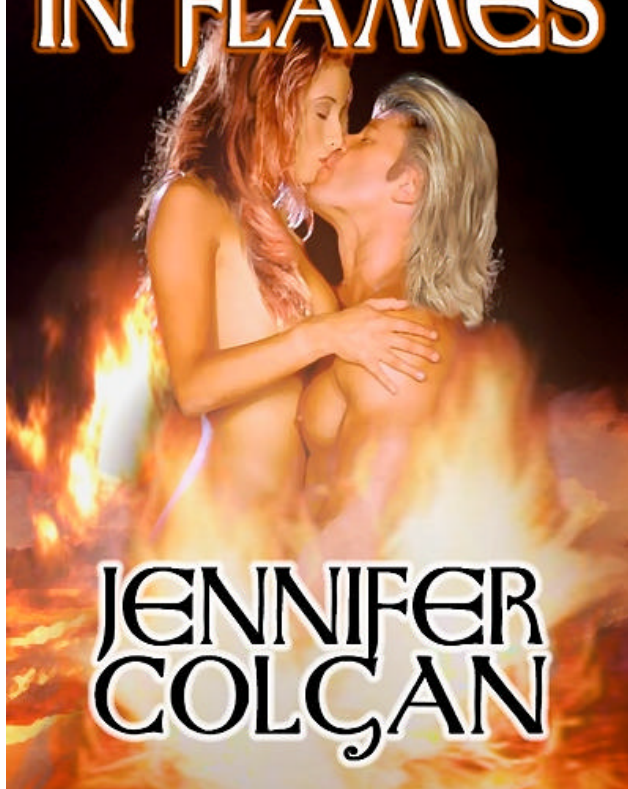


CONJURED IN FLAMES



JENNIFER
COLGAN

CONJURED IN FLAMES

The coachman shivered as he urged his horses faster through the darkest part of the forest. Feeble moonlight trickled through the night-blackened leaves overhead. It fell in small, silver pools here and there, barely large enough to illuminate the deeply rutted road that led to Lord Rodan's estate.

Some unseen creature howled. It was a lonely sound, full of longing. In response, the coachman's young heart began to thud in a rhythm more frantic than that of the dozen hooves of his team. Did the sound originate from some distant glen? Or might it have been a trick of the wicked thing that rode beneath him in the coach?

Those who had captured her had assured him that she could not break the chains that bound the carriage doors. They swore she was weak from days spent in their darkest dungeon, unable to renew her power. Nevertheless, he feared her.

He was certain he could feel her wrath. It was directed at him and every living thing in the Southern Kingdom. He was terrified that she would find a way to escape before he delivered her to her new master.

He urged the horses faster yet and clutched the talisman that the men of Galadrin had given him for protection. It was only a little farther to the castle. He could make it before moonset if he kept the pace...

ALSO BY JENNIFER COLGAN
(writing as Bernadette Gardner)

Renna's Sacrifice

CONJURED IN FLAMES

BY

JENNIFER COLGAN

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*For Karen P.,
without whom there might not
be an ending.*

PROLOGUE

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* * *

Every tortuous bump sent shock waves of pain through her delicate frame. Graciela had finally ceased cursing the vile creature that drove the windowless black coach in which she had been imprisoned. She had fallen silent now. Her voice was raw from screaming, but her thoughts for him were still dark and dangerous. She would have cursed him all the way to Keragar, but she realized she had to conserve her strength to complete her most ambitious sorcery.

It wouldn't be easy for her, chained within the nearly airless box of the special coach. She'd been hoarding her power for weeks, letting the sniveling fools who had captured her think their dark dungeon and iron manacles had completely weakened her.

The spell she had planned would utterly drain her strength, but if it worked—and it would, it had to—she would be free again, and she could walk in the sunlight tomorrow and replenish her power.

She began the incantation, which came out in staccato bursts as the damnable wheels trundled over rocks and ruts at breakneck speed. The whimpering boy they'd forced to ferry her to Rodan's lair was so frightened of her he could barely drive. She'd be lucky if the coach didn't careen into a tree before she worked her magic.

Graciela held her breath after the last of the ancient words left her lips. The carriage surged forward for another few nauseating seconds.

Then she heard it.

The scream of the coachman came just as the terrified horses reared up. Graciela could see nothing, but instinct told her that her incantation

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had worked.

She smelled smoke, heard the crackle of flames, then tasted blood as the carriage toppled and violently threw her from her seat.

For a moment, the petrified horses dragged the upended coach along the road before they broke free of their worn leather harnesses. Graciela heard their terrified hoof beats receding, followed by a tortured moan from the coachman.

She smiled.

After a moment, when she heard nothing more, she rose unsteadily to her knees and pushed on the door of the carriage, now above her head. The chains that bound it fell away, broken by the force of being dragged across the road. Graciela climbed out and lowered her lithe body between the still-spinning wheels.

To Graciela, after enduring so many weeks in Galadrin's darkest dungeon, the forest looked as bright as day. The few drops of moonlight that spilled across the forest floor seemed like sparks of silver flame. Vaguely disoriented by her tumultuous journey, she cautiously looked around to get her bearings. What she saw pleased her immensely.

The horses had long gone. Tangled in the reins lay the coachman. In his gray cloak, his slender body looked like a fallen log at the side of the road.

Blood seeped from a wound on his temple, and also from the corner of his thin, colorless lips. He groaned again. Graciela lifted one slender foot and kicked him. His head snapped back, but he made no further sound.

Satisfied, she turned her attention to the smoldering scorch marks that marred the road ahead, and the crumpled body that lay in the center of a soot-blackened circle.

With a cautious glance into the shadows at the side of the road, Graciela approached the pale, seemingly lifeless body of the woman

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she had conjured with her most powerful spell. Though the moonlight was sparse and known to play tricks on the eye, she saw her effort had produced a fair result.

They were of approximately equal height and weight, or at least it appeared so on cursory glance. The woman had Graciela's copper-colored hair and upswept brows. Her pouting lower lip and high cheekbones were familiar as well. Graciela did not reach down to check the color of the woman's eyes—rumors abounded, and no one had come close enough to her in years to be certain that her eyes were the color of moss-tinged earth. Many thought them yellow, like a cat's. Others insisted they were an otherworldly shade of lavender or a feral orange, but most believed they were soulless black. Graciela had no desire to disabuse them of that notion.

