

The background of the book cover is a painting of a woman in a classical style. She is shown from the chest up, looking upwards and to the right with a contemplative expression. Her right hand is raised to her neck. The background of the painting shows a grand, multi-story building with classical architectural features like columns and a balcony with a decorative railing. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

Loose Id

• A SWITHIN SPIN 1 •

A Queen's Move

SHARON MARIA BIDWELL

A SWITHIN SPIN 1:
A QUEEN'S MOVE

Sharon Maria Bidwell

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**Published by
Loose Id LLC
870 Market St, Suite 1201
San Francisco CA 94102-2907
www.loose-id.com**

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ISBN 978-1-59632-326-1

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

**Editor: C. B. Calsing
Cover Artist: April Martinez**

Dedication

I wasn't sure what to put in this dedication. I thought of dedicating it to a couple of friends of mine who have suffragettes in their family history and, therefore, those women who sacrificed so much, who suffered such hardship in the fight for equality. Then I thought that wasn't enough and I should dedicate it to women everywhere, but if I do that, I have to include the men who've stood by them, believed in them. If I do that, I can't stop there. I have to include everyone who has ever spoken out for equality and freedom for others no matter what their sex or sexuality. So, I have to dedicate this book to everyone, to the type of people I'd be happy to call friends. Thank you for reading.

Author's Note:

This story takes place after the last chapter of *The Swithin Chronicles 3: The Comet Cometh*, but before the epilogue, although it can be read entirely as a separate book.

Chapter One

“So, explain to me more precisely why you’ve dragged me on this little jaunt.”

After so much silence, Meira’s order (she could hardly call it a question) surprised Tressa. They had spent two weeks, mostly in this carriage, navigating a route that would avoid the Azu Plains. They were now in the forests surrounding her homeland, a few miles outside Orland, the main city. At times, when their silence was mutual, the time shared had felt almost companionable. Even so, to contemplate such a long journey spent in silence was nothing short of ridiculous. Tressa had expended some effort into striking up conversation. Mostly though, Tressa felt too peeved by Meira to be the one to break her silence first. All too quickly, she had come to realise such an obstinate display would not work with the other woman, and if it came down to a battle of wills, then in all likelihood neither would break. They were both too stubborn. As to what Meira was doing here, surely she knew.

Tressa swallowed, ignoring the increased beat of her heart. She had as good as confessed to Markis, her husband, the Swithin king, her romantic interest in Meira. That might seem odd to most, but when one understood that the Swithin way allowed for unusual relationships, and that she and Markis had wed only out of duty, that paved the way for her to have another love. Markis loved her well enough, but his heart was too full to bursting

with love for the two men in his life to have much room for her. Her boys, as she had taken to calling them, were at least honest concerning their feelings. As a princess, Tressa had always known her father would sell her as a bargaining tool one day. At least in Markis she had escaped her father's plan and chosen her husband. Likewise, Markis had done the same in choosing his wife. Neither of their fathers had wished the two of them to marry. No wonder they understood each other so well, and the dynamic created a strange but righteous kind of balance between them. Still, her nation treated women harshly, and although she knew Markis and the Swithin race were not of the same ilk, she craved female companionship once again. Not that she had ever --

Tressa cut the ensuing images dead and struggled not to blush. She'd never been intimate with another woman, and while rumours existed that such occurrences happened between Azulite women, the men denied the very suggestion. Whether it happened or not, such a thing was outside of Tressa's experiences. During a very difficult and all too recent time, she had gained much comfort from Meira's presence. The woman was a great healer, and when she had agreed to join her on this journey, Tressa had expected Meira to make some sort of advance in response to the undeniable attraction that existed between them. She could think of no other reason for Meira's recent interest and almost eager acceptance to make an exhausting journey.

"Did you only come because Markis ordered it?" Tressa voiced the sudden thought.

"He didn't order."

Meira sat on the other side of the carriage as it swayed and bounced. The wooden structure creaked so much after many days on the road that Tressa had begun to wonder if it would slowly fall apart despite being of sound Swithin construction. She silently cursed her people for not caring for their roads.

While Tressa tried to look regal and hoped that she would not be thrown out of her seat to the floor, Meira leaned back, looking almost nonchalant. With her long legs crossed at the ankles, her arms folded across her stomach, and the ability to rock and sway with the

movement of the carriage, Meira appeared relaxed. Tressa didn't know how the other woman managed it. Even the heavily padded seats did little to cushion her backside. Tressa hid her discomfort well enough, but she had to admit she couldn't have appeared relaxed if her life depended on it. The most she could hope for was to appear dignified. Right now, she sat as demurely as the jolting carriage would allow and admired Meira's dark hair, which in many respects resembled her own. Hair aside, they looked very different. Tressa's eyes were brown; Meira had the glittering green eyes of a cat, as all Kita did. She was taller, stockier, and possessed a more angular face. The woman wasn't entirely Swithin. Her father had been Kita, and his race had killed Meira's parents for the union that they considered a travesty. The Kita were a vicious race, but not many of them survived.

"Markis doesn't order unless he deems it necessary. He asked if I would care to come with you," Meira finished explaining.

"So, you are here of your own volition?"

Meira didn't answer her. She just sat and stared. Tressa thought of how she could explain her interest without making it sound too personal. She was feeling her way through the possibility of a same-sex relationship, and although she had taken readily to the Swithin life, she still felt a twinge of embarrassment over such things. "I told you why I need you here. I need a strong woman to help me to --"

"You mean to use the attraction we feel to help change things for your people, but I don't see how."

This was the first time Meira had made any allusion to their feelings, and heat immediately rushed into Tressa's face. Meira roughly voiced what Tressa had intended to say, although she hadn't planned to mention the part concerning their mutual affection. She wasn't sure whether to cringe now that their emotions were out there for open discussion or to give in to the fluttering of her heart that wanted to dance and skip with joy over the idea that Meira might possibly share her feelings to the same extent. She erred on the side of caution and spoke responsibly. "I am uncertain myself. The first thing I shall do is --"

“Winging it is never a good idea.”

Tressa frowned. “I...am unfamiliar with that expression.” Alas, Meira just sat and stared, her gaze now expressing disapproval. Tressa began to feel as though she were not a queen, but a young princess again and this time in audience with her own mother. The idea gave her pause. How would she feel face-to-face once again with her mother? Did a daughter ever grow out of that feeling of insecurity when facing the woman who had given birth to her? Even worse was the fact that Tressa had as good as absconded, run away to wed the Swithin prince to become the Swithin queen, and now she returned in defiance.

Although the position of Azulite women was a peculiar one, they did hold some power. Even as a princess, Tressa had enough power that, under certain circumstances, she could order a man to his death, but in regards to a husband, she was supposed to obey him in all things. Mothers still held sway over their daughters unless the father chose to take over a child’s discipline. In the matter of disciplining a male child, even a queen was supposed to consult her husband first. Now a queen in her own right, Tressa could all too easily imagine her mother ignoring her title and still scolding her.

She wanted comfort from Meira, not this inflexibility. Her heart tightened in pain. Perhaps she’d been wrong to seek a romantic relationship with this woman. Hating the way that Meira’s unwavering stare made her feel, Tressa tried for a change of subject, referring to recent events. “Do you really think you can rehabilitate that man, the Kita --”

Once again, Meira interrupted her. “You don’t understand. Markis has given him the chance, not I, even though I said I would do what I can. Personally, I am not sure I would be so lenient.”

“But he’s one of your people.” Even as she said the words, Tressa accepted that Meira’s “people” had done nothing but bestow upon Meira pain, misery, and the possibility of death. She could hardly blame Meira for harbouring such belligerent feelings. Meira frightened her sometimes, but Tressa silently acknowledged she needed that sharp edge the woman possessed. She needed a formidable woman at her side. Before she left, Markis had told

Tressa that despite her slight size, she was a formidable woman herself, but Tressa knew that her father would not see her that way. Especially not now, for he saw her as soiled, corrupted by the Swithin and their immoral standards.

The Kita to whom she referred was one of the men involved in a plot to overthrow Markis's reign as the Swithin king, to make him a puppet ruler only, to eventually steal his power if not his life. She and Meira had been among the few people Markis had trusted, the healer's skills coming in handy, first to combat poison and later to treat the numerous bloody gashes obtained during a sword fight. Meira had sewn up the cuts Tressa had suffered. The truth was, she'd been lucky in the fight. As she'd once demonstrated, people saw a small woman and underestimated her. Meira might be staring at her with what looked like disdain now, but Tressa need only think back to the night where she lay receiving the healer's treatment, those knowing hands easing together her sliced flesh with the smallest, neatest stitches, and she could recall the gentle hand and concern that shone in those green eyes.

As punishment for what he had done, Markis had kept his promise to the Kita -- that the man would live -- and given him over along with a Kita female into Meira's care. During Meira's absence, both prisoners remained in the Swithin city, although the Swithin people considered the female more a victim than a villain. No doubt the man had considered this time as a welcome respite from Meira's watchful eye. However, she had left him in the care of the Swithin guards with a long list of chores and a timetable in which he was to complete each task. Tressa struggled not to smile. Meira might well be absent from the treatment centre, but the man in her charge would still feel her presence. Meira suddenly grinned at her now, as though she knew what Tressa was thinking.

"You still have much to learn about me and my past, no matter what stories Markis has told you. I am the product of my experiences, many of them unpleasant. One word of warning, Tressa, before we embark on this adventure of yours, and before you try to worm your way into my heart. Take me as I am or do not take me at all. I will not appreciate it if you try to change me later on."

Tressa laughed, perhaps a little too harshly. Meira raised an eyebrow. Feeling it prudent to explain, Tressa said, "You sometimes remind me of me. You sound as if it could be me talking. Perhaps this is not such a good idea after all. We are too much alike."

"If there wasn't more to you than immediately meets the eye, do you think I'd be interested?"

Once more, the taller, larger woman took Tressa by surprise with the compliment, even if the praise did sound somewhat guarded. Very well, if Meira preferred her to act in a forthright manner she would ask what was on her mind. "Have...you had a female lover before?"

"I have experience of sex with women, but nothing that involved emotions other than the delight of the flesh."

The way Meira said that caused Tressa to shiver. She couldn't be sure if it was from fear or delight.

* * * * *

"Sardia, I do not think this is wise."

For one brief moment, Tressa felt sorry for the man at her side. She felt even worse knowing that she intended to betray him. Morton was one of Antal's brothers, and just as Antal was *Sonndre*, protector to Markis's lover Uly, Morton was now Sonndre to her. He always addressed her as *Sardia*, the correct Swithin term for queen, was nothing but respectful and protective of her, and she was going to repay him by driving him sick with worry. Should Markis ever find out, it could quite possibly result in Morton receiving a flogging. Well, maybe not that. Markis would scream at him, maybe even demote him for a short time, but knowing her like the king did, he would surely realise that Morton didn't stand a chance.

"I have an errand for Meira," Tressa explained. "One I cannot impart to anyone else."

Morton gave the larger woman an uncertain look, but she stared at him without blinking. Tressa had seen even the Swithin king hesitate under that gaze. Meira had her reputation to back up her stare, and although Morton was clearly uneasy, his orders were to protect Tressa. Only by association did he have to protect Meira. No doubt, in the young man's eyes, Meira could take care of herself. What probably appeared to be odd to Morton and Tressa both was seeing Meira dressed as a lady. The woman favoured breeches, or at the very least casual skirts, and only as they had drawn closer to Orland had she agreed to wear an Azulite gown. Having grown used to Swithin dresses, Tressa could understand Meira's reluctance to don one of the heavier and confining fashions that Azulite women wore.

"Meira and my maid will enter the city by a different route, and I will carry on in the carriage by way of the main road." They had sent a message on ahead to let the Azulite queen know they were coming, although Tressa had been deliberately vague as to their intended arrival time. "Now, if you will give me a few minutes, I need to make certain my maid understands my instructions. Both women need to know what message to carry in case something should happen to one of them."

Morton had already confessed that he had no head for politics, and as Tressa had discussed this plan with Markis and he had given permission to proceed, the young Sonndre nodded his consent and walked away to a polite distance. Tressa stepped up into the carriage on the pretence that she had some secret to impart. What she had failed to tell Markis, or Morton, was that she had no intention of going directly to the palace and that she was going to swap places with her maid. It would be she and Meira that entered the city by a back gate, and the maid that would go directly to the city, where Morton would discover the sham.

Quickly shrugging off her cloak, she changed boots and cloaks with the maid, who chewed nervously at her lip. "Danna, please do not do that. I chose you for having a calm nerve and a clear head. Do not disappoint me."

"Never, Sardia. Only, are you sure the Azulite queen won't have my head?"

“She does not know of the ruse. Not even my father has taken a messenger’s head. Besides, you are not going to see the queen. Morton will discover what has happened before it comes to that.”

Meira chortled slightly, which indicated the woman was highly amused, and it occurred to Tressa in how many ways the large woman had much in common with Ryanac, Markis’s own personal guard, best friend, and his second male lover. As good a man as Morton was, Tressa already saw Meira in much the same fashion as she was certain Markis viewed his own guard. She considered it safer to have Meira as a friend rather than an enemy and harboured no doubts as to the woman possessing decent fighting skills. The only thing left was for them to become lovers, and as that had not happened during the journey, Tressa now wondered when they would find the time. She had the views of an entire nation to change, and that was not an easy matter, would no doubt leave her drained and exhausted owing to frustration alone. Right now, though, she was running on pure excitement spiced with a little trepidation. Meira stepped out of the carriage to gather their horses.

“You have your orders, and you know what to do.”

“Morton won’t be pleased.” Danna stared at her unblinking, an almost-beseeching expression on her face.

“I know. Give him this. Tell him to read it and then destroy it.” The note was an apology and further orders. “Tell him that if he values my life, it’s imperative that he does as it says and that he acts as if nothing untoward has occurred. He must pretend that he is your escort.”

Having no more time for argument, Tressa lifted the hood of her cloak and exited the carriage. She quickly mounted the waiting horse and then turned to the road that led into the forest.

As Tressa cantered off, Meira drew her mount round in a circle to face Morton. As she and Tressa had expected, he approached the carriage.

"Don't dawdle, man," Meira snapped, gazing down into his upturned, surprised face. "It's but three hours till sunset. The queen will sleep, for she gathers her strength to meet her mother. Get going. On the road with you. Best take the queen out of these trees." Meira glanced around the forest as though she expected the very trees to uproot and stomp after them. Whether Morton envisioned the same image, her words or her manner apparently conveyed anxiety, and she watched alarm seep into his eyes. He gazed around now as though he expected an ambush.

Hesitant but clearly shaken by Meira's insistence, Morton nodded to his men. Several times he appeared as if he would open his mouth to question her. He even cast a suspicious glance towards the carriage, but even if he had thought the queen might lie to him, apparently he struggled with the idea that Meira would disobey Markis and put Tressa in danger. Meira almost smirked when she saw him shake his head. If she could actually interpret the gesture, no doubt the man dispersed his worries and laughed at his own foolishness.

She felt a pang of regret. Morton was a good man; he would feel sick as soon as he realised he had allowed the queen to ride off into the forest instead of the maid. He would feel even sicker when they returned home to Sarad, the Swithin city, to face the knowledge that Markis had not put Tressa's safety solely in his hands. Another of Antal's more experienced brothers should also have accompanied them, but Tressa had deftly altered Markis's orders without anyone but Meira knowing. Of course, Meira had provided her with the solution to eradicate the ink from the parchment, wiping out the second name. There was no reason for Markis to become aware that they'd not followed his orders for some weeks.

Still, neither woman was fool enough to think he would never find out. Things had a way of getting back to the king's ears. Having survived the death of her parents -- her

mother dying seconds before Meira entered the world -- and endured many days and nights a victim of a Kita trapper who had wanted to use her for his pleasure, Meira feared no man. Not even the Swithin king. Nevertheless, it crossed her mind that she had yet to meet one of these Azulite men, but Meira feared neither pain nor death, even if warranted; what she had done to aid Tressa amounted to treason. Just because Markis lacked the heart for brutality, such knowledge hardly gave her the right to break the rules. Still, Meira was certain that Markis would forgive her for what she had done at Tressa's request in the name of...love?

The word felt foreign on her tongue. What did she know of love? She knew it existed. Her parents had died for love, her mother suffering to hold on to find a way to bring her daughter into the world out of love. Meira knew what people did for love, but how it actually felt to love someone... That was something else. She cared for Tressa. Already she had done things in her name she would have done for no one else. Was that love? If so, she would give into it only if she chose. She had yet to trust this thing called love, and if this was love, it had yet to bloom in full.

Seeing the procession back on the main road again, Meira turned her mount into the woods and hurried after Tressa, who had slowed in order to allow an easy pursuit. Even as the smaller woman came into view, Meira examined her feelings for the queen. She liked Tressa, and although she harboured no particular hatred for men -- one bad apple did not make a good one any less sweet -- she had never felt desirous of their company. That did not mean she did not want sex, and it certainly didn't mean that she wanted a life without devotion. Tressa was right, and they were too much alike; Meira acknowledged this was exactly the reason she felt drawn to the small queen. She saw strength; she saw passion. She also saw a certain tenderness in the other woman's eyes, which was an emotion she understood but seldom had the patience to bestow on others. The trouble was, could two dominants possibly share a mutual love?

Meira could stand the animosity between them outside of the bedroom, but within it was another matter. Pursing her lips, she drew her horse to Tressa's side, staring into those deep, expressive eyes. Tressa replied by way of a small frown, but Meira only smiled.

Very well, my small queen, we shall see. Although she was uncertain of Tressa's plan, she had followed her thus far, and she would respect her position as royalty. Tressa could be queen outside of the bedroom, but Meira had other plans for when they were between the sheets.

Chapter Two

“This...friend?”

“A consort of my mother’s, yes.”

“Consort?”

A small frown tightened Tressa’s forehead. Meira regarded the delicate-looking woman where she sat atop her horse to her left side. Many wandering and distracting thoughts flittered through her mind. They were not lovers, though she knew that was what Tressa hoped for. Likely it would please the small queen to know that, many a night, Meira had fantasised about such a time. Even now, she couldn’t keep her thoughts entirely free from wondering over Tressa’s weight. Meira was strong enough to lift an average man. She would have no trouble picking Tressa up in her arms.

Still, although she had decided some days ago that they would make love, Meira had her own reasons for making the other woman wait. Half-Swithin she may be, but Meira knew what the Kita did to their women. There was a prime example residing in the Swithin city right now: Tihea.

Used as part of the political plot Tressa had alluded to earlier, men had used Tihea as entertainment and a way to shame others. Meira had offered to try to rehabilitate the young

woman along with the man who Tressa fretted over so. The man's fate was an eyelash in Meira's eye that blinking alone would not rid her of. As for the female, despite wanting to offer the woman a new life, Meira harboured ambiguous emotions. Meira certainly wouldn't trust Tihea to administer treatment or prepare potions unsupervised, although the woman's training did not make her malicious to others. Indeed, the problem Tihea had was obeying other women. A man snapped his fingers, and she...*scurried* to obey.

Meira suppressed her shudder. The truth was, she looked at Tihea and saw what she would have been if not for the fact that her father had loved a Swithin woman. The Kita trained their women to give pleasure and provide children. Women performed nominal duties, but whereas some races expected the women of the household to cook and clean, Kita women were never in charge even when it came to mundane chores. No. Kita women were there to pleasure men.

Even knowing she was more Swithin than Kita, Meira was aware that she overcompensated. She'd had lovers both male and female over the years, though not many, and never was she one to go easily to another's bed. Making Tressa wait had not been her way of teasing the other woman, or of gaining the upper hand. Meira wanted to feel certain that the attraction was mutual and genuine, and here, a month on, they still felt the same way. Their mutual affection continued, and she was now certain she wanted to take this relationship further. Only time would tell if they could be long-term lovers. However, Meira was also aware that her predisposition and unreasonable need for others to see her as a strong woman and in no way subservient could manifest at a most unfortunate time. It troubled her that she had no way to know whether Tressa would like the manner in which she made love or not.

Only one way to find out and then if Tressa didn't like it, at least they would know.

"I'm sorry; I do not understand. Yes, I said consort." Tressa's voice brought Meira's wandering thoughts back to her question.

"So, is it a man or a woman we wait for?"

“A woman.”

Meira raised an eyebrow. “Your mother has a female lover?”

“What? No!” Even in the deepening twilight, Meira could see that Tressa’s skin turned a deeper shade. “Oh. You mean consort signifies --”

“Lover,” Meira said, “married partner, or lifetime companion.”

“Well, to the Azulite it means close friend.”

“So, why are we meeting this friend...here?” Meira turned her head and looked around. The deeper into the outskirts of the city they progressed, the worse her estimation of the place grew. The buildings were tall and loomed over them. Many were fashioned from wood, and in places, the streets grew so narrow they needed to proceed in single file. At such times, Meira had wondered what one did if one met someone coming the other way.

“This is the old town. The newer part is better.”

“You mean this is for the poor.”

Tressa opened her mouth as though to protest, then snapped her mouth shut, making an audible sound as her teeth clicked together. Obviously, she disapproved of the fact, but Meira was accurate in her estimation.

“Why are there few people on the streets?”

“It grows dark. Soon it will not be safe, but we will be long gone from here by then.” Tressa jerked her head. “There’s a courtyard at the end of this road. That is where we will meet.”

“To what purpose?”

“I wish to speak to my mother in private before seeking an audience with my father. This was the most appropriate way. Jarnis has never let me down. I sent a message on ahead.”

So, that was why Tressa had insisted on a day’s rest a few miles south of their present location. Tressa had gone with Morton to a nearby farm, apparently to arrange to send a

message, but Meira had not been privilege to the meeting. The message had clearly been for this Jarnis, to arrange this reunion. "Jarnis is the name of the friend?"

Tressa nodded as they emerged into a small area that was so dark due to the towering buildings, which obscured what little light remained, even the horse hesitated. Meira felt the animal tense and needed to pat its neck to calm it down. Many animals had better sight and instincts than humans did, but most still required some light to see.

At the thought, a flash caught Meira's gaze and even then, she needed to blink several times before she recognised the rectangular opening of a doorway. Then a person stepped through and closed it again. At least this newcomer carried a lantern, even if she kept the light dim. Meira assumed the figure was female due to the person's size and because Tressa had said they were here to meet a woman. A moment later, as the stranger spoke, Meira had her assumption confirmed. The voice was definitely feminine, but hardly sounded welcoming.

"Hurry. Follow me."

There were to be no preambles, then. Meira was at once glad and suspicious. She followed Tressa's example and dismounted. Tressa's hand -- it had to be Tressa's -- lightly squeezed her arm in what felt like reassurance, and they proceeded along the pathway on foot, leading their mounts.

"Give your horses over," Jarnis instructed, and despite her misgivings, Meira had no option but to follow Tressa as the smaller woman unhesitatingly handed over the reins to a waiting man and hurried after the swiftly disappearing figure of her friend.

Stifling a curse, Meira picked up her pace, but the two figures had turned a corner taking the lamp with them, which plunged her at once into darkness. She had no choice but to stop, give her eyes a few moments to adjust, and then, as she took a step forward, the accursed skirt of the Azulite dress almost tripped her up. What fool designed dresses that hung to the ground? What was so enticing about a woman's feet? Gathering the skirt in her

hands, she quickly dashed after Tressa, turning into the road where she had seen her flee. When several assailants took her by surprise, she lost precious seconds while the heavy weight of the fabric encumbered her hands. Her astonishment allowed enough time for them to drop a loop of rope over her to bind her arms, and then, even as she opened her mouth to shout, she breathed in something harsh that made her dizzy. Meira struggled to turn her head to the side, but even as she did, she became vaguely aware that her body was falling. Her mind slowly tumbled into unconsciousness. Her last thought was that she should have done a better job of protecting Tressa.

* * * * *

Believing she would take a bad fall, Tressa managed to suppress her cry of outrage as two men pushed her roughly into the room. She even managed not to flail too inelegantly before stumbling to stay on her feet and to turn on them a look of fury before they slammed the door in her face. Tressa snarled in defiance while rubbing at her wrists. The gesture was one of annoyance more than to ease the slight soreness caused by the ropes they had used to bind her. How dare Jarnis...? Why the...woman! She... Gagggh! They'd been friends for so many years and now... Tressa wanted to punch something.

"Some friend." A quiet, patient-sounding voice issued out of the darkness.

Tressa blinked, turned, let her eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, and then, allowing herself the privilege of a small cry, she hurried over and crouched down. Meira lay on her back, ropes securely fastened around her.

"Are you hurt?" Meira asked.

Tressa swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. Here Meira lay trussed, and her first thought was to ask if Tressa was hurt. Well, her second thought. She had sneered over Jarnis's betrayal first, but Tressa could forgive her for that. "I am fine. Are you injured?"

"Just my pride." Meira made that sound worse than any physical wound. "You're sure they've not hurt you?"

"No. Jarnis just... Never mind that now." Tressa shook her head, reiterating the fact that she was fine as she struggled to untie the ropes.

"Feel at the back of my neck, under my hair."

Confused, Tressa obeyed. The warm, soft skin of Meira's nape made Tressa aware of how cold her fingertips were. "Sorry. My hands are cold."

"I don't mind," Meira said lightly enough, but something existed in her tone that caused the chill of Tressa's fingertips to scurry up her arms and then down her torso. Beneath the dress, her nipples hardened as the icy shiver sped down.

"I do not... Oh!" At last, Tressa felt the peculiar object to which Meira must have been referring. Carefully, she drew it out of the other woman's dress. Removing the tiny scabbard, Tressa held up a small, slender, and sharp dagger with a five-inch blade. Tressa imagined the weapon piercing someone's heart. She even felt tempted to ask if Meira had ever used it, but decided that she didn't truly want to know. Meira was hard on the outside, but Tressa believed in the woman's soft core. If nothing else, Meira liked her chosen profession as that of a healer, and healers seldom desired to kill unless they absolutely needed to or out of compassion. The healer also possessed a sense of fair play. What people didn't often get from Meira was mercy. For a healer, she had a lousy bedside manner come to that, but one could forgive her perfunctory and no-nonsense attitude if she kept you alive and healthy.

Tressa hesitated as she began to slice the ropes. She had decided she wanted this woman as a lover, but did she truly want someone capable of killing without a pang of regret? Between conversations with Markis and Meira, she had pieced together a good picture of Meira's background, and Tressa knew that Meira had shown no mercy to a man who had once treated her ill. Having suffered such things as this woman had, perhaps she would view the world as harshly as Meira did, but even understanding the woman, did that make everything she did all right? Did the end truly justify the means, and was revenge ever a good thing?

