

# The Loremaster



by: Dymitia

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## Chapter One

The door of the all but empty tavern opened to admit a blast of frigid wind, a swirl of snow and a warmly dressed woman followed by three escorts. The last man closed the door, and the four began removing their fur-lined cloaks, shaking the white coating they'd accumulated crossing the courtyard from whatever conveyance they'd arrived in. It spattered onto the stone floor and lay for the time it took them to unencumber before it began turning to slush.

Comfortably warm at his table near the hearth, Stormcaller watched them head for the doorway to a private dining room just to his right. He took careful note of all four as he sipped his spicy mulled cider, an act so deeply ingrained by both nature and training it was automatic.

Although the shortest of the three men in her entourage topped her by a head, there was no question the creamy-skinned beauty with the elaborate braid of honey-gold hair was in charge. She

glided over the floor, her chin high and her violet eyes daring any of the riff-raff around her to look at her with anything other than respect. Her dress, the same violet as her eyes, was of the finest wool and clung to impertinent breasts and a backside that begged to be cupped in eager hands.

Which was exactly what each of her companions was hoping he would be doing once the lady had assuaged her winter claustrophobia with this ridiculous outing in a blizzard. Only she and Storm knew two of them were doomed to disappointment. The bond between her and the tallest, a sharp-eyed man who might as well have had "commander" tattooed on his forehead, was unmistakable. The others were there as a shield to keep the evening from becoming any more intimate than the lady desired.

She glanced at him as she passed before vanishing through the draperies that covered the doorway, and he caught her flash of attraction...and curiosity. He was used to that. Although he and other Drevnya now mingled freely with the other races of Karlathia, the old stories of their sexual talents and their eagerness to display them had never been laid to their proper rest. The first, of course, was true. Except for the rare outlaw, however, the second was not.

Still, there were times, like now, when Storm might have capitalized on that curiosity to benefit a depleted purse had he not been who and what he was. Loremasters with integrity didn't prostitute their formidable skills, and he had integrity despite the opinions of many members of his guild. His participation in the Great Search had the blessing of

both the Chief Elder and the Archmage, though he doubted anyone would have believed it would carry any of the Searchers this far.

The drapery parted, and the lady's lover emerged, the barely suppressed sneer on his face sufficient evidence of his thoughts even if his aura hadn't been riddled with flashes of dark red. He was military, Storm decided, but not army. A constable, then.

"Lady Merelynda bids you to join her at dinner, Nomad."

Amazing how much contempt could be inserted into a single word. His people hadn't been "nomads" for more than three decades.

"Advise Lady Merelynda I've already had dinner."

It amused Storm to watch the man struggle. Part of him was delighted he wouldn't have to share table with a Nomad. The other part was shocked and outraged that an itinerant would dare to calmly refuse the demands of his beloved. Well, his desired, anyway – his thought patterns when focused on Lady Merelynda were a hodge-podge of love, desire, irritation and frustration.

In the end, the man's training as a keeper of the peace prevented him from initiating a taproom brawl. As he returned to the back room, Storm centered and used his Farsight to follow.

A brief spasm of anger tightened the woman's face when she heard her gracious invitation had been refused. Then, to his surprise, she stood, bade her companions stay where they were and came herself.



Merelynda had decided to brave the snow, over the strenuous protests of Hallor and the boys, more out of boredom than any real desire for the Green Pony's pedestrian fare—or so she had thought. The sight of the trim, broad-shouldered man with the rich mahogany hair sitting alone in the empty tavern, however, suggested her not inconsiderable intuition might have been at work.

Hallor was, on reflection, not the best choice to extend her invitation for dinner; his distaste for both the errand and its target had been all over his face. She did love him, really, but the times she had allowed him into her bed had shown his amorous swordsmanship wasn't nearly the equal of his military skill. That made her leery of the permanent arrangement he had offered, although she was running out of excuses.

Now that she had the Nomad right in front of her, though, she considered that her original plan might change. He wasn't tall—full-bloods like he obviously was never were. Nevertheless, it was clear his compact body was solid muscle, and he radiated an energy that resonated along her spine and settled in wet heat between her legs. Pale skin any woman might envy stretched taut over high cheekbones and a firm jaw in an oval face with just hint of a widow's peak. His lips were full, his forest-green eyes slightly tilted under thin, dark brows; and where his long hair had dried it reflected gold glints from the firelight. He sat with his forearms on the scarred table, hands loosely clasping his mug, his face unreadable.

Merelynda wasn't used to that sort of indifference from men, and she wasn't inclined to accept it now. Allowing her hips just a bit more freedom to sway, she flashed him her very best sultry smile.

The next instant, her head filled with a vivid image of those long-fingered hands cupping her naked breasts, the thumbs circling and teasing her nipples. The surge of desire that slammed through her made her stagger, and she stopped to stare at him. *Well, that answers my first question.*

"So," she said, taking the final two steps to stand in front of him, "you *are* the one they call the Loremaster." She heard the slight unsteadiness in her voice and hated the advantage it gave him.

He never turned his eyes from hers to survey her charms the way all the other men of her acquaintance did.

"I'm not 'called' anything," he said, his voice a soft, musical tenor that skipped down her spine and made her already peaked nipples tighten even more. "I am a Loremaster of the Wind Clan Drevnya."

Wrestling her body under reasonable control, she pulled her spine straight and put on her business face.

"I'm Merelynda Suttoth, of the Merchant House of Suttoth. I understand your services are for hire. I have a problem that requires the skills such as Loremasters are reputed to have."

His mouth curved in a slow, sexy grin, revealing a dimple in his right cheek. He knew she knew there was no "reputed" about it. Yes, she was definitely going to have to put this one in his proper place once he'd tended to the job she needed done.

"Given the personal nature of the situation, I'd rather not discuss it here," she went on. "I'd like to see you in my offices on Tall Cedar Street at noon tomorrow."

"Would you?"

*Damn, how could two words be so arousing? Or was he still...doing whatever it is Loremasters did?*

"I'm prepared to pay quite well for your...expertise." There. She had managed to lace some condescension into her tone.

"Then, tomorrow at noon," he said, raising his mug to his mouth with both hands to drink while looking steadily at her over the rim.

Merelynda spun on her heels and stalked back to her escorts, her body still vibrating and a hungry ache in her loins that made her suddenly glad she had company. She also cherished a thrill of victory. Despite his arrogance, it was clear the Loremaster needed money. She would make sure he earned every coin before she sent him on his way.



## Chapter Two

The snow ended before morning, but it had left enough accumulation that people were still clearing paths and areas in front of stores when Storm set out for his appointment. Dressed in an ankle-length wolfskin coat, his hood up against a sharp wind, he drew no more notice than any other brave pedestrian. This was good, since he was using his power over water to walk atop the snow rather than sinking into it. Some people reacted badly to such tricks.

Merelynda Suttoth believed he was coming to hear her proposition because he needed money. Which, of course, was true. Even so, he wouldn't have braved what he already sensed was going to be a serious clash of wills if he hadn't felt real concern for someone else underlying the woman's manipulative behavior. That aroused his curiosity, and it was his curiosity that had pulled him away from the comfort and security of the City of the Clans in the first place. Living tucked away safely in the Valley of the Elder Ones might appeal to most of his people, but he wanted to see more of the world the Drevnya had

kept away from for three thousand years.

The Merchant House of Suttoth occupied the entire space between two cross streets, most of it comprised of a busy warehouse. One of the workmen pointed the way to Merelynda's offices. To the right of the endmost of three broad loading doors, a smaller door opened onto a staircase. At the top of the stairs, a hall traveled the length building, doors punctuating the left side. The first of the doors stood open, and when he stepped inside he saw a row of clerks on their high worktables on his left and two offices directly in front.

The right hand office door stood open. A woman sat at a large desk seemingly engrossed in a stack of papers, although Storm knew she was aware he had entered. Her inattention was deliberate, and his empathic sensitivity caught the defensive anger underlying it.

She was as dark as Merelynda was fair. *A touch of Mage blood there*, Storm thought, taking in the caramel tone of her skin, the deep brown of her tightly braided hair and the long bones of her arms and upper body. She would be as tall as he when she stood, but she was painfully thin. She had the strong jaw of the Magi, too, and neither her lack of weight nor her choice of hairstyle did anything to soften it. The nape of his neck tingled—she may be why he was in this frigid northern corner of the known world.

His study was interrupted when the second door opened, and Merelynda stood aside inviting him within. She was dressed for business in a severe blouse and dark serge skirt, but the costume somehow enhanced her sensuality rather than

mitigating it.

She closed the door then leaned against it, arms folded across her ribs to accent the thrust of her breasts. It was likely very effective with men who didn't know it was deliberate. Storm shed his coat and hung it on a rack on the wall next to her. She was wearing a light scent, florals with an underlying hint of musk—and it slammed through him like a forest fire. Maintaining his impassive expression only with the greatest effort, he fought his response under control.

Many expensive perfumes contained a touch of Kresh musk, which had an aphrodisiac effect on other species as well as on those who produced it. Very few knew that effect was magnified a hundred times for Loremasters. Fortunately, its being a natural rather than a manufactured substance, he could render it harmless; so by the time she accepted he wasn't going to react and led the way to a wide sofa his body was reasonably recovered.

"You saw my sister when you came in," she said, turning so she sat facing him.

"The woman in the next room? I saw her. I take it she's the reason I'm here?" That did excite him; usually, getting close enough to the ones he was looking for to test them wasn't that easy.

"Exactly."

"Just to make it clear, I am not a seducer. If your plan is to have me romance the lady, for whatever reason, I can save you time by refusing right now."

She flushed, partly in anger but there was also a bit of real embarrassment mixed with it.

"I love my sister, Loremaster Stormcaller," she snapped. "I want her to be happy. And she can't be, ever, not the way she is."

"What way is that?" He said it with quiet encouragement in his tone. No question, her concern was genuine.

"Let me give you the background first." Merelynda shifted slightly and clasped her hands in her lap. Her face lost all its flirtatiousness, and she gave a deep sigh before she continued. "Kerelle is really my adopted sister. My mother died shortly after I was born, and three years later my father remarried. I can't imagine what he saw in the woman. All the stories I've heard about my mother said she was delightful, warm and loving and full of laughter. My stepmother couldn't have been more opposite."

"Which perhaps explains her attraction for a grieving widower."

Merelynda glanced up at him; she had clearly entertained that thought herself and her look said she appreciated having it confirmed.

"Sephorma—my stepmother—set out immediately to 'instill discipline in this obviously spoiled child.' My father, thank the Light, would have none of it, and eventually sent me to live with my mother's sister. He would visit me there, and I would visit him here but always with a nanny in attendance. Kerelle was adopted when I was six. Unfortunately, she couldn't escape the 'discipline.'

"I learned later that after her arrival my stepmother moved to her own rooms and never entered my father's bed again. When he sought solace

elsewhere, as any healthy man would, she turned against him—and tried to take Kerelle with her. She failed, mainly, because my father was too kind and loving to make anyone hate him unless they were as twisted as Sephorma. But she did manage to corrupt poor Kerelle's view of men and women and the intimacy they share before she finally died three years ago."

Storm had already seen where this was leading. He felt sad for both women, but what Merelynda wanted from him was impossible.

"Mistress Suttoth, I understand your problem, but I can't...fix... your sister against her will or desire."

"But you won't be." Merelynda jumped up and paced to her desk then turned back. "At least, I don't think so. Last year, at one of my parties, Kerelle met a young man and fell in love with him—and he with her. In the end, though, Sephorma's poison was too strong. His efforts to woo her terrified her, and in the end he gave up. She cried for days, Loremaster."

She came back to drop onto the seat beside him.

"She said she would do anything—*anything*—to have been able to accept his love. And then I heard about you, only I couldn't find you no matter how many people I sent looking. So, you see, I can't believe it isn't an omen that you're here. That you aren't meant to help Kerelle. And I'll pay you whatever you ask."

The difference between this woman and the one who had tried to use her considerable charms to entice him the night before was astonishing. Still, her genuine concern for her sister was colored by

seething discontent with her own intimate experiences. She wanted him, wanted to see if he could give her what her lover couldn't once he had tended to Kerelle; and she wasn't fussy about how she achieved her goal. Merelynda Suttoth was a strong-willed woman used to getting what she wanted and unaware that her best quality was sometimes her worst flaw.

"I can make you no promises I will succeed," he warned.

"I understand that."

"And I must have a completely free hand and absolute control, no matter how strange you may find my methods. I will do nothing to cause harm—you must trust my word on that."

Her face was a study in relief and hope.

"Agreed."

"My fee is ten gold scaddi, whether I succeed or fail."

"If you succeed I'll double it."

"Then all that remains is to learn for certain if the lady is willing."

Merelynda leaped to her feet again and all but ran for the door.

"I'll get her now, and you can ask her yourself."

## Chapter Three

All Kerelle had seen of the man her sister was waiting for were a pair of boots and a great mass of fur. She knew he was looking at her, but she couldn't so much as lift her eyes from the inventory list she wasn't reading to glare at him. She hated it when people stared at her, especially men. She knew she was too tall, too thin, too ugly, had heard the snickers and felt the scorn when she went to one of Merry's parties and sat in her corner waiting for enough time to pass she could leave without being rude.

If she had any backbone, she would just tell Merry she hated those parties and refuse to go; but her sister still had a misguided hope Kerelle would somehow absorb the gaiety and transform from a caterpillar to a butterfly. For a brief moment last summer, with Jontas, Kerelle had almost begun to believe it was possible. Until he wanted to do more than hold her hand and talk about books. Until he put his hands on her and tried to kiss her.

"Kera, do you have a minute?"

Merry stood in the doorway, her lovely face

flushed and excited. It was the way she looked when she had found some wonderful present for her sister and couldn't wait to give it to her.

"I'm just rechecking the inventory," Kerelle said, getting up to follow to the adjoining office. Did this have something to do with the furclad stranger? Was he a potential new customer? But Merry never needed her help to win those over. She could sell a love potion to a Mage.

He stood with his back to them, looking out the broad window behind Merry's desk; but he turned when they entered and his eyes locked on Kera's. Her breath stalled, and she stopped so suddenly she stumbled. He was surrounded by a glowing cloud of light, white and gold with streaks of rich purple and vibrant rose.

*So, a calm voice said in her head, you can see the aura and you have mindspeech. Does anyone know?*

Panic washed over her. She had never told anyone of her Talents. How did he know?

*They are the most common among those of mixed blood. You needn't be afraid – I won't betray your secret.*

She felt his smile, and a warm wave of reassurance engulfed her fear and tempered it, though it didn't disappear altogether. She also understood why the man was here.

"Merry, you didn't –"

"Kera, you promised. You said if I could find the Nomad you would let him help you."

Kera didn't know whether to laugh, cry or vomit.

"The choice is yours, Mistress Kerelle," the Drevnya said, his real voice as soothing and kind as



his mental one. She felt his concern, but it only made her humiliation all the worse. How could Merry have shared her secret with a total stranger, one of a race of sorcerers that derived their Power from the very act she found so utterly repugnant?