The woman's clothes were strange. A skirt the color of ocean sand rode high on her thighs and a blouse of crimson hung open at her neck. Delicate gold hoops sparkled in her ear lobes and her fingernails, clean and perfectly shaped, were a healthy, shiny pink.

Graciela raised an eyebrow. Could her magical net have snared a *sorceress* from another realm? If so, all the better. If this creature had any power, she could use it against Rodan and that would only further Graciela's cause.

The woman stirred and muttered something Graciela hoped was not an incantation. She stepped into the shadows, resisting the urge to stay and watch what might happen. Tempted as she was, she couldn't risk it. The spell had drained her, as she had expected, but not enough to numb her to the unpleasant tingle at the back of her neck that heralded Rodan's approach. Perhaps he'd seen the fleeing horses, or heard their screams. Or perhaps he'd merely planned to meet the coachman and provide a proper escort to Keragar. It didn't matter. Graciela felt his approach and his proximity galvanized her.

With a final glance at her unfortunate twin, she fled into the dark

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recesses of the forest.

CHAPTER 1

Gillian moaned and uttered a mild curse as she rolled onto her stomach. She wished it were still the middle of the night so she could burrow under the pillows and work her way back into the dream she'd been having. No such luck.

When she reached out, instead of encountering one of the soft mounds of crisp, cotton-covered goose down that inhabited her bed, her fingers closed over what felt like a jagged rock. The unexpected sensation jolted her brain, but left her still partially trapped in a fuzzy dream state.

Irritation brought her closer to full consciousness when a pungent, sulfuric smell invaded her foggy senses. Vaguely, she wondered if someone had left the Dumpster behind her apartment building open again.

More stretching made her realize that her body ached in places she'd forgotten she had. Worse, a crystalline grit in her mouth tasted

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like dirt rather than the minty fresh “whitening crystals” they put in toothpaste these days.

What the...

Oh... God! She’d forgotten for a moment. She’d been so far out of it that she had dreamt she was at home in bed.

She’d spent the day trotting from one tumbled-down hole-in-the-wall to another with a plastic smile on her face. It had been a struggle to keep the torrential rain off her new silk blouse, a challenge she’d ultimately failed. She’d been tired, hungry and drenched by mid-afternoon. Typical. It stood to reason her traumatized brain would create a safe, comfortable haven for her.

Think back, she commanded herself as she took a mental inventory of body parts. *How exactly did I get here? Where are the firemen?*

She *had* called them—at least she remembered dialing 911 on her cell phone—shortly after she arrived at the fourth stop on her appointment list.

The former Swiss Chalet Motel, on Route 279 just outside of Pittsburgh, looked like a half-eaten gingerbread village. Abandoned for years, it was finally up for sale and Gillian was going to show it to Carson McNelty. The local land developer had been itching to get his hands on the place for the past year.

McNelty was supposed to meet her at the property at 2:30. At 2:45, the heavens opened up and a deluge of Biblical proportions pounded the roof of her little Toyota. Water cascaded across the parking lot, carrying with it all manner of debris from the piles of garbage that had collected against the deteriorating buildings.

Gillian remembered thinking, *If this guy pays three million for this place, he’s out of his mind.* Then she’d recalled that three million would bring her a tidy commission and McNelty certainly had it to spare.

She’d been waiting in the car for his huge, black SUV to pull up,

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idly surfing through the radio stations, when something drew her eyes to the motel's tiny office. A bright flicker, visible through the gray curtain of rain.

Fire.

Oh... Gillian cringed at the memory. She had fished her cell phone out of her purse and made the call while two voices argued in her head.

The pragmatist said, *At least it's raining. How bad can the fire get?*

The Good Samaritan argued, *Do something! It's not that big a fire and there's an extinguisher right inside the door.*

The pragmatist said, *Fire damage will knock down the sale price.*

The Good Samaritan said, *With your commission, you can afford to get the damned blouse dry-cleaned.* Well, maybe that was the voice of the pragmatist. They both sounded so much alike.

The Good Samaritan had won the battle and Gillian got out of the car. Where the hell is McNelty, anyway? she wondered irritably as her day went from bad to worse.

The force of the rain took her breath away. It immediately plastered the supple fabric of her blouse to her skin. Her hair sagged and her shoes flooded as she ran across the intervening few yards to the office door. With slippery fingers, she managed to push the key into the lock.

She flung open the door and grabbed the red canister that hung from a bent bracket on the wall beside it. From inside the office, the blaze actually looked a lot larger than it had from across the parking lot. It didn't make sense though. Was the wooden counter on fire, or the linoleum-tiled floor? Maybe it was an electrical fire. That might explain its suddenness and the strange odor of the smoke.

There wasn't time to ponder too many possibilities of how the blaze started. Gillian snapped the safety ring on the extinguisher and pointed the nozzle at the rising flames.

The headlines would read: *Heroic real estate agent saves multi-million dollar property from destructive blaze. Arson suspected.*

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Nothing came out of the nozzle.

Gillian shook the heavy canister and repositioned her finger on the trigger. The flames leapt higher. Black, oily smoke began to rise from the debris on the floor. The smell grew stronger. It just didn't fit. It was heady like brimstone, not ozone. It choked her and made her certain the fire was the work of vandals.

No matter how hard she pressed on the trigger, nothing came out of the extinguisher. Gillian dropped it in annoyance. The thing was probably fifty years old.

As she began looking for something to smother the flames, she heard the sirens. The sound stopped her search. *Good. Let the fire department take care of it.*

When she turned around, the headlines she imagined abruptly changed: *Damn fool dies in six-alarm fire. Film at 11:00.*

The flames surrounded her, growing taller by the second. She screamed, and in response, she imagined she heard the whinnying of horses. Before Gillian could think of what to do next, everything around her went black.

Now, she had no idea how long ago that was. Everything was still black, but now a cool breeze raised goose flesh on her damp skin and a mossy, woody odor filled her nose.

