

Fantasy Flames: Soothsayer

Kate Hill

**All rights reserved.
Copyright ©2005 Kate Hill**

No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared by any electronic or mechanical means, including but not limited to printing, file sharing, and email, without prior written permission from Changeling Press LLC.

**ISBN 1-59596-112-7
Formats Available:
HTML, Adobe PDF,
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader**

**Publisher:
Changeling Press LLC
PO Box 1561
Shepherdstown, WV 25443-1561
www.ChangelingPress.com**

**Editor: *Sheri Ross Carucci*
Cover Artist: *Karen Fox***



This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

Chapter One

Vlas closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. It had been over sixteen years since he and Ivana made love that one and only time, yet every touch, every kiss, every word that passed between them was etched into his mind.

Returning to Ori Paz after so long was likely a mistake, especially since Ivana was in all probability another man's wife. Still, now that he was once again master of his own life after sixteen years of serving a king he despised, the only place he wanted to go was home. Even if they banished him forever, at least he would see the icy gates of Ori Paz one last time, and more importantly, he would see the woman who had never left his thoughts.

He wanted to say he'd never stopped loving her, but when he'd invoked the ritual that bound him to his former master, most of his emotions had been sealed away. His weak, mortal sensations had been trapped in the same black glass bottle as the severed part of his soul. For the duration of his servitude, he had become one of the walking dead. Though he'd aged, and could sustain injuries, even feel pain, as long as his master held that bit of his soul, he could never be free, even through death.

Sixteen years he had waited. Through cunning and manipulation, his plan had finally succeeded. Yesterday, he had reclaimed his soul. He was no longer a slave. His evil master was dead.

Yet his freedom had come at a price.

Vlas glanced at his bandaged wrists where they poked through the sleeves of his white robe. Luckily his horse responded to his commands with scarcely a touch, or else the wounds on his wrists might reopen yet again. Though he knew he was too weak from blood loss to travel safely, he'd forced himself to make the journey home today. He had no desire to remain for another moment in the place of his former enslavement.

Even if I might have had the beginnings of friendships there. He shook his head. "Impossible."

The few people who had even the slightest bit of compassion for him could never truly be his friends. He'd used them to secure his own freedom. He ignored the fact that if not for his plan, the man would have died, the woman bound to a man she hated, and the young prince raised without ever knowing the truth about his parents.

The young prince was the reason for Vlas's injuries. To save the child's life, Vlas had used a protection ritual which required the blood of an Ori, or soothsayer, as humans preferred to call his kind. The amount of blood required would have killed a human. It had been enough to steal most of Vlas's strength. A single night's rest had done little to restore his health, but it wouldn't matter. Within a few days, he would reach Ori Paz.

His gray stallion snorted and tossed his head, indicating his boredom at the slow pace. "All right, I'll let you run for a while," he said, urging the stallion to a gallop. Vlas hadn't the energy to ride the speeding horse for long, but at least the release of pent up energy would help keep the animal from indulging in a fit of temper. Equines of Ori Paz tended to sense weakness in their riders. Normally Vlas could easily control the animal through his powers as an evoker, but now he needed to reserve his energy for the more difficult part of the journey to come.

At dusk they reached the continent's northernmost shoreline. Several stone fishermen's huts huddled amidst snowdrifts, smoke from their chimneys slicing through the darkening sky. Only a handful of ships waited on the dock. Two men and a boy who had been stacking firewood against the back of a barn glanced in Vlas's direction. The men approached, signaling for the boy to continue working.

Vlas dismounted and placed a hand against his horse's shoulder to keep from swaying. His head spun, and for a moment he thought he might be sick, but the feeling passed before the men reached him. Their dark eyes, buried deep within folds of brown flesh, stared at him cautiously. "Looking for something?" one of the men asked.

"A ship. I'm traveling to Ori Paz."

The other man smiled, revealing a missing front tooth. "I could tell by looking you're a soothsayer. It's a bad time for you to be returning home. The weather has been harsh this winter and it seems another storm is coming."

Vlas knew the man spoke the truth, but the storm was exactly what he was counting on to reach Ori Paz in record time. Even with the help of a strong wind, it would take half a night of sailing to reach the shoreline of his homeland. After that, it would take yet another daylong journey on foot to arrive at The Falls.

"Are you willing to sell a ship?"

"We're fishermen here," said the man with the missing tooth. "Our lives depend on our ships. If you'll wait until the storm clears, I'll be glad to take you to the shore of your homeland myself."

"That is a fair offer, but I wish to leave immediately. Yours is the closest village to my destination."

"Look, we told you that we can't afford to sell a ship."

"Even for the price of a year's worth of catch?"

The men exchanged glances, greed shining in their eyes.

"That wouldn't be fair," said the first man. "No ship we have here is worth that much."

Vlas removed a black pouch from the folds of his cloak and poured its contents into his palm. The men's lips fell open in silent wonder at the sight of gold and jewels glistening in the soothsayer's black gloved hand.

"I can buy at least three new ships with that." The toothless man reached for the small fortune, but the soothsayer returned the contents to the pouch. He slipped the valuables back into his cloak.

"You have a ship for me, then?"

"This way."

After tethering his horse to a fence, Vlas followed the toothless man to one of the ships. "It's old, but in good condition. It will get you and your companions home safely."

"It's just me and my horse."

The man curled his lip. "What? I thought you must have a camp somewhere close by."

"No."

"Sir, it's a small ship, but it will take at least two men to bring it in. Trying to sail this vessel alone, even if you are a soothsayer, is suicide."

Vlas stared at the man with his sternest expression.

Casting his gaze to his boots, the fisherman shook his head. "Then it's your funeral." The man snatched the pouch that Vlas held out to him. As he walked off the ship, he glanced over his shoulder with a disbelieving expression. "Good luck to you. You're going to need it, that's for certain."

Sighing, Vlas tried to ignore the dull ache creeping up his forearms from the stinging cuts on his wrists. He knew that his decision to rush home after so many years was impractical and foolish. What did he expect to find there? He had no connections to anyone except Ivana, and even that had only been a one-night affair. No one had ever cared for *him*, only for his skills.

An even icier chill swept across the deck, prompting Vlas to glance skyward. The storm the villagers had spoken of would be arriving soon. If he hoped to use it for travel, he would need to leave tonight. He could afford only a few hours' rest.

When he returned to his horse, the same man approached. "If you need a place to sleep tonight, you and your horse can stay in the barn."

"Thank you, but I'll only need a few hours."

"You're leaving tonight?" The man shook his head and muttered, "Really must be trying to commit suicide. How about a warm meal before you die?"

Vlas resisted the urge to grin. "That sounds good, if it's no trouble."

"Trouble?" the man snorted. "You've more than paid for it already. By the way, I'm Cutler."

After a moment's hesitation, Vlas accepted the man's extended hand. "Vlas."

"Funny that in all the years of living here with your people being so close to ours, you're the first soothsayer I've ever met."

"Perhaps you met some and didn't realize it."

Cutler chuckled. "Could be. I'll be back with some food."

As Vlas approached his horse, the animal gazed at him with large, dark eyes. Slowly he guided the stallion to the barn, trying not to wince at the pain in his wrists when he lifted off the saddle. It made sense that the best protection rituals demanded the invoker nearly kill himself. The desire for power needed to outweigh the fear of death. After so many years as one of the walking dead, terror of that final release had faded for Vlas. At times life itself seemed much more terrifying than death.

He had just finished rubbing down his horse and was changing into a dry cloak when he sensed he was being watched. Two sets of wide brown eyes stared at him from a pile of hay. He took a step closer. The boy and girl seemed to shrink deeper into the hay.

"I think he saw us," whispered the girl.

"Come out of there," Vlas ordered.

They slipped out of the hay and edged their way toward the barn doors. "Sorry, sir," said the boy.

"We've never seen a soothsayer before."

"Where are your horns?"

"My *horns*?" Vlas's brow furrowed, then he raised his eyes to heaven, recalling some of the myths that circulated among humans about his kind. Unfortunately, he could almost understand how the stories had developed. More than once in his life Vlas had been worthy of horns as well as an arrow-tipped tail.

"What are you two doing out of bed?" Cutler demanded, stepping inside, a basket in his hand.

"We just wanted to see the soothsayer," the boy replied.

"Go back to the house. Both of you!"

Casting a final glance in Vlas's direction, they raced out of the barn.

Cutler shook his head. "They're more trouble than a net full of sharks. Have you any children?"

Vlas shook his head. The closest he had come to a child of his own was the young prince for whom he had performed the protection ritual. He'd been unable to form true relationships with anyone in his walking dead state. Funny, he didn't feel any different even though the missing part of his soul had been returned. He still felt numb, as if everyone else was drifting in the same warm pool and he was frozen in the surrounding walls of ice.

Cutler waited while Vlas ate. A few times he tried to initiate conversation, but the soothsayer had no inclination to share even his most impersonal thoughts. He needed to rest and conserve his strength for the remainder of his journey.

Finally, Cutler gathered the basket and left. Vlas wrapped himself tightly in his cloak and rested against the hay. Before falling asleep, he touched the eight silver rings on his fingers, impressing upon them his desire to wake within a few hours. They were magical rings and the metal in them obeyed his command only.

As he drifted to sleep, images of Ivana floated through his mind, just as they had on so many nights since he had left Ori Paz. By this time tomorrow, he would see her again. She would be married of course, and any feelings she might have had for him long forgotten. It didn't matter. At least he would know she was alive and well, then he would truly be free to take up his life again where he belonged in the land of Ori Paz.

Chapter Two

Vlas awakened to an almost painful tingling sensation in his fingers. He nearly tumbled back into the blackness, but the tingling strengthened and changed until it felt as if dozens of tiny needles were piercing his fingers to the bone.

Panting, he sat up and ran his hands through his hair. If the rings hadn't been so persistent, he most likely would have slept through the night. Every muscle in his body ached from the cold and the soreness in his wrists felt worse than before he'd fallen asleep.

By the sound of the wind howling outside, the storm had already begun. For a moment he considered waiting until morning to leave, but something inside him refused to delay his journey any longer than necessary.

When he led his horse out of the stable, he noticed that no light shone in any window in the village. Once aboard the ship, Vlas gazed skyward and focused every fiber of his being on asking the wind and water to lend him their power to speed his ship toward his destination.

The small boat cut through the water as if pushed by the hands of the gods themselves. The price of summoning such power drained not only Vlas's mind and spirit, but his already exhausted body, as well. By the time he reached the shore of Ori Paz, he could scarcely invoke the wind and water to dock the ship. No sooner had he and his horse reached the icy shore than the wind smashed the ship against the rocks and the water devoured it in a dark whirlpool rimmed with alabaster froth.

For several moments, Vlas closed his eyes and leaned heavily against the stallion's neck. Drawing a breath of air so cold that his lungs ached, he mounted. Before him stretched seemingly endless hills of ice and snow. Still, the slightest smile touched his lips. Finally, after so many years, he was home.

The stallion's spirits, too, seemed to lift as the creature recognized the land of his birth. He tossed his head and tugged on the reins. Vlas tightened his grip, ignoring the pain in his wrists and arms.

Dawn would soon be breaking. If they traveled steadily, they would reach The Falls by mid-morning. Several miles inland, crystal trees began littering the hills. Forests of them loomed in the distance. Vlas had almost forgotten how beautiful the trees were. Native to Ori Paz, they were pure white from trunk to the tip of every triangular leaf.

At noon, they stopped by the edge of the Pure River, which never froze solid. He drank carefully, since even a man in peak physical condition had little chance of surviving once the violent currents caught him.

He was far from peak physical condition.

They rested for a short time before continuing on their journey. Though he tried to ignore his body's needs, Vlas was forced to admit the danger of continuing when he nearly fell asleep atop his horse.

Glancing around, he realized that instead of guiding the animal safely across the hills, he had turned to the flats. A dangerous mistake. Though the terrain appeared solid, it was actually littered with pools of water covered with shallow ice that a man and horse could easily crack.

Vlas was about to dismount and walk his horse to the nearest hill when a horrible shattering sound split the stillness. The ground shifted beneath the stallion's legs. Both Vlas and the horse cried out as the animal tumbled, nearly crushing his rider. Vlas landed with a grunt, a chunk of ice smashing his side. Together they thrashed in the icy water, somehow managing to fight their way to safety.

Panting, frozen to the bone, Vlas lay on the snow, the pain in his side telling him that he had cracked a rib or two. He glanced at his wrists. He'd bled through the bandages again. The fall must have reopened the wounds.

Suddenly Vlas laughed. It was as if the gods themselves were telling him he should have stayed away from Ori Paz.

A quick look at his horse revealed the animal was limping. Regaining his feet, Vlas inspected the stallion's leg. It was cut, but didn't appear broken.

After rebandaging his wrists tightly, Vlas applied healing salve to the horse's leg and wrapped it. He changed into a dry cloak that had been stored in his saddlebag and was still fairly dry -- not that it helped much considering his clothes beneath were soaked.

The horse's injury would slow them down. On foot, he would be lucky to reach The Falls by tomorrow evening. Tired, cold, and dispirited, Vlas decided to build a fire and catch a few hours' sleep before moving on.

* * *

Vlas awoke shivering and feverish. His entire body ached so badly that for several moments he couldn't stand in spite of the rings that stung his fingers, reminding him it was time to continue. He coughed, the sensation akin to gargling with needles. Though he wanted to curl up and sleep off his illness, remaining in Ori Paz's frigid wilderness in his condition might mean death, even for one of his kind.

The horse seemed no happier about continuing than Vlas did, though he noted that the animal's limp was less pronounced than earlier. "Sorry about this," he told the horse, rubbing between its eyes. The animal nuzzled his side and Vlas winced at the pain in his ribs. "Let's go."

Slowly, horse and master made their way across the frozen land. By late afternoon, Vlas was forcing himself to place one foot in front of the other. He tried not to lean on the injured horse for support, but failed several times.

Finally, he glanced up with feverish eyes and saw what looked to be an enormous frozen cascade extending for miles.

The Falls.

Closing his eyes, he raised his hands and opened his thoughts, baring himself completely to The Falls. For several moments nothing happened and Vlas's throat constricted with frustration. He should have guessed that after breaking one of the High Laws his people would shut him out.

Suddenly the ground trembled and the cascade split, leaving just enough room for him and his horse to fit through.

Vlas couldn't tell if his heart was pounding from the fever or excitement. He led the stallion down a frigid corridor that gradually turned warmer, the ice walls changing to rock. The heat actually stung his face that had been too long exposed to the freezing weather outside, but it was a welcome sensation.

Two guards dressed in red cloaks approached. The fierceness of youth shone in their dark eyes, even as a look of surprise flashed across their faces. Vlas knew it was the sight of his white robes that stirred their interest and their caution. The white robe spoke of his crime, marking Vlas as a man with half a soul.

"Come with us," one of the guards said without greeting or introduction. No one would ask the name of one wearing the white robe. That right was reserved for the emperor and empress. Even though his soul had been freed, only the leaders of Ori Paz could return his citizenship and allow him to rejoin his people as a living Ori. If and when that moment arrived, only then would he be called by his name. Until then, he would be called Death.

Vlas gritted his teeth as one of the guards snapped manacles on his wrists and tugged. He followed them silently and without rebellion. After all, this was exactly what he wanted, to be placed on trial and hopefully granted a pardon.

Halfway down the corridor, another guard approached and spoke with Vlas's escorts. The new guard then led Vlas's horse away.

They stepped out of the corridor and into the heart of the city. For a moment he almost forgot to breathe. It was as beautiful as he remembered. Sunlight bled through the snowy sky far above the city, but due to the rituals invoked by the citizens of Ori Paz, the land inside The Falls was warm. Green grass, trees, flowers, and vegetable gardens filled the city with color. While winter forever raged outside, within The Falls endless spring prevailed.

Vlas struggled to control a coughing spasm as the guards dragged him toward the prison, a tall gray building on the west side of the city. Suddenly a man on a horse stopped on the cobbled road in front of them.

"By all the gods," the man murmured. "It's... you."

Vlas glanced up, narrowing his eyes. The man's handsome face had aged a bit, but Vlas would know those glistening blue eyes and full lips anywhere. "Nicolai."

"I can't believe it." Nicolai dismounted, tossing his blond mane over one of his broad shoulders. His golden robe rustled as he approached and spoke to the guards. "Where are you taking him?"

"To the prison house where we will log him in and send word to the emperor and empress. Then he will await his trial."

"You will take him to the Royal Haven now."

"Yes, sir," the guards spoke in union. It seemed the power of Nicolai's family still spoke volumes.

"And remove those damned manacles."

"Forgive us, sir, but we cannot do that. The law requires --"

"Fine, then," Nicolai snapped. He spoke to Vlas in a softer tone. "I will ask for an immediate trial. I'm sure the emperor will agree. He will be glad to see you."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"You look terrible, by the way."

"As if you ever said I looked good."

Nicolai smiled slightly, gazing into Vlas's eyes. "I wonder, have you changed at all during your absence?"

Drawing a deep breath, Vlas closed his mind to Nicolai's probing. If not for his weakened state, he would have little problem fending off such a mental assault.

Nicolai's thoughts slipped out of Vlas's head. Panting slightly, the blond grinned. "Still formidable, but I can tell you're not at your best."

"Enjoy it while it lasts."

Together, the small group walked to the Royal Haven, a circular building of white and gray stone. While Vlas and his guards waited in the foyer, Nicolai was admitted to the emperor's private chamber. Moments later, he returned and escorted Vlas and the guards to the emperor and empress's receiving hall.

Both leaders sat side by side at a small marble table below a stained glass window. Except for a full head of gray hair, the emperor was as Vlas remembered him. Tall and powerfully built, he was a proud, imposing figure. The empress, a woman Vlas had never met, seemed to make a perfect match for him. Also tall with steel gray hair, she possessed a softly curved face with gentle yet stern blue eyes.

"Leave us," the emperor ordered the guards and Nicolai. They left and the emperor beckoned Vlas closer. "I thought never to see you again."

"Not a day has passed, my lord, that I have not hoped to return."

"I would like to believe that, Death."

"You have broken one of the High Laws," the empress stated. "We will judge how desperate you are to return to us, and how worthy."

Vlas bowed from the neck. Though every fiber of his being rebelled against surrendering to anyone or anything, he understood that he must appease this man and woman or else be shut out of his world forever. He had come too far and endured too much to risk losing this one chance to regain at least some of what he'd lost.

Without warning, both the emperor and empress struck Vlas with the full force of their combined powers. Every memory of the past sixteen years, from the moment he performed the soul sharing ritual until now, seemed to explode within his head. Their probing was so fast and agonizing that he lost awareness of everything except the need to free himself from their power.

Suddenly everything went black and Vlas sank into an abyss without sound, scent, vision, or touch.

Chapter Three

Ivana's hands slid up Vlas Sascha Evgenyl's chest before locking around his neck. Her lips devoured his in an unexpected kiss, and he prayed he wasn't so drunk that he wouldn't remember this moment when he woke the next morning. An even worse thought struck him. What if he were so intoxicated that he was imagining her here in his chamber, unfastening the ties on the front of his shirt?

Her warm, wet tongue stroked his and all his drunken doubts faded as passion cradled him in its velvet embrace. Wrapping his arms around her, he closed his eyes and savored her taste and scent. His erection, pressed intimately between their bodies, swelled and ached.

He'd loved her since he was eighteen years old, but knew he hadn't a chance with a woman like her.

Throughout his life, especially during the war, he had released sexual tension with women. Still, whenever he closed his eyes and thrust his cock into his partner's body, he imagined her. Perhaps it was his part in Ori Paz's winning the war that had nabbed her attention enough to make love with him now. Power such as he wielded was often more tempting than a handsome face or esteemed family class. Such power wasn't given by the gods, but earned. He had paid for it in blood, his own as well as others. Was it worth it, even if he did have Ivana?

"What's wrong?" she murmured against his lips.

"You're certain I'm what you want?" The words were ripped from his soul. He certainly didn't wish to discourage her, yet he had to be sure.

