

GUARDIANS
OF LIGHT
BOOK FIVE

Riever's
Heart

RENEE WILDES



Riever's Heart

Renee Wildes

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Riever's Heart

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Chapter Eighteen

Verdeen stumbled into her tent, beyond exhausted. It had to be late into the night. For once she was glad not to know for certain. The wounded were all tended and resting. The funerary pyres still burned. They'd found Vygnal's body and sent him off with the honored dead. Nomok and Beloq were left to lie where they'd been felled. Aryk forbade them rites, declared they could feed the ravens for all he cared. His implacable forbidding expression still made her shudder to think on. He'd hold this volatile country together through sheer *toshi* will alone.

She blinked in the dim light, befuddled. Since when had her stuff multiplied?

"Since my tent was taken over by the northern commanders and Nomok's and Valkyn's were needed for wounded I moved my things in here." Aryk's voice sounded rougher when he was tired. Not too tired to sweep her hair aside and plant a soft kiss on the nape of her neck.

She shivered at the brush of his beard and leaned back against him. "*Pgah*. I hate war."

"*Hai*." Aryk heaved a sigh. "Waste of lives and resources. Your young opponent awoke spitting fire and fine threats by the way. Sveinn got him sorted out though. Good lad, that one."

"Good." Verdeen rummaged through her pack for a tin of strealta root tea, breathing deep as she pulled off the cover and a strong, pungent aroma filled the air and cleared her head.

"I could use a cup of tea. Mayhaps a dozen or two."

"You don't want to drink this." She dumped some in a basin and poured hot water over it.

"How'd you get hot water so quickly?"

She indicated the pot she'd pulled from the top of the brazier. "Charmed dragon skin vessel compliments of Queen Dara's Aunt Anuk." She dunked a rag in the tea mixture. "Strip. 'Tis a cleansing blend which keeps wounds from souring." She helped him with the brooch holding the cloak, sweeping it from his broad

shoulders whilst he unlaced his boots and kicked them off. She wrung out the cloth and laid it atop the cut.

He hissed.

“Too hot?”

He shook his head. “Stings almost as bad as *schnae*.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Don’t tell me you use that poison on wounds.”

“In a pinch.”

Verdeen finished cleaning the wound then sponged him off from his hair down, scrubbing layers of blood, sweat and who knew what else from his hair and skin. He sucked in a breath, his gaze growing hot and intent. She strove to ignore that, got to his breeches and tugged at the laces. “Off.”

His lips quirked even as his eyes narrowed, hooded and predatory. “Valkyn’s right. You *do* sound like a wife already.”

She snorted. “Because you’ve had so many wives afore me acourse.”

“Verdeen, look at me.”

She tugged his breeches down his legs and waited whilst he stepped out of them afore looking up from where she knelt afore him.

He held her gaze, his eyes almost black in the dim light as he shook his head. “We’re a small population. Having children with as many different partners as possible keeps anyone from being too closely related. Each of mine had a different mother. I ken my way around a woman’s body.”

She blushed. Aye, he did at that. The very thought made her shiver.

“But never have my emotions been a part of it. ’Til now. ’Til you.”

Verdeen tried to disregard the fact that he stood naked afore her even as she finished what had to suffice as a bath. He should have been exhausted but his body stirred at her touch.

His smile held an edge of hunger. “You have that effect on me. You have from the moment I first saw you at the tournament.” His eyes glinted down at her. “My turn now.”

“You should be sleeping. ’Tis been a long day.” She wanted naught more than to crawl into bed and sleep for a week... Didn’t she? She dumped out the old water and mixed a fresh batch with a clean rag.

“We will sleep. *Later.*”

Oh stars. Her mouth went dry.

“Strip.”

She fisted her hands on her hips. “Sit. Speak. Strip. Listen you, I warned you about that whole one-syllable, ordering-Verdeen-around barbarian act—”

“Let me help you.” Aryk tugged at her laces.

Verdeen yanked her bloody tunic over her head as he slid her breeches down her legs. He took the rag from the basin and wrung it out, wiping the blood from her hair and face. She shivered at the warm circles of the cleansing cloth across her body. The tea caused a flushed, tingling effect on her skin. Everywhere he touched. She shifted. The air cooled against the drying liquid and her breasts tightened.

Aryk’s eyes blazed. Her nipples pebbled further from the intensity of his gaze. He took his time, more caressing, less scrubbing. He dragged the cloth up the back of her thigh over the curve of her backside. “Spread your legs.” His voice was hoarse. “I missed a spot.”

She whimpered as he stroked her sensitized flesh front to back. The tingling was unbearable. She’d known the tea had healing rejuvenating effects, increasing the body’s blood flow, but no one had ever mentioned this one small detail.

“Oh, *hai*, you feel it too.” He closed his eyes, his face tight with unexpected passion as he fondled her. “You’re growing so hot, so lush, so sensitive...”

Verdeen clutched his shoulders, bit back a moan and struggled not to move on his hand.

“Amazing stuff this.” Aryk set the cloth and basin aside. “Stronger than merc root and analir cream combined.”

Merc root was a stimulant. What was analir?

“Sensual stimulant.”

Verdeen blushed. No one had ever mentioned using strealta root tea on the entire body—neither advised nor dissuaded. “I’m sorry. I swear I didn’t know.”

Aryk laughed. “I ken that by the look of horror on your face. I’m not complaining. I can think of much more interesting things to do with my bride-to-be than lying facedown and snoring.” He nuzzled her belly.

Heat flushed her skin. She threaded her fingers through his hair. “Like what?”

“Driving you wild.” He slid her leg over his shoulder and fluttered his tongue down over her cleft. “Making you scream.”

The prickles of his beard against her swollen, aching flesh as his tongue delved deep... “Aryk.” Her nails tightened on his shoulders as she moved on his mouth. He found and suckled that tiny jewel and the world exploded in a flash of heat.

He growled as she tried to squirm away.

“’Tis too much.”

His shoulders shook with laughter as he pulled back enough to speak. “Not by a long ways.” His eyes glinted up at her and he grinned. “This is going to be fun.”

Oh stars, she’d never survive. “Bed?”

“Now you’re grasping the notion.” He rose and took her mouth in a voracious kiss. She moaned at the taste of herself on his tongue. He cupped her breasts, thumbing her nipples. She retaliated by curling her fingers around his shaft, sucking his tongue deep as she squeezed. ’Twas his turn to groan as he lifted her up. Verdeen wrapped her legs around his waist, aligning herself so he slid deep inside her. Her body pulsed around him as he turned and staggered to the bed on the floor, all but collapsing atop her.

Aryk rolled onto his back. She broke off the kiss and sat up. Both of them panted as she straddled him. His stomach muscles clenched, pulling him up so he could take one of her aching nipples in his mouth and draw hard, rubbing his tongue against it. Verdeen cried out and clutched him closer, arching into his mouth and tightening on his shaft.

His rough fingers tugged at her other nipple whilst he teased her with the tip of his tongue. The world splintered anew. She met his gaze, dazed and breathless as

he lifted her off himself.

“What are you doing?”

“Remember what I said about doing both at the same time?” Aryk lay back. “Turn around.”

Her cheeks flamed. “I’ll never be able to concentrate.”

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Aryk grasped her hips and spun her about. “Never try to dissuade a warrior bent on plunder.”

She stared at the thick shaft jutting afore her, still glistening with her own excitement. Taking him in her hand, she swirled her tongue around the soft skin of his broad, flushed head. She whimpered at the tangy salt taste, tracing her tongue along the heavy vein. She opened over him, sliding him in over her tongue. He groaned and pulled her down over his mouth, licking along her hot, swollen folds. She choked and tried to flinch away, embarrassed and overstimulated. He held her still, his grip almost bruising as his tongue delved deep.

She sucked hard, rubbing her tongue against the smooth velvet of his shaft. She was beyond words, beyond thought. He slid two fingers deep into her core, scissoring them as he teased her jewel with the tip of his tongue. Verdeen moved on his mouth, certain she’d go up in flames at any moment. She sucked him down the back of her throat, pressing hard with her tongue just as he suckled her betwixt his lips. The scrape of his beard pushed her over the edge again with a force that left her shaking.

How was he able to hold back, still flushed and turgid as she collapsed breathless, boneless?

Aryk slid her off himself with a groan. “You’re incredible.” He caressed the curve of her backside. “Get up.”

She didn’t think she could move but dragged herself up, poised tense and waiting. What was he going to do? She flinched as he reached around her to tease her breasts with his hands, circling and tugging at her nipples. He nuzzled her back and the scrape of his beard against her sensitized skin made her gasp.

“Stars. I think my first decree as daqira will be to outlaw shaving.”

Aryk chuckled. “Like that? *Tisht*, you’re sensitive. Spread your knees a little.” He nudged hers apart with his own. “Just like that.” She felt his engorged shaft sliding along her folds. “So hot...so wet...” He flexed against her and she gasped as he buried himself deep. He groaned and she squeezed hard around him. “Oh *hai*, lass. Do that again.”

Verdeen’s arms shook and collapsed. She folded them and rested her chin on them like a pillow, closing her eyes. From this position she felt so full of him, every little nuance of movement. “This feels incredible.” She whimpered at the long, slow slide of his withdrawal.

“Which do you like better?” Aryk’s voice sounded hoarse and strained. “This?” Long, excruciatingly exquisite slow strokes...ininin...outoutout... “Or this?” Short, rapid thrusts, teasing deep against that sweet spot—

“*Aryk*.” She panted, on fire, her body sucking on his. “Don’t stop. More...”

“There’s my answer,” he gritted out, thrusting in those short, hard, rapid-fire bursts that heated her core to melting around him. “*Tisht*, you’re hot.” He groaned as he pounded into her.

