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THE CHRONICLES OF ARIANTHEM IV

by Samantha Sabian

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Chapter 1

SkSkye awoke to the loveliest, filmy curtains over her bed. She stared up at their iridescent color, enjoying the little rainbows that formed as the sheer cloth moved in the gentle breeze. She was drowsy and comfortable and hadn't the slightest idea where she was. She looked down at the naked woman in her arms and smiled. She was not in her own bed, which was part of her mild disorientation. She was in Lifa's bed in her chambers in the Ministry building.

Lifa stirred, then stretched, which pressed her full breasts up against Skye's lean torso much to Skye's enjoyment. She reached down and caressed Lifa's hip, which caused Lifa to sigh with pleasure in her half-sleep and press closer to her. Skye buried her head in Lifa's auburn hair, which elicited another murmur of pleasure and brought Lifa fully from her sleep. She looked up, her brown eyes full of love and laughter. Lifa turned to the open window where the gentle breeze was coming from, noting that the sun was already halfway to its peak.

"You're keeping me from my duties," Lifa chastised, "they will begin accusing us of exclusivity if you keep this up."

Skye laughed. Lifa was a Priestess of the Ha'kan, an all-female race that eschewed monogamy. Sexual activity was so woven into the fabric of their society that the third branch of their culture, the Ministry, was devoted entirely to the sexual health of their people. Relationships, whether casual or professional, were augmented by this sexual bonding, and as a result, ability in the bedroom was as important as any other skill or exper-

tise. And Lifa was a very special Priestess, one who despite her young age had already been added to the staff of the Queen's High Priestess, Astrid. It was widely recognized that Lifa would succeed Astrid when Queen Halla relinquished the throne to her daughter, Dallan.

"I doubt that any would accuse either of us of that offense," Skye said, her eyes softened. "I just missed you."

Lifa rolled over on top of her. "I missed you, too. And my Priestesses miss you as well. You were hardly healed when you, Dallan, and Rika took off on your little jaunt. And although Ama takes her duties quite seriously and does not play favorites, I feel she has missed you particularly."

"Ah," Skye said, beaming. Although she was Tavinter and one of the few non-Ha'kan welcomed into their society, she eagerly embraced their open ways. The thought of Ama, the short, voluptuous little Priestess who was part of Lifa's inner circle filled Skye with warmth. "I will see her tonight, then." She stopped, realizing she was being presumptuous. "If that works into her schedule and you approve, of course."

Lifa inwardly smiled. Scheduling was always done by the Priestesses, not by the women they serviced. The Ministry assigned trysts based upon perceived needs and compatibility, as well as any identified deficiencies in skill or training. But Skye had no deficiencies and was compatible with everyone, for she was known as a gentle but passionate lover, and she was a favorite of the Priestesses despite their vows not to play favorites.

"I have a feeling her schedule will be open," Lifa said, "and I approve as much for her well-being as for yours."

"Good, that will give me something to look forward to. I have a very busy day." She rose and pulled on her clothes beneath Lifa's appreciative gaze. "If you don't stop looking at me like that," Skye said, buttoning her shirt, "I will climb right back into that bed with you."

"That is not the way to discourage me," Lifa said, "now get out of my chambers before I keep you here the rest of the day."

Skye stumbled out into the hallway, still adjusting her clothing, and nearly ran right into Astrid. She blushed crimson under the elegant woman's assessment.

"High Priestess," Skye mumbled in greeting.

"Getting a late start on the day, are we?" Astrid said.

"Um, yes, apparently so," Skye said, just realizing how late it was.

“If you will excuse me,” she said with a respectful bow, then practically ran down the hallway to escape the scrutiny of the High Priestess. Astrid watched the girl flee with amusement, although technically she wasn’t a girl any longer. Skye had turned from a beautiful girl into a gorgeous young woman. She was still younger than her cohort because she had come into the Sjöfn Academy young and been adopted by Dallan’s inner circle, who were several years older and in their final year at the time. Had Skye finished the Academy, she would have graduated only last year.

Astrid knocked lightly on the half-open door to Lifa’s chambers, then pushed her way inside. Lifa smiled warmly at the High Priestess, demonstrating none of Skye’s bashfulness. The last few years she had spent many a night in Astrid’s bed, learning some of the more esoteric techniques a High Priestess might need. Bashfulness was rare in the Ha’kan and although endearing in Skye, would be a detriment in a Priestess.