*The choice is mine, he said. So, all I need do is tell him it was all a mistake. Something said in a moment of weakness.*

But as she opened her mouth to put the thought into words, the pain and sorrow she'd felt the day Jontas said goodbye, told her he loved her but could not cope with her rejection of the slightest physical manifestation of his feelings, resurrected from the depths in her soul where she'd believed it dead and buried. Was it possible? Could she condemn herself to a life of loneliness when this handsome, kind-eyed stranger might be able to break down the barriers that kept her from a normal life?

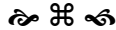
She glanced at her sister and saw the plea on Merry's face. Beautiful Merry, who embraced her sensual self without reservation, who loved her despite everything that could have kept them separated. Tears burned in her eyes, and she wrung her hands and chewed on her lower lip.

"I-I...would like to try."

An instant later she was in Merry's arms as her sister hugged her and babbled that she knew everything would be all right. Kera looked over her sister's shoulder at her "physician," who hadn't moved from the window. The clouds suddenly broke, and an enterprising ray of sun lanced through the window and turned his hair into flame.

Kera shivered and prayed she hadn't just made the

biggest mistake of her life.



Storm felt the turmoil in the young woman as she wrestled with her revulsion. For a moment, he thought she might succumb to it, or that her sister had overestimated her willingness to face her restriction. Merelynda, however, knew the younger woman well—in the end she agreed. Still, he wanted to hear it from her when they were alone.

“I’ve had a room readied for you at our home,” Merry said after the two women had finished hugging. “I’ll have one of the clerks—”

“I would rather Mistress Kerelle show me, if she can be spared.”

Again, their eyes locked, his and Kera’s sky-blue ones. She blushed and broke the gaze.

“I’ll just get my coat,” she murmured and hurried out of the room.

Nodding politely to Merry, Storm followed her, snatching his own coat off the rack as he left. In the adjacent office, Kera was fumbling with buttons. Tossing the mass of fur over the back of a chair beside the door, he went to her and caught her trembling hands in his. Calling a wisp of power, he closed the door, lowered her arms to her side and began fastening her coat, watching the emotions crossing her face in flashes.

“Now,” he told her, his voice warm and intimate, “tell me again that you wish me to help you.”

The tears she had held back earlier returned, and

one trickled down her cheek. He paused, and caught it on his thumb, hearing her breath catch when he touched her face. His eyes holding hers, he raised the droplet to his mouth and licked it off.

"I don't want to live my life a lonely, bitter woman like..."

"Like your mother?" He went back to buttoning her coat, the last fastening lying directly over the top of her thighs. As his fingers touched it, she stepped away and did it herself.

"Yes."

"But you have questions about what I will do to you."

She blushed again, and all the tales she'd heard about Drevnya swirled through her mind—some true, some false, some a little of both.

"Nothing, Kera. I will do nothing to you that you do not wish me to do and not until you ask it of me. The Drevnya are not the lascivious creatures mad with lust some would have you believe. We are a race for whom intimate joining is a source of immense power, which we may use to enhance our natural talent for magic. A loremaster takes that one step further. He or she is born with the ability to find and absorb those intimate energies, collect them and then focus them. To do it properly requires years of training and discipline, and to misuse it for personal pleasure is a crime that carries one of the few death penalties among the Drevnya."

He turned to put on his coat, allowing her time to decide whether or not she believed him. When he turned back, she had tied a hooded scarf around her

head and pulled on gloves. She stepped past him, tossing him a look that was now more curious than frightened.

"Our house is just across the street," she said.  
"Have you eaten?"

"Not since breakfast."

"Then I'll show you your room and you may answer my questions at midday meal."

## Chapter Four

Storm lay in the dark, his sensual nature appreciating the comfort of the wide bed with soft linen sheets and thick down comforter. Despite his early misgivings, he looked forward to his task after spending most of the afternoon with Kerelle. Once he had answered her questions, most of which were the usual misconceptions, he had given her a lesson in Shielding. She had learned quickly, to both his relief and hers, so her fear he would use his mind to manipulate hers to hasten success was gone.

Then it had been his turn to ask questions, and as he listened to her talk about books and her work and her special project to help the elderly in the city who had no families to see to them, she revealed a deeply passionate nature. True, these were substitutes for the carnal passion she feared and longed for, but that she had it was sufficient indication her problem was "curable."

When, after they had dined with Merry and the evening turned to night, Kera escorted him to a different room than the one her sister had chosen, any last doubts that she was committed vanished.

Now, he lay in the quiet dark, the only sound the soft crackle of the fire in the hearth. In the next room, Kera had finally fallen asleep. When he sensed she was in the deeps of dreaming, he got up, fastened on a narrow breechclout against the off chance she would awaken unexpectedly and removed the tie to let his hair flow over his shoulders. Then, silent as only a woods-trained hunter could be, he went to the unlocked door that connected the two rooms and slipped into hers.

He stood for a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust to even less light. Kera denied the pale glow of the single half-moon access on her privacy, and the heavy drapes were drawn as well as the draft curtains. The lady herself was an anonymous mound of down-filled comforter.

Moving to the side of her bed, Storm touched her sleeping mind lightly, pushing it deeper into slumber, then slowly drew the covers down until she was revealed from head to foot. The season in her dream might take a brief journey into winter now that her warm cocoon was missing, but he hoped to balance that momentarily.

Instead of a gown, Kera wore a loose pair of men's woolen undergarments. Storm unfastened them all the way from her neck to her groin, spreading the two sides to reveal as much of her bare skin as he could. Her breasts were surprisingly full, and the pale-pink tips puckered and hardened in the sudden chill. He climbed onto the bed and knelt over her lower thighs then positioned his open hands as close to the bare skin of her shoulders as he could without touching.

Letting a trickle of Power flow through them, he began moving them in small circles, working his way down.

By the time he reached those lovely breasts, he could sense her arousal beginning. He spent extra time on them, circling in spirals from the luscious outer curve to the taut nipples that begged for his tongue. *Not yet, little one, he thought, but sooner than you expect, I think.*

Then he continued down, channeling the energy through the tips of his fingers and making smaller spirals over her belly. She had grown wet, and the scent teased his nostrils and stiffened his cock. He let the pleasant ache grow a little before grasping the Power it triggered and sending it through his hands as they hovered over the tangle of dark curls at the apex of her thighs. He felt the pressure building, sensed the first light spasms of the muscles in her now-slick channel and quickly closed her garment. Pulling the covers back in place, he returned to his room and closed the door, pausing only to be certain her body finished what he had started.



Merelynda punched her pillow, as if a different shape to the down would solve her problem and let her sleep.

She had given the Drevnya magician a room next to hers, so she could slip easily into it and get what she was determined to have before he concluded his task and was gone. She'd come home, already hot and

wet with anticipation, to discover Kera had moved him all the way to the other end of the hall, next to her.

As bad as that was, though, his apparent indifference to her all evening had been worse. Oh, he'd been polite, but her usual flirtations games had slipped off him with no effect at all. At least, none that she saw, and in the five years since she had been free to indulge in the pleasures a man's mouth and cock could provide she'd grown adept at recognizing the signs of attraction and desire.

In another man, the loremaster's apparent indifference would have been insulting; but she suspected it was just a sign of his ability to control those desires. If he could do that in bed, too...

The thought turned the tingle between her legs into a full-blown ache, and she groaned and slid her hand down between the wet folds. She envisioned Stormcaller tied naked to her bed, helpless and aching with want of her as she teased and tormented him until he begged for relief. She pictured herself impaled on his rigid shaft, driving him to the edge again and again, and her hips bucked as her practiced fingers worked.

Suddenly, her covers were thrown back, and she opened startled eyes to find the object of her fantasy standing beside the bed wearing only a tight breechclout that did nothing to hide the hard bulge beneath. For a moment, the image of how she must look crossed her mind, lying with her nightgown at her waist, legs sprawled, nether lips wet and swollen. She smiled, and began moving her hand again,



watching him through narrowed eyes. She knew the effect this had on Hallor.

He didn't watch as all the others had. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand away. Still smiling, she reached with the other, but he seized that one as well, holding both wrists in one hand and extending them over her head.

And then, as if it had never been, her arousal was gone. Just as always, she felt hollow, unsatisfied—though she understood that this time it was because he had stolen it. She fought against his hold but he was as strong as he looked.

"You brought me here for your sister," he said, his face stern and his voice carrying a warning. "Don't meddle with something you don't understand, Merelynda, or you may find the consequences are not what you might wish."

He let her go then left her room as silently as he had entered. She yanked down her gown and pulled the covers back over her and fell asleep plotting how she would show the arrogant Drevnya bastard a whole new meaning for "consequences."

## Chapter Five

**K**era woke wrapped warmly in her covers, her body suffused with a wonderful languor she had never experienced before. It was as if every muscle in her body had melted and was only just becoming firm again. Yet there was, at the same time, an odd sensation of...incompletion.

Then, as vividly as when she had been in it, she remembered her dream.

She had been working on the floor of the warehouse, as she often did, supervising four young men as they unloaded a wagon. She had suddenly become aware of their bodies—the way their clothes clung to broad shoulders and strong legs, the ripple of muscles beneath bronzed skin—and had felt warm pressure in her nether regions. Her breasts grew full, the nipples tightening against her blouse. For some reason, in her dream, she had worn no chemise.

One of the workers set a crate next to her and glanced up, and she realized he could see those aching peaks. He stood up slowly and smiled, then took her writing board from her hand and set it down. He reached toward her and brushed his palm

over her breast.

A hot jolt sang along her spine and turned the pressure between her legs to wet simmering. Part of her demanded she run, run, get away before something awful happened yet, as often happened in dreams, her legs refused to obey her.

Now the other three had seen; and they surrounded her, watching as the first man, whose name she knew was Adron, caressed her other breast, savoring her response. He leaned over and kissed her, chastely, just as Jontas had done that last time she had seen him, but the touch of these lips made her body all soft and filled her with a need she couldn't define.

Then, again in the way of dreams, she was suddenly naked. She thought to cover her breasts and her secret place with her hands, but two of the others held her arms, gently yet irresistibly. Dream Adron cupped her breasts, his thumbs circling the nubs then flicking. Finally, he took them between thumbs and forefingers and lightly pinched and twisted.

Dream Kera moaned, and felt something wet seep from her secret place and onto her trembling thighs, and when Dream Adron bent over and sucked one aching bud into his mouth and teased it with his rough tongue she would have fallen to the floor had the others not been holding her.

She felt hands on her thighs, and again the desire to flee swept over her, only to be drowned in the unbelievable sensations pulsing from her tormented breasts downward. Lips brushed the damp flesh, fingers gently urged her legs apart, warm breath blew over her hot slit; and she bucked her hips seeking

relief from the incredible pleasure-pain.

The man at her feet went to hands and knees. Dream Adron carefully bent her over the kneeling man's back as the others released her arms. Hands slid over her naked ass, kneading and rubbing, and then spread her legs wide. Something hard touched the mouth of the needy channel and...

She had sprung awake, waves of pleasure pulsing through her, her thighs soaked, shame and delight battling for dominance. In the end, she had turned on her side, her knees drawn up to her chest. It was, after all, only a dream.

She had seen what occurred between men and women when she was thirteen and stumbled on a stable hand and one of the laundry maids when she had gone to the stable for her riding lesson. All the grunting and moaning, the faces contorted with what had obviously been pain. She had run back to the house and sought comfort from her mother, her only real companion. Mother had listened, her face growing darker and harsher by the word; but when Kera thought to end her description Mother had demanded every detail. The hand and the maid were gone the next morning.

The images of what she had seen, however, wouldn't leave Kera's mind, and she discovered she experienced a peculiar sensation in her forbidden place when she recalled them. A sensation she discovered she could enhance by rubbing a small button of flesh there until she would explode in delight. It was one of the few delights she had, living under Mother's strict supervision that allowed for no

real association with others her age.

Until she was caught, lying in her bath stroking her slit, feeling the delicious tension building. Mother had hauled her from the tub, dragged her to the bed, forced her across her lap and spanked her until her bottom burned and she sobbed out apologies and promises. Never again had she touched herself except for the brief moment it took to wash.

Which she did now, cringing at the icy touch of the cloth. Then, dressed in her concealing workday skirt and blouse, thick warm stockings and sensible shoes, she started downstairs for the dining room.

The Loremaster was in the atrium wearing only a pair of loose white trousers. He was doing some sort of dancelike exercise, moving with a fluid grace that caught and held her eye. Most smaller men of her acquaintance were either thin or stocky, but his body was powerful. Wide shoulders narrowed down to slim hips, and sculpted muscle rippled and bunched under sweat-sheened skin tanned the color of honey. The image of the muscular young men in her dream came back full force, and so did the tingle at the bottom of her belly.

He spun on the toes of one foot, his body flowing into position as his eyes met hers. He smiled, but he didn't stop immediately, not until he had repeated the earlier series of movements.

"It is called *shan lahr*," he explained, walking toward her. "It is exercise and meditation and self-defense, all in one. I can teach you, if you like."

"You would be wasting your time," she said, her voice sounding priggish even to her own ears. "I am

hopelessly clumsy. I would only end up looking like a cow in a marsh. I've had at least six dance masters give up in despair. I had no desire to attempt a seventh."

He laid his hand over hers where it rested on the banister. Her first impulse was to pull hers back, but she told herself it would make her look like a silly schoolgirl. He picked it up and turned it over, studying the palm as if it held some secret message only he could read. Then, he looked up at her and shook his head.

"Incompetent teachers always blame their students," he said. "I am now your teacher, and I have never been incompetent. Tomorrow, you will join me here and I will begin instruction in *shan lahr*."

She started to refuse. There was an intensity in his dark-green gaze that terrified her yet challenged her at the same time. She didn't believe he would succeed with her. Whatever it was that made Merry so delight in the touch of her many male admirers had been excised from Kera's innermost being. Still, it was only fair she cooperate, however useless she considered the exercise.

"Very well, but you've been warned."

"You will need loose clothes—a man's shirt and trousers are best."

"I have some I use for gardening. I will be here, Loremaster—"

"Storm."

"Storm. Now, however, I must have my breakfast and be at my work."

He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to the

center, and now she did snatch it back. She clenched it in a fist as she swept past him and into the dining room. *Did he really lick it?*

## Chapter Six

Kera wiped her palms against the legs of her baggy trousers, angry at herself for being so absurdly nervous. Usually, she rather enjoyed slipping on the loose, oversized men's garments—they made her feel oddly free. It made no sense for that to change simply because she was with Stormcaller.

He was dressed—or, rather undressed—as on the previous day, wearing nothing but a pair of soft-tanned leather breeches that came only to his knees and nothing else. Kera was careful to keep her eyes from the slight bulge she had noticed as she approached him. He was definitely wearing nothing else. Perhaps that was why she was so unstrung.

"I can teach you in either of two ways," he said. "I can simply perform the first level of *shan lahr* and you can follow what I do."

*And be dreadful at it and end this nonsense. Why did I ever agree in the first place? I –*

"But I think that is not the best way for you. You will resist, and it is resistance we must teach you to



avoid.”