"Don't talk, Vlas. Just kiss me. Touch me. Please."

He was either too drunk to argue or too worried that she would change her mind, so he did what she asked and swept her into his arms.

Fire blazed in the nearby hearth. Its heat lashed his face as he knelt and placed Ivana on the thick black carpet in front of the flames. Gazing at him with her slanted green eyes, she

offered the slightest smile. Her fingertips caressed his cheek and swept down his throat while Vlas unbuttoned the front of her burgundy velvet gown. He drew a sharp breath at the vision of her bare breasts, so full and creamy, with delicate mauve tips. By the Ice Goddess, her body was even more beautiful than he had imagined.

He finished undressing her. When she lay naked on the rug, he sat back on his heels and stared. Trembling slightly, his hand hovered over her belly, then rested gently on her soft mound. She was so warm and soft. So lovely. It must be a dream or a drunken illusion. There was no way that after all these years, she was giving herself to him.

"Please, I want to feel you." She sat up and knelt in front of him, tugging at his cloak. He shrugged off the heavy wool garment and raised his arms so that she could remove his shirt.

With a feral groan, he wrapped his arms around her so that their bare torsos were pressed close. Her breasts flattened against his chest, the nipples hardening on contact with his hair-roughened flesh. Her moist lips rested against the side of his neck and her fingers entangled in his hair. By the way she squirmed against him and uttered soft little moans of passion, he knew that she desired him as much as he desired her. That realization sent waves of increased passion rippling through him. His cock felt ready to burst with need, so he forced himself to draw several calming breaths. Between all the wine he'd drunk and the force of his desire, he was liable to go off like a novice and ruin the moment before it began.

Mastering himself, he gently pushed her onto her back and discarded the remainder of his clothes. He stretched out beside her, leaning on his elbow, his head propped on his hand. Again those green eyes glistening with emotion bewitched him. He stroked wisps of hair from her face, then swept his hand down her ribs to her hip. She was fleshy in all the right places. He would have closed his eyes in pleasure as his palm traveled over the soft curve of her belly, but he didn't want to miss seeing her. He stroked her inner thighs, loving the smoothness of their pale flesh.

Suddenly he needed to taste her. Without hesitation, he slid down the rug and guided her legs over his shoulders. Settling in a comfortable position, he slid his tongue over her pink clit. The plump flesh felt so good that he closed his eyes and continued lapping.

"Ah! Vlas, this is too wonderful. Please, please, please," she panted, her fingers almost painfully tight in his hair, but he didn't care. The roughness excited him, as did her writhing. He grasped her satiny buttocks and held her steady while running the tip of his tongue down one

side of her clit and up the other. She moaned and thrashed, but he didn't relinquish his hold on her.

Though his cock ached for the slickness of her pussy, he had no intention of stopping until she climaxed against his lips and tongue. By the rasp of her breath and the frantic pressure of her hands on his head, he knew it wouldn't take long. He left her clit for a moment, only to thrust his tongue into her pussy and swirl it around, loving the heat and taste of her. When he returned to her clit, it was to lick her with soft, fast upward strokes that flung her over the edge in a matter of seconds. Ivana cried out, her grip tight on his head, but he continued until she lay spent beneath him.

His heart pounding so hard he thought it might fly through his chest, Vlas covered her body with his. Inch by torturous inch he slid into her.

She gasped. Her eyes flew open and stared into his, her body tensing and her fingers gripping his shoulders. A barrage of strange emotions crashed through him upon realizing he was the first man she had ever bedded. She could probably have had any man in Ori Paz, but she had chosen him. Why?

Gods, what did it matter? Conscious thought faded when she began shifting her hips in a manner that nearly hurled him over the edge. It took every bit of his control to slowly press into her until his throbbing cock was fully buried in her tight, wet sheath. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his cheek against hers, loving the softness of her flesh.

After a few moments, she slipped her arms around his neck and whispered, "This is nice."

"It'll get nicer," he purred, thrusting slowly and tenderly in spite of the passion threatening to kill him.

It took her a short time to relax and accustom herself to his movements, then something seemed to catch fire inside her. She moaned softly and tightened her arms around him. "Yes, oh, yes!" she gasped. Her feet slid up and down his calves, then she wrapped her legs around him, her hips meeting his thrust for thrust.

"Gods, Ivana, slow down," he panted, forcing his eyes open and doing his best to control the sensations flooding his loins. It was nearly impossible. His obstinate cock was going to betray him. He slowed his thrusts, his heart drumming against his ribs. Sweat beaded on his forehead

and upper lip. Why the hell had he decided to make love in front of the fireplace? As if simply being wrapped in her arms didn't create enough heat.

"Oh, yes, Vlas. Just a little more. Just --" She convulsed, clinging to him so hard that he thought she might break bones, yet he loved the sensation. Her pussy throbbed around his cock and he shot off like a flaming arrow.

"Ivana. Ivana," he panted, his entire body surging into her, every muscle blissfully tight.

Then it was over. The most wonderful sense of peace and fulfillment washed over him. Rolling onto his back so that he wouldn't crush her, he tugged her close to his side and kissed her forehead before drifting to sleep.

Vlas came to awareness slowly, reluctant to let go of the dream. The first sensation he noticed was that of a cool, thick substance being gently spread on his left wrist. Then he realized the pain in both wrists had dulled to a mere annoyance. His ribs hurt, but not mercilessly, and in spite of his fever, he felt better than he had in days. By the warmth and softness around him, he knew he was lying in a comfortable bed.

He might have left his eyes shut and tumbled back into the kind, numbing sleep, but another sensation jerked him fully awake. Someone was kissing the corner of his mouth.

Vlas turned his head sharply so that he faced the audacious nurse who kissed a total stranger. Familiar eyes, as green and beautiful as a flawless hillside, stared at him with a battlefield of emotions -- anger, haughtiness, confusion, bitterness, worry, and something else he couldn't place.

Ivana.

He tried reaching for her thoughts, but he was too tired. His head spun. Perhaps she wasn't there, but he was imagining her. It was too much of a coincidence that she would already have heard about his return and arrived at the exact moment he made a fool of himself passing out during his trial.

"How do you feel?" she asked, sitting on the edge of his bed and taking his hand so that she could continue applying the healing salve to his wrist.

Like an idiot. Tired. Sore. "I'm fine."

She offered a sarcastic smile. "I'm sure. You're lucky to be alive, by the look of these injuries. Your wrists are infected."

A glance at his arm revealed that his injury was indeed swollen and red. She wrapped it in a clean white bandage that matched the one on his other wrist.

"How is my horse?"

"He's doing well. You, however, have several broken ribs and though your fever has come down, you need rest." She finished with the bandage, but continued holding his hand. "I know you too well to think you attempted suicide -- at least by cutting your wrists. Who were you performing the protection ritual for?"

Her voice held the reprimanding edge he recalled so well. It used to incite his anger like nothing else, but also lit a spark deep inside him. He nearly smiled.

"Vlas?"

Again his gaze shifted to her and his heartbeat quickened. Vlas! She had called him by his name. Was the trial over? Had his exile been lifted? Impossible. There was still another part to the trial that he had yet to endure.

"I have spoken to the emperor and empress. They have agreed to postpone the second part of the trial until you recover. As you know, they only have the power to sense your emotions. They realize that you did not perform the soul sharing ritual for personal gain and have, in a way, regretted your choice. The second half of the trial will be performed by an Ori whose gift is to view your thoughts, therefore your memories. Once this is done and she assures the emperor and empress that you are neither criminally insane nor immediately dangerous to our kingdom, your privileges as an Ori shall be returned."

"Danger to our kingdom," he murmured bitterly. After all he had done to secure the safety of their kingdom. Still, when he had chosen the soul sharing ritual, he had given up his rights as an Ori, even as a living creature. The respect and title he had worked so hard to achieve had been shattered as well.

"It has been such a long time, Vlas, but when I look at you, I almost feel as if you never left."

"Is that good or bad?"

"I'm not sure."

He nodded, making a conscious effort not to let her see that her words... stung? Impossible. He was as numb as when his soul was split. At least he thought he was, until he looked at her. Though dulled from being locked away for so long, his emotions were reawakened by her. Why else would he feel such an odd tingling deep in his gut?

What might have happened if he had stayed? Would their one-night affair have turned into something deeper? If it hadn't, how would he have endured watching her marry another man? How could he bear seeing her with someone else now? If she was married, why had she kissed him? Most of all, he wished she would do it again. Or embrace him.

She'd been the first and last person to wrap her arms around him in affection. Prior to that he had worthless affairs that lasted no longer than an hour. There had been no warmth in those women's embraces. No tenderness in their kisses. Reaching even further back into his memories, he couldn't recall a single instance of being kissed or held as a child. Such gestures were reserved for his brothers, Pavlik and Misha.

Sandy-haired, bright-eyed, and physically powerful even in childhood, Pavlik was an exceptional Ori born to a common-class family. Their parents lavished him with affection and used every spare bit of wealth to send him to the finest teachers. Pavlik was expected to join the emperor's guard, one of the only ways a common-class Ori could enter the royal circle.

Vlas was Pavlik's complete opposite. Gangly and unattractive with dark green eyes that appeared almost black, he was the sort of child his parents didn't want to admit to producing.

Disappointed in Vlas, his parents waited eight years before having a third child, Misha. To their delight, he was another pale-haired, cherub-faced Ori, much like Pavlik. Their parents doted on him, ignoring Vlas even more. At times it seemed as if the entire family pretended he didn't exist.

Perhaps their revulsion and negligence had provided him with the strength to do what Pavlik had not. To the family's disappointment, Pavlik had decided upon an unassuming religious career in the temple. Misha had become a foot soldier, but hadn't the skill or power to progress further. Vlas, however, shocked the family by being the only member to enter the royal circle -- not just as a guard, but as a Supreme Evoker, the most feared and respected position that any Ori could hope to attain.

"Are you hungry?" Ivana interrupted his thoughts.

"No."

"You should still try to eat something." She edged closer and rested her hand on his shoulder. The warmth of her palm seemed to melt through Vlas's loose cotton shirt.

Closer, Ivana. I need to feel you so much.

Her gaze locked with his, and for a moment he thought she might have heard his thoughts. Then she stood. Pride refused to let him ask for her continued touch.

"Do you want to talk about what's happened these past years?"

Vlas shook his head. "It's nothing you'd want to hear."

"You might be surprised." The harsh, scolding edge had returned to her voice.

"Would you like to hear?" he snapped. "Would it amuse you?"

"Oh, yes. I'm sure the past sixteen years of your death-like existence will amuse me. I thought you might want to talk to someone about it, but it seems you haven't changed a bit. You still think the world is out for your head."

His fists clenched, causing his wrists to smart. "I apologize if I've jumped to conclusions, but I don't want to talk about what's happened. It's bad enough that another Ori will be forcibly viewing my experiences without discussing them with anybody else."

A strange glimmer flashed through her eyes and her mouth opened as if she was going to speak.

"I'm sorry," he spoke softly. "I didn't mean --"

"It's all right. I can't imagine what you've been through. I didn't mean to pry."

"You didn't."

A tap on the door was followed by Nicolai stepping inside, wearing a blinding smile. "I'm sure Ivana has told you the wonderful news. Soon you'll be an Ori again."

Vlas nodded, slowly tearing his gaze from Ivana.

Nicolai's smile faded as he approached. "You really do look terrible."

Vlas was about to retort, but was surprised by Nicolai sitting on the edge of the bed and embracing him. "I know your sort doesn't particularly like displays of affection, but you look ill enough to tolerate it."

Rather than protest, Vlas accepted the hug, his own arms tightening briefly around Nicolai. It certainly wasn't the same as embracing Ivana, but at least the man offered some grounded connection to the world. At that moment, Vlas needed to belong somewhere. He'd thought the return of his soul's missing part would somehow repair past damages and let him experience pure emotions again, yet he only felt empty. Worse than empty. He longed for something just beyond his reach.

* * *

Ivana stared at Vlas locked in Nicolai's embrace and wished she had acted on her impulse to initiate the gesture first. Other than the few private hours she had shared with him on the night they'd made love, Ivana had never seen Vlas willingly exchange affection with anyone. Perhaps he had changed after all, since he actually seemed grateful for Nicolai's embrace. At least he was accepting it. She expected him to shove the man away at any moment. Instead he tightened his arms around the blond and held on for several heartbeats.

A wave of jealousy swept through Ivana, then she shook her head at such foolishness. Nicolai preferred men in his bed, but not Vlas. Not a man who had made love to her with such unrestrained passion.

Finally, Vlas tugged away from the blond man and gazed across the room. A hint of discomfort glinted in his eyes, as if he was angry with himself for what he considered a display of weakness.

"Once you've recovered, the ritual will be completed and your colors returned." Nicolai stood and crossed the room. He picked up Vlas's white robe which had been draped over a chair. He shook his head. "White doesn't become you, my friend."

Until his rights as an Ori were returned, Vlas was forbidden to wear any other color. Ivana agreed that white didn't do him justice. A man like Vlas was simply created for black.

Nicolai glanced from Ivana to Vlas. "Funny, but I expected to feel a bit more joy in this room."

"Why?" both of them asked in union. Their gazes met in irritation.

How had she ever fallen in love with such a sour beast?

Ivana studied him carefully, as she had when he'd slept. Earlier that day, after Nicolai had brought her the news that Vlas had returned and was seriously ill, she'd hurried to see him. Other than concern for his welfare, she wondered if he'd changed much since she'd last seen him. She knew she had. A few more lines, some silvery streaks through her light brown hair. Her trim figure remained, mostly due to the physical demands of her post.

Gifted in reading people's thoughts, she had pursued a career in aiding troubled Oris. Though highly skilled, she often felt physically drained from her work, depending on the extent of her patient's emotional distress. If only she hadn't been so inexperienced when Vlas had lived in Ori Paz, she might have been able to better understand him and prevent him from nearly destroying his life. Still, at that time she had been so young and foolish that she could scarcely help herself.

After so many years, she'd wondered how Vlas would look. Though tall with the steely, whipcord body of a soldier, he had a face that most people considered unattractive. Ivana often wondered how many of them had gazed into his beautiful, slanted eyes of emerald green. Very few, most likely, since Supreme Evokers were known to strike terror in others with a glance.

Ivana remembered Vlas as the most powerful Ori she had ever known. Stepping into the chamber and seeing him pale, unconscious, and wounded had uncovered

feelings she thought might have lessened after so many years. The fine lines around his eyes and mouth had deepened over the years, but his eyelashes were as thick and dark as ever and his mouth looked just as kissable.

Seeing him again, all the love she had ever felt for him rushed back, along with hatred that was just as powerful. Never in her life had she known a more frustrating, arrogant, frigid man. Well, perhaps not frigid, at least not when intoxicated enough to lower the defenses around his heart.

Shivers coursed through her when she recalled how warm and soft his lips had felt against her bare flesh. The remote Supreme Evoker's embrace had been fierce and his caress shockingly gentle. On the night they had made love, he had outshone her most romantic fantasies and driven her to heights of passion she had not achieved since.

Then he'd left, broken a High Law, and never returned. Worst of all, he had performed the illegal ritual for a human king. An evil, unworthy human king, Ivana had learned through investigation. Though she would not put it past Vlas to break a High Law -- most Supreme Evokers did at one time or another -- it seemed impossible that he would do so for such a loathsome individual, even if he had a good reason.

"Well, unless you need anything from me, I'll leave you in Ivana's capable hands," Nicolai said.

Once the blond left them, Vlas glanced around the room. "Where am I, anyway?"

"Nicolai's chamber in the Royal Haven."

Vlas smirked. "I should have known. I thought it might have belonged to one of the empress's ladies in waiting."

"It's typical of you to be sarcastic regarding the man who probably saved your life."

"I appreciate what he did."

"Do you? Have you ever appreciated anything?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well I know you certainly didn't appreciate what we shared that night sixteen years ago."

Vlas's brow furrowed. "I can't believe you're bringing that up."

Clenching her fists in anger, she approached him. "Of course. Why should I? I mean, I've had so many cheap affairs why should that particular one mean anything to me?"

"I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean?"

"Only that I thought it might be something you wish to forget. Considering all we had to drink that night, I assumed it was a mistake."

Now Ivana was boiling mad. "So it was a mistake to you?"

"No! You're putting words in my mouth."

"Than say what you mean."

"I mean you were drunk. You were young, curious, and vulnerable. I was available at the moment."

"Really?" Ivana folded her arms beneath her breasts. "If you weren't injured already, I'd hit you."

He lifted an eyebrow, his face taking on a familiar arrogant expression. "Hit me?"

"Yes."

In a smooth motion he stood, using his height advantage in an attempt to intimidate her. In spite of his pallor and the pain she knew he was in, she felt power rolling off him like mist on the ocean. "Well who's stopping you?" he snapped. "You always were a damn rich brat. It figures nothing's changed. Go on. Hit me. It will probably make both of us feel better."

"Get back in bed and stop acting like a child."

"You're the one who wants to start slugging it out like school children."

By the gods, her hand actually *itched* to slap him. Instead, she drew a long breath and released it slowly. "You are ill. Obviously my presence upsets you, so I'll send someone to check on you later."

"Why are you here, anyway?"

"If you must know it's because I was concerned about you." She advanced on him and jabbed a finger at his chest. For a moment she almost forgot how angry she was. He felt as rock hard as she remembered.

His look changed from taunting to skeptical. "You were?"

"Yes."

His hand closed over hers, pressing it to his chest. By the intense expression in his emerald eyes, she knew he was attempting to read her mind. As much as she would have loved to share so much with him, she couldn't. Not now. Perhaps not ever. Too many other people would be affected if and when she disclosed the events of her life over the past sixteen years.

When she tried pulling her hand away, he refused to release it. His palm and chest, hot from his fever, burned her flesh in a manner that was nothing short of erotic.

"Let me go."

Slowly, he dropped his hold and she jerked her hands behind her back, folding them tightly.

Again her gaze locked with his, and she said, "About that night we shared, Vlas."

"Yes?"

"I hadn't touched the wine, so I was not drunk. You were."

Without waiting for his reaction, Ivana turned and swept out of the room.

* * *

"I can't believe it. The man hasn't even been here for an entire day and you've already argued with him," Nicolai scolded Ivana from where he sprawled on her bed. His head dangled off the edge so that his blond hair brushed the floor like a silken drape.

Ivana sat in front of her vanity mirror and unbraided her hair. "He was always difficult to get along with, and it seems the years haven't improved his disposition."

"As if you're any better."

"Excuse me? Haven't we always gotten along well?"

"Yes, darling. You and I are like two buds on the same stem. At least as best friends go."

"We're more than friends. You're the father of my children."

"Yes, in the loving, caring, wiping-their-runny-noses and tucking-them-in-at-night sense, but everybody in the kingdom knows they didn't spring from these loins, honey."

Ivana stood and approached the bed, pointing at Nicolai with her hairbrush. "I know where this conversation is headed, so you can end it right now."

"What?" Nicolai pulled himself completely onto the bed and gazed at her with innocent eyes. "Don't tell me you're going to keep a secret like this? Not when the love of your life is back and --"

"Vlas is *not* the love of my life."

"Not much," Nicolai muttered under his breath.

"Excuse me?"

"You've been in love with the man forever, and he *obviously* feels the same."

"*Obviously*? I don't think Vlas has *obviously* revealed an emotion in his life. Except anger. Or irritation. Or amusement if something strikes his flat sense of humor."

"Didn't you look in his eyes? His heart is in them when he looks at you and your name is branded right on it."

"It was the fever you were seeing in his eyes."

"Yes, but it had nothing to do with physical illness. It was another kind of fever."

"As if I'm supposed to care. He made love with me, then took off looking for his brother and never came back. He didn't even have the courtesy to send me a message. I had to find out through rumors at court that he'd left Ori Paz to serve the king of Julius. Now he's back and I'm supposed to leap into his arms? He didn't even wait around to hold me all night after we made love."

"Did you ever consider that he might have been thinking of you?"