“Good morning, High Priestess.”

“Good morning, Lifa,” Astrid said, admiring the young woman’s curves as she pulled on her robe. “And how are you today?”

“I am wonderful, Astrid. Thank you.”

“And how is Skye?” Astrid asked.

“I think she is still making up for lost time,” Lifa said, and the faintest trace of a cloud crossed the perennial sun of her disposition. Skye had been taken from them through a series of tragic events. When she was finally returned, it was only briefly because she was then taken again, this time by a sorceress who tortured and nearly killed her. Skye then spent months recovering from her illness, and when at last she was well, she had disappeared for a few weeks on some recent mysterious expedition. Lifa had made her promise she would not go anywhere for a while.

“Yes, I imagine so,” Astrid said. Although she thought of Skye as the little beauty who had enamored them all at the Academy, she had to remind herself that the girl was also the leader of the Tavinter, one who had successfully waged a guerilla war for years against the Ha’kan, an especially impressive feat considering the Ha’kan military rivaled that of the empire. Still, the girl was young, and if she was to occupy the high place in Ha’kan society that had been offered to her, then Astrid was responsible for her sexual development and by extension, so was Lifa.

“Is Skye aware that, although sex is always pleasurable, it is not always

strictly for pleasure?”

“I believe she understands the idea in concept.” A memory brought a twinkle to Lifa’s eye. “She did provide pleasure for half her class in a single night at the Academy, and that seemed out of obligation.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Astrid said, smiling at the reminder. That incident had been the topic of conversation even amongst the royal staff. “Good. There is a contingent coming from the western holds. There will be many meetings, formal dinners, entertainment, the like, and someone may take an interest in her.”

“I have no doubt that will happen,” Lifa said, “and although Skye is still shy, I think she will respond appropriately.”

“Good. There is a second matter. I know that Skye enjoys your company and spends a great deal of time with Dallan and Rika as well as the Priestesses.”

“Yes, and Kara as well,” Lifa said.

“How could I forget Kara?” Astrid said wryly. “But has Skye been with any older women?”

“We are all older than Skye, but I think I know what you mean and the answer is no.”

“Hmm,” Astrid said, “I wish her to experience that sometime soon.”

“Are you thinking of taking her to your bed?” Lifa asked curiously.

“I have had that thought from the day she showed up at the Academy,” Astrid admitted without hesitation, “even prior to her Age of Consent. But that is not my motivation at the moment. From my understanding, she is an excellent lover and I want that progress to continue.”

“Of course, High Priestess, I will discuss it with her. Do you have any suggestions?”

Astrid waved her hand. “No, no. You can decide that. I am sure your judgment will prove sound as always.”

“Thank you,” Lifa said, nodding as Astrid stood. The High Priestess started towards the door, then paused in the entryway. Lifa loved her elegant, sultry manner and hoped that one day she could emulate it.

“Do not mistake me. I would take Skye to my bed tonight. I just fear she would run in terror at the thought because she still cannot look at me without blushing.”

“The Tavinter do run like the wind,” Lifa said, laughter in her eyes,

“but I have a feeling you would catch her, High Priestess.”

Skye took two wrong turns, then stood baffled in the center of the hallway. She was still getting used to living in the royal palace. Dallan had insisted she maintain quarters here as was appropriate for her staff, and Skye’s suite sat between Dallan’s and Kara’s and across the circular forum from Rika’s, and Lifa’s. Unfortunately, she didn’t know where any of those were right now and was afraid she would wander into the housing of the Queen’s staff which was opposite Dallan’s. She had done that once before, mistaking the Queen’s forum for Dallan’s, and the smoldering gaze of the High Priestess and the graceful sensuality of Queen Halla herself had haunted Skye’s dreams for a week.

The guards looked at Skye and the one nearest her shook her head, chuckling. That lovely little Tavinter did this about once a day. She pointed down the hallway in the right direction.

“Thank you,” Skye mumbled, “this place is just so big.” She would not get lost in a thousand square miles of forest, but she could not navigate the palace.

Skye found her room and pushed through the double doors with relief. Her chambers were huge and luxurious and she was overwhelmed every time she walked into the rooms. There was an enormous bed in the sleeping area, but it might as well have been a cot because Skye rarely slept there. Although she changed clothing and bathed in her chambers, more often than not she slept in one of the other suites.

