mercenary, by the Goddess! She was silent and deadly killer. Her mere presence caused fear in most women, but here, surrounded by silence, trapped in a tiny cottage, she was a stuttering idiot.

Luna jerked in surprise at the sudden break in the quietness. There for a second, she had forgotten she wasn't alone. Tired blue eyes looked up from the flames to meet Torrin's gray eyes.

"In the back store room, next to my mo ..." her voice cracked slightly, "my mother's armor." Standing up, she winced as she put weight on her feet once more. "Can you see if there are boots in there, too? I think I left a pair."

She hefted the dried rations. "I'll get us some soup to go along with these."

Happy to be doing something, Torrin shot up to her feet.

"Yeah, no problem, be right back."

Luna's eyes strayed towards the long bow hanging above the mantle of the fireplace. The dark wood of the bow shimmered the dim light. The Warrior stared at it, entranced. With a sudden shake of her head, she hurried away towards the kitchen.

Torrin found the back storeroom easily. Noting the slightly dusty, yet spotless Ranger boots hanging on a nearby peg, Torrin surmised that these were the boots Luna had mentioned. Looking around, she saw the pristine armor, extra clothing and packs that obviously had belonged to Luna's mothers. She had heard the grief in Luna's voice when discussing her parents and knew it must still be hard for the Warrior to accept their passing.

As she rooted around for the medical supplies, she reflected on the death of Quinn. She could honestly say she wasn't sad about something she had wanted all her life. But strangely, she wasn't overcome with joy from it, either. Just relieved and a bit stunned that the all powerful, highly decorated and skilled Warrior leader could be killed.

Fumbling inside her pocket, she pulled out her mother's torque, the silver dragon representing the Air Clan. It glinted in dull light and Torrin swallowed a lump in her throat. If something had happened to her mother... Her eyes widened. By the Goddess, what would she say her mother if she actually found her? "Yes, mother. I'm a mercenary and I helped bring down the Castle of Abnoa." Her mother would hate her just as much as Quinn had! Pushing down her escalating emotions, she quickly grabbed the medical supplies and boots and hurried back to the main room.

Grabbing whatever was still edible from the rations, Luna dumped them into the slowly simmering water. The cabin's only window was above the washbasin and she could see the white sheets of snow falling heavily. They'd have to start melting snow for more water if the snow kept falling like this. They would never get to the well and back safely. Leaving the soup to boil, she limped back to her seat by the fireplace. Gingerly, she started to pull off her shirt, exposing her wounded side. Curling her lips in pain, Luna stared at the blood-soaked, pus-encrusted bandage covering it.

"Well, that looks nasty," Torrin blurted out as she came back into the room.

Luna jerked in surprise, grabbing in reflex for the non-existent sword at her side.

"By the Goddess, you move silently!" the warrior snapped, surprised and slightly ashamed that she hadn't heard Torrin coming. Then, without a shred of self-consciousness, she removed her shirt completely and threw the soiled bandage in the fire.

"Of course, I move silently. If I didn't, I'd be out of a job," Torrin snorted in amusement then schooled her features as she examined the ragged hole.

The wound looked nasty, but she'd seen worse. In reality, the freezing cold air probably had helped to keep the infection under control. However, she could see flushed spots on the woman's cheeks indicating some fever was there. "It needs to be re-opened. I should boil some water and flushed the wound out. I'm impressed, Northerner. Most of my Pack would have been blubbing like a babies traveling with a wound like that, but you take stoicism to a new level." Softly whistling a Southern jig, she set the boots and supplies down and moved to the kitchen.

Using the dagger that Torrin had handed her earlier, Luna started undoing the wrappings around her feet. "You know us barbarians..." she muttered, peeling the used bedroll away and tossing the ruined scraps into the fireplace. For now, she left her feet bare so the sores could air out.

Returning, Torrin said, "Yeah, I do know you barbarians." Setting down the pot of hot water, she sat and picked up Luna's left foot. Whistling another tune she began to gently clean the wounds.

Despite the surprisingly gentle treatment, Luna winced as her injuries were cleaned. She hadn't expected such care from the Mercenary and her surprise showed on her face as she studied the woman tending her wounds.

"Your feet don't look too bad. After we do this easy stuff, we'll move on to that monster in your side. There are still some medical herbs in the sack with the other supplies and I'll make you a bit to drink. It will taste like Rock Wolf shit but it will help with the infection and pain."

"Rock Wolf shit?" The warrior murmured, slowly relaxing as the fire warmed the cabin.

Torrin gave a small grin, "Yeah, Rock Wolf shit. They are small beasts that live in the rocky hills beyond the town of Thulis, but before the Drakemore plains of the Horse Clans. They eat anything they can get into their mouths. They're like a living waste dump. They're easy to avoid because you can smell their shit from a mile away."

Bending to her task, she took the other foot gently in her hand and began to wash the raw flesh. The wounds were mostly superficial and would heal without problem. Putting down the foot she asked, "Why didn't you retreat? Abandon the castle?"

In the flickering firelight, Torrin's Southern heritage was obvious in her profile.

"Retreat where? Abnoa is our home. It's also the gateway to the North. When spring comes, Khelin can move supplies up the river Anduira, to re-supply her army. Then she can march straight to the Queen's City in the northern reaches. How could we not try to stop her here?"

"Because it was suicide," Torrin said quietly then went back to humming a tune, this one slower.

"We could have held them for days if they hadn't managed to open the gates," Luna murmured, answering Torrin's point with one of her own.

Torrin stared at the filthy water and then abruptly stood up, went to the door with it, and quickly tossed the water outside. She scooped up some snow into the pot and brought it back to the fireplace.

"We'll have to wait for a few minutes for the water to heat, then we'll start on the one on your side," she asked brusquely. "You have any woolies for your feet here?"

Nodding, Luna reached under her seat and found the wooly socks Mezzarna had knit her the winter before. Grimacing with pain, she pulled them up over the cleaned red cuts on her feet.

"I don't know if I want you to touch the wound in my side." Luna warned, sweating slightly at the thought of additional discomfort.

Torrin went silent and then in a quiet voice asked, "Khelin's army had you vastly outnumbered. There was no way you could have held out that long." She turned back to the melting snow. She bit her lip in thought. She would not feel guilty. Mercenaries did not feel bad or good, what they did had nothing to do with morality, just with money.

Luna stretched her feet towards the fireplace, reveling in the warmth on her feet. Quietly, she explained, "With my archers I could have whittled her forces down. We would have held the Castle until the night at least. Then the snow would have slowed her down. Granted, she would have taken us eventually, but she would have paid dearly for it. Khelin might not have even had enough warriors left to invade north of here." Closing her eyes, she sighed. "It doesn't matter anyway. We lost Abnoa."

Torrin, not sure how to feel, dealt with things as she always did, she let her emotions bleed out until she was cold inside. Picking up the now hot water, she moved towards Luna and briskly said, "Now for that wound on your side." She set the pot down and went to get her pack. She pulled out her small kit and brought it over with the other one. Inspecting both of them, she put together what she thought she might need. She then resumed cleaning the wound.

Luna hissed in pain at the slightest pressure, jerking away from Torrin's touch. "By the abyss, that hurts! How about we don't touch it?" The warrior protectively tried to curl an arm around the wound trying to guard it from the short, dark-haired woman.

"Yeah, then you'll get an serious infection and die from blood poisoning, and I won't get paid and I'll be a laughing stock at the Mercenary meetings," Torrin said with a straight face. Leaning over the medicine supplies, she looked through them until she found the ointment she wanted.

Luna watched her warily, "Forgive me if you being a laughing stock of a mercenary meeting doesn't worry me too much."

She knew Torrin was right about the infection, but that didn't help much with the pain she knew would be coming.

"Okay," Torrin started with a gentle tone, "this should numb the skin. I don't think we need to stitch it but it definitely has to be cleaned out. I'm fairly certain that yellow, oozing pus is bad."

Despite herself, Luna let Torrin draw her arm away from the wound.

"So you're a healer, too?"

She gave a small grin as she spread the ointment around the offered skin. "Yeah," she nodded. "I know you honorable warriors have a hard time being concerned about us Mercs, but we get hurt, too. I had to become a healer. The armies that pay for our services often won't treat us or charge us hefty prices to use their healers. We aren't part of the real army so we don't get perks like food and healers unless negotiated ahead of time." She finished applying the salve. "Let me know when you can't feel the skin on your side."

Sitting back, Torrin pulled her own heavy tunic off leaving her in a lighter under tunic that was popular in the South. She inwardly grinned, knowing her fellow Hawks were probably freezing their asses off right now since they were not use to dressing for the colder climate. Unwrapping the dirty bandage from her own arm, she poked at the slightly red wound and saw where the stitching had come loose.

"Now should be good." Luna said softly.

It had worked quickly. Luna had to give the ointment that. Whatever it was managed to dull the agony in her side quickly, turning the painful heat into a welcome cool numbness. The Warrior glanced away from the ugly wound, not liking the sight at all. Instead she concentrated on another subject.

"How long have you been a mercenary?"

Torrin stopped poking at her own wound, "Um..." She frowned thinking, "four years give or take."

Moving back to look at Luna's wound, she stared at it thoughtfully. "Um, close your eyes. You can squeeze my shoulder if you want. It shouldn't hurt but it can still be unpleasant." Picking up a small knife she moved it over the wound, a hot cloth in her other hand.

She continued her explanation, "Actually being one of Rya's Hawks is an honor. I'm pretty happy she, and not some other band, bought me from the Mistress's Temple."

Luna's hand squeezed painfully down on Torrin's shoulder, more from the words than from any discomfort in her side.

"What? What do you mean 'bought'?"

Blue eyes narrowed as she watched Torrin as the Mercenary concentrated on the wound in her side.

Torrin frowned as pus began to ooze out of the wound as she reopened it. "What do you know about the Mistress of Shadows?"

Relaxing her grip slightly, Luna looked away from the disgusting excretion that erupted rather than oozed from her wound. The stench was bad enough.

"Only what I learned when I visited the South." Her tone was dismissive and vaguely disgusted by the memories of that trip. "They're some sort of Thieves Guild, right?"

After putting warm, damp cloth strips on the now oozing wound to draw out the infection, she nodded. "Sort of. She's the Goddess of Thieves, Murderers and Assassins, the Goddess of the Dark Heart. In her Temples, priests find those they think to be worthy and train them. At the end of your training, if you are found unworthy they sell you. Since, by then, all you know how to do is sneak and kill, it's mostly Mercenary bands or perhaps a noble looking for a bodyguard that buys you. When I ran away I..." She blew out a breath, "They thought I had potential, but I didn't."

She set down the cloth and picked up two new ones, soaking one in the water. Then she went back to the wound and pressed down on it with the wet rag.

Sweat beaded on Luna's face as she struggled not to move. There was no pain but the discomfort was enough to keep the Warrior agitated.

"They train Assassins?"

A priesthood that did nothing but train Assassins? The thought alone caused Luna's blood to run cold. How could her people stand against such a ruthless people?

"I never heard about that when I was in Thulis."

Wincing, she closed her eyes as more pus oozed out of the wound, followed by healthy red blood.

"Yeah, they train Assassins."

Happy that the wound was bleeding clear, Torrin patted it with the dry cloth and then reached down for a different ointment.

"People don't talk about the Mistress, afraid that it will bring her attention on them, I guess. I don't know why, though, compared to the Hounds of War, she's a minor Goddess. Maybe it's 'cause the priests are all big with the secrets."

Gently she rubbed ointment into the wound to combat infection and then began to wrap it. "There, all done. I'll check it again tomorrow."

Frowning at the pile of soiled cloths and bandages, she set them near the fire to burn later. Sitting back down, she picked at her arrow wound some more before putting ointment on it.

"You could have been a healer," the warrior murmured, watching the Mercenary as she worked. "Here, let me do that."

Quietly she reached over and picked up a clean bandage, wrapping it around the cut on Torrin's arm. With fingers calloused by countless hours of sword practice, she wrapped the wound and tied off the bandage.

"You've been gone for almost ten years. What did you do before you became a Mercenary? Were you in this Temple of the Shadows all that time?"

Torrin frowned but let the woman wrap her wound. "I..." She let out a heavy breath, "What were you doing in Thulis? That's a long ways from the forests of Abnoa." She picked at the white bandage around her arm.

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours," the Warrior retorted and leaned back in the wooden rocking chair, thankful that the injury cleansings were over. She felt slightly feverish, but still was hungry enough to nibble on some of the dried rations. "The soup should be getting ready by now if you want some."

Torrin's stomach rumbled slightly. "Soup sounds good. I'll go get it."

Getting up, grabbed the water pot and moved into the kitchen. Looking around she spotted a few wooden bowls. As she dished the soup, she figured she must have cabin fever. Torrin couldn't remember the last time she had spoken so much. Maybe it was the common connection of being back to her homeland. A homeland she had been gone from so long ago.

'Business, Torrin, get back to business', she chastised herself. Luna might act liked she was concerned now, but once Torrin had her safely with one of the other clans, the Warrior would want nothing to do with her.

Coming back into the room, she handed Luna a bowl then sat down staring at the fire. "Where do you want me to take you after the storm breaks? I think the Southern Army will stay camped until the spring thaw comes. They are unprepared for the cold and snow. But Khelin is so insane, I wouldn't put it past her to have the Hawks and her troops out looking for us once the storm passes. I'd like to get paid before they find us."

Luna sighed, reminded again that the Mercenary was just that, a mercenary, in it only for the money.

The Warrior took the offered wooden bowl of soup and brought it to her lips, sipping from it carefully. She was desperately thirsty and hungry, both, she knew, due to the wounds and the battle. The soup disappeared quickly, so did much of the rations she'd brought out. Edible once they were soaked in the soup.

Chewing on another mouthful of salted venison, Luna swallowed before answering, "Help me get to the Queen's City, then I can give you the treasure."

Torrin reflected on what she had heard of the Queen's City. It was relic of a lost age when all the Clans of the North had been united under one ruling power. Rumors abounded about it being haunted with ghosts and monsters. At least that's what the kids told each other while playing.

"The Queen's City? Isn't it just a empty place in the Wild's?"

"The Wind Walker tribe still inhabits it. I'm surprised you've forgotten that." The Warrior polished off the last of the dry rations and set them aside, loathe to move from her comfortable spot. This was the first time in days that she felt full, relatively content, and above all, warm.

"Tyra might have gone to joined them there. Aren't they your mother's old tribe?"

Torrin stared at the fire confused. She was happy that she might see her mother again but another part was worried. Maybe her mother wouldn't love her anymore. Torrin was far different from the little girl who had run away. The Mercenary grabbed the empty dishes and headed to the kitchen.

"My mother never talked much about her tribe."

Luna watched the smaller woman thoughtfully as she left the room, then sighed, looking back towards the fireplace. It was strange being here with someone other than her mothers. Luna was quickly finding out that she didn't understand Torrin at all. Shouldn't the Mercenary be happy to hear that they might find her mother at the Queen's City?

Shaking her head in puzzlement, she then called out, "You never answered my question about what you did before you went into this Shadow Mistress's Temple."

True to her stoic heritage, Luna stubbornly wasn't about to let a question go unanswered.

"Vladlin's Hounds!" Torrin yelled as she poured hot water onto her hand at Luna's question. Glaring at the woman, she came back out of the kitchen with two mugs.

"Has it occurred to you that it is none of your business?"

Luna grinned and shook her head.

Handing her a mug full of hot tea, Torrin sat down and sipped her own. After a moment of silence she spoke. "I wandered for a bit. I thought that the South would be friendlier. It was, but only barely. The plains are a harsh place, full of Horse Lords who wander around with their herds. I saw lots of amazing things and I saw a lot of horrible stuff. The cities are huge, dirty and full of noise and people. Which, I might add, was a big shock for someone from the North."

She sipped some more tea. "I was always small, and living in Abnoa made me quick and silent. Better that no one noticed me and if they did, I needed to be quick to get to one of my hiding spots. So I started picking pockets, it was either that or join a pleasure house. One day, some acrobats were giving a performance in City Square. Let me tell you, if you're watching a show or circus hold onto your purse, they always have someone working the crowd."

Luna's mouth twitched into a wry smile at that, but she didn't interrupt Torrin's rare moment of freely divulging information about her past.

Torrin gave a chuckle. "The sneak thief they had working the crowd picked the same pocket I was going for and in a second the whole place was in chaos. I started sprinting away but somebody caught me by the scruff of the neck. I thought it was over, but nope, it was one of the acrobats. She had a business proposition. That, or prison time. So I joined up with them and eventually, because of my size, started training to be an acrobat." Her forehead wrinkled. She had been happy with Kess and her sister Krystal, as well as the others. Unfortunately, that action stirred the interest of the Temple of the Mistress of Shadows.

"Fair is fair, I suppose," Luna said after the silence stretched for a little while. It was obvious that Torrin wasn't going to say any more.

"When I finished my training as a Border Ranger, I was asked by Leariel, the head of the Rangers, to go to the South and find out more about one of their new leaders. Her name was Khelin and she had just come to power in Thulis. I walked in through the front doors of her palace and announced myself as the..." Luna coughed, trying to cover over her embarrassment with her previous actions, "Emissary from the North."

"Uh, huh," Torrin grinned. "And she snowed you, didn't she? Got you to think she was all sane and stuff." Torrin shivered, having seen first hand, the rapid mental decline of the South's new leader.

Luna turned her face away from Torrin, the color in her pale cheeks having little to do with fever. "She made me feel special."

Surprised and embarrassed that she had said that out loud, the Warrior abruptly stood up, wavering only slightly on her feet. "Good night." Tossing another few logs onto the fire the tall blonde headed towards the back of the cabin, and her old room.

"Maybe it's 'cause I've seen into the black fire burning in the Mistress's Temples, but that woman is darker than any assassin that has walked through the black fire," Torrin muttered to herself.

Sighing at the woman's retreating back, she could only imagine how Khelin had made Luna feel special and she felt bad for the woman. Standing up, she threw the rags into the fire and picked up the mugs.

Sitting down in the chair that Luna had abandoned, she stared into the fire, one hand rubbing the brand on her shoulder. Suddenly feeling cold, she looked around for a blanket.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Disclaimer: This is going to be a long story. The longest that either of us have ever written. So if you want a little PWP, you might want to look elsewhere. This story will have violence, sex between consenting adults who just happen to be female, and a few swear words. In Canada this would get you a rating somewhere around 13+, but I think it would get an R rating in the States. We crave feedback. Please send any constructive criticism or just a note to say hi, to: zeewriter@yahoo.com, adarkbow@yahoo.com

Chapter 3

A timid, young woman, who had chosen the name Willow for herself, dreamed one cold night. While her slight body shivered, wrapped in her thin blanket on the ground, in her dream, she wandered among the heavens.

Her expressive, brown eyes watched stars and galaxies birthed from nothing into Creation. They witnessed wonders upon wonders as she walked. Only recently had her people learned that the dreaded Dragon God was not the only God. There were many other Gods and Goddesses now being worshipped. Slowing her steps, she knew she should be afraid to be in a place where these deities tread.

"Hello?" She asked tentatively. "Why am I here? She spun around in a circle but stopped when she grew dizzy. "Why are you showing me all this?"

"Look around you. Do you not see the miracle of Creation? Life where once there was none?" The voice was quiet and surrounded her.

Her dark eyes growing wide Willow spun around in another circle, all the while, searching the heavens. "Who are you? Where are you?" she called out fearfully.

"I need to ask something of you, Willow." There was a hesitation, and then the voice came again, "I've freed your people, but only to lead you down a path with no future. For the survival of your people, I need your help."

Willow tensed. This must be the Goddess that Selene was always speaking about.

"Me?" Her eyes got huge 'how could she help a Goddess. "Um, what can I do?"

"I would like to bestow a knowledge upon you. The comprehension for what you see happening all around you in this place."

"Um, Goddess? Are you sure I'm the one you want to give that sort of knowledge too? I'm just an ordinary worker. I only know how to till soil, dig holes and plant stuff."

The voice laughed and Willow felt comforted by the sound.

"No child, you are exactly the sort of person who should have this understanding. But unlike the stars, you do not need to create something from nothing. You merely need to combine the essence of those who will come to you for assistance in starting a family. You will help them create a new life."

"Me?" Willow squeaked out in response. "I don't... What about Selene?"

"Oh, child! First Chosen Selene has many things to keep her busy and she is not appropriate for this particular duty. But you, Willow, you were meant to be called my First Priestess. Through you, new life will be born."

Willow frowned in thought, she wasn't sure if the voice was right about that. She had never had much hope for herself. She'd always been too afraid of living. "I don't know, being a First Priestess sounds too important for me."

"It is important, child. But, believe me, you are the right person. But only accept this if you are sure you can accept the consequences. For, while you generate life for those around you, should you ever take a mate, you will be unable to create a new life for yourself."

Willow frowned harder as she thought over the Goddess's words. She was unaccustomed to making decisions. She found it easier to let others make them for her. Finally, after much deliberation, she straightened her slender frame and announced, "I will do this. I understand the price for me but helping others to have children is of a greater importance than my own need."

"Very good, Willow," said a nearby voice.

A hand on her shoulder caused the young woman to turn. Before her, stood a beautiful woman seeming both young and old at the same time. She trembled at the touch.

"Close your eyes, Willow."

Willow did as she was asked and felt a fingertip gently placed on both of her eyelids. At that moment, she felt like she had been struck by lightning, and words of power flowed into her mind as the secrets of Creation poured into her.

Then all went black.

Her body jerked in her blanket. Others rushed over to the seizing woman.

"Willow!" Some of the women shouted, unsure of what else to do.

Willow went still and then opened her eyes. Eyes that were now a brilliant green.

~The Exodus

Chapter 3

Present

Khelin was sprawled out onto the simple wooden throne that adorned Castle Abnoa's great hall. The remnants of last night's feast still littered the multitudes of tables spread out in the hall. A dozen of her most loyal warriors stood on guard behind her, spears and ceremonial armor polished to a brilliant shine. Yawning, she glanced at the woman in front of her.

"I have a task for you, my pet," the Leader of the Southern tribes purred.

The woman stood silently in front of Khelin, her head slightly bowed, her short, dark hair falling forward to hide her face.

She tried not to appear too eager but it had been too long since her Mistress had given her a task. Licking her lips, she responded neutrally, "I serve your will, My Queen. I am your instrument."

"Yes, you are," Khelin smiled brightly, sitting straight up in the throne and clasped her hands together like a little schoolgirl. "I want you to go after my Luna. Bring me back her heart, and the heart of whoever helped her escape." Someone else had been spotted running towards the woods

with the Northern warrior, but Khelin wasn't certain who it was yet.

The Assassin's eyes dilated and her nostrils flared ... a hunt. Her skin tingled. Prey *and* a hunt. "By your will, it will be done."

"See that it is, my pet." With a wave, Khelin dismissed her servant, then reclined in the throne once more.

The Assassin nodded and then turned, gliding out of the room noiselessly. No one, not even the guards would meet those dark eyes and watch the dark figure leave. They had heard too many rumors whispered about the Mistress of Shadow's Chosen for them not to fear her.

Lolling her head to the side, the Southern Queen stared at the tapestry that hung against the nearby wall. A map of the Northern reaches was laid out upon the wall hanging. Khelin grinned as she studied it. To the north of her lay the Ellris Pass, the only way through the towering mountain range. On the other side, she would simply follow the Winderling River down to the Queen's City.

There... her smile turned deadly. There, she would find the Orb of the Moon Goddess. Once that was in her possession, nothing could stop her. She would rule this world, bleed it dry and then become a Goddess herself. After that, her mother would then understand who was Mistress and who was the servant.

Torrin slipped on her boots as quietly as she could and made for the door. There was only so much brooding and moodiness that she could take. With Luna's fever, cough and foul attitude, the mercenary decided she would be safer outside hunting for food or sweeping the heavy snow off the roof. Yes, Torrin thought, she was much better off freezing certain body parts than staying in the small cabin any longer.

Opening the door Torrin breathed in the coldness and gave a shiver. She missed the lazy winter sun of the South and the cool, crisp nights filled with flickering lantern flies. Shouldering her quiver of arrows she stepped outside.

Luna glared up at the ceiling above her. She was lying in the bed she'd occupied ever since the first night they had arrived at the cabin. The fever had fully set in by the early morning of the next day, causing her to be freezing one moment then burning up the next. Most of the following day had been a confused haze of delirium aided only by the fever herbs Torrin had made her drink.

Now though, two days afterwards, the Warrior Ranger was reaching a point where she was going stir-crazy from the inactivity. Her body, unfortunately, was still as weak as a newborn kitten. The only good news was that the wound in her side no longer looked infected.

"Torrin!" Coughing from the exertion, she tried to sit up, then dejectedly flopped back down when she failed.

Snow was falling softly around her as she placed a hand on the door to shut it. As her hand touched the wood, her shoulders slumped in defeat when she heard her name shouted. Going back inside, she pulled the door shut and set her bow and arrows down. Goddess! She felt like she was hand-fast to the woman.

Walking down the hallway she poked her head inside. "You bellowed?" She almost ended the sentence with 'dear' but felt it would just stir up Luna even more.

The Northerner knew she was acting like a child, but she wanted out. Wanted to be outside in the forest where she belonged. Not stuck in bed doing nothing.

"Torrin, I know I've been a little difficult," trying not to look at the space where she had thrown a dish at Torrin last night. She continued, "But I just thought of something I could do while trapped in this stupid bed."

"Okay," Torrin said quietly while staying in the safety of the doorway, reluctant to move any closer. Luna may look like death warmed over, but she still had a wicked aim.

Luna finally managed to sit up. With a glare at the woman standing out of harm's way in the doorway, she snapped, "Give me a dagger."

She immediately realized her mistake when she saw Torrin startled face. With a deep breath, she did her best to reign in her frustration and softened her tone, "Please? And I need the old leather bag of stuff that's next to the fireplace."

Torrin hesitated a moment, thinking perhaps an evil spirit was possessing Luna. "Are you sure you should be handling...?" she trailed off at Luna's glare. "Right, I'll get them."

Luna glowered at Torrin's back, and grumbled about the comment, 'should you be handling weapons?' I'll have her know I've been handling daggers before she knew what a dagger was."

Torrin raised an eyebrow at Luna's muttering when she returned. Checking to make sure Luna's hands were free of anything that could be used as a painful projectile, she set the bag and the dagger into Luna's held out hand. Duty done, Torrin retreated back to the door.

Luna slightly winced when pulled the skin around the still healing wound on her side as she stretched out her arm.

"I need to see your foot, too."

Torrin's eyes widen. "Uh... I... um..." By the Goddess! She was a fierce, horrible mercenary and

wasn't scared of anything or anybody. Right. Feeling slightly bolder after her internal pep talk, she lifted her foot slowly.

Luna rolled her eyes as she set the dagger within easy reach and from the bag, pulled out a bundle of leather strips along with curved pieces of wood.

"You need to come closer than the doorway, Torrin," Luna grinned at the uncertain Mercenary. She was amused for the first time in days.

"I knew that." She moved forward silently. "It's nice to see you smile. Not that I care or anything. Um, what are you planning on doing with my foot?" she asked as she raised it up again. Only this time, Torrin was standing next the bedridden woman.

The foot in question was grabbed by Luna's left hand to keep it steady. Pale blonde eyebrows lifted mischievously as the Warrior studied the Mercenary. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

Torrin watched nervously, her gray eyes still slightly large. "Honestly? The way you've been acting, I have no idea. But I don't think I've done anything to piss you off recently. So I'm fairly certain I'll be getting my foot back the way I presented it to you."

'Way to be blunt Torrin', she chastised herself. 'Now she'll take a toe just to spite you.'

"You shouldn't make assumptions like that," Luna said, still grinning, as she used a long leather strip to measure the size of Torrin's foot. After measuring both the length and the width, she nodded and let go of the Mercenary's foot. "This time you got lucky, I guess."

Letting out a breath in relief, Torrin lowered her foot back down. "You need the other one? I'm fairly certain they're the same size. What did you need them for?"

Dumping out the contents of the large leather sack, the warrior started sorting through the leather strips.

"No, *you* can go and flee the cabin now," said with a note of bitterness in the laid up Warrior's voice. "I'm going to make us snowshoes. Hopefully, you can practice using them before we have to leave."

Torrin backed up towards the door. She had heard the note of resentment and decided to answer cautiously. "Yeah, snowshoes will help out a lot. Thanks. I'm just going to go see if I can catch us some fresh meat for dinner."

Having made it to the doorway, she ran for the outer door. Snagging her bow and quiver again as she ran by them, she made it outside, letting the door bang behind her.

Luna glanced up at the sound of the slammed door, sighed, and went back to work on the snowshoes. She had lost her own back at Abnoa, so she would have to make both of them a pair.

Thankfully, Mezzarna believed in having enough material around to make pairs for all three of them, so two sets wouldn't be a problem. Deftly, with fingers that had done the same task many times through the years, she began threading the sinew and leather strips together.

As she picked her way down the hill, Torrin lost her footing and, cursing the North in general, tumbled the rest of the way down and landed in a heap at the bottom. Gritting her teeth together, she staggered upright, brushing the snow from her clothes and searched her bow for any damage. She was positive that, somehow, this was all Luna's fault.

While wiping off her face, Torrin noticed something next to the hillside. Blinking the snow out of her eyes, she could just make out an outline of another building covered in the heavy snow. She struggled through the snowdrifts to get closer. To her amazement, it was a horse stable. She whistled in appreciation at the craftsmanship used to construct the building to blend in with its environment. Although, parts of the wooden corral had fallen down during the past few months, the barn itself looked intact. A small well next to the barn supplied both house and barn with water. The dark, weather-beaten wooden doors to the barn were latched from the inside, but cleverly, a drawstring allowed the latch to be opened from the outside.

She noticed two score marks in the wood that looked more recent than the rest. Torrin gently touched the door, a horizontal slashing mark about head height on a Northerner, and a puncture mark next to it that might have been from an arrow. The wood below both was stained darker than the rest of the door

The mercenary frowned in puzzlement. What had happened here? Although, she could guess some of it from the signs left. What she didn't know 'why'. Torrin knew the look of a sword slash and the jagged hole was obviously where an arrow had been embedded. And, wood never looked the same after it had been stained with blood. Nothing, she reflected, looked the same after blood had sullied it.

Pulling on the latch, the door creaked open, sounding ominously loud in the quiet snowy landscape. There were no sounds of movement inside, only the stillness that comes after a long abandonment. The temperature felt the same as the outside, cold. Only the stacks of baled hay gave any indication that the barn had ever been used. Nothing she saw gave a clue to what had happened here in the past. Pensively, Torrin shut the door, and melted cautiously into the pines to hunt.

Hopefully she could find a rabbit barrow or some of the dappled deer that lived in the forest. Fresh meat would be very welcomed. She had just about had it with stew and rations. Plus, with every day that passed, the stew was getting closer and closer to resembling a thin soup.

Torrin moved silently, warily weaving through the thick tree trunks. Faintly marked in the snow were the tracks of the deer as they moved towards the river. Because of the visible prints, she knew they couldn't be that far ahead of her. Careful to keep the wind to her front, she slowly

crept around some bushes and found her prey. Notching an arrow, she pulled the string back, the wound in her arm stinging at the effort. She aimed at the older deer trailing behind the herd. Breathing slowly, she waited for the silence in between the beats of her heart then released, praying for a clean kill.

At the sound of the whistling arrow, the other deer startled and bounded for the low flowing river, leaping through it. Torrin stared at her kill for a moment then slid down the small rise, to her prey. The deer was twitching, its eyes growing dim. With one last jerk of its legs, the deer lay still in the fresh snow. Around its neck where the arrow had hit, vivid red blood stained the white snow. A gust of wind sent snow down Torrin's back, as once again, snow began to fall from the sky. When winter hit in the north, it hit hard.

Shivering, Torrin cursed the cold and the snow again. Grabbing the two back legs, she began to drag the deer back to the house. With the winds picking up again, she didn't want to be caught in a white out. She decided the well-protected stable would be a perfect place to gut and clean the deer.

Silent as the shadows she hid among, the Assassin watched the woman drag the deer carcass through the wooden doors into a barn cleverly carved out of the hillside.

There was something about the woman, the way she carried herself that reminded her of others like her, bloodied in the art of secrets, shadows, and murder.

Uncharacteristically, she bit her lip in thought.

Her mind drifted to the past as she devised a plan for dispatching this woman and then killing the one her Mistress really wanted. Briefly, she remembered the moment she was Chosen. Her trainer had hauled her naked, screaming and kicking through the long halls to a black, iron door where the carved faces of figures on it seemed to be squirming in torment. Then the door opened and she was shoved inside. She remembered feeling her terror because it was the last time she had ever felt the emotion.

The room was empty except for a huge fire in the center that burned with black flames that reached to the ceiling. She stood trembling before it. After a moment of silence, a quiet voice spoke, 'Worship me. Be worthy of me. Walk in me and be Chosen.'

She remembered hesitating in front of the fire when an ember shot out from it and landed on her naked breast. It burned fiercely for a bit and then disappeared, along with her fear. She boldly walked through the roaring flames and had been changed forever. While in the fire, embraced by her Goddess, the secret of the Shadows had been given to her as well as other dark, horrible knowledge. She accepted it all.

Now, all but the mightiest of Gods feared her.

A snowflake landed cold and wet on her nose breaking her out of her thoughts. She shivered, not use to the cold of the North. She wanted to kill both women quickly and leave this dismal place. With that in mind, she decided on a more direct course of action. She'd get the smaller woman to come to her. She crept forward using the shadows to hide her and unlatched the doors. Now, a strong burst of wind would bring her victim to her.

Torrin was elbow deep in removing the internal organs of the halfway-butchered deer when the doors to the barn, caught in a gust of wind, whipped open. They slammed against the side of the barn and bounced back closing, only to be flung open again by another gust.

Torrin crouched on instinct, her hand going to where her sword should be, and then silently cursing the fact that she had left it inside in favor of the bow.

The wind continued to batter the barn doors back and forth against the side of the barn while sheets of white snow fell beyond.

The blood on her hands ran down her sword hip, as she was slow to move it away. She blinked at the doors. She had latched them when she entered, hadn't she?

Maybe not.

Wiping her hands on the old straw, Torrin moved to the frantically swinging doors. She stood in the doorway waiting for the doors to swing back her way so she could re-latch them. Briefly, she stood absolutely still. In front of the barn, she saw a second set of prints in the snow. The wind hadn't had enough time to wipe them away.

Her heart beating frantically, Torrin dove to the side. She waited for an attack, but nothing happened. Looking frantically around, she sprinted over to the torch that hung in a metal ring. As she ran, she could feel an itch between her shoulder blades.

Eyes completely black, like pitch, as were all of those who had walked through the Mistress of Shadow's dark fire and been accepted, watched as the barn plunge into darkness as the torch was extinguished.

As the snow fell harder, she waited in the shadows until she was certain that her prey had been spooked and she knew she wouldn't have her easy kill. The Assassin wasn't sure what had given her away, but she would soon have her kill. Then the Assassin was not there anymore, flowing through the dark shadows, invisible to everybody.

Inside the small cabin, glad to have something to occupy her time with, Luna worked on the snowshoes. She would have much rather been outside but at least this way she wasn't completely

useless. Finishing one of the snowshoes, she set it aside and glanced towards the falling snow outside. How long had Torrin been gone? Had the Mercenary gotten lost or hurt? The area was tricky to hunt in if you didn't know it very well. Disturbed by the thought, Luna forced herself upright and started the struggle to stand up.

Using the makeshift cane by the bedside, the blonde warrior staggered to her feet. Cursing how weak her wounds and the subsequent fever had made her, Luna slowly started to make her way towards the front doorway to check for any signs of Torrin.

Torrin crouched on the other side of the hay bale she had been using as a make shift table to clean and gut the deer. Hopefully, the slight dripping of blood might mask her breathing and her scent. Especially if she was correct about who was out there. It had to be an Assassin. Soldiers would have just burst in and attacked. She should have known Khelin had one with her. Torrin wished she had her sword. The bow and arrows were useless in this situation.

Closing her eyes, Torrin reached out with her other senses. Her heartbeat slowed, as did her breathing, her right hand pulling a long thin dagger out of her boot. Among the Hawks, there had been a bet going as to how many daggers Torrin had on her body at any one time.

The Assassin slipped through the shadows. Outside the barn, she slipped into the shadow of a tree and then emerged in the back of the barn from the thick shadows that lingered there. She had no need for doors, none of the Chosen of the Mistress of Shadows did. Silent as death, the Assassin moved through the barn.

The barn was completely dark, robbing the assassin of a favorite tactic. With no light to cast shadows, she had no way to leap from shadow to shadow. Still she was trained to fight in the dark. Slim hands gripped poisoned blades as she moved towards the smell of blood. Her prey was here, she just had to find it and kill it.

The Mercenary's ears perked as the sound of something wet touching the floorboards flowed into her ears. Silently, she shifted her weight.

Torrin smiled. She had put the light out so she would be on an equal footing. There were no dancing shadows for the Assassin to lunge out of. Assassins were always so cocky in thinking they were the Mistress's Chosen few.

The killer would be coming from the outside and therefore, her presence would be cooler than the air in the barn. Bracing herself, she felt the change of temperature in the air. Waiting silently, Torrin let her mercenary numbness sweep inside her, taking over, schooling her face into her killer's mask. Staying low, she lunged out from behind the bale of hay, stabbing upwards as she moved.

Tracking the scent of blood permeating throughout the barn, the Assassin drifted between the

bundles of hay. She was only a foot from the deer carcass resting on the hay bale when she felt the air shift to her side. With long-practiced reflexes, the Assassin dodged the upward thrusting dagger, and kicked outwards with a booted foot.

Torrin remained silent as the booted foot connected with her wrist, gritting her teeth as she tried to keep a hold of her dagger but failed. As she moved with the kick, she let her body go to the right. The dark-haired mercenary felt the air move to her left and shuddered, knowing that she just missed being impaled with a poisoned blade.

She rolled to her feet only to receive a very solid round house kick that sent her flying into the wooden wall of the barn.

The Assassin threw a poisoned blade towards the sound of where Torrin's body had hit the wall. Even as she threw the first dagger, she leapt towards the sound, slashing through the dark air with her second dagger.

The wood groaned as Torrin hit it, and she bit back one of her own as her nose smashed on the wood. Going limp, she fell heavily, dully noting the sound of metal hitting the wood above her. Spinning around, she managed to get to her feet and lashed out with a kick of her own as she felt the air behind her move.

The Assassin folded around the kick, soundlessly absorbing the energy as best she could. Another slash of the dagger forced Torrin backwards, barely avoiding the dangerous blade. They danced through the dark barn, fighting in pitch darkness as snow continued to fall softly outside. Their labored breathing guided each other as the fight continued, with the Assassin pressing Torrin more and more into the defensive.

"Give up," she whispered in the darkness, as the two dark-haired women circled each other, sound as their only guide.

Torrin tasted blood in the back of her throat. Her wounded arm and nose throbbed in time with her heartbeat. Her response to the Assassin's taunting was to hock a wad of spit and blood towards the voice.

Her move of defiance nearly ended her life. The Assassin's poisoned blade sliced through the air only a hair's breath from Torrin's neck. Snarling as she failed to connect, the Assassin blindly swung her arm and backhanded the wounded mercenary across the face.

Torrin stumbled backwards, tears burning in her eyes; lucky she wasn't relying on her vision. With a growl, she fainted with a punch, and then at the last second, twisted her body for a spinning hook kick aimed at the Assassin's head.

The move and following kick caught the Assassin by surprise. It landed on the side of her head and sent her flying backwards, and tumbling in a bale of hay.

Twisting back around to her feet, Torrin didn't waste any time and leapt at the Assassin. Wrestling with each on the floor, they tried to pin or get a chokehold on one another. The Assassin grinned as she got her arm wrapped around the front of Torrin's neck and in a quick move, pulled the woman into her body. Using her other arm as a brace, she began to choke her. Torrin flailed in panic for a moment, knowing she had about 12 seconds before she would lose consciousness. With 10 left, she began to search desperately around her for something to use as a weapon.

"Torrin?" Luna pushed open the still unlatched doors to the barn, letting dim light flood the darkness inside. The Assassin hissed in reaction to the sudden intrusion, giving Torrin the distraction she needed. The Mercenary rammed her elbow downwards into the Assassin's midsection and squirmed out from the chokehold.

While gasping for breath, Torrin saw one of the Assassin's daggers lying on the ground. Frantically, she scrambled for it, needing to reach it before the assassin regained her footing and start using the shadows again. If that happened, both she and Luna were dead.

Luna's eyes widened as she saw the figure struggling with Torrin. "Torrin!" she yelled just as Torrin's borrowed dagger found a home in the Assassin's chest.

The Assassin jerked once, her mouth moving but no words coming forth, and then she fell to the floor. Luna stared at the dead woman, then looked to Torrin. As quickly as she could manage, she limped her way to the shorter woman's side.

"Are you all right?"

Torrin flopped on to the floor and watched her hands clench and relax, unable to stop them.

"No, I'm having a moment that resembles that one day you had. You know the one." With adrenaline still pumping through her system Torrin was too high to make much sense.

Wincing from the pain in her side, Luna reached down and grabbed Torrin's arm, pulling her back to her feet. Slipping one arm around the dark haired woman's shoulders, she began leading her back towards the barn doors, sparing the dead Assassin a single, disgusted glance.

"Come on. Let's get you inside."

"Oh, Goddess, I just killed a Shadow Assassin," Torrin mumbled to herself, letting Luna lead her. "Luna, I think my nose is broke. But I got a deer, there's fresh meat in the barn, oh, and a very dead assassin." Torrin babbled.

In the entrance of the barn, snow swirling around their feet, Luna paused to examine Torrin's nose. Probing each side of it, the Warrior nodded, "You're right, it is."

Ignoring the rest of younger woman's babble, Luna let go of her cane to grab onto the sides of

Torrin's nose with both hands. With a quick sudden move she straightened the nose, producing a cracking sound.

Torrin jumped backwards, cursing, "Oh for the... you bitch... you could have warned me.... ow, ow, ow!"

After finishing her tirade, Torrin scooped up some snow, balled it up and placed it over her nose. "I don't like you," she said with a glare.

"You wouldn't have held still for it if I had told you what I was going to do," she retorted. " Now, come on, let's go inside."

Carefully, Luna bent down and picked up her cane from the ground. Her eyes were worried even as she held out her hand to the cursing mercenary. Torrin eyed the hand warily, afraid it might try and sneak in and reset some other body part. After a moment of hesitation, she took the offered hand, knowing they would probably have to help each other up the hill, anyway.

Luna cast one last glance backwards towards the dead assassin, and then slowly started back towards the house. It would have been slow going even without the wind and snow, as it was, they struggled laboriously back up the hill.

"We'll have to leave soon, won't we?" the warrior gasped as soon as she had shut the door behind them, blocking out the driving snow as the blizzard howled outside, the temperature dropping as night approached.

Torrin frowned in thought, absently letting Luna guide her towards a chair. "More than likely," she sighed. " Khelin probably only had one Assassin. They are expensive and hard to come by. But, if she has another one, it won't have any problem following the trail of the first one."

Luna studied Torrin's face, and then nodded, frowning. "I was afraid of that. We really can't leave before the blizzard breaks, but we must head North as soon as it does. Hopefully, it won't last too many days." Dragging a stool over to Torrin, she sat down heavily, winded and tired from the simple trip down the hill and back. Using her cane, Luna dragged over a bag of healing supplies. "Did she hurt you anywhere other than your nose?"

Unconsciously, the smaller woman kept clenching and relaxing her fists, and her right foot kept tapping a nervous beat on the floor. "I'm afraid I'm going to be a big bruise tomorrow. I don't think any thing is broken but I'm still too hopped up on my own adrenaline to be able to tell."

"Hold still." Her tone, oddly gentle, as the blonde warrior grasped Torrin's fists, stilling her nervous movements. Meeting her dark eyes, the Warrior mustered a small smirk and recited, "You're alive, your enemy's not, you can smile, they cannot." It was part of an old Northern song taught to children as they grew up. Releasing Torrin's cold, but now unmoving hands, Luna turned and added wood to the fire. "I'll get us some of that thin stew, then, I think we should both

rest."

Limping towards the small kitchen, the blonde paused and glanced over her shoulder towards the Mercenary.

"You fight well."

The complement was simple and starkly given, as was the Northern custom. Luna passed into the kitchen to see what she could do for food without the deer meat.

"'You fight well'... 'You fight well', she says!" Torrin snorted. "I fight 'lucky'. You know how many people survive an assassin of the Mistress? I'd have to say, probably none." Torrin realized that she was babbling, and worse than that, babbling to herself. Easing back into the chair, she willed the muscles in her back to relax. A twinge of pain from her arm attracted her attention. Picking at the ties of the dirty bandage, she removed it and sighed. At this rate, the arrow wound would never heal.

"Well, here's to another scar that a bar wench might find sexy," she muttered.

"Do you often talk to yourself?" Luna called from the kitchen, then returning with two mugs of old apple cider she had found in the back of a cupboard. There was a precarious moment when she moved to sit down, but she managed to set the mugs down without spilling anything.

"I just used the last of the rations in the soup. It's good you caught the deer, we're going to need it." There was still a touch of bitterness to her voice since it was Torrin and not her who killed the deer in her own backyard. Luna tried to remove it by taking a sip of cider.

"No, I don't normally... it's just so quiet, I'm not use to it. Sorry." Torrin picked up a mug and quickly took a sip to hide her floundering.

Relishing the flavor, she gave a small smile; the South didn't have apple cider. It reminded her of time spent with her mother. Everyone would be busy working away from their small rooms in the Castle and it was only her mother and her in the area. Her mother would then tell her tales and stories that would just be about the two of them.

Luna found herself studying the other woman. She was doing that a lot these days. The Warrior wasn't used to another person in her parent's cabin. It had been years since the last guest had ever visited.

"You get used to it." At Torrin's questioning look, she elaborated, "The quiet. You get used to it."

Torrin gave Luna a smile, "I had forgotten the North was so quiet and clean, no sweaty bazaars filled with unwashed people trading and selling. No homes packed on top of each other. The grass lands aren't so bad, but watch out for the Horse Lords."

Realizing she was being chatty again, she changed the topic. "Um, tomorrow, I'll finish dressing the deer and smoke the rest of the meat so we can have it for travel."

Luna was sorry that Torrin had stopped talking about her life in the South. Stretching her legs towards the fire, she gestured towards the other woman with her free hand, taking a sip of cider from her cup before asking, "Please, go on. What are the Horse Lords like? I never made it further south than Thulis." Feeling she had to clarify the request for some reason she licked her lips and explained, "We have time before the soup is ready."

"Uh, well, okay... it's too bad you didn't make it any farther than that. Thulis is kind of a cesspool." Torrin looked at Luna's face, somewhat surprised to see the other woman looked genuinely interested.

The blonde nodded, having thought that the capital city from which Khelin had ruled had indeed left a lot to be desired.

"What is it like further south? I heard stories but before I could go see for myself..." Her words trailed off, and Luna uncomfortably looked towards the flames. She wished she could cleanse her memory of Khelin.

"Did you know the Horse Lords worship a male God? And there are a few other minor male gods as you get into the deserts and closer to the Inconcessionian Mountain range."

The Mercenary took another sip, thinking back to the first time she met one of the wandering tribes. "The Horse Lords are a lot like the Northern tribes. They are largely nomadic and follow their herds across the grassy plains. They are fierce warriors who can sweep down on their horses faster than the blink of an eye. Some cut their hair until they have one single long lock of dark hair in honor of their horses. Actually they remind me of everything my mother ever told me of the Northern tribe of Fire. Their horses are like the Alces they ride, only without the horns and the shaggy fur. Instead, they are sleek and swift, beautiful to watch."

Torrin sighed as she remembered the one time she had been allowed to ride such a beast. She had never forgotten it. The People of the Horse had joked that maybe her Muanya had been one of them. The power and freedom she had felt on the beast had been something she had never forgotten.

Luna could almost picture it in her mind. What she would have given to see such things! Unfortunately, her scouting mission had ended in Thulis, as had many other things. With a regretful sigh, the taller woman forced herself back to her feet and limped to the kitchen to check the soup.

"The soup is ready. It's not great, but it will keep us warm. I wish you could have tried my mother's soup." The last part had slipped out without her conscious consent and the Ranger scowled at the soup pot as she realized what she'd just said.

Snapping out of her memories, Torrin caught the reference to Luna's mother. "What happened to your mother and Muanya? I maybe only an obtuse mercenary, but even I can see, it hurts you to even think about them."

Torrin tried to get up and follow so Luna couldn't dodge the question, but found herself groaning as her abs shot pain back into her body. Tearing off her bloody outer tunic, she dumped it on the ground. Lifting up her lighter Southern shirt, she groaned at the sight of bruises starting to form on her stomach and ribcage. Poking at her ribs, she was happy not to find anything feeling spongy or broken.

It was quiet in the kitchen, as Luna stared down into the bubbling soup. No matter how hard she tried not to, she remembered. Her lips twitched and she replied, "It was late in the summer. I had just come back from Thulis that night. It was a full moon. I can remember how light it was outside, almost like day." Moving over to the cupboard, the warrior fetched two bowls.

Trying to keep her voice level, she continued, "There were a dozen of them. A Southern scouting party." Her voice cracked despite herself, "They found Muanya in the south field, with our ox." Luna had found Fengold's body stretched out in the meadow. "Mezzarna had killed four of them before their leader pinned her to the barn door."

Luna's hands were shaking at the recollection. "She was using Mother as a shield." Setting down the bowls, she leaned against the countertop, closing her eyes against the memories. "I missed." Her words were a bare whisper.

Torrin stopped poking her ribs. Luna's story didn't surprise her. The Southern soldiers under Khelin were known for their lack of control. It wouldn't be unusual for a scouting party to do more than scout; they would probably have dabbled in some pillaging, raping, and murder.

"I'm sorry," she called out. There were other things she could say but she was afraid she would seem false and hollow. Besides, as she had learned, a simple response sometimes said it all.

Luna let out a breath; squeezing her eyes tightly to force away tears she could not bear to cry again. Filling the bowls with the hot soup, she brought them back to the sitting room, thrusting one in Torrin's direction. Wordlessly, she sat down and began to eat.

Surprised by Luna's sudden presence in the room, Torrin barely had time to drop her tunic and grabbed the soup bowl before she ended up wearing it.

Without another word for the rest of the evening, as if the story had drained her of them, the Northern Ranger Warrior finished her soup, silently tossed more wood onto the fire, gave a simple nod to Torrin, and limped to her room to bed.

Torrin set her own soup bowl down and started poking at her bruises again. She hadn't even tried to speak to Luna, but just let the warrior dwell in her emotional pain, alone. Leaning back in the

chair, she drifted off to a fitful sleep.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Disclaimer: This is going to be a long story. The longest that either of us have ever written. So if you want a little PWP, you might want to look elsewhere. This story will have violence, sex between consenting adults who just happen to be female, and a few swear words. In Canada this would get you a rating somewhere around 13+, but I think it would get an R rating in the States. We crave feedback. Please send any constructive criticism or just a note to say hi, to:

zeewriter@yahoo.com, adarkbow@yahoo.com

Chapter 4

Willow glanced around the temple. It was a simple affair, the basic tent with a smooth stone altar and rough wooden benches. She had told Selene and the rest of the builders that a temple could wait. There were more important buildings that should be built, like a Healers hall.

Head bowed, Willow's small hands rested on the cool stone of the altar as she waited there. It had been almost two years since they had fled the man-filled lands of the Black Dragon God Korgon. And now, the sun-warmed spring air felt good after the bitter cold and snow of winter. She reflected on the dream the Goddess had sent her several nights ago. The ritual felt to her like an invasion of a couple's privacy, yet she knew it was necessary and vital in order to keep their society going.

There was a small commotion outside the tent, and she heard two women quietly arguing.

"Are you sure she can help?" one voice asked, obviously doubtful.

"She's the Priestess, right?" the other answered only slightly more confident.

Willow smiled. Just as the Goddess had promised, outside was her first couple seeking guidance. Finding that her mouth had suddenly gone dry, she swallowed nervously.

A small, fair-haired woman poked her head in through the tent flap, looking around cautiously. The young woman smiled shyly as she spotted Willow.

"H-hello?"

Willow smiled back and stood up. "Hello. Is there something I can help you with?" she asked softly.

"Well, yes, we... I mean I... well, we wanted to..." The woman blushed and looked behind her for her companion. A dark, larger hand covered her shoulder and a tall, raven-haired woman poked her face through the flaps, and then stepped inside the tent to join her.

Willow looked at her visitors discreetly. A brand scar marred the taller woman's angular face, indicating she was once a field worker. The petite blonde was quite pretty and probably had been a bed servant before the Exodus.

The larger woman frowned at Willow and then asked defiantly, "We wanted to know if you and your Goddess could help us have a child."

"Valla!" the shorter woman exclaimed with a shocked tone.

As Willow took a breath to steady her nerves, she noticed the hand that touched the other woman's side in reprimand had thick white scars around the wrist. She gave another smile to show she took no offense at the woman's tone.

"The Goddess foresaw that if we wished to continue as a People, we would need to have children to continue our legacy. She then blessed me with the insight to help."

The tall woman still looked skeptical, but her shorter companion beamed at the Priestess.

"I told you she would know, Valla."

*Valla crossed her arms, still unconvinced. "She hasn't said **how** she can help, Kelsy."*

Willow sat back down and uneasily licked her lips. She knew this would be the hard part, the explanation. "If only it weren't so intrusive!" she thought.

"Well, you see... um... well, normally a child is created by the mating of a man and a woman. Um, however, due to our interesting circumstances... having no men..."

Valla's eyes narrowed and she glared fiercely at the Priestess. "I will let no man touch Kelsy again," she growled and put her arm protectively around Kelsy's shoulders.

Willow blew out a breath. She was not doing this right at all. "Oh, no, no. No men," she hastily assured her.

Taking a breath, the flustered Priestess started over. "The Goddess has enabled me, as her Chosen, to help the women in our society, if they chose, to have little ones. Through Her divine will and certain rituals, I can help you produce an offspring."

She smiled sheepishly at them, hoping she had done a better job of explaining this time.

Valla relaxed her hold on Kelsey and looked less skeptically at the Priestess.

"What do you need to do?" the shorter woman asked fearfully, unconsciously tugging down her sleeves to hide her wrist scars.

"Well, um..." Willow could feel herself blushing. "You and your partner have to... ah," she paused, looking for the right words, "be intimate while I perform the ritual's chants." Then she studied the ground in front of her feet to avoid looking at the couple's reaction.

There was a small silence, then Kelsy asked hesitantly, "Where will you be when we are... umm... intimate?" Her own pale features turning as red as Willow's.

*Willow scuffed her toe into the packed dirt, now totally embarrassed. "I will need to be nearby, in hearing range," she blushed again, "I don't have to be **right** there, but you two have to be able to hear the ritual's words."*

Valla and Kelsy briefly stared at each other and then came to a silent consensus. Turning back to face the Priestess, Kelsy's voice was steady as she spoke for both of them. "That seems like a small inconvenience for a child."

Valla hugged Kelsy and asked another question, "Who will bear the child?"

Willow sighed in relief. Bless the Goddess! She hadn't done too badly. "Well, both partners must be in agreement to carry a child, then as I carry out the ritual, the Goddess's Sight will look at both women. The one found most able to bear the child will be the one blessed with it."

Valla smiled at Kelsy. She wasn't entirely comfortable with the thought of the Priestess needing to be so nearby while they made love, but they both wanted a child very much. "Very well," she agreed. "When does it need to be done?"

Willow smiled at both women. "I can perform the ceremony at any time, but it would best during the full moon when the Goddess's power is the strongest."

"Tomorrow night then?" Kelsy asked hopefully.

"Yes, that should be fine," she said warmly. "Both of you will need to take the ritual bath and after that the Goddess's symbols will be drawn on your bodies." Then the Chosen Priestess grinned and hugged both of them.

Nine months later, under the light of another full moon, the first daughter of the Exodus was born.

~The Exodus

Morning came too soon for Torrin. So in a rare indulgence, she chose to go back to sleep, snoring softly in the chair she had collapsed in the night before. She had stayed up late to pack and to prepare for leaving before another Assassin could find them. She was so tired she didn't hear Luna moving around the cabin.

Luna had literally gotten up with the crack of dawn, eager to be off. Her feet felt better and were almost healed. Even though the wound in her side still hurt, she had recovered more of her strength. Carefully packing things in her travel pack, she gathered together everything she thought they might need for the long, cold trek. A spare set of armor and long sword for herself, along with heavier winter clothing for Torrin. The tall blonde had finished the snowshoes the night before. She stepped into the main room and grinned when she saw Torrin still bundled up, asleep, in the chair.

"Wake up! It's time to get going!" With that Luna tossed the heavy winter travel clothes onto the sleeping mercenary.

Torrin cracked an eye and groaned as she lifted her leaden limbs to hold off the clothing attack. She felt like Rock Wolf shit and probably looked like it as well. Her torso was a patchwork of black, blue and a few yellowing bruises. Her face didn't feel much better, but her eyes weren't as swollen since she could see the smirking Luna.

"By the Mistress! Why are you so alert and chipper?"

"We're going out," was the simple answer.

The lure of the outdoors had been calling her for the last three days of her enforced confinement. Now, finally, Luna would be able to leave the cabin for more than just a quick, shivering trip to relieve herself.

Torrin sighed rubbing her eyes and slowly stood up stretching her back. She gave a happy grunt as it popped. Scratching her head, she dragged the clothes over to her pack, sorting what she would need to wear now and packing the rest. Unconcerned about her nudity, she stripped and put on the heavier winter clothes thrown at her. She sniffed them. They smelled much better than her current ones. Anything smelled better than the clothes the two of them had been wearing the past few days, she decided.

"It looks like we should have a few clear days at least before any more snow." The Northerner held up a pair of snowshoes. "I hope you learn how to use these quickly."

Blue eyes narrowed as Luna caught a glance of Torrin's naked torso.

"By the Goddess... who did this to you?" She reached toward the shorter woman's back, lightly touching one of the many criss-crossing scars on it.

Torrin instinctively twisted around, snatching Luna's hand, her other one going for a dagger that wasn't there. Realizing what she had done, she quickly dropped Luna's hand.

"I-I'm sorry. You surprised me." The dark haired woman finished pulling the new tunic down, hiding the scars. "I forget them most of the time. Um, some are from my training in the temple, others are..." her throat closed for a second, her right hand clenched in frustration. Even with Quinn dead she would never get over the fear that woman inspired. "It doesn't matter." She turned back around hefting her pack.

Luna hesitated, unsure whether she should push for the rest of the answer. Finally, she settled for nodding, hefting her own pack and stepping out onto the porch to put the newly made snowshoes on.

"If we move quickly enough we can make it to a good place to camp tonight," Luna stated, stepping out into the soft white powder.

Torrin laced her own up pair, but walking in them was a different story. It took her a few strides to get use to the shoes. She followed Luna. Grinning at how easy it seemed, she took another step and lost her balance as she realized that her left shoe was resting on top of her right one. Arms wind milling, she hopped around until she finally got her balance. She glanced up, hoping Luna hadn't noticed. However, the wide grin on the woman's face was proof that Torrin was going to be disappointed.

"It's trickier than it looks," Luna said laughingly as she broke a path through the deep snowdrifts.

Torrin grunted and tried to keep up with the long limbed Ranger. "Great. Now my legs are going to kill me," she grumbled to herself as she plodded in Luna's footprints.

Instead of heading north, the Warrior went around to the side of the cabin and set off going slightly to the south. Perched on the top of the hill, covered by the blowing snow, were two simple grave markers. For a silent moment, the blonde stood beside them, watching the snow whirl around them.

When the trail ended, Torrin looked up wondering why. Noticing the markers half hidden in the swirling snow, she remained quiet and let Luna have as much time as she needed.

Luna didn't take long. After only a few moments, she tugged on and tightened the straps of her travel pack and began breaking trail towards the north.

"Keep staying in my path. Later on we can switch, if you feel up to it," the taller woman called back, heading north through the pine forest.

Torrin just grunted again, realizing she had spent too much time in the South. This traveling in snow was taking up too much of her energy. She sidestepped over until she was back in Luna's trail and staggered after her.

The snow had coated the trees during the night, and in some places was almost waist deep. Movement without the snowshoes would have been nearly impossible; with them it was merely exhausting.

After a time Torrin asked, "So where are we headed?"

"To a place where we can stop smelling like animals," was Luna's slightly enigmatic response.

Torrin rolled her eyes at the answer, but didn't say anything. She went back to concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. "Well not smelling like an animal would be a good thing," she thought.

Moving through the snow, Torrin again was caught up in the quietness. Other than the sound of them moving through the snow, it was silent. But for the first time since she had been back, it didn't seem so disturbing.

The blonde followed no obvious trail, just simply weaved in and out of the trees. They came across a few fresh animal tracks. More than once Luna was tempted to try to hunt down more food for them, but since time was of the essence, she resisted. She consoled herself by remembering that they still had a good portion of the deer meat left.

Occasionally a birdcall would echo through the woods, but those were few and far between. It seemed even the birds had fled the snow filled land. However, Luna knew it was an illusion. The woods were filled with life around them a person only had to know where to look. She had spent a good part of her youth tracking and hunting in these forests.

They ate smoked deer meat as they walked since Luna continued to push the pace. The pale sun continued to move across the sky. It was nearly to the horizon by the time Luna slowed to a stop, scanning the trees around her. The terrain had changed into higher hills as she approached the towering mountains. They would have to pass through those mountains in the next few days to get to the Queen's City.

"Ah, there it is." Luna smiled and headed off toward what looked like a nondescript pile of boulders nestled between two small hills.

Torrin frowned not seeing anything but rocks in front of her. Squinting she tried again. "Is this a trick? I don't see anything, but more blasted rocks."

The Mercenary stopped suddenly. Licking her lips, Torrin sensed a change of moisture in the air. "Is there water nearby?" She shivered. Despite the chance to get clean, she was not looking forward to a cold bath.

Luna simply cast a smile over her shoulder at Torrin and continued toward the boulders. Only when they got closer did the sound of water reach their ears, and then as they reached the pile of jumbled boulders, they could feel the heat emanating from them.

"I told you I'd bring you to where we could get clean," the tall woman stated proudly and stepped aside to reveal a steaming pond nestled behind the piled rocks. "How does a warm bath sound?"

Torrin didn't answer since she was already stomping awkwardly to where the steam of the warm water met the colder air. The snow gradually thinned away to nothing near the boulders. Beyond them, green grass still grew despite it being winter.

Luna laughed as she watched Torrin tramp forward. Removing her travel pack and wincing as she set it aside, the blonde blissfully took a seat on a warm rock. Now if only she could work up the energy to undress and get in the heated water.

"We'll rest here tonight."

Torrin grunted back at her, dropped her pack and fumbled with the snowshoes, which almost resulted in another awkward scene, but at the last moment, was able to contain her balance. After getting the shoes off, her clothes shortly followed. Digging around in her pack produced a small bar of soap.

Only after hissing and squirming into the water did she finally speak to Luna. "You're the best. I take back all those things I thought about you when you reset my nose."

With a snort of amusement, Luna slowly followed Torrin's example. After removing her winter garments she gingerly pulled her shirt up over her head and tossed it aside with a wrinkled nose. Later they would have time to wash clothes. For now though... "Oh by the Goddess, that feels good," the blonde hissed, slipping into the hot, steaming water. Even the wound in her side felt better. Closing her eyes, she ducked her head under the water trying to rinse the last of the dried blood from her hair.

For the first time since her ass kicking by the Assassin, Torrin felt her muscles begin to loosen. With a happy sigh, she leaned back letting her hair get wet. She wasn't happy with how long it was getting. Long hair was just a liability in war. Scrubbing her scalp with the soap, she smiled. She could almost feel the dirt and blood being worked loose. Slowly she began to wash the rest of her body, frowning as she noticed the bruises were more blue and yellow now. She tried to wash her back. After a few twists and turns she gave up, it hurt too much to bend like that.

"Luna, a little help here. You wash my back, I'll wash yours." Realizing that her statement sounded a bit suggestive, she added a comic eyebrow wiggle.

Luna's hands, busy from trying to work the dried blood from her scalp, froze. The expression on her face was comical as she gaped at the Mercenary. "Wash your back?" the blonde repeated

dumbly.

Torrin nodded then spoke with exaggerated slowness. "Yes. Back dirty... please wash... if you do good job... me return favor."

A slow blush worked its way across Luna's cheeks as she hastily pulled her hands out of her hair. Holding out her hand for the soap, the Warrior licked her lips, "Umm, yeah, no problem."

Torrin snickered and handed her the soap. She turned, presenting Luna with her back. "Oh, come on, its just a back. Well, probably a filthy one, but I'm sure you've seen plenty of naked ones. If I remember right, the girls of the Castle were always sneaking off to the river to swim and skinny dip. Not that I was ever invited, but I spied on Tasha plenty of times."

Luna hesitated a second then started to scrub away days of filth and blood from the shorter woman's back. She did her best to be careful of the maze of scars that covered the slim woman, unsure if any of the old injuries still pained Torrin. She collected her thoughts while washing the Mercenary.

"I didn't get to go to the Castle much. My parents didn't like the fort. They said it wasn't healthy to have so many people in one place."

Torrin stifled a yawn. "I'm sorry, I keep forgetting your parents were Rangers. Did you regret living outside Abnoa? Not having children your own age to play with?"

The tall woman thought back on her childhood. "No, not really. I got to see the other children sometimes, and I got to play and get into trouble with Tasha and her friends. And I had my own friends when I was home. She whispered to herself, "All sorts of imaginary friends."

Luna's methodical washing of Torrin's back while she was talking had her nearly purring like a lap cat. "You can scrub harder. The physical scars don't hurt anymore."

Luna's hands slowed as she took in the meaning of that simple statement. Then she began scrubbing in earnest. "I can't believe how filthy we got."

"Yeah, a few days running around for your life will do that. Fighting off the cold and snow... and the Assassin. Hopefully, the farther we get away from Khelin, the better things will get for us."

Luna finished scrubbing Torrin's back. "She won't stop, will she?"

Torrin's relaxed state ended at Luna's question. She turned holding out her hand for the soap. "Your turn."

Luna handed it to her. Watching Torrin's face intently, she asked again, "Khelin won't stop until she has what she wants, will she?"

Torrin took the soap and looked into the Northerner's worried blue eyes. "No, she won't. Khelin's insane and is absolutely fixated on you. She was going to burn you alive for the sheer pleasure of watching you die in agony. She has the might to back up every one of her whims. But I promised I will get you to the Queen's City, and I'll get you there. Nothing can break that pact." She paused, clearing her throat, "Now turn around. She gave a leering grin, "Although, I have no problem washing your front if you want me to."

If Torrin was trying to get Luna to forget about Khelin for a while, it worked. Her eyes narrowed and Torrin got exactly what she expected, a splash of warm water in the face. Her cheeks red from blushing, Luna turned her back on the dripping Mercenary.

"The deal was for our backs only."

Torrin wiped the water off her face, and gave a sniff. "Fine, fine, be that way." She continued, mockingly, "I don't know why that didn't work. You know the bar maids always go for it. With me being a dark and dangerous mercenary with the cool scars and tattoos proving it. You sure you don't want me to wash your front?"

"If you haven't noticed," Luna growled, keeping her back firmly to Torrin "I'm not a bar maid. So don't get your hopes up." She continued, her tone just as mocking as Torrin's, "You should try that line on one of the Fire Clan warriors. I'm positive they'd love it."

Torrin laughed, glad that Luna's mind was away from the dark thoughts and she scrubbed Luna's back harder. "I'll have to try that. Some burly warrior and me can go off in some dark corner and share war wounds. How terribly romantic."

"Don't forget their piercings. Maybe the lucky warrior can help you acquire a few of your own."

Torrin grimaced at the word 'piercings'. She had enough of sharp objects coming at her flesh on a daily basis that she had no desire to be pierced just for the style of it. Why would someone willingly stick metal into their body? She frowned. She just couldn't fathom it and finished washing Luna's back.

Luna glanced over her shoulder and grinned at Torrin's expression.

"I wish we could stay here for a while and rest," Luna sighed as Torrin finished with her back, "but we'll have to leave at dawn." She then dove under the water and resurfaced near the shore. Climbing out of the steaming water she did her best to dry herself with her spare shirt.

"It is a shame to have to move on so soon. I'll miss this place." Torrin agreed and climbed out as well, groaning as the cold air hit her body.

Shivering despite the warm air coming from the hot springs, Luna quickly dressed and then collapsed on a bedroll. The bath had helped the aches and pains of her body, but that same body

now demanded sleep.

Leaning back on the blanket, she stared up at the brilliant stars above. "If we make good time, we can make it through the Ellris Pass in three days. Then another four to cross the White Plains, and then we'll reach the Queen's City within another day." Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, "Your mother and all the others who escaped the Castle should be there."

Torrin stopped putting clothes on and swallowed hard. "You said you weren't sure where my mother had gone." Oddly, she found herself scared at the possibility of seeing her mother again. She finished getting dressed and curled up in her own bedroll. She decided she would just find out if her mother was okay, get the treasure and go. Torrin blinked back the moisture forming in her eyes. Where could she go? If the Hawks were still with Khelin she could not go there ...unless she wanted to die.

Luna cracked open an eyelid, peering towards the other bedroll. "I lied." She shrugged and closed her eyes again. "I wasn't sure if you were going to go back to Khelin or not." Yawning, the warrior settled in to sleep. "You don't sound really happy about seeing her again."

"You lied!" Torrin sat up. "You..." She was torn between screaming at Luna or strangling her for her deceit. She lay back down. "I'm back to not liking you again," she muttered and rolled over.

The other woman snorted softly and rolled onto her side, curling up in her blankets. Sleep came swiftly to both of them, exhausted from the long day's march.

The Assassin crept around the house. She was positive it was empty but still, she preferred to be careful. Her sister had not returned. That itself hinted at a need for caution.

Breathing in the air, she smelled the snow and blood. Death had visited here. Her forehead scrunched into a frown, this was not good. She pulled her short sword free, as well as a poisoned dagger.

Placing a palm on the door, she felt nothing from the other side. The house was still and cold.

Moving down the hill, she flowed in and out of the shadows. In front of the barn the smell of blood and death was stronger. She opened the barn door slowly and found inside a hay bale stained with blood. Examining the floor and walls carefully, she found evidence of a struggle but still no physical evidence of her sister.

Exiting the barn, she circled around the building and found a faint trail not covered by the snowfall. Following it, she found the remains of a deer left for the carnivores.

The Assassin scowled. Was this the death she had been sensing? Searching the area carefully, she

found a patch of ground that had been disturbed. She swept away the snow and a thin layer of dirt and found her sister. Examining the body, she found the injury that had ended her sister's life.

Pulling the tunic away from the body, she frowned at the blackness around the bloody wound. This was bad, very bad. Her sister had been killed with her own poisoned dagger. This had never happened to one of her Order. Pulling the stiff, cold eyelids back, she pressed a fingertip to each black eye. The blackness seeped out of the eyes and poured on to her fingers. The Assassin hissed as she witnessed, first hand through her sister's eyes, her death. The figure she was fighting was hidden in the dark but the moves were not. It was a student of the Mistress but one not chosen. Not a sister, but one possessing enough skills to make her formidable prey.

An evil grin crossed her face. It had been too long since she had a good hunt. Khelin had sent her after petty nobles and chieftains, but this; this would be a real test of her skills. She felt her heart speed up in anticipation.

Torrin was up before first light. She had scouted the hot springs area for any sign of another Assassin or Southern scouts who might have been sent on their trail. So far she had found nothing. When faint light touched the cold winter sky she found herself looking into the water trying to see her face. She wondered what her mother would see. Her little dark-haired girl? Or would she see the face of a killer, the woman who had brought Abnoa to ruin?

The Mercenary sighed in disgust and struck the water, distorting her reflection. The splash woke up her traveling companion.

Groggily, Luna rolled up into a sitting position. Gingerly, she started to stretch. The wound in her side felt a hundred times better than it had yesterday, although her entire body felt stiff. Raising her hands above her head she stretched, her back cracking as she realigned it. Blearily, she glanced over to Torrin, groaned and got to her feet. "Ahhh... morning."

Torrin looked up from her brooding. "Morning." Getting up, she walked back to the bedrolls and pointed to the weak fire. "I caught a rabbit and found some edible greens. The hot spring seems to be a great attraction for wildlife in the winter."

Luna blinked in surprise as she was used to being up first. "Yeah, it is. If we had time to prepare it, we could easily get another deer here. She looked at the skinned rabbit. "You caught it, I guess I get to cook it?"

A short time later and with a flourish, she offered the first bowl of rabbit stew to Torrin. The tall blonde's cooking skills was barely passable for trail rations. Mezzarna had tried repeatedly to teach her daughter more than the basic fundamentals of cooking, but none of her lessons had stuck. Luna knew how to make an edible stew and soup, but that was about it. She figured that was good enough. At least she wouldn't starve.

"Have you ever been through the Ellris Pass?"

Torrin gave a thin smile and took the still steaming stew. After blowing on it, she took a bite, hummed in appreciation, and then responded to the question. "Hmmm, uh, no, I haven't. I haven't been any farther north than Abnoa. Why? Is there anything I need to know? Like trolls or dragons living in the Pass?" she said jokingly.

"Let's not tempt fate, okay?" Luna answered, blowing on her own stew before taking a bite. *Hmm, not bad.* "There used to be an abbey at the top of the Pass dedicated to the Moon Goddess. We might be able to make it there tonight."

"Sounds like a plan. I'm not sure my ribs are up for digging a snow shelter yet." Torrin scratched her ear in thought. "That is, if I can even remember how to make one."

"That's not something you'd forget." Luna grinned, "Like other things."

She stood up and started to break camp as the sun cleared the horizon and flooded the area with bright light. A glance and nod to the clear blue sky, she observed, "It's going to be a cloudless day. That means it's going to be bitterly cold tonight."

Torrin stood to help. "Then we best get going. I don't fancy becoming an icicle." She took one last lingering look at the hot spring; she was going to miss it.

It turned out that they would both miss the hot spring by the time the day was over. The cold air beyond the springs was a shock after the evening spent near the hot water. The trek only got worse as they began the hike toward the Ellris Pass. The snowshoes helped a little, but even with them, the going was bone chilling slow through the deep, powdered snow.

Gusts of wind frequently whipped the snow up, driving white sheets of it across the landscape. The higher they went, the worse the wind became as the sheltering trees thinned out and became shorter.

"You okay?" Luna had to yell over the wind as they struggled up another steep pitch of snow and ice.

As they marched through the heavy snow Torrin had taken up a constant stream of curse words in her head as she tried to navigate in her snowshoes. To her, it was just one more reason why she would never be a true Northerner. She glared at Luna noting how easy the Ranger made it look. And momentarily, Luna's ass distracted her. She mentally slapped herself around for such a thought.

"What?" Torrin reddened when she realized Luna was looking at her and desperately hoped she would think it was just windburn. She yelled back, "I'm good, great, fantastic..." At Luna's raised eyebrow she conceded. "Um, I've been better," she muttered.

"We're almost there!" Luna hollered again raising a glove covered hand to point up toward a ridge above them. Through the swirls of snow they could just make out the straight lines of a solid barrier. "That's part of the abbey's outer wall." Grimacing as another gust of wind drove a chill down her back, Luna picked up the pace, trying to out run the fading sunlight.

Torrin huffed as Luna started to widen the distance. "How the hell am I supposed to ensure her safety?" she grumbled. She tried to hurry but lost her footing on the ice. "By the Goddess, I'm going to kill her for making me wear these stupid..." She froze sensing something nearby. Her gray eyes darted around, but she couldn't find anything. Struggling to her feet, she followed Luna's trail.

Luna paused just under the rock face, gasping for air she turned to wait for Torrin to catch up. As Torrin approached, she pointed back the way they had come. "Look at that."

Below them lay the lands of the Earth tribe. Pine trees, green with white dusting of snow, formed a dense forest as far as the eye could see. In the distance, against the horizon, a small prick point of dark stone jutted upwards, marking Castle Abnoa. The setting sun painted everything with golden colors. The Warrior had seen this sight four times before in her life, and this one was just as magnificent.

Taking a breath, her exhaled breath forming a white cloud, she smiled and said, "It's so beautiful."

Torrin quirked an eyebrow but turned around and looked. It *was* beautiful, but she only said, "Looks cold and full of snow."

Luna rolled her eyes and turned back to the wall. She stared up at the last steep incline leading to the abbey above them and then moved forward. Nearing the top, she slowed to a stop and crouched down next to marks in the snow. "Torrin," she called out quietly, "I don't think we're alone here."

Torrin's hand discreetly went to her sword. "Yeah, I know. Are there still Priestesses at the abbey?" Her eyes scanned around them. While she felt like they were being watched, she didn't feel the prickling feeling of any danger.

"The abbey's been closed since the High Queen died." Luna slowly rose to her feet, her own hand going to the pommel of her sword. "But travelers use it as shelter when they cross the Pass."

"Well, either we go in or we stand out here freezing. I'm all for going in. It's probably just another traveler." However, she wasn't sure what kind of traveler would be moving about in winter.

Luna nodded and headed toward the remains of the abbey.

A large hole was all that was left of the main gate. The buildings inside had suffered from the

passage of time. The only one still relatively intact was the main temple itself. It was toward this simple three-story stone structure that the Warrior headed.

Luna removed her snowshoes on its steps. With a glance to make sure Torrin was shoeless and ready, and a hand on her own sword, she pushed open the heavy wood door into the temple. The rapidly fading sunlight streamed through elaborate stained glass windows into the interior of the temple. Luna frowned and glanced around; the inside was different than the last time she had been here. Slowly, she worked her way toward the back of the room.

Torrin followed Luna closely, her hand held loosely to the pommel of her sword. She shifted into mercenary mentality; she had a client to protect. Her face closed off and her gray eyes went cold and dark. Opening her senses, she still didn't feel anything menacing but she knew it was better to be safe than sorry. Now, without the cumbersome shoes, she moved silently, a shorter shadow to Luna's taller form. The temple seemed empty and was sparsely furnished but Torrin noticed a distinct lack of dust and debris. Someone was obviously taking care of the place.

Spotting an orange glow flickering in front of them, the Mercenary and the Warrior quietly crept forward. They peered into a back corner of the temple and found a small fire was burning brightly, the pillars around it casting shadows everywhere. Someone was bent over a pot hanging over the flames.

Luna couldn't make out whom it was. The figure wore a rough brown robe with a hood that covered her shape. Luna glanced at Torrin for direction, but instead, saw a stranger. The Mercenary's face was completely devoid of emotion; her eyes were hard and dark. Luna took a step away from her in shock.

Torrin ignored Luna's reaction. The woman would have to get use to it. She had hired a mercenary, and that's what she got, a paid killer. She stepped forward, careful to make sure that her body was between Luna's and the stranger's.

"Are travelers welcome?" she asked calmly.

Torrin really was hoping to see the woman's eyes. Assassins couldn't hide their eyes. The blackness in them was always there, a gift and a curse, from the Mistress of Shadows.

Warm green eyes in an ancient face looked up from the fire and the stranger smiled, white teeth glinting in the firelight. "Travelers are always welcomed. Come and have some tea," the elderly woman motioned toward the simple wooden stools placed around the fire, "you and your friend." She went back to tending the fire, humming a song under her breath.

Torrin's eyes did another sweep of the room but found nothing amiss. She relaxed and a smile came to her lips. "Thank you. Tea would be most welcome. I think my blood has turned to ice." She motioned for Luna to come toward the stools. "You'll have to forgive my traveling companion, she's shy."

That earned her a whack on the back from Luna as she moved to join them at the fire. The old woman smiled again and began pouring them tea into three cups already prepared. Luna raised an eyebrow at them and glanced questioningly towards Torrin, then back at the woman.

"My name is Luna, and this is Torrin. What's yours, old mother?" She gave their true names without even considering aliases.

The woman offered them each a cup before answering. "My name is Melina. May the Goddess bless you both, Torrin and Luna." With a small smile she raised her cup of tea in a salute to them and then took a sip.

Torrin glared at Luna. She'd have to talk to Luna about being so honest with strangers. But she raised her cup in salute, "Thank you, Melina." She took a sip, tasting the tea. Smiling in approval, she took another sip.

Luna also returned the gesture and took a sip of the hot tea, mirroring Torrin's appreciative smile at the hot drink.

"This is very cold weather to be traveling in, Priestess." A pendant around the old woman's neck had caught the Warrior's attention, confirming her suspicions. Only the Moon Goddess' priestesses wore the moon-shaped necklaces.

Torrin kept checking out the temple's interior while sipping her tea and added, "Yes, what brings you here? Traveling during the winter can't be much fun."

The Priestess simply smiled at the women's questions and sat down cross-legged at the fire. Stretching bony hands towards the fire, the old woman sighed as she heated them. "There is work to be done, and the Moon Goddess called me. I'm headed to your Castle Abnoa. Seems there are some babies that need conceiving." The priestess wagged her eyebrows at them.

Torrin blushed slightly at the older woman's suggestive look.

"Oh, you're *that* kind of Priestess." She raised the cup of tea and quickly took a sip, trying to hide her reddening face. There was something about a grandmotherly-looking woman talking about conceiving babies that was just... unsettling. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask how that sort of thing worked since her mother hadn't found the time to explain to her about the birds, the birds, and the Priestesses. She was fairly certain she hadn't created any new lives, since she thought a blessing or ritual and priestess was needed.

"Yes dear, I'm that kind of Priestess. We are in demand. Without us none of you would be around."

Luna choked on a sip of tea, coughing and spluttering in surprise at the old woman's words. Eyes watering, she glanced away missing the amused look the old woman sent the two of them. The Warrior managed to get her coughing spell under control. "We know that, old mother. We just

weren't expecting..." Her voice trailed off as she realized what the Priestess had said earlier. "You can't go to the Castle."

With a sad sigh, Torrin backed up Luna's statement. "Yes, the Abnoa has fallen to the Southern Army."

The white-haired Priestess smiled gently, "Of course I can. I know the weather is a bit harsh, but I've traveled in worse. Believe me."

Luna glanced uncertainly at Torrin, then back at the tranquil Priestess. Not sure if the old woman was hard of hearing, she spoke a bit louder, repeating Torrin's words, "Castle Abnoa has fallen to the Southern army."

The priestess shrugged. "The Goddess asked me to go to the Castle, and to the Castle I will go."

Luna stared at her incredulously, and then looked to Torrin for help.

Torrin sputtered sarcastically, "Right... so what did the Goddess say to you exactly? Thou shall go out and be road kill for an insane despot?" Torrin couldn't help her tone of voice, even though she expected to be turned into a toad for it.

Luna winced at the Mercenary's harsh words.

Instead of flying into a fit of anger, which other priestesses had been known to do when their decisions were questioned, this one simply sipped her tea. Tranquil green eyes watched the two of them over the rim of her cup. "I had a vision," she finally answered.

Torrin took a sip of her own tea. "A vision of what? A need to help Northern women make babies in a castle over run with an army that will gut you? Those women are all dead. Your vision is wrong," she challenged. Taking another sip, she tried not to laugh at Luna's gaping fish impression.

Luna edged away from Torrin just in case the Priestess, the Moon Goddess or both, suddenly turned the shorter woman into something nasty.

The Priestess, again not doing what the Northerner had expected, laughed at Torrin's statement. "Vision's are many things, but they are never wrong. Difficult to see the truth in them or vague and puzzling, yes. Wrong, no."

"But what if you misinterpreted this one? I may be a merc but I'm not big on innocent people walking into a war zone. I'm fairly certain your Goddess wouldn't do that to you."

"If the Goddess wishes me to go to the Castle, then I shall go to the Castle." Keen green eyes glanced towards the mercenary. "It's called faith. You have to trust in something."

Torrin rolled her eyes at the old mother's stubborn attitude but she could tell the Priestess was challenging her. So, if the old woman insisted on being a martyr, far be it for her to stop her.

"I trust myself and my sword. Now people and Gods, they're a little trickier." Torrin glanced over at Luna raising an eyebrow at the increased distance between them. "What? Do I smell that bad?" she teased.

"I'm just not sure I want to be sitting next to you right now, in case I get caught in the crossfire," Luna shot back, embarrassed have been caught by Torrin. To cover her dismay, she began to rummage through her travel pack for some rations for dinner.

Torrin laughed at Luna. "I'm sure if the Moon Goddess gets upset at me, she'll let me know. Since she didn't kill me at birth, I'm thinking my chances are good she'll let this pass."

The Priestess shrugged at the conversation, pulling over her own smaller pack to contribute to the night's meal. The old woman produced slices of dried fish that she passed around for them to try. "A day may come when you will have to trust someone else to save your life. That's faith. "

Luna was watching the two of them oddly, not quite certain where the conversation was going, but she was ready to jump in if it looked like it would end up in a major confrontation.

Torrin laughed, "Not likely. No offense, but the people you give your trust to, let you down the hardest. On the other hand, money is dependable. It always has value and you know that someday it will leave you. It's honest. My blade will do its best until it breaks. It's honest. I live each day knowing I might not see the end of it and that is also honest." Then she nibbled on the offered fish, smiling at the flavor. It was a nice change from their rations.

Luna made a sound that was halfway between a denial and a choked cough. The Priestess patted the blonde on the back, grinning in spite of Luna's expression.

Turning back to the dark-haired mercenary, the grin faded. "What a sad way to live your life. I hope someday you find something or someone to have faith in. Someone to trust."

Torrin looked over to Luna, checking to see if the taller woman was really all right. Then she leaned over and picked up the water skin, handing it to her. She smiled back at the Priestess. "It may be sad to you, but it's my life, and it's a lot better than the one I had..." She almost said 'here' but decided it was none of the Priestess's business.

The Priestess merely smiled and said nothing as she helped Luna pool their rations to create something a bit more appetizing.

Once dinner was done, the old woman simply wrapped her cloak around herself and nodded off to sleep.

Luna raised an eyebrow at how fast the Priestess fell asleep, then inched closer to Torrin, whispering, "Are you out of your mind? You practically told her to go jump off a rampart."

Torrin grinned. "Yeah, it was fun, wasn't it?" she whispered back. Leaning back against the wall, Torrin pulled out a sharpening stone, a cloth and unsheathed her sword. Looking back up at Luna, she asked, "So, what's the big deal? The old mother seemed to enjoy a good verbal sparring and nobody got turned into a newt."

The blonde glanced across the fire at the sleeping priestess then shook her head at Torrin. "She's a Chosen of the Moon Goddess. You know what they say about crossing them." She reached for the whetstone in her bag.

"No, what do they say about crossing a priestess?" Torrin asked, enjoying how worked up Luna was getting. She didn't see the big deal. The old mother had loved the verbal exchange. She had seen the grin on that wrinkled face.

Luna paused, stone in one hand, her blade in the other, and stared at Torrin as if she had gone mad. Then shaking her head, she went back to work. "Just be careful. They control who gets to have children." She paused, frowning, and looked back at Torrin. "Who does that in the South?"

"Oh." Torrin's eyes got huge. She gave a cough. "Um, I believe it's the Goddess Amai. She is the Goddess of Love and Lust. She has a few brothel... er... temples one can worship at. Some of the High Priestesses travel about performing rituals I assume are to help couples have children. I don't really know since I've never been in a situation to have, er, um, kids." She studiously inspected her sword.

Luna's smile transformed itself into a grin as she studied the other woman. "You don't know how it works, do you?"

Torrin huffed. "Of course I do. I've been around. Lived a full life. Traveled extensively..." She trailed off and sheepishly admitted, "No, not really. Mercenaries aren't big on families. I've heard... you know stories about Creation, but I figured if one isn't a Priestess or committed to another that, you know one doesn't really need to understand such things." She scrubbed her face trying to get the blush to go away. 'Hardened mercenaries don't blush' she told herself, but it didn't help.

Luna snickered at Torrin's discomfort. "There aren't any little Torrins running rampant in the South then?"

"By the Mistress, I hope not!" the mercenary blurted out.

Luna laughed, set aside her blade, added another log to the fire and leaned back against the wall. Judging by the soft snores from the other side the Priestess was out for the night. "I always wondered what it would be like to have children."

Torrin's eyes went distant. "I haven't. Being a merc isn't exactly a good lifestyle for having a family. Plus, I always have this fear in the back of my mind I'd be the kind of Muanya that Quinn was." With a start, her mouth snapped shut. She'd said too much. "I'll go scout around just to make sure we're safe." With quick efficient movements she packed up the sharpening stone, cloth and sheathed her sword.

Pensive blue eyes watched the shorter woman gathered her things. Quinn's death had nearly gutted the morale of the remaining warriors in the Castle. Luna couldn't help but keep wondering what Quinn would have done differently in defending the Castle? Would Abnoa still be in her tribe's control with Quinn in charge? "She was a good leader, despite whatever else she did."

Her anger and hatred of Quinn flared. Torrin couldn't stop the words as they spilled out. "Quinn was a bastard. A mean, cruel bitch who, more than anything else, loved being important. Wait, no, she loved beating people up more, but not by much." She turned and fled into the dark of the abbey before she lashed out at Luna again.

"I'll take second watch," the blonde called to the fleeing figure. Luna sighed and crawled into her bedroll. That hadn't gone well.

Torrin paced around the deserted abbey, her thoughts disjointed and dark. Unable to control her anger, she lashed out, hitting the stone wall in front of her. With a growl, she punched the cool stones again and again, wishing it were Quinn she was beating.

"What did that wall ever do to you?"

The quiet question took Torrin by surprise. She whirled around baring fists with bloodied knuckles. Standing in front of her was a slightly bow-legged, petite woman with black hair and gray eyes, her red lips quirked in an amused smile.

"You're a Southerner!" Torrin exclaimed.

"My, you're a quick one," the woman responded.

Torrin pulled her blade free, her dark eyes narrowing. "Quick enough to know that I have most of the Southern army looking for my ass right now."

The woman laughed, an open rich sound. "Actually, the Southern army cares little for you. That insane bitch is more interested in your friend's ass. And it's a nice ass, I admit. So, I can see why Khelin is going to all this trouble." The woman laughed again at the dark look she received. "However, I am not your enemy."

"Right." Torrin rolled her eyes. She left her sword pointed at the strange woman.

"It's the truth. Right now, the only enemy here is you." The woman held up her hands as she could see the storm cloud of anger brewing on the younger woman's face. "Before you blow up,

hear me out. You let Quinn mold and shape you. You took all that vile woman's anger and rage and made it a part of you. Now, it lives inside you, making you no better than she was. You lashed out at your home and your people. You brought Abnoa to its knees. Without you, the attack would not have been successful. You opened the gate. You let the foreign army in. You have the blood of all those people on your hands."

"I did my job, what I get paid for. People die in war," Torrin said defensively.

"You were given the option to sit this battle out. But you let your anger at one woman rule your actions. You weren't meant for this mercenary life and I think you know it."

Torrin snorted, "This is the only thing I'm good at."

The stranger lifted an eyebrow and pointed to the room where the two other women slept. "You seem to be good at protecting the ranger."

"She's paying me for a job. There's no difference. Each one was for services rendered."

The woman laughed again and sneered, "So you're a whore?"

Torrin hissed and slashed at the woman with her sword. With a laugh the woman danced back.

"I don't think Tyra would raise her daughter to be such a thing."

Torrin leapt at the woman with a growl, her sword meeting only air. The woman danced away from each of her attacks. Her bent legs much quicker than Torrin expected. A swift kick from one of them knocked her sword from her hand infuriating Torrin into carelessness. With a quick move and a twist by the diminutive woman, Torrin found herself pinned to the wall.

Gray eyes filled with concern looked into Torrin's stormy ones. "Torrin, daughter of Tyra, you need to let go of your anger. Even more, you need to let go of the past. That's all the remembered pain, hurt and anger is, the past. It can't hurt you anymore. Recognize how it helped you get here, recognize how it helped shape you as a woman, but don't let the past and one bitter woman's anger control your life."

For the first time in a long time, Torrin began to cry, unable to handle any more guilt and blame. The woman eased her hold so she could embrace Torrin in a hug. Slowly patting Torrin's back and giving her comfort like she would to a grieving child, she whispered softly, "There, there, let it out. Trust me, you'll feel better. It's been bottled up inside you for too long."

Torrin gave a hiccup and asked raggedly, "Who are you?"

"Someone who has been waiting a very long time to meet you. Someone who loves you. When you see your mother again, tell her... tell her that Jinete never stopped loving her. Tell her I

didn't run away." With that said, the woman dropped her arms and let Torrin go.

Torrin looked at her with red-rimmed eyes and grew slightly afraid, as now, she could clearly see through the woman.

"By the Mistress! What trick is this?" Her hands fumbled around, searching for her fallen sword. She scooped it back up and confronted the spirit.

"In the spring, Torrin, if you could come back here, there is an old oak tree in the gardens behind the abbey with a shallow grave next to it. It would be nice to be buried someplace warm, perhaps in my ancestral home in the plains. I do miss the horses." With a laugh at the Torrin's shocked expression, "Shut your mouth, daughter, you'll attract bugs. I'm sorry I can't stay longer but it takes so much energy to show myself. But I will try to watch you the best I can." With that promise, the woman vanished.

Twisting her sword back and forth in confusion, Torrin wasn't sure what had just happened. She had seen a ghost, a ghost that had tried to mess with her head, she thought bitterly. She wondered if it was Khelin doing dark magic. Perhaps she was slowly losing her sanity. Or, maybe not, she mused, thinking of the comforting arms and the warm gray eyes. She slid down the wall to sit on the floor. If she ever found her mother and they were still willing to talk to each other, she would have to ask about Jinete. Feeling overwhelmed by her exposed emotions and the spirit's disconcerting words, she placed her head in her hands began to cry again.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Disclaimer: This is going to be a long story. The longest that either of us have ever written. So if you want a little PWP, you might want to look elsewhere. This story will have violence, sex between consenting adults who just happen to be female, and a few swear words. In Canada this would get you a rating somewhere around 13+, but I think it would get an R rating in the States. We crave feedback. Please send any constructive criticism or just a note to say hi, to:

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Chapter 5

Jinete had had left the Castle common room to escape the drinking contests and matches of strength. She just didn't understand the fascination with such things. It wasn't part of the Horse tribe history. Now, a race to prove speed fleetness or a lance contest to show power and

accuracy, well that was something she could appreciate.

She was on her way to the makeshift stable to check on her horse, when she heard the music. She wasn't sure why, but it captivated her.

It was a sad melody full of longing for all things lost. Following the sounds, Jinete found the source of it, a slender, golden-haired woman playing a violin. The woman was sitting in a moon lit section off the main courtyard offering up her song to the night sky. As she played, she glowed with something so beautiful that Jinete couldn't help but be smitten.

As quietly as she could on her horse-bowed legs, Jinete crept closer to hear better. Leaning against the stone wall, she closed her gray eyes and listened, aching for this woman's sadness. As the song ended, she opened her eyes and was quickly ensnared into gray ones.

"I-I-I'm sorry I didn't mean to disturb you. I can leave if you want me to. It was just so beautiful and yet, sad."

The woman was silent for a moment, and then spoke softly, "Can something be both beautiful and sad?"

Jinete took a step forward out of the shadows of stone into the moonlight. "Of course. You are." Her eyes got huge at her words. "Forgive me. I-I... that was out of line."

The woman laughed with a small rusty sound. "It is okay. It's nice that somebody notices."

"It was the first thing I noticed about you. Then, it was the decidedly pompous woman attached to your arm at dinner." Jinete stepped closer to the slender figure knowing she shouldn't but unable to stop herself. "Tell me, does she ever smile?" she whispered conspiratorially.

The blonde smiled bashfully. "She? Oh, Quinn. She use to smile and laugh. We had fun..." She trailed off her mind reliving happier times.

"Had fun?" Jinete slid behind the woman and couldn't help but take in her fragrant scent. She sat on a nearby stone bench. "Tell me. What has happened to the fun?" gesturing to the seat next to her as she asked

The woman stared transfixed at the short, dark-haired woman. She had heard tales of the People of the Horse and their suave ways. She eyed the bench with skeptical eyes.

Jinete laughed at her hesitation, "Your honor is safe. I swear to Amando, the God of Horses, I will not do anything to you unbidden. Besides, if I'm not mistaken, your Quinn is an advisor to the Castle. I don't fancy being strung up on one of those ramparts for the elements to have their way with me. By the Gods. It is too cold here for such things."

Mollified by her statement, the woman sat down next to her. "I am Tyra."

"Jinete. Ambassador from the South. Second daughter to the Horse Lord Jin."

As they shook hands, Jinete did not want to let go. Finally after the appropriate length of time had come and gone, she released Tyra's hand. If Tyra noticed the delay, she didn't say anything.

"It's very nice to meet you, Jinete, daughter to Jin."

They sat for a moment in the night silence with only the moon for company before Jinete broke the stillness.

"So what makes a beautiful woman such as yourself, play such heartbreaking music?"

Tyra ducked her head, letting her long blonde tresses cover her face.

The Southerner was sadden to see her distress and struggled to keep her hand from moving the hair away.

"Did you ever think you had everything you could possibly want? That this was it and your life would be happily ever after from that moment on?"

Jinete pondered for a moment, her forehead scrunched in thought. "I have had moments of happiness, but never one where I thought that this was it, that I had achieved everything I wanted out of life."

Tyra gave a sad sigh. "I did. I came to Abnoa to deliver news from the Clan of Fire to the Clan of Earth. While here I met a young warrior named Quinn, she was..." Tyra smiled at the memory as she thought back on her first meeting of Quinn.

"Charming, strong, brave, and she made me feel like I was more wanted than the sun and the stars."

Jinete bit her lip, "Ah, that is a special thing."

"We have two children. They look just like Quinn, blonde, tall and strong, with blue eyes."

*The Horse tribe woman had to laugh, "You **all** are tall, blonde, and for the most part have blue eyes. At least to me."*

Tyra smiled. "Yes, I suppose we all look pretty much the same to Southerners."

"Well, not all of you. You, my lady, have a shining soul and are a glowing beauty. You make all others look like common river rock."

Tyra blushed and looked away. "You should not say such things."

"Why not? I speak the truth. Plus, did it not make you happy to hear such truths spoken aloud?"

"I have heard about you Southerners and your smooth talk."

Jinete laughed a full rich sound that seemed to come up from her toes. "Ah, it is true some of us have been born with a snake's tongue. But I tell you this, with the Moon Goddess as my witness, I speak no falseness."

Tyra stood abruptly. "You should not make such pledge to the Goddess, she will punish you harshly." And without another word, the Northern musician left.

Jinete slid from the stone bench to her knees. What a cruel fate the Horse God had given her. To be trapped all winter with this unattainable woman. She looked up at the moon hanging coldly in the sky.

"You think I play this woman for quick pleasure, huh? You think so lowly of me, you cold distant Goddess, because I worship you not? I tell you this. Look into my heart and tell me if this is a lie. I would give up ever riding another horse again for a woman like that and I would give up the warmth of my homelands for this Northerner. This, Quinn, does not deserve a woman like Tyra. Her coldness and indifference is killing Tyra's spirit. Now that is true cruelty. I would gladly give my life to make Tyra happy. Wouldn't you want that for one of yours?" She waited a moment but the moon remained silent.

With a sigh, Jinete stood and brushed off her leather trousers and made her way to the makeshift stable. Her horse nickered a greeting and Jinete stroked the fine curved neck. "Ah, Veloz Basa, you will always love me, won't you, boy?"

The horse shook his head and then nipped at her shoulder. "Such a frisky boy. Perhaps I have a treat for you." With a laugh she pulled out an apple she had snuck from the banquet hall. As she fed it to her horse, she buried her face in Veloz Basa's neck breathing in its animal scent. "It is going to be a long, cold, miserable winter," she mumbled.

Luna woke up during the middle of the night to find herself alone at the fireside. The old Priestess had apparently left sometime earlier. Worried about the mercenary, she prowled the dark abbey with sword in hand, until she found Torrin curled up next to a stone wall sound asleep.

Surprised that the mercenary had fallen asleep during her watch, the warrior draped a warm blanket over the smaller woman. Then, taking her own bedroll from the fireside, and starting a

new fire near the sleeping dark-haired woman, Luna spent the night half awake, half asleep. It was a trick Fengold had taught her. How to make it through the night awake enough to react to an attack, but asleep enough that you could travel the next day. A 'Ranger trick' she had called it, and Luna had spent the entire summer of one year trying to practice it.

With the rise of the sun, she put a small pot full of snow on the fire to melt and cautiously crouched next to the sleeping Torrin.

Gently she shook her shoulder. "Torrin?"

Torrin grabbed the hand while trying to open gummed up eyelids. Peering up at Luna with bloodshot eyes she grumbled, "Why are you poking me?"

"Because it's morning."

Luna frowned. Torrin didn't look very good. "Are you all right? Do you feel sick?" Luna prayed to the Goddess that Torrin wasn't ill. Getting sick in the middle of the Ellris Pass was a recipe for disaster. The worst of the trip was still to come; the north face of the Pass chilled the bones of even the warriors from the Fire Clan. The biting cold wind sucked the heat from everything and more than one Ranger had failed to survive the trip.

Worried, the blonde pressed a hand to Torrin's forehead, trying to feel if she had a fever.

Torrin sat up rubbing her eyes. "It can't be morning I just sat down..." Blinking around she realized that indeed morning had come. "Shit. No, I'm fine." She scowled and tried to push Luna's hand away.

The warrior was unconvinced, but relented and backed off. "You sure?"

Torrin just leveled a bloodshot glare at Luna. "Yes, I'm sure."

Leaning back against the wall she looked around for any sign of her ghostly companion from the night before. "Luna..." she started then stopped. At Luna's questioning look, she shook her head. "Never mind. It's not important."

Giving an odd look to the younger woman, Luna started to pack up her things and asked, "What? Does it have anything to do with how bloodshot your eyes are right now?" Luna hoped that Torrin wasn't a drunk. She didn't think she could deal with her if the mercenary was addicted to drinking.

"I, um, saw something weird. Ahh, I saw..." She let out a breath. "Um, do you believe in ghosts?" She looked down, not wanting to see the look on Luna's face, and played with the blanket edge. She was certain the warrior would think she was losing it now.

That wasn't what Luna had been expecting her to say and she blinked in surprise. Then the

warrior shrugged and continued to pack her things. "Of course I do." Her tone implied what a silly question she thought it was.

Torrin looked up trying to gauge the look in Luna's eyes. "Huh? You do? I think I met a ghost last night. It might have been a trick by Khelin, but this ghost, she knew about my mother, knew her by name." She let out a breath. "The experience was very... disturbing."

Understanding blue eyes met Torrin's confused gray one's. Luna wasn't about to let Torrin dismiss the entire thing as fantasy.

"You are lucky. The spirit of someone who loves you came to you. What did she say? Was she your mother? You should feel honored. Such visits seldom occur. My parents haven't ever visited me." Although, Luna reflected, she wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

"You think that ghost was my mother?" Torrin frowned. "She was an annoying Southerner, with a smart mouth and quick feet. There's no way my mother would fall for that kind of person." Her frown deepened. *Was she really her Muanya?* She shuddered as her mind pictured her mother being intimate with a woman like that. As she rubbed her aching head, she said, "I think it was just the ghost of someone trapped here. She asked me to come back in the spring and dig up her bones. She wants to be buried somewhere warm and with horses."

Rubbing her head led to pinching the bridge of her nose. *Too many things going on here for me.* Letting out a sigh, she decided first things first. She needed to concentrate on getting Luna to the Queen's City. Then she could worry about the requests of a ghost.

Seeing that the other woman didn't want to hear any more comments, Luna held her tongue and simply slung her travel pack over her shoulders and said, "We should go. We can't be stuck in the pass at night. It's a good way to die from exposure."

After checking to make sure the fire was out and glancing about once more to make sure the old Priestess wasn't just hiding somewhere, Luna waited patiently for Torrin to finish packing. Finally, after some thought, she blurted out, "If the ghost asked something of you, you should try to do it. Mezzarna often told me about stories of the ghosts of the dead, coming back to ask their children to right a wrong. I grew up with those stories."

"Yeah, it would suck to be a Southerner trapped in this cold for an eternity. If Khelin hasn't taken control of the Pass by spring, I'll do my best to come back and honor her wish," Torrin replied distractedly as she packed. "But who knows where I'll be when that time comes around. I can't go back to the Hawks until they are done with Khelin. I don't fancy being strung up for helping you."

Luna bit back her reply. It was on her lips to tell the dark-haired mercenary that she could stay with her, in the Queen's City. The suggestion died stillborn, though, as Luna reminded herself again that Torrin was only a mercenary, just in it for the treasure. Instead, she let Torrin finish her packing and looked out of the abbey window, studying the snow-blanked landscape they would

have to travel today.

When Torrin was ready to go, they went outside and strapped on the snowshoes. Then, once again, they set off across the snow-covered trail.

While crossing the frozen terrain, Torrin started up her mental cursing at all that was cold and snowy as she followed Luna's path. For once, though, she was happy her hair had grown long enough to cover her freezing neck. Unconsciously, she whistled a tune as they traveled across what looked to her a bleak, washed out landscape. Soon she zoned out as she hummed, lifting one leg after another in and out of the snow, and watching Luna's ass move in front of her.

Every so often the Ranger glanced over her shoulder at the humming woman, who would give her a strange stare and a ghost of a smile. Wondering about the weird look on Torrin's face helped distract Luna from the cold. It was worse than she had expected. The wind howled up through the Pass, right into their faces, hurling snow at them. The few trees around them, small, stunted things, twisted by the endless wind provided little protection. On either side, the towering cliffs of the mountains rose into the sky, offering little cover. Near noon, she managed to find shelter in a chiseled out niche in one of the steep, cliff sides.

"Here." Hands shaking with cold, Luna offered Torrin a piece of their dried meat. "Do we have anything else to eat?"

Torrin took the meat, with her own shaking fingers, "Not really, it's dried meat or meat that's dried. Well, maybe some dried up vegetables." Rubbing her frozen hands on her face, she tried to get her jaws unstuck so she could actually chew the meat.

"Great." Luna chattered, trying to stop shivering enough to chew her piece properly. "It's a little brisk out," she commented, forcing a smile as she tried to rip another piece of the frozen meat apart.

"A little brisk? I'm a walking icicle! Actually, I take that back. I think icicles are warmer than I'm feeling right now." She would have rolled her eyes but she was afraid they'd freeze mid roll.

"How much farther until we're out of this?"

Luna squeezed her eyes shut tight as a gust of wind made it into their somewhat protected hollow. When it had passed, she cautiously opened both eyes and finished chewing. "You want the truth or something to make you happy?"

Torrin just looked back at her with expectant eyes.

"Before nightfall. If we're lucky." If they weren't, Khelin would be thanking the night for their frozen corpses. "We really need to get going." She took another bite, leaving the meat in her mouth to try to warm it a bit before she tried chewing on it.

Torrin nodded tiredly and tried to chew her last piece of jerky faster. Swallowing, she said, "You know, dried deer meat kind of grows on you after you eat it for a few days in a row." She began humming a new song, preparing herself to go back into the bitter cold.

"Careful, you'll start to sound like a Northerner," Luna said with a smile. Then, bracing herself for the relentless wind, she started back to the Pass path. Breaking trail, she pushed as fast as she dared, glancing over her shoulder often to make certain that Torrin was keeping up. The dark-haired woman had quickly gotten used to her snow shoes, proving there was at least some northern blood flowing in her veins.

The Assassin watched the old woman struggle down the snowy path. The same path her prey had gone up. Gliding in and out of the thick shadows of the trees, she approached the woman. "Excuse me, old mother." Black eyes glinted with amusement as the woman stopped, clearly startled by her sudden appearance.

The Priestess leaned on her staff, squinting at the dark-eyed woman who had just appeared in front of her. Recognition dawned in her watery blue eyes. "You." The word was almost a curse as the Priestess straightened, her grip on the staff tightening.

The Assassin laughed. "No need for violence. I merely wanted to ask a question."

She held out both of her hands so the woman could see that she was unarmed. She snickered to herself knowing that it didn't mean anything. She was capable of being lethal without weapons.

"I was wondering if you had seen two women traveling together?"

"Your dark mistress has no business in these northern lands," the Priestess spat, her old wrinkled face twisting into a sneer at the young woman.

It wasn't clear to the Assassin whether she was speaking of Khelin or of the Mistress of Shadows.

"Darkness has a right to be everywhere. How else would you know what was light?" the assassin responded. "However, I'm sensing you don't want to answer my simple question. Perhaps I need to give you more incentive." She disappeared into a shadow, coming out behind the old woman, dagger in hand.

The old Priestess turned around slowly and lifted her chin defiantly. "I will never help you or the one you served. Go back to them groveling on your belly, serpent."

"I love you priestesses. You're all so full of righteousness. Humans can be serpents, too, you know. They are just better at hiding it. I'm just more honest than they are." She settled the poisoned blade softly on the skin.

The old woman opened her mouth to say something else, then paused. Blue eyes narrowed slightly as she stared hard into the eyes of the Assassin. With a light chortling laugh, she shook her head.

"All right," the priestess muttered, almost to herself. Then, looking at the Assassin again with a smile, she said, "They were in the Abbey last night. I spent part of the night sharing a campfire with them. I suspect they've gone over the Pass by now."

The Assassin stopped surprised, her eyes narrowed as she looked for the signs of a lie. She pulled the dagger away, feeling unsettled and unsure. Just for a moment, she wanted to kill the old woman anyway. But decided there was no point in killing a favored one of a Goddess. The Gods were funny about losing their chosen ones for no reason.

The Priestess smirked, turning her back to the Assassin and walked down the path, heading toward Castle Abnoa. "Oh, and one last thing, Assassin," the priestess called back as she reached a bend in the path. "You're going to die." With a smile the Priestess continued on her way.

The Assassin chuckled at her boldness. "We're all going to die, old mother. Especially you, if you insist on going down that pathway. There's a nest of serpents waiting to eat you at the end." And she disappeared from view, sliding in and out of the shadows up the mountain trail.

As she had thought, the wind didn't let up. Throughout the long hours heading down the other side of the Pass, it harassed them, trying to bleed the heat from them. In the northern winter, warmth was life. Luna was colder than she had ever believed she could be, and still be alive, by the time she and Torrin staggered into the grove of trees at the bottom of the Pass. Only in the shelter of the large pines did the wind abate.

Torrin was fairly certain that when she had gotten up in the morning she had toes and feet. She leaned up against a tree panting and shivering, "Oh, Goddess that was something I don't want to do again anytime soon. I don't remember being so cold."

"We have to start a fire before night falls," Luna managed to say through chattering teeth, fumbling with twigs and half buried wood in the snow. "Otherwise, we'll freeze."

Staring around her, Torrin wondered if there was shelter to be found. "Okay. I don't suppose there's another abbey to be found around here?" she asked hopefully.

Teeth chattering, Luna simply glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. Then she bent back to trying to pile twigs together with hands that were shaking. The light was starting to rapidly leave as the sun started to set behind the mountains, casting them into the colder shadows.

Torrin sighed and then leaped upwards, snagging the tree branch above her. Using her body

weight, the branch bent and then snapped, sending her back down to the snow covered in pine needles. "We need a few good sized ones to help block the wind and snow." Not looking at Luna she continued, "I'm afraid you may have to snuggle with a lowly Merc to keep warm tonight." Leaping back up, she struggled with another branch, trying to convince it to leave the tree

Luna gave up on starting a fire and helped Torrin pull down a few more pine boughs. It wasn't much of a shelter, but the small lean to would block out most of the wind and help keep them warm. Ignoring the other woman's words, Luna crawled inside; it was going to be a tight fit. Squeezing to one side she made enough room for Torrin. Still shivering, she clumsily undid her travel pack, spreading out the bedroll so that they had something between them and the snow covered ground.

Torrin shoved her pack inside then attempted to find some dead fall to use for a small fire. After a few moments of freezing, she gave up and crawled inside. Looking around the cramped space she remarked, "Cozy isn't it." Shivering, she unpacked her bedroll.