“What’s taking you so long?”

“Nothing.” Tressa went back to slicing the ropes and refused to move away when Meira sat up, rolling her shoulders, evidently easing the tightness caused by being tethered and rendered helpless by drugs. They’d done the same things to Tressa, and then Jarnis had spent two hours talking to her once she came around. No, not talking; *lecturing* her. Surely, Meira’s head was as clear by now, but it annoyed Tressa that they had left Meira tied up for so long.

“May I have my knife back?”

“What? Oh.” Tressa sheathed the dagger and handed it over, but she couldn’t seem to rise from her kneeling position on the ground. Only when she felt Meira’s gentle fingers against her face did she realise that she shed tears.

“Tell me what they did to you?”

Although there was no mistaking the underlying tenderness, something in Meira’s voice suggested that if it was bad their captors would regret it, but Tressa felt too tired to feel any anger over what Jarnis had done. Besides, as Tressa had said to her maid, even her father had never killed the messenger, and Jarnis was surely that.

“Jarnis was delivering a message. My mother does not wish to see me. She does not want me stirring up trouble.” Tressa managed to put at least some sarcasm into her voice, was even grateful to hear that she could still manage to sound annoyed even if all she felt was defeated. She had hoped for a private conference with her mother so that they could discuss long-term implications of the truce Markis had enforced between the Swithin and Azulite nations and how they could eventually use the alliance to change things for Azulite women. She had brought things with her for that purpose, proposals and gifts that she had hoped her mother would pass around.

“Jarnis means to turn us away from the city and make certain I never see the queen. The only way I can do so then will be an open audience, and Jarnis will continue to thwart

any attempt I make to speak to my mother privately.” If she could not speak to her in private, there was no way Tressa could hand over the things she had brought. Tressa fisted her hands and shook her head in frustration. “I have no head for this.”

“For what?”

“Politics.”

“You have to be joking. That’s not what Markis says or what I have witnessed.” Incredibly, Meira’s voice contained some laughter, a most unusual thing indeed.

“I do fine when it comes to day-to-day problems. I can handle the petitions from the people and even those grouchy old men.” She meant the Swithin council. “But changing the views of an entire nation, that is a little beyond me. I had hoped to enlist my mother’s hand in this.”

“What you seek for your people will happen in time.”

“I want it to happen now.”

“You’re sounding like a petulant child.”

Tressa started, gasping in anger.

“And you’re forgetting a very important thing.”

Tressa shook her head, not understanding.

Meira’s gaze wandered as though to take in the sight of Tressa’s face in what little light was available through cracks in the wooden walls even as her hands smoothed back Tressa’s dark hair. Tressa tried to ignore the little shivers of delight the other woman’s touch caused. “Tressa, my love,” Meira said, “your mother is scared.”

Tressa frowned in confusion, then realising that Meira might not be able fully to see her expression, she asked, “Scared?” Meira leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, right over her frown, so maybe she could see well enough in the dim light, after all.

“You know of my background?” Meira asked. Tressa nodded. “Then you must realise that in many ways you and I have much in common. Kita train their women to serve men for two main purposes, for sex and breeding.”

Thankfully, the race was almost extinct, although Tressa felt a little twinge of guilt for feeling thankful. Somehow, she was certain that Meira felt the same way minus the guilt.

“The Azulites are a little more advanced. At least their women can talk to each other and of topics that do not solely include new ways to sexually stimulate a man.”

Tressa winced. “True. They still dictate who we should wed, when we should have sex, what we should learn.” This meant that Azulite women, for the most part, had a poor education. Tressa had overseen her own education, even stealing books or paying for them with little trinkets of jewellery that her father gave her and he would never miss. Azulite men thought that the way to an obedient woman was through threats, bribes, or a combination of the two. Throughout her life, her father had given her many gifts of frivolous things.

“I know all this,” Meira said, “and although I escaped what would have been a demoralising and abusive upbringing, I have made certain that I learned the ways of my father’s people and of why he would turn to a Swithin woman for love. It is a miracle that he broke his training, and I am proud to be my parents’ daughter and to carry their strength. I also spent time in a Kita man’s unwanted company. I understand how you feel, and I can understand how scared your mother must feel having known only one way of life.”

Tressa forced herself not to flinch. If the woman ever wanted to discuss the actual events regarding her capture by a Kita hunter, then Tressa would listen, but she would not force the issue. One thing about it bothered her, though.

“Are you interested in a relationship with a woman because of what a man did to you?”

“Are you?”

Tressa blinked, taken by surprise. "I...do not know. I suppose that has something to do with it. However, I am used to spending time with women more than I am with men, and I confess I miss that. I do not feel that is the sole reason for my feelings."

"Nor is it mine."

She was pleased to hear that but wanted Meira to understand. "I was...curious, but when we met..." Her words trailed off as Meira took her hand.

"Tressa, I have had both male and female lovers. I have lived the Swithin way, and while I find a cock interesting, I take pleasure from my own touch just as well. A person's anatomy will not dictate who I fa..." Meira's words trailed off, and she finished by saying, "Who I eventually settle with."

Even in the dim light, Tressa could see that a smile played about the other woman's mouth. Despite her hesitancy, Tressa knew that the woman had been about to say a person's anatomy would not dictate with whom she fell in love. That didn't mean that Meira loved her, but it gave her hope, and clearly, Meira wanted an intimate relationship.

"Why, Tressa, are you blushing?"

"Of course not! You are in error due to the poor lighting in here. As to what you say about my mother, I see some sense in it now." Tressa did, now that she thought about it, though that wasn't why she dragged the conversation back to the topic. Some Azulite women held power. Royalty of either sex could condemn someone for treason, but what Tressa wanted to propose to her mother, the king could -- no, *would* -- view as treason by the queen. She couldn't believe she had been so shortsighted, and yet they had to start somewhere. Perhaps her mother believed that Tressa expected her to stand up and denounce men openly. She would never have done that, but she could understand if her mother believed so and... "What are you doing?"

Meira had stood up and was calmly inching her way out of her clothes. Tressa whipped her head around wildly, her gaze just as crazed as the movement, feeling ridiculous even as

she checked for anyone watching. There was no one around to see Meira strip but her. Tressa couldn't help but wonder over the sudden rush of embarrassment and trepidation that overcame her. A rustle of clothing drew her attention. When she looked back, Meira stood before her naked. Even in the dim light, she could see the paler and darker tones of Meira's form. The effect highlighted her natural curves, formed a triangle of her throat and her sex. The darkness painted an arc of her breasts, light made a pronouncement of her nipples, leading down to the pear shape of her hard, tight stomach. For some reason, Tressa couldn't tear her gaze away from the woman's navel. To do so meant she would have to pay more attention to her luscious shape. Tressa admired Meira's long legs. When younger, she had once wished for such long, sleek limbs. Now Tressa liked herself well enough not to waste time wishing for attributes that were not hers to have, for nature had been more than kind in any case. Tressa knew others desired her, but she wanted someone to desire her for more than what she saw in the mirror. Neither Markis nor Meira were people capable of finding pleasure in beauty alone.

"We cannot. Not...here."

Meira knelt on one knee before her, then leaned closer, because even on one knee the position gave her height over Tressa's crouched form. "I would love to carry you to a silken bed, and if destiny permits, I will do so one day soon, but we have blankets, which indicates they do not intend to disturb us for a few hours yet, and I have need of you, Tressa."

Tressa opened her mouth to say she knew not what, but only managed to utter a small cry before Meira gathered her up in her arms.

It took much enticing to get Tressa out of her dress, but once naked, even in the dim light, Meira became aware of her own size compared to the small woman. Tressa was luscious, yes, but Meira was aware of her own body and knew that, although she had womanly curves, much of her body was hard and firm. She hiked for miles in the woods on a regular basis to gather herbs for medicines. A long time had passed since she'd had a lover,

male or female. Now that this moment was here, it struck her as less than romantic. Meira hesitated long enough for Tressa to ask her, "What's wrong?"

"I've not had a lover for many months. In fact, for well over a year, and now that I lay beside you with nothing between us, fabric or guise, I find myself quite afraid of what I'm feeling." Meira couldn't keep the grin from her face, and it had been so long that she'd any true happiness in her life that, to her dismay, her heart swelled with a lightness of being that quite stole her breath. She set the feeling aside, unwilling to examine it right now. "I want my wicked way with you."

"I am...prepared," Tressa said. She made it sound as if she were about to be sacrificed.

"Are you now?" Meira couldn't help her natural cynicism leaking through. She knew Tressa wanted this, was even eager, but it was easy to want something only to regret it later. "Why then do you sound like you're offering your body up as a forfeit?"

Tressa gave a soft laugh, but the sound contained too much anxiety to be real. "It is not that. I want this. I...care for you a great deal. I would like to know if we can --"

Meira placed a finger over Tressa's lips, silencing her. "I know what you hope for. Let's not speak of an unseen future. This is about here and now."

At least Tressa had not been so foolish to say that she loved her, even if Meira had considered the word in regards to her own emotions. What they felt was possibly the start of love, but it was too soon for Tressa to know her true feelings, even if Meira was fully aware and brave enough to acknowledge that she was growing to admire the small queen a little more each day. Despite her feelings, Meira was not prepared to acknowledge them yet, certainly not openly, and so she didn't expect or even want Tressa to speak of such things too soon.

"You've truly never been with a woman?" Meira asked.

Tressa shook her head, perhaps a little uncertainly.

"Then how do you know you will like it?"

“I don’t --”

Meira had never intended for Tressa to answer. She silenced her with a kiss, making it firm. She felt the hesitancy in Tressa’s mouth -- indeed, throughout her entire body -- and then relished the moment when Tressa gave in to the kiss. Still the kiss remained light, somewhat chaste. Thinking of Tressa rather than her own pleasure, Meira waited for Tressa to respond a certain way and then pushed forward with her tongue. Tressa gasped in what sounded like shock and arousal combined. Knowing the small queen had surely experienced passionate kisses -- as well as a great many other things, considering the rumours and knowing the Swithin king as Meira did -- she tried to imagine what was going through Tressa’s mind right now. Tressa was the Swithin queen, but although she and the king loved each other well enough -- Markis would never treat someone with such a lack of respect as to wed without some mutual feeling -- both Tressa and the man in her life knew that she deserved a more personal relationship.

For the first time in her life, Meira experienced a pang of... It wasn’t regret, but something like it, edged with pain. She wanted someone to love too, but although she had tried to remain open to love, Meira had never found someone that she considered her equal. Did she have a life-mate here, in the form of the Swithin queen? Their backgrounds were similar enough that they shared a common pain. They were both intelligent women, and from the way Tressa now opened her mouth and allowed her tongue to dance, Meira would say they were equally passionate. Could she be a queen’s consort in the way the Swithin used the word? She almost laughed. By the time she was finished with Tressa, the woman would not only be in love with her, she would never look at sex the same way again.

The kiss was wonderful; so soft, yet insistent, and Meira’s tongue demanding. Tressa was so lost in the dance that she almost groaned when she felt Meira’s fingers trailing over her skin. The touch was light, tickled and teased, the woman’s hands much smaller and softer than Markis’s touch. Not better exactly, just different, and it was a difference she liked.

Somehow, Tressa sensed that Meira would usually be bolder than this, but that she held back, allowing Tressa to grow accustomed to her touch. Not wishing to examine her feelings, preferring to lose herself in sensation, Tressa knew it wouldn't be fair to disconnect her mind from the pleasure; if she did that, afterwards, she might well regret what they had done, and then she might look at Meira with different eyes. Whatever happened between them, Tressa didn't want that. Meira deserved more respect than that. So even as they kissed, Tressa tried to open her mind and heart to the moment, but it was difficult. Difficult because a curling tightness cramped her stomach, her nipples hardened, and...

Meira broke the kiss, her lips whispering over Tressa's face, kissing a path to her ear. Close enough so that even if others had been in the room, they couldn't have heard, she whispered, "If I touched you now, would I find you wet? Would I be able to drive my fingers in?"

It wasn't until Meira gave voice to the prospect that Tressa realised the answer to both questions was yes. Her eyes shot open, and she stared at the ceiling even though it lay in darkness. Her heart pounded in a wild rhythm. She tried to tame her ambivalent emotions, draw in her desire, repress it, but she couldn't. The fact was, whenever she tried to consider her choice or think about making love with another woman logically, her brain went off on its own wild fantasies, thoughts she was certain no one could ever fulfil. Markis was an excellent lover. What could a woman give her that he couldn't?

The spark caused by Meira's light touch, brushing over her sex and lightly teasing those swollen nether lips, threw Tressa's head back. Her spine arched. She gasped, trying to take control of her body, to ease back from such a wanton display, but Meira had seen her reaction and her voice sounded wickedly full of promise.

"Haven't you learned by now, Tressa, that good sex is only partly physical? Your brain is the largest sex organ, and when your heart and mind are in unison, when you've found the right person, then the sex becomes something other."

Tressa blinked into the darkness, certain that from their positions, Meira could see more of her than she could see of the other woman. “You mean...?”

“I’m speaking of...affection and of us. I don’t think sex between us is going to be a problem, do you?”

Tressa frowned, wondering over Meira’s hesitation, positive that once again the woman had almost mentioned love. Still, now was not the time to think of what that meant, even though she despaired that even now Meira held back from the words. She was a little afraid but already nodding her head in agreement. She couldn’t imagine anything that Meira would do to her that she wouldn’t want, except... Tressa licked her lips with uncertainty. Having grown up in a world dominated by men, she wasn’t at all certain that she wanted a woman to dominate her. As though she knew of Tressa’s fears, Meira soothed her brow, first with her touch and then with kisses.

“Trust me,” she whispered. “I may fuck you senseless, but I’ll not fuck you over. This time, let me show you.”

Struggling with her own fears, finally Tressa’s determination won out. She wanted this.

Chapter Three

Her heart hammered in her chest from so many emotions that Tressa could almost believe that the feeling alone could split her asunder. Tressa didn't know if this was the stupidest thing she had done in her life or the best. If Jarnis walked in on them like this, she could only imagine the other woman's shock. She had believed that Jarnis was one of those women who wanted her freedom, who longed for equality for her race, but now she was not so certain. Perhaps everything Jarnis had ever told her had been a lie, and the woman had certainly never expressed an interest in physical pleasure of any kind so this... Ahhhhh, but this...

If this was seduction, then Tressa wanted Meira to seduce her. The other woman went to her knees even while kissing her, and when she felt the nudge of Meira's knees seeking a passage between her legs, Tressa allowed her legs to fall open. Meira settled her weight between them, using her elbows to ease off. Still, so much soft flesh coming into contact at once with hers made Tressa gasp and writhe. Clearly delighted, Meira made no disguise of watching her reaction. So embarrassed was Tressa that she whimpered, but the sound didn't match her emotions. Or maybe it did. Oh dear...*the comet*. Maybe she could send up a plea to the comet, for if she could believe in anything, she believed in the power that Markis possessed, but he wasn't with her and he couldn't save her from her own desires. Meira was a

heathen. She was wicked, evil incarnate to let her writhe like this, but the more Tressa tried to hold still, the more she quivered. Soft breasts stroked against hers, and it felt so right that she wanted to huddle against and hug all that softness that cushioned the underlying hardness of muscle and bone. Meira's skin felt silken and even as Tressa calmed, the wicked vixen undulated like a snake, brushing all that softness against her. Tressa would have cried out for real if Meira had not silenced her with more kisses that began at her mouth and then slowly worked their way down her body.

"Neat," Meira said, her fingers brushing gently through the soft, dark hair covering Tressa's sex, and the small queen blushed, trying to interpret her meaning. Before she could think to ask, Meira dipped her head, and Tressa had to cover her mouth with her arm to keep her cries muffled. She couldn't understand it. This wasn't the first time someone had kissed her there, but Meira's touch was different, unique, as Tressa imagined every lover's touch was unique. Could it be true? Could Meira be right that more than her body was involved in this? The idea that Meira was the one breathing in her scent, tasting her, delighting in sending her body into frenzied spasms, did things to Tressa's heart and body both. The other woman held her tongue flat against the outer circle of Tressa's sex, leaving the more sensitive areas alone. The result was that Tressa wanted to plead for more, was almost puffing and willing to beg by the time Meira touched her more intimately. Even then, she teased, using two fingers to nip and pinch together the soft folds of Tressa's sex. The slight pain should have offended her, but instead, Tressa experienced spreading warmth that radiated out and gathered in the entrance to her body. The seeping wetness that ensued ran down to the dark crevice beneath. Perhaps she even soaked the blanket, but Tressa was only mindful of wanting Meira's fingers inside her. What she wanted was apparently secondary in Meira's mind.

"Oh please," Tressa murmured, much to her consternation, for she only realised when she heard her voice.

"Don't beg. I don't heed begging."

Oh for... If begging would do no good, what would make Meira do more before she went out of her mind? The woman gave her nothing but those little teasing licks, and then Meira's tongue grew more earnest. Tressa thrashed her head from side to side, biting on her arm now, afraid to cry out too loudly in case it brought their captors inside. Meira's tongue wriggled into her, lapping, alive, even as Tressa felt a finger push into her other entrance. She was so wet they needed no other form of lubrication. Tressa almost yelped, unsure if she should allow this. Larger things had pierced her on previous occasions, but maybe this was too much, too soon, and maybe...

She lost the idea, the sounds spilling from her lips as incoherent as her thoughts. Fingers assaulted her back and front, and then Meira's wicked lips found that small, aching piece of flesh and started to suck, alternating her attentions with softly pressing hot licks. She blew to cool Tressa's overheated flesh and then sucked again, all the time sliding her fingers back and forth.

The wave gathered and crashed so violently that Tressa almost tore herself free of Meira's hands. Even as it started to ebb, and Tressa rose out of her daze to her senses, she became aware that her orgasm just wasn't dying. Her sex pulsed again and again, tightening, squeezing down on Meira's fingers. She wanted to squeal with release, but Meira's warning words, "Hush, be still," reminded her that a traitor stood on the other side of the door. Tressa held her cry in check even as her body continued to shudder.

Meira's senses were full of Tressa's sweet taste and smell, but she was mindful enough to ease her fingers from the small woman's body with care. Tressa was so aroused she clearly hovered on that fragile precipice where pleasure could turn to pain. As reluctant as she was to withdraw her fingers from that slick heat, as long as she touched Tressa's sex, the other woman would continue to feel the little aftershocks that were running through her. Even now, Tressa's core tightened, that ring of muscle giving Meira's fingers a last, almost-lingering squeeze before she eased her hand free.

At once Tressa's whimpers changed to little sleepy murmurs that brought a smile to Meira's face. Surprised to find she was emotionally happy as well as physically delighted, Meira brought her fingers to her face, only vaguely aware that her hand smelled and tasted of Tressa's pleasure. She let her own fingers rest against her lips, breathing in the arousal of the smaller woman. Then she gathered Tressa to her, pulling the blanket over them both.

"What about...?" Even as she asked, Tressa's voice grew heavy with sleep. Meira longed to laugh aloud, but not only the idea that their captors would hear her kept her silent. Tressa was a living, languid doll, replete, and Meira delighted in being the cause of the small queen's condition.

"Sshhh," she whispered. "We will see to my pleasure another day." Whether Tressa heard her, Meira couldn't tell. The sound of regular breathing told her that the other woman had given in to sleep. Meira always slept lightly, but as she laid down her head, she had no fear of what tomorrow would bring. She doubted Jarnis meant them physical harm, for if that was the case, then she would have already seen them injured or dead. Neither did she fear Jarnis walking in on them like this. Meira intended to sleep for a few hours only. She would be up well before dawn, and if necessary, she would dress Tressa while she continued to sleep. As to what else the morning would bring, Meira had a strange feeling that the fates would provide.

Chapter Four

"How long will you keep your face turned from me?"

Meira's question made the heat in Tressa's face increase. The fact that the other woman knew of her uneasiness exacerbated her disquiet.

"I...I need help fastening my dress," Tressa said, avoiding the subject.

"As do I. I don't know how you cope with these ridiculous costumes. At least they are easier to get out of than into."

Tressa tried her best to ignore what that statement implied. The other woman walked across the room and began to fasten Tressa's dress up the back with almost-perfunctory movements. Even that slight touch, the heat of Meira's fingers tickling her back, made Tressa shiver. Her nipples hardened, and as if she knew, once finished with the last hook, Meira slipped her arms around her and cupped her breasts. Tressa spun, aware she flushed, that a look of disapproval shone on her face. The trouble was, she wasn't certain what she disapproved of. "Turn around," Tressa ordered, her voice only croaking a little. Meira obliged, although Tressa was certain that was almost a smirk on the other woman's face.

It took a little more fumbling on Tressa's part to fasten the hooks. Meira was taller, and she had to reach up. Her hands also shook. She could ask Meira to kneel, but for some reason, she resisted the idea.

"What do we do now?" Tressa asked, certain that Meira had already come up with a plan of escape.

"We wait until Jarnis leads us out of the city."

"What?" Tressa intended to sound annoyed, but instead, she only sounded confused. Meira turned, positioned the slim dagger in whatever manner she managed to wear it hidden, and slid it down into the back of her dress at the nape of her neck. She stood straight, glaring down.

"Jarnis clearly means you no harm. She intends to escort us to the main road, and we will obey her." Meira silenced Tressa's protest with a slight movement of her head. "There are too many of them, and I will not risk injury to you over some foolish desire. You must give up the idea of a private audience with your mother. We need to join our guards before Morton has a heart attack looking for us. Jarnis will happily let us go if she believes we intend to leave. Then, as soon as we can, we sneak back to the city limits and officially seek an open audience."

Tressa had also explained in the note to Morton that without her presence, they would not immediately get to see the king but would have to put their names down on a line of petitioners. Better, she had told him, to wait for her at a local inn and search for her only if she failed to send word by tonight. She had named a place where the presence of Swithin men would not raise too many eyebrows, and her retinue was no doubt still there. Morton would likely question her knowledge of such a place, but even princesses knew how to bribe and blackmail. Indeed, perhaps royalty especially knew such things. She had always kept the innkeeper's secrets and paid him well to carry out her orders. Azulite men might want their women subservient, but they were not fools, especially when even a woman could denounce a man for the crime of treason. Tressa's father had listed the trade of certain products and the

nonpayment of taxes on such as among the many crimes that came under that convenient heading. The innkeeper definitely wanted to keep Tressa happy and his secrets safe. Morton and his men would be safe at the inn.

Seeing the sense of Meira's words made them no less easy to accept. Yes, no doubt they would have to enter the city by the main gate, make an official petition to see her mother, and make their way to the inn to await word from the palace. Tressa gritted her teeth. No way would her mother speak to her in private now.

Commotion on the other side of the barred door made Tressa thankful that Meira had woken her in time to make herself presentable. She couldn't believe that she had fallen asleep in the woman's arms like that. Wasn't it men who should fall asleep after sex? She hadn't even... Returned the compliment? Tressa shook off the thought. Taking pleasure was one thing. Giving it was an entirely different matter, and the idea of a female lover was still so new that she was lost when it came to taking the initiative. Still, she had no wish to be entirely passive.

"Whatever you're thinking, you're thinking it too hard."

Tressa blinked in surprise. She was used to schooling her face better than this. She couldn't face her family if she was this distracted. Taking a calming breath, she smoothed her skirts and faced the door as it opened, expecting to face Jarnis. Jarnis entered, but she came in second, on the heels of a man.

"Arren!" Tressa failed to conceal her surprise as well as behave with proper respect. Remembering her place, she dipped her head and bobbed a small curtsy. "Forgive me, my lord. I have spent much time in the --"

"In wrong company," Arren interrupted.

Tressa stifled a snarl. She had been going to say in the company of Swithin men, but now that Arren had called such company wrong, she could not dispute his statement. Despite wanting to change things, she had to remember that she was in Azulite territory. As

a female, she could not argue with a male. Although they would not harm her directly, due to the threat posed by Markis and the Swithin race if they should do so -- even her father dared not openly injure the Swithin queen -- that did not mean she could simply march into the palace and demand they change laws so ancient they were literally written in stone. She could not argue openly with a man, only best him by wit, and for now, a clever retort escaped her.

Arren had turned his gaze to Meira. Thankfully, the woman remained silent, although she returned his stare with one of equal measure.

"You are to come with me. I will escort you from this place."

"Lord Ar --" Jarnis cut off her protest at his glare.

"Are you disputing me, Jarnis?"

"No, my lord. It's just that I carry out the queen's orders and --"

"As do we all. I, as a man, am more qualified to interpret such orders, of course."

Tressa struggled to keep the frown from her face. She failed to understand Arren's reasoning and why he should want to act as her escort, but whatever the queen's orders, Arren held Jarnis over a proverbial barrel. A man ruled by right of being male. Although the queen ruled by proxy as wife to the king, and could act in certain cases as the king's voice, men still counted over women, and the queen was by her very nature a woman. Jarnis could not disobey Arren, but if he were lying and disobeyed the queen, Jarnis might face the woman's wrath, and being that the king would see it as a woman's problem as well as entertaining, nothing would save her, except the queen's mercy. Right now, Tressa wouldn't take bets on her mother's ability to be merciful.

"As my Lord Arren desires." Jarnis dipped her head and then bowed from the waist, stepping aside.

Snapping his fingers as an indication that they should follow, Tressa spared a shake of her head for Meira, hoping the gesture was sufficient to make the woman wait to see what

developed, and to withstand Arren's annoying attitude for now, and then hurried through the door.

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"Where is your entourage?" Arren asked. Tressa opened her mouth, and then, as Arren flicked his gaze in her direction, she closed it again. "Come, Tressa, do not take me for a fool. Not you of all people." He lowered his voice to a careful level. "I could stand it from everyone else, but not you."

They were once again on horseback and riding towards the main gate of the city. Jarnis's orders had indeed been to see her back on the road, with or without her men. Jarnis, now seeing that Arren had no intention of pointing Tressa back to the road leading out of town, kept turning her head in that direction, as if she could make them change course simply by wishing. Tressa almost felt a wave of pity for her. Then she remembered how Jarnis had drugged them, tied them up, and bundled them into a dirty storage room in a hovel, and she kept her pity in check. She could well understand Meira's confession that she wanted to drag the woman along by her little hooked nose.

