

The Shequanti: The Stone Table

Isabelle Spurrier

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Chapter One

It was a lovely old house.

When Kate first saw the long, low building tucked into the entrance of the forest, she knew she had to have it. It was perfect, despite the unpainted shutters and look of neglect. It was a project she could sink her teeth into, the restoration of the weathered house, the weed-choked yard, the broad, friendly porch that hugged the house with an air of cheerful disarray. She had wanted it, plain and simple.

Now it was hers. As she wandered through the backyard toward the trees, already wearing their autumnal finery, she felt a swift moment of pride. Kate smiled, clutching her cup of coffee tightly as she stepped over a gnarled oak root into the dim coolness of the woods.

She hadn't explored this section of her domain. The house sat on ten acres of land, bordering a national park. Here the trees grew taller and thicker than any other woods Kate had seen before; the ground beneath her feet was thick and springy with moss, almost like a carpet. Everything was preternaturally still; even the birds were silent in the crisp autumnal morning. Kate took a sip of her coffee, marveling at the seclusion. She turned back toward the house, surprised for a split second that the dense screen of trees hid it from her view, then continued into the woods.

It was only a few minutes later that she discovered the stone table.

It sat in a glade that was the shape of a perfect circle, red and yellow-leaved trees ringing it like silent sentinels around an army encampment. Kate halted in surprise. What in the world was this? Curiously, she approached it. The table stood upon a tall pedestal, a strange sight in the rustic splendor of the forest. The rough, stone top was level with her breasts, its lip carved with a strange series of interlocking circles and whorls. The omnipresent moss had found its way here as well, invading the intricate

design with a plush coating of green softness giving the table a patina of great age. Kate stroked her fingertips over the scrollwork. She was unfamiliar with the design.

What in the hell is this doing here? It looked like something you'd find at Stonehenge, not in the backwoods of North Carolina! Kate stared at it for a moment longer, then abruptly turned and went back to the house.

* * *

"You doin' all right up here, Miz George?"

Kate smiled at the questioner. He looked like every possible cliché of a man who'd lived in these mountains for decades, wiry and upright with a seamed old face and twinkling eyes.

"I'm doing fine, Mr. Washer," she replied. "I'm settling in."

"That's good," he approved, turning to watch as his two young assistants carried her sofa into the house. "Gotta wonder about a girl livin' out here all by herself."

Kate laughed, not only at being called a "girl" when she was over thirty but also because she'd lived all by herself in large cities and wasn't particularly worried about surviving mountain life. "I'll be fine," she assured him. "I like it out here," she added, looking fondly up at her house.

"This is a nice old place," he agreed as he unwrapped a cigar from its cellophane. "The Freisners had this place since before I was born. It was a shame their grandson got killed in Vietnam. He was a nice boy. His sister didn't associate much with the town after her parents died."

"Oh?"

"She was a little touched," he confided. He put the cigar in his mouth, but didn't light it. "She called herself an artist. Folks used to buy her paintings when they came down here for the summer. I didn't care for 'em all that much, but then art ain't exactly my thing."

Kate nodded, her attention wandering back to the moving truck. The boys were unloading her mother's china cabinet and she watched idly as they lifted it from the bottom of the ramp.

"What is it that you do?"

"I'm an antiques dealer," she replied, wondering why he only chewed on his cigar instead of smoking it. "I deal mostly with rare books, but I'm planning to open a shop in town this fall."

"There's a lot of them there antiques around here. Lot of people from up north come down here to buy 'em too. You should do fine. There's the one big shop in town, but their prices're bit too high for me."

"Well, we'll see what we can do about that," she promised.

The old man hesitated, and then leaned in closer to say confidentially, "Don't pay no mind to anything you hear up here at night."

"Excuse me?"

Mr. Washer chewed on the end of his cigar, his straight, yellowing teeth flashing through his clenched mouth. "There's lot of old stories about this here place, Miz George. Mostly old folks' superstition, not much to worry about save fer the occasional wildcat or bear. If I was you, I wouldn't wander around in the woods at night. There's lots of critters around here that don't take too kindly to folks."

"Like what?"

"Oh, snakes and such. They won't bother you if you don't bother them."

Kate's face paled as she recollected her morning stroll. *Snakes!* She shuddered in distaste.

Mr. Washer's eyes narrowed shrewdly, and then twinkled at her in a knowing fashion. As she watched the "boys" move her antique Chippendale table through the front door, Kate wondered if that wasn't what the sly old man intended all the while.

* * *

It was nearly midnight. The autumnal air was cool, whistling as it raced down from the mountaintops. Kate sat on her front porch with a glass of wine and listened to the night. Despite Mr. Washer's warning, she found herself drawn to the sounds of the forest, the sighing call of owls as they hunted for prey, the little rustles that alerted her to the presence of rabbits and other small game. Once she looked up to see a family of

deer, two does and three fawns, regarding her from the edge of the forest with liquid, glowing eyes.

Her house was nowhere close to being in order. Half-packed boxes still littered the large front hall. After the old man and his “boys” had left, she’d forced herself to set her kitchen in order, even down to scrubbing the old linoleum floor after she’d settled her dishes and foodstuffs. Then, doggedly, she’d cleaned the upstairs bathroom and worked on her bedroom. Now it was sweet-smelling and pristine, white lace curtains at the windows and her grandmother’s old white crocheted bedspread smoothed neatly over the mattress and tucked into the corners of the antique brass bed.

The rest could wait.

For now, she was at peace, much like the forest or the mountains that reared silently around her. Peace was a priceless commodity to Kate; it wasn’t anything she’d experienced in some time.

Her lip curled as she took another sip of wine. Her divorce from Jon had been final two weeks ago, as she negotiated the last-minute details of buying this house. He was, more than likely, off on a honeymoon cruise with his latest bimbo. After all, he’d married her.

“You just don’t make me happy any more, Kathryn,” Jon said, his voice as reasonable as it always was.

“No, I just won’t tolerate you cheating on me!” she’d retorted, dashing the angry tears from her cheeks.

Jon smiled. It was the smile that infuriated her; it was so smug and condescending. He knew, as did she, that despite anything she might do or say, no one would ever believe that Jonathon Xavier George was so unrefined as to fuck around on his beloved wife.

Kate forced the memory back, swallowing it with the rest of her wine and the bile that churned in her throat. No, no one *had* believed her. Jon managed to convince all of their friends and even her own family that ‘Kate is obviously suffering some sort of breakdown; she’s imagining these things.’

Hard to imagine things when you walked in on your husband fucking someone else in your bed.

That bed was gone, tossed into the nearest landfill without ceremony, along with all of Jon's papers, books, clothes, jewelry, and personal items. Hopefully, some deserving homeless person was enjoying the proceeds of the three Rolex watches.

The resulting emotional trauma had sent her fleeing from her comfortable loft in Soho to this backwoods hamlet. She'd visited here before, on one of the many antique-hunting trips that drove her from New York, and loved everything about the town. She'd even tried to talk Jon into leaving the frenzy of the city for a more peaceful location. He'd laughed and gone off to another "business meeting."

Jesus Christ, I'm stupid.

With that cheerful thought in mind, she went to get another glass of wine. After all, she was here, stuck in the middle of nowhere with no one to answer to. She might as well get drunk. It was as she was pouring her glass at the kitchen counter next to the sink that she saw the light.

Shining like a beacon through the mottled darkness of the wood, a single pinpoint of yellow wavered through the trees. She swore, setting the bottle of Pinot Grigio down unnecessarily hard, and glared at the light. Wasn't that just typical? She came here for some well-deserved solitude and some asshole was trespassing on her land, in *her* woods!

Without stopping to think, she rammed her bare feet into sneakers. Tying her robe more securely around her waist, Kate grabbed a flashlight and headed out the door.

It wasn't until she was some distance from the house that Kate remembered about the snakes. She paused, her flesh crawling, as she swept the ground around her for any tell-tale signs of reptilian movement.

Not that I have a rat's ass of a clue what those signs are, but surely I'd be able to spot a snake!

Nothing coiled or crept in the beam of her light, so Kate peered ahead into the murky cluster of trees that surrounded her. This morning, the woods had felt welcoming. Now, they were more than a little sinister.

The light bobbed through the trees a short distance ahead of her. Instantly, Kate moved toward it, her temper rising again. Since the long-ago days of high school, Kate George in a temper had managed to intimidate even the haughtiest of the New York elite. She stomped through the underbrush, heedless of the loud crunching her sneakers made against the season's first leaf fall.

The light disappeared just as she charged through the trees into the clearing where the stone table reared into the night. Kate skidded to a stop just before she collided with it, cursing as she stubbed her toe on a protruding root.

"Where in the *hell* did they go?"

There was no sign of the light, no sign that anyone else had been in this clearing since her trip earlier that day. She ran the beam of her flashlight over the moss-covered table, watching the light dance and play along the carved relief.

Then she saw it. The moss on top of the table was scarred, ripped into balls of greenish dirt as if someone had slid from the top. Kate frowned; if someone had just been here, surely she would have heard them running from the clearing.

And just why would anyone get on *top* of the darn thing?

She moved to stand beside it, resting her hand against the edge as she peered at the table closer. The table felt like it was vibrating under her skin, humming almost as she touched it. She couldn't quite see what was in the middle of the table even on her tiptoes. Swearing under her breath, she laid the flashlight down on the top and searched for a foothold to pull herself up. Grabbing the edge with both palms flat on the table top, she stuck one canvas-shod toe into a corner of the carved base and hauled her body onto the table top with a grunt.

The stone thrummed under her knees and palms, pulsing with some sort of strange energy. Kate gasped, grabbing the edge of the table as it inexplicably shook with sudden violence. The movement threw her off-balance, sending her face-down to

the stone table. Her temple struck the stone hard and knocked her into confused unconsciousness.

Chapter Two

"What in the blazes is this?"

The angry voice shattered Kate's darkness, bringing her to her senses with swift, savage pain. She opened her eyes, staring blurrily at the shifting greenery of the trees around her, then moaned and closed her eyes again.

"It's a lady," a second voice replied.

"I know that, you dolt! What in the blazes is she doing on that cursed table?" The first speaker still sounded angry, his low voice buzzing insistently against Kate's aching head. A moment later, someone touched her face.

"In the name of the gods," the second, younger voice exclaimed. "She's bleeding!"

"She is? Where?"

Another hand lifted her cheek gently from the table, turning her head to one side. The first man made a sound of disgust. "Looks like someone rapped her in the head. That's a nasty bruise."

"Should I get someone?"

"No, Moratin. We'll take her back to the house and let Dunna take a look at her. I think she'll be all right but it's best to get head wounds checked by a healer."

"It's strange to find a human here," Moratin noted, his young voice sounding concerned. "What do you think happened to her, Briason?"

"I'm not sure," Briason replied. A pair of strong arms lifted Kate's motionless form from the table with suspicious ease. "Whatever it is, it can't be good."

Kate remained perfectly still in his arms. At one point, she'd almost opened her eyes to see who her rescuers were but decided against it when the boy used the term "human." For some reason, the word had chilled her very blood, that and the shock of

discovering that someone actually lived close to her house. The Realtor had assured her that there wasn't a neighbor for miles. As the man holding her began to move fluidly through the trees, she concentrated on forcing the piercing pain in her skull away. When he stepped over some obstacle in his path, the sudden jar sent her back into oblivion.

* * *

When she next opened her eyes, it was to find herself in a strange place. The room was small, plainly furnished with white walls and no curtains at the tiny window. Kate was lying on a wide bed, one that was very, very long. She moved her head slightly, winced at the spear of pain that lanced her skull, and nearly jumped out of her skin when an amused voice said, "Hurts like the devil, doesn't it?"

She turned to see a man leaning casually against the far wall. Her mouth fell open in shock. He was *beautiful*; there was no other word for it. His fair hair was offset by eyes that shone like black jewels, the stern lines of his face softened only slightly by the pair of sensuous red lips. He was tall, too, abnormally tall, but with a body that bespoke strength and masculinity despite its slimness. Even under the belted shirt and tight pants he wore, Kate noticed the bulge of well-defined muscles and swallowed hard.

"Yes, it does," she replied cautiously, keeping her head perfectly still.

The man took two long strides across the room and poured some liquid into a metal cup. She took it automatically, her antiques dealer's eyes instinctively assessing its worth.

The cup was made of gold.

Without drinking, she looked up at the stranger with narrowed eyes. "Where am I?"

He contemplated her for a long moment. "You are in an outpost in the forest of Jonctif."

"The what in the where?"

"Jonctif," he repeated patiently. "Where did you think you were?"

"North Carolina," she retorted.

He looked puzzled. "I have never heard of such a place."

Kate laughed, ignoring the flash of pain in her bruised skull. "Of *course* you haven't! After all, anyone could live in the States and not hear of North Carolina."

"The States?"

She glared at him.

The man's eyes narrowed slightly. "I found you," he began, stressing the word *found*, "unconscious on the stone table. The forest in general and that table in particular are not safe for humans to be in, around, or upon, particularly a human child."

"Child?" She echoed the word indignantly. "Why would you think I am a child?"

He shrugged. "You are very small."

"I'm thirty-two years old!"

He smiled. "As I said: a child."

Kate set the cup down upon the bedside table with unnecessary force.