She peered out of her window into the courtyard. She had thought the Sjöfn Academy was a beautiful place, but the Ha’kan Royal Palace was a wonder to behold. The capital itself was impressive, with exquisite architecture, cobblestone streets, marbled walkways, areas of greenery filled with flowers and statuary, and the Palace was the jewel of the city. It sat high on the hill and was built in a square, each side dedicated to one of the three major branches of Ha’kan society, the Priestess caste, the Warrior caste, and the Scholar caste, with the fourth side occupied by the Ha’kan royal family and staff. Much like the Academy, there was an outdoor area set aside for training. An elaborate garden bordered the Ministry Building

where the majority of the Priestesses lived, a garden which extended into a more private area that was adjacent to the quarters of the royal family and accessible from Skye's room and the rooms of all the royal staff. Skye had not ventured out to the private garden just yet, but Dallan had given her a wicked grin and told her she would give her a personal tour very soon.

Skye washed herself and pulled on her lightweight training armor. The leather straps gleamed and the subtle eagle outline on the chest gave her a little thrill. This armor was Tavinter but had been slightly altered when the Tavinter had agreed to act as a scouting regiment for the Ha'kan army. The armor had always been functional, but the Ha'kan had to add beauty to everything, and their stylish touch was evident.

The forum was empty when she left her room, and Skye hoped she had not kept Dallan and Rika waiting too long on the training field. She passed Kara's room and wondered if the lithesome scholar was in there. Kara kept the oddest hours and had chambers in the Scholar's wing as well, much like Lifa who often slept at the Ministry as part of her duties. Because of that, Skye also slept in the Scholar's wing on occasion, and spent half her time sleeping at the Ministry, either in the arms of Lifa or one of the Priestesses. Such a practice might have been disorienting for some, but Skye was from a nomadic people and it felt quite natural. Additionally, she had slept in her bed at the Academy on few occasions and Dallan herself had commented that Skye really didn't need her own bed.

Skye found her way out much easier than her way in and trotted down the marble steps leading from the palace. She nodded to those she passed, and they returned the cordial greeting. Skye was not quite certain how the majority of the Ha'kan felt about her. Through no fault of her own or that of her people, she had waged war against them for three years. Although it was later found that neither side had committed the atrocities the other believed, Skye wondered if any held a grudge against her. She knew there were some among the Tavinter who still held hard feelings for the Ha'kan, especially those who had lost someone in the war. But the majority understood the deception that had been perpetrated by the Garmlain, and the fact that the Ha'kan had turned about and utterly destroyed the Garmlain soothed the hearts of many.

The mild unease these thoughts caused increased when she walked onto the training field. She had spent many hours in swordplay and ar-

chery at the Academy, but this was the first time she had trained with the Ha'kan troops since her return. She felt the weight of hundreds of eyes upon her, a weight that seemed to grow heavier when she did not see Dallan or Rika. She scuffed her boot in the dirt. She was supposed to be in charge of the new regiment of Tavinter scouts, a very high-ranking position within the Ha'kan military, but right now she felt like it was her first day at the Academy all over again.

The Ha'kan warriors examined the newcomer with interest. They had heard tales of this one's exploits at the Academy, and her ghostly presence in the Tavinter forests during the war was legendary. Still, it was hard to square that image of her with the slender figure that stood before them. Skye was tall for a Tavinter, but that meant she was not even of average height for a Ha'kan. Also, she was far younger than any had imagined. Her discomfort and uncertainty were obvious.

"Well she is a gorgeous little thing, I'll give you that," one soldier whispered. "But she looks more like a priestess than a warrior."

"By the gods, can you imagine that one in your bed?" another soldier whispered back. "I have a sword I'd like to show her how to use."

One of the Royal Guard, a member of far higher rank than the two whispering behind her, overheard the remarks. She had been assigned to Queen Halla's contingent at the Academy and had ridden with the Princess's regiment during the war. As a member of the Royal Guard, she was older and far more experienced than the two behind her, and she had seen Skye in action firsthand.

"You would be wise not to judge her by her appearance," she said over her shoulder, "and give her the respect her position deserves. Besides," she said, turning to look at them. "She will take that 'sword' and break it over your head."

"Yes, commander," the two responded in unison, embarrassed they had been overheard. Still, as their eyes returned to the tentative figure in front of them, that hardly seemed likely.

