

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

THE ORB OF
ATRICES



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The Orb of Atrios

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THE ORB OF ATRIOS

Kate Steele

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Prologue

In the small garden under the windowsill a warm breeze stirred bushes and flowers, mixing their scents. A brass wind chime swayed, its tubular bells brushing together. The ringing was soft and insistent. The air, smelling of lavender and lilac, stirred the filmy green curtains at the open window as it made its way across the naked body of the woman who lay sleeping on the large four-poster bed. She stirred softly at the whispering caress, a low murmur issuing from full, parted lips. The ghostly ringing of the wind chime insinuated itself into the dream that began to take shape in her mind.

Lealah Redmond wandered through the silvery light – its color gently pulsing and spinning around her. Warmth caressed her naked skin, and a moaning sigh caused a shiver to slowly flow through the tension of her body. Irresistibly drawn to the sound, her bare feet carried her noiselessly across the smooth marble expanse of the floor. As she drew closer, a bed-topped platform appeared. A silken sea of blankets, sheets and pillows littered the bed and surrounding area. Amid the disarray two bodies lay entwined. Lea felt her heart begin to beat faster, her breath pick up speed. The couple was making love. The shock of the unexpected left her immobile. Knowing she should back away, she froze, unable to tear her eyes from the beguiling sight.

The man was incredible. Even lying down, she could tell he was tall – well over six feet. Midnight dark hair fell forward like a raven's wing, shadowing his face. His body was glazed with a sheen of sweat. Muscles rippled in his wide shoulders, back and tight buttocks with each agonizingly slow inward thrust of his lean hips. Sculpted thighs tapered down to well-rounded calves, ankles and large elegantly formed feet. His legs strained with the rhythmic motion, and she caught tantalizing glimpses of his cock, thick and hard. It glistened as it burrowed into the slick, wet sex of the woman beneath him.

The woman writhed, meeting his thrusts with her own. Her head tossed, long chestnut hair tangling on the pillows. Her body seemed to glow with a ghostly inner light, her porcelain skin moist with exertion. Firm, full breasts jiggled with each move, and a low moan issued from her throat as the man above her captured a tight, swollen nipple between his lips and began to suck. Her shapely, widespread thighs rose as her legs closed tightly around his tapered waist.

Her own body tightening with need, Lea felt moisture forming and flowing into her aching, empty pussy. A small whimper of want passed her lips, and as she watched, the face of the woman turned toward her. Time seemed to slow as Lea's eyes widened in disbelief. It was as though she stared into a mirror. She was the woman on the bed.

Eyes locked on her twin, she felt a pulling, twisting motion. Her perception changed, and with the alteration she found herself lying on the bed staring up into the most intense pair of sapphire blue eyes she had ever seen. His features were strong and sensual, his lips a miracle of male sculpting. His breath feathered softly over her face, and his scent, the hot, spicy musk of aroused male, made her toes literally curl.

“Tezza.” His voice was a deep growl that sent a shiver of anticipation sliding down her spine. “Do you want this?”

Lea felt his body shift against hers, and looking down his long length she could see the thick, quivering stalk of his aroused cock poised at the entrance of her cream-filled cunt. The large, plum-shaped head nestled at her dripping slit.

Her eyes flew back to his and again he questioned her, “Do you want me, tezza?”

Unable to deny the need that rose inside, despite the fact that this man was a total stranger to her, Lea gave the only answer possible. “Yes!”

She felt his body tighten and saw pure male heat and satisfaction fill his eyes. Her own eyes closed and her body writhed against his in reaction, her thighs spreading wider, her pussy tensed, eager to be filled. Nothing happened. Her lids slowly lifted and again her wide green eyes met that glittering sapphire stare. His hand caressed down her cheek and across her chin, his thumb grazing her full lower lip. The deep, dark, molasses-smooth tones of his voice rolled over her. “Find the Orb, tezza, find the Orb.” With those words echoing through the room, her would-be lover began to fade...

“No! Don’t go. Don’t go!” Lea woke, her cry ringing in the empty darkness of her room. Sitting up, she scanned her surroundings. The moonlight filtering through the fluttering curtains made it possible for her to see that she was in her own bed and, as usual, totally alone.

“Damn! Why is it that you always wake up just when you’re about to have the best sex you’ve ever had in your life?” she questioned the room at large.

A loud groan of frustration burst from deep inside as she flopped bonelessly back onto the pillows. Lying there staring up at the canopy, fragments of the dream played through her mind. Seeing *him*, feeling the heat of his skin, hearing his voice—just thinking about him made her arousal become an insistent ache. Her hands slowly caressed her body, lightly drifting over her heated skin. She cupped her swollen breasts, the sensitive nipples hardening under her palms as she gently massaged them. One hand strayed down over her gently rounded stomach, fingers tangling in the damp curls that guarded her throbbing sex. Her juices saturated the puffy lips of her outer labia. She momentarily considered using the vibrator that was hidden in the drawer of her bedside table, but vetoed the idea immediately. Why did it seem that using it would be a betrayal of *him*? Instead, she slid a finger into the snug, slippery channel of her pussy, circling and caressing her throbbing clit.

Imagining her dream lover, his face buried between her spread thighs, his tongue licking at her dripping cunt, her fingers began a quicker pace. Sliding to the hot slippery entrance of her vagina, they rubbed and thrust then slid back up to gently but firmly manipulate the tiny bundle of nerves that drove her. Lea hooked one ankle on the edge of the mattress pulling her thighs wider apart, her hips undulating in a steady pumping rhythm. Sweat broke out on her skin as her lungs labored. Small moans became a long

wailing cry as her vagina began to quiver and throb, a rush of creamy liquid gushing from inside. Orgasm washed over her heaving body.

Lying in a sated sprawl, breath returning to normal and taut muscles relaxing, she yawned, moving over on her side to stare out the window. Sleep was quickly reclaiming her. Heavy eyelids closing she murmured, "Wish he was mine."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in another dimension...

Darien Finn Mal awoke with the words, "Find the Orb, *tezza*, find the Orb," falling from his finely chiseled lips and echoing in the stillness of his bed chamber.

"By the Mother! *Tezza*, if you don't come to me soon *I shall* go mad!" Dare lay back with a heartfelt groan, his hand irresistibly drawn to encircle the hot engorged length of his aching cock. He briefly considered calling one of his body servants to him, but dismissed the idea. Why did it seem that to do so would be a betrayal of *her*?

Instead, he let the dream play through his head. He felt again her smooth, naked body lying under him, saw that long, silky chestnut hair spread over his pillows. He envisioned her oval face with its high cheekbones, slender nose and heavily lashed, wide green eyes with golden-amber flecks. And those lips! Eagerly parted, small panting breaths had issued from between their full, perfectly kissable shapes. His hand began a slow stroking movement as he pictured her breasts. They were a definite handful. Firm and ripe, large tan areolas surrounded hardened brown nipples, which had turned an amazing shade of ruby red when he had taken one in his mouth to nibble and suck. Mentally, his gaze wandered down her body to her tapering waist, the tempting curve of her quivering stomach, the indented belly button and her lush, full hips.

A groan made its way up his tensed throat as the speed of his pumping strokes increased. His other hand cupped the heavy sac of his scrotum, massaging in rhythm with the strokes at his straining cock. He pictured the chestnut curls that guarded her sex. He could smell the sweet, fragrant musk of her arousal, and see the glistening cream that coated the swollen lips of her pussy.

Dare imagined her rising to her knees and kneeling over him, her luscious mouth parting, her dainty tongue sliding over the plump, engorged head of his throbbing shaft. Her graceful hand would wrap around the hard column, her fingers unable to meet around his girth. As her tongue licked and probed, her hand would begin a slow, squeezing stroke. Mouth opening wider, she would eagerly engulf the silken-skinned, iron-hard shaft.

The sensations evoked by the mental picture of his beautiful *tezza* working his staff with her hands while her full lips and hot mouth sucked were overwhelming. A deep groan was torn from his lips as his body arched. Thick hot streams of cum spurted from the angry reddish head of his pulsing cock to land on his muscled torso. A long sigh of

relief blew from his parted lips as he lay regaining his breath. Languidly reaching to the bedside stand, he dipped a washcloth in the water of the basin that reposed there. Dare wiped the cooling semen from his skin as his cock and straining muscles began to relax. Sleep again made its claim and he yawned, rolling to his side. As his eyes closed against the moonlight filtering in the open window, he whispered a promise into the night.

"You're mine, tezza, mine."

Chapter One

"I just can't stand the thought of going back to school!" Lea complained to her friend, Jessica Mason. "I know I need to get more credits under my belt if I'm going to get a better job, but it's just too cruel a fate to face."

"Ever the drama queen," Jess replied, rolling her eyes. She stopped to admire the grained texture of a nearby oak table.

The girls were engaged in one of their favorite activities, shopping. They were wandering the massive local antiques mall. Located in a long barnlike structure, it consisted of aisle after aisle of partitioned spaces. Each space was numbered and crammed with everything from garage sale and flea market junk to genuine, top of the line antiques and collectibles. The corner spaces were glass-enclosed and generally held smaller, finer items such as jewelry and glassware. So individual dealers would not have to spend every day there, each piece of merchandise was marked with a space number as well as a price. An occasional dealer could be seen at work, but for the most part the spaces were dealer free, allowing the patrons to shop unmolested. Those shoppers needing help had merely to alert one of the employees who manned the checkout counter at the front door.

Lea and Jessica had known each other all their lives. Growing up together as next-door neighbors, they'd attended the same schools, taking many of the same classes. They'd experienced and shared all the trials and tribulations of growing up, from braces to the senior prom. They followed the old adage about opposites attracting. Where Lea was somewhat shy and self-possessed, Jess was bold and self-confident. Where deliberation and caution was needed, Lea led. Where risk taking and just plain hell-raising was concerned, Jess excelled. Lea tamed Jess' wild streak and Jess pushed Lea to experience life rather than hide from it. They liked to joke that, between the two of them, they were the perfect woman.

"You know what your problem is, don't you?" Jess queried her friend as they continued to stroll and examine any object that caught their eye.

"Pray, oh wise one, enlighten me," Lea replied with a grin.

"For starters, you're a smartass." Jessie grinned, but soon sobered. "We're closer than sisters, and you *know* I love you, so please don't be hurt by what I'm about to say, okay?"

Lea nodded, mirroring Jessie's suddenly somber mood. "Say on," she encouraged.

Jess nodded, took a deep breath and dove in "Your problem is you have no definite career goals, no list of things you want to accomplish, nothing to work toward...and worst of all, no ambition."

Jess waited in the tense silence, sure that Lea's first words would be a denial.

"You're absolutely right," Lea admitted.

A disbelieving frown furrowing her brow, Jess questioned, "Wait a minute, you mean you're not going to argue with me?"

Lea shrugged, her unconcern evident. "Nope. Why argue with the truth?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Jess pointed in the direction of the mall's café. "Come on, you need food. Most likely hunger has made you too weak to come up with a decent argument."

* * * * *

They retreated to the café, unaware of the speculative gaze that followed them. The watcher had studied the two friends on several occasions, not yet approaching. He was almost certain now that it was to one of them he had been led.

The one called Lea was taller than most women of the clans, but not so tall she would intimidate a warrior. He admired her long, chestnut-colored hair. It was wavy and shimmered with deep mahogany highlights when the sun shone through the skylights above.

Her body was well formed—voluptuous, some would say. He'd studied her face, and though it was lovely, he was concerned more with what he saw in those green- and amber-flecked eyes. He had seen her many times. She laughed easily with her friend and was polite to the other patrons. Her smile was sweet and sometimes amused as she looked upon young ones, but not easily bestowed upon any male who showed too much interest. It was as though she guarded herself. Considering his mission, he found this to be a good thing.

The other woman, Jess, was lovely as well. Not quite as tall as Lea, she still was a goodly height, perhaps five feet seven or so. Her hair was the color of pale wheat, with streaks that varied from tawny gold to almost white. It, too, was long and thick, flowing to her slender waist. Her eyes were a silvery gray, and looked at one with a straightforward bravery. Where Lea was full lush curves, Jess was more delicately built. Her breasts were not as large, but still a man would find them a pleasing handful. They tapered down to a slim waist which flared into full hips and long lovely legs. The watcher smiled, thinking of his favorite part of her anatomy. The round curvaceous mounds of her delicious bottom He shook his head with a smile, knowing how his clansmen would react to such bounty. She exuded an air of confidence and control. He likened her to the women of the clan who were trained in weapons to hunt and fight. A woman who knew who she was and what she wanted in life. If she were chosen, the adjustment might be a more difficult one.

He found a certain amount of relief in knowing it would not be his choice if, in fact, either one was chosen. To choose the *tezza* of he who was High Chieftain of all the Clans was not a job he would wish to undertake. To be the bearer of that which made the

choice was honor enough. Today would bring the answer he sought. Was either woman to be the mate of Darien Finn Mal? Mother Goddess willing, yes, for he longed to return home.

* * * * *

Leaning back into the padded bench seat of the café booth, Lea took a last sip of soda and contemplated the remains of her meal. "They make the best chili in town," she observed with a sated smile.

"Agreed," Jess replied as she dipped her napkin in her water glass, using the damp towel for a final cleanup.

During the meal, neither friend had alluded to their earlier conversation. Deciding to broach the subject, Lea placed her elbows on the table and leaned toward her friend with an intent expression on her face. "About that no ambition thing?" she said, smiling somewhat sheepishly.

"Yeah?" Jess inquired softly.

"I do have certain..." Lea hesitated "I don't think you could call them ambitions exactly. More like desires, I guess."

Jess waited expectantly, but when Lea refused to elaborate, she prompted her. "Spill it, girl."

"Liberated women everywhere would shudder in disgust at what I'm about to say," she temporized. "Including you."

With a quirk of her lips and a raised eyebrow, Jess sat back in her seat. "As you've just pointed out," she said, "I'm a liberated woman, part of which includes the fact that I keep an open mind. Now quit stalling."

"All right. It's just that admitting something like this is kind of hard, considering how things are nowadays." Lea eyed her friend with some trepidation and began. "First of all, I want to be married. I want a man who's confident and strong, a real alpha type. I want him to dominate me when I need it, but also be gentle when I need that. A man who wants me so much that we burn the sheets up every morning, every night and any hours in between. I want to be a *sex* object for my husband, and a *love* object, and a *lust* object, and a *support* object and whatever other kind of object he needs me to be." Taking another breath she continued. "Not that I *am* an object or that he would treat me as anything other than a person deserving of love and respect."

Lea paused for a moment but obviously had more to add. Jess, her expression impassive, nodded in understanding. "Go on."

Wading in again, Lea went on. "I want to have children. I'd like my husband to be like my dad was with me, fun and kind and loving, but willing to discipline when needed. My kids are not going to be like so many of the brats you see today who have no manners and no respect for anyone, especially their parents." She paused, biting her lip. "And one final thing."

"There's more?" Jess inquired with a bland smile.

Lea dropped her voice to a near whisper. "Oh yeah. The real betrayal of women's liberation." She paused dramatically, her eyes widening, head shaking in the negative "I don't want a career. I want to stay home and raise my children and take care of my husband and my home and garden and stuff like that. I don't want to worry about bills or money or insurance or taxes or any of that other stuff. Pretty awful, huh?"

Lea dropped back in her seat, resignedly watching her friend for her reaction. Jess leaned forward, her eyes determinedly meeting Lea's. "My first question is, does calling this alpha male *master* come into this anywhere?"

"Heck, no!" Lea scoffed. "It's not about a Dominant or submissive lifestyle, although I'm sure a little D/s would be fun during appropriate moments." She laughed at Jess's raised eyebrows. "I'd be the first to admit that I have a submissive personality, as you, my friend, should well know, considering you're a Dominant. But no, I don't want my every move or decision dictated to me, especially if it's something really important."

"Well then...okay," Jess stated.

"Okay? Is that it?" Lea found herself surprised not to be on the receiving end of some heavy-duty chastisement.

"Yeah, okay," Jess repeated. "Look, everyone has needs and desires and—thank God—we're a pretty varied lot. What you want out of life and what I want may be different, but that doesn't mean that one is any better than the other." She paused thoughtfully. "If that's what makes you happy, go for it," Jess stated firmly. "I see only one problem here."

"And that would be...?"

"Where are you going to find this paragon of an alpha male?" Jess answered her with an inquiring look.

"That," Lea replied with a grimace, "is definitely a problem."

Air cleared, harmony restored and stomachs filled, the girls returned to their shopping. As they wandered the carpeted aisles, their conversation returned to a less intense subject matter. They discussed Jessie's redecorating project and continued to search for the antique furnishings Jess wanted for her bedroom.

"I think I'm in love." Jess stopped in one of the more spacious booths and examined a carved oak headboard with matching footboard. "This is it, this is what I've been searching for."

"Well don't say it too loud or you'll never even get a chance to haggle—and believe me, you want to haggle the price on this one." Lea had picked up the price tag and examined it with a low whistle. Displaying it to Jess she said, "You got your work cut out for you on this one, girl."

Jess waved her hand with a negligent flip. "Who got them to drop fifty bucks on that koala bear cookie jar you just had to have? Never doubt the skills, baby."

Lea chuckled as she watched Jess make her way to the front desk. Feeling sorry for Jess's intended victim, Lea wandered on, knowing that the business at hand would take some time.

She strolled leisurely, giving the merchandise on display only a cursory examination as she pondered the problem of finding her ideal man. Advertise? No. Bar hop? No. Grocery store? No. Internet? No. *My problem is I'm not aggressive or adventurous enough. That being the case, am I doomed?* She unconsciously shrugged her shoulders and paused at the glass-enclosed booth on the corner of the aisle.

Inside, a man sat behind the counter. Lea studied him curiously, recalling that she had seen him occasionally during previous visits. He was tall, with short-cropped dark hair, shot with gray. His hawklike features were somewhat hidden by a well-trimmed beard and mustache. He seemed absorbed in his study of the book he held in his hands.

Just as she decided to move on and leave him undisturbed, he looked up, pinning her with eyes that at first seemed completely black. He beckoned her forward and she felt compelled to follow his unspoken request. A trick of the light, she decided as she got a closer look at his eyes, for she could indeed see a demarcation between pupil and iris. He smiled and she felt an instant affinity with him, returning a smile of her own.

"Enjoying your shopping today?" he inquired politely. His voice was melodic, with a soothing quality that made her feel at ease, despite the fact that strange men normally made her feel very uneasy.

"Yes, very much so," Lea answered. "You have some interesting-looking things here," she offered. "These crystals are beautiful."

"There is nothing quite like that which is shaped by nature's hand." He reached into the glass case, pulling out the tray she indicated and placed it on the counter.

Lea picked up several of the stones, examining them curiously. "This one is lovely," she indicated, pointing out a particular stone. "I love the amber color."

He picked it up, holding it upward to catch the light. "It matches the golden flecks in your eyes," he said softly. Noting her blush and the small flash of unease in her eyes he quickly added, "No disrespect intended, *basaya*."

Looking into his warm, guileless gaze, Lea relaxed asking, "What does that mean? *Basaya*?"

"It is an old word in an almost-forgotten language. It means beauty."

For some reason Lea felt tears prick her eyes. Why did it matter that this man thought her beautiful? It was impossible to analyze the feeling, but knowing he thought well of her was important. She offered a soft thank-you.

"I have a very special crystal I wish to show you." Suiting actions to words, he reached under the counter, producing a small velvet-wrapped bundle. Pulling aside the wrapping, he silently offered it to her.

Opening her hand, she felt the weight of it drop into her palm. Never had she seen anything to compare with its beauty. It was an orb, fashioned of a silvery, crystal-like substance. It seemed to glow with an inner light. Fine cracks peppered the smooth surface, reflecting multiple images. Lea was captivated.

The orb grew warm in her hand and she began to feel something akin to arousal as she stared into the mirrored surface. The heat that centered in her palm shifted to her nether parts and a throbbing beat began deep inside. Sudden need erupted and an involuntary moan passed her parted lips as her inner fire and that of the orb synchronized and grew in intensity. *Aurora borealis* colors began to shift and swirl over the surface of the orb, drawing her deeper within its fiery heat. A pearlescent bubble of light grew and enveloped her straining body.

Unable to disconnect herself from the sensual excitement transmitted by the orb, Lea swayed with the wanton beat of lust coursing through her veins. Her clit vibrated, slick moisture pooling in her vagina as it tightened and throbbed in preparation for orgasm. Before her eyes, a figure took shape inside the light generated by the orb. It was the man from her dream, he of the sapphire eyes and sinfully majestic body.

"At last, *tezza*," he groaned, caught in the same trap of desire. "I will come for you in two risings of the moon." His lungs labored with the effort of speaking through the aching arousal. "Until then release us, my own. Take your pleasure, come for me, *tezza*. Now!"

His bellowed command snapped through her taut form. Released like an arrow from a bow, her climax swept over her shuddering body, a low wailing cry tearing from deep inside. Light erupted from the pulsing orb, an incandescent flash which began to wane with the lessening ripples of Lea's orgasm.

No longer held upright by the power of the orb, Lea sank slowly to the floor as her knees buckled. Her pounding heartbeat began to slow and her panting breaths to steady. Her hand clenched around the orb, and the fading light was absorbed until only a small glow filtered between her fingers before it, too, winked out. Opening her hand, Lea watched, dazed, as the orb became insubstantial and sank into her open palm, disappearing as though it had never been.

Staring at her hand in shock and disbelief, a breathy, "What the hell was that?" left her lips. Preparing to be mortally embarrassed for her wanton, albeit involuntary, behavior, Lea looked around. The man she had been speaking to was gone. The orblike crystal was gone. The only evidence left to support what had just happened was the unmistakable wetness that lay between her thighs.

Chapter Two

Jess found her friend emerging from the restroom, where Lea had retreated with the aim of cleaning up and calming down.

She had spent several moments studying her reflection in the mirror, searching for any signs of change. Thankfully, the mirror revealed the same sight as usual, and she breathed a silent prayer of thanks.

She had lightly splashed her flushed face with cool water from the tap and used a paper towel to blot her heated skin dry. With a final glance at the mirror, Lea decided to go in search of her friend.

"There you are!" Lea turned, seeing Jess stride toward her. "You so missed it! I bargained that guy into oblivion, look at this." She was proudly waving the bill of sale under Lea's nose.

Lea soberly examined the bill and told Jess, "You are the wizard of wear 'em down."

"They deliver day after tomorrow" Jess paused, taking in Lea's rosy cheeks and somewhat bemused expression. "What's wrong?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Lea sighed. Shaking back her long hair, she lifted it away from her neck to let the cool air flow against the moisture that had gathered there.

"So tell me, and let me be the judge."

The girls began walking toward the front entrance, lightly bantering back and forth. After a particularly lengthy discourse from Lea, Jess was heard to yell, "You did *what?*"

* * * * *

Lea straightened her back with a groan. After persuading Jess that she did not need emergency psychiatric care and dropping her at home, she'd decided to do some work in the garden. She loved the rich smell of the earth as she weeded around her vegetable patch. She looked proudly at the tomato plants with their ripening fruit. The pepper plants, squash and cucumbers were all growing well. *Hell, even the weeds look extra healthy*, she thought with a grin.

As she worked, the slight breeze that had been blowing became brisker. The sweat that dampened her body now caused her to shiver as the wind blew across her skin. Darkening sky and clouds heralded the approach of a storm. A distant rumbling of thunder had her looking up and, sure enough, a faint streak of lightning could be seen flashing between the clouds.

Deciding that the approaching storm was her cue to retreat, Lea replaced her tools in the gardening shed and quickly made her way into the house. Her home was small and cozy. It consisted of a large living room, kitchen, bathroom and two bedrooms, the smaller of which she used for storage. The decor was simple and relaxed. The colors of the curtains and carpet were predominantly shades of green, the walls a creamy parchment. Antique side tables stood by the modern sofa and recliner. Her mother's oak library table held a place of honor, and was Lea's work station when she did the monthly bills and checking account balancing.

Walking into the kitchen, she washed her hands, then went to her bedroom to gather a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, her usual "lounging around the house" wear. She hurried into the bathroom, checking out the window to make sure she had time for a quick shower before the storm got too close. All the warnings about what not to do during a thunderstorm, shower-taking included, whirled through her head as she opened the tap in the tub so the water could warm.

Undressing, she dropped her dirty clothes into the wicker hamper and stepped into the tub. Switching on the shower, she sighed with pleasure as blessedly warm water cascaded over her. In Lea's opinion, the bliss experienced during a hot shower rated second only to a great orgasm.

Normally one for enjoying long, leisurely showers, another rumble of thunder had her quickly soaping and rinsing her body. She jumped out of the tub and dried briskly with a thick, fluffy towel, and after throwing on her clothes and running a brush through her damp hair, she returned to the kitchen to brew some tea.

With the steamy fragrance of orange pekoe drifting into her face, Lea settled into a chair on the front porch to watch the gathering storm. Rain began to drop slowly, then with increasing speed. The air was filled with a fresh, ozone-tainted scent. Rumbling sounds of thunder grew louder, an especially loud boom making her jump. Lightning cracked, jagged bolts lancing to the ground.

Sitting deep under the protective porch roof, Lea watched in fascination. She loved storms, even the threat of tornadoes did not dim her enthusiasm for them. Placing her empty teacup on the floor by her chair, she moved to the edge of the porch. Her hand reached out, feeling the cold, biting sting of the rain as it spattered into her open palm. Exhilaration tightened her nerves and a shiver raced a path down her spine.

Intent on the storm, she was at first unaware of the soft glow that began in her palm. The misty, pearlescent sheen spread with liquid grace until her entire body was enveloped in the softly shimmering light. Warmth and comfort accompanied the glow, as though she were being wrapped in a welcoming hug.

Another loud rumble of thunder sounded as the rain pelted down with abandon, and suddenly the sky was split asunder by a blinding flash.

Frozen in wide-eyed terror, Lea watched the approaching lightning bolt, mesmerized by its deadly beauty. The glaring white core was tinged with shades of blue, its twisted, jagged length pulsing with crackling energy.

As it slowly snaked toward her out-flung hand, Lea knew she was about to die. In that heartbreaking moment, a face appeared in her mind's eye. Sculpted planes, sapphire eyes and midnight dark hair. She felt a wrenching pain all the way to her soul—knowing that they would never meet, never love. The strength of the feeling overwhelmed her.

She struggled to break the spell that bound her, but could not as the killing bolt connected with its target. The blinding incandescence of the lightning bolt met the gentle glow from the Orb and every motion ceased. Wind stopped blowing, rain hung suspended. The hush was as deafening in its own way as the storm.

Instead of being instantly fried as she had expected, the glow that encased her began to pulse, matching the pounding rhythm of her heart. The Orb absorbed the energy from the bolt, feeding it into the glowing bubble that surrounded her. She felt her feet lift from the floor and she hung suspended, weightless, waiting. Eyes closed against the increasingly blinding light, Lea felt a building pressure, then a sudden expansion—as though her very atoms were being flung outward and away.

As the lightning passed through her incorporeal form, Lea neither felt the concussion, nor saw the resultant explosion, as the jagged bolt connected with the porch. She was gone.

Chapter Three

Dare stood watching the storm, his expression tinged with disgust. “Until this lets up, I can’t use the portal to bring her through.” He swept his hair back in agitation. Impatience was not a feeling with which Dare was used to dealing. Patience, cunning, the ability to read and understand others—these were the things his father had encouraged and nurtured in his sons. Along with the rigorous physical training that gave them the strength, confidence and courage to rule themselves and those around them.

For years, Dare had been content with the direction of his life. He trained hard with the warriors of the clan, rising in the ranks—not because his father was High Chief, but due to his natural ability to lead. An ability which also dwelt within his brother, Ran, as he too made his way up the ranks.

Dare had won the respect of the people of the clan and the admiration of many of the women. A man of more than passing good looks, he usually had no trouble finding a willing female. Dare and Ran had been figuratively fighting them off with sticks since they’d entered puberty.

Life had been as near perfect as a man could ask for. A warm and loving family, pride in his accomplishments as a warrior, hot, willing women whenever the need arose—which was often. Dare was not a man given to excess, but the men of his clan were a lusty bunch and had no leaning toward the celibate life.

Yes, life had been good until the accident that claimed his parents’ lives...

Using a ground skimmer on one of their outings, the onboard navigational system had malfunctioned, causing the vehicle to go out of control. Searchers had found Lorzan and Sharmair Finn Mal near the wreckage. It was speculated that Sharmair had been killed on impact. Lorzan had somehow managed to drag both her and himself from the wreckage. They were found lying together, his arms wound protectively around her body. The tracks of his tears could be seen in the dirt that marred his strong face.

Finding them thus, Dare and Ran had wept unashamedly, as had all the searchers. The two—their clan High Chief and his beloved tezza—were the cornerstone of their existence, the pride and strength of the clans, revered and loved by the people.

Despite his youth, Dare had been well prepared by his father to take up the challenge of assuming the role of High Chief. Candidates gathered and were tested by Novan, Guardian of the Orb. The Orb, released from Sharmair’s body with her death, had materialized on the altar in the Hall of the Mother Goddess. Each candidate held the Orb in his hand and was accepted or rejected. Those passing the test of the Orb began the tests of arms and warrior skills, competing in groups until eliminated.

Ran helped Dare prepare for the final contest. "You've done well, Brother," he praised. "Father and Mother are proud of you this day, as am I."

"Ran, why did you not test as a candidate? Father trained you for this as well."

Shaking his head, Ran smiled "I would not have this day come down to a contest between brothers. To do so would divide our strength and invite our enemies to undermine what has held strong for generations. I know you, my brother," he clapped a hand to Dare's shoulder, "and I know myself. This is your path, not mine. You have my sword, my loyalty and my support. Now, end this so the feasting may begin. I have my eye on a wench from the Cal Tar clan and hunger for a sweet, wet woman."

And so it was ended. Dare won the day after a long, grueling fight against an older, highly skilled opponent. The day was theirs, the High Chieftainship again rested with the clan of Finn Mal, and Ran indulged in his "feast".

It was then that a restless hunger began to burn within Dare. He slaked his baser needs between the willing thighs of many of the various clans' most beautiful women, but none filled the void he felt within.

Finally approaching Novan, his teacher and advisor, Dare lay the problem before him, hoping for an explanation, a way to ease the constant need that plagued him.

"I wondered how long the Orb would be patient," Novan pondered, stroking his bearded chin.

"The Orb?" Dare replied with a puzzled frown "What does it have to do with this?"

"As you well know, Darien Finn Mal, the Orb finds she who is fated to be the mate of the High Chieftain. It also engenders the need that drives our illustrious High Chieftain to seek me out, so the Ritual of Seeking may be performed. Your carefree bachelor days are about to end, my friend."

Slapping Dare on the back with the ease of long acquaintance, Novan proceeded to explain the coming ritual.

It was performed in the Hall of the Mother Goddess. Wooden screens – intricately carved and inlaid – were placed around the Altar of the Orb. For three days Dare had eschewed any sexual release. He was led to the altar and disrobed by a Handmaiden of the Goddess. The Handmaiden, using fragrant oils, began a sensual massage over Dare's naked body. As her hands glided over his warm, muscular body she chanted in the old tongue to the Mother and to the Orb, a supplication for guidance in finding Dare's tezza. Her soothing voice and the firm pressure of her hands sliding over his oiled skin, soon had his cock full and firm, standing at rigid attention. Kneeling before him, she took his throbbing shaft into her heated mouth and cupping the heavy sac between his legs, gently massaged as her mouth rode his cock with long, suctioning strokes. Finally, unable to withstand the building pressure, he bade her stop.

"Your hand, my lord." She reached to take his in one of her own. In her other hand she held a small golden dagger. Holding his hand palm up, she ran the razor-sharp edge of the dagger across his palm. The resultant slash began to bleed. "I will leave you to finish it, my lord."

As she exited the alcove, Dare barely acknowledged her retreat. His attention was snared by the Orb. Soft, pearlescent light began to form around it, pulsing in time with his heartbeat. Wrapping his uninjured hand around his waiting cock he began long firm strokes. The pressure

built, pleasure beckoning, his sac drew up tight against his body and he groaned as he ejaculated into the palm of his bleeding hand. Placing his hand with its mixture of blood and seed over the Orb, he felt a tingling heat suffuse his body. The light engulfed his hand as his essence was absorbed. Moments passed, and as the light began to fade, Dare withdrew his hand. The long slash was healed and every drop of semen and blood had been consumed.

Now attuned to all that was uniquely him, the Orb was prepared to find she who, above all others, would be the perfect mate for Darien Finn Mal, new High Chieftain of all the Clans of Atrios...

“Patience Brother, you’ve waited this long, a few more hours won’t make that much difference.”

This teasing admonishment came from Dare’s second-in-command, who also happened to be his brother. Tieran Finn Mal matched his brother’s six-foot-four height and muscular body. Not surprising, as they were twins, though not identical. Ran’s hair, which fell midway to his back, was lighter, a deep mahogany brown. His eyes were a warm golden brown, like their mother’s.

Dare was the eldest, born but moments before Ran. Beyond the normal rivalries of boys growing up together, they were very close.

“Sometimes moments make all the difference, as you should well know, my brother.” Dare favored Ran with a glare.

A vicious lightning strike, followed by an especially loud rumble of thunder, startled both men into silence. Dare felt a sudden warm, tingling sensation. He felt his hunter’s sense open and expand outward, then focus with an abrupt jolt. He knew with absolute conviction that somehow, she was here. Hardly needing it, but wanting confirmation, he started for the door, urgently motioning Ran to follow.

“What is it, Dare?” Ran questioned in consternation.

“She’s here,” he bit out on the run.

“Impossible.”

“So I would have said,” Dare agreed. “But I feel her.”

They strode purposefully down the marble hall, heading for the Hall of the Mother Goddess. Before they could reach it, the Guardian of the Orb exited the doorway at a run, heading in their direction.

“She’s here!” Novan Dal Wri was not a man given to outbursts, but an event such as this was far from the norm.

“Dare said so, but how is this possible?” Ran asked.

Novan stroked his hand thoughtfully over his bearded chin. “I know only that the altar began to glow and with that last strike of lightning, a rift opened. You must find her, Dare, Goddess knows where or how she is.”

“You think she may have been harmed?” Dare demanded.

"I've no way of knowing. The Orb should protect her, still..." Novan gave Dare a worried look. "Find her, Dare. Quickly."

Fixing Ran with his most commanding look Dare ordered, "Ready the ground skimmers, I want you and a dozen of our best hunters with me."

"Done," Ran assured him. "You know where to look?"

"Sheraltz Peak."

"By the Mother," Ran swore. "That's prime hunting range for the mountain cats at this time of year."

"That's why there's no time to waste," Dare replied grimly.

* * * * *

Lea woke facedown in lush green grass. The fragrant stalks tickled her nose with every breath. Cautiously raising her head, she looked around, expecting to find herself lying on her own lawn. Instead, tall trees surrounded her and her home was nowhere to be seen. She carefully rolled over and her gaze was caught by bright blue patches of sky that could be seen through the sheltering canopy of leaves.

Lea slowly sat up, anxiety pinching her face, fear twisting her stomach. "Oh God, please tell me I'm dreaming," she mouthed in an almost inaudible whisper.

No celestial reply forthcoming, she rose shakily to her feet. It was then that she realized that she was stark naked. A fine powder lay on the ground around her, some of it clinging to her skin.

"I don't freaking believe this!" she railed to the world at large. "I get hit by a bolt of lightning and I'm fine, but my clothes are ashes? What the hell am I supposed to do now?"

Again greeted with silence, the absurdity of the situation hit her and she felt a giggle bubble up her throat. Quickly clapping a hand over her mouth she silently admonished herself. *I will not get hysterical, I will not get hysterical.*

Sternly bringing herself under control and deciding she needed a plan of action, Lea seated herself on the grass. She wiggled a little, as it tickled parts of her anatomy not normally exposed to such, and tried to recall everything she had heard about what to do when lost in the woods. Of course, a lot of that was based on the fact that someone knew you were missing.

She knew that Jessie would soon realize she was gone, but how would she have the slightest notion where to look or direct a search? Lea herself had no idea where the Orb had sent her, but she did realize the Orb was responsible for this. Somehow, someday, that shiny round crystal had done this to her.

Panic made her mouth go dry, and her stomach began doing backflips when she realized this is what it felt like to be totally alone. Lea's mother had died of cancer when Lea was twelve, but she'd still had her father. Even after her father had died, Jessie had

been there for her. Her home and everything familiar was now gone. Here there was only the unknown.

She determinedly fought her panic, pushing it down, fighting to think straight. There had to be a way out of this, whatever *this* was. For now, she decided to concentrate on survival necessities. Water, food, shelter and clothing—those were her most pressing needs, and judging by the dryness of her mouth, water took precedence.

Standing, she thoughtfully studied the terrain in all directions. It was all remarkably similar, except for a low mountain range that was dominated by one towering peak. The peak looked to be heavily forested, its upper reaches capped with what she assumed was snow.

Trying to think logically, Lea reasoned that streams probably came down that mountain. Since water would run downhill, she decided to walk a course parallel to the mountain, hoping to come across a stream.

