

The Shequanti 3: The Shattered Pyramid Isabelle Spurrier

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Kathryn is determined to return to Shequanti. She finds herself bound, body and soul, to the fate of the Elves. Once she returns, however, she discovers new dilemmas. Although Briason and Abaus have been forced into an uneasy alliance against the humans, the cousins' rivalry for her love is as heated as ever.

Kathryn brings them her power and hope for the future. In the end, she must make a choice that will affect the future of the entire Shequanti home world. When evil is the ultimate seduction can there still be room for love?

Prologue

Kate stormed into the house. Even in her rage, she noted that everything was just as she'd left it; as a matter of fact it looked like she'd only been gone for a few minutes. She flew up the stairs to the room she'd designated as her office. Boxes were stacked neatly around the large oaken library table she'd discovered under twelve layers of paint at a garage sale. It didn't take her long to find the one she sought -- the one with all the legal papers dealing with the purchase of her house.

Elaine Friesner. The previous owner of this house was the only person who might conceivably know how to help her. Kate had no doubt that this Elaine was Kaberon's Elaine.

It was harder for Elaine than me; the strain drove her mad.

Mad? Kate snorted. Probably the only thing that had driven Elaine Friesner mad was dealing with a Shequanti male.

There it was; her new address! "Second Avenue in Nashville?" Kate read the words aloud out of sheer anger. "You have got to be fucking kidding me!"

Nashville? But that was at least six hours away! Kate frowned at the address for a moment, then got to her feet. If she left within the hour and drove all night, she could be in Nashville by ten o'clock the next morning.

Quickly, she ducked into the bathroom. At least she could have a shower before she got on the road. As the hot water pounded against her skin, she closed her eyes and sagged against the wall of the shower in a moment of sheer exhaustion.

Despite all of Briason's assertions to the contrary, his father had shipped her back to North Carolina without so much as a by your leave. Now they were fighting for their lives against a group of Numeni warriors and she wasn't there. Of course, Kaberon had no way of knowing that she and Briason had completed the magical bond between

them. He couldn't have known she was now the energy his son needed to combat the forces against the Shequanti.

And Abaus.

She spared a moment to consider his role in all of this. Was it possible the Numeni were acting in accord with Abaus' plans to assume the throne? Somehow, she doubted it. He wasn't the type to share power with anyone, particularly not the humans who inhabited his world and threatened the Shequanti way of life. No, the Numeni had to be acting on their own initiative.

Kate toweled herself dry. A few minutes later, she was comfortably dressed in jeans and a sweater and throwing things haphazardly into a bag. If anyone could help her, it would be Elaine Friesner.

Chapter One

Morning traffic crawled through the streets of downtown Nashville as Kate pulled into the parking garage. The city proclaimed its heritage as the "Music City," and everything on Second Avenue seemed to reinforce that claim. As she walked out onto the street, she looked around with eyes that were now jaded from time spent in the world of the Shequanti.

Everything looked garish to her now. The neon signs were annoying, the smell of car exhaust nauseated her, and the clamor of people hurrying on their way to work was deafening. She ignored the Hard Rock Café and the numerous bars, and walked down the sidewalk clutching Elaine's address in her hand. She finally stopped before a nondescript green-painted door.

Sure enough, there was an address plaque for an E. Friesner. She rang the bell and waited.

"Yes?" The voice that emerged from the speaker was hesitant.

"Miss Friesner? This is Kate George. I bought your house in North Carolina and I have to talk to you. It's very important."

There was a moment of silence, and then the buzzer rang. When the door unlatched, she pulled it open and mounted the stairs.

* * *

Elaine Friesner was unmistakably a lovely woman. Although she was in her fifties, her long, silvery hair framed a face that was surprisingly smooth save for a few telltale wrinkles around her dark eyes. Elaine's expression was wary, but pleasant as she led Kate into her comfortable loft.

"I'm sorry to intrude, Miss Friesner, but I felt I had to see you," Kate began in the voice she usually reserved for negotiations.

"Is there a problem with the house?"

"No, not exactly."

"Then how can I help you?"

Kate looked at her directly. "You can help me get back to Shequanti."

Elaine's face paled dramatically and one slim hand went to her throat. "Shequanti? You've been there?"

"Yes, I've been there," Kate said in relief. If Elaine had looked at her like she was crazy she might have had to do something desperate. As she told her story, Elaine got up and went to the kitchen, Kate following. By the time Kate finished, the older woman returned with two steaming cups of coffee.

Kate hesitated. So far she hadn't mentioned any of the Shequanti names. As she took a sip of coffee, she regarded Elaine over her mug. Elaine returned the look, her pale face going a shade whiter.

"You're going to tell me this story involves Kaberon, aren't you?"

"Yes," Kate affirmed quietly. "I am. The prince is Briason's father. Briason is my, well, for lack of a better term, my mate."

"And Buonarre has fallen?"

"Yes, it has. I have to get back. Without me, Briason won't be able to counter either Abaus or the Numeni. Please tell me, Elaine, that you know of *some* way to use the stone table."

"I do." Even her lips were blanched of all color now. She set her coffee cup down on an old wooden milk crate. It was the kind of thing that artists seemed to be able to use as an artsy statement to their décor. Kate had tried the whole shabby chic eclectic before, and it had only looked like junk.

"On this world the stone table can only be used with two people," Elaine was saying. "On Shequanti, one person can summon another from this world. Kaberon sent you back? Then he has mastered the power. He can tap into the energy of the table no matter where he is."

"How can I get back?"

Elaine smiled. It was a sad, almost bitter smile. A little color went back into her cheeks as she replied, "You can get back if I go with you."

Kate frowned. "I thought you were able to manage to get back on your own once."

"Oh, I managed it," Elaine agreed. "It nearly killed me. It was only when I got there that Kaberon told me how dangerous it was."

"How did you do it?"

Elaine smiled enigmatically. "I have no idea how I managed it the first time. All I know is that one minute I was crying my eyes out on top of the stone table, and the next minute I was lying on the ground in Shequanti, half-dead and out of my mind."

"What makes you so certain that we can do it together?"

Elaine rose to her feet. "I made Kaberon tell me how to do it. I don't think he expected I would ever find someone else to work the magic with me. If he sent you back to save you, he must have expected you to find me."

Kate eyed her thoughtfully. Despite what both Kaberon and Mr. Washer had said, Elaine seemed to be completely rational and in control of herself. "Why would you think that?" she asked finally.

"Because I know how Kaberon thinks. I also know if the situation is that dire, he needs me. You were the only way he could get through to me."

Elaine appeared to be much taller. There was an aura of power crackling around her like an electric charge. Kate stared at her mutely as comprehension finally set in.

"It'll only take me a minute to get things settled here," Elaine was saying. "I can drive if you're tired, Kate. We'll be back home by sundown."

* * *

Kate kept her eyes closed for most of the trip. She had managed to doze fitfully for a couple of hours after they left Nashville, but now she kept her eyes closed so she could think. Elaine drove competently, if a little too quickly. Even now, Kate could feel the waves of impatience pulsing from the other woman. Elaine had packed a small bag

swiftly that morning, emerging from her bedroom with a long, dark tunic and leggings, wearing boots. The outfit wouldn't have been out of place in Nashville or Buonarre.

Obviously, Elaine had waited -- prayed -- for this opportunity for a long time. Was it possible Kaberon's assessment of her sanity was wrong? Maybe she had been disoriented when she'd forced her way alone through the stone table to Shequanti and Kaberon *thought* she'd lost her senses.

What if Elaine's interpretation of Kaberon's actions was correct? If Kaberon had intended for her to find Elaine and return with her to Shequanti, then he too expected to need the power of their bond to fight the invaders. She felt a moment of doubt. Kaberon's injury had appeared to be severe. What if he hadn't lived? What would that do to Elaine?

Kate sighed. There were too many possibilities to consider. All she knew, all she *needed* to know, was that this woman could help her get back to Briason's side. In the long run, she was prepared to risk any consequence in order to make that happen.

"Stop worrying about me," Elaine said quietly. "I can handle it, Kate, and the journey won't be as hard on me if you're with me to share the magical burden."

"How did you know that was what I was thinking?" Kate opened her eyes and turned to stare at Elaine.

"What is your magical talent?"

"Telekinesis."

"Mine is a bit more insidious. On our world, I am a psychic. On the world of the Shequanti, I am a mind mage."

"What does that mean?"

"My talent is especially beneficial for political situations. I can sense people's moods and change them accordingly. I can put people to sleep or wake them up. Kaberon and I together can do amazing things."

"Like what?"

Elaine's profile was suddenly etched in crystalline perfection. It was almost as if her skin had hardened into a stone mask. She was beautiful and more than a little frightening. Kate recoiled from the sight. "Kaberon and I together can interfere in the involuntary actions controlled by a person's brain," the other woman said softly.

A cold thrill raced down Kate's spine. "You mean like breathing?"

"Oh, yes," Elaine affirmed. "If we are driven to it, we can kill an adversary without ever touching them."

"You're talking about murder!"

"If we used it indiscriminately, then yes, I am. However, you should know Kaberon well enough to realize we would never use this skill in that way." Elaine shot a quick glance at Kate, one that was full of such resolve that Kate flinched. "Only twice have we done such a thing. The first time was an accident. Bandits on the fringe of Jonctif attacked us. When we bonded, I was already searching through the leader's mind. He didn't even make a noise; he just fell to the ground like a rock. That was when we discovered what we were capable of doing."

There was silence for a moment, then Kate asked, "And the second time?"

Elaine's voice was cool. "The second time we were trying to sift through a plot against the king. I was spending a great deal of energy sneaking through the emotions of those in the court. Kaberon had a suspicion the traitor was someone close to the royal family. You must understand when I use this skill, I cannot distinguish a person's identity -- only their thoughts. We found the traitor. Kaberon made the decision to execute him."

The silence returned, only this time it was much heavier. Elaine's expression didn't change however, as she finished. "The traitor was Prince Worakon, Abaus' father. In order to save one brother, the king to whom he owed fealty, Kaberon killed the other."

"You're kidding!"

"Not at all. I was shocked when Worakon fell down dead next to his brother. All hell broke loose. People thought an assassin had somehow managed to poison the prince. Only one face was unsurprised. Kaberon's. When he looked at me from over his brother's body, I realized he had known even before we killed him who the traitor

was." Elaine sighed again. "It was the hardest thing Kaberon had ever done. He was devastated." Elaine paused. "I, on the other hand, was not. Worakon would never have felt a twinge of regret over killing his brothers."

"And now Worakon's son has killed the king and looks to assume the throne in his place," Kate murmured. "Yes, you're right; it does make sense that Kaberon would want you to return to Shequanti."

The road twisted through the foothills of the Smokies now, a long, grey ribbon winding sinuously upward as the mountains reared before them. Kate fell silent and it seemed Elaine was content to do the same. Everything was so clear now. Kaberon *had* sent her back knowing she would run to find Elaine, fully aware that she also would be forced to return to Shequanti. If they were reunited, then they could end the civil war simply by killing its architect.

And if Kaberon was seriously injured? What then? Kate had only the slightest knowledge of medicine, and that was human medicine, but she had the feeling Elaine's particular talent could be used to facilitate healing.

And if he were dead?

Kate glanced at Elaine's stony profile. If Kaberon were dead, Elaine wouldn't hesitate to find some way to avenge his death. If thirst for vengeance led her to Worakon's son, all the better.

Now she understood. Elaine wasn't insane; she was merely possessed of a ruthlessness that the Shequanti, and particularly her mate, could not understand in a woman. Kate knew instinctively that once Elaine was in the world of the Shequanti again, no one would be permitted to stand between her and her mate.

Not even Kaberon's son.

* * *

There was at least three inches of snow in the driveway when the car pulled into it. Kate felt a momentary pride of ownership as the headlights fell upon the gingerbread-trimmed front porch and curtained windows.

Elaine flashed a quick grin of understanding her way. "It still feels like home to me," she commented as she opened her car door. "You haven't really had the chance to feel that way about this place yet, have you?"

"It felt like home to me the first time I saw it," Kate replied honestly.

"Some places are like that."

Without even discussing it, they made their way around the house to the backyard. This time, there were no yellow lights luring the unwary to the table. Kate followed the older woman without comment, noting she unerringly picked out her path through the snowy brush. In a matter of minutes, they stood beside the table.

The snow reflected a new, argent light over the table so the stone gleamed like marble. Overhead, the quarter moon filtered its light through the silvery branches, casting long shadows upon the snow. Elaine took a deep breath, as if she were steadying herself. She reached out to brush snow from the carved relief with a gentle, almost caressing hand.

"What do we do?" Kate asked quietly.

"You should change clothes first."

Kate didn't relish the thought of changing in a snowy wood, but hastened to obey. When she'd finished, Elaine stood silently by the table with her hand resting on the top. "I'm ready."

"Climb on top of the table."

Kate did as she was told, cursing as the long cloak tangled around her ankles. Elaine followed her up, hoisting herself onto the table with surprising ease. She took a deep breath. "Hold onto something. Whatever you do, don't fall off. This will not be pleasant."

Before Kate could ask what she meant, Elaine closed her eyes and raised her arms to the icy, crystalline winter sky. Startled, Kate grabbed the older woman's ankle as the table thrummed beneath her. The world slipped to one side and everything went black.

Chapter Two

"You have got to be kidding me." Kate looked around in disbelief. Elaine was nowhere to be seen. She was perched precariously on the stone table, her stomach churning with nausea. "Just great. If I'd known I'd feel like this I would have taken a Dramamine."

It was frighteningly, disturbingly apparent that a human couldn't work the stone table quite as effectively as a Shequanti mage.

Damn it.

Although she'd been sent home only the day before, the season had changed. It was now crisp with the clarion chill of midwinter. Kate bit her lip. She had no way of knowing how much time had passed. She'd left the Jonctif forest to the sounds of battle on a warm, early summer's afternoon.

It could be months or even years later.

Kate swallowed hard. Moving carefully, she scooted to the edge of the table and down to the ground. The leaves crunched under her feet and she swore.

Frost.

"This just keeps getting better and better." Her voice sounded unnaturally loud in the crystalline air of the forest. She winced. She was alone, trapped in an alien world without food, water, friends, or any clue what direction to take.

A wave of dizziness rushed through her. She leaned back against the edge of the table, closing her eyes. What in the world am I supposed to do? As her mind raced with nauseating confusion, a twig snapped in the trees. She froze. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Abaus stood twenty feet away.

His face looked different somehow, almost gaunt in the silvery light. He stared at her, seeming surprised. As he moved toward her with his peculiarly swift, feline gait she held up a warning hand. "Stay right there."

Instantly, the mage halted. "How did you get back here?" he asked in an even tone.

"You have no clue what I can do if I set my mind to it." She had no intention of revealing either Elaine's presence or her powers to him.

"Evidently." He held out his hands, palms up, in an age-old gesture of good will. "Are you all right? You look ill."