She tightened around him at that sweet fiery friction, pulsing, breathless. “Harder...please...”

Thrust-thrust-pause. Thrust-thrust-pause. He tweaked her nipples, scraped his teeth over the nape of her neck. “Feels so good,” he groaned. “So sweet. So hot.”

The splendor boiled up, a rolling wave that hovered just out of reach. She held her breath as he let go of her breast to reach betwixt her thighs to circle that sensitive bud. Tension coiled in her thighs, her back as she swelled and tightened around him.

“That’s it, love,” he whispered against her ear. “Right there with you. Let go.” He hammered into her as she panted and clenched around him. That exquisite burning slide. He shuddered against her, freezing as the first shockwave hit.

Verdeen felt the first scalding spurt of heat and she cried out with her own release, wave after wave that shook her in pulsing, squeezing satisfaction. Her legs trembled as she collapsed under him, her head spinning. A distant buzzing in her

ears, a heart thundering in time with her own as Aryk crawled up alongside her to haul her into his arms. She shivered against him, dizzy, disoriented.

“I’m undone.” He hauled in deep breaths as a lingering shudder wracked his frame.

“You should come with a warning,” Verdeen muttered. “You’re lethal.”

Aryk’s gaze held hers. “Only with you. Your eyes are so beautiful. First they go all smoky and hazy when you start to burn. Then they blaze molten silver when your need is hard upon you.” He smiled. “Now they look a bit sleepy...and very, very satisfied.”

She reached up to trace his lips with her fingertips. “I feel drunk. Drunk on you.”

“I like the sound of that.” He leaned in for a lingering kiss. “I think I could get used to waking up to you every morning provided we go to sleep every night like this.”

Verdeen shifted in his arms, snuggling closer and closing her eyes. She felt a twinge deep within and smiled even as she flinched.

“Sore?”

“Not exactly.” She reached behind her to draw a blanket over them.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“When?”

“Hush. I’m serious.” He tilted her head to look in her eyes. “You worship the Lady of Light, with Her connection to the sun. The sun’s due to break the horizon soon. What better omen could it be for both our people if we get married then?”

Verdeen sat bolt upright with a squeak. “Aryk, I thought you were jesting. I can’t plan a royal wedding in five days.”

He looked baffled. “Everyone’s gathered. ’Tis not like I can afford to feed everyone for much longer than that. There’s two thousand people out there now.”

She panted. Her head spun. “I can’t breathe.”

“What’s there to plan?”

Her jaw dropped. “Are you—Aryk, what do your weddings entail?”

“A couple petitions the elders for permission and once ’tis granted they build a new dwelling and move in together. There’s a night of feasting and dancing in celebration.” A wary look crossed his face when she groaned. “Why? What do your weddings entail?”

“Family and friends gather. The bride and groom wear special clothes and are married in a special ceremony by a priest or priestess of the Lady of Light. They burn a symbol of childhood as a gesture they’re ready to take on adult responsibilities and bring a symbol of their adult vocations for the Lady’s altar. They write their own vows or pledge to each other—one, why they choose each other over all others and two, the actual promise to each other. There’s flowers and music and the feast and dancing come afterward.”

“Well at least we have *something* in common.”

She didn’t know if he was jesting or not. He must have seen or felt her distress because he took her hands in his. “I still think ’tis the best time to marry. I can’t say much about flowers but the rest of it sounds doable. Your family will have to use one of those mirror-gates to get here in time though. You’d better contact Loren.”

“What if he’s sleeping?”

“Your stalling wastes time.”

“*My king?*”

“*What news from my Right Hand?*”

Did he never sleep? “*The battle is over. Aryk defeated Beloq and Nomok.*”

A pause. “*I thought Nomok was an ally.*”

“*His greed got the better of him, and he betrayed Aryk.*” She might as well get this over with. “*I killed him.*”

“*Defending Aryk. I have no problem with that.*”

“*Loren, Nomok was a daq. Whoever kills a daq in single combat takes his medallion—and control of his clan.*”

“*So, you rule White Plains?*”

“*I wasn’t thinking about that part of it. Nomok was going to stab a wounded*

man in the back. I just reacted.” She glanced at Aryk. If he had died... “Valkyn’s sister Erlynda told me to take the medallion. ’Twas not like I could undead him. Asides, he deserved it.”

Really, *really* deserved it.

“Dara would like me to tell you she finds this rather funny, in an ironic sort of way. Of all the clans to be ruled by a woman...” Another pause. “So Aryk rules five and you rule one?”

“He repetitioned the White Plains daq to an alliance. We-we’re getting married.”

Would Loren be angry?

“’Tis normal for lifemates to wed. I expected this. You have my permission.”

“He wants to get married on the day the sun breaks the horizon and spring begins. He says it would be a good omen for both us and them.”

“A thoughtful gesture. I commend his reasoning.”

“Loren, that’s five days from now.”

Was that a shriek she heard, echoing through the link?

“Or not. Get to a fire. Dara is on her way.”

Oh stars. Verdeen broke the connection, panicked. “Clothes. I need clothes—*now.*”

“What’s wrong?” Aryk watched as she rummaged frantically through her pack.

Nay, not that one...nay...nay... “These’ll do.” Verdeen yanked on breeches, tunic and boots. “Where’s the biggest fire in the camp?”

“Right out front, why?”

“Dara’s on her way.”

He still looked puzzled.

“Dragon. Fire mage.” Verdeen raked a hand through her damp, ragged braid. “She doesn’t need an actual gate.”

“I’ll come with you.” He rose and donned breeches, boots and his fur vest. “Ensure no one tries to skewer her when she shows.”

Verdeen grimaced as she redid the braid. “I’d like to see anyone try. For your sake I hope ’tis not a friend.”

They hurried outside where Falke stood guard. He snapped to attention. “My *daq*.”

Verdeen’s cheeks burned. He’d been standing right outside when she and Aryk had...?

“Verdeen’s got a visitor coming,” Aryk stated. “Clear the fire.”

“My *daq*?” Confused but compliant, Falke helped Aryk remove the big pot of water from the stand over the fire.

There were other guards scattered across command row, watching with weapons in hand.

“Weapons on hold,” Aryk ordered. “No matter what you see, you hold.”

The fire flared to man-height and Verdeen spotted two glowing salamander eyes. “Greetings, First,” she called to Dara’s principal elemental.

“*Vertenya*.” First always sounded amused. “*She comesss*.”

A woman-shape appeared and Dara stepped from the fire. Verdeen and Aryk took a knee. After a shocked moment so did the guards. Verdeen watched the flames recede to normal and Dara took her arm. “Get up.” The queen hauled Verdeen and Aryk to their feet. “First, would you see to the unpacking?” She waved to an open spot. “There would be fine.”

A stream of flames shot from the fire to where the queen had indicated and a large tent took shape—presumably with all her required possessions within. To their credit not a guard flinched, although Verdeen spotted white faces and big eyes. Even Aryk swallowed hard.

Dara *tsked* at Aryk’s wound. “Well, that won’t do.” She traced a finger over the stripe. “Restore.” The wound faded as if it had never been.

“Anuk taught me that one. Sometimes simple can be the most effective.”

“*Ready*,” First reported.

“Thank you, First.” Dara watched as he faded from view. “So come with me, you two. I hear we’ve a royal wedding to plan.” She led the way into her tent.

From the outside it resembled a hide tent like the others but inside were all the amenities of home. Dara rummaged in a chest and retrieved an empty pitcher and three changling-glass goblets of turquoise-to-coral. “Khaffa.” She placed them on the table betwixt three camp chairs. She poured and sure enough the scent of hot, spiced khaffa filled the tent. “Sit.”

They sat. She joined them. “Loren’s summoning your parents. This separation has gone on quite long enough.”

Verdeen’s heart ached. *“Promise me you won’t order them to come,”* she begged Loren. *“If they can’t rejoice in me following my dream and finding my lifemate, they aren’t going to celebrate me marrying a human mortal and settling in a frozen wilderness. If they can’t be happy for me then I don’t want them here.”*

“Verdeen, they’re your parents,” Dara said. “Your family. They should be here.”

“Not if you have to force them. Promise me.”

Aryk looked solemn. “They object to me?”

“Nay. To *me*. I’ve not heard from them in five years. Why start now?”

“Very well,” Dara conceded. “We promise.”

Verdeen took a sip of khaffa. Stars, she’d missed it.

Dara held out her hand. “May I see those medallions?” She examined each one afore handing them back to Aryk. “I understand your family’s already on their way. Are there any special rituals to be observed?”

Aryk looked startled. “My family?”

“You mother, your children and their mothers,” Verdeen said.

Aryk choked. “You invited Dagmar? Here? Are you mad?”

“You expect a five-year-old to travel here without his mother?” Verdeen rolled her eyes. “Aryk, we have to live with these people. If you can live with Beloq’s people and I can live with Nomok’s people then we can live with Dagmar.”

He looked resigned. “Special rites? Nay. Here marriage is a simple thing. Once the elders approve the couple just moves in together. One night of feasting and dancing in celebration just with the local village.”

“You just united a nation,” Dara reminded him. “You’re marrying a royal ambassador. I fear we do things differently. Have you objections to an elven priest and priestess?”

He shook his head. “We celebrate spring rites in the name of Saskia, Mother of All. My mother Gefjun leads the ceremony. We ken the importance of the sun. I think ’twill be a good reminder to people of something we share in common.”

“Gefjun should speak with Aletha and Everett so they can figure out how to blend the rituals together. Send her to me when she arrives.” Dara poured more khaffa in Verdeen’s goblet. “We’re feasting two thousand people out there?”

“We’ve fish, fat and meat aplenty for now but not much else.”

“To be expected at the end of winter,” Dara replied. “What do you plant here? What are your people familiar with?”