Working to stem the panic that kept threatening to rise again, she studied the wooded area as she walked. Fortunately the ground was even and thickly padded with grass. Walking barefoot on rocky ground would not have been pleasant. The trees were large and fairly well spaced, so she didn't feel claustrophobic. She noted small birds flitting among the branches and occasionally heard a few faint rustling noises that indicated the presence of some kind of other wildlife. Rabbits or squirrels, she told herself hopefully.

A light breeze blew warm and pleasant against her skin. Unfortunately, it served to remind her constantly of her lack of clothing. *This really isn't half-bad*, she thought. *No wonder nudists like this kind of thing*. But what if she should run into someone? Her mind refused to envision that scenario.

Several hours later, Lea decided she wouldn't care if she ran into a platoon of marines, as long as one of them had a canteen of water. She stood pensively biting her lip. So far her survival needs remained unfulfilled. She'd found no water or food, and nothing remotely resembling shelter or clothing—and all she could think was what she wouldn't give for one of those Super Mart stores about now.

Deciding to give herself a short rest, Lea made her way under a tree with some low-hanging branches, one of which made a convenient seat. She lifted one tired foot to rub, then took the other one in hand for equal treatment. As her fingers kneaded her aching foot she realized how utterly quiet it had become.

The birds, which moments ago had been trilling lilting calls, were now silent. Feeling a prickling sensation steal over her, she slowly lowered her foot to the ground, while trying to maintain her air of unconcern. She casually scanned the area. A growing feeling of dread, of unseen danger, filled her and sweat, which had dried as she rested, broke out again on her body. The breeze was the only thing that continued to move, and as it swept over her damp skin, she felt her nipples tighten in reaction. Seconds passed, then minutes, as she waited. Just as she almost had herself convinced that her fears were groundless, a slight movement snared her attention.

Her eyes focused on the area of disturbance. Like staring at a hidden picture within a picture, she sought to find that which was nearly invisible and suddenly the image seemed to leap out at her.

There, some thirty yards away, crouching in the tall grass, was a cat. An extremely large cat. Its dappled coat mimicked the play of light and shadow cast by the sun as it streamed through the overhanging leaves of the trees. Its body was sleek and streamlined, stretched taut in anticipation of the hunt. The cat's unblinking golden eyes focused with single-minded intent on her, its intended prey.

Unthinking instinct took hold of Lea, causing her to rise slowly to her feet. Instinctively knowing she could never outrun the beast, she chose the one action left. With a strength and agility fueled by the wildly pumping adrenaline that suddenly filled her veins, she pivoted and quickly began to climb the tree. The branches were laddered in such a way that she was able to make her way upward with ease.

Behind her, she heard a snarling growl and the sudden harsh swish of the grass as the cat launched itself across the distance that separated them. Sparing a quick glance down, she saw the cat begin to climb. A panicked whimper escaping her parted lips, she kept moving upward.

The close-spaced branches that helped Lea, hindered the much larger-bodied cat, slowing its ascent. It yowled its frustration, causing Lea's already wheezing breath to leave her lungs in a tortured gasp.

As she climbed, the branches became less sturdy, some bending under her weight, and she realized she would not be able to go much higher. Her only hope was that the branches that now barely tolerated her, would collapse under the much heavier cat before it could reach her.

She stopped, afraid to continue for fear a limb would break and send her plummeting to the ground, and wrapped her arms securely around the now-slender trunk and looked down. The cat was still climbing, almost delicately making its way closer. As with the lightning bolt, she once again felt death approach. "No!" she screamed. Freeing one arm she desperately struggled to break a limb from the tree. Knowing it was probably a useless gesture, she refused to let herself be taken without a fight.

With another look below to judge the cat's approach, Lea was surprised to see the cat had stopped its upward climb. Its ears were pricked forward, and it seemed to be listening. Casting a baleful glare in her direction, the cat did an abrupt about-face and gracefully made its way down the tree, disappearing into the tall grass.

Quivering with relief, her muscles suddenly feeling like pudding, she clung weakly to the bark-covered trunk under her shaking hands. Danger had passed her by, and with the adrenaline dissipating from her system, she became aware of the stinging collection of scratches and scrapes she'd earned on her panic-driven ascent. As she rested her forehead against the smooth bark, a low, thrumming hum announced the

arrival of something. Something mechanical. Something big. And it was headed in her direction.

"Now what?" she whispered as frayed nerves caused her stomach to cramp. A flash of sunlight reflected off the smooth metal surface of the approaching vehicle, and Lea stared in fascination at the sleek craft that hovered below. *Did the forest service use experimental vehicles?* she wondered fleetingly.

The air around the craft wavered like a heat shimmer off pavement. The slim, bullet-shaped body reminded her of a speedboat. Its open cockpit area had two seats in front, facing the control panel, and a longer bench seat behind them. The two front seats were occupied and as the craft lightly settled to the ground, the shimmering air disappeared and the men disembarked. With unerring accuracy, two pairs of male eyes fastened on her naked body.

They both wore loose sleeveless tunics tucked into tight black leather pants which flowed over black leather boots. Even from her lofty perch they looked...large...intimidating...dangerous.

"Oh shit," she whispered in a stricken tone. Apprehension caused her hands to tighten convulsively on the tree trunk as she pressed herself tighter to its now-comforting shelter.

"Well, this certainly is a welcome surprise," Ran murmured appreciatively. He unabashedly studied the sleek line of Lea's back, the sweetly rounded curves of her bottom and her long, luscious legs.

"Ran," Dare growled in warning.

"Well, it *is*," was Ran's unrepentant reply.

Dare, too, could not help drinking in the pale perfection of her nude body. He felt his cock go rock-hard at the sight, then shook his head in disgust. *Get her out of the tree first, dunc.* After what she's been through, she's probably frightened, he thought to himself.

Dare and Ran had used the onboard infrared scanners in their search. Coming across two large readings, the sensors had identified them as one human female and one mountain cat. Thanking the Mother that they had found her in time, Dare admired the courage and wisdom she had displayed in making her escape. Ignoring the flight response in the face of danger was a difficult thing to do. Not many would have made the correct decision. He felt supremely proud of her and grateful to the Mother for guiding her.

Modulating his voice, Dare spoke as gently as possible, but with enough force to be clearly heard "It's safe, *ahnba*, you may come down now."

Unmoving, she offered no reply.

Worry made his next words sharper "Are you injured?"

Her reply was a subdued, "No."

"Come down then, sweet, I promise we mean you no harm."

"I can't." Lea's voice wavered "If I let go I'll fall."

Alarm galvanized Dare. "Don't move," he ordered "I'm coming up." Dare quickly scaled the laddered branches and soon was just below Lea's perch. "I'm here, *ahnba*." The words were softly spoken as he reached up to touch her ankle.

Lea jerked in reaction and brought forth a panicked, "Don't!"

Dare slowly made his way closer, his voice low and soothing. "It's all right, don't be afraid. I would never hurt you, *basaya*."

Startled green eyes, wide with shock, met gentled blue. "*Basaya*?" she whispered, and her breath hitched in her throat as tears filled her eyes. "That means beauty."

Dare watched as she bit her full lower lip and a single crystal tear spilled from her wide green eyes. He felt his heart melt. A sudden urgent need to protect and comfort filled him. "Indeed it does, *tezza*," he assured her as his solid body moved behind, then wrapped around her trembling one.

"I'm sorry," she said, blinking hard to keep more tears from falling. "I don't know why I'm crying."

"Escaping a dangerous situation and finding yourself safe is a good reason to cry," Dare replied gently.

"Am I safe?" she asked uncertainly, lower lip trembling.

"Most assuredly, *tezza*."

One arm reached around her waist to hold her as the man pressed himself against her back. Their bodies' warmth melded them together. His low rumbled, "Mine," reverberated against Lea's skull where it rested against the strong column of his throat.

She relaxed against him, not knowing and unwilling to question why she felt so safe and warm with this man. Even his possessive declaration did not diminish the effect. Instead, it sent a wave of warmth along frayed nerves, serving to calm and steady them.

They stood pressed together for some time, each absorbing the mesmerizing presence of the other.

"What does *tezza* mean?" she asked dreamily.

Dare remained silent a moment. "That perhaps is a subject better left until we are safely on the ground," he finally answered, nuzzling her hair.

"Do you think you might be coming down anytime soon?" Ran yelled up, his voice full of teasing sarcasm.

Dare laughed softly, the sound sending a quiver through Lea. His arm tightened around her, pulling her harder against his muscular frame. She could feel the hard bar of his erection prodding the soft cleft of her buttocks and breathing suddenly became a conscious chore.

"Are you ready, *basaya*?" Dare's warm breath brushed her ear and another shiver slid down her spine.

"For what?" she squeaked as returning sense made her aware of her lack of clothing.

"To climb down, of course." Lea couldn't see the mischievous smile that crossed his face. "Shame on you, *tezza*. Are you so anxious for me that you wish to make love in a tree?"

"I never thought that!" she sputtered, her spine stiffening in affront. "I knew what you meant!"

"Easy, *ahnba*, of course you did. I but thought to tease you," Dare soothed, rubbing his large calloused palm over her waist, then lower to her stomach.

Lea gasped, then bit her lip as a shaft of pure lust hit her. She felt her sex swell and open as moisture formed within. Suddenly making love in a tree was a decidedly appealing thought.

Dare brushed his lips lightly over her ear "Do you like this, *tezza*?" he teased.

"No!" she quickly denied, her breath quick and thready.

"Little liar, I can smell your need," he said with a pleased chuckle.

Struggling to find something scathing enough to put him in his place, Lea was saved the trouble by a sudden loud crack.

"We will discuss this later sweet," Dare spoke, suddenly serious. "For now, let's get out of this tree."

Quickly considering the logistics of their situation, Dare made a decision on the best way to get her safely down. "I want you to turn and face me, *tezza*," he ordered, "then put your arms and legs around me."

Appalled at the thought in her present state of undress, she cried, "Are you nuts? In case you've failed to notice, I'm naked here. Uh-uh, no way, not happening!"

"This branch is about to break under us," Dare sternly admonished. "There is no time for debate, you will do as I say and you will do it now," he demanded.

Further protest died on her lips at the unyielding command in his voice. With a muttered, "Dictator," Lea turned as quickly as possible and pressed herself against him. Her arms wound around his neck as she lifted her legs to encircle his waist. *Oh lord*, she thought, *this is either a nightmare or one of the best kinky fantasies a girl could have.*

Dare sucked in a sharp breath, having caught a tantalizing glimpse of the large round globes that were now pressed tight against his chest. He felt his already hard cock strain eagerly against the tight confines of his leathers as her long legs wrapped around him.

Breathing a quick, "Mother give me strength," under his breath, and an audible "Hold on tight," to Lea, he began the long downward climb. Carefully angling his body in such a way to keep from further damaging her delicate skin, Dare made short work of the arduous descent. Having this most precious of women wrapped tightly around

him made the chore passing pleasant. Her nipples, which had hardened when they came in contact with his chest, rubbed sensuously against him with every downward movement, and he could smell the increasingly heavy scent of her arousal.

Lea, her eyes closed as she held tightly to Dare, struggled to rein in her arousal. Having wrapped her legs around him, her quivering pussy was exposed to the most delicious friction. The wet lips of her labia slid against the warm leather of Dare's pants. His every movement increased the dizzying pressure.

Unable to suppress the small whimper that slipped from her, she ostensibly cleared her throat asking, "Are we almost down?"

"Almost there, *basaya*, just as *you* are almost there," he teased knowingly.

Feeling herself flush with embarrassment, Lea's scattered wits denied her search for a suitably scathing reply. "Just shut up and get me down!" she hissed desperately.

Dare laughed. "You are a demanding wench. And a lusty one, too, it would seem. I have high hopes for the future, *tezza*."

"I don't know about the future, but right now this has got to be the most humiliating moment of my life," she confessed.

"Don't be embarrassed, *ahnba*," Dare sympathized. "A man likes to know a woman desires him."

Lea's body stiffened in his arms, drawing back. "*I do not desire you!*"

Dare met her gaze with a challenging stare and pulled her tight against his chest. "Last branch, *tezza*, hold tight while I jump down." So saying he jumped, landing on the ground with a jolt.

Ran, waiting at the bottom, held out a thin blanket, "For you, *basaya*, unless you wish to remain in your present enticing state?" he asked with a teasing smile.

"I'll take the blanket, please," she replied, unwinding her limbs from Dare. Lea resolutely kept from making eye contact with either man as she quickly wound the soft fabric around herself. She felt an overwhelming relief at being covered.

"Well, all things considered, that wasn't so bad," she said turning to face them. "Just one thing though..."

"*Tezza?*" Dare questioned as he saw the color drain from her face.

Lea felt a wave of dizziness pass over her and her vision began to go gray, sliding into black. "Something's...not...quite...righ..." As she collapsed bonelessly, she didn't feel herself swung up into a pair of well-muscled arms.

Chapter Four

She woke to a slightly swaying, hypnotically seductive motion. Flashes of memory drifted through her head of past road trips with her parents. Her dad would have the radio on low, tuned to his favorite country station and Lea would snuggle in the back seat with her favorite stuffed animal as her parents' voices flowed over her. Their conversation meant little to her, just the tone of their voices. She could hear the love between them, the teasing laughter of her mother, the answering chuckles from her dad.

She snuggled closer to her toy, rubbing her cheek against the soft fur. When had her stuffed panther acquired that enticing smell? She lifted her chin slightly and found her nose buried against smooth warm skin. Inhaling deeply, she held the captivating scent deep inside.

A purring, "Mmmm," accompanied her exhale. "You smell so good."

Lea wiggled against the seat, settling herself more comfortably. It was then she felt the hard ridge against her hip and buttock. She gave her bottom another experimental twitch and was rewarded with a masculine groan.

Momentarily frozen, she took stock of her surroundings. This was definitely not Mom and Dad's car and she was *not* cuddling her stuffed panther. She was being held on someone's lap and cuddled against a warm hard chest.

Lea slowly pulled back and met a pair of amused blue eyes.

"I thank you for the compliment, but if you don't stop squirming around we may have a problem."

A small struggle ensued. Lea to release herself and Dare to keep her right where he wanted her. "I'm not letting you go, so you may as well relax, *ahnba*."

"You are insufferable!" she panted.

"I know, but you have to admit, you like me."

Lea's eyes widened as she stared at him in disbelief. He was grinning at her, mischief dancing in his sparkling blue eyes. A reluctant smile tugged at the corners of her full lips. He was even cuter than she'd thought. He was downright devastating. As she watched, his grin slowly faded and the sparkle in his eyes became a heated flame. Her own smile faded away. She felt the sudden tension that vibrated in the air between them, and her lips parted in an unconscious gesture of seduction.

Dare gently brushed back the hair from her face. "I am Dare, *tezza*, Darien Finn Mal, High Chieftain of all the clans of Atrios. Will you gift me with your name?"

Somewhat taken aback by his serious demeanor, Lea studied his face. He was easily one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. But more than that, she saw nobility

and honor. She had the inexplicable feeling she could trust him. Dare returned her perusal, calmly waiting for her reply. "Lealah Redmond. I like to be called Lea."

"Lealah...Lea, I would welcome you to my home." Dare's hand, which had been stroking her hair, now glided over the silky skin of her cheek. Coming to rest under her chin, he tilted her face up.

She felt a heated tingle along the path his touch made. "That's really not necessary." Lea was hard pressed to say that much, as she met the warmth of his gaze.

"Shhh, 'twill be my pleasure." Holding her steady, Dare closed the short distance between them.

Her eyes closing, she felt his lips gently brush against hers. Again. And again. Lea shivered, her lips parting, her arms moving of their own volition to encircle his neck. Dare's arms wound around her, pulling her close, surrounding her with his heat and strength. It felt like coming home. Had anything ever felt so right? *So soft*, she thought, *his lips are so incredibly soft*. As they settled firmly against her own, all coherent thought fled. She felt liquid fire slide through her veins. Her arms tightened as she pulled herself closer to his heat. Her breasts felt heavy and swollen, the nipples hard pebbles.

Dare groaned as he felt those hard peaks burrowing into his chest. His cock grew impossibly harder, elongating against her. His mouth slid against hers and he reveled in the slick heat. Catching her lower lip in his teeth he pulled it inside the hot cavern of his mouth, gently biting and sucking.

He pulled back, studying with satisfaction her flushed cheeks and red, kiss-swollen lips. As her closed lids started to flutter open, he again captured her mouth, plunging inside. Tongues met, stroking and swirling. Her taste was indefinable, intoxicating woman, his woman.

Dare suckled her tongue, eliciting another whimpering moan. His hand trailed down her back, over her waist, to end cupping the rounded curve of her bottom. As he kneaded the firm fleshy mounds, her body began moving against his. Each undulating movement increased the pressure in his aching cock, until he felt close to exploding.

Lea began to struggle in his arms, mindlessly wanting to wrap her legs around him. She wanted, no, *needed* him to fill her. Her pussy felt so open and wanting, she felt compelled to spread her thighs wide and pull him inside. Just when she felt she would scream in frustration, a teasing male voice caused her to cease struggling.

"Sorry to interrupt," Ran's voice was laden with amusement, "but we're here. And we have company."

Dare and Lea separated slightly, eyes locking. Her face flushed at the heated promise she saw in his eyes. Turning away, her flush became a full body blush as she saw the men gathered around their grounded vehicle. Being somewhat distracted, she had failed to notice the other vehicles that flanked them on the return journey. These were now ranged around them and the men who piloted them waited patiently.

Seeing her embarrassment, Dare smiled. He rose, eliciting a gasp from her as she frantically clasped her arms around his neck. He gracefully exited the vehicle, moving among the assembled men while looks of masculine appreciation and low murmurs of admiration followed in their wake. Mounting the three low steps that fronted a sprawling, columned portico, he turned and lowered Lea to her feet.

Taking her hand he spoke. "Today we successfully completed the most important mission we have undertaken since my rule as your leader." A large grin encompassed the crowd. "I present to you Lealah, Bearer of the Orb, and soon to be *Tezza al Darien*."

A loud roar of approval met his words. Lea felt a chill flow through her. Overwhelmed by the accolade and confused by his words, she turned to him. "I don't understand," she said in an undertone. "What are you talking about?"

Seeing her fear and uncertainty, Dare hugged her tightly to him. "Come with me, *basaya*, all will be made clear."

Taking her hand, he guided her across the rambling portico and into the entrance hall. Lea felt a sense of *déjà vu* as she took in the cool marble expanse of floor and walls. The chill of the hall was offset by colorfully woven wall hangings and lush, deep-piled rugs. Inside, members of the household gathered, anticipating their arrival.

"I know you are all anxious to meet Lealah," Dare announced. "But she has been through quite an ordeal on her journey to us, and that being the case, we will delay the introductions for now I want to allow her time to rest and recover." He quickly dismissed them with a thank-you.

As the crowd dispersed to return to their duties, two remained.

One was a girl of perhaps eighteen, with long straight hair, dark as a starless night. Her eyes were a replica of Dare's, a deep sapphire blue. She was of medium height, her body showing the developing promise of womanhood. She wore a loose blouse with long sleeves that were slit from shoulder to wrist, with a gathering tie. The blouse was cross tied down the front and neatly tucked into a long skirt that was slit to her knees.

The middle-aged woman by her side was similarly attired. She, too, was of medium height, her brown hair shot with gray. She was an attractive woman, with an air of calm efficiency.

Dare motioned them forward. As he placed his arm around the girl's shoulders, Lea felt an unexpected and momentary pang of jealousy until he announced, "Lea, I would like you to meet my sister, Shaylar."

Both girls smiled, greeting each other shyly.

"And this is the tyrant who runs the household and keeps us all in line," Dare introduced the other woman. "Gilaine Senn Var."

Stepping forward Gilaine took Lea's hand, welcoming her "Don't listen to this one," she said indicating Dare. "He's let no one keep him in line, but now you're here, perhaps you can rein him in. *And* his scoundrel of a brother." Her eyes fixed on a point over Lea's shoulder.

"Ah, Gilaine, you wound me." Lea turned to see the same man who'd accompanied Dare during her rescue.

"He's your brother?" she inquired, turning her gaze to Dare.

"I am indeed," the man answered as he stopped before her. He reached for her hand and placed a gently sensual kiss on her open palm. "Ran Finn Mal. Welcome to Atrios, Sister." Giving her a distinctly unbrotherly look, he continued, "My first sight of you will stay with me always."

Lea's mouth dropped open as a blush suffused her face. "I should have known!" she retorted. "Only brothers could act so much alike." Her tone clearly indicated she found their behavior somewhat lacking.

Dare and Ran exchanged a "what did I do?" look, then broke into identical peals of laughter.

"Braying jackasses," she muttered.

Throwing his arm around her shoulders, Dare squeezed her to him. "Gilaine, would you send food and drink to my, that is, *our* quarters and see that we're not disturbed? Shaylar, Ran, we'll see you both tomorrow at firstmeal."

Dare guided her forward, and as they traversed the long hall, Lea caught intriguing glimpses into the various rooms they passed along the way. Midway along the passage they mounted the stairs leading to the second floor. "These stairs lead to the family wing," he informed her as they climbed. "Those opposite," he indicated the stairway across the hall, "lead to guestrooms." At the top of the stairs they turned left, stopping before a set of double doors.

Throwing open the doors, Dare led her inside. "These are our chambers, *tezza*. Ran is across the hall and Shaylar's quarters are beyond his. The rest of the rooms are empty. For the moment," he qualified, giving her a look that made her distinctly uncomfortable.

Turning away from his gaze, Lea felt a jittery quiver of nerves as she put some distance between them. Her eyes wandered the room. It was beautifully furnished. Large comfortable chairs and tables set atop nubby-textured rugs in jewel tones made an inviting oasis. The far wall was dominated by a large fireplace, which she could see was open to the next room as well. Before the fireplace stood a large, cushiony sofa. It, too, sat atop a richly colored carpet. As she wandered near, her toes sank into the soft inviting pile. A fresh breeze blew through the open windows, bringing a sweet floral scent, drawing her to them. They looked out over a roofed balcony. Further along the wall, a doorway allowed access outside. Beyond the balcony she could see gardens, splashes of color that drew the eye.

"Do you like what you see, *tezza*?"

Dare had again closed the distance between them. His nearness caused a nervous shiver and she faced him, determined to have answers.

"It's all very beautiful, but just what do you mean by '*our quarters*'?" The wave of her hand encompassed the room, the balcony, the gardens. "I think it's time you tell me what's going on."

Dare captured her hand, placing a soft kiss on her palm. "Come, sit with me."

Drawing her to the nearest chair he sat, pulling her down onto his lap.

"Hey, don't make a habit of this!" she huffed, looking up at him. She felt her stomach roll and flutter. *Did he have to be so damned hot?* Every time he touched her the need for answers came second to just plain need. *What's wrong with me?* she thought.

"Indulge me, *tezza*, I enjoy having you near." Dare wrapped her securely in his arms. The hand resting at her waist began to wander as he explained. "Do you remember the Orb, *ahnba*?" His hand glided over her hip, down her thigh and slowly returned, only to repeat the gesture again and again.

Lea nodded, her tongue suddenly stuck to the roof of her mouth.

"The Orb was given to us by the Mother Goddess. Each High Chieftain uses it to find his *tezza*, his wife." His hand stopped at her knee, fingers squeezing and rubbing through the blanket. "In this way we are assured that their union will be a long, loving and happy one. Thus the strength of the clans is also assured."

Struggling not to moan at the sensations evoked by his massaging fingers, Lea licked her dry lips "How does the Orb know who your wife should be?"

As Dare followed the movement of her tongue his roving hand slid under the edge of the blanket, making contact with the smooth warm skin of her knee. "There is a ceremony in which the Orb is anointed with the life essence of the High Chieftain, blood and seed. The Orb absorbs these and is then able to find she who will complement and complete him." The calluses on his hand gently abraded her silky skin as it slid up her thigh, the blanket parting in its wake.

Suppressing a moan, her voice went low and breathy "But how did it find me, and why? I'm not part of your clan. I'm not even from here, wherever here is." She squirmed under his errant hand. "How do you know the Orb made the right choice? And what about me? Don't I have any say in this?"

"Novan, whom you will meet later, is Keeper of the Lore and Guardian of the Orb. He was given a vision of where you were to be found." No longer able to restrain himself from more intimate play, Dare moved his hand up over her hip, to her waist and higher until the blanket parted completely, revealing her gloriously naked form.

"As to the right choice having been made, how can you doubt, *tezza*? Do you not feel the heat that flows between us?" His hand moved to cup her full breast, his thumb stroking lazily over her hardening nipple. As Dare moved to cover her, his gaze fastened unwaveringly on her taut, firm breast. Lowering his head, his mouth opened, engulfing the hard kernel of her nipple. He suckled her, a soul-deep groan of infinite need emerging from his throat.

Lea moaned, her back arching with the sharp pleasure. She felt encased in the heated tension of desire. Dare's mouth, pulling at her nipple, sent urgent quivering

spasms to her pussy. His groan caused her own need to ratchet higher and her resistance began to fade.

Feeling his hand glide over the smooth expanse of her stomach, she whimpered in anticipation but still struggled for her independence. "This can't be right. I don't know you, you don't know me."

Dare's long fingers stroked the silky hair that guarded her mound and the muscles in her bottom bunched, pushing against his thighs as her hips surged, convulsively seeking his touch.

Dare released her well-suckled nipple, studying his handiwork.

The moisture-coated peak glistened, engorged and ruby red. It felt full to bursting against his tongue. Determined to give the other equal attention, he pulled it into his mouth. His teeth closed gently around the base. As he sucked, his tongue laved the tight bud.

"Dare, please, I'm trying to having a serious discussion here. Oh God!"

Dare ignored everything but Lea's pleading as it inflamed his need to pleasure her even more. His hand slipped between her thighs, cupping her swollen, heated sex. His middle finger burrowed into the slick, wet warmth of her slit. Finding unmistakable proof of her arousal, he swirled his finger in her thick syrup, spreading it upward, coming to rest on her aching clit. His gentle manipulation of that turgid bud brought small trembling cries of pleasure from Lea.

The wellspring of liquid desire between her thighs drew his exploring fingers, one sliding in to begin a slow rhythmic surge in her tight silky channel. A second finger joined the first, caressing, opening. "You're so tight, *ahnba*, so tight and wet." He continued to work his plunging fingers in and out of her clinging sheath. When Dare slid a third finger into her drenched, clinging passage and his thumb worked her throbbing clit, Lea screamed. Orgasm seized her straining body and a gush of hot cream burst from her tight, quivering channel, soaking Dare's pumping hand.

Releasing her engorged nipple, Dare basked in the sensual joy he saw written on her face and in the trembling spasms of her lush body. "That's it, come for me, *ahnba*. Give me your pleasure." As Dare's heated words of encouragement urged her on, a second peak arched her back, her hips undulating as she rode his long burrowing fingers to completion once again.

Gently withdrawing his fingers, Dare continued to softly stroke her clit, easing her down from her peak. Faint contractions continued in her quivering vagina, slowly calming, leaving Lea a languid puddle of replete pleasure.

She opened her eyes, her lips curved in a lazy smile of satisfaction. Drawing him down, her mouth teased his with small nibbling kisses and quick tantalizing licks. "Thank you," she whispered, her heated breath mingled with his. "That was wonderful, but you know it doesn't change anything. You may be gorgeous and sexy – and I admit that when you touch me anything resembling logical thought goes out the window, but

sex does not a marriage make. I have a mind of my own, Darien Finn Mal, and no round piece of rock or single-minded man is going to bully me into anything.”

“I understand your hesitation, *tezza*. Perhaps in the next few days I can ease your misgivings. Let’s discuss it in the bath.”

Sweeping her up in his arms, Dare strode into the next room. Lea caught a quick glimpse of the bedroom as Dare carried her into the bathing chamber. The bedroom was just as she’d seen it in her dreams. There was the smooth marble expanse of floor with its scattering of lushly colorful carpets, the large platform bed that looked big enough to accommodate a family of six, covered with a thick, cushy comforter done in warm shades of deep red, gold and taupe. Intricate beadwork and embroidery decorated the comforter and the matching pillows that were scattered across the bed. The bed was draped with a suspended canopy of filmy gold and red tissue, adorned with a fringe of red crystals. Curtains of matching fabric hung at the arched windows. The effect was exotic, the colors warm and welcoming.

“That bed looks like a sultan’s tent,” she commented. “Do you have a harem?” her voice dripped acerbic sarcasm to hide her fear that he might actually say yes.

“I disbanded the harem when I learned you were coming,” Dare answered with a perfectly straight face as he set her on her feet in the bathing chamber.

“Lecherous wretch,” she accused, not really sure if he was teasing or serious.

Looking around, Lea’s eyes widened in wonder. “This is the bathroom? It’s amazing. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

The large room was dominated by the bathing pool, which was recessed into the floor and accessible by a series of wide shallow steps leading into the water. Each step led the bather deeper, until the pool dropped off at the far end to form an area deep enough for swimming. The walls abutting the pool were covered with a rough stone substance, giving the bather the impression of being in a cave. At the far end, a small waterfall ran over a high rocky ledge and emptied into the pool. Steps carved into the rock, accessible from the pool, led to a shelf directly under its cascading spray. Anyone wanting a shower instead of a bath had merely to stand under the waterfall. Lush green plants gave the room the feel of a tropical paradise.

In the far corner a small partitioned alcove contained the utilitarian amenities of sinks and a toilet. “Thank God,” she breathed, with a heartfelt sigh. “Indoor plumbing.”

“Did you think you would be using the bushes outside, *tezza*?”

Turning to him with an irritated reply, she stopped short as she watched him pull his tunic over his head, revealing an upper body that could stop traffic. His hard, muscled chest, wide shoulders and arms were covered by glistening satiny skin tanned a golden brown. A mat of crisp, black, curling hairs—just enough to make Lea’s fingers long to run through them—covered his chest. The soft trail narrowed over his washboard abs to disappear into his tight leather pants.

Swallowing convulsively she asked, “What are you doing?”

“Undressing,” he replied, all the while gazing at her steadily.

“Why?” Her voice held a faint waver.

“I always undress before I bathe.” His tone was matter-of-fact, pitched to calm and soothe. “Get into the bath, *tezza*,” he gently urged. “The scratches you acquired while tree climbing should be attended to. The water holds natural healing minerals which are very soothing.”

As Dare began to unfasten his pants, his unwavering gaze made her own state of undress suddenly hit her with the force of a freight train. A full body flush cascaded from the top of her head to her curling toes. She hastily made her way down the steps and gingerly lowered herself into the warm water.

She met his steady regard as he peeled the formfitting leather pants down his lean hips and over his tight buttocks. As he stepped out of the pants and straightened she got her first look at his cock. Lea’s mouth began to water and her eyes went wide. He was long and thick, fully erect. *Holy...wow*, she thought disjointedly, biting her lip. *That’s...that’s big. That’s really, really big. Gotta be nine, ten inches, holy...wow*. His cock stood boldly, pressing against his taut belly. Butterflies whirled and dipped in her own stomach at the thought of taking that solid length into her pussy or mouth. A nervous smile began tugging at her lips and she turned away to hide it.

She heard the splash of water behind her. “Something amuses you, Lealah?” he asked, his tone indicating a certain defensiveness.

“No,” she quickly assured him. “I’m just a little nervous, I can’t help smiling when I get nervous, it’s just a habit, you know, something I can’t control, and now I’m babbling so I think I’ll just shut up and...and have my bath. Is there soap?” she asked desperately.

He opened the door of a recessed shelf, revealing soaps, creams and cloths for washing. “Let me help you, *basaya*.” He reached for a bottle holding a fragrant soap. Pouring some in his palms, he rubbed them together, creating a rich lather. Dare’s hands began a slow, soothing massage at Lea’s shoulders. He spread the slick soap over her smooth porcelain skin, lost in the warm, satiny feel of her.

Lea swallowed a hedonistic moan as he firmly washed her pliant body. The soap smelled of citrus and something unfamiliar, but delicious. It invigorated and soothed at the same time. His ministrations soon had her hot and hungry, her need pulsing through her veins like molten lava.

“What are you doing to me?” she panted. “I’m never like this. You’ve got to stop, I can’t think when you touch me.”

“The Orb brought us together, Lea It knew we were each incomplete without the other. Can you not feel how I burn for you, as you burn for me?” He turned her, his large calloused hands smoothing over her shoulders and chest in a seamless glide to her ample breasts.

“Dare,” she sighed in frustration. “I *do* want to touch you. I want to taste you and take you inside me, but it’s not real. It’s this...this *Orb*. It’s making me feel things and do things that I normally wouldn’t do. This isn’t me, I’d never throw myself at a man

I've known for all of two hours. Don't you see? It's not real," she repeated, a steely glint in her eyes. "And I don't like being tricked and used."

Dare dropped his hands from her body. "Is that what you think? That I'm using you?"

Lea looked deep in his eyes finding no hint of the warmth that had been there but seconds ago. "I know you believe that your Orb found the right woman for you, but what about me, Dare? I don't know the Orb or what it is or *why* it's in me or what it's doing to me. I don't know anything about you except that when you touch me I burn. I don't know where I am or why I'm here or if I'll ever see my home again. I can't just close my eyes and accept everything you say without question and let you lead me blindly into a situation I don't have the least idea if I really want any part of!"

With a frown Dare lowered his head, a hand rising to sweep over his hair. He was silent for a moment. "You're right," he admitted, capturing her gaze. "I'm not being fair to you. I've let my own needs and desires overrule my common sense. I'm sorry."

Dare backed away, silently took some soap in his hands and without another word attended to his own bath. Diving into the deeper part of the pool to rinse himself, he came up out of the water at the far side and climbed behind the waterfall to stand under the free-flowing water for a moment before taking a towel and drying himself under Lea's worried gaze.

Finished, he donned a robe then set out several clean towels and another robe for her. "These are for you, finish your bath, *tezza*," he said gently and began to walk out of the room.

Feeling like she'd just kicked a dog that had done nothing but offer her its unwavering devotion, she swallowed her pride. "Dare, I'm...I'm sorry."

Dare stopped and looked back giving her a wistful smile. "You've done nothing to be sorry for, Lea. Finish your bath and I'll have Gilaine bring the evening meal."

She watched him disappear, her stomach cramping as a wave of regret swept through her. "Damn," she whispered.

Disconsolately, Dare stopped in the bedroom long enough to pull on a pair of loose silky trousers in addition to his robe. He wandered across the hall to Ran's quarters where he knocked and waited.

The door opened and Ran looked at him with a raised brow, standing aside to let him enter. "I thought you'd be well occupied with your new *tezza*, about now," he commented, watching as Dare walked to the sofa in front of the fireplace and threw himself down in a corner.

"Have you ever felt like a fool, Ran?" he asked quietly, staring into the flames.

"Uh-oh, what happened?" Ran asked joining him on the sofa.

"It's just been pointed out to me that I'm a selfish, inconsiderate idiot."

"She said that?"

“Not in those exact words, but she pointed out to me that she’s been taken from her home and asked to accept a situation, that—to say the least—is sudden and strange, without the least explanation of what’s going on.”

“Well, when you put it like that, I guess she has every right to complain.”

Dare shook his head. “I *have* been an idiot. I was so concerned about my own feelings that I didn’t stop to think what all this was doing to her.” He looked at Ran, a rueful smile on his face. “It’s just that finding her the way we did, from the very beginning, all the blood that should have been in my head ran south, and I’ve been letting my cock do the thinking ever since.”

“That’s understandable, but Dare, don’t you think you should be telling *her* this?”

“I will, I just needed a minute to brood and feel sorry for myself.”

Ran slapped him on the back and rose to fill two small glasses with a clear liquid from a glass decanter. He handed one to Dare. “To working things out,” he said and they both downed the contents of their glasses. “Now get over there and get to it. I fully expect to have a niece or nephew within the next year.”

Dare snorted and rose from the sofa, handing his glass to Ran. “Unless I learn to start thinking with the right head where Lea’s concerned, you shouldn’t hold your breath.”

“You really are feeling sorry for yourself,” Ran commented dryly. “Dare, you are an intelligent man and a respected leader, stop acting like a lovesick boy and go win your *tezza*. Just because she’s not handing herself to you on a platter doesn’t mean she’s unable or unwilling to develop feelings for you. The very fact that the Orb chose her gives you an advantage. She may not be aware of them yet, but those feelings are there and merely waiting for you to stir them. Go. Stir.”

“You know that if that wasn’t such good advice I’d punch you, don’t you?” Dare asked, giving him a hard glare.

Ran’s lips twitched. “You’d try.”

“I’d succeed.”

“Maybe.”

“*Definitely.*”

Simultaneously they both began to laugh and Dare gave his brother a hug. “Thanks.”

“That’s what brothers are for...Brother,” Ran answered and retreated behind his closing door.

Dare grinned and crossed the hall to his own quarters. All was quiet as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He walked through the lounging room into the bedroom then into the bath. Lea was nowhere to be seen. In the bathroom she’d neatly hung up the damp towels, and the robe he’d supplied her with was gone.

Moving back into the bedroom he noticed the door leading to the balcony was slightly ajar and when he crossed the room to look outside, Lea was standing at the low

balcony wall, looking out across the gardens. Moonlight fell on the dark, damp, tangle of her hair and set small sparks dancing across the loose chestnut strands that swayed in the gentle breeze. But for the movement of her hair, she was perfectly still, as though carved from alabaster. Dare let his gaze wander over the pale perfection of her profile and realized that despite his first impression she *was* moving. She was shivering.

