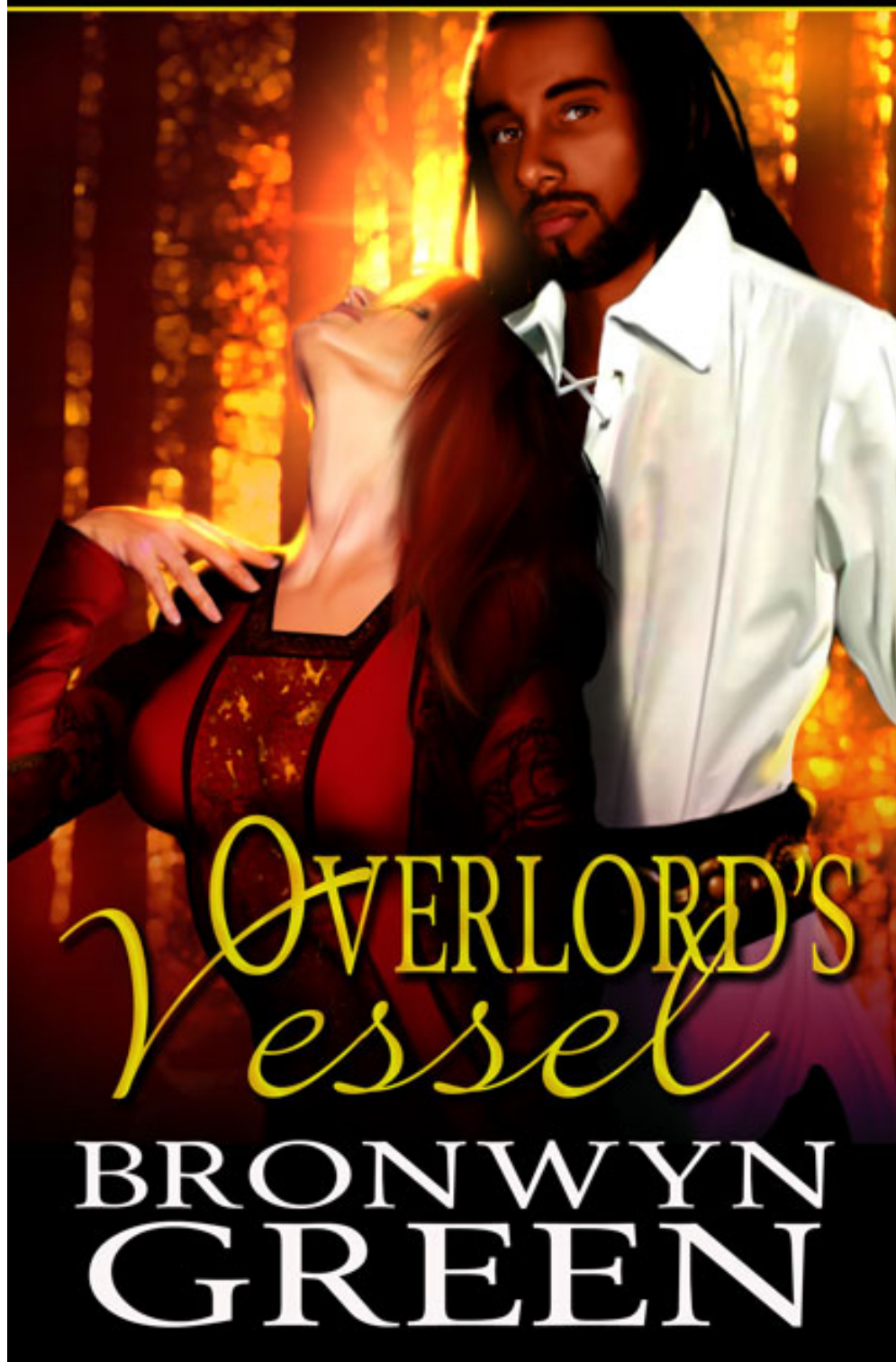


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Overlord's Vessel

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OVERLORD'S VESSEL

Bronwyn Green

Dedication/Acknowledgement

Dedicated to Matt because you make me laugh, you drive me crazy, you're good for research, you actually understand me, and most importantly, because I love you.

A huge thank you to the best critique group on the planet—The FNMS. I couldn't ask for a better group of friends. Chel for your unflagging love, support, brain-sharing and butt-kicking. Jen for your tough love and wildly inappropriate sense of humor. Cheryl for teaching me the difference between lyrical and erotic sex. Mary who wouldn't hesitate to use Martha to ensure my writing time. Marti who reminds me that my angels are here to catch me when I fall. Thank you also to my wonderful editor, Helen, to Kim and Jan for the timely arrival of a certain laptop, and last but not least, to Mom, Cait, Manda, Julie, Margaret, Shannon and Roxanne for always believing in me—I love you all.

Chapter One

He was here. In her home.

Elizabeth peered around the woolen blanket that separated the sleeping quarters from the rest of the meager cottage. He stood with his back to her but there was no mistaking his identity. Micah Bleddyn, Overlord of all of Maelgwn, towered head and shoulders above her father, who shifted nervously near her pallet.

Countless black braids fell over Micah's broad, muscled shoulders to hang to the middle of his equally muscled back. Several weeks ago, she'd seen him swimming in the river. She'd watched, fascinated, as the water coursed in rivulets over his creamy, cocoa-colored skin. Though she'd thought herself well-hidden behind the willow that bent gracefully over the bank, he'd known she was there. He'd stood waist-deep in the middle of the river, the current flowing around him as if he were an immovable boulder.

For long moments, she'd stared at him, tracing the planes of his chest and abdomen with her eyes. She couldn't say what prompted the thought but she longed to taste the water directly from his skin. She'd followed the path of hair from his chest as it narrowed over his stomach only to thicken again as it disappeared into the river.

With dark eyes shining, he'd beckoned her toward him, as if he knew her thoughts. When she didn't move, he'd taken several steps toward her, more of his body becoming visible in the shallower water. She'd ached to see what lay beneath the surface but when he'd held out his hand to her, she'd turned and run. His laughter had followed her through the forest. Since that time, she'd dreamed of him—waking with her blood thrumming through her veins and her skin too sensitive to touch. The worst was the damp ache between her legs that throbbed for the want of a man. Not just any man. Micah.

That same ache caught her unaware as she listened to the rumble of his voice as he spoke to her father. A cold knot of fear coiled in her stomach. Why was the country's ruler here? Could he be here to bring her to the temple? Once she'd passed her last birthday, she'd assumed she wouldn't be chosen as a consort, which was fine with her. No matter the tales of physical pleasure at the hands of the guardians, she had no wish to be passed from man to man until she bred the next generation of magic users.

From what she'd heard, the women were well-treated. Those who conceived were kept at the temple and allowed to rear their sons. However, if they birthed a daughter, the child was sent to the village to be reared. The mother had the choice to go to the village to rear her daughter, or stay at the temple and try for a son.

Elizabeth was always surprised by the number of women who chose to abandon their children. She couldn't imagine giving away a baby she'd created. Her dearest

friend, Fiona, had chosen to stay with her little girl. The guardians had gifted her with a handsome dowry and arranged a marriage for her with a kind man.

Serving the temple guardians was a great honor. Fiona considered her time there blessed, promising that Elizabeth would enjoy it too. But, now, at twenty, she was too old to be chosen.

Which brought her back to her original question. What did the overlord want with her family? Had her father failed to repay his debts again? Or had he done something worse?

Since Micah had returned from the battlefield a few weeks earlier to assume the position of overlord, she'd seen him ride past her home often. She'd assumed he'd been patrolling the borders, overseeing the strongholds that protected Maelgwn from the threat of Cadeyrn raiders. Perhaps he'd had another reason to venture this way. He'd never spoken to her, or even stopped. But he'd watched her. He'd watched her with those burning eyes that heated her skin and forced the air from her lungs. And now he was here. In her home.

"Where is she?" Micah demanded.

Elizabeth startled at the deep timbre of his voice. She? Perhaps he sought her sister, Maureen. After all, most of the rest of the men of Maelgwn had. Jealousy poked at her. Since when was she envious of Maureen? Since she imagined her with Micah—that's when.

"She's gone to forage for herbs," her father answered.

Elizabeth placed her carefully gathered basket of yarrow and wood sorrel near her feet and crept closer. Obviously, the man was looking for her but why? Panic flared in her stomach. Had someone seen her practicing spells deep within in the forest? She'd taken great care to make sure her activities remained hidden from prying eyes.

Magic was forbidden to women. All of the men of realm had some ability but only the most powerful became temple guardians. In addition to helping to advise the overlord, they were permitted to manipulate the unseen forces of nature, helping to protect Maelgwn from the constant threat of the Cadeyrn.

Women discovered to possess magical abilities were punished—some more severely than others. The greater the power, the greater the punishment. Though she could no longer remember her face, Elizabeth could still hear her mother's piteous cries as the flames took her.

Since the old overlord, Micah's father, had died, Elizabeth couldn't remember a woman being put to death for using magic. However, the last two mates of Micah's brother were killed because they hadn't been able to conceive an heir. Several months ago, Collin, along with his third mate, had vanished.

There were rumors the woman had enchanted the ruler and convinced him to take her to safety. But Elizabeth had known the young woman. If she'd had that kind of power, Elizabeth would have sensed it. Intuiting others' ability was one of her more recent gifts.

Her powers continued to develop at a startling pace. While she could hide her spellwork, she couldn't control the visions. So far, she'd been fortunate. They'd only revealed themselves when she was alone. However, lately they visited her with alarming frequency. She feared it was only a matter of time before her sedition was discovered. Perhaps that time had come.

"I'll find her," her father vowed.

Elizabeth snatched up her basket and darted outside. She needed to discover why Micah sought her before she allowed herself to be seen by either man. Creeping around the perimeter of the cottage, she poised to escape into the forest should the need arise.

Her father called her name, his voice ringing through the still air. It sounded as though he headed in her direction. She inched around the side of the house and realized she was beneath the bedroom window. Unable to resist, she peered inside.

Darkly handsome, Micah seemed to take up all the space in the small area. She watched, mesmerized as he lifted her nightgown from her bed. Slowly, he crushed the fabric in his huge hands and lifted it to his face. Closing his eyes, he inhaled.

Elizabeth gasped as the ache between her legs returned and intensified. Though she'd made barely a sound, his eyes snapped open and he pinned her with his deep brown gaze. His firm, almost full lips curved in a knowing smile.

"Mine," he mouthed.

"Elizabeth!"

Her father's voice galvanized her into action. With a last glance at Micah, she raced into the trees surrounding her home. Branches tore at her skin and dress as she crashed through the brambles. He must know of her treasonous behavior and meant to punish her.

She would not die in agony like her mother. If she could get far enough upstream, she might be able to disappear into the catacomb of caves. If she were lucky, she could survive there until the search had been abandoned. Unless Cadeyrn warriors found her first. Distantly, she wondered where the temple guardians were. They'd been present when the former overlord had taken her mother.

The crashing of branches sounded behind her. She glanced around. The only person she saw was Micah. His long, powerful legs closed the distance between them. Desperately, she tried to run faster but he kept up with her. Leaping over a fallen log, she dodged a patch of briars. Her lungs burned as she forced air in and out.

"Stop!" he yelled. "I command you to stop!"

He was getting close. Too close. She pushed a whiplike branch aside, letting it fly free as she passed. Satisfied with the resounding thwack and the bellow of rage that followed, she turned west.

The sacred oak grove lay on the other side of a deep ravine. If she could reach it, perhaps she could scramble up a tree and hide until he ceased searching for her. She spared a glance over her shoulder. The branch hadn't slowed him as much as she

would have liked. The anger seething in his eyes brought back memories she'd submerged until now.

Fifteen years ago, on a day much like today, Elizabeth cried as the overlord tore her from her mother's arms. He'd dragged the chained, sobbing woman from her family. Now, at twenty years of age, it seemed Elizabeth's fate would be the same. She consoled herself with the thought that she wouldn't be leaving behind two young children.

She struggled to keep her legs moving through the blazing pain that shot through her muscles. A dense copse of trees spurred her on. She needed to find a hiding spot and catch her breath. If not, she'd die of exhaustion long before the flames seared her skin.

Micah's harsh breath sounded in her ear. How had he'd gotten so near? Sensing his movement, she turned to the right. It wasn't enough. His fingers tangled in her hair and he yanked her back against his heaving chest. Despite her struggles, he wrapped his arms around her torso, holding her immobile. His hot breath burned a trail across her cheek as he tightened his grip, nearly crushing the remaining air from her body.

"You will never run from me again."

Tears burned her eyes but she refused to respond. Gripping her chin, he positioned her head to look into her face. Up close she could see the flecks of gold and green that seemed to swirl through his brown irises. Startlingly long lashes framed his eyes, softening the harsh masculinity of his features. His neatly trimmed beard brushed across her skin, sending tingles of awareness through her limbs. She stiffened and tried to twist from his grasp.

She should be terrified and to be honest, she was. But his nearness aroused other, more unwelcome sensations. As if he knew what she felt, he chuckled, the sound rasping against her taut nerves.

"You are mine now, Elizabeth. Never forget that."

"My father—"

"Your father," he interrupted, "has been informed of my decision."

Staring at the ground, she swallowed hard and forced the words from her lips. "What decision?" She tried to keep from trembling as she waited for him to list her transgressions against the realm and the torturous death that awaited her. At least, she'd be with her mother again. The thought didn't do as much to reassure her as she'd hoped.

Micah tightened his grip on the girl. Woman, he corrected himself. She was already twenty, only eight years younger than he. He'd been surprised at the guardians' choice for his mate. He'd expected them to pick one of the young, docile maids from the village. Not Elizabeth. He'd have the gods' own trouble bending her to his will. But he had no doubt that in the end he'd prevail. And enjoy it. His blood stirred and his groin tightened at the thought of mastering her.

"Beltane comes, leannan, and I need an heir."

"I am not your lover," she practically spat.

Micah grinned, pleased by her fire. "You will be...leannan." He bit the tender spot where her shoulder met her neck and a tremor shot through her. She again tried to twist from his grasp.

"I will have you," he whispered as he savored the sweet taste of her skin. He wanted more. He wanted to take her now, against the loamy earth, with only the spirits of the forest as their witnesses.

The woman nearly growled as she struggled against him. In response, he thrust his hard cock against her ass. A whimper escaped her full lips. If she conceived, she might make a worthy mate. "The temple guardians have divined that, in seven days, you are to be mine."

"They must have made a mistake." She shook her auburn hair off her face as she tried to meet his gaze. Her stormy, gray eyes shone with the beginnings of tears but she blinked them away. "Perhaps they've confused me with my sister."

Wry amusement filled him. "There's no confusion." Her sister had bedded nearly every man from here to the sea. Including most of the guardians. "The ritual of joining requires a virgin and they've chosen you."

She shook her head, silently protesting the decree. Compassion tugged at his conscience but he shoved it aside. He didn't want this either but sacrifices needed to be made. He amended his thought. He didn't want the joining but he did want her. He wanted to bury his cock inside her, thrusting until she came. He wanted to taste every inch of her skin. He wanted to fuck her endlessly until they were both sated. As often and as long as it took.

He'd balked when the guardians demanded he produce an heir. By all rights, this was his brother's duty. Not his. Three years after their father's death, Collin had vanished, leaving Micah to rule Maelgwn. Micah hadn't even held the throne for three weeks before the chancellor, his topmost advisor, had begun clamoring for an heir, pressing the guardians to find a suitable vessel. Micah had wanted to wait until the following Beltane, giving himself time to acclimate himself to his new station. Instead, it would happen in a few days' time.

Before she'd come upon him at the river, he'd not seen her in years. She'd been among the townspeople who'd watched the troops depart to defend the border. He remembered glancing across the sea of faces to notice her standing in the shadow of a cluster of trees. Her hair had blazed against the foliage, flying in the wind like a banner. She'd watched the soldiers ride out, her huge eyes worried. For a moment, their gazes had caught and she looked as though she might cry.

Ten years ago, she'd been a skinny, gangly child, all arms and legs and wild red hair. Her hair still looked like windswept autumn leaves but there was nothing awkward about her now.

He'd known it was her at the riverside the moment he'd seen her huge gray eyes. As she'd stared at him the color had changed to liquid silver and her lips had parted as

if she'd wanted to take him into her mouth. His cock jerked in response to the thought and he pushed closer to her. Full feminine curves pressed against him and his body responded. He ground his hips against her backside. He wanted inside her sweet body. Now. Rituals be damned.

As the younger son, he'd never planned on ruling the nation. He'd never desired it, either. Anger at his brother flared again and he tightened his grip on Elizabeth. "You are the one I shall mate with at the full moon."

Refusing to speak, she looked away.

"I've been watching you."

"Why?" she blurted out.

He could tell by the disgust crossing her features she hadn't wanted to voice her curiosity. She pressed her lips together in a taut line, as if that would be enough to keep her mouth closed.

Trailing his lips over her neck, he swirled soft kisses over the exposed skin. He wondered if she was aware of her gentle sigh as he lapped and nibbled at her flesh. In truth, he'd been observing her since the guardians prophesized her as his mate. They hadn't chosen well for Collin. Micah didn't want those consequences repeated. He pushed away thoughts of his brother and the tragedy that followed him, focusing instead on the rapid rise and fall of Elizabeth's chest.

"I've seen how your breath quickens," he said, ignoring her question, "when your sister's lovers arrive and drag her into the hayloft, insisting that you stand guard." He loosened his grip slightly and slid his hands over her shoulders and down her arms, willing her to relax against him.

"Your nipples tighten," he murmured as he skimmed his hands up her torso, barely grazing the outer edges of her breasts. "And you grow restless listening to the sounds of their mating."

Groaning, she shifted, as though trying to put some space between their bodies. Her nipples pebbled against the fabric of her dress. Gripping her hips firmly, he pulled her securely against him. Against the rock-hard proof of his desire.

Burying his nose in her silky hair, he breathed in the sharp scent of crushed greens and soft flowers and something vaguely spicy that was entirely Elizabeth. Gods, he wanted her. A week was far too long to wait to lose himself in her lush body.

Micah splayed his hand across her stomach, feeling her muscles tremble under his caress. "Late at night do you touch yourself?" His lips coasted around the shell of her ear, inciting more tremors. "Do you give your body the relief it craves?"

"Leave me alone," she whimpered. "Please."

"Not until you answer me. Do you touch yourself, Elizabeth?"

She dropped her chin, refusing to look at him. He spun and pinned her against the nearest tree. She shoved at him but he wouldn't be budged. Finally, she raised her gaze to his. Thought deserted him as he stared into her storm-swept eyes.

He tried to tell himself he should leave her be but he couldn't. Instead, he pushed her. "Who is your imaginary lover? Whom do you think of late at night when your body trembles under your fingertips?"

She squeezed shut her eyes as if she could make him vanish. He chuckled. Now that he had his hands on her, it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Shall I guess, then?"

Her eyes snapped open and she glared at him. "I don't care what you do."

He couldn't stop the grin that spread across his face. "Hmmm..." He tapped his finger to his chin as if deep in thought. "Is it the miller's son?"

Her brows furrowed and incredulity lit her eyes.

"No? Then, perhaps, Emrys, the shepherd?"

Her lips twitched but she pressed them together in annoyance. He wet the tip of his forefinger and tenderly traced her mouth.

"Who heats your blood, I wonder."

Her gaze clashed briefly with his before she glanced away. She bit her full lower lip as her normally porcelain skin flushed a deep rose. Squirming, she tried to free herself from his grasp. Her body twisted and pushed against his as she struggled, arousing him further.

He'd toyed with her long enough. Cupping her head in his hands, he angled her face to meet his. "I want you too." Her eyes widened. He felt her sharp, intake of breath all the way to the pit of his stomach.

Elizabeth froze. What did he mean he wanted her too? She hadn't spoken aloud — had she? Micah's hand cradled the side of her face as he stroked her neck with his fingertips. Calluses attested to the time he'd spent training and on the battlefield. Shivers skated over her skin, following the path of his hands.

Helpless to do more than stare into his eyes, she moistened her dry lips as he moved closer, filling her entire range of vision. All she could see was Micah — his eyes dark with intent, his firm, parted lips. His whispered words caressed her skin. "Someday, you'll show me how you touched yourself when you thought of me."

She gasped as his meaning sunk in but he'd already reached her mouth, swallowing the sound with his lips. Heat swept over her senses. Sweet, wet heat. Micah tunneled his fingers through her hair, grazing her scalp with his nails. The pinpricks of pleasure-pain surged through her as his tongue swept past her shocked defenses. No man had ever kissed her like this.

He stroked the inside of her mouth, tasting her, biting at her lips. Dizzy with desire, she timidly mimicked his actions, returning his kiss. With no conscious effort, her arms circled his neck and she pressed her body to his. His groan shuddered against her neck, heightening her senses as he ground his arousal against her. The bark bit into her back through the thin fabric of her dress but she barely noticed. Pinned between the hard tree behind her and the equally hard man in front of her, she wanted more.

"Elizabeth!" Her father's voice rang through the forest.

The haze of desire vanished. She remembered why she was here and why she should be running. She pushed at Micah's chest, desperate to flee.

"Elizabeth!" her father called again.

As she struggled, her nails sliced across Micah's skin where the tunic gaped. He hissed through clenched teeth. In a movement so quick she hadn't seen it coming, he pinned both of her wrists above her head.

He loomed over her and she swallowed hard, watching the blood well at his throat. With his free hand, he swiped his fingertip across the wound. He frowned at the thin sheen of liquid coating his skin. With slow, deliberate movements, he smeared his blood at the hollow of her throat where her pulse beat frantically under his touch.

"Never forget, leannan," he whispered, his voice harsh. "You're mine, now." His hot breath coasted over her skin. "Mine to punish." He nipped her neck hard enough to draw a gasp from her lips. "Mine to fuck." He squeezed her wrists together and she knew she'd have bruises by tonight. "Mine. For the rest of your life."

She forced herself to hold his gaze as if she had nothing to hide. If he discovered her secrets, the rest of her life might not be long at all.

"Milord," her father panted as he stumbled into view. "You've found her." Catching his breath, he sliced a green branch from a nearby tree with his knife. "Shall I beat her for you, milord?"

Elizabeth blinked several times, unsure if she'd heard him correctly. She wasn't sure what was more astounding—the fact that he'd offered to discipline her, or the way he groveled to Micah. Judging from his behavior, she suspected, he'd offer to light the kindling if they burned her at the stake. She'd never expected him to protect her. After all, he hadn't tried to save his own mate. But at the same time, she never thought he'd be so eager to hurt her.

Elizabeth glared at her father but Micah's eyes never left her face. He skimmed the backs of his fingers over her cheeks, drawing her attention back to his harsh beauty.

"I prefer to administer my own form of punishment."

His tone was conversational but his eyes blazed with anger. And lust. Her insides twisted and she grew damp with sudden need. Squeezing her thighs together, she tried to quell her reaction. As if he sensed her response, he chuckled. The low sound vibrated up her spine.

"I'll send a detachment to fetch her belongings. Have them ready."

"Yes, milord," her father stammered.

Was he planning to curtsy next? Disgust curled her lip. If Micah thought she'd behave in such a manner, he was sorely mistaken. She might feign acquiescence but as soon as she had a chance, she'd run away.

Micah studied her, a predatory smile curving his mouth. His expression seemed to be daring her to try to escape. Despite the worry trembling in her belly, she returned his smile, enjoying the questions that surfaced in his eyes.

"Ready my horse," he growled at her father. "I'm taking my woman."

Her father hurried back toward their home. It wasn't hers anymore, she supposed. Strange, she would have expected to feel more sadness. She'd miss Maureen. A little. But as frequently as her sister visited the temple guardians and the soldiers Elizabeth would likely see her often enough.

Micah didn't release his ruthless hold on her wrists. He merely shifted his grip and tugged her along behind him as he pushed through the forest. He strode toward the clearing as if he expected the trees to part for his passage. They seemed to move with uncommon ease through the overgrowth. Maybe the branches did move for him. Perhaps his abilities affected plant life, though she sensed nothing that would indicate he used magic.

She shook her head to clear it. She should be trying to plan an escape not pondering his powers. Besides, she had a sinking feeling she'd be experiencing those powers soon enough.

They emerged through the last of the trees and the low-lying brush that surrounded the cottage. Her father held the horse's reins, waiting like the perfect sycophant. While she'd never been close to him, she hadn't expected his eagerness to rid himself of her. The betrayal stung more than she wanted to admit.

Elizabeth glanced at the ground as Micah led her to the huge black horse that snorted and pawed at the earth. Her basket of herbs lay crushed under the beast's feet, visual confirmation she no longer belonged here.

Micah lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. The triumph she expected to see was conspicuously absent. Instead, he studied her as if discovering something he hadn't before noticed. What if he could sense magical ability as she could? Was that what he'd ascertained? Belatedly, she attempted to shield the raw power that flowed through her.

"Can I trust you to stay here while I mount?" His voice was a pleasing rumble that slid over her skin.

Before she could answer, her arms were roughly pinned behind her back. Her shoulders burned at the twisting sensation.

"Release her," Micah thundered. "I did not ask for your assistance."

"Forgive me, milord. I didn't want her to run again." Her father freed her arms more slowly than she would have liked. "She's a willful one," he warned.

"She is no longer your concern."

The older man stepped back. "Aye, milord."

Elizabeth shifted and stretched but remained silent.

"You didn't answer me, leannan. Can I trust you?"

The question seemed to hint at far more than the present moment. "I won't run." Now.

His lips curved slightly in that sinful smile she suddenly wanted to taste and his gaze heated. Without taking his eyes from her, he swung himself over the horse's back. Fascinated, she watched the play of muscles shifting beneath his well-fitted braies.

His huge hands gripped the reins, steadying the beast and she couldn't help but imagine those same hands on her body. Her skin still burned where he'd stroked and caressed her. She knew he'd restrained himself in the forest. What would he be like in the privacy of his chambers? Would he hurt her? Would he be a gentle lover or cruel? She trembled, fear and excitement vying for supremacy.

Captured in Micah's burning gaze, Elizabeth stared, feeling like a mouse hypnotized by a viper. The irony wasn't lost on her. For a brief moment, she considered running but to what avail? He'd either trample her with that great beast of his, or he'd capture her and who knew what manner of punishment she'd suffer. As it was, she suspected her earlier transgression wouldn't go ignored.

Once Micah was settled on the horse's back, he leaned down and lifted her across his lap. His hard thighs shifted under hers, igniting a heavy, aching want that seeped through her limbs. She stiffened, unwilling to let him know how his nearness affected her.

Without another word to her father, he urged the horse into a trot. Nearly losing her balance, she gripped Micah's thighs. His hard arousal pressed into her hip and her stomach fluttered in nervousness. If he was as large as he felt, there was no way she'd be able to accommodate him.

Her sister always said "the bigger, the better" but Elizabeth wasn't so sure. Perhaps if she was as experienced as Maureen it would be fine. Unfortunately, she'd never had a man. No one but Micah had interested her enough. His earlier comment returned to her. The ritual of joining required a virgin. Hope blossomed. Maybe she could escape her fate after all.

"I'm not a virgin," she blurted out, hazarding a glance at his face.

Rich laughter rolled from him, stroking her senses like warmed velvet. She looked away from him, refusing to hold his gaze. He slowed the horse and lifted her chin. His brown eyes crinkled enticingly at the corners. She fisted her hand to keep from smoothing the skin with her fingertip.

"You don't expect me to believe you've been with a man, do you, leannan?"

She glared at him. What did he mean by that? "Are you suggesting no man would want me?"

His smile faded and his expression grew grim. "I'm not suggesting that at all. I've seen the attention you attract." He didn't sound pleased.

"Then why do you laugh?" She tossed her head. "I've lain with so many, I've lost count."

Micah leaned forward and grazed the side of her neck with his teeth. "You'd best hope I don't believe you or I'd have to leave you at the soldiers' barracks."

Her breath caught and she swallowed heavily. She knew what would happen there.

He slid his hand up her abdomen and cupped her breast. Without warning, he twisted her nipple and heat shot savagely through her body. She bit back a gasp.

His lips soothed area he'd scraped a moment ago and he slid his hands over her thighs, his fingertips veering dangerously close to her mound. She crossed her feet at the ankles and squeezed her legs together.

"No, leannan," he murmured, continuing to stroke her. "I don't believe you've spread your legs for any man. Even so, by law, there must be proof."

"Proof?" she choked out.

"The guardians," he gritted out, sounding angry, "will judge your purity."

Fear closed her throat. "How?"

Refusing to answer, Micah secured one arm around her waist and urged the horse into a gallop. The motion forced her against the warmth of his chest. She tried to think. Surely the guardians would sense her ability. She needed to find a way to escape or in a matter of hours, she would be dead.

Chapter Two

Micah tightened his grip around Elizabeth's waist as they approached the keep. He didn't believe her story of lying with more men than she could remember but he wasn't sure he wanted to risk it. He should have fucked her in the forest as he'd wanted. They could have avoided the rite of proof. But that would have caused other problems.

He shook his head, unsure why it mattered. If the guardians had erred, they'd find him a suitable mate. He frowned. He wanted Elizabeth. He'd lied when he'd threatened to leave her at the barracks. The thought of her passed from man to man was more than he could bear. If she wasn't pure, he'd simply keep her in his chambers until he'd had his fill of her sweet body.

She'd been willing enough, in the woods—responding to his advances, melting against his body, drawing him closer. He could still taste her on his lips and he wanted more.

The gates swung open as they approached and she stiffened in his arms. Fear vibrated through her though he could tell she tried to hide it. The courtyard had been bustling with the activity of vendors selling their wares but movement stilled as he halted his mount in front of the doors to the inner bailey.

Elizabeth's eyes widened as she caught sight of the black-robed guardians lining the steps to await his return. Micah considered reassuring her but thought better of it. She'd given him enough trouble this morning. Perhaps anxiety would keep her willfulness at bay. If not her punishment would increase.

His cock stirred at the images that evoked. He hadn't thought he could get any harder. Riding the distance from her cottage to the keep with her hip moving rhythmically against his groin had been torture. Worse, her warm scent had twined around him until baring her flesh had become his first priority.

Asher, his oldest friend, threw back his hood and stepped from the rest of the guardians. Summoning a groom to take Micah's mount to the stable, he advanced, his assessing gaze intent on Elizabeth.

Hostility burned through Micah's veins, followed quickly by confusion. There had been plenty of nights when he and Asher had shared the same woman. From the look in his friend's eyes, he contemplated pleasuring Elizabeth in that way. Micah stifled the growl that crawled up his throat but not soon enough. She turned to look at him, her lips parted in surprise and the other man laughed.

Micah glared at his friend. "The netherworld take you."

"In due time." Reaching up, Asher motioned for him to release Elizabeth so he could help her alight. Micah sighed and handed her down. Dismounting with a near

painful erection would be difficult but he wouldn't leave her alone with his friend longer than necessary.

What was the matter with him? He had no attachment to this woman. He felt nothing for her beyond the needs of his body.

A flash of red moving toward him caught his eye. Willem, the Chancellor, his father's head advisor—his now, he supposed—walked though the courtyard at a clipped pace. Micah threw his leg over his mount's back and leapt to the ground, hoping to drag Elizabeth to his chambers before Willem reached his side.

As was usually the case where the chancellor was concerned, luck was absent. The man moved quicker than a wraith.

"Willem." He nodded.

"Mic—milord," the man corrected smoothly.

The slip hadn't been a mistake. The chancellor never made mistakes. Though the man had professed great joy at Micah's return from battle Micah hadn't believed it. He'd overheard too many bitter arguments between Willem and his father. The chancellor had insisted that neither son was fit to rule in the overlord's stead. In fact, he'd assumed control of Maelgwn when Collin vanished, insisting that Micah had been reported dead at the battle's front line.

The older man gripped Elizabeth's chin and forced her to meet his gaze. "So this is our chosen vessel."

Micah's hands fisted but before he could respond, she shook her head from the other man's grasp. Instead of the frightened expression he expected to see Elizabeth's eyes had narrowed and her mouth opened. Before she had a chance to speak he tugged her into the shelter of his body.

"My vessel," he snapped.

The chancellor toyed with a lock of her hair, twining it around his finger.

She tossed her head, tugging her hair from his grasp. "Don't touch me."

Micah tightened his arm around Elizabeth in warning but she continued to glare at the other man.

Willem sputtered in outrage but Micah ignored it. As soon as was feasible, he'd replace the man. Though the chancellor was sworn to serve the Overlord of Maelgwn, Micah didn't trust him. When his heir was secure, he'd appoint Asher to Willem's position. Though he was the overlord by right of birth, he could still be replaced if he didn't produce an heir in a reasonable amount of time. Until then he was bound by his father's regime.

Micah and Willem stared at each other in strained silence, until his friend moved forward. "She must be prepared for the rite."

Elizabeth's eyes widened and her teeth sank into her lower lip.

Micah stifled a grin. Preparation for an experience that would only bring her pleasure frightened her but staring down one of the realm's most dangerous men didn't

affect her. Pride and unease warred for dominance within him. Her spirit pleased him but he worried for her safety. The chancellor wasn't a man to take lightly.

Micah's gaze swung back to Willem who studied Elizabeth with a predatory air. His suspicions about the chancellor increased, especially where she was concerned.

His misgivings weren't foreknowledge like some of the guardians had. Micah, shamed as he was to admit it, had no magic. He trusted his sword and he trusted his gut. Right now, his gut told him not to leave Elizabeth alone with Willem. It was more than the puzzling jealousy he'd felt toward Asher. His mistrust of the chancellor settled like a millstone in the pit of his stomach.

Taking her arm, he led her away from the older man.

"Where are you taking me?" she whispered, her gaze darting around wildly.

"To my chambers."

He was surprised he was still so hard. The confrontation with Willem should have cooled his need but the sound of her sweetly husky voice brought his desire to the forefront again. How the guardians expected him to wait seven more days to plunge himself into her body was beyond him. He wasn't even sure he could wait seven more minutes.

Irritation simmered in his blood. He'd never had this much trouble controlling his lust before—not even when he was an untried youth. What was it about this woman?

Perhaps it wasn't her at all. He wasn't used to having to restrain himself. He'd known for weeks that she would be his come Beltane. He'd also known that he couldn't touch her until the full moon. It was likely the anticipation more than the actual woman.

He'd considered bringing her to the keep as soon as he heard she was to be his mate but Asher had warned against it, insisting that for the time being she was safer on her family's farm. The more people who knew his mate's identity the more danger she'd be in. Asher didn't trust Willem either but unless they caught him in an act of treason they couldn't do anything about him. Not until an heir was assured, anyway.

He glanced her way. She watched him with wary eyes that betrayed her fear. He wanted to see them glazed with passion as he brought her to the edge over and over again. He wanted to see her soft lips glistening as she took his cock into her mouth.

Quickening his pace, he pulled her toward the archway that led into the inner bailey. He needed to get her to his chambers. They'd still have the ritual on Beltane but there was no way in hell he'd wait any longer to have her. He wasn't sure how he was going to get around the joining traditions but he'd find a way.

Without warning Elizabeth wrenched from his grasp and sprinted away, dashing around a vendor pulling his cart through the crowd. Bellowing her name, Micah gave chase. He darted around merchandise spread over tables and dodged people and animals. Anger and embarrassment clawed at him. By the gods, she'd pay for running off.

Losing sight of her, he stopped in the middle of the square and scanned the crowd. The clever wench had picked the perfect spot to disappear. There wasn't a sign of her anywhere. As he was about to begin a systematic search of the area an image flashed in his mind's eye. Elizabeth trembling under wooden steps behind a table draped with a blue cloth.

He almost dismissed the sensation but it was so real. He felt her panicked heartbeat, felt her lungs constricting as she tried to calm her breathing. Were his abilities finally developing or was this simply wishful thinking?

He scrutinized the enclosure, oblivious to the crowd who had abandoned their business in favor of watching their overlord. A bit of blue attracted his attention. He strode across the marketplace to the fabric-covered table and motioned the proprietor aside. Behind the table was a set of wooden steps, exactly as he'd seen in his vision. Squatting, he peered beneath them. Elizabeth sat in a panting huddle.

"If you make me drag you out of there it will go far worse for you," he promised.

It might not go well for her anyway. She'd run from him twice. This time she'd called his authority into question in front of his people. His hands tightened at his sides as he waited for her to move.

She glared sullenly for several long moments before inching toward him. Once she reached the opening, he scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder, refusing to give her another chance to defy him.

When she began to squirm he swatted her rounded ass. Her breath hissed out and she ceased moving. "If you behave like a spoiled child, you'll be treated like one," he muttered.

He'd have to watch her more carefully in the future. He wasn't stupid enough to believe her defiance was over.

Reaching into the pouch at his waist, he tossed the merchant several coins and strode in the direction of his chambers. The crowd parted for him, cheering as he carried her through the throng.

"Put me down," Elizabeth demanded.

In lieu of an answer, he slapped her ass again. Harder. Ignoring her cry of impotent fury, he kept his hand on her, caressing, tracing the space between. He walked slowly through the square, continuing to stroke her body.

Her emotions were so intense he felt them as easily as his own. She was mortified at being fondled in public but each touch made her hotter. In this position he could smell her honeyed warmth.

"I smell your heat for me, leannan. Soon I'll taste it as well."

Gasping, she wriggled, trying yet again to escape his grasp.

"Put me down!" She thrashed and beat her small fists against as much of his body as she could reach as the crowd murmured, growing louder.

His frustration flared and he fought the urge to throttle Elizabeth. She and the rest of his subjects, who watched with openmouthed fascination, needed a lesson in authority. Keeping his arm tight around her thighs, locking her body in place, he slipped his hand up her skirt to settle on her near-naked flesh. She screamed in outrage as he caressed her thighs and bottom.

"Get your hands off me," she demanded.

"You belong to me, now."

She hit him again.

"Do you want me to bare your ass for the entire marketplace to see?" He slowly gathered the fabric in his hand, his fingertips playing across her weeping cunt.

"No!"

Her hips jerked under his touch and he repeated the motion.

"Then stop trying my patience," he ground out as he carried her from the courtyard.

Shuddering under his touch, she fell silent.

The entire situation had pushed the limits of his forbearance. The Cadeyrn. Collin. Maelgwn itself. And now a mate. This mate. He should have stayed on the front lines and left Asher to struggle with Willem. It would likely have been easier than trying to tame Elizabeth. But not nearly as enjoyable.

No one spoke as Micah carried her through the winding stone corridors that led to his quarters. Elizabeth shifted on his shoulder as if she craned her head around to see where they were going. From her vantage point, she wouldn't see much more than the fieldstone walls, the rush-covered floors and an occasional torch set high above her.

As he approached the section of the center tower he'd claimed for his private quarters, his guards pulled open the heavy iron-studded doors. Willem had made himself at home in Micah's chair while Asher and several of the other guardians stood near the fire.

Micah stopped in front of the chancellor. "Your presence wasn't requested," he bit out, "nor is it needed."

Willem's oily smile slid across his face in a challenge. "I've always presided over the rite of proof for the overlord."

"Not this time." Micah refused to let him touch Elizabeth.

Asher approached them cautiously. "With a new overlord, come new traditions," he interrupted, attempting to smooth the unrest.

Yes, whether Asher liked it or not, Micah would make him chancellor at the first opportunity. He had more diplomacy than Micah could ever hope for.

"Leave. All of you," he thundered. He looked at each man in turn. "I'll send for you when it's time for the rite."

Silently, everyone filed out. Except Asher. Micah turned to him and glared.

The other man raised an eyebrow and returned the harsh look. "What are you doing, Micah?"

"Throwing you out."

Asher laughed disdainfully. "I don't think so. If I leave, you'll do what you want with the girl, proof or no." He stepped closer and stroked her hip.

Micah choked back the desire to tell his friend to get his hand off Elizabeth. Again, he wondered at his sudden surge of possessiveness. As far as he was concerned she was just another woman.

But she was his. Maybe that was the problem.

In the past, when they'd both wanted the same woman, there had never been any question of jealousy or greed. Besides, there were certain responsibilities that accompanied Asher's position. As the leader of the temple it was his duty to make sure the union was consummated and that the woman was not hurt in any way. Even going as far as helping to arouse her if need be.

Remembering her eager response to him in the forest, Micah was sure that wouldn't be an issue.

"We chose her for reasons other than sating your lust," Asher continued.

Micah sighed. His friend was right but all he wanted was to lose himself in her body. He wanted to forget about plots and wars, intrigue and rituals and focus on how he and Elizabeth fit together. Tiredly, he rubbed his hand over his face as he tried to think. The scent of her on his skin poleaxed him and he tightened his arms around her.

"Put me down," she demanded.

He gripped her waist and slowly dragged her down his body, letting her feel just how hard she made him. Staring into his eyes, she gasped as her mound came into contact with his cock. But as soon as her feet touched the ground she tried to run.

He was ready for her this time. Grabbing her wrist, he twisted her arm behind her back and locked his forearm over her chest as he dragged her against him.

Asher raised an eyebrow. "Trouble?"

"Was it necessary to choose such an uncooperative wench?" Micah asked.

His friend traced the line of Elizabeth's neck and collarbone, smiling gently when she trembled under his touch. Micah realized that she trembled from fear, not desire.

"Please let me go," she begged, her eyes wide with panic.

Micah studied her. For some reason, his friend seemed to frighten her more than anything else but why? Women typically fell over themselves to get closer to Asher but Elizabeth cringed at his touch. He'd felt her fear and distaste for the chancellor but it was nothing compared to this. As if it was his own, he felt her heart beat frantically. Why this intense fear of Asher?

"I'm not the one you need," she continued. "There must have been a mistake."

Asher shook his head. "No mistake, little one."

The sound of the endearment directed at Elizabeth rankled Micah, which was ridiculous. She was a vessel. Nothing more. A protest rose in his mind but he quashed it. She was a means to an end – his heir.

He'd seen soldiers – good men – turn from ferocious warriors to besotted fools all because they'd become attached to a woman. They'd fancied themselves in love. He refused to fall into that trap. He wouldn't be cruel to Elizabeth but he wasn't about to rush headlong into the role of the muddled idiot, either. She was the same as any other women he'd ever had.

If that were true why did he feel the need to comfort her?

"Shall I call for the attendants?" Asher asked.

Elizabeth looked around wildly at the question and Micah loosened his grip on her. Without warning she thrust her elbow into his stomach and twisted from his hold. Asher grabbed for her but she ducked under his outstretched arm and raced toward the door.

The wench! He didn't need this aggravation. Getting an heir shouldn't be this damn difficult. Micah roared her name as he followed her across the room. Luckily, he reached her before she could turn the handle. Claspings his hand over her mouth, he smothered her scream of frustration and pinned her against the door with his body.

"That's not how I want to hear you scream," he murmured into her ear.

She bit him hard, nearly drawing blood and forcing his hand from her face.

"I don't care what you want," she ground out.

He thrust his still hard cock against her ass. "You will, leannan."

He lifted her around the waist and dragged her kicking and screaming across the room. Asher waited, absently twirling iron cuffs that hung from a chain mounted to the ceiling.

The room was one of many Micah's father had used over the years. He'd never thought he'd actually use the equipment his father had installed but that was just another difference between them. He liked his women willing. The old overlord hadn't cared one way or the other.

"You could help," Micah grunted at his friend.

Asher smirked, clearly finding perverse amusement in the situation. "You seem to be doing just fine on your own."

With a few whispered words of magic the man could immobilize her yet he stood there grinning like an idiot.

She smashed her head into Micah's chin and he winced. As they got closer, she stomped on his foot, fighting even more fiercely when she saw the manacles. His skin would be covered in gouges and teeth marks by the time he secured her.

The more she struggled, the more aroused he got. At this rate, he wouldn't last a minute once he got inside her. Maybe he was more like his father than he'd thought.

The idea sickened him but there was something about the sensation of her body thrashing against his that excited him.

"So you're going to force me?" she sneered.

He laughed, knowing how cruel he sounded. "It won't be force, Elizabeth. You'll be begging for my cock before we're done."

Shock momentarily slowed her motion and he took that opportunity to lock one of the cuffs around her slender wrist.

"I won't beg you for anything," she snarled.

Cold iron closed around Elizabeth's skin. Distantly, she realized the guardian stretched her arm upward and secured the other manacle. Her wrists already ached where Micah had squeezed them when he pinned her against the tree this morning. Was it only this morning? It seemed a lifetime ago.

With her hands secured above her head, she panicked. Gripping the chain, she lifted herself into the air and kicked savagely at whichever man was closest. They were going to have to work harder than this to shackle her. Her foot caught the guardian in the temple, nearly toppling him. As she drew back to kick Micah, he wrapped his arm around both legs, immobilizing her.

"Enough!" he thundered.

Unforgiving metal clamped around each ankle and her legs were spread apart and bolted to the floor. Panic choked her throat. With her arms secured to a chain that hung from the ceiling and her feet to cuffs attached to the floor, she'd never felt so vulnerable. The fight drained from her. What was the point? She wasn't going anywhere. The magic she had would be of no use in this situation. She had to rely on her wits. So far, they'd only gotten her chained up.

The guardian studied her intently but she looked away. His power coursed so strongly she felt it as soon as he'd approached her in the courtyard. Locked in this room with him the sensation was even more acute. He'd discover her secret soon and she'd be dead. She wished she'd had time to gather the herbs needed to render herself unconscious before they burned her.

