

“Anderank, I’ll speak plainly. I care for him, but he’s like no man I’ve ever met. He argues with me, he doesn’t listen to me. He’s far too blunt and direct. Sometimes he almost intimidates me, and then in the next second he seems like a shy little boy. He’s more intelligent than any man or woman I know, but he has no sophistication. Some nights he’s like the most seasoned pleasurer in all the land, and the next day he’s an innocent.”

Anderank laughed and withdrew his hand to take a sip of tea. “I can see why you’re smitten. You’re no ordinary woman, Minn, you would never be happy with an ordinary man.”

“Then what in the goddess’ name am I doing wrong!?!”

“Well for starters you’re judging his actions by the standards society has set. He’s a sorcerer, something outside, and even were he not our Tomass is no ordinary young man. You need to recognize that.”

I cradled my head and sighed. “I feel as if I am losing my mind.”

Anderank snickered. “Oh yeah, that’s love.”

I jerked my gaze up and saw his face was half hidden by his oversized mug. “Love is something only men feel.”

Anderank sighed. “My wife loved me as much as I loved her. I paint wedding portraits of the rich and titled. Most are matches made in ledgers, but every now and again a love match comes through. It is not something only men feel.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re a man.”

He snickered again. “She who protests overmuch reveals the opposite.”

“Are you laughing at me?”

“You’ve broken countless hearts in your life. It is a little nice to see you holding the short end of the stick.”

“I would insult you but I fear what would happen if you turned us out.”

“Minn, do you want my help or not?”

“Yes!”

“For this moment in time you need to start learning to adjust. We’re working hard to avert total disaster, so there’s not much time. Tell me, at what moment did you feel you and Tomass were most happy together?”

I thought hard for a long moment. “At my country estate. There’s a...private place I go to, alone, a special place. I’d never taken anyone there before, and then I brought him. We, ah-”

He waved his hand indicating he didn’t want details, to my relief. “I get the picture. There you go. You gave him something of yourself. You let him see inside you.”

“Huh?”

“That is what he wants. His mentors have been killed. He’s had to leave the safety of his home. He’s had to leave his native land and come to the city. He’s had to abandon a dream of a solitary life for marriage. He is a man in chaos, and you are his only anchor. And while you’re floundering around, you are making the only stable earth he has to stand on shake.”

“Huh?”

He gave me a quelling look. “You have to be serious. What he wants is intimacy. You may have bedded other men, and bedded them well, but there was never any intimacy. You shared nothing of yourself with me, and never did you ask for a glimpse inside me.” He held his hand up when I started to protest, cutting me off. “You can treat a pleasurer like that and earn friendship. You were always kind to me, honorable, and in time I could see you’re a good person.

“You don’t have that luxury of time with Tomass. Show him who you are. Discover who

he is. Talk to him about his feelings, his worries, and listen to them. Ask about magic, don't treat it like a tool. It's not like your sword, it's who he is. Find out exactly who he is and let him see who you are."

I nodded. "I think I understand. Anderank, did I ever...make you...feel used?"

His hand covered mine once more. "In the beginning, yes. That's how I always felt when I did that work, and that's why I choose to be a painter now."

"I'm sorry for that."

He gave me that strong smile again. "You are my friend, and I'll always treasure that. We simply weren't meant for more."

I smiled back and that's when the back door opened. Tomass stood there, black hair blowing in the wind. His eyes trailed from our faces down to our joined hands and Tomass' look turned thunderous.

"Tomass," I said, jerking my hand free and standing. "Would you care for some tea? After a cup I would like very much to visit the plant house with you."

He gave me a look as if I had just proposed we sprouted wings to fly, though goddess only knew how. Perhaps a sorcerer could. I knew so little about them, truly. Closing the door he stepped in. "I've come to use the garderobe. Do not touch my wife again."

Anderank grinned at his retreating back. "He's not indifferent, that's encouraging."

I threw a cake at his head but he just caught it and swallowed it in one go before rising to return to the bubbling pot. Perhaps he was right. The focus of my time with Tomass had been sex. Never had I desired a man the way I wanted him, and he was new to it, lost to discovery. Adding to that the need for his magic and the speed with which sex raised it...all we had truly built was passion, which ran easily from lust to anger. We needed more.

I went back to the plant house hoping he would join me. The back garden had high walls for privacy, shading the windows for when young pleasers came to sit naked for their patron's desire to have their erotic image captured in oils forever. The house of glass had mirrors at the top, an ingenious invention to bring full light in. A brazier glowed at one end with a large pan of water on top of it, making the air as humid as my homelands.

Most of the plants were native to my lands, thick decorative fronds and large flowers in violent colors. The northern peninsula had become fashionable among nobility, but seeing it now made me homesick. I soon forgot why I had come as I smelled the flowers, lost to the beauty.

"It's quite an accomplishment." The door shut firmly behind Tomass.

I turned to face him, clothed all in black, looking like one of the vengeful pagan gods of ancient tales in this little garden of pots. "It reminds me of home." I stepped to one long red flower, a narrow tube that fanned out in a violent explosion of fretted petals at the edge, the pistols solid yellow and bright inside. It smelled of spice. "This is *chrysalium pollinaus*, commonly known as cinnamon flower. It's always been my favorite. In the spring they will bloom everywhere in our lands."