"Where I come from, thirty-two is teetering on the edge of middle age. I don't know what game you're playing at, mister, but you'd better take me back to the stone table. I can find my own way home from there."

"Briason."

"Pardon me?"

"My name is Briason, not Mister."

She stared at him incredulously, unable to determine if he was joking. Briason seemed quite serious, however, his beautiful features remaining bland and expressionless.

"And your name is?" The prodding question was polite, but nonetheless insistent.

"Kate George!" she snapped.

"An unusual name," he murmured.

Kate snorted and sat up. Much to her consternation, her feet dangled several inches above the floor. She glanced at her interrogator, annoyed at the swift flash of

humor that crossed his face. Getting angrier by the minute, she slid off the mattress and landed on the floor. Her temper rose even higher when she realized that she was at least a foot and a half shorter than he was. Briason sobered abruptly as her eyebrows rushed together.

"Look, I don't really want to continue this conversation," she said with an attempt at dignity. "I just want to get back to my house."

Briason shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about, but this is the only house near the stone table. The closest human habitation is on the other side of the forest."

"Human habitation? What in the hell is going on around here?" She put her hands on her hips. His eyes darted down from her face. Kate looked down and realized that she was clad only in her thin nightgown. The tips of her breasts were poking through the filmy material aggressively. Fighting the urge to cross her arms over her chest, she demanded, "And just where in the hell is my robe?"

Wordlessly, he handed it to her from a hook that she'd never have been able to reach on her own. Kate snatched the thick terrycloth from him and wrapped the robe around her, tying the belt with an irritated jerk. "My shoes?" she added peremptorily.

He hesitated. "You really *don't* know where you are, do you?"

"None of your business. Thanks for looking out for me, but I'll look after myself now. Just point me in the right direction and I'll get out of your hair."

Briason frowned. "I cannot permit you to go off into the forest on your own. It would be too dangerous."

"Permit me?" Kate laughed. "And just how in the hell do you expect to keep me from going off on my own?"

* * *

"I ask the stupidest questions," she muttered half an hour later. She was following Briason through the tangled underbrush. Every once in a while, he sighed. Kate realized that this stranger was simply humoring her.

"You don't have to go with me," she said loftily. "I'm sure I'll find the road soon."

"There are no roads in this part of the forest," he replied. "It's too close to the border."

"The border of what? Tennessee?" Kate eyed him irritably. The man was actually holding a bow and arrow, some antiquated-looking weapon longer than she was tall. Wondering if she'd wandered into some bizarre tourist play, the *Lord of the Rings* of North Carolina, she trudged after her guide muttering to herself.

He halted abruptly, putting one hand back to stop her. Briason's sudden stillness overrode her temper and she stopped immediately. Ahead, she could hear a steady crashing in the woods, as if the branches and leaves of the spring forest were being crunched under many feet.

Spring forest? The forest of yesterday had been autumnal, festive-colored leaves bedecking the trees and drifting through the crisp mountain air to settle upon the ground. For the first time, Kate felt a small thrill of dismay.

Briason pulled her abruptly into the shelter of a broad tree trunk, wrapping his huge cloak around her. The hem cascaded to the forest floor, fabric pooling around her feet. "Stay here and do not move," he breathed, pushing her into deeper concealment. "I will see what they want."

Before she could ask what was going on, he slipped away, his face furrowed with concern. Kate considered going after him for a brief second, but when an entire troop of tall, black-cloaked men entered the clearing with swords drawn she stilled.

Swords? Cloaks?

Kate suddenly realized that, wherever she was, she wasn't in North Carolina any more.

"What are you doing here?" A single man strode forward to meet Briason, who leaned upon his bow apparently waiting for them.

"I am patrolling, Abaus," Briason answered mildly. "What are *you* doing here? This section is under the protection of my outpost."

Abaus eyed him with an expression of disdain. "I am looking for someone," he replied.

"I don't suppose this has anything to do with the disturbance I heard at the stone table last night, does it?"

Kate stared at the man confronting Briason. He, too, was abnormally tall, with long, dark hair and cold eyes the color of ice. Abaus was handsome, as were all the men gathered in the clearing looking at Briason warily, but his good looks were almost ethereal.

"It might," Abaus said, his lip curling.

"Did you summon a human for your little games?" Briason's voice sounded faintly disgusted.

"That is none of your concern," the other man said coldly. "Have you discovered anyone wandering through the forest?"

"No. I did discover some signs that someone unfamiliar with the ways of the forest was traveling south of here, close to the escarpment. I was tracking them, actually."

"There's no need to do that. We'll take care of it."

Briason straightened. "Track away, Abaus, but take care. I do not want your men wandering freely through my sector. If you have summoned a human, and I find them, I'll be forced to report you to the council."

Abaus sneered. "Your father's faction is entirely too concerned with the well-being of those humans, Briason! The day is coming when that concern will be his downfall."

"Don't be so certain," the other man said pleasantly. "I'll give you two hours before I send my own men out to secure this section of the forest. If I were you, I'd be gone. I'd hate to have to report an accident wherein one of our last mages got killed while trespassing."

Abaus turned his back on him. Briason's fingers twitched on his bow, as if there was nothing better he'd like to do than knock the man over, but he remained motionless

as he watched Abaus lead his men back the way they'd come. Kate remained motionless in the recess of the trunk until he returned to her side.

Briason seized her hand. Without a word, he pulled her through the brush, back toward his house. When she glanced up at him, he murmured, "Wait until it's safe."

Kate nodded. For the first time, she had no desire to argue.

* * *

"What is going on around here?" she demanded a short time later.

Briason sighed and handed her a glass of wine. "I thought that Abaus was up to his old tricks when I found you on the stone table," he admitted. "That's why I was trying to get you back there, hoping to send you back to wherever you came from initially."

"I don't understand," Kate said, pulling her legs to her chest under the concealing fabric of his cloak.

"You are in the forest of Jonctif, as I told you before. This forest is the border between the lands of the Shequanti and the Numeni. For a long time, our two peoples have been at war. We are, at the moment, in a state of uneasy peace, but no one expects that to last for long. I am a captain of the Shequanti scouts, assigned here not only to watch the border but also to ward the stone table."

"What is so important about that table?"

"It is a magical implement, used by sorcerers like Abaus to summon the unwary to our world." Briason took a deep swallow of his wine. "There is a long-standing debate in our council as to the morality of such practices. It is thought that the stone table is a link to other worlds. Many of our mages believe that those whom the table brings have inherent powers that can be leashed to their own, increasing their abilities in the realm of magic. Last night, apparently, Abaus performed such a ceremony. He lured you to the table and brought you here, hoping to channel your power through his."

"Power?" Kate laughed. "I don't have any power! I'm an antiques dealer."

Briason ignored the unfamiliar term. "Usually, any humans the mages bring forth have no idea of what their capabilities are in this world. That is why such victims are sought: because they do not know what they can do, it becomes an easy matter for the mages to leech that power from them."

Kate shivered. Briason's words chilled her to her very core. She remembered Abaus' apparent contempt for "humans" and realized that this man had saved her from what could have been an unpleasant fate. "You keep saying 'humans'," she noted. "Why is that? Aren't you a human?"

"No. The relationship between humans and the Shequanti is a close one, but we are not of the same race." His black eyes suddenly flashed with some unknown emotion.

Kate swallowed hard. "Then what are you?"

His voice was bland as he replied, "In your world, I believe, your people call us Elves."

Kate had a sudden vision of little people who lived in trees and made cookies. She stared at Briason in disbelief. "You can't be serious!"

"I understand that in your world, we are considered myth. In my world, however, things are a bit different. You see, humans are known also as Numeni and they are our traditional enemies. We have been fighting this war for untold centuries. Most of my people hate and fear humans for what they have brought upon us. That is why mages such as Abaus have no compunction about bringing humans from another world to this one. They think it permissible to use their victims for the power they can take from them. Some of our people, such as my father, think otherwise. He leads a small faction of the Shequanti who believe that using the innocent, or the ignorant, as a basis for power is inherently wrong. I agree with him."

Silence descended upon the little room. Kate glanced at Briason apprehensively. It never occurred to her to not believe him; instinctively she knew that he was telling her the truth. "So what will you do now?"

Briason regarded her thoughtfully. "I cannot take you back to the stone table. Abaus and his men will be searching the forest for you, and any attempt on my part to send you back will not only alert them to your presence but keep the link between the worlds open long enough for them to pursue you. Our only choice is to take you to my father. He is powerful enough to send you back without the stone table."

Briason stared out the window, his black eyes searching the edge of the forest for movement. "It will have to be in a few days, however. I cannot risk trying to move you with Abaus and his men so close. You'll have to remain here, hidden, until it is safe to go."

"Is it safe?"

"As safe as it can be," he said grimly. "My men are loyal to me, and to my father. They will protect this outpost as if their lives depended upon it, which, in fact, they do. As soon as it is safe enough, I will take you to Buonarre, the capital."

Kate got to her feet. "Thank you," she said simply, holding out her hand from the billowing cloak. "You have been very kind. I understand, now, what is happening. Forgive me for my rudeness earlier."

Much to her surprise, Briason took her hand and lifted it to his lips. The kiss scorched a trail all the way down her arm. Her eyes flew up to meet his. There was something new flickering behind the black eyes, some fiery sparkle that caused her lips to part involuntarily.

"It is my privilege," Briason said in a low voice. "I will do all that I can to see you safe, milady."

Chapter Three

That “milady” resonated through Kate’s mind as she tossed and turned on the too-large bed. Something about the tall, serious Briason pulled at her, made her restless. She wasn’t certain exactly what it was, but for some reason he thrilled her. Even now, hours later, she could feel the searing brand of his lips upon her skin, a preternatural heat that still warmed her.

The house was silent. Over the course of the afternoon, she’d been allowed to explore it thoroughly. There was a large central hall, where the men of Briason’s squadron gathered, ate, and planned. Behind that was a large bunkroom for the men and an even larger kitchen populated by young boys who cleaned and cooked and fetched as the first duties of their service to the Shequanti army. As commander of the troops, Briason merited his own room, which he’d gallantly given up to Kate during her stay. There were about fifty Shequanti manning this outpost, which she’d discovered to be one of the furthest from the capital and the closest to the edge of the forest.

The Shequanti were courteous and quiet. Although none of them had spoken to her as she’d walked through the house with their stern commander at her side, she’d intercepted several curious, even compassionate looks. It was apparent that, whatever the political situation was in the Shequanti nation, these men were solidly behind the faction of Briason’s father Kaberon.

Now she lay awake in Briason’s long bed, sleepless and anxious as her mind attempted to assimilate the strange happenings of the past twenty-four hours. Finally, she gave it up as a bad job. She slid to the floor, her gown slithering to her ankles, and walked to the single window.

The forest was quiet. Not even a stray breeze rustled the leaves as she peered out into the moonlit night. As she stood there, however, something stirred within her. A

yearning, a *need*, to leave the shelter of this outpost and wander back into the woods suddenly raced through her body. It was calling her.

Where are you, beloved? I am waiting for you.

The night beckoned. Kate imagined the feel of the dewy leaves upon her bare feet, the cool air upon her bare skin. She craved the feel of the night caressing her arms and stirring her hair. The feeling was suddenly so overwhelming that she dug her nails into the rough wooden sill, pressing her body against the wall longingly.

I cannot find you. Come to me.

She had to go out there. There wasn't another choice.

Bemused, she moved away from the window, her bare feet making no noise on the smooth floor as she crossed to the door. The door latch was a little higher than she was used to; she fumbled with it for a moment.

The door flew open. Briason stood there, his hair falling loosely around his face. She ignored him completely and tried to squeeze past him into the corridor.

"What are you doing?" he demanded in a low voice. Without another word, he put his hands on her shoulders and forced her back a few steps. He kicked the door shut behind him and stood for a moment, peering down into her face.

"Damn him," he muttered. He picked her up and placed her back on the bed. Kate strained against his hands, the strange compulsion singing in her veins.

I am waiting for you; come into the night so I can find you!

Kate looked past Briason mutely, staring hopefully at the door. Briason pulled her roughly to his chest, wrapping his arms around her. Almost instantly, the compulsion waned, drowned out in her consciousness by another, new sensation.

She smelled the crisp freshness of spring leaves, felt the sun warm upon her skin and heard the birds chattering overhead. The arms around her tightened, and the new song soared around her, drowning out the seductive pull of the benighted forest. Gradually, she became conscious of a pounding rhythm beneath her cheek.

Kate opened her eyes. Briason's long, fair hair fell like a silken curtain around her. He'd tucked her head beneath his chin, wrapping himself around her body

protectively. His heart beat rapidly against his chest. She felt safe, languorously content to be held in this stranger's arms and sheltered from the lure of the night. Without thinking, she turned her face up to his, intending to thank him. Her lips brushed against his throat.

Instantly, he stiffened, his arms turning to steel around her. Kate froze.

"Don't," he growled.

"Don't what?"

Briason took a deep breath. She was surprised when his arms trembled around her, but didn't dare to ask why. All of a sudden, she was conscious of the feel of his hard body against hers, of her breasts crushed against him through the silken fabric of her gown, and her mouth went dry.

She *wanted* him. It was as simple as that. A thrill of lust, pure and vibrant, coursed through her veins. Instantly, her body relaxed against his. Air hissed through Briason's teeth as he felt her sudden compliance.

