



LIANDOCK



J.M. TIBBOTT

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A small whirlwind whipped past Liandock, making him spin in its wake. He coughed, spat sand from his mouth, and counted slowly to ten. “I’m going to have to kill my sister.”

He brushed sand from his hair and growled at her. “Irina, you have to stop running around like an anxious Wullawerth. You have sand flying everywhere. You’re living on borrowed time, young woman.”

“And you, Liandock, are grumpy and boring. You have lived only four more star circuits than me, but you act old.” She raised her arms and turned in circles. “I need to practice running, because I’m going to be the head of guards at the Keep when Murwenna takes over as Lord of Rifella. I will have to be fast to be a worthy warrior.”

“Murwenna will not come into her birthright for at least another ten Star circles. You have time. But you need to slow down. I had my eye on a beautiful gemstone, and the sand buried it.”

Irina stopped and stared up at him. “Are you sure you do not want to be a warrior too?”

Liandock gazed down at her. He could not help himself. He smiled at the little snub nose, sprinkled with freckles. *She looks so innocent when she tilts her head like that. Perhaps I will not kill her just yet.* He sighed. “No, I have no wish to be a fighter. I love the beauty of stones, and the way they nestle into the metal designs I create. I intend to be the most famous Metal Master on all Pridden.”

Irina raised a blond eyebrow. “That does not sound exciting. I will wager our parents will not view it as an acceptable calling.”

He smiled at her. “You are wrong. Our parents are aware of my wishes and their only desire is for me to be happy in my choices. You are right about one thing, though. The joy I find in using stones and gems and metals is a calling. They speak to me and tell me secrets.”

She widened bright blue eyes. “How can stones have secrets?”

He ruffled her hair. “You doubt me? I do not understand how the language of gems and stones operate. Perhaps I can show you. We are not far from the Crystal Dunes. Let us go and find a crystal for you, and it will tell me secrets about you.”

Irina grinned and jumped up and down. “Yes, we must do this. I will get canteens and you must saddle a horse for us.” Without waiting for a reply, she ran back into their home.

Liandock’s heart warmed as he watched her run. He adored his sister, even though she often annoyed him. *She understands me almost as well as I do myself.*

He turned and ran to the stable. By the time Irina arrived, flushed and grinning, he had saddled and bridled his horse. She held up two canteens.

He mounted and reached down to grab her arm and lift her into the saddle in front of him, and they set off for the Crystal Dunes. The Dunes, Rifella’s extraordinary cache of glorious gemstones lay close, but the day was hot, and horseback shortened the distance from their home.

Liandock took his time riding to the Dunes, and Irina chatted non stop, asking him question after question. “What makes you think stones have secrets?”

“You remember Mannin? I was quite taken with her, and I believe our parents thought she might one day become my mate. While we were on our way to that camping trip in the Torrenton Forest, she picked up a small crystal. I asked her if I could examine it. As I held it, I knew that Mannin and I would never bond and that she would, in her future, mate with a warrior from Pakanna and would live there with him.”

“She did do that. What words do the stones use to talk to you?” She frowned. “I think our parents were sad she did not stay to be with you.” Irina sniffed. “I always thought she was a bit stupid.”

“Irina, that is not kind of you.”

“Well, she was.”

He stopped the horse. "We cannot take this animal further into the Dunes. I forgot to bring padding for its hooves. We cannot afford to injure them on the sharp crystals."

He lowered his sister to the ground, and slid from the saddle.

Irina headed straight for the Dunes, but recoiled from the blinding sun bouncing off the crystals.

"Wait. Do not forget your mask." Liandock reached into his saddle bag and withdrew two masks fashioned from dark wood. Each sported slits for their eyes.

Irina returned to his side and grabbed a mask from him. "Thank you. I was so excited to see how you read the gems. I sort of forgot about protecting my eyes."

He pursed his lips. "A fine warrior is always concerned with protecting themselves from potential dangers. You cannot help another unless you help yourself first. Pay more attention, Irina."

She hung her head. "I am sorry. I know you are correct. I promise I will be more aware of what I am doing."

He put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her to him. "Not just because you wish to be a warrior. You are important to me."

She snuggled into the hug, and smiled up at him.