He smiled, but she blushed anyway. She knew he hadn’t read her thoughts. He had promised he wouldn’t, and for some strange reason she actually believed him. It wasn’t any more comfortable to have a stranger understand her so well.

“So,” he continued, “you will stand facing me, as if you were my image in a mirror. When I begin the level, you will reflect my movements as exactly as you can. If you make a mistake you will simply ignore it and continue. We will not stop until the level is complete. Then, we will do it again. Do you understand?”

It was a waste of time, but she nodded acceptance. Suddenly, he knelt at her feet and circled her left ankle with his hand. She automatically tried to yank it from his grip.

“You cannot do *shan lahr* wearing shoes. You must be as close to the earth as possible.” He unlaced her work boot as he spoke and tugged it off, tossing it off to the side. His other hand now slid up underneath her trouser leg, warm against her skin as he peeled off her sock.

“I c-can—” *do the other one*, but he had already moved to it, repeating the process. This time, though, he seemed to tug a little too hard on the boot. She tottered and had to grasp his shoulders for balance. His skin was as smooth as it looked, satin over steel; her palms tingled even after she was steady again.

The carpet was soft against the soles of her feet, slightly chilly despite the blazing fire in the hearth. It was oddly comforting, as if that contact of her body

and the floor provided added stability.

"Now," he said, "do as I do."

She began by copying his stance, feet parallel and about a foot apart, spine straight, arms at her side. He slowly raised his arms, palms flat and downward, to shoulder level, and she aped the movement, although with none of the grace he managed. *I should just stop. I'm going to look like an utter fool!*

"Look at me, not the inside of your head," he commanded without losing the soft tone in his voice.

She forced herself to concentrate, and after a few minutes she realized she was able to follow his simple movements so quickly that she almost seemed to be moving with him instead of after him. She became aware of every part of him—and of every corresponding part of her. Her first awkward attempts acquired a flow, which seemed to generate an internal counterpart that made her feel vibrant with joy and energy. This was *fun*!

At last, they sank to their knees, eyes locked. A drop of sweat—who would have thought such seemingly simple exercise would be so exhilarating?—began to trickle down the side of her face.

Stormcaller leaned forward, closer...closer. She sat frozen as he licked the salty drop, the tip of his tongue rough against her cheek. Part of her screamed for her to flee, but something about the warm energy flowing to the very ends of her fingers and toes kept her in place as he shifted and brushed his lips over hers.

It was such a very brief contact, barely more

pressure than a breath. Then he did it again, this time just a little harder. The third time he caught her lower lip between his, sucking it gently and flicking his tongue over it.

The tingle in her toes moved upward, to her thighs; and she was abruptly aware of how the rough cloth of her trousers felt against the skin there.

He moved away far enough to see her face, and to her surprise she felt a pang of disappointment. Unconsciously, her own tongue traced the path his had just taken, and he smiled.

He cupped her head in both hands and drew her toward him, slanting his mouth across hers. He teased her with his tongue, and without thought she opened and allowed him entry. He brushed her cheeks, explored the sensitive inside of her lips, and made a soft moan when she met his invasion and matched it. The tingling in her thighs had become shocks of heat snapping into her secret place, and she felt her underdrawers growing wet. Her skin felt...lonely.

The probing, teasing kiss seemed to go on forever, and when he finally ended it she realized she had moved. She knelt straddling his thighs, her fingers laced through his hair, her breasts pressed against his naked chest. She felt dizzy and excited and mortally ashamed. What if someone had seen her?

She scrambled off him and slid on her backside well out of his reach before leaping to her feet.

"I-I must go," she stammered, dashing around the room to collect her boots and socks. "I have work—"

"Merelynda told me today is one of your free days."

Damn Merry, anyway! She would have a word with her sister about being so very helpful at the earliest possible moment.

“Go and bathe, Kera, and we will have breakfast.”

She had intended to spend the rest of the morning—perhaps the rest of the day—in her room, trying to salvage some shred of her dignity. Something in the tone of his voice, as soft as it was, told her if she tried that he would come to fetch her. Boots in hand, she literally ran for the stairs, struggling mightily to erase from her mind the sensation of that hard bulge she had tried to not notice pressing insistently against her aching core. Wanting to forget that for a moment she had raged against the layers of clothing that lay between the two.



Merry ducked back around the corner and flattened against the wall as Kera fled the opposite way down the hall to her room. She hadn't been prepared for what she had just seen going on in the atrium.

To watch clumsy Kerelle moving with such utter grace and balance was shock enough. The effect watching the two of them had on her had been worse. The kiss that ended that little dance had soaked her drawers, and she knew if she didn't get some relief she'd never be able to concentrate on work.

Just as she peered around the corner at the top of the stairs, the front door opened, and as if responding to a cue Hallor stepped inside. The Drevnya was

gone—probably out cooling off with a roll in the snow if the size of his swollen cock had been an accurate indication of the effect his little “exercise” had on himself. That was what she really wanted, but under the circumstances she would take what was provided.

“Merry, I need to speak to you about your ‘guest.’” the big man said, striding to the bottom of the steps.

“Well,” she said, leaning against the wall so her breasts stretched the front of her blouse in an invitation he couldn’t misinterpret, “why don’t you come up here and talk to me about it.”

## Chapter Seven

**T**he soft click of the latch alerted Kera that Storm had arrived to brush her hair and braid it for the night.

He had entered her room with that same gentle warning his third night in the house. She had frozen, certain he was there to further the experience they had shared after her first *shan lahr* session. Instead, he took the brush from her hand and begun drawing it in long, fluid strokes from her scalp to the waist-long tips. He had done the same every night for the week since, and she would not have believed such a mundane act could feel so...intimate.

He always wore a robe, soft and white and tied with a braided gold cord, and soft ankle-high boots. His own hair was loose, lying in cascading waves of contrast to the pale cloth. He smelled of spicy herbs and pine and something indefinable she suspected was just his own essence.

"Your hair lies in my hand like warm spring rain," he said. It was the first time in all these private nights he had spoken. "Your skin glows like warm caramel in the lamplight."

"You're wasting your time, Loremaster." Why did he have to spoil everything with flattery? "I've been looking in this mirror for twenty-two years."

"You have been looking in the mirror," he agreed, "but you have not been looking at the image within it. Look!"

As if his command acted directly on her brain, she suddenly found herself actually *seeing* her reflection—and was astounded.

The too-thin face with the too-wide jaw had filled out, developed gentle curves and softer angles. Her complexion glowed, a faint blush of pink coloring the cheekbones she had always thought too high, too sharp. It was almost like looking at a stranger.

Storm leaned over to set the brush on the vanity and began to loosely braid her hair at the nape of her neck. It swept in a deep wave from the crown of her head along her face, framing it in a dark wave. He leaned over again to retrieve the ribbon to fasten it and paused with their images side by side. His mirrored eyes held hers for a long moment, and she couldn't breathe. The warmth of his body touching her on one side made the other seem suddenly chilly.

He tied the ribbon with their gazes still locked in the silvered glass. Slowly, he reached around and slid the top button of her sleeping garment free, then the next and the next down to her waist. Now it was his hands she watched, those long fingers that so deftly exposed her without once touching her skin until he trailed them along her collarbone. That, too, had acquired a softening layer of flesh—the morning exercise had impacted her usually poor appetite, and

this was the result.

She caught his hand and held it away from her, her stomach fluttering with a mixture of fear, embarrassment and curiosity. The gap in her nightwear revealed the round inner edges of her breasts. What would happen if...?

Slowly, her eyes fastened to his reflection, she slid her thumb under the edge of the opening and pushed it down her arm. He drew in one quick breath but otherwise was still. She repeated the movement, exposing herself to him.

"Shall I touch you, Kera?" he murmured, his Drevnya accent suddenly strong. "Shall I hold your beautiful breasts in my hands, run my thumbs over your nipples and make them tighten into buds? Shall I tease them and make them ache for my mouth and my tongue."

Every word went through her like arrows of fire, and her skin seemed to take on a life of its own, craving the contact of his hands.

"Tell me, Kera," he purred, leaning down so that his warm breath trailed over her bare shoulder. "Tell me what you want."

"T-touch me," she whispered, feeling powerful and wanton and she couldn't think what. "Please," she added, but it was unnecessary. He slid his fingertips down her naked chest to her breasts, which suddenly felt heavier. He spiraled his delicate touch from the base to the nipples, which had already grown taut with anticipation, then gathered them in his palms, kneading lightly as his thumbs flicked and taunted. Without conscious thought she leaned back, giving



him even greater access. Dampness seeped her secret place, moistening the soft wool covering it.

He took her peaks between thumb and index finger, pulling gently and rolling them. He leaned down further, pressing nipping kisses from her shoulder to her neck to her ear, catching her earlobe in his teeth and sucking it. She shivered, but it wasn't from cold. Sensation passed over her in building waves, and the dampness between her legs had become a tingling ache.

"Tell me, Kera," he demanded. "Tell me what you want."

But she didn't know what it was her body was asking for, couldn't translate its response to his tormenting hands into words.

"I don't...I can't..."

In one swift movement he slid one arm around her shoulders, the other under her knees and lifted/spun her around to face him. He pushed her knees apart and knelt between them, slid his fingers into her hair on either side of her head and pulled her mouth to his.

She whimpered and opened to his silent command, his tongue invading, seeking, inciting. It was all the first kiss had been and much, much more; and she responded in kind, tasting him, devouring him.

*Wanton slut!* Her mother's voice rang in her mind. *Dirty, dirty girl!* It didn't matter. Not now. Not with his hot mouth tracing a path down her neck to the hungry mounds eagerly waiting for it. She clutched his shoulders as he licked and sucked and nipped, retracing his fingers' earlier path, and when he drew

the first needy bud into that wet heat her hips bucked and she groaned. The crotch of her nightsuit was soaked, and she could smell her desire sharply sweet.

"Touch..." she blurted. "I want to touch..."

He raised his head, and she could see that his eyes were nearly all black. She knew what that meant, had seen it when Hallor looked at her sister; and that sense of power came over her again. He wanted her, yet with a single word she could end this moment. It wasn't at all like her mother had described, a brutal man taking his satisfaction from an unwilling yet helpless woman.

"Shall I stop, Kera?" he asked, though he still teased her breasts with those talented fingers.

"N-no," she managed. "I want...to touch you."

He got to his feet and moved away half a step.

"Then undress me."

Skin tingling, hands trembling, she undid the cord and dropped it on the floor. His robe gaped, and she was looking at a rigid bulge that seemed on the verge of escaping the brief loincloth that was all he wore underneath. Did he ache as much as she was?

She, too, got up, and shoved the robe off his shoulders to pool at his feet, then knelt and pulled off his boots. She ran her hands up his calves and over the sculpted muscles of his thighs as she stood, then traced the broad expanse of his chest. She had seen him with only slightly more clothes on than this, but this was somehow different. She felt like an explorer discovering the secrets of a long-hidden treasure.

She leaned to lap one of his nipples, savoring the taste of sweat and male. His scent seemed to seep into

her blood, ignite her nerves. She slid her arms around his waist, sliding her hands over his tight buttocks, kneading the hard muscle as she pressed against him. He closed his eyes, and breathed a soft moan as her lower belly made contact with his hardness. She expected him to grab her, throw her on the bed, ease himself into her slick heat, but he didn't move.

*I want to watch, she realized. I want to see what I do to him.*

She stepped around behind him, briefly grateful that their nearly matching height allowed her to view their images in the mirror over his shoulder. He was watching, too, his eyes intent as she teased his nipples with her nails, slid her hands over his chest and down his flat belly to the edge of his loincloth. She brushed him, and he bucked against her palm. She cupped one hand over him, rubbing gently as with the other she untied the last barrier and let it drop.

For a long moment she simply stared. Then, at last, he moved, spreading his legs apart and covering her hand with his to wrap her fingers around the hard length. Slowly, he taught her what to do, then curved his arms behind him and pulled her against his back, holding her by her hips as she slid fingers along him. Moisture oozed from the head, adding the scent of the sea to the heady mixture that seemed to engulf her. She rubbed her mound against his backside.

He caught her wrist.

"No more, now, sweet Kera. We have no need to hurry. Let me give you as much pleasure as you've given me."

He gently brought her around to face him then

took her in his arms and kissed her until she was breathless and the ache between her legs was verging on pain. He put his hands on her suit, slowly peeling it down as he sank to his knees, stripping it from one foot, then the other, planting kisses on her instep that initiated a trek all the way up one trembling leg before he turned to the other. On the second trip, he continued to the joining, and when he lapped his tongue along the swollen lips and sucked the tiny aching nub just below the bone she felt a flood of pleasure so intense she would have fallen had he not held her upright.

He swept her up and carried her to the bed, laying her on the edge with her legs hanging. He spread them so wide she knew all her most intimate parts were there for him to see, and she was about to struggle away when his mouth descended again and she was beyond anything but sensation. He opened the lips with his thumbs, running his tongue along every fold and crevice. He circled it around the pulsing center of her need, lapping, nipping, sucking. Then he replaced mouth with thumb, thrusting his tongue into her quivering, burning core as he rubbed. She wrapped her legs around his head, her hips thrusting against him as the sweet agony built and built until she disintegrated into a million pieces, only vaguely aware that the screaming voice fading into oblivion was her own.

## Chapter Eight

**S**torm lifted Kera onto the bed, relieving the ache in his groin a bit by converting the arousal to energy and using it to turn back the comforter before he laid her down and stretched out beside her. He moved her so she was half on top of him, her head resting on his chest, then caressed her back as she recovered, stirred, remembered.

As he'd anticipated, her old feelings of shame returned full force, and she tried to push away.

"Be easy, *shi'menye*," he told her, refusing to let her go as he watched the deep rose glow that surrounded her turn muddy and flash with bile green and black. He cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her face up; her eyes darted everywhere but him. "Look at me, *shi'menye*."

She did, but her body stayed stiff and still. She licked her lips, too innocent yet to know the effect that had. The relief he'd gained using his magic came to an abrupt end, and her eyes widened when she felt him against her belly.

"You-you..." she tried, then blushed fiercely, and he prayed to the Lord of Light she would overcome

her fear because even his iron control was being sorely tested—and he had no more covers to remove. “You didn’t...”

He slid her up so they were face to face, putting his hand to the nape of her neck to draw her mouth a breath from his.

“There is no joy in taking pleasure unless it is given as well,” he said, and shadowed her tongue’s path with his. “And you are virgin, a state your people prize. I would not change that without you were awake and willing.”

He sucked the lip he’d teased then added the other, knowing she would taste herself on his mouth. She opened for him, and he thrust his tongue into that moist heat in place of the other.

She breathed a whimpering sigh, and his soothing hand slid lower to her backside, kneading and circling, then past to her upper thighs and back. The other went to her luscious breast, and when he twirled the already hardened peak she groaned and pressed against him.

Then it was her hand that sought and found, her fingers wrapping his shaft as he’d shown her, her thumb circling the crown where a trickle of moisture had appeared. She moved her fingers lightly from head to base, discovered his sac and gently explored it. He moaned, and when she would have started her tormenting slide again stopped her with his hand on hers. Too much more and he would either explode or send the furniture flying, neither of which would serve his purpose—or hers.

