

The Shequanti 2: The Gilded Sphinx

Isabelle Spurrier

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Kathryn is a catalyst -- a well of human magic -- coveted by royal cousins, warring Elves on the parallel homeworld of the Shequanti. Determined to be king, ruthless Abaus seeks to control her using magical sexual captivity. Wanting only her love, Briason confronts his wicked cousin to save Kathryn, sparking a war that engulfs their entire kingdom. Kathryn will be no man's pawn, not even Briason's. She must embrace her own magic and use all her power on her lover's behalf. She'll do anything to be with Briason -- even if it means crossing worlds.

Prologue

"You are not well enough," the healer said faintly.

"I do not have a choice, Dunna," Briason said, wincing as he struggled to pull a tunic over the thick bandages bound around his torso. "I must go."

"Is this human so important to you then?" she asked bitterly.

Briason regarded her. The Shequanti woman was perhaps half a head shorter than he, with long fair hair bundled into a snood and angry, flashing dark eyes.

"Yes," he said gently, trying to ignore the look of pain on her face. "She is my *nemida*."

"Briason, you're held together with sinew and linen! You can't be thinking about going after her. It's insanity!"

"I will take some of my men with me," he replied stubbornly. "She is frightened and alone. I must free her."

"To what purpose?" she demanded furiously. "To marry her?"

Briason brushed past her, his lips pressed tightly together. In the doorway, he paused. "No," he said, his voice almost inaudible. "To send her back."

Chapter One

Kate had discovered the joys of her own company since her arrival at Abaus' fortress. All during the long, tedious days, she was left to fend for herself while the fortress bustled around her with activity. She had no books to read, no television to watch, nothing to do at all. She reflected bitterly that this was sort of like Gilligan's Island for Tolkien fiends; as it was, for Kate it was dreadfully boring.

Until night. At night, Abaus came to her room with all of his clever, seductive magic and scarcely hidden anger. Every night, she resolved to find a way to resist him, and every night he subdued her will until she found herself in the throes of ecstasy. All the while, he watched her, his feline eyes searching her face for some indication that he had finally succeeded in shattering the bond between Kate and his supposedly dead cousin.

Briason.

Abaus had no idea that Briason lived; he had no clue that he was on his way here to snatch Kate from the mage's fortress. She had no idea how he would manage such a complicated feat. The fortress sat upon a sheer pillar of rock with no way to cross safely to the other side as far as Kate could tell, but if Briason said he was coming for her, then he was.

That was all there was to it.

Kate smiled secretly. She, too, had plans. For the past several days, she'd been trying to befriend the sullen maids who cleaned around the fortress. This morning, she had a feeling that she would succeed with one of them. Mesyndre was a beautiful, sulky girl who'd responded with almost pathetic shyness when Kate had spoken kindly to her the day before. It was ludicrous, the way that the tall Shequanti woman had looked down at Kate's five foot four inches with admiration.

And all for scolding one of the young men nearby because he watched lazily as the girl struggled with a metal tub that was obviously too heavy for her. Kate smoothed the skirts of the long, blue gown she wore and smiled, complacently this time.

You'll always catch more flies with sugar than vinegar. Apparently her grandmother had been right.

* * *

The various men of the fortress were accustomed to Kate now and paid her no attention as she wandered through its halls. Everything about the complex was grey: grey stone walls and floors, grey-cloaked Shequanti warriors, even the light was of a greyish hue, screened as it was usually by the never-ending flow of clouds around the high-perched fortress. Today, a chilly rain fell, wetting down the grey stones of the walled courtyard until they looked remarkably like slabs of obsidian.

None of the Shequanti spoke to her. Kate had a feeling that this was under Abaus' orders. He seemed like the possessive type. He couldn't keep them from looking at her, and stare they did. Most of them were covert about it, but she could feel their eyes on her as she passed. One or two of them were bolder, watching her openly. She made note of these men, filing them away in the clinical portion of her mind.

Her seemingly aimless wandering eventually served its purpose. She found Mesyndre in the great hall, sweeping around the long tables. Kate smiled at the girl and was rewarded with a shy smile in return.

"How are you this morning?" Kate asked.

"Fine, my lady," Mesyndre replied with a curtsy.

I'll never get used to that, Kate thought.

The girl continued her work, slight color staining her cheeks.

"I was wondering if there were some parts of the fortress I haven't seen yet," Kate said casually.

"You haven't been in Lord Abaus' wing yet," the girl said.

Kate frowned. "That's true."

"I could show you," Mesyndre offered.

"I'd like that."

Mesyndre rested her broom against the high dais and beckoned to Kate with a smile. Kate lifted her skirts and followed the girl up the four steps to the dais. Much to her surprise, Mesyndre moved aside a tapestry to reveal a corridor.

"What's this?"

"The servants' passage," Mesyndre replied, letting the tapestry fall closed behind them as they entered the passage.

"I had no idea this was here."

"It's to help create the illusion that the servants are invisible," the girl said, a definite note of bitterness in her voice. "We are low-caste and therefore unworthy."

"Low caste?"

"I am not of noble birth," Mesyndre explained. "My parents were servants to Lord Abaus' family as were theirs. It is our ordained role in life, to wait upon the members of the royal family."

"Royal family?"

Mesyndre looked surprised. "Didn't you know? Lord Abaus is the eldest son of the king's brother."

"Does that mean that Briason is the king's son?"

Mesyndre laughed. "No, my lady. Prince Kaberon is the next in age to our king. He is older than Prince Worakon, who is my master's father."

"I see."

The women subsided, walking silently through the corridor. No one else was in sight. The corridor ended abruptly in an intersection. Stairs to both the left and the right let Kate know that they were in the corners of the massive square fort. Mesyndre took the right-hand stairs and Kate followed her curiously. The girl paused by a heavy tapestry, putting her face to it.

"No one is there," she reported with satisfaction, and Kate realized that there must be some sort of spy hole in the fabric. Mesyndre pulled the tapestry aside and gestured for Kate to precede her.

If this place is riddled with tunnels behind the main rooms and they're all masked by these tapestries, I might be able to find out something important, she thought, chewing on her lip meditatively as she entered the room.

This room was vastly different from the other rooms she'd seen. Although the omnipresent stone walls were here as well, they were a strange, gleaming white. Upon examining them further, Kate realized that they weren't painted at all. Instead, each individual stone was sheathed in some other material that looked a lot like mother-of-pearl. The walls refracted the light, shimmering with opalescent color. The room was lavishly furnished. Thick, white carpets lay upon the floor and much of the furniture was inlaid with silver ornamentation. The bed was against the far wall, a huge four-poster of some strange, light wood with silver snakes curving around the posts. It was heaped high with fat pillows and a white furred coverlet.

"Jesus Christ," Kate muttered. "This guy has the worst taste I've ever seen."

"I beg your pardon, my lady?"

"Nothing. Any other interesting rooms around here?"

"I'll show you his workroom," Mesyndre suggested. Kate followed the girl back into the corridor. About thirty feet away, there was a heavy, iron-studded wooden door.

"No tapestries here I see," Kate remarked.

"No. There are times that it would be death to walk into Lord Abaus' workroom," the girl replied with a shiver.

"He'd kill you for that?"

"Perhaps not on purpose. Lord Abaus is a powerful mage, and to interrupt him at his work might make something go wrong."

"Quit calling him that," Kate said irritably. "He may be a lord here, but if you get right down to it he's nothing more than a man. Period."

"I couldn't do that!" Mesyndre seemed genuinely shocked. Kate sighed.

"I'll bet he really loves all of this 'lord' stuff. It probably feeds his ego more than anything else."

"Ego?" the girl asked.

"Don't worry about it."

Mesyndre shrugged and put her eye to another spy hole concealed in a knot of wood on the heavy door. Kate waited while she pulled up the latch on the door then followed her into the room.

It was entirely different from Abaus' bedroom. This room was dark and cold, the stone walls and floor unrelieved by any sort of decoration. Huge shelves lined one wall, full of books and rolled-up bits of paper. In the center was a huge oaken table, while behind it was a long worktable that was crowded with jars and bottles.

"Bad taste and a mad scientist," Kate noted in disgust. "Could this get any worse?"

Mesyndre seemed uncomfortable, shifting from foot to foot like she was standing on hot coals. Kate ignored her, moving around the edge of the table to examine the objects of the worktable. Something metallic glinted from amidst the clutter and she picked it up curiously. It was a small knife, with an ornate hilt and slender blade. Kate's mouth fell open.

It was made of gold.

Every square inch of the blade was covered in intricately etched designs, whorls and spirals and shapes interlocked in a pattern so complex that she couldn't pick it out. The golden hilt was carved as well, the long, sinuous shape of serpents coiling lazily around it. The knife was heavy, ornate, and utterly useless.

"This is so stupid," she muttered. "What good is a gold knife? It's too soft to cut anything."

She set her finger against the edge and was rewarded immediately with a sharp twinge of pain. She dropped the knife, stuck her bleeding finger into her mouth and thought ruefully, *It's hard enough to cut skin at least.*

A scrap of paper suddenly caught her eye. Written on it were only a few sentences. *I have managed to eliminate my cousin as a threat. It will be much easier to overcome Kaberon's resistance with Briason gone. The planned invasion of the Council should be*

successful now. I have summoned a human woman to create a new bond. She is more powerful than --

"My lady! Put that back! What if he comes?"

Kate replaced the parchment on the table. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking."

Mesyndre hovered in the doorway, her eyes darting nervously around the room. "Let's go," she urged. "I wouldn't want him to find us in here."

Obediently, Kate followed her back into the corridor. Mesyndre shut the door softly, careful lest any unguarded bang resonate down the empty, cool corridors.

"Look, I'm really trying to find something to read," Kate said abruptly. "Is there a library somewhere in this mausoleum?"

"I didn't know humans could read." Mesyndre's face was devoid of anything other than innocent curiosity. Kate decided to let the comment pass.

"Most of us can," she said dryly, "although some people just pretend to read."

"Why would they do that?"

"To try to appear smarter than they are."

Mesyndre stopped with a sudden gasp. Kate opened her mouth to ask what the problem was, but then she felt it. The corridor was suddenly icy, bitterly cold with a chill that didn't emanate from the cheerless stones. Without knowing why, she clenched her teeth against a surge of panic. When the girl gasped again and cringed back against her, Kate looked past her.

Abaus stood just outside the tapestry that led to his room. His blue eyes were glacial as he stared at the two women. "Having a pleasant tour?" he asked, his voice light.

Kate stepped around the terrified girl and faced him squarely. "No, not really. I was looking for a library."

"Why?"

"Because I am bored and want something to read," she replied. "What other reason could there be?"

"Did you find anything to read in my workroom?"

Abaus' voice continued to be conversational, but Kate knew that he was furious. His eyes, narrowed with suspicion, were all the clues she needed. Despite herself, she swallowed hard.

"No, I didn't. There was nothing but a bunch of old jars in there. Quite frankly, I think that room could use a good cleaning."

Abaus regarded her with cold speculation tightening his lips. His eyes darted once to the panic-stricken girl cowering behind her. "Won't you both step into my chambers?" he asked softly.

"Why?" Kate demanded.

Abaus barely spared her a glance. "Because I told you to."

Chapter Two

Kate bit her lip. Desperately, she tried to think of a way to demur. There was a loud click behind her and she whirled to see two of Abaus' men-at-arms standing not five feet away. Her shoulders slumped. There was no other choice. She fastened her fingers around Mesyndre's arm and pulled her past the stone-faced mage into his private chambers. The warriors followed them in. Abaus came last, closing the door behind him.

Kate lifted her chin. She remained silent as Abaus stalked past them. He settled into a large chair, resting his slim hands on the ends of the arms with a graceful lack of deliberation, and stared at her.

"I wonder," he began, looking at the trembling Mesyndre, "why you saw fit to violate my privacy."

His voice was gentle, almost compassionate, and Kate winced. This was going to be bad.

The girl stared at him, her face bleached of all color. She seemed unable to respond. A tiny smile curved Abaus' lips.

Kate's eyes narrowed. He was enjoying this!

"You know," she heard herself saying in a deliberately insulting tone of voice, "they say that men who get their kicks from torturing those weaker than themselves are really nothing but cowards."

Oh, shit. When will I learn to keep my mouth shut?

Abaus' smile vanished instantly. "Do they?" he asked softly.

"Why torture her?" she challenged him. "It was my idea."

"So I should torture you then, in my cowardly way?"