Skye was relieved to see Dallan and Rika approaching on horseback. They flew in at breakneck speed and both looked splendid in their gleaming armor, Rika's emblazoned with garlands indicating her rank and Dallan's slightly modified to indicate her royal status. They were both grinning at their impromptu race, one that Dallan just barely won. Rika calmed

her rearing horse, and both dismounted. Their excitement and joy were infectious and all the Ha'kan felt it: this was their beloved Princess and her capable right hand. Both had won the hearts of their people by exemplary leadership and bravery in battle despite their youth. Although Skye was happy to see them, their impressive appearance magnified her current feeling of inadequacy.

The imaginary inadequacy was nowhere in Dallan's sight as she gazed at Skye. She could only marvel at how good Skye looked in that scout armor, which made her want to pull Skye into the nearby armory and take it off of her. Rika, too, examined her with admiration.

"Finally able to drag yourself from Lifa's bed?" Rika said, and Skye frowned at her.

Dallan nudged Rika. "Got bumped from Lifa's schedule, did you?"

"Can you believe it?" Rika said with mock indignation. "Training needs, she said."

A retort was on Skye's lips, but this caught her attention. "Training needs," she said, concerned, "does Lifa think me deficient?"

This caused both Rika and Dallan to burst into laughter. "Oh yes," Rika said, "I think half the Priestess caste wishes to assist you in remedial training."

It seemed they were teasing her, but Skye wasn't entirely certain. "Well I am sorry if I bumped you from Lifa's schedule."

"It is no matter," Rika said, "I have been rescheduled for this evening. And you," she said with a gleam in her eye, "will pay me back."

Skye frowned again. That generally meant that within a day or two she would be face down somewhere with Rika mounting her from behind. The thought was as arousing as it was distracting.

"Come, you two, we have to focus," Dallan said, turning to address the troops. "We will warm up with the Progression," she said loudly, "so pair off and begin."

The troops all found a partner, decided who would attack and who would defend, and began the elaborate exercise. The Progression was a choreographed series of strikes and parries designed to teach basic to advanced skills. It was taught at the Academy and then used for on-going training. Dallan and Rika watched for a moment, then Rika turned to Dallan and drew her sword.

“Wait, wait,” she said, and Skye braced herself at Rika’s mocking tone, “who am I?”

Rika held the sword at an awkward angle and Dallan knew immediately what she was talking about. Dallan drew her own sword and knocked the one from Rika’s hand while Rika made herself look as incompetent as possible. They both then burst into laughter while Skye looked at them blackly. They were making fun of her. When she had been a new student at the Academy, she had hidden her considerable skill by performing as poorly as possible, an attempt to blend in that had backfired. She had fooled everyone except Dallan, who watched her attempt the Progression but one time and called her bluff, forcing Skye to fight her. The ensuing swordplay had been epic.

“Do you even remember the Progression?” Dallan asked, swinging her sword about playfully.

Skye drew her own sword, and the feel of the hilt in her hand soothed her. Dallan felt a thrill of anticipation because the change in Skye’s demeanor was instant. Whereas most became more agitated and aggressive with a weapon in their hand, Skye was the opposite. She became calm and composed, transitioning from a little woman-child to one of the most dangerous individuals Dallan had ever met. Dallan would have loved Skye for her beauty and skill in bed, but she adored her for her skill in battle.

“I remember it,” Skye said, “would you like to test me?”

Rika observed the impending challenge and could not resist playing instigator.

“I think a wager is in order,” Rika suggested.

“I think that’s a very good idea,” Dallan said, swinging her sword arm to loosen up, “we will wager for earth or sky.”

Skye swung her own sword about. “Just so I am clear, if I win, I get to be sky?”

“You get to be whatever you want,” Dallan said nonchalantly. “Tomorrow night. In the garden.”

“In the garden?” Skye said, shocked, for they were discussing who would get to be in the dominant position for sex.

“Yes,” Dallan said carelessly, “in the garden. It can be quite private there. Or not, depending on your wishes.”

Skye’s cheeks reddened. “The privacy is not part of the wager, is it?”

“Ah,” Rika said knowingly. “I think I have identified a training need. I will have to tell Lifa.”

“You will not!” Skye exclaimed, although she knew Rika would at the first opportunity.

