

"Why does Byram hate your people so much?" The question was out before Gaige could think.

"Because we know the truth."

"The truth?"

Keiran leaned in close. One of his hands moved up to cup the back of Gaige's head, while the other slid around his waist. The heat of his breath caressed Gaige's neck, making his pulse roar.

"That we didn't start the war a hundred years ago. He did."

And then the damp heat of Keiran's tongue burrowed into Gaige's ear. His legs went numb. He staggered back a step, glad for the support of the cool rock wall against his back. A low groan escaped him and he buried his hands in Keiran's hair, tugging free the bit of leather holding it, and savoring the soft, thick feel of it sliding through his fingers.

A deep ache throbbing in his groin, Gaige pulled Keiran's mouth toward his and, at long last, tasted what he'd craved since he'd first met this man.

Their mouths and tongues moved together with desperation, as if each had been starving for the other much too long. Keiran tasted of the spicy wine, of earthy passion, and of something powerful and mysterious that filled Gaige's body with a tingling energy. Draegan magick? Gaige had to wonder...

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## BY

## M. L. RHODES

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# TRUE OF HEART AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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## This one's for my sisters...women of exceptional quality!

With huge thanks as always to EJ, Brenda, Trace, Ing, and my three patient, supportive, and always loving guys on the homefront.

## **PROLOGUE**

High Sorcerer Byram shifted in his gilded chair and stretched his legs out before him. At the unnaturally old age of one-hundred fifty-two, he didn't look a day over forty. His body was lithe and his appearance young given his advanced years—a result of the powerful magick he wielded. Not a single streak of gray adorned his shoulder-length black hair or beard. But today, despite his seemingly relaxed pose, his knuckles glistened white as they flexed against the arms of his chair.

His obsidian gaze settled on Gaige Rizik, Captain of the High Guard, known to the people of Velensperia as the White Panther.

"The draegan rebels *will* be stopped," the high sorcerer said. "I won't tolerate their defiance in my empire. If our spies' reports are correct, they've now managed to sway some of the humans into aiding them." His thin lips curved into a sneer. "Human and draegan working together!" he spat, as if the words were a foul concoction in his mouth. "What kind of human would allow himself to be seduced into a draegan cause? No people of mine will help draegan filth."

His gaze narrowed at Gaige. "You will infiltrate this band of rebels, posing as one of these weak, easily-swayed humans. I want to know who's leading them. I want names of collaborators, locations of their camps, plans...as much information as you can uncover so we can be thorough in our eradication of this rebellion. Is that clear?"

Gaige nodded in deference to the high sorcerer, even as he bit back annoyance at the sorcerer's patronizing tone. He acted as if Gaige were a child rather than a grown man. "As you wish, my lord," he said, keeping all trace of irritation out of his voice.

Cool control had been bred—and at times, beaten—into him as a youth. He'd learned early the importance of keeping his feelings tightly under control around the high sorcerer. And around his own father, Everard Rizik, the sorcerer's most trusted general standing silently at Byram's side right now. Anything else would be seen as a sign of weakness.

Gaige had perfected the art of giving off an aloof, stoic mien in public—not just in front of his father and Byram, but in front of the people of Velensperia as well. Yet within him

lurked a powerful depth of emotion he feared would boil to the surface one day. And if that should happen...it wouldn't bode well for his health and well-being. Weakness of any kind was not tolerated in Byram's realm, especially not from those who lived and worked here in his castle stronghold, Thrythgar.

"I want this nonsense stamped out forthwith." Byram swiped a hand through the air, using magick to slide the heavy drapes away from the paned windows on the west wall. Shafts of autumn sunlight glinted through the glass, bathing the audience chamber in tones of shimmering gold.

"It may take some time to locate and infiltrate the group," Gaige said.

"Yes, yes, I know how it works." Byram waved a restless hand at him. "I prefer expediency, but we can't afford to be reckless or we'll risk taking out only part of them, while leaving enough behind to start their rabble-rousing again. Better to be thorough."

"I agree. I'll leave at first light tomorrow."

Gaige waited to be dismissed, but apparently Byram wasn't done with him yet.

The sorcerer picked up a silver mug and drank from it, taking his time, clearly not caring that Gaige already itched to be away from here. As the sorcerer's heated, suggestive gaze slid over him across the top of his mug, Gaige's veins ran cold with revulsion. While Byram had his loyalty in issues of the realm, Gaige loathed the lascivious desire that often filled those jewel-black eyes when the sorcerer looked at him. Though some found Byram handsome in a darkly seductive

way, Gaige did not. He'd heard stories of the man's sexual depravity and cruelty, and could well believe it was true. With the high sorcerer's eye turning his way more and more often of late, it was just as well he was leaving and would likely be gone for several weeks.

"The draegans have cowered in hiding this past century, as they should," Byram finally continued. "I won't have some trouble-maker inciting them against me. They need to be shown their place and reminded that their deeds from the past will neither be forgotten, nor forgiven."

"Well said, my lord." Gaige's father spoke up for the first time. His hand rested on the hilt of the oversized sword at his hip.

Gaige barely spared him a glance. His father, the great General Rizik...nothing more than a classic yes man to the high sorcerer, he thought with sarcastic bitterness.

Byram eyed Gaige critically. "The rebels can't suspect who you are. I'll supply you with a disguising charm. Use it. You look too much like your father."

Gaige nodded, but another flash of irritation shot through him. He knew how to do his job—this would hardly be his first undercover work for the sorcerer. And he didn't need a reminder that his appearance would attract attention. His hair, like his father's, was a striking white-blond. Unusual by all standards, and a dead giveaway to his identity. Though Gaige kept his trimmed just above his shoulders, while General Rizik's hung long and loose in a cascade down his back, there was no mistaking they were related.

"The high sorcerer is putting his trust in you," Gaige's father said. "Don't disappoint him." The words, as always, were etched with stony disapproval, but Gaige understood what he was really saying...don't disappoint me. Again.

He ignored him, having learned long ago that nothing he did would ever be enough to please the elder Rizik. He honored the man as his father, but held little love for the icy general who'd never shown him any.

Instead, he addressed the high sorcerer. "If there's nothing else, my lord, I'll make preparations to leave."

"Yes, be on your way, then." The sorcerer gave him a pointed and decidedly libidinous look that set Gaige's skin to crawling. "Don't fail me in this task I've given you, Panther. Bring me the information I seek, and when the rebel leader's head is on a pike, I'll have a most generous reward for you."

Gaige suspected he knew the nature of the reward and wondered how quickly he'd be killed if he refused.

Once again keeping his true feelings tightly under control, he bowed. "Always your servant, my lord." He kissed the bloodstone ring on the sorcerer's hand and exited the chamber.

## CHAPTER 1

It had taken Gaige a full ten days to locate one of the fringe human groups supporting the draegan rebels, and another ten to get information on the whereabouts of the draegan camp and its leader. Through a series of created opportunities, he'd at last managed to imbed himself in the encampment. Since then, he'd been working alongside the draegans, earning their trust.

He'd chosen to use his own first name since, as far as he was aware, no one in Velensperia aside from his father and Byram knew it. He'd taken his mother's name as a surname—Albione. And he had, of course, shed his usual High Guard uniform of all black to don clothing of the normal folk—

brown leather pants, loose-fitting shirt, vest, and knee-high leather boots. Before leaving Thrythgar, he'd used Byram's charm to turn his hair light brown.

His military training had stood him in good stead. His dead-on talent with a bow and a *vrieg*—a short-handled dagger particularly useful for dispatching an enemy at close quarters if one knew just where to thrust—had earned him a position in the *draeganjhere*. He didn't speak draega—wasn't certain any humans did—but had been told the word meant something along the lines of "draegan watch"—those who watched over and protected the camp.

He'd explained away his skill with weapons by saying as a youth of eighteen he'd been conscripted to serve with the Taladarians in their seven-year war against Byram on the outer edge of Velensperia, near the Onyx Sea. No one had questioned the story. The Onyx War, as it was known, had been an extended conflict that caused heavy losses on both sides. Many humans had fought alongside the Taladarians.

For the past two weeks, he'd been in the perfect position to observe the comings and goings of the draegan rebels, and was beginning to get a solid feel for their inner structure. With one exception...he'd yet to see the draegan in charge of the rebellion. Hareldson, he was called. Literally...Hareld's son, Hareld having apparently been a respected leader in his own right until he was killed by Byram's guard some thirty years ago.

Although the man—the son—was spoken about with nothing but the highest respect, Gaige couldn't fathom why

this dynamic and beloved leader didn't make an appearance. Perhaps he stayed closeted away with his advisors. Wherever he might be, Gaige was determined to gain access to the man. He refused to contact the high sorcerer until he was able to identify and meet the rebel leader.

In the meantime, he had a job to do to keep up appearances.

Tonight he watched as a grizzled draegan, Iann, approached him. Pale light from one of Velensperia's two moons reflected off the older man's long, gray hair, giving him an almost ethereal cast. Gaige strolled across the clearing to meet him.

Iann placed an age-spotted but still strong hand on Gaige's shoulder in the traditional greeting of comrades. "Your watch, my friend. It's been quiet tonight. Let's hope it stays that way."

"Have we heard anything else about the detachment of the high sorcerer's troops spotted last night?"

Iann shook his head. "Nothing. It's as if they disappeared into the mist."

Byram certainly had the power to raise a mist—Gaige had seen the high sorcerer do it. But he also knew the unit of Byram's men spotted last night hadn't disappeared by magick.

"They're probably hiding. My best guess would be in the south forest. Waiting for a good opportunity to delve deeper into draegan territory. We need to keep our eyes open."

He didn't know why he'd shared the information with the old draegan. He should have kept his mouth shut so Byram's

men could have stayed secreted. But he kept finding himself offering such bits of aid. He tried to tell himself it was all part of convincing the draegans he was an ally, earning their trust.

Still...his actions troubled him, and a sense of disloyalty to Byram gnawed at him.

He tried to shake it off as he clasped the man's shoulder. "You get some rest. I'll stay alert for unwelcome activity."

The old man flashed him a tired smile and squeezed his shoulder again. "You're a good man, Gaige. We were lucky to enlist your help."

Gaige forced a smile onto his face, ignoring the sudden twinge of guilt in his gut at his deception.

"Sleep well, Iann."

The old draegan waved and disappeared into the trees.

"Damn it all!" Gaige swore softly when he'd gone.

What was wrong with him? He and his father were an extension of Byram's arm and, as such, held nearly as much authority with the people of Velensperia as the sorcerer himself. Gaige had learned young to hold himself above others. He wasn't supposed to give a fuck about anything except accomplishing his duty. And his duty was to the high sorcerer of Velensperia.

Best he remember that...or pay the price for his disloyalty.

As he settled in for his watch, finding a comfortable spot against the stone outcropping that overlooked the moonlit forest valley below, he wondered again, as he had each day since he'd joined the draegans' camp, why he was allowing his judgment to cloud. Why he was allowing himself to feel

anything for these people.

There had been a time when the thought of having physical contact with a draegan would have disgusted him. He'd been taught the human shapeshifters were the lowest of all creatures in Velensperia—ruthless killers with no redeeming qualities. Hatred for them was not only expected, but encouraged throughout Byram's lands. But after several weeks in their company Gaige had yet to be convinced the draegans were the brutish beasts he'd been led to believe. Every day he found himself lured in more and more by their humanity. Not only did they stay in human form most of the time—though a few times late at night he'd heard the faint beat of wings in the air and suspected some of them had taken their airborne form—but, in spite of the fact they'd been hunted and persecuted for a century, they were a surprisingly warm and welcoming people.

Gaige knew the stories of old, knew the horrors the draegans had wreaked on humankind, yet he struggled to match those tales with the people he'd met these past weeks.

The high sorcerer hated the draegan race for their bloody history. And, granted, the draegans had been waging attacks on the sorcerer's outposts for the past few months. But their reasons for doing so were, in Gaige's estimation, not unreasonable. After a hundred years of the high sorcerer's reign, all the people of Velensperia—draegan and human alike—were weary of his dictatorial control, weary of the starvation and poverty that increased each year. Virtually all the raids the draegans and their human allies had undertaken

these past months had been on Byram's well-guarded grain storehouses and livestock herds. The people needed to eat, and Byram hoarded obscene amounts of food.

Although the recent raids and attacks were new, the population's unrest was not. Gaige had been seeing it for years. As captain of the High Guard, it was his job to enforce the laws, to hunt down those who disobeyed. The first few years he'd been a cock-sure, egotistical young whelp, eager to prove himself to his father and Byram. He'd earned his nickname, the White Panther, in part from his fair hair, but mostly because he'd relished the hunt, had perfected the ability to stalk his prey, capture them, and turn them over to his father and Byram for punishment.

As time passed, however, his pleasure in the hunt had waned, eventually fading into nothing more than emotionless rote. And over the past year or two, each time he'd been charged with arresting a bedraggled, starving man, woman, or child for the crime of stealing, knowing they were going to the dungeon, or worse, it had grown harder to swallow back the bitter taste of pity for their plight and do his duty. Too many times in the recent past, he'd come away from such situations feeling utter disgust with himself at his part in the travesties of justice.

The reality was that Byram had become ever more greedy and demanding, no longer caring how his actions affected the masses under his rule—if he ever had cared. And while Gaige remained loyal to Byram, for some time now he'd begun to question the sorcerer's methods. Those who questioned,

however, were dealt with severely—as he'd learned many months ago. He'd carry the lash scars on his back for the rest of his life.

Since then, he'd remained silent, keeping his thoughts and concerns buried deep whenever he was around Byram or his father. But for how much longer he could do it, he didn't know.

In truth, he'd delayed contacting Byram with what he'd already discovered about the draegan rebellion because he needed to convince himself first that Byram's outrage was justified. Gaige had come here expecting to find savage killers, and if that had been the case, he would have had no issue with turning the information over to the high sorcerer and helping him crush the rebellion. But now...there seemed no clear black and white. He was drowning in shades of gray. And until he was able to fit more pieces into the puzzle, his conscience wouldn't allow him to take action. He needed to meet the draegan leader. Needed to determine what the leader's agenda was and how far he was willing to push Byram.

The snap of twigs on the forest floor jerked him out of his musings.

On edge due to the nature of his thoughts, his military instincts took over. He snapped his bow up into position with an arrow already nocked.

"Don't shoot," called a familiar voice. "It's me."

Gaige shook his head, but lowered the bow. The voice belonged to one who, against his better judgment, he'd come

to enjoy spending time with during the past weeks. These seemingly incidental encounters had become more and more regular, and he looked forward to them more than he should.

"If you're going to continue to lurk about in the dark and show up like this, you ought to come up with some kind of signal so I know it's you," he said dryly. "Otherwise, one of these nights I might mistake you for one of the high sorcerer's henchmen and shoot you."

The shadow in the dark drew closer, began to take form and, as always, Gaige found himself acutely aware of the way his senses heightened and his nether regions stirred to attention at the man's presence. His name was Keiran, another member of the *draeganjhere*, or so Gaige surmised, since he, too, had guard shifts. Keiran usually did foot patrols while Gaige stood sentry at one of the outer posts that guarded the camp.

"It's good you're so alert. I've never managed to sneak up on you."

The warm resonance of his voice always caused a tremor low in Gaige's groin.

"You always make noise," Gaige said matter-of-factly. "I thought draegans were known for their stealth?"

The man settled his own bow and quiver upright against the rocks and took a seat. He was dressed similarly to Gaige, and his presence was all masculine and startlingly compelling. He sat close enough Gaige felt the man's body heat on this crisp, early fall night. Felt it...and wanted more.

"Oh, but we are. Has it occurred to you that I might make

noise on purpose...as a signal, to let you know it's me."

The moonlight was just bright enough Gaige could see the man's eyes sparkle with humor. Eyes he knew from seeing them in the daylight were a soft silver-gray in color.

"Mmm. Tell me...how is it your patrol always seems to bring you in this direction when I'm on duty?"

"It's my sector to cover. Besides, I know I can always count on you to have something to quench my thirst."

Gaige huffed a soft laugh, tugged a flask free from his belt, and passed it to his companion. "And here I thought you showed up because I was such good company."

Keiran uncorked the top, took a swig from the flask, then smiled. "Well, there's that, too."

He passed the flask back and, for just a moment, their fingertips touched. Awareness pulsed through Gaige, but he fought to ignore it. For all that he could find no obvious fault with the draegan race since he'd been here, and despite this unexpected and arousing interest in Keiran , his duty, he reminded himself again, was to the high sorcerer, not his own desires. He could get laid back at Thrythgar.

But you don't.

No, damn it all, not recently. There'd been none in the sorcerer's stronghold who'd stirred his lust for some time now. His body, however, clearly found Keiran all-too-fascinating.

"So has it been quiet here tonight?" Keiran asked.

"I just came on duty not long ago, but Iann tells me it has been. No more signs of Byram's men who were spotted

yesterday evening."

Gaige swallowed from the flask, trying not to think about the fact his companion's mouth had just been where his was now, but experiencing a thrum deep in his groin anyway. They'd shared a drink like this before, and each time he'd had the same reaction—a craving for something beyond just the faint echo of Keiran's taste on the neck of the container. Tonight the yearning was even more powerful than ever, as was his body's response to the draegan's close proximity.

What in *hel* was wrong with him? His attraction to Keiran was getting out of hand. This was not a direction he dared go.

He needed a distraction. Something to get his mind off the way his insides were turning to liquid heat—a heat that had little to do with the fruity alcoholic burn of the *sorral* wine he'd just drunk, and everything to do with the way the draegan's gaze suddenly seemed focused on his groin. As if the other man could see, even in the dark, the erection swelling against the leather lacings of Gaige's pants. The draegan race as a rule had preternatural eyesight, so Keiran probably *could* see. *Good gods above*.

Gaige passed the flask back to him and searched for a quick topic of conversation, something safe that would allow him to get his lust back under control. "So," he said, managing to keep his voice calm and not betray his inner turmoil, "I've been in this camp over two weeks. I've yet to meet or even see our leader, Hareldson."

Keiran, about to raise the bottle to his lips again, paused. In the moonlight, Gaige saw his dark brows knit together. He

lowered the flask and a fleeting smile crossed his face. "You haven't?"

"No. Has he been away?"

Keiran stared at him for a moment, coughed lightly, then took a swallow of wine. "He's been out and about. He takes guard shifts just like the rest of the camp."

"Really?" That bit of information surprised Gaige. "I figured he was ensconced with his advisors, plotting strategy and planning how to wrest control from the high sorcerer."

"Ah, you see him as a bureaucrat then?" Keiran's voice held a note of humor. "All talk and paperwork and little action himself, while he lets his lieutenants do the dirty work?"

"Isn't that the way of most leaders?"

The husky sound of Keiran's chuckle curled around Gaige's balls like teasing fingers.

Concentrate. Information on the leader is the priority. Not you getting a hard-on over a shapeshifter who'd gladly kill you if he knew who you really were.

"I suppose many leaders are like that," Keiran was saying. He gave Gaige another enigmatic smile. "But not all."

"So...what are you saying? That Hareldson's just one of the common folk who, instead of leading from afar, actually fights alongside his people? I suppose next you're going to tell me he has no desire for the glory and power that would come to him should he defeat the sorcerer once and for all?"

Another smile lit Keiran's face. "I'm saying maybe Hareldson encourages the draegans and humans to fight for what *they* believe in, rather than fight for what he wants them

to believe in. There are many types of leaders, my friend, and not all are like Byram. Not all are in it for their own power and glory."

Gaige realized in spite of his smile the man was serious. Keiran fully believed what he'd just said...that Hareldson led not out of a desire to be powerful, but only to empower his people. Gaige struggled to wrap his mind around the idea, so different was it from the world of decadent power in which he lived. And yet...the concept appealed to him more than it ought to.

Another twinge of guilt hit him in the gut, and he had to ask himself yet again why he was allowing these people to influence his thoughts? Was he inherently weak and easily swayed and for some reason just now discovering that about himself? Or was this some power the draegans had...the ability to influence minds and actions? Draegan magick was old—older than any kind of magic even a sorcerer like Byram might wield—and it wasn't well understood. It was possible these people had the ability to ensorcell those around them.

Of course, that didn't explain why he'd been feeling less than content with his position in life for some time now and had already begun questioning the high sorcerer's decisions even before he met the draegans—the scars on his back were a daily reminder of that. What was wrong with him?

"You're deep in thought." Keiran studied him with unusual intensity. "I often wonder what goes on in your head. I can't quite figure you out."

Gaige's heart faltered. Did Keiran suspect he wasn't who

he said he was?

"How's that?"

"I'm not sure exactly. You ask a lot of questions. Questions that have real depth. And you often seem surprised by the answers you receive. It feels like there's more to you than what you show on the surface."

Gaige shrugged. "I guess I just like to understand the hows and whys of things. And isn't there more to all of us than what's on the surface?"

"Yes, I suppose there is."

"So I'm no different than anyone else." He forced a casual smile onto his face.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Keiran's voice dropped to a low pitch and his gaze suddenly seemed to smolder with a decidedly sensual heat. "I find the mystery of you fascinating. You intrigue me, Gaige...in more ways than one."

As if the tone of his words themselves, rife with what Gaige could only read as sexual suggestion, wasn't enough, when Keiran lifted the container to his lips and drank, his eyes never left Gaige's and his mouth lingered a bit too long. Like he was savoring Gaige's taste on the rim, much as Gaige had done earlier.

His groin gave another slow, deep pulse.

Stop this. Don't even go there. Although "there" is exactly where he'd been going for over two weeks. From the moment they'd met, Keiran had stirred an instant primal attraction in him. And each time he saw the draegan, it only grew more powerful, until now the mere sight of him or the sound of his

voice or his warm, woodsy scent had Gaige hard and aching.

Gods, he was in trouble. This attraction hadn't been part of his agenda and was a complication he couldn't afford.

But the warning in his mind was drowned out by the hot flood of need that surged through him as Keiran lifted the flask once again.

Gaige followed the line of the man's strong throat down to his chest and, unable to resist, to the tight pull of black leather against the bulge at the draegan's groin. He'd admired it many times before, as he had Keiran's muscular legs, firm ass, and the way the fabric of his shirts stretched at the seams across his shoulders. Though the draegan wasn't as tall as Gaige, he was all lean muscle, with a graceful athleticism about him. He gave the impression he would be equally at ease running through the forest for days without rest, or handling a heavy broad sword without breaking a sweat...and what a sight that would be, Gaige realized, to see Keiran shirtless, watch his muscles rippling and flexing.

He wasn't sure how old Keiran was—it was hard to tell with the draegan race, except for the very young and very ancient, because the draegans had much longer life spans than regular humans. If he had to guess, he'd say Keiran was near his own age, in his thirties, but in truth, knew the man could be much older. If he were older, however, his body gave no hint of it.

His dark brown, shoulder-length hair was thick and wavy, and he often wore it drawn back at the nape of his neck with a bit of leather thong. Did he have hair elsewhere on his body?

Most of the men in the high sorcerer's stronghold kept themselves shaved or plucked free of body hair as custom and Byram dictated. But the draegans apparently didn't subscribe to that practice. From what he'd seen of the other men here in camp, they chose to go natural.

Gaige had let his own hair grow in since he'd been with the draegans, giving himself the gift of that freedom. A small thing, to be sure, but he rather liked the crisp feel of it against his cock and testicles, and it helped conceal his identity. It seemed a universal truth, even amongst the draegans, that men shared their nudity with one another while relieving themselves, bathing, dressing. A smooth groin would have been a dead giveaway he wasn't who he claimed to be.

His mind—and ever-hardening erection—fixated again on the man sitting next to him. What would it feel like to fuck another man with body hair? The thought sent a new flash of heat through Gaige.

"You're quiet again," Keiran said.

Gaige realized the silence had dragged out to unnatural proportions while he'd been lost in thoughts of lust.

"And, again," Keiran continued, "I have to wonder what could possibly be going through your head?" But his husky tone said he knew exactly what had been going through Gaige's head, and the look on his face indicated he'd been right there with him in the sexual haze.

Tension arced between them, flowing back and forth like a surge of lightning...hot, powerful, and raw in intensity. There were so many reasons this shouldn't happen. But in spite of

his many internal warnings, Gaige wanted the draegan with a desperation so powerful it almost hurt.

Keiran leaned closer to him and Gaige moved to meet him.

They paused, their mouths so close their breath mingled, warm and spicy from the *sorral* they'd been drinking. Their gazes clashed. All his nerve endings aflame, Gaige moved in to press his mouth against the other man's, craving it as he never had any other's.

But before he had a chance to experience it, a faint rumbling sound in the forest caused them both to freeze.

"Did you just hear that, too?" Keiran asked, looking at him in surprise.

"I did." Gaige had always had better-than-usual hearing for a human.

Both of them turned toward the encroaching forest. Another sound, again faint but enough there was no mistaking something was out there, rustled in the distance.

Their gazes came together in unison.

"Byram's troops."

They grabbed their weapons in a quick motion and rose as if they were one.

"I should give a warning at the camp," Gaige said.

"No, let's do some scouting first, see where they're headed before we sound the alarm. They may not even know the camp is here."

Nodding, Gaige followed Keiran down the boulder-covered slope into the valley below.