Ivana curled her lip in disbelief. "What?"

"You were betrothed to the emperor's cousin. Vlas is from a common-class family."

"Who gives a damn about his class? He was a Supreme Evoker. But even that doesn't keep him from being a sour, ugly beast. I don't know whatever possessed me to sleep with him in the first place."

"Three good things came out of it."

"I can't argue with that." Ivana smiled slightly, glancing at the trio of miniature portraits framed on her night table. "That's why even if I was so inclined to try again with Vlas, it could never work. Not now."

Nicolai raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"My children have a father. They have you."

Nicolai stood and grasped her hands, squeezing them gently as he held her gaze. "I love those children like my own. Like you said, I helped raise them. Nothing and no one can ever destroy the relationship we have, but that doesn't mean they can't get to know the man whose blood runs in their veins."

"They think their father is dead."

"We never said dead. We just said he was a soldier who never returned from a mission. So it took him a while to come home."

"Sixteen years? Damn it, Nicolai, this shouldn't even be an issue. Just because Vlas wasted his life doesn't mean we can let him come back here and ruin ours. If he wanted to know his children, why did he leave Ori Paz?"

"Well, in the first place, you never told him you were pregnant."

"He has the power of divination. He could tell another woman the sex of her baby the night after it was conceived. I heard him do it many times, yet he couldn't see that I was carrying his own children." Anger and hurt burned inside her as deeply as it had so many years ago.

"You know divination is a tricky gift. Sometimes if you're too close to the subject --"

"Don't give me excuses, Nicolai."

"Haven't you ever heard the old saying that you often can't see the forest for the trees?"

"This conversation is over. If I decide that Vlas is worthy, then I might tell him about his children. Until then, they are yours and mine and their blood father is gone."

"Fine. I'm not going to waste my breath anymore. I have a meeting with a friend and I don't want to wear myself out arguing with you."

"Anyone I know?"

"Just the crystal gazer I usually see."

"Have fun."

"Oh, I intend to." Nicolai kissed her cheek. "Just promise me you and Vlas won't make the same mistake twice."

"I can only speak for myself. As for him --"

"Why do you think he's back, if not for you?"

Ivana shook her head. It was a romantic thought. Romantic and foolish. "Go before you're late in meeting your crystal gazer."

Sighing, she sat on the edge of the bed and glanced at the portraits. Moments later, the door closed and she was left alone with her thoughts.

* * *

It was Ivana's eighteenth birthday. Her parents, close friends of the emperor, had arranged for her party to be held at the Royal Haven. Though Ivana enjoyed dressing up and eating the lavish food provided, she felt rather lonely in a hall filled with people she didn't know. Most of them were acquaintances of the emperor's cousin, Sigwald, with whom Ivana's parents were trying to arrange her marriage. Because of this, she was the envy of most of the young women in the kingdom. The emperor's cousin was not only rich, tall, and handsome, but he possessed nearly as much power as a Supreme Evoker. If he weren't such a lazy, self-absorbed fool, he might have attained such an esteemed rank himself. Still, it often seemed like Ivana was the only person who noted his faults. Most other people chose to overlook them, especially when begging financial or political favors from the royal family.

Ivana glanced around the hall, past couples dancing and guests talking while enjoying the feast. Her gaze fixed on the young man who had been the object of her desire for the past two years. Vlas stood outside on the terrace, nearly hidden in the shadow of an overhanging tree, draped in a black hooded cloak. His eyes gleamed as he looked through the glass window, so tall and proud yet frustratingly remote. For a moment, their gazes locked and Ivana glanced away, her heart pounding. The young man bordered on ugly with his gaunt face and lips that seemed frozen in a sullen line. He was serious and extremely powerful, even for a palace guard. Rumor had it that he was in training as a Supreme Evoker. At least that would explain his somewhat haggard appearance. Their training surpassed intense and was often violent, which was why so few were admitted to their ranks.

Standing several feet from Vlas, Sigwald laughed with two of his friends. All three were handsome with fine features and thick honey-colored hair. The gold and scarlet robes of the emperor's family draped their tall, muscular frames. Catching Ivana's gaze, her potential marriage partner motioned for her to join him. With a forced smile, she made her way to the terrace.

"Are you having a nice evening, Ivana?" Sigwald asked, flashing a toothy grin. He lifted a hand to touch her cheek. "You look lovely. Doesn't she, gentlemen?"

"Without doubt."

"Definitely."

"Exquisite," came a soft yet deep whisper from the shadows.

Ivana and the three men turned in Vlas's direction. Though she couldn't read his expression, something told her that he hadn't intended for them to hear his comment.

"You have lofty taste." Sigwald laughed. "And quite a bit of nerve, I might add."

"For speaking the truth?" Vlas took a step nearer.

"I suppose even a toad might admire a swan," said one of Sigwald's friends. "Isn't that right, Lady Ivana?"

"Yes." Ivana smiled, approaching the handsome youth and staring at him with the hypnotic gaze she had been practicing. She easily read his thoughts. Lust for her. A touch of envy for Sigwald's slightly better family class. Contempt and pure jealousy for Vlas, the toad who

dared to challenge his betters by training as a Supreme Evoker. "I would very much like to dance."

All three men stepped closer to her, their most charming smiles plastered on their faces and their hands extended.

"My goodness, how is a girl to choose from three swans? I'm afraid I simply can't bring myself to make a decision, so I'd best dance with the toad, if he will be so kind?" She turned and gazed at Vlas.

The corners of his mouth seemed to twitch the slightest bit and for a moment she thought he might actually smile. Slowly, he offered her his arm and she rested her hand upon it, stunned by the hardness of his muscles.

On the dance floor, his large hand enveloped hers and his other rested lightly on her waist while hers settled onto his broad shoulder. Their position was respectably distant, yet she felt flushed, as if he were holding her close to his steely, black-robed body.

Their gazes locked, and though she tried reading his mind, it was impossible. He was too powerful and far more experienced in mind control. Still, she wondered if he felt even a bit of the excitement she did as they twirled across the floor.

Chapter Four

For nearly a week, Vlas did nothing except sleep and eat with only Nicolai's book collection to keep him from total boredom. To his disappointment, after their argument, Ivana never returned. No matter how he tried, he couldn't get her out of his mind.

He'd been a fool to expect anything of her. Why should she welcome him home after so many years' absence, especially when she'd slept with him of her own free will? She'd been sober on the night they made love, therefore she had truly wanted *him*. By the gods, how could he have been so stupid? He hadn't even given their relationship a chance.

If he'd known how she felt, would he still have performed the soul sharing ritual?

He didn't want to think about the answer. It didn't matter anymore. He'd driven Ivana away yet again, and most likely there would be no third chance to win her back.

Though Vlas's health had greatly improved, Nicolai insisted he be fully restored before undergoing the second half of the trial. By agreeing, the emperor was either indulging Nicolai or else had not completely forgotten the services Vlas rendered to their kingdom during the war so long ago.

Still, Vlas was not allowed to leave the rooms or converse with anyone other than his few visitors. Even the maids who brought his meals and freshened his room stared at him with wary eyes and spoke to him in timid whispers, careful to address him as "Death." To his annoyance, he found he actually preferred the humans' habit of calling him "Soothsayer."

On the sixth day of his confinement, Vlas felt as healthy as he'd ever been. He was anxious to either rejoin society or be exiled from Ori Paz forever. Nicolai examined his wrists, which bore only fading pink scars.

"Well, I suppose we can't put the emperor and empress off forever," the blond man sighed. "And I'm anxious to get my room back."

"Where have you been staying?"

"With my wife, of course."

"Wife?" Vlas's brow furrowed. The last person he would have expected to take a wife was Nicolai. "When did this happen and where did you meet her?"

"It happened sixteen years ago and I've known her all my life. I think she wanted to tell you herself, but she's too stubborn to see you right now. Ivana and I are married."

Though he made a conscious effort to appear unaffected by the news, Vlas's heart dropped to the floor. Ivana and Nicolai? It was impossible. Ridiculous. Unbelievable.

"It's only for the sake of the children. We're just good friends. She has her private life and I have mine."

"Children?"

"Ivana's triplets."

Sighing, Vlas walked to the terrace and stepped outside. His gaze swept the courtyard below, though he scarcely noticed it as his mind spun with Nicolai's revelations. The blond man followed him, but remained several steps behind.

It seemed Vlas wasn't the only man whose chamber Ivana had slipped into after celebrations at the Royal Haven.

"She was upset about them not knowing their father, and you know how cruel the gossips can be. An unmarried woman with triplets wouldn't exactly be welcomed with open arms, especially among the higher classes. Ivana and I had always been best friends, so I figured marrying her and helping with the children was the least I could do."

"I see," Vlas murmured. "It was decent of you."

"I gained more than you think. They're wonderful children. The gods know, I wasn't about to father any of my own." Nicolai chuckled.

"Did she --"

"Yes?"

"Did she love their father?"

Nicolai stepped closer, as if trying to catch Vlas's gaze, but he wasn't prepared to look at anyone, not with the jealousy he was certain glistened in his eyes.

"I think you should ask her."

"When? I doubt she'll ever speak to me again."

"Of course she will. I'd be willing to wager that the woman won't be able to keep her hands off you."

It seems she can't keep her hands off men in general.

"Hey!" Nicolai slapped Vlas's arm hard. "I heard that thought."

"I suppose I wasn't trying very hard to conceal it."

"Ivana's right. You *are* an ass. I have news for you, she loved the father of her children, and for a man like you to insinuate otherwise makes me sick."

"You're right. I don't know why I'm discussing her affairs anyway. Her life is not my business, just as mine is no concern of hers."

"You're both so stupid!" Again, Nicolai slapped his arm.

"Try that again and I'm hitting back. Besides, why are we stupid? It's not as if she and I --"

"Oh please. I know all about that one night of bliss."

Again Vlas felt stunned. At least now he knew his emotions weren't completely lost after all. "She told you?"

"We're best friends. She cared about you, Vlas. She always has."

"What about the father of her children? Apparently any affection she had for me faded with his arrival."

Raising an eyebrow, Nicolai lifted his hand to slap Vlas again, then seemed to think better of it and let his arm drop to his side. "I give up. The two of you work it out."

"There's nothing to work out."

"Right... I'm going to arrange the second half of your trial. Most likely it will be tomorrow evening. You'd better rest because you'll need all your strength for it."

Vlas nodded, though he scarcely heard what Nicolai was saying or even the door closing as the blond Ori left.

The second half of the trial would be similar to what he had experienced during the emperor and empress's mind search, only this time, the Ori would be able to see his thoughts and memories. The very idea of anyone witnessing his most personal feelings and weaknesses disgusted him. As a Supreme Evoker, he had been trained to keep even the strongest Ori out of his mind and to destroy any enemy who breached his mental defenses. Now he was to bare himself completely in an ancient ritual of body and soul.

The purpose of the ritual was not only to ensure that he was fit to return to Ori Paz, but to shame him as punishment for his crime. No matter what happened or how he was exposed, he vowed never to break before the Ori chosen to slip like a snake into his very soul.

* * *

The following evening, Vlas found himself walking down a long, icy corridor in The Falls. The cool breeze seemed to cut through his white hooded robe to his bare flesh beneath. Just an hour ago, he had learned that the Ori performing the memory ritual channeled her powers through physical contact. For her to gain access to his thoughts that spanned so many years, she must summon the greatest of her energy. To do that required the most intimate of touches. The mating act itself.

The thought of exposing himself both physically and emotionally disgusted him so much that he had requested that the ritual be performed by another Ori, one who didn't require sexual acts to stimulate their mental bond.

The emperor and empress had refused. Vlas had no choice but to accept their terms or spend the remainder of his life in exile. He briefly considered the latter. After all, there was no reason for him to stay in Ori Paz. Only a foolish dream had lured him back in the first place. No matter what Nicolai insinuated, that dream had been shattered when he learned about Ivana's love for another man.

Still, something inside him refused to forget her, especially when he recalled that gentle kiss she had pressed to his mouth when she'd thought him unconscious.

You're an idiot, Vlas, for clinging to the wishes of a boy, not a man. Even if she does still want you, what sort of a mate would you be? You haven't experienced a warm emotion in -- have you ever truly felt one?

He paused outside a door built into the wall of ice. Two guards stood at attention on each side of it. Silver battle-axes glistened in their hands. Like Vlas's rings, the metal in the axes was magically connected to their owners, making the weapons formidable. Though Vlas and the Ori behind the door would be alone inside the chamber, a single call from her would alert the sentries.

One of the guards offered Vlas a black velvet pouch. "Place your rings in here."

Vlas understood the need for him to leave his rings behind. The trial would most likely evoke pain, either physical or emotional. Since he would probably be too lost in his interrogator's spell to control the rings, they were sure to react by burning the other Ori, should metal somehow contact her flesh.

Removing the eight silver rings from his fingers, Vlas dropped them into the pouch. He returned it to the guard who then handed him a gray hood with holes only for his eyes. The Ori might require eye contact to initiate thought sharing, however both of their faces would be concealed to avoid any embarrassment.

As if it will matter, when she's humping my body and crawling through my mind.

Vlas dropped the hood over his head, grateful that the material was light enough to easily breathe through. Already his pulse was racing in spite of how he tried to control himself. It wasn't so much the anticipation of sex with a hooded stranger that

affected him, but the idea of someone else having such complete control over his innermost thoughts.

“You may enter.”

Drawing a deep breath, Vlas opened the door and stepped into the chamber.

He noticed that unlike the corridor, the room was warm. The scent of cinnamon and honey wafted on the air, an aroma that Vlas knew most people found soothing. Obviously it was meant to stir feelings of comfort and stimulate relaxation, but it provoked the opposite reaction in him. During feast days, his mother had often cooked with cinnamon and honey. His relatives would gather to celebrate, but Vlas was not encouraged to join in. Though allowed to eat at the table, he was seated at the very end, so that the others wouldn't be forced to glance at his homely face while dining.

Oris prized beauty. Pale green and blue eyes, golden hair, though light brown was acceptable, and chiseled features were the mark of their magical ancestors. With beauty prevalent in even the lowest classes, ugliness was rare among their kind. Therefore on feast days, his parents never allowed Vlas to forget that he was a source of embarrassment and shame to the family.

A twinge of rage struck him even now, but it was tempered with satisfaction. Beauty didn't provide power, courage, or determination, as Vlas had proved. No one in his common-class family had ever attained the position of Supreme Evoker. Even the emperor's family itself could only claim seven of such rank in the past fifteen hundred years.

Realizing that his thoughts had forced him to a dead stop just behind the chamber's closed door, Vlas shook his head and moved forward. He continued his assessment of the room.

Rather than ice, the walls were made of stone and covered with jewel-colored tapestries. Two chairs with thick black cushions faced each other in front of a fireplace filled with crackling flames. The small wooden table between them bore a tray with a marble pitcher and two matching glasses. Torches burned in the walls, casting flickering light on the bed covered in burgundy satin that stood in the center of the

room. The smoke from the fireplace and torches was magically funneled upward through tiny holes in the ceiling, keeping the air pure.

His gaze flew to one of the tapestries that rippled slightly before a feminine figure draped in a rose-colored robe stepped from behind it. She was of medium height with lush curves that, to Vlas's irritation, stirred his desire. Like him, she wore a hood over her head, however her eyeholes were also concealed by mesh material, so closely knit that other than a hint of green, he could not see her eyes. Damn this trial. His eyes were to be exposed to her, untainted mirrors of his every emotion during this sacrifice of his innermost thoughts.

"You're tense," she said, her voice altered by the same magic that channeled the smoke. It was another way of protecting the Ori's identity.

Who the hell wouldn't be tense?

She stepped closer and paused in front of him, her face tilted upward. Straining to see her eyes behind the mesh, he wished she would just get on with it.

"I cannot force a man of your power to reveal your innermost secrets. You must give them to me freely. During this encounter, you must completely bare to me memories and emotions regarding your breaking of the High Law, or else the trial will be deemed useless and you will be exiled. You are under no obligation to provide access to feelings and remembrances that are not connected to your crime. However once our souls mingle, you may find that even an Ori of your talent may not have the strength to break our connection."

Vlas realized she spoke the truth on both counts. Without his cooperation, only another Supreme Evoker could hope to breach his mental defenses. Still, if this woman served the emperor her skills were superb.

"I have no wish to pry into matters that do not impact this trial, so I ask that once we begin, you focus on the moment you decided to break the High Law which prohibits the soul sharing ritual. I will then search your thoughts about the crime from the instant it occurred until now."

At least he would be left with some of his dignity. She wouldn't rake through his humiliating childhood, his grueling education as a Supreme Evoker, and the crimes he committed as part of that training. Nor would she press to explore thoughts and feelings about anything not directly connected to the soul sharing ritual.

He repressed a snort of wry laughter when he thought about the hypocrisy of Ori Paz. It seemed his world turned its head to the breaking of High Laws if it suited the government, such as through the creation of Supreme Evokers. How many times had he and others broken High Laws during their training and service? Of course, Supreme Evokers had their own system of punishment which was often far worse than anything public laws could dictate.

"Before we begin, I warn you that if you try to deceive me and exercise even the most subtle of defenses, I will sense it."

Vlas nodded, again not doubting the truth of her words. He almost didn't care what she saw in his mind. He just wanted this trial to be over and either be accepted again as an Ori or banished forever. Not only that, he was confident that he could easily guard parts of his life not involving the soul sharing ritual.

His certainty faltered when he dropped his guard to accommodate the first touch of her power. Her essence melted into him like warm honey, sweet and soothing. If he allowed it, she could steal his every thought and slice through his emotions. Resisting the urge to thrust her completely out of his mind, he concentrated on that moment sixteen years ago when he had performed the soul sharing ritual.

His brother Misha was suffering mercilessly due to an injury sustained in an accident. While abroad two years before, Misha had been mortally wounded in a fall from a horse. The Prince of Julius had discovered him, and Misha, terrified of death, begged the prince to partake of the soul sharing ritual. Once performed, the prince would hold a portion of Misha's soul. He would have almost complete control over the Ori and use his power as he desired. Misha would survive, as a creature both living and dead. For as long as the prince lived, or until he was released from his part of the ritual, Misha could not die. Even on the verge of death, Misha's power cast a protective veil

over the prince. Because of this, Vlas was unable to kill him to free his brother. The only way he could end Misha's suffering was to switch places with him. In exchange for Misha's release, Vlas performed the soul sharing ritual with the prince.

Misha's ravaged body was freed in death, but Vlas's years as a walking dead creature had just begun.

Yes, I see. You're showing me what happened, but I need to know more.

The Ori's mental voice spoke to him and in it was a startling familiarity. He knew this voice, though he had only dared reach out to it once before, and that had been during a drunken stupor. Even then his pride had stopped him from exploring mind sharing with her for longer than a moment.

Ivana.

I need to feel what you felt so that I can judge. Nothing we share tonight will go beyond this chamber.

By all the gods, the last person he wanted slinking through his head was Ivana.

To refuse me is to ensure your banishment.

She stepped closer and rested her hands on his chest. Surely she must feel the pounding of his heart? She pushed him onto the bed, using her hands and her thoughts.

He submitted and lay on his back, staring at her, trying to see her eyes beyond the hood. The scent of her perfume filled the chamber, seducing him almost as much as her physical and mental touch.

Slowly she unfastened the sash on her robe and the silky material parted, revealing her naked curves. She couldn't possibly have believed he wouldn't recognize her? Though her body was a bit more rounded than when they had last made love, the memory of her had been forever imprinted on his mind.

Even through the hood, he could almost feel her gaze upon him as she approached the bed and bound first one of his hands, then the other above his head using manacles attached to thick chains. He tugged them slightly, testing their strength and weight. They were heavy enough to restrain an ox, if necessary.

Once she was satisfied that his hands were secured, she untied his robe and parted it. His cock saluted her, stiff and ready in spite of his wish to exercise at least some control over himself.