"Home, sweet home," Luna agreed, helping to pull the second bedroll out. Wrapping it around them, they managed to block out most of the cold. By this time of their journey, they were well beyond any sense of privacy, and Luna gratefully leaned against the other woman, soaking up the warmth.

"I've never done the Pass in winter." Still shaking, she tried to move closer to Torrin. "It's colder now than hanging off the walls at Abnoa."

Torrin laughed. "Yes, this is much colder than being on the walls of Abnoa. Although, I'd have to say it's causing almost the same amount of adrenaline. We have to be insane. Who in their right mind would try this pass in the winter?"

Luna smiled, with both of them wrapped up together and the lean-to blocking the wind, she was actually getting warmer. "That pass will buy us time. Even if Khelin attempted it, her army would never survive."

Wincing as her limbs started to warm up, Torrin replied, "I hope so. Khelin is insane enough to try it, but I think if she did, her troops would desert her." Grimacing, she tried to stretch out her toes and exclaimed, "Oh there they are! I was afraid I lost them somewhere in the Pass."

Luna chuckled, nudging the other woman with her shoulder. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Tentatively, Torrin put her hands around Luna and burrowed into her warmth.

"I think I left some of my..." Luna missed a beat as cold arms wrapped around her. "Oph! You're freezing!" The warrior didn't try to move away though. Instead, she wrapped her arms around Torrin as well. For the warmth, she told herself.

Torrin smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, sorry. But I'm not sorry enough to move my hands. You're a

big, bad, stoic northern-type warrior, I'm sure you'll deal with it." She gave a yawn. "I've been gone too long. There's no more northern ice in my blood. I think the South has melted it all out of me."

Luna was silent for a second, tentatively resting her cheek against Torrin's head. "It's harder to melt out than you think." Letting out a sigh, she relaxed into their position, giving into a yawn of her own. "We should get some rest."

"Yeah. Tomorrow's another day filled with more cold and snow." Torrin yawned again. Loath to let go of Luna, she eventually did, lying back with a small shiver. "What's tomorrow's plan?"

Immediately missing the other woman's warmth, Luna lay down as close to Torrin as she could manage so that they could share body heat. "We should be able to pick up the Winderling, and follow it all the way to the Queen's City. It's probably frozen solid by now."

In the summer time, the Wave Dancers always had ships going up and down the Winderling, bringing supplies to the Ellris pass for trade with Castle Abnoa.

"Mmmm, okay. Sounds cold and wet ... should be a blast." Torrin closed a small gap by pressing her front to Luna's back and smiled at the warmth. Fiddling with Luna's long hair that she was practically inhaling, she asked, "Isn't it a pain to fight with such long hair? I could never understand why you keep it that way."

"Mark of honor. The longer the war braid, the longer you've been a warrior." Her own braids had been in complete disarray since the defeat at the Castle. She considered trying to redo them, but decided to wait until they reached someplace a bit warmer. "Besides, it keeps the base of your neck warm," Luna added with a grin. "I notice that yours isn't that short now either."

Torrin mumbled something about 'when we get there' and snuggled closer to the warrior. Luna grinned to herself and wondered what Torrin would look like in braids.

With that last thought, the long bitter cold day of marching finally caught up with her. Warm and ensconced in bedrolls she followed Torrin into sleep.

Luna felt good. The night of full sleep after a hard day of exercise had invigorated the blonde warrior. The wound in her side was healing quickly; she was well on the way to mending completely. Although, she didn't think she'd be any good in a fight just yet. To top it off, the weather had turned out to be spectacular that morning, a bright sunny day that was even warm.

They followed the frozen Winderling River that wound back and forth across the northern landscape, every step taking them closer to the Queen's City. Soon Luna would be able to warn the other clans of what had happened and aid them in planning to stop Khelin. The Northern Warrior was dearly looking forward to stopping Khelin's army in their tracks come springtime.

Torrin couldn't believe it when the next day turned out to be sunny and clear. She winced at the brightness. It was so intense. They trudged along following the frozen river and for the first time in days, Torrin was actually too warm. With each step they took, a blossom of dread slowly grew in her chest. Looking around furtively, she couldn't figure out why she felt that way. She hurried to keep up with the long-strided Ranger.

The Assassin grinned. Oh, it had been a good hunt and she sensed there was more fun to be had with these two. They would fight her until the bitter end. Her heartbeat quickened in anticipation. She watched them struggle along in the snow, her black eyes taking them in, the tall Northerner with her long blonde hair and the shorter, Southern woman. The blonde would have been her first target, but the memories from her Sister clearly showed her that the other should not be ignored. Besides, she was familiar Luna. Her mistress was obsessed with the Northerner. After disposing of the Southerner, she'd bring the blonde back - barely alive. She would be rewarded greatly for that gesture.

Not use to the quiet of the North the Assassin didn't notice when the wildlife went still and silent in her presence.

Torrin and Luna both paused, noticing the sudden silence. Luna's hand went to the hilt of her sword, blue eyes scanning the trees that they were passing through trying to spot the source of the disturbance. The smile she had on her face since she had gotten up that morning slipped away.

Torrin's heart sunk. She had been afraid of this since they had left Luna's parents home. "Keep moving," she whispered. "Don't let her know we know she's there."

Luna hesitated a moment, her instincts were to attack the threat, not to ignore it. But she knew she wasn't in any condition to fight. She'd tried to swing her sword at the Abbey and had ended up doubled over in pain as she pulled the scabbed-over wound in her side. And she was definitely in no shape to fight if it was another Assassin's assault. She started moving again.

Torrin's mind furiously tried to come up with a plan. After looking around, her heart sunk. The bright sun was creating long deep shadows among the trees. Then she noticed there were no shadows on the frozen crusts of ice they had been following. The trees stood too far away from its banks. "We have to get on the river. When she comes, I want you to keep going and stay on the ice."

It was the best that she could come up with. She couldn't move as fast as Luna in the snow but she could slow the Assassin down. Maybe even long enough for Luna to reach the Queen's City.

The blue-eyed warrior glanced at her incredulously. "Are you out of your mind? There's no way I'm leaving you to face whatever it is alone!"

"Yes, you are. You hired me to keep you safe and get you to the Queen's City and that's what I'm

doing. I'm doing the job you're paying me for!" Torrin hissed back angrily. "I trained in the Temple. I have a better chance of slowing her down than you do."

"You can go jump in the river if you think I'm running away from a fight!" the warrior countered, wincing as she drew her sword from her scabbard.

"Stop. Just stop. Put your sword back and listen to me. You're hurt. Maybe, just maybe, if you were at 100%, you could take on one of the Mistress's Dark Shadows, but you're not. I know this is hard for you, but our best chance is if you go alone. Now. I'll slow her down so you can make it to the Queen's City. I won't take any chances of you going back to Khelin!" Torrin was shocked at her outburst. Even more so since she meant it. She'd pay with her life if she had to. She would not let Luna to fall back into Khelin's hands.

Luna was tormented inside as she struggled with the thought of running away and leaving Torrin to a sure death. It was against all that she had been taught. But Southerner was right. She had to warn the others. And she never wanted to be in Khelin's hands again, either.

"You get away when you can, Torrin. I'll meet you at the Queen's City," she whispered. Even as she said them, Luna didn't believe her own words. Grasping the Mercenary's shoulder with one hand, she squeezed it. More words failed her, and with a sharp nod, the warrior set out at over the ice.

Torrin intently watched her go, knowing it would be the last time she would see the tall and blonde Northern.

The Assassin cocked her head then realized they knew she was there as they scrambled on to the sunny field of ice. She hissed in anger from having her advantage of the shadows taken from her. It didn't matter, she shrugged, they would be dead soon. She laughed not bothering to remain quiet. The sound rolled down the small hill, dark and more chilling than the winter landscape. "You're making this so much fun, I'm sad to see it end." Then she popped in and out of shadows as she stalked her prey.

Torrin could sense the woman coming. She quickly whirled around, nearly slipping on the ice. "I killed your Sister and I'm happy to do the same to you, " she called out. She struggled out of her pack, throwing it to the bank. Her sword and the snowshoes followed. Pulling the climbing claws from a pocket, she snapped them on her feet, happy that they indeed gave her more security on the ice.

"You were lucky with that kill," the Assassin shouted back.

"I'm feeling lucky again today," Torrin sneered as she slowly slipped into the place she went when it was time for battle. She settled her nerves to meet the woman who emerged all in black from the trees.

Torrin didn't move from her ready position. She laughed at the Assassin and taunted her to come

out onto the ice with her. "I killed your Sister with her own knife. I'm surprised that the Mistress chose someone so incapable."

The Assassin's face twisted into snarl of rage as she slid out on the ice, a dagger in each hand and lunged for Torrin.

The Mercenary danced around the attack, relieved that the spikes on the claws gave her better traction. They slid around each other in a deadly dance, metal claws and poisoned daggers flashing around. Coming close to each other, but never connecting.

The Assassin's cold heart nearly burst at such a fight. It had been so long since she had fought someone so worthy.

Torrin focused on keeping the daggers away from her skin. She needed to draw this out to give Luna a good head start, to keep her ahead of the stalking Assassin. She ducked spinning low under a slice and came up in a solid kick to the woman's stomach. Her face split into a grin of joy as she felt the claws pierce the thin leather armor and drive into the flesh. It turned into fear as her foot got stuck there.

Not missing a beat, the Assassin absorbed the pain, went past it, grabbed the leg and yanked it.

Torrin's head hit the ice hard. Stars swam in front of her eyes.

Sheathing her daggers, the Assassin grabbed the fallen woman in a headlock. "There's more to you than what you present. What kind of Southerner would desert her army to help a Northern dog?" Fumbling with Torrin's tunic, she ripped the shoulder exposing the flesh. "Ah, I knew it. Your fighting style could have only been learned in the temple." Slowly a finger traced the brand, and then sunk into the branded flesh. The Assassin's eyes rolled up but her grip never weakened.

Torrin fought against the hold, her thoughts fuzzy and thick. She felt her tunic rip and her struggles increased as the pain came. She felt like her memories were being torn from her mind. Screaming, she thrashed around.

"My, aren't you an evil girl." the Assassin quipped pulling her finger out of the mark. "Does she know? Does she know you're the reason her Sisters are all dead? Maybe I should tell her. You know she hasn't gone that far." She gave a chuckle.

Torrin screamed again.

Luna hurried through the trees, rushing back to where Torrin and the Assassin were fighting. Her side was in pain, but she pushed herself through it. She'd gone only far enough up the ice to be hidden by the trees when she heard the screams and started her desperate run back. She drew her blade as she got closer and snarled as she moved as fast as she could on her snowshoes. Her long legs ate up the distance and the snow flew around her.

"My dear Luna," the Assassin shouted. "Khelin misses you dearly. I've been sent to bring you back. However, before that happens, I have an overwhelming urge to tell you about your so-called friend. I'm surprised you trusted your life to a Mercenary that single-handedly was responsible for bringing Abnoa to its knees. Oh, yes. How do you think the Southerners got the gate open? Why, it was our little friend here. Who better than someone who had been in the Castle before? Because of her, all your friends and sisters-in-arms are dead. Yet, you believed in her to get you to safety. How foolish."

The Assassin's words stopped Luna's frantic run at the edge of the river. Her sword tip trembled as she tried to decipher if the Assassin was lying. Fragments of memories flooded back through her mind, and she was once again back on the battlements of Castle Abnoa.

Watching a small, dark-haired mercenary rush towards the gatehouse, opening the main gate for the flood of Southern warriors. She lowered her sword.

Torrin struggled against the Assassin's grip, trying to look like she was trying to get loose. Instead, her hand found a dagger hidden on her body. Pulling it out, she stabbed it deep into the back of the Assassin's knee. Screaming, the woman in black went down.

Torrin grinned a dark smile. "For stealing my memories, I owe you pain." With a powerful kick, Torrin snapped the Assassin's head to the right.

Spitting out blood, the fallen woman pulled a dagger out and threw it at Torrin. Torrin laughed and danced out of the way.

"I'm going to gut you," the Assassin hissed. "Leave your insides decorating these trees. All will know what happens to traitors. The people of the North will spit on you, as will the South's. No one will remember you or give you a proper burial. No one will mourn you."

Torrin rolled her eyes. "Shut up. All you Assassins do, is run your mouths."

Mentally deadening the pain in her leg, the Assassin struggled to her feet, blood seeping from the wound.

Torrin could feel blood trickle down her neck and the vision in her left eye was blurry. They circled each other feinting attacks then pulling back at the last minute.

"All alone now. No Northern warrior to save you. How does it feel to be abandoned?"

"I probably feel the same as you. Hurt, tired, and cold and yet, I can't wait to see your blood on the ice," Torrin growled, launching into a flurry of moves made sloppy from the icy footing. The Assassin easily absorbed the first punch, and then blocked the next two. She returned the attack with sidekick on her wounded leg knowing it would be blocked and spun around, snapping her fist into side of Torrin's head that had cracked on the ice.

Torrin staggered back from the punch desperately trying to track the Assassin's next movements but was having difficulty seeing her.

Grinning a blood-filled smile, the Assassin knew she had won. Swinging low, she kicked the Mercenary's feet out from under her and as Torrin landed heavily on her back, the Assassin leaped on her with her dagger drawn.

Torrin screamed as incredible pain exploded in her hand. She grabbed frantically at the body on top of hers but found only one hand would move. She looked up into black eyes.

The Assassin dipped her head low ignoring the groping hand on her side. She whispered into an ear, "Don't worry, I'm not going to kill your friend. I'm going to take her back to Khelin. I'll leave you to live your last moments envisioning what kind of torture your friend will endure because you failed." She brushed the hand off of her and stood up.

"TORRIN!" Luna screamed, ripping away from the confusion of her memories and lunging out onto the frozen ice. "NO!" She couldn't move fast enough as she ran to where Torrin lay on the ice and the standing Assassin who turned towards her with a dark smile.

Torrin looked to her left and saw her hand pinned to the ice with the dagger. Already black tendrils of poison were creeping up her hand from where the dagger pierced the skin. Breathing slowly, she reached over and slowly pulled the knife out. She gritted her teeth so hard she was afraid they would break.

She was dead.

She had a small resistance to the poison due to her time in the Temple, but that only slowed its spread. She would still die, but more gradually and in greater pain. She stared at the Assassin's back as she looked down the center of the frozen river, her eyes scanning the ice for something. Mustering all her strength, she stood cradling her wounded hand to her chest. Moving slowly backwards, she tried to stay out of the Assassin's peripheral vision. She desperately hoped the ice was weaker toward the center of the river. Suddenly she was rewarded with a satisfying crack as the ice protested her weight.

The Assassin whirled around surprised that the Southern Mercenary wasn't dead yet.

Torrin lunged to tackle the Assassin and as they both hit the ice, it gave a horrible groan and crumbled away under them. Torrin grinned evilly at the Assassin as they fell through to the freezing water and whispered, "Looks like I'm lucky again."

Wrapped around each other, they fought sluggishly under the freezing water, both found their strength ebbing away in the cold. Finally, Torrin pulled away from the killer and paddled upward. Breaking through the newly formed ice, she gasped for breath. She clawed at the thin ice only to have the edges break away under her weight. Suddenly, hands grabbed her from behind.

"I thank you for a worthy hunt, but I'm taking you with me," the Assassin said before dunking them under again.

Twisting and turning, Torrin found hands around her throat trying to choke the precious air out of her lungs. Moving her frozen hands, she pressed her thumbs into black eyes.

The churning water went still. A few bubbles broke the surface and small chunks of ice bobbing up and down. Then, a dark head broke the surface gasping for air, breaking the quietness again.

Torrin struggled to the ice's edge and tried to climb out. Again, she found her numb hands and body weight working against her as the weakened ice crumbled. Spitting water out of her mouth, she tried to stay on the surface of the icy water but found it harder and harder to keep from sinking as the numbing cold bit by bit shut down her body. With a final gasp, Torrin slowly sunk back under the frigid river.

Luna skidded to a stop as close to the widening hole in the ice as she dared. The warm sun had weakened the ice, and all around her it groaned ominously. Quickly she tossed off her pack and her snowshoes followed a split second later. Then, before she could consider what she was doing, the blonde dove into the hole.

The cold water was a sudden shock, causing her entire body to seize up. She'd expected it, though. She'd fallen through the ice with Mezzarna once while they had been out on patrol. But the cold was even worse than she remembered it, and almost immediately her limbs started to go numb.

Forcing her body to move, Luna swam to Torrin's side.

"Hold on!" she yelled, grabbed the Mercenary's shirt and pulled her toward the edge of the ice.

The trick to getting out, her mother had taught her, was to keep your weight distributed as widely as possible on the ice. Kicking her feet, she pulled Torrin upward for her to land on her stomach.

The sun-warmed ice gave away, dumping them back into the freezing water. Focusing all her energy on escaping the river, Luna tried again to shove them up onto the frozen river. Once more the ice broke apart under them. Although, this time it seemed to take longer for the ice to crack.

Torrin had stopped moving and the frigid waters were sapping Luna's strength out of her. She knew she couldn't last much longer. Desperation lent her power and she lunged up onto the ice again.

This time it held.

Beyond shivering herself, she dragged Torrin off the ice toward the trees. She grabbed her discarded pack and tossed it ahead of them. As soon as she had dragged the unmoving Mercenary

to it, she began working to save Torrin. She pulled out the bedroll and her spare clothes and set them aside. With shaking hands, she started to undress Torrin.

"Torrin, wake up. Don't you dare leave now!"

She caught sight of the younger woman's hand and winced at the sight of the darkness crawling up it.

Quickly she yanked off her belt, tied it around the young woman's wrist and pulled it as tight as she could make it. Hoping that would slow the poison's spread, she began tugging off Torrin's clothes again. The Mercenary's clothing was frozen solid, and finally, Luna had to use her dagger to slice them off of her. Then, stripping bare herself, she wrapped both of them in the bedroll and spare clothing.

Shivering violently as she tried to warm up Torrin, Luna chattered, "Torrin, don't you dare, don't you dare leave me!" She hugged the other woman close, trying to will her own body heat into the younger woman.

Torrin's body felt like a block of ice and she was still deathly white. Her chest rose and fell slightly, and Luna felt a thin, uncertain pulse.

She was losing her. Luna could feel the body in her arms growing colder despite everything she was doing. Although the belt wrapped around Torrin's arm had slowed the spread, the darkness crawling up it hadn't stopped.

Torrin was back in the sacred room at the Temple of Shadows. Before her the pit of black fire burned. Around the flame's edge, it seemed almost purple. "Will you walk through me? To be blessed by my touch?" a voice spoke from it.

Torrin shivered. She wanted to, she wanted to be worthy of something or someone, but she couldn't walk into that fire. The room became colder and colder. She took a step but then stopped.

"I can't! It's not my path!" she shouted to nothing. Abruptly, the room was gone and she was falling into darkness. It wrapped around her, pulling her downward.

A voice spoke quietly at Luna's side. "You know, I'm sure you'd both enjoy this a lot more if you weren't freezing and she wasn't dying."

Luna jerked, turning to look at the source of that voice. "Who...?"

He gave a little bow, his long black hair flipping back and forth with the movement. "I am Amando, although I doubt you've heard of me being so far North." His black eyes twinkled, "You seem to be in a dire situation and while my elder sister isn't inclined to step in at this moment, a certain Muanya kept pestering me, so here I am, to give aid."

"I'm seeing things," was Luna's first thought. "Never heard of a ghost called Amando, either." Ghosts didn't come out in the daylight, everyone knew that, and the person in front of her looked too solid, too different to be a ghost. Shivering, Luna ducked her head, worriedly trying to tighten the belt around Torrin's wrist. Her body shaking and blue eyes frantic as she tried to think up of a way to help Torrin. Finally, she said something to the figure.

"Okay, Amando what-ever-you-are, if you really can help, help me stop her from dying!"

He frowned and puffed up a bit. "I doubt you've seen a man before either, but lucky you, you not only get to see a man but a God." He made a gesture and suddenly Luna and Torrin were inside a rough hide tent with a small fire. "Ah, much better. You Northerners and your cold brisk lifestyles. Now, for my little one's deadly wound." He crouched over the smaller woman, undoing the belt.

Luna glanced around, startled.

There had been no sense of transition, one minute they had been outside in the cold, the next they had been inside a nicely built hide tent. Slowly the Northerner reached over and picked up her sword. This... thing... was a man?

Her eyes narrowed. It didn't look like one of the monsters the old grandmothers described. "What did you say you were?" The strange person kept examining Torrin's still form without acknowledging her question.

"Such an evil hobby my little sister has. Making evil, sinister things. You know she tried to make my little one here into one of her wicked dark followers. She and Vladlin are always poking their noses where it doesn't belong." He spoke quietly while investigating the wound. Looking up, he frowned darkly at her. "If you want your friend to live, I suggest you put that down and treat me with a little respect."

His eyes crackled with power. "I am doing a favor for someone. I can take it back at any moment."

Blue eyes studied him, then Torrin, then the male one again. Slowly she released her hold on her sword, leaving it on the floor. Whatever this thing was, he was her only hope for helping Torrin. "Can you heal her?"

He snorted, "I'm a God." He leaned back over examining the spreading darkness. Slowly he ran his finger from the top of the blackness down to the open oozing wound in her palm. A foul, black liquid began to trickle out.

His forehead beaded with sweat, and he murmured, "Oh, my sister is pissed at this one."

A sudden wind gusted against the side of the tent, and Luna could swear she almost made out a woman's howl. Feeling completely out of her depth, she stayed where she was, naked except for the bedroll slung over her shoulders and her sword within easy reach. If this God did anything to hurt Torrin, she'd attack. Then they would know if Gods bled.

After a moment he stood up blinking.

"That's all I can do. I've got the poison out but I can't do anymore healing. My sister, she's trying to block me. She's not real happy about two of her Chosen getting killed, or more exactly, that the one who killed them still refuses to serve her. He looked down at the now steadily breathing Mercenary. "Torrin would have been an excellent addition. Good thing my other sister and I have other plans," he said with a wink.

"Enjoy the tent. I'm afraid it will be gone in the morning. I'm sorry there's not more I can do for you, but my power is only so much when I'm away from the plains." With another wink, he disappeared.

Luna stared at the spot he had been in for a long moment, as if expecting him to reappear. When he did no such thing, she reached down and picked up her sword, using it to prod through the space where he had just been. Only when her blade touched nothing did she moved forward to kneel by Torrin's side. The other woman had more color to her now than she had before, and the blackness that had spread throughout her hand was gone. With a sigh of thanks to the Moon Goddess, Luna pulled the Mercenary closer to the fire. Then, wrapping the bedroll around them both again, she held her as the wind howled outside.

Torrin struggled in the darkness. She couldn't breath; the water was choking her trying to drag her down. With a scream she tried to sit up, then collapsed, too weak to hold her head up. Her eyes stared at the sky noticing it looked kind of brown and furry.

"Why is the sky brown and furry?" she croaked out.

"Because we're in a tent," Luna whispered, her mouth close to Torrin's ear. The fire had died down to a low bank of coals during the last few hours. Despite her exhaustion, Luna hadn't been able to do more than nod off for a few minutes at a time, her mind whirling with questions and implications.

"Oh." She coughed. "You had a tent with you this whole time and we didn't use it?" she asked, befuddled.

"No." The bedroll shifted as Luna pulled a small bottle of water free from her pack and held it to Torrin's lips for her to drink. Only when she had finished taking a sip did the Northerner continue.

"Amando made it." There was a slight pause. "I think."

"The Horse God? He's a little far from home. I wonder why he helped." She frowned. "Um, am I dead? If I am please feel free to lie to me. I was trying to be brave about the dying thing but I would rather not be dead." Torrin's thoughts were very disjointed; she couldn't seem to place what happened other than being cold and trapped in water.

Luna chuckled, wrapping them both in the warm bedroll. "You aren't dead. Go back to sleep." With a sigh, the blonde leaned her forehead against Torrin's shoulder, shaking her head. "We might as well stay here the night."

"Okay. But we won, right?" she asked trying to turn and look at Luna. "No more Assassins waiting out there to kill us?"

Luna nodded. "She's dead. We don't have to worry about her anymore." As for other Assassins, that question Luna couldn't answer. She didn't know how many of them Khelin kept around.

"Good." Torrin gave a weak smile. "I was afraid I wouldn't be enough of a deterrent and that she'd still get you. I was afraid I'd fail, and she'd take you back to Khelin." She yawned slipping away into sleep.

Gently, Luna brushed dark bangs away from Torrin's face, whispering. "Don't you ever do something like that again." In the morning they would have to talk. For now though, they would rest and recover.

The tent disappeared with the first rays of the sun, just as Amando had said. The sudden burst of cold air that accompanied its disappearance caused Luna to stir. Opening her eyes, she yawned. Still sleepy, she tried to burrow closer to the source of warmth next to her. Only when she encountered bare skin did the memories of the previous day flood back and she hastily started to try to extricate herself. It wasn't easy; the two of them had formed a human puzzle of sorts during the night, with the bedding wrapped all around them.

Torrin gave a low groan, and tried to open an eye as she felt someone moving. Her throat felt raw, and parts of her body throbbed painfully. Finally, getting an eye open she looked around trying to get the other open. She was slightly worried when her vision remained slightly blurry in her left eye.

Struggling with the blankets, the Mercenary sat up. As she placed weight on her wounded hand, she gave a cry of pain and crumpled back down to the bedroll.

Luna immediately stopped trying to escape and wrapped her arms around the other woman.

"Careful. I don't think it could completely heal. The poison is out though." Gently she cradled Torrin's injured hand, checking the bandages she'd wrapped it in last night before sleep had

claimed her.

Torrin gave a whimper, "I feel like I've been dropped off a tall, rocky mountain peak." Her thoughts started to click back together giving her a view of what had happened yesterday. "Oh." She snatched her hand back giving a sob of relief at not seeing the black snaking tendrils of poison. "I don't understand. Nobody survives the poison. Its lethal." The hole in her hand still looked nasty, but it would probably heal well enough to give her a full range of motion.

Luna shrugged, "Hold out your hand." Taking out one of her spare shirts she shredded it to make more bandages. They certainly were going through a lot of these on the trip.

With just as much gentleness as before, she started to wrap the injury, keeping her attention focused on that job. "You opened the gate at Abnoa." It wasn't a question. It was a statement of fact. Not looking up, Luna continued to work on Torrin's hand.

Torrin blushed, swallowed hard and tried to take her hand back. "I can do that." Her eyes darted around, she felt trapped. Goddess, how could she have forgotten that part of the nightmare?

Ignoring her request, Luna looked at the wound, frowning at the ugly look of it. The warrior did her best not to put too much pressure on it. "Were you paid a lot?" she said as she carefully covered the hand with another bandage.

Torrin could feel her heart speed up and her gut churned. She licked dry lips. "I, we... Rya's Hawks are the best. So yes, we were paid a lot. I...", she trailed off looking at her other hand that was playing with a loose thread on the bedroll.

The warrior's lips twitched. Tying off the bandage, she let go of Torrin's hand. Still not meeting those gray eyes, she asked the question that had haunted her all night.

"Was it worth it?"

The Mercenary cleared her throat and then opened her mouth, then closed it again. Finally she blew out a breath. "The Assassin didn't lie. I opened the gate. I'm to blame that your friends are dead." She paused, thinking back to her meeting with the ghost in the Abbey and allegations.

Luna finally looked up, her face emotionless. Blue eyes gone dark with emotion met Torrin's. "You didn't answer my question. Was it worth it?"

Torrin jerked back to the present and exclaimed, "It was a job! My job is war. And bad, evil things happen in war. Was it worth it?" She pushed back her uncut hair. "It seemed like it when we got ready. It seemed like it when we were fighting, but after it was over..." She cleared her throat looking away. Torrin wasn't use to feeling remorse, and she hated the way it stabbed at her soul. She gritted her teeth, her hands forming fists, and grew angry. She growled, "What do you want me to say? I'm not a good person. I'm a hired killer. People employ me to do the things when they don't want to get their own hands dirty."

The blonde's mind was full of the images of her Sisters lying dead and dying in the courtyard as the Southerners streamed in through the gate. Because it was a "job." Luna shook her head to clear the painful memories.

"So, this," she waved her hands around her, "is just another 'job' for you? You're just upholding a contract? Well, if it is, I should have let you left me on the wall."

Abruptly she stood up, yanking her clothes free from the pile they'd slept in. Without a word she started to put them on, angrily cursing herself for being a fool.

Torrin stood up, ignoring her dizziness and snarled at Luna, "Of course, it's just another job for me! I don't have the luxury to think of it any other way because I don't belong anywhere! Not in the North. Not in the South. And at the end of my day, if I'm lucky, maybe there's bar maid who wants a thrill for the night, cuz I'm not the girl you make a life with. I'm not the sort that someone would take to meet their mother and their muanya."

Torrin's head throbbed from her outburst. "I'm not like you, Luna. I don't get the luxury of having my world be so black and white. I don't have an untainted heritage. When this is over, you'll live out your life happily roaming the woods. Maybe settle down with another Ranger and someday you'll go to the Priestess and with her help, you'll have a couple of baby Rangers. So, don't you dare judge me or my life!"

She stood angrily in front of Luna. Goddess, if this woman wasn't a client... she wanted to hit the woman. What did Luna know about Torrin's life and the choices she never had?

Luna gazed at the small Mercenary with cool blue eyes as she finished dressing, yanking her clothes on with more force than necessary. She nearly tossed Torrin off the bedroll as she started to roll it up.

"Then I guess your job is almost over," Luna finally said, grabbing her travel pack and started to put on her snowshoes.

Torrin stiffened. Luna's remark hurt that small part of her that she had so carefully protected. She berated herself. This was why she didn't want to care about people. They should be either a client or an enemy. Stilling her emotions, she put them away. They would only cause her pain. She slid her inner mask on once again.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

She turned looking around until she found her own pack. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she dressed slowly, finding it hard because of her hand. Slinging her pack over her shoulders, she took stock of her body. With a sigh, she admitted she was just about worthless. Thankfully, she was ambidextrous so she could use either hand for her sword, but using her bow and arrows were

out of the question.

Torrin's head still ached and she felt slightly feverish, but it was the blurry vision in her left eye that really bothered her. She tenderly felt along her scalp until she found the lump. Wincing, she gently examined it. Torrin hoped that when it healed so would her sight. Sadly, she realized she might be reaching the end of her career; she would be no good as a mercenary if she had limited vision.

She would do this job and then be gone. All that matter was that she would get paid. Her resolved hardened. Luna and the whole damn North could jump off a cliff for all she cared and then, Khelin and the Southern army could follow. She could go back to the South and be warm. Maybe find a tavern somewhere and drink until she lost track of the days or her money was gone.

Money was honest. Money didn't have feelings. Money wouldn't hurt her.

Luna stood off to the side, waiting for the Mercenary to gather her things. She stared out at the once more, frozen river. The spot where Torrin had fallen through with the Assassin had frozen during the night with a clear layer of ice covering it.

Mentally, Luna cursed herself for ever believing she was more than just client for the Mercenary. She was outraged and appalled that the woman had betrayed her former Clan for money and vengeance. Blocking out everything else, the blonde wrapped her anger and despair around herself like a cloak. Without looking back, she angrily set out along the riverbank towards the Queen's City. She stalked through the snow, gritting her teeth against the absurd feelings of sadness that were creeping up on her.

With her mask firmly in place, Torrin followed the trail that Luna made, ignoring Luna's tense posture. Absently, she hummed a tune that was occasionally broken by a cough.

The Windling was as good as its name, snaking back and forth through the countryside north of the mountains. They travel along its banks for the rest of the day, seldom stopping for anything other than a bite to eat. The quiet during those brief stops was strained and deafening. Luna refused to meet Torrin's eyes and as soon as possible, the Northerner would push on. They made good time, the snow wasn't too deep, and the day was warm for winter. The sun was just beginning to set when Luna spoke for the first time since that morning.

Stopping at the side of the river, her breath steaming the air, she pointed towards a dark shape on the ice in the distance. "The Queen's City. We're almost there."

The city itself was built upon an island in the middle of the Winderling. In the summer, boats would cross to either bank, upstream to the mountains or downstream to the ocean. In the winter, large wooden sleds pulled by mules would bring supplies and people across the ice. Even from where they were, they could see the huge, soaring gray towers of the Queen's Palace.

Luna smiled at the sight. Forgetting her anger for a moment, she turned toward Torrin to see her

reaction. Belatedly she remembered her ire, and quickly turned away, picking up the pace once again through the snow.

Torrin said nothing. All that she was capable of was putting one foot in front of the other. Her head felt like it was stuffed with wool, and her lungs felt heavy, plus it was hard for her to breath. She blinked at the towers, seeing them but not caring. Looking back at the Ranger, she realized Luna had moved on again. Coughing, she spit a wad of phlegm into the snow and trudged after the quickly striding figure. She thought, before her thoughts began to wander even more, 'Note to self. Falling in a frozen river... bad.'

Luna had gone a dozen steps before she realized Torrin wasn't following closely behind her anymore. Annoyed, she turned around to call back to her, only to pause as she watched the shorter woman staggering with her every step. With a longing look to the gray towers in the distance and every fiber of her being wanting to push on until they reached the city walls, she sighed and headed back toward the other woman.

"We should camp here tonight," Luna announced.

Torrin blinked trying to understand what Luna was saying. She shook her head. She replied neutrally, " No. I wouldn't want you to spend any more time with a murderer than you need to. We should keep going. We're almost there, anyway." She started to walk in the direction Luna had come from.

Luna's lips thinned at her words and with a snort, she turned and continued her rapid pace again. "Fine. Just keep up, will ya?"

Torrin grunted a "yeah, sure" and struggled to follow Luna's quickened gait.

There were four of them waiting for them.

They must have been hiding there all day for an unlucky traveler to come across them on the way to the Queen's City. Luna only had time to let out a yell of warning as the figures erupted from the trees on either side of the path that they had been following for the past hour.

"Torrin!"

Luna's sword was in her hand before she knew she'd drawn it, and the first thief's neck blossomed open as Luna swung. The second thief was nowhere as foolhardy as the first one and fainted at Luna with a wicked looking set of daggers.

Torrin's head snapped up and let her pack slid off her shoulders. Drawing on all her remaining energy, she drew her sword. "Oh, sure. Now that you're in a bit of trouble, you need me."

"Behind you!" Luna yelled, ducking under a swing from the woman she was facing, while blocking a thrust by one of the others.

Torrin tried to spin around to get at her attacker but she over rotated and fell down just as her attackers sword sliced the air where her head had been. Grunting, she lifted a snowshoe and planted it in the bandit's midsection. "By the Mistress! Look what you've done. Now I look like a incompetent newbie in front of a client," she shouted shoving the woman back into the snow.

"I don't think they really care!" Luna shouted back, ducking another swing, and impaling another bandit on her sword. There were more of them emerging from the trees, and Luna's heart dropped as she realized how out numbered the two of them were.

As thieves went, these were fairly well trained. Luna had to give them that. They were still far below either her or Torrin's ability with a weapon. On a good day, Torrin and Luna could have driven them off easily.

This was, unfortunately, not a good day.

Luna barely ducked another slice at her head, wincing as she pulled the wound in her side. Fighting in snowshoes wasn't doing her any good either.

Staggering upright, Torrin barely blocked another attack. The woman growled at her. Torrin rolled her eyes and then figuring her head was well padded with wool, she headed-butted the woman, breaking the other woman's nose.

Torrin fumbled for a dagger, closed her bad eye as she let it fly at the woman sneaking up behind Luna. She frowned as it hit the woman in the shoulder and not in the kidney as she had hoped.

Trying to clear her vision that had been covered in red stained snow, she blinked rapidly. Torrin pulled out another dagger and launched it at another bandit. She looked around for her sword. She gave a smile as she noticed her sword gleaming in the snow near her. "Oh, there you are," she spoke cheerily and picked it up. A few of the bandits paused their attack, unsure if they wanted to deal with an insane person.

Torrin laughed twirling her sword and then frowned when she missed grabbing it and it fell back into the snow. "Hold on a second. When I do this right, it looks really cool." One of the thieves decided Torrin had just been lucky with her daggers and rushed her.

Scowling, she pulled her sword out of the snow and growled at the woman coming towards her. "Come on! I haven't got all day." In the distorted vision from her left eye, she saw another come at her from the side. She tried to block the attack but misjudged. The sword sliced her heavy tunic but, luckily, not reaching her skin. "That's it. I'm running out of clothes!" Torrin howled and tackled the surprised woman.

Luna spun her sword in a deadly arc, slicing down a fourth thief. With a snarl, she flipped her hold on it, driving it backwards into the belly of another who was trying to sneak up behind her.

Wrenching it free, she spun to attack the next one, only to find herself and Torrin alone. The last of the thieves had decided to call it a night and were fleeing through the trees, leaving behind the bodies of their fallen.

After taking care of her clothes-shredding thief, Torrin picked up her sword again and looked around. She asked Luna, "Where did they go?"

Luna kicked one of the bodies, sneering at the seven bodies that lay around them. Blood had turned the white snow red, and its smell was heavy on the air. Scavengers would come soon. By morning, little would remain of the bodies.

Sheathing her sword, Luna held out her hand for Torrin to help her up. "They've fled." With the aftermath of the fight, the Warrior's hurt and anger was gone, replaced by a bone deep weariness. "Come on, we're almost there."

Sheathing her sword, Torrin looked around at the bodies. *All that red on white.* Feeling something wet run down her forehead, Torrin wiped it away. It came away red. She stared at both her hands. The wound in her other hand had reopened and the bandage was stained red. She frowned and just stared at her hands. How many people had she killed with her hands? How much blood was on them? She trembled, her eyes rolling around staring at the bodies and then down at her hands. She doubled over, retching.

Luna hesitated for the space of a heartbeat before placing a hand on Torrin's back. When the Mercenary had finished being sick, the blonde silently handed her the last of their water to wash her mouth out.

"Come on, just a little further." Helping her to stand up, Luna asked Torrin, "Can you walk?"

Torrin nodded disheartened, and handed the water skin back. Picking up a handful of snow she scrubbed her hands, hoping the blood would go away. After a moment, she started to follow Luna.

After her first sideways lurch, Luna gave up letting the younger woman walk on her own. "Okay, let's do it this way." Taking the smaller woman's arm she slid it around her waist. She was too tall for her to sling Torrin's arm over her shoulder.

"Come on, Torrin. Keep moving. When we get to the city, we can get healers to look at you."

Torrin did as Luna directed. Her thoughts were thick and she was weaving in and out of awareness. Blinking her eyes, she looked around, catching blonde hair out of the corner of her eye. She stiffened then tried to move faster. "Come on, Tasha," she urged. "We're going to be late again. I told you to hurry up!" Torrin pulled at the arm around her waist trying to urge Tasha to move faster. "Come on. I know it's fine if you're late, but Quinn will blame me. She always blames me. Last time I let you talk me into staying out late playing I couldn't sit for a week, and

you just had to go without supper."

Torrin's steps were starting to slow down more and more.

Luna swallowed, fear blossoming in her chest. This was not a good sign.

"I'm so sorry, Torrin," Luna whispered as she picked up the smaller woman and started to move as fast as she could, her breath coming in harsh grunts. Night would be upon them any moment now, and with it, the plunge of the temperature. Neither of them would survive a night outside in their current condition. The city seemed impossibly distant, the tall towers set against the red sunset, isolated by the ice of the Winderling.

The second time she fell, the moon had risen above the horizon. She had slipped on the ice and both of them went tumbling to the hard, slick surface. The blonde let out a scream of pain as the wound in her side reopened, she could feel the wetness seeping down her body. "Goddess, please," Luna prayed, weeping with pain as she struggled to pick up Torrin once more.

The wind swirled snow around her feet as she mechanically plodded along the road. Time lost all meaning. There was only the snow-covered road a step ahead of her. Nothing else mattered than continuing to move.

"Torrin," she panted, calling the other woman's name to see if she had regain consciousness. The form in her arms was frightfully still.

The third time she fell she couldn't get back to her feet.

Sobbing, Luna grabbed Torrin's jacket by the neck and started to drag her as she slowly crawled across the snow.

The guard patrol found them on the bank of the Winderling; Luna curled around Torrin's still form, trying to shelter them both from the biting cold and wind.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Disclaimer: This is going to be a long story. The longest that either of us have ever written. So if you want a little PWP, you might want to look elsewhere. This story will have violence, sex

between consenting adults who just happen to be female, and a few swear words. In Canada this would get you a rating somewhere around 13+, but I think it would get an R rating in the States. We crave feedback. Please send any constructive criticism or just a note to say hi, to: zeewriter@yahoo.com, adarkbow@yahoo.com

Introduction

Several years in the past.

The city state of Galia, unlike Thulis, was located far away from the seacoast. Since it depended less upon the military than Thulis, walls protecting the city were absent. It was, Khelin reflected as she politely took a bite of plum, ripe for the picking.

She languidly noticed the large banquet hall was full of diplomats, military officers and assorted civilians. A full band played discreetly in the corner for the dinner guests. On one entire side of the long formal table were her people from Thulis, the other side, Galia's people. Forcing herself to smile, she raised her glass of wine as the leader of Galia, her cousin Khandra, as she rose to give a toast.

Political politeness engrained into her, Khandra hid her grimace behind her wine cup. She hated Khelin. The most polite word she had to describe her dear cousin was... sociopath. With a silent sigh, the leader of Galia lifted a bony arm. As she raised her arm the room went quiet. Her dark brown eyes glanced from face to face freezing for a moment on Khelin's.

The leader of Thulis did her best to school her features into a comforting smile for her elder cousin. Her thoughts were far from calm though as she mentally sneered at how weak Khandra looked.

Khandra hid a shudder. Her cousin's smile wasn't fooling her. The woman was a barely restrained monster reeking of bloodshed, she thought. She was very nervous about her cousin's presence in her quiet city. Galia was primarily an agricultural community. They provided food for most of the south. There was no military troops to talk about, just the local volunteer militia. But Khandra had no illusions about her ability to protect herself. She had been born a painfully skinny child who had grown into a painfully skinny woman. Therefore, she had surrounded herself with the best guards that money could buy.

She gave her a small smile and let her eyes drift away from Khelin. "A toast."

Khelin kept her glass of wine up as all eyes turned to the leader opposite her at the table.

After waiting for everyone to lift their glasses, she continued. "To our dear cousin from Thulis. We welcome you to our humble community. While we are not the military might that you are, we do pride ourselves on keeping the warriors going by providing them with our food. We hope that

your time spent in Galia will be fruitful. We praise the Pantheon of Southern Gods for our good fortune and pray for continued peace within our city-states."

Khandra raised her glass then sipped her wine.

"Praise the Gods!" the others echoed before drinking.

As the cheering died away Khelin stood, her thin smile widening as she stared directly at her cousin. Raising her own glass again, she gave her own toast. "I thank you, my cousin, for such a warm welcome. To open your doors to us and to this wonderful banquet."

Khandra nodded politely.

Contrary to proper etiquette, Khelin's warriors then rose to their feet as well, and set down their own glasses.

"I especially thank you for hiring personal guards." The smile twisted as she lifted her eyes to the row of guards behind her cousin.

Three of those guards disappeared into the shadows, melding into them with a peculiar twist of reality. Khelin's smile grew as the Chosen of the Mistress of Shadows went to work on the rest of the guards loyal to her cousin.

It was over quickly and silently.

Khandra looked puzzled. "What concern are they to you?" Then, uneasiness began to blossom in her stomach. "What rudeness is this?" she demanded.

"Rudeness?" Khelin purred, "Rudeness was when you rejected my offer for an alliance between us." The Thulis warriors quietly drew their blades as the leader of Galia stared at her cousin as Khelin started to walk around the long table.

Khandra scoffed, "Alliance? What alliance? You rule and I become a glorified advisor." Arrogantly, she proclaimed, "I am Queen here, and Queen I shall remain."

"Very well, dear cousin." Khelin grinned manically.

Blood sprayed the walls swords emerged from shadows slicing necks and exposed flesh of Galia's court.

Khelin held out her hand to a shadow from which the hilt of her blade emerged. Taking it from a Chosen, she drew forth the dark blade, holding it high as she crossed toward Khandra.

"You are Queen until your death."

"Guards!! Khelin, why are you doing this? Guards!!! You are no farmer. What do you know of growing food? Khelin... don't do this. Guards!!!!" The skinny woman fell out of her seat banging her limbs on the table and chair legs.

"An army needs to eat, dear cousin," Khelin answered with a shrug. "I need your food under my control if I am to conquer the North," she smiled simply.

Khandra cried out, "Please, Khelin, it's yours!"

Khelin paused and then granted her childhood friend her wish.

With a single swipe the dark blade cut through Khandra's neck, sending her head tumbling to the floor. At least she could give the Queen, her cousin, the boon of a clean death.

Chapter 6

The patrol found their huddled forms on the bank of the Winderling. A tall blonde was curled around a small body in what looked like an futile attempt to shelter themselves from the biting cold, snow and wind.

Inside the city a rumor began to float through the packed city that one of the frozen strangers found near just outside the city had dark hair. Dark like a Southerner's. Most were not worried, but those women who had fled Abnoa were on edge. The WindWalker peacemakers found themselves soothing tempers and controlling irrational fears.

Tasha, with her younger sister Rhain following quickly at her heels, strode through the city to the Queen's Castle. Her Muanya, Quinn, had given her the responsibility for the safety of the people from Abnoa as they fled from the invaders. Tasha still felt that it was her duty to check out these rumors bombarding her once she had returned from patrol. If the truth was to be known, she hadn't wanted to be in charge of the evacuation. She wanted to stay and fight at Abnoa. However, she knew Quinn had sent her away because the advisor had known the situation at Abnoa was hopeless and, Tasha thought bitterly, Quinn would not want that sort of failure on the family's name.

The sisters slowed their pace as they reached the Castle walls and eyed the contingent of guards in front of them.

After the death of the last Queen decades ago, most of the Queen's Castle still remained unused and abandoned. However, due to the influx of the refugees from Abnoa, the old soldier barracks had been re-opened and converted into living quarters so the newcomers could have shelter from the Northern cold.

The healer had taken up residence in what used to be another set of guard barracks. Standing outside of the hastily converted healer's chambers, the head of the Castle Guard talked quietly with the guards who had found the frozen strangers. Catching sight of the two sisters, the Fire Clan member eyes widened and she dismissed the four guards with a motion and the parting words, "Good job. Now, get some rest." With a bow, the four guards left, giving a quick glance at the approaching women.

The short, redheaded Captain stepped in front of the healer's doors and blocked the sisters' path. "Ladies? Is there something I can help you with?"

Rhain scowled, she was not use to being questioned about anything, but Tasha smiled pleasantly at the head guard and answered, "Hello, Valeria. My sister and I just wanted to check on the rumors. I have a lot of worried people out there who think the Southern army is now camped at our doorstep. I just would like to ease their concerns."

The Captain glanced at the one sullen Earth Clan member sharply. "Not to mention your own?"

Rhain stiffened. "If there is a Southerner alive here, we have a right to know that and then deal with her."

"No one's dealing with anyone unless I say so. Got it?" Valeria glared at Rhain, making it perfectly clear which sister she was addressing.

Tasha frowned at her sister. "You'll have to forgive Rhain. She's still angry over the death of our Muanya by the Southerners." She looked back at Valeria and said apologetically, "I just want to be able to go back to my people and soothe their fears."

The head guard was certain that 'soothing fears of the Abnoans' wasn't the only reason they were there, but she dismissed the thought with a shrug. Politics wasn't her thing. " They were almost dead when the Patrol found them. One of them is yours. The other is still unconscious. The healer is working on her, but she looks like she has Southern blood. Luna's the name of the other one." Since 'Luna' was such a common name, she wasn't sure it would mean anything to the two sisters.

"Ours?" Tasha looked puzzled.

Rhain just tossed her head and asked rudely, "Why would one of ours be with a Southerner? Do you think she was attacked by her?"

Valeria snorted. "Not from what the guards tell me. They say that this Luna was trying to carry the Southerner to the Castle and collapsed a mark from the gates. She was found covering the small one with her body. From their injuries, it looks like they had trouble on the roads." The guard's mouth tightened as she said that. She knew her patrols were doing as much as they could, but there seemed to be more and more outlaw bands every year.

Tasha knew the Fire Clan took their duty seriously. They were personally affronted whenever the outlaws struck. "I'm sure your troops have done all they can under the circumstances. Tomorrow I'll send some of my more experienced archers out with your patrols. Hopefully that will help you some."

The Captain gave Tasha a quick nod and a small smile. Continuing, Tasha asked, "Can we see this Luna? I have an idea who it might be, and if it is, I will need to speak with her."

With one last warning look at Rhain, Valeria reluctantly stepped aside and let them enter the chamber.

The sisters saw a woman sitting on the first occupied bed staring down the hallway.

Tasha sucked in a breath. This wasn't the woman Quinn left in charge. Her next thought was that she should have been the one to have stayed and fought at Abnoa instead of Luna. But she shook her thoughts away. She and Luna had been friends and she knew that the woman was a good leader and would have done all that she could to stop the Southern army.

"Luna?" Tasha spoke quietly.

Luna was sitting and staring down the hall toward where the healer and her apprentice worked on Torrin. Wrapped in a blanket and with a hot cup of cider, she felt warm for the first time in what felt like forever. She stiffened at the voice but didn't turn around, her gaze still on the action at the far end of the hall.

"I lost the Castle." Luna raised the cup of cider to her lips, her hand shaking slightly. "They all were killed."

Tasha saw Rhain's posture stiffen and her face grow angry. She knew a scene from her temperamental sister was imminent. Quickly, Tasha glared and gestured for Rhain to stand down.

Then she stepped quietly over to her old friend's side. "I'm sure you did the best that you could. Quinn would not have named you to be in charge in case her ambush failed had she not believed that you would do everything you could to defend Abnoa." She placed her hand gently on top of Luna's shaking one.

Blue eyes gazed down at Tasha's hand, as if confused that it was there. Slowly she withdrew her hand, freeing it from Tasha's comfort.

"Khelin will cross the Pass come summer."

"But all is not lost," Rhain blurted out. "The winter will slow the Southern dogs, and we have you here. Since you've had a first hand look at the army, you'll be very helpful in preparing for the

upcoming battle."

Then Luna turned, her haunted eyes looking at the two sisters. She smiled faintly, "But you will have a family reunion at least."

It took Tasha a moment for Luna's words to penetrate. Then she frowned. "What do you mean a family reunion? We know that Quinn is dead, there's no way she survived."

Rhain's face grew dark as she realized what Luna meant. She remembered the dark-haired woman who had come one year and stolen her mother's attention. The looks her mother had shared with the woman and the bitter fights that had erupted in their house. She also remembered the dark-haired sister that had come and how their family had never been the same after that.

Luna glanced toward the other room, then back at Tasha and Rhain. The warrior still exhausted and emotionally numb from the last few days, simply said, "Torrin."

Tasha gasped. "Torrin's alive?"

She swallowed trying to fight away the sickness of guilt that had sat in the back of her mind for years. She thought back to the day Torrin had run away. She had forgotten her training shield and returned home when she had heard Quinn's angry, hateful words and Torrin's screams. She had loved her Muanya but Torrin was only 11 and small for her age. No one should do that to a child. After that day, she no longer cared about Quinn's approval.

"I tried to find her, but she was gone. No sign. "I always hoped she was..." She stopped as she watched Rhain stalk angrily from the room.

Luna sighed and looked down at her hands. "She saved me from Khelin," the blonde said.

She decided to ignore the rest of what the dark-haired mercenary had done for the moment. She wasn't sure what to do or say about Torrin's part in Abnoa's fall. Everything up until now had been about getting to the Queen's City quickly and safely to warn them about the South's advancing troops. Now that she had done that, she wasn't sure what to do next.

Luna flinched when Rhain slammed the door shut and heaved another sigh. "I guess she's not happy?"

Tasha nodded. As beautiful as Rhain was, her spirit had always been quick to anger and slow to forgive.

"She's taken Quinn's death hard. Sometimes I wish Mother would just throw her over her knee and spank her, but I guess she's too big now." Tasha gave a weak smile. "Sometimes I'm afraid there's too much of our Muanya in her and not enough of Mother."

Luna looked up at Tasha. "Is your mother well?" She suddenly realized she didn't know how

many of her clan had made it north.

Tasha pulled over a stool and sat next to the bed. "Oh yes, Mother is well. Secretly, I think she's happy to be back home." She looked speculatively at her friend. "So tell me, how did my half-sister end up saving you?"

The warrior's glance drifted away from Tasha and back to where the healer worked. Closing her eyes, Luna took a deep breath, trying to clear her thoughts. She was weary to her bones and her body was demanding rest.

"After Khelin took the Castle, she strung me up on the battlement, naked." Her voice was colored at shame at that memory. "She kept on demanding to know where the rest of our people had fled. Torrin saved me before Khelin could burn me alive at that night."

Tasha frowned trying to mask her horror at Luna's words. To be treated in such away was disgraceful. Being burned alive was a punishment reserved for traitors. She put aside her disgust and started to think about what else Luna said. "My sister just happened to be in our Castle that had just been taken by the enemy?" Parts of her story weren't making sense. "So how did Torrin end up here?"

The warrior paused, stifling a yawn, uncertain as to how to continue. Then the warrior shrugged. "I engaged Torrin's services in order to stay alive so I can go back and kill Khelin."

From down the hall yells erupted and a young assistant to the healer came running out of a room, a hand held to her face trying to stop the flow of blood from a broken nose.

"Valdlin's balls!" Luna cursed, jumping to her feet and rushing down towards the end of the hall where the commotion was taking place.

Tasha hurriedly followed after Luna although she really wasn't ready to see her half-sister.

Torrin struggled through the layers of fog that clouded her mind. As she came back into her body she was aware of people surrounding her. Holding her down. Struggling against the hands that held her, she screamed, bringing her elbow up and crashing it into someone's face.

She was lost to her fever and the people that surrounded her looked distorted and monstrous. "Where is Luna?" she raved slashing at people with her dagger when they came too close to her. "What have you bitches done with her? I won't let you take her back to Khelin!"

"Torrin!" Luna called out as she entered the room, holding up both hands in what she hoped looked like a placating motion to the distraught mercenary. It was obvious that Torrin was hallucinating. She noticed the healer was cowering in a corner, her left arm cut from Torrin's knife.

The warrior part of Luna wondered what fool had forgotten to remove the wounded mercenary's weapons.

Torrin's feverish eyes looked around the room for Luna. "Luna?" she called out again.

"I'm here." A quickly raised hand stopped the two guards who had entered the hall from coming any closer. Slowly, as if she were approaching a wounded animal, Luna slipped closer, keeping her voice low and comforting. "You saved me, remember? We're at the City. We're safe."

"We are?" Gray eyes blinked as she tried to process the words. "I thought I failed. I thought Khelin got you again." She coughed again and her arm dropped down to her side. She reached up to touch Luna's face with her other hand. As her fingers touched the skin of Luna's cheek, she knew she wasn't dreaming.

"Khelin will never have me again." Luna caught and held Torrin's hand, keeping it pressed against her cheek ignoring the puzzled look from the healer and hoping that Tasha wouldn't ask any more questions. Luna stepped up close to Torrin. "You have to put down the dagger, Torrin," she said softly.

Rhain entered the healer's chamber, standing behind the two guards. Whispering harshly she insisted. "This woman is dangerous. So why are you just standing there? She should be restrained at once."

Tasha turned and glared back at her. "Rhain, the situation is being handled."

Torrin had flinched at Rhain's tone of voice. "Are you sure, I have to put it down?" She whispered the last part. "I'm not sure they like me. I have dark hair."

That bought her a bittersweet smile from the blonde as Luna gently brushed dark bangs away from Torrin's face. "I like you." She said it before she could think about it

Scowling almost immediately after the words left her mouth. Why would she say she liked someone that helped kill all of the women in Abnoa? She would not, could not, deal with the thought of Torrin being the person who had caused Abnoa's downfall right now.

Luna asked again but a bit more demanding this time, "Put down the dagger, Torrin. Let the healers help you. Okay?"

Torrin frowned, looking away from Luna and down at her hand. She dropped the dagger and as it hit the floor with a hollow thud, people began to move closer to her.

"I like you too, Luna. You're much nicer than everybody else. I wish..." Torrin coughed roughly, nearly doubling over.

Reluctantly Luna stepped aside, letting the grandmotherly healer, along with her newly summoned apprentices, help Torrin back into bed. They managed to get Torrin to drink another sleeping potion and she slumped back onto bed.

At Luna's questioning look, the old lady smiled and patted her hand reassuringly. "It will keep her calm until she's had a chance to start to recover. A full night's sleep will do her wonders." The healer gave Luna a hard look. "She isn't the only one who it would do wonders for either." With a wry smile and a nod to acknowledge the healer's words, Luna, nonetheless, waited while a guard searched Torrin and relieved her of her weapons.

Rhain, after watching the display, looked hard at Tasha and growled, "She needs to be tied down. Look at her; she's a Southerner through and through. She's already attacked an innocent person."

Tasha, wanting to smack her sister, just gave an exasperated snort. "By the Goddess, Rhain!!! She's sick. Everyone in this room can see that she's out of it."

"I don't care! She's dangerous and should be locked up."

A guard went past them chuckling. Tasha looked at her in question and she grinned and held up five small throwing knives and one dagger. "Took 'em off the patient's body."

Rhain looked back at her sister feeling smugly justified.

"Rhain just go. And if you can manage it, would you tell Mother that Torrin has finally come home?" Tasha watched her younger sister's face turn red as she stormed off. Tasha frowned, sensing bad things to come from her. She turned, coming face to face with Luna.

Luna had waited until Torrin's breathing had evened out before leaving the room. She felt on edge and disoriented. The healer was right. Sleep was what she needed, lots of sleep. Then, in the morning she would be able to think clearer. She entered the hall just in time to catch Rhain's words about Torrin and she let out a frustrated sigh.

Tasha took a quick look at the Luna's tired, grimacing face and reached out to her. "Here, let's get you back into bed." She gave Luna her arm and helped her to her room.

The blonde warrior gave her a pathetically grateful look. She could hardly walk without assistance.

"Keep an eye on Torrin, will you?" Luna managed to say, watching the retreating back of Rhain. "There might be trouble."

As she helped Luna back to her bed, Tasha sat on the stool next to it. "Luna, please get some rest. We'll talk more in the morning. But understand this, I don't want to know why my half-sister has more cutlery on her body than a cook. And I will not be asking any more questions as to how she

happened to be at Abnoa to help you escape."

Luna rubbed a hand over her face and sighed in relief.

Tasha then took Luna's hand and squeezed it gently. "Trust me, I'll keep an eye on her, too. I owe her a debt that can never be repaid."

"I think a lot of us do." Luna whispered, her eyes slipping shut. Then the warm bed and her body conspired to lure her into a sleep from which she would not awaken until late the next day.

Tasha patted Luna's hand and left to find her mother, knowing that Rhain would not have done what she had asked her to do.

Luna awoke from a strange dream.

She had been standing at the edge of a grand ballroom that was filled with people and a band had been playing. Everyone had stopped dancing and had turned to stare at her, watching as she stepped inside.

Disoriented and disconcerted by the dream, Luna gained her bearings slowly. Wincing at the light of day, she rubbed a hand across her face, pushing herself up into a sitting position. The bed had been the first she'd slept on in days, and from the looks of it, her body had taken advantage of it. It was well past dawn outside, probably well into midday.

Blinking away the gunk in her eyes, she stretched, wincing as she pulled the wound in her side again, and then staggered to her feet. Some kind soul had left a washbasin next to her bed that she used gladly. More awake, the blonde strapped on her sword, slipped on her boots, and made her way to the healer's hall where Torrin was.

The healer was just finishing up. She wiped Torrin's sweat-covered brow one last time and then moved to the hand that had been stitched up earlier. Happy to see that there was no sign of infection, she rewrapped it and gently set it back down on the bed.

"I'm sorry about your arm, grandmother." Luna said from the doorway, motioning towards the old woman's arm that Torrin had cut earlier. Stepping inside she watched Torrin's even breathing, noting how young she looked at rest. "How is she?"

The old woman looked up and smiled at the woman in front of her, happy to see her looking better. "I'm fine and I think the apprentices have learned a thing from last night. Size doesn't matter, a small person can be just as dangerous as a tall one."

She patted the stool next to the bed. "Have a seat."

Luna took the offered seat, pulling the stool closer to Torrin's bedside before sitting down.

"Your friend is better, but still not out of the woods. She has a fever and fluid has built up in her lungs. We stitched her hand and I suspect with some basic therapy she will regain full use of it. But, I'm concerned about the knot on her skull and its placement. The fact that I checked her pupils and the left one didn't track has me worried. Once the rest of her body heals, she may have reduced vision in that eye. Which, for warrior, will be a problem."

The tall blonde looked worriedly at the healer. "She will recover though?"

The woman patted Luna's arm. "She will. She's a tough one." The healer picked up the basin and the cloth. "I'll leave you to sit with your friend. Talk to her. Let her know that you're there. Human contact is a far better healing agent than many give it credit for." With another smile the woman left the room.

Luna felt ill at ease as she watched the healer leave. Her own feelings were confused and mixed-up about the last few weeks. What was she supposed to say to the injured mercenary? She turned back to watching Torrin. Licking her lips, Luna gently touched the bandage covered hand and tried to put her feelings into words. "I can understand why you did what you did at Abnoa. She paused for a moment and stroked the hand. "I can't forgive you, but I understand. I think."

The blonde hesitated again, and then plunged forward with her thoughts. "You think you don't have a place up here, but you do. You are a Northerner, Torrin, whether you like it or not." Luna fell quiet again, frowning, as she tried to sort through conflicting emotions. There were things she had to ask the Mercenary, more questions than she had answers for.

Finally, awkwardly, Luna brushed dark hair from Torrin's face. "Get better."

Then she fled the room ignoring the troubled questions raised in her mind. She wanted to be angry with Torrin, wanted to be furious with her, wanted to hate her for what she did. Instead she was finding things less clear-cut than she had ever believed would be possible.

Moaning in her bed, Torrin twisted and turned, her body soaked with sweat as she dreamed.

Torrin stared into the roaring fire pit. It almost took up the whole room. The room was dusky, in the shadowy half light that only exists where light and dark meet. The fire was not a happy crackling orange; it was ominous, black, and ebony flames danced silently. Flames so dark they almost looked deep, midnight blue in places.

"Walk through me and be worthy of me." A voice whispered all around her.

The muscles in her legs tensed and slowly her foot raised but then she froze. Somehow, it wasn't right. As much as she wanted to walk through the fire, she couldn't. The voice began to rise,

becoming louder and louder until Torrin placed her hands over her ears and screamed.

As she woke herself up, heaving to catch her breath, the final words stayed with her.

"You have my mark. No matter what you do, you still belong to me."

Alarmed, she looked around the room trying to figure out where she was but the drugs they had given her were powerful and quickly had her eyes drooping as she fell back into an uneasy sleep.

Luna had never been to the Queen's Castle. She'd heard of it often enough, though, from her Mother and Muanya. Listened to tales from the past, all away back to her grandmothers' day when the Queen still ruled from the all-clans City before she was assassinated on her throne.

She had stopped by the healer's hall early that morning to check on Torrin's condition. There had been no change since the day before and Luna felt an unfamiliar tickle of fear for the dark-headed mercenary's recovery. She sat by Torrin's side until she couldn't take Torrin's pale face and quiet moans any longer.

It was the Northern Warrior's curiosity that drew her from the healer's rooms and sent her exploring through the towers, walkways and rooms of the Castle.

Unlike Abnoa, this Castle was barely used. The Wind Walkers had abandoned most of it when the last Queen had died, choosing instead to build a city around the Castle walls.

It was at least a hundred times larger than Abnoa, and she had often thought Abnoa to be the largest castle she would ever see. Soon her wanderings got her turned around and lost. Luna found herself in a section of the Castle that hadn't seen use in many years, if the layers of dust she found were any indication.

Now searching for a way back to her room, Luna prowled the unfamiliar corridors. They had once been richly adorned, but time had taken its toll on them, reducing rich tapestries to shadowed pieces of fabric cloaked in dust and cobwebs.

She let out a sigh of relief when she found a recently traveled path through the dust at one of the corridor intersections. Someone had been through here recently. The warrior turned and followed the path through the dust, which lead her to a spiraling staircase that obviously led up into one of the Castle's many towers. Curious, the blonde followed, climbing up floor after floor. She finally arrived at the top of the tower, and jerked to a surprised stop as she realized she wasn't alone.

An old woman, her hair white, skin wrinkled and dark, stood in front of a simple wooden doorway. She was dressed like one of the warriors from the Fire Clan, and her gnarled fingers gripped a ceremonial spear. Luna was amazed the old crone could stand under the weight of the

armor she wore. Taking a step forward, she noticed the old crone's eyes were milky white with blindness.

"Who goes there?" the old woman demanded in a sharp voice, swinging the spear around wildly.

Luna barely had time to duck as the spear point sailed above her head. "Easy, old mother! Easy! I mean you no harm!"

The woman might have been blind but she turned toward Luna like a hound following a scent. "Only one who is Queen may be here." She spoke with a firm, quiet voice. A gnarled hand then wrapped around the handle of the short sword at her side in a visible threat.

Luna kept her distance from the blind woman and the door she was obviously protecting. "Easy, old mother, I mean no harm," she repeated, hoping to avoid any more wild attacks. "I'm lost and I've been trying to find my way back to the barracks. I didn't mean to startle you."

The woman's white eyes stared into Luna's blue ones. Slowly, the eyes dropped and seemed to be judging Luna. "What appears on the surface of things doesn't actually show things as they are. Perhaps you're not as lost as you think." The gnarled hand slowly withdrew from the sword.

The blonde raised an eyebrow, her expression doubtful as she watched the old warrior. Not quite certain how to take that, Luna decided on what she hoped would be a neutral question, still curious as to why the old woman was up here all alone. "My name is Luna, daughter of Mezzarna and Fengold. What is your name?"

The woman scowled, "I do not have a name as it has been struck from all records and history." Her face softened. "But, well met, Luna, noble daughter of Mezzarna and Fengold." The old woman gave a half bow, her armor rattling as she did so. "Luna, that is a popular name." The old woman mused. "How are you lost, Luna? Are you physically lost, is your heart lost, or are you lost in spirit? There are many ways to be lost."

The younger woman frowned in confusion and watched the old lady carefully in case she became irrational and decided to use her sword after all. "I'm lost, physically. I'm trying to get back to my room. It's in the barracks." That seemed like a safe answer. "Are you certain you are not a Priestess, old woman? You sound like one."

The woman chuckled heartily, "No, I am not a Priestess." The woman wiped her eyes. "I thank you for that it's been so long since I've laughed. Her face saddened. "Once, long ago, I was a warrior, a guard in this very tower. My duty was to protect the most precious thing in this world and I failed." She pointed to the stairs that Luna had just come up. "To go where you need to be, go down the stairs. When you get to the bottom, take a right; go through the war room and the ballroom, and then down set of short stairs. You will find yourself back where you started. As for your heart, you'll need to ask someone else about that." The woman smiled a secret smile.

Convinced that age and senility had taken its toll on the woman's mental health and forgetting the

other woman was blind, Luna produced a smile for her. "Thank you. I'll just leave you to your guarding then." The younger woman turned to leave, then paused. Biting her lip, she thought for a second, then turned back around.

"What is it that you are guarding?" she asked.

The woman cocked her head as if weighing her answer. "Right now, I guard a memory. This is where the Queen's chambers are. Someday, soon perhaps, when another Queen comes, my sisters and I will be released from our duties."

Luna opened her mouth to ask another question, but thought better of it and started down the stairs back the way she had come. "Thank you, old mother," she called out. Shivering slightly from a sudden cold draft of air, she quickly went down the stairs. She would find Tasha and ask about the old woman and perhaps that would get her some answers.

Luna, after getting turned around a few times, managed to escape the Queen's castle, seeking fresh air after her encounter. Something about the old blind woman had made her uneasy. Tilting back her head, the blonde smiled as she felt the weak winter sunlight strike her face. In a little while she would go see if Torrin was any better, but for now she wanted to take a walk in the city, outside in the cold air.

Tasha sat on a stone bench in the courtyard messing with the fletching on her arrows. She had gone by the healer's room to check on Luna but the woman had left. She was, in fact, now enjoying the warm winter sun and the lack of snowfall. Perhaps if she were lucky, Valeria would walk by on her way to guard duty. And perhaps, if she were feeling really brave, she would ask the head guard if she would like to get a drink with her when she got off duty.

Tasha gave a sigh, "Right and pigs can fly." But, it was nice in theory.

Luna had scarcely taken two steps outside the Castle when she recognized a familiar figure sitting on one of the stone benches across the courtyard. "Tasha!" she called.

Tasha's head whipped up and she smiled when she saw Luna. "Hey," she said as she waved at Luna to come join her. "There you are. I came looking for you at the healer's room but you weren't there." She set her arrows back into the quiver and nodded at the entrance behind Luna. "I see, you too, couldn't escape the lure of the Castle. Have fun looking around?"

Not sure how much she wanted to say about her conversation with the old woman, she hesitated a moment before answering. "It was interesting," she answered vaguely as she joined Tasha on the bench. "Have you ever gone exploring?"

Tasha laughed. "How could I not? A castle, dark and mysterious, that everybody talks about but nobody actually lives in? The WindWalkers take care of it, but other than the library, they don't

really use it either."

Luna shifted uneasily, glancing up at the gray walls that loomed over them. "Have you ever met an old lady? Up in one of the towers? She was guarding a door. I think she was blind."

Tasha looked intently at Luna, "No, I can't say that I have. She was guarding a door? How odd. Perhaps she's an older, retired guard who got confused and lost. I can talk to some of the WindWalkers about her, but Luna, I'm fairly certain no one actually lives inside the Castle. I think it's forbidden until there is a new Queen."

Luna's eyes were troubled as she stared up at the Castle, but she forced a smile as she glanced back at her old friend. "Well. How about you show me the city then? You're being a remarkably poor host, Tasha," she said good-naturedly. She looked around and spread out her arms. "I've never been here before, you know." When there was no response, Luna looked over at Tasha who was staring across the courtyard.

As Luna was talking to her, Tasha noticed Valeria walking by with a few of her fellow guards. There was just something about the way she looked in her armor that drove Tasha to distraction. "Huh, what?" She blinked at her friend while slowly dragging her eyes away from Valeria's backside.

"Ooh, a Fire Warrior? You're just asking for pain, aren't you?" teased Luna, thankful to put things on a lighter note for a little while.

Tasha just blushed. "I don't know what you're talking about." At Luna's skeptical look, she just sighed. "Yeah, yeah. But there's just something about her. I know Fire warriors have a certain reputation, but I've talked to her a few times and she's actually rather nice... once you get past that prickly front she presents to the world."

Luna continued to look doubtful. "If you say so. Isn't she the head of the Castle guards?" Luna vaguely remembered her taking them into the Castle. "I'm surprised they still have Fire warriors here after..." Luna paused, not sure how to continue.

"Yeah, she is Captain of the Guards which is the only reason I've gotten to speak to her, I doubt she'd have much to do with an archer any other way." Tasha cleared her throat. "Yes, well, the WindWalker Clan is slightly more forgiving than the rest of us. Plus, it's some sort of debt of honor for them. The tribe of Fire continues to send a detail of warriors to guard the City and Castle as a way of making amends for their failure so long ago." Tasha shrugged. "It's politics, think about it too hard and it will give you a headache."

"Politics." Luna rolled her eyes, remembering the vague disgust that had been in both her parents' voices whenever they discussed the subject at home. Shaking away those memories, Luna nodded toward the city. "So are you going to show me around? Or do I have to go ask your Fire warrior for a tour?"

Tasha sputtered for a moment. "No, no. No need to ask the Fire warrior for a tour. Let me get my stuff." Tasha picked up her quiver and bow slung them over her shoulder. "You're a mean woman, Luna," Tasha said bumping her shoulder with Luna. "I remember when you were a shy, sweet Ranger."

"I still have my moments," The taller woman muttered, bumping right back with a smile.

Tasha had been her one true friend at the Abnoa, and it was nice to be able to pick that friendship up again. She had feared that the other woman would resent her after Quinn had put her in charge and not her eldest daughter. In companionable silence, they began walking away from the main Castle courtyard with Luna avidly taking in the sights around her. This wasn't the first city she'd been in, but it certainly was cleaner than Khelin's capital city of Thulis.

"Are there more people here in the summer?" Luna asked as they walked down one of the broad central streets. Although there were people hurrying from one destination to another, it was nowhere near as many as the size of the city suggested.

Tasha shrugged, "You know, I don't honestly know. I don't think so. Mother always talks about how the WindWalkers are the least nomadic of the tribes. So I think what we see is what we get." Tasha sidestepped a small child that was running down the street.

She cleared her throat pondering how to phrase what she felt needed to be said. "Luna, I... well... you..." She stopped, frowning. "Okay, let me try again. Luna, I don't blame you for Abnoa at all. Actually, I feel guilty. Like I should have stayed. Quinn shouldn't have put you in that position... Goddess, that didn't come out right." Tasha berated herself. Why couldn't she have her mother's way with words?

The blonde she was talking to just kept walking, her gaze riveted on the city ahead of them. Only a slight twitch of her mouth indicating she heard her at all.

"Luna, I feel like I should have been there with you to help defend Abnoa, instead of helping the refugees across the Pass." She stopped talking and looked at her feet. It was probably as close as she going to get to telling Luna about Quinn's underhanded tactics.

The Warrior stopped, watching the children playing in the street. Without looking at Tasha, she quietly stated, "I failed Quinn and my sisters at Abnoa."

Her back straightened. "I won't fail again." With a sigh she turned around and faced the archer. "Tasha, you did your duty. There had to be warriors to escort the refugees here. It's a good thing you did, or..." Luna faltered, searching for the words, "or else our entire tribe could have been wiped out."

Tasha tried again to say the right thing to Luna. "I don't doubt for a minute you did everything you could." She shook her head and gave Luna a brief touch on the shoulder. "Enough about

what happened in the past, we can't change it. Just learn how to live with it, I guess." Luna gave a brief nod and turned away to stare at the playing children.

They started walking again down the path. Tasha looked around and remarked to the silent warrior, "Mom says, 'cause they stay in one place, the WindWalkers are big on public art. In the summer time they have fountains going with musicians, and stuff." She appraised the buildings. "I don't know. Sure, they're pretty and all, but I'm not sure how these buildings would fair in an attack."

Luna stopped and glanced behind them, back toward the walls of the Queen's Castle. The city was crouched at the base of those walls, looking like a child, trusting in their mother to protect them. Then her gaze turned toward the edge of the city, where the houses met the river's edge, and then to the docks that ringed the island.

"Khelin's troops will burn it to the ground."

Shaking her head at the thought, Luna caught up with Tasha. "They'll force us back up into the Castle. They won't even have to land here to do it, just attack us from the far shore. The Winderling isn't wide enough to stop a good barrage of arrows and the Southern army has more than arrows on its side," she said as she remembered the brutal assault on Abnoa.

Tasha grimaced as she agreed with Luna's assessment.

Not wanting to think any more about the Southern advance, Luna asked, "How is your mother handling all this?"

"Oh, she's Mother. She's happy to be home. She hasn't liked living in Abnoa for quite awhile. And she's overjoyed that Torrin is finally back. You know," she confided to Luna, "I think she was the only one who never gave up hope that Torrin was still alive. Me, I didn't think she would have lasted the first night, not with all that blood..."

Tasha's face drained of color when she realized what she said. Quickly, she added, "Uh, but Torrin's always surprising everybody. Probably a trait she inherited from her Muanya."

Luna glanced sharply at Tasha's slip of the tongue, her blue eyes hardened, her lips pressed to form a thin line but then, she looked away without commenting on it. She walked a few strides before she said, "I'm glad to hear your mother is happy here. I always loved hearing her play at the Castle, although her music was always so sad."

Tasha sighed in relief at the observation as she felt the blood slowly return to her face. "It was. I remember, when I was little, her music was happy and more upbeat. But now that I'm older and think back on it, I realized it started to turn sad when she and Quinn drifted apart. Then when Jinete ran off, it became really sad and when Torrin disappeared, she just stopped playing."

Luna wasn't sure what to say to such a revelation, so she just murmured, " Well, maybe things

will be different now that Torrin is back."

"Hmm, I hope so."

Leisurely, the women continued walk around the city, each lost in their own thoughts.

Luna's lips crept up into a smile as she spotted a building tucked behind an interesting piece of artwork. "Looks like we've reached the "tavern district"." Some of the buildings looked like legitimate inns and taverns. However, a few were little more than pleasure houses. Luna's eyes sharpened as she spotted a particular sign over one of the buildings.

"I need a bath."

Tasha grinned at Luna. "I agree." Then she laughed as they went around the corner. "I've heard that this is considered the seedier side of the city, but I wasn't sure they had one. I guess even the artists like to get toasted and laid every once in awhile.

Luna smiled at observation.

"I was talking to some of the Fire clan warriors. They tell me they have a tavern outside of the city, a day or so ride, where they all go. If you're game, we should go check it out. It will be just like old times." Tasha gave Luna a devilish grin.

The taller woman groaned, remembering a few of them. "I don't think I can survive reliving some of those times." Luna started to walk towards the bathhouse. "Bath first, then we can head back to the Castle. I want to check on Torrin." She gave Tasha a smile. "Then maybe later we can see about finding a tavern."

Tasha smirked at Luna. "So what's up between you and my little sister? That was quite the show she put on in the healer's rooms when she thought you were in trouble."

"I don't know." That was the truth, but Luna's voice betrayed her confusion on the subject of Torrin.

"Uh, huh. I saw the way she reacted to your voice and how you held her hand, " she teased.

Luna turned away from her. There were too many issues left unresolved for her to know where she and Torrin stood. Were they even friends? Did Torrin really like her or was she just considered a mercenary contract to her? Instead of trying to reason it out, Luna pushed her doubts aside and ignored Tasha's joking words. She started toward the bathhouse, deciding she needed to get dirt free after the long trek to the Queen's City.

Tasha frowned and then ran after her friend. Tugging on Luna's arm she looked sheepish, "I'm sorry. It's none of my business. But if you ever want to talk, I'm here." Then she patted Luna's arm and smiled. "Go enjoy the baths."

Luna gave her friend a grateful smile, surprising both of them by tugging Tasha into a swift hug. "Thank you."

Letting go, she took a step towards the front door of the baths, and then stopped. "Tasha? Despite what Torrin might have done in the past, I wouldn't have survived in getting here without her."

Tasha looked back very seriously at Luna. "Luna, I'm not dense. I just don't want to know because then I'd have to feel obligated to do something." She thought for a moment and then continued, "Luna, whatever you do, don't discuss Torrin, or how you got here with Rhain. She's...um, just don't. Promise?"

Luna nodded and headed into the bathhouse, hoping to escape her doubts and confusion for a while in a tub of hot water.

Tyra sat next to the bed studying her daughter. Yesterday she had cried. Cried enough tears that she could have flooded the Winderling, but today she was determined there would be no more crying. She had rushed to the healer's chamber the moment the news had left Tasha's mouth. The older woman had been stunned by the changes in her daughter. Gone was the slightly chubby eleven year old who had been on the edge of growing into her body. The woman lying injured in the bed was almost a stranger to her. Yet, she could see hints of her little girl.

Torrin murmured and moved restlessly, her legs thrashing. Tyra leaned over and stroked the sweaty hair, which seemed to calm Torrin. She smiled fondly and drew the loosened covers back over her daughter. She smiled in remembrance. As a little girl, Tyra had an awful time trying to keep Torrin clothed. She would get the girl dressed only to find, not a minute later, Torrin naked and streaking around the castle.

It seemed that this was a trait Torrin still possessed, she observed. She probably inherited it from her Muanya she mused. Smiling wistfully, she recalled how easily Jinete seemed to lose her clothing. She leaned over, picking up the sleep shirt that Torrin had some how wiggled out of again.

She thought for a moment about putting it back on, and then set it at the end of the bed. If her little girl felt better naked, then let her be naked.

Tyra began humming a song as she picked up a washcloth out of the water basin and rung it out. Coming over to the prone figure, she gently washed the sweat off Torrin's forehead. Inching the sheet down Torrin's slight frame, she wiped her neck and slowly moved to her arms. She took in every scar and every bruise. And barely, she kept her tears in check.

"Oh, my little one, this is not the life I wanted for you. I had always hoped you would become a

musician. You have such a talent with the fiddle." She moved to the other arm and froze at the brand.

Jinete had told her many stories of the South. She knew what the black serpent meant. It was a mark of the Mistress of Shadows. If she remembered Jinete's words, she was a Goddess of dark deeds.

Tyra burst into tears and pulled the sheet back up, covering her daughter's shoulders. She wept for the little girl she had failed. If only she had been stronger. If only she had been better able to protect Torrin from Quinn. If only Jinete hadn't left her.

"Oh, my little one, I'm so sorry." She held Torrin's uninjured hand and wept.

The bath had done Luna a world of good and even though she'd been shy around the bath girls, she had enjoyed the scenery. Feeling more relaxed than she had since the hot springs, the warrior stepped into the healer's hall. Intent on checking up on Torrin, she paused as she realized that the mercenary had company.

Feeling awkward and uncertain on what to do, she shifted from foot to foot in the doorway and helplessly watched Tyra sob over Torrin.

Tyra sniffed and wiped her eyes. Noticing Luna standing somewhere between entering and fleeing, she waved the poor girl in.

"Never mind me, I'm just being a mother." The woman gave a watery smile.

"Lady Tyra," Luna said and nodded. She still felt like the awkward youngster she had once been. "How's Torrin?" she asked while staying in the doorway, uncertain if she was welcome.

"She's doing well. The fluid in her lungs seems to be clearing, but her fever hasn't broken. And call me Tyra, child. I'm not a Lady. Not here, nor do I ever want to be one again." Tyra pointed at the other chair in the room. "Come sit, I don't bite and although Torrin use to as a child, I'm hoping she's out grown it by now."

Hesitantly, the blonde took the offered chair, lightly touching Torrin's shoulder as she sat down. It was a touch to simply reassure herself that the mercenary was still with them. She glanced up to Tyra's questioning look.

"She went through a lot to help me get here," Luna explained, looking back down at Torrin's pale face. She looked so young and vulnerable without the nervous, wary energy that filled the dark-haired woman when she was awake.

Tyra smiled sadly and stroked Torrin's hair. "You know I always hoped Torrin would come here.

I just thought it would be as a student. She had such a gift for music. She could hear a piece of music and then copy it exactly. But I never thought my little girl would enter the city like this."

She gave Luna a piercing look. "I know what that brand on her shoulder means, but regardless, I'm thankful that you've brought my little girl back to me." Tyra looked away while wiping a few stray tears.

Luna frowned slightly. Studiously, she avoided looking at Tyra to give the older woman time to compose herself.

"Does her past matter?" Luna found herself asking, not sure of the answer herself.

Tyra thought the question over while sensing there was more to Luna's words than just a simple question. "Should the past matter? No, it shouldn't. We all make mistakes, we all get thrust into things that are out of our control, and we deal with them the best we can. The past makes us who we are." She watched Luna's reaction to her words.

She asked Luna, "Can you honestly say that you would have made it here without Torrin's help? If you say no, then her past was helpful. However, we can't let the past weigh us down. We have to acknowledge it and accept it, even if our past is less than pretty. But then, we have to let it go. Or we never grow and move on. We just stay stuck in the past lamenting things we can't change."

She gave Luna a poignant smile. "We all have things in our past we wish hadn't happened, or that we had never done."

Luna shifted uncomfortably, not sure how to answer to Tyra's words. To be honest, the warrior wanted to simply steer clear of dealing with the entire dilemma of Torrin and what had happened in Abnoa. With a sigh, she studied the dark-haired woman's face certain that avoiding the problem wasn't going to make it go away.

She changed the subject anyhow. "I'm glad you made it here safely, you and your daughters. I know the Ellris Pass wasn't completely snowed when you left, but you can never tell what the weather will be up there." It still had been late enough in the season to worry about it when the non-combatants had evacuated Castle Abnoa.

Torrin, thrashing in her sleep and mumbling for Luna interrupted Tyra's reply. Twisting, Torrin pushed the cover away. With a small smile Tyra pulled the covers back up. "She does that a lot... calls out for you in her sleep."

Luna blushed but still reached out to touch Torrin's arm to calm her.

Ringling out the cloth, Tyra wiped Torrin's forehead again. "Thank you again for bringing my baby back to me. And Luna, I'm glad you made it here safely, too. I know it's probably a hard thing for you to be alive while those you were pledge to lead didn't make it. But, I'm grateful you

did."

Luna's smile was strained in response as she watched Tyra care for Torrin. Feeling like an interloper, although not sure why, she started to rise from her seat. "I just wanted to see if Torrin was doing any better. I should go."

Tyra examined the young woman fidgeting in the chair while she cooled Torrin's fever. The Ranger had been not much more than a young girl the last time she had seen her. Now there was something different about her. Maybe it was the way she carried her body or it was in her eyes, eyes that had seen things nobody should. Yes, she decided, there was definitely a new growth, a deeper layer to Luna now.

"You need to enjoy being alive. There is a reason for it, just as there is a reason why Torrin happened to be at Abnoa. Who knows? Maybe the Goddess placed Torrin there to do just what she did."

Tyra sighed as Torrin threw off the blanket again. She pulled the cover up over Torrin. "Did you know, as a child I couldn't keep her clothed? Much to my embarrassment, she streaked naked all over the Castle."

The warrior hesitated, and then sat back down, her smile more natural this time. "Torrin streaked through the Castle?" Grinning, Luna tried to imagine that.

Tyra laughed. "Oh, yes! She was such a curious child, and fearless. She apparently felt the need to be curious and fearless while naked. Why, I remember the time when we were having a meeting of the four Clan chiefs. Quinn was having a trade meeting with the Tribes of Water, Air, and Fire and Torrin ran stark naked right into the middle of the meeting."

Tyra chuckled, "I thought Quinn was going to choke on her tongue. Before anyone could do anything, she climbed up on to the lap of the Clan Leader from the tribe of Fire and called her a pretty lady. Do you remember Magda's mother? 'Pretty' is not a word I would use."

Luna laughed at the mental image, laughing hard enough that she had to hold her side or pull her wound stitches. "Oh, by the Goddess!" Wiping her eyes she smiled at Tyra. "Thank you. It's been... a long time since I've laughed like that."

Leaning back in the chair she smiled fondly at the woman lying on the bed. "You better wake up, Torrin, or your mother's going to tell me some more embarrassing stories about you."

Tyra laughed some more. "Ah, yes. I have quite a few stories I can tell." They were interrupted by a quiet knock at the door.

Tasha's head peeked around the slowly opening door. "I thought I would find you here. Mother, dinner will be ready shortly. Luna, would you like to join us?"

Luna turned in her chair to look at the door, grinning as she spotted Tasha. "Only, if you have enough food."

"Of course, especially since I can't find Rhain anywhere."

Tyra grinned feeling much better than she had in days, "Yes, you should join us. I have plenty of embarrassing stories about all my children." She gathered the used wet cloths and started for the corridor.

Luna stood up, placed a hand on Torrin and leaned down to whisper, "Wake up soon, Mercenary. We need to talk." Squeezing Torrin's shoulder, Luna stood upright and walked toward the door.

Tasha fell back with Luna as they followed Tyra down the hall. "I'm glad I've found you again. I wanted to ask... um, well falcons were sent out to the Clan chiefs. We've been trying to have a war meeting." Tasha gave a sour look. Using the word 'meeting' was being generous.

"I would like for you to join us."

Luna glanced sideways at her friend, making a face. "You want me to attend a war meeting?" She mockingly shuddered. "Don't you all just scream at one another?"

Tasha sighed. "Pretty much. I'm hoping, somehow, we'll be able to pull together but I'm not holding my breath. I'd like you there. Like Rhain said, you have a first hand account of Khelin's troops and fighting style." She put a hand on her friend's arm. "You don't have to, and I will understand and respect your decision if you don't, but I think what you can contribute would be very helpful."

Luna did her very best to avoid thinking about her own personal, first hand experiences with Khelin. Her happy mood from moments before vanished at those memories. "I'll come," the warrior said softly. "They should know what we're up against."

Tasha squeezed Luna arm. "Good. Now, come on. I'm sure my mother can't wait to tell more embarrassing stories about us."

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Disclaimer: This is going to be a long story. The longest that either of us have ever written. So if you want a little PWP, you might want to look elsewhere. This story will have violence, sex between consenting adults who just happen to be female, and a few swear words. In Canada this would get you a rating somewhere around 13+, but I think it would get an R rating in the States. We crave feedback. Please send any constructive criticism or just a note to say hi, to: zeewriter@yahoo.com, adarkbow@yahoo.com

Introduction

The full moon glared down on the night landscape. Nix winced from the intense light. To her, it was as bright as any daylight hour. She had grown up and spent her whole life in the mines, working in them up until the night of the Exodus. Such work had made her nearly blind until well after the sun had set. She preferred being alone in the thick woods where the trees blocked out the never-ending, open sky.

Sadly, she didn't get much solitude anymore. She was one of the few women in this bewildering new utopia who could work metal; bend it, shape it, and make it take on fantastic forms. Most days, she worked long hours in the smithy where people came by, hour after hour, with jobs and requests. The women only talked to her when they had something they needed done. With upper body muscles overdeveloped from a life spent in hard labor in the mines, the smith knew she was odd to look and behaved differently than the others.

Nix sighed deeply, she should have followed her fellow sisters from the mines. They had traveled even farther north where they had found harsh, rocky hills much like their old home. But, something had told her to stay in this place, so regretfully, she had told them no and remained living uncomfortably with the strangers.

She got that same feeling tonight. She should be sleeping but something kept sleep at bay and told her to venture out into the inky, dark woods that she loved. So here she was, sitting on a boulder watching the moonrise into the sky like a courtly lady making a slow grand entrance to a ball.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught movement in the night sky. She gulped, it looked as though part of the moon had broken off and was now falling to the earth.

Blue eyes with oversized black pupils watched the shining object streak through the sky. Her body flinched and she cowered as the streaking mass crashed into the nearby ground with a loud boom.

When her massive limbs ceased their trembling, she slowly made her way to where the forest and ground smoked and groaned. Trees were little more than black, standing ash, and she could feel the air grow warmer as she got closer. But since she was use to the great fire of the forge, Nix

ignored the increasing heat and made her way to the edge of a smoking crater in the earth.

It wasn't very big, but a brilliant white light came from it making her eyes water in pain.

"Careful!" a voice called out from the other side of the steaming crater.

Nix drew up short at the voice. Squinting and peering across the glow, she asked, "Who's there?"

Instead of answering, the figure near the edge of the crater tried to step closer, but the heat drove her back. "Selene," she finally replied and peered at the strange silvery radiance that was slowly fading at the bottom of the hole.

Nix tried to say something but her throat had gone dry. "M-m-my Lady," she squeaked out.

Nix had never really met their savior, but had seen her plenty of times wandering through the village. She never figured they would ever meet. Selene, she figured, had far more important things to do than talk with a simple, misshapen smith.

Shielding her eyes from the glowing light, Selene tried to see who had ventured upon the crater. "My name is Selene, not 'my Lady'," the blonde teased, "and who are you that is so immune to heat?"

"I-I-I'm sorry, my Lady..." Nix flushed and wanted to kick herself. "I mean, Selene. Sorry, my... Selene." She shook her head. "Agh! Let me crawl under a rock and hide before I die of embarrassment!" she thought.

"Me...I'm... I'm Nix. I work in the smithy. I guess I am more resistant to heat than most, my Lady, Selene."

Selene smiled at the other woman's stuttered apology, dropping her arm as the bright light at the bottom of the crater slowly faded away to a dim glow. "Well met, Nix. What is that?" She kneeled and motioned toward the glowing hunk of rock that lay at the bottom of the crater.

Nix blushed harder at the greeting and then pulled out a thin, gauzy cloth and wrapped it around her face so she could look into the depression. The slight material filtered the light so it wasn't as bright on her oversensitive eyes. Eyes safely covered, she peered over the crater's edge.

"Looks like a glowing rock. I'm going to guess it's important since it came from the moon." She stood up and stared in awe at Selene before she remembered her last thought. "Um, did the Goddess send you any messages about...?" she waved her hand at the smoking hole.

Selene looked up in amazement at Nix. She was easily one of the tallest and most muscular women she had ever seen. "Ah, what?" She shook her head at the sight and then smiled at the smith. "Messages? No, the Goddess has not appeared to me since we began the Exodus."

"Oh..." Nix scratched her head. "So, you want it?" she asked nervously. She shuffled her feet as she spoke, uneasy at being so close to the North's leader.

Blue eyes followed the outline of Nix's muscles as the woman scratched her head. "Want it?" she asked stupidly. "Oh. No. I mean, well, it must be too hot to pick up?"

Nix bent down and placed a hand down into the softly glowing hole. Amazingly, she felt no real heat coming off the rock. With a mental shrug she climbed over the edge and picked it up. "Not really."

"I've never seen a rock glow before," Selene whispered.

Selene found herself holding her breath as the taller woman lifted up the glowing rock. Almost, as if her touch were a signal, the glow ceased leaving a large silvery rock in the smith's hands.

"Oh! By the Goddess, I broke it!" Nix was horrified and looked in shock at the stone in her hands. "Stupid, big, clumsy hands," she muttered to herself in chastisement.

Selene reached out and touched one of her large rough hands. "They aren't stupid. I think you have nice hands."

Nix blushed profusely. "Um, thanks." She quickly became interested in the strange rock. Her eye caught sight of a small crack in the stone and without thinking her fingers began to fiddle with it. "Uh... it was very nice to meet you. But, I think ..."

Suddenly the fissure widened and the stone split open in her hands. Nix wanted to crawl back into the crater. She looked guiltily at Selene. She was, single handily, destroying a gift from the Goddess in front of the most important woman of the North.

"What is that?" Selene asked quietly, stepping closer to the tall woman as the top half of the rock cracked off and fell to the ground. Revealed was a perfectly round, silvery orb still embedded in the remaining half of the rock.

"Huh?" Nix looked down. "A small shiny rock."

Gently Nix reached into the broken half of the stone and picked out the smaller object. It was beautiful with a pure pallor that was unblemished in anyway and she noticed it was much lighter than the surrounding stone.

Carefully the blonde reached out and touched the sphere that Nix held. The orb shimmered with a sparkling silvery glow. "You were right, Nix," Selene said. "It is a message from the Goddess."

"Really?" Nix looked down at the smaller stone. She unwrapped the cloth from around her eyes and squinted at the rock. "How can you tell?"

"Because it looks like the moon," Selene answered simply, tracing a finger along the smooth exterior of the sphere. Everywhere her finger touched, the stone glowed brighter and then dulled as her finger passed by. "We should take it back to the city and show it to Willow."

Nix shrugged her massive shoulders. "Okay. Whatever you think is best."

So, it was on that bright moonlight-filled night that Nix and Selene brought the Orb of the Goddess to the first city of the North where it would become the mark of the Queen of the City.

Chapter 7

The cold northern wind blew through the quiet city. A lone figure wandered around the wooden and stonewalls that encircled the town, occasionally pulling the fur cloak tighter around her face and body. Blue eyes stared accusingly at the moon.

"Why?" The question was whispered harshly and hung in the sky like the white plumes of her breath before it disappeared into nothing.

Rhain's thoughts were angry and dark. They had been that way since her Muanya had died. "This is so unfair," she thought. Just as she was starting to earn respect in the eyes of her Muanya, Quinn was so cruelly ripped away. "Quinn should be here," she cried out to the silent moon, "not Luna, not Torrin."

Especially not Torrin! White teeth ground together. Hatred flowed through her body. By the Goddess, how she hated her half-sister. Torrin was the reason that her mothers' relationship fell apart, and why her mother seemed so sad now. As far as Rhain knew, Torrin was the reason Abnoa was now in enemy hands.

"Actually you're more right than you know."

Rhain froze, had she imagined the words? They were spoken so softly that she wasn't sure they were just the sigh of the wind.

A laugh, strong and familiar, came from behind her and Rhain whirled around, her hand going for her sword. Her eyes went wide and she went still. Then in a voice close to a sob, she whispered, "Muanya?"

"Yes, girl. It's me."

"But, you're... I don't understand."

"Yes, I know. But hush now, my time is short."

Trembling, Rhain nodded silently as her eyes desperately took in the form of her Muanya. The Castle wall was barely visible through Quinn's spectral form. The woman standing before her looked as proud as always. Her blonde hair was braided in a thick long braid, armor hung with neat precision off her body, her thick arms hung loosely at her side, yet ready to draw her bow at a moment's notice. She looked exactly like the last time Rhain had seen her on that fateful morning when she left to lead the ambush.

"I knew that girl was going to be trouble the day she was born. With her dark hair, short size and gray eyes. She reeked of betrayal. And that's what she is girl, she's the betrayer!" Quinn exclaimed.

"From a false union shall the betrayer be born. She will exist of two worlds yet belong to none. She will crumble the earth and through her will, Queens be created and destroyed." Rhain quoted words from an old prophecy that was little remembered but for a handful of priestesses of the Goddess.

"Very good, girl."

Rhain puffed up at the praise. "Thank you." She thought over the old prophecy. "But Torrin? She can't be that important."

"What do you know, girl? I was there. I watched her open the gate at Abnoa. I watched her betray the North and could do nothing to stop her. But now, I can work through you to stop her taint from corrupting this place."

Rhain paled, "She... she... she..." Rhain had no words only rage. Finally, she choked out, "She will die."

Quinn smiled darkly. "That's my girl. A time for great things is upon us. Either a Northerner will take the place on the Queen's throne or that Southern bitch, Khelin, will be sitting there. If Torrin has her way, Khelin will be sitting there."

Rhain nodded digesting her Muanya's words. "I promise you, I will take care of Torrin. She will not be allowed to corrupt this place with her evil."

"I know you won't. That's why I came to you. You're the only one I can trust."

Rhain felt tears spring into her eyes as she finally felt worthy of her Muanya's great shadow that the whole family had lived under.

Dinner had been fun. Luna had laughed until she had cried over some of the stories Tyra had told about her daughters. It had felt good to laugh again. Once she had finished eating the warrior had wandered back to her chamber. That is, after checking in on Torrin. Although, there had been little change in the dark-haired woman's condition, Luna had stayed a while and talked softly about her day. After seeing Torrin finally ease her leg thrashing and moans, she went to her own bed and rest.

Up early the next morning, she had breakfast with Tyra and Tasha. Luna spent the rest of the morning finding out exactly how many of her fellow sisters had survived in reaching the Queen's Castle.

Torrin's fever finally broke sometime in the night freeing her from her restless nightmare sleep and she fell back into a deep, true slumber as the early morning light danced across the building tops.

She cracked a gummy eyelid. Torrin's throat felt dry and rough. Weakly, she struggled to sit up. As the covers slipped down, she shivered as cool air touched her skin. Raising an eyebrow at the fact she was naked, she spied a sleep shirt at the end of the bed. Muscles tight from being unused protested as she reached for it. Slipping it over her head, she blinked, noticing the room around her. The first thing that was apparent was that she wasn't in the stockade. She could only assume that they had actually made it to the Queen's City where she half expected to be locked up on sight.

The healer, still wearing a bandage around her arm where Torrin had sliced her, entered in time to see her patient sit up. "Ah, so you've decided to wake up," the older woman said with a grin, quickly crossing the room to check on her patient. "How do you feel?"

Torrin shrank back from the smiling woman. "I feel like Rock Wolf shit. Where am I? Who are you?"

The healer paused, not having expected that reaction.

"You're at the Queen's Castle," called a new voice from the doorway as Luna hesitantly stepped inside. The healer glanced at the Ranger, and then back at her patient, nodded and as she left the room, she whispered to Luna, "I'll let Tyra know that Torrin is awake."

Torrin felt her throat constrict. "Ty-ty? My mother is here?" Waking up was proving to be a tad overwhelming. She felt happy and yet terrified at the news.

Luna had stepped aside to let the healer pass by and then silently moved over to Torrin's side. Uncertain if she was welcome, she took a seat in the nearby chair. Remembering how she'd felt last time she had woken up from being injured, the blonde poured Torrin a mug of water from the pitcher by the bedside. "Here."

Taking a deep breath, Torrin tried to center herself. She looked warily at the blonde woman seated next to her. Luna looked good. Rest had obviously done the woman a world of good. With shaking hands, Torrin took the mug. "Thanks," she whispered before taking a sip.

Her mind raced, now what? Now that they were at the city, Luna had no need for her. A momentary sadness flickered across her face before she pushed it away and softly said, "I don't remember much after my dunk in the river. I guess you didn't need my help after all to get here." It was lame but she was uncomfortable with the way Luna was looking at her.

Luna's eyes slid sideways away from Torrin's face. She'd been staring, and she knew it. Taking a breath, Luna opened her mouth to say something, anything to take away the uncomfortable silence that was growing between them. "Um..."

A commotion came from the other room startling both of them and then Tyra was at the door. Luna stood up, moving out of the way. Feeling completely out of place, she stood awkwardly in the doorway, not sure what to do. Luna's eyes suddenly narrowed as she spotted Rhain enter from the far set of doors. Leaving mother and daughter to themselves, she entered the hallway where Tasha waited behind Tyra and hurried to intercept Rhain and the two guards before they got closer to Torrin.

Tyra's frantic blue eyes searched the room for her daughter's open gray eyes. As she saw that her daughter was indeed awake, she smiled at her and then burst into tears.

Torrin was shocked at the sight of her mother. Tyra looked old, her blonde hair was faded, and she seemed smaller, more fragile. Then, as her mother broke into tears, Torrin felt bile creep up her throat. Her mother must be disgusted with her. She looked down at the mug in her hands so no one could see the tears that glistened in her own eyes.

While fighting her leaking tears, Torrin searched her brain for anything to say as she sensed her mother moving over to her bed. She licked her lips but couldn't bring herself to look up. After a second she croaked out, "I guess I'm kind of a disappointment to you." She felt a warm hand brush over the side of her face, wiping the wet trail away and then a gentle pressure moving her head up.

Tyra blew out a breath at Torrin's words and then gently touched Torrin's cheek again to reassure herself that her little girl was really here. She lifted Torrin's chin up and said softly, "Oh, Torrin, I love you no matter what you've done. I just can't believe you've come back to me."

Torrin's gray eyes searched her mother's and in those deep blue eyes she saw only love and acceptance. The words and touch were too much for her to deal with and she began sobbing. Tyra quickly sat down on the bed and held her little girl as she cried.

The dark-haired woman sobbed even harder as she felt her mother's arms surround her. It had been so long since she had experienced this connection, this sense of family that she had

forgotten how it felt. Now, she realized she had been missing it all these lonely years.

Tasha could hardly keep up with her mother once the Healer had delivered the news. Trying to catch her breath from the frantic rush to the healer's room, she stood back from the doorway, still not ready to see Torrin but knowing eventually she owed the woman at least a long overdue apology. Startling her, Luna bolted from the room into the hallway and Tasha grimaced as she saw Rhain burst into the hall with guards originally from Abnoa. Nothing good could happen from this she thought as she quickly followed the long-striding Ranger. Hopefully, they could stop Rhain before her actions exploded into something that could never be set right again.

"Rhain, what is this about?" Luna demanded, blocking the pathway with her large frame.

Rhain stopped, looked up at the tall Ranger and sneered. "You know what this is about. She shouldn't be here. Now that she's awake, we are being put into a dangerous situation."

Tasha frowned at her younger sister. "Rhain, stop this. By the Goddess! She's our sister!" she exclaimed.

Luna's eyes hardened at Rhain's tirade, and she rested her hand on the hilt of her sword. "I don't know what you're talking about, but she is no danger to us."

Rhain's eyes flashed, and her face became an angry mask. Tersely, she spat, "How can you stand up for that piece of filth? I realize that you think she saved your life. But doesn't it seem the least bit odd to you that a Southern Mercenary paid to fight with Khelin's army, a Mercenary, who I might add, brought down the Castle at Abnoa, suddenly found a change of heart and helped you here to the last place we can make a stand against the Southern army?"

Shocked by the outburst, Luna rocked back on her heels. How had Rhain found out about Torrin's part in the fall of Abnoa she wondered? Luna had said nothing to anyone about it so far. Had Torrin talked in her fever?

Rhain continued to rant. "How blind can you people be?" Rhain said harshly. "It's a trick. It's all one big trick. She's a spy. Who better than the bastard daughter of a Southern noble who just happens to be half Northern, to worm her way into our graces while she pulls the same trick she did at Abnoa."

"Get out, Rhain." Luna said with her teeth clenched in sudden anger at the pure hatred that Rhain was spouting. "Torrin is still healing, she can barely sit up."

"Like that matters," Rhain snarled. "You saw what she did to the healer's assistant." Her face was red in anger. How stupid could everybody be? Couldn't they understand she was right? Why couldn't they see the danger they were in with that woman here?"

"By the Goddess! She was hallucinating. She had a fever!" Luna retorted defensively. She kept glancing at the two guards who had accompanied Rhain. They were shifting uncomfortably and fingering their weapons. They didn't seem fond of any Southerner at the moment.

Tasha looked pensively at Rhain and then looked apologetically over at Luna. "Rhain actually has a few good points."

Rhain smirked at Luna when it looked like her sister was going to finally agree with her.

Luna scowled and put her hand back on her sword.

Tasha sighed while looking at the two angry women.

"However, Rhain, you know this really isn't a good time to discuss this. Let's not ruin this moment for Mother. You know she's been hoping for this day for nearly 11 years now." She watched Rhain's shoulders drop. "I will assign a guard to watch her, though, but I really do believe she's not going to do anything to harm us."

Luna was poised to defend Torrin again against Rhain's fury, but forced herself to relax at Tasha's words. Whatever it took to get Rhain to leave before someone's blood was shed was fine with her.

Rhain started to gesture for one of the guards to stay.

Tasha held her hand up. "Um, I think someone from the Fire Clan will do nicely. I would prefer that no accidents happen to Torrin before she is well."

Rhain's face started to turn red again. "You are making a terrible mistake," she shouted at Tasha. Then she glared at Luna and stomped back down the hall.

Luna relaxed as the two guards went with Rhain. She frowned and shook her head. "There's going to be trouble with that one," she muttered, running a hand over her face. "Thank you, Tasha."

Tasha let out the breath she was holding and slumped against the nearest available wall. "You know, I think she becomes more and more like my Muanya everyday." After a moment she looked over at Luna and gave her a weak smile. "You do realize that some of the points she made were valid. However I respect your judgment, Luna. But you're sure this isn't a set up? Because, trust me, Torrin has nearly 11 years worth of reasons to hate the North."

Luna hesitated for a second, glancing back toward where Torrin and Tyra were. There was still that small part of her that kept reminding her exactly what role Torrin had played in the fall of Abnoa. Ignoring that voice as best she could, she sighed and shook her head. "I don't think so." The warrior forced a smile at Tasha. "I'll leave you to your reunion." With one last lingering glance toward Torrin's room, Luna departed the hall through the same door Rhain had used. She

intended to find out how many guards from Abnoa were actually listening to Rhain these days.

"Have you seen Torrin?" Luna asked.

Tasha shook her head as they started up the stairs together, heading toward their meeting.

"Not since this afternoon. You?"

Luna shook her head worriedly.

"No. I tried to find her just a little while ago to see how..."

Her words faltered. Luna wasn't certain why she had tried to find the mercenary after her fever had broke. Perhaps it was just to see if Torrin was getting stronger from her ordeal in the river. That and she felt she still owed the dark-haired woman for saving her from Khelin's cruelty. At least, that's what she was telling herself.

"I'm sure she'll turn up."

Luna's nod was uncertain as she kept glancing down hallways.

Tasha's eyebrow rose as she noticed Luna's preoccupied state. She tried to regain Luna's attention by changing the subject.

"Don't expect too much from this meeting, Luna. We've been trying to decide on what to do ever since Magda showed up three days ago. So far, there's only been arguing and someone's walked out of the meeting every time."

"Don't they realize they have to work together?"

Tasha shrugged at Luna's question as they approached the doors to the library. "They do. But they're just used to their leadership roles. It's familiar and comforting, I guess. Then, of course," she smiled slyly, "Some of them really don't like each other."

Luna snorted, "Well, I'll tell them what I can about Khelin's tactics. Maybe I can get them to understand how much trouble we're in."

Tasha muttered something under her breath that sounded too much like 'don't bet on it' to reassure Luna. Before she could ask anything else they were at the doors to the library, and the four guards stationed outside it, one from each Clan, stepped aside for them to enter.

The library was located inside of a part of the Queen's Castle that was still in daily use. Unlike the rest of the palace, this section didn't smell of decay and rot from the long period of disuse.

The library had been closed for the meeting, despite the protests of Wind Walker scholars who had resented being removed from their studies.

It was, Luna thought, one of the most beautiful rooms she had ever seen. The large space was full of warm polished wood. A huge stained glass window, depicting the Exodus in loving detail, dominated the entire southern wall. The true treasures of the room, however, were the books. Shelf after shelf of them, two floors worth, filling the room with their dry, musty smell. They represented more knowledge than Luna had thought could exist. The Wind Walkers, who worshipped this library, had lovingly maintained everything. She had never seen so many manuscripts in her entire life. Abnoa's small library had held only a handful of jealously guarded volumes. Even at Khelin's castle, the library had not been as large as this one.

Here, surrounded by the knowledge of the past, it was somehow fitting that they gather to discuss the future.

In the very center of the room stood a massive oaken round table, its top covered by a tile mosaic depiction of the Queen's City at the height of its power. Chairs had been gathered around it with a place for each Clan leader and their aides.

Luna mentally nodded approval at the set up. The round table insured that no one Clan leader felt ignored or slighted. Things were going to be prickly enough as it was. There hadn't been a truly successful meeting of the four Clans since the assassination of the last Queen years before.

Led by Tasha, Luna made her way to the table, taking a seat that had clearly been left for her.

An uneasy silence dominated the gathering, with wary looks between Clan members. It was obvious they distrusted each other. The Ranger recognized most of the faces at the table. Magda, sitting across from her and next to her eldest daughter, Fyre, was the head of the Fire Clan, well known for her fierce temper and strength in battle. Next to them sat Allysandra, Chief captain among the Wave Dancers, and her partner. Sitting next to her was Tasha of the Earth Clan. On the other side of Luna was Athena who, with her second, her daughter Eve, represented the Wind Walkers.

Magda was the first to break the uneasy silence by leaning forward in her chair and glaring around the table.

"Well, what are we going to do about this mess?"

Allysandra, who lounged in her chair more than sat in it, feigned a disinterested voice as she replied.

"Are you telling me you don't know the answer? I thought you knew everything."

Luna winced at the snide remark. It was obvious that there was bad history between the two.

Tasha did her best to bring things back on track. "No one here knows everything, Allysandra, not even Athena."

The regal blonde head of the Wind Walkers nodded with a small smile in response to the reference to her Clan's attributes.

Magda refused to be placated so easily. She retorted, "If your Rangers had done their job, Tasha, we wouldn't have to worry about it. Instead, they lost Abnoa. I knew it was a mistake trusting you Earth types with holding the key to the Ellris Pass!"

Things went downhill quickly from there.

The remarks soon became vicious and the shouting started to get louder. Luna sat back in her chair, watching the proceedings around her with a sense of detachment. Anger slowly coiled its way through her stomach as the insults flew back and forth.

She scowled at the arguing women. Her sisters had not died for nothing. She had not fought and clawed her way over the Ellris Pass in the middle of winter for nothing. Everything that had happened to her and Torrin for them to get to the Queen's Castle to warn these people of what was coming was not going to be in vain. Not if she could help it.

Pushing back her chair, she wordlessly slipped away from the table. Near the entrance to the library there was an old display of weapons, some of them allegedly from the great Exodus itself. The tall blonde picked up a heavy ax, weighed the heft of the thing in her hands, turned around and stalked back toward the loud voices that had turned into screaming match.