“Potatoes, turnips, carrots, cabbage, kale and cauliflower.”

“That we can do, as well as bread. My mother Fanny had a wonderful recipe for chowder. I’ll have to speak to your cooks and arrange for Gwendolyn to start sending supplies over.”

Verdeen stifled a yawn. Dara pinned her with her gaze. “You two should get some sleep. Busy day tomorrow. Today. Go to bed.”

Verdeen grabbed Aryk’s wrist and let herself get shooed out of Dara’s tent.

“’Twill be nice to awaken with you in my arms not clear across the room.”

She snorted. “’Tis going to be a hectic few days. We’ll need all the sleep we can get.”

“Are you suggesting I might do otherwise?” Aryk was all innocence. “You wore me out, woman. You’re safe for at least a mark.”

“Don’t make me sic Fiske on you.” A jaw-cracking yawn ruined the effect. She staggered into her tent and dropped into bed fully clothed. Aryk tugged off her boots and his own afore drawing a blanket over them. She sighed as he drew her close. “S’nice.”

“Sweet dreams. Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of our lives.”

“Poet.” She hesitated. “Aryk, no matter what happens, no matter how crazy it gets, I love you. Remember that.”

Chapter Nineteen

“What do you mean ‘they decline’?” Dara demanded. “Whom do they think to defy here?”

Verdeen had expected no less from her disappointed parents. She’d thought herself beyond hurting so. “Dara, you promised. ’Tis all right.”

“I was ordered not to order them,” Loren reminded them both. *“Short of said imperial order they declined.”*

“What did they say?” Her eyes burned. She tried to swallow down the lump choking her.

“It matters not.”

“No more tears,” Dara urged. “Those stiff-necked bastards aren’t worth it.”

Verdeen flinched at the queen’s harsh tone. “I’ve the right to know what they said.”

“They no longer acknowledge a daughter Verdeen. They declared Veona an only child.”

Verdeen collapsed into her chair. Her head spun. “I-I knew they were angry, but...”

“Breathe.”

Aryk stormed into the tent, plowing to a halt afore Verdeen. She took one look at him and burst into heartrending sobs. He hauled her into his arms and glared at the queen. *“Tisht. What did you say to her?”*

Verdeen buried her face in his shoulder.

“Shh. I’m here. What happened?”

“H-how did you—”

“I felt your distress clear across the command square.”

Lifemate bond, she realized. Human or nay it was what it was.

Aryk pulled Verdeen out of her chair and took her place, settling her on his lap. She snuggled in, emotionally exhausted but comforted within his arms by the steady beating of his heart under her ear as his warm scent curled around her.

“Well this changes everything.” Dara stalked about her tent. Her torque blazed. “When Loren declared you near as kin to us he meant it. You still have family, Verdeen. *We’re* your family now. Loren had you entered in the records as a royal ward effective the moment we met six years ago.”

A royal ward? Verdeen was just beginning to grasp the titles of daq and ambassador. Her head spun. “You can’t.”

“I’m queen.” Dara glared. “I can do whatever I wish.”

“*Such as?*” Loren sounded apprehensive.

“Anuk’s on her way?”

“*With Aletha, Everett, Aurelian and Veona.*”

Veona. Verdeen shuddered. “They’ll be furious she came.”

“She doesn’t care,” Dara assured her. “Loren and I are Verdeen’s family, Aryk, as well as Veona and Aurelian. Is there no family you wish present with you for marriage negotiations?”

“Here my word is law.” His jaw tightened. “I stand and speak for myself.”

He felt tense, his muscles stiff as he held himself still. Verdeen snuggled in under his chin. She slid one hand around behind him, under his tunic to rub soothing circles on his lower back. “*No matter what, I love you.*” She didn’t know if he could catch the actual thought but she knew he’d receive the emotion, the intention.

His arms pulled her closer still as he shifted in his chair.

“Very well.” Dara indicated them to sit around the table and poured more hot khaffa from the seemingly never-ending-and-never-cooling pitcher. “Verdeen’s parents have withdrawn all support from her—including what should have been her dowry.”

She flinched at the word dowry, realizing she had naught but the items in her tent.

Dara cleared her throat. “Aryk ta Egil, Verdeen te Dara, as the rulers of an entire nation you shall be visiting and hosting your peers from other nations. I fear you both shall have to look the part. The largest portion of a royal dowry would be

title and land but you already have both. What you need is a royal household, a place to hold court as well as live.”

“We’re going to need to build a bigger house,” Aryk acknowledged.

“No palace,” Verdeen decreed. “Valkyn’s right. That won’t do here. Stone not marble.”

“Svaaldur shall be our capitol. We’ve the stone and the hands for the labor. A hall, kitchen, bedroom, bathing chamber and nursery—with an upper loft—should suffice.”

Verdeen’s face burned. *Nursery?*

“Now”—Dara moved on to the next topic—“we come to the practical details. Funding and furnishing. You build the hall, we supply and furnish it. You’ll need timbers for the doorways and stairs, marble for the bath and ground-level flooring and glass for windows.”

Aryk nodded. “Sounds reasonable.”

“Loren and I are prepared to offer an alternative equivalent to the title and lands. Six years in our household. So, we offer you Verdeen’s body weight in gold times six.”

“*Tisht.*” Aryk’s arms tightened around Verdeen.

Verdeen felt faint. “You can’t do that. ’Tis too much.”

“Silver,” Aryk countered.

Dara shook her head and crossed her arms.

“*Half* silver,” he tried.

“*A quarter,*” Loren offered.

“A quarter?” Verdeen echoed.

Aryk shook his head. “*A third.*”

“Done,” Dara agreed. She moved on. “Furniture, household linens, kitchen utensils are a given. But you’ll need clothing befitting your stations.”

Aryk rolled his eyes.

“What need have I for gowns?” Verdeen snorted.

“You’ll need some for yourselves and your official representatives when you host and when you travel south and east.”

Screams sounded outside along with Valkyn’s frantic shouts of, “Weapons on hold. Do not attack.”

Verdeen and Aryk rushed out with Dara to see an enormous carnelian dragon landing with four elves clinging to a harness on her back. Anuk. Half the camp stood gawking with weapons in hand, Gefjun and Erlynda amidst them. When had Aryk’s mother arrived? Where were Aryk’s younglings—and their mothers? The dragon’s passengers slid to the ground and she shimmered into a voluptuous redhead of lethal beauty clad in red leather.

“We’re here.”

“Nice entrance, Aunt Anuk,” Dara drawled.

Anuk’s gold eyes glinted as she sized up Valkyn. He gaped back, quickly recovering to flash a cocky grin.

Dread seized Verdeen. He really didn’t want to mix it up with Anuk. She and mortal men used to be a dangerous combination. Verdeen still wasn’t sure she was trustworthy. She saw the same misgiving on Dara’s face.

“Aunt Anuk, you promised to behave,” the queen reminded her.

Anuk rolled her eyes. “Greetings, warrior. Pretty brave to stand your ground. What’s your name?”

Veona rushed to hug her sister. “I cannot believe they did it.”

Aurelian trailed behind her but stepped up and wrapped his arms around both sisters. “I am here as older brother to give the bride away.”

Verdeen shook in their embrace, dimly aware Dara and Aryk had moved off to introduce Aletha and Everett to Gefjun. Anuk and Valkyn were still conversing. “I’m so glad you’re both here.”

“I would not have missed it for the world. Our parents are idiots.”

“I offered to roast them, but someone”—Anuk glared over at the priestess Aletha—“wouldn’t let me.”

She would have too. Verdeen shuddered. Anuk scared her.

Aletha frowned from a distance, a momentary crack in her goddess-serenity.

Aryk strode up. “Mother’s taking them to her tent to discuss things.”

Verdeen wondered how the two elven clerics would handle *schnae*. “Why didn’t you tell me your mother was here? Why wasn’t she present at our discussion?”

“My mother hasn’t spoken for me since I turned six.”

She flinched at that pointed cultural contrast.

“You” Dara pointed to Aurelian “and Anuk go with Valkyn to visit the wounded. See what the two of you can do to help.”

Verdeen’s jaw dropped. “You’re a healer?”

His azure eyes twinkled. “You are not the only one who took extra classes, *vertenya*.”

They followed Aryk’s second across the clearing. Did Valkyn have any inkling of what he was in for? Should she warn him? Anuk wielded her allure like a hammer; she was insatiable.

“All right, folks, get back to what you were doing.” Aryk cupped Verdeen’s cheek in his hand. “Go with your sisters. I ken you’d appreciate some privacy for a bit.”

Verdeen had a brief glimpse of him heading toward Erlynda afore Dara and Veona dragged her back to Dara’s tent. She frowned at the niggly-naggle of jealousy that made its ugly presence known.

Dara caught her eye and shook her head. “Have no fear. A true lifemate is incapable of straying. He holds no desire for anyone but you.”

She hated that pettiness within. She liked Erlynda and Birgit but the thought that Erlynda and Aryk had come together to create Birgit still rankled. Never mind it was in the past. As for Dagmar whatever had Aryk seen in her?

The tent flap dropped behind them. Veona turned to her sister. “Do you love him?”

“More than my life. He completes me.”

“I have a gift for you.” Veona took a deep breath. Dara nodded. “I sold exclusive rights to your scent-blend to Queen Dara. You can have both that money from the sale and the recipe as well as every bottle of the finished products I could find. If you’ve a competent herbalist here we can get you the ingredients as needed for more in the future.”

“*Something’s missing...the scent you wore.*”

“*Rather extravagant for a warrior...*”

“*Pity.*”

Verdeen shivered recalling that past conversation at Ravenscroft—and what followed. She blushed. “Thank you. It couldn’t have been easy to defy them.”

“I also give you my hope chest and my half of the fabrics.”