He lifted her chin so she had to look into his deep green eyes. She caught her breath as his gaze seemed to penetrate her. It was as if he could see into her soul but if he saw any of her closely guarded power he said nothing. Instead, a small smile curved his lips and he brushed his thumb over her mouth.

"Asher," Micah said, his voice like a warning.

So that was his name. He turned to Micah and grinned, his long chestnut hair shimmering like silk. His smile was dangerous, provocative. If not for Micah, she would have thought him the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

Both men were tall and broad across the shoulders but she couldn't tell if Asher was as muscular as Micah. The shapeless black robe hid most of him. His fair skin was sun-kissed but still pale next to Micah's beautiful, brown body.

What was she doing thinking about their bodies? They had her trussed up and were going to do who-knew-what with her. She had a sinking feeling she knew exactly what they would do.

Her gaze darted between the hulking men who stared at her like they were starving. She closed her eyes, willing the ordeal to be over. "Just do it quickly."

"We're not going to hurt you," Asher murmured, his voice soothing.

Her eyes flew open and her anger spilled out. "I've been taken from my home and imprisoned. Do you really think I'm going to believe you?"

Ignoring her outburst, they slowly circled her body. Every now and again, one of the men would reach out and caress her with teasing touches. She stiffened, vowing to fight them. But fear warred with desire as they gently stroked her skin, making her want more than a fleeting touch. What was the matter with her? These men would likely be her death and she wanted more?

Someone stepped close to her back. Micah. She knew his scent already. Heady, enticing, arousing. The gods help her, she wanted him closer.

"We're not going to hurt you," he murmured. "But it won't be over quickly."

What did he mean it wouldn't be over quickly? They planned to draw this out indefinitely? "Just finish it," she said between gritted teeth.

Micah's hot breath skated along her neck and a shiver worked through her body. The damp ache between her legs intensified. Why did she have to respond this way? Why had her body turned traitor?

"I'm going to take my time with you," he whispered against her ear.

As if she'd forgotten to breathe, she sucked in a harsh breath, turning to face him. Lust burned bright in his eyes as he held her gaze.

The flutter of material falling to the floor drew her attention. Asher had stripped off his robe and stood clad in snug-fitting black braies and a green tunic. Micah nuzzled her ear and neck before moving to stand beside the guardian.

He still wore the black breeches but he'd removed his tunic. The wounds she'd inflicted were painfully apparent. Somehow, she knew he wouldn't let her offenses go unpunished. Besides the scratches that marred his beautiful skin he had several jagged but healed scars. She couldn't suppress the thought that she could have cured him with far less damage to his perfectly sculpted body.

Asher arched a speculative brow at her. Had she spoken aloud? No, she knew she hadn't but it was as if he heard her thought. He couldn't do that, could he? She'd heard rumors of men with that kind of power but that's all they had been. Rumors.

His curious expression vanished as if it had never been there. Side by side the pair studied her, their eyes hot and hungry. Micah pulled a wicked-looking knife from a sheath at his side and stepped toward her.

"Don't move," he warned.

The blade trailed along her collarbone and she gasped from the cold metal and colder fear. Her breath stalled in her throat as he brought the point to rest between her breasts.

This was it. She was going to die. Somehow, they must have figured out what she hid and decided not to bother with the stake. Surely stabbing would be better than burning to death.

Catching the thin fabric with the tip of the weapon, he tugged, slicing through the front of the gown. The cloth fell open, exposing the tops of her breasts.

His gaze dropped to her chest. When it rose again, she realized that he wasn't going to kill her. Not yet, anyway. She glanced downward at the straining evidence of his arousal and her body clenched. How could she still want him?

Sheathing his knife, he slipped his hands inside her dress and cupped her aching breasts. She wanted to tell him to leave her be, to take his hands off her but she couldn't find the words. Even if she could, she didn't want to say them.

Her nipples hardened against his skin. It felt so good to finally have his hands on her. So much better than she'd imagined. And she had imagined it. Repeatedly.

Heated shame rushed to her cheeks but she couldn't keep herself from arching into his touch. He swirled circles with his palms over her almost painfully tight flesh, drawing a cry from her parted lips.

She was pathetic. A simple touch had her crying out. Practically begging him for more. She was no better than her sister.

Micah slipped his hands free of the fabric and dropped to his knees in front of her. What now? She couldn't tear her gaze from his. Even when Asher moved behind her, she remained trapped in Micah's hot predatory stare. Shamed as she was to admit it, she missed the sensation of his hands on her body.

The guardian stroked down the sensitive skin of her arms, his fingertips coming to rest on either side of her breasts, pushing them gently forward, toward the man who would be her mate. Without warning, Micah gripped the fabric of her dress and wrenched, splitting it from neck to hem. The tearing sound seemed to echo for endless moments as he gazed at her exposed body. His chest rapidly rose and fell as he surveyed her.

Unable to bear his scrutiny, she closed her eyes. She would never be beautiful like Maureen. She was just plain old Elizabeth. She didn't belong here as Micah's mate. If she could have she would have covered her nakedness with her hands. Instead, chilled air assaulted her skin and she jerked away from him. That only served to push her against Asher, his erection flush against her bottom.

"Open you eyes, little one," Asher murmured into her ear. "See how much he wants you."

As if hypnotized by his voice Elizabeth complied, nearly drowning in the blistering heat emanating from Micah's gaze. For a moment, he glared at Asher.

"Don't think this will be a regular occurrence," he growled. "Once the ritual has been performed, her body is mine alone."

"Until then, it's both of you?" she squeaked.

Micah looked at her, his golden brown eyes heavy-lidded and determined. "We've been known to share."

Share? They shared women? Both of them together? With one woman? She reassessed her earlier insight. They were going to kill her. It just wouldn't be the painful, bloody massacre she feared.

"But you're mine, Elizabeth," he breathed. With a half growl and half groan, he lunged for her, devouring first one nipple then the other. Suckling then biting, he drew her into the wet, scalding heat of his mouth.

She'd never felt anything like it. Sensation, centered at her breast, pulled a taut fiery line to her core. If he didn't stop the moisture collecting at her center would begin dripping down the insides of her thighs.

"Please," she whispered.

Asher plucked and twisted the opposite nipple, his hips rhythmically thrusting against her. "Please, what?"

A pounding at the door drew her from the sensual haze that had enveloped her.

"It's time," Asher said.

Fear streaked through her, pounding in time with the fist on the door. Time for what?

Micah rose gracefully to his feet and again withdrew his knife. The remains of her gown were stripped from her body. Several metallic clicks sounded and she found she could lower her arms and move her feet. Even if the cuffs and chains had been completely disengaged, she still wouldn't have been able to move quickly.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Asher spread a white linen cloth over the bed. What now? Micah lifted her from the floor, cradling her against his hard chest, tightening his grip when she began to struggle. "It will be all right. Don't fight them and it will be over more quickly."

"Them? Who? Micah, please tell me what's happening."

Gently, almost reverently, he laid her on the huge, curtained bed. Before she could move, he and Asher quickly reattached the chains to the bed frame. Now she lay spread-eagled, completely nude. Blood drummed in her ears as fear washed over her.

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked, amazed at how steady her voice sounded.

The men stood on either side of the bed, trailing their fingertips up and down her body.

"It's time for the rite of proof," Asher said.

Before she had time to consider that thought, Micah loomed over her, his long, black braids forming a curtain around their heads, isolating them. "I know you're frightened but I won't hurt you."

She glanced at the manacles around her wrists and stifled a hysterical laugh of disbelief.

"You have been chosen." He frowned as he visibly weighed his words. "If you don't conceive my child, they will kill you. I don't want that to happen."

She blinked away the tears that threatened. "Please, don't do this."

"Neither of us has a choice." The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable. *He didn't want her at all. He was just doing his duty. She was an unpleasant chore.*

The situation had seemed somewhat less horrible when she thought he actually wanted her.

"It will all be over soon."

Apparently, he was in a hurry to be finished with her.

He cupped her cheek and dropped a tender kiss on her lips. "I'll make sure you're ready," he promised. The expression of desire was back in his eyes again.

She wanted to believe it was genuine but now she knew better. To her mortification, she realized that it didn't matter. She still wanted him anyway. Not like this. Not with a ritual and onlookers but she did want him.

Asher crossed his arms. "There are still seven days until Beltane. You cannot take her."

Micah's gaze never left hers and he brushed his fingertips over her nipples, smiling as she sucked in a breath. "As you said earlier, 'with a new overlord, come new traditions'."

The other man laughed as he headed toward the door. "This particular tradition will need to remain secret between the three of us."

Elizabeth vowed to remember that piece of information. Perhaps it could help her somehow. Should she tell the chancellor? No. She didn't trust him. If evil had a stench, she suspected it would smell like his breath, fetid and rotting.

A sickening thought occurred to her, as a new horror clawed to the surface of her consciousness.

"Wait!" She twisted as far as she could toward Micah.

"What?"

She swallowed hard. "Please, whatever you do to me, please don't let him touch me."

The door opened and she heard several sets of footsteps file through.

Micah leaned closer. "Who?"

"The chancellor," she whispered. He, along with Micah's father, had lit the flames that killed her mother.

Chapter Three

“Do whatever it is you need to do,” Elizabeth pleaded, “but please don’t let him touch me.” She wasn’t above begging—not given the circumstances. She’d rather fight her own battles but that wasn’t an option at the moment.

Micah’s eyes showed something that looked suspiciously like concern and he leaned toward her.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” she whispered.

Holding her gaze, he brushed her hair from her eyes. “No one here will hurt you.”

That wasn’t the reassurance she needed. Would he keep the chancellor away from her or not?

He moved to stand near her feet, taking all the warmth in the room with him. Fighting the cold that tightened her flesh, she tugged at the chains that secured her to the bed.

Asher joined Micah with several other guardians—and of course the chancellor. Her stomach knotted and her breathing sped up. Micah’s gaze met hers and she refused to look away. He had done this to her, stripped her naked, body and soul. Yet she knew he was the only one who could protect her.

She searched his face. His lips twisted, his lustful expression bordering on anger as his gaze darted around the room. What right did he have to be angry? He wasn’t chained like some sacrificial offering waiting to be inspected. Her fury at the situation gave her something to cling to. It was better than the immobilizing terror that threatened whenever she thought about her future.

As if there had been an unspoken signal to begin the assembled guardians closed their eyes and began chanting in a language Elizabeth didn’t understand. Their voices rose and unseen forces touched her skin, caressing her. The words drugged her, warmed her, lulled her into a false sense of security. Her thoughts slowed and the fear and rage that had gripped her so tightly ebbed away.

Through it all, Micah held her gaze. His heated expression kept her anchored. Even the angry voices that surged above the chanting couldn’t pull her from the security of his presence.

The intensity of the invisible, stroking fingers increased, trailing up the insides of her thighs and across her stomach. She should be scandalized. It felt like every man in the room was touching her. Caressing her breasts, plucking at her nipples, stroking her folds. The level of chanting increased, as did the strength of the sensations. She writhed against the bed. The contact was too much and simultaneously not enough. She needed

it to stop. She needed more. She wanted to scream for Micah to take her but finding her voice was impossible.

The words "new tradition" seeped into her consciousness and the chancellor's voice pierced the haze of desire that surrounded her. She stiffened, woken from a dream. For a moment, Micah seemed so far away.

"Elizabeth. It's time."

Micah. Her rising panic receded at the sound of his half growled words. Everything but him faded. He filled her entire focus as he smoothed his hands over her hips, caressing her body as if he'd always known it.

Suddenly desperate for him, she arched off the bed as far as the chains would allow. He might have groaned but in the multitude of other noises, she couldn't be sure.

He repeated her name. She watched him, immobilized by his penetrating stare. Kneeling at the foot of the bed, he stroked the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. She clenched her teeth to keep from crying out.

He gazed at her, eyes smoldering. Bound and spread before him, she must look like a virgin waiting for a dragon to devour her. She almost laughed. Micah might not breathe fire but she knew from her brief experience with him that he could burn her. Would burn her. When he was finished, there might be nothing left of her at all.

The spell broken, she looked away. A huge mistake. Evident lust shone on the face of every man around her. To be the object of such desire sent ice racing through her veins as much as it intensified the heat between her legs. What was the matter with her? She couldn't believe their lust aroused her further. Unable to bear them watching, she squeezed shut her eyes.

Gliding his fingers through her cleft, Micah parted her folds, caressing her, heightening her need. Her body throbbed for him.

"Look at me, leannan," he commanded.

When she didn't immediately comply, he withdrew his hands from her body. Her eyes snapped open and she found herself again snared in his dangerous, hooded gaze.

With deliberate movements, he again parted her folds. Captured by the heat in his eyes, she couldn't look away while he carefully pushed a finger inside her channel. Involuntarily, she clenched on the intruding appendage and his jaw tightened. Brightened by desire, his eyes glowed like dark amber. Pushing farther inside her, he came into contact with her virgin barrier and a satisfied smile spread across his face.

"She is pure."

"There must be additional confirmation," the chancellor announced, moving closer.

Fear tightened her body as she tried desperately to close her legs. Micah promised no one would hurt her but he'd never responded to her entreaties regarding his head advisor.

"Asher," Micah bit out, withdrawing from her aching body.

The other man replaced Micah, testing her himself, internally stroking her. She moaned at the pleasure he induced.

"It's true," he said.

A flash of red moving near the bed forced her needy arousal away. The chancellor reached toward her but Micah grabbed the man's wrist and twisted. "You will not touch her," he said, his voice low and deadly. Still holding the man's wrist, he met her gaze.

He'd done it. He'd kept the chancellor from touching her. The brute who'd manhandled her in the market square, who whispered carnal threats against her skin and subjected her to this demeaning ordeal, had just protected her. Of course, his defense of her didn't extend beyond the chancellor. But at least, he'd offered that much.

Looking from her, he motioned to his friend. "Choose the third."

Asher glanced around the assembled men before nodding toward a young man with long golden hair. "Joseph," he barked.

The man in question knelt almost deferentially at the foot of the bed, glancing at Micah who glared down at him. Joseph swallowed nervously and touched her.

Her body hummed with suppressed need and she tried to keep from shuddering as he tested her.

"It is as the overlord said. She is pure." Looking into her face, he lifted his finger to his mouth as if to taste.

Elizabeth's womb constricted at the sensuality of the act. As Joseph brought his hand to his mouth, Micah caught it.

"She is mine. Never forget that."

The younger man blushed and stammered out an apology.

Before Micah could respond, a clamoring rang through the hallway. At the same time, she sensed a small release of magic from Asher directed outside the room. What was he doing? And why didn't anyone else notice? She glanced at him but he seemed intent on the developing drama between his friend and the young guardian.

The doors to the chamber opened and a messenger with several soldiers entered. Micah and Asher stood in front of her to block their view.

"What is it?" Micah demanded.

"A land squabble has turned violent."

The messenger continued relaying the information and the sensation of released magic from Asher grew stronger. She stared at him again. He met her gaze, his expression almost challenging.

Micah addressed the chancellor. "See to it."

The man nodded. Turning on his heel, he followed the soldiers from the room. Micah spoke quietly with the remaining men. They all left, save Asher. With a flick of his wrist, heavy wooden bars fell across each doorway, locking away the outside world.

The edge of desire still lurked under the blanket of fear. An uncontrollable shivering claimed her body. More than ever, she wished she'd been able to outrun Micah in the forest. Clearing her throat, she tried to speak. "Please, this is all wrong. There are other women who would be better suited to be the overlord's mate."

Asher shook his head, his smile kind as he ran his fingers over her rib cage. "None better suited to Micah."

She shook her head, willing back the tears that gathered in her eyes. "I can't stay here."

"I won't hurt you," Micah rumbled, heat burning in his gaze. His expression tightened her womb with unnamed longing. How could he make her want him with little more than a look? The trembling anticipation that had vanished with the earlier commotion gripped her body again. How was she supposed to survive this intense need for seven more days?

The men moved closer.

"You realize I must fulfill my duties," Asher said.

Micah nodded.

"What duties?" Elizabeth choked out. What other humiliations did they plan to visit upon her?

Asher stepped to the head of the bed, his bulging erection eye level. He leaned over her. "By law, I must verify the union is consummated."

She swallowed heavily and licked her parched lips. "I thought that was to happen on Beltane."

He looked toward his friend and then back. "The ritual of joining will still take place then but..." He shrugged with a smile. "New traditions."

Desire warred with fear at the heat in his gaze.

As if they'd done it a thousand times before, each man settled on either side of her supine body. The bed was more than large enough to accommodate the three of them. It probably could have held at least two more people, she thought, trying to smother a near-hysterical laugh.

With his fingertips, Micah teased one nipple into a hardened nub, while Asher did the same. Fiery sensation rioted through her body and she bit her lower lip to stop the moan of pleasure that threatened to escape.

Micah's attention stayed riveted on her face as he stroked her body. Though she tried to appear unaffected, it was impossible. No matter how hard she tried, she knew the reaction to every touch, every whispered endearment, every brush of heated flesh against hers, played across her features. The effect she had on him was apparent in his eyes. In the back of her mind, she tried to cling to that realization, knowing she might need it later but he lured the thought away with his skillful fingers.

He gently twisted her nipple, tugging at it, hardening it further. It wasn't enough. She wanted more. The groan she'd suppressed earlier slipped free as his warm breath surged across her skin.

Micah caught the small sound with his mouth as he took hers in a desperate kiss. He tasted better than she remembered. Decadent. Sinfully delicious. Unable to stop herself, she kissed him back, shyly brushing his lower lip with her tongue.

Her inner voice screamed that she didn't want this. She didn't want him. But that voice was wrong. She wanted his hands on her body. Wanted his mouth on hers. Wanted more.

He drove his fingers through her hair and cradled the back of her head, pulling her nearer. With a groan, he deepened the kiss, nearly undoing her with every thrust of his tongue. To her dismay, his lips left hers and he trailed kisses along her jaw to her neck to the sensitive flesh behind her ear. She trembled in response to the nipping bites followed by soothing flicks of his tongue. His hand smoothed over her belly, the calluses teasing her tender skin. Sliding his fingers upward, between her aching breasts, he angled her face and took her mouth again.

Lost in the sensation of Micah's lips, the swipe of Asher's tongue across her nipple took her completely by surprise. She stiffened in shock, her breath trapped in her chest.

Micah raised his head, his eyes gleaming with lust. "Do you like that, leannan?"

Pressing her lips together, she shook her head. It didn't matter how much she enjoyed their attentions, she wouldn't admit the devastating effect they had on her.

An amused smile curved his mouth. He knew she lied. Holding her gaze, he slowly lowered his head, until his lips hovered above her other nipple. She fought the urge to arch her back, to push her breast against his mouth.

He grazed the tight tip with the barest touch of his lips. His tongue darted out and flicked across her nipple. With a gentle breath, he blew the wetness dry. A strangled groan escaped her throat and she shifted on the bed, trying to find relief.

He traced spirals with his fingertip, beginning at the outer edge of her breast and stopping when he reached the puckered areola. Reversing the direction, he repeated the motion until she panted with unfulfilled need.

"Elizabeth," he breathed against her skin, his voice rough with need. Unable to stop herself, she turned to look into his darkening gaze and instantly regretted it. His single-minded concentration twisted her womb into a knot of near painful longing.

She breathed deeply in an attempt to calm her racing heart. It only served to draw the scent of warm, aroused male closer, heightening her growing desire.

"It's going to be so good between us," he murmured, his voice full of dark promises she suspected he would keep.

She squeezed shut her eyes as Asher caressed her belly, avoiding her breasts altogether. It was more than she could bear.

As if they were parts of the same being, both men descended on her nipples simultaneously, drawing them deep into their mouths. It had been good when Micah suckled her earlier but the sensation of two men at once was almost overwhelming. Unable to keep the sound from bursting forth, she cried out and she felt Micah smile against her skin.

The rhythmic suction at her breasts created an answering ache in her womb. It pulsed, desperate and throbbing. Empty. Slowly, both men slid their hands down her belly, each pausing to trace her navel. She trembled in near breathless anticipation as they neared her core. She was as decadent as she'd ever accused Maureen of being. Two men at once...perhaps she was worse.

Sensation surpassed guilt and she sighed as their fingers parted her, sliding unerringly to her center. A thumb—she wasn't sure whose—played across the swollen nub of flesh. She shuddered at the sensation.

Micah had been right. Sometimes, in the depth of the night, she'd touched herself, thinking of him but it had never felt like this. Never felt so intense. Their fingers dipped into her opening and she whimpered as a third finger joined the first two.

"So wet," Micah groaned. "So tight."

Asher murmured his agreement, the sound vibrating around her breast.

Her blood pounded through her veins and her hips thrust up, seeking more. Thwarting her, Micah shifted to lie between her spread legs. He moved up her inner thighs with long strokes of his clever tongue. Sliding closer to her core, he inhaled deeply.

"Your scent makes me wild, Elizabeth. My cock aches to be inside you but I need to taste you first."

The sound of her name in his coarse, hungry voice sent shudders along her limbs. Asher shifted closer but she barely noticed. She lifted her head as far as the chains would allow, needing to see Micah. Huge and dark, he lay between her pale thighs. The sight of him there sent a fresh wave of juices rushing from her.

Slipping his arm under her shoulders, Asher supported her and they both viewed the erotic scene.

"Do you know what he's going to do?" he asked.

Elizabeth had heard her sister and her friends giggle about such things in hushed tones but she wanted to hear it from Asher. She shook her head.

"He's going to spread you wide so he can see all of your beautiful cunt."

Her breath caught on a gasp. Micah shot her a wicked smile from the foot of the bed. His lips hovered over her, his breath escaping in hot puffs against her moist skin.

"Then, he's going to taste you. Licking and suckling. Drinking your cream, filling you with his tongue, drawing on you until you climax against his mouth."

Elizabeth gasped at the carnal images Asher's words evoked. Her breath already came short and sharp and Micah hadn't even touched her yet. He just lay there, his eyes fastened on hers.

Together Elizabeth and Asher watched as Micah lowered his face, all the while holding her gaze. Finally he dipped his head and tasted her, his tongue a swipe of rough, wet velvet across her delicate skin. Groaning, he went back for more.

"You taste so sweet," he murmured against her.

The tiny vibrations of his words set off a series of flutters deep in her womb. His tongue darted inside her slick passage delving deep, making her squirm and cry out. He pulled her snugly to his mouth, using his thumbs to spread her wide and explore, drawing hard with his lips.

Nothing she'd ever before experienced prepared her for this sensual assault. He wouldn't get a chance to breach her virgin barrier. Death would claim her long before that.

She struggled against the restraints, desperate to touch him, wanting to tangle her hands in the braids that cascaded over her thighs and abdomen. Fisting her fingers in the bedding, she pulled at the fabric. She wanted her hands and mouth on him, exploring the hard planes of his body, tasting his skin.

"Soon, little one," Asher whispered in her ear.

Distantly, she wondered again if he'd heard her thoughts but he seduced the idea from her as he plucked and twisted her nipples. She thrust against Micah's mouth fighting her bindings. He groaned and the sound ricocheted along her limbs.

Asher bent over her and latched on first one nipple and then the other, finally pushing her breasts together. He alternated between scraping the sensitive flesh with his teeth and sucking. Her back bowed as she shoved her breasts upward.

Micah dug his fingertips into her hips and held her to the mattress. His tongue danced over her flesh as desire pulsed urgently through her womb. She barely recognized her own voice. He'd taken away her capacity for speech, leaving her with nothing but sobbing, breathless need.

Tremors streaked through her body, centering on the swollen nub he tormented with his tongue and teeth. She rode a wave of pleasure so intense she was sure she wouldn't survive. Though she couldn't see the face of either man right now, she knew the moment Micah's and Asher's eyes met. She couldn't say how. She just knew. She sensed an exchange of information as if they'd spoken but she hadn't heard a thing save her harsh gasps and keening cries.

Asher released her breasts and slid his hands down her body, framing her rib cage and waist with his fingers as he moved inexorably downward.

"What are you doing?" she gasped.

Micah answered, his voice a savage growl. "Making you come."

She almost flew apart at the sound of the dusky vow.

Asher splayed his hands across her belly, before sliding downward, his fingers dipping into her drenched cleft, brushing across the painfully swollen nub of flesh. Slowly, he reversed the direction and resumed the sweet torture of her breasts.

Micah held her motionless, trapped in his devouring gaze. After several long moments, he returned to her mound and drew the sensitive nub between his lips and sucked. Hard. At the same time, he slid his fingers into her body, filling her over and over.

She cried out, as her internal muscles clenched and unclenched around him. Harsh pleasure seared her. All thought disintegrated along with every particle of her body. Death seemed imminent as darkness crowded.

When she opened her eyes, languorous bliss claimed her. Her hands and ankles had been freed from their restraints but she still couldn't move her arms and legs. They wouldn't obey her commands.

Her eyes drifted shut but the sensation of Micah rising to his knees between her legs caused them to fly open again. His abdominal muscles flexed hypnotically as he stripped his braies from his body. Her breath stalled in her throat at the sight of his erection. Feeling it pressed against her was nothing compared to seeing it. Darker than the rest of him, it jutted upright from inky black curls and rested against his tightly muscled stomach. The size startled her. Worse, it seemed to grow longer and thicker as she stared at it. Instinctively, she tried to squeeze her thighs together but his body kept them spread.

He shook his head. "We're not finished, Elizabeth." Arms on either side of her body, he prowled toward the head of the bed, his eyes hungry and predatory. Lying at her side, he half covered her with the length of his body, his erection pressed against her hip. He skimmed a hand over her thigh, following her curves.

Her skin sang at the contact but she couldn't quell her fear. Maureen had always insisted the better endowed the man, the better the sex. Clearly, she'd never seen anyone like Micah. Elizabeth sighed. She'd had her pleasure, now it was time for the pain. At this point, fighting was useless. She'd just have to suffer, biding her time until she could escape.

He settled between her thighs, his weight sensual and heady against her body. And somehow welcome. He shifted and prodded her entrance, drawing a startled gasp from her. The heat of his arousal seared her, solid against her moist flesh.

Wanting him closer and at the same time wanting to push him away, she squirmed beneath him. His coarse chest hair abraded her sensitized nipples with each harsh breath she took. Betrayed by her body, which practically wept for need of him, she forced back a scream of frustration. She didn't want this desire he'd set loose in her but she couldn't fight it, either.

As if they belonged to someone else, she watched her hands settle on his shoulders and stroke his skin. She'd wanted to touch him for what seemed like hours. No, she'd

wanted to touch him long before he'd brought her here. She might as well get her fill since, gods willing, this would be her only chance.

Tentatively she smoothed her fingers over his chest, stopping to trace a thick, jagged scar. Who had wounded him? If the injury had been deeper, neither one of them would be here now. Unable to explain or dismiss the cold streak of dread that raced through her at that realization, she pulled her hand from the wound.

Forcing her attention elsewhere, she slid her palm up the strong column of his throat, trembling slightly as his breath hitched under her touch. His gaze darkened and he slanted his lips over hers, demanding she respond to his kiss. Responding wasn't a problem. She gripped his head, driving her fingers through his hair. For a moment her nervousness vanished and she gave herself to the need building between them.

At the edges of her awareness, she felt Asher leave the bed. Micah had been her sole focus. She'd forgotten the other man was still in the room, let alone lying beside them. The raw need in Micah's eyes drove away all other thoughts. He lowered his head and dragged his lips along her neck, down her chest, stopping to draw on her nipples. His name left her lips on a groan.

"I like the way you say my name, leannan."

She swallowed hard, trapped in the near feral intensity of his voice.

"I liked it even better when you screamed it while you came," he whispered roughly as he slid forward, entering her just slightly.

She arched against him, desperate for more. With startling clarity, she realized how badly she wanted him inside her. Need overcame fear. "Please," she whispered against his lips.

He raised his head. The fierce purpose in his expression transfixed her. "You're done fighting me?" he asked. "You accept me?"

She blinked, trying to think. Done fighting? She might as well set herself on fire but she couldn't deny she wanted him. "I accept you."

He searched her face as if looking for something important.

Beneath him, she spread her legs farther apart, coaxing him forward. He inched between her slick folds, working his way inside her. The entire time he held her gaze, the strain of his patience showing on his face. Her heart clenched at his careful treatment.

She flinched as her body stretched to accommodate him. With whispered reassurances he stroked her face and she relaxed under his touch. His tenderness surprised her. She could almost forget he was the enemy. Almost. But even that fact didn't stop her from wanting him.

Needing to move, she ran her hands down his back and over his flanks. The tight fluidity of muscles shifting under her touch tightened the coil of need deep in her belly. His eyes brightened as he responded to her caresses. Growing bolder, she traced the

curve of his buttocks, scoring his skin with her nails. In response, he gritted his teeth and pushed steadily until he reached her virgin barrier.

She caught her breath on a gasp. Suspended in one another's gaze, she finally tugged at him. "Just do it."

"I don't want to hurt you by going too quickly," he whispered.

Fright loomed nearer. She wanted it over. Now. "Finish it," she demanded.

The moment he made his decision was clear in his eyes. He thrust forward, breaking through the obstruction.

The torn flesh stung. Why had she thought getting this over with was a good idea? And where was the bliss Maureen insisted mating brought about? She struggled as her body adjusted to the invasion.

Micah steadied himself inside her, leaning forward to kiss the outer corners of her eyes. She hadn't realized tears had seeped out until he kissed them away. She opened her eyes to find him staring down at her, concern and worry etched in his face.

"It gets better."

Comfort was the last thing she expected from him. Unable to speak, she nodded, blinking back new tears that had nothing to do with physical pain. The stiffness slowly receded from her body as she grew accustomed to the intrusion.

He flexed inside her and fluttering sensations cascaded through her womb. Mind racing, she could barely focus on a single thought. The only constant seemed to be Micah.

Unfamiliar restlessness built within her and she wriggled against him. On a groan he brushed his lips across hers, coaxing her mouth open. Framing his face with her hands, she deepened the kiss, her worry all but forgotten. Slowly he pulled back. She cried out at the sweet friction of their bodies as she contracted and released around him.

His whispered encouragements sharpened the need racing through her blood. He slipped a hand under her bottom and urged her to follow his lead. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, she tried to meet his slow thrusts, to catch his rhythm. Sensation piled on top of sensation until she was ready to fly apart—his thick heat working in and out of her. Her body gripping him. Needing him as deeply as possible. His body sliding against hers. His rasping breath hot against her throat.

She could tell he held back. His limbs shook with the exertion of restraint. Planting her feet on the mattress, she pushed against him again. She didn't want his restraint. She wanted Micah in all his primal glory. She wanted him to lose control and take her the way she sensed he wanted to.

A muffled moan drew her attention and she noticed Asher from the corner of her eye. Again she'd completely forgotten he was in the room witnessing the consummation as was his duty. His expression, filled with ravenous need, speared through her and she tightened around Micah, a fresh wave of moisture dampening her center.

He groaned. Her cheeks heated with shame and she buried her face in his shoulder.

"He's watching me fuck you," Micah rasped in her ear. "Wishing he was buried in your tight little cunt."

Her breath caught in her throat but she kept her face hidden.

"It excites you," he continued, "knowing he's watching us." He thrust deeper, lodging himself at the mouth of her womb. "Knowing he's watching my cock fill you, stretching you."

She trembled as he flexed inside her.

"He's watching your pussy grip me so hard you're shaking."

His dark, captivating voice caressed her, reached inside and filled the raging emptiness she'd felt for so long. Tears of need spilled over her cheeks and he pulled back to gaze into her eyes, worry thinning his lips.

Nearly painful desire clawed through her. She pulled at his shoulders, trying to draw him closer. The concern ebbed from his face as he realized what she wanted. Snaring her hands, he pinned them to the mattress above her head.

He withdrew almost entirely and she whimpered with the loss. Her whimper turned to a cry when he plunged into her again.

"Ye-ess," she sighed as he lodged himself as deeply as possible. "More," she demanded.

He filled her with long, deliberate thrusts. Driving over and over, his face a mask of grimacing absorption. All his concentration directed at her sent breathless shivers racing through her and she doubted she'd live long enough to escape.

With his free hand he stroked her thigh, urging it around his waist. She followed suit with her other leg, shuddering as the angle of contact changed. Locking her ankles at the small of his back, she groaned his name, finally understanding everything her sister had ever told her.

Her pleasure was so intense it bordered on pain. He released her hands and slipped his arm underneath her hips, fitting her more tightly against him. She clung to him with sheer desperation, her nails gouging his shoulders. He was the only secure thing in her present reality.

"Mine," he growled.

He'd barely finished speaking when she contracted around him, rippling, squeezing him. Straining against him, she met him thrust for thrust, even as he pounded faster, driving her into the bed. The coil of need deep in her belly tightened. A sensation stronger than anything she'd ever felt shimmered through her, danced along her limbs and burst like stars behind her eyes.

Micah lost himself in the exquisiteness that was Elizabeth. Her body milked him, gripping him so fiercely he had trouble moving. But he pushed on, drowning in the drugging sensation of the woman he'd wanted for so long. Unable to hold back

completion, he stiffened, a guttural cry ripped from his throat. For a moment, black spots clouded his vision, as he released his seed in thick, fierce spurts.

She arched against him, crying out as he filled her. The shudders that racked their bodies slowed as he collapsed on top of her. He took long, steady breaths while her quivers quieted to sporadic trembling.

"I didn't know," she whispered half to herself.

He couldn't help the satisfied smile that curved his lips as he smoothed her damp hair from her forehead. "Are you hurt?"

"Hurt?" She smiled weakly. "I think I might be dead."

Micah threw back his head and laughed. Perhaps the guardians had chosen well, after all. He kissed her and she smiled against his lips.

He turned toward the sound of approaching footsteps. Asher. Sweat beaded on the man's brow and a vein throbbed in his temple. He crossed the room, walking as only a man with a raging erection could walk.

"Give me the damn cloth," he ground out. "I must return to the temple."

Micah grinned, not feeling the least bit sorry for his friend's pathetic state. He knew that as soon as Asher had fulfilled his duties and taken care of the fabric, he'd find relief with one of the willing consorts. Perhaps more than one.

Micah eased his still semi-erect length out of Elizabeth. Eyes closed, she whimpered at the loss and reached for him. He lifted her in his arms and stepped to the floor. Cradling her to his chest, he realized just how long it had been since he'd felt any kind of peace. It was more than the sex. It was Elizabeth. Before he could question it, Asher pushed past him, jerked the fabric off the bed and stalked toward the fireplace. Stone ground against stone as he activated the passage that led directly to the temple.

He paused. "Will there be anything else, milord?" he asked testily.

Micah gazed at the woman in his arms. "See that we're not disturbed."

Chapter Four

Micah couldn't blame Asher for his foul mood. If he'd gotten a taste of Elizabeth's sweet charms and then had to walk away without sampling her completely, he'd be bitter too. Bitter and in need of pummeling someone.

Her stomach growled and she shifted in his arms.

How long had it been since she'd eaten? Annoyed with his lack of foresight and consideration, he set her on the bed. "I'll send for food."

"Thank you," she said on a yawn.

After pulling on his breeches, he lifted the bar from the door to the main hallway and summoned a servant. Elizabeth watched him with sleepy eyes from where she lay in his bed. He'd seen plenty of women in his bed over the years—but never one who'd looked like she belonged there. Uncomfortable with the direction his thoughts had taken, he turned from her and busied himself stoking the fire.

By the time the man returned with a plate of apples, bread and cheese, Elizabeth had fallen asleep. Placing the platter on the table next to the bed, he crawled in beside her. In her sleep, she moved closer to him, likely seeking warmth. He could give that—physical warmth anyway.

He pulled her chilled body into his arms and curled around her. A soft snore broke the silence and he smiled, looking at the woman who slept so soundly in his arms. He hadn't realized just how tiny she was. When she was awake her presence filled the room. Filled him.

Delicate and slight she seemed fragile next to his bulk. She was, he supposed. He could crush her with very little effort. The thought constricted his chest. She sighed and nestled closer to him, nuzzling his neck, her breath soft puffs against his skin.

She was so pale compared to him—purest porcelain. What would their child look like? It was the first time he considered their issue would be more than just his heir. He'd be a person in his own right. Micah rested his hand on Elizabeth's stomach. She was so soft and warm. It was easy to picture her heavy with his child. How long would it take her to breed?

Her autumn-colored hair spread across his pillow like so many windswept leaves. For a moment, he buried his nose in the soft strands. She smelled of the forest and sex. It was the most intoxicating scent he'd ever encountered.

He ran a fingertip over her swollen lips, remembering her face as she found release. He hardened again at the memory but forced himself to ignore his body's response. Even if she hadn't been sore when they'd finished, she'd likely be by the time she woke.

Guilt prodded him. He hadn't meant to fuck her so hard. Not the first time, anyway. They'd have plenty of time to explore one another's bodies in the years to come, yet he'd rutted on her as if it would be the only time.

He pulled Elizabeth closer, taunted by the thought of her running away from him. No, that wouldn't happen. She knew now that she needn't fear him. He pushed the worry from his mind and gave in to the lure of sleep.

* * * * *

Elizabeth navigated the dimly lit hallways, trying to remember the way to the courtyard. Since she'd been upside down and disoriented when she'd last been there, it was difficult.

Clinging to the shadows, she pulled Micah's cloak tighter to her body. She'd also taken one of his shirts. The hem hung to her calves. It wasn't the best solution to her lack of clothing but it would have to do. She felt badly about taking them but he'd destroyed her dress. She wasn't about to sneak from the keep completely naked.

Her heart pounded in her throat as a shadowed figure passed the alcove she'd ducked into. The person didn't appear to be in a hurry, so she assumed her disappearance hadn't been noticed. Yet. She wondered what Micah would do when he discovered she'd gone.

For the briefest of moments, she considered going back to him. Shaking her head at her lunacy, she pushed away the guilt. What was she? The village idiot? He'd taken her against her will. Well, taken her from her home against her will. He'd certainly had her permission to take her body. Just like he'd promised she'd begged him to fuck her.

Heat flooded her at the memory of the things he'd done to her. The things he and Asher had done to her. She couldn't honestly say she regretted the experience. No, she didn't regret it all. If she were to stay she suspected Micah could easily make her a slave to her own pleasure.

Sighing, she hoped he still slept. He'd appeared so beautiful against the light bedding, almost as if he'd been carved from stone. She'd fought the urge to kiss him goodbye. She couldn't risk waking him or losing this chance at escape. So she'd crept past the dozing guard and begun searching for a way out.

Remorse elbowed her as she imagined Micah waking alone but she ignored it. It wasn't as though he was in love with her. And she wasn't foolish enough to imagine herself in love with him.

Once Asher figured out who and what she was, her fate would be sealed. She knew what happened to the overlord's mate. Inevitably the woman died a terrible death for something beyond her control. Elizabeth refused to become another sacrifice on the overlord's altar. With a blush, she realized she'd already played that part tonight.

Peering from the alcove she checked the hallway. Empty. She darted across and rounded the corner. The night sky was visible through the arched windows. She must be close. One more corner and she'd be at the doorway.

If she could make it through the courtyard undetected, she might have a chance to leave the compound. Earlier that afternoon, she'd seen a couple vanish through a door on the opposite wall from where Micah had humiliated her.

Her bottom no longer ached but the place between her legs throbbed. What she wouldn't give for a bath but there wasn't time for trivialities. There also hadn't been time to make love with Micah again and she'd desperately wanted that. Of course, she couldn't classify it as making love. There was no love between them. She pushed down a pang of sadness. Even if she'd stayed, there would never be love between them. Especially if Micah discovered her secret. Then there would only be death.

Hers.

Edging through the open doorway, she couldn't keep her thoughts off him. She sighed and tried to forget about him. The only reason he played so heavily in her thoughts tonight was because he'd taken her virginity. It had to happen sooner or later. It didn't mean it was important. Or that he was.

She spotted the door on the far side of the courtyard and considered running for it. Better not, to be safe. Instead, she edged around the perimeter of the enclosure. As she moved closer, the shadows deepened but didn't slow her. She had to escape before Micah found her. She didn't want to contemplate the punishment he'd mete out if he caught her.

Extending her hand, she felt along the stone wall as she crept further into the darkness. Any moment, she should reach wood. Hopefully, the door wouldn't be locked. In her hurry to escape, she hadn't considered that possibility.

Her fingertips hit the edge of a doorframe and the air left her lungs in a rush of relief. It had to be unlocked. It just had to. She began patting the door, feeling for a handle. Instead, she found flesh. Hard. Warm. Flesh.

"Lost, leannan?"

Micah.

"I...I—" She took several steps back and he followed her into the open.

"You what?" His voice was as hard as his body.

Damn it. Why hadn't she thought of a plausible explanation in case she was caught? What kind of idiot was she? A dead one from the lethal expression on his face.

He stalked closer, his dark skin absorbing any light. His chest and feet were bare. He'd only pulled on braies. She glanced down. He hadn't even taken the time to fasten them. She swallowed hard at the expanse of exposed skin and tried to quell her rapid heartbeat.

Staying to accept her punishment wasn't an option, so she ran. She hadn't taken three steps before he grabbed her, yanking the hood from her head. She almost slipped

away, leaving him with empty fabric but he'd caught hold of her hair, wrapping it around his wrist, like a fish on the line.

Without a word, he lifted her and carried her back to his bedchamber, dumping her on the bed.

"Don't move," he growled.

She wouldn't beg. She refused. If he beat her, he beat her. She'd withstand it and she'd be damn sure her escape was successful next time.

He simply stood there in the torchlight and stared. Worry swept through her middle but she tried to hide it. Despite her fear, excitement trembled in her belly. She tucked her legs beneath her and waited.

"Take them off."

"What?" she asked, confused.

"Take. Off. My. Clothes," he commanded, as though he were still on the battlefield.

The flickering flames cast harsh shadows over him, making him appear more menacing. Not that he needed the extra enhancement. He was intimidating enough without it.

Slowly, she raised her hands and released the clasp at the neck. The heavy cloak slipped from her shoulders and pooled around her body, marooning her in a sea of darkness.

"The shirt," he prompted.

Elizabeth peered at him from beneath her lashes as she released the closures. His burgeoning erection grew as she bared her skin. Did he plan to use his body to discipline her?

Moisture dampened her core. What was the matter with her? Did she want him to rape her? Obviously she didn't but she realized that no matter what he might threaten, he wouldn't hurt her in that way. He wouldn't take any woman against her will. He would just convince her she wanted him desperately. It had certainly worked well enough the last time.

Anger surfaced. She unfastened the last closure and flung the shirt straight at his head. He plucked it from the air and tossed it over a chair as he prowled closer to the bed. In a hopeless act of defiance, she crossed her arms over her chest.

His jaw tightened as he studied her. "You will not hide yourself from me, Elizabeth. You are my mate. You'd do well to get used to that."

"We haven't been officially joined yet," she snapped.

He smiled grimly. "I've had my face buried in your cunt and my cock even deeper. Asher witnessed it and holds evidence of your virgin blood. How much more official does it need to be?"

He knelt on the end of the bed, the mattress sinking under his weight, and loomed over her. Instead of shrinking like she was sure he expected, she rose to her knees and faced him.

She wasn't sure how effective her stance was. It was difficult to appear aggressive while naked, especially to a man who towered over her. His lips curved cruelly and she fought a shiver.

Without warning, Micah grabbed her shoulders and shoved her. She landed on her back. Rolling to the side, she tried to scramble from the bed but he caught her and held her in place.

Hardening his jaw, he collapsed on top of her, pinning her arms above her head.

"So we're back to this?" she taunted. "Is this the only way you can get a woman to lie down for you?"

Why couldn't she control her mouth? She'd be safer poking a wounded bear with a stick. She tossed her head, trying to fling her hair from her eyes. She wanted to see what was coming. She immediately regretted it.

His lips compressed in a harsh line and his eyes glittered coldly. Without another word, he locked the manacles around her wrists again. Like a trapped and injured animal, she continued to fight, kicking at him.

"Remember, leannan, I will always find you. No matter what." He grabbed one ankle, his massive hand circling it and forced it to the bed as he snapped the cuff around it. With quiet purpose, he moved around the other side of the bed. Drawing her leg back, she thrust it forward, trying to reach his chest or his head. If she'd been thinking more clearly, she would have aimed for his groin. He caught her foot easily and held it flat against his chest.

He bent his head and his teeth scraped her calf. A tremor shot through her, though she couldn't tell if it was due to the ravenous expression glowing in his eyes or the sensation of his teeth on her flesh.

He dragged his fingertips from her thigh to her ankle and she couldn't suppress the moan that burst forth. Pure satisfaction emanated from him, as he forced her leg to the mattress.

"Obviously, we need to discuss your role as my mate."

She looked away, refusing to meet his gaze.

"We'll also need to discuss punishments for your transgressions. I have a feeling we'll be spending a lot of time on those."

Unable to help herself, she turned her head and glared at him. "Go fuck a sheep," she muttered.

A tight smile creased his face but genuine amusement seemed to lurk behind his eyes. "Why would I when I have such a succulent little lamb in my bed?"

Ignoring her impotent snarl, he trailed his hand down her body. His touch spread through her like warmed honey.

"I'm cold. I'd like a blanket." She knew she sounded petulant but she didn't care. Maybe if she annoyed him enough, he'd tire of her and release her. Or maybe she'd sprout wings and fly away.

He stripped off his breeches. "Oh, I'll keep you warm."

An annoying flutter fanned through her womb. How could he make such a tender offer sound like a threat? Worse, how could she be aroused by it?

He climbed on the bed and straddled her. She felt warmer already. His buttocks settled over her mound, though he didn't rest his entire weight on her.