His heart skipped a beat. *My little sister can be so captivating when she smiles.* "We will not go too far into the Dunes. It is part of the Hellesmouth Desert, and we only have a limited amount of water. There is a flat rock to your left. We will sit and search the area around it, and are bound to find some beautiful crystals."

Irina nodded and they walked over to the rock and sat. She leaned over and began searching through the various gems, as if hoping to find something that appealed to her.

He gazed at Irina again. *She is still young, but when Irina reaches her mating age in five more, four-season circuits, she will be a stunning young woman. There will be many young warriors at her door.*

He searched the area in front of him, and as he reached down, a frisson of a strange vibration attracted him. He picked up a magnificent green stone, gazed at it for a moment, felt the calling of it, and pocketed it.

“I love this one, Liandock.” Irina held out an oblong crystal in a glorious red. “It reminds me of the colors in the sky when our star is sliding below the horizon. What does it tell you?”

“Do not rush this, Irina. Hold it, and I will wait until it speaks to me. Stones are never impatient.”

They sat together in silence, and Liandock closed his eyes, waiting for a message from the red stone. “Oh, Irina. This is indeed a fine stone. It tells me you will be a wonderful warrior, and will serve at a Keep. But you will not serve Murwenna.”

“But...”

He held up his hand to silence her. “You will meet a fine warrior, and the two of you will bond.”

Irina scowled. “I do not need to bond with anyone to be a warrior on my own. Males are silly, and they are annoying.”

Liandock laughed. “You will discover, Irina, that not all males are silly. This one will be invited by a Lord to hold the title of Praetor at his Keep. The two of you will travel to the Lord’s land and you will serve together.”

Her eyes were bright with keen expectancy as she looked up at his face. “Which Lord will we serve? What is the name of my supposed future mate? Are you sure he will not be stupid or annoying?”

He laughed. “The stones do not tell me everything, my impatient sibling. I can give you no more information.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Crosa curses. I wish they told you more.”

Liandock shook his head. “Irina, that is not an appropriate expression for a young woman of breeding to use.”

She pursed her lips at him. "You use it."

"I am older than you."

She sighed. "Wait. Did you find any stones you liked and needed for your adornments?"

"I found a most important one." He brought the green stone from his pocket and held it up to the light."

"Oh, that's beautiful. Who is it for?"

"An exceptional woman. A stranger I have yet to meet. She will need this for her protection."

Irina's face crinkled up in puzzlement. "You have no idea who?"

He shook his head. "Not yet."

Pridden had circled its star five more times when Liandock looked up from his work. He was hammering silver metal into a series of bends and twists, when Irina appeared at his doorway. He smiled at her. "What is it? You are blushing. Unlike your normal self, you seem to be unsure."

She moved without her usual grace. "I need your advice."

Oh dear, what has she done now. "You need my advice? You have never needed it before. Why now?"

Irina shifted about, and avoided his eyes. "Um. Bardu has asked me to be his bond mate. Is he the one you foresaw in the stones?"

His heart lifted. *Bardu? He is the perfect mate for my sister.* "Oh, Irina. Do you love him?"

She nodded.

"Then he is the one. Accept him. Do not wait. He is perfect for you. I believe he is to be Praetor for Lord Eduardo of Kaylin."

“The only thing that is not perfect is that you and I will be separated. I will live in Kaylin and you will be here in Rifella.”

She seemed so sad and forlorn that Liandock laughed aloud. “We will not be separated, sister-mine. Lord Eduardo has requested I come to Kaylin to take up residence as their Metal Master.”

Irina’s face filled with joy. She threw herself at Liandock and hugged him. “Caleesh has bestowed us with good fortune.”

“You are squeezing the breath from my body. Bardu is most fortunate. You will be a mate worthy of a Praetor.”

Irina peered up at him. “It is most unusual for Lord Eduardo to request you to serve in the capacity of Metal Master. I wonder why he asked this of you.”

He frowned at her. “I do have a reputation of being at one with the stones and crystals of Pridden. Plus, I believe he is anxious to have Bardu as his Praetor. I suspect he made sure to cement that relationship by having us in the same land. Eduardo is a brilliant man. He knows you would chafe if separated from me.”

“Are you at peace being away from our home land?”

He laughed at her and tousled her hair. “I am at peace, and I know full well who I am.” His breath filled and warmed him inside. “Irina, I was never meant to be a warrior. If I had remained in Rifella, that pressure would always be there. I am well satisfied with my lot.”

