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*A
Warriors
Witch*

*Mackenzie
McKade*

The Beginnings Anthology

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Beginnings: A Warrior's Witch

Mackenzie McKade

Dedication

To my wonderful editor, Angela James. Thank you for your guidance and the opportunity to express myself through my writing.

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Chapter One

Scotland

November 1, 1578

Scotland welcomed Conall Lachlan back to her moonlit shores by pitching him on his arse. One minute he was astride his horse cantering along the cliff side—the next airborne when a rabbit darted across their path. While his skittish mount ran one way, the hare sped in the opposite direction.

Conall struck the ground hard and rolled with the momentum of the fall.

As pain splintered across his backside, he caught sight of the Barney drifting back out to sea. With the ship's departure went his freedom.

Unexpected sorrow pierced his heart. At fourteen, travel, adventure and exotic tales of the Orient lured him away. Now, ten years later, his father's death called him home.

Eyes pinched closed, he remembered their argument, words exchanged in anger.

"Lad, ye'll be back," Hamish Lachlan, the Lachlan clan's chieftain had growled. "With yer tail 'a'tween those scrawny legs."

"Dinna hold yer breath," Conall shouted, without glancing back.

He never returned, until now.

The message he had received from his cousin Eacharn that his father had died had been a shock. Although Eacharn had promised all was

under control, Conall knew it was time to come home and fulfill his duties as clan leader.

Unmoving, he lay where the horse pitched him upon the sandy ground sparsely covered with patches of rough grass. Sounds of the ocean's unrest rose and crashed against the jagged rocks below mimicking the turmoil churning inside him. He let a calming breath fill his lungs, gathering scents of pine and oak with the salty air. When his eyes opened, he rose and dusted off his leather tunic and leggings. Scotland had changed little, except the ground seemed less forgiving.

With a tug, he straightened his red and gold plaid, adjusting it over his shoulder and waist. As soon as they disembarked the ship, Conall had sent his men ahead to a neighbor's castle to announce their need for accommodations. He and his men were still a day's ride from home and would need a place to stay the night.

His destination was the grey, majestic castle looming ahead. Years ago, the Earl of Loch Tower, Edmond Macleod, had been an ally. Conall hoped that was still the case. The earl was not a man he cared to have as an enemy, especially since they shared an ancient bloodline.

They were a breed apart from humanity.

Beserka.

Men neither fully human nor fully animal gifted with shape-shifting and preternatural abilities rumored to exist as far back as the Nordic gods. Known as Odin's warriors, each blessed with an animal totem.

The wolf was Lachlan's totem. The feline was the Macleod's.

He bent at the waist, gathered a stone off the sandy path, chucked it and watched it bounce and roll away.

Odd what one remembered. As a child he'd heard claims the earl's daughter possessed her mother's witch heritage and, strangely, her

father's lineage. She possessed not only the Beserka totem, but the ability to shape-shift into whatever form she chose.

Impossible. The child was only eight when he had left. Beserka abilities surfaced around puberty for boys, never a girl.

Female Beserkas did not exist.

A sudden breeze stirred his shoulder-length blond hair, whipping the thin braids along each side of his cheeks. Thunder boomed. Threads of lightning raced across the sky, one after another. The scent of rain filled the air.

He glanced askance at the angry clouds above. "Och. Ye threaten tae spit on me?" He stepped over a fallen log, stumbled, nearly falling as the earth trembled beneath his feet. Again, lightning flashed illuminating the heavens.

A sudden blast of heat surged through the soles of his boots grinding him to an abrupt halt. Feet temporarily paralyzed, his skin prickled as the hairs on his arms rose.

Lightning strike?

He glanced at his feet. No blackened spot lay beneath him. No tree or bush nearby was afire.

And he still stood.

"Good sign indeed." He chuckled. Yet the beast inside him wasn't reassured. It moved silently below his skin, forcing his chin upward to scent the air. The distinct smell of honey and cloves and something—no someone—female caused his groin to tighten. Not with a mild stirring, but an ache that bent him so that he had to brace his hands on his thighs, forcing a groan from his throat.

"It canna be," he murmured, slowly rising to his six-two height.

The Beserka were a dying breed, only able to procreate with a true lifemate. Finding that mate was a lifelong challenge.

If his body's reaction was an indicator, Conall's search was over. He had found his mate.



Samhain was strengthening.

As it neared the witching hour, Sabine Macleod could feel its magic calling. Soon the great Shield of Scathach would lower its barriers between worlds to allow the spirits of the dead and those yet to be born to walk amongst the living.

It was a magical night.

Still, a whisper of unease raced through her body. The wind tugged at the hem of her long white robe, tossing her waist-length black hair around her shoulders.

Throughout the village bonfires flickered brightly. Before the night ended, they would extinguish all but one—a common flame—to light their hearths and bond the families of the village together.

It was tradition.

Sabine gazed around the sacred clearing surrounded by tall oaks and alder. Tonight she would ask for clarity of thought and thank the Goddess for guidance, because something was amiss.

The sackcloth Sabine held slipped to the ground. With a shrug, her robe followed to reveal her nudity.

Was her anxiety due to Samhain? Or perhaps it was her father's invitation for every eligible Beserka in Scotland to court her. He worried the Beserka curse would leave her unwed.

That aspect worried Sabine naught. Loss of independence and the unknown were her concerns. At Loch Tower the clan understood and

accepted who and what she was. Strangers were either frightened of her differences or wished to use her unique gifts for their own benefits.

From the bag, she retrieved a flask of saltwater and sprinkled half of the contents about, purifying the area. Even as she poured the remaining water over her body, she knew Loch Tower's dining hall was filling up with visitors who had two goals in mind—to celebrate the final harvest and witness the possible pairing of mates.

Sabine had stayed away as long as she dared. Her father would send his men in search of her. She had to hurry.

"It will be my choice," she stated firmly. Yet her frustration came from knowing that if the Beserka legend was true and if her mate existed among her father's visitors, when the sun rose on the morrow her life would change forever.

Conceived on Samhain, witch blood ran deep in her veins, clouded with that of the beast. The mischief of an evening just like tonight had caused the phenomenon.

"Beserka lust is an impellin' force that must be answered—a matin'—the joinin' of two lifemates," Sabine's mother, Isobel, had said on numerous occasions.

Another wave of anxiety swept across Sabine's skin but she pushed it aside.

To connect with the earth she focused on the core of light inside her body. She faced the east calling upon the air.

The element responded, stroking her body with an intimate breeze. A gentle caress circled her breasts and weaved between her legs. Her nipples grew taut, stinging. Moisture dampened her thighs. She wiggled her hips, trying to shun the strange tightening in her loins that appeared out of nowhere.

"From the forest, South, I call tae thee." The sudden rush of heat stole her breath. Visions of two naked bodies, hot and moist, intertwined, came to her.

"Saints preserve," she gasped.

Aye. The Goddess was sensual, but never had Sabine felt these sensations.

Sabine spun to the west. "From the sea, West, I call tae thee." Like a dolphin leaping the waves, her belly did several flip-flops. Her pulse sped. The increasing throb between her legs turned her breaths into small pants.

What is happenin' tae me?

She swayed. Eyes clenched shut, her knees wobbled as she fought to continue.

"...ground, North, I call tae thee." The temperature in her body soared.

Her voice shook as she lifted it to the sky. "Join in the circle, Center, I call tae thee."

The elements came together in a rush, slamming into Sabine. Raw power surged throughout her. She felt alive, standing on the pinnacle of something new and exciting.

With a thrust, she raised both hands into the air, invoking the Goddess. A moment of meditation followed. She prayed for peace, healing and guidance, closing her invocation to thank the Goddess for her presence.

The earth's melody rose. Sabine's slender form began to move in slow undulations to raise the Cone of Power needed to strengthen the vision of her destiny.

Invisible hands washed over her body. She spun in circle after circle, loving the way her skin felt, tight and tingling. Eyes remained closed, her

palms moved boldly across her heated flesh, until she cupped her breasts. The peaks of her nipples were sensitive, hot nubs of sensation, as she rolled them between her fingers.

Uninhibited, no maidenly shame rose, only the excitement to follow where the Goddess led.

As the music in Sabine's mind grew wilder, her back arched and flexed, a fluid wave that rippled through her like water rushing over stones. Her hips swayed as she tried to ease the ache between her thighs.

The wind's caress was no longer a whisper across her skin. Instead, warm, firm hands guided her wrists above her head. It felt right to lean against the wall of muscle that appeared, spooning her from behind, because she was safe—no evil could enter the sanctity of the circle.

Salt and spices permeated the air. Heavy breathing warmed her neck. A seductive touch slid down her arms and around her waist, holding her close.

Sabine thanked the Goddess for sending this ethereal being to fill the emptiness inside that she had never voiced. Something was missing in her life, she just didn't know what.