"I sent them on ahead to Miloss, my lord." The *lord* part only stuck in her throat a little. She was thankful that so far no one had asked Meira to speak. She couldn't imagine the woman uttering the honorific without gagging.

Arren looked at her from the corner of his eye without turning his head. "One day I would love to know what you have over that man. Oh, do not look so surprised. The time came when our lives diverged, but I spent much time with you when we were children. I know you have a devious mind, even if our father would rather not acknowledge it. On to Miloss's tavern it is. There, we need to talk."

Her brother. Hmm. Now that she thought about it, Meira could see the resemblance. At first, all she had seen was a man dressed in Azulite garb. If she thought the female's attire

ridiculous, she wanted to roll around laughing on the floor upon seeing what Arren wore. At least his breeches were plain. The brocade coat she could cope with, but the frills made her gawk. More than once, she had caught Arren's quizzical eye, the expression on the man's face indicating that he wondered what in the world made her stare. It hadn't occurred to her that this could be Tressa's kin. Once that little snippet of information became clear, Meira viewed Arren with a clearer eye. Being Tressa's brother did not mean the man was on her side. Yet as they entered the main part of the city, Arren told Jarnis that her services were no longer required, splitting the group. Meira couldn't resist showing her teeth in an evil grin to the woman who had dared drug her with she knew not what. As a healer, Meira was well aware of drugs that could render someone unconscious. She also knew what they could do if used incorrectly. Although she and Tressa appeared to have suffered no ill effects, if she had a chance to query what Jarnis had used, she would do so. It could be useful, and she wanted to be certain neither she nor Tressa would become ill later.

When Arren dismissed many of his party and they carried on with only two other men as escorts, Meira became more watchful. For all she knew, the king intended that Arren should dispose of them in some out-of-the-way place. If she failed to protect Tressa because of something Arren had done, Meira would make sure the man paid in numerous and varied ways. Watching for signs of distress in the smaller woman, however, Meira saw none, and she believed that Tressa knew this part of the city well. When they pulled into the courtyard at the back of an inn, and Tressa jumped down from the horse without hesitation, Meira experienced only slight surprise. Clearly, Arren had brought them to the very place he said he would.

A rotund man with a less-than-clean beard greeted them at the back door. He deferred to Arren and then nodded to Tressa. "Your men have the best rooms."

Meira doubted such an establishment had "best" rooms or best anything. She hoped they didn't have to eat here. When Arren asked for somewhere quiet and private, Miloss reacted as though insulted, and he assured Arren that all his rooms ensured privacy.

"Not on the ground floor and not under the eaves, my lord," Tressa remarked.

Arren glanced her way and then raised an eyebrow at the innkeeper.

"I trust my men were given rooms on the central floors?" Tressa asked.

Miloss's expression took on a sneer that spoke of little respect and even a great deal of dislike for Tressa, but his eyes brightened at the sight of the coin she slipped into his hand. No doubt, Morton had already paid the man well. He clearly hated a woman having power over him, but the bright disc of metal calmed his rage.

"Of course," he muttered, distracted by the size of the payment.

They entered and ascended the back stairs. Arren led, but Morton and his men were apparently on alert and heard them coming. Both parties froze at either end of the hall. Meira nodded to Morton, and the man heeded her, although he stared with malice at the small woman at her side. Tressa kept a serene face, but her colour spoke of embarrassment.

Arren opened a door and held it back for the women to go on ahead. Strange land this, where a man would hold a door open for a woman yet treat her as a whore in everything else.

"Thank you for the courtesy," Meira murmured, entering the room. The flush that appeared on Arren's face was most heartening.

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Tressa settled into a chair on one side of the table at her brother's behest, while Meira chose to stare out of the window taking in the scenery below, if one could call the busy road below scenic.

"You may sit," Arren said, apparently addressing her.

She turned to face him, and he withered under her gaze.

"Meira, you should understand --" Tressa began what Meira was certain was some form of explanation for her benefit.

“Tressa!” Arren sounded shocked and more than a little scared, although his reaction confused Meira. Tressa regarded him from the other side of the table.

“Arren, you clearly want to discuss something with me, and Meira is not about to leave us alone so how do you expect us to talk if you do not wish for honesty?”

“You do not trust me.” Arren sounded disappointed, but Meira found this only slightly more aggravating than the formal speech. Of course, this wasn’t formal. When Azulites really got going with ceremonial speech, all the *thees* and *thous* could drive you crazy. She let her gaze drift once more to those frills at his neck, at his wrists, even... Her eyes widened at the sight of what looked like stockings that spilled out and flounced over the tops of his boots. How had she failed to notice them before?

“I do, but Meira has no reason to. If you wish my trust, then show me yours. I give you my word that you can trust Meira.”

For the first time, Meira realised that Tressa had dropped the honorary “lord.” Arren stared at Tressa for a moment and then nodded. Tressa turned her gaze to Meira.

“My brother is without a doubt an Azulite man, and yet he is not as bad as some.”

Arren’s colour deepened. “Must you put it like that?”

“How should she put it?” Meira quickly decided to test this young man’s limits. “Either women are equal to you, or they are not.” She could see that Tressa’s eyes were a little wide in warning, but Meira never saw patience in matters such as this as much of a virtue.

“Not...” He hesitated. “Not equal but not...” He shook his head, frowning as though confused with his own thoughts. He clenched his hands into fists, dipped his head, appeared to be in some kind of emotional agony, and for one moment, Meira thought he would pound his fists into the table. She didn’t hold out much hope for the rickety piece of furniture if he did.

Arren stared across the table at Tressa once more, a look of anguish on his face.

“Oh, Tressa, help me! I find myself in love.”

Chapter Five

"You make that sound as if it's a terrible thing."

Tressa ignored the disapproval in Meira's voice. For an Azulite man, being in love could be a terrible thing, indeed. She hoped it wasn't another man because, if caught... Well, although the authorities often overlooked such things, if it became public knowledge that a son of the king indulged in pleasure with another man and, worse, his heart as well as his cock were involved, her brother might well face an execution. That their father would make an example of one of his sons she never doubted for an instant.

"Who is the..." She hesitated, uncertain how to phrase the question. Her brother sat opposite, sniffing, as his eyes glittered with unshed tears.

"Kiana," he mumbled, making the woman sound as though she were the epitome of misery rather than his heart's desire.

"Can you not speak to our father and broach the subject of marriage?"

"That is the problem," Arren mumbled. "Jemes has beaten me to it."

Tressa exchanged a look with Meira. "I am one of four children and the only female. One of my brothers died a few years ago. Jemes is now the oldest and in line for the throne."

"I presume that means he has his first choice of bride?"

Tressa nodded. "Although" -- she turned her attention back to Arren -- "maybe if you spoke to Jemes?"

"I have tried. He says that he simply wants to marry one of the Robeins women for they are good child bearers and that Kiana is the prettiest. He asked her if she would prefer me, and she...she said no." The last came out on a wail that made even Tressa flinch.

She glanced towards the door, wondering if anyone else had heard. They would think Meira was torturing him. "She was likely too scared to speak up."

"I tried to tell him that, but he assured her that he would take no offence. She said..." Arren took a deep breath. "When I asked her why she would take my brother over me, she said what did it matter to her which of the king's sons she wed."

Clearly, Meira couldn't help the laugh that barked out of her. Tressa managed to hold hers in check.

"See," she said, "what creating a nation of women with no reason to love men does for you?"

Arren glared at her. "Are you going to help me or not? Besides..." His voice trailed off as though he harboured second thoughts. "I fear it's not that simple."

Tressa stared at him in question. Arren glanced around and then leaned in over the table as though he feared someone hearing their conversation. "I am afraid that I have lost her to another. To that...desire that no man speaks of."

It took Tressa a moment for her mind to catch up, and when she did, she blushed. Raising her cold hands to her face, she tried to force back the heat in her cheeks. Arren mistook her blush for embarrassment of a different sort.

"I am sorry to shock you, sister."

Meira moved towards the table.

Tressa could hardly avoid her gaze. "He means...that Kiana feels love for another woman." She didn't have to look to Meira's face to know that the woman's expression would

be full of amusement. Arren was understandably oblivious to the intimate play going on between them, but Tressa struggled not to lean away as Meira approached. Her steps were slow, measured. The woman almost stalked her. The heat eased in her face, but her heart picked up its pace.

"I believe that she means to carry on this...association even after she is wed. I cannot even imagine my sweet Kiana with..." Once more, words failed him. "She made it quite clear to me that Jemes intends to let Helsa attend her as a...a personal companion when they are wed. It seems generous of my brother, but if he knew... Well, of course I cannot speak to Jemes of this. If he should find out..."

"Perhaps he already knows." Meira was smiling down at Tressa, who could not mistake the woman's expression purely for one of amusement. Desire made the woman's nostrils flare, her eyes to sparkle.

Oh my word, we really made love last night. Although she had been all too aware of that glaring fact, only now did Tressa realise and accept that she could not take it back. It crossed Tressa's mind that Meira had waited on purpose. She had waited until they were very far away from Swithin land and Markis. Tressa had no one to turn to, nowhere to run...

Meira widened her eyes for a brief moment so that her gaze flashed at Tressa. That look dared her to run, hide, try to get away. That look said, *I will have you*. Tressa's mind wandered to how many ways.

"He...knows?" Arren sounded amazed and perplexed in equal measure. "Then why marry such a woman?"

"Oh, come now." Meira winked at Tressa as she took her hand and drew her out of her seat. Tressa shook her head only to have the other woman ignore her. Meira turned her without difficulty, easing her body back in against her. With her greater height, Meira easily rested her head on Tressa's shoulder. "One man with two women... Are you telling me you've never heard of such a fantasy?"

Tressa saw her brother's eyes go a little wide just before she felt the warm press of Meira's lips on the side of her face. Arren's gaze went from her face to Meira's and then back again.

"Are you telling me the two of you and the Swithin king...?"

"No." Tressa shook her head. She was aware that Meira could well be testing her feelings as much as putting on a show for Arren. "Markis has two male lovers."

"He has..." Arren swallowed audibly. "You accept that? I mean, not that as his wife you have a say but --"

"I most certainly do have a say." Tressa could have gone on to explain but left it at that. Even though Arren was her brother, he was still an Azulite male, and the conversation swiftly grew tiring. "Even so, yes, I accept Markis's choices, especially when I consider the simple fact that we married out of duty."

"Our father would not be...pleased."

"With my feelings for Meira? Or do you mean knowing that Markis loves two men?"

"Either. Both."

"Our father already believes the Swithin to be heathens. What difference would it make?" Tressa waited for her brother to recover. He still appeared to be digesting the information.

"It could make a difference to your stay here. You know our father has a volatile temper. I'm surprised you're brave enough to show your face."

"I am certain my father has heard the rumours regarding Markis. In his eyes, I am already sullied. None of that has any bearing on my safety. The only thing that protects me is my position as Swithin queen. Markis and I may have married out of duty, but he cares for me enough that he will protect me as though I am the love of his life. If I come to harm during this visit, the Azulite nation will feel his wrath. Our father knows that."

"Two male lovers..." Arren seemed preoccupied with the idea of men being lovers more than he was by any possible peril to his people. Then her words appeared to sink into his brain. "Oh my, so the rumours are true. As are..." He looked to her face. "Does he really wield so much power?"

The Swithin royal line commanded the power of a comet literally at its fingertips. Tressa nodded. "What you have heard of the confrontation on the Azu plains is probably mild in comparison to the truth. He could shatter the world."

Arren paled. "And you are his false queen."

"No, Arren. Many may assume that. All will be mistaken. I *am* the Swithin queen. I am just not the love of his life. He has left me free to find such a love if fate is kind enough." Meira tightened her grip even as Tressa spoke. So perhaps Meira had made her decision about them, even if Tressa still thought it wise to be cautious. She would not speak of it yet. Still, she leaned into the other woman willingly enough, and not just to manipulate her brother, although she enjoyed it when his eyes widened even more.

"You are lovers?"

"As of...recently," Tressa told him. "Love is love, Arren. It makes little difference what shell you inhabit. It's not a choice you make, but it's somewhere your heart and even your instincts take you. You have no control over it when the right person loves you as well."

Instead of comforting him, he looked even more fraught. "Then I have truly lost her. If I cannot win her heart..." He shook his head, distraught. Even now, the idea of losing Kiana drove him to despair. That fact gave her hope.

"Kiana has..." Tressa hesitated now. She could feel that both Meira and Arren regarded her with equal interest. "Normally, I would hesitate to tell you this, but Kiana always spoke highly of you. She thought you better looking than our brother, and she thought you had the better temperament. I do not know if that feeling extends to love, but it makes little sense that she would choose Jemes over you."

“Unless she knows for certain that James will be accepting of this female in her life and you would not be?” Meira made it a question, and only when she voiced the thought did Tressa realise she’d been working her own way to that conclusion.

Arren jumped up out of the chair so fast that both Tressa and Meira reacted as though they believed he was going to attack them. He grabbed one of Tressa’s hands in both of his.

“Then I need your help more than ever. You can talk to her and get to the truth of this.”

“You would share her?” Tressa asked, feeling a pang of sorrow when Arren’s face creased in what could only be anguish.

“I...do not know. I just know that I need the truth of her feelings for me. I would marry her in love or not at all.”

“I will speak with her.”

Arren’s face lit up as though the sun suddenly shone on him and they sat not secreted in some dim, dingy room, but in the open air. “I knew you would not let me down.”

“Of course, one may ask what you propose to do in return for your sister.” Meira made the request sound perfectly reasonable, but Tressa held her breath.

“I...” Arren shook his head. He looked down into Tressa’s face. She smiled up at him.

“Let’s just say that you owe me a favour.”

“Owe?” The idea of a man owing a woman anything was clearly a new concept for him, but she watched his expression as he slowly made his way through the conundrum.

“And to show good faith, better accommodations for your sister and her retinue would be a nice start.” Once again, Meira made the suggestion sound perfectly equitable.

“Our father?” Arren sounded horrified.

“Would say nothing to his son making room for a sister so she could visit an old friend. As the Swithin queen, he cannot refuse to see me, even if my nation has rejected me as a child of the realm, and it is not unreasonable for me to visit friends.”

"Then why try to sneak in?" Arren sounded more than put out.

"I wanted to speak to our mother in private."

"Who has refused to see you."

Tressa was swiftly losing patience. "Do you wish me to speak to Kiana or not?"

Arren opened and closed his mouth like one of the carp kept in the royal ponds. "I will go on ahead to order rooms prepared for you and your people in my wing of the palace. Follow me in an hour."

"That will be acceptable," Meira said. Arren glared first at her and then at Tressa. When she only continued to smile sweetly, he blushed and left without saying another word.

Chapter Six

“Definitely better accommodations,” Meira said, rolling over on the satin covers of the bed. Sitting in a nearby chair, Tressa rolled her eyes rather than her body.

“I would not have thought you so easily” -- she hesitated before concluding the sentence -- “satisfied. We have a saying that small minds are pleased by small things.”

“And of course, the idea of a little luxury or self-indulgence never pleased someone so highly born as you.”

Tressa had the timidity to flush upon hearing Meira’s words. Meira sat up on the bed.

“I may have been born in the woods, but I will wager I know more of the world than you do.”

Tressa mumbled her reply.

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘I do not doubt it.’” Tressa gathered her skirts, stood up, and warily approached the bed. She watched Meira’s lips stretching into a grin just short of smirking. No doubt she recalled her promise of what she would do to Tressa should she get her on satin sheets. As much as Tressa desired -- and feared -- holding her to that promise, she had other things on

her mind right now. "Our first order is not to give in to self-indulgence but to speak to Kiana."

"You truly believe you can convince this woman to marry one brother instead of the other?"

"I do not know, but what I told Arren was true. She has long favoured him over Jemes."

"Then why choose the older brother?"

"Aside from the fact that being his wife would provide her with a little more status -- something for which I have never known Kiana to care -- I honestly do not know, except that perhaps you were correct in your assumption that Jemes is open to this other relationship of hers."

"You sound surprised that Jemes would indulge her."

"Actually, considering some of the things I have known our brother to *indulge* in, it is not such a leap as you might think. On the contrary, it is quite tame. I wish to make sure that Kiana will be happy in her choice, and I wish to be certain that Jemes has no other motive. Either way, I will find out the truth."

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"Tressa." Kiana inclined her head and held out her hand in greeting. Hesitating, Tressa almost glanced around, only just managing not to in time. Still, she was uncertain as to whether she hid her shock well. Although they'd been friends for many years, the very fact that Kiana not only addressed her solely by her first name, but also refused to rise to welcome her, told Tressa just how much her position at court had changed. She might well be the Swithin queen now, which meant that in formal gatherings they would treat her outwardly with respect, but clearly she was no longer the Azulite princess as dictated by her birth. She had known this fact these past months, of course, ever since the night of her escape, but she had at least harboured some hope that time would ease ill feelings towards

her, particularly where the women of her acquaintance were concerned. She couldn't help wondering if the slight pain she saw in Kiana's eyes was genuine or her imagination.

"You may leave us," Kiana ordered, as though she were the one of royal birth. The other ladies and maids all dipped their heads as a sign of esteem to one of higher or equal rank. The maids curtsied as they left; the ladies did not, but they still went.

Once the door closed on them, Kiana provided the answer to Tressa's unspoken question. The woman stood at once and hugged her. When she drew back, her eyes glittered. "It is so good to see you."

"I was beginning to wonder if anyone would receive me half so well."

"Oh, take no notice. Many feel as I do. Needs be we must curb any outward displays of affection in front of an audience. Now, tell me why you would return to this forsaken place."

Tressa sat beside Kiana, overlooking the fact that so far Kiana ignored Meira. She had warned Meira that Kiana would likely take her for a lady's companion -- and by that she didn't mean any reference to sex -- and that for their purposes, for now it was convenient to let her do so.

"I came to speak with my mother but was waylaid by Jarnis."

"That wretch. Still, she is faithful to your mother in many ways, not that I would not like to flick that hook nose of hers."

Afraid Meira would laugh, Tressa glanced her way, but the other woman sat demure enough. Seeing where Tressa cast her gaze, Kiana glanced at the other woman and then looked back to Tressa in question. Tressa shook her head. "It's fine. We can speak openly in front of Meira."

"I am glad that you have some form of travelling companion. I would not know what to do without Helsa."

Grateful that Kiana was first to mention the other woman's name, Tressa asked after Helsa's health and passed several moments in casual conversation.

Tressa was purposely ignoring her, Meira was certain. The small queen quite deliberately avoided looking in her direction. So what if patience regarding social etiquette wasn't her best virtue! As the minutes went by and the conversation consisted of how many friends and relatives had suffered small ailments and the latest fad in embroidery, Meira began to consider her options. If she had to suffer many more minutes of this, she would pound her head against the nearest wall. Finally, Tressa began to steer the conversation back to Kiana's choice of husband.

"I hear congratulations are in order."

Kiana shrugged. "You know how Azulite marriages are arranged."

"True, but I would hope that you feel some happiness on the day."

Kiana frowned. "Tell me, dear friend, does it hurt to have a...man inside you?"

Meira blinked. The woman was younger than she was, yet older than Tressa. Surely, she didn't mean...

"You can't be a virgin," Meira exclaimed. Despite her promise to remain silent, the statement just slipped out. Kiana stared at Meira, her expression aghast.

"What else should I be?"

Tressa patted Kiana's hand. "Please forgive her."

At her words, Meira turned her baleful gaze to Tressa's face, but the small woman resolutely refused to look at her.

"She is half Kita and half Swithin," Tressa said, "but it makes no difference. Neither race holds to our antiquated values."

Kiana gasped and stared at Tressa, her mouth agape. "Do not let the king hear you say such things."

"I hope in time he will hear me say far worse." Tressa's dark gaze flitted left and right as, even now, Kiana began to shake her head in denial.

"I cannot hear you say such things." She even pressed her free hand to one ear as though blocking the sound would mean Tressa hadn't spoken.

"Very well. Then let me ask you why, when I have known for a long time that you favoured Arren, you suddenly turn your affection to Jemes?"

"I did no such thing. Jemes merely asked me first, and I have given my answer. I will not take back my promise."

"A promise that Jemes has said you may recant if you favour Arren."

Kiana hesitated. The moment was brief, but Meira narrowed her gaze. Tressa was right, after all. Kiana clearly preferred Arren.

"Still, a promise is a promise and not to be discarded lightly," Kiana scolded mildly.

"Nothing an Azulite woman does is done lightly," Tressa told her. Meira glanced her way, fascinated by the sudden change in her. For the first time during this audience, Tressa sounded authoritative. "Tell me the truth of why you have chosen Jemes over Arren."

The other woman blinked and gazed down at where Tressa still held her hand. It was as though she had forgotten that their hands touched, that they shared the familiarity of skin. "I am afraid you are mistaken. I must marry, and Jemes is an excellent candidate. Choice hardly comes into the decision."

"Does it have something to do with Helsa?"

At once, Kiana's expression turned watchful. "Helsa and I have been friends for many years. She is as close to me as I should hope a sister would be. Maybe more."

"As we once were?" Tressa made it a question.

Kiana shook her head and rose to stand. She paced a little and then turned back, towering over Tressa. "You are once again in error. We were never that close. Good friends, yes, but you are not as a sister to me."

"And Helsa is?"

Once more, that dark cloud appeared in Kiana's expression. It occurred to Meira that the woman feared even someone she trusted, and it pained Meira to consider the subject of trust at all. Trust was something you took on faith, and she could understand lacking such conviction.

"Are you lovers?" Meira asked outright.

Both Tressa and Kiana gasped. Kiana looked shocked. Tressa glared in apparent anger, but Meira was in no mood to take things this carefully. They would run out of time for talking before anything was resolved.

Kiana uttered a laugh that surely had to sound false to anyone who heard it. "I know not what you mean. It is hardly possible for two people of the same sex --"

"You know that for a lie. Why, Tressa will tell you that her husband has male lovers and that she has experienced...a softer touch."

Kiana stared from one woman to the other, her eyes growing impossibly wide. "You...?"

"Tell her, Tressa. We do not have time for this."

No time for this; why, she could just... Tressa wanted to slap Meira but more out of frustration than annoyance. As always, Meira was right. It had taken far longer for her to coax Kiana into changing the topic, even to mention her proposed marriage at all. As soon as a member of either family heard that they sat talking in private, they would be interrupted and then they would have no opportunity to discuss this.

"Yesterday," Tressa admitted, feeling her face grow warm. "I had not had the...pleasure until yesterday, but Markis has agreed that I may have a lover, and if things work out between us, then I hope that Meira will be my faithful *consort*." She flicked her gaze towards Meira, almost daring her with her eyes to change her wording. This was a delicate situation.

As for things working out, when they got out of here she would think of a few choice things to say to her “consort.”

Still, Kiana appeared uncertain. Her gaze moved towards the door. When she looked back at Tressa, she chewed at her lip nervously. “I am placing my trust in the fact that I speak to the woman who defied not only her father but the same man who is king. I admit that my friendship with Helsa may have taken my heart in an unseemly direction, but to speculate beyond that is questionable. I am certain that Helsa would not permit any unseemly behaviour even if Jemes was open to such a situation, which being the son of our king, he would not be.”

Tressa almost tugged at her hair in frustration. “Kiana, I appreciate your words and that you speak in such a manner that would protect your friend, but time is racing. I need you to be honest. I swear on my life and that of my unborn children that my intention is only to help, not to trap you.”

Despite her reassurances, Tressa could see that Kiana could not allow the confession to pass her lips. Howsoever she felt for Helsa, Kiana would not risk the other woman’s life, and by accusing her of returning such feelings, that was precisely what she would be doing. Tressa admired Kiana for the sentiment but was momentarily at a loss as to how they should proceed. How could she move ahead without assurance of the truth? Even as she opened her mouth to speak, Meira took over.

“Jemes clearly understands that Helsa is important to you. He clearly wants for your happiness to continue?”

Kiana agreed. “He’s a good man,” she said. Meira raised an eyebrow, and even Tressa accepted Kiana’s tone required more conviction.

“He has...discovered that Helsa means a great deal to you?”

Kiana nodded.

"If Jemes, or any Azulite man, were to catch two women in a disorderly manner, he should report them, should he not?"

Kiana looked uneasy but nodded once more.

"The women would face...punishment?" Meira's tone made it a question. Clearly, she was wondering what form such punishment would take.

"It would vary," Tressa whispered. "Anything from public shaming to execution depending on the wishes of the family, who it was that caught them, the extent of their disgrace, and the mood of the king."

"So, clearly Jemes has caught Kiana doing nothing wrong." Meira spoke in a tone as though this clarified the matter. "He is clearly satisfied with whatever form Kiana's relationship with Helsa takes."

Tressa exchanged a glance with Kiana, and then both nodded at once.

"It would be mere speculation on my part to suggest that such a man has no qualms with the idea of two women as lovers, and even allowing them to share his bed."

Whatever buoyed Kiana up was lost upon hearing Meira's words. She sank into her seat. "Speculation indeed," she said.

Tressa leaned forward, taking one of Kiana's hands once more between hers. She lowered her voice to a whisper more to keep her friend calm than because she thought they could be overheard. "If such were the case, do you really believe that Arren would not be open to the same suggestion?"

A look of surprise and almost pain filled Kiana's eyes. Her head shot up and her gaze became searching. "I have always known Arren to be more...conservative," she said, carefully.

"True, but if he *were* open-minded?" Tressa let the quiet suggestion hang in the air.

A look that was almost one of panic came over Kiana's face. Her grip tightened, and now Tressa worried that she might not be able to pull her hands free if she tried. Little hitching breaths caused Kiana's breasts to jolt.

"Oh, what have I done?" She stared into Tressa's eyes, bringing their heads so close together that her face went out of focus. "Tressa, I have coveted Arren in the past, but Helsa is of a rank beneath his attention even if she were so inclined, which she is not. Jemes is open to our union, but only if we both share his bed, and although Helsa does not wish to feel his touch, she will do what needs must. I feared that if I chose Arren and asked for her to be my companion that one day --"

"He would catch you and report you," Tressa finished on her behalf. She understood Kiana's wild nodding well enough.

