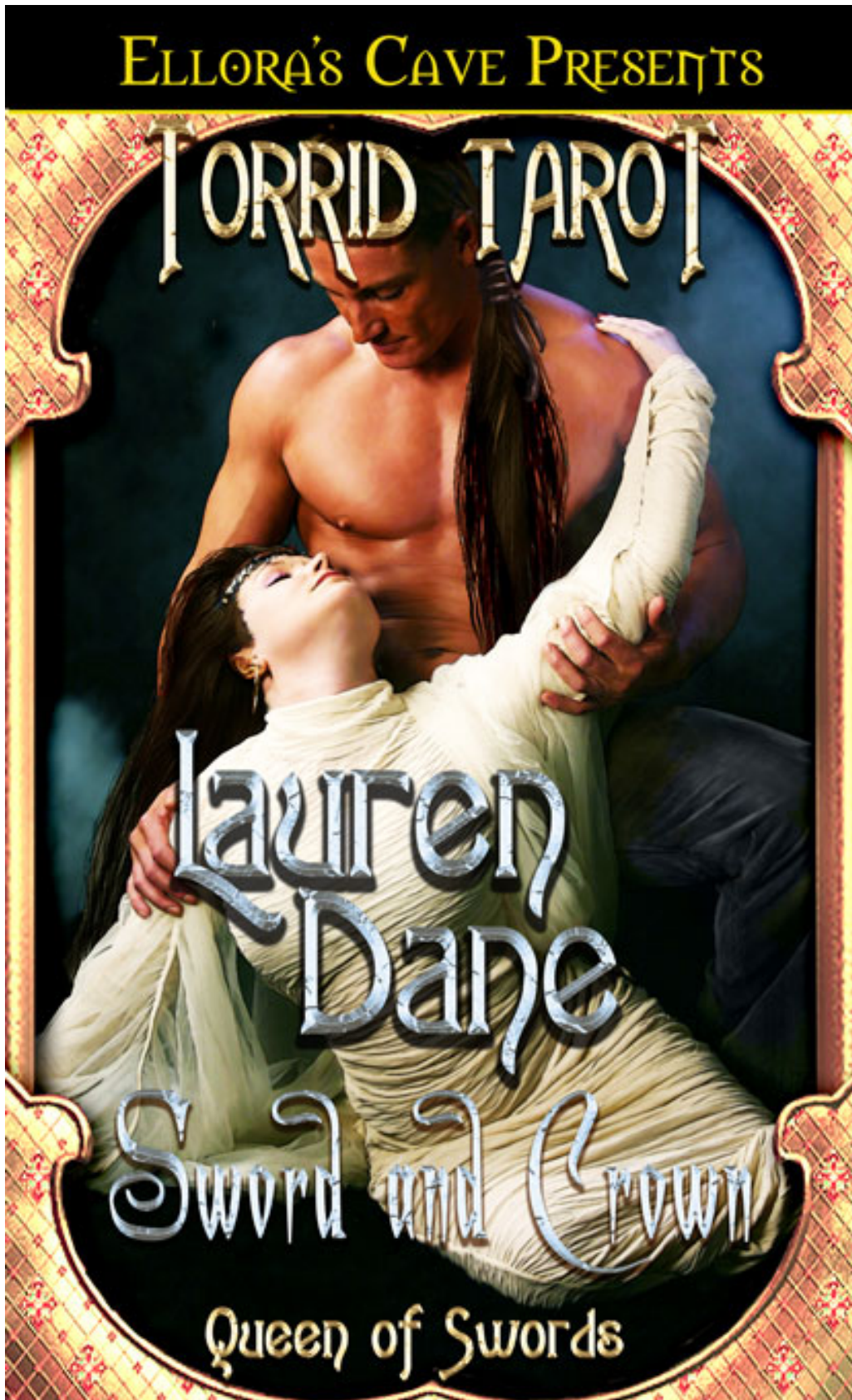


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Lauren
Dane
Sword and Crown
Queen of Swords



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Sword and Crown

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SWORD AND CROWN

Lauren Dane

Author's Note

The Queen of Swords has been through many trials, many conflicts in her life. She has weathered them with strength and courage. She's lost loved ones and experienced pain but those experiences have made her stronger. She is realistic and pragmatic, she is a loyal friend and determined ally. She is also intelligent, rational and has a cutting wit. This card, this woman, is extraordinarily astute and forthright and does not play games or tolerate falsehoods. She looks beyond the face others present and sees deeply into their true natures. This makes many uncomfortable. Her blunt nature is often considered aloof or cold when really she is simply very discriminating about who she lets into her inner life.

The Queen of Swords is portrayed on her card in the Rider-Waite tarot deck as standing. Light glints off her sword and crown, showing the relationship between truth (light) her thoughts (crown) and her actions (sword) amongst the swirling air that governs her suit. Oftentimes she bears a third eye of intuition, a sixth sense of wisdom. Butterflies symbolizing change after incubation fly around her. She has been through hard times and has become stronger, she is able to cut through illusions with clarity.

Rhea is a Queen of Swords woman. She's a woman who's discovered strength and wisdom through the trials she's been through in her life. In *Sword and Crown* she's on the verge of a change. She must reconcile who she used to be as a young woman to the changed person she is today. Her world exists in peril and she must greet that as a woman with her past as not a burden, but armor.

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Holly Hobbie: American Greetings Corporation

Chapter One

Rhea moved through the night air, the cool breeze caressing her bare flesh. Talent flared from her skin in indigo arcs and swirled around her. Pleasure pulsed through her, jumped from her to her partner—his magic uniting with hers. The darkness edged back until it was a mere shadow on the far horizon again.

Triumph roared through her at their victory. Until she looked up and saw Paul standing in the doorway, clutching one of his bottles of elixir. Eyes that had once gazed at her filled with love and adoration now held jealous bitterness.

And then she came awake from the dream with a gasp, trembling as the memories crashed back through her.

* * * * *

Walking across the campus to her ten a.m. lecture, Rhea ignored the interested stares. She always did. It was more than her voluptuous, nearly six-foot frame. More than the blue-black hair and the plump lips. It wasn't even the steely blue-gray eyes fringed by dark lashes.

No, Rhea Harris was overflowing with sex magic. Even when she tried to stifle it, she exuded raw sensuality. No glamour could hide what she was.

"Rhea," the assistant dean of the department met her outside the lecture hall.

That sensuality often attracted smarmy assholes like Tom Andrews. Men perpetually on the make, regardless of the wedding ring they wore on their left hands.

Rhea didn't bother to hide her annoyance. The prick had been hounding her for the last six weeks. She was sorely tempted to bewitch the bastard off a short pier. Instead she'd decided to try giving him as little attention as possible.

"Tom." Not even looking at him, she reached around him for the door. He moved to touch her body with his own. She really hated that sort of thing. "Hey, Touchy McFeely, back the fuck up."

He winced, shock on his face as she pushed past him to walk into the room. Every seat was filled and people stood up at the back.

At the front of the hall she tossed her bag to the side, pushed the lectern out of the way and perched on top of the desk instead.

"I'm Rhea Harris, the visiting Rex Scholar. And I don't tell you that to impress you or anything. Believe it or not I have to say that before every lecture I give. I don't know why, it's not like there's Rex Scholar products for you to buy in the bookstore or anything but there it is. I'll be talking for about an hour. Afterward, I'll take questions."

And she began. As always when she spoke about the intersection of science and magic, her deep passion for the subject took over and the entire hall was swept along. Didn't matter if she was in Los Angeles or Budapest.

"Humans are fond of talking about the unknowable, the paranormal. But everything has an explanation. Even if we don't understand things, there are laws which govern space and time. All magic is, is the manipulation of those laws by those who have a natural skill to do so.

"There is nothing mystical about magical Talent. It's like the ability to sing or paint. An artistic talent if you will. Magic is energy. We know from Newton and Einstein and countless other scientists that energy does not go away. It simply metamorphoses into something else.

"Psychics and other empathic people—those who are gifted in dealing with animals and other humans, those who wield great amounts of charisma and sexuality, those who sway with anger and fear—to an extent this is all magic or the manipulation of energy. There is nothing unknowable. There are many things we just can't explain right now."

She went on to talk about chaos theory and high-level mathematics as well as particle physics and their intersection with magic. Rhea loved giving people food for thought about how they accessed the world around them. Coming from a world where magic was commonplace, she wanted those humans she came in contact with to understand that a mystery was just a question that hadn't been answered yet.

At the end she saw them all queue up eagerly and waited for the inevitable.

"Ms. Harris, what makes you think we believe any of this crap? You're taking the university's money and conning people! This is a rip-off."

Rhea watched Ardent Doubting Thomas with amused eyes. There was a version of him at every single lecture. "You don't have to believe any of it. I'm not trying to sell you anything or recruit you to live on a compound. Relax, kid. It's just a lecture."

He looked as if he was going to pop a vein when she didn't rise to the bait. "I just believe people should be thinking critically about this stuff," his voice cracked.

"I agree. Critical thinking is important."

"But magic isn't real! If it's real, show us. Make that clock fly off the wall or something."

Rhea smiled at him. "I'm not a performing monkey. Look, kid, make up your own mind but remember that within the realm of human history there were those who thought the Earth was flat and any mention of astronomy was heresy. It's the question that matters."

"That's so true, Professor Harris!"

Rhea saw the girl all in pink and begged the universe for strength. Why were they all so *pink*? The girl probably dotted the "i" at the end of her name with a heart. And Rhea knew the girl was a Bambi or a Missi or something of that ilk. She probably had pink pens with sparkles and fluffy feathery crap on the end and a cell phone with rhinestones. Her boyfriend probably shaved his chest.

"What's true?"

“Well, you know, I was born when Mercury was in retrograde and that’s like a science. Just like you said. It’s not hair, er, what you said.”

“Heresy. It’s an opinion contrary to one generally accepted in any field or belief system. In this case, the belief that the Earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around was considered heresy. Those who insisted the Earth was round and not flat were called heretics. But really, Galileo and those like him were visionaries because they answered questions by asking them in different ways.

“And you’re thinking about astrology. I’m speaking about astronomy. Astronomy is the study of space and the stars. Not star signs. But thank you for your confidence.” And that was it, she’d exhausted every last bit of nice she had within her, which wasn’t much to begin with.

“Oh.”

Next up, the fluffy bunny in the Holly Hobbie dress and the dreadlocks. “Ms. Harris, are you taking students? I’d love to study with you.”

“I don’t teach magic. I don’t give private lessons. Either you have magic or you don’t. But science, reason and logic – these are things that exist for all of us every day.”

Holly Hobbie looked disappointed but still had the gleam of adoration in her eyes. Rhea made a mental note of the multiple exits so she could avoid the fangirls.

And on it went. The Aleister Crowley wannabe, the Goths, the pretty princesses, a few more fluffy bunnies and a few more doubting Thomases.

When the time was up she rose and waved, taking advantage of their surprise at her sudden movement to dash from the room.

She walked, head down, to her car and got out. Their energy, their desire, their adoration and lust pressed at her, made her exhausted.

* * * * *

A relatively quick drive from campus brought her back to the condo on the beach owned by the Rex people. Compared to the last place she lived, this was far preferable.

The air was clean, and the saltwater dampened some of the negative energy that always tired her out.

Inside she kicked off her shoes and opened up the sliding doors on the deck, letting the sound of the ocean wash into the room.

"How'd it go?"

Rhea turned and rolled her eyes at Sarai, her familiar and best friend. Currently, she appeared to be a tall, lithe woman with cocoa skin and large yellow eyes but Rhea knew she could also take the form of a cat the size of a small pony. "The usual. That asshole Andrews came on to me yet again. Rubbed himself against me. Gah! Why do men do that? Blech! I'd like to know if it ever works for them. You'd think it would or they'd stop it. Wouldn't you? Then again, disgusting men in stained T-shirts hoot at women walking by on the streets over and over. One wonders, Sarai, what lies between their ears."

Sarai got up and brought a pitcher and two glasses back from the kitchen, placing them on the table outside on the deck. "I've made you some fresh juice. I can see the strain around your eyes. Drink."

"I'm all right. I just need to cleanse my system more often." Even so, the fresh juice made her feel much healthier. She'd taken in far too much synthetic and processed matter. It weakened her and left her vulnerable to those around her.

"Better?"

Reaching over, she rubbed her face along Sarai's jaw, seeking comfort, giving it in return. Rhea didn't have words to thank Sarai for coming with her when she was exiled. "Thank you for taking care of me. All of these years you've been here, without another of your kind. I'm sorry to have robbed you of your life."

Sarai looked at her through those big yellow eyes, not bothering to make them look human when it was just the two of them. "You're alone here without another of your kind too. You did not ask. I came to be with you. You are the sister of my heart and I'm honored to serve you now as I was then."

Familiars and Practitioners bonded when both were very young. In Rhea's case, she and Sarai had bonded when Rhea was three and Sarai was a mere kitten. Sarai had jumped into Rhea's arms and the bond had been formed at that moment. There hadn't been a day in Rhea's life where she'd failed to hear Sarai's voice or seek her advice or comfort. A sort of substitute for Rhea's mother, who'd always been a place of refuge for her.

The thought of her mother brought a slice of pain through Rhea's gut. Gone. All of them gone. Damn it.

"Rhea, I worry about you. You have to Practice more and more often to keep yourself unharmed by the energies of the humans. You're lonely. You have no roots." Sarai purred as she smoothed a hand over Rhea's hair.

"I have enough roots. But something is wrong. I can feel it. It drains me."

"Wrong how?"

"The balance is tipping. I see more thin spots than I used to. After Ra'Ken was destroyed I often wondered if the Council could hold the Nameless back. I wonder that even more now."

Sarai didn't push any further. She knew it was pointless. There would come a time, though, when she wouldn't stop pushing until they went back. It was not only imperative for Rhea's health, but her birthright as well.

"You know, that hottie from next door was asking after you again."

"I can't. Don't start this." Rhea's eyes flashed.

"It was a fluke, Rhea. He clearly had some Talent. You couldn't have known. You had no problems before that."

"Problems? Is that what you call blowing out the windows in every building on the block? I can't risk it. I can't hurt anyone again."

Sarai closed her eyes against Rhea's pain. "It wasn't your fault."

"I so don't want to go over this with you again, Sarai."

"Fine. You know, I'm the one with fur but you're the one wearing a hair shirt. Get over it. How long will you let something you *had* to do define your life?"

Rhea got up and went back into the condo and put her glass in the sink. Hearing a knock on the door, she called to Sarai that she'd get it.

And opened it to face her past.

Jaac Sarne looked into the face of the only woman he'd ever loved and the only woman whose loss had ever mattered. Fifteen years without hearing her voice or her laughter. Her magic had gone and the world was a darker place without her. Literally.

She stood there in the doorway without speaking.

"Aren't you going to bid me enter?"

"Stop talking like that. No. Go away." She tried to close the door on him but he blocked it with his foot.

"I need to talk to you, Sa'Rhea. Please."

"Don't call me that. I'm Rhea Harris now." She spoke low and looked out past him, making sure no one had overheard the exchange.

"Who is it? Oh shit..." Sarai came to a halt when she caught sight of Jaac. In the stillness of the moment, Rhea took him in. He was the mirror opposite of his brother. Dark where Paul had been fair, tall and broad where Paul had been thin and athletic. Deep eyes as dark as midnight stared back at her.

"He was just leaving," Rhea hissed.

"No he wasn't." Sarai pushed past Rhea. Grabbing his arm, she yanked him into the apartment and closed the door, locking it. "You can't ignore this, Rhea. What are you doing here, Jaac?"

"The Nameless. It's back and the entire western shore has fallen. We need you, Sa'Rhea."

Shock, cold and hard, slammed into her. Shaking off the hand at her upper arm, she fell into a chair. "How many?"

"A lot." Jaac was quiet as he watched her reaction. Still so fucking beautiful that looking at her hurt his chest. And he'd thrown it away like a stupid boy.

"A lot? You still a scientist, Jaac? That's very astute of you. Precise. A lot."

The dry sarcasm in her voice surprised him. The Sa'Rhea he'd known had been sweet and joyful. "Ten thousand, four hundred and six. Is that better?"

She opened her eyes and that stormy blue-gray gaze held him fast. "Don't piss me off, beefy."

"Beefy?"

Sarai snickered.

"Look, Paul Bunyan, tell me what it is you were sent here to say. I have things to do."

Sarai really seemed to think that was funny and he resolved to look it up when he could. "We need your Talent. There are no high level Practitioners left. At least none who can hold the Nameless back."

"And you come crawling to me? After shaming me and sending me away like I was nothing? *Now* I'm worth speaking to, when you need me?"

"We could have used the scrolls but they're gone now."

Immediately, he regretted his words when she flinched as if he'd physically struck her.

"You're an asshole, Jaac. I can't believe I let you in here." Sarai's voice lowered into a growl and her face took on a more feline shape.

Damn it, a familiar minx in fury mode. Perfect.

"I'm sorry. Okay? I didn't mean it. I know you...I know you had no choice. I believe your account of what happened." Sighing, he splayed his fingers out before his

body and then pulled them into fists. "It doesn't change the fact that we need you desperately. You're the last of your line. Your father is too old."

"And my sister, Emmia?" Once she could have said "sisters", but no longer. "Your sisters?"

"Your sister may be strong enough with the aid of the scrolls but without them..." He shrugged. "The power holding the Nameless back has been weakening for the last fifteen years. Many of those remaining have been sent away to the Eastern Mountains."

"Who sent you here?"

"The Council. We need you. Please."

"My father? Yours?"

He sighed, nodding. "Yes. Both. Your father would have come but he's not in the best of health. He's been using most of his energy to keep the boundary up. The coastal cities are in danger but the wards are holding. For now."

Rhea went to look out the sliding glass door at the ocean. She'd yearned to be with her own people for fifteen years. Wanted to hear the sound of the food sellers as they called out their afternoon bargains. Missed her mother's humming and her sisters' laughter, her brothers teasing each other. Not that her mother could laugh from her grave. She missed her Talent. She wanted to go home.

Sarai came to stand next to her. "You don't owe them anything."

"Not the Council, no. But the millions who are threatened now, how can I ignore that?"

"You can't, because you're you. Get a guarantee that the geas against you has been lifted. Make sure the family holdings due you as Paul's widow are awarded so you have a place to live after this is over. It's not greed, Rhea, it's common sense. You can't come back here, you're dying. There you can have your magic back and a living. Fuck the rest of them." Sarai said it quietly but Jaac heard anyway.

"You're dying?" The panic in his voice was obvious.

“Not from a sickness. The environment here drains me. I can’t keep it all out without a severe bleed on my powers.”

He wanted to touch her. Pull her into his arms and kiss the lips he dreamt of every night. “I can assure you your widow property. I have the paperwork with me. You’ve got enough of a settlement to live comfortably for the rest of your life. The geas was lifted when you agreed to leave, by the way. You’re free to return.”

Home. The mere thought of it took away the aches and pains of her day. If she lived alone with Sarai in her home—even if no one ever spoke to her—it would be better than dying a universe away. And she’d be able to save millions of lives and Practice again.

“I have to call my employers here and then we can go.”

Chapter Two

Holding a small bag and leaving the rest of her belongings back in her condo, she walked into the rift behind Jaac and back into D'ar, the capital city of Molari. *Home.*

Her magic rushed back into her the moment her foot touched the soil. So much, so fast that her back arched and a gasp broke from her lips.

Jaac was next to her then, holding her arm, steadying her. "Sa'Rhea? Are you all right?"

It filled her. More and more until she was sure she'd explode from it. Until she was sure she must glow with the power rushing through her cells. But the warmth of his hand on her arm, of his body against hers, holding her upright, anchored her until the intensity passed.

When she opened her eyes Sarai's widened. "Rhea, your eyes are..."

Jaac looked and laughed. "Your eyes are normal again."

Meaning that the gray was the dominant color once more. The slate blue-gray of a snow sky. Her magic was back and it showed in her eyes. Marked her as a high level Practitioner. And it felt good. Clean. And she realized how much she missed this feeling. Feeling at one with her environment. Feeling her magic course through her veins. Feeling nurtured and fed by the very ground she walked on. In the distance, the emerald spires of the capitol building jutted up into a sky more amethyst than blue. The air was clean and crackling with magic.

"Welcome home, Sa'Rhea. You've been missed," Jaac said quietly, squeezing her hand before letting it go.

Joy. For the first time in fifteen years she felt joy as she'd thought she'd never feel again. Her magic was back. At the same time, she felt the...wrongness in the air. A taste

on the back of her tongue. Things were out of balance. "I can feel it," she murmured. "How did you let it get this bad?"

"I don't have an answer to that, Sa'Rhea. I've been counseling them to seek you out for a very long time."

She turned to him, surprised. "You're on the Council now?"

"Yes. After Paul...after his death, I stepped in." Not that his worthless brother had been useful anyway.

"Ah, I see. Well, let's get this show on the road, so to speak. I imagine we're to go to Council chambers?" The joy on her face was gone, replaced with an expressionless mask.

"Yes, there's a conveyance here." He pointed to the small car that waited across the park from where he'd opened a rift.

"Pretty sure of yourself, weren't you?"

He looked at Rhea. "I hoped that you still had your big heart."