## CHAPTER 2

Single-file, they headed south, running through the forest, their booted feet moving noiselessly against the moist earth.

They'd only been traveling a few minutes when the sounds grew louder and more obvious—the soft nicker of a horse, heavy boots on the forest floor making no attempt at stealth.

Keiran stopped and crouched behind a felled log, and Gaige sank down next to him.

"Your eyesight's better than mine," Gaige said. "Do you see them yet?"

Keiran stared out into the dark woods. "No...they're near, though. Sounds like they're headed directly toward us, moving northeast"

"Parallel to the camp that means. You might be right that they don't realize it's there. How big is the detachment, based on what you hear? Can you tell?" Gaige guesstimated it to be around thirty men, but was curious what Keiran's senses said.

"I'd say thirty to forty. Still no sight of them, though. Damned sneaky bastards, aren't they?"

Gaige nodded. He'd trained many of Byram's foot soldiers himself.

"They're going to come up over that ridge any second now," Keiran said. "We need to get out of si—"

On cue, a line of soldiers breached the forest ridge.

"They're already here," Gaige whispered fiercely.

They were coming straight at him and Keiran, and it was too late to escape the way they'd come without being seen since they'd have to cross the open clearing the soldiers were about to enter.

Gaige stared at their surroundings and spied a dark opening in the rocky, tree-strewn hillside that rose to their left. He patted Keiran on the shoulder. "Quick! This way," he hissed.

As they ran, Gaige realized his heart raced with fearful adrenaline. Odd, since the men they ran from were his own. Yet he ran as if they were after him personally. Perhaps it was his own self protection to keep his identity hidden and not be found and recognized, thereby losing his cover should the men see him. Or perhaps, he thought with a troubled tightening in his chest, he ran because he felt guilty. Guilty for allowing himself to sympathize with the draegan cause he was supposed

to be helping shut down. Or, perhaps, guilty that he'd allowed himself to feel friendship and desire for the draegan who ran at his side.

They sprinted and reached the shallow opening in the hillside just as the front soldiers filtered down into the clearing.

Keiran entered the small cave first, with Gaige moving in behind him. Gaige turned to pull vines and branches in front of the narrow entrance to hide it from view.

As he worked, he heard Keiran moving around, but not far away...probably scouting the shallow cave. And then he was behind him, his hard, hot-from-the-run body pressed close to Gaige's backside. Gaige dragged in a slow, deep breath, trying to quell his sudden upsurge of desire and stay focused on what was happening outside their hideaway.

"They're stopping," Keiran whispered, peering over Gaige's shoulder through the tangled vines into the moonlit clearing. "The question is...are they stopping to rest or are they setting up camp?"

Gaige studied the men clustering together some forty paces from the cave. They were led by a lieutenant he didn't recognize, and their structure, though similar to that used in the High Guard, had a faintly foreign feel to it. They did wear Byram's golden chalice seal on their black uniforms and shields, however. They must have been trained and sent from one of Byram's field outposts. Still...their procedure was familiar enough.

"A rest stop," he whispered to Keiran. "Although judging

from the gear they're unloading, an extended one...probably to eat dinner and rest their horses. I suspect they'll move on in a few hours. We should be safe enough in here until they leave."

"And if they don't...we could be trapped here for an extended period of time."

"No, it'll be a few hours at most. They'll try to make for a more secure location before daylight. They likely know they'd be too exposed in this clearing once it's light out. A draegan in flight overhead would spot them right away."

"A draegan in flight overhead would spot them even in the dark," Keiran muttered. "Do the fools think we can't see in the dark? Not that we have the freedom to fly anymore, in light or darkness."

The bitterness in Keiran's voice shocked Gaige. It was the first time he'd heard the draegan express such anger and disgust.

"I thought sometimes at night I heard the beat of wings," Gaige said, wanting to know more but feeling like he needed to tread with caution here, not wanting to further insult Keiran.

"On rare occasions one or two might take to the sky—sometimes the need to spread wings is an unbearable ache. But it's not safe to do so, even on the darkest nights. Byram has traps set all over the land—magick nets if you will—that alert him when a draegan flies within a few leagues of one. He's found a way to keep them invisible to us. We don't know we're near one until it's too late."

"What happens if you fly near one?"

"Byram has agents whose sole job it is to kill us the moment he knows our location. If a net is triggered, agents are deployed to destroy us."

"Can't you outfly the agents?"

"Not when they're nyctophans."

*Nyctophans...dark mind dwellers*. One of the most feared creatures in Velensperia, but thought by most to be only a myth, a terror of dreams.

"Byram employs nyctophans?" he breathed, barely able to say the word without a cold chill shooting up his spine.

"Yes."

He, trusted right-hand of the high sorcerer, had never imagined the creatures really existed, much less that Byram was using them to do his will. According to legend, the nyctophans got into one's mind using a terrifying supernatural ability. They could drive one mad in a matter of minutes with the blinding pain and terror they inflicted. "And draegan magick?"

"Doesn't work against them. At least not that we've found"

Gods almighty. Byram didn't just want these people dead. He wanted to torture them in the most horrible way possible. That realization, and the thought, once again, of what the nyctophans could do caused a sick knot in the pit of his stomach.

Gaige turned and, in the ebon darkness of the cave, found Keiran's stubbled cheek with the palm of his hand. "I had no idea," he whispered.

"Most don't."

"And so you don't shift into your other form and fly. You stay in human form because he can't tell you apart from regular humans that way." That would explain why Gaige had never seen a draegan in winged form in his life.

He felt Keiran nod.

"Why does Byram hate your people so much?" The question was out before he could think.

"Because we know the truth."

"The truth?"

Keiran leaned in close. One of his hands moved up to cup the back of Gaige's head, while the other slid around his waist. The heat of his breath caressed Gaige's neck, making his pulse roar.

"That we didn't start the war a hundred years ago. He did."

And then the damp heat of Keiran's tongue burrowed into Gaige's ear. His legs went numb. He staggered back a step, glad for the support of the cool rock wall against his back. A low groan escaped him and he buried his hands in Keiran's hair, tugging free the bit of leather holding it, and savoring the soft, thick feel of it sliding through his fingers.

A deep ache throbbing in his groin, Gaige pulled Keiran's mouth toward his and, at long last, tasted what he'd craved since he'd first met this man.

Their mouths and tongues moved together with desperation, as if each had been starving for the other much too long. Keiran tasted of the spicy wine, of earthy passion, and of something powerful and mysterious that filled Gaige's

body with a tingling energy. Draegan magick? Gaige had to wonder.

Their bodies notched together perfectly—hard heat pressed to hard heat—and Gaige wasn't surprised to discover that, in spite of their current situation, trapped in a tiny cave with the high sorcerer's troops nearby, Keiran was as turned on as he was.

The draegan pulled away first, but not far. "I've wanted to do that since I first met you," he whispered against Gaige's lips.

"As have I."

"Was it worth the wait?"

Gaige chuckled softly. "You have to ask?"

"Not really, no."

He heard the smile in Keiran's voice. It was too dark in here to see anything at all. At least for him. Perhaps Keiran could.

"Can you see in the pitch black like this?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"Not in a way you'd be familiar with. In the dark what I see are heat patterns." He was busy pulling his bow and quiver off his shoulder, setting them aside somewhere in the dark, then taking Gaige's as he handed them over.

"Heat patterns?"

"I can see your body heat."

Gaige grinned. "Tell me...what part of my body is giving off the most heat right now?"

Keiran's hand grasped Gaige's erection and balls through

his leather pants. He wasn't gentle, but not rough enough to hurt either. His fingers began to stroke in the same firm manner, sending a flood of heat through Gaige's veins and bringing forth a low groan from his throat.

"Shhh," Keiran said, his mouth once more hovering near Gaige's lips. "Though the high sorcerer's fools outside make enough noise to wake the dead, we can't risk them hearing us."

"They're not getting their cocks massaged by a horny draegan either, are they?" Gaige rasped.

This time it was Keiran who chuckled, the sound soft and low and filled with playful lust. "You have a point there."

Gaige's hand did some seeking itself, coming to rest on the bulge at the draegan's groin. He smiled in satisfaction at Keiran's instinctive, appreciative grunt.

"Ah, not so silent yourself now, are you?" he asked, giving as good as he was receiving.

"Cock tease."

He unfastened Keiran's belt, letting it and the items attached to it slide to the floor, then jerked open the laces on Keiran's pants, pleased but not surprised to find nothing but bare skin beneath them. He freed the hot, firm, velvet-skinned monster, fisted it, and squeezed, wresting a soft, strangled moan from the man.

"Did you just call me a tease?" he asked, biting Keiran's lower lip even as his hand continued to stroke the magnificent cock. "Poor daft man. That was *so* unwise."

He jerked Keiran's pants down his hips, sank to his knees

on the hard cave floor, and, holding Keiran's shaft at the base, lightly tongued the smooth, helmeted head.

The draegan sucked in a hissing breath. His hands burrowed into Gaige's hair and grasped the back of his head.

"A tease," Gaige murmured again, reaching around to cup a firm cheek of Keiran's ass and pulling him closer. "You'll pay for that comment," he promised.

He licked over the swollen head of the man's shaft again, while his hand moved lower to capture his knotted testicles in a gentle grip. The soft yet crisp feel of pubic hair lent a new and sexy texture to the mix. Gaige buried his face against it, pressing kisses, savoring the damp, masculine smell, and finding it more arousing than anything he'd experienced in years. Or perhaps it was the man himself he found so arousing and intoxicating.

The high sorcerer, the ongoing conflict, the detachment of troops outside, and his own loyalties faded into the shadows. Right here and now, he wanted nothing more than to lose himself in the uninhibited joining of flesh with this man.

Rolling Keiran's balls between his fingers, he suctioned the head of his cock back into his mouth, bathing it thoroughly, dipping his tongue into the slit to catch the drops of fluid that already seeped from it. He traced the sensitive ridge on the underside until Keiran's hips twitched and his breathing grew ragged. When Keiran tried to thrust farther into his mouth, Gaige wouldn't let him, curving his fingers against the man's hip and holding him right where he wanted him.

"I...take it...back..." Keiran gasped in a panted whisper.

"What's that?" Gaige asked, pausing, smiling again at the way the draegan's cock lunged and the hot, silken skin of it brushed against Gaige's cheeks and lips in its attempt to reenter his mouth. Gaige teased the tip of his tongue over the slit for a moment, but then pulled away once more.

Keiran groaned. "I take it back. Damn it, Gaige. Just suck me. All of me. Please..."

"Well...since you asked so nicely."

He grasped Keiran's ass in both hands and guided him close, teasing the throbbing, damp tip of his shaft against his lips, tasting not just the man's pre-ejaculate now, but also the faint yet not unpleasant taste of something else, something slippery...

I'll be damned!

He'd heard of this before, but never having been around a draegan, hadn't known whether it was truth or fallacy. Draegan males, clearly a notch higher on the evolutionary scale than humans, secreted a natural dry lubricant when they were sexually stimulated. As Gaige understood it, it came through the skin of the draegans' cocks and was invisible and unnoticed until moisture activated it. His saliva had done so tonight. The lubrication gave a draegan the added advantage of a pleasant, non-friction entrance to whatever orifice he chose to plunder.

He swallowed the remainder of Keiran's thick length into his mouth, amazed at how the bit of added lube helped it slide more easily down his throat.

Keiran's groan of raw pleasure brought Gaige's focus back to the man as a whole. He licked and sucked, sliding the magnificent shaft in and out of his mouth, loving the way Keiran trembled and thrust against him. There was nothing as seductive and enticing, Gaige thought, as a strong man losing control in the heat of passion.

After coating his fingers with some of the slippery dampness at the base of the man's cock, Gaige reached around and probed against the tight, clenching ring of muscles that guarded Keiran's anal passage.

"Fuck," the draegan gasped, his body jolting at the contact.

Gaige took advantage of it to slide his finger into the hot, squeezing passage as far as he could reach. The lube was amazing, giving him much more freedom to move his finger about than he would have been able to without it. And he did just that, probing deeply, stretching the opening wider, lightly massaging the small pleasure gland inside.

In response, Keiran's plundering of his mouth grew wilder. He grunted, panted, and, still holding Gaige's head in his hands, bobbed it up and down on his cock to a rhythm of his own making.

The draegan was close to bursting. Gaige felt it.

That realization made his own painfully hard organ throb for its own release, but his hands were busy on Keiran, and he was enjoying it too much to stop. He probed harder, deeper with his finger in Keiran's ass, then added a second, eliciting another soft, desperate groan from the draegan. With his other hand, he grasped the base of Keiran's cock, squeezing and

releasing, letting his fingers play with the man's hair-covered testicles.

Keiran fucked his mouth with abandon now, thrusting so deep and hard Gaige's throat ached. But he wouldn't have stopped Keiran for anything. He'd never been with a lover as purposeful and uninhibited as this, had never been with anyone who had matched his own unbridled passions the way Keiran was doing now. He'd gladly take the discomfort, knowing at long last he'd found someone who could make him really *feel*.

Keiran's motions became more purposeful. His testicles drew up tight and hard.

Oh, yes...he's very close.

When the first blast of magma erupted against Gaige's throat, he was ready for it, swallowing it eagerly, finding the taste slightly different, a bit saltier, tangier, yet more pleasant than any human seed he'd ever had. He urged Keiran on, holding him close until the very last drop of his seed was spent and Gaige had licked him clean.

When Keiran's shudders had at last ceased, Gaige was surprised to realize the draegan was still hard. He himself had always been unusually resilient, shocking more than one lover with his ability to have two or sometimes even three orgasms before growing soft. But he'd never met anyone else with a similar constitution. It was yet another sign to him that Keiran was the lover he'd longed for all his life.

He rose, and Keiran immediately pulled him into a deep, appreciative kiss. Their tongues stroked in an erotic dance, and

it almost seemed as if Keiran were savoring his own flavor in Gaige's mouth.

"You like how you taste on my tongue?" Gaige asked softly against Keiran's lips. "Do you like knowing my mouth just sucked your cock and swallowed your seed?"

"Yes..." Keiran breathed. "I like knowing I fucked you there. And before we're done, I plan to fuck your sexy ass as well."

Gaige's breath caught. Gods....he could so easily fall for this man. Could so easily spend the rest of his days nude and tangled together in an erotic dream where he and Keiran fucked each other to exhaustion.

His cock ached, squashed as it was inside his tight pants. Keiran seemed to know it. His hand slid back down to Gaige's erection where it had been earlier and resumed the firm stroking.

"Still exuding heat, I see," he murmured, his whisper little more than a sultry purr.

"Not all of us have had a chance yet to relieve some of the pressure."

"We can't have that. Check to be sure none of our unwanted guests are wandering nearby while I get rid of these damnable clothes. I want to feel all of you with no barriers."

Shuddering with arousal, Gaige turned in the cramped space and peered through the branches across the clearing at the troop of men reclining, eating, and talking.

Keiran's hands slid around to unfasten Gaige's belt, then set to work untying the laces on Gaige's pants.

"They seem preoccupied with their own business," Gaige whispered, starting to turn around to face Keiran. But the sound of voices drawing closer halted him. He looked out again, still not seeing anyone nearby, yet the sound of at least two men talking was unmistakable. And it was getting nearer.

Keiran's hand stilled as he heard it, too, and Gaige felt him reach to the floor for what he knew was a weapon.

Two, as it turned out. Even as Keiran's long-handled knife appeared in his hand, he pressed Gaige's *vrieg* into his—Gaige recognized the comfortable shape and weight of it in his palm.

"Where?" Keiran's barely audible whisper brushed against Gaige's ear, exciting him even now.

He shook his head, still searching.

And then he saw them. Two soldiers, moving in from the left. They'd been walking just out of sight, thanks to the thick vegetation.

They paused only twenty foot-lengths away from the cave.

Gaige drew in a slow breath, forcing his body into a fully alert state. He felt Keiran do much the same behind him, muscles tense and ready for action.

Gaige was already planning the attack should it become necessary. It would have to be a quick thrust of the blade, a hand over the mouth to muffle the cry, then they'd have to drag the bodies in here to keep anyone from finding them.

Keiran tapped his left shoulder. "Yours," he whispered.

Gaige nodded, understanding, as if he and Keiran had worked together in a situation like this a hundred times before,

that Keiran meant for him to take out the man on the left, while he took care of the one on the right.

A brief flicker of thought crossed his mind that these were his own men—well, Byram's men—he was so casually plotting to kill. Why did he feel no guilt over that?

The taller, thinner man on the left looked up at the sky, his actions almost fearful.

"Will you stop doing that?" his companion growled. He was older than the other by a few years, and heavier-set. "There aren't any damned draegans flying over you." He brought a long, thin roll of paper to his lips, took a drag on it, and Gaige could see the red glow at the end of it brighten and flicker as he did. The pungent scent of *kellow* leaf wafted into the cave.

"You don't know that. The lieutenant said we're in draegan territory here. They could be watching even as we speak."

Gaige could have sworn he felt a soft snort from Keiran, yet not a sound emerged from the other man's mouth. It was more like he'd felt it in his mind. Or perhaps he was just imagining that would be Keiran's reaction.

"The draegans aren't going to show their faces to us, you idiot. They know High Sorcerer Byram won't tolerate 'em and will have 'em killed on sight."

He passed the smoke to the other man, who took a puff of it.

"You ever see a draegan, Lugh?"

"Once. After I'd left home as a youth and was working for

a *rhum* runner. We were delivering a shipment to the Taladarians. It came up on us near one of the mountain passes as we were crossing into the outer-realms. Big, horrible beast. Black as Cydonian tar, red eyes. It let off a blast of fire that turned our pack horse to dust, then it came after us. Wanted us for dinner, I've no doubt. We hid amongst the rocks for two days until it finally gave up and flew away."

Now Gaige was certain he felt waves of annoyance rippling off Keiran. And he couldn't help but roll his own eyes at the story. The draegan wanted them for dinner? Good gods. And even he knew the draegans didn't have the ability to breathe fire. That was a myth. He found it likely Lugh had never seen a draegan and was spinning a yarn to scare his nervous companion.

And it seemed to have worked. The thin man had gone quiet.

"What's the matter, Frange? A draegan got your tongue?" Lugh gave a coarse laugh. Then he elbowed his companion. "Eh, don't fash yourself. The draegans wouldn't want someone as skinny and dumb as you anyway. Best you get your mind back on our job. We have to be across the forest and meet up with Ragnar's troops by sunset tomorrow so we can escort them and the special cargo they're carrying to Gelvish. The high sorcerer doesn't want to take the risk of any draegan raids, so he's doubling security on this load and all the rest crossing the Great Plain."

Gaige mulled over this bit of news. What kind of cargo might the high sorcerer be transporting across the Great Plain?

"I'm not ready to join the others yet," Frange said. "Bub and Jaston are drinking again and they always get mean when they do. I don't know why the lieutenant lets them have *rhum* when they're on duty," he grumbled.

"You gotta toughen up, kid. Don't let Bub and Jaston push you around."

The words were surprisingly kind, considering moments before Lugh had been trying to scare the younger man.

Lugh put a hand on Frange's shoulder, but the young man shrugged it off almost as if he were embarrassed. He stalked a dozen paces away and sat on the fallen tree Gaige and Keiran had crouched behind when the soldiers had first entered the clearing.

"Little brothers," Lugh muttered under his breath, then followed.

*Brothers*. That explained the teasing torment followed by kind words.

As Gaige and Keiran watched, he sat down next to Frange. They were far enough away now Gaige couldn't hear their whispered words.

Far enough away for the first time in several minutes he felt like he could take in a full breath.

He felt Keiran relax behind him and lower his knife. He did the same, reaching down in the dark to find his belt and slide his *vrieg* back into its case.

Gaige hadn't realized how tense he was, but his adrenaline was still surging at how close they'd come to discovery. And with the surging adrenaline came a hard-on so stiff it and his

balls throbbed in agony.

Keiran's strong, callused hands were on him almost before he could finish the thought, turning him back to face the entrance and the clearing full of soldiers beyond.

"Keep watch. Just in case they come back or someone else approaches," he whispered.

"And what exactly are you going to be doing?" Gaige asked.

"Finishing what I intended to do before we were interrupted."

A ripple of pleasure surged through him as Keiran dragged his pants down his hips and thighs and pulled them and his boots off. A hint of cool breeze from the cave opening stirred against Gaige's damp, aching, and now fully exposed cock.

Gaige's vest disappeared and his shirt was pulled up and over his head. A warm hand slid around to stroke his cock, while the fingers of another toyed with one of his nipples.

Keiran's voice was low, gravelly, and hot against Gaige's ear as he spoke. "I'm going to fuck you. Right here. Right now."

Raw lust shot straight to Gaige's groin.

He felt Keiran move in close to him and it was only then, when the swollen heat of the draegan's shaft pressed against his ass and the warm skin of bare chest brushed his back, that Gaige realized the other man was a nude as he, and obviously had been the entire time the two soldiers had been talking outside.

Keiran ground his dick against Gaige's crack. "It's

payback time for teasing me."

"Now who's the tease?"

The draegan's soft laughter only made him harder and ache more.

\* \* \*

*Gods*. Keiran had never wanted anyone with the magnitude he wanted this human. Gaige had become like a drug to him. He was never able to get enough of him when he was around him, and craved him obsessively when he wasn't.

The man, in all his tall, lean glory, had captured Keiran's attention the first night they'd met. Gaige, in spite of his humble history, carried himself with an almost princely bearing, as if the world had been put here for his sole benefit. Yet there was so much more beneath that proud surface—a solid common sense, true intelligence, humor, compassion. It was a striking combination and had immediately ensnared Keiran. When they'd parted company that first night, Keiran had returned to camp feeling strangely lonely and unfulfilled. As he had every night since then.

For over two weeks, he'd fought the urge to act on his baser desires, knowing with Byram's troops out looking for the rebels, and feeling the weight of his own responsibilities heavy on his shoulders, it wasn't a good time to delve into a new relationship. And he'd known from the beginning what he wanted with Gaige was a relationship. No quick one-night fuck, or even a short-term dalliance would do.

There was something about Gaige that spoke to him, lured

him in, and tied him up in sexual and emotional knots. They were damned good together, both in a crisis, as they'd proven tonight, and in more intimate ways. As, somehow, he'd always known they would be.

He'd realized almost immediately when they met that Gaige felt the same sexual pull he did, but hadn't realized until tonight just how deeply Gaige's desires ran, matching his own with a startling intensity.

Now, in spite of the recent close call with the soldiers and the fact a clearing full of thirty of them were paces away, all he could think about was being buried inside Gaige, thrusting into him with animalistic eagerness, and spilling his seed to mark the man as his own.

What?

The thought shocked him.

Gods almighty! He was experiencing a need to mark Gaige as his? What had gotten into him? He was acting like a draegan who'd found his true mate...which was impossible with a human. Certainly humans and draegans could have intimate relationships. It wasn't common, yet not unheard of. But actual true-matings only occurred between two draegans. It was more than a choice to be with someone—it was a fervent need at the cellular level, two draegan souls meeting in time and space and unable to deny the connectedness that made them one. With the draegan race so few in number now, having been hunted almost to extinction a century ago, most draegans in the current era would pass their lives without ever finding a true mate.

And yet...belying all tradition and genetics, Keiran felt his body surge with the need to ritually claim Gaige—a human. Just the thought of such a thing was sacrilege against everything the draegans held sacred.

Maybe he was damning them both to *hel* by even having such thoughts and desires.

But with the feel of Gaige's muscular ass pressed against his groin, the warmth of his body heat scorching into him, and the heavy weight of the man's shaft in his palm, all he knew was that right now, in *this* time and place, he needed Gaige with a ferocity that bordered on recklessness.

Reckless enough to want to fuck him with Byram's soldiers close enough to hear them should one of them lose control and moan too loud in passion.

Leaning down, Keiran grabbed his cloak and spread it across the dirt floor of the cave, then urged Gaige down onto it on his hands and knees, facing the cave entrance.

Gaige's body glowed red with heat in the dark, and Keiran wasted no time claiming it. He curved an arm around Gaige's waist and leaned over him so his mouth was once again next to the human's ear. "I've wanted to fuck you since we met," he whispered.

He felt rather than saw Gaige smile. "Usually I'm the one who does the fucking."

"Then I'm going to show you what you've been missing..."

With a smile he slid backward until he sat on his haunches between Gaige's legs. He splayed his hands against the man's

ass and lowered his mouth to the sensitive opening.

Gaige's body jerked in reaction, and he sucked in a sharp breath...but he didn't utter a sound. It would be too risky with the two soldiers sitting on the log.

Still smiling, Keiran licked again, over and around, then probing with the tip of his tongue. Gaige pushed back into him, silently asking for more. Which he gave willingly.

The man's essence, the taste of him, the way he responded, set Keiran's nerve endings on fire. He made a game of pleasuring Gaige, tonguing him, withdrawing until Gaige quivered and panted, then resuming his attention. Eventually he knew it was taking all the other man's willpower to stay silent, not to cry out, beg. And knowing he was forced to stay silent only drove Keiran to push him farther.