Strong hands guided Sabine around. Heavy-lidded, she gazed into the intensity of eyes a crystal blue. Golden hair swept his shoulders. Thin braids hung at each cheek.

As their mouths touched, his tongue slipped between her lips.

Sweet Jesus. She'd been kissed before, but never like this. It was a spell, an attack on all her senses. She felt helpless, melting in his embrace. As he tasted her, their naked forms continued to strengthen the Cone of Power in movement.

When their kiss broke, his lips traced a path down her throat. His hands caressed her from shoulders to hips. Slowly, he eased her down

upon the rough grass and heather. His large, muscular frame draped hers, pinning her to the ground.

“Yer an innocent?” His deep, sexy voice smoothed across her flesh like a warm breeze.

She couldn’t respond or think, not past the echo of discomfort thrumming throughout her body. She clung desperately to him, needing him to silence the storm raging inside her.

His hand slipped between them. Skillful fingers touched her where no man had ever. She whimpered as he parted her folds, and then pushed a finger deep within.

Fire raced across her womb. “What’s happenin’ tae me?” The ache low in her belly pulsed, growing to an unbearable peak. A sliver of anxiety slid up her spine.

“Fate.” His tone sounded hoarse, strained. “I will be gentle as I can, lassie, but the beast begs not tae be denied any longer.” He wedged his knee between her legs, spreading her thighs wide and moving between them.

Before Sabine knew what was happening, he replaced his fingers with something bigger and harder, slowly pushing inside her. A sharp tearing sensation made her tense as he broke through the thin layer of her virginity. Pain too real to be her imagination made her cry out. Her fingers dug into solid flesh—too firm—to be an apparition.

“A moment of discomfort—a lifetime of pleasure.” His promise was followed by a sense of fullness Sabine had never experienced. Buried deep inside her, he remained motionless for only a moment, long enough for her to catch the breath that had deserted her.

“Mine.” His husky declaration made her gasp. A rainbow of colors rippled across his eyes. Canines pushed from his gums, pressing into his bottom lip. He held back the change, but Sabine knew the truth.

Beserka!

It was too late to stop the inevitable. He sank his teeth into her shoulder, marking her.

The sudden pain only heightened the moment as her inner muscles clamped down on him. A swell of pleasure made her arch, causing her to buck beneath him. Hot spasms shot from her core. She groaned low and long as her body milked his cock.

Another growl rumbled from his throat as he smoothly disengaged their union, rolling her on her stomach. She didn't have time to savor the smell of grass and heather mingling with scents of their mating. His hand slid quickly beneath her belly, raising her hips as he entered her from behind, but this time the penetration was deeper. His thrusts were faster—harder.

The sounds of flesh slapping flesh threw her into another orgasm. As it ripped through her, she threw back her head and her beast called to his. Her canines dropped. She struggled to keep the cat within from rising.

One more pump of his hips and his beast answered, filling her with his warm seed.

Saints preserve!

The man atop Sabine was real. A pulse still beat where their bodies joined.

Although she wanted nothing more than to bask in his warmth, her mind screamed that he was a stranger, someone who could change her life forever.

The truth was she was afraid. Afraid of losing her freedom and afraid of the hot, uncontrollable desire this man stirred inside her.

Chapter Two

Conall's naked body hummed with satisfaction. The heat of arousal cooled as he rolled from atop his mate, reaching to pull her near. Instead, she yanked from his grip and scrambled to her feet, retrieving the white robe crumpled upon the ground. With short, jerky movements, she dressed, tying the sash.

"Dinna hide from me, lassie." He chuckled, sliding his hands beneath his head. Her beauty lay carved into his memory. Firm breasts, taut rosy nipples, and a heart-shaped bottom had fit perfectly in his palms. His favorite were her long, slender legs, legs that wrapped around his waist while he drove his hard cock into her hot, wet quim.

He strained to hear the words she began to murmur. With a swipe of her hand through the air, she closed her witch's circle.

A witch. And a strange one at that. He could have sworn he touched a beast within her. In the grip of Beserka lust, he even believed he had seen sharp, white fangs retract between those lovely full lips.

Damn. His imagination was running wild. If finding one's mate did this to a man, he had better beware.

The heavy tread of horses' hooves approaching from the north ripped his gaze from the woman gathering her things. He had known when his arrival at Loch Tower was delayed that his men would backtrack to find him.

Slowly, Conall pushed to his feet. As he reached for his clothes, Ewen, Cameron and Fitzer, his friends and traveling cohorts, burst through a copse of trees, heading straight for him.

Pulling his horse to a stop, Ewen haughtily cocked a brow. “Methinks there be a story here.” Conall’s childhood friend was always seeing stories where stories did not lie. But in this particular case there was.

Conall would be returning home to take his place as chieftain with a bride in tow.

“Ghosties?” Fitzer whispered. His wild mass of red hair bounced as his rusty-colored eyes looked suspiciously about. “Or would it be evil fairies renderin’ ye bare-arsed and stealin’ yer horse?” From Ireland, he was full of superstition and beliefs.

Cameron was the quiet one. His shoulder-length black hair fell forward as he leaned his wrists on the saddle and waited patiently for an explanation.

When Conall turned to introduce his friends to his bride-to-be—
She was gone.



At the top of the stairs overlooking the great hall, Sabine paused. What had she done? Before she realized the truth, she had given herself to the man in the glen. Damn her Beserka heritage.

The soft kirtle of blue she wore felt binding, too tight. Her breasts were still sensitive and the emptiness between her thighs refused to go away.

In front of one of eight long tables, her father stood. Edmond’s deep baritone voice rose with glee as several new guests entered the large communal room where the clan congregated for meals.

Sabine's beast rose to scent the air. Among the scent of freshly baked bread, fish, chicken and boar, one of the visitors smelled of warm, salty air with a hint of spice.

Nay. She worried senselessly. Her true mate was somewhere wondering the glens, not seated at her father's table.

If her father ever discovered the truth—

Sabine startled as her mother's gentle hand settled upon her shoulder.

"Mother, I feel queasy. Must I attend the evenin's celebration?"

Isobel's expression softened. "He only seeks yer happiness."

Gray whispered through her mother's elbow-length ebony hair. The resemblance between them was remarkable, except Isobel's eyes were brown, Sabine's blue.

"I am happy." Stubbornly, Sabine's chin raised. "Marriage would be a chain around my neck."

A frown tugged at Isobel's mouth. "Dinna yer dreams embody the love of a man? Children?"

"Nay." Behind a wall of indifference, she forced the emotion threatening to surface away. She couldn't allow herself to think of how the stranger made her body burn. He would take her away from everyone she loved to a world of unknown.

Isobel brushed a lock of hair from Sabine's face. "Yer father will be sadden if ye dinna make an appearance."

Sabine raised a single brow. "Then I may return tae my chamber?"

A knowing twinkle sparkled in her mother's eyes. "An appearance."

Panic raised its ugly head. Surely her mother had no knowledge of what occurred earlier. The woman always knew things others did not.

Nay. It wasn't possible.

Sabine inhaled a deep breath of courage, squared her shoulders, and began to descend the stairs. Light-footed, she crossed the room.

As her heart leaped into her throat, she jerked to an abrupt halt. For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

"It canna be," she whispered. Her beast stirred with both excitement and fear.

The man from the glen sat next to her father.

Before she could flee, their eyes met. The intensity of his dark stare made her pulse race. Like fire to dry tinder her body went up in flames, her nipples drew tight. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

Quietly, he placed his eating knife down. Palms on the table, he pushed to his feet. His approach sent a wave of heat radiating through her body.

When a growl rumbled from his chest, she noticed the room had gone silent and her father had risen. Servants paused where they stood. Friends, family and strangers gathered around the eight tables drew their attention toward her and the man who could change her life forever.

The iridescent glow of Beserka rippled in his eyes, shimmering colors of heat that caressed her skin. Then his nostrils flared—he scented her.

"Nay!" Sabine gasped, cupping her hand over her mouth. A tremor assailed her as she fought the invisible pull beckoning her into his arms. Instead, she stumbled backward.

"Sabine?" Concern furrowed her father's forehead as he moved to her side. "Have ye met young Lachlan?"

"Nay," she lied, at the same time as the man said, "Aye."

Sabine tried to center herself—gain the control she felt slipping like water through her fingers.

"Lord Lachlan, may I introduce my daughter, Sabine." Edmond's sharp gaze remained on Sabine, watching, waiting for the telltale signs that a match existed.

"Daughter?" Lachlan snapped his attention to her father. "Then we must speak."

Edmond shot Lachlan a questioning glance.

Invisible chains tightened around her. She felt the noose around her neck slip and squeeze as Lachlan said, "She is my mate."

Perched on the knife's edge of desperation, Sabine forced a laugh. "Da. He jests. Come let us eat."

Every muscle in her body clenched beneath Lachlan's scrutiny. Her nipples were hard pebbles against her bodice. She refused to think about the rush of moisture between her thighs. She felt achy and tense.