His face a mask of stark determination, he stroked her breasts. Her traitorous nipples hardened under his touch. He grinned and she arched her back, trying to throw him from the bed.

"Are you so eager for me?"

She snarled and thrust her hips upward again, trying to dislodge him.

The bastard laughed.

She went limp. Fighting him obviously wouldn't work. She'd simply refuse to respond. Satisfied with her new strategy, she turned her face to the side and closed her eyes. She'd pretend he wasn't there.

A low chuckle rumbled through his body and vibrated along her limbs.

He's not here. He's not here. He's not here.

"You're not sleeping and I know you can hear me." Humor tinged his voice but she ignored it.

He splayed his hands on either side of her rib cage and brushed his thumbs under the curve of her breasts. "As my mate, you will defer to me in all things."

She snorted but otherwise remained impassive, though it was becoming more difficult to disregard the strokes of his calloused thumbs.

"You will not leave the chamber without my permission. You will not leave the grounds of the keep."

Hah. She'd do both as soon as possible.

"You will spread your legs for me whenever and wherever I command."

"If you keep me chained like this, that shouldn't be a terribly difficult directive to follow."

Micah couldn't believe how brazenly Elizabeth insisted on behaving. In response, he twisted her nipples between his fingers. "That is a viable option, leannan."

Her eyes flew open. "You wouldn't."

Though she hid it quickly, he didn't miss the flash of fear in her expression. How long would she continue to fight before she acknowledged she belonged to him?

Instead of answering, he stared at her. She shifted uneasily. Silently, he trailed his forefinger through the valley of her breasts, challenging her with his gaze.

"I will do whatever I need to do to keep you from leaving."

Her eyes narrowed. "Is that the extent of my duties? When I'm not fucking you, what am I supposed to do with my time? Especially since I'm not supposed to leave your chambers?"

Why did she continue to bait him? Was she simply trying to distract him from her punishment, or did she hope to prove herself so annoying he'd release her?

"And what about Asher?" she continued, clearly mustering her nerve.

"What about him?" he demanded, teeth clenched.

She took a deep breath. "After today, I'm a little confused. Am I to service him, as well? What about the rest of the guardians?"

Fury tensed his fists but he forced them to relax and grasped the root of his arousal, stroking upward. "This is the only cock you'll touch."

Her eyes followed his every movement. The throbbing awareness she insisted on denying flared to life between them. Her lips parted and her breathing sped up.

"This is only cock that will pound into your tight cunt." The sound of her increasingly rapid inhalations tightened his throat around the words he pushed out. "This is the only cock you'll take into your mouth. The only cock that will fill your ass."

Her eyes widened in shock and her cheeks flushed brightly. Was she so innocent?

"You belong to me, leannan. Only to me. Never forget that."

Fear and anger churned in the depths of her storm-swept eyes. "I hate you."

Surprised by a stab of pain in his chest, he fought to remain impassive. What did he care if she hated him? She just needed to give him an heir.

"If I decide," he continued to push her, still stroking his cock, "to share you with another man, it will be my choice."

"What if I refuse?" she asked, hypnotically watching the pearly drop of fluid form on the head.

He laughed, a derisive sound. "Do you think I didn't notice the way you looked at Asher. Or even Joseph?"

She shook her head. "Of course, I looked at them. I was chained and naked in a roomful of men. Did you think I'd just lie there and close my eyes and wait to see what would happen?"

Guilt surged through him, followed by resentment. He had nothing to feel guilty about. She was his destined mate. And, if she hadn't tried to run, he wouldn't have had to restrain her again. She'd brought it on herself.

Her lower lip trembled but she glared at him with summoned bravado. "Why don't you just tie me up in the stables with the rest of the brood mares? You're no better than the Cadeyrn," she snarled.

Bringing up the Cadeyrn proved she was looking for a fight. He wasn't going to give it to her. Not now, anyway. "I want you nearby so I can touch you whenever I want." He swirled his palm over a turgid nipple. "I like touching you."

"Well, I don't like it."

He laughed, angering her further if her glower was any indication. The way she trembled beneath him, the gouges on his back, her desperate cries—she liked the way he touched her.

He leaned forward, letting his hair spill across her breasts. He caressed her neck with his breath and the barest touch of his lips until he reached her ear. “Liar,” he whispered.

She gasped in momentary surprise but that was her only reaction.

“There is still the matter of your punishment.”

Her jaw dropped. “Isn’t this it?”

He’d planned to chain her to the bed and leave her there but once he’d started touching her, he couldn’t bring himself to stop. “I haven’t even begun to discipline you.” His smile widened. “You have plenty of offenses to atone for.”

Closing her eyes, she waited. He shifted atop her and she flinched, pushing her head into the mattress. Did she think he would hit her? Had her father beaten her? Micah’s gut twisted at the thought of those big, meaty fists pummeling Elizabeth.

He moved between her legs and she recoiled again. He might kill her father. First, he had to deal with the daughter.

Lying between her spread legs, he waited, inhaling her sweet scent. Her eyes flew open and she lifted her head as far as possible, confusion furrowing her brow.

“This is punishment?” she asked, incredulous.

“It will be.” He swiped the crease where her thigh met her groin with his tongue and she startled, biting back a moan. “Do you remember what it felt like to come against my mouth?” he asked.

She nodded.

He trailed his finger through the fresh rush of fluid that dampened her center. Gods, he loved her responsiveness. Nuzzling the flesh of her inner thigh, he wondered idly if he could make her come with words alone. “I’m glad you remember, because you won’t feel that again, for a long time.”

“What?”

Lowering his head, he licked her. Just one taste and he wanted to ram his cock inside her until they both came screaming. Hell, he’d wanted to do that long before he’d tasted her again.

She shivered under his touch.

“It’s going to be a long night,” he murmured against her.

“Bastard!”

Laughing, he spread her wide and feasted on her, drinking her deeply. He filled her pussy with his fingers, thrusting in and out while he sucked and scraped her flesh. “Let me know when you’ve had enough.”

"I will not beg you!" she insisted. Still, she railed against the chains, trying desperately to lift her hips to his face. The sight of her straining body made him harder than he thought possible.

Who was he punishing here?

Whenever her release threatened, he'd raise his head and watch her frustration as the summit slipped away. Each time he brought her close to her peak, it got more difficult for him to pull away. Sweat beaded on her body as he pushed her further. As he pushed himself.

She thrashed and cried out, need glowing brightly in her eyes. She'd managed to keep her promise not to beg him. For a while. Now, with tears rolling into her hair, she begged. She pleaded. She demanded.

It made no difference. Or so he pretended. Gods, he wanted to fuck her. Desperately. Longing clawed his gut. He wanted her so damn bad it hurt.

Micah slid his hands under her ass and again raised her to his lips. No matter how many times he had her, he never got enough of her taste.

She clutched the sheets, desperate for something to hold on to. "Please," she panted.

"Please, what?" He drew her clit between his lips and flicked his tongue across it.

"Please, stop."

"No." He wondered if she had any idea how hard it was to deny her.

"I can't take this anymore. Please just fuck me."

He lifted his head and met her gaze, swallowing several times to get the word out. His voice was nearly as raw as hers. "No."

Tears streamed over her cheeks. There was more than lust in her eyes but he couldn't put a name to the elusive emotion. Hell, he could barely remember his own name.

He noticed her palms were bleeding. In her distress, she'd clenched her fists, clawing at her skin. He'd caused her to hurt herself. Sickened with guilt, he gently disentangled her hands. He pressed the sheet against her palms and closed her fingers around it.

Satisfied she'd no longer mindlessly hurt herself, he added another finger to the digits pumping in and out of her pussy while he continued to suck her clit. Slick with her moisture, he skimmed the pad of his thumb over her anus, around and around, dipping slightly inside the aperture.

Her entire body shook. It was all he could do not to let her find her release but somehow he managed it. If this would make her think twice about running off again, then it was worth the torture for both of them.

Repeating the process, he suckled harder, teasing her swollen flesh with his teeth. She screamed until she was hoarse, as each time he brought her a little closer, only to leave her dangling at the edge.

"Please," she begged again.

"No." He reached up and twisted first one nipple and then the other.

Her breath came faster and her eyelids fluttered closed. Was she about to faint? He sensed a feeling of hope emanating from her as the speed of her inhalations increased. She was trying to lose consciousness.

Stopping his sensual assault, he stared at her. "Oh no, leannan. You're not going to evade your punishment that easily."

"The gods damn you," she panted.

He froze, a torrent of emotion spiking through him. "You're years too late with that curse."

Curiosity and concern shone in her eyes but he wasn't about to give her time to question his unintentional admission. Before she could form the words, he prowled up her body until he knelt over her, hands on either side of her head. Turning suddenly to the side, she tasted the pulse that frantically beat at his wrist.

Micah drew in a breath through gritted teeth. What game did she play now? His cock throbbed against her silky, scorching skin. He thrust, mimicking the motion they both wanted so desperately.

"Do you think to suspend your punishment by tempting me? I won't stop simply because you attempt to seduce me."

She raked her teeth across his skin. "I'm not trying to seduce you," she said, her voice full of scorn as she turned to meet his gaze. "I've been dying to touch you and this is the closest you've come."

Molten desire raced through him but he refused to be manipulated by her. "You hate me," he ground out. "How can you possibly want to touch me?"

"I don't have to like you to want to fuck you," she practically growled. "You made me realize that."

Shock tangled with dismay but lust overrode it all. He entered her with a quick, decisive thrust that pushed the air from her lungs. They cried out as their flesh melded. Finally. Finally he was inside her—cradled deep in her heat.

She whimpered as he pulled back, nearly withdrawing completely. Gripping his cock with her internal muscles, she refused to release him, letting him know without words how much she wanted him. He wanted her just as badly.

Holding her gaze, he plowed into her. There was no way he could possibly stop. He embedded himself over and over, remaining propped above her body on extended arms that shook with the effort of fucking her.

"Kiss me, Micah."

How could he continue to deny her? Deny them both? Something about her threatened to fill up the empty spaces inside him but he needed to keep his distance. He couldn't allow himself to become attached to her. In the end it would only bring pain.

He plunged in and out of her hungry body as she kissed every bit of him she could reach. His neck, his ear, his cheek, his shoulder. With a groan of surrender he finally took her mouth, claiming her lips with his own, his tongue mimicking the desperate dance of their bodies.

On a groan he collapsed on her, crushing her breasts to his chest and completely covering her with his warmth. This. This was what he wanted. This closeness. This connection.

Since she was still bound, they fit together differently from before. The angle had changed. Each thrust ground their pelvic bones together, the friction almost overwhelming.

Lifting his face, he stared into her eyes. The sight of such passion directed at him nearly pushed him over the edge. They were so close to the bliss he'd denied her. Denied himself.

She raised her head from the bed and sank her teeth into his lower lip. Releasing him she laved the area with her tongue. "If you stop," she whispered, "I swear I will kill you."

He couldn't hide his surprise or amusement at her announcement. Only Elizabeth would be so audacious as to threaten him while he had her chained to a bed. Her passion deepened his thrusts. If it hadn't been for the restraints he would have lifted her from the bed with his momentum. He slid forward again, coming to rest as deeply as possible.

She was so damn beautiful. From her rosy flushed skin and her wild eyes to her halo of tangled red hair he'd never seen anyone more magnificent. And she was his. Only his.

"You are mine," he growled. "Say it."

Her eyes flashed and she pushed against him. "You are mine."

He pulled back slightly and frowned. "Say it."

She pressed her lips together, refusing him. He withdrew completely and she moaned.

"Say it," he repeated. He didn't understand why he needed her to acknowledge it. He simply did. But he needed her to say it quickly. He was dying outside her cunt.

She drew a shaky breath. "I'm yours," she whispered, so quietly he wasn't sure he hadn't imagined it.

He waited, watching her.

"I'm yours, damn it!"

On a sigh of relief, he entered her. Rocked against her. Ground against her pelvis. Crying out his name, she reveled in every pulsing thrust. He slipped one hand under her ass, cupping it, lifting her to meet his passion. He couldn't deny her any longer.

She began to climax almost immediately, spasming around his cock. She convulsed around him, screaming mindlessly and he gloried in the force of her release.

His balls tightened as he pounded into her. He couldn't hold back. A tingle of awareness pooled at the base of his spine then tore through his body. Stiffening, he bit the side of her neck, his fingers digging mercilessly into her ass. In shuddering gushes he filled her, releasing himself in a scalding eruption of seed. He dropped his head to her shoulder while his reaction continued to rock through him.

Who belonged to whom?

Chapter Five

Panting, Micah rested on Elizabeth. Her breath still came in shivering sobs against his neck. He'd never had an experience this intense. It had to be because he'd deprived himself of fulfillment for so long.

He raised his head and looked at her. Sweat had matted her hair to her head and dark circles framed her eyes. Bonelessly she sank into the mattress, sound asleep.

Shame tasted bitter as he studied her. He'd been too rough, using her as surely as his father used every woman he'd come into contact with. He closed his eyes. The only difference was that Elizabeth had been begging him. Begging him to take her. To make her come. He smiled at the memory of her threat. Bound to the bed, impaled on his cock and she'd threatened to kill him if he stopped.

Slowly, he withdrew from the sweet grip of her body. In her sleep she winced. Remorse again flooded him. He never should have tormented her as long as he had. It was unconscionable. If he'd been thinking clearly he would have chained her up and left the room.

When he'd woken and found her gone he'd panicked. Then when he'd found her safe, albeit attempting treason, he'd overreacted. He looked at her naked still heaving body. It was as though she'd run for her life rather than be mated.

He'd more than overreacted.

Perhaps in part his response may have been due to the odd circumstances surrounding the way he'd found her. It still didn't excuse his conduct, however. He'd startled awake to find her gone. After his initial panic he'd suddenly realized he saw flashes of starlight. Yet he'd been in his chambers. Exhaustion and sleep had confused him. At first he'd thought it was a bad dream—a nightmare of Elizabeth's flight.

The cold bedding next to him quickly disproved that supposition. He'd quieted his breathing and tried to focus on those scant images. He'd recognized the silhouetted shape of the battlements that circled the courtyard. Her escape route. Trusting his instincts, he'd run to the far door and entered the empty marketplace. She'd been just where he'd sensed she would be.

He glanced at her sleep-slack face. This was only the second time he'd had a psychic occurrence in his life. Stranger still, both incidences had involved her.

He'd acclimated himself to his lack of magic years ago. One of the few magicless males in all of Maelgwn, he'd hidden his defect from all but Asher and his immediate family. In time, his father had confided in Willem. It was decided that Micah should govern the battlefield. He'd been happy with his lot but Collin's disappearance had changed all that. Micah knew his lack of magical ability distressed Willem. The man

considered him unfit to rule, going so far as refusing to contact him when his brother vanished and attempting to rule in his stead.

At the time, Asher had sent messengers to Micah but they'd never reached him. It wasn't until his friend had traveled to the frontlines, two months later, that he heard the news. Upon their return to the keep, they learned that Willem had announced Micah's death on the battlefield and declared himself overlord.

They both knew the chancellor was behind the missing couriers but thus far there had been no proof. Privately Micah wondered if Willem was somehow responsible for his brother's desertion. As much as he'd like to believe that he wondered whether it was true. He'd read the letter Collin had supposedly left in Willem's care. It seemed Collin was entirely responsible for the chaos that had become Micah's life.

Damn Collin! He never thought about the scope of a situation. He only saw how it affected him. It wasn't that he couldn't sympathize with his brother's predicament. He'd watched the chancellor hang his last two mates because they hadn't produced an heir. According to his letter, he refused to let that happen again. His mate had only another month to conceive and he wouldn't stand by and watch the woman he loved condemned to death. Instead of growing a pair of balls and standing up to his father's men, he'd run.

Where had he gone? Did he even realize the danger he'd put himself and his mate in by abandoning his post? Collin was a good man but sometimes Micah doubted he understood the intricacies of ruling a territory as complex as Maelgwn.

Elizabeth's soft sighs brought Micah back to the present. With careful touches he brushed the hair from her eyes before he eased off the bed. He needed to unshackle her before her muscles seized. Retrieving the iron key from his belt, he fitted it into the lock at her ankle. As it clicked open, his stomach lurched.

Gods, let those be shadows!

He lifted the candle from the bedside table and carried it to the foot of the bed. Bruises circled her tender flesh, silently accusing him. He'd killed men on the field and barely noticed. But this—this was different.

He'd hurt her. He thought he might vomit. Yes, he'd intended to punish her. He'd wanted her to acknowledge his control. His mastery. But this had gone too far. He had gone too far.

Moving to the other side of the bed, he released her other delicate ankle. It looked worse than the first. In her sleep, she drew her legs together but not before he saw a tiny smear of dried blood on the inside of her thighs. He'd seen it earlier—after her first time—but it roused a new wave of self-doubt. Yes, she been a virgin but had he been too brutal?

With a sense of impending dread he approached the head of the bed. Two turns of the key revealed her wrists. In addition to the metal-gouged bruises fingernail marks were clearly visible.

She'd clawed herself to get loose.

Guilt consumed him. Free of the cuffs, she pulled her arms into her chest and rolled to her side, curling her body into a protective ball. Carefully he drew a blanket over her and dragged a chair to the side of the bed. Sinking onto the seat, he watched her sleep. He wanted nothing more than to hold her but he didn't deserve the comfort it would bring.

As her shuddering breaths slowed, the tension drained from his body. Still, he ached with regret. Wrestling with guilt, he watched her until the candle burned away. Sleep eluded him, leaving him alone with his brooding thoughts.

An unfamiliar sound stabbed through his awareness and he surged to his feet, the chair scraping the floor behind him.

Elizabeth muttered and thrashed in her sleep. "No...keep him away."

Keep him away? Sickness twisted inside him again. Was she talking about him? Had he traumatized her that badly?

"You killed her," she cried.

Micah climbed onto the bed next to her. Tentatively, he offered his arms for comfort. Tears streaking her face, she immediately sought shelter in his body. Her instinctive response healed his torment—at least, for a few moments.

"Don't let him take me, Micah. Please."

The sadness in her voice pulled at him and he gently shook her, trying to wake her. "Elizabeth, wake up. Wake up, leannan. You're having a nightmare."

He smoothed his hand over her back and whispered reassurances. Never waking she quieted, her cheek damp against his chest. He tightened his arms around her and lay down to pull her into the warmth of his body.

Troubling questions gnawed at him through the remainder of the night. Who did she fear? Besides him? Who had hurt her? Besides him?

As soon as dawn lightened the sky, he slipped from the bed. She slept soundly, still curled in a protective ball. He tucked the sheet around her and set about seeing to a bath and a morning meal for her.

* * * * *

The smell of warm oatcakes and apples woke Elizabeth. Blinking, she sat up slowly, registering every twinge, every ache, every outright pain. In a blinding rush, the events of the previous day flooded through her mind.

Where was Micah? She pushed herself to a sitting position, glancing at her wrists and palms as she did so. They looked as awful as they felt. Lifting the blanket, she inspected her ankles. They were nearly as bad.

The mattress sank at her side. She knew without looking Micah waited. Did he want to continue yesterday's punishment? Gods, she hoped not. She wouldn't survive. She turned to him. Seeming unconcerned with his nudity, his eyes were dark with emotion she couldn't guess at.

Without a word, he lifted her hand and gently brushed his lips over the bruises. He repeated his actions on the other wrist with the same careful consideration. Was this the same man who'd withheld pleasure as a form of punishment?

He tried to pull the sheet from her but she held it to her breasts, unwilling to expose herself to the man she'd begged so brazenly for release. He met her gaze. Was that shame she glimpsed in his face? Whatever it was, it was gone before she could be sure. Moving to the foot of the bed, he lifted the cloth from her feet to inspect her ankles. With a gentle touch, he dabbed at her wounds with a cool damp cloth.

"What are you doing, Micah?" She barely recognized her own voice, it was so rough from hours of screaming.

"Tending your injuries."

"That's awfully generous, considering you inflicted them."

She waited for him to backhand her for her impudence. Instead he swung her into his arms, crossed the room and lowered her into a steaming tub of scented water. Blessed relief spread through her limbs as the warmth enveloped her.

Micah let her go once she'd reached the bottom and withdrew his arms from the water. It gleamed on his skin, running in rivulets down his chest, over his hard belly to disappear in the nest of black curls at his groin.

Elizabeth sighed, wishing she didn't appreciate the view as much as she did. It would be easier if she could keep her hatred from getting mixed up with lust. She closed her eyes. If she were honest with herself, she'd admit that she didn't hate him. She wanted to. But something, some speck of nearly hidden vulnerability in his eyes kept her from it.

The sensation of a warm wet cloth at her back startled her from her thoughts.

She stiffened and turned to face him. "Now, what are you doing?"

Half of his mouth turned up in a wry smile. "Taking my life into my hands?"

Her lips quirked in what would have been an answering smile if she hadn't stifled it.

Silently, he moved behind her and lifted her hair aside. With strong, agile fingers, he massaged her neck and shoulders. His touch was heavenly. A contented groan slipped from her lips as he dropped a kiss on the back of her neck. He trailed his mouth up to the sensitive skin behind her ear. She tried to suppress a shiver but couldn't quite manage it.

Damn it. She didn't want to want him again.

He traced a circle over the spot where her shoulder met her neck. "You bear my mark."

Dimly, she recalled him sinking his teeth into her neck as he came last night, though she couldn't remember if it was the first time or the second. "Oh," she managed.

Moving, he knelt in front of her and lifted her arm from the water. With tender strokes, he washed it, taking special care with her wrist.

"You—" She had to clear her throat in order to speak. "You don't need to do this. I can manage."

He met her gaze and said nothing. Instead, he washed her other arm and legs. He lathered a bar of heather-scented soap in his huge hands. She watched, completely mesmerized by the smooth, white lather rolling over his skin. With a gentle touch, he washed her neck, sliding over her chest, his hands molding her breasts.

Her nipples hardened insistently into his palm. He didn't pretend to be unaffected. Instead, he let her see the heat in his eyes. Desire hit her hard but she refused to give in to it. After, dipping the cloth into the tub, he lifted it and squeezed it above her breasts, letting the water trickle through the soapy lather, washing it away.

He submerged the cloth again and swirled it over her belly before dipping down between her legs. She winced. The soft fabric felt harsh against her swollen flesh.

Remorse replaced the heat in his eyes. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

"You're sorry for punishing me?"

His face hardened as if the regret had never been there. "No. You disobeyed me. Punishment is to be expected."

He wouldn't admit to the flashes of guilt she saw in his face. Questions clouded his eyes as if something had occurred to him. "Last night, I asked you if you were done fighting me. You said you were but then you ran away. Again."

A small smile curved her lips. She'd wondered if he'd remember that exchange. "At the same time, you also asked if I accepted you. That was the question I answered."

Leaving herself a vague, indistinct escape route, she'd essentially manipulated him. It was the best she could do. For reasons she didn't understand, the idea of lying outright to him bothered her immensely.

Anger flared in his eyes at her explanation.

She didn't truly believe he'd hit her but shifted position to better protect herself, just in case. Wincing at the tenderness throughout her body, she stopped moving. She'd already paid the price for duping him.

For a moment, she let herself imagine how it would have been if she hadn't run from him in the forest, if she hadn't tried escaping into the courtyard, if she hadn't fought him once they reached his chambers. What kind of a lover would he have been then? She knew she still would have had to undergo the humiliating rite of proof but would he have chained her?

Such imaginings were pointless and foolish. She needed to keep her wits about her and stay aware of the present if she hoped to find an opportunity to escape.

Micah moved behind her and used his cupped hands to pour water over her head. With a firm touch, he worked the suds into her hair and scalp, drawing tortured moans from her parted lips. Slowly, he dragged his fingers through her hair, working the snarls out. The sensuous pull of his fingers on her scalp streaked through her limbs.

He did nothing more than wash her hair but it aroused her nonetheless. Of course, so much about this man aroused her. How could she want him again after everything he'd done to her?

Knowing she'd been at his mercy was frightening and yet undeniably erotic. Her body was his to do with what he wanted. And for a time, it had been Asher's, as well. Her core throbbed at the heady recollection of their hands and mouths on her simultaneously. If pressed, she might even admit that she'd liked the sensation of being bound and on display.

Memory, mixed with Micah's expert touch, sent tendrils of yearning through her and she moaned in appreciation. Or was it acceptance? Through her lashes she saw each whimper hardened his cock. Was he remembering what it felt like to be embedded inside her so deeply and tightly he could barely move? The gods knew she was.

The image was forced aside when he lifted a pewter pitcher of water from a nearby table. Motioning for her to rise, he rinsed the soap from her hair and body. As if hypnotized, he watched the water course over her skin, his eyes glowing like dark amber. Shivers coursed down her spine at the longing in his gaze. Motioning her forward, he held a large soft-looking sheet. She reached for it but instead of handing it to her, he wrapped it around her body, lifting her from the tub.

It was strange, she'd spent less than twenty-four hours in his presence and any timidity she would have expected to feel was curiously absent. Before she had time to fully question the anomaly, a sharp rap sounded on the door. The guard she'd snuck past the night before entered.

Elizabeth wrapped the sheet more snugly around her body and stepped behind Micah. Apparently unconcerned with his nudity, he listened while the younger man announced Asher's arrival.

"Send him in," Micah said and the man left to do his bidding.

"Wait," she blurted out. "I need clothes."

His gaze traced her from her feet to the top of her head. "I don't think so."

He was denying her covering? "Why?"

"Think of it as incentive against running away."

Some incentive. She wouldn't get far without clothes. She'd have to convince him to give her something. Convince him that she'd cooperate. The idea of lying to him made her stomach lurch. Or maybe it was simply the lack of food. When had she last eaten? She grabbed two apples from the bowl near the bed and started to retreat across the room as Asher entered.

But Micah grabbed her arm, halting her movement. "You don't really think I trust you that far from me, do you?"

Sighing, she refused to answer him and bit into the first apple. Tart juice exploded over her tongue and coated her lips. Before she could wipe it away, Micah lowered his head and licked it from her skin, trailing his lips over hers, nipping gently.

The sound of Asher clearing his throat startled her away from Micah but he didn't let her get far. The towel slipped, baring her shoulders and the tops of her breasts. Hurriedly, she adjusted the fabric, dropping her apples in the process.

With a grin, Micah plucked them from the air.

Asher laughed. "You needn't cover yourself on my account, little –"

His eyes flashed with sudden anger and he stalked across the floor. Trepidation growing, she backed away from his approaching wrath. What had she done now?

He shoved Micah away with a firm hand to the center of his chest. Then with a movement so fast she barely saw it, he reached out and grabbed her arm. Carefully, he pulled the towel away from her wrist.

He turned his thunderous expression on Micah. "I don't remember her looking this bad when I left yesterday. What did you do to her?" He inspected her other wrist and then pulled the cloth away from her ankles. If possible, he seemed even angrier.

Elizabeth snuck a glance at Micah. She expected him to defend himself but he said nothing. Instead, he looked like he'd welcome his friend's fist in his face. Asher appeared more than ready to deliver it.

Since she was stuck in the role of Micah's mate for the time being, she might as well act like it. Swallowing her fear, she met Asher's intense stare without flinching. "I appreciate your concern but this is between Micah and me."

Both men stared at her and she shifted uncomfortably until Asher looked at Micah. They maintained eye contact for what seemed an inordinate length of time. Again, she had the oddest sensation they communicated without words but no man had been reputed to have such a gift for several hundred years.

Finally, Micah spoke. "I'm sorry," he said simply, his gaze on Elizabeth. "I never meant to go that far."

The sorrow in his softly spoken words tugged at her. Before she could think of a suitable response, he turned to Asher.

"Send one of your men with salve."

Panic twisted her stomach. Exposure to more guardians would make the discovery of her power that much more likely. "No. It's all right. I heal quickly."

Micah tucked her drying hair behind her ear. "It will ease your pain."

She shook her head, thinking quickly. "It's better this way. The pain will remind me not to do foolish things." Or more precisely, it would remind her to do them without getting caught.

She took the apples from Micah's hand and retreated to the chair beside the bed. She didn't remember it being there the night before but she had been distracted. Still feeling somewhat exposed with Asher in the room, she dragged a heavy blood-red blanket from the bed and covered herself. When she had some time alone she'd try a small healing spell. That should at least ease some of her discomfort.

Micah stared at Elizabeth, shame deluging over him. Somehow he'd make it up to her. Granted, she'd disobeyed him but the sight of her delicate flesh marred by those dusky bruises sickened him.

"I need to speak with you," Asher said.

Micah turned back to the other man.

"Alone."

He glanced at Elizabeth, not wanting to leave her for a moment. He couldn't shake the notion that if he left her alone, she'd slip through his fingers again and damned if he'd let that happen. She was his. And he wasn't letting her go. Not now. Not ever.

"Antechamber," he snapped at Asher as he walked toward Elizabeth. "I'm setting three guards on each door. If you want the entire keep to see your naked body, by all means, leave my chamber."

Gratified by the color rising to her cheeks, he pulled on his braies and followed Asher through the small wooden door.

The other man waited with his arms crossed over his chest.

"What?" Micah asked.

"I'm not about to lecture you regarding your treatment of your mate but what the hell were you thinking?"

"This sounds very much like a lecture to me."

Asher sighed and dragged his hand through his hair. "Don't do anything to jeopardize this union. You need an heir to maintain your hold on the throne."

Rage burned through Micah. "Do you think I wanted to hurt her? Do you think any of that was intentional?" He sank onto a bench by the door. "Gods, Asher—it makes me sick."

He stood, unable to contain the restless agitation that plagued him. "What is so important that you needed to drag me out here?"

"Members of a Cadeyrn raiding party have been captured. High-level members."

As soon as they'd heard Collin had abdicated, they'd attacked more viciously than ever. Their goal was fairly simple, abduct enough Maelgwn women to create their own race of magic users and defeat the armies of the surrounding lands. Maelgwn in particular.

He cringed inwardly, remembering Elizabeth's accusation. Perhaps he wasn't any better than the Caderyn. But if he'd learned anything from his father it was that the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few.

He and Elizabeth were at the mercy of the many. If he let her go and allowed the guardians to choose a new mate for him, the invaders would perceive that as weakness. How many of his people would suffer as a result of increased attacks?

"Have you discovered anything we can use?" he asked.

Asher shook his head, clearly frustrated. "I haven't figured out how but they've been especially resistant to memory exploration."

"Keep working on it." He moved to return to Elizabeth.

"Micah, wait."

He stopped but didn't turn. "What?"

"Something is different."

It wasn't a question. Asher was the only person outside his family and Willem that knew he had no magic ability. It stood to reason that he'd sense a difference.

Micah sighed and returned to his seat on the bench. "I'm not sure if anything has actually changed. It may just be my imagination."

Asher sat beside him. "Tell me."

"Both times when Elizabeth ran off, I saw her hiding place in my mind." He raised his hand to his chest. "I felt the panicked beating of her heart. When I found her, she was in exactly the position I'd seen."

His friend said nothing but studied Micah as if he could see beyond the flesh and muscle, straight into his mind.

"It's most likely coincidence," Micah added.

Asher leaned his head against the wall. "I'm not so sure. What is she doing right now?" he asked, suddenly.

"How would I know?"

"Close your eyes and try to see," his friend insisted.

"Fine but you're making too much of this."

Asher shrugged. "Perhaps."

Micah closed his eyes. In his mind, he saw his chamber, the rumpled bedding, the damp floor near the tub and Elizabeth. She sat cross-legged on the bed, working a carved wooden comb through her autumn-colored locks.

He opened his eyes and looked at the other man. "She's combing her hair. Which I'd like to point out is very likely a good guess since she just got out of the tub."

Asher raised a brow. "Is she sitting or standing?"

"Sitting," Micah answered on a sigh. "On the bed."

In a moment of time too quick to register, Asher shifted into a small, gray field mouse and darted under the door. Micah shook his head. His friend's ability to transform never failed to amaze him. He smiled. As children, they'd played such tricks on their mothers.

The memory was cut short by a shriek and a thud that sounded on the other side of the door. Micah charged toward the room, ready to protect his woman. Before he took three steps, the mouse darted into the antechamber and transformed into its rightful form. Asher's hair seemed slightly damp. Stepping nearer, Micah realized his friend smelled of apple.

Asher picked a small piece of fruit from his hair and grinned. "She's got good aim."

"Where was she?" Micah asked.

"On the bed, combing her hair as you said."

"Coincidence."

"Another thing," Asher continued as if Micah hadn't spoken. "It was difficult to tell from the floor but her injuries looked several days old, rather than fresh."

Unease niggled at Micah. "She did say she healed quickly."

"No one heals that quickly."

Micah frowned, unwilling to consider the implications. If she... No. He refused to consider the possibility that Elizabeth had magical abilities.

"Just be careful, my friend," Asher murmured. "My duty is to you and your duty is to Maelgwn."

Micah clenched his teeth. His duty was to Maelgwn. After the havoc his brother caused he couldn't make it worse. He needed to abide by the same laws as the rest of the populace.

"If other oddities occur," Asher continued. "You must tell me as soon as possible."

Micah stared at the other man for a moment. After what had happened to Asher's sister—Collin's second mate—Micah couldn't believe he'd consider forcing the issue with Elizabeth. Without a response, he turned and entered his chambers.

Elizabeth sat on his bed in the exact position he'd imagined. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. Was it actually possible his powers were developing this late in his life? Despite the strange occurrences, he had difficulty believing it.

She watched him warily, her hands and legs tucked under the blanket, hiding her wounds. His stomach fell to the floor. Was Asher correct? Gods, he hoped not.

"Why did you scream?"

"I saw a mouse." She tried to peer around him as he approached, still looking for the creature.

He tried to keep the smile from his face as he studied her. "I wouldn't have imagined that you'd be the type to fear a small rodent."

"This one was different. He stared at me like he knew things." Her cheeks colored at the admission. "I know that sounds ridiculous."

He lay on the bed at her side. "Perhaps he was taken with your beauty."

Instead of the smile he hoped to see she shook her head. "Perhaps your eyesight is failing you. My sister is the beautiful one."

He studied her. She wasn't searching for a compliment. She truly believed it. He trailed his finger down the side of her neck, separating the sheet where it met, exposing the soft skin of her breastbone. "You are the loveliest woman I've ever known."

Sadness veiled her features and she sighed. "The guardians chose the wrong woman."

She looked so forlorn, he had the ludicrous urge to promise he'd do whatever he needed to make her happy. "They chose you."

"Exactly. I'm not meant to be the mate of the overlord." She sat straighter as if to make her point.

"The guardians do not make mistakes." Even as he said it, he remembered his mother's sadness and couldn't quite bring himself to believe his own claim.

"What about your brother's mates?" she cried. "They were killed because they couldn't give him an heir. How could they have been the right choice?"

Micah frowned. How many times had he had the same thought? "I am told the chancellor heavily influenced the choosing of Collin's women."

He trailed his fingers over the satiny, smooth skin of her chest, following the invisible lines connecting one freckle to another. "He objected fiercely to you."

Her eyes widened in fear.

"But the guardians insisted. And I agreed."

Her breathing sped up as she attempted to control her anxiety. "You could let me go," she pleaded. "Say I vanished. Say I died. I'll go into exile and the guardians can choose a more suitable mate for you."

He slipped his palm down to rest on the slight mound of her stomach, loving her silky texture. The stark contrast between their skins was mesmerizing. He could spend the rest of his life touching her and never grow tired of it.

Startled at the thought, he pulled away. No. It was just the novelty of Elizabeth. Sooner or later, she'd become the same as any other woman.

He cleared his throat. "I can't let you go. You could already be carrying my heir."

An expression of sheer panic crossed her face and his chest tightened. He didn't know why he expected it would be different with Elizabeth. For some foolish reason, he'd thought she'd accept him for him—but apparently she found him as lacking as his father did. "Am I that offensive to your delicate sensibilities? Would carrying my child be so abhorrent?"

"No! I—"

"You what?"

She pressed her lips together. "I don't want this and I know you don't want me."

He sat up and leaned in close. "That's where you're wrong, leannan. I want you. Very, very badly."

She started to move away but he stopped her, grasping her shoulders. The sheet slipped and she yanked it up. As she tugged it back into place, he caught sight of her injuries. Asher had been right. Only the mark at her neck looked fresh. The rest had the appearance of week-old wounds.

He extended a cautious hand toward her. Noticing where his attention was riveted, she drew the blanket more snugly to her.

"Let me see your wrist."

Taking a breath, she thrust her arm past the cloth. "See." She smiled widely. "I'm doing better already."

Her artificial smile faded as he turned her wrist this way and that. The rate of healing was remarkable, far beyond nature. He ran his thumb over the fading bruise.

"Is there anything you want to tell me, Elizabeth?"

Chapter Six

Elizabeth cringed at Micah's knowing tone. Not having exercised her powers in several days, they'd spilled slightly beyond her control. She'd done more healing than she'd intended to. He still held her wrist, caressing the newly healed skin.

Nervous energy fluttered through her stomach. Was this it? Was he going to call Asher or the chancellor and have her dragged to the stake? She tried to pull her hand from his grasp but he held her firmly.

With his other hand, he carefully, he lifted the sheet away from her ankles and gently stroked the unbroken skin. "Elizabeth? What happened here?"

"The salve you used must have been very powerful."

He stared at her. Waiting. Clearly not believing her.

She needed to distract him but sex seemed too obvious. Not only that, what if he somehow felt the residue of spell-work on her skin? She couldn't risk it.

Staring into his eyes, she wished she could tell him the truth. She dismissed the idea with a sigh. She didn't need the sight to know what would happen if she did.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?" he asked again.

"No. There is nothing...except that I'm bored." She hoped he'd believe that. In truth, she'd hadn't had time to be bored. She cleared her throat. "If I promise not to try to escape, will you show me the grounds?"

He watched her intently, his gaze dropping to her nearly healed wrists. She could almost hear his thoughts as he considered her request.

"I've never been in the keep," she said, rushing to fill up the silence between them. "And most of what I saw yesterday was upside down."

His rich laugh rumbled around her, warming her. With a start she realized she genuinely liked the overlord. She enjoyed his company. Her eyes skimmed his bare chest. She enjoyed his body, as well. However, she still had no desire to be his mate. The likelihood that he'd discover her abilities grew with each passing moment. She had no idea how she'd survive on her own once she escaped, but it had to be done. The mystery of the unknown seemed far safer than the danger of the known. She forced her clenched fingers to relax as he studied her.

His smile faded. "It would be a good idea for you to acclimate yourself to the holdings as well as let the people meet you." He glanced at her wrists again. "We're not finished discussing your injuries but for now I'll check to see if your belongings have been sent up."

A reprieve was better than nothing. Hopefully, in the meantime she'd come up with a better explanation for her rapid healing.

Walking to the door, he conferred with the solider in the hallway. Micah seemed almost as relieved as she was to sidestep the topic of her injuries—at least, for now. Who knew when that would change?

A few moments later, he returned carrying a tiny wooden box.

His brows drew together in confusion as he opened it and glanced at the contents. “This is everything?”

She shrugged. “I suppose my sister decided that she’d keep my other dress and nightgown. I’m sure she assumed I wouldn’t be needing them.” Without intending to, her eyes sought the pile of shredded fabric on the floor on the far side of the room. Those rags were the closest things she had to clothing.

Distracted, Micah lifted a silver, moon-shaped pendant from the box and inspected it.

“Why do you have the symbol of a consort?”

“My mother was a handmaiden to the temple guardians.”

He didn’t hide his surprise as he handed her the box.

Uncomfortable under his assessing gaze Elizabeth traced the outline of the crescent moon, her fingertip grazing several small stones. She had no idea what they were for but they were one of the last links to her mother and she refused to give them up.

When she glanced at him, he still watched her, his eyes full of unspoken questions. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I’ll send to the temple,” Micah said. “I’m sure one of the consorts has something that will fit you.”

She groaned inwardly. She might as well parade around naked for as much as those outfits covered.

“I’ll have new dresses made for you as soon as possible,” he offered.

“Thank you.” She fought the guilt that rose when she realized she wouldn’t be around to wear them. His kindness to her would be a wasted effort.

What felt like an eternity later, the guard announced the arrival of Neeve, one of the temple consorts. With long dark hair and caramel-colored skin, she was the most beautiful woman Elizabeth had ever seen. She also looked to be about her own size.

She inclined her head to Micah as she entered and for a crazy, jealous moment, Elizabeth wondered if Micah had ever lain with the young woman. What did it matter to her? Despite everyone’s insistence on the contrary, she wasn’t his mate. Not for long, anyway.

“Thank you for offering to share your garments with my mate. I will see that you are well rewarded for your generosity.”

She smiled shyly. “I need no reward. I am happy to share with the regent.”

The regent? Foolishly, Elizabeth hadn’t made the connection. If she were truly mated with Micah, she would be the regent. Even more reason to escape as soon as possible. She didn’t need such pressure.

Hiding her unease, she smiled at Neeve. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Elizabeth."

"I'm honored to meet you, milady."

"Please, I'd feel better if you called me Elizabeth." She glanced up to find Micah studying her speculatively, while Neeve put the beautifully colored fabric on the bed. She ran her hand over the sensuously soft cloth. She'd never owned dresses as fine as these. Plum, black, garnet, emerald and gray. She fingered the deep green dress and started to lift it from the bed.

"No," Micah said. "Wear this one." He held up the deep gray gown.

As the light caught the fabric, she noticed it had a lovely pearlescent sheen. She looked at him questioningly.

"It matches your eyes." He leaned down and brushed his lips across her ear. "Especially when you're angry." He gently bit her earlobe. "Or when you come."

Elizabeth caught her breath at the dark desire evident in his voice. She glanced at Neeve. The girl looked around the room, pretending not to notice.

Micah motioned to her. "Help my mate dress." He turned back to Elizabeth. "I'll be back to fetch you shortly. I trust you'll be waiting here for my return." It wasn't a question.

She nodded. As desperate for escape as she was, she didn't want to get Neeve in trouble. Besides, what good would it actually do? She needed to learn the layout of the keep before she could go dashing off again.

"Good." He started to leave but turned back and crushed her to him, lifting her face for his kiss. Coaxing and hungry, he kissed her until she wanted to forget her plans to escape—or at least postpone them indefinitely. When he raised his head, she saw the promise of more in his gaze. A shiver trembled through her body and she was unable to stop it.

He pulled from her and she watched him walk away. In fact, she continued to stare at the door he'd exited when the consort touched her arm, drawing her attention.

"I'm sorry, Neeve. I've been a bit distracted since arriving."

The girl's cheeks pinkened and she smothered a giggle. "Begging your pardon, milady. But the entire keep has been abuzz with stories of your exploits."

Elizabeth groaned. That news would surely put Micah in a foul mood.

"Not to worry," she continued. "Guardian Asher has predicted that you are the one to tame the overlord and he is never wrong."

The awe in Neeve's voice was painfully evident. Clearly she idolized the man.

"Might I do something with your hair?" she asked.

Elizabeth glanced in the mirror. Despite Micah's effort to work out the tangles and her attempts at combing, her hair looked as though several woodland creatures had taken up residence. The gods knew she didn't have the energy or expertise to see to it herself, so she sank into the chair Neeve offered. The girl plucked an ivory comb from her silken pouch and began easing it through Elizabeth's hair.

As she worked Neeve hummed to herself and Elizabeth was overwhelmed with memories of her mother. Not since she'd died had anyone else brushed her hair. Tears stung her eyes but she blinked them back.

"How long have you been a consort?" she asked, desperate not only for information she might be able to use but to banish the sound of her mother's beautiful voice.

"I mark my first month tonight." Excitement tinged her tone.

"Does something special happen at that time?"

"Oh, yes," she breathed.

Elizabeth stared at the girl's dreamy face in the mirror and waited.

"During the first month as a handmaiden, we are only allowed to watch."

"You watch?" Elizabeth choked out. Images of innocent young women watching carnal acts assaulted her mind. And her body. She couldn't help but imagine Asher and Joseph taking this girl much as Micah and Asher had done to her last night. She shifted in her chair to alleviate the growing discomfort. What was the matter with her?

Using long even strokes, Neeve worked the comb through Elizabeth's hair. Thanks to her overactive imagination even the act of grooming had taken on an erotic quality.

"It's true," Neeve sighed. "We are only allowed to watch. We aren't even permitted to bring ourselves or each other any kind of release."

Elizabeth squirmed in her seat. Each other? She cleared her throat. "That doesn't seem fair."

"I know," the girl whispered conspiratorially. "But the guardians have assured us that the mating will be so much better because of the denial."

With deft hands she braided Elizabeth's hair into an intricate arrangement, her cheeks coloring fiercely. "Milady, may I ask you something?"

"Of course, you may. But please call me Elizabeth. Milady seems too formal. I haven't any friends here and I'd like it if you would be my first."

Neeve beamed and dropped to her knees on the floor. "What is it like?" she asked. "The mating, I mean." Before Elizabeth could answer, Neeve rushed on. "There are a few girls in the temple who insist it will be nothing but pain. Is that true?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth but the girl continued. "I have been watching for a month and I have not seen anyone in pain. But their cocks are huge," she whispered. "I am a little nervous."

Patting the girl's hand, Elizabeth contemplated her explanation. "It hurts a bit when a man first breaches the virgin barrier. But the pain does not last long," she hurried to say. "But I suppose if a man was cruel, it would be painful. Do you know who you will be mating with?"