But he had underestimated just how much her

barriers had cracked. She sat up, and a hot, sexy smile that would have shocked her an hour before crept across her face. She shifted, leaned down and took him in her mouth. She sampled first, tasting him like an unfamiliar candy, swirling her tongue across the head, then around, flicking the taut skin on the underside. He became all sensation, using the last of his control to thrust gently while she sucked and lapped. She left off only to change position a little and slide her mouth down his length. She savored him like the new treat he was, experimenting with her lips and tongue and light nips of her teeth to see his response while she teased the swollen head with her fingers.

Then she sucked one of his balls into her mouth, sliding her hand up and down him, sending cascades of pleasure through him that did nothing to ease the flood building in his groin.

He grasped her knee, pulled her leg over his chest, caught the rich scent of her own arousal as her swollen folds opened to his gaze. She was so wet, her thighs glistening. He traced each side, circling her entrance with his thumb before gliding it up to the bud of her deepest pleasure. She cried out when he rubbed it, and he took that opportunity to pull her on top of him so she was as available for his tongue and hands as he was to hers.

But he felt her stiffen, and understood it still made her uncomfortable to be so utterly exposed. He rolled her onto her back and twisted so they were again face-to-face, his one leg over her thighs, claiming her mouth again. She fought against the weight holding

her down, wanting to press her length against his, needing the feel of skin against skin.

He raised his head, studying the soft blue of hers.

"You are beautiful, shi'menye," he said. "Dessen' shi'menye assat t'ashmen."

"What does that mean?" Her voice was warm, husky, deeper than normal – her pleasure voice.

"Your body delights in my touch as fireflowers bend to light."

"What's a fireflower?"

She combed his hair with her fingers, trailed her fingertips over his face as though memorizing it.

"It is a tiny blossom that grows in the shade of the ancient trees of the Great Forest. Because it gets so little sun, it has a tiny bulb below its petals where it stores the light. If you go to a patch of them at night and tease that bulb, it bursts into sparks and the others all turn to face it."

She blushed again, though not as much as before, and teased his mouth with nipping kisses and laps of her tongue.

"You like to look at me...down there?"

"Yes. Your woman's part is also beautiful, and it gives me pleasure to look on it and touch it and taste it. Have you never looked at yourself?"

The deep color that flooded her face was answer enough, not that he'd expected otherwise. He had already learned all he needed to know about the reason for her resistance to physical pleasure. Taking a deep breath, he focused on his body, slowing his heart rate, shifting the blood flow away from his groin. He would pay for it later, but he couldn't do



what he knew needed to be done when his cock was in charge.

He got up and went to the vanity, bringing her hand mirror and the lamp. The lamp he set on the bedside table. The mirror he propped against the pillows he piled against the headboard. He sat facing it then guided her over between his legs, bending her knees so that place she was so ashamed of was reflected in the mirror.

"Look, shi'menye," he commanded gently.

She sat with her eyes closed for so long he began to think she would refuse. Then, finally, she looked.

He took her hand, curling all but her index finger under, and guided it over the slick folds.

"You used to touch yourself so," he murmured as her initial resistance faded. "You knew pleasure."

"She punished me," Kera whispered, and a tear trickled down her face. "My bottom was sore for days."

"She was a sad woman, shi'menye, and she needed you to be sad as well. But she is gone, and the only one left to punish you for taking pleasure in your body is you." He kissed her shoulder, licking and nipping her satin skin to the pulse beating in her throat. He replaced her hand with his own. "Look, Kera. Watch me give you joy."

He teased her pleasure bud with one hand and her breast with the other. She leaned against his chest, but kept her eyes on the image in the mirror, and he felt how the sight of his darker skin against the deepening rose of her most secret place made her hot and yearning. When he slid first one finger, then two

inside her she lifted her hips to meet the erotic invasion.

"It was...never...like... this," she panted.

"Together is always better."

Her hips were bouncing faster as he pushed her again toward the edge.

"Not...together..." she gasped, and suddenly spun around kneel facing him. She grasped him, guided him to the neediest part of her and sank onto him. She winced when he penetrated her barrier, but only for a moment. She who claimed his mouth, her tongue mimicking the lower joining. She was tight and slick, and he groaned with the clutch of her inner muscles. Even loremasters had their limits, and he had been holding back much longer than was good for him. What he wanted to do was throw her onto her back and pound into that tormenting heat until he burst.

Instead, he lay back, pulling her with him, then cupped her backside in his hands and lifted her until only the very tip of him was inside her. She braced her hands on his shoulders and wriggled; and he let her down, slowly, slowly, watching her face. His thumb caressed her pleasure bud as he lifted her again...and again...faster and faster, felt the pressure build, felt her inner muscles twitch, released her bottom to pull her down for a hot, deep kiss as she worked him. His last thread of control snapped and he was no longer loremaster but only male joined to female. His body roared with exquisite hunger, his universe contracted to that burning point of contact, growing tighter and hotter until it exploded as the soft tunnel of her inner core clenched him over and

over and her shriek of completion carried him into release.

## Chapter Nine

**K**era realized she was humming softly as she hurried down the hall. When was the last time she had done that—or wanted to?

That nagging voice in the back of her head insisted she should feel totally ashamed of all that had happened the night before, but it was very dim and far away. Her body seemed to vibrate, and she still felt jolts of pleasure when she remembered the soft kisses as they lay joined, the tender way he had fetched a cloth and cleaned her blood-streaked thighs then tucked both of them under the covers.

Granted, she had been disappointed to discover Storm gone when she woke. She had fallen asleep nestled against him, her head on his chest so she could hear the steady beat of his heart. She hadn't felt him leave. It occurred to her then that he was likely downstairs doing the full twelve levels of *shan lahr* so he would be ready to repeat the first with her. That had propelled her out of her warm cocoon and into her exercise clothes.

She turned at the top of the stairs, all ready to greet him—and he wasn't there.

The voice in her head was suddenly louder. *See, you stupid fool? Did you really think he cared about you and wasn't just doing what Merry paid him to do? Likely he's collected his money and is long gone.*

Cold seeped from her brain to her heart and took up residence. She felt sick, betrayed and irretrievably humiliated.

But wait. Perhaps he was already finished and at breakfast. As she looked at the slant of pale winter sunlight coming through the front windows she realized it was actually much later than she usually got up. She hurried down the stairs to the dining room.

The table was set for three, but none of the place settings had been touched. Bitter tears flooded her eyes. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* She dashed them away with the back of her hand as one of the serving maids arrived and began filling glasses with juice—one...two...three!

"Mayli, have you seen Loremaster Stormcaller this morning?"

"He went to the solarium, miss. Looked pale, he did."

So, he hadn't left yet—probably had to wait for Merry to come downstairs to collect his fee. If she were going to regain any of her lost dignity, she would have to confront him now.

The earth-and-growing things aroma of the lush indoor garden embraced her in warmth as she opened the glassed door and stepped inside. The solarium, built by her father for his first wife, had been a neglected ruin by the time his second died. For the

last two years, she and Merry had used what time they could spare to bring it back to life, preferring to do the work themselves rather than leaving it in the hands of a gardener. It was, Merry said, the only thing she really had left of the woman she had never known.

Kera swept her eyes over the room, but lattice frames divided the room into paths; and at first she could see nothing. Then, in the far corner, a brilliant flare of green light exploded. Her indignation and anger were joined by curiosity, and she padded in her soft slippers to where she could see.

He was naked, kneeling beside a raised bed she had planned to prepare for planting when spring came. A third of it was turned, the desiccated soil loose and cleared of the dead hulks of rosebushes that had once grown in it. Only, the soil was now black and rich, and Storm worked on the untouched section, using a trowel to break the hardened crust and turn the dirt over.

All of which was odd enough. What kept Kera from voicing the accusations roiling through her mind was the way he moved, as if the least twitch was mortal agony. His body was drenched in sweat, much more than even the steamy air in the solarium would warrant, and he paused frequently to take a deep shuddering breath.

He made another row of loosened earth, and it looked gray and dead beside the part already finished. Laying the trowel aside, he plunged his hands into it, working them down as far as they could go. Another deep breath—and suddenly he flashed

with that green light, so intense that Kera had to turn away and cover her eyes. It didn't prevent her from hearing what she'd missed before, a soft moan of incredible pain.

Her own agenda forgotten, she moved to his side and dropped to her knees beside him, reached to touch him then stopped, afraid she might add to his suffering. He looked at her, the skin stretched weirdly over the bones of his face as if his skull were on the verge of breaking through. His eyes blazed glowing green in the dark hollows of his eyesockets.

"Gods, Storm, what's wrong?"

He attempted a smile, and she wished he hadn't. It was a parody that made her shudder.

"A small price I pay for the privilege of having given you pleasure." His voice was as strained as his expression.

"You're in such pain because of me?" It was guilt that drove her tears this time, both that he was so tormented on her account and that she had been so ready to doubt him.

"No, shi'menye, no." He sank back on his haunches and took her in his arms, though she sensed it cost him. He held her on his lap like a child, pressing her head against his chest and resting his cheek on her hair. "It is how I chose to be with you that causes this, not you. I said it poorly. It is what loremasters do—accumulate the Power special to Drevnya until it is needed. It is just that usually there is more than one, so if a great deal of the energy is created the burden can be shared."

She could feel the tension in his body—even now

he was battling pain to reassure her.

"What can I do?" She shifted back to her knees. "And don't tell me 'nothing,' because I won't believe you."

For an instant she thought he'd say it anyway. Then he sighed and picked up the trowel, holding it out to her.

"It would help if you would dig, shi'menye. It hurts less if I don't have to move."

She took the tool from him, but only to take it to a potting table nearby. From a rack by the door that led into the yard, she took a tilling fork and a pair of gloves, stepped up onto the bed and began to dig.

That was how Merelinda found them an hour later, just as Storm had finished infusing most of his overdose of magic into the drained earth, soaking it with vibrant fertility. They had worked in silence, but Kera had noted the way he moved with greater ease as they completed the job.

She saw the hungry way her sister slid her eyes over Storm's naked body. Curiously, she felt not jealousy but pity. She had always envied Merry, who never lacked for male companionship and seemingly reveled in her body and the pleasure she could derive from it.

However, her own sensual surrender seemed to have provided her with a new and sharper eye for true feelings, and she realized in that moment that Merry was just as unhappy as she had been. She had abandoned her exploration of her femininity before taking more than a few cautious steps into that unknown territory. Merry had dashed into it



headlong — and now was lost.

Without haste, Storm got to his feet and put on his loremaster's robe, which had lain on a nearby bench. Only then did he acknowledge Merry's presence with a nod.

"It seems you've been successful," she said, and Kera felt her face flame. "How was he, little sister? Did he live up to Nomad reputation?"

A hundred things to say in response, split half and half between defensive and hurt, dashed across Kera's mind. Instead, she drew on an inner strength she would have denied existed a day ago and, using Storm's broad shoulder to balance, hopped down onto the floor.

"I'm sorry, Merry," she said, her voice carefully neutral as she tugged off her gloves, "that's really none of your business. And I'm shocked you'd be so rude to our guest. That's not like you."

Merry stared at her, not used to a sister who didn't blush and stammer and protest weakly. She was about to say something then snapped her mouth shut and turned on her heel, stalking out of the solarium and slamming the door behind her.

Kera felt Storm's hands on her shoulders, and on impulse lowered the Shield he'd taught her to use. Instantly, she felt him connect, mind touching mind.

*You still have a nasty headache.*

*It will pass, shi'menye. Was that wise, making her angry?*

*She'll get over it. Merry can be shallow and demanding, but her heart is good. She's just more used to dealing with a mouse than a fireflower.*

She felt his smile, and suddenly a possibility crossed her mind that sent a tingle into her lower regions.

*Oh, definitely, he answered. But it is not something to be undertaken lightly.*

There was an undertone of reluctance in his mental voice.

"It is dangerous," he continued aloud. "To share so deeply can destroy the boundaries of who we are, so that forever after we are not one but one and part of another. The result is usually madness."

"So, I shouldn't consider it?"

He stepped to her side, and she turned to look at him. His eyes were dark and penetrating, and he studied her for a long moment.

"It might be possible, if you are willing to accept the constraints. Tonight?"

Suddenly, she was afraid, though she couldn't have given a name to what caused it. At the same time, some deep part of her craved what that ultimate merging of body and mind.

"I-I need to think about it," she said. "And I'm late for work."

Feeling like a coward, she fled upstairs for a bath.

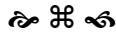
## Chapter Ten

**M**erelynda sank into her place at the table, tempted to shatter the glass of red juice against the wall and imagine in was the Nomad's blood. She knew she was being idiotic. He was only doing what he had been hired for—and doing it well, if the softer curves of Kera's body and the glow on her face this morning were indicators. There was just something about his apparent indifference to *her* that goaded her to want some kind of revenge. Well, and curiosity. All her life she had heard about the Drevnya and their strange powers, powers she had really only understood when she was old enough to appreciate what they meant.

She loved Hallor, for all his faults and his inability to give her the rapture she heard other women brag about. He did whatever she asked him to do, but there was still something missing, something she couldn't define that kept her always teetering on the brink but never falling. Something a man who was supposed to know all there was to know about such things would be able to show her.

They came from the solarium, looking like a pair of

farmers, heading, no doubt, for the bathing room. An idea sprang up in her mind, and Merelynda let it grow. She studied it, looking for a flaw and finding none. Then, she summoned the steward and began to plan a party.



"I've decided we need to celebrate your...coming out," Merry announced when she finally arrived in the office for her first appointment. "I've sent out the invitations for a week from tomorrow. That's not too soon, is it?"

Kera yanked herself from a daydream in which she had been sharing the previous nights pleasures with Jontas Permentu. It was a moment before her sister's announcement completely registered. She smiled.

"If I said yes would it make any difference?"

Merry grinned in response.

"Not really. But you won't take this short notice as an excuse to hide in your room, will you? And please persuade the Loremaster to come."

"What makes you think I have any influence over him?" *And why is it so important for him to be there?*

Merry gave her what she had always called the "big sister look," the one that said she should know without having to be told.

"Now he's shared your bed he'll be happy to do whatever you want. Men are like that, if they think it will mean getting more—and you can't convince me that in the end a Drevnya isn't just like any other man."

"Drevnyi."

"What?"

"The masculine form is 'Drevnyi.'"

That earned her the other familiar look, dubbed the "what's that got to do with anything" look.

"Well, I want his masculine form at the party." Her expression, which had gone a bit sulky, cleared as suddenly as a summer shower. "Please?"

"I can only promise to try, Merry." The outer door opened, and she heard one of their clerks greet the newcomer. "I think Mistress Medwine is here."

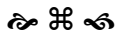
Turning around, Merry welcomed the woman, a local weaver who also acted as a jobber for others in town and the surrounding farm country. Before she left for her own office, though, she looked over her shoulder, a pretend glare in her eyes.

"And wear the burgundy gown," she commanded, then flashed another grin and went to work.