I know this sort of exposure goes against your very nature and you won't make this easy for me, even for the sake of your life. However, I have ways of drawing you out, she continued, slipping onto the bed and straddling his waist. Her smooth thighs caressed him, stirring him even more. Soft, strong hands slipped around his cock and gently squeezed. She stroked up and down his length, then used her thumb to sweep over the head and trace the underside with feathery touches.

It felt so good. His heartbeat quickened with each caress and he tingled from head to toe. The entire process might have been sheer bliss, had it not been for the emotional torment involved.

For years he had dreamed of making love with her again, but never under these circumstances. He wanted to take her. Make her scream with passion. Have her hold him with affection. In no way did he want to relinquish complete control to her just so she could rake through his thoughts and memories.

Vlas concentrated on controlling his breathing, but she spoke to him again.

No. Think about the past. How did you feel when you found your brother? What did you feel when you gave yourself over to the human king?

She rose onto her knees, her hands sliding up his ribs until her palms rested flat on his chest. Reaching down with one hand, she guided his cock to her pussy and lowered herself onto him with agonizing slowness. She was enticingly warm and drenched. For a moment he considered probing her thoughts to find out if she had prepared herself for the trial ahead of time or if she was wet because of him. No. If he did that, then she would experience his emotions regarding her and that would lead to other private memories that he didn't want to reveal. At least not like this.

He forced himself to concentrate on the soul sharing ritual. Recalling how he felt when he found Misha, he experienced a wave of emotions so strong that he teetered on

the verge of losing himself completely. Never had he imagined spoiled little Ivana, the beauty of royal-class, would become such a powerful Ori.

Once again he was gazing at his brother's bleeding body, blackened with disease. The body of a corpse, but still alive and suffering as a mortal man. The soul sharing ritual tore out a good portion of an Ori's emotions, trapping them in the little glass bottle along with the severed portion of the soul. Pain, hatred, and anger seemed to remain, too powerful for even the ritual to sever. Or perhaps the ritual intended for such horrible feelings to fester inside the invoker's walking dead shell, another reminder of the disgraceful choice he had made.

Vlas experienced a momentary flash of satisfaction, as if Misha's suffering was some sort of payment for having been favored all his life while Vlas was despised. The feeling passed so quickly that it might not have been and was replaced with disgust and sympathy. Supreme Evokers were trained to master their emotions and never surrender to them, but Vlas couldn't help being moved with pity.

Misha didn't deserve this. He was little more than a boy. He wasn't prepared.

Vlas instinctively withdrew from the memory, but Ivana's mental hold refused to allow it. She leaned down and whispered in his ear. "This is what I need to see and feel. Close your eyes if you have to."

Her voice was soothing and filled with compassion. That in itself twisted his insides, giving rise to anger that he quickly repressed. She didn't need to feel how much this exposure of his memories angered him.

When she began rocking against him, his eyes slipped shut and waves of passion crashed over him. Her warmth enveloped his cock so perfectly, her softness embracing him. Wet and velvety, her pussy squeezed his staff, making his heart pound. With each movement of her body, her power wrapped more snugly around him. Perhaps it was the combination of baring his emotions along with intimate physical contact with a woman he had dreamed of for so long, but he had never experienced such intense feelings in his life.

"Show me what happened after the ritual," she said breathlessly. Her hands stroked his chest, her thumbs circling his nipples.

Opening his eyes partway, he nearly came upon seeing her slip her robe off her shoulders, completely baring her smooth, ivory torso. Her pendulant breasts tipped with aroused pink nipples brushed his chest as she leaned forward. The beautiful silken mounds rubbed over his torso, the hard tips gently scraping his belly until it clenched and unclenched almost uncontrollably.

It took all of Vlas's self-control not to moan with pleasure.

"Show me the human king," she panted.

Vlas's thoughts once again swept the past, more quickly this time, since his body cried out for fulfillment. If providing her with information would give him the release he so desperately needed, then he would surrender it.

A greedy, vicious man, the prince had used Vlas's power to advantage -- or so he had thought. Due to the careful wording of the ritual's rules, Vlas was often able to use the vaguest interpretations to thwart the king's commands. He shuddered to think of what greater evil he might have been a part of, had the human discovered the full extent of his power.

Finally, after years of hellish service, he discovered a way to cheat the ritual itself into securing his release.

Yes, that's right, Ivana coaxed, rocking a bit faster now. Her wet sheath teased his erection mercilessly.

Even humiliating memories weren't enough to destroy the sexual hold she had over him. Vlas's entire body was aflame, as tortured by pleasure as his soul was by his past.

Don't stop, Vlas. I must know everything.

Closing his eyes tightly, Vlas strained against the bonds holding his arms overhead. They cut into his wrists and for a moment the pain helped him regain his rapidly slipping control.

Panting, he focused on his enslavement in Julius. During the sixteen years he waited for the opportunity to regain his soul, he was often forced to use his power in ways that shamed and disgusted him. At first he rebelled, but the magic of the ritual itself punished him with immobility while enduring agony powerful enough to rob a lesser man of his sanity.

Unable to directly refuse his master's orders, Vlas used his shrewd mind to advantage. Many times he outsmarted the prince -- now the King of Julius -- and saved lives. Still, each time the king used Vlas's power for death and torture was burned into the Ori's soul. The Supreme Evoker had been reduced to the lackey of a miserable, insignificant human king. His only desire was to free himself and return to Ori Paz.

Ivana's rocking had quickened so much that Vlas was no longer in control of his physical response. His cock felt ready to burst, the sensations pulsing through it painful in their intensity. Concentration on anything except the present was suddenly impossible.

"Oh, gods. Oh!" Ivana's breathy voice filled the chamber. Her hands clutched at his chest, her fingers digging into the hard plates of muscle. The sound of her lusty whimpers and moans shot his passion to fevered heights.

His heart pounded so hard that he thought it might leap through his chest, and he didn't care. Never in his life had he needed sexual release so badly. If he didn't get it, he felt he might die. For that matter he might die if he did get it. His hips bucked upward, meeting her thrust for thrust in a storm of passion. Even the pain from the bonds grinding into his wrists seemed to belong to someone else, since his entire focus vibrated around his cock. The rigid staff felt raw, as if her velvet flesh and feminine honey had magically enhanced the sensations.

Gasping, he arched his neck. Somewhere in the back of his mind, his pride forced him not to give vocal evidence of his carnal state. More than anything he wanted to scream in pure ecstasy.

"Go on," she panted, her voice trembling. "Cry out. In spite of being a Supreme Evoker, I've always known you're just a man, Vlas."

Now that he knew his tormentor wanted it, he vowed that he wouldn't so much as groan. Locked in an almost grotesque battle of wills, they lunged faster and harder, Vlas straining for release, Ivana trying to hold hers at bay with the hope of drawing a scream of passion from his lips.

Suddenly she convulsed, moaning and writhing atop him. The massive pulsations surrounding his cock flung Vlas into the most intense orgasm he had ever experienced. Still he refused to utter a sound other than several ragged breaths. He could have easily sobbed with pure ecstasy as, miraculously, his orgasm seemed to last forever.

Dizzy with his release, he pressed his head into the pillow, his entire body trembling and aflame.

Ivana collapsed on top of him, panting, her legs entwined with his. Her hand absently stroked the base of his throat. After several moments during which he doubted either of them could move if they wanted to, she sat up and released his wrists from the bonds.

Her fingertips gently stroked where the metal had rubbed his skin raw, but he jerked away and lay with his back to her, panting in the aftermath of the most exquisite yet emotionally draining climax he had ever experienced.

She touched his shoulder, but he stood, adjusting his robe.

"So this is what you do, Ivana. Use your sexuality to dig through people's minds. It's quite a skill for an Ori. You must be proud," he snapped.

In an equally biting tone, she replied, "As proud as a Supreme Evoker who breaks laws at will in the name of training? Everyone knows that none of you live by the same rules as the rest of us."

"Knows or suspects?"

"What's the difference?"

"A great deal."

"Well to appease your suspicions, this is the first time I have ever engaged in sexual relations to gain access to an Ori's thoughts. I have never performed this trial

with a Supreme Evoker before and it was the only way to gain enough strength to keep you in control."

"Control?" The humiliation of being violated in such a way by the woman from whom he wanted to keep his most sordid secrets was almost unbearable. "How dare you do this?"

"I asked the emperor to allow me to perform the ritual. I wanted to glimpse inside you, Vlas."

"You haven't changed much, Ivana." He ripped off his hood and glared at her. "When we were young, you aroused and mocked me by turns. I have matured. It seems you have not."

He stood, his posture proud, and stalked to the door. "I had a right to have this trial performed by someone who didn't know me. Someone I didn't..."

"Didn't what?"

Turning, he glared at her, burying his confused emotions regarding his love for her and calling forth his rage instead.

"You haven't changed, either, Vlas. And you seem to have forgotten that you are a criminal. You have no rights here until I decide to sway the emperor into freeing you."

Without another word, she gathered her robe over her gorgeous curves and marched out of the cave.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Vlas drew several deep breaths, attempting to calm his racing heart and purge himself of the raging emotions Ivana stirred.

When he stepped outside the chamber, his gaze fell upon Natasa, a Supreme Evoker who had been one of his instructors long ago.

"Your trial here has ended, but we have not excused you," she said. "Our kind can only be truly judged by us."

Vlas's jaw tightened and he fought to keep outward control of his emotions. After what had just happened between him and Ivana, he felt uncharacteristically vulnerable, but he was certain that's what the Supreme Evokers hoped for.

He fell into step beside Natasa, knowing this confrontation was unavoidable. The emperor ruled publicly, but many affairs, both legal and illegal, were handled privately by the true lords of Ori Paz, the Supreme Evokers. In the end, they always judged and punished their own kind.

Keeping to the corridors inside The Falls, they made their way to Silence Point, domain of the Supreme Evokers.

The entrance to Silence Point was sealed behind a wall that split for Vlas and Natasa to pass through. They walked by the Principal Caves and stepped into a square room made of ice. A single pillar candle was the only source of light. It stood in the center of the room and cast eerie shadows on the faces of the six Supreme Evokers present. Each wore a colored robe of his choice. Four of them Vlas recognized instantly. The other two looked vaguely familiar. He guessed they had been young trainees at the time he left. Their initiation into the world of Supreme Evokers was enough to warrant the same respect as their elder companions, for Vlas well knew the intensity of their training.

No sooner had he stepped inside than the room's entrance froze over and Natasa joined them in forming a circle around him. They spoke without words, their demands echoing in his mind.

You have satisfied the public law, but as one of us, we cannot trust you again until we judge for ourselves if you are still worthy to live freely as an Ori. With your skill, you could cause destruction to the world we fought hard to keep.

I know how hard we fought to keep it, Vlas replied.

Yes. When you turned your back on Ori Paz to break a High Law, it was the greatest of insults to us.

Vlas understood their shame and anger. At the end of the civil war that had nearly destroyed Ori Paz, even the Supreme Evokers had been split in their loyalties. There had been fifteen of them at the time. Ten joined the rebels in their quest to take over Ori Paz and afterward, the world. Five defended against them. When the armies on both sides found themselves at an impasse and the entire island ran red with blood,

the Supreme Evokers ended the war through the summoning of their powers. Earthquakes, floods, and storms shook Ori Paz. The power of ten Supreme Evokers against five seemed like an impossible fight, yet Vlas and his companions would not easily submit. The five stood strong and their enemies fell, nearly drained of power. At the very end, Vlas was the last Supreme Evoker left standing, the others either dead or exhausted beyond usefulness. It was his power that finally stopped the devastation. He had struck the last blow that won the war.

His name had been honored throughout Ori Paz. Even the rebels held a grudging respect for his power. Had he remained, he would surely have secured a place of leadership among his kind.

Instead, he chose the life of an outlaw.

Without warning, all seven Supreme Evokers struck him with their power at once. They raked through his mind with a harshness that stole his breath. As if separated from his physical body, he was only aware of soul-searing mental pain as his emotions tossed wildly with each memory.

Unlike Ivana, they didn't limit their search to thoughts relating to the breaking of the High Law. They ripped through each corner of his mind. Every emotion he had ever experienced from joy to unbearable agony was theirs to sense. Vlas probably could have resisted them and he didn't doubt they knew it, but rebellion would have been useless. Unless they achieved their goal, they would never allow him to remain free in Ori Paz.

Moments after giving himself over to their interrogation, he lost the ability to defend himself. Once inside, their mental bonds latched onto him in a way no Ori could hope to fight.

Still wrapped in their soul-searing power, he heard the combined voices of his judges:

We understand why you performed the soul sharing ritual with the human. Pity, an emotion that is practically useless to a Supreme Evoker, drove you to it. What we want to know is why you returned here, knowing that you would be forced to endure our wrath, knowing that

should we choose it, you would be imprisoned with the Supreme Evokers you once condemned. A fate worse than death, as terrible as your years of walking death.

Vlas rallied what little strength he had left in a feeble attempt to keep them from seeing his deepest secret.

Impossible.

His love for Ivana broke over him like a tidal wave. Powerful. Unstoppable. A pure force of nature.

Then everything turned black.

* * *

When he regained consciousness, Vlas found himself lying on the icy cave floor, his cheek almost numb from the cold. The seven stood around him.

"What we have learned from you worries us," Natasa said. "Supreme Evokers must bury their emotions when necessary. We act on reason and give ourselves over to the forces of nature itself. You have disguised your true self well over the years, but the most important decisions in your life have been influenced by emotion."

Vlas could not deny her accusation.

"This is an issue that has concerned us much since the war," said Saschar, the eldest of the Supreme Evokers.

"As well it should," Vlas replied, sounding much steadier than he felt. Drawing a deep breath, he rose painfully to his feet. "Most of the ten who changed sides didn't do so because they wanted to rule the world, like the rebels, but because they had been asking for reform in the way we exist as Supreme Evokers."

Saschar raised an eyebrow. "So they nearly destroyed our world?"

"I didn't say their methods were right. I just said it's something to think about." Vlas's gaze trailed over each of his judges. "Will I be doing my thinking from a prison cell?"

Natasa shook her head. "We see no reason to keep you. When you performed that despicable act, your service to Ori Paz had been fulfilled and you were free to live life how and where you chose, providing Ori Paz was not harmed or affected. Of course

your service during the war has influenced our decision, however we urge you to make your choices more carefully in the future. We are not inclined to excuse one of our kind a second time."

"We can expect that you will return to service, now that you're home permanently." Saschar's tone suggested that this was a statement rather than a question. The Supreme Evokers wanted to keep close watch over him. Earning their trust again wouldn't be easy, but at least he was being given the chance to try.

Vlas nodded.

"You may go," Natasa said. "If you would like your old chamber, it has been prepared for you."

"The thoughts and emotions I have shared with you," Vlas said, "will they --"

"They will never be spoken of," Natasa told him. "No one outside of this room will ever know."

"Thank you." Vlas turned to face the cave door. The ice melted and he stepped into the corridor, tired beyond belief but repressing the slightest smile.

He was truly home.

Chapter Five

Two days later, Vlas awoke in his room at Silence Point.

On the first evening after the trials, he'd been plagued by horrible dreams prompted by the experiences he had been forced to relive. After several meetings with his fellow Supreme Evokers to discuss his new duties, he had finally succumbed to complete exhaustion. Now he felt more like his old self than he had in ages.

After bathing, he dressed in his preferred black. It felt strange to don his own color after so many years cloaked in death white. He walked through the corridor to the Principal Caves in the mountain's lowest levels, the place where Supreme Evokers honed their skills. Stepping into the Cave of Fire, he recalled the first time he had attempted to summon the essence of fire. Scarring from the burns had taken several years to fade, even with his Ori constitution. Such a memory was enough to humble even the most arrogant Supreme Evoker. Funny how other Oris looked upon his kind as almost godlike when in truth their strongest powers derived from complete submission to nature.

The only light inside the Cave of Fire came from the flames that endlessly flickered in the stone hollow in the center of the rounded room. The cave walls had been polished smooth, almost mirror-like in several places. The guard on duty, a younger man, in training as a Supreme Evoker, stood several feet from Vlas. He bowed from the neck and left his superior alone.

Seconds after pausing in front of the hollow, Vlas was covered from head to foot in flames. His eyes closed, he focused completely on the fire. Though he felt its heat, it didn't burn him. He was keenly aware of the fragile bond between himself and the element.

Part of him realized another presence had entered the room. He coaxed the fire back into the hollow and drew several deep breaths. After the fire's embrace, the cave felt almost cold. His gaze fixed on the red-garbed messenger who stood in the doorway, his head bowed respectfully.

"The emperor and Lady Ivana have sent for you, sir."

Nodding, Vlas swept past the messenger. More curious than he wanted to admit, he walked down the corridor and out of The Falls. Though it wasn't unusual for the emperor to call upon a Supreme Evoker at any given time, he wondered what Ivana could possibly want with him. He hadn't expected to see her again so soon. He'd been a fool to expect a relationship to develop between them. Now more than ever he recalled why they, as a couple, would never work. When in her presence, he remembered how little they had in common.

He wondered what the father of her children had been like. Handsome and of upper- or royal-class, no doubt. Most likely it was someone he had served with during the war. He wouldn't pry into her thoughts, but maybe he would sift through Nicolai's. One of Ivana's servants would be easier to take advantage of, but only if she had been foolish enough to give them a clue as to who her lover had been.

No. Her private issues weren't his business. It was bad enough he had wasted his youth burning for a woman he couldn't have. He wasn't about to spend the rest of his life obsessing over her.

The emperor was seated at a polished wooden table, Ivana to his left and a richly dressed blond-haired youth to his right. The young man cast a curious glance in Vlas's direction before turning back to the open book in front of him.

"I have a task for you, Vlas," the emperor said. "A young woman has been kidnapped and I need you to bring her home."

Vlas raised an eyebrow. "Aren't jobs like that usually reserved for the home guard?"

"I told them the same thing," the youth said, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Heaven forbid we call upon a Supreme Evoker for anything except the threat of complete disaster. But no. Lady Ivana insisted."

"Silence, Stepan," the emperor said. "Vlas, this girl has been promised in marriage to a royal, but it seems one of the guards has decided to claim her as his own."

"The girl's betrothed hasn't gone after her himself?"

Stepan laughed. "As if I would sully myself dragging her out of the place he has brought her to."

"She's his wife to be?" Vlas gestured in Stepan's direction.

"You may talk directly to me, you know," Stepan whined.

Vlas didn't so much as glance at him.

Ivana stood and approached Vlas, her gaze fixed on his with such intensity that he felt hotter than when he had invoked fire. "She is *my* daughter, Vlas. I want her returned safely and don't trust just anybody to do it."

"Right," Stepan interjected. "Vlas Sascha Evgenyl is, after all, a hero among heroes. The Supreme Evoker who basically ended the war. The one left standing when all others fell."

Vlas switched his glare to the youth. What did the little prig have against him?

"I said silence!" the emperor roared. "Without Vlas and the others who stood for us during the war, life as you know it would not exist. Ori Paz would have been destroyed from within."

Stepan's lip curled. "Yes, Uncle."

"My daughter has been taken to Bear Cross. I tried to reach her this morning, but as you know only members are allowed inside, unless invited. I was not admitted. Even with force, I could not pass."

"With force?"

"Her maid brought her back to Royal Haven unconscious this morning." The emperor cast Ivana an irritated look. "You should have come to me for assistance immediately."

"Are you all right?" Vlas said, not bothering to disguise his concern.

"Fine. Just get my daughter."

Nodding, Vlas held her gaze. More than anything he wanted to pull her into his arms and soothe away some of the worry etched on her face. The best way to do that, however, would be to find the girl and return her to the Royal Haven.

"I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't desperate," Ivana continued. "If Nicolai hadn't left Ori Paz two nights ago, he would have gone for her instead."

"Where did he go?"

"He and a friend had business to attend."

Stepan snorted with laughter. "*Business*. With a *friend*. I'm sure."

Vlas turned to Stepan with his fiercest stare. "If the girl is engaged to this one, I can understand why she left."