With a grunt, she brought the ax up and over with a vicious swing, slamming the still sharp head down into the center of the tabletop. The tiled mosaic shattered into a thousand pieces, pelting the women sitting around the table. Leaving the blade buried in the wood, Luna released the wooden handle. The silence was sudden and deafening. All their eyes were upon her, all wondering if she had lost her mind.

"Enough! All of you! You whine like babies!"

When the shock lessened, they all had enough grace to look ashamed. Some even muttering apologies as they sat back down.

"Now, Tasha, how many archers do we have?"

The de facto leader of the Earth Clan frowned. To admit that in front of the others would show how weak the Earth tribe was now.

"Luna I don't think..."

Furious blue eyes pinned her to her seat.

"How. Many. Do. We. Have?"

"Thirty-eight."

The number hung in the air, revealing exactly how many warriors the Earth tribe had lost at Abnoa, and how little protection was left now.

"Don't you think we should send messenger falcons to every Ranger station telling them to come here?"

Slowly, Tasha nodded. "I'll send the messages tonight."

Luna turned to face the rest of the group, an eyebrow raised. "Now, what are the rest of you doing to help?"

Luna left the ax buried in the center of the table, a reminder to everyone there to behave.

It worked.

The meeting started to run better after that, not smoothly, but at least there was no more shouting involved. They ended up talking about everything from numbers of warriors, to equipment, reserves, and number of ships available to help out. They discussed it grudgingly, but they discussed it.

Castle servants, hesitant at first, then with growing surprise at the lack of yelling and storming out, came and went with mugs of water and food.

By the time daylight had turned into darkness and the large oil lanterns had been lit, the conversation had turned from what forces they had, to what to do with those forces. Luna had stayed out of most of the conversations up until that point. She had merely listened to the reports from the other Clan leaders on the amount of resources they had to offer. She was certain that everyone had held something back from their expressed totals. Magda had been easy enough to figure out, the Fire Clan leader was obviously holding back some of her warriors as a reserve. Allysandra was a bit harder to decipher, but Luna was fairly convinced she was leaving some of her ships uncouned.

The enigmatic Athena was harder to understand. She revealed nothing behind her cool façade and Luna made a mental note never to play a game of twical with her. Luna was certain she was hiding something, but the blonde couldn't figure out what the Wind Walkers could have in reserve.

"We should hold the City. The Queen's Castle has never fallen to an enemy, not once since it was built," the leader of the Wind Walkers said and basically summing up the general feelings of the

Clan council expressed during the past hour of debate.

Luna sat back in her chair, frowning as she saw more than a few heads around the table nod in agreement.

"That's your solution? Hide behind these walls?"

She hadn't realized she'd spoken out loud until Athena arched a sculpted eyebrow in her direction, and imperiously demanded, "You believe you have a better idea, Ranger?"

"If we wait for them, we will lose the North to Khelin and her Southern army."

Magda snorted contemptuously at the idea.

"What are you thinking, girl? No Southerner is ever going to hold the North."

Luna's voice was quiet as she spoke. "Who said she wants to hold the North?"

"What are you implying, Ranger?"

The blonde gave Athena a dangerous look and replied with a steely voice. "First off, my name isn't Ranger. Second, I'm surprised you haven't figured it out. She wants the Orb of the Moon Goddess. Once she has that, she won't have to worry about us at all."

By the uneasy looks going around the table, Luna realized, that possibility had been considered by them, and probably ignored simply because they hadn't wanted to face that risk.

"Look. Khelin is insane, but she's not stupid. She knows it's here. She'll tear this Castle apart, stone by stone to find it.

Magda gave a short bark of a laugh. "Oh? How do you think she'll do that with the Winderling between her and us? Your archers and my warriors can turn any trip across it into a death trap. She'll never get close to us!"

"She won't have to," Luna replied coldly. "If she traps us here long enough, she can starve us out." Luna held up a hand to stop the rebuttal she knew was coming. "But, Khelin won't have the patience to wait that long and she won't have to. The Southerners have weapons none of you have ever seen before. These weapons can hurl large pieces of iron long distances with devastating force. They can easily launch these things across the Winderling."

Luna leaned forward, her blue eyes deadly serious. "All she has to do is get within range and start attacking us. She won't have to cross the river until she's brought the Castle down around our ears. Then she can storm in whenever she wants, take the city, and find the Orb."

There were skeptical glances around the table. Luna rolled her eyes. "Even disregarding that,

imagine how much damage her army can do marauding at will across the rest of the North while we are trapped inside these walls?"

That argument carried more weight with them than the previous one did if the increase in voices were a judge Luna noticed. Although privately, she considered it a less compelling one.

"What do you suggest, Luna?" Allysandra asked, her hooded eyes watching the blonde intently.

"We should stop them at the Ellris Pass." Before any of them could raise an objection, Luna hurriedly continued, "We bring everyone up the river by ship, along with our supplies, to the base of the Pass. Then climb it as fast as we can. We use the old abbey as our base, and form our defenses from there. We could hold Khelin at the bottom of the Pass and make her climb up to us."

Magda sat back, an objection dying on her lips as she considered it.

The others were less enthused by the idea, especially Athena, who complained vocally about how that plan stripped the City of its defenders.

Luna sighed, tiredly rubbing a hand across her forehead. It had been a long day, and the meeting showed no sign of ending anytime soon. Which was actually a good thing, she realized in afterthought.

Tasha touched Luna's arm. Leaning in closely, she whispered, "Why don't you go rest? We won't decide anything else tonight. It's a miracle we've actually gone through as much as we have, thanks to you"

Eyeing the debates that were taking place and pleased that they were actual discussions, Luna nodded slowly. Her body was still recovering and more rest was exactly what she needed. Sparing a thought to wonder what Torrin was up to, and if she might be able to track down the mercenary, Luna slipped away from the meeting, leaving the Clan leaders to their deliberations.

Torrin moved slowly, feeling like a toddler again with her hand firmly gripping her mother's arm. She didn't know why she had agreed to go for a walk with her mother. It was cold and she ached all over. But the way her mother's face had lit up made it seem worth it.

Tyra bit her lip and wondered how to start a conversation with her youngest. She had missed out on so many mother-daughter talks over these past years. Her baby was now an adult. Finally she blurted out, "You look so much like your Muanya."

Torrin's eyes went wide and she stopped moving.

Tyra smiled and patted her daughter's hand then lead them over to a crumbling piece of garden wall to sit on. "She would have loved you, no matter where your life has led you, just like I do."

Light blue eyes tried to look into dark gray ones to see if the message she was trying to relay was being accepted.

Her dark hair covering her face, Torrin looked away and muttered, "How do you know? I've not led a very respectable life."

"Your Muanya was no Priestess of virtue, either. She did seduce a married woman," Tyra said with a smile.

Torrin's face turned red in embarrassment. She finally asked quietly.
"Why did you...?"

Tyra frowned not expecting the conversation to take this direction.

Torrin scowled at her. "Do you know how many times I wish I had never been born? All because *you* couldn't keep to your vows!" Anger burned inside her, pushing out the words and questions that had been unanswered all her life.

Tyra sighed with dismay, but knew her angry child deserved an answer. "We both broke our vows. Quinn stopped loving and honoring me, and at the end, we were both unfaithful. However, mysteriously, I became pregnant with you. You may have been unplanned, but you were not unwanted." Tyra smiled somewhat wickedly remembering the night of Torrin's conception. "Having sex in a temple has its consequences, I guess," she laughed.

Forgetting her anger, Torrin turned even redder. "Mother, ewwww."

"I knew that Quinn and I no longer loved each other. However, I knew Quinn would not just let me leave. She didn't want the dishonor it would bring to her image. So, your Muanya and I made plans to escape. But one night, Jinete just left and never came back." Tyra wiped a tear away at the hurtful memory.

Torrin paled and looked at her mother. "Did you say 'Jinete'?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. She patted Torrin's hand. "I guess I never told you your Muanya's name," she apologized. "I knew better while Quinn was alive. And then you disappeared..." She shook her head sadly. "Well, your Muanya's full name was 'Jinete, Third Daughter of the Horse Lord Jin..."

Tyra kept speaking but Torrin's head was spinning with disbelief. She thought back to the encounter at the Pass, "There is no way the ghost at the Abbey could..."

"... Torrin, I don't care what you've done up to this now. I have missed out on so much of your life." Tyra smiled ruefully, "I had all these speeches made up in my head for you: the 'you're turning into a woman talk', the 'dating rules' talk, and the sex talk. I've lost so much of your growing up years. So, from this point on, we start over."

Torrin just nodded at her, trying to process everything. Finally, overwhelmed by all the mixed emotions, she began crying.

There was an unfamiliar guard stationed outside the door to the healer's hall. The short, blunt-faced woman had a no-nonsense look about her that even caused Luna to slow her approach. Then, feeling foolish, the tall blonde continued walking to the door. Nodding to the guard, she stated, "I'm here to see Torrin."

The guard shrugged and said, "Leave your sword with me and then you can go in." Privately, she wondered why the woman inside even needed a protecting guard. She winced, remembering the kick she had taken to her kidneys when Torrin had realized why she was there. As a Fire warrior, she had to respect someone who could get the drop on her like that. She hadn't expected that at all. But Tasha had instructed her to watch out for the woman, so she would.

Luna frowned, but undid her belt and handed her sword and scabbard over to the guard. Feeling naked without its comforting presence, the blonde entered the healer's hall, looking around for a certain dark-haired mercenary. She headed for an open door.

Torrin slowly moved her arms in a series of blocks. She hated feeling weak and useless. Muscles protested as her feet slid into a cat stance, her hands held up in a knife block.

"I didn't know you could dance," Luna said, hoping her attempt humor would defuse some of the awkwardness she had felt earlier with Torrin. Stepping inside, she closed the door behind her, leaving the guard outside in the hallway.

Torrin's eyes widened in startlement and she quickly raised her hands up in defense. For a second, all she saw was a face with the blonde hair and blue eyes. *So like every Northerner I've known, but yet very different.* She let her hands fall to her side. Being out of it for three days, having the tearful, emotional moment with her mother and then finding a guard at her door, made her feel very vulnerable and since old habits die hard, she retorted sharply, "Of course, I can dance. One never knows what skills might be handy in my trade."

Luna's hopeful smile faltered and died. Searching for something to say besides what she wanted and feared to talk about, the Northerner switched tactics. "You look better. How do you feel?"

Torrin leveled a look at Luna and snapped. "I look like shit. I feel like shit. I have a guard to make sure I don't go off and murder anybody or steal precious northern barbarian treasures. Although my mother says she loves me, she doesn't know that I'm a murder yet so that will probably change. Besides that, I'm great. How the hell are you, Luna?" Torrin knew she needed to stop her harsh words but she felt like she was trapped in this place. She moved to the bed sitting down holding her head in her hands.

The taller woman stiffened at the sudden verbal attack. Blue eyes narrowed angrily. "Considering what you did at Abnoa, I think a single guard isn't too bad. Don't you?" Luna spat out before her tired mind realized could stop the cruel words.

Torrin looked up, stung and hurt by Luna's words. "You agree with them that I need to be guarded like a criminal? she exclaimed hotly. "I saved your life, not once, but I think it was a grand total of three times!" Torrin clenched her fists. *'That's why you don't let yourself care about people'* a voice whispered in her head. *'There are no friends or family for mercenaries, only clients.'* Hurt was giving way to anger.

Hastily Luna held up a hand to explain what she had just said before Torrin exploded. "Wait, that's not what I meant. It's just that people don't trust you." The blonde mentally cursed, "Goddess, this is the best I can come up with?"

Torrin got off the bed glaring at Luna. "What else is new? They've never trusted me. Only maybe this time they have reason. After all, I *am* a killer. All your sisters are dead because of me, so maybe what you're really saying is, *you* don't trust me?" Crossing the room she moved until she was planted in front of Luna. Torrin refused to back down from the warning look she was getting from the warrior.

The taller woman stared down at those angry gray eyes, her own blue eyes narrowing in anger. Luna's patience had left her during the war meeting and she snarled, "Why should I trust you, Torrin? It's obvious that you don't trust me either!"

Torrin retorted hotly, "What the do you mean 'I don't trust you'? What's to trust? You offered to pay me to save you, remember? You're just a client to me." Her jaw snapped shut when she realized how that sounded.

Luna stiffened as if she'd just been slapped. "I see," her tone was completely cold, devoid of any emotion, "I'll make certain you get your payment then." Seething, Luna whirled around and stalked towards the door.

Torrin berated herself over the loss of control of her temper as she caught at Luna's cold look. "Luna... wait..." She ran after the Ranger, catching her arm.

"What?" Luna growled, keeping her face towards the door, not wanting to, or able to, deal with the stricken expression on Torrin's face. "Are you going to tell me how much I owe you now?"

Torrin's face hardened into a expressionless mask. "Never mind," she said curtly, "Pay me what you think is fair." She quickly turned away from Luna and went back to lay on her bed.

Luna paused slightly at the doorway and then walked out of the room, angrily snatching her belt and sword back from the startled guard.

The blade sang through the air as Luna blocked a particularly vicious slash at her mid section. Metal clanged off metal and her hand tingled from the force of the impact. With a shove she sent the blade and its wielder back a few steps, earning her some desperately needed breathing room.

"Remind me why I agreed to this?"

Valeria grinned, the expression reminding Luna of a wolf's smile.

"Cuz you were angry?"

"Oh. Right."

Lunging forward, she tried to drive the Fire warrior backwards, only to nearly have her knees cut out from under her. With a grunt she leapt over the attack, slicing downward with her own blade, just to have Valeria spin away easily from the attack.

"Not bad," the shorter, red-haired woman called out, still grinning as she twirled her long sword.

The tall blonde couldn't help but grin back.

After the blow up with Torrin, Luna had abandoned any attempt at sleeping. Still seething from the hurtful words, she had stalked down the hallways, finally emerging in one of the castle smaller courtyards that the Fire warriors used for training. Drawing her sword, she'd set about hacking at one of the wooden training posts, trying to vent her anger. The cold night air had helped to lessen it, but not completely. The ranger realized she wasn't alone as Valerie had sauntered towards her, a cocky smile on her face, and twirling her blade. It was all the invitation Luna had needed; it had been far too long since she'd sparred.

"Want to talk about it?" she asked as she swung her sword at Luna.

Luna kicked the woman in the chest, sending her backward and then pressed her attack.

"No."

With a grunt, Valeria blocked her swing, then managed to turn Luna's attack against her, forcing the taller woman to defend herself.

"Does it have anything to do with that Southerner you came here with?"

Blue eyes narrowed sharply and suddenly Valeria found herself forced back into defensive moves.

"She isn't a Southerner," Luna growled, pressing her attacks.

Valerie had no time for a verbal response as she instead ducked to the side, letting Luna's slash

go wide, and kicked the blonde in the side to get some breathing room of her own. The kick landed on the tall woman's still healing side and she gasped in pain, nearly doubling over.

The spar instantly forgotten, Valerie lowered her sword.

"You all right?"

Luna nodded, with a grimace, and stumbled to one of the low wooden benches.

The Fire warrior sat down besides her, silently offering her a water skin which the blonde gladly sipped from. Finally, she leaned back, closing her eyes and let her head lean against the solid stonewall behind her.

"She's infuriating."

Valeria laughed. "I knew it was about a woman, it's always about a woman."

Patting Luna on the shoulder, the other woman levered herself back to her feet.

"Let me know if you want to spar again. You're pretty good...for a Ranger."

Luna snorted at Valerie's words, taking a swipe at her, which the Fire warrior easily dodged.

"Get some rest, Luna."

Then she was gone, leaving Luna alone in the courtyard to contemplate how things had gotten so complicated in her life.

Torrin was in such a foul mood now that none of the healer's assistants would come into her room anymore. The only one that was with her was the guard who stood quietly, stoically, at the door. When she left the room, the guard followed her, when she pissed, the guard was standing there attentively, and when she ate, the guard was nearby. It made Torrin feel like a prisoner and increased her surliness. Paranoia blossomed in her head. She fully expected a guard detail, lead by Luna and her sisters, to show up at any moment to drag her away to the stockade.

She passed the time by training with her sword and by working on her hand-to-hand skills. Her mother wanted to spend time with her but she kept excusing herself. Torrin was in no mood to make nice with a woman she hardly knew anymore. Sometimes she just wandered the city streets fully aware of the stares she received by the passer-bys. Some were curious, others, hostile or fearful.

And Luna had never come back to her room.

On one of those lonely, early morning walks, Torrin turned a corner and abruptly pulled up short.

Standing in the road was Luna talking with someone. Torrin made a decision, took a deep breath and started to approach her with an apology on the tip of her tongue. But then Torrin saw who Luna was deep in conversation with. Her sister, Rhain.

Her anger returned as well as another unfamiliar emotion. She tasted it, not sure what it was. It couldn't be that she was jealous that Luna would prefer Rhain's company to hers? "How could she?" Torrin wondered. Rhain had gone out of her way the few times they had met, to let Torrin know that the only place she rightfully belonged was in a small, locked cell.

Turning on her heel, her eyes watering, she quickly walked away from the couple, her guard racing to keep up.

That afternoon, as she was going back to her room, she saw Luna walking down the hallway by herself. She quickly caught up with the Ranger.

She tried again. "Um, Luna, I'm..."

Luna stopped and looked at her coldly, "Torrin, I'm really busy at the moment." And she turned on her heel and walked away rapidly. She soon caught up with an approaching Tasha and Rhain.

Torrin slunk into the shadows, frowning at the way Luna laughed at something that Rhain had said. She slowly wandered back to her room.

Then she had stretched until her muscles burned. She had even run up and down a set of stairs while carrying a large rock, but still the anger and hurt had not left her. She plopped down on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

She rubbed her eyes feeling them burn. What in the world was wrong with her? She felt like... like crying and hitting something all at the same time. She wanted to choke her sisters for making Luna happy when she herself couldn't. *All I do is hurt people.*

Her thoughts were disrupted by a knock at her door. Getting up, she opened the door only to be frozen by Rhain's cold gaze.

Torrin stared into the angry eyes of her sister and shivered, her sister's eyes reminded her so much of Quinn's.

Rhain shut the door and Torrin took a step back. She kept her limbs loose and relaxed just in case Rhain was here to kill her. She wouldn't put it past anyone, let alone, this particular sister.

"I want you to leave."

Torrin frowned. "You what?"

"I want you to leave. I'd rather throw you into a cell but I know how much that would hurt Mother so I want you to leave of your own free will."

"Go eat Rock Wolf shit. I am not leaving here in the middle of winter."

Rhain glared back. "If you don't leave I'll tell everyone that you're the reason their sisters at Abnoa are dead."

Torrin paled and Rhain grinned evilly, "Yes, I know full well that you were the one who opened the gate."

Torrin's mind flinched. The only person who knew that was Luna. She tried to grasp any reason that Luna would tell her sister that.

Rhain's blue eyes narrowed and she smiled wider now Torrin was making the connections she wanted her half-sister to make.

"Luna and I have become quiet close lately with all the planning for war."

Rhain couldn't help but make the next dig. "I think we've even discussed her flight from danger on occasion. Truly remarkable and quite disgusting. I had to comfort her from the memories."

Torrin's eyes narrowed at the admission. "Don't judge me."

"You couldn't even manage the strength of character to save her just because it was the right thing to do. Your black Southern heart obviously over-ruled your Northern half. No, you needed payment like a common whore. The fact that we share blood makes me sick." Rhain stood up and looked down on Torrin. "I know how much your kind depends on money for services rendered. I'll make sure that you are compensated from the treasury. But then, I want you gone."

"You can't kick me out. I want to speak with Luna." Torrin retorted harshly, her hands clenched in a fist.

Rhain laughed. "Don't you get it, sister mine? Luna doesn't have time for a filthy murderer like you now that she's among her own people. You've served your purpose. So now, go."

Torrin stood glaring up at her sister. "Luna's not that cruel. She's not like you. She's kind, fair, and a good person..."

"Exactly. What would someone like that want with someone without honor like you?" Rhain sneered.

Torrin blinked and looked away, her shoulders slumped in agreement. Her sister was right. Why would Luna want to be associated with a Southern mercenary?

Rhain, sensing victory, continued on. "But she wanted to make sure you got paid. That way, there are no debts left hanging between you."

Rhain opened the door again and looked out. A few minutes later a small chest filled with gold was brought in. Rhain grinned in triumph as she quietly shut the door, leaving her sister alone.

Torrin stared at the wooden box as if it was a poisonous *suisun*. Finally she turned away from it. She felt funny, like she was caught in the middle of a whirling river eddy. Everything around her felt like it was moving at a different speed and she couldn't keep up.

Not knowing how to deal with all the emotions and strangeness surrounding her, she began to pace the room trying to sort out her conflicting feelings. Part of her wanted to find Luna and see if this was what the Ranger really wanted but she knew Luna was still angry with her about their argument and was still ignoring her.

"I'd probably say something else that I would regret," Torrin thought pensively. But the idea of Rhain being with Luna when she could not made her lose her all rational thought. Why would she tell Rhain about the gate? How close *had* they become?

In a rage she flew around the room destroying the furniture until finally, exhausted, she sat slumped at the foot of the bed and cried. She cried for things she didn't even know she had wanted, she cried until there was nothing left.

Rhain was right. She could not stay here, it was too much like being a child again and having the Abnoa bullies encircle her. She calmly got up and went to her carry pack. She unpacked it, examining everything very carefully. She put the clothes Luna had given her so long ago in a pile on the foot of the bed. She took out her mother's torque and the bag of gold she had received for the fall of Abnoa and placed it on another corner of the bed.

Torrin slowly slid into her black leather trousers and black shirt. Lastly, she slid the thin, scaled armor over her shirt. It reminded her of the black scales of a snake and bile rose in her throat. She looked down at her outfit feeling somewhat like an assassin dressed all in black. She shivered remembering the woman with the black eyes frozen at the bottom of the Winderling.

With quick efficiency, she repacked her pack and strapped her sword to her waist. Checking her various daggers and knives, she smiled at their familiarity. Pausing, she stared at her bow and arrows and after a moment, decided to leave them. They reminded her of the North and what she would never be.

Torrin picked up a parchment and quill and looked around until she had found the bottle of ink that had somehow managed to remain unbroken. In a neat, tight script she wrote. "*Keep your gold and stick it up your righteous Northern ass.*" Then she laid it next to the carved chest.

For a moment she stared at the note. By doing this, by refusing payment, she was breaking faith

with the only life that she had really known. She wasn't really sure what to do or where to go, but she did know she could not stay in this place. Maybe in the summer, she would try to get back to the Abbey and honor Jinete's request but until then, she would wander around the North and explore the other side of her heritage.

With a sigh, she pulled a small pouch out of her pack, opened it and gave a sniff. Carefully she dumped a small amount of brownish powder into her hand. Stowing the pouch away, she opened the door with a slight smile.

The guard turned, a reddish eyebrow rising in question at Torrin's choice of dress. Then without warning, Torrin raised her hand and blew the powder into the woman's face.

The world quickly went black for the guard and Torrin caught her with a grunt, then pulled her back into the room.

In her black clothes she had no problem leaving the city unseen. She winced at the thought, and for a brief moment, worried for Luna's safety. If she could sneak out so easily, then surely an assassin could sneak in just as easily.

She pushed that worry down. "The mighty warrior obviously doesn't want my help, so let her fellow sisters deal with an assassin if one shows up," she muttered.

Once outside the light from the city, Torrin got out her heavy cloak, wrapped it around her and made then her way into the cold, winter night.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Zee: By an American and a Canadian well mostly the Canadian, it's her fault.

Windstar: Zee is, as usual, making things up. This story is completely her fault and a result of her imagination only. I claim no responsibility for this at all.

Feedback is always welcome at: adarkbow@yahoo.com

Chapter 8

Prologue

Many years ago.

It had been weeks since Nix had spent that surreal night in the woods with Selene. Nix sighed as she thought the name. 'Selene.' There was just something about how the name rolled off the tongue. After a moment of reflection, she frowned. Nix had not heard from the woman and had only seen her from afar when she had come by to supervise the construction going on. Nix would have approached her but standing at Selene's elbow was Laurel.

Nix had nothing against Laurel. The woman was just the epitome of perfection: not too tall and not too short, fit, intelligent, well spoken, could read and write, was an excellent warrior and had a beautiful voice. She, on the other hand, was too tall and muscular, not very intelligent, couldn't read or write, and sounded like an Alcen that had stepped on a thorn when she tried to sing. The only thing she could remotely do well was the warrior thing, she mused. She knew she could pound people with her hands or a hammer if she needed to.

Nix's frown deepened, she didn't know why Selene spending time with Laurel bothered her. But, it did. A lot.

As the sun sank away giving the Goddess reign in the night sky, Nix removed the protective cloth from her eyes, rubbing them as she yawned. She slowly went about closing up her metal workshop for the night. It had been a busy day. They had needed her size and sheer strength today, not her smith skills. She had hefted beams for the roof of some building in the center of the city. Settling her large frame back into a nearby chair she gazed around her workshop until her eyes fell on the silvery stone halves that had fallen from the sky. The mysterious orb they had protected was now in Selene's able care, but she had not been able to leave the remaining stone halves behind. They were still important. Nix felt it in her bones.

She got up and made her way to the broken stones. With her heavily callused hand, she picked one of the halves up. It was heavy and cool in her hand.

She eyeballed it for a moment and then muttered, "What is your purpose?"

As she stared at it, she suddenly realized that it wasn't really a rock but more like metal ore. 'Hmmm,' she pondered. 'Perhaps I could melt it down and make something... jewelry, a crown, or... something.' There were so many possibilities.

She picked up the other half and carried them to the back of her shop where the bellows sat like a sleeping dragon.

With a nervous cough Nix ran the polishing cloth over the blade one more time. She eyed the

sword. Not quite what she had in mind when she had taken the moon rock back to the fires three nights ago.

She dropped the cloth and picked the sword up gently and then set it down into a long, wooden box she had made just for it. A sword had been the last thing on her mind when she had gone to her forge but somehow that was what had been made. Thick fingers closed the box. Then blue eyes focused on the other object. She'd had just enough of the molten liquid left to fashion a small headband.

She wanted Selene to have a gift of beauty and she thought the headdress would make the woman stand out like the leader all the women saw her to be. Picking up a brown soft cloth she wrapped the circlet in the cloth, smiling one last time at the delicate winding vines that came together in the front to cradle a full moon. Nix was always surprised that her large hands could do such delicate work.

Nix stood and wrapped the protective cloth around her eyes, grabbed both the box and the cloth and left her workshop.

Selene wiped a dribble of sweat from her forehead and surveyed the progress they'd made with approval. She'd been helping a group of women set up farm plots to sustain them through the next long winter. She sighed tiredly. There was too much to do and too few hands to do it. Trying to dust off her dirty hands she finally gave up and simply rested in the shade of the large tree as the long summer day ended. She watched the sunset as it lit up the western sky. With an effort she brought her gaze back to the working women.

"Natasha" she called to one of the nearby women, "have you seen Laurel?" The other woman, a scullery maid before the Exodus, shrugged her permanently hunched over shoulders. "Not since lunch, m'lady."

Selene sighed again, both because of the title and the fact that her supposed suitor had again slipped away during the work period.

Selene pushed herself off the ground. The humid heat was oppressive and she suddenly had an urge to swim in the cool clear waters of the river someone had decided to call the Winderling. She wasn't sure why. Probably, she thought idly, because it wended its way through most of the countryside after it left the mountains to the south.

"We can try to get the rest of the gardening done tomorrow," the blonde called out to the group of women, who waved their understanding.

Nix had stood in the shadows of the trees and the setting sun, watching the women garden, noticing one in particular. It looked rather hard and sweaty work. But Selene, she decided, made sweaty hard work look rather appealing. Nix blushed as she realized where her train of thought had taken her.

After taking a moment to put her thoughts back on track, she happily noticed Laurel was

nowhere to be found. She stepped out of the shadows and approached Selene,

"Um, my lady," she said softly.

"... gardening done tomorrow." Selene started from the nearby voice and she turned around looking up to meet Nix's face.

With a bright smile the blonde moved closer to the other woman, touching her arm. "Nix! I haven't seen you since, well, you know." She'd wanted several times to go see how the smith was doing, but somehow Laurel had always managed something else for her to do.

As Selene touched Nix's arm, the tall woman's blush came back and she ducked her head. "I understand. You're busy, lots of people and things to keep track of."

"Still, I should have made time and come and seen your smithy." Selene took hold of the taller woman's arm and tugged her toward the path that led down to the river. "Come on, I was just about to take a swim."

Too stunned to object, Nix let the woman lead her. "Oh... okay, are you sure you want me to come with you?"

The blonde squeezed the hard muscles under her fingertips and nodded. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Um... well... because I don't know how to swim?" she stammered.

Nix had almost said 'because Laurel might be upset', but decided not to ruin the moment.

"Well then, you can keep watch and protect me from any marauders," Selene said teasingly, keeping a hold of Nix's arm as she led her down to the river. Pulling Nix down with her, she sat on the grassy bank and undid her boots, setting them to the side. And she started on the rest of her clothes.

Nix carefully put the box down beside her and held onto the wrapped circlet. For a moment, she closed her eyes trying to find the right words. Turning her head toward Selene she took a deep breath and blurted out. "I brough... You're naked!"

Nix quickly turned her cloth-covered eyes away from the shapely flesh in front of her.

Selene laughed, stood up and dived into the water sighing with relief. The sweat and grime of the day washed off in the cool refreshing water. Coming up for a breath she shook her head, sending water flying. "That's what generally happens when you go swimming." she called to the woman on the riverbank.

"Oh."

'I've been missing out by not learning how to swim, I see,' the smith muttered to herself.

"I showed the orb to Willow. She agrees that it's a sign from the Goddess," Selene called out, floating on her back for a moment before diving under the water and surfacing again.

Nix tried to look everywhere but at Selene's body. "Well it's good that we found it then," she responded, self-consciously wiping ash from her leather pant legs.

"Before we fled, swimming was the only time I felt free," the blonde said suddenly, treading water and staring up at the sunset hued sky.

Nix looked up, surprised by the admission. "Really? Before the Exodus, I'd never seen water that didn't come out of a bucket. Actually, I'd never seen the sky either. It still frightens me, all the emptiness." She shivered thinking about it.

"Then I'm glad we left. Now you get to see the sky and the rivers, and best of all, we are free," Selene said simply, wading to shore.

"Being free is good. Now I can make the things I want, not just dig for gold and make weapons. Oh!" Nix remembered the gift that she was clenching.

"I made you a gift... well, gifts rather..." She trailed off as she watched the approaching woman. "Um, you're naked again." 'Was it really this hot?' she wondered. Maybe I should try this swimming.

Selene pulled the cloth shift over her head, grinning at the red-faced smith. "Well, I had to get out of the water to find out what you've been holding onto so tightly."

For the third time, Nix blushed, "Oh, um, sorry... here." She dumbly thrust the wrapped circlet at Selene, then grabbed the box and shoved it toward her.

Blinking in surprise the blonde found her arms full of a long box and a cloth-wrapped present.

Not really wanting to see Selene's reaction, she walked toward the river and stared at abundant liquid.

Bending over, she trailed her hands in the water. She was fascinated by the shell that seemed to separate the air and the water, and she spent moments playing with the surface tension.

Behind her Selene lay the heavy box down on the ground and opened it first, saving the cloth wrapped object for last. With a gasp she fingered the hilt of the blade, which shimmered from within at her touch. "It's beautiful," she whispered. "I don't know how to use it, but it's simply gorgeous."

Next she opened the cloth bag and took in the circlet, gasping at how exquisite it was. "You made

these, for me?"

Nix blinked and turned around. "Yes, I made them for you. I wanted to make you something special. I didn't intend to make a sword but that's what the moon rock wanted to be. I had just enough metal left over to make you the circlet. I think you're beautiful and should have beautiful things." Nix cringed inwardly at her boldness. Saying such things was probably crossing a line. She turned back to stare at the moving water.

Selene stared at Nix in shock, and then looked back down at the circlet in her hands. Moving closer to the muscular woman she held it up. "Help me put it on?" she asked softly.

Nix turned around at the request. "Oh, of course, my lady." Gently she took the round silvery metal out of Selene's hands and carefully placed it on the smaller woman's head.

Selene captured those hands and leaned upward, pulling Nix downward so she could meet the taller woman in the middle. "They are as beautiful as the one who crafted them," she whispered, brushing her lips against Nix's.

Present Day

The dagger sliced through the neck of the northerner with a satisfying, wet slurping sound. Blood splattered her chest and arms as the woman's heart continued to pump blood. Smiling serenely, Khelin watched the life fade from the woman's eyes. Casually she shoved the body aside towards the dark priestess gathered near the throne she had claimed for her own.

"Here. Read her entrails."

In the torch light, shadows flickered around the room giving the priestess additional strength. She nodded her shaved head at Khelin as she approached the body.

A terrified servant cautiously approached with warm water and a towel for Khelin. She cleaned herself off absently as she watched the priestess open the woman up to read the future in her organs.

Closing dark brown eyes, she shoved her hands into the bloody opening letting the warm blood envelop her hands. The woman went still and then her head shot up and her eyes darkened until they were completely black.

Khelin shoved the servant aside, expectantly leaning forward on her throne to listen to what the priestess had to say.

A voice too big for the priestess's skinny body boomed from her throat. "The two Chosen of the Mistress are dead. Both are incased in ice. They are nothing but food for scavengers and additional proof of your failure. The Dark Lady is displeased." The priestess's helpers looked around nervously fearing that their deaths would come soon.

With a furious snarl, Khelin stood from her the throne in Abnoa. "Their failure is not my fault." She sneered stalking around the priestess and the body she was bent over.

The priestess swayed from side to side but her hands never left their bloody resting place.

"The Moon hides the Mistress's eyes but she can hear rumblings in the North. One has come who will lead. One has come whose bloodline will sire a line of Queens and the castle will be filled with life again. On a razor edge do both sides sit and when spring comes, Vladlin will have his fill of blood. But the Betrayer will awaken the spoils of the Gods and from her will, Queens be made and destroyed." The Priestess closed her eyes and with a shudder fell back. Her helpers quickly rushed to attend her.

With a growl Khelin turned her back on the priestess. "Prophetic rubbish," she muttered, her thoughts whirling as she tried to make sense of the priestess's words. She sat back down on her throne. The problem with prophecies was, you never really knew what they were about until it was too late.

"Get me my pets," she called out, impatiently rapping her fingers on the granite arms of the chair. The four women who entered the hall looked normal enough, but all of Khelin's generals, advisors, and staff knew enough about these four to keep a very healthy distance.

The priestess whispered harshly, "If you insist on killing off the Mistress's Chosen, you will find her goodwill taken from you."

The dark-haired queen smiled slightly, glancing dismissively at the priestess.

"Are you telling me four of the Mistress's Chosen can't take care of a little upstart?"

"Your obsession with this Luna has killed two already. And now you send them into the enemy's camp," the priestess snarled.

The assassins looked over at the priestess coldly. They were the best. Nobody doubted them, especially a Priestess of the Mistress.

With a smirk toward the assassins, Khelin levered herself up off the throne. Ignoring the priestess's warning, she languidly walked around the four, smiling at them. "You are the best, aren't you?" The Queen trailed her fingers along their shoulders and arms, much as if she were examining a new horse for flaws.

Each one nodded, proud to belong to such a powerful owner, one who was favored by the

Mistress. One spoke up, "We are the best. Those who have come before us showed you dishonor in their failure. Allow us to put this grievous error right." Her black eyes looked at the floor.

Khelin patted that one on the cheek. "I have no doubt." She turned, squatting down to face the priestess on the floor. "There you have it. They won't fail."

With a flick of her wrist, Khelin pulled the dagger at her waist and drove it into the Priestess's chest, twisting it with a crunch of bone. "Unlike you." With her face a sudden mask of rage, Khelin stabbed the fallen priestess again and again until she was once more splattered with blood.

Only then did she stand up, smiling once more serenely at one of the horrified priestess's assistants, and returned to her throne. "Find this new leader. Kill her and her council. Then," Khelin leaned forward, her eyes reflecting insanity, "find Luna and kill her, slowly. Very slowly."

Each one of the four looked up at her, murderous hunger burning bright in their eyes. One by one they nodded and left, none sparing even a dismissive glance to the dead priestess on the floor. The last one spoke before leaving.

"Your will is our will."

"Yes it is, isn't it?" Khelin purred.

"How many Rangers have answered so far?" Luna asked, staring down at the map of the northern lands that was rapidly consuming her life. They were once again in the library of the Queen's Castle pouring over possibilities for the spring and the inevitable attack by Khelin. Ever since her disastrous talk with Torrin, Luna's days and nights had not been her own. She'd met more people during meetings and planning sessions in the last few days than she'd known existed in the entire North.

Tasha yawned, leaning back in her chair. "Two dozen. We'll probably get more during the spring time, hopefully before Khelin moves."

Luna nodded, rubbing her eyes and turning towards Alyssandra. "Ship's?"

Before she could answer, angry mumbling drifted through the closed doors. Then a voice was very clearly heard ordering the guard to open the door. That was their only warning before the door jerked open by a very scared looking guard. Tasha's chair hit the floor with a thump as her mother stalked angrily into the room. She gulped nervously, looking around wondering who in the room had earned Tyra's anger. She shrank back as she realized that her mother's gaze was directed at Rhain, Luna, and herself.

Luna blinked and looked up from the map in surprise as Tyra barged into the room and marched toward them with the apologetic guard helplessly following behind her "Tyra? What's wrong?"

Her head held high, back ramrod straight, and gray eyes blazing, Tyra glared at the women gathered. As her gaze swept over everyone in the room even Magda looked down at her lap ashamed for something although she wasn't sure what. Finally Tyra's eyes found the ones she was looking for. "Which one of you is responsible?" Her voice was quiet, but it dripped with menace.

Luna had the urge to find a shield. "Responsible for what?" the blonde asked, carefully, not sure if she should be finding cover yet.

"Which one of you is responsible for driving her away? She's gone, and I know it's one you," Tyra nearly growled.

Tasha shrank back in her seat, as her mother pointed at the three of them. 'Goddess,' she thought, 'her mother was pointing at them...she is really upset.'

Rhain remained still and concentrated on looking just as confused as everybody else. 'Goddess...,' she could just dance though. 'It had worked,' she thought gleefully, 'the Betrayer was gone.'

"Torrin?" Luna asked, rising to her feet. "Torrin's gone?" Slow but mounting dread curled through her gut. She had brushed the mercenary off the last time she'd seen her, still angry over the fight they'd had earlier.

Tasha blinked, "Mom? Is...? She has a guard... she couldn't have gone far..." She was interrupted by Rhain's smug voice. "I told you she should be locked up, she's probably half-way back to Abnoa to report to Khelin."

"Shut up, Rhain," Luna hissed, quickly walking away from the table and headed toward the Healer's hall. She nearly ran over the guard outside the doors in her haste.

Tasha noticed the others in the room seemed very interested in the discussion, and so she growled at Rhain, "Not here! This is a family matter."

Their mother's blue eyes grew even stormier. "Since her return, both of you have gone out of your way to make your sister feel unwelcome. You..." she pointed at Rhain, "with your threats. And you..." looking at Tasha, "by pretending she's not here." Tyra pointed at Luna's retreating form. "She at least tried." With that, she turned and followed after Luna.

Luna took the stairs two at a time, her fast walk becoming a run as she neared the hall. Bursting through the doors she skidded to a stop. The room was empty. A pile of clothes and a small leather bag on the neatly made bed were all that remained. Swallowing hard, the blonde gingerly picked up the leather bag, untied the drawstring and emptied its contents. Gleaming gold coins spilled out onto the clean linen.

Tyra paused at the door for a moment. "Those are southern," she said quietly as she moved into the room. A lump formed in her throat. When she first came in and found the room empty of her daughter, she became angry. But now, tears came to her eyes. "Her pack is gone...that's how I know..." She trailed off looking around, for the first time noticing the mess, and the broken chairs.

Luna lightly touched one of the gold coins with a finger tip. Then, with a snarl, she shoved them away, sending the coins scattering across the stone floor. "Where's the guard?" she asked, closing her eyes and tried not to feel sick.

Standing next to Luna, Tyra spied the torque lying on the bed. She reached out and traced the lines that made up the silver dragon. "I don't know. I didn't come in past the doorway really."

Panting with exertion, Rhain and Tasha pulled up short at the door, not sure whether or not to come in. Rhain's face paled upon seeing the chest of gold on the floor.

Just as Luna was going to confront them, she spotted something on the other side of the bed. Leaping over it, she pulled up the bound and gagged guard. "I found the guard." Luna said. Quickly she undid the bonds, relieved when she was certain the guard was breathing.

Rhain glared triumphantly at Tasha. "See? How much more proof do you need to show you that she's dangerous? She is the Betrayer. She destroyed Abnoa, and now she's going to destroy us here and put that Khelin on the Queen's Throne."

Tasha waved Rhain's outburst off and moved into the room to check the guard. She crouched down next to Luna. "Wow, she's out cold," she said as she touched her face.

"How do you know that?" Luna asked coldly. She stood up from examining the guard. "How do you know what happened at Abnoa?" Taking a step forward toward Rhain, murder in her eyes, Luna growled, "You weren't there. Who told you what she did?"

Rhain took a step back flustered by the sharp questioning. She didn't know why Luna was so fond of Torrin, or why any of them were so blind to her traitorous sister. She was quickly trying to think of what to say. Quinn had told her not to mention her ghostly visit. She squared her shoulders and stammered, "I-I, have my sources."

Luna got in Rhain's face, her nose less than a hair's breath from Rhain's. "What have you done?" Luna spat, her hands clenched into fists.

"My duty to the Castle and the people here," Rhain shouted back at Luna. "Something you all seem to have forgotten. Tell me she isn't a mercenary? Tell me I'm wrong about her opening the gate for the Southern forces. Tell me she won't turn around and try to kill us all if some one offers her just the right amount of money. Tell me..."

Luna backhanded Rhain hard. The move surprised Luna almost as much as Rhain. The warrior reached for the hilt of her sword when she heard Tyra gasp. Then she realized what she was about to do and dropped her hand. "Get out!" Luna snarled. "I don't ever want to see you again! GET OUT!"

Tyra rushed to Rhain, grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the room before she lost another daughter.

Luna had never wanted to kill a Northerner before. Only Tyra's presence kept Rhain from being slain. With Tyra and Rhain gone, Luna numbly sat down on the bed, staring at the gold coins spread across the floor. "I never got to tell her 'thank you'," she muttered hoarsely.

Tasha heaved the guard onto the bed. Looking over at Luna, she asked mildly, "Thank her for what?" She returned her attention to the guard. She was totally at a loss for why the woman was out cold. There wasn't a mark on her.

"For saving me," Luna whispered while staring dully at the coins on the floor, her anger having drained out of her.

Tasha gave up and sat down next to Luna. She frowned as she heard paper crinkle. Reaching under the bed, she found a small piece of paper with Luna's name on it. Without reading it, she handed it to Luna who just put it in her pocket. "Well, I'm not trying to put a bad light on my sister, but why would you need to thank her? You paid her to save you. Wasn't she just doing a job?"

"I never paid her," Luna said with a ghost of a smile as she kicked at one of the mocking gold coins that lay nearby. "I didn't... I couldn't bring myself to," she sighed. Just another reason she had been avoiding talking to Torrin for the last few weeks. She'd feared that the mercenary would ask for her money and then leave.

"Oh..." Tasha scratched her nose in thought. "I saw the ...," she pointed to the small chest on the floor just visible under a smashed chair. "I just assumed that was the real reason she left. Of course, it still doesn't explain the temper tantrum someone had in here, and the southern coins, and clothes." She paused as she looked around. "This room is turning into one big mystery." Tasha sighed, rubbing her face. "Can I go back to bed and start this day over?"

"Me, too," Luna said, standing up and looking back at the guard who was slowly showing signs of waking up. "Do you think I could find Torrin if I went after her now?"

Tasha looked shocked. "You can't leave the meeting now! You're the only one anybody will listen to. If you leave, everyone will go back to fighting and nothing will get done."

Luna closed her eyes. She didn't want to hear what Tasha was saying. What the ranger truly wanted to do was leave the city, track down Torrin and apologize and try to make things like they

were. 'What chance do I have? She probably hates me now and thinks I had something to do with whatever Rhain did.' Sighing, she glanced once more at the coins and reluctantly nodded at Tasha, and then abruptly left the room. The questions still lingering in the air, unanswered.

Nearly frozen from traveling all night and most of the day in the cold and snow, the mercenary stumbled upon a run-down tavern. Drunken laughter echoed out of the building. As she approached, a few shaggy beasts lifted their dangerously spiraled twin horned heads and stared at her with curious brown eyes.

The steps up to the door creaked under her weight. She took a moment to knock the snow off her feet and then opened the door. Torrin's nose was assaulted by the musky smell of people. For a moment, everyone paused to take in the newcomer but then they went back to their cups.

Pulling off her fur lined gloves, Torrin went to sit at far end of the bar. The women here all had a rough-and-tumble feel to them. They all had a similar look to them as well. Unlike Luna and the Tribe of Earth, these women were shorter and thicker. They had reddish hair, blue eyes, and broad shoulders, thick arms and legs. Torrin had to smile. She felt like she was back in her mercenary camp. These women were scrappers, definitely in-your-face, steel fighters and not lean-bodied rangers.

"You're a new one?" the young server asked.

Torrin snorted, "Yeah, I would say I'm new since I've never been here before."

"You a southerner?"

"What gave it away? It's the hair, right?" she said sarcastically.

"Eh, no need to be cheeky. I can have my mum throw you out any time," the woman retorted.

Torrin nodded at the girl. "Warning received."

The woman acknowledged the concession. "Good. You know this tavern is owned by Wooten of the Fire Clan. Normally only those of the clan come here. They tend to think of it as their own place."

"You telling me to leave?"

"Nah, just giving you another friendly warning. They may give you plenty of shit for being here."

"Thanks, but I'm more than capable of taking care of myself."

The server looked the stranger over and nodded at what she saw. "Yes, I bet you can. So you want the stew and ale?"

Torrin grinned. "Sounds good."

She sighed happily as the ale was placed before her. As she took a sip, she tried to ignore the person who sat down next to her.

"Hey, we got ourselves a girlie here," the woman said with a laugh as she looked at Torrin's dark, short hair. "She doesn't even have a braid."

Torrin gritted her teeth, took another sip and continued to ignore the loud woman.

"Hey, pretty thing, your mama know you're out playing with the big bad warriors of the Fire clan?"

Torrin took another swallow, but broke her vow to ignore the woman when she seized her neck and in a quick move, grabbed the woman's offending hand and snapped it back at the wrist. Twisting it to make sure she had the woman's attention, she quietly hissed, "Don't touch me. Don't ever presume that you can just take liberties with my person without being invited. You got me?"

The woman nodded her head stoically as she held back a scream of pain.

Two other women appeared. "You braid-less baby, how dare you attack one of our sisters?"

Torrin let go of the woman's wrist and turned around on the stool. "You want to know why I keep my hair short?"

Both women quirked eyebrows at the question.

In another quick movement, Torrin grabbed them, a braid in each hand, and slammed their heads together.

The Clan of Fire, true to their name, quickly leapt into the conflict. Before Torrin knew it, she had started a bar brawl of epic proportions. A stool flew over her head and she sidestepped a kick. Bare knuckles cracked on her cheek and she slid back. Ducking under another swing she sent an uppercut into a thick woman's chin, with a grin, she watched the woman's eyes roll up into her head. Turning, she jumped into the fray with a joyous grin. She had a feeling she was going to get along well with these women.

The bar was a shamble of broken furniture and broken limbs. Around a table propped up with a broom and a stool, 15 women drank ale. Torrin found herself with a black eye and a split lip,

squeezed in between two stout women, singing dirty songs and passing a mug around. Feeling a tap on her shoulder, she turned, coming face to sternum with an older woman. The woman was huge with fleshy jowls, gray hair capping her head in wild curls, and angry blue eyes staring back at Torrin.

"You wrecked my bar." The woman stated barely on this side of calm.

Torrin looked around as if seeing the tavern for the first time and she winced at the damage. "Yes, it looks like I did."

"Ah, Wooten, give the girl a break," someone at the table called out. "She's been having a rough time of it. Look at that face. All I have to say is it must be a woman."

The rest of the women at the table chimed in with, "Because it's *always* about a woman."

Torrin flushed at the implication but apologetically said, "I don't have enough money on me to pay for the damages but if you can spare me a place to sleep, I'll stay and work it off."

Wooten stared hard at the girl. The dark hair and short stature gave away her southerner heritage, but the gray-blue eyes and pale skin showed a hint of a northern mother in the mix as well. "Let me see your hands."

Obediently, Torrin held them up. Wooten grabbed a hand feeling the strength in it as well as the rough calluses. This one was no stranger to a sword. Examining the other one, she paused at the bandage. Ah, a warrior with a wounded wing... that might explain the lost look in the girl's eyes. "Very well, at least your hands aren't lily soft. You stay here two weeks, fix the damage and do the odd jobs I tell you to and we're square. Okay?"

Torrin nodded her head. "Okay."

Luna stared moodily out of the Castle window and watched the increased activity in the streets below. With agonizing slowness, the clans were beginning to work together for the first time in generations. The streets of the Queen's City were once again filled with members of all clans and not just the Wind Walkers. This now was causing its own problems.

With a sigh, Luna glanced sideways towards Magda, and raised an eyebrow. "Why did your warriors decide to brawl with the Wave Dancers again?"

Magda tried not to wince. She would have to lecture her youngest about who she bedded and why she shouldn't bragged about it. "It seemed like the thing to do at the time," she said with a shrug of her large shoulders.

"Allysandra wants the head of whoever it was that started it, you know." Luna was inclined to

agree with Magda on that answer. The Fire warriors weren't exactly known for their patience in working out problems. She had a few ideas about how to deal with it, but Luna first wanted to deal with the current issue at hand.

Magda rolled her eyes. "Well, that's Allysandra for you. She always makes things seem bigger than they really are. It was nothing, just some young ones testing each other out. Once they get it out of their system things will settle down." Magda didn't understand what the big deal was. This was normal behavior for the Clan.

"Magda, four of her people are in the Healer's Hall and two of them are going to be lucky if they are healthy enough to join us at Ellris Pass."

Magda cracked her knuckles. Sheesh, another talk with her youngest. That damn girl and her mouth, though Adrian really should keep her hands off of anyone from Allysandra's clan.

Luna eyed the other woman. "Do you really want to shatter whatever trust exists between the clans? Because, if your people keep this up, that's exactly what's going to happen. Then we might just as well hand Khelin the throne on a platter."

Magda looked down like a chastised, unbraided girl. "No, I don't want that southern bitch on the throne." She sighed, "Fine, if it will make ya happy, I'll rotate them out so some are staying at Wooten's Tavern. That way not so many of us are underfoot. We wouldn't want to disappoint the North yet again," she muttered under her breath.

Luna clapped the shorter woman on one broad shoulder. "I know you don't." Suddenly changing topics, Luna motioned towards the southern bank of the river. "I have something I wanted to talk to you about. Your people are getting restless and so are the Rangers. I'd like for squads of your people, with Rangers attached to them, to begin patrolling the woods."

"That should help your people get used to us." A memory of the attack by marauders on the way to the Queen's castle crossed Luna's mind and she added, "and at the same time, help make the roads safe again."

Magda nodded. She liked the idea. "Good thinking." She slapped Luna on the back. "We'll cut down those miserable excuses for Northerners."

The tall blonde winced, nearly stumbling from the stinging slap. "Only those who won't surrender," Luna hastily corrected her. She didn't want Magda to get it into her head to wipe out the roving bands. "We'll offer them amnesty if they agree to fight with us."

Quickly she continued, seeing Magda beginning to frown. "Magda, you know we'll need every bow and sword we can get if we are to have a chance at holding the Pass."

"Oh right, I suppose there's some wisdom to that thinking. I guess that's why you're the leader."

Magda grinned and slapped Luna on the back again before turning to go.

Luna stared dumbly at Magda's wide retreating back, blinking a few times before shaking her head. She wasn't the leader. She was just helping out where she could. "Fire warriors," she muttered, rolling her eyes and then turned to look back out the window.

Wooten covertly stared at the young woman fixing a table over in the corner. It had been a little over a week since the stranger had entered her place, and yes, she was just a girl. Thanks to her talkative daughter, Weslen, she had found out a plethora of information on the new arrival that had nearly wrecked her bar. The most surprising fact was the girl was only 22, and if Wooten wasn't mistaken, the girl had seen way too much of life for someone her age. She doubted if Torrin had ever lived normally. She had noticed how surprised the girl always acted when one of the warriors would invite her to join a table for a drink, and the guarded look she got when she sat down. It was like she was waiting for the other shoe to drop, or for the chair to be yanked out from under her at the last moment.

However, what Torrin failed to realize, Wooten mused, was since the moment she beat up most of the women in the bar, the Clan of Fire had accepted her as a sister and toasted the happening with a drink and a few bawdy songs.

The only thing Wooten's daughter had failed to learn, was why Torrin seemed so sad and forlorn. Wooten finally had enough moping and had decided to plunge in. So after closing one night, she had just come out and asked the girl point blank.

Torrin stared into the wooden mug as if looking for the answer. Wooten sipped her own ale wondering if the girl would reply. She hadn't missed the guarded look that had slipped over those gray eyes. Taking another sip, she mentally sighed and wondered if the one of the girl's mothers hadn't been from the Tribe of Fire. The only way to get a warrior to chat was to get them drunk.

"I did something so bad no one will ever forgive me for it."

It was said so quietly Wooten wasn't sure she even heard it. She remained silent another beat. Then she asked, "Is that why you're sad and unhappy?"

Torrin blinked, absorbing the question. "I use to be a mercenary. I belonged to Rya's Hawks, that probably means nothing to you, but they are some of the best." She cleared her throat taking another drink and Wooten remained silent.

Torrin continued after a moment. "I've been around here a couple of days and I know how you Fire types feel about mercenaries."

"Well, because my Muanya was a Windwalker, I've learned things aren't nearly as black and

white as most Northern type warriors like to think." She and Torrin shared a smile over that.

Torrin took another sip. "I won't deny most mercs can be..." she shrugged, "a bit cruel and unhonorable, but the Hawks are different. By being a Hawk, I felt worthy. I was always proud of my skills."

Wooten didn't miss the dark look on Torrin's face. "So what changed?" she asked quietly as she refilled the mugs.

"There was this woman ..." Torrin started taking a sip.

Wooten snorted and automatically replied. "Because it's always about a woman..."

Torrin snorted, "Yeah, yeah... and she offered me a job." She took a sip. "It should have just been another contract. But at the end of it, I found myself so different than when I started and it wasn't about fulfilling a job anymore."

"Oh, so you went and fell in love with her," Wooten cackled.

Torrin looked back indignant. "I did no such thing."

"Uh huh," the older woman replied unconvinced.

"I..." Torrin licked her lips and looked into her mug for the words. "At the end of the job, I was so beat up... my hand, my eye. I'm not sure I can go back to being a mercenary, but that's the only thing I know how to be. But what's worse than that is I'm not sure I want to go back and even be one again. I want to feel worthy..." Torrin scowled into her mug.

Wooten laid a hand on Torrin's arm. "We all want to feel worthy. We all want to belong."

Torrin blinked back a tear. "I've never felt that way. I thought I did with the Hawks but that seems hollow compared to what I felt with her. I had to keep reminding her what I was, but she just treated me like a person. Then she found out about that bad thing I did and then I think it hit home for her. I finally got what I wanted, for me to just be a merc in her eyes, and it hurt."

"Torrin, I know you've had a hard go of it, but trust me. To these girls here, you're a sister to them, although, some wouldn't mind taking you to bed either." She laughed at Torrin's blush. "You've got to learn to trust them. If you let them, they'll be your family. They don't care if you've got southern blood in your veins."

"They won't want me as family once they find out that bad thing I did," she whispered into her mug. "I don't know if any Northerner could."

"Someday we'll talk about that bad thing," Wooten said patting the girl's arm. "But now wash these mugs and get your ass to bed."

Wooten smiled, wiping away another spot on her bar. It didn't take a heavy thinker to put two and two together. She knew that Abnoa had fallen and if Torrin was a mercenary in the Southern army, she could guess what that bad thing was. However the Clan of Fire was not one to throw stones, they too had made a costly error in judgment years ago and were still paying for it.

Luna sat on the edge of her bed staring at the small leather bag and crumpled note that sat on her makeshift dresser. They had sat there since the night Torrin had left the Castle and Luna had often found herself staring at them wishing things hadn't turned out this way. The note had hurt, but she deserved it. She had made such a mess of things with Torrin.

Rhain had avoided her, which was good considering Luna was still furious with the other woman. Tasha was acting quiet and withdrawn ever since and Luna's visits with Tyra had been sad affairs. Night had fallen hours ago but sleep had been elusive.

Feeling confined and edgy, the blonde grabbed her sword belt, pulled on her boots, and headed out into the hallway intent on prowling the halls. She decided to once more scout out the unused portions of the Queen's Castle, but decided to stay away from the towers this time. Instead, she found herself crossing through dark grand ballrooms that had thick layers of dust in them, empty feasting halls, countless bedrooms, offices, and kitchens that could feed an army.

Instead of being apprehensive from the deathly still Castle, Luna found the empty corridors and rooms strangely comforting. The peace and quiet calmed her nerves, relaxing her mind and body. She let her feet decide the path, wandering aimlessly through the Castle's silent and dim hallways.

After descending a flight of stairs, she came upon a torch-lit hallway that held no windows or exits other than a simple iron bound oak door at its far end. Cautiously, Luna advanced toward the door. Gripping the iron pull ring, the Northerner heaved the heavy door open, and peered inside the room beyond.

Two women stood in front of a plain wooden chest with faded writing swirled on the wood. They stood still and silent like statues in a glowing light. One held a spear while the other a short sword and thick leather shield. Eyes that flicked toward Luna were her only proof they were not life-sized statues.

With her hand resting on the hilt of her sword and frowning in confusion, Luna stepped into the room. How many guards were there in the supposedly abandoned Queen's Castle?

"Hello?"

The one with the spear turned her head. Her long gray hair shifted and spilled over her shoulder

as she looked at the newcomer. "You should not be here," she said.

"Only one who is Queen may come in here," the other one chimed in. Both voices were rusty from disuse.

Luna shook her head in exasperation. She really had to sit down with Athena and see if the Wind Walker clan chief knew anything about these old warriors who seemed to think they were still on guard duty. "I'm sorry, grandmothers." She nodded respectfully. "I was exploring the Castle and saw the light." The tall blonde said as she motioned toward the lit torches. "May I ask what is it that you guard?"

"We guard the Light that fell to earth to help the first Queen," the one with the spear replied. The other warrior squinted at Luna and took a step toward her but was stopped by the other one, and grumbling, returned to her original resting place.

Blue eyes widened at that. "The Orb of the Goddess?" She had known it was here, somewhere, but had always assumed that Athena and her Wind Walkers had it hidden away somewhere.

"She's here too soon," the one with the sword and shield complained to her partner. The one with the spear smiled, "But at least she's here." The other just rolled her eyes.

The one with the spear spoke to Luna. "Yes, young one, it is the Orb. But only the Queen or the Betrayer may touch it. Time is moving quickly now. The Gods are positioning themselves for battle. Will you be ready for what is to come?"

Luna frowned in confusion at the old warrior. "What is going to come? Do you mean the war with the Southerners?" She was prepared for what was going to happen on the top of the Ellris pass. She knew she wanted to kill Khelin more than she had wanted to kill anything in her entire life, but did that mean she was ready? Luna wasn't sure what the old woman meant.

The guard with the sword and shield frowned. "She shouldn't be here, she's not ready yet." She hated it when Jess talked mumbo jumbo.

Jess just snorted and smacked Adia with her spear. She turned back to Luna. "The actually fighting is but one thing, what comes after it is more important. This war will change everything. Things will be done which cannot be undone."

"Are you certain you aren't a Priestess?" Luna asked curiously. The words the one with the spear was saying sounded a lot like those a priestess would say.

The one with the sword and shield snorted. "She was supposed to be but her Muanya pressed her to be a warrior. Then again, we stand around for decades guarding this sacred rock. I think maybe some of its mystical vibes have rubbed off on us." She dodged a smack from Jess's spear.

"Well, I'll leave you to your, um, guarding then," Luna said backing away from the two strange

old warriors. Athena better have some good answers about why the Orb of the Goddess was being guarded by these two.

"Would you stop that?" Adia groused at Jess as Luna backed away.

"Well, you scared her off." Jess replied poking Adia.

Luna closed the door on the two bickering old women, chuckling as she heard the comments.

"Great. I'm stuck for eternity guarding this rock with you. I wasn't even supposed to be on guard duty that night. I traded so Fritz could see her woman."

Luna, blue eyes widening, froze on the other side of the doorway as she heard the complaint. Puzzled by it, she stood by the door for a moment. Shaking her head, "I'll have to find replacements for them," she mused and retraced her steps back to her chambers.

Torrin sighed her feet propped up by the fire. It was an oddly, quiet night. Most had stayed away because of the storm that had blown through. Many had not wanted to risk the cold for their nightly ritual at the tavern. There was a couple seated in the back shadows and if Torrin's hearing wasn't mistaken, they were trying to create little ones ... vigorously.

Standing up slowly, she made her way to the backroom where her pallet was laid out. She dug through her pack and pulled out her mother's fiddle. She hadn't wanted to give it up since it held so many happy memories for her. She pulled it out and quickly scanned it. It had a nick here and there but, surprisingly, it had survived the journey. She returned to the nearly empty main room and poured some ale into a mug. Sitting down again by the fire, she softly tuned the instrument and then when she was happy with the tones, she began to play.

Wooten paused hearing an unfamiliar sound in her place. She looked in question at her daughter who just shrugged. They exited the kitchen and found all the fierce warriors in the place trying to hide their wet eyes from the sad song being pulled from the fiddle. When it was over, Wooten clapped her hands in appreciation. "By the Goddess, girl, that's a talent."

Torrin blushed when she realized that she now had an audience of seven listeners.

"But enough of the sad stuff, play us something to warm us up on this cold winter's night."

Torrin nodded and placed the bow onto the strings. She held it there for a moment. In her head, she saw the notes form for a southern jig that was often played in the marketplaces. She took a breath and as she breathed out, her hand began to move on the strings. Soon the women in the tavern were clapping along.

After that, Torrin started playing one hour a night in the tavern. Slowly without realizing it, a month had nearly passed. Her hair had slowly grown longer. After one drunken night she woke up to find it had been braided. She scowled and undid it. But it had become a game with the women and frequently after a night of heavy drinking, she would wake up her hair braided. Torrin kept threatening to just cut her hair, but for some reason, never got around to it.

It was starting to feel like spring. The day was one of the warmest since winter had begun, full of sunlight and barely any wind at all. The snows from the recent storms were starting to melting, and the streets were filled with people who were simply enjoying the respite. It had been a long, hard winter and the future was grim, but today the Clans were content to enjoy the weather.

Luna had escaped from the Castle's council room, fleeing from another series of complaints between Clan members. How she had somehow fallen into the role of an arbitrator was a mystery to her. All morning she'd been meeting with group after group of Fire, Earth, Water and Wind clan members. Each one had a grievance, and each one demanding justice from her. Dealing with them had taken its toll on Luna, and she had been determined to slip away during the midday meal to wander the city.

There were even more people out on the streets now than there had been only a few weeks ago. Earth clan members seemed to be appearing out of the very woodwork itself, which was typical for the Rangers. Fire clan members were assembling in the city, mostly filling the taverns, as well. There weren't that many Wave Dancers yet, but as soon as the Winderling thawed, she was sure there would be more.

As she wandered down the snow and ice-free avenues of the city, she felt herself beginning to relax and her mood improving.

Crossing the central market square of the old city, with its non-functioning fountains and mostly empty shops, Luna headed northward, away from the Queen's Castle itself, towards the docks. She had in mind a trip to see more Wave Dancer ships.

Children's laughter caught her attention though, and she found herself following it into one of the parks.

"Watch, Chrissta, you have to put the arrow here, and then pull back."

Taking a seat on one of the ancient granite benches, Luna watched the scene with delight. A group of children, none having reached their first decade of life, were learning to use a bow.

Several older women, obviously mothers of the children, were helping them aim toward a set of bundles of hay that were the targets. So far, none of the children had actually managed to get an arrow to reach the targets.

Luna smiled at several of the Ranger mothers she vaguely recognized. She had done her own apprenticeship with some of them.

"Look, Mother! I hit the target!"

"Good, Luna. Now, you have to hit the center."

"How many times?"

"Every time, Luna."

The memory snuck up on her, and Luna's thoughts turned sad at the memory. Mezzarna had been the primary one to teach her to use the bow. Her mother had been an expert at the bow and she'd drilled Luna relentlessly until the young girl had been able to hit anything that moved.

She had thought she was the best. By the time her apprenticeship came, she was an outstanding marksman with a bow.

Luna had excelled during her apprenticeship and loved every rotation, even the ones that had sent her into the far north. Everything seemed to come easily to her and she'd never once believed she could fail.

Even when Quinn had asked her to go to Thulis and scout out this new southern leader, Luna believed she was infallible. Against her mother and Muanya's warnings, she'd accepted and went into the southern regions.

Her parents had been right, though, she wasn't ready for what she found.

The culture was different, far different than what Luna was accustomed to. Although she had half expected that, it was Khelin she wasn't prepared for. The new Queen of the South had needed only a day to seduce Luna and then blind her to the truth.

Luna shook her head, trying to avoid her memories of that awful time and of the horrific things that Khelin had done to her.

She'd come back to her home a changed woman. Although, Khelin had nearly broken her and scared her in ways that she would never admit, Luna had always clung to the fact that she had done nothing wrong and that she considered herself to still be one of the best. Hadn't she brought the warning to Abnoa about Khelin's ambitions?

The Ranger had been home for only a week before the Southerners had appeared.

Their brown eyes were hard and cold. They had been sent in ahead of the army to get a lay of the land around Abnoa. They were vile, twisted women, little better than murderers. The only

difference was Khelin had hired them to spread terror, so by the time her troops marched in, the people broken and ready to be conquered.

They had almost missed the small cottage, but one of them had smelled the smoke of a fire, and the scent of dinner cooking.

Fengold had been in the meadow gathering wild herbs to be dried and used during the coming winter. Her Muanya was armed only with a small knife. She'd looked up as the first of the six southern riders had cantered into the far end of the meadow. It had taken her only an instant to realize they were strangers. She had abandoned her things and started to run back toward the cabin, yelling.

They had cut Fengold down halfway to the foot of the hill, chopping at her ruthlessly until she no longer moved and the grass around her stained crimson.

Grinning at the blood, they moved on to see what else they would find. Their drawn swords wept warm red blood onto the ground. The leader motioned for two to dismount and explore.

The first arrow caught one of them in the throat, sending her sprawling to the ground. The second arrow caught the other one in the left eye before the southerner realized she was dead. Luna, her face a mask of fury, reached for another arrow as she stood on the porch of the cabin. Mezzarna had been in the barn, tending to the livestock when she heard the commotion outside. Emerging from the barn with a scythe she was greeted by the carnage outside.

The leader let out an animalistic howl when she realized what had happened to two of her people. Kicking her horse, she galloped down the hill while she motioned the others forward, her eyes firmly fixated on the new threat.

Luna's bow sung. Arrow after arrow flew down the hill, sending warriors tumbling from the back of their horses. Mezzarna let out a scream as well, running toward the oncoming southern leader.

The leader ducked a swing from the scythe and slashed out with her sword. Growling when she realized that her height on the horse was a disadvantage, she leapt from her horse swinging her sword in crude vicious cuts at the woman in front of her.

Luna sent the last of the mounted warriors to their death, then drew another arrow, and aimed down toward the barn. She hesitated, her aim wavering as she watched Mezzarna and the other raider duel. She couldn't find a clear shot. With a growl of frustration, the blonde leaped off the porch and ran down the hill, bow and arrow still in hand.

Mezzarna fought with a deadly silence, trying to keep away from her by using the unwieldy scythe. The older woman's eyes narrowed as she saw the blood already on the raider's sword and feared what that might mean.

Grinning manically, the woman blocked a blow from the scythe and punched the older woman in the face and licked a splatter of blood that landed on her cheek.

"Mother!" Luna yelled, trying to run faster down the hill.

Mezzarna's head whipped back from the blow. With a growl, the older ranger tried to tackle the raider. But she had danced away and resumed her attack.

"Bitch! I can't wait to see your blood on the ground too!"

Things blurred after that. Somehow Mezzarna managed to get a hold of the warrior's sword. In her wrestle for it, Mezzarna lost her scythe and the sword went flying away from them. By the time Luna reached them, the leader had an arm around Mezzarna's throat and a dagger pressed to her skin as well. Arrow notched and ready, Luna kept her aim on the Southerner's face, the tip wavering slightly as she looked at the expression on her mother's face.

The leader looked the woman over, pressing the dagger against Mezzarna's skin. "You're not that bad looking. Perhaps, I might spare you." She licked the throat in front of her then frowned at the lack of fear in the taste.

Luna bit her lip while trying not to let her panic take over. "Let her go," she ordered. She matched the leader step for step as she dragged Mezzarna backward toward the barn doors.

The leader stopped, turned her head but didn't move the dagger and growled, "Or you'll what? I can slit her throat before you get me with your arrow." Her eyes roamed over Luna. "Perhaps a trade, though. Not that she..." The woman laughed and moved the dagger slowly into the skin until a thin line of red appeared. "...wouldn't be fun, but I do like 'em a tad younger, like you."

The tall blonde took a step forward, her eyes furious, drawing the arrow back even further, her bow creaking in protest. "I'll kill you," she hissed.

The woman grinned, "And I'll kill everything you hold dear. In the end I still think I'll be the winner." She licked dry lips and leered back at Luna.

Mezzarna met her daughter's eyes, forcing a brave look on her face. Fengold was dead, she didn't know how she knew it, but she was certain of it. Now their daughter was in danger. If she didn't do something soon, she knew Luna would let the Southerner use her in a misguided effort to save her mother. She tried to convey how proud she was of her daughter and how much she loved her. Then she slammed her foot down onto the Southerner's boot.

Luna saw her mother's motion and knew it was her chance. In that split second, she took aim at the Southerner and let loose the arrow. It sailed through the distance between them and slammed into the raider.

The woman howled like a beast, and in her anger and pain, slit the Mezzarna's throat and

stabbed her in the chest.

Luna looked on in horror. She had missed. She aimed for the southerner's face and hit her shoulder instead.

The shock of her miss kept her frozen in place long enough for the southerner to finish driving the dagger up inside Mezzarna until it met resistance from the door behind them. Suddenly, she snapped out of it and screamed in rage, closing the distance between them and swinging her bow like a staff. Again and again she slammed it against the southerner, not stopping when the bow broke, not stopping until her fury was drained and all that was left were the bodies.

"Are you all right?"

Luna jerked back to the present, wiping at the tears that ran down her cheeks. Surprised and ashamed, she glanced around the park and then offered a weak smile to the woman in front of her.

"Yeah. Fine."

Luna fled the park, leaving another generation to learn how to shoot and miss.

Torrin took a healthy puff of the pipe and felt the heady Karo weed relax her body. She was supposed to be outside chopping wood. Instead, she and a few others were goofing off.

"Eh, come on, Torrin, the Southern army can't be that good."

Torrin passed the pipe to the next woman. "I'm not saying they are, but I am saying they're going to wipe you Northerners off the face of any map."

Another woman frowned. "No way. Sure they may have taken out those silly archers at Abnoa, and they'll probably take out those weakling Wind Walkers, but not us."

Torrin rolled her eyes. "You don't get it." She paused, taking back the pipe. "Khelin's going to wipe you out because you refuse to come together as a solid, united Clan and fight as one. You remain separate tribes and assume that Khelin is somebody else's problem. I hate to break it to you but she's already your problem. She wants every last Northerner dead and she has an army to back up her wish. So, all I'm saying is, until you Northerners learn to come together as a single force, she's going to annihilate you all." She took a puff, holding the smoke in her lungs, and then exhaled. Torrin leaned back as arms wrapped around her. Looking up, she saw it was a recent newcomer to the tavern. The woman whispered an invitation into Torrin's ear. Torrin looked the woman over. She was tall, lean-muscle, blonde, and blue-eyed. Torrin shrugged and accepted the invitation.

The woman smiled sheepishly as her friends whistled at their leaving. She leaned over and said, "I'm called..."

"Nothing personal, but I don't care what your name is. And in all honesty, you're just curious if I really did all those things to that stuck up daughter of the leader from your tribe."

She grinned evilly remembering Adrian. The woman had been an ass, thinking she was the Goddess gift to sex and any woman should feel honored to be taken to bed by her. Finally, after having the woman hound her for almost a full day, whispering all the things she would do to Torrin or make Torrin feel, Torrin reached her limit. She told the woman to go get ready and she would be up in a moment. She grabbed her pack and went to the woman's room minutes later. The next morning Torrin left the woman passed out and tied up to the bed.

"That's the only reason you approached me," Torrin smirked.

The woman blushed at Torrin's accurate assessment.

"Goddess, you all may act tough, but you're just a bunch of submissives waiting to be released," Torrin muttered as they climbed the stairs.

"Impressive."

Luna didn't know much about ships, but the Osprey was a beautiful vessel and the ship was larger than she had expected.. The tri-masted schooner had the lean lithe lines of a runner. Luna could almost feel the ship's speed even as she lay in dock surrounded by the frozen waters of the Winderling.

"She's the fastest ship in the north."

Luna had little doubt of that. "Are there more like her?"

Allysandra leaned back against the deck railing, negligently fiddling with a small carving dagger.

"No. She's the largest one in the north as well."

Luna shook her head, sliding her hands along the first of the three masts, enjoying the solid feel of the oak. The ship was armed with an impressive array of ballistae and catapults.

"Too bad. We could use them. Still, we can hold the river banks with her while we ship people to the base of the Pass. If things go badly, you might be able to take some of our people away to a new land with them."

Allysandra nodded, watching the blonde carefully as she looked around the deck. Most of the Wave Dancers were in the city for the winter, but a skeleton crew remained on board to take care of the ship and prepare her for the spring thaw.

"How many of your people's ships can we expect come spring?" Luna asked at last, turning to face the head of the Wave Dancers.

She'd been edging her way around the subject ever since she'd asked Allysandra for a tour of the Osprey. The Wave Dancer chief had yet to reply to that question during any of the war meetings. Blue eyes met blue and Luna raised an eyebrow waiting for the tall, sandy-haired Wave Dancer to answer.

The other woman finally snorted and returned her carving knife to a small sheath on her belt.

"You don't give up, do you?"

Luna smiled. "Rarely."

"I've sent word by messenger falcon to the other wintering spots. As soon as the ice breaks, another dozen ships will be here. More afterwards, but those ships put in for the winter farther away. It could take them days or weeks to get here."

Luna nodded thoughtfully, trying to estimate how many they could ship up at a time. Together with the dozen ships that were already at the Queen's City for the winter, there should be enough to shuttle quite a few people up to the base of the Pass.

"Good. How close to the base of the Pass can you get us?"

Allysandra shrugged, shoving herself away from the deck railing as a blast of cool air swept across the frozen river and up over them. Luna shivered a little, but the sun was out and without the wind, it was still fairly warm.

"Probably an hour's hike. There are some nasty sandbars close to the shore of it. Those used to be dredged out but..." The Wave Dancer shrugged and Luna nodded in understanding. Such things had stopped with the assassination of the last Queen.

"Thank you for the tour."

The sandy-haired woman grinned suddenly. "I always love showing her off." Allysandra swept her hand in a motion to encompass the entire ship. "My first love."

Luna smiled. "Careful, don't let your partner hear that."

The other woman shrugged and walked alongside Luna toward the gangplank.

"She already knows."

Wave Dancer ships were handed down from mother to daughter thus staying in the control of a few families in the Clan. Luna found it an odd way to determine who was the captain, but it seemed to work for them.

The Earth warrior had only just begun to walk down the fairly empty dock back towards the gate into the city when a woman called out to her.

"Luna?"

Since there was a standing joke that in any crowd there was bound to be at least three Luna's, Luna glanced around to see if it was someone else who the woman was calling. When there didn't appear to be anybody nearby, she turned to face the caller. She smiled as she recognized the person.

"Janice?"

The other woman met Luna at the foot of the dock, the two of them hugging each other enthusiastically.

"Dear Goddess! It *is* you. I thought you were dead!"

Janice smiled but a nasty scar on one cheek turned the smile into a grimace.

"There were a few dicey moments after the raid. I got myself cut up pretty bad. That's why I wasn't able to get back to the Castle before that bitch took it. Sorry I wasn't there to help you."

Luna shook her head, patting the other Ranger on her shoulder.

"Don't be sorry. If you'd been there, you would have died. There wasn't anything you could have done."

Janice shrugged, still looking faintly embarrassed.

"I heard about what Khelin did to you. You all right?"

Luna shrugged. She thought less about her torture on the walls of Abnoa than she did her time in the South at Khelin's court.

"It's over. What happened at the ambush?"

The two started walking back toward the City gate. The two Fire warriors on duty let them pass with an acknowledging nod.

"You remember how you told me I shouldn't go?"

Luna nodded. She'd told Janice that it was suicide, but the other woman hadn't wanted to listen. Luna had prayed to the Goddess she was wrong, but when word had come that Quinn had failed, she'd been certain her friend was dead.

"Well, you were right. We destroyed the first group of Southerners, but the rest of Khelin's army just ran right over us. That's where I got this little souvenir." Janice pointed at the still red scar on her face.

"I found a small group of Rangers trying to make it over the Pass. Thank the Goddess or I would have frozen to death trying it alone. But we can talk about that later. I have some news that you might find interesting, Luna."

"And here I thought you had tracked me down for old time's sake, Janice," Luna teased her friend.

The other woman grinned. "Well, we can go get drunk later. I ran into Tasha today who let it slip that it had been her younger sister with you when you came north?"

Luna slowed to a stop, turned and faced her old friend. "She helped me escape from Abnoa before Khelin could burn me alive." Janice nodded, apparently already knowing much of the story.

"Well, you know that Fire Clan inn on the South road?"

Luna nodded. Magda had kept her word and had been rotating platoons of warriors out there.

"Well, you'll never guess who I heard playing the fiddle a few nights ago."

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Blood and Honor

Zee: By an American and a Canadian well mostly the Canadian, it's her fault.

Windstar: Zee is, as usual, making things up. This story is completely her fault and a result of her imagination only. I claim no responsibility for this at all.

Feedback is always welcome at: zeeamy@gmail.com, or Adarkbow@yahoo.com

Chapter 9 Intro

The Last Queen

By the time the last of the Queen's guests had gone to home to bed, it was early in the morning. As with most of Cassandra's parties, this one had degenerated into a drunken orgy and had lasted throughout the night. A small group of women had stayed with the Queen after the others had left.

Since she had become Queen after her mother's death, Cassandra had ruled only to indulge in her own pleasure. The affairs of the Clans had taken a back seat to her self-centered vision. The late night parties had become a signature of her young reign over the northern Clans.

Two Royal Castle Guards stood watch in front of the doors to the Queen's chambers. Both were clad in ceremonial but still functional chain mail armor.

One of them had a spear and used the end of it to smack her fellow guard in the shins. "Stop yawning, Adia. You're making me tired," Jess complained.

Adia stifled another yawn and glared with blood-shot red eyes at her companion on guard duty. "Too bad. I don't know why I traded with Fritz to be here. I should be at home in bed sleeping soundly with my woman."

She scratched her shaggy blonde head and blushed at the noises coming out through the door. "Goddess, if people only knew." She shook her head and her face turned slightly red.

"It was really nice of you to trade with Fritz. Her and Amanda were supposed to go visit the priestesses tonight." Jess wagged her eyebrows. "Just think, a little Fritzie running around."

Adia laughed. "Oh, we're all doomed." Little spikey-haired Fritzes ran around her head with them falling down and getting into trouble. She grinned at the thoughts.

The guard with the spear shrugged, rolling her head to loosen her neck and wincing at a loud moan from inside. "Doesn't she ever sleep?" Jess whispered.

"Rabbits have nothing on our Queen," Adia said with a shrug. It was sad. Cassandra had been such a sweet girl, but her mother's death had changed her as had the rise to the Throne as a young, inexperienced teen.

"Uh, oh," Jess hissed, straightening to attention as she spotted the head of the Castle Guard stalking toward them.

Ella was head of the Guards for the simple reason that she was the best fighter in the city, and some said, in the entire North. The tall Fire warrior could hold her own against two or even three of the Castle guards at a time, and they were considered among the best in the north.

"Ella looks pissed," Jess whispered out of the corner of her mouth as her body remained stiff at attention.

Adia scrambled to straighten her sinking posture and then froze. She so didn't want Ella on her case.

"What is going on here? the Captain barked out.

Ella hoped that the rumors she had been hearing couldn't be true. She had only been gone a short time to take a short pilgrimage home to visit her Muanya who had been hurt falling from an Alcen. Her ears could not deny the moans and groans she heard coming through the shut doors. Each noise made her face grow stonier and her eyes colder.

Jess swallowed and shifted a little uneasily and wished she were somewhere, anywhere, else. "What do you mean?" she asked in a play to gain a bit more time and shifted her grip on her spear.

Blue eyes narrowed into angry slits. Her words were clipped. "I mean, what is going on here? How many people are in there with the Queen? Have they all been approved?" Her right eye twitched at a loud scream of pleasure that ripped out through the closed doors.

Adia opened her mouth and then shut it and glanced at Jess.

A trickle of sweat beaded its way down the unfortunate guard's face. "Uh, they were... umm... approved by the Queen." Jess answered, trying to make it sound better than it was.

"So?"

Adia's eyes bugged slightly at the head guard's question. "So, she's our Queen."

"And we are the Queen's Guard. We protect her even from herself!" Ella bellowed. "Cassandra's mother hasn't even been dead a year. The girl is in a vulnerable place."

"From those noises, I'd say she's in a good place," Adia muttered.

Ella hand curled into a fist so hard her knuckles cracked and strained white against the skin. Adia flinched.

"None of them had weapons on them." Jess objected, trying to defend their actions. "We searched all of them."

"What a surprise. At least you two got the basics done."

Jess sent an uneasy glance towards Adia. "Did you want us to throw them out?"

"I will throw them out. Make sure they leave," Ella snapped. The massive warrior turned towards the door, squaring her shoulders and placing her fiercest look on her face. With a snarl, her right hand wrapped around the polished bone door handle, with ease the door was pulled open and she marched inside.

"What is going on here?" She bellowed out.

Jess winced as she heard the startled squeals from inside. The guard stayed where she was. She was certain she didn't want to see what was going on inside the Queen's bedroom. One by one, women clutching clothes to their chests, were shoved out of the room. Jess met Adia's gaze from the other side of the doorway.

"See, this is why Guards should never get involved with Royalty."

Adia was completely shocked. Her mouth opened and shut, then she gasped, "I thought that was, you know, just a rumor. Ella is the definition of duty and loyalty. She wouldn't..."

Jess shook her head. "She and Cassandra were involved before her mother died." The last of the women from inside were shoved out and the door slammed shut. Jess started to herd them out. "I don't think Ella knows it's over."

"Oh," was all Adia could say as she began to follow the drunken partiers down the hallway to make sure they didn't puke on anything priceless and occasionally smacked them on the ass with the flat of her sword.

They returned to their post after herding all the revelers to the capable hands of Shamira, Ella's second in command.

Adia looked around and sighed. It was too quiet.

She winced at the angry voices coming from the Queen's room. Eyes wide she looked at Jess. It sounded like Ella's voice and it wasn't a happy sounding voice.

Jess bit her lip and shifted her grip on her spear, feeling awkward. She didn't want to be here listening and especially didn't want to hear the shouted words.

"What in the name of the Goddess do you think you're doing? You've been Queen for only a month and you're now sleeping with whores?"

Jess met Adia's eyes and winced at that particularly loud outcry from Ella.

Adia whistled softly. "This isn't going to go well." She nodded sagely. "Business and pleasure should never mix. It always ends badly. Maybe I should go get Shamira? You don't think Ella would do anything stupid in there, do you?"

Jess nodded in agreement. Yes, Shamira would know what to do.

Before Adia could go get her the door to the Queen's room was flung open.

Ella stalked out. Her face was red and stormy and her entire body radiated anger. The Captain of the Castle Guard didn't even glance at the two women as she stalked down the hallway and disappeared into the depths of the castle.

Jess slowly relaxed. "Maybe it's done with now," she reasoned. "Ella will get over it."

Adia nodded, feeling bad for her Captain. "I hope so." She blew out a breath, her eyes roaming the ceiling. "So," she sighed, "I have a gold coin saying they're knocking boots within the week."

The other woman grinned. "You're on," she said as she tried to ignore the disquieting feeling telling her that it was not yet over.

Chapter 9

Torrin thrashed about in her sleep. She was trapped again in the cold water with hands wrapped around her neck that was slowly squeezing the air out. In a last ditch effort to save her own life, she stabbed her thumbs into the black soulless eyes. In horror, she watched the blackness creep out of those eyes and onto her skin. Unable to move, she watched it absorb into her flesh.

Horrible images of torture and death flashed in her head and she screamed. Waking herself up with her own screaming voice, she crouched from the pallet on the floor. Dagger in hand, she stumbled around the room looking for an enemy. Sweat covered her body. Slowly calming, she lowered the blade when she realized she was alone.

After lighting a lantern, she looked in the small mirror that hung on the wall at her eyes. Gray, tired eyes stared back. Her shoulders slumped in relief. She often had nightmares of the assassin and being trapped in the water. Other nights, she dreamed of black fire and a woman's voice urging her to accept her darkness. The worst ones were when she dreamed of being pinned to the ice thus helpless to save Luna as the assassin dragged her back to Khelin. She slumped back down on the pallet holding back her tears.

Wooten frowned as she watched Torrin do her chores. She had noticed that while the girl's physical body had healed, a disease of the spirit still infected her. Dark circles had set up camp

under the girl's gray eyes and sometimes Wooten heard horrible screams coming from the Torrin's room. It seemed that neither hard work, drink or companions were able to cure what bothered the girl.

Luna sat down, ignoring the curious stares.

Wooten studied the woman for a moment. This one wasn't here for the food, she knew that. "What can I get you?"

Luna hesitated for a moment then just decided to come out and ask. "I'm looking for a woman..."

"Cause it's always about a woman," the women around the bar responded automatically.

Wooten snapped her towel at them and told them to behave.

Luna cleared her throat and continued, "This woman... her name is Torrin."

The women sitting around the bar went still and then one by one they set their drinks down. Torrin was like a little sister to most of them so this became business now.

Wooten frowned "Stop the posturing, you Alcian dung. I won't have my bar turned into shambles, again."

The women looked embarrassed but stayed ready just in case there was trouble.

Wooten turned back to the newcomer. "She's out back chopping wood. I think Adrian is sniffing around her..."

Some of the women chuckled. "Adrian is always sniffing around Torrin ever since the little one rocked her world. And all I have to say is, thank the Goddess someone finally put that womanizer in her place."

Another woman started laughing, "It's true, you know. I saw it with my own eyes. Torrin left her passed out, blindfolded and tied to the bed. Couldn't have happened to a nicer woman, if you ask me," she snickered.

Wooten snapped her towel at the loud mouths. "What happened between Torrin and Adrian is nobody's business. Bunch of old women, you are." She turned back to Luna. "She's out back. Go say what you need, but I warn you, if you're here to do the girl harm, you'll have a fight on your hands."

Luna frowned. The story has stung her, but she pushed back her disappointment. She nodded to the bar keeper and walked to the back door.

Torrin really wanted to bury the ax into Adrian's skull, but since the woman was the fourth daughter of the Chief of the Fire Clan, she suspected that action wouldn't go over well. So she did her best to ignore the whining woman, lifted up her arms and brought the ax down hard, splitting another log.

The dark haired woman had stripped down to a sleeveless under tunic. Sweat made it stick to her back like a second skin. She wore soft brown leather trousers and high winter boots.

She put the ax down and stared over at Adrian. In a quiet voice she said, "Adrian, I am not taking you to bed again, so just give it up."

Adrian pouted. "Torrin, you can't give me a taste like that and then deny me ever again. Nobody has done the things you did to me."

Torrin snorted, "Of course they haven't because you've never been honest with bedroom partner about what you really wanted. Go find some nice girl you like and tell her you like to be tied up."

Adrian blushed and stammered, "I could never do that. I'm not sure I could trust anybody to do those things, just you. Besides I would lose respect if I was seen to be weak."

Angrily Torrin split another log and turned at Adrian. "Adrian, what folks do in the bedroom is nobody's business but the two people doing it."

"Well, that's not true people like to talk..."

"No, Adrian. *You* like to talk, or brag rather, and it's unattractive. The only reason I took you to bed was because I was feeling twitchy and dangerous and when you came in, trying to push my buttons, I just wanted to show you that you didn't know squat. 'Cause if you knew anything, you'd know that it's the submissive with all the power. They control the terms of the "encounter". They have the power to stop it at any moment."

"How can a person who is tied up, stop the aggressor?"

Torrin blinked in amazement as she realized Adrian was serious. "By saying no, of course."

"What would prevent them from not stopping? What if I said 'no' or 'stop' and they didn't."

Torrin stared at the other woman in shock. She thought it was pretty obvious. "Because if someone says 'no' or 'stop', and the person she's with doesn't, it stops being about pleasure or having sex. At that point it becomes rape."

Adrian frowned slightly and then shrugged. "It doesn't matter, I only trust you to give me what I want."

Torrin growled in frustration. Maybe the woman had a hole in her head where everything she said just kind of leaked out. "Then you're in for a lonely life 'cause I don't want you."

Adrian made a grab for Torrin but Torrin shoved her away bringing the axe up like a weapon. "Get out of here, Adrian. I don't want to see you again. Pull your head out of your ass and grow up."

Adrian's face turned purple in anger and she stalked off, nearly knocking Luna down.

"You do realize that's one of Magda's daughters?" Luna asked who had been standing by the corner of the inn watching Torrin and Adrian argue.

Torrin stiffened and the axe raised above her head froze in mid flight. Slowly, she lowered it until the blade rested on the stump. "Luna?" She turned around, her eyes wide in shock.

"Surprise," the Northerner said, with a hint of a smile on her face, still uncertain how she would be received. Taking a step forward, she kept a distance between them, not wanting to push Torrin into any reaction. "I heard the most amazing thing about this musician playing in an inn owned by Fire warriors so I decided to come hear her play."

"You have? Um, I, well..." She blushed, completely flustered, and then she blushed even more when she realized what Luna must have witnessed between her and Adrian. "Ah, how long were you standing there?"

No matter how hard she told herself it didn't matter, she answered with a hint of hurt in her voice. "Long enough." She watched Torrin flinch. Luna didn't know why she had come here. There had been a half formed plan to bring Torrin back to the city, but it was obvious now that Torrin had friends and... other people here. "So you found wom..., um ...a place you like?"

"Oh." Torrin's face fell a little bit. She set the axe down and went over to a tree where she had draped her heavy tunic over a limb. "Great, now she thinks you're a murderer *and* a whore. You're such an idiot." she mumbled to herself. She fingered the braiding on the jacket. "So, you just came to hear me play?"

Luna remained where she had first stopped, unsure what to do next. This had all seemed so much simpler in the Queen's City than it was here in person. "Um, actually, I just wanted to ask you something." she said, "then I'll get out of your way."

After putting her tunic back on, Torrin turned around and faced Luna. Torrin didn't really want her to leave so soon. She realized now, with the woman standing in front of her, how much she had missed Luna. "All right," she sighed.

"The gold that we found, it was Rhain who offered it to you, wasn't it?" Luna wanted to ask more, but she wasn't sure how, or if she even had the right to. It was obvious that Torrin had her

own life here now, and it hurt her to see how fast the dark haired woman had managed to create one.

Torrin looked back at her puzzled and a bit hurt. "She said she was following your wishes." Her face darkened, remembering that night. "Since you and she are so close and all now." Torrin snapped her jaw shut. By the Goddess, she sounded jealous. She moved angrily to the pile of freshly chopped wood and started to pick it up.

"Close?" Luna was incredulous. "I'd rather be close to a snake! Why would I be close to Rhain?" Then blue eyes narrowed as she realized what Torrin had just said. "I'll kill her." Luna muttered, her fists clenching.

Torrin dropped the wood and glared at Luna. "What game are you playing? I saw you two in the Marketplace looking all cozy together. She knows about what I did at Abnoa. How could she know? The only person who knows is you, so you must have told her." She turned her attention back to the logs. Maybe she needed to split a few more dozen or so.

Luna frowned, not certain how to answer Torrin's accusations. She was doing her best to keep her own temper in check. "I don't know how she knew that. I didn't tell her, I swear. Besides, I wasn't being cozy with her. I was talking with Tasha and then Rhain barged in." The taller woman shifted her stance. "Besides, you seem to be *friendly* with quite a few women here."

Luna took a breath, a surprised expression on her face at how petty that had come out sounding.

Torrin looked up, "What do you care? Last I heard I was just some piece of filth not worthy to be in the same room with you decent people!"

"I never thought that," Luna said quietly.

Torrin snorted and then circled the blonde. "But you think I'm a murderer, and apparently a whore now. Goddess, you Northerner's are so... arghh!" Torrin was so frustrated she couldn't come up with any of the numerous descriptive words she knew.

"This was a bad idea." Luna said. Making up her mind, she held up a burlap sac that she had been carrying. "This is for you." Setting it down on the snow, she hesitated a second then smiled wanly.

"I'll let Tyra know where you are. She was very upset when she found out you'd left. Goodbye, Torrin." Luna turned toward the tavern door.

Torrin looked at the sack and then at Luna's back. "Luna, wait." She ran over to the woman and placed a hand cautiously on her arm.

The blonde stopped, startled by the touch. Although she secretly didn't really want to leave, she didn't think she could handle another fight. Guardedly, she turned and cocked her head toward

Torrin.

Torrin flushed at the look Luna gave her. She licked her lips and then said, "I'm sorry. Um, I haven't been sleeping well, and Adrian makes me want to hurt things, and I'm sure I have a myriad of other excuses..."

Luna smiled, ducking her head in acceptance of the apology.

"I'm sorry, too. I just... I don't know what to say." She sighed. Even her apologies to this woman were lame. "Okay. How about this? Want to get a drink?"

Torrin grinned; relieved she didn't need to babble out anymore excuses. "Funny thing, we seem to have a tavern right in front of us."

After a moment of silence where neither moved, Torrin reached out and squeezed Luna's hand. "I'm not use to apologizing for my actions, but for what it's worth, I really am sorry for what I did back there..." She looked down at the hand in hers. "I wish I would have known you when I was growing up. Maybe I would have done things other ways." She let go of Luna's hand and started for the door.

Luna stared after her and then down at her hand as if she'd never seen it before. Only when Torrin reached the back door of the inn did Luna regained her senses and jogged to catch up with her.

"I wish I'd known you too. Perhaps things would have turned out differently for both of us."

The tavern went silent as the two women entered. Torrin looked around. "What?"

Wooten snapped a towel at the girl. "Where's my wood? You've been outside playing around again, I see."

Torrin looked indignant. "I would never."

"Ha," Wooten barked out a laugh. "You would too. Don't think I haven't seen you sneaking outside with the rest of the young ones to goof off and smoke that awful Karo weed."

Luna's eyebrows rose, and she started to smile again. "Karo?" the blonde muttered, trying her best not to laugh. "Aren't you the bad girl?"

Torrin rolled her eyes and looked back at Luna. "Yes, it's a known fact that I'm bad influence. Mothers tell their children stories about me so they'll behave." She grabbed Luna's hand and dragged her forward. "Wooten, I have a guest. See?"

Luna straightened up as the formidable tavern owner's attention switched toward her. She had the strange urge to make sure her face was clean and her hair combed. Luna leaned close to Torrin, whispering to her, "I think I'm afraid to be here alone."

Torrin grinned and whispered, "I'll be right back."

Wooten snorted. "We've met already. And you're still bringing the wood in. So, get to work while I pour your friend a drink."

Torrin frowned. "But, but..." She dodged the snapping towel and shuffled back outside.

The general level of noise in the tavern was starting to increase again as the other women returned to their own conversations when they saw Torrin leave.

Wooten looked at Luna and then barked out, "Sit!"

The tall blonde was sitting before she realized she'd moved to Wooten's command.

Wooten set a mug down in front of Luna and looked the woman up and down. "Hmm, she didn't drag you back to her room right away, so you must be pretty special to Torrin."

Luna gaped in shock at Wooten for a moment, then recovered and grabbed the mug placed in front of her.

"Does she take a lot of women back to her room?" Luna mumbled, her grip on the mug tightening.

"A few. Sometimes when people are lost and not sure what they want or need to fill a hole inside themselves, they do things to fill it. Torrin's got a big hole inside her."

The warrior took a large sip of ale, not thrilled at Wooten's words. She stared down at the mug. 'What did I expect? For her to stay celibate?' she wondered.

Sighing, she set the mug down. "She seems to like it here."

Wooten wiped a nearby water spot. She had noticed the woman's reaction to her comment. "And we like her here. She's handy, made her fix everything she broke after that bar fight, and she just sort of stayed. But you just look at her and you know this isn't where she belongs. Nope, this is just a waypoint on the road."

Cradling the mug in both hands, Luna thought over Wooten's words and said, "I wish I could help her, but every time I try, I think I make stuff worse. I never seem to do or say the right thing."

Wooten laughed, "Well, sometimes we have that effect on the people we care about the most. And she's got a lot of anger she hasn't learned to let go. But she's a lot different than the cub that wandered in over a month ago. Sadly though, she won't make her peace if she hides here."

"I don't know how to help her." Luna whispered, staring down into the mug of ale in her hands. She barely knew how to help herself, how could she help someone she hardly knew?

Wooten nodded and set a warm bowl of stew in front of the woman. Luna seemed almost as lost as Torrin. "Oh, you must be the woman." By the Goddess, these two were quite the pair! Wooten looked up as Torrin came in and pointed for her to go back out.

"I know you didn't clean up the mess you made."

Torrin looked guilty and went back outside.

The blonde grinned faintly as Torrin tromped back outside then glanced back towards the imposing bartender. "What do you mean, I 'must be the woman'?"

"It's always..." Wooten snapped her towel at a nearby eavesdropper who quickly moved out of the way. Looking sheepish, Wooten turned back toward Luna. "a woman... that's why the girl's so messed up. Someone who makes her feels... hmmm... worthy, like she could be so much more, I guess." Wooten shrugged. "Mind you, I'm reading between the lines 'cause with her, it's like pulling teeth sometimes."

Blue eyes widened. "And you think I'm that woman?" she squeaked, her face turning red as a blush worked its way across her skin.

Wooten laughed and ticked off the reasons. "Well, she didn't drag you to her room to have meaningless sex. She seemed happy to see you, which means she knows you because I haven't seen you around here, and I know the girl doesn't know all that many northerners." The bartender eyed a couple of women in the tavern who were looking with interested at Luna. Goddess, she hoped she didn't have another bar brawl on her hands. "And I suspect if anyone were to hit on you, she'd break their nose."

Luna stared at Wooten, unsure how or if she even should respond to that. She blinked, shook her head and took a large gulp of ale. "I..." She paused, rearranged her thoughts and started again. "You really think she was glad to see me?"

Wooten stopped cleaning the bar top and looked at the woman in front of her. She quirked an eyebrow and barked out a laugh. "She was smiling and she was holding your hand. She never does that. Torrin is the least touchy feely warrior I know."

"You know Fire warriors that are touchy feely?" Luna asked, both eyebrows rising in surprise. She probably could have gone without knowing that piece of information.

Before she could ask anything else, Torrin was tromping back in through the back door of the Inn. Luna watched her, studied the small dark-haired woman as she walked toward the bar. And seeing for the first time, the way the Fire warriors waved and nodded to her as she passed. She'd

gained friends here, Luna noticed. The haunted expression in those dark eyes was still there, but better hidden. Luna found herself staring into Torrin's gray eyes unsure how she was supposed to react to her.

Wooten went back to cleaning the bar pretending to ignore them both.

Torrin looked around wonder who Luna was staring at but realized she was looking at her. She shyly grinned back. "Um, what? Should I go clean up? Do I smell bad?" Unconsciously she fidgeted with the newly grown hair that fell around her shoulders.

"No, you look good." Luna said before her mind could stop her mouth from moving. Suddenly, conscious of how many people were watching them, Luna grabbed her mug. "Can we go sit down?" She motioned towards one of the booths.

Torrin blushed slightly at the complement, "Oh, sure." She frowned at the bowl of stew and then up at Wooten. "How come I didn't get one?"

Wooten rolled her eyes and got another bowl. "Now, Torrin, remember to use a spoon this time."

"This time?" Luna asked, grinning at the blushing mercenary.

"You wound me, Wooten, you really do," Torrin responded dryly before she grabbed the two bowls and led Luna to a table away from most of the other patrons.

Luna followed her, taking a seat across from her, fidgeting with her half empty mug of ale. "So..." She trailed off, looking everywhere but directly at Torrin.

Torrin squirmed nervously in her chair. "You look good, Luna. Not fleeing for your life has done wonders for you." She could have smacked herself. 'Goddess, that was lame.' She looked down into her bowl and began to busily push her spoon around.

Luna let out a chuckle, and then quickly took a sip of ale to hide her smile. "Thanks." Licking her lips she tried to think of something, anything to say. "Will you come visit me, at the city?"

Torrin looked up, surprise written clearly on her face. "I...y-you want me to visit?"

"Well... I mean, ummm, Tyra wants to see you. Only if you want to come I mean. Maybe I could bring her here, too." Luna muddled her way through an answer as best she could. "And I kind of missed you," she murmured quickly, looking anywhere but at Torrin's face.

Torrin sat there stunned, "Really?" She looked down, "I kind of missed you too. It hurt when..." She trailed off.

"When what?" Luna asked, watching the other woman intently. The warrior was leaning forward in her chair, her attention focused on Torrin, watching her eyes and tracking the movement of her

lips.

"It doesn't matter." Not looking at Luna, Torrin gave a tiny shrug with her shoulders. "How are things going in the city?"

Luna sat back, taking a sip of her ale to hide her disappointment. With a mental sigh she let Torrin switch the topic. "We are a city getting ready for a battle. Everyone is busy, now that spring is on its way. We've got Rangers up in the Pass to keep an eye on things. Everyone not able to actually fight is busy preparing for the battle, from making arrows to loading the Wave Dancer ships. I guess they have decided to wake up and fight for their lands."

Torrin nodded sipping her ale. "That's good. Khelin will whip her troops into a frenzy mass of killers and push them to the last woman. She won't surrender; she won't retreat unless she's out of troops. She's insane and a coward. Khelin was the last person to enter the Abnoa, you know. She didn't come in until she was sure it was in her power." Torrin paled as she remembered parts from a recent nightmare. With her hands shaking, she quickly took another drink.

Luna was quiet, remembering her own sufferings at the hand of that woman. Her own hands were none too steady when she drained the last of her ale. For a moment neither spoke, each haunted by the memories of the past. She pushed the thoughts away. "I need to get going. It's a long ride back to the city and I need to be there tomorrow. There's another war council meeting set to finalize plans for the Ellris Pass and I shouldn't miss it."

Torrin looked sad for a moment then the expression was gone. "Yeah, I guess it is kind of a trek back to the City." Impulsively she took Luna's hand in hers, squeezing it gently. "I'm glad you came. I thought you hated me. Our last meeting wasn't so good." Torrin gave a weak smile and let go.

Luna caught that hand before Torrin could reclaim it, squeezing it in return. "I'm sorry. I was, I mean, I'm still...well, puzzled by everything that has happened.... But despite it all, I've come to the conclusion that you are a good person inside, Torrin. Luna smiled slowly, "No matter how hard you try not to be". She stood and quickly released Torrin's hand after she realized she hadn't let go. Her cheeks turned red and she turned toward the door.

Torrin stood and followed Luna out. "I don't know why you think that. Out of everybody, I think you have the most right to hate me." She paused, breathing out a breath. "But thank you."

Although spring was starting to make its presence felt in the lands below the pass, it was not noticeable in the Ellris Pass. The wind was just as harsh and the temperature plummeted each night to painful extremes. Even for Northerners, the Ellris Pass was no place to go until the snow began to melt. Wendi clutched her bow tighter to herself and shivered, and tried to sit even closer

to the fire. The old abbey walls offered some protection from the wind, but it was still bitter cold. She glanced around the fires, grinning as she realized she wasn't the only one who was cold.

"You sit any closer and you'll be in the fire. Of course don't you Fire warriors train for that sort of thing?" she teased the woman next to her, holding her own fingers towards the flames to thaw.

Black eyes glinted just out of sight. They watched with great interest, taking in the routes the women guarding the Pass walked and how often. Happily, they noted, that most were loath to go to far from the fires that burned. It wasn't that they were immune to the cold, they just ignored it. Cold was like pain, it made one stronger.

The woman rolled her eyes at the Ranger. "Yeah, we do the dance in the ring of fire on certain religious ceremonies," she grunted. Then as the wind howled through again, she shivered and moved a little closer to the fire. "We don't get a wind like this," she chattered out.

The woman just nodded and tried discretely to lean back into the Ranger so she could get some more body heat, without looking weak in front of her captain. "Shit, if we don't like it, the Southern army ain't going to try to do this Pass in the winter."

Wendi shivered and nodded, wondering if she could get the Fire warrior to sleep next to her. She didn't even remember what the woman's name was but it didn't really matter either just as long as she kept her warm. Glancing up, she watched the latest patrol hurriedly claim seats around the fire while another stalked out into the darkness. She gave the poor Ranger assigned to them a wide grin as she passed and getting a slap on her head for her trouble. "Ow."

The woman snickered at the Ranger's outcry. "You shouldn't mock another's luck. Of course in a few hours it will be us."

The leader of the Assassins made a sharp gesture with one hand. Sure they could get by unseen but they needed a little fun. They had been relegated to sitting by while the other two favorites got all the work. At her gesture, the other three disappeared into shadows.

Glancing toward the darkness, then back towards the warm fire, Wendi sighed. She could have left well enough alone, but no, she'd had an extra mug of wine with their thin dinner. It had kept her feeling warm for a time. But now her bladder was refusing to be ignored. "Save my seat" she told the woman, rising to her feet and making a sprint for the small latrine area.

The woman grunted. "Hurry up. I have parts getting cold."

"Not as cold as mine." Wendi muttered, starting to fumble with the thick hide coats that they all wore to survive the weather. As she was walking forward she stumbled on a dark shape in the way. With a curse she went down on her hands and knees. "Stupid ice..." Her words trailed off as she realized what the dark shape was. Stretched out in the snow, her face a mask of pain, and her neck sliced open, the blood freezing as it leaked from the wound was the patrol's Ranger.

Dara looked around. Where the hell was that Ranger? She'd been hoping for a bed warmer when their time was up from guard duty. She frowned trying to remember how long the woman had been gone. Slowly she got up and moved in the direction the woman had gone.

The Fire warrior scowled at some of the hooting when others noticed where she was going. Walking into the ruins she called out, "Hey... um... Ranger. You okay?" She blinked in the dark trying to make out shapes. She couldn't put her finger on it but something was wrong.

"Hey..." She was cut off as a figure materialized out of the blackness, placed a hand over her mouth and slipped a dagger between her ribs. The poison spread quickly. The warrior jerked in reaction, muscles spasming violently before she went limp, blood trickling out of her nose.

Her body was gently lowered to the snow next to the two dead Rangers. Wendi's face still showing her surprise as the dagger went into her.

The shadows created by the fires the Rangers and warriors were sitting next to seemed to grow darker.

The Fire clan captain chewed on a piece of dried beef jerky while trying to figure out a way to stay warm. Damn Magda and her orders. Glancing up, her eyes narrowed as she realized a few of the fires had more empty spots around them than they should have. "Where's Dara? And where is that other Ranger?"

The shadow behind the captain stopped flickering with the light of the fire and its shape began to change. Then without warning a body emerged. Two hands grabbed either side of the captain's head and then gave a swift jerk to the right breaking the neck. Before anybody could react the person was gone and the shadow flickered again with the light. The captain's body fell slowly hitting the snow.

Shouts turned into screams and then all was silent and still except for the flickering light of the fires that were slowly dying away.

Luna leaned her head against the shattered remains of the still un-repaired mosaic tiled table top. Closing her eyes she let her head rest there. The gouge from her ax still remained in the center. The meeting had taken all day. Dimly she wondered if she'd ever do anything other than be in meetings for the rest of her life. "Tasha, I don't think I ever want to sit at this table again." Tasha rubbed her tired eyes. She looked to her friend and bit her lip in concern.

"That's it though, we start moving people as soon as the river thaws." Groaning, Luna leaned back and rubbed her arms and then tried to work out a kink in her neck.

"Yep. We should be getting a report from the guards at the pass within the next couple of days

but I'm not expecting anything exciting." Tasha eyed Luna for a minute. "So what's the story with Magda's daughter? If looks could kill..." She trailed off knowing she didn't need to finish her thought. Magda, thankfully, wasn't as clueless as she seemed and had sent her daughter out of room earlier in the day.

The taller blonde shrugged, stretching her feet out and then stood up. "She was at the tavern with Torrin when I got there." She had told Tasha a little about where her sister was staying. "I don't think she likes me very much for some reason," Luna grinned.

"She hit on you, didn't she? I'll kick her ass!" Tasha fumed. "She's the biggest bitch I know." Tasha was working her way up into quite a huff. "Personally, I think she's part of the reason for all the problems we've been having between the Fire and Water clans. I just can't prove it yet."

Luna patted her friend on the shoulder. "No, Adrian was hitting on your sister." The blonde grimaced a bit in distaste. "Actually it was more like begging for Torrin to take her back. Torrin sent her away, though." Walking toward the doors to the library she held them open, waiting for Tasha.

"Torrin did what?" Tasha asked in disbelief as she raced to catch up. "Ewww, my little sister really slept with that thing? I suppose it's a bit late to have that discussion about sex." She shook her head, time for a change of subject. "Um, thank you for telling mom about Torrin. She's been there a few times to visit and she seems much happier now."

The woman winced at hearing Tyra had made several trips since her only visit. Things had been getting more and more hectic in the city and if she wasn't settling disputes between different clan members, she was attending strategy meetings. There just never seemed to be enough time for anything else. Nowadays, even sleep came second. "I'm just glad she's all right."

Tasha nodded. "Me, too. I should go and visit but..." she let out a sigh. "Well, I'm just not sure I guess." She shuffled uncomfortably. As they walked outside she frowned as she spotted Rhain with several Rangers from Abnoa. "Vladlin's balls," she cursed, "I'm not sure what she's up to. But it makes me nervous." Glancing at Luna, she patted her on the arm. "I'm going to go break that up. I'll meet you for dinner?"

Luna nodded. She was also frowning in the direction of Tasha's younger sister. Whatever she was up to wasn't good, Luna was certain of that. She made mental notes of the Rangers Rhain was talking with.

"Sure, I want to go visit the Temple anyway." She'd been in the Queen's City over a month now and had yet to visit the Temple of the Moon Goddess. Even as irrational as Luna knew it was, a part of her resented that the Goddess had allowed Abnoa to fall.

Tasha nodded then plastered a fake smile on her face. She walked over to Rhain and her toadies. "So, what are you all up to today?" she asked sweetly.

The tall blonde watched for a few moments, making certain nothing was going to happen. When the Rangers with Rhain slipped away, Luna took her leave as well. The days were starting to get longer and it was staying lighter as well. The streets were full with people, and Luna realized with a start, that even more must have arrived in the last week. To her surprise, she recognized quite a few of those she passed, nodding and returning hello's as she made her way towards the Temple.