She heard hoof beats, and when she finally pushed herself to a sitting position her vision swam dizzily.

She braced herself on the ground and blinked. The boxy black shadow nearby was definitely a horse-drawn carriage of some kind, but it lay on its side, one door flopped back on broken hinges.

She turned her head to take in the scenery. The canopy of leaves high above was dark as ink, and the night sounds were close and curious. The dirt road beneath her was scorched in a perfect circle around her body.

I'm in a coma, Gillian decided. It was the only reasonable

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explanation. She'd fainted in the office, probably from the strange fumes. Smoke inhalation had made her delirious.

Gillian had no time to contemplate further. The hoof beats grew louder, and she scuttled out of the way when an enormous, dappled stallion bounded out of the darkness. Her breath left her in a startled whoosh as the gray and white horse reared up in front of her.

The rider skillfully managed to keep the beast from trampling her. The massive hooves merely scattered a cloud of dust in her direction. As the horse calmed, the man in the saddle shouted something over his shoulder to a companion who galloped up behind him on a smaller horse.

In rapt surprise, Gillian stared up at the first horseman. He carried himself like only the aristocracy could. His face, though shadowed, looked handsome, despite the expression of smug self-assurance. His outfit, a dark cloak and breeches and a crisp linen shirt, spoke of nobility. Gillian would have smiled at him, but the look of barely controlled disdain he leveled at her didn't warrant a friendly greeting.

He pulled his horse to a nervous stop and dismounted in a fluid motion that belied his familiarity with the move. His long cloak swirled behind him as he strode across the blackened circle to stand over her.

"So close to freedom again, Graciela. And so far. You should have run when you had the chance, rather than linger here to survey your handiwork." His voice was smooth, a deep baritone laced with sarcasm and contempt.

"Huh?"

Gillian inched back in the dirt as the man leaned over her. He grabbed her wrist and yanked her to her feet. Shocked, and still a little dizzy, she stumbled and came up hard against his broad chest. Her hands met a wall of rock-hard muscle.

She looked up defiantly into his crystal blue eyes, and the look he gave her in return heated her blood, even as his words sent a chill down

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to the tips of her toes.

“Make no mistake, you will not escape from *me* ...ever.”

CHAPTER 2

Gillian's heartbeat stuttered when the man scooped her into his arms and deposited her on the back of the stallion. She teetered a bit, too mesmerized by him to think about hanging on. He stood below her, his head even with her thigh, his attention on the scene around them.

When the horse pranced nervously, he clutched the animal's reins in one large hand and calmed the beast with soothing words. His voice became low, cajoling and sexy.

Gillian watched curiously as his companion, a barrel-chested man with graying hair and deep-set, black eyes, dismounted from his own horse and stalked along the edge of the road. He tightly pulled his brown cloak around him as he walked, as if to ward off a chill. She thought it strange since, despite the light breeze, the temperature in the forest felt comfortable. Gillian followed his movements with her eyes. When his gaze swept the scene, it skipped over her as though she wasn't there.

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“Lord Rodan,” he called, kneeling beside what looked like an ash-covered log at the base of a thick, gnarled tree. “It’s the coachman.”

Gillian found the saddle horn and held on as the man called Rodan gently led the stallion across the road. Too stunned by the circumstances to know what to do, she only watched mutely and concentrated on staying on the slippery, polished saddle between her legs. She made a vain attempt to straighten her skirt, now bunched uncomfortably at the top of her thighs. It had ridden up when he’d pitched her onto the horse.

“He’s dead, Milord.” The gray-haired man’s voice drew Gillian’s attention to the ground. She winced as he rolled the body of what appeared to be a teenage boy onto his back, revealing a narrow face partially covered with blood. “Neck’s broken.”

Rodan looked at Gillian, his glance as sharp as a blade. “His is the last death you’ll be responsible for...save your own.”

“I...you...I didn’t kill him!” Gillian choked out the words. She hadn’t even known the boy was there. How could Rodan blame her for his death?

“You may not have put your hands on him, or your vile magick to him, but whatever you did here, you’re responsible.” Rodan looked away and gestured to his companion. “Madran, take him. We owe him a proper burial. In the morning, we will send word to his family, and some money to ease their loss.”

“Aye.” The other man nodded and stooped to gather the body into his arms.

“Sit forward, Graciela,” Rodan commanded in a voice so devoid of emotion, that Gillian wondered how it could have come from the same man who had just spoken to her with such contempt.

She obeyed without thought, but when he swung his body up into the saddle behind her, and one steely arm closed around her waist, she came back to her senses.

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“You...obviously have me confused with someone else. I’m not Graciela. I’m Gillian Lawrence...from Pittsburgh and—”

Rodan yanked her against him as he settled himself into the saddle. Trapped between his powerful thighs and held fast against his body, Gillian felt panic, coupled with a strange, erotic excitement.

The hard wall of his chest was hot against her back, and his thumb grazed the underside of her breast through the damp blouse. Though he had looked at her with a mixture of disdain and arrogance, she couldn’t help but respond to the natural male prowess he exuded. It had been a long time since a man had held her, a year, in fact, since she’d broken up with her last boyfriend. Part of Gillian wanted to run from this man, and keep running until she woke from this fantastic dream, safe in her own bed. Another part was dangerously intrigued and just turned on enough to recklessly consider playing along for a while. That was the part, she warned herself, for which she needed to watch out.

On the other hand, she could see no avenue of escape. By the way he clutched her to him, he obviously wasn’t going to let her flee. It seemed, for the time being, she had little choice but to go where he commanded.

A mistaken identity could be easily corrected, she decided as the horse broke into a powerful gallop. Wherever he was taking her had to be better than a dirt road in the woods. She settled against him and hung on, anticipating, at the very least, a virtual adventure she could relay to the girls at the office on Monday.

Before Gillian could get her bearings, the forest fell away behind them. Ahead lay an enormous circular lawn, perfectly manicured and silvery green in the pale moonlight. The sweet aroma of the close-cropped grass reminded Gillian of the fresh scent of early spring in Allegheny County.

The color of the road changed from dirt brown to sandy beige. The horse kicked up fine pebbles with its hooves as it raced home.