"I'm not feeling too well at the moment, no. Just stay away from me."

Abaus lifted an eyebrow. The gesture smoothed the tightness from his face and Kate felt a flutter of disturbance in her stomach. She'd forgotten how attractive he was, how perfectly alluring the blend of beauty and danger was to her. "I mean you no harm, Kathryn. You must know that things are different in Shequanti now."

"How so?"

"For one thing, Briason and I are allied against the Numeni invasion." She considered him silently. When she didn't respond, he continued, "For another, a great deal of time has elapsed since you left."

"I noticed the seasons had changed. How long have I been gone?"

"Six months or so."

She closed her eyes again, slumping against the stone edge in disbelief. Six months? How was that possible? Abaus took advantage of her confusion to move closer. "Is Briason safe?" she asked finally, her eyelids fluttering as she tried to focus.

"As safe as any of us could be. The human army is bogged down on the other side of the forest. We hold this side."

He stood directly in front of her now, looking down at her with a strange expression on his face. Irritably, she snapped, "What are you looking at?"

"I just cannot believe you are here," Abaus said after a long moment. "It doesn't seem possible."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Kate admitted, her anger draining away. "A moment ago I thought I was dreaming."

They looked at each other. Abaus moved his hand to her cheek and touched her softly. "Maybe you are, Kathryn, and I am sharing the same dream."

The touch of his cold fingers against her skin jolted her. Kate took a deep breath, willing herself to turn away from the blue-white fires dancing in his eyes, even as Abaus' fingers slipped into her hair. He tilted her face up to his.

"I have dreamed of you," he murmured, staring at the dark strands of hair twined about his fingers. "I have awakened in the night with the feel of your body under mine only to find it an illusion. Tonight it drove me from my chambers, brought me here to the place where I first summoned you, and I find you back in the flesh."

She wanted him, desired him with a feral hunger that shook her to the very core. She couldn't resist him. She simply stared up at him in silence, her body tingling with the knowledge that all she had to do was reach out her hand and he was hers.

The realization was intoxicating. Abaus' other arm came around her body swiftly, lifting her to the top of the table once more. For the first time she faced him as an equal. The table began to pulsate beneath her, a strange, magical rhythm blocking out her awareness of anything other than it.

And him.

His lips brushed against hers gently, so gently she barely registered the stroke of coolness on her mouth. She felt the cloak fall away from her shoulders, slithering onto the vibrating table without a sound. As his hands moved to the lacing of her tunic, she opened her mouth against his. Instantly, Abaus kissed her savagely. His tongue thrust brutally between her lips to dance with her own.

She welcomed it, craved the wildness of it, the ferocity of his desire for her in a way she'd never wanted anything before. She had no thought other than him; his hands frantically pulling the tunic open to the icy touch of the night. He didn't bother lifting it over her head. Instead he dragged it down her body until it lay forgotten atop her hips. As his hands closed over her breasts, Kate made a little sound of longing in her throat.

Her nipples hardened in the cold air, tantalized further by the chill pull of his fingers as he caressed her.

She didn't resist when he pushed her down so she lay upon the table. Small kisses of wintry moisture tickled along her bare chest and she opened her eyes. It was snowing, tiny, delicate flakes illuminated with an argent cast by the cloud-shrouded moon.

"I have always wished to see you like this," he growled quietly. "Your body is glowing like a goddess' in the moonlight."

Before she knew what was happening, he untied her breeches with swift surety. It only took a moment for him to strip her. It was invigorating; the humming magic of the table, the silence of the glade, the feathery sting of the snow against her nude body, and the fervor that blazed in his eyes. Abaus was in his element now, and she thrilled to the predatory beauty of his face.

He spread her legs so her sex lay bared to the night sky. His hands were cold against her naked thighs; cold with a sexual fire that coursed through her veins and aroused twists of desire in her body. She was completely wet, excited in an instant of fierce anticipation.

Abaus lowered his mouth onto her pussy, parting her hair with his hands while his tongue sought out her clitoris. She arched spasmodically as he savaged her, sucking on the hard little nodule with greedy ferocity. The table's pulse quickened as he inserted a finger into her, increasing her desire until she felt deliciously warm. It made the arctic staccato of the snow melting against her skin even more arousing and she moaned.

"I want you," he whispered, lifting his head long enough to trail small bites along her right thigh. "Tell me you want me too, Kathryn."

She couldn't reply. Instead, she threaded her fingers into his hair. He put his mouth on her sex again, his tongue flicking incessantly against her clit.

When he pulled away she moaned again, this time in protest. He removed his clothes swiftly, tossing them to one side with disdainful haste. Kate looked up at the

sky, at the moon peeking through the diffusing veil of snow and clouds until his body reared above her.

He looked like a god of old, Balder perhaps, with his pale beauty set aflame by the silver sheen of the moonlight. His dark hair cascaded over his shoulders, brushing against her skin. Then his body lowered onto hers. His mouth fell upon hers, their tongues mating savagely as his cock stabbed into her inner thigh. She arched against him, her arms winding around his neck and pulling him closer. He entered her with a swift, decisive thrust and she gasped.

The whole world pulsed around them. The table thrummed beneath her, the wind throbbed against her skin, and his cock pounded into her willing cunt. She thrilled to it; the feel of her breasts crushed against his chest, the merciless scraping of his hard body against her oversensitive clitoris, and the full, hard length of him inside of her. She raked her nails against his neck and was rewarded when his mouth hardened on her throat. Kate dug her fingers into the muscles of his lean back as Abaus' pace intensified.

Her body screamed for release. This hard, savage sex roused her to the brink of unconsciousness. She wrapped her legs around his waist and he drove into her harder. His hands tightened on her shoulders, digging into her flesh with a fury that would leave bruises. She didn't care. She wanted more.

She wanted it all.

He gave it to her. His cock swelled within her, filling her completely. She thrust with him and against him, willing him to give in to the primal instinct that took him over. He buried his face in the curve of her throat as he came, moving so swiftly that his hips slammed her ass into the unyielding stone of the table. Sparks flew behind her closed lids as her body responded, exploding with waves of ecstasy unlike any she'd known before. Abaus collapsed against her, his breathing ragged. Everything stopped; the table, the winds, the light, and the world.

Kate let her arms fall weakly back onto the stone table. For a long moment they lay entwined together in absolute stillness. Then the world started again, and as it did so Kate realized she was in a lot of trouble.

She'd come back to find Briason. What quirk of fate had led her to find Abaus instead?

* * *

They'd dressed in silence. Once back on the ground, Kate found the dizziness and nausea she'd experienced upon first arriving in Shequanti had returned. She'd struggled back into her clothes, swallowing against the illness. Pulling her boot back on, she reeled to one side.

Abaus caught her. She sagged against him, closing her eyes. His arms came around her and she noticed that for the first time, his flesh seemed warm to her.

"You are ill and cold. I am an idiot to have exposed you to the elements the way that I did."

"It's all right. At the time it seemed like a good idea."

"Yes, but now it seems rather stupid. Since the Numeni are not that far away, this isn't exactly a safe place. Can you walk?"

"I think so."

He loosened his grasp and she staggered. Before she knew what was happening, he'd scooped her up in his arms. As her head lolled against his chest, he strode into the darkness of the forest. "I will take you to my cousin. Rest now, Kathryn. You will be safe with me."

As if his words were some sort of enchantment, Kate sank immediately into a dreamless oblivion.

* * *

Kate awoke in a bed. Although she was still fully clothed, her boots were gone, and someone had covered her with a rough woolen blanket. By the dim light of a candle guttering by the window, she squinted around the room.

She was alone. Kate recognized the chamber as the one Briason had given her when she first came to this strange world. The table and two chairs remained by the window, piled with parchments and boasting the candle, an inkwell and quill, and a decanter of wine with a few glasses.

Kate rolled to her other side toward the door and moaned as another wave of nausea and pain rolled over her. However Elaine had managed to get them back here, it certainly hadn't sat well with Kate's system. She closed her eyes in sick resignation. Where was Elaine? Why hadn't *she* materialized at the stone table too?

And how had Abaus known she'd be there?

Voices and the clatter of feet moved down the hall. Kate shrank back under the covers, recognizing the sounds of male voices raised in argument. As the door flew open, she opened her eyes feebly.

Briason towered over the bed. He too looked different. His eyes were dark-shadowed and tired, his mouth tightened into a thin line. His cheeks were haggard, giving him a drawn, weary look. He stared down at her for a moment, chest heaving, nostrils flaring, and his eyes snapping with fury. Before she could ask what was wrong, he snarled, "What in the name of the seven hells are *you* doing here?"

Kate's mouth fell open. "What?"

"My father sent you home for a reason, Kathryn! How in the blazes did you get back?"

Despite her churning stomach and pounding head, Kate felt the first stirrings of anger. "Is that all you have to say, Briason? I get sent home, against my will I assure you, and all I can think about when I get there is you. I came back here to find *you*, to help you as best as I could. I'm lying here about to throw up on your nice boots, feeling like someone kicked me in the head, and you're mad because I'm back? What in the hell kind of a thing is that to say?"

Abaus appeared just behind his cousin's shoulder. He too frowned but not at her. "Briason, go easy on her. The journey has made her very ill."

Briason whirled on the mage. "Did you summon her?"

"I?" Abaus' voice crackled with disdain. "Certainly not."

"Then how did she get here?"

"I do not know. From the human world it takes two to operate the table and I have never discovered that humans were able to do so."

"Well, it only takes one from this world. Send her back!" Briason snapped.

Kate's queasiness subsided enough for her to say evenly, "If you do that, I'll just turn around and come straight back. You can't tell me what to do."

"I don't know how things work on your world, Kathryn," Briason drawled in a light, pleasant voice that chilled her to the bone, "but this is Shequanti. Here, you will *obey* me. I do not have time to deal with any sort of rebellion on your part."

"Obey? Who in the *fuck* do you think you are? I've made my own decisions for a long time, thank you very much."

"Not any more. Abaus, send her back."

"If I send her back now the journey might kill her," Abaus said quietly. "Is that really what you want? Humans are not strong enough to make the trip frequently."

Briason swore. "How long?"

The mage shrugged. "I have no idea. If your father were here --"

"How is Kaberon?" Kate interrupted.

A heavy silence descended upon the room as the two Shequanti exchanged glances. Finally Briason replied, "He is held prisoner by the Numeni. I know he survived the wound he took in your defense but no more than that. They will not let me ransom him unless I surrender the kingdom and that I cannot do. If I did, he would never forgive me."

Kate didn't know what to say. The silence grew ominous once more. Briason sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. "I have too much to do this night to deal with this situation any further. Get some rest, Kathryn. In the morning I'll decide what is best for you."

"Somehow I don't think so," she muttered sullenly.

"Somehow I don't think you can think," he returned. He strode quickly to the table and scooped up the parchments. Without looking back at her, he stalked out of the room and slammed the door.

Kate closed her eyes against the bitter tears scorching her lids. A moment later she heard the door open and close softly as Abaus followed his cousin from the room.

What in the world had happened to Briason? He seemed a completely different man from the one she'd left when Kaberon thrust her back into the harsh reality of her own life. All of Briason's gentle kindness had apparently vanished, buried under the weight of the Shequanti kingdom and the burdens of command.

For that matter, Abaus was different too. The invasion of Shequanti seemed to have changed him for the better. He wasn't as intimidating to her now.

I'm sure that has nothing to do with the fact that I just fucked him in the forest, she thought cynically. What in the devil was I thinking?

The answer was simple. She *hadn't* thought about it. For the first time in this strange world, she'd simply done as she'd pleased without thought or concern for the consequences.

But Kaberon... his loss was a major blow to the Shequanti. Not only was he a powerful mage, but he was also the unifying force in a kingdom that had been in turmoil since the long-ago days when he'd killed his younger brother to preserve the reign of the elder. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to balance the two cousins who now led their people -- two men who had been at odds with each other for a long time and now were uneasy allies in a desperate situation.

And Kaberon was held by the Numeni... the human foes who had invaded a Shequanti kingdom already sundered by civil war.

Human foes...

The idea came so quickly that Kate felt a jolt of energy supersede the sickness. Obviously, Elaine had ended up somewhere else. It was entirely possible she'd sensed Abaus' proximity to the stone table and had hurried off into the forest while Kate reeled

with nausea. Kate thought of the older woman's implacability and knew without a doubt that Elaine was already making her way to Kaberon as quickly as possible.

If my power is teleportation, I need to find Elaine. Then we can just walk into the Numeni camp, find Kaberon, and teleport back here. That would take much of the burden from Briason's shoulders -- and the worry.

Maybe if I can pull that off he'll be happier to see me.

Hard on the heels of that thought came another, more sobering realization. It was going to be almost impossible to get out of this house without someone knowing. If it wasn't her psychic link with Briason that gave her away, it would be Abaus' instinctive feel for magic or an overzealous guard ratting her out. She'd have to find some way to get in touch with Elaine. If Elaine's magic was psychic there was a chance she'd hear Kate trying to contact her.

I need to find a way to get out of here. As soon as I can sit up, I'll have to work on it. Kate forced the thoughts from her mind. She needed to sleep. Hopefully in the morning she'd be able to think clearly about all of these things.

And ignore the other things that were equally as disturbing, like the sudden disappearance of her fear of Abaus and the desire for him that now gnawed inside her.

Chapter Three

The next morning swirled with grey snow. Kate, who'd arisen feeling much more herself, stared out the window in disgust. Obviously, she would be going nowhere soon. Without an idea of where to go, she wouldn't dare attempt a trip through the forest in this kind of weather.

Not without a car, anyway.

A soft tap sounded at her door. Without turning around, Kate called, "Come in!"

"What are you thinking about?" It was Abaus. She turned to regard him. A young Shequanti pushed past him with a tray. Kate blanched at the thought of eating what passed for breakfast among these people; thick hunks of meat, whatever stewed vegetables were handy, and last night's leftovers. As the young man left, Abaus' lips twitched.

"I'm thinking I'd rather hit my head against the wall than eat any of that." Kate glared at the food.

"You should try to choke something down. It will help with the sickness."

She eyed the tray dubiously. "I'll think about it. What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

Kate lifted an eyebrow in a fairly good imitation of his old, cynical manner. "Oh? What about?" She sat at the table and stared at the food with a frown, doing her best to appear unconcerned. Kate had a feeling she knew where this line of conversation was going to take them.

"You never did tell us how you managed to come back." Abous sat opposite her, his expression bland. "As I mentioned last night, it takes two humans to operate the stone table from your world. Obviously, someone else made the crossing with you."

"You're wrong, actually," Kate interjected. "You may think it takes two humans, but a human who is powerful enough can do it by herself."

"How do you know?"

"Because the woman who brought me has returned on her own in the past," Kate replied nonchalantly. "Oh, you were right that there was no way I could do it on my own. I went and found her instead. She used the table, but something went wrong. When I found myself here, she was nowhere to be seen."

"I see."