He reached around and grasped Gaige's rigid organ, only to find it already seeping with hot, sticky beads of moisture. *Gods*, he wanted to taste that, too. Hungered to feel it on his tongue and sliding down his throat. He promised himself he would, just as soon as he could get Gaige into a proper bed where they'd have more time to explore.

With a muffled groan, knowing he couldn't take the waiting any longer, Keiran sat up, licked his palms, and rolled his aching prick between his hands, activating his natural lubrication. Then without further ado, he pressed the head of his shaft against Gaige's slick and waiting hole.

"Do it," he heard Gaige groan, his voice so soft, even with Keiran's heightened draegan senses it was barely audible. "Don't go slow."

Closing his eyes and giving himself up to the exquisite pleasure of the moment, Keiran thrust, hard....and slid in to the hilt.

His body shook at the heat, the tight pressure, the closeness he felt to this human. Gaige shuddered and trembled as well. His passage clenched down against Keiran's cock, squeezing...squeezing...oh, gods....

A soft moan escaped Keiran before he could stop it. It was too good, too powerful this connection between them.

Anchoring one hand on Gaige's hip to hold him steady, and recapturing the man's root with the other, he slid out partway, then pushed back in again with forceful intensity.

With each thrust, Gaige rocked back against him, urging him deeper. And each time Keiran pulled partway out, Gaige's cock surged forward into his fist, fucking it hard.

They built a counterpoint rhythm that brought them both quickly to a frenzied state.

Keiran lost all sense of time. A potent and ancient magick drove him now, urging him on, demanding he go deeper, penetrate all the barriers, physical and otherwise, between himself and his mate—no, not a mate...that's impossible.

Yes, his instincts urged. Yes...fill him...mark him...only yours.

He's human...

He's yours, the magick told him. Yours. Now and for all time.

His balls began to ache and tighten. Heat built in his cock. He closed his eyes, feeling his body swept up in the storm.

Now. Make him yours.

No, no, no, some logical thread inside him warned. He's human. It's never been done. You don't know the consequences!

Do it. He's yours.

No...not without him knowing...

Then something happened that had never happened to Keiran before. On a particularly deep thrust into Gaige, a powerful tingling sensation of pins and needles tore through his testicles. It was pain and ecstasy at the same time, stealing his breath and wracking his groin with tremors. He tried to pull out of Gaige, suddenly afraid of what was happening to him. But he couldn't move—no matter how he tried, he could not pull free of Gaige's body.

A moment of panic hit him. What is this?

If felt as if his penis was expanding, lengthening. The sensation became more powerful, overwhelming...and then something surged up his shaft...fire...and ice. It burst forth from his slit like liquid lightning, finding purchase deep within Gaige's body.

At that exact moment, all Gaige's muscles contracted, his back arched, his body clamped down tight on Keiran's oversensitized member. A low, throaty cry, almost animalistic in sound, tore from his throat, and his cock spewed hot seed over Keiran's fingers.

It was then Keiran knew....knew what had just happened.

But before he could process it, a new rush of warmth coursed up the length of his rod and his own orgasm tore

through him. He realized he could move again and, unable to stop the thrust of his hips, he pounded into Gaige's out of primal, instinctive necessity as wave after wave of his own thick seed spilled out.

Completely spent, he collapsed against Gaige's back, resting his cheek between the other man's shoulder blades and listening to the steady *thud*, *thud* of his heart.

As if sensing his drained and unsettled state, Gaige curved an arm around behind him, then turned his head and pressed a kiss to Keiran's lips.

The warm and openly given intimacy was almost more than Keiran could take. Guilt and a sense that he'd betrayed this man settled like a heavy stone in his stomach. What would Gaige's reaction be if he knew the truth of what had just happened between them?

Gods... what have I done?

# **CHAPTER 3**

They dressed in silence, though talking wouldn't have put them in any danger—the soldiers were packing up to leave and weren't even trying to be quiet about it.

Gaige couldn't wait to get out of this cave and into the moonlight, where he could really see Keiran, look into his eyes, and get a read on what was going on in his mind right now. Something had happened between them there at the last, and though he couldn't define what it was, it had shaken Keiran.

In truth, Gaige couldn't deny he'd been affected as well. From the moment Keiran had entered him, his body had come alive in a way it never had before in a sexual encounter. And

then, in the brief space of time before he'd gone over the edge and spilled his seed, there'd been a moment where it had felt as if Keiran had touched his very core. A white-hot flame had exploded inside him, spreading through him like wildfire. The pleasure/pain of it had been so intense that the most powerful orgasm he'd ever known had wracked his body. Along with it, and for several minutes afterward, he'd quite literally felt connected to Keiran...a part of him, able to feel Keiran's heart beat in his own chest, know his ecstasy...and sense his fears.

Yes, something had happened. Something not of the ordinary. And though Gaige felt closer to Keiran than he ever had, Keiran had withdrawn from him—he was keeping his distance even now.

He was a draegan with draegan magick. It was magick humans knew very little about. Was it possible that in that powerful moment of connectedness Keiran had been able to see into Gaige's mind and had discovered who he really was?

A cold chill spread up Gaige's spine. And not, he realized, for the right reason.

Instead of worrying his cover might have been compromised, which would bring Byram's fury down on him...what turned his blood to ice instead was that Keiran would know he'd intentionally misled and lied to him. In that moment, Keiran would hate him, and what had happened between them tonight would never happen again.

Damn it all. Your duty is to Byram. That's what's important. Not what a draegan thinks of you.

But he knew differently. In a flash of raw honesty with

himself, he knew without a doubt that he cared all too much what this particular draegan thought of him.

You're a liar. A betrayer. You're here to gather information about him and his people for the high sorcerer, who's then going to destroy them all. Keiran is going to find out eventually that you're his enemy. You know this.

A sick lump burgeoned in his gut. He did know it. No matter how carefully he trod, he was captain of Byram's High Guard, the White Panther. Those details would eventually come to light.

Gods, how had he let this happen? Once upon a time he hadn't allowed himself to feel anything for anyone. It had been easier that way. Easier to do the tasks the high sorcerer demanded of him. Easier than feeling hurt and betrayed because his mother had died, abandoning him to a father who didn't love him, to a life of cold demands, brutal punishments, and ridicule for every misstep he made. He'd learned quickly the only way to survive was to shut himself off from all that painful emotion, to bury it deep and fortify it with impenetrable walls. But then a pair of pathetic, starving human children had gotten under his skin, made him care. He'd paid the price for that at the end of Byram's jailor's lash. And had continued to pay it ever since, bleeding emotion from a wound that wouldn't heal.

Keiran's callused hands on his face in the dark startled him...and sent a new wave of guilty anguish storming through him. Did Keiran know? Was this going to be the confrontation he'd dreaded?

The last thing he expected was warm, insistent lips against his, teasing, then demanding a response from him. Out of instinct, and the raw need to savor every possible last moment he could with the draegan, Gaige opened to him and met his hungry exploration with one of his own.

It didn't feel like a last, poignant kiss between sworn enemies, though. Instead, it sizzled with possibilities, promises of things to come. Gaige sensed something was still troubling Keiran, but whatever it was, Keiran had decided not to allow it to control him.

He felt a whisper of relief that his charade hadn't been called yet. But that was followed by another round of hard guilt. Did it matter whether his deception was discovered now or later? He was still a liar either way. How could he continued to face Keiran, knowing this?

"Come back to camp with me," Keiran said. "There's something you need to know."

"Something I need to know? What?"

Another urgent kiss. "At camp."

It was almost another full hour before the soldiers finished saddling horses, packing gear, and left the clearing.

Gaige and Keiran sat in what Gaige could only define as tense silence. His own thoughts were once again caught up in a swirling vortex much like the spiraling dust storms that sometimes came up on the Great Plain. He couldn't guess at Keiran's thoughts, only sensed that he was anxious to get out of here and back to camp. And that realization only put Gaige more on edge. What was it he needed to know that Keiran

wanted to show or tell him?

By the time they left the cave, the night was nearly spent. It would be dawn in little over an hour, Gaige thought as they hiked through the forest, back the way they'd come. When they reached the plateau where Gaige was assigned, Keiran urged him on.

"We'll send another sentry back to cover the rest of your shift."

Wondering what exactly was going on, Gaige followed. But with each step, he grew more and more wary. Was it possible Keiran had figured out who he was and was taking him back to camp where he'd have reinforcements to help him arrest Gaige?

As if he sensed Gaige's concerns, Keiran stopped suddenly, turned, and walked back to him. He buried his hand in Gaige's hair and tugged him close, then planted another blistering kiss to his mouth.

Once again shocked at this unexpected action, all Gaige could do was kiss back, even as his pulse pounded.

Keiran pulled away and rested his forehead against Gaige's. "I'm sorry," he said in a husky whisper. "I just... When we get back to camp, there are things you'll learn. There'll be people around all the time. I wish I could have you to myself for just a while longer, but duty calls."

At Gaige's frown, he continued, "I just need you to know that I trust you. I want more than what we've been doing—the meeting in the forest each night for a few minutes. But there are going to be some who won't understand and won't like it."

Gaige's stomach was a writhing mass of knots. He wasn't sure whether he was dreading whatever it was Keiran was referring to, pleased Keiran trusted him and wanted more, or wracked with guilt that Keiran trusted him and wanted more. "Could you be any more confusing?"

Keiran gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. I'm not doing this well, am I?"

A half-smile teased at Gaige's lips. "I'm not sure, since I have no idea in the name of all that's holy what you're talking about."

This time a soft, sexy chuckle was the response. "Point taken. Okay, let me try to make this as clear as I can. I want to be with you, Gaige. Nothing else matters. It's that simple."

Gaige's heart stopped. The open sincerity on Keiran's face, in his expressive eyes, filled him with a joy and contentment he knew he had no right to accept or yearn for. "It's that simple?"

"Yes. Can you trust me?"

"I trust you," he whispered.

"Then let's go face the wrath of the draegans."

That didn't sound good. At all. But Gaige picked up his pace, matching Keiran stride for stride. Whatever fate held for him back at camp, he'd deal with it. Just as he'd dealt with everything else life had thrown his way.

The gray-pink glow dawn was swelling on the horizon when they reached the encampment. Several draegans and humans, up early and about their duties, nodded at them or waved as they passed, and Gaige noticed Keiran had a smile

for all of them.

They paused only once, stopping to speak with a young draegan, no more than twenty—or so he appeared—who Gaige recognized as a member of the *draeganjhere*.

"Wen, be a help, would you, and take the south outpost sentry watch until Bessel comes to relieve you," Keiran told him. "Gaige is coming with me...there's been activity tonight that needs to be reported."

"Of course." The young, shaggy-haired man reached for his bow and quiver.

"Keep your eyes open," Keiran warned. "A detachment of the high sorcerer's troops is making its way through the forest. They don't seem to be aware we're here, and we want to keep it that way. But should they swerve from their course, report in immediately. And tell Bessel the same when he takes over."

Wen gave Keiran a brief, respectful nod. "By your command." He turned and left camp at an easy run.

As he and Keiran continued on through camp, Gaige studied his companion. The young draegan had treated him as a superior. Was Keiran more than just a regular member of the *draeganjhere*? Was he in a position of command? Perhaps one of Hareldson's lieutenants?

The thought intrigued him as their booted feet covered ground.

Though Gaige had wandered through the camp on his own many times, he had no idea where Keiran was taking him. His own small tent was near the outer southern edge since he was a recent arrival to the group. Around a hundred people lived in

the camp, fairly evenly split, so he'd heard, between draegan and human. Fifty or so tents were spread across a clearing at the top of a low forest hill, surrounded by pine and the dense, gold-leafed delik trees.

Fifty tents. One hundred souls. Not all that many in the grand scheme. Gaige still couldn't fathom why he'd never seen the rebel leader. His first few days in camp he'd looked for a tent that had the trappings of a leader's presence...surely a leader would have a bigger, finer tent than anyone else. But there was no such thing. And no one he asked seemed to know where Hareldson resided...or perhaps they knew and just refused to tell.

Yet he'd been assured by the human fringe group he'd first found and signed on with that this was, indeed, the main draegan camp and the leader lived here. He'd heard the same from the people here. He'd asked many to describe Hareldson—"Of an average height, dark hair" was what he'd been told. Excellent...that described seventy-five percent of the men in camp.

Now, given what Keiran had told him last night about Hareldson having no desire for power and glory, Gaige supposed the lack of fanfare around the leader made sense. It didn't seem to be Hareldson's desire to attract attention to himself.

They passed right through the center of camp and continued on. By the time they reached the eastern edge, Gaige was beginning to worry again. They were heading into the forest. What was going on?

Well out of sight of the tents, Keiran paused and ran his hand along the trunk of a particularly tall delik. The air seemed to shimmer for a moment. Anyone else might not have even noticed it, or might have written it off as a bit of breeze stirring dust in the air. But Gaige had lived around the high sorcerer all his life and knew magick when he saw it.

Keiran turned to him and gave him a fleeting smile. "Come on."

Deciding not to mention the magick—acknowledging that he'd recognized it might lead Keiran to ask questions about how he knew—he followed the draegan past the tree. He suspected wherever they were going was hidden by the magick screen they'd just walked past, and once beyond it, the screen would shimmer back into place behind them. Anyone else who wandered this way would see nothing but forest.

As they rounded a particularly dense stand of deliks, Gaige saw the tent. Though larger than any in the camp, it was no less utilitarian in appearance—dark gray-green canvas with gold flecks that gave it camouflage against the pine and delik trees.

A buzzing began in Gaige's head. This was the leader's tent. He had no doubt.

The tent flap was open and Gaige heard voices inside.

Keiran strolled in and Gaige followed, though with caution. He couldn't shake the niggling feeling his secret might be out or might come out rather quickly.

A draegan man and woman stood at a large table, looking down at a map spread across it. Gaige wasn't sure how he

knew they were draegan and not human...it was a feeling mostly. Although it was virtually impossible to tell a draegan in human form apart from a regular human, after several weeks, Gaige was beginning to realize there was something a bit different about the draegans' eyes. Nothing overt, yet when facing a draegan, it seemed as if they didn't just look at you, they could look into you or through you. The two at the table hadn't yet noticed him, though, so gut feel was all he could base his guess on.

The male, unusually tall and muscular with several thick black braids draped over his shoulder, looked up at Keiran with a welcoming expression. But the moment he noted Gaige's presence, his black-eyed gaze fixated on him with suspicion.

Was this the leader? He had the presence of one.

Keiran pulled off his quiver and bow and leaned them against a stool near the table. "We're going hunting," he announced.

The woman showed interest at once. Her moss-green eyes opened wider and her eyebrows disappeared up underneath the heavy, sandy-colored bangs of her long, thick hair. "Where and for what?"

"Who's that?" the dark-headed man demanded, ignoring Keiran's words and the woman's response.

Gaige had paused just inside the tent entrance. Keiran looked over his shoulder with a smile and gestured him to join them at the table.

"This is Gaige. He's been doing sentry duty at the southern

outpost. Last night we spotted a detachment of Byram's troops"—he leaned over the table and stabbed his forefinger down onto the map—"right here."

"That's awfully close to us," the woman said.

"Yes, but they seemed to be unaware they were near our camp. They were passing through the forest for—"

"He's human."

Keiran glanced up at the interruption and met the darkheaded man's gaze. "Yes, Jax, he is. And he's going with us."

Gaige was surprised at the authority Keiran conveyed in his look and voice. Perhaps the big man wasn't the leader after all. And it was clear Keiran held even more authority than Gaige had suspected if he gave the big man orders.

The woman seemed to take the announcement in stride. She smiled across the table at Gaige and offered a hand. "Nice to meet you, Gaige. I'm Marta."

Her grip was surprisingly strong for a female.

Jax offered no such welcome. His black eyes continued to bore into Gaige with undisguised enmity. Gaige had been a leader of men too long not to recognize a challenge when he saw it. This draegan—and he was dead certain now Jax was draegan—had already decided he didn't like Gaige for whatever reason. Glancing away from him or ignoring him would only be seen as a sign of weakness, and if Gaige had learned nothing else in his years working for Byram, it was how not to show weakness. He kept his own gaze steady and cool—not openly defiant, but not turning away either.

"I've seen this man," Jax said. "He's been in camp with us

less than a full month. We know nothing of him."

"I came here with a recommendation from Xelos at the Charn River camp," Gaige responded.

"I've heard of your abilities," Marta said, still smiling. "Iann says you've been a real asset to the *draeganjhere*. He speaks highly of you."

A smiled quirked Gaige's lips. He nodded in acknowledgment to the compliment. "Iann's a good man."

Jax's eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth to speak.

But Keiran held up a hand to stop him. "If you're done posturing, my friend, we have work to do. I understand how you feel about humans. But Gaige is here with my blessing and my trust. He stays."

Jax huffed out a disgusted breath, gave Gaige one last, long glare, then stalked across the tent and out the doorway.

Marta chuckled and looked at Gaige. "Not to worry. He'll be back. Just needs time to get over his huff. They've been friends since they were kids and it's not often Keiran has to go boss man on him and order him around."

Gaige looked at her for a moment, then turned his head and studied Keiran, who was bent over the table, busy looking at the map, but with a faint smile on his face.

It was then the pieces fell into place. Gaige's heart rate quickened at the obvious answer. "You're him."

Keiran straightened and turned to face him. His silver eyes sparkled with humor and just a touch of apology. "I had no idea you didn't realize it. Not until you asked last night why you'd never seen him...me."

"So you let me look the fool instead of telling me the truth?"

"Would it have made a difference...if you knew?"

Gaige knew Keiran was asking if he still would have shared the intimacies they had last night if he'd known Keiran was the rebel leader.

"No," he answered honestly, his body suddenly warm and heavy with need again as he remembered how Keiran's masterful hands had felt on his cock, how full and stretched and thoroughly fucked he'd felt when Keiran was inside him. "I wouldn't have changed a thing."

Keiran's slow, seductive smile only served to bring his desire to an ever higher pitch.

"Neither would I," Keiran said softly.

Gaige became aware that Marta was watching them with open curiosity and a hint of a knowing smile. Keiran must have realized it also because after another meaningful gaze that let Gaige know he was remembering last night, too, he turned back to the map.

"Last night Gaige and I heard and scouted a detachment of Byram's troops. We overheard some of the soldiers say they had to reach the south end of the forest by sunset tonight. They're meeting up with another detachment coming from across the Great Plain. Apparently Byram's transporting something and the draegan raids have him spooked. He's ordered double guards for all shipments coming across the Plain from now on."

"Shipments of what?" Marta asked, her freckled features

squinting. "What in *hel* could Byram possibly be transporting across the Great Plain?"

"An excellent question. Any thoughts?" Keiran asked Gaige.

Gaige mulled the possibilities. "There's nothing across the Great Plain but the outer realms. They're all small and barely produce enough goods for their own survival. There's nothing in any of them I can think of that might interest Byram except, perhaps, the gem mines in Antara."

"Those have almost been worked to death, though," Marta said. "There's not much left in them. Unless, of course, they've uncovered a new vein of something."

"It's possible. But not likely." Keiran absently scrubbed a hand against his stubble-covered cheeks. "Well, regardless of what it is, Byram doesn't want us to know about it and interfere, which means..."

"We're going to interfere." Marta's grin was infectious, and without thinking, Gaige echoed it.

But the sight of Jax's brooding face as the man returned to the tent sent it fleeing. Jax didn't trust him...and for good reason. What was he thinking, grinning like a fool over interrupting one of Byram's shipments? He was here to put a stop to the rebel raids, not join in on them, and certainly not to agree with them and take pleasure in them.

"We'll have to travel light and fast to reach their meeting spot by sunset," Keiran was saying. "Marta, gather your boys. Jax, Gaige, get what you need. We'll meet at the southern edge of camp in twenty minutes."

# CHAPTER 4

Gaige jogged back across camp to his tent, battling his conscience the entire way.

Keiran was the rebel leader. Keiran Hareldson, he'd told Gaige as he walked him back to the delik tree that marked the boundary between the magickally shielded clearing and the camp itself.

That was the last bit of information he'd been waiting on before he contacted Byram. But now...well...Keiran was the leader. And that changed everything.

Or did it? Gaige asked himself. Did it really change anything? Yes, he'd been waiting to contact Byram until he knew the leader's identity. Or so he'd told himself. But was

that the full truth? He didn't have to search hard within himself to know it wasn't. The truth was...after living amongst these people, he couldn't hate them. Couldn't fault them. And couldn't find any way to justify betraying them to Byram. He'd been holding off contacting Byram because he simply didn't want to do it.

A vision of Keiran filled his mind—strong, passionate, intelligent, only wanting what was best for his people. Keiran's eyes were so often filled with a humorous mischief that hinted at a genuine love for life. That unto itself was a powerful attractor for Gaige, who'd begun to realize his own zest for life had eked away years ago. He'd felt more alive and more at ease in these past few weeks with the draegans than he had in years. The draegans, as a whole, had shown him an openness and acceptance he'd never received in his High Guard life. Here, he was appreciated for what he had to offer, no matter how big or small his contribution. And, selfishly, he wanted that to continue.

But more importantly, how could he turn these good, hardworking people over to Byram? It didn't matter what the draegans had supposedly done in the past. And for all he knew, tales of their bloodthirsty attacks on humans all those many years ago had been exaggerated. Hadn't Keiran said just last night that the reason Byram feared the draegans so much was because they knew the truth? The truth that Byram was the one who'd started the war a hundred years ago, not the draegans?

Gaige's mind churned with conflicting facts and his heart

with conflicting emotions. The sorcerer would be expecting a report soon. What was he going to tell him?

As if some ill-humored hand of fate chose that moment to make Gaige's life miserable, he felt a burst of heat emanate from the pouch on his belt.

"Gods damn it all," he muttered under his breath. Was the high sorcerer now able to read minds?

As he entered his tent, he swore fiercely again. He knew the consequences of ignoring the signal, and had no interest in losing a limb when the seeing stone exploded because he didn't respond.

After tugging the tent flap closed and tying it against interruptions, Gaige reached into the leather pouch where he carried bits of herbs for medicinal purposes, leather thong, a few coins, and several other odds and ends, and pulled out what looked like a small, gray rock. He held it in the palm of his hand, and within seconds, it had grown and expanded until it was the size of a *choku* melon, though still no heavier than the small stone it had started as.

"High sorcerer." Gage nodded in deference to the man as his black-bearded face became visible in the luminescent sphere.

"You've been most quiet, Panther. I can be a patient man when necessary, but I'm thinking well over a month is more than long enough to wait for a report. Explain yourself."

"It takes time to gather information, my lord. It takes time to make contacts and establish trust."

"Yes, yes," the sorcerer snapped. "But my patience

grows thin. Surely you've learned something worth sharing. Where are you?"

"I'm in one of the human encampments at the base of the Black Mountains." The lie came smoothly off his lips. He'd never been anywhere near the Black Mountains. "One of the humans here does monthly supply runs to the draegan rebels' camp. He's agreed to take me with him on his next trip."

"And when might that be?"

"Two weeks, my lord."

"And there's nothing else you care to share with me?"

Byram's gaze was steely. The sorcerer was all too observant. The slightest flinch, the slightest hesitation before a response, even the smallest alteration in breathing would alert him that Gaige was lying.

"Nothing as yet. The main draegan encampment is a tightly guarded secret. Only a few know its location."

"Then find someone who does know it and torture the information out of him. This man who does the supply run...beat it out of him."

"With all due respect, my lord...you asked me to infiltrate the rebel camp. I can't do that if I tip my hand by torturing someone for information. It would be too big a risk to my cover"

Byram swore using a variety of graphic and colorful terms. "Very well. But I'll not play this waiting game much longer. You get me my information, Panther...or I'll make certain you rue the consequences. I remember your fondness for the health and well-being of the youngsters in the village. You wouldn't

want any harm to come to them, now would you?"

Gaige barely dared to breathe for fear of giving away the sudden burst of raw hatred that surged through his veins. The idea that Byram might hurt the village children to get back at him caused a red haze to form in his brain.

Careful... Stay in control.

"You'll have your information, my lord."

"Yes. I will. One way...or another."

The luminous sphere popped out of sight and the gray stone was once again a drab gray stone.

Gaige tucked it back into his belt pouch with a shaking hand. The urge to hit something tore through him. He knocked everything off the small table that sat next to his cot. But he found little satisfaction in the *clatter-clang* of the objects hitting the hard dirt floor.

How much longer would he be able to hold Byram at bay? Not long, he suspected. And then? And then he'd have to make some choices. None of them, he knew, would give him any satisfaction.

\* \* \*

"I don't trust him."

"So you've said...several times over." Keiran looked fondly at Jax as they shouldered packs and headed around the outskirts of the camp to meet up with Gaige, Marta, and her boys at the southern edge. "But I do."

"Why?"

The question was bold, blunt. Anyone else might have

taken offense at Jax's manner, but Keiran had known him for too many long years and was used to it.

"Because I've worked side-by-side with him. He's strong, quick-thinking, and his heart's in the right place."

"And the fact you're attracted to him has nothing to do with it? Did you fuck him already?"

Keiran gave Jax a quick glare. "I don't recall that my sex life is any of your business."

"It used to be."

Keiran sighed. "Not for a very long time, Jax. We agreed years ago that our personal encounters with others were not going to be a topic of conversation."