Other than the Queen's Castle, the Temple of the Moon Goddess was the next largest building in the city. It was a graceful, soaring structure full of stained glass windows and carved statues. Her parents had often told her of this place. Stepping inside the Temple, Luna started to walk around, staring up at the high vaulted stone ceilings. Then she remembered that there would be a service in a few days. A holy day to celebrate the Full Moon.

Luna stopped in front of the back wall of the temple. It was the crowning glory of the Temple, a soaring thirty feet tall stained glass mural to the Exodus. Selene, the first chosen one. She stared at the women depicted in it, her thoughts in turmoil.

Adrian thought she was being sly, having followed Luna since she'd left the Castle. She wasn't use to not getting what she wanted. She wanted Torrin, but Torrin had rejected her and for what? She fumed. This weakling Ranger? Even her mother seemed under this woman's spell.

"If you're here to pray, you're welcome to stay," the ranger called out, keeping her back to the woman who had followed her into the Temple.

Adrian froze for a moment, surprised she wasn't as sneaky as she thought. Regaining her cocky attitude, she walked forward ignoring a look from a Priestess. Then she snarled, "What if I'm not here to pray? You think these Priestesses could really get rid of me."

Luna turned, sighing. "You don't want to do this, Adrian." The High Priestess had wisely gathered her acolytes and was leaving the Temple through a side door. Luna closed her eyes briefly. Her first visit here was turning out unpleasant. Perhaps she should have continued to stay away.

"Do what?" Adrian sneered. "I just wanted to meet you. See what the big deal was. Just wanted to meet the 'Luna', the one who has all the leaders of the tribes jumping around and asking 'how high?'" Adrian snorted and looked unimpressed.

"Fine, you've seen me, now get out." Luna gritted her teeth, her dislike for the Fire warrior showing in her eyes.

"Or what? This is a public place. You're the one who seems all jumpy and angry. You know what's a good cure for that, don't you?" She grinned evilly at Luna. "Sex. You know all about sex, don't you, Luna? I've heard a few rumors. You know, Torrin's a very sexual person. She's not going to want a virginally ice queen like you." Adrian wanted to stare down Luna and she was very unhappy at the fact that Luna towered over her.

Adrian had done some sniffing around. Luna had yet to take a lover of any kind. She wasn't sure what the deal was between the Ranger and Torrin, but she hated the fact that Torrin had sent her away yet invited Luna for dinner.

The blonde swallowed, her fingers curling into fists. The verbal attack wasn't unexpected, but it still hurt. "What's wrong? Torrin tell you to go away again?" She said the words in anger, her blue eyes ice cold as she stared down at the Fire warrior.

Adrian growled and took a step forward. "She'll get bored with you and I'll be there waiting. I always get what I want and whom I want." She smirked at Luna. "Why would she want you when she can have me?"

Luna snorted. "Because you're always whoring around?"

Adrian lost it and before she realized what she was doing she swung at Luna.

The Ranger danced backward, just avoiding the enraged warrior's punch. "What? You aren't going to try to seduce me? I'm hurt," Luna spat, taking another step backward, her fists raised.

Adrian sneered. "You? I don't want you." The larger woman moved forward, cracking her knuckles and then, with a lunge, tried to catch the back-pedaling Ranger.

Luna fell into the unarmed combat skills that Mezzarna had drilled into her. A quick punch caught the other woman in the chin as Luna danced away from the relatively clumsy lunge. Adrian, she decided, relied mostly on her strength and very little on any sort of actual tactics.

"Problem?" Luna taunted.

Adrian shook and tasted the blood in her mouth. "Not with you." She straightened up to her full height while rubbing her chin. "You think you're special but you failed at Abnoa and you'll fail here. I don't know why everybody thinks your shit don't stink, but I will be watching you and when you fail again, me and my friends will pick up the pieces." She gave one last angry glare and then stormed out of the Temple.

The blonde slowly lowered her fists, her shoulders slumping as she closed her eyes. Adrian was right, Luna had lost Abnoa. How could she hope to succeed in stopping Khelin here? Flexing the hand that ached from her punch, Adrian's chin had been surprising hard.

A wrinkled hand touched the slumped shoulder.

Luna nearly jumped out of her skin in surprise, spinning around with a startled yelp, her hands coming up once more as she took a defensive stance.

The old woman laughed. "I mean no harm. For harm is forbidden in the Temple."

Realizing she'd just hit a woman in the sacred hall, Luna winced. "I'm sorry, Priestess." Feeling foolish, the blonde lowered her aching fists. "I just wanted her to leave."

The old mother nodded, her silver hair swaying with the movement. "She is a prickly one, so full of her own self-importance and her mother's indulgence. However, I did not miss how you asked her not to bother you, so I don't see how you are at fault for defending yourself."

The Ranger gave the Priestess a relieved smile for that. "Thank you." Her glance strayed towards the large stained glass mural behind her. "It's beautiful."

The old woman patted Luna's arm. "Yes, it is. It's one of the lucky things about being in the city. The Wind Walkers are such talented artists. That one is a scene of Cassia, the third Queen, being crowned in the Castle courtyard. She is the first Queen to rule in the Castle, the previous two helped build it."

Luna nodded towards the section she'd been studying before Adrian had disrupted things. It was quiet now that she was gone, and the Temple exuded a sense of peace and tranquility about it that was soothing to Luna's soul. "That's from the Exodus over there, isn't it?"

The Priestess looked where Luna was looking. "Yes. That is their descent out of the mountains and into the desert. Before the first band lost faith and left the Exodus. They're now called the desert dwellers or the Vagari."

Luna had heard tales of the desert people, living even further to the south than Khelin's people and the Horse tribes. Blue eyes studied the picture intently.

"I think I've lost faith."

There was a brief flicker in the Priestess's sea green eyes. She sat down and motioned for Luna to sit next to her. "Why do you say that?"

The Ranger didn't sit, she paced instead. "How can I still have faith after Abnoa? Why would the Goddess abandon us?" Luna knew the questions were not logical, but her heart cared little. "Why was it this Horse God who came to save us on the banks of the river after the Assassins nearly killed Torrin and not the Goddess? She scuffed at the smooth tiles. "I don't know if we can stop Khelin, we'll try, but there's a good chance we'll fail."

Luna stopped her pacing to stare up at the stained glass again. "I don't know what to do." The insecurities and doubts that had been growing inside her sounded slightly foolish now that Luna had spoken them out loud.

The priestess looked up at her, smiling. "Do you feel better now? You've been holding that all inside for a while now. Doubts are a like a sickness. If you don't get them out, they can poison

you."

Luna let out a small laugh, ducking her head in agreement and finally took a seat. It did feel better now that she had voiced them. "I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from."

"Yes, you do. But Abnoa fell because your own leader doubted the strength of her own people to hold it and sent her strongest warriors away to help those make it here. The Goddess doesn't abandon us, but like the moon, She can be distant. She has an ultimate plan, but her means are so subtle that even her siblings are surprised when She out maneuvers them. As for the Horse God, his council is his own." She looked into Luna's eyes. "Child, sometimes we have to have failure so we know how not to do it again. Sometimes we must be lost in order to find ourselves again."

Luna smiled wryly at the old Priestess, touching her shoulder in thanks. "Thank you, I think. I would rather have never lost in the first place, though." Rising to her feet, she glanced one last time at the beautiful stained glass and turned to leave.

"Who said it was you who was lost, child?" The priestess chuckled and walked to the back to motion the others back in.

Torrin stared at the target tied to the tree. She was slowly learning to compensate for the lack of clarity in her eye. While most of the vision had come back, it was not as perfect as it had once been. Her sense of self was still very much wrapped up in her skills as a fighter and she was worried about the loss.

She pulled out another slim throwing knife, feeling the cool smooth metal against her fingers and felt its weight in her hand. Against the skin of her cheek, she felt the wind direction and was already making adjustments. Then, as her heart beat and then rested, beat and then rested, beat and... during the rest she threw the knife. It sailed cutting through the air.

With a silent, deadly beauty, it sank deep into the wood. She frowned. While she had hit the target, it was not the bulls-eye. Before, even dead drunk, she could hit the center of a target repeatedly.

With a sigh she pulled out another one and repeated the ritual. Closer, but still not perfect. With her frustration growing, she took a break. She picked up the water skin and took a swallow. For a brief moment, she wondered what Luna was doing. The Ranger hadn't been back to visit her. Although Torrin was happy they had managed to break the ice of hostility, she wasn't sure why it mattered. Why Luna mattered in the first place. But she did and that was almost more distressing.

She retied her hair back into a horsetail and picked up another knife. With a sudden flick of the wrist she sent it flying. Right into a body that wasn't there before.

The short man with long black hair looked down at the knife in his chest. Then with an arched eyebrow, he looked back up at Torrin. "Pray tell. Have I offended you in some way?"

"N-n-no... where did you come from? Who are you?" She demanded once she got over her surprise.

He pulled himself up to his full height and with a mocking bow said. "I am Armando, the God of the Horse People."

"Okay. Horse God. Right. Um, my knife?"

"What? Oh, yes." He pulled the knife out and smoothed his shirt making the hole disappear in the fabric. "You're not going to throw it again? While you can't kill me, it is an unpleasant feeling." Then with a flick he flipped the knife over and handed it back to Torrin handle first.

Warily, Torrin took the knife back. She stared at him uneasily. Armando seemingly was comfortable looking at the unfamiliar white northern landscape.

Finally Torrin cleared her throat. "Why are you here?"

He looked at her, his dark eyes taking in everything about the young woman. "You've grown up beautifully. I can see your Muanya in you. She was truly a wonderful soul." He gave a chuckle. "But as to why I am here. I am here because *you* are here. And you, my youngling, should not be here."

Torrin snorted. "Then where should I be? I finally found a place where I belong and you want me to leave?"

"Yes." He responded matter of fact. "You were born to fulfill a destiny and you cannot in this place."

Torrin rolled her eyes at his words. "Destiny. Sure. Then where should I be?"

He smiled. "Not here." As he began to vanish, he whispered. "In two days, four Assassins will kill the Council... including your Luna."

Torrin felt the blood leave her face. "What?" She rushed to the spot where he had been standing, but he was gone.

"You bastard," Torrin growled out. Then, she quickly pulled the knives out of the target and ran back to the tavern. Rushing into her room she pulled out the black leathers and mail. She didn't have time to waste, lives were in danger. No. Luna's life was in danger.

Wooten watched as a very different woman emerged from the back room. She got a chill looking at the mercenary. Torrin wore a look of death. Now Wooten could see how all the tales about

Torrin could be true.

Cold eyes stared at Wooten. "I need to get to the city as fast as I can."

Wooten just nodded. "Take Weslen's Alcen. He's too stupid to know you're not his owner."

Torrin nodded, pausing when Wooten wished her good luck and then she was gone.

Torrin slid off the shaggy beast, her inner thighs flaring in pain. She wasn't use to riding the shaggy, stocky beasts. She wasn't use to riding, period. Other than a few times with a few Horse warriors, she hadn't really ridden that much. Alcen's were deer-like creatures with shaggy fur that turned white in the winter and brown in the summer. From their foreheads twin spiraling horns emerged. Those horns made the creatures fierce in battle; many Fire warriors trained their mounts to use those horns on command. This beast seemed to be a happy stupid creature and Weslen had taken to trimming her riding beast's horns so he wasn't a danger to himself or others.

It was now dark but it had only taken her a day to get to the Queen's City. She tied the halter to a nearby post and slipped into the city.

Torrin wasn't sure what to do. She didn't know how involved she should get. She had barely defeated the previous Assassins with only luck on her side and Luna's timely intervention. Four together was suicide. She bit her lip. However, she could not stand by and let her friend die. She paused mid-step. She had thought of Luna as her friend. When had that happened? Perhaps if she wasn't such a coward, she thought, she could have seen Luna as a friend from the start. Perhaps she could have avoided this path of haunting nightmares and regrets. She needed to find her mother. Her mother could tell her where she could find Luna. Shaking her thoughts away, she proceeded onto the city streets toward home.

Some people were still outside, but mostly, they were guards out patrolling the restless masses. There was a fragile peace now that too many bodies were now in the city. Tempers were short as well as many people's patience. Torrin kept to the edge of the road and tried to look like she belonged there.

"Well, well, lookie at what we have here, girls." The voice cracked through the night like a whip and Torrin flinched.

Rhain emerged from the shadow of building with four other women. Their blue eyes became dark with rage as they recognized Torrin.

Torrin knew that this would only end badly but she didn't want to start any trouble. She held up her hands. "Rhain, I don't have time for this. I have to see Luna. It's a matter of life and death."

Rhain grinned. Quinn was right, the traitor had come back. "What do you think girls? Should we let this murderer walk free?"

The tallest of the five cracked her knuckles. "Torrin, daughter of Tyra and some bastard southerner, I proclaim you a murderer. My sister died at Abnoa and her blood is on your hands."

Torrin gulped and felt cold inside. Not the cold she felt before battle that helped her distance her humanity from inhumanity of war. No, she felt the coldness of fear and shame.

"I'm sorry, but we need to hold off on blood feuds for a moment." She stepped back away only to find two more at her back.

"Rhain, please." She tried to reason with her sister, but she was almost certain what the outcome would be. "Khelin has sent Assassins to murder your Council."

Rhain snorted. "How convenient that you show up just in time to warn us. You may have everybody fooled but not me. All I see, is a trick to get you back into our good graces so you can feed information to your Mistress." Rhain waved a hand. "These women all lost a loved one because of you and I will see justice done."

"Rhain don't..." Torrin was cut off as rough hands grabbed for her. As she struggled, she vowed the next time to not try being nice and polite at all. Not wanting to hurt anybody she missed blocking a punch on her weak eye side that dropped her to her knees. Another blow to the side of her head knocked her out.

Rhain grinned and stepped up to give a kick of her own to Torrin's unconscious body. "That's for ruining my parent's marriage." She looked at the women and nodded. They understood why Torrin shouldn't be trusted. "Take her to the holding cells. In the morning, I will start the process to try her as a traitor. Do not worry. Your families will see justice."

Two of the women nodded and picked up Torrin each one grabbing her under an arm and started dragging her.

The taller of the two stared down at the small, dark-haired woman. She didn't look like such a threat now, just a little girl. "You think we need to chain her up?"

The other shrugged. "You heard Rhain, she's a trained killer. You want her loose so she can do what she did at Abnoa?"

"Fine." They dragged her into the cell and chained her to the far wall.

Torrin jerked awake and felt the chain manacles. She'd been in such positions before particularly, after a heavy night of drinking. Her head was throbbing and for a moment she panicked, how

long had she been in here? What if she was too late? Frantically, she jerked on the chains, but they didn't give an inch. She groaned and went slack in the chains leaning back against the cold stone.

"Hey!" she yelled, wincing at her voice as it bounced around the small room.

"Hey!" Nobody even looked through the window in the door. By the Goddess, this was so not good.

"Listen to me! People are in danger! You have to let me out." Silence was her only response.

She could feel the despair in her rising. She was going to fail. Here was her chance to do something right for the right reasons and she was going to fail. Luna was going to die and she wouldn't be there to help her. She thrashed in the chains for a few moments before she got herself back under control. Losing control now would guarantee that people would die.

Slowly, she evened out her breathing and tried to analyze her problem... chained to a wall inside a locked prison with a quite a few unfriendly women who wanted her blood outside the door. "Not good," she thought. A breeze blew into the room through the small opening in the window causing the torches to flicker and send shadows dancing across the stone.

Torrin shivered as a shadow caressed her skin. Then a memory flashed in her head, 'she was standing in a room and the black fire was at her back and a voice whispered for her to touch the shadows to be one with them.' Shivering Torrin shook her head. That wasn't her memory. She had never walked through the fire. It had never been on her back...ever.

She looked at the shadow; it flickered and seemed to beckon to her. She really wanted to feel it. The chain on her arm clinked as she leaned over to try to touch the flickering darkness. It danced just out of reach of her fingers.

Growling under her breath, she stretched out again. Her eyes widened in surprise as she touched the shadow. The secrets of the Assassins opened up to her as her fingers slid into the shadows for a moment. It looked as if her skin was absorbing the shadows. Then she vanished and the chains went slack, slapping onto the stones.

She emerged into the hallway. Cocking her head, she listened to the whispering of the shadows. She wasn't alone. There were other shadows in the City infected with evil intent. They told her a great many things. She put the information away for a later time.

Torrin easily moved through the city to the Castle. She was happy she was not too late but still, she would be cutting it close.

Torrin slipped past the four guards and made her way into courtyard of the Castle. The Castle

seemed to radiate a sense of sadness. The shadows whispered to her of dark pasts and bloody deeds, but she didn't understand what they were trying to tell her.

The Warrior haunted the hallways, lurking and watchful. She was cursed for an action so horrible nobody would speak of it; her name was forgotten, stricken from all records. Her own hubris had made her both the Deceived and the Deceiver and for that she would remain locked inside the Castle never to find the Goddess.

Since she had been cursed, she had felt like she was waiting for something important. At first she thought it was forgiveness, but after the years had passed into decades she had given up on that notion. Still, as time passed, she felt like she was waiting.

Now after years of lingering and skulking around in the darkened hallways, she felt it. Another had come. Another who bore the heavy mark of the Betrayer. A heavy curse to bear, one she knew all too well. She felt like a plucked chord on a stringed instrument, a sense of completion hummed through her. Her chance had arrived. The salvation she had dreamed and feared was upon her.

Torrin made her way past the thick stones into the Castle itself. It was very cold, Torrin shivered but kept moving. She needed to find Luna. Time was winding down and if she didn't find her and the Council, they would be killed. Somehow, Torrin knew more than people would die. If she failed, the North's hopes of winning would end as well.

Swiftly, she rushed through the empty hallways, a small chill gust of wind the only proof of her passage.

"Girl." The whisper was little more than a brush of wind across Torrin's skin, raising goose bumps in its trail.

Torrin's head whipped around. Squinting, she looked into the darkness, "Who's there?"

The gust of wind brought with it a sound of bitter laughter. "The Deceiver, of course." The cold voice was full of bitter sadness. Dust whirled around her as the sudden gust blew around her.

Torrin had felt fear before and recognized it here. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. "The Deceiver?" She peered into the darkness, straining her eyes to pierce the darkness.

A ghostly form emerged from the darkness in front of her, clad in ceremonial armor, a bloody sword in her right hand. She was insubstantial and Torrin could see through her. "Yes." The woman grinned wryly. The woman was taller than Torrin, and her armor was that of a Fire Warrior.

Torrin was, for the first time in her life, so afraid that she was frozen where she stood. But after a moment, when she saw the ghost only stood and looked back, she relaxed. She took a step back giving her some much needed space. "What is it with me and ghosts?" she muttered under her

breath.

"Destiny." The ghost smiled, her eyes were filled with an ageless sadness and regret.

"I've come to you to help you." The woman's face twisted into a self-mocking sneer. "Believe it or not."

Torrin's eyes locked with the ghost's, and she knew that look in the ghost's eyes. She knew it because it was the same haunted look she had in her eyes when she looked in the mirror. It was regret. It was a pain that could never be purged. It was the wanting so badly to have the chance to redo something and make a different decision.

"I believe you," Torrin whispered.

The ghost stilled briefly as if not expecting that answer. "Then follow me, young one." Turning around she floated down the hallway, heading back deeper into the Castle.

Torrin followed without question. Perhaps she was insane to trust the apparition, but she could nothing else. She trusted her gut. Her gut told her the ghost would be her someday if she didn't follow her.

She cleared her throat. "Assassins are in the Castle. I need to stop them."

The ghost ignored Torrin.

They went through hallways, long disused and up several flights of stairs. Turning down one, the ghost paused in front of a simple iron bound oak door. "In there," she pointed.

Torrin stared at the door, and then shrugged. Touching the handle carefully, she explored it for a trap. Not finding one, she turned the handle and slowly opened the door, listening for anything that would signal deception.

She shielded her eyes as a torch sprung to life, its light shining off the polished metal in the room.

"There." The ghost motioned to the back of the small armory where a single sword rested in an ornate holder, its blade liquid silver.

"Do not touch the blade. Bring it to the one you protect."

Torrin walked back to the sword, pausing she frowned. "The one I protect? I assume that will make sense at some point." She was getting sick of ghosts and Gods and their need for cryptic talk. Continuing her way to the sword, she picked up the blade awed by its weight. It was a beautiful weapon. "Figures I wouldn't get something that neat," she mumbled.

There was the sound of laughter at that. "You are what you are, as I am what I am." The ghost hovered at the entrance to the room, unwilling or unable to enter.

"See, more cryptic talk," she huffed and went back to the entrance. With a wistfully sigh at the other weapons inside, she slowly shut the door.

The ghost was slowly beginning to fade away, becoming only an outline of the woman against the wall behind her. "You will find the Assassins in the Library. Do not fail as I once did."

Torrin nodded, took a step to leave, and then stopped. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You already have," the voice whispered in the darkness, fading completely away to leave Torrin once again alone in the dark hallway.

The meeting, like many of them in the past month, had stretched throughout the day and into the night. The Clan leaders were still willfully stubborn, but on the whole, Luna was happy with what they had accomplished.

Every remaining Ranger was now rushing toward the Queen's City. Many had already arrived and been assigned to help clear the woods with Magda's warriors. They had been devastatingly effective at reducing the number of rogue groups around the City and surrounding roads. To such a point, some of those groups were being sent to set up camp at the base of the Ellris Pass in preparation for the coming spring.

Healers from the Wind Walkers would be traveling up river on the first Wave Dancer ship to join that camp. They had planned as best as they could. Now, they just were waiting for the thawing of the Winderling.

Draining the last of the wine in her mug, she started to rise to get another when Eve leaped up next to her. The Wind Walker danced from her seat, grabbing a jug of wine and pouring Luna another glass.

Nodding her thanks, Luna took a sip from the new mug, frowning at the amused look on Tasha's face.

"The ice is starting to break up on the Winderling, we should be able to start transporting people to the base of the Pass by the end of this moon phase."

Luna smiled at Allysandras's words. It had been a long hard winter and the spring did not bode to be any better. Her deepest fear was that Khelin would somehow get her own troops to the top of the Pass before they could and block them.

Torrin stalked up the stairs that lead to the room where she knew the meeting was going on.

At the door the guard tried to stop her. She slid away and seemed to disappear into a shadow before reappearing behind the startled guard. The former mercenary slid her arms around the thick Fire Warrior's throat and giving a squeeze sent the guard into unconsciousness.

"Any word from the scouts at the top of the Pass?" Magda shook her head in answer to Luna's question. "None yet, but the next group just headed out to replace them. We should hear from them tomorrow."

The shadows in the room grew darker and went still, they no longer moved with the motion of the lanterns in the room.

The skin at the back of Luna's neck crawled and she slowly stood up, ignoring the confused looks she was getting.

Torrin could feel the dark magic swelling and with a swift kick, kicked the library door in.

"Assassins!"

Luna wasn't certain who it was that yelled the warning, all she knew was that between one heartbeat and the next the room was filled with turmoil. Black-clothed women stepped out of the shadows, whirling blades in hands.

A figure at the doorway caught the Ranger's attention despite the swirling bedlam around her. "Torrin!" Luna yelled as she drew her own sword, barely avoiding a thrown dagger that thudded into the back of the chair she'd just been sitting in.

Torrin felt her heartbeat speed up as she watched the room dissolve into pandemonium. She had to get to Luna. She felt urgency deep in her bones that certain things could not come to pass. She sidestepped a sword thrust and then quickly reached out with her hand catching the wrist and with a quick wrench, the bones snapped and the Assassin's sword fell useless.

The Assassin snarled, looked up and paused.

Torrin wasn't sure why the black-eyed woman hesitated but she used it to her advantage by shoving the woman out of her way to make it over to Luna.

Assassins flanked Luna, forcing her backward away from Torrin. She fought for her life. She had never imagined anyone could be so good with daggers. Her sword seemed slow compared to the slashing dance the Assassins used. Desperately she swung back, trying to force them away from

her.

Tasha was fighting by Luna's side, doing her best to help the blonde. She wasn't as good with a blade, but she could at least deflect some of the knives. A flicker of movement caught her attention and someone slid out of a flickering shadow. Tasha opened her mouth to yell a warning when a boot caught her in the temple, sending her spinning to the floor unconscious.

The Assassin that had emerged lashed out with her dagger, catching Luna's hand with the pommel, causing the Ranger to drop her sword with a yell of pain.

To her horror, Torrin saw an Assassin slam the handle of her dagger down on Luna's wrist, causing her to lose the grip on her sword. Unthinkingly, Torrin pressed herself into a shadow, walked in the twilight road for a moment before popping out closer to Luna. While the other Assassins were busy keeping the Clan leaders occupied by leaping in and out of shadows, two concentrated on Luna, advancing on the weaponless Ranger.

Instinctively, she bellowed out Luna's name and tossed the sword the ghost had given to her care in the Ranger's direction. Even as she tossed the sword, her other hand moved to her clothes producing a dagger. With a quick flick of the wrist it went sailing through the air seconds after the sword. With a curse, she saw it sink into the Assassin's thigh.

Luna's hand still felt numb from the hit the Assassin had given it making it hard to concentrate but she did her best to ignore it. Luna kicked the nearest Assassin while snatching the sword sheath Torrin had tossed her. The Assassin she had kicked went down with a yell as a dagger found its mark in the woman's leg. Luna drew out the sword.

The beautiful blade looked like it was made of liquid silver. As she raised it, the sword glowed, spreading a brilliant, silver light throughout the library, chasing the shadows from the farthest nooks and crannies of the room.

Stunned, the Assassins hissed having their advantage taken away. Their black eyes turned towards the source of their discomfort and with a malicious glint, three of them moved toward the woman with the shining sword. Even with this surprise, they were more than enough for these weak warriors. They were the Mistress's Chosen. They were unstoppable.

Somebody somewhere yelled 'help' and another voice called for the guards. After the surprise of the lighted sword, the room erupted back into the chaos of battle.

Magda tackled one of them, taking the dark-eyed Assassin down to the floor with her as soon as the Assassin turned her back on the Fire Warrior.

The fourth Assassin was busy trying to pull the dagger from her thigh, cursing as she struggled with it.

Torrin blinked at the light, momentarily blinded herself. Sensing movement behind her she

ducked the swing of a poisoned blade that would have sliced her neck open.

Torrin spun remembering a move not hers and kicked the Assassin's feet out from under her. Leaping sideways, she grabbed the woman on her way down to the floor pinning her hands to the ground with a barely audible smack of flesh on stone.

Black eyes stared into black. "You betray your sisters. May you burn in the Mistress's fire for all eternity," the Assassin hissed back at her.

Torrin frowned in confusion, but kept her focus on the poisoned blades attacking her. She rolled into a shadow with the woman, winking out of sight.

Magda struggled with the killer, pummeling her with her fists. A sudden pain caused her to scream as her opponent drove a blade into her stomach. The Assassin pushed the larger woman off of her, a cruel smile flashing over her face as she saw the blackness sweeping up from the stab wound on the woman's abdomen. Regaining her feet she hissed out to the others.

"The sword! Sheath the sword."

Luna twirled the new blade, a smile forming on her face at the weight and perfect balance of it. The light emanating from the blade seemed to outline the assassins. The smile fled from her face as two of the dark-eyed women once more attacked her.

Allysandra and her partner fought the third Assassin, doing what they could to keep her away from Athena and Eve. Neither were pure warriors, but they fought as best they could with the curved scimitars favored by the Wave Dancers.

In the corner of the room, Allysandra and her partner rushed the sole Assassin they faced, trying to trap her between them. To their surprise, the Assassin laughed and stepped backward into a shadow, disappearing from sight.

A scream behind them echoed through the room as Eve backed away from her mother. A black-gloved hand emerged from the shadows, the dagger it held slashing across Athena's throat. Bright red blood fountained into the air as the leader of the Wind Walkers went down gurgling.

The Assassin on the floor finally pulled the dagger out of her thigh and unsteadily got up to her feet. She blocked the pain out and twirled the twin blades in her hands while looking at the blonde.

"I remember you. Khelin had fun with you. Did you know that we were always there, watching? Yes, we watched just in case we were needed." She grinned cruelly seeing her words had hit the mark she had intended.

Luna rocked backward, her face betraying the shame she felt at the Assassin's words. She had always believed that what Khelin had done to her would remain her own secret. To hear that

others had seen Khelin abuse her sent her into over the edge.

With an inarticulate scream, Luna attacked, lunging at the injured Assassin, slashing mindlessly. Her sword connected with the Assassin's poisoned blade, shattering it into a thousand shards and continuing through. The silvered edge sliced through fabric, flesh and bone, cutting the killer nearly in half with a fountain of blood.

The black eyes went wide in surprise almost if she could not believe her own death, then she fell onto the floor, red blood spilling out into a large puddle.

The silver light dimmed immediately as the Assassin's dark blood covered the sword, allowing shadows to once more creep further into the library.

Luna quickly wiped the blade across her shirt sleeve, cleaning away the blood. Once again the bright silver light chased shadows from the room, stranding the Assassins.

Torrin tumbled out of a shadow landing heavily on to her back, the wind in her lungs being expelled in a loud gasp. Sensing movement coming at her, she fumbled for a weapon but her trip through the twilight left her at a disadvantage.

"Torrin! Watch out!" Luna yelled, leaping over a fallen chair as she rushed towards the shorter woman.

Reacting to Luna's command Torrin rolled to her left. Her shirtsleeve was pinned for a moment by a dagger and then the cloth ripped away. Torrin flowed back into action. She brought her foot up, caught the Assassin in the chest and pushed the woman back toward the moving Luna.

The tip of the silver sword emerged from the assassin's chest as Luna ruthlessly stabbed forward and upward. The Assassin hung for a moment, pinned upwards upon the blade. Luna hissed into her ear, "Say hello to your Mistress."

Getting to her feet, Torrin pulled a knife and threw it at one of the remaining assassins approaching a group of women who were desperately trying to fight back at her. Her face gave a flicker of disappointment as she saw her knife sink into a shoulder.

Torrin, noticing the shadows were once again back, stepped into a one and flickered out of sight. She stepped out behind the other Assassin who had pulled her knife out and was advancing again on Allysandora. She pulled the woman into the shadows and away from Allysandora.

Eve cringed backward as the Assassin turned toward her with a feral grin that curled her lips back. Hurriedly, Luna shoved the body off her sword, cleaning it on the dead Assassin's shirt. The shadows winked out of existence once again just as the Assassin leapt toward one to reach

Eve.

The surprised Assassin slammed into a wall head first, sliding to the floor from the impact as the shadow she'd been leaping into disappeared.

A body fell from a great height and crashed heavily on to the table top, followed by another. For a moment they wrestled and then the woman on the bottom arched and screamed. Then she flopped back to the table, blood pouring out from where Torrin's two daggers had stabbed into her body.

The guards, led by Rhain, pounded up the steps, their armor clanking and echoing in the stairwell. They broke into the room and stopped abruptly, stunned at the carnage.

Rhain gasped like a fish out of water. "What in the name of the Goddess is going on here?" she screamed.

Luna, her sides heaving from the brief but frantic battle, hurried toward the table, her sword held high, illuminating the scene on the table top.

Rhain took in the blood and the bodies. "You." She pointed at the nearest guard. "Get the healers. Seeing Luna move toward the table with her sword drawn, she drew her own and nodded for the others to follow.

Sensing movement, Torrin looked up. Wincing, she looked away from the bright light of the sword.

Only after she had made certain that the assassin was dead did Luna sheath her sword, returning the room to its normal lighting.

"Torrin?" Dropping to her knees the Ranger tried to check her for any wounds, remembering the black poison that had spread so quickly in the shorter woman's hand back at the river.

Torrin muttered, "I'm okay."

She turned back to Luna, giving her a small smile. "Just happy I wasn't late."

The tall blonde looked around her, wincing as she spotted Magda's still form and then at Eve sobbing over her mother's bloodied body but she saw no other dead. Looking back down, Luna smiled wryly, brushing black hair from Torrin's face. "No, you weren't."

Rhain has a bewildered look on her face as she looked at the dead Assassins. Then she looked down at her sister and froze in fright. "Luna, get away from her," she screamed. "It's a trick!" Vindicated yet terrified, Rhain had her proof literally staring her in the face. Torrin's eyes were as black as the dead Assassins sprawled on the floor.

"Don't be stupid, Rhain." Luna snapped at her. She helped the dark-haired woman to sit up. "She killed the Assassins. We'd all be dead if it weren't for her."

Luna's rebuke stung. Why could nobody but her see the danger that Torrin was to them? "Look at her eyes!" she shouted. "They're as black as the Assassins'. I've researched this Mistress of Shadows. Only Her Chosen have the black eyes. It's her mark on them."

Luna stood up, her eyes full of anger. "Listen to me, you little..." A nearby groan stopped the tall blonde. Tasha was starting to wake up. "Get a healer over here!" Luna snapped.

Torrin had paled at Rhain's accusation and frantically looked around the room. She peered into a mirror hanging crookedly on the wall. Solid black eyes stared back at her. She gasped and scrambled for the door. Instinctively, the dark haired woman stepped into a shadow when the guards tried to stop her.

Rhain cursed, torn between her sister and going after Torrin. Looking at two of the guards she nodded for them to follow Torrin. Then she rushed to her sister's side.

Luna glanced up when she heard the sharp intake of breath... cursing as she saw Torrin dive into a shadow and disappear.

"I let her go once," Luna whispered as she started for the door. "If something happens to Torrin, I'll have your head, Rhain," the blonde fumed.

Torrin fell out of the shadows and into the stairway then pushed past two startled guards. What the hell was happening to her? She had memories that weren't hers. She had skills to walk through shadows. Goddess, was she a danger to those around her? She had no answers only panic-stricken thoughts as she fled farther into the Castle.

The two guards gave Luna a starting point as to where Torrin had gone. From there it was fairly easy to track the panicked flight of the dark-haired woman. Her footprints were crystal clear in the dust for the Ranger to follow and Luna looped along through the corridors, her long legs eating up the distance as she ran.

The blonde had gone only a short while before she came across the two guards that Rhain had sent out after Torrin. They were in the center of an intersection trying to figure out which way to go. "You two." Luna's voice carried down the hallways, louder than she'd intended. Both turned towards her in surprise.

"Go back to the library." They hesitated and she drew enough of the sword from its scabbard for light to shine through the shadows. "Now."

Her tone brooked no argument. She watched until the two had disappeared back the way she had

come before resuming her tracking.

Torrin raced blindly.

She was tainted somehow and she would never be worthy of anything or anybody. The mercenary slammed through a door and then froze, blinking at the black eyes in front of her. For a moment she was afraid there were more assassins, but she realized it was only a mirror.

The only killer here was her. Howling in rage, she flew across the small room and smashed her fists into the dusty glass.

Hands cut and bleeding, she sank to the ground on the broken pieces of glass. Rocking back and forth she cried. She had almost felt like she belonged somewhere and now that had been taken from her. Nobody would trust her now or see beyond her black eyes.

"You have to stop running away," a soft voice called from the doorway. Luna stepped inside, slowly approaching the upset woman. Keeping her voice soft and soothing as if she were talking to a cornered animal, Luna crouched down next to Torrin.

"You hurt your hands."

Ignoring the blood on her hands, Torrin tried to wipe her tears away. "You shouldn't be here. I'm not safe to be around," she said quietly, not looking at Luna.

"Really?" the blonde said, dropping to her knees and gently grasping Torrin's hands. "How come I think I'm not safe unless you *are* around?" the blonde gently teased. She took off the light outer shirt she'd been wearing to wrap Torrin's cuts with.

"Cause you're messed up in the head," she muttered quietly as she let Luna wrap her hands.

Luna grew quiet at that and kept her eyes fixed on the bleeding cuts.

Torrin finally allowed herself to look at Luna's long graceful fingers as the woman tended to her hands. Then she looked up at Luna's face. "Why do you keep coming after me?" she asked softly. "If anyone should hate me it should be you. After what I did at Abnoa, you should want vengeance, like the others, but you keep treating me like I'm a good and worthy person."

"I did want vengeance," the blonde answered, her eyes still on the bandaged hands she held in hers. "But I can't see you as evil, Torrin. I just can't. You aren't bad, no matter what you think. You've saved my life and I've saved yours. That binds us."

Torrin snorted but then gave a small smile. "Well, it does seem that we can't get rid of each other."

Suddenly Luna looked up at Torrin, her eyes cold and distant. "And I still want vengeance, just

not against you." Then her blue eyes thawed at Torrin's words and she slowly gave her a crooked grin. "Looks like it, doesn't it?"

Torrin stilled at the look on Luna's face. It was so out of place on her friend's face. Unthinking, she touched Luna's cheek with her bandaged hand. "Vengeance doesn't suit you."

"What does?" Luna found herself asking, her voice low and quiet. Her body froze as she felt Torrin's hand brush her cheek.

Torrin gave her a genuine smile. "You're a leader, Luna. And a good leader can't rule with vengeance. Unless, of course, you want to be Khelin or some of her relatives," she added. "But you're not like Khelin, so don't let her memory taint you. I don't know what happened, and it's not my business, but as long as her memory affects you, she controls you. You need to let her go, Luna, don't give her that power."

Luna stared in shock at Torrin, not knowing what or even how to say it. "Your eyes aren't black anymore," she finally whispered,

Torrin frowned as she processed what Luna had said. Removing her hand from Luna's cheek, she fumbled for a piece of broken glass. Lifting it up she nearly sobbed in relief as her own gray eyes looked back at her. She dropped the piece of glass with a laugh.

"Thank the Goddess," she said and impulsively grabbed Luna in a hug and then kissed her cheek. She pulled back with a grin. "That has to be the best thing anybody has ever said to me." With another laugh she stood up, feeling the heavy weight lift off of her chest.

Luna smiled up at her, her face red and her body well aware of the hug she had just received. A bit unsteadily, she stood up and touched Torrin on the shoulder. "Think we can go back now? Tyra will want to make sure you aren't hurt and that Tasha is all right."

Torrin sobered a bit, her good mood dampened. Could she face them? Why had her eyes changed back? Why had they changed in the first place? Searching back through the past events, she suddenly remembered the cold river water and struggling with the Assassin, her fingers stabbing into the black eyes in an attempt to save her life and the blackness that had then swept into her body. "What?" She looked back to Luna when she realized she was being asked a question.

The blonde watched her, worry in her blue eyes. "Will you come back with me?"

"I don't know if I should stay. I don't fancy being beaten up and chained to a wall again. Maybe it would be best if I left." Torrin didn't really want to go. It felt wrong, like an ache that wouldn't go away. But she couldn't stand staying under the constant threat of imprisonment. Especially since she couldn't argue since some of the women really had a legitimate claim to a judgment.

Luna's eyes flashed with anger. "What?" Her grip on Torrin's arm tightened. "Beaten up?"

Chained to a wall? What are you talking about?" Realization slowly dawned and she growled, "Rhain."

Letting go of the shorter woman's arm Luna whirled and stalked from the room and headed back toward the library. "That's it! I'm going to kill that woman! I don't care if she's your sister!"

Torrin grabbed Luna around the waist and pulled her back into her body trying to hold her still. "Calm down. Luna, calm down. You can't attack Rhain. Not yet, at least...but hopefully in the future..." She trailed off thinking of some punishments for her half sister.

"I won't let her get away with this." Luna hissed, twisting around in Torrin's arms. "She can't..." Luna's words slowed to a halt as she realized exactly how close she was to Torrin, their bodies pressed against one another.

Torrin shook her head. "Luna, you can't attack her. Okay? She's Quinn's daughter. You know Quinn the legend, the ass of epic... uh, never mind." She looked up at Luna, "Um, have you always been this tall?"

Luna consciously made her legs take a step backward, her face burning. "I'm certain I was shorter when I was young," she muttered.

The dark-haired woman flushed at her inane comment. "Um, yeah. I suppose you were shorter when you were, uh, younger." She let Luna slip out of her arms but not really wanting to let her go. She flushed even more at her thoughts.

"I want you to stay," Luna mumbled. She had no problem facing the Mistress of the Shadow's Assassins that could meld in and out of darkness, but for some reason she found herself having trouble facing the small woman in front of her.

Before her courage failed her, the tall blonde held up a hand to stop Torrin before she could answer. "Wait, hear me out before you say anything?"

Torrin opened her mouth to protest then shut it, quirking a dark eyebrow at Luna. "Hmmm."

The ranger thought fast trying to come up with a way to get Torrin to stay. She didn't want her running away again. Who knew where the other woman would end up if she fled again? Luna bit her lower lip in thought then nodded to herself. "I want to hire you."

Torrin's gut sank. "What? I thought we were more..." She looked down at her feet. 'Stupid. Why would Luna think of her as her friend?' She looked back up, her grey eyes distant. "Okay," her voice cold. "What is that you want me to do? And you're racking up quite the tab, you know."

Luna's resolve crumbled. Taking a step back toward Torrin, she gently touched her cheek. "Torrin..." Luna paused, struggling for the words. "I want you to stay because... you're my friend." Blue eyes searched the gray eyes in front of her intently. "Um, I... well, don't leave me

again. Please?"

Warmth flickered back into Torrin's eyes, and she looked at Luna with wonder. "Really? I don't know why... considering what I did." She blew out a breath and reached up, gently squeezing the hand that rested on her cheek.

Her throat suddenly felt thick and she cleared her throat. "I don't want to cause you any more problems, Luna. Rhain will create them just because I'm here, and my past activities could hurt you too. Are you sure you want me to stay?"

Luna's lips curled upward into a smile and she nodded before her friend had even finished speaking. "Of course I do. Who else is going to watch my back? What do you say?" She took Torrin's hand in her own and tugged her toward the hallway back to the Library. "Keep me out of trouble?"

Torrin laughed and let herself be led away, enjoying the touch. "Somehow, I sense keeping you out of trouble is a full time job. Ah, I get perks with the job, right?"

The blonde glanced over her shoulder at the trailing woman and wiggled her eyebrows and smirked. "Depends how good you are," Luna turned away quickly before Torrin could see the blush creeping across her face.

Torrin snorted. "You need to work more on being dirty. It totally blows it when you blush," the petite woman said evilly behind Luna's back.

"I don't know what you're talking about," the other woman muttered, hastily dropping Torrin's hand and continuing down the hallway.

Torrin couldn't wipe the grin off of her face but wisely chose to stay quiet. After a few moments of following Luna she wondered where they were. "I'm glad you know the way back. I wasn't really paying attention."

The taller woman accepted the change of topic. "I've been wandering the halls at night." She pointed down one of the cross-corridors they passed on the way back to the library. "There's a stairway down there that leads up to a tower guarded by these old women. It's kind of strange."

Torrin nodded. "The Castle is haunted. Something bad happened and people can't move on until things have been set right. I met a ghost. She's the one who gave me that sword." Torrin gave a shiver remembering the sad warrior.

Luna touched the hilt of the sword in question then paused, looking to the other woman questioningly. "A spirit gave you this? A ghost?"

Torrin stopped and looked back at Luna, she shrugged. "A ghost, a non-corporeal being, a body you can look through."

"Smart ass," Luna said. "I meant, did the ghost have a name?"

Seeing that Luna was not amused with her quip she meekly finished her story. Torrin recited everything she could remember. "She was dressed in armor that looked like it was Fire Clan in origin, a sword that still looked like it had fresh blood on it, and she called herself the Deceiver."

The blonde frowned, her fingers curling around the hilt of the blade for a second. "The Deceiver?" There were legends about the assassin who had killed the last High Queen named that. I think we should pay a visit to the Priestesses after this."

"Okay." Torrin agreed. She grinned at Luna. "Goody, more verbal sparring with a Goddess' Chosen."

Luna grinned back. "I know the feeling." Impulsively, she took Torrin's hand once more and pulled her toward the stairs leading to the Library. "Come on, we better get back before things get even worse up there."

Torrin hid a small grin as she looked down at their hands wondering why she was letting Luna be all touchy feely with her.

"Fine, but you can't let Rhain's goons pound on me anymore. I don't know how many more blows to the head I can take."

Luna's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I promise." She was going to have a word with Rhain or a fight; she wasn't sure which one yet.

As they were climbing up the stairs, they could hear the chaos in the Library. Several people were screaming at each other at the same time, while several other were wailing. Luna glanced at Torrin, straightened her shoulders and dropped the ex-mercenary's hand as they reached the doorway.

The guards eyed Torrin with suspicion but stepped aside to let them enter. The scene inside was worse than Luna had expected. Magda's body was laid out next to the table that Athena's was laying on. Crouched next to Athena, crying and wailing was Eve and another woman Luna didn't recognize.

Next to Magda's body, Adrian and Valerie were screaming at each other about who was in charge, while several Fire warriors watched on uncomfortably. Allysandra and her mate were in the corner, watching it all silently with unreadable expressions.

A healer was tending to Tasha, wrapping her head in a bandage and trying to get the Earth warrior to stay still while she did it.

Rhain stood just inside the doorway, talking to the two guards that Luna had sent away earlier.

She turned toward Luna and scowling in anger as she spotted her half-sister. Before she could start ranting again, Luna hauled back and slammed a fist into Rhain's face, breaking her nose and sending her tumbling backwards.

Torrin winced, and then frowned. Not that she cared about Rhain getting her nose busted, she was worried more about the impact that action might have on Luna's leadership role.

Rhain staggered back up holding a hand to her gushing nose. "You bitch!" she gargled from her own blood.

Luna reached down and hauled Rhain back to her feet. "You're a disgrace to the North, Rhain." She shoved her toward the closer of the two guards that she'd been talking to. "Get her out of my sight." She glared at the three of them. "Next time you try to imprison someone without orders, I'll kill you all myself."

Rhain flushed, both from anger and embarrassment. "You're being tricked. Can't you see that?" the woman nearly howled as the other two women dragged her away.

"Your sister's going insane," Luna muttered to Torrin as she moved toward the two bodies.

Torrin just nodded sadly. She wondered what had happened to Rhain to make her this bitter. Growing up, it had been Tasha who had picked on her while Rhain seemed indifferent to her presence. Now, Tasha seemed almost likable while Rhain had become her tormentor.

Although they were both still glaring at the other, Valerie and Adrian had stopped yelling at each other during the altercation.

Adrian's eyes lit up as she spotted Torrin. Torrin resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Goddess, she was ready to try celibacy. Just as long as she never slept with someone like Adrian again. Honestly, she'd give it a real shot this time. She didn't bother to acknowledge Adrian as she just let her eyes slide over the room to take in all the details.

Luna sighed as she spotted Adrian's look, briefly closing her eyes to refocus on the situation. "Valerie, what's going on?" she asked the head of the Castle guards. When she caught the Wave Dancer's eye, the Ranger nodded toward Allysandra getting a small nod in return and a questioning glance toward Torrin.

"I was trying to figure out what to do with the last Assassin, when..." Valerie curled her lips, "Rhain tried to kill her while she was unconscious."

Luna mentally groaned.

Glancing toward the back of the room she saw the still unconscious Assassin that had rammed into the wall head on wrapped up in what looked to be more than fifty feet of rope.

Torrin looked over at the bound woman. "You need to put her in a room with total darkness or total light. There can't be any shadows."

Valerie looked skeptical.

"She's as close to an expert as we have on this," Luna gently reminded the head guard. She grudgingly agreed and signaled her guards to take away the bound woman and to start rounding up lamps... lots of them.

Touching Eve's shoulder in sympathy, Luna moved away from the two fallen leaders. Her anger and sadness would come later. She was too drained by the day long meeting and then the battle to deal with any more emotion.

Torrin looked around frowning. "How did they get in here unnoticed?"

Fire Warriors made excellent fighters, but apparently their guarding abilities left something to be desired. Luna wisely did not say that out loud in front of Valerie. Instead, she stepped aside as a group of white-robed priestesses entered to take care of the two fallen clan Chiefs. With a start, she realized that one of them was the old priestess she'd talked to in the temple when Adrian had tried to assault her.

Noticing a guard moving toward one of the dead Assassin's weapons Torrin snapped, "Don't touch that unless you want to die. Do you know how many poisons they have on their bodies and knives?"

Kneeling next to a now pale-faced guard she quickly checked for anything that looked useful. "The blades are poisoned. Just place them in a sack and burn them. The fire will render them harmless, but until then, one nick and you are a corpse."

The guard nodded and got up to get a sack.

Luna alternated her attention between watching Torrin and the priestesses as they prepared the two bodies. The family of the dead women would guard over them while their bodies were burnt and their spirits sent to the afterlife.

After only a few moments they picked up the two dead women and carried them back toward the doorway. Eve and the other woman trailed after them. After a moment of hesitation, Adrian followed as well.

Stepping away from the group, Luna moved over to Allysandria. "You two all right?"

The head of the Wave Dancers nodded. "Yes. Fine. I'm sorry we couldn't save Athena."

Luna clasped the sailor on her shoulder. "You did your best."

As Allysandra and her wife left the room, Luna talked briefly with the healer that had dealt with Tasha before walking back to where Torrin was. "I think that's about all the excitement I can stand for a night."

Torrin had sat back with a sigh while the guard when for the sack and watched everybody leave. She noticed the way Luna interacted with everybody, and gave a small smile. They may not know it yet, but Luna was their leader.

She looked up at Luna and gave her a sad smile. "Think you can stand a little more?"

"That depends, what is it?" Luna watched as the healer led a still disoriented Tasha pass the Fire guards standing by the door leaving her and Torrin alone with the dead Assassins.

"I have a theory why I can walk in shadows..." She looked up at Luna, "you have to believe me this is a new thing. I am not an Assassin."

Luna nodded, "I believe you," touching Torrin's shoulder to encourage her to continue. The nearby guards were watching them with interest. "Maybe we can talk somewhere more private though?"

Torrin shook her head. "Just shield me from the guards for a second. It shouldn't take more than that." She hoped. It hadn't taken very long in the water but that woman wasn't dead. This assassin was very much dead.

Curious, Luna stepped sideway to block the guard's view of whatever Torrin was about to do.

Torrin smiled in thanks and then leaned over the corpse. She moved her bandaged hands up to the woman's black eyes that stared into nothingness. Then with a delicate movement, she placed her index fingers over each eye. She flinched, not really wanting to see what she had last time. The blackness moved like ink coating each finger then it was gone. Torrin bit down on her lip so hard it started to bleed. Shaking, she removed her fingers and tried not to cry. There were too many bloody and violent images in her head. She wanted to scream, Khelin was viler than she had ever suspected. Slowly her brain cataloged the images and memories.

"Torrin?" Luna grabbed the other woman's shoulders to keep her from falling over, her fingers brushing bare skin as she pulled the other woman to her feet. "Torrin? Look at me."

Torrin's shook her head and refused to meet Luna's gaze. "I can't, give me a moment," she choked out.

She looked down and noticed the dead Assassin's eyes were brown now, no longer black. "You see what she saw, don't you?" Luna whispered with a slow tendril of horror winding its way through her gut and she dropped her hand. If that was true, and the Assassins had been there when Khelin had... Luna took a step back.

Torrin breathed harshly through her nose. "It's nice to know a lot of my nightmares aren't things I've done." Feeling Luna step away she reached out not wanting to lose her connection to reality.

"Don't leave me, please..." She looked up desperately to Luna, her eyes slowly bleeding back from black to grey.

Luna hesitated, still appalled by the discovery, but took one look at the shaken woman, and reached down to take Torrin's hand. She slowly pulled the black-haired woman to her feet. "Come on. We both need sleep."

Torrin shook her head. "Yeah." She let herself be pulled along. "You're right, I do see what she has seen. Most of it makes no sense. It's too much to process, but Khelin sent them to murder the Council and the new leader of the North."

She blanched remembering more details. For a moment she thought she would be sick. "You-you-your guards at the Pass are all murdered."

A warm arm went around her shoulders, steadying her until the moment had passed. Luna nodded. She'd feared that was the case ever since she realized the Assassins had to have gone over the Pass themselves. "A new group was already on its way to replace them." She helped Torrin down the stairs and towards her room.

Torrin looked around Luna's room. "Nice. You must have impressed some people."

The blonde gave her a sheepish grin, slightly embarrassed by the room. They'd moved her from her previous quarters that were next to the Healers hall to a small suite of rooms. The three rooms were bigger than the Ranger actually felt comfortable in, but Athena had assured her that they were not being used.

"I get a lot of visitors," she said, undoing her belt and carefully laying the sword and scabbard on a dresser.

Both of Torrin's eyebrows rose at that. "Really?"

Once again Luna could feel her face heating. "Not those kind of visitors!" Luna stalked toward the washbasin. "Just people who want to get advice on problems."

Torrin grinned at the blush that covered Luna's face. "Uh, huh." Torrin's grin faded as she sat down, she hurt. First getting pummeled by Rhain and her goons, then fighting the Assassins plus crashing into the table, and finally her hands. She stared at her hands. Goddess she was a mess.

The excitement that had been keeping Luna on her feet slowly drained away and she sat down

heavily next to Torrin, staring at the polished wood floor. "Thank you." She said quietly, her fingers fidgeting with the blood stained tunic she wore.

Rhain had taken the ex-mercenary's sword and the black scale mail when she had her locked up. But lacking imagination, they had not taken her knives. The few that she had left on her body she pulled out and put them on the small table next to her.

She looked over at Luna and gave her a wan smile. "You're welcome." She laid her hand on Luna's arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry I wasn't there sooner. I'm sorry those women died."

The blonde turned to study the face of the woman who sat besides her, smiling faintly and nodding before letting herself fall backward on the bed top. "I know. But we probably all would have died if you hadn't come. We'll deal with Athena and Magda's deaths tomorrow."

Torrin's eyes followed Luna as she fell back. She didn't fail to notice the way the skin was exposed on her abdomen as the fabric rode up. Blushing as she realized she was staring, she started to get up. "I should go, um, let you sleep. I'll find a place to bed for the night."

Warm fingers closed around Torrin's wrist that kept her from standing up. "There's another bed in the other room." Luna waved toward a second doorway, a room she hadn't used for anything yet.

"Oh, are you sure?" She licked her lips nervously. "I don't want to cause you any problems."

"Are you going to run away again?"

Torrin grimaced at the implication. "No. I made a promise to keep you out of trouble. So, you, my friend, are stuck with me."

Long fingers slowly released her.

"Then you aren't going to cause me problems." Luna grinned wryly and struggled up to a sitting position, wincing slightly as she pulled the scar on her side. It was very nearly healed but the fight had stretched it more than she'd realized.

Torrin noticed Luna's wince. "Is that still bothering you?" Reaching over she started pulling up the side of Luna's shirt.

"Here let me take a look."

The blonde went completely still. Her breathing stopping for a second as Torrin lifted up the side of her blood-stained shirt. "It's just stiff." She managed to say her voice a bit higher than normal.

Torrin made an "uh huh" noise, and gently touched around the wound. She grinned, "I do good

work. You will hardly have a scar."

She prodded some of the muscles in the back. "You just need to soak in a hot tub to loosen the muscles around the area. They've been overcompensating for the wound and now they're stiff." She dug into a nasty knot giving a grin as it relaxed. Her grin fell when she realized what she was doing.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have just... I'll just go away now." Blushing she scrambled off the bed and made her way to the extra room Luna had pointed out. She left the Ranger staring after her with a confused expression on her face and her blue eyes darkened with emotion.

Swallowing, Luna shook her head and quickly changed out of the bloody clothes she was wearing. A soak in a hot tub sounded great but unfortunately she was too tired to go down to the bath houses. Instead she settled for a quick wash by the washbasin and climbed naked into the clean bed. Luna's last thought as she slipped into sleep was how gentle Torrin's touch had been.

Torrin slowly stripped out her clothes. With a groan, she realized she didn't have anything else wear. She debated for a moment, then with a shrug, decided to go naked. As she sat on the unused bed, she unwrapped her hands. Happily, she noticed that other than some nicks, they looked undamaged.

Sliding under the covers she wondered why she was so eager to touch Luna yet embarrassed when she did. Sighing, she realized it didn't matter. Luna was a decent and honorable person. Luna had never killed for money. She was everything Torrin wasn't. She turned over deciding that she should just be happy with the friendship that she had and focus on not screwing that part up.

The angry winds around Abnoa shrieked around her.

Slowly the winds became voices of the many dead. The voices turned into maimed bodies rising up from the stones and the earth covered in blood. They clawed and screamed at her for vengeance. They called her the Betrayer. Over and over they screamed for her death to give them peace.

Torrin tried to shove them away but there were too many. "I'm sorry!" She cried out over and over until her voice was raw. But still they came, overpowering her until she smothered by rotting flesh and surrounded by the smell of blood.

Luna was awakened from a deep and dreamless sleep by a sound. At first the Ranger didn't know what it was it. Then, as she sleepily sat up, she decided it was coming from next door.

Frowning, Luna got up, wrapping a blanket around herself and went to investigate. Opening the door silently she stepped into Torrin's room. The shorter woman was tossing and turning on her bed, obviously in the throws of a nightmare.

Immediately Luna crossed to her friend's side, knelt down next to the bed and touched Torrin's shoulder.

"Torrin, wake up, it's just a nightmare," she murmured softly.

Suddenly Luna found herself pinned to the bed. The remnants of sleep evaporated as she reacted to the position.

Torrin jerked awake from her dream at the pressure on her shoulder. But the terror of the dream was still there. She reached her hand for the dagger under her pillow, but it wasn't there. Automatically her body moved to another defense. Rolling to her side she grabbed the hand and pulled and flipped. With a growl she pinned the hands and grapevined the legs with her own. "I'm sorry," she howled. "I really am, but I can't bring you back from the dead!"

Frantically Luna tried to shove Torrin away but the shorter woman was stronger than she looked.

"Let me go!"

Torrin blinked at the voice. Slowly the nightmare faded and she looked down into blue eyes. The dark-haired woman frowned, and then realized who it was. Her face went pale and she let go of Luna as if she had been burned.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't know," she wailed and curled into a ball and started to cry. 'Oh, Goddess...I'm a danger to everyone. Even in my sleep, I'm dangerous. All I know is how to hurt and kill. Perhaps the gift of shadows wasn't just a quirk of fate,' she thought. She wanted to run, get as far away from this situation that she could, but she had promised Luna she wouldn't.

Luna rolled to the side quickly, snatching up the blanket she'd been holding and wrapped it around herself, her breath coming in short quick pants as she got herself under control.

She was just opening her mouth to apologize when she heard Torrin's ragged voice. Twisting around on the bed her heart broke at the sight of Torrin twisted up and sobbing. Ignoring the faint tremors of panic still coursing through her limbs, the tall blonde stretched out alongside Torrin.

Hesitantly at first, then more firmly, she pulled the younger woman to her and held onto her tightly.

"Shhh, it's all right. You surprised me, that's all." Gently she brushed her fingers through short black hair that was damp with sweat.

Torrin froze in surprise for a moment at the contact, and then relaxed against Luna. She had expected the Ranger to leave in disgust. "I'm sorry," she mumbled out again.

"Don't worry about it," Luna whispered, drawing the blankets up over them to keep out the cold air. She brushed aside locks of hair that had drifted across the other woman's forehead. "What

were you dreaming about?"

Torrin gave a shiver as her mind went back to the nightmare she had been having. "I was back at Abnoa." She cleared her throat. "The dead wanted their pound of flesh." She looked away not wanting to see Luna's face.

Calloused fingertips drew Torrin's head back so that Luna could see her grey eyes. In the dim light they looked pale and vulnerable. "I don't blame you." She found herself saying, her fingers remaining on Torrin's cheek. "Not for what happened."

"You should. You should hate me. I could have stood down," Torrin whispered. "Rya gave me that option, but I was a Hawk. So, where my pack went I went. Even if it was to bring my old home to its knees. Even if it was to put a sword through the back of someone who might have been a sister."

Torrin's eyes flickered back and forth across Luna's face, unable to hold her gaze. "Rhain is right, you know. I couldn't save you just from the decency of my own heart. No, I had to make you pay me."

She gave a bitter laugh. "You know the sad thing? I actually wanted too. You were noble and dignified even strung up. You had fought well and although with Khelin's guards beating you down, you seemed so much better than the rest of us. Then when she had you stripped and tied up like a traitor..." Torrin closed her eyes. "I was too scared to give up my life even to do the right thing."

"But you didn't take your payment," Luna reminded her quietly, blue eyes sparkling in the dim light as she watched Torrin's anguished expression. "So you did save me without pay. That means you did it from the goodness of your own heart."

Torrin reached up and wiped her face. "You know I'm 22 and I've never cried. Not when Quinn beat me, not when the priestesses at the Temple were trying to 'condition' me. But I've cried more in these last couple of months than in my whole lifetime."

Luna smiled and gently touched Torrin's chest, just above her breast. "You might not believe me, but I think you're a good person, Torrin."

Torrin flinched at the touch and her nostrils flared, taking in the warmth of the touch.

Luna drew her hand back. "I cried a lot when my parents died." Luna revealed haltingly.

"You were close to your parents. It's understandable that you would," Torrin murmured. It felt strange, lying together. The bed warming around them as the blankets kept in their body heat, sheltering them from the outside world. It almost seemed as if they were completely alone in the entire castle.

Then Torrin began to notice other things she missed because of her previous emotional state. There was a lot of skin on skin contact going on. She licked her lips and tried to drag her mind away from the spiral it was going down.

She sighed and tried to refocus. "Oh, about the assassins? Um, Armando the God of the Horse people came to me. He told me that you were in danger, and that I wasn't where I belonged." She rolled her eyes. "More cryptic shit." She stretched and yawned. "You know, I'm getting tired of ghosts, Gods, and priestesses all with their mysterious messages that make no sense."

"I'm glad you listened to it, even if it was 'cryptic shit'." Luna's grin turned thoughtful as she shifted slightly on the bed and away from Torrin's warm and soft body. She really should have kept a blanket wrapped around herself, but she wasn't certain how to do it now without embarrassing Torrin.

"That's the second time he's helped us, right?"

"Yeah. I don't get why though. This is kind of far from his people and the grassy plains of Drakemore," she replied.

Torrin's yawn was infectious and Luna found herself yawning as well. "We should get some sleep." She contemplated getting out of the nice warm bed and into the cold air to go back to her bed.

Torrin nodded, feeling her eyes grow heavy. She matched one of Luna's yawns with her own and closed her eyes.

The blonde fought to keep her eyes open. She'd get up and go back to her own bed in just a minute.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Blood and Honor

Zee: By an American and a Canadian well mostly the Canadian, it's her fault.

Windstar: Zee is, as usual, making things up. This story is completely her fault and a result of her

imagination only. I claim no responsibility for this at all.

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Chapter 10 Intro

The Fall of the Last Queen

Ella, Captain of the Queen's Guard, was huddled under a tree, wet and miserable. The woman clutched a long sword to her chest, blue eyes staring but not seeing the river in front of her. Her only companion this night was the rain as she sat beneath one of the large fir trees that lined the Winderling's banks.

In the distance she could just barely make out the lights of the Queen's city. Mocking her. Taunting her with the promise of something she could never have.

The rain had turned the Fire warrior's blonde hair dark like the color of old blood. Irritably she wiped a long strand of it out of her face and closed her eyes as she remembered the past...the days when her Cassie had been hers alone, before she had become Queen Cassandra. The good times before the Queen had invited others into her bedchambers.

Scarred fingers tightened about the hilt of her sword as Ella thought about all the women she had tossed from the Queen's bedchambers. She hadn't wanted to believe that Cassie would change so much, but she had. Or maybe she hadn't. Maybe the young Queen had always been like that and it was Ella who had seen things that were not there.

Love, for example.

"Love." The voice in her head was cold and mocking. "There was no love. You were only a thing to be used and now Cassie has no use for you." The voice chuckled, "Not when she has so many others to warm her bed."

As the voice spoke, Ella's hand gripped the pommel of her sword tighter and tighter until her knuckles turned ghostly white.

"She has no right to be Queen. She makes the throne room into a whorehouse slandering the names of all who came before." The voice was sly and coaxing. "Something should be done. Someone should remove this disease before it spreads through the Castle like a plague and into the land."

Ella nodded. It was her duty to protect the people. Maybe it was even her duty to protect them from an unfit Queen. As the voice spoke, her thoughts twisted round and round until only one thing made perfect sense. She rose up wet and dripping from the shadows of the trees. The voice stilled inside her head and with steady measured steps, she entered the Castle.

She passed her guards nodding and smiling tightly to them. The second in charge of the Guards, Shamira, stopped her as she tried to make her way into the Queen's room. "Ella, you have to stop doing this to yourself."

"I swear. No more after this." She smiled reassuringly but the smile only seemed to make Shamira more uneasy.

"Promise me that this is the last time, Ella. You have to let her go. No matter how spoiled a child she's being, she is still our Queen. Give her some time she can still grow into the woman we know she can be." Blue eyes searched her Captain's determined face.

"Ella, please," she pleaded.

"Last time, I swear."

The guard knew she shouldn't but she nodded anyway. "All right, I'll stand over here. Okay?"

Ella nodded and strode toward the door.

She entered silently and saw them intertwined like vines. It was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. She felt her gut twist and a fire born on anger's wings alight in her breast.

She unsheathed her sword and with a cry of pain and rage, rushed forward. The blade lifted high and brought down quickly. The lovers too startled to react were impaled together. With such force was the blow given that the blade sank deep into the stone. When the Captain of the Guard tried to lift again, it broke at the tip leaving an inch embedded into the stone.

The Queen and the Captain's eyes met. Both held anger, sorrow, and pain but no longer any love. It had been pushed aside by their actions.

The door was being forced open by the guards, their panicked voices shouting loudly. Horrified, the guards stopped as they saw the one woman they had trusted beyond all others betray what they all had stood for.

The room became chaotic with the stench of vengeance hanging heavily.

The Queen's mouth opened. "You," she hissed blood dribbling down her chin.

"You all shall pay for this failure," the queen spoke raggedly as her breathing became labored. "I curse you all to remain here during life and in death until once more the line of Queens is returned to the throne."

"You, my Deceiver," dying blue eyes turned to her one time lover. "You shall never again be known by your birth name. Your name shall be stricken from all records. People will spit at you

and remember only the horrible thing that you have done. And after your death? Your ghost shall be cursed to roam these halls... never to pass over."

"No more lies from your faithless lips!" Ella roared and swung her blade again. The Queen's head fell landing on bloodied stones. Still her eyes remained open and her mouth moved. "Never"

Chapter 10

She was in a warm comfortable place.

Luna moved closer to the warmth, pulling it closer to herself and holding it there. Warm skin pressed against warmer skin. Slowly, her eyelids fluttered open to reveal contented blue eyes. Yawning, Luna stretched pressing her front against the warm back of the person she held. The blonde froze as her brain caught up with the actions of her body.

Torrin was trying desperately to seem like she was still asleep. Luna was only doing this because she was asleep and thought that Torrin was someone else. Torrin held no illusions that Luna would ever be more than her friend, no matter how much her body wanted to be more than that at the moment.

Slowly Luna let go over the firm flesh she'd just been groping, her face so hot she feared she would burst into flames at any instant. Hoping that Torrin was still asleep she tried to shift away, which was difficult because Torrin seemed to be laying on one of her arms.

Torrin swallowed and wondered why Luna wasn't moving. She wasn't sure how much longer she could play this game, she had bit back a moan as Luna had slowly let go of her skin. Then she realized she was using Luna's arm as a pillow.

A pounding on the outer door announced a visitor and gave Luna the opportunity to slide her arm out from under Torrin as she got up to answer it.

Muttering a good morning and trying not to let the dark-haired woman see her face, Luna pulled a blanket up over her shoulders and headed for her room to put on some clothes. More pounding on the door caused her to hurry.

"Luna?" A voice called from the hallway.

Hastily pulling on a clean shirt, pants and boots, Luna strapped her new sword to her side. It felt right there, and she spared another thankful prayer to the Moon Goddess for Torrin's presence yesterday. The outer door swung open just as she finished buckling the belt.

"Luna, are you... oh. Sorry, I wasn't sure you were here." Eve stammered a bit, smiling as she spotted the tall blonde.

Eve looked a lot like her mother, the same blonde almost white hair, fair complexion, and high sculpted cheek bones. However, where her mother had given the impression of aloofness, Eve always gave Luna the impression of a scholar not certain how to deal with the real world.

"Good morning, Eve," the ranger said.

"I know it's early, but I wanted to let you know that I've officially been made the head of the Wind Walkers."

"Congratulations. I wish it were under better circumstances, but you will make a good leader for your clan." Eve was positively beaming. Luna hoped the Wind Walker wasn't going to ask for something else from her.

"I would like you to come to the ceremony with me, if you can that is?" Eve asked, foiling Luna's hopes.

"Ceremony?" Luna asked a bit weakly.

Eve nodded somberly. "Mother is going to be burned and I'll be fully instated as the head of the Clan."

Torrin had given a small whimper as she rolled over to watch Luna leave. Fate was a cruel bitch some times. Sliding out of the bed she pulled on her clothes from yesterday, black would be oddly fitting after the deaths of yesterday.

As Torrin slipped the shirt over her head she wondered if she was up for the task of protecting Luna. Without a doubt she knew Luna would need protecting, although after last night Luna might need protection from her. She blew out a breath and ran fingers through her lengthening hair. She needed to cut it, but for the moment, settled for tying it back in a horsetail. Hearing voices she moved into the other room and saw Eve talking to Luna.

Torrin unconsciously scowled at the young woman, seeing the way she looked at Luna. 'Luna's apparently a dying woman's meal and that girl is dying,' she thought.

"Goody," Torrin mumbled as she heard the Wind Walker's news. Fortunately she had said it too quietly for it to be heard.

Torrin was actually proud of herself as she bit back another nasty comment. She gave a small cough to announce her presence in the room but the girl was quite happy to pretend she didn't exist, her eyes never once leaving Luna.

"The other Clan leaders will be there, Allysandra, Tasha, and all of Magda's children. The Fire warriors said something about starting their Rites of Passage afterward."

Luna winced. That meant the Fire warriors would be choosing their own leader after Eve's ceremony. The Rites consisted of every warrior who thought they were strong enough to challenge for the position of leader. The one standing at the end of the day was the leader. It was brutal but effective.

"Give me a moment, Eve?" Luna asked the girl and moved over to where Torrin was standing.

"What do you think?" She was more the aware that Eve was ignoring Torrin as if she didn't even exist.

Torrin's ears perked up at the Rites of Passage, and then she frowned. Adrian would no doubt be going for the leadership of the clan. She blinked looking up at Luna. "What do I think about what?"

A pale eyebrow rose. "About attending this ceremony?"

With a grin she placed a hand on Luna's hip, not missing the scowl the girl in the doorway gave her with that action. "Oh that? You should go. People will be disappointed if you don't. Plus, as the City's Leader, you will need to make the new Clan chiefs feel welcomed as they step into their new roles." Then she muttered, "But not too welcome, I hope," as she gave Eve a glare of her own.

Luna stared at Torrin as if she had lost her mind. "What?" She'd missed everything Torrin had said after the shorter woman had put her hand on her hip.

Torrin looked back to Luna thus breaking her glaring contest with Eve.

She gave Luna a smile. "Hate to break it to you, but somehow you're the big chief to all these women. You have to go. You have to welcome the new Clan chiefs. It would look bad for you and to them if you didn't."

"Are you out of your mind?" Luna asked incredulously, turning to look toward Eve who was nodding enthusiastically. Turning back to Torrin she shook her head. "Oh no. No way, not possible."

Eve smiled at Luna, "You'll come then, good" and then frowned at Torrin as she backed out the door and headed off to get ready, leaving Luna staring at Torrin in shock.

"What?" Torrin looked puzzled at Luna.

"I'm not a big chief! I'm just a ranger." Luna stepped away from Torrin, gesturing towards the doorway. "And what was that all about?"

Torrin looked back innocently, "what was what all about?"

Blue eyes narrowed. "You know full well what I'm talking about. Did Eve do something to you to make you dislike her?"

Torrin started picking up her throwing knives and securing them. She frowned. She would need to get her stuff back from Wooten and buy a new sword. Rhain probably would pretend she had no idea what she was talking about if she demanded hers returned.

Luna stared at the woman who was calmly strapping on her knives and crossed her arms over her chest. "Are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what? That, yes, you are the big chief whether you know it or not. You maybe a ranger, but somehow you've become much more than that here. Or, that Eve was flirting with you and wanting me very much gone so you could give her a big old welcome." She made a face at Luna.

Luna blinked, started to say something, stopped, stared at Torrin, then shook her head and went looking for something a bit more formal to wear. "I don't even know where to start correcting you on that."

Torrin laughed. "Luna, you're very attractive. Trust me, the women around here and at Wooten's tavern noticed. I thought I was going to have to bust some heads at the tavern. You need to be careful, okay? Some women are going to be only interested in you for your power." Torrin wasn't even going to argue the leadership issue. Luna was their new leader. She couldn't stop leading the women here even if she wanted to.

Luna paused, holding up the only shirt she owned that could be considered somewhat formal. Mezzarna had done the embroidery for it herself. "You think I'm attractive?"

"Of course," Torrin said absently as she looked at the bruise on the side of her face in the lone mirror in the room. She paused as she realized what she'd said.

Luna gave her a dazzling smile then turned her back and changed her shirt. "You don't look so bad either," she said, turning around to survey Torrin from head to toe. "We better go see about finding breakfast before this ceremony starts. If it's like any other Wind Walker ceremony, it's going to be long and pretty boring."

Torrin blushed and squirmed. She wasn't use to that kind of attention. Sure people checked her out but normally it was judging her strength for fighting. "Um, okay, thank you. Are you sure you want me to go with you?"

She was trying to get her balance back after Luna had taken it out from under her.

"You aren't getting out of this so easily." Blue eyes blinked at her innocently. "Besides, aren't you suppose to be protecting me?"

Torrin sighed. "Yes, I am. Do you want me to protect you from Eve? She could have dangerous,

grabby hands."

"Eve's harmless, she was just being friendly," Luna retorted, waiting for Torrin to finish getting ready.

Torrin rolled her eyes. "Yeah and she'd like to get really friendly with your body," she muttered.

Luna pretended not to hear her. "Are you coming?"

"If I must," Torrin sighed.

Luna began to feel uncomfortable as they walked down the streets toward the Temple of the Moon Goddess. After they grabbed a quick breakfast, Luna had decided that they should talk to the Head Priestess as soon as possible. As they walked there, it was obvious that word about the assassinations had spread throughout the city. Luna had expected that. What she hadn't expected were the looks they were getting as they walked down the street. "This is strange," she muttered, watching as another group of women nodded toward her, all of them going silent as the tall blonde and the shorter dark-haired woman passed by them.

Torrin shrugged. "It's respect," she stated. But it was making Torrin nervous too and she kept finding her hand inching for her sword that wasn't there. Her eyes kept sweeping around them, cataloging each avenue that could be open for an attack on Luna. She quickly scanned each person they passed and filed their faces away to be remembered if needed.

"Whatever it is, I wish it would stop." The bubble of silence that surrounded them as they moved was starting to spook her a little. It was with considerable relief that she spotted the soaring spires of the Temple ahead of them.

Torrin began to have second thoughts as they closer to the Temple. "Is this necessary? She was just a ghost. A very miserable ghost and anyway, the sword was a good thing, right?"

"There's more going on than we know about. I'm sick of ghosts knowing more about what's going to happen than I do," was Luna's simple answer as she climbed up the steps toward the entryway, nodding to the two guards who stood outside. "I want answers, no more cryptic stories."

Torrin sighed. "Joy." She followed Luna into the building.

For a moment, Torrin froze just inside the entrance. She hadn't been in one of the Moon Goddess' temples before. Quinn had never allowed her to go to the rituals saying it was 'sacrilegious' for her kind to be there. Her eyes swept over the carved stones and the artwork.

The Temple staff was already preparing for the ceremony that would establish Eve as the head of the Wind Walkers. Acolytes were busy cleaning and setting up the ceremonial candles.

Tomorrow would be the burning of the bodies, when both Magda and Athena would be returned to the heavens.

Luna stalked passed them all and headed for the back of the Temple and the Head Priestess.

The old Priestess that Luna had met was kneeling by the altar. Leaving Torrin lagging behind her, the Ranger headed directly for the old woman who straightened up from her prayers. Luna came to a stop at the base of the altar and drew her sword. "What is this? Why did Torrin get it from a ghost?" Luna wasn't going to mince words.

The Priestess held up her hand to reassure the approaching Temple guards that everything was all right. "Child, it looks like a sword. And who is Torrin?"

Luna gave the old woman a scowling look and glanced behind her to find that Torrin was still back at the entrance. "That's Torrin." Sheathing the sword she made a motion trying to get the shorter woman's attention.

Torrin noticed a movement out of the corner of her eye and looked over at Luna. She quickly moved over to where Luna stood with another older woman.

"Torrin this is..." Luna paused, suddenly realizing she didn't know the old woman's name. The Priestess smiled and stepped down from the altar and touched Luna's arm. "My name is Lucinda. Well met, both of you."

Torrin gave a short formal nod. "Nice to meet you."

Lucinda smiled at the shorter, dark-haired woman. "So, you're Torrin."

Torrin nodded. "Um, yes, uh, I would be Torrin."

"We need to have a talk, now," Luna stated bluntly and then frowned as the first Wind Walkers began to filter into the Temple. They didn't have as much time before the ceremony as she would have liked.

Sea green eyes turned to Luna. "Yes, of course. Follow me, please." She turned and started walking towards now empty teaching rooms.

Torrin snickered and bumped her shoulder against Luna. "Weren't you the one who told me to be respectful?"

The blonde glanced at Torrin, smiled and shrugged. "Aren't you the one who's sick of ghosts and gods?" she said as she followed the Priestess.

"Well, yeah I am sick of the cryptic shit. But relax. You're only going to give yourself stomach pains if you keep this up." She reached up to rub Luna's back gently. "At least you're not a ghost

magnet like I am."

Luna thoughts flickered back to the three old women she met standing guard in the Queen's castle. "I'm not so sure of that," she muttered. Her back was warm where Torrin had rubbed it. She did feel calmer as they moved into the small teaching room with its simple wooden chairs and desks.

"Now Luna, may I see the sword?" the Head Priestess asked.

It sang as she drew it and then she reversed it so she was offering it to the Priestess hilt first. "A ghost that called itself the Deceiver gave it to Torrin."

The Priestess grasped the handle and carefully lifted it out of Luna's hands. She sucked in a breath. "By the Goddess, it's the Queen's sword. We thought it had been lost." She respectfully handed it back to Luna and turned to Torrin. "Tell me everything, child."

Luna hesitated then carefully took the weapon back. She studied the blade as light flickered along its edge. It had only looked like a beautifully crafted sword in the old woman's hands. Frowning she sheathed it and leaned back against a wall to listen to Torrin. It was the first time that she had heard to the entire story.

Torrin rolled her eyes, but started from the beginning when she snuck into the Castle. As she finished her story, she looked at the Priestess for a sign that she believed her. But the woman's face gave nothing away.

"I see, and how did you know when to give the sword to Luna?" the priestess asked, her eyes studying Torrin's.

Torrin opened her mouth, and then shut it. "I dunno," she finally mumbled. "The Assassin knocked her sword away and she needed one...and...." She blew out a breath. "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time," she said defensively as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Luna pushed away from the wall to stand next to Torrin. She touched her arm in reassurance and felt Torrin relax slightly. They both stood there looking at the old Priestess...waiting.

"Well?"

The woman nodded and her eyes seemed far away. "So, Luna is the one you protect?"

Torrin shrugged. "Well, that's all I seem to do." She blanched thinking how that must have sounded to the warrior. "Umm, well, I mean, not that Luna isn't capable of taking care of herself, but you know she just..." Torrin decided silence was the best answer.

A low chuckle from her side, along with a warm touch to her shoulder let Torrin know that Luna

hadn't taken offense to her words.

The Priestess nodded in understanding. "Well, over the years, several of the Priestesses have been stricken with a madness and in this state, prophecies been made. Hmm... I will need to do some research. But if my memory serves me right, the Deceiver came to Torrin because she sensed a kindred spirit."

Blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "Torrin isn't a deceiver."

Torrin's hopes deflated at the Priestess's words and she looked at the far wall trying to fight off stinging tears. Being called a Deceiver was engrained in northern society as being the worst kind of scum and murderous backstabber.

"I'm not positive but I would guess that Torrin is the Betrayer." Lucinda cleared her throat, her old eyes losing their focus as she sought to remember the passages from the Codex of Madness. "I'm not sure I remember the passage..." Her voice took on a sing song cadence as the old words came back.

"The first, deceived by love and through deceit, shall extinguish the line of Queens. From her violence shall the Castle grow dark and all flee from its embrace. She will curse her sisters to life beyond death and none shall leave the Castle until Northern blood once again sits on the throne. Her name is forgotten, but she will be known for all time as the Deceiver."

The Temple seemed to hold it's breath as the Head Priestess continued, her words filling every corner with their power.

"The second shall hold within her the balance of light and dark sitting on a sword's edge. Two possible destinies sit within her breast. From an illicit union she shall be born. She will exist of two worlds yet belong to none. She will crumble the earth and through her will, Queens will be created and destroyed. She will be known as the Betrayer."

Luna shivered, the sword at her side feeling heavy for the first time since Torrin had given it to her. Wordlessly she turned to look at her friend, worried blue eyes studying the shorter woman's face but Torrin refused to make eye contact with her.

Torrin wasn't sure what to feel. Her chest felt heavy and she remembered her nightmare of the dead screaming for blood and vengeance.

In a hollow voice, she said. "I betrayed my home and brought Abnoa to ruin. So, I guess you could make an argument for the crumbling of earth part since it was the home of the Earth clan."

"This prophecy, who made it?" Luna's voice was hard. Her hand came up to rest on Torrin's shoulder, giving what comfort she could. The Ranger refused to think what else that might mean to her.

Lucinda's forehead scrunched in thought. "She would have been a Priestess, a Chosen of the

Moon Goddess, but a specific name I don't know."

"Luna!" Eve called from the doorway, bursting in onto the scene. The wind walker was radiant in a silken gown. "Oh good, you're already here. I was worried I might have to go looking for you."

Torrin shifted away from Luna's touch, her gray eyes shuttered. She felt even more lost. Stupid prophesies. Life, she decided, had been simpler when she had just been a lowly mercenary. Maybe not better, but definitely simpler.

Luna's thoughts were much the same. Her life had been considerably less complicated when she had been in training as a ranger. She let Torrin pull away from her, forcing herself to nod in greeting to Eve as the other woman entered.

There was a carefully hidden sadness in the Wind Walker's eyes as she gazed at three women.

"All the Clan representatives are gathered," Eve politely informed Lucinda.

Luna could see the close resemblance between Eve and her mother, Athena, at that moment. Both had been tall and thin and had almost the same respected attitude.

The Head Priestess nodded. "Then it is time to begin. I'm very sorry for your loss, Eve, but I know you will do her memory justice. Your mother raised you well," the old woman said as she left to prepare for the ceremony.

Ignoring Torrin completely, Eve stood in front of Luna. "Will you do me the honor of taking part in the ceremony?" Blue eyes widened in shock and Luna wondered if she could manage to flee from the room or if it was too late for that.

"Wh-what?"

Torrin, was again proud of herself as she kept in a nasty comment, but thought she was going to be ill at all the eyelash fluttering. Grudgingly, she did have to admit that Luna and Eve would be a beautiful couple. With a scowl she pushed past Eve and made her way into the Temple. Sitting down in a back row, she stared gloomily at one of the stained glass windows.

The ceremony was a simple one by Wind Walker standards. The Head Priestess called the gathering to order and then asked for proof that the former head of the Clan was dead. Solemnly, those gathered rose to their feet as an Honor guard from both the Fire and Wind Walker clan carried in the bodies of their fallen leaders. As they were brought in front of her, Lucinda touched their foreheads briefly.

"As is written, the Clan chiefs shall be chosen by their Clan rituals. Fire Warriors, those who wish to be named Chief will challenge each other for leadership. I shall see the victor in three days at moon rise." The old priestess turned away from the grim and silent warriors and toward the gathered Wind Walkers.

"Wind Walkers, is the eldest daughter of Athena present?"

There was a pause in which Eve elbowed Luna in the side.

"Um, she is," Luna called out from the side room, stepping out into the main Temple aisle along with the beautifully dressed Eve.

Torrin studied the Fire clan members. She was familiar with many of them from the bar. She saw Adrian's smug look even in this time of sorrow. Her thoughts broke away as Luna and Eve made their way to the front of the Temple.

Eve was delicate and fair, her face held a bookish wisdom to it. With a sigh, Torrin admitted to herself that Eve was everything she was not.

Not entirely certain how she'd been roped into participating, Luna walked Eve to the front of the altar where Lucinda and the other senior priestesses awaited them. "Eve, daughter of Athena, daughter of Claire, you have been called upon to bear a heavy burden. Being a leader of a Clan is not an easy one and demands many sacrifices." Eve nodded in understanding while Luna tried not to fidget. With a gesture Lucinda summoned forth the Temple guards who carried between them a large wooden box.

Setting it down next to the altar, they lifted off the polished lid. Gently, Lucinda reached inside and lifted up the book that was its cargo.

Luna sucked in a breath as she spotted the hide-covered book. It was old, the oldest book to exist in the north. "This, the original sacred words of the Exodus, written in Luna's own hand, is entrusted to your safe keeping, as your mother did, your mother's mother, and throughout your line."

Torrin watched the ceremony with interest, a small smile coming to her lips as she saw how nervous Luna was. Her eyes, though, never stopped moving around taking in everything around her in case Khelin had sent more Assassins.

She noticed how everyone's eyes got big seeing the book. "Sheesh," she thought rolling her eyes, "it's just a book for crying out loud." Books were not among her favorite things. Perhaps it was all the quoting from them as she was growing up. Quinn made sure she knew she was an abomination.

With utmost care the Priestess lowered the book back into its resting place. It was never brought out except for the most special of occasions.

The Priestess touched Eve's shoulder, "Care for it and your clan well," and then she stepped back, allowing the new leader of the Wind Walkers to greet her people. As soon as she could, Luna slipped away from the sudden press of people. Many of the Fire warriors were doing the same, eager to get started on the challenges that would allow one of them to become the head of the

Fire Clan.

The Ranger watched Adrian stare longingly toward Torrin, and then purposefully stride out of the temple. She prayed Adrian wouldn't win.

"Let's get out of here. There are too many people."

Torrin got up quietly and followed Luna out. Outside she blinked at the bright sun. The air was warm and much of the snow in the city had already melted. "How much longer until Khelin can make for the Pass? A month, two?" she asked.

Luna nodded slowly, staring up at the blue sky. "A month at most. The Pass will be open by then. The Winderling will be open in a week, perhaps two at this rate, unless there is a cold snap."

Luna sighed. "The Fire warriors and Rangers that were up at the top of the Pass were found dead by their replacements yesterday. A messenger falcon arrived this morning with the news. Valerie told me when we were leaving the Castle."

Torrin nodded her head sadly. She knew what had happened. The Assassin's memories had shown her the whole violent event.

"But you already knew they were dead," Luna said quietly as they started to walk back towards the Castle.

"Yeah. Um, when I touched the Assassin" She shivered. There were other darker things seen, but Luna didn't need to know of them.

The tall blonde licked lips that had gone dry. "What else did she show you?" She was upset she couldn't keep the tremble out of her voice.

Torrin looked at Luna. Her eyes were vacant and haunted with the violent memories. "More than a person should see."

The blonde nodded and continued to walk slowly down the crowded street. "Khelin was attentive, sweet, and so very charming when I first arrived in Thullis," Luna said quietly. "It only changed later, after..." She shivered.

Torrin grabbed Luna's arm and gently pulled her away from the prying eyes and ears and into the shadows of an unused side street. She placed a finger on Luna's lips. "It's not my business, Luna. But to me, I see a strong, compassionate, intelligent woman, who, despite being knocked down a few times, still gets up to do the right thing. Whatever Khelin did, doesn't make you less of a person. It just makes her less of one. Okay?"

Luna slowly let out a sigh of relief with a spark of gratefulness showing in her blue eyes. "You

are a good friend, Torrin. You know that?"

Torrin blushed, shrugged her shoulders and then looked at the ground. "I try. I'm not use to being a friend or having any," she admitted. "The other mercenaries and I, well, we weren't really friends. It was more like we respected each other. But it's hard to let yourself have friends when you or them might die in the next battle."

Blue eyes studied Torrin intently and then she slowly smiled. Taking a hold of Torrin's hand she pulled her out of the alley. "Come on, your mother wants to see you."

"Okay." Puzzled at the change in topic, Torrin let herself be dragged off.

Tyra's family home was a small yet elegant two level near the artisan district. The bottom level of the home was primarily an artist studio. If she remembered correctly her grandmother had been a sculptor. The top level held the sleeping rooms. Two trees in the small front yard seemed to embrace each other. The smell of food drifted out of an open window. As they stopped in front door Torrin paused, unsure if she should knock or just go in.

Luna already been here several times, but the Ranger was well aware this was Torrin's first time to her mother's house. She grinned and gave her a playful shove toward the doorway. "What's wrong? Go on in."

Torrin swallowed nervously and opened the door. Entering slowly she stared around before remembering to announce herself. The room had several small clay and stone works in it. "Mom? It's me, uh, Torrin. Oh, and Luna's here, too."

The taller woman chuckled behind her at that, following her into the house. Appreciatively sniffing the air, she called out, "Hope you made enough for two more, Tyra."

From another room the shuffling of feet were heard and then. Tyra's head peaked out of the doorway. Her face broke out into a wide grin. "Ah, there is my little one."

Torrin blushed.

"And Luna, nice to see you. I heard you all had some problems the other day."

Luna grinned and nudged the scowling "little one". "Nothing your daughter couldn't handle."

"Come on in. I'm just finishing up making biscuits and stew. Oh Luna, if you want to check on Tasha, she's upstairs." Tyra smiled again at them and then ducked back into the kitchen.

"Thank you, Tyra."

Lowering her voice Luna whispered to Torrin. "Will you be all right down here if I go see how Tasha is feeling?"

Torrin gave her a nervous smile. "Yeah, it's okay. Go on."

Luna gave her pat on the back and headed up the small staircase to where Tasha was recovering from the vicious hit to her head.

Torrin took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen in time to watch her mother place a pan into the bulky black stove. Tyra wiped her hands on a towel and turned looking at her youngest. Her blue eyes took in the bruises on her face and the dark shadows under Torrin's eyes. Tears sprang into her eyes. Rushing across the room she gave Torrin a fierce hug. "Oh, my little one. I'm so sorry."

Stunned Torrin just patted her mother's back.

After a moment Tyra pulled back and gently touched the bruise on the side of Torrin's face. "How?" she asked.

Torrin shrugged not sure how to answer her. How could she tell her mother that her own flesh and blood caused them? "Fighting with some unfriendly folks," she finally answered.

Tyra nodded but her eyes reflected she was aware the whole truth had not been given. She gave her another hug and walked to the pot of stew that sat on the stove.

Torrin stammered, "Uh, here, uh, let me help. You just sit." After a moment of staring at the pot she looked at her mother. "Was there something specific that needed to be done to it?"

Tyra started laughing. "No, just stir it so the bottom doesn't burn."

"Oh, okay. I can do that." Relieved, Torrin started to stir.

Tyra watched for a moment, happy to have her youngest with her again after all these years. She sighed, if only Jinete was here to see their child. She couldn't shake the sense of unfairness. If things had only gone like they had planned, Jinete would have gotten the chance to see their little girl grow up. She had wanted to go with Jinete, but Quinn would not allow her to end their marriage. But regardless, they had no one but themselves to blame for the burden they had placed on their child. She sniffed back her tears and wiped her eyes. What a horrible mess her life had ended up being. A mess she had trapped her daughters in, too.

Torrin dutifully stirred the stew. She was aware of the distress her mother was in but wasn't sure what to do. Should she say something? Offer comfort? Pretend not to notice? Fortunately, Tyra broke the silence.

"In the spring, if we survive this war, I want to go to the Abby with you. I want to help you to take Jinete back to her homelands."

Torrin looked back at her mother, startled but pleased. "If that's what you want. I would love your company and I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

Torrin still had a hard time reconciling the fact that the smart mouthed ghost in the Abby was her Muanya. She supposed she should feel sad that she never got to know the woman or to be angry at Quinn, whom she was positive, was responsible for Jinete's murder. But she just felt detached from it all. Maybe when it came time to return her Muanya's remains, it would affect her.

Tyra smiled with relief.

Luna took a seat in the chair by the side of the narrow bed that Tasha was asleep in. A white bandage was wrapped around her head, evidence that the healers had been by recently.

Tasha's eyes fluttered open, and she gave a weak smile at her friend. "I take it, we won?"

The Ranger grinned. "Well, we didn't lose. How are you doing?"

Tasha tried to shrug but ended up grimacing. "I've been better. My head is ringing like it's Evenstin Day. By the Goddess, that was some kick."

"I brought a visitor..." Luna started then stopped, shaking her head as she realized what she had just said. "I mean, I brought your sister back. She's downstairs talking to Tyra."

Tasha smiled. "Good, Mother was worried. She's been hearing all sorts of rumors in the marketplace." Tasha frowned as she thought about how to phrase something she wanted to ask Luna. She decided just to say it. "Did you really punch Rhain out?"

Both pale eyebrows went up at that. "What?" Luna laughed. "No, I didn't punch her out." She glanced sideways and smirked. "I did punch her, though."

Tasha's eyes got huge.

Luna cleared her throat. "And I think I broke her nose."

Tasha closed her eyes. "Please tell me you had a good reason for that?"

"She's an idiot. Isn't that a good enough reason?" Luna said plaintively.

Tasha just sighed and rolled her eyes.

"All right. She beat up Torrin and then tossed her into a cell when she came to the City to warn us about the Assassins."

Tasha raised an eyebrow. "That's a pretty serious action. Do you know why she had Torrin tossed into a cell?"

Luna remained silent but shook her head slightly.

Tasha let her head sink back into the pillow. "Okay, we need to cut Rhain's power off or she's just going to keep undermining our efforts. Those women that follow her? They all lost a loved one at Abnoa."

"I know." Luna finally found her voice again. "We'll think of something to stop her." The tall blonde patted Tasha's shoulder. "Get better. I'm going to go see how your mother and Torrin are doing."

Tasha yawned, nodding. "Okay. Tell Torrin 'thanks'. Oh, how did she know we were going to be attacked?"

"Not sure," Luna hedged as she stood up. "I'll bring you up some food." Giving Tasha a quick smile, she went downstairs to see what Torrin and Tyra were up to.

Tyra was sitting at the table laughing as Torrin attempted to pull the biscuits out of the stove without burning herself.

"You're going to need to find yourself a woman who knows her way around the kitchen," she remarked.

Torrin stuck her tongue out then nearly dropped the pan when she burned her forearm on the top of the stove. "Vladin's balls!" She juggled the pan and caught it before it spilled.

"Ah, language, young lady," Tyra mock-scolded Torrin while she tried not to laugh at the same time.

Torrin stuck out her tongue again. "I try to be nice and let you take a break and you mock my pain." She held up her arm, "Look at that. I think it might even blister."

"Does that rule me out?" Luna called from the doorway, watching the scene with veiled amusement. Torrin certainly didn't seem to fit into the kitchen scene.

Tyra turned to Luna. "Does what rule you out, dear? Did you have a good visit with Tasha?"

Luna nodded and went to take a seat. "She looks a lot better. What did the healers say?" Then Luna tisked at the sight of Torrin's burn. "Do you think it's life threatening?" she teased. "The Fire warriors will love it if there's a scar. Adrian, let's say for example?"

Tyra's eyebrows went up in question. "Why would Adrian like a scar on you, Torrin?"

"Yes, Torrin, why?" Luna asked innocently.

Torrin became very interested in making lunch. "I have no idea," she mumbled.

Tyra looked between Luna and Torrin, "I probably don't want to know, do I?" Focusing back on Luna she patted the woman's hand. "Tasha will be just fine. The healers say she will be up and back to normal in a day or two. She just got her brains scrambled."

"Good, I was worried. A good thing your daughters have thick heads, Tyra."

Torrin blew out a breath. "Hey, they get it from Quinn. You can leave me out of that statement."

Tyra gave a bittersweet smile at Torrin's back. "Oh, your Muanya had a thick skull as well, young lady."

Torrin looked back at her mother, "As well as a sharp and quick tongue."

Tyra laughed. "That she did, something you did not get, but the thick head, definitely."

Torrin huffed, she couldn't win.

Luna snorted, trying not to laugh out loud.

"Don't pick on the cook," Torrin warned. "I could add a something to give you the runs."

Tyra laughed. "I cooked it, dear. You're just the server."

"And you're supposed to be protecting me, not threatening me." Luna teased right back, enjoying the relaxed atmosphere. It felt... it felt like a home.

Torrin sniffed and rolled her eyes. "Fine, fine. Food's ready." She placed two bowls on the table before going back for her own and the biscuits. Torrin sat the plate that held the biscuits down in the center of the small table. She ate in silence but aware of an odd undercurrent at the table.

She occasionally snuck a glance from her mother to Luna. Her mother seemed to have something on her mind and she hadn't failed to notice the blush to Luna's cheeks. She wondered what that was about.

Luna ate the stew appreciatively, it was better than what she'd managed to snag from the little used kitchens inside the Castle. Blue eyes glanced up from time to time to study the other two, not quite certain what to say now that they were eating.

Mopping up the last of the gravy with her bread, Luna sighed with pleasure. "Thank you, Tyra, this was delicious." She offered Torrin a grin as well. "Torrin seems to be capable of cooking, something I'll have to remember."

Torrin laughed, "Yeah, I'm quite the cook, all right. I just placed everything on the table.

Tyra smiled. "Torrin, would you take some up to Tasha? I'm sure real food would be appreciated."

Torrin frowned. "Um, wouldn't Luna..."

Tyra cut her off. "You two need to stop acting like strangers. You are family. You need to act like it."

Luna glanced uncomfortably from woman to woman, not entirely certain she wanted to be left alone with Tyra right now. To her surprise she was a bit afraid of what Torrin's mother might ask her.

Torrin hung her head and got up from the table without a word. "kay," she mumbled. Her shoulders were tight from being lightly chastised, but she gathered up a bowl of stew, a few biscuits and left the room without another word.

Luna watched her go, jerking her head away when she realized exactly what part of Torrin she was watching.

Tyra sighed. "Those two. Tasha is filled with guilt and Torrin is full of anger. Now they are at an impasse. Stubborn." She gave a smile waiting for Luna's eyes to come back to her.

"Those black leathers do make her look rather... intimidating. Or perhaps you like the way they highlight my daughter's ass." She laughed as Luna turned bright red.

After a moment, Tyra caught her breath. "You know I was starting to consider you another daughter, but perhaps daughter-in-law would be better."

Slightly panicked blue eyes looked up at that and Luna started to shake her head. "I don't... I mean... she doesn't even..."

Tyra leaned over and patted Luna's hand. "Breathe. That's it, nice deep breaths."

The blonde took a few deep steadying breaths then tried to form a normal sentence. This was

turning out worse than she'd thought.

"Her Muanya had a quick and clever tongue and I was smitten despite myself. She made it impossible not to be. Torrin, I think, maybe a bit slower than her Muanya, but that I think has more to do with all the guilt she carries around. You see it in her eyes don't you?"

Playing with the spoon she'd been using, Luna avoided looking up at Tyra. "Yes." She said slowly, not wanting to lie to the other woman. "I see it in her eyes sometimes." There were other things that Luna sometimes thought she saw in those gray eyes, but she wasn't certain if that was simply wishful thinking.

Tyra nodded in understanding. "She cares very much for you. Why else would she come back here to face four Assassins? She didn't do it for anybody else in that room." She studied Luna's face. "But she won't ever do anything about how she may feel for you. She doesn't feel worthy. From the moment she was born, Quinn made sure she knew she was less than everybody."

"Why didn't you stop it? How could you let Quinn do those... things to her?" Luna asked before she could stop herself. Her blue eyes darkened as she remembered the pain she'd seen in Torrin's face at the mention of Quinn. "Now, Rhain thinks the same way and is trying to do the same things as Quinn did."

Tyra gave her a sad smile. "Luna, who was in charge at Abnoa? Who did everyone look to? Who was the best fighter there ever was? Before I met Torrin's Muanya, I had tried to leave Quinn. I went home. I came here. When Quinn realized I wasn't coming back, she found me and dragged me back. Said I made her look foolish and weak to the other leaders. You can think ill of me if you wish, but I did the best I could, but I'm no soldier, Luna. Quinn was unmatched as a warrior."

The Ranger understood the truth in Tyra's words. Quinn was a feared and formidable warrior. But her heart still questioned how Tyra could have watched Quinn subject her daughter to the cruelties Luna had pieced together from Torrin.

With a sigh the blonde shook her head. "I wish I'd known. I would have..." Luna paused, realizing she'd only been a child then as well. Even now she wasn't certain if she could have taken Quinn in a fair fight.

Tyra placed a hand on Luna's shoulder. "I know you would have, and that's what really matters now. Torrin needs people like you in her life."

She took a deep breath as her thoughts turned to Rhain. "Rhain is Rhain. I don't know what's happened to my little girl. I see her turning into a copy of Quinn. All she wanted was to feel loved by Quinn. She went out of her way to get Quinn's approval."

The Wind Walker sighed, "But Quinn had Tasha in her sights to follow in her footsteps as a leader. So, Quinn ignored Rhain. After Quinn's death, she seemed to retreat in to herself. Then after you and Torrin arrived, she became this brooding, wounded creature."

Luna did her best to avoid reacting to Rhain's name, but her lips pressed into a thin line of distaste anyway.

"She's going to get herself hurt if she keeps going as she is," Luna finally said. She was hoping that Rhain's mother might get through to her to leave Torrinn alone.

Tyra nervously tore apart a half eaten biscuit. "I know it seems like I don't know what's going on with my children, but I do. I know Tasha is filled with guilt and can't stand to be around Torrinn. She relives what she did to her with her lies. Rhain hates Torrinn because, for some reason, I think it helps her feel close to her Muanya."

She looked up at Luna. "She came in last night ranting that you hit her. I want you to know that I don't hold that against you, but you need to address Torrinn and Abnoa soon. That will take the wind out of her sails. The Fire Clan will back Torrinn. She's almost one of them."

Luna leaned back, surprised. She truthfully hadn't thought that Tyra knew so much about what was going on. Of course, most of it was common knowledge after yesterday's events.

"How do you suggest I talk about what happened with Torrinn at Abnoa?" She was still cautious about saying what Torrinn's exact role in the fall of the Castle had been.

Tyra got up and started clearing the table. "I know she opened the gate, Luna, and so does Rhain. What Rhain and others don't realize is that if Quinn failed with the ambush that she had set the leader of the Castle to fail as well.

Luna frowned at that. "What? Quinn wouldn't have set me up to fail." But a thread of doubt was already working its way into her mind.

Tyra laughed bitterly. "Do you really think we needed so many guards with us to escort us to the Queen's City? We needed maybe 10 yet we had 38. Oh, Luna. You are so trusting. Yes, she did. She set you up to fail so Tasha could regroup here and gather the other Clans. Then she was to lead them to victory over the south. Quinn was very optimistic that Tasha could succeed."

The Ranger stared at Tyra, a denial dying on her lips as she thought about what the older woman had said. Bitterly, she bit back her words and shook her head wordlessly. To have failed was one thing; to know she had never been expected to win was quite a different aspect.

"Quinn left us to die there," Luna whispered. Looking up at Tyra, she frowned. "Wait, how does Rhain know about Torrinn? Torrinn thought I had told her, but I never mentioned it to anyone."

Tyra shrugged. "I don't know. Whoever her source is, she's keeping it a secret. I confronted her after a visit to that tavern where Torrinn has been staying. Rhain told me what Torrinn had done in hopes to sway me into hatred, but I've seen what comes from hating. Quinn despised Torrinn, and

in essence, brought about Abnoa's doom since she created the hatred in Torrin. So much hate that Torrin was willing to bring down her own place of birth. Hatred does nothing but bring ruin." Tyra finished bitterly.

Luna briefly considered her own loathing toward Khelin. It was different she decided. "I don't know how to broach the subject of what Torrin's done. There will be those, like Rhain, who will want her killed for her role." Luna knew the names of many of those already. They were the women who had lost family and loved ones at Abnoa.

Tyra shrugged. "You may have to punish Torrin for it."

Luna looked away, her eyes troubled and her expression unhappy with even considering such a thing. She sighed mentally, why did she have to deal with these things?

"Punish Torrin for what?" Torrin asked coming into the room.

Tyra replied without missing a beat, "For leaving me to clean up this mess."

Torrin sighed in exasperation. "Mom, you told me to leave, remember?" She sat down at the cleared table.

Relieved by Tyra's quick thinking, Luna asked, "How's Tasha."

"She's fine. We had a fascinating talk about Fire warriors for some reason."

Luna hid a grin and stood up. "I should be getting back to the Castle. Now that the Fire warriors are competing, the City is going to turn into a virtual war zone with the spars happening everywhere. Then there is the ceremony tomorrow to say goodbye to Magda and Athena."

"Okay. Don't be strangers. My door is open to both of you," Tyra said. She hugged Luna and then Torrin.

"Tasha talked to you about Fire warriors, hmm?" Luna asked casually as they made their way back toward the Castle as the sun was slowly setting..

"Hmmm, yeah we talked about Fire warriors. Which was odd, but I guess a safe ground for us. She wanted to know if Valerie was at Wooten's tavern a lot." She shrugged. "Then she wanted to know what they were like when they weren't being all big with the warrior thing."

Luna suppressed a grin, knowing full well what Tasha's interest in Valerie was all about. "Your sister has a bit of a crush, I think."

Torrin blinked as her brain digested what Luna had said, "She has a crush on... really? Huh, I

figured her for a quiet artistic girl. Guess she likes rough and tumble, er, women."

Luna just laughed. Suddenly Torrin stopped walking.

"Oh, Vladlin's balls! I left Weslen's Alcen tied up near the front gate. You think I could borrow a Fire warrior to take it back to Wooten's and get my stuff? I don't want to leave you... um, cause, well..." She blew out a breath, thinking quickly. "Um, you seem to attract trouble and all. Plus, I need clothes. I can't keep wearing this. I'm freezing."

Luna's glance appreciatively took in Torrin's current wardrobe although she had to agree, it probably wasn't the warmest. "Come on, clothes first and then I'll find someone who can take care of the Alcen."

Luna led Torrin towards a row of shops that was on their way back to the Castle. Leaving the ex-mercenary inside with the seamstress, the blonde grabbed the first person she spotted outside.

After a few moments she entered the shop with a smile. "The Alcen is taken care of. I found a Fire warrior who just lost her challenge and will take it back to the Inn for you."

"Thanks," Torrin said as she slapped the seamstress's hands away from her chest. "Stop that. You don't need to measure it again."

The woman rolled her eyes. "You're smaller than most of the women I clothe. I will need to make alterations for you."

Luna managed to turn her laugh into a cough, her sides shaking.

Torrin huffed, "Fine. Apparently I'm not as well endowed as most Northern women."

Luna did laugh at that.

"I think you're just perfect, Torrin," she said, her laughter dying away as she realized what she'd said. The blonde busied herself looking at a selection of clothes to keep the shorter woman from seeing her blush.

The seamstress sighed and poked her difficult customer with a pin. "Be quiet and stand still."

Torrin yelped and missed hearing Luna's comment.

While she wasn't as concerned about the pants, leather wiped clean pretty easy, her old shirt was stiff in areas with things she didn't want to think about. After getting stuck one more time, Torrin was happy with a new shirt to put on.

Luna watched with amusement as the seamstress efficiently began making alterations on another set of shirts and pants for Torrin. Glancing at the other woman, she grinned. "You don't have to look so disgruntled. You're the one who said you needed new clothes."

"I will send the trousers and a few more shirts to the Castle," the woman said as she bent to her task.

Torrin glared back at Luna. "I'm not use to being trussed up like a goose, and poked with pins, and... and... so there." She stuck out her tongue.

Luna shook her head in mock dismay. "I just can't take you anywhere, can I?"

Torrin laughed as they walked out of the shop. "Nope. I have no sense of decency." Quicker than the eye could follow, she stole three apples from a basket being carried by a dour looking woman. As the woman disappeared around a corner, Torrin began to juggle them.

Blue eyes widened in surprise and Luna leaned closer, hissing. "You did not just steal those in front of me!"

Torrin winked. "Did you see me steal them?"

She grinned broadly. "Besides, they were begging for liberation, trapped in that miserable basket. Plus, oddly enough, that unhappy woman will find a copper coin in her basket when she gets home." She tossed an apple to a child who was watching her.

The child squealed in delight and grabbed the apple.

Torrin laughed again and tossed one to Luna before catching the last one in her mouth and taking a bite.

Luna snatched the apple out of the air, groaning at her friend's antics even as she smiled. Polishing the winter apple, she bit into it, glad that they kept so well in the cold. A crowd ahead of them caught her attention.

"I wonder what that's all about."

Torrin stopped chewing. "Looks like pre-fight posturing," she mumbled, her mouth full.

Moving closer, Luna caught sight of the two fighters currently preparing to make a go at one another. She frowned when she recognized one of them.

"Let's go around," the blonde said with a scowl.

Torrin leaned into Luna and whispered into her ear so only she could hear her. "All right. But you should watch some of the fights and not just the final round. It's good for morale."

"Fine, but not this one," Luna whispered back, fully intending to tell Torrin that no one really cared if a simple Ranger was around for a spar or not. Too late, she winced as she tried to steer

the smaller woman farther around the crowd. She knew the second Adrian spotted them by the way the Fire warrior had puffed up. "Great."

Adrian's face lit up and she squared her shoulders, but then her hands clenched into fists and she scowled when she saw Torrin lean into Luna's body.

"What did you say?" Torrin asked taking another bite of her apple.

"Your obsessed Fire warrior is headed this way." Luna nodded toward Adrian who was moving through the crowd, obviously intent on reaching the two of them. It was too late to avoid what Luna feared was to become a nasty situation.

"Huh? Oh! Well, Alcen dung." Torrin grimaced.

Adrian brusquely pushed her way through the people. "Torrin!" she bellowed. "So, you've decided to be seen with a winner," she said giving Luna a sneer.

Luna bristled, her lips curling as she took a step towards Adrian.

Torrin shrugged and took another bite into her apple. She wrapped a hand around Luna's waist and pulled her back to her side.

Adrian's nostrils flared in anger and she sent daggers to the hand on Luna's waist.

The sneer disappeared from Luna's face as she spotted Adrian's reaction. She smiled and deliberately slid an arm around Torrin's shoulder, pressing up against her. "Are you fighting today, Adrian?"

Torrin sucked in a breath and choked with her unexpected reaction from Luna's touch. After a moment she got the piece of apple out of her throat and looked at Luna.

Luna smiled directly at Adrian as she slid her hands up and down Torrin's back and side.

Adrian growled. "Yes I am. Just ready to start." Her gaze narrowed trying to figure out what Luna was doing. "Torrin, you want to be standing on the winner's side?"

The Ranger smiled sweetly at the Fire warrior as she leaned down to whisper into Torrin's ear, her voice purring, "I thought you were taking me back to the Castle?" She made certain her voice was loud enough for Adrian to hear.

Torrin's eyes widened as Luna touched her side and back. As Luna breathed into her ear, her only thought was she should have waited around for the less tight pants. "Um, Castle..."

The blonde smiled seductively, standing up straight and pressing tighter along Torrin's body. "We should stay and watch your friend's," she gave a slight stress on the word "match." Her blue eyes danced with amusement at Adrian's glare. Then her eyes traced a path up along Torrin's

thigh, hip, stomach and chest. "Then you can show me your...mmm... room."

"I have a room? Um, I thought I was sharing yours." Torrin stammered, confused.

"Adrian!" her opponent yelled out. "You going to play with the girls or are you ready to fight?"

"In a minute!" she yelled back. Her eyes narrowed at Luna. "Torrin, come on, stand on my side."

Torrin shook her head at her and looked at Luna. "Um, we can stay or go. Whatever you want, Luna." Her voice was low and thick. She cleared her throat nervously.

