

~ Selene and Nix ~

by Zee and Windstar

Windstar: This story is sort of a prequel to a novel length story that is going to be posted in parts. The novel, Blood and Honor, is just being edited. My deepest thanks to Claudia, the beta reader who helps keep us on track. Also, I'd like to say that any and all sparks of genius in this story are a result of Zee, and not me. Any and all praise should be sent to: zeewriter@yahoo.com

Zee: This is a result of insanity. Windy went, "Hey what do you think of this?" And I went, "Nice. But where are you going with it." Then she said, "Dunno. Why don't you help me." And for some reason I said, "Okay." So no, Windstar and I haven't died we've just been working on this story which is taking on war and peace like size. So there you have it. Nix and Selene is a prequel to Blood and Honor. I hope you enjoy, if you don't its windy's fault so bug her at: Adarkbow@yahoo.com

Intro

Freedom's Passage, from the Book of Exodus in the Queen's Castle.

Contained here in these pages is our story, the story of our people. The story of our beginning, the story of our exodus from slavery to freedom: In the beginning we were slaves. It is good to know this, from this knowledge we can prevent ourselves from ever falling back into those dark times

Blood coursed down her face from where the foreman had hit her, and she cowered in the dirt as he circled her. She didn't have a name, none of them did, there were too many women so those not used for breeding purposes were just slaves, work animals. She felt the loose dirt move and knew he was coming at her again. Curling into a ball she threw her arms over her head to protect herself as the blows came. Pain blurred and faded away into numbness, so did the names and curses he hurled at her.

Darkness came and the slaves were herded into pens for the night. As they were driven into the pens they refused to look at the fallen woman they gave her unmoving body a wide berth. Heavy clouds that had been threatening to burst finally did and rain fell, the cold liquid slid down the curves of unmoving flesh blending with blood and dirt creating 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 match in a breeze.

The foreman would be coming back for her, probably to finish the job he had started earlier. Weakly she raised her head, peering into the rain filled darkness. At first she thought she had dreamed the words. Then she saw Her. The woman was walking slowly towards her, emerging

from the darkness. The woman glowed with a pale white light and even though the rain fell in torrents her beautiful white robes were untouched by rain or the mud she walked through. Gracefully the woman knelt next to the now cowering woman in the mud. "My poor child. I have come to bring you and your sisters to freedom."

Looking out through swelling eyes she tried to speak but coughed up dirt and blood. Finally able to speak she croaked out a single word, "Freedom." The word tasted funny on her tongue. Fear filled her chest. What trick was this? A cruel joke, to dangle such an illusive thing in front of her. A strangled laugh that sounded like it might turn into a sob at any moment burst out of her. "There is no such thing as freedom."

"You're right. There isn't in this land, not for you, or any of my children." An old painful sadness showed in the glowing woman's voice. Gentle hands helped the cowering slave up to her knees. "But there is freedom elsewhere. Far from this land of men and their Gods."

She tried to stop it but the woman's words burrowed past the thick walls she had created to survive, and hope began to burn in her breast. It was a faint warmth inside her numb heart. "Freedom." She said again tasting the unfamiliar word again.

Where the woman's hands touched the slave they healed the wounds that had been inflicted on her, both old and new. By the time the glowing woman had helped the slave to her feet the last of the wounds from the foreman's fists had disappeared 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 illuminating the darkness around them, and even the rain seemed warmer as it fell on the slave's bare shoulders. "It is a long road, but I will help you. Will you lead your sisters from this place towards a place where they shall never fear a man's anger or follow his orders again?"

Hope burned brighter and she looked into the strange woman's eyes, for a moment she found herself sucked in and lost in the swirling vortex of the woman's eyes. Pulling herself away with a gasp she shivered and her mind slid away from the secrets she had seen to complex for a mortal's mind. Steadying herself she bowed her head. "I will my Lady. I will 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 chosen one, and I name you Selene."

She breathed in a quick breath and tears prickled her eyes, she had a name. "Selene." She spoke the name in wonder.

"Thank you my lady. Thank you for such an honor. I shall do my best to never let you down."

A soft smile at that and the glowing lady gave her a small push towards the pens that held the other slaves. "Go now, free your sisters. The foreman and his guards are playing dice; they will not notice for hours that you are gone. 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 Luna's words, but others their skin a map of bruises and wounds took her words to heart and unlike the others felt not fear in their hearts but hope. Taking courage they fled the pens and followed the moon.

Selene and Nix

By: Zee and Windstar

A long time ago...

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 now preferred being alone in the thick woods where the trees blocked out the open and never-ending bright sky.

Sadly, she didn't get as much solitude as she craved anymore. She was one of the few women in this bewildering new utopia who could work metal by bending and shaping it to take on fantastic forms and designs. Her days now were spent working long hours in the smithy where people came by, hour after hour, with jobs and requests. Her only conversations were with the women demanding her skill. No one else took the time to seek her out for companionship. With upper body muscles tremendously overdeveloped from a life spent in hard labor, the smith knew she was odd to look at and behaved so differently than the others it made her desire for solitude even stronger.

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 strange feeling tonight. She knew 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 remarked wryly, "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 La... er, 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 temples 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 her fingers began to trace it nervously. "Uh... it was very nice to meet you. But, I think ..."

Suddenly the fissure widened and the stone split open in her hands. Nix stared in shock at the rock pieces. She looked guiltily at Selene. She had single handedly, destroyed 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 a piece of the rock fell to the ground revealing a perfectly round, silvery orb still embedded in the remaining half of the rock.

"Huh?" Nix looked down. "Oh, a small, shiny stone."

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. Unwrapping the cloth from around her eyes she 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."

She watched as Selene tucked the orb carefully into her pocket and moved away from the crater. Nix paused a moment and looked down at the fallen piece of rock on the ground and then the one in her hand. She picked up the rock as Selene gave her an inquiring look. She just shrugged. Then they made their way back to the village together.

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. She was okay with 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 half 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 a 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 fire of her forge.

She dropped the cloth and picked the sword up gently and 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 three nights ago but somehow that was what had been made. Thick fingers closed the box. Then blue eyes focused on the other object. She had just enough of the molten liquid left to fashion a small circlet.

She wanted Selene to have a gift of beauty, and she thought the circlet 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 made a winding trail 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 towards the path that led down to the river. "Come on, I was just about to take a swim."

To 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.

The hammer came down and sparks flew from where metal met metal. After a moment the large hands stilled and Nix let out a loud sigh. She'd done it again. All she needed to do was make large bolts to help secure the buildings that were being built and she just couldn't seem to do that.

Why? Because two days ago, Selene kissed her.

Not a big deal to some, but to Nix, who had only been kissed once before, it had tilted her world. Selene's simple brush of lips against hers had meant so much more.

She frowned at the twisted piece of metal and thrust it back into the fire to be remade.

"So, you're the blacksmith," a low sultry voice called from the doorway behind Nix. "The one that Selene just can't stop talking about."

Nix almost dropped the metal into the fire from surprise, but honed practice saved the piece. She frowned. This was her domain, she was ruler. She'd talk to Laurel when she was good and ready. Slowly she pulled out the red-hot piece of metal and swung her hammer.

The woman in the doorway was a little shorter than Selene, and had luxurious, long auburn hair framing a heart-shaped face with dark brown eyes. Unlike the majority of women from the Exodus, her skin was unblemished by scars from past beatings.

"You're certainly large enough to get one's attention," Laurel purred, leaning against the wall near the door.

Three quick strokes with the hammer and then Nix thrust the metal into the cooling bucket, nodding in approval she handed the tongs to her assistant.

Finally she gave her concentration to Laurel. "Thank you, I think. Is there something you need?" She was puzzled why Laurel would be here in her shop.

"I just wanted to see the person who made such stunning sword and a beautiful piece of jewelry," Laurel responded, watching the assistant take the tongs outside.

"Yes, that would be me. Selene is important to our world. She deserves something to make her look the role."

"So you decided to make her those things. How sweet," Laurel said icily, crossing her arms over her chest.

Sensing that being near hot metal might not be a good idea right now, Nix sighed and took off her leather apron. She hung the apron on its hook and picked up her protective cloth and tied it around her head.

"Yes, I decided to make her those things." She shrugged, "I guess that could be called 'sweet'." She stepped out into the small yard next to her workshop and grabbed a ladle of water.

Laurel moved outside with her, slumping down onto a bench. "I don't understand." she said, "how can you bumble your way into meeting her, make her two trinkets, and then she suddenly

likes you better than anyone else?" Laurel wrapped her arms around her bent knees and stared at Nix accusingly. "That's not how it's supposed to work."

"Not how what works?" Nix asked confused. "Um, would you like some water?" she asked belatedly remembering her manners.

"No, I would not like some water. I would like you to stay away from Selene," Laurel said bluntly.

Nix shrugged and poured herself some water. She took a sip and looked down at Laurel. "It's good water," Nix mumbled taking another sip. She frowned at Laurel. "Why do you care if Selene and I are friends? Seems like you're making a big deal out of nothing to me."

The other woman made a disbelieving noise. "Friends? That's what you think this is about?" Laurel stared at the large woman then shook her head. "You can't be that much of an innocent. No one is after..." she shook her head again. "Just stay away from Selene."

Nix frowned again and set the ladle down. "I'm a free woman now, Laurel. This means I don't have to take orders from anybody, especially you. I'm not sure what your problem is but Selene is my friend and will continue to be friends until she tells me otherwise." She would have glared at the other woman but because her eyes were covered it would have done no good.

Laurel wavered, not sure what to say to that. Finally she lithely unfolded her legs and stood up. "Just stay friends," she settled on at last.

Nix scratched her head in puzzlement, what else would she be to Selene?

Nix stepped out of her shop. It was warm, unbearably warm both inside and out. She glared down at her leather pants. While they might protect her from sparks, on a day like today, they were uncomfortable.

She wasn't sure if she liked this new place, it was cold in the winter, and hot in the summer. With a grunt she lifted up her braid and scratched the back of her neck. She was hot and bored. Everybody seemed to be taking the day off. Having finished the pieces she had been asked to make she now found herself with nothing to do.

Suddenly a smile sprang to her lips, ducking her head into her shop she yelled out, "Gina, I'm done for the day! Close down the shop!"

Her assistant looked up, startled by the shouting from the normally quiet smith. "Y-yes, Nix. No problem."

Nix wandered down the street with no real direction in mind. She was still puzzled by the visit from Laurel. With a shrug she pushed the thoughts away. Without realizing it, she found herself approaching the river. With a smile, she stretched out under the shadow of the trees near the cool, calm water and lazily threw a few rocks. She liked the trees, they blocked out that endless sky. She threw another rock.

Selene stopped in surprise as she spotted someone sitting at what she thought of as *her* spot and throwing rocks into the river. Then she smiled as she recognized the interloper.

"I thought you never left that smithy of yours?" the blonde called out as she walked the rest of the way down the small path to the riverbank.

"Oh, hi." Nix sat up startled and dropped the rock in her hand.

"Hi." Selene echoed back, dropping down onto the ground next to Nix. "You decide it's too hot to work with melted metal?" the smaller woman asked, leaning back against a small tree trunk.

She unsuccessfully tried to brush dirt and leaves off her clothes as she sat up. "What? Oh, yeah, hot." She winced at her awkward speech. "Um... Yes, it was really hot today and not much work to do. The builders are taking it easy during this heat spell." She blushed lightly.

Selene picked up a small rock of her own and flicked it into the river, idly watching one of the new fishing boats lazily drifted downstream with the current, nets trailing behind it. "Laurel told me she went to see you," the blonde said carefully, as she glanced at Nix out of the corner of her eye. "I hope she didn't do anything?"

"It was a weird meeting. She didn't seem to make a lot of sense." Nix shrugged and threw another small rock. "Tried to tell me what to do but I think we cleared things up."

Selene gave her large friend a strange look and then went back to studying the river. "Don't worry about Laurel, she's had a bad time before we left. Worse than a lot of us, I think, although she hides it well."