Color rose in Stepan's face, but he glanced away from the Supreme Evoker's penetrating stare. "Uncle, must I sit here and listen to this... *man*?"

"Perhaps you should accompany him to Bear Cross. After all, it is your future bride who is to be rescued."

"No!" Vlas and Stepan said in union.

"It's settled then. Vlas, you should leave immediately."

"What does the girl look like?"

"Come with me. I'll give you all the details," Ivana said, sweeping past him.

The scent of her perfume tantalized him, but he thrust aside all carnal thoughts. The task at hand required his attention.

In the corridor, Vlas fell into step beside Ivana. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, noting her concerned expression.

"When I find your daughter, do you want her kidnapper brought back for trial or do you want me to kill him?"

She glanced at him with a hint of fear. "No! Don't kill him. I'm sure he means her no real harm."

Something in her tone aroused his suspicion. He waited until they were alone in her chamber before questioning her further. Once she closed the door behind them, he glanced around the large room. A rose-colored carpet covered most of the gray marble floor. Several pieces of elegant white wood furniture trimmed with silver were scattered throughout the room. On the wall across from a round balcony overlooking the courtyard stood a large bed covered in rose-colored quilts. Vlas momentarily imagined himself and Ivana naked beneath the covers.

"Tell me more about this young man who has supposedly taken your daughter."

She glared at him. "What do you mean supposedly? She is engaged to Stepan, not to Yuri Slavik."

A knowing smile twisted Vlas's lips. "Yuri Slavik. A common-class name. I see."

"What do you see, Vlas?" she demanded.

"Tell me, Ivana, was your daughter actually kidnapped or did she go willingly?"

She closed her eyes for several seconds and whispered a prayer for patience. When her gaze finally met his, she seemed no calmer than before. "Vlas, please do not start with your old class lectures again. My daughter is in that den of pond slime. You know the sort of people who frequent Bear Cross."

"I'll return her to you, but I need to know what I'm getting into. Is the girl going to come willingly or will I be dragging her back here kicking and screaming?"

Ivana sighed and dropped onto the bed. She pressed her palms into her eyes, her worry almost tangible. Sitting beside her, he resisted the urge to touch her. She was so close. All he had to do was slip an arm around her. In her present state, she might not resist.

"I suppose you should know the truth, if you're going to find her. Yes, she'll probably kick and scream. And worse."

"Worse?"

"Keep your guard up. She has an excellent command of the elements." Ivana shook her head. "She has too much of her father in her."

"She sounds like an interesting girl. It's unfortunate that he didn't get a chance to know her."

She held his gaze, her lovely green eyes almost bewitching him. Ever so gently he reached out with his mind, hoping to slip past her guard and perhaps catch a glimpse of the man she had loved enough to create three children with.

"Don't," she said, a hint of desperation in her voice. "You have no right to my thoughts."

"I forgot. The privilege of rummaging through private affairs is reserved for you alone."

"I wasn't the one on trial, Vlas."

"You'll never let me forget it, will you? You should not have been the one to conduct the trial. It was supposed to be someone who didn't know me."

The slightest smile flirted with her lips and she cupped his cheek in her palm with surprising gentleness. "Who doesn't know the man who ended the war?"

"It takes more than one person to end a war."

She edged the slightest bit closer and he bent so that their lips almost touched. His entire body sprang to life. If he kissed her now, he wouldn't be able to resist taking her again.

Later. Once her daughter was returned, he might ask for repayment, and something in her eyes told him she would give it. "What does your daughter look like?"

Ivana stood and walked across the room to a table on which sat three miniature portraits. He narrowed his eyes in their direction.

"Your children?" He approached.

"Yes." She picked up one of the portraits and handed it to him.

Vlas glanced at it, then at the other two, noting with some surprise that all three youths possessed black hair rather than the blond common in Ori Paz. A pang of envy followed by a stab of regret shot through him when he realized that some other man had given her what he had always dreamed about. He buried his emotions in the deep, dark grave all Supreme Evokers dug in their minds.

He studied the girl's picture, noting that she possessed Ivana's slanted green eyes. Her features were beautiful and her expression fiery. Thick black hair cascaded down her shoulders, a startling contrast to her ivory complexion.

"Her name is Ondrea."

"Pretty girl."

"Yes. She is."

His gaze switched back to the boys' portraits. He noted that they closely resembled their sister, except one of them had eyes of such dark green they appeared almost black.

"Their father was of the common-class, wasn't he? The gods know you won't find hair like that among royals. That's why you've never revealed who he was."

"I have no intention of discussing their father with you, Vlas."

Though he knew she couldn't tell by his outward appearance, her words stung more than he wanted to admit, even to himself.

"Just bring Ondrea back."

"So that she can marry Stepan." Vlas wasn't sure why that thought disturbed him so much. For all he knew, Ondrea was a spoiled little bitch, just as Ivana had once been. She and Stepan would probably be a perfect match.

"He is from an excellent family and she will want for nothing."

Vlas stared deeply into her eyes. "Really?"

"I will not allow my daughter to make the same mistake I did. She will not give up a perfect match for a dream."

"Regret giving up Sigwald, do you? But you didn't do too badly, if money and a royal-class husband was what you wanted. You and Nicolai seem to have a workable life."

"How dare you make such a comment to me? You have no idea what my life has been like and you made it clear that you didn't care."

"I made it clear?"

"This conversation is over. Are you going to find my daughter or not?"

"As long as she's still at Bear Cross, I'll have her back by this evening."

"Remember what I told you about her."

"I'm sure I can handle a young girl, no matter how talented an Ori she is."

"There's one more thing. Yuri Slavik is preparing to enter training as a Supreme Evoker."

Vlas paused before he reached the door and turned back to her. "Ah. Wants her that badly, does he?"

"Excuse me?"

"The only way a common-class boy can compete with royals is to become a Supreme Evoker. Of course it's nearly impossible, but for those of us who want it badly enough..."

"The façade of love is a stupid reason to endure training as a Supreme Evoker. You're worse than animals."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why don't you try telling me how you really feel?"

"Now isn't the time for your sarcasm, Vlas. And what makes you think Yuri would do something that ridiculous for the sake of love?"

"Just a feeling."

She curled her lip. "I didn't realize you had them."

The slightest smile flickered across his mouth before he stepped out of the room.

* * *

Bear Cross stood on the eastern coast of Ori Paz, far beyond the safety of The Falls. Created from the ruins of an ancient castle, it was a haven for male warriors. Members underwent initiation and were the only ones allowed to enter. Even the law usually overlooked the goings on within Bear Cross, making it one of the most dangerous places on the island.

In his youth, before becoming a Supreme Evoker, Vlas had spent a few evenings there. To a young soldier the decadence was appealing, though the lure of the place had quickly worn off for him. Vlas didn't care much for gambling, whoring, and excessive drinking.

The thought of Ivana traveling to a place like Bear Cross alone was most unsettling. Why hadn't she come to him immediately if she needed help, and why had she contacted him through the emperor rather than approach him directly? Surely she didn't think he would have refused to find her daughter?

Deep inside, he realized that she had every reason to believe he might not help her. It wasn't as if he'd been her closest friend for the past sixteen years. Just because he had thought about her every day didn't mean he had so much as crossed her mind. Her thoughts must have focused on the man she'd lost and raising his children with Nicolai. Gods, she must have been in love with the father of her children to have surrendered to a passionless marriage to someone who could never fulfill all her needs as a woman. How could he hope to compete with the memory of such a man?

He stopped his horse outside of Bear Cross and approached the gates on foot. The two guards refused to let him pass.

"You are not a member," said one of the sentries.

They were right, of course. It had been ages since he had entered these decadent walls.

Vlas's gaze seemed to fix on both men at once. They attempted to thwart him with their powers, but his mental defenses thrust them out so abruptly that they winced.

With a thought, he stirred the wind behind him. Snow and ice lashed their faces, practically stealing their breath. Their fear was almost tangible, though to their credit they stood their ground.

"You are a Supreme Evoker," said the guard who had initially spoken.

"I am here for Yuri Slavik and Ondrea," Vlas stated, his look alone telling them that he would not leave before getting what he came for.

"Of course."

Both guards bowed respectfully and allowed him to pass.

Nodding, Vlas released his touch on the wind and the snow settled into drifts behind him.

Once beyond the gate, he crossed a small yard, then stepped through a thick oak door. Inside, the great hall was alive with soldiers drinking, eating, brawling, and gambling. The scent of overcooked food, whiskey, and heavy perfume hung on the air. Music played while several whores danced atop the tables where men gathered, laughing and grabbing at their bare legs. Vlas glanced at the women, hoping that Ondrea wouldn't be among them. Thank the gods none of them looked remotely like the girl.

He made his way around the room, checking in all the dark corners where soldiers groped whores or ingested herbs that should have been used for medicinal purposes only. His presence caused many curious glances and he knew that sooner or later someone would approach him looking for trouble. The last thing he wanted was a confrontation.

Then he saw her at the top of the winding staircase leading to the bedchambers. Other than the dark hair, she looked so much like Ivana that for a moment he could only stare at her.

All her attention was focused on the tall, lean youth standing beside her in soldier's garb. He held one of her hands in both of his and she smiled at him as if he were the god of love incarnate. Vlas knew instantly that he had to be Yuri Slavik. The soldier's gaze fixed on Ondrea with such intensity that Vlas almost pitied him.

Find someone else, boy. Even if you become a Supreme Evoker, it won't change your common-class heritage. Higher classes accept you outwardly, but inside they will always believe you are inferior.

Ondrea glanced in Vlas's direction and her radiant smile faded. Somehow she seemed to know that he was there for her. Yuri was also staring at Vlas. Even from such a distance, he saw the boy's jaw tighten and his gaze turn steely.

This should be fun, Vlas thought sarcastically, preparing himself for the kicking and screaming that was sure to come. He didn't doubt for one moment that Ondrea and Yuri were in love.

He strode across the room and up the stairs. Ondrea and her young man faced him with the confidence of youth. Her haughty expression reminded him so much of Ivana at her age that he resisted the urge to smile. "Ondrea, your mother wants you to return home. I am to accompany you."

As he neared the top of the stairs, Yuri stepped protectively in front of Ondrea, but she pushed past him. Her eyes gleamed with annoyance as she faced Vlas with her hands on her hips.

"I don't know who you are, but you have no authority over me. I'll return home when and if I'm ready."

Pausing, Vlas held her gaze. "Coming quietly will be to your benefit. I have no wish to embarrass you by dragging you out of here by force, nor do I have time to waste arguing with you. Decide quickly, girl."

Yuri glared at Vlas. "Don't worry, Ondrea. You're not going anywhere with him. If you value your life, sir, you'll leave. Now."

"I understand your concern for her. You may come with us without fear of punishment. Lady Ivana has expressed no desire for your death or imprisonment for kidnapping her daughter."

"Kidnapping?" Ondrea snorted. "I asked Yuri to take me away from the city."

"What a surprise," Vlas muttered, then spoke aloud. "You have a marriage contract to honor."

"Then there should be a law against forcing a woman to marry a weasel."

"She's not going back," Yuri stated. "I don't know you, sir. I don't want to kill you, but I will do whatever I must to protect Ondrea."

Vlas's mind probed Yuri's. He spoke the truth. He loved her with almost painful force.

Yuri's mental powers struck him hard. Though the youth couldn't overpower him, he was strong. With the right training he might one day make a worthy Supreme Evoker, providing his other skills were up to par.

"You don't want to force me," Ondrea warned.

"Neither of us have a choice," Vlas told her, reaching the top of the steps.

Ondrea glanced at a torch on the wall beside Vlas. The flames jumped toward him and spread over his clothes. If he had been a second slower in taking control of the fire, he would have been severely burned. Breathing deeply, he summoned the essence of the flames, allowing them to cover him from head to toe. He stepped closer to the couple, backing them down the corridor.

The strength of their combined power struck him like a thousand blades of ice. Powerful wind smothered the flames and shook the hallway in its intensity. Vlas's power quickly stifled theirs and the wind subsided.

By then, everyone in Bear Cross knew about the confrontation taking place between the young runaways and the mysterious stranger. A group of soldiers tore up the steps and raced at Vlas, using not only their Ori powers, but swords and daggers as well.

With a thought, he summoned a circle of fire that encompassed Ondrea, Yuri, and himself.

"Shall we continue until Bear Cross is destroyed, or will you accompany me home?"

"By all the gods," Yuri breathed, his eyes wide. "You're a Supreme Evoker."

"Mother sent a Supreme Evoker after me? She really is intent on ruining my life."

"It might seem that way, but that's not her wish."

Yuri drew a deep breath and once again stepped in front of Ondrea. "I am sworn to protect her and I will do so until my dying breath, which will undoubtedly be very soon. For disrespecting you in this way, Supreme Evoker, Highest of Oris, I know I must die." He dropped to one knee in front of Vlas, though his gaze never faltered.

Amused by the young man's display, Vlas forced a grin into submission. Yuri was clearly serious in both his love for Ondrea and his awe of Vlas. Neither should be mocked. "Are you going to come with me, Ondrea, or should your young man sacrifice his life to me?"

"Don't give in, Ondrea," Yuri said. "You deserve a better husband than Stepan."

The girl's cheek twitched and she caressed Yuri's golden hair. "I have to go with him. There's no way I'll trade your life for my happiness." She shot an enraged look at Vlas. "I'll go with you, bastard."

"Ondrea!" Yuri looked horrified. "You can't call him that. He's a --"

"I won't worship a man because he's a Supreme Evoker, especially not one who's trying to help my mother destroy my life. Now, *sir*, relinquish these flames so that we can be on our way."

Vlas curled his lip in her direction. "You remind me so much of your mother. She was a brat, too."

"How dare you!"

Vlas cleared the flames and the soldiers cautiously approached.

Yuri turned to them. "It's all right. We're leaving."

As they descended the steps and walked outside, whispers of *What was that about?* and *Supreme Evoker* echoed through the hall.

It took nearly a full day to reach The Falls. By the time they arrived, Vlas wasn't sure if forcing Ondrea to return home hadn't been a mistake. The love between the young couple was obvious. Unlike her betrothed, Yuri had been prepared to give up his life for Ondrea. Just by looking into her eyes, Vlas could tell that the girl was totally captivated by Yuri. The young soldier fulfilled a part of her that Stepan never could.

Had he not cared so deeply for Ivana, Vlas would most likely have sent them on their way and returned to the Royal Haven saying that they had already left the island. Unfortunately, he already had enough strikes against him with Ivana. If he even hoped for friendship with her, he knew Ondrea must be delivered home safely.

Chapter Six

Ivana paced up and down the rose-colored carpet in her room, her stomach twisting with worry.

The previous day when she had found a note in Ondrea's room saying that she had run away, it had taken her little time to guess that she had fled with Yuri. She truly sympathized with her daughter's affection for the young soldier. Unfortunately, she knew through harsh experience that choosing the wrong sort of man, no matter how much she loved him, would only end in disaster.

She should have known Ondrea would go to extremes to be with Yuri, or to get anything she really wanted for that matter. Always a wild, willful girl, she had caused more trouble growing up than both of her brothers put together. Ondrea was, without doubt, her father's daughter.

The last thing she wanted was for Ondrea's own stubborn nature to ruin her future. As the wife of a royal, she would be protected and want for nothing.

Except lust and love.

Shaking her head, Ivana wrapped her arms around her middle. Such emotions were fleeting. At least as the wife of a royal, Ondrea would have security. What could Yuri give her except a broken heart?

She knew Vlas would find the girl and have little trouble bringing her home. Though Yuri was young and strong, he was no match for the power of an experienced Supreme Evoker. Even if he managed acceptance into the elite group, he would be lucky to become half the Ori Vlas was.

Damn! Why did she tingle all over just thinking about Vlas? After so many years, how could she still desire him?

She could have asked the emperor to send somebody else to bring back Ondrea, but Ivana refused to place her daughter in the hands of just anyone. If Yuri didn't put up a fight, then Ondrea undoubtedly would, and she couldn't risk her being injured in some ridiculous scuffle. Ivana had the headache to prove that the soldiers at Bear Cross had no qualms about injuring anyone who looked for trouble in their domain.

Vlas was the only person she trusted to get the job done as quickly and easily as possible, but what would he think when he finally met Ondrea? Would he somehow sense that she was his? He shouldn't have to sense. The girl was so much like him that it was almost frightening.

Someone knocked on the door and Ivana jumped, her heart pounding. She drew a deep breath. "Come in."

A messenger stepped inside. "Lady Ivana, the emperor asks that you come to his private chamber. Your daughter awaits you there."

Nodding, Ivana swept past the messenger and hurried down the corridor.

Inside the emperor's chamber, Ondrea stood in front of the window, her arms folded tightly beneath her breasts. Yuri stood in front of the emperor who was reprimanding him while Stepan sat at the breakfast table, sipping tea.

The room fell silent seconds after Ivana closed the door.

"Ondrea, what do you have to say for yourself?" Ivana demanded.

"I have nothing to say for myself! You had no right to send this... this *man* to drag me home like a child!" Ondrea pointed to a dim corner of the room where Vlas stood, silently observing, his expression characteristically unreadable.

"Then stop acting like a child. You are a woman, now, with responsibilities, most important of which is to be present at your wedding next week."

"Yes, Ondrea. We've gone through enough time and expense with the preparations. The least you can do is keep your carnal cravings hidden until after the ceremony," Stepan said.

"How dare you speak about her like that?" Yuri turned toward Stepan, his fists clenched and his eyes blazing.

"Oh, shut up. You do realize I could have you imprisoned for kidnapping my bride-to-be?"

Ondrea snorted. "Kidnapped? Is that the story you're spreading around to save face?"

The emperor held up his hands. "Enough of this. Young lady, if you didn't want to accept Stepan's proposal, you should have mentioned it before now."

"I did mention it. Several times. Mother accepted the proposal. I didn't."

"It is her right," the emperor said.

"I also sent a proposal only to have it ignored," Yuri said calmly, though his chest rose and fell with agitated breathing.

"Not that this is any of my business, but I have insight as an impartial observer," Vlas said, stepping out of the shadows.

Ivana turned to him, uncertainty creeping up her spine.

"If Ondrea refused his proposal, perhaps she has good reason."

Folding her arms beneath her breasts, Ivana glared at Vlas. "That's the most stupid observation I've ever heard."

"Stupid is asking a girl like *this* to marry a boy like *that*," Vlas pointed to Ondrea and Stepan respectively. "Her life will be a misery. She's far too spirited for him."

"Excuse me!" Stepan snapped.

Ondrea's furious expression faded and she looked at Vlas as if he were some sort of god. By the hint of a smile on Yuri's lips, he shared her sentiments.

"You have no right to make such comments," Ivana raged.

"Perhaps everyone should take some time to think about the upcoming nuptials before a mistake is made," the emperor said.

"There is no mistake --"

"Yes, Mother, I think there is."

"I ask you all to go and in four days I will call another meeting. Whatever decision is made by then will stand."

"Four days?" Stepan grumbled. "She should be able to decide by then."

Ondrea shot a fiery look in his direction. "I can decide right now."

"Ondrea, that is enough!" Ivana snapped. "It's bad enough that you did something as dangerous as run away to Bear Cross."

"And damn near got your mother killed," Stepan added, though Ivana knew that he didn't speak out of concern, but only to goad his bride-to-be.

"What?" Ondrea's eyes widened.

"The guards at Bear Cross knocked her unconscious when she went to bring you home."

Ondrea took several steps closer to Ivana, concern in her eyes. "Who did it?" Ondrea demanded. "How dare they lay a hand on you? I'll go back and make them wish they were never born!"

The last thing Ivana wanted to do was use herself to instill guilt. "You're not going anywhere, even if I have to keep you in chains this time."

"This is a fine girl you have, Ivana," Vlas said. "Loyal. Courageous. A bit impulsive, perhaps, but that's not necessarily a bad thing."

This time Vlas and Ondrea exchanged a look of mutual admiration that chilled Ivana to her very core. "Stop it, Vlas! You are not helping this situation."