"It would be fairer."

"Perhaps it would," he agreed, and she shuddered at the amusement in his silky voice. His eyes left her face. He glanced at the warriors still standing on either side of the door and nodded once. A moment later, Kate's arms were roughly seized from behind.

A swift mental image of Briason's bound, bleeding form dangling from a tree branch made her knees go suddenly weak. When the soldiers tied her hands together with a coil of rough rope and tossed the rope over the bar connecting the end posts of the massive bed, everything suddenly swam in her vision. She blinked rapidly, trying to control the roaring in her ears. When they stepped away from her, she found that her lower legs were pressed against the bed frame, her feet resting firmly on the floor.

"You're afraid." Abaus had moved right behind her, his feet as silent as a cat's, and murmured the statement into her ear.

She didn't reply; instead she clenched her jaws shut. *I will not let him have the satisfaction of seeing my fear.*

"Don't worry," he whispered, his body pressed into her back. "I have no intention of marking your beautiful skin."

Behind her, Mesyndre made a quick noise of protest. Kate couldn't turn to see what was happening to the girl.

"You see, there are many ways to torture someone," Abaus continued, his voice low and throaty. "You think I'm going to whip you, don't you? No, Kathryn, I have no intention of using you as I did my cousin."

Something cold and metallic traced a line down the curve of her neck. She cringed away from it, then held herself perfectly still as it moved under the neck of her gown.

It was a knife.

Kate could barely breathe. Abaus turned the blade so that the dull edge pressed into her skin, and the fabric of her gown parted easily along the seam. "So lovely," he said, using the blade to slice the sleeve until it slithered down her body, baring the curve of her breast. The knife slid slowly across the back of her neck, repeating the same

move on the other sleeve. The torn fabric sagged, held up only by her breasts as the blade continued its deliberate journey, tracing a cold kiss along her skin. He moved the point of the knife between her breasts, using it to drag the gown down to rest on her hips. The frigid air of the room assaulted her skin, causing her nipples to harden while gooseflesh raced down her arms.

The knife left her flesh. His hands snaked around her, cupping her breasts with chilly fingers. She felt his breath on the back of her neck as his body hardened against hers. Mesyndre came into view, pulled to the side of the bed by the two warriors. The girl was shaking so violently that Kate thought she might faint.

"Oh, yes," Abaus said quietly, his fingers pinching lightly at Kate's nipples. "There are many other ways to torture a woman, Kathryn."

One of the guards held Mesyndre's arms while the other unlaced her gown. The look of terror on her face suddenly changed. As the men stripped her, Mesyndre's eyes drifted closed. The tension left her body. Abaus made a sound low in his throat and Kate knew that he was using his magic on the girl, creating that same, pulsing desire within her body that he poured into Kate every night. Mesyndre didn't struggle when they pushed her onto the bed. She lay there, her nude body creating a spot of warmth against the fur coverlet. The warriors stared at her in silence.

"You probably have wondered why the Shequanti prefer human females as lovers," Abaus said, still murmuring as his hands moved slowly over her body. His voice changed as he said to the men, "You may proceed."

Abaus' hands moved to her hips. The two warriors removed their clothes quickly as the mage worked the shredded remnants of Kate's gown from her body. As the two men climbed onto the bed with the naked, compliant girl, Abaus removed the last of Kate's garments. She hung there, completely nude in the cold room, as the men knelt over Mesyndre. She noticed that these men, anonymous among the battalion of Shequanti men in the fortress, were just as handsome in their own way as Abaus and his cousin. Their bodies were lean and muscled and both of them hardened as they stared down at Mesyndre's body. Almost simultaneously, their cocks rose. Abaus'

hands returned to Kate's breasts, kneading them gently while his cold lips moved on the curve of her neck.

"Look at her," he murmured, nipping lightly at her earlobe. "She isn't resisting, is she?"

"That's your doing," Kate retorted.

"No." He attached his mouth to her neck, sucking on it hard. "It isn't."

One of the men leaned over the girl, his hands closing on her breasts. As he started to caress her, Mesyndre's eyes opened. She smiled, a slow, lazy smile, and arched into his hands. The other man bent over her, dragging his mouth over her abdomen.

"Not even I can create passion in two women at once," Abaus said quietly. He stepped away from her abruptly. Kate was left alone, restrained, to watch the events unfold upon the bed. A second later, the magical desire began to churn in her belly.

Mesyndre's hands moved to the back of the first man's neck, pulling him down to suck her breasts. Kate bit the inside of her lip. The second man's tongue was flickering against the girl's white thigh, his hands dragging across her hips sensuously. As Kate watched, the first man moved to kiss the girl. Mesyndre's mouth opened beneath his, and Kate caught a glimpse of their tongues twining languorously together. Her vagina contracted suddenly as her body awakened to arousal.

"She is lovely," Abaus murmured from right behind her. He did not touch her and Kate was suddenly craving the feel of his body against hers. "Do you see how eagerly she responds to them, Kathryn?"

It was true. Mesyndre's body was moving in response to the twin assault upon her body, her back arching, her legs spreading as the men moved over her. The second man bent over and spread her pussy wide. Kate was helpless; she could do nothing but watch as the man's tongue started to tease Mesyndre's clitoris, vibrating across it with quick, light strokes. She was compelled by Abaus' magic, by the passion rising within her, to stare, fascinated, at this demonstration.

"Shequanti women are insatiable," Abaus whispered. "A single man cannot satisfy their urges. They crave sex the same way that a miser lusts for gold."

His fingers traced a light pattern on the outside of her legs and Kate sucked in a quick breath. Mesyndre was writhing on the bed now, her breath coming in short gasps. The first man crouched over her on hands and knees, his face near the girl's navel. Without hesitation, she reached up and took his cock in her hands, her fingers stroking the tip. A moment later, her mouth encircled his swollen cock. The man shuddered as she moved back and forth, slowly, her tongue circling his cock greedily while the other man lapped at her pussy. Kate's body was burning with heat. Abaus continued his tantalizing touch on her skin. It was never enough to satisfy. The tickling drag of his fingers only made her want more even as his magic seared within her.

"However, Shequanti women are lacking one important thing," Abaus continued, and his voice was suddenly matter-of-fact. His hands moved up her flat belly, stroking her skin lightly. "Do you see what it is yet?"

Mesyndre shrieked. She collapsed onto the bed, freeing the man's cock. Together, the men moved the girl so that she lay sideways on the bed, their hands continuing to caress and stroke her flesh. She moaned, her head thrashing from side to side.

"Shequanti women never reach fulfillment," Abaus said. "No matter how much stimulation they receive, they never climax. During foreplay, they are extravagant, even frenzied lovers. But during sex itself --"

His voice trailed off. As one of the men positioned himself between her legs, Mesyndre suddenly sat up. Her face was flushed with desire. The warrior spread her legs wide, while the second man slipped behind her. One big hand cupped her breast while the other slid into her pubic hair. As he began to massage her sex, Mesyndre's eyes closed and she sagged backwards. The first man buried himself in her.

"It takes two men to make the sexual act bearable for a Shequanti woman," Abaus said. "One man has to stimulate her so that the other can mate with her. It forces us to find men we are compatible with if we wish to mate. There are some who find pleasure in both men and women. I am not one of those."

Kate's head was swirling dizzily. She barely registered it when Abaus said, "Stop!"

Immediately, the man withdrew. Without a word, he lifted the girl from the bed. Mesyndre didn't protest as she was carried from the room, trailed by the second man.

"We should let them continue in privacy," Abaus said as Kate heard the tapestry move. His hands fell on her waist and lifted her from the ground, turning her so that when she was set down she faced him. He was unclothed, his eyes burning with that cold intensity that she both feared and desired.

"Our women do not respond like you do, Kathryn," he said. His eyes roamed over her body possessively. "Human women are gratifying lovers. Their bodies react in fascinating ways."

He put his hand to her cheek, his fingertips running along the curve of it. As he moved down her throat to her breast, Kate felt the tide of desire building within her again. His hand slid over her belly to her hip, then around to the front of her leg. She shuddered as it slid between her legs. He parted her sex gently, his thumb barely moving against her clitoris.

"Human women get wet," he breathed, staring at her face fixedly. "Their bodies accommodate their lovers."

His finger slid into her. Kate shuddered at the sensation. Abaus smiled. "You see, I know that you want me."

His mouth fell upon hers, forcing it open with a quick thrust of his tongue. His fingers mimicked the movement of his tongue, gliding in and out and sliding sensuously over her passion-slicked flesh. When he pulled away, his eyes were slightly glazed.

"Nothing arouses a Shequanti more than the scent of a human woman," he said, his voice lower now. Her hands dropped abruptly as the rope fell from the canopy. Abaus pushed her back so that she fell on the fur-covered bed. With one quick move, he tied her hands to the post at the foot of the bed. He stalked around the bed, lithe as a cat, and stood over her.

"You have gone out of your way not to touch me," he commented, his eyes flashing in anger. "This time, you will beg to touch me."

He grabbed her ankles and spread her legs, settling between them with a slight smile on his face. His eyes raked over her, lingering on her exposed sex. He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes, and then opened them once more.

"Nothing arouses me more than your scent, Kathryn, save perhaps your taste."

Deliberately, he bent and licked a long, wet path along her thigh. "The taste of your skin."

He moved over her and pressed another savage kiss on her mouth, his tongue compelling her own to mate with his. "The taste of your kisses."

He reared over her, staring down at her. His hands curled around her breasts once more, his thumbs teasing her nipples into erect buds. Without warning, he fell upon her pussy. His tongue moved slowly through her pubic hair, and then circled her clitoris. Abaus raised his head, hovering just above her so that she could feel his breath moist against her skin. "But the taste of a human woman's arousal is addictive."

He straightened. His hands moved over her flesh. Kate moaned in frustration. She wanted to feel his mouth on her. She lifted her hips impatiently and stared up at Abaus.

"It's addictive to you as well," he noted. A feral smile tightened his face. Despite the passion throbbing within her, Kate felt a cold chill along her spine at his expression.

"You forgot, didn't you?" he asked her.

She was bewildered. Abaus' smile vanished. He leaned closer to her and growled, "This is torture, remember?"

He impaled her. As his full cock slammed into her, Kate gasped in shock. His fingers dug into her hips as he moved inside of her, taking long, deep strokes. His taking of her was savage, almost violent, and her body responded in kind. A mindless ecstasy drove her to meet his angry thrusts, her hips moving of their own accord to match his driving pace. She no longer felt the cold; all she felt was the heat pulsing between them as he plunged furiously into her willing pussy. She felt his cock harden

even more as her passion increased, the grinding escalation of pleasure taking her to the brink of a climax.

He sensed the reaction within her. Abruptly, he withdrew.

The unanticipated disappointment of her body was almost painful. Abaus was breathing hard, his cock still pulsing against his stomach. Mindless with surprise, she tried to free her hands from the rope, feeling the cord chafe at her wrists. A moment later, his mouth swept across the skin of her belly. His lips fastened on her clit, sucking on it strongly. Kate screamed. The resumption of pleasure seared through her with a slash of pain. His fingers worked into her vagina, moving with quick surety against her inflamed flesh. Again, the impending orgasm swelled within her and she writhed against the bed. Just as the sensation grew to the point where she could no longer contain it, he sat up.

"Torture," he growled. "Tell me, Kathryn; is this torture?"

"Yes," she whispered, spasms of unrelieved pleasure tightening her body.

"There's only one way to make it end," he said quietly.

She knew what he wanted. The demands of her body made it impossible for her to deny it to him. "I want to touch you," she murmured. "Please."

He stared at her for a moment. A slow, cruel smile stretched across his lips. His hand moved between her legs, manipulating her already over-stimulated clitoris with slow, circular strokes. Her legs trembled against his body, quivering with arousal. As her breath grew ragged, Abaus spoke. "You will not deny me again."

He buried his face in her, his lips pulling eagerly at the center of her desire. She screamed and fought frantically to free herself from the torturous pleasure his tongue and mouth were inflicting upon her helpless body, but his strong arms locked around her legs like iron bands. There was no escape, no matter how she turned and writhed; she could not evade the clever, cruel yearning he drove her body to. Her vagina contracted with frustrated longing as he pulled away.

"Say it, Kathryn: you will come willingly to my bed."

She was sobbing, both from thwarted desire and the realization that he would torture her until she agreed. Once she agreed, she would be expected to keep her word.

"Yes," she breathed.