"Did you want some of this?" Kate asked sweetly, offering him the plate of something that looked like half-cooked shoe soles.

His lips twitched again. "I've already eaten."

"You know, it's really strange," Kate went on, sawing through the meat with deliberation. "You've changed a lot since last I saw you."

"The last time you saw me, you'd thrown yourself off a cliff."

"I accidentally fell off it. There's a difference."

"Things are different now. Our country is at war. My priorities have changed."

"I'm sure that the Numeni found it much easier to invade after you'd softened up the defenses with your little civil war, Abaus."

"Undoubtedly." His agreement was bland.

She set her fork down, all pretense of eating over. "Nothing has changed, you know. Not between us."

He quirked an eyebrow at her.

"I'm serious. Just because you've switched sides doesn't make everything you did in the past go away."

"Not everything that has happened between us has been unpleasant."

"You're right, it hasn't." She hesitated then went on. "By the same token, Abaus, it hasn't all been pleasant either. Or forgivable. I don't like being told what to do so there's no way I would ever accept being held against my will."

"So I discovered," he said dryly.

She was anxious for him to leave. More than anything, she wanted to try to contact Elaine. She knew her idea for Kaberon's rescue was a solid plan, but one that required the older woman's assistance if it were to work.

"What are you planning?" Abaus asked abruptly, shattering her thoughts.

"Planning?" She repeated the question with a note of polite enquiry, stalling for time.

"Your mind is a million miles away."

"Yes, it is. I'm still trying to assimilate all the changes that have happened since I left."

"I don't blame you," Abaus said, rising to his feet. "If you don't like being told what to do, Kathryn, then I'd venture to say my cousin and I have a great deal more in common now. He won't hesitate to tell you what to do." The mage smiled briefly and went for the door. With his hand on the latch, he turned to look over his shoulder, "And, if it comes down to it, neither will I."

He left, closing the door behind him. Kate stared at it with a frown creasing her brow. *Jesus Christ, what have I done? Now I have two of them to deal with!*

* * *

It was mid-afternoon before she saw Briason again. Apparently his mood hadn't improved. He threw open the door and stormed into the room.

"Not over your snit yet?"

He looked momentarily puzzled. "What is a snit?"

"Never mind. What do you want, Briason? To yell at me some more?"

He took a deep breath. "Why did you come back?"

"I already told you that. Because I wanted to help you."

Briason sighed. "I don't think you realize why I'm so angry. All this time, I've been able to concentrate on my work here because I thought you were safe. Now you've returned, you're in greater danger than ever."

"Why?" she challenged him. "Because of Abaus or the Numeni?"

"Abaus will not be a threat again until we have repelled the Numeni from our lands," he replied grimly. "The Numeni, on the other hand, are particularly brutal to human women who mate with a Shequanti."

"Really? Why is that?"

"Because human women increase our power."

Kate rolled her eyes and got to her feet. "If someone said that to me back home I'd slap a lawsuit against them so quick their heads would spin. What you're talking about, Briason, is discrimination pure and simple. We have idiots in my world who support the same thing."

"Kate, I don't think you understand the situation. We are penned into this small section of forest by the Numeni armies. They already occupy most of the cities. When the spring comes, we'll be fighting for our survival. Our chances are not good."

"But your chances are better with me here," she pointed out. "I can take your army anywhere in the kingdom. Do you realize what an advantage that is?"

"It is too dangerous to risk."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

His hands flashed out swiftly, seizing her wrists. "Are you insane?" he snarled. "Can't you see I'm trying to protect you?"

"I don't need to be protected!"

"Yes, you do. What good would you be to my people if you fell into the hands of the Numeni? How could you help us then?"

"Is that what this is about?" The anger left her as quickly as it had come. "You're afraid for me?"

"Of course I'm afraid for you."

Kate relaxed in his grip. "Don't be," she said gently. "I'll be fine, Briason."

He stared at her. "You are the most annoying female I've ever met. Why can't you let me ease my mind if nothing else and send you back to safety?"

"Because I love you."

Her simple statement shattered the mounting tension in the room. He dropped her hands abruptly, leaving red imprints of his fingers on her skin. She rubbed the bruises absently, her gaze never leaving his face.

He sighed again. "I must get back. I'll return this evening. Perhaps by then you'll have seen reason."

"I won't have," she assured him. "But I'd like for you to come back anyway. We need to figure out what we're going to do for your people." Kate reached up to stroke his face lightly. His eyes closed, whether in exhaustion or because of her caress she didn't know.

"The army is camped around this house," he said with resignation. "I'd advise you to stay indoors. It will be safer."

"I have no intention of going outside in this mess. I'll see you later?"

He took her hand gently and removed it from his face. "Yes. I'll come back later." Briason lifted her hand to his lips. The kiss scorched her skin, overlaid with the peculiar heat she'd always associated with him. When he opened his eyes, a familiar intensity flickered behind the black glitter of his gaze and she shuddered with delicious anticipation. "Good. I'll be waiting for you."

* * *

It was almost surreal.

She'd spent the afternoon at the window, thrusting her mind out into the snowy woods hoping for some sign of Elaine. A few times she'd felt the familiar wriggle against her mind, but it always slipped away. She knew Elaine was trying to find her, too. It was only a matter of time. After all, the two women hadn't been able to bond as intimately as Kate had with Briason.

She wondered if it were possible to latch onto Elaine and teleport herself to where she was, or vice versa. She'd been practicing throughout the day, popping things from one side of the room to the other. It was time, probably, to experiment with something bigger.

Much bigger.

As the light faded behind the falling snow and darkness descended on the forest, she decided it was time to give it a try. She changed into a long, sheer linen shirt she found in a chest beside the bed, leaving her legs bare. The shirt hung almost past her knees anyway. It would serve as a nightgown. She undid the twisted knot of hair and combed it out with her fingers, leaving it waving and loose around her face. Then she made her first move.

Briason?

Yes, nemida?

She smiled at the familiar endearment. Are you very busy at the moment?

Not really. Why?

Kate grinned. She could sense his presence as surely as if he were in the same room. She let her power flow from her, wrapping it around his body like a rope. Even as his mind startled at the contact, she took a deep breath and pulled him.

He materialized two feet away from her. She felt a thrill of excitement. Just looking at him made her knees weak.

"What in the hell --"

"Wow. It worked. I wasn't sure it would." Kate smiled with innocent surprise and poured him a glass of wine.

"You teleported me here?"

"I sure did. Pretty nifty trick, huh?"

He shuddered as he took the glass from her. "It's disorienting."

Kate frowned. "Really? Is it bad? I know how I felt last night and I wouldn't want to do that to anyone else."

"Not that bad. After all, you came from farther away."

"True. So, Briason, tell me, have you decided what to do with me yet?"

Briason took a sip of wine. "Point taken, Kathryn. I can't really do anything with you if you can send me packing with a thought."

She laughed and poured a glass of wine for herself. "Glad you finally see the light. Now, should we fight some more or should we spend our time more pleasantly?"

An unwilling smile stretched his lips, relaxing the taut lines of strain. "You are an amazing woman, nemida."

"Thank you." Kate lifted the glass to him and took a long drink. She set the drained goblet down and looked up at him. "So, what do we do now?"

"I'm sure we can think of something."

His eyes began to glitter again. She moved closer to him. "Do you have any ideas?"

"A few."

"Like what?" She purred the question, standing with her breasts just brushing against him. "It hasn't been that long for me since I saw you, but it's been a long time since you saw me. Did you miss me?"

"More than you know."

She ran her hands lightly up his chest. He stood silently, staring at her face. "Kiss me, Briason."

She'd even surprised herself. This new assertiveness, this need to seduce him worked on her as it did him. The dark eyes flickered with a swift, hot light and he put down his glass. A slow, lazy smile spread across his mouth. "No."

"No?"

"No. I think I'd rather you kissed me."

"Well, what do you want me to do? Stand on a chair?"

His muscled torso felt hard as stone under her hands. He didn't say anything at all, just continued to stare down at her with that sexy smile burning into her belly. Kate undid his tunic with slow deliberation, tugging the fabric aside until the thin, white lines of his scarred chest were revealed. She pressed her lips to his hot skin, flicking her tongue lightly as she did so.

He inhaled sharply. Kate trailed her fingernails down both sides of his chest, looking up at him seductively from beneath her lashes. As she bared his nipple, she ran her tongue lightly around it, and followed with a stronger nip of her nails.

Kate liked the feeling of taking charge, of demanding his attention upon her and only her. Judging from the hardness of his muscles Briason liked it too. She moved her hands lower, fluttering over his lean hips and tracing lightly against the bulge of his erect cock through his trousers. He continued to watch her, never moving under her assault.

"So tell me, Briason, have you decided what to do yet?" Kate moved her hands boldly over his crotch, a tiny smile on her face.

"I'm waiting for you to tell me your pleasure, nemida."

Kate curved her hands around his ass, turned on just by the tight solidity of his body. When she took his hands in hers, his glance flickered quickly to her lips. She put his hands on her breasts, arching against him in invitation. He obeyed her silent demand, kneading her sensitive flesh through the thin linen shirt as his eyes darkened even more.

"Kiss me," she said again.

"Where?" His voice was husky, deepened almost to a growl as she pushed her hands under his tunic.

"Wherever you like." She tickled his sides with her nails then ran them with fervent intent up his back.

He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. Kate pouted as he pulled away, his sensuous smile still intact. "Is that the best you can do?"

"No. I'm waiting to see what the best you can do is, Kathryn."

She slid her fingers to the laces of his trousers. With a quick motion, she untied them. Kate smiled as her small hand wrapped around the head of his cock, pleased with the small drop of moisture lingering there. Kate dragged her fingers through it, swirling it around the sensitive tip until he jerked involuntarily.

"How's that?" She curled her hand around his shaft, moving it slowly down to the base of his penis.

He wasn't smiling any more. Instead, his face was set and blazing with intensity. His hands tightened on her breasts almost to the point of pain.

"Kiss me, Briason," she demanded for a third time, her hand working slowly up and down.

This kiss was slightly deeper, his tongue pushing against hers in a moment of heated dance. When he pulled away, his breathing was ragged.

Impatiently, she tugged his trousers down with her free hand, baring his hips and thighs. He closed his eyes as she began to tickle his balls, running her fingernails lightly over the hypersensitive skin while she continued to massage his engorged penis. She leaned her face against his chest, biting lightly at his skin.

That was the final straw.

His mouth devoured hers, all pretense of restraint shattered. His hands left her breasts abruptly, snatching her up and against his body with furious possession. Before she knew what was happening, he'd tossed her on the bed. Briason stripped away the rest of his clothes and joined her. He put one big hand to the neck of her shirt and ripped it completely in half before falling upon her again.

Kate's mind whirled. It had taken so much to shake him into action that she was quite unprepared for the violence of his passion now. His hand roved over her body, searing trails of fire along her flesh, demanding her surrender even more than the raw savagery of his mouth did. He rained kisses across her face, onto the sensitive lobe of her ear, and nibbled the column of her throat. When he fastened onto her breast she nearly came off the bed. His lips, tongue and teeth ravished her while his hands twined mercilessly into her hair. The combination of pleasure and pain excited her even more and she moved her body restlessly beneath his.

He needed no further invitation. His legs thrust between hers, pushing them far apart. As the head of his cock nudged against her sex she lifted her hips to him. Briason drove into her with a muffled shout. Her body responded instantly. Her cunt was so full, so stimulated that each powerful thrust made her want more.

Need more.

She dug her nails into his ass, urging him to greater speed. The sexual frenzy between them was stronger than ever before. In the past, they'd made love. This time

she wanted him to *fuck* her. The love was still there, buried beneath the passion, but it was the passion that she wanted.

"Kathryn!" He groaned against her skin. She couldn't answer him; instead she raised her mouth to his kiss as he pounded into her with desperate possession. Her eyes closed reflexively as a tear trickled into her hair.

God, this is too much! This is too --

His mouth and tongue muffled her scream as she came violently. Despite the spasms rocking her body, he continued his frantic pace. Almost as quickly as she'd come, she felt another orgasm building within her.

He pulled away from her kiss abruptly. His hands trapped her head, his fingers curling painfully into her hair. She opened her eyes to see a look almost of rage on his face. "Say it!" He grated out the words between clenched teeth. "Tell me you love me!"

She gasped for air as her body arched involuntarily under his. His body went rigid, moving quicker than she thought possible. Finally she managed to rasp, "I love you, Briason!"

His cock exploded within her. The sensation threw her over the edge once more as she joined him in a spectacular orgasm. Then her vision went black. As he pumped the last bit of his seed into her willing body, Kate fainted.

The last thing she heard was his murmur, "I love you too, my beloved Kathryn."

Chapter Four

When Kate awakened, everything was silent. Next to her, Briason lay motionless, one arm draped possessively around her waist. He was asleep. Kate stared at him for a while. In sleep, his features had relaxed into a semblance of what she remembered. The slight curve to his lips indicated that he, at least, had fallen asleep with a smile on his face.

He was beautiful, stunningly so.

For a moment, Kate thought of a painting she'd studied in college of the sleeping Cupid. Briason reminded her of that now, with a body as chiseled and gorgeous as that of any Greek god and a face that no artist could ever hope to do justice to.

If I keep this up I'm going to drool on him and that would not be cool.

Now she was hungry. She wormed slowly from under his arm, sliding as gently as possible to the edge of the bed. He stirred as she moved away, then snuggled into the blankets with the same contented languor a child did. She smiled down at him lovingly.

Then she laughed as she picked up the tattered remnants of her shirt. Eventually, someone was going to have to buy her some clothes if he kept ripping them off her.

Kate?

Kate was immediately alert. Elaine?

Where are you?

The Shequanti encampment. Where are you?

I'm in the forest at an outpost about five miles from the stone table.

Kate bit her lip. I've been trying to find you all day. I'm not as good at this psychic thing as you are. I think I've thought of a way to rescue Kaberon.

Good. I haven't. What's your idea?

Can you find him psychically?

I have found him.

Immediately aware of some emotion tingeing Elaine's voice, she risked another glance at Briason and instinctively moved to the window. *Is he all right?*

He's very weak. I think they're keeping him drugged. He thinks I'm a hallucination. The Numeni are holding him captive.

I know. Listen, if you can find him, I think I can teleport us to where he is. Then we can grab him and bring him back here.

It will be dangerous. We won't be able to use magic very close to the Numeni camp. They have mages of their own.

Do we have another choice? The Shequanti need Kaberon. Their army is in a tough situation. Briason and Abaus are allied against the invaders but without Kaberon here to act as a buffer that could change.

Can you get here to me?

I think so. Give me some time; I need to be very careful about this. Either Briason or Abaus could sense what I'm doing and try to stop me.

Elaine's voice sounded slightly amused when she replied. *Briason isn't going to notice a thing for a while. I think you wore him out.*

Elaine!

I wasn't eavesdropping, honest.

Just let me get dressed and fed before I take off. If he wakes up, it might be a little longer.