"I'm not worried about Laurel. Why would I worry? Just cause she's perfect, and can't do anything wrong?" Nix shut her mouth quickly in embarrassment. She sounded like she was whining about a woman she hardly knew.

Selene touched the other woman's arm, smiling up at her. "You think she's perfect?" For some reason, the idea that Nix would think Laurel was perfect made Selene want to laugh.

Nix felt her skin break out into goosebumps where Selene's hand rested on her skin. "Well, is there anything she's not good at?"

Leaving her hand where it was, the blonde leaned back against the tree again. "Let's see. Well,

anything to do with physical labor, anything requiring any sort of concentration or a large amount of planning. Oh, and she hates competition."

Nix picked up another rock throwing it. "I'm only good at one thing, bending metal."

"I think you're good at more than that." Selene said honestly, squeezing Nix's forearm.

Nix swallowed thickly. "Really?" She looked over at Selene. "Thank you." Slowly she reached over and gently squeezed the other woman's hand.

The smaller woman's smile grew and for a moment she stared up at Nix's face, leaning slightly forward and toward the larger woman. Then, realizing what she was doing, Selene let go of Nix's hand. "Want to take a swim?" she knew she could definitely use a cool dip in the water.

Nix looked at Selene confused. "Sounds nice, but I can't swim."

Standing up, Selene held out her hand invitingly. "I could teach you?"

Nix thought about it, weighing her fear of the unknown with her desire to be with Selene. "Um, okay."

Taking the other woman's hand, Selene helped her to her feet and led the way down to the water's edge.

Selene let go of Nix's hand at the water's edge, tugging off the simple shift she'd worn for the day. It was too hot to bother with anything more than the bare necessities, and she tossed those aside as well. Stepping into the water, she stopped and raised an eyebrow at the other woman. "Are you going swimming fully dressed?"

"Um..." Nix stalled for time, letting her brain catch up from its visual vacation. "Wearing leather in the water would probably be bad for it, I guess."

The shorter woman laughed and moved further out until the water was lapping at her shoulders. "Not unless you wanted to make a new leather shirt."

A faint blush dusted across Nix's cheeks. Shyly she began to strip out of her leather pants and thick shirt. Self-consciously she rubbed the thick calloused scars around her wrists.

Selene smiled and dove under the water, emerging a few feet further out with her back to Nix, giving the other woman some privacy.

Nix started with a toe. It was cold but not too bad. Inch by inch, she submerged her body into the river. After a hot day spent working around her forge this was bliss. When the water hit her chest she stopped and dug her toes in the river bottom creating an odd sensation.

Glancing over her shoulder, Selene swam towards the taller woman standing in the water. "Well? How does it feel?"

Making a face she peered down into the water. "It feels nice, but something weird is going on between my toes."

"Mud," Selene explained as she tried to stand up next to Nix and nearly drowned when she realized the water was still over her head. Spluttering, she swam a bit closer to shore and managed to touch ground. "I keep forgetting how tall you are."

"Yeah, I was taller than the mine owner and his enforcers." She shrugged uncomfortably. "I think I intimidated him because he made me pump the bellows. I guess it worked out, though. I did learn a lot about metal work."

"I was shorter than the plantation owner," Selene said, frowning as a wisp of a memory crossed her mind. Shaking it away, she kicked off from the bottom, slowly swimming a circle around Nix. "So that's how you know so much, eh? I've heard you can make anything out of metal," Selene remarked with a smile. "I love the sword and the circlet. Have I told you that yet?"

Nix blushed and ducked her head. "It may have come up. I'm glad you like it. I know the sword isn't your thing but I'm sure Laurel can show you how to use it."

"Laurel?" Both blonde eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You think Laurel knows how to use a sword?"

"Um, yeah. I... I've heard that about her... among other things."

Selene moved in front of Nix, treading water as she watched the other woman's face. "Laurel..." the smaller woman hesitated then continued, "Laurel knows how to use small weapons. She used to be a bed slave. Her last owner trained her so he could use her to assassinate his rivals."

Nix scratched the back of her neck under her thick braid. "Um... why would anybody need a trained assassin to make the bed?"

The blonde blinked, then smiled slowly and swam closer to the taller woman until they were almost touching. "She didn't *make* the bed; she was *used* in the bed."

Nix frowned in thought, "In the bed? I don't..."

Selene raised an eyebrow, waiting for Nix to understand.

Suddenly Nix blushed profusely. "Oh!"

"Oh," she nodded in agreement. "So don't let her bother you. She just gets defensive sometimes. It's all she has."

Changing the subject Selene splashed the other woman suddenly. "Come on, I promised to teach you how to swim, not talk about Laurel."

Nix sputtered and wiped water off her face. "Hey!" Smiling she brought down her massive, calloused hands into the water splashing Selene and herself thoroughly.

The hot summer days seemed to fly by as the women tried to prepare the settlement for winter. It would take generations before what would become the Queen's City to fill the island, but for now, they were a simple village. Most of the buildings were made of split wood, but it was a step up from the tents they had last winter. Selene and Nix had continued their meetings on the cool banks of the Winderling so Selene could teach the taller woman how to swim.

The days, then weeks, and eventually the months passed quickly. The leaves on the river trees were starting to change colors. Selene sat with her back against what she'd begun to think of as their tree, watching one of the small fishing vessels struggling up stream against the current towards the docks.

"Winter's coming," she said at last, turning her head slightly so she could see her companion. "Pretty soon it will be too cold for swimming." The last remark was said with sad regret. Selene had come to treasure these quiet moments away from everything and everyone else.

"Oh," Nix replied quietly.

Selene let out a sigh, turning back to watching the small sailboat.

She stared at the gently swirling water forlornly. It wasn't like this could last. She should be happy with the brief times she already had shared with Selene. "I suppose you'll be busy with Laurel and everything... getting ready for the Harvest Festival and preparing for the winter and stuff."

Selene turned at the comment, sitting up straight. "Nix, Laurel and I, we, I mean..." she hesitated, not certain what to say or even how to say it.

"Selene!" a voice cried from down the path as a woman ran towards them, stumbling every few steps. "Selene!" she yelled again, nearly tripping into the water in her rush to reach the two by the tree.

Nix shot up, her hand going for her hammer that wasn't there.

Sliding the last few feet, the anxious woman came to a stop in front of Nix and Selene. "Selene, Willow, she said to find you. It's Kelsy."

Fearing the worst, Selene grabbed the large, calloused hand of her companion and tugged her into a full run back towards the village. "Come on!"

Surprised by being dragged by the smaller woman away from the river, Nix tried to ask Selene to explain the rush but the woman just shook her head, focusing on running down the twisting root covered path back to the village. Only when they broke free of the trees and were running toward the couple's house in the village, did she answer. "Kelsy, she's the first one Willow helped make pregnant, she panted."

Nix felt awkward running next to Selene with her longer legs being hampered by Selene's shorter legs. Finally giving into the urgency of the situation she bent over and scooped the smaller woman into her arms.

The smaller woman let out a squawk of surprise as she was suddenly picked up, and then held on for dear life as Nix put on a burst of speed. "There!" Selene pointed towards the group gathered outside one of the log cabins.

Nix easily leapt over a few logs left out to be chopped and then stopped outside the home.

"Umm, Nix? You can put me down now."

She gently placed Selene down. "Sorry. I... um... thought it would help."

"It did." she answered, smiling up at the other woman, and ignoring a few of the speculative looks they were receiving. "Come on."

Valla, Kelsy's partner, was inside, pacing back and forth across the common room. Valla was as tall as Selene, but easily twice her mass in muscle. Even so, she seemed small in comparison to Nix.

"Thank the Goddess," Valla muttered as she spotted Selene, clapping Nix on the shoulder in way of greeting. "Nix, thanks again for helping with the walls."

Nix smiled softly. "No problem, just happy to help you two out. Not many folks around here are as tall as me so stacking logs high wasn't a problem."

A long drawn out scream from the other room caused Valla to start pacing again. Selene's eyes widened as the scream went on, and then ended in a series of what sounded like grunts. She looked up at Nix, then toward the simple wooden door to the other room.

Nix winced. "Is Kelsy okay?"

"I don't know, they threw me out." Valla growled, kicking at a wall.

Nix nodded her head causing her large braid to shake. "Ah." She paused not knowing what to say. "Um, well since we can't be helpful in there why don't we make sure Kelsy has everything she and the baby need. Um, so she can relax after her, ah, effort is done."

Selene patted Nix's arm and stretched up to whisper to the taller woman's ear. "Keep her distracted? I'll try and go see what's going on."

Nix nodded. "Valla, I noticed some wood that needed to be chopped outside. It is getting cold at night now. I think we should chop that and bring it inside. The baby shouldn't get cold."

"Wood, right. Need wood for fire." Valla repeated as she watched Selene slipped into the other room as another drawn out scream erupted from inside.

Nix was at a total loss when it came to babies and prayed she was suggesting the right thing. She understood that a baby was small version of an adult, but mine workers came to the mine as half grown children. She really had no idea what a baby or a mother needed.

"Hey, we know we can help by chopping wood. So let's get going." She herded the distracted woman toward the door.

"What if something goes wrong?" Valla asked as they stepped outside, trying to get around Nix and back into the house.

"Then a bunch of people would come running out of the house in a panic to get you." She handed Valla the axe. "Now chop. We don't want a cold baby and mother, do we?"

"Right." Valla grabbed the axe, hefted it and slammed it down onto the nearest log, shattering it in two.

"Good. Just like that," Nix said encouragingly.

"I know how to use an axe." Valla growled, grabbing another piece of wood and setting it up. Working out her anxiety on the wood, she cleaved it in half with another well-aimed, powerful stroke.

"Now, how about you take a few deep breaths? I find it calms me whenever I'm feeling out of sorts or nervous." Nix added helpfully.

"Deep breaths?" Valla looked at her incredulously, axe held up in both hands.

"Yeah." She shrugged at Valla's expression. "I feel funny whenever I hang out with Selene so I take a few deep breaths and I find my stomach isn't so rumbly."

Valla grinned at her.

"I'm just trying to help," she muttered while picking up a log and dragging it closer.

Selene interrupted them as Valla weighed the axe in her hand and contemplated exactly where to strike the wood.

"Valla? You can come in now." Selene barely managed to step aside as Valla barged inside. Smiling at the smith, the blonde stepped outside, grinning widely as she spotted the remnants of the wood strewn about. "Good job distracting her, Nix."

"Valla!" Nix yelled. "Drop the axe! I'm fairly certain you shouldn't greet your new one with an axe in your hand."

A loud clunk signaled that Valla had heard the shouted command. Then a healthy sounding baby's cry came from inside. Those gathered outside let out a cheer and Selene laughed. "The baby has a healthy pair of lungs, I see."

Nix looked down at Selene. "Sounds like it. Is Kelsy okay?"

"Tired, I would say, but Willow thinks they are both going to be fine." Taking hold of Nix's arm without realizing it, the blonde smiled at her, "We have a future now."

"I'm glad I could help." She gently squeezed Selene's hand.

"Selene, I came as soon as I heard..." Laurel skidded to a stop several feet down the road, staring at the two of them. Selene dropped her hand, taking a step away from Nix, and felt her face heat up.

"I see." Laurel said, her face clouding over. "She's why you've been sneaking away all summer? Is that it?" the other woman screeched.

Nix was confused as Selene took her hand off her arm and then pulled away. She didn't like how Laurel phrased their time together making it sound like she was some dirty secret Selene was hiding. Puzzled, she focused her attention on Laurel. "What are you yelling about? Selene's my friend. Of course we've been spending time together. She taught me how to swim."

Selene winced at the admission. She really wished Nix hadn't said anything about the swimming lessons.

"Swimming? Naked, of course," was Laurel's scathing answer. "Did you teach her anything else, Selene?" the woman snarled, and then she wheeled around and fled back down the path.

Selene stood rooted for a second, torn between following and staying. "I'm sorry, Nix," the blonde whispered, her face troubled as she hurried after Laurel.