Dare walked silently to her and stood behind her, close but not touching.

"It's very beautiful here," she said softly, letting him know she was aware of his presence.

Dare moved closer, his body brushing hers to share his warmth. "Yes it is," he agreed. "Do you know how to ride a horse?"

"Yes. You have horses here?" she asked wistfully.

"Yes. We have many things in common with Earth. If you like, tomorrow we could go riding and I'll show you," he offered. Slowly he pressed his body against hers, his arms sliding gently around her.

Lea stiffened slightly, then relaxed back into the warmth of his embrace.

"You're cold, *ahnba*, let's go in and get you warm and dry, all right?"

She nodded silently and Dare released her, but for his hand in hers, and led her inside to the bathroom. In the light he could see something fragile and tightly leashed in her eyes. He had her stand on a small metal plate on the floor, and as she did warm air began to flow around her.

"With these buttons you can make the air flow faster or slower, cooler or warmer," he explained while demonstrating before returning the dryer to its original setting. His hands moved over her hair lifting the strands and fluffing them in the warm air. "You have such beautiful hair, Lea, so soft—like silk sliding through my fingers."

She watched him in the mirror that graced wall and shivered at the delicate touch he applied. "Thank you," she whispered.

Dare's eyes met hers in the mirror and he smiled, then urged her to sit on the cushioned seat in front of a low counter that had several drawers. Opening one, he reached in and brought out a brush and began to carefully run it through her hair. Starting at the ends, he eased the tangles from it before moving higher and higher until her hair was one long shining mass of chestnut waves.

"Are you hungry?" he asked as he replaced the brush.

She nodded.

"Would you mind if I shared the evening meal with you?"

"Do you want to?"

"Very much."

"I...I thought you were angry with me."

"No, *tezza*, not angry with you, angry with *myself* for pushing you, for thinking only of my own needs and not yours. I'm disappointed with myself for being such a fool as

to think that the Orb would find you and bring us instantly together with no thought or consideration or effort on my part." As he watched her, her eyes filled with tears and a single crystal drop slipped down her cheek.

Appalled that he'd made her cry, Dare urged her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry, *ahnba*, please don't cry."

Lea took a deep shuddering breath. "You're making this very difficult for me."

"What do you mean?" he asked, easing back to look at her face.

"Not only are you sexy as hell, you're nice, too. That's not fair," she added with a tremulous smile.

An instant grin swept across Dare's face. "Aha! You do like me."

Pulling out of his arms, Lea gave him a watery, yet haughty look. "Don't let it go to your head," she said, walking toward the door and halting just shy of leaving. "Did you say something about food, or are you going to let me starve?"

Dare felt a wave of relief pass over him, it seemed the crisis had passed, and just as Ran predicted, somewhere inside this beautiful woman, emotions were just waiting to be stirred to life. He grinned with anticipation. "As you command, *tezza*," he answered and followed her out the door.

Moving to a console recessed into the wall, Dare motioned Lea close and pointed out the unit and various buttons. "This is the household comm," he explained. "The flashing blue light indicates a message on hold." When he pressed the button, Gilaine's face appeared. "Your meal is prepared and waiting for your signal. I'd like to deliver it in person and get a few quick measurements from your *tezza*, that we may begin preparing a wardrobe for her."

Lea smiled at the thought of clothing. It was a relief knowing she wouldn't be walking around naked for much longer.

Seeing her smile, Dare gently brushed a lock of hair back from her face. "A shame about that, but I suppose it's inevitable. I liked the idea of having you unclothed at all times."

She shook her head decisively. "Not gonna happen."

Dare breathed a resigned sigh. "A man can dream can't he?" he teased, then contacted Gilaine telling her they were ready for their meal.

A few moments later there was a chime at the door heralding her arrival. Gilaine stepped in followed by a servant with a wheeled cart and Dare directed them into the bedroom.

"I thought we could have an informal meal here in front of the fire." Dare indicated the cozy nest of thickly piled rugs and pillows layered on the floor.

"That sounds fine to me," she agreed.

Dare dismissed the servant with a quiet thank-you and took over transferring plates from the cart to the floor.

"Before you begin your meal I'd like to take a few measurements. I'm sure we can have some things ready for you by morning," Gilaine told her with a smile.

That would be wonderful," Lea sighed "I don't really care for the robe and blanket look."

"Not very practical either," Gilaine agreed, readying her measuring cord. "If you will remove your robe, Lea, we will get this done, then you two can enjoy your meal."

Lea shot a quick look Dare's way, then, biting her lip, reluctantly opened the robe, dropping it on the bed. As Gilaine quickly took the needed measurements, Lea tried to ignore the fact that Dare was only a few feet away, and although he was being a gentleman and keeping himself occupied, a flush of embarrassment burned its way over her skin as her nipples tightened. Keeping her own gaze resolutely on the far wall, she kept herself still with an effort. Her body wanted to squirm with a confusing combination of arousal and mortification.

Thankfully, Gilaine was quickly finished and Lea donned her robe with relief. Issuing a goodnight, Gilaine retreated to the door escorted by Dare. Lea could hear their softly murmuring voices. At Dare's sudden laugh she found herself unable to resist smiling. The sound filled and warmed an empty place deep inside her, a hidden place she'd had no idea was there until Dare's presence filled it. Her smile bled away and she frowned, wondering if this was a true feeling within herself of something fostered by the Orb.

She suddenly felt Dare's warmth behind her and his arms were wrapping around her, pulling her against his body. "You were embarrassed to be naked in front of me," he lightly teased, his breath a warm caress against her cheek.

"Yes," she admitted without evasion.

"Never be embarrassed with me, *ahnba*. You are beautiful." He turned her in his arms. Placing a gentle kiss on her lips, he drew back "Let's eat," he said with a grin.

Lea frowned, torn between liking and not liking his familiarity, but helped him arrange their meal in front of the fire. Her mind was consumed by a confusing morass of thoughts that chased themselves around and around like a dog chasing its tail. She needed answers and felt she would go mad without them. With that thought foremost in her mind, she settled down on the pillows and watched as Dare loaded her plate. The meal consisted of a savory stew, cheese, bread and fruit. A sweet beverage made from what Dare called *tiko* berries accompanied the meal.

As they ate, Lea began to question Dare about the new world she found herself on. Atrios, Dare explained, existed in a different dimension from Earth. It occupied a spatial coordinate that was very close to Earth, enabling the use of the Orb-created portal.

"How is it you know of our existence, yet we know nothing of you?" Lea wondered as she chose a small bit of cheese from the plate before her.

Dare settled himself more comfortably against a mound of pillows. "We have been very careful to conceal our visits to Earth," he explained. "After very thorough study, it was discovered that our technological level is somewhat more advanced than yours.

The level of conflict on your planet is such that we did not wish to be drawn into it, or be asked to contribute weapons or other technology that would enhance your destructive capabilities. We believe that the people of Earth must learn to coexist the way we have." Dare paused thoughtfully. "We of this planet have adopted a simpler way of life. We use our technology in social advances, such as many of the things you will find in the household and our vehicles and medical techniques. But we wish to stay grounded, close to nature and to the Mother Goddess."

"Do you never have problems between the clans?" Lea asked.

"We do. But even in that we strive to keep things simple. There are council meetings every three months. The chiefs of each clan meet here to discuss any conflicts that arise. Most can be resolved peacefully. There is an occasional problem that results in battle. But we do not turn to wholesale destruction. Most of the time it is a one-on-one fight with sword or similar weapon. And even then, killing your opponent is not encouraged. It is a mark of the most highly trained warrior to force capitulation with skill, not with death."

Dare spoke with such pride, Lea felt a stirring of admiration for him.

The effects of the strenuous day began to take their toll. Stifling a yawn she asked, "Are all the men warriors? What do the women do?"

Dare opened his arms and offered her a place beside him. After a moment's hesitation, Lea scooted close and he gathered her to him, leaning them both back against the pillows. She snuggled in, her body limp and relaxed against his warm strength. "Not all men train as warriors. We have our share of artisans, tradesmen, farmers and scientists. As for the women, all those fields are open to them as well. There is even a special group of women who have trained as warriors and hunters. They are as skilled in the use of weapons as the men. The only restriction worth mentioning is that women who are not trained are prohibited to handle or use weapons of any kind." Expecting a protest but hearing none, he continued. "It's an old tradition, but one we hold to. As men, we are expected to protect our women. By her obedience to the tradition, a woman shows her trust in her mate's ability to protect and care for her."

"I guess that makes a certain amount of sense, no one should handle weapons if they don't know what they're doing," Lea agreed. "Dare, about the Orb, is there any way to remove it?"

Dare's body stiffened and Lea looked up to find his eyes shuttered. She felt a twinge of regret for any hurt she might be inflicting, but she had to know, had to ask. He shook his head. "No, once the Orb has joined with a woman it stays with her until her death."

Lea felt a shiver slide down her spine and she looked at the palm of her hand, so ordinary, so familiar, and yet it made her stomach quiver to think of that alien presence inside her. "Is it controlling me?"

"No, *tezza*, it is not, of that I can assure you. The Orb does not influence the bearer in any way mentally or emotionally. In some it enhances natural gifts or brings to the fore hidden talents, but never have I heard that it controls the Vessel."

"Vessel? That's a rather glorified title isn't it?"

"We, as a people, think highly of the Orb and she who carries it. Novan, who is Guardian, will wish to speak with you further about these things, and I know he will be able to answer any questions you may have. In the meantime, please don't worry. I promise you, Lea, the Orb will bring no harm to you. In all our long history such a thing has never happened, and I see no reason to believe that anything will change."

When no reply was forthcoming, a look down had Dare smiling. Lea was asleep. "Lealah," he murmured into her hair.

A sleepy, "Mmmm?" was his answer.

"Time for bed, *tezza*."

As the huskily whispered words penetrated her fuzzy consciousness, Lea stirred, sitting up. Dare stood and offering his hand, pulled her up. Her sleepy, childlike compliance roused Dare's protective instincts, and he tucked her under his shoulder, leading her to the bed.

Lea's mind began to function again as she roused and a frisson of fear swept through her at the thought of being alone in this strange place. "Where are you sleeping?" she asked softly.

"I thought I would use one of the rooms down the hall," he answered quietly.

"I...I wish you wouldn't." That fragile, vulnerable look was back in her eyes and Dare held his breath. "Would you stay with me? I don't want to be alone," she confessed.

Dare cupped his hand under her chin pulling her gaze to his own. "Are you sure? There's nothing to be afraid of here."

Lea gave him a long enigmatic look. "I'm sure, unless you don't want to."

"Oh, *tezza*, I want to, it's just that when the morning arrives I don't want to face your anger or hear you say that I took advantage of your fears. I do not wish to be accused again of using you."

"I guess I deserve that after what I said," she answered looking up into his stern but gentle gaze "All the things that happened between us... I realize it took both of us to make them happen. I didn't say no to you, I didn't *want* to say no. You made me feel good, my body said take and so I took. It was wrong of me to accuse you of using me, although I think I should be allowed a little leeway since I wasn't sure if the Orb was clouding my judgment."

She took a deep breath and touched his arm. "I don't know what's going to happen in the next few days. I know that in just this short time we've known each other I find I like you, and I've never denied the fact that you affect me physically, but I need some time to think about it, to let it all sink in. But in the meantime, and I never thought I'd

hear myself saying this, would you sleep with me? I'm a long way from home, Dare," she said with a quiver in her voice. "I don't want to be alone."

Dare reached out and pulled her into his arms. "As long as there's a breath in my body you'll never be alone, *ahnba*. You are such a brave soul."

"Brave? I just admitted I'm scared!" she said, the sound muffled against his shoulder.

"It takes a brave person to admit their fear."

"If you say so," she said with a yawn.

Dare set her away from him. "You're exhausted." He opened a drawer that was tucked into the platform base of the bed and pulled out a pair of silky pants and a matching top. "These will be too large, but it's the best I can offer tonight."

"Thanks," she said with a smile before disappearing into the bathroom.

Dare pulled the comforter and sheet down, smiling when she reappeared. She was wearing only the top part of the sleeping garments he'd given her and it hung down to her knees.

Lea shrugged sheepishly. "I won't need these," she said handing him back the pants. "I don't like stuff riding up my legs when I'm trying to sleep."

Dare accepted them and replaced them in the drawer as she climbed onto the bed. She lay down, turning on her side with a sigh as Dare pulled the covers over her. By the time he returned from using the bathroom, Lea was asleep.

Dare stood watching her sleep for a few moments, while his mind grasped the fact she was here, really here. He had touched her, tasted her and spoken with her—but seeing her asleep in his bed, the reality of it broke over him in a wave of contentment, gratitude and joy.

He turned from the bed and returned to the fireplace. Gathering the remains of their meal, he placed it on the wheeled cart and pushed it through the main entrance of their quarters, leaving it outside the door. Returning to the bedroom, he knelt in front of the fireplace. He regarded the fire for a moment then spoke softly. "Mother, I thank you for Lealah. My duty as husband I will fulfill with joy and love, thanks to your wisdom. May any and all tasks you set me be carried out with equal ease," he added with a wry smile.

He contemplated the fire, feeling at peace.

"Fire and lights out." Computer controlled, the lights and fire were extinguished. Silvery moonlight bathed the room. Dare approached the bed, debating whether or not to remove his trousers. Deciding that small barrier had best remain, he joined Lea in bed. As he cradled her against his chest she stirred slightly, burrowing back tighter against him with a sigh. Nestled against her firm round bottom, his unruly cock began to stir.

Considering his options, Dare breathed a sigh of resignation and resolutely concentrated on relaxing. The steady rise and fall of Lea's chest with each soft breath

lulled him. Contentment soon replaced desire, and with a yawn, Dare followed Lea into slumber.

Chapter Five

Lea woke on her back, a dark head between her widespread thighs and a clever tongue buried in her dripping pussy. "Oh God, Dare!" she groaned.

A muffled, growling, "Mmmm..." was her first answer and then he looked up, his sapphire eyes nearly black with desire, his lips shiny from her sweet cream. "Do you want me to stop?"

Breathing heavily, Lea bit her lip then shook her head. "No." Her head fell back on the pillow and with eyes closed, she let herself sink into the dark, velvet sensations.

Her hands gripped the satiny, sleep-warmed sheets under her straining body, as warm, perfumed air wafted in the open windows, caressing passion-moistened skin. She felt the silky slide of his hair against her open thighs and the calloused hands gripping the cheeks of her bottom, squeezing and kneading the muscles that bunched and released in his grip.

Her tender sex was swollen, the tissues engorged and sensitized. While his tongue prodded and laved, her vagina contracted, seeking to pull in and hold the teasing invader. She felt open, the need to be filled an urgent, compelling demand. As though reading her mind, Dare slid a long, broad finger into her drenched channel and was rewarded with a hissed, "Yesss," and a fresh rush of moisture.

Bathing the middle finger of his other hand in her hot cream, he spread the moisture between the cheeks of her bottom. His finger found the tight opening there and circled it, rubbing and teasing. Feeling this new invasion, Lea tensed, raising her head. "Dare?" she questioned, with panting breaths, unsure of this new sensation.

Dare raised his head from between her thighs. His eyes were intense, determined. "Relax for me, *tezza*. Only pleasure will I bring you."

With a moan her head fell back and Dare resumed his movements. His mouth latched onto the hard bud of her clit, sucking, as his finger penetrated the tight ring of her anus. Lea cried out, her body struggling to contain the fierce rapture induced by Dare's ministrations.

He added a second finger to the one that already penetrated her clasping cunt and began pistoning the fingers in and out. Lea's trembling body bowed upward and began to buck frantically as orgasm swept through her. Moaning cries filled the air and her quivering vagina tightened on his fingers, milking them. Her juices gushed and Dare's tongue moved to capture the musky, sweet cream. She rode out her orgasm, sliding sensuously against his fingers, and as her movements slowed and stilled, Dare withdrew his fingers. His tongue continued to slowly lave her swollen tissues as though unable to get enough of her scent and taste.

A long, shuddering sigh passed her lips and Lea rose up on her elbows. Dare moved up between her thighs. "My cock is ready to explode," he stated bluntly.

"Let me see," she huskily whispered.

Rising up, he lowered the silky trousers he had worn to bed. His shaft stood rigid against his flat stomach. The head was swollen, pre-cum leaking from the tip. Knotted veins ran the thick length. "Would you...?" Lea hesitated, her cheeks flushing.

"Tell me." Dare urged. "Don't feel shame, *tezza* – there is no shame in *anything* we do together."

At his words a shiver took her body and flames lit her eyes as she gazed at him from under lowered lashes. "Stroke it for me," she breathed. "I want to watch you stroke your cock until you come."

"When you look at me like that I would do anything for you," Dare growled. "First though, I will need some lubricant." And so saying, he reached between her open thighs, swirling his fingers in her still-wet pussy.

Lea gasped and watched with anticipation as his wet fingers spread her creamy essence over his straining rod. Taking himself in a firm grip he began to slowly pull and stroke. "Oh yes," she panted a chill running the length of her body. "That is so hot, so good."

Dare gave her a strained smile, his hand taking on a steady rhythm as it glided up and down the solid length of his erection. His breathing took on a faster pace, a low groan vibrating from his throat.

"You have the most beautiful body I've ever seen," Lea told him, her voice a breathy, sensual caress. "All those hard, bulging muscles under smooth, golden skin – it makes me want to run my tongue over every inch of you." Dare's hand began moving faster, and Lea smiled, her heated words were driving him to a frenzy, the edge drawing nearer and nearer.

"I'll tell you a secret," she offered, her breathing growing labored. "You have the biggest cock I've ever seen, it's so thick and long and hard." Her hand stole down to her pussy and began rubbing her clit. "I keep wondering what it would feel like to have it inside me. Don't you want to put it inside me? Fuck me? Make me come around you while your buried deep inside me...let me milk you dry?"

"Lea!" Dare groaned, all other words beyond him.

"Are you close, Dare? You must be close, your cock is swelling even more, getting bigger and harder." She moaned, her own orgasm fast approaching. "Come for me Dare. Come *on* me, please, *now*."

Dare groaned, a deep, agonized sound low in his throat, as he continued steadily pumping his cock. Lea met the heat and need in his eyes with her own, her fingers sure and steady as she manipulated her clit, determined to come with him. She watched his already taut body stiffen, his hand racing up and down his swollen shaft as he burst. Hot seed flowed forth in pearly strands he directed toward her quivering belly.

She panted and moaned through her own shimmering orgasm, feeling the hot spurts of Dare's sperm coating her. Finally, when the last few drops seeped slowly free of his shaft, she sat up and took his cock in her mouth, gently sucking up the last of his cum, tonguing the tiny slit on the still-swollen head before releasing him.

Dare collapsed over her, taking them both down to the bed. Rolling to bring them both on their sides, he lay holding her as they recovered, then rose up on his elbow. Lea echoed his movement. They lay, studying each other solemnly until small mutual smiles began to make an appearance. "You are a wicked, wanton wench," Dare accused, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

Lea bit her lip. "You didn't like it?" she asked, all feigned innocence.

"Oh, I liked it very well, as I'm sure you could tell," he answered, reaching out to tickle her ribs.

Lea squirmed under his teasing fingers. "We don't have to get up yet, do we?"

"No, *basaya*, it's early yet. What did you have in mind?" He wiggled his eyebrows in accompaniment to his wicked smile.

"More sleep." She yawned, collapsing against him and burrowing into his arms. Her head rested on his chest, her cheek rubbing against the firm muscle and soft hair under it. Slow, half-formed thoughts trickled through her waning consciousness and she wondered at herself and how easily she accepted Dare's touch and warm presence beside her. She knew she should keep herself from him until certain things were decided between them, and yet it just felt so *right* to be with him. Was it such a bad thing to accept the pleasure they brought each other?

As no answer was forthcoming, she gave up the struggle and dozed off.

* * * * *

Several hours later Dare and Lea were again in the bath. After a quick wash they dressed in anticipation of joining Shaylar and Ran for firstmeal.

Lea was delighted with her new clothing. The long ankle-length skirt of forest green was detailed with intricate embroidery around the hem. It rode low on her hips, exposing her navel, and the right side was split to mid-thigh, showing a long, shapely leg when she walked. The top was also forest green and shaped somewhat like a tank top. The material was soft and formfitting, the hem ending at her midriff. Instead of buttons or zippers, it laced up the front between her breasts.

Feeling somewhat unsure at her lack of undergarments, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. The skirt followed the long line of her body, flowing gracefully with each move. The top hugged her breasts, holding her firmly. Lea had washed and dried her hair. The long, thick mass now hung down her back, the natural waves vibrantly shining.

"I brought you these sandals, *ahnba*," Dare began as he entered the dressing room. "I hope...they...fit." He stopped, drinking in her appearance. "*Tezza*, you look lovely."

Lea flushed with pleasure "Thank you. You look quite handsome yourself."

Dare wore a sleeveless tunic in a deep navy color tucked into formfitting, buttery-soft, black leather pants worn with matching boots. Simple, utilitarian, devastating. His long black hair was tied at the nape with a leather thong, light reflecting from each silky strand. As she studied him, a flare of heat began to warm his eyes.

"Try on the sandals quickly, *basaya*. Best I get you to firstmeal now before I go with my real inclination." His hand swept over his hair in agitation.

"What inclination would that be?" she questioned huskily.

Closing the distance between them, his eyes bored into hers. "To take you back to our bed and bury my cock so deeply inside you you'll scream with the pleasure. I want to fuck you so hard and so deep and make both of us come so many times that when I'm finally done neither one of us will be able to walk."

Lea's eyes had gone wide at his impassioned speech. "Oh." Her thought processes froze at the picture Dare painted.

"You should see your face." Dare suddenly lost his almost savage expression. "Have I frightened you, *ahnba*?" he asked, his arm sliding gently around her shoulders.

"No. Not really. You just sort of got really intense there for a minute." She gave him a thoughtful look. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to run, or grab you and head for the bed."

Taking her arm he steered her out the dressing room and past the bed, giving it look of longing. "By all means, Lealah, when the subject comes up again, head for the bed. I promise I will make it worth your while."

Firstmeal was fun and relaxed. They ate in the spacious family dining room. A massive hardwood table dominated the room and was surrounded by large matching chairs which were padded for comfort. A fire burned in the fireplace at the far end to help ward off the morning chill. Deep cushy sofas and chairs were placed in front of the fire and a beautiful mural decorated the walls on either side of the fireplace. Covered dishes were arrayed on a long sideboard and held everything from fresh fruit to grilled farsi cubes. These turned out to be made of a wheatlike grain and tasted like something between pancakes and toast. There were several meats, various spreads and more of the sweet *tiko* berry juice along with, to Lea's surprise, coffee.

"You'll find we have many species of plants and animals in common with Earth." Dare offered in explanation. "Some of our scientist explorers have made trips to Earth and brought back various plants and animals to study, to see if they will thrive here without damaging any of our native species."

Having made their selections, they took seats opposite Ran and Shaylar. Ran, as usual, derived much pleasure from teasing Lea. He sent his brother a significant look when her cheeks pinked at his semi-innocent inquiry about how she'd enjoyed her first evening with them. Dare blandly returned the look before returning his attention to Lea.

Shaylar and Lea were shyly engaged in a discussion of fashion.

Having complimented each other's apparel, Lea was asking Shaylar about the beadwork on her blouse, which led to a proposed shopping trip into the village market. Lea glanced at Dare to find him watching them with a lazy, indulgent smile and she felt a flare of defensiveness. Dare might not be a typical man, but he sure had the typical male reaction when women began to talk about shopping. She felt like sticking her tongue out at him but instead turned away and gave her attention back to Shaylar.

Dare reached out, draping his arm across the back of Lea's chair. His hand moved under her hair to the nape of her neck, gently caressing and again she turned to him, her eyes filled with suspicion.

Dare leaned forward and Lea watched the growing heat of desire kindle in his eyes. Enthralled, she leaned toward him, the hand at her nape encouraging her to echo his movement. Just before his lips touched hers, a loud cough came from across the table.

Pulled from their trance, Lea and Dare met Ran's amused look. Shaylar, a slight flush to her cheeks, was also struggling not to smile. Lea felt her own cheeks heat with embarrassment, but a quick perusal of Dare's face revealed only a complacent smile.

"Judging from what I have just seen, I would say my brother made your first night on Atrios a pleasure. Hmmm?" Ran teased Lea.

Unable to maintain her composure, a snort of laughter was surprised out of Shaylar, who quickly clapped a hand over her mouth. Her outburst and Ran's good-natured teasing had them all laughing.

It was thus that Gilaine found them and joined them at the table, accepting the glass of juice Ran poured her. She had important news to impart. "It is all arranged. The clan chieftains and their *tezzas* will be here by evening meal. Their usual rooms are ready and quarters are arranged for the warriors who accompany them. The banquet is being prepared as we speak, and Novan is arranging all the details for the ceremony tomorrow evening."

A cautious smile played over Dare's lips. "I had hoped it could be arranged quickly, but we still have some things to work out." He watched Lea's eyes narrow with suspicion, and although he was surprised at the pain that pinched his heart, he kept his expression neutral.

"What things? Can I be of assistance?" Gilaine inquired.

"No, this is something Lea and I must resolve between us."

Gilaine looked from one to the other as they stared at each other. "I see," she replied then rose to her feet. "Novan would like some time with you this morning, Lea, and if you and Dare resolve your issues before tomorrow, I'll need to see you to make final adjustments to your ceremony dress."

Lea nodded her agreement, her complexion having gone somewhat pale.

"Well, I must go and make sure the preparations run smoothly. You children behave yourselves, *you* especially, Ran Finn Mal," she warned with a mock frown.

"Gilaine," Ran began with a teasing smile.

"Do not even start, boy," she warned, and gave his ear a tweak on her way out.

"See how misunderstood and misused I am?" Ran directed his plea to Lea.

"Gilaine understands you perfectly," Shaylar answered. At Ran's mock glare, she qualified, "Of course, she still loves you, as we all do, in spite of your obvious imperfections."

"You may be grown up, but you are never too old for a spanking," Ran threatened.

"Ran," Dare admonished. "You know we never punish anyone for speaking the truth."

Gauging the laughter and smiles directed his way Ran rose with offended dignity. "I believe I have taken enough abuse this morning." Striding to the door, he turned, offering the company a cocky grin and wink on his way out.

Laying her napkin aside, Shaylar rose. "I too have preparations to make, and then I will help Gilaine." Walking gracefully around the table she sat in the chair next to Lea, taking her hand. "Do not worry," she assured her. "We will all be with you. I can personally guarantee that none of the other clan chiefs or their *tezzas* bite, although..." she paused, "I am not sure about some of their warrior escorts. But Dare will take care of them." Her smile was teasing but warm. "I am so glad you are here, Lea."

She stood, placing a kiss on Lea's cheek and on Dare's as well. "Take care of my sister," she ordered, closing the door behind her.

"She's really sweet," Lea said, studying her empty plate before looking up at him. "What's this ceremony about, Dare?"

"Our joining ceremony," he answered plainly, wanting there to be no misunderstandings.

"Our joining? You mean marriage?"

"Call it that if you wish, but yes."

"Why? Why is this being arranged so fast? I haven't said yes to anything! Why am I not being given a choice?" Lea asked, her voice rising.

"Calmly, *tezza*," Dare soothed.

"Calm? You tell me I'm getting married tomorrow and I'm supposed to be calm? My store of calm is about gone, Darien Finn Mal. I don't know one woman who would be calm in the face of all that's happened to me in the past two days. Let's take a look at it shall we?" She began to count off on her fingers. "A strange alien *thing* decides it likes me and attaches itself to me in such a way that only my death can get rid of it. I'm hit by lightning and transported into another *dimension* to a planet I've never heard of. Stark naked, I get chased up a tree by a huge cat that wants to make me its dinner and then I'm rescued by you."

By this time Lea was pacing and gesturing wildly with her hands. "And now we're supposed to get married, just because this hunk of stone tells you that I'm your chosen. Well no one told *me* anything, more importantly no one *asked* me anything. I'm not

getting pushed into marriage, I'm not getting pushed into anything. Not...even...by...you."

Dare stared at her, his eyes melting to clear blue steel. "Are you through?" he asked calmly.

"Yes."

"Sit."

"I don't..." Lea began.

Dare rose from his chair. "I said *sit down*," he ordered quietly.

Lea snapped her lips shut and sat.

"We are in a unique situation here. You are the first woman not of Atrios ever chosen by the Orb, the first woman who wasn't raised knowing what the Orb does and what it means to our culture. I understand your confusion, your reluctance and your need for answers.

"You ask why the rush for the ceremony? Because it's tradition—thousands of years of tradition—that once the Vessel of the Orb is chosen, she and High Chieftain will wed. It's not a nefarious plan to push you into marriage, Lea, it's what my people expect. No one took into account that you didn't understand, *couldn't* understand, what was expected.

"Every other woman before you knew that to be in this position was the greatest gift the Goddess could bestow on any woman. To know without doubt that the man she was chosen for would love her to the end of her days and that she would feel the same for him. To be wrapped in the arms of the Goddess and given the chance to explore gifts that she might never have known to exist within herself. *This* is what you are being offered, this is what you feel is being *forced* upon you."

Up until this point Dare, too, had been pacing, but he stopped squarely in front of her and captured her gaze. "I have no wish to curtail your choices or your independence, but do you think you could swallow your pride and impatience for just a short while? Just long enough to let me help you understand, long enough to prove to you the truth of my words, long enough to offer you what choices I can?"

Lea stared up at him and watched as Dare swept a hand through his hair. She considered his words and realized all at once that he was doing the best he could, and that she wasn't the only one caught in a difficult situation. A smile tugged at her lips. "In other words shut up and listen for a while?"

Dare heaved a sigh of relief. "Yes! Please."

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

"Come and talk with Novan."

Lea stood up and offered her hand. "Let's go."

Chapter Six

The Hall of the Mother Goddess was cool and cathedral-like in its stillness. A feeling of calm and warm welcome pervaded the atmosphere within. A series of curtained alcoves for private contemplation or consultation ran the length of the room on both sides. The wood partitions were intricately carved with leaves and vines and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, reminding Lea of the pearlescent sheen she had seen the Orb produce. Most curtains were open, revealing plain walls and simple padded benches. Those alcoves that were in use simply had the curtains drawn.

Walking silently down the long middle aisle, Lea felt herself relax. The comforting warmth of the Orb manifested itself, soothing the nervous fluttering of her stomach and filling her with a feeling of peace and acceptance.

"This is such a beautiful room. Do you hold regular services like they do in the churches on Earth?" she questioned Dare quietly.

"We have certain days during the year when we gather here to celebrate, but for most, worship is a private thing. Thus the alcoves."

Just as Dare finished his explanation, one of the curtains opened, revealing a Handmaiden and an elderly woman. "The Mother's blessings be with you, Becla Cin Tar," the Handmaiden intoned quietly.

"I thank you for your kindness, Handmaiden. Mother's blessings be with you, as well," Becla returned. She turned her smile to Dare and Lea. "High Chief Darien, it is a pleasure to see you."

"It is good to see you, but why so formal, Becla?" Dare leaned forward to plant a kiss on the woman's cheek.

"I wanted to impress your *tezza*, rascal, with how much all your people respect you," Becla replied with a twinkle in her eye. "The Orb certainly found you a lovely young lady. You know, my dear, that many a heart will break when you bind our High Chief to you."

Lea returned Becla's smile. "Thank you for the compliment. And just how many hearts are we talking about here?" She gave Dare a squinty-eyed frown.

Nervously clearing his throat, Dare hastily replied, "Not that many. So how have you been, Becla?" he asked, eager to change the subject.

"Very well, Darien, very well." She gave Lea a wink. Sobering, she placed her hand on his arm. "I want to thank you again for your kindness and assistance after Carthan's passing."

“Carthan was a good man and as skilled a carpenter as any I have known. You know how mother and father valued his work.” Dare took her hand. “How is young Garat doing?”

“Excellently. Carthan could not have picked a better apprentice. Garat has such patience and skill. And,” she added conspiratorially, “he and my Carobah are to be joined.”

“That is wonderful news, please send them our best wishes.” Glancing up, Dare saw Novan enter the Hall and stand in front of the altar. “Will you excuse us, Becla?” He indicated the waiting Novan, “We had best not keep the Guardian waiting. Mother’s blessings on you and yours.”

Returning his wishes, Becla made her way out as Dare drew Lea to the altar. As they approached, Lea began to feel a sense of *déjà vu* as her gaze rested on the waiting man. He had not Dare’s warrior build, but a sleeker, well-defined body that indicated regular exercise and good health. His hair was dark and shot with gray, worn in a short style that accentuated his hawklike features. He also had a well-trimmed beard and mustache.

As their eyes met, her own widened in disbelief. “You!”

“Greetings, Lealah Redmond, it is a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance.” Novan extended his hand.

Lea pulled her hands behind her back. “Oh no, the last time we met, you gave me that crazy rock. And do you know where it is now? It’s *in me*, that’s where.” Extending her right hand she ordered, “Take it back.”

A slight buzzing shock hit Lea’s nerves. “Ow!” Stepping back and around Dare, she fixed Novan with a hurt look. “Dare, he shocked me.”

“It was not me, I assure you,” Novan declared. “I believe you hurt its feelings.”

“Hurt whose feelings?” she asked with a suspicious frown.

“The Orb’s,” was Novan’s solemn reply. He studied Lea’s disbelieving face and met Dare’s eyes. Both men silently acknowledged the challenge to come.

“Please, come sit with me. We have much to talk about.” Novan led the way through another curtained doorway. “My study,” he explained, indicating they should be seated on the comfortably worn leather chairs in front of his desk. “May I get you something to drink? Juice, water, coffee? Something stronger?” he asked with a wry smile.

“All I want right now are explanations,” Lea demanded, as she watched Dare wander to the small sideboard to pour coffee for Novan and himself. Normally a room such as this would fill her with delight. Books lined shelf after shelf, and reading was one of her most treasured activities. Unfortunately, anxiety overrode her usual interest in any and all books. Dare returned, placing a glass of juice in front of her. “Be calm, Lealah,” he soothed. “Drink.”

“I don’t want anything to drink,” she hissed. “I want to know what’s going on.”

“Drink,” he insisted, smoothing a hand over her hair.

Seeing the gleam of determination in his eye she picked up the glass and drained half the contents. “Happy?” Sarcasm dripped from her tone.

“Infinitely.” His calm reply irritated her, as did the gentle tug on a lock of her hair. “Be nice.” His voice held a gentle admonishment.

Biting her lip she looked from him to Novan. “Well, it’s his fault. He gave me the Orb!”

“I do understand how unsettling this must be for you, and I hope to be able to help unravel some of the mysteries. With that in mind,” Novan turned in his seat and reached behind to lift a large book from its place of honor. The volume was loosely bound and looked to be of some age. “This book spans generations and has been added to by every Guardian. It deals with the origins of the Orb, its role in the clan and most especially, its effect on the women who carry it.” Reverently turning the pages, Novan continued. “Perhaps it would help to begin with our history. Our people began as one clan. Naturally over time, as the population grew, new groups would splinter from the original and move into new territories, much like the forming of a new country on your world. From that one original clan there are now seventy-three. Each clan has a chieftain, traditionally a warrior. In addition, each class – artisan, craftsman, tradesman, laborer, etcetera – has a representative, and these men and women are responsible for the wellbeing of all members of their class.”

“It’s sort of like a political position,” Lea interjected.

“Yes, yes, you could say that.” Novan thoughtfully ran a hand over his beard. “As the clans grew and separated, they also began to grow apart. There were some very vicious wars fought over territory and other things. It was at that time the Mother decided to take us in hand again.”

Turning the pages of the book, Novan ran a hand lovingly down the edges. “Galatin Dal Wri became the first Guardian of the Orb – my ancestor, coincidentally,” Novan confided with pride. “He says here that the Mother came to him, bringing the Orb and her instructions that a High Chieftain was to be chosen. All candidates had to hold the Orb and were passed or eliminated. Those who passed competed in contests of strength and skill. The final winner was our new High Chieftain, who also, coincidentally, just happened to be a Finn Mal.”

“Finn Mals are born leaders,” Dare declared proudly.

“Finn Mals are probably just too arrogant to take orders from anyone else,” Lea groused.

Novan snorted with laughter as Dare narrowed his eyes. “You will pay for that remark, wench,” he stated with mock severity.

“I doubt it,” Lea returned confidently.

Seeing the heat begin to gather in Dare’s eyes, Novan cleared his throat noisily. “As I was saying,” he gave them both a quelling look, “the clans were now united through our High Chieftain. I liken us to your United States, Lea. Each clan represents a state

and Dare is, in effect, our president.” He mused over this analogy a moment. “Anyway, that is when the Orb began to take a more active role.” Novan returned his attention to the book. “Galatin was given several rituals which involved the Orb, one of which was to be performed by the High Chieftain so that the Orb might find his perfect mate.” Giving Lea a steady look, Novan added, “It is presumed that a High Chieftain who is happily mated will give more to his duties and responsibilities.”

“Well, don’t look at me like that. I’ve no intention of trying to mess up the system. I just want to know why I’m carrying this Orb around, why I was chosen,” Lea returned his look defensively.