"Then, of all things, Jemes began to make certain suggestions. I thought we had been so careful but clearly Jemes...saw something or guessed." Kiana shook her head. "I do not know which, but I could not ignore his hints. We have spent months stepping around each other carefully until the truth was clear, even though we dare not speak of it openly." Kiana's whisper sounded more like a hiss. "He laughs, says he does not mind, but he wants to do more than watch us. However, he promised us security, something I could not be assured of with Arren. The only thing Helsa and I hold fast to is the hope that he will tire of what is a dalliance to him and we will not need entertain him for long." Kiana's voice had risen a little, and so she now included Meira in the conversation. "Jemes seeks far more varied entertainments than two women, or so I have heard."

Tressa nodded. It made no difference what one heard of a man. At least, not when you spoke of the king's sons, as long as Jemes remained discreet and his desires did not involve other men. What Jemes did not know was that Tressa was a little wiser to his desires than he knew, so when Kiana voiced her fears, Tressa couldn't help feeling somewhat amused.

"What if he will not let me out of the marriage now?" Kiana spoke as if she wanted the answer here and now.

If Jemes was willing, that presented no problem. As the king's son, he could change his mind at the altar if he desired, and no one would dare dispute his right to do so. He could equally just step aside for his brother, and people would admire him for his good grace.

Tressa squeezed Kiana's hand, although the woman's grip could barely grow any tighter. "Do not worry about Jemes. It is Arren we must convince. He needs to know he can handle two women."

"If he betrays us..."

"Kiana, he loves you. You would be surprised what a man in love will do."

"Love?" Kiana sounded dubious. She laughed. "Surely a son of the realm does not speak so easily of love."

Inwardly, Tressa sighed. Clearly, they had more than one person to convince.

Chapter Seven

“I find this country sad,” Meira said. She stood looking out of the window. The day drew to a close. Arren was absent, summoned before the king, no doubt to explain why he had welcomed his sister into the part of the palace that was his home. Tressa had explained that the best opportunity to talk to him would arrive over breakfast. Meira was glad to return to the lavish suite, not because she craved luxury, but because she wanted to hold Tressa close to her. Her feelings right now weren’t even to do with sex, or not to any great extent. What she felt was the weight of melancholy. She had watched Kiana more carefully than probably even Tressa realised. She had also watched women in the street, scurrying about, uttering nonsensical blessings to each other and particularly to men who crossed their paths.

Meira was a quick study. Even a couple of hours killing time before returning to the palace, time spent wandering around the market listening in on every passing conversation, had taught her more of the women here than all the rumours put together. They talked about needlework and just how you could choose the ripest fruit, and even then, although the conversation consisted of the most mundane subjects, the women would include their father’s or husband’s names in the conversation. They were assured that the best melon was chosen by rapping it with your knuckles and squeezing one end, only because a man had been so kind as to impart this advice. If a woman wore a pretty dress, she had chosen it to

please her husband because it was his favourite colour. If she was good at some craft, it was because her husband had shown her how or permitted her to train to attain such skill.

"I have changed my mind," Meira murmured.

"About what?"

"Your people. I thought Azulite women were better off than Kita females."

"I hardly compare myself to Tihea."

"True, but where Tihea has been trained all her life to the point of mindlessness, Azulite women still have a mind and the wish to use their free will. They just fear to do so. In many ways, Tihea is freer in her ignorance."

Turning her head, Meira was in time to witness Tressa's expression change. A frown appeared to mar her face like a dark shadow.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. That's not why I said that." For once, Meira cursed her easy tongue. She moved to the bed and sat.

"No. You are right, in some manner. I have not thought of it that way before. Yet Azulite women get away with many things. The trick is to learn how to make a man think he's in charge."

Meira laughed. "Ah, now that I can believe." Women had been doing that for centuries. "This must be a strange homecoming for you."

The expression that entered Tressa's eyes was unmistakably one of pain, but Meira knew enough of people in general and now of this small woman to realise that if she pressed the point, Tressa would likely deny it. When Tressa opened her mouth, Meira was surprised at how much the other woman confessed.

"I would like to say that I feel happy, but the truth is I feel strangely blank."

"Blank?" That was not how Meira would describe any emotion.

"This is my home, and yet it is not. In many ways it never has been my home, and in there lies the conundrum. I feel adrift." Tressa began to pace. "Alas, I often feel the same way

on Swithin territory. I feel most at home overseeing court and the council, hearing petitions.” Her dark eyes lifted for a moment to gaze at Meira before she looked away once more. “To feel homeless even when one welcomes a new life can be terribly disconcerting.”

Meira patted the bed. The room interlinked with another, and clearly, she was supposed to occupy the smaller room and the smaller bed, although she had no intention of doing so. Tressa hesitated and then complied. Her dark eyes widened in possible surprise when Meira at once slipped down to kneel before her. Was Tressa surprised that she had moved, or that she deigned to kneel before another person? Meira stifled a laugh. Many failed to understand her. She had learned to be dominant and lead through necessity, but her heart was far from turning to stone, and she did not view herself as callous, just practical.

“Let down your hair, my little seductress.” Meira put a purr into the order. Once more, she witnessed that slight hesitation, and then Tressa did as she asked. In truth, it hung long anyway, but pins held the sides in place.

“Let me help you remove this dress,” Meira said, once that long black hair flowed free. She spoke lightly, but even as Tressa looked at her, she raised her eyebrows, daring Tressa to argue. Was the small woman up to the challenge? She would find out soon enough. Standing long enough to help Tressa unfasten the dress, Meira went to her knees once more just as the fabric parted enough to tug it loose. The bodice gaped, and Meira tugged it lower so she exposed Tressa’s breasts to her view. At once, Tressa tried to cover herself, her hands fluttering. Meira lifted her gaze in question. “Are you so shy in front of Markis? That is not what I heard. The rumours of the night that he stole you away to his camp tell a very different story and speak of a very different woman.”

Tressa blushed, the red crawling up her face doing strange things to tighten Meira’s stomach. She shouldn’t find that blush so delightful, but she did. “I had been kept in a chastity belt,” Tressa protested. “What we...did also served a purpose. In the light of day and having had time to think, I might not have behaved in such a wanton fashion.”

"And that would have been a pity, would it not?" Meira lightly caressed Tressa's ankles, but let her gaze wander to the small handfuls of soft flesh topped with pert little nipples. Tressa, clearly seeing where Meira's gaze lingered, blushed even more. Her voice sounded incredibly innocent.

"What now?"

"Now we undress each other, and you pleasure me as I did you."

"Do I now?" Tressa's colour deepened, but Meira could see there was a hint of anger and not just embarrassment in her flush now. "You order a queen, remember."

"I give no orders. You mistake longing for a bid for power. I have the experience you desire, and in that, you must take my lead, but Tressa" -- Meira ran her hands higher, feeling the smooth passages of creamy skin that were Tressa's shapely legs under her fingers -- "when at last we lie as equals, you will not know or care any longer where my pleasure ends or yours begins. Have you learned nothing living with the Swithin?"

"Not how to look to another female without seeing her as a rival for something, be it power or affection." Tressa sniffed. "When you meet my mother, perhaps you will understand why."

"I look forward to it," Meira said, intentionally teasing, but a little sorry for it when Tressa shot her a look of consternation.

* * * * *

Tressa had lost track of time. The night behind the curtains grew darker so that the moon shone like a beacon through a gap in the fabric, but Tressa bathed in milk of another kind. The while halo provided by the moon romanced Meira's sex, sending her dark thatch into shadow, illuminating the edges of those sweet lips that Tressa at once longed and feared to kiss. Like the rest of her, Meira's sex was strong of form, perfectly proportioned, begging for attention. For the first time in years, Tressa felt barely a woman in comparison.

A small sound escaped her. Her body tightened. Meira, ever intuitive, ever patient in this, waited. Tressa closed her eyes. What was wrong with her? Small in height and stature, at times it had felt as if many years had passed her by, making her feel too youthful in appearance and in nature. Sometimes the smallest people needed the loudest voices, but right now, a feeling of inadequacy engulfed her. Her strong, independent nature detested this type of emotion. She doubted Meira ever felt inadequate. Drawing on thoughts of Markis to embolden her, Tressa forced her body to relax. Markis would tell her everyone felt inadequate at times. She would not allow self-doubt to hamper her desire. This close too, she could smell Meira's musky scent, and it called to some primordial instinct. She opened her eyes. Meira lifted her head and looked at her.

"Let me help you over this hurdle," Meira said, smiling with a sweetness that no sane person would trust, and yet Tressa did trust her. Even when Meira wrapped her up in her longer limbs, held her down, pinned, devoured her with a kiss, and then slipped a hand down between them, Tressa lay compliant. She fought her own fear more than Meira's dominance, so turned her mind to it. Fear commanded her emotions. What if she didn't want Meira as much as she thought she did? What if she didn't enjoy all sex had to offer with another woman? Tressa had learned as a child that often the anticipation of an event far outlived the reality. Yet what if Meira was the one she could love freely? Then she had no more time to think, for Meira brought wet fingers to her lips, forcing her to kiss them and then open her mouth to the invasion. Meira's kiss followed, her tongue swirling inside Tressa's mouth with a taste at once mysterious and familiar.

Time lapsed. Tressa lost herself in kisses, bestowing them wherever her mouth happened to linger, letting Meira guide her, and then, by the time she realised her body had carried her beyond doubt, she came to realise that her fears lay buried. This was better for her. She had coped with a large man in more than one orifice; however, Tressa's mouth was as small as the rest of her. With a woman, there was no risk of choking, and she liked the softness that surrounded her. Everything felt delicate. Soft skin, soft sighs, soft whispers of

endearment. It took Tressa a moment to realise that Meira spoke fondly to her, and hearing sweet words tumble from the other woman's lips did strange things to her heart.

Azulite men spoke of love sometimes in honesty, sometimes to make a woman compliant. Markis had told her one could say the same of many men and many races, but that for the most part, Swithin men were different. She believed Markis never said something he didn't mean. He was a kind and loving man at heart. She usually *expected* sweet nothings to tumble from his lips. Nevertheless, to hear that Meira was capable of such loving utterances splintered Tressa's heart. She didn't feel injured, merely pierced and split asunder. Perhaps she made some sound, for suddenly Meira rose up over her, gathering her for a kiss, stroking her brow, reassuring her.

"I never speak a falsehood when it comes to matters of the heart," Meira said, and Tressa realised she must have done something to make her doubts known. "You are beautiful, sweet Tressa, and a kind and strong woman, good enough to be my equal."

Tressa almost laughed. Coming from anyone else, that would sound like arrogance, but not from one such as Meira. Indeed, Tressa could think of few people to whom that would apply. She longed for the day when she could claim such self-assurance. Then, once more, her thoughts dissolved, and she knew only the physical representation of affection, the surety of sweet desire fulfilled, warm scents, soft caresses, rounded dips and hollows, curves, a sweet taste, swollen flesh crying tears of desire. She drifted, not knowing if she slept or was merely intoxicated with longing. She breathed in Meira's scent, the promise of a kiss mere inches away, teasing. Then at last the kiss, the stolen breath, lips skimming, shimmering, trailing over neck and shoulders, igniting fires at her breast. Sensation shivered down a spine not touched. The moans began softly, inevitably, building. Words lost coherency. Murmurs could be names or endearments; she couldn't decipher them. The storm gathered with droplets of the torrent to come. A promise. Meira appeared composed; inside Tressa, all was chaos.

One more moment of hesitancy and then she gave in. They were females, feminine, feline. Tressa wanted to stretch like a cat, to roll, bare flesh to naked skin, to hump, to buck, to fuck, to suck, to...

Tressa licked her lips as pleased with herself as any feline. Meira's body strained against her. The sight of Meira's stomach clenching, the sound of her hitching breaths, was enough to make Tressa's need complete. She needed to make Meira mindless with sensation. She slid down, dived in, dragged her tongue through those swollen nether lips until she found the hard spot that was surely the centre of Meira's yearning. Meira's responding squeal brought out Tressa's wicked side. She lapped.

Believing the other woman would not be able to stand the onslaught, Meira's "Harder, faster," took her by surprise. Tressa obeyed, only stilling when a clutching hand gripped the back of her head. Meira moved her hips, rolling against Tressa's mouth, and a second later, the climax took her, took them both almost. The violence of it amazed Tressa, forcing her to feel an echoing shudder. It passed too quickly; Tressa wanted to see Meira fight for her pleasure once again. She wanted to hear those cries, but Meira had fallen silent. For a brief moment, Tressa was painfully aware she was a thing unreal, unnoticed, there for another's pleasure only. If the other woman had fallen back into the pillows asleep, Tressa wouldn't have been shocked. Meira looked so isolated in her passion; lost. Then those green eyes blinked. She'd got it wrong; Meira hadn't left her alone for a minute. Sentience swam back into that fervent gaze, and Meira stared at Tressa with something like amazement in her eyes.

"Oh, Tressa," Meira murmured and then she was rolling over on top, pinning Tressa to the bed. Tressa whimpered, though she failed to understand why.

No, she did understand. The intensity in the other woman's gaze was enough to make anyone whimper.

"Hush." The instruction came, commanding her to stillness. Such a simple word. Such a simple instruction to carry out, but she struggled all the same.

She didn't know what Meira used, but her touch was already slick when she came to her. Tressa's body opened, separated. Fingers slipped inside, and her body drew them in, demanding. There was only Meira's beauty, Meira's painless probing, her knowing hand drawing forth and building pleasure, each wave undulating, heightening while Tressa lay languid, welcoming, only the hidden part of her grasping. Meira's touch continued pulling, tugging at her womb, her heart, her mind. Meira paused, and the need receded, only to slam into Tressa once more as Meira curled her fingers a different way, tickled her dark recesses.

Then finally, her mind closed down to one point of intent, gradually sweeping in, her thoughts unified to one bright focus, that of Meira's power to make Tressa shudder under her.

Chapter Eight

Opening her eyes, Meira stared at the ceiling for several moments before she made sense of where she was. She sat up straight, stiff even, and looked around her. She was the room's sole occupant, but even as her heart thumped painfully in her chest, she heard Tressa's sweet voice humming softly in an adjacent room. Meira relaxed, pulling the coverlet over her, although the room was far from cold, and curling her arms around her knees.

She hadn't given much thought to the future in a long time, and she certainly hadn't thought farther than the immediate days ahead when it came to her relationship with Tressa. At least, not in more than a vague way. When she had first noticed the interest that Tressa paid her, Meira had felt... She hated to use the word *flattered*, as she just couldn't seem to connect the idea of that to what she knew of her personality. Anyone who knew her would have said that Meira was not a woman to feel flattered, but try as she might, she just couldn't think of another word for the emotion. Tressa's interest had also worried her, coming as it did in a time of great stress. Markis had called on Meira's skills as a healer to try to save the life of someone he loved. The outcome was good, although Meira would be the first to confess that she had only helped in the cure.

Meira raised a hand now and pressed it against her forehead. The truth was she had felt a disgusting pleasure upon hearing Markis's summons. A brief, undeniable delight at the king needing her services had seized her, when many people -- even well-intentioned people like the Swithin -- still treated her with suspicion. She had grown up with Swithin values and adopted their way of life, not because they had indoctrinated her, but because she saw them as practical. If you liked someone well enough to want to lie with them, and providing you were hurting no one else, then why shouldn't you be lovers? Skin was skin; flesh was flesh. As for love...

Meira shivered. Neither the warmth of the room nor the cover could banish the chill inside her. Even when she'd entertained the idea of a relationship with Tressa, she had known that she could not just play with this woman's feelings and then abandon her. Even before they shared a first kiss, Meira had felt responsible for her and now... Why, the woman had a wicked tongue in more ways than one.

Aware her lips stretched into a grin, Meira almost raised a hand to touch her mouth. How many times had people commented on her stolid expression? Only half Kita she might be and Swithin raised, but some characteristics of her race surely manifested. On long winter nights, Meira had often wondered why she could not find a reason to smile as readily as other people did. Often she had wondered why the passion died so soon after desire eased, and she spent so many dark nights sleeping alone, feeling lonely and yet resentful of the emotion because she wanted no one with her. Usually, after the sex was over, she couldn't wait for her companion -- male or female -- to leave. This morning she had opened her eyes feeling first the confusion of not knowing where she was. Then she'd panicked over the simple fact that Tressa was not lying beside her.

Well, of course she did. She had sworn to try to protect Tressa during this trip and not knowing the woman's whereabouts meant that anything could have happened to her.

You're a terrible liar.

Meira gritted her teeth. A conscience was something she could do without, for it complicated a person's life. Not so long ago, if she had been able to exorcise it with medication or cut it from her spirit with a surgical implement, she would have done so and good riddance. She had always feared that her conscience would misguide her, especially when it came to love.

One night of passion, an orgasm lovingly bestowed by the sweetest, most tender of lips, did not indicate undying love. Still, Meira knew enough of Tressa's doubts to realise that the woman had wanted to make her soar as she had made Tressa fly free the other night. That partly came from desire and partly from love. Bringing pleasure to another, the power in it, the beauty, the sheer wonder of surrender in the moment, was something every Swithin learned. The trouble was, until last night, the lesson had remained disregarded and unwelcome in Meira's heart. Now it stroked her mind, wrapped warm arms of longing around her, threatened to sink into her skin and change what she knew of herself.

Meira shivered in fear and desire, wanting to hate Tressa for diminishing her, yet she couldn't, for not only could she not drag up the slightest dislike of the other woman, she didn't feel diminished. She felt open, as though everyone who looked at her would know she had undergone some peculiar transformation.

"The water's still hot. I had them fill a bath."

Meira frowned as Tressa's words sunk in. The woman's gentle tones stroked over her skin almost like small fingers, and Meira struggled not to shudder from desire.

"How? Surely you did not let them see me in your bed?" Despite the emotions waging war inside her right now, Meira needed to put their safety first.

"Of course not. The washroom has another entrance so they can bring hot water up the back stairs."

Meira blinked, purposely putting on a disgruntled expression to hide how disordered she felt. "I can't believe that the Swithin have running water while the Azulites do not."

"We do. Just not in every room or home."

"This is the palace. Surely..." Meira let her words trail off.

Tressa busied herself choosing clothes, apparently to avoid looking at her rather than because she struggled to decide what to wear. The very fact that they had given Tressa a room without all the luxurious amenities afforded to royalty said much as to how low the small woman had sunk in the eyes of her family. The previous night, Meira had failed to notice. She lived in a small abode near the clinic. At times, various people had offered to help improve her situation, but she had shrugged, asking why she would need anything more. If she became a true lover to the small queen -- and she was fooling herself to think otherwise -- then no doubt she would have to live somewhere in the palace. Although she struggled to come to terms with the idea, Meira also couldn't stop the smirk that rose unbidden to her lips. The Kita girl, as some called her, living in the palace. That would raise more than a few eyebrows.

"Why the strange look on your face?" Tressa must have glanced at her, although she looked back to her clothes now.

"I was thinking of my own personal situation, of how this looks like elegant living to me."

"It is, yet it is a room that a companion, a friend, or a lesser member of the royal family would usually occupy."

Ah...so her assumption was correct. Tressa hesitated, her hands clasping the knobs of a drawer as she glared at its contents. Meira was certain it wasn't the garments that sparked her fury.

"Do not blame Arren. Besides his own, this is the best room in his wing that he could offer me," Tressa explained, still without looking up.

"I am glad to hear that he thinks well of you. Of course, he could do with a tanned backside, but Arren seems a good man at heart."

A small smile crept across Tressa's face. "He is. He is just a product of his upbringing." Finally, she turned her head to look at Meira, and the smile blossomed into a wicked grin. "Although, when we are through with him, maybe we will have done something about that."

"What do you have in mind?"

The question produced a flush. "I think we should talk to Kiana. As she and Helsa are lovers, maybe we should use your approach."

"My approach?"

Tressa nodded, shutting the drawer after first selecting a garment. "The direct approach. Tell me if I am mistaken, but it has come to my attention that many Swithin men like the idea of watching two women."

"Not only Swithin men. What's on your mind?"

Tressa's colour deepened. "I am thinking that, as there are many things my race does not speak of even though we know they happen, perhaps many Azulite men feel the same way. If that is the case, then maybe Arren is only shocked by ignorance." Although she still looked shy, Tressa smiled. "I am thinking it would be good for Arren to learn of what he is missing."

Meira considered her statement. "A dangerous plan, but a good one. Tell me how you mean to go about it."

"First bathe while I make arrangements, but before you do that" -- Tressa paused, her dark eyes flicking towards Meira's gaze and then away again -- "did I please you last night?"

The uncertainty and need for reassurance Meira heard in Tressa's voice touched her intimately, making both her heart and sex quiver. She didn't completely understand her desire to comfort Tressa and wasn't altogether happy with the emotion, but she could not deny it. "Yes, sweet Tressa," Meira said. "You did more than please me." The trouble was Tressa had pleased her in such a way that she had touched more than her body.

Chapter Nine

Arren stared at Tressa's hand in his as though he couldn't understand why she would be touching him. She wouldn't, usually. It was permissible for a sister to take her brother's hand, but in all things, she was to defer to the man. A female relative only took a man's hand to capture his attention, if she had something important to say. Of course, what women considered important often differed from what men wanted to hear, and the man of each house decided just how capable the women under his roof were of deciding what constituted an "important" subject. Seeing as she was trying to get him to follow her lead, Tressa believed this was very important indeed.

"Tell me again what Kiana wants me to do?" Arren sounded as stunned by the idea as Kiana had, though for different reasons. Even now, Tressa could bring Kiana's astonished expression to mind in a blink. She had no trouble recalling the woman's gaping mouth and eyes that appeared to strain in their sockets.

Kiana's trembling voice came back to her now: *Do you think this is wise?* Wise, no, but Tressa could think of no other plan.

Arren's grip on her hand tightened. Glancing back at him, she witnessed the bewildered expression on his face.

“What are we doing in this part of the house?”

As per their plan, Tressa had fetched Arren, saying that Kiana wanted to speak with him, and then taken a carriage with her brother to Longhurst, the ancestral home of Kiana’s family. Her father was gone for the day on business. Although it was unusual for a man to call on a woman in the absence of her father, it was not unheard of. Besides, no one would reject the presence of one of the king’s sons. The way Azulite society worked, Kiana was not yet promised to Jemes, even though he had expressed open interest. Next, their fathers would negotiate. This usually had a practical nature, one of finance or position. Again, being that Jemes was the king’s son, this would be perfunctory at best. No way would Kiana’s father turn down a royal son. In that, the man probably no more cared which of the boys married her, just as Jemes seemed disinclined to care overly which of the man’s daughters he married. In fact, Tressa doubted the man would object to Kiana and Arren’s marriage, for Jemes had made it quite clear that he wanted to choose one of the three daughters as his bride, for he found them all comely. This way, the father of the house would see two daughters tied to the royal line. Oh yes, Tressa could see the old man rubbing his hands together with glee.

The reason Arren was surprised was that she had not taken him into the house via the front door. Instead, Tressa had produced a key that Kiana had given her earlier and led him to a door at the side, one meant for deliveries. From there, she led him up the back stairs into a long gallery, which they almost reached the end of now. Instead of taking him through the far door as he clearly expected, Tressa pulled him behind a statue and then let go of his hand long enough to press her fingers along the edge of a wooden panel. It opened easily, sliding aside with a slight *clonk* of sound muffled only by Arren’s gasp. Once more, she took his hand and led him inside.

She reached back and gave the panel a slight push, and it closed after them, leaving them standing in darkness. The only reason Tressa could tell she wasn’t alone was because she still clung to Arren’s hand and because they were both breathing a little raggedly.

"Arren, you must promise me," Tressa spoke to the man she could not see, "that you will not use what you are about to see against Kiana." Of course, it would be one man's accusation, but the man was the king's son and that would likely be enough to condemn the women. "Both Kiana and Helsa are taking a risk with their bodies and their hearts in trusting you."

"I-I don't understand."

"I have explained well enough."

"I know, but..." Arren swallowed. Tressa could tell because it was nothing short of a gulp, and she heard it easily in the quiet, pitch-black passage. His hand now felt clammy in hers. Her senses opened, and she could smell the slight sting of sweat on him. She understood how he felt. She wanted to wipe her hands on her skirts, but she wouldn't let go of Arren just yet for fear he would bolt. He might be older, but Tressa felt the more experienced of the two just now, and that was a laughable notion. She had a female lover, and she still knew little of sex between women. This was going to be as much a lesson for her as for Arren. Even as she admitted that to herself, she broke out in a slight sweat too. Did Arren feel as nervous as she did right now? She almost wished she had brought Meira with her, and then she decided that was a falsehood. If Meira were here, Tressa would stammer and blush.

"This way, if you do not like what you see and you do not feel you can share Kiana with another female, you can simply save face, keep your peace, and let your brother's betrothal go through. If, on the other hand --"

"Fine. I understand. If I hate it, though --"

"If you hate it, you say nothing. Promise me." Tressa gave his hand a slight shake and squeeze. Her reproof met silence. "Arren, I mean it."

"And what will you do? Who are you to demand such a thing of me? If I see something that disgusts me, that I consider uncouth, then it is my duty to --"

“To what? See Kiana dragged through the streets? Punished? Executed? This is the woman you profess to love. If you dislike her choice, then the least you can do is honour both her and me by keeping silent and letting her live the life she would have had without your interference.”

Tressa couldn't help it. She struggled to keep her voice low but practically hissed at him now. If harm should come to either of the women because of this silly idea of hers, then she would never forgive Arren, but worst of all, she would never forgive herself.

“You stood up to me as a child, but as a grown woman, you should know better.” Despite his words, Arren sounded considering rather than angry.

“Perhaps I should, as an *Azulite* female. However, I am no longer Azulite. I am Swithin.”

“Right now, I'm undecided if that is a good or bad thing.”

“At least you are undecided. That is better than already having made up your mind and keeping your thoughts closed.”

Silence engulfed them then for a few moments. If it weren't for the fact of Arren's hand in hers, Tressa would have found it easy to believe she was standing alone in the dark. Oddly, that was how she felt, as though she stood alone in the darkness that was Orland, their main city. Having experienced the Swithin way of living, she now felt the darkness of ancient laws upheld by men for too many centuries. She had come here with the hope of changing things, but as Markis had warned her, change took time. She had hoped to find a way despite his presentiments. How foolish that seemed now. How small she felt. Perhaps if she could achieve this one thing, her visit would not be in vain.