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When Gillian saw “home,” she gasped. Bathed in moonlight and towering above the trees ringing the lawn, sat a castle. Perhaps “palace” was a better word. It looked more like the many-spired residences of England’s modern royal family than the ancient constructs of heavy gray stone that made up many of Europe’s tourist attractions.

It was magnificent.

“It can be your home, Graciela,” Rodan said, his breath hot against the back of her neck. “Or it can be your prison. I will leave the choice to you.”

Well, that’s a no-brainer, Gillian thought. Whoever Graciela was, she didn’t know what she was missing.

“Of course, no matter what your decision, you won’t escape punishment.” He tightened his grip on her waist, and the heat Gillian felt when he’d first put his arm around her turned to an evil chill. She stiffened. “Some say death is too good for you, and I agree, but you may find the alternative less pleasant.”

Okay. Game over. Gillian’s knuckles went white on the saddle horn. Why did Lord Tall-Blond-and-Rugged have to be a psychopath?

She struggled to keep her voice even and conversational. “Did you hear me before when I said I wasn’t Graciela? Because I’m sensing you missed that.”

“I’m surprised you’d waste your breath on such foolishness, sorceress. I’m disappointed you’ve made no attempts to kill me yet. When I rode out to meet the coach, I was expecting an epic battle, and pictured myself bloodied and bruised, dragging you back to my dungeon in chains.”

“Well, I’m really not one for epic battles...” The guy *was* a lunatic. What a shame he was so good looking. The cute ones always had a fatal flaw of some sort.

“Is it that you’re truly weakened from your imprisonment in Galadrin? I’m told you’d been there for a month before word of your

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capture reached me. Or are you toying with me? Will you trick me into believing you've not the strength to fight me and snap my neck when I let down my guard, like you did that poor boy back there on Madran's horse?"

"I didn't do anything to him!" Gillian's anger flared. It was one thing to mistake her for someone else, but she wasn't going to allow him to think she'd killed someone. She twisted in the saddle to meet Rodan's dark blue gaze. "He was dead when I arrived. Maybe Graciela killed him, but I'm not her, and I'm sure I can prove that if you give me a chance."

He laughed. The deep sound sent another chill down Gillian's spine.

"You'll have plenty of chances to prove many things to me, Dark One. But you'll start by proving that it's worth my while to keep you alive."

Gillian had another protest already formed when Rodan's left hand moved from her waist and burrowed under her hair. His fingers found a soft spot behind her ear and caressed the skin. Oddly, Gillian responded with a faint sigh to the pleasant sensation.

The sigh became a panicked gasp when his caress ended in a sharp stab of pain. Suddenly limp and numb, her hands fell away from the saddle horn, and her body sagged against his. She had one final, lucid moment in which she saw the castle looming before her, felt Rodan grab her again around the middle to keep her from falling off the horse.

Then, once again, everything faded to black.

CHAPTER 3

At dawn, Rodan paced the balcony outside his bedchamber. It had been a restless night and it would be a trying day. When the first rays of golden light crept above the trees that surrounded Keragar, his eyes stung. He rubbed them with the heels of his hands until patches of color danced before him. A moment later, a soft knock at the door interrupted his thoughts.

“Enter.” He kept his gaze on the quiet gardens below until Madran reached the balcony. The manservant looked just as tired as Rodan felt.

“Milord, the maidservant you’ve engaged to care for the needs of the prisoner is refusing to enter her chamber. The girl is simpering in the kitchen.”

Rodan’s shoulders sagged. The news didn’t surprise him, but he’d promised the wench a tidy sum to care for Graciela. He’d been honest about the task and she had assured him she would have no fear of the sorceress. She gladly pocketed the advance he had offered her.

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“Very well, Madran. Show her to the laundry, then, and remind her the extra farthings I promised were for only the job she agreed to do. Her pay will be halved.”

“Aye, Milord. You’re too generous. I’d show her to the stables and hand her a small shovel.”

Rodan chuckled. “You’d be a cruel master, Madran. I thank the powers that be every day that our stations are not reversed.”

“Who shall I assign to the prisoner, Milord?”

Rodan turned and tapped his foot, fighting off a wave of frustration. He expected an uphill battle with Graciela. There’d be no energy left to deal with her if he had to spend all his time cajoling the servants to follow orders.

“For now, Madran, let’s call her our guest. If we have any hope at all of taming her, we have to begin by treating her with more respect and care than anyone else has ever shown her. Given her history, that shouldn’t be too difficult.” Rodan looked at his servant, his lips pursed. Madran raised a gray eyebrow. “For now, I will see to her. I might as well get started with my plans.”

Madran’s eyes widened. “At dawn, sire? When she might escape into the sunlight?”

“She won’t escape, Madran. But...I am resolved to kill her if she tries.” Rodan’s chest felt heavy, but his hand went to the dagger sheathed at his hip. “Fetch her breakfast and a wash basin, then meet me in the corridor outside her room.”

Madran bowed and backed toward the heavy oaken door of Rodan’s chamber. “Very good, Milord. I’ll be only a moment.”

Take your time, Rodan thought. In truth, he was in no hurry to begin his thankless task. He wasn’t even sure it was possible to break Graciela’s evil spirit and purge her of her demons. He had to wonder, if he succeeded, would there be anything left behind worth saving?

* * *

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Gillian awoke in the dark room, shivering violently. After a moment, her eyes adjusted to the faint glow coming from under the door. She found herself lying on a painfully flat mattress, on a bed with a rough wooden frame. The thin blanket that looked as if it had been carelessly tossed over her did little to combat the bitter chill.

She sat up and blinked. When she raised her hand to rub the sleep from her eyes, she discovered an iron manacle around her left wrist. A thick chain tethered her to the wall next to the bed. The heavy links hung from a rusted ring that proved deceptively solid when she tugged on it. The chain clanked when she moved, and the sound echoed from the damp stone walls.

The only thing that kept Gillian from panicking was the firm belief that none of this could be real. She was thoroughly convinced that she had been injured in the fire and was now in the hospital, heavily drugged and hooked up to machines. The chemical soup keeping her alive was probably causing these frighteningly realistic hallucinations.