“As to that,” Novan paused, “we are still not sure. How the Orb makes its choice is unknown, but in all our long history it’s never been mistaken.” He held up a hand to still Lea’s protest. “We do however have much information on the effects of the Orb on the Vessel. In this case, its potential effect on you.”

Lea sighed and Dare reached out to take her hand, lightly massaging her knuckles with his thumb. “So what’s it going to do to me?”

“Well, I cannot say for sure. Each woman who bore the Orb was affected in different ways. For many, the only time they experienced any effect was at the initial choosing.” Novan sighed, turning the pages, studying a paragraph here and there before finally closing the book.

“Lea, I can assure you that none of the women who bore the Orb ever suffered any ill effects. Some few were given special gifts, such as the ability to heal, as the result of being the Vessel. I believe it is all dependent on the personal connection each woman forms with the Orb, the people she lives with and the potential events that can affect her and those around her.” Thoughtfully brushing his hand over his chin, Novan asked, “When you asked me to remove the Orb and it shocked you, do you remember feeling anything else?”

Lea closed her eyes and thought back. “Insult. A feeling of insult.”

“Yes, that makes sense.” Novan smiled. “The Orb has a certain sentience, but it does not control you. It can communicate certain emotions to you and *through* you, to others, but there will be no doubt as to the emotions the Orb communicates to you and the emotions that you generate yourself.”

Lea lifted her hand to her mouth and thoughtfully nibbled her thumbnail. “Now that you mention it, I have felt some feelings of comfort and warmth—as though something or someone were trying to reassure me, make me feel safe.”

“The Orb is never happier than when joined with the *tezza* of the High Chieftain. Accept what it offers you and do not be afraid.” Novan reached across the desk and Lea hesitantly placed her hand in his. “I understand how horrendous an undertaking it will be to be the wife of Darien Finn Mal, but you will have my thanks and the appreciation of every member of every clan if you decide to put up with him.” At Dare’s sputtered protest Novan raised his hand. “As for the rest, consider it the adventure of a lifetime. How many people on Earth do you know who can boast of going to another planet?”

"None," Lea replied "As for putting up with him," she motioned with her head in Dare's direction, "I'm still thinking about it."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Dare asked, his voice a dark sensual rasp.

Lea quivered in her chair. "I'll think about that, too."

"Children, children," Novan chided, looking on indulgently. "No unseemly displays in the Hall of the Mother, please."

"Your pardon," Dare said with an unrepentant grin.

"Lea, I have three diaries from women who were chosen by the Orb as you were. I've marked certain passages that I thought might be helpful to you in making your decision. I believe they might help set your fears to rest."

Lea accepted the books. "Thank you. These should be interesting reading."

"I believe you'll find them so. Now go away and play. If your decision is favorable I'll see you back here tomorrow evening for the ceremony." Novan waved them away.

"Wait!" Lea cried, pulling free of the arm that Dare slipped around her. "About the ceremony, if I decide to go through with it, do I have to say or do anything special?"

Novan walked around his desk and took her arm, leading her back into the Hall. "You and Dare will stand here in front of the altar and I will recite a small piece. It is a formality only." He paused in front of the altar and trailed his fingers lightly over the sculpted marble. "The Orb will manifest itself for the benefit of the witnesses." Seeing Lea's look of dismay, he quickly assured her, "It will not be anything painful or embarrassing. It is really quite lovely, and will not take very long to complete."

Passing her into Dare's keeping, Novan smiled. "Now go on, you two. Our venerable Gilaine asked me to remind you that she has need of Lea's presence for a short while. Something about fittings." He shook his head. "From the noises she was making, it sounded like a dire emergency."

Lea smiled at Novan's bemused expression. Dare took her hand, leading her out of the Hall. "Would you like some time to read the diaries?" he asked.

"Yes, I really would. Novan said they'll help me understand."

Dare walked her to the stairs. "Do you know your way from here?"

Lea nodded and bit her lip, almost reluctant to release his hand.

"I'm going out to the compound for some arms practice and I'll probably share the midday meal with Ran and the men. I'll have Gilaine bring your meal to our quarters, so that you may read undisturbed. "

"Thank you, Dare."

"You're very welcome, Lealah," he replied and brought her hand to his lips, bestowing a soft kiss in her open palm.

Lea, basking in the wave of warmth that crept over her, gave him a soft smile and made her way upstairs.

Several hours later, Lea closed the last diary. She curled up in her chair as her fingers unconsciously stroked the leather binding of the book she'd just finished. It had been written by the first woman to bear the Orb, Lira Sen Varr, who became wife to Talrion Finn Mal.

In it, Lira had detailed her life as a huntress, and her dismay and the fears that had assailed her when the Orb chose her as Talrion's *tezza*. Lira had met and spent a night of passion with Talrion before ever the Orb chose her. It was not so much her feelings for Tal that she questioned, as her ability to be a proper docile wife. The problem had been solved by Tal with his assurances that he had no wish for her to change. Tal, it seemed, had been a very wise man.

Of the other diaries, one had been written by a woman who met her chosen but a few days before the ceremony, just as in Lea's case. She told of herself and the High Chieftain getting to know each other, of their difficulties and ultimately, of the love that grew between them. The other diary was written by a woman who had not only known but loved the man the Orb chose her for. She told of the instant passion that sparked between them and the years they shared together, loving and working side by side.

In each case there was no magical, perfect union. There was a man and a woman and the feelings that were nurtured between them. There were also difficulties and differences of opinion—the Orb, it turns out, did nothing to turn the Chosen into the perfect little wife and homemaker, it merely brought two people together who in some cases may never have found each other otherwise.

Lea sighed She thought of her life on Earth and the people she knew. She had a job she despised, and when she really thought about it, aside from the few people at work that she interacted with, Jessie was the only person she could truly call friend. She had no boyfriend—she'd just never met anyone she cared for that much. She had no family, except for some distant cousins of her mother's who she had no contact with, and now that she'd taken a good hard look at her life she found it somewhat depressing.

After mentally listing what she had on the Earth side of her life, she began a second list under the heading Atrios. First and foremost, there was Dare. Just the thought of him brought a warm feeling inside. In addition, there was Ran and Shaylar—both of whom she liked. And finally, there was the Orb and what it might bring her way.

On Earth there was no man in her life and no excitement, here there was both. And that, coupled with the possibilities to come, swayed her. With her heart pounding and her stomach doing small flips, Lea made her decision. She was staying.

"Whoever's out there listening, God or Goddess, please don't let me be wrong about this."

She rose from her chair and went in search of Dare, but instead was found by Gilaine who, after being informed that yes, there would be a ceremony, hugged Lea with enthusiasm and whisked her away for the dreaded fittings.

After the fittings, Gilaine gave Lea a tour of the kitchens and pantries. She also made numerous introductions to the staff. Everyone she met was courteous and went out of their way to make her feel welcome. Lea volunteered to lend a hand with the preparations for the banquet being prepared for after the ceremony, but was politely shooed away.

After being informed that High Chief Darien was out in a ground skimmer with his brother Ran, she decided to explore.

The downstairs area of the High Chief's residence seemed to be mostly public rooms. There were several large living room areas which she supposed were used to entertain guests. She found one which had the look of a large conference room. *For clan meetings*, she thought. Rows of seats in a semicircle, each row stepped higher than the one before, faced a large table with several chairs.

Seeing a doorway leading from the conference room, curiosity prompted her to open it. In one corner there were chairs and musical instruments. The floor was spread with groupings of thickly piled rugs, pillows and low tables. An open area faced these groupings, and beyond, a low dais rose. It too was littered with rugs and pillows.

"Maybe he really did have a harem," Lea murmured, walking around the room. She trailed her fingers over the velvety texture of an azure-colored pillow. The fabrics were all plush and colorful—blues, golds, greens and reds—many with stunning beadwork and fringe.

"Did he tell you that?"

Lea gave a startled gasp and spun about to find Shaylar, an amused smile curving her lips.

"You scared me," she laughed. Her hand gestured to encompass the room "What is all this?"

"It is for the clan chiefs and their warrior escorts," Shaylar explained, walking gracefully into the room. "After they have their meetings, they are provided with entertainment and refreshments. Music," she said indicating the instruments, "and dancing."

"Who does the dancing?" Lea asked with a suspicious frown.

Shaylar smiled "There is never a lack of volunteers when needed. The women come from all the clans. They wish to be seen by the warriors in hopes of perhaps becoming *tezza* to one," she explained with a small sneer. "And sometimes one who is already *tezza* to one of the chiefs or warriors will perform, if she wishes to do honor to her lord. Do you dance, Lea?" she asked innocently.

"As a matter of fact, I do. I've been taking belly dancing lessons for several years. But," she added with a warning frown, "that doesn't mean I'll be performing." Having noted Shaylar's earlier expression she asked, "What about you? Don't you wish to be seen by the chiefs and warriors as a potential wife?"

"Up until this year Dare said I was too young, thank the Mother, but now that I am of age, I could if I wanted to. But I do not want to." She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"Why would I want a muscle-bound, slack-jawed, blockheaded warrior slobbering all over me? It sounds appalling."

"I will accept the muscle-bound part of that description, but I take exception to the rest."

Shaylar and Lea both gasped and turned with a start. "I wish people would quit sneaking up on me," Lea grumped.

"I beg your pardon, *basaya*."

The words were uttered by a young god. Six feet two inches of sculpted muscle, broad shoulders, smooth, tanned skin, fine chiseled features and long golden blond hair held back with a leather thong. *Thor*, Lea thought, *or Apollo*.

Shaylar stepped forward with a frown. "Lea, this is Zendar Thal Tan. Zen, Lealah Redmond, Dare's *tezza*, and soon to be my sister."

Zendar stepped forward. Taking Lea's hand, he placed a fleeting kiss on her palm. "Dare always was a lucky one. A pleasure to meet you, Lealah."

Lea smiled into a pair of twinkling eyes, sky blue with stormy gray-blue rims around the iris. "Call me Lea, please. Are you one of the clan chiefs?"

"My father holds that honor," Zen replied. Turning his attention to Shaylar, Zen's gaze took on a heated sensuality. "You are well, *ahnba*?"

Raising her chin haughtily, Shaylar glared at Zen. "I am fine, and I told you not to call me that. Lea, if you will excuse me, there are some things that need my attention."

Shaylar stalked out of the room, ire overshadowing her usual graceful movements.

Zen gave a self-mocking snort. "What she means is she no longer wishes to remain in my presence."

Lea and Zen strolled out of the entertainment room and through the conference area.

Somewhat at a loss, Lea raised a questioning brow. "Did you offend her in some way?"

"Yes." Zen paused. "By telling her that I intend to make her my *tezza*."

"Oh." Lea smiled sympathetically. "I take it she didn't accept the news too well."

"Shaylar is young, stubborn and proud. She needs time to grow up and to accustom herself to the idea," Zen revealed. "She is also sweet, funny and the most beautiful female on Atrios. I wish nothing more than to make her mine, but she has reservations," he admitted.

"I'm sure if you truly care for her that things will work out." Lea laid a hand on his arm as they paused in the doorway of the conference room. "Just have a care for her feelings and her heart, and don't push too hard. As you said, she is young, and I would say inexperienced. A certain amount of fear may also be a part of why she wants to keep her distance from you."

Zen faced Lea and again raised her hand to his lips, placing a soft kiss to her palm. "Wisdom and beauty, the Orb has truly chosen well. Thank you, Lea. Believe me when I say that when it comes to Shaylar, I care for every part of her. If one day I am lucky enough to make her mine, I will do all within my power to make her happy. I will see you at the ceremony."

Releasing her hand, Zen strode down the hallway toward the grand front entrance. Lea could see Gilaine and a number of the household staff helping with the arrival of the expected guests. Uneasy about meeting so many new people without Dare by her side, she fled.

Chapter Seven

Having successfully avoided detection, Lea relaxed as she closed the doors to Dare's chambers. She breathed a sigh of relief and walked through the arched doorway that led out onto the balcony that overlooked the gardens.

Flowers of every shape and color seemed to be represented. The smells that drifted up to her on the breeze were an enticing mix of sweet and spice. Pathways bisected the flowerbeds and as she watched, several women—guests, she assumed—wandered the paths, stopping now and then to admire a particular bloom or flowering tree.

Beyond the garden to the north, Lea could see several long, low buildings, and in the distance, green pastures wandered over rambling hillsides. Large animals dotted the pastureland here and there, and as she watched, several of them began to run with playful abandon. Horses! Though not the most skilled of equestrians, Lea loved horses.

To the west lay the road to the village. Shaylar had explained that it was just beyond the hills, no more than a mile distant, and Lea looked forward to the proposed shopping trip with her.

Although her mind felt more at ease with the decision she'd made to stay, the one thing marring her happiness was Jessie's absence. She resolved as soon as possible to ask Dare if there was some way that she could visit Jessie, or even better, persuade Jessie to make her home here on Atrios. Lea smiled at the thought of her friend attracting some big strong warrior-type. What a contest that would be! Jessie was not exactly a docile, helpless female.

Raised voices drew her attention to the garden below. Two young men seemed to be having a disagreement of some kind. As they gestured angrily, a young woman sauntered out, joining them. Placing a hand on each of their muscled forearms, she favored them with a pouting, sultry look. Lea could not make out her words, but with a final glare at each other, the men, keeping the woman between them, turned and entered the house.

Lea felt a frisson of unease run through her. There was trouble brewing between those three, and she resolved to look for them later at the banquet. Frowning at the thought, she wondered why she felt compelled to take such action. It was not normally her style to interfere in other people's problems.

Then she noticed the glow, a very small shimmer in the palm of her hand. "You're doing this aren't you? Is this the special talent you're giving me? To be a snoop and a busybody?" Her only answer was a feeling of smug amusement. "Great, just great."

Glancing up, she observed the sun was well overhead. *Tomorrow I'll be married.* Butterflies began a spinning, swirling dance in her stomach. *I wonder where Dare is?* She

longed for his steady strength and wanted nothing more than to ease the tension rising inside her. Telling him her decision, she was sure, would help her to relax.

Like a wish being granted, Dare, along with Zen and Ran, emerged from one of the long buildings in the distance. Lea realized they must be stables. The men were talking earnestly and as they neared the garden, began to laugh at some jest of Ran's.

As though feeling the pull of her need, Dare looked up, his gaze meshing with hers. Their silent communication spun through the air. Ran and Zen, following Dare's look, rewarded Lea with waves and Zen clapped Dare on the shoulder, urging him in the direction of the balcony stairs.

Dare took the steps two at a time and made his way to Lea. "Miss me?" he questioned hopefully.

"Actually I guess I did," she confessed with some surprise.

He gave her a pleased smile then sobered and asked, "Did you find anything in the diaries to help you with your decision?" He stood a short distance from her as though restraining himself from touching her. His expression gave nothing away as he waited for her answer.

"Um, well, yes, I did," Lea answered. Now that he stood here before her, revealing her decision wasn't as easy as she'd thought it would be.

"And?"

"And...I've decided to stay." Once the words were out they seemed to hang in the air between them as Lea waited breathlessly for his reaction.

Wordlessly Dare nodded and turned away, taking a step that put him at the low balcony wall. He placed both hands on top of the wall and looked out over the garden. Lea watched him for a moment, and she could almost feel the tension that radiated from the taut muscles of back. It drew her closer to him until she rested a hand lightly on his shoulder blade.

Dare tensed under her touch, then relaxed as she ran her hand over the sculpted muscles of his back. "Dare?" she questioned quietly. "Is it all right? That I stay?"

Dare turned slowly and sat on the wall. "It's more than all right, Lea. It's what I hoped for. I just didn't realize how much." He reached out and pulled her between his thighs. "When you said you would stay, my strength abandoned me—as did my tongue." His hand brushed across her cheek, his thumb brushing her lower lip, and a soft groan passed his parted lips when she rubbed her face against his hand like a well-loved cat.

"You're mine," he breathed.

Lea had only a split second to sense the change in his mood before his mouth crashed fiercely over hers, taking her breath as though he tried to swallow her down, heart and soul. Shocked, she whimpered submissively, a primitive part of her accepting his need to dominate and claim her.

As her arms wrapped around his muscled torso, her nails dug into his back and she felt power rise inside. Not power brought by the Orb, but the power she possessed as a woman, a woman who was needed by a man. Her acceptance turned to welcome, her kiss becoming every bit as fierce and feral as his.

Sensing the change, Dare fisted his hand in her hair, pulling her head back. His sapphire eyes sparkled, the pupils dilated. "Tell me," he demanded his voice hard and hungry.

Lea gazed at him, her green eyes wide, the amber specks in her eyes flashing. In his eyes she saw an almost brutal desire and gave him the answer he needed. "I'm yours."

"Yes." Pure male triumph blazed arrogantly in his eyes as he took her mouth again.

A kiss that began as a savage ravaging of lips and tongues began to gentle and soothe. Dare's hands tenderly stroked her back as his tongue languidly tangled with hers. He ended the kiss, keeping his eyes closed, his forehead pressed to hers as their bodies swayed slowly like seaweed in a drifting tide.

Something unspoken rose between them, a beginning that held them locked together, basking in the warmth and closeness.

"Lea," he breathed against her lips—and that one word held a multitude of meanings and possibilities.

She smiled against his mouth, tasting him again and again with small, sweet, gentle kisses against his pliant lips.

Finally opening their eyes, they drew apart, gazing almost shyly at each other. Small smiles began to play over their lips and Lea felt compelled to touch him. Leaning in close, safe in the circle of his embrace, one hand caressed the nape of his neck as she brought the other up to stroke gentle fingers over the contours of his face.

She felt Dare shiver under the touch of her hand and sighed, that small movement causing her nipples to rise against the firm muscles of his chest. Just as his lips descended toward hers, a knock sounded at the door. It was Dare's turn to sigh. "After the ceremony and banquet, anyone knocking on that door will be beheaded."

Lea laughed, her amusement assuaging Dare's ire. Giving her a quick hard kiss, he crossed the room to confront the offender. Luckily, the two household staff were accompanied by Gilaine.

"Ran told me you were here," she said, bustling in. "I have brought Lea's dress for the ceremony and a light meal for the two of you."

She motioned the servers in, and while they quickly set up the meal, Gilaine took Lea's dress into the bedroom. Returning, she dismissed the staff and turned to Lea and Dare with a long considering look. "I have had your kitchen well stocked, and the staff has been informed that after the banquet you two are not to be disturbed unless we are being attacked or some natural disaster occurs. I would hate to lose any of my people to beheadings after all the time I put into training them." She smiled, arching a brow in Dare's direction. "Ran tells me that you have put him in charge and that similar orders have been issued to the men. Everything is ready, so," she indicated the meal, "eat and

enjoy your evening together. Shaylar and I will come tomorrow to help Lea prepare” Without another word she herded her people out and left them alone.

Dare looked at the serving table then at Lea. “How hungry are you?”

“Well, I am hungry,” she admitted, as she walked around him then ran a teasing hand over his chest as she moved away in the direction of the bedroom, “but I don’t see anything on that table that will satisfy my appetite.”

Dare stood, thunderstruck, as she glided away from him.

“I’m going to take a bath. Care to join me?”

He watched the sway of her hips as she disappeared into the next room, then a grin crept over his face as he began to follow. Before he made it to the bathroom his tunic was off and his leathers unfastened. Lea had unlaced her blouse and was pulling it over her head, the fabric brushing her full breasts, causing them to bounce and the nipples to harden.

“Goddess,” he breathed and sat down to tug off his boots, watching as she unfastened her skirt and slid it to the floor.

She turned, presenting him with her back, a view he did not waste, as his eyes traveled the length of her body and savored every sweet curve. He quickly divested himself of his pants and moved to join her as she traversed the shallow steps into the pool.

Dare’s arms wrapped around her and he pulled her tight against his body, nestling his throbbing erection along the shallow crevice of her bottom. Lea pushed back against him. “I want you inside me,” she murmured huskily.

“Lea,” he groaned, “I want nothing more, *ahnba*, but it’s forbidden until the joining. Another tradition I would see done away with.” His arms tightened. “But touching and tasting is permitted.”

Lea turned in his arms, a slow wicked grin lighting her face. Dare sucked in a steady breath. “I’m fully prepared to follow the rules. Touching sounds nice. Let’s start there.”

She reached for the soap, filling her hands and rubbing them together to create a lather that she used to begin a sensual exploration of Dare’s sculpted body. He stood quiescent under her hands, but inside a wildfire ignited, burning through his body and soul. Silent and for the moment content to let her do as she pleased, he closed his eyes and concentrated on the feel of her hands sliding over him, until she moved in close and pressed her breasts against his soap-slicked skin of his back.

A guttural, “Goddess,” was wrenched from his lips as the hard nubs of her aroused nipples scorched his skin.

Lea moved around his body to face him, her soapy hands tracing over his broad shoulders and down his muscled arms. She slid her hands back up to his chest, fingers twining sensuously in the soft mat of hair before allowing them to follow the beckoning

trail that led downward over his sculpted abdomen, over his flat belly and lower to his fully aroused cock, which gave a convulsive twitch as her hand closed around it.

Dare let his head fall back, a moan slipping from him as her slim fingers wrapped around his aching cock, slowly stroking him to near madness.

“Follow me,” she urged and using his cock as a handle, pulled him to the deeper water. Releasing him she pushed down on his shoulders. “Rinse,” she ordered.

They both submerged then rose, water streaming down their heated bodies. Dare slicked back his hair and watched the rise of Lea’s breasts as she echoed his movements. She flashed him a knowing female grin and motioned for him to follow her back to the shallower water.

She directed him to stand at the bottom of the steps while she went to her knees on the step above him. Her hands reached out. “Now for the tasting,” she murmured, as one hand wrapped itself around his cock, the other sliding around his hip to grip the taut mound of one ass cheek.

Without hesitation her mouth closed around the swollen plum-shaped head of his shaft. Dare’s body bucked as he felt her lips sliding down while her tongue danced over him. She halted when her lips met top of her hand where it was wrapped around the base of his shaft and in unison her hand and mouth began stroking.

Dare buried his hands in her hair, his hips undulating with her movements. Looking down, he watched his length emerge, slick and wet, from her hungry mouth, felt the movement of her tongue over the swollen head then groaned as she devoured him. Again and again she relinquished his cock only to swallow him down until the hot liquid heat of her mouth brought him to the edge of release.

A deep agonized groan slid from his lips. “*Ahnba...Lea!*” he warned, “I can’t stop, can’t hold on any longer.”

Ignoring the warning, her hand tightened its grip on his ass and pulled him closer. Her mouth moved faster, sucking harder.

Dare roared his release as hot streams of liquid seed poured forth in a torrent of pulsating shots. Pleasure tightened his gut until it was near pain, a pleasure-pain that had him shuddering as the movements of her mouth continued to milk him dry.

His hand tightened in her hair. “No more, please, Lea, no more.”

As she moved back, the tug of her hair in his fist reminded him to release her, and he groaned softly at the smooth, gentle slip of her mouth in its final caress over his cock and the soft nudge of her tongue as it probed the tiny channel at the head for any final drops.

With her mouth no longer touching him he reached down and lifted her up. Pulling her with him, he staggered back to the edge of the pool and leaned back wrapping his arms around her and sealing his mouth over hers. Their tongues met, twining softly, slowly, languorously, in the aftermath of Dare’s spent passion.

Dare pulled back. "You could kill a man with your mouth," he whispered, placing soft fleeting kisses on her lips again and again. "But he would surely leave for the higher plane with a smile on his face."

He held her with tender strength, his hands moving soothingly over her back. Lea leaned into him, resting her head against his shoulder. Sleepy satisfied peace bound them together, soft sighs emerging from contented throats.

A hungry growl broke the silence and Dare patted his flat stomach. "I'm starving. Are you hungry?"

With a raised eyebrow she studied him pertly. "I just ate, thanks," she replied with a teasing smile.

Dare's face heated causing her to snicker. "You're blushing!" she crowed. "The big strong warrior is *embarrassed*."

"Stop your teasing, woman before I put you over my knee," he blustered, herding her from the bath.

* * * * *

The next day Lea stood in front of a mirror taking one last look at her reflection before attending the ceremony that would officially see her as *tezza* to Darien Finn Mal.

Her three-piece outfit was in ivory and hunter green. A long ivory skirt rode low on her hips, exposing her navel. The slit, which ran to mid-thigh, exposed the firm, shapely expanse of one leg when she walked. A filmy, midriff-length ivory blouse topped the skirt. Cut on a diagonal, it left one shoulder and arm bare. The other side sported a full-length sleeve that was slit from wrist to shoulder. The shirt was topped by a corselet of hunter green that laced up the front and rode low on her breasts. It pushed them up, barely hiding that which the blouse revealed. Skirt and corselet were beautifully embroidered. Matching sandals completed her outfit.

Studying her reflection and noting the somewhat panicked expression in her eyes, she resolutely straightened her shoulders. "I can do this," she vowed, her head awl with uncertainties. It was one thing to make a decision, another to stand by and follow it through, especially in light of the fact that there were no guarantees of what the future would hold. Lea met her own gaze in the mirror. It was then she admitted to herself what the real problem was. Neither she or Dare had uttered those three little words that normally preceded a wedding. There had been no *I love yous* from either of them, and it disturbed her more than she'd thought it would.

"I can't back out now," she whispered to her reflection, as a pang of sorrow tightened her chest.

Turning away from the mirror, she crossed the room and opened the door to find Dare waiting for her. He still wore his black leather pants and boots, this time topped by a long-sleeved, heavily embroidered forest green tunic. "Dare," she murmured. Just

the sight of him eased her worries and loosened the knot in her chest. She breathed a sigh of relief.

He gently enfolded her in his arms. "Don't be afraid, *ahnba*. I'm here." He stepped back, perusing her with a discerning eye. "You look beautiful. Ready?"

At her nod, he offered his arm and together they walked to the stairway. Below, conversation and laughter circulated amongst the waiting guests. Their appearance caused a hush to fall over the crowd and a small sea of faces turned up to them. Lea convulsively tightened her grip on Dare's arm. With a smile, he reached out and cupped her chin, turning her face to him. His firm lips met her trembling ones, bestowing a warm reassuring kiss before they started down the stairs.

A great roaring cheer broke from the assembled guests. Unable to ignore the warmth and good wishes being bestowed upon them, Lea smiled and shyly returned their greetings as she and Dare made their way to the Hall of the Mother Goddess.

Novan waited at the altar, dressed in a long white robe. Dare and Lea took their place before him. Ran, Shaylar and Gilaine took their places nearby and waited patiently for the clan chiefs, their *tezzas*, warrior attendants and all the other guests to assemble.

When everyone was settled, Novan raised his hands signaling the start of the ceremony.

"When the Mother created men, she gave them strength. She gave them also the ability to be wise, compassionate and hardworking. But man was not complete. For in every man there is an empty place. A place which must be filled by the one who gives meaning to our strength, wisdom and compassion. The one who gives us love and children. The one who makes us complete." Novan smiled at those assembled. He took Dare's left hand and Lea's right hand in his own. "Today we have come together to witness and to celebrate the joining of Darien Finn Mal and his chosen, Lealah. With the blessings of the Mother and by the power of the Orb they have been brought together. They have been made complete."

Novan placed Lea's hand in Dare's. As he released them, a subtle glow began between their joined palms, spiraling outward. Twining like a vine, it wound over their hands and up their arms. The spirals grew larger, engulfing them, binding them together.

Not content with merely joining Lea and Dare, the Orb sent its pearlescent light cascading across the floor. It wound through the people and up the carved walls of the alcoves to settle in the shimmering mother-of-pearl inlay, casting a glow over the entire hall. With a final burst of enthusiasm the light erupted outward and upward from the inlay. Reaching the high ceiling it shattered, raining softly down like glowing snowflakes. All were touched by the glowing bits of light and each flake bestowed feelings of warmth, joy and love.

The small murmurs of wonder at the appearance of the Orb's power became louder, soon the hall rang with the sounds of celebration. Dare and Lea stood with Novan,

accepting his good wishes. They were surrounded by family, and kisses and hugs were exchanged all around.

Clapping his hands together, Novan called for silence. "My fellow clansmen, let us continue the celebration at the banquet. As you all know, I am not inclined to let good food go to waste."

Heartily agreeing, the assembled began to file out.

The banquet hall was a-rumble with the sounds of merrymaking. Lea, having survived greeting the clan chiefs and their *tezzas*, was now seated next to Dare, attempting to put names to the numerous faces. As promised, Dare stayed by her side, as did Shaylar. To Shaylar's mortification and Ran's amusement, Zen also made up one of the party seated with the family. He very decisively appropriated the chair next to Shaylar and no amount of discouraging looks would budge him from his place.

Lea sent Shaylar a look of sympathy, having learned in her short time on Atrios that once a warrior decided on a course of action there was very little that would shake him from it. She also struggled not to laugh as Zen sent her a very deliberate wink.

Dare, having noted the exchange, placed his hand on Lea's exposed leg, smoothly sliding it up her thigh. Satisfied with her faint gasp and the widened eyes that met his, he leaned toward her. "What was that about, *tezza* mine? Must I fight for you so soon?" His hand wandered over her inner thigh coming to a halt at her pussy, where he slowly petted the soft curls that guarded her treasures.

Struggling to keep her face composed, Lea held her thighs tightly together as Dare's fingers tugged and teased. "It's not what you think. I spoke with Zen earlier and he told me how he wishes to someday make Shaylar his *tezza*. Now would you please stop that?" she begged desperately.

"In a moment," Dare agreed. "Open for me, *tezza*."

"Dare, *no*," she breathed. Lea looked around to see if anyone was paying them any attention. It seemed everyone was busy with their meal and their dinner partners. To the casual observer, the High Chief and his *tezza* were engaged in an intimate chat—understandable, considering the circumstances.

"Open, Lealah." Dare's uncompromising expression brooked no denial.

Lea bit her lip and let her thighs relax, opening herself to Dare's exploration. He slid a finger past the swelling lips of her pussy and into the gathering moisture. "Beautiful," Dare whispered. His mouth found hers and covered it as his finger, slick with her dewy moisture, slid up to cover her clit, gently rubbing.

Dare swallowed her moan, withdrawing his hand and moving back to study her face. Lea's eyes fluttered open, her lips parted and full, her cheeks flushed. Reaching for his glass of wine, Dare dipped his wet finger into it. Swirling it around in the blushing liquid, he withdrew it, painting her lips with the combined flavors.

Lea ran her tongue over her lips and watched as Dare sucked his finger clean. He savored the sweet-spicy bouquet of wine and woman. A slow, sensual smile curved his lips. "An interesting vintage, wouldn't you say? I look forward to a more in-depth sampling later."

A fiery blush heated Lea's skin. "You are entirely too bold, Darien Finn Mal," she declared weakly.

"And you are entirely too sweet, *tezza* mine," he declared, tapping her gently on the nose. "Here," he offered, reaching for some grapes. "Try these and tell me what you think. These were grown using vines from Earth. I believe we are beginning to have some luck with them and the winemaking process."

The banquet continued apace, and after the diners ate their fill, they began to rise and circulate. Shaylar vacated her seat next to Dare in an attempt to put distance between herself and Zen, but Zen followed, equally determined to warn away other potential suitors.

Shaylar's seat was soon filled by Krentan Tray Mar. Krentan was chief of the Tray Mar clan and an old family friend. Krentan loved his *tezza*, his family, his people and his horses, and, as some said teasingly, not necessarily in that order.

Krentan was anxious to firm up plans he and Dare had for transporting Dare's prize stallion, Rogue, to Krentan's lands, in order to introduce him to several mares they wished bred.

Lea relaxed, letting their conversation wash over her. She absently placed her hand on Dare's thigh and smiled when his fingers covered hers with a gentle squeeze. The room was warm, and after so much excitement Lea let her mind and her eyes wander.

With the subtlety of an evening breeze, a feeling of unease whispered across her consciousness. Her senses sharpening, she scanned the room until her eyes rested upon two men and a woman. Unseen waves of tension surrounded them—Lea felt it almost as a physical force. With a start she realized they were the same three she had observed earlier in the garden.

Of its own volition, her hand tightened on Dare's thigh. The tension mounted, thickening the air. All around, the party continued, the revelers unaware of the trouble within their midst.

His attention drawn to her by the increasing pressure of her hand, Dare had time to notice her distraction before all hell broke loose.

Through her heightened senses Lea could feel the anger, jealousy and pain radiating from the men. From the woman she sensed amusement, satisfaction and disdain. "She's using them," Lea whispered. And as the realization hit, the men rose from the table and, drawing daggers, they leaped at each other.

"No!" Lea stood, the cry of denial forced from her lungs. Her right hand rose. A stream of misty light engulfed the would-be fighters. Daggers were torn from fisted hands and both men were unceremoniously knocked on their respective backsides.

Cries of consternation and surprise filled the room. Dare, quick to take in the situation, signaled several of his warriors to bring the two miscreants before him.

"How did you know?" he asked Lea, his arm circling her shoulders as he drew her close.

"The Orb knew," she explained, dazed and shocked at the action the Orb had taken through her.

Brought before the High Chieftain and his *tezza*, the combatants were somewhat subdued. "Getran and Andlen Senn Var, what is the meaning of this disturbance?" Dare's voice, controlled and commanding, had both young men hard-pressed not to wince.

Andlen spoke softly. "He seeks to take my woman, High Chief Darien."

"She is not yours!" Getran interjected angrily. "She has made no promises to you."

"Nor has she to you," Andlen pointed out stubbornly.

"Enough!" Dare ordered. "You quarrel like children, not men."

Lea placed a hand on Dare's arm. "May I?"

At his nod she faced both young men. "I'm new here and not well-versed in the ways of the clans. But even here I have good reason to know that a man wishes his woman to love and care for him, is that not so?" At their curt nods of affirmation, she continued. "This woman you both claim. She cares nothing for either of you."

Both young men began outraged denials which were quickly silenced by Dare's command.

Lea continued. "I am a woman and I have seen the way she looks at the two of you. It is not with affection. It is with amusement. You entertain her with your jealousies."

Getran and Andlen stayed silent but their eyes revealed their disbelief. "You may believe me or not as you see fit, but until this day I had never set eyes on any of you. Why would I lie?" she asked, looking into their shuttered faces. "If you will not take my word as a woman, you must believe the Orb, for it was the Orb that first drew my attention to you. It was the Orb that revealed the woman's game to me. And it was the Orb that prevented two brothers from making the biggest mistake of their lives."

As she spoke, the brothers' stubborn refusal to accept the truth dissolved. Lea could feel their anger turn again to pain and humiliation. Eyes filling with tears, she appealed to Dare. "Do something," she pleaded.

Taking the brothers aside, Dare spoke quietly with them for a few moments. Clapping them both on the shoulders, he sent them from the room in company with several of his men.

"Where are they going?" Lea inquired.

"To find drink and willing wenches," Dare answered, grinning. "My men will see to them."

"Is that the cure-all for a broken heart?" Lea's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Dare chuckled. "Not a cure, but certainly a step in the right direction."

"What about the girl, the one who instigated this mess? Does she just get to go on playing her games?" Lea was disgusted. "She could have caused them to kill each other!"

Dare's expression sobered "I believe she is about to receive suitable punishment."

An older warrior, one Lea recognized as chief of the Shen Mec clan, approached with the offender in tow.

"With your permission, High Chief Darien, I would like to address my daughter's offence."

"Permission granted, Chief Romsen"

"No, Daddy, please, do not!" the girl wailed.

With quick efficiency Romsen seated himself. Tipping his wayward daughter over his lap, he raised her skirt, baring her bottom, and began to administer a very thorough spanking.

Crying and struggling to no avail, she was effectively shown the error of her ways.

Lea stood spellbound, her eyes wide with shock. She found herself torn between seeing justice done and sympathy for the girl who now found herself so completely and publicly humiliated.

Completing his task, Chief Romsen set his chastened daughter on her feet. "Apologize to your High Chief and his *tezza* for your behavior, Jayien."

Her complexion burning with embarrassment, Jayien stammered tearfully, "P-p-please accept my apology, High Chief Darien, Lady Lealah. I have no excuse for my reprehensible behavior."

"Raise your eyes to mine, Jayien," Dare commanded. At her compliance he continued. "Today you brought shame upon your clan. Have you learned from this mistake and will you mend your ways?"

"I have and I will, I promise." A few errant tears continued to drip from stricken eyes in a slow trickle down flushed cheeks.

"You are forgiven, be at peace, child," Darien pronounced gently.

With a sob Jayien threw herself into her father's arms. Broken words of apology were muffled against his broad shoulder. "Thank you, Darien." Romsen nodded and steered his subdued offspring out of the banquet hall. His murmured words of comfort and forgiveness to his daughter followed them out of the room.

"There is one young lady who will not be sitting with any degree of comfort for the next few days," Ran intoned solemnly.

Soft laughter filled the hall at Ran's words and soon the party was in full swing.

"That was...intense," Lea said, still feeling somewhat shaken. "Isn't that a somewhat barbaric practice?"

"But very effective," Dare defended "Especially with wayward children."

"You'd never do that to me, would you?" Lea asked, a frown marring her brow.

"Disobedience and defiance reap their proper reward, Lealah." Dare asserted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" A trickle of unease wound down Lea's spine.