Luna stroked a hand up Torrin's side, licking her lips. "Okay, Torrin, come on." She pulled the dark-haired woman tightly against her side and looked up to meet Adrian's gaze. "Well. I think you have your answer."

"This isn't over!" Adrian glared at Luna, and then turned on her heel and strode into the ring. She screamed for the competition to start.

Torrin dropped her apple and turned to look at Luna. "Um, what just happened?" Realizing that Luna's hand rubbing her back was causing some rather pleasant tremors to her body, she grabbed it. "Please don't do that," she pleaded.

"We're going to watch your friend's match." Luna smiled innocently and pulled Torrin toward the ring of spectators, pushing her way through the crowd until they were in the front row. Then she stepped behind Torrin and pulled the shorter woman back against her. "Don't do what?" Luna whispered, sliding a hand across Torrin's stomach, quite aware that Adrian could see them both.

Torrin shivered. "Um, what's with all the touching?" she asked in a shaky voice.

A red cloth was dropped. As soon as it hit the ground the two combatants were all over each other.

"You don't like the touching?" Luna asked quizzically, her fingers just lightly touching the cloth covering Torrin's stomach.

"They don't have a lot of finesse without their swords," Torrin said as her breath hitched. "Um, I'm not saying that I'm not liking it, but you haven't really been touchy feely before."

Luna bent down a little so she could rest her chin on Torrin's shoulder as she watched Adrian and her opponent punch and kick each another. Turning her head, she studied Torrin's face, and then whispered into the nearby ear. "Does that mean you want me to stop?"

Adrian lost focus as she saw Luna touching Torrin. A fist slammed into her stomach. As she doubled over, she barely avoided the following kick.

Luna grinned as she watched Adrian get hit. "She's not doing very well."

Torrin nodded and very glad for the change in topic so she didn't have to answer the question. It was a toss up between yes and no. No, she didn't want Luna to stop touching her. And yes, she did want Luna to stop touching her before she did something to embarrass herself. "Uh, no she's not."

The blonde tilted her head, momentarily forgetting the fight as she studied Torrin's face. Her friend was exotic and gorgeous. "Has anyone told you that you're beautiful?" Luna asked. Her voice was different than it had been a moment before as she forgot that she was only supposed to be playing a role.

Torrin blushed and tried to squirm out of Luna's hands. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Adrian take another hit. "It's a good thing Adrian is losing. She maybe strong and a good fighter, but she's still just a body with no brains to direct it."

Luna blinked, directing her attention back to the fight. Straightening up she pulled Torrin back against her, so that the smaller woman was fitted against her front. It felt better than Luna had expected, and the blonde bit her lip for a moment before answering. "Um, she's not concentrating." Her long fingers slid along Torrin's side, feeling the tense muscles beneath them.

"Relax," Luna whispered.

Torrin whimpered quietly and closed her eyes. "You're making it really hard to relax," she muttered as everyone cheered when Adrian's opponent scored another hit. Finally, she willed her body to loosen up, cursing her traitorous libido as it enjoyed Luna's body pressed into hers.

Long arms strengthened by years of archery and sword practice wrapped around the shorter woman's midsection, holding her tight against her chest. Luna pushed back a flood of emotions and looked up to watch the rest of the match, wincing as Adrian took a fist to the head.

"Right where I already hit her," the blonde muttered, shaking her head. "That must have stung."

Torrin turned in the arms that held her and looked up at Luna. "What? Did I hear that right?"

The taller woman blinked. "Hear right about what?"

Torrin frowned and pulled Luna's face down to look at her. "Did you just say you hit Adrian?"

Luna swallowed, and then nodded.

"Why?" Torrin asked impatiently.

Luna's eyes dimmed as she remembered the comments Adrian had made in the Castle. Suddenly

uncomfortable with how close Torrin was, Luna tried to loosen her hold on the other woman as she replied, "She followed me into the Temple."

"What? You're shy all of a sudden?" Wrapping her arms around Luna, she stroked the taut back muscles. "What did she do?"

Despite herself Luna felt her body lean into the embrace. "She said things." Luna frowned. "Then she took a swing at me after I goaded her. I hit her and she left. That's all."

Torrin smiled. "See that wasn't so bad." She hugged Luna. "Adrian's good at saying things, 'cause she believes she has to be seen a certain way. Her insecurities make her a big, bragging bully. Whatever she said was for her benefit, to make herself feel more important than she really is."

Oblivious to the glances they were getting from the spectators and especially from the furious Adrian, Luna returned the hug. She only reluctantly let go when the fight behind them ended with a spectacular series of punches and kicks that left Adrian down on the ground, unconscious and bleeding.

Torrin looked around as a cheer went up. "Looks like she lost." Torrin pushed Luna out of the way of the cheering people who were stampeding to congratulate the winner. "You okay?" she asked Luna.

The blonde studied the shorter woman, and then suddenly smiled. "Yes. I think I am." Taking Torrin's arm she led her away from the crowd, never once looking at Adrian. "Come on. We have better things to do."

Torrin laughed. Luna was always dragging her somewhere. "A bath perhaps? Not as stimulating as the hot springs, I suppose," she said with a leer. "But just as fun with the right companion."

Torrin was happy that she merely had to stare down the young woman in charge of the bathhouse until she got the private room she wanted. She wasn't above public nudity and bathing with others, it was just she was cautious. She really wasn't sure who was a buddy of Rhain's and who wasn't. So for the sake of not getting beat up again, she wanted to bathe alone.

When they got to the baths, Luna had blushed and then begged off, spouting something about an errand. This was also fine with Torrin. After Luna's sudden need to get all touchy feely, some solo quality time was definitely required.

She drifted down farther into the steaming water and sighed as she felt her muscles loosen. Again her mind drifted to the fight and Luna's hands touching her. She was puzzled that whole thing seemed out of character for Luna, and she felt like she was missing something. Perhaps, she reflected, Luna just needed reassurance after her run in with Adrian in the Temple. Luna had been rather evasive about what Adrian had said. Her eyes narrowed at the thought of Adrian upsetting Luna.

Her lips drooped into a frown and she gave a melancholy sigh to the steamy room. That must be it. Luna just needed some sort of physical comfort while being around Adrian again. Closing her eyes she leaned back against the back of the tub. Happily, she was smaller than most Northerners so she fit with room to spare in the tub. Lazily, she let her hands roam down her body trying to excise that last bit of tension that no amount of hot water could get rid of.

Torrin started out with a generic fantasy, a faceless woman. But that hadn't lasted but for a few touches. Somehow it became a naked Luna draped across her hips. She had seen enough of her at the hot springs to complete a mental picture. Her fingertips sunk into the flesh of Luna's hips, while naked thighs draped over her equally naked hips. Dizzying, delicious friction and wetness came from where their bodies touched as they joined together.

In reality, it was her wetness mixed with the bath water and she caused the friction. But in her mind, it was Luna. A dream where there was a possibility of more than friendship, where there was no war looming over the horizon, and no guilt chewing at her gut.

Neck muscles straining, and her teeth gritted, she began to make soft whimpering noises as she felt herself move closer and closer. "Oh, Goddess," she breathed out. Then it washed through her making her skin buzz and her heart stagger for a moment. She breathed out a single word softly like a prayer, "Luna."

The idea of sharing a private bath with Torrin had been more than Luna could handle. What had started out as a game to infuriate Adrian had turned into something more. A line had been crossed and Luna wasn't quite certain where the new line was. Leaving Torrin at the door to the baths, she wandered the busy streets in an effort to work off the excess energy she now found herself with.

She sat down on a bench in one of the main parks and watched a group of Fire warriors work each other over, wincing at the brutal hits. The spars looked like they were going to go on all afternoon and well into the evening. She was just standing back up to go and see if Torrin was done her bath when she heard her name.

"Luna!"

Turning around, she spotted Valerie walking in her direction across the grass.

"You sparing as well?" she asked.

The Head of the Castle guards shook her head, her red braid swinging back and forth. "No. That's a young woman's game. Besides, what would I do with the leadership? Bah, I have enough to do with keeping up the guard patrols."

Luna nodded in understanding while she played with her tunic sleeve.

Valerie studied her for a moment, noticed the unaccustomed fidgeting, and then smiled.

"Did you want to spar?"

Luna paused, and then smiled as well. "Swords?"

Valerie nodded. "Swords."

By the time Luna made her way back to the bathhouse, she was sporting a few scratches, a large grin, and the beginnings of a spectacular black and blue eye. The workout, she decided, was exactly what she had needed.

Torrin was waiting outside, leaning up against the building. She had her face tilted up and was enjoying the sunshine that fell on it. Her hair was clean and tied back again in a tail.

"Torrin," Luna called out, limping only slightly as she approached the other woman. Her breath caught in her throat as she studied the dark-haired woman's slight form. The restless energy she'd thought she had vanquished returned in full force.

Torrin opened her grey eyes and turned to look at Luna. She sighed and shook her head. "See? I leave you alone and you find trouble." She moved down the steps to Luna's side. Scooping a hand around her friend's waist she supported some of Luna's weight. "Let's get you back to your room, and get you cleaned up. I see a trip to the healer's room in your future."

The feel of Torrin's body pressed against hers stirred a reaction that Luna hadn't felt since her time in Thullis. Gulping, she hastily moved away from Torrin and toward the bath house.

"How about I meet you back at the Castle? I mean, I should take a bath, right? Then come, I mean, to the Castle." Luna knew she was babbling as she backed up to the bath house entrance.

Torrin frowned in confusion. "Yeah, I guess you should..." Luna was acting stranger than normal. She wondered if she had done something wrong. She gave a weak smile. "Sure, I'll meet you back at your room."

Luna limped quickly into the bathhouse, intent on some quality solo time before she did something foolish.

Torrin frowned, "Women, what odd creatures" as she watched Luna disappear into the house.

Luna made her way back to their rooms at the Castle after a very pleasurable bath. The warm water and creative use of her fingers had left the warrior feeling relaxed and sleepy. Opening the

door she slipped into the room.

Torrin was snoring lightly on Luna's bed with a few medical supplies lying next to her slumbering form.

The blonde considered waking her friend up, then yawned and decided against it. It had been a long day, and neither had slept long last night. Undoing her sword belt, she carefully set her sword aside, pulled off her boots, and crawled in next to Torrin. Her last thought was that she'd just rest for a little while before dinner.

Torrin awoke to the sound of someone moving outside the door. She tensed for a moment wondering where she was. Feeling an unfamiliar weight on her body she looked down into blonde hair.

"I'm damned," she murmured. Letting her head flop back down to the pillow she looked outside and was happy to note she had slept for quite a while without suffering from a nightmare.

Luna muttered something in her sleep, shifting her arms so she was holding Torrin against her securely. One hand possessively cupped a soft breast and a long lean leg tossed over Torrin's hips.

Torrin nearly shot off the bed. She so should have waited for the new pants. Tight leather and being groped would normally have been a good thing, but right now it wasn't. Crap, someone was going to have to protect Luna from her in a few minutes if she couldn't get free. She tried to be stealthy and wiggle out of Luna's hold.

But Luna tightened her arms as Torrin started to try to move away. A low moan made its way from the blonde's lips as she stretched. Her legs slid down along Torrin's as she slid her palms along the other woman's chest.

Torrin groaned. "You can't do this to me. It's just not fair. It's like I'm being punished." She bit her lip, stifling a moan. After a moment of internal struggle with the darker part of herself, she finally got her body out from under Luna's. She sat trembling on the edge of the bed.

Blinking sleepily, Luna looked up, squinting until she could make out Torrin's form. "Is it time to get up?" she mumbled, her voice hoarse with sleep. The Ranger had been having the most wonderful dreams.

"Um, I don't know. Maybe?" Torrin's voice cracked. A glance to the windows confirmed that it was dark outside. How long had they been asleep?

Oblivious to Torrin's problems, Luna got up and stretched her arms over her head. The tunic she wore slid upwards to expose a good amount of skin. "That was a good nap."

Torrin turned to respond and ended up gulping. Celibacy was definitely over-rated. She tried to

focus on the bruises and scrapes on her friend's body. Oddly enough that helped control her feelings.

She reached out touching a bruise on Luna's side. "So how did this happen?"

Trying to open her eyes again, Luna winced. Her right eye was slightly swollen and a bit painful. "Do I have a black eye yet?" Luna sucked in a surprised breath at Torrin's touch. "I sparred with Valerie."

Torrin looked up at Luna like she was insane. "And you did this because, why?"

"Because she asked if I wanted to spar." Luna said, as if that should explain it all.

Torrin got up and lit a lamp near the bed so she could see the black eye better. She rolled her eyes at Luna's answer. "Of course, silly me. And yes it's a nice, big, fat, black eye. We should get some ice on it."

That got a smile from the blonde. "That at least is something we are not lacking in." Stretching one last time to pop her back, Luna smiled at Torrin. "Want to go see what we can scrounge up for food? Dinner's probably long gone."

Standing next to Luna, Torrin reached up to touch the flesh around the eye, happy that there didn't seem to be anything broken. "Barbarians," she tsked.

"Are you calling me a barbarian?" Luna whispered, leaning into the touch despite the fact that the flesh around her eye was tender.

"Uh, huh," Torrin said, grinning. "You know, people who run around in furs beating each other up. You Northern types." She stopped checking the bones around the eye and gently cupped Luna's face in her hand rubbing her thumb delicately over the skin. "I hate to see you hurt. Perhaps I will have to go spar with this Valerie."

"Don't beat her up too badly," Luna said, gently smiling. "It's the same Valerie that your sister has a crush on." Blue eyes locked with gray and Luna found herself leaning forward slightly. Her chest felt constricted and it was hard to focus.

Torrin grinned wickedly. "Really? The same Valerie? Hmmm, makes it that more tempting." Torrin's grin slipped a little as she got lost in Luna's eyes. Her heartbeat drummed in her chest, and she licked her lips. "Luna... I..."

Realizing she was about to do something very foolish, she dropped her hand and stepped back. "I... we should go see about food. Yes, food. Good idea." She turned to grab her boots.

The tall blonde stood where she was, swaying slightly, her eyes slowly focusing. Licking her lips she nodded, not trusting her voice, or her legs. "Food," she managed to say. "Sure."

Torrin opened the door and found that the rest of her clothes had arrived. Gratefully, she pulled them inside and placed them on a small table. "Ready?" she asked.

Luna blushed as she was caught staring at Torrin's tightly fitting pants. Mutely, she nodded, not trusting herself to say what exactly she was ready for.

Torrin raised an eyebrow as she walked out of the room. "Is there something on my back?" She brushed a hand on her back trying to find something.

"Your back is fine." Luna winced. "I mean, there's nothing on your back that shouldn't be there."

"Okay." Torrin shrugged. Then forgot Luna's weird behavior as her stomach growled loudly.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Blood and Honor

Zee: By an American and a Canadian well mostly the Canadian, it's her fault.

Windstar: Zee is, as usual, making things up. This story is completely her fault and a result of her imagination only. I claim no responsibility for this at all.

A big thank you to Claudia for her help with all of this huge story.

Feedback is always welcome at: zeeamy@gmail.com, or Adarkbow@yahoo.com

Prologue

The first thing she noticed was the taste in her mouth. It was quite possibly the vilest thing she'd ever tasted and waking up to it nearly made her gag. The second thing she noticed, as she tried to turn over onto her side, was that she couldn't. Blue eyes flew open at that and she tensed, tugging at the ropes that bound her arms and legs to each corner of the large four-poster bed.

"Khelin?" she rasped through a parched mouth. No answer, nothing else moved in the sumptuously appointed room.

The drapes fluttered hinting at the day that had come as golden beams snuck in through gaps in

the fabric. There were no other sounds. The Palace seemed deserted.

Struggling to free herself, Luna hissed in pain as the ropes chafed against her already red and bleeding skin. What had happened last night? The entire evening was a blur of faces, wine and dancing at Khelin's latest party. Why did she hurt everywhere? Craning her neck, the blonde peered down her body, grimacing at the thin red welts that laced her skin. Maybe she didn't want to know what happened.

Somewhere she heard the sound of a door opening, and the scraping noise of wood on stone. Someone started to whistle a jangled, nonsensical tune. "Fucked another one until she was not but a bloodstain. Clean, clean, that's all your good for, Worm," a cold voice said mockingly. "But you remember this place, don't you, Worm. You were here once and the delight of our Mistress's eye. Yes, a pretty noble from Corisaco until the Mistress and her pets had their fun with you and now you're just Worm." The voice laughed. The laugh broke away, "Get to work, slave, before I don't want you either. Then you'll have nobody." The door slammed shut and the whistling slowly faded away.

A feeling of fear swept through Luna as she listened to the cold mocking voice in the hallway. Desperately she struggled against the ropes, succeeding only in making the skin on her wrists and ankles bleed more. Splintered memories from the night before returned, causing her to struggle harder. Faces she did not know, laughing cruelly as they used her and the feel of strange hands doing things to her body. She struggled harder and began to truly panic. Next to the bed, a vase teetered off a bedside table and shattered on the ground. The noise jerked Luna from her struggle and she lay panting on the bed. She shuddered, as more fragmented memories, ugly and disgusting, emerged.

The bucket slid across the floor occasionally water slopping over the sides, the figure trailing behind it with a mop was dressed in scant rags, covered in dirt and stains that looked like blood. At the noise, the figure froze, and the silence fell heavy and uncomfortable.

Shutting her eyes against the memories she did not want and tears streaking down her cheeks, Luna shook her head trying to shake them loose. How? How could she have been so stupid to let Khelin use her? A sob tore at her throat and she tugged half-heartedly on the ropes once again, ignoring the stabs of pain.

Dark brown eyes went wide at the sight on the bed. Normally they weren't alive once the Queen was done with them. Worm froze, at a loss of what to do. She should go back and let Madlin know. Yes, that was what good slaves did, and if she did good, perhaps Madlin wouldn't touch her tonight.

Blue eyes flew open at the sound of a door opening, a low gasp as she took in the pitiful figure holding the mop. "Wait!" Luna called as the figure started to turn away.

Worm halted, her body shaking, and she turned back, shutting the door. Her eyes again went to

the bed. "I-I-I c-can't," she said, trembling with fear. And then she saw the tears and the blood, and she gasped. It was her, in this place again, tied to that horrible bed with Khelin laughing and mocking her.

"A princess? Oh no, my dear, you are a whore and I will use you as such."

Worm squeezed her eyes shut trying to get those memories to go away. They belonged to someone else, not her.

"Please," Luna whispered, begging. "Please, help me."

"I-I-I can't," she repeated. "I'm only a slave. If I help you, they'll hurt me again."

"Please, don't leave me here," Luna said pleadingly, hating how desperate she sounded. "You can come with me. They never have to know. Just undo one rope, that's all." She knew she was babbling, but she was terrified of remaining where she was.

Dark, matted hair swung as the young woman shook her head, fright etched on her face. "No. You're hers now. She owns you and no one leaves her until she's done with you."

"I belong to no one." Luna stated defiantly, struggling on the bed and nearly weeping in frustration. "Let me go! Please, I can't stay here."

Worm shook her head and crossed the room standing at the foot of the bed between Luna's spread open legs. "No, you don't understand, she owns you. You have her mark, branded into you skin." She leaned over and gently touched the raised hot flesh of Luna's upper thigh. Then remembering herself she stepped back.

"What?" Luna's voice had dropped to a whisper as she tried to see down where the other woman had touched. She now realized the skin on the inside of her upper thigh was raw and it hurt. "She branded me?" True terror set in. Suddenly Luna flung herself against the bonds, ignoring the pain as she struggled viciously. "I would rather die!" she yelled hoarsely, determined to break free.

"S-s-stop. You're going to tear your wrists open. What are you doing?"

Luna ignored her, struggling even harder, the burning on her wrists was beginning to equal that of her thigh.

Worm knew she should go get Madlin. "S-stop. You're bleeding." Tears ran down her face, she didn't know what to do.

"Then undo one of the ropes!" Luna hissed as she kept thrashing. She could not, would not, survive another night like the one before. She would do whatever it took to insure that she was never a part of Khelin's pleasures again. Even if that meant she had to bleed to death on the bed.

It was the command in the voice that made Worm stoop over and untie the rope at the woman's wrist before she realized what she was doing. Her fingers slipped on the blooded rope and a fingernail tore, but now she had started, she couldn't stop.

As the rope came undone, so did Worm. She began to hyperventilate and collapsed, sliding down the wall. "By the Gods, by the Gods," she said over and over.

Covered in sweat and blood, Luna quickly freed her other arm and then both legs. Only then did she pause to see the damage done by Khelin's brand. The red skin was raised and had crusted over. The pattern of the Southern leader's house had been burnt into her inner thigh. Gagging, Luna looked away and focused on breathing. Forcing herself up, she staggered about the room, retrieving what clothes she could find. Her weapons were gone, but she would manage without them. She had to. "Come on, let's go." Luna stooped, putting wet hands under the hyperventilating woman's arms, helping her up. "We have to go."

"No, no, no," the pathetic creature cried. "There's nowhere to go. She is the Queen. Her spies are everywhere, in every shadow."

Luna grabbed the stranger by both shoulders, shaking her once to get her to look up. "North. We'll go north to my people. She is not Queen there."

Worm's eyes got even bigger. "I can't go there. That's where the barbarian's live. They'll drink my blood and grind my bones for bread." She tried to pull out of Luna's grasp.

"I live there!" Luna refused to let her go, trying to get through to the other woman. They didn't have time for this. Any moment someone could walk in. Khelin could return at any time. "I promise. We'll be safe there. Please, trust me?"

Worm whimpered wringing her hands, "I'm damned no matter what I do now." Brown eyes darted around. "Get dressed, get dressed! Madlin will come to check on me and make excuses to hurt me. Hurry!"

Quickly Luna tossed on a vest and pants, the only two pieces of clothing she'd been able to find. The vest wasn't even hers, but she didn't care. She wanted out. Out and free of this cursed place and its scheming leader. How, her mind cried, how had she fallen into this trap? "Okay. Let's go."

The slave, Worm, was disappearing and the princess from Corsico, who had been overwhelmed in this room under Khelin's hands, was coming back. She grabbed the oil lamp from the table and threw it on to the bed. The glass shattered and the flame leapt out onto the smooth fabric. "That should help cause some confusion. There should be a merchant cart leaving the Palace soon if we can get to the kitchens."

"Lead the way." Luna's fingers itched to have her bow or a sword, just anything. Nearly naked and weaponless was causing her all sorts of problems with vulnerably. The memories from last night... no, she would not think about that yet. She forced them away again.

Worm inched the door open and scanned the hallway. Finding it clear, she looked over her shoulder. "Take the mop. It's not much, but in a pinch, it will do as a staff."

"My name is Luna" she said as she grabbed the mop and tested the heft of the shaft. It wasn't much, but it would last for a swing or two, she hoped.

"M-my name is... is... I am called Worm." The slave opened the door and motioned for Luna to follow her.

They crept down the opulent hallways together, down the stairs, across a small courtyard, past lounging courtiers, and into the kitchens.

Worm was sweating. "It was too easy," she thought, "too easy." Maybe Luna's Northern Goddess was looking out for them.

Behind them, shouting started as dark black smoke poured out of the palace rooms .

"Quicker," Luna hissed, well aware that the moment anyone took a close look at them, it would be over. Blood leaked from her wrists and ankles, and Worm wore what could only be considered remnants of rags.

"There." The slave pointed to a cart that was nearly empty, stacks of canvas covers draped in the back. She started to move when a soldier came from the kitchen, gnawing on a leg of goose. Worm's face went white, all her fears suddenly realized.

Without hesitation, the Northerner stepped past her, mop arching up and then down with as much strength as Luna could put into it. The wooden handle shattered against the surprised soldier's head, sending her bouncing down to the cobblestones.

Tossing the shattered remnants aside, Luna quickly started to strip the fallen soldier of weapons. Judging by the blood spreading out from where the Southern soldier's head lay, she'd put more force into the blow than she'd realized.

Worm was starting to hyperventilate again, "We're doomed, doomed. May the Goddess of the Sea Protect me." She made a strange gesture over her heart.

"Come on." Luna managed to wrestle the soldier's leather jerkin and pants off and tossed them to Worm. "We're leaving now." she headed around the wagon. "Can you drive this?"

Worm picked up the clothes where they had fallen and scurried after the strange Northerner. "I... I... slaves aren't allowed too," she said, staring at the huge, tri-horned oxen that were standing contentedly in the path.

"I'm not asking if a slave can." Luna finished belting on the soldier's sword. She felt a thousand

times better with its weight at her side. "Can 'you' drive this?"

Worm was speechless. "Yes, well, I think I can. But these Southlander oxen are bigger than I'm use to."

They were a lot bigger than the Alcen's that Luna knew too. "Drive then." She got up on the side spot, where the escort usually rode and tried to bind her hair back so she looked somewhat respectable.

Worm pulled the guard's clothes on over her rags and scrambled into the driver's seat. There was more yelling, more chaos coming from behind them. She scooped up the reins, snapped them and gave a hoarse yell of "Gee...up!"

With the cart now empty of its load, the oxen quickly got it moving and soon they were bouncing down the road and out of the Palace grounds.

Peering ahead, Luna narrowed her eyes. "That could be a problem." She nodded toward the guard shack at the edge of the palace grounds ahead of them. Four guards had emerged from it and were staring at the chaos that was rapidly building behind them as shouts of "Fire!" were heard.

As they came closer, Worm didn't stop the cart. Instead, a commanding voice that sounded nothing like the slave, Worm, came from the woman. "Stop staring at it. Go help. The Palace is on fire! We're running to bring more water from the town as well as more help."

The Guards blinked and started to run toward the smoking Palace.

Luna couldn't help but turn in surprise at the woman beside her. That had sounded nothing like the woman who had been terrified of removing a single rope holding down Luna earlier. It was from someone used to having people obey her. "Well done" was all she murmured as they left the Palace behind them.

"I am a princess of Corisco. I am a Princess of Corisco. I AM A PRINCESS OF CORISCO!" she shouted as they bounced along in the cart. Worm had tears running down her face. She gave a joyful laugh and grinned at Luna.

The laugh surprised Luna. She'd forgotten there was such things over the past few weeks. "Well met Princess of Corisco." She glanced behind them, relaxing as she saw nothing but people running toward the Palace, not after them. "Will you come north with me?"

Worm shook her head. "No. I want to go home. Khelin made me forget what a wonderful thing it is, and I miss it." She slowed the cart down to a more manageable speed. "I will take you to Felda's Pass. That will take you home, barbarian," she said with a smile.

Luna snorted and turned around to sit down on the seat next to Worm. "I'm not a barbarian. We

just left her behind us."

Chapter 11

Khelin was enjoying her latest conquest for the night. She licked the blood off her lips, fully entertained by the young woman's pain and torment. The young woman was definitely a conquest. Her fighters had found the northerner spying on the castle and managed to capture her. The tall blonde was stretched out on the bed, arms and legs chained spread eagle to the corners.

"Now what shall I do next, hmmm?" The dark haired woman grinned, tracing a red line down the woman's already bleeding abdomen with the tip of her dagger.

The woman on the bed looked enough like Luna for Khelin to forget she wasn't. "Nobody leaves me," the dark queen suddenly hissed. Rage filled her as she reared up and plunged her blade to the hilt into the Ranger's breast. Blood splattered everywhere. The blood soaked Khelin ran her tongue over her lips again.

She climbed off the body and started cleaning her torso and chest with the woman's discarded shirt. The Southern Queen then tossed the bloodstained shirt into the fireplace as she walked to the door. The fire in the room had burned down into glowing hot coals. As the shirt hit the smoldering embers, red, fiery flames shot up the flume. After a moment, the fire turned blacker than a moonless night.

Khelin paused at the doorway when she heard the roar of the flames and glanced back at the fireplace. With a snort, she re-closed the door and waited, a hand on her hip, the other casually flipping the dagger she'd just used.

The flames twisted together faster and faster and became more solid. Then they flowed out of the fireplace and formed into a huge black serpent with eyes that shined and glistened in the light. Coiling into a ball, it reared up coming eye to eye with Khelin.

"Must you always make such a production when you make an entrance?" she drawled while cleaning the blood from her nails with the knife. Then the Queen swallowed uneasily and lowered the dagger as she recognized the feeling of dangerous anger filling the room.

"Must you kill off all the pets I've given you? I tried to warn you about the folly of pushing into the North. And now, not just one of my Chosen is dead but six of them have died." Every word dripped with anger.

The serpent reared up even taller, a black hood extending and flexing behind the head.

Khelin's lips twitched at that news. She'd hoped that Luna would be dead by now. Well, the best defense is a good offense she thought.

"You're the one who told me I had to keep them from finding a leader!" Despite her best efforts, she couldn't stop from taking a step backward from the menacing snake.

"I gave you all you needed to conquer the North but you let her slip through your fingers and return here. You discount my Priestesses, and don't think I've failed to notice you've killed a few of them as well." The glowing eyes narrowed into slits.

"They insulted me, and they did not believe in you. Besides, what does it matter? We'll still slaughter them. It took us less than a day to take this castle." Khelin thought furiously, she might have to rethink her strategy.

"Yes, you did. But before, they were scattered and unfocused," the shadows hissed out, "now you have given them focus. You have found them a Queen and sent the Betrayer into their lands." The serpent's coils flexed and retracted in agitation.

"But Mother..." Khelin began, holding out her hands to either side, one still gripping the dagger, "have the blood sacrifices not been enough?"

"Blood sacrifices! You'll need more than blood. You are in my sister's lands!" The white eyes flashed. "I have very little power here. There are no pets to snap to attention."

Khelin scoffed. "Your sister does nothing for them! I crushed her followers in this castle, and I'll do the same to the rest!"

The serpent rose up, hissing in anger. "She is more cunning than you think. She was the only one brave enough to free your ancestors from Korgon. Do not underestimate my sister! She has a plan. I can feel it but I have no idea what it is."

Khelin's expression was doubtful, but she knew better than to push too far. "So, what would you have me do?"

"Perhaps I have been over-indulgent with you." The serpent deflated a bit. "You are my first and only child." The serpent's shadow flickered. "I love you and I don't want to see you taken from me by the others."

Dark eyes widened, and then narrowed furiously. "I will grind them into the earth!" Khelin flung the dagger back into the dead Northerner. "I'll bleed them for you, Mother. Do not doubt that I will conquer the North in your name."

The snake's eyes glowed with an internal fire. "Then you need to find that Betrayer child. She was the one who brought Abnoa to its knees. Her hatred burned so brightly, she was almost her own dark star. She was magnificent!"

Khelin seethed at the praise given to the half-breed traitor.

"But that fire has dimmed and I can't sense her anymore. If you can find her and re-fire that rage, she will lead you to the orb and the North's defeat. That's all I can tell you." Then the black serpent slithered back into the fire pit, fading slowly into the burning orange fire. "Do... not... fail... me... again," the flames hissed.

#####

Luna stretched her tired body, groaning and covering her eyes with an arm and then flopped back down on her bed. It had been an exhausting day. The morning had begun with what seemed to have been an endless stream of women who wanted Luna to decide on one thing or another. The issues had ranged from when to reopen the ferry service across the river to a dispute over a bow plus everything in-between. She hadn't left her rooms all day, with people coming in just as she thought she was finished.

"Are they all gone?" She cracked open an eye to peer at the other two women, raising an eyebrow. "Tasha? Is that the last of them? Please say yes."

"Yes," Tasha laughed. "Actually it is. We get a small break before tonight's moonrise ceremony." She rubbed her temple trying to soothe a headache. "Where's Torrin?" She asked not missing the dark look that crossed Eve's face. Tasha frowned and looked at the overeager Eve who practically hovered over Luna as the girl handed her a goblet full of wine. Any minute she expected the girl to start rubbing Luna's shoulders. Of course, Luna, she inwardly sighed, was unaware of the girl's crush.

Luna sat up and frowned at Tasha. "That's a good question." She wasn't entirely certain where Torrin had gone either. Just as she was about to get to her feet and go see if she could track down the dark-haired woman, someone knocked at the door. She groaned and hid her head again as Eve rushed to open the door.

She returned with a dark ceremonial garment in her arms. "I hope you don't mind, but I had a seamstress make you something for the procession tonight."

There was a small pause as the Wind Walker placed the midnight blue tunic and pants on the bed and touched Luna on the arm. "You will be in the procession, of course?"

"Um, thank you, Eve." Luna had not intended to be part of the actual funeral procession to the temple, but now, it seemed she didn't have a choice.

Another knock came to the door and then Torrin walked in with Fyre, both disheveled and sporting a few bruises. Both women were laughing and pounding each other on the back. "Hey, Luna... oh, hey lookie, the gang's all here. Eve. Tasha." Torrin gave a mock bow and a lopsided smile to both of them.

Leaving a frowning Eve, Luna grinned and walked toward the two newcomers. She nodded to

Fyre, who she knew by sight but had not talked to before. "Hello to you both. You look like you had fun?"

"Thought you should know, about an hour ago, Fyre won the final fight. She's the new leader of the Fire Clan. Which I think is hilarious. Fyre, of the Fire Clan." Torrin and Fyre burst out laughing.

When she realized not everybody thought it was as funny as she and Torrin did, Fyre caught her breath and gave an embarrassed smile. Her gentle blue eyes took in the room, and she held out a hand to Luna. "Well met, Luna. My mother talked glowingly about you, which is rather amazing since she rarely spoke much."

Both blonde eyebrows rose in surprise at that and Luna returned the handshake as one warrior to another. "Your mother will be missed. Congratulations on winning your match. You know Tasha, I think, and this is Eve, daughter of Athena, new leader of the Wind Walkers."

Luna turned back to Torrin. "And of course you went out to celebrate during that hour?" she asked, secretly wishing she could have been there.

"Well, we might have celebrated a little," Torrin grinned at her, "and especially after Emily and Ember bought that last round. But then Adrian had to go be a party pooper."

Blue eyes narrowed slightly at the mention of Adrian, but Luna held her tongue.

"But I think the Water Clan will like the gift we wrapped and left on their doorstep, don't ya think Frye?" The new Clan leader laughed and nodded.

Luna winced, she was certain she would hear about that soon enough.

Frye turned to Tasha. "Well met, Tasha." Then she turned to Eve. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Eve nodded back cordially. "Thank you. Please excuse me. I have to go get ready for the procession." The slender woman paused at the doorway. "Luna, I will see you later in the procession."

Confused why the younger woman had felt she needed to repeat that, Luna just nodded.

Torrin snickered but then went still as she watched the exchange with Eve. Her face darkened for a moment before she schooled her features into neutral mask.

Fyre started to say something but Tasha grabbed her hand. "Fyre, why don't I walk with you to the ceremony? I have some questions I'd like to ask you about your Clan."

Fyre nodded as looked over to Torrin, but the woman ignored her. With a sigh, she let herself be

escorted out of the room.

Left alone in the room with Torrin, Luna awkwardly glanced around, trying to think of something to say. "Um, what exactly did Adrian do?" was her first brilliant thing to say.

"You're really integrating yourself into the Wind Walker culture, I see." Torrin said at the same time.

"What do you mean?"

Gray eyes slid away from Luna's frowning face. "Um, well, you just seem to be filling in for Wind Walker customs that a mother or partner would be doing."

Blue eyes darkened for a moment. "You're the one who told me that they expected me to be at Eve's ceremony, didn't you?" Luna placed the mug of wine down and paced to the window. "Besides, Tasha was here too, unless you've started to pretend you can't see your sister?"

"Yeah, you were expected to be there, but not stand at her side. And what does my half-sister have to do with anything... You know... oh, just forget it." Torrin rubbed her forehead moving to the bedroom. Normally she saw the barstools when they came at her, but Adrian's buddy had gotten in a luck shot. "I'm going to go lie down."

Luna stared in surprise at the smaller woman's retreating back. "What just happened here?" the Ranger muttered as she watched the door to Torrin's bedroom slam shut. She stood there for a moment, not sure what to do. As she covered a yawn, she decided she could afford a nap as well. Luna skimmed out of her shirt and pants, and slipped into the cool sheets. Promising herself only a short sleep, she'd closed her eyes and hoped that Torrin would be in a better mood when she woke up.

Torrin struggled as dark dreams forced themselves upon her. The dark-haired woman groaned and twisted around in the sheets.

The room was dark and smoky. Incense burned everywhere making one dizzy with the sweet scent. In the silky shadows, humanoid forms writhed and merged in and out of each other.

She watched her Queen move over the Northerner, grunting and sweating in a beautiful display of strength and control. When the bodies stopped moving, a dark hand moved to a table and picked up a cup sitting there. Its narcotic contents then forced down the throat of the woman underneath.

Then, she was motioned forward and she knelt at her Queen's side. She sighed as a hand caressed her head.

"You've been good, haven't you, my pet?"

She nodded.

"Good. Perhaps a reward?" Hands came down removing her shirt. Then the hands were back tracing the muscles in her back and arms.

"I want to watch you. Go on. Yes, I want to watch you fuck my tasty little Northerner."

She crept on to the bed, her hands holding Luna down. Her hands...

Torrin woke up, a scream working its way up from her toes. She shoved her hand into her mouth and bit down until she tasted blood. Getting up, she heaved into the chamber pot until her stomach was empty. Grimacing from the taste, she fumbled for a pitcher of water, rinsing out her mouth. Finally, she sat on the floor letting the cool stone soothe her body.

Anger, rage... it burned hotter than any fire in her gut.

Torrin breathed in and out. 'That wasn't really her. It was the memories that had seeped into her from the assassin,' she kept telling herself. After a while, she felt more in control of her emotions and stood up to get dressed. Retrieving her recently delivered pack from Wooten's Tavern, she pulled out a small box. Opening it, she took out two objects and pocketed them on her body.

Taking another breath Torrin opened the door of her room and moved out into the other room. She fully intended on going quickly to the Assassin's cell, but she paused, her eyes straying to where Luna slept. The covers were pushed down and long blonde hair lay pooled around her face. The fading afternoon light streamed in through the nearby window, dusting the entire scene in a golden hue.

The shorter woman's gray eyes held onto Luna's face. Her friend seemed so peaceful. Luna shouldn't have had those horrors visited upon her.

The Ranger twitched in her sleep, rolling over and muttering something as she snuggled deeper into the covers.

Unable to stop herself, she moved silently to the edge of Luna's bed and crouched down so her face was even with Luna's. Her lips moved into a small smile and she reached out moving a blonde strand out of her friend's face.

"Oh, Luna. I'm so sorry," she breathed out in a whisper.

The blonde whimpered in her sleep, twisting her head to the side as she faced whatever demons haunted her dreams.

"Shhhh." Torrin stroked Luna's forehead, easing the lines of tension.

Luna stilled at Torrin's touch, turning her head towards the contact. "Torrin," Luna sighed, her lips curling into a small grin as better dreams took over.

Blue eyes fluttered open and Luna gave Torrin a slow sleepy smile. Cupping the hand on her cheek, the ranger closed her eyes again.

"Is it time to get up?" she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

Torrin felt her breath catch as Luna smiled at her.

"What?" She blinked gray eyes. "Oh, um, I don't know."

Blue eyes opened a crack and Luna twisted a bit to glance at the window, checking to see how dark it was yet. "We don't have to be there until moonrise." Yawning, she stretched, bearing more than a bit as the blankets slipped.

Torrin swallowed as she watched the blankets slip down further. "Oh, okay." She willed her eyes up to Luna's face.

Luna tugged the blankets up around her, paused a second, then moved over and lifted the blanket up in an invitation. "You're getting cold," she explained, her cheeks heating in a blush as she did so.

"What were you just doing now?"

Torrin hesitated. "I had a... I was... you seemed to be having a bad dream. I..." She trailed off, not making any sense. After a moment, she climbed into the bed.

Luna was quiet for a bit then turned onto her side, propping her head up on a pillow and studied her friend. "I won't be in the procession if you think it's a bad idea."

Torrin sighed. "No, I'm sorry about earlier. It's none of my business. You should do whatever you think is best." She rolled on to her back and stared at the ceiling. Her nightmare was coming back to her and her hands began to tremble.

Misinterpreting the source of those tremors, Luna tucked the blankets around them both, willing to help warm her friend again as she had before.

"Told you that you'd be cold." Luna yawned and took pleasure in the peace and quiet after a moment of silence. "I don't know what is best," she whispered suddenly. "I don't know why people think I do, but I don't. Even Tasha's doing it now, asking me what to do. What do I know? I'm just a Ranger who lost a castle."

Torrin rolled back over to her side and looked into scared, blue eyes. "Luna, I don't know how I

can make you see yourself as everyone else does. But you are a leader. You survived the enemy and you know how they fight. You may have failed, but you couldn't have known that Khelin would have someone who would have intimate knowledge of Abnoa." Her voice broke. "You didn't know she'd have me."

The silence stretched into minutes, and then Luna gently touched Torrin's cheek. "Then it's a good thing you're on my side now." She smiled slowly, lightly stroking the skin below her fingertips. "Right?"

Gray eyes flickered down to the fingertips. "Yes. You have me." She licked her lips looking back at Luna's face.

"Do I?" Luna whispered, her fingers sliding down to touch Torrin's neck, blue eyes fixed on Torrin's lips, suddenly aware of how close together they were and how little she was wearing.

Torrin's breath caught as fingers traced random lines on the skin of her neck. She closed her eyes trying to block everything out. She felt so out of control of the moment. Opening her eyes, she reached out a hand and cupped Luna's jaw, tracing the lips with her thumb.

"You do have me. I don't know why you'd want me, but here I am."

Luna marveled at how she could feel Torrin's pulse speed up, and the feel of her skin was intoxicating. Ignoring everything but the feel of that skin and the look in those gray eyes, Luna leaned forward. It seemed like an eternity before she slowly, hesitantly, brushed her lips against Torrin's, groaning at the softness and heat of them.

Torrin fought with herself not to push for more. She let the kiss just be a kiss. She wanted to bury her hands in Luna's hair and pull her deeper. But she resisted and let Luna have control, even as her heart speed up and her hands began to sweat. She marveled how the kiss was nothing she had imagined kissing Luna would be like. It was so much more.

Luna reluctantly pulled back, licking her lips as she did so, her heart hammering. She was tempted to pull Torrin closer, feel her skin pressed against her own. It was scary how much she wanted that.

"We should get ready." Her voice was unsteady and she was trembling as well.

Torrin nodded. Somewhat dazed, she licked her lips tasting where Luna had been. "Yeah, ready. Ready for what?"

#####

Luna stood with the others at the main gate of the Castle, waiting quietly as the Honor Guard assembled itself. Magda rested on a large shield while Athena was on a simple polished wooden stretcher. Twelve women then carried the bodies to the temple for the ceremony.

The crescent moon was just beginning to rise above the horizon when the procession began to move. The entire city gathered along the route, the way lit by torch light and the light of the rising moon. There was a somber silence as they walked. Luna uneasily straightened her dark formal garments. Her new sword hung at her side. She had no desire to go anywhere without it after the attack in the library. She also made a point of positioning herself behind Magda's family despite Eve's plea for her to walk with her.

The procession slowly wound its way through the city streets taking a full candle light to bring them to the temple, up the stairs, through the wide double doors and into the building itself. Inside, moonlight lit the beautiful stained glass work that Luna had appreciated on her first visit. She noticed Torrin positioning herself near the back by the main doors.

Torrin watched the procession from the entrance with hooded eyes. Rhain, her puffy nose taking over her face and still full of her own self-righteousness, glared fiercely as she passed by. Tasha flanked their mother's other side. She no longer wore bandages but her right eye was still swollen shut and her face was a patchwork of bruises. She smiled weakly at Torrin as they entered but seemed grateful Torrin had chose not to stand with the family.

Fyre, while still unofficially the Fire Clan leader was Magda's eldest and so she took the lead. Her sisters, Adrian, the twins Emily and Ember, and their Aunt carried the shield with Magda's body. She smiled back at the Fire Clan procession. For them, this was not a time of mourning. Their mother had died a warrior. She had died battling the enemy and that was a source of pride. She was happy to see Adrian was willing to put away petty jealousy at least for today. As they entered the Temple, she nodded to Torrin, not missing the way her friend's eyes moved to watch Luna.

Torrin nodded her head to Fyre and then sneered at Adrian. She really was unhappy with the woman. Last night Adrian had burst in on their happy drink fest and moaned about how she had been cheated out of the leadership. When she started to blame Luna, well, things had gotten nasty.

As she looked at Luna's face, Torrin resisted the urge to touch her lips in wonder as the memory of the kiss they had shared earlier came back to her. She finally shifted her gaze to the proceedings.

It was a simple ceremony. Both bodies were brought to the front of the Temple where the Priestesses anointed both bodies with oil and then wrapped them in white linens accompanied by chanting and incense burning. Once the bodies had been prepared and the chanting had finished, the procession reversed and went back out of the Temple.

Torrin stood silently as she watched them leave, still stunned at the fierce blossoming of emotion

that had burst in her chest with just a look at Luna. It was almost scary in its intensity.

Luna moved slowly, her thoughts full of the killings she had seen in the recent past and the death she would see again soon. She paused as she got to where Torrin stood. As she met those gray eyes, she found the memories of death and the fear of the future disappeared.

With a smile, the Ranger moved on, following the silent procession as it made its way toward the packed central square. It was probably the largest gathering of the Northern tribes at a single place in generations. Once there, each body was placed upon newly constructed funeral pyres and carefully arranged by their families. Ceremoniously, the priestess's touched burning torches to the pyres, setting them aflame.

Only then was the silence broken as the best singers in the Wind Walker clan sang. Their voices soared with the flames, singing the two departed women to the sky and entrusting them to the Moon Goddess.

When the pyres became embers, the crowd slowly dispersed. Luna shook hands with Fyre and Tasha, got a surprising hug from Eve, and started to leave as well.

Only then did she realize she couldn't find Torrin.

#####

When most of the people had left the Temple, Torrin moved into the street shadows. Her nightmare still rolled darkly around her head, and unhappily, she knew what needed to be done. Seeing that no one was paying her any attention, she slipped away from the crowd. Patting a pocket, she felt the forms of the tools she would need.

Torrin walked down the hallway toward the guard. Stopping just in front of the heavysset woman she nodded to her. Her eyes drifted to the closed door with light that brightly spilled out of cracks.

"She do or say anything?"

The guard shook her head. "Nope. Not a peep. I check on her once an hour to see if she's still there and alive. She just glares at me when I open the door."

Torrin nodded. "Has anybody been here to see her?"

The woman peered at the shorter, dark-haired woman. Torrin made her slightly nervous. Not that it mattered to her, but she had heard the stories and yet Torrin looked like just a girl who had seen too much in life. "Nope."

"Good. I'm going to go in and... talk with the prisoner."

The guard nodded. "Okay." She didn't have any orders to prevent that.

"If you could go to the end of the hallway it would probably be more pleasant for you. The Assassins are trained in pain repression. To get any answers, it might get, um, loud."

The guard grinned and moved down the hallway. When Torrin was confident that she would not be overheard, she opened the door and walked in.

The woman looked more gray than pale in the light. Torrin nodded approvingly as she glanced around the cell. Valarie had done a good job. There were still shadows but they were in the corners of the room far away from the Assassin to help her any.

The black clad figure looked up from the pole she was chained to and scowled at Torrin. "My, my, if it isn't the traitor," she hissed out. "The Mistress will hold you in her fire for all eternity for your betrayal."

Torrin shrugged and closed the door. "I'm not an Assassin. So I haven't betrayed anyone."

Black eyes blinked in surprise and then stared intently at the woman at the door. Under closer inspection, she saw Torrin spoke the truth. She wasn't an assassin. Her eyes were gray not black and the way she carried her body showed training but not enough. "How?"

"I don't know," Torrin answered. She had a good idea but since she knew how the Assassins shared their secrets to their Sisters, she kept that bit of information to herself.

The Assassin gathered herself. "You can torture me all you want. I won't tell you anything," she said with a sneer.

Torrin laughed. "So full of yourself. Your kind is always so arrogant. I've killed three of you now and still you can't give me any respect. Besides, I already know that Khelin sent you to kill the Council and the Leader of the North. It was fairly obvious when you attacked them in the Library."

"Then why are you here?"

Torrin crept closer, her eyes becoming cold and distant. "I was hoping you might tell me something useful about troop strength and when Khelin will start pushing for the Pass."

The Assassin smirked, "Is this the part where you threaten to torture me if I don't talk?" She gave a laugh. "I will escape. The longer I stay here, the greater my chance someone will screw up. Then I will be free to go back and tell Khelin that her whore is still alive and well."

Torrin's eyes grew colder and darker. She anticipated it would come to this.

"Ah, Luna. Khelin's whore," the woman continued. "We were always there watching when they

were together. The things Khelin did to break that girl." She smirked. "How do you think the people would react to hear how intimate Khelin and Luna were? Sure, they'd try not to believe that sweet Luna could do such a thing, but rumors would spread, whispered over drinks in a tavern. How well would Luna be able to lead then?" She laughed at the cold face in front of her. "I do believe you're upset. But you, sweet little Northerner, are so noble you'd never kill me in cold blood. No, no, I must have a proper trial to be dealt with."

She laughed again. "Oh, shall I tell you how sweet Luna's flesh is. One night, our mistress got Luna so messed up and she invited some of us to join in..." She choked off as Torrin's hand came down and covered her nose and mouth.

"Yes I know," Torrin replied quietly in a voice without emotion. "I know that you're the last one alive besides Luna and Khelin to know such things. And you've brought up a very good point. If others knew, then yes, it could cause problems for Luna and in a time of war, we can have no doubts about our leader."

Torrin knew she was only justifying what she was about to do. She knew she wasn't a good person but she wasn't an evil-made body who could live with the visions that she had in her head. Luna, a young, naïve woman, had been abused and drugged, repeatedly raped, and had other unspeakable horrors visited upon her by Khelin. She wouldn't sit by and let someone she cared about have the specter of fear and suspicion surrounding her. So she would wrap what she was about to do under the veil of protecting the new leader of the North so the war effort wasn't undermined before it had really started.

But deep inside herself, she knew it was retribution. She was going to get revenge, plain and simple. "Oh...and I'm not a true Northerner."

The Assassin struggled under Torrin's firm hand, her lungs burning.

Torrin pulled a small wooden tube out of her tunic. With a flick of her thumb, she popped the cork that sat firmly on the top. She lifted her hand off of the Assassin's mouth but kept the nose covered. When the woman opened her mouth to gasp for air she shoved the tube in and drained the contents down the woman's throat. Satisfied it all had been emptied out, she released her hand and stepped back.

The Assassin coughed and sputtered, her throat felt on fire. She opened her mouth to scream knowing the guard would be here and then she could spill her guts about Luna but nothing came out but a puff of air.

"You'll never tell your secrets to anybody. Sorry." Torrin pulled out a small, brown piece of root. "Open up," she said with an evil smirk. The Assassin struggled with her chains, glaring murderously at the petite woman in front of her.

"Fine, we can do it the hard way again." She pried the woman's mouth open and flicked the root into it. Then she slammed the jaw closed and held it shut until she felt the woman swallow.

Letting go, she stepped back looking into now scared eyes. "You're all so conceited...thinking you're the best. 'An unstoppable killing soldier'. But while you can bring death, you're cowards at accepting it. I was a mercenary and I woke up almost everyday of my life knowing it could be my last. And here we are, I'm alive and you won't be. The black eyes widened. "Don't worry; unlike the way you kill, this will be painless. You'll just go to sleep in a few hours and never wake up."

The woman nodded and looked relieved.

Torrin turned her back to the woman, walked to the door and opened it. She looked back once and then shut the door behind her. She nodded to the guard down the hall.

"Anything?" she asked as she started walking back to her post.

Torrin paused. "No. They are hard ones to get to talk."

The guard nodded, not surprised. She opened the door to look at the prisoner. Her charge was right there where she was the last time she looked. Black eyes blinked back at her. With a shudder, she closed the door and watched Torrin walk away.

#####

Luna had gone back to her...their...room after the funeral. She fully expected to find that Torrin had simply left the funeral early. Something she could certainly understand. When she found the room empty, she didn't know what to think. A part of her wanted to go searching for the ex-mercenary. "She's a grown woman, she can take care of herself," Luna muttered, pacing the length of the room. It hurt a bit that Torrin hadn't said a thing about where she was going.

"She's probably just out drinking with Fyre." Blue eyes narrowed as another thought entered the Ranger's mind. "Or Adrian." That wasn't a nice mental image.

It didn't take long for her to reach the conclusion that staying alone in her chambers, pacing, was not a good idea. Instead, she snatched up her sword, strapped it back on and set out to investigate the Castle.

Cordially, the Ranger smiled to the guards who were lounging near the entrance to the unoccupied portion of the old Castle. She'd noticed more warriors on guard duty since the assassination attempt. But considering the Assassins in question had been able to move in and out of the shadows at will, Luna wasn't certain how effective any of them would be.

The guards nodded and stood to attention. When they realized it was Luna's intention to enter the unused parts of the Castle, the one on the left cleared her throat.

"Um. Excuse me. Ma'am... uh, Luna. You really shouldn't be going into these parts of the Castle."

Luna stopped, looking at the Fire warrior with a raised eyebrow and asked, "Why not?"

The guard froze her mouth opening and closing a few times before she found a sentence. "Well, strange things have been reported. It's not too safe to go wandering in there by yourself."

The Ranger tilted her head to the side, studying the two guards. "You mean it's haunted?"

The two guards squirmed. "Well, we've never seen anything. But rumor has it that... well, yes." The last part said in a hurried mumble.

Luna smiled brightly to both of them and thumped them each on the shoulder pads of their armor. "Don't worry, I'll be fine." She went past them, paused looked back at them. "Oh, it is, you know. Haunted, that is." With another grin, she entered the dusty corridor beyond.

Both guards looked wide-eyed at each other. After a moment, they leaned their spears against the wall and played Rock, Parchment, and Sword.

The one on the left laughed as her rock beat the sword. "Great. If she disappears you get to tell the Council."

The other one just scowled.

Luna chuckled as she overheard the conversation, and then picked up her pace as she headed down the corridor. The talk of ghosts had decided the course for her. Earlier, she had been simply content to wander the empty hallways. Now though, she had a destination in mind, if only she could find her way back to it. The last time she had gone to the tower, she'd been lost.

It took her some time, but after a few false turns and lots of empty rooms, she found herself climbing a familiar set of stairs. Confirming Luna's hunch, the thick dust only showed one pair of tracks coming and going from the tower.

After she'd climbed past several floors and could see the fires lighting the city spread out below through the small arrow slits, Luna eased her pace.

"Old Mother?" she called out, not wishing to be attacked by the startled guard. She slowly climbed the last few steps and peered around the corner to the door that the blind, old woman had been guarding before.

"Back so soon?" the voice responded.

Taking that as an invitation, Luna climbed the last few steps to the short corridor in front of the doorway.

"I wanted to ask you a question," Luna said as soon as she spotted the shape of the old woman.

"Are you still lost?" the old warrior replied.

"There is a path laid out before me," Luna answered slowly, choosing her words carefully. "I don't know how much control I have over whether I walk it or not, but at least I see it now."

The warrior nodded and leaned her spear back on her shoulder. "It's good to see the path. But know, there is always a choice. We are free people. We may worship the Goddess, but she doesn't demand it of us." She smiled warmly at the young woman in front of her.

Luna frowned at her words, not convinced that she had much of a choice. "I swore to keep Khelin from winning and I will hold to that. No matter whatever sacrifice I must make."

The guard nodded. "Then do not make the mistake that the last Queen made. There is always danger. There are always those around you who will seek to do you harm. They may give you a pretty front, but underneath, they are darker than the shadows. One who has lived once in darkness will always remember its taste. Trust your heart and trust your heart's heart." The old woman straightened up, her back popping in places.

"I came to ask you about the last Queen," Luna said after a moment of trying to sort through the old woman's words. "And about this sword I wear." She touched the hilt of the sword at her side.

The woman squinted looking down to Luna's side. Tears gathered in her eyes as she recognized it. "The Queen's sword," she breathed out. "I thought El... I mean the Deceiver had stolen it."

"A ghost gave it to Torrin," Luna said quietly, drawing the sword to show it to the old woman who wasn't as blind as she appeared. Once again, the blade glowed from within, lighting the dim corridor and driving shadows from its corners.

The old warrior winced at the light. "A beautiful weapon. It provides light and hope even in the darkest of places, but only for a worthy heart."

"The ghost was the Deceiver wasn't it?" Luna asked to make certain.

The warrior frowned, her lips forming a thin line. "Yes, the Deceiver still haunts these halls with her presence."

Luna sheathed the sword and returned the hallway to its former darkness. "What happened to the last Queen? Please, I need to know."

The woman sighed and set her spear down. Moving over to a dusty, rotting chair, she eased herself down. "The last Queen... where do I begin?"

She sighed, "The last Queen was ...weak. She knew about the pleasures of her position, but little about actual ruling."

"That isn't what we learned when we grew up. We were told as children how brave and valiant the Queen was, and how the Deceiver had cut her down in the prime of her rule."

The woman shook her head sadly. "Well, she was cut down in her prime but she wasn't a leader. She was no true Queen. She was a little girl playing at being leader. Still we did our jobs. We were her Royal Guard."

Luna perched on a very little used bench, listening intently to the old woman. "What happened?"

"She played with the hearts of people. The Deceiver was madly in love with the Queen, and thought her affections were returned."

"So she killed her?" the Ranger asked, her voice quiet in the darkness of the corridor. How was it that something that had happened so long ago felt so personal?

"Ella. She found the Queen in another's embrace. She disappeared for a week and then returned as if nothing had happened. We, the others under her command, thought she was okay, and let it go. That was our fatal mistake."

Luna studied the hilt of the sword, calloused fingertips tracing the elegant designs inlaid in it. "Where did she go while she was gone?"

"Nobody knows. But I caught her a couple of times talking into the shadows but there was no one with her. She told me she was just venting to the air and I let it go. But I should have known, her heart had been twisted and become dark. She deceived those of us on duty that night. She went into the Queen's private chambers and murdered her and her unfortunate lover for the evening."

She looked down at the dusty floor. "The Queen's lips moved even though her head was no longer attached to her body. She cursed us and this Castle."

Luna tried to imagine how twisted the Deceiver's love must have become, how seductively the shadows must have whispered. "And you've remained here, you and the Deceiver," Luna finished, letting out a sigh.

"Yes," the old warrior said as she got up.

"Although I've never seen Ella since that night, I've heard her screams of rage and grief, so I know she's still here. She really was the best of us all. To have her fall so low..." She looked sorrowfully at Luna. "It's sad really, she deserved better, but we can't help who we fall in love with." Walking back over to her spear, she picked it up and returned to her guard duty.

"Do you think that when you love someone, you love all parts of them?" Luna asked at the old woman. "Even the dark places in their soul?"

The guard snorted. "You have to or you don't really love them."

She blinked at Luna. "Girl, you don't have to like those dark places, but it's unrealistic to think nobody has 'em, so just accept them the best you can, and love the best you can. Just be honest and expect that honesty in return. Now be off with you. You still do not need to be here. Soon enough, but no need to rush things, things will come soon enough."

Luna nodded and got up. There were still gaps but she understood more what had come before. "Thank you, Old Mother." The ranger gave the guard a respectful bow then headed back down the stairs, leaving the old woman to her solitary guarding of the dead Queen's chamber.

#####3

Torrin sighed inside the empty room. She felt cold and empty. Part of her hadn't come back yet. Every time she killed, she put part of her being away so she could do the horrible things that needed doing. She once dreamed of a day when she wouldn't be a mercenary anymore. But even after she had paid off her servitude to Rya, she hadn't left. It was all she knew how to be.

She didn't want to go back to Luna's rooms just yet. She wasn't ready to face Luna. She felt dirty, unfit. After easily sneaking past the guards, she had wandered around the Castle. Now in the deserted ballroom, she poked around the dusty furniture. Coming upon a door behind a wall hanging she slowly opened it. She grumbled as she peered into the darkened room. Looking around the ballroom, she found a usable half-melted candle. Lighting it, she moved back to the room to investigate.

Her eyes widened as she saw it was the music room. Entering it carefully, her hand lovingly trailed across dusty drums, wooden and bone flutes, and stringed instruments. She bent over to pick up a few crumbling pieces of parchment. Her mind caught the pattern of notes even as the parchment broke apart and fell to the floor. Letting it go, she noticed a small brown leather case. Opening it, her breath caught. Reaching in with a trembling finger, she plucked a string.

The rich pure tone made her breath catch. Even after all these years, it was still in tune. Grabbing the case, she returned to the ballroom and set the candle down on a table. She reverently pulled the fiddle out of the worn holder. Searching inside it a bit, she found the bow under a flap. Setting it under her chin, she slowly pulled the bow across each string. Finding each one still in tune, she pressed the bow to the strings again but this time forcing a song out.

At first, the music was strained and dark, and seemed to flicker ominously with the shadows around the room. By degrees, the music began to change until it became sad and melancholy. In her head, she saw the notes floating. They hovered on the flames of the pyres that burned their tribute to the night sky. Inch by painful inch, she played the sadness and anger out of her system, and finally felt the locked up side of her come back.

With her fingers aching from playing, she collapsed to her knees and cried for what she had done. She knew she had lied to herself and now the noble excuses she had told herself fell apart in her heart. Tears ran down her face in regret and she cried for the look of repulsion she knew Luna would get on her face if she ever found out.

"Torrin?" Luna called out from the doorway of the dark room. She had followed the sound of the sad, melancholy music through the hallways of the old Castle. She was expecting to come across a ghost, not her friend.

Torrin wiped her face. Squinting she looked up to the doorway. She gave a weak smile.

"Hey."

Quickly crossing the dusty floor Luna crouched down next to her friend, worried blue eyes studying Torrin's red face.

"What happened?" Her eyes darkened. "Did Adrian do something? Or Rhain?" If they had hurt Torrin in some way, she would track them down and skin them. The burst of protectiveness was strong enough to make Luna shiver with emotion.

Torrin hesitated for a moment then replied, "Nothing. Just life catching up with me." She got up slowly and gently placed the fiddle back into the leather case.

"Want to talk about it?" Luna asked, watching Torrin's fingers as she replaced the fiddle. She was glad for the darkness as she felt her cheeks heat a bit at the sudden thought of what those fingers would feel like touching her.

Torrin shrugged. "Not right now." Turning around, she reached over to Luna and squeezed her arm gently. "But thanks for asking. Nobody has ever cared to ask."

Luna grasped Torrin's hand in her own and squeezed back. "Come on, how about we go get some rest? I don't know about you, but I'm tired." Biting back a yawn, Luna patted the shorter woman's hand one last time and then let go.

"You play very well." Standing up, Luna smiled. "Will you play for me sometime?"

Torrin blushed.

"Thank you. I-I-I could play for you sometime if you wanted." Trying to hide how awkward she felt, she turned to pick up the fiddle case. She wasn't sure what she and Luna were. Were they courting, dating, or what? She had never done this, whatever this was. Normally, it was only about sex and then leaving.

The Ranger waited for Torrin to gather the last of her things and then followed her down the

corridor back out of the unused portion of the Castle.

Curious as to where Torrin had disappeared to after the funeral, Luna asked, "Did you go celebrating with Fyre again?"

Torrin struggled for an answer. "Um, no. I went down to question the Assassin. But she wasn't forth coming about anything. After that, I was feeling restless so I decided to explore a bit." She winced internally; it wasn't a lie but not quite the truth either.

Luna nodded at the explanation. "You know, it just occurred to me that we missed dinner." She could see the doorway where the two guards were on duty.

Taking Torrin's hand in hers, she allowed herself to go with the impulse and tugged the shorter woman along.

"Come on, how about we hunt up some food first, and then get some sleep?"

Torrin blushed at the guards as their eyebrows rose at the pairing.

Taking a deep breath, she wound her fingers with Luna's, happy to let things be for the moment for however long it might last.

"Okay, food sounds good."

#####

It started to rain the next day. The spring precipitation heralded the end of winter in the North and the beginning of the mud season. Within hours, the Winderling was a swollen torrent, and the few countryside roads were becoming huge pits of muck. Luna knew that would happen. It was only a matter of days before they would have to leave the city. She just hoped that Allysandra's ships would be able to brave the high spring waters to bring the warriors to the foot of the Ellris Pass. The top of it would remain closed for a while yet with winter snows, giving them time to trek up to the Abbey and set up a defense.

Luna lay in bed, listening to the rain pelt the windows and luxuriating in the feel of the warm body next to hers.

They had each gone to their respective beds during the evening, but Luna had awakened to the sound of her friend in the throes of a nightmare. It had seemed easier to stay after soothing Torrin out of the grips of whatever demons haunted her dreams.

She'd been glad last night, Luna realized, that Torrin's nightmare had given her the excuse to share the smaller woman's bed again. Now she found herself in Torrin's bed, loathing the idea of getting up.

Torrin awoke slowly. As she did, she became aware of the warmth next to her. Rolling over with a stretch, she stared at Luna and then gave a sleepy smile at the woman.

"Can't resist me, huh?" she teased with a sleep-roughened voice.

"Don't get too cocky there," Luna whispered, her voice cracking at the sudden wave of desire that flowed through her. Torrin, she had just realized, was beautiful in the morning.

Torrin laughed.

Luna shivered.

"I'm always cocky, but I'm that good." She grinned, but her grin turned into a yawn.

"Sorry." She laid her head back down on Luna's shoulder, snuggling into the woman's frame. Then she stiffened as she realized Luna might not be comfortable with it. "Um, is this okay?"

Luna couldn't resist reaching out to tuck back an unruly lock of black hair. "Yeah," Luna whispered back, wrapping her arms around the slender woman. "It's perfect." She meant it too. With a sigh, she relaxed, perfectly happy to remain where she was for as long as possible.

Torrin smiled into the shoulder. "Good, I'm glad." She wrapped a hand around Luna's waist and started to drift back into a light doze.

Part of her mind was amazed she was okay with this. She had never been one for cuddling either before or after sex. "This is new for me," she mumbled, unaware she had said her thoughts aloud.

Long, calloused fingers played with the dark hair and Luna smiled gently. "This is new for me, too." Her time with Khelin had definitely not been about cuddling or waking up holding one another. "We seem to be doing well so far, though."

Torrin blushed and hid her face deeper into Luna's shoulder.

A low chuckle resounded through the taller woman's chest. "Did I actually just see a blush?"

A muffled "No" was the response. After a moment to get her composure, Torrin turned over to look at Luna.

Her breath caught; Luna looked very sexy with her disheveled hair and her blue, sleepy eyes. Torrin swallowed. "I'm amazed you want to be here, like this, with me. Um, I'm thankful that you want to be."

"Where else would I be?" Luna whispered, ducking her head towards those inviting lips.

The kiss was just as good as the first one. If anything, it was even better. Wrapping her arms

around Torrin, she held the smaller woman close as she at first, just gently brushed Torrin's lips. Then, tentatively, she deepened the kiss.

Torrin was taken aback for a moment. Luna seemed so shy and innocent, so when she initiated the kiss, it took Torrin completely by surprise.

Pulling back, Luna worriedly studied Torrin's face, not certain about the other woman's reaction. "Was that okay?"

Torrin blinked for a moment then realized Luna had asked her a question.

"Huh?" Exhaling, she grinned rakishly at Luna. "That was very okay. I'd like to do it some more if you don't mind."

Luna grinned and leaned down until her lips were only inches from the other woman's. "Maybe." Leaning closer until their breaths mingled Luna shivered and whispered, "What did you have in mind?"

Torrin felt her heart race, pounding in her chest like a drum. Slowly she licked her lips. "Hmm, what are you up for?"

Luna swallowed nervously, not sure how to answer that question. "How about more kissing?" Kissing seemed safe enough and she wasn't certain how far past that she could go.

Torrin nodded. "Whatever you want. No hurry. I'm not going anywhere." She lifted herself up and placed a gentle kiss on Luna's lips. Hands slid through her dark hair and pulled her back down as Luna moaned in appreciation.

Luna let the kiss deepen, groaning once more as she felt Torrin's mouth open. Her hands were shaking and her heart pounding. She couldn't seem to concentrate on anything other than the warm soft lips she was kissing and the warm, lithe body pressed against her own.

Torrin groaned as well. Who knew kissing could be so powerful just on its own? Letting a hand gently stroke Luna's back, she opened her mouth a bit, hoping Luna would be okay with that. But other than that move, she was going to let Luna dictate the pace. She gave a small whine in the back of her throat as Luna nails scraped along her scalp.

Reluctantly Luna broke the kiss, gasping for air as she stared wide-eyed at Torrin. With a shiver, she kissed the dark-haired woman again. Accepting Torrin's invitation, she hesitantly used her tongue to lick the other woman's lips and taste her.

Torrin sighed happily and wrapped both hands around Luna so they rested on her back and enjoyed the kissing. After a moment of pleasant torment, Torrin gently pushed Luna away. "Luna, I'm sorry but we need to slow down," she panted out, "because in a minute or two, my

head is going to melt."

The other woman nodded, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She wasn't sure how much farther she could have gone anyway. "I wish I could just..." Frustrated, Luna sat up, her lips still tingling from the kisses they had just shared, and well aware of her own arousal.

Torrin, sensing Luna's distress, pulled her back down to her side. "It's okay. Whenever you're ready for more, we will do more. This is new to me, too." She blushed. "Normally, it's just sex in a dark room and then leaving." She gave a nervous laugh. "Makes me sound a bit, um, callous doesn't it? I haven't really done all this... uh... foreplay, er, slow stuff." She groaned and wondered if she could have made things any worse.

Throughout her ramble, Luna slowly relaxed, until she smiled at the end and pressed her lips to Torrin's in a chaste kiss. "We both have our problems." She said simply, sighing and snuggling back down into the covers.

"We'll figure it out." She certainly hoped so.

#####

The day turned out to be gray and overcast with a constant drizzle. All in all, it was ugly to be outside and Luna was happy for once to stay inside the Castle. There was supposed to be a council meeting later that morning, and she idly wondered what the new council would be like as she and Torrin grabbed breakfast with a group of Fire warriors in one of the kitchens.

News had come up from the harbor that the lower waterways of the Winderling were free enough of ice that four more Wave Dancer ships had arrived early in the morning. Luna had shared a glance with Torrin at that news. The time to begin moving warriors and supplies to the Ellris Pass was upon them it seemed.

From there they had climbed the marble stairs to the main library. Luna smiled as she saw that no less than a half dozen guards were on duty this time. "Nothing like locking the barn door after the horse has left," she murmured to Torrin, nodding her head towards the guards.

Torrin leaned into Luna, getting a guilty thrill out of touching the other woman's body for a moment before whispering. "Are you sure you want me with you in the meeting?"

The taller woman stopped before they reached the guards and touched Torrin's arm. "Aren't you supposed to be keeping me out of trouble?" She let go of the dark-haired woman's arm when she realized the guards were watching them with great interest.

Torrin felt a slight stab of insecurity as Luna pulled away. She scowled at the guards and made a face. "I see your point. Libraries are hot spots for trouble."

"Don't make me laugh," Luna whispered. The guards stepped aside as they approached. The blonde nodded back uncomfortably as the Fire warrior in charge saluted them.

Torrin started when Fyre came up behind her and clapped her on the shoulder.

"You and our leader both disappeared at the same time last night. Adrian went on and on about it for hours before we spiked her drink to shut her up. So what's up with you and Luna?" Fyre asked, batting innocent looking blue eyes.

Torrin glanced swiftly at Luna, but the woman in question was thankfully too busy talking to Allysandra and Tasha, both of whom had ambushed her the second she'd entered the library, to hear Fyre's comment. Torrin turned around and grinned at her. Despite Fyre's size and prowess as a warrior, she still maintained a simple, childlike demeanor that made people underestimate her. "Don't try the eye thing, I'm on to you."

Fyre batted her lashes again, laughed and then pulled her friend to chair. "Come on, spill it."

"It's none of your business." Torrin replied.

"Okay then, tell me why you slept with my sister and then broke her heart. Now that is my business." She smacked Torrin on the back of the head. "What were you thinking?"

Luna glanced over to them, blue eyes narrowing slightly as she caught sight of Fyre hitting Torrin. Apparently convinced that Fyre wasn't about to start a fight, Luna went back to talking to Allysandra and Tasha.

"Ow!" Torrin rubbed her head. Leaning closer to the warrior, she whispered into her ear, "None of your business."

Fyre rolled her eyes, "Whatever. You had sex with her."

"I prefer to pretend that happened to someone else." Torrin grumped out wishing Fyre would let it drop.

Fyre's face went blank for a moment and then she doubled over laughing. "Oh, oh, that's too good. I can't wait to rub her face in that!"

Torrin smacked Fyre. "You will do no such thing. Your sister has enough issues. She'll be a total pain in the ass if that gets around."

Fyre looked heartbroken, "Oh come on. She deserves it."

"No," was Torrin's firm response.

Eve entered the room and breezed past Torrin and Fyre without a backward glance. She sidled up

to Luna with a wide smile and insinuating herself into the conversation.

Torrin scowled at Eve. "You know, I don't think she likes me," she whispered loudly to Fyre.

Fyre laughed heartily. "Stop it! my stomach is starting to hurt."

They watched as Eve leaned toward Luna and whispered something into the other woman's ear. Luna glanced at Eve with a confused expression, shook her head, and then clapped Allysandra on the shoulder. Torrin frowned and wondered what that was all about.

Tasha rolled her eyes and muttered something about "being in heat", before saying to Luna. "I guess we're ready to start now."

"Okay." and took her spot at the head of the scarred table. "Let's get this moving, folks." Luna was thankful that Tasha still had the seat to her right and Fyre now occupied the seat to her left. She didn't want to be close to Eve right now.

Luna, not wanting to waste more time started without preamble. "We all know the river has melted. That means we can start shipping people up the Winderling. Allysandra, how long will it take your ships to get everyone there?"

The head of the Wave Dancers leaned forward, white blonde hair draping low across her face. "With the four that came this morning, we now have seven ships in port. More are on the way. The Osprey, Kestrel, and Hawk are ready to depart. I can start taking the Rangers and Fire warriors immediately."

She nodded at Fyre. "The first Fire warriors will be at the base of the Pass by tomorrow night."

Luna started to ask another question but paused as she noticed Eve frowning at something over Luna's shoulder.

"What is she..." The head of the Wind Walkers pronounced the word 'she' with distaste... "doing here at this meeting?"

Torrin knew Eve was referring to her but she kept her face emotionless. She hadn't sat at the table figuring she was not really part of the war council but only there as security for Luna.

"Why is she here for a war council meeting?" Eve asked again, her expression conveying what she thought of the Southerner's presence.

Tasha cleared her throat. "Is everyone okay with Torrin being here?" She hadn't been expecting her sister at the meeting but was glad she was.

Fyre face started to go red, losing some of that girlish charm as she bellowed, "I

"She's here for added security and because she knows more than the rest of us about the way the Southerners fight." Luna replied calmly, even though her fists clenched below the tabletop.

Tasha nodded. "Luna's right. She has lived in the South for awhile." She wasn't willing to divulge more at this moment.

As always, Allysandra held her peace, simply waiting for a decision to be made before continuing with matters that affected her.

Torrin remained slouched in the chair with an aloof look on her face, seemingly not caring that they were talking about her.

Outnumbered, Eve reluctantly gave up, sat back in her chair with a disgusted motion. Luna glanced over her shoulder toward Torrin, sighing at the other woman's expression. She'd known it wouldn't be easy. Hopefully, the worst was over now though.

"Okay, then. Fyre, Tasha, you both know what needs to be done. Get our warriors to the top of the Pass as soon as possible. We'll need to establish a base at the old Abbey as well. Allysandra, as soon as the warriors have been sent up to the Pass, we'll need your ships to bring a constant stream of supplies to us."

Luna paused to think, "Eve," calling the younger woman's attention away from Torrin, "Your people's healers and teachers need to come in the second wave along with any of the priestesses who wish to join us."

"You should spike the path up to the Abbey with some pit traps," Torrin said softly. "It will slow down the troops and hopefully take them longer to get those cannons up to the Pass."

Before Eve could comment on Torrin speaking during the meeting, Luna spoke up. "Good. We need to keep those cannons away for as long as possible." She knew the others didn't realize how big a threat those new southern weapons were.

"When the fighting starts, you should smear oil or something slick on the back wall of the Abby." Torrin broke in again, not looking at the table. "That's how the Merc's took Abnoa. The troops will act honorably, mostly, but Khelin's paid well for the mercenaries. They won't hesitate to pull underhanded tricks."

Luna said nothing to that, simply nodding in agreement, fearful that her voice might betray her emotions.

Fyre frowned but nodded, she knew the role Torrin had played in Abnoa's fall and was happy to see her friend turn her back on the South.

Tasha's jaw fell. She looked around the table. How did troops get up the back wall at Abnoa

without being seen? How did they get up there at all?

Allysandra, to everyone's surprise, did comment. "Oh please. You warriors with your armor couldn't climb over a fallen tree. My girls could probably climb a wall like that and they haven't even trained for it."

At Eve's incredulous look, the head of the Wave Dancers laughed. "How do you think we change the sails, by magic?"

Torrin nodded at Allysandra. She liked the woman. She was practical. "Climbing claws don't hurt either. They spear right into the stone."

"Good. Tasha, we should start sending Rangers down the Pass to keep an eye on Khelin's movements as soon as we..." Luna paused, as there was a commotion outside in the hallway, followed by Rhain bursting in.

Torrin went still as she saw Rhain enter, pulling the guard from the cellars with her. She winced internally but showed no outward emotion.

Rhain's face turned red in anger as she saw Torrin sitting in on the meeting. "How dare you have that viper listening in on our war council!"

"Rhain, what are you doing here?" Luna countered with a frown. She was trying to figure out why the guard had been dragged in by Rhain.

Tasha sighed at her sister's outburst. She didn't have much hope that this would be resolved peacefully. "Rhain, now is not the time for this."

Rhain glared at her sister, "She's the Betrayer and you have her sitting here like it's not a problem. Well, it is! And I'm not going to stand for it anymore. The Assassin is dead. She," Rhain pointed at Torrin, "killed her."

A resulting uproar engulfed the library as everyone immediately started to ask questions and demand answers.

Torrin sat silently; avoiding Luna's questioning eyes as she let everyone explode around her.

"SHUT UP!" Luna roared, glaring at everyone in the room. "I swear, it's like dealing with children." Taking a breath, the Ranger looked back at Rhain, "Why do you think Torrin did this?"

Rhain pulled the guard forward. "Tell them," she hissed.

The guard swallowed nervously. "Last night, she came down to question the Assassin. She was the last and only visitor. This morning when they went to feed the woman, she wouldn't wake up. She was dead."

Fyre stood up and bellowed, "What kind of lame accusation is that?"

"Fyre! Be still." Turning back to face the guard, Luna motioned to her. "So, why do you think Torrin did this?"

Rhain snorted. "She did it to keep us from questioning the Assassin ourselves. That way she couldn't spill the fact that Torrin is one of Khelin's lapdogs."

Fyre looked around and then sighed. "There's no way Torrin could have killed the woman. The guard said it herself. Torrin saw the prisoner last night and then she was dead this morning." She looked to the guard. "Was the woman alive when Torrin left?"

Torrin gazed at Fyre with a bittersweet smile. She was honored that her friend would defend her but sad that she knew how upset she'd be if she knew the whole truth. She could feel Luna's eyes searching for hers. She looked away, unable to look her.

Luna hung on the guard's answer, praying. The hope died in Luna's chest as Torrin refused to meet her eyes. Luna said nothing, simply sitting there and watching Torrin.

"Well, yes," the woman stammered. "I checked her right after Torrin left and the woman gave me a scowl. So yes, she was alive."

Fyre laughed. "Oh yeah, Rhain. Torrin's the killer. The guards probably didn't search the woman good enough and she killed herself with some poison she had in her clothes for just such an occasion."

As much as Eve didn't like the southerner, she reluctantly spoke up. "The few books we have dealing with these southern Assassins agree that they would rather die than be captured."

Torrin sat very still waiting. If someone asked her, she wouldn't lie but she didn't want to reveal the why. She could feel Luna's eyes on her and for a brief moment, she glanced at her.

Rhain scowled and nearly howled in frustration. "She's fooling you all. Why can't you see this? I want her judged. I have 11 women who lost loved ones at Abnoa and they want justice. She opened the gate and let the South take our home, yet she walks around free of her crimes."

Luna took an angry step toward Rhain. "Torrin is redeeming herself by helping to keep Khelin out of the North." Luna stopped, forcing herself to calm down. "Let's end here. You all know what we have to do now that the Winderling has thawed." Looking at Rhain and the guard, she said. "Fyre, have someone help Rhain investigate the death of the Assassin. A healer perhaps?"

Fyre nodded. "I will see it done."

Torrin slowly relaxed. Fyre shook her head at her and made a crazy gesture with her hand. Torrin

had to smile at that.

As the people began to leave, Luna stopped Rhain and hissed. "Unlike some people, Torrin is trying to stop Khelin."

Rhain shrugged. "You can't ignore this or what she's done." She pushed past Luna and sneered, "The people of Abnoa won't follow her."

Luna waited until the last of the women had left the library, leaving her and Torrin alone. Moving to the main doorway, she closed it, barring it from the inside. Hands still on the wooden doors and with her back to Torrin, did she speak.

"You had a hand in her death." Luna said. "You said you saw her last night."

Torrin rubbed her head and then in a quiet voice said. "Yes."

Luna leaned her head against the door, feeling the smooth polished wood against her forehead as she closed her eyes, her shoulders sagging. "Why?" she whispered.

Torrin looked sadly at Luna's back. She tried to hold on to the memory of the morning but she could see it all slipping away.

"She was a liability for you," she answered back simply.

"Did you kill her, or just help her kill herself?" Luna didn't know why it made a difference, but she needed to know anyway. Her hands, she noted absently, were shaking slightly as she pulled them from the door.

"Please don't ask this." Torrin's eyes pleaded with Luna's back. "I did what had to be done. Can't you just trust me on that?"

Luna gave a half sob, her shoulders shaking. Shaking her head she stood up, keeping her back to Torrin. "I don't know if I can," she said, her voice heavy with emotion.

Frustrated and hurt, Torrin got up and kicked the chair. She claimed hotly, "I killed her. I pried her mouth open and dumped poison down her throat. Is that what you want to hear? "

Luna stood still, staring at the door in front of her, and then closed her eyes at Torrin's words. She felt as if a dagger was sticking into her heart. "I have to go now," she heard herself say, as she began to unbar the door. Her voice sounded strangely flat and hollow even to her own ears.

Torrin's eyes widened as she realized what she had done and winced at the tightness in her chest. "Luna..." She trailed off as Luna got the door open and left without ever looking back at her. Numbly, she watched her go.

#####

A grumpy Fyre opened her door. She blinked for a moment before she motioned Torrin in.

"Torrin, couldn't this wait...?" She trailed off seeing that Torrin was carrying her pack.

"I need a place to sleep. Can I stay here tonight?" Torrin asked hollowly.

Fyre nodded. "Yes, of course you can. But I thought you were staying with Luna."

Torrin shrugged. "I don't think she wants me there anymore." Torrin kept her voice calm belying the fact she was anything but that. She hurt inside. Luna walking away from her had upset her a lot. She knew she probably should have explained the details to Luna, but why didn't she just trust her?

"Oh ho, trouble in paradise," Fyre teased.

"Shove it, Fyre," she snapped back. "It's not your business."

"Oh come on. Don't tell me Luna believed that crap Rhain was spouting. She has to know it was that foolish girl's paranoia."

Torrin shrugged again and set her pack down with the new fiddle she had found. "We fought about the Assassin, yes."

Fyre blinked and then realized Torrin had never come out and plainly said she hadn't murdered the woman. Fyre's face grew dark in rage and without warning; she leveled a solid punch to Torrin's face just as the dark-haired woman started to turn around.

Torrin's head twisted back as Fyre's knuckles slammed into her cheek and the next thing she knew she was on her hands and knees on the floor.

"You lying bitch! I stood up for you! I defend you!" Fyre bellowed.

Torrin coughed and gasped trying to catch her breath. "I, Fyre, I never denied it."

"You lied to us all with your silence." Stooping over Torrin, the sturdy woman lifted her up by her shirt.

Torrin gasped and struggled weakly.

"My clan considers you one of us! Why would you use us so?" Fyre snarled out.

"I had to. You don't understand," Torrin choked out.

Fyre shook Torrin. "Help me understand before I go and tie you upside down to the Castle tower."

Torrin shook her head, sniffing back tears. "I can't. Please, I just can't."

Fyre just stood there with wavering emotions. "Come on Tor, give me something, 'cause right now I'm having a hard time with this."

Torrin cradled her head in her hands. "Khelin and Luna... they have a past, an abusive, cruel one. The Assassin threatened to tell everybody about it. Do you see how damaging that could be to Luna, especially now everyone has put her in command? And don't tell me you don't jump when she tells you to do something."

Fyre paused to think. "No, you're right. I don't know how she became our Leader, but she is." Fyre bit her lip; she was at heart just a simple warrior. The in's and out's of politics were too complicated for her, but she could see Torrin's point. That kind of information could be damning and undermine people's confidence in Luna. "You shouldn't have done it, but I can understand why it was necessary."

With a heavy sigh, she turned walking over to the washbasin and rung out a cloth. She threw it at Torrin. "Goddess, Torrin, we're warriors, we don't cry. Get yourself cleaned up."

Torrin nodded her thanks and sat up against the stonewall wiping her face.

Fyre winced seeing the bruising already starting on Torrin's cheek. "I'm sorry, Torrin. I should have heard you out before losing my cool."

Torrin smiled cautiously. "It's okay. You couldn't help it. You're a Fire warrior."

Fyre returned the smile. "That we are. You're one too, don't forget. We've adopted you."

Torrin beamed for a moment. "Thank you." She got up slowly and looked around the room. "You got a sharp knife?"

Confused, Fyre looked at Torrin. "Duh, of course I do. Why?"

Running fingers through her long dark hair, she replied. "We're going to war. Its time for a hair cut."

Fyre paled. "Hey, no need for that."

Torrin chuckled. "Long hair and battle don't mix. I think I proved my point at Wooten's."

The Fire clan chief frowned and grumbled, "It's just not right, Torrin."

#####

Luna ran out of the library, sprinted down the stairs and out into the street, oblivious to the startled looks of those she passed. Her eyes burned with unshed tears and her heart shattered. Once out of the Castle, her sprint turned into a ground-eating run as she sought distance from the Castle and her own thoughts.

It was an ugly day outside, a light rain keeping most people inside. The weather fit her mood. Almost blindly and as if the very demons of the abyss were behind her, she ran down the streets with little regard to the healed wound in her side. Her feet chose the course, and she soon found herself headed into a part of the old city that she didn't recognize. Many of the houses looking like they'd been abandoned for a long time. Her legs ate up the ground beneath her as she pressed onwards, the drizzle hiding her tears.

Only when she could run no further did she stumbled in a large walled garden and collapsed on the ground. Then she let the tears freely come, clutching her arms around herself at the heartbreaking pain. Finally, Luna slowly stopped sobbing. She shivered as the drizzle had soaked the indoor clothes she was wearing. The feeling of betrayal remained, but she was in better control of her emotions. Sniffing, she wiped a wet hand across her face, trying to clear her eyes.

"Do you feel better, child?" a quiet voice asked from behind Luna.

With a start, Luna half stood then sat back down as she spotted the source. Lucinda, the old priestess from the Temple, sat nearby under the overhang of a nearby shed.

Shivering, Luna shook her head. "No, it hurts." Swallowing she wiped at her face, irritated at the tears that streaked down it again.

The Priestess patted the rock next to the one she was sitting on. "What hurts?"

"What are you doing here?" Luna countered, not ready to talk about it yet. But she got up and took a seat on the rock next to the priestess. At least it was out of the rain.

Lucinda handed the soaking wet woman a heavy cloak. "Here child, put this on. We can't have you sick, too much is already in motion."

After Luna took the cloak, she stared off into the wet sky. Luna sighed, bracing her head in both her hands. "I'm not sure how I got to this place. But since you are here now, I assume it's where I should be." She looked down and mumbled, "I think I fell in love."

"Falling in love can be painful. But it's also very pleasurable. We sometimes forget, though, love is never easy. It's more like a delicate flower; a strong breeze can destroy it."

"What if the one we fall in love with someone who does something horrible?" The words tasted

like ash and she turned away, closing her eyes tightly.

The old woman shrugged. "Our last Queen was killed because of love. Luna, lots of horrible things can come out of or because of love. Did this horrible thing cause you to stop loving her?"

"I don't know," she whispered, and that was the truth. How could she feel the same for Torrin? Luna didn't know why she had done it, however she still couldn't bring herself to ask her.

"There are reasons for everything. But before you beat yourself up any further, you need to figure out if you still love this person and want a future with her. If the answer is no then there is no need to be hurt over it." She patted Luna's knee. "If the answer is yes, then you need to look under the surface of things and see if they are as terrible as they seem on the top."

Luna could only shake her head in acknowledgement, her emotions too confused. "Thank you," she managed to say, then stood up and wrapped the cloak tighter around herself.

"Child." The priestess spoke up again. "One should never be with one whose nature it is to do and enjoy horrifying things. However, on occasion, there are stand-alone events that happen. But I do agree that if she is truly an evil person, no matter if you are still in love, you should take it elsewhere."

Luna paused, and then nodded, not trusting her voice. Leaving the priestess sitting on her rock, the cold and soaked Ranger started to find her way back to the Castle. It was a long, wet walk back. She felt totally drained and emotionally exhausted by the time she staggered into her room.

The sight of Torrin's bedroom door open and the room beyond empty caused another bolt of pain. Stripping out of her wet clothes and leaving them where they fell, Luna curled into her bed and cried. She cried for a future she feared she would never share with a certain dark-haired woman who held her heart.

#####-

Before the morning sun had made it over the mountain peaks, Torrin was helping Fyre, and the twins Emily and Ember organized the masses of arriving Fire warriors. The docks were a scene of organized chaos. They were busier than they had been in generations, with hundreds of people working to load supplies, animals, and warriors onto the first five ships, while the second group of ships took on their own supplies.

"Stop that." Torrin slapped Fyre's hand as it yet again came up to feel the smooth, shaved back of her neck.

Fyre shrugged. "It's just so wrong, I can't help myself."

Torrin glared back. "Well, try."

"Fine, I won't give you the present I found for you," Fyre replied smugly.

"What do you have?" she asked as she turned around and looked at the Fire Warrior.

Fyre moved out of the way and Wooten was standing there. Torrin fought back the tears that sprung into her eyes upon seeing the older woman.

Wooten came up giving her a hug. "I've heard you've been busy since you left my fine establishment."

Torrin shrugged sheepishly. "Here and there."

"Good. But you need to come back. It's not the same without my musician."

"If I survive the war, I will, I promise."

Wooten nodded. "I'll keep you to that. Now, since I'm too old for such things like wars and fighting, I have something for you. I see you could use some added protection to help you keep that promise." Giving a motion with her arm, the twins came up carrying beautifully made Fire Warrior armor. "It may seem hard to believe, but once I was a small thing like you. And Weslen, Goddess bless her, well she's not a warrior."

"Mom!" Weslen's voice called out indignantly."

"Right, dear. As I was saying, I want you to wear this. It will keep you safe."

Torrin blinked. Then she reached out touching the gold scales. "I couldn't."

"I know it's not your customary black, but you know a change in color would be good for you. Go on, put it on. It's not that crap the other Clans make. We fire warriors know how to make armor."

Torrin nodded and held up her hands so the twins could slide it on her. Emily checked the back, adjusting it, while Ember checked the front. "Well, she's more on the wiry side, but we think we've got a good fit," Ember said.

Wooten smacked the girl. "Did you just call me fat?"

Ember smiled. "Nah, I called you thick, er, muscular."

Weslen came up clearing her throat. In her hands, she held a white jersey with a sword surrounded by a red flame of fire on it and a sword. She gave the cover to Ember who slid it over the scale mail.

Fyre took the sword. "Torrin, daughter of Tyra and Jinete. You have proven yourself to us of the Clan of Fire. In our eyes, you have fought back for atonement and, we of the Clan, understand the

stigma of deceit and the hard road of redemption. We acknowledge your past, we cheer at your actions in the present, and we look to the future and still see you as one of us. You can out drink and out fight most of us, and to that, we say welcome, Torrin, daughter of the Fire."

Holding the sword out, she made a shallow cut in her palm, then did the same to Torrin, and then grasped bloody palm to bloody palm.

Around them on the docks, the Fire Clan cheered.

Letting go, Fyre handed Torrin the sword. Torrin fumbled with it for a moment before placing it at her side.

Fyre laughed. "I think we broke that cool demeanor, girls."

The women laughed before coming forward to slap an embarrassed but beaming Torrin on the back in welcome.

Luna, expressionless, watched the gathering from the deck of the Osprey. She'd barely slept at all last night, only too aware of the empty bed in the room next-door. "How long until we can set sail?" she asked the woman next to her, her eyes not moving from Torrin's smiling face. Allysandra started to say something else, then paused, and answered the question instead.

"These ships will be ready by mid-afternoon."

Luna nodded in understanding, ignoring the expression on Allysandra's face. Five more Wave Dancer ships had made it to the city that morning, but they wouldn't be fully loaded until the next day with warriors, Alcens, and supplies.

Torrin thanked everybody but was still a bit dazed at what had happened. Feeling eyes on her, she looked over at the ship close to where she had been working. Her smile slipped as she caught Luna watching her, and with pain-filled eyes, she tore her gaze away.

She needed to get away for a bit. "Fyre? Can you handle everything for a bit? I want to go show my mom my stuff."

The woman nodded and went back to yelling at people. As Torrin left the docks, someone slammed into her. She started to yell but held her tongue when she realized it was Rhain.

Rhain sneered. "You may have them all fooled, but not me. Quinn was right. You are nothing but a disgrace. I'm watching you."

Torrin rolled her eyes. "Have fun then," she quipped before walking off.

Fyre looked over at the Osprey and waved, she shouted up to the standing women. "You two

should have come down. It was quite the event."

"I saw it, Fyre." Luna called back, blue eyes watching Torrin until the shorter woman was out of sight.

"Although we probably have everyone wondering why we adopted a braidless baby, but I couldn't stop her from cutting it." Fyre mused. "Well, I figured you and Torrin, being close and all, she would have liked a word of congrats." Fyre knew she was fishing but wanted to help her friend.

Luna said nothing, her fingers gripping the rail turned white as she flexed them.

Fyre shrugged, took the hint and went back to work.

"Tasha?" Luna called out, spotting Torrin's eldest sister in coming up the gangplank. "How long until the Rangers are all on board?"

Tasha frowned in thought. "Not too much longer, they should be all on soon."

"How many came?" Luna asked quietly once the leader of the Earth tribe was on board the large ship.

"Eighty three."

Luna's eyes followed where Tasha motioned and saw the group of women standing uneasily further down the dock. The Ranger's heart constricted at how small a group they seemed. Swallowing, she whispered to herself, "Is this what we've come to?" There were girls and old mothers among them. Some of the girls were barely taller than the bows they carried.

"Did you talk to Torrin today?" Luna found herself asking, anxious to know if the dark haired woman was really all right. "She cut her hair, I see."

Tasha's eyes flicked back to Luna. "I talked to Fyre earlier. She asked me whether mother had designs on her for the Wind Walker Clan."

Luna nodded, her eyes drifting back to the street where Torrin had disappeared. "Tyra will be proud when she hears about it."

Tasha motioned for some warriors to move something out of the way to a new spot. "And yeah, I saw her hair." Tasha laughed, "I can't wait for someone to give her grief over that."

All Luna could think was that Torrin looked good with or without long hair. But she couldn't imagine cutting her own hair that short. With a shake of her head, she turned away from the railing to see what she could help with.

#####

Torrin had never been on a boat before but she equated it to the rolling gait of a horse. Unlike some of the other Fire warriors, she found her sea legs quickly. She had taken great pains to be placed on Luna's boat without having it look like it. She did not seek Luna out, but she had made a promise to see that Luna was safe. To her dismay, Rhain, with much yelling, had been placed on the same boat and was staring daggers at her. Rubbing the spray of water off her cheek, she winced when she touched the bruise that Fyre had given her. She didn't blame Fyre one bit. If truth be told, she felt she deserved it. She only wished Luna had hit her instead of walking out. Sighing, she leaned against the rail and watched the women row. In another few minutes, it would be her turn.

A huddled form in a thick waterproof traveling cloak stood near the back of the boat and leaned over the railing. She dry heaved again. The swollen river was causing the large ship to toss and bob as it forged its way upstream. The sails were of little use, and so the Wave Dancers, along with a few Fire warriors, were working the oars. Luna was simply miserable. Her stomach twisted in knots and every motion causing her to lean over the railing. Her breakfast in the Castle was long gone.

Wincing in sympathy, Torrin watched Luna get sick again. She wished she could do something for her but she doubted Luna would welcome her help. Torrin spotted Allysandra and walked over to the woman. She nodded in greeting. "Is there a remedy for sea sickness?" she asked, leaning into the woman's ear, so her words were not lost to the cold wind.

The bronzed-skinned leader of the Wave Dancers smiled her teeth white against the color of her skin as another gust of cold wind tugged at hair white from endless days in the sun. "Time," Allysandra said, keeping an eye on their course. The Winderling was challenging enough during the summer, but now swollen with melting snow, it was proving very difficult. They crept up stream, their progress marked by feet. "Why?" She glanced sharply at her daughter who was keeping a hand on the helm, gesturing sharply toward the approaching bend. The girl nodded, rolled her eyes and starting to correct. She'd seen the approaching bend, just like the dozen or so before it.

"Our glorious leader is giving an offering to the river... frequently." Torrin responded with a nod of her head in Luna's direction.

Allysandra craned her neck around to glance towards the aft, chuckling as she returned her attention to the river ahead of them. Floating trees were a danger. "She'll get over it, or she won't. If she doesn't, then it's a long ride to the base of the Pass." A Wave Dancer who couldn't get over her seasickness quickly never traveled on her family's ship for long. "This is nothing. You should see what it is like upon the ocean." The older Wave Dancer smiled at the memories. "Now those are waves." Her eldest daughter just rolled her eyes.

Torrin grinned. "I'd love to see the ocean. This reminds me of the one time I rode a horse. The motion of the water, it's kind of like being on a horse." She explained, realizing almost nobody in the North knew what a horse was.

"Then you should come with us after this is over. There are sights we can show you that only a few mortals have seen. The pillars of the Gods, the Frozen Sea..." Allysandra trailed off, her eyes squinting. "Watch it, Megan!" But Megan already had started to turn to avoid the floating tree trunk barreling past them on the river current. A hit from the huge log could have put a hole in the hull.

"Perhaps I will. However, I have promised to return my Muanya's remains to the Plains of Drakemore but after that, we will see." Sighing, she looked at Luna out of the corner of her eye. "Well, I hope she gets her sea legs soon. Can you send somebody back to her with some water so she doesn't get dehydrated?"

Allysandra nodded absently, her eyes on the ships behind them, making certain that each of them had avoided the tree as well. Only when the last of the five had passed it safely did she ask, casually. "Why don't you?"

"Because she wants nothing to do with me," Torrin responded, then turned and walked back to relieve one of the rowers.

Thoughtful eyes watched the Southerner go before glancing back to where the tall blonde was leaning over the rail again. With a shake of her head, she relieved her daughter from the helm. "Go get a healer. Luna will be useless if she's sick all the way to the base of the Pass."

"But Muyana..."

A sharp glance silenced the girl's whine. "And do it quietly, Megan. No need for the others to hear she was sick." Wave Dancers generally considered seasickness a weakness.

Tapping the woman on the shoulder to alert her that she was there, Torrin took a moment to strip off her heavy outer layer leaving her with the sleeveless under-tunic. Her armor was stored away with her pack until they landed. Quickly, they swapped out and Torrin bent her back to the task.

The Osprey crept northward, the mountains coming closer with every hour they spent upon the river. Snow still covered the banks of the river although the ice was breaking up now. Every once in a while, a piece would float past them on the river current. They saw no sign of anyone in the trees or on the river itself but that was common for this early in the spring.

The sun rose to its spring zenith only slightly higher in the sky than it was in winter. By summer, the day would be many hours longer. It was almost dusk by the time the Osprey approached the end of her journey. The Fire warriors and Rangers already there had put out a single makeshift dock into the Winderling. It would take all night to unload the ships.

Never before had Luna been so glad to see the end of the voyage. Even with the herbs she'd been given, she had been nauseous all the way north. She had been unable to even look at food, and barely able to drink anything. It had been a miserable trip.

Torrin was happy that Luna had kept some water down, and figured she would eat once she was on solid ground again. Her arms ached from the rowing and she was happy when the horn sounded for them to put up oars. Not the most favorite thing she had ever done, but she had felt the needed to pitch in and help.

The nearest Wave Dancer stretched well-muscled arms over her head and gave Torrin a cheerful smile. Then she readjusted the patch over her eye and got up. "Nothing to it," she announced, pounding Torrin on the back before going to attend to other duties.

Torrin smiled back. "Yep, nothing to it." Getting off the bench, she fished out her heavy outer tunic and with a groan slid it over her head

Luna nearly fell over as the ship slowed to a stop next to the dock, its anchor splashing into the water at Allysandra's shouted orders. Steadying herself on the nearest person, the pale-faced Ranger mumbled an apology, and then froze when she realized whom it was she was holding onto. "Sorry," she mumbled, backing away from Torrin.

It stung to have Luna so disgusted as to not even want to touch her. "It's okay." Torrin replied giving a weak smile before she stopped trying and let it fade away. "I'm sorry, I'll get out of your way," Torrin said moving away from the Ranger. She quietly stood looking out on the raging river as the boat was being secured. She wanted to look at Luna but decided one should torture themselves only so much.

The Ranger hesitated, confused by her emotions, and not certain what to do. She tried to say something, but after the third attempt, she let herself be hustled to the blessedly immobile, waiting dock. With one last glance towards the shorter woman she started down the gangplank had been placed over the side of the ship.

Torrin was aware as Luna moved farther and farther away. She rubbed herself and told herself it didn't matter. All that matter was keeping Luna safe and winning the war. Straightening up, she moved into the line to disembark.

#####

The unloading of the ships did indeed take all night. One full of the cursing women, the baying of annoyed Alcens, and the occasional splash as someone dropped something in the river. Torches lit the bank and dock, casting shadows everywhere making the Fire warrior guards all the more tense. But, by the first rays of dawn, the five-ship fleet had been unloaded and was on its way back to the Queen's City to pick up the next load and the women had started their way up to the Ellris Pass.

Near mid morning, Luna paused as they approached the base of the Pass, her eyes widening as

she recognized the area. This was where the Assassin had attacked them on that desperate flight to the Queen's City, where Torrin had gone through the ice, and where the Horse God Armand had first appeared to them. Blue eyes sought out the smaller shape of her companion. She owed that small woman more than she could repay, yet she couldn't figure out how to talk to her now. With one last, wistful glance toward Torrin, Luna started to walk again.

Torrin trudged on along the path, cursing the snow under her breath. It was even worse now that it was all runny and slushy. She shivered as she looked at the cold running water. Somewhere a body floated and it could have been her. She paled as thoughts ran through her head of what would have happened had she failed. She stepped out of the line to get her bearings. The idea of them taking Luna back to Khelin made her angry as once again the nightmare floated through her head. Khelin would never touch Luna again if she could help it. She closed her eyes and rubbed her aching temple, then reached out with her other hand as she caught Fyre's before she could rub the shaved part of her neck again.

Cracking an eyelid, she looked at Fyre. "Stop that."

Fyre batted her eyelashes. "But it's just like a baby's butt."

Torrin sighed. "Then go find a baby's butt to touch." Then in a quick move, she dumped Fyre into the wet snow. Looking down at angry blue eyes, she grinned and then took off running.

Luna and the group of warriors spent their second night setting up a temporary camp at the base of the Ellris Pass. The tent city would be the forward base for healers and most of the Wind Walkers. It would also serve as a supply depot for everything that the ship brought up the Winderling. Luna spent the night dealing with issues brought to her by Fyre, Allysandra's daughter Megan, Eve and Tasha.

Finally, on the second morning after the trip upstream, as more warriors streamed in from the recent arrival of more ships at the river docks, they set out to go up to the Pass. It was a lot warmer than Luna remembered from the last time, though the wind was still bitterly cold. The higher they traveled up the wind scoured Pass, the colder it got. Luna was glad to see the walls of the old Abbey in the distance. It felt odd returning here with so many warriors around her. The last time she had been fleeing, now she was here to fight. A small group of Fire warriors and Rangers, glad to have their sisters arriving at last, called out to them from the Abbey walls as they approached. Luna barely had time to step into the old Temple before there was a torrent of questions. Where should they set up? Who should go on patrol and how far should those patrols go?

Torrin walked out in the snow around the Abbey. She was aware of Rhain following her. She could complain but figured there was no point. If Rhain wanted to waste her time by stalking her, let the girl waste her time. What really amused her was that Rhain thought she was being sneaky. But there wasn't a time when Torrin wasn't aware that she was there.

Going into the back of the Abbey, she wandered into the snow-covered gardens. She noticed the

untended, wild disarray of the plants. She wondered what happened to the old woman. Standing near the wall in the back, she saw the oak tree. It was old, thick, and devoid of any leaves, making it appear sad and alone. Coming up to the tree, she touched the cold bark with her hands and then circled it. Stopping, she leaned her forehead into the bark, and stood still, letting the last few days catch up with her.

"You know, you could have just told me who you were," she mumbled into the bark. "I figure since Rhain is following me around, you won't show yourself now. But I wanted to say thanks for talking Armando into helping out. He kinda hinted it was your doing." She took a breath and let it out slowly.

"Um, if we win this... well, if we win and I live. I want you to know I'll be back." For a moment, she thought she felt a hand touch her cheek. Startled, she jumped back from the tree and looked around but she only felt the wind.

"There you are," Tasha called out from the door of the Abbey, her cloak wrapped tightly around her to ward off the chill in the air. Since she was not completely sure of her reception from Torrin, the leader of the Earth clan stepped hesitantly out into the garden. "I thought you'd be with Luna."

Torrin looked away from the tree to her half-sister. She worked out an acceptable response in her head before she replied. She shrugged, but then winced from the movement as the rowing from previous days still left some sore muscles. "Luna has better things to do than hang out with me."

A whisper of movement in the hallway behind her distracted Tasha for a moment, but then she firmly shut the door as she was intent on having a talk with her younger sister.

"I haven't seen you with her since that Council meeting." There was no need for her to specify which one.

Torrin's face took on a cool, bored look, "So? Look, somehow you all made her in charge, so she's in charge. You're keeping her busy. Really busy. For every pissant little problem, you folks go crying to her instead of acting like the leaders you all are. She needs people to help her make good decisions, not solve all your petty squabbles. You know, you're going to burn her out and then you won't have a leader, period." She hadn't meant to vent. She was just trying to change the topic, but once she had gotten going, it had been hard to stop.

Tasha frowned at the unexpected rant and even if she agreed with her, she wasn't going to get sidetracked.

"She was busy at the Castle too, but you were always with her then." Tasha crossed her arms, determined to find out what was going on. She'd failed Torrin twice now; if she could help it, she wasn't going to do it a third time.

"I talked to Mother before we left," Tasha said before Torrin could answer. "She's very proud of

you."

Torrin's eyes went wide and she felt tears gather. "You're such a shit. You know that, Tasha? I'm trying to be all unattached and then you go and bring up Mother." Growling in exasperation, she started walking to the Abbey door.

Tasha took a step sideways and blocked Torrin's path to the door. "What's going on, Torrin?"

"Nothing is going on. I'm doing the best I can. Luna doesn't want anything to do with me, and it sucks. But I made a promise to her that I would watch out for her, and I'm trying to. I really am trying. But it's between Luna and me and not any of your business." She scowled at Tasha, "And it's a little late to start playing caring, older sister." She gave Tasha a small push to move her out of her way, and started for the door again.

Tasha shoved her back hard. "Why? Because it's so hard for you to believe that I care?" Her voice was harsh with sudden resentment.

"Yeah, it is hard to believe. Torrin shoved Tasha back. "I only have a couple dozen scars on my back for playing scapegoat for you while growing up! You want to see?" she screamed, her temper boiling over.

The taller woman shoved her away with a sneer. "Oh, poor Torrin. 'Life was so hard for me, pity me'. None of us had it as bad as you, right?" She laughed bitterly. "Mother only thought of you! She loved you best. Muyana only wanted us to be just like her... Quinn's little warriors. You don't know what happened after you left. I'm sorry it happened, but I was a child, Torrin, I didn't know what to do!"

Torrin lashed out with a right hook, catching Tasha in the jaw. "You bitch. You had a home, you had friends, you weren't treated like a disease, you weren't beaten almost everyday. Fuck you!" Spinning on her heel, she brought her leg up in a hook kick.

The fist caught Tasha unaware and she went flying backward and only barely avoided the follow-up kick. With an enraged shout, she lunged, tackled Torrin and sent them both thrashing into the mud. They pummeled and screamed obscenities each other.

Torrin wrapped her legs around Tasha's waist and forced her over on her back. Pinning Tasha's arms with her knees, she ignored the swinging legs. She laughed darkly. "You really think you can take me on? I spent my teenage years being taught how to be the best killing machine money can buy." She cocked her arm back, intent on slugging Tasha senseless.

A shape loomed up in the shadows behind Torrin. Tasha blinked her eyes and focused them on the upraised sword poised behind her sister's head. With a shout, she twisted desperately, shoving Torrin to the side as the sword sliced downwards cutting through the air with a whistle.

Torrin rubbed the wet snow and mud out of her eyes. She stared until her brain comprehended what she was seeing. "What have you done?" She looked up, her eyes trailing up the sword.

"What have you done?" she shouted again.

Tasha blinked, not comprehending what she was seeing. A sword was stuck into her shoulder. She weakly tried to say something but the burning pain overwhelming her. She looked up in the eyes of her sister holding the hilt of the sword.

Rhain stared down her, eyes huge in horror. "It wasn't... you...I..." She shook a finger at Torrin. "You were trying to kill her," she said defensively.

"Shut up!" Torrin yelled. "Just shut up and for once in your useless life, do something that matters. Go get help!"

Rhain's face went red and both hands went back to the pommel of the sword.

"Touch the sword again and I'll gut you," Torrin growled as she ripped off her outer tunic and wrapped it around the front and back of the wound. Looking up she saw Rhain's hands were still on the sword.

"Rhain?" Tasha whispered, "Why?"

Rhain looked down at her sister. "She was trying to kill you. I was just... just... I was trying to save you."

There was the sound of distant shouts through the closed doorway as people came running toward the sound of conflict.

Fyre and Luna flew through the doors, sliding to a stop at the scene in the garden. There was Rhain, with her hands on the sword buried in her sister and Torrin crouched next to Tasha trying to stem the flow of blood. The other women following piled into them, all stopping and staring in silent confusion.

Torrin ignored everybody and pulled back the tunic to see if the blood spurted or not. Happy to see it was not, she put pressure back on the exit wound around the sword. Looking up at Rhain, she yelled. "Get a healer, you piece of shit!"

Rhain's eyes narrowed as she let go of the sword hilt. "This is all your fault. You attacked her, I saw you." Rhain yelled out to the women that were watching. "Torrin attacked Tasha. I saw her hit her and then they were fighting .I was just... I was just trying to save my sister."

Ignoring Rhain rants, Torrin looked around frantically. "Help me! Stop standing around and help me! She's losing blood." She pressed her right hand down tightly and wrapped it around the sword as it entered her back, while her left did the same in the front.

That snapped the group of watching women out of their shock. Rapidly, they converged on Tasha and Torrin, many hands helping to stop the flow of blood. Others went running for the nearest healer while two of the Fire warriors pushed Rhain back away from the group.

Luna touched Torrin's shoulder gently. She leaned down closer when Tasha tried to speak. "She didn't mean to..." Luna wasn't completely sure who the injured warrior was talking about and looked inquiringly at Torrin.