She examined the chain and the metal cuff on her wrist, noting the cold strength of the iron. *Very realistic.* It was probably an IV that her fevered subconscious recast as an unbreakable bond.

I'll wake up soon, but not too soon, apparently. I'm strong. I'm a fighter. I'll beat this, whatever it is.

She sighed.

A shadow passed by the narrow strip of light below the door, and a scraping sound accompanied the rattle of the large iron latch. Gillian fixed her eyes on the door and instinctively coiled a length of chain around her fist. *I'm a fighter*, she repeated in her head. She'd taken self-defense classes, because in her line of work, it was wise to be prepared for anything. She wasn't prepared for this, *per se*, but she was damned sure ready to improvise.

She held her breath as the door swung open and the golden rectangle of light filled with a muscular silhouette.

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Rodan loomed in the doorway, balancing a glimmering silver tray on one hand. His face was partially shadowed, but his arrogant smirk was unmistakable.

“Good morning, Graciela. I trust you slept well.”

Gillian wanted nothing more than to smack the smug grin off that granite jaw. The light from the corridor caught the golden highlights in his hair, and his dark blue eyes sparkled with ...something. Whether it was mischief or just the rock-hard glint of moral superiority, she couldn't tell.

“What the hell did you do to me last night?” Her free hand went to the still-sore spot behind her ear.

Rodan moved into the room. Gillian saw the outline of another man waiting just outside the door, the gray-haired man from last night. What had Rodan called him? Madran.

“I have a few tricks of my own,” Rodan replied. “Unfortunately it was necessary to sedate you. The house staff is...understandably skittish about your presence here. If you'd made a fuss, I daresay they might have abandoned their duties.” He set the tray on the floor halfway between the doorway and the bed.

Behind him, Madran edged over the threshold and set what looked like a porcelain bowl on the floor near the door. The servant favored Gillian with a look of awe mixed with terror, which she met with a curious stare. At least this morning he acknowledged her in some way. Last night, he had avoided any eye contact at all.

“As it is,” Rodan continued while Gillian and Madran dueled each other with dirty looks, “I've not been able to secure a maidservant brave enough to attend you. So any discomforts you suffer in your personal needs are the result of your own...dubious reputation. Madran and I will do our best to see to your comfort.”

“My reputation?” *This Graciela must be a real piece of work.*
“Look, Rodan—”

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“*Lord Rodan*, if you please.”

Gillian rolled her eyes. “*Lord Rodan*. I’m *not* Graciela. I’m sure if you find someone who knows her, they could settle this very quickly.”

Rodan laughed. “Perhaps if you didn’t kill everyone you know, there might be someone to vouchsafe your identity, Dark One. Those who live know you only by rumor and myth—exaggerations many of them, I’m sure.”

“My name is Gillian Lawrence, not Graciela, and not only do I have no idea who she is, I don’t know where I am or how I got here.” Gillian held up the manacle and chain and pointedly shook it at Rodan. “If you could just take this off, I promise, very sincerely, *not* to kill anyone.”

Rodan stared for a moment, his expression blank. Then he approached the bed in two swift strides. For a moment, Gillian believed he was going to set her free, but his handsome face went hard. Instead of reaching for the manacle, he took a handful of her hair and drew back her head, forcing her to meet his fierce gaze.

“Your tricks have no effect on me, Dark One. You cannot feign innocence and coerce me into letting you go. I suggest you think about your options. Cooperate with me or die at the hands of the people you have terrorized for so long. I’ll give you some time to consider.”

He let go abruptly. Gillian’s head bobbed forward. She resisted the urge to rub her scalp. Her fingers itched to slap him, but he’d made himself very clear. If talk made him this angry, smacking him would probably get her killed.

Her eyes bore holes into his retreating back. They stung with unshed tears when he slammed the door hard enough to rattle the delicate dishes of food on the silver tray.

Some drug-induced fantasy, she thought, swiping at her eyes. *Instead of a white knight sweeping me off my feet, I get a lunatic who chains me to the wall.*

* * *

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“She’s more difficult to deal with than I imagined, Madran,” Rodan said later in the library. He leaned back in his soft leather chair and balanced his booted feet on the edge of a low table.

Madran looked up from setting his master’s midday meal and nodded. “I expected biting, sir. And hissing. She’s more beguiling than I would have imagined.”

“She’s obviously trying some spell on me,” Rodan mused. He reached for the platter of meat and cheeses that Madran placed before him. “Her days in Galadrin’s dungeon weakened her powers just enough that I’m able to see through her guise, but imagine if she were at full strength. We’d be escorting her to the edge of town on my finest mare and she’d likely have us apologizing for treating her so poorly.”

Madran nodded obligingly.

Rodan shook his head in amazement. “Even weakened, she’s powerful, though. For a moment she sounded so sincere. Do you see her as I do, Madran? Is she beautiful to your eyes?”

“Yes, Milord...” Madran’s answer sounded hesitant. “Such a fey creature. I must admit I cannot see the blackness in her soul.”

“She hides it well. Unfortunately, I’ve got to uncover it before I can purge her of it...if such a thing is possible.”

“How will you draw her out, Milord?”

Rodan chewed a piece of roasted meat as he considered his answer. He stared into the smoldering embers in the hearth and thought of the fire in her eyes.

“Perhaps I should just give her my ultimatum—force her to make a choice now while there’s still a spark in her, rather than wait until she’s completely drained.”

“Then I daresay you will get what you bargained for, Milord. The biting and the hissing, that is.”

Rodan gave Madran a faint smile. “I can’t vouchsafe the hissing, Madran, but I can all but guarantee the biting.”

CHAPTER 4

It seemed like days passed before anyone returned to Gillian's dungeon cell. In the dark, she had no way to count the passage of time. After a while, she was aware of nothing but the beat of her own heart and the soft clink of the chain when she moved.

The scraping of the door handle startled her out of near-catatonia. She flew to her feet. This time she wasn't going to sit there like a wimp and let Rodan manhandle her.

"It's sunset," he said without preamble when he strode into the room. "No chance for you to recharge your powers."