"It would be wrong of me to take advantage of you," he grated. "You can have no idea what you are responding to, Kate. Give me a moment to regain control of myself and I will leave you."

"No." The refusal left her lips before she had time to consider it, surprising her as much as it did him. Kate abandoned any thought of propriety, any fear of her strange situation, and slid one small hand up his chest. He shuddered at her touch, his arms tightening even more in an attempt to stop her. Her hand was so small, however, that the defensive move had no effect upon her.

Briason wrenched himself away. He turned his face from hers and clenched his hands in his lap, breathing hard. Instantly, she was contrite. Without thinking about it, she laid a hand on his arm, intending to apologize to him.

Briason turned back to her. His black eyes were blazing in his face, focusing on hers with an intensity that almost frightened her. Reluctantly, he stretched out his hand and touched her cheek. "You are lovely, far more beautiful than any woman I've ever seen. You are a temptation to me and I am not sure that I am strong enough to resist it."

His hand trailed down her neck, curved along her bare shoulder and moved down her arm. Kate held her breath, spellbound both by his undeniable beauty and the fire that burned behind his eyes. Abruptly, his hand curled into a fist. Before she could react, Briason turned and slammed it into the wall.

"Don't do that!" she cried out in protest.

"You do not wish to travel this path," he growled. "It is too dangerous."

She ignored him and leapt to her feet. Snatching a towel from the table, she dipped it into the ewer of water. Taking his hand in hers, she began to dab at the bleeding scrapes. "You could have broken your hand," she scolded him, washing the oozing blood gently from his knuckles. "That was really stupid of you, Briason."

"Was it?" he asked mildly.

Alerted by the change in his tone, she glanced up. His eyes were still blazing, searing into her skin. Without warning, his free arm snaked out and pulled her against him once more. He examined her face minutely, those eyes flickering over every inch of her features.

"This is a dangerous path," he repeated, more to himself than to her. "I should not touch you, milady. It is wrong."

"Why?" she demanded.

His hot breath brushed against her skin. Wordlessly, he took the cloth from her limp fingers and dropped it to the floor. He caressed the bare skin of her arm lightly. A warming thrill ran through her; his touch was so gentle, so reverent, that it was more seductive than anything she'd felt before.

"Gods help me," he murmured. He threaded his fingers into her unbound hair. "I know I should not touch you; I know these are the aftereffects of magic. But you are so beautiful, so innocent of what you are doing. I don't think I can resist this."

He leaned forward and brushed a gentle kiss against her lips. It was the merest touch, nothing more, but it ignited something within her that she was helpless to prevent. Kate made a tiny sound of longing, all thought leaving her head as she wound her arms around his neck and pressed against his body. He made a sound low in his

throat, whether of warning or of pleasure she couldn't tell, then his mouth fell upon hers, devouring it. He forced his tongue between her lips, and her mouth parted beneath his as she welcomed the swift passion that sprang up between them. His hand kept her head steady beneath his lips as he plundered her, his other palm pressing with sudden fervency into the flesh of her back. His lips left hers abruptly, moving with insistent demand to the column of her throat.

Kate gasped. There was something different about this strange man, something that drove her to discard the teachings of a lifetime. The passion he invoked within her surpassed anything she'd ever known before, the preternatural heat of his flesh exciting her beyond conscious thought. Her fingers moved into his hair, pressing him against her neck with fevered encouragement.

Effortlessly, he pulled her onto his lap. His free hand now moved along her leg, pulling the flimsy fabric out of his way with impatient shoves. As his hand fell upon the skin of her thigh, she moaned. Briason pulled away from her throat. His black eyes were now slightly glazed over, his lips set hard as he raked that scorching gaze along her body. As if in a daze, he pulled the straps of her gown down her arms, baring her breasts to his eyes.

"You are so small," he muttered, "so delicate. I am afraid I might hurt you."

"You won't," she breathed. His hand captured her breast, a callused thumb agitating her swollen nipple. The roughness of his skin rasping against hers was almost too arousing; she bit her lip and stared up at him mutely.

"If I take you now, we set events into motion we will not be able to control," he warned her hoarsely. "It is a dangerous folly, Kate." Briason frowned suddenly. "Your name doesn't suit you; it is too abrupt for a shining, lovely woman."

"It's a nickname. My full name is Kathryn," she said, turning more fully into his hand.

"Kathryn," he growled. "That suits you better."

She traced the line of his face with curious fingers. His eyes flamed with that odd intensity once more. He kissed her again, fervently, as his hands curled around both of

her breasts. A second later, she was on her back on the huge bed. Briason sat next to her, staring down into her face. Her breasts cooled abruptly in the absence of his touch.

"It is too late," he said softly. "The moment of decision is gone."

With one quick jerk, he ripped the gown from her. His eyebrows lifted at the sight of her panties, the twin little scraps of fabric that hid her sex from him. Gently, he worked them from her, tossing them across the room impatiently when he was done. She lay there, exposed completely to his greedy eyes, her body throbbing with passion.

"I am no better than he," Briason said, apparently to himself. He pulled his tunic off, discarding it swiftly. Kate caught her breath at the sight of his body. It was beautiful, sculpted with painstaking clarity against the faint light of the moon streaming into the window.

Then she gasped. His entire torso was lined with old scars, stripes of darker scar tissue crossing his pale skin with painful regularity. "What happened?" she asked timidly. Her hand moved along the line of one of the scars, tracing it lightly with her fingertips.

He removed her hand from his chest. "I want to feel your skin against mine," he whispered. "I want to lose myself in you."

It was like he was asking her permission. She pulled him down to her, reveling in the warmth of his body against her skin. With a sound that might have been either a growl or a sigh, he took her into his arms. Just before his lips met hers again, he murmured, "It is too late, indeed."

At that moment, Kate felt his self-control snap. His mouth savaged her body, moving swiftly from her lips to the curve of her shoulder, and then fell upon her breast hungrily. As he took her nipple into his mouth, she arched involuntarily against him. This sign of arousal on her part inflamed him further. His big hands slid under her ass, lifting her against the muscled bulk of his thigh now thrust aggressively between her legs.

Kate wormed her hand to the front of his trousers. Her fingers worked frantically to untie them, tugging to pull them from his lean hips. Briason lifted himself enough to

help her, then kicked the garment away and settled back against her. His cock rode high between them, an iron-hard brand that pressed pleasantly into her leg while he sucked first one breast, then the other, with increasing fervor. Her hands roved over his back, noting the raised scars in the back of her mind as she dragged her nails against his skin. He sucked in his breath violently and lifted his head from her breasts. When he slid from her body and nestled against her side, she made a sound of protest that was quickly drowned out by his kiss.

His hand slid over her abdomen and into the thatch of pubic hair that guarded her pussy. She moaned as his finger flicked against her clitoris. He growled once more, deepening his kiss as he began to manipulate the swollen bud of flesh. Kate lifted her hips against his hand as his fingers sped up, teasing her arousal into greater intensity.

She clenched her legs together involuntarily, driven almost to the point of orgasm already. He laughed quietly, thrusting one leg between hers and forcing them apart. Her hands fluttered down in an attempt to pull his away, but he caught them with his free hand and pinned them above her head. All the while, his assault upon her clit continued, never speeding up or slowing down, just moving in a steady, mind-numbing escalation of sexual pleasure.

"Tell me what you want," he murmured against her lips, his tongue flicking out to moisten them.

"You!" she gasped.

"Not yet," he replied and slid one, long finger into her.

His mouth took possession of hers, swallowing her scream as his finger began to move slowly within her. His thumb found its way back to her clit, continuing to maneuver it in tiny, swift circles. She arched against him restlessly, almost sobbing with desire as he inserted a second finger to join the first.

She had never felt like this before. Although she'd enjoyed sex with unabashed abandon, no one had ever brought her to this state of crazed longing only with their hands. Briason's mouth moved again, traveling back down her throat to her chest. This time, however, he bypassed her aching breasts and moved to the flat planes of her

abdomen. His tongue dipped briefly into her navel, tracing a moist circle around it. Her thighs trembled with pleasure as his hand left her pussy. Swiftly, he moved between her legs, settling his upper body between them and spreading her wide open to his gaze. When he lowered his mouth to the quivering flesh of her thighs, she moaned.

"Nothing inflames a Shequanti male like the scent or taste of a human woman," he grated, his breath hot upon her skin. His mouth hovered an inch above her wet pussy, as if he were trying to deny himself a treat.

"Oh, God!" she replied, tossing her head from side to side. "Please?"

The single word broke through his last defense. His mouth fell upon her, his tongue instantly worming its way to her clit. She bucked wildly as his tongue vibrated against her, her clitoris stimulated almost beyond bearing. His lips fastened upon it, drawing it into his mouth as he replaced his fingers within her. He drove his hand into her as he sucked upon her clitoris, lapping greedily at her sexual juices as she rose to meet the thrust of his hand. Kate felt the orgasm building within her and actually whimpered. The intensity was too much to bear. Tears fell from her eyes as Briason remorselessly teased and stimulated her while she writhed helplessly against him.

She came with a gasp that was almost a shriek. As the cum exploded from deep within her, Briason fastened his mouth upon her completely, drinking her essence in. As the shuddering reaction began to ebb, he straightened until he towered above her. Her eyes met his pleadingly. Without another word, he nudged his cock between the swollen lips of her vagina.

Kate groaned. He was so big! Briason gritted his teeth and pushed gently into her. She was so wet that the walls of her pussy adjusted quickly to his size. He closed his eyes, his arms trembling on either side of her shoulders, and buried himself inside her. The friction was driving her wild and she tentatively moved against him. He shuddered in reaction as her pussy clenched his rigid penis, and then he began to move within her.

She clutched mindlessly at his arms; his shoulders were too far away for her to reach. Her touch seemed to inflame him even more, for he suddenly drove into her with

new forcefulness. His hands curled around her shoulders as she moved with him, encouraging him to greater speed. Briason responded with such fervor that she fell back, helpless against the power of his body, and her eyelids closed over her eyes. His hands moved to either side of her face, cupping it with fingers that still smelled of her arousal.

“Look at me!” he demanded.

She opened her eyes.

“I want you to watch me when I come inside of you,” he instructed. “Whatever you do, keep focused on my face, Kathryn.”

She nodded. He slammed his hips into hers, his balls creating a second tempo against her sensitive flesh. Again, the wave of pleasure rose within her. She curved her hands around his wrists, amazed that her grasp wouldn’t reach all the way around, and Briason groaned. His cock seemed to grow even larger inside her as he mercilessly plundered her compliant body.

The orgasm took them both. His seed exploded into her with an eruption of sensual rapture that brought her back to the same edge with him. His cock continued to move, pumping within her throbbing pussy as she sobbed and arched against him. Kate stared up at Briason’s face, watching the play of emotion. His eyes were closed as the waves of sexual release tightened his skin. Finally, they were both still.

Briason opened his eyes. They were blazing once more, but not with the struggle of restraint he’d displayed earlier, nor with the drive of passion that had consumed them both. Now they flared with something different, something almost frightening. For a moment, Kate thought it was triumph.

Then she realized it was fear.

Chapter Four

The room was silent. Briason lay upon his back, staring at the ceiling. He'd tucked Kate into the curve of his arm, cradling her protectively against his chest with her head on his shoulder. She was completely relaxed, satiated with pleasure as she curled against him, too content to question the circumstances that had brought her to the bed of a man she'd only just met.

"Are you hurt?" he asked finally, his voice rumbling under her ear.

"No," she replied. "I feel wonderful."

Briason did not respond. The silence continued for a few minutes, but it was heavier, almost ominous. Kate waited for him to say something, but finally had to ask, "What is wrong?"

He sighed. "I should not have allowed this to happen."

"Allowed?" she repeated, not quite certain if that was insulting or not.

"You were vulnerable," he explained. "Abaus was searching for you in the forest and cast a spell of allurements to call you to him. I took advantage of that."

Kate laughed and reared up to look at his face. "Is that what you think?"

Briason's eyes were haunted. "It is what I know," he replied stiffly.

"Would it help you to know that I've wanted you almost from the moment I first saw you?"

His change of expression was so rapid that it was comical. Kate laughed again. "I don't know how it is on *this* world," she went on, teasingly. "On *my* world, women are encouraged to pursue men that they want. No stupid spell was required to make me jump at the chance to go to bed with you, Briason! As a matter of fact, it's probably more accurate to say that *I* took advantage of *you*."

"You don't understand," he said slowly. "In order to block Abaus out, I countered with a spell of allurement of my own. It's the only way to counteract such magic."

"So you can do magic too?"

"Of a sort. I do not have much talent for it; that's why I joined the military."

"You seemed fairly talented to me," Kate said with a grin.

Briason did not respond to her attempt at levity.

Kate frowned. "Okay, you're right; I don't understand. Just explain it to me."

"I cast the same spell he did. I am guilty of the same crime."

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"You do not understand our ways," he reminded her.

"Maybe not, but I understand *human* nature," Kate retorted, stressing the word.

"Where I come from, a woman makes her own decisions about sex."

"Tell me," he began conversationally. "On your world, can men do this?"

As if in response, the candle on the bedside table flared into life. Kate stared at it in amazement. "Um, no, not usually."

"Then they cannot control your physical urges either."