If you hold this link in your mind lightly you should be able to get here. I'll keep an eye out for you.

Elaine's voice fell silent, but Kate could feel the connection without effort. She sighed and turned back to the bed. Briason slept on, his naked body stretched over the blankets. She went to cover him up and let her hand linger against his warm skin.

"I hope you realize that I'm doing this for you," she muttered, and started to get dressed.

Abaus took his time walking through the crowded halls of Briason's base, his brow furrowed in a thoughtful frown and his attention obviously elsewhere. The Shequanti who passed him in the corridors took one look at his face and hurried away.

No one wanted to cross this most powerful mage of Shequanti.

When he reached the door to Briason's room, he hesitated. Everything within him rebelled at this. He'd never cared for his cousin in the past and he shouldn't interfere with Briason's matters now. Unfortunately, this matter included Kathryn. He couldn't, in all conscience, leave Briason in the dark.

With a slightly self-mocking smile, the mage knocked loudly on the door.

He waited for a moment then opened the door. Briason sat up in bed, his hair tousled as he looked around in bewilderment. Abaus felt a swift flash of pain in his chest, much to his surprise. *She's been with him*.

He narrowed his eyes bitterly. Briason's eyes narrowed at the precise same time as he recognized his cousin. "What is it?" Briason asked brusquely, completely unconcerned about his nakedness.

"There's something you need to know," Abaus replied with a sneer, closing the door behind him. "We need to have a talk, cousin."

"What about?"

"Kathryn."

Briason threw back the blanket and got to his feet. Abaus forced himself to watch emotionlessly as his cousin pulled his tunic over his head. "Where is she?"

"That's what we need to talk about. She's gone."

"Gone?" In a flash, Briason leapt across the room, one big hand twisting into the other man's tunic. "What did you do with her?"

Abaus' mouth filled with sudden malice. There was a swift spark, a smell of sulfur, and Briason snatched his hand away with a vicious oath. "I didn't do anything with her. She's gone on her own."

The men stared at each other in silence. About continued after a moment, "She came back with someone else, another woman who'd been to Shequanti before and

somehow learned how to operate the stone table. I didn't think much of it until a little while ago. I felt Kathryn start to use her magic, and before I could intervene she'd teleported herself somewhere. I was able, however, to recognize the woman she went to meet."

"Who was that?" Briason asked in a deadly tone.

"Elaine."

"Elaine? But I thought she was mad!"

"Apparently not. She's not only sane enough to travel between our two worlds but she's back here on Shequanti. That can only mean one thing."

Briason closed his eyes in horror. "They're going after my father."

"Yes. And between Elaine's abilities and Kathryn's they'll find him too. They're headed straight for the Numeni camp."

The two men exchanged another glance. Briason cursed and reached for his pants. "I'll go after them."

"How are you going to catch up with a teleporter and a psychic? Don't be ridiculous!" Abaus snapped. "I'm not even sure I could get to them in time. For one thing, I have no idea where they might be."

"I can find her," Briason said grimly. "She can't hide from me."

"Oh yes, I can see that," his cousin said softly, venom dripping from his tongue.

"Apparently she can hide enough from you that you can't latch on to her plans. That should make it easy for you to pick her out from thousands of other humans."

"Be very careful what you say, cousin," Briason warned, his voice also quiet. "I will not forget any comment you might make about this."

"I'm aware of that." Abaus' voice was cool and controlled once more. "I am also not particularly concerned about it."

Briason slammed his feet into his boots. His eyes took on a distant look as he reached for Kathryn with his mind.

"She's not that stupid," Abaus pointed out, glancing down at his slender hands with seeming interest.

"I'll beat her until she can't move," Briason vowed.

"That's not going to help either."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"The only way we can find them, cousin, is to combine our resources."

"How?"

Abaus shrugged. "If you allow me into your bond we can find her together. Then I can teleport us after them."

"What possible reason would I have to trust you to keep your word?" Briason snarled.

Abaus' expression showed nothing but bland assurance. "I swear it to you. We find them, I'll teleport us there and make certain we all return safely."

Briason hesitated, his natural distrust warring with his desire for action. Abaus waited a moment. "I swear it on my father's grave, Briason. Even you know it is an oath I will not break."

"And once we return?" Briason asked, his voice chilled with distaste. "Then what?"

"Then Kathryn might have to make some decisions. The fact of the matter is that we *both* have a bond with her. She's given you access to her powers, true. But *I* am the one who summoned her. I, too, have created a binding with her. She may love you, cousin, but she still desires me. It can be a powerful tool in our hands, Briason, one that may allow us to win this war. Against that, what choice do we have?"

"We don't." Briason's voice was flat. "You are correct in that at least." He set his teeth together as he pulled the bell for his servant. Within moments, the room teemed with activity. Briason armed himself, slinging a quiver of arrows and a bow over his shoulder while the servant buckled his sword around his waist.

Abaus waited, fastening a heavy cloak around his throat and pulling up the hood to shadow his face. When the servant had gone, Briason spared a glance for his cousin who stood patiently with his hands folded in the sleeves of his robe. "If you hurt her in

any way I will kill you," he promised, his quiet voice slicing through the room like a dagger.

"The same to you," Abaus replied, baring his teeth. He crossed the room and stood before Briason, lifting one hand to rest lightly on the warrior's temple. A swift-moving array of images flashed before his eyes, moving through the shadowed forest like a wraith. He reeled slightly as he fastened onto one tenuous link.

Kathryn.

"I have found her, cousin," he said as if from a great distance away. "Hold onto me."

As Briason gripped his shoulder with steely fingers, Abaus allowed himself a brief moment of triumph. The whole of their magical bond lay open before him. He sent a finger of magic into it, penetrating the veil of intimacy with ease. Then he poured his power into the link and sent them flying from the room into the chill silence of the night.

* * *

Kate crouched next to Elaine in the thick cover of a clump of evergreens. Below them, in a snow-blanketed valley, was spread the might of the Numeni army. Hundreds of fires flickered against the trees, casting shadows upon the tents clustered in a huge expanse of cleared ground. The trees, so beloved of the Shequanti people, were paying the price for the Numeni invasion. A wide perimeter of stumps encompassed the camp, giving mute evidence to the depredations of the encroachers.

Can you find him? she asked Elaine.

I sense him, but I need to get closer.

Kate nodded and they moved farther down the hill, ghosting from tree to tree like wraiths. As they approached the encampment the noise grew louder. It wasn't that the army was boisterous, quite the contrary. Instead, the murmur of voices around the fires, the stamping of the tethered horses, and the flap of tents in the wind created an undercurrent of sound that superseded the quiet of the wood.

There were sentries posted at regular intervals along the perimeter of the camp, although it was quite apparent this was just routine. The yawning men leaning on their long pikes had no indication that any sort of encroachment was imminent. They stood at their positions because they were told to. Only their black, motionless silhouettes reared before the glow of the campfires to warn the women to caution.

Elaine had obviously learned quite a bit during her tenure with the Shequanti. She moved with amazing stealth through the icy trees. Kate did her best to emulate the older woman with some success.

They made it to within a hundred yards of the sentries before Elaine stopped her with a hand on her arm. *I found him!*

Elaine's exclamation rang in Kate's head. Kate looked at her and nodded.

It had taken some trial and error to get this far. They'd made the jumps in small chunks at first until Kate had caught onto the trick of looping her power around Elaine's psychic link. She did it again now, permitting the barest trace of energy to penetrate the woman's power.

Then she felt him too -- a tiny flicker of energy, a bewildered, feeble pulse of power in the center of the camp. Even without Elaine's ability, Kate could tell Kaberon was ill and dangerously weak.

Will he be able to withstand the trip?

He'll have to, Elaine replied grimly. I'll make sure he does.

Kate sighed. Without any further discussion, she threw her power into the link and the two women vanished from sight.

* * *

"Damn!" Abaus swore. "They've gone again!"

The two Shequanti lay prone on broad tree branches several hundred yards farther up the hill. Briason glanced at his cousin curiously, startled by the intensity of Abaus' tone. The mage glared down at the encampment, his eyes distant as his mind moved furiously through it.

"Can we follow them?"

Abaus shook his head. "It would be too dangerous. We've already taken a grave risk by venturing this close. Kate's magic might go unnoticed in this cesspool of humans but mine will not."

"What should we do?"

"We wait," the mage said flatly. "If they get into some kind of trouble we'll reevaluate our options then. But for now, we'll have to wait and see what happens."

* * *

The tent was completely dark. Only the glow of a small brazier gave any sort of light to the disconcertingly small space. The frigid air felt heavy, dampened by illness and the arctic night outside the thin canvas walls. It took a minute for Kate's eyes to adjust. Before they actually had, Elaine was on her knees beside a long, still figure.

Kate joined her. Kaberon's skin felt icy to the touch, and his breathing was shallow beneath a ragged blanket. Kate took his wrist to feel his pulse, horrified at the emaciated feel of his arm. Obviously, the Numeni had not been treating their captive well.

"Kaberon? Can you hear me?" Elaine's hands fluttered over his face. The Shequanti prince didn't answer.

"Let him sleep," Kate said in a whisper. "He's alive, that's all that matters at the moment. Bundle him up and we'll get him out of here."

"It's probably best to make the first jump a short one." Elaine hurriedly removed her cloak and wrapped it around the prone man. "We can take the time in the forest to get better situated before going back to the Shequanti camp."

"Good point," Kate agreed. She was going to say something else when the tent flap was thrown back with a jerk.

"What are you doing in here?" a stern, heavily accented voice demanded. "Who are you? Leave the Elf alone!" In the next instant, a torch ducked into the tent. In the sudden flare of light, Kate saw a bearded face.

A human face.

"To me! To me! They are trying to take the Elven prince!" the man bellowed, drawing his sword. Kate didn't hesitate. She grabbed Kaberon with one hand, Elaine with the other, and threw them back into the depths of the icy forest.

They slammed into the ground hard. Kate lay there a minute, winded. Below them, the camp suddenly streamed with action. Men ran from their tents to hurriedly assembled groups.

"Kate! We've got to get out of here!" Elaine urged desperately, struggling to lift Kaberon's inert body from the snow.

"I know," Kate wheezed. She risked another look at the camp and swore. "Damn! I dropped us too close. Jesus Christ, Elaine, we've got to pick him up! If I try that again the hit will be worse next time."

"Don't worry about it," an icy voice interjected. "I'll carry him."

Stunned, Kate looked up at the pair of dark bodies towering over them. A dull roaring in her ears subdued the sound of the pursuing men as she stammered, "Briason? How did you get here?"

"We don't have time for that," Abaus said urgently. "Pick him up, Briason. Kate, can you get us all the way back to our camp?"

"I don't know. I've been doing short jumps all night."

Abaus took her hand. "Use my power, then. You teleport us, and I'll make certain we stay together."

Kate didn't stop to think about it and obeyed him without question. As the first Numeni troops spotted them against the snow, she snatched up the entire party and hurled them back across the forest.

Chapter Five

It was quickly apparent that longer teleports were much more difficult than short ones. As they materialized in the courtyard of Briason's house, Abaus collapsed to the ground. Right behind him, Kate fell to her knees on the ice-rimmed cobblestones and retched miserably. Briason shouted for help as Elaine staggered into him, barely managing to keep his grip on the immobile form of his father.

Within minutes, someone had lifted Kate from the courtyard and carried her into the house. She'd closed her eyes as soon as the unknown man began to move, desperately trying to keep from vomiting all over him. He set her down gently in a chair close to something warm, and someone began to chafe her icy hands.

"See to the prince!" someone shouted, and scurrying feet announced the arrival of the Shequanti healer.

"Are you all right, milady?" the man asked her anxiously.

"Fine!" she gasped. "Kaberon?"

"Dunna is tending to him now. Can I get you anything?"

"Hot tea would be best," a cool, feminine voice said. Kate opened her eyes to see a tall Shequanti woman staring down at her with every indication of dislike. The woman appeared to dismiss her immediately, following the group of men who carried Kaberon from the hall. Kate leaned her dizzy head against her hand and closed her eyes again.

They had done it. Despite everything, they'd managed to bring Kaberon home. For a swift confused moment, Kate wondered how Briason and Abaus had managed to get there, and then unconsciousness fell over her again.

When next she awoke, it was midday. The snow had stopped and the glare of the sun reflected from the ground into the bedchamber with vicious clarity. Kate moaned, putting one hand to her head as she turned away from the window.

"Here. Have some of this. It will help you."

"Briason?" she asked feebly.

He lifted her from the bed and handed her a steaming mug. "Drink this. It will help with the pain and the nausea."

"This feels like the worst hangover of my life."

"The complaint seems to be universal," he observed wearily. Kate obediently sipped at the hot mixture, making a face at the bitter taste. Then she relaxed against his chest. Within a few minutes, she discovered he was right; the concoction did help her feel better.

It was a little while longer before she dared to open her eyes.

Briason's face came into focus. His face was pale, washed free of color entirely, and the hard lines were back around his mouth and eyes.

"How is Kaberon?"

"Resting," came the reply. "He is doing better. A few days of good food and rest will help him immensely."

"I'm so glad. And Elaine?"

"Is resting with him. She will not leave him."

Kate opened her mouth to ask about Abaus but thought better of it. Instead she asked, "How are you?"

"I feel like I've been dragged behind a team of horses, but I've felt worse." He took a sip from her cup and set it aside. Then he grasped her arms hard and said evenly, "If you ever -- ever! -- do anything like this again I will beat you senseless."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"Barely."

"Can we hold off on the beating until I feel well enough to deal with it?" she asked plaintively. "I really feel awful."

"You should. What you did is one of the most idiotic things I've ever heard of." As she stared up at him mutely, he relented. "And one of the bravest," he added in a kinder voice.

"You need Kaberon here," she insisted, her lashes drifting down over her eyes.

"The Shequanti need him."

"What possessed you to do such a thing?" he demanded, and she heard the tremor of fear beneath his words.

"I did it for you. What a stupid question."

* * *

Kate didn't feel well enough to leave her bed for two days. During that time, Briason came and went on numerous errands: checking on his father, seeing to the camp's defenses, and setting sentries in an ever-widening perimeter through the forest. He knew, as did everyone else, that the Numeni would not take the loss of the prince lightly. They were coming without a doubt.

Retribution was a side effect neither Kate nor Elaine had considered.

During her recuperation, Briason was quietly attentive. He conducted the business of the army from the table in the room, speaking in a quiet voice with the commanders who came to him for instruction.

When Kate managed to drag herself upright, the first thing she did was take a long, hot bath. After she'd dressed, she feebly made her way to the great hall to see what was going on.

As she entered the chamber she saw Kaberon and Elaine had both recovered, and sat together at a table in the corner. Briason and Abaus were nowhere to be seen. Moving slowly, she made her way toward the Shequanti prince and his mate.

"Kate!" Elaine's face was radiant as she looked up. "Are you feeling better?"