Neeve looked about as though someone might be listening and then turned back to Elizabeth. "I am hoping and praying Guardian Asher chooses me. He is so handsome," she confided. "And I do not believe he would hurt me."

"He would not," Elizabeth promised, remembering the feel of his hands on her body. "I am positive he will see to your pleasure as well as his own."

A bell rang in the courtyard beyond, startling Neeve from the floor. "We need to dress you, mil—Elizabeth," she corrected. "It is time for our afternoon meal. The overlord will be here for you any moment."

She picked up the shimmering gray fabric and motioned for Elizabeth to drop her towel. Her eyes widened when she saw the bruises and a horrified expression crept across her face.

"What happened?" she breathed.

Elizabeth swallowed, not sure how to answer. She didn't want to cast Micah in a bad light but it seemed that Neeve might be a valuable ally should the need arise.

"I have a hard time following rules." She smiled, hoping that the conversation would be dropped.

"Did the overlord do this to you?" she whispered.

She started to answer yes but stopped herself. Why did she feel so badly about saying negative things about Micah? He wasn't her husband. She didn't love him. He didn't love her, either. He might enjoy her body but that was as far as it went. She was nothing more than a vessel to him. A vessel to hold his child.

Her child as well. If she became pregnant would he expect her to give up her child to the care of the guardians and their women? If he did, he'd be sadly mistaken. She couldn't believe she hadn't thought of this before.

"Milady?" Neeve peered questioningly at her.

Elizabeth tried to remember what they'd been talking about. She glanced at the mirror. Her injuries, that was it. "I fought him. And Asher." She shrugged. "They restrained me and I continued fighting."

Neeve timidly extended her finger and traced the circle at Elizabeth's neck. "This is not from a restraint."

Studying the injury in the mirror, warmth spread through Elizabeth at the memory. He'd sunk his teeth into her tender flesh as he'd come shuddering into her body.

She placed her palm over the mark and focused on the conversation at hand. The question had been about restraints. She shook her head. "No. It's not."

Neeve's eyes widened in understanding. "He marked you during the mating."

Uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the other woman, Elizabeth reached for the dress. "I should put this on."

The younger woman motioned for Elizabeth to stand. Once she did, Neeve wrapped a length of fabric around her waist, knotting it at her hip. Elizabeth tried to hike it up but Neeve pushed her hands away, adjusting it so it displayed her bared stomach and navel. Next came the top portion of the gown.

The shimmery cloth bodice was nothing more than another length of fabric that Neeve wrapped around her upper body and fastened over one shoulder, securing it with a silver crescent moon-shaped pin.

Elizabeth had never worn anything that exposed so much skin. She felt almost nude. She studied her reflection, trying to decide if she was brave enough to leave the chamber while wearing it. She glanced at Neeve. She seemed completely at ease in the same style dress. The only difference was that hers was a brilliant purple, which accented her caramel skin and dark hair.

"You look beautiful, Elizabeth," her new friend said.

"It is because of the hairstyle and the dress. Thank you for helping me."

She smiled gently. "You are most welcome but you were beautiful before these things."

"Neeve is wise," Micah said from behind them. She, and apparently Neeve, from the expression of surprise on her face, hadn't heard him enter.

"A gift for helping my mate." He handed her a lovely silver bracelet.

She curtsied deeply before accepting it. Once she rose, Micah lifted her delicate hand and slipped it on her wrist. "Now, off to meal with you. I heard Guardian Asher asking after you a few minutes ago."

Elizabeth's and Neeve's eyes locked and they shared a smile before the temple consort curtsied again and hurried from the room.

Micah slid his hands over Elizabeth's shoulders. "Now, what was that about?"

"Hmmm?" she asked, distracted by his touch. "Oh, she's hoping Asher chooses her when it is her time to mate."

Micah looked momentarily surprised.

"Women talk," she said with a smile.

"Do they?" Micah trailed his lips up the side of her neck, planting a kiss behind her ear. Trembles of anticipation wove through her belly but she pushed them aside.

"Don't we need to go to dinner now?"

"I suppose but first, I have a gift for you, too." He lifted two intricately woven silver arm bracelets. They reminded her of the artwork she'd seen on the cover of the only book she'd ever seen.

"They're beautiful, Micah," she breathed.

"Not as beautiful as you."

She couldn't help it, she snorted. Maureen was beautiful. Neeve was beautiful. She was plain. More suited to gathering herbs in the forest than life as the overlord's mate.

His face hardened at her articulation. "Are you insinuating that I am wrong?"

She laid her hand on the side of his face. "I think you are very sweet and trying to make me feel better about this situation. But you don't need to. I've seen the consorts. I know what true beauty is."

He arched his eyebrow. "So you are telling me I'm wrong."

"Wrong might be too strong a term. Misguided is better."

She thought she saw a flash of amusement in his face but before she could be sure, he lifted her arm. Starting at her wrist, he trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses to her elbow and then further to the inside of her upper arm. Following that same path, he slid the cool metal over her flesh, until it fitted snugly around her upper arm. He repeated the motions with the other arm and she found herself wishing they didn't need to leave the chamber.

But that was wrong. She couldn't let herself get attached to him. Or more appropriately, the amazing sex. What she really needed was to get away from him as soon as possible. Every moment she spent with him risked a pregnancy she couldn't allow.

She cast about for something to distract him. "Will I be mistaken for a consort in this outfit?"

His brow furrowed. "Not if you stay with me. Where you belong."

Micah's warning was obvious. His mind had begun spinning, she could see it in his eyes. Guilt nauseated her as she contemplated other ways to manipulate him. She hated this. Hated being put in this position. Micah was the latest and largest layer of the deceit that had become her life.

Had she been born a boy with these abilities, she wouldn't have to hide them. She would have been able to use them in the town square if she chose and never worry about persecution. Of course, if she were a man, she wouldn't experience the wonder of having Micah inside her body. Of course, if she was a man, she wouldn't have to worry about becoming pregnant either.

Ready to growl with frustration at the direction her thoughts had taken, she glanced at Micah. The questions in his eyes threatened her. Without giving him a chance to ask them, she smiled. "Thank you for the bracelets. Where do we go to eat?"

If he was surprised by her abrupt change of topics he didn't show it but she thought it was best to keep him off balance anyway. He looped her arm through his and her hand rested in the crook of his warm, muscular flesh. Without any forethought she squeezed it, loving the sensation of his skin. He glanced at her, a smile in his eyes that hinted at heated pledges.

* * * * *

Micah glanced at Elizabeth. She took in everything happening in the great hall with her wide eyes. For a moment, he tried to imagine the room as it must appear to her. At least a hundred warriors and their women filled the room. The guardians and their consorts would sit on the dais with him as would Elizabeth.

Micah was somewhat surprised to see Willem in the hall. Recently he had been taking his meals in his room. Since Micah had brought Elizabeth to the keep Willem

hadn't taken his vulture-like stare from her, which explained his presence in the great hall this afternoon.

The memory of Elizabeth's terror-filled eyes rose in his mind. He still hadn't discovered the root of her fear concerning Willem. And it was possible that he might never know. The woman avoided answering questions better than the most polished court advisors. He knew she hid something but what?

Willem motioned to Micah. Gritting his teeth, he left Elizabeth with Neeve and crossed the dais to the chancellor's side.

"You wanted something from me?" *Besides my woman and my throne?*

"I should not have been denied the rite of proof," Willem said, perched imperially as if Micah paid him homage. "Your father would be most displeased with your behavior concerning your mate."

Hands clenched, Micah refused to bend in order to speak to him. "My father is dead."

Willem swiveled in his seat to stare at him. Several guardians moved to stand in a semicircle around the chancellor. Apparently, he'd spoken louder than he'd intended. Stepping closer, he forced Willem to look up in order to maintain eye contact. "You will not touch my mate."

Dismissing the man, he turned back to Elizabeth. Several of the younger guardians surrounded her. One was so bold as to trail his fingertips over her shoulder. It was one thing to see Asher touch her but this, innocent as it may be, was unacceptable. Fury coiled in his gut.

Elizabeth took a step away from the man's touch and backed into another guardian who settled his hands at her waist, presumably to steady her. Asher, damn him, watched the entire scene with ill-concealed amusement.

Trying to rein in his anger, Micah stormed toward them. The young men straightened, their expressions puzzled.

"Take your hands off my mate," he ground out.

"Your mate?" one stammered, removing his hands from her waist.

The other gestured loosely at her garments. "We thought her a new consort."

Not trusting himself to speak, he shook his head. Why hadn't he realized what dressing her in the garments of the consorts would bring?

Both men bowed to Elizabeth. "Begging your forgiveness, milady." They turned to Micah but he waved them away.

"Be gone."

They bowed again before joining the other guardians at the far end of the dais. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Asher crossing the room to join them.

Micah glanced at the woman at his side. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes shone with stifled laughter. He traced the delicate line of her collarbone. "Obviously we need to arrange for a suitable wardrobe for you more quickly than I'd originally anticipated."

"That might be a good idea." A smile bloomed as her laughter bubbled out. He paused, realizing he wanted to hear that melodic sound again. He pushed the thought away. He didn't have time to play the enamored bridegroom. He needed to focus on the more pressing problems of invading forces and the undermining facets of his own regime.

The moment of easy companionship they'd shared faded away. Her smile dimmed as he guided her to the seat next to his. "The meal will be served shortly," he said, needing to fill the sudden silence.

She nodded and looked across the great hall. The servers took great care to present the best dishes to Elizabeth first. Though he'd placed food on her trencher, she didn't eat much. Feeling her gaze on him, he turned to face her. "What is it, leannan?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He glanced at her trencher. "The food is not to your liking?"

"It's very good." Her brow furrowed, she nodded toward the hall. "Are there always so many people here?"

He nodded. "Most in the keep take at least one meal in the hall each day."

She smiled wanly as she glanced around the throng. "It's a bit overwhelming."

Living on the outer reaches of the forest, as she did, she likely saw no more than two or three other people a day. Including servants, there were well over two hundred in the great hall right now.

"I imagine I'll get used to it in time." Without a giving him a chance to respond, she straightened. "After we eat, will you take me around the keep? I'd really like to see everything."

Something about her demeanor made him suspicious. If he were to give in to his paranoid thoughts, he'd suspect her of trying to memorize an escape route.

"Or, if you're too busy, I can ask Neeve if she'll take me around."

"That won't be necessary. I'd be happy to accompany you." Two could play this game of subterfuge of hers. Neeve was likely to answer all of Elizabeth's not-so-innocent questions without realizing what his devious little mate was attempting.

Her face fell, though she tried to hide it and he knew he'd been correct in his mistrust. Disappointment tasted bitter in his mouth. He'd hoped that maybe she would have come to trust him more than that.

He glanced at the fading bruises marring her pale, perfect skin. He hadn't given her reason to, he supposed. The bracelets, no matter how much she liked them, weren't going to make up for what had happened. Not that he'd intended them to, he realized with a sigh. He'd just wanted to see her smile. He was becoming a besotted fool. He needed to rein himself in where she was concerned. She was his vessel. Nothing more.

If that was true, why did he care?

As the meal wore on, he noticed she seemed more withdrawn in the great hall than she had been in the bedroom. She stiffened at his side. He glanced up to see what had

caught her attention. Willem conferred with one of his underlings and both men stared intently at Elizabeth from several seats down the table.

Abruptly, their view was blocked by the arrival of Asher and several consorts. Elizabeth brightened when she saw Neeve and they greeted each other like old friends.

Sitting opposite, Asher pulled the new consort onto his lap. Elizabeth's eyes widened as she noticed Asher stroking Neeve's hip and thigh. The girl squirmed on his lap, as if trying to get closer to his cock.

Elizabeth shot the girl a questioning glance and she shrugged in return. What had they talked about while he'd left them alone? For a moment, he worried that perhaps Elizabeth had talked her new friend into helping her try to escape. But to do so would jeopardize Neeve's position in the temple and possibly her life. She seemed a sweet girl. He'd have to warn Asher against the possibility.

As the women talked together, Micah noticed that Elizabeth became more relaxed, even going so far as eating much of the food on her trencher. The conversation stumbled suddenly. Micah glanced up. Asher had cupped Neeve's breast in his hand. He absently flicked his thumb across the distended tip of her nipple that shown clearly against the fabric of her dress.

Neeve's eyes closed under Asher's touch and Elizabeth watched raptly, despite the deep pink blush that tinted her cheeks and neck. Using his free hand, Asher slid it beneath the slitted opening of the girl's skirt. Micah knew the moment his friend found the girl's pussy. She gasped and clenched her thighs together around his hand. Leaning forward, Asher whispered something to Neeve and she relaxed slightly.

Elizabeth glanced around the room. Micah guessed she wondered if anyone else noticed Asher's performance. In fact, Asher now held Elizabeth's gaze with his own as he brought her friend closer and closer to her peak. Elizabeth wiggled in her chair but her eyes never left the spectacle in front of her. With her lips damp and parted, it was all Micah could do not to shove aside the food, throw her on the table and bury himself into her tight cunt right there.

He rested his hand on the back of her neck and began to massage the exposed skin. As he did so, Asher became less subtle in his assault on Neeve's body. A soft groan escaped Elizabeth at Neeve's escalating whimpers.

Look how hot I'm making your woman. Asher's voice sounded in his head.

Fuck you, he thought back.

Asher's hands suddenly stilled and he looked straight at Micah. *Did you just speak to me?*

What was happening? Asher had always been able to send his thoughts to others when he chose. He could hear most people's in return but he'd never been able to hear anything Micah said, unless he'd said it aloud. They had always assumed it had been due to his lack of magical ability.

Micah tried again. *I said, fuck you.*

A slow grin split Asher's face. *Well, I'll be damned.*

Too late. I'm certain you've been damned for some time.

Asher threw back his head and laughed. Both women stared at him as though he'd gone entirely mad. Micah joined him but privately, he couldn't help but wonder what was happening to him. Would he get a taste of everything he'd been deprived of, only to have it stripped away later? Or was this actually the beginning of a new stage in his life? More importantly, why was this happening? He'd never heard of anyone developing powers after the age of maturity. He sighed. It wasn't that he regretted the growth but it was just one more thing to contend with in the constant flow of changes that had become his life.

Perhaps it was just a series of coincidences. Yes, he could now send his thoughts to Asher and there were the occurrences of sight when Elizabeth ran away. Perhaps his powers didn't extend any further than that.

To test the theory, he closed his eyes and mentally extinguished every flame in the hall. All at once, the candles blinked out. The hearth fire wavered but didn't smother entirely. The occupants of the hall collectively startled at the sudden lack of light.

Not bad, he heard Asher say. *But can you right the situation?*

Again, closing his eyes, Micah willed life to the flames. Simultaneously, the candles flickered and then burned steadily. Elizabeth glanced at him from the corner of her eye but said nothing.

Willem's grating laughter floated down the table. "It seems a child is coming into his power and wants to play."

Don't do it, Asher muttered.

Do what? So he'd entertained the idea of dumping the chancellor's wineglass on his head. *Wait. If you could sense what I was about to do, can others?*

Asher grinned. *I could not sense your intent. I just know you well enough to know that you would want to do something to the pompous ass.*

Micah raised his glass to his friend and they drank a silent toast. Elizabeth studied them quizzically, her teeth sunk into her full lower lip. It looked like a ripe, succulent piece of fruit and heaven help him, he wanted a bite. Leaning forward, he brushed his mouth across hers. When she responded to the kiss he captured her lower lip between his teeth and laved his tongue across it. She shuddered under his touch. He deepened the kiss and pulled her into his body. Her arms twined around his neck but she pulled away as a cheer went up from warriors and guardians alike.

Many of them believed that until their leader found peace, the land would be at war. For his part, Micah didn't believe getting a child on Elizabeth would make the Cadeyrn leave Maelgwn's shores but the prospect of an heir might hearten the troops. After the debacle of Collin's reign, the attempts at driving the invaders from their land had been halfhearted at best. But the way things were going, it would take more than a pregnancy to stem the tide of invasion.

Elizabeth blushed deeply at the crude suggestions and raucous yells. He kept his arm around her when she would have pulled away.

"Be thankful, leannan," he whispered into her ear, keeping her pulled tightly to his side. "In the time of my great-grandfather, the vessel was taken at a meal much like this one."

"What do you mean taken?"

He toyed with her hair, drawing in her sweet scent. "The consorts prepared her and brought her to the great hall. Once she reached the front of the room, the women stripped the clothes from her body."

He traced her exposed collarbone with his forefinger. She trembled under his touch, sucking in a deep gulp of air.

"Then —"

"I think I can figure out what happened next," she hurried to say.

She crossed her arms over her chest, her flush deepening. "And this custom is no longer observed?"

He shook his head, his gaze holding hers captive. "Not since the ceremony of joining." He waited a beat and added, "Unless you'd like to reinstate it?"

"Reinstate it?" She shook her head as if waking from a trance. "No. Of course not," she said more vehemently. She rapidly scanned his body as if looking for someplace safe to fix her gaze.

Refusing to give her that option, he lifted her chin and raised her eyes to his. "Are you sure, leannan?" He stroked his fingers down her side.

"Yes." She pointedly removed his hand from her hip. "I'm quite sure."

He glanced down. "Your nipples are tight little buds begging for my kiss."

Her lips parted sweetly and her eyes darkened. Cupping the back of her head, he directed her gaze over the hall. "You don't want to admit it but the idea of having all of these people watching us makes you wet, doesn't it?"

She shook her head. "No."

It's not nice to play with your food, Asher said into his Micah's mind. *Besides, he continued, Neeve can't wait much longer.*

Micah looked his friend up and down. *Neeve?*

Unfortunately, I don't dare leave you here without supervision.

I can control myself, he shot back.

Asher raised his eyebrows. *Are you forgetting what happened earlier?*

Shut the fuck up.

Micah noticed Asher's attention fixed on Elizabeth, or more precisely, her wrists.

Did you heal her? he demanded.

No. He didn't like the direction of this conversation. He didn't want suspicion falling on his mate. For reasons he couldn't begin to explain, he wanted to protect her. He needed to protect her.

They look even more improved than they did this morning, Asher continued. That level of healing is not possible without spell-work.

I'm aware. And before you ask, no, I don't know how it happened.

See if you can find out. Damned if I can figure out why but the girl trusts you.

She truly seemed to and Micah didn't know what to make of that. As far as he could see, he didn't deserve it.

Asher looked at the woman on his lap and then at Micah. *I need to see to someone's needs. But, later, we need to discuss these new developments of yours. In the meanwhile, keep experimenting.* He glanced at Elizabeth. *And keep a close watch on your mate.*

Chapter Seven

With a wave, Elizabeth watched Neeve and Asher leave the great hall. Just thinking about where they were headed and what was likely to happen agitated her already frayed nerves. She still hadn't recovered from Micah tormenting her with tales of past overlords.

Shame gripped her and she bowed her head. What was the matter with her that the idea of a man taking her in front of roomful of people should excite her so? It wasn't just any man, she admitted to herself. Just Micah. He could do whatever he wanted with her and she'd quite likely enjoy it.

She'd noticed how hard his arousal grew when he talked about it. If it excited him, it was bound to excite her, too. Everything about him excited her. She wondered how long it would be until he drove himself inside her again. A delicious shiver trembled through her and she sighed. She shouldn't be thinking of things like that. She should be paying attention to her surroundings so she could escape as soon as possible.

Forcing herself to look away from him, she studied the room. There were four doors and she knew where only one led—the one they'd come through to enter the room. She tried to think of a way to ask Micah to take her to see the rest of the keep without looking like she was trying to memorize the layout. Before she had a chance to contemplate her strategy, the chancellor rose from where he'd been eyeing her the entire meal.

Forcing her pounding heart to calm, she lifted her goblet and drank deeply. At least, she could blame the bitter twist of her mouth on the wine as opposed to her intense dislike of the oily man.

Several men followed him to stand before Micah. From their obsequious behavior she surmised they were completely loyal to him. She wondered if they delighted in cruelty as much as the chancellor seemed to.

It was more than the fact that he'd sanctioned the murder of her mother. He'd actually seemed to enjoy it. She wondered if he'd made the connection between mother and daughter. Schooling her features to blandness, she tried to bury any hint of her extra senses. Not even Micah could help her if the man discovered what she hid. That was assuming that Micah would want to help her. He might decide that he'd be better off if she were dead.

Of course, he would decide that. Their entire society was based on the belief that a woman with power was evil. As much as she knew that not to be true, she also knew that she wouldn't be the one to change the collective mind of an entire civilization.

How many more women and girls hid their abilities under the fear of death? How many buried their gifts and lived a lie? Not for the first time she wondered if the battle

for Maelgwn could have been averted if both sexes worked together. Perhaps it was a power imbalance that triggered the siege in the first place. More likely this was merely her wishful thinking for a people that didn't torture and murder those who were different.

The chancellor continued to stare at her while she fought to make her mind a blank. She drew a curtain over her thoughts, preventing prying eyes. The man narrowed his gaze while he studied her. Did he sense it? Fear roiled through her stomach but she took a deep breath, refusing to let the evil man get the better of her.

"Can we help you, Willem?" Micah asked.

Micah sounded irritated with the man and Elizabeth's brow furrowed in spite of her attempts to remain impassive. A strong sense of dislike emanated from her mate. Strange. She hadn't thought of him as such but she supposed he was hers as much as she was his. She pushed the thought aside. That was a mystery for another time. Now, she needed to focus on the chancellor and his plans. She simply didn't trust the man. It appeared that Micah didn't either. The realization gave her more hope than she'd had since she'd found him at her home.

Willem smiled and Elizabeth's stomach lurched at the sight of it. He oozed pure malice. "I just wanted to see how our vessel is settling into her new role."

"Micah's," she stressed the name, "vessel is settling in just fine. Thank you for asking." She returned his smile, watching as his expression cooled several degrees.

Behind the chancellor was a man she hadn't noticed before. He smothered a smile but amusement shimmered in his eyes as he watched her. Who was he? Something about him seemed familiar but she couldn't place him in her memory. He appeared to be close to the same age as Willem but she didn't discern the same sense of malevolence.

Micah slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her from her observations and drew her closer in a gesture of affection. Elizabeth didn't believe for a moment that it was genuine but she was grateful nonetheless.

With a cold smile Micah addressed the other man. "My mate's name is Elizabeth."

Willem's expression became even more strained but he bowed his head to her. "Of course it is. Please, Elizabeth, if you need anything don't hesitate to ask me or any of the other guardians. We'd be happy to assist you in any way possible."

She didn't need any special gifts to know the man lied but she nodded and murmured her thanks. From beneath her lashes she studied the assembled men. Besides the man who watched her with kindly gray eyes, three were elderly, possibly older than Willem and the remaining three appeared closer to Micah's age. Had he appointed them? Or perhaps his brother?

One of the younger men mirrored Willem's every move. With skin even darker than Micah's and eyes more intense, she sensed a hunger for power that would move a man to kill his own parents. She'd need to stay as far away from him as she planned to stay from Willem.

Micah rose to his feet and drew her to stand at his side. For the first time since donning the clothing of a consort, she felt truly exposed. Willem's toady stripped the miniscule amount of cloth with his gaze. She glanced at Micah to see if he'd noticed but his eyes were on Willem.

"Thank you for your kind offer to Elizabeth but we were about to leave. I'll be showing her the holdings."

A tight smile twisted Willem's lips. "Do be sure she doesn't try to run off. It wouldn't do to have her escape before the joining."

Elizabeth laced her fingers through Micah's and gazed at him in what she hoped was an adoring fashion. "No need to worry about that, chancellor. I'm quite satisfied with my position at the keep."

Micah's eyes flashed with amusement but she was sure she was the only person who had seen it. Looking away from her, he nodded a dismissal at the chancellor and the others.

Micah led her through the door at the opposite end of the hall. Once they were out of hearing, he stopped and pulled her into an alcove.

"What was that all about?"

"What?" She knew immediately that he didn't believe her innocent act.

"You've fought me since I arrived at your father's home yesterday and now you want me to believe that you are thrilled to be here?"

"No, I want him to believe it."

The warmth in his laugh sent delighted shivers along her limbs. He sobered quickly and cupped her cheek. "Be careful around him, leannan."

For what seemed like hours, they wandered through the winding halls of the main keep, all the while Elizabeth tried to ignore the searching expression in Micah's eyes. She could feel his questions bubbling up and threatening to spill out but so far, he'd restrained himself. He cleared his throat and glanced pointedly around the empty battlements overlooking the market square. It seemed the period of restraint had come to an end.

"Why do you dislike the chancellor?"

What was he getting at? Was he looking for a way to trap her with her own words and then punish her? That didn't make sense since she sensed he loathed the man nearly as much as she did. "I never said I disliked the chancellor."

A small smile curved his firm lips. "You didn't need to. I can feel the revulsion rolling off your body every time you're within mere feet of him. Why do you hate him so?"

Micah seemed genuinely puzzled. If she had to guess, she'd assume that he didn't remember her mother's execution. She supposed that made sense. He would have only been twelve or thirteen at the time. Perhaps he hadn't even witnessed it.

"I wouldn't say that I hate him," she hedged. Actually, yes, she would say that but she wasn't foolish enough to admit it aloud.

He laughed in what seemed genuine amusement. "I would."

When she remained silent, he stepped closer and lifted her chin. "You don't have to tell me if you don't wish too but I need you to listen carefully."

He waited, making sure she paid attention to his directive. "Make sure you are never alone with him."

"You don't trust him?" she blurted out. He frowned and she lowered her voice. "There seems to be an air of adversity between the two of you. But I could be wrong. After all, this is the first time I've ever really met the man."

"I don't trust him," he murmured. "Especially not where you're concerned."

"Why?"

He stared at her as if weighing sides of a sensitive issue. Finally, he sighed and drew her against his chest so they both looked out over the darkening landscape. "He's been against this union since it was proposed. He wanted Maelgwn tied to Cadeyrn."

"But they've been attacking us for the last four years. Why would he want that?"

"Since my father died, they've been circling us like ravenous wolves, looking for an easy meal. Willem's reasoning was that if I mated with one of their princesses, Maelgwn would no longer be a military target."

"What about a political target?" she asked, her mind whirling. "Would Maelgwn then be bound by Cadeyrn's laws?"

She felt him smile against her hair. "I begin to see Asher's wisdom in choosing you."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I assumed he chose simply because of your beauty and fire. Clearly, you have a wit to be reckoned with as well." Before she could think of a suitable response, he continued. "I believe there are plots afoot that I am unaware of as of yet."

"Of course, there are. The chancellor is hiding something from you."

"How do you know?"

She was back to this again. How could she explain her knowledge without being hauled off and burned as a witch?

"I don't know." She gritted her teeth. Lying to Micah became more difficult by the moment.

He lifted her arm and placed a warm kiss on the inside of her wrist. "Does it have anything to do with what happened to your injuries?"

She yanked her arm from his grasp. "No! Why would you think that?"

He turned her to face him, pinning her between the cold stone wall and his rocklike body. "Because healing this rapidly isn't normal. I've never seen anyone mend from wounds as deep as yours in so little time."

He stroked her wrist absently murmuring. "Not without the use of magic – and no one has had healing abilities that strong in hundreds of years." His eyes narrowed as another thought occurred to him. "Did one of the guardians come to the room after I left to speak with Asher?"

He seemed angry. Jealous, almost.

"No. The only creatures I saw were you and that nosy little mouse."

"You're lying to me, leannan. I don't know what you're hiding yet, but I will discover your secrets."

She sighed. "I don't have secrets."

He raised an ebony eyebrow.

"Everything about you is a mystery."

"Oh please," she sighed. "I gathered herbs and tended to my father's sheep. Now, I fuck you. It's all I do."

He skimmed his palms up, over her arms and shoulders until he reached her neck. His touch was sensuous and arousing. For a moment, he circled her neck with his hands. Despite the threatening position, she didn't fear him. But how would that change if he knew the truth?

Fog drifted in, obscuring her sight, nearly eliminating Micah's face. He might be about to learn the answer to his question. No matter how hard she tried, she'd never been able to force the visions away. This was no exception.

New images rose in her mind's eye, obliterating the battlements and her mate's face entirely. It was as if she could see herself and her surroundings from the uppermost branches of a tree. She was led through the dark forest to the ancient oak grove. Black-robed guardians flanked her, leading her deeper into the sinister night. Brightly burning torches ringed the area around a huge stone altar. They must have discovered her secret and now, they were leading her to her death.

A scream rose in her chest. She tried to tamp it down but it ripped through the night air. From a great distance, she felt herself being lifted into the air and carried. They must be taking her to be sacrificed. Her body was leaden and she couldn't fight them no matter how hard she tried. It was as if she'd been drugged or magically bound.

"Elizabeth! Leannan, I'm here. Elizabeth!"

Her head bobbed on her neck. Slowly, the night sky and Micah's face drifted back into view. The vision had gone. She took a deep breath and tried to lift herself from his embrace.

Still cradling her, he sat down on a carved bench in a secluded alcove. Gently, he smoothed his hand over her cheeks, brushing the hair from her face.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice hushed and tight with worry.

She searched her brain for an explanation. "I'm not sure. I don't think I'm feeling well."

"I'm taking you to Asher."

That was the last thing she needed. "No. I'll be fine. I just need some rest."

Micah didn't seem at all convinced. She wasn't surprised. She wouldn't be either. She didn't want to do it but she was going to have to wield guilt.

"I haven't gotten much sleep lately. And with all of the excitement... I'm sure I'll feel better after I rest for a while."

"I'm sorry, leannan." He looked stricken. "I've pushed you too hard."

She lifted her tired hand to his chest and yawned. Visions, when they came, took so much from her, draining her of energy and the ability to think clearly.

"We'll go to the temple and then I'll bring you back to our chamber."

She smiled sleepily. When had it become their chamber? "No. Just hold me for a while and I'll be fine. I promise."

He studied her as if trying to make up his mind. "If you're not feeling better in a short while, I'm calling for Asher and the rest of the guardians."

Nodding, she closed her eyes and rested her head against Micah's chest, soothed by the strong beat of his heart.

Later, she woke to the sensation of being closely wrapped in his arms. Warmth and safety like she'd never before experienced enveloped her. Basking in his comfort, she drifted back to sleep. When she woke again, Micah stared down at her, his forehead furrowed.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, his voice heavy with concern.

She snuggled closer to his body. "Better. Thank you for not bringing me to the temple."

An amused chuckle sounded from across the room. "No, he brought the temple here."

Elizabeth struggled to raise her head. Asher was here? Had he figured it out? If so, he didn't seem angry.

"Micah thinks you fainted," he continued.

She could tell by the tone of his voice he didn't believe it for a minute.

Micah slipped his arm around her shoulders and helped her sit up. Gently, he raised a cup of cool water to her lips.

After taking several swallows, she cleared her throat. "Much has happened in the last few days."

Asher moved closer to the bed. "Do you often have these spells when you're tired?"

Was it her imagination, or had he put an emphasis on the word spells? "It's happened before. Usually, a little rest and I'm fine."

"Do you often scream and thrash about when you faint?" Obviously, he wasn't as willing to be convinced as Micah was.

She laid her head against Micah's shoulder. "I don't know since I'm not conscious."

Asher smiled, not unkindly and she prayed he believed that it was nothing more than a faint. Her lies were getting thicker by the moment. If this continued much longer, she'd never be able to keep track of them.

"Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell us. We'll keep your confidence if that's what you're worried about."

Of course they'd keep it while she burned to death on a pyre. "I'm not sure what you mean."

She remembered every detail of the vision clearly. It had been her warning. She needed to escape soon. It wouldn't take long for Asher to turn Micah against her. The thought tore at her heart.

What did she care if Micah turned against her? He didn't love her and she didn't love him. If that was true, why did the idea of his betrayal fill her eyes with tears? She took a deep breath. She was simply overwhelmed and exhausted. It wasn't anything more than that.

"Could she be breeding already?" Micah asked Asher.

The other man tilted his head to the side and studied her. "She could be." He stepped closer to the bed and laid his hand across her lower abdomen. "If she is, it's too soon to feel the life spark."

How would she survive on the run with the overlord's baby? Sooner or later, she'd be spotted and someone would put the pieces of the riddle together. If she couldn't escape her fate, it would be better to be put to death now than to be taken from her child. She didn't want to put any child through what she'd experienced.

What if she ended up staying? Would Micah be so cruel as to take her child from her? After Asher left, they needed to talk. She had questions for which she needed answers.

Asher looked at Micah. "Make sure she stays quiet. I want her to rest. At least, until morning. I don't think you'll be able to keep her in bed any longer than that—unless of course, you keep her busy."

Elizabeth closed her eyes and pretended not to hear the last. Asher lingered in the room for a few minutes more but the men were silent. If they communicated through telepathy, she didn't want to know.

After a while, the door shut and Micah barred them from intruders. She had no doubt that Asher could enter the room should he choose to—especially since he'd seemed to melt through the wall last night—but hopefully, this would keep everyone else out. Willem in particular.

Unfortunately, it would also keep her in. She couldn't silently lift the wooden beams and she didn't possess the ability to move objects with her mind. For now, she was trapped here.

Micah lay at her side and curved his body around hers, his hand splayed across her stomach. They rested in silence and Elizabeth enjoyed the simple pleasure his nearness

brought her. Agitation soon replaced her contentment. She couldn't allow herself to become complacent. It didn't matter how comfortable she was beginning to feel with him. She had to maintain a level of wariness in order to take advantage of any possibility for escape. Restlessness swelled and she fought to remain still.

"What is it?" he asked, concern coloring his voice. "Are you feeling unwell?"

"No." She turned to look at him. How could she make him understand? "I don't belong here. I didn't ask for this, Micah. If I had a choice I wouldn't be here."

His expression softened slightly. "I know, leannan. I didn't ask for any of this, either."

For the first time she considered his position. After Collin had abandoned the throne, Micah didn't have a choice but to return and rule Maelgwn. Perhaps he'd been happier on the battlefield. He might have even been in love. Was he forced to leave another woman for his people?

Sympathy welled within her. "Was there someone you loved? Someone else you intended to mate with?"

He squinted at her as if he had trouble following her conversational leaps. "Why?"

"I just thought you and Maelgwn might be better served by someone you loved...who loved you in return."

His lips thinned as he scowled. "Love has no place in the life of an overlord."

Her heart sank at his pronouncement but she reminded herself that she didn't care. Besides, if he loved her, she'd feel far more guilt over her eventual desertion.

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. "And to answer your question, no, there is no woman that holds my heart."

Hope leapt foolishly at his admission. She was an idiot. He'd already said he had no room in his life for love. He needed love, though—just as badly as she did—but she knew he'd never accept more than her body. And therein lay the problem. Her body would eventually betray her by giving life to his seed.

She needed answers to the questions plaguing her. "What happens if I become pregnant?" she blurted out.

"We have a child." Amusement was evident in his voice.

"Would you allow me to see the baby?"

He rolled her over so he could look into her face. "You are my mate."

"That doesn't make a difference and you know it. The guardians send away the mothers of their children all of the time."

"Only the mothers of girls."

"And if we have a girl, would you send us away? Find me a husband in one of the villages?"

"You are my mate," he repeated.

"For now." With sudden clarity, she knew without a doubt that she would be pregnant within the week, with a little girl.

"What do you mean by that?" He propped himself up on his elbow and stared at her, his jaw tightened. "Are you planning to run again?"

She shook head, unable to force another lie between her lips. "I won't send my daughter away to be reared by someone else."

He traced lazy circles over her belly. "So you think we'll have a girl first."

"I know we will." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. In a desperate bid to change the subject of conversation, she asked for a drink of water.

His eyes clouded with concern as he raised an ornate pewter goblet to her lips. She drank deeply and lay back against the pillows.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I was just wondering if I spoke at all during my fainting spell."

He seemed puzzled by her change in topics but didn't question it aloud. "You cried and begged me to let you go."

"Oh."

"Do you remember anything?"

"No," she lied, shoving aside the feeling of guilt.

"You also screamed about the fire. About the heat. Do you remember that?"

She shook her head.

"Why do you assume we'll have a girl first?"

She stifled a groan. He was back to this again. Sighing, she rolled over. "I don't know. I was just thinking about my own family." There. That made sense.

A thought suddenly occurred to her. "Micah, do you have any sisters?"

He slid his arm under her and pulled her close. "I honestly don't know. If my mother had any, they were sent away before I was old enough to remember."

She took a deep breath, wanting answers to questions that didn't matter. If she stayed with him, the answers would be important but since she wasn't, it was just an exercise in futility. But, she still wanted to know how he felt.

"Do you think it's right that girls are sent away?"

"It's the way it's always been done."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know." He absently stroked the length of her body as they lay together on the bed. "If you bore me a girl, you'd stay with her." It wasn't a question.

She turned to her back so she could see his face. She needed to see his reaction to her words. "I couldn't abandon my baby to strangers."

She choked back tears. "My mother was the child of a consort and a guardian. The people who reared her were kind but I think it hurt her to know that her real parents sent her away because she wasn't good enough."

Elizabeth's words and shiny eyes tugged at his heart. He smoothed her hair from her forehead and kissed her cheek, tasting her salty tears on his lips.

As a child, he'd asked his mother about whether or not he had any sisters. She'd never answered him but seeing how upset the very idea made Elizabeth, he wondered now if this had contributed to his mother's sadness. He'd always assumed her unhappiness was due to his father's treatment of her but perhaps there was more underlying her sorrow than he'd been aware of.

It wasn't hard to imagine Elizabeth with a babe in her arms. His child. She'd been with him for such a short time but he couldn't imagine being without her.

"If we have a girl child, we'll keep her here with us and rear her with her brothers."

Her eyes brightened and the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen bloomed across her face. She looked at him as if he'd single-handedly slain every demon that had ever plagued her.

Her smile faltered. "What will the chancellor and the guardians say?" she asked, her voice filled with worry.

"With a new overlord come new traditions."

She placed her small hands on either side of his face and drew him down to kiss her. Against his better judgment, he responded to her sweet, slow heat. He should insist that she rest but when her fingertips trailed across his chest and down to his waist, all thoughts of rest vanished. He wanted to be inside her again. And again. He couldn't get his fill of her beautiful body.

It was as if she'd cast a spell on him. He'd never wanted anyone with the intensity that he wanted her. Perhaps this was what Asher meant when he mentioned a true mating. Even so, the sensation left him unsettled. Better to focus on the physical, the rest would work itself out in time.

With deft hands, he released the clasp that held her shirt together and exposed her full breasts. Burying his face in them, he groaned, inhaling her sweet scent. She clasped his head to her as he took a taut nipple between his lips. The pebbled texture rasped against his tongue and he nipped at her sensitive flesh.

"You're mine, leannan. Never forget that."

Her movements jerky and harsh she tugged at his clothing, trying to pull it from his body. She struggled against him and he let her push him to his back. Tugging at the fabric knot at her waist, she shed the last of her clothing and straddled him. The sight of his delicate little mate atop him, wearing nothing but the bracelets he'd given her, nearly had him spilling in his braies.

Her beautifully flushed skin glowed under his hands as he caressed her while she stripped him of his remaining clothing. Once he was naked she straddled him again

and pinned his arms to the mattress. She had to lean well over his face to accomplish it, which threw her off balance. He didn't exploit it though. He wanted to see what she had planned for him but he wasn't sure how long he could remain passive. Even now, he couldn't stop from lifting his head and drawing her nipples into his mouth.

She drew in a ragged breath and settled her dripping pussy on top of his stomach. The head of his cock teased her ass as she wriggled against him.

"Never forget," she whispered, "that if I'm yours, you're mine."

She slid backward, over his aching erection, staring into his eyes. She cupped her breasts as if offering them to him and he groaned at the sight of it. "My body is the only place you'll spill your seed. My body is the only place your cock belongs."

She slid her hands down her belly and spread her pussy lips wide so he could see all of her. "If I decide to share you with another woman," parroting his words to her, she caressed her slick folds while he watched. "It will be my choice."

Flicking her finger across the tight bud at the apex of her thighs she shivered and her eyelids fluttered closed. "You said you wanted to see how I touched myself when I thought of you."

"Open your eyes," he ground out, fighting to keep control, to keep from lifting her and ramming her onto his cock until he was seated to the hilt.

Lazily, her gaze focused on his face.

"Tell me what you imagined when you made yourself come."

Her cheeks pinkened but she kept stroking herself. The sound of her hand against her wet flesh tightened his balls. He gripped her hips, stopping her rhythmic movements. He didn't want to explode until he was buried inside her.

He pushed against her. "Tell me what you pictured."

"Once I saw a man take my sister. She was on her hands and knees." The breathy quality of her voice made him shudder and her fingers fluttered to a stop.

"What did the man do?" he coaxed.

"He grabbed her hips and shoved himself into her."

"Don't stop touching yourself. I want to see you come. I want to feel you drip all over me."

She sank her teeth into her lower lip and slid a slender finger inside her cunt and then added another.

"Yes," he groaned. "Don't stop." He reached up and plucked at her nipples and her head dropped back. Her hips resumed their slow slide against his cock and he thought he'd go mad.

"Do you want me to take you like that?" he asked. "Turn you over and fill you with my cock, thrusting until you come?"

She began to tremble.

"Look at me, Elizabeth," he commanded. Her head lolled on her neck like a doll but she met his eyes. "Tell, me, leannan. Is that what you want?"

She nodded.

"Tell me," he demanded. "Show me how much you want me. Come for me. Now."

He brushed his thumb across her clit. She shattered, her entire body stiffened and she cried out, her voice raw with agonized pleasure. Grabbing her around the waist, he threw her to her knees. Propped up on her elbows she looked over her shoulder at him. Her stormy eyes called to him, begging for fulfillment.

Micah drew a strained breath through clenched teeth, trying to go slowly enough not to hurt her. As much as he wanted to plunge himself deep inside her, he held back. But every time she wiggled her ass he had to try even harder not to impale her.

Gripping his cock, he probed her snug opening and she dropped her forehead to the bed. She arched her back and wriggled like a cat in heat.

"Please, Micah." Extending her arms and raising her head, she looked back at him, her eyes pleading. "I need you. I need you inside me. Now."

He put his hand in the center of her back and pushed, holding her upper body to the bed. His other arm locked around her waist and drew her back onto his cock. He split her tight folds, nearly spilling himself at the sound of her satisfied whimper.

"Yes," she whispered. Without giving him a chance to move, she ground herself against him.

Restraint demolished, he reared back and thrust deep. She was so tight he could barely move. So much for making it last. If he made it past the third stroke it would be a bloody miracle.

He pushed again and she began to shudder, milking him with her internal muscles. Keeping up the punishing pace, he pounded in and out of her while she writhed on the bed. Her fingers tangled in the bedding and she hung on for dear life, slamming her hips back to meet his every thrust. Her untutored movements outshone the most skilled women he'd ever had.

She whispered his name like a prayer as she came again. The desperate pulsing of her cunt and her sighed entreaties pushed him over the edge. He shuddered and spilled his life force into her, nearly passing out from the intensity of his release.

She collapsed under him. Withdrawing from her sweet grip, he fell next to her and pulled her into the curve of his body. He stroked her clammy skin as her breathing eventually slowed. He dropped a gentle kiss in the curve of her shoulder.

"So I belong to you?" he asked.

"With certainty," she yawned, "and you'd do well to remember it."

Chuckling he drew a blanket over them and buried his face in her hair.

* * * * *

The more time that Elizabeth spent with Neeve, the more she was convinced that the young consort had power of her own—considerable power—but of a nature Elizabeth had never sensed before. She wanted more than anything to discuss it with the other woman but there hadn't been an opportunity.

For the last few days, it seemed Micah never left her side. During those rare times he was otherwise occupied, there were always guardians or consorts in the nearby vicinity. It was as if he didn't trust her. She cringed. Not that she'd given him any real reason to trust her.

If it weren't for the constant threat of death hanging over her head she would have enjoyed her time with Micah. She was becoming far more attached to him than was wise. She tried to tell herself that the only thing she was attached to was his body but it was more than that and she knew it. Fiercely protective, kind, loyal and passionate—and she was lying to him. Pretending to be something she wasn't.

There were moments she wanted to confess everything—the deceit, the reasons behind it. She wanted to explain that she cared for him. She wouldn't go so far to say that she loved him. That would be stupid but she did care for him and she didn't want to hurt him.

She needed someone to talk to about this. Neeve was the only person she could trust. She sighed. Micah had been closeted with the chancellor for hours now. If she was going to get a chance to talk to Neeve alone now was the time.

Ignoring the young guardian who had been following her through the keep all morning, Elizabeth navigated the maze of hallways and headed to the temple. It was midday and she doubted that she'd be interrupting anything of importance. Besides, many of the guardians were with Micah and Willem. Hopefully it wouldn't be too difficult to find her friend. Although she knew where the temple was, she'd never actually been inside.

Elizabeth tugged on the heavy oak doors. That was odd. They were barred from the inside. She made her way to the small side entrance Micah had pointed out several days ago. A curtain partway obscured the opening but she could see beyond it. Candles flickered in the dim room and Asher stood at the dais. Was someone else in the room with him? She moved closer. Neeve. On her knees. Elizabeth took a step forward. Asher had better not hurt her friend. She wouldn't allow it. Darting around the curtain, she suddenly stopped.

Chapter Eight

Neeve was indeed on her knees but it didn't look as though Asher was hurting her. His robe pooled on the floor at their feet and Neeve's hands worked the lacing of his breeches open. His thick erection sprung free and the consort groaned at the sight of it. Reverently, she stroked his flesh from root to tip, caressing every inch of his erection with nimble fingers. Her tongue darted out and flicked across the head and Asher shuddered at the sensation. Slowly, she guided his arousal into her mouth as far as it would go. Her cheeks hollowed as she sucked on him and his hips rhythmically thrust into her mouth.