It'd been broken, but she still had her sense of duty and kinship with the people she was born to protect and had served ably until she made a mistake. A mistake that cost her her family and her homeland.

Sarai sensed Rhea's pain and leaned in to nuzzle her softly. "We're here. And we'll make it all right."

"Go and see your family, Sarai. They'll want to see you. Come to our home when you can."

"You're sure they'll give it to you?"

"They will or they can face the Nameless alone. I didn't come here to play games. If I'm back, it's as a full member of the Hars Caste or not at all. My home seems a small price to pay."

Jaac stared at her.

"I'm not her anymore, Jax. That girl is gone. Rhea Harris would not have allowed herself to be scapegoated and shunned in the public square."

"Jax?"

"I like it better than Jaac. Anyway, let's go."

Sarai metamorphosed and bounded toward her familial home after a brief hug. She was emotionally tied to Rhea through the bond, she'd know if she was needed and come immediately. Rhea knew that and appreciated it.

Jax put a hand at the small of her back and guided her to the car that awaited them and helped her inside.

She leaned back against the seat, trying to ignore the brand of his touch, the way the simple stroke of his hand against her back had ignited her senses. "Tell me what the situation is on the Council."

"What do you mean?" Jax was careful. He knew the driver was listening. Then again, he wanted quite badly to run his fingertips down her neck, sliding his hand around the back enough to pull her to him for a kiss. He'd forgotten the way her body called to his. It had been why he'd stayed away after she married Paul. He needed to be careful in more than one way.

"I mean, who's in charge? Which caste is in charge? What has happened in the fifteen years I've been gone? Who is on my side? Who do I need to worry about?"

The last time he'd seen Sa'Rhea, she'd been weeping. Begging her father to save her from the exile order. That Sa'Rhea was such a sweet woman. Not much more than a girl really. She'd never questioned the love and loyalty of her family. Never imagined that they'd toss her on the altar of convenience and make the whole debacle with his brother—her husband—her fault. But they did. And in doing so they'd tossed away their strongest weapon against their biggest threat.

This woman, Rhea, was stronger and there was no air of innocence in her. And yet, that was more alluring. As he sat there next to her, he realized this was his second chance to be with her. He'd failed her before, yes, but he aimed to be the man she

needed him to be. This woman wasn't a fragile girl to be taken care of. She would stand at his side. But first he'd have to convince her of it.

"Your Caste is still the ruling family. There was a power struggle for the first three years after you left. My Caste challenged yours." He paused, not sure how to proceed, but decided to just tell the truth as he knew it. "There was a shake-up. We're in the second position now."

He turned to her and took her hand. "You can count on me to be on your side. Always. If I'd been here when..." He shook his head at the memory, "Anyway, that's over. The Dashan Caste was opposed to bringing you back but they're still at the end of the table. Your Caste is divided. Your sister and uncle Treya are all supportive. Have been for years, by the way. Your father, well, he's recently come around but his brothers are opposed. The other Castes were never vehement either way. They'll fall where the power lies."

"My uncles know that I'll take over my father's chair when he steps down. They don't want to lose power. And the Dashans will never forgive Paul marrying me instead of their Aan." Then again, she'd have been better off without Paul. "So it sounds like the only people I need to worry about are my father's brothers and your family."

"My Caste isn't necessarily against you."

She looked at him and made a disgusted click of her tongue. "Don't shit me. I've had enough. Fifteen years in exile worth of enough. I wouldn't be here now if you all weren't staring obliteration in the face."

He blinked several times and didn't argue. Couldn't argue.

They pulled in front of the capitol building. She got out without waiting for her door to be opened. He followed, interested in what she'd do next.

Straight backed, she walked confidently through the halls, up the grand stairway and into the council chamber without even a glance at the men-at-arms at the doors.

The people inside, all members of the Ruling Council, stared at her. Some with relief, some with disdain, all with shock.

"I hear you have a problem you need me to solve." She walked to the head of the table, where her father sat with her paternal uncles to one side and her maternal uncle to the other. "Where's my chair?"

Her uncle Treya stood and smiled at her. "Welcome home, Sa'Rhea. Still the most beautiful woman this family has ever seen." He winked and she smiled, shaking her head.

"Thank you, Uncle."

Taking a fortifying breath, she faced the table again and her father and other uncles. "Well? My chair?"

"Wait just a second, young lady! You can't just come in here and demand a place at the head of the table!" Her uncle Arta's face was beet red.

"I can. And I will. It is my rightful place as a Hars and a Sarne."

"You are no Sarne!" one of the Dashans declared from the end of the table. There were murmurs of shock and assent.

Rhea put her hands on the table and leaned in. "I am. I married Paul in a legal and binding ceremony. I was born a Hars and I held my place well. I kept you safe from the Nameless for my entire life. Paul would not be dead if he hadn't tried to steal those scrolls. I did what I could to save him for two years as he slid deeper into his bottle of elixir.

"I paid for my title with blood, loss and exile for fifteen years. It's mine—without question—along with my holdings and my seat at the head of this table or you can all face the Nameless alone because I'll leave right now."

She stood and waited.

"We've all signed the papers giving Sa'Rhea back her rightful inheritance. Including her place at the head of the table. Let's remember that. And the important thing, stopping the Nameless." Jaac's voice rang loud through the chamber as he tossed the papers on the table.

Treya pushed a chair at her. "Here you go, sweetie."

Nodding, Rhea sat down and moved closer to the table to grab the papers Jax tossed toward her. Looking through them quickly, she saw she'd been made right again. Had all her property restored including her bride price credits. The Sarnes must have hated that.

She put them aside and looked at the faces at the table. "I've had a long day, tell me what's happening."

Her father, who hadn't spoken a single word, watched her through half-lidded eyes. He'd missed her every moment of every day even as he'd done what he thought was necessary to end the ordeal. And now she'd come back and her life would be in danger. She was their only chance against the Nameless.

Her mother, his beloved wife, was written all over her face. Oh how he'd missed them both. He knew Chela would have never let him exile their daughter. Knew it was wrong even as he'd done it. Now the child he'd tossed in the air just to hear her giggle hated him. And rightfully so.

He outlined the situation, explained that those younger citizens with Talent had been taken to the Eastern Mountains to a stronghold there. Just in case. He knew Emmia would appreciate the solitude. The separation from the voices, the emotions that made living among her fellow citizens nearly unbearable.

"We've had Practitioners at work every moment of the day. But the job gets harder and harder the longer we wait. Since it took all those people, the Nameless has gotten much stronger."

"Without the scrolls, we're too weak to hold it back much longer." Rhea's former father-in-law said.

But she didn't rise to the bait. He knew, they all did. "I need some rest, a meal and someone to Practice with. Give me twelve hours and I'll go to the borderlands. The wards need to be strengthened so we'll start there."

"I'll escort you," Jax said, rising when she did.

Leaning down, she kissed her uncle again and let Jax lead her out without another word to anyone.

* * * * *

"Are you sure you'll be okay here?" Jax asked as he led her into the large entry of the house she'd once shared with Paul while they were in D'ar.

She didn't answer as she walked past him and into the main room. Her fingertips traced the hand carved back of the chaise. "It hasn't changed. Not one bit."

"My mother closed it the day you...left. We opened it up a week ago and had some cleaners come in and get rid of the furniture covers, tidy things up. Your old staff, every last one of them, is back."

She smiled as she moved to face him. "Really? Oh, I've longed to eat Mrs. Dakins' stew again, missed the scent of her fresh bread baking every morning."

Touched, he reached out and pulled her to him, and time slowed when her body touched his. His laugh died in his throat as he leaned in and brushed his lips over hers ever-so gently. Her taste teased him and he wanted more. So much more. "Sa'Rhea," he whispered.

She extricated herself from his embrace. "Rhea. And yes, I'll be fine here. This is my home. Even the last two years with your brother didn't ruin this place for me." She dusted invisible dirt from her clothing but he saw the slight tremor in her hands and knew she was as affected by him as he was by her.

He cleared his throat but her taste still hinted on his lips. "Your clothes are in the closets. I believe Emmia made sure your things were shipped here before she left for the mountains. She wanted to stay but there wasn't time. Anyway, you should still fit in them. Your body looks as good now as it did then. You're even more beautiful."

"What's your game, Jax?" she called back over her shoulder as she walked up the stairs and into the master suite.

"Game?" He followed her into the room. He sat on the bed as she went into the dressing area, closing the door behind her. Looking around, he saw the stamp of the old Rhea on the space. The room was bright and colorful. The books on the shelves were volumes of song and poetry. Little ceramic animals lined the windowsills.

She exited a few minutes later and left him breathless. She stood there, not in the jeans and T-shirt she'd returned with but a sumptuous eggplant-colored at-home gown worn by the women in highborn Castes. A flowing skirt with cuts along the thighs and a tight, high waist with a bodice open at the neck. The sleeves were short and he could see the silky, creamy pale curves of her breasts and the long, elegant line of her neck. She'd pulled her hair up into a loose knot and that only emphasized her eyes and her lips.

"I...you... No one has worn that color since you left. I think because they would have been a pale shadow of you."

Rhea saw the greedy heat in his gaze and her pussy slicked in response. She'd wanted him so damned much in her youth. For three glorious months she'd had him in secret. They'd snuck out late at night to meet on the shores of the lake and made love under the open sky. He'd been older, skilled, and had taught her a great many things. Oh how she'd loved him!

But then he'd rejected her. Gone to the central cities without telling her. A few months later Paul had begun to court her and she'd fallen for him. Paul hadn't had his brother's intensity or his passion but he'd adored her and in time, she'd loved him too.

Twenty-one years since Jax had looked at her that way openly, and she shouldn't want it but she did. She'd never stopped craving him. Even in the early years with Paul when she'd truly loved him, Jax had filled her dreams, her fantasies.

"So? What's your game?" She waved him to follow her and went down to the kitchen. When the cook, Mrs. Dakins, saw her, she squealed in delight and pulled Rhea into a tight embrace.

“Sweetest! Oh how I’ve missed you! Come and sit at the table there. I’ll have a meal for you both in just a few minutes. There’s fresh juice there in a pitcher with some glasses.”

Rhea smiled. “I’ve missed you too. Any fresh bread?”

Mrs. Dakins blushed, pleased. “Of course! I knew you’d be coming back, didn’t I? There’s lemon cake for dessert too. Now go on and sit, you look a bit tired.”

One of Rhea’s favorite things about the house was that it wasn’t the large manor that they’d lived in, in Ra’Ken. This house was smaller, intimate. There was a formal dining space but Rhea had filled it with bookcases and couches and chairs instead, thinking one day it might be a playroom for children.

But the kitchen had always been a favorite room. The tall fireplace dominated the room, giving heat to the whole house in the winter months. The floors were a polished reddish tile, making the room seem cozy. Large windows dominated one wall and Mrs. Dakins had always had pots of herbs growing in the light there. Rhea took in the space as her fingertips stroked over the tabletop, smoothed from years of use.

It was jarring, the way things hadn’t changed in the house but she’d done so much changing herself.

“What do you mean, Rhea?” Jax asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

“Why you? Why did you come to get me? Why are you here now? What’s with the kiss in the sitting room?”

“I came to get you because it’s what I’ve wanted to do for fifteen years. I argued for it because I hoped you’d trust me and I wanted the person who came to ask for your help to be someone you could trust. I never thought you should have been exiled to begin with. And I kissed you because I’ve wanted to for twenty-one years. You taste even better as a woman.”

“Is that why you left without telling me? Because I didn’t taste good enough?” One of her eyebrows slid up.

“What happened to that sweet girl, anyway?”

“She killed her husband as he attempted to steal priceless scrolls to sell for more elixir and whores. That same night, when she was imprisoned in the capital city, the Nameless came and razed the entire city of her birth. Not only did she lose her husband but her mother, brothers and two older sisters. Then her own father turned on her and exiled her to save their collective skins. She took on the responsibility for the fuckups of the Council and those in charge. For everyone who should have protected her but failed her and then exiled her to cover up their neglect. She lived alone without anyone but her best friend in another universe that killed her slowly every day of the last fifteen years. Being sweet gets you stomped on, Jax. Being wary keeps you alive.”

Mrs. Dakins tsked as she put a plate heaping with food before Rhea and another down for Jax. She kissed the top of Rhea’s head. “You’re back now. Wiser and older, and you’ll not let them mess with you this time, I’d wager. Now eat up.”

Rhea’s eyes were amused as she thanked the cook and grabbed a slice of bread, beginning to eat.

“I left because you scared me.” If she could be so painfully honest, so could he. “The way I felt for you terrified me. I was twenty-two. Gods, so damned young! I had a life and a whole lot of women ahead of me and you were there suddenly, filling my every damned thought. You were eighteen then, you’d just grown into your body. Long, leggy, your breasts, well, they still look damned fine. Anyway, the way you looked at me, the way your body reacted when I touched you...” Pausing, he closed his eyes briefly before continuing. “So eager to let me love you. You wanted to learn from me, to please me and be pleased. I suppose part of it was your magic, but mostly it was just you.

“I ran because I couldn’t face it. And when I got back, you’d moved on to my brother of all people. And he loved you. And you loved him. So I stepped back and into my lab and jumped into as many beds as I could. And in doing so I wasn’t here to watch Paul’s descent.”

She nodded, not speaking. Knowing that if she did, she'd lose control. And control was all she had at the moment.

A comfortable silence settled between them as they finished eating. Finally, taking a deep breath, she allowed herself to look at him. "I need to sleep. I've been up a very long time. I haven't Practiced in fifteen years. I didn't have all my magic on Earth. So I'll need some help. Who will I be working with?"

Okay. She seemed to just be ignoring all he'd told her. So be it. For now. But Jax meant to have her. This time for good. He'd bide his time but not forever.

"Me."

"What?"

"I'm not good enough to work without the scrolls, but almost. Together, you and I should be very strong. Better than you and Paul were when he was well. Sex magic is a secondary trait in my family, you know." Lucky for him, even though having a primary Talent at sex magic was rare, it was among the secondary Talents that ran in his family. Meaning he wasn't strong enough to Practice alone but he was excellent with a partner.

She stood. "Fine. I'll see you in ten hours." She turned without another word to him, thanked the cook and went upstairs to sleep.

He watched her walk out of the room and sighed heavily.

"Well? You going to lose her again, you fool?"

Surprised, Jax looked over at Mrs. Dakins. "I...no, ma'am. Not if I can help it."

She narrowed her eyes at him for a moment and then nodded quickly. "Good." And turned her back to get to work.

* * * * *

All Rhea could think about once she slid into her bed was Jax. The way his hands felt on her, his mouth. Gods, the first time he'd spread her thighs and loved her with his mouth. That thought made her wet and achy. The girth of his cock as he slid into her

body, stretching her, filling her up. Nothing and no one had ever felt that good. At one time she'd tried to tell herself it was just youth. Paul had been loving and giving for the first two years they'd been together. He'd been a good lover. And when she arrived on Earth she'd taken many lovers, faceless and nameless, just to try to fill the empty spot inside herself. No man she'd ever been with had come close to making her feel like Jax had.

She could admit to herself that she had been forever changed by Jax. That he was written into her so deep he was indelible. But the pertinent fact was that he'd abandoned her and thrown her love away and it would not pay to forget it.

It took Rhea a good long time tossing and turning before she remembered she had her magic back and spelled herself to sleep, hoping it would be dreamless.

When she awoke some eight hours later, Sarai was back, lying against her in the bed in her minx form. Rhea got out from under the blankets carefully and went into the large bathroom and took a very long shower and dressed for travel. It was the predawn deep purple of night outside. A color she was once so very sure she'd never see again.

"When do we leave?" Sarai asked sleepily, sitting up to stretch when Rhea came back into the bedroom.

"You don't have to come, Sarai. You can stay here with your family. They must have missed you. How are they?"

Sarai conjured up clothes for her humanoid form and padded downstairs behind Rhea. "They're all well. My mother sends her love to you. And of course I'm coming. That's what I do. That's what *we* do. I hear Jax is going to be your partner."

"I'd forgotten how quickly news travels around here." Rhea spoke over her shoulder and then turned, smiling, to see her cook up and already at work. "Mrs. Dakins, what are you doing awake already?"

"I'm making you a breakfast and packing some food for the trip. I'm coming along as well."

Ushering Rhea to the table, Mrs. Dakins put a steaming mug of coffee before her. It had been a pleasant surprise indeed to find that Earth had coffee too. "You don't need to do that. I was just telling Sarai to stay here with her family. I don't want you endangering yourselves to come along to the borderlands with me."

"And I believe I heard Miss Sarai tell you she was coming because that's what she does. As do I. You'll need to eat while you're there. I'm your cook. You're a smart girl, figure it out." A plate filled with food showed up on the table for each of them and a basket of fresh rolls followed.

Jax strolled in and sat in the chair closest to Rhea. "Morning. Or night. Whatever. How are you feeling today?" He nodded his thanks to Mrs. Dakins as she put food before him.

"We've got a whole caravan coming to the borderlands, apparently." Rhea's voice was wry. She used her sarcasm to hold back the gulp of air she'd wanted to take when he came into the room. Paul had been handsome in a boyish way, almost pretty. But Jax was all manly man with his predator's walk. His eyes were the deepest midnight blue and he had a well-trimmed beard. Ebony hair trailed down his back, caught in a leather tie at the nape of his neck when it wasn't braided at the temples. His shirt was sleeveless and he wore leather bands at each biceps, marked with the runes of his Caste. He'd been a scientist of fairly high renown but Rhea had never met any other scientist who made her toes curl the same way.

"Well, we'll need a cook and I never imagined Sarai would stay here without you." He winked at Mrs. Dakins and she laughed.

Rhea put her hands up in surrender. "Okay, thank you both. It should be safe. Sarai, if it gets dangerous, open a rift and take her out of there." That would be very last resort, a rift could go anywhere if opened near the wards.

"I'll open a rift and shove her through. I'm not leaving you. We've gone through this a thousand times."

"Ugh! You know, I hear that some people have familiars that are obedient. I get the cat with attitude."

"I heard that, human." Amusement lit Sarai's eyes.

"And I don't get thanks?" Jax teased her.

"For what?" Her eyebrow rose.

For soon delivering a fucking that will make you beg for more. "For accompanying you to the borderlands."

She waved her hand at that. "BFD. You'll ride in a car with some beautiful women, stay in a castle that's older and more revered than anything here and eat gourmet food for a few days while we rebuild the boundaries and wards."

"BFD?"

"Big fucking deal. I learned several useful phrases in my decade and a half on Earth."

"Wonderful," he said, tone laced with sarcasm.

In truth, he liked all the mannerisms she'd surprised him with so far. He liked getting to know this new side to someone he thought he'd known so well before. So the trip down would be nice and getting her alone would be even better. And he'd get to see her naked. Touch her, love her the way he'd longed to for twenty-one years. What was fresh bread and a moldering pile of stone compared to that?

They stood after eating and got ready to leave. They'd be unable to open a rift with any level of accuracy anywhere near the borderlands. The unique magic of the place coupled with the magical wards to hold the Nameless out canceled out that kind of inter-realm travel there. So they'd take one of the larger transports for the half-day's drive.

Rhea got in and wrapped herself in the plush blanket to ward off the early morning chill. Sarai curled up and went back to sleep and Mrs. Dakins rode forward with some

of the other staff who were coming to the borderlands with them, including two burly guards.

Jax settled himself next to Rhea and breathed her in. The color had returned to her skin and he could see the magic pulsing through her. They'd create powerful magic together, he knew that. She was one of the strongest Practitioners he'd ever met, and definitely the most Talented. She was immensely powerful and it was a major bonus that her medium was sex magic and he'd be her partner. Sex magic was rare enough and mainly confined to three Castes of the Twelve, and none alive had more Talent than Rhea did.

"Tell me about your life. What did you do on Earth?" He fisted his hands to keep from reaching for her.

"Not much to tell."

"What did you do for a living? Where did you live? Your abode was so small compared to your home here. It took me a while to find you. It's a lot harder to lock there. Did you have a man?" He asked the last as casually as he could.

"I was a scholar of science and magic. I traveled a lot, all over the world, lecturing. Not a bad living really. They provided me with places to live. It's harder to lock because your magic is dampened. The longer you stayed, the weaker it would have become."

"A man? Did you have one?"

"More than one. I was there for fifteen years. A virtual menagerie if you must know. I kept them all on shelves and pulled them down when I needed a vigorous fucking."

He started and then narrowed his eyes. "Mmm hmmm. And were any of them special to you?"

"Do you mean did I play with one more than the others? They were all special, Jax. I'm just that magnanimous."

He tried to look annoyed by her ridiculous truncation of his name but in truth it pleased him.

“And it’s not like it matters now anyway. Even if I did have a man back there, I’m here now.”

Well he wanted to know if he was going to have to erase the memory of some beloved from her time on Earth or not. She was so evasive and contrary.

“Are you married?”

He laughed. “No. The only woman I ever wanted to marry has been very far away for the last fifteen years.”

“Watch out. Sarai can be very violent during sex, you know. And children are out because you can’t breed across species. Other than that and how she likes to groom you when she’s sleepy, you two have a chance.”

Sarai’s ear flicked up and her pelt jumped in a few places until Rhea snorted and broke into laughter. A yellow eye opened and stared at Rhea for a few long moments. Heaving a heavy sigh, Sarai closed her eyes again and went back to sleep.