"And so they haven't been. But this is different. This involves the safety of the entire camp."

Low laughter bubbled out of Keiran's chest. "I appreciate your vigilant concern, but I hardly think bringing Gaige along with us today is worthy of that much drama. He's a good fighter. He was with me in the forest when we overheard Byram's soldiers talking. He'll be an asset to the team."

Jax stopped on the trail and grasped Keiran by the shoulder. His eyes, as dark as pools of Cydonian tar, were stormy with frustration. "There's something about him, Keiran. Something I can't put my finger on, but it gives me concern."

Keiran put his hand on Jax's shoulder and squeezed. "Don't take offense...but is it possible what gives you concern is the fact that I am attracted to him?"

"Are you saying I'm jealous?"

"I'm saying it's been a long time since I've had more than a casual fuck with anyone. A long time since anyone's stirred more than my cock. Maybe what's bothering you is that Gaige is different."

"So you're admitting you have feelings for him?"

"I plan to get to know him better, and I don't plan to share the details of what I mean by that with you." He tried to say it as kindly as possible, but damn it, as much as he cared about Jax, he wouldn't let his friend interfere in his relationship with Gaige.

Jax's lips compressed in a thin line and he dragged in a deep breath. "Fine," he said, barely keeping the bitterness under control. "All I ask is that you be careful. Watch your back, Keiran. For all the rules you've set up to keep me out of your 'personal life' as you call it, I still care. I'll always care. You can't stop that."

"I know." Keiran smiled at him. "And I promise I will take your words under advisement."

Jax snorted. "Since I'm not convinced of that, I'll just keep my own eye on your new human friend."

"Fine. But don't cause problems, Jax. I mean it."

"Now when would I ever do that?" He gave Keiran a wicked grin as they resumed their hike.

\* \* \*

Sunset was almost upon them. Fingers of orange, pink, and indigo stretched across the sky and disappeared into the horizon.

In the crisp evening air, Gaige crouched just behind the ridge of the steep hillock overlooking the road. Next to him on his left, Keiran's body radiated heat. Their thighs nearly touched and a tingling energy arced between them.

Regardless of their location, the people with them, and the impending agenda, a slow pulse of excitement throbbed in Gaige's balls. Would he ever be able to get enough of this man? Would just the simple sight, or smell, or feel of his body nearby always do this to him?

As if reading his thoughts, Keiran glanced at him, and the sensuality smoldering in his silvery gaze made it clear they were once again of the same mind. He reached over and stroked a bold hand along Gaige's thigh, letting it linger for a just a moment before removing it. If any of the others noticed, they didn't let on.

"Here they come," Marta said softly.

She sat to Gaige's right, surrounded by her "boys" who had, quite literally, turned out to be *her* boys. Her sons. She had four of them, one of whom was Wen, the young draegan Keiran and Gaige had stopped to talk to this morning. All four were strapping lads who looked to be in their late teens and early twenties, though again Gaige knew his guess at their ages could be way off. Their father had been killed not by Byram for a change, but in a simple hunting accident several years earlier.

"Looks to be upwards of forty soldiers all together, guarding two horse-drawn covered wagons." Jax's voice was low and gravelly as he squinted through the foliage.

"Forty...there were thirty in the detachment Gaige and I saw, and I recognize some of them down there. There must only have been ten in the original guard."

"Forty of them. Only eight of us," Gaige said. "How are we going to get those wagons?"

"Watch and learn," Marta said with a grin.

She nodded at her boys. Two of them took off at a quiet run through the bushes. Gaige watched them disappear from sight, wondering what they would do. Was it their job to create a distraction?

A minute passed. Then two. The troops and wagons were almost directly below them now. Close enough Gaige could see details of the men's faces. He spotted Frange and his brother Lugh near the rear.

An unholy screech filled the air. It was followed by another.

"What in the name of..." Gaige whispered.

"Watch," Keiran said in a low voice.

An astounding sight filled Gaige's vision. In the air above them two creatures hovered, broad wings flapping, necks curved, long, spiked tails trailing behind them, holding them steady.

"Holy gods..."

Draegans in their winged form. He'd never seen anything more magnificent. The beasts were huge—their wingspans had to be forty foot-lengths across. Both were a pale yellowish-green in color, with eyes to match. The color of Marta's eyes— He turned to stare at the woman.

"My boys," she said with a proud smile.

"But I thought... The nets?"

"It's a risk. Always," Keiran said. "But as long as they don't move around too much and they stay in one small area, the nets don't seem to be as effective at picking them up."

"I thought the boys might be a distraction, but I had no idea..."

"Never seen a draegan in winged form before, have you?"

"Never. Gods...they're beautiful."

Keiran's pleased smiled went straight to Gaige's heart. What would Keiran look like in his other form? Similar, or would he have different coloring, a different shape?

"Get ready," Jax growled.

Gaige focused his attention below once more, to discover that more than half the soldiers had run screaming. They were scattering in every direction, some already disappearing into the scrubby brush that marked the edge of the Great Plain. Of those who remained by the wagons, most appeared completely terrified and ready to run at any moment, with only two or three others looking prepared to hold their ground and guard the wagons.

Another screech from one of the boys above, a low swoop over the wagons from the other, and another six soldiers took to their heels.

Gaige was shocked at just how frightened these otherwise hardened soldiers were at the mere sight of the two draegans.

"They've been raised on tales of the fierce and terrible draegans and, like you, most of them have never seen one

before," Keiran whispered. "Draegans have been the source of their nightmares since they were children. Seeing them, hearing them..."

"It's their nightmares come true."

"Exactly. This isn't the way we like to promote our race...we hold no joy in terrorizing humans. But in situations like this, fear is an effective weapon to even the odds."

"Enough of the history lesson," Jax grumbled. "Can we work now?"

"If at all possible, aim to wound them, not kill them," Keiran cautioned as he lifted his bow and nocked an arrow.

In a few short minutes, the remaining soldiers had been subdued and Keiran's team had taken charge of the wagons, turning them and steering them back down the Plains Road, then turning off onto a little used path that led them deep into the forest.

Adrenaline coursed through Gaige at the success of the raid. And an even deeper respect for Keiran settled within him. Not a single life had been taken. It would have been so easy for the draegans to lash out at Byram's soldiers, take out their hatred and anger on them for what had been done to the draegan race so many years ago. But instead, they'd respected the lives of those who wouldn't have done the same had the tables been turned.

Gaige felt humbled by their actions. How many years had he blindly followed Byram's orders, hunted down those who'd broken the high sorcerer's rigid laws, deposited them in Byram's dungeons to be tortured or killed? How many deaths

were on his hands, even if he hadn't always been the one to deliver the final blow?

He looked at Keiran, knowing he didn't deserve the man's trust or high regard.

You're a liar. A betrayer. A murderer. He's going to find out and then he'll hate you.

\* \* \*

It had grown dark and both the first and second moons had risen by the time they felt confident none of the soldiers had followed them. Hidden in the depths of the forest, they stopped near a rippling stream.

"Let's see what prize Byram would want so badly he'd double the guard to protect it," Keiran said, jumping down off the driver's bench and stalking around to the back of the wagon.

Gaige and the others gathered around.

Keiran untied one side of the rear canvas, while one of Marta's boys freed the other. They lifted the sheet up and over the top, revealing the contents inside.

"Gods of Erantz," Marta whispered.

They stared, all of them frozen in time for several long seconds.

Wide, terrified eyes stared back at them from inside the wagon.

"They're kids," Wen said, breaking the shocked silence.

"Draegan children," Marta breathed.

As if thinking in tandem, Gaige and another one of Marta's

gangling boys ran to the rear of the second wagon and untied the flap to reveal more of the wide-eyed, frightened youngsters.

Marta immediately took charge. "Come on out now, darlings. It's okay...no one here will hurt you. Come on now."

There were fourteen in all and, according to Marta, who'd gotten a few of them to talk, they ranged in age from four to nine years of age.

Keiran, Gaige, and Jax stood off to one side in quiet conversation as Marta and her sons soothed the scared children and tried to find out where they'd come from.

"There haven't been that many draegan children in one place since before the slaughter," Jax said, referring to Byram's quick, deadly war against the draegan the century before.

"What in the name of all the gods was Byram doing with them?" Gaige asked, his thoughts reeling with how Byram treated human children. He could barely stand to imagine what sort of lives these draegan tots had lived or had been about to face.

"I don't know." Keiran looked troubled. "But he transported them across the Great Plain. That's ten days hard ride on a horse, and longer in a wagon. There are very few draegans left in the outer realms. To have this many children all in one place..."

"You know what he did to our children before." Jax's voice was low and angry.

Gaige knew he'd be showing his ignorance and would, no

doubt, only cause a resurgence of Jax's enmity toward him, but he had to ask. "What did he do to draegan children before?"

"What do you care, human? Where were the humans when Byram sent assassins after our people? I'll tell you where they were...standing beside him, throwing stones and believing the lies he told. You have no place here, no right to be here, no right to ask questions!"

"Jax!" Keiran's tone carried firm authority. With his square jaw clenched tight and his eyes flashing silver fire, he was every inch the leader. "That's enough. An attitude like that is exactly why many humans still see us as feral beasts. I told you earlier...no problems. I meant it."

Gaige wondered what kind of conversation the two had had earlier and if his name had come up. After Jax's reaction to him at the tent when they first met this morning, he didn't doubt the dark-headed draegan had given Keiran an earful the moment Gaige had left.

Jax glared at Keiran. Then he turned on his heel and strode off.

Keiran watched his back and sighed.

"I'm causing problems between you and your friend."

Keiran's attention immediately focused on Gaige. His eyes churned with repressed emotion, but Gaige couldn't define it. "No. Jax causes his own problems. He was a child when his parents were killed by Byram's assassins. He was hidden in a closet and watched it happen."

Gaige winced. He could only imagine the horror. "What

did Jax mean about what Byram did to the children before?"

"At the same time all those human children were slaughtered and the draegans were blamed for it—the impetus for the war against us—we discovered that dozens upon dozens of our own had been slain as well."

"Holy gods," Gaige breathed. "Did Byram do it in retaliation for...well..."

"For what the draegans had done to the human children?" Keiran's lips had thinned and his voice had a brittle edge to it.

"I didn't say that."

"No, but you thought it. Let's get something straight right now...the draegans did not kill those human children. It goes against everything we believe in."

Gaige placed a hand on Keiran's shoulder. The draegan's body heat radiated up into his hand and arm, leaving him feeling close and connected to him again, as they'd been in the cave last night. He wanted to draw Keiran against him and kiss him. But decided this wasn't the time or place. Words would have to suffice. "I believe you."

Keiran took a slow, deep breath and finally nodded. "I'm sor--"

"No, don't apologize. We're both acutely aware of Byram's crimes against the innocent. You have every right to defend your people."

The heat of Keiran's gaze settled on him, igniting a fire not only in his groin, but in his heart as well.

Keiran didn't seem to have any issues with the time and place, since in one swift motion he pulled Gaige against him,

pressing their full lengths together. Their mouths met in an emotional kiss that left Gaige shaking at its intensity.

"You are a man of exceptional quality," Keiran whispered. Guilt hit him hard and with a vengeance. "No," he rasped. "I'm—"

"Yes." Keiran kissed his forehead, then held him tighter. "And I don't plan to let you go."

Numb with anguish, Gaige leaned into the welcome but bittersweet embrace and tried to soak up as many sensations as he could, memorizing them so he'd be able to keep them in his heart when this beautiful reality ended.

As awareness of their surroundings returned, they separated. But the emotional closeness remained.

"We have to figure out what Byram's doing with these draegan children," Gaige said, his gaze falling on the poor little tykes seated near the stream. "Where did they come from, and what does he want with them?"

"I can answer at least part of that." Marta joined them, looking like she either wanted to hurt someone or be sick. Or perhaps both.

Keiran wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "What is it?"

"The children were raised in a house together, brought up from babes. They were cared for by humans who fed them, clothed them, but nothing else. The poor darlings..." Marta's voice broke and in the moonlight, Gaige saw tears sparkling on her lashes. "They were left on their own to do chores, locked in the house, except for at feeding times. If they didn't complete the chores to the satisfaction of their keepers, they

were beaten."

"Where are their parents?" Gaige asked, his own chest tightening at what Marta had described.

"They don't know. They've never seen them."

"It almost sounds as if they were bred and raised for a purpose." Heavy lines were furrowed into Keiran's forehead.

"But for what? Surely they weren't raised only for Byram to..."

Marta's voice trailed off without speaking the horror aloud, but Gaige's mind filled it in... Surely they weren't raised only for Byram to kill them.

"Our priority right now," Keiran said, "is getting these kids out of here and safely back to our camp. And we'll have to hide our trail because sooner or later the sorcerer's troops are going to come looking for these wagons. We can't have them following us."

"Perhaps we should split up," Gaige suggested. "Give them several paths to follow, then confuse them so they find nothing.

Keiran nodded. "Not a bad idea. I know we're all tired. Some of us have had very little sleep, but we can't afford to stop tonight. We have to keep moving. If we move fast, we can be back in camp in five, maybe six hours."

"I'll travel with the human," Jax said, appearing out of the shadows and glaring at Gaige.

He doesn't trust me, Gaige thought.

But Keiran overturned Jax's decision. "No, you're both strong fighters. I need you separate to watch over your own

group of children."

Keiran called Wen over and briefed him on the plan to split up. "Jax, Marta, Gaige and I will each take three kids. Wen, you and your brother Jarad will take two. Marta, your two younger boys will travel with you. Everyone will take a different route back to camp. Be careful to cover your tracks or disguise your passage. We can't lead Byram's troops back to our encampment. Let's unharness the horses and let them free. We don't want to make this easy on the soldiers. Ouestions?"

There were none.

"I don't think I have to say this, but...protect these children as if they were your own."

# CHAPTER 5

It was well past midnight before Gaige made it back to camp with his charges. He'd carried the tiny five-year-old girl most of the way, with the two older children trotting along beside him. They'd never complained, never once asked to stop for a rest or a drink. After the first hour, when he'd realized they weren't going to speak up, he'd made a point of stopping as often as he felt they could spare and being sure they all sipped from his water canteen and took bites of the dried meat and fruit he carried in his pack.

Children should laugh and play and be free to talk. These children did none of that. He knew they were scared, confused by what was happening to them, and in a new place with a

complete stranger. But their silence had been almost eerie at times.

He'd found himself talking to them in spite of their own quiet demeanors. He'd told them stories...certainly not ones he remembered from his own childhood, since there had been none. But stories of make-believe fairies, good wizards who loved children, and lands filled with sweet treats to eat.

Underlying his attempt at comforting babble, however, the question of what Byram had been doing with these children gnawed at him until he was nearly raw from it.

And with each step, he knew with a certainty he'd never betray the draegans. He wasn't sure yet what he was going to do. He'd told Byram he needed two more weeks and hoped the sorcerer would give him that reprieve. Two weeks to come up with his best story yet...a story to convince Byram he'd been unable to locate the draegan camp and its mysterious leader.

And then what? Would he leave the draegans and go back to work for Byram? The thought made him feel physically ill. He would never, could never, be Byram's well-trained puppet again. The taste of freedom he'd had these past weeks had shown him there was so much more beyond the gray walls of Byram's fortress. Life for the regular people of Velensperia was hard at times, he knew that. But there was also a joy that even Byram couldn't beat out of them.

You can't stay here. If you don't go back to Byram, he'll know you betrayed him and he'll come looking for you. Every draegan around you will be killed. That is if Keiran and his

people don't kill you first when they find out who you really are. Jax will gladly wield the blade that slices open your heart.

He couldn't think about it right now. One step at a time. One day at a time. First he had to find a story for Byram.

Or perhaps you could just disappear and never talk to Byram again? Leave here, leave Velensperia proper and travel to the outer realms. Or across the Onyx Sea.

No. If he disappeared, Byram would just send another in his place, someone who wouldn't find a soft spot in his heart for the draegans. Someone who'd do exactly what Gaige could not, who'd serve up Keiran's head on a pike and crush all the draegans and humans who followed him. No, before he could go anywhere, he had to first convince Byram the draegans couldn't be found.

Marta waited for him at the large delik tree in the woods just outside the camp.

"Come now, my tired darlings. Let's go get you a proper dinner, then a nice long sleep." She gathered the youngsters to her as she spoke to Gaige. "Some of the mothers in camp are taking the children into their tents. We thought it best to put them with families where they can be with each other and some of the other children."

Gaige nodded. He took the time to smile at and pat the cheek of each of his charges before Marta took them. She gazed at him with approval shining in her eyes. "You're a good man, Gaige."

He shrugged off the praise, only feeling another round of

guilt at her words. He knew she wouldn't have said such a thing if she knew who he really was. "They're good kids. Is everyone back?"

"All but my boys Wen and Jarad. I expect them shortly. I'd know if anything had gone wrong with them."

"Draegan sixth sense?"

"Mother's sixth sense," she said with a smile.

She stroked the tree and brought down the magick barrier. "Keiran's waiting for you. You look about to drop. Get some sleep."

Gaige's tired feet carried him to the tent.

Keiran met him at the entry. A single candle burned on the table, giving off just enough flickering light for Gaige to make out the features on his face.

"Any problems?" Keiran asked

"None. The children are so quiet, though."

Keiran sighed. "I know. It was the same with my group. Gods only know what their lives have been like. Or what would have happened to them if we hadn't retrieved them."

Gaige yearned to tell Keiran about the way he'd seen Byram treat human children, of how he was using the village children at Thrythgar as a threat to make Gaige comply with his demands. But, of course, he couldn't tell any of that. Not yet anyway. And in any case, tonight he was dead on his feet and all he wanted—

Keiran pulled him into an embrace and another soulchurning kiss like they'd shared in the woods earlier in the evening. But this time there were no children, no spectators,

no interruptions. It was just the two of them. Alone. And as tired as he was, as much as he longed to crawl into his cot and close his eyes...he wanted this closeness with Keiran more. Wanted to feel the man's warm body moving against his. Wanted to feel needed, and alive, and lov— The thought caught like a knife in his chest.

"Stay with me tonight," Keiran whispered against his lips. "Yes."

In silence, Keiran pulled closed the tent flap and tied it off, then pinched out the flame on the candle. The light from the double moons outside was so bright it filtered in under the tent walls and through the canvas, imbuing everything with a faint silver glow.

Keiran laced his fingers through Gaige's and led him through an opening into a second room of the tent. The bedroom. Another candle burned in here, casting a circle of warm light that didn't quite reach the edges of the room.

A pallet bed large enough for two sat off to one side, covered with a sweet grass and herb stuffed mattress—he smelled the clean scents from where he stood. But what caught his eye and drew him forward was the sight of a bathing tub. It wasn't fancy, no gilding or elaborate scrollwork like the ones in Byram's stronghold. This one was wooden, but larger than any Gaige had ever seen. Wisps of steam rose from it.

Keiran came up behind him and wrapped his arms around Gaige's waist. "I just finished filling it before you got here. I was hoping you'd be back in time to enjoy it. It's probably cool enough now to use."

"I didn't see a fire burning. Where did you get the hot water?"

Keiran's soft chuckle had its usual effect...a ripple of desire moved through Gaige, tightening his testicles. "You know the hot springs pools near the camp?"

"Of course." There were several of them and most of the camp made use of them for bathing.

"Well, there's another small spring just a few paces away from here. It's much hotter than the others, too hot for bathing in. But close enough to easily fill the tub."

"It must have taken you forever to fill it."

"Worth every second and ever bucketful to see the look on your face right now."

Keiran slowly stripped off Gaige's clothes, then Gaige did the same for him. When they were both nude, Keiran took his hand and led him to the tub.

It was big enough to fit them both if they sat one at either end facing each other.

Gaige sank into the hot water with a sigh. The pools near the camp had been a pleasant surprise to him when he arrived—he'd never expected to have regular warm water for bathing out here in the woods—but the lack of privacy made it a utilitarian task rather than an enjoyable one. This, however...

Keiran was smiling. "You look like a man who's just found the Erantzian heavens."

"And you like the proud man who's just shown him the gate."

Keiran chuckled. He dunked his head under, came up dripping, and picked up a cake of soap from the table next to the tub. He scooted forward until his knees were drawn up on either side of Gaige and he was within easy touching distance. "I can show you much more than the gate."

Gaige leaned forward and pulled Keiran into a kiss. "Then show me..."

Keiran seemed to take his words as a personal challenge and within minutes Gaige was breathing hard and aching as the other man's skill and imagination with a cake of soap proved a hundred times over that he certainly could show Gaige the heavens themselves. The scent of clean sage and citrus from the soap mingled with the seductive aroma of aroused male. It was an intoxicating combination.

They kissed long and languidly as they explored one another. Gaige was fascinated by the broad planes of Keiran's chest and the triangle of dark hair at its center that dipped downward, faded away briefly, reappeared just above his navel in a dark line, then merged with the thick wet curls at his groin. Though he'd let his own groin hair grow in these past weeks, and it was currently brown to match the hair on his head because of Byram's disguising charm, Gaige's natural pubes, when not shaved or plucked smooth, were as fair as his hair. And he was and always had been naturally smooth-chested. He found Keiran's lush, dark body hair too tantalizing to ignore. Why the upper classes and those who worked for Byram preferred the look and feel of bald skin to this kind of natural glory was a mystery to him.

With one hand he rubbed his fingernails over Keiran's beaded nipples. With the other, he reached for the man's cock. Keiran groaned against his mouth as Gaige's fingers slid along its length to the root, then back up again.

Keiran's hands, meanwhile, were busy with their own slow and sensual torture, stroking Gaige's shaft.

"Do you know what I want to do with this beautiful prick of yours?" Keiran asked, resting his forehead against Gaige's as he continued to fondle Gaige's cock between his palms.

"Tell me."

"I want to suck it so hard and so thoroughly you won't be able to speak. You'll barely be able to breathe. All you'll be able to do is moan...and beg me with those blue eyes of yours."

Keiran's stroking became firmer, his fingers sliding and tugging the skin up and down, while his thumb brushed over the bulging crown.

"And do you know what you'll be begging me for?"

Gaige shook his head. His eyes closed as his body grew rigid, focused on the building heat in his organ and the gravelly voice in his ear.

"You'll be begging me to let you come. But when you're so close your balls burn, and your prick is so thick and hard you're certain it's going to burst"—he bit Gaige's lower lip, then sucked on it—"then I'm going to stop"—Keiran's hand slid away, moving up to tug on one of Gaige's nipples—"and make you wait."

Gaige groaned. His eyes flew open. His shaft was already

so hot and swollen it hurt. He reached up and grabbed Keiran's upper arms to steady himself. "No, don't stop."

"Oh, yes," Keiran murmured in that soft voice that turned him inside out. "Don't you know the waiting just makes it feel all that much better in the end?"

Gaige's body began to tremble as his cock continued to be ignored.

"Touch me... Damn it all, Keiran."

"I love hearing you say my name, especially with that look on your face. You want me...badly. Don't you?"

"Fuck, yes...you know I do."

Keiran smiled. But he still didn't touch Gaige where he most wanted to be touched. Instead, he continued to toy with his nipples as he leaned in to lick the sensitive skin beneath Gaige's ear.

"Keiran! For the love of the gods!"

The soft, teasing chuckle was almost more than Gaige could take.

"Do you want my mouth on you now?"

"Now...would be good..." Gaige groaned, almost unable to get the words out he was so stimulated and on edge.

Keiran's hands cupped Gaige's ass. He lifted him just enough for his blood-filled, thickly veined cock to breach the surface of the water, and then... Gaige jerked and moaned as the wet, suctioning heat of Keiran's mouth closed over him.

"Unnh! Thank gods!" He didn't try to hold back his appreciative moans.

Keiran's mouth worked him over in the most masterful

cock-sucking Gaige had ever experienced—stopping, starting, moving slow, then fast, playing lightly, then sucking him long and hard. All designed to keep him hovering on the brink of release without going over.

Gaige was nearly out of his mind, desperate, begging when Keiran gave in and let him have what he needed. The world suddenly stood still. His balls drew up tight in his scrotum. His muscles tensed. And then he exploded.

By the time Keiran had milked the last of his seed, he could barely move. Could barely think. He collapsed back against the tub.

But Keiran wasn't done. With a determined expression on his face and a smoldering gleam in his eyes, he rose to his knees between Gaige's drawn-up legs and pressed the head of his thick organ against his quivering hole. Gaige's body surged to attention. Shocks of lightning traveled through his veins.

"I want you, Gaige. Tonight...and every night." Keiran's voice was thick not only with desire, but with such heartfelt emotion Gaige's throat seemed to clog.

Keiran leaned forward and captured his lips again. And then he entered him...slowly...stretching him, filling him.

Gaige hadn't been joking with Keiran in the cave when he'd told him he was the one who usually did the fucking. It had always been easier that way...easier to be the one in control rather than to allow himself to be vulnerable to someone else. And when he fucked, he always did it from behind so he didn't have to look into anyone's eyes. He hadn't

wanted to feel a connection with anyone or discover that the other person felt something for him. It had always been about slaking his lust and nothing more. Because he hadn't wanted more.