Torrin looked back at her heatedly. "No, she didn't. Rhain meant to stick it in me. So I suppose that would have been all right." With a growl, she turned back to tend Tasha. "Don't pull that sword out until the healer says it's okay," she barked out to the other women.

"I'm sorry," Tasha whispered, her bloodstained hand reaching up to touch Torrin's shoulder. Her face contorted in pain as they tried to stem the steady flow of blood.

Torrin felt tears trail down her cheeks. "Don't be sorry. Just be okay. Please? Cause you're part of the only family I have and I just found you again."

A half-asleep healer rushed in and took in the scene with a glance. The young woman pushed her way through the crowd and crouched down to examine the sword and wound.

Luna, not sure what to say or do, stood aside silently as she let go of Torrin's shoulder. She looked toward Rhain's angry face. There was one thing she knew she could take care of though.

While the healer got several of the warriors to help slide a stretcher under the injured woman, Luna drew her sword. The light from the long blade illuminated the garden as she stalked toward where the two warriors kept Rhain at bay.

"Grab her," she snapped at them. Startled, they seized the yelling Rhain and held on to her tightly.

Rhain fumed. "She attacked my sister. I saw her punch her and then, she, ah, she said something about her being a trained killer. I was just protecting my sister."

"You cut down the leader of your own Clan!" Luna snarled furiously. Reaching out, she grabbed a hold of Rhain's braided hair and yanked it up over her head. Then, with a swift slash, she cleanly sliced the braid off. With contempt, she tossed the braid aside.

Shocked, Rhain stopped her struggling. Then after a moment, she started to thrash around again. "You bitch. How dare you! You're nothing! If my Muanya were still alive, none of this madness would be happening. You think I would really try to kill my own sister? It was an accident, I tell you. I was trying to save her!"

Luna re-sheathed the sword with the blade sliding home with a soft snick. "Get her out of my sight." The two warriors dragged the hysterical woman away.

The young healer nodded to the women around her. "Gently." She kept a hand on the sword, making certain it didn't move as they picked up the cot. Even as gently as they were, the movement caused Tasha to cry out in pain.

Torrin followed them numbly. She had been certain her life couldn't get worse in the emotional department, but apparently she had been wrong. It was ironic, she thought, as she trailed behind the healer and covered in Tasha's blood. With Tasha cut down in front of her, it made her realize how much she did care about her half-sister. Why did it take a terrible act to make her realize this?

"Lucky you, you're our first patient," the healer said as the group of women gently laid down the stretcher in the healer's tent.

An older priestess moved over to the patient, tsking as she probed the injury. Then, before Tasha could say a thing, she yanked the sword blade free, tossing the blade aside with obvious distaste. Tasha gasped, then her eyes rolled up and she passed out from the pain.

The older healer nodded to the younger one, and they began stitching the wound and cleaning it.

Torrin sat down in an uncomfortable chair as the healer took Tasha into a room and shut the door. She watched as a few pale-faced warriors came out, but that couldn't even give her amusement.

Luna found her there, sitting outside the tent in the ruins of the temple. She moved to stand next to her. After three false starts, she managed to ask her question. "How is she?"

Torrin looked up, her eyes glassy. "I don't know," she mumbled out, before looking back down at the floor.

Luna looked around uncomfortably, very aware of the abyss that seemed to separate the two of them. She couldn't think of the words to bridge it. She didn't even know how to begin.

"I cut Rhain's braid." Then she forced herself to walk away, not wanting to make Torrin feel worse by staying nearby.

Torrin looked up and watched Luna leave. "I'm sorry," she said too softly for Luna to hear. She didn't know how to fix things. All she seemed able to do was break them.

A little bit later, the young healer stuck her head out the door and smiled as she spotted Torrin still sitting there. "You can come in and see your sister now if you want."

Torrin got up and moved inside. "Is she going to be okay?"

"She won't be able to use her arm for a while, but she should be fine." The older healer, just finishing wrapping the wound, glanced up as Torrin entered.

"Good. There was so much blood, I was worried." She took a breath, exhaled, and felt her nerves relax.

The old woman patted Torrin on the shoulder as she passed. "I'm going back to sleep. Wake me if she develops a fever, Ingrid." The younger healer nodded, pulling a chair over to keep watch over the Earth warrior.

Torrin looked around then noticed the blood on her hands and for the first time, felt the cold. "I'm going to go wash and change. Can somebody find me if there is a problem?"

"I will. Don't worry, I'll sit with your sister tonight," Ingrid said with a smile and motioned her toward the door of the tent.

#####-

Luna managed to slip away from the group of women who had surrounded her for the past two days after the incident with Rhain. It actually had started as soon as they had set out from the Queen's City. Question after question, many of which she had no idea how to answer. Finally she would ask what their opinion was, and then told them to do what they thought was best. It was beginning to be more than she could deal with.

Luna had hoped that she could talk with Torrin on the way up to the Pass, but every time she'd tried, words failed her.

Feeling lonely and sad, an unusual feeling for her, she crept out of the temple and began exploring the rest of the abandoned Abbey. Time had been cruel to the once popular retreat. The main temple was the only building to survive with all of its walls intact. The only thing left of the outbuildings was the foundation.

High above her, a nearly full moon shone, and Luna took it as a good sign. The silvery moonlight lit her path as she wandered with her thoughts for company. The hilt of her sword lent her comfort as well, a solid presence under her fingertips.

Had she over reacted at the news of what Torrin had done?

She didn't think so. The ex-mercenary had killed someone in cold blood, even if that person had been an Assassin sent to kill her and the war council. Where was the honor in that?

Luna was certain that Torrin had done it to protect her from something, but did that mean she had to forgive the other woman? What if this was how Torrin handled threats? By killing every time?

She had no answer for these and other the questions that swirled through her head. In a way, it would be a relief to find out what Khelin's forces were doing. Then she could turn her focus on trying to counter the Southern army and finding a way of keeping them from coming through the Ellris Pass.

Luna stopped on the edge of the outer wall and peered down into the darkness. Beyond the wall lay the other side of the Ellris Pass, and further on, Abnoa. Soon enough she knew that Khelin would force her way up that path, and then blood would flow.

A figure, still as a statue, stood silently in the night. It was incased in black studded armor, with cruel spikes tipped in red that jutted outward. At the figure's feet laid three massive hounds, their panting sides giving life to the scene. The hounds watched with bright red eyes but did not move from their master's feet.

Catching sight of a large shape out of the corner of her eye, Luna froze. It hadn't been there a second before. The Ranger carefully wrapped her fingers around the hilt of her sword. The Ranger licked lips gone dry, and took a step backwards away from the wall. Whatever this was, she wanted no part of it.

One hound, gaunt to the point its ribs were visible through the skin lifted its head and growled, showing off dangerous fangs. The figure didn't move but the hound looked up, whined softly then lay back down. Slowly hands came up and removed the helmet. He was a handsome man with short blonde hair and a boyish face. But his eyes were red like old blood and hard. He studied Luna, sizing her up. "You can smell it in the air. It's like dawn, far away... yet coming, the death, the blood, and the sadness. Think of the heroes and cowards that will be made... all deciding on the turning of a blade and the strength of people's souls."

He spoken softly but his voice carried to her. His voice brought with it the images of wars fought since the beginning of time. Her feet would not obey her, and she could not turn away from the man. She would have wept at the horror his words conjured, if she was able to. Only the feel of the hilt under her fingers grounded her, and she squeezed it tightly. The warm metal seemed to pulse in her hand and little by little, she regained control of her body, panting from the effort.

"Who are you?" she gasped weakly.

He laughed grimly, a sound that made the hounds at his feet whine. "I have, of late, been your companion. I am Vladlin, God of War. These are my Hounds: Death, Fear, and Famine."

His laughter washed over her colder than the winter wind, and she shivered uncontrollably. Again, the hilt of the sword gave her comfort and she stood fast, although, everything inside twisted in fear and a primal urge of self-preservation screamed at her to flee.

"Why are you here?" she managed to chatter out.

"I am where I need to be." He looked her over again. "You are a rare breed. I watched you during

the battle of Abnoa. You never gave up, even when you faced greater odds. You fought and kept fighting even when death was upon you. There are thousands of warriors out there but few that are truly worthy of the name." He grinned rakishly and then he lowered his voice so it was more intimate. "I could help you. I could help you use that sword and cut Khelin's head right off from her shoulders."

"I don't want to be worthy for you." Luna took comfort that he hadn't struck her down yet. She shook her head, trying to shake his clawing words from her ears. "You would just be offering me more carnage and killing."

His eyes narrowed and each of the hounds rose to their feet. "Don't fool yourself. You are already on that path of bloodshed and death." He inhaled her scent, "Already your soul is filled with hatred and the desire for vengeance. I can guide you. I can help you. He smirked at her. "Trust me, Khelin's parentage will make her hard to kill."

So the rumors were true, Luna thought. She'd half feared they would be. A part of her was so very tempted to agree. He offered her a power she'd longed for, a chance at revenge for her parents, friends and fallen comrades. She would become so very strong. None would ever dare take anything away from her again.

Then, over his shoulder, she caught sight of the moon. It steadied her and the lust for vengeance and blood eased. "No," she said quietly, clearly. "I am the servant of the Moon Goddess, none other."

The hounds started circling. "Really? Then, where is my sister in your time of need? How has she given you aid and help? I've sensed my brother's hand and my dark twin's but not hers."

That was true, she had seen far too much of the other Gods and Goddess.

"I have only my faith." Luna admitted, shivering from the cold that radiated from the hounds that surrounded her.

They growled and snapped at her. The pommel of the sword grew hot in her grasp and she drew the sword. The light shining from it forced them back, keeping them at bay outside the circle of light.

"Faith." He mocked her. "That is how you purpose to win a war? On faith? Didn't you have faith in that murderer of yours...Torrin. We see how that well that turned out." He laughed and the hounds whined. "Didn't you have faith in Khelin once? Perhaps you just have poor taste and judgment. You won't be the first woman to enjoy the caress of a killer." He whistled and the hounds retreated. "When you want to rethink your position on faith, I'll be waiting." In a sudden, bright flash, he and the hounds were gone.

In the sudden silence, Luna collapsed to her knees, the sword dropping from fingers gone numb. The worst, though, was that she feared he was right about her.

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Tasha frowned, trying again to pick up her spoon of what looked like smashed apples. Her right arm was nearly worthless and her fine motor skills weren't as controlled with her left. As she picked up the spoon, it started to shake and by the time she had it to her mouth it most of the food was gone. Growling in frustration, she swiped the bowl off the desk in front of her. It made a nice noise as it smashed into the wall. She grinned and felt better now. Her smile fell as her stomach gave a hungry rumble.

"Hey! What's with throwing your food around?" a voice from just outside the doorway called, followed a second later by its source, Valarie. The Fire warrior looked relieved to see Tasha up. "You can't be that badly injured if you are throwing things."

Tasha blushed and looked down at the desk. "I'm getting better but..." She trailed off and flapped her right arm bound in a sling to her body. Tasha winced as that move pulled stitches.

"I'm right handed and..." She blew out a breath. "I think I've pissed off all the healers and their assistants. They're all avoiding me."

"Imagine that," the red head replied wryly. Taking off her travel pack, the Fire warrior set it aside inside the doorway. Fearing the worse from the moment she'd heard about Tasha's injury, she'd taken the first ship going up the Winderling. There had been no other information before she'd boarded the Hawk at the Queen's City. From there, the Fire warrior had done a forced march up the Ellris pass, leaving her group behind to follow tomorrow.

"I guess I could help since you haven't pissed me off yet."

Tasha looked up then back down. "Oh, you don't have to do that, I'm sure you're needed for more important things elsewhere," she mumbled while absently tracing designs on the desktop.

"Since I am here earlier than planned," she said sheepishly, I don't have anything to do. So let me help. All right?" The Fire warrior bent down to pick up the hurled bowl. Going over to a nearby tray, she cleaned it out and refilled it. How did you get hurt? You zig when you were suppose to zag?"

Tasha blew out a breath then in a quiet voice said, "Rhain stabbed me." It hurt her deeply that her own sister had done this.

Valarie stopped dishing out the food. "Rhain?" She turned to look at the injured blonde, eyes darkening in anger, her long red braid swaying as she moved. "Why?" There was a carefully controlled edge of steel in that question.

Tasha sighed and was surprised when she felt herself almost break into tears. "It's such a mess. Torrin and I were fighting. Rhain came upon us and thought Torrin was trying to kill me."

Leaving the bowl where it was, Valarie pulled a chair over to Tasha's side and sat down. "And then what?"

Tasha felt a tear slide down her cheek and she quickly wiped it away. "Rhain was going to stab Torrin. I was on the bottom so I could see Rhain coming up behind us with her sword drawn. I couldn't let Torrin be hurt again over something that was my fault. I had pushed us into the confrontation, so I rolled Torrin over but it was too late..." She trailed off.

A warm, calloused hand touched Tasha's cheek that drew her look up to Valarie's face. She caught a glimpse of the lingering anger there.

"Where is Rhain?" The Fire warrior's voice promised swift justice for the person who had hurt Tasha.

Tasha shrugged. "I don't know. Luna told me she cut Rhain's braids." It hurt that her sister hadn't even come to see her. "My own sister, our Mother will be outraged." She couldn't help it and she started crying again. She tried to jerk her face out of Valarie's hand. She had wanted, for the longest time, to feel any sort of touch from Valarie but not like this.

Valarie deflated a little. She'd been ready to seek justice for Tasha, but if Rhain's braid had already been cut there was little more she could do. Uncomfortably, she looked around for help, not quite certain what to do with a crying Tasha. Give her a battle over tears any day. "I'm sorry," she said awkwardly, placing a hand on Tasha's shoulder. "Shhhh, please don't cry. I hate it when you cry." That was the truth.

Tasha started to hiccup as she tried to stop crying. "I know. You're a Fire warrior and now, the first time I finally get your undivided attention, I'm crying." She sniffed and took a few deep breaths.

"That's not true, you know," Valarie said quietly, snatching a nearby cloth and offer it to Tasha for her tears. "You always have my undivided attention."

Tasha gave a hollow laugh, and took the cloth. "Could have fooled me. I thought you just kind of tolerated my presence."

Valarie glanced to the side, struggling with her words. Goddess, how she'd rather be in a battle!

"I... I'm a warrior. That's all I am. You, though... I mean, you're the head of your Clan." Valarie gave a little grin. "I was honored but I always thought you'd... find someone else." She knew she wasn't explaining herself well. Disgusted, she leaned back, frowning.

Tasha laughed again. This time with more spirit. "Could two women be any sillier? No, my dumb warrior. No one else. I have been putting myself in places all over the Queen's City just so

our paths would cross."

Valarie smiled a little. "Really?"

Thinking back on all the things she had done to get Valarie's attention, she grinned. "Yes, really."

"Well..." Valarie shifted in her chair, flashing the injured woman a grin. "I know this isn't how it's supposed to go, but can I feed you dinner?"

Tasha grinned back. "That would be really nice."

#####-

Luna hadn't been able to sleep at all the rest of the night. Her mind kept replaying Vladlin's visit. She was sitting in front of a fire trying to warm herself when Eve came in. She nodded to the leader of the Wind Walkers and wondered why she was still up. She didn't have to wait long as Eve grabbed her and kissed her soundly. In her surprise, Luna let it go on longer than she should have.

"Eve!" Luna pushed the girl back, staring at her in dismay.

"What's wrong, Luna?" Eve asked plaintively, taking a step toward the Ranger who was frowning and keeping her at arms length.

"Eve... why did you just kiss me?" She really should have seen this coming but had tried to ignore the warning signs.

Eve just smiled up at her, "Because we should be together, of course."

The little voice in her head started to laugh hysterically at that, making Luna wonder if she'd lost her sanity during the night. She firmly told it to shut up and tried to figure out a way to fix the situation.

"Eve, we have to talk..."

Not able to sleep, Torrin wandered around the halls of the Abbey. Ever since Tasha had been hurt, she found sleep to be elusive. She knew she was not to blame for the injury, but still it gnawed at her. And she felt helpless and hurt about the situation with Luna. The gulf between Luna and her was a painful one.

Finally, she couldn't take it anymore, so she changed her aimless wandering to certain direction and navigated her way to Luna's section of Abbey. Rounding the corner to Luna's quarters, she saw two women in a... upon closer inspection... a romantic embrace. Blushing, she started to back up quietly when she realized that the women were Luna and Eve. Gray eyes widened, then not caring about the noise, she turned and fled. In her haste, she stumbled and crashed into a

messenger. She snarled at the young woman as she got up and ran again, ignoring the tears and the pain in her chest.

Torrin crumpled up against the outside wall and slid down it. She shouldn't be surprised, but still it hurt to see that Luna had moved on. Eve was everything she wasn't. The young Wind Walker had no dark, bloody past, no mercenary's mark branded onto her shoulder, and was free of crimes against the North.

She should be pleased Luna had moved on and found someone who could make her happy. She should be, but she wasn't. She hurt inside. Feeling like the walls were closing in on her, she got up and stumbled to Fyre's door. After pounding on it, a sleepy Fyre opened. "Torrin it's... it's early." She blinked sleepy eyes. "Goddess you look like shit. What happened?"

"Fyre I don't want to talk. I just want a favor."

"Huh?" Fyre wasn't following.

"I know you have patrols going out and scouting the area for any sign of Khelin. Put me on a patrol."

Fyre pulled her friend into the room and shut the door. "What is going on?"

Torrin started crying. "It's too much. I keep screwing everything up. Luna and now Tasha. I just need to get away."

Fyre sighed. "Stop crying. You're a Fire Warrior now and we never cry in front of one another. So just stop." She rubbed her temples as Torrin sniffed and quieted her tears.

"Now tell me what happened."

Torrin wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "I guess Eve and Luna are a couple."

"A couple of what?"

Torrin glared at her friend.

"Oh, no way." Seeing her friend's sad and dejected face, she blew out a breath. "Well, shit. Okay, I have a patrol leaving today. Tasha was supposed to be on it but now that she's down you can take her place. All right?"

Torrin managed a wan smile. "Thanks. It's just too much right now. I just need to get away before I do something stupid and ki... hurt Eve."

Fyre nodded. "Well, good. Go get your stuff and I'll go talk to Robin."

Watching Torrin leave her room, all Fyre wanted was a nice, cold ale. Her life had gotten this messed up only since befriending Torrin. She shook her head and went to find the patrol leader.

#####

Impatiently, Luna banged on the door. She banged on it again when it didn't open. Not caring that it was long past the evening meal and most people were asleep, she called out loudly, "Fyre!"

Rubbing sleep out of her eyes, Fyre opened the door. "What? I'm trying to sleep! Does everyone like waking me up around here?" Blinking sleepily, she realized it was Luna. "Oh, it's you."

"Where's Torrin?" Luna demanded, craning her neck to see past Fyre to see if the woman was hiding in Fyre's room. "Someone said they saw her come here this morning. I haven't been able to find her anywhere today."

"She's away. Now if you excuse me, I'm going back to bed." She tried to shut the door but Luna didn't move back.

"What do you mean, 'away'?" Luna growled.

Fyre sighed, "What do you care? You've wanted nothing to do with her since the Assassin was found dead. Now leave the girl alone, I know it may not seem like it, but she's very fragile when it comes to matters of the heart. And I think you've done enough." She glared at Luna.

Luna blinked in surprise her manner becoming more uncertain.

"Is she... I mean, is she all right?" Luna had feared the worse when she couldn't find Torrin. "I haven't been avoiding her... I just, I didn't know how to talk to her." She knew she was sounding desperate, but after last night, she was exhausted and then finding Torrin was missing had nearly broken her.

Fyre frowned in confusion. "Torrin's fine. She came to me before dawn asking to be placed in a patrol group. The patrol left early this morning."

"Patrol group? Why would she..." Luna trailed off, blue eyes widening as she realized what else had happened that morning. "She saw Eve." Luna whispered in sudden understanding, closing her eyes in pain.

"Yes, she saw you and Eve. Just tell the girl, Luna. She's head over heels for you." Fyre sighed, rubbing her head. This was a Wind Walkers job. Why was she doing sensitive chats? "Anybody with eyes in their heads and half a brain can see it. So if you and Eve are together now, just tell her. Don't string her along. She deserves better."

Luna let out a bitter laugh. "Eve and me?" She shook her head, her smile tight. "There is no Eve and me."

She laughed without humor. "Eve was mistaken. I set her straight." The talk had been difficult. She liked the young Wind Walker, but not like that.

"Eve's going down to the base camp for a while, to oversee things there." She had left in the late afternoon.

"Oh. Well... I... um..." Fyre wasn't sure what to say. "She'll be back in nine days," she finally said.

"Nine days?" Luna asked in dismay. The Ranger stared at Fyre for a second, her shoulders sagging, and then nodded. "Thank you, Fyre."

"Um, glad to help." She slowly shut her door. "Oh Muanya, why would anybody want to be a leader?" she wondered silently.

#####

Khelin was starting to hate the North with its long, cold winter. Now that spring was approaching, she had thought they could leave immediately for the Pass that would her and her army to the Queen's City. Unfortunately, she and her generals had not counted on another northern phenomenon. The mud.

The Queen of the South stared in disbelief at the advisor cringing in front of her. Her lips curled in a sneer. "Are you telling me you can't move the siege engines or the cannons because of the mud?" Her voice rose to an incredulous yell.

The woman swallowed nervously. "Yes. The equipment is too heavy. It, uh, sinks." In the south it rains but mud never lasted very long once the sun was out. She was just as dumbfounded by this as her leader.

"Must I always be surrounded by such incompetence?" Khelin screamed, lashing out at the nearest person.

The serving slave had only a second to realize she was in danger before the insane woman grabbed her head and twisted sharply. The body spasm once, and then slumped to the ground, the chains around her ankles jingling on the marble floor.

The advisor's only reaction to the outburst was to step to the side to avoid the falling body. She was very happy it hadn't been her.

"We will leave by the end of this month, do you understand me?" Khelin said her voice low and dark. "In fourteen days, we are going to the mountain pass. Even if I have to lay your body and the commanding officers on the ground so I can run the equipment over them to get there!"

The woman gulped and nodded. "I'll let the generals and the others know right away." She all but sprinted out of the room.

#####

Torrin, wet and cold, slogged through the melting snow. They were on their fourth day of the nine-day patrol of the woods and area around the Abbey. To her knowledge, there had been no evidence that Khelin or her army had started the push to the Pass yet. But Torrin would be surprised if they had started moving. The heavy siege equipment and the cannons - she shuddered at the thoughts of the new weapons and the damage they would do - would bogged down and get stuck in the wet earth. No, Torrin suspected Khelin would wait a little longer.

There were only seven members in the scouting party. Four of them were Fire warriors and the other three, Rangers. One Ranger, Tamra gave Torrin a bad feeling. It was nothing the woman did, but at times, Torrin would catch the woman giving her dark looks.

This time away from Luna was good and bad. She felt her head clearing and the longer she was away from everything, the better she was able to put it all in prospective. The worse was that she missed Luna. She couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't where she should be. How could she be looking out for Luna, if she wasn't at the Abbey? But then, Luna had Eve to help her now, right?

Torrin stopped moving. Something was wrong. Cocking her head to the right, she listened but didn't hear anything but the cool early spring wind moving through the trees. She took a step and paused again. There... the creaking of wood on wood but not from the trees. She opened her mouth to shout a warning but it came too late as a crossbow bolt sprung out of Robin's chest.

Even as Torrin drew her sword, figures wearing the South's colors emerged from the woods. Slashing out, she parried a sword strike then lashed out with a foot knocking the attacker back.

She barely caught the words "... for Abnoa." Turning toward the voice, she caught the arrow in her upper chest instead of her back. She staggered back a few steps, nearly going down in the snow. Grey eyes locked on to angry blue ones. Torrin snapped the shaft of the arrow off and then picking up her sword. She stabbed at the woman as she fumbled to notch a new arrow.

Blue eyes widened in fear, as she knew she was too late to do anything. Then as the sword stroke missed her, she turned with wide blue eyes and looked behind her. There impaled on Torrin's sword was a Southerner.

Torrin growled at the woman. "Kill the enemy. Already two of ours are down when you could have saved them." Kicking the enemy off her sword, she turned, blocking another strike.

Torrin felt dizzy from blood loss. The wound in her chest bleed freely, too slowly she lowered her sword to block a desperate slash at her thigh. Her leg gave out under her and she pitched

forward into her attacker. For a moment, they stood still then the compact Southerner slowly started to slide back, slipping in the snow. Wide brown eyes stared into gray.

Looking over the woman's back, Torrin grimaced at the nearness of the embankment's edge. They struggled for a moment, the woman trying to stab Torrin and Torrin trying to keep the sword away. Then without warning, the dirt gave way under their weight.

During the downward, tumbling fall, Torrin and her attacker broke apart and Torrin came to an abrupt stop as her body slammed into a thick tree trunk. She cried out in pain, and then everything went dark.

Faintly, she heard voices.

"She's probably dead. We're wasting our time, Robin and Vella need to be taken back to the Abbey. They might not make it as it is."

"Shut up, Tamra."

"I found the Southerner, neck's broke."

"Found her. Hurry up, she's alive."

Torrin felt warmth on her cheek and open gray eyes for a moment before giving up and going back into the darkness.

#####

Torrin's patrol group returned four days early. In a panic, people rushed to the front of the Abbey as the healthy members of the group yelled out frantically for help and for the healers as they carried their wounded comrades,.

Luna emerged from a war council meeting and broke into a run as she spotted the commotion. Behind her, the other leaders, including Eve who had returned from the base camp, hurried after her. Tasha, still recovering in the healers chambers was the only one absent.

"What happened?" Luna shouted as she reached the chaos, then stepping aside as the healers came running as well. Her breath caught in her throat as she spotted the first casualty. Robin, if she remembered the Fire warrior's name correctly. The warrior was on a pallet, her face white, and gasping for each breath. Luna felt her own face go white as she spotted the next injured woman. "Torrin." she whispered.

Torrin hobbled along, barely lucid. She stayed upright with the help of a large branch and the Fire warrior who had wrapped her arm around her waist for support. Torrin really wished she could remember the woman's name but her head felt thick. The new cut on her leg and the arrow wound in her shoulder were infected. She had used what herbs she had for Robin, but Torrin

knew the patrol leader was in critical condition. A small smile came to her face as she saw the Abbey. "Almost there," she whispered out.

The fire warrior grasped Torrin tighter as she swayed and just grunted. As they got closer, the woman yelled out, "A little help here!"

Luna was moving before she realized it, breaking into a run down the path towards Torrin. The ground was a blur as she ran, tears pooling in her eyes. Skidding to a stop on the other side of the injured woman, she carefully took her other arm, replacing the large branch.

"Easy, I've got you."

Torrin blinked then turned her head to look at the person who had just made her other side warm. "Oh good, cause in all honesty, that branch wasn't much of a warrior."

The Fire warrior rolled her eyes and whispered to Luna. "She's been like this since last night."

The Ranger gave a strangled laugh, tightening her hold on Torrin, mindful of the woman's injuries. "Come on. Let's get her to the Healer's quarters." More healers had arrived in the days since Tasha's injury. They were gearing up for casualties from a major battle. Two injured warriors were well within their capabilities.

The Fire Warrior nodded and gently led Torrin up the path.

Worried blue eyes took in the obviously infected wounds, wincing at the look of them. Judging by the heat radiating from Torrin's body, the woman had a fever as well.

Torrin's head spun, and she groaned. "Can somebody please take the arrow out of me? It hurts." She turned her head to look at Luna. "I offered to do it, but they wouldn't let me, something about a forced march to get back here as soon as possible." She paused for a moment. "You know, Luna, you have really pretty eyes. I've missed them."

The Fire Warrior rolled her eyes again. "Yes, Torrin, we know all about Luna and her eyes. Now be quiet and let us get you to the healer."

Luna swallowed, her eyes misting over. "I missed you too," she whispered as she helped get Torrin up to the Abbey and inside.

Once she was at the Healer's room, Torrin was efficiently stripped, given a draught for the pain and the arrow in her side removed. Through it all, Luna hovered in the corner, never more than a few steps away from the bed where they had placed Torrin.

The healer frowned examining the arrowhead for a moment then waved Luna over.

"Is she going to be all right?" Luna asked as soon as she moved over to the healer's side.

The woman smiled. "Yes she will be fine. The infection hasn't spread too far. We will need to keep an eye on the wounds. They will probably need to be flushed a few more times, but I expect her to be up and about in no time." She blew out a breath and her face became serious. The woman whispered softly so only Luna could hear and held up the arrowhead. "Tell me if I'm wrong, but this is a Northern design, isn't it?"

Luna's relief in the healer's first words was short lived as she focused on the arrowhead. Frowning, she took it from the old woman and studied it closely. Her shoulders stiffened and her lips thinned into a snarl.

"Yes, it is. It's from a Ranger's arrow."

"I thought as much. It could be an accident in the heat of battle, or, Torrin being in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, you may want to talk to the Rangers that were on the patrol. I don't know about you, but I would rather not have to treat people wounded by our own." The woman gave a soft smile and patted Luna's hand. "I have confidence that you will get to the bottom of it."

Long fingertips traced a mark imprinted on the base of the arrowhead. "I even know whose it is," she whispered to herself, barely hearing the healer's words. Glancing towards Torrin, she hesitated. "Tell her I'll be back if she wakes?"

"I will, but I doubt she'll be awake for awhile," the healer replied.

Luna paused by Torrin's bedside, studying the wounded woman. Tenderly she brushed a lock of black hair away from a pale brow. "You and I need to talk," she whispered. Then, clutching the arrowhead in her fist, she swept out of the room.

It only took a curt question to a startled Wind Walker to find out where Tamra was. Those who crossed her path made way for the Ranger as she strode rapidly toward Fyre's room. The expression on her face did not bode well for the person she was angry with.

Fyre frowned and tried to follow the babblings of a thin, blonde woman named Tonya, Tabra, or something like that who had been on that patrol. The only thing Fyre had understood so far was 'not her fault and ambush.'

Fyre didn't miss how twitchy the woman seemed. "Um, how about you take a deep breath and start from the beginning?" Fyre listened carefully as the woman started up again. She sighed. "Whoa! One word at a time. Don't bunch them up."

"Yes," Luna called out as she entered the room, slamming the door shut behind her. "Why don't you start from the beginning? And while you're at it, how about you explain why your arrowhead was in Torrin's chest!"

The woman paled and her eyes darted between the two women. Her mouth opened and shut hastily.

Fyre's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I'm really interested now."

"Talk quickly," Luna growled her fingers wrapping around the hilt of her sword.

"Y-y-you see, it was accident," she blurted out, looking down at the floor.

"Little girl, having your arrow in one of your own people is not an accident!" Fyre yelled out.

"An accident?" Luna said disbelieving. "Ranger's do not accidentally shoot anything."

Tears sprang into Tamra's eyes. "No we don't." Her shoulders slumped, and then she looked up, "I was just so angry, at her. She gets to walk around free and unpunished while my sister died at Abnoa. I've been trying to avoid her but then being stuck on patrol with her. I-I-I don't know something snapped and I saw a chance for vengeance for my sister. I saw a way to avenge her murder."

She started crying again. "I'm sorry. Even after I shot her, she, I... I thought she was going to strike me down, but instead, she saved my life." Tamra truly felt confused. She should hate that small woman, but how could she when the woman had just saved her life?

The rage that had possessed Luna fled as quickly as it had come and she removed her hand from the sword hilt. "If you ever shoot one of 'our' people again," Luna stressing the word "our", "you will be made an outcast. Understood?"

Tamra nodded her head wiping away her tears.

Fyre just snarled, "I think you're getting off light. Get out of my sight before I hurt you."

As the woman scrambled away, Fyre blew out a breath. "What a mess."

Luna nodded, sinking into a chair with a groan. "Yes, it is. Torrin's going to be all right though. The healers said they got to the infections in time." Warily Luna scrubbed a hand over her face.

"Well that's a bit of good news then." She looked at Luna. "I'll go wrangle this mess, you go sit with Torrin. And I don't want to see you or Torrin until you get your problems sorted out." Fyre tried to look fierce but knew she was failing when Luna snorted at her.

With a slap to Fyre's shoulder, she said, "Don't kill anyone" and started down the hallway and back toward the healers quarters.

"Oh sure, take all my fun away." Fyre sighed as she went out into the fray. "Yeah, I'll try not to

kill anybody."

#####-

Night had fallen, cloaking the room in shadows. Only the torches and the small fire provided any light. Sitting beside the bed, Luna kept a silent vigil by her injured friend's side. The healers came and went; mostly working on Robin whom they weren't certain they could save. The Priestess's had come as well to bless the injured.

Torrin shivered even as sweat gathered on her forehead. "Can I have another blanket?" she asked sleepily.

Luna stirred, having been half-asleep in the chair. Reaching over to the next bed, she grabbed a spare blanket, spreading it out over the dark haired woman. "That better?"

Torrin's arms and legs felt heavy, they didn't want to move, and her mouth tasted awful. Cracking an eye open at the voice, she looked around, finding everything was blurry. Torrin realized she was looking with her bad eye. She closed it and opened the other one. In the dimly lit room, she was aware of someone next to her. She smiled as Luna came into focus. "I think so. Thank you."

Her smile fell as she remembered Luna was with Eve now. "Thank you for sitting with me. But you don't have to stay. I'm sure you're needed at other more important places."

Gently Luna brushed back a curly lock of dark hair, and smiled at Torrin, glad she was finally awake. "Hush. Here, how about some water?" Picking up a nearby mug, she helped Torrin drink a little.

Torrin lay back, exhausted from the effort. But her throat did feel better. "How is Robin?" she asked.

The Ranger hesitated, setting the mug of water aside before answering. "Not so great." She pulled her chair closer to the bed. "They say if she makes it through tomorrow she should live..."

Torrin shivered again and tried to wrap the blankets around her more securely.

"...and, thanks to you, it's probably the only reason she's alive now." Luna fussed, tucking the blankets around Torrin.

"I'm tired of getting my ass kicked." Torrin blurted out. "Really, I am a very good warrior. People use to shell out lots of money for my services." Torrin flushed when she realized what that sounded like.

"I know." Luna whispered, tracing Torrin's cheek with her fingertips. "I thought we agreed that you wouldn't run away again?"

"Wha-what are you talking about? I didn't run away." She shivered, but this time it was because of Luna's touch on her skin.

Luna moved closer until she could peer into gray eyes, studying Torrin's face intently, her fingers cupping a warm cheek. "You mean to tell me, you didn't run away on a patrol?"

"I-I-I... well, if you put it like that, I might have. Um, I don't think Eve would like you doing this," as Luna touched her cheek. It felt very intimate, but wasn't hers to have.

"Eve?" Luna whispered, blue eyes dancing with amusement. "Eve who?" She found herself enjoying this. It wasn't often she got to tease Torrin.

"Eve who?" Torrin frowned. "Tallish, but you are all tall to me, book smart, and she hates me. That Eve." Torrin knew she was missing something, but she had no idea what.

"You saw her kiss me, didn't you?" Long fingers stroked Torrin's cheek.

Torrin looked up at the ceiling. "Yes, I did," she said coldly.

"You didn't wait to see me push her away though, did you?"

"Huh?" Torrin tried to turn on her side to see Luna better but yelped as she pulled the stitches on her chest.

Gritting her teeth, she settled for moving just her head. "Um, no I didn't see that part."

Leaning in even closer until she was certain she had Torrin's undivided attention Luna continued. "You also weren't there when I told her that there was only one person I have feelings for."

"Oh." Torrin swallowed nervously as Luna grew nearer. "You do... I mean you did... I mean. I'm not sure what I mean."

"Don't run away again, okay?" Luna whispered, and then pressed her lips to Torrin's in a slow kiss. In that one kiss, she tried get across how much she'd missed Torrin, and how worried she had been.

Torrin, surprised by the kiss, returned it after a moment. "I missed you," she mumbled against Luna's lips.

"Then stop running away from me," Luna muttered back, before kissing her again. Only then did she pull back, mindful of Torrin's injuries.

"I wasn't... I didn't want anything to do with me. Luna, you've been avoiding me. I was on my way to make you talk to me when I saw you kissing Eve. What was I supposed to do? Beat Eve

up?" Torrin grumbled back, frustrated. This wasn't all her fault.

Blue eyes glanced away guiltily; Luna was more than aware that this was her fault as well. Then taking Torrin's hand in hers, she gathered her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "I didn't... I didn't know what to do or think after the Assassin's death." She still didn't want to think about that.

Torrin sighed nodding. "I don't blame you. It's a horrible thing to digest. I'm sorry I had to do it, but I'm not unhappy I did." Torrin held Luna's hand letting her thumbs stroke the skin. "Not all things are black and white. Sometimes there are darker things that need to be done to keep a country and its people safe."

"Is that why you did it? To keep us safe?" the other woman asked, fascinated by the feel of Torrin's hand in hers.

"Kind of. In all honesty, I did it mostly to keep you safe. But other parts were to keep everyone focused on the battle at hand. The words the Assassin was willing to tell would have brought division and infighting." Torrin was doing her best to explain.

Luna licked dry lips, fearing what words those were. "What would she have said?"

"It's not important," Torrin said closing her eyes.

"Yes, it is, Torrin. Please, what did she tell you?"

A single tear fell from her eye. She uttered in a quiet, toneless voice, "She told me that she was going to tell everybody who would listen, about you and Khelin and what Khelin did to you."

Luna ducked her head, letting long blonde hair hide her expression. Softly she said, "So you killed her?"

"Yes." She opened her eyes looking up at Luna. "I'm sorry it upsets you. I really am. But I would do it again."

In the silence that followed, there was only the sound of their breathing and the crackling of the fire filling the room. Finally, Luna nodded, lifting her head, her expression lit by the firelight.

"Thank you, but I can't tell you it's easy for me to accept that."

With a sigh, she squeezed Torrin's hand, which she hadn't let released. "I'll try though. I really will."

Torrin shuddered, remembering her dreams. No, she wouldn't feel remorse. The woman was a rapist and a murderer. "You don't have to accept it, and I don't want you to." Torrin took a breath. "But know that I will do whatever I have to keep you safe. Khelin's orders to them was to kill the

council and then to bring back your heart. I swear, Khelin never will hurt you again."

"That's right," Luna whispered with a ghost of a smile. "You're going to protect me, right?"

Torrin smiled and lifted Luna's hand to her lips. She gave it a kiss before whispering, "yes, that's right."

Luna's breath caught at the simple movement, and then she grinned. "Good."

Leaning forward, she brushed her lips across Torrin's forehead and noticed her temperature had gone down a little. "Rest. Tonight it's my turn to watch over you."

Torrin yawned. "I bet if we're careful and we squeeze together real close, you could get in here." She looked hopefully at Luna. "Um, for some reason I sleep better when I'm with you."

Without comment, Luna slipped off her boots, took off her sword belt, and slipped under the covers next to Torrin. As long as they didn't mind being that close together, they would fit. And Luna most certainly did not mind.

"I'll tell you a secret," she said once they had managed to find a position that didn't hurt Torrin's wounds. "I sleep better when I'm with you too."

Torrin grinned and eased her head onto Luna's shoulder. "Good."

#####-

Rhain was scowling as she talked to Tamra.

"I can't believe you wasted an opportunity to get revenge for your sister. If they place Torrin back on your Patrol, I don't want you to fail again." She ran an agitated hand through her now short hair pulling at the ends in frustration. Damn Torrin! She didn't see how this was her fault at all. Torrin had attacked Tasha. By the Goddess, Torrin had attacked Abnoa.

Tamra glanced around quickly, wishing that the other woman would keep her voice down. She was in enough trouble already. "I don't know, Rhain..." she said, not certain if that would truly bring her satisfaction for her sister's death.

Would anything ease that ache? The Ranger was beginning to think that the idea of killing Torrin had just been a way for her to avoid grieving. Besides, there was another problem now. "She saved my life."

Rhain blinked in surprise. "What?"

Part of her wanted to believe Torrin had changed, but then she remembered what her Muanya had told to her. She retorted, "It's all just a trick so she will be in position to betray us here when Khelin's army marches on us. Mark my words, she'll pull the same stunt she did at Abnoa. I won't fail, I will make Quinn proud." The last part mumbled more to herself than Tamra.

Tamra looked at the other woman with dismay, not sure what to make of her mumblings. Rhain was doing that more and more often these days Tamra realized. It didn't speak well for the woman's state of mind. And what, Tamra wondered, did it say for her own that she'd followed Rhain's plans so far?

"Quinn is gone, Rhain. So is my sister. Nothing will bring them back." Her eyes misted over at that, but she made herself say it.

Another woman broke out of the shadows. "Rhain, give it a rest. You had us throw her in a cell. If she hadn't gotten out, the whole council would be dead. We haven't seen anything suspicious with her behavior. In fact I'm beginning to wonder about you."

Rhain's eyes darted between the two women. "Quinn's presence is still with me and I will do my best to honor her wisdom. Don't you see Torrin is the Betrayer? Don't any of you remember your teachings?"

Tamra shrugged. "She saved my life, Rhain." As far as the Ranger was concerned, that went a long ways to wiping the slate clean between the two of them.

The other woman shook her head. "They're ramblings of a Priestess driven to insanity. Let it go, Rhain. I am. I'm not going to end up braidless like you." The woman snorted, "Torrin screwed up, but she's done nothing but save lives while she's been here. Give it up, Rhain, before you cross a line that can't be undone." The woman walked off.

"Ezra is right Rhain, let it go." Tamra urged her.

Rhain's face went purple with rage. "Don't you see its all tricks and lies?"

"What I see is that you are losing your mind!"

"Me! I'm the only one still using common sense here. Get away from me. Weak! You are all weak. I will take care of things myself."

"Don't make things worse, Rhain!" Tamra called out as she walked away.

Rhain was left alone with the specter of her Muanya. She rubbed her short hair and then looked up at Quinn. "Why can't they see?"

Quinn scowled down at Rhain. "Because you're a pathetic leader. Perhaps I should have gone to Tasha."

Rhain's face paled. "No. She is like them, she doesn't see Torrin for the threat that she is. I will do this. I will save the North from the Betrayer."

Quinn's ghost looked at her daughter skeptically. "Best move quickly before Torrin has a chance to show her true colors."

Rhain nodded and moved off to find a quiet place to make plans.

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~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Blood and Honor

Zee: By an American and a Canadian well mostly the Canadian, it's her fault.

Windstar: Zee is, as usual, making things up. This story is completely her fault and a result of her imagination only. I claim no responsibility for this at all..

A big thank you to Claudia for her help with all of this huge story.

Feedback is always welcome at: zeeamy@gmail.com, or Adarkbow@yahoo.com

Prologue

It was an uneasy darkness. That uncertain time when the moon and sun pulled and pushed at each other, the ebbing of the night just before dawn.

Jinete stood quietly, listening intently into the dark. Beside her, Valzobasa snorted, impatient to be going. They had survived the winter, a cold unpleasant experience for both of them. The snow had been fascinating for about a day. After that it had just been a cold, wet annoyance that made both their joints ache. However, Jinete mused to herself, at least she had found some one to keep her warm at night. She grinned as she remembered some of those nights. She really did feel like singing, or dancing a jig. Love was a wonderful thing. And she, Jinete, second daughter to Herd Mistress Jinn of the Swiftrunner Clan, was in love.

Her smile got larger. Here she was, standing outside in the cold predawn hours because after a month of sneaking around, she had finally convinced Tyra to run away with her. Back to her plains, far away from that vicious, posturing bully. She didn't understand how Quinn could be so

callous and cruel in treating that beautiful woman with such indifference. No, she didn't understand, but she did rejoice in it. For without Quinn's lack of attention, Jinete would not have found room in Tyra's shuttered heart.

She heard the careful tread of footsteps and she turned toward the sound, her face beaming with happiness. That happiness fled at the site before her.

Three women emerged from the trees. Leading the trio was a very grim looking Quinn.

Jinete, wished she could say she was an honorable enough woman that this was first time she had dealt with an angry partner, but it wasn't. She had seen this look before and knew what it meant. Quinn had murder on her mind. In a quick bounding step, she was mounted on Valzobasa. She wheeled the stallion around and urged him to run. Underneath her she could feel his powerful muscles uncoil, moving them quickly away from the approaching danger. Tree branches snapped at her snagging her hair and clothes, and she cursed the north.

Quinn watched the woman react, momentarily impressed by the woman's quick reaction time but then, her anger returned. She shouted for her two hidden riders to give chase. She would have that bitch's blood. How dare she make a fool of her in her own home. The Alcens would be slower than that horse thing, but they moved better in the trees.

Jinete hung on tightly to Valzobasa as they ran northward through the trees, branches whipping around them. Tiny cuts sprang up over their bodies as the foliage caused gashes across flesh and fur. Jinete could feel Valzo tiring and mentally urged him to keep going. She peeked under her arm and saw one of the Alcen following them, its horns glinting in the approaching dawn light. At least they had lost one of them. Then in her mind came a shout of warning and she automatically clamped her legs tighter as Valzo reared up when the second Alcen cut them off. Those deadly twin spiraled horns pierced her leg and slammed into the flesh of her mount. As one, Jinete and the stallion screamed in pain. Valzobasa veered sharply away, leaving a spray of red as the horn ripped out and threw Jinete from his back.

She scrambled to her feet, the pain almost making her swoon, but she gritted her teeth and stayed up. Valzobasa urged her in her mind to keep moving as he stayed in front of the riders to block the path. He reared up onto his hind legs and lashed out with his hooves. She forced herself to move but knew it was pointless. She could feel the Goddess of Death approaching her, but she refused to look at her. 'It's not fair', she wanted to scream, but instead, saved her breath for her escape. She struggled up a hill, slipped on some rubble from an old crumbling wall and nearly fell. Her head was pounding and she couldn't hear Valzo thoughts anymore. They were drowned out by her pain and exhaustion.

Cold, angry eyes drilled into the struggling woman's back as the bow was drawn back until it shook with tension. Then fingers released the string, the tension of that string transferring into launched arrow. With satisfaction, she watched it hit her target; sending the woman tumbling over the brink of the hill.

Jinete woke from unconsciousness screaming as the arrow in her shoulder was torn out. Her dark eyes darted around and she found herself surrounded by five women and all staring at her grimly.

Ducking down low to get into the Southern woman's face, Quinn snarled, "Did you really think you could get away with sleeping with my wife? That I would just sit by and let you make a fool of me?"

"You're the fool and the ass," Jinete gasped out. "You treat her as a thing not a person. You ignore her beauty and preen around in your own self importance..." The rest of her retort was silenced as Quinn backhanded her.

"None of your pretty words. They are meaningless drivel. You are nothing but a liar and a thief. Did you really think you could get away with trying to steal what is mine? Tyra is mine. She will always be mine."

Jinete winced inwardly. She had thought they were being so careful, so cautious. How had Quinn discovered them?

"I rule Abnoa. Nothing goes on there that I don't know about. Even the shadows have eyes."

Jinete felt fear prickle along her scalp, living shadows, a very real Southern fear. She didn't think the North had any followers of the Shadows.

"Now, I'm going to kill you." Quinn leaned forward again. "And remember this. I will have the pleasure of raising that brat of yours."

Jinete's eyes grew wide as Quinn's boast sunk in and she weakly began to thrash around.

"You'll never hold her or be her Muanya. Just know that I will take as good care of her as someone of her lineage deserves." Quinn smiled a cruel smile that left little doubt how the unborn child would be treated. Then with a sudden motion, she stabbed Jinete in the chest and left the dagger in, the blood flooded out around the weapon.

Jinete gasped and bucked and then the world began to fade away. 'It's not fair,' she wanted scream, but her lips wouldn't move, 'I just found love. I have a daughter that I'll never know...not right.'

"But you knew love, and enjoyed its touch upon you, even if it was a for a short time. Isn't that better than to have never have felt it?" The words were soft, the tone musical.

Jinete turned her head and spotted a pale woman with large violet eyes and inky black hair standing just beyond the circle of her murderers.

The woman strode toward her, moving through Quinn without the angry woman even flinching

and then reached down, took her hand and pulled. It was an unpleasant sensation, having her soul taken from her mortal flesh and she gasped from the ache.

"I'm sorry," was all the Goddess of Death said, then turned and walked away, stopping only when she realized that Jinete was not following her.

"It's best if you leave mortal concerns behind now. Everything will work itself out," the Goddess said softly.

"No!" Jinete shouted angrily.

The Goddess blinked in surprise at the refusal. "If you stay, you'll be a ghost and bound to the area of your body.

"Quinn just can't get away with this. There must be something..."

"These aren't your concerns anymore."

"I'm not leaving," Jinete said stubbornly and turned her back on the Goddess of Death and watched Quinn and her thugs bury her body under a large oak tree.

There she would stay. Always alone, lingering on the edge of life and death as the stones of the nearby Abbey weathered with age while the tree she was buried under grew even taller and broader as the years passed.

Chapter 12

"At last," the dark-haired Queen of the South muttered as she surveyed her army. Thousands of warriors, the largest army the South had ever seen, and it was hers to command. She would crush the pitiful northern barbarians beneath her boot. Finally, after months of forced inactivity and frustration, the army had begun moving as the ground no longer threatened to swallow her wagons.

The advisor walked quickly over to where Khelin sat on her horse. She took a deep breath, relishing the taste of the fresh air. She hoped it wasn't her last. "Your Majesty, there's a problem."

"The next words out of your mouth, Klynn, better be 'I'm joking'," Khelin growled, turning her gaze to stare down at the fidgeting advisor as her troops continued to head for the distant mountains.

"I wish," Klynn mumbled. "Two scouting parties have failed to return." She stood ramrod straight and stared at the grass under the horse, noticing how green it seemed in the sunlight.

The Queen snarled, glancing up towards the mountains. Was Luna there already... in the mountain pass, waiting for her? No matter. "And how many of the northerners did our scouts kill?" Khelin asked softly.

The woman flinched. "At this time I don't know. I'm hoping other scouting parties will return with information." Wistfully, she remembered she could have taken the posting to be an ambassador to the Horse Clans on the Drakemore plains, but no, she had wanted the prestige of working for the next Southern Queen.

Khelin reached behind her and gripped the pommel of her sword. The world grew dark as it cleared its sheath. The black blade appeared to absorb the light around it. All the nearby shadows grew larger, as if it were twilight and not noon. With a casual, backhanded movement, the blade cut through the air, whistling like a banshee, and sliced clean through the advisor's neck. The woman's head toppled backward off her body. The blood arched from the stump of her neck.

With a smirk, Khelin sheathed the black sword. "You there," she called toward one of her nearby officers. "You're my new advisor. Find out what happened to the scouts."

The woman eyed the decapitated body in horror and slowly nodded. It wasn't as if she could say no.

"Well?" The Queen growled as the woman stood rooted to her spot. "Get going!"

"Yes, my Queen. Right away." She started running away, not sure what to do but she was sure Klynn had underlings somewhere.

"Must I always be surrounded by incompetence?" Khelin muttered. Her frown slipped away though as she watched the first of her babies roll past her. It took six oxen to pull each of the long black cannons. They were the pride of her army and had gone a long way to assuring her place as Queen of the South.

"Soon, my beauties, soon." She smiled as she pictured the bloodshed to come.

Oh yes, so very soon.

#####

Torrin grumbled, sweating as she pushed against the healer's hand with her foot. Stupid strengthening exercises. She was tired, grumpy, and generally not in a good mood.

She rarely got to see Luna because she was busy running the Northern clans. "People can't scratch their ass without checking with Luna first," she thought glumly. It also didn't help that Eve was back at the Abbey with the other Clan leaders. Torrin knew she was feeling insecure but she couldn't help it. It was all fine and dandy to talk about their attraction but they really hadn't had much time together once the healers had determined Torrin was okay to move around again.

Finally, after being coaxed into doing one more, Torrin snapped at the healer. "Get the frak away from me before I break your leg! Then see how you like doing this."

The healer's face paled as her eyes caught Torrin's. She was quite certain the woman would follow through on her threat. Laughter from the doorway stopped her from replying.

"Is she being a troublemaker, Anna?"

Letting go of the foot in question she moved away. "Yes, just a little bit."

Torrin growled and snapped her teeth.

"Mind if I take over?" Luna asked, moving into the room with a fond grin at Torrin. "I think she tolerates me," she mock whispered toward the healer.

The healer nodded and quickly left the room.

Torrin eyed Luna warily. "Come on. I've already done 30 of them," she whined.

"How many did Anna say you had to do?" Luna asked, taking off her coat and setting it aside before sitting down. She'd just gotten back from seeing the improvements to the Abbey walls, and had decided she'd had it with people asking her questions for one day.

"Don't know. A lot," Torrin mumbled.

Luna grinned and gently picked up Torrin's leg. "How about we do a little more, then we hunt down dinner?"

"Fine," Torrin grumbled. "You're such a slave driver."

Luna's grin slipped, she stopped talking and simply provided resistance for Torrin's pushing.

"Do you really think that?" she asked quietly after several minutes of therapy.

Torrin hid her smile. In a quick move, she wrapped both her legs around Luna's waist and then pulled the woman down on top of her. She looked up into Luna's surprised eyes and grinned.

"No, I don't. In fact, I think you need to delegate more. People around here don't need to come to you for permission to scratch their ass." She kissed Luna's nose. "You let them push you around. If they're not capable of doing their job, then get rid of them."

Luna studied her intently, troubled blue eyes slowly warming. With a sigh, she laid her head down on Torrin's chest, careful of her wound. "I missed you," she whispered.

Torrin wrapped her arms around Luna and hugged her tight. "I missed you too. I'm sorry. I will

try to do better in the future. I just have a lot of training to overcome and most of it is not pleasant," she murmured into Luna's hair.

The blonde nodded, greedily soaking up every moment of contact with Torrin.

"A messenger falcon came in this afternoon," she said quietly. "Khelin's troops are on the move." More and more she was finding it difficult to talk with the others. She was glad it wasn't like that with Torrin. Luna didn't think she could bear it if it was.

"Have the patrols started to trap the path? We can't let the cannons get up here. We won't survive if they do." Torrin shuddered remembering the demonstration that Khelin gave of one of the cannons.

Luna nodded; she too had seen what those cannons could do. "Yeah, the scouting parties are pulling back, trapping as they go." She was quiet for a moment as she struggled with her silent fears. "Um, I don't know if we can stop them from reaching the Pass. At Abnoa, at least she didn't have time to bring them. Now she's clearing the way in front of them with her slaves."

Torrin kissed Luna's temple. "If they make it up here, we'll deal with it the best we can. There are always options. Nothing is ever hopeless."

Luna braced herself on an arm, pushing up so she could watch Torrin's eyes. "You'll be there with me, right?"

"Yep. Can't wait to see you kick Khelin's ass." She smiled trying to reassure Luna. "I'm not running away. Trust me."

"I do," Luna whispered, giving into her desire and leaning down until she could reach Torrin's lips. What started as a gentle kiss quickly escalated. Luna's body was completely aware of Torrin's beneath her. She pressed closer with hungry kisses.

Torrin felt herself melt into Luna's body. Afraid to do something that would scare her away, she merely let Luna control the pace as she let her hands caress Luna's back. She groaned in pleasure when Luna upped the intensity of their kisses. Her hands snuck under the fabric of Luna's shirt so her fingers could touch the hot skin.

With a tug, Luna slid her fingers under Torrin's shirt, groaning at the feel of smooth flesh beneath her fingertips. Then she paused. Stilling her fingers, she slowed their kisses until she could pull back. Letting out a shaky breath, the blonde smiled wistfully at the dark-haired woman.

"I wish I could just..." She trailed off, shaking her head in irritation. Instead, she laid her head back down on Torrin's chest, fingers tracing patterns on the other woman's exposed skin.

Torrin took a deep breath to calm herself. She could feel her libido urging her on but she pushed away its demands. "It's okay. Really. We'll go at your pace. Whenever you're ready to do more,

we will." She left her hands under Luna's shirt but instead of caressing skin, she began to massage the tense muscles she felt in Luna's back.

"No, it isn't okay..." Luna's words trailed off into a moan of contentment as Torrin's skillful fingers began to work. Nearly purring, she went limp, hedonistically enjoying every second as Torrin found tense muscles Luna didn't know she had.

"By the Goddess, you're good at that."

Torrin grinned. "Thank you. She whispered into Luna's ear. "You work too hard. Make Fyre do some of the heavy thinking. It would be good for her. And Tasha, all she does is lay around moaning about her shoulder. Make her brain work on things other than her pain. It would be good for her to strategize about possible plans for Khelin's troops. She gave the ear a soft kiss.

"Mmmm, you're right." Luna sighed. "But it's strange telling these people what to do. It's different when they ask me. But to tell them they should do something," Luna shrugged, not moving from what she was coming to think of as her favorite spot, "that seems... presumptuous."

Torrin snorted. "Why? They invade your space and interfere with your life by asking for your opinion and help. So just start out asking them to do stuff and then we'll work up from there to ordering them around." She couldn't resist. She licked the edge of the ear.

The tall woman quivered at the touch. She gave Torrin one last searing kiss before she grudgingly stood up. Holding out her hand for the prone woman, Luna smiled. "How about we start with getting dinner? Then I can show you what we've done while you and Tasha have been healing." The Ranger wanted to see what Torrin thought of the preparations so far.

Torrin pouted at having to get up. "All right." She grabbed Luna's hand and let herself be pulled to her feet. "But I was enjoying the cuddling. Having dinner is under protest."

"Didn't you just tell me I have to start ordering people?" Luna teased, not letting go of Torrin's hand as they started to walk toward the eating area.

Torrin nostrils flared at the thought. "Well, that does have possibilities." She muttered and gave her an evil grin.

#####-

Dinner was interesting. Luna and Torrin sat at the main table, having a perfectly normal conversation about mundane things. But quite aware of the fact that every few seconds, Eve would glare at the two of them from her own seat further down the table. Fyre joined them shortly after they had gotten their meal, as had Valarie. Although, the former had only stayed long enough to grab food to bring to Tasha's room. Luna shared an amused look with Torrin at

that.

"Eve's just upset now. She'll get over it," Luna said, continuing their dinner conversation as they headed out of the crumbling Abbey for a tour of the defenses.

"Well, if I were her, I wouldn't," Torrin admitted. "When I was out on patrol, I kept wondering how I was going to be pleasant to the both of you when I got back."

Torrin did feel badly for Eve. But she wouldn't give up those peculiar, giddy, and contentment-filled emotions that made her want to grin all the time. She slowly brought up a finger and tapped her heart. So this must be what feeling happy was like.

Luna grinned as she studied the smaller woman's profile. Impulsively she leaned forward and captured Torrin's lips in a quick kiss. "Come see what we've done for the defenses while you've been laying on your back."

"Well, I admit lying on my back would have been more productive if you had been there." She laughed as Luna turned faintly red. "Okay, show me what you've been up to."

Luna recovered from her blush and swatted Torrin on the side. With understandable pride, she began to show the dark-haired woman what work had been done so far. The crumbling outer wall of the Abbey had been fortified and reinforced. Several catapults were in varying stages of assembly inside the courtyard. Warriors patrolled the top of the wall, on the constant look out for more assassins.

Torrin whistled. "My, my... you have been busy." She nodded her approval. Then she nervously cleared her throat. "At Abnoa, she had Rya's Hawks take the back wall. We scaled it with the climbing claws and infiltrated the castle while your troops were all focused on Khelin's main army." Torrin looked at her feet, unable to look at Luna.

"Hey." Luna touched Torrin's chin, drawing her face up until she could meet those gray eyes. "I know that." She nodded toward the sheer cliff face behind them. "We'll have archers ready to take down anyone who tries it this time though. We also are going to have vats of boiling oil ready to toss down the walls. Something we didn't have at Abnoa."

With a tug and nodding to the guards on duty, she drew Torrin out of the Abbey and into the Ellris Pass itself. As large as the Abbey grounds were, the Pass was going to be the main battle area. A long, deep trench had been dug along the top of the pathway and the resulting dirt was used to make an earthen wall behind it. Spikes planted in the bottom of the trench and along the top of the wall pointed southward.

"We need to stop her from crossing through the Pass," Luna said, shrugging.

Torrin smiled as she looked at all the extensive preparations. "I guess we're ready for war then." And for a brief, surprising moment, she felt sad. Normally before a battle, she felt nothing. She felt Luna reach for her hand.

The Ranger slid their fingers together and clasped them tightly. "We won't fail. We can't," she whispered.

Torrin squeezed Luna's hand. "We won't fail," she whispered back, "I'm the Betrayer, remember? From me, Queens will be made and destroyed, and I'm not choosing Khelin." She didn't know why those words had come to her just now. They stirred something deep inside her.

"From you, eh?" Luna whispered. How different this time was than the last time she had stood guard before a battle. Drawing Torrin close, she slid her hands down her side, and then pulled her closer. Dipping her head, she claimed Torrin's mouth, moaning appreciatively.

"Hmm?" Torrin mumbled as Luna claimed her mouth, and then she forgot everything else. She slid her hands around and down, grabbing and pulling the woman in to her body tighter. She couldn't get enough of Luna. She wanted to touch the taller woman everywhere, and taste the skin on her throat, stomach... everywhere.

Luna let out a surprised hum as Torrin pulled her closer, then lost track of everything as Torrin's tongue started to do wonderful things to her. She shivered and ran her fingers through Torrin's short dark hair. Despite the difference in height, they fit together well, and Luna gasped at the heat she felt when she slid a toned thigh between the other woman's legs. A tendril of discomfort wound its way through Luna's mind, but she pushed it aside, determined to enjoy the moment. Tugging on Torrin's shirt, she pulled it free and slid her hands underneath it.

Torrin felt like she was on fire as the Ranger's fingers danced across her side and upwards. Slowly, part of the ex-mercenary's brain realized that they were outside, in full view of anyone on patrol, and she gradually stopped what she was doing. Torrin whimpered as Luna's hands found a sensitive spot.

"Luna," Torrin panted, "not that I want to stop... because trust me, I really really, really don't want to... but I'm not sharing this moment with anybody."

The blonde stilled her hands, and then reluctantly let go of Torrin with a sigh of regret. "We're outside, aren't we?" Luna murmured. She glanced around in the moonlight.

Torrin nodded against Luna's chest. Already she was starting to hate this new sense of nobility.

"Want to go see how Tasha is doing?" Luna asked as she pressed a kiss to the top of the dark head nestled against her. She wrapped her arms tightly around Torrin and hugged her, enjoying the warm feelings that spread through her.

Torrin pouted, then after a moment, sighed, "Yes, let's go see how the one-armed wonder is doing. I bet she's managed to get Valarie pinned to the bed."

#####-

A day later, a messenger falcon brought the news that they had all been expecting. Khelin's army was on the move and would be at the southern base of the Ellris Pass by the following night. The mood in the Abbey was tense and brooding with most of the women getting ready by going over gear and weapons, mentally preparing for the battle ahead, and spending time with loved ones.

The Clan of Fire, however, was throwing a bash outside in the newly blooming gardens. Laughter and drink flowed freely. They were warriors through and through. If they fell tomorrow, then they died being who they were and doing what they loved to do.

Torrin grimaced as drunken women jostled her again. She really didn't want to be here but had promised Fyre that she would stay for a while. She sighed as she looked around. She had hoped Luna would come, but so far, the woman was a no show. "Probably stuck in some stupid meeting," she muttered to herself.

As a hand grabbed her by the waist and pulled her out of the mass of people, Torrin gave a small smile of relief. Turning around, she expected to see Luna, but instead, found herself face to face with Adrian. She tried to step away, but Adrian's hands only tightened and she could smell the ale on the other woman's breath.

"Hey, Torrin. Long time no see," the fire warrior slurred.

"Uh, yes." She looked around hoping to find some one to help her out but saw no one she knew. With a sigh, she realized she was probably going to have to hurt Adrian.

Oblivious to Torrin's search for escape, Adrian continued. "We should be together." She stroked Torrin's cheek.

"Um..."

"But no, that bitch Luna had to step in." She tried to focus on Torrin's face. "Honestly, what has she got that I don't?"

Torrin rolled her eyes. "Adrian, I really want you to let go of me, because I don't want to hurt you. Tomorrow we're going to need every warrior and if I do, well, you won't be in any shape to fight."

"Really? You think you're that much better than I am?" Adrian snorted. "See how that bitch Luna has changed you? You didn't feel that way with me earlier."

"Adrian, that was just sex. It had no meaning. There was definitely no intent on my part for an encore performance, so just let it go. I'm very happy now and if you'd grow up, you'd find someone who makes you feel the same way too." Torrin tensed as she felt Adrian shift her hand to the back of her neck.

Adrian gave an ale-scented burp. "But I have found someone."

Torrin was ready to protect herself, but instead of the choking she was expecting; Adrian pulled her head down for a kiss instead. Shocked, Torrin stood there dumbly and let Adrian kiss her.

The news the southern army was on the move created quite a stir in camp. It had taken hours for Luna to soothe people and remind them, repeatedly, that this was what they had all been waiting for. Finally, much later than she'd expected, she managed to make her way to the Fire Clan's war party. She saw no sign of Torrin so the Ranger set out in search for her companion.

She found her in a dark corner of the ruins not far from the dancing going on around the bonfires. "Torrin?" Luna called, not sure what to make of the sight in front of her.

The sound of Luna's voice freed Torrin from her shock. She pushed Adrian away and spun around. "Luna?" Torrin paled seeing it was indeed Luna. "That... this... Adrian...um, it's not what it looks like." She mentally slapped herself at the lameness of the words.

Luna looked back and forth between the two of them. She wanted to believe Torrin. Like Torrin did when Eve had grabbed her. But, still... she tried to push away her confused feelings.

Adrian stood back up with a drunken wobble and laughed. "Sure it was. She was kissing me."

Torrin glared at Adrian.

"Torrin?" Luna asked, ignoring the drunken Fire warrior.

Torrin's mind raced trying to find words to explain but somehow they kept swimming out of reach. She stammered, "We weren't kissing." She watched Luna's eyebrows arch. Torrin rambled on quickly, "Well, we were, but it was a one-sided kiss because Adrian kissed me... I was not participating. Actually, I thought she was going to try and choke me, so when she pulled me down for a kiss I was caught off guard..."

Adrian just laughed and reached out for Torrin. "Oh, come on Torrin, just tell the Ice Queen you're better off with me." Losing her balance, she fell backwards into the crumbling remains of an old wall.

With a contemptuous look at Adrian's sprawled figure, her fingers curled into fists ready to pummel the drunken Fire warrior, Luna said, "I'm going back to my room." As she stalked away, her icy gaze slid over Torrin's red face.

Torrin watched Luna's retreating back and felt her heart fall into her stomach.

"Oh looky, the Ice Queen ran off." Adrian reached up, grabbed Torrin's arm and pulled herself back to her feet. "You really want to be with someone who won't even fight for you?"

Torrin growled. Grabbing Adrian's wrist, she turned to face the warrior while twisting the arm at the same time. Grimacing at the sudden pain, Adrian fell back to her knees. Torrin stared down at the woman in contempt.

"There is no 'you and I'. Get that through your thick skull! I want to be with Luna. I will never be with you," she snarled. "And you better pray I can fix things with Luna or I will make sure you never fight again."

Adrian eyes widened as fear worked its way into her ale-addled brain.

Seeing that she had made her point, Torrin let go of her arm and ran off after Luna.

Luna was in her room by the time Torrin caught up with her. She was standing at the window, staring at the newly repaired Abbey walls, and the warriors who endlessly patrolled them. She didn't turn around as she heard Torrin enter, nor did she say anything. She knew this really wasn't as different as her incident with Eve, but it still stung to see Torrin with someone else. She didn't know what or even how to say the thoughts that raced through her confused head.

Torrin stood and fidgeted for a moment then became more distressed as Luna continued to ignore her. Finally, she spoke in a soft voice. "Luna?"

"You didn't have to leave the party," Luna said quietly, forcing her fingers to uncurl from the fists she had made.

"Yes I did. I upset you. I can't just stay there while you're here being upset because of me." Torrin replied.

Luna turned around. A plan formed in her mind. She was not going to let the likes of Adrian to take Torrin away from her. "I need some wine. Want some?" she said at last, moving over to the side table and pouring a goblet for each of them. Her hands were trembling slightly as she did.

Torrin blinked in surprise. "Okay," she said, then took the goblet from Luna. "Are you okay?" She asked, not sure what was going on.

The Ranger didn't answer, draining most of her goblet before setting it aside.

"I just think it's time for bed," she said instead. The warmth of the wine had stilled the shaking in her fingers and she was able to undress without visibly trembling. In the light from the moon, she tossed aside the furs wraps they wore to keep warm and started to undo her tunic and pants. She moved slowly purposefully as she stripped in front of Torrin.

Torrin coughed as she took a sip, spilling it down her face and chest. Setting the goblet down, she wiped the wine off. "Um..." Forgetting what she was going to say as she watched Luna undress. Torrin's eyes got large at the show in front of her. Shaking her head, she got her

thoughts back on track again. "Ah, um... don't you want to talk about earlier?" Her libido was screaming at her to forget the questions and move closer to the nearly naked woman in front of her, but her gut kept telling her something was wrong. Fumbling for the goblet, she brought it up and took a healthy swallow.

Luna let the last article of clothing drop to the ground, her blue eyes almost cobalt in the faint moonlight. The silvery glow highlighted her tall lean frame as she moved toward Torrin. Without saying a word, she took the goblet from the mercenary and set it aside. Taking Torrin's hand in hers, she drew her toward the bed.

Torrin let her. She knew there was some reason why this wasn't a good idea right now, but for the life of her, she couldn't think of what it was. As they sat on the bed, she licked her dry lips and took in Luna's stunning, moonlit body.

Long fingers began to undo Torrin's shirt, sliding under the fabric to touch warm skin. Luna leaned closer, her breath hot on Torrin's ear. "Do you like what you see?" She whispered, her lips teasing Torrin's earlobe before pressing kisses to her neck.

Torrin squirmed and her breathing ragged as Luna's hands touched her skin. "Yes. I like what I see very much. You're beautiful," she whispered back.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Luna asked, her fingers sliding up over Torrin's chest and cupping her firm breast.

Torrin blew out a breath. She placed her hand over Luna's, stilling it. "Are you sure you want this?" she asked. Inwardly, she was amazed she had that much self-control left.

The Ranger leaned back, her long blonde hair hiding most of her face. "Don't you?" she purred as her other hand slid down between Torrin's legs, feeling the heat there.

Torrin moaned, torn between jerking away or toward that hand. "Yes, I want this," she gasped. She ripped off her shirt, tossed it somewhere into the room, and laid down on the bed as she tried to get her boots off.

"Let me," Luna said, proud that her voice didn't waver. Sliding her hands down the length of Torrin's legs, she grasped the boots, pulled them down, and then tossed them aside. The dark-haired woman's pants quickly followed. Soon there was nothing between them but bare skin. Luna trembled as she lowered herself onto the bed next to Torrin.

Torrin sighed in pleasure as a naked Luna slid up against her. She felt her heartbeat as it pounded in her chest. Slowly she kissed her, letting her mouth and tongue convey what she couldn't say.

Luna lost herself in that kiss. Maybe this wouldn't be as bad as she had feared. Pressing herself against Torrin, she let herself be swept away by the emotions that Torrin's body was expressing. Her fingers traced patterns along the smaller woman's side and chest, then up along her breast,

circling erect nipples.

Torrin groaned as Luna touched her chest. It was something she had wanted Luna to do for so long. Gently she stroked Luna's sides and then down her backside. Letting her hands come upward a second time, she lightly trailed her hands under Luna's breasts without touching them. Then she caressed the valley of skin between them before slowly moving her hands and cupping each breast while being careful to ignore the hardening nipples.

With the heat of their touching bodies, her heart racing, and hands shaking, Luna trembled beneath Torrin's touch. She refused to give in to the painful memories that hovered just outside her consciousness. Luna drove them away by immersing herself in Torrin... her taste, her smell, and the feel of her beneath her lips and fingers.

Torrin was on fire. Her skin burned and desire flared throughout her veins. Her groin throbbed and all sensations came to a boil. Gently, she rolled them over so she was on top and Luna was easier to touch and feel. With a moan, she kissed and tasted the skin on Luna's throat and collarbone.

On the bottom, Luna turned her face to the side, biting her lip at the memories it triggered. It was hard to distinguish between what was happening to her now and her past with Khelin. Her thoughts struggled to keep up them apart. But desperate to give Torrin what she thought the ex-mercenary wanted, Luna forced herself to lay there, her hands urging Torrin on.

Torrin could feel her desire coat her upper thighs and whimpered as she started to kiss down Luna's body. Her hands were stroking everywhere, never staying in one spot. She wanted to map Luna's body into her. As her right hand caressed the flesh on Luna's upper inner thigh, she paused as she felt raised, smooth flesh that shouldn't be there. At first she thought it was a birthmark. But it wasn't. Torrin knew how branded skin felt. She had one too.

Luna went still, not wanting to see the look on Torrin's face.

Torrin removed her hands from the mark. She sat back on her knees and looked up at Luna. Finding Luna's face hidden away from her she moved off her and slowly lowered her body down next to Luna's. "Are you okay?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"I can't give you what you need," Luna whispered, her voice deep with anger and sadness. "I can't." Sitting up, she snatched a blanket and wrapped it around herself as she prepared to flee out the door.

"Luna, don't..." She knew she could grab Luna, but right now, that would only make things worse. Staring at Luna's back she said, "Luna, don't run away from me. Please."

Luna's shoulders heaved as she sucked in needed air. It took everything in her to stay seated where she was. "The last..." She faltered for a second then went on. "The last night I was in Thulis, Khelin did... things."

The blonde shivered, her mind skirting around many of the things that had happened that night. "As she finished with me, she took a piece of metal with her brand on it, heated it up in front of me then she..." Her voice failed her and she hung her head, tears leaking out from tightly closed eyes.

Torrin had closed her eyes during Luna's recounting of the events so firmly etched into her own mind. When Luna stopped talking, she got out of the bed and stood in front of her. Clearing her throat so Luna would know she was there, she placed her hands gently on Luna's shoulders to give the woman the option of rejecting her comfort.

For a second Luna didn't react. Then, with a strangled cry, she buried her head in Torrin's chest. With tears flowing freely from her eyes, she cried for the past, for her parents and for the youth she had given up to Khelin during those nights in Thulis.

Torrin held Luna close and whispered, "It's okay. It's over now. She can't hurt you again." When she felt Luna's tears stop, she gently took Luna's hand in her own and brought it up to the brand of the serpent coiled around a sword on her arm. "I understand completely. This marks me. Anyone who sees it knows me for what I am. And I can never get rid of it. It's forever seared on my skin."

"If..." Luna took a deep breath and forced herself to say the words. "If you need to be with someone else, like Adrian, you could..." She couldn't even finish the sentence.

Torrin sighed and shook her head. She grabbed Luna's hand again and brought it up to her lips, kissing the palm. "I don't want Adrian. I don't want anybody else. I only want you." She kissed Luna's palm again and let the hand go. "I'm not going anywhere. And when you're ready, we'll move at your pace." Torrin marveled at her words. When had she become so understanding? When had someone else's needs become greater than her own? It had to be Luna. Somehow the woman had changed her into someone she hardly recognized.

Luna gave her a weak smile, her blue eyes shining with another wave of unshed tears. Shaking her head, not trusting her voice, she held Torrin tightly for a few minutes then slowly let her go. Finally she whispered, "Then how about we go to sleep?"

Torrin nodded and slid back into bed.

#####

Torrin was cranky, so ill tempered the next day that the women of the Abbey were desperate to avoid her. Torrin tried to feel remorseful, but then again, it wasn't her fault that her libido had gone from go to stop so fast she still ached from it. She was proud of herself for putting Luna's needs and fears first. It gave her an unfamiliar warm and good feeling. But that didn't change that fact her libido was upset. Finally, she went down to the bathing chamber, stripped down and much to the horror of the other women present, dropped her body into an unheated pool. With a

sputtering gasp, she lifted her head out of the water, her teeth chattering from the cold water. Her eyes narrowed, she was so going to kill Khelin.

Torrin started to smile at an archer as she made her way out to the Abbey wall then stopped as the woman dropped her gaze and gave Torrin a wide berth. Torrin shrugged inwardly, she was feeling much better now. Her hair was still slightly damp as she made her way over to Luna. She was proud she had healed so quickly. Her limp was hardly noticeable. The stitches in her shoulder had been taken out the other day and while the muscles were stiff, she had a full range of movement. The only thing that scared her was her eye. She had managed to hide from everybody the fact that she was nearly blind in her left eye. And after her tumble into the tree, her sight was nothing but murky grey shadows when she closed her right eye.

Luna stood on the edge of the newly repaired Abbey walls. Her winter cloak flapped around her as the cold wind tugged on it. Below her, she could just see Khelin's army emerging from the trees. From where she stood, they seemed to be nothing more than little colorful dots. If only they were as harmless. Her shiver had little to do with the cold. Sighing, she glanced about noting the hurried last minute preparations around her.

As they had all morning, her thoughts once again turned to the night before. She didn't know what to feel or think about it. She tried to offer herself to Torrin, to give the dark haired woman what she wanted, but just hadn't been able to. And now... now Torrin knew her awful secret. How the Southern Queen had branded her like a slave. Torrin had been kind and understanding. But still... Luna shook her head at her confused feelings. Despite herself, the blonde felt her lips tilt into a smile when she caught sight of Torrin trudging toward her. The ex-mercenary's wet hair was evidence of a recent bath and Luna had the sudden urge to run her fingers through those short dark locks.

"The wind is cold up here," she called out in warning.

Torrin made a face. "It's the north, Luna. It's always cold," she replied as she made her way up to where Luna was standing.

Silently the Ranger made room, and after a moment of indecision, wrapped her cloak around them both. It was a beautiful spring day, not a cloud in the sky, and the sun warmed the rock around them. The clear air gave them a good view of the activity in the valley below. She nodded down at the Pass. "She's coming."

Torrin smiled as Luna enclosed her with her cloak. With that one move, Luna rested her fears about any awkwardness between them after last night's adventure. After a moment, and not caring who saw, she leaned over and kissed Luna's cheek, then turned to look out over the wall. She closed her left eye to see better and saw Khelin's army slowly moving toward them.

"How are you feeling?" Luna asked quietly.

Torrin opened her eye and turned her attention away from the Pass to Luna. "I'm okay," she

answered. She studied Luna's face. "And how are you doing?"

"Better." To her surprise, it was the truth. Wrapping her arm tighter around Torrin's shoulder, she held the other woman firmly, enjoying the shared warmth. She softly murmured into the smaller woman's ear, "How are your injuries?"

"Mmmm, they're okay," she said while sliding her hand around Luna's waist. "A little stiff perhaps, but getting better each day." She grinned. "Nothing that will stop me from going out into the fray for a little hack and slash."

The taller woman frowned at that, but Luna knew Torrin better than to say anything. Instead, she gazed down the slope, studying what was obviously a field camp that the Southern army was setting up at the base of the Pass. With every hour, her estimate of the Southern force grew. "There are so many of them," she whispered.

"Yes, there is. But we have a lot of things to our advantage so don't lose faith." Torrin said, giving Luna a soft squeeze.

"I haven't yet," she replied with a grin and returned the squeeze. "What are you doing right now?"

"Copping a feel. Was I doing it wrong?" Torrin asked innocently.

Luna laughed and drew the attention of the nearby warriors who shared amused glances and went back to what they were doing. "How about we go cop a feel inside, where it's warm?"

Torrin grinned and started bounding down the stone steps. Half way down she looked back up, "What are you waiting for?"

With one last glance down the valley, Luna shook her head. "Nothing."

#####

Khelin was pleased.

Things were starting to get back on track. The infernal northern winter was well behind them now, with spring in full flower. The Southern Queen glared up at the mountains in front of her. There was still snow up on those peaks, and she had no doubt it would be damn cold in the mountain pass itself.

Despite that, she would crush the northern army beneath her. Then it was only a matter of time before she would be in the northern city and their magical relic would be hers. Then she would rule everything. Her Mother will be so proud.

Her grin made the nearest of her warriors so uneasy that they decided to go help set up the base camp.

Teryasa coughed softly hoping to get her Queen's attention. She also hoped she was just far enough away should the Queen decided to start swinging with that dark sword of hers.

Patting the neck of the dark horse she was sitting on, Khelin glanced down at the woman hovering nearby. "What?" she snapped.

"Um..." Her mind went blank. Why did the last advisor have to go get herself killed? "Oh, um, I have a report for you, my Queen."

"Go on," Khelin drawled, dark eyes watching the woman with barely veiled contempt. Why did she always have to put up with these scribes? Life would have been so much simpler if she could rely on her warriors to do everything.

Teryasa cleared her throat. "We believe that the Northern army has set up a base at an old Abbey at the top of the Pass. From all reports, we should have no trouble defeating them and descending into the valley beyond. The Troops are moving well, only a few falling to sickness. The cannons are slow to navigate but they are moving up the pass. Um..." She trailed off.

Dark eyes narrowed ominously. "Yes?"

"Well, um, we've lost a lot of slaves and a few scouts to traps set in the trail, but it is a manageable loss of life. Your troop strength is still glorious." She was shaking as she finished her report.

A gauntlet-covered hand flexed, the reins she held, creaked. "It better be," Khelin purred. She had stripped the southern lands bare of warriors, demanding tribute from every land under her rule. There had never been such an army assembled. She dismissed the loss of the slaves with hardly a thought; they were good for little else.

"Oh yes, my Queen. Your army is still the greatest that has ever been. She cleared her throat nervously again. "Tomorrow early afternoon the cannons should be up here with us."

Khelin nodded, dismissing the woman with a sneer.

"Good." Her gaze turned once again toward the pass above her. The sheer mountain cliffs to either side meant she had to go through that pass. If she squinted a little, she could make out the form of a building. Probably the Abbey the Northerners were using. It would make an excellent target for her lovely cannons.

"Wait," she snapped as Teryasa started to move away.

The advisor halted the blood running from her face. She turned slowly around. "Yes, my Queen?"

"Find me the leader of the mercenaries. Time the dogs earned their scraps." Khelin smiled at her own joke, her gaze never leaving the pass in front of her.

"Yes, my Queen. Right away." Teryasa took off as quick as her short legs could take her to find the Merc leader.

After a few minutes, Rya strode over to Khelin, her steps confident and her posture relaxed. The advisor followed behind, hiding behind the thick Mercenary.

Rya grinned at the Queen but it didn't reach her eyes, "You wanted to see me?"

"Tomorrow we will begin the battle," Khelin pronounced. She would wait no longer than that to crush the northern army. "Tonight I want your people to pay them a visit." Her expression was bloodthirsty as she turned to look at the mercenary. "Make them bleed and demoralize them for tomorrow."

Rya glanced over squinting to make out the Abbey. "A little slash and dash. We can do that. Usual fee," she replied matter-of-factly.

"Fine," Khelin sneered. "Double if you bring back the head of their leader."

Rya frowned, "I make no promises to do what your shadows could not, but we will slash and dash tonight. Now if you excuse me, I have to go prep my Hawks."

Khelin waved her away; contented that blood would finally flow tonight.

Rya gave a short bow and walked off, her mind busy making plans for an effective attack.

#####-

The sun did not linger long in the northern sky. It would be a while yet until the long, hot days of summer would come. Twilight gave way to darkness. The night lit only by the full moon above. The northern camp was restless. Many warriors prowled the walls of the abbey, while even more helped to bring up supplies from the river. A never-ending procession of non-combatants had taken over the task of supplying the northern fighters. There was stillness to the air, as if the earth itself was aware of the battle soon to come.

Torrin couldn't sleep. She stared at the ceiling and listened to Luna breath next to her in bed. Normally that was a comforting sound, one that lulled her to sleep in a matter of heartbeats. Again, another oddness she mused, since she was not use to this intimate closeness. She fought the urge to wiggle around and then finally eased herself out of the bed. Maybe it was the battle to come. Maybe it was being so close to Luna while her libido was on overdrive, but whatever it was, she just couldn't sleep.

She covered carefully Luna not wanting to wake her. She knew Luna needed all the sleep she could get. Quietly Torrin got dressed and slid her sword into the scabbard before leaving the room.

In the deep shadows created by the light of the full moon, the Hawks studied the stone walls in front of them. While not as impressive as the castle walls at Abnoa, these were more heavily guarded.

Rya frowned, it was almost if they were aware of the possibility of what her Hawks could do. But that was impossible. In the South, a defender might try to out guess her, but in the North there was no way. Unless... Rya's eyes narrowed then shook her head. Even if Torrin had managed to survive the Assassins, there was no way her Baby Bird would give up the secrets of the Hawks. After a moment of deliberation, she nodded for Helen's pack to go further down and cause a distraction. Then Nixos' pack and hers would scale the wall here.

Luna turned over in bed but then waking up slowly as she realized that the nice warm body cuddled against her was gone. Sleepily she sat up, squinting around. When she failed to see any sign of Torrin, she grabbed her clothes.

Torrin gave a shudder as the cold night air struck her, and she wondered again why she was here instead of inside in bed wrapped around Luna. She nodded to a guard. "How goes it?"

"Cold and dark," the Fire warrior mumbled, the chain mail she wore jingling as she moved along her patrol.

"Then it's a good night, no one's bleeding yet," she said with a grin.

The guard snorted. "I'd be warm then at least."

"And less bored, but tomorrow will come soon enough and so will your second shift." Torrin's grin got larger and as she turned to leave, she clapped the woman on the back causing the woman's chain mail to jingle.

Torrin froze. That have been the cry of a bird, but her gut told her it was not a sound made by animal, but a human imitation.

"You all right?" the guard asked, turning to look at Torrin as she stopped dead in her tracks.

Quietly Torrin turned and whispered to the guard. "Go get reinforcements. Khelin has sent us a welcoming party."

The guard paused, started to ask a question, then nodded and headed for the main part of the Abbey.

Torrin gestured to some of the guards to join her as she made her way to the edge of the wall her eyes trying to pierce the darkness. "You two see anything?" she asked in a quiet whisper.

The Fire warrior to one side of her shook her head, the helmet she wore shaking with it. The Ranger on the other side leaned further over the edge, frowning. "I don't see anything... but what is that sound?"

There was barely a flicker in the moonlight as the dagger slid straight upwards. The tip sliced through the ranger's throat, then upwards. For an instant the woman tottered on the edge of the wall, then slowly pitched over, tumbling gracelessly down into the darkness.

Torrin backed away from the edge dragging the Fire warrior with her. "I'd say they are right here." She said calmly, "How about we send them some oil and fire?"

The shocked warrior, to her credit, quickly understood what was going on. Snatching at her belt, the older woman raised a horn to her lips and blew a single piercing note into the night. Other horns took up the call around the Abbey and everything was suddenly alive with people.

"To the walls!" was the shout, and large pots of slow boiling oil that had been kept ready at the fires were brought forward.

Torrin could hear the click of the climbing claws on the stone. She drifted away inside herself. She would be attacking and killing women she had once fought side by side with. She shouted for the oil. "A little quicker, please!"

As the first woman's head came up over the wall she stopped in surprise to see Torrin. Then her face became a cold mask and she lashed out with the sharp metal claws attached to her left hand. Torrin avoided the slash and kicked out sending the woman's head snapping back, and then with another kick the woman was gone.

Grunting and cursing warriors carried the heavy pots closer, and then dumped the boiling contents over the side of the wall. All along the wall, oil was tossed downward.

Torrin stared down the wall into the night and listened to the screams of pain, but something wasn't quite right. The Hawks were the best and that had been too easy. As she heard more yells and fighting on her right she realized why - it had been a diversion.

Torrin cursed herself for falling for it. By the Goddess, she should know better.

"Leave the oil, too late for that. To arms!" she shouted as she unsheathed her sword and ran to meet the enemy climbing over the walls.

Torrin ducked and slashed, parried and twisted in a deadly dance of steel. If any of the foes remembered her, they said nothing, just intent on spilling her blood. Spinning away from a

desperate slash to her stomach she turned to raising her sword to meet an attack at her back. She winced as metal met metal the blow vibrating along her arm. Her gray eyes met hard brown ones.

"How dare you." Rya spat out. "Tell me are you at least getting a good payment out of this?"

Torrin's eyes slid away from Rya's and she pushed the heavier woman away.

Rya's face turned dark in anger. "How dare you turn your back on us? I raised you, nurtured you in our art, and this is how you repay me?" She slashed out again and again putting Torrin on her guard.

Torrin backed up blocking blows and gave a cold laugh. "Nurtured? You *bought* me from the Mistress of Shadow's temple. I was an indentured slave for two years with you. I had no choice but to be a Mercenary. Now for the first time, I have a choice to be who I want to be and you want to take that away from me."

With a scream of rage both women fell at each other their blows coming hard and fast.

Torrin was quicker in getting in kicks and cuts on Rya's muscled arms and legs but nothing life threatening. Rya's blows were heavy, making Torrin's shoulders ache at each block. Around them women on both sides got out of their way not willing to intrude on their deadly dance.

Torrin jumped over a slice to her legs and tsk'd. "That's weak, Rya," she taunted and before the woman could get her sword back into position, Torrin slammed her blade down and pinned her arm to the stone.

Rya cried out in surprise and pain, her sword dropping from unfeeling fingers.

Torrin sneered darkly and kicked the sword away before pulling her own out. "How would you like to have a choice, Rya? Life with you wasn't all bad. You were honorable for the most part, gave me a small taste of what being apart of a family could be like. Treated me well. I think perhaps I could give you a choice." She whipped her blade over to the thick neck stopping it only just before it would have sliced the skin. "Death or chains?" Torrin asked quietly.

Rya laughed. "It's not over yet, Baby Bird." She looked up unafraid into the gray eyes above her, and then shouted "Ferratilis!"

Torrin's eyes went wide in fear as the word of power washed over her. She had not heard that word since the Temple. Muscles bulged as she tried to resist its demands, part of it was training but the other part was the Magic in the word. Before she realized it, she had dropped her sword, fallen to her knees, bowed her head, and clasped her hands behind her back.

A perfect picture of submission.

Luna emerged into chaos, her sword clearing the sheath at her side without conscious thought. "Can't even have one quiet night," she muttered, sprinting with a group of warriors toward the Abbey walls. She ducked a vicious swipe, stabbing her sword up into the gut of the mercenary in front of her. Shoving the dying woman off her blade, she looked around. The fighting around her was dying off as more northern warriors flooded onto the walls. Blue eyes scanning for any sign of Torrin.

Luna squinted against the glow of her sword, blinking as she spotted Torrin further down the wall. "Torrin!" What in the name of the Goddess was she doing?

Rya laughed, stood up and picked up Torrin's sword with her undamaged hand.

"Surprised, Torrin? Do you really think the Priestess would sell me a highly trained killing machine and not sell me the control word to keep such a slave under my command?" She laughed again and drew the sword blade along Torrin's neck making a shallow cut.

"You may have paid off your purchase price to me, but I still own you. I will always own you." The Mercenary rested the sword under Torrin's chin forcing Torrin's head up. "So how about I give you a choice? Death or you return with me?"

Torrin's mind whirled as she tried to get her muscles to move. Slowly her pinky on her right hand became unfrozen, but at this rate it would take forever for the rest of her.

Rya smiled. "Oh, I give you permission to speak."

Torrin opened her mouth slowly as the feeling returned there. She rasped, "Death. I won't betray Luna or any of the women here."

Rya nodded, "Very well." She drew the sword back. "Lucky for you, you keep your sword sharp. I should be able to do it in one quick cut."

Torrin closed her eyes, holding a picture of Luna in her mind to be the last thing that she saw.

Luna watched in horror as she saw the mercenary's sword arch back. They were at least fifty feet away from her. There was no way she would reach them in time. She slid her long, glowing sword into the sheath at her side, ripped the bow out of the hands of the woman next to her, and yanked an arrow from the woman's quiver. In one smooth motion, Luna knocked the arrow, drew it back, and let fly.

The arrow streaked through the air in the blink of an eye. The steel arrowhead, designed to pierce heavy southern armor, hit the mercenary leader in the left eye. It flung her backward, her body sliding to a stop against the edge of the wall. A crimson pool slowly formed around it, dark in the moonlight. As if her death had been a signal, the last of the fighting on the walls ceased. Only a

few mercenaries were left to flee back down to the valley below.

Torrin opened her eyes at the noise and stared across to Rya's lifeless body.

Slowly her muscles began to unlock and she felt tears come to her eyes. Her hands unclasped and fell to her sides. Despite her harsh words earlier, she had no bad will toward Rya. War was violent and messy, and that was the kind of world Rya had existed in. And despite the end, there had been times that had been very good between them.

Luna ignored the startled woman next to her, her heart in her throat as she took off at a run toward where Torrin remained kneeling..

"Torrin?" She called out, almost falling off the wall as she stumbled to a stop next to the kneeling woman. "Torrin?"

Torrin slowly moved her head feeling the muscles gradually release. "I'm okay." Torrin found herself yanked upward into a fierce hug.

"What in the name of the Goddess were you doing?" Luna yelled, but the dark-haired head she was kissing muffled her voice.

Torrin groaned as some of her muscles hadn't relaxed yet. " Sorry to scare you. I didn't have much of a choice," she said into the fabric of Luna's shirt. She looked up and gave a relieved grin, "Thank you for saving me ... again."

"Almost puts us even," Luna replied and grinned despite the organized chaos around them. She glanced down at the bow still clutched in her right hand. "I think I stole someone's bow. A Ranger is never supposed to give up her bow."

Torrin smiled, "Do you hear me complaining?"

Luna hugged her again. "Let's go see how we fared."

No one slept for the rest of the night as the wounded were tended to, and the battlements cleared of the dead.

#####

The beginning of the dawn found the two of them preparing for the day to come. There would be a battle this day. Luna was sure of that. She thoroughly wiped and polished the sword she had been entrusted with then moved on to the chain mail armor she would be wearing. Every few seconds, she glanced across the room to her silent companion. Again trying to come up with the words to ask what had happened earlier.

Torrin could feel Luna's eyes on her, questioning, wanting answers to questions she didn't want

to answer...before now.

Before this strange, never imagined Northern path she was on, she had little thought about the life she led in the South. She just let it be what went before... the temple, her training with the priestess.

Now, in a short time, so much had changed inside her. Anger didn't rule her so much and she was finding she was a little sad and somewhat ashamed of her past. Rya was a big part of who she had been. The woman had been a good owner, all things considered, but now that she had grown up, she was finding she had a different perspective of that time.

But still, now in this room with Luna, she wasn't sure if she could give voice to her earlier life.

"That was an... ummmm... interesting tactic you used on the wall," Luna finally ventured, wincing at how inane it sounded.

Torrin's mouth went dry. "Um...you know me, full of surprises." She shrugged and picked up her soft undershirt and slowly slid it over her head. She felt the pull of the muscles in her chest but it was not serious, just a twinge to remind her that she had been wounded not that long ago.

"Warn me next time, I don't think I could survive anymore of your surprises," Luna said quietly, setting the polished sword aside. "Want to tell me what happened?" she asked cautiously.

Torrin sighed and sat back on the bed. She looked up at Luna, her gray eyes getting lost in Luna's blue ones. Her eyes dropped down to the messy sheets on the bed. "If you had a vicious guard dog, wouldn't you train it so it wouldn't turn on you?"

Luna's fingers found Torrin's, gently squeezing them in support. She knew she wasn't going to like whatever Torrin was going to tell her, but she had to hear it. "I suppose."

Torrin squeezed Luna's fingers back but didn't look up.

"At the Temple, we are all trained to be efficient fighters, assassins, mercenaries, or whatever word you want to use. We're highly skilled killing machines. Each of us had our own Priestess as a trainer. And in order to assure our compliance or at the very least, if we tried to turn on our trainer, we were given a control word. It's... a..." She trailed off trying to find the right words to describe it. "Um... each word is different for each trainee. It's a word tied to our very essence. It's magical and binds us to submission at its very utterance. When Rya bought me, my trainer at the Temple must have sold her the word as well. So last night, when I had the upper hand, she used it on me, reminding me that I was nothing but a slave that she owned."

"We've both been branded by the South, each in our own way it seems," Luna thought. She ducked her head down until she could see Torrin's troubled gray eyes. "You know you're more than that to me, right? More than an ex-mercenary or assassin?"

Torrin gave a weak smile. "I try, but... but sometimes the past seems like it's so heavy. I did some awful things without nary a thought to right or wrong."

"You think about it now, though." Luna said, cupping Torrin's cheek. "Whatever happens today, I'm happy I got to know you, Torrin, Daughter of Tyra."

Torrin soaked up the warmth of Luna's hand on her cheek. "Yes, I think about my past a lot now. I feel like I have new eyes sometimes." She turned her head in Luna's palm and kissed the flesh now under her lips. "I'm happy that I got a chance to know you as well. Even on a day that dawns with the possibility of carnage and horror, there's no place I'd rather be."

#####

Khelin's warriors began the push up the Ellris Pass before sunrise. The slaves went first, exposing the traps set by the northern Rangers. Then came the bulk of the army, each flank covered by the cavalry. Finally, inching their way up the steep incline, were her cannons. It would take most of the day to get them within firing range, but when they did... the Southern Queen smiled. When they did, Northern blood would flow. Until then she would engage the Northerners with her slaves and wave after wave of warriors and mercenaries.

That reminded her.

Turning around she stared at one of the surviving Hawk mercenaries, the sun glinting from the woman's immaculately polished armor. "What happened?"

The scarred woman grimaced and shrugged her shoulders. "They were expecting us. Knew our tricks and had boiling oil to send on the pack making a diversion, then when the others made it up the wall, they were waiting for us."

Khelin scowled. That was unfortunate. She had hoped that the Rya's little pack would have been able to cause a lot of problems. Instead, it seemed they'd managed to do little damage. "Where is Rya?"

"Dead," the mercenary choked out. "One of our own betrayed us. Should have known though, she's part Northerner. She's the one who freed your prisoner at Abnoa. Torrin, she's the Betrayer." The last part was sneered out as a curse.

The Queen stiffened, the color draining from her face. "What?" she demanded. "What did you just say?"

The mercenary looked up at the Southern Queen puzzled. "Torrin, she was one of the Hawks, she has turned into a betrayer."

Khelin paced in a circle, her thoughts whirring. "Impossible," she muttered to herself. "No, it's not possible." Frowning, she whirled on the mercenary. "What else did you see?"

The woman shrugged, "Lots of women with swords wanting to skewer me."

"Useless," Khelin spat, making a motion to the nearby warriors to remove the mercenary. "Take her away."

"Hey!" the woman shouted as she was dragged away.

A wicked little smile crossed her face. "Put her in the front ranks, with the slaves," Khelin called after them. She dismissed the thought of the Betrayer. It was impossible. Besides, it didn't matter now. She was so close to victory.

#####-

As the sun rose and painted the sky a brilliant red, Torrin stood with her head leaning on the cool bark of the oak tree. "Hey. It's me again. I'm off to defeat a much larger Southern army. Um... wish me luck?"

Laughter came from behind her. Torrin whirled around and saw the aggravating dark-haired ghost of her Muanya.

"Daughter, you are the luckiest woman I know."

Torrin glared at her.

Jinete laughed harder. "Who else could defeat the Mistress's Chosen not once but multiple times? Although," she reflected, "if it wasn't for Luna's prowess with the bow, you'd be fish food now. So, all in all, I'd say you're very lucky."

Torrin scowled harder. "I don't care what Mother says, I don't see how I possibly take after you in anyway."

Jinete smiled at her daughter, "It's a certain cocky arrogance." She stared intently at Torrin and her smile fell. "I can not see the future or its outcome, but heed me well, the sword is not enough. Don't forget your music when things are at their darkest. Don't allow your heart to shut out the thing that means the most to you when all you feel is pain. And in the end, the sword will not be enough. Trust your blood and its heritage." With those words, the ghost of Jinete vanished.

Torrin's mouth fell open. "What... I... you..." She growled in frustration and kicked a rock. "I'm having a Priestess banish all ghosts away from me!" she shouted.

"Torrin?" Luna peeked around the corner into the garden, her blue eyes dark with worry. "It's time. If you're done yelling at trees, that is," she added with a smile.

Torrin looked over to her and rolled her eyes. "Okay and yes, I'm done."

#####

Luna had never seen so many fighters in all her life.

They were a sea filling up the Ellris Pass. First came the slaves, many weaponless, some still shackled. Behind them came mercenaries and fighters, while behind them, in a third wave, she could just see the bright armor of Khelin's own warriors.

The northern forces were in a precarious position. The majority of the warriors were standing on the rough earth wall that stretched across the top of the Ellris Pass. That line was anchored on one side by the old Abbey walls, and on the other, the sheer cliff face of the mountain. Behind the northern lines were the mounted Alcen riders, forming the core of the small northern reserve. They had been charged with containing any possible breakthrough.

All was quiet on the line.

No one spoke. The flags above them flapped loudly in the wind. Luna glanced sideways towards Fyre and Tasha. Tasha had refused to stay away and carried a shield in her uninjured hand. Beside her stood Valarie.

"You okay?" Luna whispered to the smaller woman at her own side, blue eyes never leaving the row upon row of advancing enemy warriors.

Torrin nodded feeling her heartbeat pickup at the sight before her. The Southern army was enormous, bigger now than when she had been a part of it.

Luna licked lips that had gone dry, and watched as the front rows of slaves came to a stop just outside of bow range. They waited there as the other ranks closed up behind them. Knowing it was only a matter of moments, Luna drew her sword, raising it into the air. Up and down the line rangers drew their bows, knocking arrows and aiming skywards. The moment of hesitation, the breath before the storm, seemed to stretch on for an eternity.

Torrin looked out over the slaves searching. No cannons yet but they were coming, Torrin was sure of it. Her eyes paused on the mounted soldiers. "We need to hold back our warriors with the long spears until the cavalry comes into play," she muttered low into Luna's ear.

"As long as we survive the first waves," Luna muttered in return, blue eyes spotting the cavalry behind the rows of slaves and mercenaries. The deep ditch that had been dug in front of the earth wall would help stop them, she hoped.

Torrin nodded and went back to waiting. She wasn't worried about the slaves. They were fodder; not trained in war. The most damage they could do was their dying, as their corpses became breeding grounds for disease.

A single horn, further down the valley, blew a long high piercing note. Like dogs straining at their leash, the first rows of the enemy formation broke into a sprint, screaming as they flowed as a human sea toward the northern lines.

Luna's sword swept down the moment the first of them crossed an invisible point. In response, arrows launched into the sky, arcing up and then down to rain into the unarmored slaves and only slightly more armored mercenaries. There were screams of pain and bodies littered the muddy ground, but the wave kept coming.

More and more arrows rained down in flight after flight as the rangers fired as fast as they could. The air seemed dark with them, but the human wall of slaves continued up the hill.

Further down the Northern line, Luna heard Allysandra yell as she signaled her troops. The Wave Dancers let loose with their crossbows as the enemy swarmed closer, adding to the death and mayhem. As they charged the hill, Luna couldn't help but feel sorry for the slaves.

Grimly she set herself for the coming torrent, spreading her feet and raising her sword. The top of the earth wall was muddy and she hoped she wouldn't slip. To her right, she was reassured by the sight of the archers stationed on top of the Abbey's stone walls.

Then there was no time for conscious thought as the first disorganized ranks broke upon the northern line. Some fell into the ditch, trampled to death by the ones behind them. Those who reached the top of the earthen bank were met with steel blades, and the ground began to run red with blood. The bodies of slaves covered the ground. Behind them came the grim faced mercenaries, a more serious threat with their armor and training.

The sword Luna held glowed faintly in the morning sun as she twirled it, slashing and thrusting. Those who came too close to her lost limbs and lives. Yet again, she felt pity for the slaves. They had no training and no chance. Wiping at her brow Luna glanced upwards. It felt like hours had passed; yet the sun had barely moved across the sky. It was going to be a long, long day.

Torrin gripped her sword so tightly her knuckles turned white. She wished the slaves would break ranks and retreat, or at least flee from their Southern masters instead of this mindless race towards death. There had to be overseers down there, driving the slaves forward. Torrin's eyes scanned the masses looking for a Pitt Master. If they could be taken out, the slaves might break and flee.

There. Torrin's grey eyes caught a flash of a whip wielded by a stocky woman dressed in the South's colors. "There!" Torrin shouted and pointed. "Take down the woman in the blue and silver with the whip!"

The nearest Ranger grunted, drew another arrow from her rapidly emptying quiver and let loose. The Pitt Master went down thrashing, swallowed up in the mass of humanity.

Grey eyes frantically searched the mass of slaves. With that many bodies, there had to be more

than the one overseer. "There!" she shouted again pointing out her target. "Find those women among the slaves and kill them. If we are lucky the slaves will break and flee."

Torrin drew her sword to protect the archer as she took out the Pitt Masters.

Up and down the line the order was passed and the Rangers began to hunt their targets. Anyone who bore a whip and the colors of the South became marked. With swiftness shocking for any not familiar with the Northerner's prowess with a bow, the Pitt Masters were culled.

The reaction by the slaves was abrupt as slaves either threw themselves down on the ground pleading for mercy, or fled. The pressure on the northern lines slacked and then died. Luna spared Torrin a pleased grin before the next line of mercenaries arrived.

Torrin winked back at Luna as she brought her sword back up to block a blow.

There were fewer mercenaries than slaves, but these women had actually been trained for battle. The raining arrows and flashing swords cut many of them down, but they did not die alone. All along the line, northern warriors began to fall. The lucky ones merely injured were dragged away to the healers in the Abbey. With every one that fell, the northern line weakened. Twice the mercenaries came at the Northerners, and twice the Northerners flung them back. The ground leading up to the Abbey was covered with the dead and had taken on the smell of death that every battlefield seemed to take on.

Torrin kicked a woman back and then lashed out cutting her cleanly across her neck. As she dropped, another woman took her place, her face dark with anger and rage. "Betrayer!" she shouted as she slashed out with her sword.

Torrin blocked the clumsy blow and shrugged. "I get called that a lot lately." She knew the woman and had served with her under Rya.

"Rya's death is on your hands. May all your oaths rot in your mouth," the woman rambled, her blade trying to get through Torrin's defenses.

"Goyia. I'm not the one who threw you in chains to fight with the slaves. You know the chances you take as a Mercenary. Don't make Rya's death more than it was. Don't sully her memory like this."

They fought back and forth each one seeking an opening.

The woman howled and charged. Torrin spun to avoid the charge and tripped the woman to send her tumbling in the mud. Quickly Torrin stripped the fallen woman of her sword. "Goyia, surrender. Please?"

The woman turned back over, a knife in her hand flashed in the midday sun. The woman was a predictable fighter and Torrin easily avoided her knife. Their eyes met and Torrin nodded sadly

as she blocked another blow and then her sword was sprouting out of Goyia's chest. As she pulled the sword out, Goyia whispered one more time "Betrayer."

Despite wanting to help Torrin out, Luna had her own problems. She grunted as she was kicked in the stomach but managed to side step a thrust that would have impaled her. The Ranger had to trust Torrin could take care of herself and as she continued to deflect blows.

Shoving the last of the mercenaries off her own blade, Luna let out a relieved breath as she saw Torrin still standing. She was terrified that another woman would know Torrin's command word. A quick glance down the wall assured her that the northern line held during the last assault, although the Fire Warriors were stretched thinner now.

"Torrin." Luna called out, stepping over two bodies to get to her as the mercenaries regrouped for a third attack.

Torrin smiled tiredly at Luna. "How goes things?"

Luna let out a snort, wiping a hand across her face to clear away the sweat. "We're still here, so pretty good." She kept an eye on the other mercenaries, watching Khelin's troops behind them getting organized.

Torrin looked down at the army. "Eww, she hired Addison's mercs. She's nasty, heard a rumor they're into cannibalism."

The blonde nodded wearily. Nothing would have surprised her when it came to Khelin.

"How sad, there are only a few Hawk's left down there. I thought they would flee with Rya dead." She gave a shrill whistle and seven heads popped up glaring at her.

Torrin gave another one, this one followed by two shorter whistles. She looked at Luna. "We got any money in the treasury?"

Young girls, too small to fight, came up to the warriors on the lines carrying wooden buckets filled with water from the Abbey well and rough bread for the fighters.

"Treasury?" Luna asked with a raised eyebrow, taking the bucket of water from a young girl and offering Torrin first drink. "Some, I guess."

Torrin sipped the water. "Well, with freedom and a few coins and we might get seven new fighters." She blinked. "Um, if you're okay with them switching sides."

"You think we can trust them?" Luna asked, taking back the bucket and drinking deeply from it.

Torrin shrugged, "Yeah. With Rya dead they don't have a contract and I'm fairly certain Khelin is

forcing them to fight. They aren't getting paid so they have no loyalty. You probably wouldn't want them wandering around unescorted, they're not fond of me right now, but give them to a few of the Fire Warriors..."

"Very well." Luna handed the half full bucket to the next warrior. "First one that calls you a Betrayer, though, gets killed"

Torrin nodded, then gave a low whistle that sounded like the cry of a hawk.

A couple of the mercs looked nervously up at Torrin.

Torrin scowled and whistled again. "Cover them with some arrows. I don't think Addison will like them coming up here."

Luna nodded. Leaning down she spoke quickly to one of the girls. With a motion she sent her running back to the Abbey and to the archers on the stone walls. "Fyre!" She called, raising a hand to get the attention of the head of the Fire Clan.

Fyre grunted and got up from where she was checking on one of her warriors. "What?"

"Torrin's going to recruit some warriors for you," Luna answered.

Fyre nodded. "Okay, but I don't want any little girls." She went back to checking her warriors.

Luna just shook her head and shrugged. "I guess that is a yes. Just tell me when you need the distraction, Torrin."

"If the other mercs make an aggressive move toward those seven, we'll need an arrow storm," Torrin replied.

It was going to be difficult, Luna thought, since the mercenaries were almost out of bow range.

Finally, the remaining seven Hawks began to edge up toward Torrin.

Torrin frowned as a tall dark-haired Mercenary shouted something at the Hawks. "I'm thinking that's Addison and I'm guessing I'm not the only bastard from a Northern- Southern meeting. Why couldn't I get the height?"

Luna looked down at her friend with a fond smile. "Is this a bad time to tell you I like how short you are?"

Torrin grinned back wickedly. "I'm not complaining, really. At this height I have easier access to your breasts." She wiggled her eyebrows.

Luna's laugh caused more than a few nearby heads to turn toward them curiously. "Hold that

thought," she said.

"Don't worry, it's all I think about. That thought isn't going anywhere." Torrin turned her attention back to the mercenaries.

The Hawks came up the hill holding their muddy, dirty hands up to show they were not armed although Torrin knew that could change in a heartbeat.

The nearby Northerners watched them warily and more than a few arrows were aimed in their direction.

"Hey you louts, move faster! Addison is looking like she's going to blow," she shouted to the Hawks.

Addison, just now realizing that she was losing some of her human shielding for her own mercs, reached for her sword. "Hey! Get back here!" she shouted.

"Here we go," Luna muttered as a group of mercenaries separated from the rest of the pack and set out at a run toward their defecting comrades. Raising her hand, she waved to the rangers on the wall of the Abbey.

Torrin grunted. "Hold on that. Addison was too slow on the uptake. Don't waste any arrows. She can't get to them in time now."

The pack that had set out at a run seemed to realize it at the same moment and slowed to a walk, turned around and then heading back to their line. Slowly Luna let her hand drop.

Addison was just about to wave more of her women forward when she realized it wasn't worth the effort. She snorted, she'd just be sure to snack on them when they were still alive.

Luna squinted against the glare of the sun, taking in the unusual sight of the next wave of mercenaries. It took her a moment to realize the bones hanging from many of them looked human. "Cannibals, you said?" Luna asked grimly, drawing her sword as the mercenary line finished organizing itself.

Torrin nodded. "That's the rumor. I told you I was very thankful Rya bought me from the Temple and not some other band of mercs."