Jax let her evade, for the moment. But he’d be back. Rhea was his. He’d missed his opportunity all those years ago but he was a smarter man now and one who was willing to seduce her back to his side. Once he got her there, he planned to keep her there.

* * * * *

Rhea tried to pretend that Jax’s presence didn’t affect her, but the heat of his body seeped into hers and his scent filled the air. *And gods how she wanted him to touch her.* Relief filled her when they began to descend into the long valley that marked the borderlands between the central coast and cities and the western shores that lay just outside the warding walls.

There was another set of wards just to the south of the western shores. Obviously it'd been breached if the Nameless had been able to flow in and decimate the entire population.

A large keep sat on a bluff overlooking the water and lands to the south. Bleached white towers rose toward the amethyst sky proudly. Large walls stood around the keep and a lush garden, untamed and overflowing, roiled through the inner courtyards. The keeps were magical bastions against the Nameless from the time when it had roamed more free and deadly and they'd needed constant vigilance. The Nameless had been contained and then it stayed away from the cities long enough that people got lazy. And then it had devastated tens of thousands in one night.

With that thought on her mind, she got out of the car, and the wrongness in the air hit Rhea like a punch. It felt unnatural. The normally clean, crisp smell of the sea was masked by something foul in the distance. The breeze that came from the water hung thick instead of light. The taint was palpable.

"It hangs like smoke in the breeze. The stench of the Nameless." Looking around warily, she searched for physical signs but saw none. Yet.

Jax came to stand next to her while their things were unloaded and taken into the keep. "Yes. It's out there."

"And it knows we're here." Rhea could feel the cold regard of that eye of evil. She'd felt it twice before. Once when she turned eighteen and did her first full-fledged Practice. She'd come face-to-face with it in the ether. Several months before Paul had died in fact, and not too very long before she'd been exiled. For some reason the Nameless had appeared with a great well of strength and it'd taken her and others using the scrolls to push it back and close the boundary lines.

Rubbing her hands up her arms, Rhea warily looked out over the shoreline. The pristine, white sandy beaches and the small fishing boats in the harbor below were signs of normalcy. But she felt the end of that normalcy coming. Dread, cold and heavy, sank through her.

"Shall we go inside? We'll prepare and begin work. I feel we don't have long." Jax's face was serious and Rhea turned to him, nodding.

Inside the keep the echoes of generations of magic reverberated through the hallways. It was impressive and awe-inspiring to be there, to be one of those whose magic would protect the people of their world. She only hoped she wouldn't fail them.

"We've prepared the uppermost chamber for you." Mrs. Dakins met them at the base of the grand stairway. "Your bags are there and have been put in the adjoining suites."

Jax turned to Rhea, holding out his arm. Taking a deep breath, she reached out and laid her hand on it and let him lead her up.

Outside the doors to the main chamber, she let go. "I'm going to go change. I'll be in in a few minutes."

Standing in front of the mirror in the suite adjoining the room where she'd Practice with Jax, Rhea looked at herself. A frisson of fear slithered through her. Would she still have her power? Would she be what she was before? As strong? Could she Practice still after so long without her magic?

The need to Practice again was strong within her, along with the need for connection with a partner.

Sarai helped her out of her clothes and Rhea bathed in water laden with ritual herbs.

She donned a loose white robe and with one last look in the mirror, headed through the doors into the other room.

Jax was waiting there, kneeling on the bed.

The echoes of magic past swirled about her like dust motes. The doors and windows opened to a battlement that faced the walls of wards. The gauzy curtains blew gently on the breeze. Up there, inside the keep, the air wasn't as fetid as it was down below.

The bed Jax rested on dominated the room and had been carved from a single tree that was hundreds of years old. Rhea had Practiced in this room once when she'd been a lot younger. It had been more a trial run with her magic than anything else.

The expectancy was heavy this time, the stakes much higher.

Her bare feet walked over the cool, smooth wood as she made her way toward him.

He was beautiful there, ebony hair loose about his neck and shoulders like a spill of midnight. Shirtless, his broad shoulders and chest made her stomach clench. His thighs bulged from his position, so muscular and thick. He wore nothing and it was impossible not to take in the line of hair leading to his erect cock. Magic pulsed from him, catching her magic's rhythm in a seductive answer.

"Rhea..." The unspoken hung in the air like a spell and she shook her head sharply, not wanting him to speak it. Wanting this to be magic and magic only. She could not afford to open herself up to him. The memory of loss was still too sharp to bear.

He knelt there looking at her, eyes greedily soaking up her every move as she walked toward him. Her skin was beautiful, glimmering with magic as he caught glimpses of it as she moved.

He'd never seen a more beautiful sight as this woman he loved. He'd thought he loved that Sa'Rhea of his youth, but no. He'd loved the idea of her. This Rhea was his woman. A woman who'd endured and was strong and a bit remote. A woman who'd be a true partner.

After they beat the Nameless back.

Dropping her robe, Rhea reached out to take the hand he'd held out to her and joined him on the bed. Her body was lush, fecund and filled with magic. The sex arced from her and wove a spell around him.

Once both their hands joined, they moved close, bodies just touching, and began to Practice.

Magic moved through different mediums. Anger, fear, joy. But most powerful was sex magic because it encompassed all of these things and radiated from two Practitioners. The peak of sex was the peak of the spell.

There was usually companionship between Practitioners of sex magic. In this case, it was more. Jax wanted her desperately.

Leaning in, he heard her murmuring the beginning of the spell. His lips touched the column of her neck and she purred at the contact. The magic expanded and began to fill the room.

The undertow caught him, drove through his body, his senses. His cock hardened impossibly as he rolled his hips, driving himself into the softer flesh of her belly. Hands sliding up the soft flesh of her torso found her breasts, palming the nipples.

Opening up his own Talent, he pushed it hard into hers. Their magic, united, brought a gasp of pleasure from her lips. Her head lolled back and he brought his lips down her neck to her nipple.

How could he have forgotten her taste? The salt of her skin, the sweet essence of her flesh and the tang of her magic locked into his senses like they'd never left his mind. Her nipple, hard and eager, pressed against his tongue. Her back arched as he dragged the edge of his teeth over the sensitive flesh.

When her hands moved up his biceps and into his hair they left a tingle in their wake.

The spell began to build, the intensity of it discernable on the air, like heat from the ground on a hot day.

He pushed her back and climbed between her thighs, between those incredibly long legs. Her eyes were glazed and faraway as she gave herself over to Practice. As the vessel for the Talent, she'd weave the magic and her partner would drive the pleasure for the magic to ride through and be delivered.

Kissing up the inside of her thighs, his lips just barely skimmed over her heated pussy. From his vantage point he looked up the line of her body and watched her nipples darken and harden.

His hair skimmed over her legs and belly, her fingertips rested at his temples. He devoured every inch of her with avarice. With mouth and teeth and tongue, with fingertips and palms and the entirety of his body rubbing against hers.

Twenty-one years he'd wanted this. Wanted her under him and over him, wanted her around him. That would come soon. Forcing down the intensity of his need to be inside her, he went back to trailing licks and kisses up the backs of her legs and toward her core.

Spreading her to his gaze, the sight of her cunt, cocoa brown and glistening, swollen and ready, slammed into him. Certainly, he'd never needed anything more than to lean in and taste her.

Suddenly she sat up on a gasp. The room darkened.

"It's here."

The wall of magic they'd been weaving tighter wavered. Weakened. Fear replaced pleasure and the spell began to break down.

"Rhea, focus." Jax's voice was urgent. He felt her trying to regain control but it wasn't working. If she failed, they'd die and make the Nameless even stronger.

He pressed her back to the bed and kissed her hard, lining his cock up and pressing into her deep and hard.

"You're mine. I control your pleasure, Rhea. That thing does not get you. Now I'm going to fuck you like you've wanted me to for two decades. You got me?" His voice was a low growl in her ear and he felt her body respond, felt her magic stop wavering and begin to flow out again.

She was so tight and hot he didn't know how long he'd last. He wanted it to be hours, she felt so good around his cock. He knew he'd have to fuck her a few hundred times more before he got anywhere near sated with her.

Holding her wrists above her head, he thrust into her cunt relentlessly. Sweat trickled down his spine, his orgasm began to build at the base of his balls. She writhed beneath him, making soft sounds of whimpered pleasure around the spell she whispered.

Grinding his pubic bone into hers, he felt the swollen bundle of her clit. She rolled her hips up with a gasp and the Talent streamed from her, stronger. The room was no longer as dark and the stench had lessened. He moved his attention back to her, to making her come.

"Come for me, Rhea. Your pleasure is mine, give it to me." Leaning down, he took a nipple between his teeth and she thrust back at him, rubbing her cunt against him, straining against his body to get the friction on her clit.

He was so close his control hung by a thread as she arched and writhed, and suddenly a cry broke from her lips as her pussy clamped down on him. Orgasm claimed her and a last burst of magic overflowed from them both when his climax exploded from the head of his cock.

In the aftermath he collapsed against her, face buried in the crook of her neck. Her pulse pounded under his lips. He stayed, buried deep within her, her pussy still spasming around his cock, until he began to soften.

"Thank you." Her words were quiet.

He rolled to the side and looked at her. "It wasn't very finessed of me. Next time we'll make it better. I'll take my time. I only got the barest taste of your pussy." He grinned.

"Thank you for helping me focus my magic." Her lips were pursed, he couldn't tell if it was ire or she was trying not to laugh. "If you hadn't taken over like that it would have broken through."

She sat up and when he reached out all he got was air. Frowning, he watched her pull the robe back on and he got up to follow her outside onto the battlement.

The horizon was dark.

"It's still out there."

"Damn it."

"The wards here are as strong as we can make them. We need to move inland, continuing to strengthen them elsewhere."

"That's not going to work forever."

Rhea felt the cold regard of that darkness all the way down to her soul. "I know. We're going to have to face it in open battle before this is over."

"You aren't ready for that."

"Not right now, no." Turning, she went back inside.

"We should work together more after a break. Work on concentration. You've been gone for fifteen years. Your power is still so very strong, but you were unfocused. If you hadn't been as strong, it might have broken through."

Rhea nodded absently as she looked out over that dark horizon from her place near the bed. "Yes. And we should leave at first light tomorrow. Go to the next keep. And the next, to continue to strengthen the wards."

"It's stronger now."

She turned and faced him. He saw the fear shining in her eyes. "I know. The lives of the ones it took have made it stronger." She shook her head to clear it. "But it seems like there was something else too."

"Come back to bed. Let me love you slow this time." Jax reached out to touch her but she stepped away.

"Jax, there's to be no recreational sex here. We have a job to do. We Practice together but there's nothing to be gained with play."

He narrowed his eyes and stalked into her space but she didn't back up. "This isn't play, Rhea. I made a mistake then. A big one. But I aim to make it right between us."

His head dipped for a kiss but she put her hand on the center of his chest to hold him back. "There's nothing wrong between us, Jax." She stepped neatly away. "Now, I need to work."

He watched as she walked just outside the room and brought her bag back inside with her. Sitting on the bed, his eyes followed her movements as she sprinkled salt in the four corners of the room and came back to the center.

Eyes closed, she struck three wooden matches at once, the acrid scent of the sulfur harsh against his senses. She breathed it in and slowly breathed out again.

Her long body folded itself gracefully as she sat on the floor. Magic began to pulse around her. He felt it beat against his skin. Panicked at first, he relaxed and let it flow against his skin like a warm caress.

Rhea opened herself up and cast her consciousness out into the ether. It was the first time she'd done it in twelve years. The first few years on Earth she'd been able to but as her magic was drained away she'd lost the ability. Still, she kept herself tethered to Jax, felt his reassuring presence back on the other plane.

The Nameless was there, just outside her reach, in the corner of her vision. She held her place, conquering her fear of failing as she drew her power from the air. The Nameless gave her its regard and she felt it cold and dark. In response, her strength grew as she soaked up the energy on that plane and slowly let herself fall back into herself.

The light had paled. Long shadows played on the floors and walls and Jax lay there on the bed as he watched her.

"You were gone so long. I would have worried but your body was so relaxed. I felt you along my spine. I just knew you were all right." He swung his legs off the bed and went to her, holding out a hand to help her up.

Stiffness held her muscles and she hissed at the feeling as she stood. "I'm too old to sit on a hard floor for hours."

"I'll have a hot bath run for you, shall I?"

She began to refuse but changed her mind. A hot bath would help her muscles and enable her to relax before she ate dinner.

"Yes. Thank you. Please tell them I'll be in shortly. I just want to put my bag back in my room."

"You can sleep with me, you know. I'd like that."

She sighed. "Jax, this isn't going to happen. We're friends. Nothing more."

He snorted. "You keep telling yourself that, Rhea. When it finally happens between us, when the walls come down and it's more than Practice and it's real, it's going to be incredible. Just Jaac and Rhea, not to save the world, but just you and me. I'll wait for you to come around. It'll be delicious when you do." Winking, he turned and walked out into the hallway, whistling.

Pissed off, she slammed back into her suite, changed into a casual robe and tied her hair up before heading to the bathing chamber.

Jax smiled the whole time he arranged for her bath and their dinner. Oh he'd break down her defenses all right. He'd felt her as they Practiced, he knew what they shared was more than just magic to her.

* * * * *

The room that held the large tub was steamy and fragrant. Immediately, Rhea began to relax as the scent of coconut reached her. Mrs. Dakins taking care of her with a bit of kitchen magic. Smiling, she dropped her robe and stepped into the water.

She knew what had to be done. As she lay there, letting her muscles relax, she realized they'd have to call the population in the area surrounding the keep back to the capital where they'd be safe. Until they could get the Nameless under control it would simply be too dangerous to let them stay there.

After a long soak she went back into her room and changed, heading down to dinner.

She sat at the table and Jax pushed a glass in her direction. "Drink, you're bound to be dehydrated after this afternoon."

Nodding, she took several long drinks of the cool fruit juice and ate silently for a few minutes, refueling before speaking.

"We're going to have to call the people here back. Away from here and toward safety." She sat back before starting another course.

He looked concerned. "They aren't going to like that."

"The people here whose lives are in danger or the Council?"

"It's a political nightmare to try to get people to leave their homes like that. We got the wards back in place. Don't you think it's an overreaction to call them back?"

She blinked at him in disbelief. "Overreaction? Like those who died in Ra'Ken perhaps? Or those ten thousand four hundred and six who used to populate the entire western shore? You don't believe what you're saying, Jax. You can't. You felt it today. Those wards will hold, yes. For tonight, for the next week maybe. But if it comes back and pushes like it did today and we aren't here, what then?"

Savagely, she tore a piece of bread and used it to mop up the gravy on her plate. "Look, I know it's a political nightmare. I'm not doing this lightly. But I can't not make this recommendation, Jax. They have no protection once we go if these wards fail."

"They won't do it if he doesn't back you up." Sarai sat down at the table and began to eat.

"I can't make his choices for him. I can only make my own." Rhea stood and went to the sink to rinse off her plate.

Before she walked out of the room she turned and looked at him once more and was startled by the intensity in his eyes. "We should move to the next keep first thing in

the morning. If we're to have them fall back to at least the next wards toward the capital, we need to get the orders out now."

She left without waiting for an answer.

"She's putting me in a difficult position." He looked up into Sarai's yellow eyes.

"She's wanting you to do the right thing, Jax. The only real difficulty is talking yourself around doing it. She's not..." Sarai broke off with a shake of her head.

"What? Tell me, Sarai. Surely you know I still care about her deeply."

"It's not mine to tell."

Chapter Three

Rhea awoke as the sun rose. Her second morning back. Things should have been easy. Joyous even. A homecoming with people happy to see her, but no. She got ominous threats of death to tens of thousands, if not millions, and political undercurrents she felt but didn't understand completely.

Getting out of bed she went to the windows and threw them open to the morning air. It was then she saw the trails of people moving inland. Toward the capital. A sigh of relief broke from her.

Dressing quickly, she grabbed breakfast and went to the cars, where everyone was waiting to go. She saw Jax and nodded as she got in.

"Thank you for backing me up." She settled in and he sat beside her. Far too close for her peace of mind.

"It's only to Ma'ken. More wards there and no signs of weakening. And it's voluntary. Those who want to stay can do so. I sent home word last night and workers are in the city below helping those who wish to leave."

Reaching out, she squeezed his hand quickly, but the warmth of his skin radiated up her arm. She knew he'd taken a political risk and she was relieved he'd chosen the lives of their people over political expediency. Gods, how he got to her, even then, with such a silly thing. Only it wasn't silly. It was important and he thought so too.

Jax watched her as the miles passed. Her reaction when she realized he'd gone forward with the evacuation gave him hope. He'd broken through one more barrier.

As they drove, they spoke of their lives over the last fifteen years. She fascinated him. Her intelligence had grown and her knowledge of magic and the scientific foundations of Talent impressed him. After they'd stopped the Nameless, he planned to ask her to teach at the university with him. He thought she'd make an excellent teacher

to the younger Practitioners. She had a way of speaking about magic that seemed so straightforward and uncomplicated. He liked that.

The next keep was inland several hundred miles and when they arrived after many hours' driving, Rhea sat forward in her seat. The horizon was dark. The air crackled with negative magics attempting to short-circuit the wards.

"Let's get inside and working right away. I think we made it not a moment too soon." Rhea practically jumped out as they came to a stop, and began to give quiet orders to the staff while Jax had their things carried inside.

This keep wasn't as old as the last. The location was remote but the wards were aided by the mineral deposits in the mountains that flanked the plateau the keep stood on.

She went up the stairs and headed into a room adjoining the Practice suite and he did the same.

Running the water for the cleansing, she poured the herbs and flowers into the water. Words as old as time left her lips as she stepped in and immersed herself and then stood, the water cascading down her body.

The robe was white, shot with silver thread. The silver magnified the magic. Her familial runes marked the edging of the silk. Her bare feet showed with each step toward the Practice room, where she knew Jax would be waiting for her.

Her heart quickened at the thought.

They could have Practiced anywhere, but Practice rooms were furnished and sanctified in a way that protected the people within as well as amplified the power to carry outward.

Jax watched as Rhea walked the four corners and opened the space. He felt the stagnant air and the oppressive feel of the Nameless flow outward as she worked. He appreciated her addition of the cleansing magic to ritual. Her hair was loose and still wet from her ritual cleansing. It slid around her shoulders as she moved. His hand

tightened in the comforter on the bed as the sense memory of it floating against his skin hit him.

She turned and came to him and he saw the power shimmer against her flesh. A gasp broke through his lips as she dropped the robe and stepped to him.

Shaking his head, he held his hand out to stay her and went to her instead. "I want you standing," he murmured against her collarbone. "For now." He maneuvered her so that her back was to the bed and took a moment to breathe her in as she centered herself and opened herself to her Talent.

Magic began to flow out of her in a warm stream as her eyes closed and her lips parted. The spell wrapped around him, around his own Talent, and he dropped kisses over her neck and the hollow of her throat. His hands found her breasts and palmed her nipples. Those swollen points pressed into his touch and her magic intensified as he rolled and pulled, tugging them.

Her taste called out to him and he leaned down and flicked his tongue across first one nipple then the other, pressing her breasts together, moving back and forth rapidly. Her power rose, filling the room, the murmured words of the spell echoing outward.

Graceful hands slid up his biceps and into his hair, holding his head to her, taking strength in how he gave her balance, kept her from falling.

Bowled over by her effect on him, he fell to his knees before her. He didn't want to distract her then but he made a promise that after the spell was through he'd tell her how beautiful she was there. He looked up the line of her body to see her head tilted back, breasts high and proud—the curves of her body called to him to touch her, love her.

And so he did. He waited, letting his own Talent build until the timing was right for him to plunge it into hers. With that transfer established—the connection between them, their power mingled, emotion flowing between them—he brushed his hands up the silky skin of her legs. Up over the curves of her thighs, thumbs brushing against the neatly trimmed hair that shielded her pussy, and her hips rocked forward.

The seductive scent of her desire rose from her body in waves. Savage triumph roared through him. He'd conquer her bit by bit. Each time they Practiced together he'd break her defenses down more and more until she had no place left to hide from him.

Pushing her back onto the bed, he pulled her ass to the edge and stayed on his knees between her thighs. He had been rushed the last time he'd had the opportunity to taste her pussy and he wasn't going to be this time. He planned to take it slowly. Enjoy each and every fold of flesh.

His thumbs pulled her open and he stared his fill as he slid the pads up and down the wet lips of her sex, and her body squirmed even as her power expanded as her arousal rose.

Unable to resist any longer, he pressed a thumb inside her as he leaned in to take a long lick from perineum up to the swollen button of her clit. His body tightened as her taste sang through his system. His senses filled with her essence. Her pussy tasted like magic and he had to have more.

A twist of his wrist and two fingers pressed into her and a third tickled her anus while his tongue flicked, licked and teased her clit.

A ragged sob of need broke from her mouth and her magic swelled to such an extent he felt it hot against his skin. He was the channel so it could leave her and move outward. On the outer edge of his consciousness he felt the Nameless rise and press back. As her partner, it was his job to keep her focused on Practice, to build the medium—pleasure—on which she could deliver her spell with her Talent.

Shoving her thighs wider, he went back to eating her pussy and felt her gain control.