"I see," was all Nix said to the empty air. With her massive shoulders bent, she slowly made her

way back to her forge and home.

The smithy was a noisy place. Nix beat on the glowing hot metal in front of her. Orange sparks sprayed out like fountain with each strike. The furious beating went on for a few more seconds before massive hammer stilled and cloth covered eyes stared at the twisted piece of metal.

"No good. Not good at all," she berated herself. In disgust she dropped it into a tub of water waving away the steam that bellowed out of it. She stood still for a moment and then with a scream, kicked the bucket over.

Nix's assistant, Gina, scurried quickly to a corner of the smithy. She had known Nix for awhile now and despite the large woman's fierce looking appearance, she had never actually known Nix to raise her voice or act violently in any way. But her teacher's mood today and yesterday was making her very nervous.

"Nix, do you want me to..." She trailed off as Nix looked at her, even though she couldn't see the woman's face, she knew she was being glowered at angrily.

Nix's glare crumbled away at Gina's alarmed face. Her mistake wasn't Gina's fault. She sighed, "No. Gina, just go. Go see your lady and have a fine rest of your day. I'll clean up my mess."

Gina decided to leave before Nix started acting any weirder.

Nix picked up the bucket she had knocked over, held it for a second then flipped it over and sat down on it. Her brow furrowed in thought, she wasn't sure what was wrong with her.

Outside the smithy a figure lingered in a warm autumn rain that had blanketed the island for the past day. Wearing a thin cloak soaked through with water, Selene stared at the entrance to the metal working shop. Nervously, she smiled as she spotted Nix's assistant.

"Gina?" Hesitantly Selene stepped forward. "Is Nix inside?"

The soot-covered assistant paused then slowly untangled her thoughts away from her girlfriend. "What? Nix? Oh, yeah, she's inside, but I'd be careful if I were you. She's been in a foul mood all day today."

Selene nodded, gazing with apprehension at the open door over the assistant's broad shoulders. "Did she, umm, did she say anything?"

"No, just told me to take the day off." She scratched her face smearing the accumulated soot around. "Now, if you would excuse me, I have to go bathe."

"Thanks." Selene squared her shoulders and stepped into the smithy. "Nix?" she called cautiously.

Nix didn't turn around, just sat on the upturned bucket with her back to the door. "Yes. What do you need made?"

The indifferent question hurt more than Selene had expected, and she froze in the doorway. "Um, I came to apologize."

Nix remained still for a while and then finally lifted her head. "Apologize for what? Laurel's your companion. Me? I'm just... me."

Gathering her courage, the blonde stepped further inside, gingerly circling the sitting woman until she faced her. "She isn't." Selene whispered.

Nix unbound the cloth from her eyes and rubbed them. Then, after a moment, she hefted her bulk off the makeshift chair. "Isn't what?"

Selene watched Nix as she stood up, keeping her eyes focused on the other woman's face, trying to gauge her reaction. "My companion." Selene took another slow step toward the taller woman.

Nix swallowed nervously. "Then why do you let everyone believe that she is?"

Selene shrugged, taking another slow step forward. "It's easier than fighting her. Laurel had always been present, ever since the beginning. She helped me get here."

Nix took a step back from the approaching woman and tried to collect her thoughts. She started her chores to sooth her mind with the familiar tasks, closing her eyes while leaning over to dampen the fire in her forge. Gradually she re-opened her eyes and asked the question that had popped into her mind.

"Helped you how?" She took off the heavy leather apron and hung it up.

"I had a hard time getting us here," Selene answered slowly. I doubted myself when we were crossing the desert. When the sand seemed to go on forever, I thought I'd made a mistake, leading you all to your death. She supported me during those dark times in the desert, when many had left the Exodus, and then again in the south Laurel kept me going. She made me keep moving, especially after that group of women refused to leave the desert."

The smaller woman stepped in front of Nix, looking up at the other woman's eyes. "I thought I owed her, so..." she trailed off uncomfortably.

Nix stood silent, for a moment. "So you became closer. Selene, I'm not sure what you want from me."

That was the easy answer and the other woman gave it without thought. "I want to be your friend." Swallowing she reached up a hand, gently touching the side of Nix's face. Her hand was trembling she realized, "And maybe something more?"

Nix rubbed the back of her neck unconsciously smearing soot on to the skin. "What? Me?"

It wasn't the rejection Selene had feared. Emboldened with the question, she left her hand where it was, smiling slowly as she nodded. "Yes, you."

Nix felt like she might faint. "Um, I need to sit down again." She took some deep breaths. "I'm all dirty, and smelly," she blurted out lamely.

Selene's tentative smile grew a full out grin as the smaller woman nodded. "I know." Leaning upward, she pressed her body against Nix's, lightly pressing her lips against the taller woman's in a chaste kiss. "I still like you."

Nix gulped. "I-I-I like you, too." She awkwardly returned the kiss.

Still smiling, Selene took a step back, granting the other woman room. "How about this? Can we be friends and whatever else happens is a bonus?"

Large hands gently captured Selene's, "I'd like that."

A pair of dingy brown Alcons walked slowly into the rough, newly forming city. They were shedding from the heat. Massive clumps of hair fell to the ground and then were trampled by dirt-caked hooves, their heads hung wearily. The two women following behind weren't much better.

"Crow, this is stupid. The whole point of taming the stupid beasts was so they would carry stuff," the smaller of the two women grumbled at her companion.

The taller woman raised a white blonde eyebrow, "So they're smarter than we thought."

The two women were taller than most anybody in the town. They were big-boned, with bulky muscles in their arms and shoulders. The taller of the two wore a cloth over her eyes.

Over their backs were dirty, smelly packs that bulged with raw ore.

"It's hot," the smaller one whined.

"One more word out of your gob, and I'm going to smack you silly, Yuri. Come on. Let's find the runt and drop this shit off."

Yuri opened her mouth and then wisely shut it.

A group of women tending to the gardens beyond the village border waved to the two as they passed by and then resumed their weeding.

The Alcens bobbed their heads. Crow laughed. "Look at that, they know how to greet the ladies. Now if we could just train you."

Yuri stuck her tongue out. Crow waved to the ladies, and then resumed walking. "Where do you think the runt set up her shop?"

Yuri looked around brown eyes taking everything around her. "Why'd Nix stay behind? This place is hot and the people don't seem nearly as fun like us."

Crow shrugged massive shoulders and said nothing. She couldn't understand why Nix had forsaken her sisters to stay, either. She spotted a building at the edge of town that looked promising.

"Hey, dumb ass. I bet that's Nix's place."

Brown eyes looked up to Crow's face. "How do you figure?"

"I figure, 'cause... who else would have a fire going on a shitty, hot day like today?"

Yuri nodded in agreement and followed Crow's path, whistling for the Alcens to follow.

"Oh, hey. Look at her. We need more ladies like that to come up North. Your ugly mug don't do it for me."

Crow rolled her eyes.

Selene leaned back against the side of the building, trying to find some relief from the humid heat. She'd never thought it could get this hot in a place where it got so cold during the winter. She was almost napping when she heard the Alcens approaching with two large women leading them. Both of Selene's eyebrows raised in surprise at the strange women. She had caught Yuri's comment though.

"Thank you, I think." Selene called out, curiously watching the two draw near.

Yuri preened. A lady had spoken to her.

Crow smirked and yelled, "Halt!" to the Alcens and Yuri. Happily all three stopped.

"Pardon my friend. She's not use to women outside us sisters of the mines. I'm Crow and this is

Yuri. Do you know if this is Nix's place?"

Selene blinked at the two of them, and then looked upward at the sign that hung above the smithy door. "It says "Nix's Smithy" so I guess it is her place." Selene answered dryly. "You know Nix?"

Crow laughed. "If I could read then I wouldn't have had to ask." She watched the woman's face grow red. "No harm. You didn't know," she smiled warmly. "As for the runt and me, we go way back. I've known her since the day they took her from her mother and threw her into the mines."

Interested, Selene got up, forsaking the shade to come out into the center of the courtyard to meet these two strangers.

"What was she like? In the mines, I mean?" The blonde hadn't had a chance to learn much about Nix before the Exodus. Nodding toward Crow's face, she asked a second question before the first had been answered. "Does the light hurt your eyes also?"

Yuri glared at Crow for taking all of the pretty woman's attention.

Crow chuckled and swung the massive pack off of her back and then sat on it, grunting in relief to get off her feet. Grumbling, Yuri did the same.

Crow smiled. "The old sister, who taught me the rules of the mines, told me that because we lived in complete darkness, with the exception of the smithy fires, our eyes changed, adapted to the lack of light. So at night I can see like it was day. Yuri was young enough when we escaped so her eyes changed back."

"Hey, I can still see really good at night," Yuri butted in.

Selene smiled reassuringly at the smaller woman towering over her and hoped they would keep talking about Nix.

"Uh, huh, anyways, the runt as a child..." She paused, thinking back. "She was always quiet and shy. Goddess, she was so serious, tell the girl a joke and she took it at face value."

Selene crouched down in the shadows of the two miners, listening with fascination.

Crow smiled fondly remembering. "The mine owner mistook her shyness for stubbornness, stuck her in the forge with the Master Smith from a young age and made her pump the bellows until her hands bleed. Good thing the Master Smith was a decent fellow, he wasn't into men being superior, just wanted to make things with metal. He gave Nix her name. I can still hear the old guy telling her to 'nix it' or stop what she was doing."

"I wondered how come she already had a name," Selene murmured, glancing toward the open door of the smithy. "She should be happy to see you both."

"You know the Master Smith taught her everything he knew. She's the best. You're lucky she stayed here," Crow said wistfully.

"I know." Selene answered truthfully, although she wasn't sure why exactly Nix had stayed either. *Yet another question to ask the other woman.* The blonde smiled fondly at the smithy shop, thinking of last night.

Suddenly, a grinning Nix appeared in the doorway, filling it. "Another thing about growing up in the mines, the silence improves hearing. I am glad to see you two." Her face tilted so it was looking at Selene and she ventured a shy smile at the woman.

Without hesitating, Selene smiled back, ignoring the miners as she rose to her feet and took a step towards Nix. "Hey, you. I was hanging around outside waiting for you to finish when" she motioned to the two, "friends of yours showed up. I got them to tell me stories about when you were younger."

"Runt!" Crow bellowed and ran over and hugged Nix fiercely.

Nix winced. "Hey. No crushing my ribs."

Yuri sighed and waited patiently.

Nix got Crow off of her and rubbed her stomach and moved over to Selene kissing her shyly on the cheek. "I heard you talking. I would have come sooner but I was working on something for the little one."

The blonde beamed at the smith, pleased beyond words at the small kiss to the cheek. She hadn't expected a public display from Nix.

At heart, Nix was a very gentle person, however, Yuri's pointed staring at Selene was bringing out a possessive side she was unaware she had.

She draped an arm around Selene's waist. "Selene these are my sisters from the mine; Crow and Yuri accompanied by two smelly beasts that appear smarter than their owners. They are bringing more ore so I can fashion nails, bolts and various other things we need for building."

Crow smiled and nodded. "We've met."

Yuri got up and took Selene's hand in hers and kissed the knuckles. "A pleasure,"

"Well met, both of you," the smaller woman answered, grinning at Yuri, amused by the gesture.

Crow barely kept from laughing. Poor Yuri, it was quite obvious Selene was only interested Nix.

"Have either of you seen the village since last year?" Selene asked, curious if this was there first

time back since the Exodus had ended.

Crow shook her head. "No, we sisters take turns taking the trip back here for supplies. Unfortunately, we drew lots for this trip. Blasted heat."

Yuri grinned at Selene. "Hey, the trip has had some up points."

Nix felt her face color in anger.

Seeing where things were leading, Crow butted in, "Yuri, why don't you go feed and water the Alcens."

Selene glanced upward as she felt the arm around her waist tighten. Patting Nix's side she leaned against the taller woman. "You shouldn't growl at the guests," she whispered once Yuri had gone.