Taking her chin firmly in his hand Dare stared into her wide green eyes. "It means that no one is above punishment if it is warranted. We do not advocate abuse. As you saw, Jayien was not tortured or maimed. She was shown that bad behavior will be punished. Would you rather we do as many of those on Earth do? Toss idle threats at our children until they realize we are no more than raised voices with no power? To do so brings no respect, endangers our children and would make them into ill-mannered monsters who would grow up to be selfish, lawless adults." He released her chin with a soft caress.

"I understand that, but what I'm talking about is a woman, an adult woman. Is it right that she be punished as a child?" she protested.

"Perhaps not, but what is a man to do when the woman under his protection disobeys him at peril of her own safety and perhaps that of those around her?"

"Well, I'm not really sure. As an adult you'd think she'd know better."

"You would think so, but sometimes that is not always the case and something must be said or done. As a tool, a spanking seems a mild punishment. Would you have the man ignore her or greet her words with silence for days as some women do when their man is out of favor with them? That would accomplish nothing and in itself would be childish behavior."

Lea opened her mouth to protest his sexist words.

"Shhh, no more talk of punishments. I wish to talk of pleasure." Dare ran a caressing hand down her arm, sending a shiver of awareness over her skin. "In fact," he brought his lips to her ear, "I intend to do more than talk of pleasure. I intend to indulge, to revel, to wallow, to *glut* myself on it." Dare's tongue traced a damp path over the shell-like curves of her ear, dipping suggestively inside. Lea felt her nipples harden as her breath caught in her lungs. "But to do that, I will need your assistance." He leaned back allowing her to see the heated intent in his eyes. "Will I have your cooperation, *basaya*?"

Taking a deep shuddering breath Lea nodded, "Oh yes, please. Now?"

"Right now," Dare affirmed. Standing, he took her hand and led her from the room.

Ran grinned and raised his glass in a salute to his brothers retreating back. "I do not imagine we will be seeing much of them for the next few days," he speculated.

"When a man finds the woman of his heart, he is entitled to a few uninterrupted days of pleasuring," Zen replied. "And of course, done correctly, it will see him with a very grateful and content *tezza*."

Zen directed this last across the table, concentrating his gaze on a scowling Shaylar.

“Is that all men ever think about?” Seeing him about to comment, she imperiously raised her hand. “Do not tell me, I do not wish to know. I am going to bed.”

Rising, Shaylar pressed a kiss to Ran’s cheek. “Goodnight, Ran.”

“Lucky man,” Zen commented cheekily.

Passing him, she glanced down. Seeing his somewhat mournful expression, Shaylar surprised not only Ran and Zen, but herself, by pressing a kiss to his cheek as well. “Goodnight, Zen,” she murmured.

Zen sat frozen, a man stunned by the unexpected. Ran grinned and chuckled. “Looks like you are wearing her down, my friend. At this rate I will be calling you brother in say, another five years or so.”

Chapter Eight

Dare ushered Lea inside their quarters, closed the doors with a satisfying thud and keyed the locks. He leaned against the solid wood and watched her as she idly wandered the room, unconsciously putting distance between them.

His sapphire blue eyes followed her like a predator sighting its prey. He could feel the waves of nervous tension emanating from her. This was the moment he had waited for. The moment when he would fully claim his mate.

Dare studied her tall, voluptuous figure. His cock, which had been semi-erect the entire evening, began to thicken and fill completely. He loved the long, lush fall of her hair and the way her breasts were cradled so lovingly by the corselet, standing high and firm. Her hips and the enticing curve of her buttocks sent lustful shock waves through him.

He admired the porcelain smooth texture of her skin, and his fingers twitched at the thought of running his hands over every inch of her. Dare knew the feel of her, the taste, the smell – and soon he would know the ecstasy of being buried inside her.

The primitive man inside him howled to be set free, but the thinking man drew rein on the raging beast. Yet even as he studied the physical beauty before him, Dare saw more. So much more. For Lea was not only beautiful in body, but her spirit glowed as well. Her kindness and compassion, the sweet generosity of her nature, the trust she so carefully bestowed upon him and his family, all enhanced her appeal.

He felt his heart swell with pride and something else, something that caused him to pause and consider, until the sight of her stopped any and all thoughts but having her. She was his. *His!* Dare pushed away from the doorway. It was time.

At his movement, Lea looked up. With the grace of a hunting cat, Dare stalked her, his eyes finding and holding hers, which were filled with trepidation and longing. He stopped before her, holding out his hand, “Come make love with me, *ahnba*.”

When they retired from the banquet room, Lea knew what was coming. She was eager to be alone with Dare. Eager to share the passion and indulge in the pleasure he spoke of so eloquently. But as they neared their quarters, she felt tension begin to rise inside. By the time Dare closed and locked the doors, her nerves were ping-ponging around like drops of water on a hot griddle.

Struggling to keep her breathing even and to slow the pounding of her heart, she forced herself to slowly wander the room. From the corner of her eye she could see Dare watching her. Had she never fully appreciated, until this moment, the sheer masculinity of the man? Tall and broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped and long-legged, his presence

in a room would draw every woman's attention. Lea also realized it was not only his physical appearance that attracted her, but his confidence, his air of command. Dare made her feel safe. But at this moment he also made her feel vulnerable.

As far as men were concerned, her experience was limited. No longer a virgin, her one, brief affair had been a disappointment. Her so-called lover had been an insecure jerk. He'd intimated that her inability to orgasm during sex was her fault. Never mind the fact that he could never last more than five minutes and was hung like a Vienna sausage. Thank God she'd had Jessie to talk to. Jess, with her usual straightforward attitude, had put the whole thing in perspective and saved Lea from a lot of self-doubt and angst. Lea had already done things with Dare that she'd only read about. It all seemed so natural, so effortless and right. And lordy, did it feel good! Dare had the moves, the expertise and the equipment to make any woman scream with pleasure.

But this...this final step that would truly unite them, was monumental. So far Dare seemed to have enjoyed all the things they had done together. But sex? What if she disappointed him? What if she couldn't come? What if...?

He was coming to her. She noted the smooth glide of his body as he moved, the more than visible evidence of his arousal. Meeting his eyes, she saw the molten heat shining there. His hand reached out to her. His voice was husky with emotion. "Come make love with me, *ahnba*." A command, a request, a promise. Lea felt her tension fade, her doubts melt. A quiver of anticipation shot through her body to settle in her swelling sex. She placed her hand in his and led him into the bedroom returning the sensual smile of delight he gave her.

The wide, silken expanse of the bed beckoned as they crossed the cool marble floor. Lea felt herself drawn to a halt as Dare swung her around and into his waiting arms. His mouth descended toward hers, lips opened, tongues met and tangled in a mass of writhing need. Lea pressed herself to Dare, struggling to get closer, her growing arousal making mockery of her earlier worries.

Dare eased back and reached for the ties of her corselet. With alacrity it parted and spilled the fullness of her swelling breasts into his waiting hands. He fondled the round globes, savoring the weight of them, his fingers rubbing and pulling the hardened nubs through the thin fabric of the shirt that still covered them. Lea cried out, his clever fingers sending shock waves through her pliant body. She reached out, fastening her hands on his tunic. A frustrated moan left her throat as she strove to pull the concealing garment from him.

"I want to touch you," she panted. "Dare, now!"

"Easy, *tezza*," he soothed, and with quick practiced movements had the tunic off.

Lea soaked in the sound of his groan of pleasure and the heat that emanated from his skin as her hands roamed his muscled chest. She brushed the tip of one finger gently over the flat disk of his nipple and watched the small piece of flesh at its core rise and harden. Fascinated, she leaned in, her tongue making gentle, swirling whorls.

Encouraged by Dare's groan she repeated the process on his other nipple with satisfying results.

Lea stood pliant under his hands as Dare rid her of her concealing shirt. His hands found the release of her skirt and she watched the heat flare in his eyes as it slithered over her rounded hips to land in a soft puddle at her sandal-clad feet. She stepped out of both skirt and sandals and gasped as he swept her up into his arms.

Striding to the bed, he laid her down and stepped back. Never taking his eyes from her, he removed his boots and the leather pants which were now painfully constricting. Dare stood tall, a satisfied smirk passed over his chiseled lips as he saw Lea's eyes widen. His cock had taken on truly magnificent proportions. Thick and full, it stood rigidly from his body. She could see the swollen, knotted veins that ran its engorged length. It had looked big before, but now, knowing that it would soon be making a place for itself inside her, Lea began to have her doubts. She sucked her bottom lip in and bit at it worriedly.

Dare quickly joined her on the bed. Leaning over her supine form, he took her chin in a firm grip. "Do not worry," he assured with a knowing smile. "It *will* fit." His lips took hers in a sizzling kiss as his hands began roaming.

Lea moaned as he cupped her breast in his hand. The hardened nipple was chafed by his calloused palm as his fingers kneaded the taut flesh. Releasing her mouth, he wandered down her jaw, biting and nibbling his way to her throat. He lingered at the junction of neck and shoulder. Soft bites and soothing licks had Lea trembling with need.

Dare's roving lips and hands kept Lea in a state of building anticipation. Her soft whimpers and moans drove him like a bullwhip. Reaching the goal of her ample breast, his mouth fastened to the swollen nipple, suckling gently.

Lea fisted her hands in his hair, pulling him to her. She lifted herself, offering more of her bountiful flesh to his teasing mouth. He released her nipple with soft licks and moved to give equal treatment to the other. As his mouth drove her to sanity's edge, Dare's hand trailed slowly down her body, caressing and petting. Drifting lower, his hand came to rest at the junction of her thighs. Lea writhed as he cupped her cushioned mound, stroking the silky curls before the tips of his fingers insinuated themselves into the aromatic liquid that seeped from her quivering pussy.

"Open, *tezza*," he growled.

His command penetrated the sensual fog of her growing arousal. Lea complied and a wild cry was torn from deep inside as his fingers plunged into the wet, swollen depths of her throbbing sex.

Dare crooned softly, "Easy, *ahnba*, easy." His fingers eased slowly out. "Did I hurt you, *tezza*?" His eyes, passion-dark and inflamed with need, found hers.

"No, Dare, no, and don't you dare stop!" she demanded, clutching at his shoulders. He eased his fingers back inside the sleek heat of her pussy and slid his thumb over the hardened nub of her clit.

"Are you ready for me, *tezza*? I need to be inside you." Dare settled between her open thighs. "*Tezza*." His voice was taut with need. "Do you want this?"

Lea felt the insistent nudge of his cock as it stood poised at her creamy entrance. Her gaze wandered down the hard length of his body and lingered on his engorged shaft. *Déjà vu* hit with dizzying speed. Her eyes flew to his and she grabbed at his arms with desperation. "Don't go!" she pleaded with a gasp.

"I go nowhere but inside," Dare growled. "Do you want me, *tezza*?"

"Yes!"

She felt the flared tip of his cock lodge inside. Her hands slid down the smooth expanse of his back and came to rest on the firm globes of his buttocks. The muscles under her hands bunched and tightened as he thrust slowly inward. Her legs locked around him as she felt each swollen inch insinuate itself into her drenched channel.

Through slitted eyes she watched his jaw clench as he fought for every inch that led into her clutching depths, the sight and feel making her body tighten and seize the thickness of his cock with the quivering walls of her pussy. Lea threw her head back, lost to the growing pleasure and need.

"So tight, *tezza*. Goddess have mercy," he groaned.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God." Her panting litany filled the air, as her body struggled under him. Her stunned eyes locked on his. "You feel so *good*."

She thrust her hips up, tearing a groan from both of them. "Is there more? Do I have it all? More, Dare, more!"

"All you can take, *ahnba*." He thrust forward, seating himself to the hilt.

They froze at the stunning sensation of being fully joined. Dare leaned up on his elbows and studied Lea's closed eyes and parted lips. He slowly undulated his hips, stirring his cock in her silken sheath, waiting for her reaction.

She moaned and reciprocated, her hips moving with a slow, sensual rhythm.

"I take it that means you're all right," Dare commented with a teasing groan as she tightened around him.

"So full." Her hands tightened on his buttocks, urging him in. "So big. Fuck me, Dare, please fuck me!"

Startled and titillated by her unexpectedly base demand, Dare began a steady, thrusting, rhythm designed to drive them both over the edge. He captured a tight, swollen nipple in his mouth, suckling vigorously.

Lea moved mindlessly under him. The feel of his thrusting shaft sent wave after wave of pleasure coursing through her. Small whimpers and moans issued from her parted lips. Her skin became moist and slid against the sweat-slicked flesh above her. The air was permeated with the enticing, pungent smell of their mutual arousal. She could hear Dare's panting breaths and feel the pounding rhythm of a heart that matched her own.

Behind her closed lids, a soft glow began to form. She opened her eyes to see a glowing bubble of light engulf their straining bodies. Dare chose that moment to increase the pounding cadence of his thrusts and Lea was lost to everything but the feel of him pushing her higher, fully immersed in the very essence of Dare. His smell, his taste, his groans and grunts of effort and arousal—all of the overwhelming sensations drove her to follow him into a blind mating fury. Distantly she felt him reach between them, his finger and thumb closing on the swollen bud of her clit. With a few gentle tweaks he threw her into orgasm. She screamed, her creaming, quivering pussy pulsing around the raw-nerved, engorged shaft of his cock. Body taut to the breaking point, Dare erupted into her welcoming depths. Lea's wailing cry of completion echoed in the air joined by Dare's guttural, triumphant shout as hot streams of creamy seed bathed her inner walls and trickled from the seal of their joined bodies.

At the same time, the Orb induced bubble of silvery light that engulfed them pulsed and burst, sending sparkling shards winging into the night.

* * * * *

The next few days passed in a blur of carnal self-indulgence. As they explored each other's bodies, they also learned about the person behind the passion. Lea had expected there might be some awkwardness, at least on her part, after behaving so wantonly, but she felt perfectly at ease with Dare. She had to admit that in part, it was because he seemed so damned pleased with everything they did.

He was openly sensual, touching her without hesitation or question of his right to do so, and he encouraged the same in her. Lea was secretly delighted to learn that she could thoroughly captivate and arouse him with just a look or a touch. Dare's eager willingness and his unspoken approval of her fed the primal female within until she rode the power of her femininity, rolling in the carnal delights like a cat mesmerized by a patch of catnip.

The one thing that marred her happiness was the lack of any acknowledgement of love between them. There were times when she looked into Dare's eyes and felt so wrapped in the emotion shining from his eyes, so *sure* that he would say the words that she was trembling with fear at what her answer might be. As much as her body appreciated and reveled in every touch, her mind and heart still held reservations.

She did admit her need for a strong man, and her desire to be dominated to a certain extent. "I'm not a doormat," she warned. "I don't want to be tied up and beaten. Although," she teased, seeing the spark of interest in his eyes, "being tied up might have a certain appeal. It's just that I need to feel safe. Sometimes I feel," she paused, searching for the words, "exposed...vulnerable. I need someone to stand between me and the world."

Holding her on his lap, Dare tightened his arms around her. After a light evening meal, they sat on the balcony in one of the large cushiony chairs from the living room. Dare had carried it out so they could lounge in comfort under the balmy night sky. The

dominant moon rose high above them, attended by her three lesser satellites. Stars sedately twinkled, adding their light to the moons.

"That someone would be me, *tezza*. You will always be safe with me, love. You know that, do you not?" He cupped her chin in his hand, lifting her face to his. Her eyes were wide and shiny with the tears she tried to hide. She nodded, afraid to speak, and laid her head on his chest, comforted by his words and the steady beat of his heart.

"I'm too emotional," Lea whispered. "I cry at the drop of a hat."

Unbeknownst to Lea, her vulnerabilities only increased Dare's love for her. He was possessed of a strong need to protect those closest to him. Her needs fed his own, as his fed hers.

Dare grinned. "You are not *too* anything. You are my woman and as such are perfect," he concluded arrogantly.

She looked up at him, a smile on her lips "Just because I'm your woman?"

"Just because you are you," he replied seriously.

Their lips met in a kiss, soft, accepting, loving.

"Did anyone ever tell you how sweet you are?" Lea asked as she slipped her hand into the open flap of his robe where it lay parted on his chest.

Dare scoffed. "Don't let that get around. My men will be bringing me flowers."

Lea snickered. "Well, you *are* sweet and I happen to know you *taste* sweet, too." She gave him an archly sensual look. "Time for dessert."

She slid out of his lap and to her knees, making a place for herself between his thighs. Keeping eye contact with him, she reached for the robe's tie, loosening it. She parted the fabric, revealing the hard-muscled body beneath. Lea released his gaze, hers drawn to the juncture of his thighs. She watched with fascination as his member began to thicken and fill.

"That is so amazing," she murmured and ran an exploring finger from the base to the rapidly expanding tip.

She loved the way Dare watched her through lids gone heavy with arousal. Her tongue made a circuit of her lips, leaving them slick with moisture, and she felt the tension in his body as he braced himself. Her long slim fingers encircled his swollen length.

"Dare, I have an oral fixation..." Her warm breath misted over his sensitized skin. "When I see you like this, my pussy gets wet and achy for you—but my mouth wants you too." Her fingers tightened. "My mouth wins this time."

Lea's tongue slid slowly over the plump, flared head. His hot, velvet-soft skin grew slick with moisture. She closed her mouth and ran the pulsing knob over her lips like an oversized lipstick. Humming with pleasure, her mouth opened and took him inside. Lips locked over engorged flesh, her tongue swirled and probed as she took him deeper.

Dare's fingers dug into the arms of the chair as he absorbed the overpowering sensations created by Lea's ministrations. He groaned under the deluge swamping his senses.

Lea slowly pulled her mouth up and away from his cock, the hard suction causing a small pop as she released him. Her mouth fastened to the underside of his cock and ran down his length. She slowly explored the swollen ridges and veins under the hot, silky flesh. Pressing against his inner thighs, she urged him to spread his legs wider. Her mouth continued down to the round pouch of his scrotum as she sucked the heavy sac inside.

Dare bucked in the chair. "Unh, Lea!" He grunted as her tongue tenderly massaged his sensitive balls.

She released him and again ran her tongue up his fevered, rock-hard cock. Lea was ready to take no prisoners. She covered as much of his straining rod with her mouth as she could, and with her hand encircling the base, began a coordinated attack. While one hand squeezed and stroked, her lips tightened around him, sliding up and down, and her other hand took up the gentle massage of his balls.

Dare's hips began to undulate as she pumped and sucked his beleaguered shaft. When Lea began to hum with pleasure, the resultant vibrations took him over the edge. Head thrown back, groaning deeply, he bucked and shuddered. Hot spurts of cum jetted from his pulsing shaft, filling her mouth. She swallowed again and again, relishing his tribute, greedily sucking down the evidence of her skill. She held him in her mouth, her tongue gently caressing and encouraging the release of every drop, until she was satisfied she had everything he had to give. Releasing him, she rested her head on his muscled thigh as he recovered.

"Mmmm," she moaned, licking her lips. "I think I found the creamy center of this twinkie."

"Twinkie?"

"Um-hum, a long cake filled with rich sweet cream. It's a decadent delight, junk food supreme on Earth."

Dare's eyes narrowed with mock-anger. Rising, he swung her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. "I don't like the tone of your voice, woman. You should speak of nothing but me with such longing."

Lea's laughter soon changed to moans as Dare showed her a new item from the dessert tray.

* * * * *

Between bouts of lovemaking, Lea and Dare indulged in other activities. They spent many hours in or around the bathing pool. In addition to keeping them clean, it had the added advantage of letting them swim and relax in its warm, tropical atmosphere.

Their quarters included a study, where Dare kept a number of books. Some detailed the history of Atrios, others were literary works by authors of their world – tales of love, adventure, tragedy and triumph. There were books of poetry as well as stuffy tomes pertaining to varying scientific studies. They spent many hours lounging together on the wide comfy sofas or lying on high-piled rugs and pillows in front of the fireplace, as Dare read to Lea. His voice was smooth and deep. When he read aloud, he not only read the words, he infused them with emotion and heart. Lea lived the stories, her laughter and tears following the lives and loves of the characters.

The entertainment room also became a great favorite of theirs, for it was here that Lea discovered that the people of Atrios had a passion for movies that were brought back from Earth. Their society contained people who entertained by way of stage plays, as well as musicians, but they had no television or movie industry. The room contained a large screen and Dare ran through the list of available movies. Lea was amazed by the sheer number of them.

“How did you get so many of them?” she inquired, while they studied the list.

“Your people have a very convenient market place called Wal-Mart. It was a simple matter to buy what you call DVDs. They were downloaded into our computer system, and are available for the viewing pleasure of anyone who wishes it,” Dare explained. His eyebrow rose as Lea began to giggle. “What?” he asked somewhat defensively.

“I find it very hard to picture you shopping at Wal-Mart,” she laughed. “You’re not exactly the type of person who would blend in with the crowd I imagine the female associates would be falling all over themselves to help you.”

Dare smiled at her now slightly disgruntled expression. “Jealous?” he asked, teasing and yet somehow hopeful as well.

Lea considered him, pouting. “Truthfully?” At his nod, she went on. “Yes! You are no longer allowed to go to Wal-Mart,” she declared.

Dare laughed, delighted at her admission. His arm tightened around her shoulders pulling her close. “I have never been there, *tezza*. Our people who work in the sciences are the only ones, save for Novan, who have made that particular trip.” He tipped her face up for a deep, loving kiss. “You may sheathe your claws, little cat,” he murmured.

Lea purred, as she snuggled into his arms. Her attention was caught by a particular title on the screen. “Hey! *The Maltese Falcon*. I love that movie. Humphrey Bogart is wonderful. Have you seen it?”

Dare smiled indulgently. “Several times, it is a favorite of mine. Shall we watch it together, *tezza*?”

“Oh yes,” she agreed. “You wouldn’t happen to have any popcorn, would you?” she asked hopefully.

Dare shook his head in the negative. “I am unfamiliar with this...popcorn,” he admitted “What is it?”

Lea explained in delicious, enthusiastic detail.

"I shall have the next expedition to Earth add it to their list," he promised solemnly.

"You'd do that for me?" Lea was touched that filling her little request took such precedence with him.

"Your pleasure is mine, *ahnba*," he replied, simply. "But you must promise me one thing." Dare had drawn near and his lips hovered over hers.

Lea's lips parted in anticipation. She whispered a breathy, "What?"

"You must promise to share," he teased.

"Oh I will, I promise." Lea's lips curved into a sultry smile as her hand slid over the corded muscles of Dare's chest. "In fact, if you don't mind delaying the start of the movie for a while, I feel very much like sharing. Right now."

"As I said, *tezza*, your pleasure is mine." Dare's lips closed over hers.

* * * * *

On the fifth day after their joining, Lea wandered out to the balcony.

She and Dare had started their day with a particularly interesting firstmeal that consisted of eating various food substances from each other's bodies. They had teased and tormented each other to the edge, time and again.

When Dare had finally joined them together, the tension had already risen so high that their orgasms were immediate and mutual. Afterward they lay in a sated puddle of exhaustion and dozed amidst the remnants of their food. Lea had awoken to a grinning Dare, who had just placed hollowed out grape halves on her beaded nipples.

"Don't tell me you're still hungry," she gasped as his mouth lowered, sucking in one grape-covered nipple.

"Mmmm," was all the reply she received as Dare's tongue glided like wet silk over her pouting flesh. He rose up, his eyes finding hers as he slowly chewed the grape, then swallowed. "Sweet, succulent, firm and very tasty," was his verdict. "The grape was not half-bad either."

Lea laughed but was soon gasping as his mouth went for the second juicy tidbit. She moaned and arched under him, pressing her breast into his face with fierce urgency. Dare understood her need and continued to vigorously suck the engorged nubs switching from one to the other.

"I want a banana!" she called out desperately.

Dare stilled and raised his head. "What is a ba-na-na?" he asked. Knowing she had something in mind, he was more than willing to play.

"Lie down and I'll show you," Lea answered, hoping to entice him into cooperating.

Dare rolled to his back, and Lea grinned at the eager light in his eyes.

"A banana is a fruit. It's long and thick and yellow," she explained, looking with ostentatious care for one amid the remains of their firstmeal. "We don't seem to have

one." She sighed in feigned disappointment as her gaze moved to his thick, throbbing erection.

"When I was a teenager, I learned about oral sex. I sometimes used to peel a banana and suck on it while I pretended it was a man's cock. Kind of like this," she demonstrated. Her mouth closed over the plump, velvet-soft head of his cock. Her tongue began to work his pulsing flesh, stroking, laving and massaging the cushiony bulb. The firm ridge drew her and she followed it to the underside, where it curved inward to form a vee. She concentrated on that vee, using the tip of her tongue to apply a firm yet gentle caress. She purred with satisfaction as Dare's groan transmitted his approval.

Keeping him trapped firmly between her lips, she slid lower, taking as much of his ample erection as possible. Eyes closed in gratification, her mouth stroked slowly up and down the thick column. Every nuance of shape, texture and taste was noted with growing pleasure. Dare's hips had begun a slow undulation in counterpoint to the movements of her mouth. Pushing into her downstroke, pulling back on her upstroke.

Lea felt her pussy contract with need. She slowly pulled up and away, lingering again to lave his now flushed and reddened skin.

She straddled his hips "Now that I think about it, this is much more like cucumber." Her hand reached out and she gave his cock a firm squeeze. "It's way harder than a banana."

Lea rose up and positioned herself over his eager member. Her eyes locked with his as she lowered herself, taking each solid inch slowly inside the slick creamy depths of her clenching passage. She felt Dare's groan vibrating through him as she settled over him. Her flesh gloved him in wet heat and she fought his hands when they grasped her hips, holding her still when she would have moved. He lay under her, eyes closed, his cock buried to the hilt and unmoving, except for an involuntary shudder that shook his entire body and drove him an infinitesimal bit deeper.

"Do not move," he ordered, a deep guttural sound that seemed to border on pain.

His eyes opened and their gazes locked as Dare moved one hand away from her hip and between her widespread thighs. His fingers bathed in the thick cream that surrounded the place of their joining. He carefully slid his fingertips up and over the swollen bundle of nerves that held her pleasure. Applying gentle pressure, with a few well-placed strokes he drove Lea over the edge. She threw her head back and screamed her release as he bucked madly under her. His hoarse cry of completion joined hers as he emptied himself, adding his own creamy fluids to hers.

Lea collapsed over him, her body shuddering, as spasms of decreasing intensity left her shaken and weak.

"I love fruits and vegetables," she murmured when her gasping breath had slowed.

Dare chuckled, then began to laugh. Lea grinned as her own body, draped over his, shook with his mirth. "It's like Magic Fingers," she told him, referring to the old motel beds that would vibrate for a quarter.

"Aye," Dare agreed arrogantly, "I do have magic fingers."

Unwilling to burst his bubble, aside from the fact that he was perfectly correct, Lea sighed with contentment and relaxed against the warmth of his body as he cushioned her...

And so, after a much needed bath, Lea found herself on the balcony, a soft, whimsical smile on her face as she replayed their firstmeal interlude.

Dare joined her and her smile widened. "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

Dare's arms slid around her, pulling her back into the comfort of his embrace. "It is, indeed," he agreed, nuzzling her hair. "I am pleased the weather is clear and warm. I had hoped it would be thus. I have a surprise for you on this, the last day of our joining revels."

Lea turned to face him, the question clear in her eyes. Dare reached out to caress the smooth skin of her cheek "I must resume my duties, *tezza*," he explained "However much I wish to remain locked in this paradise with you."

"I understand," she acknowledged. "I can't keep you to myself, no matter how much I desire it." She forced a bright smile. "What's my surprise?"

Dare smiled. "I thought we might take a ground skimmer and go for a ride. You have not seen much of your new home. Would you like that, Lea?"

"Oh Dare, that would be wonderful!" Lea agreed happily.

"Come," he said, holding out his hand "I will arrange it."

Stepping into the bedroom, Dare moved in front of the comm unit and contacted Ran.

"Dare." Ran grinned, seeing his brother's face on the incoming call. "You are looking...relaxed," he commented discreetly.

Dare snorted. "Good description. I am taking Lea on a tour of the surrounding area. Have a ground skimmer brought around front for us, will you?"

"Will do," Ran complied.

"And Ran," Dare added, "we are invisible."

"My word on it, Brother." Ran agreed with a grin.

Dare and Lea left their quarters and descended the stairs, heading toward the front entrance. They encountered not one soul on their way. Dare smiled, gratefully acknowledging his brother's work. The ground skimmer waited out front and as they entered it, a gardener, busy at his work, rounded a tall hedge. With perfect aplomb, he ignored the presence of his High Chieftain and Lady Lealah, going about his work as if they were indeed invisible. Dare and Lea smiled at each other and settled into their seats.

* * * * *

They spent several hours riding in the skimmer as Dare pointed out various points of interest to Lea. They rode through meadows populated with horses, keeping a careful distance so as not to startle them. Dare showed her the Katal River, its beautiful clear waters rushing endlessly onward as it wound through the peaceful countryside.

He gave her names for the many trees that were so similar to those on earth. Lea was particularly interested in the *othantal* tree. A slow-growing tree, it was also very rare. Its elegant, deeply lobed leaves were a deep reddish-purple and it bore a cherrylike fruit that was highly prized due to its healing properties. The location of every known *othantal* tree was mapped. They were protected, and never harvested for anything other than the berries that dropped from its generous branches. They lived for centuries and produced fertile seed only when the parent tree began to decline. Of the seedlings that were produced, never more than one survived. It was believed that they could not live in close proximity to one another.

"It's beautiful," Lea commented. "But kind of sad, all alone in its solitary existence."

"You are a sentimentalist, my *basaya*," Dare replied. "Perhaps it is too jealous to tolerate others of its kind."

"And you're a pragmatist," Lea retorted. "Where's the romance in that kind of thinking?"

Dare slid his arm around her and kissed her soundly. "I have plenty of romance with you, *ahnba*. I do not need to invent more for a tree."

They continued their tour. Sheraltz Peak became a prominent feature in the landscape. Dare wove the skimmer through a wooded area and halted it beside a tree that looked *very* familiar.

"Do you recognize this place, Lea?" Dare asked expectantly.

Lea nodded, a soft smile on her lips.

Dare rose and retrieved a blanket from a recessed storage compartment under the back seat. He held out his hand to Lea and led her under the sheltering branches of the tree that had saved her life on that fateful day.

"Here I had my first glimpse of she who would come to mean everything to me." He spread the blanket on the ground and captured her gaze. "I have not said the words for fear you would think the Orb directed me to do so, but I cannot contain them any longer." His eyes held a look so intense Lea felt as though her heart would stop. "I love you, Lealah Finn Mal. I wish to make love with you, here, where we first touched."

Lea's eyes filled with tears. Not daring to speak, not even sure of what to say, she nodded and began to undress. Dare tenderly assisted her, his hands skimming over her silky skin as he shaped the curves of her sumptuous form. His own clothing was quickly dealt with and he laid her gently down on the blanket.

His lips took hers in a soft, sensual kiss that was at once tender and wildly stirring. He made love to her slowly, almost delicately, his touch filled with reverence and wonder. Their passion simmered, heightening gradually as they explored each other. Dare rose over her, mounting her with deliberate ease. His cock pierced her swollen sex,

sliding in with one agonizingly long glide. He stopped, staring into her eyes, memorizing the look of dazed pleasure on her face. Dare began to ride her gently, in and out, pulling almost free of her clasp channel only to sink completely to the root, again and again.

Lea undulated under him, matching his stroke for stroke. Her breath hitched in her throat and she breathed his name softly again and again, lost in the exquisite sensations.

Dare felt his body prepare to release. He reached between them and gently manipulated Lea's swollen clit. His mouth closed over hers as she shattered under him and he drank down her whimpers as she shuddered. Her silken sheath milked the creamy essence from his cock as it quivered and pumped. Tears began to fall from her eyes as her climax waned, and she wound her arms around Dare holding him desperately as she wept. He rolled, bringing them to their sides "Do not weep, *tezza*," he crooned, rocking her, soothing her. "Shhh, *ahnba*, it's all right."

Lea eventually calmed. She regarded him with eyes gone green as grass. Tears sparkled on the spikes of her wet lashes. "I love you, Dare," she whispered, shocked by the knowledge that burst into being like a sacred revelation. "I don't know when it happened, maybe it was there all along, but I love you, I really do love you," she repeated as though needing to hear herself say the words.

The joy in Dare's eyes was unmistakable, as clear to see as the sheen of tears that brightened his eyes. "Lea, my *tezza* in truth, my heart, I never thought I could be happier than the day you arrived on Atrios, but I was wrong. You've given me a joy beyond words to express."

Lea was helpless to stop the tears that leaked from her eyes.

"And this is reason to weep?" he teased gently, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

She regarded him earnestly, nodding "I'm happy," she explained as a shy smile began to pull at her lips. "And I was wrong about you. You're not a pragmatist, you're as much a sentimentalist as I am."

Dare rose and pulled her to her feet and into his arms. "If you tell anyone I shall deny it."

"I won't tell," she promised "Your tough guy image is safe with me. Although it's excellent material for blackmail," she teased "What will you give me to keep quiet?"

"Perhaps, *tezza*, you should ask what I will give you *should* you speak," he stated, raising an eyebrow.

"What?" she asked warily.

"The flat of my hand against your sweet round bottom, my wicked *basaya*," he promised.

Lea pouted. "Meanie," she accused.

"Wench," he returned.

They began to dress, calling each other ridiculous names, until Lea started to snicker with the absurdity of it all. Dare picked up the blanket and laid his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. They entered the skimmer and in perfect accord, headed for home.

Chapter Nine

Lea and Dare joined Shaylar and Ran for firstmeal the next day, officially ending their joining revels. They filled their plates and seated themselves in their usual chairs across the table. Ran studied them with a glint in his eye. Knowing his brother would not be able to resist, Dare was prepared for what was to come.

"You are both looking well," Ran commented mildly. "Being joined must have its advantages. I shall have to look into it one day." Ran returned to his meal.

Dare and Lea exchanged mildly surprised glances and Shaylar rolled her eyes. She knew what was coming.

"How have things been while we were...?" Dare became stumped for a word.

"Invisible?" Ran suggested, with a knowing smile.

"Sounds right," Dare agreed, returning his smile.

Lea and Shaylar shook their heads, lamenting male immaturity.

"Everything has been as usual," Ran assured him. "Except for one strange occurrence."

Here it comes, Shaylar thought, giving Lea a sympathetic look. Ran was about to lower the boom.

"Not too long after you left us that first night, after the joining ceremony, something strange happened." Ran leaned back in his chair, preparing to elaborate. "I was in the dining hall talking with Zen and some others, when a familiar feeling came over me. Now normally this feeling, which is accompanied by certain changes in a certain part of my anatomy, only occurs when I am in the presence of a desirable woman. Imagine my dismay to find myself growing physically excited while talking to Zen." Ran paused, giving his audience plenty of time to get the picture.

"Now as you know, Zen is a good looking man—or so he says," Ran qualified, not wanting to give the impression that he had been noticing Zen's looks.

Shaylar snorted with laughter as Lea and Dare stared at Ran as though he were demented.

"But he is definitely *not* my type," Ran asserted positively. "To get back to the strange occurrence, it was then that I noticed, to my everlasting horror, that I was not the only one so affected."

Shaylar began to snicker uncontrollably as Ran gave her a quelling look.

"Before I had a chance to make sense of this, a burst of silvery white light bathed the room and..." he paused again this time for dramatic effect, "everyone in the room experienced, shall we say, an *extreme* physical reaction."

“What?” Lea frowned, totally confused.

Shaylar was outright laughing, as tears coursed down her cheeks.

Dare began to grin.

“My dear sister,” Ran explained “Every person past the age of puberty, within a one mile radius, unloaded their assets and experienced nirvana, without the use of hands, partners or any of the other usual aids.”

Lea’s eyes grew round in disbelief. “Oh. My. God.”

Dare had joined Shaylar, and was howling with unsuppressed laughter.

“Next time, I wish you would give us some warning,” he continued plaintively. “Do you have any idea how uncomfortable it is walking around in soggy leathers?”

Dare almost tipped out of his chair.

Lea was horrified. “How can you sit there and laugh? I’ll never be able to show my face in public again!” she exclaimed, burying her red face in her hands.

Dare struggled to contain his mirth and choked out, “Now, Lea, it is not that bad.”

“Not that bad?” she echoed “Not for you – you’ll be revered as the Mr. Macho who fucked his wife to orgasm. But I’ll be known as the Slut of Atrios, who made countless men come in one night.”

Dare immediately sobered as a hush fell over the room.

“Never again, in my presence or out of it, will you repeat such words,” he commanded. “I shall allow no one to slander you with such an untruth, not even you, *tezza*,” he warned. “Anyone who dares will be punished.”

Lea’s eyes had grown round with surprise as Dare spoke sternly, and she found herself somewhat intimidated by this facet of his personality. More surprising was the sudden arousal that coursed through her body. She felt her pussy quiver and moisten as her breath began to speed in her lungs.

Dare’s pupils dilated, his eyes growing heated as understanding seeped in. He pulled her close. “Come, we will discuss it,” he murmured, his voice a husky rasp. He led her, without excuse or farewell, from the room.

“That should be an interesting discussion,” Ran observed with a wry smile.

“Brother mine, you are so bad,” Shaylar pronounced “Best you apologize to Lea for making her feel bad.”