Kera sighed. As usual, Merry was doing what she did best—getting people to do what she wanted the way she wanted. At least this time there was a possibility Kera could get what she wanted, too.

From a drawer of her desk she took a sheet of vellum, dipped her pen and began to write.

*Dear Jontas...*



His headache somewhat abated by a strong dose of willow bark decoction, Storm decided the slightly warmer than usual day was a good time to survey the local herbalists to determine which offered the best

quality. He would need to replenish his supply before he moved on, which he expected would be within a day or two, weather permitting.

Truthfully, he had expected to need more time to break down Kerelle's barriers and dissuade her of the false notions of intimacy between man and woman her embittered mother had tried so hard to instill. Merelynda had given him the impression their father had all but abdicated responsibility for his younger daughter to his wife, as if the child were a pet given as a gift. On the other hand, he didn't really trust Merry's intentions, no matter what Kera said. It would behoove him to be on guard from now until he had left Overton far behind, if the images she had been savoring his first night in her house were any indication.

"We need to talk, Nomad."

"Captain Hallor." He'd sensed the man approaching from behind, sensed also the broiling anger and jealousy swirling inside him. They had encountered one another in passing this past week, enough for him to know the King's Man truly loved Merelynda—they were well matched.

Unfortunately, Hallor didn't know that, and it was only natural he would consider a Drevnyi—and a Loremaster, at that—as significant competition.

"I was on my way for my midday meal and thought I would invite you to join me."

He didn't wait for an answer, just strode away. Smiling a little, Storm followed in his wake to a nearby tavern redolent with the delicious smells of hot stew, fresh bread and good ale. They were early

enough to have a choice of tables, and Hallor led him to one in a rear corner separate enough from the main room they would have some privacy.

After giving their order to the barmaid, they sat on opposite sides of the small wooden surface and studied one another. Hallor was a big man—at least six feet two of solid muscle. Handsome, too, his strong face darkened by weather so his bright hazel eyes were startling under thick black brows. He wore his hair cropped short as was common with the militia, but the style complimented him.

“Are you fucking Merry?”

*Nothing like getting right to the point.*

“No, nor do I have any desire to. She is a beautiful woman, but my business is with Mistress Kerelle.”

Hallor clenched and unclenched his left hand—his sword hand, by the calluses—and the muscles along his jaw rippled as he gritted his teeth. He couldn’t decide whether that was the truth or not.

“Captain, do you know much of my people?”

“Some,” he said. “My granddad was a King’s Man, patrolled the Great Forest when your people lived there.”

“Then perhaps you know that we hold earth and water sacred as our source of power, and that an oath made on those sources cannot be false?”

Hallor nodded once.

“Then I swear to you by the Power of Earth and Water that I have not, nor will I, touch Merelynda Suttoth in the way you fear.”

“Not even if she asks?”

“Not even if she asks.” The barmaid arrived with

their food and drink, and Storm waited until she left before he continued. "I wish I could help you, Captain. It is hard to love a woman who fears giving herself to you because there might be something better around the corner."

For a moment, anger flushed the other man's face again; but then he sighed and drank off half his ale.

"No way to hide how I feel from one of your kind, I suppose," he muttered, oblivious to the implied insult. It didn't matter. Storm had developed a thick skin in his hundred years of wandering the world.

"It doesn't take a Drevnya to know when a man is in love, Captain. And, if it helps, she does love you, in her own limited way."

"I asked her to marry me. She said she couldn't marry a man who was away from home seven days out of ten. So I applied for the job when the local magistrate retired."

"Congratulations, Magistrate."

Hallor glanced at him, saw he was sincere and grimaced.

"Save that for the wedding." The man's tone dripped sarcasm.

They finished eating in silence, and Storm watched the tenor of Hallor's thoughts flash through his aura. He could tell the man wanted to ask his advice, but pride won over frustration. Bad enough to ask another man how he should go about winning his woman. Asking a Nomad was impossible.

For now, at least.

They parted on peaceful terms with a clasp of forearms, and Storm finished his browsing. The



afternoon was dying as he returned to the Suttoth house. He spent the time until Kera returned working in the solarium, providing an occasional magical boost to struggling greenery.

The evening meal was surprisingly pleasant, at least until Merelynda announced her plans for a social evening she expected him to attend. Since he couldn't leave until he was paid and she wasn't likely to pay him until after her party, he dismissed that protest without a second thought. His attempt to escape on the grounds he had nothing appropriate to wear was dismissed out of hand—he could wear his Loremaster's robe, she insisted.

He held Kera's hand on the way to their rooms that night, deliberately keeping his mind separate from hers, although he could feel her frustrated probing. He rarely went this far with his lovers, even those with sufficient magical talent to do it. There were dangers inherent in that much intimacy, and not just for his partner.

Yet his intuition told him it was right to share that deepest level with this woman, that her mind was strong, her body more than eager and her heart committed elsewhere—for now, at least. For her, he was a key to free her deepest longings. In addition, the merging would allow him to fully explore the range of her Talent. He had begun to suspect she might have a greater future than as a simple businesswoman in a cold northern city.

He stopped at her door and opened it; she looked at him with surprise.

"When you are ready, come to me," he murmured,

tracing the tip of his finger over her full lower lip.

"I'm ready now."

"Are you?"

She started to say "yes," but the stern look on his face kept her silent. He watched her eyes, saw her understand what he wanted her to do. That once this happened between them she would never, could never, be the same again. She had instinctively postponed it this morning, and he suspected she had considered why all day while she worked.

"Goodnight, Loremaster Stormcaller," she said.

He kissed her mouth tenderly and went to his own room to wait.

## Chapter Eleven

Kera smoothed the soft fabric of her robe, adjusting the fall of the fabric. She had almost forgotten she owned anything so blatantly feminine, a gift from her father on her sixteenth birthday “for her wedding chest.” Her mother had sneered at it when they were alone, but she hadn’t dared destroy it the way Kera knew she’d wanted to.

This wasn’t her wedding night, but it seemed appropriate she wear something special. Provided she summoned enough courage to go through with this...merging. It had seemed like an exciting idea on the spur of the moment, but after a day to contemplate it the thought of becoming completely submerged in another mind frightened her. Yet, at the same time, it drew her with the fascination of the unknown. What might she learn while she and Storm were one, what secrets would lay open to her?

He had come to her when she asked him to, teaching her things about her body and the depths of delight it could experience. They met each morning for *shan lahr*, and she had reached the fourth of the twelve levels. She had also become acutely aware that

the looks she received from the industrious clerks working at their ledgers when they thought she wouldn't notice had the same spark they had once reserved for Merry. It made her feel powerful in a way she never would have imagined, and more than once when a task was so familiar she hardly needed to think about it she would drift into a daydream in which she called one of them into her office, locked the door and played with him some of the games she shared with Storm.

Slowly, she felt her doubt and misgivings fade. Tonight, as she sat across from him at the dinner table, she knew she could wait no longer. The sensual merging of body and mind and soul he had described called to her; she had to experience that farthest limit of pleasure.

Well, she wouldn't find it out hiding in her room. With one final deep breath, she crossed to the shared door and entered the Loremaster's room.

There was no light save that from the fireplace, which burned high to ensure the room was warm enough. Once her eyes adjusted, it was enough for her to see Stormcaller, sitting crosslegged above the bed. A foot above it.

He opened his eyes slowly, and for a flash they glowed with brilliant green light. In that instant before he sank slowly onto the mattress, she understood completely just how very different he was from anything or anyone she had ever known.

"Close the door," he ordered softly without moving, then, when she complied, "Lock it and bring me the key."

He took it from her hand, which she now saw was trembling slightly, and placed it on the pillow.

"Between now and the moment I tell you otherwise, you may at any time take that key and return to your room. When that moment arrives, the doors must be locked—any unexpected intrusion is dangerous. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes."

He was a stranger, and not just because of what she had seen a moment before. The warm lover of the previous night was gone, replaced entirely by the Loremaster. He frightened her, and yet at the same time she felt a warm shiver of excitement deep in her innermost being.

"You wish to know the soul-bond, to share not just your body with me but your mind and spirit and all that you are." His voice was ice and stone, with a cutting edge.

"Yes."

"And you understand there is danger that in this sharing you can become lost to yourself? That all you are may become so enmeshed with all I am you will never again be able to regain all of it?"

She hadn't thought of that possibility, which was likely the reason behind this unexpected yet clearly ritual interrogation. Did she want to risk becoming what she had been up till last night—incomplete?

"Yes."

His expression never changed, but his eyes softened briefly as a compliment to her courage. The warm shiver passed through her again and left an ember glowing at the joining of her thighs. The Storm

she had come to know was still there.

"For your own safety," he said, and though his voice was still stern the ice had melted, "from this moment on you must surrender your will to mine. I will have absolute truth from you—do not say what you believe I will wish to hear or what you wish to be so. No matter what I ask of you, you must do it without question or hesitation. And before you answer, know that this is not as easy a thing as you might believe."

"I received a thorough education in obedience."

He climbed to his knees and drew her onto the bed to kneel facing him. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her, gently at first and then with increasing demand that sent searing waves of desire along her veins. She whimpered and pressed against him, only to be thrust back at arm's length.

"I am not speaking of obedience, Kerelle. I am speaking of surrender. Total and absolute surrender. There can be only one will in this room tonight. Mine."

She was about to agree when she realized she couldn't. Part of her was already rebelling, denying that anything could require what he was asking. She cherished her hard-won independence, and even knowing him as well as she felt she did she could not entirely agree to trust him that far.

Almost without thinking, she glanced at the key.

*No. If I run away now I'll only wonder for the rest of my life what I missed. I can do it. It can't be that hard, no matter what he says.*

"I'll do whatever it takes."

He swung off the bed and went to a low chest of drawers along the wall by the door to the hall. He stood with his back to her for a several minutes, and she felt her arousal congeal back into fear. Did he sense her resistance? Stupid question, of course, he did. How many other times had he done this, with how many other women?

An unexpected flash of jealousy stung her, surprising her. It was like being jealous of her Healer for having other patients. What was wrong with her all of a sudden?

"Take off your clothes, Kerelle."

He said it without turning around, but it was not a request. Scrambling off the bed, she tugged on the ribbon holding her robe just as he spun around.

"Slowly."

Confused, frightened, unsure yet determined, Kerelle stripped off her lovely, lacy robe, folding it carefully and placing it on the top of the nightstand. He watched her, moving his eyes over her as if memorizing each inch of flesh and hair. Even before she peeled off the gown, she felt naked under that burning scrutiny. Naked, nervous and very, very excited. Her breasts felt full, the nipples puckered and tight. Her belly felt filled with melted silk, and liquid desire flowed to wet her already aching groin.

Then the silence began to drag. He didn't move, didn't speak, and she began to feel an urge to cover herself with her hands, undo her hair and let it veil her. She licked her lips, shifted her weight. The excitement faded, replaced by the nagging voice.

*You're letting him make of fool of you. He's laughing at*

*you, standing here exposing yourself to him. What do you really know about him, anyway? What if all his kindness and understanding and consideration were pretense. You let him handle you like a whore – now he's going to treat you like one.*

"Do you wish to leave, Kerelle?"

Yes!

"No."

"Come here."

Grateful for any change, she did as ordered, praying she had passed whatever test this had been and he would once again be the familiar Storm. Except he wasn't.

"Get on your knees."

She sank down, even more uncomfortable having him looming over her. She hadn't realized how important it had been that they were the same height. It had made her felt like his equal, to a degree, at least. Crouching at his feet eliminated that.

"When you answer, you will address me properly," he commanded.

"Yes, Loremaster."

"Go lie on the bed on your back."

"Yes, Loremaster." She started to stand.

"On your hands and knees, Kerelle."

She stared at him, saw nothing but cold stone. She wanted to ask him why he was doing this, what he thought to achieve by treating her so.

*There can be only one will in this room tonight. Mine.*

Carefully, lifting her knees so as not to abrade them on the carpet, she crawled to the bed and climbed onto the mattress, staring up into the shadow



of the canopy.

"Spread your legs and raise your hands above your head."

Her arm brushed the cool metal of the key as she obeyed. *Pick it up and get out of here! He lied to you. What he's promised is impossible.*

"Do you wish to leave, Kerelle?" he asked again.

"N-no." She pushed the nagging doubt away as she listened to his soft footsteps across the floor.

"That's twice you've lied to me, Kerelle."

"I just—" *need to know why you're doing this* she meant to say, but as she started to explain she turned her head to look at him. Terror snared the words in her throat when she saw what he held in his hand.

## Chapter Twelve

Storm looked down at her, combing the soft strands of leather with the fingers of one hand while he rubbed the braided covering on the handle with the thumb of the other. His groin was pleasantly heavy, and the pressure escalated as he watched her pupils expand with fear. If she were going to run, it would be now.

But he smelled the faint scent of arousal rising from her, and a small spiral of rich red moved over her dark, soft thatch. Extending his arm, he slowly trailed the thongs of the whip along her far side, beginning at the top of her foot and running up to circle her breast.

"I will ask you once more, shi'menye. Do you want to leave?" He reversed the movement, watching as her breath sped up and her nipples puckered. He wanted to lean down and suck them into his mouth, feel their roughness against his tongue, weigh them in his palms. *Soon.*

"Y-yes, Loremaster" she whispered, unconsciously gripping the spindles of the headboard as if they were anchors to prevent her from completely drifting into

her terror, “but I will stay.”

Desire rippled through him, strong enough that his own breath shuddered. It was not complete surrender—not yet—but it was a first cautious step. If she hadn’t admitted her ambivalence, he would have had to either punish her or send her back to her room—perhaps both. It was too soon for the first, and he truly did not wish to do the second.

He had no doubt pain would enter their dance before they were finished. It had been the infliction of pain in anger that caused her to build barriers in the first place, and fear of it would keep at least some remnant of those barriers between them. That he could not allow, for her sake. He needed her absolute trust that he would do nothing to cause her harm or this most intimate of joinings would go horribly awry.

He slid the thongs over her body again then carefully set the whip on the nightstand atop her clothes, angling it so it draped where she need only turn her head to see it. Kneeling between her spread legs, he used his own to nudge them even farther apart so she unfolded for him drenched and sweet. He leaned forward, bracing himself with a hand on either side of her head, and took her mouth, demanding admission with a thrust of his tongue, conquering the warm depths—she tasted of honey.

She responded with a low moan, freeing her hands and lacing them over the back of his neck. Instantly, he pulled away.

“No.”

Her eyes were soft and slightly unfocused, her cheeks flushed. Reaching between the mattress and

the headboard, he pulled out the fur-lined wrist cuffs and bound her, fastening her arms over her head again. She struggled at first, testing them, but this time there was no fear, only frustration. Going to the footboard, he retrieved the ankle cuffs and bound her with legs spread wide. He slid the pillow from under her head and slid it under her lower back so she lay like a libidinous gift for his eyes and hands and mouth.

He trailed the tip of his index finger along her moist center, rested his hand on her damp thatch and pressed so, so lightly with the heel against her, circling, rubbing.