She sighed. “If only you would also find a bond mate, Liandock, my world would be perfect. There are so many females who would mate with you in an instant, yet you turn them all down.”

“None of them are the right one.”

“Yet you bed so many. Why are none of them the right female for you?”

He shook his head at her, feeling the strange emptiness in his heart. “Although I am not a warrior, I am still a male. I do have needs.” He sighed. “Do not trouble yourself

about me. Now go and begin the preparations for the mating ceremony. In a few turns, we will all depart for Kaylin.”

Irina entered the sitting room of the house she and Bardu now occupied. “Where are you, bond mate? Lord Eduardo will be wondering why we are so slow.”

“He never thinks of us as slow. You are always impatient when we leave for our annual tour of Kaylin.”

Irina pretended to scowl at him, but could not hold her expression and finally burst out laughing. “You know perfectly well, mate of mine, I have not met with my brother in more than three seasons, despite the fact he lives but two turns from us. I need to make sure he is well, and is happy.”

“With a sibling like you to take care of him, I guarantee he is happy.” Bardu pulled her into a hug and kissed her.

She snuggled into him, reveling in the warmth and comfort of him. “I only wish he could find a bond mate who is as fine for him, as we are for each other.”

“Irina, he is a grown man. Allow him the freedom to find his own mate.”

“I just want him to have as wonderful a life as we do.” She pulled back, and her face lit up. “I will take Glo to show to him. I was so surprised when Lord Eduardo gifted me with a pyrock. He told me he has always thought it necessary for his Praetor to possess a pyrock, so that when they tour Kaylin, they are able to contact him without delay. He also said males are less nurturing of pyrocks than females. So, I was given Glo instead.”

Bardu tapped her on the nose. “So, worry about the well-being of Glo and allow your brother to worry about himself.”

Liandock appeared at the gates of his small village, arms outstretched to welcome Irina and her mate. “Welcome to Lanfair.” He walked over to Irina, his kilt swaying like

that of a highland warrior, helped her down from her horse, and drew her into a tight hug. “I have missed you, Irina. It has been many seasons since you visited me.”

She just grinned and clung to him.

Holding onto Irina, Liandock strolled over to Bardu and held out his hand, and they performed the complicated Rifellan greeting between men. Liandock bowed his head to Bardu. “Praetor, have you yet managed to bring my sibling under control?”

Bardu’s eyes widened, and he stared at Liandock in mock horror. “Control her? Are you mad? If I attempted to control her, she would force me to sleep in the stables.”

Irina humphed, and glared at them both.

Liandock gazed at Bardu, his face set in a serious expression of curiosity. “In the stables, Bardu. Would she truly do that?”

“Liandock, I have no idea why you never warned me what a vicious mate she would make. I am forced to believe that if she had her way, she would geld me.”

Unable to contain themselves any longer, the two men burst into laughter.

Irina stood still, hands on her hips. Eyeing the two of them, she gave a long audible sigh. “Are you both quite finished?”

They smiled at her, and with one on either side of her, they headed into Liandock’s section of his house. Just before they entered, Liandock tilted his head at the stable master, who nodded and took control of their horses.

Irina called out, “Stop.” She rushed over to her horse and took a small cage from the pommel before running back to the two men. “I must show you my gift from Lord Eduardo.”

Liandock guided them toward the dining lounge. “It is time for a noon-turn meal, so we can sit and you can show me the gift.”

The three sat at a table in the hall, and a serving person brought them food and drink.

Irina placed the small cage on the table in front of her. She beamed up at Liandock. “Meet Glo.” She reached into the cage, withdrew the warm furry pyrock. With a proud smile, she presented the small creature to her brother. “Is she not adorable?”

Once Glo had been shown to them all and had passed admiring examination, they settled down to eat and enjoy a lively conversation.

Liandock gazed at his sister and her mate. *They love each other so much. I am so glad Irina found a mate worthy of her.*

After the meal, Irina asked to visit his workshop again. “I love seeing all the new stones you have found, and all your new metal creations.”

Liandock turned to Bardu. “Do you also wish to visit my workshop?”

“No, because I have seen your workshop before. However, since I am aware you have made changes to the buildings of the village, I will examine what you have done. Some of these changes, might be worth recommending to other villages in our land.”

They left the hall, and Irina and Liandock headed for his workrooms.