She thought briefly of Jon, and then forced the thought away. "You might be surprised," she murmured, watching the dancing flame.

Briason chuckled. "Like that, was it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Grant me *some* credit; I could tell that you're not a virgin."

"I was married for ten years," she replied dryly.

"Dead?"

"He is to me." At Briason's puzzled frown, she explained, "He left me for another woman."

"Then he is stupid." The statement was flat and unequivocal. Kate smiled against his chest.

"Yes," she agreed softly. "He is."

They lay together in silence for a few minutes. Kate finally lifted her head and peered up at him. Briason's face was inscrutable, silhouetted in the fading moonlight. "So tell me: what is this crime you committed?"

He sighed. "The act of love between us originated with an act of magic. In this world, magic begets magic. I do not know what we have created this night."

"That doesn't really make sense," she complained.

"Think of it like this," he suggested. "If a mage, like Abaus, summons a human to the stone table it is for one purpose only: to siphon that human's power from them, power they do not even know that they have. The way he does it is through sex."

"Okay," she said dubiously.

Briason looked her squarely in the eyes. "Which is precisely what I did," he finished. "Whatever power he sought in you is now bound to my own. That bond is now between us, and gods help me -- I have no idea what it will create as a result."

"Wait a second." Kate sat up, her hair falling over her breasts. "Do you mean to tell me that now I'm some sort of never-ending *power supply* for you?"

"Perhaps," he admitted. "On the other hand, it is possible that our power will meld together. On rare occasions, such a bond can be formed between a Shequanti and a human."

"And what does *that* mean?"

He sighed once more. "It means, Kathryn, that if our power melds, we can work powerful magic together."

Kate had the sinking feeling that the powerful magic was not restricted to sex. She stared at him, her mind whirling, until he pulled her back against his oddly warm body.

"Sleep now," he murmured. "We will consider these things in the morning."

Within seconds, she fell into a slumber so profound that it was almost like a coma.

* * *

When she awakened the next day, the other side of the bed was empty. The sun already hung halfway to the midpoint of the sky as she stretched luxuriously and glanced around the room.

Nope. It wasn't a dream.

Her pleasantly aching body could have told her that, but the confirmation was nice anyway.

She got out of bed, tying her robe around her as she went to peek out the window. It was a beautiful day, although a grey smudge behind the mountains warned of a stormy afternoon. Kate smiled, hugging herself tightly. The Shequanti of Briason's troop were moving across the clearing in groups of twos and threes, melting into the woods like grey-cloaked wraiths.

"Milady?"

She turned to see a young Shequanti standing uncertainly in the door. She smiled reassuringly at the youth, who grinned and dragged in a heavy metal tub.

"Lord Briason thought you might like to bathe," he said. "He also sent you these."

Lord Briason? Kate smiled a little smugly. *Well, well, well.*

"Thank you," she said aloud, taking a bundle of clothes from the youth. "What's your name?"

"Moratin."

"Thank Lord Briason for me, please, and thank *you* for bringing this to me."

Moratin smiled again. Although it was apparent that he was little more than a boy, he still topped her by almost six inches. He dragged the tub into the center of the room. Kate peered into it and frowned.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Um... there's no water in it."

Moratin laughed. He put his hand on the edge of the tub and squinted. Instantly, the tub was full of water, steam curling lazily into the air. Kate's mouth fell open.

"Enjoy your bath, my lady. I'll be back after a while to take you to the Hall so that you can break your fast." The boy left the room, a comical air of nonchalance in his posture.

"Well, I'll be damned," Kate muttered.

* * *

Refreshed by the hot bath, Kate barely had time to dress herself before Moratin returned. As it was, she found herself laughing hysterically at the options given her. Briason had sent two dresses for her. Both were lovely, daintily embroidered and full-skirted -- and about a foot too long. When Moratin entered the room, she was giggling as she tried to roll up sleeves that dangled uselessly past her fingertips.

"They seem a little too big," the boy noted diplomatically.

"Just a bit," she agreed. "Can't I have something more like what you're wearing?"

Startled, Moratin looked down at his grey tunic and loose trousers. "*This?* It wouldn't be seemly for a woman to wear this."

Kate put her hands on her hips, a gesture made completely futile by the snapping flap of the too-long sleeves against the skirt. "Where I come from, women wear things like that all the time. At least I can roll the sleeves and legs up to make them fit."

"All right," Moratin said dubiously.

* * *

Kate felt more like herself in the boy's clothes. The shirt, which hung past her knees, was loose and comfortable while the trousers were held up with the sash of her robe and cuffed at the ankles. She knew she looked ridiculous, but anything was better than trying to swim through miles of skirt. As she followed Moratin into the hall, Briason looked up.

His lips twitched.

"I trust you slept well, milady?"

"Like a rock," she confirmed. Briason's eyes swept over her with critical amusement.

"You did not like the gowns I sent to you?"

"Let's just say they didn't like me," she retorted. "This is a lot more comfortable."

He raised an eyebrow, but let the comment pass. "Abaus' men are still searching for you in the forest," he informed her. "My men will escort them to the sector boundary then we'll set out for Buonarre."

"How far away is it?" she asked.

"Traveling quickly it's a three-day trip. We will travel through the forest and avoid the roads. It will be a hard journey, my lady. I hope it isn't too much for you."

"It won't be," she assured him. "I run every day."

"From what?" Moratin asked, puzzled.

"Cellulite," she replied dryly.

"Is that a monster that lives in your land?" the boy asked, his eyes wide.

Kate laughed. "You could say that."

"As soon as it's safe, we'll leave," Briason said quietly. "I cannot take any men with us, milady. We will have to travel alone. If Abaus discovers that I have left my post, he'll realize that I found you. We'll have to move quickly and quietly."

The serious expression behind his dark eyes made her hesitate. It was very apparent that he was concerned, even apprehensive about the trip and her safety. Kate swallowed hard and nodded.

"I'll do exactly what you say," she assured him.

* * *

They set out in mid-afternoon. The grey smudge Kate had noticed in the sky that morning had overcome the forest by that point, and dark clouds scudded across the gloomy sky. Under the trees it was almost like twilight, everything darkened and muted by the clouds. A cold wind whistled down through the branches, slicing through the cloak wrapped around her. Kate shivered, amazed at the volatility of the weather.

Briason was just in front of her. He moved at a steady, deliberate pace through the tangled bushes and deadfall that cluttered the forest floor. A bow was slung over one shoulder along with a quiver bristling with arrows. On the other shoulder he carried a pack. She'd noted as they left the outpost that he not only wore a sword at his side but carried a couple of daggers as well.

He was heavily armed and obviously prepared to fight if necessary. This did little to reassure Kate.

It took a little while for her to catch the trick he had of moving silently. At first, her tennis shoes crunched noisily over the leaves and twigs, earning her a look of pained entreaty over Briason's shoulder. She'd watched him for a while, noting the deliberate placement of his feet upon the ground, and soon she began to imitate him, stepping in the same places he had.

Now, several hours later, she was moving almost as silently as he was.

She shivered again, grateful for the cloak. Moratin had ruthlessly sheared a foot of material from the bottom of one of his spare cloaks and given it to her as they made preparations to leave the outpost. She huddled into its thick folds as a chilly rain began to fall. Somehow, the heavy fabric was impervious to the wet. She pulled the hood over her head as the rain intensified and wondered vaguely what the cloak was made of. It seemed similar to wool, but didn't have the same scratchiness that she always associated with the fabric. Instead, this material was soft, almost like terry cloth, with a lush pile that retained warmth better than the ski jacket she usually wore on the slopes.

"Doing all right?" Briason asked suddenly. He'd only spoken three times since they'd left, and each time was to ask the same question.

"I'm fine."

He halted. "Let's rest for a moment. I want to keep traveling as long as we can tonight. Are you hungry?"

"No," she replied honestly. Briason sat on a fallen log and she settled herself next to him.

The Shequanti squinted up at the sky through the sodden leaves of the trees. "I don't like this weather," he muttered.

"It's not very pleasant," she agreed.

"There's more to it than that," he said grimly. "Although we are almost a month past winter, the air smells like snow."

"Snow?" Kate shuddered involuntarily.

"I think Abaus is tampering with the weather," he continued. "If it snows, he'd be able to track us easily."

"He can do that?"

"He is a very powerful mage. He is also very determined. He wants to find you and will stop at nothing to accomplish that goal."

"Why doesn't he just summon someone else if it's so important?"

Briason sighed. "The summoning is not that simple. Only a human with a touch of Shequanti magic will respond to the call of the stone table. From all that I've heard, there are only a few such humans on your world."

"How do you know so much about my world?" she asked curiously.

Briason's face took on a distant, bemused expression. "Others have come through before, Kathryn. There is a legend that once our two worlds were so close together that any with power could come and go freely between them. There were powerful sorcerers on your world who raised great portals of stone and they used them to mingle with the Shequanti and learn our ways. Some of them remained on this world, and they now are the Numeni who live outside our borders. They are a warlike folk with thoughts only of conquering our people. I understand that they were this way on your world as well."

"It sounds like you're talking about Druids," she murmured, more to herself than to him. "No wonder the stone table reminded me of Stonehenge."

"Stonehenge?"

"It's a monument in a land across the ocean from where I live. Centuries ago, there was a band of priests called Druids who lived there. They built Stonehenge and other monuments like it all across England. It's one of the great mysteries of my world."

"Why a mystery?"

"We don't have magic," Kate explained. "We have people who call themselves magicians, but it's all illusion and sleight of hand. Stonehenge is a mystery because no one knows why it was built or what it was used for. Most scholars think it was some sort of calendar or a place of sacrifice, but they don't even know *how* the Druids built it."

Briason frowned. "So your people have lost part of their history? That is strange - and dangerous."

"Most of the people on my world are more concerned with the future than the past, Briason."

"It must be an odd place," he commented.

"It would probably seem that way to you," she agreed mildly.

They sat for a moment in silence. The rain continued its steady, chilling pace, filtering down through the trees with quiet regularity. Aside from the sounds of the rain, however, the forest was completely still. Briason suddenly lifted Kate's hand from her lap and brought it to his lips. The scalding warmth of his touch repelled the clammy kiss of the air and she stared at him mutely.

"We must be going on, Kathryn," he said softly. "I want to get as much distance between us and Abaus as I can."

"Okay."

He hesitated, then asked, "I didn't offend you, did I?"

"Offend me? How?"

"By taking liberties," he replied, stroking the back of her hand with his thumb.

"Taking liberties?" For a moment, Kate was confused. As his meaning became clear, she laughed softly. "Oh, no; I don't consider this as 'taking liberties'."

"I would not wish to cause you insult."

“If this is an insult then feel free to give me some more, please,” she said lightly, smiling up into his serious face. For a moment there was a quick flash of intensity behind his black eyes, like a fire that flared into swift and violent life. A second later the intensity was gone, but Kate recognized it for what it was and her body tightened with pleasurable satisfaction.

It had been a long time since she’d seen a man’s eyes covet her like this. She knew instinctively that he wanted her, that he wanted to bury himself in her body and take her with all the passion she’d missed for so long. It gave her a feminine thrill of victory, of conquest and power, and the knowledge that this man lusted for her enough to discard his better judgment.

She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. His arms went around her strongly, tightening as he deepened the kiss into a passionate mating of tongues while his lips firmed on hers.

He pulled away regretfully. “As much as I would love to stay for a few hours,” he began, his eyes full of dark promise, “we need to keep moving.”

Shakily, she nodded. He took her hand and pulled her from the log, drawing her back into the depths of the forest. As they began their journey anew, the wind howled with sudden violence.

The rain changed to snow.

Chapter Five

Kate had rarely been so miserable.

The temperature continued to drop steadily as the snow thickened around them. At first, the snow melted almost as soon as it touched the ground. When the afternoon darkened into night, however, the snow turned first to icy pellets of sleet then changed once more into a thick, heavy snow that coated everything within a matter of minutes. The ground, once so easy to navigate, became treacherous. There was no longer any concern for being quiet; the snow muffled their footsteps. Unfortunately, their footsteps were also plainly visible in the silvery light that illuminated the woods.

Briason's expression was taut with concern. Although he didn't mention it to Kate, she knew that he was convinced Abaus was following them. They continued well into the night. By the time they stopped, Kate was exhausted and shivering. Several inches of snow now lay upon the ground, deep enough that each step became a struggle for her. It permeated the cloth of her trousers, her tennis shoes were soon soaked, and the cloak dragged behind her with sodden weight.

"There it is," Briason announced abruptly, coming to a stop.

"There what is?" she asked dully, plowing into his back.

He steadied her on her feet and said, "The way station. We can get out of this weather until morning."

Kate looked around. She didn't see anything that remotely looked like a building. She was stunned, therefore, when Briason walked up to a thickly-growing cluster of trees. He put his hand upon the trunk of a slender tree roughly in the middle. Much to her surprise, it swung inward. *It was a door!*

Her teeth chattering, she followed him into the dark way station. Light flared from her left and she knew he'd called fire into a lantern or candle. As her eyes adjusted

to the light, she realized that they were in a small, nearly circular room. Briason stripped off his gloves and bent beside a fire pit dug into the floor. Within seconds, flames erupted from the neat pile of wood and kindling and brought the way station into greater focus.