Elizabeth's insides clenched. This wasn't anything she'd ever seen her sister do. Would Micah like this? Could she possibly take all of him? Asher had buried his hands in Neeve's hair and guided her up and down his shaft. With his head tilted and his hair spilling loose down his back, he looked more god than man. It was easy to imagine Micah in that position. What would he do if she tried?

She must have made a noise. Asher turned to face her. A slow, seductive smile curved his mouth. Unbidden, she remembered that mouth on her. Remembered the feel of his lips. The scrape of his teeth.

He held her gaze with purpose and a shiver worked through her body. Mesmerized, she watched as his cock disappeared and reappeared with a wet sheen. His jaw went slack and his eyes closed in what looked to be torturous pleasure. His breathing escalated as Neeve took him deeper.

She'd like to cause Micah that kind of torture. What would he think if she tried that with him? What would he taste like?

Elizabeth felt Micah approach but didn't turn. She didn't want to miss the scene in front of her. His warmth hovered behind her, enveloping her without even the slightest touch. His hot breath skated past her ear as he bent. "You look like you want to join them, leannan."

"What? No." Even to her it didn't sound very convincing.

Judging from his low chuckle, it sounded even less so to Micah.

"So men like that?" she asked, glancing at him.

His eyes gleamed with mirth. "I can't think of a man who doesn't."

She licked her lips. "Do you?"

"Is there something specific you're trying to ask me?" He dragged his hand over the hard ridge at his groin. Her eyes hungrily followed the movement.

Nodding, she dropped to her knees, unable to take her gaze away from the ever-thickening bulge.

With shaking hands, she unfastened his braies. Dark and dusky, his engorged cock sprang free and skimmed the side of her cheek. His skin was so impossibly soft there. Soft and hard and incredibly hot.

Tentatively, she stuck out her tongue and licked the thick head. She swiped away the slightly salty drop of fluid that had gathered there while she'd stared.

"Oh, gods, leannan."

Trying to remember what she'd seen Neeve do, she swirled her tongue around the wide, flared head. Micah sighed and twisted her hair around his fist, drawing her closer, his muscles shaking and straining. She could tell he held himself back, wanting more than she was giving him. He'd given her so much pleasure, she wanted to return it—at least try to. Slowly, she dragged her fingernails up and down the insides of his thighs. His legs and buttocks clenched at her caress. Emboldened, she dug her fingers into his buttocks and tugged him forward until his cock hit the back of her throat. A shudder shot through his body.

She had such power over him. On her knees and she was the one in control. She could have laughed but all of her energy was focused on Micah. Pulling him from her lips, she dragged open-mouthed kisses over his groin, sinking her teeth into the curve of his hipbone.

"I need to be inside you."

She wrapped her lips around him again before releasing him with a popping sound. "You are."

From the corner of her eye she noticed Neeve and Asher watching avidly as Micah slid in and out of her mouth. He noticed too.

"You're making them almost as hot as you make me," he growled in a harsh whisper. "They're watching the way my cock stretches your sweet little mouth. They're watching how hard you suck me. How deeply you take me."

She whimpered around his cock, his desperate words making her juices drip down the inside of her thighs. Glancing over at the other couple, she caught Neeve's eye. They held each other's gaze as their lovers pumped in and out of their mouths.

It was as if they'd all become part of the same intimate act. Their fevered intensity fed off one another, collectively driving everyone's desire higher. The soft groans and gasping breaths quivered over Elizabeth's body as tangible as Micah's stroking fingers.

Asher stiffened and cried out, spilling into Neeve's mouth. She continued to suck, swallowing everything he offered. He shuddered and tried to back away but she sucked him deeper. Finally, he pulled free and turned her around, hauling her skirt to her waist. Pushing her to her knees on a pile of silk pillows, he thrust his still hard cock into her trembling body. She cried out, begging for more.

Elizabeth tore her gaze from the writhing couple and peered up at Micah.

"Leannan, you have to stop. I'm too close to coming."

She shook her head as far as she could and still keep him in her mouth. She drew harder and wrapped her hand around the root of his cock, stroking upward to meet the downward slide of her mouth.

His head fell forward, shrouding her in the curtain of his hair. The ends tickled her neck and shoulders. She glanced up, his eyes were open and focused on her.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.”

Despite the intensity in his gaze, she knew he didn’t mean it. He was just caught up in the intimacy of the moment but the compliment warmed her anyway.

For a moment, she let herself imagine what it would be like if he actually felt that way about her—if he loved her. Her eyes stung with sudden tears as she realized the idiocy of that thought. He’d never love her. She was nothing more to him than a vessel for the child Maelgwn so desperately needed.

Pushing aside her disappointment, she focused on Micah’s pleasure, sucking him harder and deeper. He shuddered and tried to pull from her grasp. She wrapped her hand around the base of his cock and squeezed rhythmically.

“Yes, oh gods, yes, leannan.” His cock jerked in her mouth and he spilled hot across her tongue. Swallowing, she tried to take everything but he didn’t give her a chance. He lifted her in his arms. Carrying her to the pile of pillows, he laid her next to where Neeve knelt and Asher thrust into her from behind.

Elizabeth’s impassioned cries joined Neeve’s as Micah rammed his cock into her needy body. He lifted her legs and tossed them over his shoulders, giving him deeper access. She couldn’t imagine anything better than the feeling of his huge cock filling her. He thrust so hard they slid closer to the other heaving couple. Driving frantically into her body, he groaned as she clutched at him, her nails scraping across his forearms.

Asher’s harsh breathing drew her attention and she lifted her eyes to the others. The sight of their bodies straining together heightened her excitement, sending shivers of longing racing across her skin. Neeve’s gaze tangled with hers and Elizabeth cried out at the sheer sensuality of the moment. In the last week, she’d gone from being a timid virgin to making love with three other people.

“I can’t believe how wet you are, leannan,” Micah grated. “Does watching Asher fuck your friend make you hot?”

Elizabeth looked into her mate’s eyes. The intensity there should have frightened her, but it didn’t. Instead, his near savage need for her tightened the desire spiraling through her womb. “More,” she demanded and met him thrust for thrust.

The dull thud of scrolls hitting the floor sounded from across the room. Unable to keep from looking, she saw the same young guardian who’d been in Micah’s bedchamber that first day. His eyes darted between the couples and he seemed helpless to move.

Micah chuckled. “It seems you’re not the only one who likes to watch.”

Elizabeth could imagine the picture they made. Black, brown, white and sun-kissed bodies writhing on brightly colored silk pillows. Holding Micah's heated gaze, she released his arms and dragged her hands across her belly to cup her breasts, offering herself to him.

The guardian groaned as Micah lowered his head to devour her nipples. She cried out as he sucked harder, watching the young man's reaction. His hand rubbed the hard bulge in his braies.

"You're wicked," Micah murmured against her skin. "Making the poor boy suffer like that." He thrust hard, coming to rest as deeply as possible within her. "Joseph," he bellowed.

"I'm sorry, milord," he stammered. "I didn't mean to —"

"Come here."

Micah exchanged a pointed look with Asher.

Joseph swallowed thickly and approached.

"Remove your clothes," Asher ordered.

As the guardian stripped, Micah withdrew from Elizabeth's body. Sudden worry knotted her stomach and she glanced at him. He urged her to her knees, nudging her stance wider with his own, situating a pillow between her spread legs.

"What —"

Before she could voice her question, he pushed forward, filling her so completely she nearly collapsed. As her body rippled and clenched around his cock, he inhaled, his breath a sharp hiss. His fingers dug into her hips as he steadied himself within her.

He leaned over her back, his warmth blanketing her. "I want to see his mouth on you, leannan."

He wanted what? Her heart sunk. Would he share her with anyone? She tried to swallow past the rock that unexpectedly lodged in her throat. On a grateful sigh, Joseph lay between the two couples. Even as he slid his head between her legs, the silk of his hair caressing her thighs, Elizabeth couldn't tear her gaze from his rigid cock. Was Micah planning on letting Joseph fuck her, too? She stiffened and considered pulling away. Did he care so little for her?

"Relax, leannan. I just want to give you pleasure. Let us bring you to your peak."

She met Neeve's avid gaze as her friend watched. But the minute Joseph swiped his tongue along her weeping cleft her eyes closed and quaking racked her body.

Micah had stayed still until Joseph began his carnal assault. Now he shafted her mercilessly, murmuring about how good it must feel to have a cock in her pussy and a mouth at her clit. She couldn't have agreed more but a low keening noise was the only sound she could produce. Sensations rioted through her body and her arms shook with the effort of staying upright.

Asher's voice tugged her eyelids open. She couldn't make out what he said, but the sight of his body pumping into Neeve's sent a fresh rush of moisture from her core.

Both men must have felt it. Micah jolted inside her and Joseph groaned against her over-sensitized pussy. She dug her fingers into the soft pillows, knowing she wouldn't last much longer.

Neeve caught her gaze and winked before lowering her head and taking Joseph's thick cock into her mouth. He trembled between Elizabeth's legs, drawing more intensely on her swollen flesh.

"More," she begged. "More, Micah. Please."

Joseph sucked her clit between his lips, biting gently. Micah pounded faster and faster, his balls hitting her body with sharp wet slaps. She squeezed him with her internal muscles, trying to draw him deeper. Despite their frantic pace, Joseph dug his fingers into her thighs and pulled her snugly against his mouth. As if from a great distance, she heard Neeve moaning around Joseph's cock as her climax neared. He shook as he spilled into her mouth, but his lips never left Elizabeth's pussy. His deep groan vibrated through her until finally the sensations were too much.

She exploded, taking everyone else with her. Black spots danced behind her closed eyes and she shook, trembled and contracted around Micah. spurts of white-hot come filled her as he jerked and shuddered into her body. Neeve cried out her release and Asher stiffened, groaning out his completion. Aftershocks rocked their bodies as they continued to sporadically thrust against each other. Panting and sweating, they curled together in a tangle of limbs like a pile of tired puppies.

Blushing at what she'd just done, Elizabeth glanced at the others. Asher kissed Neeve. Long, slow deep kisses. Smiling contentedly, Joseph had closed his eyes. As Elizabeth watched, Micah wrapped his arms around her and drew her closer to his warmth. He buried his face in her hair and sighed deeply. Satisfaction flowed through her and she sank into the comfort of his body. She committed the feeling of lying in his arms to memory. Soon this, along with everything else, would be gone.

Micah pulled Elizabeth closer. Though he'd let the other man taste her, he'd never share more than that—she belonged to him. He'd sorely misjudged his mate, never imagining that she'd be so uninhibited. From the way she'd devoured his cock to the way she taunted Joseph, he couldn't imagine a better bed partner. Though she'd been sweetly awkward at times, she'd more than compensated with her enthusiasm. Yes, the guardians had chosen very well.

According to law, the overlord was supposed to lie with his mate only. His father had blithely ignored that edict, fucking whatever woman he wanted, never caring how much he'd hurt his mate in the process. Micah had confronted him about it once, before leaving for the academy and the man had only laughed, calling Micah an idealistic child.

He had no idea if Collin had upheld the law with his mate—mates, he supposed since his brother had had three. Three women and none of them had managed to produce an heir. He remembered reading the missives of their grisly deaths. Following

Maelgwn law, they were executed for barrenness. Micah wondered, not for the first time, if the blame perhaps lay with his brother.

Regret still plagued him over the loss of those two women. He'd known Collin's first mate, Catia, since they'd been children. They'd played together. She'd given Micah his first kiss. Collin's second mate had been Asher's beloved sister, Anna. He and Asher had both been repelling a contingent of Cadeyrn raiders at the borderlands when they'd heard. In some ways, Asher still hadn't recovered from the loss and Micah wasn't sure he ever would. He'd reared his sister after their parents died. He'd also been against the match with Collin since it had been decreed but he'd been overruled.

What if Elizabeth didn't conceive in the first year? Fear raced like an ice floe through his veins. He wouldn't let them do that to her. He'd hide her if he had to. Take her someplace where she wouldn't be found. He tightened his embrace. She shifted and sighed in her sleep and he kissed her forehead. He wouldn't let any harm come to her.

Had Collin fought for any of his mates, or had he been willing to see them led to their deaths? Micah sighed. Collin was on his mind often today. He had never gotten a decent accounting of how and why his brother had left in the first place. He'd brought it up again today at the council meeting and Willem once again dismissed it, reminding him that the letter Collin left had explained everything. Micah couldn't shake the feeling that the man had something to hide.

Micah had been at the front with a contingent of guardians when word of Collin's disappearance reached them—well over two months after it had occurred. When they'd returned to Maelgwn keep, there were only a few scant details. It was as if he and his mate had simply vanished.

No matter what Willem said, he knew far more about Collin's disappearance than he would admit. Asher sensed it too but he'd never been able to read Willem like he could most other men.

Cradling his mate, watching her sleep, Micah realized that the truth about his brother might affect their future more than he'd ever imagined. He needed to discover what the chancellor knew.

Movement from the corner of his eye drew his attention. Asher pulled his robe over himself and Neeve's now sleeping form. They needed to talk later and see if they could devise a way to find the information they needed.

I can hear you thinking from here, my friend. Asher grinned as he drew his consort closer. *We need to discuss this new development of yours.*

We've got more important things to discuss, he shot back.

I agree and somehow I think your mate is at the center of everything.

What the hell did you mean by that? Micah lifted Elizabeth into his arms and prepared to carry her back to their chamber.

I mean, she's not what she seems.

Either stop this cryptic pointlessness, or stay the fuck out of my head.

I'm not trying to be cryptic. I just think there's more to Elizabeth than we know. Have you considered she might have abilities that we need to deal with?

Of course, he'd considered that. Particularly, after he'd seen how quickly her injuries had healed. It was rumored that long ago all women had the power to heal, just as all men had the ability to work other magics. Was Elizabeth a throwback to an earlier time?

I won't let you hurt her.

The thought nearly paralyzed him with fear and for a moment he saw her in his mind's eye bound at the stake, engulfed in flames. In destroying women with magic, Maelgwn had destroyed its ability to heal. Men still used the ancient herbal recipes and they helped but their powers were not compatible and did nothing to increase the plants' strength.

Micah. I won't allow any harm to come to her. You know, I'd never hurt her.

There are laws that you're sworn to uphold.

Maybe it's time those laws changed. Asher grinned.

New overlord—new traditions.

They would be bringing about a civil war. Many, if not most, of the men would be opposed to allowing women the use of magic. Over the generations magic ability had essentially been bred out of some of the women. And some of the men, he thought bitterly. Had he been stripped of his birthright because men like Willem and his father were threatened by the power of healers?

He looked at Asher. *It will take more than a decree from either of us.*

I'm aware. There are factions that will be resistant.

Resistant. That was putting it mildly. Willem would likely try to declare him incompetent and have him put to death. Well, he was welcome to try. Micah grinned. He might be replacing the chancellor sooner than he'd planned.

* * * * *

Elizabeth stretched, twisting her body against the cool sheets. Rolling over, she pressed her front against Micah's back and wrapped her arms around him. He sighed and shifted in his sleep, murmuring her name.

Her chest tightened at the thought of eventually leaving him. Like the fool she was she'd fallen in love with him. But now, she had not only her own life to consider but that of her unborn child. She'd felt the life flare into being several nights ago, felt it take root, felt the baby's soul enter her body.

She wanted so desperately to tell Micah, to share the news with him but she couldn't. Eventually, she would find an opportune time to leave. She couldn't hurt him further by letting him know she was taking his child with her.

If she concentrated, she could feel her daughter—their daughter—constantly developing in strength and size. She knew she'd be healthy but what would she look like? She glanced at her pale, white arm wrapped around Micah's strong, dark chest.

For a moment, she imagined them curled up in this big bed, holding their perfect child. Would she be dark like Micah or pale like her or possibly some combination of the two? She imagined Micah cradling the tiny babe in his huge, strong hands and she had to blink back tears. They would never have that experience. She'd never nurse their child curled up in her mate's protective embrace. Their daughter would never fall asleep on her father's lap. She'd never know her father. Micah would never know his little girl.

The tears flowed freely now. Gently pulling from the bed, she crossed the room and splashed cool water on her face from the basin.

"Leannan?" Micah's sleepy voice startled her. She must have woken him when she'd left the bed.

"I'm here," she called, swiping the last of tears and water from her face. "You needn't try to chase me down."

"Come back to bed." Propped up on his elbow, he patted the mattress next to him. His lips curved in a sultry smile and his eyes heated. "I want to show you how much I missed you."

She hesitated only momentarily. She was already pregnant so that was no longer a consideration. She swallowed the sudden tears that threatened and walked toward him. She needed to make as many memories as she could.

Crossing the room, she put a knee on the bed and leaned over him. In a movement too fast for her to see, he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her under his hard, heated body. His weight pressing her into the mattress aroused her to the point where she just wanted to lift her hips and let him slide inside her. She arched against him but he pushed her back into the bed.

"I want to take my time loving you," he breathed against her skin. He cupped her hip and slid his hand over the curve of her waist, smoothing his thumb over her stomach.

Her body tightened at the smoky tone of his voice. He'd never touched her so gently, so reverently, almost as if he were in love with her, too. She knew he wasn't but it was so tempting to let herself think he was actually was. What would it hurt? Her heart would end up broken by the time she left him, anyway.

Staring into her eyes, he stroked her face, trailing his fingers across her forehead, along her cheekbones, over her lips. He replaced his fingers with his lips, gently kissing every exposed bit of skin he could find.

"No matter what happens, you're mine," he whispered.

He took her mouth in a kiss that nearly broke her heart. Slow and achingly tender, he seemed to pour every ounce of emotion he couldn't or didn't want to express into his

kiss. Into her body. He raised his head and stared into her eyes. "You'll always be mine."

Her heart constricted and for a brief time she couldn't breathe properly. She wanted to speak, to answer him but the words wouldn't come. Instead, she skimmed her hands down the sides of his body and urged him into her.

With a leisurely, deliberate thrust, he entered her. Wrapping her arms and legs around him, she drew him closer and whispered, "And you're mine."

He held her gaze the entire time, never breaking his measured pace. No matter how much she begged him to move faster, he continued his unhurried tempo, refusing to be rushed. A knot built in her middle, heightened by the intensity in his eyes. Her need coiled tighter with every stroke and she met his each stroke, grinding against him.

"Oh, gods, Elizabeth. Yes."

Her heart twisted, she'd miss him so much when she was gone. Until she left, she'd take every opportunity to show her love now. Suddenly, he began moving faster, thrusting harder. She squeezed him, her internal muscles clenched tighter and tighter. The friction overwhelmed her. A tremble started in her middle and spiraled outward, encompassing her entire body. Instead of fading, it rose higher as Micah spilled hot and heavy into her.

He dropped gentle kisses over her face and neck, as their breathing slowly returned to normal.

"I can't get enough of you," he breathed.

"You'll grow bored soon enough." She smiled even though it hurt to admit it. It was true. She was a novelty. Nothing more than a new toy. Even if she were to stay, he'd grow tired of her and move on to mistress after mistress.

It seemed that every time she went to town to sell vegetables and herbs, she'd see his father with a new woman. Sometimes the man even had the audacity to bring his mistress out with his mate. Never noticing—or more likely, caring—how miserable and humiliated his mate appeared. She wouldn't let any man do that to her. Not even Micah.

He frowned at her. "Don't presume to know my thoughts."

"Then don't be ridiculous. You're mating with me only because it's been decreed. You don't want me. Not really."

He opened his mouth but she continued. "I'm your duty. Just like taking over the throne is your duty."

His face hardened and his eyes narrowed. "I wanted you before this was arranged."

"I'm not stupid, Micah. You might have wanted to fuck me—in the way that most men want to fuck women—as much as possible—whenever possible. It doesn't mean you wanted me. There's a difference."

She wasn't sure why she antagonized him other than she needed to shore up the emotional barriers between them. The emotional barriers that he'd managed to consistently break through.

Before he could answer a heavy knock sounded on the oak doors leading to his chambers. "Milord, the consorts are here for Lady Elizabeth."

"What? Why?" What did they want with her?

"The ritual takes place tonight."

It was Beltane already? It couldn't be. How had a week passed so quickly? And at the same time it felt as though they'd been together forever.

His lips were compressed and though he lay still, agitated energy seemed to flow from his body.

Cold fear slid down her spine. She wished she hadn't tried to anger him earlier. "What will happen? Will you be with me?"

"I'll be there tonight but once the consorts take you, I won't see you until the ceremony."

"Why?" She didn't like this at all. "Who will I be seeing?" She prayed he wouldn't mention the chancellor. She wasn't sure she could handle him alone. She was likely to say something incredibly incriminating and he'd discover her secret. Instead of a joining ceremony, it would turn into a death sentence.

He studied her as if he carefully considered his answer. "Only the consorts until it's time to leave. Then the guardians will accompany you."

"Accompany me? Where am I going?"

"The ritual takes place in the sacred oak grove."

Leaving the keep made the ritual seem suddenly more sinister. She tried not to let her fear show. His face softened and he stroked her hair. He must have sensed something. He'd become so attuned to her in such a short time. She felt closer to him than any other person she knew—including her sister. How had this happened?

"It will be all right. I'll be waiting for you. I won't let anything happen to you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder, inhaling his comforting masculine scent.

"Micah, I need you to promise me something."

"Anything I have is yours."

"No. I need you to do something for me."

"Of course. What is it?"

"If they decide to burn me at the stake, promise me you'll kill me first."

Kill her? Why in the name of the gods would she ask that of him? Any irritation he'd had with her earlier vanished. "I don't understand."

She bit her lip and her eyes filled with tears. "They killed Collin's mates. And—" She stopped and took a deep breath. "I don't want to suffer like my—like she did."

It hit him like a mace to the gut. Her mother. Memory flooded back in a torrent. The summer he'd turned twelve, a woman from the outlying village had been burned to death. His mother had tried to stop his father but he'd beaten her, telling her she'd be next if she didn't stop trying to thwart him.

Micah stood by his father at the execution because he'd had to. And then he remembered. Two small red-haired girls. The older one held the younger back, preventing her from diving into the flames after her mother. The smaller child had been Elizabeth. She'd watched her mother die. The woman's crime had been suspicion of magic use. After the cries had died away, he'd left the keep and vomited into the bushes along the stream.

Elizabeth's terror of the chancellor made a new and terrible sense. He'd been the one to light the pyre.

Micah pulled her close, holding her as tightly as he could. "I won't let him touch you, leannan. He won't come near you. I promise."

No matter what, he'd keep his promise, even if he had to kill the other man to do it.

Pulling back, he looked into her eyes. "Elizabeth, I need to ask you something and I need you to tell me the truth."

She pressed her trembling lips together as if it would keep her from screaming. "What is it?"

"Do you have magic?"

Chapter Nine

"What?" She squirmed in his embrace. "No, of course not. Don't be silly." Her voice was too shrill. She laughed nervously. "Women aren't allowed to have magic."

"That doesn't stop nature from bestowing it from time to time."

She shook her head and tiny tears ran from the corners of her eyes. "No."

Her voice was barely a whisper. If he hadn't been looking directly at her, he wouldn't have heard a thing.

"I know that's why your mother was put to death. If there's something I should know, please tell me. Otherwise I can't protect you properly."

"I can't."

"You can tell me, leannan. I won't tell anyone but I need to know."

"I can't. I can't do anything."

He still held her in his arms but he held nothing. She'd pulled so far from him she'd become a shell. Empty. It was as if they never shared any intimacy at all. She'd become a stranger.

She gazed at him through vacant eyes. "I don't have any magic." Her voice was wooden. "I don't have any abilities."

He dropped his forehead to hers. "I can't protect you if you don't help me."

His heart constricted. She was lying to him because she didn't trust him. Even after everything they'd shared, she couldn't bring herself to believe him.

He tried to tell himself she had good reason to be distrustful. He'd taken her away from her home without her consent, brought her here, chained her up and fucked her into submission. Add the fact that his father had brutally murdered her mother. No she didn't really have reason to trust him but damn it, it hurt anyway. How could he make her believe?

He brushed her hair from her forehead and wiped away the tears that trembled on her lashes. "I'll keep you safe."

Her mouth curved in a halfhearted smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I know you will."

The gods damn it, she still didn't believe him. There had to be a way to convince her.

Perhaps if he revealed his secret, she would feel safe in sharing hers. Years of keeping his vulnerability buried where it belonged made it all the more difficult to bare it now but Elizabeth needed to know she could trust him. This was the only way he could think to convince her.

"Until a week ago," he began, his words hesitant. Until she came into his life. The pieces of the puzzle that comprised Elizabeth began to fall into place but he couldn't stop to examine them now. "I had no magic," he continued. "As a child, while all of the other boys practiced their skills, I pretended, praying the guardians wouldn't call on me to demonstrate."

She stroked his jaw, her fingertips soft against his hair-roughened face. Holding her hand against him, he pressed a kiss into the center of her palm.

He looked away from the sympathy that softened her gaze. "Eventually, the other boys began to suspect my failing. Asher covered for me as best he could but..." He shrugged. "It wasn't always enough."

"Oh, Micah," she murmured, her voice heavy with sadness.

He wouldn't tell her how his father beat him, hoping to force a latent talent to develop. "Willem demanded that my father rid himself of me, saying I was worthless."

"But you couldn't help it!" she cried. "That's the way you were born. It wasn't your fault!"

He stared into her eyes, holding her still with his gaze. "I could say the same of you."

Before he could continue, the knock sounded on the door again and one of his guards called out. "Milord, the consorts are waiting."

"We'll be out momentarily."

"Aye, milord."

Elizabeth started to pull away from him but he locked his arms around her. She glanced away as if unable to meet his eyes. "They're waiting. I should leave now."

He turned her chin so she had to face him. "They can wait a bit longer."

She blinked at him, her beautiful gray eyes lifeless and flat. If she'd considered telling him the truth, the moment had passed. Now the vast ocean of distrust surged between them.

"It will be all right," he promised.

She wouldn't meet his eyes. "I know."

Micah couldn't remember a time his heart hurt more. Even hearing of his mother's death and Collin's disappearance didn't engender this kind of helplessness. He wanted so desperately to make this right between them but without her trust, there was no way. He had to believe time would show her the truth. But after the ritual tonight would she even speak to him? It was supposed to be pleasurable for the woman but it would be sheer and utter hell for him. How he'd get through it, he had no idea.

When she pulled from him a second time he let her go, watching as she stiffly donned her clothing. Where was the passionate woman he'd held in his arms a short while ago? It was as if she'd died. An icy fist gripped his heart.

Rising from their tangle of bedding, he crossed the room and lifted her hair out of the way so she could fasten her bodice. He grabbed a wooden comb from the table and tugged her back to the bed. She followed emotionless, devoid of hope.

He directed her to sit between his spread thighs and she complied. Slowly, he worked the comb through her hair, gently unsnarling the tangles and massaging her scalp. She breathed deeply and leaned into his ministrations. After he'd untangled her hair, he rubbed the knots from her shoulders and back. She sighed and went slack against him.

Her relaxed state lasted until the knock sounded again. She became rigid and sat up straight at the sound of fist on wood. "The guardians have arrived, milord."

"They'll have to wait," he bellowed but Elizabeth had already risen and had begun lacing her tiny leather slippers.

He dragged clothes over his body, preparing to accompany her to the temple. He wouldn't let her go alone. He knew he couldn't follow her inside but he wouldn't abandon her now.

Slipping his arm around her waist, he led her to the door. "What are you doing?"

"I'm not ready to be separated from you."

A genuine smile reached her eyes and she leaned into his embrace. "Thank you," she murmured.

He dropped a kiss on her upturned brow and opened the door.

At least twenty people crowded the hallway outside his door. Fifteen or sixteen consorts, at least five guardians and both of his personal guards. He half expected a juggler or an acrobat to pop out from behind the crowd.

Neeve approached and kissed Elizabeth's cheek. He couldn't help but remember his mate's impassioned cries as they'd all made love in the temple. His cock hardened and he knew without a doubt that this would be the longest day of his life.

Keeping Elizabeth tightly by his side, he followed the giggling consorts to the temple. Once there, the guardians blocked his way. "I'm sorry, milord, but you can go no farther. She must be prepared."

He nodded sharply. "I will bid my mate good day. In the meanwhile send Guardian Asher to my chamber. I must speak with him."

The younger man nodded and backed into the open doors of the temple with the rest of the guardians. The consorts, however, stood in clusters nearby and watched his every move.

Ignoring them, he turned to face Elizabeth. He lowered his head to hers and his hair shrouded them from the curious eyes of their audience. "I will be waiting for you," he murmured.

She lifted her hand to his cheek. "I know you will."

He turned his face into her palm and kissed it, scraping gently with his teeth. A shiver worked through her and she slipped her hand around his neck and drew him

forward. Sliding his hand through her silky hair, he cupped the back of her head. Their lips touched in an explosion of passion and they kissed as if they never would again.

"Milady," Neeve interrupted quietly. "It's time."

Elizabeth stood on her toes and kissed him once more before she let Neeve lead her away. She stood just inside the door and he watched as it shut between them.

This desolate feeling was ridiculous. He'd see her again tonight and after the guardians had sufficiently tortured him he'd be buried inside her where he planned to stay for a long, long time.

Asher already waited for him in his chambers when Micah returned. He glanced around the room. They were unaccompanied but given the political climate, Micah wasn't sure he trusted his eyes alone.

Leaning close, he whispered to Asher. "I don't trust the level of privacy. Is there something you can do?"

The guardian nodded and closed his eyes, his hands made an open circle in front of him. A crystalline blue orb formed between his palms. Slowly, it grew until it encompassed the entire room.

"Better?" he asked.

Micah nodded.

"What have you found out?" Asher asked.

"She says she has no powers."

His friend rolled his eyes. "Of course, she says that. Think what the alternative is."

"She's terrified," Micah continued. "We have to keep Willem away from her."

"Why does she hate him so much? I know why I hate him but I'm sure we must have different reasons."

"Do you remember the summer we were twelve?" Micah began. "The woman that was executed?"

Understanding crept over the guardian's face. "Gods! Her mother?"

Micah nodded.

Asher's head dropped back and he stared at the ceiling, lost in thought. "That explains much."

"Will Willem be there tonight?"

Asher nodded.

Anger tightened Micah's fists. "Will he be participating or observing?"

Asher scrubbed his hand over his face, his eyes bleary-looking. "He's participated during the last four rituals."

Micah cringed. That would mean that the chancellor had touched his mother. Impotent rage filled him. "He will not touch my mate."

A grin split his friend's face.

"What?" Micah demanded.

"You."

"What about me?"

"You balked at taking a mate, swearing you wouldn't sanctify the union. And now look at you. Threatening the life of any man who looks at your woman."

"Go fuck yourself."

"You're going to have to control yourself tonight."

"I know," he growled.

"Nearly every man there will be touching her."

Touching her with their hands...their mouths...their cocks.

Micah's hands fisted at his side and he seriously considered punching his closest friend in the face. Repeatedly.

"I'm serious, Micah. You need to figure out how to get your emotions under control." A wicked light gleamed in the man's eyes. "Do you want me to send some of the consorts to your room so you can work off some tension?"

"No," he snapped. The thought of another woman, or women, should have improved his mood but instead it made it worse.

Asher laughed and threw up an energy shield as Micah's fist flew toward his face. The energy block was only somewhat softer than a rock wall.

"I couldn't be sure," his friend chortled. "But I suspected she was your true mate. Seems I was right."

Micah glared at the other man. "Explain. Now. I'm not in the mood for your puzzles."

"There are mates and there are true mates. Mates will do. They fill a need and bear children. True mates become your reason for breathing. You're in love, you idiot."

Micah shook his head. Yes, he was fond of Elizabeth. Very fond of her but love? He thought of all of the other women he'd shared with Asher over the years. Women who had gone from his bed to another's and he didn't care.

The thought of Elizabeth in another man's bed made him angry beyond reason, not to mention sick at heart. He glared at his gloating friend. He wasn't completely convinced Asher was right but he also wasn't convinced the guardian was wrong.

As an extra knife in the gut she didn't love him. Didn't even want to be with him. That wasn't entirely true, he reminded himself. She'd insisted he belonged to her. That meant something. Right? With a sinking heart, he knew she'd still run if given the chance.

* * * * *

Elizabeth allowed Neeve and the other consorts to lead her through the labyrinth of hallways that led beneath the temple. Despite her friend's reassuring smiles she couldn't ignore the trepidation that filled her soul.

"It's all right," Neeve said, taking her hand. "We're just going to prepare you for tonight. You'll enjoy it." Her eyebrows rose, her expression devious. "I promise."

Neeve and a talkative consort named Jenna stripped Elizabeth's clothes from her body. She stood naked in a room with at least thirty other women, all in varying stages of undress. Steaming water rose from tubs made of natural rock formations and the scent of spices filled the warm air.

Several of the woman chatted while they soaked in the water and others took turns caressing one another, their husky groans filling the air in the humid room. Neeve urged Elizabeth to lie down on a narrow table covered with a cushion.

"You need to relax or you're not going to enjoy yourself tonight."

"I can't imagine enjoying this ritual – whatever it is."

Jenna laughed and flung her bright red hair from her face. "What's not to enjoy? Endless pleasure at the hands...and mouths of all those men. Mmm...and then the overlord at the end? I'll take your place."

Elizabeth glared at the young woman. "You can have the rest but Micah is mine."

Neeve and Jenna laughed.

"We've heard wonderful stories about him from past consorts," Jenna said. "From the sounds of it, you're a lucky woman."

Past consorts? Jealousy twisted Elizabeth's stomach. Of course, Micah had sex with other women. It just never occurred to her that she'd be forced to interact with them.

She glanced around the room. Who would he turn to when she was gone? Worse, who would he turn to when he grew bored with her? Tears burned her eyes but she blinked them back.

"She is lucky," Neeve breathed. "He's magnificent."

Jenna put her hands on her hips. "When did you see him?"

"The other day in the temple." She winked at Elizabeth. "He takes his role as mate very seriously."

Jenna swept aside Elizabeth's hair and began to massage her stiff shoulder muscles. She continued talking but the relaxing sensation of her hands drowned out the words. Neeve moved to the head of the table and worked her fingers over Elizabeth's scalp. A satisfied groan escaped her parted lips.

Two more sets of hands lifted her feet and began rubbing sensuous circles into the arches. If this was the preparation for the ritual, they could prepare her all they wanted.

Jenna's hands slid down her back, loosening up the muscles around the spine, while Neeve moved to the other side of the table and placed her hands over Elizabeth's bottom. She jumped at the sensation of the woman's small strong hands on her backside. Micah touched her there all the time. But that was different. His hands nearly

covered her and frankly, she expected that from him. Under Neeve's expert handling, she managed to relax enough to close her eyes.

"See," Neeve murmured. "You've nothing to worry about." Finally, she lightly slapped Elizabeth's hip. "Time to roll over."

On shaking limbs, she turned over, wary of what would happen next. Jenna stood at the head of the table and rubbed soothing circles over Elizabeth's temples and scalp. From there, she moved to Elizabeth's neck, shoulders and arms and then reversed the process.

Languid arousal spread through her body. She squirmed and wriggled on the table, practically growling in frustration. She wanted Micah. She needed him.

Neeve bent to her ear. "I promise, Elizabeth. Tonight, you'll be the most satisfied woman in Maelgwn."

The rest of the afternoon passed in equal frustration. A bath, another massage even more torturous than the last and barely veiled allusions to what she'd experience during the ritual completed the maddening day.

Elizabeth shifted in her chair as Rhian, a voluptuous blonde, styled her hair. Something about this woman rubbed her the wrong way. In addition to her smugly superior attitude, Rhian twisted Elizabeth's hair, pulling so hard her scalp hurt.

Elizabeth stopped the other woman's hand with a smile. "I think I've had enough."

Rhian frowned. "Don't you want to look...decent for Micah?"

The way she said his name implied an intimacy that rankled Elizabeth. Judging from Rhian's expression, she knew it.

Neeve stalked over, hands on her hips and glared at her fellow consort. "The overlord likes her hair down, so why don't you go find something else to do."

A malicious smile spread across Rhian's face. "Micah, for instance."

Rage knotted Elizabeth's stomach and her hands fisted in her skirt. She rose from her chair and turned toward Rhian. "If you go near him, I will kill you. And I'll enjoy it."

The sound of a masculine throat being cleared spun her around. Asher. His eyes glinted with amusement.

"Has she been prepared?" he asked.

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "If I were any more prepared, I would have died of excessive mistreatment."

A huge grin split his face and he laughed.

"What about Micah?" she asked, irritation and jealousy growing. "Has he been prepared?" The thought of other women touching him, kissing him, sucking his cock—especially a woman like Rhian—enraged her.

Asher grinned as he trailed his finger between her breasts. "His only preparation involved obsessing over what we've been doing to you."

The information filled her with a ridiculous sense of relief.

He glanced around the room. The consorts gathered nearer and Neeve draped a dark cloak around Elizabeth's shoulders.

"Choose my consort," he said, staring into Elizabeth's eyes.

"What?"

"You get to choose who will help me officiate the ritual."

She wanted to ask what his duties would be but since the majority of her earlier questions had gone unanswered, she didn't waste her breath. She just wanted this over with. After the ritual she should be under less scrutiny and she'd have an easier time making her escape. "Neeve," she said without hesitation.

He nodded. "It's time." He took Elizabeth by the arm and Neeve took her other arm. Together, they led her back through the maze of passageways into sanctuary of the temple where the other guardians waited. An excited energy filled the air, bounding between everyone present. Even Rhian seemed slightly less bitter and eager.

The chilled night air kissed her flesh as they emerged on the west side of the keep. She tried to memorize the path they'd taken from the humid underground chamber but it seemed to weave back upon itself with tunnels that split off every few yards.

In the distance, she could see the glow of a huge bonfire flickering through the forest. Her stomach twisted with nervous energy. She glanced around. Black and red robes—this was what she'd seen in her vision. What if they weren't leading her to Micah? What if they were leading her to her death?

Her heart beat faster as she scanned the procession for escape opportunities.

Don't even think about it.

Elizabeth's head whipped around. Had she spoken aloud?

Quit looking for opportunities to run away. We're not going to hurt you. I vow it.

She met Asher's gaze and he continued speaking into her mind. *If you try to escape, Willem will distrust you even more than he does now. You don't want that.*

Asher could communicate without words. She'd thought that gift had only been a rumor to frighten little girls into behaving.

Can you read my mind? she thought at him. When he didn't respond, she focused more intensely.

If you're wondering if I can read your thoughts, I can't. You seem to have a natural shield. Some people do and others don't, he thought before she had a chance to voice her question. *I knew you were thinking about running because I've seen that look on your face before.*

For a moment, she saw what he'd seen the night Micah had dragged her to his chamber. She saw herself thrashing in Micah's arms, biting and scratching at him. She saw Micah shove her up against the door, grinding his pelvis into her. Her breath caught at the combined effect of the visual images and the tactile memory.

Yes, it was incredibly arousing.

Stranger than hearing his voice, she could feel his amusement and his desire in her head.

I knew without a doubt that you were the perfect woman for Micah. You affect him like no one I've ever seen. Tonight, you may damn well kill him.

His grin broadened and he led her into a circle of trees. She'd been so distracted with her conversation with Asher, she hadn't realized how far they'd traveled. He'd gained her compliance by feeding her bits and pieces of information and now there was no chance of getting away and disappearing into the night.

She looked around. The sacred oak grove. It was strange to think that only a week ago she'd tried to escape Micah to hide herself at this very place.

A rectangular slab of granite, now surrounded by black-robed guardians, filled the center of the circle. A large bonfire crackled several yards from the stone table, casting disturbing shadows over the grove and all of its occupants. She looked around nervously. Where was Micah?

A hulking figure loomed, approaching through the shadows, a hood drawn over his head. She knew him in an instant and relaxed infinitesimally. The reprieve vanished as he entered the circle of firelight and drew back his hood. His bare chest gleamed in the light. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to taste him, to trail her mouth over his beautiful dark flesh, to take him in her mouth.

She was startled from her lust-filled thoughts by the sound of drumming. Gathered at the edge of circle, several guardians had divested themselves of their garments and had begun pounding out a primal beat on the stretched hide drums.

Her heart thumped in time with the pulsing rhythm. She swallowed hard as Asher brought his staff down upon the earth. His voice echoed through the forest. "We have gathered here on Beltane to bind our lord to his lady. Their union will bring fertility to the land and prosperity to our people."

The drums didn't waver, their beat steady but unsettling nonetheless. It was as if her body had begun a climb to a great height and didn't remember to bring her mind along. She began to move to the seductive beat.

"Prepare him," Asher barked.

Hips swaying, Neeve walked to the granite table and lifted the larger of two dark shadows from the top. She turned and walked back to Micah. In the firelight, Elizabeth could see it was a crown made of oak leaves, small branches and deer antlers. He bowed his head and Neeve set the circlet on his head, adjusting it over his black braids.

Moving behind him, she drew his cloak from his shoulders and he stood naked. Elizabeth caught her breath at his beauty, captive in his hungry gaze. Willingly captive, she realized.

The tempo of the drums increased and Neeve dropped to her knees before Micah's straining erection and took him into her mouth. Elizabeth reminded herself that this was all part of the ritual but the sight of her friend sucking her mate's erection nearly

killed her. Her body clenched, wet and needy. And yet, it was oddly arousing watching Micah's arousal disappear in and out of Neeve's mouth.

Don't worry, little one. She will go no farther.

She smiled gratefully at Asher.

But, I, on the other hand, will be forced to go beyond that.

Her eyes widened with surprise. Asher turned on her, pulling the cloak from her body. Her dress had become transparent in the flickering light and she heard Micah's breath hiss through his clenched teeth. Whether from the sight of her mostly nude form or Neeve's clever tongue, she couldn't be sure.

"Behold our lady," Asher called out as he led her closer to Micah.

Micah's eyes burned as he stared at her. With deft hands, Asher stripped the clothes from her body, leaving her naked to all in the circle. Not wanting to shame Micah, she tried not to cringe.

Neeve left Micah's glistening erection, walked back to the stone slab and gathered the last item. She handed it to Asher who gently set the wildflower and leaf crown on her head. Lilacs and violets bloomed around her head, the lush, heavy scent stroked her senses, mixing with the smell of burning wood and musky arousal.

Asher dropped to his knees before her and parted her. Micah drew a harsh breath as Asher traced her cleft with his tongue.

Elizabeth bit her lip, trying to stifle the groan that threatened. She cried out as Asher gripped her hips and pulled her forward, flush against the flat of his tongue. Micah held her gaze the entire time, his eyes as powerful as his arms.

She tried to imagine how she must look from his perspective. Neeve's dark hands against her pale flesh and his best friend's face between her legs. Micah's chest rose and fell as he watched them pleasure her.

"Mine," he mouthed.

Heedless of the hands and mouths on her body, she tried to move to him. She wanted him so badly but Neeve and Asher held her in place.

It seemed that every time she and Micah made love, she wanted him more. Again, she wondered how she'd find the strength to leave him but she'd have to. For their daughter's sake.

Rhian approached Micah and began to caress his chest. There was no way Elizabeth would let that bitch touch her mate. She tried to step around Asher but he bound her using his magical abilities. She was frozen in place, able only to accept.

To her relief, Micah pushed away Rhian's hand and stalked toward where Asher held her prisoner. Before he could reach them, Asher nipped at her clit and lifted his head.

"Restrain yourself, milord. Not all traditions may be dispensed with."

Micah ceased moving but impatience and annoyance were clearly etched on his face. "Don't push too far, priest."

He said the last as if it was a curse. "She is mine and mine alone."

Pleasure streaked through her at his possessiveness.

He and Asher exchanged a look fraught with significance and she had no doubt the conversation continued.

"Look how he defends you," Neeve whispered in her ear. "So jealous of anyone who touches you." Micah's gaze fell to Elizabeth's tightly peaked nipples and he took a step forward before stopping himself. Neeve cupped the weight of Elizabeth's breasts in each hand and pushed them forward as if offering them to Micah.

His gaze darkened and he licked his lips. Before he got closer, Asher took one pebbled nipple in his mouth and then the other until she cried out with the intensity of the sensation.

Micah's eyes narrowed. She knew that once he got his hands on her, he wouldn't stop until he was done. She'd welcome every pitiless thrust. As it was, her body dripped more in response to the craving in his expression than Asher's attentions.

The guardian released both her nipples and the magical hold he had on her. "Bring her," he snapped.

Taking her hand, Neeve led her to the center of the grove. As high as her waist, the stone slab was even larger than she'd thought. Her body clenched. This was where Micah would take her. She glanced around. He'd take her in front of everyone. Shame slithered through her. She actually wanted him to fuck her in front of an audience.

Asher gestured to the altar. "Prepare her."

The consorts melted in from the edges of darkness. With eager hands, they helped Elizabeth onto the edge of the table and lay her back. She raised her head, searching for Micah but the women blocked her view. From between their bodies, she caught a glimpse of red. It drew nearer. The chancellor!

Icy fear snaked through her veins and she struggled to sit up.

Hush, Elizabeth. Micah won't let him near you.

She calmed somewhat but relaxing now would be next to impossible. Micah intercepted the man but the drums were so loud she couldn't hear what was said. Asher joined them. Judging from the facial expressions, no one was happy. Eventually, Willem retreated beyond the ring of light. She sighed in relief but more than ever she wanted the ritual finished.