Verdeen shook her head. “You can’t do that.”

“My half is mine to do with what I will,” Veona argued.

They’d already granted Verdeen’s portion to Veona, she realized.

“Asides, ’tis already here,” Dara remarked. “I’ll send all your gifts on to Svaaldur when the festivities here conclude.”

“My lady included a gift of her own for you. Changling-glass. Two full drinking sets—pitcher and twelve goblets. One in green-to-rose and one in cobalt-to-copper.”

“They’re bespelled,” Dara stated. “Whatever you wish to serve, just name it and the pitcher will produce an unlimited supply for that sitting. Just speak and start pouring.”

A lifetime of cider, hot spiced khaffa, sweet golden wine...

No more *schnae*...

“She also included two sets of four goblets, each in a different color range, for you to gift to Aryk’s former *sensuri*. You decide who gets which. There’s a pitcher and six goblets in turquoise-to-coral for Aryk’s mother.”

Like the elven queen’s. No one outside the elven realm possessed such. ’Twould be an extravagant gesture. Verdeen was overwhelmed at their thoughtfulness.

“We’ll need wedding finery for the participants,” Dara said. “I assume Valkyn stands with Aryk?”

“And I stand with Verdeen,” Veona stated.

“Aryk shall wish to wear his daq cloak,” Verdeen told them.

“Acourse. It represents who and what he is. I think black and gold with gold and ruby accruements,” Dara mused, “to set off the crimson of the cloak.”

“Valkyn, Aurelian and I in ice blue and white velvet with white ermine trim for me and white fox trim for the men,” Veona added. “Good Isadorikjan colors. As for you—”

“I’d be honored”—Dara broke in—“if you’d wear my gown *sans* train. For good luck.”

Time stopped. Verdeen froze. Her heart thundered in her ears.

“With strands of gold and pearls in your hair,” Veona agreed.

Verdeen remembered that grand monstrosity of a royal wedding gown. Pearl-encrusted ivory with long sleeves, high neck—and nigh a hundred tiny pearl buttons down the back. “Loren hated that dress.”

Dara snickered. “He just got a bit annoyed at the delay.”

“’Tis good for a ruler to learn patience,” Veona noted.

Both Dara and Verdeen looked at her.

“What?” she asked.

All three women burst into laughter.

The morning of the wedding found Verdeen awaking in Dara’s tent with Veona and the queen. Verdeen had no idea how she’d come to fall sleep. She’d been so nervous when Veona had done some final, temporary tucks. Verdeen was more slender than the statuesque dragon queen and she’d lost even more weight since coming to Isadorikja. Anuk had gone missing and no one knew where. She eyed Dara, who was being her usual closed-mouthed self. “Did you have something to do with my sleeping?”

“You needed your rest,” the queen said. “You’ll thank me later.”

Veona poured bath oil into the steaming hot tub that had been awaiting Verdeen when she'd rolled out of bed. The familiar scents of lavender and vanilla filled the spacious tent. The lingering sadness over her parents was tempered by the thought that today the sun would crest the horizon and she would be wedding Aryk—and co-ruling Isadorikja. Verdeen gulped, took a breath and ducked under the water, letting the luxurious oils soak into her skin and hair.

She surfaced to find Dara holding out a steaming cup of khaffa. It's wasn't easy taking sips whilst Veona scrubbed her skin all but off her bones. Once out, Veona massaged more oil into her skin 'til Verdeen glistened. Dara ramped up the central fire to dry Verdeen's hair, brushing it into a pale, shining river of silk. Verdeen pulled up her spider-silk stockings and donned a lace-trimmed chemise of sheerest linen whilst Dara shook out the pearl gown. Verdeen stepped into it with trepidation. What if she tore it or spilled something on it?

“Don't be afeared of it. 'Tis naught but a gown.” Dara helped her pull it up over her shoulders. The queen started buttoning as Veona wound bands of gold and pearls around her hair, bringing it forward over Verdeen's right shoulder. The finishing touch was a pearl net which Veona pinned atop her head. A single giant teardrop pearl dangled in the center of her forehead. Veona finished afore Dara did.

Veona then dressed in a white wool gown, buttoning an ice-blue velvet jacket and split overskirt atop it. The hooded ice-blue cape was trimmed in white ermine, held with a clasp of silver and pearls. Verdeen acknowledged her older sister was right—they were perfect Isadorikjan colors.

Finally done buttoning Verdeen, Dara donned a long-sleeved shimmering gown of gold brightcloth split over an undergown of sheryl-silk that gleamed maple red and burnt orange as she moved. “You should remember this gown.” The queen braided her hair into a twisted figure-eight bun at her nape and finished with the stunning set of fire opals that had been a gift from Loren's grandmother, Lorelei.

“I remember Loren couldn't take his eyes off you.”

“Aryk shall not be able to take his eyes off you,” Veona assured her. “You look amazing.”

Verdeen's stomach roiled; her head spun. She didn't know whether to faint or throw up. "I feel odd."

"Nerves," Dara stated. "Breathe. Trust me, once you see Aryk they all go away."

A cough sounded at the tent entrance and someone cleared their throat as Verdeen finished lacing up a new pair of ivory ankle boots. "Ladies? Are you ready?" Aurelian called. "I am told it is just about time to start."

"Come on inside," Dara called.

To Verdeen's shock an entire masculine entourage trooped in. Loren and Cianan, in the white velvet of Lady's Champion. Lord Elio in his green dress uniform, wearing so many medals 'twas a wonder he could stand upright. Dear Aurelian dressed in white wool breeches and ice blue velvet tunic and wool cape trimmed in white fox. He bore a half-dozen white calla lilies tied together with her White Plains medallion on a braided cord of shining white. Dara's father King Hengist in blazing red and gold, representing Riverhead and thus Arcadia. 'Twas his kingdom Westmarche had invaded with riever mercenaries. That he was here in Isadorikja staggered Verdeen. He was flanked by the one man she feared she'd never see again in Aryk's lifetime—King Berend representing Shamar. Somehow he still resembled a stark hungry wolf even in midnight blue velvet.

Her eyes burned with tears. "You came? You're here?" She reached out to touch his sleeve and then threw herself against him in a fierce hug. "Thankyouthankyouthankyou, Lady," she whispered.

Wolf returned the hug. "You achieved the impossible. I could do no less."

"I bring flowers and *he* gets a hug?" Aurelian grouched. "How is that fair?"

Verdeen laughed around the lump in her throat as she turned to her best friend. "You *did* bring flowers. How?"

"With a bit of help. Gwendolyn assures me they shall last forever," he stated.

Her eyes locked on the cord holding the medallion. It looked like... She raised her gaze to his as the tears spilled over.

Aurelian nodded. “We have tail hair from Hani`ena, Kikeona, Milisena and Lanakea. They wish you well, *vertenya*. I was to remind you they knew you were meant for other things.”

“We need to begin,” Cianan prompted.

“Is that trumpeter still out there?” Hengist grimaced.

“And the crier.” Wolf rolled his eyes. “Let’s go take our places.”

Loren presented his arm to his wife. “Shall we, wife?”

They stepped out, all but Aurelian. He handed Verdeen the lilies as the first trumpet sounded. “There goes Hengist. Now, there is a white runner leading from this tent to the ceremony so you do not get your dress muddy.” A second trumpet. “That would be for Wolf. There are two rows of Isadorikjan commanders with Creataq’s Blood swords that will create an arch as we pass through.” A third trumpet. “Cianan. There are two rows of torches that burn. I am told they get ceremoniously extinguished after the sun rises above the horizon.” He yawned at the fourth trumpet. “Lord Elio. Remind me to never have a dawn wedding.”

Verdeen cradled her flowers and tried to remember the vows she’d prepared.

“Breathe,” Veona reminded her.

The fifth trumpet sounded. “There go Loren and Dara,” Aurelian said. “Our turn next. Now, when the swords are raised the Isadorikjan women will break into a hymn to their version of the Lady of Light, Saskia. It is a hymn to the sun, to spring and new beginnings. It was the closest they could come to a wedding song.”

“Appropriate,” Veona pronounced.

Verdeen nodded and took a deep breath.

Aurelian tucked her free hand around his arm. “Remember, the show is for the people. For you dearest, Aryk stands at the end of the runner with Valkyn, waiting to join his life to yours. Just think on that.”

Veona drew back the tent flap and Aurelian escorted Verdeen out into the torch-lit gloom. Verdeen shivered in the chill damp air as her sister stepped behind her. She caught a breathy twitter in her ear, a shimmer in the air from the corner of

her eye. Elemental sylphs danced in the breeze, there to carry their words to the masses.

The Isadorikjan commanders snapped to attention and in a fluid motion that bespoke much practice drew their swords and formed an arch of Creataq's Blood. Verdeen noted every clan was represented. Sudaviq smiled as her as she passed. She caught the eye of the White Plains men, who straightened with pride but could not quite meet her gaze.

Well, that ended here and now. As the women began the hymn and Aurelian led her down the white runner Verdeen stopped afore her—stars, *her*—men. “Nomok's dishonor was his alone. It doesn't reflect on you. I'm honored you stand with me this day. You do our clan proud.” She caught and held each man's gaze, nodding when they did.

They moved on toward the canopied chapel.

“Spoken like a true queen,” Aurelian murmured.

She blushed.

Someone had made clan pennants—each symbol stamped in silver on an ice-blue yaga-felt background edged in white-and-silver braiding. They fluttered side-by-side in the breeze, flanking a large central banner in identical colors with all six symbols in an unbroken ring. Dara had ensured someone was busy. There stood Cianan and Lord Elio, Hengist and Wolf, Anuk.

Where had she been?