But this, with Keiran gazing into his eyes as he invaded his body in the most intimate way...it broke all his self-imposed rules. And scared the shit out of him. He'd never allowed anyone this kind of intimacy. The handful of times he'd let someone else penetrate him, he'd never let them come inside him. That, like the eye contact, gave someone too much power over him. Yet Keiran had come in him once already, and was about to do it again. And he couldn't deny he wanted it. He wanted Keiran inside him, wanted Keiran to fill him with his seed and in some primal way mark him, make him feel like he belonged to and with this honorable and magnificent draegan. And then he wanted to fill Keiran and mark him as well, binding them together.

Why had he allowed Keiran to breach his carefully constructed walls? Especially knowing that by virtue of their positions in life, they could never have more than a brief interlude together. This closeness between them only made it harder because it had to end. He closed his eyes against the heartache.

"No...keep your eyes open," Keiran said as he grasped Gaige's hips to anchor himself, then began to slide slowly and smoothly in and out. The warm water sloshed around them, the sound and sensation of it heightening the eroticism.

He watched as passion consumed Keiran. Lines formed on

his forehead. His silver gaze swirled with lust and emotion beneath half-closed lids. His full, sensuous lips parted and warm breaths of air escaped.

Gaige, who'd only softened a bit after his powerful orgasm minutes before, grew painfully hard again. As Keiran thrust into him, the urge was strong for Gaige to take himself in hand and find another climax. But he didn't. The thought of fucking Keiran, of being inside him, reined him in. He'd rather wait and expend his energy on what he really wanted. When Keiran reached for his cock to stroke him off, Gaige stopped him as well with a shake of his head.

A tremor shook Keiran, as if he knew what Gaige was waiting for, and his eyes said he wanted it as much as Gaige did.

When Keiran's head fell back, his body stiffened, and a ragged cry escaped him, Gaige's chest tightened until he couldn't breathe. He swore he felt the thick, powerful heat of the draegan's cream filling him. Claiming him.

Watching Keiran in this vulnerable moment touched Gaige in a way nothing else ever had.

How can I ever let you go?

They lingered and kissed a while longer, drinking from a flagon of *sorral* wine that sat on the table next to the tub.

Eventually, though, the water grew tepid and they hurried to wash up and rinse before it became too cold. Though the days were still quite warm, as was often the case in the more temperate regions of Velensperia in early fall, the nights were beginning to show signs of the cooler weather to come. Not a

pleasant mix with cold bath water and bare skin.

They toweled off with a large woven bath sheet and slid into the fragrant bed under a warm blanket.

But the heat soon became overwhelming, two hard bodies pressed together, hands stroking and exploring, and the blanket was quickly kicked aside.

Gaige rolled Keiran to his back, moved between his legs, and teased the man's flat, bronze nipples with his tongue. Keiran's eyes closed in pleasure, only to flicker back open right away, as if he didn't want to miss anything. His fingers tangled in Gaige's hair, pulling him closer.

Gaige smiled and laved a path with his tongue down the man's flat, furred abdomen, while his fingers found and fondled heavy balls. Keiran's shaft was already hard again, and jutting eagerly upward, asking for attention. Taking advantage of the candle light next to the bed, Gaige admired Keiran's cock...the way the dusky skin moved so sleekly up and down at his touch, the thick, purple crown with the generous slit that was already seeping fluid, the way the shaft widened at its root amongst the crisp, intriguing nest of curls.

"Are you enjoying yourself down there?" Keiran asked, his voice rather ragged, since Gaige was admiring with his hands as much as his eyes.

He grinned and looked up at the draegan. "I am. You?"

Keiran groaned. "I never knew just having someone studying my prick so intently could be such a damned turn-on."

"It's beautiful. Masculine and strong"—he slid up Keiran's

body, letting his own hard shaft rub against Keiran's—"like the man it's part of." He lowered his mouth to Keiran's in a leisurely, delving kiss. Then, eventually nuzzled his way along his jaw line.

"Now it's my turn," he whispered against Keiran's ear. "I'm going to fuck you now."

Keiran's sucked in a slow, deep breath and his cock pulsed against Gaige's. "Yes," he breathed. "I want you to."

"I know you do."

He teased his tongue around the man's ear, dipped inside, smiling at Keiran's hiss of breath, then retraced his earlier path down his chest and abdomen to his groin. He kissed the head of Keiran's prick, licking up the shimmering beads of his desire, savoring the unique tangy flavor that was Keiran's alone, then moving lower, bathing the long shaft with his tongue, activating the natural lubrication. When Keiran was writhing on the bed and his hands were clutching at Gaige's shoulders, Gaige gave the sleek, velvet cock one last lick, then rose to his knees.

Looking down at Keiran, feeling his heart pound and his chest tighten at the welcome, raw desire, and the open emotion in those expressive silver-gray eyes, Gaige dampened two of his fingers in the slippery lube of Keiran's cock, then slid them into his lover's passage.

"Fuuuuck!" Keiran's eyes closed again and his head tilted back on the pillow as a slow shudder shook his body.

Smiling, Gaige rubbed his cock against Keiran's until it, too, shone like polished glass from the draegan's lubricant.

Then he withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his shaft...probing firmly and sliding home.

Keiran's eyes opened. Gaige leaned forward, pressing them both farther into the sweet-scented mattress, and kissed the man, trying to show him in that intimate oral act how much he needed him. How much he cared. He knew his time here was growing short. Soon Keiran and the other draegans would discover his true identity and that would be the end of this idyll. He wanted to savor and remember as much of it as possible to hold close in whatever limited future he might have. And he hoped Keiran would remember some of the good as well.

They rocked together, kissing. The sounds of their damp skin slapping together and the wet suction of his shaft moving in and out of Keiran's body merged with their sighs to wrap them in a cocoon of sensuality.

"Need you..." Keiran gasped.

"Need you more."

Their motions grew more fervent. Keiran's cock, trapped between their bodies, grew ever stiffer and Gaige was surprised to realize he could feel it pulsing. He himself couldn't seem to get deep enough inside Keiran. He was already in to his balls and yet still wanted more. The powerful burn to touch the man's very core became a pounding mantra in his mind, his body. He grew lightheaded and, at the edge of his consciousness, recognized it was only partly from the wine they'd been drinking before they came to bed. No, it was more than that. Something drove him now, something that told him

in no uncertain terms Keiran was meant to be his. Now and forever.

Deeper. Can't get deep enough.

He almost cried out the longing was so intense.

And then he felt the surge in his balls that meant orgasm was imminent. The sensation was more acute than it had ever been in life, tightening his testicles almost to the point of pain. He plowed into Keiran with a fierce groan and stayed there, pushing as hard as he could, not understanding why he had such a vehement need to do so, only know it had to be.

Keiran's hands locked in his hair, and he kissed Gaige as hard as Gaige was fucking him. A fiery sensation surged up Gaige's cock, and with his body clenched in an agonizing contraction, the first blast of his semen shot deep into Keiran. It felt like boiling pitch, searing Gaige's shaft on its exit. Keiran cried out against Gaige's lips as if he'd felt the heat and force of it as well.

Just as the first contraction eased up, another hit Gaige and waves of seed burst free, these no longer on fire as the first had been, but still erupting with frenzied abandon. Keiran came as well, groaning and spurting hot liquid against their abdomens.

They clung together until the last tremor had rippled through them and then Gaige rolled to his side, taking Keiran with him.

Keiran stared at him, something akin to shock in his eyes, but before Gaige could ask him about it, it passed and Gaige wondered if he'd seen it at all.

"I don't think I can move," Gaige said, his voice shaking.

"Then don't." Keiran pulled Gaige's face close and kissed him, stroked his hair, kissed him again. The look in his eyes reached deep inside Gaige and touched him in a place he'd never been touched. Had never allowed himself to be touched.

Keiran rose from the bed, albeit heavily and with a soft groan, proving he was as drained as Gaige. He crossed to the tub and dampened a cloth, then returned and wiped them both clean. The bath water had grown cold, so the scrape of the nubby fabric with chilly water brought goose bumps up on Gaige's skin. On Keiran's, too. When he'd finished, Keiran tossed the cloth aside, pinched out the flame on the candle, and slid back into bed with Gaige, pulling the blanket over them.

Within minutes their body heat had produced a warm glow around them. Gaige luxuriated in it and let himself relax in their shared embrace. Another first, he thought with a tired smile. He'd never stayed all night with a lover. Had never slept with one. It was another one of those intimacies he'd avoided.

Why and how had Keiran gotten so deeply under his skin and so deeply into his heart?

He felt the world slide out from beneath him and knew he was hovering at the edge of sleep. "I love you," he heard a voice whisper. His voice. But not out loud, he decided. He would never have said it aloud. It was part of a dream.

As it was when her heard Keiran's warm, husky response. "I love you, too."

And then he was out...floating with the stars.

# CHAPTER 6

Something woke Gaige. He didn't know what, and for several moments he lay still, disconcerted, his mind and body sluggish, not sure where he was, what time it was.

The incredible heat from the hard body pressed against his backside brought him back to reality with a jolt...and a surge of warm emotion. *Keiran*. They lay spooned together, Keiran's chest against his back and his groin snugged up against Gaige's ass. One of his arms rested lightly across Gaige's waist.

A low, vibrating hum cut through the silence. The sound that had awakened him. What the...?

He leaned up on his elbow to survey the room. Dim gray

light seeped through the tent canvas...it must be nearly dawn.

He heard the sound again. And then it hit him what it was. *Oh*, *no*.

Trying to move as fast as he could without waking Keiran, Gaige slid out of bed. He found his pants near the bathing tub, pulled them on, fastened his belt around his waist, and slid his feet into his boots.

The vibration had started again, and bursts of heat flared out of the leather belt pouch.

Damn, damn, damn! Not now. Of all times...not now.

He untied the flap on the tent door and slipped outside into the damp, foggy, predawn. Glancing around, he spied a dense thicket of delik trees well away from the tent and made for it. His mind spun with possible stories he could tell Byram, because to have Byram contacting him again this soon meant the high sorcerer's patience had worn thin more quickly than expected. And that couldn't be good. *Damn*.

Gaige crouched behind the trees and made certain he couldn't see the tent from his position, which meant should Keiran wake and look out, he wouldn't be able to see Gaige either.

With his heart pounding like a doomsday drum, he pulled out the small gray seeing stone. It was so hot to the touch it burned his palm. It immediately expanded into the iridescent sphere with which Gaige was all too familiar.

"High sorcerer."

Byram's dark eyebrows drew together over stormy, obsidian eyes. "Did you think to ignore me, Panther?"

"I was asleep and didn't realize you were trying to reach me."

Byram glared at him for a long moment in which Gaige's pulse thundered. He forced himself to take slow, calm breaths and not give away anything.

"I will not be ignored. You will sleep with the stone on your presence from now on. Of course, only time will tell how long you remain free and alive enough to need it."

Gaige's heart stuttered. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning there was a draegan raid last night and some of my most valuable property was stolen. I want it back. And I want the draegans responsible to burn."

"What type of property, my lord?"

"None of your business," Byram snapped.

"If I don't know what was stolen, how can I help you get it back?" Gaige remarked, keeping his voice smooth and matter-of-fact.

"I'm not giving you the assignment of getting it back. That will be someone else's job." Byram's eyes narrowed. "You have another mission."

"I thought my mission was to infiltrate the draegan camp?"

"Ah, yes...the mysterious draegan camp no one you've been in contact with seems to be able to find. Do you think me stupid?"

Oh, shit. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"It's been six months since you spent time in my dungeons for your treason against my laws. You, the captain of my High Guard. The one man only, aside from your father, who had, up

to that point, earned my implicit trust. Did your time in chains and at the end of my jailor's whip not teach you anything? I've had you watched since that incident."

A cold shot of fear spread up Gaige's spine. "Watched?"

"Yes. If pathetic children from the village could so easily sway you from your obligations to me, then how was I to trust that someone else or some other cause might not do the same? I know you're not in the Black Mountains. My spies have seen no sign of you in that area of the realm. You were, however, spotted near the Charn River Valley some two weeks ago, and one of the men the draegans foolishly let go free last night gave a description of a tall, lean man with light brown hair and striking blue eyes, who was dead-on with a bow, helping the draegans in the raiding party."

"And you think there are no other men in all the realm with brown hair and blue eyes who are good with a bow?" Gaige kept his tone aloof and scornful. "Considering I don't even know where this raid against your property took place, I would have been hard-pressed to be there."

He knows. Gaige could tell from the sorcerer's expression that he wasn't buying Gaige's tale, but Gaige didn't back down.

Byram looked imperiously down his long nose. "I've tolerated much from you these last months. I gave you a second chance after your disobedience and disloyalty. But I won't be played any longer. You have one last opportunity to prove yourself worthy of my employ. You have three days, Panther. Three days...to kill the draegan leader and bring me

his body."

Gaige's heart stopped.

"You will, at that time, also supply me with the location of the draegan camp, which will be burned to the ground with all the draegans and traitorous humans in it."

He paused, as if to give time for his words to sink in.

"Fail me on this and you will feel just how much pain I can inflict. You have no idea just how many ways I know to make a man scream. You'll wish for death. But I won't give it...to you. Instead, your young friends in the village will pay with their lives."

Reeling, but struggling with all his might not to let it show, Gaige didn't get a chance to respond.

"Three days," Byram said again. Then the orb disappeared. Shaking, barely able to breathe, Gaige stood and stared down at the insignificant-looking gray rock in his hand.

"No..." he whispered. "No!" He tipped his hand and let the stone fall to the ground. He crushed it beneath his boot.

Kill Keiran, or Byram will kill innocent village children.

Leaning against the rough trunk of a delik tree for support, Gaige fought back the bile that rose in his throat.

The choice was too awful to contemplate. And impossible. He was damned no matter which he chose. He could see no way to put a stop to the nightmare.

For the first time ever, Gaige realized he couldn't do this on his own. He needed help. Did he dare to walk back into the tent and tell Keiran the truth...about everything?

It's the only way. He'll hate you, maybe even imprison you

or have you killed for your betrayal, but at least he'll know the threat and be able to protect his people. And he may be able to find a way to help the human children as well.

Never having felt so powerless in his entire adult life, he knew there was no other choice.

He dragged in a deep breath and returned to the tent.

Much to his surprise, or maybe it was relief, he found Keiran still sleeping.

His heart aching, Gaige sank onto the edge of the bed pallet, his back to his lover, his elbows propped on his knees, and buried his face in his hands. The rough stubble of three days worth of beard growth itched, but his misery was too far gone for him to care.

He'd known this moment was coming, had known it from the beginning. But when he'd started this assignment, the possibility he might actually grow to care for the man behind him had never entered his mind. And why should it have? There'd never been anyone who'd made him care, or who'd cared about him. Why now?

A sudden burst of unadulterated rage shot through his veins...at Byram. The conniving, ruthless old bastard. That was one death Gaige would gladly dirty his hands for. He slipped his *vrieg* out of its case on his belt and studied the compact weapon with its sharp blade and leather-wrapped handle that fit so perfectly into his palm. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine how he'd sneak up behind Byram, capture him around the neck, and deftly thrust the blade between Byram's ribs to puncture his heart. Oh, yes. Now that would

feel good. Payback for all the torment the high sorcerer had caused his own people, had caused the draegan for a hundred years.

"Are you going to stab me with that?"

The words ripped Gaige out of his thoughts. His eyes flew open and he turned to find Keiran lying on his back, his eyes open.

"What?" he gasped, shaken.

"I've seen you practice with it." Keiran gestured toward the *vrieg* still in Gaige's hand. "I know how deadly accurate you can be."

"Gods...Keiran...I..."

Keiran grabbed his head and pulled him down into an open-mouthed kiss. "If you do...make it quick and painless."

"No..." Gaige shoved the vrieg back into its case, feeling dirty for being caught holding it. Byram's orders echoed in his head... *Kill the draegan leader and bring me his body*.

"Of course"—Keiran's hand reached around to fondle Gaige's cock through his pants—"I'd much rather you stab me with something else." His sudden teasing smile shook Gaige to the core.

A ragged breath, almost a sob, tore out of Gaige's lungs and he closed his eyes against the relief...and guilt that wracked him.

Keiran's hand moved up to cup Gaige's cheek, suddenly gentle. He turned Gaige's face more fully toward him and when Gaige opened his eyes it was to find Keiran's concerned silver ones on him. "What is it, love?"

Gaige's heart caught at the endearment he didn't deserve.

Keiran sat up. They were face to face now. "Talk to me. What's happened?"

His soft, concerned tone was more than Gaige could take. That same old lump was back in his throat and his chest squeezed so tight he could barely find his breath.

"I need to tell you something."

"Of course. You can tell me—"

A loud scuffling in the outer room and a guttural yell stopped him. Both of them looked to the opening between the bedroom and the main room of the tent.

Jax burst through it, long black braids flying, black eyes glittering with hatred.

"Get off him!" he bellowed, planting his fist in Gaige's face before he could react, then grabbing him around the neck and throwing him on the floor as if he weighed nothing.

Gaige fell to his hands and knees on the hard-packed dirt.

"Jax!" Keiran's voice was one-hundred-percent pissed off leader.

Gaige turned his head in time to see Keiran shove away the blanket and stand in nude glory next to the bed, glowering at the dark-headed man. "What in *hel* is going on?"

He moved toward Gaige, his hand extended, but Jax stepped between them and leveled a hard kick at Gaige's stomach. Pain shot through Gaige and with an *oomph*, he slumped to the ground.

\* \* \*

"What the fuck are you doing?" Keiran shoved Jax in the chest. "Get out!"

Jax stood his ground. "He's not who he says he is. I told you I didn't trust him, and I was right not to. He's lied to you, Keiran. Lied to us all."

Bitter frustration rose in Keiran. "You're jealous, Jax. You're trying to turn me against him because you don't want me to ever care about anyone but you. But it's too late, I do care about him." *More than you could possibly know.* 

He tried again to get to Gaige, but Jax shoved him away.

Fury stirred in Keiran's veins and he shoved back, this time with enough force to move the huge man out of his path. "Get away from him and leave here now!"

He knelt next to Gaige, but once again Jax interfered, pushing Keiran aside and kicking Gaige again.

In one swift, fluid movement, Keiran pulled Gaige's vrieg out of his belt and rose to face Jax. "Don't touch him again," he said in a low, threatening voice from between clenched teeth. As tall and leanly muscular as Gaige was, with Jax's overwhelming height and bulk, he could kill Gaige if he set his mind to it. "I'll kill you myself if you try to hurt him again."

That caused a flicker of something in Jax's eyes—was it sadness that it had come to this? But Keiran meant it with every breath in his body. If Jax continued his insanity, Keiran would kill his best friend of almost forty years before he'd let him hurt Gaige again.

"This isn't about jealousy," Jax said, his voice intense.

"This is about treachery. He's lied to you, Keiran. He's not some regular human who fought in the Onyx War or came to this camp out of the goodness of his heart. He's a spy. Byram's spy."

"That's a pretty dangerous accusation, my friend. Be very, very sure you know what you're doing before you open your mouth and spread any more lies about him."

"It's not a lie. I told you I was going to watch him. And I did. I saw him sneak out of the tent this morning, into the woods. I followed him. He had this..."

Jax held out his hand to show Keiran what looked like several crushed pieces of gray rock.

"One of the high sorcerer's infamous seeing stones. I saw it. Heard it all. He was sent here as a plant by the high sorcerer himself to get information on us, on you. This morning, Byram told him he had three days to kill you and bring your body back to the stronghold at Thrythgar."

"Get a grip, Jax. How could you come in here and make up such a heinous fairy tale."

"A fairy tale? Is that what you think this is? The only fairy tale is the one you've been tricked into believing." Jax stepped closer to Gaige and before Keiran could stop him, pressed a hand against Gaige's head. He muttered, "Rehvellian," in draega. The word was used to unveil magick and return whatever the magick was used on to its original state.

Before Keiran's eyes, Gaige's hair slowly turned from its usual light brown to a pale white blond, as did the stubble on his face, and the hair on his arms.

When Gaige opened his eyes and looked up him, Keiran was struck by what he saw. White-blond hair, striking pale blue eyes...

"No," he breathed.

"He's not just any spy," Jax said, sneering. "He's the son of General Rizik and the captain of Byram's High Guard. The White Panther himself."

Something inside Keiran's chest began to crush. He took a step backward. How could this be?

No, he wouldn't believe it.

He glared at Jax. "You did something to make him look this way. Stop trying to manipulate me!"

Jax placed a solid hand on his shoulder. "I've done nothing but reveal the truth." He pointed down at Gaige, who'd squeezed his eyes closed again, a tortured look on his face. "The only one who's manipulated anyone is him. He was going to kill you, Keiran. That was his assignment. And we both know the White Panther is ruthless and cold. He would have done it without a second thought."

"No." The hoarse sound came from Gaige.

His mind spinning, his chest still feeling as if it were caught in a vise, Keiran looked down at the man who'd been his lover.

"I wasn't going to kill you. Or betray the camp." Gaige coughed and his face pulled into an agonizing expression as if the coughing hurt him. Jax had probably bruised a rib or two with his kicks. "I was going to tell you the truth this morning. I told you I had something I needed...to tell you. I was

going...to ask...for your help."

Keiran wanted to reach out to him. He wanted to believe the quiet sincerity in his voice.

"Don't believe him," Jax snarled. "He's gotten this far because of his ability to spin tales. This is just another one to earn back your trust. The moment you offered it, he'd stab you in the back."

Jax knelt and jerked Gaige's hands behind him. He pulled a length of rope from the bag he always carried with him and tied Gaige's hands together with a brutal sense of enjoyment.

Gaige didn't protest or fight. A sign that, for some reason, made Keiran believe in his guilt.

"Why?" Keiran asked, barely able to stand the agony in his chest now.

"I would never have betrayed the camp or hurt you," Gaige repeated.

"Shut up!" Jax punched him in the face again. This time Gaige's eyes closed and stay closed while his body went limp.

"Stop beating on him," Keiran growled. For all that Gaige's lies and apparent betrayal weighed heavily on him, he couldn't stomach Jax's treatment of him. Gaige was still a live being who deserved at least a modicum of respect. And in spite of knowing his true face now, you're still in love with him.

He shoved the thought away. He couldn't go there.

"It's no more than he would have done to you, Keiran. He deserves whatever he gets. We should string him up in front of the entire camp and let them do their worst to him before we

hang him."

Keiran turned to face his old friend. "Stop it. Don't touch him again. What gives you the right to abuse him like this? Is this what the draegan race has come to now? All those years of hating and fighting the repression and torture and terror Byram's caused and now you think we should take his methods as our own? That we should stamp out people's rights, passing judgment and doling out punishment and death without question, without taking the time to find truths?"

"We have his truth. I told you...I saw him in the forest speaking to Byram. Byram ordered him to kill you and turn over the location of the draegan camp so everyone in it can be burned. How much more truth do you want, Keiran? Do you want to wait until your lover has plunged a blade into your heart? Or until Byram's troops show up here and murder our people? Why would you want to treat him with anything except the disdain and cold calculation he's used against us?"

"I'll tell you why. If we do what you want, then we cross a line that the draegan have never crossed. Our people have been persecuted by Byram and the humans he managed to sway against us. But in all that time, we held to our own truths and our own code. And our code demands we treat other beings with respect. Our code demands we take the time to ask questions, to investigate, and then to offer a fair trial before we pass judgment. We will not, after thousands of years, alter that code now because you and your personal anger at the high sorcerer and any humans who follow him demands it."

Jax opened his mouth to speak, but Keiran held up a hand

to stop him. "As for your comment that Gaige has treated us with disdain and cold calculation...no matter his agenda, one thing he has never done these past weeks is treat anyone in this camp with anything less than full respect."

"You don't even know if Gaige is his real name. And the way he's behaved was all part of his plan to make us trust him," Jax interjected.

"No matter what his plan was, Gaige has never once hurt or disrespected a single inhabitant of this camp. I dare you to ask around and come up with one. You won't. Because there isn't one. So you will *not* touch him again. Nor will anyone else in this camp without my leave. If you or anyone else violates that, I'll have you locked up until you can keep your temper under control. Is that clear?"

The large draegan stared at him sullenly, but nodded. "Fine. Treat your lover to all the best if you will. It's your funeral we'll be attending. What do you plan to do to protect the camp? Has it occurred to you that he might already have given up its location to the sorcerer?"

"We'll protect the camp as a precaution. There are too many of us now with the draegans and humans, too many families and children, to move the entire camp. So you and Marta are going to gather the draegans together and we'll put up a shield around the entire perimeter. Byram's troops could walk right up next to it and never know the camp was here. "

"It won't hold if the sorcerer himself shows up."

"When was the last time Byram did his own dirty work?"

"We're holding his right-hand prisoner. He might make an

exception."

"Gaige won't be here."

"What?" Jax's thick brows drew together.

"As you said, if Byram decides he wants to come after his man, the best thing for everyone in camp is for his man not to be here. I'm going to take him to Kellesborne."

"Like *hel* you are! First of all, Kellesborne is even closer to Thrythgar than we are here, which would make it all that much easier for your lover boy to get away and go back to his master so he can tell all. Second, I keep telling you...his mission is to kill you. You need to be away from him. I'll take him away somewhere."