“Drop your Shield, Kerelle.”

He felt it dissipate, caught the full measure of her uncertainty. It increased briefly with this exposure of her innermost thoughts, but then settled back to a mixture of curiosity, trepidation, excitement and frustration.



He snared her mouth again, luring her tongue to fence with his, then moved slowly along the edge of her jaw to the pulse beneath her ear, nibbling and licking. He sucked her earlobe, followed a path down and across her throat to the other. She arched her back in response, and her nipples rubbed against the soft suede of his shirt. Jolts of fire shot down to her knees, and she heard someone whimper, only vaguely aware it was herself.

He stretched out on top of her, propping most of

his weight on his forearms. She could feel the hard bulge of him pressing against her tingling, wet slit. He pressed his lips to the base of her left breast, then the right, kneading them as he moved in slow, tormenting steps to first one taut bud then the other, only to nip and suck his way all around them and deny her.

The illusion that she had experienced the height of intimate pleasure was fading rapidly. Already her body was a quivering mass of heat and sensation, every inch of her skin alive and hungry for the touch of his hands and mouth. When he finally gave his attention to her nipples, sucking them almost to the point of pain, lapping around and across with sharp flicks of his tongue, she lashed her head back and forth and pulled on the restraining bonds.

He had only begun to torture her.

Slowly, maddeningly, he traveled down her belly, swirling his tongue around her navel and thrusting into it in teasing imitation of what she truly wanted. He spread her lower lips even more than they already were, and she felt a warm trickle of fluid seep from her throbbing passage. He smeared his thumb in it, slid it back; and she jumped when he rubbed it over the tight opening behind.

Then his mouth was on her, and she shrieked as he delved into every fold, his wicked tongue lapping, his lips nipping soft, slick flesh. He avoided her point of purest pleasure as he had her nipples, and when she bucked her hips seeking relief he held her down.

It was too much—she would go mad. The sweet, burning pleasure gathered in her core and grew until

she wept with it. Only then did he bend, and when at last he sucked and nipped the neglected fingertip of flesh she sobbed aloud because he revealed there were even greater erotic heights to be scaled. Again and again he drove her to the brink, only deny her the final push. Time lost all meaning; she became only a boundless mass of sensuous hunger.

He stopped. Sat up. Slid off the bed, picking the key off the pillow as he went. Carried it across the room and put it into the keyhole of the connecting door. There would now be no escape. She moaned and tried to squeeze her thighs together, a shivering mass of unrequited need.

He took off his shirt, tossing it aside, then went to put more wood on the fire. The light of the flames kissed the molded muscles of his back and shoulders, the soft suede clung to his tight butt and strong thighs and did nothing to disguise the hard, swollen length of his cock.

He came back to the bed, trailing his fingertips over her breasts, her belly, her thighs. Her legs fell open almost of their own accord, a silent plea for his touch. He slid his finger along the cleft, dipped it into her seething passage and out, driving her back to the brink she had just begun to fall from. This time he knelt above her chest and slowly unlaced the front of his pants. She knew what came next, and licked her lips in eager anticipation...

And realized she was no longer completely alone inside her mind.

## Chapter Thirteen

Instantly, her old defenses sprang up, but she shoved them aside even before the slight frown furrowed his brow. Tentatively, she explored the odd sensation of feelings that were not her own. He paused then slowly peeled down his pants to free that enticing bulge. She lifted her head and lapped at the head.

Heat shot all the way from the base of her spine to the top of her head, and her inner muscles clenched on the first spasm of climax. A breath later, it stopped, and she groaned. He had taken it away from her, absorbed it; yet across the link connecting them it skittered over her skin and along her nerves, an unscratchable itch.

He climbed off the bed and finished undressing. Naked, magnificent, he loomed over her with a face gone colder than the ice on the windows.

"I did not give you permission to touch me."

"I'm sorry, Loremaster, I—"

"I have forgiven you twice already, and I see it was a mistake. If I had punished you in the beginning perhaps you would be more obedient now."

Her stomach knotted, and she looked automatically at the whip lying on the nightstand. Her eyes burned with tears. How could he give her so much pleasure and then, in the next instant, speak of causing her pain?

Then, abruptly, she was filled with rage. How dare he threaten to beat her for something as stupid as being over-eager to give him as much pleasure as he had given her? He was the one who had awakened these desires in her, taught her to give pleasure because she received it in the giving. They were joined now, and she felt no sense of losing herself. There was Kerelle and there was Stormcaller and there was something that was both and neither.

"Because you agreed to abide by my will, shi'menye," he replied to her unspoken debate. "You said you would do only what I permitted you to do. I have promised you a greater pleasure than you have ever known if you abide by this, yet you do not yet trust me to fulfill that promise."

She had forgotten he could hear her thoughts.

"Please, Loremaster, I promise I—"

He shook his head.

"Promises are worthless when fear is in command, shi'menye. You were so long without control that you fear to relinquish it to another even when you wish to. Your fear owns you."

He went to the foot of the bed and freed her legs, then returned and unfastened her arms. She lay still, watching him. The hard ball of terror still hung in her middle; but whether it was the slight mental connection between them or simply that his words



held the resonance of truth, she knew he was right.

"Get on your knees and face me, Kerelle."

She scrambled to do as he ordered. He leaned over and gave her another soul-melting kiss, caressing her breasts, tweaking the nipples, teasing all the places that triggered sparks with hands and lips and teeth until her body glowed. He picked up her hand and wrapped it around him, giving her permission to touch at last. His swollen staff jumped when she slowly moved her fingers up and down the stiff length, and she felt the sea-scented droplets that seeped from the tip slippery against her palm. She wanted to take it in her mouth, wanted to taste him, swirl her tongue around him and feel him growing harder and harder until he exploded into her throat. Knew it was his own desire she felt, yet shared it with as much eagerness as he.

Instead, he denied them both. He took her hand away, turned her so her side was to him, gently bent her over so she knelt with her cheek on the mattress and her cringing buttocks high. He ran his hands over them tenderly, bent down and kissed each one. Her thighs were flooding; she was so aroused she thought she might explode.

She watched as he picked up the whip, shook it, but there her nerve failed. She closed her eyes, felt the exposed flesh of her naked ass twitch with expectation.

The leather cracked; and she wailed, clutching the blanket in her fists. Perhaps some part of her had thought he would hold back, deliver a token blow. Again he swung, and again and again, and her

backside was aflame. She shook with her sobs.

But it was only partly the pain that drove her weeping. Rather, it was as if with each stinging slap of the thongs a crack opened in the darkest regions of her soul. He paused after the third lash, and through the bond that connected them she understood he waited for her to plead with him to stop. It was in that moment she realized pleading would acknowledge that all the power was his, that so long as she accepted punishment that very acceptance was a form of control.

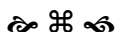
Again the whip fell, and again, and she embraced the burning pain. Deep inside her something *shifted*, and she felt an unbelievable flow of power blast from the base of her spine. Stormcaller slid onto the bed behind her and spreading her fiery rear cheeks. He slid into her slowly, slowly; she trembled as she resisted the urge to jam herself against him. He ran his hands over her aching backside, easing the pain with a flow of cool Healing as he moved in and out with increasing speed and force as he reached around and rubbed and tweaked the swollen center of her need with the tips of his fingers.

*Kerelle spun up and up into the realms of sensation and desire and hunger and heat and suddenly the boundaries of her very self begin to dissolve. She pumped her hips now, wanting, needing the totality of him as deep inside her as he could reach, and the deeper she took him the less she was herself and the more she became them. Images of things she had never seen flashed past her inner eye and yet she had no sense they were not her memories. She felt not only his hard virility within her but her velvet folds around him.*

*Her physical being shrank to the point where their flesh met even as the rest of her expanded and the burning coil in her belly drew tighter and tighter until it shattered into a trillion sparks of light and for an eternal instant she was no longer Kerelle but Kerelle/Storm/Other.*

She floated on a sea of lights with colors she had not words to name. Around her, within her she knew the presence of another, and knew herself around and within him as well. No edges, not ends, no I nor he, only is/was/will be. It was joy and peace and a love that would not allow limitation. She/he was as vast as the universe and so small as to be nonexistent.

Then the light began to swirl and spin. *Come, little one*, she felt rather than heard in her mind, and she had no will save obedience to that voice/non-voice as she was drawn down into dark silence.



Warm. Melted. Kerelle lay with her back pressed against Stormcaller and tried to decide whether she wanted to go to the effort to move. She felt his chest expand as he breathed, felt the breath on the back of her neck. His leg lay over hers, his arms wrapped her waist, the fingers of one hand bent down to cover her mound in a way that was just short of possessive.

“Welcome back, shi’menye,” he murmured, and pressed his lips to the spot just under her ears in the way that always made her shiver.

“I didn’t want to come back,” she said, the words emerging in a harsh croak because, she suddenly realized, her mouth and throat were almost painfully

dry.

"I know. That is why it was necessary that you surrender your will to me, so that you would not fight me when it was time to bring you home."

The languor in her body was slowly dissipating, and she became aware that her backside was still sore where it was pressed against his belly. She wondered if she could get him to kiss it and make it better and grinned at the image.

*I can perhaps be persuaded.*

She felt his answering grin, and he rolled her around to face him, trailing his free hand along her back and rubbing the sore spots. She shifted until she had her head nestled against his neck and it was her leg holding his prisoner then began tracing circles around his nipples.

"Do loremasters ever fall in love?" she asked.

"Sometimes. But only with our own kind."

She leaned up on one elbow.

"You needn't worry – I'm not in love with you."

"If you were, or even thought you were, we wouldn't be here."

Now she leaned over and kissed him lightly.

"Well, I do love you, I think – but not like I do Jontas."

She nibbled on his earlobe before nipping a path down to the nipple she had been playing with. He tasted of salt and something she had come to recognize as distinctively himself. His flesh pebbled, and although a moment ago she would have sworn nothing could have aroused her she felt her own tighten with empathy and a warm tingle between her

legs.

He raised his arms above his head, grasping the headboard spindles. She turned her head to look at him, saw green fire swirling behind his nearly closed eyelids and his lopsided smile that was so very sexy.

"Are you putting yourself at my mercy, Loremaster?" she asked, slipping over to lie on top of him, her legs between his.

"Ah, shi'menye," he purred in that voice that always turned her insides to jelly, "I am hoping you will have none."

## Chapter Fourteen

“Was Mistress Kerelle already gone?” Merry asked as the maid set her breakfast in front of her. She had gotten up earlier than usual to oversee the final preparations for the party, expecting to surprise her sister.

The maid’s normally rosy cheeks flushed even darker.

“No, miss,” she said, “Mistress Kerelle is...not in her room.”

She scurried away as Merry’s stomach sank and tears of anger and frustration burned her eyes. It was too much to bear, knowing her timid sister had broken a lifetime of early-rising tradition to wallow in the sheets with the man Merry was convinced could give her the satisfaction she craved. It was the final blow, the moment when her half-formed thoughts turned into a decision.

She heard laughter—Kera, who had two short weeks ago barely managed to smile when in the company of a man. They came into the room, not touching and yet bound as surely by looks and some intangible connection as they would have been by

held hands. Kera glowed in a way that turned Merry rigid with envy, because she had seen that same look on other women when they spoke of their lovers and wondered why she had never enjoyed what gave it to them.

"Good morning, Merry," Kera said, coming to give her a kiss. "I'm sorry to be so late."

*You're not one bit sorry*, Merry thought. "I suppose you'll want to be on your way," she said to the Nomad, forgetting in her frustration that she was the one who had insisted he stay..

"Kerelle has asked that I stay for your entertainment, and I am expecting a friend to arrive today," he said, using the precise, cool tone he reserved for everyone but Kera. "I will go tomorrow morning."

*That's what you think.*

"I'll arrange to have your payment ready."

She had hoped that mentioning the money so bluntly would dampen that blissful look on Kera's face, but she was again disappointed. What power did the man have that he could pleasure a woman well enough to give her that look and yet leave her willing to give him up? Well, she wasn't going to give him up until she was good and ready.

She finished eating without speaking, no longer hungry but not wanting to let either of them know how she felt. They didn't say much, either, but every time she glanced at them she knew they were communicating and that made it all the worse.



*Your sister does not know you can read thoughts?*

*I think she's suspected sometimes, when I slipped.*

That explained why Merelynda had never learned to block, as most people did when they were aware just how easily even a low-level mind speaker could hear them.

*But I don't, usually,* Kera added, the thought wrapped in curiosity.

Storm didn't, ordinarily, either—it was unethical to read the thoughts of another without permission, not to mention that the mental cacophony of eavesdropping would have been maddening. However, he had Read in Merelynda's aura when they came in what she thought she was so cleverly hiding, felt that it was directed at him. That, in his opinion, gave him the right to see what precisely she was planning.

What he saw confirmed what he had already suspected from his conversation with Hallor, whom he had come to admire in the brief time since they cleared the air between them over the woman. The soldier-turned-magistrate was an intelligent and fair man, if a somewhat unimaginative one; perhaps it was time to offer some unsolicited advice.

*Is something wrong?*

*No, shi'menye. It may be that something is about to be made right.*

First, though, he needed to reach one of the Magi. As he had suspected from his first sight of her, Kerelle was a Lost Child, one of the hundreds of children that had resulted from the late and unlamented Emperor



Hasdrugon's breeding program. The Enclaves where they were born had fallen to angry mobs at the end of the Everdark Wars, many of the youngsters within simply given to anyone willing to take them, tainted as they were in their "rescuers" minds with the touch of evil.

Joining the search for these children, most with enough Talent they were nearly the equals of the Magi or, very rarely, the Drevnya, had been his excuse for escaping the too-confining life of the Loremaster's Guild. He had followed his intuition to this far northern country, and it had not failed him.

The knocker on the front door sounded, and several minutes later the houseman entered with a sealed envelope. He handed it to Kerelle, whose face lit with pleasure when she read the name of the sender. Eagerly, she cracked the seal and began to read.

The light in her eyes dimmed with each sentence then filled with tears. He felt the echo of her pain, although the bond between them was all but gone; and his first impulse was to ask her what was wrong. He ignored it—she would tell him if she wanted him to know.

Instead, she crumpled the letter in her hand and threw it toward the fireplace, then bolted for the stairs, blinking rapidly to keep from weeping. The ball of foolscap struck one of the andirons and bounced onto the carpet. Storm picked it up and tossed it where it was meant to go but not before he saw the name of the sender: Jontas Permentu.

It didn't take a magic user to figure out what had

happened. Kerelle had written her former suitor, likely inviting him to tonight's gathering, and he had rejected her. Storm's heart ached for her, knowing how much worse that rejection would be now that she had opened herself to the full range of her feelings. His head, on the other hand, knew it was likely to be the best thing that could have happened. It would be one less tie for her to have to sever.

So, although he wanted to follow and offer her comfort, Storm retired to the solarium and settled on a patch of just-tilled earth. He took from his pocket an amulet charged with the energies of all the Mages taking part in the search. With practiced ease, he sank deep within, utilizing the Power engendered by the previous night's delightful activity to enhance his own not-inconsiderable skill. Immediately, one of the threads of personality swirling around the amulet flashed brighter than the others.