Nix hung her head. "Sorry. She was... just that... sorry."

"I kind of liked it," Selene whispered, grinning as she watched Yuri sulk away.

"Really?" Nix tried to figure out what she had done so she could do it again.

"You're a big goof," the smaller woman said, twisting around in Nix's arms to hug to taller woman. "Now," she turned back to a now sitting and grinning Crow, "How much more ore can we get?"

"What?" Crow had been waited patiently for the two women to notice her again. It was nice to see her friend happily befuddled. "Oh, well, now that we have a mining camp set up, you should be seeing ore coming in once a month. We'll trade it for the food and medical supplies that you folks have here."

The blonde nodded, that was a good arrangement. "Good. We're going to need a lot of ore to build our city, I think."

Crow stood and lifted her pack up. "Come on, runt, be useful, or has this city living made you soft?"

Nix groaned. "Whatever, Crow. What are you up to in the mountains other than playing with those overgrown deer of yours? Drinking and lazing around, I bet."

Selene chuckled, leaned up and pressed a kiss to Nix's cheek. "Play nice. I have to go see Willow."

She slowly let go of Selene and went over to get the pack. Easily she lifted it up and stared challengingly at Crow before looking to Selene. "Why do you need to see Willow? Nothing bad's

going on?"

Selene hesitated a second, and then shook her head. She wasn't going to trouble Nix with something that would probably turn out to be nothing. "No, I just want to ask her about the Orb." That was most of the truth at least.

"Oh, okay. I'll see you. Come by later and see the toy I'm making for the little one," Nix said a bit sadly as Selene left the smithy.

The blonde smiled over her shoulder, waved and kept going down the street leaving the two women alone.

Crow smirked. "She has you wrapped." They stood looking at each other. Crow slightly taller, Nix more muscular, both with similar eyes hidden behind thin cloth.

"That's good right?" Nix asked after a moment.

"Yes, Runt, that's very good."

Willow smiled as she moved around her makeshift Temple. The walls were up now, but the roof was still a tent. Slowly, it was coming together.

She blushed as she picked up a mixing bowl, remembering the ritual she had performed the other night. Now that Kelsy and Valla's child had been born healthy and sound, more couples were coming to her. She was happy to do the ritual but it still embarrassed her to no end.

"There is the Priestess I've been looking for," Selene called from the door of the Temple, letting the simple leather flap close behind her as she entered.

Willow set the bowl down and turned to the door, "Hail, Selene. How are you?"

"Better," was the slim woman's simple answer as she smiled at the small Priestess. "How are the ceremonies going?" she teased.

Willow's face did not disappoint her at the mention of the ritual. Her face heated up and turned red. "They're going, um, fine. Just fine." The priestess squirmed for a bit then came up with something to turn the tables. "How is our resident smith? Is her butt really as firm as it looks in those leather pants?" Her green eyes sparkled with good humor.

Selene's face matched Willow's for sheer color and it was the blue-eyed woman's turn to squirm a bit. "I wouldn't know," she muttered. "But I intend to find out."

Willow laughed, "Good for you. It's nice to see you so happy, my friend." She walked over

giving the slightly taller woman a hug.

Still blushing, Selene hugged her friend back then gave her a little push toward one of the simple wooden benches. "I actually came to ask you about something a bit more serious."

Willow's mood sobered and she sat down. "Tell me, what's going on?"

Selene's smile faded as she took a seat as well, clasping her hands and frowning. "It might not mean anything," the blonde hesitated, now unsure if she should even have come to bother Willow.

Willow placed a hand on Selene's shoulder in a comforting manner. "Whatever it is, tell me and then we can decide how much it means."

Taking a deep breath, Selene nodded. "I've been having dreams for the past several nights. Every night it's been the same dream, over and over again." She looked at the green-eyed woman to see if Willow understood so far.

"A repetitive dream is not something to be dismissed." Willow said softly. "It could mean many things, but when one such as yourself who has been touched by our Goddess, well, it should not just be dismissed."

Selene licked her lips. Even thinking about the dream was enough to cause her stomach to knot. "I'm standing on the bank of the river, and though it's night time, there is no moon in the sky. Something is on the far bank, hunting us. I can't move, I'm so scared, and it's too dark. The thing on the far shore is getting closer and closer, and I know, I know in my soul, that when it reaches me I will die painfully."

Swallowing, Selene turned towards her friend, troubled. "I wake up sweating and tangled in the sheets."

Willow nodded and patted Selene's hand reassuringly. "Yes, a troubling dream indeed. The lack of moon is disturbing. It could mean the Goddess is not looking down and watching us. The hunting aspect could be many things. Many fear that Korgon's men will not just let us go and will hunt after us. Perhaps it means that they had not let us leave as easily as we thought." She patted her friend's hand one more time. "I will meditate on this and ask the Moon Goddess for guidance."

With a thankful look, Selene got up and gave her friend a hug. "Thank you, Willow. I'll let you know if the dream changes."

It was late at night and Selene was doing her best to sneak through the village. Something that she had quickly discovered she had no aptitude for. Almost at every house she passed someone

would call out a greeting to her, even though she had been trying to hide in the shadows and slip by unnoticed.

Judging by the amused tones of the voices behind her she wasn't just failing to hide, she was failing miserably. Halfway through the village she simply gave up and walked down the center of the road with a long heavy bundle held in one hand toward Nix's smithy.

Glancing behind her, she didn't miss the fact that there seemed to suddenly be quite a few people on the road, despite the late hour. "Busy bodies," she muttered on her breath, sending a glare towards them all as she slipped into the smithy.

"Gah!" Selene exclaimed, finally reaching the relative safety of the forge door, and sending one last glare outside. "Try to sneak through town and everyone and their dog has to say hello!" she said, annoyed that her attempt had failed so badly.

Turning around she smiled a touch sheepishly at the three women staring at her. "Good evening." She awkwardly held the large, bundled up sword.

Nix sat in the open space behind her smithy. She and Crow had wrangled the ore into a corner out of the way so it could be broken down into more manageable pieces. Yuri had joined them and they now had a small fire going and were passing around a wine skin. She had grinned at the irony. It had taken longer for someone to come up with a healing drought for fever than to figure out how to make wine in the new land.

Due to the darkness of the hour, she and Crow had taken off their eye protection and revealed matching light blue eyes.

Nix grinned broadly at the flustered leader. "Good evening."

Yuri got up and gave a flourishing bow. "How lovely to be graced by your presence again."

Nix scowled and leaned over so far she almost fell out of her makeshift chair and punched Yuri solidly in the leg. "Back off."

Selene grinned at Nix, rolled her eyes at Yuri's little display, and moved closer to where the three of them were sitting. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were entertaining guests tonight, Nix."

Nix righted herself and smiled again at Selene while Yuri winced and sat back down rubbing her leg. "It's just Crow and her little sidekick. Join us?" She looked up hopefully.

Crow barely resisted the urge to laugh at everybody, but did shoot Yuri a warning glare. Turning her gaze to Selene she stood up giving up her seat. "Please join us."

Selene smiled and nodded, taking Crow's makeshift chair to sit down on, setting the sword down

on the table top. "I need to learn how to hide better, half the town knows I just tried to sneak in here."

Nix scratched her head. "Why would you need to sneak? You're the leader."

The blonde sighed not even trying to explain that one to Nix. She watched Nix lift the wine skin up and take a healthy swallow.

Nix wiped her mouth and handed the skin to Selene. "Give it a try. It's something Crow brought. I think they have too much free time on their hands. When they're not playing with their deer, they're making wine."

Yuri frowned. "They're Alcens, not deer."

Nix shrugged.

"No, really. Deer are smaller and not as smart."

Nix grinned. She liked pissing Yuri off.

Looking from person to person, Selene relaxed, leaning back in her chair and taking a small sip of the wine. Coughing a little she handed the wine skin over to Crow. "It's certainly..." she paused, searching for words, "wine."

Crow patted the small woman on the back. "That it is. Give us a few more seasons and we'll have made wine making into an art."

Nix giggled, then leaned over and wiped a dribble of wine off of the corner of Selene's mouth with her finger. After a second of thought, she popped it into her mouth sucking the flavor off her tongue.

Blue eyes widened in surprise and Selene could feel her face growing warm. "How much has she been drinking?" she asked Crow, keeping an eye on Nix. "And did she just giggle?"

"Well, not a lot, but she doesn't normally drink, only when we get together. Soooo, I'd say she's kind of relaxed," Crow whispered down at Selene.

"She giggled," Selene whispered back in a slightly accusatory tone.

Crow sighed, "Well, maybe she's kind of verging on drunk now." She looked over to where Nix and Yuri were debating the difference between deer and Alcens. "And maybe she's feeling a little insecure about Yuri hitting on you, so she might be trying to match Yuri drink for drink."

Selene sighed, eyeing the two of them and the way they were 'debating'. If it kept up much longer, one of them was probably going to end up hurt and Selene didn't want that tonight.

"You've had a long trip to get here, right?"

"Yeah, um...and you know, I'm feeling kind of tired so maybe Yuri and I will go bed down for the night." Crow faked a yawn. "Yuri, grab your stuff and let's go get some sleep."

Selene nodded seriously. "You should get plenty of rest while you can. I think some of the others want to give you two a party tomorrow night in celebration of the mine being open."

Yuri blinked. "But I was just warming up to the company." She looked at Crow's face and gulped. "Yeah, I'm feeling tired. Nice to see you again, Selene. As always, Nix, I think you're stupid for staying here." She stood up quickly.

Crow leaned down and gave Selene a gentle hug. "Um, go easy on her she's never... well, she's never done a lot of things." She stood back up. "Night, Runt. Night, Selene."

"Night," Selene called, ignoring the heat of her face as she took up the wine skin and took a deep swallow. Silently she mouthed 'thank you' to Crow as the large woman left. "Your friends are nice," she remarked to Nix.

Nix nodded. "Yes they are. Yuri gets on my nerves but Crow likes her, so she must be okay." She looked over at Selene and smiled. "I'm glad you and Crow seem to get along."

"She takes hints well." Selene smiled, standing up from the chair and moving over to stand by where Nix was sitting. For once she could look down into the taller woman's eyes.

Nix blinked and smiled up at Selene. "How was your meeting with Willow?" she asked as she placed her hands on Selene's legs.

A flicker of a frown crossed the blonde's face but quickly disappeared. "Fine," she answered, placing her hands on Nix's shoulders and lowering her head. "I didn't really come here to talk about Willow, though," she breathed while lightly brushing her lips against Nix's, savoring the feel of the other woman's muscles moving beneath her hands.

It was on the tip of Nix's tongue to ask what Selene wanted talk about before her brain shut off with the kiss Selene gave her.

She had only ever kissed one other person, and this was far better than that time. Pulling apart, Nix grinned at Selene. "That was nice."

"How about this?" This time Selene deepened the kiss, slowly exploring Nix's lips and mouth. When she finally pulled back, she was breathless as well and leaned her head against Nix's shoulder. Somehow she'd ended up sitting on the taller woman's lap.

"I dunno. I might need to practice that one a lot." Nix murmured into Selene's hair.

"I don't know if I can survive doing that a lot," Selene answered, closing her eyes and enjoying the sensation of being in Nix's arms.

"Oh." Nix frowned. "Was I doing it wrong? I can work on it." The big woman blushed. "Um, you're only the second woman I've ever kissed."

The smaller woman let out a shaky laugh. "No, you were perfect." Pulling back, Selene raised an eyebrow, although the look was ruined as she brushed her fingers through Nix's dark locks of hair. "Second woman? Who was the first?"

"Ashiva. She used to bring me water and food at the Master's forge." Nix lowered her gaze. "When we got free, she stayed in the desert with those other women who lost faith in the Exodus."

"The desert was a bad time," Selene whispered softly as she remembered the anguish. She forced her thoughts back to the present. Glaring at Nix with a twinkle in her eyes, she tilted her head, studying those pale blue eyes by the firelight. "Should I be jealous?"