And beat him to death, Keiran thought, heavy with sadness that his best friend had become so jaded and quick to punish.

"No. You're staying here," he told Jax. "Your job is to protect this camp and the people in it. I'm taking Gaige to Kellesborne alone. He needs to be out of camp and, quite frankly, so do I. As you've pointed out numerous times, Byram wants me dead, which means it's better for everyone here if I'm gone. As for Kellesborne itself, I know it's closer to Byram's stronghold. But Byram and his troops don't know how to find it. Plus, it's easy for me to fly out of if I need to."

"Damn it, Keiran! You're-"

"I've made my decision. Do you want to challenge my authority for leadership? If so, let's gather witnesses and do the *bach nejhe* now because there's work to be done."

Jax looked startled that he'd mentioned the *bach nejhe*, the primitive but honorable fight the draegans of old had used to

remove one leader and replace him or her with another. The loser was allowed to live—if he or she survived the fight—but was banished from being in the presence of draegankind for the rest of his or her life. And considering some draegans had lived for nearly three centuries, that was no pleasant punishment. The *bach nejhe* hadn't been done in over a thousand years because up until Byram's slaughter, the draegans had been peaceful, and life prosperous. Leaders had stepped down gracefully when they felt they'd exhausted their ability to do their best by the people, and new leaders, usually chosen by the council of elders, were installed in their place.

The council of elders was long gone, however, the first group of draegans to have been destroyed by Byram's assassins in the last century. Being leader wasn't a job Keiran had asked for, but he'd always tried to do his best for his people and he would stand up for them, even if it meant having to face a challenge for the right to do so.

He met Jax's shocked gaze calmly.

"Have you lost your mind?" Jax said, his eyes wide.

"No. Have you? Make your choice because, as I said, there's work to be done."

"You know I would never challenge you."

"Do I?"

Jax drew in a deep, shaking breath. "How could you even ask that?"

"Because you gave me reason to."

"No, I have no desire to challenge you for leadership," he said formally.

"Then let's do our jobs." Keiran kept his voice even, but inside, he breathed a sigh of relief. Jax was becoming more and more unpredictable and hot tempered. Keiran wondered if the day might yet come when Jax would push too hard one too many times.

"Find Marta and gather the draegans so we can get that shield up as quickly as possible."

Jax nodded and turned to leave

"And, Jax..."

He looked back at Keiran.

"Don't let Byram find out we have those children here. Or he may very well show up on your doorstep."

"I won't betray them. Or you." He scowled down at Gaige, still unconscious on the floor. "Unlike someone else you know."

# CHAPTER 7

They'd been climbing for hours after traveling hard and fast by foot all day yesterday and today, with only a few hours of rest last night.

Gaige's body ached, as did his shoulders and arms from his hands still being tied behind him. And with his bruised ribs already making it hard to breathe, the thinner atmosphere up here on the side of the mountain barely gave him enough oxygen to function.

Keiran climbed the steep, rugged path behind him in silence. Aside from an occasional few words saying they should stop for a brief rest, or asking if Gaige needed a drink, he'd been silent since they left the draegan camp yesterday

morning. It was a silence that cut deep, leaving a wound more painful than any of the physical ones on Gaige's body. And with every step, feeling Keiran's eyes on him from behind, Gaige felt as if he were walking to his death. It didn't matter what Keiran planned to do with him—he hadn't even bothered to ask. Even if Keiran spared his life, he was dead inside. He'd had two silent days to contemplate his own history, to come to terms with what he had to show for his thirty-two years. It was a fairly dismal accounting until recently. And even that was tainted by his lies to Keiran and the draegans.

But none of that mattered now. It didn't matter what Jax or Keiran believed of him. All that mattered was that measures had been taken to protect the draegan camp. And although Keiran hadn't said as much, he suspected he and Keiran had left as a further precaution. The one thing remaining that he felt completely impotent over was Byram's threat against the human children in Thrythgar. And for that, he had no answers. Yesterday morning he'd hoped to ask for Keiran's help. But now...the man wouldn't even speak to him. And even if Gaige talked to him, he honestly wasn't sure that Keiran would believe him anyway.

And so he staggered step by step up a mountain leading to gods knew where, struggling to find a way to save the innocents he'd put in danger.

\* \* \*

The sight of Kellesborne filled Keiran with an odd sense of joy. He hadn't been here in many years, but each time he

returned, though the white stone castle had long been abandoned, he still sensed life in the ancient walls that had stood during hundreds of years of peace.

Maybe peace is what you're looking for now? Why you came here over any other place in the realm?

Maybe. But a quick glance at Gaige, whose eyes were focused on the ground ahead of him, a faint grimace on his face as if he were in pain but trying to fight it, gave Keiran no peace. He was horribly torn...between wanting to punish the man for his lies and his invasion of Keiran's heart, and wanting to go to him right now, cut his hands free, pull him into his arms, and kiss away his pain.

Jax's words rang in his head... The White Panther himself. And he was sent here to kill you.

Keiran studied the way the afternoon sunlight reflected off Gaige's white-blond hair, causing it to shimmer. Almost like he had a halo. But the man was no angel. Keiran knew the White Panther's reputation. Knew the stories of his cold, emotionless control and ruthless hunting skills. He'd been in charge of Byram's High Guard for a dozen years and wasn't known for showing mercy.

Why then did that so conflict with what he'd seen of Gaige these past weeks? The Gaige he knew, though terribly quiet and lost in thought at times, had shown a vast depth of emotion. Keiran had watched him with the draegan children, had seen the honest concern on his face at what Byram planned to do with them. He'd seen the way Gaige treated old Iann...with a gentleness and respect many of the younger

draegans didn't even afford the draegan elder. He'd experienced the magick of the man's laugh, the intelligence of his conversations, and the passion of his lovemaking.

All things that were faked to gain his and the other draegans' trust? That was Jax's belief. Yet Keiran couldn't resign himself to accept that explanation. He'd seen the hint of vulnerability in those sky blue eyes when Gaige thought no one was looking.

So which did he believe? The stories of the cold and merciless White Panther? Or his own experience with the strong but gentle warrior he'd fallen for?

He was no closer to an answer when they entered the great castle.

It was the first thing in two days Gaige had shown any interest in. His expression was appreciative as they entered the great hall and he caught sight of the elaborate stone arches and the intricate carving in the ceiling. Keiran didn't want to care that Gaige seemed to like the castle...but he did.

"It was built by draegan lords over a thousand years ago," he offered. His voice, quiet though it was, echoed in the huge, open room.

Gaige looked startled at the sound. And no wonder...they'd barely said a dozen words to one another since they'd left the camp.

"It's magnificent," he said. "Is this..."

"Kellesborne."

Gaige's eyes widened. "I've heard stories of this place all my life, but wasn't aware it even still existed."

"Most don't. It's hidden by some of the most ancient of draegan magick. Only those with draegan blood can find it. So should you get any ideas of telling Byram about it, he won't be able to get here."

Gaige winced at that, and Keiran felt both a stab of guilt that he'd broken the peaceful moment with a sarcastic dig, but also perversely pleased he'd hurt Gaige with the little comment.

Stop. Now you're behaving like Jax.

"Come on."

He led the way through the great hall and up the carved, winding staircase to the second level, where several doors opened off the wide hallway. He stopped at the first one and entered. The cavernous master's suite.

He heard Gaige's soft intake of breath at the sight and again felt a jolt of pleasure that he liked what he saw.

"Does anyone live here?" Gaige asked.

"No. It's been abandoned for decades."

Gaige turned to him, shock clearly evident on his face. "How is all this possible then?"

"The same magick that protects the outside of the castle also protects the inside, preserving everything in the same condition it was in when first brought here."

"The furniture looks like new, although the style is ancient...my gods, even the bedding looks like it was just put on," Gaige murmured. "And the rooms don't smell dusty or musty like an old castle should."

"It's draegan magick at its strongest, created by some of

the most powerful draegans ever to live in this realm." Keiran slid the heavy pack off his stiff shoulders and let it fall to the floor. The large canopy bed draped in shades of blue, with a rich, silver *sabeen* fur bedspread and plump linen pillows looked all-too-appealing after long days and little sleep.

He crossed over to Gaige and worked free the knots in the rope.

Gaige brought his hands around in front of him in a halting motion, his face drawn, but he sighed softly. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. It's not staying off."

Gaige nodded, his face resigned as if he'd expected as much.

Keiran gave him a few minutes to loosen up and restore his circulation, then retied them. But this time with his hands in front. Fool though he knew he was, he didn't like seeing Gaige in pain. It was hard enough looking at the blue-green bruise on his cheek and the split in his lower lip from Jax hitting him. And he knew from listening to his ragged breathing that Gaige's ribs were paining him as well.

"Why are all the draegans living in tents in the forest instead of here?" Gaige's voice was soft. "Wouldn't this be safer for them? And certainly more comfortable?"

"This castle was built by the draegans of old, when they could easily shift between human and winged forms and were free to fly over the land. It's a dwelling created for a race of beings who could get here by air. Now, we no longer fly, except in the dark of night and only short distances. It's safe here, yes. But you made the climb up the mountain by foot

and saw how challenging it was. Think of how difficult it would be for the very young or very old to travel by the same route."

At Gaige's nod, he continued. "There's also a supply issue. Though the castle has its own spring, so water would never be a problem, any foodstuffs have to come from below. Hauling food and supplies up by foot for that many people would be a daunting if not impossible task."

Gaige walked to the enormous floor-to-ceiling glass-paned window and stared out at the land below. His brow furrowed. "What a terrible shame, to have such a beautiful place off limits to the very people whose right is to be here," he said quietly.

Keiran's heart stuttered at what sounded like genuine sentiment from the man.

You can't believe him. He'll tell you whatever he thinks you want to hear.

No. The White Panther might, but the Gaige he knew was sincere.

And how do you know which one you're with right now? How can you trust anything he says or does?

Hating this situation, angry at the confusion he felt over Gaige's actions, and empty inside from the loss of the closeness they'd shared, everything in Keiran suddenly surged to a boiling point. He jerked Gaige around so they were face to face.

"Why didn't you do it?" he demanded. Gaige's fair brows drew together. "Do what?"

"Why didn't you turn the camp over to your sorcerer?"

The man's breathing grew shallow and pain flickered in his eyes.

"Tell me, "Keiran demanded. It was the thing that bothered him the most. If Gaige was such a dangerous and heartless man, why hadn't he already turned the draegans over to Byram?

"You spent weeks with us. You learned our camp inside and out. You could have reported in to Byram at any time with the information he wanted. You could even have set up a trap for us when we went to intercept those wagons. You knew where and when we were going to strike Byram's troops. But you didn't. Why?"

Gaige's lips closed tight and, with a sadness so profound Keiran could feel it rippling off him in waves, he shook his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. Why would a man who's supposed to be the high sorcerer's trusted ally infiltrate our camp at the sorcerer's command, learn everything there was to know, but then not fulfill his mission? Jax said he heard Byram tell you you had three days to deliver my body and the camp's location. But I ask, why would someone with the reputation of the White Panther not have given the sorcerer the location of the camp right there on the spot? Or last week? Or the week before that? Why would Byram have needed to give his loyal man a deadline at all when that man, the deadly Panther, was sitting right in the middle of his prey?"

Gaige's eyes closed. His face twisted into a mask of pain

and something else Keiran couldn't quite define.

"Damn it, Gaige! Or is that even your real name?"

"It's my real name."

"You see...I don't know what's real and what isn't. I can't make sense of these two identities you have. The supposedly ruthless captain of Byram's High Guard versus the compassionate man I thought I'd come to know. Which is real? Or was the Gaige I knew nothing but a lie?"

"It wasn't all a lie," he whispered.

"Then convince me of it. Tell me why, in spite of damning evidence against you, you fought by my side two nights ago instead of setting a trap for me? Tell me why my people are still in their camp and alive if your orders were to give up their location?"

Silence was his only response.

He couldn't fathom why Gaige wouldn't answer. It was unnerving.

In a surge of anger and hurt frustration, he pushed him over to the huge bed and shoved him down onto the fur bedspread on his stomach. In a quick motion, he untied, then retied Gaige's hands to one of the bedposts.

"What are you doing?" Gaige rasped, his breathing hitched and rapid.

Keiran didn't answer. He yanked off the man's boots, then peeled down his pants.

Gaige shuddered and twisted, trying to fight, but the sight of his strong, lean, and unbearably sexy body writhing atop the silver fur only made Keiran more determined.

He jerked off his own clothing and straddled the other man's legs. Spreading the globes of Gaige's ass apart, he stroked a fingertip over the delicate skin of the tight entrance, eliciting a tremble from the man. But when he lowered his mouth and licked along his cleft, played his tongue over the sensitive pucker, then deftly probed it open, Gaige's tremble became a shudder, and a low, soft moan escaped him. As Keiran penetrated him, Gaige arched and his hips thrust back against Keiran's mouth.

Keiran backed off, letting him suffer for a moment, but oddly, not feeling pleased to do so. When he moved in again, this time he pushed just the tip of his finger into the wet, clenching ring, but didn't penetrate farther than that.

Tell me," Keiran said softly. "What are you so afraid of?" The blond head shook.

Damn the man. Keiran pressed deeper, adding a second finger, then he curved both up to rub the soft nub of spongy tissue inside.

Gaige's reaction was immediate and powerful. His ass jerked. He turned his face into the fur and Keiran heard his muffled groan.

As he continued to massage the sensitive pleasure spot, Gaige's groin began to surge into the bedcover, but Keiran put his free hand on the sculpted, flexing ass and stopped him.

"No. Don't you dare come."

If he didn't get what he wanted, then Gaige wasn't going to get what he wanted either. But the truth was...the sight of Gaige writhing beneath him and the sound of his soft,

agonized noises were making Keiran out-of-his-mind insane with a need of his own. His cock was so hard it ached.

The thought flashed through his mind that it would be so easy to fuck Gaige hard and furiously and find relief. But he forced himself to stay in control. If he took Gaige in a rage like that, he wouldn't be any better than Jax, lashing out in anger.

Whether it's slow or fast, isn't that what you're doing anyway? Lashing out at him by using sex?

Keiran winced.

Does it matter why he didn't tell the high sorcerer about you or the camp? The fact is, he had opportunities to do all kinds of damage and he didn't. Does the why matter?

Yes, damn it. It matters.

Gaige's whispered words two nights ago, just before they fell asleep, haunted him. "I love you," he'd said. Was he telling the truth, or had it been another lie to gain Keiran's trust? Keiran knew what his heart wanted to believe. But he had to know for sure. And this was the only way he could think of to bring down the man's walls.

With a ragged breath, Keiran slid his fingers free, moistened his cock with saliva, and stabbed the tip of it against Gaige's opening. Without any other lead-up or warning, he pushed in. He felt the muscles clench in reaction, but he held steady and breached them, not stopping until he was buried balls-deep in the hot, gripping tunnel.

Gaige raised his ass, forcing him deeper. They both groaned.

Keiran paused for a moment, savoring the multitude of sensations he always experienced when he penetrated this man.

"I can feel your pulse," he murmured. "When I'm inside you, I feel everything. Your heartbeat. Your breathing." He pulled out until just the crown of his prick remained, letting Gaige moan and struggle for a moment before pushing back in.

"We're so damned good together. We've shared every part of our bodies with one another. I thought we'd shared something else as well. Why won't you talk to me, Gaige?" He pulled out and stroked in again.

"You listened to all Jax's accusations and denied nothing...except that you never intended to tell Byram where the draegans were hiding and that you weren't going to kill me."

Keiran thrust into him again with more force. "But since then, you've remained silent. Not defending yourself. Not asking me what I plan to do with you."

Another, even harder thrust.

"Do you care so little what happens to you?"

"It doesn't matter," Gaige rasped, his voice thick with need, but beneath it, Keiran heard defeat.

"Why doesn't it matter?"

"All that matters is that the draegans are safe. You'll make sure of that."

Keiran's heart twisted and the pain was so intense it stole his breath for several seconds. "Why do you care?" he

demanded when he could speak again. "You're High Guard. Byram's trusted man. Why do you care if the draegans are safe?"

Gaige was silent again, shaking his head.

"Damn you!" Anger coursed through Keiran. He fucked Gaige hard now, taking out his frustrations and hurt on him, knowing it was wrong, but unable to stop. Gaige rocked against him and met his thrusts as if he were exorcising his own demons with the brutal sex.

The sounds of their guttural cries and panting filled the room. Keiran was close to coming...so close. He knew from Gaige's half-sobbed moans that he, too, was on the edge.

"Do you want to come?" Keiran growled against his ear. "Yes."

"Then answer my question."

"No...it doesn't matter."

"It matters to me, you stubborn ass. Why won't you talk to me? Do you hate me that much?"

Gaige turned his head to look at Keiran and his blue eyes were alive with shock...and passion...and sadness. It was the first time he'd made eyes contact since Keiran had tied him to the bed. "I could never hate you."

Keiran grabbed a handful of blond hair and pulled Gaige's head back, then kissed him. It was angry, full of demanding tongue and nipping teeth. When he pulled away, Gaige's lips were red and swollen from the punishment...and he'd never looked more delicious.

"Trust me," he told Gaige.

"I do. But you can't trust me."

"I want to, damn it."

Gaige grunted at a particularly hard thrust in his ass, and his eyes closed.

"I'm a draegan...I can do this all afternoon and into the night if I need to. I'm going to fuck you until you talk to me."

Gaige grimaced and a soft whimper escaped him. But he didn't speak.

Frustrated, Keiran pushed himself up and ripped off Gaige's shirt.

But the sight of the long, pink, puckered scars brought him up short.

My gods. They were scars from a lashing. Recent, within the last few months. Frowning, he remembered feeling them with his hands...that first night in the cave, and then again in his tent two nights ago. But in the dark or even in the candle-light he hadn't realized how many there were, and hadn't recognized them as marks from a whip.

He stopped moving. "How did you get these?" he asked, brushing his palms over them. "And tell me the truth."

Gaige sighed. He was quiet for several long moments, long enough Keiran feared he'd stay silent on this, too. But finally, in a resigned voice, he answered. "A few months ago, Byram had two of the children from the village in Thrythgar arrested. They stole a piece of bread because they were starving. For this monumental crime, their sentence was to each have a hand cut off."

Keiran sucked in a horrified breath at the barbaric penalty.

"I was supposed to deliver them for their punishment, but instead I freed them and sent them into hiding. I spent seven days locked in the dungeon and received twenty strokes for my 'treason."

Something inside Keiran's chest broke free and the crushing weight that had been with him since Jax had barged in and made his accusations eased. *This* was the man he'd grown to know. And finally he understood. The compassion Gaige had shown in the draegan camp wasn't the charade at all. Instead, for whatever reason he felt he had to do it, the cool control of the High Guard captain was the real charade that hid the true-hearted man beneath.

Keiran's body surged into motion again, this time driven by the need to reconnect with the lover he'd shut out two days ago. He began to move in slow, sensual strokes, plunging deep, sliding out, and moving deep again.

"You're a good man, Gaige Rizik," he whispered.

Gaige shook his head.

"Yes, you are. You're a good man. A worthy man. You can continue to punish yourself for your deception if you feel you must, but I won't any longer."

Gaige's chest caught in what sounded liked a sob.

"Maybe one day you'll tell me the whole story of how you came to be in the draegan camp, and why the man I know is nothing like the stories of the ruthless White Panther."

Keiran increased his tempo, savoring every sweet inch of Gaige's hot passage squeezing and coaxing him closer to release.

"Come with me," he whispered. "Come with me now..."

Gaige's ass began to move as he pumped his groin into the bed.

"That's it, love...fly with me."

Keiran's orgasm hit him in deep pulses of ecstasy, and as he bathed his lover's insides with his offering, he felt Gaige shudder and convulse with his own.

Both of them limp with exhaustion that Keiran suspected was as much emotional as physical, Gaige sagged into the bed, and he slumped on top of Gaige's warm body.

"I'm in love with you," Gaige whispered, his voice ragged with emotion.

Keiran's breath caught at the softly spoken words.

"I didn't tell Byram about you or the camp because I'm in love with you...and because I've grown to care about your people, too. None of you were what I'd been expecting. And I just..."

"You just what?" Keiran coaxed, moisture burning in his eyes.

"I wanted to stay." His voice was raw with pain. "All my life, I've felt empty. I hated the person I was, and I was everything the stories said...hunting Byram's law-breakers with disdain...cold, unfeeling. At least that's what I made people believe. Except I did feel it. All of it. All those years I kept everything hidden because Byram doesn't tolerate weakness, you see. So I was a good soldier and showed none.

"But then I came to your camp, and with you and the other draegans I discovered I didn't have to keep everything locked

up inside me. I wanted it to last...that feeling of belonging. I knew in the end, though, it wouldn't. I knew I could never stay because my past had already tainted any future I might have, and because as soon as you found out who I really was..."

"We'd do exactly what we did," Keiran finished, sick to his stomach at the way Jax, and he, had treated the man. Hadn't he kept his own secrets from Gaige?

Like the joining.

Yes, like the joining. He opened his mouth to tell Gaige now, to get it all out in the open and share his surprised observations, but then closed it. How did he explain such a thing? And was this the time to turn Gaige's world upside down even more? No. Probably not.

He slid out of Gaige, found his knife, and cut the ropes binding him. For several long moments Gaige didn't move, aside from letting his arms fall to the bed.

Keiran lay down next to him and stroked long strands of soft blond hair off his sweat-sticky, flushed cheek.

Finally, with a soft groan, Gaige rolled onto his side facing Keiran. His eyes were still turbulent with raw emotion.

Keiran kissed him, slowly, lingeringly. "Stay," he whispered.

# CHAPTER 8

Gaige's skin crawled at the sight of the foreboding gray battlements of Thrythgar rising like unforgiving stone war gods against the backdrop of the double moons. The larger white moon, Halla, was nearly full, but disappearing on the horizon. The smaller yellow one, Ell, hung suspended above the stronghold, but was only a thin sickle.

*Good.* Once Halla set, it would be nearly dark and he'd still have a few hours before dawn to accomplish his mission.

He'd made good time. Going down the mountain, even at night, had been much faster than going up it had been. And once he was down and had reached the East Road, he'd run. Hard. As if the beasts of *hel* were after him. And in a way,

they were. The clock was ticking. He'd have to move swiftly.

He had to thank Keiran for taking him to Kellesborne. The beautiful draegan castle sat closer to Thrythgar than he was sure Byram, or any of the human rulers who'd come before, had ever realized.

Keiran.

Each time Gaige thought of him, it was like the plunge of a blade through his heart. He'd left Keiran asleep in the bed at Kellesborne. With moonlight flooding through the large window, imbuing everything in the bedroom with a silver glow, Keiran, stretched out atop the rich *sabeen* coverlet, had looked beautiful and regal.

Gaige knew he'd never forget that sight. Never forget the face, the voice, the touch of the man he'd fallen in love with. And perhaps one day Keiran would be able to remember some of the good things about him as well. He could only hope. He'd never see him again to know for sure.

Once he'd completed his mission here at Thrythgar, he was leaving Velensperia proper. There was no place for him in this land any longer. He'd be a criminal, forever on the run from Byram and his soldiers for his treason. He couldn't shelter with the draegans and bring Byram's wrath down on them more than it already was. Not only that, but there would always be draegans who would never trust him because of his past.

And Keiran? If he stayed, Keiran, gods love him, would be true and honorable and would defend him to the death he suspected. But to the rest of the draegans, his loyalty to Gaige

would be seen as a weakness. That was something Gaige could never accept. And so he'd said his silent goodbyes to his sleeping lover and left. The sleeping draught he'd given Keiran, mixed from some of the herbs he carried in his belt pouch and placed in the flask of wine Keiran had drunk from, should keep him out long enough for Gaige to finish his task here and disappear.

"Stay," Keiran had said.

But Gaige had known then, as he always had, that it was impossible.

\* \* \*

As the first faint light of dawn caressed the horizon, Gaige sighed in relief and, with a sense of accomplishment, watched as the last group of families disappeared into the depths of the Crystallian Caves.

The caves, located in the jagged range of mountains just behind the stronghold, were an endless maze of tunnels and passages. The perfect place to lose oneself to avoid Byram's soldiers. Gaige had selected the strongest men and women to lead the group. He'd provided them with a map to the other side and a suggestion that they stay hidden in the caves for a while and then leave in small groups to find sanctuary in the towns of the eastern realms of Velensperia.

The people in the village of Thrythgar held no love for Byram. At first, recognizing Gaige as the captain of the High Guard, in spite of his civilian attire, they'd been suspicious of his directive for the families with children to go into hiding.

But then an old woman who worked as a laundress in the stronghold itself told them she'd seen Gaige whipped for freeing the two village children months before and how he'd helped that family escape. That had turned the people in his favor. And so moving surprisingly faster than he might have thought they could, the families had gathered enough supplies to last a month and followed him to the caves.

He hoped it would be enough. He'd give anything to be a draegan and be able to work some kind of protective shielding magick to ensure the families' safety and keep Byram's troops out of the caves. But the villagers were smart and tough and had the spirit of those who, tired of being repressed, carried deep wells of strength inside them.