Overhead, a ceiling of roughly-woven branches provided protection from the elements save for a single, loose section above the fire pit that served as an outlet for smoke. There were blankets folded neatly on a shelf close by, and there were several wooden chests against the opposite wall. Various pots hung from hooks above them.

Chills raced through her body. Briason stood and turned to her. "Let's get you warmed up." He unfastened her cloak as if she were a child, hanging it from a peg hammered into the wall. Stupidly, she let him pull her down, next to the crackling fire. He moved to one of the trunks and threw it open.

"There are some warm robes in here. Take those wet clothes off and hang them to dry, then put this on. I'll get some snow to melt for tea."

He handed her a folded bundle of heavy cloth. Then he took a kettle from the wall and went back out into the snow.

Numbly, Kate did as he said. When he returned, she was huddled next to the fire in a long-sleeved robe that was miles too big for her. He set the kettle on the fire and rummaged in his pack. Pulling out a small cloth pouch, he selected several sprigs of some plant and tossed them into the kettle. "When that boils, have yourself a cup," he instructed her. He took several blankets from the shelf and wrapped them around her. Then he stood up and pulled his gloves back on.

"Where are you going?" she demanded between her chattering teeth.

"I'm going to backtrack and brush out our tracks," he said grimly, removing his pack and bow and setting them against the wall. "I won't be gone long. If you're hungry, there is some bread and cheese in my pack and some other supplies in the chests. Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow is likely to be a long day."

"When will you be back?"

"A couple of hours, probably. Don't worry about me; I can move more quickly alone. I'll be fine."

He bent swiftly and kissed her. Her lips warmed under his and Kate felt her body go soft and pliant. When he stood back up, she saw that the fiery gleam had returned to his black eyes. Before she could say anything else, he was gone.

* * *

She awoke when a blast of icy air interrupted the warm cocoon she occupied. Her eyes drifted open to see him shaking snow from his cloak near the door. She watched from under her lashes as he hung the dripping cloak next to hers.

Briason moved toward the fire on silent feet. She'd concocted a sort of soup from the dried vegetables and meat she'd found in one of the chests. He discovered it quickly, dipping a battered metal cup into the pan. He ate quickly and efficiently, cupping his hands around the mug to warm his fingers. When he was done, he set the cup aside and stood up.

Unaware that she was watching him, he began to strip his clothes away. He put his drenched boots on the other side of the fire pit, next to her steaming tennis shoes, then removed his tunic and trousers. Kate caught her breath.

He was beautiful. There was no other way to describe it. In the flickering light of the fire, the striped scars stood out against the pallor of his chest and back. His long, lean body was muscular, but not overwhelmingly so. Kate had never really liked bodybuilders; she thought their bulk was unattractive. Not so this lithe figure illuminated in the tiny room. She liked the way his muscles roped along his arms and shoulders. His legs were long and well-defined, originating from buttocks that could only be described as mouth-watering. With quick fingers, he undid the long braid so that his fair hair fell loosely around his face.

"You're really breathtaking, you know that?" she asked quietly.

Briason turned to face her. His face was solemn in the half-light, and Kate bit her lip. He was gloriously, deliciously male, his nudity an arrogant challenge. "You should be asleep," he chided her, unfazed by the way her eyes moved over his body.

"I'm not particularly sleepy at the moment." She sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees as the too-wide neck of the gown fell down over her arm, exposing her shoulder to the air. "You never did tell me how you got those scars."

"I was punished," he said shortly.

"Punished? By whom?"

His expression was unfathomable. He hesitated, then replied reluctantly, "Abaus."

"The magic guy?" Kate was horrified. "Why?"

"I prevented him from doing something several years ago. His men ambushed me and took me to his house."

"What did you keep him from doing?"

"It's not important," he said, shrugging.

"It is to me," Kate replied quietly. "If Abaus did that to you he is inhuman."

Briason laughed. "He isn't human; he's Shequanti."

"What happened to him? Did he go to jail?"

Again, Briason hesitated. "My father broke him."

"Broke him? What does *that* mean?"

"If one mage breaks another, he takes some of his power for himself. The only way for the broken mage to regain what he lost is to learn it all over again."

"So Abaus isn't as powerful as he once was, right?"

"He has already recovered from the breaking. He is now much as he ever was."

"But that's not fair!" she exclaimed indignantly. "He should have been punished more than that!"

Briason smiled suddenly, a slow, sweet smile that transformed his face into greater beauty. "You are very kind to think such a thing."

"I'm not kind at all. I'm pissed off."

"Pissed off?" he asked in confusion.

"Angry," she clarified. He sank down beside her, facing her. Instantly, the atmosphere in the room changed, became charged with something indefinable and pulsing.

"No one has ever shown me such concern," he said almost tenderly.

"Then the women in this place are idiots!" she snapped.

He lifted a lock of her long, brown hair, his fingers caressing the strand. "Yes, they are," he said simply, his eyes seemingly riveted to her hair. "They are also quite boring when compared to you."

Again, Kate felt the shimmer of passion flare up between them. Just as in the forest that afternoon, she tasted a sense of power over this man, the power that desire can bring to any woman. Without even thinking about it, she kissed him. His hand moved to the back of her head, threading through her hair with possessive strength as his tongue forced her lips apart. She wound her arms around his neck as the kiss lengthened and his other arm pulled her strongly to his chest.

His mouth left hers and rained small kisses across her cheek to her ear. Taking the lobe between his teeth, he tugged gently on it and growled deep in his chest. Obediently, she tilted her head back, exposing the long curve of her throat to his wandering lips.

Kate had never been kissed by a man whose lips were as soft as Briason's, as demanding. Her body relaxed in his arms as his open mouth left a wet, hot path down her neck. He nibbled on her shoulder, his hair screening his face, and Kate nearly purred in satisfaction.

"You like that?" he murmured.

"I love it," she replied, slightly breathless.

His hands moved to the neck of the robe, pulling the laces free until it fell to her waist. As his palms grasped her breasts, she shivered in anticipation. He lifted his head and looked down at her, his eyes glazed with passion. Without hesitation she kissed him again, hard.

Briason laid her back against the blankets, his mouth moving sensuously against her own. When he pulled away, she simply looked at him while he stripped her gown from her trembling body. A moment later, he lowered himself onto her.

His hands were everywhere, smoothing back her hair, cupping her cheek, sliding down her arms to caress the curve of her hip. Impatiently, he moved onto his side so his fingers could shift to her erect nipple, teasing it with small, quick motions until her breasts ached for more. Briason obliged her, taking her other breast into his mouth and sucking on it hard. She gave herself up to the desire flooding through her body, her legs turning outwards of their own volition as her arousal increased.

She could feel the hard stiffness of his cock against her hip. All of a sudden, she didn't want to play around with this game of stimulation any more. She wrapped her fingers around him, marveling at how large his cock grew in her hand. Without shame, she began to stroke him, her other hand squirming around to take the soft heaviness of his sac. Her fingertips scratched lightly on the bottom of them and he groaned against her mouth.

"I want to pleasure you, but you are driving me out of my mind," he complained, his breathing suddenly ragged.

"I want you now," she said insistently, nipping at his neck with her teeth. Before he could reply, she pushed him over. Briason gaped at her in surprise as she straddled him, moving his cock to the wet, swollen lips of her sex. In a single movement, she sheathed his full length within her. Kate gasped; the first time they'd done this, he'd been careful to ease into her. This time, her impetuous possession of him filled her. Beneath her, Briason groaned again as she began to move, clenching her jaw until her vagina started to relax.

"This is unbearable, *nemida*," he said, his hands moving to her hips as she maintained her slow, deliberate pace. "Doesn't this hurt you?"

"Not at all," she assured him, biting her lip as his penis throbbed inside of her.

It was true. Pleasure grew within her like a knot of warm, wet bliss. Briason closed his eyes as a muscle twitched in his cheek and Kate almost laughed. It was quite

apparent that, although he was an experienced lover, Briason had never *been* fucked before.

He evidently reached the same conclusion. His hands moved up to cup her breasts, his thumbs teasing the nipples while she rode him. Despite several attempts on his part to increase her pace, she purposely continued to move slowly, taking his whole length into her then moving until only the tip of his cock remained within her.

Pressure built within her. Responding to the drive for release that twisted in her belly, she leaned closer to him and began to move faster. With a muttered oath, he moved his hands to her hips, rolling her to her back.

Instinctively, she locked her legs around his waist. His mouth fell upon hers, devouring her own with primitive fire as he lifted her hips from the floor, driving into her with mindless ferocity. The firm plane of his pubic bones ground into her ruthlessly and Kate moaned against his lips. The sound inflamed him even more. His pace quickened until she thought she would faint; his skin abraded her clitoris even as his cock stretched her pussy with demanding fervor.

He came violently, shudders racking his entire body as his seed pumped into her. The muscles of his scarred back strained under her nails and he buried his face in the curve of her neck with a triumphant shout. It was as if the cry released her own orgasm and she came silently, the walls of her vagina contracting around his still-hard cock while she arched against him.

Kate came back to her body with languorous relish. She was pleased to note that Briason was breathing heavily, still overcome by the waves of pleasure thrilling through them both. She dug her fingers into the wealth of his hair, enjoying its silken texture and clean scent.

"Just so you know," she murmured, pressing her lips against the top of his head, "I had every intention of seducing you from the moment I woke up."

Briason chuckled. "Seduce me any time you like, *nemida*. I would undergo all such intentions at any time."

"What does *nemida* mean?"

He lifted his head and looked down at her. There was a strange, fleeting look in his black eyes. "It is just a pet name we use for our lovers," he said. His black eyes began to sparkle with sudden mischief. Before she could ask what he meant, he began to move within her again.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, the question ending on a squeak.

"Isn't that obvious?" he returned, the ghost of a wicked smile lurking about his lips. Much to her surprise, she felt his cock harden as if in response.

"But --" she sputtered, gasping as the friction started to warm her willing body again. "Isn't this impossible?"

"For the sorry man who left you, probably," he said teasingly, staring at her lips hungrily. "Not for a Shequanti male in his prime."

As he lowered his mouth to hers again, she murmured, "I have a feeling I'm going to like it here."

* * *

The traveling was much worse the next day. Kate floundered through snow up to her knees and it was still falling, drifting through the spring greenery like the glitter in a paperweight her father had when she was a child. At first Briason traveled behind her, trying to eliminate the signs of their passage. Even for one as skilled as he, however, there was no way to disguise the swath of piled and trampled snow. He gave it up after a while and opted for speed instead. He walked just in front of her, breaking a path through the deep, soft snow so that it would be easier for her.

As the day lengthened, his face grew grimmer and grimmer. Kate was afraid to ask him the reason why; she was afraid she wouldn't like the answer much. So, she gritted her teeth and continued in his wake. Her feet squelched inside her sneakers and the cloak felt like it weighed a ton but she was too proud to ask him to stop for a minute.

Suddenly, he stopped. Kate froze immediately, her eyes flying to his stiff shoulders in alarm. Moving very deliberately, he drew his sword. With a jerk of his head, he silently commanded her to enter a tangle of snowy shrubs to her right. She

didn't argue; she instantly crawled through the snarled branches and crouched, breathing heavily in the center of the clump. Briason kicked the snow to disguise her path, his hand white-knuckled on the hilt of his sword. While she watched, shivering in combined fear and cold, he turned back the way they had come and waited, his sword at the ready.

The forest was silent. Even the birds were quiet, huddled together in their early spring nests with their heads tucked under their wings. Kate clutched at the branch that pricked against her face with fingers that trembled.

An ominous feeling drifted through the trees. It settled like a quilt over the snow-shrouded woods and wrapped itself around Kate's throat like a hand. Even Briason's immobile form shuddered suddenly, but he straightened and continued to wait for the threat that even Kate felt on the horizon.

The threat materialized in the clearing in a silent rush. Suddenly, there were twenty Shequanti surrounding Briason, all of them save one with arrows notched to their bows. The lone exception stepped forward and said in a pleasant voice, "It's strange to meet you here, cousin. Shouldn't you be running your never-ending patrols on the border?"

Kate barely restrained a gasp. Abaus had found them.

"My men can function without me," Briason said evenly. "What are you doing so far from your own sector?"

"A little hunting," Abaus said, his voice still tinged with the light, conversational tone that sent shivers down Kate's spine.

"I've seen no game," Briason retorted, baring his teeth.

"Somehow, I think you have," his cousin mused. Kate felt a twinge of revulsion; it didn't seem possible that this loathsome man could possibly be related to Briason! Now that she looked more closely at him, she could see the shadow of resemblance on Abaus' face, like a blurred facsimile of Briason's familiar features. On any other man, she would have thought his face effeminate, but the cold flatness of his eyes and the tightly-pressed set of his lips prevented her from arriving at that conclusion.

"Where is she?" Abaus demanded, his voice changing swiftly to menace.

"Where is who?" Briason asked politely.

"The human woman I conjured onto the stone table! I know she travels with you. Give her to me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Briason replied with a shrug, ignoring the arrows aimed at his throat. Kate's mouth went dry.

"I don't have time to play your games," Abaus said coldly. "Give me the woman or I'll have you shot."

"Shoot me then," Briason said with a feral grin. "You'd better hope you kill me."

Abaus' eyes narrowed. The two men confronted each other in the silent clearing. Briason's smile changed to one of lazy contempt.