Nix's eyes got wide. "No! No, not at all. She thought I could get her favors with the Master Smith." Nix shrugged her shoulders. "She already had the easiest job in the mine. All she had to do was bring water and food to those of us digging in the rock and pumping the bellows." She looked down shyly. "Um, besides, you're a much better kisser."

"Relax," Selene chuckled, spreading her hands across Nix's shoulders. "I'm teasing you." With a shy smile of her own, Selene ducked her head, capturing Nix's lips in another slow kiss that ended in both of them being breathless.

"I certainly hope I am," she sighed contentedly.

Nix just smiled goofily again. "Oh, yeah."

She cradled Selene's body, keeping it close to hers, enjoying the sensation. "Um, I was wondering, not to be forward... and you can sleep in the bed and I can sleep on the floor." Nix blew out a breath and started again. "What I was wondering was, it's late and... would you like to sleep here with me. Um, well like I said, I would sleep on the floor if you wanted and..." Nix trailed off and looked down at the ground.

Selene got off Nix's lap without a word, took the larger woman's hand in hers and tugged on it to get the other woman to stand up. "I think I'd love that," the blonde answered solemnly.

"Kay," Nix replied nervously and she let Selene drag her into her bedroom.

Behind them the bundled sword lay on the tabletop, forgotten.

There was a horrible pounding going on in Nix's head before she realized that it wasn't her head but actually someone pounding on her front door.

"Make it stop," Selene muttered, turning around in Nix's arms and trying to bury her head in the other woman's shoulder to block out the sound.

Nix smiled and gently stroked Selene's hair, enjoying the feeling of the blonde strands under the rough palm of her hand. "Anything you want," she whispered before slowly untangling herself from Selene's body. She blinked and looked around. It was very early, dawn at least an hour away. As the pounding started up again, she grumbled and pulled on an old pair of loose woven pants tying the strings at her waist.

Growling as she reached the door, she pulled it open. "What!?"

The woman at the door almost took a step back in surprise as the door suddenly opened, but she recovered quickly. "Where is she, you bitch?" Laurel screamed.

Nix winced at the shriek. "Laurel. Please don't do this. Just go home." The large woman would be the first to admit she wasn't the quickest wit around, but she knew why Laurel was at her doorstep.

Ignoring Nix, Laurel tried to push her way past the smithy. "I know she's here. Selene! Selene!"

Nix squared her shoulders into the door, literally becoming an immovable object. "You're just making things worse. Go home."

"Don't think this is over," Laurel snarled after trying to shove past Nix one last time. When that failed, she spat on the ground near Nix's feet and stormed off down the street.

Nix shut the door and slowly unclenched her fist. She had almost hit Laurel... almost. The only thing hold her back was fear of what she would do once she got started.

Selene emerged from the bedroom and came into the smithy, the blanket draped over her shoulders, still half asleep. "Nix? Who is it?"

"What?" She jumped startled. "Oh... um... it was..." She gave up trying to come up with something other than the truth. "It was Laurel."

There was a moment of silence and then Selene came forward and touched Nix's shoulder. "Was she, um, mean?"

"No, just loud," Nix answered with a yawn. "I've handled meaner people than your upset ex-girlfriend."

Selene cast a worried look towards the door, but said nothing. Instead, she took Nix's hand and pulled her back toward the door to the bedroom. "We still have a while before the day starts. How about we get a little more sleep?"

Nix yawned and nodded. "Sounds good." She kissed the back of Selene's head. "I like having you here," she said softly as she kicked off the pants and crawled into the bed.

"I like being here," Selene answered, snuggling into the larger woman's side and letting her eyes close.

It had been a great morning, despite Laurel's early appearance. Selene woke up happy. She'd been pressed up close to Nix and it had felt good. She left Nix at the smithy to let her finish the day's orders and to catch up with the news from her miner friends. With only a few stops, the smaller woman managed to slip out of the town with the intention of spending some quiet time by the river.

He stood silently by the trees next to the water. He took their shadows and wrapped them to his form, hiding himself even more.

He waited patiently in his newly-formed flesh. His hair was black and his skin darkly tanned, but his eyes were the surprising color of liquid gold. His ears picked up the light tread of the woman he had been waiting for and as he turned slowly around and stepped into the light, he revealed a face harsh and cold with angled planes sharper than cut stone.

Selene stopped dead in the middle of the path a few dozen steps from the trees she and Nix had lounged under for many summer. She grimaced as she thought of the sword she left back at Nix's smithy.

He studied her carefully; she really was nothing more than a girl, this leader of defectors. Small and tiny, he wondered why his sister had chosen this one. Actually, he wondered why his sister had deigned to get involved at all. Of any of his siblings, he really expected it of that whelp, Valdlin.

His black eyebrows drew down over his eyes as he scowled at her. "So all this rests on your shoulders?" he hissed out softly.

Startled, Selene tried to step backward, only to find her body betraying her as she froze in place. "W-who are you?" she whispered, her blue eyes widen in fear.

He sneered. "Who am I? Little girl, I am your Master."

He took a step forward and then suddenly was standing over her as the shadows swirled around them. "Did you really think I'd just let you go?"

She trembled, "Kor..Korgon?" her voice was a barely a breath as she whispered his name.

His smile fell as she spoke. Nobody spoke back to him, not his generals or the fools he allowed to be Kings of his lands. "What was that?" he roared.

Mentally she said goodbye to her life as she looked him in the eye. "You aren't my master." Her voice was still quiet but she didn't stutter.

Korgon blinked in surprised, and then he laughed. "Perhaps, I *can* see what my sister finds so fascinating about you." As swiftly as the laugh came, it was gone and he backhanded her into the trees behind them. "Still nobody talks back to me. I am the Lord of Everything."

Selene never saw the hit coming as she tumbled through the tall grass off the path and slid down through the mud. Everything hurt and her eyesight was blurry. She clawed back up to her knees.

He was beside her in the blink of an eye. Grabbing a fistful of hair, he jerked her head back. "I know where you and your worthless followers are. Soon the armies of the Black Dragon will march over you." His gold eyes bore into hers.

"Never," she managed to spit out, still trying to pry herself away from him.

He threw her back on the ground, grinning at her grunt of pain. He stood over her, eyeing her critically. "A field hand is not normally pretty enough to be bedded but there is something about a female leader." He leered down at her.

Nix didn't know where the overwhelming sense of terror had come from but she had felt it run through her body, turning her stone cold. She was afraid, not for herself, but for Selene. Without a word to her apprentice, she took off out of her shop only stopping to lose the heavy apron and to grab Selene's sword.

She pounded down the path that led to the spot were Selene had taught her to swim. Thankfully, she had learned to use other senses than her sight or she might have overlooked the thick shadows in the trees. Her eyes told her nothing was there, but her other sense told her differently.

Korgon ignored the running footsteps. He knew the shadows would hide them. He bent down to run a finger down Selene's cheek. "Who would follow you after I'm done with you?"

"Someone will lead," she whispered, struggling to turn her face away from his touch. "We will never be your slaves again!" She knew her people. They would die before they went back to Korgon's lands to endure his cruel laws and continuous torture again.

His eyes narrowed. "You keep telling yourself that," he growled as he grabbed a fistful of her shirt and lowered himself down to the ground.

Nix launched herself forward, trusting her instincts over her limited eyesight. As she hit another very solid body, she lost her grip on Selene's sword.

Selene tumbled backward with a cry as something large slammed into the God on top of her.

Korgon's shock at being struck gave Nix an immediate advantage as she landed two heavy blows on him before she was pushed several feet away.

Korgon stood and lifted a hand to his lips. His finger came away wet with blood. "What is this? How can you..." In a rage, his question faded away and he launched into a flurry of punches.

Nix staggered back under the attack and was barely able to defend herself.

"Nix!" Selene cried out, scrambling on the ground towards the two. Her fingers curled around something solid in the mud and she found the sword Nix had been carrying. Still on her knees, she drew the blade, tossed the scabbard aside and stumbled to her feet.

"Get away from her!" the blonde screamed, trying to hold the sword in what she thought was a threatening manner.

With the protective cloth pulled from her eyes, Nix was literally blind. She had no idea who was attacking her, just that they were tall and strong. She winced as her fist was caught in a vise like grip and she was slowly forced to the ground.

Korgon growled and turned to Selene. "Or what? You'll poke me with your little sword?" He squeezed tighter, relishing the grunt of pain Nix gave him.

Nix could barely keep back a scream of pain as she felt one of her fingers pop out of joint. Any more pressure and she was afraid her finger bones would be crushed.

Selene didn't even hesitate, she simply charged the God. Her only thought was to try and get him away from Nix as quickly as possible. Clumsily, she slashed with the sword toward Korgon's shoulder in an attempt to just distract him.

The Dragon God was well aware of the impending sword strike. But he just didn't care. He was a God. The sword would just bounce off unable to pierce his Godly skin.

The razor sharp edge of the sword cut through the cloth of his shirt and then the flesh, burying itself deep into his shoulder. Eyes wide, he screamed and stumbled away while trying to process what he was feeling. By the mother and the father, he hurt. His eyes grew wide and he stared at the shaking sword stained with his blood.

"You..." He needed to get away and figure out how this was possible. Scrambling out of the cover of the trees, the shadows wrapped around his form and then he was gone and a black dragon was streaking through the skies.

Dropping the sword from stunned fingers, Selene crumpled to the ground next to Nix. Clinging to the larger woman's shoulder, "Nix, oh, thank the Goddess!"

Nix whimpered and rolled over, holding Selene the best she could. Since she couldn't see anything, she tried to feel Selene with her good hand to make sure she was okay.

"What's wrong? Oh." Fumbling around, she managed to pick up the thin fabric strip the larger woman had been wearing. It was wet but better than nothing.

"Here." She placed it in Nix's hand. "I'm fine," she whispered. "Thank the Goddess you came when you did." Selene glanced toward where the God had disappeared. "It was Him, Korgon." she whispered, checking Nix for injuries.

Nix's eyes widened. "Korgon, here? This is bad isn't it?"

"Are you hurt?" Selene ignored the question.

She tried to tie the cloth back around her head and winced as the fingers on her left hand wouldn't work. "My hand... he dislocated most of the fingers on my left hand."

"We should get Willow to look at those." The smaller woman finished tying the cloth and struggled to help Nix to her feet.

With the help, Nix staggered upright. She frowned and shook her head. "He couldn't have been a God." She lifted up her right hand showing the knuckles dotted with blood. "Gods don't bleed, do they?"

Selene shrugged, dipping down to pick up the bloody sword. "I don't know. All I know is I don't want him here" she said as she helped Nix back down the path. "How did you find me?"

"I was working in my shop when suddenly I got a very scared feeling so I took off looking for you." She shrugged her massive shoulders. "I just knew you were here and were in trouble."

That earned the taller woman a bright smile. "Come on you, let's get Willow to fix those fingers?"

Nix just nodded and followed Selene.

Willow was just sitting down to meditate with some hot tea. She didn't really meditate. That's just what she told everybody when she wanted to be alone for few minutes. With a contented sigh, she started to sip her tea.

"Willow!" Selene yelled from outside.

Hot liquid splashed all over Willow's face and dress. Her green eyes looked upward. "I really should have seen this coming," she muttered. She knew she shouldn't have been thinking how quiet and peaceful it had been recently.

She set down what was left of her tea and cleaned off her face before going to the door and opening it.

"Selene, my friend, I was just getting ready to meditate..." she trailed off as she saw the bloody smith. "This can't be good. Come in, quickly.

"Nix is hurt," Selene pointed out while holding onto Nix's side.

"She's not the only one," Willow said, quietly shutting the door. "Let me see to Nix while you go raid my shirts for a clean one... one that's not ripped and stained with blood."

Selene had completely forgotten about her own shredded shirt. Ducking her head in thanks, she went to find something that would cover her. "Nix's fingers are hurt," she called out helpfully from Willow's room.