"Why?"

"Because... because I want you."

Instantly, the rope fell away. He stretched his full length upon her, his body crushing her to the bed. When he lowered his lips to hers, she returned his kiss eagerly, her arms winding around his neck. Her fingers dug into his hair, pulling him closer to her. With a snarl of repressed passion, he buried himself within her in one swift movement. Again, it was as if he'd been seized by some frenzy. He drove into her with swift violence, the rigidity of his cock demanding that her body respond to his movements. Kate was helpless against it. Her pussy clenched tightly around him as her legs locked around his waist. He lifted her hips from the bed, pounding into her passionately.

As his orgasm exploded within her, she climaxed as well. The fury of the feeling almost left her unconscious and the whole room went black. Abaus collapsed against her, panting. As her vision cleared, she stared up at the ceiling.

I hope Briason comes soon, she thought. I don't know how much longer I can hold out against this man.

Chapter Three

Kathryn?

The question nudged her from sleep. Kate sat straight up, momentarily confused. She looked wildly around her room, trying to identify the source of the voice.

Kathryn.

Briason? Where are you? She noted that his voice sounded stronger.

I am here.

Here?

She hurled herself out of bed. In a flash, she was at the trunk and rummaging for clothes.

Can you make your way to the front gate of the fortress?

I can try, she replied dubiously.

I need you to get there. Are you alone?

She closed her eyes. There was a grim note in his voice that frightened her. *Yes, Abaus isn't here.*

He is probably in his workroom then, Briason said with satisfaction. *You must be very careful, Kathryn. If I must, I will come inside the fortress to get you, but I cannot guarantee my success. Many lives will be lost if I try it. If you can get to me, then I can get you without killing my own men.*

Kate hurriedly pulled on a dark dress and a pair of soft boots. She tied her hair back with a ribbon. *I'll try it. If I act like I'm just out for a walk no one will take much notice of me.*

Be careful.

Kate opened the door slowly. The fortress was silent, shrouded in its nocturnal isolation with an eerie detachment. She crept down the darkened hall, placing every step with deliberate care.

She knew that the hardest part would be the great hall. If any were still awake, they would be gathered there with their ale and the few women that inhabited this grim place. She spared a thought for Mesyndre. The girl had ducked her head earlier when Kate had passed her in the hall, whether from shame or anger Kate couldn't tell.

Moving cautiously, she snuck down the stairs. She could feel Briason's presence in her mind still, a gentle touch for reassurance. She couldn't blame him for not wanting to get his men killed. Any attempt on his part to force entry into the fortress would also alert Abaus that his despised cousin was still on the loose.

She stopped abruptly. *Briason?*

Yes?

Exactly how are you planning to get me anyway?

There was a slight pause. *You must trust me, Kathryn. I am waiting for you outside. Have no fear.*

That wasn't particularly helpful. She bit back a very unladylike curse and edged toward the end of the hall. Apparently it was empty.

Kate took a deep breath. It was now or never. Holding her skirts firmly in her hands to lessen the noise, she stepped around the corner into the dark emptiness of the great hall.

"You're up late."

Kate froze. Instantly, Briason's voice reentered her mind.

What is wrong, nemida?

"Are you looking for me perhaps?" Abaus sat alone at the high table, one leg cocked over the arm of his chair and a wineglass dangling loosely from his slender, elegant hand.

"No, I'm just taking a walk," she replied, taking care to sound normal.

"That's a pity," he remarked as he took another long drink of his wine. "I was hoping that you were seeking me out."

"No such luck," she said flippantly.

He eyed her over the rim of his glass. "So you don't find your bed lonely tonight, Kathryn?"

"No." As she uttered the flat denial, she frantically told Briason, *It's Abaus! He's in the hall and I can't get past him!*

"You will," Abaus said and Kate realized that he was somewhat drunk. "The bond you have with my dead cousin can't last much longer."

"You might be surprised."

Kathryn, can you outrun him?

I might be able to. He's drunk.

"Do you know why I hated Briason so much?" Abaus asked, splashing more wine into his goblet. "All my life, I've had to take second place to him. We were evenly matched in every way, but I was always the afterthought while he was the favorite."

Kate sidled toward the door, keeping her face turned to Abaus. "I have a sister like that," she admitted. "It does get tiresome."

"So you understand, then."

"Yes, I do."

How close are you to the door, Kathryn?

I'm at least fifty feet from it.

Abaus stood up suddenly. In the light that flickered on his face from the single torch, she saw some strange, new expression. She watched him warily, continuing her easy, casual trip across the hall. "He shouldn't have taken you. You were mine. I summoned you."

"You summoned me against my will. I was perfectly happy on my own world."

"I needed you." His voice was almost pleading. "I still need you, Kathryn."

"You just need my power," she retorted. "You don't need me, Abaus. Any human will do."

"Not like you," he muttered. "There's something different about you."

Thirty feet, Briason.

"You don't even know what your powers are," Abaus continued, his face working as if he tried to focus his eyes. "You would have been wasted on that world you come from, crawling around like a magicless animal among the other humans. Here, you have the potential to be a rarity."

"I don't want to be a rarity. I want to live my life, not produce power for you to suck from me."

Get ready to run, Kathryn.

"On this world, Kathryn, you could be a queen."

Kate laughed. "What makes you think that appeals to me?"

"Why don't you come have a glass of wine with me and I'll tell you," he offered.

Kate froze. Abaus' eyes had suddenly sharpened. He placed the wineglass on the table and peered at her through the gloom.

Run, Kathryn!

Kate hesitated only a second. Even as Abaus shouted, "Guards!" she took to her heels and ran for the arched doorway. Her feet pounded against the stones of the floor as she fled down the corridor.

She slammed into the wooden door. Sobbing for breath, she fumbled for the latch. As she heard the unmistakable sounds of pursuit entering the corridor, she managed to unlatch the door. Throwing it open, she stepped onto the wooden platform.

Briason wasn't there.

Briason! She screamed his name mentally as panic clutched her throat.

I am here, Kathryn. Just do as I say.

They're almost on me!

Jump.

"What?" she screamed out loud. "Are you absolutely fucking insane?"

Jump, he repeated patiently. I will catch you.

"Kathryn!"

Kate turned around slowly. Abaus stood in the doorway, warriors at his back. He frowned. "What are you doing?"

"I can't live like this," she faltered. "I can't be kept as your slave."

She took a step backwards, her hand automatically searching for something to grab onto. It wasn't as bad at night; she couldn't see the fathomless drop behind her. She knew it was there, however, and her stomach was churning with fear.

"I have not mistreated you," Abaus said carefully, a look of alarm crossing his face.

"Abducting me from my home is mistreatment," she said, her fingers clutching at nothingness. She took another hesitant step backwards.

Kathryn, jump!

It wasn't intentional. She had miscalculated the distance to the edge. Her foot slipped off the platform. The sudden shift of weight threw her off-balance, and she plummeted from the platform into the darkness. The last thing she heard before she fainted in fright was Abaus screaming her name.

* * *

"She's coming to, my lord."

Kate's eyes fluttered open. She was lying on the ground, her skirts wet with dew, and supported from behind by someone. As her eyes focused, she began to notice small details around her. It was still night, but the area was illuminated by the faint ring of a moon overhead.

"Kathryn."

The voice came from behind her, rumbling against her back. She sat up and spun around with a glad cry. "Briason!"

She threw her arms around his neck and burst into tears.

"It's all right now, *nemida*," he murmured, holding her carefully. "I've got you; you're safe."

"We need to hurry," one of the other men urged.

"Can you walk?" Briason asked.

"I can walk," Kate said, wiping her face. "Let's go."

* * *

After a while, Kate managed to get the story out of Briason. They were in the bottom of the huge canyon, well below Abaus' fortress. His magical bond with Kate enabled him to catch her as she fell, easing her to the ground below. Although this sounded farfetched to Kate, there was no denying that it had been effective.

The canyon was thickly forested, lush with verdant life and soaring trees. A river coursed right through the center of it, the water roaring against jagged rocks carved from aeons of erosion. Briason had brought four Shequanti scouts with him. They moved with eyes darting in every direction and hands upon their sword hilts.

Briason looked pale, but otherwise all right. Kate noticed that his chest was bulkier and assumed that it was the result of bandages. Now that she was back with him, however, his outstanding beauty hit her anew. Already, she felt safer and happier just being with him. They stopped at sunrise for a quick meal, and continued on their swift journey.

The land of Shequanti was beautiful, Kate realized. Everything here seemed much greener, more colorful than it did at home. Probably the result of no pollution, she realized, as the sun gilded the deep, blue waters of the river. They followed the river downstream until early afternoon. At that point, the river branched into two different directions. The group followed the easternmost branch for a mile or so, and then rounded a small hill.

Kate stopped in surprise. There, moored alongside the shore, was a long, low boat. Several Shequanti lounged near it. Briason grunted in satisfaction as one of them stood and grinned.

"You got her, I see!" he called. This was an older Shequanti, his eyes crinkled at the corners from both sun and age.

"Yes," Briason replied. "Are we ready to go?"

"As soon as you board, we'll shove off," the man said. He took one admiring look at Kate and bowed low. "Welcome to the *Noble Imp*, my lady. We'll see you safely to Buonarre."

"Thank you," Kate said, and darted a look up at Briason. "Buonarre? Is that where we're going?"

"Yes," he replied, his face unreadable. "Let's get on board and get underway. I don't want Abaus to figure out that I have you."

* * *

The vessel wasn't really big enough to be called a ship, but it was a bit more than a boat. Briason escorted Kate into a tiny cabin. The room was furnished with a small cot and even a table and chair. He'd bowed slightly and left her, returning to the deck.

Kate sighed. She knew she couldn't be out in the open, just in case Abaus was looking for her. By the same token, she wished that Briason had stayed in here with her. The guilt was swelling more by the minute, and for some reason she felt like he blamed her for this. Although she knew she shouldn't, she allowed herself to wallow in the emotion.

By the time Briason did return, she sat on the edge of the cot with tears running down her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked sharply, shutting the small door behind him.

"I feel like this is entirely my fault," she replied miserably, glancing down at her clenched hands.

His face softened. "You shouldn't feel that way, Kathryn," he said in a gentle voice. "None of this is your responsibility. You did not choose to come here, and you did not choose to be used by Abaus. Any talk of fault should lie at his door."

"I should have been able to resist him," she murmured.

Briason shook his head. "No, *nemida*. It is not possible for a woman to resist Shequanti spells of desire. There can be no blame upon you."

She looked up at him. "How badly were you hurt?"

Briason hesitated, and then shrugged. "Badly enough," he admitted.

"How is it that you escaped? Abaus was convinced that you were dead."

"I had a couple of my men trailing behind us. They cut me down and got me to a healer."

His face was expressionless. Kate read past the bland façade to the slow anger that burned inside his body and inexplicably shivered. On the day that Briason caught up with his cousin, things would get very bad indeed.

"We will be in Buonarre by nightfall," Briason continued. "I'll take you to my father's house. We'll make further plans from there."

"Briason, I'm sorry," Kate said, her voice low.

"You have no reason to apologize to me."

"I do. I slept with him, Briason."

A muscle in his jaw jumped and Kate realized that it was clenched. "I know," he said calmly. "You could not prevent it."

Kate bowed her head. "I hated it," she whispered. "A part of my mind always hated it; but I have to admit, Briason, that I loved it at the same time."

"It is the magic. Nothing more."

Kate didn't look at him; she only prayed for a painful moment that he was right.

Gentle fingers lifted her chin. She met his black velvet gaze, her own blurred by bitter tears. "Do not cry, *nemida*. I have no claim upon your body. You need feel no guilt."

"I don't know why I do, but I do," she confessed.

He cupped her face with his hands. "Then you should stop. Believe me when I tell you that Abaus will answer to me for this. He is the guilty one." He leaned forward and kissed her, then brushed the tears from her cheeks. She managed to smile at him.

"Fair enough," Kate said.

"Good," he replied. His arm settled around her, pulling her gently against his chest. "Sleep now, *nemida*, and I will watch over you."

* * *

Buonarre looked like some strange sort of movie set. The boat moved toward it slowly, borne along by the casually moving waters of the river, and the city rose from the horizon like a golden stage. Even from several miles away, Kate saw the tops of pyramids and obelisks, the rounded domes of several large buildings, and a single spire that was unbelievably high. As they neared the city, however, more details came into focus. Although she'd thought that the society of the Shequanti must be a medieval-type one, it became quickly apparent that the level of sophistication was much higher. There were many familiar elements from different ancient Earth civilizations: Rome, Greece, and Egypt were all represented in the architecture of the city.