Lachlan contracted his brows, his displeasure evident. "I jest not. We are mated."

Embarrassment heated Sabine's face. Perhaps not everyone heard him, but she knew those who shared her lineage did, no matter how far away they sat. Her skin shrank two sizes too small. For the first time in her life, she stood speechless.

Edmond's face turned red. "Enough! Both of ye—in the library." He didn't wait to see if they followed as he stormed out of the great hall.

Sabine leveled Lachlan with a frown.

Isobel came up beside her. "Please, Sabine. Dinna anger yer father. We can resolve this peacefully." Together they followed Lachlan out of the room.

As Lachlan entered the library, Sabine held back. "Mother, please dinna let this happen." There was a shrill rise in her voice.

Isobel cupped Sabine's face. "Destiny will reveal yer course. Come, let us face this together."

Her mother's words didn't comfort Sabine. As they entered the library, shutting the door behind them, Edmond poured *uisge beatha*, a distilled brew called the water of life, into two glasses.

Lachlan's intense stare met hers, sending flames licking across her body.

Breathe.

She gathered her resolve. "Father—"

Edmond held up his hand. His stern expression pinned Lachlan as he handed him the glass of scotch. "It is true?"

"Aye. Have ye a priest? We leave on the morrow," Lachlan stated.

Sabine's heart stuttered. "Mother!"

Isobel stepped forward. "Edmond, must we act so promptly?"

Edmond hesitated. "Lachlan, since we have no proof of a match I must side with Sabine."

"Proof?" Lachlan's voice rose sharply, which didn't bode well for Sabine. "Yer daughter bears my mark. Her right shoulder."

Sabine whipped her hand over the evidence that would seal her fate.

Shock flickered across Isobel's face. "Sabine?"

Without a word, Edmond brushed Sabine's hand away, pulling the sleeve of her kirtle so it slipped from her shoulder. He released a heavy sigh. "Wake the priest."

"Da. Listen tae me. A mistake it was. Please." Sabine's pleas went unheeded.

"Prepare yerself, Sabine. Ye wed within the hour," Edmond announced.

Sabine was not one to cry, but tears seeped from the corners of her eyes. With a sharp pivot, she ran toward the door, jerked it open and fled.

Isobel watched as an array of emotions filtered across Lachlan's face. Sabine had wounded his pride, not a good way to begin a relationship. He bowed to both her and Edmond and quickly left the room, no doubt in pursuit of his mate. When Edmond had marked Isobel, he hadn't let her out of his sight for nearly two days. She smiled at the tender memory.

"Isobel. He has nary an idea what Sabine is. D'ye think he stands a chance?"

"Sabine is powerful," Isobel said. "Perhaps I could bind her magic toward Lachlan. Her destiny would be revealed and..."

Edmond's brows pulled together. "Yer hesitance warms my heart, naught."

"...and maybe she wouldnae kill him before they are wed," Isobel replied sheepishly.

"Then let me suggest ye cast yer spell right away. Lachlan appears tae be a man who gets what he wants. And, my love, he wants our Sabine."

Chapter Three

Sabine's magic had gone amok.

Twice she attempted to transform Lachlan into a frog as he chased her out of the keep's front entrance. Each time her spells fizzled and rebounded to change her voice into hoarse croaks. She had to get away from him, had to feel the forest beneath her feet.

Only by a stroke of luck did she escape the beast trailing her when he stopped to speak with a man who looked at her appraisingly.

"This canna be happenin'." She trudged through the dimly lit forest using Beserka sight to lead her way. The night wind whispered through the trees, tugging at her kirtle. She glanced at the cloudy sky looking for the answer.

Sabine felt like a forsaken child, instead of the woman she was. And where was her aplomb? The man confused her on so many levels. Her body screamed to be near him. Yet she feared leaving the safety of her family.

Frantically, she tore her chemise and kirtle over her head and tossed them aside. The beast within her rose to the surface, sending a tingling sensation across her skin as her body began to shimmer. Heat waves rose as every muscle clenched and shifted, rolling across her body until a leopard, black as the night, stood in her once human footsteps.

She raised her head to the heavens, releasing a sorrowful mewl. Then she began to run, fast and furious, away from the castle—away from her destiny.

Light raindrops fell as she bounded over fallen logs and large boulders in her way. She ran fast and far, until her lungs burned, felt as if they would explode. Then she slowed. Panting, she gulped breaths of air to quell the ache in her chest. When the beat of her heart was almost normal, she stretched, and laid her lithe form upon the ground. Soft, non-aggressive puffing sounds came from her nostrils as she called her friends to her side.

From a copse of trees emerged a reddish-brown fox. He sniffed the air. Reynard had been one of the first animals she befriended as a child. Beneath a bramble a rabbit appeared. Kasha's long ears twitched as she hopped closer.

From high in the treetops, a gray squirrel jumped from one branch to another, until he perched on the limb above where Sabine lay. She mewed, urging the skittish animal from its sanctuary. Rubus's encounters with humans and animals alike had left him untrusting, but not so with Sabine. As he crawled closer, Sabine began to purr. Among her friends, she was content.

For a moment in time, all was well. At the rustling of a bush, her friends each startled and began fleeing in opposite directions. Sabine jumped to her feet, crouching low to discover the largest wolf she had ever seen staring at her. He held her chemise, kirtle and a pair of breeches in his jaws.

Devil take the man.

Slowly the change rippled across his body. What was once golden fur was now tanned flesh stretched taut over firm muscle. He was

magnificent from his clear-blue eyes, broad shoulders, taut abdomen, to—

Saints persevere! The man was endowed.

“’Tis time, Sabine.” He held his hand to her.

She crouched lower. Her tail jerked with agitation, then it beat the ground as her top lip rose in a snarl.

He answered her defiance with a low, ominous sound that rumbled up from his chest. As he began to slip his leggings on, he said, “Change now or I will haul that bonnie arse of yers over my shoulder.”

How dare he speak to her in such a way? She barely held her temper as she released her beast’s hold, allowing the change to whisper across her body.

She refused to allow Lachlan to dominate her. With a proud stance, she raised her chin. That was until his cock jerked alive, lengthening. She gasped, hastily making tracks to gather her chemise and kirtle and quickly dressed.

“I dinna wish tae wed.” Her voice trembled.

A shadow raced across his face as he fastened his breeches. Had her words hurt him? She thought differently when his features hardened. “’Tis done. Come.” He pushed by her, and then headed for the castle.

Anger surfaced hot and fast. Impulsively, she shoved her hands in front of her. “Rat!”

Nothing happened as she watched his muscled back draw further away from her. Once again, her magic failed. Instead, her nose began to twitch. When whiskers began to appear on her face, she released a high-pitched cry.



Tears fell from Sabine's eyes as her father held her. "Dinna cry, sweetlin'. Ye'll be but a day's ride. We will visit often."

Her sorrow tightened Conall's chest.

Was joining with him that repulsive?

"Da, please." She sniffled and her long whiskers twitched. Conall would have laughed if the situation hadn't been so serious.

The rumors were true. Sabine was a Beserka, as well as witch. Not a very talented witch, if he judged her magic by the bristly vibrissae growing on each side of her upper lip.

A touch of apprehension moved beneath his skin. Would his clan be as accepting as those individuals seated around him?

Edmond firmly set Sabine from him, placing her hand within Conall's. "Let it begin."

Not exactly how Conall pictured his wedding day. The bride's parents, and Sabine's twin brothers who glowered at him, looked bereaved. His friends, Ewen, Cameron and Fitzer stood beside him, but even their expressions lacked the support he sought.

And his bride?

Her tears had dried, but she stood like a statue. The priest began to recite from the bible, never pausing as he lunged right into the wedding ceremony.

"Sabine, do ye take this man tae be yer wedded husband?"

Silence.

The priest cleared his throat and repeated the line.

A deep warning growl from Edmond made Sabine startle beneath Conall's hand.

“Aye,” she whispered so softly it was nearly inaudible. Her whiskers grew faint, dissolving.

Within several minutes the deed was done.

Conall was married.

Chapter Four

Conall glanced at his new bride. Backbone rigid, Sabine sat astride a horse for the journey, choosing to refuse the carriage her father offered. Blindly, she stared ahead. Still, she appeared regal wrapped in her red velvet cape and hood.

Beautiful and defiant.

Since departing Loch Tower earlier that morning, not a word passed between them. Dark circles shadowed her eyes. She slept not a wink. He knew because she insisted on sleeping in a chair next to the hearth, instead of beside him in the bed.

He hadn't touched her last night, though he had wanted to. Even now, his cock hardened with the need to feel her warmth surround him. Images of their coupling were never far from his mind.

The afternoon was cool and crisp. The trees exploded with color—brown, gold, yellow and russet red. He had missed the changing of seasons in Scotland. High above a golden eagle soared. From the tree line just beyond the road they traveled, a majestic red stag watched them. Oddly, so did the fox, rabbit and squirrel he had seen cuddled next to Sabine in leopard form last evening.