"I think you've forgotten, cousin, what I'm likely to do if I get angry," Abaus drawled. Some unknown signal passed among his men, and suddenly several swords pressed into Briason's back. The Shequanti did not move; he just continued to stare at his cousin with his disdain evident on his proud, beautiful face. Abaus' men quickly disarmed him, then seized him by the arms and dragged him forward.

"Bind him," Abaus purred.

One of the warriors produced a length of rough rope. He quickly looped this tightly over Briason's wrists, tying it off with a cruel jerk of his hands. Abaus nodded and the men holding Briason dragged him to a nearby oak tree. The other end of the rope was tossed over a branch just over Briason's head and quickly secured to a root.

"Your father broke me once for doing this to you," Abaus remarked in a matter-of-fact voice. "Since then I've dreamed of the day that I could strip your skin from your bones."

One of the warriors removed Briason's cloak, then put a knife to the back of his thick tunic. With a sharp pull, the fabric ripped all the way to Briason's waist. Abaus held out his hand negligently.

The man closest to him handed him a whip, a long, cruel-looking metal-tipped bullwhip that slithered from its loose coil to pool at Abaus' feet like the entrails of a

slaughtered cow. Briason eyed his cousin and said, "I've already told you I don't have her, Abaus. It would be a shame if you whipped me for nothing and my father had to break you again."

"He can't," Abaus said simply, and the insouciance of his tone alerted Kate that what he said was absolutely true. The ice-blue eyes sharpened suddenly, focusing on the striped scar tissue on Briason's back with a look almost of longing.

"Human woman!" Abaus shouted suddenly. "I am prepared to flay the life from my cousin within seconds! He will die horribly, dangling from this tree like a trussed deer, in order to preserve your life! I will show him *no* mercy; I will kill him like the scum he is -- and then I will find you anyway." The cruel lips spread into an anticipatory grin. "If you come to me willingly, I will spare his life."

Kate screwed her eyes shut. She'd heard that same tone in Jon's voice too many times, that quiet certainty that always foretold some new emotional game. She knew that Abaus wasn't joking; she also knew that Briason was the bait in an intricately laid trap. If she sprang it, perhaps Briason would escape unscathed. He'd find her; she knew it. If she didn't, Abaus would kill him. She'd be left alone in this great wood, with no idea how to find her way out and no one to protect her. Then Abaus *would* find her and Briason's death would be for nothing.

She had no choice.

"I'm coming out," she said in a level voice.

"Kathryn! No!" Briason struggled furiously against the rope around his wrists. Blood immediately sprang to the pristine snow, dripping from his lacerated wrists as he tried to free himself.

Kate crawled through the bushes. She stood up and glared at Abaus. The Shequanti mage barely glanced at her as two of his men grabbed her arms and led her toward him. Abaus fingered the handle of his whip thoughtfully, staring at the scarred welts on Briason's back. When his warriors pulled Kate to his side, he turned and looked her up and down once, assessing her body with a glimmer of triumphant possession in his eyes.

Then he smiled.

"I lied," he said in a casual voice. The bullwhip snaked over his shoulder then whistled through the air to snap against Briason's back. Instantly, the metal barbs sliced through his skin, parting it with a sudden rush of blood. Kate screamed and fought furiously against the men who restrained her. Desperation gave her strength. She managed to wrench one arm away from her captor as the whip struck Briason for a second time.

"We can't have that," Abaus said, amused. Something heavy cracked across the back of her head and she collapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter Six

For the second time in three days, Kate awoke to screaming pain in her skull. She moaned, closing her eyes tightly against the wave of nausea that rolled up from her gut.

This all had to be a nightmare. In her mind's eye, she saw Briason's skin shred under the merciless kiss of the whip and gagged.

Maybe I dreamed all this, she thought plaintively. Maybe I cracked my head against a tree or something and I'm back home.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes. This place was unfamiliar, almost exotic to her confused gaze. Soft fabrics were draped everywhere, even around the bed where she lay curled up into a sick little ball. Was this a *tent*? Visions of the old harem movies from the forties and fifties swam into her mind; this place looked like somewhere that Errol Flynn or Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. would hang out.

Apparently while she'd been unconscious, someone had removed her heavy, boy's clothes and dressed her in a thin gown with some sort of lacing on the front. Her feet were bare, her hair loosely tied back from her face, and every muscle in her body ached. She pulled her knees closer to her chest and closed her eyes again in misery.

"Holy shit," she muttered. "It's real."

Opening her eyes again she saw more evidence of luxury: several braziers glowed with warmth, there was a small table and two chairs with a bottle of wine and some glasses upon it. Some of the sheer draperies fluttered slightly in an unfelt breeze, moving to reveal a glimpse of a white-painted wall behind them. Moving carefully, she sat up. Her head immediately lolled on her neck. Kate swallowed hard, closed her eyes, and waited for the dizziness to subside.

"So you're awake."

She froze. Something moved behind her, out of her line of sight, and a moment later Abaus walked around the bed. He stood over her, smiling pleasantly. Her gut curdled; how could this man look like that after what he'd done? She glared at him, ignoring the renewed vertigo the action brought.

Abaus' eyebrows lifted. "Ah," he murmured. "So now you're going to hate me forever, are you?" He shrugged, the motion accentuated by the unwrinkled white shirt he wore. "I do not require your liking, fortunately."

"Where is Briason?" she asked in a low voice.

"Probably residing in the bowels of carrion birds by now," he replied in the silky voice she'd always associated with Jon. Kate closed her eyes in horror.

"I'd imagine you're not feeling too well," he went on conversationally, dismissing the topic of his cousin as if it had been the weather. "Have a glass of wine; it will help to restore your strength."

She opened her eyes. He was holding a glass out to her, his face bland and smooth. "No," she said flatly.

Abaus sighed and took a sip of the wine. "How tiresome; you're of no use to me dead." He extended the glass a second time.

Kate took it, avoiding his fingers as she did so. A quirk of the curved mouth indicated that he'd seen her revulsion and rather enjoyed it. "You know, you've caused me a great deal of inconvenience. Nothing would normally induce me to race across the Jonctif through a snowstorm of my own making save for something very... valuable."

Kate didn't answer. The silence in the room grew heavy. He watched her in much the same way that a cat waits at the entrance to a mouse hole; almost curiously, he wanted to see how she would react. Kate responded by not reacting at all. She figured that the one thing he wouldn't be able to stand was being ignored.

"I take it that my meddlesome cousin explained to you why you are here," he said after a moment, his chameleon voice switching to a business-like manner.

Kate took a drink of her wine and stared at the draped fabric on the far wall as if she'd never seen such a thing before. Abaus' face showed a moment of annoyance, and then he tried again.

"I would assume that means he did. You should be pleased; most human women who come to me find their service an enjoyable one."

Kate couldn't restrain the snort of disgust these words caused, but she continued to look at the wall.

"You might be surprised," he murmured, "at how enjoyable it is."

He traced a line down her neck. Kate leapt away from the bed violently, her whole body shaking with outrage. "Don't touch me!" she snarled and threw the whole glass at his face.

It stopped inches away from its target. The glass hovered there, immobile, while around it the drops of wine remained suspended like they were flash-frozen. Abaus smiled and moved to one side. In the next instant the glass continued its interrupted journey, smashing against the far wall with a splintering sound and drenching the pale blue curtains with blood-red wine.

"So, you are not immune," he said clinically. "That's good; I prefer a woman with a little spirit."

"If you come near me, I'll kill you," she replied in a flat voice.

"I doubt it." The disagreement was gentle. "I have advantages that you cannot hope to match. In the end you will come to me, pleading for me to touch you, to caress your flesh while you writhe beneath me."

She stared at him in shock. The sinuous voice was now low and intimate. Inexplicably, her body tightened. She stood, trembling, against the column in the center of the room.

"One of those advantages, my dear, you're probably feeling even now," he went on, his cold eyes never leaving her face. "You can feel the desire pulling at you, can't you? I can make *all* of your waking hours filled with pleasure, pleasures like you've never known."

"It takes a big man to resort to rape in order to get his way," she remarked, adopting a brusque tone even as she felt her nipples harden under the sheer fabric of the gown. In horror, she realized that she wore nothing but the gown and she bunched her hands in the fabric of the skirt.

"Rape?" He laughed, genuinely amused. "What makes you think I have to resort to rape? I've never had an unwilling woman; why should you be any different?"

"Trust me; I am."

Suddenly, her entire body froze. She couldn't move a muscle save for her eyes, which widened in fear. Even her voice was paralyzed. Abaus smiled lazily. "Not so different," he commented, and walked across the room to stand in front of her.

"Usually, I permit my women to keep the use of their tongues," he murmured, stopping only inches away from her trapped body. "For some reason, however, I do not find *your* tongue quite as amusing."

His eyes traveled down the length of her body, lingering with sinister intent upon her nipples. One slim hand moved to cup her breast through the fabric, lifting it with delicate precision. His hand was freezing cold, almost icy, but the intensity of it against her flesh was amazing. The sensation brought a burning to her pussy. Kate tried to repress her desire, but her resistance seemed to feed into it.

"You are lovely," he said. She could only stare straight ahead at his chest. The white shirt was sheer, immaculately pressed and open halfway down his chest. She saw the perfect skin and developed muscles, at once so unlike yet similar to his cousin's. Abaus took her other breast as well, caressing them both with soft kneading motions. Kate blinked as the desire tightened within her.

What is wrong with me? she thought frantically as the Shequanti mage continued to arouse her suddenly all-too-willing body. *How can I be responding like this to someone who I just saw murder a man?*

"Yes, very beautiful indeed," he whispered, leaning forward so that his lips were only an inch from her ear. His cool breath stirred a loose strand of hair as his hands traveled lower to the sides of her waist. He pressed his mouth against her neck. Even

his lips were cold. It made her skin crawl even as her body warmed with the flush of desire.

His arms went around her like bands of ice. He moved her carefully, gently pulling her across the room to the bed. When he pushed her down onto the thick mattress, her body obeyed his wishes. She lay there, passively staring up at him while he arranged her limbs as he wanted.

Color rode high upon his cheeks when he finally straightened and stood over her. Once again, his eyes traveled the length of her body, assessing it with hot promise. Even his gaze brought a response from her; her flesh shivered under his eyes. Abaus seated himself next to her on the bed, his hand moving to lie gently upon her flat abdomen. "I can feel you resisting me. You shouldn't waste your energy that way," he advised her. "There is nothing you can do to prevent this. In a few minutes there will be nothing you *wish* to do about it."

His fingers moved to the intricate lacing between her breasts, untying the little bow deliberately. As each string was freed, the gown loosened around her. When he pulled the final string free, he put his hands on her shoulders and pushed the gown away. She lay there, completely helpless, as he drank in her nudity with eyes that were sparking with something other than his customary iciness.

Suddenly, they were hot, searing against her skin like heated metal. His hand traced a long line from her shoulder, over her right breast to her abdomen, then along the curve of her hip onto her thigh. He smiled as she sucked in a sharp breath.

"Oh, yes," he purred. "You feel it now, don't you? Your body begins to crave me, despite your efforts to stop it." He paused, and then added, "Just as I begin to crave you, Kathryn."

Kathryn! The name that Briason had used rang dully in her roaring ears. His fingers moved over her knee then started a tickling path up her inner thigh. The movement stopped just short of her pubic hair, and a sick wave of frustration screamed through her body. He waited, his eyes gauging her response, then brushed his hand lightly over the tight curls and paused.

She felt the slickness of her vagina from some distant, analytical place in her fevered mind. Her clitoris was throbbing, her pussy aching for fulfillment. His hand rested lightly over her sex while his other hand returned to pinch at her hardened nipples. With a curiously feline smile, his hand brushed her hair aside to reveal the moist nodule hidden within it. For a moment he stared at it, his breath coming in a shallow rhythm, then he moved his finger onto her clit.

Kate could have screamed. He began to manipulate it, moving it in tiny little circles while he pressed against her hypersensitive flesh. She felt her body relax, her thighs quivering with arousal. When he took her nipple into his mouth, she closed her eyes.

The desire was washing through her urgently now. His lips warmed as they moved across her skin, his tongue flicking across the nipple even as his fingers moved quicker at the core of her sex. When his mouth moved from her breast, the nipple puckered as the cool air hit the wet brand of his mouth. His hair brushed against her belly as the lips continued their inexorable journey, sliding over her skin with slow, torturous ease. The tempo of his fingers increased until he was fluttering them over her clitoris, each touch adding to the fire building within her.

He moved abruptly, settling himself between her legs. He spread her thighs wide and she opened her eyes. He was staring at her sex avidly, apparently enraptured by the play of his pale, slender fingers against the dark thatch of her pubic hair. Abaus inhaled deeply, his eyes closing for a brief moment. His fingers stilled and left her clitoris. She wanted to scream in frustration, the thwarted arousal of her body clamoring for release. He slid down and deliberately pressed a hard kiss against her clit. His tongue snaked around it, tantalizing her even more, before he took the nodule into his mouth and started to suck on it.

Kate gasped. The pleasure was overwhelming, rushing at her from every direction. His hands returned to her breasts, fondling them with greater urgency while he greedily lapped at her pussy. Kate felt the juices of her desire trickling from her, and her body responded frantically when he licked them away.