“I intend to,” Ran admitted with a sigh. “It was not my intention to hurt her. I had hoped my humor would help ease the telling.”

“I know,” Shaylar comforted. “I understand Lea’s discomfort and, humor or no, you would still have garnered the same result. It was not your fault, just your bad luck to have the telling of it.”

Ran gave Shaylar an assessing look. “For one so young, you have acquired an inordinate amount of wisdom.”

Shaylar smiled with pleasure at her brother's praise. "Thank you, Ran. If it is any consolation, I find your humor extremely...interesting."

Ran snorted as his customary good humor was restored.

* * * * *

Dare marched Lea to their quarters and quickly moved them inside. Without stopping, he urged her into the bedroom. The growing bulge in his leathers clamored to be free.

"On the bed," he ordered. "On your knees, thus." He swept her skirt aside, that it not impede his desires as he positioned her with her knees on the edge of the bed, her upper body tilted down and resting on her elbows.

Lea wasn't sure what was about to happen, only that she was incredibly turned on by his stern demands. She sought to question him. "Dare, what...?" She got no further, as his hand connected with one porcelain-smooth buttock. The resultant smack drew a yelp of surprise from Lea, while it pinkened her pale skin.

Admiring the result, Dare ordered her, "Quiet wench, you must needs be punished for slandering that which is mine." He administered several more stinging slaps, as Lea squirmed and cried out. "Beautiful," he praised. His hand caressed the reddened skin of her quivering bottom. "Do you wish me to stop, *ahnba*?"

Lea lay shocked and panting as the bite of pain turned into a blaze of pleasure that burned through her as each blow landed. Her pussy wept with need as she shivered in anticipation. When Dare offered to stop she answered without hesitation. "No, don't stop." She moaned, then cried out as he spanked her until her buttocks glowed with the warmth his hand raised from her skin.

Dare slid two fingers into the thick cream that filled her channel and pumped them slowly in and out. Lea's hoarse muffled moan caused his cock to jerk in reaction. Quickly opening his pants, he released his straining erection and placed the throbbing head at her pouting entrance. With a groan he grasped her hips and pushed forward, easing his way into her tight, wet sheath until he was seated to the hilt.

"A man could die of such pleasure," he gasped and began to pump his hips. The taut muscles in his buttocks clenched and released with each churning thrust. Dare's gaze was drawn to the pink rosette of her anus. Slicking his finger in her ample juices he swirled it over the tight entrance. "I wish to take you here," he told her, then reassured as she stilled "Not yet, *basaya*, you must be prepared, but soon, soon," he promised. "For now take this much for me, *tezza*." His finger slid home, giving her a taste of what was to come.

Lea cried out at the additional invader, then sank into a cloud of pleasure so thick she felt nothing beyond the broad finger in her back entrance and the easy glide of his cock as it filled her, then retreated to fill her again and again. Eyes closed, repeated moans left her parted lips. Impending orgasm had her tightening on his cock as she

pushed back into each thrust. The steady slap of their flesh meeting, sounded out as Dare began to pound into her with increasing desperation. "Touch yourself, Lea," he ordered, his jaw clenched as he fought to hold off his release. "I want you to come with me." She complied and with a few caresses, she burst apart, his name torn from her throat. Dare's hoarse shout followed as his seed erupted, filling Lea's fluttering passage.

Spent, Dare withdrew and sat on the bed beside her, sinking back with a satisfied grunt. Released, Lea collapsed and lay panting as she recovered. A few quiet moments passed before Dare reached out and cupped the cheeks of her ass, gently rubbing the delicate pink tint of her silky skin.

"Have you been suitably punished, wench?" he inquired lazily.

"Mmmm," Lea purred, enjoying the warm press of his slightly calloused palm as it circled her flesh. A sated smile curved her lips.

Dare grinned and chuckled, a sound of smug masculine satisfaction. "I will take that as a yes." He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her parted lips. "Rest, *tezza*," he instructed. "I must take up my duties."

Dare rose and entered the bathroom for a quick wash as Lea pulled herself fully onto the bed and lay back with a sigh. Her eyes drifted shut, sleep claiming her so quickly she did not notice Dare pull a light cover over her or hear the door shut quietly as he left.

* * * * *

Lea woke a scant hour later and stretched with languid ease. A slow, wicked smile stretched her lips as she replayed her "punishment".

Dare had been so commanding and bold. She bit her bottom lip, worrying the full curve, remembering his promise to prepare her for his invasion of her anus. The thought was very intriguing, but the idea of Dare's thick length invading that virgin hole was a bit unsettling. His finger had stretched her back entrance, giving her a feeling of fullness. She could only imagine how his cock would feel there.

With a shrug she dismissed her worries. Dare was an experienced lover and her husband. She knew without doubt that she could rely on his judgment. He would never hurt her.

Quitting the bed, she drifted into the bathing chamber and disrobed. With a sigh she stepped into the soothing waters and washed away the evidence of Dare's latest oh-so-welcome sexual possession. A happy smile graced her lips as she dried herself and dressed.

Deciding to go in search of Gilaine or Shaylar, Lea made her way downstairs and toward the back of the house to the kitchen. A host of delicious smells assaulted her nose. Her stomach rumbled its approval and she was forcibly reminded that firstmeal had not included food, just the shocking news Ran had imparted.

Lea was determined to put it behind her. She trusted Dare to see to it that no embarrassing mention would be made of the incident. With that thought firmly in mind she approached one of the cooks, a man of middle years who was stirring what appeared to be a sauce or soup of some kind on the stove.

Seeing her approach, he smiled. "Goddess bless, Lady Lealah. You are well this day?" he inquired politely.

"Very well, thank you. I'm afraid I don't recall your name," she admitted. "I've met so many people in such a short time, it's all very confusing."

"Perfectly understandable, my lady," he assured her. "I am Jayton Sen Var, Gilaine is my aunt."

"Oh yes, I remember now," Lea said, as Gilaine's introduction replayed in her memory. Jayton was the son of Gilaine's eldest brother. He had been part of the Finn Mal household for the past two years and was reputed to be one of the best cooks in all the clans.

Her stomach again rumbled its distress and she rubbed it with a sheepish grin. "Whatever that is you're making smells delicious," she confessed.

"You are hungry, my lady," he exclaimed almost accusingly. "Sit, I will fix you something." He ushered her to a large table and urged her to be seated.

"I don't want to bother you," she apologized. "I'm interrupting your work."

"Nonsense," Jayton assured her. "Miral," he called out to a young woman who at that moment entered the kitchen. "Please bring a glass of *tiko* berry juice for our lady."

Lea squirmed in her chair, embarrassed to be the center of any special attention. Miral reappeared with the juice and placed it with a smile in front of her. "Goddess bless, my lady. Is there anything else I may do for you?" she inquired politely.

Lea shook her head and returned Miral's smile. "No, thank you," she answered, then sighed with relief as a familiar figure entered the kitchen. *Gilaine to the rescue*, Lea thought, relaxing.

"Lea," Gilaine exclaimed. "I heard that you and Dare had decided to rejoin the rest of us. It is good to see you. You are well?" she asked.

Gilaine studied Lea openly. She looked happy and well rested. Her eyes sparkled and her skin glowed. Gilaine was pleased that Dare had managed to make his new *tezza* happy. She had seen Dare earlier, as he was on his way out. He, too, had looked happy and was full of vigor, eager to return to his duties. He had informed Gilaine that Lea was sleeping and not to be disturbed. Having heard about the firstmeal fiasco from Shaylar, Gilaine was happy to see that Dare had managed to soothe Lea's upset.

"I'm very well," Lea replied. "I actually came in search of you or Shaylar. When I got here the wonderful odors caused my stomach to sit up and beg, so Jayton very kindly offered to fix something for me," she explained as Jayton set a plate before her.

Gilaine nodded her approval. "I was told that you did not enjoy a very hearty firstmeal."

"Was the food not to your liking, Lady Lealah?" Jayton asked with concern. "I will be pleased to prepare anything you wish."

Lea looked down at her plate as a blush lit her cheeks. "The quality of the food was not at fault," she assured him. "We had a discussion at the table that I found rather...ah...disturbing."

"I am sorry to hear that," Jayton offered sincerely. "I hope all is well now."

"Yes," Lea answered. "Everything is fine, thank you."

"Jayton, thank you for taking care of our lady. Would you excuse us please?" Gilaine asked.

Jayton nodded politely and returned to his work.

"Eat before the food goes cold," Gilaine ordered softly. She watched with a small smile as Lea made quick work of the fluffy omelet and fresh fruit on her plate.

"Jayton certainly is a wonderful cook," she commented as she took another sip of her juice.

"That he is," Gilaine agreed. "When one loves what one is doing, the thing is usually done well. Now tell me truthfully, are you all right? Shaylar explained to me the discussion the four of you had at firstmeal. She said you were upset."

Lea nodded. "I was, but Dare made me realize that it was not worth being upset over. It's just that it was *our* moment. Knowing that so many other people shared in it, even though I didn't know it at the time, takes the intimacy from it. Not to mention the fact that every man who was affected knows who and what affected him." Her eyes were bright with tears, her cheeks pink with embarrassment.

Gilaine reached out and took her hand, patting it comfortingly. "Listen to me," she counseled, "that moment was and still remains yours and Darien's. The men who were affected, as you say, were given a gift from the Orb, which wished to share its joy." Her voice took on a no-nonsense tone. "And as for anyone being less than respectful of you, that will not happen. As Darien's *tezza* you will always be treated with respect. And when the people truly come to know you, they will see that you deserve it on your own merits as well."

Lea nodded, too touched to speak, as she struggled to contain the tears that tried to break free.

"Come now, child." Gilaine smiled, tugging at Lea's hand. "No more talk of such a serious nature. Would you care to see the herb garden? It is beautiful this time of year, and so fragrant, the smells will make your mouth water."

As they wandered the herb garden, Shaylar joined them. The three women strolled and talked about plants and gardening, a subject in which they shared a great passion. Lea lamented the fact that there were no live plants in Dare's quarters. When she expressed her love of lavender, Gilaine steered her to a corner of the herb garden, where several large clumps of it grew amidst other plants.

Lea was delighted, and bent to smell the sweet, soothing scent. "We acquired it from Earth," Gilaine explained. "It was determined that it could be grown here without ill effect and so I planted some in this garden to start. I, too, have a fondness for its scent and have successfully kept a pot of it in my quarters. If you like, I will have some potted for you, that you may have it near you."

"That would be wonderful, Gilaine, thank you." Lea was truly grateful at the prospect and gave the older woman a hug.

The day continued to be pleasant as Lea, Gilaine and Shaylar toured the gardens and grounds, then retreated into the house to share the midday meal. After the meal the three of them wandered the house, with Gilaine and Shaylar pointing out things of interest to Lea. When the late afternoon sun began to shine through the windows, Gilaine excused herself to help with the evening meal preparations. Lea and Shaylar retired upstairs to their quarters.

Lea wandered into the study and chose a book, settling down to wait for Dare's return. She heard the door chime that signaled someone wished admittance. With an indrawn breath she rushed to the door then chided herself at her silliness – Dare would not activate the chime, he would simply come in.

She opened the door and was surprised to find Ran standing there. He looked hot and sweaty, as though he had been hard at work on some difficult project.

"Forgive my appearance, Lea, but I wished to speak with you in private," he explained. "I wish to apologize for this morning, Sister, it was not my intent to upset or anger you. I am truly sorry."

He looked so contrite, Lea felt a stir of pity for him. "It's okay, Ran, I know you didn't mean anything by it. You just got the unfortunate job of having to be the bearer of bad news. I don't hold it against you." She smiled. "Besides, after I got to thinking about it, it really was funny. I especially liked the...unloading of the assets description, it produces a very vivid picture."

Ran grinned, relieved that Lea was not angry with him. "I am forgiven, then?" At her assent he took her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm, then bent and bestowed a second one to her cheek. "Thank you, Lea, I shall see you at table."

Dare ascended the stairs in time to witness Ran kissing Lea's cheek. A swift pinch of jealousy assailed him. Then he met Lea's love-filled gaze. She came to him and melted into his arms, bestowing a kiss of such joyous passion that his jealousy melted like ice in the hot sun. Their lips melded as all thoughts disappeared, except the one that shouted, *here is my beloved.*

When he finally raised his head, breaking the kiss, Ran was gone. He wondered whimsically how long they had been at it. Time came to a halt each time their lips met. He tucked Lea under his shoulder and steered her into their quarters.

"Did you have a pleasant day, *tezza*?" he inquired.

Lea gave a short laugh. "That's my line," she insisted.

"Pardon?" Dare gave her a quizzical look.

"Not too long ago on Earth, the husband would go to work and when he came home the wife was supposed to say, 'How was your day, dear?'" she explained.

"I see." Dare smiled indulgently. "I shall endeavor to play my part correctly next time. Come join me in the bath and I shall tell you about my day," he offered with a wicked wink.

"Gilaine, Shaylar and Ran are expecting us to join them for the evening meal," she told him. "If I join you in the bath, will we get there?" she asked, already knowing the answer, as her pussy began to heat and moisten.

Dare gave the question serious consideration. "In all probability, no," he answered gravely.

"Aren't you hungry?" Lea inquired. "From the looks of it, you've had a rough day." Dare was every bit as disheveled as Ran had been.

"Oh I hunger, *ahnba*," he purred softly. "I hunger for *you*."

Lea could see the growing proof of his hunger as it strained against the confining leathers. A sultry smile curved her lips as she took his hand and led the way to the bathing room. "Let's eat."

* * * * *

Several hours later, Lea and Dare were sprawled in front of the fire in the front room of their quarters. They had just finished the meal that had been delayed earlier, and now lay relaxed and replete in every way. Dare had indeed told Lea all about his day, which had involved meetings via comm with several of the clan chiefs, some work with the horses and training with the men. It was that last which had gotten him and Ran so disheveled. Unarmed combat had been the big topic of the day. The men, who were always well disciplined and enthusiastic in their training, were especially so when the High Chieftain joined them in their labors.

Lea related her day to Dare and wound down when she noticed how seriously he was watching her. "What's wrong?" she asked softly, her hand cupping his cheek lovingly.

Dare grasped her hand and placed a sweet, fleeting kiss on her palm. "About what happened this morning," he began, watching her closely for her reaction. "Did I frighten or hurt you in any way, *tezza*?"

Touched by his concern she rushed to reassure him. "No, I wasn't afraid. And as for being hurt, well," she hedged, as her cheeks turned pink, "it did hurt when you spanked me, but not too much because it was also pleasurable." Lea's eyes were fixed determinedly on the rug under her, as she shyly avoided his gaze.

Dare hooked a finger under her chin and brought her face up, making her meet his eyes. "Do not be embarrassed, *ahnba*, there is nothing wrong with what we do, as long as both of us enjoy it. I just wish you to know, if ever I do anything you find intolerable,

you are to let me know immediately.” His serious words had her nodding her agreement. “I have no wish to hurt you. As you said, there is pleasure to be found in pain. But never too much pain, little one, and *always* pleasure for you, my *tezza*,” he whispered as his lips claimed hers in a slow, burning kiss.

Lea shivered as the fever in her blood began to heat. Dare’s touch ignited a fire that only he could quench. Her mouth opened as she accepted the invasion of his tongue, sparring with his in the warm moist heat of their mouths.

“Did you think also about my wish to take you anally?” he murmured huskily, as his hands began to move over her body.

Lea nodded, a moan slipping from parted lips as his hand cupped one firm breast, his fingers pulling at the distended nipple.

“And are you willing, *tezza*?” His question was punctuated by an intake of breath as she leaned in to lave his throat with her tongue, then administer small stinging bites.

“Yes,” she assented. “But Dare,” she pulled away as she trailed a hand down his chest, over his flat stomach, cupping his swollen cock, which bucked with pleasure under his lounging pants. “You’re so big, how can you possibly fit? I have to admit it’s a little scary.” She worried her lower lip, not wishing to disappoint him with a refusal, but afraid of the potential pain involved.

Dare smiled with understanding and rose, pulling her to her feet. “Come with me into the bedroom, I have something to show you.”

The platform that supported the bed contained drawers and from one, Dare pulled out a device. A small anal plug.

“Is that what I think it is?” Lea asked as she gazed at the innocent-looking device. “It’s not very big,” she commented, wondering how it was going to help prepare her for Dare’s prodigious dimensions.

“Watch,” he instructed. Dare activated a small switch which caused the anal plug to hum with a gentle vibration. When he began turning a small dial on the control box, Lea watched, amazed, as the plug began to literally grow before her astonished eyes. “It can be adjusted by use of this dial and will, at full growth, equal my cock in size. This is how I shall prepare you, *tezza*,” he told her, his voice a dark promise. “Let us begin. Remove you clothing, *ahnba*.” The mastery in his voice sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. Lea disrobed and stood naked, feeling more vulnerable than ever at the knowledge of what was to come.

Dare pulled the covers to the foot of the bed, revealing the cool sheets underneath. “Lie down on the bed as you did this morn,” he instructed. As she complied, Dare again rummaged in the drawer and found a bottle of lubricant. He applied it liberally to the plug and then with much pleasure and anticipation began smoothing it over Lea’s tight entrance. His finger penetrated her, spreading the lube inside, stretching her.

Lea whimpered as his finger moved inside.

“Relax, *tezza*,” he soothed. “Bear down for me.”

Lea fought to obey him and felt the pressure build as he began to work the plug into the tight ring of muscle. Her body protested the invasion as the burning sting of penetration built and she squirmed, seeking relief. At once, two things happened – Dare activated the vibration and his hand landed with a stinging smack against one pale rounded cheek.

“Be still,” he ordered firmly.

Lea gasped as her pussy clenched and creamed with the shock. Distracted, she unconsciously relaxed. Dare pressed the plug in firmly, seating it inside the tight confines of her rectum.

“Dare!” she cried out as she felt the plug begin to thicken and grow, stretching and burning her protesting muscles. She lay still, trying to accept the pleasure-pain that filled her anal passage as her pussy creamed with growing need. The vibration from the plug stimulated her rectum and sent waves of pleasure through her body. Her back arched when Dare slid two fingers into her heated passage, stroking slowly, emerging to tease her swollen clit, only to sink inside her again.

Lea writhed under him fighting to relax under his softly crooned praise. “That’s right, *ahnba*, take it, sweet, just a little more.” Lea heard and felt his movements as he replaced the control and the lube in the drawer and quickly removed his lounging pants. “There now, *tezza*,” he told her. “That’s all for now. Each day we will slowly increase the size until you are ready for me. Turn over, *ahnba*.”

Lea rolled to her back, her body aching with arousal and the unfamiliar fullness in her anus. She moaned with anticipation as Dare grasped her ankles and pulled them over his shoulders. His swollen cock pressed against the weeping entrance of her core and slowly he worked it into the fist-tight confines of her pussy. She bucked under him, her passage tightened by the anal plug.

“Goddess!” Dare swore. “You are so tight, Lea. I will not last.” He braced his hands on either side of her body, hips pumping, powering his thick length into her cream-filled sheath again and again.

Lea screamed as orgasm tore through her like a windstorm. Her body tightened and shook with the intense pleasure, and as her vision grayed, she realized dimly that she was about to pass out. Distantly she heard the agonized groan of pleasure that crawled from Dare’s throat, and felt his last powerful thrust. His seed jetted in hard spurts into her welcoming body and through her diminished awareness she felt his movements slow. Eyes still closed, she sensed him bending over her.

He gently patted her cheek. “Lea, *tezza*, are you all right?”

Stirred by the worry in his voice, she took a deep shuddering breath. “I just died of an overdose of pleasure,” she moaned. “It was a beautiful way to go.”

Dare snorted as a smug smile wreathed his face. Nothing made him feel more of a man than pleasuring his woman. He climbed onto the bed and pulled her unresisting body over his own.

“Sleep, my own,” he encouraged, as he gently rubbed her back. “Are you comfortable?” he questioned, his hand drifted over her backside.

She wiggled under his caress and snuggled closer “Fine,” she affirmed with a yawn.

“Then sleep, we shall remove the plug in the morning,” he told her, as he reached down and pulled the blankets over their loose-limbed and sated bodies.

Chapter Ten

Lea's days passed quickly, filled with the wonders of her new home. She and Shaylar became fast friends and spent many hours together—talking, gardening, walking into the village to shop in the marketplace. She also spent an equal number of hours with Gilaine, who acquainted her with the running of the household. Lea had taken up embroidery and beadwork under her tutelage and was becoming quite proficient.

Dare, after making sure she was adept at riding, gifted her with a beautiful bay gelding. Anzair was spirited, yet gentle with his new mistress and Lea spent a part of every day, weather permitting, riding him in the company of Shaylar and the guards who were assigned to protect them whenever Dare or Ran could not. Danger and trouble were not expected, but Dare insisted on the guards in case of accident or a wandering mountain cat.

Lea was curious about the training Dare participated in with the men, and after one evening in which she questioned him unmercifully, he offered to take her to the training grounds where she could uncover the mysteries for herself. They would also tour the barracks and armory.

The day dawned bright and clear and after a particularly vigorous loving, a soothing bath and a hearty firstmeal, they set out for the training fields. Shaylar, who had expressed a wish to go as well, accompanied them. Ran appeared with a ground skimmer and they rode in comfort and parked near the barracks.

Dare's home guard consisted of any man from the Finn Mal clan who had the skills to join the warrior caste. There were also two men chosen from each of the other clans. It was considered a great honor to serve in the High Chieftain's guard.

The men trained on a daily basis so as to keep their skills sharp and ever ready should the need arise. Atrios was a peaceful planet, the clans existing—for the most part—in harmony. It was outside interference for which they stayed on alert. Years ago, the nearby planet of Somerce had sent an invasion force which was successfully repelled. Ever mindful of the proximity of their hostile neighbors, the High Chieftain gave priority to the training of his forces and to the development of weapons and defense methods that would keep these enemies at bay.

Today in the training yard, many of the men had taken up swords and were being instructed by their senior members. At Dare's appearance many a good-natured challenge was issued. Not wishing to disappoint, he left Lea and Shaylar on the sidelines and took up his sword. Lots were drawn for the honor of sparring with him and soon Dare and his opponent were facing off, swords drawn and ready.

At the signal from the senior instructor they began. Lea breathlessly watched the dancelike moves of the two men as they swung their swords, thrusting and parrying each other's moves with such ease.

Sunshine glinted off shining blades and the clear ring of steel on steel rent the air. Sweat broke out on their straining bodies, dampening shirts which clung to hard, flexing muscle. As the contest wore on, Dare began to back his opponent across the field. His lightning-quick moves became harder and harder to block and, with a move that defied the eyes to follow it, he disarmed his opponent.

A roar of approval went up from the men watching and Lea let out her pent-up breath with relief. Knowing Dare was an expert with a sword did little to help while watching him put himself in danger. Dare grinned and slapped his opponent on the back as he spoke earnestly with him. They separated and Dare returned to Lea and Shaylar, a grin on his face.

"What did you think, *ahnba*?" he questioned her.

"Were you showing off for me?" she asked seriously.

"Aye," he answered. "Were you impressed?"

"Very much," she answered "Though not so much had you been injured." Her words held a hint of disapproval.

"That would not happen," he assured her arrogantly. "But, does not the winner of the contest deserve a prize?"

"What did you have in mind?" she asked suspiciously.

"A kiss, *tezza*, just a kiss."

Grateful for the simplicity of his request, she acquiesced, thinking he would accept a quick peck. Caught by surprise, she squeaked as Dare hauled her into his arms and kissed her deeply and thoroughly. She heard an indistinct roaring in her ears and realized the men were again cheering their High Chieftain.

Lea flushed from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes as Dare chucked her playfully under the chin and laughed.

"You rat," she hissed. "I'll get you for that."

"I look forward to it, *tezza*. Now, shall we continue the tour?" he asked, smiling as he extended his hand.

Lea placed hers in his and agreed, eager to cease being the center of attention. They did a quick inspection of the barracks, not wishing to intrude in the men's private living space. The quarters were spacious and comfortable, complete with all the amenities. Dare's men were not asked to live a spartan existence.

Afterward, they toured the armory. Lea was fascinated by the variety of weaponry to be found there. Everything from primitive swords and knives to what seemed to her to be wildly futuristic weapons.

Following Dare as he explained the uses and workings of the different items, she was again reminded that although the people of Atrios, on the surface, appeared more

primitive than the people of Earth, they were instead light years ahead of them in their technology.

Ran entered and approached Dare, Lea and Shaylar. "Sorry to interrupt," he apologized, "but Chief Romsen of the Shen Mec would like to have a word with both of us. He says it is important. We can take it on the comm in the armorer's office."

Dare nodded his agreement and turned to Lea. "I shall return as soon as possible. Wait here and do not touch anything," he cautioned.

Lea and Shaylar continued to stroll around the large room. Shaylar stopped to study what looked like a crossbow. Lea continued on and brooded. Dare's last words to her were like those of a parent to a wayward child. *Don't touch anything*, she snorted. She had not told him, but Jessie's father had taught both Jess and herself to handle guns. Both girls had participated in shooting contests. Jess had turned out to be the superior shot, but Lea was no slouch.

She stopped in front of a rack that held pistol-like weapons and, refusing to heed Dare's warning, picked one up. She examined it curiously, then felt a frisson of concern when a red light began to blink.

"Lea, no!" Shaylar called, having just noticed Lea holding the weapon.

"Lealah, do not move." Dare's voice was iron-hard and brooked no argument.

Lea froze, her breath caught in her chest. She watched Dare's approach with trepidation, not sure which to be more afraid of, the weapon in her hand or the man with the closed, steely expression on his face. Dare reached her and carefully removed the weapon from her hand, pressing a series of buttons that made the weapon power down. He placed it with deliberate care back in its position on the rack. His movements were smooth and measured as though he were holding himself under tight rein.

His eyes met hers and she staggered back at the raw anger she saw reflected there.

"Do you have any idea what almost happened?" he growled.

She shook her head in denial, afraid to speak.

"That weapon went into self-destruct mode. You could have killed yourself, Shaylar and Goddess knows how many others." He held himself rigidly, his chest heaving with the force of his ire. "Did I not tell you not to touch anything?" he asked with quiet menace.

Lea nodded.

The force of Dare's displeasure had drawn several of the men from their duties and a small crowd had gathered.

"Do you remember me telling you that disobedience and defiance reap their own reward? This you have done, *tezza*. You must be punished." Dare clasped her wrist in his hand and pulled her with him as he seated himself in a nearby chair.

Lea stared in shocked disbelief as realization of his purpose struck with blinding clarity. "Dare, no," she whispered as fear filled her. She pulled without result against his hold but failed to break it.

With quick and efficient economy of movement, Dare took her across his lap and bared her bottom. The sight of those luscious mounds normally stirred his blood, but not this time. His fear when he saw her holding the gun, its self-destruct indicator blinking, had swept away all other needs save the one that would teach her never to take such risks again.

He steeled himself against her pleas and struggles as he spanked her. His palm landed again and again on her sleek skin until it was fiery red and Lea was crying uncontrollably.

Lea struggled against him as fear, humiliation and pain warred for supremacy in the turmoil of her emotions. She was blinded by tears as she cried out with each stinging blow that landed on her tender flesh. When Dare finally set her back on her feet she continued to cry, as hurt—not only physical, but emotional—tore through her.

“You will go to our quarters and stay there until you are given permission to leave them,” Dare ordered curtly. “Ran, see Lealah and Shaylar home.” He turned and headed out the door, scattering the audience as he went.

“I’ll go,” Lea sobbed, “but don’t you dare expect to share them with me. I hate you!”

Dare paused, his shoulders stiffening slightly, and without looking back or replying he walked from the room.

* * * * *

Lea sat in the entertainment room as *The Maltese Falcon* played on the screen. Her mind had not been on the movie since it began. She brooded, a sad expression on her face as she contemplated how much she missed Dare. It was the third day since the incident in the armory had taken place, three long days of hell.

Ran had delivered Shaylar and her to the High Chieftain’s residence and left without a word, although his gaze had held a hint of censure. Believing herself ill-used, Lea had sequestered herself in her quarters and refused to see or speak to anyone for the past three days.

That first evening, she lay on the bed on her stomach—her backside too tender to stand any kind of pressure—and sobbed wildly. Like a lost child, she’d cried herself to sleep only to wake in the night reaching for Dare. Not finding him, memory reasserted itself and she cried again, the hurt tearing at her as she wrapped herself in a ball and rocked forlornly. Twenty-four hours of almost nonstop tears had netted her swollen eyes, stuffed nasal passages and a blazing headache. Driven from bed by the pain, she had entered the bathing chamber and submersed herself in the soothing waters. With the repeated application of first heat then cold, her sinuses had finally cleared and she was able to drink some *tiko* berry juice without feeling sick to her stomach.

The receding headache and the influx of energy from the juice she drank helped her to think clearly for the first time about the incident. Her emotions were in turmoil. If

Dare loved her, how could he have done that to her? She recalled his order and the resentment she'd felt at his cavalier treatment of her—but had she done any better in defying him? If he was wrong in not explaining the dangers to her, one adult to another, had she behaved any better by picking up an unknown and dangerous weapon that could have killed, as Dare said, not only herself, but Shaylar and who knew how many others as well? She began to realize that she had acted just the way Dare had treated her—like an unruly child.

The thought brought a flush of shame to her cheeks and she realized that if she'd only thought it through clearly the whole incident could have been avoided. Dare was an intelligent, reasonable man. She silently cursed herself, realizing that if she'd only asked him to treat her as a responsible adult, he more than likely would have. Instead she'd thrown away her advantage with a petulant show of defiance that had done nothing more than prove to him that he'd been right in his attitude toward her all along.

His words echoed through her mind, the litany of destruction she could have caused, the deaths—including her own—that could have occurred. The weight of his words fell upon her as she truly realized why he had become so angry and implacable in his decision to punish her. *He'd been afraid for her.* The more she contemplated the idea, the more it made sense. Dare loved her, of that she was certain, but even more, he was a man who while very passionate, also knew how to keep himself under tight control. She remembered how she'd felt watching him at arms practice. It hadn't mattered that he was an expert at handling the sword or that the fight had been nothing more than a test of skills. She'd been afraid for him, afraid he might be injured.

Knowing now that her love for him had brought about that fear, how much greater would his fear have been when he saw her holding death in her inexperienced and unaware hands?

Her final words to him rang in her head and she whimpered in distress. How could she have been so petty as to say those hurtful words to him? "Oh Dare, I'm so sorry," she whispered, as she again broke into sobs. How was she to ever set this disastrous mess straight? She was more than willing to admit to her part in the mess, but she needed Dare to admit to his part as well. If she apologized and he did not, she knew the resentment she felt would eventually come between them.

After spending another evening alone, sobbing in the big bed that seemed so empty without Dare, she again sat brooding as *The Maltese Falcon* filled the silence around her.

I have to find a way to apologize, she thought. A way that will truly let him know how sorry I am and show him how much I love him.

Lea frowned and sighed, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. She needed help. Going to the comm, she put in a call to Gilaine. As the older woman's face appeared on the screen, Lea felt tears fill her eyes.

"I need your help," she told her. "I'd come to you, but I'm not allowed to leave my quarters," she confessed shamefaced. "Will you come?"

Gilaine's face softened. "I'll be right there," she assured Lea.

"Gilaine? If she will, would you ask Shaylar to come too?" Lea asked.

"We will both be there in a few moments."

Lea sighed with relief, and a little while later when the door chime rang, she rushed to answer it. Gilaine and Shaylar stood waiting, along with a cart loaded with food.

Lea burst into tears as Gilaine and Shaylar gathered her close. They stood together, arms around each other, as they comforted Lea.

"There now, child, that's enough," Gilaine ordered gently. She handed Lea a cloth to wipe her face and blow her nose. When she finished, Gilaine smoothed back her hair with a cool hand. "I am more than willing to bet that you have a headache."

At Lea's nod, she poured some clear liquid from a small vial into a glass of *tiko* berry juice. "Drink this," she ordered kindly.

Lea complied and immediately felt better. "Thank you for coming," she told them. "I feel so terrible about what happened. When Dare told me not to touch anything I resented it and instead of acting like the adult I am, I acted like the child he treated me as," she confessed. "I know I was wrong, but...don't you think he was, too?"

Both women nodded their heads in agreement. "Our men, especially the warriors, have a very highly developed sense of responsibility when it comes to women. Sometimes they forget that we have minds and common sense of our own, that we're not children who need to be guided through our daily lives," Gilaine explained.

"Men have a tendency to like things simple. I believe this is why they sometimes act so arrogant in their efforts to protect us. If we do what they say without question it's one less thing they need to worry about. I don't blame them for it, but like you and many other women, I do resent it. It's up to each one of us to make our partner realize that we are thinking, reasoning adults and that we expect to be treated as such. This you must do with Darien."

"That's a tall order," Lea commented. "But you're right. I've also got to apologize for my actions, but I'm not sure what to do." She paused. "How is he?"

"He is by turns as mean as a mountain cat, and silent and brooding. Everyone has taken to avoiding him whenever possible. Even Ran is losing patience with him," Shaylar told her.

"How can I fix this?" Lea asked them desperately. "Do you think he will forgive me?"

"Of course he will," Gilaine snorted. "Darien *loves* you. You frightened him, Lea. He is a strong, confident man, but the thought of losing you shatters him. I shudder to think what would have happened had we lost you and Shaylar." Seeing Lea's look of distress, she quickly changed the subject. "But no more of that talk and no more tears," she admonished gently. "First we will eat, for I know without doubt that not much food, if any, has passed your lips in the past three days. And then between the three of us we will think of something that will set our High Chieftain on his ear."

They dug into the food and Lea, encouraged by the hope that Gilaine and Shaylar brought, ate a good meal. They had made her feel so much better, lifting her battered spirits. She was hopeful that she could set things right between herself and Dare.

After the meal, they contemplated different plans, only to discard them as unsuitable. At one point the comm chimed, a message for Gilaine concerning the arrival of the clan chiefs the following day for their regularly scheduled conference.

"I'm taking you from your duties," Lea pointed out guiltily.

"This is more important," Gilaine replied.

"Hmmm." Shaylar sat with an intrigued look on her face as the glimmer of an idea shone with ever increasing light in her mind, "Lea, did you not tell me that you know how to dance?" she asked.

Lea nodded "I've been taking classes for several years. It's lots of fun and good exercise. Why?" A suspicious frown crossed her face.

"The clan chiefs are assembling tomorrow for their conference, and tomorrow night they will be expecting entertainment to be provided. Remember the room you found, the one where I told you musicians play and women dance for them?" At Lea's cautious nod, she continued. "Tomorrow night you are going to be the entertainment."

"I can't!" Lea denied. "Not in front of all those men."

Shaylar gave her a stern, no-nonsense look "Did you not say that you wished to let Dare know how sorry you are?" she asked. "When you do this, he will know beyond doubt that not only are you sorry, but that you love him with all your heart."

Gilaine solemnly nodded her agreement. "Such is the meaning given when a *tezza* dances for her husband."

Lea frowned, biting her lip in nervous agitation. "Oh, all right. What do I have to do?"

"As you are the experienced dancer, I will let you decide on what you will perform. I will bring the head musician here, that you may instruct him on what kind of music you need," Shaylar answered.

"And the three of us will create an appropriate costume for you to wear," Gilaine added. "What form of dancing is it that you do?" she asked curiously.

"Belly dancing," Lea replied sheepishly.

"It certainly sounds interesting." Gilaine smiled.

"Oh, I think I can safely say that the men will like it," Lea told her as the idea began to grow on her. She would shake Dare from the top of his head to the tips of his toes before she was done, she vowed. A wicked little smile began to curve her lips.

"And with a few added extras, my dear brother will be so enchanted, he will not know what hit him," Shaylar assured her.

The three of them began to laugh with almost sinful delight.

Chapter Eleven

Dare stood on the balcony, brooding, his mind firmly on the one subject that had haunted him for days. Lealah. *What am I going to do?* he asked himself for the thousandth time. He missed her with a fierceness that was tearing him apart inside. Time and again he had almost gone to her, ready to apologize, just to be taken into her good graces again. Then he would stop, realizing that he could not. Her punishment had been well deserved, it was she who had been in the wrong, not him. To apologize would defeat the object of the lesson he wished her to learn. She needed to learn that where her safety was concerned, he would accept nothing less than her total obedience.

Dare struggled with himself over the issue. He had told her not to touch anything, but had not told her why. Still, he felt she should have trusted in him. He would not have idly issued such a warning without reason...yet perhaps the fault had been just as much his as hers. He kept forgetting that she was not of Atrios, not reared as the women of this world were. His Lea had a streak of independence that needed to be nurtured, not beaten out of her. He cringed at the very thought. It had not occurred to him that by spanking her in anger and fear he had taken an activity that they had used in the bedroom to invoke pleasure and turned it into a weapon of chastisement. It pained him to think that he may have lost her trust. His thoughts chased themselves round and round in his head until he felt he would go mad with it.

He was not sleeping well, and when he managed to doze off, the scene in the armory replayed itself again and again in his dreams. Lea standing so innocently, holding the object of her potential destruction. He felt himself moving toward her slowly, as though his limbs were weighted and agony flooded him as again and again he realized he would not reach her in time. He would wake, gasping for breath, as a cold sweat broke out on his body.