He pulled back on his horse's reins. "We'll rest here." He dismounted, and then moved to assist Sabine. She felt small as he lifted her from her mount. He should have avoided touching her. His body throbbed with need. A need only she could fulfill. "Come, walk with me."

She followed, but remained silent.

A distance away from his men, he halted. "I displease ye?" Graced with no response, he continued. "Fate can be cruel, Sabine. What is done canna be changed." He placed a finger beneath her chin and drew her troubled gaze to his.

So beautiful.

Desire hit hard, blood rushing to his groin. No way would he be able to sleep beside her this evening and not mate her. "Dinna think tae deny me my rights." In a show of his authority, he pulled her into his arms and firmly pressed his lips to hers.

Her mouth remained pinched until he bit her bottom lip. She yelped. He took advantage to deepen the kiss, thrusting his tongue inside to taste her.

Sweet. Innocent. Fiery.

"All mine," he growled, before devouring her lips again. When he cupped her breast, she whimpered softly. It was hell holding her, tasting her, and not being able to part her thighs and bury himself deep within. "This eve, wife." He left her with the promise, before releasing her and walking back to his men.

Sabine couldn't breathe. Her aplomb melted the minute he kissed her. Her body thrummed, begging for his caress—his hot, wet mouth working its magic.

She couldn't deny Lachlan, even if she wanted to. The heat between them was wild—animal instinct. Even now, her nipples were taut, her inner thighs wet with desire. Last night had been a test of her will. She had won, but paid the price. Her body ached and he was seldom far from her mind.

As Lachlan stood beside her horse, she hastened her steps. His strong hands around her waist as he hauled her up onto her mount made her think of Samhain and their night together.

It was a woman's lot in life to leave the shelter of her family, wed and bare children. The Goddess, as well as Sabine's father, had spoken. Whether Sabine agreed or not was moot. It was time she accepted her fate.

Astride her horse, she gazed down at Lachlan. "I am not displeased, Lachlan."

Surprise filtered across his handsome face. "Conall," he said.

She kicked her horse and the beast lurched forward.

Hours passed and soon Lachlan Tower came into view. Surrounded by a moat, the tall grey castle stood ominously before Sabine.

Lachlan's expression was noncommittal as they drew nearer. The grinding of wood against wood sounded as a drawbridge lowered. Horse hooves clicked across the planks covering the moat. They passed beneath the wall of the bailey and gatehouse to enter a weathered courtyard in need of attention.

A hearty cheer rose. Hands waved, people crowded to get a glimpse of the new chieftain. Lachlan sat erect in his saddle, an aristocratic image, handsome and regal. If he were apprehensive, one would not know.

Then all eyes turned to her.

The breath she inhaled froze in her throat. Smiles turned to frowns. Whispers followed. Tension felt alive and thick in the air. She pulled another breath that didn't fill her lungs.

"Abomination," she heard murmured.

Conall drew his horse to an abrupt halt and pinned the man who spoke with a menacing glare. "Insult my wife, ye insult me." His palm lay upon his sword.

The man bowed, color draining from his face. "My apologies."

Sadly, her notoriety had reached the castle before she had. Her Beserka blood offended them, unlike her own clan who loved her.

A large redheaded man stood in the middle of the courtyard, a half-smile upon his hairy face. When Conall dismounted, the man stepped forward and he embraced him. "Cousin."

"Eacharn. Yer lookin' well." Conall released him and moved quickly to Sabine's horse. "Give 'em time, Lachlan's be a suspicious lot," he whispered to her, before turning back to Eacharn. "My wife, Sabine, of the Macleod clan."

Eacharn's smile vanished. "We must speak." He willfully ignored Sabine.

She froze midway in her curtsy. Her gaze darted from Eacharn to Conall. Heat crawled up her neck, sweeping across her cheeks. Slowly, she rose.

Eacharn leaned into Conall, but spoke loud enough so Sabine heard. "The clan's troubled with yer weddin' a woman cursed by the beast."

Beads of perspiration dotted Sabine's forehead. Her pulse sped in anticipation of her husband's response.

"Careful, Cousin. We share that so called curse with many of our clansmen." Conall's ominous warning hung in the air. With a brush of his hand, he pushed back her hood. Long ebony hair fell down her back. He slipped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a little squeeze. "If anythin', she is a gift tae our clan." His smile was heartwarming. "Now let us not hear any more on this matter. We are tired. Hungry."

Eacharn nodded. "The evenin' meal is bein' prepared. I am sure yer new bride is eager tae assume her duties." There was a snarl in his voice as he led the way into the castle.

A short, stodgy woman greeted them at the door. Conall took her into his arms and swung her around in a big bear hug. "Cait."

With a pinched expression, she snapped, "'Tis about time ye showed yer ugly mug." Then she grinned, standing on tiptoes to ruffle his hair.

Affection sparkled in his eyes for the woman. "Come. I want ye tae meet my wife."

Hands on hips, Cait wagged her head. "Wife? And who'd be crazy enough tae marry ye?"

Sabine liked her.

The woman's sharp gaze assessed Sabine quickly, before she curtsied. "Milady."

Sabine returned the curtsy. "Sabine, please."

"Cait." Eacharn's rough voice boomed. "Show the woman her duties."

Conall's face flushed with anger. "Eacharn—" His deep voice halted, as Sabine placed her hand on his arm.

"Aye. I would like tae see the keep," Sabine said to stop a confrontation between the men. She could feel Lachlan's beast rising, held lightly beneath a guise of calm.

"Best hurry. The light of day will be gone in a whisper," Cait warned.

As Conall disappeared into a room with Eacharn, Cait led Sabine downstairs to the cellar. Torches hung from the walls lighting their way.

"Milady, the castle stands five levels high. The cellar houses the dungeon tae the right. Tae the left be storage." She pushed the door open, then placed the key ring into Sabine's hands. "Keys tae the spice chest and every lock in the keep." Bare shelves spoke loudly of the impoverished condition of the castle.

From behind a tall crate, Sabine saw a set of tiny toes. They wiggled. When Cait's back was turned a wee lass peeked around the corner. A light-hearted giggle followed.

"Iris?" Cait planted her hands on her hips. "Lassie, ye hidin' down here again?"

A child around the age of seven eased into view. "Aye." Blonde curls bobbed as she nodded. Her gown was dirty and hung off one shoulder.

A grin teased Cait's mouth. "Who be huntin' ye now?"

A frown deepened the lines on the child's forehead. "Dugan."

"What did ye do?"

Blue eyes as large as platters gazed innocently at the older woman. "Nothin'."

"I...ris?"

A big smile brightened Iris's face. "Hid his sword."

Cait shook her head despairingly.

"I only wanted tae play with it."

"Get up those stairs." Cait swatted the child on the arse. "And leave that lad be." Her light laughter followed Iris up the stairs.

"She's adorable," Sabine said.

"Aye. But the child is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Nothin' goes unnoticed."

As they climbed the stairs, Cait wheezed, a scratchy sound. "The ground level contains the kitchen and entrance hall. Third floor the Great Hall. The fourth contains the private apartments." She stopped and took a deep breath. "Servants' siege quarters are on the next level. Above 'em is the gallery and a large spiral-stair tower. Ye be wantin' tae visit the gallery?"

Cait was in no condition to be traipsing up and down stairs. "Nay," Sabine answered.

Lachlan was a large castle in much need of attention.
Sabine had her work cut out for her.

Chapter Five

Conall sat at the seat of honor, his father's chair, as his clan filled the great hall. To his left sat Eacharn. The right saved for his bride, whom he hadn't seen since they arrived. He held tightly to the beast stirring beneath his skin, needing to find its mate.

He scented Sabine before he saw her. Honey and cloves. She entered, a vision of loveliness in lilac. All around him smiling faces turned cold. A chill iced the room.

In a show of bravado, she raised her chin. As elegant as a queen, skirts brushing the floor, she moved to his side. The only sign of nervousness was the rapid rise and fall of her breasts accentuated by a deep purple bodice hugging her mid-section. Breasts he needed to feel and taste the second the meal was completed.

The thought hardened his cock against the ties of his black breeches. He stood to greet her, extending his hand. She trembled as he folded his fingers around hers, guiding her to the chair to the right of him. Her hand still in his, he brought it to his lips. "Bonnie lass."

In an attempt to draw his clan's attention away from Sabine and onto filling their bellies, he said, "Shall we eat?"

For a moment, everything returned to normalcy, and then several people begin to sputter. More joined, even Eacharn.

He coughed, before jumping to his feet. "Salt. Someone has added salt tae the wine."

"The witch," a woman cried from the crowd.

Surprise, then anger brightened Sabine's eyes. Her fingers curled into fists. She shifted in her chair. He scented her beast rising. Any show of magic or worse—shape-shifting—might incite the clan.