She was about to come. She knew it. Nothing in her life had prepared her for this. She wanted to grab his head and press it further into her sex, to twist her hands in the bedclothes, to scream and struggle as he drove her to climax. But, she remained compelled to stillness as he inserted two fingers into her pussy. His hand moved slowly, gently within her, mimicking the thorough movement of sex. He released her clitoris from his mouth and blew on it gently, then flicked his tongue lightly across it.

Her over stimulated body remained trapped in the grip of his magic, helpless as he coaxed her to greater arousal. His fingers left her suddenly. Her pussy ached longingly as he trailed his wet fingertips across her skin. His tongue followed the trail, licking the taste of her desire from her scorching flesh.

"Now you understand," he said softly. "Now you, too, feel the need I have created within you, don't you, Kathryn? I don't think you understand fully how much I control that need yet."

Her eyes met his, glazed with a combination of fear and raw lust. He smiled at her. Inexplicably, the pressure within her mounted even higher. He laid his hand flat on her stomach.

"Come."

The single word brought about an explosion within her body. She felt shattered, broken into shards of repletion mingled with sorrow as her body climaxed violently. The cum wet her thighs, soaking into the bedclothes. Without a word, Abaus fastened his mouth to her sex again, his fingers resuming their wicked manipulation of her clitoris while he nuzzled against the moisture of her orgasm. Kate was horrified to feel her body responding yet again, the pressure rebuilding within her loins as if she'd never reached orgasm at all.

"Look at me," he commanded, lifting his mouth from her skin.

Her eyes met his again. Slowly, he pulled the shirt over his head, then stood to remove his trousers. As his nude body emerged, Kate found herself craving the feel of skin against hers. His cock was huge, straining against the pale, perfect skin of his

abdomen. He slipped between her legs once more and without a word drove his cock into her wet, greedy flesh.

It was beyond anything she'd ever experienced. His hand moved back to her clitoris, agitating it even as he slammed into her. The driving tempo of his hips drove her wild, building another crest of pleasure within her body. Suddenly, all restraint fell away from her. She experienced a moment of dizziness, but then focused on the pounding of his cock into her. Instinctively, she arched her back, her hands fluttering to his forearms as her eyes closed. Abaus groaned. His cock seemed to grow even bigger, then he came. As the orgasm took him, he ground his hips into her thighs, his fingers still driving her clitoris to wild desire. She felt herself respond, and as her pussy contracted with her own, unfettered climax she knew a moment of sick pleasure.

Jesus Christ! I just fucked my enemy and it was probably the best sex I've ever had.

That thought was followed immediately by another, darker thought. The only time she'd experienced more pleasure had been her first night with Briason. That had been honest pleasure, reciprocated desire between partners -- no, lovers. She opened her eyes and stared bleakly at the ceiling. A tiny movement fluttered against her mind, a shimmer of something almost unseen. She frowned, confused. It felt like an emotion, like something outside of her was trying to communicate with her. It felt familiar. Kate felt the agitation within it, and then mentally reeled as she realized what it was.

Briason was alive!

In a second, she remembered what he'd said about the bonding between Shequanti males and the women they possessed. Even as this stunning realization seared through her consciousness, Abaus withdrew from her body abruptly.

"He already had you." His voice was flat with anger.

She looked at him defiantly. "Yes, he did."

"It doesn't matter!" he snapped. "Briason is dead. It will take some time for the bonding you forged with him to break, but break it will. Then I will make you mine as you were *supposed* to be."

Kate turned her face away and closed her eyes. She couldn't let him see the triumph in them. Briason was alive and she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would come for her. When that happened, nothing would protect Abaus from his anger.

"Nemida," she murmured. "What does that mean?"

She felt Abaus' violent departure from the bed. "Where did you hear that?"

"I overheard someone else say it," she replied, opening her eyes to look at him with an expression of mild interest.

"It means beloved in the ancient tongue," he snarled. He threw his shirt and trousers back on and stormed from the room.

Kate smiled. *Nemida*. Beloved. In that instant, she knew that her intuition was correct. If Briason loved her, nothing on this world or the other would keep him from her side.

Chapter Seven

When she awoke the next morning, Kate was very angry -- not only with Abaus but with herself. Although she knew instinctively that it wasn't her fault, she still felt as if she had betrayed Briason. She lay there for some time, staring angrily at the cloth-draped ceiling. Her head hurt, her body felt dirty, and her mouth tasted bitter.

She straightened into a sitting position, concentrating on the minute flutter against her mind. Somewhere, Briason still lived. She could almost feel him next to her, his preternaturally warm skin emitting the spicy scent that she already associated with him. She savored it, brushing her awareness against his.

Abaus didn't know. He had no clue that Briason was still alive. Kate winced. He must have hurt Briason badly, however, if he was so convinced of his cousin's death. A mental picture of Briason dangling from the tree branch over a swath of churned and crimson-stained snow flashed into her mind.

Briason needed time. Time to heal, time to find her, and she knew that he would find her. Abaus must be kept in ignorance during that time, lulled into a false sense of security that he was safe from his cousin's anger.

Kate frowned. She wasn't certain how the magic worked in this strange place; it might be possible that Abaus would discover Briason's presence very quickly. But, if she could fool him into thinking that Briason was dead, it might keep him safe long enough to recover from the torture Abaus had meted out.

It would also give her time to figure out how to use this new link, this power that the mage craved so greatly that he'd summoned her to a whole new world.

If a mage, like Abaus, summons a human to the stone table it is for one purpose only: to siphon that human's power from them, power they do not even know that they have. The way he does it is through sex.

Briason's words came back to her now. Kate mulled them over, considering every angle of his statement.

It means, Kathryn, that if our power melds, we can work powerful magic together.

Kate rose from the tangled bedclothes. If her guess was correct and their power *had* melded then it could just be possible that *she* could work magic on this world. Her lips pressed together tightly. If that was the case, then she needed to figure out how to do it, and quickly.

For the time being, she would continue to hold Abaus off as best she could. It wouldn't be hard to assume the guise of a woman grieving for the death of a lover. If she were very sly about it, she might actually be able to see how this power worked here, and perhaps learn how to access it herself.

A slow smile curved her lips, strangely at odds with her narrowed eyes. God help Abaus if she learned how to control her own power. Briason might not have to rescue her if that happened.

It might actually turn out the other way around.

* * *

It didn't take long for Kate to deduce that, while she was technically a prisoner, Abaus didn't consider her much of a threat. It turned out that the cloth-draped room was actually a chamber in some sort of stone building. She found a window almost immediately as she searched the room and pulled the fabric aside to peer outside.

The window looked down upon a courtyard, with a fountain in the very center of a meticulously-laid stone terrace. Flowers and small trees were growing in what looked like terra cotta pots. The other three sides of the courtyard lay at the feet of grey stone walls, each wing of the building rising several stories into the air. She opened the window and a warm breeze rustled through the room, causing the draperies to billow.

Further exploration revealed a trunk tucked into a corner. Upon opening it, she found several gowns. She grimaced. Apparently there was no such thing as jeans in this place. She couldn't help a small thrill of feminine pleasure, however, as she handled the delicate fabrics. She chose a soft green dress, mostly because its neck wasn't as low-cut

as the others. Further exploration revealed several pair of leather shoes that laced around the ankle. After she'd dressed, spending quite a bit of time trying to figure out how to lace the gown up, she returned to the window.

It was midmorning. Her stomach rumbled noisily and she wondered vaguely when the last time she'd eaten was.

And why in the hell has no one been here yet? The thought was irritable. She wanted food, she wanted a bath, she wanted to explore this strange place and find out whatever she could.

As it turned out, what she really wanted to do was yell at someone.

Not even five minutes later, she heard a click from the opposite wall. She turned swiftly as a young Shequanti man entered the room with a tray. Unlike Briason's men, who were all soberly clad in muted colors fit for the forest, this one wore brightly-colored clothes and looked like he'd fallen right out of some old medieval painting about minstrels.

"Milady, come break your fast."

"Why bother?" she snapped. "It's almost time for lunch!"

Color rose into the boy's cheeks. Kate would have felt sorry for her words had the situation been different. He set the tray on the table and asked stiffly, "Is there anything else you would care for?"

"Yes. I want a bath, I want some sensible clothes, and I want you to show me the exit out of this madhouse."

"I will have a bath prepared for you. Lord Abaus wishes you to join him when you are ready."

"Tell him to go jump in the lake."

"There isn't one."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There isn't a lake close by. There is a river --"

Kate ground her teeth. "Then tell him to take a flying leap into that."

"I'll let you tell him that yourself, milady," the boy said with a curt bow.

"Coward!" she taunted him as the door closed behind his back.

Smirking, Kate sat down to enjoy her meal.

* * *

The bath came. The sensible clothes didn't. After she'd washed and donned the green gown once more, Kate walked firmly to the door. Much to her surprise, it opened easily.

Apparently, she was so dangerous that they didn't even bother to lock her door.

To her right was a flight of steps. To her left was a short hall that ended with a circular staircase leading up. There were no other doors. She headed to the right, trying to manage the dress as she descended. Even to formal occasions in New York, she'd always worn short dresses. As a matter of fact, her wedding dress had been a suit whose skirt hit right about her knee. All this fabric was hard to deal with, swirling heavily around her ankles and whispering against the stone steps.

She emerged into a large hall, much like the one at Briason's outpost. There were a few differences, however. A long table sat upon a dais, overlooking orderly rows of rougher wooden tables. The walls here were hung with what appeared to be tapestries. Automatically, her glance moved to the closest one, scrutinizing the needlework with an appraiser's eye.

No one was in sight save for a couple of maids who were desultorily scrubbing the floor under the high table. She looked at them curiously; these were the first women she'd seen on this strange world. They both wore sullen expressions on their faces, their bodies slender under the drab grey gowns that they wore. Even from a distance, Kate could tell that these young women were lovely, so lovely in fact that in New York modeling agencies would be beating at their doors. Why were they working like slaves? And what in the world would Abaus want with *her* when there were women like this here in his native land?

"I see you've decided to explore."

The drawl stiffened her spine. Immediately the two girls rose, bobbed quick curtsies, and scurried out of sight through an opening behind the table. Kate turned slowly to see Abaus standing not five feet away.

"I'm looking for the way out of this place," she said shortly.

His eyebrows lifted. "I'll show you," he replied with a strange smile.

Suspiciously, Kate followed him through an arched doorway. They passed through another hall. At the end of the corridor was a door. Abaus opened it and gestured for her to lead the way, bowing with a mocking smile. Kate flounced by him, and then stopped in shock.

Just outside the door was a sturdy wooden platform. Beyond it was... nothing.

The building was perched high upon a spire of sheer rock. Some distance away was another cliff. All around them was nothing but a sheer drop of thousands of feet to a dimly seen smudge that must be the ground.

"How did we get up here?" she asked weakly, her hand automatically groping for something to hold onto. Her fingers closed around a bracket beside the door, clutching it desperately while her stomach did flips. Kate hated heights, had always hated them since she was a child.

Abaus shrugged. "There's a rope bridge, but only I can extend it to the other side."

Kate chewed on her lip. Then she turned to Abaus, her eyes flashing. "Just another example of your courage," she said in a scathing voice. "I suppose it's necessary for you to keep your *willing* women locked up. Where I come from, we call men like that cowards."

"Must be a boring place," he commented, amused. "Well? Are you going to hurl yourself to the rocks below to preserve your purity?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she muttered. She closed her eyes, willing the vertigo to recede, and wrapped her other hand over the first.

"What's the matter?" Abaus asked sharply.

She opened her eyes and stared mutely at him. His face changed from sardonic amusement to a slight frown. "I didn't know," he said shortly. He pried her fingers loose and pulled her back into the corridor. As he shut the door, Kate relaxed. Abaus took her elbow and hurried her back into the main hall.

"Wine!" he bellowed, pushing her into a chair. "You're very pale," he noted. "I'm sorry; if I had known you were terrified of heights I would never have done that to you."

Kate barely registered the words. A moment later, one of the sullen maids hurried up with a goblet. Abaus took it from her and pressed it into Kate's hands. She drank it numbly, as her entire body began to shake. He put a hand on her shoulder and she jerked it away furiously.

"I know you think this is a fun game, but it isn't for me!" she snarled. "Playing with people's lives and emotions is a sick, sick way to live. One of these days it will come back to haunt you!"

"Undoubtedly," he replied, his face smoothed back into its customary mask of indifference. He turned to the maid. "Escort her back to her chambers," he instructed the girl before turning on his heel and stalking away.

* * *

The light from the window had faded. One of the maids brought her a meal and bustled around the room, lighting the lamps and setting a fire in the brazier to ward against the chill of the night. Kate sat morosely on the edge of the bed, watching the girl's preparations with dulled eyes.

The flutter she'd associated with Briason was gone. All afternoon, she'd tried to find it, to recapture the feeling of closeness she'd had, but to no avail. As the sun had set, gilding the courtyard below with light that refracted from the settling dust, she'd given up.

Either he was asleep or he was dead.

Now it was night, and she knew that Abaus was coming to her. He had avoided her for the rest of the day, but Kate didn't need to be told that her defiance of the morning would be punished.