Arren loved Kiana. He was at heart a good man. Only his upbringing kept him from being the man he should be. Kiana shared that love, and she would be a good woman for Arren. In time, she would help him become the man he should be, but Kiana had loved Helsa for a long time, and Tressa understood her reluctance to give up such a faithful

companion. It was not simply a question of what her heart dictated, but the fact that Kiana needed someone in this accursed world she could trust. Having lived in a similar position, Tressa understood that need. Kiana had been one of a few who held Tressa as she cried when her father placed her in a chastity belt.

Kiana had shared her pain, and she was the one Tressa had confessed her hopes and dreams to when she had set out to meet with Markis, the then-Swithin prince. The Azulites had no intention of letting them wed, but the suggestion, having been placed on the table for discussion, hung in the air. It had been in Tressa's mind that she liked the idea, and that led to her decision to use Markis as a means to escape. Not only had he provided the perfect means, it turned out he was a welcome choice. She cared for him greatly.

None of this had she managed to convey to Kiana yet. Too caught up in politics were they, and too intent on seeing this plan through to unite one man and one, possibly two, women. Still, Tressa was assured of Kiana's love and trust, for the woman was in turn placing not only her life in Tressa's hands, but that of the woman Kiana loved above all else. That responsibility sat upon Tressa's heart as though she carried a stone in her chest. Now, if only the man in this scheme would co-operate, all would be well.

Reaching out, Tressa began to fumble her way along the passage, tugging Arren in her wake.

"A secret passage," Arren mumbled, causing Tressa to roll her eyes in view of the obvious statement. "Does the man of the house know this is here?"

"I do not know. I doubt it." If he did, no doubt he would have had it sealed, especially considering... Tressa allowed herself the privilege of a smirk, seeing as Arren couldn't read her expression, and decided to be honest as well as have a little fun with him. After all, considering the show Kiana and Helsa were about to put on for him, this was nothing that could get them in any more trouble. "Kiana and I used to use this to sneak out when our fathers allowed me stay over."

Arren's answering gasp warmed her heart, sending the nervous chill back a little. The environment in the passage had lightened, and now she could make out dim shapes. They were almost closing in on the first of Kiana's rooms. Mindful of the idea that as Kiana used this passage to sneak out, anyone aware of its existence could use it to spy on her, Kiana had set a trap within the walls. Fine threads that one could not avoid would ring a bell in her bedroom. Tressa stood on one now, knowing that it would announce their approach to her friend. Kiana had said that although she checked the warning system periodically, no one had ever disturbed it in all these years, and they had long ago decided that a female member of the household had installed the moving walls connecting the passage with the bedroom to the gallery. As to which woman in which generation had created this passage, they had no way of finding out. The idea that in passing down this knowledge, women down through the ages disobeyed the "man of the house" thrilled Tressa as much now as it had years ago.

"I knew you were always wilful but this..." Arren seemed at a loss how to complete the statement.

"Wilful?" Tressa snorted. "That is a man's word. Try independent."

"Women are not meant to be independent. They have no need to be."

Once more, despite Arren's words, his voice lacked conviction. Tressa's patience, never good to start with, failed her. "You have never known what to believe. You have simply done what many men do, taken the easiest and safest option. Well" -- Tressa drew Arren to a halt -- "after today, you will have to look at the world a different way."

The passage remained dim, but sufficient light shone through the wall. Seeing a puzzled and somewhat-anguished expression on his face, Tressa took pity on Arren. She reached up and patted his face. "I wish I could take you back with me. I wish you could see how freely and happily Swithin men and women live."

For a moment, it looked as though he would denounce her wish, but then Arren surprised her and gave her hope. "I wish for that as well."

They both knew it was something their father would dislike. The king could deny Arren permission, but it would not sit well with the other men at court. Their father would argue against giving permission for *anyone* to visit with the Swithin for fear of their *corrupting* influence. However, by declaring the superiority of Azulite men to overcome temptation, if he denied his son, it was as good as saying an Azulite male was as open to corruption as a female. The idea of Arren opening the way for others to expose themselves to “corruption” amused her, but she set it aside for now.

“Here.” Tressa pointed to one of the spikes of light that shone through the wall. “Narrow your gaze and look through one of these. You will be able to see into the room.”

Arren did as she said, and shortly after, his eyes went wide. At the same time, a feminine laugh resounded through the wall and echoed into the enclosed space. Tressa turned her attention to seeking a gap through which to peer. Prudence and decency told Tressa to look away, but she couldn't bring herself to do that. It wasn't as if she and Kiana had not seen each other disrobed before. This was a learning experience for her as much as Arren. Tressa took a few steps to the side. One glance at her brother told her that he had already forgotten her presence. Tressa turned her head and set her own gaze to a gap in the wall.

Helsa chased Kiana around the bed. Kiana, giggling and smiling, made a poor show of escape, deliberately choosing a route that would soon trap her against a wall. Helsa quickly caught up and almost collapsed against her. Both women were a little breathless, and Tressa had to wonder how long ago the game had begun. Perhaps Kiana had made Helsa chase her indoors all the way from the garden as Tressa had once chased the other woman, as children at play and later as young women.

Tressa bit her lip to silence her gasp. She and Kiana were close friends, but now she had cause to wonder if her friend had ever wanted such a relationship with her. Thinking back on it now, on times that they used to play together, she had to admit the possibility existed.

Still, she had never felt that way for Kiana, and if a more intimate friendship had been the woman's intention, she had never pushed for it.

Was that out of respect or fear? Tressa hated the thought that Kiana might have dismissed her as a lover out of fear, although seducing the king's daughter would make anyone think twice. She forced her attention back to what was happening in the room when she heard Arren's almost -strangled-sounding cry.

The two women stared intently at each other, and then Helsa shoved Kiana hard against the wall, pressing in close to kiss her. Urgency existed behind the kiss. This was not the soft, sweet enticement Meira had first bestowed. This was hard and forceful. It reminded Tressa of how a certain man had kissed her, that man being one of Markis's lovers. To escape her nation and to ease the delirium induced from too long in a chastity belt, she'd delighted in letting Markis and his lovers deflower her in what the Azulites considered a most unseemly fashion. Physical need requited, Tressa had discovered her heart longed for intimacy as much as her flesh did. She had even grown a little jealous of Markis and his true loves. Despite his blessing to seek such a union, in reality, love did not drop in your lap because you wished for it. Then, under the direst circumstances, Meira had appeared.

Tressa was grateful for the darkness, which hid her blush. The way Helsa looked at Kiana, as though she were the most beautiful, most important thing in the world... Tressa had seen that look on Markis's face when he looked at the two men in his life. She could remember feeling stunned when she had first seen Meira. That perfect height, those long, slender limbs, the high cheekbones and full mouth, had left her gaping. A soft curl of desire had warmed the pit of her stomach then as it did now.

There'd been no time to give in to such feelings. Not then. Not with lives at risk, but clearly, she'd failed to hide her desire. Meira knew of her longing looks. Markis confessed later that even he had noticed. Certain her blush deepened, Tressa only now realised her attention had wandered, but she turned her gaze back to the room in time to see Helsa go to her knees.

The woman's hands were wild things, pushing at Kiana's skirts as though she would have dived underneath if need be, but Kiana, prepared for this, had chosen a simple skirt and apparently one fastened by only a few hooks. She let it fall with a wild abandon that shot pain straight into Tressa's heart.

She turned her head and spared a glance at Arren, but his stare was so intent that she was quite certain he had forgotten her presence. She looked back to watch Helsa's and Kiana's hands working together eagerly, in unison, to get Kiana out of her clothes. While they did, Helsa leaned forward, and Tressa could imagine the feel of those soft, warm lips against her skin. Helsa drew in the skin of Kiana's stomach between her lips, and looking up the line of Kiana's body into the face of her lover, she snagged the flesh between her teeth, surely biting. There was no way to judge how hard Helsa bit or how much pain her teeth caused, but it couldn't have been that great for all it did was make Kiana gasp and roll her head from side to side against the wall. If it hurt that much, surely she would have cried out instead, and yet, when Helsa let go, Tressa could see the dark, blossoming mark that looked almost like a bruise against Kiana's skin. That the women would risk marking each other like this spoke much of their passion and in what they hoped would come from this.

Helsa's bites and kisses now turned to licks, her tongue delving into and circling Kiana's navel. Kiana, meanwhile, had gathered Helsa's head in her hands. She caressed her face, sank fingers into the auburn hair. When she appeared to gather enough of her wits, Kiana opened her eyes and looked down once more into Helsa's upturned face. Tressa wanted to weep at the look in Kiana's eyes. She looked at Helsa with love, with desire, with longing and hope. She looked to her as though she looked upon something divine.

In answer, Helsa raked Kiana's thighs with her nails but not apparently to hurt. She left red lines against that paler skin, but even as Tressa stared, the marks began to fade. The feeling, though, seemed to do much for Kiana. She opened her legs, letting them fall apart lewdly. Tressa caught a glimpse of her friend's most intimate flesh just before Helsa leaned

in. From his position, no doubt Arren had a better view. Tressa hoped so. She was starting to shake and quiver. If this did nothing for Arren's libido, they were wasting their time.

She closed her eyes, shaken by the fact that her dress now rubbed against her nipples. Where she had been oblivious of the restricting fabric before, it now served to irritate her. She was aware of her flesh jutting into firm peaks. Her stomach felt tense. Lower down, a delicate curling sensation teased her sex. She knew without checking that she grew wet. What she longed for just then was sure, knowing fingers slipping inside, spreading her.

Kiana cried out now, almost uttering a sound of pain. Her sex, obscured by Helsa's head, was lost to view, but Kiana's breasts heaved, appeared to swell even as Tressa watched. Her whole body took on a pink hue. From the way Helsa moved, there was no doubt she knew what to do with her tongue. From the change in position, Tressa could tell that the woman used her tongue first to fuck, then to lave Kiana's aching bud. Kiana's hands clawed into Helsa's hair, almost savagely gripping her head, pulling her tighter against her quivering flesh. Her hips started to move seemingly without conscious thought. Her breaths emerged on gasps that made her whole frame shudder.

When a contraction ripped through Kiana, Tressa witnessed it by the way the woman's whole body shook. Tressa felt an answering throb deep inside, and now Kiana juddered in place, almost vibrated against the wall, her head falling back, her eyes closing. She writhed and then whimpered as the orgasm clearly faded, and she started to come back to her senses.

Tressa couldn't help wondering if it was always like this between the two women or was the idea that they had spies intensifying things. She wasn't sure she cared. Even as she saw Helsa look up, a playful expression on her face and lasciviously licking her lips, Tressa knew they hadn't finished.

She couldn't watch another moment. She would orgasm without a touch, and she didn't want that. She wanted Meira. She had to get to her. She had to leave, to go to Meira. She needed to...

Wait. She needed to wait until the soft moans and sharp cries coming from the room beyond ceased. She had to wait until Arren recovered enough to walk straight. Even as she spared him a thought, she heard his voice. "Leave." Frowning, Tressa stared up into her brother's face. He was staring down at her. "Go to the head of the passage," he hissed. "Wait for me there."

Tressa moved to shake her head, but then what little experience she had kicked in. No, Arren was not out to cause trouble. He wanted privacy. At least she had turned her face from the wall before he looked at her. She stood on shaky legs and made her way slowly into the darkness.

* * * * *

When Arren finally appeared, he looked as shaken as she felt. He also looked pale, and she suspected that if she touched him, he would feel clammy. She didn't want to touch him. She didn't want to know what he'd been doing in the passage while she sat waiting for him in the gallery, sitting on the floor, hidden from view behind the statue. The house had a basic staff today, and no one had come to disturb her peace, but alas, that had given her plenty of time for thinking.

Why did the idea of Meira touching her fill her with such longing, when Markis's touch, though pleasant, was more to do with physical need than fulfilment of the heart? Perhaps her spirit -- as the Swithin called it, and if such a thing existed -- knew her desires more than her mind did. The trouble was Meira appeared to be more a creature of the physical than the heart, and Tressa couldn't be certain if she could stand the idea of another relationship borne out of affection more than true love. She needed to be certain of Meira's true feelings before she committed herself, and she could hardly blame Meira for wanting to take the time to discover what those feelings were. Unfortunately, perhaps she had been around Swithin men too long, for Tressa was beginning to realise that patience in love was not one of her virtues any longer. She almost sighed. How often had she glared at Meira

recently for her impatience? Tressa understood patience. She had spent the whole of her childhood and adolescent years waiting to grow into a woman and then waiting for the world around her to change, or to find the means to escape her fate.

Waiting worked out well. All very well for her traitorous mind to remind her of that now; still, she'd had enough of waiting.

Arren still hadn't spoken, and they needed to be away from here. "Are you well?" She could think of nothing else to say, and besides, Arren looked anything but well. His appearance made one think he was positively ill. Perhaps she had made a serious error.

"I do not know what I am, except a man confused. I...need time. A day or two. Perhaps then I can speak with Kiana. Perhaps then I will have worked out what I wish to know."

Yes, perhaps. Or perhaps he would decide that the woman he believed he loved wasn't worthy of his affection. That was hoping for the best result. If Arren's doubts grew and got the best of him, the worst thing he could do was go to the king and declare Kiana unworthy of a man's attention. Then Jemes would not even be able to take her for a wife, and Kiana and Helsa would face whatever punishment the king decided to bestow. Tressa had unwittingly turned from trying to change a nation to trying to change one man, but for the first time, seeing the horrible expression on Arren's face, Tressa's confidence wavered. Markis had referred to Azulite men as fops on more than one occasion, and with the way they groomed, the manner of their dress, and the way they behaved, she could understand why. Alas, they could still be dangerous. This could have serious consequences. What had she done?

"Arren, please do not --"

"Shut up!" He stared down at her, leaning against the statue for support as though his legs would give out if he didn't. "Do not... Just *do not* say a word. I cannot think straight, and I do not know how I feel right now, but so help me, Tressa, if you say one word, I will not be responsible for my actions. I believed my beloved chaste, innocent, and now you open

my eyes. Well, maybe I can accept that and maybe I cannot, but you are the one responsible for whatever I decide.”

“No.” Tressa rose to her feet despite feeling unsteady herself. “Do not dare do that to me. Do not tell me that it is I who will betray Kiana if that is what you intend to do. If you love her and cannot live with this, then at least let her go. If you love her, let her go in peace.”

“You fail to understand,” Arren said, avoiding her gaze. “You have no idea what you ask of me.” He turned his head then and gazed wildly up and down the corridor. When he next spoke to her, his voice was quieter. “You have no idea what an Azulite man goes through. How many beatings he takes from his father should he ever express a radical thought.”

Tressa blinked. “Women are whipped.”

“I know.” He stared at her, his eyes wild. “I know! But Azulite men...” He physically shook then, as though he contained some heretofore unspoken rage. “Boys! Our fathers and teachers drum it into us from as young an age as they beat it into you. Tressa!” His eyes were wide, glazed with something she didn’t want to think about, memories perhaps. “It is not solely the women of this city that live in fear. It is not solely the females that hate their fathers.”

“Yet men perpetuate this fear. That makes no sense.” She wanted to understand. She truly did, but she only knew her world from one point of view, that of the female.

“It’s easy to speak out from a righteous viewpoint. It’s not so easy when you are told lies that your cock will drop off if you desire anything that is not sanctified under our laws, and a man can be condemned as easily as a woman.”

“Only for treason.”

“No, Tressa!” Arren hissed at her. “No. For conspiring. There are laws written for women, but there are other laws written for men. You are unaware of them for they are not

intended for your eyes. Trust me. I had to learn them, chapter and verse. Before we reach maturity, we have to be able to recite them. Those in power can call on a man at any time, Tressa. Any time! And if we cannot repeat the whole of the charter, we can be flogged, fined, have our lands or possessions confiscated.”

This was madness. “A charter,” Tressa heard herself saying as though her voice belonged to someone else. “Who would know of this?”

“The king. The enforcers.” Arren meant those who enforced their laws. “Any in power. All men once they are of an age to learn it and the queen.”

Tressa stared at Arren, speechless. She mouthed the word *mother* without sound. He nodded, stared at her a moment, and then looked around. “Come. We have lingered too long.” He appeared much recovered, and he was right. He’d given her much to think on, and Tressa was eager to be gone.

Chapter Ten

Meira opened her mouth to ask Tressa if her plan had succeeded and didn't even get the chance to finish her greeting. Tressa crossed the room to her, tugging the cord at her neck that fastened the cloak. The garment fell to the floor with a flutter that matched Meira's heart. The sudden and unexpected sensation took her by surprise, and by then, Tressa had threaded her slender arms around Meira's waist, turned her head, and was resting the left side of her face against her breasts.

Meira stood there for a moment in shock, and then, gradually, she forced her body to relax. Her arms encircled the smaller woman, and she held her in an attempt to offer comfort.

"What's wrong?" she eventually asked, but aside from that, she didn't prompt again, just waited for Tressa to catch her breath, gather her resolve, and do whatever else she needed to do in order to talk.

"I learned the most ridiculous and awful thing today."

"And what is that?" Meira guided the other woman to sit down, for she trembled at the onset of her words. Still, Meira refused to break contact. She leaned back into the curved arm of the couch and pulled Tressa in against her, until the other woman snuggled in close.

"I grew up believing that our men truly thought women the weaker sex, but I always surmised that they had ulterior motives."

"Not an unworthy consideration. I would think the same thing. One race or creed has much to gain from keeping another subservient."

"True, but today I learned that this is drummed into men from as young an age as it is drummed into women. The men of my land live in almost as much fear as the women do."

Blinking, Meira tightened her hold a little. What Tressa had just told her should have surprised her more than it did. Instead, the most overwhelming emotion she felt was pain. "I feel such sorrow for your race."

Tressa lifted her head. "As do I."

"I don't know if that makes the changes you wish more difficult or whether we should be hopeful."

"I agree." They gazed at one another in painful silence. This could go either way. Even Meira had imagined a riot, an uprising of women demanding equal rights, but now the men might allow their own fears to dictate. On the other hand, there had to be some men out there who also wanted things to change. The ambiguity of the situation left even Meira speechless. Finally, Meira felt it prudent to break the silence.

"Tell me what else happened today."

Even before she completed the sentence, Tressa shook her head. "That is something else that could go either way. Please, Meira" -- her grip tightened -- "I do not want to think on it just now. I do not want to think on anything. Can you make me forget?"

Forget? Meira could make Tressa forget her name if she so desired. A wicked grin infused her face, and though it still felt odd to grin, Meira did nothing to hide her merriment or her desire. Meira kissed her, making a sinful sweep with her tongue before prying Tressa's lips apart with force. When she finally broke the kiss, the one expression she hadn't expected

on Tressa's face was one of thoughtfulness. She would have to increase her efforts if Tressa required further distraction. "What are you thinking?"

"Bright, charming, sinful, pitiless, and cruel, but darling," Tressa murmured.

"What?" Meira asked with a laugh in the tone of her voice.

"It's an old story," Tressa told her. "They read to young women here, to warn against vice, but I always thought it odd. The story is about a woman born to a good family and ends with her dying horribly. Bright, charming, sinful, pitiless... It's how they describe her."

"Charming indeed," Meira said. "This is hardly the sort of thing that enters my mind when I want to make love. What a thing to think of while I'm kissing you!"

"But it is fitting," Tressa said, laughing. "You see, there are many who believe that despite the outcome of the story, it depicts women in quite a different light." She turned in Meira's arms as they lay on the couch. Leaning in, she bestowed the most delicate of kisses along the line of Meira's chin as she continued to speak. The light touch of Tressa's lips was definitely enticing. "They try to tell us that by bright they mean the woman's image, meaning she was pretty. I think the writer meant intellect."

Meira grinned, squirming. Tressa had progressed to her neck and the feeling was the sort that thrilled and aroused but walked the line of growing annoying. Oddly, the annoyance was part of the delight. She wanted to get away. She wanted to stay and endure.

"They count the charming as the woman's behaviour being sinfully enticing, a display of lascivious deeds, quite unseemly. They believed she could entice others to lust, *charm* them into such conduct. I have always viewed the image of the woman being charming as precisely that. Charming, pleasant, charismatic."

"You cannot find another characteristic in sinful," Meira chided as a distraction from the hot little licks Tressa had taken to pressing into the hollows of Meira's neck.

"Can you not? Even when the idea of sin is what an Azulite man considers to be sinful?"

“Point taken,” Meira said, giving in to her need to squirm. Rather than put Tressa off, the woman’s skin flushed and an expression of delight stole over her face. Her eyes shone with an evil light that Meira considered the epitome of sin. She could almost deduce the delightfully wicked thoughts flitting through Tressa’s mind right now. “Pitiless and cruel?” she asked, her words coming out on a croak. She didn’t need to see Tressa’s mouth turn up at the sides to realise that the woman gained pleasure from her ability to affect Meira’s composure.

“Pitiless and cruel to whom? You see, this is a woman who scorns men. The story shows a woman who spends more time with a friend, spurning the advances of men. The story depicts her as wilful, but I think for those of us who have learned they love their own sex that the truth of the friendship the two women shared practically leaps from the page.”

“Ah...” Meira wasn’t quite sure she was saying “Ah” in understanding or “Ahhhhh” in response to Tressa’s meandering lips.

“And why would the writer end by calling her darling, if she were not precisely that?”

Meira nodded, her eyes closing, giving herself to sensation. She turned, facing away at Tressa’s beckoning so that the small woman could reach the fastenings on the back of Meira’s dress.

“There’s another twist to the story that women know but dare not speak in front of men.” Tressa’s lips followed her fingertips as the dress opened. Meira knew just how far down the line of grips Tressa had progressed because she experienced the heat of Tressa’s small, pert lips as the dress gaped. “Although it is a rumour only, many women believe this story was written by a woman, not a man. It’s a lesson to show women they have no need of men, especially if that man is unworthy.”

“So most of the Azulite population then?” Meira’s sarcasm produced the laugh she had hoped it would. As well as the sweet sound emerging from Tressa’s mouth, a puff of warm air played over Meira’s skin at the base of her spine. Conversely, the cooler air of the room that

played across her exposed shoulders created an interesting contrast. Meira shivered. Gooseflesh rose. Her nipples reacted.

"I want to explore you," Tressa whispered, and Meira only just barely consented when the dress fell away. It hung on her frame still, trapped at her elbows and knees, but it lay under her, making her feel more exposed than had she been naked. On her hands and knees, Meira quivered. She blinked, amazed and confused by the sudden feeling of vulnerability. She never felt vulnerable. How had Tressa weaved this spell over her merely from soft kisses and licks, and undressing her as she saw fit?

"I shall kiss your lips," Tressa whispered, and Meira turned her head slightly only realising to which lips Tressa referred when the heat of the kiss burned into her sex. The kiss was almost chaste, yet Meira could feel that Tressa's pursed lips fitted perfectly. She pictured Tressa, bending down, leaning forward. Tressa's hair tickled her thighs. Meira knew that in this position her thighs made a perfect frame for her sex.

Smelling a heady scent, Meira turned her head to the small table by the side of the couch. Arren had sent his sister flowers the day before -- a nice gesture that met Meira's approval -- but she hadn't thought much of the blooms. "Wait until you see them tomorrow," Tressa had told her and now she saw why. Overnight the flowers had opened. They trembled as Meira trembled. Indeed, they trembled *because* she trembled. Without realising, Meira had begun to rock her hips. She shook and the couch shivered. Resting as it did against the table, the table quaked.

Tressa pulled back to stare at the ripeness of Meira's sex. Her cool white thighs framed her secret, moist pink flesh. Even in the grip of lust, there was something orderly about the larger woman. Even Meira's sex was neat, the hair at her groin soft and fine, ticklingly delicate. Tressa wanted to see her dishevelled. There were books in the Swithin library that both Tressa and Uly had found entertaining, educational and...well, just plain stimulating. Some of the images or descriptions had disturbed Tressa even as she found them arousing.

One passage, under the drawing of a luscious woman with a whip in hand, returned to taunt her now.

I want. I want to beg, to swear foul words and bark at you in kinship to the lowest beast. I want your laughter, your sorrow, and most of all your pain. Switch me, whip me, open up my veins to seek the well of life, to flow, to sink, to swim, dissolving, disintegrating...

It went on, but Tressa could remember no more of it. She lowered her mouth and licked, her tongue darting, barely touching, examining, probing, seeking out everything forbidden.

Meira gasped. Tressa's kiss had progressed to other, even more intimate areas. She hadn't taught Tressa to kiss her "there" and yet the small queen seemed to know what she was doing. The touch stopped short of embarrassing -- not that Meira felt embarrassment but was rather concerned for Tressa's feelings -- the teasing lick at one entrance while, at the sound of her gasp, Tressa's fingers turned savage at the other. Meira fell into a spiral of overlapping sensations. One hard and corkscrewing at slick, soft flesh, yanking on her nether lips, drawing her open, making her seep, and the most gentle of all possible licks where her nerves screamed out with sensitivity. One touch harsh, one incredibly gentle. It proved too much. Meira's body tightened, and then...

Then nothing. Meira blinked. "Stay there," Tressa said, and Meira almost laughed. Had Tressa just given her an order? Even as the thought speared through her mind, she felt bereft. Tressa had scrambled from the couch.

Turning her head a little, Meira saw the small queen struggle out of her dress. The agitation on her face and the small curse that left her lips would have been comical under other circumstances. No sooner did Tressa expose her creamy flesh, than she was gone,

darting out of sight across the room. Meira heard a drawer open, close, then Tressa's footsteps padding across the wooden floor, returning to her.

More movements, sounds, the snap of a box lid... Meira frowned. "Wha --" she began to ask, and then Tressa's hands stroked her flanks, stealing Meira's words, making her shiver. No sooner did the touch recede than Tressa moved up behind her. From what she could perceive, Tressa adjusted her position. Concentrating intensely, Meira at last discerned a quiet but familiar humming. She opened her mouth to protest, but Tressa cut her short.

"For my pleasure as well as yours."

"We brought them here for the ladies of the court," Meira remonstrated, although it sounded a weak objection at best.

"And there's plenty left for them."

No more time to argue, for Tressa's fingers spread Meira's willing flesh and then something larger, harder, more forceful slid into her depths. Meira closed her eyes. As far as she knew, the crystals were unique to Swithin culture. They vibrated, and although they were difficult to cut, the Swithin formed them into toys. By its size, Meira could tell which one Tressa had selected. Long in length, middling in girth, curved up at one end...the end that Tressa shifted now to fit inside her, if Meira could tell by the woman's movements. Apparently, they both had a good eye. She had thought to use this one on Tressa but set the idea aside, not wanting to alarm the less experienced woman and because they'd intended to give it away.