"Better than what?" Kate half-fell half-sat on the bench opposite.

"That's a valid point," the older woman said.

"Kaberon." Kate acknowledged him with a slight nod of her head. "How are you doing?"

He peered at her curiously. "I am much better, Kathryn."

"I'm glad to hear it." Kate looked around the room. Kaberon lifted a hand, and a young Shequanti hurried over with a bowl of soup, a hunk of bread and an extra glass. Kaberon poured wine into the glass as Kate tucked into the food. He hesitated, and then said, "I owe you an apology, my lady. I misjudged you."

"That happens a lot. Don't worry about it."

"You did a very brave thing, Kathryn, and I owe you my life."

Kate smiled at him. "I'm not so sure that it was brave; stupid, maybe. Either way, it was necessary to get you out of there. Your people need you, as does your son. I didn't really stop to think about it."

"That's what makes it extraordinary." Kaberon glanced at Elaine and frowned.

"Of course, I'm not condoning such behavior from either of you."

Elaine rolled her eyes. "When are you going to learn that I don't require your approval?"

"Probably never," he admitted cheerfully.

Kate swallowed a spoonful of soup. "Has anyone seen Briason lately?"

"He's out in the forest, checking the waystations."

"I see. And Abaus?"

Elaine's expression was bland. "He's still down for the count. Apparently you dragged a bit too much energy from him."

"It was a long jump," Kate said defensively. "It's not like I've ever done it before."

"True," Elaine agreed. "Well, as soon as Kaberon gets some of his strength back he'll be able to take some of the burden away from Briason. Then we'll be able to plan what to do next."

"Don't you have any ideas?"

"A few. We still have some time left to us, so we can consider our options carefully."

"What options do we have?" Kate asked.

Kaberon and Elaine exchanged a glance. Instantly alerted to something odd, Kate set her spoon aside. "It's probably better we explain this to you when everyone is present," Kaberon hedged.

"That's not fair," Kate accused him.

The prince looked uncomfortable. "You're right. It isn't. However, that's just the way we're going to have to play it."

"You're being purposely difficult," Elaine chided him. She turned to Kate with a serious expression on her face. "Haven't you wondered how Briason and Abaus were able to find us, Kate?"

"Well, yes, I have."

"They were able to find us because Abaus is powerful enough in some ways to teleport. The only way he could have followed us is if he had a bond with either you or me." Elaine smiled grimly. "It's highly unlikely he would have a bond with me, so that leaves you. Either he has bonded with you in the same way Briason has or Briason allowed him to tap into his bond."

"Okay." Kate felt dubious. "So what does that mean?"

"It means the three of you could conceivably create a bond that includes all of you. If this new bond occurs, then there is a possibility it could be a magical weapon beyond anything the Shequanti have been capable of in the past."

"We call it a pyramid," Kaberon explained. "It is a structure of power. If the pyramid is formed between two warriors and a mage, the mage's most powerful spell will be amplified beyond any individual's power. If it is comprised of two mages and a warrior, however..." His voice trailed off. Kate stared from one to the other with a nagging suspicion in her chest.

"If it's two mages and a warrior, Kathryn, then it creates a magical sphere of destruction. It has been many centuries since such a pyramid existed. The last pyramid in Shequanti history destroyed an *entire army*."

Kate gasped. "You can't mean that. That... that's impossible!"

"On our world, yes," Elaine said gently. "But this is Shequanti and anything is possible."

"There's only one thing I can't quite put my finger on," Kaberon said, toying with the stem of his wineglass with a faraway look in his eyes. "I can't imagine my son going into this willingly. If Abaus persuaded him to do this, there's no way Briason could have known what it meant."

"I don't believe that you know your son as well as you think, Kaberon. If Briason thought it would be best for the Shequanti, he would agree to it without hesitation."

"That may be so," the older Shequanti replied. "I'd be willing to wager, however, that when full realization hits Briason there will be a sizeable explosion in this house. If there is, I'm not certain I want to be there when it happens."

Kate rose from the table. "I think you're wrong, Kaberon. I think there's going to be an explosion *right now*."

With that, she stormed out of the great hall. As soon as she found Abaus, she was going to tear him limb from limb.

* * *

Five minutes later, Kate found his room. Without knocking, she threw the door open and stalked in. Abaus sat at a table, a glass of wine before him. His face was extremely pale, his lips even bleached of color. She stood over him for a moment, speechless with anger as he merely quirked a sarcastic eyebrow at her. "Is there something wrong, Kathryn?" he asked mildly.

"You -- you --" Kate sputtered to a stop, forcibly restraining herself from knocking him over the head with the opened decanter. Abaus' eyes sparkled with malicious enjoyment as he prudently removed it from her reach.

"I take it I've done something wrong?" he prompted, his lips twitching.

"You arrogant, sneaky, miserable son of a bitch!" she snapped, her voice returning in one fell swoop. "How in the *fuck* did you expect to get away with this?"

"I'm not certain what I've gotten away with, Kathryn."

"Don't lie! What in the hell did you do to get Briason to agree to this?"

"Ah." He took a minute to sip at his wine. "I see some helpful person has told you about the change in circumstances."

"Did you lie to him? Threaten him? I swear to God, Abaus, I'm seriously thinking about sending you on a very long trip off a mountain or into the ocean, if you follow my drift."

His eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't advise it."

"Then talk! You'll never be able to convince me you knew nothing about the consequences of being included in the bond I have with Briason. You had to have done something really sneaky to get him to even *consider* it."

He shrugged. "No, not really. I proposed it as the only way to track you on your unexpected journey. I told him there could be certain consequences and he agreed."

"He agreed, did he?"

"What choice did he have?" All of Abaus' amusement dissipated. "It was either that or allow you to be killed, which I assure you would have happened. At the time we had no other options. It was the only way to get to you quickly enough to help you."

"You could have tried a little faith in me," she replied acidly. "It's not like I'm a sniveling weakling."

"No, you're not a weakling. You are, however, inexperienced and untested. We had no way of knowing if you could pull off such an audacious feat. After all, don't you think if I thought such a thing were possible I would have tried it?"

"No," she said bluntly, "I don't. You've always hated Kaberon. I think you would have left him there to rot."

There was a heavy silence. Abaus sighed. "Do you think I hate him enough to endanger my country?"

"You weren't so particular about that six months ago."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he said coldly. For the first time since she'd returned to Shequanti, Kate knew a moment of fear. The mage's mouth had set into a tight, angry line.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you did start a civil war, didn't you?" she asked, sugar oozing through the words. "As a matter of fact, I distinctly remember your soldiers trying to kill Kaberon."

"That was different. I would never permit humans to control this kingdom."

"But you opened the door for them. If you hadn't been so intent on grabbing power for yourself they'd never have been able to get as far into Shequanti as they did." She hardened her voice and continued relentlessly. "It's about time you grow up, Abaus, and take responsibility for your actions. If you're looking for someone to blame you don't need to look any further than your chair."

In the next second he was out of his seat. His hands seized her shoulders, fingers digging cruelly into her flesh as her head snapped back violently. She felt a tingle along her skin and realized in horror that he was barely containing his rage -- and his power.

"Don't you think I know that?" he asked in a voice so quiet and controlled that it sliced into her soul. "Don't you think I tell myself that *every single day*? You haven't known this world, Kathryn. You don't *know* why things are the way they are. You think because Briason supported our uncle it automatically means the king was a *good* king. He wasn't! The only reason I deposed him was to *save* Shequanti, not destroy it!"

He released her with a contemptuous snap of his wrists and turned away. Kate took a deep breath and said confidently, "You're lying."

"Am I?" His voice seemed tired. "Why don't you try to find out for yourself? Why don't you ask my esteemed cousin what *he* thought? Perhaps then you will believe me. When I deposed the king, *I didn't care who became the next king*, as long as it was someone -- anyone -- other than my mincing uncle who capitulated to the Numeni threat year after year."

"That's a lie."

"Is it? Do you realize that he was afraid of them? That every time they demanded some new humiliation from our people, he gave it to them? You think the Numeni decided to invade just because I started a rebellion against the king? No! The Numeni have been biting off pieces of my country for decades!"

He turned back to her. "It was this that I tried to prevent," he said, his tone gentler and infinitely sad. "I failed. When we have driven the Numeni from Shequanti, I will pay for my mistake. Thousands of my people have died because I didn't move fast enough. Why do you think I summoned you? It was in the vain hope that all of this would never happen."

Kate stared at him in shock. Abaus looked away again, back out the window to the snow-covered forest. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Just go away, Kathryn," he muttered. "Leave me alone."

"Look, if I was wrong, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's always easier to place the blame than to discover the truth." Abaus' back was taut with furious restraint. "I'm accustomed to it. Go. Find Briason and ask him. Perhaps then you'll think more kindly of me."

She hesitated, and then put a gentle hand on his arm. He tensed once more and pulled away. "Go," he repeated, and this time the single word was growled in a dangerously feral tone. Kate turned and slowly made her way to the door.

"One other thing."

She turned back to find him staring at her, his face paler than she'd ever seen it. He looked beautiful and lethal, beseeching and angry. She took a deep breath and waited as her pulse sped up.

"When I summoned you, it was to save Shequanti. I needed your power to fuel my own, thinking that together we could find a way to keep all of this from happening. If I had been successful from the first, if Briason hadn't interfered, things would be much different today. All of this could have been avoided."

He stopped for a moment and his voice grew gentler. "I did not know you then. You were nothing more than a means to an end. But now --" He paused, his upper lip twisting bitterly. "Now I regret that more than you could ever know."

Kate stared at him in shocked silence. He seemed utterly sincere in his expression of regret. In the back of her mind however, doubt still hovered. "I don't know what to say to that," she said finally.

"There is no need to say anything," Abaus replied, turning back to the wintry landscape. "Go find Briason. I need to rest."

She found herself obeying him, closing the door quietly behind her as she exited his room. The more cynical portion of her mind wondered briefly if he'd "persuaded" her to do as he said, but she dismissed that almost instantly. As she returned to the great hall, she considered the events that had just occurred.

What if -- what if he *was* telling the truth? As she thought about it, she realized she hadn't heard anyone say anything positive about the murdered Shequanti king. She couldn't even remember his name. Was it possible *Abaus* actually acted for the good of the country and not for his own personal gain?

Being king was, from everything she'd ever read, actually a pretty thankless job. So was a traitor.

As she entered the great hall, she caught sight of Briason standing over his father and Elaine. Squaring her shoulders, she went to join them. "-- on the move," Briason was saying gravely as she sat down. "I expect them here within a week depending on the weather."

"If we need to, I can tamper with that," Kaberon said with a frown.

"I think it's probably better if you don't. We will need all your strength soon enough."

"I have a question." Kate's voice cut through the conversation like a knife. "Tell me, was the king who was killed a few months ago a good king?"

She was instantly aware of the alert sparks in the eyes of the two Shequanti men. "What do you mean?"

"It's not a difficult question, Briason. Your uncle, the king -- was he a good king?"

"No," Elaine interjected flatly. "He wasn't."

"So he was a bad one?"

"I wouldn't say that," Kaberon argued.

"Come off it, Kaberon! You practically ran the country for the last fifty years!" Elaine said in disgust. "Quit trying to make him out to be something he wasn't! He took more interest in his parties and social life than his own people."

Kate glanced at Briason. "So that's why you formed the alliance with Abaus," she said softly. "You agreed with him."

"I never agreed with his methods, nemida."

"If he was such a bad king then why didn't you do something about it?"

"Because I swore an oath of fealty to him," Briason said simply. "I cannot break my word once it's given."

"I see. That explains a lot." Kate got to her feet. "So, I suppose since you gave Abaus the freedom that allows him into our bond, you can't break your word there either, can you?"

"It's not quite like --"

"Oh, isn't it?" She laughed, the sound grating harshly against her ears. "Tell me, Briason, am I expected to keep your word for you too?"

"No," Kaberon stated. "The pyramid cannot be formed without your permission, Kathryn."

"Really? Tell me then, what precisely is it that I must do?"

Kaberon and Elaine exchanged uneasy glances. Briason frowned and turned to his father. "What are you talking about?"

"Pyramidal magic," the prince said shortly. "Because you allowed Abaus to infiltrate the magical bond you have with Kathryn there is a possibility the three of you can bond simultaneously. If you can, the magical power generated by that bond will supersede anything seen in Shequanti for generations."

Briason's face went white. His eyes glittered with black fire. "And to create this bond? What must happen?"

Kaberon sighed. "I shouldn't have to tell you that."

Briason's gaze flickered to Kate then back to his father's face. Before anyone could stop him, he'd whirled toward the corridor that led to Abaus' room. By the time

Kate thought to react, he'd already yanked his sword from its sheath and disappeared around the corner.

"Holy shit!" she muttered, running after him.

* * *

"You did this deliberately!" Briason snarled as she hurried back into Abaus' bedchamber. Kate skidded to a stop. Briason's sword point was at the mage's throat. Abaus stared up at him calmly, his hands resting lightly on the table. Kate's new sensitivity to magic warned her Abaus was gathering his power together and she sucked in her breath.

"I did this to save Kathryn -- and your father -- from an inevitable demise," he said coolly, not even flinching, "as you well know."

"You lie!" Briason snarled.

"No, I do not. As I recollect, I told you at the time when we returned Kathryn would have to make some decisions and this might give us a weapon we could use."

"It's just another way to manipulate yourself between us!"

"Cousin, if we form the pyramid I won't be between you," Abaus said malevolently. "She will be between us."

Kate stared at him. The meaning of Abaus' words sank in slowly. "You mean that we'd be together -- all three of us?"

"That's exactly what I mean," the mage said, ignoring the sword point pressing into his skin. "The power we would gain from that is unimaginable. It may be enough to end this war and free our country."

The scowl on Briason's face grew more pronounced. "In what way?"

"Meaning, my dear cousin, that pyramidal magic might be enough to annihilate our enemy completely and free Shequanti from the Numeni yoke. Ask your father if you don't believe me."

Kate moved swiftly to Briason's side. Looking up at him beseechingly, she laid a hand lightly on his wrist. He hesitated, then lowered the sword and looked down at her.

"Let's stop and think about this for a moment," she said quietly. "Abaus has no need to lie to us, he knows we'd double check anything he said with Kaberon. Before you gut him like a fish, let's consider this."

"There is nothing to consider."

"Isn't there? What if he's right? What if doing this can end this war? What if it can save thousands of lives and the kingdom?"

He stared at her incredulously. "You sound like you think it's a good idea."

"I didn't say that. I want more details before I make up my mind."

"I have a suggestion," Abaus interjected smoothly. "Why don't you leave us alone for a while, Kathryn, so my cousin and I can discuss this between ourselves? That will give you time to think about it yourself. If he and I cannot come to an agreement on this it will not work. If we find ourselves in accord, then you can decide for yourself."

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "Why? What are you planning?"