Damn it, she was so wet and hot. He held her juicy pussy to his mouth, serving himself of her body. Her breath caught, he knew she was close. He added a third finger and sucked her clit into his mouth, slightly grazing it with his teeth. Her back arched and a ragged moan came from her and a bass hum echoed as the burst of her climax powered her Talent and the Nameless was pushed back a bit more.

Standing quickly, he took his cock in his hand and slid into her slick, hot cunt in one thrust. Her inner walls fluttered and clenched around him as he hilted himself deep within her.

Her eyes came open and she reached out and grabbed his biceps. Pulling herself up, she took a long lick up the wall of his chest. The muscles leapt at her touch. His cock pulsed at the sharp bite of her nails as they dug into the flesh of his upper arms.

Because she was so tall, they fit there like that. Wrapping her long legs around his waist, her cunt opened more and he slid in even deeper.

"Fuck me," she slurred and her head dropped back, sable hair pooling down the curve of her back, breasts arched toward him so tantalizing he had to lean in to take a nipple between his teeth.

And then he began to thrust. Dragging himself almost all the way out of her body and then pushing back in, the wet embrace of her body nearly undoing him before he even got started.

Taking a deep breath, he focused and centered his power, sending it in a steady stream to her, aiding her even as he devoured her body. Over and over he thrust into her, his own pleasure gathering at the base of his spine and spreading outward, through every cell of his body with electric ferocity.

Her nipple beaded against his tongue as he undulated his hips, fucking into her hard and deep. A soft, needy cry whispered from her lips when he bit down. *Ah, she liked a little pain with her pleasure*—he smiled at the discovery. Tucking that away for the time he'd be able to love her without the pretense of Practice, he refocused on the task at hand.

Releasing her nipple, he grabbed her hair in one fist and pulled her mouth to his, breathing power into her as he tasted her lips. Their tastes mingled, the salty sweet tang of her pussy and the velvet taste of her lips, as her magic left them. His own magic accented the mélange of flavors, deep and rich. Her fingers tightened on his biceps and dimly he felt the Nameless stumble back even more.

Sucking her tongue into his mouth, he took one of her hands and slid it down to her pussy. Fingers entwined with hers, he found her slick clit and played over it and felt her inner walls respond, rippling around his cock.

As her orgasm began to build she felt it within her, felt it fill her up until she threatened to overflow. She tasted it—her desire of this man inside her—metallic on her tongue. The scent of it filled her nostrils but she pushed aside the panic and used it to add extra strength to her spell.

The Nameless was different here. Smug, for want of a better word. Oh she'd knocked it on its ass all right. But it wasn't banished like it should have been. Her Talent had re-knitted the wards where they'd weakened but there was something wrong that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Better to think of that than how much she never wanted this moment with Jax buried balls-deep in her to end. Wet sounds of just how much she enjoyed the time with him echoed through the room. She didn't think she'd ever been so wet in her life as when he touched her.

His cock was thick and long and he filled her to the point of too much. So much the intensity of feeling rode right on the edge of pain, but it hurt just right. His hair swept forward and caressed the skin of her arms and over the sides of her breasts.

Wrapping his Talent inside of hers, she grabbed her climax and rode it, let it send her spell out into the air around them as her back bowed and the last words of her spell burst from her lips.

"Fuck..." Jax gasped as her cunt gripped him in climax and his balls pulled up tight and orgasm shot from his toes and scalp and out the head of his cock. Everything he had, everything he felt, poured into her.

After several long moments he let his weight carry them both to the bed and pulled her tight against his body while he regained his breath.

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Rhea allowed herself the comfort of his body and the cadence of his heartbeat until she regained her senses. Exhausted from Practice and from the sex, she pulled healing breaths in through her nose and meditated while she let herself recharge.

After some minutes she sat up, still a bit shaky. A warm hand at the small of her back supported her. For a moment she despaired at how much she wanted to lean into him, let him help her. Take the comfort he offered.

But that was a dead end. He'd abandoned her once before and she had no intention of letting him do it again. She'd survived far worse than feeling a bit alone and she wouldn't trade a big heartache named Jax for a few days or weeks of comfort.

"There's something different." Standing, she reached for the robe she'd dropped and wrapped it around herself, shielding herself from him if only in a minor sense.

He felt no such compulsion and came to stand with her at the windows, still naked, half-erect cock teasing her senses. The heat of his body, the scent of his skin, married with her own scent, their sex hanging in the air, seduced her, and she leaned out to take a breath of fresh air.

"Different how?" Jax leaned against the windowsill and watched her through very alert eyes. An arrogant smile played at the corner of his lips. The bastard always was sure of his own allure.

She crossed the room to be away from him. "I don't know. It's not going away like it should." Shaking her head, she fought for the right words. "It could be that I'm not as powerful now but I don't think so. We generated a hell of a lot of power today and yesterday. It should have erased all weakness from the wards. Should have pushed the Nameless far, far away.

"And we did knock it on its ass, no doubt. But the wards are still weak. Even here with the mountains as an amplifier. It doesn't make sense."

"Let's return and report this to the Council. They should know what's going on."

Sighing, she turned and shoved her hair into a knot. "Fine. But in my opinion, we need to be moving along the entire borderlands to deal with these wards. This is our first line of defense. If it fails..." Rhea shrugged.

"All right. I agree with that assessment. But we'll need to get direction on that anyway. So let's go back and talk to them and then we'll be free to keep moving. And perhaps on our way back from the frontier wards we can strengthen the secondary wards and the ones around the capital." His eyes took note of her slightly shaking hands as she clutched the robe to her body. It didn't escape his notice that she'd practically leapt across the room when he sidled next to her. Oh yeah, she was going down. When she finally broke and let him in, he'd relish every moment.

Until then, though, they had to deal with a very real problem. Because she was more powerful now than she had been fifteen years before. Most Practitioners became more powerful with age so it wasn't like that was a surprise. But her perception that something was different with the Nameless was disturbing and he only hoped the Council listened to her because she was their big weapon. Most likely their only weapon.

"Let's go now. Not wait until tomorrow."

Her sense of urgency caused panic to flow through his system. He bowed his head. "Of course. You get cleaned up and I'll go get everyone ready to leave. If we drive straight through we can be back just after daybreak tomorrow. We'll leave most everyone at the halfway point so we can get right back to work when we finish with the Council."

"Thank you," she murmured and went back into the connecting room, closing the door gently behind herself.

Cleaning up quickly, she dressed and grabbed her bags and headed back downstairs.

She paused for a moment before she reached the bottom of the grand staircase. Jax stood in the doorway, directing people as they repacked the transports and readied to

leave. His features were set in a hard line, dark hair pulled back from his face, hands on his hips. Lean hips, flat stomach, clever fingers. His skin was so hard and hot. A flush broke over her and her hand went to her throat as she devoured the sight of him.

His head snapped around and his gaze locked with hers. The hard line of his lips softened into a wicked smile. Oh he knew exactly what she was thinking. And he liked it. Even so, Rhea couldn't stop herself from smiling back at him and shaking her head as she finished taking the stairs.

As she walked toward Jax, someone immediately came to take her bags.

"I'll take you up on that promise in your eyes when we get back to D'ar." His voice, a silky undertone, caressed her senses. Sexy bastard.

"In your dreams." She snorted, walked outside and got into one of the transports.

Chuckling, he nodded to Sarai, who watched him from the other side of the yard.

* * * * *

The drive back to D'ar was quiet. Once they'd gotten away from the mountains, Jax had been able to get in contact with the Council and set up a meeting for first thing the next morning.

She dug in her bag and pulled out a black velvet pouch.

"What's that?" He nodded his head toward the pouch.

She looked at him, not even realizing he'd been watching her. "Tarot cards. I brought them back for Emmia. They're special. A reader, a woman with probably more magical ability than anyone I encountered on Earth, gave them to me three years ago. She told me I'd need them to see clearly. I have the feeling she meant now."

Rhea pulled down the small console and laid out a soft cloth. Taking a deep breath, she shuffled the deck over and over until it felt right. And then she laid out her own spread.

Nine of Swords—beware isolation. Reach out for help close at hand. She sighed.

Queen of Swords—survival. Reason. Seeker of justice and giver of wisdom. Also a woman who's been hurt and remains wary, sometimes to her detriment. *Okay, I'm getting it. Thank you, universe. Sheesh.*

Ace of Wands—a gift of beginnings. Ability to achieve goals. Reject inaction.

The Chariot—victory. And yet, a message to continue to seek answers and not turn away when puzzled or challenged.

Six of Cups—faced with memory. Be sure the memory does not control you or keep you from moving on.

She put her head back on the seat and closed her eyes. Yeah, she was getting the message. The real question was whether or not she could bear to make the right choices.

"Is it bad?" Jax asked softly, his fingertip trailing up her arm.

"No. Yes. Oh fuck, I don't know. I think it's more about me personally than this thing with the Nameless. Anyway." She sat back up and put the cards back in order before sliding the deck into its velvet bag. The purple cloth followed and both disappeared into her duffel.

She knew he felt her close up but thankfully he just shrugged instead of pressing. She might be tired but she knew he'd be back to the matter later on, he had a gift for knowing when her guard was down.

"Why don't you sleep a while? We'll get into the city at first light and won't have a lot of time before the Council meets. You need to rest."

She nodded and allowed him to wrap a blanket around her. She curled up in the seat and closed her eyes, thinking she wouldn't be able to sleep, but it found her quick enough and she fell into a dreamless rest.

* * * * *

Jax watched her as she slept, mesmerized by the rise and fall of her chest. Of the way her hair looked like midnight against her skin. One of her hands was open just

beneath her cheek. In that one unguarded moment he saw a bit of the Sa'Rhea he'd known in their youth.

When he'd felt her eyes on him as she came down the stairs, his whole body had come alive. Turning and meeting her eyes, seeing her flush and the hand at her throat, he'd known he'd win. Known that eventually he'd break down those defenses and she'd let him into her heart again.

Because Rhea wanted him. Not as a Practice partner but as a woman wants a man. He still affected her as deeply as she him and he held onto that like a life preserver. He would have her once and for all and he'd spend the rest of eternity making her glad she let him in.

But for the time being, he'd continue to slowly seduce her. And try to shield her from the political shitstorm that brewed back home. His advice to evacuate had not been met with a lot of support at the bottom of the table. Luckily, he knew his father would always back him and, surprisingly, Rhea's father had backed her as well. But her paternal uncles would prove troublesome, Jax knew.

He worried that she'd be attacked. That some would say she wasn't strong enough anymore. Although what good that would do them, even if it were true, he couldn't see. Rhea was their last, best hope.

Still, protectiveness edged through him as he put her head in his lap and ran his fingers through her hair, giving in to his need to touch her.

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Rhea awoke to Jax's voice in her ear. "We're here, angel. We've got about an hour before the Council will convene so they're dropping us off at my house. You can clean up and get breakfast and we'll walk over together. Sarai can go visit her family or stay here, it's up to her. All right?"

Rhea realized she'd been sleeping curled in his lap and sat up slowly. She didn't want to go to his home. She felt off balance with him enough as it was. But her home

was a ways from the Council Chambers and from the looks of it his was right across the square.

“Swanky.”

He looked at her oddly.

She laughed and got out of the car, stretching. “Swanky means really nice. Richly appointed.”

He grinned. “Ah. Well, thank you then.” He pointed the way up the steps of a very grand townhouse.

The double doors opened up and Rhea froze for a moment.

“Sa’Rhea, it’s good to see you again at last.”

Heart in her throat, Rhea looked up into the face of Paul and Jax’s paternal grandmother.

“Katai.” Unable to say anything else, she went up the steps quickly and into the embrace of a woman who’d been her biggest ally in the Sarne family. The only one who’d tried to help her with Paul.

Katai drew her inside and they sat on a small bench in the front hallway. Jax stood with Sarai and they watched Rhea weep. Jax knew his grandmother and Rhea were close but he apparently didn’t know the half of it.

“Sweet girl, I’ve missed you. Stop your tears now. It’s over.” Katai kissed the top of Rhea’s bowed head and patted her back slowly. With her other hand she passed Rhea a handkerchief to dry her tears.

After some time, Rhea sat up and looked into the older woman’s face. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

Katai laughed. “I’m not that old!”

Rhea blushed. “I didn’t mean that! I meant I was sure you’d be away in the Eastern Mountains, where it’s safe.”

“She refused to go. She lives here with me.”

Rhea turned to look at Jax, surprised. "Really?"

He laughed then. "What? I love my grandmother. Why shouldn't she live here with me?"

"It was that or with my son and daughter-in-law." Katai's voice made it clear what she thought of that idea. And Rhea couldn't blame her. Her former in-laws were obsessed with position and rank. Their home was the kind of place one could never feel comfortable in.

"I've had some breakfast prepared and a hot bath drawn for you in the guest suite, Sa'Rhea. There are clothes there for you as well. Sarai, darling, it's wonderful to see you too."

Sarai hugged the older woman and stood back at Rhea's side.

"I'll go freshen up and be down in a bit. It's good to have you back again, Katai. We'll visit when all of this is over." Rhea pressed a kiss to Katai's forehead.

"Let me show you where the guest suite is." Jax moved to the stairs.

"Rhea, I'm going to go visit my family for a few hours. I get the feeling that we'll be leaving again after you meet with the Council. I want to try to convince them to head east." Sarai's face showed concern but her words were calm.

Rhea nodded. "Good idea. I'll see you in a bit."

Jax led her up the stairs and down a quiet hallway. He opened the door at the end and stepped aside. "This is it. The bathroom is through there. I...I hope seeing my grandmother hasn't upset you too much. I thought you'd be happy to see her. She's always spoken so fondly of you."

Rhea touched his arm softly. "No, it's fine. Thank you. Katai is very special to me. She was the only one who listened to me. The only one who tried to help with..." She shook her head once, hard, and stopped speaking.

"With Paul. I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"Me too." She stepped into the room and closed the door softly.

Chapter Four

The two of them entered the Council Chambers right as the session began. Rhea walked to the head of the table with such ease that, if Jax hadn't known her, he'd have guessed she'd done it every day for years.

He took his own chair a few down from hers.

"I demand to know why you've ordered an evacuation! You'll cause panic in the streets. Chaos!" her uncle Arta shouted in a shrill voice.

Rhea took a sip of her coffee and leaned in. "The Nameless is stronger than I've ever seen it. The wards are weakened significantly at both keeps we visited. For now they'll hold. But until we figure out just why..."

"You'll cause panic!"

Rhea sighed. "Let. Me. Finish." She looked to her father and he nodded once, sharply. "As I was saying, the citizens are in danger and will continue to be. We need to figure out why the Nameless is able to wield so much power. And then we need to beat it back and defeat it. *Then* those people can go home."

"Maybe you're not up to the job." Her other uncle, Stephen, said this with a smirk.

"You'd better hope you're wrong, Stephen. Because you sure as hell aren't up to it."

The room silenced as they all turned to stare at Rhea's father, Timus.

Jax's father nodded and soon most of the room nodded with him.

Rhea told them all about what she'd felt and that she worried about the difference in how the Nameless seemed to attack the wards.

"We believe that the population at the across the borderlands should be pulled inland toward the capital, where the wards are much stronger. Rhea and I will move to the central keep next." Jax sent her a supportive look that she appreciated greatly.

"We'll send out a voluntary evacuation notice and set up camps at the base of the mountains. I've also called up some of our other Practitioners to head to the keeps farthest out to work on the wards there. It can't hurt and it may help. For now, we'll keep those we've sent eastward there. But it may be that we send for the strongest to help in the end." Timus looked at his daughter and she sighed.

"The end is coming. I can feel that much." And the truth was, Rhea felt that someone at the table was betraying them but she couldn't figure out why or how. But the way the Nameless seemed to know her and the way it attacked the wards, changing its focus each time in direct reaction to what they'd been doing, was as if it somehow had inside knowledge. That shook her.

"Then let's be sure we're the ones standing."

She nodded at her father. "If that's all, Jaac and I need to be on our way."

"You can't just leave now, son! At least have dinner with us before you go." Jax's mother's voice still drove Rhea insane all these years later.

"We can have tea now but we've got to leave within two hours. This is urgent, Mother. Rhea, would you like to come?"

It took all she had to hold back a snort of derision. "Uh, no. Thank you though. Just come by my home when you're finished. I'll go and get some supplies at the market while you're out."

And Jax watched as she left, back straight, and utterly alone.

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But she wasn't lonely. She walked out into the city she'd once loved and caught a trolley down to the public market.

And there it was. The smell of the food stalls, the calls of the different merchants. More than the sky or her house, it was this that made her feel like she was home.

She shopped the stalls for the different supplies she'd need as they went to the different keeps. Sesame seeds, yellow to enhance sex magic, and black to dispel evil.

Elder leaves to scatter around the Practice room to ward off evil. She bought henna to stain her hands for protection. Lastly, she found thistle to protect against dark magic attacks.

She walked back to her house through the teeming streets of the city and marveled to be there. Was overjoyed to hear the language of her birth, see the style of clothing she'd yearned for, the colors that indicated caste and rank.

Jax waited for her at her door and without many words they moved into the back of the house to open a rift that would get them half a day's drive closer to the next keep. They'd left most of the other people and all vehicles but one at the halfway point. They'd be prevented from getting any closer by the protective magics around the keep but it meant an entire day's drive would be split in half and they wouldn't be so exhausted by the time they arrived.

And they traveled for the next ten days. Shoring up the wards when they could, falling back when they had to. More and more they ended up sending any local populations toward the capital.

At each keep they came upon, the wards were weakened. Not so much broken as thinned, even brittle in some places. Each time they Practiced they had to approach the strengthening of the wards differently. It was as if the Nameless had taken on human sensibilities, and that scared Rhea to the marrow in her bones.

Worse, Jax kept at her, worming his way back into her life. Their magic intensified each time they Practiced together. He was always *there*. Helping her, listening to her talk about magic, telling her what had happened in their world since she'd been gone. He'd put himself into her life in a way that she was suddenly unable to imagine it without him. And that was dangerous. Her defenses against him were weak. They weakened more by the day and it was harder and harder to remember why she resisted to begin with. The idea of sleeping next to him every night was appealing, she admitted it to herself. Letting him touch her outside of Practice... Gods she wanted him to kiss

her, hug her, caress her. It drove her insane and she knew he knew it, which made her even more crazy.

But the situation became more and more dire and they Practiced pretty much daily, which only made her want him more. His damnable, smug attitude and the knowing look on his face only agitated her more. That and resisting him when she knew that ultimately it was futile.

* * * * *

High Plains Keep was one of the newer fortresses. Built when Rhea's father was a boy, it filled the gap between the mountain keep they'd been at just before and the next one, five hundred miles to the east.

It sat atop a flat-topped mountain that overlooked the valley below. When they first arrived it felt peaceful. They'd eaten a late dinner and had gone to bed to recharge before the next day, when Rhea and Jax would Practice at dawn.

But Rhea had awoken several times during the night, feeling the sense of darkness in the air spreading, getting heavier and heavier. Finally she gave up and went down to the cozy sitting room where the fire still burned.

"I thought I'd find you in here."

Rhea turned to see Jax walk into the room. He wore loose sleep pants with an untied robe over them and no shirt. The hard, tanned flesh on his chest taunted her. She picked up a mug of tea to keep from reaching out to him.

Still, he sat next to her, not quite touching but very close. Close enough to smell his skin.

He nodded his head in the direction of the velvet bag that held her tarot deck. "I've never been one to read the cards. My mother used to. But she hasn't...in a long time."

"Since her precious Paul was killed?" The depth of anger in her voice surprised them both.

But Jax just nodded. "Yes. She's sort of given up since then."

"Yeah, because she didn't have any other children or anything. Oh and because she did everything she could to help me rein your brother in, bring him back from the brink. Oh wait! No she didn't. She ignored it like they all did."

"Whoa!"

Her teeth clicked together as she locked her jaw. Standing she nodded once. "I'm going back to bed."

He moved quickly, blocking her exit. "Why don't you tell me? It's eating at you. You hold it to yourself like some kind of fucking millstone. Or do you like the misery too much, Rhea?"

She froze. "How dare you? Where were you, Jaac? Where were *you*? Too busy fucking your way through co-eds at the university, I'd wager. While your precious mother and father played blind. Don't you judge me!"

"Then tell me, damn it! I know I failed you but I don't know the whole story. Stop holding it so fucking close it's like a lover."

"You think you're ready for it, Jaac?"

"Jaac? What happened to Jax?"

"You can't have it both ways." Her voice was flat and he narrowed his eyes.

Grabbing her upper arms, he moved her back to the couch, careful not to hurt her. "We're going to do this once and for all." He got on all fours over her, his arms caging her.

Glaring up at him, she clamped her lips shut stubbornly.

"I've got all night, Rhea. But you know you want to tell me. Unburden yourself. Let me in! I'm not trying to have it both ways. I'm trying to understand. Won't you please help me understand?"

Suddenly it all uncoiled inside her gut. The burden was too heavy and she wanted done. "The first few years with Paul were wonderful. He was young of course, immature, but he loved me. He was my Practice partner and I was stronger. That was a

fact. He knew it when we got married. He said it didn't bother him. But he began to start these stupid, petty fights. The jealousy," she closed her eyes a moment, "he began to work on his magic all the time. And I encouraged it because it made him stronger and it seemed to give him a goal. But it didn't last.