Less experienced... Now that was a laugh. What *had* Tressa seen to make her behave this way? At that moment, Meira's thought disintegrated. Tressa thrust with her hips, driving the crystal forward into her, riding the same wave of vibration. Already aroused, so close to the brink, the vague thought that they wouldn't get to enjoy this for long trembled inside Meira's head. She heard Tressa cry out, words of entreaty on the sound of a sob, and knew they shared the same pleasure.

Meira screamed as her body bucked, only remembering to bury her head into the cushions as she did so that she would not bring anyone running. She had just enough coherent thought left to wonder what had come over the small queen and where had she learned to do such things, so right, so delicately, so harshly, the sensations contradictory, confusing...so perfect, and then she lost herself to the demands of her body.

She heard rather than saw the vase containing the flowers fall over, even as she closed her eyes and pressed her mouth into a cushion, burrowing. Still she drowned in the fragrance. She heard the gush of water flooding out of the urn and hitting the floor, just as she erupted, the cacophony adding harmony to the sensations wrecking her body, turning her boneless, mindless...completely at the smaller woman's mercy.

She was at the crystal's mercy, actually, for until Tressa pulled back, it would continue to vibrate and whack Meira's insides in a series of aftershocks that might well drive her insane. The question remained of whether Tressa could move. The way she shuddered, gasped, and clutched at Meira adequately expressed what neither of them had the energy or strength to say.

Chapter Eleven

No doubt Tressa would be less than pleased upon waking, but in all honesty, Meira had not imagined for one moment that the queen would grant her this audience. Now she stood nervously waiting for Lilanna, Tressa's mother, to see her. The idea that she was nervous gave her pause, and yet Meira was, if nothing else, prepared to admit to her emotions silently. Nervousness was unusual for her but not unprecedented. She viewed her feeling as merely one of common sense under the circumstances.

Finally, the door opened and a reedlike woman stared out at her. Meira fought the frown that threatened her face. She hardly expected the queen to open her own doors, and this female in no way resembled Tressa, so she doubted she faced the woman she was here to meet. For a few moments, the two women stared at one another, and Meira was wise enough to notice when someone took an instant dislike to her. She could only hope that her meeting with Lilanna would prove more fruitful.

"Her Majesty doth greet you and favours you with her attendance."

Trying not to wince, for she had heard how some Azulites spoke, Meira nodded. She just about refrained from curtsying, even though it was not in her nature. She followed in the other woman's wake.

It was not difficult to spot the queen. The woman looked remarkably like her daughter, except she was taller and her hair had turned grey. She threaded wool through her fingers while another woman wound it into a ball at her feet. The queen's task seemed perfunctory at best. The kneeling woman could have as well taken care of the wool alone. If the expression on the queen's face was anything to go by, she found this activity as boring as it looked. Meira almost smiled, for now she understood all too well why the queen had agreed to see her. Boredom was maybe not the nicest reason to grant an interview, but whatever made it happen was good enough for Meira.

Lilanna waved the women surrounding her away as though they were flies. She looked at the reedlike woman with an air of command. Clearly, Lilanna had no need to speak; this woman, after pressing her lips together in a haughty fashion, clapped her hands and had the rest scurrying from the room. She looked back once to the queen, who bestowed her with a patient look, before hurrying out after the others and closing the door behind her.

"Tell me, do you knit or sew?"

As an initial acknowledgement, one could call it objectionable, but Meira answered the question. "I sew when it is necessary, though prefer to stitch flesh rather than fabric. We do not use many woollen garments in Swithin land. They have excellent weavers."

"Flesh?"

"I treat the sick and injured."

Lilanna raised one eyebrow but gave no true indication whether she believed anything that Meira said. Either way, she looked unimpressed as her next words indicated. "I dare say the Swithin have many excellent things, according to you, but you are not Swithin?" Lilanna made it a question by the lilt of her voice.

"Not entirely. I consider myself to be such, though, born and raised."

"Raised perhaps, but born?"

"My mother was Swithin."

"Ah. That explains much."

Meira didn't see that it explained anything but remained silent.

"It is not good to deny one's heritage," Lilanna continued.

"I deny nothing. I am part Kita, but as a race, they leave much to be desired."

"Desire..." Lilanna said the word as though she failed to understand the meaning of it.

"Many put too much emphasis on desire."

Sorely tempted to ask if Lilanna had ever desired her husband or freedom, Meira almost had to bite down on her tongue to stop from speaking her mind. Still, she couldn't help thinking that Lilanna read her too well.

"Why have you sought this audience?"

Generally, a woman who had no patience to dance around the subject should have made Meira feel grateful. Instead, she was too wary to feel thankful. "Several reasons. One, I should like to speak my mind to you without fear of reprimand. Two, I have a gift for you, and three, I wish to say a few words on the subject of your daughter."

"Has she sent you here? No. Do not answer that. I know she has not. I know Tressa too well." Lilanna looked considering. "I have allowed you to stand, though most who come before me kneel before their queen."

"You are not my queen." The words slipped out before Meira could prevent them, but she quickly worked out a way to cover her error. "However, if that is what you require me to do, I can kneel."

"Not *too* proud, then."

"Pride is a luxury that often serves one ill."

Lilanna's face altered. The gesture was subtle, but Meira was aware of the change.

"I feel I may be looking at something of an oddity: a wise woman." Lilanna sounded sincere, if a little mocking.

“If you can recognise a wise woman, does that not also make you wise?”

Lilanna laughed. Meira blinked in surprise but otherwise kept a straight expression. The queen might well resemble Tressa, but she sounded nothing like her. That laugh was hard, cackling almost.

“I would say not. No. Only men are wise.” The woman’s eyes almost dared Meira to challenge her on that score. “Of course, you may think otherwise for you are not of our race. The men here would not think so ill of you for believing so.”

“No?”

“No. They would blame the men who have not taught you well.”

Meira hesitated and then decided to say what was on her mind. “A man once tried to *teach* my mother that she loved wrongly. She managed to stanch her wounds long enough to save the life -- *my* life -- growing within her. A man once tried to *teach* me that my worth was to give him pleasure. I left him for dead, or as good as.”

The queen’s expression changed once more. She spoke calmly yet carefully as she stood and crossed the room to a side table where a pitcher stood. “I would not speak too openly on that score, even if we do not command obedience from all other nations should they visit here.”

“We?”

“The king and the males of our race. I by association to the king. Drink?”

Meira shook her head.

“Because you do not trust me?”

“Quite.”

Lilanna laughed, and this time the cackle emerged as a gentle sound, though it could never be as tender as Tressa’s laugh.

“What do you command of visitors from other nations?” Meira enquired.

"To obey our laws while they are here. To refrain from seeking companionship or partnerships with any of our people."

"That is all?"

"Yes. They may trade if they obtain a permit first." The woman sipped from the glass in her hand. "If your mother died," she began, clearly referring to Meira's statement of a few moments ago, "did not the man make his lesson well?"

"No. He killed the flesh. He did not kill her spirit."

"So you believe we continue after our life here has ended."

"No."

Lilanna raised an eyebrow once more. Meira was certain that was as close to looking surprised as the woman ever came.

"Explain."

"Our spirit is intangible. Whether you believe it continues to exist after death is irrelevant. Many Swithin believe they are made from the stars and that in some form they return to the sky, but either way, your spirit is what makes you *you*. It is what guides your judgement, forms your personality, makes you unique. No one can destroy that just by taking your life. They may not even destroy it if they break your will. A broken will may find its way back to the truth one day. Enslave people, force them to obey, and it is what remains in their hearts that counts."

Meira stared at the queen who was staring at her. She couldn't tell if the woman was angry. If not anger, then she couldn't interpret the expression on the woman's face.

"Quite," Lilanna suddenly murmured, so low that if there'd been any others in the room, Meira doubted they would have heard her. "You said you have something for me?"

"I do." Meira reached into a pocket and withdrew a small box. Lilanna took it at once with a manner of trust that quite amazed Meira. The queen set down her drink and then sat before opening the box. She gazed at the large, and rather long, pink crystal that lay within.

“What is this? It appears...to hum.”

“May I ask one more question before I tell you what it is?” She took Lilanna’s frown for yes. “I hear that when the king placed a chastity belt on his daughter, you denied him sex.”

Lilanna snorted. “For all the good it did. He simply took another female to his bed.”

Meira failed to hide her surprise this time. Lilanna smirked.

“One rule for women, another for men. He’s the king. He can especially break laws that he made. The girl was a ‘gift’ from a visiting noble. She seems docile enough and dim enough to believe that he truly has feelings for her.”

“Yet how could an Azulite woman deny a man his rightful pleasure?” Meira was slightly uneasy she’d anger the other woman with the question, but Lilanna looked rather amused.

“She should not, but how would it look for the king to have to berate the queen? It’s become one of those things. Azulite men are good at ignoring what is inconvenient.”

“Still...a difficult thing to do. Deny oneself sex as well as the man.” Azulite women had a reputation for being highly sexed.

Lilanna’s eyes narrowed, and Meira approached her and bent to remove the crystal from the box. She placed it in the queen’s hand, and before the woman could berate her for being so bold, as Meira felt certain she was going to, the other woman’s eyes opened wide.

“It...vibrates.”

“It’s a toy. For when one has a lonely night with no man to warm the sheets,” Meira whispered. She could see by the look in those dark eyes that the queen understood her meaning. As though Meira had given the queen a mere trinket, Lilanna placed the gift back into the box. She then proceeded to slip the box into as deep a pocket as Meira had brought it in.

“There are more of these...strange crystals?” To anyone else, Lilanna’s question would sound casual enough, but Meira was no fool.

"Yes. They are as expensive as they are difficult to produce, but the Swithin can supply enough to share in trade. We have some with us that we thought some of the women of the court would like to accept as gifts. By your leave, of course."

"Of course. And the third reason you wished to speak to me?"

"I wanted to ask you to see Tressa."

A dark cloud entered the woman's eyes. For one moment, Meira believed the queen might even return the gift, but then she clearly decided she'd rather keep it.

"Why?"

"Because standing up to the king... Well, what you did for her spoke of love. Because you're her mother. Because she misses you."

"I have not kept her at bay out of spite."

"I know. If I tell Tressa that you may speak of frivolities only...?"

Lilanna nodded. "That would do. The meeting, however, cannot be private."

"I understand and will make certain Tressa does too."

Lilanna looked up at her, and it was a small wonder she didn't berate Meira for towering over her. "If you can rein in that headstrong girl, then there is more to you than I know, and I find I am glad you are her...companion?"

"Quite so," Meira replied, refusing to look away from that searching gaze.

"Before you go," Lilanna said, patting the seat at her side, "tell me a little of this Swithin king my daughter has wed. After all, she will bear his children, and that would make me their grandmother. I think I should also like to know what this Markis would make of his mother-in-law."

Meira sat down and obliged. For the next half hour, she answered Lilanna's questions with care. There was no way she was going to give this woman anything she could use against Markis and no way she had the courage to say what Markis would think of Lilanna. As strong as he was, there were some women even the Swithin king would do well to avoid.

Chapter Twelve

“You do not need me here,” Tressa protested.

“Yes, I do!”

Despite her words, Tressa couldn’t mistake the tight grip Arren had on her arm or the wild look in his eyes. Having decided that he needed to speak with Kiana personally before making any decisions, now that the time had come, he was acting exactly the way Markis viewed Azulite men. They were either unyielding as the grave or quivering like a blade of grass in a storm. For once, Arren seemed determined to exert the forceful side of his nature.

“Oh for goodness’ sake.” Tressa tried to shake off his grip, but he wasn’t letting go. “Very well, but this should be private between you.”

“I am not asking for you to take part, just be present.” Colour rose in his face. “For all I know, I may need your guidance in this.”

“My...guidance?” Tressa tried to choke back the horror she felt as realisation dawned. This time when she yanked her hand back, he let go. “It may have escaped your notice but I have little in the way of experience myself. You probably have more.” Whereas females were to keep themselves chaste for their husbands, males could visit females of certain social standing. In other lands, they called them whores. The Swithin had no use for such things.

Sex was such a thing of joy they never used it for personal gain. They saw it as a celebration of life.

Her brother was clearly embarrassed, but probably in an attempt to hide that fact -- although the furious red glow to his cheeks grew deeper rather than faded -- his manner changed to one of anger. "I have no idea of what two women can do..." He hesitated, and Tressa was well aware of why. He'd *seen* what two women could do together, so his denial was farcical at best. "I have no idea why one woman would seek pleasure with another especially when she had a good man. No, when she has more than one good man who wishes to marry her."

"Such choices are a matter of the heart, not sex. Let me tell you that if you harbour any ideas that once Kiana gets a man between her legs she will mend her ways, we should call a halt to this now."

Silence followed the snap of Arren's teeth as he closed his mouth in apparent shock. They stood in the room where a servant had led them, awaiting Kiana's arrival. What they had failed to notice during their squabble was the fact that the woman they awaited had already arrived. Clearing her throat a little even as they noticed her, Kiana walked demurely into the room. She offered Arren a small curtsy and even held out her hand so that he could kiss her fingers. She offered Tressa a polite smile and then said, "Shall we be seated?"

At once, Tressa and Arren moved to the table that Kiana indicated, almost tripping over each other's feet in haste. They all three sat with the modest but far from tiny table between them. Tressa wished the vase of flowers that sat at its centre were bigger so that she could hide behind the blooms.

"It is of marriage that I come to you to speak," Arren began.

"I know, my lord, but as you are aware, I have already received a proposal from Jemes."

"One that he will renounce if your wish fulfils mine own."

“Oh, get on with it,” Tressa hissed between clenched teeth. If they carried on as most Azulites did, they would take an hour before they got to the real problem. Both Arren and Kiana stared at her, and then both shifted uneasily in their seats. Kiana turned her gaze to Arren, waiting for him to speak.

“If we wed, could you not find it in your heart to be faithful?” he asked.

“It is not a question of that, and if one was to talk of faithfulness, then I would not wed for I have...” Kiana swallowed, then looked down at the tabletop briefly before squaring her shoulders. When next she spoke, she spoke more honestly, but she kept her voice lower in tone. “My lord, you are asking me to give up someone I love, someone, the only one, I have been able to trust with everything that I am, everything that makes me the person I am for more years than I care to count, even before we became lovers. The...sex was born out of friendship, which grew into love. I know that by our laws I must marry and...”

Once more Kiana’s voice faltered. She took a breath and then looked up at him.

“Arren, there is no man who touches my heart better than you. Jemes is an acceptable second, but I would rather share my life with you, if I must share it with a man, but Jemes will accept Helsa as my companion. As a lady’s companion to the wife of royalty, she can forgo the need for marriage and stay by my side. Jemes will allow this. The question is whether you can find it in your heart to grant the same.”

Arren stared at the flowers in the vase, and the look in his eyes suggested he might wither them by his stare alone. An age passed before he spoke. “I could not fathom what I witnessed the other day, not at first. I thought I dreamed it. Still, perhaps I could come to terms with that.”

“Only perhaps?”

Arren coughed, maybe to hide some other gesture. “What we need to speak of is the idea of sharing you with someone else. Love should be between two people and --”

"You may be right in an ideal world, but this world is far from ideal. The way Azulites live is far from *ideal*."

Tressa couldn't be sure if she was grateful for the anger and irritation in Kiana's voice or despairing of it.

"The Swithin way is far from ideal, yet it appears to work better than most," Kiana added, although Tressa wasn't sure she agreed.

In truth, many Swithin pairings consisted of two, a male and female. However, the sex of a person held no bearing on choice. Many Swithin had no liking for their same sex at all. The Swithin way worked because people had the freedom to choose. If Markis had not needed to wed because he required an heir for the throne, she was certain he would have married Uly and Ryanac. He still could with her agreement. Alas, the way the law stood meant Uly and Ryanac would also have to marry her, and none of them truly wanted that, Uly especially. Even now, Markis sought a way to take vows with Uly that would not bind the young man to her. Maybe she should have taken exception to that, but she didn't. Ryanac and Uly would stand by her until the day she drew her last breath. This was a matter of the heart only, not loyalty. She had their loyalty. She was even eager for Markis to find a solution because the way she felt about Meira now, maybe in time she could use such a ceremony.

Opening and closing his hands as though he would grasp the right words out of the very air they breathed, Arren shook his head. "I am no scholar or philosopher. I know only that my heart tells me I love you and that I would struggle to share you with another."

"Why?"

Arren wasn't the only one that Kiana's question took by surprise. "Because to love..."

Raising a hand, fingers towards him, Kiana silenced Arren with that simple gesture. "If you believe that you cannot abide the idea of my loving another because it will eat you up with jealousy, then that is one matter. If you believe there is no room in my heart for two

and that by sharing me it will lessen what I feel for you, then I can only tell you that I have long admired you. As for love, there has been no time for it. What Azulite woman can grow to love a man when their families arrange marriages? Mayhap love grows afterwards or not, but most cannot know what their future holds. At best, they hope to live in polite civility. At worst, the woman has to hold her tongue because our society dictates or face the often-violent consequences. An Azulite man may beat his wife for what he perceives as insolence. Are you such a man?"

Arren flushed at the question. Kiana stared at him briefly and then continued.

"I fear that we could grow to hate each other. I know that I care for you already, but if you want that love to flourish, then you must nurture it. The fact that you, as an Azulite male, can speak of love tells me much about you."

Arren's colour deepened, though this time Tressa suspected that he flushed from Kiana's praise.

"I understand the sense of your words, but still I must learn to share you with another. Even if I can be part of it --"

"Did you find it...displeasing?" Kiana interrupted.

Tressa almost jerked upon hearing Kiana's question. What was the woman thinking? Arren was frowning, his mouth agape, staring at Kiana.

"My lord, Helsa has no specific taste for men, but I do. That does not mean she is shy or wishes to hide behind closed doors or under heavy coverlets. She would delight in an audience, if it were the right man watching. She might be happy to share the *right* man's touch." Her words explained much as to why Jemes was happy to consider the marriage together with the arrangement. Clearly, Helsa did not find Jemes to be her ideal audience, and he likely wanted to have sex with her as well as Kiana. Now, Kiana had made it clear that Helsa preferred Arren to Jemes. Did Arren feel flattered? Tressa could only hope so.

"Did you find nothing we did...arousing?" Kiana asked suddenly, directing the question at Arren, although mentally Tressa answered on his behalf. *Yes, oh yes. Yes, indeed, yes!*

Arren sounded half choked when next he spoke. "Tressa, I was mistaken by the need to have you here. You may leave."

Kiana raised a hand, forestalling her departure; Tressa wasn't sure whether to feel unappreciative or grateful, for she lacked the strength to stand right now. Never had she envisioned a time in her life when she would be privy to this type of conversation with her brother in the room.

"I wish Tressa to remain."

Arren stared at Kiana, and it didn't take much supposition to read his face. What woman denied a man when he had spoken? "Do you fear for your safety? Kiana, I would never hurt you."

"I am pleased to hear it, for if such were not the case, then I have placed in your hands the very means to denounce me." Her eyes were bright as she studied him. "That is the level of my regard for you."

If Arren had an answer for her, it must have lodged in his throat. For too long, he sat there staring at her, and when Tressa felt certain he would flounce from the room, he stumbled from his seat, reached almost blindly for Kiana's hand, gripped it, pressed it against his lips, and then bowed his head, his forehead resting against her fingertips. Tressa stood. By the time she reached the door and looked back, Arren had gone to his knees at Kiana's feet. She didn't need to hear his words to know he proposed, nor see Kiana's nod and smile of acceptance. One meeting was over. Tressa's next engagement was with her mother, arranged for the following day. To prepare for that, Tressa would have to speak to Meira and ask if she could think of a treatment to settle her stomach.

Chapter Thirteen

“How did it go?”

Tressa was aware that Meira watched her as she moved about the room. She was equally aware that her movements appeared stilted. She felt as wooden as a marionette. How could she explain that in some ways the meeting with her mother had gone exactly as she expected and yet not how she had hoped?

“I...” She hesitated, trying to search for the right words to explain so that she would only have to say this once. She lacked the strength to dwell on her emotions. “I feel as though I have no home to speak of.” She let her gaze wander about the room, over the too-heavily patterned linen, the thick drapes, the square-shaped vases that were a common adornment in the palace. These things that she had seen daily before leaving with Markis now felt foreign. Her hand reaching out awkwardly, she grasped the arm of a chair, grateful to sink into it.

Meira had moved from her position where she’d been reading. In truth, Tressa doubted the woman had taken much interest in the book, and if she queried her as to its contents, Meira likely wouldn’t be able to repeat a word of it. Still, the idea that Meira had been anxious during Tressa’s visit to the queen spoke much of the woman’s feelings.

"I have interfered," Meira began.

Tressa recognised the beginnings of an apology. She raised a hand. "I came here in the hopes that I could lay the foundations to change a nation," Tressa said, "and now I know that I wish for the impossible."

A brief glance displayed Meira's frown. "You would abandon these women?"

Tressa shook her head, the movement making her dizzy. The meeting with her mother had left her feeling ill. "No, but Markis was right, and these things take time. I knew patience once. I almost made a grand study of it. I needed to, for I had to grow to an age where I could wed, and then I needed to look for the right opportunity."

A wry smile stretched Meira's face, but Tressa wasn't fooled. Some slight disapproval existed in the other woman's expression. "Does Markis know you saw him as an opportunity?"

"Yes." Tressa answered her simply and felt oddly gratified at the brief flash of surprise that she saw in Meira's eyes. Most would not have recognised it, but the fact that she did also told Tressa how much she had come to know the other woman. Not only did that speak of Tressa's feelings but of Meira's, because the woman certainly allowed no one to witness emotions she wanted to keep private. In many ways, she was like Ryanac, but Ryanac was more open with his emotions, more honest. Still, like Meira, he was a very controlling individual. Yet they were also opposites. Ryanac often manipulated people, even though they were aware of it by the outcome, if not during. Meira didn't understand such subtlety. She was a palpable thing, such a direct force that it often gave Tressa a headache. She had liked that Meira spoke her mind, but right now she would have preferred someone lie to her, even if it was like taking alcohol to ease pain, for it worked only temporarily.

"I will do what I can for Kiana and Arren, and then I will go home."

"Home?"

Tressa stared up at Meira. “Yes, home. I thank you for arranging the meeting with my mother.”

Meira blinked, and Tressa could understand why, because initially she’d been furious with her. Furious with her for interfering, furious with her for doing something behind her back, furious that Meira might have done something, said something, to irritate her mother. Now she had no reason to feel angry.

“I owe Markis an apology.” The words felt peculiar on her tongue, but they were honest at least.

Meira’s raised eyebrows begged the question.

“Oh, he knew why I went to him as a willing bride, and I confess there is no man I can think of I would rather have by my side, but I have fought him at times. I am old enough to wed, yet young in many ways. I have behaved as if I was a petulant child, and you were right to call me one.” Tressa stood now and moved about the room aimlessly, just needing to move. She ignored Meira’s expression, which quite plainly teased her. Yes, she could imagine what the other woman’s thoughts were. *A petulant child? You, Tressa? Why, I can’t imagine it.*

“I do not even know why I fought him. I just wanted to...” Tressa formed her hands into claws. “I guess I wanted to be in control in some way, and I felt, at first, that I had given my life from one man’s control to another. Even though I knew it was not true, I feared I had made a mistake.”

“You haven’t.”

“I know. I know.” Tressa moved about the room, almost wringing her hands. She had no idea what Meira thought of her so obvious agitation. “The stupid thing is that I needed to return here to see my people and my mother to remember just why I was so anxious to leave in the first place. Is that not ironic, not to say ridiculous?”

“It’s easy to forget a bad experience when surrounded by so much good.”

Meira's comment gave Tressa pause. Was that it? Was it so simple? Perhaps it was. While living in a palace so full of light and laughter, she had begun to think that perhaps she was mistaken and her childhood could not have been so bad after all. She nodded. "Yes. I see that now. I began to forget the melancholy child I was, how I kept out of my father's way as all good children, especially female children, should." Her tone sounded bitter, but she didn't think Meira would mind. "How could I so easily forget why I ran from here? And to think I believed my mother... Damn the woman! I thought having done such a courageous thing as to stand up to the king and deny him sex in my honour meant that she had done something for me, that she would be pleased to see me." Once more she raised a hand in a stalling gesture, seeing Meira was about to interrupt. "You are right, and she is scared, but I saw that look in her eye today. That look that spoke eloquently of the daughter who has always been a trial to her. Do you know what she said as a way of farewell? She said it hardens her heart to see that I had my wilful way as always."

"Perhaps she feels that you left her bearing the brunt of your disobedience."

Tressa held her glare in check. "Perhaps, but from what I can glean it affected none of the women at this court, not even the queen. My father in no way retaliated, in no way took out his bad mood on my mother. No, my father was too busy blaming the barbarous hordes of star worshippers."

Meira's answering laugh first surprised Tressa and then made her smile in response. "Is that the way he sees Markis?" Meira asked.

"Apparently."

"I can't wait to tell him. Markis will be thoroughly entertained."

Thoroughly entertained. Well, that was one way of putting it. Tressa grew serious once more and quiet. "I needed this," she affirmed. "I needed to return here. I needed to accept this is no longer my home. What I fail to understand is why that hurts so much."

“Really?” Meira’s expression was one of compassion, but it struck as if it was a spear at Tressa’s heart. “I find it all too easy to understand why it hurts to accept that those who should love you the most have closed their doors to you, especially when those doors lead to their hearts.”

Tressa grimaced. “There was something Uly tried to tell me before I left home. Something he said that he had learned from Markis and Ryanac both. That you could choose friends but not relatives, and that a family could be anything you made of it. Family could be people you chose. Not necessarily those related by blood, but those who would cry most when you were gone.”

“He is wise for a young man.”

“Wiser than his queen,” Tressa mumbled, meaning herself. “Only now do I understand what he means, but it still leaves me feeling adrift, even if I know it’s only a feeling and not the truth.”

Meira stood there frowning. She had allowed Tressa her rant and remained patient while the smaller woman worked through her pain. Strangely, she now realised that she could have predicted much of the outcome of this meeting, and she could well understand Tressa’s sorrow, but now that she had reached the decision Meira had expected all along, it seemed to give Tressa no peace.

“Why so glum?” The question made Meira want to laugh. Never had she foreseen herself asking such a thing, but it suited Tressa’s expression and mood well enough. “You say we will go home. Do you not see the truth of that?”