"Planning? Nothing. But remember this: I told you once Shequanti women require two lovers and only one male cannot satisfy them. I also told you the two males must be in accord in order to share the same woman. If Briason and I cannot resolve our differences with each other then this entire debate is moot."

A sudden vision of Mesyndre and the two Shequanti guards from Abaus' fortress rushed into Kate's head. She remembered the sensuality, the raw, greedy lust on the girl's face as the two males had stimulated her, and without warning her face grew hot. Unable to look at either man, she turned on her heel and fled.

I am in big trouble, she thought desperately as she sped down the corridor to her room. *If I do find myself in bed with both of these men, I'm likely to die of a heart attack.*

* * *

An hour later, she was staring out the window of her room when someone knocked on her door. She went to open it, unsurprised to find Briason there. He didn't even have to say anything; the look on his face told her what had happened.

"All right," she said quietly. "I'll do it. I have only one request and I don't care how you manage it."

"What is that?"

She looked him squarely in the eye. "I don't want to know which one of you is which," she said in a voice that brooked no argument. "You figure out how to do that, and I'll agree."

He took her hand in his and lifted it to his lips. "Very well. We will come to you tonight."

Chapter Six

Kate felt nervous.

More than nervous, actually. More like terrified. It wasn't that she was afraid they would hurt her, quite the contrary. Instead she found herself almost frantic with fear that *she* would hurt one of *them*.

There was no doubt she was getting the best of the deal. Kate was frank enough with herself to admit that right off the bat. Both men were fantastic lovers. And to be the sole center of attention for both of them? At the same time?

She almost had an orgasm just thinking about it.

But what if she discovered she truly did prefer one to the other?

She loved Briason. That wasn't an issue. But something inside her, some small inner core that wanted to be teased, tortured and dominated found an illicit, addictive thrill in the touch of Abaus' hand.

Damn. It's like hitting the super lotto in two different states at the same time.

Since the sun had set behind the white-capped forest, she'd paced the room in agitation. They'd left her alone since she'd agreed. Someone had thoughtfully sent up a tray of food and several bottles of wine, but she couldn't eat.

Kate didn't have much trouble drinking. She was already on her third glass when another knock sounded at the door and Elaine stuck her head in. "Doing all right?" the older woman asked with a grin.

"I have no idea," Kate replied, twisting her hands.

Elaine laughed. "You will be! Here. I brought you something." She handed Kate a folded pile of gauzy fabric. "Wear this tonight. It will give you confidence."

Kate held up the delicate gown and looked at it dubiously. "I don't know about that. This is very pretty and both of them have a habit of ripping clothes off me."

"You know," Elaine said with a twinkle in her eye, "I might just be jealous of you. Let them rip it off if it gives you a thrill and them a charge. Trust me, dear. Wear the gown. Put a mantle over it at first if you like. Oh, and if I were you I'd have another glass of wine. You look a little pale."

With that cheerful advice, Elaine left as suddenly as she'd appeared. Despite herself, Kate laughed. Obediently, she poured another glass of wine, and then set about changing into the gown.

It was another half-hour before they came to her. Her first clue came when the candles in the room sputtered and went out. She stood in a silvery shaft of moonlight by the window, one hand instinctively going to her throat. A second later the door opened.

They were hooded, cloaked, and masked in black. Involuntarily, she took a step backward and mentally stammered, *Briason? Abaus?*

Just relax, Kathryn. Briason's familiar presence soothed her nerves. She watched as one closed and bolted the door.

They were the same height. She'd never noticed that before.

Close your eyes.

She obeyed. A moment later, someone blindfolded her. Alarmed, her eyes flew open only to be met with stark, unrelieved black. A hand landed gently on her back, moving with a calming rhythm until she relaxed. She was pulled back to rest against a broad chest. She leaned against him and his arms came around her. A gentle tug and her long braid was pushed aside so lips could trail lazily down the curve of her throat.

When his hands moved up to cup her breasts she exhaled shakily. Arousal already stirred within her body, her nerves singing along hypersensitive skin. He nibbled on her earlobe, exhaling softly into her ear as he captured her nipples in his fingers and rolled them through the flimsy fabric of her gown. Her head tilted back of its own accord as his mouth left her skin.

Then another set of hands moved onto her body, tracing the curves of her figure with delicate deliberation. As they rounded over her hips, she shivered.

She wanted to be kissed.

Even as the thought crossed her mind, her lips were gently parted with a questing tongue. She gave herself up to it, opening her mouth in submission while the hands slid all over her body. They seemed to be everywhere; stroking the flesh of her inner arms, pressing lightly into her belly, curving around her ass and her trembling legs.

The man behind her scooped her up into his arms. She didn't protest as she was laid upon the bed. Warm hands parted the neck of the gown -- *Briason's hands!* she thought triumphantly -- and slid it down her body. She lay there deliciously naked and already thrumming with arousal as they moved her arms straight out from her sides. Before she knew what was happening, her hands were tied down. She opened her mouth to protest, but whatever she was going to say was drowned out by the searing kiss that fell upon her lips.

It was amazing. Now there wasn't just one mouth, but *two* scorching wet paths across her quivering flesh. The hands returned as well, caressing her skin with firmer pressure. She moaned under the mouth that still ravaged hers, torn between the fiery coldness of Abaus' hands and the branding heat of Briason's. She could tell only in fleeting moments whose hands belonged to whom; once when Abaus kneaded her breasts, then again when Briason dragged his fingertips down her sides with familiar intensity. For the most part however, she was incapable of following the different sensations.

She could only feel. And in the feeling, she lost her ability to think.

When both mouths moved to her breasts, she gasped. She strained against the bonds around her wrists, desperate to touch and feel them as well. A second later, one began to suck on her nipple hard while the other traced a leisurely path down her abdomen. A big hand covered her neglected breast as her nipples hardened to the point of pain. Someone bit lightly along her hipbone and involuntarily her legs jumped.

Her thighs were spread wide. The lips left her breast and moved back up her neck, sidling to capture her mouth once more. A tongue flicked lightly out against her thigh and Kate moaned.

It was exciting beyond belief. The blindfold and hand bindings only made it that much more intense. Both men had exploited her unspoken need to be restrained in the past, playing on her helplessness to excite her more. This was almost unbearable. Already groaning with desire, she felt her sex slick with arousal. She strained upward into the kiss, demanding more passion as the tongue skirted around her pussy and began a long, tantalizing journey down her other leg. As one man fondled her breasts, the other wrapped his arms around her thighs and lowered his mouth to her cunt.

Kate writhed helplessly. This felt different from anything she'd ever experienced before. It aroused everything at once and her body was burning. Now it seemed easier to know which man played where; Abaus' strange chill flickered too noticeably against the flames that consumed her. He knelt between her legs, while Briason occupied himself with her breasts and her lips.

Then she no longer felt so sure. The hands on her breasts moved to her belly and cooled with inexplicable speed.

Only then she realized Abaus had added his own particular brand of sexual magic to ascertain she would *never* know which man was which. One lover drew her clit into his hot mouth and the drawing pressure built within her. She arched her back mindlessly, her head rolling from side to side. As her back lifted from the bed, someone slid just behind her, his hands digging into her outer thighs while he sucked on her neck.

"Dear God!" she cried. As if in answer, her pussy clenched when two fingers slid slowly into her. Hands curved around her face, tilting it up and backward for a savage kiss. The tongue moved relentlessly against her clit, the tip moving the nodule firmly and with increasing speed. The fingers moved slowly in and out of her, the tips curving into her sensitive flesh. She bucked wildly in an instinctive attempt to free herself, but the arms around her thighs tightened with brutal strength and pinned her to the bed.

Kate couldn't breathe, she couldn't move, and couldn't escape. All she could do was moan and struggle against the tide of stimulation that beat a merciless tattoo in her veins.

She wanted to come! Her body screamed for release. But Abaus with his damnable magic made certain that wasn't going to happen. The rousing of her body escalated. The fingers moved faster within her, keeping pace with the vibrating tempo of the tongue against her clitoris. The kiss deepened until she felt as if she were being devoured whole. Hands cupped her breasts again, pinching and rolling the nipples until she felt she was going mad.

Then, abruptly, it all stopped.

Kate groaned. Her body throbbed with excitement and where in the *hell* had they gone? She opened her mouth to ask...

And was impaled.

The full, hard, hot length of a cock slammed into her. She shrieked. Slowly, deliberately, it sank to its full length then slid almost completely out. Again he sheathed himself within her. Kate thought she would die. After the incredible stimulation she'd just experienced, this slow pace was maddening.

Then a finger found her clit and began to move it in hard, swift little circles. Gradually, the tempo of the cock increased as well, each stroke a little faster than the one before it, each one pounding with just a bit more force. Someone lifted her ass from the bed entirely, raising her until she was on a sharp diagonal plane. Then he slammed against her body frantically, pumping into her while she locked her legs around his waist.

The hands were everywhere now; one curved around her ass, another stroking her clit with electric speed, one fondling her breast and the last one wrapped around her braided hair, baring her throat to the ravening grind of lips. A trickle of sweat ran between her breasts as she strained to match the pace.

Someone groaned beside her. The cock inside her swelled into rigid immensity. Fingers dug cruelly into her flesh, indicating at last which hands belonged to the man

who was fucking her so thoroughly. When he came with a strangled shout, Kate whimpered in dismay.

She hadn't, couldn't, come.

He sagged against her for a moment as his seed filled her. The hand manipulating her clitoris never broke stride, stimulating her with maddening ferocity as she was deposited carefully onto the bed. For a brief moment she lay trembling violently, untouched save for that one damnable finger!

A moment later, she realized they had changed places. The hand moved from her throbbing sex. The hands cupping her breasts were gentler, caressing her hot flesh with tender assurance. Her hands fell free and her upper body was pinned down by the weight of the man kissing her.

And then her legs were nudged apart once more. Her other lover settled between her thighs, skimming his face lightly along her legs until he hovered over her pussy. She wound her arms hungrily around the man kissing her, arching spasmodically when a questing tongue circled her shuddering clit.

The pressure within her was almost unbearable now. She sobbed aloud as the kiss ended and the mouth traveled to her breast. A hand replaced the tongue on her sex and tiny little kisses rained down her legs.

"Oh God!" she whispered hoarsely. "I can't stand it."

There was no reply. The hands roamed with feverish haste over her skin. Kate lifted her hips in invitation and a tear coursed down her cheek as she was pushed back into the softness of the mattress. "You're torturing me. Please, *please*! I have to come!"

It was what they were waiting for. She moved her hand down the upper man's body, circling his penis as the lower man's shaft slid into her. As he moved within her, she began to stroke the cock in her hand with frantic need.

Then she felt it.

The energy in the room soared. It was almost electric, sparking against the black cloth that bound her eyes. She felt the hair on her arms stand up. Both men were moving now, responding to the stimulation of her body with fervent passion. Her mouth was devoured once more; hips slammed into her with each growing stroke. The orgasm, so long denied, built up within her body until she thought she would break from it.

Now?

Now. Come, Kathryn.

The orgasm ripped through her body, dragging a hoarse scream from her ravaged throat. Simultaneously, both her lovers came as well; one draining his seed into her cunt with an exultant shout while the other came silently, shuddering in her hand. As they all fell over the brink of passion fulfilled, the magic swelled in the room until the glare of it penetrated her mask. Kate collapsed, her body quivering with the savagery of her orgasm.

Briason is the one holding me, she thought dizzily. His hands and body are warm. It's Abaus who just fucked me; the outside of his thighs feel cool.

She reveled in the sensations, of hot and cold, of beloved and forbidden, of safety and danger all combined in this one encounter. Weakly, she pulled the cloth from her eyes.

And looked up into Abaus' face. He had a peculiar smile as he reached to stroke a sweaty strand of hair from her forehead. *Surprise*, he said mentally, and Kate closed her eyes in confusion.

How could I be so wrong? How could I not tell the difference?

Maybe it's because my cousin and I are opposite sides of the same coin. Abaus' thought was amused but almost tender. Or maybe it's because now we are all one.

* * *

Everything felt different. Kate lay exhausted on the bed. They'd covered her with a light blanket. She kept her eyes closed, almost afraid to open them, but listened as they moved about the room, pouring glasses of wine, bringing in hot water for the tub. She assumed Abaus teleported them; she'd never heard the door open.

After a few minutes, someone lifted her gently from the bed and eased her into the hot water. She sighed, luxuriating in the comforting sensation of being taken care of. If nothing else they owed her a hot bath. She was definitely sore. Despite herself, a smile curved her lips at the thought. *I should be sore*. *Hell, I should be ripped in half!*

She relaxed gradually as the warm water soaked away the tension in her muscles. Someone had put a floral-scented perfume into the water; it smelled like honeysuckles and violets.

"Kathryn, you should drink this. It will help."

She opened her eyes. Briason stood over her, wearing nothing but his trousers and holding out a glass of wine. She took it, unable to keep from looking around the room. "Where's Abaus?"

"Gone." Briason's single word was curt.

Instantly, she felt a tremor of fear. Briason must have seen the feeling flicker across her face because he hastened to reassure her. "Everything is all right, *nemida*. Do not fear me or what I might do. I am not angry with you, or with my gods-cursed cousin for that matter."

"Really." Kate couldn't help the note of disbelief.

"Really." A slow smile lightened his face. "That was the most erotic thing I have ever seen, Kathryn; watching you aroused to the point of delirium drove me to the edge."

"Well, it kind of worked for me too," she pointed out, unable to keep from grinning at him.

"So I noticed. Are you hungry?"

"A bit. What's on that tray I couldn't touch earlier?"

"Some fruit and sliced roast. Would you like something?"

"Maybe a piece of fruit."

He selected a pear from the tray and settled in the chair by the tub. Pulling his dagger from its sheath, he carefully began to peel slices from the fruit, feeding them to her one at a time and occasionally keeping one for himself.

"You know, back home this is an activity that was once reserved only for emperors," she noted. "I'm a trend-setter if nothing else."

He smiled and fed her another slice of pear.

Later, when she tried to get up from the cooling water her legs almost went out from under her. He caught her up in a huge towel, drying her gently and dressing her in a nightgown as if she were a child. Then he tucked her up into bed and blew out the single candle. She waited until he slid under the sheets with her and then snuggled up against his side.

Briason's arms went around her as she pillowed her head on his chest. Kate stifled a yawn, almost too weary to move. The last thing she remembered before drifting off into sleep was a brush of his lips across her forehead and a whispered, "I love you, *nemida*."

Chapter Seven

The next day, there was a council of war. Kate sat quietly to one side with Elaine, watching as grim-faced Shequanti males filed into the room that was Briason's control center in the encampment. Each of them bowed to Prince Kaberon, and many of them bowed to the women as well. Abaus entered the room last, his face smoothed into his customary blank mask. Kate couldn't keep from glancing at him. He didn't appear to notice her.