"The elixir started first. He told me he needed it to be as strong as I was. But it didn't make his Talent stronger. It never does. The elixir, the fights, his behavior, it all got worse, and money started disappearing from our accounts until I had to begin to freeze and hide things. I put him on an allowance. I became his mother. Certainly more than yours was ever willing to. Gods, your mother was fucking worthless."

He winced at the vehemence in her voice but didn't try to deny it. He knew she wouldn't lie. Saw the truth, *knew* the truth, even if he didn't know the specifics.

"He'd lose his temper when he'd run out of money. I begged your parents for help. They ignored it. Said it was a phase. Advised me to downplay my own Talent to help his esteem. Like I could! The Nameless could just walk right in because your brother couldn't handle that his wife was more powerful. Even when I went to them, my face bruised and swollen from one of his insane, elixir-fueled beatings, they pretended it wasn't a problem.

"So yes. Your brother stole from me. Stole from my family to buy more elixir and pay for whores. And I caught him stealing those scrolls! He sneered at me, taunted me that he was going to sell them to set up a house for his newest tart. I sent out a spell to stop him but he sent one out too. It was unwieldy and I tried to stabilize it – *to save his life!* But it...he..." A sob broke through and he moved back, touching her softly, but she shook her head. "He tried to kill me. I counteracted his spell with my own to try to save him and he used the scrolls on me and all the power...it just exploded on him, destroying the scrolls and killing him."

"Why didn't you tell them?"

She blinked back tears. "I *did!* I told the magistrate when I was brought before him. Your parents denied that I'd ever come to them for help. That night, in jail, that's

when...Ra'Ken...the whole city...my mother and my brother and sisters. If Emmia hadn't come to help when she'd heard I was arrested, she'd be gone too."

"My parents denied it?"

"Yes. That day in the square, you were there, Jaac! I tried to tell them all but my father handed down that sentence and sent me away. They never tried to help me. Not when they could have saved Paul, not when they could have saved me."

He'd asked for it. Bullied her to tell him, and the truth of it was worse than he'd imagined. Guilt and shame at his family's behavior flushed his skin. His own part in the mess coiled low in his gut. She was alone and he'd done nothing to help her. His hands clenched and he forcibly relaxed. If his brother had been alive, he'd have beaten the hell out of him for harming Rhea in such a way. His parents would have to be dealt with as well. He didn't relish that but it had to happen. Especially as Rhea would be with him. "Oh gods. Rhea, I...I don't even know what to say. I'm sorry. I failed you. And my parents, how could they do that? It's like they're strangers to me."

She stood up and tried to leave but he grabbed her arm and pulled her back. Pulled her tight against him, needing her more than he'd ever needed her before. Wanting to establish their connection and claim her right then. "Where are you going?"

"To bed."

"Not without me, you're not. You've resisted me long enough. I am not Paul."

"No you aren't. He married me. You ran away. When I needed you..." She shook her head, refusing to finish the sentence.

"When you needed me I wasn't there. Is that what you were going to say?"

"I'm tired. I need to sleep."

"No. Damn you. I made a mistake. I wanted you too much. I had to stay away. Each time I saw you, even after you'd married him, I wanted you. I didn't care that you were his. I had to stay away. I didn't know he'd fallen so far. It doesn't matter now. I can't change the mistakes I made. I can only make the future better."

"Fine. Now let me go."

"No. You want me, Rhea. As much as I want you. Damn you, I *love* you. I always have. We have a second chance. Do you know how rare that is?"

"My body wants you. You've always been able to make me want you like that. But I'm smarter now. I can use my head and not my heart. So fuck me, Jaac. Let's go." She pulled her gown up over her head and stood there, naked, skin glistening in the light of the fire.

He knew what she was doing and it wouldn't work. She thought if she could make it seem like it was just a quick fuck he'd back off or be hurt and she'd protect herself that way. "It's not going to work, Rhea. Don't mock it. It's more than that and you know it."

"You gonna control my feelings now, Jaac?" She prayed he couldn't hear the tremor in her voice. She held her hands in fists at her sides, hoping he couldn't see them shaking. She couldn't afford for him to see how much she craved his touch. Needed him not just in bed but in her life.

He narrowed his eyes and used his body to push her back into the room, kicking the door shut behind him. "I'm going to control something. But you and I both know what your feelings are. You may not like it, but you love me. And by the time the sun comes up you're going to say it. I've taken it easy on you, knowing you had to work through it your own way. I gave you time to come to me but I'm done waiting now. The time for patience is over and the time for reckoning has arrived, Rhea. I aim to take what's mine."

The look he bore was feral, intense and possessive. Instinctively she took a step back, even as her hand went out to touch his face. He leaned into her caress a moment before sliding out of his robe and shucking his pants.

He stood there, gloriously naked, cock hard. His chest moved with shallow breaths as his pupils enlarged until black was all she could see. Reaching back, he pulled his hair free and it fell around his shoulders and down his back. A tide of barely leashed

masculine sexuality rushed from him, knocking the breath from her lungs and bringing her hand to her chest above her heart.

"I know. I feel the same way every time I look at you." He circled her, his body just close enough that she felt his heat, still not quite touching hers. "So beautiful. Still young, in the prime of your life." He reached out then, a fingertip trailing down the line of her spine. "I can't wait to see what you'll look like in middle age. When you're sixty or seventy and your hair finally begins to silver...gods, you'll be stunning. I want to grow old with you, Rhea."

She didn't want his words to make her feel this way, damn it!

He chuckled. "It rankles you, doesn't it? Knowing I can see right into your soul."

"Don't be so fucking sure of yourself!" She spun to face him. "You're a pretty face and a nice hard cock. Don't make more of it than it is."

Quicker than she expected, his hand shot out and cupped her neck, pulling her to him. His lips met hers in a kiss that devoured, devastated. Her body was electrified by contact with his.

Their magic rose, warm, thick like honey. His cock burned against the flesh of her stomach, that sensitive place where thigh met body. Pre-cum seeped from the head, first hot then cool against her skin.

His tongue swept into her mouth like it belonged there. He didn't just kiss her, he *possessed* her. Dominated her. Pulled emotion from her despite the fact she didn't want to give it to him. There was no place to hide from him with his hands on her, his lips over hers, tongue sliding sensuously against the inside of her mouth.

Desire drowned her but anger rose too. Anger that he could make her react to him even though she didn't want to. She wanted to stay behind the walls she'd erected. No one could hurt her there. Exposed now, in his arms, she was raw and open and vulnerable.

She tried to push away and he broke the kiss but continued to collar her throat with a gentle hand. "You can't hide yourself from me, Rhea. I *know* you. I'm not letting you go. I'm not going away."

His gaze bored into hers, the intensity of emotion panicked her.

"I've got you on the ropes, Rhea. Just give in to me."

His arrogance rankled but at the same time comforted. He did know her, in a way that no one else ever had. But he took it away. Took that knowing, that comfort of being known, and left her alone.

"You left me." Planting her palm against his chest, she pushed away from him. "You know me so fucking well? You walked away from that! You don't deserve me."

She bent to grab her nightgown but she found herself tackled, her back on the soft rug in front of the hearth, his body holding hers with his weight.

"I was a fool! But I've paid for it every day of the last two decades, knowing you were in Paul's bed every night and then knowing I'd failed you. I thought about you on Earth, wondered if another man got to hold you and love you the way I wanted to. I was young and stupid."

She tried to get out from beneath him but the subtle move of her hips brought him into the cradle of her thighs. His cock slipped between slick labia and pressed against her gate. She felt the throb, throb, throb of the head as it rested just inside her.

"I can't trust you." Her voice was soft. He heard the fear in it.

Slowly, giving her a chance to refuse, he pressed into her pussy, watched her lips part and her eyes widen.

"I'm not that scared boy anymore. From the moment you opened that door a month ago and I walked back into your life have I let you down once? Stop trying to find ways to keep me out, Rhea."

A soft grunt came from her lips when he hilted fully within her. Her thighs widened and the magic flowed again between them.

"I want to look into your face when you come. When we Practice, there's always the magic there. You hold it between us like a screen, a mask. But I want you to find release while looking at me. Know I'm the one who's making you feel that way."

"Shut up and fuck me," she murmured, rolling her hips. Her fingernails dug into the hard muscle of his shoulders as her legs moved to encircle his waist.

She meant to try to keep him out with sex. Smoke and mirrors. Thought she could toss a fuck at him and he'd forget about the rest. He saw her ploy ten miles away. Still, he'd let her get comfortable, and enjoy it all the more when he sprang the trap.

"Is that so, Rhea? You want me to fuck you?" He underlined the sentence with a particularly hard thrust. Her breasts bounced and he grinned. "I like that. I like that a lot."

His lips skimmed over her collarbone, tongue flicking over the hollow of her throat. Her taste, sweet and heady, slammed into his system. She was integral to him in ways he couldn't even articulate. He just felt them, knew she was absolutely essential to his body, soul and heart. And he'd been showing her that, telling her that, and what lay between them at that moment was the final chapter. He absolutely knew he'd win because he loved her. He may not deserve her, she was right about that, but he loved her and he'd spend every moment of the rest of his life to work to deserve her.

His mouth slid over the skin of her chest and down to first one nipple and then the other. She arched with a soft cry as the edge of his teeth scraped over the sensitive tip. Round and round his tongue circled her nipple, teasing it harder and harder as he took his time fucking into her hard and deep.

He resisted the lure of taking her fast. He wanted to thoroughly win her over and so he'd take his time.

When he pulled out her half-lidded eyes sprang open and she tried to reach him to pull him back into her. "Jax!"

“Oh no, Rhea. I have plans for your pretty cunt right now. I’ll fuck you again very soon.” His eyes rolled up to meet hers as he licked a trail down her stomach, keeping her thighs wide open with his body between them.

Settling down between her legs, he pressed her knees up and out, spreading her wide open to him. “Now this is breathtaking.” Her pussy lay pink and glistening wet to his eyes. To his mouth.

A mouth he lowered to her humid flesh. A bright flash of her Talent burst through the room, through him, riding his spine. In their youth there’d been a hint of this raw connection between them and their magic, but nothing at that level. When they’d Practiced together it had been different, controlled and channeled. Now it was just them, and the wild sex magic between them crackled and slithered through them both. Her control wavered and he saw victory within reach.

The taste of her, sticky sweet with the tang of her musk, seduced him, shot straight to his cock. He speared into her gate with his tongue. She writhed beneath him, attempting to roll her hips, but he held her immobile as he ate her pussy with abandon.

Wetter and wetter, her body heated. The scent of her drove him crazy, burned into his senses until all he had was her. There was room for nothing else in him. “Hold yourself open for me, Rhea. Wide. I want to lick every bit of you I can get.”

With shaky hands, she moved quickly to comply. The flat of his tongue pressed up through the folds of her pussy and over her clit. Her entire body shuddered and a groan from deep in her gut broke from her. Beneath the pressure of his tongue, her clit swelled and hardened. Slowly but with insistent rhythm, he swirled the tip of his tongue around her clit and then, with a featherlight touch, flicked the underside of it over and over.

Her thighs began to tremble and her moans became breathy. He let go of one of her legs and pressed two fingers inside her, hooking them to stroke over her sweet spot.

She nearly sat upright the first time he did it but settled back, arched and moving restlessly under his mouth and hands. He briefly entertained making her beg and

confess she loved him but he was too greedy for her climax and pushed her over, saving her confession for later.

Her hands gripped his head, fisting in his hair as the air whooshed from her in climax. Honey, scalding hot and delicious, rained on his hand and lips.

Riding it out, his mouth worked on her until she finally relaxed back against the carpet with a sated sigh.

Crawling up her body, he hovered over her lips. "Don't go anywhere just yet, Rhea."

An eye cracked open and she allowed herself a small smile at his audacity and in appreciation of his talented mouth. "Not going anywhere. My legs don't seem to be working just now anyway."

One of her hands snaked down and grasped his cock. He was so hard he throbbed in her hand and hissed at the sensation as she squeezed gently.

She shoved him onto his back and rolled onto him. Her hair curtained around their faces and he leaned up to touch his lips to hers.

"Have your wicked way with me, why don't you?"

"What a lovely idea." Pressing kisses across the edge of his jaw, she reveled in the way the bass of his groan vibrated through her. He smelled damned good—like magic and masculinity and sex on legs. It made her wet anew just breathing him in.

His pulse beat steady under her lips as they skimmed over the hollow just below his ear. She loved the way the prickle of his beard tickled her lips. He was so big beneath her, even though they'd both been angry she'd never feared him, always knew he'd treat her carefully, even as he pushed at her emotionally.

His powerful torso flexed between her thighs as she kissed, licked and nibbled down his chest. There was something incredibly sexy about having such a big, bad man under her power.

His magic created spice on his skin and her tongue tingled as she licked over the jumping muscles of his abdomen, scraping her teeth over him.

“You feel so good, baby. Your hair is like silk. Your lips, gods, I’ve never felt anything so fucking good in my life. Suck my cock, Rhea. Please.”

Shimmying further down his body, she settled between his thighs. She took her time looking at him. Flat stomach, narrow hips that flared out to wide shoulders. His hair spread out around his head. Damn he was gorgeous.

Leaning down, she whipped her head, bringing the caress of her hair over his cock. He gasped and she looked up into his eyes, smiling as she reached out and grabbed his cock.

Moving her head, she took a long lick from his balls to the weeping slit of his head. The salty taste of him echoed through her senses. In the times they’d Practiced together, she hadn’t been able to go down on him. It seemed decadent to be able to take her time with him, to taste him, drive him up slow and steady.

Her mouth moved down over his cock, taking him in as far as she could and backing off again. She did this over and over, feeling the change in his body, the electric hum of his magic as his pleasure moved toward peak. This kind of sex, with a partner who was matched magically and Talent-level-wise, was incredible. And she’d only ever experienced it with him. It was like all the other times she’d been with men were watery shadows of what she and Jax were together.

And that terrified her.

Pulling off him, she took a gentle nibble just below the crown and licked her way toward the root until she reached his balls. Her fingernails gently scored that sensitive flesh and he hissed, his balls drawing tight against his body. Her tongue gave just the right amount of pressure as she licked over him and then found her way back up his cock and around the crown.

She didn't want to think about how he made her feel. Didn't want to think about how good it was to give him pleasure, about how much it meant to her that she affected him so deeply even after all the years that had passed between them.

Sure hands slid up her arms and one moved to hold her neck, collaring her throat as she took him fully into her mouth again. He arched and thrust, meeting her. She knew his control was whisper-thin at that point as the muscles in his belly tightened to hold back.

"Stop, gods, stop. I want to come inside of you," he gasped out at the last moment, pulling her back by the shoulders.

She moved up to lie beside him but he stood quickly, picking her up and carrying her to the couch. He sat and dropped her astride him. "I want to watch you rise and fall on my cock. My own personal goddess."

Gaze locked on his, she reached back and guided the head of him to her gate and slowly sank down. There weren't words for what it felt like to be filled by him like that and so she sighed, replete.

One of his hands found her breast, palming the nipple, and the other slid up into her hair and pulled her down to his lips for a kiss. Nimble fingers rolled and pulled her nipple until she gasped softly and his tongue invaded her mouth. Hot and slick, he chased, teased and seduced hers.

Seeking to even the playing field, she pulled up and nearly off his cock and then pressed back down with a swivel.

Breaking the kiss, he looked deep into her eyes. "Rhea, you mean everything to me. I've been empty all these years. I tried to fill it with work, with faceless, nameless women, with power. Nothing completes me but you. Right here, right now, even with the danger on the horizon, I am home. In you, I am a full person. Give yourself to me. Let yourself love me, Rhea. I won't run this time. I swear to you on my life. You can trust me. You know that."

The passion in his voice made her breath catch even as the sensation of his cock slicing through her cunt deepened the intensity of the moment. He invaded her physically and emotionally—a dual assault, and she was weak. He'd worn her down over weeks and weeks of being with him when they Practiced and on the road—reforging the closeness they'd had in their youth only with more depth born of decades of learning from mistakes.

The words were there, burning the back of her throat. Her heart filled, her eyes brimmed with tears. Fear froze her in that moment.

"Let me love you," he whispered softly, his lips just above hers, his kiss deceptively gentle and soft. But he was there and she was in a corner emotionally and she had nothing left to hold him out with. He had proved she could trust him. He'd been at her back the whole time. Taken risks with his own power, his own family, to back her up time and again with the evacuation orders. She'd been evasive and rude and cold over and over and he'd still been there afterward. He hadn't left. He still remained. Constant.

And therein lay his allure. More than his physical beauty or the thick cock deep in her pussy—it was constancy that he provided, something she craved deeply.

Her mouth opened to speak and he watched her lips but he didn't say anything else. He didn't want to push her that last inch and she knew it. She also knew he'd never give up until she let him back in her heart. And the fear melted into something else, something deeper.

"Damn you."

He chuckled softly. "I got you. I'm under your skin, little lady, and I'm not letting go. So give in already."

"Gods, you're an arrogant bastard." She slid down on him harder and rolled her hips forward, smiling savagely when he groaned. "We've got each other, I think. Gods help me."

"I'm really close to coming here, Rhea. Will you just admit you love me already so I can? And we can go to sleep for a few hours and fuck again once or twice before

Practicing again." His voice broke and she watched a bead of sweat break out on his temple and slide down his face and neck.

"So fucking sexy." She leaned in and licked from the place where neck met shoulder to his temple, tasting salt and magic.

His laugh was genuine and cocksure and suddenly it was easy to say because she felt it. Totally unfettered. "I love you, you bastard."

He froze a moment and then yanked her mouth down to his, kissing her with a ferocity she hadn't seen from him before. The hand on her breast moved to her clit and he flicked it while moving his hips to thrust back into her cunt.

Her breath was his breath. Her pleasure was his pleasure. It flowed between them hot and sticky until a mingled cry burst from both as climax broke. He came deep inside her body as she climaxed around him.

Cries of pleasure were swallowed and fed back as their mouths remained locked in that kiss. Her magic, freed by her admission of love, flowed out of her in a rush and filled the room. Sensing it, he carried it and it drained from the keep out into the air.

Breaking the kiss, she looked around. "Is it me or does it feel lighter?"

He picked her up and strode toward the door and up the stairs to her bedroom, not stopping until they were both in bed, under the blankets.

"It feels lighter for a hundred reasons but yes, I think we've cranked out quite a bit of magic tonight. That kind of wild magic may have been so effective because it wasn't what the Nameless expected. And I love you too, you shrew." He planted a kiss on the tip of her nose and snuggled her into his side.

"So romantic."

Caught by surprise, he laughed. "It's a good thing you're so beautiful and hot in the sack or all that sarcasm would turn people off."

She smiled in the dark. "Yeah, good thing. Now shut the fuck up and go to sleep, beefy, we have work to do in the morning."

Chapter Five

Rhea's eyes fluttered open as her body rocketed into extreme pleasure. Sitting up, she found Jax nestled between her thighs, mouth on her pussy. His hair spread over her thighs like a blanket.

She let herself fall back to the mattress. Let herself go, be free to enjoy what he offered. It felt almost as good as his tongue on her clit.

After she came, he kissed his way up her belly and found her mouth, where she received him with joy. When she tried to push him back and grab his cock he batted her hands away playfully.

"We've got to work in about half an hour. Save it for then. I just woke up and you were in my arms and I had to taste you." He moved so that she was nestled against him, his heart beating sure and steady in her ear.

"Well, I'm not complaining."

"Good. I was worried."

"That I'd complain? Lookie here, beefy, I complain, it's what I do. But I'm not gonna turn away your mouth on my pink parts any time soon."

He laughed and stole a quick kiss. "Well, I meant I was worried that perhaps you'd be sorry about last night."

She sighed and spoke to the wall of his chest rather than look into his face. "I should feel sorry. But I don't. And I suppose that makes me feel guilty. And I feel guilty that I don't feel guilty."

"Angel, I love you but I have no idea what you're talking about." One of his hands stroked through her hair.

"All of those years I thought about you. I did love Paul, truly I did. Even at the end when he was violent and intoxicated and had turned into another person. But I wished for you. Sometimes I'd dream of you. Worse, he'd be making love to me and your face would be there. I wasn't totally his. I've often wondered if he knew that."

"Can I look at you, please? I want to see your face."

Nodding, she let him move her back. She looked up into those deep midnight eyes and his masculine beauty made her pulse speed.

"My brother loved you. And if I know you, and I think I do, you gave your all to him. You stuck with him until the very end. Even as he tried to kill you, you tried to save him. Rhea, I'm not sorry I was on your mind, but I am sorry I wasn't there to help. I can't change that. I stayed away because I wanted you so much. I would have seduced you in a heartbeat and it would have destroyed my brother, and you as well because that's not who you are."

"The guilt over that is gone now. After a time," she shrugged, "I accepted my hunger for you even as I knew I was the very best wife I could be to your brother."

"And now we're finally together where we should have been all along. If I hadn't gone away you wouldn't have been exiled. It's my fault."

Rhea sat up and sprang out of bed. "Are you only with me out of guilt? Because I don't need your guilt. What happened made me into a stronger person. I understand what's important and that I've got to fight for it. I wouldn't be this person today if we'd been together. I don't want your pity, Jaac."