Last night, as he lay back, waiting for his heart to cease pounding, he found himself imagining her with him, warm, naked and willing in his arms. His cock had immediately come to attention, demanding action. Dare seriously considered going to their quarters, until the memory of the last time he'd seen her face filled his mind. Her face had borne a closed and shuttered look, the love in her eyes replaced by hurt, as tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks. *I hate you.* Her final words to him echoed in the dark empty chasm of his heart.

Dare turned away from the view of the training fields. He had taken up rooms in the guest quarters, afraid to be too near Lea, afraid he would not be able to resist going to her. As he stood contemplating another empty evening alone, the door chime sounded.

A scowl crossed his face, he had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. He had come close to verbally disemboweling one of the serving staff and he had no wish to give in to such childish behavior. Gathering his restraint, he approached the door and opened it, surprised to find Shaylar standing there.

"May I come in for a moment?" she asked hesitantly.

"If you are feeling very brave," he answered, stepping aside.

She apparently was, for she entered and immediately faced him. "Lea sent me," she told him. "She wishes permission to leave her quarters."

Dare swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat. "Granted," he bit out curtly. "How is she?" he asked softly, unable to resist the need to know at least that much.

"Better," Shaylar admitted. "Gilaine and I persuaded her to eat, for what I believe is the first time in the past three days."

Dare turned and swore softly. "Do not allow her to become ill." His voice was thick with emotion.

She placed her hand softly on his forearm. "Everything will be fine, Dare, sooner than you think, I am sure. Try not to worry."

He placed a hand over hers and gave it a comforting pat. "I thank you, little one, for your news. Now if you will excuse me, I have business to attend to."

He strode from the room gathering his composure as he went. It was time to fix this mess. Dare went in search of Ran to help him form a plan of attack.

* * * * *

Lea waited, with equal parts dread and anticipation, for the signal that her dance would begin. She was dressed, poised and polished from head to toe. Her costume was very traditional and *very* skimpy. She wore a bralike top that was encrusted with gold and jewels that draped down in a glinting fringe that shimmered with each move. There were also jeweled chains that descended from the middle of the cups and curved down, draping her waist and hips before fastening at the back to hold them in place. Her arms held bracelets—wide gold bands at her wrists, thinner gold bands just below her elbows and triple spirals of gold that wound her upper arms. Riding low—very low!—on her hips, was a golden girdle also weighted with gold and jewels, the long bejeweled and beaded fringe flowing down like water, glinting with reflected light.

The girdle was covered with numerous sheer, flowing panels of filmy fabric in greens, gold, amber, bronze, bittersweet orange and deep cherry red. Two were permanently attached to the girdle, the others were anchored there temporarily, as she would pull them away at different stages of her dance. Underneath the see-through veils of her skirt she wore a thong, the tiny triangle of fabric at the front just covering her mons. Her feet were bare, her ankles draped with jeweled chains. Lea's hair was

freshly washed and shone like fine silk as it fell almost to her waist. Around her neck she wore jeweled chains that matched those on her ankles.

Gilaine, Shaylar and some of the other woman had worked like mules to complete the costume for her. All were anxious to see their High Chieftain and his lady restored to each other. The gloom that permeated the residence was most distressing.

Lea had consulted with the head musician and they had worked out the music for her dance. It was a blend of slow and faster rhythms that would allow her to use many of the belly dancing techniques she had learned.

She willed herself to remain calm. As the beginning strains of the music began, she took a deep breath and walked forward into the room, her slow, swaying steps hypnotic and arousing to all those who watched.

A collective gasp, then surprised and pleased murmurs broke out as the men realized that it was Lady Lealah who had come forward to perform for them. They were all well aware of the incident that had taken place but a few days before their arrival. Such monumental news could not be kept hidden, especially as it concerned the welfare of their High Chief and his *tezza*.

Dare was ensconced amid the cushions and rugs on the raised dais at the front of the room. He sat in solitary state, his mind dwelling on the problem of Lea and what to do to bring about a resolution to it. He knew for a certainty that he could not go on this way much longer. His mind, heart and body cried out for his woman, and the need could not be denied for much longer.

He paid no attention when the music began, until the surprised murmur of voices drew his attention. His gaze moved with arrowlike precision to the familiar figure who had entered the room and was moving with a sensual grace that had his body wound tight within seconds. His cock filled and rose with such speed he was surprised it did not tear through his leathers as it strained to be freed.

He struggled to remain still, determined to stay where he was, seemingly relaxed and unconcerned, when his every instinct urged him to rise and claim his woman. He could not still the increased breaths or the faster beat of his heart as she moved amongst the men, drawing closer and closer to his position.

Dare was captivated by her dance. Muscles flexed and flowed under pale skin that gleamed with gathering moisture. Her hips twisted, swiveled and bumped, each movement exotic and intoxicating. As her pelvis thrust and shimmed, she spun with an erotic beauty that tore the breath from his lungs. Her arms and hands flowed and waved with sensual grace as they accented her body's smooth motion. Lea's chestnut hair fell like a curtain of silk and glowed with red, gold and mahogany highlights as it swayed with her every motion.

The music held an almost feline quality, inciting heat as the drums encouraged each man to join in the compelling rhythm. A sudden increase in tempo and Lea's hips shook with a snappy, staccato motion that tore a reverent, "Goddess," from his lips. She tore

two of the veiling skirt panels from her hips and paused dramatically for several beats as they floated to the floor, two jewel-toned, transparent scraps that fluttered and teased.

Her path led her closer to Dare as she left a trail of colorful fabric behind her. Her lips were curved in a shy, yet sultry smile. The music took on a slower, sensual rhythm as Lea at last stood before him, and it was at that moment that she danced for only him. Her eyes met his and clung, never wavering. She slowly lowered herself to the floor, and on all fours, with the mesmerizing grace of a mountain cat stalking her prey, she moved, mounting the low dais.

Stopping before him, she raised her upper torso and slowly lowered herself back, her body a perfect arch as her hair swept the floor. Bringing her body back to an upright position, she stayed on her knees as her abdomen flexed and her belly rolled with smooth, flowing movements.

As the tempo of the music increased Lea rose easily to her feet and continued to dance. Dare could clearly see the sheen of moisture that gleamed on her skin from her efforts. He smelled the warm heat that emanated from her. It carried the scent of his woman—fresh, sweet and aroused. His cock redoubled its efforts to escape as the music swelled and rose, richer and higher. Lea pulled the final veils free and was left with only two gossamer-thin, diaphanous panels of fabric so sheer they revealed more than they covered. The firm mounds of her porcelain smooth bottom flexed with each move and when Dare saw the tiny triangle of fabric that veiled her pussy, he felt a shock of sensation so intense it took his breath.

With several more gliding spins the music ended and Lea fell to her knees before him, her body bent forward in supplication.

Lea was elated. She had performed without falling on her face. She had kept her eyes resolutely away from Dare as she danced, sure that if she set her eyes on him too soon she would mess up before she reached him.

She had put her all into the dance, conveying without words her feelings for him. Her eyes had briefly met others in the room, and their looks of approval and enjoyment had encouraged her. As she neared the front of the room, Ran had been there. His teasing smile and wicked wink had stilled the panic that began to stir with Dare's presence but feet away.

When her eyes finally met his, all doubt and fear was swept away. His eyes shone with such heat and love her entire body had quivered with reaction. As she went to her hands and knees before him, it took every bit of restraint she could muster not to continue on and find the welcome she knew was waiting for her in his arms.

But finally, here and now, her restraint was about to be rewarded. With joy, on her knees before him, she spoke the words that would heal the rift between them.

"For my arrogance and willful defiance, I humbly beg your forgiveness. I am truly sorry, *chatok a' reyya*." Lea spoke the words clearly and without hesitation.

Murmurs of surprise and approval rippled through the rapt audience. Lealah, with the invocation of the ancient words, had just acknowledged Darien Finn Mal as her lord and master.

With easy grace, Dare rose to his feet. "Come to me, Lealah," he ordered gently. Lea followed his example and rose, walking the short distance that separated them, taking the hands he held out to her. Her eyes drank in the sight of his cherished face.

"You have done me a great honor this day," he began, his voice loud enough that every person in the room heard his words. "You have filled my soul with joy and pride, and my heart with love. You are forgiven, my beloved, my *tezza*, but only if you will forgive me as well."

A startled hush fell over the room. "I did not mean to belittle you, Lea. I'm not your master. I wish only to be your partner, equal in all things, each treating the other with respect. Will you accept my offer and forgive my arrogance?"

Lea's eyes shone with unshed tears. "I will."

He leaned forward and for her ears alone he whispered, "I love you, Lea."

Tears of joy spilled from her eyes and flowed down her cheeks as she threw herself into his arms. Dare held her close, then bent and picked her up in his arms, holding her against his chest.

"Men of the clans," he announced, "continue without me. I find that my attention is needed elsewhere."

Cheers erupted as Dare strode from the room, Lea cradled in his arms.

Ran laughed and shook his head, "Thank the Mother," he sighed, then suddenly had a thought. "I believe I shall retire to my quarters," he told the others who were standing near.

"Leaving so soon, Ran?" Krentan Tray Mar asked. "I would say the best entertainment just left the room, but there is more to be had." He indicated the musicians as they took up their instruments and began to play. A lovely young woman was waiting in the doorway, preparing to dance for the assembly.

"Those two have been apart for almost four days," Ran informed Krentan, referring to Lea and Dare. "Considering what happened on their joining night, I believe I prefer to take no chances. If you take my meaning."

Krentan nodded his head gravely, considering the possibilities. "I believe I, too, shall call it a night."

As word circled the room, a general exodus took place until the assembled had all disappeared, much to the dismay of the young ladies who had been waiting to perform.

* * * * *

Dare marched with unerring purpose through the conference room, out into the hallway and up the stairs to the family rooms. His arms were like steel bands wrapped in velvet as they held her close.

Lea's arms were draped around his neck, her cheek pressed against his collarbone, her eyes closed. She wanted nothing more than the scent of him in her nostrils, the feel of him as he touched her, the taste of him as he kissed her. She knew when next she opened her eyes it would be his precious face she would see. All else faded away. Only Dare mattered.

He came to a halt at the door to their quarters and lowered her to her feet. His arms kept her tight against him as his mouth swept down to claim hers. Lea immediately opened for him, her body straining against his, her sighing moan filling his mouth as their tongues met and mated.

Dare spun her around, her back to the wall. "Put your legs around me, *ahnba*," he ordered, his voice a deep, hoarse rasp.

His hands moved, cupping the luscious cheeks of her bottom and, as he lifted, she obeyed, wrapping her legs around him. Her sex was pressed intimately against his leather-wrapped erection and she strained forward, her buttocks flexing, thighs clenching as she fought to pull him closer.

A groan of frustrated arousal broke from his lips as he ground his hips against her cushioned mons. Reaching down he found first one then the other thin strap that held her minuscule thong in place. With little effort he snapped each strap and pulled the tiny obstruction away, dropping it to the floor.

Lea gasped as the swollen lips of her sex came into direct contact with his throbbing, leather-encased bulge, and she writhed against it as she panted and whimpered.

"Dare!" she gasped, that one word conveyed her frustration, impatience and need.

"Ah, Goddess," he growled, "Ease back, Lea, ease back. Just a little, *tezza*."

Lea understood his need and eased herself away from him. Dare released his grip on one rounded globe of her bottom to reach around and free himself, but Lea beat him to it. She swiftly unfastened his pants, spreading the front open, reaching in. One hand grasped his engorged shaft and the other helped to gently work him free. Mission accomplished, both hands wrapped around the thick column and gave a few experimental pumps.

"Do not!" he ordered urgently. "Inside, *ahnba*, now!"

Guiding him to her well-lubricated channel, a long drawn-out moan was her response as he slid inside, stretching and filling her. They rested a moment as her body adjusted to his girth and Dare strove to keep from immediately shooting his seed into her hot, tight passage.

Lea had reached the point where it was move or go insane, when a slight movement caught her eye. She watched with mortified shock as Ran mounted the stairs.

“Oh my God, Dare! It’s *Ran*,” she hissed.

Lea’s body went stiff with shock and Dare turned his head to see Ran stop at the top of the stairs. His brother’s eyes widened, and an unrepentant grin stole over his face.

“Ran,” Dare spoke quietly.

“I know,” he answered. “You are invisible.”

Lea buried her face, scarlet with embarrassment, against Dare’s shoulder as he chuckled, unconcerned at being caught by his brother.

With perfect balance and dexterity, Dare found their door, opened it, stepped inside and closed it after them, all with Lea clinging to him, his cock buried to the hilt in her clasp pussy.

He braced her against the wall saying, “Where were we? Ah yes, I believe it was here,” as his hips surged forward.

Lea cried out as the rounded head of his cock nudged her cervix, the pleasure moving from her core to flow over every nerve ending in her body. Once again, her body made its demands and she tightened her thighs around him, her heels grinding into the taut cheeks of his ass as she strove to pull him deeper inside. She mindlessly rode the constant waves of pleasure as they steadily increased in intensity.

Dare set a steady pounding rhythm as he repeatedly sank into her and Lea welcomed every thrust, accepting him deep, deeper. His groans and pants of effort fired her blood as the pungent scent of their mutual arousal clouded her mind. Primal man had taken control and he fucked his woman. She rewarded him with moans and cries of growing passion as he labored between her thighs, filling her again and again. A deep guttural groan was torn from his throat as, with one more deep thrust, she felt the final swelling and jerk of his cock that signaled the release of his seed. He held himself high and deep inside her heated depths, and Lea ground herself convulsively against him as her sheath suddenly seized his gushing cock.

With a wailing cry she undulated on the thick column of flesh buried deep inside as release rushed through her body and exploded. Her whole body stiffened as she threw her head back. If not for Dare’s quick reflexes, she would have cracked her skull on the wall, but with lightning speed, one hand reached up to cradle her head. Her back arched as her head hit the cushion of his hand again and again. Repeated waves of pleasure washed over her, decreasing in intensity until she sagged, exhausted and replete, in his arms. She unconsciously uttered small incoherent sounds of satisfaction as she cuddled in Dare’s sheltering embrace.

Dare smiled at the little noises Lea made. How he’d missed the sweet sounds his *tezza* made after he loved her. They were a clear indication that he had indeed pleased her.

Unwilling to admit it, he needed her affirmation of love and desire again. “Do you no longer hate me, *basaya*?” he asked softly.

Lea raised her head from where it rested on his shoulder. Her hands cupped his cheeks. "I never hated you," she confessed earnestly. "I was hurt and angry. I am so sorry I hurt you," she whispered. "I love you, Dare, always, no matter what happens between us. I will never stop loving you." Slow tears dripped from her eyes as she sought to reassure him.

"Shh, my *ahnba*," he soothed, as elation and relief made his knees weak. "No more tears, all is forgiven, and all is forgotten except the lessons we both learned. Yes?" he questioned.

Lea bit her lip, a bashful look in her eyes, as she nodded her agreement. "Yes," she assured him.

Dare withdrew from the warmth of her body and lowered her to her feet. Cupping her chin in his hand he studied her seriously before speaking. "I wish only that you consider carefully before you act. When I give an order, even if there is no time to explain, know that my reasons are sound and given with your safety in mind." He wanted to make absolutely certain she understood, that they could avoid the agony of another misunderstanding. "I promise you, I will make every effort to remember that you are an intelligent adult and to treat you as such."

"Thank you," she told him. "I won't forget, I promise."

Dare hugged her close. "All is well then." He smoothed the hair back from her face "Join me in the bath?"

Lea smiled. "Of course," she replied, then examined his face. "You look tired, love. Are you all right?"

The worry that shaded her question filled Dare with warmth.

"I am fine, *tezza*," he reassured her. "I did not get much sleep while we were parted," he admitted, somewhat sheepishly.

Lea immediately turned solicitous. "Oh, Dare." She took his arm, urging him into the bathing chamber. "Come on, baby, let's get you cleaned up and then you're going right to bed," she insisted.

Dare chuckled with delight, touched at how she fussed over him. "I will go to bed," he conceded. "But only if you are with me."

"And where else would I be?" she teased.

They undressed and entered the water, bathing quickly. Both of them were eager to go to bed, thinking they would make love again.

Dare finished first, and kissed her, whispering, "Hurry," in her ear as he retreated to the bedroom.

Lea hastened to apply body lotion, finishing in record time. She entered the bedroom and approached the bed. Dare lay on his back, sound asleep. A tender smile wreathed her face as she softly ordered the lights out and climbed into bed. As she snuggled up to him, he automatically pulled her close and, with a mutual sigh, they both succumbed to much-needed rest.

* * * * *

In his quarters, Ran heaved another sigh, then shook his head with disgust. Here he sat, alone, contemplating the tiny scrap of fabric he had picked up off the floor after Dare and Lea retreated to their quarters. His brother was certainly a lucky man. Lea had proven to be everything a man could want in a wife. Sweet, kind, loving, sensual, daring. *The way she had danced.* It was safe to say that she fired the imagination of every man who watched.

Not that Ran coveted Lea, she was Dare's *tezza*, his soul's mate. He was more than happy for the two of them. Lea was a beautiful woman and he had come to love her, but she was not for him. His feelings for her could never approach the intensity of Dare's.

Ran realized with a shock that he, too, was longing for a woman of his own. Perhaps it was seeing Dare and Lea so in love and lost in each other. Whatever the reason, he knew he was tired of the meaningless encounters that had satisfied him up until that time. He began to think of the future, of what it would mean to have his own *tezza*, his own children. His customary grin returned to his face as he thought of those future Finn Mal offspring. A rowdy son and a daughter who would no doubt be shy and sweet, like her mother.

A soft laugh fell from his lips. *I grow maudlin in my old age*, he thought. *Soon I will be weeping like a lovesick maid.* With another shake of his head he rose and headed for bed, resolving to give each woman that came his way more than just a quick assessment of their worthiness to be bedded.

He also resolved to return that tiny thong to his brother at the first opportunity. It would doubtless become a cherished memento.

Chapter Twelve

“Dare?” Lea lounged lazily in front of the fire. She and Dare had just returned from evening meal with the family and were enjoying some quiet time together in their quarters.

He gave a long, leisurely, “Mmmm?” while lying with his head in her lap.

“Can I go home?” she asked in all innocence, not realizing how the question would sound.

Dare sat up abruptly and gave her a searching look. “Did we have another disagreement I am not aware of?” he questioned with concern.

Confused by the intensity of his look, she shook her head. “No. What makes you ask that?”

“Why else would you wish to leave me?” he asked, keeping his expression under strict control. His heart felt constricted in a chest that had suddenly gone tight with tension and dismay.

“I *don't* want to leave you,” she answered with a frown until comprehension dawned. “Oh no. Oh God, Dare, no! I would never leave you.” She threw her arms around his neck and began placing small kisses over his face all the while repeating, “I love you,” until she had him laughing with relief.

Hauling her into his lap, he leaned back against the sofa and cuddled her close, kissing her hair. “Tell me why you wish to return to Earth, *ahnba*. I will not call it home, for your home is here with me.” His words held a slight hint of admonishment.

“I really need to see my friend, Jessie. It’s been weeks. She probably thinks I’m dead. That some horrible person kidnapped me and killed me.” She lifted her head from his shoulder and met his eyes earnestly. “I can’t let her go on thinking that, not if I can let her know that I’m okay and that everything is so wonderful here.” She reached up to tenderly stroke his cheek, her eyes gone liquid with love. “And that I’ve found you.”

Dare kissed her with profound tenderness. “*Tezza*, you fill my heart,” he confessed in hoarse murmur.

She gave him a soft trembling smile. “Are you trying to distract me, Mr. Finn Mal?”

“Could I?” He returned her smile, his taking on a sensual twist.

“Easily,” she admitted with a breathless sigh. When his lips neared hers she placed her hand over his mouth. “But not now,” she teased archly.

Dare groaned in good-natured defeat, kissing her palm then pulling it away from his mouth. “You wish to see your friend?” At her nod he continued, “You have the power at your fingertips.”

"The Orb?" Her expression was doubtful. "So what do I do, click my heels together three times and repeat 'there's no place like home, there's no place like home'?" She grinned at his disbelieving look.

"No, Dorothy." At her look of surprise, he told her, "I, too, have seen *The Wizard of Oz*—a very fanciful story. But as I was saying," he gave her a quelling look, as she struggled to keep a straight face, "all you need do is concentrate, and the Orb will take us there. And Lea," he told her sternly, "I do mean *us*. You are not to use the Orb for transport without my presence. On this I will have your word."

She didn't hesitate. "I promise, Dare."

He nodded his satisfaction and sealed the promise with a kiss.

Lea smiled, pleased that he so easily trusted her. "If the Orb is the source of the power for these transports to Earth, how do your scientists make the journey without it?"

Dare settled them more comfortably "The Orb was instrumental in discovering the technology by which we are now able to create a portal to Earth. I'm no scientist, but I could explain some of the technology to you if you like."

"If you're going to start talking about photons and fluxes and energy fields and things like that, I have to tell you right now, you'll be wasting your time," she warned him. "I don't know anything about quantum theories or theories of relativity or...or I don't know what," she finished helplessly.

"Best we skip the technological explanations then," he agreed. "Suffice it to say that by close study of the Orb as it created a portal we were able to duplicate the effect." Warming to the subject Dare continued, "The first traveler to Earth was actually one of the Guardians. He was never really sure why the Orb transported him, but on his return to Atrios with news of what had occurred, our scientists immediately went to work. As they studied the phenomenon, with much trial and error they were able to duplicate the effect."

Lea was impressed by Dare's enthusiasm and his interest in so many diverse subjects. It became more and more apparent to her how well-educated and intelligent he was.

Dare continued. "They began experimenting with place-to-place transports here on Atrios. When this was accomplished to everyone's satisfaction, the Guardian, in company with a few others, made a return trip to Earth. Once there they set up the equipment that would allow others to make the trip without aid of the Orb's power."

"So somewhere on Earth you have this portal equipment set up?" she questioned. "How do you keep it from being discovered?" she asked with some concern. "If it was found and disabled or destroyed, what would happen to the next group that tried to transport?"

"They would be lost, *tezza*," he told her frankly. "When our scientists did their tests, this is one of the questions they asked. In the beginning, inanimate objects and information gathering probes were sent through. In the cases where the receiving

equipment was not in place, all was destroyed. The probes relayed energy readings that were off the scale before they were destroyed. No one could survive such. With that in mind, we have many safeguards in place on the equipment located on Earth. First and foremost, it is in a very remote and isolated location where discovery is very unlikely. It is also guarded by our people. Revolving teams of five members each, spend month-long shifts on Earth for that purpose. The teams of five, we feel, are sufficient to guard the equipment and be of help to each other in case of accident or injury. And regularly scheduled messages are sent from the Earth portal to Atrios to let us know that all is well. So," he continued proudly, "as you can see we have attempted to—what is the Earth saying?—have all our bases covered?"

Lea laughed. "Just like baseball," she agreed.

"Ah yes, baseball." Dare nodded. "A very interesting game involving much skill."

"You've seen baseball?" she asked him, wondering at all the information they had gleaned from Earth.

"We had samples of your television broadcasts sent to us. I found your channel ESPN most interesting," he admitted.

Lea clapped a hand to her forehead. "What a surprise, men and sports—it has to be universal."

"A man always enjoys a good challenge—sports, much like the military training we do, provide this." He paused, a glint in his eye as a slow, sexy smile curved his lips. "Another challenge a man enjoys is a woman who claims she will not be distracted. I wonder who that might be?"

"Now, Dare," she admonished. "You still haven't told me when we can go. I refuse to be dis...mmmm."

Dare's lips sealed over hers taking her breath along with her thoughts.

After a while he raised his head. "Tomorrow," he promised.

"Hmm?" she questioned, lost in the sensations he roused in her.

"I will tell you later, *ahmba*," he whispered. "When you're not so distracted."

* * * * *

The next morning, talk of the proposed trip to Earth never made it to the table, as another important matter soon had all of Dare's attention.

Chief Romsen of the Chen Mec clan sent a message a few moments after they had settled down to partake of firstmeal. Dare and Ran quickly left to discover what the trouble was.

Lea remembered it had been Chief Romsen who had contacted Dare while they were at the armory, but with everything that had happened since, she had never learned why. On Dare's return she found out.

"Tezza, I must leave for a few days," he told her without preamble. "There is trouble to the north and my men and I are needed."

Lea felt a spasm of fear clutch at her stomach. "What is it, Dare?"

"The people of Somerce are again attempting to gain a foothold here on Atrios. They thought themselves more clever in this attempt. They have sent but one ship with a small force. It has landed on Chen Mec lands and was quickly discovered and reported to Chief Romsen. It seems the Somerce have discovered some kind of transport technology similar to ours and are using it to fortify their position and bring in more troops," Dare explained grimly. "We will rout them from Shen Mec lands and again show them how unwelcome we find their advances."

"How long will you be gone? Could I not go with you?" Lea pleaded with some agitation. This was no sparring match, this was the real thing. Real enemies and danger and blood spilled. The thought of Dare in the middle of such was terrifying.

"No, *ahnba*," he told her gently, understanding her state of mind. "You must remain here where you will be safe. Ran is to remain here with the bulk of my home troop. They will ensure your protection. Do not worry about me, Lealah, I will return to you, I promise." He took her into his arms and kissed her. "I love you, Lea."

She looked into his eyes and pulled herself back from the brink of hysteria. She would be strong and not send him on his way crying like a frightened child. "I love you, Dare. Be careful. If you do anything reckless and get yourself hurt," she threatened, "I'll kick your ass when you get home."

Dare grinned impudently, relieved at Lea's fortitude. "How could I be anything but careful with a threat like that hanging over my head? Come, *tezza*, see me off."

Ran, Shaylar, Gilaine and members of the household staff were waiting on the portico. Numerous ground skimmers waited, the men ready and eager to be off. Many women and children were gathered to see their husbands and fathers on their way. Dare hugged Shaylar and Gilaine, before taking Ran's hand, slapping him on the back. "Take care of things here at home, Brother, I depend on you to keep our family and Clan Finn Mal safe."

"You know you can depend on me, Dare," Ran told him. "But next time I get to go on the mission, while you stay home."

"Should something like this come up again, Mother Goddess forbid, we will discuss it," Dare promised.

Ran nodded. "The Mother's blessings on you, Brother. Deal with those who seek to take what is ours."

"Consider it done," Dare told him. They exchanged a quick embrace.

Dare turned to Lea, who stood forlornly between Shaylar and Gilaine. He motioned her forward and she flew into his arms, holding him tight. Dare breathed in the sweet, fresh scent of her as his arms enclosed her beloved form. "Take care, *tezza*, stay close to home and listen to Ran." He pulled back, looking into her eyes. "You will do these things for me?"

She nodded, afraid to speak for the tears that blocked her throat.

Dare smiled. "Then all is well. I love you, Lea." He kissed her fast and hard, then made his way down the steps and into the waiting skimmer. As he settled in, preparing to pull away, her voice rang out.

"Darien Finn Mal," she spoke clearly so that everyone could hear, "I love you." Her eyes roamed over every skimmer and man assembled inside them. "The Mother's blessings on all of you."

A cheer rang through the yard as every voice joined in. Dare grinned as pride and love filled him. His eyes savored the sight of Lea holding herself proudly, bravely eschewing the tears he knew were locked inside. With a final wave he took the lead position. The other skimmers quickly formed up behind him and were lost from view as they flew to defend their world.

Chapter Thirteen

Dare had been gone for almost a week. It had taken them nearly a full day by ground skimmer to arrive on Shen Mec lands. Dare had vowed that it was time for efforts to be made to put in place a faster method of transportation for situations such as this. While their portals could handle the transfer of a few men and their equipment, they had not yet been able to safely increase the power levels that would allow for the transport of a skimmer – let alone a force of them.

The Shen Mec clan and their neighbors had kept the Somerceian troops penned in place. Dare had relayed instructions while in transit and all was ready to be put into action with his arrival.

It had been decided to give the Somerceians a chance to peacefully withdraw. If they refused, the issue would be forced.

Dare spoke with the commander of the Somerce force. He explained quite clearly that their position was an untenable one, their defeat inevitable. The man was arrogant, trying to bluster his way out of a bad situation. He went so far as to offer Dare terms for surrender. Dare had merely laughed and given the commander an ultimatum, their withdrawal or their destruction – they had an hour to decide which it was to be.

The commander of the Somerce troops was in serious trouble. He had been ordered to set his force down in an isolated area, so that by the time they were discovered, their numbers would be of sufficient strength to overwhelm the Atriosians. He chose instead to set down in a place that, while more populated, was still fairly isolated. He had considered it worth the risk, as it would be easier and quicker for troop deployment. He had been wrong. They were discovered too soon. With no other option open to him, he chose retreat. He relayed his decision to Dare with ill-disguised ire.

“I am pleased you have decided to be sensible about this,” Dare told him pleasantly. “Just to ensure that you have no treachery in mind, I would ask that you look to the small stand of trees one hundred meters to the south of your position. Please relay to your men that a small demonstration is to take place, but that no one is to be harmed.”

The commander obeyed Dare’s instructions and relayed their readiness. In response, a brilliant arc of light shot from an unknown source into the midst of the trees. With a shimmering glow they disappeared.

“These weapons are trained on your position,” Dare told him in a cold, hard voice. “At the first sign of hostile activity you will be annihilated. You may begin your withdrawal.”

It took several days for the Somerceians to be sent back the way they came. All the while, the encampment was carefully and constantly scanned for any weapons or devices that might be left that would cause damage or harm of any kind. Finally, all that was left was the ship and its original complement. As the ship lifted from Atriosion soil, a great cheer arose. They had again defeated the enemy, and all without a life lost or a shot fired, save one for demonstration purposes.

At home, the news was received with much rejoicing and no one looked forward to their return more than Lea. Since Dare had left she had felt antsy and ill at ease. She had assumed it was due to her anxiety over what Dare was about to face and her fear for his safety. With the good news she had expected the feeling to leave, but instead it increased.

Dare called every day before evening meal, and she expected his call anytime now. She wandered their quarters, unable to relax as she waited. When finally the comm chimed, she sighed with relief, perhaps now she could calm down. She activated the screen and as his face filled it, her body began to heat with arousal.

"Dare," she breathed. "Are you on your way?" she asked anxiously.

"We leave as soon as I finish this call, *tezza*," he confirmed. "I will be with you tomorrow."

"I can't wait," Lea confessed "I've missed you so much." Unconsciously she fidgeted in her seat.

"I, too, have missed you, *ahnba*," he told her. Dare watched her closely with some concern. "Are you all right, Lea? You look flushed."

Lea began to rock. "I'm okay, I just need you, Dare. Hurry home."

"I will, *tezza*. You will be in my arms before you know it," he promised, preparing to end the call. "I love you."

"I love you more," she told him with a teasing smile, struggling to cover the need that had begun to grow with each passing minute.

"Impossible," he stated with a grin and ended the call.

Lea moaned, rocking as her body demanded fulfillment. With the end of the call, the need began to lessen and she was finally able to stand. She felt moisture between her thighs, her pussy had creamed at the first sight of Dare's face. *This is totally weird*, she thought to herself. Shrugging, she headed for the bathing chamber. Perhaps a soothing soak was just what she needed.

After bathing, Lea felt well enough to join Gilaine, Shaylar and Ran for evening meal. They were all in good spirits, anticipating Dare's return. She began the meal with good appetite, but that soon changed as that same uneasy feeling began to take her again. Symptoms of arousal began to blossom and she went pale as a sharp pain shot through her abdomen.

Gilaine was the first to notice Lea's distress. "Are you all right, child?" she questioned her.

"I'm fine," Lea lied. "I think it's just the relief of knowing that everything is okay and that Dare is on his way home. I've been so anxious. I think I'm just crashing from an overabundance of worry."

"Of course," Gilaine agreed. "Perhaps you should retire early. A good night's sleep will make you feel better."

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Lea agreed. "If you'll excuse me, I'll see you tomorrow."

After Lea's retreat, Ran gave Gilaine a questioning look. "Do you think that is the problem or is it something more?"

"I am not sure," Gilaine answered. "But I intend to check on her later."

"A good idea."

Shaylar looked from one to the other and bit her lip with worry.

Lea made her way with some difficulty back to her quarters. As she closed the door behind her, another sharp pain ripped through her, wringing a gasping moan from her lips. The pain and arousal were increasing in intensity.

She staggered into the bedroom and began tearing off her clothing. The feel of it against her sensitized skin was driving her mad.

Pulling back the covers on the bed, she sighed with relief as she lay down on the cool, silky sheets. Her body, already warm, grew warmer, and soon she was twisting under the whip of driving need.

Dare filled her thoughts as her hands began wandering her heated skin. When her fingers plunged into the silky-wet warmth between her thighs, she cried out his name. Driven by an arousal that would not be denied, her fingers drove into her clutching sheath again and again. She brought them out and up to circle and rub her swollen clit, only to plunge them deep again. Her mindless moans filled the air as, with one last vigorous sweep of her fingers over flesh throbbing and slick, she came. The orgasm swept through her like a sheet of living fire, as her back arched off the bed. Spasm after spasm rippled through her womb until they finally lessened and she groaned with relief as her body relaxed. Sated and drifting free from the need that had driven her, Lea turned to her side and slept.

A few hours later she woke as a tearing pain brought her into a fetal position. "Not again, oh please, not again!" She shuddered as the arousal returned with a vengeance. She began to stroke herself, but her touch, while pleasing, brought no relief. Fear swelled inside as she pulled herself from the bed to the comm unit.

"Gilaine?" she gasped, as the older woman's face filled the screen. "Something's wrong, I need help."

"I'll be right there, Lealah, it's all right," Gilaine assured her.

In record time, Gilaine arrived at Lea's quarters and let herself into the front room. A soft light was on in the bedroom and she entered to find Lea on the bed, a sheet

thrown over her body as she writhed with pain. Pearlescent light emanated from her skin.

Gilaine sat on the bed and placed a cool hand on the hot, moist skin of Lea's face. "Tell me what you are feeling," she ordered.

"Hot, hot, I need...oh God, I *need* Dare!" Lea twisted under Gilaine's restraining hands "It hurts, it hurts..."

"I'm going to get help, Lea. Try and stay calm, child." Gilaine was shaken but kept herself calm. She went to the comm and called Ran.

When he answered the call, Ran became immediately alert. "Ran," Gilaine told him hurriedly, "I am with Lea, something is terribly wrong. Please come and bring Guardian Novan with you."

Within minutes, both men arrived. Novan had come with his bag of healer's instruments and medicines. Ran and Gilaine stood by as Novan drew a chair up to the bed and used his med scanner to ascertain Lea's condition.

"What is it, Novan?" Ran asked, moving behind him to study the readings over his shoulder.

"She's ovulating, but that should not be the cause any of these other symptoms. Her temperature is up three points over normal and slowly rising. Hormone levels are out of balance and as for the pain, I can find nothing here which would cause this." He looked at Ran with some concern. "It must be the Orb—see how she is bathed in light?"

"But why?" Ran questioned. "Why would the Orb do this?"

Lea began to thrash on the bed as another tearing pain ripped through her. Ran quickly went to her side and took her hand, trying to calm her. As he murmured soothing words, Novan noted that the readings on the med scanner were leveling out and, in some cases, dropping.

Lea sighed in relief as the pain and need eased.

"Let me get you some water," Ran told her. When he released her hand and stepped away from the bed, the readings immediately began to spike.

"Ran," Novan instructed, "take Lea's hand again."

With a puzzled frown he did as Novan bid him, and again the readings on the scanner leveled out. "What is it?" Ran asked.

"When you touch Lea the scanner shows a marked decrease in the symptoms," Novan told him.

With Lea now coherent Novan questioned her. "What exactly are you feeling?"

Lea flushed with mortification. Unable to look him in the eye she murmured. "Arousal, like my body is out of control with need. Earlier I...I..." She couldn't say the words.

"Touched yourself?" Novan asked as diplomatically as possible, his own face taking on a faint flush. At her affirmative nod he asked, "Did it help?"

“For a little while, yes. I slept and then I woke again with the pain and it started all over again, only this time, I couldn’t get relief. I called Gilaine because it hurt so bad and I was scared,” she concluded.

Novan studied the readings again. “The levels are beginning to rise again. I think we should call Dare. Certain steps may have to be taken and I believe he should be consulted.”

Gilaine volunteered to go for a portable comm unit which she brought back on a wheeled cart. The call was put through to Dare.

Lea lay on the bed struggling to still the arousal that had again began to burn in her belly. A flash of pain tore a moan from her lips. She had no attention to spare the comm. Ran kept a firm grip on her hand and with the other applied a cool wet cloth to her forehead that Gilaine supplied. He swore silently, urging the call to be answered. Dare appeared on the screen, took one look at the worried faces and blurted, “Mother Goddess, Lea, is she all right?”

“Calmly, Darien,” Novan soothed. He explained to Dare what was happening. Giving Gilaine a look, she immediately took the hint and excused herself. As the outer doors closed behind her, Novan continued. “I believe the Orb is determined to see Lea with child. She is ovulating and it is the only explanation I can find which fits with all the evidence. With your absence Lea’s sexual activity has of course been curtailed. It’s my opinion that the pain and arousal are the Orb’s way of pushing Lea to resume being sexually active so that she will be impregnated. Dare, you *must* get here as quickly as possible, but in the meantime I see but one solution to keep Lea’s condition from worsening and causing permanent damage.”