Large statues of rearing horses greeted them as they moved into the port. Kate glanced around curiously. It appeared that this port was constructed -- dug out of the land, in fact, and lined with a low, stone wall. The boat sailed smoothly into a mooring, and a few moments later the men had it tied to the dock.

"Keep your hood up," Briason advised as he helped her from the ship.

Kate nodded in acknowledgment. Everything she'd heard about the attitude of the Shequanti toward humans encouraged her to follow his instructions to the letter. If they were lucky, people passing by would assume that she was a child of their own race.

It only took her a few minutes to admit that the city was beautiful. She'd been to Rome once, while she was in college, and as she'd wandered the ruins of the great forum and the Via Appia she'd imagined what they must have looked like in its heyday. This was very close to it. The streets were smoothly cobbled with precisely laid stones. The stone buildings had grandiose façades of marble sheathing and statuary, and the setting sun yellowed everything. The major difference between here and Rome was the smell. It was generally agreed by classical authors that Rome was a smelly place; it still was even today. But this city smelled of flowers and fruit, wafting on the afternoon air from the numerous public parks, and Kate could only assume that in that respect, at least, the Shequanti were much more advanced.

Briason kept his hood up as well. Kate could only assume that he didn't want word of his survival to reach Abaus either. She stayed close by his side as they moved through the crowded streets, watching the people of the city curiously.

The Shequanti seemed to be a lot happier in their city than the people of New York. Here, there was none of the agitated bustle that earmarked her former residence. The people were pleasant and went about their business with an air of contentment. They were all very tall, however. It took a while for Kate to adjust to seeing children, obviously still quite young, who were close to her own height. They passed through a market, where slim, gowned women bartered for fruit and vegetables. A group of musicians played next to a bubbling fountain, surrounded by a group of young girls who eyed them with lively interest. A procession crossed a street ahead of them, led by red-veiled Shequanti who chanted in a low-pitched monotone hum.

Briason turned from the main thoroughfare to a smaller street, steering her into the shadows with an arm to the back of her elbow. They traveled without speaking for several blocks. Here, the streets were lined with metal fences, soaring ten feet in the air and backed with tall shrubs. Briason led her to a gate, looked both ways, and opened it. She followed him in.

"State your name and business please."

In surprise, Kate looked around for the source of the voice. There was no one nearby at all. Just before them was a statue of golden stone. She did a double take and looked at it again.

It was a sphinx. Kate frowned. How odd to find something so essentially Egyptian here! The sphinx looked much like the great sphinx at Giza, the bland, stone face staring blankly over extended paws.

"It is I, Briason. Tell my father I am here."

"Yes, my lord."

Kate blinked. The sphinx had answered! Now that she looked at it more closely, she saw the great, golden eyes blink.

It was alive.

Briason pulled her past the sphinx. She turned her head reluctantly to see where they were headed, and gasped in surprise. Ahead of them, down a flower-lined paved path, was a huge house. This, too, reminded her of the great villas she'd seen in Pompeii, preserved under a millennium of volcanic ash. As she followed him through the squared-off portal, she swallowed a superstitious lump of fear.

Chapter Four

The inside of the villa was cool, shaded by the tall ceilings and emanating the natural chill of stone. Once inside, Briason pushed the hood back from his face. Kate did the same. He smiled down at her.

"We are safe now, *nemida*," he said. "Abaus will not dare to come to my father's house."

"You're sure?" she asked dubiously.

"Trust me. Come! Let me take you to my father."

He seized her hand in his. Kate suddenly remembered how preternaturally warm his touch was. She'd forgotten, accustomed as she'd become to Abaus' icy fingers. His skin warmed her as he pulled her after him through the empty, silent corridors of his home.

Her first glimpse of Kaberon, Prince of Shequanti and Vicegerent of the Council, was reassuring. He sat, alone, in a room that was obviously a study, frowning over a paper in his hand. He looked eerily like Briason, even down to the tied-back fair hair and prominent, pointed ears, except for a few slight marks of age around his eyes. When he looked up, however, his eyes were blue. Not the icy blue of his nephew, but a deep, dark, twinkling blue that instantly reassured her. Kaberon's eyes met hers and for a swift moment they flashed with some unknown emotion. Then, his eyes moved to his son.

Instantly, the Shequanti rose from his chair. "You're hurt!" he exclaimed. "What happened, Briason?"

"Abaus," Briason replied in a tight voice. "Father, allow me to introduce Kathryn."

Kaberon's eyes narrowed. He looked from Briason's inscrutable face to Kate and his lips tightened. "My lady, I ask your pardon," he said with a slight bow. "It is obvious that my son has a story to tell, but I can already sense that you are not a Numeni. Abaus summoned you here. Please, have a seat." He glanced back at Briason. "And you too," he commanded. "You look like you're ready to keel over. Should I call a healer?"

"No," Briason replied even as Kate said simultaneously, "Yes, you should."

Kaberon smiled. "And already the story gets more interesting." He waited until they sat upon a long, low couch facing his desk, and then pulled a golden rope in the corner. "Now, then," he said, seating himself and steeping his fingers before him. "Tell me what's going on."

* * *

The healer arrived before Briason had finished. Kaberon nodded at the woman, who took a pair of scissors from her bag and cut the back of Briason's shirt open. The Shequanti never paused in his story while the healer began to gently remove bandages. Kate watched idly as the long strips of white linen began to fall away. After a time, however, the bandages became red-spotted. Then, they were almost entirely red.

Then she gasped. As the last bandage fell to the floor, Briason's back came into view. Kate swayed violently to one side, overcome with nausea and sudden dizziness.

His back was one raw, savaged wound.

An instant later, someone caught her and propped her up. The blackness receded almost instantly and she looked up into Kaberon's concerned face.

"I am sorry," he apologized. "I should have realized my son wouldn't have told you the extent of his injuries."

Kate sat up and turned on Briason. "You idiot!" she snapped. "Do you mean to tell me you came all that way with your back looking like that? Are you some kind of moron? You could have bled to death!"

Briason was dumbfounded. He gaped at her as she got to her feet.

"If I ever hear of you doing something so absolutely retarded again I will beat you into a pulp!" she shouted, wagging her finger in his face. "Of all the moronic, stupid, harebrained, ridiculous --"

"I see she has your measure," Kaberon interrupted with a perfectly straight face.

"-- insipid, thoughtless things to do! Even a ten-year-old child would know better than to --"

"I'm afraid so," Briason replied with a wince.

"-- travel all that way with an injury like that! And you!" she added, turning on the surprised Kaberon. "You could have taught him better than this! Jesus Christ, are all of you this abysmally stupid?"

There was silence for a moment, and then the two men burst into laughter. Kate glared back and forth between them as they whooped. The healer remained bent over her work, but a smile hovered at the corners of her mouth as she dabbed at the raw flesh of Briason's back.

"You will heal it, won't you, Anitelle?" Kaberon's question was colored with repressed laughter.

"Yes, my lord. It will take some time, but I can repair this." The healer rummaged in her bag and asked, "You didn't have a mage-healer with you, Lord Briason?"

"No. Dunna is an herbalist. She has no magic."

Kate crossed her arms over her chest. She was still angry, but allowed the conversation to continue without interruption. Anitelle glanced at her then and explained, "I have healing magic, my lady. I can repair Lord Briason's back in a matter of hours."

"Then wouldn't it have made more sense for him to be healed before he came after me?" Kate asked sweetly.

Briason flinched.

Kaberon laughed. Kate realized almost instantly how much she liked his laugh. Deep and rolling, it reminded her of a professor she'd had in college.

"My son is not known for his common sense, my lady," the older Shequanti said. "You could take it as a compliment that he felt it more important to come to your rescue than to be healed of his hurts."

Although the comment was light, Kate felt the small rebuke hidden within it. "You're right, of course," she agreed immediately. "I'm sorry. I let my concern for him overwhelm my gratitude."

"There is no need for gratitude," Briason's deep voice rumbled. "I would not leave you in Abaus' hands regardless of how hurt I was."

Kate stared at him in horror and then burst into tears.

* * *

Kate spent the rest of the dying afternoon with Kaberon. Briason had been led away by the healer and the Shequanti prince went out of his way to entertain his human guest. They sat over a light meal in his study, enhanced by the light, spicy wine Kate had grown to like. Kaberon was an amusing companion, with a gentle sense of humor. She could see the resemblance between father and son; it was rather endearing to picture how Briason would mature and mellow into the man who sat before her.

There were also differences, however. Briason's quiet calm solidified into a strange aura of resolve in his father, an eerie sense of implacability that resonated around him. It defined the man, in much the same way that Briason's innate sense of justice defined him. Occasionally, as she related an edited version of her adventures since coming to the Shequanti, Kate caught a flash of intensity in his blue eyes that alerted her to the prince's ability to see past the façade she was trying to erect.

It was entirely possible that he saw through her light conversation to the conflict lying beneath. As the thought came to her, the prince smiled slightly.

"So you can read my mind," she said abruptly, setting her wine on the table.

"No," Kaberon replied. "I can sense your emotions, and I have the ability to tell when someone is coloring the truth."

"I see."

"It is a useful skill in politics."

"I'll bet." Kate leaned back in her chair and met his eyes squarely. "So tell me: what do you sense about me?"

"You are an honest woman," came the prompt reply. "You think to spare me turmoil by altering the facts of your story slightly. I assure you, Kathryn, that there is no need. I know what my nephew is capable of doing. I have encountered him before, after all."

Kate looked away. "It's embarrassing."

"It shouldn't be."

Surprised, she glanced back up only to find his gaze resting upon her with compassion. Kaberon smiled and continued. "The bond, the attraction between Shequanti males and human females is powerful. Abaus is unscrupulous enough to enhance that if it serves his needs. Not all Shequanti are that callous."

"Briason isn't."

"No, he isn't." The prince sighed. "My son is a rare man among our people. He has always preferred the solitary existence of the military. He has a rare talent for magic, probably at least as powerful as Abaus', but doesn't have the resolve to develop it."

"The resolve?" she echoed. "I think Briason has the resolve to do whatever he wants!"

"Perhaps a better word choice is the indifference," Kaberon interrupted, one eyebrow lifted in amusement at her immediate, unthinking defense of his son. "Mages are ruthless; we must be. We cannot be hampered by feelings of guilt when we work magic."

"I wonder at you being able to do it then."

"Make no mistake, Kathryn, I am easily as ruthless as my nephew," the prince said lightly. "I do nothing, however, unless I consider it for the betterment of my people. Abaus thinks only of his own gain. Do you understand why he summoned you here?"

"No."

"Mages use the energy of their human lovers to increase their own magic," Kaberon explained. "If the bond between mage and human is strong enough, it enables the mage to perform the greater magic. Everyday magics are well within our strength; we levitate and shield and light fires without much effort or thought. The greater magics, on the other hand, the powers of teleportation or invisibility or summoning, are beyond the abilities of most mages. Only the greatest mages, who have summoned a human lover, can hope to channel their energies to the point where these feats are possible."

"That much was explained to me, but I don't really understand it."

Kaberon's eyes were distant. "Only a human with latent magical ability could come through the portals to the Shequanti. Shequanti mages use that ability to fuel their own. They siphon strength from their human mate. It is the only way for a young mage to gain the power to achieve true greatness."

Kate stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "And you are a great mage, aren't you?"

Kaberon sighed. "Yes. I am."

"That means you summoned a human as well?"

"I did."

Their eyes met again. A chill trickled down the back of Kate's neck. Kaberon's face was calm, etched in stoic blankness. She couldn't read his face or gauge his feelings; the statement had been so matter-of-fact that it was disconcerting. "Yet you disapprove of it now?"

"Yes, I do." Kaberon's gaze was steady. "I summoned my mate through the same stone table that brought you here. Her name was Elaine. I loved her deeply."

"What happened to her?"

"I sent her back." Kaberon's eyes flickered with some hidden thought as he continued. "She was not as strong as you are. Elaine was very emotional. The strain grew to be too great. She could not adapt to our ways. I left her in her own world, only calling her to me if the need was very great. When my brothers fought for the throne, I brought her back. I only wanted enough power to help the king, but she gave it all to

me. I couldn't stop her. I thought her power was drained but she managed to return once, on her own, after that."