The blonde sighed. She didn't want a reason to be thankful to the dead mercenary leader. Further down the Pass was a sight that made her blood run cold. She could just make out the forms of Khelin's cannons as they slowly moved up the sharp incline. "There they are," she muttered, returning her attention to the arriving mercenaries.

Torrin glanced down the road and then leaned over lightly kissing Luna's cheek. But to someone watching, it could have been a secret conversation being whispered. Torrin straightened and

turned to her one-time comrades-in-arms. They glared at Torrinn.

The Ranger couldn't help but smile at the kiss, and she didn't bother wiping that smile from her face as she stood at Torrinn's back, hand on her sword hilt.

Torrinn nodded her head in understanding at the glaring women. "I offer no apologies for the other night. As a former mercenary, I know you all know the risks of what you do. That you run the risk of dying." She was encouraged that they remained standing there, listening to her. "I'm offering you a contract. I know with Rya dead, her contract and thereby, your contract, with Khelin is no more. I know Addison is down there ordering you around and that you are now little better than slaves. I'm making you each, individually an offer. Each of you can take it or go back down there to die."

The ex-Hawks grumbled a bit but still listened.

"With Luna's consent, I can offer you freedom and coin if you join with us and help us fight the Southern invaders."

"Right, Torrinn." A woman sneered. "Now, as well as being a Betrayer, you're insane. Have you seen Khelin's army? She's going to make you a bloodstain."

Luna caught Fyre's eye and nodded toward the standing mercenaries.

Fyre rolled her eyes but came up behind the woman and picked her up easily.

Torrinn sighed. "Put her down, Fyre."

Fyre grumbled and put the mouthy woman down then gave her a quick parting punch to the kidneys.

The woman staggered, grimacing in pain.

"Next one who calls Torrinn the Betrayer gets an arrow in the throat for her trouble," Luna said quietly, meeting the eyes of each of the mercenaries to make sure they understood.

"No, it's okay. I am the Betrayer and that's a good thing," Torrinn said, a plan forming in her head.

"What?" Luna exclaimed.

"I was destined to be the Betrayer, and from me 'would Queen's be made or destroyed'. Are any of you aware of that prophecy?"

Most shook their head, but two nodded, their eyes going wide.

"Torrinn..." Luna started, shifting a bit uneasily at where this was going.

"And, because I'm the Betrayer, I can promise you that I'm going to destroy the Southern Queen. That's why I'm not worried about Khelin and her army. So what is your answer?" she asked looking each woman in the eye.

Luna sighed. There went any chance of stopping people from calling Torrin, The Betrayer. "Decide quickly," she said instead, with a glance toward Addison's mercenaries who were starting to move toward the northern defenders.

A thick woman with a broken nose shrugged. "Food's got to be better than the scraps Addison was giving us."

The rest followed after that.

Torrin grinned but knew better than to clap any of them on the shoulder or back. She was no longer one of them. She had made her decision and had no regrets.

"Very good. Fyre will take care of you. Follow her."

"From me, Queens will be made or destroyed, huh?" Luna whispered as the last of the mercenaries were led away to strengthen other parts of the line.

"Well, that's what the priestess said. Might as well make use of some creepy negative prophecy and turn it into a positive. And who knows? I might actually somehow destroy Khelin." Torrin gave a sheepish grin. "Can't think of anyway right now, but it is possible."

Luna smiled at the shorter woman, her blue eyes lightening for a moment. "You are one of a kind, you know that?" A yell from the mercenaries pulled the Ranger's attention away and she sighed as the massed group of women began to charge toward them.

"Here we go again."

Torrin grinned. "I know and be thankful there aren't more like me out there."

She gripped her sword and turned to face Addison's hordes.

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Torrin wiped the sweat off of her face not noticing the smear of red that she streaked on her skin. She was tired and the muscles in her upper chest hurt where her wound had been. She could see the cannons in the distance. They weighed heavily in her mind knowing that they could be fired at anytime and she wondered why they hadn't.

Luna scowled at a bite mark on her arm. "I can't believe she bit me." The blonde gave the dead

mercenary at her feet a swift kick, sending the body rolling down into the ditch.

Torrin grimaced and looked over at Luna. "Probably should have a healer flush that. Goddess knows what else they put in their mouth. They could be worse than Rock Wolves."

With a snort a tired Luna stood upright, stretching out the kink in her newly healed side. Shielding her eyes against the noontday sun she stared at where the last of the southern cannons had been wheeled forward. "Frak."

Torrin's head whipped up. "Well, Alcen dung. Incoming!" she shouted.

The first shot out of the new weapon was loud and impressive but fell short. The cannonballs fell into the cluster of Southern mercenaries blowing them into small pieces.

Torrin's heart started beating in her chest once more. "Oh, Goddess. I guess two more shots and they'll have their range worked out."

Luna nodded grimly, certain of that very thing. She watched the southern cavalry begin to shift. "They're going to try to hit us with those damn cavalry of theirs too."

Another loud explosion. This time the cannon ball went sailing over the northern lines.

"Goddess, Luna you were right." Fyre whispered, her face pale. She gulped and then laughed. "I'm giving them one more shot and then they'll get us."

Torrin made a face. "Spears. I need women with long spears to unhorse those women on horseback. Once on foot they'll be worthless."

"Take Allysandra's women, they're the only one's we can spare right now." Luna told her, even as the third shot slammed into the northern line down from where they stood.

Bodies and earth exploded upwards, raining back down.

"Hold the line!" Luna shouted, raising her sword as the warriors shifted nervously. This was entirely different than facing an enemy face to face.

Torrin eyed the horses wistfully, remembering the time she had ridden one. "All right. Don't die on me, Luna. I have plans for you."

Luna ducked her head and gave Torrin a swift kiss in promise. "You either."

Torrin blinked and gave a goofy grin for a moment. Then she schooled her features. "Good, as long as we are of the same thought on this."

#####

Torrin stared at Allysandra then back out to the wall of horseflesh coming at them. "Well..." she trailed off, thinking. "Okay, crossbows, spears, and then woman on woman combat. Sound like a plan?"

The Wave Dancers gathered behind the northern line were smaller than the Earth Clan women and more slender than their Fire Warrior sisters. Most still wore the attire they had on board their ships, and quite a few carried no armor at all. However, spears and crossbows they knew how to use.

Allysandra raised the long spear she'd been carrying and grinned. "Aye, that works. Let's go, girls. Time to earn our pay."

"We get paid?" One of them shouted back in jest.

"If we can get the first line on horseback down, it should trip up the ones following behind," Torrin noted.

The earth shuddered beneath them as a cannonball slammed into the front of the earthen mound. Each woman turned to watch a cloud of dust rise near the Abbey. Grimly they turned back to the task at hand. They couldn't do anything about those cannons, but they could about the cavalry.

"Spear carriers with me, crossbows behind, and Alcean riders to the flanks!" Torrin shouted. She'd let the crossbows do the work until the riders got to close then they'd go hand to hand. She forced her worry for Luna out of her mind and tried to focus on the chaos at hand.

It was obvious where the southern cavalry was headed. The cannons had blown apart a two-dozen foot wide stretch of the northern line, and the southerners were streaking towards it. The few northern warriors left standing there looked relieved as Torrin and her reinforcements arrived.

As the riders got closer she could feel the ground shake under their hooves. She gritted her teeth as she waited for them to get into range. As she looked out on the approaching riders she noted they weren't really of the Horse People. Their armor was too heavy and bulky. Torrin knew the Horse Lords favored light armor as well as the spear and bow. These women were armed only with swords.

This might play to their favor.

Just as her teeth began to rattle from the pounding hooves, she looked to Allysandra and then gave the order to fire. "Now!" she shouted.

The front line of Wave Dancers braced themselves as they raised their spears creating a hedge of long spears aimed at the rushing cavalry. The Wave Dancers who were armed with crossbows fired. Although the bolts lacked the range of the northern longbows, they could punch through

armor just as well. The heavy bolts sowed chaos in the charging cavalry, sending horses and riders tumbling.

Then the wave slammed up into the wall of spears and everything became chaotic.

Torrin was happy to see the Alcens' long dual horns being just as deadly as their armed riders. This gave them a slight edge over the horses.

Horses and women screamed and bodies covered the blood-soaked ground. The sheer numbers of the Southern cavalry pressed against the northern line, forcing them back step-by-step. For every southerner that the northerners took down it seemed two more took her place.

Allysandra fought her way to Torrin's side, using her spear to unseat a nearby southerner and fling her to the ground. "They're forcing us back!"

"Yeah, I know." Torrin grunted. She wasn't sure what to do. They were doing all they could.

The horseback warriors, sensing a victory, fought harder. More and more of them crammed into the small hole in the northern line, forcing the Wave Dancers back. They bled the southerners for every foot, but they were still giving up ground to them.

The southern cannons roared again, flinging the explosive cannonballs up the Ellris Pass. Three of the cannonballs slammed into the stonewall of the Abbey, sending stones and warriors flying as a section of the wall collapsed into rubble.

But the fourth, as if guided by the hand of fate, went wild. It tumbled erratically as it exited the cannon, slammed into the hard ground just below the northern line and bounced up into the massed cavalry. If the explosion of one of those cannon balls along the top of the northern lines caused mayhem, its explosion in the center of the densely packed cavalry caused a massacre. What the blast did to the southerners was beyond imagining.

Shrapnel cut down a few Wave Dancers, and a shard of metal nearly took off Allysandra's head.

Pieces of horse and warriors were flung about. Warriors missing arms, legs and in some cases, half their bodies, screamed and moaned. Injured horses flopped about on the ground, while others lay still.

Torrin stared out over the destruction. If she hadn't been so far into her detached mercenary role she might have puked on her boots. Instead she just wiped blood and guts off of her body while making sure none of it was hers. Taking a moment to compose herself she looked over at Allysandra. "You okay?"

Allysandra, her tanned face looking decidedly green, nodded slowly. A small cut she'd taken on her forehead bleeding down her cheek. Nearby, several Wave Dancers did heave the contents of their lunch onto the ground. It took only a small push by the Northerners to send what was left of

the Southern cavalry rushing back toward the southern lines.

"By the Goddess..."

Torrin watched them go. "Yeah, I'm hoping that was a touch of the Goddess there, although she could have avoided cutting it so close to our own lines."

Wind Walkers were already searching the area for the wounded, dragging away those who could be saved to the doubtful safety of the Abbey.

Torrin watched as the battered and blood-soaked riders wheeled around each other. They looked more like a manageable level now. "Crap. Looks like they're regrouping. I guess they're more afraid of Khelin than another stray cannonball."

Even as they watched, the dreaded cannons fired again, puffs of gray-white smoke drifting up from their muzzles as the low thunder rumbled outwards. A second later all four cannonballs slammed into the side of the Abbey's outer wall, once again reducing a section to rubble.

Torrin flinched at the sound and destruction but calmly picked up a spear from a fallen warrior and hefted it into her hand. "Let's take care of these fools and then we can make plans for those cannons. Are you with me?"

The small group of women, Fire Warriors, Earth Rangers, and Wave Dancers, cheered and raised their weapons skyward in answer.

"Luck saved us the first time, but it won't be luck this time. She shouted to the women looking back at her. "This time were going to push them back with our own might and show them why they should fear the Warriors of the North!"

"Go me," Torrin thought tiredly before turning to face the oncoming cavalry that had just finished reforming. Strange...the earth doesn't shake so much this time, and my teeth don't rattle. Instead it was an odd feeling that over took her, the vibration of each hoof on the ground seemed to travel up her legs and straight to her heart. The pounding seemed to grow until she could feel her limbs being infused with strength, shaking off her weariness from the long day of battle. Then she heard the whispering. It made no sense, it was of a language in no human tongue, but it plucked at the edge of her consciousness.

Shaking her head Torrin tried to focus on the battle to come. But it was hard to fight the whispering voice at the edge of her hearing. It was driving her crazy. It would almost make sense to her but at the last minute the meaning would elude her.

Once again the Southern cavalry charged toward the northern lines determined to drive a wedge in them and force the northerners aside. There were fewer women on horseback this time, but they were no less determined. There was no trumpet calls or wild grins on the rider's faces anymore but instead grim expressions well aware of the carnage that awaited them.

Torrin shook her head again and took a deep breath. She gripped the spear tightly in both her hands, set her feet and braced for the onslaught.

Then she heard the laugh.

It was out of place, deep and masculine. Frantically her head whipped to the right and then the left. By the Goddess she was losing it and this certainly wasn't a good time for her nerves to go.

"Oh, stop it. You're not losing it."

Torrin turned to the woman on her left. "What did you say?"

The nearby Wave Dancer looked at Torrin as if she had lost her mind. "Um, I didn't say anything," she replied, edging away as much as she could from the dark-haired woman.

The laugh came again. "The gifts of your blood are awakening. Now that you've made your decision, the gifts of my line are open to you."

Torrin looked around. "What the hell does that mean?" she mumbled as she realized it was probably another ghost giving her confusing advice.

"That means, my little one..."

Torrin blinked as Armando appeared on the field in front of the oncoming cavalry.

"... that you should do something to stop this," he said with a wide grin.

Torrin rolled her eyes. "Like what?"

"Tell them to stop."

"Yeah, right."

"Oh, I should probably tell you that you are the only one who can see and hear me."

Torrin cursed. "Figures."

The women to either side of her, oblivious to her little conversation tensed and raised their spears as the cavalry pounded closer. Crossbows were hurriedly reloaded and aimed.

The whispering got louder to her ears. She fought the urge to cover them from the sound that began to drown out the thunder of the horses galloping towards them. Torrin didn't say anything, determined to ignore the God until the fighting was over. Maybe he'd get run over.

The horse riders raised their voices and screamed a war cry as they swept toward the northern lines. The Fire Warrior near Torrin whispered a prayer to the Moon Goddess.

Finally Torrin couldn't take it any more, she held her head and screamed out, "Stop!" The women on both sides of her glanced at her. Quite certain she had lost her mind. She felt foolish but as the pressure receded in her head she looked around, stunned to see the result of her outburst.

She watched the horses closest to her skid to a stop, sending quite a few riders over their necks to the ground. Others danced away, prancing sideways as their riders tried to urge them forward. Whatever happened hadn't affected the horses behind them but the sudden halt of the first line of cavalry caused the entire Southern formation to dissolve into chaos.

"Nice trick," a warrior to her left said, while one to her right simply stared at the chaos in surprise.

"Um, thanks. It's new," Torrin said after she got her mouth to work again.

Allysandra clapped a hand on Torrin's shoulder, shaking her head. "Whatever you did, keep doing it."

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Facing the continual bombardment of cannonballs was a sort of courage that none of the Northerners had ever had to summon before. Luna was proud of them though; none left their spot in the line. She could tell the moment that Khelin was going to send her cavalry into the fray. The Southern cannons stopped firing at the northern line and started to focus their attention onto the stonewalls of the Abbey.

One the four Southern cannons fired and the cannonball arched up over the Southern army, and then slammed down into the outer Abbey wall. The explosion flung pieces of stone high in the air and before their eyes, a section of the wall collapsed into rubble. Luna was moving before her brain gave her body a conscious order.

There had been women on the top of that wall when it collapsed. With the cannons still firing she was certain the Southern forces would not attack her position, but would concentrate on trying to breach the northern lines where Torrin was.

"Start digging!" Luna shouted, sheathing her sword and beginning to frantically toss stones aside.

A twenty-foot section of the old stonewall had collapsed under the bombardment and reduced to a mound of rubble. Healers and nearby warriors rushed to help her, forming a line to toss aside rocks in an effort to reach any survivors.

Two more hits caused another section of wall to collapse, and a near miss almost killed them all.

Luna was beginning to hate the whistling sound of an incoming cannonball.

"Here's one!" Healers rushed toward the bloody Fire Warrior who was being pulled from the debris. Another was found and tugged free, then a ranger and a stunned young girl who had been bringing water to the warriors.

Her hands bleeding, Luna dug with the others, with every passing moment fearing they would find no more survivors.

Then her fingertips touched something soft. Shoving aside the rock she'd been reaching under, Luna spotted a small piece of fabric. "Here!" Others gathered around, helping her dig faster, as the bombardment around them continued.

Slithering down into the hole they had dug, Luna carefully pulled the warrior free of the rubble. The body was covered in dirt, and a cut bled freely from her shoulder, but the face was unmistakable. "Adrian?" Luna blinked in surprise, staring down at the injured Fire warrior.

Adrian coughed and her eyes fluttered open. "Am I alive?"

"So far," Luna muttered, lifting up the heavier woman, trying to pass her upward to the waiting healers.

Adrian just weakly shook her head in disbelief and limply let herself be hoisted out of the debris.

A quick search of the cavity where Adrian had been found revealed the crushed remains of a warrior far beyond the healer's help. With a bit of scrambling, Luna climbed up out of the hole, ducking as a cannonball screamed overhead, overshooting the Abbey. Two healers worked on Adrian as the others continued to sort through the rubble.

Adrian waved off the two healers, grunting that she would be fine. She was alive. As she had lain under the crushing weight of stone, her life had flashed before her eyes, and sadly she found it had been a miserable one. She watched Luna tiredly brush off the dirt and debris on her shirt. Then with a deep sigh, she called out, "Luna?"

Luna approached cautiously, quite certain she might snap if Adrian started ranting about how she didn't deserve Torrin. "What?" she asked briskly.

Adrian looked away and mumbled, "I'm sorry."

Luna blinked, and then frowned. Just when she had decided the Fire Warrior was beyond wasting time on she does this. "Well, you should be."

"I, um..." Adrian blew out a breath. "I deserved that." She finally looked at Luna. "I know I'll probably be an ass again in the future, but something about knowing I was going to die and feeling all that stone crushing down on me... well, I suddenly realized I had lost the only person

who would miss me if I died, my Muanya. That was a slap to my face knowing the women here, and probably my own sister would celebrate if I had died." She paused, taking a breath.

Luna didn't have time for this. There was a battle going and she'd spent as much time helping search for survivors as she dared. Meeting Adrian's eyes she nodded swiftly. "You need to apologize to Torrin, too," She said as she turned and headed for the front line.

Adrian nodded. "I will. I just hope she'll let me. It's not easy for me to say this, but I hope you two can be happy, and ... um, she was telling the truth. I grabbed her and kissed her the other night." Adrian looked back down and bit her lip. "I feel good and kind of sick to my stomach all at the same time right now. I hope being a better person doesn't feel like this all the time."

Pausing, Luna let out a laugh. "It usually does, but there are benefits." She grudgingly gave the injured woman a smile. She hadn't forgiven Adrian completely, but perhaps the Fire Warrior had indeed turned over a new leaf.

"Get better, Adrian." With that the blonde hurried back to the fighting, anxious to make certain Torrin was alive and safe.

She climbed back up the artificial hill that marked the northern lines, nodding to Fyre as she came up to the top of it. "How are we doing?"

Fyre blinked and then as if in a daze, turned to Luna. "I think we're doing better. Your girlfriend just stopped a line of charging cavalry and the ones behind them ran into the stopped ones. At least I think that's what I saw, I could be having a Karo flashback."

"What?" the blonde asked, even as she studied the scene in front of her. The Southern cavalry had obvious been in disarray as they hit the northern lines. That chaos had only grown once they entered range of northern bows and as she watched now, the whittled down Southern cavalry broke and retreated back to the southern lines.

"How did she stop the first line?" Luna asked, confused.

"Um, she shouted 'Stop!' and the horses stopped. I'm positive the two are related." The muscular warrior shook her head still trying to believe what she saw.

Luna glanced sideways at Fyre, raising an eyebrow. "No more doing Karo while we're here, okay?"

Fyre sighed in relief. "Yeah, that does make more sense doesn't it? I mean nobody can just command a bunch of charging horses to slide to a stop."

"Yeah," Luna whispered, not entirely as certain of that as she would have been before the fall of Abnoa.

There wasn't much daylight left. In a little while it would be nighttime. She studied the southern lines, nodding as she spotted them digging in for the night. The cannons had stopped firing as well, at least for the moment. "Fyre, make certain we have a lot of sentries out tonight, but rotate them so everyone gets to sleep." She spotted Tasha and Valarie a short distance away, helping with the wounded, and was relieved that both had survived the blood filled day. "I'm going to go see my girlfriend." Luna grinned tiredly.

"The Horse God, Armando, can," Tasha said quietly as she passed by her.

Luna stared at Torrin's elder sister, frowned and shook her head before she started to walk toward the hole where the southern cavalry had attacked.

Tasha looked over at Valarie "I heard Jinete, Torrin's Muanya, once say she was descended from him. I always thought she was spinning a good story but now... you think it might have been true?" She looked at Valarie, her face a little pale.

Valarie tightened the bandage she was putting on the stump of what had been a woman's leg. Stepping aside she let two other Fire Warriors take the moaning woman away before joining Tasha at the edge of what remained of the Abbey's outer wall.

"Maybe. Those Southern Gods and Goddess's seem to interfere more than the Moon Goddess does." She touched Tasha on the shoulder and looked up at the taller Earth warrior.

Tasha leaned into Valarie's touch, getting all the comfort from it that she could. "It's just a little scary to think back on how mean I was to Torrin as a child and well, she can stop a line of running horses with a simple command. Kind of scary to think what she could have done to me as a child."

Valarie said nothing for a moment, simply wrapping an arm around the other woman's waist, her armor clinking as she moved. "I think we can trust in Luna to keep her in check," the Fire Warrior finally said with a wry smile.

"Yeah. " Tasha smiled and patted Valarie's arm. "Guess I'm being silly. Obviously, I survived childhood just fine."

Since she was certain there was much of her childhood that Tasha had avoided talking about so far, Valarie simply gave the taller woman a squeeze. "Come on, let's see what else we can do to help."

Tasha nodded but didn't move. She just held Valarie's arm. She was enjoying the silence and the falling night sky as it covered over a day of vast horrors and appreciated the comforting solidness of Valarie's presence behind her.

Then after a moment, she let go of Valeria's arm, "Okay, let's go help."

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Rhain grumbled to herself as she cleaned another pot. She was a warrior, a fighter trained by the best there ever was, her Muanya. But since Luna had cut her braids off no one would let her fight with them.

They laughed at her and told her to come back when she was old enough. She had thought about going to Tasha but then changed her mind. Tasha had chosen Torrin's lies over her.

She still had some pride so she helped out where she could but the only place they would let her help was in the kitchen scrubbing pots.

This was all Torrin's fault.

She was almost to the point where it mattered very little if Torrin was the Betrayer. Regardless, Torrin had made her life like this. She should be a leader but instead she was scrubbing food off pots! Now she wanted revenge for the sake of revenge. And then she would take her place at the head of the Earth Clan.

"You really think you can fill my boots as Head of the Clan?"

Rhain winced at her Muanya's voice. It grated at her nerves, no longer a welcomed voice. She looked around and then set the pot down and walked over to alcove.

"No, Muanya, no. Nobody could take your place."

"Especially you." Quinn sneered. "Look at you, cleaning dishes! While that traitor fights on the front lines swaying over even more of our people." Quinn's ghost sniffed in disdain. "You are a failure. No wonder I had Tasha in mind to take over when I died."

Rhain's vision tunneled and turned red. "I have done nothing but try and please you!" she shrieked. "I have done nothing but try to convince my Northern sisters of Torrin's duplicity. I have done nothing but follow your wishes!"

A few passing warriors glanced toward the alcove, then at each other, shook their head sadly and kept going. It was sad to see the daughter of Quinn losing her mind and screaming at walls.

"And yet you fail," the ghost sneered. After a moment Quinn's features softened. "But I do concede that Torrin's power over your sister is seemingly hard to overcome. You must watch and strike on your own it seems."

"What?" Rhain asked, blinking as she tried to decipher her Muanya's words.

"Keep an eye on your dear half-sister and when the time comes - kill her," Quinn spoke slowly.

"What? Murder her?"

Quinn glared. "More like becoming a hero and cleansing the North of scum. What? It was easier to swallow when you had others to do your dirty work but now you don't have the stomach to do it yourself?"

"No, I will do what needs to be done for my people," Rhain said with a sigh. Her head hurt and everything seemed to be spinning out of control.

"Good. Time is growing short, before too much longer, things will be too far along to be fixed."

Rhain looked up to ask what that meant but her Muanya was gone.

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"Idiots! Morons! Cowards!" the Southern Queen raged, flinging a dozen rolled up maps at the nearest unfortunate officer.

The assembled officers and aides of the Queen stood in silence inside her tent. Two bodies already lay on the floor, rapidly cooling, their blood splatter against the canvas of the tent as testimony to the Queen's rage.

"How!? How have they managed to hold out against us?" she demanded of the first person she came across.

Nobody dared say a word for fear their blood would be next to be splattered on the ground.

The young woman she grabbed choked as her body was shaken to help her come up with the answers more quickly. "Th-th-they have a g-g-good luck charm?"

With a snarl of disgust Khelin tossed the young woman aside. "Fools!" She cursed them all, kicking the fallen women before crossing to the throne that had been transported with her tent. "Well?" she demanded of her generals. "What plans do you have for tomorrow?"

The new current advisor cleared her throat. "We plan to hold the troops back and let the cannons decimate the structure. They got here too late to be fully effective today and since the cannonballs are a hard to replace we don't want to risk wasting them by firing at night. But tomorrow will be different."

Khelin studied the advisor, her fingers caressing the hilt of the dark sword. Slowly she nodded, the murderous mood of moments before suddenly disappearing as she smiled. "Yes. Perfect. We will crush them with the cannons and then we will simply march over any who survive." She smiled at the uneasy generals and advisors.

The advisor nearly wept in relief but held together. To show weakness now would mean death.

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Darkness fell upon the Ellris Pass, bringing the fighting of the daylight hours to an end. The Southern cannons, the bane of the Northern defense, remained silent thus giving the Northern clans a chance to regroup, count their losses, and do what they could to prepare for tomorrow. Healers did what they could for the injured, and everyone got bowls of hot stew prepared by Eve's people. Those most seriously hurt were taken down the northern side of the Pass to the base camp that had been established near the banks of the Winderling. Supplies, especially the seemingly endless number of arrows that was needed, were brought up to the Abbey on the return trip.

Luna, once again, found herself on the battlements. The outer walls of the Abbey had taken a beating. Nearly all of them had been reduced to rubble. Another day of such onslaught would destroy the northern lines. The cannons, she thought grimly, were worse than she'd expected. Gazing up at the full moon, she prayed once again for a miracle. The mood at the war council meeting had been grim and the news not much better. More than a hundred warriors had died, three times that number was seriously injured.

Below her laid the battered defensive wall. It had been chewed up, a part of it blown apart, and repeatedly assaulted. Somehow though, they had held that line, denying the Southerners passage. Whatever else happened, Luna was proud of these women, all who had bled and died to keep Khelin from entering the North. Even in the face of the new horrible weapons, they had held.

She had already vowed that she would not live through another victory by Khelin. Luna intended to either succeed in stopping the Southern army or die trying. She would not, could not, allow herself to relive what had happened after Abnoa had fallen.

Torrin came up to the wall silently. She stopped for a moment and just watched Luna. She felt her heart lurch in her chest as she gazed on Luna, softly bathed in the full moon light. The Ranger was so beautiful but Torrin suspected Luna didn't see it. The Ranger's past with Khelin had somehow blinded her to her own inner strengths and the brand blinded her to her own beauty.

Feeling eyes upon her, Luna glanced behind her, smiling softly as she spotted Torrin. "Hey."

Torrin smiled back and then continued her way over to Luna. "How are you?"

"Tired," the blonde said, admiring the way the silvery moonlight illuminated Torrin's features. "You?"

"Oddly, I find myself full of energy." Unable to resist, she leaned over and kissed Luna's cheek.

Luna chuckled, allowing herself to be distracted from the worries that had plagued her and slid her arms around Torrin. Drawing the smaller woman's body tightly against her own, she turned

her head and met Torrin's lips.

When she pulled back, Luna brushed aside a few short locks of dark hair, studying Torrin's face intently. "Tasha thinks you told the southern horses to stop charging today."

"Um..." Torrin looked away nervously.

Her calloused fingertips gently urged Torrin to meet her eyes. "Tell me what happened?"

Torrin's grey eyes darted around over Luna's face and finally she leaned her head down to rest against Luna's breastbone. The soothing sound of Luna's heartbeat relaxed her. "It was a noise at first, a whispering of voices in a different language. One I didn't know, but it was familiar."

Wordlessly Luna wrapped her arms around the smaller woman again and offered whatever support she could as she listened.

"It just kept building up, distracting me from the charging horses. I thought I was losing it, that my nerves had finally given up the ghost. Then Armando was there, saying things..." She looked up, "he was being annoying and cryptic and he was saying things about heritage, and having chosen the right path and the gifts of the blood."

She made a face. "I'm beginning to really hate that godly interference."

Luna brushed a thumb across Torrin's cheek, slowly grinning. "When you came up here, I was praying for some interference by the Moon Goddess."

Torrin turned her head just enough and snagged the thumb with her teeth and gently sucked it into her mouth and then teased it with her tongue for a second before releasing it. "Well, I guess it's okay then."

The taller woman gasped at the unexpected move, blue eyes darkening with desire. "You guess?" she whispered, closing the space between them until her lips brushed against Torrin's, their breaths shared. The fatigue she'd felt earlier fled as her heart sped up, her skin suddenly hyperaware of every place they touched.

Torrin grinned and then asked innocently, "Do you want to hear the rest of my story or do you want to go make out somewhere private?"

Luna didn't deign to answer. Instead, she released Torrin from her arms, snagged the dark-haired woman's hand and tugged her toward one of few Abbey buildings to have survived the day's barrage relatively intact.

Torrin giggled until she realized she was giggling and then went quiet and let Luna lead her.

Luna drew Torrin along through the battle-scarred buildings, nodding and calling out to those she knew. The further they got away from the central buildings, the quieter it became until they were nearly alone as they entered the building with their rooms.

With a growing impatience she pulled Torrin faster down the hallway, shoving open the door to their room. Closing the door right after Torrin, Luna pressed the shorter woman against the doorway. Pinning her there with her body, she ducked her head and urgently kissed the other woman, trying to sear the feeling of Torrin's lips into her soul.

Torrin kissed Luna back and felt every horrible moment that had happened on the battlefield being released from her soul in that kiss. It reminded her that she was still alive, that she was still here with Luna.

She let her hands trail up Luna's sides feeling the contrast of cool metal and warmer furs. Then she let her hands slide down Luna's back, over her hips, and then she grabbed Luna's thighs. With a small grunt she picked Luna up and started walking them back to where she vaguely remembered the bed being.

Luna let out a startled yelp, then a laugh. "I keep forgetting you're stronger than you look." She smiled. Taking advantage of the change in position Luna slid her hands down Torrin's chest, tugging aside cloth and armor, she found warm bare skin and traced patterns on it.

It felt strange being carried, but Luna didn't care at the moment, all she cared about was the feel of Torrin pressed close, the feeling of rightness in kissing her. Which is exactly what she did, claiming Torrin's lips and mouth with a fervor that surprised herself.

Torrin sighed into the kiss forgetting about the bed until her shins banged into it and then they both tumbled into the bed with a clank of metal armor.

Torrin began to laugh a loud belly laugh.

Luna landed with a grunt, trying not to slam the full weight of her armor down onto Torrin. With a laugh of her own, she twisted onto her side. "What?"

Torrin rolled over and wiped her eyes. After she got her breath she just grinned. "Nothing. Just thought it was funny. Trying to be all seductive and stuff and I trip over the bed."

With a mischievous smile, Luna sat up, and helped Torrin with the straps of her armor. "Hard to be seductive when you're wearing thirty pounds of metal."

"That too." Torrin leaned back on her hands and let Luna remove her armor. "I should be sweating over a strategy for those cannons but I don't care. All I want to do right now is touch you. I suppose that's bad?"

Blue eyes sparkled with laughter as Luna shook her head, pulling off the armor and letting it fall

to the ground. "No, it's not bad." She wanted to remember this, every moment, every touch, no matter what happened tomorrow.

Torrin let out a breath in relief as her armor was finally removed.

Slapping Luna's hands away she turned her attention to Luna's armor and returned the favor.

Getting rid of the heavy metal armor was nearly a sexual experience in itself. Luna groaned in delight as Torrin removed it, and then pounced on the smaller woman, sending them both tumbling into the bed. "Much better," Luna murmured, investigating Torrin's neck with her lips.

Torrin yelped in surprised. The yelp turned into a moan as she felt Luna's lips on the now sensitive skin on her neck.

Pulling back, the blonde tugged on Torrin's undershirt, pulling it upward. She didn't want to be held back by ghosts of the past anymore. She wasn't certain she was ready for this, but there might not be a tomorrow for them.

Torrin slowly realized what Luna wanted and quickly raised her arms up over her head so her undershirt could be pulled off.

Then, locking gazes with Torrin, Luna tugged off the other woman's pants, tossing them aside to join the growing pile of clothes on the floor. She paused, drinking in the sight in front of her. Her fingers trembled as she slid them along newly bared flesh, tracing the contour of Torrin's body.

Torrin sighed softly in her throat as Luna touched her. She didn't move for fear of scaring Luna off and ruining the moment.

Biting her lip, Luna drew off her own undershirt, and then leaned forward, pressing their bodies together. Groaning at the feel of the other woman's body against hers. "I want..." she didn't have the words for what she wanted.

A hiss of breath came shooting out of Torrin's lungs as Luna pressed their bodies together. She kissed the flesh of Luna's neck and then moving up to her lips. "What do you want?" she breathed.

The answer, when it came to her, caused her to smile, her blue eyes lighting with the simple joy of it. "You," she said.

Torrin blinked back tears, "Really?" There was a certain raw grasping for hope that she couldn't keep out of her voice.

"Really," Luna agreed. Pressing herself against Torrin, she kissed her, slowly and thoroughly. Gone was the hurried frenzy of their earlier meeting. Now it was as if they had all the time in the world.

A band seemed to loosen around Torrin's heart at Luna's response. Somebody wanted her not for the skills she had been taught in the temple but for herself. She and Luna had danced around it, but to have her say it out loud... If she had been standing up, the words probably would have brought her to her knees.

Breaking the kiss off, Torrin hugged Luna fiercely until she could get her emotions back under control.

Luna took her time, luxuriating in Torrin's body and the other woman's response's to her touch. She was still uncertain about being touched, but she decided she loved touching Torrin, stroking her skin, tasting it, and feeling Torrin shudder in response.

The pounding on the door was a sudden and unpleasant call back to reality. "Luna!" an indistinct voice called from the hallway beyond.

Torrin groaned and yelled out. "If you don't want to die a slow painful death, you'll go away!"

"This can't be happening," Luna muttered, burying her face in Torrin's neck.

"Torrin?" Another voice called out, this one belonging to Tasha.

"Well, that's a mood killer," Torrin mumbled out. "The only thing worse would be if my mother was out there as well."

"Go away and don't come back for..." Torrin trailed off. Then after considering she'd been worked up for what felt like almost a year she finished with, "at least 20 minutes."

"Torrin?" The third voice caused Luna to freeze with horror, and then nearly fall out of the bed scrambling for her clothing. "That's your mother!" she hissed, frantically pulling on her shirt. "Your mother is on the other side of that door!" Blue eyes wide, she searched for their clothes.

Torrin threw her hands over her face and groaned in misery.

"I'm naked, give me two minutes!" she snarled out.

There was what could only be described as stunned silence on the other side of the door. Luna groaned, closing her eyes and holding her face in her hands. "By the Goddess, this can't be happening."

Scowling, Torrin sat up looking for her pants and a shirt. Angrily she thrust her feet into her pants and pulled them up. Then finding the undershirt she pulled it up over her head. Looking to make sure Luna was dressed, she put her best 'You are so dead look' on her face and opened the door.

"Yes?"

There was a crowd outside the door. The leaders of each clan were there along with their partners and several priestesses. Tasha stood just outside the arch, and in front of everyone, stood Tyra. The Wind Walker smiled as she saw her daughter, drawing her into a hug. Luna, peering over Torrin's shoulder at the crowd, groaned again.

Torrin huffed unable to keep the look of death on her face as her mother hugged her. "Mom, why are you here?"

As Tyra released her, Torrin got a good look at everybody and frowned, she knew this could only mean an end to her naked time with Luna.

Tyra smacked Torrin on the shoulder. "My daughters are here. So why wouldn't I be here?"

Torrin gave a long-suffering sigh.

Luna shifted behind Torrin, wondering if Tyra had heard about Rhain.

The others began to file into the room past Tyra and Torrin, obviously intent on a meeting at that very instant. Tasha and Fyre both gave Luna significant looks, while Allysandra waggled her eyebrows at the increasingly flustered blonde.

"This is so not fair," Torrin mumbled.

"What isn't?" Tyra asked.

Servants came in afterwards, bringing in chairs for everyone to sit on, and platters of food along with bottles of wine and glasses. Luna watched it all pass with a bewildered look on her face. "What is all this?" she whispered to Torrin.

"I have no idea," Torrin replied, equally puzzled. She wrapped her arm around Luna's waist and gave her a quick kiss to her cheek.

"Not that I don't like having visitors in the middle of the night on the eve of another battle, but what are you all doing here?" Luna demanded of the group of women who had invited themselves into Torrin and her room.

Fyre bit her lip as her eyes darted from Torrin to Luna. Well, their timing certainly could have been better. She looked at Tasha who just squirmed and coughed nervously and then she looked at Eve.

Eve ducked her head, bit her lip, and then looked at Allysandra.

Luna followed the glance from one person to another, the uneasiness in her gut deepening as no one spoke.

"What?" Luna demanded, meeting the troubled eyes of the Wave Dancer leader.

"We can not survive those cannons for another day, Luna." Allysandra answered.

Luna frowned, not understanding yet. "I know. We talked about that earlier."

Fyre scowled, glanced at the confused look on Tyra's face and forged then ahead. "We thought there might be a way to silence them. Tonight."

Torrin felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up and she held Luna tighter.

Tasha refused to meet her mother's eyes. "We need to disable those cannons if we are to stand any chance against Khelin's army."

Blue eyes narrowed as she looked from face to face, then understanding dawned as none of them would meet her eyes. "No," she said, desperation in her voice. "No. There must be another way. No, no you can't ask that of her!"

Torrin frowned, confused. "Ask who to do what?"

"How dare you!" Trya screamed out and slapped Tasha on her bad arm before storming out.

Tasha yelped but said nothing.

Holding tighter to Torrin, Luna shook her head. "No! It's suicide! Don't you all understand?"

"What the hell did you do to Mother? And what are you people all talking about?" Torrin growled out.

"They want you to lead a party to disable the cannons," Luna whispered into the silence of the room.

"Oh." Torrin blinked, then shrugged. "Sure, no problem. Who's going with me?"

Luna whirled around to face her lover. "What?" she shouted. "Are you out of your mind!?"

"Um, could everybody leave?" Torrin asked quietly.

Glancing at one another, the group got up from their chairs and filed back out of the room, leaving Luna, with her arms crossed and scowling at Torrin.

Torrin sighed. "It needs to be done and I have to most experience in such... um... covert actions.

It's what I've been trained to do. Plus, there's my unexpected gift from the Assassin to move through shadows. Not that I've been using it anymore, it makes me feel kind of dirty," she admitted.

"There are other ways," Luna said, even though she still could not think of one. "It's suicide, Torrin." Fear made her voice higher than usual.

"Maybe. But I can't think of any. Can you?"

"I don't care!" Luna said, turning her back to Torrin so the other woman wouldn't see the fear written on her face. "Haven't we done enough?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Torrin answered. She took a step forward and rested her hands on Luna's hip.

"Then, I'll go with you," Luna said, turning around in Torrin's arms and placing her own on the shorter woman's shoulders.

"You know you can't," Torrin said with a sad smile. "They need you here."

Luna shook her head, even though she knew Torrin was right. Closing her eyes against the tears that threatened, she leaned forward, long hair hiding her face as she pressed her forehead against Torrin's. "I can't lose you."

"You won't." Torrin said as she let her hands move around to Luna's back stroking slowly up and down.

"You can't promise that."

Torrin brought one hand up moving Luna's hair out of her face so she could place a tender kiss on her lips.

"Yes, I can. I'm that good, Luna. Plus, all those annoying Gods and ghosts owe me the right to come back to you."

Luna could do nothing but shake her head and draw Torrin in for a fierce hug. Silently she let go, swallowing against the ache in her throat. "You have to come back." Luna said quietly.

"I will," Torrin whispered back softly.

Luna decided that fate was conspiring against them as she went and opened the door. Outside, the crowd was still there, waiting silently.

Fyre had only to take one look at Luna's red-rimmed eyes to know the decision. "She'll have our best going with her," the Fire Clan leader said.

Luna did not believe Fyre's boast. No one would be good enough to guard her lover's back. Everything in her screamed that she must go with Torrin, yet she knew she could not. Not this time. "Show them to me," was all she said, her voice thick with sadness and fear for Torrin.

Fyre nodded. "Luna, if there was any other way, you have to know I would do it. Torrin is like a sister to me."

Luna made no answer to the warrior's words. Only reluctantly did she turn to follow Fyre, but then often turned around to meet Torrin's eyes.

Torrin followed close to Luna. This was her penance. Hopefully this mission would make up for putting this all in motion by her actions at Abnoa. She reached out and grabbed Luna's hand and held it tightly. If things went wrong, this would be a memory to help her come back. It was odd. She had fought many battles but never had anything to return to. Now it was important that, no matter what, she had to survive for Luna.

They made their way down the torch lit corridor out into the courtyard of the Abbey. Four women, one from each of the Clans, had volunteered to go with Torrin. Luna noticed that and felt a little better. It seemed right somehow.

Torrin squeezed Luna's hand one last time before going to inspect the women. She was impressed all the women were all whip-thin and on the small side like her. Although, she still was the shortest one by an inch or two. "You all know the risks?" she asked in a quiet voice.

Luna's old friend from their days of apprenticeship, Janece, answered for the other three women. "We do, and we go willingly."

Luna managed a thin smile for her old friend, clasping arms with her

"We will have to move silently and swiftly. If one of us should fall or be captured, the rest will not have time to stop and help. Disabling the cannons comes first," Torrin said bluntly.

Luna grapped her hand again at those words, though she still did not say a word. Torrin squeezed gently back. Then she said, "I give you all one last chance to change your mind."

None so much shifted their feet, and Luna closed her eyes, knowing for certain that Torrin would soon be going into the darkness.

Torrin smiled. "Okay, then. Do whatever you need to do. Then meet me by the south wall in an hour. No armor, leather is okay as long as it's old and well worn. No large crossbows and nothing heavy, we move swift and fast."

They each went to finish their preparations according to the customs of their Clan. Janece stopped at Luna's side, whispering, "We will watch her back, I swear it."

Then, as the crowd left them, they were alone once again.

Torrin hugged Luna. "There is so much I would like to do in an hour, but I'm afraid I need to prepare some tricks for my big adventure."

Luna said nothing, her voice held in her throat by a heart that trembled with dread. Instead, she hugged Torrin fiercely in return, and only grudgingly letting her go. "I'll keep you company," she managed to say at length, her voice quiet and sad.

"I'd like that," Torrin said. She pulled away and gave a grin. "I can show you how to make a powerful sleeping potion. It can knock the biggest women on their ass."

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Torrin stood near the south wall dressed in her black leathers and a small pack tied to her back. She had about 20 needle thin darts that had been dipped into a powerful sleeping potion as well as a little used blowgun she had picked up years ago. She had no other weapons other than a few hidden throwing knives.

Luna, with one last measuring look at the four other women, drew Torrin close and kissed her slowly, as if to imprint the memory upon her mind forever. Then she let her hands dropped, whispered, "Remember, you promised to come back to me" and then fled. She could not watch Torrin go over the wall.

Torrin, stunned by the intensity of Luna's kiss, just watched her go. Then she licked her lips, savoring the taste Luna had left there. A cough reminded her that she wasn't alone. She blushed slightly. "Oh, um, I guess we should get going."

The other four shared smiles and hoisted their gear.

Torrin was happy to see the moonlight being blocked out by clouds. Going over to the newly tied rope, she started her descent down the wall.

The other women were not so pleased however. The hiding of the moon was considered a bad omen. But each was sworn to the task and they were grimly determined to see it through.

In Torrin's mind, a little voice nagged her. 'What if' she couldn't keep her promise to come back? Finally she was able to push it away. Standing on the ground, she moved back to the stonewall and waited for the others.

One by one they dropped down next to Torrin, landing almost as quietly. These were women who all had skill hiding in shadows or moving silently.

Torrin motioned for them to follow her. She led them on a wide path around the battlefield not wanting to get tripped up on things she couldn't see or lose someone to a crater created by a

cannonball.

The others followed her as quietly as they could. Yet it seemed to them that she moved with the shadows and that if she had wished to, she could have lost them, although they followed only a few feet behind her.

Torrin moved silently in the dark, pleased that the women following her were keeping up easily. Half way to Khelin's camp, she motioned for them to stop. Turning, she looked at them and then whispered, "We need to find the cannons fast. Therefore, we need to split into two teams."

They did not like the idea and it showed on their faces, but the women decided the quicker they finished this task, the quicker they could start back toward their own side. Janece would not leave Torrin's side, for she had sworn so to Luna. So the other three went off together, taking the small vials of acid that Torrin handed them.

Torrin grinned evilly as they came to the outskirts of Khelin's camp. It smelled of wood smoke, sweat, blood and alcohol. Looking around, she wondered where one would put a cannon. Then she froze for a moment she felt like she was being watched. She turned her head slowly to the side but didn't see anything.

Janece crouched behind her, going still the second that Torrin had frozen. She waited for the smaller woman in front of her to move, not daring even turn her head in case a guard was nearby.

Torrin looked back at Janece and shrugged. She moved forward again searching for the cannons. They would need to be in a clear spot out of the trees so the women firing it would have a clear view of the Abbey. Reaching in her pouch she pulled out the blowgun and a smaller bag filled with darts.

Having neither, Janece pulled a long curved dagger from the sheath at her side and followed Torrin.

Stopping again, Torrin took a step back to make herself even with Janece so she could whisper in the other woman's ear. "Any clue where a cannon would be?"

Janece shrugged, peering into the night. "They were moving them at sunset." Beyond that, she knew nothing.

"Hmm. Well, they would probably move them closer not farther, so we look for fires away from the main body, which makes it easier for us." She grinned and started moving around the edge of the camp.

She froze once more and looked around. "I swear to the Goddess, we are being followed. Do you see anything?"

Janece once again shook her head, though she strained to catch a hint of movement near them. The only thing she could spot were the Southern warriors moving about the campfires but nothing closer.

Torrin nodded. Probably just her nerves. She continued moving and then stopped, giving a truly evil grin. "Jackpot." She pointed with the blowgun. Slightly farther away from the main camp was a smaller camp. The cannons had indeed been moved closer to the Abbey during the night. From the look of it, two of the cannons had been dragged toward the northern line, while the other two were closer to the Abbey walls. "Keep an eye out for guards moving between the two camps."

"No problem," Janece whispered in return, gripping the hilt of her dagger.

Torrin spotted a bored guard leaning on a spear, between her and the smaller camp. She carefully loaded her blowgun with a dart and then raised it to her lips. She gauged the wind and blew.

The guard felt a brief sting and swatted at her neck. "Damn bugs," the guard growled out before giving a yawn. Then she slumped to the ground snoring.

Torrin pulled the gun away grinning. "Neat."

Janece glanced at her with a raised eyebrow, shook her head and turned back to keeping watch for any patrolling guards.

Torrin loaded the gun again and took out a small woman fussing over some sort of black powder. The woman set the small barrel down yawning. Then she too was on the ground sound asleep.

"Nice toy," Janece whispered, keeping an arrow notched and ready to let fly at anyone who spotted them.

Torrin grinned evilly. "I like it."

After scanning the area, she motioned Janece to follow her. "Take out anybody who looks like a threat or who notices us. I'm going to give the South a surprise. When they try to use that thing in the morning they aren't going to get what they are expecting."

The ranger nodded in understanding. The flickering firelight from the camps fires dimly illuminated the dark clothing she wore. Most of the southerners appeared to be sleeping, though there were a few moving around, tending to the fires. Janece followed along behind Torrin, keeping an eye out for others as they crept toward the smaller camp's two cannons.

There was that feeling again. Torrin swore they were being watched.

With a shake of her head, she focused again on the task at hand. The cannons seemed to loom larger and larger as they crept toward them. Large metal tubes of death and destruction. She

wondered why someone would make such a thing and then decided it must have been someone touched by Vladlin's hand.

A soft whisper of sound behind her signaled that Janece had let go of her first arrow. A guard had rounded a corner and spotted them just as Janece had been set to follow Torrin to the cannons. The Southern guard clawed at the arrow in her throat, the blood spurted black in the firelight and went down.

Without thinking, Torrin used a shadow to hide herself and then stepped out next to the cannon. Blinking as she tried to process what had just happened, she shuddered and pushed it away.

Janece had to scramble a bit to catch up to where Torrin was crouching next to the first of the two cannons. Janece hid in the shadow of the large metallic tube, refusing to touch the item that had brought such death to her sisters.

Inspecting the weapon carefully, Torrin quickly stowed the blowgun away and pulled out two different tools. Luckily, on the trek to Abnoa, she had plenty of time to listen to the Southern warriors brag about their new weapon.

"What are you doing?" Janece whispered, her back to Torrin as she searched the night for any other problems.

Torrin slid under the thick metal object and began making her trap.

She poked her head out while her hands kept the acid on the metal and not on her. "Um, I'm going to fix it so when they go to fire this thing in the morning it goes boom. Probably taking out this whole patch of ground in the process." She ducked her head back under checking the weakening metal. Then she looked back out at Janece. "Behind us a bit out of the way should be a large crate. In it will be small barrels of a red powder, could you bring me one?"

Feeling the metal weaken, she focused back on the task at hand not waiting for Janece's response.

The Earth Clan member glanced at the crate in question suspiciously, but did as Torrin asked.

Lowering a leather-covered hand, Torrin eyed the faint white acid on the belly of the cannon. For some reason, the acid loved breaking down metal but wasn't fond of leather. However it still could be very uncomfortable if it hit her exposed flesh.

She had used it before. Sneaking into one of Khelin's Manor houses and sabotaging all the weapons in the barracks had been one of her lessons.

"Here," Janece whispered, ducking down to slide the pouch of powder to Torrin. Then she got back up to resume her guard.

"Thanks," Torrin whispered back. She grabbed the powder and then turned her attention back to

the hole. Making her hand small, she reached up into the cannon just barely making it through the hole the acid had created.

After a moment of fumbling around she found the priming coil. "Janece, look at the back of the cannon. Is there a long piece of rope there?"

Moving around the large object, the ranger found what Torrin was talking about. "Yes." She glanced around nervously, hoping all the whispering wouldn't attract attention.

"Tell me if disappears completely."

Fearing more magic, Janece took a small step backward.

Torrin yanked the coil loose from the firing mechanism and started pulling it out of the cannon through the small hole she had made.

Blinking, Janece shook her head at her own reaction and moved back next to the cannon. "Yes, it's gone."

"Alcen balls." Torrin didn't want it to run out completely. "Is there more rope in the crate?"

With another quick glance around, Janece ducked down and scurried over to the crate, returning with another length of rope.

"Good, now feed it down the slot where the other disappeared."

The ranger did so as quickly as possible, taking up her bow and arrows again as soon as she was finished.

Torrin smiled as she popped the pouring cork out of the small barrel and slid the priming coil inside and into the destructive red powder that gave life to the cannons.

The coil was a stiff rope dipped in some flammable liquid and then dried. When they lit the rope tomorrow, the coil would burn down to the barrel blowing everything up.

Janece tensed as another guard began to make her way through the camp. On the Southerner's current course, it would only be a matter of time before she literally tripped over the woman she had killed earlier. "Hurry up," she hissed.

"Done," Torrin said putting the small vile and gloves away and then slid out from under the cannon.

Janece brought up her bow and drew back an arrow as the Southerner continued on her rounds. With a muttered curse she loosed the arrow, dropping the guard just as she reached the first dead woman. Someone was bound to notice before too long that there were a lot of guards missing.

"What about the second cannon?" she whispered.

Torrin shrugged "I'm just dropping the acid down it and letting it eat a huge hole in it. I know we don't have time for two traps but I want the South to feel just a little bit of our pain."

Janece glanced at the two cannons, shivering in dread at the mere sight of them, and the destruction they represented. They seemed evil and foreboding, the firelight reflected along the length of their barrels.

"Come on. Right now it's just a sleeping beast with no one to feed and clean up after it. No need to be scared." Torrin crept forward towards the next target. She hoped the other three were doing as well.

"I'm not scared," Janece hissed after the other woman, but her steps were slower than Torrin's toward the other cannon. She waited as Torrin poured acid down the barrel of the second cannon and watched the shadows. Torrin was getting to her, she decided. Now she thought she could feel someone watching them.

Rhain squinted trying to figure out what was being done. Was Torrin really disabling the cannons? If so that meant... meant that she had been wrong. Wrong about everything.

"Did you see her do anything? It was all just a trick any moment now she's going to blow the whistle on those poor women and show her true colors," a smug voice whispered in her ear.

Rhain turned and saw her Muanya, but something seemed off in the smoky shadows of the Southern camp. Quinn's form seemed smaller and darker.

Rhain crept closer to the two women. "I don't see anything suspicious." Rhain voice was without emotion. "She's... she's disabling the cannon just like she said she would." It struck her how it was very possible the stress of the war, losing her Muanya, and the flight to the Queen's City might have been too much. She just may have snapped somewhere along the way, and just now she was coming to her senses.

She turned on the ghost next to her. "Who are you? My Muanya would never undermine her people, and that's what you've been doing all this time...just using me."

The ghost laughed. "Ah, ah, watch the tone of your voice. You are in a war camp, after all."

The ghost looked around. "You were always so weak, needing approval. Real warriors don't need to look for approval. They just do it. You were never a real warrior, Rhain. You're only a second best child who should have gone into the service of the Goddess like I had originally intended. But to answer your question, I'm the dark part of Quinn, the part she gave to the Mistress of Shadows so she could have revenge on Jinete for making her look like a fool. Even in death, I must serve the Goddess." Quinn's dark ghost gave a wink and disappeared just in time for Rhain

to see a guard come around a tent corner and spot her.

The southern guard yelled out a warning as she spotted Rhain. The yell woke every sleeping woman in the small camp, and almost immediately another yell was raised as the dead guards were found.

Janece didn't know what had just happened, but she swore. "Come on! Time to go! Someone sounded the alarm." Janece ducked behind a bush as a group of guards went running past. Further back toward the main southern camp a horn blew and all at once the alarm spread to the entire southern line. "Vladlin's balls!" Janece swore.

"Frak! I hope the other team got finished." Torrin dropped the bottle down the cannon tube. She grabbed two knives from somewhere on her body.

A lot of shouting was coming from the direction of the two guards that Torrin had dropped with her blowgun. Janece looked towards the other woman, waiting for her to point out a direction to head in.

Torrin eyes flickered over the ever-growing chaos. "Back to the Abbey. Follow the way we came and stick to shadows."

As she started back into the night skirting the Southern camp, her eyes caught a figure fleeing the guards. She gave a groan. Rhain. What the frak was Rhain doing here? Ah, but she knew why. Rhain was trying to prove yet again that she was out to destroy the North. "Go on," she whispered to Janece. "Find the others if you can and get back to the Abbey."

"Luna wants me to stay by your side," Janece hissed back, drawing an arrow and sending it hurtling into a nearby guard before she could summon reinforcements.

Torrin looked back at her. "I need you to go back and let Luna know what has happened. Besides you can't keep up with me and I don't want to worry about you" and with that said, she stepped into shadow and disappeared.

"Luna's going to kill me," Janece said with a grimace as she did her best to make her way back to the northern lines unseen.

#####

Rhain found herself at sword point. A burly Southern warrior glared back at her. "Looky what I caught," the warrior grunted.

Rhain closed her eyes and waited. How pathetic had her life ended up? Her braids were cut and her illusions about her wonderful Muanya were gone as well. Ready for her death, Rhain opened her eyes to face it head on like the warrior she had tried to be.

The Swordsman's eyes widened in surprise and then her neck opened in a gush of red blood. The sword fell from nerveless fingers and the body soon followed.

Torrin stood behind the fallen woman holding a knife bathed in red. Rhain felt relief for the first time upon seeing her half-sister.

Torrin scowled as she looked back at her sister. "Do you know what you've done?" she hissed out. "You better hope the other team was able to disable their cannons or tomorrow the Abbey will fall and it will be your fault."

Rhain's face fell. "I'm sorry. In my head everything seemed so clear but now..." She trailed off realize anything she said just seemed weak.

Bugles behind them took up the call and the sound of horses could be heard nearby as the Southern cavalry started to sweep the area. There were loud shouts from everywhere along the southern line now.

Torrin's expression never changed. "Let's get out of here." She pulled Rhain along, dodging troops in the chaos.

A large amount of torches seemed to knot together back by the cannons, as warriors gathered together around something.

"Frak!" Torrin's eyes could see that a faction of troops had found something. "Get out of here. I'm going to cause a distraction."

Rhain gaped for a moment and took a step to follow, then stopped. No, she had done enough damage. Now she would listen and take orders. She took off sprinting across the night-covered battlefield.

Stepping into a shadow, Torrin popped out behind a cannon. Reaching into the crate she pulled out a small barrel of red firing powder and then disappeared into another shadow. A part of Torrin's mind noted that the darker her feelings became, the easier it was to use the shadows.

One of the figures on horseback stiffened the moment Torrin disappeared, spinning her horse around. Dark eyes searched the darkness and her teeth flashed white as Khelin urged her horse into a gallop.

Stepping out next to a campfire, Torrin grinned, popped the pour cap and dropped it into the fire and then with a small wave at the several women gaping at her in surprise, stepped into a shadow and vanished.

A few women blinked then stared in horror at the fire when their brains caught up with what she had done. Before any could get up to flee, the fire exploded in a huge red fireball scaring the women and horses throughout the camp.

Ignoring the growing confusion and chaos, Khelin galloped through the darkness unerringly headed toward a specific destination.

Torrin stepped out behind a guard, her eyes black and an evil grin on her face. As the guard pulled her bowstring back to fire, Torrin reached across her throat and with a quick moment split the flesh open. The woman fell gagging on her blood.

Pivoting, she threw the knife at a woman who was charging her. It speared deeply into the woman's eye. Torrin's grin got larger. She loved it that with this power, her eye was healed and she was at the peak of her performance. She almost never wanted to go back and be just Torrin again.

As three women advanced on her swords drawn Torrin winked and disappeared into a shadow, laughing at the surprised looks on their faces.

Khelin ran the woman in the center down as she galloped to the spot where Torrin had just vanished. With a sneer she leapt from the saddle and reached her hand into the shadows. "You think you can escape me?" the Southern Queen demanded. Her fingers curled around something and she heaved backwards, yanking Torrin out of the shadow realm.

Torrin was stunned for a moment as she was ripped out of the embrace of a shadow. Regaining her senses she twisted out of the woman's grasp and stared back at the Southern Queen with black eyes. "Well, that was my plan." Her eyes darted around taking in her surroundings and her options. She was in the middle of the Southern camp, facing down the Southern leader with only a knife and a blowgun. Things weren't looking good.

Khelin laughed, "You are so pitiful. You are not one of my Mother's Chosen." Then her face twisted into a mask of rage as she grabbed Torrin's face. "I think this belongs to me!" Curling her fingers, Khelin began to draw the darkness out of Torrin. It seeped from her eyes and mouth and oozed out her nostrils.

Torrin choked on the exiting darkness. It tasted like ash. She thrashed around trying to get free.

Khelin's hands were like iron as they gripped the struggling woman, keeping her upright. The darkness seeped from Torrin and onto Khelin's skin, shimmering there for a second like an oily sheen before disappearing. With contempt, Khelin tossed Torrin to the ground. "Fool."

Torrin lay limply, looking up at the insane woman and laughed. "I'm pitiful for not being one of your Mother's Chosen? I think that makes me pretty darn special. I mean, after all, they're so easy to kill. Yep, pretty worthless to have around, if you ask me." She gave a weak grin. "I've only killed, what? 4 or 5 of them?"

Insane rage glittered in the Southern Queen's eyes. "Take her." Khelin screamed.

The soldiers close to Khelin looked around nervously. Here was one who could kill the Mistress' Chosen. They weren't sure if they wanted attack her.

When they hesitated she drew her sword, the dark blade absorbing the firelight. "I said take her!" she shrieked.

The circle of warriors rushed Torrin.

Torrin rolled out of the way of the first oncoming woman and then lashed out with a foot tripping the next.

The first few went down, but there were a lot of warriors and they simply bore her down because of sheer numbers. Without her ability to escape in shadows, they could grab onto her, and there were many hands grabbing for the ex-mercenary.

Breathing heavily, her arms pinned behind her back, Torrin just stared calmly at Khelin. "Well, I suppose asking you to make it quick is out of the question?" Torrin had very little illusions about what was going to happen. She gave a quick prayer to the Goddess and Armando that she would survive it somehow and get back safely to Luna.

Khelin simply smiled and darkness flowed across her eyes. "Oh no, it won't be quick at all." The women holding Torrin shivered at their Queen's tone. Khelin stepped toward the held woman, tracing a finger down Torrin's jaw. "I wonder if you will be as good as Luna was?"

Torrin face grew dark and in a quick movement did the only thing she could, she opened her mouth and bit down on the finger that had been touching her. The muscles in her jaw grew tense and she kept biting down until she tasted blood and then kept biting.

Khelin screamed in pain as Torrin bit her. Belatedly, one of the warriors holding Torrin slammed the pommel of her blade down on the back of Torrin's head.

Startled, Torrin's jaw went slack and she nearly blacked out from the blow. Blinking at the stars that swam in front of her eyes, she went limp.

Clutching what was left of her finger, Khelin stepped back away from Torrin. "Take her to my tent, and shackle her well. I'm going to have fun breaking this one."

#####

He studied the dimly lit figure nestled in the tall, unkempt grass. Her hands pressed together palm to palm. He snorted in amusement. "She doesn't care, you know. She only helped your ancestors out of pity, not out of any really fondness for humans of her own to worship her."

He gave a frown as she said nothing and made no move to acknowledge him in anyway.

Only when she had finished her prayer to the Moon Goddess did Luna lower her hands and slowly stand up. "Didn't I already tell you no, Vladlin?" The blonde didn't turn around to face him. She didn't want to show him any weaknesses.

He gave a small grin. "So you did, but it only makes me want you more." Absently he reached down patting the gaunt head of his hound, Disease. "You're about to get some bad news. I can help you. I can give you the strength and the power to march down into Khelin's camp and destroy it."

Vladlin wasn't sure what it was about Luna he wanted so much. Maybe it was that seed of darkness that festered in her heart. Maybe it was the fact she was nearly the ideal leader and he could make her perfect. All she had to do was accept him and his favor.

Luna shivered at his voice, closing her eyes against the words. Dreading his answer, she asked, "What bad news?"

He grinned. "That depends. Do you accept me and my help?" Reaching down with his other hand he petted his hound Death, while the large red hound, Fear lay at his feet and just stared at Luna.

He looked up at her, his red eyes finding hers. "Trust me, it's bad."

Despite herself, Luna turned until she was facing him, her knees going weak at the sight of him and the hounds at his feet. The horror was as strong as it had been the last time. "I'm not yours." she managed to say, her voice shaking.

He could feel her hesitation, her warring within herself. His eyes never left hers as he took a step forward. Such will, even now as she tried to defy him.

"But you could be mine," he whispered. "I could make you a Queen. With my help you could destroy Khelin and then sweep down to South and teach them a lesson once and for all. No one would dare march against the North and her people again."

Luna gasped, the vision soaring in front of her eyes at his words. She could see it, the north sweeping through the south and crushing them. Never again would they rise against the north, she would be a queen feared and loved by all.

"I..." her voice was barely a whisper.

She was tempted. More than she had ever been tempted in her life. One word, that was all it would take, she knew that.

He took another step forward close enough he could reach out and touch her. He crouched down so he was face to face with her. "Tell me you don't want what I'm offering. Tell me it doesn't appeal to you." He breathed onto her face.

"Of course it appeals to her, Dog boy. Who wouldn't be tempted by such an offer?" A voice broke in suddenly, snapping the moment.

As if she were a puppet whose strings had just been cut, Luna sagged to the ground, her breathing harsh and jagged.

Vladlin stood up his lips pulled back in a snarl as he turned to face that would dare address him in such a manner. "How dare you..."

"Yeah, whatever, I'm dead so there is very little you can do to me that would scare me. So take your petulant attitude and your puppies and get out of my resting place."

Slowly, Luna drew herself up to her knees. Her fingers curled around the hilt of her sword, drawing strength from it even as she looked for the source of that other voice.

Vladlin's mouth snapped shut as he looked at the woman addressing him. She was short with long dark hair pulled back into a horsetail and slightly bowed legs. And she was transparent. "This is none of your business. This is between Luna and me. Go back to your resting place, ghost or perhaps I shall call on my sister Morana to retrieve your soul. Apparently, you've been lost too long in this world and she should guide you to the plain of the dead."

She glared back at Vladlin. "Your sister has no sway over me. My blood is of Armando's and here I shall stay until certain wrongs are righted. You, on the other hand, are no way a noble God of War. You are an underhanded Rock Wolf who waits until another wounds your prey before you pounce. My daughter loves this woman and since she cannot be here to give guidance, I shall step in. It's the least I can do. I have missed out on so much of my daughter's life, I do what I can to help her have a happy future."

As quietly as she could to avoid attracting attention, Luna stood up. Her fingers gripped the hilt of her sword so tightly it hurt. Who was this ghost that stood up to Vladlin and his hounds? Then slow understanding dawned. This was where Torrin had asked her about ghosts that lifetime ago when they had been heading to the Queen's City.

"Jinete?" she called out questioningly. Was this Torrin's other mother?

Jinete cocked her head and gave Luna a small grin before confronting Vladlin again. "You are nothing but a spoiled child. Khelin worships her mother and the women of the North have no temples for you, just their Moon Goddess. You're being left out of this fighting, you poor excuse of a war God."

He glared back. "This isn't over. I will get a foothold in the North. Perhaps I should have gone after Torrin, but she's too tuned into chaos to follow me." He glared at the two women for a moment. Then, with a wicked grin, he said, "Oh, I'm sorry for both of your losses" and vanished.

Fear gripped Luna again after the disappearance of Vladlin. "Did he mean, is..." she forced herself to ask the ghost, "is Torrin dead?"

Jinete slowly came over to the upset woman. "No need to worry. This is Torrin after all, she has more lives than a striped, skunk cat." Jinete reached out to tenuous connection she had with those of her blood. She frowned, not good but not bad.

Vladin's lingering dread slowly faded and Luna nodded, loosening her hold upon the sword at her side. "Are you Jinete? Torrin's Muyana?"

Jinete gave a roguish grin and then a small bow. "Why, yes I am. Jinete, daughter of Jinn, at your service."

"I am Luna, daughter of Mezzarna and Fengold," she answered, bowing to the ghost of the woman who bore such a strong resemblance to Torrin. Straightening, she met the ghost's eyes. "Thank you, for what you did. He nearly convinced me, I think."

Jinete smiled warmly. "Well met, Luna. I'd shake your hand but you know being dead and all." She laughed. "He has that effect with his pretty words and his promises of power. They tempt me little. What use do I have for power?" Her eyes got a far off look, "All I want is to go home. Feel the hoof beats of the horses on the plains and smell the long grass."

Luna struggled not to shiver. The laugh of a ghost was not something that the ears of the living were supposed to hear. Still, it was infinitely better than His words whispered in her ear. "If we survive this, we will do our best to make certain you go home." Luna thought a moment then licked her lips. "I don't know if you know this, but Tyra is here."

Jinete sighed sadly and nodded. "I know. I've looked on her several times. Quinn's presence prevented me at first, but now it seems best not to open old wounds and show myself. It wasn't a noble path we took, but sometimes love is messy and hurtful. I paid for it. Tyra paid for it and sadly, our innocent daughter paid for it. Thankfully, Torrin found the path she was supposed to follow." Then the Horsewoman grimaced in pain. "I have to go. It's hard to show myself to those of my blood let alone those not of it. But know this. Torrin loves you so. I could not but help my daughter where I could."

The ghost winked at her and slowly vanished into the dark.

Luna stood alone in the quiet of the garden for a while longer. She was thankful for Jinete's interference. She felt Vladlin's presence melt away from her. But there would be no rest for her this night. Not until she was certain that Torrin was safe.

A noise from the hallway caught her attention and her heart started to pound as Fyre emerged from the doorway. "Luna, you better come." The Fire Warrior's tone chilled the blood in her veins as she hurried after her.

#####

Rhain crouched down, hiding in the night. The heaving of her chest would have easily given her away had anyone been nearby to hear her panting breaths. She could kick herself. What a fool she had been, a mindless fool, unfit to wear any badge of honor. Bent over hands on her knees she looked up just in time to see four women let into the Abbey. There should have been five, and with a sinking feeling in her gut, she knew who the missing person was. Looking over her shoulder, she spied the fires of the Southern camp and swallowed, her throat feeling dry and rough.

Standing up, she squared her shoulders and started walking back. It was time to show that she was truly Quinn's daughter. Not the twisted dark-sided Quinn, but the proud and noble woman she had remembered and loved.

#####

Khelin drew a dagger down the length of the chained woman's torso, humming merrily to herself. Torrin was stretched out on a large wooden table, arms and legs chained. "Time to wake up, little shadow," the Southern Queen crooned, then backhanded Torrin across the face. "Wake up, I said!"

Torrin groggily opened her eyes. After taking a look at Khelin, she decided she didn't like reality much and would rather be unconscious

Khelin grinned down at her captive. "Good morning." She sounded positively elated. "I'm so glad you could join us this morning." Using the dagger, Khelin slowly cut away Torrin's shirt. "Now why, I wonder, were you doing sneaking around my camps?"

Taking a breath, Torrin tried to center herself. Pain and humiliation were dealt out on a regular basis at the temple. "Oh, come on, Khelin, you're a smart woman. It should be obvious, I was returning the favor you sent us, you know, with Rya's Hawks."

"You were trying to kill me?" Khelin was amused by the very notion. "Don't you know, you can't kill me?" she smiled, slicing away the last of Torrin's shirt and ripped it off the captive woman's body.

Torrin shrugged, seemingly uncaringly. "I guess I do now."

Khelin grinned; the light from the nearby-lit brazier giving her eyes an insane look. "You're mine now, Torrin," she said, reaching over and shifting something in the coals of the fire.

"I wonder, did Luna tell you what I do to those things I own?" the Southern Queen's voice dropped to an intimate whisper, "Did she show you what I did to her? How I branded her?"

Torrin laughed. "I already have a brand that you're familiar with. It's your Mother's after all."

That hadn't been the reaction Khelin had been expecting and she bared her teeth at Torrin in a mockery of a smile. Then she disappeared into the depths of her tent for a moment, and then returned with a long slim wooden box. Opening the polished box she showed Torrin the row upon row of silver needles inside. "Do you know what these are? The tips are coated with an excruciating toxin the far southern tribes use to kill traitors. The people die, they say, of sheer pain." The queen's smile was bloodthirsty. "Let's find out, shall we?" She drew a needle and drove it into Torrin's cheek.

Torrin twitched and tried desperately to move through the pain as she had been taught time and time again at the Temple. The pain kept building up. Like a smithy on her forge, it pumped through her body. Gritting her teeth, she just prevented herself from making a noise.

Khelin stroked the writhing girl's hair, smiling to herself. "There, there. That was good, wasn't it?" she drew another needle, the length of it glinting in the firelight except for the red coated tip. "Now, where too next?" she trailed the tip of it down Torrin's chest, along her right breast, circled the nipple, and then watching Torrin's eyes, stabbed downwards.

The shadows in the tent collected, focusing together in a swirling nexus behind the mad Southern Queen. Faster and faster they swirled until they formed the semblance of a human form. Features became clearer: eyes, white like hard diamonds, red lips, and hair so dark it shown blue in some places. The lips opened, "Stop." The word was breathed out yet it nearly froze the motion of the stars with its force.

The box of needles dropped from Khelin's fingers, scattering them across the floor. "Mother," Khelin ground out, frozen in place by the Mistress of Shadow's command.

"Daughter," the Mistress of Shadows responded. "I see you have retrieved the Betrayer. I am most pleased."

It was obvious from the expression on Khelin's face that she was anything but pleased at the interruption. "As you requested, Mother," she said, slowly released from the earlier command.

The Goddess smirked, not missing her child's petulance. "I wish to have a moment alone with dear Torrin. If she fails to give me the answers I desire, you may continue your games."

There was little room to argue with that command. With a lingering glance at the captive woman, Khelin stalked from the tent.

The Goddess moved over to the bound woman. "She reminds me so much of my brother, so moody..."

"Don't forget insane," Torrin croaked out.

The Goddess smiled darkly. "Look at you. The lessons of my Priestesses serve you well at this moment, don't they? You were so talented at all those things taught to you at the Temple. You only failed the final test. I was so disappointed, I had worked so hard to nurture your hatred and darkness at your homeland."

Torrin could have cared less what the Goddess was saying. All she wanted to do was scream in agony.

"You see, my sister foresaw my daughter's dark path of destruction and with the help of our brother, Armando, she set in motion a child to be born who could unite the North and the South and destroy my line... my baby. I, of course, couldn't let that happen, so I twisted her prophecy. I couldn't change it but I could put a fork in its road, a dark fork." The Goddess pouted, stroking the branded mark in Torrin's shoulder. "Things were going so well and then Luna came into the picture, a counter weight of light and honor. I told my daughter to break her, but alas, she failed and now our destiny is twisted and murky. Neither I or my sister can see the outcome."

Torrin faded back in at the mention of Luna. She was slowly losing her control of the pain.

"I can free you from this. All you need to do is accept me, love me above all others and I can still raise you up to the honor of being one of my Chosen."

Torrin laughed a harsh tormented sound. "Sorry, I've met a few of them. Bunch of pansies, if you ask me. And I will love no other in my heart than Luna, so I'm sorry, there's no more room in there."

The Goddess's face hardened in anger. "Very well. I could have spared you the pain to come." She turned to the door. "Daughter?"

Khelin slid through the tent flap immediately, proving she had not gone far. "Yes?" she purred, hoping for what was to come.

"It seems Torrin will not be joining the ranks of the Chosen. I had hoped to give you a new bodyguard, but oh well. Have fun, but she must never get loose." The Goddess began to vanish, the shadows pulling apart, "Oh, you must not get her blood on you, either," the Goddess breathed out before she left completely.

Khelin grinned at her fading Mother, and then turned her attention back to Torrin. "Let's pick up where we left off, shall we?"

#####-

Luna hurried after Fyre, her blood frozen by the look on the Fire Warrior's face. Quickly they passed through the halls of the Abbey, and those they passed stepped aside silently, as if aware something terrible had happened.

The outside walls were quiet when they reached them. Only the soft moonlight illuminated the women who were raggedly gathered together. The Fire Warriors and few remaining Earth Clan rangers hung back in a semi circle around the four who had gone with Torrin over the wall. None of them would meet Luna's eyes as she stepped forward.

Luna could feel the looks of pity and sadness given to her from the surrounding people. Still, licking lips gone dry, she clung to a last shred of hope.

"Where..." her voice failed her, "where is Torrin?"

The four shuffled their feet and glanced at each other silently. Finally it was Janece who stepped forward. The small ranger met Luna's eyes and Luna nearly collapsed as she realized her old friend had been crying.

"We disabled the cannons."

Luna staggered forward.

"Where is Torrin?"

Her words were desperate.

Janece looked to the other three for help, but found none.

"Something set off the guards at the Southern camp. They realized we were there. Torrin ordered me to go, to tell you what had happened. I found the others." She gestured to the other three women "and we made it back here. The Southerners were going crazy for a while, and I heard a lot of screaming. Then it stopped and... I think, I'm sorry Luna, I think they killed her."

From behind her Luna could hear Tyra scream out something and burst out sobbing.

"No," Luna said, not recognizing her own voice, "Jinete said she wasn't dead."

More than a few people shared glances at that, and Tyra's sobbing abruptly stopped.

"Luna..." Tasha hesitantly approached the blonde.

"Don't," Luna snapped angrily. "You all asked her to do this."

Tasha face was somber. "I know we did. And don't think that doesn't weigh heavily on me. You think you're the only one who lost her? I-I-I just got her back, got another chance to know my little sister again..." Tasha trailed off the words, her emotions overwhelming her.

Luna closed her eyes and bowed her head. Tasha was right, no matter how much it hurt; she was not the only one to have lost Torrin. Squeezing back tears, Luna lifted her face. No, she refused

to believe Torrin was dead. She confronted Janece. "You aren't certain she was killed, are you?"

Janece hesitated, and then slowly shook her head. "Luna, Torrin was captured by Khelin. You know what she does to prisoners... better than any of us."

"No, we're not." Fyre broke in, steady and calm. "We don't know that she was caught, and this is Torrin we are talking about." Fyre caught everyone's eye, daring them to counter her.

Something had happened to Torrin, Luna was certain of that, especially after the encounter with Vladlin. Otherwise, Torrin would have made her way back by now. Quietly she asked Janece, "Do they know the cannons are disabled? Does Khelin know her precious war machines won't work?"

The ranger glanced to the other three, all of which shook their head in silent answer to her question. "No. Well, at least they didn't know when we left. They'll realize it the first time they try to fire them though."

"At least there's some good news to come out of this crap," Fyre mumbled.

A plan began to form in Luna's mind, hastened by her desire to find out what had happened to Torrin. "We'll charge them," Luna said softly, staring at the southern lines through one of gaps caused by a cannon ball in the outer wall. She turned to face those behind her. "At daylight, before they realize their cannons no longer work." Luna met the eyes of the gathered Clan leaders. "Do what you want, but come morning, I will charge them, alone if necessary. I would rather die on my terms than waiting for them to attack here, or repair those cannons."

#####

There is a point when the flesh becomes weak, a point where the body breaks and causes the soul to rebel against common sense and the greater good. A point when the line between good and bad ceases to be important. Torrin's body reached that point a few minutes ago when she wondered who was screaming and if somebody could please shut them up. Then she realized she was making the noise and she felt her hold on sanity slowly crumbling.

A group of slaves had placed Khelin's throne next to the table so that the Southern Queen could sit and enjoy her work. She'd long since done away with most of her armor, and her dark sword hung across the back of the chair. Leaning forward, she studied her artwork, the naked body in front of her covered with pins.

"Torrin?" She frowned when she got no answer. Picking up a nearby pitcher of water she dowsed the exposed woman with ice water. "Torrin?"

Torrin gasped from the water, and after a moment opened her mouth. After another moment she managed to croak out a word. "Y-y-yes?"

"Oh good, you're still with us." Khelin smiled and leaned back, crossing her legs. "I wanted to make certain you could still understand what was happening to you."

"Like I would miss all the fun," she sneered. Torrin was quite proud she still had some attitude to give but she had no illusions she would last much longer.

"Annoying to the end, I see," the Queen said contemptuously. She would have much preferred breaking Torrin's will, but dawn was rapidly approaching. Already the eastern sky was beginning to lighten. She needed to get the army ready for the final assault. "I just wanted you to know that Luna's going to be joining you in death soon."

Torrin looked up, her gray eyes meeting Khelin's black ones. "I still don't choose you," she spat. Then she closed her eyes, trying to ignore the pain. Suddenly the tune she had found transcribed on the crumbling parchment at the Castle came back to her and she began to play the song in her head, letting the music take her far away from the physical world and its pain.

"So be it," Khelin murmured, drawing a long slender ceremonial dagger from a nearby tabletop.

#####

Rhain wandered around the camp in a stolen uniform. With some mud in her hair she looked Southern, kind of, she thought. At least nobody had tried to run her through yet. Looking around, she wondered where prisoners would be kept. After staring at a dirty tent with a couple of guards in front of it, she felt like smacking herself in the head.

One of the two guards yawned, struggling to stay awake until they were relieved at dawn.

Rhain looked around desperately trying to come up with a plan. It was hard without someone telling her what to do. Spying a bucket filled with water next to a smoldering campfire, she quickly snagged it and started walking toward the tent. Her brain kept telling her to run away, that her plan was stupid, and she had to agree, but it was the only thing she had.

The yawning guard stretched her arms over her head and glared at the approaching woman. "What do you want?" The other guard simply watched without comment, looking half asleep.

"Um, hi, I have some water to throw on... I mean give to the..." she trailed off. That had not gone well.

The guard snorted, stepped aside and jerked a finger toward the door. "Good, about time someone washed the stench of that one."

Rhain contemplated running away.

"What's wrong with you? You get hit in the head or something?" The guard peered closer at Rhain.

"Oh, good... I mean, glad I can help." She quickly ducked under the flap.

Inside the dark tent, an old woman lay curled up on the dirt floor. A single chain around her ankle shackled her to a large iron rod driven into the center of the tent. The old woman shifted as Rhain entered, holding up withered old hands to stave off another beating.

Rhain blinked letting her eyes adjust to the dim light. Sadly, she only saw the one woman in the tent. Bending down she spoke softly. "Shhh, I'm not here to hurt you. I... I guess I'm here to help you."

The old woman turned her face toward that voice. "Rhain?" the old Priestess whispered, recognizing the voice.

"Do I know you?" Rhain asked puzzled as she bent over to examine the chain on the woman's ankle.

The woman began to laugh softly, shaking her head, sightless eyes staring more or less toward Tyra's daughter. "Little Rhain, Tasha's sister. Yes, I know you," the Priestess laughed softly. "I Chanted for Tyra and Quinn when they were ready to have you."

"Oh." Rhain blushed not wanting to think about her parents having sex. "Well, I guess we have met then." Staring at the chain she wished she were Torrin. Torrin would know what to do or be able to pick the lock. All she could do was sit here and be a failure again. Rhain wondered if she could some how convince the guard to give her a key. Peeking through the gap in the tent flap, she looked at the guards.

The one on the right seemed to be asleep on her feet and the other one wasn't much better. If she could just get the keys without her waking up. Hesitantly, she reached her hand out. Her heart seemed to be in her throat and her hands shook no matter how hard she tried to get them to stop.

The guard shifted sleepily on her feet. It had been a long night on guard duty, with all the excitement halfway through it. Guarding the old woman wasn't that high a priority, and it always seemed that they were the last to be replaced during the change of the guard.

Leaning forward onto her toes, Rhain pressed her face into the fabric of the tent. She wrinkled her nose as the smell off the unwashed fabric traveled up into her nose; dirt, sweat, and other things she probably didn't want to know. She nearly cheered as her fingers wrapped around the cool metal keys. Her hand slick with sweat, she nearly lost her grasp. As quietly as she could, she lifted them off the hook on the guard's belt.

By a small miracle, neither guard noticed the loss of the keys. Indeed, if anything, they both

seemed to be even more oblivious to what was going on around them. Behind her, the priestess quietly continued to murmur a prayer.

As the keys slid off the hook, Rhain cheered mentally. Torrin wasn't the only one with skills. With a large grin she brought her hand with the keys into the safety of the tent. The grin fell slightly as she saw how many keys were on the ring. How many prisoners do they have, she wondered. She returned to the Priestess' side. "I got the keys," she whispered as she began trying one key after another.

"Good, child." The priestess whispered, reaching one trembling hand out to touch Rhain's shoulder. "We must hurry, I fear."

"How did you get here? Have you seen Torrin?" Rhain stopped questioning her when she found the right key. With a small groan the metal separated.

"I met Torrin and Luna at the Abbey, back before the winter," the Priestess whispered, her head turning back and forth as if she were trying to see something through her ruined eyes. "She is near. We must go soon, or I fear She may take your sister."

Rhain felt her spirits fall. "She? She who? Oh, Goddess, this is all my fault."

"Hurry, child," the Priestess urged, not answering her question.

Rhain looked around. It was obvious they couldn't go out the way she'd come in. "Don't rush me. I'm thinking as fast as I can." Then with a sheepish look, Rhain reached down to her boot and pulled out a small knife she had forgotten was there. Going to the back of the tent she made a small cut at eye level and peeked out.

Not seeing anyone nearby, she slit the back of the tent and went back to the old woman. She bent over and wrapped an arm around the Priestess and helped her up. Once at eye-level she cringed. "Oh, Goddess. What did they do your eyes?"

The Priestess patted Rhain's cheek with a thin, emaciated hand. "Shh, it is all right child. Quickly now, you will have to lead me. Now I understand why the Goddess sent me south."

O-o-okay," Rhain stuttered, not able to really focus for a moment. Finally she looked somewhere else rather than at the blood-caked holes where the Priestess's eyes had been.

Taking the younger woman's hand again, the Priestess waited for Rhain to lead the way. "You must look for the largest tent."

Rhain nodded and then realized how stupid that was. "Okay."

She led her outside and stopped once they were clear of the foul prisoners' tent. She looked around for a place to leave the Priestess while she searched for the other tent.

The Priestess tugged on Rhain's hand, drawing the warrior's attention. "Quickly, hide us," she hissed.

Frantically, Rhain searched for a place to hide. Not seeing much she pulled them behind some hay bales that were used for the oxen and horses.

A group of Southern warriors passed by the place they had just been standing, The Priestess relaxed her claw-like grip on Rhain's arm. "Now we can go."

"Wow, that was close," Rhain breathed out. "Can you stay here while I go looking for Torrin and that big tent?"

"No child, my destiny is with you," the Priestess whispered.

Rhain bit her lip but finally shrugged. "Okay then." She took the old woman's hand and helped her up. She scanned the camp. "Well, that looks like the big tent over there." Rhain started walking as carefully as she could so not to trip her companion or attract attention.

#####

Khelin looked at the black serpentine blade glinting in the candlelight. "Goodbye, Torrin," the Southern Queen whispered, a smile on her face as she drew the dagger up, ready to plunge it into the chest of the woman tied to the table top.

The blade tip glinted as the Southern Queen drove it downward. The tip scraped through Torrin's right shoulder and buried itself into the tabletop. Khelin laughed at the expression on Torrin's face. "What? You thought I would kill you without having more fun?" With a yank she pulled the dagger free, grinned and sliced Torrin's other shoulder, letting the blood flow freely.

The music inside Torrin's head faltered, becoming discordant. Her face twisted into agony and she screamed out, thrashing in her restraints.

Khelin laughed again, loving the feeling of power she had over the other woman. This was what she had been missing ever since Luna had escaped her clutches. Idly, she traced the tip of the blade along smooth skin. "Now, where should I bleed you next?"

Panting, Torrin pushed the pain away again as she delved into another musical score in her head. She was far from Khelin and her torture. She was in a safe place where the pain of the real world couldn't touch her.

The smile slipped from Khelin's face as Torrin mastered her pain. Dark eyes narrowed as the Southern Queen studied the relaxed form on the tabletop in front of her. "Well, this is no fun," she muttered, pondering her next slice.

With a sneer at the woman stretched out in front of her, Khelin dug her finger into the cut on Torrin's shoulder. "Torrin, can you feel that?"

Torrin blinked, coming out of her safe place for a moment. Oddly, she didn't feel any pain. "No," she mumbled. "Are you doing something?"

Khelin blinked in surprise. In all the times she'd done this, no one had ever answered her by saying no. Then the burning started, seeping into the bite wound that Torrin had given her earlier. Swearing, Khelin yanked her finger free, shaking it. Then when that did nothing, she plunged her hand into a pitcher of water, washing the blood from it. Still the burning grew, spreading through her veins.

Torrin drifted away back to her music that made her feel safe and free of pain. She hummed a southern jig very softly.

"You bitch, what did you do?" Khelin swore, grabbing at the ceremonial dagger. The pain radiating from her hand was a constant distraction and she nearly dropped the dagger. Her face a mask of rage she drew the dagger upward. This time she was aiming for Torrin's heart.

A blur streaked from the back of the tent, a tall body running right for the Southern Queen.

Any other time Khelin would have cut the interloper down long before she had reached her. Now though, confused and distracted by the pain in her hand, and focused on killing the one who had caused it, Khelin didn't realize the invader was there until too late.

Rhain felt her heart lurch as she peeked inside the tent. She was going to be too late. Seeing what to her seemed to be the biggest knife she'd ever seen being aimed at her half-sister's heart, gave her feet movement. She burst from her frozen stance running directly at the Southern Queen. 'Faster' she told herself over and over. She had to make it in time.

Driving her body into Khelin's, she reached with a long arm for the knife.

The force of the impact sent them both tumbling backward over throne. Even caught unaware and distracted by the fire in her veins, Khelin was still a warrior. With a wrench, she sent Rhain flipping over, slamming the taller woman into the floor.

The Priestess felt her way into the tent, following the sounds of the fight, whispering under her breath as she prayed they were not too late.

Khelin grunted as she took the kick to the stomach. The dagger went flying to the side, skittering under the table that Torrin was still tied to.

Rhain got to her feet sizing up her opponent. While she was taller, the Southern Queen's eyes seemed to dance with an unholy darkness that made Rhain shudder. She knew the odds weren't in

her favor but she had to keep going, she had to make things right. Pulling out her own small knife she lunged at the mad Queen, slicing at the unprotected stomach.

Khelin, her lips curled back in what was a smile only in name, exclaimed, "Oh, how nice, someone's trying to save you, Torrin." Fumbling behind her, the Southern Queen picked up the first thing she touched, a second ceremonial dagger. This one was unlike the first one. This one was long and curved. With a snarl she met Rhain halfway, the clash of metal on metal ringing out in the tent.

Rhain tried to power the smaller woman back, using her height as leverage, but felt her panic rise, the woman was unmovable.

Khelin's smile turned nasty. "I hope you love that Moon Goddess of yours, you are about to meet her," Khelin purred, switching to the attack, driving Rhain backward.

Rhain tried to push back and keep her ground. Finally she had to take a step back and then another.

While they fought, the Priestess, staying low, fumbled her way across the floor and bumped up against the tabletop. "Torrin?" she whispered. "Torrin?" the Priestess called urgently, and then felt the warm body on the tabletop. She inadvertently ripped a few of the slender needles from the body. "Torrin, please, is that you?" the Priestess begged.

Torrin stopped humming and gave a small moan. Her glazed-over eyes blinked and she stared at the sightless woman in front of her.

"It isn't your time yet, child." the Priestess whispered, fumbling with the ropes that held Torrin captive. "Quickly, you must go." Grabbing Torrin's arm, she half dragged the wounded woman off the tabletop.

Torrin moaned in pain as her arm was pulled and the wounds wept more blood. She sat up blinking and jerked her arm away. She pulled the rest of the torturous needles out of her flesh. With the needles gone, she shifted until she slid off the table. She grimaced as the world spun and her stomach lurched.

The clang of metal on metal was reaching a crescendo as Khelin and Rhain sparred, blades flashing. Khelin pressed Rhain back step by step, the smile on the Southern Queen's face growing as she gained the advantage.

Rhain saw her sister fall off the table and knew she just needed to keep Khelin occupied long enough for Torrin to escape. Feeling somewhat renewed, Rhain pressed back and lashed out with a punch to the Queen's face.

Khelin's head whipped backward as Rhain landed the punch. Grabbing the wrist of the hand that Rhain held the dagger in, Khelin drove her own dagger upward, plunging it up into Rhain's

stomach and angling under the ribs. "Fool," Khelin spat.

Rhain's eyes widened and her hands fell to the blood gushing from her stomach. She staggered back and fell to her knees. Closing her eyes, she hoped what she had done had been enough.

Planting her foot on the fallen woman's chest, Khelin shoved Rhain's body aside. Reaching under the tabletop, she grabbed the first ceremonial dagger. "Now, where were we?" she asked, spinning around, only to find that Torrin was gone.

"What?" Jerking her gaze upwards she spotted Torrin and the fool of a Priestess hobbling toward the door. "No!"

The Priestess shoved Torrin forward, sending her tumbling out of the tent. "Run!"

Still in the tent, the Priestess turned and faced in the direction of the Southern Queen.

Khelin advanced on the sightless Priestess, blade in hand. "I should have killed you earlier."

The Priestess smiled, raising her hands as if in offering to the sky above. "But you didn't."

Khelin drove the blade home.

[Continued...](#)

Psst... coming next, the last chapter.

[Windstar's and Zee's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)

~ Blood and Honor ~

by Windstar and Zee

Blood and Honor

Zee: By an American and a Canadian well mostly the Canadian, it's her fault.

Windstar: Zee is, as usual, making things up. This story is completely her fault and a result of her imagination only. I claim no responsibility for this at all.

A huge thank you to Claudia and Lucy for their help throughout this monstrosity of a novel and to everyone else who has enjoyed reading this.

Feedback is always welcome at: zeeamy@gmail.com, or Adarkbow@yahoo.com

PROLOGUE

From the Book of Exodus:

In the nineteenth year of Selene's reign as Queen of the North, a new tradition was brought into being, that of Rezan, or the Consort of the Queen. In that time the first children of those who had escaped the lands of men were becoming women themselves. This first generation of northerners was finding their way in the world. The Queen's daughter, Cassia, had grown up knowing that she too would be Queen and believed she was in love with a daughter of two scheming merchants, named Sable.

It is from this that the tradition of Rezan arose.

Tradition's Passage: From the second part of The Book of Exodus in the Queen's Castle.

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It was odd, Selene considered as the three women made their way down the street through what had become a bustling town. The years together with Nix had been the happiest she could have imagined and when Nix had given birth to their daughter Cassia she thought she might die of happiness.

Then had come the teen years and problems had started in earnest. Culminating in their daughter's infatuation, she refused to call it love, with Sable. There was no way any of the other families were going to accept Cassia as Queen if she married an obvious idiot like Sable and her scheming, devious, money grubbing parents.

She looked up anxiously at the woman walking alongside her toward the still under construction temple. "I think Crow is onto something, Nix. We can make it so that anyone who wants to marry our little girl has to go through some sort of trial or challenge. This way we can weed out anyone who might not be worthy."

Looking at Crow, Nix said, "What if Sable completes these trials successfully? We'll have to accept her whether we want to or not."

"Runt," Crow said as she slapped Nix's head and immediately regretted it as her back protested the movement. "This is the best I can come up with under such short notice. Moreover, if she does complete the trial, don't you think that will prove that maybe she is the right girl for your little one? You could be wrong about Sable," Crow said.

Nix snorted, slowing down. "Maybe."

Selene tugged on Nix's arm. "Hurry, love. Let's go find Willow and see what she thinks."

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

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

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

"As always, a pleasure, Priestess. So, has the Goddess told you anything exciting lately?" Crow asked.

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

Selene shook her head. "No, it's about Cassia."

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

"Runt," Crow said while clapping Nix on the back thus interrupting her. "Perhaps we should go inside Willow's house and away from nosy ears."

Willow agreed. "Come, please." She led the way to a simple log building built years ago when it became apparent that the attending priestess needed something better than just a tent when a woman wanted to become pregnant. Waving away an acolyte who had opened the door, she led the three other women into a sitting room inside.

"Kristin, why don't you go make sure we have enough candles for tomorrow's service." She turned back to the women. "Please sit and rest. Can I get anyone something to drink or eat?"

Three heads shook side to side.

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

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

ceremony?"

Selene took a seat next to Nix, taking a large hand in her own for strength and support. "She thinks she's in love with Sable and wants to marry her." Selene looked genuinely upset at the idea.

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

"Is it possible that she is in love with her?" Willow folded her hands on the tabletop.

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

"If I thought for an instant that Sable would make her truly happy, I wouldn't be this upset about it." Selene chimed in.

Willow considered the three of them, then nodded and sighed. "I could try to put off the ceremony until they were older. But I assume Sable's parents are pushing for this to go forward?"

"Of course." Nix raised an eyebrow at Willow. She knew Sable's mothers had been good friends with Laurel. "They think it's great. They have this notion of what a Queen should be," Nix said with disdain. "They've been quite vocal with their opinion of the disgusting smith who dared to rise above her place."

Selene just gripped Nix's hand tighter. She'd heard those opinions as well.

"You look like someone with a plan over there, Crow," Willow drawled.

Crow made a face at the Priestess. "Yes, I think the solution is a series of tasks, or trials. That way, once completed no one will worry about a woman who will become the right hand of the Queen, who wishes to be a... um..." She frowned looking for a word. "... a Rezan." She smiled, that was a good word. "Tests for anyone who wishes to be the Queen's Rezan. They will prove devotion and loyalty to the Queen and the land she rules."

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

Three heads nodded again.

"Who would you have design these trials?" she asked Crow.

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

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

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

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

She wished she could come up with a better idea, but Selene didn't have one either. "I'm for it as well."

Willow bowed her head. "So be it. I'll publicly support it. You do realize we might be setting a precedent here. All the future Queen's consorts, um, Rezans might end up having to go through this."

"Hopefully, they will understand it's intended only to prove merit, heart and mettle." Crow said. "Those who rule have different needs. Was Selene not attacked by an ex-lover, but by a God as well? I would say Nix has proved herself to the Queen and its people by protecting and saving her from them."

"And would that be such a horrible thing?" Selene asked, smiling toward Nix. "Might stop people from complaining."

Nix blushed. She hoped no one else trying to be a Rezan would have to fight off Gods or ex-lovers.

Chapter 13

Luna stood on the remains of the North's battle lines and watched the dawn arrive. With the gradual lightening of the eastern sky, she could see individual features of the land around her appear. When the first edge of the sun appeared above the horizon, Luna drew her sword. Without a backward glance, she walked down the earth mound, and started toward the southern lines.

"Luna!"

"Yes?" she called back, not breaking her stride.

"Want a couple of Fire Warriors?" Fyre asked as she caught up to Luna, her own sword out. The twins came up on her other side, grinning roguishly at her.

"Good to see you." Luna gave her friends a smile. She glanced up at the cloudless sky. "It's going to be a nice day, don't you think?"

"Adrian would be here too, but the healer won't let her." Fyre glanced up. "Oh yes, a lovely day." Fyre turned her head and shouted. "Fire Warriors! Classic wedge formation!" The sound of hooves and feet moving drifted up behind them.

Ember yawned and scratched her unruly red hair. "Tasha's coming up on the flank with the Rangers. Gonna to give us a storm of arrows."

The quieter, more thoughtful Emily looked at Luna. "Tyra wanted me to give you a message. She said you have to believe she's still alive. Because she knows in her heart that Torrin still lives." Emily glanced at Luna shyly. "I hope that made sense to you." She blushed and then frowned when Ember poked her. She poked Ember back, but before the twins could get into it more, Fyre pulled Ember to stand over by her.

"Children," Fyre said with a shrug and then blocked the kick Ember had aimed at her shin.

Luna swallowed past the lump in her throat. She simply nodded at them, feeling a weight lifted from her chest. Tyra was right. Torrin was still alive. She had to believe in that hard enough so it would be true.

The Northern line grew as warriors, mothers, daughters and sisters joined them. Everyone who could wield a sword, carry a bow or hoist a shield, joined the line. The walk turned into a jog, and the jog into a run, as they streamed toward the Southern camp. Cries of alert from the camp slowly began to sound as the Northerners did the unexpected. In front of the advancing line, Southerners frantically swarmed into action. They swung the heavy cannons around and aimed them down at the charging Northerners.

Fear coil in Luna stomach. If Khelin's people had somehow figured out what had happened during the night and undone it, her people would die long before they reached the camps.

A stout Southern hefted the cannonball into the mouth of her cannon only to watch the belly of the cannon give way and the ball fell to the earth. She looked up at her fellow cannon operators in surprise. At the other cannon, a stouter soldier than the first woman lifted a heavy cannonball into the mouth of the cannon and then quickly grabbed a rod to pack it in tight. Moving to her right, she shouted, "Cannon ready!"

Another woman nodded at the confirmation and lowered the flame to the coiled wick. The flame

leapt to the wick and quickly ate its way down the fiber. The woman turned and yelled "Firing!" The flame ate its way down through the cannon and to Torrin's trap. The cannon exploded in a deafening boom and covered the small area in thick black smoke.

Luna flinched at the blossoming explosion and watched debris hurtle upward into the air. She smiled in relief as her long legs ate up the distance between her and the main Southern lines. Beside her, ran her sisters in arms. Before the Southerners could react to the loss of their cannons, Luna's warriors rolled over them. Shouting war cries, they cut down everything in front of them, barely slowing as they continued towards the main camp. They swept through the two smaller southern camps like a wildfire. No quarter asked and none given as Luna and the Clan leaders led their troops. Only a few northern warriors fell during the attack due to the element of surprise and the distraction of the cannon blowing up.

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Khelin shoved the priestess's body aside, and staggered outside as a wave of pain shot through her body. Whatever Torrin had done to her was spreading, weakening her. "Torrin!" she screamed, brandishing the bloody dagger.

A deafening boom rocked through the camp. For a moment, all was still until women began to scramble for their weapons. Khelin spun around, her eyes widening as she spotted the stream of Northern warriors heading towards the camp.

"My Queen!" the disheveled advisory shouted as she ran to Khelin's tent. She paused as she entered, taking in the two bloody bodies. "A busy night I see," she whispered to herself. "My Queen, are you okay?" She glanced around the huge tent.

"I'm here!" Khelin yelled as she reentered the tent, tossed aside the dagger and grabbed her sword. "What happened to my cannons?" she demanded.

"I-I-I'm not sure. I would guess sabotage. There is a large hole where the third cannon use to be and a lot of unattached body parts," the woman answered. "I'll go and make sure the generals are up and organizing your troops." With a quick bow, the woman fled.

"Useless," Khelin muttered, strapping on her sword. She made a mental note to dispose of this most recent advisor the next time she had a spare moment. Striding from the tent, she watched the Northerners overwhelm the two smaller camps. She bellowed for her warriors to gather around her.

As Luna led the charge towards the main southern camp, the element of surprise had passed. Southern warriors were creating a line of battle as Luna struggled to run faster toward them. Around her, the others forced themselves to keep up, legs and lungs burning from the strain. Halfway between the two camps, Luna waved her sword, still visible in the early morning gloom,

a dim glow emanating from the blade. "Tasha! Now!" The Rangers stopped, drew arrows and began to fill the sky with them, pelting the still forming southern line with deadly accuracy.

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Dazed and confused, Torrin staggered in a circle and ended up back at the tent from which she had escaped. She was vaguely aware of noises that sounded like battle nearby, but she didn't care. She was numb from her head to her toes and void of any emotions. Inside the tent, her feet sticking to the blood covered floor, she stared uncomprehendingly at the body of the priestess lying crumpled up to the side of the front tent flap.

"Stupid woman. Why couldn't you do what I asked and gone back to the Abbey?" Torrin croaked out. Another body caught her eye. Torrin knelt by her half-sister's side. "You think I endured all that just so you could die?" she whispered to the bloody body.

Rhain groaned. "Gods..., Torrin, always 'bout you."

Torrin blinked. "Oh, good Goddess, you're not dead!" With her good hand, she rolled Rhain's body over and saw the dagger jutting up from the woman's stomach. Blood flowed freely from the gaping wound.

Rhain's cloudy eyes cleared. " Didn't fail. You... free." She coughed for a moment, wincing as pain shot up her body.

Torrin gazed down at her sadly. "No, you didn't fail. Come on, we have to get you out of here and to a healer."

Rhain feebly smiled back. "Don't think so. Go... 'fore Khelin comes back. So much you... meant to do. Sorry ... so long for me...to see you as you really are." She coughed again, blood rising to her lips. She gasped, "Torrin, you... my sister. Proud...that. Proud ...found your way. The North... lucky to have you. Don't forget tha...".

Torrin got up from the lifeless body, her face expressionless. She ripped some of the fine cloth Khelin had draped around her tent and awkwardly bound her wounds to slow the bleeding. As she walked out of the tent, she snatched a short sword from the Southern Queen's weapon rack. She would have Khelin's blood.

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Outside, in the midst of the battle Tasha watched as the rain of arrows fell and pierced the bodies of the hastily dressed Southern warriors. Notching another arrow, she cried out. "Again!" She drew her bow taut and then released.

Fyre set herself up to guard Luna's back. She knew Torrin would have wanted her to. She sighed mentally as she gripped her sword tightly. It was sort of her fault Torrin wasn't here and she knew

bad things happened during war. Nevertheless, this simple logic didn't make her feel any better about it.

Luna continued to charge straight towards the main Southern formation, a scream coming from her lips as she closed to the last few feet. The Southerners, not as heavily armored as they usually were, fell quickly as the fully protected Northerners slammed into them. For a moment, Luna caught sight of Khelin, standing behind her warriors, yelling orders. Then there was nothing but blades and bodies pushing and attacking at her, and the twirl of her own blade slicing arcs of light through the air and drawing blood.

+++++

The battle became a swirling mass of chaos as the Southern line disintegrated. Even though the Northerners were badly outnumbered, they forced a wedge into the center of the Southern forces, curling them apart. The fighting deteriorated into small clumps of conflict. Luna cut her way through another Southerner, blood splattering across her armor as she frantically searched the camp for her target. There... she could see Khelin, trying to rally her troops. Luna's face set into grim determination she started to fight her way toward the Southern Queen, cutting down anything in her way.

Fyre suddenly realized she had been cut off from Luna and shouted for twins. "Ember and Emily! To Luna! Guard Luna's back!" Ember nodded and twisted around her opponent and raced to Luna's side.

Forced to fight this time, Khelin cut down the Fire and Earth warriors who came at her. Around her, a growing number of her own warriors were beginning to rally. Darkness seemed to spill from the black long sword she wielded, dimming the sunrise, and lengthening the morning shadows around her.

It seemed to Luna, as she fought her way that way, those shadows seemed to sap the strength of any of her people who entered them. "Khelin!" Luna screamed, ducking a sword slice from a Southerner, then cut the woman across the stomach and sent her tumbling to the side. "Khelin!" Luna yelled again, her sword glowing brighter with each step toward the mass of shadows. When the sword light met the dark shadows, they seemed to burn, writhing in the pure silvery light from her blade. Gradually, she forced them backward and ultimately driving them away from her warriors.

Ember raced to keep up with Luna but then stopped, stunned by the display of light and dark. Emily, coming from the other side, slashed out, blocking a warrior attempting to sneak up behind Luna.

Torrin's blood burned through Khelin's veins, robbing the Southern Queen of much of her strength. It should have been easy to force Luna's light aside. She was half god after all, but instead, it was all she could do to keep her own shadows gathered around herself.

+++++

By sheer force of will, Torrin kept her body moving toward the sounds of battle. A Southern soldier stared at the woman coming at her. Torrin looked like the dead brought back to life with blood streaking her body and dripping to the ground. Too late to react, Torrin's sword pierced her chest. With a grunt, Torrin removed her sword and kept moving forward.

+++++

Luna cut her way through the last of the warriors between her and Khelin, and attacked the Southern Queen. Light and dark blades met with a booming crash of sound and a flash of light that blinded those nearby. Shadow and light surged and enveloped the two women in an eerily, beautiful, writhing dance.

"Khelin," Luna snarled, slamming her blade against the Queen's sword.

"Luna," Khelin replied with a sarcastic smile. "Did you miss me, my pet?"

"I'm going to kill you." Luna grunted, blocking a swing.

The dark-haired woman laughed, slashing repeatedly at Luna, the blades sparking when they hit. "Don't forget, you wear my brand, Luna. That makes you Mine!"

+++++

On the edge of the battlefield, gray eyes stared at the Southern Calvary that was trying to gather itself. Torrin focused her will and commanded the horses to flee. Without warning, the horses began to buck and twist, losing their riders as they suddenly spooked.

Focusing in on a small, midnight-colored horse, Torrin asked for its help. Slowly, it made its way to her. Torrin stood quietly, letting the horse's breath wash over her. Then she slowly reached up and with a scream of pain, hauled herself up into the saddle. Torrin leaned against the horse's neck, her eyes closed and her breath shallow. The stallion picked his way through the dead and the dying looking for the person his mistress held in her mind.

+++++

"I'll never be yours." Luna growled, shoving Khelin back a step and going on the offensive.

The battle around them faded away as each concentrated on killing the other. Luna and Khelin fought their own private war, swords clashing as each briefly found an advantage, then slowly forced back again.

Fyre came up finally upon the Twins. "I thought I told you two to watch Luna's back."

Ember shrugged. Emily looked up to her big sister and then pointed to Luna. "I'm not going in there."

Fyre looked to where her sister pointed. "Oh shit. That's... that's... what is that?"

From the outside, little of the two women could be seen, only circling vortexes of light and shadow that danced and annihilated each other.

Luna winced as Khelin's blade drew blood along her chest, opening a small wound. Khelin grinned, pressing her attack. "My Mother will feast on your soul."

"I'm going to make you pay for what you've done to Torrin and me, Khelin," Luna grunted, blocking the series of blows the other woman was landing.

Khelin grimaced in agony and lowered her sword as the burning in her blood redoubled at the mention of Torrin's name.

Luna took advantage of the distraction. With a quick swing upward, and then a reverse, she sent Khelin's blade tumbling to the side. A slice to the legs brought Khelin to her knees with a scream.

"You'll always be Mine, Luna!" Khelin shrieked, as the pain Torrin's name caused overwhelmed her.

Luna brought her sword back, and then swung again. The blade sliced through the air with a shrill whistle, cutting cleanly through Khelin's neck and sending the Queen's head tumbling to the blood soaked ground. "I was never yours, Khelin," she spat as she kicked the head aside. "Never."

With the death of Khelin, the light and shadow pyrotechnics died as well. The suddenly bright morning sunshine highlighted the body of the dead queen and the victorious Northern Ranger.

A stunned silence fell upon the battlefield.

Luna raised her glowing sword, pointing the tip toward the nearest Southern officer she could see. With great effort, she held the sword steady. "Surrender," she called out.

Her response was the sound of the officer's weaponry hitting the ground.

The sound of dropped weapons rang out throughout the camp. Luna didn't know whether to laugh or weep. Wearily she turned, nodding to Fyre and the twins. "Anyone seen Torrin?" she asked hopefully.

Ember shrugged and shook her head.

Fyre smacked Ember. "When your Commander asks a question, you respond in a respectful manner."

Ember shoved Fyre back.

"Commander?" Luna asked, giving Fyre a bewildered look.

Fyre and Ember stopped their shoving and looked at each other. Then Fyre looked at Luna. "Um, Luna if you haven't noticed, we've been following your command for quite some time. We followed you into battle today even though there was a good chance we would all die. We did it because we believe in you and we knew our chances were better with you leading."

Luna blinked, opened her mouth, closed it and then shook her head. Later...she'd deal with this later. First, she had to find Torrin.

Emily answered her initial question and quietly said, "No, not yet. But we should probably look for her in the Queen's tent."

Luna didn't know if she had the strength for that. What if Tyra's intuition had been wrong? What if Torrin was dead? She struggled not to think of the anguish that would cause her.

Suddenly the shadows around Khelin's body seemed to gather and swirl. They spun faster and faster until they made the form of a body. Luna swiveled to face this new threat, tiredly lifting her sword only out of habit. She felt drained, barely able to think.

"You!" a voice wailed, thick with anger and grief. "You will pay for this."

Luna knew she should be afraid, but she just couldn't manage it. "Go away Shadow," she said tiredly. "You do not hold sway here."

"I hold more sway than you think." The Mistress of Shadow's stared at the body of her only child and felt an unfamiliar sadness piercing her breast. In a gentle movement, the Goddess picked up the body of her headless child. "You think your people are so pure of heart that I cannot gain a foothold, yet I held the heart of your very own warrior leader, Quinn." Shadows swirled around Khelin's head until it disappeared. "I am the Goddess of Vengeance and I will have it!" she vowed as she vanished with her child.

Luna closed her eyes at the threat. So, what she had feared about Quinn was true. She set aside the implications for the moment. Her primary goal now was to find Torrin.

"Fyre, see if you can find Janice and ask her to..." she trailed off, her attention caught by the sound of a horse whinnying nearby.

"Ask her to what?" Fyre questioned. "Um, Luna you okay?"

"Torrin!" Luna shouted, all fatigue forgotten as she sprinted toward the form slumped over the horse's back. "Tasha!" Luna called over her shoulder. "Get a healer!"