There stood a resigned-looking Dagmar and Joro in indigo blue and Erlynda and Birgit in soft periwinkle. Joro waved at her. Erlynda winked. Verdeen wanted to laugh. Birgit looked lovely next to a ribbon-bedecked Ebony. The yaga tried to sneak a nibble of Verdeen's flowers as she passed.

Then they were under the canopy. The hymn ended; the yellow-clad singers withdrew. Dara and Loren waited off to the side. Gefjun stood resplendent in sunny yellow with a gold headpiece that looked like a rising sun complete with rays. Aletha and Everett stood with her in goddess-white. They three presided in the east where the sun would rise. A small fire burned in a Creataq's Blood bowl atop the altar, which was covered in a white silk altar cloth edged in gold. As

Aurelian and Verdeen paused at the west end Valkyn and Aryk stepped forward, up to the altar.

Aryk was...riveting? Compelling? Breathtaking? Verdeen couldn't decide which as she stared. Black woolen breeches buttered his muscular thighs, topped by a black velvet tunic with gold braiding. A ruby-encrusted gold belt and gilded leather sword scabbard. Someone had taken his five daq medallions and attached them to a heavy gold chain that draped over his broad shoulders. His tawny mane flowed over the crimson cloak fastened with an ornate gold-and-ruby brooch. She stared at that cloak. It looked brand new, not a bloodstain in sight. Was it, or had Dara worked yet another renew spell on his as she had Verdeen's? He looked every inch a king. His hot hazel eyes blazed in a face set with determination, hope and...love. His gaze drew her toward him as if Aurelian didn't exist. The scent of cedar and sandalwood tickled her nose.

Veona's handiwork most likely.

Everett stepped forward. "Who giveth this woman to this man?"

"I do as her brother," Aurelian replied.

"And who accepts her as wife and daqira?"

Aryk straightened and took a deep breath. "I Aryk, son of Egil and sire of Joro, daq of Isadorikja, do accept Verdeen ta Dara as my wife and daqira of Isadorikja." He turned to Aurelian. "Brother, I relieve you of your responsibility."

"I stand relieved." Aurelian bowed to Aryk, kissed Verdeen's cheek, placed her hand in Aryk's and went to stand with Dara and Loren.

Aryk squeezed her hand, raised it to his lips for a kiss. They twitched with his amusement as she frowned at this rather chauvinistic twist to the traditional elven ceremony even as she shivered at the caress.

"On this day of days Daq Aryk te Egil and Daqira Verdeen ta Dara hath chosen to set aside their childhoods and take their adult places as husband and wife," Everett continued. "As a gesture of this transition I wouldst receive their tokens of childhood."

Valkyn and Veona stepped forward with closed boxes. Everett opened them and removed a frayed and faded pink hair ribbon for Verdeen and a knotted leather snare for Aryk. He turned to the altar. “Lady Goddess, receiveth these tokens of childhood and with it, Verdeen’s and Aryk’s pledges that they hath indeed chosen this first step into their adult union.”

The incense-scented flames licked at the tokens and Verdeen watched a past treasure blacken and curl.

The priest smiled at them. “I wouldst receive their tokens of adulthood at this time.”

Veona and Valkyn bowed and presented two more ornate boxes. Everett accepted a knife, a pen and a small blank book for Verdeen.

“I began our partnership as bodyguard and advisor,” Verdeen announced. “I shall continue to counsel and advise you on this new path of peace, as scholar and scribe.”

Everett took a small, symbolic shield and spear from Valkyn.

“Always have I stood as warrior and daq, once of Widowmaker alone but now of Isadorikja as a whole,” Aryk declared. “A warrior who fought for peace, long may I defend it—and you, my daqira.” He raised her hand to his lips, flicking his tongue over her knuckles when Everett turned his back.

Verdeen locked her knees to keep them from wobbling. *Bad*, she mouthed at him.

His eyes glinted at her.

Everett laid the tokens on the altar afore the burning bowl of incense. “Lady of Light, Mother of all life, accept these symbols of Aryk’s and Verdeen’s eternal vows.”

Gefjun stepped forward. “Our great Saskia took pity on humankind and gave us Her light to ease our way in this life. On this day of days rejoice as a single people as once again the sun banishes the gloom of winter and heralds in a new dawn. A new season of hope and renewal, of spring.” As one everyone turned to face toward the east, waiting, breathless.

She and the elven clerics had timed it perfectly. As if on cue the sun peaked over the horizon, its brilliant rays slicing through the clouds to turn the grey sky a pale blue. As one, all of Isadorikja rose, cheering, whistling, stomping their boots and clapping.

“During the long winter we use fire to light our way and warm our days,” Gefjun stated. “Now with the sun we no longer have need for such lesser flames.”

Each of the torches was extinguished.

“May Saskia provide,” Gefjun finished.

Aletha stepped forward. “With the dawning of a new day, a new season of hope and renewal, we witness the dawning a new age of hope and peace and prosperity for Isadorikja. As a first symbolic step toward joining our world community, Aryk and Verdeen hath chosen this holiest of days to make their vows to each other, a sacred union betwixt man and woman, daq and daqira, Isadorikja and Cymry.”

Verdeen handed her flowers to Veona afore turning and facing Aryk.

He took her hands in his.

Pulling a shimmering silver cord from around his neck, Everett wrapped it several times around Verdeen’s and Aryk’s hands. “Two bodies, two minds, two hearts, two souls—two halves of a whole. No longer apart, no longer separate.” He looked at Verdeen. “Daqira Verdeen te Dara, why dost thou chooseth this man above all others?”

Verdeen had eyes only for Aryk. “You entered my life on my darkest day. When I thought all my dreams lost you give me a new one. I left my homeland to find and make my true home here with you. You taught me to balance woman and warrior. You accept me for whom and what I am. You complete me.”

“Daq Aryk ta Egil, why dost thou chooseth this woman above all others?”

Aryk squeezed her hands. His gaze held hers. “I started out with a hope and a dream for peace and equality. You saw not whom I was but see whom I am, whom I can be. You push me, challenge me. You give me belief and strength when mine

wavers. As we take these first steps in peace together, you're my faith and my conscience, my heart and my soul."

Everett beamed at them. "Daqira Verdeen te Dara, afore thy goddess and this gathering declare thy intent."

Verdeen smiled through her tears as her hands trembled in Aryk's. *I'll never get through this.* Her voice was barely a whisper; thank the Lady for the sylphs. "I come to you as elf to human, woman to man, daqira to daq. I'll fight by your side against all foes in war. I'll counsel you and comfort you in peace. I vow to be an equal partner and helpmate in your home and your kingdom. I'll honor your friends and your family. I'll be a good mother to our children."

"Daq Aryk ta Egil, afore thy gods and this gathering declare thy intent."

Aryk's grip tightened around her hands. His voice rang with conviction. "I come to you as human to elf, man to woman, daq to daqira. Together we've accomplished what some believed impossible. You've taught me that together all things can be possible. I vow you shall be an equal partner in all things. We shall face all things together, side-by-side. I value your wisdom, your counsel and opinions. I take your heart in my keeping and give you mine in return. I shall honor your friends and your family. I shall be a good father to our children. 'Til the end of my days."

She tried not to flinch.

"Who bears witness to these vows?" Everett demanded.

"We do," the entire gathering answered.

"Aryk, Verdeen, with the blessings of our goddess I now declare this union sealed 'til thy last breath. Aryk, thou may kiss thy bride."

"Husband," Verdeen whispered.

"Wife." Aryk's gaze burned into hers as he curled his hand behind her neck. Isadorikjan warrior to the core, he wasted no time in capturing her lips in a voracious, plundering kiss that stole her breath—and her wits. His other arm came around her waist as her knees buckled and she sagged against him.

Verdeen clung to him as his tongue stroked hers, dimly aware of Isadorikjan cheers and whistles. When Aryk broke it off she stared at him, dazed, breathless.

“Mine,” he whispered. “Say it.”

“Yours.” Her cheeks flamed as she recalled the last time they’d spoken these words. From the wicked glint in his darkened eyes ’twas his full intention.

“My lords and ladies, I present to you Daq Aryk and Daqira Verdeen of Isadorikja,” Everett pronounced, retrieving his silver binding cord. “Wish them well on their life’s journey.”

Veona looked scandalized as she handed Verdeen her lilies back.

Aryk glanced down. “So that’s where they stuck your medallion.”

Verdeen laughed as she took her place beside him afore the altar.

Aletha also looked a bit scandalized as she laid a hand on each of their heads. “Lady’s blessings on thee and thy union.”

Everett looked as if he was trying not to laugh. “I foresee a bright future for thee both.”

Veona embraced Verdeen in a flower-crushing hug. “I have not lost a sister. I have gained a brother.” She gave Verdeen and Aryk a kiss on the cheek.

Gefjun came forward next. “I too foresee a bright future with many children. Happiness to you both.” She moved to bow but Verdeen was having none of that. She gave Aryk’s mother a hug. After a single moment’s hesitation the woman hugged her back. A bit stiff, as if she was unused to such shows of affection.

Well, she could just get used to it.

Aurelian came up next, followed by Dara and Loren, Cianan and Lord Elio, in a flurry of hugs and congratulations. Cianan leaned in close.

“Here’s to changing the world, *vertenya*. Hmm?” His cobalt eyes twinkled at her.

“Aye.” That conversation in the gardens seemed a lifetime ago.

Valkyn was right behind them. “You did what you set out to do.”

“We’ll be the stronger for it,” Aryk assured him. “You’ll see.”

Erlynda bustled up to give Verdeen a crushing hug that would test the power of Gwendolyn's flower-preservation spell. "I'm so happy for you both. I told you that you were perfect for him."

Dagmar followed looking none too pleased with Erlynda barging ahead of her. As Joro's mother protocol probably demanded she lead. "So what becomes of your heir now, my daq?"

Verdeen tensed.