"Sabine," Conall warned softly. He placed a hand on her shoulder, rising to his feet. She tensed beneath his palm as he shouted to those gathered around the table, "Silence."

As the crowd calmed, he stared from one and then the other. "Who possesses keys tae the spice trunk?"

"I do." The head cook buried her meaty palms against her hips, as if to dare him to accuse her. "As well as Cait."

Cait's gaze darted to Sabine and back to Conall.

"Cait?" he asked cautiously.

She cleared her throat. "Milady, has mine. I gave 'em tae her upon arrival."

The crowd grew loud again.

A flush of heat raced up his neck as he turned to his wife. "Sabine?"

"Me?" As she jumped to her feet, her chair skidded across the stone floor making a screeching sound. Disbelief widened her eyes. "Ye think I did this?" The last came out a growl as her fangs dropped.

The crowd gasped as one.

"Hold, Sabine," he said firmly. He took a moment to silence the chaos roaring inside him and forced a smile. "Nothin' but a child's prank. Cait, see tae it everyone's glass is refilled." He pulled Sabine's chair close. "Sit."

Damnation. This was indeed a quandary.

She trembled, blue eyes nearly black with anger. "Nay."

"Sit," he ordered beneath his breath.

Slowly she complied, but the grim look on her face showed her displeasure. "I wish tae retire."

He placed his refreshed glass to his lips to hide his words. "Afterward ye may do as ye please. For now, eat. We shall talk of this later."

For over an hour, Sabine bore the suspicious and condemning glances of those present. Every morsel placed into her mouth was tasteless and odorless, colored by the anger and hurt burning inside her. The clans' treatment of her was beyond disrespectful. Even the few glances her husband gave her felt condemnatory.

When Lachlan finally rose from the table, she breathed her first sigh of relief. As he spoke to a tall, brown-haired man, she took the opportunity to escape, fleeing out the front entrance.

Torches burned brightly around the inner walls. As a guard approached, she slipped behind a pillar, hiding. Without a second thought, she removed her slippers, gown and chemise, allowing the change to roll over her, shimmering through her with life. A domestic cat was her guise for the night. In a flash, she raced through the courtyard and straight out the front gates.

The night air was crisp. She ran as fast and as far as her small legs could carry her. Her muscles stretched against the tightly wound tension. When the forest closed around her, she stopped. Nails extended, she took her frustration out on an old oak tree, scratching the bark until long deep grooves appeared.

The devil take them all.

"M'lady." Sabine's back hunched as she hopped sideways. Big-eyed, Iris stood motionless. Her small hands clasped in front of her. "Dinna be afraid." She ventured a step and then another, until she was positioned before Sabine. Squatting, she ran her fingers down Sabine's back. "Soft."

Her girlish giggle made Sabine relax for the first time since arriving at Lachlan. The child's touch of kindness was like a raft saving Sabine from drowning in self-pity. As Iris rose, Sabine wove in and out of the girl's legs, rubbing against them gently.

Iris scratched Sabine behind the ears. "Yer innocent. This I know." Then she froze.

Lachlan stepped from the shadows. Sabine's lilac gown and chemise were in his hand.

"What have ye, Iris?" The rumble of his deep voice sent shivers up Sabine's spine.

Devil's breath. How did the man find her?

Iris dipped into a curtsy. "It be a cat, m'lord." She scooped Sabine into her arms. "My cat."

Strangely, Sabine felt safe in the child's arms, safer than in the arms of the man who strolled forward. When he reached out to pet her, Sabine hissed and swatted his hand.

Before her claws met skin, he jerked back. "More like a wildcat." He frowned.

Iris hugged Sabine closely. "Nay, m'lord. Tame as a kit'en if ye treat her well."

From the mouth of babes. The child was wise beyond her age, thought Sabine.

He bent to the child's level and smiled. Something in Sabine's heart melted. He had a beautiful smile. "What say ye we take ourselves and yer feisty feline back tae the keep?"

Iris hugged Sabine closer. "If ye wish, sire."

"That I do. Now up with ye." With gown and chemise in hand, he hoisted the girl into his arms. "Hold tight tae that beastie. We dinna want her tae get away."

His furry wife looked content in Iris's arms as they traipsed through the woodland. Had she been attempting an escape or had she simply needed to release the animal within? Either way, he couldn't allow her to spook the clan.

"M'lord." Iris had been quiet since they passed the gates and entered the courtyard. "M'lady is nary tae blame fer the salted wine."

He carefully let Iris's feet touch the ground. "And how would ye be knowin' this?"

She rubbed her cheek against Sabine's fur. "Please dinna tell Cait."

"I make no promises, lassie." He opened the heavy wooden doors to let Iris enter. "Tell me what ye know."

"After m'lady and Cait left the cellar I hid there. Nary a soul returned."

Sabine meowed and pinned him with a pointed stare, before she jumped from Iris's arms. With a haughty stride, she strolled toward the stairs, stopping to glance back and twitch her tail at him, before bounding up the steps.

A chuckle rose in his throat. *Saucy wench*. "Good-night, Iris." He headed for the stairs, looking forward to what the night promised.

Iris curtsied. "M'lord, ye will not hurt her?"

Shock drew him to a halt. He faced Iris. "Nay, lassie. Why would ye ask?" His gaze met innocent eyes.

"She's scared and lonely, sire. A friend she'd be needin'."

Leave it to a child to see what others refused.

Blinded by his own insecurities returning home, he hadn't realized how this change would affect Sabine. "Aye." He nodded, then continued up the stairs. As he pushed open the chamber door, he saw the change

roll over Sabine. Where only moments ago a black cat stood, his beautiful bride appeared.

Naked.

His pulse sped. His cock hardened.

He expected her to lunge for the blanket on the bed. Instead, she rose boldly. Her shoulders back. Her chin held at an obstinate angle.

It was a pretense. As he grew closer her breathing elevated, chest rising and falling rapidly.

He leaned past her to pinch off the flame next to the bed, throwing them into darkness, except for the sliver of moonlight peeking through the window and the faint glow from the fireplace.

Sabine didn't need the light to see his face or the lust raging in his eyes. The scent of ocean and spices surrounded her as his arms did the same. "Yer people hate me."

Soft lips brushed hers. "Give 'em time." He kissed a path to her ear and lightly blew.

"They branded me a witch and accused me of workin' spells tae harm their kin."

His voice hummed, "Let me speak the obvious, lassie. Yer a witch." He nipped her earlobe. "'Tis the Beserka blood that frightens 'em."

She angled her head wanting him to bite her again. "Why? The clan accepts ye and the others."

"Ye be a woman."

"Surely—"

Irritation surfaced in the puff of air he released. "Lassie, must we talk of this now? My thoughts are more tae the likin' of havin' my way with ye."

Sharp prickles raced across her flesh. Memories of their night in the glen filled her head. As much as she wanted to deny it, she wanted the same. Destined to be tied to Lachlan, why not make the best of it?

Already her breasts felt heavy, nipples tingling with the thought of his hands playing at their tips. Desire moistened her inner thighs.

When his fingers parted her folds, she was wet and slick.

“Lassie, ye be a mon’s dream come true.” He whisked her into his arms, crossing the room to lay her upon the pillowy bed.

Without hesitating, he began to undress. The sounds of leather sliding against leather only heightened Sabine’s arousal. She loved the scent of rawhide. Shadows rose and fell across his face.

Anticipation was killing her.

The bed creaked beneath his weight. Lissome and sinewy, he crawled toward her, sensual movements of a predator that called to her beast.

She mewled.

He answered with a deep growl. “I need tae taste ye.”

Sabine parted her mouth upon a sigh, ready for his kiss.

When he spread her legs and dipped his head, a squeal squeezed from her lips.

“Relax, lassie.” His warm breath brushed across her moist flesh. “This ye be enjoyin’, I promise.”

“Nay—”

As his wet tongue slid across her slit, her hips flew off the bed in surprise. The strange sensation was wicked—sinful—and she wanted more.

“Nay?” Eyes filled with laughter gazed up the length of her body. He licked another path that sent shivers down her spine. “Is it nay or aye, lassie?”

“Aye,” she released on a breath.

His chuckle filled with male pride.

With a flick of his tongue, he teased the swollen bud, making her stomach flip-flop and tense. Golden hair tickled the inside of her thighs. He pressed deeper, licking and sucking, devouring her. The animalistic sounds he made hummed through her body. Heat simmered across her flesh, her beast waking—needing to mate with his. She felt like at any moment the animal inside her would be unleashed.

“Conall. Please...” Tied into knots, her insides threatened to come undone.

“Lassie, ye taste so good.” His tongue continued to work in and out of her channel.

When he latched on to her clit, her climax burst. Her womb clenched and released, repeatedly. With a cry, her beast roared to life, the sensation of human and animal coming together was beyond anything she could imagine. It was magical, sending shards of bright lights through her body.