She raised one skeptical eyebrow and swept her gaze over him. *If he wasn't such a nut case, he'd be one hell of a find.* In spite of her resolve to despise him, she still found herself able to appreciate his looks. She hadn't noticed much about his clothing before, but now she saw he wore the dark, tight breeches and billowing white shirt of ancient European nobility. His golden hair was thick and short, and his profile,

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when he turned into the half-light, was razor sharp.

He smiled at her and nodded to his right forearm, over which hung a length of crimson cloth. “Dine with me this evening, Graciela, and we will discuss your future.”

“Future?”

He handed her the cloth, and when its rich folds spilled from his grasp into hers, she saw it was a gown. The soft fabric slid across her fingers and gave her goose bumps. It was the same color as her blouse, which was now beyond the skills of even the best dry cleaner.

“I trust red is to your liking.”

Gillian looked from the dress to the chain that bound her to the wall. “I’m sure a contortionist could puzzle this out, but how am I supposed to put this on?”

One of Rodan’s eyebrows rose speculatively, and he appraised her with a look that intensified the tingle in her flesh. “Very well. Because I *do* believe your powers are weak.”

To Gillian’s amazement, he produced a small iron key and opened the manacle on her wrist. She rubbed the liberated limb to ward off the bone-deep chill of the metal.

“Thank you.” She added a hint of sarcasm to her tone. After all, why should she thank him for setting her free?

Gillian gasped when Rodan snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. Instinctively, her hands went to his chest, and the silky crimson gown sank into a blood-red puddle on the floor between them.

“Don’t challenge me, Dark One.” His breath warmed her. Gillian felt her knees weaken as he lowered his lips and brushed them against her jaw. “Remember, your cooperation will be rewarded. Don’t take advantage of my desire to treat you hospitably.”

A hundred replies popped into Gillian’s head, any of which would likely have gotten her chained up again. “I told you before,” she said,

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annoyed by the breathless way the words came out, “I won’t hurt anybody.”

Rodan released her and stepped back. Before Gillian could say anything more, he brought one finger to her lips. “Don’t make promises, sorceress, that I know you cannot keep.”

He trailed his finger down her lips and chin and into the open neck of her blouse. He stopped when he reached the valley between her breasts.

Gillian’s breath caught in her throat.

“I know it’s far too early for you to have developed any scruples.”

She held his gaze for a moment, then dropped her eyes to his finger, where it rested on the sensitive flesh just above the clasp of her bra. “Lord Rodan, if you would like me to begin to keep my promises, may I suggest you remove your hand from me and allow me to put on this lovely dress, so we can go to dinner?”

He immediately dropped his finger and Gillian exhaled.

“I’ll wait in the corridor. Knock when you’re ready.” He left without another word.

Gillian sank onto the bed. She wanted to scream. A few choice obscenities came to mind, but she also felt a strange sense of anticipation. That annoyed her more than Rodan’s arrogance. When he’d touched her, just north of intimately, she should have slapped him. No man in her world would have gotten away with that. But it was obvious this wasn’t her world—or even a reasonable facsimile thereof.

She looked at the dress at her feet and bent to retrieve the sumptuous creation. Her options were limited but crystal clear. Play along with Rodan until someone or something finally convinced him he had the wrong woman, or antagonize him until he made good on his threats. Again, a no-brainer.

With a skeptical eye on the door, she started to strip.

* * *

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The tentative knock on the door behind him surprised Rodan. He'd been expecting Graciela to pound on it, or maybe remain silent until his curiosity drew him back inside her room so she could ambush him. Her gentle tapping on the heavy oak planks, however, further proved her an enigma. He could scarcely predict a thing about her actions or her moods.

When he opened the door, he nearly forgot that this was the legendary Dark One.

The woman looked magnificent. She was no stripling as he might have expected of someone purported to have fey blood in her. Beneath the strategic drapes of crimson silk, she was made of lush curves, gently rounded hips and full breasts. Her hair was a lustrous copper color, and a strand hung just above one sultry brown eye. When she raised a delicate hand to brush aside the stray lock, the movement revealed a patch of chafed skin on the underside of her slender wrist.

Rodan cursed silently. It was not his desire to hurt her. He knew well that she'd suffered as many hardships as she'd caused, and though she was fully capable of killing in cold blood, she looked utterly innocent. Well, as innocent as a woman in red could look.

He hated himself for the threats he'd made and more so for those still to come. What would she have been, he wondered, if she'd not spent most of her life running from those who hated her simply for existing?

He held out his hand to her. "Milady, shall we?"

She nodded, a single uncertain bob of her head. For a moment, Rodan thought he saw fear in her eyes. Could his plan have begun to work already? No. She was too clever for that. He had to keep up his guard.

He escorted her through the corridors of Keragar's lowest level and up the stone stairs that led to the great hall. He noted that she took in the surroundings with unrestrained awe. Despite himself, he felt a surge

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of pride in his ancestral home. If Keragar impressed her, perhaps her greed alone would be enough to sway her decision when he made his offer.

When they reached the private dining room, Rodan showed her to a chair. Madran had set their dinner on the linen-covered table. Rodan saw the effect the rich and spicy aroma had on his guest. She hungrily appraised the food, but remained still, watching him with guarded curiosity.

“We will have to serve ourselves,” he said as he took his own seat. “Even if any of the staff would enter this room with you here, I prefer our conversation this evening to be private.”

“I don’t mind,” she replied, though she remained motionless.

He grabbed a slice of bread from the artfully arranged loaf. Only after he had taken a bite and a sip of wine to wash it down, did Graciela finally make a tentative move to serve herself.

“I assure you, I’ve not poisoned the food. I’ll eat any morsel you wish in order to prove that.”

* * *

Poisoned food. As if I don’t have enough problems, Gillian thought as she helped herself to small slices of hard cheese, a handful of grapes and a piece of sumptuous roasted chicken. The breakfast Rodan had brought her hadn’t gone far, and she was starving. She had to wonder how a person in a coma—as she had to be—could feel hungry, anxious, and strangely enough, a little turned on.

The dress Rodan had given her clung to her body. Her underwear didn’t really work with the slinky design, so she’d left the bra and panties with her blouse, skirt and pantyhose. She felt a little wicked sitting in an overstuffed chair, popping fat grapes into her mouth while Rodan looked at her like she was the main course. If he only knew just how naked she was beneath her flowing red dress...