Irina gazed around Liandock’s workspace and exclaimed in delight. “Wow. You have expanded the length of your workshop. And you have put all the display cases in the cool side of the room. I approve.”

“I have not made you any metal adornment in many seasons. I will do so now.” He removed his shirt and, bare-chested, approached the kiln and opened the door. He donned massive protective gloves, picked up a stone clamp to remove a small pot of melted silver, which he poured onto a slab with thin lines carved into it. Once done, he placed the rest of the melted silver back in the kiln and closed the door.

He carried the slab to a section of stone, which was set near a doorway, and through which a pleasant breeze blew. He removed the gloves and set them aside.

“While the silver hardens, let us sit over here.” He led them to seats in the cooler end of the room. In front of them were trays of cut crystals and smoothly polished rocks of all colors and sizes. “You may choose a stone or a crystal.”

“Before I do that, I want to ask about your attire. You wear long leather boots done up with laces that reach up above your knees. Why so high?”

“When the metal comes from the kiln, it is molten and could cause great pain if it landed on my skin. It tends to splash on the floor, so my legs are most in danger. The boots protect me.”

“You are always bare-chested when you work, so there is no protection for your upper body.”

“I only use small pots of molten metal, and pour it downwards, so there is no possibility of any landing on my upper body. As you can tell, the heat is intense in the workshop, and leaving the upper part of my body unclothed means I can have more air around me, which helps to cool me down.”

“And the kilt?”

“Ah.” He grinned. “You are now no blushing untried female. You are a mated woman and no doubt understand males more than you did as a child. A kilt allows air the ability to flow around my male parts. It is much cooler, and” — he grinned again — “I have a tremendous sense of freedom.”

Irina blushed a pale pink. “Oh.”

She eyed him. “I have realized something, brother. You are a most handsome male, and if any woman walks into this workshop and catches you in this state, Rifellan pheromones or not, she will be most taken with you.” She shook her head at him. “You could have any woman you want. Why have you not had them?”

He stared down at her. “Who says I have not?”

Irina turned red again. “Oh Liandock, really.”

“I told you before Irina. While not a warrior, I am a male with strong needs. I would be a fool not to enjoy what is available.”

Irina swallowed.

Liandock placed a tray of crystals in front of her. “Enough about me. You may choose a crystal.”

She put out her hand to hover over a dark blue stone with a circle in the middle of it, but Liandock grabbed her hand. “No. Not that one. It is not for you.”

Startled, she withdrew her hand and reached instead for a pale pink stone, shot with streaks of silver.

Liandock smiled. “This is indeed for you, but not just yet. I will place it in a silver cage and hang it from a chain in this corner. It will wait for you, and when you retrieve it, it will give you immense joy.”

Irina shook her head and gazed at him, a puzzled expression on her face. “I will wait for it. But do not make me wait too long.” She gazed around the familiar lines of his workshop. “Liandock, I see that you still possess the glorious deep green stone that you found at the Crystal Dunes, before we left for Kaylin.” Irina cleared her throat. “You said it was for someone who would need the protection it would give. You have kept it for so many seasons. Have you still not met the woman you say it is destined for?”

“I have not. I keep the stone because it is for someone who is exceptional. She will need much protection.”

“So, who is it?”

“I do not know, my dear one. But I will when I see her.”

Irina continued to visit Lanfair once every four seasons for the next seven circuits to sit in peace and comfort in Liandock’s old workshop. Peace had come to Kaylin, and although Liandock no longer lived there, his memory lingered on throughout Pridden. The village of Lanfair was maintained as a remembrance of a fine Metal Master. Pridden became an example of a world of peace and prosperity, due in part to the care of Lord Eduardo and his sibling, Lord Markallo.

Irina entered the workshop and found a chair. While seated, she heard Liandock's voice as if he sat beside her. *"It is time for you to accept your crystal."* She rose and walked over to the corner where the necklace rested. She lifted it and placed it over her head and experienced a warm glow within her heart.

Liandock's voice spoke again. *"My dear sister, Irina. The joy this crystal represents is for you and Bardu. The progeny you bear within you will bring you both much pride and happiness. Your daughter will become a warrior of note, and your son, will use this workshop to become an even greater Metal Master than I."*

"You will bring new life and love to the world of Pridden."

J. M. Tibbott