"Everyone out," shouted the emperor. "Use these next few days to settle your arguments. Yuri, return to the barracks immediately. Your commander shall issue a formal reprimand."

The youth bowed to the emperor, though his furious gaze still fixed on Stepan. In spite of herself, Ivana could hardly blame him. Losing the love of one's life was not easy to endure.

As the group left, Ivana called to Vlas, "I would like to speak with you in my chamber. Now. Ondrea, go to your room."

"But --"

"I said go!"

Her lips pressed into a taut line, Ondrea hurried down the corridor. Ivana had never felt so torn in her life. She hated to see her daughter unhappy, but better to upset her now than have her entire life ruined.

Seeing her with Vlas only fueled her worst fears. She needed a stable family life or else the lure of her own wild spirit might just destroy her.

No sooner had Vlas and Ivana entered her chamber than she grasped the front of his shirt and said through clenched teeth, "You have no business interfering between me and my daughter."

His hand covered hers and pressed it closer to his chest with such gentleness that for a moment her anger faded the slightest bit. Until he spoke. "I'm sorry, but if you think she'll be content in a marriage with that pompous, lazy excuse for a man, then you're completely mad."

"He's from one of the most respected families in Ori Paz and can provide her with everything she needs."

Vlas curled his lip. "You think so?"

"She has far too much of her father's wildness in her as it is without somebody like you encouraging her."

"If her father was so awful why did you give up Sigwald for an affair with him? Now you're trying to force her into the same type of marriage you didn't want."

"I was young and stupid. I will not allow her to make the same mistake I did."

"Maybe if your lover hadn't died, it wouldn't have been a mistake."

Ivana's heart pounded. The desire to tell him the truth, just to let him know how much of a mistake her affair with him had been, was almost tangible. Still, she had to think of her children. Would they be better off knowing who their father was? If she told them, could they forgive her for lying?

Drawing a deep breath, she forced herself to speak calmly. "Vlas, if she was your daughter, how would you feel?"

"I would be concerned for her welfare, but not so obsessed with imposing my views on her that I would override her wishes for her own future. I don't know why

you're so worried about Yuri. I caught a glimpse of his future, and he will succeed in whatever path he chooses."

"Even if that path leads him toward the Supreme Evokers? You know better than anybody how much an Ori must sacrifice to become one. Would you wish your daughter to marry one?"

He paused, staring at her, unblinking, for several seconds. "She's a strong girl. Their feelings for each other are powerful and should not be ignored."

"Since when have you ever cared about feelings? You've always been a frigid, cunning bastard."

"And you're a manipulative brat. You used to think it was quite amusing paying attention to me every now and then in front of Sigwald and your other admirers. Tell me, did you do it simply to annoy them or were they in on it, too? Did you all laugh about it behind my back?"

"Shouldn't you know? You're the Supreme Evoker who has the power of divination. Perhaps not. Nicolai has a theory about fortune tellers. He believes they can never see what's closest to them."

"This conversation isn't about me. It's about your daughter marrying that fop."

"It's about you keeping your mouth shut about her affairs and mine. The gods help us if she becomes any more like you than she already is!" Ivana stopped suddenly, realizing that in her rage she had dropped a dangerous clue.

"Like me? What do you mean?"

Sighing, she turned away from him and walked toward the window. "Maybe it's better if you know. That way you can at least understand why I want to protect her from herself."

"Know what?"

Turning to him, she noted that he had most likely guessed what she was about to tell him. His face looked even paler than usual and his gaze fixed on hers with something akin to fear, though she wondered if somebody like him could feel such a

strong emotion. His kind were so dead inside that only a fool such as herself could have fallen in love with one of them.

"You are the father of my children, Vlas. There was no soldier killed during the war. It was a story Nicolai and I made up."

For a moment he appeared frozen, then he crossed the room and dropped into one of the chairs by the hearth. "Why?"

"Because you didn't want anything to do with me, so I had no reason to believe you would want your children, either."

"But the night we made love... I saw you drink the herbs that prevented pregnancy."

"You saw me drink plain water. I lied."

"Did you know before I left Ori Paz?"

"Yes."

"And you never thought to come to me?"

"I was the one who initiated lovemaking with a drunken man. I was the one who deliberately refused to drink the herbs. If I meant anything to you, you would have made an effort to see me again when you were sober."

He turned to her, his expression stunned. "But you were engaged to Sigwald. As far as I knew, you never cancelled the wedding. I didn't think I meant anything to you. If I'd told you how I felt..."

By the gods, why didn't he finish his sentence? Her head spun with his insinuation. "Vlas, how did you feel?"

"I..."

She approached, standing between his open knees, resisting the urge to touch him, kiss him. The man was like the missing part of her soul. Only when they were together did she feel complete.

"I wanted you so badly, Ivana. From the moment we met you were all I could think about. Since returning and finding out that you had an affair with another man, a soldier, and that you had children with him, I've been eaten alive with jealousy."

Raising her eyes to heaven, Ivana resisted the urge to shake him out of pure frustration. "Nicolai was right about you. How could you not have seen from the portraits the children look like you? How could you have met Ondrea and not seen yourself in her? Most of all, how could you have thought after the night we spent together I could so quickly fall in love with another man?"

"I thought you were intoxicated when we made love and that once you realized what happened, I wouldn't have a chance of marrying you. Gods, you were so beautiful. You still are. And me... I'm not exactly stunning. Let's be honest. I'm barely passable."

Unable to resist touching him, she placed her hands on his shoulders and gazed deeply into his eyes. "Vlas, you started looking handsome to me a long time ago."

His brow furrowed. "Now's not the time for jokes."

"I mean it."

"Gods, have we both been this stupid? All these years wasted. Our children..."

"Don't just trail off. Tell me how you feel about knowing they're yours."

"I don't know if I feel guilty or cheated. I guess both." He stood, his fists clenched, and paced the room. "Damn it, Ivana. You should have told me."

"Would it have stopped you from looking for your brother or from breaking the High Law to release him from his suffering?"

"Yes."

"You say that now."

"What sort of a man do you think I am?"

"I don't know. We never really got that far in our relationship."

"And now it's too late."

"It's not too late. If we still want to try, we'd be fools to give up a second chance."

"What about Nicolai and the children? I didn't return to destroy more lives."

"Nicolai left for a few days with the hope that you and I would get together. He said so. As for the children, he's raised them and they look on him as their father, but I'm sure they would want to know you. Ondrea already seems to adore you."

Vlas's arms slipped around her and he held her close. "She's so much like you, Ivana."

"I always thought she was like you." She looped her arms around his neck. "Vlas, make love with me. Please."

He swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Placing her upon it, he covered her body with his and gazed into her eyes. "I will make love to you, Ivana."

She reached for him, but he pinned her arms above her head.

"I said *I* will make love to *you*. The last two times we've been together like this, you were in charge. Now it's my turn."

Her initial instinct was to argue, but he silenced her protest with a kiss that made her forget everything except the driving need to have this man possess her.

Closing her eyes, she surrendered completely to the softness of his lips as they moved gently against hers. This was real. Neither was intoxicated and there was no trial. For the first time, they were making love out of mutual desire, without lies. Ivana had dreamed of this her entire life and she wanted to savor every moment.

Vlas's tongue outlined her lips, then parted them. Her tongue met his with eager strokes. The intimate contact nearly made her head spin and she arched against him, wishing that their clothes would vanish. More than anything, she wanted to feel his naked flesh against hers. She wanted his cock buried deep inside her.

"Gods, I didn't think it possible, but you're even more beautiful than you were sixteen years ago," he whispered in her ear.

She laughed. "You're such a liar."

"It's true." He gazed at her, bewitching her with his fathomless emerald eyes.

Was she still being a fool? She almost believed him. Why shouldn't she? To her, he was as virile and attractive as his younger self. Yes, his face bore the ravages of his harsh life, yet somehow the lines about his eyes and mouth made his appearance more

interesting. His expression, though no less fierce than in his youth, now revealed hard-won wisdom that she found most beautiful.

Tenderly, he brushed his cheek against hers. The sensation was affectionate yet arousing, a combination that tugged at her heart and caressed her libido. He must have enjoyed it just as much, because for several moments he continued rubbing his face against hers. He must have shaved at some point during the day, because his skin was smooth and warm. Ever so slowly, he kissed her brow and eyelids until he reached her opposite cheek where he began the tender caresses over again.

She parted her legs as one of his slipped between them. Even the barrier of clothing couldn't disguise his arousal. The bulge of his cock, stiff and tempting, pressed hard against her. Thoroughly excited, she arched harder against him, wishing he would tear off their clothes and take her quickly.

Again he kissed her mouth, a bit more demanding than before. His tongue caressed hers before he caught it and sucked upon it. Raw desire shot through Ivana, centering in her pussy. Whimpering with need, she squirmed beneath him, her arms tugging against his grip.

With a low chuckle, he released her wrists, his kiss deepening, pressing her harder into the pillows.

Finally free, her hands entangled in his hair. She tugged fistfuls of the dark, silken locks and held him even closer, if possible. Her tongue fenced with his, thrusting and stroking until they nearly lost their breath. Gasping, he broke the kiss and buried his face in the hollow of her shoulder.

Ivana wrapped her arms around him tightly for a moment, scarcely believing that after so long they finally had a chance to be together.

Shifting position, Vlas stretched out beside her. He leaned on his elbow, his head propped in his hand, and used his free hand to unfasten the ties on the front of her gown. He parted the fabric and stroked the base of her throat, then rose to his knees.

When she reached for him, he caught her hands and kissed them before placing them back by her sides. "Remember what I told you. Tonight you're mine."

"But I want to touch you."

"Not now. Close your eyes and be still."

After a moment's hesitation, she did as he asked. She felt him slip her dress down her shoulders and arms, then tug it off completely. A slight chill coursed through her as the cool air kissed her body that was now covered only in a thin shift. Seconds later, he had removed the shift as well. She felt the bed lurch as he rose.

Ivana opened her eyes and watched him approach the hearth, his back to her. First, he removed his robe, then his boots and clothing followed. Her breath caught at the sight of his tall, lean form in all its naked splendor. To her, Vlas had always exuded the intoxicating combination of virility and grace in a way no conventionally handsome man ever could. The fire raging beneath his cool veneer ignited her passion. With a look alone this man could summon her like the elements he so easily evoked.

Summoned by Vlas, flames leapt in the hearth. Their shadows licked at his pale flesh and inky hair. He turned and approached the bed, his erect cock tantalizing her. The urge to leap on him and cover him from head to foot with kisses was almost unendurable, yet she knew he was adamant about keeping control over this lovemaking session.

The sexy, powerful expression in his slanted eyes made her heart pound. Her nipples, already semi-aroused from kissing and embracing him, hardened even more as her desire rose.

He joined her on the bed, tugging the sheet to their waists. Bracing a hand on either side of her head, he loomed above her, his gaze fixed on her so that she felt as if he were calling forth her very soul.

"Do you know how much I've missed you, Vlas?"

"Tell me. I want to hear it."

"Not a night has gone by that I haven't wanted you in my bed."

"It has been the same for me. Even when part of my soul was torn away and most of my emotions trapped in an unreachable place, I still wanted you."

"Remember when you were a palace guard and were often called upon to escort me and the emperor's nieces when we went riding?"

"Of course. It was almost on a daily basis and you would deliberately goad me, not only with bratty comments but by riding off to places you shouldn't. How many times did I chase you through the forest?"

She smiled. "As often as I could manage. Were you really annoyed by it?"

"Only because I had to fight to keep my hands off you."

His admission sent fresh waves of desire coursing through her. Closing her eyes for a moment, she drew a deep breath, loving the sensation of his warm flesh against hers. She ran her hands over his ribs and across his back, feeling each bone and muscle.

"I asked to have you assigned to us, you know, and the emperor's nieces were amused by our banter, so they indulged me."

"Gods, you were even more of a brat than I thought."

"And I had to fight to keep from throwing myself at you during those times in the woods. Didn't you have even the slightest inkling that I used to run off so that we could be alone?"

"You did?"

Nodding, she gazed at him through her lashes while sliding her hands along his spine. Her bare feet slid up and down his calves and she shifted her hips against him. Gods, she ached for him. She was so wet and ready that she wondered if she could stop herself from coming upon his entry alone.

She didn't try disguising her urgency as she said, "Please take me, Vlas. Now."

The desire in his eyes led her to believe that he would act quickly, but he surprised her by covering her neck with feathery kisses before slipping down her body. At the first lash of his tongue over her nipple, she gasped and clutched him hard. He nibbled and licked the taut nub, teasing it as tremors of pure arousal tore through her. While he continued feasting on her nipple, his hand stroked and squeezed her other breast. His thumb swept over the erect bud in time with his sucking. Having both of her breasts fondled in such a manner was nearly enough to hurl her over the edge.

As if sensing how close she was to orgasm, he edged lower, beneath the sheet, and settled between her legs. His hands caressed her thighs and hips with long, sweeping strokes.

When his mouth hovered over her clit, his warm breath arousing her even more, she moaned softly. The tip of his tongue flicked her engorged nub and she gasped.

“Oh, gods, Vlas. Yes!” she panted, trying desperately to squirm beneath his exploring lips and tongue, but he grasped her buttocks and held her steady against his mouth.

It was too much. She was far too excited to hold back. With several more sweeps of his marvelous tongue, she climaxed so violently that she thought she might faint.

Wave after wave of orgasm broke over her. Her head thrashed on her pillow and she tried to keep her pleased sobs as quiet as possible. Vlas continued licking and sucking her sensitive flesh, mercilessly drawing out her climax.

Finally, she lay still and spent, her eyes closed as her breathing returned to normal.

Once more his body covered hers and he whispered against her lips, “You seemed to like that.”

A smile tugged at her lips and she gazed at him through half open eyes. “I loved it, but I still want to feel you inside me. I... oh, Vlas,” she purred, spreading her legs wider to accommodate him. His thick, hard cock slipped inside her. Perfection. He was absolute perfection.

Without hesitation, she lifted her hips, following his rhythm. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, loving the feeling of his warm flesh so close to hers. The sound of his ragged breath in her ear made her quiver. Everything about him thrilled her. She used to think that her feelings for him would diminish with time, but somehow they had only grown stronger.

His steady rhythm drove her toward another orgasm. By the sensations breaking over her, she knew it would be even more wonderful than the last one because this time

he would share it with her. The realization that he was as impassioned as she hurled her to amazing heights of pleasure.

Every muscle in her body tensed as she and Vlas strained against one another, whispering breathless endearments that neither paid much attention to. At that moment only the sound of their voices and the friction of their heated bodies mattered.

"Ah! Oh, Vlas, please don't stop. I'm almost there. I..." Her words faded into a moan of rapture. She convulsed.

Massive pulsations ripped through her, squeezing his cock and flinging him into orgasm.

"Gods, Ivana. Oh, gods!"

In the midst of her climax, she felt him come, flooding her with his passion.

For several moments he lay atop her, their panting breaths mingling and their bodies damp with perspiration.

Finally, he rolled onto his back and tugged her against him.

Resting her cheek against his chest, she smiled and stroked his ribs. "Vlas, I really had started to lose hope in love."

Lifting his head, he met her gaze. Never had she seen such blatant emotion gleaming in his eyes. He cupped her face in his palm. "Ivana, I lost hope in just about everything. Except..."

"What?"

"Except the thought of being with you again. It was crazy, clinging to the memory of a single night for so many years, but I couldn't stop it. If I thought I had the slightest chance with you before --"

"Don't." She shook her head and touched a fingertip to his lips. "It's as much my fault as it is yours. Probably more. It's bad enough that I never gave you the chance to decide for yourself about us, but I lied to our children, too."

"You did what you thought was best. The gods know I wasn't the easiest man to approach."

"Not when you were sober, anyway." She smiled, resting her head against his shoulder. Sighing, she drew random circles on his chest with her fingertip. "Vlas, my sons will soon be returning home from a hunting trip."

"I'm looking forward to meeting them. What did you call them?"

"Sascha and Ustin."

The slightest smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You gave one of them my second name."

"Sascha is a common enough name that no one would get suspicious. Vlas, there's something you need to know about Ustin."

"Yes?"

"He's part of a group that has been protesting Supreme Evokers."

Vlas curled his lip. "What?"

"The group has evolved since the war. After what happened, many people fear your kind even more than before. Some protestors have organized with the hope of forcing the emperor into outlawing the training of future Supreme Evokers. Ustin is one of them."

"How do you feel about it?"

"I think he has a right to his opinion, even if it's wrong in my eyes."

"Let me see if I understand this. Ondrea is not allowed to choose her husband because she has no right to decide the course of her life. Ustin, however, may protest, even threaten, the existence of the warriors who protect Ori Paz because he has a right to his opinion?"

She tried tugging away from him, but he grasped her arm.

"Let me go."

"Where?"

She glared at him. "Now I'm starting to vividly recall why I never believed you and I could be together. You are an arrogant, opinionated ass."

"And you are a manipulative, self-righteous brat."

"If that's how you feel about me, then let go of my arm and get the hell out of my bed."

"This time I won't be so easy to get rid of."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Moments ago you were clinging to me and murmuring endearments. Now you want to discard me again like so much rubbish."

"Damn you, Vlas Sascha Evgenyl."

In a swift motion, he rolled her onto her back. His body pinning hers to the bed, he spoke against her lips in the low, dangerous voice that always sent shivers down her spine. "I was damned from the moment I met you. Damned to long for a woman who could never need or want me. Or so I thought. Do you really want me to leave your bed, Ivana? Think carefully before you speak, because if I go this time, I won't return."

Fury tainted by desire boiled inside her. "You would turn your back on your children so quickly?"

"Never. I want to know them, but I can do that without bedding you. I'm getting too old to chase dreams, Ivana. Either you want to take a chance with me or you don't. Tell me so that both of us can get on with our lives."

"No. I don't want you to leave my bed," she snapped, still glaring at him. Grasping his face in her hands, she kissed him roughly, pouring all of her anger and lust into that single gesture.

The man enraged her, yet the last thing she wanted was to spend any more time without him. She wanted to tell him that she loved him and have him say the same in return, but she knew better than to hope for so much. Coaxing an admission of love out of a Supreme Evoker was an impossibility. Having him surrender to this point was more than she had ever imagined possible.

When the kiss broke, he said, "Good, because there's no way in hell I want to leave," and claimed her lips with such passion that they forgot about their argument.

Vlas shifted position slightly. While nibbling her earlobe, he slipped his hand down her stomach to her soft mound. He cupped it gently, stroking with his palm while two of his fingers explored her slick passage.

"Oh, Vlas," she purred, closing her eyes and rubbing his biceps.

Someone knocked on the door.

Ivana's eyes flew open, her heart pounding. She and Vlas stared at each other with disappointment.

"Who is it?" she called.

"It's me, sweetie!"

Vlas's hand flew from between Ivana's legs and they said in union, "Nicolai."

"It's all right." Ivana stood and slipped on a robe before crossing the room.

Vlas reached for his trousers, but he hadn't time to put them on, so he dove back into the bed and tugged the sheet up to his waist just as Ivana opened the door.

"I wanted to let you know that I've returned early and heard about what's going on with Ondrea. Now that girl is really getting out of hand, but it's not all her fault. I told you that she should not be forced into marriage... with..." Nicolai's voice faded when his gaze fell upon Vlas, naked in the bed. A wide grin spread across his face and he did a little dance across the room. "Yes! Gods, yes! I didn't think you two would do this so quickly, but now that you're finally together, let's get the divorce underway."

"Will you calm down, Nicolai," Ivana said. "We haven't even told the children yet."

"Then round them up, sweetie. My lover and I have been waiting ten years to go public."

"We need to wait for Ustin and Sascha to return from their hunting trip."

"Nicolai," Vlas said, looking rather uncomfortable in such a vulnerable position. Ivana imagined that being caught naked in the bed of another man's wife, even a man who was itching for divorce, was not a humiliation commonly suffered by Supreme Evokers. "Thank you for all you've done these past years."