*Drennan, he called.*

A moment later, the Mage's mind touched his—a profoundly irritated mind.

*You have extremely bad timing, Nomad. The lady will not appreciate the interruption.*

*If you make love as badly as you do everything else, my friend, she will likely be flooded with relief.*

*Everything I know I learned from you, Loremaster. Could you get to the point?*

*I've found one. A woman named Kerelle Suttoth. I'd prefer she be in your hands before I leave here. Figuratively, that is.*

He felt the big man's excitement, which turned to exasperation when a moment later he sent him the

image of where he was.

*How in all the hells did she get there? Oh, well, never mind. I assume that's a clear image – I'm not going to arrive and find myself part of a wall or a tree or something?*

*Don't tempt me, Mage. Now satisfy your lady and I will see you tonight.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Uttoth House, like that of most merchants, lacked a ballroom. Instead, several rooms were connected by double pocket doors that, when opened, allowed Merry and Kera to entertain large numbers of their friends easily.

Those rooms were thronged by men and women in their finest as Storm descended the stairs. Despite his protest, he wasn't completely without party attire. Whether the other guests, in their breeches and coats of dark wool and gowns of satin and silk would consider that attire appropriate wasn't his concern.

He wore black leather trousers that clung from waist to ankle like a second skin. Soft boots of the same material laced to his knees, their tops decorated with intricate beadwork in gold and green. His shirt matched the green, full-cut with long, billowing sleeves and embroidered in black and gold in an identical design to that on his boots. It was open to reveal the dusting of red-gold hair on his chest, against which glinted his Loremaster's chain. His hair hung in a loose cascade, held in place by an embroidered band, and a single gold earring dangled

from his right earlobe.

The noise of many voices waned as he entered the front parlor, where Merry and Kera stood receiving their guests, as everyone within line of sight turned to gawk at him. By now, of course, it was common knowledge that the Suttoth women were entertaining a Nomad, and anyone who had known Kerelle had likely guessed why just from looking at her.

She wore a low-cut gown of burgundy velvet that set off her dark hair and the rich deep gold of her skin. Rubies sparkled from ears and wrist, and a magnificent stone the size of a robin's egg lay tantalizingly in the hollow of her cleavage. The weight she had gained the last weeks had softened her curves and filled in her hollows—she was beautiful.

And she hid well from those not endowed with his Talent the sadness he saw flickering in the glow that surrounded her.

She had just sent the latest arrivals off to mingle with the rest of the company when he stepped into the room, and with a word to her sister she broke away from her hostess duties and all but ran to meet him. Slipping her arm through his, she turned him around and led him across the entry hall to the dining room, still closed off from the festivities while the servants finished setting out the food for the night.

Once inside, the doors shut, she stepped away from him and stood in front of the fire, rubbing her arms as if either chasing away a chill or trying to wipe them clean.

"I'm not used to being stared at," she said, trying

to make it sound like a joke and failing.

He went to stand behind her, not touching but near enough he knew she could feel his body heat.

"Is that really what troubles you?"

He felt her turmoil. The old, reticent Kera, the one who kept all her feelings under rigid control because no one else had ever been interested in them anyway, wrestled with the new woman who had given those feelings free rein and found the ride exhilarating beyond her wildest imagination. Finally, the new woman won.

"The letter...this morning...I wrote to Jontas, inviting him to the party, telling him I had been a fool before and wanted to see if perhaps things could be different."

She stopped rubbing her arms and clenched her hands together, squeezing so hard the knuckles were white, as if the pressure would help hold back the tears he heard in her voice. The urge to take her in his arms was powerful, but he knew to wait.

"He wrote back that he knew you were in the house, and that it wasn't hard for him to guess what had made me so suddenly eager for his attention. He said that it had been my purity, my untouched innocence that had been what he admired most. That he had wanted to be the one to 'introduce you to the pleasures of the marriage bed, knowing you would then look only to me as the source of that pleasure.' He said now I was no better than my sister."

Her taut tone quivered then, the snub to herself weighing on her heart less than the insult to Merry. He turned her around by her shoulders and drew her

against him, dismissing the two staring serving girls with a sharp look and a tip of his chin toward the door to the kitchen. Then he held her while she cried.

Suddenly, the air seemed to vibrate, and his body tingled as it sensed the swirl of magic. Kera shivered and stepped away wiping the tears with the heels of her hands as she scanned the room.

"What...?"

He picked up a napkin and cleaned her face.

"Someone I want you to meet, I suspect."

A moment later, the door to the solarium opened and a giant of a man strode into the room. He topped Storm by head and shoulders, shoulders that barely made it through the door without his having to twist. His dark-brown hair waved over his ears and the nape of his neck, and his skin, a rich bronze, was a startling contrast to eyes the rich blue of a high summer sky.

He paused and glanced at Kerelle. Their eyes met and held with an all but audible click.

"Drennan," Storm said, then louder, "*Drennan.*"

"I heard you the first time," the Mage rumbled without looking at him. He came to them in two strides, and Kerelle didn't move when he stopped mere inches from her. "And you are?"

"Kerelle Suttoth," she breathed.

"Drennan alt Medrik." He gave in and shot a brief look at Storm. "You're free to go, Loremaster. The lady and I are going to talk."

*Talk, my ass.* Storm shot to him. His own reaction to the raw sexual energy infusing their instantaneous attraction showed clearly under the tight leather of

his pants until he channeled it away for later. *Just remember there's a party going on and she's one of the hostesses. Her sister will be looking for her and won't appreciate finding her in some dark corner with you and that lovely dress above her waist.*

*Don't be crude, Drewnye. Go find your own girl.*

*Later, Drennan. Now you'll have to show you have some idea how civilized people behave.*

As if on cue, the dining room doors opened and Merelynda joined them, Hallor behind her. She gaped at the Mage, her eyes traveling back and forth between him and her sister, clearly noting the racial resemblance.

"This is Drennan, Merry" Kera said, wonder in her voice. "Drennan, this is my sister Merelynda and her betrothed, Hallor Temrand."

"I came to tell you Jontas is here. He said you invited him."

"Oh, yes, I did," Kera said, sounding all but breathless. "How nice that he could come."

Storm didn't bother hiding his grin. No doubt the young man had decided to come in spite of his reservations, perhaps thinking he could rescue the fair maiden from the clutches of evil then help her spend the rest of her life atoning for her error. Storm hadn't anticipated his old friend might be more than just attracted to Kera—he had felt the life bond mesh between them even if they hadn't. Poor, smugly virtuous Jontas was doomed to a severe disappointment.





Kera couldn't take her eyes from him. She studied his square, strong face as if to memorize every plane and angle, every one of his incredibly long eyelashes, the bold cleft chin, the sharp, clean line of his nose. She knew she hadn't moved, and yet it seemed as if her body *leaned* toward his like iron to a lodestone.

He smelled of some strange scent that spoke of spices and yet was oddly other. It turned her legs to water—very, very warm water. Her breasts felt suddenly full and tight, her belly quivered and her core throbbed and wept. She wanted to rip off her gown, press her skin against the smooth bronze of his, lap her tongue on it to see if the taste matched that enticing scent.

And what was that peculiar feeling in the center of her chest, just below her heart. It was as if something had latched in place the moment their eyes met, a piece of a puzzle long missing and suddenly found. She was aware of each breath she took, that it thrust her breasts upward as if offering them to him. Those eyes—those incredible blue eyes—devoured her, and her spine melted.

And when he finally looked away to glare at Stormcaller it was as if he had taken away something she needed desperately to survive.

"She has obligations for now," the Loremaster said in what she had come to call his "teacher's voice."

"Who is this man?" Merry demanded.

Stormcaller sighed, and Kera knew him well enough to interpret it. There was about to be a confrontation he had hoped to postpone.

"Drennan is a Mage, as I assume you've guessed," he explained. "He and I are part of a group who are seeking a people we call the Lost Ones, children born in the Enclaves who were...misplaced after the Second Everdark War. Kera is one of the Lost Ones. Drennan is here to take her to the Sorcerer's Tower so she can be trained to fulfill her true self."

Merry's face turned angry red; Kera had never seen her so enraged.

"How dare you?" she shouted, advancing on Storm with fists clenched into white-knuckled balls. "I brought you here to do a job, not kidnap my sister. I want you and this...this *person* out of my house within the hour."

"Merry, stop," Kera said, stepping in front of Storm—as if he needed her protection. She could sense his amusement and couldn't help smiling. Then the full import of what he'd just said registered, and she turned to face him. "Although she does have a point, Loremaster. By what right do you assume I'll go anywhere with this man, leave my life and my family..."

In that moment she made the mistake of glancing at Drennan, and her voice failed as their eyes connected again. By the gods, she would do all of that, without a moment's thought or hesitation. If he left without her she would break in two.

"I will admit I didn't anticipate this particular outcome when I called him," Storm said with a soft chuckle. "It's been such a rare occurrence among the Magi in the last several millennia no one even considers it."

"Considers what?" Merry demanded, though she sounded more confused now than angry.

"Life bonding," Storm explained. "If Drennan were to leave now, alone, it would be only a short time before your sister went looking for him. They are part of each other for as long as they live. Sometimes even beyond that."

Someone rapped on the doors.

"Merry! I thought you were checking to see if the food was ready."

"Just a moment." She licked her lips, glancing from Kera to Drennan to Storm as if she might find the decision somewhere on their faces. Frustrated, she glared at the Loremaster. "We will discuss this later, after the party."

Spinning on her heel, she took a deep breath, raised her chin, pasted on an alluring smile and went to open the doors. Behind her, Storm quickly crossed to where Hallor stood frowning, arms crossed over his chest, and said something to him that made the newly appointed city magistrate look first startled, then disturbed, then very pleased. They both watched Merry as she looped her arms through those of two of the male guests and escorted them into the dining room.

*Now, what is that about?* Kera wondered.

But then Drennan came up behind her, wrapping her in his scent and his heat, engulfing her in a sensuous haze without once touching her; and she had no thought for anything but him. She turned and tilted her head to look up into his face, that face already engraved on her soul.

"A life bond?" she managed to say past lips that wanted kisses, not words.

"So it seems," he answered, his voice a velvety bass rumble that flooded her core and made her shiver with need. "And Magi live a very, very long time."

## Chapter Sixteen

**M**erelynda paced the small space of the cottage, wondering what was keeping the Nomad. The longer she had to wait, the more she questioned the wisdom of her plan. First, there was Hallor, who loved her despite her flirting and her reluctance to set a date for their wedding. She loved him, too—at least she thought she did. Until the Nomad she hadn't seriously entertained the idea of inviting another man to her bed.

Until the Nomad. It wasn't just that he was so different from all the others. She wasn't a fool to throw away her future with Hallor just for the sport of tasting an exotic dish. She was driven to risk that watching Kera blossom under the Loremaster's attention. She hadn't really expected him to succeed, to be honest. Even her limited visits to her stepmother's house hadn't sheltered her from having to witness the woman's idea of enforcing proper behavior—proper behavior being defined as however she defined it. She'd heard the lectures, too. About how the pleasures of the body were a trap. About how men were to be used to obtain whatever a

woman couldn't manage on her own.

She glanced at the table, where a decanter of rich purple wine and two glasses sat waiting for her "guest." If you looked at it just right, you could see that one of the glasses wasn't quite clear. She had coated the inside with an herbal extract, one that would submerge Stormcaller's will to hers. She had paid a pretty penny for it—it was only to be sold to qualified healers. However, it was her best chance to get what she wanted.

A soft rap on the door settled her inner debate. He was here.

"Come in."



Storm exchanged a look with his companion.

"You're certain you want to do it this way?" he asked softly.

Hallor's jaw clenched, but he nodded. Storm lifted the latch and stepped into the trap.



He paused in the doorway, silhouetted against the bright early-spring sunlight for a long moment before he stepped inside and closed the door. Nervous, Merry rubbed her sweat-damp palms down the sides of her thighs then stopped, realizing it pulled the clinging fabric of her dress tight across the V where they met.

He looked at her, those dark, dark green eyes

traveling slowly up her body until they locked on hers. She could *feel* them, and her nipples tightened and peaked not from arousal but from fear. There was the look of a predator in those eyes, a male animal scenting a female ripe for mating.

*Well, that's what I want,* she told herself and crossed to the small table where the purse with his gold lay beside the tray with the wine and the tainted glass. He took off his fur coat and tossed it over the back of a chair, watching her, savoring her.

"This seems an odd place for a business meeting," he said, glancing to the other side of the room where the bed stood. His voice was sultry and smooth, colored by that intriguing accent he had never used directly to her. It made her loins ache and dampen, but only worsened her anxiety. *It doesn't matter. In a short time I'll have him under my control.*

"I didn't think it a kindness to Kera to pay you in front of her. Although she seems to have found another interest." She watched him to see if the reference to his friend's having taken his place in Kera's bed annoyed him. All she saw were those eyes, lingering now on her nipples thrusting against her dress. She should have worn a shift, but it had seemed more daring to greet him naked under the clinging gown. She had expected to have to penetrate his aloof indifference.

*Pour the wine!* She opened the decanter, filled the glasses. She hoped he wouldn't notice how her hands shook.

"A toast to your unqualified success, Loremaster?"

She picked up the glass with the potion in it, held it

out to him. He took it, but when she reached for her own he caught her hand, held it, set his glass back on the tray. He bent her arm behind her back and pulled her forward until she was pressed tight against him.

"I think I would prefer a kiss," he purred.

His mouth came down on hers with merciless command, and she could feel him already hard against her belly as his tongue invaded her. He trailed the fingers of his free hand up her side, cupped her breast and circled the nipple with his thumb then rolled and stretched it, sending tingling pulses through her.

His kiss became even more demanding, his tongue thrusting against hers as he pressed her mound against the rock-hard bulge in his pants. He trailed his fingers along the scooped edge of her neckline, then slid the dress off her shoulder and freed her breast. His hand was hot, the rough callus striking sparks that made her whimper.

She pushed against his chest, resisting the warm flow down her spine into her core; and after a moment he let her go. She smiled to herself as she licked the taste of him from her lips. He *did* want her after all. And this was going to be everything she had hoped it would be. The difference was, she would be the one in control, not him.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. *Who in the hells could that be?* Her annoyance turned to shock when she yanked her dress back up and went to open the door.

Hallor smiled. "I came to take you to dinner—the houseman said you were here."



Without waiting for an invitation he stepped inside and nodded a greeting to the Loremaster.

"I'm afraid I have a previous engagement," she said, thinking fast as she went back to the table. She gave him her best smile, the one that promised she would more than make it up to him. Did what had just happened between her and the Loremaster show on her face?

"I see."

"Perhaps the magistrate would join us in our toast," Stormcaller suggested, then explained to Hallor, "We were drinking to Kerelle."

"Your skills could not have been better used, Loremaster," Hallor said, his tone much more agreeable than Merry would have thought likely. Still, if it would get him out of here...

She fetched a third glass from the shelf, filled it and handed it to him. Stormcaller picked up his and handed hers to her. She moved over in front of the fireplace and raised it.