"He joins me when he turns six as is custom. He shall learn the duties of daq at my side."

Joro beamed up at him. Aryk ruffled his hair.

Tables were set up whilst the Isadorikjan commanders took their oaths to their new daq and daqira. Joro and Birgit sat with the small wedding party and looked thrilled to be included. Erlynda and Dagmar joined the commanders and looked to be quite the centers of attention at that table. Aurelian didn't look too uncomfortable at the table full of visiting royals. Gefjun chose to join them, too.

Verdeen leaned against her husband's arm and closed her eyes.

"Falling asleep?" he teased.

She smiled. "Nay, just soaking it all in for a moment."

The simple agreed-upon menu had been enhanced with a salad of greens garnished with cranberries and apricots and a dessert of honeyed apples and pears dusted with sweet spices and topped with candied pecans. Multiple cooking stations ensured everyone present was served in a timely manner and there was plenty for all. When the meal was ended, distant music began. Lively. Discordant. It sounded as if there were multiple bands—all playing a different tune. But the Isadorikjans didn't seem to mind as they rose from the table, bowed to their daq and went off to join the celebration.

Footsteps approached and Sveinn appeared in the banquet tent, holding a gilded box in his hand and looking rather nervous. To Verdeen's surprise he caught Cianan's eye and the elf nodded what looked to be encouragement. "My daq?" Sveinn called. "May I approach?"

Aryk raised an eyebrow, bemused. “You may.” When Sveinn stood before them, Aryk asked, “What would you say to me, warrior?”

Sveinn straightened at that. “I would ask your daughter Birgit if she’d attend the dancing with me. Have I your approval?”

Birgit blushed but looked both flattered and hopeful.

Verdeen fought a smile and noted Aryk too struggled to appear duly grave.

“Well warrior, here a kyra may speak for herself.” Aryk glanced at Birgit. “But does she say yes, I would not disapprove.”

Birgit looked shocked to be called kyra by her father. “I...” She cleared her throat. “What’s your name?”

“Sveinn, son of Roald of Granite Falls,” he replied. “What say you?”

“Aye.” She rose and came around the table to stand afore him. They made an attractive young pair.

“This is for you.” Sveinn handed her the box. “Candied layas petals.”

Birgit opened the box and stared at the sugar-dusted pink flower petals uncertainly.

“They’re an elven delicacy,” Verdeen advised. “Very special. You eat them.”

She tried one and her eyes widened. “They’re good.”

Sveinn grinned and held out his hand. “Come on.”

They left to vanish into the crowd.

Valkyn growled.

Aryk laughed. “’Tis just a dance. Relax.”

“Oh, *hai*, sure. A dance,” Valkyn muttered. “’Tis how it always starts. He can just keep his Granite Falls hands to himself.”

“If I ken your sister,” Aryk assured him, “she’s taught that lass nigh a dozen different ways to fend off unwanted advances. He seems a good lad. Let them get acquainted.”

Valkyn still didn’t look happy.

Veona laughed and stood up. “Come on, grumpy. How about we join the party? Aurelian. Valkyn’s taking us to the dance.” She held out a hand to Joro.

Verdeen smiled as her best friend approached. Looking resigned, Valkyn led them away.

“I’m trying to decide if I feel abandoned or not,” Aryk mused.

“Left all alone with your new bride,” Verdeen teased. “Whatever shall you do?”

His gaze heated as he raised her hand to his lips, turning it to plant a kiss on the palm. “You’re so beautiful.”

“This dress is amazing,” she said.

Aryk shook his head. “The dress has naught to do with it.”

She blushed. She never knew how to respond to compliments.

“Want to join the dancing?” he asked her. “Or would you rather join your family?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Tell them all good night and go figure out how to get you out of this dress.”

Her cheeks flamed. “Won’t that seem rude?”

“Who cares?” Aryk leaned in to nuzzle her ear. “Sure I can’t talk you into it?”

Verdeen shivered as his tongue teased and she curled her hand around his neck, twirling his hair around her fingers. “I think you could talk me into just about anything. I love you.”

“I have a surprise for you,” he whispered.

Chapter Twenty

Verdeen blinked. What had he done now?

“A battlefield might be an appropriate place for a wedding—”

Anyone else would have found that statement odd.

“—but not the most romantic spot for a wedding night,” Aryk stated. “I want some privacy. So Anuk and I prepared a retreat and she’s going to fly us there. For three days and nights Valkyn and Sudaviq are going keep things running here with Dara and Anuk for additional security. When we return we settle the council and send everyone home. Then we go home to Svaaldur to start building our not-palace and a council house.”

She stared at him. “Really?” After all the hustle and bustle of the past several weeks the thought of peace and quiet... Her ears would probably ring from the silence. “Just you and me?”

His gaze heated. “*Hai*. A place no one else kens of, where we can be together without any interruptions.” He leaned in and captured her lips in a kiss of melting tenderness, his tongue stroking her lower lip with leisurely sensuality. “I don’t want any interruptions.”

Verdeen trembled, blinking back tears. “Won’t we be missed?”

“Not if we keep the party going.” Dara strode up to them. “After three days of celebration I think everyone will be ready to go home and spread the word of their new daq and daqira.”

“You two ready to go?” Anuk asked.

“Aye.” Verdeen let Aryk haul her to her feet and they followed Anuk and Dara out into the clearing. A shimmer of flames lit Anuk as she transformed into her true draconian form. Aryk swung up into the harness and Dara helped Verdeen up afore him. She sat sidesaddle, nigh in Aryk’s lap as the queen strapped them both in.

“Close your eyes,” Dara ordered. “Anuk’s going to jump to the location to save time. You think gating’s bad? Try streaming with your eyes open. Unless you wish

to spend your away time unconscious keep your eyes closed until Anuk tells you to open them.”

“Keep an eye on things here,” Aryk said.

“We will,” Dara promised.

“Valkyn shall keep an eye on the camp and I shall keep an eye on Valkyn,”
Anuk purred.

She’d be keeping more than that on him.

“Relax,” Aryk whispered. “He can take care of himself.”

Verdeen leaned back against him and tried to relax. The combination of sandalwood and cedar, Aryk’s own masculine musk and Anuk’s draconian allure made her head spin as the dragon leapt into the air. Aryk’s arms tightened about her waist as a pulse akin to a lightning strike sizzled over them. He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. There was a sense of *pulling* that quickly dissipated. Anuk did something to counter the effects. Verdeen buried her face against Aryk’s chest, her head tucked in beneath his chin, letting his warmth seep into her.

Love...contentment...a sense of rightness...

Stars he smelled good.

Snap. “We’re here,” Anuk sent. *“You can open your eyes now.”*

Verdeen did and gasped at the wind on her face, the clouds and landscape rushing past in a dizzying blur. The sensation of flying was indescribable, somewhere betwixt exhilaration and terror. Her stomach fluttered betwixt nerves and nausea. Anuk banked as she circled, using the air currents and eddies to drift ever closer to Widowmaker Mountain. Verdeen stifled a scream as the carnelian dragon dove headfirst toward the snowy mountainside, only to realize they passed through it into the earth beneath. A broad passageway lit by glowing gold mage lights that opened into a beautiful underground chamber.

Anuk landed and her passengers slid to the ground. Verdeen gasped as she tried to steady her wobbly legs and pinched herself to ensure that she was indeed awake.

Glittering with crystal and quartz and white limestone formations, lit by more mage lights of blush pink and ice blue, the chamber was heated by a hot spring that steamed in the corner. Two chairs flanked a table graced by Verdeen's lilies in a clear crystal vase and the green-to-rose changling-glass pitcher and two goblets. A canopied four-posted bed took up most of the floor space, covered with white rose petals. They also covered a rug she knew came straight from Kunigonde Keep. White swirls on an ice-blue background, 'twas also littered with rose petals. Their sweet floral perfume filled the air.

"'Tis so beautiful. Like a dream."

Anuk grinned a terrifying toothy grin. "'Tis my cue to depart. I'll return in three days." Afore their eyes she dissolved into mist and vanished.

I was right. Her ears did ring with the sound of stillness.

"Finally I have you all to myself." Aryk tugged her close. "Greetings, my daqira bride."

"How did you do all this?"

"I stumbled upon this chamber through the mines and thought I'd never seen such a wonder. I kened I wished to share it with you and no other. Anuk sealed it off with a door we lock on this side. She and Dara provided the lights and the furnishings."

"Thank you." His thoughtfulness touched her deeply. "'Tis unbelievable."

"I couldn't wait to be alone with you." He slid his arms around her waist. "After all we've been through a part of me still waits to awaken. I can't believe you're here with me now."

"Now and always." Verdeen reached up to interlock her fingers behind his neck. "I love you. You complete me."

"Kiss me, bride. I need reassurance you're real and not some fantasy I conjured."

To think her *toshi*-willed warlord sought reassurance. She pulled his head down to hers, brushed her lips across his. Again that crackle of awareness zinged

through her. She shivered. “Just like that first night in the garden. No one moved me as you do. ’Twas like I waited for you, like I came alive when I met you.”

Aryk’s gaze felt like a physical caress as it wandered over her from hairnet to boot. “So beautiful.” His gaze heated as it met hers, as he reached up to pull the strands of gold and pearls from her hair. “Mine. Say it.”

“Yours—” Her thoughts scattered as he captured her lips in a ravishing kiss, his tongue sliding deep. She moaned. He stroked her, thrusting to fill her mouth, teasing the sensitive inner flesh. Hers tangled with his until she was breathless and shaking. He overwhelmed her. All she could do was cling to him as desire swamped her senses. Aryk surrounded her—his warmth, his touch, his taste. Naught else existed beyond him. Her heart pounded in her ears, a counterpoint to his ragged breathing. Her skin flushed as the heat of his hand on her backside seared through the pearl-encrusted material of her gown. She gripped the heavy gold chain bearing his daq medallions. Off. She wanted it off. All ties with the outside world gone. Just the two of them, together.