Asher approached, looking more grim than she'd ever seen him. He waved his hand over her body and she found herself pinned flat against the rock, arms and legs spread wide, completely unable to move.

Oh gods, now what were they going to do to her? A hysterical laugh threatened. She wasn't an idiot. She knew what was coming. What had sounded erotic moments earlier now seemed like torture.

Asher knelt between her spread legs and chanted in a language she didn't understand. As the words grew in intensity, invisible ribbons of power caressed her

body. One by one, the other guardians circled the rock, blocking her view of everything except Micah who glared from the foot of the altar.

The head guardian leaned forward and licked her cleft from top to bottom and back up. His tongue darted in and out, circling her clit, working her into a frenzy. Neeve and the other consorts, began caressing the bodies of each guardian and stripping them of their robes. One garment after another fell to the ground, baring the body of the man beneath. Nude, muscled bodies and throbbing arousals were everywhere she looked. There had to be at least twenty men surrounding her. And Micah.

Two of the guardians knelt on either side of Elizabeth and began sucking her nipples, while Asher continued to torment her clit. Micah watched the proceedings, his eyes never leaving her face. The stimulation was too much and her womb contracted, spasming as her release washed over her.

Asher stood and began chanting again. The tempo of the drums changed, becoming more seductive, more sinuous.

Micah stepped closer, his expression intense.

"It's time for the anointing," Neeve whispered.

Now. Now, Micah would come to her and fill this gnawing emptiness.

Asher turned and pressed his hand against his friend's chest. "Not yet."

Chapter Ten

Not yet? Elizabeth whimpered. What did he mean not yet? Asher was going to kill her. She was going to die—all because she was being denied the one thing she needed. Micah.

Asher turned back to Elizabeth and Jenna pulled his robe from his body. He stood before her, fully erect and gorgeous. The firelight played off his muscled planes and the sight of him dampened her further but she still wanted Micah. Of course, if Micah were sharing, she'd take Asher, too.

She struggled against the magical bonds that bound her, wanting to touch him. To touch Micah. Asher stroked his thick erection as he watched her. Her gaze sought Micah. He stroked his arousal, too and a drop of moisture eased from the tip. Gods, she wanted him inside her.

Asher moved closer, tugging her gaze back to him. He dragged the tip of his arousal over her cleft, through the wet heat that gathered there. She whimpered as he brushed it across her clit. He stroked her with his erection until she was ready to scream for him to take her.

Finally, he stepped aside and another man moved to take his place. What the hell was going on? She stiffened and struggled again.

"Shhh," Neeve whispered. "They're anointing you. Blessing your body to ready it for a babe."

Elizabeth would have laughed if her nerves weren't stretched so taut. She was already with child. How much more ready could she get?

This man was shorter and stockier than Asher but not unattractive. He rubbed his thick member over Elizabeth, closing his eyes as if he wanted to sink inside her. Micah growled and the man moved on, quickly finding a willing consort and plunging himself into her mouth. The woman sucked him greedily.

As soon as he'd moved, another man took his place, stroking over Elizabeth's cleft, gliding through her wetness. His tip sunk slightly into her channel and she shuddered at the contact.

Micah grabbed him by the shoulder and hurled him to the ground. "Anoint her, priest, but her cunt is mine."

Under Micah's watchful glare the next man took his turn. Elizabeth groaned, feeling him quiver against her. One by one, the guardians dragged their swollen arousals through the moisture that poured from her desperate body as others continued to torment her breasts.

She was so close to coming but she didn't want that with these strangers. She wanted her mate inside her when she shattered but it felt so good to have all these men playing at the opening of her center.

"Micah," she called, barely able to form the word.

He met her gaze, soothing her with his eyes but when Willem's underling joined the gathering of men waiting to pay homage to her body, he ran toward him as if he'd attack. Several other guardians, including Asher, grabbed him by the arms and chest and held him back. He fought them but several more men tried to assist and managed to hold him down. He was trapped in a cage of their arms.

Elizabeth glanced at the man standing between her spread, bound legs. Micah thrashed, as Willem's underling had his turn. His touch chilled her body but the revulsion was quickly replaced by desire when the next man anointed her. She didn't want to be aroused but it couldn't be helped. The sensation of those smooth, hard erections gliding over her, made her body weep.

After the rest of the guardians had their turn, Joseph approached. She remembered the release she'd experienced in the temple. Joseph stroked his shaft a few times before anointing her with it. It was huge and thick, almost as big as Micah's. He looked between Asher and Micah as if seeking permission. Micah growled but Asher nodded and tilted his head toward her.

Without warning, Joseph dropped to his knees and buried his face between her legs. He groaned at he tasted her. His vocalization reverberated through her body, as his tongue dove in and out of her dripping hole. He slid his hands under her bottom and lifted her tighter to his lips. She couldn't hold back.

"Micah!" she cried out, coming in waves against Joseph's mouth.

Micah broke free of the men holding him as Elizabeth's orgasm crashed over her. For a moment, he was transfixed by her beauty. Eyes closed and damp lips parted, she screamed his name as she came. His name. Not Joseph's. Not Asher's. Despite all of the men bringing pleasure to her shuddering body tonight, he was the one she wanted. Satisfaction curled through him as he lurched toward Joseph.

The anointing is over, he thought toward Asher.

No. I still—

No, you don't. I am claiming my mate. Release her bonds.

Asher must have obeyed because Elizabeth lowered her arms. Panting with exertion, she reached toward Micah, her legs draped open and Joseph's head still buried between her thighs. Part of him, an infinitesimally small part, he admitted, liked the sight of another man pleasuring Elizabeth—knowing she still wanted him.

Grabbing the younger man's shoulder, he pulled him off her, replacing Joseph's mouth with his own. He could smell her sweet musk from where they'd held him back and he had to taste her. He had to replace the other man's touch with his own.

"Micah, please," she begged. "Take me."

He lifted his gaze to her storm-swept eyes. "Soon," he rumbled against her body.

"I need you inside me."

He thrust two fingers inside her grasping pussy. She squeezed them rhythmically, milking with her inner muscles. He couldn't wait to bury himself inside her tight heat.

"More," she moaned. "Please, Micah."

He added a third finger and latched onto her swollen bud with his lips, sucking hard. She grabbed his head, tangling her fingers in his hair and pulling him closer as she cried out her release, clenching his fingers so hard, he wasn't sure he'd ever get them out again. Her tight sheath was the most incredible place he'd ever been.

Standing, he trailed his hands along her writhing body. He was glad this damn ritual didn't involve anyone else penetrating her. He'd never let another man take her cunt. That was his. However, if it pleased her, perhaps he'd share her with Asher from time to time. He'd consider letting Asher breach her ass while he was buried inside her tight pussy. The thought nearly made him spill over her milky flesh.

The drumbeat pounded through his blood, urging him to take her. He stared down at his mate. The rock beneath her ass was drenched with her cream. Coming down atop her, he entered her quivering tightness in a single thrust.

"Yes-sss," she hissed as he seated himself to the hilt. She began spasming around him as soon as he breached her. He halted, afraid that if he moved right now, it would be over immediately.

He gazed at her but she wasn't content waiting for him to move. Grasping his ass, she tried to pull him forward and arched into him.

"Gods, leannan," he groaned. Her inexperienced enthusiasm drove his need higher. He let go, pounding into her slight frame, reveling in her whispered encouragement.

The sounds of sex permeated the forest. Gasping, groaning, the wet slap of bodies coming together. The sound of Elizabeth's breathless cries were far more arousing than the rest combined. She repeated his name like a prayer, her warm breath coasting across his cheek.

She arched into his body as if they could get closer. Shifting, she wrapped her legs around his waist, crossing her ankles at the small of his back. The new angle ground their pelvises together and created a near-unbearable friction.

Gods, he could stay buried inside her forever. He'd never felt anything that surpassed her glorious tightness.

The sensation of fingers trailing down his back startled him from his thoughts. Neeve and Asher stood on either side of the stone altar and caressed his back. Fingers entwined, they dragged their hands downward over his ass until they reached the spot where his cock plunged in and out of Elizabeth's pussy.

Together, they stroked his shaft and Elizabeth's tight little cunt. The added stimulation made it nearly impossible to hold back. His mate cried out each time they touched her. With each touch, each stroke, Asher intoned the words of some ancient

prayer but Micah had no idea what the other man said. Between Elizabeth milking his cock and Asher's and Neeve's talented fingers playing over his balls and shaft, it was a wonder he hadn't come yet. Asher stroked faster as the incantation increased in both tempo and volume. His fingers were dripping with Elizabeth's juices. The four of them were covered with her essence.

Asher grabbed Neeve and turned her, pushing her against Micah's back. Her small, firm breasts dug into the small of his back. She reached around and continued stroking his cock and Elizabeth's weeping cleft.

Though he couldn't see it, Micah knew the moment his friend had entered the other woman. She shuddered her pleasure against him, her small hands convulsing against him.

Asher placed his hands over his consort's, stroking in time to his thrusts. Soon they'd all caught the same rhythm and Micah moved, willingly pinned between the supple bodies of two beautiful women. One beautiful woman and one extraordinarily beautiful woman. If he didn't know better, he'd worry that he was falling in love with the little flame-haired wench. For a moment, he remembered the sight of her face as Joseph had shoved Elizabeth headlong into orgasm. It was too much. Micah couldn't hold back any longer and he shafted her even harder.

"Yes!" she screamed as she tightened her legs around him. He pushed up, planting his hands on either side of her head and extending his arms. He slammed into her again, practically lifting her with each thrust.

She shuddered and began to clench around his pulsing cock, grasping him so tightly it was difficult to move. With a cry, he arched into her, releasing his seed in hot, gushing spurts.

Asher and Neeve reached their peak along with them. It felt as if the entire earth opened up and spilled through the four of them. They were connected in ways Micah didn't understand. The heat and power of their combined release continued to pulse through them until it slowly ebbed and dissipated into the rock and earth itself.

* * * * *

Elizabeth woke and discovered she ached in places that had never hurt before. Making love on a huge slab of granite wasn't the most comfortable thing in the world. But she wasn't going to complain. She'd never felt anything like the rush of magical power like when Micah had come. It was as if the core energy of the earth had burst through the ground, spread through the rock and poured through them. Their orgasms were one. He'd experienced her waves of shattering pleasure and she'd had the sensation of hot rushes of fluid leaving her body. They were one, sharing far more than the physical. It had spread from them to Asher and Neeve. She'd felt their shock and release as powerfully as she'd felt her own.

Vaguely, she wondered if she'd been the only one to feel what had occurred. No. She knew from the expression of stunned wonder and confusion that Micah had felt it,

too. When he'd finally pulled out of her, the frenzied sounds of passion had died down. Couples stumbled from the grove and headed through deep night toward the keep. When she started to move, Micah rolled over and pulled her atop him. She still sprawled there now, resting her head on his massive chest, listening to the comforting sound of his heartbeat and his deep, even breaths. She didn't ever remember feeling more contented or at peace.

She shifted and looked around. Someone must have spread Micah's cloak over them while they slept.

Elizabeth needed desperately to relieve herself. Slipping from Micah's warm embrace, she darted deeper into the forest, stepping carefully around Asher's and Neeve's sleeping forms. She supposed she could use this moment of solitude to try to escape but where would she go with no provisions or even clothes?

The thought of leaving Micah made her chest ache and it hurt to breathe. She'd known the man for only a week and the idea of never seeing him again brought tears to her eyes. What was the matter with her? By the gods, was this what love felt like?

A cold knot twisted her stomach as she picked her way through the fallen branches to get back to the clearing. So intent on her new worries, she almost missed the bright splotch of red interrupting the uniform brown of the forest floor. Was it a fox sleeping in the open? That seemed unlikely but curiosity drew her in that direction. Squinting, she inched closer.

At first, her mind refused to make sense of the sight before her. As it became clearer, a scream rose in her throat and tore from her lips with no conscious thought directing it.

Jenna, beautiful Jenna, lay in a twisted heap. Her pale skin was tinged with blue and violet bruises marred her flesh. Elizabeth could discern handprints around the girl's throat and her eyes stared blankly at the canopy of branches that sheltered her.

"Elizabeth!"

Footsteps thundered toward her. Micah raced to her side, drawing her against his chest.

"What's wrong, leannan?"

Wordlessly, she stared at the shell of the vibrant, young woman whose laughter and playful antics had calmed Elizabeth's fear yesterday. Micah followed the direction of her gaze, his entire body tightening with rage.

"Asher!" he bellowed. "Asher!"

In a matter of moments, Asher, followed closely by Neeve, stumbled through the undergrowth to join them. A variety of emotions played across her friend's face as reality made it dreadful truth known.

Neeve sank to her knees beside the body. Tears streaming down her face, she clutched Jenna to her chest and rocked her back and forth.

The full magnitude of the situation hit Elizabeth and she pulled from Micah's grasp. He followed her but she waved him away. Falling to her knees, she vomited endlessly, though she had nothing in her stomach.

Had Jenna screamed for help? Had anyone heard her? What if she'd cried out? Whoever had done this could have been stopped. Elizabeth could have healed the damage to her body. But, now, there was nothing. Nothing Elizabeth could do that would change Jenna's fate. Another wave of nausea swelled and pitched.

Dimly, she became aware of a gentle hand in her hair and another rubbing circles on her back. She knew without looking, it was Micah who comforted her.

Reaching up, he picked several leaves from an overhanging branch and handed them to her. She wiped her mouth and tried to push to her feet. His steadying hands kept her from falling when her knees would have given out.

She glanced toward the other couple. Asher had wrapped Neeve in his embrace and the other woman clung to him with desperation true grief brings. She was glad Asher was comforting her. She and Maureen hadn't had anyone but each other when their mother had been murdered.

Neeve's tears covered Jenna's cold face. Micah's and Asher's gazes met over Neeve's head and Elizabeth knew they communicated wordlessly. The rage evident in both men's eyes would have terrified her had it been directed at her.

Against her will, her gaze returned again and again to the violent marks around Jenna's neck. Who would do something like this?

An image of Willem immediately surged into her mind. Just because she loathed him didn't mean he'd kill one of his own consorts. But the feeling wouldn't leave her. But why Jenna? Sweet, funny Jenna. What had she ever done to deserve this?

The answer was nothing, Elizabeth knew. Nothing the girl had ever done or said warranted this. Of course, nothing her mother had ever done deserved death either. One way or another, the sick bastard who did this was going to regret it.

"Who did this?" she whispered, finally finding her voice.

Asher raised his head and his gaze burned through her. "This spot has been magically cleansed. All traces of the killer have been wiped away."

It seemed to reason, the culprit could only be a guardian. Surely, someone else would have been noticed. Or perhaps not, she considered remembering the frenzied coupling that had taken place the night before. No. She was sure of it. Anyone else would have been removed. But why would the guardians kill off a potential vessel, one who might already be with child, for all they knew.

Neeve cleared her throat. "I noticed that Guardian Banyon never reached the grove. He was with us as we left the keep but he..." She broke off as fresh tears began. "He seemed to vanish into the trees as we walked."

His face drawn in a grim line, Asher spread his cloak next to Jenna's body. Reverently, he lifted her from the cold earth and laid her in the center of the fabric.

With tears continuing to stream down their faces, Neeve and Elizabeth knelt on either side of her and covered her with the fabric. Neeve began to pull the hood over her friend's head but stopped and peered at Elizabeth.

"I'd never noticed how similar you two looked."

Startled, Elizabeth glanced at Jenna. Her hair was a darker red than Jenna's bright copper curls but Neeve was right. Their facial features were amazingly similar. She supposed she'd never noticed since Jenna's cheerful vibrancy was such a contrast to her own quieter demeanor. It was terribly unsettling to realize the coincidence now.

Asher and Micah shared another wordless exchange and a sick feeling swirled through her stomach. Suddenly, their similarities didn't seem like an odd coincidence at all.

Micah knelt at her side and wrapped his arms around her.

"We'll find who did this."

Again, Willem's hateful face appeared in her mind.

"Willem," she heard herself whisper, unable to stop the sound from issuing forth.

Across from her, Neeve met Elizabeth's gaze, her deep brown eyes red-rimmed and swollen. Silently, she nodded.

"Did you see him with Jenna?" Asher asked gently.

Both women shook their heads.

"Then why do you think it was him?" Micah prodded. "Has he hurt you?" He glanced between Neeve and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth shook her head wordlessly.

Neeve cleared her throat and looked away from Jenna's body. "He hasn't hurt me but...but sometimes he's rough with the other girls."

Both men's expressions turned deadly. Asher turned Neeve to face him. "Why didn't any of you speak up?"

The girl shrugged and tried to look away. "He said he'd have us removed from the temple and sent to the soldiers' barracks. Or burned."

Asher pulled her against his chest and closed his eyes in what appeared to be pain. "Never," he whispered.

Micah laid his hand on his friend's shoulder, murmuring quietly. Had Asher lost someone to that brutal punishment too, or was he actually in love with Neeve?

She hoped she was wrong on both counts. Guardians weren't allowed to mate for life. She'd hate for them to be brokenhearted when they had to part when it was time for Neeve to leave the temple.

She glanced at Micah who continued looking between her face and Jenna's. What was he thinking? With shaking hands, she finished drawing the fabric over the dead girl's face. Somehow, she'd prove Willem did this. And he'd pay.

Micah drew Elizabeth into the shelter of his arms. "I promise you, this will not go unpunished."

The pain in his voice cracked her already aching heart. The only response she could make was to nod numbly against his chest.

Finally, he released her and lifted Jenna's lifeless body from the damp earth. The cloak fell away from her face and Elizabeth started. Jenna's dull, glassy eyes seemed to stare accusingly at her.

She shivered. This was her fault. She knew without a doubt that whoever murdered Jenna had wanted to kill her instead. The girl was simply a convenient substitute. The traces of magic might have been cleansed but she could still feel the murderous hate that clung to Jenna's skin like a coat of invisible grime.

Elizabeth knew what she'd have to do. She had to leave. It was more important than ever. She couldn't bear it if anyone else died because of her.

No one spoke during the trek back to the keep. The silence was broken only by Neeve's occasional muffled sob. Elizabeth needed to speak with her away from the prying eyes and ears of the others. She needed to discover the extent of Neeve's power before anyone else did. Like Asher. Or worse, the chancellor. If the hateful man knew they suspected him, neither of the women would be safe.

Chapter Eleven

Shivering from a bone-deep cold she couldn't shake, Elizabeth paced the floor of the chamber she shared with Micah. Wrapped in a blanket, she grew more frustrated with each circuit of the room. Upon returning to the keep, she'd had a vision. She'd been bound to a stake and flames licked at her feet. Micah lay unconscious on the ground a short distance away and the chancellor stood nearby with a torch while the fire spread to her skirts.

Elizabeth tried to push the terrifying images from her mind. She needed to talk to Neeve but the consorts had been confined to their chambers right after they'd discovered Jenna's body. This couldn't wait any longer, she needed to see her friend now.

Drawing the blanket tighter around her shoulders, she paused at the heavy oaken door and stood quietly for a moment just listening. The guards Micah had posted were still there murmuring to one another. Gripping one of the handles, she tugged at the door and inched it open. Both men turned and blocked her way, crossing their spears in front of her.

Ignoring the weaponry, she smiled. "I must speak with the consorts."

The shorter of the two men regarded her with a kind expression. "We're not to let you leave, milady. Overlord's orders."

"I'll only be gone a moment," she assured him.

"I'm sorry, milady, but the entire keep knows you've tried to run off at least twice. That won't happen while I'm on duty."

For a brief moment, she considered attempting to push past the guards and running but thought better of it. There had to be a better way. Feigning a calm she was far from feeling, she nodded and shut the door.

Pacing the room, something niggled the corners of her memory. Asher. He'd entered and exited the room several times in the last few days without using either set of doors. She dimly remembered the wall giving way the night Micah had first taken her. Ruthlessly, she pushed aside the image of her mate's heated gaze as he held himself rigid before he plunged inside her.

Closing her eyes, she tried to recall what had happened after Asher claimed the sheet she and Micah had lain on. He'd walked toward the fireplace and seemed to melt into the wall. At the time, if she had given it any thought, she would have assumed he'd used magic. But now that her head was somewhat clearer, she knew she would have felt the discharge of power but there had been nothing.

Hope raced through her like flame. There had to be another door. Walking to the fireplace, she studied the stonework on either side of the hearth. It was here. It had to be. With renewed determination, Elizabeth purposely pressed each stone, willing the release to give way. Finally, the hard granite depressed and the wall slid away into darkness, stone grating on stone. She whirled, glancing quickly at each set of doors, praying that the guards hadn't heard. No large, angry men burst into the room, so she assumed she was safe enough to gather her few meager belongings and leave.

Her heart lurched. She was running from Micah again. How would he feel when he discovered she'd gone? He'd be angry, that was a given. But it wasn't as though his heart would be broken. He wasn't in love with her. Asher could find him a more suitable mate.

Ropes of pain squeezed her heart at the thought. She imagined him taking another woman to their bed. It wasn't their bed, she supposed. It was his before she arrived at the keep and it would still be his after she left.

She slipped off the intricate silver armbands Micah had gifted her with and closed her fingers around the warm metal. She felt naked without the tangible link to him but it wasn't right to keep them. The jewelry was a sign of her station as his mate and she wasn't that. Not anymore.

Reluctantly, she placed them on the table near the hearth. For a horrible moment, she imagined Rhian as Micah's mate and she had to fight the urge to throw the bracelets into the flames. No matter who the guardians chose next, she couldn't let it influence her decision to go. She needed to leave now – while she had the chance.

Elizabeth lifted Micah's cloak from the chest at the end of the bed and settled it around her shoulders. She shivered under the weight of the fabric. She hadn't wanted to take anything that didn't belong to her but this early in spring, she'd need the extra warmth especially at night. A little voice reminded her that she took something far more precious from her mate. His child.

She remembered the night he'd promised her that they would rear their children together—sons and daughters alike. Of course, he could have simply told her that to keep peace between them for the time being. A hot rush of tears burned her eyes. She may not have known him for long but she knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't lie to her. Especially not about something so important.

She wiped her tears on the fabric, catching Micah's scent. Heady and male, it made her body clench with longing. His cloak would be all she'd have to comfort herself with in the long months to come.

Striding to the table near the fire, she opened the carved wooden box, shoved her few possessions into a small leather pouch and secured it at her waist. She glanced around and considered what else to bring with her.

Elizabeth glanced around their chamber and a lump rose in her throat. For all she fought Micah, she had come to care for him. A dull ache throbbed in her chest at the

thought of never seeing him again and tears welled in her eyes. How could she leave the man she loved?

No. She didn't love him. She liked him. When he wasn't being an overbearing brute. The memory of him looming over her as he poised to take her rose in her mind's eye. Sometimes she enjoyed his brutish ways, she admitted and wished for a moment that things could be different. What would their life have been like if he'd chosen her of his own free will – if she hadn't been foisted upon him like yet another distasteful duty?

Another thought occurred to her. If Collin hadn't vanished, she would have never had this time with Micah. She wouldn't be carrying his child right now. She also wouldn't be running for her life. She had no choice. She had to leave. She had the life of her unborn child to protect. No matter how much she'd miss Micah, her daughter had to come first.

Lifting the torch from the iron holder, she stepped into the dank, still air of the passageway. Holding the light aloft, she searched for the mechanism to close the secret door from the inside. The grating sound of stone scraping stone was even louder in the tunnel. Silently, she prayed that the guards hadn't heard. She needed more time to convince Neeve to leave with her and get safely away.

Taking a deep breath, she forged ahead into the looming darkness, hoping the tunnel wouldn't be full of twists and turns. The last thing she needed was to get lost in the caverns under the keep.

The tunnel sloped downward and the air turned slightly colder. She tightened Micah's cloak around her body, futilely wishing for the warmth and protection of his embrace. That would never happen again, she reminded herself.

The steady drip of water against rock was the only noise besides the soft scuffing of her shoes. She couldn't have been in the tunnel for more than a few minutes but it felt like she'd been walking for hours.

All at once, the tunnel turned sharply to the left and she heard the muffled sounds of many voices—some crying, some raised in anger. Before going any farther, she listened intently. She heard only women. Securing the torch in one of the many iron holders she'd passed, she inched closer and peered through an ornately carved wooden screen. Most of the view was blocked by heavy, velvet drapes but she could see Neeve shivering in a chair pulled close to the hearth.

Elizabeth had guessed correctly. The tunnel did lead from the master chambers to the consorts' rooms. In her shortsightedness, she realized she hadn't planned how to get Neeve's attention without alerting the rest of the women to her presence. Barely daring to breathe, she willed her friend to notice her, to lift her head and look toward the drapes.

Neeve, she thought. Please.

As if she'd heard, Neeve sat up straight and turned toward Elizabeth's hiding place. Elizabeth gestured to her, hoping Neeve could see her in the shadows.

Please, Neeve, I need to talk to you.

Neeve adjusted the blanket around her shoulders and rose from her seat by the fire. Walking slowly, as if without purpose, she made her way toward Elizabeth's hiding spot.

Her friend's eyes were red and swollen. She looked as though she'd been crying since they'd returned to the keep. Elizabeth didn't want to cause her more anguish but they had to talk while Micah and Asher were closeted with the other guardians and advisors.

Taking Neeve's hand, Elizabeth drew her to stand deep in the shadows of the tunnel. The young woman raised her gaze to meet Elizabeth's. Her face was drawn and pinched and her eyes hollow.

Now that she had Neeve here, Elizabeth wasn't sure how to begin. She swallowed hard. "I think you need to leave the keep."

Her eyes clouded over. "What? Why?"

"I know you have power," she whispered. Neeve opened her mouth but Elizabeth rushed on. "I can feel it. You have as much, if not more, than I do."

The other woman's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "You?"

Elizabeth nodded. "It's why I tried to leave."

Neeve sank to cold stone floor and Elizabeth followed her down.

"I thought I was the only one," the girl breathed.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I know there are more. I can sense it. And if the chancellor finds proof..." She couldn't finish the thought. Neeve knew the outcome as well as she did.

"What should we do?"

"I think we should leave," Elizabeth whispered. "As soon as possible."

Neeve's gaze darted wildly around the room. "Where will we go? The Cadeyrn are abducting all of the Maelgwn women they can find."

Elizabeth scowled as she retrieved the torch from the iron scone. She was so tired of women being used strictly for breeding stock. It was as if their only value lay in their wombs. She wanted more for her daughter and she wanted more for herself. Neeve should have more to her life than bearing children for others to rear. They all should.

"We'll be careful." They'd go to the caves. It's where she'd hoped to hide when she'd first run from Micah.

"Gather your belongings," she urged. "We need to leave while they're still convening."

Neeve stared at Elizabeth as if weighing her options. "Wait here," she whispered before silently slipping into the great room. She melted into the crowd of other women. Elizabeth watched as her friend discreetly gathered her belongings. Neeve lifted a tunic. Asher's tunic.

A pang of regret tightened Elizabeth's throat. Was she doing the right thing? Convincing Neeve to leave? It was clear she cared deeply for Asher and she knew he cared for her, too. No. This was the right thing. When Asher discovered Neeve's abilities, he'd be forced to kill her. This was the only thing to do. She was protecting them both.

The doors to the outer chamber opened suddenly and the scent of freshly cooked meat drifted over to Elizabeth. Her stomach growled, then lurched in panic. If the servants were delivering food to the consorts, they'd soon bring a meal to her chamber. They'd discover she was missing and alert Micah. They were running out of time.

Desperately, she willed Neeve to hurry. She peered through the screen again in time to see Neeve shove several helpings of food into the wad of cloth balled up in her arms. While the rest of the consorts began eating, Neeve darted around the heavy curtain.

"We have to hurry," Elizabeth whispered. "They're going to discover I'm gone as soon as the servants enter my chamber."

Neeve nodded and grabbed the torch from Elizabeth's hand, dousing it in a bucket of water.

"What are you doing? We need that."

With a grim smile Neeve thrust her bundle into Elizabeth's arms and put her hands together as if she were praying. When she drew them apart, a pale blue orb of light hovered in front of her. Turning on her heel, she headed down the passageway, leaving Elizabeth to catch up. Wordlessly, they crept toward freedom, stopping only when they realized they were behind the temple. Neeve doused the light immediately and they stopped frozen by the sound of angry words. Micah's, Asher's and Willem's voices rose above the rest.

Holding hands and breath, Elizabeth and Neeve inched past the temple area, carefully feeling their way in the dark. Once they were out of earshot of the angry men, Neeve created her light orb again. It hovered near her face, casting an eerie glow over her skin and the hewn rock.

"We're getting close to the end of the tunnel—I can sense it," she whispered. "But I'm not sure where it empties out."

Elizabeth hoped it would be full dark outside by the time they emerged but she had no idea if that hope was realistic. Since discovering Jenna's body, it was as if she existed in a place outside time, where the normal rules didn't apply.

As they trudged on, the air became fresher. And colder. Elizabeth shivered, wishing she had thought to take a blanket as well as Micah's cloak. The distant rhythm of waves on rock drifted toward them on the salty scent of sea air.

Since they still traveled downward, the tunnel must emerge near the shore. Fear slithered through her. What if they exited straight into a squadron of Cadeyrn raiders? They'd be trading one form of captivity for another but she wasn't foolish enough to

think that the Cadeyrn would treat her as well as Micah had. Of course, the Cadeyrn actually wanted women with magical gifts.

From the accounts of Maelgwn women who had escaped, they were treated worse than cattle, their children taken from them after birth. At least, she'd have the option of keeping her babe if she stayed with Micah. Of course, if he discovered her secret, her life would be forfeit as well as her child's.

The tunnel emptied into a cave and water crashed against the rocks on the shore. Stars speckled the sky at the mouth of the cavern as Elizabeth tried to remember what cycle the moon was in. Gripping Neeve's hand, she pulled her deeper into the shadows along the wall.

Staying close to the ground, Elizabeth peered out of the cave into the night. The shoreline was deserted and the only sound was the wash of water on rocks. She released the breath she hadn't realized she held.

Clouds scuttled across the stars and a memory caught her unaware. Her mother. She'd rocked Elizabeth when she couldn't sleep and told her stories about the night sky. Right before Elizabeth would drift off to sleep, she and her mother would wish on a star. She hadn't bothered making pointless wishes since her mother died.

Tonight, though, she almost considered it.

"Maybe we should stay here for the night," Neeve suggested.

Elizabeth shook her head. "It probably won't take them very long to figure out how we left the keep. We're better off walking as far as we can and sleeping during the day."

Neeve nodded and together, they fled into the night.

* * * * *

Micah scrubbed his hand across his eyes. Gods, he was tired. It was as if he'd lived an entire year since waking to the sound of Elizabeth's panicked scream.

When he'd burst into the clearing and saw the tangle of red hair and the pale broken body, the blood had frozen in his veins. It wasn't until she'd launched herself into his arms that he realized she hadn't been taken from him. The relief that overwhelmed him had brought him to his knees. For a moment, he worried that he'd crushed her. She'd only been with him for a week but the moment he'd thought she'd been taken from him—gods, he couldn't even complete that thought.

Now, as he listened to the assembled council of guardians and advisors, all he wanted was get back to her. He needed to reassure himself that she was all right. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Elizabeth's broken body in place of the consort's.

He shook away the image and tried to focus on the debate. They'd been discussing the situation for hours now. It was obvious that the murderer wasn't about to step forward and admit his crime. Further talk was simply an exercise in pointlessness.

But wasn't it interesting that Banyon was nowhere to be found? Micah had never known him to miss a council meeting. Neeve's observation about seeing him vanish

into the trees before the ritual niggled at him. He'd known Banyon since he'd been a child. He'd always had a sad, distracted air about him but Micah never would have thought the older man capable of that kind of random violence.

The fact that Banyon was missing hadn't gone unnoticed by Willem, either. He'd gone to great lengths to point out his absence, casting suspicion on his underling.

Micah had to consider the possibility. As much as he didn't want to believe Banyon capable of such an act, the truth was no one had seen him since the group had reached the clearing. In fact, he'd acted strangely since Micah had brought Elizabeth to the keep. He'd stared at her with sadness, his thoughts seemingly years away from the present.

Asher slammed his hand on the table, pulling Micah's attention back to the matter at hand. "I refuse to believe Banyon is responsible for something like this."

Willem shot to his feet. "You are a child. You would do well to heed your elders."

The entire room erupted into verbal chaos.

The guardian cleared his throat and leveled a piercing glare at each of his peers, finally stopping at Willem. "Until further notice, the consorts will be under constant guard."

Willem stood, his oily smile fixed to his face. "Those precautions seem a bit excessive. After all, this was likely an isolated event."

"Are you prepared to offer that placation as comfort to Jenna's parents?"

"It's foolish to frighten the villagers over what will likely amount to nothing."

"Nothing?" Asher's voice dropped to a deadly whisper. "She was murdered! How can you call that nothing?"

Willem's smile grew tight but it didn't waver. "She was one girl. We have plenty of other breeders."

Asher's expression turned deadly. "They're not just breeders."

Willem's smile slipped away. "They —"

"Enough!" Micah roared. "The order of protection stands. We will not risk any of Maelgwn's people needlessly."

Willem stepped toward him. "But —"

"I said, enough." He scanned the room, looking into each man's face. "I will not discuss this further." His gaze settled on Willem. Micah knew the bastard was responsible for Jenna's death. He just had to figure out how to prove it. Unfortunately, he wasn't going to solve that mystery right now — not without Banyon.

Right now, however, he needed to get back to Elizabeth. He needed feel her in his arms — to reassure himself that she was safe.

He swept the room with his gaze. "As soon as any new information comes to light, bring it to me at once."

Without another word, he turned and left the room. The trek to his and Elizabeth's chamber seemed to take years. The image of Jenna's broken body rose in his mind's eye. Her face shifted once again to Elizabeth's, a specter taunting him with lifeless gray eyes.

As he drew closer to the room, he knew something was wrong. He shouldered aside the guards posted in front of the doors and pushed them open. The room was as still as death.

"Elizabeth," he called.

He moved to the bed as he tried to convince himself that perhaps she'd fallen asleep. She must be exhausted. He knew he was.

Empty. Queasiness gripped his gut. Though he knew the results, he searched the room anyway. She was gone.

Cold fear gripped him. Had someone taken her? Willem was the first person who came to mind but he'd been present at the council the entire time. Banyon hadn't, though. Was he responsible for her absence?

Micah pulled open the doors to the antechamber. The guards posted there turned and looked at him in surprise.

"Milord?" one of them asked.

"Has anyone else been in these rooms?" he demanded.

"No, milord. Not since you left them. Is there a problem?"

Ignoring the question, he slammed the doors and turned back to the empty chamber. How had she gone? Asher suspected she might have some magical powers. Had she been able to render herself invisible and sneak past the guards? No, if she'd had that ability, surely she would have used it to evade him when he'd first chased her.

Shock sucker-punched him in the gut as he realized the direction of his thoughts. No. She couldn't have powers. That would mean...he shoved the thought aside as he scanned the room, searching for anything that might lead him to her.

He opened the ornately carved chest he'd given her to store her belongings in. The majority of the clothes were still there but the meager items she'd brought from home weren't.

She'd left him. Again.

He couldn't believe it. After everything they'd shared—after the ritual binding them together, she'd left him. The knowledge burned his chest and he swallowed past the rock in his throat.

When he found her—if he found her. The Cadeyrn raiders could find her first. They might have her already. The fear he'd felt earlier was a pale comparison to terror that gripped him now. He had to find her. To do that, he'd need Asher's help.

Micah headed toward the main doors but thought better of it and turned toward the hidden tunnel. A metallic glitter near the base of the opening caught his eye. Stooping, he tried to lift the silver pendant from the floor but it was caught in the door's mechanism. He peered more closely. Her mother's necklace.

The dying embers in the hearth roared to life along with his anger. The little wench had figured out how to access the passageway. With a sinking sensation, he remembered that Asher had used it the night Micah had brought Elizabeth to the keep and other times too. He stared at the ceiling, praying for patience. The only time he'd left her alone in the room, she'd taken advantage of it.

The fire sparked and sputtered with his frustration. He'd have to figure out how to better control his emotions or he'd likely burn down the keep.

Sighing, he lit a torch from the snapping flames and depressed the mechanism that released the door. With any luck, he'd find her wandering through the tunnels. But even as the door swung open and he pocketed the little crescent moon, he knew it wouldn't be that easy. Nothing concerning Elizabeth would ever be easy.

The door slid shut behind him as the darkness engulfed him. He could almost feel her presence here, as if part of her still lingered. If he could home in on the feeling, perhaps it wouldn't be so difficult to find her. But as quickly as it had suggested itself, the feeling slipped away like smoke in the wind.

His steps sure and quick, he traversed the passageway, bypassing the consorts' quarters to enter directly into the temple. Closing his eyes, Micah leaned against the doorway to await Asher's return.

Stilling his mind, he tried to focus on Elizabeth—to see what she saw. At first, the only thing he was aware of was his own racing heartbeat but as he stretched out his senses he became aware of other more distant impressions—the cold bite of wind against his cheeks and the icy spatter of rain soaking through his clothing. The burden of waterlogged fabric pulled at his neck as the rain weighed down his cloak. Though his eyes remained closed, he saw the river empty into the sea and rain wet trees. Feeling a tug on his arm, he turned his head. Neeve. Neeve was with Elizabeth.

"Shouldn't you be in your chambers comforting your mate?"

Micah's eyes flew open at Asher's weary tone. "She's gone," he replied, woodenly. "And Neeve has gone with her."

Asher's eyes glittered with sudden fury. "Those little fools! The Cadeyrn grow more daring with their raids. They could be captured at any time." He whirled on Micah. "Where are they?"

"Outside in the rain."

Asher grabbed him by the shoulders and stared into his eyes. "Use your connection to Elizabeth. See through her eyes."

"Don't you think I've tried that?" Micah shook off Asher's grip. "I can feel the freezing wind and rain soaking her skin."

It was as if his extremities had been exposed to the elements for hours. She was out in this miserable weather with only his cloak for protection. She was so delicate, so fragile, she might well freeze to death before he found her. The thought sent ice through his veins.

"The only landmarks I can see are the river and trees. They could be anywhere in Maelgwn. But no matter how quickly they're moving, they shouldn't have been able to leave our borders, yet."

"We need to move."

"I'll go."

"Not alone," Asher bit out. "Neeve is out there, too."

Micah nodded. He couldn't blame the other man. He wouldn't stay behind and let someone else search for Elizabeth. No matter how his friend would deny it, he was besotted with the young woman. Micah had overheard the other guardians grumbling about Asher never allowing anyone else to touch Neeve.

"Tell only those who must know of our absence but keep their flight to yourself. I don't want Willem catching wind of this."

Asher nodded. "We've had word of a Cadeyrn raiding party and we're going to scout it out."

"We'll meet in the stables."

Not bothering to wake the stable hands, Micah saddled his and Asher's horses and led them outside where his friend waited. Without speaking they mounted their horses and rode past the guards at the gate.

Micah turned his horse toward the seashore where the tunnel exited. While he was certain they were no longer in that area, he hoped they would be easier to track if he started at the beginning. Was it possible to look through Elizabeth's memory and see where the women had been, or was his connection to her bound to the present?

When they reached the site, Asher dismounted and studied the ground, looking for telltale signs of the direction they'd headed. Micah closed his eyes and tried to see this place as Elizabeth would have experienced it. He reached out with his mind to his mate but instead of seeing the rocky shore and wind-tossed waves, he saw torchlight glinting off sword blades.

Fear knotted his guts as a man's lust-twisted face filled his mind's eye. Elizabeth's panicked heartbeat pounded in his chest and he tasted her fear as if it were his own. His throat constricted as the man pressed his forearm across Elizabeth's neck.

Fight, Elizabeth! Fight him!

Forcing himself to concentrate, he scanned the area through her eyes, looking for any recognizable landmark. Jagged lightning cut through the night, illuminating Neeve's terrified face as she was dragged away from Elizabeth.

Fight! he screamed in his head.

His elbow twinged as she made contact with the warrior's stomach.

That's it, leannan. Fight him! Please.

His muscles burned with her struggles as she fought her attacker. She sank her teeth into the man's arm and Micah heard his bellow of rage. Pain exploded in the back

of his head. Before Elizabeth's world went black, he recognized the bend in the river near her father's house.

Kicking his horse into a run, he prayed for the first time in recent memory. *Please, gods, please let her be safe.* He needed her. With sickening clarity, he realized he loved her.

Elizabeth! he screamed to her in his mind but got no response. There was nothing but darkness.

Please don't let her be dead.

Fear knotted his gut. He tried to calm his racing heart and focus, calling out to her with his mind. Nothing. He had to get to her. He barely noticed the branches tearing at his skin. Nothing mattered but reaching her.

Chapter Twelve

Elizabeth woke to the press of a cool cloth on her forehead. She blinked, trying to adjust her vision to the dim surroundings. Water dripped in the distance and the air was chilly and dank as if she were underground or in a cave. Where was she? "Micah?" she croaked.

"Good, you're awake."

Elizabeth turned toward the sound of the woman's voice. An older woman, regal-looking despite her ragged brown robes, gazed kindly at her. Pushing her graying hair behind her ear, she offered Elizabeth a cup of cold water, a gentle smile creasing her weathered brown skin.

Elizabeth took it gratefully, studying the woman. Though she didn't recognize her, something about her seemed familiar. With a start, she realized the woman's eyes were the same color and shape as Micah's. Were they related? A knot of longing twisted her stomach. She missed him more than she cared to admit.

Instinctively, she laid her hand over her abdomen. She couldn't have stayed, not with everything at stake. Closing her eyes, she pushed the memories of Micah from her mind. She needed to focus on the here and now, not on the life she'd never have.

She breathed deeply and tried to calm her thoughts. With each inhalation, she felt the familiar shimmering of magic. In fact, now that she concentrated on it, it seemed that the power came from all around her, seeping into her body from the very earth.

Fear raced along her limbs. This was why she ran. She glanced rapidly around the area, half expecting Willem or his men to haul her to the stake.

"You're safe here," the woman soothed.

Elizabeth nodded absently, not really believing the declaration. She scanned the area for a means of escape. She needed to find Neeve and leave as quickly as possible. As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she noticed her friend lay unconscious, another woman tending to a wound on her neck.

The memories swirled back to her in a rush. The Cadeyrn raiding party ambushing her and Neeve, Micah screaming into her mind begging her to fight and the women warriors who'd seemed to melt from the trees. She'd seen one nock an arrow before the world went black.

Slowly, she pushed herself to a sitting position and crept toward Neeve. Her friend looked ghostly white against the dark blanket covering her.

"Will she be all right?" she asked the woman tending Neeve's wounds.

"With your help," she responded.

Panic turned her hands clammy and sent her heartbeat skittering. "I-I don't know what you mean."

"Enough," snapped the woman who had given her the water. "You are safe here." Her eyes softened. "We know of your power. It led us to you like a beacon." She gestured to Neeve. "We've been able to keep her comfortable but even the combined abilities of our healers are not enough to save her."

Elizabeth took a deep breath. She would not let Neeve die. Her shallow breathing was punctuated with a wet, gurgling sound. Listening to it, Elizabeth prayed she had the skill to save her.

She pushed off the blankets and moved to kneel by her friend and the woman who tended her. Three other women joined them, looking to Elizabeth for guidance. She tamped down the fear that coiled inside her whenever she attempted magic.

Closing her eyes, she took deep cleansing breaths and tried to calm her raging emotions. All sound and thought faded away as she slipped into a place of warmth and light. In her mind's eye, she saw Neeve lying before her, a jagged knife wound stretching from her neck over her collarbone and ending above her right breast.

Reaching out, Elizabeth clasped the hands of the women on either side of her. She sensed that they did the same, forming a circle around Neeve. Tiny pulses of energy jumped from hand to hand, increasing in speed until it sped around the circle. They all breathed in unison, letting the spark of magic connect them.

Beneath Elizabeth, the earth pulsed with energy, the slowly dripping water amplified it and she pulled it into her body. It settled like a warm hand over her heart. Above her she heard thousands of stars singing in the night sky. It was as if she could pull their life force from the heavens straight through her crown to gather with the earth energy centered in her heart. Like a cup overflowing, it rushed from her chest and spilled down her arms into her hands. As it raced around the circle, it gained in intensity, amplified by the power of each woman present.

When the power became too much to hold, Elizabeth leaned forward and placed their joined hands on Neeve, focusing the energy to the sucking wound in her chest. The blue-white light swirled through Neeve's body to center on her chest and neck. She stiffened under the influx of power but as a cloth absorbs water, it seeped into her flesh and she quieted.

With the rush of power gone, Elizabeth collapsed to the cave floor beside her friend. She was dimly aware of a shadowy figure spreading a blanket over her before exhaustion pulled shut her eyes.

She woke later to the clatter of pottery and the scent of stew. Her stomach growled as she pushed to a sitting position. With trepidation, she crept closer to Neeve and laid her hand on her forehead. She was cool to the touch and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. A fever combined with the jagged knife wound would have most likely been deadly.

Elizabeth drew aside the blanket that covered her friend. A bright pink scar replaced the oozing gash she expected to see. The blanket fell from her nerveless fingers. Never before had a healing been so rapid. It had to be the combined powers of the women who'd helped her. The ground seemed to pulse under her splayed hand as if to remind her of its presence. And the earth itself, she amended.

"You've saved your friend's life."