"To my sister's happiness," she said as she drank it down and watched the Drevnya do the same. The apothecary who had sold her the potion wasn't able to tell her how long it would be before it took effect. Hopefully, she could get Hallor out of here before that effect became noticeable.

Then, to her horror, she felt a strange languor stealing over her. Slowly, her mind began to detach from her body, and she found she no longer cared whether Hallor left or not. She still had all her reasoning faculties, though, and didn't need to see the expressions on the two men's faces to know she had

been tricked.

Stormcaller set his glass onto the tray and picked up the purse, tucking the contents into a pocket in his wide belt. Crossing to where she stood helpless, he cupped her chin in one hand and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Pleasure is better when given and best when shared," he said. "This is what your sister has discovered and you must learn. But it is not my place to teach you, Merelynda."

He shrugged into his coat, clasped forearms with Hallor and was gone.

Hallor tossed his cloak onto a peg by the door then strolled back and sat on the table, looking at her with an expression she had never seen on him. Was he going to tell her now that he was leaving, too? That he had no more patience with her? That she had finally gone too far? The thought of living without him suddenly filled her with aching terror, and she wanted to plead with him, tell him it had been a stupid misjudgment, a moment's folly.

But the drug had sapped her will, and the words dammed up behind lips that couldn't release them unbidden.

"My lovely Merry," Hallor said finally. "Did you truly think you could trick a man who can read your mind as easily as you breathe? Drug him into becoming a slave to your will and then use him like some kind of toy for your own satisfaction?"

"Yes." It came out without her thinking about it, and cold shock washed over her. Even so, she felt the irony of the situation. At least the rogue herbalist

hadn't cheated her.

Hallor smiled, a smile he might have given an errant child caught raiding the cookie jar.

"Did the apothecary who sold you the potion tell you of its other effect – that it forces you to speak only the truth?"

*Oh, gods!* She struggled to move, to throw off the drug and flee to the safety of the big house. It was as though she were locked inside a carriage without horses, a prisoner in her own body.

"In all the times we've made love, have you ever once experienced satisfaction?"

She willed her lips closed. "No."

Horror replaced the shock. She had taken great care to learn how a woman reacted in the throes of pleasure so he would never know that final culmination had always eluded her.

He shook his head slowly, as if even with the truth-compelling draught he found her answer hard to believe.

"You've been a naughty, selfish young woman, Merelynda Suttoth, in more ways than one, and I've allowed you to get away with it far too long. What if that crackpot drug seller had mismeasured the dose? You might have poisoned the man. And now you admit you've let me use you like a whore."

*No, it wasn't like that.*

"Do you ever intend to marry me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life not knowing what other women know. I've heard them talk about the wondrous joy – I saw it on Kera's face. I want...I want..."

"I know what you want. And if you had simply joined me in our lovemaking instead of trying to organize it as you do a shipment of cloth, you likely would have had it long ago." He poured another glass of wine and sipped it, never taking his eyes off her. Had she ever really noticed his eyes? They were dark, dark brown, fringed in long, thick lashes the same black as his hair. Beautiful eyes, looking at her, studying her, pausing as they passed over her breasts or the spot where her gown clung to the V of her upper thighs.

"Well," he said, setting the empty glass down, "today you're mine to do with as I will, Merry. I can order you to do anything and you will do it without question or hesitation, even walk naked down the high street and give yourself to any man I bid you to. Does that frighten you?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe I would do that – make you into a whore? Or do you love me enough, trust me enough to place yourself in my hands and know it will bring you nothing but what you've wanted all this time?"

"Yes. I love you, Hallor. But I'm afraid."

He smiled again, but this one was slow and sexy and turned her thighs to jelly.

"I know you are, love. But the Loremaster said you need a lesson, and I'm your teacher. You will do things, feel things today you never believed possible.

Is that what you want?"

This time the answer came with her full cooperation.

"Yes."

## Chapter Seventeen

**H**e held out his hand. "Come here to me, Merry."

Her feet carried her the few steps to him, stopping between his spread legs.

"Do you love me, Merry?"

"Yes."

He placed his hands on her shoulders and slid them downward, pushing the dress off as he went until she was naked to the waist. Her nipples tightened slightly with the cooler air struck them then even more as he studied her with slow, absorbed interest.

"I like to look at you," he said, cupping her breasts in his hands and pushing them together. He leaned forward and lapped first one nipple then the other, kneading the soft weight gently. She shivered, but not from the cold. It was as if her skin had suddenly come alive, and aching heat flared between her legs. She wanted to thread her fingers through his thick dark hair and press his tormenting mouth tighter, but she could not move.

He stopped and straightened, and she could see

the outline of his own response pressing against his pants. Had she been under her own power, she would have released it, guided it into her. She looked into his eyes, able only to plead silently.

He shook his head.

"That's your problem, Merry. You're always in too great a hurry, always wanting to be the one to decide. Not today." He took off his shirt, and the sight of his broad chest, banded with taut muscle and dusted with dark curls, made her belly quiver.

"Go stand in front of the fire, Merry."

Again her feet obeyed, and the movement sent her dress sliding further down over her hips. Hallor stood and crossed to the bed, sitting on the edge and pulling off his boots and stockings.

*I want to see him*, Merry realized. *I want to see him, touch him, taste him.* The desire wasn't new, but always before she had thrust it aside, done something to distract herself until the need had dwindled to safe, manageable proportions. Now, though, she had no recourse nor could she act on the desire. That, perhaps, was even worse.

"Take off your dress."

One shove and she stood naked, totally exposed to his exploring eyes. She had never been like this in front of him, had always insisted on wearing a gown albeit one so translucent as to barely matter. Even that thin barrier had allowed her to feel that she still had some control.

"Turn around."

The fire flickered bright, but no brighter than her face as she stood for what seemed like forever,

knowing he was looking at her. He was going to punish her, she knew it, no matter what he said about teaching her how to achieve the pleasure she wanted. He would mock her, tell her how ugly she was, take what that big bulge in his groin said he wanted and leave her forever. The people she cared about always left her for someone better—her mother, her father, now Kera. She knew her mother hadn't died, as she'd been told. She'd found the letter, fallen behind the drawer in the desk in her office, the office that had been her father's.

She had fallen into a reverie, half-entranced by the flames, so she hadn't heard him pad across the floor. She startled and squeaked when he laid his hands on her shoulders.

He didn't speak, just kissed the side of her neck, the sensitive spot that always made her shiver. Now she couldn't prevent it, couldn't push him to another, less disturbing place. He knew that, and savored it with tiny nips and licks then shifted to the other side. The ache in her core grew, hungry, needy, as he covered her with those kisses and nips and licks—across her shoulders, down her back. He knelt on the floor and continued down, ending by taking off her slippers and treating the soles of her feet with tickling, shiver-inducing caresses.

"Turn around, Merry."

Now she could see him, his eyes all but black with the dilation of his own hunger. Now she had to watch as he started with the toes of her right foot, bending her knee so he could suckle each one, watching her face. Her hand went to his wide shoulder for balance,



and she felt the play of his muscles, steel bands under velvet. The scent of sandalwood and carnations, the soap she had given him as a gift on his last birthday, simmered from his skin mixed with a hint of sweat and something she hadn't ever noticed before, something she understood was uniquely Hallor.

A wave of warmth flashed through her as he finished her feet and traveled up her legs, first one then the other. Moisture washed from within her, soaking her swelling lower lips, dampening her inner thighs as his tormenting mouth drew closer. She heard someone whimpering and realized it was her.

He buried his face in the soft gold fleece at the base of her belly, drawing a deep breath, then continued his trek up her body. Back and forth across her belly, thrusting his tongue into her navel as he kneaded her buttocks, up to breasts that felt turgid and heavy and ached. He slid his hands up her sides to support them on the web between thumb and finger and...

No whimper this time as his hot mouth and seeking tongue engulfed her pebbled nipples. This time she moaned, and it was sheer torture not to be able to raise her arms, bury her hands in his tumbled hair. He was relentless, moving from one side to the other, tweaking and kneading whichever he didn't suckle and bite. The inner pressure built and built until it bordered on pain.

He released his prey and continued his erotic journey until he reached her mouth. He took her lower lip between his teeth, ran the tip of his tongue across it, then took the rest and plundered, trailing his fingertips up and down her back, cupping and

squeezing her bottom. Indeed, holding her up because her legs refused the job. Her skin had grown so sensitive that every touch, every caress shot straight to her groin in a fiery arrow of desire. She was beyond thought, beyond anything but sensation and a shocking emptiness between her legs like nothing she had ever imagined.

He scooped her up and carried her to the bed, setting her on the edge so her legs hung down.

"Lie back, Merry, and spread your legs."

Tears of humiliation sprang to her eyes as her body obeyed, exposing her secrets to him. She felt how wet and slick they were with her intimate juices, knew the tiny nub of pleasure had swollen and hardened.

He knelt between her widespread thighs, drawing spirals on the damp, twitching flesh of her inner thighs with his fingertips as he stared at her.

"Touch yourself, Merry."

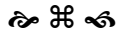
Again the desire to plead with him for mercy tightened her throat, but her fingers went obediently to that wanton slit. He told her what to do and she did it, slipping her fingers inside and pumping them then sliding them up to rub the hot, demanding pleasure bud. Her hips bounced, the hot hunger gathered and expanded...

And then he caught her wrist, moved her hand away and replaced it with his mouth.

She screamed. He pushed her thighs wider, thrust his tongue into her, lapped and sucked and devoured her without mercy. She forgot everything, drowning in pulsating pleasure-pain unlike anything she had ever dreamed or imagined. The world lay between

her legs, under siege by his lips and tongue.

And then the gates shattered, the walls exploded and her entire body convulsed in rhythm with that culmination as she screamed on last time before falling into darkness.



She returned to awareness of a warm weight on her belly, a whisper of breath on the sensitized skin of her thigh. She opened her eyes—

*I shouldn't be able to do that!*

Hallor, feeling the change in the rhythm of her breathing, raised his head and met her gaze, his face impassive, his lips still wet with her pleasure juices. He got on his feet, and she sat up as if there were a cable connecting them, one with limited length that prevented their moving too far apart. Her knees were still widespread, and her first impulse was to pull them together.

But then he looked down, his gaze lingering on her displayed like a luscious prize; and she felt a renewed swirl of warmth where he looked. Her own eyes drifted lower, alighting on the captive bulge in his pants. She reached, undid the fastenings, slid them down and set him free. He drew in one long, shuddering breath, stepped out of that last barrier and kicked them aside.

Fascinated, Merry wrapped her fingers lightly around the arrogant maleness and felt it twitch and swell even more. She leaned forward, slid the hood back and ran her tongue around the end, sampling

him. Her reward was a deep moan as he grasped her head between his hands and tilted it back so she had to look at him.

Eyes locked with his, she took him into her mouth, sucking as she teased him with her tongue. With her free hand she found the sac at the root and gently rubbed it, delighted and astonished to feel him tremble. Even more amazing, his pleasure—the pleasure she gave him—echoed in her own body, fanning the warmth in her core to embers. Warm fluid trickled onto her tongue, tasting of salt and desire; and the smell of her perfume and her arousal merged with his scents of sandalwood and carnations and male musk to send the fires melting along her bones. She lost contact with everything save the feel and taste of him against her tongue, savored him, wanting to give him the same pleasure he had given her.

“Oh, gods, Merry, suck me,” he groaned, thrusting slowly, gently in her eager mouth, his fingers tangled in her hair.

She didn’t need encouragement. She was discovering a new world of delight and was determined to explore it completely. With hands and mouth she cherished every throbbing inch of his aching maleness—licking, sucking, nipping ever so lightly until with a deep growl he ended the torment by pulling her to her feet with his hands on the nape of her neck and crushing her lips with his.

They fell onto the bed, hands and lips and bodies touching, rubbing, caressing. Merry felt as if she had been starving all her life and he was a banquet set

before her to devour. Her body came alive, her blood racing hot to pool in the wet, slick passage seething for the hard, willing length of him. Yet each time she tried to guide him there he took her hand away, until she was ready to scream with the frustration of the need that consumed her.

Suddenly, he rolled her onto her stomach and lay on top of her, his cock pressing against the crack of her buttocks.

"You still want to be in charge, don't you, my love?"

He worked his hand under her, found the swollen center of her passion, rubbed it until she thrashed under him. Her thighs were soaking, everything focused on that needy, unfilled part of her that only he could complete—and wouldn't.

"If you want what I can give you, you'll have to ask me," he said, turning her again onto her back, kneeling between her legs, thrusting one, two, three fingers into her.

"Gods, Haller, please," she wailed, the words bubbling over her tongue. "Fuck me, fuck me hard, please, I can't stand it. Do whatever you want, but I'll die if I don't have you inside me."

He pushed her legs up onto his shoulders and with one thrust was in her so deep she screamed with the unbelievable sensation. He paused, withdrew with slow torment and buried himself again. Faster, harder he moved, and she engulfed all of him and asked for more, her hips rising in rhythm. The pleasure pressure she had thought ready to burst impossibly grew even more, and then she felt him spasm inside

her, pouring hot jets of completion and it set off her own to roar through her in thundering waves that left her boneless.

He lay on her for a few moments, then rolled to the side and lifted her so she was lying against his side. Pulling her leg across his groin, he rubbed his hand up and down her back. She could have lain there forever, skin to skin, surrounded by his heat and the mingled scents of their bodies, listening to the strong throb of his heart.

"Do you understand, Merry?" he asked, his voice tender. "Do you know what Stormcaller meant?"

Mention of the Loremaster sent a cold chill through her.

"I'm sorry I was such a stupid fool," she said, sitting up so he could see her face and know she meant it. She hadn't, always, in the past. She suspected now he knew she hadn't.

"That doesn't answer my question."

She felt herself blushing.

"I...before when we...I wouldn't let go...of myself. That's why I couldn't..."

Blessedly, he was willing to have some mercy on her.

"And do you think you'll have that problem anymore?"

"No...I don't think so."

"Well, work on it, because otherwise I might have to resort to the method the Loremaster recommended."

"You mean this wasn't it?"

He gave her a wicked grin as he cupped one breast

and teased the nipple with his thumb. Even that small caress, which would have actually irritated her once, now sent a pleasant tingle into her toes—and other places.

“He suggested the best way to deal with you was to bend you over my lap and spank your bottom till it glowed. Which is likely what would have happened if he hadn’t decided to leave you in my hands. Not that I won’t keep his advice in mind.”

Merry’s face burned again, not in small part because his stern tone sent a quiver into her belly that had nothing to do with fear.

“Tell me, love,” Haller went on when she didn’t speak. “Did you really think you could get the better of someone like him?”

“Could we talk about something else?” Thinking about what she had intended to do made Merry feel ashamed that she would stoop so low as to drug a man just so she could...

Haller took her hand and laid it on his swelling cock, and the gleam in his eyes became hot and hungry.

“Merelynda, my love, we don’t have to talk at all if you can find something else to do with that sexy tongue of yours.”

Then it was her turn to wear a wicked grin.

**End**