They ate in silence for a while, watching each other with wary

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fascination. When Gillian had eaten her fill, she sipped the red wine and leaned back in her chair. “This was nice,” she said, unsure of how else to begin the conversation.

“You could dine like this every night.” Rodan picked up his glass and mimicked her posture, leaning back with an easy grace.

“I guess that brings us to discussing my *future*.”

“Yes. To your credit, I had expected it would take weeks to get to this point, where we could converse over dinner.”

Gillian wrinkled her nose at him. “Why? Haven’t you ever heard you can catch more flies with honey?”

He looked puzzled, apparently unfamiliar with the analogy. “I believed you would be too angry to talk.”

“*I am* a little miffed about being knocked out last night. But if you promise not to do that again, I’ll do my best to behave.”

“It shouldn’t be necessary.”

“Good. Now, you’ve got some kind of deal to make, don’t you?”

Rodan smiled and sipped the wine. “Yes. One that I think will benefit both of us.”

Gillian waited. His words hung in the air. *He’s a master of suspense, isn’t he?* Still, she thought she detected reluctance in his manner. He seemed hesitant to name his terms, as though he were uncomfortable with them.

She watched carefully as he placed his glass on the table and steepled his long, graceful fingers in front of him.

“Have you ever thought beyond the moment, Graciela? Have you ever considered there could be more for you than life as a fugitive, living day to day, always running from your enemies?”

Gillian sighed. It wouldn’t do any good to rehash the argument. He wasn’t going to believe her claims. Every scenario she ran in her head came out the same way—with the heavy iron manacle clamping shut around her wrist. She decided the only course of action for the moment

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was to give him the answers he wanted to hear.

“Of course I have.”

“Good. What would you say to life here, as the Lady of Keragar? You would have wealth, power. You could command a measure of respect from the people of the Southern Kingdom. I know it seems impossible, but I think between the two of us, we could achieve it.”

“You want me to...marry you?” Okay, now this coma dream was starting to take a turn for the better. A proposal from a handsome lord beat a night in the dungeon any time.

“Not immediately, of course.” Rodan held up one hand as if they were already jumping ahead of his plans. “In time...once we’ve convinced the people that you’ve repented.”

Gillian took a big gulp of wine. “How would I do that?”

“By helping our army to defeat the Saracen.”

Rodan let the words hang in the air. Gillian eyed him, aware that his sentence was supposed to be pivotal in some way.

“Defeat who?”

“The Saracen army is planning another incursion into our territory. Lord Baygard is prepared to fend them off. With your help, I’m sure he will succeed. In exchange for your cooperation, you will walk in the sunlight. You will have the opportunity to finally have a home, and ultimately perhaps, a family.”

“I...uh...” Gillian shrugged. Who could refuse? It sounded like a great deal, for Graciela, whoever she was. She had to wonder, though, what exactly he expected her to do to help defeat an army.

Rodan rose from his seat and moved to stand beside her. She looked up at him, suddenly and acutely aware of her body. The silky fabric against her skin and the heat of Rodan’s thigh as it brushed against hers created a strange frisson of excitement that she hadn’t felt in a long time.

Rodan’s eyes smoldered and his voice went low. “Graciela, I’m

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offering you a life...help me defeat the Saracen. Then conceive a child with me and you won't have to see your race die out."

"Whoa! Conceive a child?" Gillian's fairy-tale fantasies came to an abrupt end. They'd just met and he wanted her to have his baby?

"Think about it, Graciela. You don't have to be the last of your line. A child of ours would be blessed with a respected name, money and privilege, and may likely have a portion of your abilities. You could finally see your race exalted rather than hunted to extinction."

The candlelight heightened the planes of Rodan's face and played with the sparkling blue of his eyes. Gillian felt flushed and decided she'd had too much wine.

"I...think your offer is very generous, Rodan. But, what if I c-can't help you defeat these...Saracen? I don't know anything about war."

"You needn't concern yourself with strategy. Leave that to Baygard. Your part will be to manipulate the forces at your command. Weave your magick spells and see that every advantage possible falls to the Southern Kingdom. In exchange, I will see that the people of this land know their victory rests in your hands."

"Magick spells..." Gillian mused. "They're pretty...tricky. What if they don't work?"

Rodan's eyes clouded. He pursed his sensuous lips and turned away. "Your arrogance is legendary, Dark One. Don't test my patience by feigning humility now. If your spells fail, it will be because you *choose* them to fail. And the consequences will be the same for you as if you had refused my offer. You will be led in chains to the Village Square in Verdan and given to the people as a sacrifice. I'm certain when they're finished with you, there will not be enough left to warrant a burial."

He whirled and leveled his hot gaze at Gillian, emphasizing the weight of his words. Her throat constricted and the flavor of the wine grew sour on her tongue.

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“I won’t tolerate artifice, Graciela. This is too important. Choose wisely. Life or death?”

CHAPTER 5

Rodan stared at his guest, his emotions a mixture of anger and embarrassment. She'd played him well tonight. She'd managed to lull him into believing she was civilized. Her careful subterfuge had fallen apart, though, the moment she asked about failure. That's when her plan became instantly transparent.

She would agree to anything he proposed, and then, once restored to full strength, she would use her powers to her own gain. He should have known.

Before she could utter another treacherous word, he grasped her injured wrist and dragged her to her feet. She gasped and used her other hand to brace herself against his chest when he pulled her into a rough embrace.

"I've never been a cruel man, Graciela, but I've resigned myself to deal with you only in ways you can understand. Perhaps you'd like to face those you've wronged? Maybe that would help you make your

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decision.”

She remained silent, glaring at him as he tightened his grip on her. Her breasts jutted against his chest and the deep cleft between them beckoned his attention. He was torn between the desire to tear away her filmy dress and show her the heights of passion they might reach as allies, and the equally strong desire to abandon his reckless plan and rid himself of this terrible temptation. He had foolishly thought to make the sacrifice of himself in order to harness her power for the greater good. He never imagined he would find her so irresistible.

It defied logic that such evil could thrive in a body so supple, or could lurk behind eyes that looked at him with that daunting mixture of fear and lust. Her body quaked in his arms and made him aware that he wielded power over her in a similar manner.