“Are we going to do this or not?” Dallan asked, now that she was certain Skye was completely distracted. She took her position, and Skye, after throwing a dark look in Rika’s direction, took the counter position. Rika noted they looked more like a graceful pair of dancers than two about to engage in a brutal fight.

Dallan initiated and took the first swing at Skye who, despite the speed and force of the blow, parried it without effort. Dallan struck twice, Skye parried, Dallan struck thrice, Skye parried, and so the Progression began. And it did indeed look like a dance as the two began moving far earlier than the Progression called for. And they were completing it with such speed that they had already surpassed those who had begun far earlier.

“Do you wish to stop at fifty?” Dallan said, only slightly out of breath.

“Are you tired?” Skye said, not out of breath at all.

“One hundred it is,” Dallan said, and swung her sword with blinding speed. Rika crossed her arms over her chest. These two were not even breathing hard whereas many of the soldiers who were beginning to finish were covered with sweat and gasping for air. The Progression was brutally difficult so that was expected, but even so, this example would provide great incentive for conditioning.

As the two continued their fierce contest, more and more of the soldiers finished and began to gather around. It took the combatants longer to reach the hundredth strike for each round a single strike was added but everything was repeated. By this time, both Skye and Dallan were showing signs of exertion, although still far less than expected. After the one hundredth strike, the Progression moved to free work, which could sometimes be dangerous as the participants were generally so fatigued that control could become an issue. Still, the Ha’kan Princess and the Tavinter sparred full force without pulling their strikes in any way. Both were perfectly in control despite the length of their contest.

Which is why Rika was greatly surprised when Dallan dropped her guard. It was so dramatic an error that Rika flinched because Skye was coming in full force, and Dallan did not appear to be responding in time,

or even responding at all. At the last second, with monumental effort, Skye stopped her blow which would have otherwise killed Dallan. The effort required was so great, Skye staggered off balance, dug her sword into the earth, then flipped herself to dissipate her momentum. She lay on her back looking up at the clouds, her chest heaving from exertion.

Rika looked at Dallan with disapproval and admiration. Disapproval for dropping her guard, but admiration for the devious tactic. “That was mean,” she said, and Dallan just grinned. Dallan walked over to Skye, sticking her own sword into the earth.

“I guess this means I win the wager.”

Skye looked up at her. “That was not fair.”

Dallan helped her to her feet, wanting to kiss her right there and almost did. “You are right. It was not. But I will collect my bet nonetheless.”

Rika turned to the watching crowd. “Now that is the example I wish for you to follow,” she said, drawing her own sword to begin the training in earnest. “Except for that last part,” she said, turning to frown at Dallan but not Skye. Dallan just grinned wickedly.

“What just happened?”

The soldier who had whispered about conquering Skye in bed earlier had watched the contest in astonishment. She had completely reevaluated her opinion of the Tavinter, but the end of the fight had left her puzzled. The Royal Guard who had chastised her smiled. Dallan was not only brilliant at swordplay, she was wise beyond her years, for she had communicated something far clearer through action than words.

“The Princess lowered her guard on purpose.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Because she cheated,” the guard said.

“How did she cheat?” the soldier asked, still puzzled.

“She knew that Skye would not strike her down.” The Royal Guard turned to all of the soldiers who were listening to their conversation to make certain Dallan’s message was delivered.

“The Princess trusts that Tavinter with her life.”

Skye trained for hours with the soldiers, and her unease dissipated.

As the drills continued, she found herself more and more paired with the Royal Guard who sought her out because of her skill. All Ha'kan warriors were dangerous in battle, but the Guard were the elite, and this Tavinter's skill was a whetstone for their swords. Rika observed this with great pleasure because she was responsible for the readiness of her regiment, and until Senta returned, she was responsible for the Guard as well. She was also pleased with Skye's near-instantaneous integration back into the Ha'kan forces. She knew that her influence and even more so, Dallan's, would carry great weight. But it appeared that influence was hardly needed.

Rika herself engaged Skye many times, and theirs was always an interesting battle. Dallan was larger than Skye, but their fighting styles were similar. Rika was much larger than Skye, not only in height but in pure physical size. Skye gave a textbook lesson on how to bedevil a much larger foe as she danced about, dodging Rika's blows, never allowing one to fall with full force. Rika was not slow, she was dangerously fast for her size, but even so, she was no match for Skye's speed and dexterity, and Skye was very good at using Rika's weight and momentum against her. It was unlikely Skye could defeat Rika, but it was just as unlikely that Rika would defeat Skye.

