

TORN

The setting sun cast a checker-board pattern across the wooden floor. Half-seated and half hanging from the ceiling by the stout cords around her wrists that were attached to a heavy bar that ran across the ceiling she panted heavily, head down. It seemed to her that she could pick out every knot in the wood of the floor, see every tiny crack and the dust motes made almost glorious by the sun's dying rays. Then the pain came again, rippling through her body causing her to cry out against the agony. The pain was sharp and deep, combined with a heavy pressure that was totally beyond her control. The pain filled and consumed her erasing all thought except to concentrate on the pain.

Eventually the pain lessened again and she could think. She had been here for three months now. When she had first left the place that had become her home she had no true idea of where she could go, where she could hide. All she had known was that she could not stay a moment longer. Her shame was becoming more obvious daily and soon enough they would have driven her out anyway. This way, she had thought at the time, there was a chance, however slim, that she would be able to go back. Go back to the warm embrace of those who had adopted her as family.

Now, tied like this with her legs splayed apart, sweat dripping off her tawny skin, she wondered how she could have been so stupid. If she had told the truth from the beginning she might not now be in this position. Yet stubborn pride had led her to lie and sent her great love far away, coldly cast off as if she did not want him. Even as she had rejected him, her own heart breaking to see the pain on his handsome face, she had not once given thought to the consequences. Nothing that day could have prepared her for this; she had torn his heart to shreds as much as her own and now she must pay the price as her body was slowly being torn to pieces from inside. She had been so young, so naive and so full of pride that she had never once looked beyond the moment, never thought that this day would come.

The pain struck again, deeper and harder, as tears poured down her face mixing with the sweat dripping from her long black hair. Suddenly she was certain the pain would kill her, perhaps not now but soon. She became utterly convinced she would die here in this barren room with its' slatted wooden walls and cold wooden floor. Around her she could hear people moving, murmuring soft and even gentle words but they meant nothing to her; the relentless, bitter pain filled everything, mind and soul.

She looked down at the floor through the curtain of her sweaty black hair. A pile of blankets lay directly beneath her, thin, soft blankets spotted now with blood, her blood. Soon the blood would become a tidal wave, sweeping her life away. In some small part of her mind she knew her thoughts were irrational but she could not shake the dreadful fear that was consuming her; not just fear for her own life but for that of the child fighting within her to enter the world.

Someone brushed her hair back from her face with a damp, cool cloth and offered her a wet rag to suck on for the moisture. The priestesses of the moon goddess Lamia had taken her in after she left the Black Lotus monastery; telling her mentor Solomon only that she needed some time to reflect prior to taking her final vows. If her mentor, who had become like a father figure to her after she left the palace, had known or suspected of her pregnancy he had given no sign. Ming had often wondered how much not only Solomon but High King Erich had known when she left the palace to join the monastery and Slade had left court so quickly after her departure.

Now she was alone, with only the comfort of the priestesses, instead of with Slade by her side giving birth to the future Crown Prince and one day High King of all Vestland. Pride, her stupid, stubborn pride had kept her from accepting Slade's proposal; in her own mind she could never forget that she was nothing more than a bastard off-cast given the charity of the royal family. And now she would condemn her son, their son, to the same fate. The priestesses would raise him but Ming knew that when the birth was over she would return to the monastery, take her final vows and put her love affair with Slade behind her; even if that meant leaving her son.

"Bear down now my lady," the priestess at her feet said, "the baby's head is crowning. Now, push with all your strength."

With a last agonizing flash of pain Ming felt the small body slip free from her body. Covered in blood and slime as the priestess cut the umbilical cord and then wrapped the precious boy in the soft blankets Ming smiled down at her son and prayed that he would forgive her for her decision.

The priestesses worked quickly, cleaning both Ming and her newborn son and settled them in the large soft bed that had been prepared. Holding her precious baby Ming felt a brief moment of doubt but she quickly brushed it aside. He would be an outcast in Vestland if his true identity was known; she had no choice but to leave him to the care of the priestesses. She gave the ring Slade had given her to the head priestess with instructions for him to be given it when he attained his manhood; perhaps one day he might even come looking for her.

"And what shall be his name, my lady?"

"Sloane, he shall be called Sloane, after his father."