"You don't have to thank me. Those children are mine, Vlas," Nicolai cast him a poignant look, "but I am more than willing to share them."

"If they want," Vlas stated, his look just as intense. "I have no desire to upset their lives or yours."

Nicolai raised his eyes to heaven and snorted with laughter. "I wish you had that attitude sixteen years ago, my friend, but the important thing is you're an older and wiser man now. By the way, the youngest of the triplets, Ustin, will probably want to see your head on a pike. Did Ivana tell you how much he hates Supreme Evokers?"

"Yes."

"He'll get over it, though. Oh! I almost forgot to tell you. On my way home, I stopped at the temple. Your brother, Pavlik, was happy to hear about your return. He wants to see you."

"Really." Vlas's voice dripped with annoyance. "What could he possibly want?"

"Don't know. Well, I'll leave you two lovers alone. We can discuss the Ondrea situation later."

"Actually, I think we should discuss it now, before she tries to run away again," Ivana said. "Give me a moment to dress."

Nicolai nodded and swept out of the room. Vlas shoved aside the sheet and reached for his clothes again. While Ivana dressed, she couldn't keep her gaze from Vlas. Too quickly his long, lean body was concealed by the heavy black clothes.

"I'll return to Silence Peak. There is some work I need to do."

Ivana pulled on her dress and tried to smooth some of the wrinkles from the fabric. "Why don't you go to the temple and find out what your brother wants?"

"I'm not at Pavlik's command. If he wants to see me, I'm sure he can find me."

"You have a terrible attitude."

Before stepping out of the room, he glanced at her over his shoulder with the stern expression that had always annoyed yet intrigued her. "It's part of my charm."

"Honestly, Vlas, sometimes I can't tell if you're joking or serious."

The slightest smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Good."

A moment later, he had disappeared, leaving Ivana longing for his touch. Sighing, she pushed aside carnal thoughts and prepared herself for the discussion with Nicolai and Ondrea. Though Nicolai supported her in front of the children, in private he made his feelings perfectly clear. Like Vlas, he thought arranging a marriage between Stepan and Ondrea was a mistake. Yuri's common-class background didn't thrill him, but he liked the boy and believed he was ambitious enough to make a comfortable life for a family. He also believed that forcing Ondrea into anything she didn't want to do would end in disaster.

Perhaps she was wrong about the marriage. As both Vlas and Nicolai pointed out, she had rebelled against a similar match. If she and Vlas had been honest with each other, they might have had a happy life. Yuri had made his feelings for Ondrea clear.

She opened the door and headed for Ondrea's room. She would tell her daughter that she didn't have to marry Stepan, but must wait until she was eighteen before marrying anyone else. At least that would give her and Yuri more time to get to know one another, and for him to establish himself as a worthy mate.

She prayed that the boy would reconsider becoming a Supreme Evoker, for she felt certain that any warm feelings he now possessed would be destroyed upon initiation to the elite group. Then Ondrea would find herself loving a man of ice, one who could never admit his love, or perhaps even feel such an emotion. She would find her heart and soul sacrificed to a man like Vlas.

Ivana had no illusions about Vlas Sascha Evgenyl. She would take what she could from him, but she had learned long ago that no one would truly reach his heart.

Chapter Seven

Vlas spent the remainder of the day in the Cave of the Dragon. There Supreme Evokers practiced summoning beasts in the form of ferocious arctic snakes with azure eyes and pure white scales.

He returned to his chamber, both weary and invigorated, a common state after working with the Dragons. Looking forward to some time alone, he was surprised to find a visitor seated outside his door.

Pavlik lifted his gaze from his hands that were folded on his lap and offered Vlas a smile. With his pale green eyes and handsome features, Vlas's brother was still the epitome of male beauty. His dark gold hair was streaked white at the temples, but that sign of aging only served to make him appear even more distinguished. The few lines around his eyes were scarcely noticeable and his expression was more serene than Vlas remembered.

Though Pavlik had never deliberately flaunted his favored family status, Vlas couldn't help the jealousy that twisted inside him each time he looked at his perfect older brother.

Pavlik stood and offered Vlas his hand. "It's good to have you back."

Vlas glanced at Pavlik's hand for a moment before grasping it in a quick handshake. "Is it?"

"I know the two of us were never close, but you're still my brother and I care about you."

Vlas couldn't keep the wry smile from twisting his lips. "I'm sure."

"Could we talk?"

Drawing a deep breath, Vlas resisted the urge to dismiss Pavlik. Instead, he opened the door and gestured for his brother to accompany him inside.

Pavlik glanced at the austere room. He approached the shelf beside the window and touched the spines of the books resting there. "I've always wondered what it was like inside this realm of the Supreme Evokers."

"Then I'm surprised you disappointed the family by not trying to join our ranks."

Pavlik laughed. "One in the family is enough. Besides, I didn't have the stomach for it. You always were the strong one."

Vlas raised an eyebrow. Was Pavlik complimenting him? If so, why?

"Have you seen Ivana?"

"Of course."

"You probably have no idea how much you meant to her."

"How is this your business?"

"It's not, but I know certain things..."

"What things?" Vlas held Pavlik's gaze, not even trying to disguise the fact that he was probing his brother's mind. Surprisingly, Pavlik didn't try to stop him.

"So, you've always known that I'm the father of Ivana's children," Vlas said, breaking contact with Pavlik and approaching the hearth. Rather than invoke the fire, he started one in the normal way, suddenly needing something to do with his hands lest he use them to strangle Pavlik.

It seemed just about everybody but Vlas himself had known about his triplets.

"I didn't know until several months after you'd left. I had been away on a retreat with some of the other priests, and when I returned and saw Ivana at the temple, I knew right away that she was carrying two boys and a girl that belonged to you. Like you, I have the power to judge women's pregnancies. Usually it's a pleasant gift, but in this case..."

"Does Ivana know you know?"

"Of course not. She and Nicolai were married and it was not my place to interfere in her life. I'm sure she had good reason for keeping her secret, especially

when I found out you had left Ori Paz and broken a High Law. About the soul sharing ritual --"

"I don't want to discuss it."

"All right, but before we drop the subject, I want to offer you my deepest thanks for what you did by freeing Misha."

Vlas's brow furrowed and his gaze met Pavlik's. This was the longest, strangest conversation he ever had with his brother. In truth, Pavlik had made overtures of friendship before which Vlas had rebuffed. His anger and jealousy wouldn't allow him to look at Pavlik as anything but a hated rival.

"You think I don't understand what you gave up for Misha's sake? I know that ever since we were children, the only thing you had to hold onto was your pride. I can't imagine what it must have been like for a man like you, a Supreme Evoker, to grovel at the feet of a human king."

"I didn't grovel."

Pavlik held his gaze and this time it was Vlas who glanced away first. Unfortunately, there had been times when he'd been forced to grovel, at least by his standards.

"You don't like me and I can't blame you completely, but I've always liked you, Vlas. I admire you and I don't want to see you give up a chance for happiness again."

Vlas glared at him. "It's time for you to leave, Pavlik. Go back to your temple. Light a candle and pray, just like you and the other priests did during the war."

"While the rest of you fought?" Pavlik smiled sadly. "Remember, it was priests who saved your life when you nearly died after the final battle."

"And you expect me to thank you for it? You should have let me die." Vlas closed the distance between himself and Pavlik. He didn't stop walking until the priest's back was against the wall.

"What a waste that would have been. Have you seen your children yet?"

Vlas sighed and turned away. "One of them. Ondrea."

"Ah. The fiery lass. I can't tell if she's more like Ivana or you."

"This is insane. Nicolai is their father."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean you can't be part of their lives. Nicolai would never try to stop you from knowing them, and he wouldn't stop you and Ivana from starting the life you always should have had together. You love her, don't you?"

"I've never loved anyone or anything. I'm a Supreme Evoker."

"But you're still a man. Vlas, listen to me. You've developed this harsh exterior because you had to. The way our family treated you was cruel. You didn't deserve it." Pavlik approached and placed a firm hand on Vlas's shoulder.

Vlas stiffened beneath his touch. "That's long past."

"But it left scars that haven't faded. You have more courage than any man I know, but even someone like you has inner needs that can't be ignored or else you will become as cold as The Falls."

"What if I already am?"

Pavlik shook his head. "You're not. Any man who would give up part of his soul out of compassion for a brother he had every right to hate has not lost his heart."

"Maybe I have since."

Sighing, Pavlik dropped his hand. "Only you can answer that. You have been given a second chance. Choose your path carefully."

Without further comment, Pavlik left Vlas alone with his thoughts.

* * *

Moments after Pavlik's departure, a messenger arrived with a note from Ivana stating that her sons had returned from their hunting trip and that she would like Vlas to join her family for dinner the following evening, a veiled invitation to meet his children. A combination of excitement and apprehension washed over him.

Vlas found sleeping difficult that night. His thoughts focused mainly on Ivana and the triplets. To keep from obsessing about his newly discovered family, he reviewed his lesson plans for the trainees the following morning.

Dawn found him several miles outside The Falls with a group of Oris hoping to join the ranks of the Supreme Evokers. There were ten young men and women, but the

chances were slim that even one would manage to complete the training. It took years of hard work and sacrifice to become a Supreme Evoker. Few were willing and able to endure the requirements.

This morning, Vlas would guide the trainees in invoking a combination of forces. It was simple enough to summon fire, water, a beast, or even to manipulate the thoughts of another person, but to use a combination of powers at a single time was one of the skills that separated normal Oris from Supreme Evokers.

Yuri was among the group, and Vlas used discretion to observe him a bit more carefully than the others. Though not the most talented of the group, the boy possessed determination that could very well push him ahead while others eventually stumbled behind. Skill could always be improved, but courage was something a person was born with.

The training lasted until the afternoon when the hopefuls were allowed a brief rest before meeting with other instructors for their late afternoon classes. Most of them returned to Silence Point tired, preoccupied, and in need of even the slightest respite. Vlas remembered the stress of training. He recalled watching other students around him succumb to the physical and emotional trials and somehow that gave him the added strength to continue. Funny how simple the training now seemed. After so many battles and far worse tests, instructing hopefuls was almost a welcome relief.

Vlas made his way to the Cave of Fire where he dismissed the guard. One of his favorite methods of meditation was to focus on a single invocation. Moments later, he was covered from head to foot in flames and had attained an almost trance-like joining with the fire.

Another presence in the room distracted him, and he asked the flames to return to their hollow. He was surprised to find Yuri lurking in the doorway.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. I'll go."

"No. Come in."

The youth stepped closer to the hollow, his gaze switching from Vlas to the fire.

"I thought you would be taking this time to eat or relax before your afternoon sessions."

"I was concerned about my lack of control during training this morning, so I thought some additional practice would help."

"Yes, I noticed you had some difficulty with multiple summoning. It's because you're trying to force nature."

Yuri's brow furrowed. "But isn't that what we do?"

"No. It is especially important for Supreme Evokers to realize that we are merely borrowing these powers. You never make demands of nature. You ask her to hear your call. If you don't show her the respect she deserves, she will destroy you, or even worse, she will ignore you."

"Since entering the training, we've been taught to bury our emotions when summoning, but I find it difficult. How can you beg the elements yet remain cold?"

Yuri's question disturbed Vlas, not only because the boy had struck upon a nerve that had been pinching the Supreme Evokers for years, but because it was close to the truth.

Calling upon his powers of divination, he approached the boy and gazed deeply into his eyes, trying to decide how trustworthy he was. Not only did he like Yuri, but Ondrea was in love with him. He wanted him to succeed, for both of their sakes.

"I'm going to tell you something that the others do not approve of. They would not want me to pass this information on to a trainee, but you have more potential than any Ori I have met in my lifetime."

Yuri stared curiously into Vlas's eyes.

"When we call upon our powers, we are taught to bury our emotions, especially the intense ones such as hate and love. It is thought that they interfere with our concentration and show disrespect to the elements. As Supreme Evokers, we spend so much time perfecting our skills that we often forget to dig up those emotions when practice or duty is completed. That is why so many of us never have families or even friends outside of Silence Peak."

"Yes. Such discipline is what pushed several of the Supreme Evokers to the other side during the war. If not for Oris such as yourself, they might have destroyed us. There would have been disorder and --"

"Yes. That is a common belief, and it holds much truth, except for one thing."

"What? I'll listen to anything you have to say. You were the one left standing."

"Because I *felt*."

Confusion clouded the younger man's eyes. "Sir?"

"At the end, when the island was nearly destroyed, when the others had almost killed me with their power, only one thing gave me the strength to hold them off. Emotion. My fear of what would happen to our world, especially one person whom I cared for very deeply."

"This is a very unconventional lesson, sir."

The slightest smile touched Vlas's lips. "Bordering illegal, you might say."

Yuri nodded.

"I am in no way implying that emotions should not be controlled. Without control there is total disorder. However, to dismiss the value of our own... feelings, if you will, is unnatural, and it is nature itself that we wish to commune with as Supreme Evokers."

"I think I understand."

"Good. Don't let your fear or frustration master you. Acknowledge it. Feel it, but do not allow it to control you. Only then can you hope to reach your goal."

"Thank you, sir."

"One last thing. You want to marry Ondrea."

"Yes. I meant to thank you for standing up for us in front of her mother --"

Vlas held up his hand. "I'm not here to discuss a private matter regarding Ondrea, just to offer you a bit of advice, regardless of whom you choose to court. Becoming a Supreme Evoker demands everything a man can give. You may love a woman with all your heart, but your duty will call you away from her and you must go. Supreme Evoker isn't merely a title. It is a way of life. If you and the woman can accept

this, you have a chance. If not, then choose your path wisely, or else you risk destroying both you and your mate."

"Yes, sir."

"Now if you would like additional practice, I have some time."

"Thank you."

Vlas motioned for Yuri to step closer to the hollow. It seemed they both had much to consider and rational thought would be easier after a session with the flames.

* * *

That evening when Vlas arrived at the dining room between Ivana and Nicolai's quarters, he was greeted with an enthusiastic embrace from Ondrea. After a moment of surprise, he returned the gesture. Slipping from his arms, she offered him a warm smile so much like Ivana's that he felt another pang of regret over the years he'd lost.

"This afternoon Mother and Father told us who you are. Quite a surprise."

"It was for me as well."

"Dinner is ready," said Ivana.

"And getting cold," Nicolai called. "Come and sit down."

"I'm sorry to be late. There was a meeting at Silence Peak that went on longer than expected," Vlas said, following Ondrea to the table. His gaze met Ivana's from where she sat at the end of the table. She smiled at him, her gaze innocently welcoming yet with an underlying sensuality meant for him alone. It took all of his self-control to keep his desire for her at bay. Nicolai sat at the opposite end of the table and two dark-haired boys sat side-by-side in the chairs across from Vlas and Ondrea's.

The boy with pale green eyes, like Ivana's, watched him with curiosity. He wore the rust-colored uniform of a low ranking palace guard, not unusual for a youth in training for a military career. As Vlas approached, he stood respectfully.

The other boy, dressed in a plain cream-colored robe, similar to the ones worn by temple priests, remained seated. The intensity in his emerald green eyes was a startling contradiction to his religious attire. He glared at Vlas, his jaw visibly taut.

"Vlas, this is Sascha and Ustin," Ivana introduced the guard and the temple servant respectively.

"It's an honor, sir," Sascha said.

"For me as well." Vlas held his gaze, pleased to see that he was a tall, well formed young man. Though he and his siblings possessed Vlas's dark hair, they had inherited the traditionally beautiful features possessed by a majority of Oris. Actually, they were lovelier than most since they resembled Ivana.

"I thought this was a social visit?" Ustin asked in a deceptively soft voice.

Ivana closed her eyes for a moment. "Ustin, at least for tonight I ask you to curb that sharp tongue of yours."

"I merely wanted to point out that it's strange for a guest to bring weapons to his hosts' dinner table."

"What nonsense are you spouting now?" Nicolai snapped.

Vlas followed Ustin's gaze to his magical rings.

Ondrea also caught the look and said, "If you bothered to learn anything at all about Supreme Evokers other than the hate tales spun by your little group of rebels you would know those aren't simply weapons. They're part of him, blood and spirit."

Ustin's glare remained fixed on Vlas. "I've heard. A disgusting ritual. Some of your blood is mixed with the molten metal before the rings are formed, isn't that right?"

"I didn't come here to discuss the Supreme Evokers' rituals, but to get to know you better."

"What do you want from us?"

"Ustin, that's enough," Ivana stated.

"I don't want anything from you, except your friendship, if possible," Vlas stated.

"I'd like that, sir," Sascha replied before Ustin could.

"So would I." Ondrea smiled at Vlas.

Ustin stood, his fists clenched. "The last person I would ever consider a friend is you."

"Sit down and be civil, boy!" Nicolai snapped.

"I'm sorry, Father," Ustin glanced at Nicolai, "but you all seem to be forgetting that this man stands for everything I protest. Power without rules. A few lording over all."

"That's not true." Vlas's gaze bore into Ustin's. Though he sensed the boy's discomfort, he credited him with not looking away. "We are created to serve."

"Serve? You nearly destroyed us."

"Ustin, if it wasn't for him, there would be no Ori Paz, at least not as we know it," Sascha stated.

"I don't expect you to understand. You guards are brainwashed from the moment you begin training. The only way to ensure that what happened during the war will never happen again is by unseating the Supreme Evokers."

"Oh that's just brilliant, Ustin." Ondrea raised her eyes to heaven. "Unseat the Supreme Evokers and leave us vulnerable to those who will continue to illegally harness the same power. You think that eliminating their ranks will stop Oris who have Supreme Evoker potential from honing their skills?"

Sascha said, "She's right. If we disband the Supreme Evokers, then only criminals will have access to their power. What do you think will happen to Ori Paz then? Who will protect us should there ever be another uprising like before?"

Ustin shook his head, a disgusted expression marring his handsome face. "You are all so stupid. Violence will never bring about peace."

"Neither will surrender," Ondrea said.

"All I know is my group has spent years trying to undo the damage from the war."

"Ustin, you weren't even born until after the war. You've been part of the rebel group for a year at the most."

"But other members have been striving for continued peace since the war ended."

Ondrea reached across the table and waved a hand in front of her brother's face. "Hello. We have been at peace. You and your group are just stirring up more trouble."

"Peace? Most of the Supreme Evokers who defected to the rebel side and nearly destroyed Ori Paz are still alive and imprisoned in Silence Peak. As long as they live, as long as their kind exists, they will be a threat to us. Having that kind of power isn't natural. It's an insult to the gods."

"That's not true," Vlas stated, remaining outwardly calm though his anger rose at the impertinent youth's accusations. "We have an unyielding respect for nature, the gods, and Ori Paz itself. We would give our lives to protect its people. Throughout the generations many of us have."

"I cannot remain at the same table as this man." Ustin glanced from Ivana to Nicolai. "Mum. Dad. Thank you for the dinner invitation, but I'm returning to the temple. Thank you, *sir*, for successfully ruining my life." The boy glared at Vlas. "Once the group finds out that my father is the most powerful living Supreme Evoker, the one who ended the war, I will be lucky if they allow me to continue breathing the same air as they do. Good night."

Ignoring Nicolai's reprimanding shouts, Ustin stalked out of the room.

For several moments, everyone remained silent, then Vlas said, "I'm sorry. Perhaps I shouldn't have come."

"No, it's not you," Ivana said. "Ustin was completely wrong."

"He wants to be a *priest*," Ondrea said.

Vlas nearly smiled at her disgusted expression. "That's not such a terrible vocation."

"It is when you have no concept of compassion and forgiveness," Sascha said. "His group of protestors think they're so peace-loving, but they're willing to put all of us at risk by disbanding the greatest source of protection we have. The Supreme Evokers."

"You don't have an interest in becoming one, do you?" Vlas asked warily.

"No, sir," Sascha replied. "I admire your kind, but I'm not so devoted to duty."

Ivana, Vlas, and Nicolai turned to Ondrea with concern.

She laughed. "Don't look at me. What I want more than anything is to be a wife and mother. However, I do want to marry a potential Supreme Evoker, and no, Mother, that will not change. Even if you do make me wait two years before marrying Yuri."