Nix groaned and sat heavily in the chair that Willow directed her to. "My hand, he hurt my hand," the large woman whimpered out. Willow froze at the mention of a *he* but then whispered soothing words to Nix while she examined the hand. Willow hummed under her breath and then went to her kitchen to prepare the proper herbs.

Nix really didn't feel very good. Her skin itched and felt hot and her brain felt like it was going to crawl out of the top of her head at any moment.

Selene hurried back to Nix's side, crouching down and taking the tall woman's uninjured hand. "What's wrong with her, Willow?" the blonde asked quietly, stroking the dark haired woman's cheek and feeling the heat there.

Willow emerged from the kitchen with a steaming mug. "Now, Nix. I need you to drink all of this," she said, gently holding the mug to Nix's lips. She shook her head at Selene and mouthed 'in a moment'.

Nix drank the mug of funny tasting stuff and then let herself be led to the bed where she soon fell asleep.

Willow smiled faintly, "you did pick a big one. Look at that, she barely fits in the bed."

Selene hovered by the sleeping woman's shoulder, worriedly glancing back and forth between her and the Priestess. "She saved me," Selene stated quietly.

Willow pulled a stool over and began to manipulate Nix's fingers. "Other than her fingers and a fever, I don't see anything wrong with her," Willow said as she snapped the middle finger back

into place. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Wrapping her arms around herself, Selene sat down on the bed and rocked back and forth. Now that it was over and she was certain that Nix was safe, the horror of the events was starting to catch up with her. She forced the words out. "He was waiting for me at the tree by the river. I tried to move, but I was so scared, Willow. He was fast. I didn't even see him move when he slapped me."

Swallowing hard, the blonde struggled to continue. "He pinned me in the reeds and I think he was going to..." she trailed off, shuttering. Reaching out, Selene took hold of the sleeping woman's hand, and gripped it for support. "Then Nix was there. She hit him off me." She looked down at the sleeping smith. "I was so glad to see her."

"She brought the sword with her, I don't know why, but she did. I swung at him. He was choking her, Willow. I think I hit him with it, there was blood and he ran away." Horror filled eyes looked towards the Priestess waiting for her reaction.

Willow's green eyes had gotten huge at the use of the word 'he'. She was afraid to ask but she needed to know. "'He', who?" she finally asked softly, pausing as she splinted Nix's now straightened fingers to small pieces of wood.

"I think he was Korgon," Selene whispered, her hold on Nix's good hand tightening.

Willow was shocked into stillness. "K-K-Korgon. Oh, my." Green eyes went impossibly wider. She started moving again finishing up Nix's fingers and then rested the large woman's hand down next to her side. She slowly stood up but still lost in thought. "Selene ... um, feel free to rest here with Nix. I must go meditate for answers." She moved to the door that separated her personal dwelling from the Moon Goddess's Temple.

Selene watched her friend go with a worried look, and then turned back to stroking Nix's arm. "Wake up soon, my protector. I miss you."

Willow paused at the doorway and looked back at the couple and said teasingly, "So, ah, how is the tall one's ass? I heard a rumor you spent the night."

That drew a startled laugh out of the blonde, who tried to glare at the Priestess, but only managed to grin crookedly. "I'm not telling."

Willow snorted then chuckled as well, happy she had distracted her friend even momentarily.

Then a frown replaced the laugh as she turned away and moved into the next room, quietly closed the door behind her.

Willow knelt down at the altar and willed her thoughts away. Her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow, and her heartbeat barely enough to give life. She didn't know how long she hung in this state. She was everything and nothing.

"My child." The quiet voice was accompanied by a touch to Willow's shoulder.

Startled, Willow's eyes flew open. "My Lady," she said as she rapidly scrambled to her feet.

The Moon Goddess smiled gently at her Priestess. They were standing in the midst of a garden. All around them were exotic flowers in full bloom. In the distance a simple fountain gurgled. "What troubles you, my child?" the lady asked.

Willow bowed. "My Lady. The Dragon God has come. He attacked Selene. I fear what else he might do. If not for the smith we could have lost our leader. I fear soon we will have a war on our hands that we are not ready for."

The Moon Goddess was silent for a time, her long, silver hair glinting in the light. "I know. I had sensed that my brother had come across the sea." Her eyes went distant as if she were peering into the distance. "He is still here, injured, but here." Blinking her eyes, she focused on Willow and smiled. "Be not afraid my child. All will happen as it should."

Willow lowered her eyes and frowned in thought. "Then I shall not fear and trust in your wisdom." She paused for a moment. "The smith, she is hurt but other than her hand, I don't see what would cause a fever. Has your brother done something else to her? Something I can't see?"

"His blood will bring plague and pestilence," the Moon Goddess answered, reaching into her garden and plucking a plant. She pressed it into Willow's hands. "Seep this in water and give it to the injured woman. It will purge her of my brother's taint."

Willow nodded and wrapped her fingers around the plant. "Thank you, my Lady. I will humbly follow your wisdom." She bowed again.

"Willow." The Goddess waited until her chosen had stopped bowing. "My brother will never stop, but we must make certain he does not come back until my children are strong enough to meet him and his."

"I understand, my Lady, I just don't know how we can stop him. But we shall do our best. You gave us freedom and that is a gift we shall never give up."

"My children, you are strong and you must trust in that strength," the Goddess said as the garden dissolved around them until Willow was once again alone.

Willow took a deep breath, inhaling air into her lungs until she felt they might burst. Slowly she re-centered herself into the physical world and opened her eyes.

Unclenching her right hand, she saw the flower the Goddess had given her.

The flower was a perfectly formed rose in full bloom. Its pale blue petals were only slightly crumpled from Willow's grasp.

Quickly Willow rose and went to her kitchen to start boiling water. She placed the rose in an empty cup and then stirred up the ashes of her dinner fire.

In the next room, Nix dreamt she was in the heart of her forge, all around her the flames danced and licked at her skin. She moaned in pain and tried to get away but the flames chased her.

Selene used a clean rag and a bowl of water, trying to battle the fire that seemed to be raging in Nix's body. Worriedly she kept glancing toward the doors to the Temple, hoping that Willow would be back soon. Placing a hand on Nix's forehead the smaller woman winced at the heat.

"Willow?" the blonde called, hoping the Priestess could hear her. "Nix is getting worse!"

Willow opened the door, and stuck her head through. "I know. The Goddess has given me something for your friend. Give me a moment to prepare it." With that the Priestess disappeared.

"Hold on, love," Selene whispered, as she wet the cloth again to cool the feverish woman's brow. "Hold on."

Nix had never had the fire turn on her. She was always careful and respectful of it just as Kien, the Master Smith, had taught her. The flames grew darker and began to draw together in the form of a large black dragon. Fear ran through her body. She had stamped the vile image in enough swords and shields to know who it was. She would have screamed in fear but she was frozen where she stood.

Willow burst through the door carrying a steaming mug. "We need to get this into her."

Selene climbed up onto the bed behind the unconscious woman, cradling Nix's head on her thighs. "Here." she offered, tilting up Nix's head a little more and gently opening the smith's mouth.

Willow blew on the mug a little bit to cool it down and then lifted it to Nix's lips. As the Priestess poured, some spilled down the smith's face and chest, but enough made it down the woman's throat.

"What is it?" Selene asked as she picked up the cloth again and wiped away some of the sweat that was pouring off Nix's skin.

Willow smiled and patted her friend's hand. "Not to fear, the Goddess gave it to me to help the smith."

Still troubled, Selene nodded and brushed back damp dark curls from Nix's face. "You hear that? The Goddess wants you to stay here, and so do I, so you better wake up."

It was dark outside and only a few flickering candles lit the darkened room. Selene sat next to the bed, her hands clasping one of Nix's as she fought against sleep. Her head drooped again and the blonde shook her head to force herself to stay awake. It had been hours since Willow had given Nix the potion, and although the fever had broken, the tall woman hadn't awakened.

Nix slowly opened her eyes. It was a struggle and, for a moment, she thought she was back in the mine and had been breaking ore for 15 hours straight.

In the dark, she easily saw Selene's tired face. She lifted up her hand and gently stroked the skin on Selene's arm. "You okay?" she whispered.

"Nix?" Selene blinked trying to clear her eyes, a tired smile forming. "Thank the Goddess. You're back." the blonde slipped out of her chair, hugging the other woman tightly, kneeling next to the bed. "I was so worried," she whispered into warm skin.

"I dreamt I was in the fiery heart of the forge and then it turned on me. It turned into a great black dragon." Nix shivered and pulled Selene easily to her even in her weakened condition.

Slipping up onto the bed, Selene fit her body to the taller woman's. She pressed against her, as if trying to reassure herself that she was still there. "You saved me... down at the river bank."

Nix nodded her head slowly. "I remember that. Someone big and dark was hurting you. I'm not violent, really I'm not," she said earnestly, "but I won't let someone hurt you."

"Shhh," Selene whispered, pressing her lips to Nix's cheek. "It's all right. He hurt you when you stopped him though, and you were sick for a while. We're in the Temple. Willow healed you."

Nix nodded again, she had noticed this wasn't her house. She merely wrapped her arms around Selene and curled into her. "You need sleep," was all she said.

The smaller woman let out a sigh of contentment, nodding. Sleep was already stealing over her as she whispered. "Don't you dare scare me like that again."

"I will do my best not to," Nix swore solemnly.

He was in pain and that in itself was troubling. He had only felt it once before. The first and last

time was when his father had punished him.

He, the Black Dragon God, was running. Worse yet, he was running from a woman.

It had to be magic... his sister Hala's doing. She had given these throwaways too much power and too much free will.

He was weak in this new land. There were no temples praising his name or giving sacrifices in his honor. His wound was healing slowly and where his blood fell, plants turned dark and poisonous. He slowed his running and sat down to think, wrapping the shadows thickly around himself. He scowled. He would not run back home with his tail between his legs like a common cur. But he couldn't do this on his own. He needed someone in this land with power. He needed an ally. He ran through a list of his siblings.

Armando was definitely out of the question. He could be as bad as Hala when it came to these mortals. As he thought about his younger brother, he saw him running with his horses, laughing and full of joy.

Vladlin was out, too. Although Korgon was tempted, liking what he saw in this dark and angry younger sibling, he also saw too much of himself in Vladlin. A partnership with him would only end badly.

Morana, his mysterious sister, wouldn't do either. Instead of devouring the mortals and becoming even stronger, she felt pity and sympathy for them as she guided their souls to the afterlife.

Finally he settled onto Vladlin's twin. An odd, quiet child who had learned to hide in the shadows so well as a child even he couldn't find her.

Ethelinda ruled the shadows in these strange, southern lands. She was neither good nor evil. It was to her that the Southern women turned when they wanted the promise of easy power within the lure of darkness. Those of impure thoughts worshiped her in order to gain cunning within the shadows.

He smiled darkly. Given enough promises of power, he could easily shift that. She would be easy to sway to his will.

He gathered his power around him and the darkness swallowed him and then spat him out in the form of a black dragon. Roaring, he took to the skies in search of his littlest sister.

In the dark of night, he circled her temple. He wasn't impressed as it was small and hidden in the makeshift city. After landing in the temple courtyard, he changed his shape and strode in as if he ruled it.

The temple was empty and with only a few burning torches fluttering in the nighttime breeze to

illuminate it. A swirl of shadows crawled in the corner as Korgon entered into the temple. "How dare you come here?" the shadows hissed.

He scowled at the greeting. "I can go anywhere I wish. I am the King of the Gods. He sneered. "Did you really think I'd let your lowly, little worshipers go?"

"You aren't the King here," the shadows whispered. "And didn't one of these 'lowly' worshipers manage to hurt you?" they asked slyly.

He frowned. "It is but a scratch, nothing to be concerned about. Besides, I am still more powerful than you." He smirked. "You and your siblings scrounge like lowly dogs to find those to worship you."

He walked the length of the hall as he spoke, idly looking around. "You know, perhaps I was hasty in banishing you all to this place."