"You see, this is why I pin you down," Rika said, blocking Skye's thrust with her shield.

"Oh, so that is your excuse," Skye said, swinging again.

Rika blocked the blow, this one that was at her head. "Actually, I just like you thrashing around beneath me."

"I do not thrash," Skye said, "and why is it you put me face-down? Do you not like to look at my face?"

Skye's sword struck with such force on Rika's shield, it drew the attention of those around them with the sound. Rika grinned.

"I love to look at your face. Why do think I put you on your hands and knees in front of a mirror?"

"Damn you!" Skye said, striking with even greater force and attracting more attention. But Rika's teasing was not making Skye angry. If anything, it was exciting her, and Skye was hitting her harder so she could maintain her concentration.

Rika realized they were attracting too much attention. "Stop," she said laughing, and moved closer to Skye to end their battle. "Stop, or I will

take you to the ground right here and we will work on your 'privacy' issue.”

Skye lowered her sword. “You would, too, wouldn't you?”

“With complete and utter abandon,” Rika said. “Now I think we are done, or I will have nothing left for Lifa.”

“Do not blame your shortcomings on me,” Skye said mischievously, then darted from Rika's attempted grasp.

“You are going to pay for that,” Rika called after her as Skye ran from the field laughing. “I will just add it to your debt.”

Chapter 2

Dallan's inner circle had fallen back into the habit of meeting in Lifa's chambers at fourth bell. They had done it regularly at the Academy and the tradition had waned during the war. But when Skye had returned, they fell back into the comfortable routine as if it had never stopped. Lifa more often than not stayed at the Ministry building and the Ha'kan population was grateful, for it allowed them far more access to the Princess and her staff, even if it was from a distance and only in passing. It was not that Queen Halla was inaccessible, for she was considered quite approachable if need be. It was simply that the Princess was slightly less formal than her regal mother, a role that Halla had played when her mother had been on the throne.

Dallan was grateful for the ritual because it allowed her to keep her staff close and bonded with relatively little effort. Plus it was incredibly enjoyable and something they all looked forward to each day. She was already lying on Lifa's couch with her head in Lifa's lap when Rika walked in and sprawled onto the couch as well. Lifa's chambers were much like they were at the Academy, with the cushy, semi-circular sitting area, but the suite was larger and far more luxurious. There were several bedrooms off the main room, each separated by a series of sheer veils. Rika kissed Ama, who although always lively, was in a particularly good mood which Rika commented upon.

"Ama has an appointment with Skye," Lifa explained.

"Say no more," Rika said. "Although she may be a little tired as the

entire Ha'kan army tried to wear her down without success. And Dallan tried to kill her."

The future High Priestess ran her fingers through Dallan's hair. "And what did you do to our little Tavinter?"

"I left myself wide open and I think she pulled every muscle in her body trying to stop her attack. She actually flipped herself to stop the blow."

The fingers ran through the hair again and Lifa leaned down to kiss Dallan's forehead. "You are cruel," she said.

Skye strolled in and Ama was pleased to see she did not look the least bit tired. She stopped to give Lifa a kiss which Lifa passionately returned. Dallan took that opportunity to snatch her by the collar and playfully pull her down on top of her, causing Lifa to laugh.

"Are you mad at me?" Dallan asked.

"Of course I am, you idiot. I could have killed you."

"Idiot?" Dallan said teasingly, "I hardly think that is how you should address royalty." Dallan was holding her tightly, enjoying the lithe form on top of her while she got to stare into those lovely hazel eyes.

"You are a royal pain in my backside," Skye said.

"No, that's Kara's job," Dallan said, eliciting laughter from everyone. Kara was known for unconventional sexual exploration. "You still lost the wager."

"What wager is that?" Lifa asked.

"Earth or sky," Skye said darkly, "and of course I am earth once more."

Dallan released her and Skye rolled off onto her feet.

"Come here, little one," Ama said soothingly. The endearment always amused Skye because Ama was one of the few Ha'kan that Skye actually dwarfed, especially now that she was fully grown. But Skye had once challenged Ama regarding the title and Ama had simply thrust her ample breasts in Skye's face, forcing Skye to agree that Ama was much larger than she was. She had not argued since. Skye settled in next to Ama, taking comfort as the voluptuous little Priestess pulled her down so that her head was in her lap. Skye liked this position because her cheek was pressed against those wonderful breasts.