He followed, backing her against the wall. "Jaac huh? What happened to Jax? I thought you were done trying to hold me out. I'm with you because I love you. I have always loved you. Even now I want to be inside you. I want to touch you every moment of the day. When I'm not with you I'm thinking of you. Sleeping in a room just feet away from you these last weeks has been torture. I want to marry you. Start a family with you. Even if you are a very prickly woman."

“Marry me? Beefy, your family...well, I’ve been there and done that and I’m not in any hurry to do it again. Except for Katai, who is marvelous. Why don’t we take it slow? You can start with the being inside me part and we can maybe talk about the marriage stuff in a year or so. You can have the milk for free any old time you like.”

Confusion marred his features.

“It’s a saying on Earth. Now I need to bathe for Practice. We need to use the power of dawn today. I can feel it.” Stretching up a bit, she kissed him quickly and ducked beneath his arms and headed into the bathroom as he stood and watched her retreat.

Her taste was still on his lips as he ran his tongue over them and headed into his own chamber to cleanse and ready for Practice.

* * * * *

Jax thrust into her body, watching, mesmerized, as her breasts bounced. Her head hung off the side of the bed and her lips moved with the spell.

Leaning down, he licked over her throat and her magic turned up in intensity. Her cunt wrapped around his cock, hot and wet, pulling him back on each upstroke. He’d Practiced with lessers before, with people who possessed small bits of sex magic, but this was different. This was even different from the day before when they’d Practiced. Now that she held nothing back, their united magic was amplified. They were more powerful now that they’d unified in their personal lives.

And the Nameless felt it. Through Rhea, Jax felt it stumble back against the slap their magic produced. He felt the wards strengthen as she wielded her magic more effectively than she’d done before.

But at that moment, he continued to fuck deeply into his woman while she fought for the future of their people. Turning his thoughts back to channeling her magic, he felt that her spell was nearing an end and his fingers found her clit, pressing against it the way he knew she liked.

At the deep tremors in her pussy, his orgasm unleashed. The last words of the spell sighed from her as she found her own climax around him.

Rolling to the side, he kept an arm around her waist as they both caught their breath.

How could his brother not have been proud of how strong Rhea was? Jax wanted to brag about her to everyone they came across. He'd mourned for Paul a long time ago, knowing part of the story from his grandmother. But hearing it all from Rhea the night before had been the final bit he'd needed to close the book. He'd have to deal with his parents when they returned to D'ar. After her comments about not wanting to marry him because of his family, it was imperative he deal with it. For her sake mostly—he certainly couldn't expect her to share his life with such a huge betrayal unaddressed. And for his own, because his mother had attempted to paint a different picture of Paul's end.

"Wow," she murmured some minutes later.

"Mmm hmmm. We should eat a morning meal, get your strength back up. And then I want you to rest all the way to the next keep."

"Bossy." She stretched her long body and stray magic floated into the air like dust motes.

"I like you this way. Before you ran out five seconds after the spell ended. If I wasn't boneless right now, I'd take you again."

"Well then, why offer? I'm supposed to believe you're all studly when your pecker is all wrinkly after one fucking? I thought you were all big, bad man?"

He would have been offended. He was on his way when she cracked open an eye and snickered.

"Oh, you're in big trouble later on."

"Promises, promises." She got out of bed and, without her robe, walked into the bathroom.

Damn, the woman looked good leaving a room naked.

Breathing deeply of their mingled scents—sex and magic, man and woman—he grinned and headed into the bathroom behind her.

“Got room for me in there?” He poked his head into the large shower stall where she stood, wet and glistening.

“In where?” An eyebrow rose.

Chuckling, he got in and crowded up against her. The friction of her soap-slicked body against his was delicious and even though he’d thought it impossible, his cock began to show interest.

“I like this side of you. You’re so serious, it’s nice to see you playful. You’re usually only this way with Sarai.”

He took the sponge from her and began to soap up her back.

“Sarai is my best friend. She’s the only person other than my mother who I’ve always been able to trust. She left her home to come with me to a place that she was never able to freely exist in.”

He scrubbed shampoo into her scalp and she leaned back into him.

“I’m honored then, that you feel comfortable enough to joke with me.” And he was.

She didn’t respond but let him continue to take care of her, and that spoke louder than words anyway.

* * * * *

“That was some bit of magic you two put out.” Sarai grinned as Rhea and Jax walked into the kitchen half an hour later. “It feels better already out there. My teeth aren’t on edge anymore.”

Rhea took a deep breath and nodded. “I think this keep is safe. We don’t need to evacuate the locals here. There aren’t many of them anyway and it’s near the rice harvest so I’d hate to interrupt that.”

"I'll call and let the Council know. The good news, for a change, will be received well, I'd wager." And he leaned down and kissed her temple before walking out of the room to use the phone in the space they'd used as a makeshift office.

Annoyance warred with pleasure on Rhea's face as she watched him from where she stood, listening to the sound of his voice. Finally she rolled her eyes and gave in to the smile her lips wanted and winked at Sarai.

Mrs. Dakins hugged her tight. "Oh, you're together then? At last?"

Rhea nodded slowly as she drank her coffee. "Yes. Whatever it means when all this is over I don't know. But for now, we're together."

"Jaac is not a man to fuck and run. Not this Jaac. That boy is as dead as Sa'Rhea," Sarai said quietly.

"Do you approve, Sarai?"

Sarai's mouth curled into a smile. "Of course! I've wanted you to hurry up and admit you loved him since the first keep. But you're stubborn. Nice thing is that he's just as stubborn and you couldn't chase him away."

"I know. I like that about him. Even if he is bossy."

"I'm glad to see you happy. You deserve it." Sarai lowered her voice. "And I have to tell you I can't wait to see what his mother does when she hears."

Rhea's face was horrified for a moment and then she laughed. "Oh, my. Well, poor woman. I can't imagine she'll be very pleased to hear it. Hopefully Jax will wait until this is over so we can take it slow and deal with it in a way that won't cause too much trouble."

Even as she said it, she doubted it. Jax was a take-charge guy and she had the feeling he was going to be calling his parents very soon about her. She'd hesitated in telling him the truth of what had happened with Paul for so long because—despite the fact that she loathed her former in-laws for lying and leaving her to hang for their son's misdeeds—she knew Jax loved them.

And of course he was doing just that. In a very businesslike tone, she heard him inform his parents that he was in love with Rhea, always had been, and intended to marry her once this whole business with the Nameless was over with. He also added that they'd have a lot to talk about when he returned to D'ar.

Halfheartedly, Rhea cursed her luck that Earth and Molari shared so many conveniences like phones. But if they didn't, she wouldn't have chocolate or coffee so she scratched that thought.

He walked back into the kitchen, helped himself to breakfast and sat down next to her.

"The Council is relieved and quite happy to hear that we've been successful here at least. We're to go on to the next keep and assess the situation there. They got a report from the badlands that the power has been out in the surrounding towns along the river. The weather's been acting up too. Weird electrical storms."

"Shit. Let's go. That's what happened in Ra'Ken before the Nameless broke through."

He put a hand on her shoulder to stay her. "Eat first. You've been Practicing every day, Rhea. That's a lot of stress on your body and spirit. You need to keep your strength up. It'll take us seven hours to get there, another half an hour won't make a difference one way or another. I've already had the staff begin to load up the cars."

It was a relief, having someone else take care of the details. She let herself lean on him a bit and continued to eat even though her appetite was gone and worry ate at her. She knew he was right. Using her magic day after day was taking its toll on her body.

Mrs. Dakins clucked around and plied her with food, making sure they had plenty of juice and ate high protein meals while they traveled as well. It was nice to be taken care of.

In the car, Jax pulled her into his lap and gently massaged her temples until she fell asleep.

And that's when the dreams began.

One after another, each dream was of the Nameless. Of death and destruction. She could not shake the dreams, instead got sucked into a maelstrom of misery and fear of failure. The Nameless knew things about her magic. About their plans to defeat it.

Finally Jax woke her, shaking her hard and shouting her name. She clawed her way free of the dream state and sat up, groggy.

"Gods, Rhea! Are you all right?" He knelt before her and she realized she wasn't in the car. She was in a bed.

"What the hell happened? Are we at the keep already?"

"Already? Rhea, you've been unconscious for two days. I've been arguing with the Council to bring you back! They kept saying no."

Rhea heard the anguish in his voice.

"I thought I'd lost you. So soon after getting you back." He buried his face in her hair.

"The Council knows I've been unconscious for two days and they wouldn't send help or have me come back?"

"Your father wanted you back there but your uncles voted him down. Said you'd be more useful here when you awoke. They convinced everyone else you were the best hope. They did say they'd send someone if you hadn't awoken by this evening."

"I'm all right now. The Nameless caught me in a dream. I've been there all this time." She shook her head. "It's not just some *thing*. There are people behind this. I felt that. And someone in the Council is helping them."

Jax froze and Sarai leaned forward. "What do you mean? How do you know that?"

"I felt it in the dream. It knows things about our strategy. How else would you explain how it meets us on every damned front? And no one could have gotten into my dreams without some bit of me. Sarai, call your mother right now. Have her go to the house. See if any of my personal effects have been taken. She'll smell if anyone other than me, you and Jax have been there."

"You can't mean this! If anyone on the Council is cooperating with the Nameless, they'd be helping with genocide! I can't believe it, Rhea. I can't." Jax stood up and began to pace.

"We need to Practice."

He spun. "It hasn't been here since you've been out! We're winning, Rhea. Why are you looking for problems that don't exist? Are you just looking for a reason to be dire?"

"No, we aren't. The Nameless was in my dream with me. But now that I'm free it is too. Now let's get moving before it's too late. We're on borrowed time, Jax, and you're lying to yourself."

She stood, expecting her legs to be shaky, but they weren't. She walked past him and into the bathroom where Mrs. Dakins was already laying out her robe and had run a bath with herbs in it.

"He'll come around. It's a shocking thing to learn someone you know and most likely trust is cooperating with the enemy." Mrs. Dakins clucked around, putting everything just so.

Rhea drank the glass of juice the other woman handed her and shed her clothing, getting into the bath without saying a word. His denial shouldn't have stung, she'd probably have done the same in his shoes. But it did. He thought she'd *wanted* something bad to happen? Like it was a part of her nature? She knew better than most what it felt like to confront the reality that someone you loved and trusted betrayed you. But his thinking she wanted something dire to happen hurt and hurt deeply.

Dunking herself three times, she stood and got out, quickly eating the sandwich Mrs. Dakins provided.

Robed, she headed back into the Practice chamber and waited for Jax.

He came in shortly and approached her, circling in a way that made the hair on the back of her neck rise, along with her nipples. He'd better hurry up and get over his snit because she wasn't going to fuck a man throwing a tantrum or blaming her for someone else's perfidy. She'd do her duty and Practice but there'd be no recreational sex.

She grounded herself, feeling the earth at the foundations of the keep, drawing power through it and up into herself. Slowly, surely, she uncoiled that power as the warmth of her Talent coursed through her and out into the air. Even though he was being a baby, Jax still rang her bell.

He kissed the back of her neck and she closed her eyes and began to speak, trusting him to put aside his emotions and do his job.

"You're angry with me," he murmured and she felt the warm wetness of his tongue trail across her shoulder.

Ignoring him, she drew more focus and continued to build her magic. Soon, she lost herself to it, falling into the tide of her Talent, of the sex and desire that drowned her senses as she worked her spell. She felt lips and hands, dimly heard him speak, but she let the Talent intoxicate her.

"I know you've gone off to your special place deep in yourself to work this spell. We'll work this out later on." His hands skimmed over her skin from her fingertips to her shoulders, across her collarbone and down to the other hand. He let himself get caught in the undertow of her magic, hitched a ride on it, became her anchor.

Large hands palmed her nipples, pulling back so that his fingertips pulled gently and then pinched until she gasped. Her nipples hardened and swelled, darkening and begging for his mouth. He complied, needing her as much as she needed him.

Her taste, as always, was a siren song. Luring him, seducing him, making him feel like he needed to fall to his knees and wallow in her essence. No other woman, not ever, made him feel a shadow of the way Rhea made him feel and respond.

And this woman was pissed off. He knew her well enough to tell. She hadn't looked at him very long and had fallen into herself and the Talent very quickly to avoid dealing with him.

And he knew why and despaired of it. He hoped like hell she was wrong.

Kissing down her body, he picked her up and put her on the bed, moving to straddle her body. As he did, his cock dragged heavily over her skin, torturing them both.

Spreading her thighs, he'd bent his head to taste her when her back bowed and she sat up. He felt it then, the Nameless coming, pushing hard at the wards.

"Rhea, focus!" But he knew it was more than that. It was too much. The membrane of the wards bent inward and stretched. He felt the strain on them, as if suddenly the very air around them was stretched too thin and tight.

Her eyes cleared and she jumped up. "It's too late. We've got to get out of here." Pushing past him, she yanked her robe on and ran into the hallway, raising the alarms.

"Rhea!"

She turned and stared at him for a long moment as he pulled on his pants. People began to rush down the stairs, carrying things out to the transports. He heard the engines turning over and the civil defense horns blaring through the valley where the river was. Most of the population had been evacuated several days before and he hoped they'd moved their asses to the next wards.

"It's too late, Jax. It knows! Damn you! Someone is helping and we're fucked if we stay. We cannot stop it." Still in her robe, she turned and raced down the stairs, urging the small staff to keep calm and get out of the house.

Reality hit him and he grabbed his duffel and followed her out into the night where he felt the Nameless, dark and toxic, in the air. He realized Rhea was right, it was too far gone. Maybe, if there had been other Practitioners there to help, it might have been possible to check the attack on the wards, but with just the two of them it was hopeless.

He jumped into the conveyance and they drove quickly away. They'd have to drive at least two hours before they could safely open a rift. In an emergency they could risk it but you couldn't be sure where you'd end up—in the middle of a mountain or at the bottom of the sea.

She grabbed the portable communicator and dialed her father. "It's breaking through. We're heading to a safe rift point. Get people back to the capital now. And watch your back because there is a spy at the Council table."

"What? Are you all right? Gods, Sa'Rhea, I wanted to come to you when you were in the dream but I couldn't undermine you with the Council. I wanted them to know I believed in how strong you were." Rhea heard the thread of panic in his voice and the idea of forgiveness suddenly wasn't so foreign.

Rhea explained what was happening and her suspicions about the spy or spies.

He sighed. "I've had the same suspicions over the years. I'm sorry to say so but I've felt that Paul had been working with spies and that was the real reason behind the scrolls being stolen. I wish I'd been more clearheaded when...well, I'm sorry. Not that it matters now. But I am.

"Get back here. We'll stage a last stand. I'll call back Emmia and the other Practitioners. We'll need every single weapon we have to stop it. Do you have any suspicions about who may be behind this?"

"Even though I believe the Sarnes would be overjoyed if I perished, I do know they love Jax, and for that reason I don't think it's them. And frankly, Father, it can't be anyone much lower at the table because they wouldn't have the information."

She knew she'd probably hurt Jax with her comments but the truth was the truth. His parents were lying bastards and totally capable of something like this. But not at his expense.

"My brothers?"

"I'm sorry, but yes. That's who I'm leaning toward right now. Don't tell them about bringing the Practitioners back from the Eastern Mountains. If they're innocent I'll apologize myself. But if they aren't we can't take the chance. This is bad. It's very powerful."

"Get to a safe rift distance and get back here right away. Straight to Jax's house. Do not speak to anyone else until you get here. Be safe, Rhea. I lost you once, I don't want to do it again."

She hung up before she started crying.

Sarai took the phone and dialed. She listened to her mother for long moments and hung up. "It appears your pillowcases were taken. In addition to those of us who belonged in the house she smelled your uncle Arta and someone else she hasn't identified yet. She's going to go to the Council to see if she recognizes anyone."

Rhea didn't dare look in Jax's direction. Knowing she'd been right didn't bring her any solace.

Jax touched her shoulder but instead of leaning into him, she stiffened and then moved further away. He felt it like a slap.

"You know, no one is perfect."

Her jaw clenched but she kept quiet. Sarai looked at him like he'd gone insane.

"What? She's so fucking perfect? No one gets to make a mistake?" Jax's voice rose.

"Is that your idea of an apology?" Sarai growled.

"Stop it, both of you! Do not talk around me." Rhea moved out of the forward-facing seat and next to Sarai.

"I'd apologize but she's too fucking self-righteous to accept it."

Rhea winced like he'd physically struck her. And he watched her draw into herself and wished with all his being he could take the words back.

"You can't run away from this, Rhea. How can we have a relationship if you do this every time I make a mistake?"

"You're right." Her voice had that flat, emotionally reserved sound again, and all his internal alarms sounded.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're right. We can't have a relationship. I'm clearly too self-righteous for you. Add that to my terrible penchant for wanting something bad to happen and I'm clearly not fit." Her eyes met his and he saw the depth of pain there. Realized his error. It wasn't his inability to believe the worst in his fellow Council members, it was his thinking she wanted something bad to happen. She'd done what was right at a great cost and he'd called her self-righteous. Hadn't even apologized.

He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Rhea, I'm sorry. Let's start this over. I'm sorry I didn't believe you. And I'm sorry you took my words to mean I thought you wanted bad things to happen. I shouldn't have said it, I didn't mean it. I was shocked and, well, there's no excuse. And I suppose I was hurt that you'd suspect my parents, and I took out my frustration on you. It was wrong. But we do have a relationship, Rhea. I love you and you're mine. We have to be able to fight and get through it. People who love each other can have disagreements and work past them. In case you failed to notice, we're both pretty strong personalities, this won't be our last fight. I swear to you I'll be more careful about how I phrase things in the future. But I want you to trust one thing over everything else—I love you and I believe in you and us."

"I'm so tired of people thinking the worst of me. I'm not the one who stole those scrolls. I didn't lie and get someone exiled. I didn't give information to the Nameless. I have done nothing wrong and yet I get blamed. Usually by those who *have* done something wrong. That's not love, Jax."

It was one of the most revealing things she'd ever said to him and it felt like a gift. Hope bloomed in him that she'd share even a small part of herself with him. Sarai watched him with narrowed eyes but her claws had retracted—a good sign.

"I'm not blaming anything on you. Even before I knew the whole story I knew you wouldn't have killed Paul without absolute provocation or as anything other than an accident. And I've spent the last fifteen years working to get you back here. I wish it hadn't been this as the cause, but I'm not sorry it brought you home. To me. Please. Can't we get past this? I love you, Rhea. I do."

He held her gaze, begging her to see his sincerity, while he sent out a prayer that she'd forgive him.

"I'm so tired. I'm going to rest until we get to the rift point. My father is calling people back from the Eastern Mountains but he's not going to tell my uncles. I can't apologize for suspecting your parents, Jaac. Their lies sent me into exile. I lived in misery for two years with Paul and then lost everything but Sarai because they're liars. The only reason I don't think they're behind this is your involvement. I do believe they love you and wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

He sighed. She was trying to avoid him again and he wasn't going to have it. "Sarai, trade places with me please." He got up, threatening to sit on her if she didn't shove aside. Reluctantly, Sarai moved into the seat he'd been in and he plopped down next to Rhea and grabbed her into his embrace before she could move away.

Gently but firmly he tipped her chin so she was looking him in the eye. "I understand why you suspected my parents. I'm sorry they caused misery on your part. But I'm not them. Now," he brushed his lips over hers once and then another time because even when she was hurt and pissed off, she tasted good. "Now, darling, we are going to get past this. If you don't forgive me, I'll continue to bother you. I'll make a terrible nuisance of myself and sing beneath your windows at night. Plus you'll have to have sex with me in order to Practice and I'll leave love marks all over your neck. You'll look like youth after her first kissing party. And we both know I can do it. So save yourself the annoyance and embarrassment and admit that I'm an idiot but one you love, and forgive me."

When she rolled her eyes he knew things would be all right. "Gods, you're a big, giant tool. A tool of mythic proportions. I couldn't fall in love with an insurance salesman? No, I get Paul Bunyan with super testosterone power. Special."

"Who the hell is Paul Bunyan? An old lover?"

Sarai burst out laughing. "You'll have to look up Earth lore when you get back home. Now don't do this again or I'll have to gut you."

Rhea allowed him to bring her into his lap and put her head on his chest as they drove.

They arrived at the rift point and, as they got out of the car, Rhea nearly fell to her knees. She truly felt the dark presence of the Nameless once she was in the open air. Sickness coursed through her as there was one less barrier between her and the Nameless. "The wards have broken. It's coming."

All around them, the people who'd been in the conveyances as they'd fled the area around the keep and the refugees who'd convoyed out began to open rifts, and those without the magic jumped through. The vehicles would be abandoned there, they were unimportant in comparison to their lives. Jax opened a rift of his own and Rhea grabbed her bag and walked through, hand in hand with him.

And walked into his front hallway. His valet waited there, looking dire but able. He took Rhea's and Jax's bags and moved quickly to put them upstairs.

Katai came down the stairs and hugged both Jax and Rhea. "Thank goodness you're here safe. I've been out of my mind with worry since Timus dropped in." She turned to Sarai and the others. "Rooms have been prepared for you. Rest now. Unless you're hungry? There's a meal waiting in the kitchen if you are. Timus has asked that everyone stay here or rift back to your homes and not contact anyone just yet."