He broke off the kiss and she dragged her eyes open. His own were nearly black; but a thin ring of hazel-gold remained. Panting, Verdeen lifted the chain over his head, dropping in on the rug aside where the gold and pearl cords coiled. Unfastening the ruby clasp, she let his crimson cloak crumple to the floor. Aryk grinned as she reached for his belt, tossing that somewhere behind him. He groaned when she slid her hands beneath his tunic, her fingers gliding over his hot, sweat-slick skin.

“Stars, you’re burning up,” she whispered.

“You get me that way.” He cupped her cheek in his hand. “Pure silver...so beautiful.” He sucked in a breath as she knelt to run her tongue over his muscle-ridged belly. “Feels so good, wife.”

Verdeen whimpered as he threaded his hands through her hair and cradled her against him. “You taste so good, husband.” Salt and heat. His scent enveloped her—sandalwood and cedar, musk and man. “I think I’ll taste every inch of you.”

A shudder wracked his large, powerful frame. “Have mercy, wife.”

She kissed her way up his chest, licking and nibbling, swiping her tongue over his erect brown nipples. The black velvet tunic crumpled in her hands as she raised it. “Off,” she ordered.

“*Hai.*” He shrugged out of it. “So you’re determined to have your way with me?”

Stars, he was beautiful...and hers. “Mine,” she declared. “Say it.”

Aryk’s eyes danced. “Yours. From the moment we met.”

She melted at those words.

He moved behind her, nuzzling her ear as his fingers found the first button on her collar. “Now I get to unwrap my gift.” He swept her hair aside and as the material parted button by button he leaned in to lip at the sensitive skin of her nape. Taking a deep breath, he shuddered against her. “Now there’s the sweet scent I remember. You haunt me night and day.”

She gasped at the rasp of his beard-roughened jaw and quivered at his words. “You stalk my dreams. Dreams so hot I burn for you.”

“*Hai?*” Aryk licked his way down the ridge of her spine, the lacing of her chemise no impediment at all as he unbuttoned her to her waist. “Your breasts swell, your nipples tighten, you get all wet and lush betwixt those smooth white thighs?”

She whimpered as he slid his hands around to cup her breasts. His thumbs stroked heated circles around the tips, right through the thin linen. Stars that felt good.

“Just like they’re doing now,” he whispered. “You get all restless and needy? You ever touch yourself when you’re alone? Think on me and touch yourself, imagine ’tis my hands, my mouth on you?”

Verdeen froze. Her cheeks flamed, reliving that night in her hot, steamy bath.

The breath hissed right out of him. “You do. You have. What a thought. Your skin all golden and dewy, bathed in candlelight, yours eyes glowing silver as your fingertips glide across your belly, delving through lush, wet folds to tease that little point of fire.”

She moaned. “Wicked man.”

“You’re getting wet now,” he rasped. “I want you to do it. I want to watch you whilst you do it. I want to see you panting and writhing on those sheets until you shatter under your own hands.”

The thought was shocking...arousing...enticing.

“You asked about sharing fantasies?” he growled. “’Tis one of mine.”

It was? Stars, could she do it? Could she open herself so completely? No shyness, no hiding. Let him share in that most intimate of moments? Let him *watch*? She studied his face. Why would he request such a thing?

’Twas more than a sexual fantasy for him. ’Twas a matter of trust. Always she’d shied away from that openness, from baring her soul to him fully. ’Twould reassure him that she trusted him fully, could throw all caution and decorum to the winds and be completely open and uninhibited with him. Share everything with him without fear.

Simple trust.

Not so simple. Not when protocol and decorum had ruled her from her first breath. Bit by bit, she grew beyond that. Heart over head. Could she take this one final step?

Slowly she peeled the ivory wedding gown from her shoulders until it pooled in a shimmering heap about her ankles. Turning to him, she reached behind her to untie the laces holding the chemise in place, wriggling as she tugged, her breasts bobbling beneath the linen cloth. The sensation of the thin material rubbing her nipples made her gasp as they puckered.

He sucked in a breath. “*Tisht*. You can see right through that thing.”

“Aye?” She pulled the lacing free, reached up to grasp the thin straps and slide them down her arms. “And do you like what you see, husband?” The materiel slipped beneath her breasts and she tightened her grip so the linen and lace lifted them up.

“*Hai*.” He swallowed hard, eyes blazing. “Your skin glistens in these lights.”

Verdeen wriggled as she shoved the chemise over her hips. The linen slithered sensuously down her legs. She shivered. “No one else has seen me. No one else ever shall. You are my first, my only. I am yours.” She bent over to unlace her boots and step out of them.

“Leave the stockings on.” His voice was hoarse.

How odd. Well, ’twas his fantasy. The hard part wouldn’t be the touching. ’Twould be the courage to speak whilst she did it. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and turned to approach the behemoth of a bed, bending to give him a clear view of her backside and mayhaps more as she crawled up onto the mountain of covers. Sweeping her hair aside to fan out across the pillows, she lay back, blushing fiercely as she fought the urge to close her eyes. Aryk followed her, perching on the corner of the mattress as his hungry gaze caressed every bit of her.

Stars, this was harder to begin than she’d thought. “That night in the gardens, I returned to my room after the fight. I could still taste your kiss, still feel your tongue stroking mine, your hand on my backside. My breasts tingled...” She cupped them, stroking and kneading gently, rubbing circles around the flushed tips. “My nipples were stiff and so sensitive I could barely stand wearing my gown. I had to get it off. I thought a hot bath would help me sleep.”

She pinched her nipples, hissing as she tweaked them until they were rosy and erect. “Stars, that feels good.” She moaned, arching into her hands. “Not as good as your mouth on me. I couldn’t imagine that pleasure. I wondered how it would feel, you know. The rasp of your beard, the stroke of your tongue. Remember how you started tugging on my laces? I imagined you doing that—unlacing my gown, baring me to the cool moonlight and your hot, hungry gaze...”

“*Tisht.*” Aryk shifted on the mattress. “You’d glow. You’re glowing now. All flushed and glowing. Your eyes pure silver, shining with a light all their own.”

“It doesn’t frighten you a bit?”

“’Tis the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

She shuddered at that harsh, sensual tone. “Stars, this is arousing. I couldn’t figure out how I could feel your kiss, every stroke of your tongue on mine, here...” She stroked a hand down to her belly. “And here.” She continued lower to just

brush the tingling folds betwixt her thighs. She sucked in a breath at the zing that pulsed through her. “My legs start quivering and my belly clenches...” Her eyes drifted shut with the temptation to savor the building need.

“Keep your eyes open. Don’t shut me out.”

Her eyes snapped open. “I imagine your mouth lipping at my belly...”

“So soft, so sweet under my tongue...”

Verdeen whimpered, drawing her legs up and parting her knees. “I’m getting so hot.” She brushed against her flushed and swelling folds, gasping and squirming. “You nibble on my thighs,” she trailed her fingertips over her inner thighs, spreading her legs wider, “and the anticipation of when you finally place your mouth on me makes everything tighten up. Makes me want to hold my breath.” She panted, stroking the sensitive folds. “I need you, need your mouth on me.”

“So wet.” He growled. “I can see you pulsing. I can *feel* you pulsing.”

“I’m so empty, so hungry.” She writhed. “The tension’s growing.”

“*Hai*. Finish, bride. Show me your pleasure.”

The need for the splendor overwhelmed her. “You awakened my senses and my body. For the first time I truly feel like a woman with a woman’s desires and needs. Because of you. You complete me.” Verdeen coated her fingers with her cream, circling the tiny bud. “I love the feel of your tongue on me,” she panted. A storm of lightning zinged through her as she stroked herself into gasping, writhing need. Words proved all but beyond her as she gave in to the need for release. “So good, so sweet.” She trembled all over, circling that point of fire. Her other hand pinched her nipple as her hips lifted off the mattress, pressing into the fingers rubbing her aching, swollen flesh ever closer to the brink. “*Aryk*.”

“I’m right here with you. Let go. I’ve got you.” His gaze held hers as time stopped and pleasure exploded through her, so powerful she burst into tears. In a heartbeat she was in his arms, his mouth silencing her cries as she shuddered against him. “I’ll always have you,” he whispered against her lips, “to catch you when you fall. Let’s fall together.” His tongue surged into her mouth, stroking hers

with blatant, thrusting sensuality. One arm held her against him, the other hand curling around her breast, thumbing her nipple.

The shuddering waves went on forever as he refused to let the pleasure fade. Dizzy and breathless, she writhed against him. He slid his hand down to delve through wet, velvety folds. *Dracken rue*, she felt the scalding cream from her body coating her own fingers as he thrust two fingers deep inside her and she throbbed around him, squeezing her hand...his hand... Terrified, she broke off the kiss and stiffened.

Undeterred, he nuzzled betwixt her breasts, taking a nipple in his mouth and suckling gently. A new flash of heat sizzling though her core even as she felt the sweet slide of her nipple on her tongue... Aryk growled as her eyes nearly crossed.

“Aryk, cease.” Her head swam under the dual sensory assault. “What’s happening?”

He lifted his head. “Easy. I feel it also. I’m told ’tis normal in the bonding when a couple opens up fully to each other. I feel what you feel. You feel what I feel.” He groaned as her body kept sucking at his fingers. “So hot... ’Tis unbelievable.”

The bond. “*Open up fully.*” *Trust.*

“Twice as hot,” she whispered.

“Double the pleasure.” Aryk’s face was tight with unfulfilled passion. “Trust me, bride. Give yourself over to it. I’ll take care of you. Let’s fly together.”