"Torrin? Where?" Fyre sighed as Luna took off. Frye looked at Emily. "You and your sister round up the other leaders and get them to start organizing this mess. I'll take care of Luna." The two younger women nodded and scampered off.

The stallion gave a soft whinny in worry. He whinnied again. The approaching woman looked like the one he had been commanded to find. The stallion stopped as the woman raced toward him. He laid his ears back and nervously stamped a foot.

"Easy, easy there." Luna tried to soothe the skittish animal. She sheathed her sword and held both hands out for the horse to sniff.

Fyre ran over to help Luna. "Here, let me get her down, you hold the animal."

Luna grabbed the dangling reins, doing her best to soothe the wary animal. "Shh, there you go, see, it's all right." All the while, she nervously watched Fyre lifted Torrin off the horse.

Fyre had seen many injuries as a warrior but she felt herself pale as she lifted Torrin up.

Luna gasped at the sight of her lover, letting go of the horse's reins as she rushed to Torrin's side. "Torrin, what did she do to you?" Luna whispered, helping Fyre lower her to the ground. Gently she brushed dark hair back from Torrin's face.

"By the Goddess, I never want to know what that bitch did to her," Fyre blurted out.

Tasha ran across the ground dragging a healer behind her. "What's going on?" She stopped in her tracks "Torrin? Oh my! What happened to her?"

Luna had a good idea from her own experience at Khelin's hand. With tears in her eyes, Luna looked up from where she knelt. "Quick, get her back to the Abbey."

Torrin whimpered and thrashed in the bed, tangling herself up in the bed sheets. Her eyes fluttered open and she tried to sit up. Finding her limbs trapped and thinking she was back in Khelin's tent, she began to scream.

Luna snapped awake and fell off the bed in her scramble to get to the thrashing Torrin. Cursing, she got up off the floor. "Torrin, it's all right, you're all right."

Torrin flinched as out of the corner of her eye, she caught a shape coming at her. "Nooooo!" Torrin struggled harder with the sheets until she fell from the bed. Scrambling on all fours, she tucked herself into a small ball in a corner.

Luna froze, and then very slowly approached the terrified woman making low calming noises. Gently she touched Torrin's back, letting Torrin feel her warmth. "Torrin, it's me, it's Luna," she whispered, trying to draw Torrin out of her nightmares.

Torrin flinched and shrank against the touch. But after a moment, Luna's presence filtered through the fog in her mind. "Luna?" Torrin whispered, but she didn't look up... afraid it was another trick by Khelin.

Moving closer, Luna slid her hands down Torrin's arms, trying to reassure the other woman that she was there. "Yes love, it's me."

Torrin slowly began to shift her body out of its protective curve. "Luna?" She asked again as she lifted her head and looked at the woman behind her.

Luna brushed her hand through Torrin's short dark hair, waiting for those gray eyes to focus on her face. "I'm here."

Torrin didn't say anything but turned, wrapping her arms around Luna. Burying her face in Luna's hair, she breathed in its sweet scent. Finally, she knew it was not an illusion. "Luna," she whispered more to herself.

Luna closed her eyes, holding Torrin close, but mindful of the woman's still healing wounds. The healers had worked miracles, but even miracles needed the time to heal the damage that Khelin had wrought. Only when the cold of the stone floor started to seep into her, did Luna pull away. "Come on, let's get back into bed?"

Torrin just nodded her head and let Luna help her up.

Luna tucked them both back into the narrow bed in the Healer's room. "How do you feel?" Luna asked finally, breaking the silence as she carefully held Torrin close to her.

Torrin blinked and stared at the ceiling.

"Numb. I feel like I'm not really here." She searched her mind for clues to what had happened but came up empty. "What happened? Where's Khelin?"

"She's dead." Luna answered simply, wrapping her arms tighter around Torrin and offering her what comfort she could.

"Oh," Torrin mumbled. "I hope it was painful." Torrin shivered, remembering the needles placed in her skin with such glee by Khelin.

"I cut her head off." Luna said quietly, pressing her lips to the top of Torrin's head.

Torrin snorted. "Couldn't have happened to a more deserving person. She pulled back and looked at Luna. "She killed Rhain, you know. I told my stupid sister to go back to the Abbey and what does she do? She comes right back into the serpent's den."

Nodding, Luna softly replied, "She rescued you, Torrin."

A lone tear fell from Torrin's eye, followed quickly by others. "She saved my life actually," she sniffed. I was so far gone. Khelin was going to kill me and I really didn't care. Then, she and that Priestess was there... freeing me, urging me to leave."

Luna gathered the smaller woman into her arms and cradled her as she cried. She knew there was little for her to say.

Torrin just let herself be held and eventually cried herself to sleep.

It was daylight when Luna woke up, cramped and hurting but still holding Torrin. It was a sensation she wouldn't trade for anything. She found that she didn't want to let go and the thought scared her. For several minutes, Luna studied Torrin, tracing a finger down along her jaw and cheek. Torrin felt comfortable in her arms, warm and solid, a comforting reminder that they were both alive. Giving into her growing impulse, she leaned over Torrin and gently kissed her. She started with little nibbles and let her fingers traced paths across her body.

Waking up, Torrin shivered and then stilled. Warily, she assessed the touches to her body, but felt no violence in the caresses, only gentleness. "Luna?" Torrin breathed out.

"Hmm, hmmm?" Luna murmured, teasing an available earlobe with her teeth. "Good morning."

Air rapidly sucked into her lungs with the sensation and sluggishly, Torrin opened her eyes. She looked at Luna and felt warmth creep in and slowly fill up the hollowness in her soul. "It wasn't a dream. We won?" she said more to herself.

Luna smiled widely and nodded. She never expected to survive the battle either. To live and find herself holding Torrin was more than she had thought possible. She just knew she was going to explode from happiness.

"How do you feel?" Luna gently touched the bandages that covered the worst of Torrin's wounds.

"Better," Torrin answered, giving a small lopsided smile.

Luna ducked her head to press one last, lingering kiss to Torrin's lips, then threw aside the covers, stretched and stood up.

Torrin's smile disappeared into a frown. "Where are you going?" She was perfectly happy to stay

in bed and let the rest of the world rot.

"We've got things to do." Luna answered brightly, stripping out of her nightshirt to begin dressing. "I want those southern warriors sent packing before they decide to cause anymore trouble. The sooner they are out of northern lands, the better. Then we have to send a party south to see about Abnoa, and of course, send word to the Queen's City about what happened." Luna paused to smile at the smaller woman. "It's going to be a great day."

Torrin pouted and stared at the ceiling. "A great day would be spent in bed... naked."

Luna drew on a shirt, and then went back to the scowling Torrin. With a wicked smile, she bent over and kissed Torrin thoroughly, enjoying the taste of the other woman's lips. Only when her own breathing became labored did she pulled back.

"We both fought a battle yesterday, and you've been seriously injured." She brushed her fingers lightly over Torrin's lips. "I want our first time to be when we can both enjoy it." Luna could feel her face heating as a blush rose, but she had managed to say the words without stuttering. She still wasn't certain she could give herself to Torrin that way, but she certainly wanted to try again.

Dazed, Torrin blinked back at Luna. "Um...okay," she agreed. She just wasn't sure what she had just agreed to.

"Good." Luna ducked her head to hide her blush and retreated to the other side of the room to finish dressing.

As Luna got farther away Torrin found her thinking improving. With a deep sigh, she attempted to sit up. Pain. Lots of pain radiated up and down her arms and hands. A few seconds ago, her mind might have been willing, but obviously, her flesh was weak.

After pulling up her pants and belting on her scabbard, Luna managed to slow her racing heart. She hadn't meant to take things quite so fast. Belatedly, she noticed Torrin's pain-etched face. "You all right?"

"Yeah," Torrin said, breathing heavily, "just forgot about the dagger Khelin repeatedly stabbed into me."

Luna crossed over to where Torrin was sitting up, and helped the shorter woman to her feet. "Hold still." She checked the bandages, making certain none of them had come off during the night. "The healers are going to want to change these soon." She traced over the angry red welts that Khelin's needles had left behind.

Torrin shivered at the touch and felt goose bumps jump up on her skin. "Needles," she said simply. "I must be rather ugly to look at. Scars on my back and now this on my front."

"No, you're beautiful," Luna whispered, her voice hoarse with emotion.

Torrin scoffed. "You're the one who's beautiful. Both inside and out, darkness doesn't touch you." She winced, remembering how the power of the shadows had enticed her before Khelin had striped them away.

Luna was silent for a moment as she helped Torrin put her shirt on. "You're wrong, you know, darkness touches me, too." The memory of Vladlin and his hounds rose in her mind and she shook her head to clear it.

"If it does, you're strong enough to push it away." Torrin winced as she tried to stretch her body. Although she could feel the fingers in her left hand, she still couldn't move that arm.

"So are you," Luna reminded her.

Torrin hugged Luna with her functioning arm. "Sorry I'm so... I don't feel myself yet," she said quietly into Luna's shoulder.

The taller woman wrapped her arms around Torrin, resting her chin on the dark head. "I think we both need some time."

A pounding at the door caused Luna to chuckle. "Ah, typical start of another day."

Torrin grinned back at her. "Should I tell them I'm naked again?"

"I don't think that will help." Luna muttered, and then called out, "Come in!"

Fyre barged in and promptly got a sheepish look on her face. "I'm sorry I didn't realize Torrin was up and you two were having a ...moment."

"You're good at interrupting our moments, Fyre," Luna said, still upset at the Fire warrior and the others who had talked Torrin into going after the cannons.

Fyre snorted, "And you both are good at keeping me from sleeping, so we're even."

Torrin grumbled and detached herself from Luna. Slowly she lowered herself to the bed. Standing and dressing had worn her out a bit.

Fyre grinned good-naturedly at them. "Luna, if you can tear yourself away from the walking dead here, we're getting ready to send the Southern army packing."

That was the best news that Luna had heard for many cycles of the moon. "I've longed to hear those words said for a long time now. In fact, since last autumn," she said, glancing toward Torrin. "Are you up for a little walk?"

Torrin made a face at Fyre. "I don't really look like the walking dead. Do I?"

Fyre laughed. "No. But there's a handful of Southern Warriors who swear you rose up from the dead to get vengeance."

"Humph," Torrin grumped, "and yes, I suppose I'm up for a walk. Actually the fresh air would be nice."

Luna offered the injured woman her arm. "Care to have an escort?"

Torrin smiled. "Only if it's you. I don't trust Fyre. She'll let me fall so she can laugh."

"Come on then, old woman." Luna grinned helping Torrin stand back up. "Let's go take a stroll."

The remaining intact area of the Abbey's courtyard had been turned into a makeshift Healers ward. The healers, many of them Priestesses of the Moon Goddess, moved through row after row of injured women. Further down the Pass, row after row of funeral pyres burned. Once night fell, more would burn again.

Luna, her arm around Torrin's waist for support, followed Fyre past the injured filled cots.

Torrin let Luna lead her outside. As the sun hit her face, she blinked and then slightly tilted her face towards its warmth. Then after a moment, she realized what was going on around her. "How many women were lost?" she asked quietly.

"Too many," was Luna's troubled answer. Half of the women who had come to hold the Northern lines were either severely injured or dead. "We lost fewer than they did though." Luna motioned down toward the Pass. "Between the slaves sent against the northern lines, and all the fighting, they lost twice as many as we did.

Torrin nodded. "How long have I been out?"

"Three days." Luna answered, helping Torrin across a section of rubble that use to be the outer wall.

"Really?" Torrin was surprised. Out for three days? Strange. But, she figured, she'd never been hurt that badly before either. So, all and all, she decided, not too bad since she had been certain that she was going to die from her encounter with Khelin.

"Um, I saw Jinette," Luna said as they walked toward the area where the Southerners were contained.

Torrin's thoughts paused and she processed what Luna had said. "What? You saw my Muanya?"

How?"

Luna smiled as they slowly made their way down the slope. "She came to me during a, um, a bad part of the night." Luna decided to leave out the part about Vladlin. "She told me you were alive." Luna still wondered if she would have folded had Torrin's Muanya not appeared.

Torrin smiled brightly. "I'm so glad she could be there for you when you needed someone." Torrin's smile fell and tears gathered in her eyes as she remembered trying to hold on so she could be with Luna again and how close she had come to failing in her promise to return.

"Hey," Luna whispered, turning her so that they faced each other. Gently she wiped Torrin's tears away with her fingertips and felt her own eyes water. "It's okay. We both made it," she whispered and wrapped her arms around Torrin.

"I'm sorry," Torrin mumbled.

"For what, love?" Luna asked.

Torrin sniffed and held back her tears. "Never mind. You're right. We made it. I'm just being silly."

Luna simply smiled and squeezed Torrin once more. Then she released her. "You want to keep going?" She motioned down the slope. "We could keep them waiting, I wouldn't mind."

Torrin squeezed Luna back. "No, let's get them sent back home. That way, they stop taking up valuable time we could be using to do other things."

Luna liked the sound of that. Making a face at a grinning Fyre, Luna continued to help Torrin down the slope again.

"You know, Tyra came to see you a lot, Torrin. She'll probably have a fit when she finds out you are awake and I didn't get her. Tasha came to see you too." Luna hesitated a moment then plunged on. "Um, Rhain's set to be sent back to the Moon Goddess tonight."

Torrin blinked back another onrush of tears. "I'm glad I can be here to honor her tonight." She gave a small sigh. "I'm not sure what happened to her, but I think the woman who came back to save me was the real her." She wiped a tear away. "And I'm glad I got a glimpse of that woman."

Luna wanted to ask more questions about what had happened, but this wasn't the time or place. With a few more steps, they reached the area where the majority of the surviving southerners were being held. Most had simply fled after Khelin's death. Those who didn't, were quickly rounded up, disarmed, and put under guard. It was this group of dirty, forlorn, and demoralized women that watched Luna and Torrin come to a stop in front of them.

Alyssandra, her arm bound from a nasty cut she had taken during the battle, met them with a nod.

"Ladies." The head of the Wave Dancers gave Torrin a small wink.

Torrin frowned at Alyssandra. "Why did she wink at me?" Torrin whispered to Luna. "Isn't she married?"

Luna coughed, her face turning a brilliant red as she blushed. "I have no idea." she squeaked, giving Alyssandra a dirty look.

Fyre laughed at the exchange and slapped Torrin on the back as she walked past her.

Torrin winced and glared at Fyre, and then turned her attention back to the captive southerners. "How the mighty have fallen," she muttered. The soldiers were no longer preening Birds of Paradise. Instead, they looked more like plucked pheasants ready to be sent to the cook. "So, what are we going to do with them?" she asked Luna.

"We gave the mercenaries who switched side the option to leave. Most of them did right after the battle," Luna said, frowning slightly as she studied the women in front of her. She expected to feel hate or at least anger towards them, but instead, she could barely manage pity.

"Well, they can't stay here," Alyssandra pointed out reasonably. "Even now it's taking a lot of women to guard them. The sooner they're gone, the better.

"Send them back with an escort of the Earth tribe," Torrin suggested. "They need to go back to Abnoa and clean out Khelin's stink." Torrin paused in thought. "Don't they have a Second in Command? You need someone to sign a treaty. It should be valid until someone fills Khelin's void... still plenty of time for them to go back home."

Luna nodded, and took a step forward, grinning as she saw that the guards nearest to her were Emily and Ember. "Who here is Khelin's second?" she shouted.

A dirty woman with a black eye spoke up. "Um, The Queen didn't really have a Second. She was... um... not into sharing her power. I was, however, her newest advisor."

"Lucky you," Luna muttered. "What's your name?"

She cleared her throat nervously, "I am Theoda."

"Well, Theoda, you get to sign a treaty with me. Come over here."

Luna spotted Eve emerging from one of the tents with a scroll. Ever since that earlier misunderstanding, she had been nothing but civil. Luna hoped the girl was over her crush. Eve made her way to the small group, giving Torrin a single, haughty glance, before smiling and offering Luna the scroll.

Luna sighed, took the scroll from Eve and scanned it quickly. Unlike most Wind Walker texts, this one was simple and to the point. She liked it. "Here, Theoda, take a look." She handed the scroll to the Southerner.

The ex-advisor took the scroll, opened it with a snap and began to read. She nodded her head as she read the listed points. "Hmmm, one thing. Once we reach the border to the South, I would like us to get our swords back. Under Khelin's longtime rule, there has been a philosophy of 'might equaling right'. To send us back unarmed gives us no defense against our own people." She looked up from the paper to the Northern leaders. "But other than that, I agree to these terms."

Luna didn't feel like being charitable, she'd rather see the oppressed Southerners rise up and wipe away every vestige of Khelin's rule. Still she turned to the others, raising an eyebrow in silent question.

Fyre frowned and looked to Tasha. Tasha looked back, shrugged and looked to Eve.

Torrin sighed and asked, "How many warriors are returning to Abnoa? Enough to defend it should these women decide to throw away this treaty when armed?"

The Advisor gave a sniff, "We would never..."

Torrin glared at the woman who shut up quickly. "I am *well* aware of what the South would and would not do... as you well know.

The advisor reddened and looked away. She wondered if the mercenary knew she had spent the early hours of the dawn listening to her screams.

"There aren't enough Rangers to hold Abnoa," Luna admitted, and then shrugged. "This means, we'll have to send some Fire warriors with them." Luna turned back to Theoda. "We agree to return just your swords and only when you reach the border. Make no mistake about this, though. I don't want to. I simply think there has been enough bloodshed today." Taking back the thick parchment scroll, she signed it quickly using a quill that Eve was holding. "Break this treaty, Theoda, and we will never show the South mercy again," she said.

Theoda nodded. "I thank you for your leniency." She picked the quill up, wrote her name and position, and handed the scroll back to Luna.

Luna handed the signed scroll to Eve, who bowed and tucked it away. "It will be placed in the library at the Queen's City," she said.

Fyre gave out a loud whoop. "About time!"

Luna relaxed a bit. It was almost over. "Fyre, see that these ladies are escorted out of the North." She hoped that Fyre would pick a good set of Fire warriors to help guard Abnoa until there were

once again enough Rangers to hold the Castle and the surrounding countryside.

Fyre nodded. "I'm on it." She started discussing personnel with Tasha as they walked away.

Torrin rubbed her head as she heard that strange murmuring noise again. This time though, it was only one voice. She smiled. It was asking if she was okay. Torrin turned her head, looking around. Seeing everyone was busy with negotiations, she slowly made her way to where she thought the voice was coming from. Shuffling along, she spied a horse, black as a moonless night, tied to a tree. As she approached, he nickered and threw his head back. A few braids in the long mane showed that this horse belonged to the plains.

Torrin smiled and ignoring the pain, raised a shaking hand. The stallion sniffed her outstretched hand. "Hey. I vaguely remember you. You helped me get back here." The stallion nickered again and then gently head-butted Torrin in the chest causing Torrin to cry out in pain. "Please don't do that again," she whispered to the horse.

Noticing that Torrin was missing, Luna turned and looked around, finally spotting her some distance away with a black stallion. Following her friend, Luna said nothing as she watched Torrin talk to the stallion. Finally she asked, "Are you sure you're not a Ranger?" as she watched the two of them.

Torrin turned to look at Luna. "A Ranger... me? Surely you jest."

"You're good with animals," Luna said, motioning toward the stallion. "That's a good start."

Grey eyes looked over at Luna. "What's a good start?"

"I mean, if you were trying to become a Ranger, I would say you have a good start since you're good with horses."

Torrin's hands slowly stroked the midnight colored coat and she grinned at Luna. "Is that all it takes? A silver tongue with animals?"

The taller woman found herself smiling. "Pretty much. Well, besides all of that other training stuff..." her smile widened into a grin.

Torrin's smile fell a bit. "I think I'm too worn out for the life of a Ranger." She petted the stallion a bit longer. "Perhaps a musician's life. Even with one eye I can still read music."

"What?" Luna asked, not quite certain what she meant. "What do you mean, with one eye?"

Torrin gave the horse one last scratch to the nose and slowly made her way over to Luna. "If I close my right eye, you look like a dark blob on a gray background."

Luna frowned. "And when, exactly, were you going to let me know about this?"

Torrin shrugged then looked at the stallion now pawing the ground. "You know, I think I'll name him Pollux. You don't mind if I keep him do you?"

"Of course not," Luna answered, reaching out and touching Torrin's cheek. "Anything else you want to tell me? I assume the eye injury was from the fight with the Assassins?"

Torrin let out a breath. "Yeah, that's when it started, when I cracked my head on the ice. Then there was Rhain punching me in the head, and then when I slammed into that tree on patrol. All and all my head has been busy." She looked at Luna and reached up to touch Luna's cheek.

Luna pressed a kiss to the palm of Torrin's hand, and sighed, "Come on, how about we get you back to bed? I know Tyra's probably going insane trying to find out where you are and you should rest before Rhain's sending ceremony tonight."

But when they returned to their room Torrin's mother swept her up in a fierce hug. Torrin gave a small squeal of pain as her mother squeezed her tighter and tighter.

"You're okay. You're up and walking and okay." Tyra babbled.

"Mom..."

Tyra pushed her youngest to arms length. "You didn't come see me and you're out wandering around. Was it too much to come see me and let me know?"

Luna knew when to beat a strategic retreat, and now was the time. Meeting Torrin's gray eyes, Luna smiled, shrugged, and slipped into their bedroom to leave Torrin to her mother's tender mercy.

"Mom, well, um...I'm sorry."

Tyra studied her daughter's face. "Are you really okay? When they brought you back, you were barely alive. I was so worried."

Torrin hugged her mother gently and wiped away a few tears. "I'm okay now. Look. I'm right here. Safe and sound."

Tyra shook her head. "Physically you look okay, but a lot of things happened to you. How are you..." she tapped Torrin's head softly, "inside?"

Torrin looked down. She finally responded quietly, "Better. But Mom, I don't want to tell you what happened...it's..."

"But if you want," Tyra broke in, "I'm here for you."

Torrin smiled wanly. "I know, but... it's just too much...." She fidgeted with her tunic as she tried to close off the horrific memories of that night. Finally she said softly, " Mom, at the end right...before Rhain saved me... I broke. Khelin, she broke me. She shattered who I was. I don't feel very worthy...", the tears started to fall, "and I feel hollow inside."

Tyra gathered her sobbing child into her arms. "Shhh," Tyra soothed. "It will be okay. You just need time. Luna, your sister, Fyre, and myself... we are all here for you."

After a few minutes, Torrin was able to get herself where she felt in control again. "Thanks. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Thank you for still loving me after all these years."

Tyra sniffed back a few tears of her own. "You're my daughter. I never gave up hope that I'd see you again." She hugged Torrin again. "I'm so glad you came back home."

"Me too." Torrin kissed her mother softly on the cheek. "Do you mind if I go lie down? I'm kind of worn out."

"No. Oh no, not at all," Tyra said with an understanding smile. "I'm not so old I that I don't understand that some wounds can't be healed by a mother's touch."

Torrin flushed at her mother's comment. "Um, okay, I will see you tonight then."

"Of course." Tyra patted her daughter's hand. "Don't hesitate to come to me if you need anything. Or if you want to talk."

In the other room, Luna poured wine from a pitcher into two mugs. Then, setting them aside, she took off the sword and placed it within easy reach. Sitting down by the small fireplace, she took up one of the mugs, and waited for Torrin. She envied the other woman. She wished she could talk to her mothers.

Torrin smiled warmly at Luna as she entered the room. "Hey," she said softly.

Luna looked up, smiling in return. "Hey." She motioned to the other chair and the mug of wine next to it. "I thought you might need that."

"Yes. Very much so, thanks." She sat down and took a small sip of wine. "Mmm, very nice."

Luna nodded and took a sip of her own, her blue eyes studying Torrin. "You doing all right?"

"Me. I'm fine." However, her eyes darted away from Luna's searching look.

"Mmm, hmm," Luna hummed, taking another sip of wine before standing up. Crossing the short distance between them, she knelt by the side of Torrin's chair and took the other woman's hand in hers. She waited patiently until Torrin's eyes met her own. "You want to talk or take a nap?" she offered.

Torrin sighed. "I sense you don't believe my statement of being fine." Luna just smiled at her. "Okay, how about a nap to start off. Then we can see from there?"

"Agreed...for now." Luna stood up, drawing Torrin to her feet and led her to the bed.

As Torrin closed her eyes, wrapped in Luna's arms, she tried to shake that feeling of failure. Here the woman she had sworn to protect was tending her instead. "Damn you, Khelin," she whispered to herself as tears leaked down her face.

Torrin screamed as the needle was inserted into her skin. Hovering above her, Khelin laughed in joy at her pain.

Luna dropped the scrolls she'd been sorting through and dashed for the bed. She'd stayed with Torrin until the other woman had fallen asleep, and then gotten up to read through some of the scrolls Eve had sent her.

"Torrin, honey," She slid into the bed with the thrashing woman. "Torrin." Gently she touched the dark-haired woman's arm. "Torrin, wake up, it's just a dream."

Torrin's eyes flew open and she felt a scream trapped in her throat. For a moment, she didn't see Luna. It was Khelin was hovering over her, laughing at her pain. Then that image faded away, showing Luna with a concerned look on her face. With a whimper, Torrin closed her eyes and laid limply on the bed.

Luna hesitated, uncertain what to do, and then she simply gathered Torrin into her arms.

"A dream, just a dream," she croaked out and then started crying. "So much pain, Luna. She used these needles..." She began to cry harder.

Luna closed her eyes, feeling them moisten with her own tears. "I know," she whispered, well aware of her own failings with Khelin. She held Torrin tighter as the smaller woman kept on crying. "She doesn't own you, Torrin. She doesn't own either of us." Luna said.

Torrin clutched at Luna's arm. "I can't get rid of her. She's still with me and it's my fault!" Torrin cried harder. "It's my fault, 'cause I was weak and couldn't resist her. I tried to be strong, but I wasn't."

Luna pressed kisses to Torrin's forehead, shaking her head. "Why do you think you were weak?"

"She got to me. She pushed me to the end of my willpower and then she broke me. I would have spilled my guts about anything," Torrin gulped out. "Thankfully, she was so annoyed with me by then, all she wanted to do was just kill me."

"That's why you think you were weak? 'Cause she pushed you to your limit?" Luna whispered, tilting Torrin's chin so she could press a kiss to the other woman's lips. "Torrin, my love, don't you realize you're the reason the North won?"

Torrin sniffed. "I could have put us all at risk. I could have told her everything about our army."

"Torrin, she already knew everything about our army," Luna countered, sliding her fingers through Torrin's short, dark locks. "If you hadn't destroyed her cannons, we would not be here tonight. I'm certain about that."

"I could have told her about that."

"But you didn't, did you?"

Torrin started to feel calmer. "I-I-I... you're right, I didn't. It's just... I always thought I was stronger than that because of what Quinn did and then my training at the Temple. But Khelin, she blew both those experiences away like they were child's play."

"She had that effect on people. But remember, she was the daughter of the Mistress of the Shadows. She was trained that way too," Luna whispered as she stroked Torrin's back.

Torrin closed her gray eyes and concentrated on just breathing. Slowly she felt her heart rate go down and her fear dissipate. "Yeah, you're right. Khelin was a piece of work." Opening her eyes, she tried to give a smile but it was shaky. "I'm better now." Torrin curled around Luna, wanting that physical connection. "Thank you for putting up with me."

"You put up with me," Luna reminded her gently. "Remember the cabin? I'm amazed you didn't just leave me there."

Torrin snorted. "I gave my word that I would get you to the Queen's City."

"You are an honorable woman, Torrin. Don't ever doubt that," Luna murmured as she leaned closer and pressed her lips to Torrin's.

Torrin sighed into the kiss, enjoying the simple comfort given by it. She looked at Luna. "How things have changed. I never would have imagined this... us... well, together. Did you?"

Luna shook her head, brushing a long blonde strand behind her ear. "No. I never thought I'd actually live through the war."

"I feel better when I'm touching you. I don't feel scared anymore," Torrin mumbled, burrowing her face into Luna's neck, feeling her nerves soothed even more by Luna's scent.

Luna's breath hitched at those words and she hugged the smaller woman tightly. "What a path we traveled to get here," she muttered, pressing a kiss to the top of the head tucked under her chin.

A knock on the outer door caused Luna to lift her head. A voice called from outside "My lady, it's time."

Luna hugged Torrin once more. "You ready for this?"

Torrin huffed. "No. But Rhain deserves a proper good-bye."

Luna had her reservations about that but said nothing. She stood up. "Come on then, let's go say goodbye to your sister."

A pale moon was rising above the horizon when the funeral processions set forth from the Abbey courtyard. The priestesses led the way as the mourners carried the bodies toward assembled pyres. Singers, raising their voices in praise to the Moon Goddess, trailed after them.

Torrin marched silently next to the platform that held Rhain's body. Tasha walked on the other side while Tyra followed behind. She noticed that Luna, along with the other Clan leaders, followed the singers. All of them were present since each had lost members during the war. How strange, she mused, the battle and the loss of so many had actually united the Clans together in a way they had not been since the last High Queen had ruled over the North. How twisted could fate be, Torrin thought. Rhain had been so cruel and mistrusting of her since she had first arrived, and yet, in the last minutes of her life, she redeemed herself. Her eyes roamed the crowd until they fell on Luna, and Torrin felt her heart flutter in her chest. For a minute, she forgot everything, focusing on the weird feeling, and then she released a great breath. So... this was what being in love felt like. Her lips quirked. It was almost scarier than being in Khelin's tent.

As the bodies were placed on top of the funeral pyre, Luna met Torrin's eyes. It seemed as if only the two of them standing there. Then the first of the pyres were lit and she was back at the funeral procession surrounded by mourners. The singing chant changed. High musical notes sent the freed souls on their journey home to the Moon Goddess. Tasha was consoling Tyra, with a suitably, grave-looking Valarie nearby. Without thinking, Luna moved over to where Torrin stood and wrapped her arms around Torrin's waist and held her while the fire burned.

Torrin hugged Luna back and then kissed her just under her ear. "I love you," she whispered quietly. "It just hit. And yes, this might seem like an odd time to have such a revelation, but I am completely and utterly in love with you." She cleared her throat. "And I understand if what I said, just freaked you out."

Luna gave a choked laugh, burying her face in Torrin's short hair and closed her eyes against the sudden flood of tears those simple words brought. "I love you, too." She stood there, holding Torrin, surrounded by people from different Clans who had all become her family, and rejoiced in living.

Luna sat in the chair by the bed and watched the sun edge above the horizon. Like a curtain opening, the sunlight spread across the land below the Ellris Pass. Frowning, she stared out the window. Her home was down there, or at least it had been. Castle Abnoa and the wild forest around it had been Earth Clan territory for generations. She glanced toward the sleeping form on the bed. The trauma of Torrin's capture and torture was still evident. The smaller woman had tossed and turned often throughout the night, and twice nightmares had broken her sleep.

Luna looked back at the brightening landscape, her thoughts whirling as she struggled to figure out what was her next move. Khelin was gone, killed by her own hand. The Southern army was in tatters and sent home. She felt some joy in that, but also felt confused. Since before the winter, all her waking moments were dedicated for this moment of victory. Now that it was over, what was she supposed to do? Go back to Abnoa?

"Do you really feel you could return to your old life as a simple Ranger?" a soft, masculine voice asked.

Her fingers had just grasped the hilt of her sword when she realized it was Armando, not Vladlin, who stood nearby. He held his hands out so that Luna could see he was unarmed. "Like I could do anything to a God," she thought. Relaxing, she let go of the blade, and sat back down.

"I am a Ranger," she answered.

"Really? It's part of who you are, but is it the whole part?" he questioned, a mysterious smile tugging at his lips.

Not enjoying the teasing question, her blue eyes narrowed at the God. "What are you getting at?"

"You can stop now if you want. Go back with Tasha. Return to skulking around the forest. However, you're almost to the end of the race. But if you want to go back to your old life, now is the time to make that decision."

She stood up at that, eyeing the Horse God with curiosity. "And what is it you see...when you look at me? What else am I other than a Ranger? It's all I've ever known how to be."

"I see a realm of possibilities when I look at you. But it's up to you to decide what you do. I am not your God and my Sister, well, she believes in choices for her people. With either decision, my great-grandchild will love you and follow you without question. But there is still a final act to

be played out." He smiled pleasantly and walked closer.

Not certain what he had in mind, she stiffened as he approached.

"You see, the first act happened long ago. My Sister helped free all the women that would inhabit this land. While we other Gods scraped and fought for followers in the Southern lands, she was alone her in her cold Northern wastes."

Luna nodded slowly. "Vladlin... that's why he wanted me to worship him. He wants to come to the North."

"No need to fear, I am not my Brother. I do not need to recruit you. I can let my little one sway you into the ways of the Horse Clan." He smiled down at his sleeping granddaughter, happy that she finally was having some peace.

She smiled back and looked over his shoulder toward the still sleeping form of her love. "True."

Armando cleared his throat. "Yes. My Sister is the eldest, well ... older than us siblings. Korgon is the oldest. She preferred this place and we did not fight her on it. It is cold and remote. I prefer the grasslands where my horses can run. At first, when your ancestors showed up, all was good. We were happy to have people to worship us. Soon though, the squabbles started. All of us were fighting to gain more followers. Some of us grew jealous of our distant Sister, the Moon, who did not have to fight with others for her worshipers."

Luna listened intently, knowing this would be more than any mortal would ever know of what had happened so long ago. Maybe she'd discover the reason for Khelin's madness and insistence on invading the North.

"Vladlin sent an army many, many years ago but was stopped at Abnoa. He was sent home with his tail between his legs." He looked sad for a moment.

Luna nodded; she had heard stories told by the older Rangers of that war.

"Then my Sister drew upon the power of prophecy to stake her claim into her Sister's land and people. Prophecy is a powerful tool and rarely used. It calls upon primal powers older than us."

Luna blinked in confusion. "Which sister?"

"Oh sorry." He flushed slightly. "Ethelinda, the Mistress of Shadows. She desperately wanted into your land." "The Mistress prophesied that, through a dark hand, the line of Queen would be no more until one of her blood rendered the Orb from the North and place herself as Queen of two lands."

Luna frowned, that wasn't the prophecy she had heard. "I thought there was supposed to be a

Deceiver?"

"Yes, well, my Moon Sister, Hala ..." he paused as Torrin sighed and rolled restlessly in the bed, a hand sleepily searching for Luna. Luna crossed the room, sat on the side of the bed and caressed Torrin's back until she stilled. "While a prophecy cannot be unmade, giving the people a choice can alter it. Thus, the Deceiver and the Betrayer were created as counters to the Mistress's prophesy. But there was still the possibility the darker prophecy would be chosen over the fork that the Moon Goddess created."

"But she didn't," Luna countered, keeping a hand on Torrin's back while the dark-haired woman slept on, "the North is safe still."

"Yes, Torrin was my darker Sister's way of getting back at me for taking Hala's side. Once she heard the new prophecy, she choose a child of my blood and put things in motion, grooming Torrin to take her daughter's side. Torrin was supposed to be a bodyguard for Khelin after she failed to walk through the black fire of the Shadow Temple. But with some godly interference, she was sold to Rya's Hawks." He smiled broadly. "All she has left is to fulfill her destiny and place a Queen on the Throne of the North."

For a brief instant, Luna had a vision of how different things would have been if Torrin had been one of Khelin's bodyguards instead of a mercenary. She shivered at the insight and mercifully, it left her quickly. "Then you have my thanks for that as well as the other things."

He nodded and gave her an enigmatic smile. "I didn't really come here to tell you all this. I came to thank you for taking care of my great grandchild." He reached out and gently touched Torrin's head. "I failed Jinete, I could not bear it if I failed again. So thank you. And perhaps, I shall see you again." Slowly he faded out of sight.

"Perhaps," she whispered, watching the place where the Horse God had been. With the full sunlight flooding the room, she curled up next to Torrin, deep in thought as she watched the rise and fall of the Torrin's chest.

Under the watchful eyes of the healers, the wounded were carried down the Pass to Wave Dancer ships where they sailed down the Winderling to the Queen's City. The surviving Wave Dancers accompanied them, eager to get back on their ships and away from the cold mountain pass. A group of priestesses, mostly Wind Walkers, wished to stay at the Abbey so they could rebuild and renew the temple. That left only the Fire warriors and Earth Clan Rangers. And nearly half of the warriors and Rangers who had survived the battle, were escorting the defeated Southerners out of the northern lands. Thus making certain that Abnoa was once more in the possession of the North. As a result, on a bright clear morning, only a small group of women gathered in the Abbey's courtyard to say their last goodbyes.

Luna tightened the last strap on her travel pack, listening quietly to the chatter around her. The

remaining Earth Clan members were going to Abnoa, heading down the south side of the pass while the Fire warriors would head north, back to the Queen's City. What direction would she and Torrin take?

Torrin stood in the garden. The events of the morning had left her drained and out of sorts. Tasha was leading the women back to Abnoa while her mother headed to the Queen's City by ship.

Scuffing her toe in the newly thawed ground, she stared hard at the oak tree. "Well, we won. I'm not real sure I understand all the undercurrents that were going on, but I know Khelin is dead." She paused, placing a hand on the bark. "I know I promised to take your remains back to the plains when I came back here, but I don't feel like things are quite done. I just wish I knew what they are."

Gray eyes looked around the garden that was struggling to go into bloom against the chilly nights. "This is a beautiful spot. Can you stand it for little bit longer?" She waited for a response. Finally, she said, "I guess I'll be going, Luna is waiting for me. I will be back to fulfill my promise to you." Slowly she turned and walked back to the Abbey.

Luna, wanting to give Torrin her privacy during this last goodbye, was waiting for her by the door to the courtyard. "You all right?"

Torrin smiled. "Yes. I made a promise that I can't quite see through yet. I was just explaining everything."

She wrapped her arms around Luna, giving her a quick hug. "You ready to leave?"

Luna hesitated, sighed, and then nodded. This wasn't an easy choice. She returned the hug and said, "I think so. You?"

"Good and well, it's not like I won't be back. I need to get my Muanya's remains back to her homeland."

Luna fidgeted with her pack strap. "I'm still not certain which way to go though, North or South," she admitted.

Torrin left one arm around Luna's waist as she watched the women around her in the Abbey say their good-byes. "Which way to go?" Torrin looked up at Luna in question. "Which way do you want to go?"

"All of my life, my home was Abnoa and the forests around the Castle." Luna brushed a stray lock behind her ear and looked down to meet Torrin's eyes. "But, um, I, um, I think need to go back to the Queen's City," she said tentatively, "I think something has yet to be finished."

Torrin grinned at her. "You know, I have that same odd feeling. I feel like things are still left unfinished." Torrin squeezed Luna. "I'm glad I wasn't the only one who felt this way."

Luna smiled in relief and picked up her travel pack. That feeling of something left undone was overwhelming her. She'd been afraid that Torrin would want to return her mother's bones to her people immediately. And even though Luna hated traveling by ship, it was still the quickest way to get back to the Queen's City. "Let's go then. Allysandra said the Osprey would be back for another load. We can probably catch them if we hurry."

Letting go of Luna completely, Torrin bent over retrieving her pack. "She better have room for Pollux or I'm going the long way back to the City."

Luna laughed and waited until Torrin stood up straight to kiss her. "I think that she'll make room."

"Good." She grinned and kissed Luna back. "He did help save my life and all. I'm scared to see what he'd do if I left him."

"Ugh! You two are going to make me sick," Janice called out from a nearby group. Luna could feel her face get hot.

Torrin looked over at Janice and shouted back, "I'm sensing some jealousy here, Janice. What's the matter? Can't get your own beautiful woman?"

The women around Janice laughed uproariously, pounding her back as she struggled to come up with a comeback.

Torrin couldn't help the overprotective feelings that rose up in her when someone teased Luna. Her cheeks turned pink and she glanced over at Luna. "Sorry, I was probably out of line."

Luna stared at Torrin, and as her blush faded, a smile appeared on her face. "I love you, you know that, right?" which of course only served to set Janice and her group off again with further comments and suggestions.

Torrin glared at the amused rangers. "Don't you people have lives of your own?"

As one, they all chorused, "No!"

Luna rolled her eyes. "Let's go before they decide to sing for us."

Torrin turned to Luna and gave her a brief wink. Then she leisurely kissed Luna's lips and then pulled back. "They're just jealous because I have you now and they can't." She kissed Luna again and then grinned evilly at the smirking women. "And when they least expect it, they will all wake up one morning with the runs and a nasty rash. I guarantee it."

Janice and the others looked at each other uneasily and decided it was a good time to leave. "Take care, Luna. See you at Abnoa!" Luna, still reeling from the sudden kisses, managed to nod

in agreement as the Rangers scurried off.

Torrin resumed kissing Luna as her hands trailed up the sides of Luna's thighs to her stomach. "Mmm...when do we have to go?"

Luna swallowed. She was very tempted to stay right where she was and encourage Torrin's fingers to stray even further. "Depends if we want to catch the Osprey," she moaned as Torrin's fingers found a sensitive spot.

"Uh, huh," Torrin responded before kissing the corner of Luna's lips and inched down to just under Luna's jaw to place another kiss. "It's not like we haven't traveled it on foot before," Torrin murmured. She aimed another kiss lower, onto Luna's neck.

"We..." Luna lost her train of thought as the other woman's breath heated her skin. She was about to give in when she realized they weren't alone. Glancing up at the doorway, Luna froze.

"Did you two ladies want me to start chanting?" the young priestess asked in amusement.

Torrin squeaked and jumped back from Luna. "Um, I...well...um." Who knew one could switch from being horny to being mortified so quickly. "We were just..." she trailed off at the priestess's smile.

"Oh, I know what you two were doing. I asked you if you want me to chant?"

"No, no children yet," Luna managed to squeak out.

"Yeah, um, no, I'm good," Torrin responded hastily, "and, ahh, what she said." Tugging on Luna's arm, she started to back away from the young priestess. "We need to go now or we'll miss the ship. It was nice meeting you. Um, hurry up, Luna."

The priestess's gentle laughter chased them from the Abbey courtyard. Hiding her red face, Luna was giggling as she stumbled after Torrin down the northern slope of the Ellris Pass.

Torrin scowled out at the water as the ship moved through the water. It had to be a curse to do no more than just kiss Luna. Granted that was getting really, really good, but still, some things were just too cruel. She sighed and rested her chin on hand.

Luna came to lean against the railing of the ship alongside Torrin. The fresh air was doing her good. As soon as they had set sail heading down the Winderling, she got sick over the side of the ship. Allysandra's daughter, Megan, had offered her a tea that had helped settle her stomach. She was still moving slower than usual but felt a lot better. "I just spoke with Allysandra. Pollux is all set, she has Megan checking on him."

"Good. He's loving the attention and pampering."

"You sound pretty certain about that," Luna said quietly, leaning closer to Torrin until their shoulders touched.

A ghost of a smile tickled at Torrin's lips, softening her scowl. "He can be really chatty."

Luna raised her eyebrows at Torrin, and then looked down at the water streaming past the Osprey. Behind her she could hear Allysandra shouting orders as the ship navigated her way down the Winderling. After a few minutes, she glanced shyly over at Torrin. "Do you?" she cleared her throat nervously, "want children someday?"

The smile on Torrin's face became more pronounced. "Hmm, we've had this conversation before, and I think the answer was 'no' then."

Luna nudged her shoulder. "We did have this conversation, but things are a bit different now."

Torrin turned away from the water and looked at Luna. "I wasn't in a place where kids were an option. Even thinking of them scares me... I might be like Quinn."

"You wouldn't be like her at all," Luna said, sliding her arms around Torrin and drawing the shorter woman against her.

Torrin let herself relax into Luna's body. She sighed in pleasure as Luna's scent drifted up into her nose. "You know, I think I believe that now. For a long time, I hated and feared Quinn. But now, it seems silly that I let Quinn have so much power over me."

Luna let silence rule for a while. The bright spring sunlight reflected up off the blue sparkling water as the ship bobbed down the Winderling. When she finally spoke, her thoughts were on their destination. "When we get back to the Queen's City, I want to see that old woman again, the one at the top of the stairs."

Torrin nodded and sighed. "Oh boy, that should be fun. More ghosts."

Luna chuckled and released the shorter woman from the hug. "It can't be that bad."

"Who says?" Torrin chuckled, "You like setting yourself up for trouble."

"Isn't that what you're for?" Luna teased, "keeping me out of trouble?"

Torrin laughed again. "Yes, I suppose that's what I'm for. But take smaller risks, okay? I only have one good eye to see trouble coming."

Luna just smiled at Torrin. Keeping an arm around the smaller woman's shoulders, she watched

as the tallest of the towers from the Queen's City gradually appeared above the treetops.

There was a crowd cheering at the dock when the Osprey pulled into her slip. Luna blinked in amazement as she stared at the sea of faces. She had expected the city to begin emptying out now that the Southern threat was over. If anything, it seemed as if the city was livelier than ever.

Torrin stared at the people on the dock. This was a new experience for her. As a mercenary, when the fight was over, there was never any cheering or anyone happy to see her return. Normally it had just been a trip to the nearest tavern, lots of ale, and a willing bed partner for a quick tumble.

Allysandra made her way over to the two stunned women, grinning. "So far," she gestured towards the crowd below, "it's been like this every trip we've made."

Torrin swallowed nervously and stuttered, "I, I didn't know there were so many women in the Queen's City."

Luna glanced at Torrin, then at the crowd below who were cheering even louder as the first of the Fire warriors descended to the dock. "I didn't know there were so many women in all of the North."

Allysandra leaned over the railing to study the scene below, and gave a low laugh. "I don't think those Fire warriors are going to be lacking in company for a while."

Indeed, a confused looking warrior suddenly found herself surrounded by a small group of giggling and admiring women.

Torrin laughed nervously, "Good for her. Um, I'm going to go get Pollux. Excuse me."

Luna looked at Torrin in surprise as she bolted toward the cargo hold. "Torrin?" Luna called. She tried to go after her, but the press of people forced her back. Unlike the Torrin, Luna wasn't small enough to slip through the crowd.

Torrin wormed her way through the women clamoring to get off ship. Finally, she made her way down to the storage area. She felt her nerves begin to settle down now that she was away from crowd of people. Pollux nickered softly at her.

"Yeah, it's me. Did Megan take good care of you?"

He nodded his head, his dark mane bouncing.

She gave a chuckle and moved over to him. Gently she rubbed his nose. She was startled by a voice coming from the other end of the cargo hold.

"You didn't betray us like I thought you would." Eve walked down the length of the hold, keeping her distance from the animals waiting to be unloaded and an even healthier distance from the Alcens and their horns.

Torrin didn't turn but her hand stilled. "Eve," she said quietly. "Somehow, I'm not surprised. You want to take a swing as well? I think you're the only one who hasn't."

"A week ago and I would have taken you up on that," Eve admitted as she leaned against an empty stall and studied the other woman. "It's hard for me to say this." She paused, still struggling with the words, "but I was wrong."

Finally, Torrin turned so she could see Eve with her good eye. "At least you're honest and by the way, I would have hit you back."

An expression of distaste flittered across the aristocratic woman's face. "As long as we're being honest, I still think I would be better for Luna than you are."

A grin tugged at Torrin's lips. "Once upon a time, I would have agreed with you, but not now. Eve, you'll find someone someday, but you can't have Luna. She's mine."

"We'll see." Eve sketched a courtly bow toward Torrin, stood up, twirled, and carefully walked back, avoiding the animal pens as best she could along the way.

Torrin snickered and turned to Pollux, "Look at her trying not to get dirty, but still it was nice for her to let me know I wasn't nearly as worthless as she first thought." She laughed and hugged her horse. "I know I feel better now." She put his halter on and started out the ship's hold. With the soft lead rope gathered in one hand, Torrin sent calming thoughts to help get Pollux down the gangplank. Looking around, she was happy to see that most of the people were gone. A few still stopped and gaped at the unfamiliar animal. She knew he was small for a horse. The Horse People rode ones that were much larger than him, but she wasn't complaining. He fit her just fine.

He stamped his feet when the wooden planks sagged under his weight and tried to pull back on the rope.

Torrin sighed softly and scolded him. "Always causing a scene, eh, boy?"

"That is the last time I ever ride on a boat." Luna swore, stepping off the gangplank after the bulk of the crowd had ebbed away. Other than a few last sailors who were still coming down off the Osprey, the dock was almost deserted. Like the first time, her legs were a little unsteady for a while as her body got used to standing on land again. Her color was improving now that she was on land too. Luna smiled as she watched Torrin talk to the horse. "I guess we better find him a stall," she called out.

"Um, yeah..." Torrin looked helplessly around, wondering where the nearest stable was.

Luna studied the other woman for a moment, and then got to her feet. Stepping in front of Torrin, Luna cupped the smaller woman's cheek.

"What is it?"

Torrin took a deep breath to calm the rising panic in her body. She suddenly felt lost inside. When they had docked, all her insecurities had bubbled to the surface. "I... I... it just kind of hit me..." She went quiet for a moment, and then said in small voice. "I'm free."

Luna nodded, but not comprehending why Torrin seemed so upset.

She looked up at Luna and then dropped her eyes. "With Rya dead, I really am free. But without her telling me what to do, I'm not sure what to do next." She cleared her throat. "War use to have a pattern. Me and the Hawks would train. Rya would tell us our new job, then Rya would tell us what we would do in the war, and then after the war, Rya would send us either to a healer, the bar, or the whore, er, Temple." Torrin looked up, a smiled tugging at her lips.

Luna snorted at that slip. She slid her hand down Torrin's arm until she could clasp the other woman's hand. "We don't have to stay here in the City," she said, not certain if that was also bothering Torrin. "We can go anywhere you want. Besides," Luna smiled, "you can always tell me what to do if that helps."

After a moment Torrin started to laugh as Luna's statement hit her, "During the whole big scramble to get to the Queen's City, when did you ever do what I told you to?"

Luna grinned. "I must have at some point. I remember you telling me so many things, I must have followed one of them at least once."

Torrin started to laugh even harder.

Luna smiled, happy to see Torrin lose her distressed look. "What? You don't believe me?" she demanded in mock offense.

"Well, I'm happy you didn't all the time. Like that time with the assassin on the ice. Without you coming there, I would have surely died."

That sobered Luna and she stepped forward until their bodies were nearly touching. "I'm glad you didn't," she whispered.

Torrin reached up caressing Luna's cheek, "I'm glad you feel that way now. I know you weren't quite sure at the time. Especially after she told you what my role was at Abnoa."

Luna gave her a small, sad smile. "My sisters would have died anyway. And without you rescuing me, I would have died on those walls, and we would never have warned the other clans about what had happened. Khelin would be ruling from the Queen's Castle right now."

Torrin nodded and then winced when Pollux made known his unhappiness loudly in her head. He was not a water creature and he wanted to be far away from the moving stall.

"Let me get him settled. Then a bath and food sounds good. How about it?"

"I don't know." Luna said, stepping aside so Torrin could lead the horse into the City. "Will I have a bathing companion this time?"

Grey eyes widened and Torrin gulped. "Th-that could be arranged."

Luna ignored the rising heat in her cheeks. "Then, how about I meet you at our old rooms?"

"Um, okay, I..I'll just take care of grumpy here and, um, meet you there," Torrin stuttered and then took off with a snorting Pollux.

Luna hurried up the stairs toward the rooms she'd occupied before in the Queen's castle. It had taken her twice as long to get to here than she had expected. Every few feet, someone would stop her on the street and thank her. It was an interesting, but embarrassing experience. Now though, the vision of sharing a bath with Torrin quickened her steps. Unlike the last time they'd shared a bath, she intended to be a lot closer to Torrin this time. Luna grinned in anticipation as she went down the hallway, only to stop in surprise at the sight in front of her.

"Eve, what are you doing?"

Eve ushered the last of the servants down the hallway. She smiled proudly at Luna. "I was getting things ready."

Luna frowned slightly, peering past the slender woman into the vacant room behind her. "Eve, that room is empty."

The elegant blonde nodded quickly, clearly delighted with herself.

Luna sighed. All she wanted was some time with Torrin alone. Was that too much to ask for?

Eve was clearly waiting for her to say something, so Luna mentally rolled her eyes and asked. "All right. What were you getting ready?"

"Come with me," Eve said, taking three steps down the hallway before she realized Luna wasn't

following. "I promise it's a good thing. Come on."

"There better be a bathtub at the end of this." Luna muttered as she followed Eve down the hall.

Torrin wearily made her way up to Luna's old rooms. She had brushed and fed Pollux, and felt slightly more settled now. Finding the door open, she paused and looked inside. The room was very much empty. Feelings of insecurity started to the surface.

"Lady Torrin?" a young child about 8 years old in black and silver livery called out from the hallway.

Puzzled, Torrin turned. "Lady who?"

The girl shifted from foot to foot, her blonde hair done up in a small ponytail. "Ummm, are you Lady Torrin?" she asked hopefully.

Torrin chuckled. "I'm Torrin, but the Lady part is debatable."

The girl brightened immediately. "Oh, good!" then she remembered her manners. "I mean, I'm pleased to have found you. I've been asked to es...escro... er... bring you to your new rooms."

"Oh. Oh!" Torrin's demeanor brightened in relief. "Well, lead on, young lady."

The girl beamed at Torrin, then led her back to the staircase and started to climb. "What's it like being a hero?" she asked as they passed the second floor.

"Um, well, um..." Torrin floundered at the unexpected question. "I'm not really a hero. Now Luna is the one you should talk to about that sort of thing."

The young girl frowned. "But my Muanya says you're a hero."

"Your Muanya said that 'I was a hero?'" Torrin blurted out.

The young girl nodded seriously, ponytail bobbing.

"Well... I... I guess if I'm a hero I certainly don't feel like one. I did what I did because I wanted to make things right, and I was the best person qualified to do them." Torrin spoke slowly, trying to wrap her mind around the concept that someone considered her a hero. "Not because I thought they would make me into some legend."

The girl stared at her blankly for a second, clearly not following what Torrin had just said. "I want to be a hero someday," she said hopefully instead.

Torrin frowned and put a hand on the young girl's shoulder. When she had the girl's attention, she said softly. "I hope you never have to be a hero because of war or violence. I hope you become a hero because you created something that would benefit people. Like a great healer."

The girl made a face. A great healer wasn't her idea of a hero. Finally, they reached the top floor. Two Fire warriors stood on either side of an ornate doorway, they stiffened as Torrin, and the girl approached

"Come on, it's right here," she said and then she bounded back down the stairs, leaving Torrin behind.

Torrin sighed at the departing girl and then looked at the Fire warriors. "Kids". The two warriors shared an understanding glance over Torrin's head. Then they moved aside and let Torrin go through the doorway.

The room beyond was easily twice the size of the rooms Luna and Torrin had shared before. The smooth polished wood floors recently had been cleaned as had the tapestries dominating the walls. Two bookcases rounded out the walls, on either side of a huge marble fireplace. Elegant chairs clustered around a circular table in front of the fireplace. Doorways at the back of the room indicated that even more rooms lay beyond.

"Hello? Luna?" Torrin called out as she took in the ornate furnishings.

"Back here!" The call came from one of the doorways.

"Wow. Defeat the Southern army and you definitely get an upgrade on the room," Torrin muttered as she moved through the room to the back doors.

The first doorway gave way to another large room with an equally large four-poster bed. The next doorway led Torrin to her goal. The full bathroom had huge stain glass windows bathing the room in warm muted light. An oversized sunken marble bathtub was currently full of hot water and a lounging Luna.

A line of clothes showed where Luna had started stripping as she headed for the water. "I'm in the afterlife." Luna sighed with pleasure from her position in the bathtub. She looked at Torrin through half lidded eyes.

"You're beautiful," Torrin whispered.

A soft lazy smile crossed Luna's lips as she moved to the side of the tub, her long blonde hair trailing behind her in the hot water. Her eyes roamed over Torrin's body. "You're wearing too much."

"Really? Let me see what I can do to remedy that." Torrin sat down and quickly removed her boots, and then started on her trousers.

Luna made a small sound from the tub, her eyes riveted on Torrin's body, taking in the exposed skin. "You have no idea how much I want to touch you right now," she whispered.

Torrin expelled a breath she didn't even know she was holding. Her shirt dropped to the floor. She carefully sunk down into the tub, its heat immediately turning her skin pink. Moving through the water, she made her way to Luna. "I think I have a pretty good idea. Probably as much as I want to touch you." The steam rising from the hot water added an almost ethereal touch to the moment.

Luna swallowed, licking lips gone dry. "Like the new rooms?" she whispered as Torrin drew closer, her eyes tracing Torrin's contours.

"Yes, very nice and they have a bathing area that we don't have to share with anyone. Now that shouts "important person", " Torrin whispered onto the damp flesh of Luna's neck.

Luna shivered, her arms coming up and around Torrin's body, pressing their flesh together. She moaned at the contact. Dipping her head, she found Torrin's lips and slowly explored them. Fingertips slid along Torrin's sides, in and out of the water, tracing patterns along the wet skin. Then slowly Luna inched her hands upwards, circling and then touching Torrin's breasts. "No interruptions this time." she whispered, breaking their kiss long enough to watch her hands at work.

Torrin whimpered as Luna explored her. "No interruptions. Or bad, bad, horrible things will happen." Her fingers dug into the flesh of Luna's back. Then her fingers traveled down Luna's back leaving faint red lines until they disappeared under the water.

Air hissed as Luna sucked in a breath between her teeth at the move. For a second she panicked and grabbed onto that hand, then, meeting Torrin's eyes, she let go of it, steadying herself in those loving, gray eyes.

Torrin stilled her hands under the water. Gently, she bestowed a series of kisses on Luna's lips, neck, throat, and collarbone. "I'm not going anywhere," she whispered reassuringly, "so we can take all the time in the world."

"I don't want to take my time," Luna murmured, capturing Torrin's lips again in a heated kiss as her own fingers slid beneath the water. Torrin was doing a wonderful job of distracting her from memories with Khelin.

. "I'm glad," Torrin gasped, "but just so you know, if you want to, we can." She went back to giving Luna slow kisses all around her body.

"Thank you." Luna arched into the kisses, her hand cupped between Torrin's legs. She wanted to touch, taste, and feel Torrin everywhere. Holding her breath, Luna slowly entered Torrin. "By the

Goddess," Luna whispered, gasping as she pressed herself firmly against the short lithe body.

Torrin's body tensed for a moment, her hands digging into the firm muscles of Luna's butt. As she relaxed, her forehead came down to rest on Luna's chest. "By the Goddess is right," she mumbled.

It was, Luna decided, the most pleasant way to wake up. The sheets and the small body pressed against her were warm against her skin. The scent of their lovemaking was still in the air and she felt deliciously sore. The best part though, was that she had been able to enjoy it. She had always worried that she would never be able to make love to anyone since Khelin marked her as belonging to her.

"You were wrong," Luna whispered, as she pressed her lips to Torrin's exposed shoulder.

Cracking an eyelid, Torrin mumbled, "Wrong? Me?"

"No, Khelin," Luna answered, squeezing Torrin as she cuddled closer to the other woman.

Torrin opened her other eye and slowly rolled over to face Luna and smiled. "Khelin was wrong about a lot of things. But I understand that happens a lot when one is completely insane." Her smile got wider and she rolled over Luna, lying on top of the taller woman. She kissed the hollow of Luna's throat and then snuggled into the other woman's body. "Um, can we stay just like this until the rest the world disappears?"

Luna opened her mouth to say yes but someone knocked on the door to their room. With a laugh, Luna let her head fall back. "I don't think that's up to us."

Torrin growled softly into Luna's skin, before turning her head to shout. "Go away! Luna saved the North. Give her a break. Leave her alone!"

There was a pause, and then the door opened a crack. "My ladies? I brought you some breakfast," an unfamiliar voice called out.

Luna raised a questioningly eyebrow at Torrin.

"Um...", Torrin hesitated. She didn't care about being seen in bed with someone, but she wasn't sure how Luna felt about it. "Just set it down inside the door. I'll get it in a minute." After a second, Torrin lamely added, "Thanks."

"Oh no, I'll just set it down inside," the woman answered, shoving the door open and bustling in with a fully loaded tray.

Luna let out a startled sound and pulled the blankets up over both herself and Torrin.

"Or that works too," Torrin mumbled. She lay back down so her cheek rested on Luna's upper chest.

The young woman, dressed in the livery of a Castle servant, did not bat an eyelid at them as she set the tray down on a nearby tabletop. Then she beamed at them. "There, and I'll see about getting clean clothes for both of you." She opened the heavy drapes and then closed the door behind her.

"Thanks." Torrin mumbled out from under the covers. "Take your time." Inhaling, she caught Luna's scent mixed in with the smell of their lovemaking. She flushed slightly as her brain drifted back to last night. Since she was already under the covers, and from the sounds of things, the over-helpful maid had moved on to the other room, Torrin decided to take advantage of the situation. There were areas of Luna's skin she had yet to map because she'd been too worn out the night before. She started by kissing Luna's hip and moving upwards from there, decorating all the flesh she could find with kisses.

"I could get used to this." Luna said, her hands cupping Torrin's backside and drawing her tight. "Think we can stay in bed all day?"

"Hey, dare to dream big," Torrin replied, before going back to her task at hand.

Luna moaned as Torrin continued her exploration. She decided the outside world could deal with itself for a while and she burrowed under the blankets with Torrin. There were far more pleasant things to be doing than getting up and Luna intended to do all of them before they had breakfast.

They finally managed to eat the breakfast brought to them many hours before. Luna offered Torrin a piece of some sort of pastry. It was too sweet for her tastes. Eggs and a hunk of meat was the universal breakfast at her home.

Torrin took the food, licking her lips, "Mmmm, almost as good as mom makes."

"You like those?" Luna looked at her in surprise.

She nodded and then wiped her chin. "Yeah. I grew up eating these. You make the pastry first and then you can fill it with anything. If mom was in a good mood, she'd fill it with sweet apples."

Luna wrinkled her nose at them and then grinned as she offered the entire bowl to Torrin. "They are all yours then."

Torrin's eyes widened as Luna gave her the pastries. "Wow, thanks."

"We could go see your mother later, if you want?" Luna said, as she looked for something a bit less sweet to eat. She found a grain muffin and took a bite. She stopped chewing and frowned down at the muffin. "Torrin? Why did we have to come back?" she asked abruptly. "What are we supposed to be doing here?"

Torrin happily munched on the pastries. Swallowing, she said, "I have no idea why we are here. Other than you are the almighty hero of the war against the Southern army and the people love you."

Luna tossed a strawberry at her. "So are you."

Torrin opened her mouth, ducked her head and snagged the strawberry out of the air. "Whatever. I was tied up to a table in Khelin's tent with needles stuck in my body. I was hardly a hero."

Luna just raised an eyebrow at that. "And who, exactly, took out the Southern cannons then?"

"Oh well, that was, a team effort." Torrin's eyes dropped.

Luna snorted and leaned over the short table, capturing Torrin's lips in a brief but deep kiss. "I really like the team leader then."

A grinning Torrin looked back up. "Thanks, I'm glad." Torrin dropped her gaze to the table where she traced random patterns with a finger. "Um... I... um... I was wondering..."

"What?" Luna asked, moving around the table so she could sit next to Torrin.

Torrin coughed nervously. "Um...are you okay with everything? I mean, are you happy with me, er... us."

Luna froze. This didn't sound good. "I love you," she answered carefully, watching Torrin closely for some sign as to where this conversation was going.

Torrin smiled. "I love you too, but I just needed to know that now... now that we aren't running from emergency to emergency, that you are okay with us." Torrin hugged Luna. "I'm sorry, Luna. I'm not doing this very well. I've never been part of a couple and I don't know what to do."

"This is new territory for both of us," Luna said, her hand finding Torrin's and curling around it. "But yes, I'm very good with us, this, whatever this turns out to be." She squeezed Torrin's hand.

Torrin squeezed Luna's hand back. "I've seen enough strange things happen during war and I know we have this strange relationship..." Torrin paused and then said softly. "I just know that I want to be with you from now on."

With a relieved look on her face, Luna said, "You just really scared me there for a moment, you know that? But yes, I want to be with you, too." She gave Torrin a gentle kiss. "Come on, how

about we go see your mother. Let her know how you're doing?" Luna stood up, tugging on Torrin's hand that she was still holding. "Oh, and later tonight I want to go see the old woman in the tower."

"Great, more ghosts," she mumbled. Then she grinned. "Okay. Maybe mom can fix us a snack. For some reason, I'm still really hungry" and she let herself be pulled up by a laughing Luna.

At the kitchen table, Torrin sighed again, her chin resting on a fistful hand while she watched her mother bustle about. "Mom, for the 35th time, I'm okay. Luna's okay, and we're planning on staying here in the Queen's City for a little while longer."

Tyra dished some soup out of the pot on the stove making sure Torrin's bowl was mainly broth. "Here eat this broth, it's good for you." She placed another bowl full of meat and vegetables in front of Luna. Going back to check on her youngest again, she placed a hand on Torrin's forehead. "You sure you feel okay? You're a little warm."

Torrin scowled. "I'm fine." She stared at her bowl of broth.

When Tyra went back to the counter to finish making the biscuits, Luna discretely spooned some meat and vegetables from her bowl into Torrin's. Torrin smiled gratefully at her and quickly ate them.

"I know you're fine, but when they brought you back to the Abbey," Tyra's voice cracked and her shoulders started to tremble, "unconscious and bleeding, I-I-I thought I lost you again."

Torrin scrambled off her chair and moved over to her mother. "I'm sorry. I should be more sensitive." She hugged her mother tightly.

Tyra turned, hugging her daughter fiercely before waving her off. "I'm just being silly," she said as she wiped her eyes. "I'm very happy to see you both. Everything was so chaotic after the fighting and I was shipped back here without getting to say much of anything to you. Her voice softened. "I wasn't sure if you two would even be coming back to the Queen's City."

She eyed the pair for a moment and gave them a knowing look. "So, when is the ceremony?"

Torrin had sat back down and was playing with her food. Spoon to her lips, she started choking on the broth she had just swallowed. "What? What ceremony?" she coughed out.

"Ceremony?" Luna echoed weakly.

"Yes, ceremony," Tyra said. "When are you two being hand-fastened to each other?"

"Oh, *that* ceremony." Luna knew her face was blazing red color.

"Mother!!" Torrin squawked out indignantly.

Tyra turned to her youngest child. "Don't 'mother' me. You do intend to let Luna make an honest woman out of you?" She looked down at Torrin with her best mom look.

Torrin shrank back in her chair and inspected her bowl. "Um, yes, of course... eventually... I'm sure..." she stuttered.

"Let me?" Luna asked faintly.

Tyra sighed. "I'm not getting any younger and I only have you and Tasha left to give me grandchildren."

Torrin blushed and began searching for the meaning of life in her soup.

"Yes. You know, when two women who love each other go to a Priestess and ask for the Moon Goddess' blessing."

"Mom, please stop." Torrin choked out. Children. As in more than one. Dear Goddess, someone save us. "Mother, Luna and I just now, finally, have time to our selves without danger breathing down our necks. Can't we have just a little time to ourselves?"

Tyra sniffed started rolling out the dough. "Well that's understandable but you could still get hand-fasted. Don't piddle around with Luna dear, there are plenty of women sniffing around who will pick up the slack and make her an honest woman."

Torrin let her forehead rest on the cool tabletop. She was afraid to look up at Luna. She thought she just might die from embarrassment.

"Grandchildren?" Luna knew she and Torrin had talked about it briefly before, but that was completely different from having the same conversation with Torrin's mother. "Umm... what if we were hand-fasted first, then we could talk about... er... umm... children later?" she offered. It sounded like a good compromise to her. Then she quickly added in an attempt to divert the conversation, "Will you be coming to the ball, Tyra?"

"Of course I wouldn't miss it. It's been so long since I've had an opportunity to get dressed up." Tyra smiled broadly.

Torrin looked up from the table, confused. "Ball?"

"Oops." Luna smiled sheepishly at Torrin. "I forgot to tell you last night..." she trailed off as her face grew red again as images from the night before popped into her head. She noticed a glassy-eyed Torrin shifting uncomfortably in her chair.

"Um. Mom, we're going to go so Luna can update me on this ball," Torrin said as she got up and pulled Luna after her.

Tyra grinned knowingly and smirked. "Heathens" she said as she started to cut out the biscuits.

"Anyway," a blushing Luna continued as she left the kitchen, "the Wind Walkers are throwing a Ball in celebration of the end of the war...oof!" Torrin yanked her down the hall.

Tyra laughed at their antics. "Young love."

By the time they got outside, Luna was giggling. "I think I love your mother."

Torrin pouted and then pulled Luna into a shadowed alley. "Not more than me, I hope," she said before attacking Luna's lips.

Only when Torrin finished did Luna shake her head, her knees weak from the sudden onslaught. "Never," she whispered, pulling the short woman closer and ducking her head to return the favor.

"Mmmm. Someone I know just had to bring up last night. I thought we should leave before I embarrassed us both in front of my mother." She groaned out under Luna's pleasant assault.

Luna grinned wickedly. "Sorry about that," even though she wasn't sorry at all as her hands wandered.

"Uh huh." Torrin said into the skin on Luna's throat, her hands wandering as well. A few minutes later Torrin stepped out of the alley slightly flushed and straightening her shirt. She turned to make sure Luna was following.

Luna stepped out, trying to keep the bottom of her shirt together and scowling slightly. "I lost a button." With a sigh, she tried to tuck the shirt in to her pants to hide the missing fastener.

"Um...you know..." Torrin ducked her head and scratched the back of her neck. "My mom is just right here I could go ask her to mend it."

"No!" Luna's near shout drew a few interested looks from nearby people. Grabbing Torrin's arm she hurried them back towards the castle. "There is no way I am going back to your mother's to get this fixed."

Torrin just laughed and let Luna drag her a bit down the street.

"As I was saying earlier," Luna said as they walked up the road to the castle, "there's going to be a grand ball tonight, hosted in the castle's ballroom. It hasn't been used since the last queen died. People from all of the clans are invited."

"Okay. I guess so." Torrin paused and then made a face. "I suppose this means I have to dress up."

It was in the middle of the afternoon and they were still lying in bed. Luna had a very satisfied smile on her face as she idly traced designs on Torrin's bare stomach. "I thought you were supposed to help me find a button for my shirt, not rip more of them off."

Torrin shrugged lazily. "Your shirt was in the way. Besides it was your fault."

"Really?" Luna arched an eyebrow.

Torrin grinned. "Yep. You were having a particular sexy moment, I couldn't help myself and that shirt wasn't being helpful at all. It was teasing me by showing a bit of skin and then hiding it again." Torrin added regretfully, "I'm sorry but that shirt had to die."

Luna laughed, resting her head on Torrin's shoulder and draping a long lean leg over the other woman's legs. "As long as it died for a good reason."

"Oh yes, a very good reason," Torrin exclaimed.

The taller woman smiled mischievously, slid over, straddled Torrin and grinned down at her. "I think you owe me for killing my shirt."

"Really? And what kind of payment are you thinking?" Torrin arched slightly into the body above her.

A sudden sharp knocking at the doors caused Luna to bolt in surprise, knocking her head against Torrin's. She grabbed her forehead and with a curse, rolled off Torrin. She yanked on a blanket, grabbed it off the bed and wrapped it around herself.

Torrin yelped in pain and grabbed her nose and fumbled for the disappearing blanket but missed. Grumbling she held her nose and laid on the bed in all her naked glory.

To their dismay, several old women entered the room and were making themselves at home, setting down bundles of clothing on the tables. One of them hobbled over to where Torrin lay, drawing out a measuring rope as she did.

"Can I help you ladies with something?" Torrin asked, warily eyeing the rope.

"Why, we're here for the fittings, young lady."

""Fitting for what?" Torrin asked as she slapped away a few prying hands. "Could I get dressed, please."

"Actually, it's better like you are, dearie," one of them answered, trying to measure Luna's arm.

"Why for the ball gowns, of course," another piped up from where she was setting out material.

"Wait a second, what ball gown? Hey! Stop that!" Luna tried to squirm away from hands that were now trying to get at her legs.

"Ball gown?" Torrin's face shifted into a look of horror. "Absolutely not!" she nearly shouted.

The assault stopped as six old women stared at Torrin. "The ball gown for the ball tonight, of course. We have to hurry to get them finished in time," one of them explained.

Torrin scowled and got off the bed. "Do I look like a ball gown sort of girl?"

"Well..." one of them voiced, hesitantly, looking Torrin up and down.

"I will find something to wear on my own," she snarled.

"You most certainly will not!" the old women said in unison.

Torrin crossed her arms over her breasts and glared at them. "You are so lucky I'm naked" as she thought about her pants that still had one knife hidden in the fabric.

"Absolutely no ball gowns," Luna said quite firmly.

"Are you certain you don't want a nice ball gown? Imagine how pretty you will look" as one of them tried to sway Luna.

"No ball gowns," was the repeated answer.

Torrin nodded. "What she said" and sat back down on the bed, pulling Luna down with her.

The group of seamstresses formed a huddle and started whispering plans while glancing at them every few seconds.

Finally, the oldest of them hobbled toward the two women on the bed with a mostly toothless smile. "We have the perfect idea..."

Torrin looked over at Luna and groaned, "That's it, we're doomed."

"How did I get talked into this?" Luna asked, staring at the stranger in the mirror. The old women had kept their promise; the long slender blue dress was not a formal ball gown. Nevertheless, with her hair loosely bound back in a slender silver circlet and wearing the elegant dress, Luna

hardly recognized herself. A new, tooled leather belt for her sword completed the outfit. She had to fight tooth and nail with the seamstresses to keep the sword at all. But Luna had refused to go without it and they relented. With a deep sigh, she stepped out of the bathroom. "Torrin?" she called. Luna awkwardly rubbed her bare arms, wondering if it was too late to change into something more comfortable... like leather armor.

Torrin was lounging in a nearby chair and tugging on her high collar. "Yes?" she answered.

"I, umm... you look really good." Luna eyed her companion appreciatively.

Torrin stopped pulling on her shirt collar and smiled nervously. "You think so?" Her hands brushed over the soft blue material of her shirt smoothing out invisible wrinkles.

"Yes, I do." Luna moved over to her, smiling as she brushed her hands along Torrin's shoulders. Um, do you think it's a coincidence that we match?" she asked, comparing Torrin's shirt with her own dress.

Torrin's forehead wrinkled in thought. "Knowing the old ladies? Probably not." In a gentle movement, Torrin rested her hands on Luna's hips and gave her quick kiss. "You look very lovely as well. But they still got you into a dress, I see."

"Yes." Luna's blue eyes narrowed as she studied Torrin. "Strange how you managed to avoid that."

A large grin appeared on Torrin's face. "Funny what can be avoided when one is sharpening a knife."

"But I had a sword!" Luna pouted, gesturing at the moon blade that hung at her side.

Torrin shrugged. "Just lucky then."

Luna snorted in disbelief.

Shifting up onto her toes, Torrin placed another, longer kiss on Luna's lips. "But I think you look absolutely stunning in this dress," she whispered in Luna's ear.

Luna shrugged. "Well, I suppose I could wear it for tonight."

Torrin grinned again. "Good. After tonight I'll never bring up you wearing a dress again, I promise." She played with her collar again.

"Stop that." Luna grinned, pushing aside Torrin's hands and straightening the collar. "There, you look very nice." She smiled. "If you aren't careful, the ladies are going to swarm all over you."

Torrin chuckled. "I doubt that. I'm going to have to stand next to you and look threatening in order to keep the women away from you."

Luna impulsively hugged Torrin tightly, and then let her go. "We better go."

"Okay." Torrin stood there for a moment then awkwardly held at her arm. "Um, may I-I escort you... my Lady."

With a sappy grin, Luna took Torrin's arm. "I would be honored, my love."

The bells of the city began to ring to signal moonrise and the start of the Grand Ball. There would be celebrations tonight throughout the Queen's City and in towns across the North. Servants had been busy cleaning the castle ever since news of the northern victory had reached the city by one of the Wave Dancer ships.

The grand ballroom, not used since the death of the last Queen, now bustled with energy. No hint of the previous disuse remained. Guards, in their formal dress uniforms with newly polished weapons, lined the hallway leading to the entrance.

"Wow. They really cleaned this place up," Torrin said as she stared down the gleaming hallway. The thick layer of dust had vanished.

One of the nearby guards grinned at them. Luna looked twice. The woman's face was half-hidden beneath the elaborate dress helmet. "Wasn't that Ember?" she asked as they continued down the newly brightened hallway.

"Um...," Torrin's head whipped back as she tried to look. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Then there was no time for guessing as they stepped out into the ballroom. They paused by the door and looked in amazement at the huge room. The entrance was a raised dais, with the polished wood floor of the ballroom set several feet lower in front of them. Soaring arches curved upward to form a ceiling several dozen feet above them. Opposite where they stood was another dais dominated by a simple white marble throne. A black cloth covered most of the throne as it had since the assassination of the High Queen. As they stood there, the dance floor stilled, with the hundreds of gathered guests staring up at them. It was all eerily familiar and Luna felt confused by a sudden feeling of having seen this scene before, somewhere. Bewildered, she took Torrin's hand in hers and stepped down onto the polished wooden dancing floor. A Wind Walker stood nearby and announced their entrance.

"Lady Luna, daughter of Mezzarna and Feingold, with Lady Torrin, daughter of Tyra and Jinete." Luna was pleased by her introduction that included Torrin's Mothers. Suddenly the crowd started to applaud. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Eve and Allysandara, and senior Fire Clan warriors joining in. The applause rose, the sound was deafening, crashing against the vaulted ceiling, and echoing through the large ballroom.

Torrin felt the short hairs stand up on the back of her neck. It unnerved her that first everyone stopped to look up at them and now this embarrassing clapping. She tightened her clasp and stepped closer to Luna. "Don't eat the food. I think they've all been drugged," Torrin whispered to Luna as they moved down to the dance floor.

Luna nodded in agreement as the applause died out, replaced by music from the band in the far corner. Dancers who had stopped as Torrin and Luna entered resumed, and a low din of conversation began to fill the hall again. People pressed in close, eager to talk to them.

Torrin smiled and nodded, but never strayed far from Luna. She felt overwhelmed by all the attention.

Luna had a bit of a wild look in her eyes when they finally managed to break free from the crowd and find shelter outside by the balcony. "That," Luna whispered as they stepped into the night air, "was too many people."

Torrin nodded in agreement, looked around and then snagged some chairs on the balcony. "Who knew you were so popular. I mean, you only defeated Khelin single handedly," she teased.

Luna snorted, and then followed Torrin, pausing briefly to reach inside the room and snag two mugs from a surprised servant. "Half of them wanted to talk to you, I noticed," she said, taking a seat next to Torrin. "Wine?" She offered a mug to Torrin.

"Thanks." Torrin took the wine and sipped some. "Mmmm, this tastes good. Swallowing, she continued, "Yes. I'm quite surprised. Somehow there's this horrible story that's gotten out that I'm a hero."

"Imagine that," Luna nearly purred as she rearranged her dress to stretch out her legs. The light from the full moon bathed the balcony and Luna leaned her head back, staring up at the moon. "When I was little, I used to go out at night when it was warm and climb onto the roof of the barn and watch the moon."

Torrin smiled softly and turned her face up to the moon. "Remember that hollow with the thicket we hid in a lifetime ago?" she asked quietly.

Luna nodded. Her memories of the escape were fuzzy around the edges from the shock and wounds she'd had, but that part was clear in her mind.

"When the moon was full in the spring time, I use to go there and watch coyote pups romp in the meadow. Some seasons, their parents didn't mind and they let me actually play with the pups. Other seasons they refused, and I had to just sit and watch. That's how I learned to be stealthy."

Luna let her head turn to one side so she could study Torrin's profile in the darkness. "No wonder we couldn't track you."

Torrin grinned in the moonlight. "Yep. I'm a sneaky one." She leaned back into the chair and unconsciously tugged on her shirt collar again.

In the comfortable silence, Luna leaned back and watched the night sky. The music from the ball drifted through the open doorways onto the balcony along with the sound of laughter. She debated whether to ask Torrin if she wanted to dance. Suddenly something caught her eye and she sat straight up in her chair. Tilting her head to one side she studied the sky, trying to understand what she was seeing. She frowned. "What is that?" A shadow was beginning to creep across the full moon. At first, it was only a small sliver of darkness, then it slowly spread, finally consuming the moon's brightness. "I've never seen this happen before," Luna said as she stood up and moved to the balcony's railing. Below her, she could hear gasps from other guests in the gardens as they looked upward at the disappearing moon. More people, drawn by the strange happenings, began to join them out on the balcony.

Torrin tilted her head back and looked up. She furrowed her brow. "That's not right. The Moon Goddess isn't due to hide her face for at least another two weeks." Then Torrin's gut clenched as she recognized the tainted smell of the Mistress of Shadows in the air. She thought she would never experience the enclosing and suffocating feeling of dry, scaly coils sliding against her skin again and yet now, it was getting stronger and closer.

"Inside!" Torrin barked out to the gathering crowd. "Stop gaping and get inside where it's safe."

"Torrin?" Luna turned away from the balcony.

"Just get inside. Hurry!" Torrin screamed, trying to push people inside.

Sensing Torrin's near panic, Luna started to help herd people back inside. With the two of them pushing and ordering people in, it didn't take long to clear the balcony. Luna slammed the balcony doors shut. Above them, the large chandeliers that illuminated the ballroom shuddered, their flames flickering.

"What do you think it is?" Luna asked, her hand on the hilt of her sword as she warily watched the balcony doors.

"It's the Mistress of Shadows," Torrin gasped as she leaned against the balcony doors her head bowed, her longer bangs hanging down and hiding her face. "You never really forget the feel of her presence. Not ever," Torrin added with a shudder.

As the crowd turned in terror toward the exits to flee, all the chandeliers' flames finally sputtered out, plunging the ballroom into total darkness. Outside, the eclipse of the moon cast the city into gloom as the street flames flickered and died, snuffed out by the advancing shadows.

At the far end of the ballroom, an unlit fireplace burst into flames. The orange fire quickly turned deep blue black and the glistening flames twisted together faster and faster until they took on the shape of a large black serpent. It rose out of the fire pit, its hood flaring out.

Luna's blade sang as she drew it from her scabbard, but even its glow was muted, barely shedding any light at all. "By the Goddess," Luna whispered, her fingers clenched about the hilt of her sword. Screams echoed through the ballroom as guests turned to run, forcing back the guards who tried to rush toward the serpent.

"You think I would let you go unpunished? You think I would let all my plans die with my daughter?" hissed the serpent. "You gave me pain and I now return it to you ten-fold." From behind the large serpent, smaller black snakes began to wiggle up out of the fireplace and onto the ballroom floor toward the huddle crowd. The Goddess slithered out of the fireplace and across the floor, her ghostly white eyes never wavering, intently focused on Luna.

"Torrin," Luna whispered, trying to force her body to move. It took all her strength, but she managed to raise the blade, keeping it between her and the huge snake. The tip was trembling and the faint light from the blade barely illuminated anything. "Torrin!" she called again. Her blue eyes widening as the serpent slithered closer.

Paralyzing coldness had seeped into Torrin's body when the Goddess had first appeared, her limbs frozen in dread. "I, I'm here." Torrin forced the words out.

At the sound of Torrin's voice, the serpent's hooded face shifted as she recognized her former pupil. "So, you live. The Betrayer lives," and altered her direction toward Torrin.

"No!" screamed Luna. The shift gave Luna new strength, and with her sword held out, she lunged between the huge creature and Torrin. She felt Torrin moved over until Torrin's front pressed into her back.

All around the giant serpent, smaller black snakes slithered forward, hissing and feinting venomous strikes to the various women in the ballroom and herded the dancers away from Torrin and Luna.

The serpent raised up hissing, exposing large fangs. "You think to hold me back with a glowing sword?"

"This isn't your land." Luna's voice trembled as she pushed aside the panic that was creeping around the edge of her sanity.

"True. Still, I can come because my mark is here. Here, inside your precious Castle," she gloated. "And my desire for vengeance makes me stronger." The serpent's eyes bored into Luna's blue ones. "I will see your blood splattered and covering the ground."

"Any ideas?" Luna whispered to Torrin, her eyes on the massive hooded head.

The serpentine embodiment of the Mistress of Shadows grinned evilly at Luna. "First, at Abnoa

and now here. You're all alone with only the Betrayer at your back."

Torrin's mouth gaped open in shock. "I-I I'm not!

Luna managed a sneer at the snake. "Be gone, serpent. You won't drive us apart that easily. Go slithering back to the south where you belong." Trickle of sweat ran down her back as she tried to keep the terror away.

The serpent laughed. "You don't think I so carefully put all of this in motion only to lose it all with the death of my child? Even if my darling Khelin lost, even if the Betrayer had chosen another path, I hedged my chances."

"What are you talking about?" Luna started pressing Torrin backward, trying to get them moving toward the doorway.

The serpent drew closer, seemingly unafraid of Luna's sword. "She bears my mark. A brand made from my blood, mixed and heated in my fire of shadows. Torrin gave me my entrance."

"I don't believe you," Luna snarled, horribly aware of how far it was between their position and the doorway. She could hear screaming from the other guests, and the sound of swords striking wood as the guards tried to kill the smaller serpents.

Torrin's face turned purple in anger and in a quick movement, she pulled a knife out of her boot and side stepped out from behind Luna's body. She started to charge, intent on driving the knife into the serpent.

The move was so sudden and suicidal that it caught Luna by surprise. "Torrin!" she cried out, trying to rush after her.

The Goddess only laughed. "And now I have no further need of you, Torrin. And you, Luna, my child's murderer, shall know what it feels like to lose a loved one."

"Nooooo!" Luna screamed as the serpent slammed into Torrin and sent her flying through the glass doors where she disappeared into the moonless night.

Some of the small black snakes quickly squirmed together and covered up the hole, thus blocking a potential escape route.

Luna made a lunge toward them anyway, frantic to find Torrin, only to dive quickly to the side as the Goddess struck, her fangs gouging the wood floor where she had just been.

The serpent hissed and moved in a hypnotic pattern around Luna. "Does it hurt? Do you feel as if a part of you is gone?" The serpent laughed taking pleasure from Luna's anguish.

Ignoring the tears that streaked her face, Luna swung at the serpent, who only danced backward

with an unnatural swiftness. "Bitch," she cried. Somewhere in the background she could hear Allysandra yelling orders, but she had no time to see what the Wave Dancer was doing as the Goddess struck again.

Glass tinkled as small pieces fell from the doorframe and slowly fell to the red stained floor of the balcony. A small body covered in glass laid motionless on the stone as blood ran from various cuts. Soon, the flow of blood ebbed. A spark of life came first from the twitch of a ring finger, then the hand, and then the arm rose up and brushed glass off the face and eyes.

Torrin rolled over while gritting her teeth. Gingerly, she got to her hands and knees ignoring the glass grinding into her palms and slowly got to her feet, swaying once she was upright. She coughed and nearly screamed at the pain in her chest. Turning around, she met a wall of hissing snakes. "Not this way," she mumbled. Looking around, she tried to get her fuzzy brain to come up with a plan. Up or down, those were her options. She went with down since she figured it was a shorter fall. She missed her climbing claws as she traversed the stone face of the wall. Her muscles and chest screamed in pain as she finally reached the rocky flower patch. The gardens had emptied out with the lunar eclipse, leaving Torrin alone in the darkness. She leaned against the wall just wanting to lie down but the thought of Luna and the danger she was in, spurred her back into action.

Finding a small door at the end of the wall, she reentered the Queen's castle. A red trail followed her unsteady steps as she tried to find warriors to help her. "Hello?" she called out. "I need help. Th-there's been an attack. The Mistress of Shadows has people trapped in the ballroom." She paused listening for a reply.

Hello!" She called out a bit louder. "I'll take another gods be damned ghost. Anybody. How about a mouse with a lot of courage?" she muttered.

"This way," a voice called from one of the nearby doorways.

Torrin pushed away from the wall that was holding her up and staggered toward the door. As she started to fall in the darkness, gauntlet covered hands caught and supported her, then helped her down the corridor. They went deep into the castle, through pitch darkness, in a never-ending series of twists and turns.

"You know, the danger is in the ballroom," Torrin slurred out as they moved further and further away from Luna.

"But the answer is here," the voice said, giving her a small push forward. The door in front of her was a massive sheet of stone. She was surprised it opened easily under her hesitant touch. Inside, a pure white light illuminated the simple room. Unlike every other source of light in the city, this one still blazed brightly.

The old woman who had helped her stepped into view, milky white eyes staring towards the source of the light. In the middle of the room stood a stone pedestal, and upon it sat the Orb of the Goddess. It was a sphere the size of a southern cannonball. Two other figures emerged from the light, flanking the pedestal.

Grey eyes widened and she tried to turn away in sudden fear. "I can't. It's so... so pure... untainted. I'm not worthy to be near it."

The old woman seized Torrin's arm in a surprisingly strong grip. "You must or Luna will fail, and the North will fade into the shadows as prophesied."

Torrin took a deep breath and then turned back toward the pedestal. With each shuffling step toward the sphere, she felt her fear rise. The only thing that kept her going was thoughts of Luna. Then she was standing next to it, her hands poised. She hesitated and looked around. "I know I cursed you a lot while growing up, and I know I haven't led a very respectable life, but this," she nodded at the Orb, "isn't for me. I need to help Luna and this old woman says this can do it."

The two guards on either side of the pedestal stepped backward as Torrin closed her fingers around the Orb.

Light.

Brilliant and beautiful burned through her body.

Healing as it flowed, chasing the darkness from her.

The tattoo of the Shadow Goddess burned away, leaving behind a, faint-colored crescent moon-shaped scar on her shoulder. Then the brightness enfolded her as if it were warm, loving arms.

The three ghosts began fading away as the light receded, leaving Torrin standing over the pedestal, her hands still resting on the Orb. She blinked, startled by her improved vision, and took in her surroundings. "Okay, that was... unexpected."

The one who had led Torrin to the Orb saluted her and smiled.

Torrin's eyes widened as the women became translucent. "Hurry! End the curse," they whispered.

"Hey, wait a minute... Stupid ghosts," she muttered as the women disappeared.

Hefting the Orb, she was surprised how light it was. She tucked it under her left arm and took off for the ballroom.

Somewhere along the darkened corridors, she grabbed an old sword from a suit of armor. Finally, she skidded to a halt in front of the large ballroom doors. "Now to get these open."

With a frantic leap, Luna dove forward just as the serpent slammed into the space behind her. The polished wood floor of the ballroom buckled upward under the impact, and wooden shards rained everywhere. Staggering to her feet, Luna kept moving, running as the serpent gave chase. She knew the Shadow Goddess was simply toying with her. "Moon Goddess, help me," she whispered, as she tried to lead the giant snake away from the cornered guests.

Then the serpent hesitated, flinched and then hissed as if in pain. "It doesn't matter, it will be too late," she gasped. The Goddess re-gathered her strength. Without Torrin's brand, she had no physical tie to her sister's realm. She continued striking at Luna. "You're tired now, aren't you? So tired. Why fight me?"

She was right, Luna thought, she was exhausted. The constant dodging and fighting had taken its toll. Limping and doing her best to duck between the smaller snakes, she kept trying to head for the back door to the ballroom. The snakes covering the door might be a problem but Luna hoped her sword would at least kill the smaller ones. If she could just hold off the Shadow Goddess for a little while longer then maybe she could help the others escape.

She wasn't sure at first, but the snakes seemed more brown than black now, and then she saw a beam of light working its way through the snake bellies. The door seemed to writhe as if it were a living thing. The smell of burning of meat became harsh in the air and the snakes began to drop from the door with small hollow thuds. Luna scrambled toward the doorway only to be cut off as the massive serpent slithered into her path.

Just as the Goddess arched for a final strike, a piercing white light overwhelmed the ballroom doors. When it died away, the small snakes and the doors were gone and the figure standing in the doorway was Torrin.

Torrin reopened her eyes after the light had faded. Blinking through the bright spots still visible, she gazed about the room. Her eyes fell immediately on the huge serpent standing between her and Luna.

"Torrin!" Luna was overwhelmed with relief at seeing her alive.

"Luna!" Torrin shouted back. She held the orb up high, waiting for it to do its thing, but the orb resting in her outstretched hand remained dark.

The monstrous snake hissed at the interruption and turned her full attention on Torrin and the orb she held. With a swift slither, she moved toward ballroom doorway.

"No!" Luna shouted, slamming her sword against the armored scales of the Goddess's side.

The black serpent hissed again, her strange white eyes and her large, flared, black hood growing larger. She turned her head back around and then snapped her tail into Luna's stomach. With a cry of pain, Luna went flying backward, tumbling across the wooden floor. Her sword skittered across the floor away from her. Then the Goddess quickly slithered back toward Torrin.

Torrin's grey eyes grew large and she shook the Orb, hoping to wake the thing up. "Shit!" Torrin growled. She needed her hands free for her sword. "Luna, heads up," she shouted, before throwing the Orb at her.

The snake snapped at it, missing it by mere inches as the Orb arched upward over the Goddess's head and hit the floor a few inches from Luna's side. It kept rolling away from the stunned Luna as she struggled to get back up. The Goddess quickly reversed her direction. If she could get to the Orb first, then she would have some of her sister's power to add to her own.

"Frack," Luna wheezed, still trying to catch her breath as she scrambled after the Orb on her hands and knees.

As the serpent turned, Torrin brought her sword down with all her might. It struck scales and shattered leaving her with a stump of a sword. Cursing, she threw it down. "Luna, hurry! She's coming!" Torrin shouted.

Cursing the dress that had wrapped around her legs, Luna could feel the floor shake as the snake slithered closer. The polished wooden boards groaned under the Shadow Goddess's sheer weight. The huge snake was nearly upon her as she lunged forward, her fingers just grazing the Orb.

The Goddess reared above her, her cobra's hood flaring out as she hissed, ready to pounce on the sprawled figure below her.

Grasping it desperately, Luna pulled the Orb to her chest.

With a sound a thousand times louder than that of any avalanche, light exploded from the Orb. It brushed away the smaller snakes with contemptuous ease. The Goddess serpent screamed a long wailing sound as she floundered in the sudden, pure white light. Her physical body burned. Her dark light completely wiped out by her Sister's brighter light. The light ate her shadows and chased the dark away.

Rising to her feet, Luna held out the Orb. At first, she felt infused by the radiating light and bathed in it. Yet subsequently, she experienced a strange, altered feeling, and no longer in control of herself. Then she heard words from her mouth. "Leave the North, Sister. They are not yours."

The Shadow Goddess tried to fight back but felt herself getting weaker and weaker, her serpentine body coming apart. "They should all be mine," she hissed. "This should all be mine. You leave them alone to waste away their lives in worthless pursuits."

"I allow them to choose," the voice coming from Luna answered, with each word ripping layers

away from the Shadow Goddess's form.

"You waste your existence. You could be a Queen of the Gods, but no." The Mistress of Shadow's voice grew weaker. She struggled against the light but in absolute light, her shadows could not exist.

"Goodbye, Sister," the voice called out as a final wave of light exploded outward from the Orb. It washed out over the Mistress of the Shadow's body, sweeping away the last vestiges of her shadow and continued to spread outward over the city. Wherever it touched, light once more existed and the candles and lanterns burst into flame again. Then it was gone and Luna crumpled to the floor in its sudden absence.

With a small groan, Luna swam back to consciousness. For a few moments, she lay where she was, gathering enough strength simply to open her eyes. She felt drained, hollowed out, and confused.

"Shhhh," Torrin whispered and gently caressed Luna's blonde hair with her hand. "Just stay still."

"Torrin?" she whispered, "why...what...?"

Torrin's eyes lit up in relief. "You, my lovely were the living, human vessel for the Moon Goddess." She bent down and kissed Luna's temple. "Not an easy task, I might add. You so kicked that serpent's ass."

"Huh?" Luna blinked, opening her blue eyes to stare up at Torrin in confusion. "I was. I did?" She teared up. "I thought you..." she swallowed at the memory of Torrin flung through the glass doors. "I thought you were dead."

"Nah, you know me. I take a beating and still keep coming back. Gotta love those God-like family genes." She leaned over to kiss Luna's nose. "Besides, I just found you."

Luna let out a sigh of relief and struggled to try to sit up. "So, what else happened? Is everyone all right?"

"I think so. In all honesty, I didn't really care about anybody else after I saw you drop. I wrangled up some healers and been with you here until you were ready to come back to the world."

Sitting up in the large bed, Luna pulled Torrin closer so she could kiss her slowly. "How could I leave you?" She glanced around the room. "Umm, so how long has it been?"

"Ah, a day and a half, almost two," she answered distractedly, leaning over for another kiss. Torrin stroked Luna's hair letting her fingers run through the blonde strands. With each movement, she felt more relieved.

The strange empty feeling in Luna's chest loosened with every touch and she moved as close to Torrin as possible. Sighing in pleasure, she closed her eyes, leaning into the touch. "Did anything else happen?"

Lips brushed against Luna's temple. "You know, the usual. You kicked ass. Got some new magical object to play with and obliterated the Mistress of Shadows. But it was all much more exciting than the way I'm telling it."

Luna snorted, happily basking in the warm feelings. "I seem to remember you're the one who found the..." Luna trailed off and her body stiffened. "*You* found the Orb of the Goddess?"

"Well, um...It's more like it found me. Well, there were these ghosts, um... warriors and..." She trailed off. "It's pretty fuzzy, actually. But I do know that there are no more ghosts in the wandering around the Castle now. As soon as the Mistress of the Shadows disappeared, those old women we keep running into? They were standing by the door, smiled and waved goodbye."

Luna let out a strangled laugh, burying her face in Torrin's side. "I don't want to have any dealings with any Gods and their curses for a long time. No more Goddess of Shadows, Vladlin or even that Horse God, all right?"

Torrin laughed, "No argument from me." She hugged Luna tightly. She was tired of almost dying, getting beat up, and always being in danger. Her body relaxed next to Luna's as she snuggled into the bed. "In a couple of days, after everybody calms down, how about we sneak away? Go dig up my Muanya's remains and take her back to the plains for a burial. Ah, that sounds kind of icky." Torrin giggled. "The digging up part...but you know what I mean. Then, I can show you the South, more than that pit, Thulis."

Luna chuckled, "I know what you meant. As long as we avoid Thulis, I think it sounds like a great idea." She slid her fingers across Torrin's stomach, enjoying the feel of her warm skin and the steady breathing. Hmm, she felt something else was different. Flipping off the blanket, Luna peered at her thigh, her grin widening. "The brand, the one Khelin gave me, it's gone!"

"Really?" Torrin peered down her nose getting closer and closer to Luna's thigh. "Hey, look at that!" She looked up with a grin before ducking back down to give the unmarked piece of skin a kiss.

Luna took in a sharp breath of air in surprise, then grinned and pushed Torrin over so she could pin her to the bed. The tiredness and empty feeling she awoke with vanished. "I think we should stay here for a while," Luna purred, her fingers tugging on Torrin's clothing.

"Hmmm, I'm not certain the healers have cleared you for this sort of activity," Torrin said with a laugh.

Luna tried her best persuasive smile as she managed to undo most of Torrin's shirt, "but I thought

love healed all?"

Torrin motioned to Luna with her finger. When Luna got closer, she whispered quietly, "If you get my shirt off, it might surprise you."

Luna's smile widened as she undid the last two buttons and pushed Torrin's shirt off. "What sort of surprise?"

"The surprise depends on how good a memory you have about my body."

"I've done my best to memorize every inch," she answered, curious about what Torrin was referring to.

Torrin laid back on the bed. "Well, are you noticing anything different?"

Slightly puzzled, but enjoying the opportunity to stare at Torrin's naked chest, Luna tried to figure out what she was looking for. Understanding dawned as she saw a faint quarter moon scar on the shoulder no longer blemished by the brand of the Shadow Goddess.

Covering the spot with her fingers Luna met Torrin's gray eyes. "When?"

"When I got the Orb. It burned the darkness out of me. And I can see better now," she grinned.

"Then I think we should celebrate, don't you?" Luna whispered. A wicked look appeared in her blue eyes as she lowered her head toward the exposed skin. She paused, lips a hairs breadth away from Torrin's chest. "Do you hear something?"

Torrin cocked her head to listen. "Let's see, we're about to get intimate, so I'm going to say it's a committee of busy bodies coming our way," Torrin said plaintively.

Luna nodded, waiting, but no committee burst in on them. The sound did start to grow louder though, and Luna could swear she heard people yelling at each other. "Maybe we should go see what's going on?"

"Do we have too?" Torrin whined.

"You really want them to come in here and find us like this?"

"Wouldn't be the first time," she mumbled back.

Luna laughed, but got up anyway. Picking up Torrin's shirt, she offered it to the dark-haired woman. "Come on, let's see what has them all upset."

"All right. But trust me, you don't want go out there." Torrin sighed as she grabbed her shirt and

put it back on.

Luna gave her a funny look, but headed out into the main room. The sounds of a large argument were unmistakable now. Frowning, Luna wrenched open the door to the corridor. The hallway beyond was filled with women from all the clans, but predominantly from the Wind Walkers. After Luna opened the door, they fell silent and just stared at her.

More than a little unnerved, Luna shut the door and turned toward Torrin as the sounds of arguing outside picked up again. "What is going on here?"

Her shirt now re-buttoned, Torrin wandered to the door wincing at the noise. She wasn't clueless. She had been aware of the muttering going on around the city regarding Luna and her ability to use the Orb.

"Torrin, why are all these people outside our door?" Luna opened the door and gestured out into the hallway as the women once again fell silent.

Torrin stared out at the silent mob of women. "Um..." She scratched her head. "I think what these women are too scared to say is..." She paused, waiting to see if someone would dare speak up. "Since you can use the Orb to do things like, oh... send a Goddess fleeing." She rushed out the last part. "They want you to be the Queen."

Luna stared at Torrin, blue eyes going wide as she started to back away. "No! No, no, no, no! Oh, no! Are you all insane?"

Torrin shrugged. She wasn't surprised by their choice. Luna had been a natural leader of the Clans since the day they had made it barely alive to the Queen's city. She also didn't care either way. Luna was just Luna to her, and she wanted Luna naked and in bed for snuggles. "That's what they've been whispering about." She scowled at the crowd, "when they think no one is around."

A few women did their best to look innocent. Allysandra didn't even try. The head of the Wave Dancers simply smiled as she leaned against the side of the hallway. Eve had the good grace to look embarrassed. Luna glared at them, and then looked back to Torrin.

"You knew about this?"

"Well... kind of... I was hoping we could sneak away before they got the courage up to start things in motion." Torrin crossed her arms over her chest and stared at her feet.

With another glance at the crowd who were hanging on their every word, Luna slammed the door shut. Moving closer to Torrin, she took the smaller woman's hand and laced their fingers together. "You don't want me to do it?"

Grey eyes examined their fingers before looking up to meet Luna's eyes. "I want you to do

whatever you want. I'm not surprised by this, not really, but..." She looked back down.

"But what?" Luna asked quietly.

"It may sound petty, but I want some time with you. Time I don't have to share with anyone else."

Blue eyes studied the woman she had come to love. "What a pair we make," Luna whispered, ducking her head and pressing her lips to Torrin's. "I'll tell them to go away."

Torrin looked up. "You sure? 'Cause I'll love you and be by your side whether it be Queen or Ranger; it matters very little to me." The dark haired woman paused, searching for her words. "And this whole Orb of the Moon Goddess... Queen thing seems kind of like destiny, 'cause if I we're to pick someone to be Queen, I'd choose you."

Luna contemplated the idea. It would be a hellish job... keeping the Clans united with all their differences. True, the war had brought them together, but how long would it last? The taller woman shook her head, smiling faintly at her love's words. "I don't know about the Queen thing. I don't want to lose you."

Torrin pulled Luna to her hugging her. "You're not going to lose me. I'm thinking your council may try to bounce me...try to get someone more respectable as Royal Consort." She grinned into Luna's shoulder.

Luna had to laugh at that. "Let them try. You have to keep me out of trouble right?" She pulled back enough to meet Torrin's eyes. "I..." she paused shaking her head. "I still don't know, love."

"It's up to you. Besides, maybe you should talk to them and see what they have to say." She blushed slightly. "I could have misunderstood the whole conversation I overheard when I was stealing pies out of the kitchen."

Luna laughed. "All right, but not today. Today, you and I get alone time." She yanked open the door, not surprised to find that the entire crowd had crept closer. "Come back tomorrow!" and then slammed the doors shut.

Torrin pulled Luna to her for a big kiss. "That's my woman." She grinned. "And oddly, that really turned me on."

The hot sun beat down on the courtyard of the Castle. A breeze from the Winderling caused the ships in the harbor to rock back and forth, and brought relief from the heat. There were more ships now, and even more that went up and down the river. The traveling ships tied the Northern provinces together during the summer months, bringing news up and down the Winderling to the Queen's City. The city was full of sounds of life.

Leaning back against the warm stone wall in the courtyard, Luna watched the breeze stir the leaves in the great Oak while she was waited for Torrin who was visiting her mother. She was still sitting there and thinking of a future with Torrin when a small group of women came out of the now, ghost-free Castle. With a sigh, Luna sat up straight, and watched the War Council headed in her direction. Tasha had returned yesterday with Fyre and Valarie after making certain Abnoa was back in Northern hands. Allysandra, Eve, and the Head Priestess of the Moon Goddess from the Temple rounded out the group. "Ladies," Luna greeted them, but making no move to stand up from the stone bench as they formed a semi circle around her.

"Luna," Fyre replied with a faint quirk to her lips. "Where's that sex slave of yours? You leave her tied up somewhere?"

Luna's cheeks turned red but she retorted, "Fyre, who says she's the slave?" Luna grinned at their reactions.

Fyre shrugged her massive shoulders. "Well, Torrin's a bit of a control freak so I figure she likes... omphfff," she grunted out as Tasha elbowed her in the gut.

Tasha glared at the Fire warrior. "Stop talking about my baby sister like that." Tasha growled out. "I can't... I'd like to believe she's pure like newly fallen snow, so don't ruin that for me."

Fyre's face turned red trying to contain her laughter.

"I'm going to assume you aren't all here to talk about my love life?" Luna asked, giving Fyre a look. Spotting Torrin coming into the courtyard, she called out, "Hey, love!"

Grey eyes eyed the semi-circle around her lover suspiciously. With lazy, rolling steps, Torrin none to gently pushed council members out of her way as she made her way to Luna. "Hey." She kissed Luna lightly on the lips before turning to Fyre. "I'm what?"

"Right here with us, um, sitting?" Fyre stumbled with an explanation.

"Uh, huh," Torrin responded, not believing a word. "I don't want to know, do I?" she questioned Luna.

"They were just telling me about how you're my..." Luna trailed off as she caught sight of the Priestess's face, "err...I'm in love with you."

"I bet." Torrin drawled out giving Fyre a look that made the other woman gulp. "We're so sparring later, Fyre" and grinned at the discomfited Fire warrior

Luna eyed the gathered women as they stayed silent. "All right, so what's on your minds?"

Tasha opened her mouth and then closed it.

Fyre grinned. "Nice day" was all she said.

The old priestess, her white robes bright in the midday sun, shook her head, muttered something that sounded like 'children' and stepped forward. "You were Chosen by the Orb of the Goddess. The Goddess spoke through you. You are the Queen that was foretold, Luna, whether you like it or not."

Luna turned her head so she could watch Torrin's face. "Maybe," she answered, and then smiled, "But Torrin and I have unfinished business to take care of before that happens."

Torrin's smile got bigger.

The Priestess glanced at the others in puzzlement. Allysandra shrugged, not sure what Luna was talking about either. Fyre scratched her head while Eve asked "What unfinished business?"

Luna slid her hand over Torrin's arm. "I have to go south with Torrin, she has a promise to keep."

Fyre's face took on an expression of puzzlement. "Let me get this straight. The Moon Goddess has chosen you to be Queen, and you're turning it down?"

Tasha elbowed Fyre again. "Don't you ever listen? She didn't say no. Right? You didn't say no?"

"No, I didn't," Luna shook her head, meeting each of their eyes, "Just delaying it. Torrin made a promise to her Muanya, and I won't leave her side. So, we'll be back before the first snow falls. The Goddess should understand that?" The priestess nodded at Luna's questioning look. "I think... hope..., that you all can keep things going at least that long?"

She was met by a series of dubious nods. Suddenly Eve smiled. "That means we get all summer to plan the coronation!"

"What?" Luna asked, mortified.

Torrin snickered.

Luna glared at her love. "Don't forget the commitment ceremony," she smiled innocently.

Eve scowled at the thought, but the prospect of planning both events won out over her dislike of Torrin and she immediately began planning things aloud. "We could have the procession through the entire city. Oh! The choirs should..."

Torrin's smile dropped and her eyes became huge. "Wh-wh-what? Wait, um..."

Fyre started laughing, "Torrin, there are going to be several Fire warriors who will be heartbroken to hear such a statement."

The priestess was already nodding. "Good, the Queen should have a Rezan."

"Rezan?" Luna wasn't familiar with that term.

"A what?" Torrin echoed.

"The wife of the Queen, the consort, her partner..." Eve explained off handedly, still planning the events in her mind.

Fyre laughed harder tears coming to her eyes. "Oh, by the Goddess! I think Torrin is going to faint."

"Am not," Torrin grumbled, but her skin had lost some color.

"Don't worry, Torrin," Luna laughed, wrapping an arm around her. "We have to return your Muanya's remains to the South before anything will happen here."

Tasha nodded in acceptance, and then gathered herself for an official proclamation as the leader of the Earth Clan. "Then, before the first snow fall, Luna shall be crowned Queen, and begin a new reign thus giving life to a place that has been empty for so long. All here are in agreement?" as she looked at the War Council members. The leaders of the Wind Walkers, Wave Dancers and Fire Warrior clans all nodded their consensus.

Then Tasha's eyes zeroed in on Torrin. "And Torrin, daughter of Tyra and Jinete shall be placed before the council to be judged of her worth to stand as the Queen's Rezan. Are all here in agreement again?"

More nods.

"What?" Luna said, frowning. "Wait a second."

Torrin's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean worthy and judged? Nobody else is going to be Luna's Rezzzi... consort... whatever." She scowled at the group. "Bad things will happen to anybody who tries it."

Fyre shook her head. "It's just a formality thing. I'd have to re-read my protocol for the exact words, but it's just a thing to make sure you're not trying to take the Queen for a ride and empty out the treasury."

Eve agreed. "We need to make sure our Queen isn't taken advantage of..." She smirked at the frowning Torrin, "and our assets are safe from plunder."

Luna didn't like the idea of anyone trying to judge Torrin' worthiness, but she figured they still had several months before any of that would happen. "Fine, now could you all go away so Torrin

and I can leave? We have to get back here before the first snow falls remember?"

"Of course, Luna. You gave us your word." The priestess gave them an inexplicable smile.
"Travel safe, the future of the North goes with you."

Torrin eyed the Priestess suspiciously. She didn't trust that smile. It was a good thing they were getting away from all these unpredictable people.

They watched the War Council returned to the Castle with Eve still lost in her planning, Fyre arguing with Tasha, and Allysandra grinning and waving goodbye to them. Luna glanced at Torrin questioningly. "You all right with this? I know I didn't have time to ask you about the commitment ceremony...." She trailed off and slumped against the bench.

"It's a bit overwhelming for someone who never thought they would ever have the chance to settle down, but..." She took Luna's hand and kissed the palm, "...with you, it feels right."

Luna smiled, then stood up, and tugged Torrin to her feet. "Come on, we better get going then. I hear it's a long way to this Horse Clan land."

"Mmm, yes, it's quite the trek. Not much to do or see. Rather boring, I'd say." Torrin said as she let Luna pull her to her feet.

Luna laughed. "Boring is not a word that describes being with you, Torrin."

"Hey, I'm dreadfully boring" protested Torrin. "Nothing exciting ever happens when I'm around," Torrin said, pulling Luna into a hug. She looked around, and then whispered in her ear. "There's nobody around now. Quick, let's leave before someone else interrupts and needs our attention."

Luna grinned. "Just how quick are you?" she said as she bolted for the door.

THE END