An amused laugh sounded. "At least I do not have to serve you here. And Hala cares nothing about what I do here in the South."

"Ah, yes. Hala. Of course she doesn't care. She has all that land up in the North and no other siblings to contend with. All that land, all those worshipers..." He trailed off hoping she would take his line and run.

"Time, dear brother, time," the shadows hissed. "For now, the North is barred to me, but even Hala cannot keep me from it for too long."

He smiled. "I could help you. 'Quicken' time," he oozed.

The shadows went still. "What are you offering?"

"I cannot let what Hala did go unpunished. However, I have no quarrel with you." He paused for effect, hiding his mounting elation. "This is too much land even for me to keep track of it. So, I will sweep in and crush Hala and her women. When I am done, I will retreat and you can pick up the pieces. I promise to leave your lands untouched."

He did grin. "I will admit that it is hard for me to take action here. I need you to act as my agent causing chaos for Hala and keeping her distracted." He clenched his teeth in anger, "and especially, away from that bitch, Selene."

"Agreed." The Shadow Goddess had her own reasons to dislike Hala's chosen.

"Excellent. I shall return home and gather my armies. They will then sail to the North and crush Hala's lands. I trust you will keep them preoccupied so they have no idea we are coming until the armies are sitting on their doorstep?"

"It shall be done."

He turned and walked out. Resuming the form of the Dragon, he flew off, knowing he would not do anything until he healed. No mortal should know of his wounds.

He returned to his temple in the mountain Panagiotis. The wound burned and refused to heal. Scowling at Hala's power, he wrapped himself in shadows and rock and hid away to sleep and heal.

When he awoke, he would seek vengeance.

Hatred. She hadn't felt its sweet intoxicating heat coursing through her veins since they'd left the lands of men. She remembered it though, and nurtured it inside her.

Laurel watched and listened, keeping track of this blacksmith who dared take what was only hers by right. The question was what to do about it? Killing Nix would only serve to turn Selene against her even further, and that was the last thing Laurel wanted.

So she sulked, staying at the edges of the town and doing only what work she absolutely had to.

"You want vengeance." A voice quietly hissed out of the shadows. "You want control back of your life because now the smith has taken everything you wanted away and your life spins in directions you never imagined. A lowly dirty smith...while you are obviously a cultured leader..." The voice oozed out, covered in charm.

Laurel whirled around, scanning the dark trees around her. She'd been wandering through the dense forest on the southern riverbank for the day, wanting to put distance between herself and the two lovers.

"Who said that?" the blonde called out, a hand slipping into the sash at her waist to grasp the dagger she kept hidden.

From the shadows enveloping a tree trunk, a small black serpent slithered down in a dizzying spiral until it slid onto the ground. It raised itself off the ground and looked at her, its small forked tongue tasting the air. "I said the truth or was I wrong?"

Blue eyes narrowed as she studied the talking snake. "You were right. But you didn't tell me who or what you are." Laurel held her ground. She wasn't going to show fear to a common snake, even an uncommon talking one.

The snake seemed to grin. "I am but a host body for my Goddess. She is referred to as the Mistress of Shadows. Your Moon Goddess, her sister, is not just as secretive with you mortals. But, she is that way with her siblings. The Mistress of Shadows just grew curious about what was

going on up here in the cold North and sent me to see. So far, I have observed much."

Laurel's lips curled in distaste. "You're from one of those other Gods? Like in the desert?" Her fingers tightened about the dagger, eyeing the distance between herself and the snake.

The small snake tilted its head. "There are no Gods in the desert, just puffed up bits of nature who think they are."

"And your Mistress is different, how?"

The snake now tilted its head the other way. "She is a Goddess that rules the shadows and controls their secrets. She can give you the power of vengeance, or she can just give you extraordinary abilities."

"Can she give me back Selene?" The question came out far more needy sounding than Laurel anticipated.

"No," the serpent hissed out. "But she can give you the ability so you can."

Laurel slowly relaxed her grip on the dagger and let her hand fall to her side. "What sort of abilities?"

"As I said, she controls the shadows and their secrets. She can bestow that onto you."

"In exchange for what?" Laurel asked, moving closer to the snake.

The serpent chuckled, "Clever, aren't you? Nothing is free with the Gods, is it? And in exchange for her gifts, my Mistress asks that she be your Mistress." The serpent went silent waiting for the reply.

"I'd have to serve her?" Laurel made certain she understood the offer. It was tempting, so very tempting. What had the Moon Goddess ever done for her anyway?

"If someone is your Mistress, does that not imply that you serve them?"

"Very well," Laurel agreed, a shifty smile creasing her lips, "I'll do it."

"Excellent." The snake grinned exposing its fangs. The scales on its body began to smoke and then suddenly it burst into black, cold fire. A voice whispered, "Walk through me and be worthy."

Laurel had never backed down from a challenge in her entire life. Now that her decision was made, she would deal with whatever followed. Head held high, she stepped into the dark flames.

Outside, a cool autumn wind brushed through the red and yellow branches, sending a shower of leaves dancing along the town's walkways. Selene smiled as she prepared for the ceremony. It had been several weeks since the attack by the river, and Nix had recovered well. Brushing her blonde hair one last time, the Northern leader shook her head at her own nervousness. She knew the ceremony would go well, so why was her stomach all twisted in knots? Picking up the warm green cloak one of the other women had made for this very occasion, Selene settled it about her shoulders.

Nix coughed nervously and tugged at her shirt. She wasn't sure how she had managed it but she was scared and happy at the same time.

It was odd to be wearing something other than her singed leathers. The trousers felt too smooth, and the shirt, well, she was scared to wear it because it was so nice.

What if she got it dirty? What if she ripped it? What if...? Her thoughts halted as Crow smacked her on the back of the head.

"Whatever you were thinking? Stop thinking it," was all the huge woman said.

Nix smiled. She was relieved that Crow was here. She needed all the help she could get. She went back to fumbling with the wooden buttons. Hoping that she was presentable, she turned to Crow and Yuri.

Crow smiled and wiped a tear off her cheek. "You look good, Runt, and right on time."

Yuri scowled and looked away. She picked at a thread on her shirt. "I don't see why that hot woman wants to be with you."

Nix felt her stomach sink and for a moment she thought she might throw up.

Crow smacked Yuri. "You, out!" and then practically threw her from the tent. She turned to Nix and smacked her in the center of her forehead. "Stop thinking those thoughts."

Nix blinked and started to breathe deep breaths.

"Selene loves you and obviously wants to spend the rest of her life with you, so stop doubting yourself. Okay?"

Nix smiled and then grabbed Crow in a hug. The taller woman hugged her back and then sent the smith out of the tent.

Crow paused at the doorway. Quietly she spoke to no one, "A long and happy life to you and Selene, little sister." With a massive hand she wiped tears from her cheeks and followed after Nix.

Biting her lip as she nervously waited, Selene studied herself in the make-shift mirror. It would be a while before they would be able to make glass so the mirror was only a smooth piece of copper that had been polished to a high sheen.

Outside she could hear the beginning of the ceremony. Any minute now, Willow would call her and Nix to stand before the gathered women for the joining ceremony. The candles that lit the room flickered in a small breeze and Selene impatiently bounced a little on the balls of her feet.

The waiting seemed to stretch on forever though and Selene started to pace. She wanted to go and see Nix, and then she knew the nervous feelings would slip away. The taller woman grounded her, centered her in a way Selene had never experienced before.

A slow smile crossed the blonde's face at the next thought, 'And she's so very sexy.'

The candles flickered again and a few of them near the fireplace went out. Since Selene didn't feel even a breath of a breeze she curiously wandered toward the dark shadows in that corner of the room.

Nix stood just outside the circle of women. She could not enter the circle without her chosen partner. She stood awkwardly and after awhile she began to shift from foot to foot. She could see the small fire flicker just inside the circle and with each flicker, grotesque shadows were thrown around the clearing. The smith tried to look toward Selene's tent without actually appearing like she was. Goddess, had Selene changed her mind?

"Nix?" Willow asked quietly, frowning from her position at the top of the makeshift altar, feeling that something wasn't right.

Her attention snapped back and she looked over the women at Willow. "Yes, your, um, Priestessness."

The Priestess smiled. "Willow, Nix, my name is Willow," she gently reminded the tall smith. Then the frown came back as she too studied the fires.

Above them a cloud passed in front of the moon, drenching the land in darkness. "Nix, go check on Selene." Willow urged, suddenly uncomfortable and worried.

"Um, yes your, um, be right back, Willow." She turned and quickly made her way to Selene's dwelling. The door was open and she shouted, "Selene!" No answer sent her charging into the small building.

A chair near the fireplace lay on its side. On the table lay the sword that Nix had made Selene, still in its scabbard. None of the candles inside the small building were lit.

Nix bit her lip in worry, her skin crawled, something was very wrong. Even if Selene had gotten

cold feet, she wouldn't have run off without the sword. Selene carried it just about everywhere as the nightmare of Korgon's attack still haunted the woman. Nix grabbed the sword from where it lay and then ran back to Willow.

"Willow! Something's wrong! Selene is missing."

"Missing?" The Priestess repeated as all eyes turned to Nix, the festivities grinding to a stop.

"She wasn't in there, but her sword was." Nix figured Willow would understand.

Willow's unease deepened to fear. "Kel, Vella. Take who you can and search the island for Selene."

She hurried towards Nix and placed both hands on the taller woman's arms, looking upward to meet Nix's alarmed eyes. "I will meditate." Squeezing the muscled arms, the Priestess rushed toward the temple.

Nix nodded then without waiting for anybody, hefted Selene's sword and took off.

Crow smacked Yuri and nodded at Nix's retreating form. The two women shook their heads and took off after their friend.

Selene groggily opened her eyes, wincing at the pain in her head. She struggled to remember what had happened. Her eyes were having trouble focusing and she rolled her head to the side, blinking as she tried to see her surroundings.

Laurel watched silently, her now black eyes looking at Selene. "That's it, my love, time to wake."

"Laurel?" Selene asked, confused. Wasn't she supposed to be with Nix? She'd been pacing in the tent, waiting for Willow to call her for the ceremony. Then... frowning, Selene sat upright, wincing at the pain in the side of her head. Reaching upward, Selene gingerly touched the side of her head, hissing with pain as she found a sensitive spot clotted with blood.

Laurel chuckled. "So you *do* remember me. I was afraid you had forgotten so you could dally with that smith instead." She could feel the power flowing inside her. The gifts the serpent had given her were truly amazing.

"Laurel, what happened?" Selene managed to focus on her ex-lover. She gasped at the changes she could see in the dim lighting. "Your eyes..." she whispered.

Laurel stood up, her smile getting larger. "My eyes? A lovely new color, are they not? They're a gift from a new friend."

Then she frowned, looking around. The only bad thing about Selene being awake was she couldn't carry her through the shadows anymore. "Time to get a move on, no doubt that smith will be looking for you. She's too dumb to know any better. Really, what was she thinking? Like she could ever come between us?"

"What are you talking about, Laurel?" the blonde asked, confused. "I'm with Nix now."

Laurel hissed and drew her dagger, "Let's go. We need to get to the border as soon as we can. My new Goddess is waiting."

"What new Goddess?" Selene asked, her voice trembling a little as she watched Laurel draw her dagger. This was not the woman she had known and once loved. Although, there had always been a taint of darkness in Laurel, now it seemed it had taken her over completely.

"She promised me everything I ever wanted and look! Now I have you. She's done more for me than the Moon Goddess ever did," Laurel sneered. "Time to go." She gave Selene a push.

The dull pain in her head flared up and Selene stumbled. Grimacing she stood up and turned to face Laurel. Although now it seemed like a lifetime ago, she had made a promise back when the foreman had beat her that last time. She would never allow herself to be forced to do something again.

"No, I'm not going anywhere without Nix."

The dark-eyed woman's skin buzzed. Somehow she knew they needed to get moving. Something was coming towards them. "I said, we're moving, so we're moving," she snapped. "You're not in charge anymore. I'm the one with the power now."