"Why did she come back?"

"To tell me that she loved me." The blank inscrutability was gone now; replaced with an expression of a regret and pain so profound that Kate felt it within herself as well. "The crossing was difficult on her. I would not dare to call her again. Even if the need were at its greatest, the crossing would break her mind. Elaine knows this; she removed herself from the table's range at my request."

"Then she really did love you," Kate said softly.

"Yes." Kaberon smiled crookedly. "I have often thought of crossing to your world to find her, so that we could end our days together as we'd always hoped. I gather from her reaction to that thought that I would not necessarily fit into your world."

Kate had a sudden mental image of this tall, graceful Shequanti traveling through North Carolina looking for his lost love and shook her head with a smile. "No, you wouldn't."

"Which brings me to my point, in a roundabout way," Kaberon said abruptly, leaning forward as he peered into her face. "Never in the lore of our people has there been a human bound to *two* mages. I am not certain what bond lies between you and Abaus, Kathryn, although I sense the bond between you and my son. Abaus is crafty; he knows how to insinuate himself into the heart of a woman. I do not doubt that you love my son. I can feel the tie between you and it is strong. But, on this world, our situation is about to explode. The king's throne is in danger, imperiled not only by Abaus but also by the Numeni. There are factions within the Shequanti as well. Humans are not well loved here. If there is some bond between you and my nephew, then you endanger more than just my people. Abaus can use you as a conduit and, believe me, he will."

"That reminds me," she interrupted. "I did see a parchment in his study. He said something about summoning me, and then said that because Briason was dead the invasion of the Council should be successful now --"

"Invasion of the Council?" Kaberon frowned. "His plans are further along than I realized."

"I'm sorry; I tried to find out more but that was all I could do."

Kaberon stared at her thoughtfully, his dark blue eyes gauging her. The feeling of implacability surrounding the prince increased, and despite her best efforts Kate shivered.

"I thank you for this information," Kaberon said gravely, rising to his feet. "I will have someone show you to a bedchamber. You must be tired after all you have endured."

Kate realized that the interview was over. She stood and made her way to the door. Once there, she paused and asked over her shoulder, "What were you going to say before I interrupted you?"

There was a moment of silence. When the prince spoke, it was in a voice so low and toneless that it was a threat within itself. "I do not doubt that your attachment to my son is sincere, Kathryn, nor do I doubt that the bond between you is true. The fact that Abaus summoned you troubles me. It makes you a danger."

"A danger?" Kate turned to confront him.

"A very real danger. You should prepare yourself, my lady." His eyes held her in a long, cool stare. "If I have any reason to believe that you are a threat to my son, I will send you back."

Kate's chin came up. "I would never do anything to hurt Briason."

"I know," the prince replied, and he looked suddenly tired. "You must understand, my lady, I will not permit you to do so."

* * *

Kate wasn't surprised when there was a knock at her door an hour later. She opened the door to find Briason leaning against the doorjamb. There was more color in his face now; he'd obviously bathed, since his long, fair hair was still damp at the ends. He'd changed clothes as well, and she caught her breath at the sight of him in his crisp,

white shirt and formal tunic. He smiled down at her, the expression never quite reaching his eyes.

"May I come in?"

"Please do," she offered, swinging the door open wider. She waited until he'd closed the door behind him before continuing. "Are you feeling better?"

"Much. I am a little stiff, but the injuries are healed."

"Good. I was worried about you."

His father's words stood between them. She wanted to go to him, but she felt too uncomfortable to do so. Briason walked past her to the window, where he stood looking out over the city. The sun was sinking over the ocean, staining the marble buildings with a tinge of blood. They remained silent for a minute, and then he spoke abruptly. "I have spoken with my father. On the morrow, he will send you back to your world."

"No!" The word escaped before she could help it. Kate hurried across the room, ignoring the long skirts that would have flustered her a few weeks before. "You can't send me back, Briason! You need me!"

"It is too dangerous for you to remain," he said sternly. As he looked down at her, she saw that the same shutters that cloaked his father's face were now dropped tightly over his own.

"I don't care." Her words were flat. "I think I have a right to decide where I'll go and when. You can't just order me around and expect me to obey! I'll go home when I'm good and damn ready to go home!"

A comical look of surprise lifted his brows. "Kathryn, you have to understand that we're only doing what's best for you --"

"Whatever. I'll decide what's best for me, thank you. I've been taking care of myself for a long time and I'll continue to do so without *your* help."

"My father told me he'd explained all this to you --"

"And so he did. The problem is that I don't quite buy into his explanation. Why would he think I'm a threat to anyone, much less this whole country of yours? So Abaus summoned me -- big deal! In the end, it was you I chose, wasn't it?"

"It's not that simple," Briason said wearily.

"It is for me." She plopped down into a chair and crossed her arms. "Look, I don't know how you treat your women here and I don't really give a rat's ass, but where I come from a woman of my age makes up her own mind as to where she goes, what she does, and who she does it with. If I want to go home I'll let you know."

"A rat's ass?" he asked, his lips twitching.

"It's a saying and don't change the subject."

"I'm not changing the subject; I was just curious. Kathryn, this world will soon be at war. My uncle the king is not well and his throne is not secure. He has no heir to follow him. My father is trying to keep the kingdom intact until the king can decide who his successor will be. Abaus is planning to force himself upon the kingdom as the rightful heir. It's quite possible that there will be a civil war."

"We've had those too!" she snapped. "As a matter of fact, my country is at war right now. What does that have to do with anything?"

"I don't want you to get hurt."

"I won't."

"I also don't want you used as a pawn in Abaus' plans anymore."

"Neither do I. I suggest you let me handle that."

"I don't want you trapped here if I should be killed. When everything settles down and it's safe, I will come back for you."

"No, you won't," she accused. "You're just saying that to get me to agree. Well, it won't work, Briason!"

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Are all human women this stubborn?"

"Yes."

He knelt swiftly before her, taking her hands in his. "Then, won't you consider going back for my sake, *nemida*? Can't you find it in your heart to give me the comfort of knowing that you are in safety?"

"Nope. You made your bed and now you're going to have to lie in it." She frowned. "Of course, the way your father was talking earlier it doesn't really matter if I want to stay or not. He'll just ship me off without warning."

"He would not do that," Briason assured her. "He cannot do that without my agreement, Kathryn. Such an action would break our bond and could have terrible consequences to us both, as he well knows."

"He'd do that without blinking an eye. The prince went out of his way to assure me of that himself."

Briason grimaced. "I don't have the time to continue this conversation, *nemida*. I must go to an emergency meeting of the Council. We'll discuss this when I return."

"There really isn't anything to discuss," she informed him loftily. "But, we'll talk about it some more when you get back. Personally, I can think of other, better ways to spend our time."

"Are you trying to make this more difficult?" he shouted, his black eyes sparkling with sudden rage. "I'm trying to protect you, Kathryn! Why can't you just agree and get it over with?"

"Because I love you, Briason, and because you're wrong."

His grip on her hands was painful. Briason realized that a moment later and loosened his hold. "Be that as it may, *nemida*, I want you to be safe."

Kate sighed. "I know that. Unfortunately, Briason, all I want is to remain at your side."

Their eyes met again. Briason sighed, and then lifted first one hand then the other to his lips. The touch of his mouth on her skin seared all the way up her arms, the hot kiss scorching her flesh. "I'll be back tonight," he promised. "I don't know how late I will be, but I will come to you."

“That’s the best news I’ve heard all day,” she said softly, extricating one of her hands so that her fingers could trace the line of his jaw. It was surprisingly smooth, the skin almost as soft as her own, and she realized that she’d not seen any beards or mustaches among the Shequanti. Briason leaned forward and kissed her hard, then rose and strode to the door. He paused for a moment, squared his shoulders, and left the room.

Chapter Five

Night had fallen on Buonarre like a dark blanket of silence, settling over the streets with a peaceful benevolence carried on the flower- and ocean-smelling breeze. Kate lay on the huge bed of her room, staring at the small book on the bedside table. For some days now, she'd been practicing a new skill. Now that she was proficient in lighting and dousing flames, she was trying to move things.

Telekinesis. In the long hours of her captivity, Kate had puzzled over the power that the Shequanti called magic. Although she'd never believed in such things, it seemed to her that the human "magic" the Shequanti craved so badly was nothing more than psychic development. For years, she'd scoffed at the thought of psychic ability. She'd laughed with everyone else at the thought of phone lines where a "psychic" would answer the caller's most pressing questions. Even the sight of tarot cards coming out at a party sent her into uncontrollable giggles.

The book slid a couple of inches toward her. Kate concentrated harder. It was easier than she'd thought it would be. It was like imagining a string attached to the book and tugging on it with her mind. She could actually *feel* the weight of it, a physical reminder of something she was touching only mentally.

The book flipped off of the table and landed on the bed. She grinned. Granted, moving a book with her mind would do very little in this magical world she found herself in, but the fact that she was learning this new skill was cheering. Maybe she'd be able to train herself to do more in time.

A different sort of sensation fluttered against her mind, one that she immediately recognized as Briason. She felt the turmoil of his thoughts, colored with a sense of anticipation that thrilled her.

He was coming home.

No matter how far away he was, she always could find him. This, too, was comforting. It kept her mentally at his side, even if he wasn't physically there. She wondered if Kaberon had such a link with his Elaine, then sat up with a snap of annoyance. The last thing she wanted to do was think about Briason's father.

The room was opulent, but restful. The big bed stood upon a dais, draped in thick curtains of red and gold. There were several plump chairs, a small table before the window, several chests and a shelf full of books. She'd amused herself earlier thumbing through the pages of a book. The Shequanti books were beautifully illustrated and had apparently been handwritten. Thick rugs lay upon the floor, and a small fire crackled on the hearth to warm the chamber against the early spring chill. It was a lovely room, one that normally would have had her avaricious antique dealer's soul digging happily through its furnishings. Even now, she enjoyed the wanton sensuality of the thin, clingy gown a maidservant had brought to her as a nightgown.

The Shequanti certainly knew how to live!

Kaberon's warning was very straightforward. Now that she was alone, Kate could admit to herself that the prince had every reason to feel as he did. She was bound to his son, yes, but he worried about both his country and Briason. Despite Briason's assurance, she knew that Kaberon would send her back to North Carolina without a quiver of concern for her well-being.

But what would that do to Briason? If, as he'd said, Kaberon needed his agreement to do such a thing then the severance of the link would harm the prince's beloved son if it came about unexpectedly. Kate sighed.

All of this stuff is so damn complicated.

Before the thought had drifted away, the door opened quietly. She glanced up and stared mutely at Briason. He stepped into the room, closing the door behind him, and their eyes met. Carefully, he unbuckled the belt that held his sword and leaned the great weapon against the wall. As he started to move toward her, Kate said quietly, "Stop."

Immediately, he halted in his tracks. "What is it?"

"You said your back was healed? I want to see it."

He regarded her with a long, steady look. "Why?"

Kate smiled. "Because I have a feeling you'd tell me that even if it wasn't true. Go ahead, Briason. Take off your shirt."

He lifted an eyebrow, but didn't reply. Instead, he unlaced the stiff, heavy crimson tunic he wore and removed it. His eyes never left hers as he tugged the linen shirt over his shoulders and tossed it onto a chair. Wordlessly, he turned to show her his back.

She closed her eyes briefly. His body had always been scarred, but they were old scars. These were new. Raised red welts of flesh crisscrossed his skin, rising over taut muscles like serpents of pain. She opened her eyes again and noted that his body had stiffened. Kate realized that he was expecting her to recoil at the scars. He was waiting for some bitter, ugly comment. "It is healed," she said, allowing a note of wonder to enter her voice. "That's amazing."

"I realize that now I am not attractive to you --" he began stiffly.

"What?" Kate laughed. "Why would you make a stupid comment like that?"

He turned back to her, puzzled. "What's so stupid about it? Scars are ugly."

"Not all scars." She rose from the bed and went to him. "Not your scars, Briason. Surely you know that each of these scars is dear to me? How could I consider them, or you, ugly? You are the most beautiful man I know."

She traced a scar that curved around to his flat abdomen with gentle fingers. He stared down at her, his black eyes smoldering. She smiled up at him and ran her hands up his chest.

"You look angry," she commented.

"I am not angry. I am trying to restrain myself."

"Why?" she breathed, leaning forward to press a kiss on his chest. "I'm not. Why should you?"

"Because I do not want to hurt you."