Running on adrenaline that was about to exhaust, most of them decided to sleep first and then decide where they'd go.

There were five sets of warding walls around D'ar. All of varying types of magic. Different spells were cast in varying layers. Spells to repel evil, protective runes, physical impediments that were magically strong were all woven together to make walls that were physically and metaphysically impenetrable. Although Rhea felt an overall sense of weakening against the Nameless, she was sure they'd all be fine for the next several days at least.

"You've been unconscious for days and you've just brushed against something so awful there aren't words for it. Come on, I want you to eat and then you're going to

bed.” Jax led her past his grandmother and pushed her up the stairs. Just outside his bedroom he asked his valet to bring up a tray of food for both of them and made sure Sarai had been given a room close to Rhea.

His room was large and masculine, just like him. And she noted that it lacked even a small feminine touch and relaxed. She wasn’t stupid enough to think he’d been a monk all the time she’d been gone. Still, she didn’t like to think there’d been one regular woman in his life.

He turned her, noting she still wore her Practice robe. “Let’s get you tucked into bed. I don’t like how pale you are.”

“I’m going to clean up a bit first. I need to wash my face and brush my teeth.”

Reaching out, he pushed open the door to the large bathroom adjoining the bedroom. “Go on then. I’ll get some clothes laid out for you. The food should be up shortly. If I know your father he’s going to be back here in a while to talk strategy. And I need to talk to my parents as well.”

“Hold that thought, I’ll be out in a few minutes.” She didn’t have the energy to deal with his parents right then.

It was the spicy scent of curry that drove her to hurry. Poking her head out of the bathroom, she made sure they were alone and went to join him, climbing next to him on the bed where the food tray sat.

“Oh man, this looks so good. I bought some curry at a food stall when we were here last, but this is a million times better.” She dug in, pouring the meat and veggies over rice and breathing in deeply before she scarfed it all up.

He stared at her and she blushed. “Sorry, I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

Starting, he blinked and then laughed. “Oh no, angel, I wasn’t staring at you because of how you were eating. I’m glad to see you with an appetite, you’re losing a lot of weight.”

“So?”

"You're fucking beautiful. I just can't believe my good fortune to have you walking naked out of my bathroom and scrambling up into my bed. I've imagined you in this room a thousand times. Reality is much nicer."

She watched him move the tray after he made sure she was full. She stretched provocatively. "Well, you do say the nicest things."

"You're exhausted," he said faintly, watching the rise and fall of her breasts.

"True. And you know what the best tonic is?"

"Turn over."

She froze at his tone, suddenly laced with command. With a half smile, she obeyed, moving to her belly.

He moved to straddle her and she jumped when a warm stream of fragrant oil pooled in the small of her back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him put the bottle on the bedside table.

A grunt came from her lips when his hands moved up her back, taking the oil with them, kneading her sore muscles. Pressing, sliding, massaging, those fingers and the heels of his hands moved across her back, over knots of tension, working the exhaustion out of her. As he worked Rhea began to feel lighter, more relaxed, warmer, even as her body began to soften and bloom, readying for him.

At that point his touch wasn't so much sexual as ministering. He took care of her, showing her how he felt with his hands. That touched her more deeply than if he'd just said it. As his thumbs slid up her spine, tears sprang to her eyes and a sob began to build deep in her gut. But it was a positive release of emotion and she let go and when she did the sob turned into a happy sigh of laughter.

Still drunk with feeling, she looked up at him when he turned her over. Lips brushed over her forehead and then her lips. "Close your eyes, angel. Relax and let me make you feel better."

She obeyed, letting her eyes fall closed. His hair caressed her neck and arms. Nimble, clever fingers slid over the mounds of her breasts. The oil on them made warming friction. He teased with that slick touch, taking the nipples between slippery thumb and forefingers. Her breath began to come shorter and shorter and her libido crashed back through her with a delicious wave of sensation.

Her thighs fell open in invitation. *Touch me.*

The sweet-smelling oil slicked his hands as he stroked down her belly, avoiding her pussy. Instead he moved down her body and massaged her thighs and calves and over each foot, including her toes. He knew all the right places to apply pressure, each pass his thumbs made over her instep shot straight to her clit.

Still, all she could do was smile lazily. She felt relaxed and pampered. His body shifted again and his hair brushed over her thighs as his hands pushed them apart. She sighed happily and he chuckled briefly.

His thumbs brushed up over her labia, swollen and wet for him. Unable to resist, she rolled her hips in the direction of his mouth. And when that warm, slick tongue slid through the folds of her pussy and skittered up and over her clit, she cried out softly.

After she tried to reach him, he put her hands at her sides. And so she received, hands open there on the mattress as he ministered to her. Worshipped her with mouth and hands.

And his mouth pushed her, tongue lapping over juicy flesh, taking her in, flicking over her distended clit and then pressing it into her body. Orgasm floated just out of her reach but lethargy kept her from working to grab it. Instead she waited, open, for it to descend upon her and through her.

Each movement of fingers and then tongue pulled it closer, drawing it into her cells, making a home for it in her body. Her breath began to speed until she sobbed, gulping air.

One hand rested on her breast, pinching and rolling a nipple, and the other fucked two fingers into her. He slid a pinky finger down to tickle against her rear passage and she gasped. Sensation rushed through her.

His lips made an O and encircled her clit, sucking it into his mouth. Orgasm, lazily circling, slammed into her body with near violent force, filling up her cells in a wash of pleasure, and she let it pull her under.

Muscles twitching, clit throbbing, her body soaked it up. The endorphins were somehow essential and life-giving and she felt near to normal for the first time in days.

Turning her back over, he put her hands above her head and bent one of her knees up, entering her from behind. The weight of his lower body held her in place as he leaned on his elbows, hovering just above her ear.

The angle dragged the meaty head of his cock over the swollen bundle of her G-spot each time he thrust into her.

Her hands grasped the edge of the bed and she held on as he took her. Muscles relaxed and loose, the warmth of her body lulled her, pleasure wrapped around her senses.

“You’re so beautiful. I’ve never seen a more gorgeous sight.” His breath stirred the hair near her ear where he whispered.

His stomach slid against her ass and the small of her back. The oil still slick between them, the scent of almonds began to mix with magic and sex. It pulled her back under—the sound of their union, the scent, Jax’s groans and murmured words of love. The rhythm of his body into hers over and over, filling her up and taking that fullness away—each time he pressed back in her body joyously received him, each time he pulled nearly all the way out she felt bereft.

They created a language there, beyond words—cock to cunt. The sensation of his body entering hers was somehow terribly monumental. Not face-to-face with him, her eyes were closed as she thought of the way he moved, of his smile and the glint of those

deep blue eyes when he began to seduce her. His hunger for her seemed bottomless and it lifted her, made her feel revered. Loved.

It hit her then in a way it hadn't before and a sob tore from her lips.

Jax heard it and pulled out, turning her over. "Baby? Did I hurt you?" Concern for her wrinkled his forehead. Still crying, she shook her head and pulled his lips to hers for a kiss.

But he pulled away from her lips and kissed softly over her cheeks and wet eyelashes. Gentle, oh-so gentle, he tipped her chin up and kissed her again. "What is it? I thought we were okay?"

She smiled through her tears. "We are okay. It just hit me—exactly how okay we are. I love you, Jaac."

He froze, a look of love on his face that sliced through her reserves. It wasn't that it made her his, she knew she'd always been. But all parts of her could finally agree to that, accept it. Her heart swelled in her chest.

His lips curved into a smile. "You do, huh? Well good. You don't know what it means to me to hear it from you. And not in response to me. I'd do anything for you. Just let me love you, all right?"

She nodded. "Now, you need to get back to work."

He laughed and moved closer, pulling her thigh up over his and entering her again. This time it was slow, as if he couldn't bear to not be deep inside her body. Instead of thrusting, he gently rocked.

Their foreheads touched, leaning against the other's. Her leg wrapped around him, calf against the hard muscles of his ass. The wall of his abdomen rippled as he rolled his hips.

"You're incredibly sexy," she said, almost shyly.

He blushed. "You think so?"

She laughed. "Uh yeah! Hello? Look in a mirror once or twice? I'm sure your bed hasn't lacked for company, Jaac."

He leaned in and kissed her quick and hard. "Yes, but none of them was you. And speaking of sexy, Rhea, you're magnificent. Overflowing with sex and magic, tall and voluptuous. I want to fuck you every waking moment and I'm sure I dream about it too."

"Smooth." She tried to suppress a grin, wildly flattered. Her hands smoothed over the bulk of his biceps. Moving her head, she gave in to temptation and sank her teeth into the muscle there.

Jax groaned softly as a shudder worked through him. "Gods, yes."

"Oh yeah? You like it a bit rough, Jax?"

Rhea shoved him back, rolling with him so that he stayed buried inside her.

"Where you're concerned, I like it all. Don't overdo it, you were unconscious for two days."

She arched, her head falling back. Her hair teased the backs of her calves. Reaching around, she found his balls and dragged her nails over them, delighting in his hiss of pleasure.

Flexing her thighs, she rose up and slid back down the shaft of his cock. Over and over.

His hands skimmed up her stomach and cupped her breasts. "How about you, Rhea?" Clever fingers pinched just shy of pain. Her nipples swelled in his hands and her head came back up.

Her teeth caught her bottom lip and she dragged her nails down his chest, leaving marks in their wake. Savage satisfaction slid through her gut at his pleased moans. Possessiveness wasn't a familiar feeling but this man was *hers*.

Leaning her body down as he continued to cradle her breasts, she bit the muscle of his chest just above his heart and then licked quickly to each one of his nipples.

“Fuck...Rhea, I’ve got to come. Please.”

Staying bent over him, she grabbed the tendon where neck met shoulder between her teeth and levered herself back onto him, fucking herself onto his cock over and over.

The angle was delicious, even better when one of his hands snaked down and his fingertips found her clit. He did little more than press into her as she rode on his cock, grinding herself onto his hand as she did.

Climax began to build deep inside her as she moved on him, felt his cock harden.

“You feel so damned good inside me,” she whispered around the skin of his neck.

“Aw, Gods, Rhea.” His voice was hoarse as he began to move his hips, thrusting into her, meeting her movements back. “Yes. Oh yes, baby. Fuck me. Your pussy feels so good.”

Tightening herself around him was the last straw, and orgasm struck with near blinding intensity. She heard his groan as he thrust one last time, hard and deep, his cock pulsing as he came into her.

“I love you, Rhea.” His words were sleepy as she collapsed beside him. She felt him pull the blankets up around them. Seeking his warmth, she rested against his body, her arms wrapped around the ones he held around her. Her last thoughts as she fell asleep were happy ones, unfettered by guilt or grief. It’d been a very long time.

Chapter Six

She awoke to low sounds of arguing in the hallway outside Jax's room. Sitting up, she stretched, amazed that she felt so good. The massage and that hot sex must really have been a tonic.

There was no way she was going out there in her current state. Quickly she got out of bed and headed into the bathroom and showered quickly. Braiding her wet hair back, she put on the at-home gown Jax had left in the bathroom for her and, in her bare feet, she braced herself and left the room.

The hallway was empty so she moved toward the voices downstairs. Walking into the drawing room, she saw her father there with Jax's father and her uncle Treya. Her father froze a moment before his face crumpled and he headed to her.

"You're so beautiful. You look much like her. I'm sorry, Sa'Rhea. I thought I was doing the right thing and then I wanted you safe and, Gods, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

Her father stood before her, tears streaming down his face. She saw two paths, forgiveness and a lessening of her burdens or the continuation of her grudge but still having to work with him on the Council. The part of her that was her mother's chose the first path and she opened her arms and he stepped into them.

And she knew it had been the right choice as her heart felt free.

Sometime later she stepped back, not missing the touched look on Jax's face. Her uncle smiled and kissed her cheek.

"You're looking pretty hale for someone who was essentially in a coma for two days."

"So maybe she wasn't."

Rhea looked at her ex-father-in-law with distaste. "I'm not going to engage in this with you." Turning to her father and uncle, she filled them in on her dream and the collapse of the wards.

"We've got reports of three other wards falling. If you and Jaac hadn't called for evacuation of the population tens of thousands would be dead now."

His words meant a lot. "What do we do now?"

Mrs. Dakins came in with a tray of tea and sandwiches. Jax raised a brow and nodded at Rhea and then the food and she rolled her eyes but made herself a plate, poured a cup of tea and went to sit down. Protectively, Jax moved next to her, drinking his own tea.

"I've called back most of the Practitioners we sent to the Eastern Mountains. The remaining Practitioners of all levels are gathering here in the city now. We'll need them all, from healers to the weather controllers. The Nameless is moving in this direction. We've gone and brought back all refugees from the staging areas, they're all here behind the grand wards. There are teams out now, rifting and moving around to report on the progress of the Nameless."

There was a commotion in the hallway and suddenly a knot of people pushed into the room. A cry came from Rhea's lips when she saw her sister there, standing with Petra, one of Jax's sisters.

Emmia's guarded eyes caught her sister's and they both stood still for a long moment. Knowing the pain of Emmia's gift, she held herself back when she wanted to embrace her baby sister. Emmia's empathy meant that she had to deal with the tide of emotions of not just everyone in the room but those in the house and even on the street outside.

"Emmia, I'm so glad to see you well. I've missed you very much."

Emmia dropped her eyes for a moment. Her hands caressed the hilt of the blades she carried on each side of her body. The long rope of her hair lay in a braid that trailed down her back.

"And I you. Welcome home."

Rhea knew that would be all she got. While she knew her sister would give her life for her, they were not close in any traditional sense. Both had walls around themselves for different reasons.

Timus looked at his daughters, the ones who'd survived. Strong. The eldest tall and essentially feminine. His baby, standing there in trousers and a baggy shirt. He knew her arms were muscled and lean from her sword work. Both had eyes that were wary and not very trusting.

Still, he loved them both so much he ached to think their lives were in such danger.

Petra pushed her way into the room and hugged Jax. Turning to Rhea, she cocked her head. Rhea's stomach tightened. Petra was the feminine version of Paul. Lithe and very delicate. She had fair hair and lighter eyes. Petra had been a child when Rhea had seen her last.

"I had a vision, Rhea. It's coming and it's bringing men."

Seeing Rhea's confusion, Jax put his hand on Rhea's arm. "Pet's Talent is her vision." Pride was clear on his face.

A Seer. A rare and powerful gift.

"I told you to stay east!"

Petra turned and looked at her father. "I saw so many things. Forward and backward."

He paled.

"Petra, what do you mean?"

"The Nameless is coming. And it has an army of men. My mother has helped. Paul helped. My father knows but he's not involved." Petra met Rhea's eyes. "I'm sorry I couldn't help you before."

"You were ten when I was exiled. It's all right."

Rhea looked at her father and then to Jax, whose lips were in a tight white line. Rhea felt awful for him.

Jax looked to the guards near the door. "Go to my parents' home and arrest my mother. Search her carefully and put her in one of the special cells." He turned to Petra. "Anyone else, Pet?"

"Arta Hars and his son."

Timus sighed deeply. "Arrest my brother as well. Keep in mind he's telekinetic, and my nephew is telepathic. Send in one of the Blanks for my nephew. Special cells for them too. They're to have no contact with each other or anyone else."

The special cells were constructed so that no magic could be performed inside them without a key—the key being the genetic code of special jailers called "Blanks" whose Talent was that they gave off no discernable mental signature. Only they could rift in and out.

The guards left. Rhea saw the strain around Emmia's eyes. She knew the strain of being around this many people all on high alert and brimming with adrenaline was a lot to bear. "Why don't you go home and rest until we need you?"

"You'll need my blades." Rhea knew it was her sister's way of making sure they'd send for her.

Rhea nodded. "We will. I have something for you. Will you wait a moment?"

Her sister nodded and stepped into the hallway when Rhea moved past her and up the stairs to Jax's bedroom. She rustled through her duffel until she found the black velvet bag and the purple cloth.

Near the front door, she held them out to Emmia. "I brought these for you. The cards were given to me several years ago. I've always imagined giving them to you and so I think they're meant to be yours."

Emmia took them, her hands sliding over the nap of the velvet for a brief moment before tucking the gifts into the inside pocket of the baggy coat she wore. Emmia smiled

softly and touched Rhea's arm gently, a rarity. And just that quickly it was gone and she turned and left.

When Rhea walked back into the drawing room her eyes immediately sought out Jax. Her chest constricted as she saw the pain on his face. "Jax, why don't you deal with your father? We'll work in here." Oh how she wished she could bear this for him.

He sighed, hugging his sister to his side. "Father, we need to talk." Leaning into Rhea, he kissed her softly. She gave him what comfort she could, touched that he'd seek it from her.

Once they'd left the room Timus turned to one of the guards. "Do not let Chan leave here without my permission."

Petra entered the room as they pulled out maps of the extensive warding walls around the capital.

"Tell us about this army, Petra."

"From what I saw it's not a large group. Not even a thousand men. But they're Practitioners of dark magic and they don't expect to be caught. They have scrolls."

"Paul."

Petra nodded. "Yes, I think so. And now my mother."

"She made a deal with them for our lives. My sisters and me and my father. Arta approached her a year ago. My mother knew about Paul but she didn't know the extent of what he'd done. My father was trying to stop her. I don't believe he helped at all."

"Except in his silence as my daughter's life was placed in danger repeatedly." Timus' anger shimmered around him. "And he sat silent while she was exiled!"

"And you did it knowing her innocence!" Jax yelled back as he came back into the room from the doorway where he'd been standing.

"And where were you? You claim to love her so much, Jaac. You stood there in the square with your family as she was sent through that rift." Timus stood, fists clenched.

"STOP IT! I'm not a bone to be fought over or a club to bludgeon each other with. I won't have it. In case you forgot, we've got an army of dark Practitioners and the Nameless barreling our way."

Jax looked at her and let out the breath he'd been holding. "You're right, angel. My father has told me my mother had plans to drug me and smuggle us all out of the city tomorrow night. He believes that's when the Nameless will arrive."

"How can we trust him?" Rhea wished she didn't have to ask but she did.

"We can't. But we can trust that he wants to try to save me and Petra." Jax's pain was clear in his voice.

Rhea nodded and went back to the maps. "We can't just wait in here. If the Nameless gets this far, it's all over."

Petra pointed to the outermost city wards, about forty miles away. "Here. They'll use the scrolls to breach here."

"Then we will be waiting."

"We can use these mountains here as cover for our own troops and most of the Practitioners. We'll need their magic to hold the next line of wards and lend you magic as you try to drain the Nameless."

"Negative magic?" Panic settled into Rhea. Trying to drain something as big as the Nameless with a negative spell to pull its power into herself was a big risk. Positive magic was something she could control, something she was sure of. But negative magic wasn't often used for a reason. It was dangerous and difficult to control.

"I don't like it either but what other choice do we have?"

"I don't suppose you saw the end of the battle?" Rhea looked to Petra.

"You know that's not how it works."

"Yeah, but I thought I'd ask anyway."

"Where is your father?" Timus asked Jax, his voice considerably calmer.

"He's upstairs. He's offered to help. I believe he will if for no other reason than to try to save my mother."

"We don't need that traitor!" her uncle Treya spoke for the first time.

"We do. He's got strong magic and he's a firethrower." Rhea shrugged. "Look, I don't like him. I didn't like him before and I really don't like him now. But this is bigger than me. This is the existence of our people. We need every weapon we can get."

Jax looked to Timus. As the leader of the Council, it was up to him in this case. After a long silence, Timus nodded shortly. "Broker a deal. If he helps us we'll spare the life of his wife. But they'll both be exiled. If we survive."

Jax swallowed and Rhea felt his relief. "I'll go then. I'll have him kept under guard and out of contact with anyone."

Petra hugged Rhea. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

Rhea looked at the empty doorway that Jax had exited through. "Yes I did."

* * * * *

After they'd worked out a plan, Timus left with most of the guards. They'd assemble the people they'd need and begin to rift out to the last ward to take their positions. It would have to happen slowly so as not to attract too much attention. They were pretty sure there were spies in the city.

Timus planned to go to the jail to interview his brother and had had Rhea's other uncle brought in for questioning.

Sarai went to her family to enlist their help. Minxes had their own kind of magic and their aid would be important.

Petra went to rest and, after the room had emptied, Rhea turned to Jax, who stood and looked out the windows.

"I'm sorry."

When he turned, his face bore a look of surprise. "You're sorry? My parents aided the thing that has tried to erase humans from this world for generations. They knew my

brother helped it and did nothing to help you! You were exiled because of my family. You must hate me."

She shook her head and went to him. Reaching up, she cupped his cheek. "I love you. You bear no responsibility for your parents, Jax. What they did, they did. Did you know before tonight?"

"No! Rhea, how can you think that?"

"I *don't* think that. Didn't you just hear what I said?" Gently, she rapped her knuckles on his skull. "I thought you had a genius-level IQ."

"You still love me, huh?"

"Fucked up, felonious family and all. And Petra's okay at least."

"Felonious? I take it that's bad? You're going to have to give me a lexicon of all the Earth references you make." His smile was hesitant but genuine. "Thank the heavens Shandi stayed east. She's going to be devastated when she hears about our parents. And your family isn't perfect either. Arta is crazy and your father is a pompous ass."