“What solution?” Dare asked, sure he already knew the answer.

“Ran,” Novan replied.

“Me? What are you saying, Novan?” Ran growled.

“To put it plainly, Ran, you may have to bring Lea to orgasm. It seems to be the only thing that alleviates the pain and arousal for a time,” Novan explained. “And as Lea said earlier, pleasure by her own hand is no longer an option.”

“I cannot do that,” Ran denied. “Lea is Dare’s *tezza*, I cannot touch her in that way. I will not dishonor my brother.” He was adamant in his refusal.

“Even to save her life?” Novan questioned, his voice whip-sharp. With a sigh he continued more gently, “Listen to me, both of you. You know well that in our history it is not unheard of for brothers to share their *tezzas*, if all parties are in agreement. There is no dishonor or shame in this.” He paused, considering his next words. “It is no secret that you have shared women in the past. I realize that this situation is not the same, but will you let Lealah suffer for your pride?”

Ran and Dare silently considered his words. Dare spoke first. “Ran, you are my brother and I trust you with my life. More importantly I trust you with Lea. I had not told you this, but I was considering, at some later time, of broaching the subject of your joining us on occasion. I wish to gift Lea with the pleasure we both know such can

bring." Dare gave a wry shrug. "I did not realize the decision would be taken from my hands. Do whatever is needed to spare her pain, Ran. I am asking you to do this for me and for Lea."

"Dare," Ran began and shook his head as emotion closed his throat.

Before he could find his voice, Lea called out weakly, "Dare?"

Novan pushed the table holding the portable comm closer to the bed.

"I'm here, *ahnba*," Dare answered softly.

Lea began to cry. "You're *not* here. Oh God, Dare, I *need* you."

"I know, little one, I know. We are in transit even now." Dare felt helpless frustration build inside. "Lea, you must listen to me." He forced his voice into a firm, commanding tone. "Are you listening, Lea?" he questioned.

"Yes," she answered with a gasp as a ripple of need sent shudders through her already trembling body.

"I want you to let Ran touch you, *tezza*. Let him ease your pain."

As his meaning became clear her eyes widened in disbelief and she shook her head in denial. "No. Dare, no! I need *you!*"

"Please, *tezza*, I cannot bear to see you in such pain!"

The agony in his voice tore through her objections.

Calming himself with an effort he continued, "Do this for me, Lealah, for us. I will not lose you."

Battered by her body's demands and Dare's impassioned request, Lea hesitantly nodded her agreement. Her body tensed as another wave of pain and arousal swept through her. She moaned, curling in on herself, riding out the wave.

"Ran." Dare urged Ran to begin.

"I will leave you in private." Novan hastily rose. "If you have need of me, call."

Novan quickly made his exit, praying to the Mother that the three left in the room would be able to handle that which they were now forced to undertake.

His attention focused on Lea, Dare spoke softly to her. "*Ahnba*, close your eyes, when you feel a touch upon your skin it will be mine. I am with you, *tezza*," he soothed, signaling Ran.

Ran slowly drew the concealing sheet away from Lea's voluptuous form. "By the Mother," he whispered reverently.

"Is she not beautiful?" Dare praised.

"I have not the words, Brother," Ran replied, his cock had begun to thicken and fill at the sight before him. Knowing that frustration was to be his lot, he gave a mental shrug.

"Touch her, Ran," Dare encouraged, his own cock making demands as he gazed upon the beauty of his wife. Sharing her with his brother, even under these circumstances, was highly arousing.

Ran reached out, placing a hand on her shoulder. A shiver slid over Lea's skin. As he urged her to her back, his hand slid slowly down over her chest, over the swell of her breast to cup the quivering mound. A moan came simultaneously from three throats.

Lea arched under Ran's hand, moaning again as his fingers closed over her distended nipple, gently squeezing and pulling. Her hips undulated in helpless need, urging Ran's touch to where it was most needed. The heated brand of his touch set her senses afire.

Lea's thighs spread as she pleaded. "Please, please, *please*." Nothing mattered but release, relief from the pain and demanding need.

"As you command, *basaya*," Ran murmured.

His free hand stroked over her belly to the silky curls that guarded her mound. He traveled down, then up the length of her inner thigh, moving closer to the heat that radiated from her swollen sex. Ran was mesmerized at the sight of the lush pouting lips glistening with cream that awaited his touch. His fingers slid the length of her slit, gliding from her opening to the throbbing nub of her clit. Reversing direction, his fingers returned to her channel and slid slowly, deeply into its claspings recesses. The silky, liquid heat of her was incredible.

"Yesss," Lea hissed as she rode his probing fingers. She moved with sinuous grace, keening her pleasure.

Two male voices, tight with arousal, encouraged her.

"That's it, *tezza*, take your pleasure, my own," Dare crooned.

"Ah, *basaya*, you are lovely in your need," Ran growled.

His thumb found her swollen pink clit and gently manipulated it as he added a third finger to those which filled her tight sheath. Lea stiffened and wailed her pleasure as orgasm exploded through her straining body. Her head punched back into the pillow again and again as peak followed peak. Shudders racked her body, waves of pleasure washing away the pain, easing the relentless arousal. Her release brought peace, and with the cessation of pain, sleep claimed her without a protest. Lea's climax was nearly the undoing of both Dare and Ran as they struggled to keep from coming in their pants like untried boys. As it was, they were both breathing heavily, trying to still the racing of their hearts. Ran pulled the sheet over Lea's pliant, sated form. His eyes met Dare's, and rueful smiles tugged at two pairs of masculine lips.

"You always were the luckiest of men, Dare," Ran chuckled. "She is truly magnificent."

"In all ways, Ran. In all ways," Dare replied, as he checked the time. "How are the readings on the med scanner?"

"Almost back to normal," Ran answered. "And yet even as we speak the levels are slowly rising again."

Dare nodded, "We will arrive in approximately three hours. If her pain returns, you will do what is necessary?"

Ran nodded. "Shall I contact you?"

"Yes," he replied without hesitation, then paused for a moment before continuing. "I accept that this is necessary, I ask only..."

"I will not enter her body, Dare," Ran promised. "Only your seed shall come anywhere near Lea's egg."

Dare nodded curtly. "I will see you in three hours."

Dare broke the transmission and Ran sighed. Goddess, he was tired. Being in such a sensitive position was more than stressful. Touching Lea was indeed a pleasure—and yet the knowledge that this privilege was his by necessity and not an openly discussed and willing offer was a situation fraught with peril. After the crisis would Dare or Lea resent what had been done? And yet, he could not refuse, for who else could be given this delicate chore? A random choice from amongst Dare's men? Hardly. Ran's own protective instincts would never allow such. He knew without question that Dare would never agree to such a thing. So here he was, trapped by circumstances, left with no choice but to do that which had the potential of driving a wedge between him and his brother. He watched Lea as she slept, a worried expression causing the skin between his eyes to furrow.

"Hurry, Dare," he murmured, although he feared it might already be too late.

Ran woke several hours later, disturbed by the moans and thrashing movements Lea made as she tossed about on the bed. Immediately alert, he activated the med scanner and swore softly. The readings had risen higher than before.

Lea began to murmur brokenly, whimpering. "Hurts, it *hurts*."

Ran joined her on the bed and gently pulled the tangled sheet from her straining body. "It's all right, Lea. Let me ease you, *basaya*," he crooned, as his hands began to roam her lush curves. Already, her skin was flushed and moist.

Lea cried out at the touch of Ran's hands on her sensitized skin. Ripples of arousal shuddered through her as her sheath went into spasms, demanding to be filled. She spread her thighs wide, showing him without words where he was needed.

Ran understood and slid an exploring hand between her thighs, his fingers finding the swollen folds and parting them. A fresh gush of liquid bathed his probing fingers as he slid two deep into her needy channel. The heady smell of her arousal teased his senses, bringing his cock to full, near-bursting readiness. Lea's hips lifted, taking his fingers deeper as her sheath clamped down tight on the welcomed invaders. Her hips lifted and fell in a steady rhythm. Ran eased another finger in as his thumb found the firm kernel of her clit. Lea again cried out, the pace of her movements quickening.

"So beautiful, *ahnba*," Ran encouraged. "Come for me."

Lea rode the broad fingers that breached her. Ran's voice both soothed and stoked the fire that burned hot in her belly. She groaned, hips undulating steadily to no avail. Her body shuddered with frustration as climax stayed just out of reach. "I can't, I can't," she wailed. A wave of heat sheeted over her skin. She panted and groaned, sure that her pounding heart was about to burst.

"Let us try this," Ran spoke quietly as he lowered his head between her thighs. His mouth replaced the thumb that rubbed her clit. A slow sensuous lick of his tongue served as a warning of the pleasures to come. The sweet, elusively subtle taste of her filled his mouth. Without hesitation, he took the small, taut mound of nerves into his mouth and began to suck.

Lea's body arched into his mouth as a sharp cry was torn from her throat. A shattering climax blazed through her as pearlescent Orb light flared. The light engulfed her body and Ran's, encasing them in its pulsing glow.

"Is her taste not more intoxicating than wine?"

Ran raised his head to discover Dare standing by the bed. His face bore an expression of love and lust, pride and desire. The Orb's light had drawn him into its sphere, illuminating his movements as he disrobed.

"Dare, I..." Ran began.

"Did only that which was necessary," Dare concluded. His voice held no accusation or hint of censure. His hand gripped Ran's shoulder in understanding.

Lea was drifting down from her climax-induced high. As the sound of Dare's voice registered in her consciousness, arousal tightened her body with renewed need.

Her eyes opened and focused on him. "Dare," she breathed, her voice an aching plea, as she reached for him.

Ran made way as Dare lowered himself to the bed, pulling Lea into his arms. "Tezza, tezza," he murmured. "I am here now, all will be well, all will be well."

Lea burrowed desperately against him. "Dare, I need you. So much. Make it stop, Dare. Make it stop." Tears of relief at his presence slid down her cheeks.

"We will, *ahnba*, we will," he promised, kissing her tears away.

Ran, who had turned to leave, halted at Dare's words. His head turned, his eyes meeting Dare's.

"Stay a moment," Dare requested before he turned his attention back to Lea. "Tezza, remember what we discussed before I left?" he asked her, his hand gently brushing the hair back from her face. "Your fantasy, Lea, remember?"

Lea's body quivered against his, as she burrowed against him, grinding her pussy against his engorged shaft. "I remember."

The night before Dare left, he had filled her anal channel with the plug before taking her. Afterward, relaxed and sleepy, she'd blurted out something she'd never told anyone.

"I've often wondered what it would feel like to have two men inside me at one time. It must be something like this."

Dare had risen over her, a speculative look on his face. "You have entertained such thoughts?"

Lea bit her lip and nodded, knowing it was too late to take it back "I've just thought about it, I've never done it," she assured him.

"Given the chance, would you?" he asked, with a curiously intent expression.

"I don't know, I'm not sure. A lot of people would think it was perverted."

"I do not," Dare stated decisively.

It was then a disturbing thought came to Lea, "Have you done it?" At his raised eyebrow, she specified, "With two women, I mean."

Dare nodded. "I have. I have also shared a single woman with Ran."

"You have?" Lea's eyes widened in surprise. A small shiver of apprehension clutched her stomach.

Seeing the look of worry and dismay on her face, Dare quickly moved to reassure her. He took her chin in his hand and gazed deeply into her eyes. "Lea, what happened in the past, is past. You are my present and my future. I will never again need, nor want, any woman save you. Will you take my pledge on this?"

Lea smiled and nodded "I will. But, Dare," she turned the conversation back to where it had began, "if I said yes to being with two men, would you actually let me? Because if you touched another woman, I'd have your balls on a platter. Wouldn't it bother you to see another man touch me?" Lea wasn't sure if she should be excited at the possible fulfillment of a fantasy or insulted at Dare's lack of concern.

Dare grinned, flattered at her jealousy. "First of all, bloodthirsty wench, my balls will stay exactly where they belong." Dare sat up, urging Lea up so they sat cross-legged in front of each other. He took her hands in his, his expression serious. "If any man dared touch you in an inappropriate manner, his life would be forfeit, this I vow. Even if you were to invite his touch." Dare gave her a meaningful look, to which Lea shook her head in denial at the possibility. Satisfied, he continued. "There is only one man, under one condition, for whom I would make an exception. The condition is you and I, in this bed. The man who would join us is Ran. If this were to happen, know that it happens because I love you. I have never been a conventional man, Lealah. There are some men, and I am one, who take pleasure in sharing our beloved with one special friend or, as in my case, my brother. It would please me to give you this pleasure, *tezza*."

As Lea replayed the memory of that conversation she looked from Dare to Ran and back. "Oh God, I...I don't know," she stuttered, tempted and yet afraid. "Are you sure?"

Dare's hand caressed her cheek "Sure that I want your pleasure? Sure that I want to gift you with what you want, what you need? Yes, *ahmba*, I am sure. But it must be your choice as well. I would not force you."

Lea's body began to quiver with anticipation and tension as she nodded her agreement. "Yes," she breathed, then swallowed hard as Ran began to remove his clothes.

"Oh God, Dare." She shuddered against him as the bed dipped with Ran's weight. He settled close behind her, his body molding hers from behind as Dare's did from in front. She felt surrounded by male heat and the hard nudge of two virile male cocks as they pulsed against her.

"Easy, my own, easy," Dare murmured. He eased her to her back and both men leaned over her, their hands moving, caressing, exploring.

Lea closed her eyes and concentrated on each tingling touch. She shivered and cried out as her breasts were cupped, the nipples tweaked, pulled simultaneously into hot, sucking mouths as clever tongues bathed and laved her peaked flesh. Moisture beaded her skin as fire flowed over her quaking body.

Dare released her breast, covering it with his hand as he made his way up her chest to her throat. Ran continued to feed from her turgid nipple, his hand gliding down her torso, coming to rest on her softly rounded belly. Dare's tongue laved the delicate skin of her throat. His mouth fastened to her, sucking the tender skin, leaving a stinging passion mark behind. He rose up and examined the result.

"Mine."

Lea's arms closed around him, her tongue twining with his, as he swallowed her moans of pleasure. Dare ravished her mouth, savoring the hot, sweet taste of his woman. He raised his head to glance down, gauging Ran's progress. Ran had abandoned Lea's breast, his mouth moving down her body to her stomach, where he lingered, tonguing the sexy indentation of her navel. His hand lightly petted the silky chestnut curls of her pussy, causing Lea's hips to lift, urging him lower.

"Ran," Dare spoke, his cock painfully swollen, his need to fill Lea stretched to the breaking point.

Ran nodded and moved back, pulling Lea with him, allowing Dare to settle on his back. "Come here, *ahmba*," Dare urged. "Straddle me." He groaned as the slick, wet heat of her pussy brushed the ramrod-straight length of his cock. She attempted to impale herself on the throbbing column but Dare controlled her easily.

"Not yet, Lea, not yet," he ordered.

She squirmed with impatience. "Yes," she insisted. "Now!"

Dare landed a firm smack on one rounded buttock. "Behave," he admonished her.

A chastened Lea whimpered in defeat.

The drawer that held the lubricant was opened and Ran took up the bottle. "Has she been prepared in any way?" he questioned as he squirted lube into the palm of his hand. His gaze rested on the luscious, twin mounds that were being offered up to him. One bore a rosy flush from Dare's punishment. Ran's cock throbbed with the anticipation of filling that delectable ass.

"Anal plug," Dare answered. "Did you continue to use it while I was away, as I instructed?" he asked her, his hands cupping and kneading both flexing globes as she undulated against him.

Lea nodded. "Every day," she panted. "Please, Dare, hurry, I'm burning up!"

"Lean forward, *tezza*," he commanded, pulling her down to his chest. "Ran is going to fill your nether hole first, then I will fill your sweet, hot pussy."

On her knees, draped over Dare, Lea gasped as an unexpected blow landed on the curve of her buttock. The resultant sting flashed through her pussy, tightening it with a convulsive jerk.

Ran leaned over her. "A small punishment for your impatience, *basaya*," he told her. "And that these delicious mounds match in coloring. You blush so beautifully, Lea," he praised as he placed a kiss against each cheek.

Lea whimpered and squirmed, anticipation and need had long driven her fear away.

Ran signaled to Dare, who reached forward, grasping her bottom in his hands, spreading her open. Ran's lubricated finger slicked over the tight bud of her anus and eased inside. Lea moaned at the invasion, rocking back into it, urging him on. He worked the tight entrance carefully, then eased a second finger in to join the first. The tight ring stretched, accepting the added bulk as he thrust slowly in and out.

Lea rode the wave of pleasure as Ran worked his fingers deeper. A third finger joined the first two and she cried out, pushing back, welcoming the burning pinch of pain that turned to pleasure as her unwilling flesh parted under the increasing pressure.

"That's it, *basaya*, relax, open for me," Ran encouraged as he slowly pumped three broad fingers into the humid heat of her ass. The tight ring eased around his probing fingers and he withdrew them, moving into position behind her. Taking his shaft in hand, he coated his cock with the remaining lubricant and placed the cushioned thickness of its head against her tight hole. "Bear down, Lea," he instructed. Ran eased forward, applying pressure. Her anal entrance stretched, widening, opening with a sudden capitulation that allowed him to lodge the plum-shaped head inside.

Lea gasped and jerked under him "Wait, wait, *wait!*" Her eyes were closed in concentration, her face pinched with pain, as she strove not to move. "Too much, too big." She panted as panic set in. "Dare!" Her hands clutched the sheets under her, twisting the fabric as she sought relief from the burning pain of Ran's entry.

"Easy, *ahnba*, easy. Give it a moment, let your body adjust." Dare reached up, cupping the firm, tempting breasts that dangled over him. He caressed the soft mounds, taking the taut nipples between fingers and thumb to squeeze and roll. Lea moaned her pleasure and acquiescence.

Ran held steady, forcing himself to be still until she was ready for more. He struggled against his cock's demand to be buried to the hilt. Sensitized nerve endings on the crown of his shaft were burning under the unrelenting squeeze of her anal ring. Eyes closed, he took deep, steady breaths. Seeking to calm them both, he ran his hands

over the plump mounds of her buttocks, and up the smooth plane of her back. The strangling grip of her anus gradually eased and Lea tentatively pushed back. Pleasure overlaid pain as a few centimeters of Ran's cock slid inside.

"More," she demanded eagerly. "Now, Ran, more."

Ran braced himself and began to slide slowly inside the well-lubed channel. He grunted with the effort. "Goddess, Lea, you are so tight!" he gasped as he worked his staff deeper.

Dare lay under them, listening to their moans and grunts as Ran powered deeper into Lea's body. His hips undulated slowly against her as he anticipated filling her eager pussy. His cock was so hard it felt as though one touch would cause him to burst. Holding Lea close, he murmured soothing words of encouragement.

"My sweet beautiful, *tezza*, such a good girl," he crooned. "Take all of Ran's cock, *ahnba*, every inch."

With a final groan, Ran hilted, his balls resting against the cushion of Lea's bottom. He withdrew a few inches, then returned, sinking deep. He repeated the movement several times, establishing a slow gliding thrust that eased her open.

Ran leaned forward draping himself across Lea's back. "Now, Dare," he gasped.

Lea's muttered protests over Ran's arrested movements became high-pitched whimpers as Dare began easing into her drenched pussy.

His hands clasped her bottom, pulling her down, impaling her on the thickness of his waiting shaft. Ran's cock had caused Lea's channel to become impossibly tight, and Dare groaned with effort as he ground his cock steadily deeper into her slick heat.

Lea's conscious mind fled as she rode a wild wave of sensation. Pleasure and pain mixed and became indistinguishable as Dare filled her yearning passage. Her pussy clenched as another gush of cream coated his tunneling rod, easing the way. Dare hilted, Ran withdrew and they began a slow, synchronized rhythm of thrust and retreat that sent Lea hurtling into maddened rapture. Her mindless cries filled the room as she balanced on the tortuous edge of release. Her body's movements were an unspoken plea for more, which they gave willingly.

Increasing the pace, their groans and grunts of effort joined Lea's keening cries as the two men labored, working her pliant body. Buttocks flexed, hips bucked and surged, as their cocks drilled deeper and harder into her fevered flesh.

No longer able to hold out against his impending release, Ran gritted, "Dare, now!"

Dare reached between their bodies to find the swollen bud of Lea's clit. She screamed as, with a few gentle flicks of his fingertips, he sent her flying over the edge to crash and shatter into tiny disjointed pieces. Her inundated passages clamped down on the thick male flesh that filled them, pulling and milking, demanding their tribute. Twin groans of release sounded, harsh and desperate as their cocks erupted, spurting thick jets of seed into Lea's channels.

She shuddered and quivered, her hips pushing forward and back, working first one then the next deeper, as her inner passages continued to grip and squeeze every last drop of semen from their pulsing flesh. Lea collapsed against Dare, Ran dropping with her. With a groan Ran pulled free, rolling to the side. "Goddess," he swore. "She took everything, Dare, drained every drop."

Dare chuckled weakly, his hands running with soothing strokes over her back. "She always does, Ran."

The three of them lay there, bonelessly sated, Lea having immediately drifted into an exhausted slumber.

Dare yawned. "Bath," he insisted.

Sliding out from under Lea, he stood and rolled her protesting body over, scooping her up in his arms. "Call the on-duty staff and have someone change the bedding, would you, Ran?" he asked as he headed for the bathing chamber. "Then come join us."

Ran groaned and rolled out of bed, his body protesting the need for movement of any kind. Complying with Dare's request, he made the call before joining them in the soothing waters of the bathing pool.

Together Dare and Ran bathed a sleepy, cranky and protesting Lea, removing the evidence of their passion. Ran held her as Dare used a soft cloth to gently wash her well-used body. Dare then quickly washed himself and held Lea as Ran completed his bath. Ran exited the bath, taking Lea from Dare as he did the same, and together they dried her and themselves.

By the time their bath was finished, the household staff had come and gone, straightening and freshening, leaving the bed remade with fresh sheets, the covers pulled down, waiting for the next occupant. Dare carried Lea to bed, tucked her in and watched as she cuddled under the covers with a sigh and drifted into peaceful slumber. He slid into a pair of lounge pants as Ran donned the clothing he had discarded earlier. Taking up the med scanner, Dare carefully studied the readings, sighing with relief as all appeared normal save for one tiny thing.

Lea had conceived. In her womb now resided the tiny spark of life that would, Dare was sure, be the next High Chieftain of Atrios.

"Is she all right, Dare?" Ran questioned anxiously.

Dare turned to his brother, his eyes bright, an unrestrained grin on his face. Ran began to laugh and threw his arms around Dare, pounding his back in congratulations.

"No one can deny that Finn Mal seed is potent." Ran chuckled with glee as he and Dare retreated into the front room so as not to disturb Lea.

Dare shook his head in wonder "I am at a loss, Ran. Never in my life could I have imagined such happiness would be mine."

"No one deserves it more, Brother," Ran told him seriously. "Go to your *tezza*, get some sleep." He gave Dare's shoulder a final squeeze and let himself out.

Dare returned to the bedroom, removed his pants and slid into bed beside Lea. Even deeply asleep she instinctively reached for him, cuddling into the sheltering arms that pulled her close. Dare kissed the top of her head and lay on his back, a smile curving his lips. He fell asleep, his whispered prayer of thanks the last sound to disturb the enfolding silence.

Chapter Fourteen

Lea woke to find a smiling Dare leaning over her. She gave him a bashful smile, "Good morning," she murmured, her voice husky with sleep.

"Good afternoon, little mother," he corrected. "We have slept the day away, *tezza*."

"Have we?" she questioned softly, then frowned. "What did you call me?"

"*Tezza*?" Dare teased in feigned innocence.

Lea shook her head in denial, a suspicious look on her face. "Before that."

"Ah, that." Dare grinned. "Little mother." He sobered, his eyes tender with love, his hand cradling her belly. "You carry our child, Lealah."

Lea's eyes filled with tears as she whispered, "Are you sure?"

Dare nodded. "The med scanner confirmed it. Our son is in residence, right here." His hand moved over her stomach, rubbing with gentle reverence.

Lea threw her arms around him. "Dare!" she sobbed as tears of joy ran freely from her eyes.

Dare rocked her, holding her close. "Are you happy, *ahnba*?" he questioned, whispering in her ear.

Lea gave a watery laugh as she pulled away to look at him. "You can't tell?"

"Sometimes women cry because they are happy, sometimes because they are sad, and sometimes for reasons altogether different," he told her earnestly. "Even though we are supposed to be able to read your mind, sometimes a man cannot help but ask why, just to be sure, you understand."

Lea laughed. "Make fun all you want," she told him loftily. "Nothing can make me angry today. Today is perfect," she pronounced as her eyes went soft and dreamy.

Their lips met in a sweet, tender kiss, filled with love, joy and muted passion. Their bodies met and melded, curves filling hollows, flowing and joining with seamless ease.

Dare rolled Lea to her back, parting her willing thighs. His cock was drawn like an arrow to the target waiting between them. As he slowly filled her, he murmured, "Absolutely perfect."

They moved together, holding each other's gaze as the pleasure rose higher and higher. Dare's fingers entwined with hers and held her to the bed as his thick shaft invaded her sleek, creamy sheath again and again. Breaths panted, hearts raced and skin became slick with moisture as they labored together, climbing the peak.

Dare increased the pace, thrusting smoothly and deeply as Lea began to chant, "Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop."

"Never," he growled, grunting with the increasing effort of powering through her tightening muscles.

Lea flung her head back on the pillow, breaking eye contact. "Dare!" she wailed as pleasure exploded, the orgasm racing with frantic speed through her bowed body.

Dare reacted, his hips pounding with jackhammer speed, only to freeze as the first jetting spurt rocketed from his burrowing cock. His hips convulsed again, driving him deep with each gush of seed that bathed Lea's clinging channel. With a groan, he grasped the cheeks of her bottom and rolled, keeping himself buried in her depths. His hands clenched on her firm flesh as he continued to drive himself up into her pliant body.

Lea dragged herself upright and began to pump slowly up and down on his still-rigid shaft. The juice of their combined climax made a wet, sucking sound as it drained from her, spreading like warm syrup onto Dare's groin. Lea continued to ride him, the pleasure building brick by brick until she stood on the apex of a tower so high the ground was indistinct, unimportant, only the fall would matter.

Dare bucked under her, jabbing his cock desperately up into the tight passage that would soon milk his balls dry. His breath panted as he grasped her undulating bottom, watching her breasts jiggle and shake with each move. "Yesss, *ahnba*, yes, take my cock, take it deep," he uttered a guttural groan. "Goddess!" Quickly finding the hard nub of her clit he manipulated the sensitized kernel, flinging Lea over the edge as his cock shot another load of creamy cum deep inside her gripping sheath. He pulled her down, taking an engorged nipple in his mouth to suckle with vigor as he pumped stream after stream into her.

Lea screeched as Dare's mouth fastened to her breast. Her thighs tightened on his body as she plunged him deeper. Loving the touch of his cock against her cervix, she felt his semen bathe her inner flesh. Her shudders eventually eased and she collapsed on top of him, totally spent.

After awhile, Lea cleared her throat and ventured a question. "Are we getting up?" she asked. "Because if we are, you have to carry me."

Dare snorted. "I was hoping you'd carry me."

Lea giggled. "I called it first."

"Let me rest for several days and I shall attempt it," he told her with perfect seriousness.

At that moment her stomach let out a loud rumble. "I don't think I have a few days," she laughed. "Junior's hungry."

"Junior, hmm? I believe you are trying to implicate our son when it is really you who is hungry." He held up his hand to forestall her comment. "However, since it is my duty to see to both of you I will bravely forge ahead, pushing my weary body into action."

Lea laughed at his oh-so-serious announcement.

Dare sat up and eased his legs over the bed, rising unsteadily to stand swaying by the bed. "Come, *tezza*, I shall carry you to the bath."

She eyed him dubiously "I think I'd better walk, after all."

Dare grinned and grabbed her carefully up in his arms, marching with steady ease into the bathing chamber.

"Faker!" she cried, tweaking his ear.

Dare took them down into the pool and lowered her into the water. "Sometimes a man wants his woman to fuss over him," he hinted broadly.

"Oh, all right," she conceded. Lea directed him to sit on one of the specially built seats at the side of the bath, and taking up a washcloth, she soaped it and began washing him. Dare closed his eyes and sighed with contentment as Lea bathed him, the washcloth rubbing with tingly abrasion over his skin. She covered his chest and arms and moved around to his back, drawing a groan from him. Her cloth-covered hand slid down to his taut buttocks. Urging him to rise, she ran the cloth completely over them and between them, lingering at his puckered anal ring, which elicited another groan. She traveled down the backs of his legs then around to the front, until she came to his groin. Just as she thought might happen, Dare had grown hard again.

She smiled wonderingly at the man's stamina. Looking up into his face she noted that his eyes remained closed, his expression relaxed. She urged him to be seated again and putting aside the washcloth, she took him in her soap-slick hands, slowly stroking his growing erection. Dare groaned, but kept his eyes closed as Lea worked his turgid flesh. One hand traveled lower capturing the heavy sac of his testicles, gently massaging. Dare's hips shifted as he pushed up into her hand. Lea leaned back and considered a moment. Releasing his balls, she rubbed soap between her breasts and leaned in, surrounding his shaft with her firm flesh, pushing them together to create a tight channel.

Dare's eyes opened and his cock jerked in reaction. "Lea," he murmured, slowly pumping his hips. His cock slid like silk between her breasts. Her nipples hardened and he pinched them lightly as her tight flesh massaged him. Dare worked himself between her breasts with slow, steady thrusts. A deep, drawn-out groan signaled his release as the first warm splash of semen hit under her chin, cascading down over her throat and chest.

Several more spurts followed the first and at their cessation Dare rose. Placing his hands on Lea's waist, he lifted her to the edge of the pool. Urging her to lie back, he parted her thighs and dove into to her already creaming pussy. His mouth and tongue worked her, savoring each sweet drop she released. Lea moaned and writhed under the lash of his tongue as it drilled deep, then slithered over her swollen clit. Her bottom bounced against the floor as her hips pumped, pushing her pussy tighter into his face. When Dare suckled her clit, she burst, wailing her release as he swallowed a fresh influx of liquid heat.

Lea's limp, sated body puddled on the floor. Dare took her hand and pulled her upright. Heaving her over his shoulder he headed into the deeper waters of the pool, where he lowered her to her feet. Lea clung to him, her eyes still closed.

"Anyone alive in there?" he teased.

"Umm-humm," she answered "But I can't come any more."

"Wanna bet?" he growled.

Lea's eyes flew open. "No!"

Dare threw his head back and laughed as Lea splashed him with water.

"Stinker," she accused.

Dare continued to chuckle. "I cannot stink, *tezza*. You did an excellent job of washing me." He leaned down and kissed her. "Thank you for bathing me, *ahnba*. Your care was much appreciated," he told her sincerely.

She looped her arms around his neck and drew him down to her. "Your care was much appreciated as well." She placed a warm kiss on his waiting lips. "Let's finish bathing and go eat. You must be starving—I know I am." As she waded toward the steps, she looked back at him archly. "And don't you dare tell me you've already eaten." With a decisive nod, she ascended the steps out of the pool. Dare grinned and followed the enticing sway of her glistening backside most willingly.

* * * * *

They dried and dressed, ready just in time to join the rest of the family for evening meal. Their entrance was greeted with much enthusiasm. Gilaine and Shaylar, having been told that Lea had recovered, were even more relieved seeing her in person. It was also the first they had seen of Dare since his return.

Everyone filled their plates and prepared to enjoy a hearty meal.

"Before we begin," Dare interrupted, "Lea and I have an announcement." he draped his arm over her shoulder, pulling her close as he grinned with pride. "Lea is carrying our child."

Shaylar squealed with delight and rushed to Lea, hugging her with enthusiasm. "Lea, I am so happy for you both! Just think, a little Dare running around the house." She stopped, frowning. "Oh well, do not worry, I am sure between you, me and Gilaine we can fix him." She grinned sassily at her older brother.

"Very amusing, sister mine," he said sarcastically, smiling as he reached out to give a lock of her hair an affectionate tug. The rest of the company shook with laughter.

Gilaine hugged Dare tight. "I knew you would finally do something right. My faith never wavered," she assured him. "But it took you long enough."

Ran laughed at the good-natured teasing his brother was receiving.

"No need for you to laugh, Ran Finn Mal," Gilaine told him. "You've not done anything right yet!"

More laughter greeted this statement as Dare gave Ran a smug look.

Shaylar hugged Dare, and Ran took her place by Lea. "My best wishes, *basaya*." Ran pulled her into his arms for a warm hug.

Lea returned his smile, her own shy and slightly embarrassed. "Thank you, Ran," she answered. "For everything."

"The pleasure was mine, Lea." He winked, and murmured for her ears only, "Anytime you wish it, *basaya*."

Lea's face flushed with heat. Dare gave his brother a knowing look. "Ran, behave or I will banish you to border patrol."

Ran merely gave an unrepentant grin. Shaylar looked on with confusion. Gilaine kept her own council.

"Let's eat!" Lea called cheerfully, hoping to distract everyone. Her mission was accomplished as, once again, they settled around the table to eat, drink and impart news as Dare gave them a firsthand account of the Somerceians botched invasion attempt.

"I do not believe their commander will be well received by his superiors at home. The man was truly an imbecile, thank the Mother. Had he carried out his orders as I believe they were issued, and set down in a less populated but more rugged area, a longer period of time would have passed before we noticed their incursion. They could have posed a serious threat." He gave Ran his attention. "We need that sensor grid up and running. With it in place we will know immediately if anyone approaches our space or attempts to land without permission."

Ran nodded his agreement. "I have seen the prototype and they tell me they should have the units ready to be placed within the next few months."

"That is good news," Dare sighed. "In the meantime, we must stay alert."

After the meal, they all gathered at the far end of the room in front of the blazing fire, enjoying the warmth and companionship. They chatted and made plans. The women for the coming baby, the men for the security system they were anxious to see installed.

"Dare?" Lea turned to him when there was a lull in the conversation. "Now that you're home, can we go see Jessie tomorrow?"

"Who is Jessie?" Ran asked curiously.

"Lea's friend," he answered. "And no, *tezza*, you may not," he told her firmly.

"Why not? You said we could. I need to see her!" Lea raised her voice in disappointment and disbelief. She couldn't believe he would go back on his word.

"There will be no Orb travel while you carry our child. I will not put you and our baby at risk," Dare stated decisively. In this he was determined to brook no argument.

Lea stood and began to pace angrily. "The Orb wouldn't let anything happen to our baby," she continued, determined to have her way.

Dare stood, blocking her path. He took her chin in his hand and forced her eyes to meet his. "I said no, Lealah. You will not defy me in this."

Lea stiffened under his hand. "But I need to see her. I need to see her now!"

She staggered back as her hand lifted of its own accord, palm flung outward. Silvery Orb light grew and pulsed, creating an empty sphere which began to cloud, the inner chamber becoming vague and indistinct. The energy inside hummed and swirled, then with a gentle pop it shattered, returning to Lea's hand.

Lea stood wide-eyed and shaken as Dare placed his hands on her shoulders. "Are you all right, *tezza*?" His eyes were clouded with worry.

"I'm fine, Dare," she assured him, her gaze going over his shoulder. A smile began to form on her face.

There, where the sphere had formed, stood a woman. Tall, voluptuous, but slender, long, pale blonde hair flowed down her back. Her naked back. She was totally naked. She turned, revealing startled silvery gray eyes, among other outstanding assets.

"Jess?"

"Lea? What the hell is going on?" Jessie shouted.

They rushed into each other's arms, laughing and crying.

"I knew it. I knew you weren't dead," Jess told her, pushing back to study her face. "It was that crazy rock you told me about, wasn't it?"

Lea nodded, too inundated with emotion to speak.

Jess noticed for the first time the two men and two women who were staring at her in open-mouthed amazement.

Her eyes fixed on Ran. She pinned him with a steely-eyed glare. "Instead of standing there staring like an ill-mannered oaf, you could offer me your shirt, like a gentleman."

Ran had been staring. He couldn't get enough of the vision that had appeared in the Orb's sphere. Mesmerized, he pulled his tunic over his head and approached, each step giving him time to recover his usual composure. As he stared into silvery gray eyes cold with disdain, he vowed he would see them glow with heated passion.

"Anything for you, *basaya*," he promised with a dark, sultry growl.

Lea's eyes went from Jess to Ran and back again. The sparks were almost tangible. She looked at Dare, finding him grinning with delight. His arm came around her, pulling her close.

"I believe my brother is about to do something right," he murmured in her ear, nibbling her lobe playfully.

Lea snickered as a shiver ran the length of her spine. "I believe *you're* right."

About the Author

Having been an avid reader of romance for years, and being possessed of an overactive imagination, Kate decided only recently to try her hand at writing. She discovered that, like reading, writing romance has become addictive. Whether writing about werewolves and otherworldly creatures or contemporary gay/erotic romance, she has found the perfect outlet and is thrilled to be part of the Ellora's Cave family.

Kate lives in a turn-of-the-century house located on three acres in the midst of Indiana farm country. Keeping her company is her family, dogs, and other assorted pets.

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