In the heights of her orgasm, he moved atop Sabine. His thick, hard cock stretched and penetrated her quim. Fast and hard, he slid in and out.

Breathing labored, he thrust once more before his head lolled backward, lips parting as he released a deep, low groan. His face was tight with what appeared more pain than pleasure. Then he collapsed atop her. Two-hundred pounds of sinewy muscle pressed her deep into the bedding, constricting her breathing, but she wasn't complaining.

Seconds passed. When he moved, he crawled from the bed and padded barefooted across the room to open a chest against the wall. Then he returned.

“Give me yer hand.” He accepted her outstretched hand and slipped a large ruby ring onto her finger. “My mother’s ring. I’d be honored if ye would wear it.”

Sabine couldn’t help being moved by the gesture. The ring fit perfectly, as if meant to be.

A semblance of pride softened his face as he stared at the precious stone glistening on her finger. He leaned over and gently kissed Sabine. The moment was tender and sweet as he moved to sit beside her. Then he took her into his arms.

“Lachlan,” she moaned.

“Conall.”

“Conall, we must talk—”

He stole her words away with another kiss. When their lips parted, he said, “Give ‘em time. It will get better.”

“What about—”

“No more talkin’, woman. I need ye again.”

Chapter Six

A fortnight passed and things at Lachlan Tower became worse—not better.

The afternoon sun was warm against Conall's back as he held the wooden post Ewen hammered into the ground. Each strike sent vibrations through Conall's palms. An animal had attacked several of their cattle. The pen they built would house those injured but still alive until well enough to join the others.

Post securely buried, he picked up another and moved down a ways.

Sabine's presence had borne the blame of the cattle incident, as well as several clanfolk who had fallen ill of late. Many of his people were calling for her return to Loch Tower.

Conall couldn't allow that. With each day, he grew closer and closer to her. She calmed his beast, gave him the strength to face the work required at Lachlan. But was he asking too much of her?

Her sadness was becoming more difficult to hide.

Conall's beast awoke, scenting Sabine near. Alone, she entered the woods carrying a basket. Earlier she had informed him that she and Iris were hunting truffles—mushrooms—for the evening's meal. He was wondering where Iris was when his thoughts were interrupted.

"Bonnie lass." Ewen struck the pole hard with a mallet.

"That she is." Pride filled Conall's chest.

Though the days hadn't been easy for Sabine, she always came to his bed eager and willing. Yet, he knew that in the wee hours of the morning she rose to sit by the window, blindly staring into the dark. Several nights, he heard her crying and rose to comfort her.

She had a good heart. Iris and Cait had discovered it. Now only if the clan could see what he saw in her. She wanted to please them—she wanted to please him.

Ewen took another whack at the pole, driving it deeper. “It dinna bode well the clan’s treatment.”

Ewen was right.

“I canna force their acceptance. Already I’ve threatened half the clan.” Conall braced himself for another strike against the pole he held.

Like a boil festering, either the clan or Sabine would come to a head. Someone would break.

God help them if it was Sabine.

At times, he felt strong energy surrounding her beast. She had restrained the animal, as well as her magic, at his request. Like all Beserkas, emotions triggered her totem. He prayed the clan would accept her before she released the fury of her true form—or worse, he released his own.

“’Tis rumblings about.” Ewen glanced at Conall.

Tension tightened the muscles in his shoulders. “What now—”

Sabine’s scream halted his words.

Sabine’s heart stuttered. Torn and bloody, Iris’s battered body lay upon the ground. Like with the cattle, the scent of an animal was present. Yet something masked its identity.

Anger and fear collided, tearing the beast from Sabine. Where the change had always been a welcoming peace, this time it was compelling

and violent, shifting and twisting her muscles and limbs until an angry black panther stood in her place. Her ruined gown lay at her feet.

The roar that tore from Sabine's throat was raw with emotion. Standing over Iris, she heard the weak flutter of the child's heart.

Desperation pulled at Sabine's soul. Her magic rose like an eminent wave to blanket Iris with every healing property she possessed. As the invisible force surrounded the child, Sabine inched closer to lie vigilantly beside Iris.

Eacharn must have heard her cry as he broke through the copse of trees to her right.

From a distance away he stopped. "Ye killed the child," he accused.

Sabine didn't have time to protest as he began to shape-shift into his family totem of a wolf. The red and gold plaid he wore draped across his shoulders fell to the ground. Fingertips turned into sharp claws as he yanked at his shirt, only managing to rip and tear it from his body. His breeches were shredded by the time he stepped out of his boots.

Rich red fur sprung from his pores and began to cover his body as the change was completed. Growling, he hunched low and began to approach, every muscle and tendon tight as he prepared to attack.

Sabine released a mournful cry of protest. It didn't stop Eacharn as he continued to stalk her.

Sabine lunged to all four feet. Ears lying flat against her head, with a watchful eye she waited.

Iris couldn't be disturbed. Nor Sabine's magic as it continued to heal the wounded and bleeding areas within the child.

Eacharn perched low.

Sabine sensed his impending attack, when she heard the pounding of feet and raised voices. Teeth bared, she snarled to warn Eacharn back. Then she glanced quickly at the oncoming crowd.

Conall, Ewen and several of the clansfolk arrived.

Gasps of disbelief followed by accusations. “The witch killed Iris.”

They thought she did this dastardly deed.

“Sabine!” Conall’s voice snapped out at her like a whip. “Back away from the child.” Wariness in his eyes disappeared. Instead, the beast shimmered in their depths. “Now,” he demanded firmly.

Her magic was stronger in cat form. Iris needed her.

Sabine released another mournful mewl. Somehow, she had to get him to realize her innocence and that Iris should remain untouched.

As he approached, she whimpered, before releasing soft non-aggressive puffing sounds from her nostrils. She drew protectively to Iris’s limp body.

Sabine’s gaze was cautious, alert, as she leaned forward and began to lick Iris’s wounds. Among the metallic taste of the child’s blood a bitter flavor rose, sending a tremor through Sabine—animal saliva—but not.

Beserka

A woman cried out in horror at the ministrations Sabine performed.

An impatient growl rumbled from Eacharn. In wolf form he crouched low, ready and poised to spring.

Conall’s outstretched palm halted his cousin’s attack.

Sabine breathed a sigh of relief. She didn’t want to kill Eacharn to save Iris’s life, but she would.

“She’s protectin’ Iris. Not harmin’ the child,” Conall said, as he ventured forward.

Ewen stepped to his side. “Truth or what ye wish it tae be, my friend?”

“Truth. ‘Tis the puffing sounds. She uses it tae call her friends tae her side.” Conall knelt down beside Sabine. She purred softly as she continued to lick Iris.

"The child needs attention," Ewen insisted.

"Nay. Look. Her wounds are healin'." Conall's eyes widened with wonder.

Blood stopped flowing from the angry tears in Iris's skin and began to pull together and close. Sabine could feel the child's internal wounds mending. Part of the healing process was sedative in nature, rendering Iris unconscious while the worst of the injuries remained.

"Tis wrong," someone yelled.

Conall picked up the remnants of her gown. "Sabine." She'd done all she could do for the child so she let the transformation slip over her. Quickly he wrapped the gown around her.

Her appearance set the gathering clan into hurling insults and names at her.

"Witch."

"Abomination."

With a growl of contention, Conall silenced them. "Hear me. The next person tae curse my wife will die at my hands. There is no proof Sabine hurt Iris, only evidence that she sought tae help the child."

Eacharn snarled as the change from wolf to human rippled over him. Bare-assed, he reached for his red and gold plaid and wrapped it around his waist. He glowered at Sabine, his glare filled with contempt.

Conall didn't care for the wild look in the peoples' eyes as the crowd began to close around them. They wanted blood. Sabine's blood.

"Cousin, ye know what must be done," Eacharn whispered in his ear. "If ye canna prove her innocence, she must die for her sins."

Conall couldn't believe what he was hearing. They wanted Sabine's, his wife and soulmate's, death?

His beast partially slipped. Fangs pushed through gum and bone, a soft down of golden fur sprung from his pores as he retained his human form.

Surprise filtered over the crowd and they stumbled backward.

“Dinna anger me,” he roared, giving no purchase.

Hugging her tattered dress closely, Sabine said, “This is not of my doin’. I would never hurt Iris.” Sorrow rimmed her reddened eyes.

“Can Iris be moved?” he asked.

“Yes, but gently. There’s much damage.” Sabine placed her hand on Conall’s arm. “An animal dinna do this.”

He frowned, as he gathered Iris into his arms. She felt so fragile, the stench of blood strong. “What are ye sayin’?”

“Beserka,” she murmured for only him to hear.

The lines in his forehead deepened. “Nay. I would know.”

He felt the tremor in her hand as she added, “He hides his scent.”