"You won't."

He cupped her face in his hands and lifted it to his. "Then I will drive my cousin's ghost from you, *nemida*. I do not think I could do otherwise tonight."

His mouth fell upon hers violently, his tongue forcing her lips apart with savage possessiveness. Kate's body melted against his, responding fervently to his silent demands. She knew that this encounter would be different, more primal, than any she'd had before.

Her body yearned for it.

His hands grasped her arms, the tips of his fingers digging into her skin. She gasped under the increasing needs of his mouth as he dragged his lips from hers and attacked the tender flesh of her throat. Already dazed, she reeled slightly as he jerked the straps of her gown from her shoulders. Within moments, she stood naked before him, and the low growl in his chest informed her that he was not immune to the sight.

She was never certain how they managed to get onto the bed. All she knew was that his hands and lips were everywhere, stamping his scorching possession upon her skin. Her breasts ached beneath the assault of his mouth and tongue; she was already wet with frenzied arousal as his fingers roamed her flesh with the heat of a brand. When his fingers slipped into her sex, she cried out her frustration to the uncaring ceiling.

This wasn't a seduction. It was a man stamping his territory as indelibly and irrefutably as possible.

She could not resist when Briason suddenly lifted his body from hers. His hands weren't gentle as he flipped her onto her stomach. He raised her body until she knelt before him. Without a word, he drove his cock into her pussy.

Kate screamed, her arms collapsing beneath her. His hands gripped her hips almost brutally as he plunged into her, his engorged cock scraping against the walls of her sex with increasing speed. Kate moaned into the bedclothes, even as she strove to match his tempo. One of his hands moved to titillate her clitoris, and she arched back against him. The bare skin of his chest scorched against her back as his other hand closed over her right breast.

"You are mine," he snarled, his teeth nipping at her shoulder.

"Yes," she agreed breathlessly.

"Say it, Kathryn," he commanded, as his cock pounded into her tender flesh.

"I am yours, Briason!"

He bent her over once more and drove into her harder. Kate screamed, her fingers tangling in the covers as the pulsing frenzy of an orgasm raced through her body. As her pussy convulsed around Briason's cock, he came as well. He shouted in primitive triumph as he collapsed against her.

* * *

The alarm was ringing. Drowsily, Kate fumbled for the clock on the bedside table, amazed at how the sound had changed. Always before it had been a shrill, metallic whine that jerked her from her sleep every morning. Now it sounded like --

-- *bells*.

The bed jerked suddenly. Kate opened her eyes to find Briason already tugging his trousers up over his lean hips. She sat up, clutching the coverlet to her chest, and stared at him.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"The tocsin is ringing. The city is under attack." Impatiently, he jerked his shirt over his head and went to the door. Throwing it open, he bellowed, "My armor!" There was an immediate bustle in the quiet house as running footsteps echoed down the hall.

Kate leapt from the bed and snatched up a gown at random. As Briason tugged his boots onto his feet, she threw the dress on and hurried to his side, letting it hang loosely from her shoulders. "Attack from whom?"

"The Numeni or my gods-cursed cousin," he replied as a young Shequanti male dashed into the room with a mail shirt. He turned from her briskly, settling his arms into the padded tunic another servant held out to him.

"Already?" Her voice cracked. Briason nodded then pulled the heavy mail over his head. It fell with a steely rattle to his knees. One of the servants knelt to buckle the

sword belt around his master's waist, while another took a helmet and shield from someone at the door.

"What are you going to do?" she cried, alarmed at the swift appearance of his military gear.

"I'm going to help coordinate the defense of the city," Briason said grimly. "You must stay here, *nemida*, until I come for you. If the walls are breached, I'll have to get you out of the city quickly."

"But you could be killed!"

Briason's lips twitched. "Yes," he admitted with a twinkle in his eye. "That is always a possibility in war."

The two servants left speedily as he jerked his head at them. For a moment, they were alone again, adrift in a cocoon of silence trapped amidst the rushing furor sweeping through the villa.

"You'd better come back," she warned him in a low voice.

"I will," he promised. "Do not worry about me."

"If you need --" Her voice trailed off and she tried again. "If you need to pull power from me, do it. Don't even think about it."

"I won't."

"Promise me you will."

He sighed. "I promise. I will. I will let you know how I fare from time to time. Please, Kathryn, stay here until I come for you or send word."

"I will. Just be careful, Briason."

He kissed her then, his arms holding her against him with possessive fervor. As he pulled away, he cupped her face in his hands for a moment and stared at her, then pressed another kiss to her brow. "I will come back to you," he swore softly.

"You'd better," she retorted, and managed to smile at him as he released her. One of the servants stepped into the door and extended a long crimson cloak. Briason threw it around his shoulders and fastened it with a golden pin. He smiled at her once more then strode from the room with long, decisive steps.

Kate whirled and stared out the window. The city streets were flaring into life, torches speeding through the darkness toward a red glow just tinting the western edge of the city. Almost immediately, she knew.

It was Abaus.

Chapter Six

The dawn had come to Buonarre with savage beauty. The blood-red sun glared upon the packed streets of the city, illuminating the hordes of people moving in opposite directions. The families were huddled together in small packs, bags of treasures and supplies upon their backs as they fled for the safety of the river harbor on the eastern edge of the city. The army marched in orderly lines, the formations of tall, slender men streaming with inexorable haste toward the battle raging along the northern and western districts of the capital. Abaus' army, apparently, had attacked from the sea.

Kate had long since changed into a pair of trousers and a long tunic that she'd acquired from one of the house servants. Once again, the clothes swam around her body, but she'd taken a knife to the sleeves and pant legs to remove much of the excess, folding the ragged edges into cuffs. She couldn't do anything about the waist except cinch it with a belt, and even less about the shirt and tunic that looked like circus tents enveloping her slight frame. But she was ready to move if the need should arise.

And it was becoming increasingly apparent that the need *would* arise.

There was fighting in the streets outside the port now. Even from this distance, Kate caught the ruddy flash of sunlight bouncing from a sword and heard the sullen detonations of magic that preceded quick explosions of fire that eliminated buildings instantly. If the defenders were already retreating into the streets, Abaus' army was winning the day.

She'd focused a lot of her energy on keeping her mind closed to any invasion on the part of the rebellious Shequanti. She could still feel Briason, however, his presence a vivid slash of energy somewhere to the northwest. She knew he was still alive, fighting at the head of the royal troops and hoping for a chance to catch his cousin alone.

Footsteps pounded to her door. Before she had a chance to open it, it flew open unceremoniously. "My lady! The prince wants you to come!"

Without hesitation, Kate tossed the cloak around her shoulders and followed the man-at-arms.

* * *

"Our forces cannot prevail," Kaberon said briskly. His desk was empty, and the roaring fire gave mute evidence as to why. Kate bit her lip; the situation was serious indeed if the Shequanti prince had burned all of his documents.

"What are we going to do?"

"I am getting you out of the city. Briason sent word that he was withdrawing the army from Buonarre. They will regroup on the plains and hope that Abaus follows them, so that the citizens have a chance to flee."

"So we're going to meet the army?"

"No." His answer was short. Another servant hurried into the room with his arms full. As Kaberon buckled a sword around his waist he continued, "I am taking you to the forest. Briason will meet us there when he is able."

"He is still well," she commented, savoring a fleeting touch against her mind.

"Yes. We will have to move quickly if we are to escape." Kaberon fastened a long, hooded cloak around his neck. "Pull up your hood, my lady. It is best if we are not recognized."

A warrior entered the room and saluted. Kaberon didn't even look at him as he said, "Remove everyone from the villa. I will set the defenses as I leave."

"Yes, your Highness."

"We will rendezvous at the Relan Mount. Get word to my son."

"Yes, your Highness."

Kaberon waited until he'd left then said, "I am deeply sorry, my lady, that this has befallen us while you are still here. My first thought was to return you to your own world and out of harm's way, but my son has forbidden it."

"I do not wish to leave."

Kaberon sighed. He pulled up his own hood and handed her a satchel. "I must ask you to carry this, Kathryn. I might need my arms free."

Kate slung the pack over her shoulder as she followed the Shequanti prince from his study. They made their way down the deserted corridor to the entrance hall. A squadron of men waited there.

"Shall we accompany you, your Highness?"

"No. We will have a better chance of remaining undetected if we are alone. Is everyone out of the villa?"

"Yes, your Highness."

"Good. Come with me."

The men fell in behind them as Kaberon hurried across the broad, green expanse of the yard. He lifted two fingers to his mouth and whistled. A few moments later, the golden sphinx bounded to a stop before him.

"Atba, I am leaving the estate. I ask you to ward it in my absence."

The sphinx's almond-shaped eyes blinked just once. "Shall I call my sisters, my lord?"

"Yes. No one is to enter the estate grounds until my son or I return."

"What of the royal family?"

"No one, Atba."

"It will be as you wish, my lord. I will prevent any from entering the grounds until you or Lord Briason return."

She closed her eyes. The ground beneath their feet rumbled suddenly. To Kate's amazement, a section of the manicured lawn fell away. She moved instinctively behind the prince as scores of sphinxes emerged from the pit. They were all different, with tawny fur or silver-grey hides framing exotic, bland human faces. Only Atba was different, her shiny golden skin glistening in the ruddy morning sun. She snarled something at them and they scattered over the lawn, each sphinx moving to a different vantage point of the estate grounds.

"They will defend your home, my lord, or die in the trying," Atba said emotionlessly.

Kaberon nodded, and then hesitated. "One other thing, Atba. This human woman may come to you for protection. You will admit and protect Lady Kathryn as if she were me."

The sphinx's cool gaze rested on Kate. "What is this human to the royal house of Shequanti?"

Kaberon hesitated once more. "She is the betrothed of my son," he said softly. "She will be the mother of my heirs."

Kate and Atba regarded each other for a long moment. Finally, the sphinx bowed her head. "It shall be as you wish, Prince of the Shequanti. My sisters and I will defend your human daughter as if she were a queen of the blood."

Kaberon laid his hand on the sphinx's shoulder and turned away. His eyes met Kate's for a second as he led the last of his retainers to the back of the house. As they neared the garden wall, one of the warriors pulled aside a tall shrub. Kaberon laid his hand upon the bricks, which melted into invisibility. The soldiers filed through the door into the silent alley. Kaberon gestured Kate through, then followed.

There was a thunderous ring. The entire wall shimmered with a golden light. Kate thought it might be a trick of the eyes, but she could have sworn she saw a dome of color slam over the estate. Startled, she turned back to the Shequanti prince, who was staring at his home with shadowed eyes.

"Come," Kaberon said quietly and led the way into the labyrinth of twisting streets.

* * *

Kate scurried after the older man, almost running in an attempt to keep up with his long, quick strides. The city was quieter now. The early morning panic that had heralded Abaus' attack had subsided into a silence that was rarely interrupted save by the sounds of someone fleeing or a muffled detonation from the harbor. Kate couldn't be certain, but it sounded like the armies were moving away from the city.

Kaberon kept his hand on his sword hilt, and she knew from the sweeping motion of his hooded head that he was watching the side streets carefully. At one point, he pulled her into a small, dark niche in the alley wall while a troop of men ran by.

"It is best that we are seen by no one," he murmured. "We would both be a fine prize for Abaus and if our own army sees me in flight they will not understand."

"Are they looking for us?"

"Without a doubt," he replied grimly. A few minutes after the troop disappeared, he pulled her out and led her down the alley. "We will keep to the smaller streets. Hopefully, we will remain undetected."

The city looked like a European city just before the Nazis marched into them in World War II. Although there wasn't the bombed-out shells that Kate had always associated with the blitzkrieg, still everything had the look of rapid evacuation. Doors hung open, gaping into houses where the furniture was overturned in a hasty escape. Shop windows were shattered, shards of glass glistening against the paving stones like diamonds. Above it all dangled that uncanny silence, hovering like a curse over the wounded and mourning capital. Kate knew that silence would live in her soul forever. It was the sound of a city in its death throes, subsiding without struggle into chaos. She swallowed hard and quickened her pace; she had no desire to find herself trapped in this ghost town and at the mercy of Abaus.

Kaberon stopped her again. Obediently, she remained motionless behind his restraining hand while he peered around a corner.

A scream rent the hush of Buonarre. Kaberon cursed softly as a woman cried out, "No! Leave me alone!"

Kate didn't even try to stop the Shequanti prince as he stepped around the corner.