Verdeen quivered at the rough edge to his voice. “I’ll never survive.”

He grinned. “I swear you’ll die with a smile on your face.”

“Wicked man. This’ll teach you.” Verdeen squirmed down to tug at the lacing on his breeches until his erection popped free, bobbing against her lips. She curled her fingers around his aching shaft, swirled her tongue around the creaming tip. He tasted so good she wanted to devour him entirely. Opening wide and sucking him deep, she choked at the wet, squeezing pleasure. Oh stars, he was sensitive. She whimpered as his need boiled up, felt him fight it down. She fought against his restraint, his need for release overwhelming. She stroked her tongue over him, a

blistering friction as she took him deep down her throat, squeezing hard as she swallowed him down. He spun her about and buried his face against her. She shuddered at the salty tang of herself on her tongue. His need boiled up anew, not to be denied. He suckled at her swollen jewel, driving his tongue hard and deep against her. The world exploded in a rush of spurting heat. She swallowed hard, moaning around him as he drank her in. 'Twas too much and the shimmering light swept her away.

Verdeen opened her eyes to find Aryk smiling down at her, an entirely too satisfied gleam in his hazel eyes. Stars, she could barely move. “What happened?”

“You swooned,” he stated. “I admit I almost did, too. 'Twas incredible. I could never have imagined this was what Loren was inferring when he mentioned that ‘trust and full surrender’ were the keys to making the bond work.” He wrapped a shining lock of her hair around his hand.

She shivered at the silken slide of it over her skin, though her fingers. “Mine,” she whispered. “Say it.”

“Only yours,” he said, leaning in for a long, slow, melting kiss. “I think we should drink a toast to start this new marriage off right.”

She slid off the bed, cursing her wobbling legs as she tottered over to the table to grasp the pitcher and goblets. “Sparkling wine,” she whispered. Sure enough, when she returned to pour, the effervescent liquid bubbled in their cups.

“What magic is this?” Aryk marveled.

Verdeen raised her goblet. “To the magic of our meeting, our joining. So much more than a fantasy or a dream. I love you.” She curled her arm through his so they were linked as they drank.

“You’re my heart, my love, my life.” He nuzzled under her jaw. “How about a nice relaxing dip in a hot spring?”

She eyed the steaming pool uncertainly.

“Trust me.” Aryk carried the pitcher and cups toward the spring. “’Tis just hot enough and there’s a ledge for sitting.”

Verdeen followed and eased herself into the water. At first 'twas too hot and she hissed at the discomfort. But then she found herself adjusting to it and eased down into it up to her shoulders. The heat soothed. Aryk eased in beside her, setting their drinks behind them and reaching beneath the water to pull her foot up into his lap. She purred as he rubbed her foot, working his way over the back of her heel and up her calf. "Stars, that feels good," she moaned, laying her head back and closing her eyes.

"You say that a lot around me," he teased, kneading the long muscles along the back of her thigh.

She splashed him. "I do. I can't help it. You have magic hands."

"*Hai?*"

"You're not at all what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

Verdeen opened her eyes. "Everyone talked about the rieviers from the Isle of Ice. I wasn't expecting someone so noble, so thoughtful...so irresistible. You were awfully patient with me. I was so awkward."

"You were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." His gaze searched hers, warm and steady and serious. "What you call your awkwardness told me you were untouched. The fact that you trusted me enough to be alone with you, to have you kiss me and let me awaken the passion within you... I kenned you'd stop me at some point but the fact that you trusted me to stop when you asked..." He shook his head. "No one's ever given me the gift of their trust like that. So soft, so sweet, so unbelievably hot..."

She shivered as he switched to her other foot. "Only with you. You're the only man I've ever wanted."

"Still pity the poor bastard who gets stuck with you?"

She screeched. "You talked to Aurelian. That *fiend*."

"You didn't tell me he kissed you."

Verdeen snorted. "'Twas not worth mentioning."

Aryk's shoulders shook with silent laughter. "He said as much, that he did naught for you. Only thing that kept me from breaking his jaw. He did warn me though, in classic big brother tones, that if I ever hurt you fire tongs and dismemberment shall be involved."

"Ooh, fire tongs," she teased, "I'd take him seriously if I were you."

"That's more serious than dismemberment?"

"Infinitely." She moaned as his fingers found a knot behind her knee. "Ooh...aye, right there..."

"*Tisht*, 'tis an arousing sound," he said. "Wonder where else I can touch and make you say that?"

"So good at that." She sighed. "Don't stop."

"Hmm, I live to hear you say that about any number of things." He pulled her atop his lap so she straddled him. "Sigh...purr...moan..." He leaned in and kissed her. "We should probably get out. Shouldn't stay in such hot water for too long a time period."

She did feel a bit like a boiled lobster at that and thirsty. He hauled her out of the water and handed her a cup. She drank it down and went to sit on the rug. The rose petals were soft against her skin.

"Lie back," he encouraged. When she did he dribbled a bit of his wine over her softened nipple which instantly popped at the contrasting chill.

Verdeen gasped. "What are you doing?"

"Taking a drink," he replied innocently, leaning over to lick up the wine and rasp his tongue over the taut nipple as well. "Mmm, delicious..."

She clutched her hands in his hair. "Wicked ma-an."

Aryk leisurely suckled wine off her other breast. "She also squeaks. Mayhaps I should oil her."

Verdeen grabbed his wrist as his hand travelled south. "Don't you dare. Aryk, I'm warning you... Oh stars..."

He lapped at the wine, stroking his tongue against her most intimate flesh. The cold, bubbling wine against her hot folds, the sensuous caress of his tongue tickling

the sensitive bud, made her hips come clear up off the floor. She moaned at his cool lips on her hot flesh. "That's it, love," he murmured, drizzling more wine over her. "Let me hear you."

Verdeen panted, unbelievably aroused at this unexpected game. "Aryk..."

"Hot and cold and so, so sweet... Say my name again."

She writhed under the merciless pleasure as it built to a feverish edge. "Aryk..."

He was insatiable as he teased, drinking her in with the wine until they were both dizzy with the sensations. Need pulsed through her and his heart thundered in her ears as he raised above her and drove deep into her aching, hungry body. The contrast of her wine-cooled folds and scalding hot channel on his shaft made him gasp and shudder. She mewled and tried to rock him deeper still.

"Easy, love." He slid her legs over his shoulders, his hips pistoning as he thrust into her.

She didn't want easy. She wanted him hot, hard and fast as she hurtled toward the precipice. He pinned her wrists to either side of her head, bending to tease her nipple with the tip of his tongue as she melted and tightened around him. He pounded into her as she fought to bring him deeper still. Need coiled tight and low as she panted and writhed under him, a scream building as he switched to her other breast and drew long and hard. The moment froze for one blistering moment afore the splendor burst over them in a rush of cold fire. She arched into him, crying out as he groaned and spurted deep within her.

"You're incredible." He rolled off her as soon as he could move.

"You're lethal." She reached for the pitcher. "Cold spiced cider," she ordered, drinking an entire goblet down in one breath.

He reached for the other goblet.

"Don't even think about it."

"Too late." Aryk's eyes twinkled at her over his cup. "Hungry?"

"Need to keep up my strength." She closed her eyes, hearing him get up and rummage through the larder. When he padded back over she opened them again.

He set down a plate of bread, cheese and fruit afore her and popped a grape into her mouth. “You’re going to spoil me,” she whispered. “Massage, breakfast in bed...”

He grinned. “You’re easy to spoil.”

They finished the light meal in companionable silence.

“I wonder how we’re supposed to know when ’tis time to return,” Verdeen mused. “I hope Anuk at least has the courtesy to knock.”

“Thinking of leaving so soon?”

Verdeen shook her head. “I could stay with you like this forever but I really enjoy watching you work. We have so much to do and no one’s going to do it for us.”

“I like the we and us part of this conversation.” He put an arm around her shoulders. “That’s what lifemates are?”

“We can do anything together.” She leaned against him. “You taught me that. We’re both strong, but we’re stronger together.”

“Strong enough to knock some sense into White Plains?”

Stars she hoped so. “There’s one thing I definitely have to do.”

“What’s that?” Aryk kissed her temple.

“Rewrite the entire book on Isadorikja. They got it all wrong.”

He tensed. “There’s a book on Isadorikja?”

She nodded. “Some of the things are correct but the writer was very biased and not in a good way. I intend to ensure the world gets to see the real Isadorikja.”

“You would do that for us?”

“Truth, justice and mercy—remember?” She turned to search his eyes. “Acourse some of the things they got right. You’re definitely a thief. You stole my heart when I wasn’t looking.”

Aryk ran a hand through her hair. “Hmm...and there’s something to be said for a good pillaging now and again...”

“Ooh, I love a good pillaging.”

“S’ that right?” He nibbled at her lips. “And then there’s plunder...”

She sighed into his mouth. “Risky endeavor.”

“Some prizes are worth the risk,” he assured her. “I would have risked anything for you. I would have challenged Loren for the right to keep you with me.”

“Really?”

“You’re mine. Had you left the sun would’ve gone out of my life forever. But you joined your life to mine and now the sun smiles on me every day even in the dead of winter.”

“Poet.” She pulled him in for a melting kiss.

“You inspire poetry...and occasional intensity.”

“You do intensity well,” she conceded. “’Tis not the only thing you do well.”

“*Hai?*” His eyes glinted at her. “Some things take lots of practice. Like loving you. I vow to practice that every day of my life for the rest of my days.”

“Practice makes perfect?”

“*Hai*. We’re already perfect together. May we never lose that.”

Verdeen shivered and snuggled closer. “I like that word. Together. Makes all the rest possible.”

“Here’s to together, then.” Aryk wrapped his arms around her.

“To together,” she vowed. “To us. To changing the world.”