“Impossible.” Conall would be able to scent his own kind. If not, who would have the ability to mask their scent?

Cautiously, but in haste, he made his way back to the castle. Sabine and the entire clan followed.

As he bedded the child down in a spare bedchamber, Sabine moved quickly to stand vigil. “I’ll stay with her.”

Eacharn motioned Conall across the room. “Ye canna allow this, mon. Yer woman will kill the child before she is allowed tae speak the truth.”

“Be careful, Cousin. My patience is growing thin,” Conall warned as turmoil churned inside.

“Aye, as it be for all.” Eacharn didn’t back down. “Ye must see the truth for the child’s sake.”

If Eacharn was right then Sabine couldn’t allow the child to wake.

“Ye must treat yer wife as ye would any others accused of this crime.” Eacharn paused. “The dungeon, until her innocence is revealed or yer ready to merit her punishment.”

A thousand stones weighed Conall’s chest.

The dungeon?

Ice slid through his veins. He couldn’t do such a thing to Sabine.

“Conall.” Her voice was tight as she approached him. “Do what ye must, but dinna leave Iris attended by one of our kind.” Her sullen gaze shot to Eacharn.

Insulted, Eacharn raised his hand.

Sabine flinched.

Conall caught his cousin’s wrist midair. “Dinna force me tae kill ye.” He let the menacing tone in his voice remove all doubt—he meant it.

Then he faced Sabine. “I canna lock ye in the dungeon.”

She gently cupped his face. “Ye have no choice.”

Chapter Seven

Cold and damp. The dungeon held no comfort for Sabine. Nor did the dour expression on Conall's face. It was as bleak as the gray walls surrounding her.

With a satisfied smirk, Eacharn stood in the distance, overseeing her imprisonment.

"Sabine," Conall whispered next to her ear. "If I canna prove yer innocence tae the clan, I will return at nightfall and take ye tae Loch Tower."

"Conall—"

"I canna let ye die. Nor will I give ye up."

A shudder raced up her back as she pulled her torn gown closer around her body. She didn't know if it was from the caring she heard in Conall's voice or the calls for her death that rang from the courtyard.

This canna be happenin'.

He held her tight, as if he would never let her go, but he did. "I will return." He kissed her soundly on the lips, and then turned and walked through the open door that clanged behind him. The screech of the lock moving into place made her eyes mist. Conall faced her again, then without a word left, taking Eacharn with him.

Standing in the middle of the cell, she looked about. The dirty pallet in the corner spoke of longevity and she didn't plan on being around to use it. Nor would she allow Conall to choose between her or his clan. He

was chieftain. Sooner or later, the truth would be revealed. She just needed to buy some time.

A mouse skittered across her foot and she squealed, followed by an ironic chuckle.

As like is tae like.

A mouse I shall be.

Tingles of sensation spread across her skin. Her gown dropped to the floor. The shrinking transformation completed in a heartbeat. She twitched her whiskers and, as a mouse, she slipped through the steel bars easily. The door lay ajar. As she squeezed through the opening, she came to a sudden halt.

Ewen stood guard.

Cautiously, she moved past him.

"M'lady."

Sabine froze, turning her tiny head to gaze at Ewen.

An uneasy smile touched his mouth. "Lachlan will not be pleased of yer choice, but if ye must go, move with haste."

Saints preserve! The man recognized her.

Her eyes moistened. Conall had placed someone he trusted to watch over her.

If she returned home, she might never see Conall again. Then again, if she didn't leave now she might not see the light of tomorrow.

Without a second thought, she ran for the stairs. Freedom led in the direction of the front entrance, but Sabine couldn't leave, not without checking on Iris once more.

Little mouse legs left a lot to be desired. She shifted quickly into her domestic cat form and leaped up the stairs. As she approached Iris's chamber door, Eacharn spoke quietly to the guard.

With a lightning flash movement, Eacharn grabbed the man's head and twisted. Muscle and bone popped, startling Sabine as the guard tumbled lifelessly to the ground. Eacharn heaved the man over his shoulder and stepped into Iris's room.

Sabine barely slipped inside before the door closed. In a hurry, she lost her footing, scrambling to hide behind a large chest.

A dull thud sounded, as the guard's body fell from Eacharn's shoulder. Then he moved to Iris's bedside.

"Troublesome lass. Ye be a hard one tae kill." Eacharn's words lit a fire beneath Sabine. Before she realized it, her body stretched and transformed into a panther. She growled low and long.

Eacharn spun around. "Witch." An ominous smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "'Tis my lucky day. After I dispatch ye, the lassie be next, then me dear ol' cousin."

Conall?

As Eacharn rounded the bed where the sleeping child lay, Sabine crouched low, ears plastered against her head. Her tail twitched. She'd kill this man before he touched Iris or Conall.

Slowly, his gaze slid across her panther form. "Ye be a beauty. Tae bad fates matched ye tae Conall instead of me." He took a step toward Sabine. "Yer magic would be handy. Impressed I was at what ye did for the lassie. Nosy chit threatened tae reveal me."

Sabine's stomach churned. Her tail moved faster in agitation.

A frown pinched his face. "If only Conall had remained gone. The clan is mine."

This wasn't about her lineage. It was about Eacharn's desire to be chieftain.

The change swept over Eacharn fast. One minute a man—the next a red wolf, clothes discarded at his feet.

Sabine was ready. Her body was a mass of tense muscle. Her upper lip curled in a snarl, baring her teeth.

They both lunged simultaneously.

She caught a glimpse of something tawny before it crashed hard against her side. She skidded across the floor, feet scrabbling to gain purchase. When she did, Conall in wolf form stood between her and Eacharn.

Eacharn attacked, but Conall was quick jumping out of the way.

Then Iris cried out in her sleep.

Conall's head snapped toward the sound and Eacharn lunged for his throat. Conall went down beneath the massive jaws of the red wolf.

The transformation surged through Sabine, rendering her to human form. She was unconcerned with her nakedness. Her fingers closed into a fist as she reached mentally for Eacharn's heart. He cried out in pain, releasing Conall to grasp his chest and stumble backward.

The man was strong fighting her magic. On unsteady feet, Eacharn moved toward Conall's unmoving form. The coppery scent of blood filled the air.

Sabine flung her hand through the air, lifting Eacharn with her magic and tossing him hard against the wall.

Thud! He yelped, falling to the floor.

In disbelief, he rose crawling toward Conall, determined to finish what he started.

Conall's death.

Sabine had never killed another. She didn't want Eacharn to be her first. Yet he left her no choice as he neared Conall. She wouldn't watch her husband die.

With another pass of her hand, her invisible force ripped Eacharn off his feet and slammed him against the wall once more. This time when he slithered down the side he didn't rise.

Sabine ran to Conall's side. Blood caked his throat. Quickly, she shifted into animal form, sending all her magic into Conall so he would live.

Silent tears fell from her eyes as she waited to see if her magic would again answer her prayers.

Chapter Eight

The bedchamber was dark. Conall woke to a scratchy throat, dry, in need of water. His hand skimmed the bed linens. He needed to know his wife lay beside him, but he was alone. Glimpses of memory flashed in his head. Iris wounded and bleeding. Hurt in Sabine's eyes as she looked at him through steel bars. Sabine and Eacharn poised to battle.

"*Sabine!*" He jerked to a sitting position, his head spinning. He swayed and fell back upon the pillow.

"Ye must not move in haste." Sabine's sweet voice caressed his ears. She sat in the shadows next to the softly glowing hearth. Firelight danced across her face as she rose, dressed in only her chemise.

He rolled to his side. "Why are ye not abed?"

She brushed her palm across his forehead. "I dinna want tae disturb ye."

He caught her by the wrist. Their eyes met. "It disturbs me that yer not beside me."

"How do ye feel?"

With a yank, he pulled her next to him upon the bed. "With my hands." He saw the smile that teased the corner of her mouth. He kissed the hollow of her shoulder. Then he tugged at her chemise. "Remove this."

"Nay. Ye must recover fully."

"Ye doubt my ability, woman?" he growled playfully.

Laughter like bells upon a breeze caressed his ears. "Nay. M'lord. 'Tis it wise?"

"T'would be foolish to have me strip ye naked."

"I see yer point." She slipped from his arms and stood before him. Slowly, she raised her chemise, baring her glorious body, inch by inch.

He loved her long legs. Firm calves, knees, slender thighs and hips rounded perfectly to fit into his hands. She moved leisurely, revealing the dark, curly patch of hair, a tucked waist and breasts that made his mouth water, as she slipped the chemise off and threw it aside.

He breathed in the fragrance of honey and cloves and woman. "Beautiful." Arms wide, he welcomed her into his embrace. He rolled her upon her back, pressing his length to hers. "Lord, ye frightened me."

In the dark, their eyes met. "Me?" He saw the worry in her gaze clearly.

"Aye." He pulled a strand of her hair. "When I saw ye in Iris's bedchamber confronting Eacharn, my heart stopped." He paused. "Does he live?"