"You may be earth or sky with me anytime," Ama said, stroking her hair, "and if they have not experienced you on top, they do not know what they are missing."

“I can attest to that,” Lifa said with emphasis.

Skye relaxed, feeling mildly redeemed, but then Lifa continued.

“That brings up another matter, however. Now that you are healthy, I am again responsible for your development and well-being, and there is something I want you to think about.”

Skye sat upright and looked accusingly at Rika. “You already told her?”

Rika had her hands behind her head as she leaned back, her long legs out in front of her. “No, I didn’t say anything. But now that you have told on yourself, perhaps we should discuss that.”

Skye sank back into Ama’s lap in self-exasperation. Rika took more enjoyment from the inadvertent confession than she would have from divulging the information herself. Dallan also immediately chimed in.

“Yes, Lifa, that’s right. Skye expressed considerable horror over having sex in the garden because of ‘privacy’ issues.”

“I wasn’t horrified,” Skye said, sounding far more defensive than she wished, “I just, I was just—,”

“I see,” Lifa said thoughtfully. She was delighted by Skye’s discomfiture, it was so charming. “Exhibitionism does take some getting used to, meaning it would require some practice and probably repeated exposure.” The pun also delighted her. “And really, we could all enjoy that.”

“Ama, why don’t you just strip her and we’ll start now?” Rika suggested.

“No,” Skye said, trying to pull herself upright. But Ama caught her.

“Shh,” she said, the priestess in her taking over. “At your own pace and in your own time,” she counseled.

“That’s right,” Lifa said, gentling her teasing, “And only if you want to. You know I wish you to try everything so that you know what you like.”

Skye relaxed once more. Of course she knew that.

Skye’s reaction puzzled Dallan a little. Skye was normally open about all things sexual and although occasionally reserved, she could be quite adventurous. And Dallan knew that Skye had been with multiple partners at one time because she and Lifa had slept with Skye, and she and Rika often took her together, two combinations of sexual partners that most could not even handle. And Skye often ‘entertained’ more than a single Priestess at a time. Dallan wondered if perhaps it was the Tavinter instinct

to remain unseen, to blend into the forest that was at play here, rather than anything to do with intercourse. If that was the case, she thought, grinning to herself, then overcoming that instinct could lead to some explosive sex.

“You are evil,” Lifa whispered to her, reading her expression. She did, however, need to return to her original conversation.

“Actually, Skye, I had something else in mind. Have you been with any older women?”

This brought smiles all around, and now Skye was more curious than apprehensive. “You are all older than me,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve been with anyone younger than myself.”

“No,” Lifa said, “that’s not what I’m talking about. We are all older than you, but only by a few years. I am talking about someone significantly older. At least a decade, preferably two.”

“No,” Skye said with a little confusion, “I haven’t. It seems that most Ha’kan stay within their age group by a few years.”

“There is a reason for that,” Lifa said, “Ha’kan women do not reach their sexual peak until their fourth, even fifth decade. And then they stay at that peak for a very long time.”

Skye thought of the Queen and Astrid, her sultry, elegant High Priestess, then stared around her at her companions. “You are all going to get worse?” she said in disbelief.

“I prefer to think of it as getting better,” Rika said with satisfaction, “but yes, we will all get much, much worse.”

Lifa tried to stay on track. “The older Ha’kan women stay with those in their age group because frankly, most of the younger women cannot,” she sought a delicate way to say it, “keep up.”

“By the gods,” Skye murmured.

“But it is important for a younger woman to experience that at least once.”

Skye looked askance at Lifa. “Have you been with an older woman?”

“Of course,” Lifa said, “I have shared Astrid’s bed on many occasions.”

“By the gods!” Skye sputtered again.

“It is required of my position,” Lifa said. “There are many things she must teach me.”

Skye could not even picture that, as much as she wanted to. She turned her head to Dallan.

“And have you slept with Astrid?”

“Oh no,” Dallan said, “Astrid is too close to my mother, and too maternal towards me. And although that dynamic can be enjoyable—,” as if to emphasize that fact, Ama pressed her breast to Skye’s cheek and she fully understood, “I don’t think that pairing would occur.”