Gaige took the time to hide evidence of the families' passing in the forest before he returned to the village. He was too recognizable here to walk openly, so he pulled up the hood of the cloak one of the villagers had given him, tugging it low over his eyes, and in the gray morning light, traversed the muddy backstreets to a ramshackle stable he knew of. It would, he decided, provide sufficient cover for the day. Once the sun set, he'd obtain a horse and supplies, then put Thrythgar and Byram behind him.

\* \* \*

It had been a good plan. But just before sunset, he was awakened when the stable door was kicked open. Before he could even lay a hand on one of his weapons, Gaige was surrounded by Byram's soldiers—his own men—swords

drawn.

No doubt someone in the village had ratted him out. Probably one of Byram's many "spies," as he liked to call them. Which meant some unfortunate soul who was promised cash or riches for information, but after arriving at the stronghold and spilling his story, was led off to what was often referred to as "the treasure room," where he was told he'd be able to pick out a valuable item to keep. Instead, once in the room, his only treasure would be a quick death. The bodies of these poor unfortunates were burned in the castle incinerator and other prospective spies were told their predecessors had taken their riches and left to travel the lands.

"Let's talk," Gaige said, raising his hands in a gesture of peace at the soldiers.

"Too late for talk. The sorcerer's put a warrant out for your arrest," a young, cocky wannabe who'd been a pain in Gaige's ass from the moment he'd arrived at the stronghold said, a smirk on his face. Sisk was his name. He craved power, and Gaige suspected he'd been told by Byram that if he brought Gaige in, he'd have it.

Before Gaige could open his mouth to speak again, someone from behind hit him over the head with a heavy object. Black stars flashed behind his eyes just long enough for him to realize he was about to pass out.

He came to as he was being dragged into the torch-lit dungeon and dumped on the stone floor. His wrists had been chained together, so he wasn't able to reach out and cushion the fall.

"Well...well...well."

Byram's voice. His black-booted feet moved in a circle around Gaige. Gaige tried to look up at him, but a boot—not Byram's, someone else's—was planted on the back of his head and shoved his face against the floor.

"The prodigal son returns. And where, might I ask, is my body, Panther? The one you were supposed to bring me...of the dead draegan leader?"

Gaige remained silent, damning the sorcerer to *hel* in his thoughts.

"What? No quick-thinking response for me?" He tsked. "I'm rather disappointed. You've been so clever at making up stories, I was looking forward to hearing another. Are you certain you don't have the body hidden in the woods and you need me to come with you to see it? And once there, your new draegan friends will leap out of hiding and smite me down?"

If only.

He circled again. "Come, tell me! Surely you had a plan when you came here. Something besides sending the families with children off into the caves to hide."

Gaige's heart stopped beating, or so it felt in his chest. But then it suddenly resumed with heavy, painful thuds. He could only hope the families had been able to hide in time and he hadn't sent all those innocents to their deaths.

"Pull him up!" Byram commanded.

Gaige was dragged to his feet by what he was now able to see was a beefy giant of a man dressed in black leather. His pock-marked face and shaved head only added to his imposing

appearance. The brute was Byram's jailor and torture master...the same man who'd lashed the stripes into Gaige's back months ago.

And then he saw his father, standing with a sneer on his lean, handsome face, not far, as usual, from Byram.

"Come to see the show?" Gaige snapped at his elder. "You must be delighted at this turn of events. Are you going to wield the lash yourself this time? Oh, no, wait...you would never have the balls for that."

General Rizik's sneer turned into a feral baring of the teeth. "You impudent piece of half-breed filth." The general turned to look at Byram. "I told you he'd turn out to be nothing but trouble. As deceitful and tainted as his mother. You should have let me wrap the birth cord around his neck and strangle him like I wanted. Then we could have been rid of both him and the filthy whore who conceived him."

Gaige stiffened. What in *hel* was his father talking about?

"Now, how could I have let you do that when I knew he'd grow up to be this beautiful creature? How could he not, with the combination of yours and his draegan mother's exceptional looks."

"What?" Gaige gasped, staring between his father and the sorcerer. *His draegan mother?* 

Byram leveled a look of affected concern at him. "Oh, dear. What an indelicate time this was to drop such a bombshell on you. But don't mind your father. He's always been bitter that his favorite pet was less than honest with him about her ancestry. She fell in love with him, you see, but

knew if he ever found out she was draegan, he'd kill her. So she let herself get pregnant, thinking that if your father ever found out her true nature, a child would bind him to her."

Byram gave a stage-drama sigh. "Well, alas, your father didn't take it well. He found out the truth during your birth, since draegans do things a bit...er...differently. He wanted to kill you both, but lucky for you"—he gave Gaige a condescending smile—"I stepped in and saved you. I have no love for the draegans, mind you, but your mother was a beautiful creature, as is your father, and I couldn't resist seeing what would come of their lust."

Gaige's lungs struggled for air. A red haze began to move across his vision. He tried to jerk away from the jailor, wanting nothing more than to lunge at the two men watching him, but the meaty hands holding him only dug deeper into his flesh and refused to let go.

"You...sick...fucking...bastards," Gaige spat.

His father glared back at him. "You've never been worth a thing to me. I only kept you because the high sorcerer ordered me to. You're nothing more than a low, dirty whore like your mother."

"Now, now, gentlemen. Let's save the name calling for another time."

Byram nodded at the jailor. "Tie him up."

The brute dragged Gaige to a low stone plinth in the center of the room from which two darker stone pillars rose. Gaige tried not to gag at the sight of dried blood and other horrors on the stone. Metal rings were embedded in the pillars, one near

the base and one just above head level on each. The chains holding his wrists together were removed one at a time and he was tied spread eagle, his arms stretched out and above his head, and his ankles to the base of the columns.

Byram approached. "Anything yet you'd like to share with me? The name of a certain draegan leader? The location of his camp?"

Gaige gave him a stony stare. Inside, he was still reeling from the shock of his heritage.

Byram let out another one of his dramatic sighs. And then a smarmy smile that could only be described as depraved curved his thin lips. "Ah, well. In truth, I was rather hoping it would turn out this way." Without taking his eyes off Gaige he snapped another order at his leather-clad beast: "Strip him. I want to see what I'm getting."

The beefy jailor pulled a knife from the array of weapons on his belt and, in a few quick slashes, Gaige's clothes were in tatters on the floor. The cool air in the dungeon immediately seeped into his skin and bones, causing gooseflesh to rise.

He swallowed back bile as Byram stepped up onto the plinth and circled him, practically salivating over him.

"Mmmm...well, most intriguing indeed. Your son carries many of your traits, my old friend," Byram said to Gaige's father

Gaige didn't even *want* to know what that comment implied, or the ones earlier, referring to his father's beauty. Ugh.

"Although...hmm..." The sorcerer paused directly in front

of Gaige and examined his groin with a critical eye. "I must say, he's got you beat here. Even at rest, the boy's hung like a stallion. I'm not enamored of the pelt you've let grow," he said, now addressing Gaige. "We're not animals, after all. Although, I confess, the blond is unique and has a certain aesthetic appeal."

Byram's hot hand wrapped around Gaige's softened cock and squeezed. Gaige gritted his teeth and refused to show a reaction. His cock, however, proved traitorous by growing semi-hard at the stimulus.

Byram noticed and chuckled.

Damn it all. No, no, no, Gaige thought at his organ.

Still squeezing his shaft in a grip that was growing tighter by the second, the high sorcerer leaned in close to him and whispered against his ear, "I've waited a long time for this. You were such a beautiful youth, so tempting. But I was patient. You see...I prefer men to boys." Another squeeze. He licked Gaige's ear, sending a shudder through him. "I'm going to enjoy breaking you. By the time I'm done, you're going to be begging me to touch you. And then...you're going to tell me everything I want to know."

"Fuck you!"

Byram's other hand gripped Gaige's balls and put firm, squeezing pressure on them as well, causing Gaige to have to fight the sudden, powerful urge to upturn the contents of his stomach..

"No, dear boy. I'm sorry, but that's not on the agenda. However, before the night is over, you might convince me to

fuck you."

Gaige jerked his head to the side, away from the sorcerer's face.

Byram only laughed. He did, however, unhand Gaige. For the moment. He stepped down off the plinth and clapped his hands. "Bring me my tools," he told the ever-silent jailor. "And then leave us. See that we're not disturbed."

A cart with several dozen items on it was pushed up near Byram, then, with a brief nod, the beefy man left the room, slamming the heavy wooden door behind him.

Byram threw off the flowing purple cloak he wore, rolled up the sleeves of his black silken shirt and, with a smile, approached the cart.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gaige saw numerous metal probes in assorted lengths and thicknesses, a thin black whip with small metal beads woven into it, a half-dozen clamps, pieces of thin wire, several knives, candles, and other metal bits and pieces, the purpose of which he didn't even want to contemplate.

"Now then, where shall we start?" Byram picked up one of the probes and held it up to study it in the torchlight, making sure Gaige saw it, too. It was longer than Gaige's hand and so thin it almost looked like a giant sewing needle.

Sickness churned like a boiling tar pit in his gut.

Byram met his gaze, his dark eyes filled with deviant delight. He approached and stepped back up on the plinth, an unholy smile on his face. His hand wrapped once more around Gaige's cock.

"Tell me, my beautiful panther...has anyone ever shown you the fine line between pain...and pleasure?" Byram's voice was low, almost seductive if it had belonged to anyone else but him. "I believe I mentioned to you once that I know many ways to make a man scream. And tonight"—his smile broadened—"you *are* going to scream."

Gaige's stomach dropped out from under him. *Gods help me.* 

\* \* \*

Exhausted, but driven by pure fear-fed adrenaline, Keiran opened a doorway in the magick protective screen that surrounded the perimeter of the camp, and took off at a run looking for Jax.

At nearly midnight, few people were up. Both moons were in the sky tonight, with the larger one, nearly full, giving off so much light it was almost as bright as daytime.

He found Jax and Marta just coming off patrol duty.

"Keiran!" Marta's green eyes were instantly filled with concern. "What is it?"

Jax's expression, on the other hand, hardened with suspicion and a hint of anger. "Where's the spy?"

"Shush!" Keiran warned him. "Not where anyone else can hear. Come on. I need to talk to you."

The two walked with him to Keiran's tent.

Marta pulled out a stool and pressed Keiran onto it with one hand, while handing him a canteen of water with the other. "Sit. Drink," she ordered, taking on the motherly tone

Keiran had heard her use with her boys. "You look beat."

He didn't argue and swallowed heavily from the canteen.

"Are you going to give me a dirty look if I ask you again where the spy is?" Jax said.

Keiran leveled a direct gaze at him. "Gaige is gone."

"I told you! And you took him right there, so close to Thrythgar he could practically shout down the mountain to Byram."

"Don't start. He didn't leave to betray us to Byram—and before you interrupt me to demand how I can be so sure, you're just going to have to trust me when I say I *am* sure."

"Of course he's not going to betray us," Marta said, matter-of-factly. "Jax filled me in on who Gaige really is," she told Keiran. "And I'd like to weigh in and say I don't agree with his assessment. Gaige will keep our secrets."

"Listen to yourselves!" Jax growled. "He's gone. Where in *hel* do you think he went off to?"

"That's why I'm here," Keiran said, turning his gaze back on Jax. "We arrived at Kellesborne yesterday afternoon. When I woke up early this morning he was gone. I searched for him, tried to find some hint of his path, but saw nothing. He didn't want me follow or find him."

He didn't mention the sleeping draught Gaige had given him. That would just infuriate Jax more and further convince him Gaige had snuck out to do him harm. And Keiran knew that wasn't the truth. He suspected Gaige had done it for the opposite reason...to protect him. He didn't know how or why he thought that. It was mostly a feeling in his gut. But he'd

learned that with Gaige, his gut feelings were usually correct.

"Something drove him to leave," he told them.

"Like his duty to the sorcerer?"

"No. Something else. He was scared of something."

Jax snorted. "He should have been. Us."

"Damn it, Jax, enough. Tell me again what you heard when you saw Gaige talking to Byram with the seeing stone the other morning."

"I told you...Byram said he had three days to bring him your dead body and tell him the location of the draegan camp so he could kill us."

"And what was Gaige's response."

Jax shrugged negligently. Too negligently.

"Damn it, Jax, what was his response? Did Gaige say he'd do it?"

"He's the sorcerer's lackey. What do you think he said?" Jax snapped.

Keiran had known the other man long enough and well enough to known when he was lying.

"There's something you didn't tell me. Something in the exchange you witnessed between Byram and Gaige."

"I told you everything."

Keiran rose so fast the stool fell to the floor. He wrapped a hand around Jax's neck and shoved him up against the thick pine pole in the center of the tent. Jax had grown silent. His eyes flashed with anger, but also shock at Keiran's actions.

Keiran pressed his hand a bit harder against the man's neck. "My patience with you is at an end. I know you're lying.

What—else—did—Byram—tell—Gaige?"

For a brief moment Keiran was shocked at the intensity of the raw hatred that burned in Jax's eyes, but the larger man quickly hooded it. He gave Keiran a quick, bland smile. "Okay...you don't have to play rough. It wasn't anything important anyway."

"I'll be the judge of that. Tell me the rest."

Marta, who'd stayed silent throughout the power play, moved up to stand next to Keiran. The scowl she gave Jax was surprisingly fierce.

"Byram told him he had three days to get him what he wanted—"

"We know that part," Marta interjected.

Keiran tightened his grip, causing the man to choke.

"Fine," Jax coughed out when Keiran let up. "Byram said something to him about treason and some punishment the White Panther had been given a few months ago. A lashing."

Remembering all too well the scars Gaige bore and how he'd gotten them, Keiran winced. "And..."

"And he said if he didn't bring him what he wanted, Byram would make him pay. He said he wouldn't kill your lover boy, instead, he implied he'd torture him. Then he said he knew how much Gaige cared about the village children and if Gaige failed him, he'd kill them."

Keiran released Jax as the horrible truth became clear.

"Oh, my gods," he said. "The brave stupid fool. He went back to save the kids."

He began stuffing supplies into a pack.

Marta glared at Jax. "Has anyone told you lately you're a self-serving bastard? You don't deserve to walk on the same ground as either of those two men."

Keiran was already headed through the door.

"Where are you going?" Jax demanded.

"To find him before Byram kills him."

"You idiot! He's not worth it. You can't—"

There was a pop, a grunt, and then a heavy thud as something large hit the ground.

Keiran stopped several paces away from the tent and turned to look back. Marta was just coming out the doorway, brushing her hands together as if cleaning off a bit of dirt.

"Did you do what I think you did?"

"Yes. And it felt damned good." Then her expression sobered. "You're going to fly?" It was said without censure.

"It's dark. I can be in Thrythgar in a few hours by wing."

"The moon's bright tonight. It won't set for another few hours. And stay mindful of the nets. Iann believes it *is* possible to fight a Nycto if you draw one."

"I'll be careful. And gods willing, I won't have to worry about Iann's theories."

"I'm sure Gaige is still alive, Keiran. You find him and get him out of there."

Keiran's chest squeezed painfully. "That's my plan."

He knew, though, that if Gaige were in Byram's hands, there were much worse things than death.

## CHAPTER 9

Keiran returned to the ground and his human form in a clearing in the forest near the stronghold. He suspected Byram would either have a net set up around the stronghold or archers whose job it was to protect the sky. In either case, although it would take a bit longer, it was more important to get inside alive, which meant going in by foot.

He quickly pulled clothes out of his pack and slipped them on, along with his belt and weapons. Then he hefted the pack onto his shoulders.

He didn't bother checking the village first to see if Gaige had been there or if maybe he'd gotten away unscathed. Again he had a powerful sensation in his gut that Gaige was in the

stronghold. Keiran closed his eyes and let his draegan senses fine tune. Yes, he was in the stronghold...and in pain.

His eyes snapped open and he took off at a run.

It was the joining that was allowing him to feel Gaige's presence nearby. He'd realized it the moment he landed in the woods. This was no ordinary gut feel. He was being drawn to Gaige—to his mate.

It took longer than he would have liked to get into the gray stone fortress. He had to stop several times to throw up a quick screen to hide himself. Once inside, he found it easier to move around. With less than an hour until dawn, most of the fortress was quiet, except for clatters and clangs coming from the kitchens.

The dungeon was in the second and lowest basement of the stronghold. No longer feeling patient or compassionate, Keiran took out the two guards near the main door without hesitation and shoved them into one of what could only be torture chambers.

Gaige's pain was getting stronger and Keiran didn't know if it was because he was getting closer to him, which was heightening the sensation, or if it was because Gaige's pain was getting worse. He was new to this joining thing, damn it. He didn't know how it worked exactly. All he cared about was finding Gaige. *Now*. And getting him out of this *hel* hole.

He began tearing doors open in earnest to find him. But none of them revealed the man he was desperate to see.

His heart in this throat, he turned to stare around the large main room.

Where are you? Gods...where are you?

Had he missed something? But, no, he'd checked all the rooms. And yet he still felt Gaige nearby. It was a like buzz under his skin, driving him mad for wanting.

As if he'd received divine intervention, his eyes were drawn to the floor. And there, in one corner of the main chamber, was a wooden trapdoor.

He ran to it, found a metal ring embedded in the floor, and yanked. The flicker of torchlight burned below him and he saw a ladder attached to the opening. He climbed down and found himself in small ante-chamber with a closed door at the end. The lock on it was sealed with magick. Keiran pressed a shaking hand against it, muttered a brief sentence in draega, and the magick fell away. The door swung open.

All the torches in this room except one had been put out. But Keiran could make out enough detail to be certain this was where the down and dirty torture work took place. This room was made for inflicting pain, from the tools hanging on the walls, to the assorted chains and devices, to the smell of dried blood and body fluids. It assaulted his sensitive nostrils like a plague.

And then he saw the pale form hanging between two pillars.

"Oh, gods...Gaige!" Keiran ran to him.

He was tied spread eagle and nude. His beautiful body bore more welts and bruises than Keiran had ever seen on any one being in his life. His head lolled against his chest, his blond hair draped over his face.

"Fucking...evil...bastard!"

Keiran dropped his pack and stepped up onto the stone platform. He could barely see what he was doing as he approached because of the hot stinging moisture welling in his eyes. "Gaige?" He brushed the hair off his lover's face, shocked to find it untouched except for the fading bruise Jax had given him. That Byram had spared his face and nothing else was a sick kind of irony.

Gaige responded with a faint groan, but nothing more.

"Gaige...it's Keiran. Gods...what have they done to you?" He pressed a kiss to the man's forehead. His cheek. His lips.

He ran his hands very lightly down Gaige's body, not desiring to hurt him more, but wanting to check for any broken bones before he cut him down. He found none that were obvious, but discovered something else...dried remains of semen were stuck to Gaige's abdomen, his groin, his legs and... Keiran's eyes squeezed closed. More dried spunk covered the pale globes of his ass.

He eased back around to Gaige's front, took both his cheeks between his hands and kissed him again through his tears. "Oh, gods, baby...I'm so sorry this happened. So sorry I didn't get here sooner. Let's get you out of here."

\* \* \*

The sound of a familiar voice stirred in Gaige's dream. Familiar and...his heart tightened... beloved.

"Keiran?" he whispered.

"I'm here, love."

He felt the comforting heat of hands on his face. Not hands wanting to hurt him, to squeeze or probe or stimulate him for all the wrong reasons. These were gentle.

This was a good dream, he decided.

"It's not a dream. It's real."

He felt lips against his, nuzzling, warm. They felt good. He wanted it to go on and on. The kiss was so real, for a few seconds it made him forget the ache in his arms, the pains over and inside his body. But it ended too soon.

"Open your eyes, baby. Open them and come back to me."

Wanting to believe, Gaige's eyelids fluttered open, gritty and heavy. A strong, handsome face with damp silver-gray eyes framed in soft, thick, dark hair swam into view.

"Keiran?"

There was that smile again that did funny things to his insides. "Hi."

"You came."

"I came. I'm going to cut you down. I won't let you fall. Lean on me, okay?"

Gaige wasn't sure when he finally decided this was really happening, but if he hadn't already, the feel of Keiran's solid, warm body supporting him as first his arms and then legs were freed, brought him firmly back to reality.

And the reality was that he hurt. And he was cold. And he'd never, ever been more grateful for anything in his life than feeling Keiran's arms around him.

Keiran lowered him to the floor as gently as if he were a babe. He brushed the hair off Gaige's face, smiled at him

through red-rimmed eyes, and pressed another light kiss to his lips. "I'll be right back."

And he was. With a damp cloth and a blanket.

"I'm sorry...the water was cold. But it looked clean." He worked the cloth over Gaige's body in soft strokes, cleaning off the remains of... Gaige shuddered. He didn't want to think about it. And bless him, Keiran must have seen it, which was why he was bathing Gaige like a child.

By the time he finished, Gaige was shivering.

Keiran wrapped him in the blanket. "I'm sorry."

Gaige sensed he didn't just mean about the cold water. He heard, "I'm sorry I wasn't here. Sorry I didn't get here sooner. So sorry this happened to you," in Keiran's voice. He didn't know how he knew it, but he did.

"You shouldn't have come here." Gaige's voice was cracked and hoarse. "He wants you dead. If he finds you..."

"He won't."

"If something happened to you... Your people need you, Keiran."

His palm came up to cup Gaige's cheek. "I know. But *I* need *you*."

"I didn't tell him anything."

"I know."

"He...asked." Demanded, tortured, stroked me, then tortured some more...and he made me scream. A surge of loathing and sick embarrassment rose in him at the memories. Gods...he made me scream and scream, until I just wanted to die.

Keiran stroked his hair, pressed a light kiss to his lips, but his words when he spoke were thick with fury, as if he'd heard every word Gaige had just thought. "He'll never touch you again. Never."

He dug in his pack on the floor, drew out a small glass bottle, and pulled off the stopper. "Here. This isn't pleasant, and when it wears off you're going to really feel like shit, even more than you do now. But I need you to be able to walk out of here. Can you do that for me?"

Gaige knew he'd do anything for this man. "Give it to me."

He swallowed the viscous liquid and gagged, but managed to keep it down. "Ugh! He shuddered. "That's awful."

"I know." Keiran's tone was apologetic. "I really know it is. But it works. It's like being shot with adrenaline. You'll start to feel it any moment now."

"Oh... Oh, gods!" Gaige clutched his stomach, where a hot buzz had begun. It slowly spread through his body...his arms, hands, fingers, his legs, feet, toes. His cock began to twitch. His head not only cleared, he suddenly felt as if he could see the dust on the far wall, and hear the scurry of mouse feet outside. "I...damn..." His skin became so sensitive the scritch of the wooly blanket against it was suddenly driving him mad. He threw it off. "Can't...can't stand the feel of it."

Keiran stood, stripped off his own shirt, pulled it down over Gaige's head and helped him get his arms into it.

"Better?"

"Yes. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

His breath was warm. Gaige had the sudden urge to kiss him. He did, shocking himself at his odd reactions to the potent contents of the little vial. Keiran kissed him back, parting Gaige's lips, then pulling away too soon.

"We have to get out of here. That little brew's not going to last long. And it'll be sunrise soon. People will be stirring."

Gaige nodded. He started to stand, groaning in spite of the energy boost, but then his eyes focused on the dark circle on the floor around the plinth. He sank back down, his heart aching. "You go. I can't."

"What?" Keiran crouched in front of him and picked up his hands, massaging Gaige's fingers between his. "What is it?"

"He's used magick to bind me here." He pointed out the circle. "You can come and go, but I can't leave the circle."

Keiran eyed it, lines creasing his forehead. He stood and moved to the circle. Holding out his hand, palm down, he uttered several words in a language Gaige didn't recognize. "Damn it." He tried again. The lines on his forehead deepened.

"I didn't notice the circle until you mentioned it, but when I tune in to it, I can feel it. I can't get it down, though. Do you remember what kind of a spell he used? Do you remember any of the words?"

Gaige frowned as he thought about it. Byram hadn't done it until he was leaving for the night. "As a precaution, in case you feel heroic," he'd said. But Gaige had been so far gone at that point, so fucking numb emotionally and physically, he'd

barely roused at the words. "Damn it all." His chest tightened at feeling so useless. "I can't remember."

"It's okay." Keiran sank down in front of him again. "Relax. Try to clear your mind."

Gaige tried. And a few of Byram's words came back to him. Then a few more. "He sealed it with...gods damn it, what did he say? He said he was sealing it with something that couldn't be found here in this stronghold, so there was no worry of me ever getting free. The word was am...amar..."

"Amorensia?" Keiran asked.

"Yes. That was it. But if whatever it is can't be found here in the stronghold, then..."

"Oh, it's here." Keiran's gaze was warm and so intense it nearly stole Gaige's breath away. He slid an arm around Gaige's waist and help him to stand. "It's okay...lean on me if you need to."

When they reached the edge of the circle, Keiran stopped. He pulled his long knife free from his belt and picked up Gaige's right hand. He turned it over so it was palm up, then pressed a gentle kiss against it. Once again Gaige's breath hitched.

"Do you remember when I told you I wanted to be with you every night?"

Gaige nodded, his pulse thudding slow and hard in his veins.

"I really meant that." His voice was soft and his gaze filled with emotion. Then, in a swift motion, he dragged the blade of his knife across Gaige's palm.