He stayed by the door, crossing his powerful arms. "Really."

Inhaling the scent deeply I closed my eyes. "Particularly in the ruins. It's so beautiful. It makes me think of my father."

"Oh?"

I didn't open my eyes, enjoying the soft petals on my face, tickling slightly. "He died before I was born. My mother didn't speak much on him. There was a chest of his things in the attic, Delice said the scent on them of this flower was his favorite. He stored his things with the dried petals. I use to pour over the contents of his trunk for hours, wondering what he was like.

“There were a few paintings of him. They say I have his smile, but I know so little about him. Yet when I smell this flower it’s like he’s with me.”

I turned away from him to face the back. I hadn’t meant to say that about my father, I merely wanted to tell him the flower reminded me of home. I had no idea what I was doing. “Tomass,” I said before I lost my nerve, turning. His arms were uncrossed but otherwise he had not moved. “I want to laugh with you.”

That made his eyebrows shoot towards his hairline. I stood there, facing him, steadying myself, and at last he laughed slightly. “You what?”

“I’ve had lovers before. You know what I never have done with them, what I see between happy couples I know? They laugh together. I want that with you. I want things to not be so intense. They have to be, given what we’re facing-oh, hell.” I turned and smoothed my hair, feeling an utter fool. “Patience. Give me patience and time and in return I will do what I can to understand you. I want to understand you.”

“You make me sound like one of your enemies in battle.”

“No. No, I mean...I’ve never met anyone like you, sorcerer or no. I want to know everything about you. I want to know what makes you cry, what makes you laugh, what makes you happy.”

“I don’t know.” At last he stepped in to be framed by the large plants. His hand trailed up to stroke a frond between his thumb and fingers reverently. “Men in this world do not have lives like women do. Most grow up, dreaming of finding a good wife, fathering children, and raising them, building a happy family. Sorcerers dream only of growing in power, of leaving their mentor and taking on an apprentice. Of becoming one with nature.

“If you asked me what made me cry two months ago, I would have said evil. M’Graough,

and people like him. Cruelty, war, famine. These things still can make me cry, but now...now it's feeling like though we're in the same room we are not together. Two months ago what made me laugh were silly tricks, the antics of animals. They still do, but now it is those moments when we both falter and take it in good heart. What makes me happy? A million and one things, and you can be that last one."

We stared at each other. That was what Anderank had meant, I understood. Tomass so easily gave so much of himself, and I had been miserly.

"Tomass, I've been at war for seven years. I've known only death, and violence. I've lived in hell. I went to war an idiotic young woman, a girl trapped in a woman's body, and I've come out of it a hardened shell. I wanted nothing more than to see to my estates, find a husband, and settle down. Instead I found myself in the middle of this intrigue.

"I would not take it back, not if it meant never meeting you. I promise you, nothing in my life has more value than you."

His gaze snapped to mine, narrowing. "Oh, really?"

What had I done wrong? Why did I sense an argument brewing? "Yes."

Tomass stepped closer and closer until I was forced to bend my neck to meet his eyes. "Really? Your pride...where do I stand in comparison?"

"My pride?" I was taken quite aback.

He nodded, slowly. "You are a very arrogant woman. You have that right. In your young life you have accomplished many things, things most women could only dream of. But with me...with me I am not one of your soldiers. I am not a servant, I am not a voter. I am your husband, and I demand to be treated as an equal."

He didn't ask for much, did he? I had to show something of myself. What I had, I knew,

in spades, was my determination. I could move mountains if I had to. I could buck every convention of society if I had to. “Yes.”

He blinked. “What?”

I couldn’t help but smile at his surprise. It seemed he’d expected me to argue. “Yes, you are my equal, and it is time that I treat you as such.”

Tomass stared at me for a long moment, and then his hand cupped my cheek, stroking with the same reverence he had shown the frond. “Do you know how frustrating it is to always be waiting? To try to remember keeping to a place I’ve lived my life never thinking about?”

“No,” I answered honestly, and then he shocked me with a kiss.

I forced myself to remain still, to respond to him, to not take control. He moved with sweet shyness and hesitation, but persisted. I wanted nothing more than to bury my hands in his hair, rub my body against his, and draw forth the passion that simmered just below the surface. I trembled with need, struggling to hold it in check, and then his tongue traced the seam of my lips and slid inside. There was nothing I could do but moan and clutch his broad shoulders.

I wanted to slant my mouth against his over and over again but remained passive, aching with near violent need. He pulled back and then crushed me to his chest, hugging me tight, burying my head under his chin. I gripped his waist and closed my eyes. As intense as the passion was, this was wonderful. I had never truly held a lover nor been held by one before.

I had grown up without a father, without that gentle, nurturing love. This was strange, yet with Tomass, it felt right. He kissed the top of my head and then we parted. “Thank you.” He turned and left, leaving me alone with the plants.

I had thought this was leading to something more...passionate. Yet out he walked with a lilt in his step. Filtin was right. I would never understand men.