Elizabeth glanced across the small cook fire to see a young woman studying her. Elizabeth's heart lurched. She looked even more like Micah than the older woman had. Her features were far more delicate but the resemblance was clear. She had to be his sister. She certainly seemed to be the right age.

"I'm Tamara," she offered with a smile. She gestured to a heavyset woman to her right. "This is Anne." She pointed to a tall blonde standing nearby. "And this is Bryony."

Elizabeth smiled as the women greeted her. It was strange. These were the same women who had helped her heal Neeve and she was just now learning their names. She squinted at Bryony. If she remembered correctly, Bryony's arrow had freed her from her attacker.

"I'm Elizabeth."

Tamara's dark amber eyes widened. "Then it's true. You're the overlord's mate."

Panic flared in Elizabeth's stomach. Would she send her away? Try to convince her to return to the keep? Or worse, turn her over to the search parties that would likely be looking for her?

If Tamara noticed her worry, she gave no indication of it. "We'd heard he'd taken a mate."

Not knowing what else to say, Elizabeth nodded. "Where am I?" she asked, changing the subject.

The old woman approached and stood next to her. "That's not a question we can answer. There is too much danger surrounding you."

"I won't tell anyone," she heard her herself say.

"It doesn't matter. There are some who have the ability to pry into the minds of others."

With a shiver, she remembered the sensation of Asher's modulated voice slipping into her consciousness. Was that only yesterday?

"We're all safer this way," Tamara added as she pushed to her feet and Elizabeth noticed she was heavy with child. Tamara brought a steaming cup to the older woman. "Here, Grandmother."

Elizabeth met the old woman's wizened gaze. "You're Micah's grandmother," she said, knowing the truth of the statement before the words had left her mouth.

Sadness veiled her features. "Not anymore." She turned and walked deeper into the cavern.

Tamara shot Elizabeth a sympathetic glance as she followed her grandmother. Bryony scooted closer to Elizabeth as she stared after the departing women. When Elizabeth moved to follow, Bryony stopped her.

"I didn't mean..."

Bryony smiled sadly. "After Tamara was born, her father wanted to have her killed." The woman's eyes narrowed. "He said death was better for her than being reared by a peasant."

Elizabeth fisted her hands in her skirt as she tried to control her rage.

"Instead, Alinore—her grandmother—stole her from the keep and reared her. Tamara has never met her brothers and has no memory of her mother."

Micah would be thrilled to learn he had a sister and that his grandmother lived. Until he discovered their secrets. Then they would be in the same untenable position she was—waiting for someone to put a match to the kindling.

"Before Alinore left," Bryony continued, "she cursed her son-in-law. She vowed that if he had any more sons, they'd have no magic."

Elizabeth's heart sat like a rock in her chest. Certainly, the old overlord's pride had been injured but Micah was the real victim. He was the one who'd had to suffer the ridicule of other children as well as Willem and his father.

"She wanted to inhibit the overlord's powers but she wasn't strong enough."

Elizabeth swallowed past the lump that clogged her throat. So much of this heartache was caused by the bitterness of two narrow-minded old men. Her mother's death, Micah's lack of magic, Tamara's expulsion, all of the women forced to live in hiding, denying their gifts. The latter had been going on for far longer than Micah's father had been in power, she admitted to herself on a sigh. But his brutal reign had definitely made it worse.

Her soul ached for all of the pain that seemed to permeate every bit of this land. When her mother died, she thought she'd lost everything she had to lose. Then she'd met Micah and stupidly lost her heart. Now, she'd lost him.

She swallowed back tears. She would never again know the joy of being in his arms. She'd never see his smile, his passion-filled gaze, never hear him whisper her name. She needed to stop thinking about him. She needed to move on with her life.

Bryony brought her thoughts back to the present by handing her a bowl of stew. "Eat. You have to stay strong for your babe."

She glanced sharply at the other woman, startled.

"Alinore sensed it when we first brought you here," she said, answering Elizabeth's unasked question.

After everything Elizabeth had experienced during the last few hours, Alinore's knowledge shouldn't have surprised her but it did. It was difficult to get used to women using their abilities without fear of punishment. But more than that, someone else knew of the life she and Micah had created. Keeping it from him didn't seem so

ruthless when she was the only one that knew. Guilt assailed her again. Maybe she should have told him. No. It was better that she simply disappear and he never know the truth.

So distracted by her thoughts, she barely noticed when several others joined them at the fire. The sound of a man's voice pulled her from her introspection and she froze. Glancing up, she eyed the tall, lanky man who sat with his arm around Bryony.

"This is my mate, Ethan," she said.

"But..."

Ethan smiled warmly at Elizabeth. "Don't worry. You're safe here." Before she could respond, he continued. "There are many men who disagree with the edicts of the guardians. Some of us have left Maelgwn's society and others choose to remain, concealing their wives' and daughters' abilities.

Elizabeth took another bite of the hearty stew as she contemplated his words.

"We had hoped that things would change when Collin took the throne." Ethan shook his head, sadly. "Unfortunately, with the barrenness of his wives, it only got worse."

He pulled Bryony into the shelter of his body, dropping a soft kiss on her shoulder. Elizabeth missed Micah so much, her arms ached from the need to hold him.

Ethan cleared his throat. "When Willem executed Guardian Asher's sister —"

Elizabeth nearly dropped her bowl. "His sister?"

He nodded. "Collin's second mate. You didn't know?"

She shook her head.

"When that happened, we assumed that he and Micah would make the necessary changes but as yet, we've seen nothing that would indicate that will happen."

Was any of this information related to Micah's insistence that she hid magical abilities? Perhaps he really had wanted to protect her? Should she return to him? No. Even if he did feel badly about Asher's sister, he still had the Maelgwn law to uphold — and Willem to contend with if he didn't. With her belly full, questions and exhaustion overwhelmed her and she lay down next to Neeve to sleep.

* * * * *

Micah reined hard on his mount, bringing it to a halt in front of the bodies of two Caderyn raiders. He jumped to the ground to get a closer look. Three arrows protruded from one man's chest. He wasn't sure but from all appearances, this looked like the same man who had dragged Neeve away from Elizabeth.

He moved to the other corpse that lay facedown in the moldering leaves. Dropping to his haunches, Micah turned the man to his back. An arrow jutted from his heart, its shaft snapped off. A familiar tangle of red drew his attention. Snarled around the broken shank were long strands of Elizabeth's hair. He'd recognize it anywhere.

He pulled the silky pieces from the splintered wood and held them to his nose. Her hair smelled of wood smoke and sex—heather and Elizabeth. Gods, he needed to feel her in his arms. Safe from those marauding Caderyn bastards. Safe from Willem's machinations. Safe. From everything.

Where was she? It was clear that she and Neeve had escaped these cutthroats. But how? Had someone else taken them? Were they traversing this forest on their own? Clearly someone had rescued them—but to what end? His heart leaped into his throat and he fought the rising waves of panic.

Forcing himself to calm, he inspected the ground for footprints. The rain combined with last season's decaying leaves made tracking impossible. He rubbed Elizabeth's hair between his thumb and forefinger and tried to focus on feeling her presence.

Elizabeth! His silent cry echoed in his mind. He turned to Asher. His friend looked near ready to pound out his frustration on the nearest target.

"Can you sense anything?" Micah asked. "Anything at all?"

Asher clenched his fists. "Someone with strong magic has passed this way recently but I can't tell where they've gone. There is no clear-cut trail. It's as if the power has been smeared to hide their location or their path from here. Have you—"

"I can't feel her at all," Micah admitted, fighting despair. He would find her. He had to.

"Try again."

Closing his eyes, Micah willed the part of his essence that his mate unknowingly held to seek her energy. As he called her again, he felt her stir. With barely controlled excitement, he could tell she'd opened her eyes. The damp, dank wall of a cave came into view. She was alive. Relief weakened his knees and he leaned against the flanks of his horse. He had never been so happy to see granite in his entire life.

She glanced at Neeve who lay sleeping near a fire, curled up on the hard ground. He felt Elizabeth's fear, regret and determination as if it were his own. At the same time, an overwhelming sense of sadness and loss washed over him. He felt her tears, hot on his cheeks. She swiped at her face and whispered his name.

His heart constricted at the anguish in her voice. If she was so grief-stricken about leaving him, why had she gone in the first place? He felt the sensation of her small, soft hands as she buried her face in them and wept. His heart ached at the intensity of her sorrow.

Not bothering to wait for Asher, Micah wheeled his horse toward the forest and sped off. Asher would have to catch up. Micah needed to find his mate.

Cursing the May rains, he rode through the storm tossed forest and headed for the catacomb of caves that opened up across the river. Cadeyrn raiding parties frequently used the cave system as a base camp when conducting their raids. His hands tightened on the reins. What if Elizabeth and Neeve had stumbled upon those savages? They would have gone from one set of attackers to another. Cold fear chilled his blood.

He tried to stretch out his awareness toward her but he couldn't hone in on her presence like he'd been able to earlier. Riding as quickly as he was, he couldn't afford more distraction from the slick ground under the horse's feet and the branches that lashed and tore at his skin.

When he got his hands on her... He couldn't complete the thought, vacillating between paddling her ass and holding her so tightly her breath became his own. Perhaps he'd do both—as long as he didn't have to face her broken, lifeless body.

* * * * *

Elizabeth wiped the tears from her face. She'd heard Micah call her name. He'd woken her from a sound sleep, his voice echoing through her empty soul. Cold and stiff, she stumbled to her feet. Her entire body ached as if she'd slept on uneven rocks, which she supposed she had. She glanced at her friend who still slept peacefully near the fire.

Gently, Elizabeth stroked Neeve's brow, checking for fever. Thankfully, she remained cool to the touch. She stirred from sleep and slowly blinked. Elizabeth watched as the memories of the past day flooded back into Neeve's mind. She gasped and stiffened under Elizabeth's touch.

"It's all right," she soothed. "We're safe among friends."

Neeve pulled away the layers of blankets and felt for her wound.

"You healed me," she croaked, her voice rusty with disuse.

"I helped," Elizabeth admitted. Had Neeve been conscious during the healing and she hadn't known it?

Neeve tried to shake her head but winced, stopping the motion. "I can feel your energy—almost like a brand on my skin. Thank you," she whispered.

Elizabeth's eyes filled with tears. She had to tell Neeve—they were running out of time. "We have to separate. Micah is on his way here. I'm sure Asher is with him."

Neeve slowly pushed herself from the cave floor. "What? Why?"

"Micah senses my presence." She swallowed hard. "It doesn't matter where I go. He'll find me."

"I'm not leaving you," her friend said forcefully.

Elizabeth gently pushed her friend back to the ground. "You have to. Otherwise we'll both be dead."

Neeve shook her head, her eyes filled with tears.

Guilt washed over Elizabeth. She'd convinced her friend to leave. It would be her fault if they got caught. When they got caught. Micah wouldn't cease searching for her.

She pulled his cloak from her shoulders and settled it over Neeve's quivering form and embraced her friend. "I'm so sorry I dragged you into this. You should be back at the temple, safely asleep."

"There is no safety there. We were right to leave." She dragged the heavy cloth from her body and pushed it at Elizabeth. "If we leave now, we can stay ahead of the overlord and Asher."

Not missing the way Neeve's voice broke on Asher's name, Elizabeth shook her head. "It doesn't matter where I go. Micah will find me. And if he finds me, he'll find you. And the rest of the women. I can't be responsible for destroying this place. I won't let that happen."

She raised her hand to stop the protestations she knew were coming. "I should be safe with him for a while. I don't believe he'll kill me yet. I'm with child – his heir."

She knew she carried a girl but hopefully Micah wouldn't until she could figure out how to escape him permanently.

Neeve studied her silently then placed her hands on Elizabeth's still flat belly. A slight smile curved her lips but it didn't reach her eyes. "She will be strong like her mama."

Elizabeth choked back tears at the realization that her friend would likely never see the babe.

"We could both go back," the younger woman offered. "I don't want to leave you to face them alone."

"I'll be fine." Elizabeth embraced the woman who'd become more than a sister to her in very short time. "Keep the cloak. You're going to need it more than I will. Micah will be here soon."

Neeve clung to her but Elizabeth pulled away.

"It's the only way."

With tears in her eyes, Neeve nodded and lay back on the blanket.

Elizabeth raised a cup of cool water to her friend's lips and she drank deeply. She lowered her head to the ground and closed her eyes. Elizabeth smoothed her friend's hair out of her eyes as Tamara approached.

"How is she?" the other woman asked.

"She's doing well. There is no fever."

Tamara smiled. It was so like Micah's, Elizabeth felt it in her chest. She motioned for Elizabeth to rise and extended her hand. Elizabeth grasped it and rose to her feet.

"Grandmother wants to speak with you."

Silently, she followed Tamara, knowing what Alinore wanted to discuss. Though Micah supposedly had no magical ability, he'd managed to find her every time she left and now he was on his way here.

Her stomach twisted and she knew with certainty that no matter where she went, he'd be able to find her. If he found her, he'd find Neeve and the others. She couldn't let that happen. These people risked their lives to help her. She wouldn't betray them by leading their enemies to their door. Her breath caught in her throat. No matter what, Micah and his remaining family members were enemies. With her heart aching, she

wished she had the power to heal that great a wound but it was far too deep. The damage was permanent.

Elizabeth followed Tamara through the hewn rock corridor until it opened out into an underground pool. Alinore sat by the water's edge, staring into its glasslike surface.

Elizabeth turned and hugged Micah's sister – her friend, she amended. "Thank you for everything," she murmured.

Tamara hugged her fiercely in return, her rounded belly bumping Elizabeth's near flat one. "I hope our children will have a chance to know one another." When she pulled back there were tears shimmering in her dark eyes. "Be well."

Elizabeth nodded, tears forming in her own eyes. She watched as Tamara walked away before approaching Alinore. Quietly, Elizabeth sat down beside her and waited for her to speak.

When she didn't, Elizabeth summoned her courage. "I must leave here. Somehow, Micah senses my presence. Sooner or later, he'll find me." She picked at the hem of her dress, waiting for Alinore to respond.

"I never wanted to hurt the children," she finally murmured, sounding weary. "I tried to take his father's power but he was too strong." Pain slumped the old woman's shoulders. "So I harmed the next best thing – his son."

So much suffering. Elizabeth's heart ached. It didn't have to be this way.

Alinore whirled to face her, eyes sharp. "I couldn't bring myself to take the child's power completely. I just blocked it." She gazed intently at Elizabeth. "You're freeing his abilities."

"But I don't know how –"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. You are the catalyst." Alinore turned away from her and stared over the calm surface of the lake. "Events are unfolding as they must."

She pulled a pendant on a chain from the inside of her dress and lifted it over her head. Still warm from her body, she settled it around Elizabeth's neck.

Elizabeth lifted the ornament in her hand and studied it. A deep green gem set in a heavy silver setting glinted in the low light. She ran her thumb over an oak leaf carved in the stone.

Alinore smiled kindly at her. "This belonged to my mother. I'd like you to have it."

"But –"

She closed Elizabeth's hand around the pendant. "It's yours, now."

"Thank you. It's beautiful." She slid the pendant along the long silver chain. She'd never seen anything so lovely.

"I should leave now. I don't want him to find you. Or Neeve," she added. "Will you be safe?"

"If you stay with us? No. If you leave? Yes."

Nodding, Elizabeth rose and tucked the necklace into her bodice to keep it safe. "Will you take care of Neeve? I fear for her safety if she returns with me."

"She will be protected. It is her destiny that she come with us."

Were they leaving the caves? Before she could voice her question, Alinore straightened.

"This is merely a temporary camp for us. We will return to our home soon."

Elizabeth grasped her arm. "Aren't you worried they'll find you in the meantime?"

A gentle smile broke the sad lines of her face. "Not the way we travel."

Elizabeth wanted to ask what she meant but Alinore stood and she knew that she'd learned all that the older woman wanted her to know. She embraced the old woman.

As she pulled away, Alinore laid her hand over Elizabeth's abdomen. "Blessings on you and your daughter." Withdrawing her hand, she turned Elizabeth toward the back of the cavern and tied a soft cloth over her eyes. "I can't risk letting anyone search your memories."

Elizabeth nodded. She hated the helpless feeling the blindfold engendered but she would do whatever it took to keep harm from these people. Alinore took her arm and slowly turned her in a circle, then urged her forward. With a heavy heart, she trudged away from the place she'd felt safest since her mother died. They moved slowly over the rough terrain and her trepidation grew with each stumble and misstep.

Replaying Alinore's words in her mind, Elizabeth kept pace with the older woman. She cleared her throat. "Earlier, you said that events were unfolding as they must. Do you know what the future holds?"

"Not entirely. The danger you face is great but you and my...grandson..."

Tears welled behind Elizabeth's eyelids at the catch in the woman's voice.

"You and my grandson," Alinore said more strongly, "have a chance at a happiness my daughter never knew. But you will both need to be strong enough to grasp it and hold on."

She patted Elizabeth's arm. "Be wary of Willem. He will not rest until you're dead – or he is."

Elizabeth fought the shiver that threatened as she remembered Jenna's broken, bruised body. Cold air swirled around her ankles as they reached what must have been an entrance to the cave system.

She knew the moment they reached the open forest. Cold rain lashed at her, soaking her instantly but it felt so good to be in the open air again. She breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of wet earth and new growth.

"Seek assistance from your father," the old woman said, as she led her farther from the opening of the cave.

"I don't think he'll be any help. He seemed very pleased when Micah came to fetch me."

"He's not your father."

The world tilted and Elizabeth stumbled. Alinore caught her, hauling her to her feet. Prodding her along, they continued to make their way through the forest.

"Your mother fell in love with a temple guardian and they continued to meet long after your mother was married."

Elizabeth's head swam as everything she'd known to be true disintegrated. Had the man who'd reared her known she wasn't his? Was that the reason he'd been so cold?

Her eyes stung with unshed tears. No wonder her mother had always seemed sad. Unable to be with the man she loved—forced to live with another. She'd always said her true joys were her daughters. So many things made sense now.

"Who is my real father?"

"His name is Banyon."

With a sudden chill, Elizabeth remembered the man who stared at her at dinner. The one with the sad, familiar gray eyes.

Alinore halted abruptly. Slowly, she spun Elizabeth in several circles. When she stopped, she hugged Elizabeth tightly. "Be safe. Be brave. This will all soon come to an end."

Elizabeth nodded, unable to form the words. She lifted her hands to take off the blindfold but Alinore stopped her. "Count to twenty—then remove it."

Frustrated by the secrecy but understanding the need for it, she agreed.

"Follow the river to the east and he will find you."

It almost sounded like a warning. Perhaps it was. Micah was sure to be enraged by her latest escape. At least, her friend had gotten safely away.

Elizabeth squeezed the woman's hand. "Please give Neeve my love," she whispered.

"You already have." Elizabeth heard the smile in her voice. "You've kept her from death."

Keeping her promise, she kept her eyes closed and counted. When she reached the appointed number, she pulled the cloth from her eyes. As expected, there was no sign of Alinore. It was as if she'd dissolved into the trees.

Inky darkness shrouded the forest. She'd never felt so alone. Squaring her shoulders, she made her way to the sound of rushing water.

In the distance, she noticed the dim glow of a small campfire. She doubted Micah would stop to make a fire—which meant that it likely belonged to a Cadeyrn raiding party. So much for following the river.

Chapter Thirteen

Predawn light filtered through the branches and still Micah searched for Elizabeth. Soaked to the skin, his bones ached with the cold. He glanced at his companion. Asher fared no better. He looked as miserable as Micah felt.

"Take my horse." Asher tossed Micah the reins and dismounted. "The sky is lightening. I'm going to search from the air."

In the time it took Micah to shake the water from his eyes, Asher transformed into a hawk and took flight. The bird's shriek shattered the still morning air as it circled back in the direction they'd come from and disappeared from sight.

Sighing, he headed in the opposite direction. They needed to find the women and return to the keep as soon as possible. The gods alone knew what trouble Willem caused in his absence.

To the west, the snapping of twigs broke the quiet of dawn. Climbing from his horse, he listened as the noise grew nearer. Micah tied the reins of both mounts around a tree and moved toward the sound. As if conjured by his desperation, Elizabeth stumbled into view.

His chest constricted at the sight of her. Her sodden hair clung to her bruised face and her dress was muddied and torn. She'd never looked more beautiful to him.

Catching sight of him, she skidded to a stop. She sighed in obvious relief and a wobbly smile curved her lips as he walked toward her. He half expected her to bolt before he reached her but instead, she took a few hesitant steps toward him.

He moved more quickly, needing to hold her. It had been less than two days but he felt like he hadn't touched her for years.

She opened her mouth to speak but her words were cut short by an arm across her throat. Two Caderyn marauders stepped from the dense copse of trees to Elizabeth's side.

"Release her," Micah commanded.

"I don't think so," her captor growled. He adjusted his hold on her as she struggled. The man locked his arm around her chest and placed his other hand around her throat, effectively immobilizing her. "Leave, or I'll kill her."

Micah's jaw clenched at the sight of the thief's filthy hands on his mate. The man would have to die. He reached for his sword, only to remember he'd left it in the scabbard on his mount. How could he have done something so foolish? The gods damn him. The only weapon he carried on his person was his hunting knife. It would have to do. He pulled it from his belt. It was a comforting weight in his hand.

"You won't hurt her," Micah said, praying they wouldn't call his bluff. "You need our women."

"You must want her dead, since you're still moving," the man's companion threatened. The rising sun glinted off the dagger he held to Elizabeth's neck and Micah ceased moving.

"She is my mate," he said. "Release her and I'll allow you to leave this wood alive."

"You are in no position to bargain." The man who held her laughed. "Besides, you should never let a woman like this out of your sight."

"She's ours now," the other man added.

Elizabeth communicated silently with her eyes but Micah had no idea what she tried to convey. Her frustration was as palpable as his own. As soon as the blade drifted slightly from her skin, she slammed the back of her head into the face of the man who held her captive.

Torn between horror for her safety and the need to act quickly, Micah sprang forward and engaged the man with the weapon. He tried to ignore the gut-wrenching terror at the sounds of struggle coming from his mate. He'd do her no good if he got himself killed trying to rescue her.

Blade up, he circled the man wielding the dagger, drawing him away from Elizabeth. He didn't want a stray blow to injure her, nor did he want his opponent close enough to her to use her for leverage.

"Bitch!" her captor roared.

Micah spared a glance to find that she'd sunk her teeth deep into the man's arm and clawed at his thighs with her nails. Fear and pride battled within him at the sight of Elizabeth's ferocity. In a very short time, he'd learned that no matter what she'd never give up.

The cold sting of metal slicing through flesh brought his attention back to his adversary. He glanced at his shoulder where blood blossomed, bright against the light-colored fabric.

"Micah!" Elizabeth screamed.

Bringing his knife in a downward arc, Micah punctured his enemy's throat, barely aware of the hot rush of blood that gushed over his hand. Ignoring the watery gurgle as the man gasped his last breaths, he kicked the dagger out of reach and advanced on the man who dared touch his mate.

Her captor's eyes widened as they darted between his dying companion and his assailant. Without waiting for Micah to attack, he shoved Elizabeth away, hard into Micah's chest and ran.

Micah drew her into his arms, heedless of his injury. His wound could be tended later. Now, the only thing he needed was Elizabeth. He rested his cheek on the top of her head and just breathed. In all the turmoil of his life, she'd become his rock. He

smiled grimly. She'd also been the cause of much of the turbulence. But the fact remained she grounded him like no one else.

He buried his face in her hair and his fear drained away as he inhaled her scent. How could he have fallen in love with a woman hell-bent on leaving him?

"Are you all right, leannan?" he asked more gruffly than he'd intended.

She nodded and pulled back slightly. "I—"

The shriek of a hawk startled her and she fell silent as Asher transformed into his rightful form before her eyes.

"Where is Neeve?" he demanded, glancing around the trees.

Micah had been so relieved to see Elizabeth, he'd forgotten about the consort. He shifted guiltily, pulling his mate closer.

"Where is she?" he challenged again.

Elizabeth cleared her throat. "She's safe."

Asher's eyes turned hard. It had been a long time since he'd seen his friend so angry. Not since he discovered Willem had ordered his sister's execution.

"Where?" The barely controlled fury in his tone was unmistakable and Elizabeth shivered in Micah's arms.

"Just tell him where she is, leannan."

Her lip quivered slightly. "I can't."

"Search her mind," he ordered Micah.

He knew his friend was upset and he didn't blame him but Asher needed to get control of himself. At the moment, he looked like he was ready to throttle the information from Elizabeth.

"I can't tell you, because I don't know," she said and glanced at Asher. "We were unconscious when they brought us there."

"They?" He moved closer, menacing her. "Who is she with?"

Elizabeth trembled more fiercely. He wasn't sure if it was fear, cold or exhaustion. Whatever she felt, she refused to look away from Asher. "She's with friends."

"Who are they?" he roared. "Where are they?"

Micah laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I know you're upset—"

"I'm upset? You haven't seen upset." He turned back to Elizabeth. "Now, tell me the truth. Where is she?"

"Enough!" Micah shoved Asher away from Elizabeth. "You're frightening her."

She pulled from his embrace. "Stop it! Both of you. Please."

She took a deep breath as if weighing her words carefully. "I can't tell you because I don't know. Alinore blindfolded me when she led me out of the cave."

"Alinore?" Micah asked. She couldn't possibly mean his grandmother, could she? He met his friend's gaze and knew his thoughts were traveling the same path.

Elizabeth's eyes darted nervously from side to side. Clearly she hid something.

"She's a woman I met. She helped us after we were set upon by Caderyn warriors." She glanced at the corpse near their feet and looked quickly away.

"Were either of you hurt?"

She shifted again and he ground his teeth. Her constant evasion and downright lies chafed at him. Would it be so damn difficult for her to tell him the truth?

Her hand fluttered to her temple. "I got a bump on the head."

Gently, he lifted her hair from the side of her face, revealing an ugly bruise that seeped into her hairline and he thought he might be sick. The thought of someone doing violence to her twisted his gut.

She pulled away from him and met Asher's hardened gaze. "Neeve was cut. Badly. But...someone healed her. I promise you, she's in perfect health now."

"Take me to her."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I can't. I don't know where they are—or if they are still there."

"What direction did you come from?" he demanded.

She turned and pointed toward the east.

"Well, then. The cave shouldn't be that difficult to find. Start walking."

"Why wouldn't they be there any longer, leannan?" Micah asked, focusing on the latter part of her statement.

"It isn't their home. They were merely camped there for the time being." Crossing her arms over her chest, she leveled a stare at Asher. "Before you ask—no. I don't know where their permanent home is."

"This Alinore wouldn't tell you?" Micah asked.

Elizabeth met his gaze, her expression guarded. "She felt it was too dangerous to her people."

She felt he was too dangerous to her people. Perhaps it was his connection to Elizabeth that posed the danger. If he could find her, then he could find the others, too.

The truth hit him like a blow to the gut. She'd only come back to him to protect Neeve and the others. When he'd seen her tenuous smile as she'd approached he'd let himself think she'd returned because she'd wanted to be with him. The realization hurt far more than he could have imagined.

"A settlement we don't know about? That seems unlikely," Asher muttered distractedly as he pushed past Elizabeth, searching the direction from which she'd come. "Maelgwn is only so big."

Elizabeth moved to follow him but Micah lifted her onto the saddle of his horse. "You're exhausted."

He wanted to be angry with her but most of his rage had vanished with the relief of finding her alive and unharmed. Relatively unharmed, anyway. The anger that

remained was overshadowed by the regret and loss. Even so, he more than understood Asher's frustration at her refusal to give them any concrete information about the consort's whereabouts.

Asher whirled to glare at Elizabeth. "How many people are with her?"

"I-I don't know," she stammered.

"What else are you keeping from us?" Asher demanded, gripping her wrist.

She blanched but said nothing.

Micah pried Asher's fingers from her arm. "Leave her be. She's told us everything she knows."

His friend laughed, the sound cruel. "Yes, and she's been perfectly honest with you since you brought her to the keep. I can see why you'd trust her so implicitly."

Micah sighed as he watched Asher turn away to study the ground in an attempt to track Elizabeth's movements. Asher had a point. What was he doing? She'd done nothing but lie to him and fight him since he'd claimed her. He was a fool if he thought he could trust her now. The anger that had dissipated rushed back with a vengeance.

"If you know anything else, tell him."

She straightened in the saddle, bristling at his tone. "There is nothing."

How could he believe anything she said? In the end, did it really matter? She was simply a means to an end. His heir.

He glanced at her pale face. Deep purple crescents marred the flesh beneath her eyes and she still shivered. What if she caught a fever?

"I'm taking her back to keep." He tried to tell himself he worried over her health because he wanted the mother of his child healthy enough to care for the babe. He almost believed it. "Are you coming?" he called to Asher.

"Not while Neeve is still out here."

He led the horses to the patch of ground Asher examined. "Whether you find her or not, I need you back by sunrise tomorrow."

"Not without her."

Anger flared and Micah's hands tightened on the reins. "Remember your duty to Maelgwn. I cannot protect all of the consorts, find the person responsible for Jenna's death, keep the Caderyn at bay and Willem from the throne unaided."

Fury borne of desperation flashed through his friend's eyes. Asher glared at Elizabeth. "If something happens to Neeve, her death is on your head."

Micah felt Elizabeth's sharp intake of breath all the way to his gut. Fresh tears welled in her eyes. He knew Asher was upset but he needed to control himself.

"Leave her be," Micah ordered again. "Find your woman and return by sunrise." Without another word, he tossed Asher the reins of his horse and swung himself into the saddle behind his mate, pulling her close.

The tears she'd been holding at bay spilled hot over his hands, making rivulets through the drying blood that still stained them. He nudged his mount into a trot and rode toward the keep.

Her body shuddered with the sobs she tried to suppress. He wondered if she cried over worry for her friend or her loss of freedom. Despite her continual betrayals, he still fought the need to comfort her.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she shifted to look at him. "Can we stop by the river?"

"Do you plan to try to swim away from me this time?"

She flinched at his harsh tone. "No."

Frustration and exhaustion were getting the better of him. In truth, he'd like to wash the sticky, drying blood from his skin. He urged his mount through the trees to the banks of the rushing water.

Dismounting, he lifted Elizabeth from the horse's back and set her on her feet. She dropped to her knees and drank great gulps of water from her cupped hands while he scrubbed at his skin. When he straightened, he found her staring at him, her eyes wary.

"What happens now?" she asked.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "We return to the keep and you never attempt anything like this again."

Standing, she turned away as if dismissing him. Her continual disregard for her own safety rankled him.

"Do I need to chain you to my bed?" The memory of her bound and begging for him caught him unaware and his breath stalled in his throat.

She stalked toward him, color rising to her cheeks. "Does it really matter what I think? You'll do what ever you want with me anyway."

She was the most stubborn creature the gods had ever created. He gripped her shoulders, shaking her slightly. "How am I supposed to keep you safe when you insist on endangering yourself?"

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. You'd be better off with any other woman for a mate."

His hands tightened around her upper arms. The sight of that bastard holding his dagger to her neck would stay with him for the rest of his days. "By the gods, Elizabeth, you could have been killed."

"Why do you care?" she demanded.

"Damn it, leannan, why do you think I care what happens to you? I love you!" The words had spilled from him with no conscious thought but now that he'd admitted it, he couldn't call them back. Insensible or not, it was the truth.

Shock widened her eyes and she froze, an expression of distress etched on her features. By the gods, what had he expected? An avowal of the same? He was a fool.

He'd never been good enough for his father. Why had he thought he'd be good enough for her?

Tears spilled over her cheeks. His declaration made her cry? His arms dropped to his sides and he turned away.

Elizabeth laid her hand on his chest, stopping him. "I need to tell you something," she whispered, her voice rough with sorrow. She raised her glistening eyes to his. "I need to tell you why I ran away."

He crossed his arms over his chest and waited. Rather than speak, she sank to the ground and cupped her hands around a dried stalk of yarrow. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply and rhythmically. As he watched, the shriveled, brown fronds softened and expanded, turning a deep lustrous green. Pink flowers burst into bloom before his eyes.

Elizabeth sat back on her heels and waited. In awe, he dropped to his knees and reached toward the plant. The supple leaves and flowers bobbed at the touch of his finger. Plucking a leaf, he brought the greenery to his nose and sniffed. The sharp smell filled his nostrils. It wasn't an illusion.

Yarrow didn't bloom until mid-June at the earliest, yet here, during the first week of May it flowered brightly against the drab colors of early spring. She had done this. She had coaxed this plant back to life.

Asher had been right all along. She did have magic. And she'd lied to him about it. Yes, he'd suspected and even accused her of such but seeing the undeniable proof still shocked him beyond reason.

"This is why I ran," she whispered.

"What else can you do?" He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer. In his mind he heard the faraway echoes of his father and Willem berating his lack of magical abilities. And here was his mate with the gifts he'd been denied. It was almost laughable.

She met his gaze, holding it steadily. "I can heal. I healed Neeve."

"You're the one who saved her life?"

She watched him closely as if searching for something and he had the distinct feeling she hid yet another secret from him.

"Some of the other women helped me. We worked together."

"Show me." A plant was one thing but flesh and blood? Even as he had the thought, he remembered how quickly her wounds had healed the morning after he'd brought her to the keep.

Moving closer to him, she knelt in the moss near his feet. Without waiting for his leave, she lifted the saturated fabric from his shoulder and peered at the wound. The skin was ragged and torn but it didn't look—or feel terribly grave. She took several deep breaths.

Closing her eyes, she laid her palm over the cut. Her head fell back and her entire body seemed to vibrate with barely leashed power. Without warning, that power surged through her hand and into his shoulder where it settled—a heavy warmth, caressing the injured flesh.

Slowly, she lifted her hand from his body and the sensation dissipated like waves at low tide. Her small, blood-coated hand trembled and he caught her to him as she started to swoon.

He looked at his skin. An even pink scar replaced the gash.

Gathering water from the river, he cleaned her hand of his blood. As the stain washed away, stark terror roared through his veins. What would happen when Willem found out? Or Asher? Before, he would have trusted his friend to remain levelheaded no matter what—but with Neeve gone...

The solution was, of course, not to tell anyone. It was the only way he could be assured of keeping Elizabeth safe. He drew her into his arms as he rested against a tree trunk.

They sat quietly but he could almost hear the thoughts churning through her head and he wanted desperately to know what she was thinking. Never had he wished more for the gift of mind reading.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth when I questioned you before?" he asked.

Her back stiffened and she pushed away from him. "Why would I willingly sign my own death warrant?"

He pulled her flush against him. She wouldn't leave him this time. "Why tell me now?"

She held his gaze, her gray eyes clear. "I've realized that no matter where I go, you'll find me. Eventually, you'll have to kill me. Or have someone do it for you."

"No..."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and she continued as if she hadn't heard him. "Please, if you're going to do it now—do it quickly. Before the chancellor finds out."

He smoothed his hand over her hair. "I'm not going to have you put to death."

"If you let me go, I'll disappear. I promise. I'll go far away. Just tell everyone I'm dead." She raised her gaze to his. "Please, Micah."

The despair in her voice pulled at him. He found himself wanting to promise her that everything would be fine but he couldn't bring himself to pledge something he wasn't sure he could provide. There was no way he could make up for everything that had been taken away from her. Not now. Not ever.

For a brief moment, he realized he could give her the one thing she'd wanted all along—her freedom. He pushed the thought away. There was no way he could do that. Not while she could be carrying his heir.

His mind raced. Even if he could bear the thought of losing her, he couldn't let it happen. Losing his mate would only prove he was unfit to rule Maelgwn—just as Willem had always insisted.

"I can't, leannan."

She nodded, clearly resigned to her fate. "Please promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Promise me that you'll make my death quick. I don't want to suffer as my mother did."

An image of her mother writhing in flames rose in his memory. Without warning her face changed to Elizabeth's and fear roared through his veins. "I won't let it come to that," he vowed.

Wrapping her arms around her waist, she studied him, her lips pressed together.

Anger and hurt unfurled in his gut. She didn't believe him. She didn't believe he loved her. She didn't believe he'd protect her. He shoved away the pain. It was easier to be angry.

She gestured to his healed wound. "Are you going to tell Willem?"

Dropping his back, he stared at the canopy of pale, spring leaves. Gods, did she listen to nothing he said? He breathed deeply and lifted his head to meet her gaze. "No."

"What about Asher?"

He sighed. "I don't know." He'd like his friend's input on this situation but he'd wait to decide until Asher returned to the keep—hopefully with his woman in tow.

She clutched the front of his tunic, desperation clouding her eyes. "Please, don't. Don't tell him."

If Asher couldn't find Neeve and continued to blame Elizabeth for her disappearance, it could affect his judgment regarding her abilities. Even though they'd discussed changing the laws, Asher's station within Maelgwn society required that he follow the tenets of their civilization. And that meant her death.

Her fear of Asher finally made sense. Unfolding her clenched fingers from his shirt, he pinned her with his gaze. "Who else knows of your skills?"

"Only Neeve and the women I met."

Whether he had his friend's help or not, Micah wouldn't let anything happen to Elizabeth. Still holding her hand, he frowned. How many other women would he have to protect? "What about the other consorts? Neeve? Do they have powers? How many of you are there?"

She stared downward as if she'd developed a sudden interest in the ground. "Jenna had some low-level powers."

"And Neeve?"

Refusing to answer him directly, she posed her own question. “Will you be able to protect all of the women who possess magic?”

Her evasion was answer enough. Understanding the need to protect her friend, he smiled tightly. “With the new overlord...”

She glanced at him sharply, meeting his gaze and he read the misgiving there. He also saw the beginning of hope warring with her mistrust.

He scrubbed his hand over his face in frustration. He understood her hesitation. If he’d been through everything she had, he’d be cautious, too. He wanted to reassure her but he didn’t know how—especially since defying hundred of years of Maelgwn tradition might be the death of them all.

Chapter Fourteen

Elizabeth shifted on the bed, watching as Micah dismissed the servants who had delivered food and bathing water to their chamber. The silence that settled between them during the ride to the keep still hung heavy in the air. A spark of need coiled low in her belly at the play of muscles under his clothing as he tested the temperature of the water.

She didn't know what to think anymore. He'd said he'd loved her. Hadn't he? Perhaps she'd simply imagined that he'd said it because she wanted so badly for it to be true. She was a fool. The worst kind of fool. In love with a man who needed nothing more than her womb.

Still, he'd said he'd protect her and the others like her. Warmth blossomed in her heart. He would be risking much to do that. She had no illusions that the chancellor and the others would simply smile politely and accept the edict. Would Asher be willing to stand with them? Perhaps she should tell him the truth about Neeve. That might help to sway him to their cause.

Micah set a basin of warm water on the table next to the bed. The mattress dipped underneath his weight as he settled beside her. Leaning forward, he wet a cloth and squeezed the excess water from it. With a comforting touch, he dabbed at the bruised, bloodied wound on her temple. His gentleness brought tears to her eyes.

Guilt over everything she'd put him through assailed her and she couldn't meet his gaze. He lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. He stared at her as if he could see into her soul. Could he see her love for him?

She loved him. Her heart nearly burst with the need to tell him but she couldn't. Not yet. Possibly not at all. Not when the visions indicated she'd soon be dead. She refused to make her death more difficult for him than she sensed it would already be.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, her voice broken. And she was. She was sorry for causing him worry. Sorry for his family's pain. Sorry for everything.

Slipping his hand behind her neck, he pulled her forward. His eyes glowed with intense need and her body clenched with anticipation.

Slowly he drew closer, his lips hovering above hers. "Never run from me again," he murmured against her mouth before claiming it.

She shook her head, tears spilling over her cheeks dampening his face. Heedless of her weeping, she responded to his kiss, spearing her fingers through his hair and pressing herself to his chest.

"I need you," he groaned.

She pulled his stained tunic from his body. Rinsing the cloth he'd used on her head, she washed away the dried blood around the wound she'd healed. With a new sense of gratitude for her gifts, she pressed kisses along the healthy pink scar. He'd accepted her—accepted her abilities. Her worries that he'd hate her because of her skills had vanished. If they survived the coming days, perhaps they would have the chance at happiness Alinore predicted.

Laying her back against the bed, he covered her body with his own, sliding his hand over her hip to rest at her waist. His thumb brushed across her rib cage, sending shivers of delight coursing through her. It hadn't been more than a day or two but it seemed like forever since he'd touched her.

With greedy hands she clutched at his back, pulling him closer. He smelled of rain-wet earth and the slight tang of sweat and Micah. She'd never smelled anything better.

Opening gratefully beneath his insistent mouth, she welcomed him as he delved inside. With a groan she stroked his tongue with her own, reveling in the growl that sounded low in his throat.

As hard as she'd fought it, she realized this was where she wanted to be. Here with Micah. For the rest of her life. Joy and belonging spread through her at the realization.

She slid her hands over the bunching muscles of his back until she reached the waist of his braies. Tracing the line of the fabric, she followed it to the lacings in front and tugged at them.

He chuckled against her neck, the vibrations sending tremors through her body. "So eager, leannan?"

"It's been forever."

Raising an eyebrow, he pulled back. "Whose fault it that?"

Without waiting for an answer, he dragged her skirt up her body, crushing the delicate fabric in his hand. She tugged again at the laces of his breeches, loosening them enough to slip her hand inside to caress his erection.

"Gods, Elizabeth," he groaned, "how I've needed your touch."

Delighting in his pleasure, she cupped his balls, massaging them gently before gripping the root of his arousal and stroking upward. He pulled away from her and quickly rid himself of the last of his clothing. Gloriously nude, his erection jutted proudly from his body. As she watched it thickened further and rose to rest against the taut muscles of his belly.

Her body throbbed with liquid longing. She wanted the hot heavy length of him inside her—filling her. Her womb convulsed in needy anticipation and she surprised herself with the whimper that escaped. Unable to bear the wait any longer she stripped her dress from her body and threw it to the floor.

Micah stood transfixed, staring at her, and she squirmed under his perusal. No, he wasn't staring at her—he gaped at the necklace that dangled between her breasts. Why hadn't she remembered Alinore's gift earlier?

Stalking to the bed, he lifted the offending pendant and inspected it more closely. She shivered at his harshly drawn breath and narrowed gaze.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

Swallowing heavily, she tried to decide how to respond. The answer came to her with absolute certainty. They couldn't build any kind of a relationship if they didn't have honesty. They'd proved that time and time again. She had to tell him the truth.

She took a deep steadying breath. "Your grandmother."

He released the necklace and the ornament thumped almost painfully against her breastbone. Eyes wide, he appeared shaken. She grabbed his hand and tried to draw him down on the bed next to her. But he pulled away, taking all the warmth in the room with him.

"What?" he asked, his voice deadly quiet. The hearth fire across the room suddenly blazed dangerously high, startling her.

Both cold and exposed, she pulled the blankets over her body. Nervously wetting her lips, she tried to explain.

"When Neeve and I were attacked by the Caderyn raiders several women came to our rescue. We were brought to a cave and I met your grandmother, Alinore, there."

"My mother's mother," he said slowly. It wasn't a question. He caught her in his anguished gaze. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

She could see the shock in his eyes. He clearly hadn't made the connection when she'd mentioned the woman before. Instead of answering his question, she forged ahead. "I also met your sister."

"My..." He sank into a chair as if his legs would no longer hold him.

"She was born after Collin. Your father wanted to have her killed."

"Because she was female," he finished for her.

Elizabeth nodded. "Your grandmother took her from the keep and reared her among others who felt women shouldn't be punished for their natural abilities. You were born a few years later."

Micah looked as though he'd taken a sword blow to the stomach. He slumped in his chair but quickly straightened and spun to face her. "And you didn't tell me any of this while I might have been able to meet them?"

Bitter understanding flashed across his features. "You didn't tell me because you thought I would harm them."

Her silence was apparently all the answer he needed.

"I am not my father, leannan."

Unable to stop herself, she glanced at the chains that had bound her when she first came to the keep. Micah's skin flushed and he had the decency to appear chagrined.

"Your sister, Tamara, is expecting a child. Very soon you'll have a niece or nephew."

He scrubbed his hand over his face as if digesting all he'd heard. His lips twitched with the beginnings of a smile. "I have a sister." He spoke quietly, more to himself than her.

He looked at her, his expression vulnerable. Her heart ached at the sight of it.

"My father always told me I had no magic because my grandmother had cursed me," he murmured.

"She..." Elizabeth had to clear her throat to speak, "she didn't take your power. She just inhibited it."

His eyes narrowed. "What to you mean?"

"She said she couldn't bear to take it from you entirely so she simply blocked it."

Elizabeth swallowed hard, imagining how he'd suffered as a child at the hands of his father and Willem—not to mention the other boys.

For what seemed like years, he stood silently, before finally asking, "Is there anything else you're keeping from me?"

Unexpectedly chilled, she drew the blanket more tightly around herself.

Without regard for his nudity, he put his hands on his hips and studied her. "Well?"

She couldn't keep anything else from him. She just couldn't. "I'm with child. A girl."

His mouth opened and closed several times before he could finally gather himself to speak. "How long have you known?"

She sighed in relief. He was taking this far better than she'd anticipated. "Since before the joining ceremony."

His gaze narrowed and he prowled toward her. "You left me? Knowing you carried my child?"

Clearly, he wasn't taking the news as well as she'd thought. Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded.

"By all that's sacred, woman!" he thundered. "What were you thinking?" He leaned forward, bracing his hands on the foot end of the bed.