Gaige hissed, but didn't try to pull away. He didn't know why...it hurt. He should have. But he didn't. He trusted Keiran, and had a strange sense that whatever he was doing was right and meant to be.

Keiran held Gaige's hand out, letting the flow of blood fall onto the circle. As it did, he murmured words in draega that Gaige had no hope of understanding.

"Keep it there," Keiran told him, letting go of Gaige's hand.

He did. But he wasn't expecting Keiran to hand him the knife and hold out his own right palm.

Gaige looked at him, and when Keiran nodded, he took the knife. It felt awkward in his left hand, but he figured he could hold it well enough as long as accuracy wasn't too important. But first, he felt compelled to follow Keiran's lead. He lifted his lover's hand and pressed a kiss into it. Then he got a good grasp on the knife handle and slid the tip of the blade across Keiran's palm.

Keiran held his hand out next to Gaige's and let the blood flow onto the circle. Again he spoke words in draega. Then he grasped Gaige's hand with his own and pressed them together, palm to palm, locking their fingers together, merging their blood. He spoke again in soft syllables.

Their gazes met and held, and a strange sensation ran through Gaige. Unlike the weird and not wholly pleasant buzz he'd gotten and still had from whatever was in Keiran's little bottle, this was different. It was a like a smooth current of warm honey flowing through him, into Keiran, then back into

him. It was sexual...and not. More like an amalgam of all the emotions Keiran had ever caused him to experience wrapped up in one.

An odd noise caught Gaige's attention. He and Keiran both looked down at the circle, which was smoking.

Keiran smiled. "We can go now."

He dug in his pack and pulled out a spare shirt. But instead of putting it on, he ripped two long strips from the bottom of it, using one to bind up Gaige's hand and finally his own. Then he wrapped an arm around Gaige's waist again, for which Gaige was grateful. The pepper-upper brew was being to wane a bit. He was already starting to feel a little shaky again.

"You're sure I'm not going to get zapped? Or turned into a toad or something?"

Keiran's grin was infectious. "I promise." They stepped across the circle...and Gaige was still alive. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Keiran, meanwhile, was eyeing him up and down.

"What?"

"You look pretty damned sexy in nothing but my shirt."

He looked down and saw that the soft, white, linen shirt hit him mid-thigh. For the first time all night, Gaige felt himself smile.

"Come on, let's go. We need to get out of here before we have company and before your adrenaline surge fades.

"What was it that you said? When you cut our hands."

Keiran's gaze softened and his eyes filled with warmth

again. "I'll tell you later. I promise. Right now, I want you safe and out of here."

Gaige couldn't agree more.

But their luck ran out the moment they emerged through the trap door. The leather-bound brute was just entering the main chamber. He saw them, his eyes widened, and he ran for them. Keiran, in a shockingly smooth move, lunged for the jailor and ran him through with his long knife. The big man's eyes widened in shock, he gave an odd sort of gurgle, then he dropped to the floor.

Keiran pulled his blade free.

"Time to go."

Gaige wanted to run. Everything in him was urging it. *Go*, *go*. *Move faster!* But his abused body just wouldn't cooperate. Not even with the herbal boost.

They were entering the main hall when Gaige thought of something. He stopped, and Keiran nearly had his arm jerked out of the socket since it was still around Gaige's waist.

"What is it?" he whispered, concern etched on his face.

"I don't know why I didn't think of this before."

"What?"

"Byram's grimoire. It's not just his spell book. He writes everything in it. Like a...a daily journal. I've only ever seen him writing in the one book. It has to be magick to be able to hold everything. We need to get it."

"Gaige...we have to get you out of here. That stuff I gave you..."

"I know. I already feel it wearing off."

This caused an expression of raw fear on Keiran's face. "We have to go."

"No. Keiran, we're here right now. Gods know when any of us might ever get a chance at this again. We need that book. It might explain everything...why Byram's transporting draegan children across the Great Plain, how he's managed to live so long...gods...it's probably full of all sort of dirty secrets."

Keiran looked torn. "Where does he keep it?"

"In his personal library."

"That doesn't sound good."

"We have to get it. Come on. This way."

He heard Keiran's concerned huff of breath, but then the draegan was beside him.

The library, on the second floor, was locked with a magick charm. He wasn't surprised when Keiran rested a hand on top of the lock, murmured something, and the lock snicked open.

Gaige was fading. Fast. Every little movement was sending shooting pains through his body. But he knew this was important.

"Here. He keeps it locked in this drawer here."

Keiran sprang the lock. Gaige jerked out the drawer, picked up the thick, heavy, oddly-bound book and shoved it down into Keiran's pack.

"Okay. Now we go. No more detours." Keiran's voice indicated there would be no arguing with him this time.

And quite frankly, Gaige knew he'd be lucky to have the strength to stay on his feet long enough to get out of the

stronghold. "You don't have any more of that stuff, do you?"

"No. But even if I did, you wouldn't be able to take it. It alters your heart rate, your breathing, everything. Another dose of it this soon would kill you."

"Great." Gaige gritted his teeth.

When they reached the stairs, he started to go down, but Keiran pulled him up instead.

"The only doors out are on the ground floor." Talking was even beginning to take too much energy.

"There's no time. We won't make it out of here and across the bailey."

"What are we going to do if we go up?"

Keiran didn't answer, just kept moving in long strides.

"Oh...oh! No, Kieran! You can't. It's too dangerous."

"It's the only way." He paused on the steps, jerked off his boots, unfastened his belt, and pulled down his pants. He shoved his belt and weapons in the pack, and handed the pants to Gaige. "Put them on. I won't need them and it'll be more comfortable for you."

Gaige stared at the nude body of the man he loved, swallowing hard, shocked that in spite of everything Byram had done to him, he could look at Keiran and get a rush of arousal.

Concentrate.

Groaning, he stepped into Gaige's pants and pulled them up. The leather was soft, and still warm from Keiran's body. But it rubbed and pressed against bruises and cuts and the raw skin of his genitals, and Gaige had to bite his tongue to keep

from crying out.

Again, as if he knew what Gaige was thinking, Keiran pulled his face close and kissed his forehead. "I know. But when I shift, you're going to have to ride me and you'll want the protection. Trust me."

A jolt of fear for Keiran's safety shot through him. "Keiran..."

"It's going to be okay."

"Give me your belt," Gaige ordered. "And a weapon. I don't think I can carry them all, but at least one."

Keiran didn't question. He pulled his belt back out of the pack, fastened it around Gaige's hips, then slid his knife into it.

Below them, the sudden clomping of booted feet moving fast was accompanied by shouts.

"Let's go!" Keiran urged.

Gaige didn't need to be told. He forced his shaking legs to move, grateful to have Keiran's arm around him helping him stay upright.

The soldiers were gaining on them, their voices louder.

"Here," he croaked.

They burst out onto the flat roof of the main tower. It was a large square with shoulder-high battlements around the edge. Beyond them, faint tinges of pink were just beginning to lighten the sky.

At the same time, a detachment of soldiers poured out from a doorway opposite them. And leading the way...General Rizik, his long, white-blond hair flying behind

him, his sword drawn. "Archers in front!" he yelled.

Keiran jerked off his pack and pressed it into Gaige's hands. Already struggling to stand, Gaige nearly staggered at its weight. The damned book was heavy.

"Archer's set!" he heard his father order.

"Down," Keiran shouted, pushing him to a crouch and leaning over him. Then, as Gaige watched in silent shock, Keiran began to shimmer. His outline stretched, growing larger and larger. The human body faded, with something primal and ancient and huge taking its place. Silver wings stretched out on either side of the sleek, scaly, powerful body, then curved over Gaige as if protecting him. The draegan turned its elongated, spiked head to look down at him...and the eyes were still Keiran's.

"Fire!" Gaige heard his father scream.

"No, you fools." Byram had arrived, and his voice, nasal and sharp, cut through the chilly morning air. "Aim for the chest. The chest! That's their weakest spot. You won't penetrate it anywhere else."

When the volley was over, Keiran's wings moved up and back and he let out a shriek that nearly rattled the battlements.

::Climb onto my back::

The voice was Keiran's, though gruffer. And it was in Gaige's head.

He threw the straps of the pack over his shoulders and dragged himself to his feet. He tried to find a place to grasp hold of Keiran so he could pull himself up, but his scales were surprisingly sleek. Keiran lowered a wing and seemed to be

offering it as a step.

Byram was shouting magick words now. Arrows flew again. When Keiran added to the chaos with another shriek, Gaige nearly lost his footing, but caught himself just in time.

Damn it all. He had not gone through everything he had to let these bastards win. Gritting his teeth, he reached for a spine on Keiran's neck and pulled. Ah, *gods*, it hurt...everything hurt...but he refused to give up. He dragged himself upward, the muscles in his arms burning. When he finally slid a leg across Keiran's powerful back, a burst of elation shot through him.

The joy was so strong that for a moment he didn't even realize he'd been hit...until a new agony of pain bloomed in his shoulder. He glanced down. Saw the brown-tipped feathers of an arrow sticking out of Keiran's white shirt he wore and the bright stain of red spreading around it.

"Oh...fuck..." he heard himself murmur as black dots danced before his eyes.

::No!:: Keiran cried in his mind. :: Don't let go, Gaige. Don't let go. Stay with me.::

Gaige fought to hold off the comforting darkness that so wanted to take him over. He struggled to hold himself upright, and finally couldn't. He let his head slid down to rest against Keiran's back, but didn't let go of the spine.

He heard Byram shout more magick words and saw a black shimmering flame rise up around the perimeter of the roof, following the line of the battlements.

Keiran turned and with one swipe of his huge claw, tore

down the first line of soldiers. He turned and did the same on the other side, sending bodies flying through the air, clearing a path so he could spread his wings for flight.

Cries and shouts filled Gaige's mind. And then he saw his father, running headlong at them, his sword drawn. Keiran was looking the other way and hadn't noticed him

"KEIRAN!" he shouted.

Keiran swung his head around, but it was too late.

With a maniacal, hate-filled howl, the general sank his long-sword into the draegan's massive chest.

Gaige felt the ripple of Keiran's shock and pain surge through him. He screamed at the agony of it and heard Keiran's shriek merge with his.

Fury tore through Gaige, even as he was still reeling from the strange connection he was sharing with Keiran. His hand closed around the handle of Keiran's knife hanging at his waist. Instinct and training took over. With a low growl, he pulled it free, sat up, and threw it with startling accuracy.

The general jerked his sword out of Keiran. It fell with a clatter. His eyes rose to meet Gaige's in horrified surprise. His hands lifted to the handle of the blade that was lodged dead center in his throat.

"You won't ever hurt what's mine again," Gaige snarled.

His expression still registering utter shock, the general dropped to his knees. A perverted part of Gaige's mind thought it looked like his father was kneeling in worship to the draegan god standing over him. Then the man's eyes closed and he slipped to the ground.

Gaige felt absolutely nothing at his loss and wondered what that meant.

His burst of strength over, he slumped once more on Keiran's back. Darkness threatened again. But fear for Keiran kept him awake.

::*Hang on.*::

The silent voice in his head sounded pained, sending cold shivers of fear through Gaige.

The powerful body beneath him surged, the huge wings spread and then they were off the ground. He clung to Keiran's neck with what little strength he had left.

The sorcerer's shouts grew louder, booming through the air, powerful and filled with magick.

In a motion surprisingly swift for a creature so large, Keiran turned his head, opened his mouth...and orange flames poured out of it in a steady, ruthless flow.

Gaige watched in astonishment. They do breath fire?

Byram stared up at them, his mouth still moving, but his words now drowned out by the furnace churning around him. He was surrounded by a blue fire of his own. The draegan flames flowed over it, leaving him unharmed. But the black glow on the battlements was no match for the draegan inferno. In spite of Byram's obvious attempts to keep it up, it grew smaller and smaller, until it faded into nothing.

With a surge of power, they were airborne. The sound of the wind tore through Gaige's ears, and its cold fingers dug into him, until he thought he might not ever be warm again. The darkness drew ever closer, making it hard to keep his eyes

open. Hard to think. Or hold on. Pain rippled over his body with every movement beneath him, and his shoulder, where the arrow protruded, had gone completely numb. He still felt Keiran's pain as well, like a gray haze, growing ever-darker itself, at the edge of his consciousness.

"Keiran, I'm sorry," he whispered, knowing his words couldn't be heard, but needing to say them anyway. "You shouldn't have come for me. Should never have risked your life. You should have let me die there..."

::Never. Need you too damned much. Love you too damned much.::

Hot tears welled in Gaige's eyes. "I love you, too, you damned stubborn do-gooder."

He thought he felt Keiran smiling. But then just as quickly felt him grow serious.

:: Gaige...I need to tell you something...in case...::

"Don't you dare say 'in case." There's no 'in case."

::Listen to me. That night we first made love in the cave...when I was inside you, something happened. A process was started. And then the night in my tent, when you were inside me...it happened again.::

And odd sense of knowing filled Gaige. "I remember. When you came in me, it was different, powerful, like we were connected. And then, when I was in you, I felt like I couldn't get into you deep enough, and there was this intense feeling, as if something were binding us together. I...I wanted it. Needed it."

::I know...it was the same for me. It's called a joining. It

usually happens between two draegans who've found their true mate. I couldn't understand how it could be happening since you were human...it's never happened before with a human. But then—::

"Byram told me my mother was a draegan."

Keiran seemed nonplussed by the information. ::I suspected as much. It was one thing for me to join with you when I was inside you. But the night you did it to me...I knew you couldn't be fully human. Humans just don't have the right organs to do it. And there were other hints...:

His words faltered and Gaige felt the haze of Keiran's pain getting darker, edging in.

"Don't you dare," he said. "You stay with me, damn it."

::I'll be fine...it's you I'm worried about. How are you doing?::

"Keep talking. It helps...both of us, I think. Tell me the rest. There's more to the joining isn't there?"

:: A third and final part.::

"In the circle...what happened in the circle," Gaige said, knowing it at the very depths of his soul, even without having to ask. The cutting of the hands. The words spoken in draega. That crystalline moment of life-force and emotion flowing between them.

::Yes.::

"Why did the ritual unbind Byram's magick?"

::He sealed the circle so that only true, soul-deep love could get you out of it. Something he thought would be impossible in his stronghold, impossible for you. But he didn't

know about us, about what we shared, because you never told him anything. The first two parts of the ritual are manifested in the physical sharing between two mates, joining them sexually, binding their bodies, organs, all the physical aspects of them together. But the third part of the ritual, the bloodsharing, binds them on the emotional and spiritual plane.::

"Love," Gaige whispered.

::Love.::

"And the words...what did you say?"

::I am yours, beloved. As you are mine. For all of eternity...::

Gaige closed his eyes and clung to Keiran's neck. The sleek and not unpleasant scratch of his scales pressed against Gaige's cheek. *Beloved*. One small word, yet it held so much power.

:: Gaige, I didn't plan this. I would never have chosen for it to happen without your knowledge.::

Gaige's heart tightened. "Does that mean you didn't—don't—want it?"

If it were possible to feel like he was surrounded by a warm human embrace, while flying through the sky on a powerful, winged creature, that was the sensation Gaige experienced.

::Gods, yes, I want it. I've never wanted anything more. I just don't want you to feel trapped by it since it happened without your knowledge or consent. We'll always be joined now. We can't break that bond. But if you...if you don't want to stay with me, if you want to live away from me...I'll...:

Tears spilled out of Gaige's eyes, dampening his face and Keiran's neck.

::What is it?::

"I went back there to get the human kids to safety. To keep Byram from hurting them."

::I know.::

"I wasn't coming back. I was going to go to the outer realms, or to the sea...and never see you again."

All was silent except for the powerful beat of wings and the whoosh of wind. But then, with a rush of air and the tensing of huge muscle beneath him, he felt Kieran slow... He barely had the strength and energy left to lift his head to see why.

The white walls of Kellesborne glinted in the morning sunlight.

Home.

It was a strange thought to have and Gaige wasn't sure if it was his or Keiran's. Or maybe one they shared. Yet it felt oddly right.

The huge glass-paned window on one of the walls seemed to be there one instant and gone the next. Gaige blinked, certain it had been a trick of light.

But then they were flying through the opening and Keiran landed. He crouched, if that were such a thing an enormous winged creature could do, and rocked gently to the side. Gaige's white-knuckled grip on Keiran's spines let up and with that loss of anchor, the rest of his body melted into the shaking, excruciating mass of skin and bones and muscles and

nerve it was. He slid off onto a thick, soft white rug that covered the stone floor and closed his eyes against the pain.

"We need to get this arrow out of you."

The words were hoarse with emotion, and Gaige realized they hadn't come in his head, but had been spoken aloud. And the hands that gently probed at the horrible numbness in his shoulder were human.

His eyes fluttered open to find Keiran's dark head bent over him. His silver eyes were clear and filled with concern for Gaige, but his face was pulled tight with his own pain.

"Your chest," Gaige whispered, his heart clenching at the sight of the angry wound just above and to the right of his left nipple.

"It was a clean stroke. He didn't hit any organs or arteries. It hurts but I'm not going to die from it. You first." Keiran had cut his pack off Gaige's shoulders and now rummaged through it. Lying on his side because of the arrow that had pierced him clean through so the end stuck out of his shoulder in the front and the point in the back, Gaige couldn't see what he was doing.

Using a short-bladed knife, Keiran cut the shirt off him and then examined the arrow shaft again. "I'm sorry...there's no way to do this gently." His voice was soft and apologetic.

"It's okay. I've been a soldier all my life. I know what has to be done."

When Keiran snapped off the feathered end, red-hot torment set his nerve endings on fire and tears stung in his eyes. But when Keiran took hold of the point at his back and

pulled, the resulting agony ripped through his control, wrenching a guttural cry all the way from his soul.

The black abyss, when it came, was a welcome relief.

He wasn't out long because when he came to Keiran was still working on him, pressing soft cloth against the ragged wound at his front and tying it in place.

He lay on his back now. "I'm bleeding on your rug," he whispered.

A faint, pained smiled curved Keiran's lips.

Gaige suddenly realized Keiran hadn't looked him in the eye since they'd gotten here. And he suspected he knew why.

Reaching up with both hands, he cradled Keiran's stubbled cheeks between them and made the man look up to meet his gaze. "I am yours, beloved. As you are mine. For all of eternity."

He saw Keiran's breath catch.

Gaige tugged off the bandage from the raw cut on his hand and pulled Keiran's hand up to do the same to his. Then, gently, he pressed his palm to Keiran's. The wounds were no longer bleeding, but it didn't matter.

"I'm afraid your people won't understand or support your choice of a human, or even a half-human, as your mate. Especially one who used to work for Byram. That's why I wasn't going to come back. Your duty is to the draegan people, Keiran. You being with me might be seen as weakness in their eyes. And I would never do anything to come between you and them."

"Have you learned nothing of the draegan in your time

with us?" Keiran's voice was low, but a gentle smile curved his lips. "Love for any being—human, draegan, creatures of the earth or sea or sky—isn't a weakness. It's a strength. One to be nurtured. Why do you think you or any of the other humans were so readily accepted into our camp? Any who come and are true of heart are welcome. It's the draegan way and has been for thousands of years. And in case you've forgotten, my people are also your people."

He brushed Gaige's hair back off his face in a touch so tender warm ribbons of emotion curled in Gaige's chest.

"Still...there'll be problems. You told me so yourself that morning you first took me to your tent. You said some wouldn't understand. And they didn't." *One didn't anyway*.

"Gaige, there will always be people who don't understand. No society is perfect. But that can't stop us, any of us as beings, from doing what our hearts tell us is right."

"Byram's going to come after us. All the draegans, and any humans who are allied, will be in danger. He's lost his most trusted general, the captain of his guard has turned traitor, he's seen that his stronghold can be breached by the draegan. And we have his book. He won't be forgiving."

"No, he won't. But he's also learning his power isn't as invincible as he'd like to believe. He's learning that a small band of rebels can wreak havoc in his realm, that even children and his own villagers can defy him. And more importantly, he's learning that he grossly underestimated the power and depth of love." Keiran's eyes burned with intensity.

"As did I," Gaige admitted in a whisper.

Keiran's strong yet gentle fingers burrowed into his hair, and his lips were suddenly oh-so-close. His breath was warm against Gaige's mouth. "Stay with me. Stay with me, beloved."

Gaige brushed his hand against the other man's cheek. "I truly am yours. I can't imagine being anywhere else but with you."

"And I'm yours. Gods...I'm always yours, Gaige."

Their lips met and lingered.

Though he wished he could close his eyes and lie in Keiran's embrace for the next several days, Gaige's concern for Keiran finally overrode his other senses. "Lie down and let me take care of this wound on your chest before we both pass out."

Without arguing, Keiran lay on his back with a grimace and a soft moan. But when Gaige dragged himself to a sitting position and reached for the supplies next to them on the floor that Keiran had obviously found earlier, Keiran caught him lightly by the wrist and feathered a soft kiss against his palm.

"When you're ready, if you want to talk about what happened...I'll be here."

Gaige swallowed past the lump that filled his throat. He knew to what Keiran was referring. "I tried to shut myself off from it as much as I could while it was happening," he whispered. "But I know it's there...I know I need to talk. And I will. Later."

"Just promise me you won't let it fester inside you."

"I promise. But I will not let him beat me to the ground,

Keiran" he said fiercely. "I will not let him think for even one second that he has fucking *traumatized* me."

"Because he hasn't," Keiran said, smiling.

"No. He hasn't."

And then Keiran's arms were around him, lifting him with a strength that was considerably more than human, and Gaige found himself lying on his back in the soft bed.

"The floor's too damned hard. You need soft comfort beneath you."

Gaige wasn't going to complain. The bed felt like heaven. "Plus, I bled on your rug."

Keiran's chuckle was the best sound he'd heard in days. "I think we both bled on the damned rug. Get some sleep. I'll take care of my wound."

Gaige protested, but Keiran kissed him silent. "I told you, I'll live."

"Are you going to tell me draegans have some magick ability to heal fast?"

Keiran groaned. "I'd love to say yes, but, no, unfortunately we heal at a regular pace." A frown creased his brows and his eyes offered sympathy. "Though I wish it were true for you."

"You said, when we were flying, that there were other hints that led you to believe I might be part draegan. Like what?"

"You hear too well for a human. And dare I mention your virility?" His eyes were twinkling now. "No human man can stay hard after he's come...and then come again."

Gaige smiled...and realized it felt good. "I just always

thought I was voracious."

"Oh, you are," Keiran said laughing. "You, my love, are voracious even for a draegan. And I am *not* complaining."

Gaige was shocked to realize the low tug in his groin was arousal and he was already thinking about how damn good it would feel to have the warm nude body lying next to him against him instead.

As usual, Keiran seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. "When you wake up, I'm going to remind you how much I love you." ::And banish every last bad memory from your mind and body, and replace them with goodness.::

The lump of emotion was back in Gaige's throat, so hot and thick he could barely swallow. "Have I told you how very much I love you?"

"Every time you look at me with those blue, blue eyes. I don't think you realize just how much power you hold in them."

"Spoken like a man in love," Gaige said with a grin.

"That's right. And don't you forget it." Keiran's lips were warm and surprisingly insistent...and felt so damned good.

"Now rest. You think you're hiding it from me, but ever since we did the joining thing...I pretty much know what you're up to. And right now, you're fighting for all your worth not to collapse."

Gaige snorted softly. But he didn't argue. The truth was, he was barely holding on. And the other truth, which pleased him more than he could say, was that he could feel Keiran also—his happiness, his pains, his sorrows. It was a strange

sensation to be so in tune with another person, yet it felt right. This was his mate. *Mate*. The word and all it represented hadn't fully sunk in yet, but he suspected Keiran would take spectacular pleasure in introducing him to the details.

"Sleep. And when you wake up, we'll crack open the high sorcerer's secret book and let him tell us what his weaknesses are."

"There's still the matter of the draegan children."

"I know. We have that and, I suspect, many other challenges to face with him. But the time has come when raids on his food stores aren't enough. Something you said the last time we were here keeps haunting me. You said it was a shame to have a place like this off limits to the people whose right it is to be here. It's true. And it's not just Kellesborne. For thousands of years draegans have lived in and flown over Velensperia. It's time for Byram's control to end. It's time to take back our heritage."

Pride surged through Gaige. Keiran was an exceptional man and an exceptional leader. When he looked at him, with the early morning sunlight shimmering around him, what he saw was a true king. A man more than worthy to walk the halls of the powerful draegan lords of old.

#### M. L. RHODES

Award-winning and bestselling author M. L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for nearly twelve years. Along with the erotic romance fiction she currently pens for Amber Quill Press, she's also published everything from poetry, to magazine articles, to traditional romance, to steamy romantic suspense novels. In her fiction works, her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim from such places as *Romantic Times Magazine*, *The Romance Studio*, and *JERR* and have garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry.

In her man-love stories, she enjoys pairing together strong, independent heroes who are open to exploring both their sexuality and their emotions. Men fall in love with one another every day, and M. L. believes in celebrating that!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M. L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, surf on over to her website at www.mlrhodeswriting.com. She also loves hearing from readers. You can reach her at ML@mlrhodeswriting.com.

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