Tressa looked up, and Meira was shocked to see the glitter of tears in those dark eyes. “Home? A place to live, yes, and my boys care well enough for me, but...”

“They more than care for you, Tressa, and they *are* your family. They or I will knock that senseless talk from you if you carry on.”

"No doubt" -- Tressa grimaced more than smiled -- "but I..." She waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "Pay no attention to me."

"You want love. Everyone does." Meira watched Tressa's beautiful eyes widen in question and possibly doubt. The idea that Tressa still doubted her feelings brought pain to Meira's heart. "Yes, even I wish for love, and until this moment, I had begun to believe I had found it with you."

"With..." Tressa's hand reached out, her manner suggesting that once more she sought the solid support of a piece of furniture.

"Why do you doubt me?" Meira rose from the seat and then took a step forward, but as Tressa leaned against the bedpost, it being the only thing within reach, she stopped. She didn't want Tressa to hear her speak of love while they were on the bed.

"You speak pretty words at times, but you... Afterwards, you seem so cold."

Cold? The shock of Tressa's words passed through Meira like ice water flowed in her veins in place of blood. She didn't care how others saw her, but she cared very much what Tressa thought of her.

"I...have learned a certain reservation," Meira began. Even those few words she found difficult. No wonder Tressa failed to believe her protestations of love, if that was what they even were, for she now realised she had spoken of affection and desire, never of love. "You have to understand that I am and always will be part Kita. I don't know if my father's upbringing is something carried in the blood, but women are formal at all times. Even in passion, they should feed their desire into pleasing men."

"But you were brought up among the Swithin."

"True, yet as much as I feel I am one of them, I feel I am apart." Meira moved her gaze from the hideous carpet to Tressa's face. To her horror, the image of the woman she loved blurred. She couldn't be crying. She just didn't cry. Afraid to blink, she tried to ignore the very idea that the realisation of so many things, of how Tressa perceived her, of how much

they were alike, had brought her to tears. “We are much alike, you and I. We have a home and it is...it should be what we make it, and there will always be those who resent that we’ve built a life among them, but we should not turn our back on it because of a few bigots. I’ve been too...aloof; I can see that now. I’ve tried to repay the Swithin by using my skills, but when I saw it was not enough, I quickly despaired and decided that I would live amongst them, not with them.”

“If by skills you mean your ability with plants and to know what heals, then that’s all to the good. But perhaps you should have tried being friendly as well.”

Meira did laugh then, the sound at last wringing a tear from her. If Tressa was shocked to see it -- and following the way her gaze briefly flicked over her face, Meira was sure that she was -- she said nothing. “Ah, but you see, I’ve just reached that conclusion as well. It’s what I was about to tell you, to try being a little more friendly to Markis.”

Tressa shook her head. “We are not the same in that. I have tried...” Her words trailed off. “No. You are right. I do owe Markis that apology. I went to him and the life that he offered willingly enough, but then I found part of me resented it. I resented his happiness even as he did everything he could to make me happy. I resented that he had not one love but two, while I had no one. Damn! I have been so difficult. He must have found me so difficult to live with. And to think if I had not gone with him I could still be living here, married to an Azulite fop.” The two women looked at each other and laughed.

“Poor Arren. It’s not his fault he’s the man he is. Ohhhh.” Tressa sat down on the bed, having to pull herself a little onto it due to the height of the mattress. “Only when I met you did I thank Markis for what he had done for me, and even then I felt guilty for meeting you under such terrible circumstances. Guilty and delighted.” She cast a glance Meira’s way that looked culpable.

“You thanked him when you met me?”

Tressa nodded. "For the life I could live if I could only reach out to seize it. I believed with you I could, but then, oh, Meira, I should have known better but you are correct in that we make a right pair. We know passion very well, but love... Ah, love is something else."

Meira approached the bed with caution. She reached out a hand, grateful when Tressa hesitated but nevertheless placed her tiny hand in Meira's much larger one. "This matter of love is perhaps something we can learn. Something we can guide each other towards." She made her smile as gentle as she could, not realising how tense she held herself until Tressa nodded and Meira sagged with relief.

Meira had spent the last few minutes kissing her. Tressa sighed, aware the sound entered the other woman's mouth and that Meira swallowed it down on a moan as though it were something truly physical. In the meantime, the woman's fingers had trailed in increasing circles up her legs, delving under the heavy skirts that Tressa wore, and now bypassed her garters to settle on and stroke her warm thighs. As the kisses continued, Tressa fought her uncertainty. She struggled to keep her body languid and open to Meira's touch, afraid that the least tension on her part would make the other woman stop the gentle stroking, the exploration, for that was how Tressa felt: explored. Meira's tongue at her throat, bestowing a heated lick, made her gasp as though someone had branded her. Something inside, central, linking her throat all the way down to her sex, tightened. As if she knew, Meira's hand moved inwards, finally cupping and pushing with just the right pressure against her mons that it made Tressa instinctively grind into her touch, rock her hips. She couldn't explain the wave of small shocks that permeated her being.

"I think you need to be unwrapped," Meira breathed into her mouth, and to Tressa's shock, she was nodding before she even made conscious sense of the words, before she even realised to what she was agreeing. Azulite underwear was ridiculous. The contraptions consisted of ruffles, not for adornment, but only because they used an excess of material to conceal the female form. Tressa had risked not wearing them, for she doubted anyone would

look under a lady's dress, and when she had shown a pair of the bloomers to Meira, the woman had not only expressed amusement but also said she would paddle Tressa's backside if she dared to wear them. Remembering how Markis had once spanked her, even if it had been a short-lived gesture of annoyance, and feeling certain that Meira would not be anywhere near as lenient, she had opted for Swithin undergarments. The particular style she had chosen gaped a little at the leg and now Meira manoeuvred her fingers into the opening, breaching the flimsy barrier.

"How do you want it?" Meira asked, barely any space between them, and Tressa struggled to rise out of the trance that Meira had weaved over her. She frowned, not understanding and therefore unable to answer. Her lover didn't await her words, though; she brushed the backs of her fingers over the swelling lips that protected Tressa's entrance, and the moment Tressa gasped, Meira captured her mouth, and her touch turned aggressive.

A spike of fear lanced through Tressa's abdomen but then dissipated as abruptly as it had appeared. She couldn't believe that the force she felt behind Meira's tongue and fingers could arouse her, but they did. Even as her mind had responded to the shock, her body had taken her in another direction. Meira's mouth was now busy, biting, sucking, on her lips, her chin, her neck, a shoulder, anything that came within reach. Tressa's breasts were starting to ache, and she wished they were free of the harsh Azulite garment. Even as the thought occurred to her, she felt the bones of the bodice biting into her, and she changed her mind. She didn't understand why but she suddenly found the small pain just another part of the pleasure that Meira wrung forth. Meira pressed and squeezed hard, and even though Tressa feared the brutal attack on such delicate flesh might bruise her, she found she was already rolling her hips, flaunting her desire. She whimpered in what she was sure was frustration, but Meira couldn't know that, and the other woman took a moment to pull back enough to stare at her. At once, she seemed to understand that the sound was not an objection, for she kissed her just as brutally once again, but the fact that she had even bothered to check touched Tressa's heart.

Her core felt heavy, swollen. A slow contraction made her legs tremble. The sensation wasn't an orgasm but the promise of one. The ache that had begun at her breasts journeyed swiftly downwards. She was empty and needed filling. Before, she wouldn't have thought Meira's fingers sufficient to ease this longing, aching need, but Tressa quickly discovered she was mistaken, as Meira's gentle, probing fingertips first eased her open, then plunged into her. She must have been wetter than she thought, for there was little resistance, and what little she felt, she welcomed. The discomfort was bittersweet and quite delightful. With her thumb, Meira sought out that small nub of pure pleasure and circled it. The touch of her thumb was light, a swirling caress that spoke of affection. Her fingers meanwhile plunged, hard and fast, almost savage with lust. Tressa quivered, unable to believe that Meira could sustain the two contrasting strokes, but she did even as Tressa reached the precipice more quickly than she had ever done.

"For me, Tressa," Meira whispered, her voice sounding thick and heavy as though she too felt drugged on something, somewhere between love and lust or maybe a combination of the two. "And for you. Let go. Soar."

Tressa didn't know if *soar* was the right word, but she could barely hold on to the thought, although she decided she did anything but soar. She plummeted, the force of her orgasm making her convulse, arch her back, throw back her head, and cry out. She crumbled at once, a great weight stealing over her. She ebbed like ripples on the water, even as Meira whispered, "My turn."

Tressa's four fingers eased into heat and slickness. They met resistance as well as submission. Meira's body sucked at her flesh drawing her in, yet Tressa hesitated.

"You've small hands, Tressa. I would think twice before doing this to you, but your hands are tiny. You're not going to hurt me."

While that was true, the concept that Meira could be enjoying this was so strange to her, Tressa trembled at the thought of complying. She looked up the length of Meira's luscious curves. Those green eyes gleamed.

"You think I don't want you inside me? I would take you in if I could, birth you out."

Maybe something in the way Meira said that spoke to Tressa's heart, or maybe she already knew what the other woman meant. So many times in the last few months, Tressa had needed to let go of her reserve. So many times had she sunk into depths of despair or desire, until she knew not where one ended or where one began. She had heard the Swithin mention pain and pleasure in the same sentence, and she had not grasped what that meant until now. Each time, whether it was in pleasure or pain, she had emerged a little altered, reborn. Her relationship with Meira would be no different. Meira's body widened under her hand.

"I want more. I want you to fill me up, fill all the empty places in my heart, Tressa."

She stared at Meira in surprise. What had brought on this declaration? Even as she thought it, she knew the answer. They had been talking about that very thing, and she could feel the truth of their emotions in the very air they breathed. They were on Azulite soil, and she had lived here long enough to recall how suffocating it could be. She had changed too much to think she could ever return here for more than a visit, not that she wanted to stay long, and now she wasn't so sure she even wanted to visit for another minute. She had tasted freedom. Choice lay here, under her hand. She could love how she wanted, laugh and live.

Suddenly she wanted to pierce Meira, open her, stretch her, and fill her, melt into her.

"You're being too gentle," Meira told her, and Tressa took her at her word.

Their movements grew frantic, racing towards the inevitable. Meira's body pulsed around her arm with the beat of life and those spasms that women knew all too well. It was all the same; no wonder the Swithin revered sex. This was the same as love, as laughter, as a smile. It was a small death amidst the sweet pulse of life, and as they fell back, satisfied,

fulfilled, Tressa gave in to tears that spoke of life, too. She finally accepted that she was no longer Azulite. She was free; she could choose.

* * * * *

Meira had just finished fastening Tressa's garment when the smaller woman suddenly blurted out, "I love you."

The words stopped Meira from catching the last hook together. Her fingertips went numb. When one person spoke of love, the other person was supposed to repeat the words, but she would not if they weren't true. To her amazement, Meira found she was saying, "I love you too," before her brain had time to catch up with her heart. Tressa turned in her hands, her dark gaze searching, asking without words if it was true. Meira nodded, laughing. "I love you, Tressa. I love you!"

They kissed and hugged, parting only so they could stare at each other. The joy was short-lived. As they stared smiling at each other for real, a sudden banging at the door announced Arren just before he burst into the room. He stared at the two women, his eyes wild. His hair and clothes looked quite dishevelled. He appeared more as a man should in that one brief moment than in all the days Meira had known him. The unkempt look suited him well, but upon hearing his words, Meira couldn't help wondering if she would ever get the chance to tell him, and if Kiana died, would he ever care how he looked.

"It's Kiana. She and Helsa..." Words appeared to catch in his throat for a moment as though to utter them would choke him. When he finally managed to spit out a full sentence, Meira understood why. "Our father, the king, he says if their crime is true, then he will not be lenient. Oh, Tressa, he plans to burn them both!"

Chapter Fourteen

“Why were you visiting the Lady Kiana today?”

Tressa’s grip on the bar in front of her tightened. *Lie, damn it, lie!* Even as she offered up the silent directive, she knew it would do no good. The witness had foolishly told her story once, and she would not go back on her word now even if she wanted to, for fear of facing her own punishment. Tressa desperately wanted to tune out the woman’s words, but she couldn’t. If Kiana was to die, then Tressa at least owed it to her, to Helsa, and to Arren to pay heed as to why. Of course, this wasn’t directly her fault. Kiana and Helsa had been careless, but perhaps if she had not interfered, then Kiana would have wed Jemes and been safe after all. If this had happened once married to Jemes, as the man of the house, he would have been able to silence a maid with a simple word. Tressa couldn’t help thinking that Kiana would not have been so relaxed, believing that she could have it all, if it were not for the events of the last few days. Surely, the knowledge that she could marry the man she desired without having to give up the woman she also loved was what had led Kiana and Helsa to relax their guard.

Tressa bit her lip until it hurt. Was it truly so easy to forget the bad things, the cautious way they lived, the moment something good occurred? Or were Azulite women just

preordained to live this meaningless existence, seldom knowing true love, not knowing how to recognise it or knowing what to do with it when it stared them in the face? Was there something in their blood that dictated they almost deserved their ill treatment for being so *stupid*! It took the tight grip on the wooden rail in front of her to keep Tressa from raising a hand to her face to tug on her hair. She could feel Meira's warm presence at her side and knew too well that the woman wanted to comfort her, but she doubted even Meira's heated touch could ease the chill inside her. They had also decided that, due to the nature of the charges against Kiana and Helsa, it would be prudent not to show any affection in court, not even a hand held or resting on a shoulder.

That she was here at all was largely down to her mother, although Tressa couldn't be certain if the woman had done her a loving favour or talked the king into allowing her attendance as punishment. Whatever her mother's motives, Tressa had no doubt of her father's. Lest it fester in her heart, Tressa tried to ignore the idea that her father would bestow the harshest sentence on her friend just to hurt his wilful daughter. Her being here could do Kiana more harm than good, but she had no choice. The king summoned, and she appeared. He had decreed that this involved dishonour to her brothers, and so Tressa was to pay witness to what happened to those who abused the royal line. That was a direct slur on her behaviour and no mistake. Although she'd been correct in her estimation that the threat of Markis, and therefore the wrath of the comet, would keep her safe, she now understood with blinding clarity that without Markis's association, she would be the one on trial. Would her father order her burned to death as penance for insulting the crown? She believed it quite possible.

As much as she couldn't run, Tressa wanted to leave here, but she simply couldn't. Physically the king would not allow it, and emotionally she could not turn her back on Kiana, even if that meant standing by and at least witnessing her death. She wanted to leave the lands she had always known as home and run to the freedom and safety that Markis

offered. Run? By the comet, she would fly if she could. These people sickened her, as the Kita sickened Meira. The woman was right; they shared much in common.

Fighting against nausea and dizziness, Tressa paid attention to the words of the witness. Although she hated hearing the story, she needed to concentrate on anything other than the roiling sickness that burned and soured her stomach.

"I am newly appointed," the young woman said, her voice tremulous. Tressa doubted anyone but those closest to her heard, and although there were not many present -- some twenty or so to pay witness to the woman's testimony -- they were enough to condemn any woman.

"Speak up!" This order came from the queen. Her own mother! Tressa clenched her jaw until her teeth started to ache.

"I am newly appointed," the young woman repeated, her voice louder, though hardly more confident. "I was changing the linen." She glanced around at the head of housekeeping for the Robeins household. The woman didn't so much as glance her way. The head housekeeper had already stated her part and explained who the young woman was and her role in the house before they had called her in for the interview. Now she stood to the back of the proceedings, ready to leave with Lord Robeins as soon as this judgement was over. Tressa looked to Kiana's father, but his gaze was all for the plain grey tiles of the floor. Either he seethed with rage, or the tight grip he had on his hat, which bent the brim, was out of despair for Kiana. Tressa could only hope the latter emotions made the man shake, be it ever so slightly.

"What did you see? Speak up! Tell us the events as they occurred, plainly and simply." This was the moderator in charge of the proceedings. He conducted the pattern of events, but only one person ultimately controlled the outcome and that was Tressa's father. She wanted to vomit at the thought.

"My lady was taking a bath, and I was about to call out before entering."

A veiled whisper ran around the room. Tressa closed her eyes for the briefest second. They were honestly applauding the maid's behaviour. A maid should always announce herself before entering a room, even if the occupant was female. Even in a male-dominated society, social standing subjugated.

"What stopped you?" the moderator prompted when it seemed the young woman's voice would dry up once more.

"I heard a woman laugh. More than one woman, that is." Her gaze wandered self-consciously around the room. "Was strange to be sure, but I hardly thought much of it. I was about to cry out even so, but then I heard one woman speak, and her words confused me. I knew not the voice or the meaning of what she said."

"You are newly appointed so there is no reason why you would recognise an unknown voice, but tell us, once you ascertained the owners of these voices, would you recognise them now, and are the two ladies that spoke in this room?"

The young maid nodded. Then her hand lifted. Tressa was only a little gratified to see that she trembled as she pointed towards the two women standing in the centre of the room. She identified Kiana and Helsa, and something inside Tressa's mind slammed shut as though she heard the clanging of a prison door.

"What was it the woman identified as Helsa said?"

If there was one thing Tressa wanted to do, it was physically to harm the man acting as moderator. His calm, complacent tone was getting to her. He sounded almost bored, and why shouldn't he? These proceedings were merely a preliminary to sentencing. They were a way to shame the two condemned women. The scribe wrote down the moderator's words. Later, a transcript would go out reporting the events and charges that led to sentencing. Expecting the worst, for Arren had already told them the king's thoughts, even now Tressa's heart beat erratically, irrationally hoping for a different, more merciful outcome.

"She spoke of teaching something, my lord."

“Teaching?” This was the king’s voice. He looked to the queen. “What would one woman teach another, my dear?”

“Little, Your Majesty. Chores perhaps,” the queen replied demurely.

“I see where household staff might do such a thing, but ladies?” He stressed the word and left little doubt in anyone’s mind that he no longer viewed these two women as *ladies*.

“I take your point, Your Majesty.” Lilanna’s tone implied that she was saying how silly of me. Her expression -- all an act, as Tressa well knew -- appeared contemplative. “Embroidery perhaps.”

The king turned his attention to the young maid, which brought a red flush to her face. She visibly trembled. “Was Helsa teaching Kiana embroidery?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

At a nod from the king, the moderator prompted her once again. “What exactly did you hear?”

“The voice I could not recognise --”

“Helsa,” the moderator said, as though he needed to make it quite clear to the room who they damned. The maid gave a slight nod.

“I heard her say that she would teach Ki...Kiana by illustration.”

“As women cannot draw well, I take it she meant some other form of illustration. So, confused, you entered the room without announcing yourself?”

The young woman’s blush could hardly turn a deeper shade of red. She also trembled, and Tressa believed the woman might faint. She almost hoped for the woman to keel over, although it would only delay the inevitable.

“I should have announced my presence, but I was so --”

“Confused, mystified, perplexed,” the moderator suggested. The wood under Tressa’s grip creaked, and Meira made the slightest movement, reminding her of her presence. Of course this court would ignore a mere slip by a maid when they had a greater charge against

these two women, one being of a good household, but for the moderator to speak as though on the maid's behalf was outrageous. Tressa was growing to know true hatred with every minute that passed.

"I was sorely puzzled and a-afraid." Many present nodded as though in understanding. "I walked forward, intending to announce myself, but then the more I heard, the more I couldn't bring myself to speak and then...then I saw something unspeakable." More nods accompanied her claim.

"We'll get to what you saw in a moment. First, what did you hear?" This was hardly the first time the moderator had asked, but he seemed prepared to repeat himself all night if it would drag the words from the maid's mouth.

"I heard a cry of a sort I have never heard a woman utter before."

At least what the girl said was true, even though Tressa dearly wanted her to lie. On this one truth, however, she could well believe her. The girl was young enough to be a virgin, and even when pleasuring a man, whether a woman cried out in ecstasy was hardly an Azulite man's concern.

"You are beautiful." The witness flinched upon speaking those words.

Tressa blinked. She'd missed something somewhere. To what was the woman replying? Thankfully, the moderator clarified.

"Are you certain that is what you heard Helsa say?"

"Yes," the maid answered.

The moderator gazed around the room. "A woman who claims not only to know beauty but calls another by that name." His statement hung in air even as he turned back to the maid. "Continue."

"She said...other things. She spoke of soft curves, ripe fl-flesh, creamy skin. I understood none of it."

“And by then you were at the door to the room and pushing it slightly, and so creating enough of a gap, you peered in.”

The maid nodded, her eyes filling with tears, perhaps from fear or perhaps from what she had seen. The men would take her tears to be what they wished.

“I almost gasped and gave myself away, but when I saw what they...did, I was afraid then to let them know I had seen. I wanted to run away from there, but I could not move. It was as though some unseen force held me in its grip.”

Once more, there were knowing nods about the room. Kiana’s father had closed his eyes, but still Tressa didn’t know what to make of that. No doubt, the woman had given her statement already, for the moderator indeed referred to a parchment in front of him, but Tressa was certain a man had guided some of her words. No doubt the young woman had been frozen in shock, but ‘held by some unseen force’? Only her father or a moderator would put those words in her mouth.

“Kiana lay back in the bath, but she was not alone. She sh-shared it with the other female, both quite na-naked.” As her description took on its own momentum, the maid’s stammering eased. Her words came more swiftly. She spoke as though she couldn’t wait for this ordeal to be over. “The two women stared at each other, and such a look in a woman’s eyes I have never seen. Such...hunger.”

Tressa wanted to scream out in anger. More words placed in the maid’s mouth, her statement reworded to suit the court! What did this young woman know of such hunger?

“Helsa licked and kissed Kiana, not just at her face or her mouth, nor her hands as a woman might kiss the back of the hand, but all...over. Then she...when she reached Kiana’s breast” -- here the maid did hesitate to speak such words, flushing and gazing at the floor -- “she licked her nipples, even sucking on them as a babe would.”

Tressa wanted to laugh. Of all the ill luck. Of all the maids who might have caught Kiana and Helsa together, they had to get this one who clearly knew nothing of sex. No

wonder she'd run to disclaim them. She had no idea that her breasts were for anything other than providing a newborn with nourishment.

"Is that when you ran to tell someone?"

The maid squirmed uneasily. "N-no. I still could not move. I stood in horror as Helsa's tongue worked on one nipple and then the other. I shuddered to hear Kiana moaning under the other woman, not knowing if she needed my help, was a victim or perpetrator."

The young woman had shuddered perhaps, but Tressa couldn't help wondering if some of those shudders hadn't been from the first awareness of desire.

"The way they moved, I could see all of Helsa's most private areas, trimmed in such a way as I never saw. As she rose up onto her knees I saw it displayed, an oval of very pink and swollen flesh surrounded by the whiteness of her buttocks and thighs."

Under other circumstances, Tressa could imagine Meira's amusement over such a description. She was mightily amused herself, but her fear overruled it. She would give anything for a happy outcome, to be able to return to Markis with this tale in a manner in which they could laugh over it.

"Then I saw that Kiana allowed Helsa to lift her from the water and, indeed, the bath was shallow. The water lapped over them with their movements even as..." Here the maid hesitated, pressing her hands to her face. "Even as Helsa lapped at the most intimate parts of Kiana's flesh."

Tressa fought off the memory of such pleasure even as the maid let out a sob. The moderator ordered someone to give the young woman a drink of water. Tressa might have laughed if it wouldn't have inflamed the situation, and if she didn't fear the sound would erupt from her throat sounding much like a sob itself.

"Then I felt as though I were drowning in their combined moans."

"Combined, you say? There is no doubt in your mind that both women uttered such cries and that Helsa was not holding Kiana in place against her will?"

“Yes. I am certain.” Despite her statement, the moderator watched the young woman until she spoke yet more words that Tressa was certain they’d rehearsed. “Their cries grew louder, became more intense. Then Kiana began begging. She...demanded that Helsa fuck her with her tongue and fingers.”

Well, that certainly sounded rehearsed, but no doubt the statement was true enough.

“I was so shocked that I suddenly came back to myself. It was as though I realised for the first time where I was and that I was witnessing something unseemly. Something...wrong.”

Wrong my arse. Tressa almost snarled.

“I grew afraid of what they would do to me if they discovered I had seen them do this thing. I grew afraid that they...would do such horrible things to me.”

You should be so lucky. Tressa gave in to a moment of despair and touched her fingers to her brow without thinking, but she quickly drew herself together. This was no time to fall apart. The maid stepped down, the king conversed with the moderator, and then the moderator addressed Kiana.

“What have you to say?”

Kiana lifted her head, staring first at the king, which took even Tressa by surprise, and then at the man who asked her the question.

“The maid was right to run in fear. I would have done the same things to her. I would have persuaded her into doing the same things to me that Helsa did. Helsa is innocent in all this. This was my doing, my desire, my offence.”

“No!” If he tried, then Arren failed to keep the anguish out of his voice. Although his cry emerged on a wail, other protesting murmurs stifled it. Still he might have rushed forward if Tressa had not taken hold of his wrist and Kiana had not turned her head to look at him. She gave him the slightest shake of her head, and for one brief moment, they stared at one another before Kiana turned once more to face the king. Helsa was staring at her as

though she didn't know her, and the sacrifice proved too much. Helsa stumbled and ended up on her knees on the floor. No one moved to help her rise.

"You do not deny your crime?"

"Only that it was a crime," Kiana said, nailing her own coffin shut.

* * * * *

No matter how long she lived, Meira vowed she would never forget the day that she caught Tressa's small form in her hands and held her tight to her body and heart under the guise of aid. She would never forget the day she heard a man condemn one woman to something he referred to as servitude, and another to burn because they loved each other. Not until then had she realised what she had risked by making love to Tressa on Azulite soil. Not until then had she ever witnessed one person hand over his or her life so easily in order to save someone he or she loved. Not until then did she realise all the things Tressa had achieved in being independent of thought, as well as self-taught, even managing to claim some males of her race as friends be they covert in their attachment to her. Even those men she had bribed were an achievement of sorts for still such relationships risked much. Never before had she appreciated men such as Markis so much.

"I asked him for lenience," Arren said. "I *begged* him." He turned to Tressa and Meira both, his eyes wide. "I am his son," he said, as though that should have made all the difference in the world. "I told him I loved this woman."

"Oh, Arren," Tressa said, her small hands holding Meira at bay even though she clearly wanted to hide in her arms. "To speak of such love condemned her as surely as her own words."

Arren's answering sobs were at least a fitting epitaph.