Anger trembled through her and she rose to her knees, letting the blanket fall away. "I thought I was saving my daughter's life."

For a moment, she thought she saw hurt flash through his eyes but just as quickly, it was gone. "I promised you that we would rear our children together."

"That was before you knew the truth about me." She crossed her arms over her chest, noticing too late the effect that position had on her breasts. She glanced at Micah. His erection grew thicker. Apparently, he'd noticed. Sinking to the mattress, she pulled the bedding over herself again and backed away toward the headboard.

He closed the distance between them, crawling toward her like a predatory animal. Her mouth went dry as she looked into his eyes. Deep brown and hungry they bored into hers as she watched his progression.

Liquid craving spiraled through her body as he came closer. His gaze grew fiercer with each movement. She swallowed tightly, captivated by his animallike grace. His skin glowed in the firelight and his muscles rippled as he continued to prowl toward her. Desire pulsed urgently through her veins at the thought of what was to come.

Kneeling in front of her, he stopped, his arms on either side of her body, effectively pinning her to the bed. Her breath stalled in her throat at his expression—tight and heavy with sensuality. Grabbing her calves, he yanked her toward him, spreading her legs wide and draping them over the top of his thighs. She caught her breath as the hair on his legs abraded the tender flesh of her inner thighs.

He took possession of her with his eyes, hotly perusing her body. Unlike the first time she'd been laid open to his gaze she didn't feel the need to cringe or cover herself. Instead, she let him look his fill, enjoying the way his breathing accelerated at the sight of her.

"What else?" he gritted out.

Confused, she propped herself up on her elbows. "I don't know what you mean."

Leaning forward, he pushed her back the mattress and pinned her wrists next to her shoulders. "What else haven't you told me?"

He lowered his head and his heated breath skated across her nipples, tightening them almost painfully. She wanted nothing more than for him to take them in his mouth but she fought to maintain focus on his question. What had he asked again?

"Tell me what other things you're keeping from me so I can fuck you—hard like we both need," he rasped.

She tried to think. Was there anything else she hadn't told him? Anything she'd learned while with his family?

He dragged his hair across her sensitized flesh, heightening her need.

"Micah," she groaned. "Please."

He swiped his tongue along the underside of her breast and she arched off the mattress, wanting more than that fleeting touch. She wanted him to consume her.

Skimming his mouth over her sternum, he kissed his way along her collarbone and up the side of her neck. "Tell me," he whispered in her ear. "Tell me, leannan, and I'll give you what we both want." He scraped his teeth over her earlobe and nipped slightly. "What we both need."

She trembled under his touch. "I can't think when you do this."

He lowered himself until his chest grazed her hardened nipples. His lips brushed her mouth, her eyelids, her temples, her cheeks. Resting in the cradle of her thighs, he transferred her wrists to one hand and restrained them above her head. He shoved his hair out of his face, watching her.

By the gods, she wanted him inside her. She rolled her hips against him. His erection brushed her damp, swollen vulva and she cried out.

He slid his hand between them and splayed his fingers across her belly. "Is there anything else, leannan?"

Elizabeth closed her eyes. It would be easier to think if she wasn't staring into his hungry, scalding gaze.

"My father," she gasped.

"What about him?" he coaxed.

"My real father is someone named Bannor. No. Banyon."

Micah stiffened but didn't speak.

She wondered about his response for only a moment before he enticed the thought away, nuzzling the spot where her neck and shoulder met. He lifted the pendant from where it had fallen to the pillow and traced her lips with the edge of the setting. Dragging the chain across her chest, he teased her.

"Is that it?" he asked.

She nodded.

"There's nothing else?" he asked, before drawing her nipple into his mouth and sucking hard.

She struggled, trying to pull her hands from his iron grasp. "Damn it, Micah. I've told you everything. Stop torturing me!"

She felt him smile against her breast before nipping at her flesh. Finally he released her hands and she buried them in his hair, tugging at him until his lips met hers. He tasted faintly of spice and something that was entirely Micah.

He stroked her skin, frenzied and desperate. Pleasure streaked through her at his fevered onslaught. Her fingers curled against the heated planes of his body as she fought to get still closer to him. Desire beat an urgent pulse through her body, centering in her womb, as his touch grew more frantic.

Slipping his hand between her thighs, he tested her readiness. With a less than gentle touch he spread her moisture, working several fingers in and out of her tight flesh.

His gaze was savage – almost feral in its intensity and his jaw clenched and released as if he fought against himself. "I can't wait any longer."

"Just take me," she groaned, closing her eyes. "Now!"

He gripped her hips hard and levered himself into position. "Look at me, Elizabeth."

Her eyes fluttered open. Trapped in his captivating stare, she rocked against him. It was all the invitation he needed. He surged forward. Her flesh gripped him as he seated himself to the hilt.

"Mine," he grated. The rough sensuality of his voice shimmered over her and his unrelenting heat filled her. Stretched her.

"Yours," she agreed.

Micah stared in wonder at the woman in his arms. She'd said it. Had she finally welcomed him into her heart as well as her body? Granted, it wasn't an admission of love but she accepted him. He took her lips again, flexing within her, reveling in the soft mewling cries she made as she returned his kiss.

He wanted to stay still—to enjoy this moment of union—but his body's urgings were too strong to ignore. Elizabeth's urgings were even harder to disregard. She dug her fingers into his buttocks and rocked against him, whispering, "Please, Micah. I need you."

Her eyes shone silver, smoldering with desire and frustration. By the gods, he loved her. He swallowed tightly. Was it truly love he felt? He'd never wanted a woman as desperately as he wanted Elizabeth. No matter how many times he had her it would never be enough.

He laved kisses over her throat and breasts, tasting as much of her sweet skin as he could reach before moving back to her lips. Holding her head still, he plundered her mouth, swallowing her cries of passion. Drugged by her taste he kissed her greedily unable to appease his raw lust for her.

The more he had her, the less control he had. He pulled away and stared at her, his breathing ragged and uneven.

She blinked at him, dazed and tried to pull him back for more.

His control ready to snap, a terrifying thought occurred to him. "Is it a spell?"

Her brow furrowed. "Is what a spell?"

Unable to stop his hand from moving any more than he could stop his heart from beating, he stroked her face.

"This need I have for you. Have you enchanted me?"

Despite her penchant for causing trouble, she was the most enthralling creature he'd ever know. He brushed his thumb over her cheekbone, watching as his hard, dark body melded with her pale, softer one.

"If it's a spell then it's been cast on me as well," she whispered.

It was all he needed to hear. He withdrew, shuddering as her body gripped him. Surging forward, he groaned as her internal muscles clenched and unclenched. She planted her feet on the bed and lifted herself into his next thrust.

Fighting for breath, he rocked against her. Unable to hold back, his thrusts deepened. Over and over he drove himself into her exquisite heat. She pulled at him with clawing desperation, her body dissolving into fierce tremors as she reached her peak. She milked his cock, drawing and releasing until he thought he'd come apart in her arms.

Still he filled her, stroking, burying himself again and again. The pleasure, so intense it bordered on pain, tightened his balls. She stiffened in his arms, sinking her teeth into his shoulder as her peak took her again.

Her quivers of response stoked his ravaging hunger and on a strangled curse he pumped mercilessly into her body. This time, he let himself fall with her. Release roared through his blood like an autumn windstorm. It was an almost brutal ripping agony – one he couldn't wait to repeat. Resting his forehead against hers, he tried to remember how to breathe.

Micah buried his face in Elizabeth's hair and breathed in her warm womanly scent. Lightly kissing his chest, she snuggled deeper into his embrace. Now that the shock of her revelation had worn off, he lifted the pendant from her chest and studied it more closely.

It was identical in design to his mother's ring. Easing away from Elizabeth's comforting warmth, he crawled out of bed.

"Come back to bed. It's cold without you."

"In a moment, leannan." He grinned. His entire life had been cold before she'd come into it.

Crossing the room, he lifted a clumsily engraved box from the mantel and blew the dust from the lid. He'd carved it for his mother the summer he'd turned ten. Before she'd died, she'd given it back to him with some of her dowry gifts. She'd insisted that he needed them for his own bride. For the first time he wondered if his mother had the gift of sight or, for that matter, any other magic. Perhaps she'd seen Elizabeth's unorthodox entrance into his life.

He glanced over his shoulder at the woman who'd very quickly become the center of his world. She grinned saucily from the nest of blankets in their bed. His mother would have loved her. Finding the item he looked for, he closed the box and crawled under the covers with Elizabeth.

She shrieked when he grabbed her, pulling her close. "You're freezing!"

He nuzzled her neck. "I know. Do your wifely duty and warm my body."

She snuggled closer, sharing her warmth. "What were you doing?"

"Finding something that belongs to you."

Her brows furrowed in apparent confusion. "What?"

He lifted her hand from his chest and slipped the carved emerald ring onto her finger. Lowering his head, he pressed soft kisses into the palm of her hand.

"It was my mother's. I want you to have it."

Her eyes filled with tears. She looked as if she wanted to speak. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck.

When she released him, he laid his head on her sweetly rounded stomach. "Someday, you can give it to our daughter."

She stroked her hand over his head. "You don't mind that we're having a girl first?"

Turning his head, he gazed into her eyes. "As long as she's not as stubborn as her mother."

She cuffed him across the back of his head. "Don't be such a beast!"

"You love me when I'm a beast."

Her eyes widened and she seemed startled. She opened her mouth to speak as a knock sounded on the door.

"Milord, there is news." The voice in the hall was urgent.

Sighing, Micah located his braies and put them on. It was just as well. He didn't want to hear Elizabeth tell him that she didn't love him. From the expression on her face, he was sure that was the message she was about to deliver.

Elizabeth watched as Micah crossed the room and unbarred the door as someone pounded on it again. Pulling the bedding snug around her body, she peered around the bedpost. Two guards flanked a sweaty, bedraggled man. Micah spared a glance over his shoulder, a warning in his eyes.

She smiled to reassure him even as guilt prodded her. He was afraid she'd run again if he left her alone for a moment. And why wouldn't he think that? She'd proved herself completely untrustworthy, time and time again. *I won't leave*, she mouthed. He nodded as if holding her to her promise and slipped out the door into the hallway.

Agitation made her restless. What news did the man bring? How would it affect Micah? Perhaps the news was about Neeve or Asher. Unable to sit idle, she slipped into her clothing and waited for her mate to return.

The ring on her finger glittered in the light of the candles. She studied it, turning her hand this way and that. She couldn't believe he'd gifted her with his mother's ring. Though he hadn't repeated it, she could almost believe he spoke the truth when he said he loved her.

As she watched the emerald sparkle, mist rolled through her mind, obscuring her vision. Images rose in her mind. The chancellor lighting her mother's pyre. Without warning, her mother's face shifted into her own. The pictures in her mind changed again. Now she saw Asher racing through the front gate with a body tied to the back of his horse. As he brought the animal to a halt, she realized the lifeless-looking body draped over the mount was Micah's. A scream tore from her throat.

"Elizabeth!"

Strong arms enfolded her and she breathed in Micah's familiar, comforting scent. With a gentle hand, he wiped away the tears she didn't realize she'd been crying.

"What is it, leannan?" His worry was almost palpable.

She glanced around the room. They were alone.

"I had a vision," she whispered.

He cupped her face in his big hands. "Whatever happens, I'll keep you safe."

"It's not me I'm worried about." There was no need to alarm him about her death. "I had a vision of you draped over the back of Asher's horse." Tears fell hot over her cheeks. "I think you were dead."

She threw her arms around his neck.

"I'm fine, leannan." He smoothed his hand over her hair. "I'm not going to die. Not until we're doddering old fools who can't see straight."

In spite of her fear, Elizabeth smiled at the idea he'd fashioned. She couldn't imagine him doddering at any age. And if he did happen to be, she knew she wouldn't be around to see it. Her smile faded and she hugged him more tightly.

She needed a distraction before she started sobbing again. "Who was the man at the door?"

He glanced quickly around the room as if worried someone would overhear and leaned so close his lips brushed her ear. "He brought a message from my brother."

She drew back in surprise.

Laying his finger over her mouth, he handed her the letter.

Carefully, she unfolded the parchment, taking care not to damage the wax seal that held the wolf of the Bleddyn family crest. She stared at the uneven handwriting. Though she was by no means an expert, thanks to her mother's insistence, she was able to read a little. The message was both short and cryptic.

I must speak with you. Meet me at noon. You know where.

Scratched underneath the words was a runic-looking symbol. Her gaze sought Micah's. "How can you be sure it's from Collin?" she whispered.

He tapped the odd-shaped symbol. "This is part of a language he and I created as children."

His eyes softened as distant memories flooded back. She laid her hand on his arm, her heart aching for all he'd lost. "Asher is the only other person who knew it."

She glanced at the message again. "Where does he want you to meet him?"

He kissed her forehead. "It's safer for you not to know."

"Are you going?" she asked, the worry creeping forward again.

"I have to. I need to find out if he's all right. And why he left."

"Why doesn't he simply come to the keep?" Hope surfaced at the idea.

Micah grimaced. "He abdicated. Abandoned his post. He'd be dead before he cleared the front gate."

She sighed, knowing he was right. The knowledge didn't quell the fear that trembled inside her. "I could go with you."

He pulled her into a fierce embrace. "The Caderyn filth grow more daring by the day. I will not risk you needlessly."

He drew back and stared at her as if something had just occurred to him.

Forcing a smile she didn't feel, she met his gaze. "I'll be here when you return."

He studied her with more than a little skepticism.

"I know I don't deserve your trust," she said, wishing it wasn't true. "But I promise you, I will be here."

Taking her hand, he lifted it to his face and pressed a soft kiss into her palm. "I want to believe you."

Pulling from his grasp, she reached for the iron cuff that lay forgotten and attempted to fasten it around her wrist, trying to muster a smile as she did so. "After everything I've put you through, I don't deserve your trust."

Holding her gaze, he took the manacle from her hand and let it fall to the floor and her heart leapt with hope for their future.

"I trust you."

Chapter Fifteen

Micah glanced over his shoulder as he left the keep. He thought he spotted Elizabeth watching from their chamber window. He had misgivings about leaving her but he refused to risk her safety. He would have had Asher to stay with her but he hadn't returned. Irritation simmered, his constant companion lately. It wasn't that he didn't sympathize with his friend's need to find his woman but the gods damn him. He needed the guardian here. Doing his job. They would speak on the matter as soon as Asher returned.

Micah focused on the matter at hand as he rode toward Pentre Ifan standing stones beyond the far border of the western forest. For years, he, Collin and Asher had met there when they'd needed to get away from his father and Willem. He wasn't surprised his brother had chosen that spot to meet. It was the only place they'd managed to keep secret.

Looking skyward, Micah checked the position of the sun. He had at least an hour to get there by the appointed time but he urged the horse forward anyway. It had been well over a year since he'd seen his brother and truth be told, he missed him. For so long, Collin had been the only member of his family he could count on. But now, perhaps, he had others.

He couldn't wait to tell his brother that they had a sister and that their grandmother lived. He wished his mother were still alive. How she'd love to know her daughter and see her mother again. He swallowed past the sudden lump that clogged his throat.

Pushing away the loss, he focused on the present. He wondered about Alinore. She'd given the necklace to Elizabeth but he was certain it was meant as a message for him as well. Perhaps she knew his mate would be reluctant about revealing her and Tamara's existence but she knew that he'd recognize it for what it was. A connection to his family.

A week ago, Asher had been his only family. Because of Elizabeth, his family had expanded to include a mate, a daughter, a sister and a grandmother. Without her, it was doubtful he'd have any of these things. Hopefully, in time, she'd come to care for him – to love him.

He shook his head. What a besotted fool he'd become. Collin would be howling with laughter if he could see him now. Of course, if his brother met Elizabeth, he might better understand Micah's predicament.

But would Collin understand the changes he intended to make? Hell, he didn't even know how he planned to broach the subject. Of course, it wasn't as though his opinion mattered in the greater scheme of things. Collin had abdicated. As far as Maelgwn law was concerned, he was a traitor. His life was forfeit. Or, perhaps, that

would be another law Micah set out to change. He didn't plan to give ruling status back to his brother but he could at least spare his life.

The stones of Pentre Ifan loomed on the horizon and he urged his mount faster. The sooner he discovered what Collin wanted to tell him, the sooner he could return to Elizabeth.

Reaching the formation, he dismounted. As he did, the hair on the back of his neck rose in warning and an arrow whistled past his head. Ambush.

Gripping the hilt of his sword, he pulled it from the saddle scabbard as he turned toward the direction of the attack.

Three Caderyn warriors rushed him and a fourth released a barrage of arrows. As he dodged the salvo and blades, he noticed four horses tied to trees at the edge of the forest. They'd clearly been lying in wait for him.

In a rush of startling clarity he realized that any secrets he thought he had as a child hadn't been secrets at all. He knew of only one person who would lie down with the enemy in order to assassinate his leader. When he returned, Willem was dead. As he engaged the man closest to him, a paralyzing thought struck him. What did the bastard have planned for Elizabeth?

With a bellow of rage, he ran his sword through the belly of his opponent. As he withdrew the blade, another man drove a dagger into his back. White-hot pain jolted through his system and he nearly lost his grip on the hilt. Only the image of Elizabeth's worry-filled eyes kept him from dropping to his knees. He would not leave her alone.

* * * * *

The sun had reached its zenith some time ago. How long would Micah be gone? Elizabeth wouldn't rest until he was safely back in her arms. She couldn't shake the dread that something would happen to him while he was away. No matter how many times she reminded herself of his superior strength and fighting skills, the fear crept back.

As she paced the length of their chamber, she caught sight of the manacle laying forgotten on the floor. Warmth blossomed in her heart. He trusted her. Even though she worried about what the chancellor might attempt while Micah was gone, she wouldn't do anything to betray that trust.

She wanted so badly to talk to Neeve. Would she ever see her friend again? Peering out the window, she wondered if Asher had found her or if he'd ignored Micah's order to return like she suspected he did. She sighed. More importantly, what would be his response to the changes Micah promised to make? And how would he feel when he discovered the truth about Neeve?

Elizabeth quickly grew tired of pacing their chamber. She had too many questions that needed answers. While Micah was away, she was going to get some of those answers from her father. Her real father.

With the help of the young guardian, Joseph, Banyon was relatively easy to find. In fact, he sat at his table as if he'd been expecting her. She studied him as Joseph quietly left the room. His once blond hair was more silver than anything else and his shoulders slumped as if he carried several lifetimes of pain.

He watched her with those sad gray eyes that matched hers. Now that she had his undivided attention, she wasn't sure how to begin. He solved that problem by pouring two goblets of wine and motioning her to take the chair opposite him. Gratefully, she sank into the chair. She hadn't realized that her legs shook so intensely.

"I'd hoped you'd seek me out." His low, modulated voice soothed her strained nerves.

"You know, then?"

He smiled grimly. "It's why I didn't attend the joining ceremony. There are some things a father doesn't need to know about his child."

"Why didn't you marry my mother?" she blurted out.

His gaze grew misty and he stared into the distance. She knew he didn't see the wall he stared at. They sat in silence until she considered shaking the answer from him.

"You're very much like her, you know," he said quietly.

She glanced away, not wanting him to see the tears that burned her eyes. "I have so few memories of her."

"She always jumped into every situation feet first." He reached across the table and took Elizabeth's hands in his own. "I didn't marry her because guardians aren't allowed to wed." He cleared his throat before continuing. "I allowed my vocation to be more important than my heart."

He released her hands and rose to his feet. "I loved your mother. But I loved my position here at the keep more." He turned away from her as if he couldn't bear to look at her. "I realized too late that she was worth far more than a pointless title and position."

Circling the perimeter of the room, he rubbed his hand across his eyes. "She deserved far better than me."

Bitterness choked Elizabeth. "She didn't get it."

He slumped into the chair he'd vacated moments before, looking like he'd aged several years in the last few minutes.

"You and your sister were her greatest joys."

She dashed at the tears that sprang to her eyes. "And she was ours."

"I'm so sorry. I know I should have done more." He looked as if he might be sick.

"What do you mean?"

Judging by the expression on his face, she knew she wouldn't like his answer. Dropping his head back, he stared at the ceiling. "I didn't try to stop her execution. Out of fear for myself, I let her die."

Tears streamed from the corners of his eyes but she felt no pity. Instead, her rage consumed her. "If you had spoken for her could you have saved her?" she demanded in a shrill voice she barely recognized.

He met her gaze, looking older and weaker than ever and shook his head. "They would have killed us both. I was a coward."

Elizabeth pushed away from the table. She couldn't remain in such close proximity to him. She understood that any protest he made would have been pointless but she didn't care.

"Believe me, daughter, if I had it to do over again, I would."

"I am not your daughter." She jumped to her feet, heedless of the chair that fell to the floor. "I have no father."

Disregarding his pained blanched features, she turned and fled.

"Elizabeth, wait!"

Tears clouding her vision, she ran blindly. She didn't care where she ended up. It just needed to be far away from Banyon.

Dodging soldiers and servants, she dashed through the great hall. She ran until she reached the outer bailey. Slumping against the wall, she tried to catch her breath. As if the gods had conspired against her, she realized precisely where she was—the very spot her mother had been executed.

She pushed away the horror-filled memories and tried to behave in a calm manner even though she knew she'd drawn the attention of every guardian she'd passed. Now they watched her, talking among themselves.

Joseph broke away from a group of men and approached her. "Are you well, milady?"

No, she wasn't even close to that state. Instead of speaking the truth, she smiled and hoped it looked believable. "I just had a bit of a fright but I'm fine now."

He didn't look convinced. She didn't blame him.

Movement beyond him drew her attention. The gods damn it. Willem headed toward her. She turned back to Joseph.

"Actually, I'm feeling a bit faint. Would you escort me back to my chamber?"

"Of course, milady."

As they turned to leave, the chancellor grabbed her upper arm and spun her to face him.

"Is there a problem?" she asked icily.

Instead of releasing her, he squeezed tighter. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

She tried to free herself from his punishing grip but he was relentless.

Joseph cleared his throat. "I believe you're hurting her, chancellor."

Willem gave no response other than to smile malevolently.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Banyon's approach. Could this situation become more complicated?

For several endless moments they all stared at one another until Willem finally asked, "Has your mate returned from visiting his traitorous brother?"

Since he'd abdicated, Collin would have had no reason to contact the chancellor—he would have been killed. With sickening clarity she knew the message had been a hoax. She had to find Micah. Now. "Release me," she demanded.

"Let her go," Banyon added.

She didn't have time to register her surprise at his protective act. The sound of hooves pounding wildly across the hard-packed dirt demanded everyone's attention. Elizabeth used the chancellor's momentary distraction to wrench free from him.

Asher reined in on his mount and brought it to a shuddering halt in front of Elizabeth. As the beast danced to the side, she saw the body lashed across the back of his horse. Elizabeth's heart lurched in her chest. Micah.

She was at his side before she realized she'd moved. His arms hung limply over the horse's rear flank. Dropping to her knees, she lifted his head in her hands. Gods, his skin was so damp and cold. He was dying. She could feel his spirit begin to loosen from its mooring.

The chancellor circled the area and watched her with an anticipatory gleam, waiting to strike. As Micah's soul started to slip further from his body she realized that Willem was about to get the chance he'd been waiting for. She didn't have the luxury of trying to heal Micah in private.

Fear twisted her stomach. If she didn't try, he'd die. If she did, she'd die. The chancellor wouldn't have any compunction about killing her. But it wasn't as if she had a choice. The thought of letting Micah die without trying to do something made her blood run cold. She wouldn't do what her father had done. She wouldn't sacrifice her love for her life.

"Lay him on the ground," she directed Asher.

He and Joseph lifted Micah from the horse and laid him at Elizabeth's knees.

"Leannan," Micah groaned.

She swallowed past her tears. "Hush now. You need to rest."

Bone-deep fear shook her. An arrow protruded from his shoulder. A ragged gash shredded his stomach and numerous sword slices covered his arms. These wounds were far worse than the one she'd healed in the forest. And when she'd saved Neeve, she'd had the help of other healers. She wasn't sure if she was strong enough to do this on her own. However, she didn't have a choice.

Taking Micah's knife from its sheath, she sliced open his shirt and inspected the arrow wound. She couldn't attempt any healing until the head of the arrow was removed. She glanced at Asher. "Hold him down."

As soon as he pinned Micah to the ground, she cut into his shoulder. His blood spilled hot and heavy across her fingers, preventing her from seeing the wound. Quickly, she tore the hem from her skirt and sopped up as much of the blood as she could. Micah gritted his teeth as she dug out the barb that had lodged in his body.

His eyes rolled back into his skull and his breath rattled in his chest. Suddenly, he gasped and fell silent. Panicking, she dropped the weapon to the ground. She leaned over him, listening for any sign of life. Nothing.

"Micah!" She shook him violently.

Heedless of the blood, she laid her head against his heart. There was nothing. No! He couldn't be dead. He just couldn't be. She loved him.

Tears streaming down her face, she pounded on his chest. "You can't leave me, damn you! I need you!"

The chancellor's shadow loomed over her. "He's dead, girl. Leave him be."

She whirled on him. "This is your fault," she screamed. "You killed him!"

Chapter Sixteen

Willem pulled on Elizabeth's arm, trying to drag her from Micah's body. She yanked from the chancellor's grasp and landed hard on Micah's chest.

Asher shoved the other man away from her. "Leave her alone."

Micah's body spasmed. He took a sudden, gasping breath and coughed up blood. He was alive! She hadn't lost him. She still had a chance to save him. Tears of gratitude clogged her throat. She wouldn't wait any longer.

Closing her eyes, she tried to gather her power. As if from a great distance, she heard Willem demanding that she stop but she ignored him and focused on her mate. She had to save him. She had to.

Closing her eyes, she drew energy from both the heavens and the earth. It gathered around her heart, a pulsing, living entity within. She prayed it would be enough. When the power grew so great she couldn't contain it any longer, she laid her hands over the gaping wound in Micah's stomach. The energy flowed from her hands like rushing water and he jerked violently under her touch.

His body drank in the magic like dry dirt absorbed rain. The shallower wounds closed before her eyes. It was working. Even the deep wounds began to knit together and his breathing became deeper and more even. Dimly, she registered the collective gasp that sounded all around her.

When she'd released the last of the stored energy she slumped to the ground at his side. Slowly, his eyes opened and he stared at her. "You saved me," he croaked.

Despite her exhaustion, a smile tugged at her lips. "Of course I did. I love you."

She didn't miss the surprise in his expression. Leaning forward, she summoned enough strength to press a soft kiss to his mouth. "I love you," she repeated as harsh hands dragged her from the ground and chaos erupted around them.

Healing Micah had taken nearly every bit of strength she possessed but still she tried to fight against the man holding her captive. She glanced around, trying to see who'd seized her. Willem's favorite minion grinned evilly at her. Somehow, she found the strength to continue struggling.

Banyon rushed toward them, his sword drawn. "Release my daughter!"

His announcement surprised her captor and he loosened his grip on her enough that she was able to plant her elbow in his stomach. She slipped away as he straightened and Banyon laid his sword blade along the other man's neck, backing him against the wall of the keep.

Elizabeth glanced at Micah who tried to struggle to his feet. Asher rushed to his side to help. The gods damn it. Micah needed to be resting after what he'd been

through. She turned toward Banyon in time to see Willem plunging his dagger into his back and twisting violently. Her scream of warning came too late.

Willem stepped over his fellow guardian's crumpled body and reached for Elizabeth. In horror, she darted to Banyon's side, fearing he was already dead. She rolled him to his back and his sightless eyes stared skyward. Laying her hand on his chest, she felt for a heartbeat. There was nothing.

Willem's apprentice caught her and shoved her at his master. Willem twisted her arm behind her back and held his blade, still warm with her father's blood, to her throat.

"Let her go," Micah warned.

"You know as well as I that she's broken the sacred law of Maelgwn. She must be put to death."

"You will not kill my mate." Micah held Elizabeth's gaze. "I forbid it."

The courtyard became more crowded as people from every part of the keep gathered to investigate the growing commotion.

"You are not in your right mind," Willem declared. He turned toward the gathered crowd and addressed them. "She has bewitched our overlord. She must be executed!"

Many in the crowd yelled their support and Elizabeth's heart sank. Even if they survived this and Micah changed the policy, they might not have the support of their people.

"I am not bewitched." Micah shook off Asher's assistance and limped slowly toward her. He wasn't well enough to attempt rescuing her. He was still too weak after his ordeal. The ordeal that Willem had caused. Her rage surfaced again and she struggled against her captor. Her struggles died when he pressed the dagger more tightly to her neck.

"Your overlord has spoken, Willem," Asher said as he approached. "Let the girl go."

The chancellor nodded toward Micah and Asher. "For harboring a criminal against the crown, your lives are forfeit, as well."

No! She would not let this happen. She would not let the man she loved and a dear friend die because of her. "That's not true," she yelled. "They didn't know. They're innocent."

The crowd's chatter grew louder as they discussed the spectacle before them. If Elizabeth could sway them to her point of view, the populace would balk if Willem tried to carry out his threat against the two highest-ranking men in the country. If this was the only way she could put an end to the bloodshed, then so be it.

"I enchanted them both."

"That's a lie," Micah roared, his voice growing stronger.

Asher rushed forward. "You can't kill her. She's carrying the overlord's child."

She glanced at Asher in surprise. She hadn't been aware he knew. A cheer rose from the crowd and Elizabeth's mouth fell open in surprise. What a fickle lot they were.

"The child must die, too," Willem screamed. "We can't let a tainted heir rule Maelgwn. It would be better to let the Caderyn rule than a child of her body."

She turned her head slightly and spoke directly to Willem. "You would know all about that, wouldn't you? You're a traitor. What do you get out of an alliance with the invaders?" she taunted. Perhaps if she kept him distracted, she could get away.

He smiled and his rancid breath hit her full in the face. She fought not to gag.

"I get the only thing worth having," he murmured. "Power."

She laughed. "You don't really think they'll allow you to keep it, do you? You'll be dead within a month."

His gaze skittered away and she saw the fear behind his eyes.

"You'd be better off throwing yourself on Micah's mercy," she continued.

The blade pressed harder against her skin, breaking it. Warm and sticky, her blood dripped past the neckline of her dress. As if mesmerized, he watched the droplets disappear one after another.

From the corner of her eye she saw Micah and Asher inching nearer. Willem must have noticed too. He dragged her closer to the wall and lifted a smoldering torch from its iron holder.

He brandished it in her face. "I'm not the one that needs mercy."

The acrid smoke burned her eyes, making them water.

"You're going to die just like your mother did," he spat. "Screaming in agony."

Her rage burned brighter and she fought harder. Asher and Micah both rushed Willem. Asher grasped the hand that held the blade to her throat and Micah landed his fist in the center of Willem's face and the torch fell to the ground forgotten.

Bone cracked satisfyingly under Micah's fist and he drew his fist back again. Glancing at his mate, he saw that Asher had pulled Elizabeth to safety. Now he could focus on ridding the realm of its most corrupt member. Before he could throw another punch, Willem formed a ball of energy in one hand and hurled it toward Micah's face. He managed to evade the full brunt of the attack but it still sent him reeling. The sheer force of the strike reminded him that Willem hadn't reached his position by manipulation alone. As Micah struggled to regain his footing, the chancellor grabbed Elizabeth's hair and tried to drag her from Asher.

The crowd pressed closer, trying to get a glimpse of the combatants. Ignoring them, he turned back to his mate. Fury screamed through his veins. He would not let her be harmed. She'd suffered enough at the chancellor's hands. All of Maelgwn had. That was going to end. Now.

He had to get Willem farther away from Elizabeth. He didn't want her hurt in what he was about to attempt. She had given up so much for him. She'd saved his life in plain view of the entire keep, knowing it would mean the end of her own. She was

willing to sacrifice herself. For him. She loved him. Even if she hadn't admitted it, which she had, he'd know the truth and it filled him with more joy than he'd ever expected to feel. But for now, he needed to push such thoughts aside and focus on saving her life.

Glancing at her, he noticed the blood that dripped down her chest and stained her dress. Rage tightened clenched his fists. Rage at Willem for daring to harm her and rage at himself for failing to protect her. If the chancellor had pressed a little harder...Micah couldn't complete the thought.

The chancellor prepared for another attack.

Get her farther away from him! he shouted into Asher's mind.

His friend dragged Elizabeth into the crowd as Micah focused his rage at the torch still burning at Willem's feet. Stretching out his hands toward the fire, he guided its direction. With an audible whoosh, the flames roared to life, sending a geyser of fire streaming upward. Willem screamed out in panicked terror. As Micah had intended, the blaze engulfed the man.

Shrieks of panic rose from the crowd at his demonstration of power. Some people pressed closer while others ran in fear toward the front gate.

Micah summoned a guard standing nearby, gawking at the scene. "Close the gate. No one leaves."

The man nodded and raced to the guardhouse, shouting out orders.

With satisfaction, Micah turned and watched as the chancellor writhed in agony. He didn't take pleasure in Willem's suffering but in the fact that he would never cause harm to any of Maelgwn's people again—especially his mate.

Centering his energy, he willed the fire to burn hotter. He wanted this over and done with. Willem stopped struggling. What was left of his body lay in a charred heap near Banyon. It was done.

Wiping his hand across the tableau, he willed the inferno to cease. As the flames vanished so did the press of voices. Only wisps of smoke rose from the body along with a few muffled sobs from somewhere deep in the crowd.

He peered through the throng of people who pressed closer. Many of his subjects backed away. They stared at him with equal amounts of fear and respect. He was less worried about their reaction and more concerned about his mate's. Where was she? He finally located her. She'd fallen to her knees and sat staring at the blackened corpse with an expression of horror.

Too late, he remembered her mother's death. He was a fool. He should have insisted that Asher take her from the area. Now, he'd added to her pain by making her witness this gruesome killing. It seemed everything he did hurt her. He wanted to comfort her but he didn't have time at the moment. Now he had to deal with the repercussions of executing his second-in-command.

Elizabeth rose unsteadily to her feet and hurried toward him, giving Willem's body a wide berth. She fought her way toward him through the crowd that swelled and pitched as fear and uncertainty raced through him. Fear punched him in the gut. She could be trampled. He needed to get her to safety, away from the rising bedlam in the courtyard.

He grabbed Joseph's arm and shoved him toward his mate. "Take her to my chamber. Make sure she doesn't leave and that no one enters save servants bringing food."

The young guardian took her arm. "The overlord says you're to stay in his chamber until further notice."

Her brow furrowed. What might have been hurt flashed through her eyes.

Micah wanted to take her there himself—to comfort her—but first he had to deal with the turmoil he'd unleashed. He couldn't risk even the smallest distraction now and the distraction she caused was far from small.

Protocol required first informing his underlings of the coming changes. However, he hadn't followed protocol since assuming the throne and he wasn't about to start now. He expected that many of the guardians would object but they would all have to become accustomed to the new laws. Maelgwn had suffered enough needless death.

The throng grew more agitated. Some even climbed the walls, looking to escape the keep. He had to get this situation under control.

Micah leapt on top of the nearest merchant's table. "Cease!" he roared. "Now!"

An uneasy hush fell over the bailey and anxious, expectant faces turned to him. With a start, he realized he had no speech prepared. His only experience with such matters involved inciting his troops before battle.

The waiting people grew restless. He'd have to approach this the same way or he'd lose them before he had a chance to announce the new decree. He had no choice but to address them as if they were his troops. And in a sense, they were. They would be partially responsible for helping to usher in these changes.

"For many years," he began, his voice ringing through the bailey. "Maelgwn has been at the mercy of cruel, self-serving leaders. That time is over."

Many people stared at him in wide-eyed awe. Including most of the guardians.

He rushed to continue before chaos broke loose again. "The people of Maelgwn suffered greatly under my grandfather's rule. The situation grew worse when my father and brother took the throne due in part to the deceit and treachery of the chancellor."

He gestured toward Willem's smoldering corpse. "Through his duplicity, we've been led astray. The chancellor made alliances with the Caderyn in an attempt to gain more power for himself."

Micah watched as varying degrees of shock registered on the faces of everyone present. The only person who had no response was Willem's favorite underling. Micah

had no proof of this man's wrongdoing but he'd be watching him closely for the rest of his life—however long or short that may be.

"Willem was responsible for the death of the temple consort, Jenna. He was also responsible for the attempt on my life and that of my mate. Because of these transgressions as well as aiding and abetting the enemy, he's been dispatched in a manner befitting his many crimes."

Hushed murmurs raced through the assembly and Micah waited for a moment so the information could sink in. He motioned Asher to join him on the table.

"Willem was the last of the old regime," Micah continued. "With the new overlord comes a new chancellor who will advise us through the challenging days to come. Asher is that man."

A cheer started among the guardians and was quickly taken up by the crowd. Micah glanced at his friend who stared at him blandly. Micah knew if they were alone, Asher wouldn't bother hiding his annoyance.

A little warning might have been nice, Asher said into his mind.

Micah shrugged, suppressing a smirk. "Many changes are coming."

The crowd quieted at his announcement.

"Changes that will better our kingdom," he continued. "Changes that will start with this command—persecution of women with magic will no longer be tolerated. It will no longer be illegal for women who possess powers to use them."

Astonishment slackened the face of nearly every person present and clamoring voices filled the air. Micah held up his hands for silence. Slowly, the din quieted.

"Maelgwn needs to work together as a whole if we are to repel the Caderyn who continue to wreak havoc on us. Riders will be sent forth with proclamations but I expect that everyone gathered here will share the news as well."

The people cheered in response. Micah suspected there were plenty of men who had been hiding their wives' and daughters' abilities, praying they wouldn't be caught and punished. Several of the women looked skeptical of the pronouncement but a little girl came forward. Her mother darted forward as if to stop her. Micah hopped off the table and squatted down to speak with the child.

She stared at the ground, nervously wiggling her foot in the dirt.

"What is it, little one?" he asked.

Shyly, she opened her clenched fist. A dusty, gray rock sat in her palm. Meeting his gaze, she laid her other hand over the stone and closed her eyes and chanted under her breath. Opening her eyes, she lifted her hand. In place of the rock sat a glittering crystal.

With a beatific smile, she placed the rock in his hand. "This is for you." With that, she scampered back to her mother. The woman's relief was obvious from where he stood, still holding the girl's gift.

He fished a few coins from his pouch and tossed two to the merchant on whose table he had stood. He then crossed to where the child stood with her mother. "Thank you," he said, handing the remaining coins to the girl.

Her eyes brightened and she grinned. The worry left the woman's face and she smiled at him. Asher got his attention and Micah returned to his side. "I'll accept this position on one condition."

Micah grinned. "It's too late for that, my friend."

Asher went on as if he hadn't spoken. "I'll accept this position but I'm free to look for Neeve as often as necessary."

"As long as you maintain your duty to the crown, you can look for her all you like."

His friend nodded in agreement.

"And keep in mind," Micah continued. "I'm still annoyed that you disobeyed me."

"What?" Asher demanded. "Are you upset, because I stopped to find your sorry ass instead of immediately racing to your mate's side?"

Micah frowned at him. "Elizabeth could have been in danger."

"And you would have died. Let it go."

Micah knew he should be grateful. And he was. He'd called to his friend during the Caderyn ambush and told him to protect Elizabeth. Instead of returning to the keep, he tracked down Micah and brought him to Elizabeth.

Asher gestured to the corpses. "Should I send for the grave digger?"

"Take care of Banyon but leave the other. For the time being, Willem will serve as a reminder to any who would think to disregard my edict."

Asher directed several of the guards to carry Banyon's body to the temple for final rites. Micah sighed. He hated to lose him. He'd always been a good man and Micah suspected he might have done much to smooth the way among the other guardians. He'd also been Elizabeth's father. His heart ached for his mate. Both parents had been brutally murdered as she watched. How many other people had suffered like this at the hands of this corrupt regime? No matter what happened, Micah knew he'd made the right decision.

He watched as his people dispersed, talking excitedly among themselves. He couldn't wait to tell Elizabeth what had happened. With a lighter heart than he'd ever had, he went to find his mate.

Motioning the guards away from the oaken doors, he entered his chamber to find Elizabeth sitting in the chair near the bed. Her pitiful few belongings sat on her lap and his family's ring and necklace were placed neatly on the table beside her. Hurt twisted a knife in his gut, far more painful than the Caderyn blade that had nearly brought him death this morning.

She planned to leave him.

Elizabeth dashed the tears that sprang to her eyes at the sight of Micah. He looked like someone he loved had just died. Fear scrabbled through her chest, sheathing its claws in her heart. Maybe someone had.

"Micah?" she questioned as she rose from her seat and started toward him. "What's wrong?"

His eyes narrowed and he slammed the door behind him. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice incensed but even.

Her heart was already broken. Why was he making this worse? She knew he planned to send her away. She'd heard the anger in his voice as he'd told Joseph to escort her to their chamber. She'd seen the coldness in his eyes. She'd felt his rage.

Apparently, he was willing to accept her powers in private but now that she'd used them publicly, he was going to shun her. She should have expected it. For all his talk about acknowledging her abilities, he'd never meant it. Just as he'd never meant it when he told her he loved her.

He stalked closer, his movements dangerous, tightly coiled. Her stomach clenched and warmth flooded her body in anticipation. She was pathetic. The man didn't want her and yet she was still ready to throw herself at him—to beg him to take her. One last time.

He stopped in front of the table and picked up the ring and necklace. "Why aren't you wearing these?"

She backed away, her thighs hitting the mattress. "They belong to your family. I-I didn't think you'd want me to take them when I left."

"And where are you planning to go?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm. He stepped closer and his legs bracketed hers.

She was trapped. Her heart beat in her throat as the fury in his eyes grew. "I don't know," she breathed. "I didn't think it mattered."

His lips tightened and he twirled the necklace around his finger. "You. Didn't. Think. It. Matterred."

"No." She fought his intimidation.

His eyebrow rose in annoyance and he crossed his arms over his chest. "No?"

She sighed. How was it possible that she'd just shed tears over this irritating man? "Why does it matter where I go?"

"You're my mate." He said the last as if she were a simpleton.

She poked him in the chest, emphasizing her point. "You're sending me away. Why do you care where I go?"

Understanding lightened his eyes and softened his features. Uncrossing his arms, he reached down and grabbed her around the thighs, tipping her backward. She landed on her back with a shriek. He followed her down, pinning her to the bed, holding her motionless with his lower body.

Slipping it over her head, he dragged the necklace's chain over her bare skin, sending shivers through her body. The look in his eyes was pure desire. She felt the proof of it cradled between her thighs. What was he playing at?

"What are you doing, Micah?" She tried to inject as much scorn and indifference into her voice as possible.

The barest hint of a smile curved his lips. "Trying to understand how your convoluted mind works."

She pushed at his shoulders. It was a pointless exercise. "Get off me."

"Not until you explain exactly why you think I want to send you away."

Surprise took her breath. "You mean you don't want me to go?"

Instead of answering, he nuzzled the exposed skin above her breasts. She sighed at the sensation of his hair-roughened face on her tender flesh. Refusing to give in to the need he roused in her, she grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked his head backward.

"You were furious after I healed you. Then you had Joseph haul me away like you couldn't stand to look at me any longer. You wouldn't even talk to me."

He stared at her, seemingly dumbfounded. He traced the knife wound Willem left on her neck. "Did it ever occur to you that I was angry because I hadn't been able to protect you from the chancellor?"

She shook her head but hope spread through her like warm sunshine.

"Then I suppose that means that it also hadn't occurred to you that I had no idea how the crowd would react? I had Joseph take you to our chamber to keep you safe."

"Oh," she said quietly.

"That's all you have to say? Oh?"

She released her death grip on his hair, too stunned to respond.

Lowering his face, he carefully kissed around the injury before meeting her gaze. "I was terrified when I saw Willem's hands on you. When I saw the blade at your throat." He buried his face in her neck. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

Elizabeth wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him closer. "I was so scared when Asher brought you into the courtyard. I thought for sure you'd died. And then when you stopped breathing—" A sob halted her words and she clung to him.

Micah smoothed her hair from her face, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"Are you listening?" he asked, his voice raw with emotion.

She met his turbulent gaze and nodded.

"I love you." He spoke clearly. There could be no mistaking his message. Taking her hand from his neck, he kissed her palm and returned the ring he'd given her, slipping it back on her finger where it belonged.

"I love you," he repeated.

She'd fought against him — against this — for so long. And for what? She was where she wanted to be. She was where she belonged. And so was he. Threading her fingers through his hair, she urged him forward. "I love you," she whispered against his lips.

Driven by the same need, their mouths met and he kissed her deeply. He tasted of promises kept and new beginnings...a magical future more wondrous than either of them had dared imagine.

Slowly, he lifted his head and gazed at her. Desire darkened his eyes, nearly swallowing the golden flecks that swirled through his deep brown irises. An answering need built within her and she traced the strong lines of her overlord's face.

She couldn't stop the smile that curved her lips. The guardians had chosen well, after all. She couldn't have done better herself. Pulling Micah closer, she released the fear and pain that had haunted her for so long. Wrapped in his embrace, she realized that love — their love — was the most powerful magic of all.

About the Author

Bronwyn lives in Michigan with her wonderful husband, two amazing sons and seven somewhat-psychotic cats. When not tormenting her characters, she can usually be found helping with reading and writing projects in her sons' classrooms as well as providing child care and tutoring for several daycare children. Besides writing, she also enjoys reading, knitting, sewing, cross stitching, pottery, drawing—basically anything that helps her avoid cleaning and cooking.

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