All color drained from her face. "Nay. I'm sorry—"

He placed a finger against her lips. "'Tis I who am sorry. I knew not of his treachery."

"Ye know?"

"Aye. I heard him." He leaned forward, his mouth a breath away from hers. "How's Iris?"

"Well." Her lips brushed his. Their eyes still locked.

Then he drew back sharply. Damnation take him. He'd been unconscious for some time. He had left Sabine alone to face his angry clan. "How did ye fair with the clan?"

Color dotted her cheeks. "Ewen is quite persuasive."

A whisper of jealousy touched Conall.

"He told of how it was." She continued, "And he said he'd kill the person who lay hands on me."

Conall burst into laughter. "I owe him much. I owe ye more."

Her brows burrowed with confusion.

"Ye accepted what fate decreed and remained faithful tae me through hardship."

She cupped his face. "Fate may have brought us together, but 'tis my heart that keeps me here." Her eyes grew misty.

Did she speak of love?

Something in Conall's chest tightened. "I care deeply for ye, lassie."

Before she could speak, he captured her mouth with his.

The kiss was tender, a soft endowment of oneself to another. She swallowed the knot of emotion in her throat, returning his sentiment as she angled her head to deepen the caress.

Callused fingers smoothed across her back, until he held her tightly. His knee wedged between her thighs, parting her legs as he moved between them.

His cock was hard against her moist folds. In gentle strokes, he rocked against her cradle.

Anticipation drew her nipples to hard peaks, sending stinging rays of sensation throughout her breasts to tighten low in her belly. She needed him buried deep within. Still it was almost serene the way he held her, not asking for anything but a moment of closeness.

The night existed for the two of them alone.

His sigh was one of contentment, as he released her to kneel between her thighs. Then he looped his arms beneath her knees, spreading her wide, before his firm erection pressed against her slit. Slowly, he thrust

his hips, stretching and filling her, drawing out the sensation until she felt like she would scream.

“Conall.” She breathed his name. Desire coiled into a tight ache begging for release.

His eyes were pools of blue intensely watching as their bodies came together. His nostrils flared, and she knew he scented her arousal, because he growled. Golden braids framed his sexy face. Muscles in his arms tightened and clenched beneath skin kissed by the sun, as his fingers dug into her hips.

He was beautiful.

When he reached to fondle the swollen bud between her legs, she nearly lost control. Her back arched as she held her breath, to prolong and heighten their coupling. Her body drew taut around him.

“Ah, lassie.” He rubbed the sensitive organ harder, faster. “Release for me. Let me hear ye scream.”

Sabine couldn’t hold back the cry of ecstasy if she had wanted to. Her body felt like a glass suddenly dropped to shatter into millions of pieces. Sharp, penetrating sensations pushed, pulled and scattered to all parts of her body, awakening her beast with a roar.

She felt her fangs burst from her gums. The animal in her moved beneath her skin seeking Conall’s. When they met, Conall groaned low and long, filling her with his warm seed and triggering another passage of ripples to wash over her.

Their beasts intertwined, mated, came together—to become one.

“I love ye, witch.” Conall’s voice was scratchy with emotion that glistened in his eyes, before he collapsed atop her.

“As I do ye, my beastie warrior.” And she meant every word.

About the Author

A taste of the erotic, a measure of daring and a hint of laughter describe Mackenzie McKade's novels. She sizzles the pages with scorching sex, fantasy and deep emotion that will touch you and keep you immersed until the end. Whether her stories are contemporaries, futuristics or fantasies, this Arizona native thrives on giving you the ultimate erotic adventure.

When not traveling through her vivid imagination, she's spending time with three beautiful daughters, two devilishly handsome grandsons, and the man of her dreams. She loves to write, enjoys reading, and can't wait 'til summer. Boating and jet skiing are top on her list of activities. Add to that laughter and if mischief is in order—Mackenzie's your gal!

To learn more about Mackenzie McKade, please visit www.mackenziemckade.com. Send an email to Mackenzie at Mackenzie@mackenziemckade.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Mackenzie!

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Beginnings: A Samhain Anthology

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Beginnings: A Touch of Magic

© 2006 Cassandra Kane

A race against time to save a planet—will the price be too heavy to pay?

Captain Tirana Albasta leads the last scouting mission to mystery planet Samhain, which has already swallowed two previous missions and a starship full of New Wiccan colonists, Lalith's People.

Determined to keep the planet from UA Special Forces' harsh military control, Tirana finds much more than she expected. For the descendants of Lalith's People have split into two separate societies—the anti-magic Priests and the magical True People—and she has just been caught in the crossfire.

Complicating matters is her attraction to Loren, the broodingly handsome True People witch who ignites passions she has never before experienced, and who just might make leaving Samhain impossible in more ways than one...

Beginnings: A Warrior's Witch

© 2006 Mackenzie McKade

Legacy bonds them—betrayal will test them—but, love and a little bit of magic will keep them together.

Gifted with both Berserka and Wicce heritage, Sabine wonders which legacy will determine her fate. A path of freedom and independence? Or will the Berserka curse tie her to one man, not of her choosing?

After his father's death, Conall returns to Scotland to take his rightful place as chieftain. Fate steps in and unleashes his hot-blooded lust on one obstinate woman resolved on defying destiny.

A forced marriage binds them. Desire and their animalistic nature draw them together. But someone is threatening to destroy the fiery love growing between them. Salt in the water, poison in the wine has everyone looking askew at Sabine, including her husband.

When the clan demands Sabine's death, Conall must choose between family and the woman he loves.

Beginnings: Babe in Woods

© 2006 Lorelei James

Animal attraction takes on a whole new meaning...

Manhattanite Lacy Buchanan is out to prove she's a tough cookie by signing up for a survivalist hiking trip in Wyoming's Bighorn Mountains. The last thing she expected was to get lost, forcing her to spend the rest of the hike alone with surly, too-sexy mountain man, Becker, who blames her entirely for their predicament. After Becker saves her from a rattlesnake, and gently calms her fears, Lacy feels lucky to be in his experienced hands.

But Sam Becker isn't really a hiking expert. He's strictly the moneyman in Back To Nature Guided Hiking Tours and a last minute, temporary fill-in guide. He can't believe his bad luck when his reluctant charge—a mouthy, but hot, blonde bombshell—pulverizes their only compass, destroying their chances of following the coordinates to base camp. Yet something about Lacy's trusting nature makes him want fulfill her idea he's her rugged hero.

As Sam and Lacy attempt to find a way out of the treacherous mountain passes, their natural instincts take them...farther away from civilized behavior and straight into the mating calls of the wild.

Beginnings: Night Music

© 2006 Charlene Teglia

When death marked her, he offered her rebirth...

Meghan Davies has been living a dream as the bass player for the all-female hit rock band, The Sirens. But the dream becomes a nightmare with the discovery that cancer, undetected and now too far gone, heralds the end of everything.

Romney Kearns has been watching the sharp-tongued, flame haired woman from afar, wanting, but never approaching because he can offer her nothing but death.

When he discovers that death already has her marked, he sets out on All Hallow's Eve to seduce her, claim her, and make her willing to accept his dark offer. An alternative. Not life as she's known it, but a kind of rebirth. Eternity with him and immortality for her to make night music.

Beginnings: Ritual Love

© 2006 Kate Davies

A lost woman. A hunted man. On a night of forbidden rituals, the veil between past and present lifts—and their worlds will never be the same.

Scientist Moira Sinclair doesn't believe in magic. Or at least she hasn't since childhood. She's only come to Iona in remembrance of her long-deceased grandmother, the last person who encouraged her fanciful side. But now she's stumbled onto a secret druid ritual—and into another time.

Aedan Ap Crannog is furious to discover an outsider spying on their sacred, banned Samhain rites. With her strange garb and stranger mannerisms, Moira is unlike any woman he's ever known. But she could cause trouble for him and the people who follow him in the ancient ways. To prevent her from sounding the alarm, he takes her captive, hiding her in the labyrinth of caves along the far shore.

Despite their differences, sparks burn between them as brightly as the Samhain bonfire. Now captive and captor must find a way to bridge the centuries before the magic disappears with the dawn...

Beginnings: The Last Prophecy

© 2006 Jennie Andrus

Hours before being murdered Maddy gives her last prophecy—her sister's death and salvation.

The MacElwain sisters had always been different. In search of a “normal” life, Lottie did her best to ignore her crazy sister, until Maddy predicts Lottie’s death. Suddenly Maddy is dead and Lottie has a very short shelf life and, according to Maddy, she’s going to need to find a moose if she wants to survive. Unfortunately, moose aren’t too plentiful in downtown Toronto.

Not willing to trust her life to an animal, Lottie runs to the shores of Newfoundland, where danger, love and acceptance wait for her to fulfill the last prophecy of Mad Maddy MacElwain

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