"Stop." His voice wasn't loud, but it carried over the square. In the middle of the street, a group of eight soldiers stood around another whose hands were threaded through the hair of a sobbing woman. They looked up in surprise, and stared at him.

"Lord Kaberon," the tallest of the men said. His face split into a slow grin, and he released the girl. "Our new king has been looking for you."

"There is no new king," Kaberon retorted. "Move on."

The warrior drew his sword as the woman crawled away quickly, her breath catching in her throat. "I don't think so. We've taken orders from you for long enough."

Kate expected Kaberon to draw his sword. He didn't. Instead he lifted his arms to the sky, causing his hood to fall back from his face. The soldiers froze. "Very well, then," the prince said in a cold, quiet tone. "If that is the case, then I will not try to command you anymore."

Without warning, the entire world flashed. Kate flinched as a sheet of blue-white light seared across the square. Instantly, the troop of men disintegrated, their bodies collapsing into heaps of blackened ash.

Everything was still. The wind lifted the incinerated remains of the soldiers and blew them into small drifts on the street. Kaberon turned back to Kate, his face suddenly lined with weariness and regret. "Come, my lady."

"What did you do to them?" she asked in a strangled whisper.

Kaberon's face was bland as he replied, "I removed them from our path. Shall we go?"

Shuddering, Kate followed him as he picked his way through the black dust. In that moment, she realized what Abaus craved. He'd summoned her to gain this power, this absolute mastery over the elements of the Shequanti world. As the prince pulled the hood up to shadow his features, Kate recognized the terrible consequences of bearing such power.

For the first time, she found herself pitying Kaberon.

Chapter Seven

They met with no further resistance as they made their way out of town. Kaberon led her to a small gate tucked out of sight in the city walls. The gate was unguarded, the door hanging open with a particularly forlorn screeching of hinges. The Shequanti prince pulled her after him, onto the broad, flat plain that harbored the city of Buonarre.

"Now is the most dangerous time," he said in a low voice. "Until we reach the safety of the forest we could be seen at any time. You must follow me quickly, without hesitation, if we are to make it past Abaus' troops."

"I don't see any troops," Kate replied.

Kaberon grimaced. "Some of my nephew's minions you would not be able to see."

Despite the treacherous sun glaring overhead, the pair made good time across the plain. It was a lovely, quiet place, far removed from the chaos in Buonarre. The plain was untended and unremarked, save for the four or five main highways carving paths through the vegetation that were as straight and unyielding as the facets of a jewel. Behind her, Kate could see the swirling tendrils of smoke that betokened the death of a great city. Before her, she could just make out a green smudge on the horizon that heralded safety. Around her were tall, waving grasses, interspersed with wild poppies and sunflowers; many of the grasses swayed over her head. Although the growth served as cover of some sort, it was still too thin and fluid to provide much protection against inimical eyes.

Kaberon seemed different to her somehow. He'd fit so perfectly into his element in the capital that she'd never even imagined him in this situation. He moved with casual surety through the towering grasses, never stopping for his bearings. He was

strangely at home here; his courtier's demeanor vanished beneath an affinity for nature that mirrored that of his son's.

Briason.

Where was he? Kate knew from the quick flashes she felt from his mind that he was still in the thick of the fighting, still alive and striving to lead his men from the doomed city. She could only hope that he'd found his way onto the plain, where the terrain would prove a greater advantage than the twisting warren of streets in Buonarre. Every once in a while, she touched his mind with her own, just enough of a touch to make him aware that she was well and fleeing to safety. The contact was hopefully a reassurance to him.

It certainly was to her.

* * *

By the time Kaberon called a halt to the day, they were deep within the forest. The Shequanti prince found another of the hidden outposts and, within moments of depositing her in it, left again to eliminate any tracks they left on their journey. Kate was alone, blessedly, frightening alone in the chill silence of the waystation.

The day had been hellish. She was exhausted and edgy, her worry for Briason foremost in her mind. She busied herself for a time making a semblance of stew for the prince's return, but ignored the food herself. Instead, she paced around the tiny outpost with her arms crossed over her midsection in a protective gesture.

Briason had been silent for hours. She wanted to assume that he was too busy to let her know he was well. The other alternative was too heart-wrenching to consider. She considered contacting him, but quickly realized that if she did so she might distract him at a vital moment. So, she waited, her agitation increasing as the hours of her solitude did.

When Kaberon returned, she was leaning wearily against the wall. The Shequanti prince eyed her with a frown as he secured the door against intruders.

"I have erased all signs of our passage for several miles back," he announced, taking her arm and steering her toward the fire. "You did very well, my lady; I think we have managed to remain undetected."

"Good."

His face softened slightly. "My son is well. You need have no fear for him."

"I can't help but be afraid for him."

"I realize that, my lady, but you need food and rest. Come; we will eat something and then try to sleep for a few hours before we start again."

"Why am I here?" The question burst from her before she could stop it. "Why couldn't I have remained with him?"

"Because you are a weapon that Abaus could use against him," Kaberon explained. "Briason will not risk your safety despite the situation."

"I think you're wrong."

"I may be," he confessed, ladling soup into a rough-cut wooden mug. "It is best not to risk it in any case. I don't think Briason would put you above the obligation he owes to his people, but he would definitely place you above himself. Our people need his guidance right now; I could not risk it."

"I understand," Kate said, trying not to wince as her sore muscles protested when she sank onto the floor.

Kaberon handed her the mug and then said abruptly, "You are a remarkable woman, Kathryn."

"No, I'm not," she disagreed.

He smiled at her. "Yes, you are. Not many human women could be thrust into this situation without hysteria. Your control has been admirable through all of this."

"I've never had much time for hysterical women," she noted dryly. "Or men, for that matter."

"You are a worthy mate for my son."

Kate sipped at her meal. Kaberon's expression was more open than she'd ever seen it. After a moment, she ventured, "Why don't you just leave me here and go back? Your brother will need your help."

"My brother is dead," Kaberon replied, his eyes shadowed again. "That was the first place Abaus' invaders went. We no longer fight for the king; we fight against Abaus taking the throne."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said automatically.

Kaberon attempted to smile. "My brother went as I would wish to go, my lady. He fought, and died, before the throne our family has fought to uphold."

Kate's eyes narrowed. "If your brother is dead, then who is the next king? Does he have a son?"

"No. The next King of the Shequanti is a matter of debate."

"Debate?"

Kaberon sighed. "According to our laws, there are only three possible candidates: myself, Abaus, and --" he sighed again "-- my son."

* * *

She stretched luxuriously. She was drowsy, but in a pleasant way. Something had roused her from the deepest sleep she'd ever known, awakened her in this warm blanket of contentment. The room was silent, dark, and heavy with the promise of something she couldn't quite fathom.

What was it that called to her in this warm darkness? There was another tiny flutter against her mind, something that felt like the butterflies that had invaded her tummy when she was a girl at dance recital. As a child, she had dreaded that squirmy sensation of nerves.

Now, as a woman, she welcomed it.

Her nipples hardened. Languorously, she raised her arms above her head. It felt like cool fingers curved around her breasts, teasing her nipples into aching need. Beneath the thin tunic and trousers she wore, her body stirred impatiently.

And then, suddenly, it was like she was wearing no clothes at all. She felt wickedly naked, the cool night air stirring over her skin like tentacles of desire. Her vagina was throbbing painfully, already slick with arousal. She felt her legs open slightly, her thighs parting like the petals of a flower in the morning sun, while the juices of longing pounded within her body.

It was a feather-light touch, a slight flick against her clitoris that took her breath away. A moment later, it happened again. Her legs spread wider beneath the rough blanket as soft coolness moved with deliberate slowness against the erect nodule of her sex. Her hands curled into fists as lips closed around her clit, sucking with gentle insistence.

Long, stirring waves of pleasure sang through her body as the tempo increased. The cool hands tightened upon her breasts, rolling her nipples between long fingers as the tongue worked ever deeper into her arousal. She was unable to move, incapable of opening her eyes to see what was happening while the stimulation grew surer. Kate was helpless against the systematic teasing of her body, desperate for some way to interact with the merciless mouth that ravaged her sex.

It was an illicit pleasure, something secret and unknown within the confines of the darkness. Some part of her mind knew that there was no one there, that this was a psychic seduction of her body. The rest of her didn't care. Her toes curled into the blanket beneath her as teeth grazed against her sex. Instantly, the cool manipulation intensified. She bit her lip as the orgasm exploded within her, unable to cry out or move as her body responded.

There was a tiny whisper of sound, like a quiet, cruel laugh. All restraint left her body abruptly. Kate's eyes flew open and she sat bolt upright.

There was no one there.

Kate shivered. She was fully clothed, wrapped in a thin, rough blanket against the chill of the night. Some distance away, rolled in his cloak against the door of the outpost, Kaberon slept on with long, steady breaths. Even as her throbbing body subsided, Kate shivered with something more than cold.

Only Abaus could have invaded her dreams so. But how had he found her?

Chapter Eight

The next morning, they were on the move again. Before the sun had fully risen above the leafy treetops, Kaberon was leading her into the heart of the great forest. Kate was distracted, her thoughts a million miles away. How had Abaus invaded her dreams? And, if he'd managed it, did that mean something terrible had happened to Briason?

She couldn't tell. The tenuous contact she'd maintained with Briason since he'd rescued her from Abaus' mountain fortress was silent. As she followed his father through the briar-snagged game trail that was their only guide, Kate worried about her Shequanti lover until she felt almost sick.

And Briason was an heir to the throne.

Any faint thought she'd had of them going to North Carolina together had evaporated at Kaberon's words. As an heir, he was bound to this land as surely as she was bound to her own parents. There really wasn't any hope of them finding a way to remain together, despite her optimistic daydreams.

It was midway through the warm afternoon that there was a sudden rustle behind her in the brush. She froze, unwilling to move even as Kaberon whipped his sword from the sheath and whirled to face their pursuer. Then, Kate caught her breath in relief.

Briason stepped from the trees onto the game trail.

She stared at him wordlessly for a moment. He opened his arms wide and she went into them without hesitation. As he cradled her close to his chest, Kate closed her eyes, mentally thanking whatever god governed this world for his safety.

* * *

"The city?" Kaberon asked tersely.

"Lost. I've scattered our troops as best I could with instructions to regroup near the borders of Jonctif." Briason replied, taking a long drink from Kate's water canteen. "Abaus has taken over the palace."

"How many men do we have left?"

"Surprisingly, we have quite a few. I'd estimate our numbers at fifteen thousand, at least until the garrisons of the outposts respond to my call."

"What are you doing here, then?" Kaberon eyed his son sternly.

Briason appeared to be unaffected as he answered casually, "I've left Irvief in charge. We'll meet up in a few days."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Should I have to?" Briason's eyes flickered for a moment with the same black intensity Kate had seen only once or twice since they'd met. For a moment, father and son scowled at each other in an uncanny duplication. She held her breath. After a moment, Briason continued, "Abaus is ransacking the city, looking for Kathryn."

"He is?" Kaberon sounded confused. "Why?"

"I don't know. Apparently, there is some facet to her power that we are not aware of. There must be *something* that makes her so important. It occurred to me that I needed to discover what that was."

Both pairs of eyes turned onto Kate. After a moment, she grew uncomfortable under the continued scrutiny and shifted from one foot to the other.

"You've been experimenting with your power?" Kaberon asked quietly.

"Yes." She saw no reason to lie.

"What can you do?"

"Not a lot. I can light fires and move things, but --"

"*Move things?*" Kaberon repeated in disbelief. "You can physically move an object?"

"Not very far, but yes."

Father and son exchanged glances. "Telekinesis," Briason muttered bitterly. "So that's why."

"I don't understand," Kate interjected.

Kaberon sighed. "Very few possess the power of telekinesis. It is the most sought-after ability among Shequanti mages. Normally, humans cannot even hope to accomplish such a feat. One who *has*, however, can gift that power to her mate. A Shequanti mage with great power would be able to move huge items with only a thought."

"Huge items? Just how big are we talking here?"

Kaberon's eyes were haunted. "An army, for example."

"It explains everything," Briason added. "With you at his side, Abaus could teleport his army anywhere on this world."

He stopped abruptly. She had a rising feeling of panic as she finished his thought, "Or the next?"

"Yours, at least."

"Dear God."

She glanced up at him in horror. His face was expressionless and that set all of the alarm bells ringing. Carefully, she asked, "You're not here to protect me, are you?"