Chapter Fifteen

The first words out of Kiana's mouth were, "Tell me how Helsa fares?"

"I..." Tressa almost closed her eyes in despair. "I do not know." In truth, she'd hardly considered the other woman's fate. After all, Kiana's love and bravery spared Helsa from the flames. "They are allowing no one to see her, other than a minister." That much was true, though once again the situation seemed ludicrous. Tressa had not thought of their judicial system since a celebrant had married her and Markis. She'd had to take the man with them, of course, for his own safety, but a celebrant was not quite the same thing as a minister. The minister was the man you pleaded with for forgiveness until your voice and spirit grew raw, and then he might deign to speak to the king on your behalf. Helsa would spend the rest of her life in servitude, doing the comet only knew what to please the minister in charge of her care. Until such time as she had shown him enough *proof* that she understood her place among men, she would have to kneel and entreat him every day, recounting her sins, denying she had known love, denying that she had ever felt anything for Kiana, and saying that the other woman had led her astray. As though they shared the same thoughts, Kiana spoke up.

"Tell Helsa, if you get the chance, that I forgive her anything she has to do, or say, in order to survive."

Kiana's steady voice and compassion made a choking sound bark out from Tressa's throat. For a moment, she couldn't even see as tears flooded her eyes. She felt Kiana's gentle touch, but then Kiana quickly withdrew her hand. When Tressa looked up, it was to see Kiana smile.

"Perhaps I should be miserly with my touch. You never know how someone might misinterpret it."

If Kiana thought that would make Tressa laugh, she was mistaken. Tressa couldn't breathe past her misery and fear. She shuddered, and Kiana merely sat quietly while Tressa regained her composure enough to speak. "This is all my fault."

"Hush. Do not say such things." A hint of warning hardened Kiana's voice. Although it was unlikely anyone listened to the condemned, still her friend thought of others first. "I was the foolish one."

"If you mean careless, I cannot disagree." Tressa almost hesitated upon seeing the slight wince that tightened her friend's face. "But I led you to such feelings of confidence."

"No. Helsa did."

Tressa frowned, failing to understand.

"Helsa was the one who was careless, not I. In her haste, she forgot to lock the door. This was not the first time she has shared my bath."

Tressa blinked in surprise. "Yet you..."

Kiana looked at her, her expression one that spoke too eloquently. Did Tressa really have to ask why Kiana had handed herself over for chastisement in order to save the woman she loved? No, of course she didn't. Even so...

"It's all such a mess," Tressa said. "Despite what you say, I should have left well enough alone."

“No. You should do what you have always done and been true to your heart. As for what is to come, I am sorry the king wishes you to be there.”

“As am I, but I would have asked to be there in any case.” Tressa sat upright, straightening her shoulders. Despite the tears she could not hide, she stared at her friend. “I shall not turn my back on you.”

“Even though part of you will wither?” Kiana smiled once more at Tressa’s frown, and the small woman couldn’t help wondering over her friend’s strength to smile at such a time even knowing what she faced. “I know you, Tressa. I know you too well. Part of you will wither and die when you see me burn, as will Helsa’s loving spirit.” Even now, she sounded more upset for the thought of her loved one’s breaking heart than the idea that she was to die in the most horrendous way. Kiana wasn’t finished yet.

“Tell Arren I am sorry. Tell him that I should have trusted him more and sooner, but Azulite women learn to think of men as the enemy. Tell him these are my words, not yours, and that I wish the king had allowed him to see me so that I could have spoken honestly to his face one last time.”

“How do you know --”

“That Arren also asked to see me but was refused?” Kiana sat waiting, her eyes bright, until Tressa nodded. “I asked the guard. They seem quite open to answering my questions. Indeed, I sense many are uncomfortable with this decision.”

“Not that they would say so openly, of course.” Tressa couldn’t keep the bitterness from her voice.

“Of course.” Kiana said it with a completely different and understanding tone. “Tell Arren the same thing I am going to tell you, that the flames will...free me.” Despite the certainty of her words, that slight hesitation gave the woman’s inner turmoil away. Tressa doubted she could have been so brave. “Tell him that I want you both to live and live with as

free a heart as the heart that dies, one full of love and love of life. Tell Helsa, if you get the chance, to forgive herself.”

“I will go to the king. I will tell him if he does this thing, then the comet will fall on him.” She meant her husband and the power he wielded, and Kiana clearly understood. She took hold of Tressa’s hand, despite her claim that it was better they not touch.

“You will do no such thing.” She made a gesture with her head, emphasising her words as Tressa opened her mouth to argue. “You cannot make such claims for another. You do not speak for Markis no matter if he would do as you asked. You would plunge our nations into war, and then it will not be the king who suffers, but people in the streets. You will force Markis to use his power in the very way you know he would hate, and yes, he will do it if he has to, but do not force his hand over one life.” Her grip tightened. “Use my death, Tressa. Take my tale with you and use it well. Change takes time. Markis is wise. Listen to him.”

“You mean to martyr yourself.” The words whispered out of her mouth with all the force of her disbelief behind them, but even before she was through speaking, Kiana was shaking her head.

“If I could escape this fate without one other person suffering I would, but there’s no way to do that, so I will settle for the next best thing.”

Chapter Sixteen

The next best thing. Since when was burning to death the next best thing? Tressa stared out of the window into the main courtyard of the palace where men were erecting the platform upon which Kiana would burn. “Well, I wanted to change a nation and perhaps Kiana’s death will do that, even if it does take another hundred years.”

“If you’re trying to share her place as martyr, you’re doing a poor job of it.”

Tressa turned her head to stare at Meira in disbelief. “If I believed you were serious for one moment I would slap your face...even if I had to stand on a chair to do it.” Despite the hilarity they shared over the remark, clearly neither of them had the energy to raise a smile. “Do you really think I am blaming myself in order to play the victim?”

“No. Then again, I don’t have much in the way of understanding when someone willingly suffers for a cause.”

Tressa raised an eyebrow in question.

“Oh, I understand the concept and even admire the courage required. I would do much for something worthwhile, but I would not die for it.”

“Would you not?” Tressa couldn’t help asking. “If by dying you could change things for other women, would you refuse?”

Meira pursed her lips. "You mistake me. I understand dying for someone you love, even for something you believe in, but I do not hold with dying needlessly. Kiana does not do this willingly. She only pretends to, for she knows that if it makes a difference at all, it will not be during our lifetime. Kiana dies out of love because she would die anyway."

"If she had not confessed her guilt in such a way, the manner would have been more merciful."

"I've no doubt, but then Helsa would have shared her fate."

There was the truth of it. Tressa nodded, unable to speak.

"Come. You need rest."

"Rest?" Meira was only trying to be kind, and the idea of the woman holding her, soothing her brow with those slim fingers, was temptation itself. Tressa almost gave in. She shook off the thought as well as Meira's hand on her shoulder, and Meira let her without protest. "I feel as if I were to rest for an instant I would be sick. If I were to sit, I would vomit." She had paced until her ankles ached, and then, when she could pace no more, the window drew her to the view of men hammering boards into a platform that fire would shortly consume along with tender flesh. "I am a queen without power in my own lands." She didn't know if she had intended to say that aloud, but Meira's reply surprised her.

"These are not your lands."

Tressa laughed. "You are right, of course. I know it. Yet I am a queen and powerless to make changes in the land where I was born, or by my wit or word. Markis will be outraged, but you are right, and he will not go to war for this, not directly, not immediately. He might to save Kiana from such a fate, but I cannot get word to him in time to stop this. Afterwards it will be too late. If anything comes from Kiana's death, it will take decades, and how many would -- *will* -- suffer in the meantime? What I would not give to have Markis's power at my fingertips. What I would not give to take the choice from his hands and place it into mine."

"Just as well you don't have it then."

For all that her heart beat wildly, Tressa understood what Meira meant. There was a reason that people thanked the comet that a man such as Markis wielded its full power, because if she could tap into it, right now she would let anger and fear rule her actions, and she wouldn't hold herself responsible for anything she might do.

* * * * *

Arren looked surprised to see her, as much as Tressa could read surprise in his already-stricken face.

"What are you doing here?" His words confirmed her suspicion.

"I am here by the king's order, but I love Kiana. If I cannot save her, the least I can do is pay witness to her...murder." She struggled to get that last word out, not because she felt she was wrong to call this execution such a thing as murder. There was no justice in this woman's death. They protected the people from no risk save that of freethinking and freedom to love as the heart willed. She hesitated because it would not be wise to speak too readily considering the mood of the day.

Everyone, even the guards, proved restless. Unease permeated the very breath she took. Even those who agreed that Kiana was guilty felt uneasy with the sentence of death by burning. Many looked away furtively if they caught the gaze of another person. Many jumped when addressed. The mood was one of disgust, guilt, and despair by various degrees. More arguments than usual broke out. In this atmosphere, such arguments might well grow out of hand. If Tressa spoke out, someone might try to silence her out of panic and then regret his or her actions later, but by then it would be too late.

On top of that, her stomach roiled. Meira had sought out the kitchens and boiled down the root of some plant, making a milky white drink. The taste was bitter, but Meira had said it eased the risk of an ulcer, and the way she felt right now, Tressa could all too well imagine acid eating away at her stomach. It rose up in her throat even now, although she had to admit that the terrible drink had eased the sting. She wasn't entirely sure the brew could

stop her from throwing up though. How was she to bear witness? How could she stand there while Kiana went to the fire? How could Arren?

She stared at him now, his face ashen, the lace cuffs of his sleeve grubby and torn where he constantly gripped and pulled on them. She had thought Arren the fop when first she arrived here, but now she tried to imagine him in Swithin garb, and she could envision it well. Across the way, Jemes stood with the king and queen, overseeing the execution. She couldn't tell if he was truly relaxed or just maintaining a mask for the world to see. He had already chosen the next woman in line to wed from the Robeins women, and whatever Kiana's sisters thought of her execution, it made little difference to their marriage. Jemes, as the king's son, would get the woman he wanted. By right, Arren could have stood with them, but he had elected to stand next to Tressa, down below in the square. No one would comment on the fact, but it was as close to an objection as Arren dared raise. The royal family would explain away such protestations as grief, of course. They would bestow the royal son with compassion.

Tressa gritted her teeth in disgust, glaring at her parents and Jemes. Were that Arren was next in line for the throne and maybe her people would have a chance at a new way of thinking.

"The prisoner doth appear."

The cry rang out across the small square, and Tressa jolted in shock and horror. She had lost time somewhere, lost in her thoughts. She could hardly credit that the time had arrived for Kiana to die. At her side, Arren swayed on his feet, and she understood how he felt. Blood pounded in her head although she felt oddly faint. She was grateful when Meira offered them her calming presence, one hand unobtrusively taking an elbow of both Tressa and her brother, steadying them.

The cry had not been one of announcement, but an order to bring out the condemned. Kiana appeared, her head held high, only the press of her lips betraying her. Huge men flanked her on all sides, as though she could break free and attack them all without even a

weapon in her hand. As the group neared the dais, another man stepped forward to grasp her arm. Evidently, he held on a little too tight as, even from where she stood, Tressa could see those thick fingers press into her friend's flesh. Upon reaching the foot of the platform's crudely constructed steps, Kiana shook off the guard's hand. White marks where he had held her flared against her flesh and then drew colour even as Kiana's complexion paled. Still, she gathered her skirts and stepped almost brusquely up those stairs.

And I call myself a queen. Never before had Tressa felt so demeaned, so small, so insignificant. Could she go to her death for the right reason? Yes, she believed she could. Could she face such a death as fire? That she doubted. Tressa knew what she would have done. She would have done *anything* to force their hand, to make them kill her by hand or sword rather than burn, but Kiana refused to fight their wish because of her convictions and to guarantee inasmuch as she could that Helsa would not suffer the same fate. Tressa shivered, and Meira and Arren standing so close to her clearly felt it. Arren let out a soft moan as they began to read out the proclamation describing the crimes and reasons for Kiana's demise.

"Does the damned have anything to say?"

Damned as in condemned, and damned as in having sinned; Tressa knew the scripture by heart. Even from across the square, Tressa saw Kiana's eyes flash as she jerked her head toward the celebrant overseeing her execution. How different this gathering was from when Tressa last stood before such a man. Her heart then had been a little afraid but filled with hope. She could see no hope for a happy end here.

"The condemned has one thing to say." Kiana clearly refused to refer to herself as damned, and she might have read Tressa's thoughts when next she spoke. "I die today in the hope of a brighter future where those that have the courage to love as their hearts demand are not punished for such bravery but applauded." Her gaze scanned the royal box and then the crowd, not resting on anyone but taking those assembled in as a whole. "Love is love," Kiana said, then closed her mouth.

Love is love.

Having shared the same thought, Tressa's heart breaking was a physical thing in that instant. This woman died not because she had hurt anyone but because she dared to love. Tressa couldn't be certain if it were because Kiana didn't trust herself to speak again or if she was determined to go to her death with those last words. *Love is love.*

Tressa closed her eyes, tears welling to sting her eyes and prickle her nose. The prickling sensation quickly grew to pain. She couldn't breathe.

"I cannot let this happen. I cannot."

Even as she heard Arren's quiet claim, Tressa reached out to take his hand. Either he moved from the reach of her grasp or she flailed blindly, for she couldn't see through her tears. She looked around, searching, focused on him then as he turned to her, and then Arren took her hand, lifted it to his lips, and kissed it.

"Forgive me," he said; then he was gone, running forward. Tressa took a step to go after him. A vicious grip on her shoulder pulled her back. She blinked to clear her eyes of tears and saw Meira's face. The woman's eyes were wide, her expression grief-stricken and full of something that Tressa couldn't place. Then she realised that Meira was afraid.

"You can't help him. There's nothing you can do."

Wasn't there? Already Arren had slipped by the guards -- for who would expect a son of the king to do such a thing? -- and gained the stairs. Even now, he ran up them to Kiana's side where they had fastened her in chains about a metal spike driven down through the platform and into the ground beneath. The fire bearers hesitated. They stepped back, looking around with uncertainty, hesitating to light the kindling arranged beneath.

Arren paused in front of Kiana, who shook her head, at last giving in to grief. Whatever Arren said to her was for her ears alone. Spectators only saw her bow her head. Arren stood in front of her, wrapping his arms around the woman he loved. Tressa held her breath. His meaning was clear. Arren was willing to sacrifice himself. If Kiana died, he meant

to die with her. If he was willing to do such a thing... Tressa took another step, and Meira dragged her back yet again. Those green eyes glittered, her expression one that Tressa had hoped never to see on another human being's face again. She'd seen it once before, on Markis's face when he thought he would lose those that mattered most to him.

Meira loves me. Even as she came to know the truth of it, still Tressa felt torn between duty and what her heart wanted.

"I can't lose you," Meira hissed. "Don't ask me to, not now that I've found you when I thought I would never find love."

Tressa didn't, *couldn't* do that to Meira. Her own life she could give up, but she didn't want to hurt the woman she loved. Still, she'd already taken that step and to back down now because of personal choice felt like a betrayal of her brother, of Kiana, of women everywhere, of Markis, and of all that his people held dear. Their way, the Swithin way, wasn't for everyone, but they didn't ask it to be. They simply wanted people to be free to choose, free to love. That was a cause she couldn't betray.

She was about to tell Meira she was sorry, although the expression in the other woman's eyes told her that Meira already knew, but then her beloved's gaze flicked over her shoulder. Meira frowned slightly, her grip tightened, and she told Tressa simply to wait.

Wait? Confused, Tressa turned her head and gazed toward Arren, allowing Meira to draw her close.

"You can't help him in this."

Once more, Tressa was about to protest, but something in Meira's voice had changed. The woman no longer tried to talk her out of doing this thing but was advising against it. What was it that Meira could see that she couldn't? As if sensing her confusion, Meira spoke in her ear.

"The way the king just looked at you, I judge that if you take the same stand, it will condemn you all. Wait to see how this pans out."

She hated doing so, but the comet help her, she had no wish to burn, and she trusted Meira. On the royal balcony, the king stood. His voice bellowed out. "What is the meaning of this?"

Arren turned his head. "If my love dies, then my heart dies, and so my flesh may as well die with her."

If rage could be the glare of an eye or the set of a jaw, then Tressa was seeing her father enraged as never before. Lilanna paled even as she watched. The queen gasped, and it brought on a fit of coughing. The coughing led to the queen struggling for breath. A breath led to a wail. Tressa would have liked to say the woman was acting, but she couldn't be sure. Her performance, real or feigned, was having an effect on the king, although Tressa couldn't tell if that was a good thing. He gazed around at the audience, and right now, Tressa was betting he wished he'd not made this such a public display. What would the people think of a king who backed down because his son was involved? Yet what would they think of a man who killed his own son? Tressa watched the calculation shifting through his eyes. If he ordered the fire lit and condemned his son, then he would be a king that many would fear. She couldn't help thinking that Arren had underestimated their father, and the man would indeed give his consent. There would be those that would tremble in fear, yes, but they would also shiver in disgust to think such a man ruled them.

Tressa watched her father watching the crowd, and she saw the moment he decided he could live with one less child. She opened her mouth to cry out, she knew not what. Then she suddenly noticed James. He stood gripping the balcony, his teeth gritted, staring down at their brother, and then he turned his head and said something to the king. The king replied and nodded to the torchbearers to light the kindle. They did without hesitation, fearing their king's wrath no doubt, but James was already moving. It amazed Tressa that James could move so well for a man of his size. He was gone from the balcony even as the men bearing burning torches stepped forward. He appeared at ground level through a doorway beneath

the balcony just as the flames took hold. So he did have a soft spot, even if it was only for his brother.

The fire leapt and so did Jemes, the fire licking at his heels even as Meira released her grip on Tressa's shoulder, and then both women were running towards the platform. A scream sounded from the left, and Tressa just had time to turn her head to see Helsa struggling in the arms of a guard, trying to break free. Tressa had forgotten that the order stood that Helsa was to witness Kiana's death. Helsa broke free and ran, gaining the foot of the dais even as Tressa and Meira made it to the top, but the flames had caught and drove her back. Jemes had his sword in his hand and hacked at the chains holding Kiana. He'd broken one chain; the others held fast.

Tressa could make little sense of the shouting except that she could hear the king's voice shouting for Jemes, and Lilanna screaming for both her sons -- was it possible she heard her mother scream her name as well? -- and Kiana sobbing as she pleaded for them all to save themselves.

The next few moments blurred in Tressa's mind. All she was aware of was more shouting, a commotion going on around them, and then smoke searing her lungs. She bent over, coughing from the smoke caused by someone dousing the flames, and the next thing she knew was that Jemes had turned, sword in hand, to greet someone else who had arrived on the platform. The guard raised his hands to show he carried no weapon and then held out a key, which could only be for Kiana's chains. Jemes took it and passed it to Arren. The guard backed down the steps, and while Jemes watched those around them, they quickly helped Kiana free. Even as the chains fell from her, the dais creaked. Someone had put out the flames, but the fire had compromised the structure. Built to collapse and to take Kiana down into the fire, now the platform threatened to break and pitch them into a pile of smouldering, jagged pieces of wood.

"We had best move from here."

They hardly needed to hear Jemes's advice, but move they did, Meira on one side of Kiana, Arren on the other, and Tressa finding her hand in Jemes's grip as they all ran and jumped from the platform to the ground. The drop was minimal, but they landed awkwardly, only Jemes rolling to his feet as though he'd not had the breath stolen from him. Tressa struggled to her feet, not caring how she looked. Arren looked into Kiana's face as Helsa fell with her arms about her neck, sobbing into Kiana's shoulder. Kiana hesitated, but then put an arm around the woman she loved even as she took the hand of the man who had risked his life for her. As one body of movement, they all turned and glared at the crowd, at the guards, and then at the royal couple on the balcony overhead.

Chapter Seventeen

“I am glad you got to stay for the wedding,” Arren said, smiling.

The comment wasn’t for Meira, but she only just managed to bite her tongue. If the Azulites called that a wedding, they should see how the Swithin celebrated such things. Not that it wasn’t nonsense, of course. Meira needed no one to speak vows. Her heart knew what it knew, and it knew that Tressa was the woman for her.

They had just said their good-byes to Jemes, Kiana, and Helsa, although Jemes said good-bye by way of a grunt rather than words. Kiana and Helsa still looked drawn, but time and rest would see their health return. They had both survived an ordeal. Arren had wed Kiana as soon as the king had given permission. It provided the woman and her companion with some protection, although the king now wanted her to stand at his son’s side in silence. Meira had heard him tell Kiana that the only time he wanted to hear her voice was as she screamed giving birth to his grandsons. Meira almost smirked at the memory of Kiana’s modest curtsy. After the failed execution, the royal family and counsellors had reconvened later to discuss the matter. Arren and Jemes had stared their father down until he’d looked from one to the other and then about the throne room, as though he only just realised how many women stood present, how many men at their sides. He had opted for leniency,

blaming administrative errors and implying that other indecorous influences in the world had disrupted Azulite harmony. At least Tressa had sense enough to remain silent. They both knew Markis would be happy indirectly to take the blame if it saved lives.

"I wish you were coming with us." Tressa turned, pausing at the door of the carriage. Meira prudently nodded to Arren and climbed inside. From here, she could still see and hear them, but it gave them some semblance of privacy.

"So do I, but I think there is much for me to do here, do you not?" Arren's voice sounded light with relief, but he looked aged in only the way heartache and conflict could age a person. That made him no less attractive; it even lent him a certain air of confidence and authority, but no doubt, Tressa would have spared him that if she could have. Meira didn't think she would be so generous. Better to look at the world with one's eyes open to the light of day than live blind in the shade.

"I know, but all the same."

"I will visit you," Arren replied. "I definitely will. I intend that many of our people should visit Swithin land, and I want you to send messages. We should set up some kind of service, I think, a way to send messages more swiftly so that we can remain in touch. I want to bring friends with me when we visit. I want them to learn what it is to live the Swithin way."

"Our father will not like it."

"The king can tell Kiana what she should do, but he cannot tell me, not now, not without imposing the same restrictions on Jemes, and Jemes..."

"Is Jemes," Tressa finished for him, laughing.

Meira sat back and closed her eyes, suppressing a shiver. They were lucky. It could all have gone another way, and she couldn't abide the thought that the last thing she might have heard from Tressa's lovely mouth would not have been a laugh but a scream of pain.

* * * * *

The carriage went over a particularly high bump, and briefly Tressa left her seat. She came back down with a jolt. "I think Arren should see about having these roads levelled."

"I think he will have his hands full of other things, but it's a good idea." Meira lay back, legs crossed at the ankles, her appearance one of total relaxation. Despite having her eyes closed, she said, "Stop smiling and looking so pleased with yourself."

"How do you know I am smiling?"

"I can hear it in your voice." Meira opened an eye to look at her. "I could have lost you back there. Don't diminish the danger, and don't try to deny that you almost made me choke by placing my heart in my throat."

Tressa couldn't help it; she grinned. She was aware part of what she was feeling was the natural euphoria of having escaped danger, but she was also bubbling over with hope for a new and bright future. Meira was shaking her head.

"Promise not to put yourself in danger again."

"That I cannot do."

"I know." Meira sighed, and Tressa blinked in surprise, never expecting to hear the other woman sigh in quite that manner. "You can no more promise to stay out of harm's way than you can promise not to die. That is something one has to learn to live with when one cares for another."

"Loves another, you mean," Tressa said and laughed when Meira tutted at her. "I *can* promise to love you."

"Good. It's time you promised me something."

Tressa gaped and then snapped her mouth shut when she recognised the amusement tugging at the other woman's lips. "Very well. If you promise to love me, then I promise to love you in return. You have to provide me with proof, though. Not mere words."

"You sure take some convincing."

Tressa grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. "So, convince me." She issued the challenge, then squealed as another bump jolted her right out of the seat and flung her forward on top of Meira.

"Hmm. Maybe we shouldn't mention repairing the roads to Arren after all," Meira mused.

Tressa's gasp was short-lived as Meira's lips first found hers, and then her tongue slipped inside, coaxing Tressa to wanton behaviour. Tressa begged, guided Meira's fingers to bare flesh, exposing more in haste. She forced Meira's fingers inside her. Touching, kissing, sucking, grasping, biting...it was all and not enough. Meira told Tressa she loved her, and Tressa's gasps of "Yes, oh yes," drove Meira crazy. Tressa's tongue probed deeper as though she needed to devour or be devoured. All Meira wanted to do was to please her. The past fell away, and she saw the same thing reflected in Tressa's expression. All Meira could think of was Tressa. The small woman's presence filled Meira's heart, mind, and spirit.

Meira's mouth and hands said things they'd only referred to lightly in speech; her limbs spoke of things for which they couldn't find words. Tressa and Meira had found each other in the very land that might have taken their lives. They left the city of Orland behind, a city that would have condemned them for the feelings, emotions, and desires that bubbled out of Tressa's mouth right now on a cry. The carriage bounced and brought them together as fingers sought to loosen ridiculous and restricting Azulite dresses. Flesh quivered from need; hands gripped in greed, and if the carriage swayed a little more than it had on the way here, mayhap no one would notice.

At the heart of all this, Tressa was aware that they danced the dance of a near miss. They celebrated love and life. Perhaps she'd been naive, and no one person could change a nation's views overnight, or even in a short time, but just maybe a handful of people standing side by side could. Perhaps Arren and Kiana could be the start of something good for all the Azulite people. Her heart was here in the carriage with Meira, but her spirit soared out through the roof, up into the sky. It soared like the eagle, the world spread out below its

predatory eye, from the tips of the Azulite Mountains, across the plains all the way to the Swithin Sea.

 THE END 

Sharon Maria Bidwell

A writer from the UK, Sharon simply refers to her work as diverse. She's written both fact and fiction; however, she prefers to call herself simply a storyteller. Her articles, poetry, short stories, and longer works have appeared in a variety of print and online publications, both in the UK and in the USA. She's received fan mail all the way from South Africa. Her work often crosses genres; thus, crime, horror, fantasy, action, adventure, fairy tales, gothic, erotica, romance, and slipstream, are themes she uses in any combination. She gave her website the title of "Aonia," for in Greek myth that is where the muses lived and with numerous small publishing credits, praise for her novels, and several books now available, the muses have definitely found a home at Aonia.

Find Sharon at any of the following:

Email: theviewoveraonia@yahoo.co.uk

Web site: <http://www.sharonbidwell.co.uk>

MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/aonia>