The maid left, closing the door softly behind her. Kate sighed and rose to her feet, wandering listlessly to the window. Several men stood in the courtyard below. It was lit by flaring torches along the four walls, illuminating the shrouded figures with a fleeting, irregular light. Three of them separated from the group and disappeared from view, into the hall. Kate remained at her post until she heard the door open behind her.

"Did you have a comfortable day?"

She didn't turn around. She continued to stare blankly into the darkening skies, ignoring Abaus' determinedly pleasant question. The door closed once more.

"Turn around, Kathryn."

She knew that she probably should do as he said, but that stubborn, angry part of her mind refused to allow her to obey. A few moments later, a hand closed on her arm. Abaus turned her to face him. His eyes were flashing with anger, his lips pressed tightly together, and dazedly she realized that he, too, was beautiful, much like the loveliness of a carnivorous cat. Lithe, feline, and deadly.

"You should take care," he warned her in a soft voice. "I do not permit disobedience."

"You can't prevent it either," she pointed out, unable to stop herself.

"I could," he said meaningfully.

She looked up at him for a moment, then dropped her eyes.

His hand came up under her chin, lifting her face. His cold eyes searched hers for a moment and then narrowed. "Still mourning my late cousin, are you?"

She jerked her chin from his icy fingers. "Don't you dare mention him!"

"Why not? I have known him longer than you," he purred.

"Fair enough; just leave me alone."

"I don't think so," he retorted. His hand returned to her face, stroking the curve of her cheek with one long, slender finger. "You have a duty to perform, little Kathryn."

His finger moved down her neck even as his hand tightened on her arm. She felt his magic rising around her, pulsing in the air that seemed to be suddenly too heavy. When his hand traced the line of her breast, running gently over the nipple, she clenched her jaw.

I will not let it be so easy for him, she thought, grinding her teeth together. As if he'd heard her thought, Abaus smiled. His hand firmed on her body, squeezing her breast while his thumb moved idly back and forth until her nipple hardened under his touch.

"Your body is so eager for pleasure," he noted clinically. Kate made as if to jerk away from his grip, but he countered the move easily and pushed her back against the wall. The unyielding stone at her back gave her nowhere to go. His hand continued to wander over her, caressing her body through the thin fabric of her gown. He moved it back to her face, trapping her chin in his fingers while he stared intently into her eyes. Without a word, he lowered his mouth to hers. Startled, she fought against the strength of his grip but couldn't escape. His cold lips moved lazily against hers, then forced her mouth open with a swift, brutal thrust of his tongue. All the while, the desire was rising within her, fuelled by the inexorable encouragement of his magic.

His lips moved away, sliding sensuously over the line of her jaw to her throat. His body pressed into hers, crushing her breasts against his chest while his tongue traced small, cold circles on the sensitive curve of her neck. Kate bit her lip until she tasted blood, trying to drown out the allure of the lust burning inside her with pain. His hands moved into her hair, threading into it with fierce strength. He bent suddenly and pressed his lips to her breast, moistening the front of her gown as his teeth grazed her nipple. Her breath came faster as his hair brushed against the end of her chin with its silky texture. His mouth moved leisurely across her chest, attacking the other nipple with the same teasing, arousing little bites. One of his hands slid down from her hair to the neck of the gown. With one sharp pull, the thin fabric ripped almost to her waist. Impatiently, he pulled the gaping dress down her arms, baring her breasts to his eyes and demanding mouth. Her pulse sped up; helplessly she felt the waves of passion

washing over her, superseding every other thought or emotion. Her defiance, her anger, vanished under a relentless escalation of lust.

His arm moved around her waist, lifting her from the floor. She was amazed at this show of strength; his arm didn't tremble at all as he supported her weight. Her feet dangled several inches above the floor as he fastened his mouth to her breast, sucking hard on the nipple. Her breasts were aching, throbbing under the assault. With three or four long strides, he strode to the bed, his tongue never pausing as it flickered against her flesh. He laid her down gently, and as she sank into the softness of the mattress his mouth lifted from her breast. He kissed her again, this time with as much seductive gentleness as demanding passion. Helpless against the desire he'd caused in her, she found herself responding instinctively as he lowered himself onto her pliant body, her tongue moving sinuously with his own. His fingers wound their way into her hair again, twining long strands of it around his hands. Her body welcomed his weight, molding itself to his muscled length.

Kate closed her eyes. The act was more than a response to his seduction; it was an admission of defeat, of surrender to his wishes and his intentions. Abaus sensed that immediately. His lips left hers, traveling down her throat to her breasts again with greedy haste. His hands moved on her body again, leaving her hair to stroke her heated flesh with strong, sure movements. The fabric of her torn gown restrained her arms, leaving her helpless beneath him. When his head moved lower, tracing wet, cold circles on her belly, his hands moved up to capture her breasts, twisting and rolling her nipples until she thought she would die of longing.

All the while, the magical pulsation of his power swelled around her, driving her body to greater heights of passion. Her resistance was gone; she wanted him as desperately as he commanded her to desire him. Her fingers itched to move across his skin, to pull his head back to hers in a silent demand for a kiss. Instead there was a tearing sound as he shredded the remnants of her gown from waist to hem.

His hand slipped under the waistband of the strange undergarments she wore, which were almost like shorts, pulling them down her slim legs with feverish haste.

Almost immediately, his fingers raced back up her leg. Her thighs quivered as his cold touch cupped her sex. He stood up, his hand still toying with the moist heat between her legs.

She heard the rustle of his shirt as he threw it off and the slither of his trousers hitting the floor. She moved restlessly as he continued to tantalize her with the light touch, never giving her what she craved but still driving her lust with feather-light brushes against her clitoris. Her body moved under his hand. She was unable to keep from responding to the stimulation, to the command of his power.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when lips touched her ankle. They moved like a brand of ice up the inside of her leg, nibbling mercilessly at her skin while his fingers continued their taunting play. When his mouth reached her thigh, he grazed his teeth along her skin. Instinctively, her thighs turned outwards, her body already longing for the feel of his cock sliding inside her, for the violence of their mating. He ignored the silent invitation, his lips gliding over the curve of her hip to her abdomen, his finger toying almost absently with her clitoris.

His hand left her. Before she had time to utter a sound of protest, his mouth clamped upon her sex with ferocious possession. His tongue manipulated her throbbing clit swiftly as his arms restrained her legs on either side of his head. She bucked wildly, the change of speed driving her into the throes of lust-driven frenzy, but she was unable to escape the way he aroused her, his clever, cruel tongue vibrating upon her so swiftly that it dazed her. Her pussy contracted painfully with thwarted desire. Her breath shuddered in her throat as she frantically tried to free herself from his grasp. The muscles of his arms tightened, preventing her from moving even an inch away from his wicked mouth. Then his tongue moved lower, diving into her quivering flesh. A finger replaced his tongue on her clit, working it furiously while his tongue moved inside her.

It wasn't enough. His tongue was too soft to satisfy the desire she had for hard, fast sex. Without realizing it, she heard herself moan.

Instantly, he released her. She felt him position himself between her legs, the head of his cock nudging against the lips of her pussy. His hands moved back to her

breasts, kneading them strongly. She moved slightly, feeling his cock slide along the slick opening of her, and knew a moment of satisfaction when he, too, groaned slightly. He remained where he was, however, teasing her with his closeness while he rolled her nipples between his fingers. She moved again, more insistently this time, and felt his body shudder. In the next second, he plunged into her, his hard, pulsing shaft filling her. She gasped when he stilled, letting her adjust to the size of him. The throbbing of his cock drove her wild, and she clenched her muscles around him so that he drew in a shuddering breath. Then he began to move, slowly, deliberately, bringing himself nearly free of her and then impaling her once more. The movement was torturous and sensual, at once cruel and exciting.

He knew what she wanted. He'd driven her there. He just wasn't going to give it to her without a fight.

His hands left her breasts and moved to her hips, lifting her from the bed. His pace never varied; it remained the same, slow, titillating tempo. Kate twisted her face into the bedclothes, biting her lip. Just as he wouldn't give *her* the satisfaction of what her body pleaded silently for, *she* wouldn't surrender to his silent demand.

She would not touch him.

He increased the strength of the magical grip he had upon her desires, intensifying the pleasure to the point where she wanted to scream. His cock slid in and out in a leisurely, almost absent-minded way. Her fingers clutched the covers, refusing to follow his silent command to move onto his flesh. Instead, she contracted her muscles around his cock again.

And she won.

He growled suddenly and slammed into her. The violence of the move made her eyes fly open in shock. Fury was written on his face, mixed with lust and triumph. She watched as he began to thrust recklessly into her, his straining cock scraping against her flesh. Her passion seared her body, forcing her to thrill to every movement he made, and every touch of his hands against her skin. His fingers dug into the flesh of her hips fiercely pulling her higher so that he could move quicker.

The orgasm took them both at the same time, slicing through their sex like a knife. As the paroxysms wracked her body, Kate felt a tiny thrill of satisfaction.

She had won.

When he finally stopped, he stared at her for a moment, his eyes narrowed in thought. She sensed the speculation in them, the tremor of suspicion mingled with a touch of challenge. There was no need for words; he knew as well as she that without his magic, he couldn't have her, but even with it, he still couldn't touch her core of independence. He couldn't compel her to do his will. In fact, she had shown her ability to coerce him.

Kate couldn't help it. She let a small smile curve her lips, a sarcastic expression of triumph to let him know that she was fully aware of his thoughts.

Epilogue

It was still dark outside. Much to Kate's horror, Abaus had elected to remain in her bed. He slept now, his breathing deep and regular, with a slight frown on his face.

Kate couldn't sleep. She knew that his presence in her bed was intended as a punishment for her, to let her know that no matter how great a victory she'd thought she had won he was still the stronger. He would sleep where he wanted, without fear, and if it caused her any discomfort so much the better.

She studied his face in the moonlight, diluted by the sheer fabrics over the lone window. Now that she looked closely at him, the resemblance between Abaus and Briason was more pronounced. They had the same sculpted, high-cheeked bone structure, the same sensuous curve to their mouths. Whereas Briason's handsomeness glowed like a benediction, Abaus' was more sinisterly alluring. She sighed silently.

Two weeks ago, she would have called all of her old friends if she'd awakened and found a man like this in her bed. Now all she wanted to do was curl up into a tight little ball and cry. There was no denying the sex was fantastic. But... but...

Briason.

She spoke his name silently, longingly.

Nemida?

Kate froze. She almost laughed, then thought better of it. She must be imagining things! After all, that almost was like an --

-- answer.

Kathryn? Can you hear me?

Briason! Her heart started to pound uncomfortably. *Are you all right?*

I improve. The flat statement was devoid of any emotion. She knew he would say no more than that. *Are you... safe?*

As safe as I can be, she retorted sourly.

There was silence for a moment. Kate was jubilant over this new discovery. She could actually *talk* to him!

Has Abaus tried to break our bonding?

Kate's excitement dissolved. She hesitated, then answered, *Yes.*

I will kill him.

She shivered. She knew that Briason meant exactly what he said. *What do I do?*

Do nothing, he replied sternly. Do what you must to survive, to keep him from guessing that our bond is still intact. I will come for you.

There's no way to get in here! Only he can get that bridge across --

Ah. He has you in his mountain fortress, does he? Briason's voice was tinged with grim satisfaction. There are other ways to get to you than that bridge. Do not doubt, nemida, that I will come for you. Until then, you must be careful. Has he hurt you?

Only my pride, she admitted, the honest response tasting bitter in her mouth.

Pride is easily repaired. There is no shame in submitting to something compelled upon you, Kathryn.

Maybe not for you.

I will be there in a few days. Be patient, nemida; do nothing to arouse his suspicions. When I arrive, I will deal with him.

Kate bit her lip. "Deal with him" had a very ominous ring to it. *All right. Be careful.*

His presence was gone as abruptly as it had come. She rolled onto her side, staring at the wall. There was obviously something going on here that she didn't know about. Why were Briason and Abaus at such odds? Briason had mentioned something about a political scenario involving his father once; could it have something to do with that? It was apparent to her that the two men had hated each other for a long time, well predating her arrival here.

Maybe there was something else she could do.

She was here in Abaus' fortress, trapped until Briason came for her. Abaus was complacent, believing that, in time, he could sever the magical bond between her and her supposedly dead lover. He never spared a thought for her proximity, never considered it feasible that she might just escape with knowledge of whatever it was he was planning.

She smiled slowly. She could spy on Abaus; gather information about his plans that would benefit his cousin immensely. Let Abaus think that she was helpless; it would only serve her purpose better in the end.

She wasn't sure when she'd become so committed to Briason. She simply knew, instinctively, that he was in the right and Abaus was wrong. Even now, just thinking his name brought warmth to her insides that all of Abaus' cold magic couldn't overcome.

Briason.

The bond he'd spoken of had come to pass. She hugged herself tightly, a small smile on her lips. If she didn't know better, she'd swear she was in love with him.

Of course, that was impossible.

She glanced around the room, inexplicably annoyed. What she wouldn't give for a lamp! She wanted to prowl around the room, search the castle for something -- *anything* -- that would bring Briason to her safely.

There was a sudden hiss. Her eyes jerked to the table in time to see a tiny flame flare from the wick. As she watched, the flame strengthened until it cast a glowing, golden circle of light over her side of the room.

Kate smiled slowly. Perhaps magic wasn't so hard to manage here after all.

Isabelle Spurrier

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