"No, *nemida*," he replied gently. "I am here to gain that power from your hands if you will permit me."

"I see." She *did* see, too. If a human could gift her powers to a Shequanti, then it was up to her to give her ability to the man she chose. Briason couldn't take the risk of Abaus gaining that power; against all the odds and his father's skill, he had tracked her down in the great forest to ascertain that he, and only he, would receive such power.

"Then you have decided to follow the paths of magic," Kaberon said in a quiet voice.

"My sword will not save our people." Briason hesitated, then added, "Kathryn's power might."

"And then?" The prince's voice shook with suppressed emotion. "Once you take this path, my son, there is no return."

"I know. I am prepared to risk that."

"Wait just a second here!" Kate was suddenly furious. "I have a say about this, don't I? What if I *don't* choose to give anyone this power? What if I decide to keep things as they are?"

"Then eventually, your power would be so great that you could rule this world by yourself," Kaberon replied brutally. "In the end, that power would destroy you, while our people would suffer and die under the yoke of cruelty. Make no mistake, my lady, Abaus will grow in strength if there is no one to contain his ambition. Eventually, you and he would confront each other, and both of you would probably die. This world would be thrown into chaos, and our people, our way of life, would become the stuff of legend."

"Just as it did on *my* world," Kate said. For the first time, she finally understood. The interdependence of the two races was absolute. Only the Shequanti had the strength and stamina to control the greater power that only the humans were heirs to. If she didn't comply, the Shequanti would drift into folklore, just like Atlantis or the Fair Folk of Gaelic legend. If she did...

"What will happen to me if I gift this power to Briason?"

"Our bond will increase in strength," Briason replied. "It will be almost impossible for us to separate in the future."

"Almost?"

"We could, but with painful consequences to us both. If you returned to your world, for example, we'd both live a half-life, an existence that was painful to us both."

Kate's eyes moved to the silent prince. "Like yours?"

Kaberon didn't flinch. "It was harder on Elaine than upon me. The strain drove her mad; but yes. Like mine."

She felt the blood draining from her face. "And how do I give him this power?"

"It is a gift, Kathryn," Briason said gently, "a gift of the greatest intimacy and trust."

Oh, yes, everything was perfectly clear now.

"When Abaus had sex with me, he was filching my power, wasn't he?"

"Yes." Briason's response was unflinching.

"And you?"

"Not since the first time, but even that was not my choice."

"Yes, I remember."

She did remember. He'd been singularly unwilling to take advantage of her situation, already aroused and half under the mental control of his cousin. She had been the one to take advantage of him.

"And now? If that changes, how will that affect us?"

"It won't affect us visibly. What might affect us is your knowledge of what is happening. You must understand, *nemida*, that it must be a gift. You must do this willingly or not at all."

"Last night, I dreamed about Abaus," Kate said carefully. "I dreamed he was with me. It was a very realistic dream; when I awoke, I wasn't certain that it *had* been a dream. I felt it as it happened. I could even feel his *touch*. Was that an attempt on his part to take that power without my knowledge?"

"It was his attempt to convince you to give him the power, yes," Kaberon answered.

"I need to think." For a moment, Kate felt sick to her stomach. She turned away from the Shequanti, staring sightlessly into the trees.

"I never wanted you to be in this position," Briason said quietly.

"I know that." She scuffed the toe of her boot along the forest floor. "I don't know what to do."

"You must do what you think is best for you," Kaberon interjected. "Neither my son nor I can tell you what that might be."

"I need to be by myself," Kate muttered.

"There is a hot spring close by," the Shequanti prince said. "We'll travel on to it and then make camp. You can sit in the hot water and relax the stresses of the last few days away. Perhaps that will help you reach a decision."

* * *

It's always easier to make up someone else's mind, Kate thought sourly as she trudged in the wake of the two Shequanti. If anyone else had been in her position, she would have said unequivocally, "Don't even think about it."

But it was *her* dilemma, *her* decision -- and it wasn't quite that simple. It wasn't quite so easy when she knew the people involved. She had no doubt that she loved Briason, but this was no simple thing he asked of her.

There was no guarantee that they would be successful. There was no guarantee that she would emerge from the battle with her sanity intact. The consequences of failure would be dire: enslavement by Abaus, insanity, or death.

On top of that, she had no idea how this exchange was supposed to take place. Images of strange voodoo ceremonies flashed across her mind and she shuddered. Surely not! If it involved decapitating chickens or blood sacrifice, she doubted that the fastidious Shequanti could manage to do it.

She was still wrapped in thought when the men stopped their march in a small clearing. She said nothing as they prepared a camp for the evening. Instead, she made her way to a shimmer of water just barely visible through the trees.

The hot spring was silvery in the fading sunlight, gilded on one side by the benevolent rays of the dying sun. Eddies of glistening steam rose above the water, shifting like dreams while she watched. Still frowning, Kate shed her filthy clothes and waded into the vapor-shrouded pool.

* * *

"Do you still wish to be alone?"

Kate looked up. Briason stood on the shore of the pool, watching her with a curious, wary expression on his face. Instead of replying instantly, she dipped her head back into the water. Her hair streaming, she glanced at her lover. "No, not really."

"May I join you?"

"Of course."

She sank back into her reverie as Briason stripped. A few moments later, he was next to her in the sultry spring, immersed to his neck in the heated water. His face was solemn, lined with deeper gravity since the fall of Buonarre.

Kate sighed. "I'm not sure what to do," she confessed.

"It is a decision that you alone must make."

"What if I make the wrong one?"

Briason looked past her to the horizon, where the crimson blaze of the day's last moments stained the forest with a light the color of blood. "You must make the right decision for yourself, Kathryn; you cannot make the wrong choice."

"You're telling me to be selfish."

"I'm telling you to be protective."

"And if I decide to go through with it? What then?"

"Then you and I will travel back to my army, and we will confront Abaus together."

"Would we win?"

"I don't know, *nemida*. We can but try."

Kate sighed again. "Briason, I have to tell you something. For the first time in my life, I find that I am free of obligations, free of demands. When I left my husband, it was very hard on me. I've only lately come to enjoy my independence. Then I met you, and everything changed. You're asking me to go back to that same reliance that poisoned my life before. You want to *use* me, the same way that Jon did. I don't know if I can do that."

"You're wrong," the Shequanti said calmly. "There is a difference."

"Oh, really? And what would that be?"

"This time, *you* have the power. I am not asking you to submit to me. I am asking you to let me share in it. It is not you who will be reliant, *nemida*. It is me."

They stared at each other in silence for a moment. Kate recognized the sincerity behind his words. For the first time, she considered how difficult this request was for *him*, how frustrating it must have been to realize that his prowess, his skill, could not

prevail against the magical might of his cousin. Unthinkingly, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body against his. She kissed him, feeling his body tighten against hers. All around them, the hot water bubbled and swirled, sending a cloud of steam into the cooling air to encompass their entwined bodies.

His hands moved on her wet flesh, caressing her breasts and sliding down to her hip. Boldly, she reached down to take his cock into her hands, reveling in how it hardened at her touch. He responded by thrusting his knee between her legs, spreading them just enough to allow him unimpeded access to her already-throbbing sex. She moaned against his mouth as he began to move her clit with swift, circular strokes, driving her desire to a fever pitch.

"No, just take me!" she gasped, dragging her mouth away from his.

Briason needed no further encouragement. He lifted her slightly in the water and drove his cock into her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, moving frantically against him while he pounded his possession of her in the steamy water. His big hands cupped her ass with insistent strength, his fingers digging into her skin as their mating escalated into sexual frenzy.

Kate arched backwards, biting her lip against the pleasure, and then suddenly she knew. She lifted her face to look into Briason's eyes. His dark eyes widened in surprise as a sudden cool clarity washed through Kate's thoughts.

Power rushed through her. It seared against the inside of her skin, blazing with a white-hot intensity that superseded the passion. For the first time, she felt the magic within her like another entity, sentient and with a will of its own. Briason, caught up in the overwhelming grip of desire, was helpless as she touched his face gently.

She was the magic, the power, a primeval goddess raised from the mists with the will and energy to infuse part of herself into her lover. This new consciousness recognized, as Kate did not, that she really had no choice. She had to bond with Briason, not only for the sake of the Shequanti but also for her own slumbering, pedantic world. Now *she was dominant*. She was in control. The granting of her power was within her domain. It was not surrender. Instead, it was an endowment, a gift from her to him.

Briason groaned. He thrust into her harder, driven not only by passion but also by the magic that swelled through the glade into the evening skies. Kate smiled, a slow, knowing smile, and breathed, "It is yours."

The magic exploded within them both even as they came. Kate knew a moment of dizzy euphoria, a split-second of confusion, and then a wave of exhaustion caused her to go limp in Briason's arms.

Epilogue

All was quiet as they made their way back to the camp where Kaberon waited for them. They walked hand-in-hand through the trees, the dusk and their silence wrapped around them like a shroud. No longer were they two separate people with their own goals and ideas. Now, they were bound to each other, bound with ties of magic and emotion that neither of them could break.

It came as a surprise, therefore, when Briason suddenly halted. He pushed her behind him as he drew his sword. Kate, still bemused by what had just happened, felt a chill trickle down her neck that had nothing to do with the cool darkness descending upon the forest.

Briason?

Hush, nemida, be still. Something is not right.

Kate looked around. The forest was unnaturally still, not even birds chirping as they readied their nests for the night. Her skin began to tingle, as if something was burning just below the surface. It took her a moment to recognize it for what it was: a magical intuition of danger. Even as the hackles rose on the back of her neck, her hand flew to the dagger at her side.

Numeni. Briason's mental voice was grim.

Before Kate could ask anything further, the forest erupted into chaos. A group of men, clad in archaic-looking armor, leapt from the brush. Briason's sword rang as it met the blade of his closest adversary, sparks flying into the low clumps of flowers scattered about the forest floor.

Run, nemida! Get to my father!

Kate didn't hesitate. She raced toward the camp, leaving her lover battling for his life against three men. Two others pursued her. She flew through the forest, ducking under a low branch as she dove into the camp.

Kaberon's eyes met hers. They took in the situation at a single glance. He ripped his sword from the sheath and leapt to confront her pursuers. Kate knew just enough about this type of combat to stay out of the way. She watched in silence, her sides heaving, as the men fought the Shequanti prince.

A sword slipped through Kaberon's guard. Instantly, his side blossomed with a crimson splash against the subdued color of his tunic. Kate's hand flew to her mouth.

Their eyes met again. Kaberon's face twisted in pain, but his eyes narrowed slightly. Their color changed as well, from a deep, dark blue to a much lighter, silvery shade.

The color of magic.

"No," she whispered in horror. She knew a split-second before it happened what Kaberon would do. That split-second wasn't enough time to protest, or even to attempt some feeble resistance. Instantly, the world tilted sideways. Kate closed her eyes against the nauseating vertigo and fell to the forest floor.

When she opened her eyes, it was night. A thin brush of snow caressed her cheek as she stared mutely up at the stone table. Beyond it, in the distance, was an only-too-recognizable glow of yellow light.

"Kaberon, you bastard!" Kate shouted the words, heedless of the fact that she screamed at an uncaring North Carolina sky.

He'd sent her back.

Tears streamed down her face. Kate gave herself up to the luxury of furious tears, her fingernails digging into the dirt. Now she was a world away from Briason, separated from the man she was bound to by a distance and time that was unfathomable. Thoughtlessly, she scrambled onto the stone table.

"Come on, damn you, *send me back!*" she shouted, beating at the unyielding stone with her fists.

The table didn't respond. Kate pummeled it until the skin broke on her knuckles, then put her face into her bleeding hands and wept.

* * *

The skies were lightening into a chilly dawn when Kate finally lifted her tear-stained face. The forest was illuminated by the glow of the season's first snow, tempering the chilly greys of the barren trees with a cold, crystalline light. A single word had roused her from her despair, and it was enough to halt the flow of tears.

Elaine.

Elaine Friesner, the sole survivor of the Friesner clan, the woman known locally as "not all there." Who else but Kaberon's Elaine knew of the Shequanti?

She might know a way back.

Kate dusted off her knees and climbed down from the table. She was no longer terrified and grieving. She had a purpose again, and one that would drive her to the end of her days. Elaine Friesner was the sole link to the Shequanti, to Briason, and she would have to track her down. Kate rubbed her chilled hands together and trudged toward the dimming light she knew to be the light in her backyard.

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