"He is a pompous ass. But he gave us his blessing before he left. And Shandi is too young to be here anyway."

"Blessing huh?" He moved closer, banding an arm around her waist and pulling her flush with his body. "Does that mean you're going to make an honest man of me and marry me?"

She raised a brow before leaning out to lock the door. "No. I think we should live in sin for a while. I've done the marriage thing before and it didn't work out that well. Jax, I don't have a good track record, I seem to kill my husbands."

"Oh, only one." He winked but got serious again. "My brother was a wastrel and a cheat and wife beater, and apparently a traitor too. You did what you had to do, Rhea. I'm hard to kill anyway."

Her shock at his comments warmed to amusement. They were both clearly twisted people. "If you cheat on me can I cut your balls off?"

Wincing, he moved her back to the couch. "Hey, no discussion of my balls in anything less than an affectionate manner. And I have no plans to cheat on you. With you here at home, married to me or not, why would I need anything else?"

She sank to her knees between his thighs as he sat on the couch. Her hands undid his belt and pulled open the fly of his pants. "I knew you weren't wearing underwear."

"Your father came into the house and demanded to see you. I grabbed the pants near the door and put them on. Fuck!"

He stopped speaking as she sucked the head of his cock into her mouth, sliding her tongue around the ridge of the crown. He tasted faintly of her body.

His balls, heavy, lay in her palm. Tension from the whole last several hours strung through his thighs and stomach.

Each time she moved her mouth back down over him she took more of him. That tension released and his muscles jumped as they flexed and relaxed.

Her tongue pressed down the center of the shaft, over the throbbing vein there and back up, the tip digging into that extra-sensitive spot just beneath the slit on the head.

The salty tang of his pre-cum teased her senses. She felt powerful there, his cock in her mouth. Completely in charge of the pleasure of this potent man.

Pressing the pads of her fingers into the spot just behind his balls, she was rewarded with a deep groan and the jerk of his cock. She hummed her satisfaction around him.

"Yes, oh yes. Like that, angel."

She wanted to laugh at his calling her that. But it was poignantly sweet and so she let it warm her insides instead.

"Make me nice and wet. Oh that's the way."

Rolling her eyes up, she met his gaze. The blue was so dark that with his pupils so wide it was hard to see where one stopped and the other began. Hunger etched his features. His lips slightly parted as his chest heaved to pull in breath.

"How sexy are you there? Mouth wrapped around my cock, hair around your back like a cloak? Your ass swaying in that gown that marks your rank and makes you look like a queen. Get up, angel. I'm going to fuck you."

Blinking, she pulled off him with a soft *pop* and he helped her to stand.

"On your knees facing the back of the couch. Open the front of your gown and free your breasts for me."

Hands shaking with barely leashed desire, she knelt on the couch and undid the fastenings that held the bodice of the gown closed. He looked over her shoulder, resting his chin there, and slid his hands upward to cup the breasts that were now free of the dress.

"Heavy but still so high. Your tits are magnificent. Gorgeous. They make me hard whenever I just think about them." He circled the nipples with the tips of his fingers. "And these succulent nipples, Gods. Rhea, you have no idea how good you taste. Your magic coats your skin like gossamer, sweet and tangy all at once."

His hands moved to her waist.

"Hands on the back of the couch."

She felt the cool air on her ass and thighs as he pulled the skirt up and over her ass, baring her to him.

"I do so like these panties you brought back. Not so different from the ones you can get here, but just different enough." He undid the tie at the left hip and she felt the silk slide down her thighs.

Gentle fingertips traced over her ass and thighs. For the briefest moment they dipped between the lips of her pussy and tickled over her clit. Just enough to make her moan a bit.

"Spread your thighs." He helped, pushing her legs wide apart.

Moments later she felt the head of his cock nudge against her gate, pressing just inside but no further.

"You're so hot. Hot and wet, and it shoots straight to my balls." As he ended the sentence, he thrust into her in one quick movement, so hard his balls slapped against her mound. "Tight, too."

She thrust back against him, needing more. And he gave it to her. "More, Jax. Please. I need it hard and fast. Fuck me so hard all I feel is your cock battering deep into my pussy."

He groaned. "Damn it, woman! Every time I think I've got the upper hand you do or say something ten times sexier."

Her laugh ended on a strangled gasp as he began to fuck into her hard and deep. Faster and faster he pistoned into her body. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the couch, arching to take more of him.

"Make yourself come, angel. I need to hold your breasts."

One of her hands slid to her clit, laying her finger over it so she could caress his cock each time he moved into her.

His body bent around hers, caging her, dominating her. Large hands took her breasts, fingers played with her nipples, each tug echoing with a throb of her clit. She did little more than leave her finger there, not wanting to come just yet, but the percussive movement of the slap of his balls against her and the bump of his cock against her cervix was enough to draw her inexorably closer each time he thrust into her.

She knew it was just about to explode through her. "Don't leave me alone. I'm going to come."

He heard her whispered words right as her cunt clamped down on his cock when she came. Wet muscles fluttered and gripped him. Her nipples hardened and stabbed into his hands. She was suddenly creamy and swollen around him as a flush worked up her back.

"Shit..." He grunted and thrust into her hard and deep, his hands moving to her waist to hold her back against him as he came.

He stood behind her, still embedded within her, when she turned to look at him over her shoulder. "Yeah, I think I'm ready to kick some ass now."

Grinning, he shook his head. "You're trouble, you know that? Thank Gods you're mine."

* * * * *

Rhea spent the next hours poring over the books in her family library, reading everything she could about negative magics. She'd never tried a spell of that type before and it terrified her. At the same time, they had no other real options at that stage of the game. It was go big or go home in a coffin.

She knew her father and Jax both worried about her but both men also believed in her and that helped.

Some hours before she and Jax planned to leave to go into the mountains they ate a meal and slept.

Against the harbor of his body, Jax's warmth lulled and relaxed her. Made her feel safe. His scent rose from his skin and her body responded. Still, she spelled herself, knowing it would be impossible to sleep without help—a sleep that was dreamless and protected from invasion with protective magic.

Chapter Seven

When she awoke, the tension was already heavy in the air. The Nameless was coming and they had to stop it.

Jax was already downstairs and giving orders, she heard him as she went down to join him. Katai refused to leave and sat in the dining room, drinking coffee and watching her grandson lead.

Rhea stood in the doorway and watched him as well. Her man emanated strength and leadership. She knew he'd run the Council at her side, a uniting of their two houses the way it was supposed to have been with Paul all those years ago.

As if he'd felt her presence, he turned, and smiled as he caught sight of her. "Good afternoon, angel. Still ready to kick some Nameless butt?"

She went to him, unable not to seek out his arms. "Yeah, something like that. It's not like I can go on a weekend at the shore instead."

"After this, I'll take you anywhere you want to go, angel. Mrs. Dakins has packed up some food. We should get going."

Katai stood and wrapped her arms around both of them. "You two will bring my great-grandchildren into the world. Believe in each other. I'll be here when you get back."

The way the internal wards were constructed, it was possible for them to open a rift to get there.

Timus met them at the base of the hillside that would serve as their staging area.

"We've set up a small place for you to Practice. It's an alcove at the top of the hill here."

Relief coursed through Rhea. The idea of Practicing with an audience didn't thrill her. She would have done it if she had to, but being alone with Jax on the crest of that mountain appealed to her far more.

"We've got Practitioners all through the mountains. Their power will amplify better that way. And soldiers stationed at the base of the rocks on both sides of the pass here. Emmia...I don't want her here but she insisted. She's with the soldiers."

Rhea nodded. "It's who she is, Father. And you can't deny her skill with the blades. I can only imagine she's gotten even better over the years. Let her help in her own way. She knows what's best for herself."

"And you? Are you sure about the negative magic?"

She nodded slowly. "It's our best hope. If it works we not only end it, we take the power and I'll transfer it into the wards."

"Sarai is here with the minxes, she said to send her love." Timus looked to Jax. "You keep my daughter safe, Jaac."

"I'll do my very best."

Rhea squeezed Jax's hand. "Where is Arta?"

"He's dead. They found him dead in his cell this afternoon." He looked to Jax quickly. "Your mother is fine. Your father is here with your sister on the far ridge. My brother Stephen knew Arta was conspiring but not exactly what. He's resigned and volunteered for exile. I sent him through a rift an hour ago. Treya is here."

"We need to go. I can feel it getting closer. When the day slides into another, at midnight, we'll begin. The Nameless will come then, it's when we will both draw the most power."

Timus kissed Rhea's forehead and turned. A guard would lead them up to the place they'd Practice.

At the crest of the mountain, they'd created a nest of blankets and mats in a small impression surrounded by rocks. The guard turned and left them there.

Under the silvery light of the moon, Jax pulled off his clothing and upended a container holding herb-laced water over his head.

Magic began to pulse low in her gut as she watched the rivulets of water run down over his muscled form. His hair was so long it hung past his ass when wet.

She pulled her own clothes off and did the same ritual with the water. The air was cold but their magic held out most of it.

Once she dried off, she pulled on her robe. Jax went to sit in the center of their nest and watched as she went to work.

She tied a piece of thistle in her hair and did the same to Jax's. Thistle would protect against magical attacks.

Moving around the area, she scattered salt, and then elder leaves were scattered at the head of where they'd lay, to ward off evil. She'd burned black sesame seeds earlier and bathed the both of them in the smoke, again to protect them from evil.

Rhea didn't always use all of these tools and ingredients, but taking the Nameless' power into herself in the negative magic spell would leave her open in ways she wasn't normally. Extra precaution would not hurt.

She knelt before Jax and held her arms out at her sides, hands stained with henna. The Nameless was on the horizon and she felt her Talent surge as midnight slipped into place.

Jax leaned in and kissed her chest above her heart. "I love you so you have to get through this. Now let's go."

"Do me." She raised a brow and smirked, pulling her robe off her body.

Warm lips grazed over her temple and then he found her mouth. The kiss was gentle, soft. It murmured sweet nothings and promised afternoon walks on the beach. She sighed into him, relaxing, giving herself.

His hands moved, sliding against her scalp, holding her head, changing the angle to suit himself, and he went back for more. His tongue, hot and wet, slipped between her

lips and into her mouth like he owned it. And he did. She was his as he was hers and their magic twisted and bound together and began to pour from them.

His effect on her was intense and her body responded—tightening, tingling, blooming and getting slick. Hunger slid through her with a sharp edge. She needed him, not just as her partner but as her man.

Need broke from her lips as a primal cry and he bit her chin as he nibbled down her face and to her neck.

When the air was just thick enough, she tipped her head back and began to speak. The words she spoke were slightly different than the ones she normally used. They felt odd in her mouth, but the power began to pulse between them in a low bass. Back and forth with a seductive tempo that echoed in her nipples and clit.

The Nameless reached the wards and stopped, sensing their presence and their magic.

And then it began to work to unravel the layers of spells that held the wards in place—in a way that made it clear someone who'd had intimate knowledge of the wards had supplied the information.

She reached one henna-stained hand out and grabbed his cock. With a groan, he pumped into her fist. Dimly, she felt the throb of him against the skin of her palm, felt the wetness smear under her thumb as she moved it up and over the head.

He whispered words of encouragement and adoration against her skin. Words her brain couldn't focus on but knew existed anyway.

He placed her gently on her back against the cool nest of blankets there. The full moon hung heavy above their heads and the light of it glinted from her skin, her magic glimmering.

Each nipple called to his mouth and he gave into his need for her. He swirled his tongue around each tight knot of flesh until her hips began to churn.

Sliding his hand down her belly and between the swollen lips of her cunt, he found her wet and ready for him. Her clit was hard and begging for attention.

He sucked a nipple into his mouth and grazed it with his teeth. Her breath caught and her magic swelled, pouring out again in a greater volume.

An electric hum filled the air. Jax's hair rose with the static. The Nameless pushed through the wards enough that Jax heard the yell of the soldiers below. He knew a battle would ensue between their troops and those dark ones with the Nameless. He felt a general upsurge in power as Practitioners all over the area began to work their magic in various ways.

Rhea had told him before they left the house that it was likely the Nameless would get very close to her and that he could not interrupt her spell no matter what the reason. If the spell tying them together snapped, her own life force could be drained back into the Nameless.

He kept this in mind as the shadow of the Nameless, dank and dreadful, loomed over them.

Leaning down between her thighs, he tasted her. The creamy honey of her pussy coated his lips, eased the way for his fingers to slide into her.

As he slid the flat of his tongue from side to side over her clit, he fucked her with his fingers and wondered what battle was going on between his beloved and the monster that threatened their very existence.

Even if she could have spoken, Rhea wouldn't have been able to describe what happened in the ether. She coursed on her magic, up and out, and with her words, connected to the Nameless. It was a shock when its cold darkness began to fill her and she was glad she'd taken the extra precautions she had. It felt as if she were drowning in icy-cold dread, and terror threatened all around. It was hard to lock out her fears. Fear that she wasn't strong enough or powerful enough to win. Fear that she'd lose hold on this plane of existence and be lost forever in that darkness. As a counterpoint,

sweet relief rushed through her as Jax's weight held her to the rocks and earth filled with power. Power she tapped into as the earth itself was her conduit.

The Nameless fought her then, trying to reverse the spell, but she'd taken it by surprise. As her pleasure built, her Talent did as well, amplified by the Practitioners all over the area and the man touching her.

Quicksilver, orgasm coursed through her as she felt the slight burn and then intense pleasure of Jax's finger pressing into her backside as he tongued her clit and stroked her sweet spot. Her body went into overdrive at the sheer abundance of sensory pleasure he visited upon her.

She felt the cord that connected her to Jax then, strong. The last bit of doubt left her and she grabbed the Nameless' life force and power with all her magical might and pulled it into herself and then back into the ground below her body. The earth would receive it and purify it and return it to the wards.

Jax's cock sliced into her, her body bent nearly in half, legs up over his shoulders. The rock beneath her bit into her shoulders through the blankets, but that only served to heighten the primal nature of the way he took her.

The Nameless surged against her and she felt its physical form icy against her skin. Fear slithered through her but Jax's fingers gripped her shoulders tight, pressing into the skin there. That brought her back to him, helped her get hold of herself again, and she struggled up to her magical feet.

The smug feeling from the Nameless receded as she began to drain power anew. Somewhere in the back of her head she knew people were dying below. Most assuredly people she knew and maybe even loved.

But she had to put it out of her mind because if she didn't finish the spell they'd all die for sure.

Jax's hands found her breasts, pinching her nipples until she made a low squeal. He bent over her as he rolled his hips to thrust deep into her. He'd never taken a woman this way before. He dominated her with his form but those long legs wrapped around

his neck, her breasts bouncing and the low, rhythmic grunts that came from deep in her gut around the murmurings of her spell made him feel like a conquered man. She held his heart in the palm of her hand, he belonged to her utterly and completely.

He'd convince her to marry him if it was the last thing he did. There was no way he was going to let her avoid marriage because of the ways others had acted.

Her cunt rippled around him, the honey spreading on his balls and stomach as he moved into her was scalding hot. Her scent drove him crazy. So damned sexy and delicious. Sliding his tongue over his lips, he tasted her anew and that small thing pushed him a step away.

Gauging from the feeling in the air and her output of power, which was cresting higher and higher, the spell was coming to a close. The ground beneath them was superheated from the magic she channeled through it. Her own body was so warm that steam rose from it into the air.

He adjusted his angle so each thrust into her was also a grind of his pubic bone against her clit. Her breath hitched and he knew it was a move he'd use again when they weren't Practicing and she could react to him.

The static built and built, the hum was lower now and it hurt his teeth. The clashes below became less frenzied and suddenly she cried out as she climaxed. So much power shot from her and ricocheted back into them both and into the earth that he felt like his entire body shot through the head of his cock into her when he came.

The last bit of the Nameless washed through them and he felt nauseated as it touched them. He couldn't imagine what it felt like for Rhea to channel such evil through her magic, through her body.

And it was gone.

There were still shouts from below, and screams, but they began to die down as well.

Rhea, pale and still, lay there with her eyes closed. Jax wanted to shake her to break the spell but she'd warned him not to and so he sat back on his haunches and watched her, willing her to wake up.

And some half an hour later she did, eyes fluttering open and coming to focus on him. A cry of joy broke from him when she reached her hand out. He pulled her up and into his lap, cradling her and weeping into her hair.

"Ashes."

He pulled back so he could see her face. "What? What did you say, angel?"

"Ashes. All I can taste and smell are ashes."

"We'll get you back to the house and Katai will pour tea into you until you burst. I'll run you a bath and scrub your back until all you can taste and smell is me. You did it. You saved us all."

She nodded and sat up, letting him put the robe on over her head. They'd have to walk down the hillside. Seeing her weakness, Jax picked her up and carried her and their bags.

He met the guards, who nodded and let them pass.

The ground below was a bloody mess of carnage. The dead and injured lay everywhere.

Timus limped toward them both and he put his hand over his mouth at the sight of her. "You did it, Rhea, you did it."

"But at what cost?" Her words were close to a croak as she looked around.

"This is not a cost you exacted. All these years we got lazy and they built an army. We were caught unprepared, never thinking we'd need one. We thought of the Nameless as a single entity. It was more than that. While we dismissed it, an army built, using the power of the Nameless and our ignorance to catch us unaware. They nearly succeeded. And now we won't forget. The wards are so strong now. And my Talent is

stronger. The energy you drained from the Nameless has flowed into us all—a new generation of Practitioners will be trained now.”

“Is...are my sister and father alive?” Jax scanned the area, relieved to see Petra standing at a knot of people. But his heart stuttered when he looked at what she stared at.

“Jaac, your father...”

Without putting Rhea down, Jax ran over to where Petra stood. His father lay in a heap at her feet.

“He saved me, Jaac. But then the one who tried to kill me got him instead.”

“Put me down, Jax. Go to Petra. She needs you.” Rhea spoke softly in his ear and he nodded and reluctantly put her down to pull his sister into an embrace.

The sorrow of that day built as many loved ones were counted among the dead, including Rhea’s uncle Treya. Emmia survived and it was a good thing Rhea was too weak to move or she’d have jumped on her sister in relief.

The two sisters embraced and Rhea kissed Emmia’s forehead.

“I know you have to go. This couldn’t have been easy.”

“I had to come.” Emmia shrugged. “But I’ve settled in the east. I can be alone when I need to be.”

Rhea nodded, understanding. Still, sorrow at being separated from her sister again coursed through her.

With a last look over her shoulder, Emmia opened a rift and walked through.

Broken and grieving, Jax, Rhea and Petra headed back through a rift. Back home to pick up the pieces and start the next chapter. Hope was an ember burning deep inside Rhea as she clutched Jax’s hand.

* * * * *

His arm around Rhea's waist, Jax gave his grandmother a rundown of what had happened, and she took a grieving Petra into her arms. "Pet, my sweet, you need to rest. Come with me, let's get you tucked up and with a cup of tea that'll help you sleep without dreams."

Katai looked at the two of them, sadness in her eyes. "Go on. You look exhausted. This will all be here when you've rested a while. You need each other right now. I'll hold everyone off for a few hours." Reaching out, she touched Rhea's cheek and then Jax's before turning away with Petra.

Not letting go, Jax picked her up and carried her straight into his bedroom, kicking the door closed behind him. Shutting out the world and all the carnage.

Laying her on the bed, he left to go turn on the water in the bathtub. Coming back, he pulled his clothes off and then hers. All the while, neither spoke, they only looked into each other's eyes.

Taking the hand he offered, she followed him into the bathroom and stepped into the large bathtub, settling between his thighs once he'd sat down. Nestling back into him more firmly, her back rested against his chest, her body cradled by his.

"I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you today, Rhea." The emotion in his voice tore at her heart. "When you were unconscious for so long I thought...I didn't know if you'd ever come back. You said you tasted ashes when you woke up. I'd have tasted them for eternity without you at my side."

A tear rolled down her cheek as she turned her head to put her ear over his beating heart. "I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere. I'm done running. Today above all else has taught me the true value of what I have. What you and I are, Jax. You fought for me, when I needed you this time you were there. I couldn't have succeeded today without your help. I'm sorry you lost your father."

His breath hitched. "I am too. But he died doing the right thing and that's important. It would have been important to him too."

And without words, with soft caresses and gentle kisses he washed her back, ministering to her body and spirit, drying her off when they'd done.

Sorrow mixed with hope as they got into bed and tried to sleep. Knowing that they'd have to deal with much more pain when they walked out of that room, they also knew they'd have each other.

"We'll make it. And you'll finally marry me. Then we can think about a baby or three in a few years."

"Leave it to you to get me when I'm tired." Rhea sighed, laughter in her voice.

"But you love me."

"Yes. I love you."

About the Author

Lauren Dane been writing stories since she was able to use a pencil, and before that she used to tell them to people. Of course, she still talks nonstop, but now she's decided to try and make a go of being a writer. And so here she is. She still loves to write, and through wonderful fate and good fortune, she's able to share what she writes with others now. It's a wonderful life!

The basics: Lauren is a mom, a partner, a best friend and a daughter. Living in the rainy but beautiful Pacific Northwest, she spends her late evenings writing like a fiend when she finally wrestles all of her kids to bed.

Lauren welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

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