"I think it's time we take the initiative," Briason said, bringing the meeting to order. "The weather will be more difficult for the humans to handle than it will be for us, and we're accustomed to fighting in the forest. They will be disorganized after their march from their encampment and the retrieval of the prince will have angered their leaders. There is no better time to strike. If we are fortunate, we can end this war now and regain our lands before spring planting."

"Do you have a strategy, my lord?" One of the older Shequanti asked the question in a grave, deep voice.

"Yes, I do. Half of the army will move out this afternoon toward the Numeni lines. The other half will come with me to the opposite flank. We'll attack tonight before the moon rises."

"The opposite flank? That's impossible, my lord, even for your scouts!"

"It is not impossible. It can be done with magic."

"Half the army?"

Most of the warriors glanced at Abaus who sat with his hands folded calmly in his lap. The mage nodded briefly. "We could move the entire army if we chose to."

"Our night vision will be invaluable," Kaberon interjected. "Between our heightened senses and our magical power we should be able to win decisively."

Most of the Shequanti looked at their prince in disbelief. The older men, however, were apparently reassured, not only by Kaberon's presence but his quiet assurance that the plan could succeed. For the first time, Kate saw hope returning to some of the grim, haggard faces.

"The first column will leave within the hour under Prince Kaberon's command. Once I have ascertained where the Numeni are, we will take the remainder of the army behind them," Briason continued.

"You'll be able to coordinate the attack?" one of the men asked.

"Yes. Are there any other questions?"

"I have one." An Elder rose to his feet. Although his face was unlined, his hair had started to silver at the temples. The Shequanti looked directly at Abaus and asked, "When this is over and the Numeni threat has gone, what are *your* intentions, Lord Abaus?"

"At the moment I have none," Abaus said mildly.

The Elder snorted. "Can we trust your word, Lord Abaus? What guarantee can you give us that your men won't turn on ours as soon as the Numeni are defeated?"

Abaus looked the man squarely in the eye. "I swear to you on the grave of my father that everything I care about at this moment will be on the battlefield with us. I will not endanger that with precipitous action."

Kate looked down at her hands. She knew without a doubt that Abaus' concept of precipitous action was of a much shorter duration than anyone else in the room could guess.

* * *

The forest was bitterly cold. They'd waited until close to sunset before teleporting their half of the Shequanti army behind the enemy lines. Conversations with Elaine throughout the afternoon had pinpointed the invaders' location. Now the Shequanti scouts flowed silently through the darkening wood, moving with inexorable speed toward the Numeni army.

Kate remained at the rear of the army with Abaus, who held her elbow in a firm grip as she floundered through the deep snow. Compared to the tall Shequanti, she was so small that the snow reached well above her knees. Briason strode in front of his men, leading them with determined surety through the inky shadows of the trees.

Doing all right, Kathryn?

I'll make it, she replied grimly. She didn't really want to think about it. Her trousers and boots were already wet and cold and the thick fur-lined cloak dragged heavily behind her.

It's not that much farther. They're less than half a league ahead of us.

Magic already swirled heavily around them. She felt it twining sinuously through the air, curling in and around them both. It was a heady feeling. When she stumbled over a hidden root, Abaus kept her steady with a minimum of effort. She looked up at him in gratitude and his face softened for a moment. Should I carry you, little one?

Uh... no thanks. Leave me my dignity at least.

His eyes sparkled with suppressed mirth. *Maybe later then*.

The dimly seen shadows of the men ahead of them eased to a halt. The Shequanti stood motionless in the stark silence of the wood.

Abaus released Kate's elbow. His face changed subtly, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the forest. Moving slowly, he steered Kate into the shadow of a huge elm tree, concealing her within the darkness of a fold in the massive trunk.

What is it?

The other column has attacked, Briason said grimly. We need to teleport these men the rest of the way.

Kate responded immediately. She stretched her power over the hundreds of men clustered around them, draping it like a blanket. Her mind flashed ahead to Elaine's, meeting her thoughts with a jolt. Instantly, a picture rose in her mind of a huge clearing, lit only by the first feeble rays of moonlight, while men shouted and swore and struck and died in battle.

She took them there.

* * *

It was worse than she'd ever thought it would be. Kate had watched more than her share of war movies. *Braveheart* had nothing on the reality. It was pure chaos. The smell of blood cooling thickly on the deep, crimson-churned snow made her head reel.

Abaus had drawn his sword and stood in front of her watching the battle. She knew without being told he was protecting her in case anyone broke through the lines. Her mind swept frantically through the morass of death and hatred, searching for Briason and Elaine.

I'm coming! Briason announced. *It's time*.

Kate! Elaine's shout arrived hard on the heels of Briason's warning. *Kate, grab me!* They're getting too --

A shrill scream rang through Kate's mind. It was painfully piercing, driving her to her knees with her hands pressed against her throbbing temples. *Elaine! Where are you? I can't find you!*

A roar of anguish rose above the sounds of battle. She felt a wrenching pain, a sundering of mind and body, and in a flash Kate realized that Elaine's presence in her mind had gone, broken like a twig underfoot.

"No!" she screamed, scrambling to her feet. "Elaine! Oh, my God, Abaus! Elaine is *dead*!"

Someone ran toward them. Briason reared into her sight and seized her shoulders. "Stop it, Kathryn! You've got to --"

Kate didn't hear any more. Shock was replaced by a rage unlike anything she'd felt before. Without warning, the magic streamed into her body, searing like liquid fire through her veins. Briason snatched his hands away with an oath. Kate barely noticed him. Her anger was focusing, directing her power upon the battle itself.

Kathryn! Stop! Abaus' psychic voice was urgent, the demand tainted with fear.

Kate ignored him. Without stopping to think, she opened herself fully to the power within.

* * *

It was pulsing, throbbing within her. Kate lost all sense of self, becoming one with the blue-white energy that engulfed her with sentient rage. She became the entity.

She was magic.

She was revenge.

She was a shadow self, a reflection of the human woman these mortals were trying desperately to reach. She was everything and nothing. She was fire and water, earth and air. Everything around her was part of her and she of it.

She was the lost goddess of the Elves.

She could sense the differences now between the mortals who struggled before her. Her power, unfettered at last, flashed through the struggling and dying men to a single one who knelt weeping at the side of a woman. The woman was dead.

A spurt of anger reasserted itself. These mortals, these humans dared to destroy one of her instruments?

They would pay.

She sensed the two men, the collaborators of her power, fighting to break through the ice-cold barrier of her fury. For a moment, the entity hesitated. Then she raised arms made solely of vengeful magic to the stars.

Everything in the clearing stopped.

The men froze in place, unable to complete their killing blows. Those who were dying stayed in limbo. Those who were falling were locked in stasis. She brushed her power through them, trying to discern which were the enemy and which were her warriors.

Something nudged against her consciousness. She frowned and considered it for a moment. Abaus. The mage. He was Elven; she recognized the taste of his power. Once, long ago, these had been her people. She had created this world to protect them from the harsher magic of the Druids. Now that safety was compromised by their descendants.

The mage brought another man into her senses. She thought for a moment. Briason. The Elven warrior. He was all that she'd loved about her Elves. His was the passion of true nobility. The mage was the culmination of generations of wisdom. He represented all that she'd wanted for her Elves. His demeanor born of the dispassion of necessity.

The entity sighed. The mortals were right. She pulled their minds into hers, ignoring their struggles. Only the pyramid could right this great wrong. As they linked with her strength, she locked them into the ages-old structure.

The pyramid flared into being. A savage white light shot through the clearing. The power grew within her, soaring to heights she'd never witnessed before. It boiled in her guts, bringing fiery tears of pain to the eyes of an entity who'd never known pain before. She screamed in a mixture of fury and submission, of agony and ecstasy.

The world exploded.

The entity wept.

She pulled her mortal lovers to her breast, enfolding them in the searing love of her beauty. The magic struck through them all. She turned to the warrior, pressing her immortal lips against his as proof of her love. She turned to the mage, kissing him fiercely as proof of her lust.

The warrior lord and his shadow-twin. Fire and ice. Love and lust. Loyalty and treachery. Hope and despair. They mirrored each other. They were imperfect halves of one soul. Together, they were perfect.

They were immortal.

They were hers.

She knew a moment of selfishness. Why shouldn't she keep them both? Why could they not, at last, be complete in the domain of magic that controlled all worlds?

The entity sighed. It was never to be. It was the eternal curse of the Elves, placed upon them by long-dead gods as a check upon their perfection. They would never be complete. She would never be complete. Now she, with all of her infinite beauty and power, was nothing more than a tool to her own people, a weapon called only as a last

resort to save the Elves from destruction. She would, as she always did, submit to their greater need. One day, perhaps, even her own self-inflicted curse would be lifted. One day, perhaps, she would no longer need to protect the Elves.

The imprisoned goddess, the entity of magic, the apex of the pyramid, glanced one final time at the faces of the Elves who flanked her. Her immortal eyes swept through the glade, marking each enemy warrior in turn. She spared a few of the youngest so they could return to their own land. This too was part of the curse; always, always the humans would threaten the existence of the Elves. This war would begin again.

But not until her instruments were at peace.

She gathered the magic of the pyramid into her hand, forging it into a flare of lightning. Without a sound, she sent it flying through the glade. Every human it touched disintegrated as thoroughly as if they'd never existed.

The magic left her weak and shaking. She fell to her knees in the melting snow, bowing her head to the inevitable. It was time.

The entity died.

Chapter Eight

She awoke to pain.

Her skin felt tender and hot, almost as if she were sunburned. She groaned as it rasped against the sheets.

Sheets? How had she gotten into a bed?

Kate's eyes fluttered open. She was back in her familiar room in Briason's outpost. As her eyes focused around the flashes of light that floated through her field of vision, her head throbbed painfully.

"You're awake, are you?"

Kate turned her head slightly to see the Shequanti healer sitting at her bedside. What was her name again?

"You must be thirsty. Let me get you some water."

"I didn't think you liked me all that much," Kate mumbled.

"I don't. But you've made a huge sacrifice for my people and you're ill," the woman replied. "Here, drink this -- slowly."

Kate sipped at the cold water, appreciating the brisk feel of it against her parched tongue. She glanced once more at the healer. Dunna. That was it. "Dunna, where's Briason?"

"The men are occupied in meetings at the moment," Dunna said smoothly.

"Meetings? About what? What happened?"

"The Numeni are gone, their army destroyed. The men meet in a conclave to decide the fate of Shequanti."

Kate frowned. The glass wobbled in her hand, spilling a few drops of water onto the blanket. "What do you mean, the 'fate' of Shequanti?"

Dunna sighed. "The war is over with the humans but there is still strife among our people. There are two claimants to the throne."

Kate sat up. "You mean Abaus is at it again? What in the *hell*? How long have I been out?"

"You've been unconscious for four days, my lady."

"Four days?"

"The aftereffects of magic like yours are unpleasant, my lady."

"Briason and Abaus have been fighting all this time?"

"Not in battle," the healer reassured her. "Unfortunately, the late king left no heirs of his own. Briason and his cousin are the sole heirs and they have equal claim."

"What about Kaberon? Shouldn't he be next in line?"

Dunna was silent for a moment, then said, "The prince was killed, my lady, as he tried to save his mate."

"Oh, my God." Kate waited until her head steadied then threw back the covers. "Hand me my clothes. I need to go to them."

"You are not well enough! You need to rest. Besides, this isn't really any of your concern."

Kate narrowed her eyes dangerously. "None of my concern? Oh, I don't think so, Dunna. This is entirely my concern. If Briason and Abaus are at each other's throats I will have to intervene."

The woman remained stubbornly silent. Kate swore and swung her legs over the edge, completely forgetting that the Shequanti beds were much taller than the ones at home. She fell to the floor in a heap.

"You should get back into bed, my lady."

"You should get the hell out of my room," Kate returned. "Where are they? In the council room?"

Kate dragged herself up to stare at Dunna. As the woman's mouth curved into a smug smile, Kate's stomach tied up in sudden knots. "Yes, they are," the healer said finally. "In Buonarre."

Kate clutched at the side of the bed. For a moment she was stunned. They'd gone to Buonarre? And *left her here*? She turned to the chest where her few things were kept. Opening the lid, she pulled out a long gown of crimson velvet that Elaine had given her. "Thank you, Dunna," she said in a distant voice. "I'll take care of it from here."

"I can't allow you to weaken yourself further!" the healer protested.

"You also can't stop me," Kate said coolly. "Now get the fuck out of my way." With a thought Kate teleported the protesting Dunna on a trip to the forest. It would probably only take her a couple of hours to get back. The bitch.

* * *

There was only one place she knew how to find without fail in the capital -- Kaberon's villa. Kate teleported herself there, staggering when she materialized on the grounds of the villa. The healer might have been right. She was undoubtedly still very weak. She closed her eyes against the dizziness, swaying strongly in the brittle winter sun.

"You have invaded the precincts of the house of Kaberon," a silky voice said, interrupting her momentary illness. Kate's eyes flew open. The gilded sphinx Atba stood a few feet away, the fur of her ruff lifted alarmingly. One big cat's claw was slightly elevated from the ground in an obvious position of strike.

"I am Kathryn, betrothed of Briason," Kate said hastily. "Kaberon promised me safe haven here."

The sphinx relaxed instantly. "My apologies, my lady. I did not recognize you."

"Don't worry about it. Listen, I need to get to the palace. How do I get there?"

The sphinx frowned. "It is a distance away," she said dubiously. "You do not look strong enough to make your way there."

Kate sighed. "I don't have a choice. Briason and Abaus are fighting over the throne. I have to stop them!"

The sphinx's heavy-lidded eyes regarded her without blinking. "Perhaps it would be better if I took you there myself."

"You can do that?"

Atba smiled. "Yes, I can leave the grounds. My sisters will guard the villa. Come, my lady, climb upon my back. I will have you at the palace in minutes."

Kate had ridden horseback many times, but she was a little doubtful about riding something that looked like it would prefer to snack upon small humans, but she swallowed her fear. The sphinx knelt so Kate could climb upon her back. Kate threaded her hands through the thick ruff as the sphinx rose gracefully to her feet.

"Hold on." With three quick bounds that snapped Kate's head back on her neck, the sphinx loped to the garden wall and leapt into the city.

The sphinx didn't bother with guards and protocol. She simply ran past the stunned sentries into the halls of the palace. Kate suspected that Kaberon's sphinx had been here before because she navigated the twisting warren of corridors without hesitation.

Kate hung on for dear life, although she was fairly certain Atba held her upright with some magic of her own. When they turned into a broad, opulent hallway, the sphinx took a small flight of steps in one leap and skidded to a stop before a pair of closed, golden doors.

"The Lady Kathryn requires admittance to the Council," Atba announced flatly.

"Open the doors for her."

"The Council is in session with orders not to be disturbed," a guard said, carefully keeping his hands away from the sword buckled at his side. "I dare not open the door."

Kate slid down from the sphinx's back. She steadied herself for a moment against Atba's velvety side then looked the guard in the eye. "I will dare to," she said softly. "Get out of my way."