"No," Selene answered, forcing herself to stand up straight despite waves of dizziness threatening to send her tumbling down again. "You do not own me, Laurel."

Laurel's face twisted into a horrible mask of rage and anger. "I own you now! I'm no longer the one who sits in the shadows living off your importance. Now, *you* sit in my shadow! I was there for you through everything and you just toss me to the side when your little smith walks into the picture. I deserve better and Selene, and I will get what I deserve. The Mistress of Shadows has promised."

A chill crawled across Selene's back at the fury that had suddenly masked Laurel's face. This wasn't the Laurel she knew. Blue eyes glanced about worriedly, searching for a way to escape. A quick glance showed her that they were on the southern bank of the Winderling. In the distance, she could just make out the island she called home. "Laurel," Selene licked her lips, trying to get back up to her feet, "I never tried to keep you in my shadow."

Laurel snorted. "We're all in your shadow except for Willow, but then, you two are the only ones the Goddess talks to. Well, now I have a Goddess that speaks to me."

"I don't think I like this Goddess of yours," Selene whispered, backing up until her back was pressed up against a tree.

The once lovely face now twisted with shadows smirked back at Selene, "Of course not. Because now you're not the only one touched by a Goddess."

Laurel wondered why everything was so clear to her now. Of course Selene didn't want her anymore. She wouldn't be content to sit in the shadow of Selene's greatness. Obviously the smith who was too slow to grasp political concepts was a much safer consort than Laurel would ever be.

The expression on Laurel's face was verging on grotesque. Her former lover was scaring her more than Selene wanted to admit. Reaching blindly behind her, she felt only the rough bark against her fingertips. 'Why didn't I make Nix show me how to fight?' the blonde cursed herself.

"Laurel, why don't we just talk about this?" she implored. "Tell me about your Goddess". Hopefully this would distract Laurel until she could figure out what to do.

Laurel's face suddenly glowed. "The Mistress of Shadows, unlike our Moon Goddess, is not distant. She is here with us whenever we need her. I walked through Her fire and was found worthy of Her."

"How did you get into my room, Laurel?" Selene slowly inched her hands way down the tree, fingers reaching for one of the rocks she'd spotted at the base of it.

With her massive legs pumping, Nix ran through the dark woods. She needed no moon to guide her. The faint starlight lit up the landscape like a cloudy afternoon for her. She held the sword that she had so lovingly crafted for Selene in her right hand. She wasn't sure, but there seemed to be a faint buzz coming from the deadly metal. When she took a random right, the buzz faded and she felt that she should go back the other way. Hoping her instinct was right, she let the sword guide her to the river and then across it.

Nix felt sweat trickle down her shoulder blades as she ran causing the skin it touched itch. How had Selene gotten this far away? She slowed down as she thought she heard voices.

Laurel leered with a grin full of secrets at Selene. "I am now more blessed by my Goddess than you ever were with yours."

The full moon that hung low to bless the commitment of Selene to Nix was now a blessing for Laurel by causing thick shadows to sway and bend with the trees they mimicked. Stepping into a shadow, Laurel was suddenly gone and then without warning, was standing next to Selene. With a cruel look, she stepped down on the hand that was fumbling for a rock.

"You know, Selene, the more I spend time with you, the more I'm beginning to wonder why I

ever wanted you. If it weren't for the principle of not letting that thick-headed smith get the better of me, I would let you go."

With a gasp of pain, Selene managed to pull her hand free from under the other woman's foot. Glaring up at the crazed woman, she shook her head. "I love her. Nothing you can do will change that, Laurel. If there was anything left inside of you from the Laurel I once knew, you'd understand that."

"Love! I thought you loved me and next thing I know you're sleeping with that smith," Laurel growled, her strange black eyes flashing in fury.

Holding the sword in front of her, Nix slowly stepped out from the shadows of two nearby trees. "Stop, please." The tall woman's eyes were uncovered, showing the large black pupils surrounded by a small ring of blue. "I'm sorry what has happened has caused you so much pain. Just please don't hurt her," Nix quietly begged.

"Nix," Selene breathed out, relieved at her love's sudden appearance. "Be careful Nix, Laurel can..."

Laurel swiftly crouched down, grabbed Selene and placed a hand over her mouth, muffling the rest of what she was going to say. "Tsk, tsk. No giving away secrets." She eyed Nix. "First, put that sword down."

Nix immediately set the sword down on the ground close to her feet.

Laurel smiled evilly at Nix. "You're not very bright, are you?"

Selene twisted her head side to side struggling to get out of Laurel's hold. When had the other woman gotten so strong? She struggled harder, trying to scream something but all that came through was muffled grunts.

Laurel beamed at the submissive smith. "Well, at least you found one who knows her place," she spat at the struggling Selene.

Nix lifted her hands palm up to show her they were empty. "Please, I love her. Don't do this."

Laurel stood up, dragging Selene upright with her, "I loved her too. I deserved more."

Nix nodded her head, "You're right, you did."

Laurel's mouth snapped closed. Hmm, it was hard to argue with someone who agreed with you, she realized.

Meanwhile, Selene was shaking her head, trying to break free of Laurel's hand wrapped around it.

Selene tried to kick her shin. Laurel scowled and grabbed Selene tighter, her fingers digging into Selene's cheeks.

Laurel growled, "Selene, do you really love this big oaf of a smith?" She slowly removed her hand from Selene's face for the blonde's response.

"Yes! Nix, be careful, she can..." the blonde tried to warn her love about Laurel's new abilities.

"Fine!" Laurel screeched. With a quick shove, she pushed Selene into the tree next to them.

The blonde's head smacked into the rough bark and stunned by the sudden hit, she slumped down the tree trunk.

Not expecting the action at all, Nix was too slow to prevent it. She lunged at Laurel only to be brought up short when the woman disappeared.

"Love. Your love. Which was suppose to be for me, wasted on a lowly smith." The words seemed to come out of nowhere, and Nix spun around trying to find Laurel.

"Keep your love, Selene, but not with the smith." Without warning Laurel stepped out of a shadow and leapt onto Nix's back. A length of silk rope was tossed over the tall woman's head and then tightened, constricting the smith's neck.

The blonde slowly swam back to consciousness, blinking against the double vision in the darkness. Everything seemed fuzzy making thinking difficult. She saw movement to her right.

"Nix," she whispered, clawing her way toward where the larger woman was struggling.

Spots traveled in front of her eyes. They danced a merry jig, an opening act to the darkness that was soon to follow. Nix couldn't move the woman from her. Slowly she sank to her knees, hands clawing at the rope around her neck.

Crawling towards her love, Selene cried, "Nix!" Laurel had been trained in the art of killing and she knew her love was in trouble. Her hand brushed something metallic and cool. Desperately she grabbed the object, nearly weeping with relief when her hands closed around the hilt of her sword. It felt comforting in her hand and she dragged it with her.

"Laurel!" she yelled, using the sword as a makeshift cane as she staggered to her feet.

Laurel blinked and looked up. "Just in time to see me take your world away," she snickered and went back to choking the smith. Selene was no threat to her even with the sword. She knew the small woman had no idea how to use one.

"Let her go, Laurel."

With a quick tug, the small blonde pulled the scabbard free of the silvery blade. Raising the

blade, she steadied her feet. The long blade shimmered in the moonlight, and then exploded with light from within, casting the entire area in a pure, white light.

Pain. Laurel lost her grip and fell backward with a wail of pain. Her eyes had exploded into piercing shards at that horrible light. Her hands scrambled over dirt and moss. This wasn't how things should be. She should get everything she wanted. The Goddess had promised her.

With waning strength, Selene hefted the blade high so that the blinding light would drive back the shadows. "Your Goddess does not rule here," the small woman called out, unaware that her voice held an odd echo.

Everywhere the light touched her hurt like the repeated stinging of bees. "This isn't over, Selene," Laurel's shaky voice vowed. Scrambling blind, she turned and made her way away from the light into the welcoming darkness.

Even if she wanted to, Selene couldn't have given chase. Exhausted, she let the sword drop, the light dimming as she did. She managed to make it to Nix's side before her legs gave out. "Nix, oh Goddess, please tell me you're all right."

Blinded by the brightness while gasping for air, Nix had fallen forward when Selene released her grip. She tried to sit up but her arms felt weak. "Selene?" she croaked out.

With more of a sob than a laugh, the smaller woman threw herself around her taller companion. "Thank the Goddess."

"Nix? Selene?" The miners shouted as they headed for the dazzling light that had suddenly lit up the now bright, moonlit evening sky.

Nix rolled over staring at the starry sky. She pondered how to answer Selene's earlier question. "I feel sad and angry at the same time," she finally said.

Selene stirred and turned over so she could study her love's profile in the starlight. "Why?"

"I feel sad that we hurt Laurel that much. But on the other hand, I am so angry to think she would try to take such happiness away from us." Slowly Nix sat up, rubbing her neck. "She's not human anymore, is she?"

Selene rolled over onto her back, staring up at the clear night sky above. A small chill in the nighttime breeze hinted at the cold winter nights to come. Not far away she could hear the sounds of the joining celebration still going on in the town. If she sat up she knew she would be able to see the bond fires that many of the women were still dancing around. A snatch of music drifted to her ears.

"I don't know what Laurel is now," Selene sighed, closing her eyes. She hated that things with Laurel had gone so disastrously wrong.

Nix frowned and then sighed herself. Here she was, on the happiest day of her life and what was she doing? Thinking about Laurel. Leaning over, she gently stroked Selene's blonde hair. In the moonlight, it seemed to shine back as if answering the moon.

She brushed her lips against Selene's, "I'm sorry. Today is the happiest I shall ever know and here I'm dwelling on unpleasant feelings toward Laurel."

"Maybe Laurel will find a place where she's happy."

Nix shrugged. "I hope she has. I also hope never to see her again."

Sliding her fingers through dark hair, the blonde tugged Nix closer and returned the kiss. She smiled at the larger woman as the deepened kiss slowly ended.

Nix rolled over, easily pulling Selene with her so the smaller woman now rested on top of her. Nix grinned goofily as she remembered again that she and Selene had pledged themselves to each other just a short while ago. Never did she dare to imagine that she could be so happy and contented.

The smaller woman happily went with the move, laying across Nix's chest and luxuriating in the feel of the other woman under her. "You look happy." Selene whispered, suspecting her own wide smile matched the one that Nix was now sporting.

"I never figured anyone would want to spend their life with me."

Selene's smile of pure joy slowly changed into something a bit more predatory as her fingers continued to trace the outlines of the body below hers. "Until the end of time," she whispered, tugging on clothing to get at the skin below and kissing Nix again.

Nix gave a muffled giggle as questing fingers grazed against a ticklish piece of skin.

Bathed in the star and moonlight, away from the celebrations, the two women learned the shape and taste of each other's bodies, loving one another through that night and for the rest of their lifetimes. They would have children blessed by the Moon Goddess and brought into this world by Willow and her followers. Together, they would watch the small town built upon an island in the middle of a river expand into a true city protected by the Orb of the Goddess and the Sword of the Protector.

South of what would one day become the Ellris Pass, past the place where Castle Abnoa would one day stand, a figure moved through the shadows. The right side of her face still burned from where that horrible silvery light had touched her skin. It had left behind scars that had transformed the right side of her face into a grotesque mask. A mask that mimicked the hate that now lived within Laurel.

She would have her revenge, somehow. Perhaps it would not come within her lifetime, but her Mistress was a patient Goddess. In the South, Laurel would find followers, and then, she would plant her seeds of hate and jealousy of the Northerners.

Laurel smiled, her scars turning it into a grotesque leer, someday, she vowed, she would have her revenge upon Selene, Nix and all the Northerners.

This ends the Exodus story about the bright, moonlight-filled night when the Orb of the Goddess was brought to the first city of the North by the Moon Goddesses' Chosen and her Consort. There it would remain to become the mark of the Queen until the last one fell and the Mistress of the Shadow fulfilled her promise.