"At least you don't have to marry Stepan." Nicolai shuddered. "I did so hate the thought of you with that conniving little weasel."

Ondrea turned to Vlas. "I can thank you for getting me out of that trap."

"You can thank your parents. They love you and want to see you happy. I'm going to give you the same bit of advice I recently gave another young Ori. Being a Supreme Evoker means giving up a huge part of yourself. Your life is never entirely your own. To love one of us means that sacrifices will be made. If you can't accept that kind of danger and at times, loneliness, then don't involve yourself with one of us."

Ondrea's smile faded and she nodded. "I understand."

Vlas turned to Ivana who was gazing at him with a look of affection that wrapped around his icy heart, warming it in a way he could not resist.

"So do I," she said.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'm starving," Nicolai said, reaching for a piece of vegetable pie.

The remainder of the meal passed with pleasant conversation. When it ended, Nicolai, Ondrea, and Sascha excused themselves for the evening, leaving Vlas and Ivana alone.

"I think that went well for the most part," Ivana said.

"I'm sorry about Ustin."

"I believe he'll come around. He just needs time."

"He loathes me."

"He didn't even give himself a chance to know you." Ivana rose from her chair, walked to Vlas, and sat on his lap, slipping her arms around his neck. "Would you like another session in getting to know me?"

"You needn't ask." He brushed her thick hair behind her ear and kissed her neck with the utmost tenderness. She shivered at the contact of his lips against her flesh and clung to him tightly. Pressing kisses over her throat, he caressed her waist and cupped her breasts. His thumb teased her nipples through her gown and she moaned softly.

"Escort me to my chamber," she breathed.

They stood and he wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close and covering her mouth with his. Closing his eyes, he lost himself in the kiss. His tongue slipped past her lips and engaged hers in a sensual dance. Vlas's cock sprang to life, aching to be encompassed by her damp velvet sheath.

Her hand slipped between them and grasped him through his trousers. She squeezed and caressed, her motions making his heart pound out of control. When the sensations threatened to overcome him then and there, he reached down and restrained her hand.

Breathlessly, he spoke against her lips. "Your room. Now. Or else I'll take you right here on the table."

Giggling, she kissed him quickly. "If there was no risk of someone walking in on us, that might be fun."

She tugged away from him and took a candlestick from the table, then headed for the door. Vlas walked so close behind her that with each inhalation, he was filled with the heady scent of her perfume.

* * *

Nearly giddy with desire, Ivana resisted the urge to run to her chamber like a girl sneaking away with her first man. That particular scenario wasn't far from the truth, since Vlas was the first and only man she had ever bedded. Though she hadn't intended to remain celibate for the rest of her life, the few times she had nearly taken someone to her bed had been thwarted by memories of Vlas. She knew loving the image of a man to whom she had meant so little was a waste. If only he had told her the truth.

Perhaps it was just as much her fault. She had been young, rich, spoiled, and raised to marry into the emperor's family. Her feelings for Vlas had not only been

unexpected, but uncontrollable. Though his status as a Supreme Evoker overshadowed his family's low social class, he was far from conventional in appearance or manner. Her family would never approve of him, but the rebellious side of her didn't care. Most of her youth had been spent deliberately sending him mixed signals. One moment she treated him like a peasant, the next she flirted with him shamelessly.

She felt a pang of guilt when she considered how closely her feelings for Vlas resembled Ondrea's for Yuri. Though she didn't necessarily agree with her daughter's choice of husbands, she admired the girl's courage to fight for the right to marry the man she had chosen.

It was only after the war, when Ivana realized how close she had come to losing Vlas, that she decided one way or another she would possess him, even if just for a single night. That's all it would take for her to gain a part of him that would always belong to her -- a child of his.

Ivana chuckled. She had certainly gotten more than she'd bargained for there.

Vlas's arm slipped around her waist and he whispered in her ear, "You're laughing while I'm dying of passion."

"Well, let's see if I can cure you." She blew out the candle and paused outside her chamber. Slipping her arms around his neck, she teasingly allowed her lips to hover over his.

"Or kill me altogether."

Rather than kiss him, she playfully slapped his shoulder and opened the door.

Once inside, he wrapped his arms around her from behind and began nibbling her ear. Ivana giggled and squirmed in his embrace, loving the sensation of his teeth and tongue on her earlobe and the warmth of his body against hers.

"Vlas, it's too dark to see in here."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing."

"I like looking at you when we make love."

"When you put it that way --"

“Vlas!” She playfully struck his forearm just as flames, called forth by his power, leapt in the hearth.

Slipping from his embrace, she turned and faced him, gazing into his eyes, a smile on her lips. She began undressing as she walked backwards toward the bed, dropping articles of clothing on the way. Shedding his clothes, Vlas followed her. Both fell naked atop the sheets. Entwining his fingers with hers, Vlas pressed her hands to the bed and kissed her temple. His lips brushed her cheek and jaw, then finally covered her mouth.

Closing her eyes, Ivana surrendered to him completely. She loved his kisses. They were incredibly gentle yet deeper than a fathomless sea. He kissed her upper lip. Taking it between his, he ran the tip of his tongue across it so tenderly that the gesture might have been soothing had she not wanted him so much. His lean, powerful body pressed intimately against her while he continued his exploration of her lips.

In spite of his leisurely kisses, the hardness of his cock revealed his hunger for fulfillment. His tongue slipped between her lips and stroked hers.

Ivana’s fingers tightened on his and she moaned softly. Her foot ran up and down his calf, the sensation of his hair-roughened flesh arousing her even more.

Vlas broke their kiss and for a moment, they stared into one another’s eyes. Ivana’s belly tightened and warmth spread throughout her entire body from the intensity of his emerald gaze.

“I never imagined I could be this happy, Ivana,” he said in a hushed tone that seemed to caress her very soul.

“I’ve missed you so much, Vlas.”

The slightest smile touched his lips before he lowered his head to the base of her throat and licked it. He released her hands and straddled her on his knees. His hands stroked her ribs and hips as he took one of her nipples in his mouth and teased it with his tongue.

Gasping, Ivana's eyes slipped shut and she buried her hands in his hair. Silken tendrils slipped through her fingers as she caressed his scalp, holding his head closer. When he began sucking her nipple, she gasped, arching against him.

"Oh, Vlas! Yes," she panted, desire shooting through her like a flaming arrow.

Her clit and pussy ached for his touch, but she knew she would have to wait, since he didn't seem in the mood to rush.

With almost frustrating slowness, he left her nipple and kissed the fleshy part of each breast, leaving not a bit of skin untouched. His lips fastened on her other nipple, his tongue circling it, then teasing its tip.

He buried his face between her breasts, his hands cupping them and squeezing gently. Trailing soft kisses down her stomach, he edged lower. For several moments, he knelt beside her, his hand sweeping her body from her breasts to her soft mound.

Suddenly a smile flirted with his lips and he tugged her onto her side and stretched out near her.

Ivana's heart pounded with excitement at his unspoken suggestion. Without hesitation, she grasped his cock and guided its tip between her lips. His hips shifted closer to her. Cupping her buttocks with one hand, he began lapping her clit. Ivana whimpered with pleasure, her mouth filled with his cock. She closed her eyes, lost in the sensation of his tongue exploring her clit as carefully as it had explored her mouth. It ran up and down one side, then the tip teased its core with perfectly paced upward strokes that made her want to scream with desire.

All she could do was moan and continue licking and sucking his erection. The guttural sounds of pure ecstasy erupting from his throat told her that his excitement was also reaching a fevered pitch. His erection seemed so swell more with each sweep of her tongue. His entire body tensed. Each warm puff of his ragged breath stimulated her clit nearly as much as his skilled tongue.

Unable to endure another moment of the magnificent torture, her entire body shook in waves of orgasm. His cock popped free of her mouth as she writhed, completely lost in her release.

Before the last pulsation tore through her, Vlas pushed her onto her back and eased his stiff cock inside her rippling pussy. The sensation of him filling her with his thick yet velvety erection rekindled her passion so that almost as soon as the first orgasm waned another began.

"Vlas, oh, Vlas!" She clung to him, her arms locked around his neck and her heels driving into his calves.

Her vise-like grip seemed to excite him even more. Groaning, he thrust faster and harder, his panting breath mingling with hers.

"Ivana. Ah! By the gods. I've needed you so much, woman."

His words thrilled her. To be needed by Vlas was her deepest fantasy come true.

"I need you, too, Vlas. I need you so much," she gasped, meeting him thrust for thrust. Climax shot through her with almost unexpected swiftness. As she cried out, his mouth covered hers, claiming her sobs of passion. He broke the kiss suddenly, his entire body tense and his muscles hard against her. With a raw shout, he came.

To Ivana that outburst of total surrender was one of the most beautiful sounds she had ever heard, surpassed only by the first cries of her children. The children he had given her.

After several seconds, Vlas moved slightly aside so he wouldn't crush her. Their legs were still entwined and their faces close enough for a kiss. His lips brushed hers gently and he swept a lock of hair from her cheek.

Content, Ivana snuggled closer and drifted to sleep.

Chapter Eight

Vlas and Ivana sprang awake to pounding on their door. Outside, Ondrea and Nicolai were shouting.

"Can't we make love just once without being interrupted?" Ivana groaned, tugging on her robe, then screamed as the entire room trembled and lurched.

Vlas grasped her, steadying her before she struck the floor. He pulled on his trousers and flung open the door.

Nicolai, Ondrea, and a palace guard stood in the corridor, their faces pale.

"Natasa is in the great hall. She wants to see you immediately," the guard said to Vlas. "Six prisoners have escaped from Silence Peak. Ori Paz is under attack."

"It seems they want to finish the job they started sixteen years ago!" Nicolai snapped.

Without a word, Vlas jerked on the rest of his clothes and swept out of the chamber, the guard at his heels.

Ivana watched him go, her heart pounding.

"How did this happen?" she asked.

"The protestors tried to attack Silence Peak. Some of them got violent and there were attacks using invocations."

Ivana's brow furrowed in disbelief. "By Supreme Evokers?"

"No. The protestors. The misdirected power caused a quake in the same area that nearly destroyed the city during the war. With the Supreme Evokers' attention diverted to stopping the quake, the prisoners took the chance to escape."

Another horrible ripple rolled through the chamber, tossing the three of them onto the floor.

“Almost as soon as they broke free, the prisoners started summoning elements.” Ondrea grasped Ivana’s arm and dragged her toward the door. “We have to get out of here.”

“The guards started evacuating the city,” Nicolai said, “but that stopped since two of the prisoners have summoned tidal waves that are growing so quickly that soon they’ll cover the island. The guards and most of the Supreme Evokers are working to protect the city. We might survive, but anyone living outside of The Falls will most likely be killed by the waves.”

Ivana shuddered, suddenly remembering Ustin. Had he been among the protestors? “What happened to the protestors?” she shouted above the noise of screaming Oris and the sickening sounds of the Royal Haven falling apart. “Where is Ustin?”

“In the city square, trying to help with the damages. You know he’s a gifted evoker,” Ondrea said. “Once we get out of here, I’m going to help him. The guards need assistance from anyone who can summon an element.”

“Look out!” Nicolai screamed, grasping both women and hauling them backwards as an enormous marble beam dropped from the ceiling.

“I think this is worse than the war,” Ivana said, climbing over the beam.

“Yuri said it’s because the prisoners were able to start evoking without any hindrances,” Ondrea replied. “During the war, they were constantly fighting other Supreme Evokers, but now they’ve been able to get a fierce hold on the elements before anyone realized what they were doing.”

“Wonderful.” Nicolai’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

With only a few minor scrapes and bruises, the trio managed to reach the city square. Soldiers and hundreds of Oris congregated, combining their powers to fend off the deadly winds and freezing rain as well as the aftershocks of the earthquake.

“Fools!” Ivana snapped. “What can they hope to prove by destroying us all? I can’t tell who is right, Ustin for saying the Supreme Evokers should be done away with, or Vlas for saying we need their protection.”

"At this point, I'm siding with Vlas, sweetie," Nicolai called.

Those were the last words spoken before Nicolai and Ondrea joined the group of Oris lending their powers in an attempt to save the city. Having no gift of elemental control, Ivana made her way to the infirmary which, thankfully, had scarcely any damage from the earthquake.

She wasn't sure how much time passed, only that the fight raged on. The city itself finally seemed normal enough, but one only had to look skyward to see the black clouds and ferocious weather overhead, kept at bay by the Oris.

Suddenly Ivana saw Ondrea and Ustin stepping inside, each supporting an injured guard. She hurried to them.

"Most of the civilians and half of the guards are either injured or too spent for their power to do any good," Ondrea said.

"Ustin, how could you have been part of this?" Ivana demanded.

"I wasn't. I told you I don't believe in violence, so I certainly wouldn't be part of an attack, even on Supreme Evokers. I'm sure the others didn't intend for this to happen, either."

"Whether or not they intended it, look at what they've done! Have either of you seen Sascha, Vlas, or Nicolai?"

"Sascha is at the edge of The Falls. Last I saw, he was fine," Ustin said. "So is Father. I don't know about Vlas."

"Oh, gods! Yuri!" Ondrea rushed across the infirmary to where Yuri was carrying an injured guard toward a cot. Ivana followed her, hoping the trainee would have news about Vlas.

"Thank the gods you're safe, Ondrea," Yuri said, his face deathly pale.

Ivana knew he must have been with the Supreme Evokers, bearing the brunt of the invocations that were keeping the city safe.

"Yuri, have you seen Vlas?"

The youth shook his head. "Not since we met hours ago at The Falls. Most of the Supreme Evokers are within the city, but one was sent to protect The Falls itself and two others were assigned to try and save the rest of the island from the tidal waves."

"Tell me Vlas is in The Falls?" Ivana murmured. At least so close to the city, he would have a chance of surviving.

"He's gone to the southern coast. I'm on my way to help now, but they won't spare any other trainees."

"Ivana! We need you over here," someone shouted across the infirmary.

"The gods be with you," Ivana said to Yuri before she hurried back to work.

* * *

Vlas wasn't sure how long he had been standing on a cliff overlooking the raging sea on the southern coast of Ori Paz, his entire being focused on keeping the enormous waves at bay. Hundreds of feet high, they shadowed the entire island.

The Supreme Evokers summoning the wind and waves had such a tremendous head start that fighting them for control of the elements was nearly impossible. Still, Vlas refused to surrender to the spiritual battering. Frozen from head to toe, he managed to transcend the physical pain and give himself completely to the forces of nature. He asked them to obey his desires. Slowly, his pleas were being answered.

He could almost sense the other Supreme Evokers' potency waning. Unfortunately that included Natasa who was helping control the waves from the northern shoreline. Suddenly, her power disappeared, and once again he was alone against enemies with power as great as his. Anger rose inside him because his children were now fighting the same war he thought had ended long ago. Sorrow also filled him when he realized that he would most likely not survive this battle, even if he did manage to fend off this onslaught. Still, he refused to accept that he was about to lose Ivana again, and this time his children as well.

Rather than bury his emotions, he embraced them and surrendered his entire being to the elements. His power increased as his connection to his physical body faded. If he could just hold out a little longer, there might be a chance of saving Ori Paz.

Suddenly he felt a rush of new power. Other powerful Oris had joined him. Though he knew they weren't Supreme Evokers, there was something so familiar about them.

One of them had power that soared above the others. A perfect combination of humility and magical skill that, like Vlas, took control of both the wind and the water with ease.

Rejuvenated by this newfound assistance, Vlas focused the last of his energy in a concentrated blow. The storm ceased and the waves receded completely. With the release of the elements, he sensed the death of the six prisoners -- the Supreme Evokers who had once been part of his fellowship. For this, he couldn't help feeling a pang of sadness.

Vlas dropped onto the icy cliff, his eyes closed and his breathing raw. At that moment, he doubted he could move if his life depended on it.

"Sir, are you all right?" asked a familiar voice.

A hand fell on his shoulder. Vlas opened his eyes, surprised to find Ustin kneeling beside him. For a brief moment, the boy's mind touched his in an effort to ensure that he was not seriously injured, and even greater shock pelted Vlas. That great power, the one that had summoned multiple elements with the skill of a Supreme Evoker, belonged to Ustin.

"You?" Vlas asked, pushing himself to his knees.

Ustin offered him a supportive arm. "Rest a minute."

"I'm fine." Vlas straightened, his gaze fixed on the youth. "I can't believe that you, of all people, are against us."

Anger sparked Ustin's emerald eyes. "I wasn't part of the attack earlier tonight."

"But you were a big part of helping us stop this disaster."

"You'll never see me use this power again. I'm going back to the city." Ustin turned away, but Vlas grasped his arm.

"You're afraid of your power. Why?"

"Because I like it too much," Ustin said in a hoarse whisper. "The gods forbid I ever use it for evil, like the ones who did all this damage."

"You won't."

"How do you know? You never even met me before last night."

"Because I can sense it."

The two exchanged a long look before walking to where they had tethered their horses.

"Thank you," Vlas said as he mounted his stallion.

"I came for the sake of Ori Paz, not for you." Ustin closed his eyes for a moment and sighed deeply. "That was only a partial truth. I... didn't want you to die before..."

"Yes?"

"Getting to know you better."

Vlas smiled ever so slightly before he and Ustin turned their mounts toward home.

When they reached The Falls, Vlas was relieved to see Ondrea, Yuri, and Natasa already stopped in front of the entrance. When Ustin said that Ondrea had joined them in battling the tidal waves, an uncharacteristic fear had gripped him. Was he starting to worry like a father after all?

"That was quite an experience." Ondrea grinned at her brother and Vlas.

"I don't want to be around when your mother finds out what you did," Vlas said.

"Too late." Yuri pointed down the icy corridor where Ivana was hurrying toward them.

She embraced Ondrea and Ustin, then turned to Vlas and locked her arms around his neck so fiercely that for a moment he could hardly breathe, but he didn't care.

Holding her tightly, he closed his eyes and buried his face in her hair.

"I love you, Ivana. I love you so much," he murmured.

"I've waited all my life to hear those words." She drew back only to take his face in her hands and kiss him. "I love you, too, Vlas."

Unfortunately, their happy greeting was short lived. Much of the city was destroyed and there were injured to tend. Vlas was glad to learn that his brother had also survived the destruction and was helping tend the injured at the temple.

It was late in the evening when Vlas and Ivana stumbled back to her room. Much of the Royal Haven was in a shambles, but somehow a few of the chambers were still livable.

"Before we go to bed, I want to check on Nicolai. His arm was hurt earlier," Ivana said.

Stepping over rubble, they noticed that Nicolai's door was slightly ajar. Vlas pushed it open and he and Ivana walked in.

A shriek sounded from the bed.

"Oh, gods." Vlas wrinkled his nose.

Ivana's eyes widened and she clamped a hand over her open mouth.

Nicolai, lying naked on his half-collapsed bed, lifted his head from his lover's shoulder and snapped, "Don't you knock?"

"This is the lover you've been meeting in secret these past ten years?" Ivana asked.

"Yes, sweetie. You didn't want him, but it turns out he's perfect for me."

Nicolai grinned as he stroked Sigwald's shoulder. The emperor's cousin was just as disgracefully handsome as Vlas remembered from their youth. The thought of him and Nicolai together suddenly seemed quite funny -- so much that his usual half smile wouldn't suffice. He laughed.

"So are you finally going to marry her, Vlas, and make an honest man out of me?" Nicolai cast a teasing glance at the Supreme Evoker.

Vlas turned to Ivana and held both of her hands snugly in his while gazing into her eyes. "If she'll have me."

"Let me think." She smirked, then leapt into his arms. "Yes. Yes. Yes!"

Lifting her off the ground, Vlas embraced her tightly. For the first time he realized that his soul was complete. His heart and his emotions were in the perfect place, entwined forever with Ivana's.

The End

Kate Hill

Kate Hill's fiction and poetry have appeared in publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not writing, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and spending time with her family. Visit her online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>.