"It doesn't have to be decided now!" Briason's voice echoed down the hall as Kate pushed the door open just enough to sneak into the council chamber. The room was in an uproar. Men shouted in fury, confronting each other in small groups. On one side of the chamber Abaus stood in silence, flanked by several men Kate recognized from the victorious army. On the other side stood Briason.

Alone.

"Can't we take the time to rebuild our kingdom?" Briason bellowed in exasperation. "Why can't we work together to insure our people are resettled and then after the harvest decide?"

"I agree," Abaus said, his silky voice slicing through the furor despite its lack of volume. "My cousin and I have proven we can cooperate for the good of the kingdom. We can discuss this at a more appropriate time."

"What time can be more appropriate?" another man snarled. "You brought us to this pass, Lord Abaus, with your rebellion against the throne! I say we need to acclaim Briason now as King of the Shequanti!"

Abaus' eyes glittered dangerously, but he said nothing. No one had noticed Kate. As she ventured farther into the Council, Atba stalked behind her on silent paws, her fur bristling. Kate touched her magic, prepared to make some sort of ruckus to distract the impending debate.

And stilled abruptly as both Briason and Abaus turned to stare at her incredulously. *Damn. That's inconvenient*.

"What are you doing here?" Briason demanded in a deadly quiet voice. The other men in the room turned to look as well.

"I came to see what you idiots were up to," Kate replied breezily. Her legs trembled under the voluminous skirt of the red velvet gown. Instantly, Atba propped her up from behind with her massive body, growling slightly as she glared at the men.

"It occurred to me after I woke up today," she went on conversationally, "that maybe I might have some say in what happens next."

"You?" One of the unknown men sneered at her. "You're nothing but a *human*. You have a say about nothing in Shequanti!"

The man found himself snatched from his feet and smashed into the wall by one big hand. "Be very careful," Briason warned. "If you insult the Lady Kathryn in my presence I will kill you where you stand."

"As will I," Abaus announced, his cold blue eyes flashing dangerously. He crossed the room with his predatory stride and bent over Kate's hand. With every appearance of solicitousness, he put a strong hand under her arm and guided her to a seat. Atba followed, waiting until Kate was settled, then lay down before her with her tail swishing in irritation.

You certainly know how to make an entrance, Abaus noted with amusement.

Shut up. I'm mad at you too.

"The Lady Kathryn," the mage continued, "is almost single-handedly responsible for the destruction of the Numeni army. In doing so, she has sacrificed her strength, her health, and possibly the chance to return to her own world. You owe her your respect."

Briason let the stunned councilor slide to the floor. He turned back to Kate with a tight-lipped frown that she recognized as the warrior in his worst mood. She met his eyes squarely. "You were saying, Briason, that you didn't see why you couldn't cooperate to rebuild the kingdom?" she asked pleasantly. "Well, I agree. That's absolutely the first order of business. Shequanti will need both of you -- all of you -- to recover from this war."

"What then? Do we lie down while Abaus forces us to crown him king?" someone shouted derisively.

"Or do we force the crown upon an unwilling recipient?" one of Abaus' counterparts retorted.

"Neither," Kate said calmly. "Where I come from, we let the people decide. Hold an election. Let your citizens vote. Then, and only then, do you need to worry about who does what."

"You're just a woman. What do you know about politics?"

Kate smiled sweetly and set the sleeve of his robe on fire. The Shequanti yelped, beating out the flames while the others laughed. "I know this much, my lord," she purred when the smoke had dwindled. "There is no way to decide this issue now.

There is too much distrust and anger built up between you. Before you can bring this kingdom forward, you need to learn to work together for its betterment."

Kate glared around the room, her hands on her hips. "Why are all of you fighting about this? There are men, *your* warriors, who are lying injured and in need of care. There are families who've been driven from their homes this whole winter. There are children who have no one to take care of them. They should be your first concern, not *this*. The only reason you're all arguing about this now is because you want to keep your own power. In a monarchy, power is conferred by proximity to the throne."

Kathryn --

"Shut up, Briason. I'll talk to you about this later." Abaus' lips twitched. Kate glanced at him coolly. "And you," she promised.

Both men winced. Atba purred deep in her chest, which Kate assumed was a sphinx's attempt at laughter.

"So we're agreed, then," Kate remarked, smiling at the assembly of shocked men.

"Glad to hear it."

"We haven't agreed to anything!" the first Shequanti Elder objected. "How do we know Abaus will hold to his word?"

Kate got to her feet, willing herself to remain upright. "Abaus will hold his word, as will Briason. How do you know this? Because I will be here to insure it. If you gentlemen will excuse me, I think I'd prefer to yell at these two idiots in private. Thank you for coming today. We'll get together tomorrow to discuss individual responsibilities in the recovery effort." She drew herself up to her full height, not caring how ridiculous it must look to a room full of seven-feet-tall men. "Good afternoon."

Atba sat up. Most of the men took one look at the sphinx's impassive face and moved hastily for the exit. Still others muttered mutinously but followed. A few of the bolder ones came to bow before Kate, some of them kissing her hand in the same chivalric fashion that Briason and Abaus did. Eventually, however, they were alone; two Shequanti males who were already squirming, one petite human female who folded her arms over her chest, and one imperturbable sphinx.

"I hope you two have this stupidity out of your systems," she scolded them.

"It wasn't our idea," Abaus said defensively.

"I don't give a rat's ass whose idea it was. Not only did you let them act like idiots, but also you left me in the forest with that mealy-mouthed healer who hates my guts. I figured that I had to get them out of here so I could yell at you about that!"

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then all of them burst out laughing.

Epilogue

Kate knocked softly at the door in the darkened corridor. As she waited, she looked up and down the corridor. No one was around. A moment later, a robed Abaus opened the door. "Kathryn! What are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I wanted to talk to you. May I come in?"

He opened the door wider with a mocking bow. She brushed past him, biting her lip.

"You seem troubled," he observed.

"I am." Kate looked down at her hands. "I have a problem, Abaus."

He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Do you?" he asked sarcastically. "I would never have guessed."

"You're not making this any easier."

"I apologize. I am at your service, my lady." He held a chair for her, waited until she was seated and then took the chair opposite. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to work through what I'm thinking. I figure you and I can do that without getting into a fight."

"You have a lot of decisions to make," he agreed blandly. "You have to decide if you're staying in Shequanti or returning to your own world and life."

"Time doesn't move the same way on my world. I can stay here for a long time and be gone no more than a day there. I have time to make that decision."

Abaus lifted an eyebrow. "Well, if that's the case, what's the problem?"

She looked up at him. His face had paled once more into its customary, icy beauty. "You are my problem, Abaus."

He laughed bitterly. "How am I a problem? The war is over, the kingdom is saved, and you are free to love Briason. I see no problem."

"I do." She pressed on mercilessly. "The problem is, Abaus, that I know you love me."

He stared at her in silence. "Why would you think that?" he purred maliciously. "I can find other women to share my bed, Kathryn."

"Because I know you now, better than I ever thought I would. When we bonded and formed the pyramid in the forest, I knew every single thought either one of you had ever had. Briason's thoughts I already knew, but yours -- well, that was a different matter. Your spell backfired on you, didn't it? You found that *you* were the one with a growing emotional attachment. Your power was fueling mine instead of the other way around. But for all of this time, Abaus, you've been intent on playing the villain. Why is that?"

He toyed with the stem of a half-empty wineglass; mute testimony he'd already been drinking that night. Judging from the empty wine bottles, he'd had quite a bit. "I am the villain, Kathryn. Everything I've been accused of is true."

"There was purpose behind it. And you didn't answer my question."

"Does it really matter? I know you love Briason and I am not prepared to fight him. My cousin and I have never been close and never will be. But you, Kathryn, have brought us closer than I ever believed possible. I don't want to risk losing what small comforts I have."

"That's still not an answer," she said gently. She leaned forward and slid her hand into his free one. "Tell me, Abaus."

The wine stem snapped in his fingers. He daubed the twin spots of blood from his hand with a rueful grimace. "Because I want to see you happy," he said at last. "Briason will make you happy. I would not."

"Are you so certain? I think I could be happy with you, Abaus."

He looked at her in surprise. "Why would you think that?"

"Because anyone who cares for someone else as deeply as you care for me can't help but make them happy. Because love begets love, Abaus."

He shook his head. "I find myself in the embarrassing position of being forced to admit that Briason's happiness matters to me as well," he said bitterly. "I will not contend him for anything."

Kate smiled at him. "You are a good man, Abaus, whether you want to admit it to yourself or not. I would have to be an idiot not to care for you."

They rose from the table at the same time, Kate's hand still tucked into his. He stared into her face for the first time with an expression something like wonder and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "You are really staying then?"

"At least for a while. I've sort of pledged myself as the token of your good faith."

"And then what?"

"I don't know. I don't feel as if I can leave Briason. We'll have to see what happens."

"You really love him, don't you?"

"Yes, Abaus. I do." She reached up to stroke his face. "But don't ever think that I don't love you as well in some secret corner of my heart."

"I know that, Kathryn." He leaned down and kissed her tenderly. "Go to him with my blessing. He deserves you."

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately. His arms clasped her to his chest tightly for a moment, but released her as she pulled away. She turned for the door, paused, and turned back. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being honest with me. For loving me." She paused and added softly, "For letting me go."

Abaus didn't answer. She paused with her hand on the door. "I have just one other question."

He sighed. "What is it?"

"Just out of curiosity, how did you convince Briason to form a pyramidal bond?"

"You aren't going to leave me any pride, are you?"

"No. Pride is wasted on me."

He looked at her with all of his grief etched on his face. "I told him I loved you," he said simply.

"Interesting," she said in a quiet voice. "I just told him that I loved you as well." She opened the door and walked out into the corridor, leaving him staring after her.

* * *

"Well? How did it go?" Briason asked, looking up from his papers in concern.

"Fine," Kate replied with a tired sigh. "It was a hard thing to do, beloved, but it had to be done."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She went to his side and he pulled her into his lap, cuddling her closely under his chin.

"What are we going to do about him?" he asked after a while.

"Nothing," she said firmly. "Abaus is adept at hiding his feelings. He'll give nothing away. In time, he'll find someone else to love."

"We can hope so. Do you think he'll keep his word?"

"I know he will."

"And what about us?"

She peeked up at him from under her lashes. "What about us, Briason?"

"What sort of future do we have? Is it to be a cursed, painful future such as my father had with Elaine?"

She sighed again. "No, I don't think so. I'm more stable than Elaine was and you're more compassionate. We'll find a way to make it work, whatever we decide our relationship is going to be."

"Going to be?" he echoed. "I thought we'd already decided that!"

"Really? Was I in on this conversation?"

He took her chin in his hand and forced her face up. "You're mine," he growled. "You are my *nemida*, my mate. You are my betrothed."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not!"

"Why in the seven hells would you say that?" he demanded, his voice rising.

"Well, if we're engaged then don't you think you should *ask* me first? The only proposal I ever got was from your father, and he only told the sphinxes so I could get back into the estate if I needed to."

"I never asked you?"

"No."

Briason grinned. "Well, maybe I'll ask you tomorrow."

Kate pouted at him. "That's not fair."

"Oh, I think it's fair."

She pushed away from him, scrambling to her feet and flouncing across the room. "In that case, I'll just spend the night somewhere else. Think you could find me my own room?"

"No, you're staying right here."

Folding her arms across her chest, Kate glared at him. "You *do* realize that you won't be able to prevent me from leaving, right?"

A flicker of worry sparkled behind his eyes. "You wouldn't do that, would you?" Kate smirked at him.

Without warning, he sprang from the chair. She laughed as he shoved her onto the bed, pressing her into the mattress with his weight. "Now what are you going to do?"

In answer, she lifted her mouth to his. He forced his tongue between her lips, kissing her with thorough deliberation. Instantly, her body responded eagerly to him, as he slid his hand roughly down her side. The warmth of his skin scorched through her thin gown.

"You're not going anywhere." Kate caught her breath as he dragged the hem of her gown to her waist. The air felt cool against her bare skin, a respite from the heat that already coursed through her veins. He rose to his knees, removing his tunic with an impatient jerk. Kate smiled up at him and he smiled back. "Let me help you," she offered, untying his breeches.

As she bared his body, Briason seized the low neck of her gown and ripped it to her waist. Kate rolled her eyes. "You realize it's going to cost you a fortune to keep me in clothes if you keep doing that."

"I can afford it," he noted, stripping the tattered remnants from her. "Besides, you like it."

He remained above her for a moment, gazing at her nude body with an odd, glittering fire in his eyes. When his hands cupped her breasts, Kate let her eyelids drift closed. Briason slid his hands down her torso, dragging a trail of heat behind them. He followed with his mouth, nibbling and teasing over her quivering skin until she wiggled impatiently against him. She heard his chuckle as he parted her legs, his mouth sliding unerringly to her clitoris.

Kate tangled his hair between her fingers, holding his head between her pussy lips while his tongue circled her clit. He began to suckle her, the smooth, hard line of his chin brushing against her sensitive flesh. Briason slid a finger into her, moving it deliberately inside her vagina until she moaned.

In response, he pulled away. Her eyes flew open as he sheathed himself within her body. He was staring at her, a grim, triumphant look on his face as he stroked his huge cock along the walls of her cunt. When he started to work her clitoris as well, she bucked against him.

"That's right, *nemida*. At last, there are only two in my bed."

His own words acted as a goad. Instantly, his pace increased, slamming into her eager body with ferocious possession. She responded in kind, meeting his thrusts with mounting excitement. As passion overtook his control, he moved his hands to her hips, lifting them from the mattress while his fingers dug into her skin. The orgasm swelled within them both. Briason bit his lip as his cock exploded inside her, pumping the fury of his ardor to meet her own.

And for just a brief second, Kate felt the brush of something else flutter against her mind. As Briason relaxed against her, she recognized the touch of the Shequanti mage, sitting alone in his chamber. Abaus' thoughts were bittersweet and tinged with irony. He found himself an unwilling witness to their love, still bound to them and incapable of freeing himself.

Kate closed her eyes. She reached for him with her mind, but before she could touch him he was gone. Even through the blazing heat of her ebbing arousal, she felt a cold kiss along her skin and knew without a doubt that Briason was wrong.

There would always be three in his bed.

* * *

Later, as they lay in bed, Kate stirred against his bare chest.

"What are you thinking about so busily, nemida?"

"I was just thinking about Abaus," she admitted. "You know, Briason, I have a friend back home that might be just enough to give Abaus all the trouble he could ever want..."

Isabelle Spurrier

Isabelle Spurrier lives in the lovely hills of southeastern Ohio. Writing since the age of seven, she won numerous awards for writing, history, and the classics throughout her education which culminated at the University of Tennessee. After college, she did a ten-year stint in professional theatre, then returned to her first love: writing. Isabelle is married, has two teenaged daughters, and way too many cats. You can find out more about Isabelle at her website: www.mythoserotica.bravehost.com.