Skye had wondered about that, as Ha’kan did not require a partner for reproduction and it was entirely independent of sex. Clearly women did not engage in sexual relationships within their own bloodline, but immediately outside of that, things got very vague as to what was acceptable. Skye thought she was beginning to understand, but Dallan’s next words destroyed that idea.

“No, I slept with Lifa’s mother.”

“What?” Skye said in astonishment.

“I slept with Lifa’s mother, too,” Rika said. “It was extraordinary. It took me almost a week to recover.”

Skye looked from one to the other, then to Lifa who appeared nothing more than pleased and proud. Skye realized she might not ever completely understand the Ha’kan.

“Well, all right then,” Skye said, laying her head back down and staring up at the ceiling.

Lifa recognized that Skye was overwhelmed and would not push her further. “Just think about it, Skye. You know I have only your best interest at heart.”

“I know,” Skye said, still staring at the ceiling. Ama stroked her hair.

“Would you like to begin our appointment early?” she said.

“I think I would like that very much,” Skye said numbly, and Ama led her by the hand from the room.

“That poor thing,” Lifa murmured.

“That poor thing?” Rika said, “Would that I had her problems. Sexual partners without end. Complete access to the Princess of the Ha’kan, the future High Priestess, and the entire future royal staff. Half the Priestess caste vying for her appointments...”

“You do have her problems,” Dallan said, interrupting her.

“Oh, that’s right, I do,” Rika said with pleasure. Her thoughts were pleasantly occupied for a moment, then a monumental thought struck her. She turned to Dallan, her eyes bright. “This might be perfect timing, Dal-

lan.”

“For what?” Dallan said, turning her head to the side.

“Senta is to return within the week.”

Dallan’s eyes also brightened at the prospect. “That’s right,” she said, “this could be perfect.”

“Senta?” Lifa asked, “for Skye? But Senta keeps very much to her own cohort. Astrid has not openly said so, but Senta seems to prefer the company of older women. I don’t know that I have ever even heard of her being with a younger woman, especially one as young as Skye.”

“You did not see the way Senta looked at Skye the day Skye kissed her at the Academy,” Rika said, remembering Senta’s enigmatic expression, one that Skye had missed entirely but that she and Dallan had easily interpreted. “That was a promise if I have ever seen one.”

“A guarantee,” Dallan agreed, “that there would be consequences to Skye’s little stunt.”

“Really?” Lifa said with growing excitement. She remembered the story well, how Skye had helped Dallan’s team in field exercises, capturing a flag no one thought obtainable. Senta had caught Skye at the last minute, literally lifting her from her feet to keep her from the prize, but Skye had startled her by kissing her. And although Skye had been somewhat vague on how things had proceeded, it was evident that Senta, at least initially, had returned the kiss before she remembered whom she held captive. And by Dallan’s and Rika’s account, Senta had given Skye a searing look at the end of that day, then simply walked away. Lifa herself recalled some pleasant tension between the First General and Skye when Skye had playfully challenged her after an archery contest.

“Has Senta seen Skye since the Academy?”

“No,” Dallan said, “Not really. She returned briefly when Skye was ill and unconscious, but she left almost immediately to invade the Garmlain territory. She has been on campaign ever since.”

“This is perfect,” Lifa agreed. “I will wait until Senta gets resettled, then see what I can do.”

Skye spent the night in Ama’s arms, giving the little Priestess renewal

as much as she gave to Skye. It was one of Lifa's little secrets, when she had a Priestess who was tired or in need of rejuvenation, she scheduled Skye to see her for Skye enjoyed giving as much as receiving. Although all Ha'kan were sexually generous, Skye was especially so. Rika enjoyed a vigorous night with Lifa, replete with role play and acrobatic positions, sating them both completely. Dallan, on the other hand, spent the night performing her royal duties which consisted of a formal dinner with her mother and the Queen's staff, followed up by a few hours spent with one of the daughters of the high-ranking nobility, a pretty enough young lady who screamed quite loudly when Dallan brought her to pleasure. Although Dallan enjoyed it as she did all sex, she gratefully retired to her own chambers to spend the rest of the evening alone. This did not quite happen as Kara saw her entering her suite by herself and therefore joined her for nothing more than slumber. And Dallan welcomed the presence of her future First Scholar, who wrapped her arms about her as she fell asleep, for the Ha'kan were rarely alone from the day they were born.