“Decide, Graciela.” He cupped her bottom as he made his demand, pulling her against his thighs. “If there is any deceit in your words, you’ll wake in the Village Square, lashed to a post.”

She let out a puff of wine-spiced breath along with an indignant sound, but she didn’t struggle to break his grasp. “What kind of choice is that? Give myself to you or die? What do you think I’m going to pick?” Her voice rose as she spoke and her body trembled.

Rodan eased his grip and felt her relax against him.

“Look. I’m starting to piece this together,” she said. “If you want...me to help you, you have to give me a better reason. Why don’t you try to make me see your point of view instead of bullying me into giving you what you want just because it’s better than dying?”

Rodan released her. She stepped back and smoothed the lines of her dress. Despite his resolve to remain in control of his baser desires, he hungrily watched her hands as they slid over her hips.

“It’s obvious you don’t like me,” she continued, her voice shaking, “Which begs the question why you’d want me to have your children. But let’s put that aside for the moment. How about we hammer out an

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understanding? A truce. Give me some time to adjust to the idea of...not dying and you can tell me more about the Saracen and how you think I can help you defeat them. You said already that you expected our...negotiations to take weeks. You obviously have time to spare.”

She put her hands on her hips and regarded him with a look that coaxed a reluctant smile from him. She was so clever. So beautiful. No wonder she’d survived so long in a vicious world bent on the destruction of her kind. Her charm was irresistible.

“Very well, sorceress. I will give you a fortnight here as my guest. But remember, subterfuge will beget punishment. *Severe* punishment.”

She nodded, but the look in her eyes betrayed her ire. Perhaps, Rodan thought, I am making some headway.

* * *

Despite having struck their deal, Rodan returned Gillian to her dungeon bedroom after dinner. He did not put the iron cuff on her this time, though, and left her to her own devices with a small candle for light.

She harrumphed at his retreating back, but decided not to voice her opinion that most “guests” of nobility were given better accommodations. She heard the scrape of the door’s heavy lock and flounced onto the bed, where she found someone had carefully folded her discarded clothes in her absence.

Also on the bed, she found a robe of velvety soft cloth. She changed quickly, eager to be out of the clingy silk, which did little to ward off the room’s damp chill.

After washing up in the basin, she attended her needs in the small dunny at one end of the room. Thank God for that, she thought. If she’d been forced to use a chamber pot, she would have gone back on her promise not to kill anyone.

Once settled under the flimsy blanket, she lay staring at the flickering candle and wondered just what was really going on. All of

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this felt too real. As much as she wished it were a drug-induced dream or hallucination borne of a head injury, she had to face the possibility that this strange circumstance was real.

She thought back to her first moments in this world, when lying on the dirt road in the forest. She had been aware of a burnt smell, like brimstone, and now recalled someone leaning over her while she lay dazed, still believing she was dreaming.

She'd seen the overturned coach, a boxy shadow on the road, and remembered the perfectly circular scorch mark in the dirt around her. The fire in the motel office had sprung up seemingly in a perfect circle around her, too. How could that have happened? Could the fire somehow have transported her to this place?

Come on. Gillian didn't believe in hocus-pocus and fairy-tale magick. Of course she had her doubts about cold, hard science, too. It certainly couldn't explain everything, like why the line she picked at the supermarket was always the slowest moving, or whether the chicken came before the egg. She doubted science could explain how she had begun her dismal Friday in rain-soaked Pittsburgh and ended it in the dark recesses of Lord Rodan's ancestral castle, heaven knew where, or when, for that matter.

Gillian dozed intermittently while she contemplated how she would manage, over the next two weeks, to convince Rodan that she was not Graciela. It should have been obvious to the man that she was no sorceress. If she was, she certainly wouldn't be hanging around waiting for him to get over himself.

Perhaps in that time, whatever had brought her here would, just as abruptly, send her home. Then she wouldn't have to deal with making Rodan understand that she couldn't help him defeat his enemies.

It seemed only a short time passed while Gillian dozed. A knock at the door startled her fully awake.

"Come in?" she acknowledged and waited quietly while Rodan let

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himself in. “Wh-what time is it?” she asked through a yawn.

He crossed the room. “Just before dawn. I’ve had the servants prepare a better room for you.”

It’s about time. She managed a tired but haughty look as she rose and took the hand he offered her. “Thank you.”

He led her back through the now-familiar corridors of Keragar. “The room adjoins mine.”

Gillian faltered a step, but Rodan didn’t seem to notice. How convenient, she thought.

“I’ve shuttered the windows, and when you’re inside, the room will be locked. But at night I will escort you through the castle so you can get to know your new home.”

“Why only at night? I’m more of a day person, actually.”

Rodan laughed, and for the first time, he seemed genuinely amused. “When the terms of our bargain are sealed, and I can trust you not to betray me, I will personally escort you to the gardens at noon, strip you naked and watch you absorb the light that feeds you. Until then, Graciela, you must live only by candlelight. I’m sorry for that.”

Gillian didn’t comment. Her thoughts had hitched on three words in Rodan’s reply—*strip you naked*. The phrase sent a warm rush through her. Her face flushed. Part of her wanted to disabuse him of the notion that he would do any such thing to her. A larger part felt a tremor of anticipation.

One thought, however, cooled the hot tingle that skittered over her flesh beneath her heavy robe. How on Earth would she convince him that she wasn’t going to betray him?

CHAPTER 6

Rodan found himself charmed by Graciela's reaction to the new quarters he'd had prepared for her. She seemed awed by the opulence of the chamber that adjoined his.

While his guest slept in her dungeon cell, he'd had the servants work tirelessly to air out the chamber, fit it with a suitable bed, lush satin bedding and thick privacy drapes. They'd beaten years of dust from the rugs and tapestries, shined the sconces and filled the wardrobe with various female necessities, the luxury of which Graciela had likely never known.

Lastly, he'd instructed one of his stablemen to nail closed the window shutters and affix a heavy locking bar to the outer door and one to the door that adjoined the master suite.

Graciela would live in unparalleled comfort while they ironed out their bargain, but Rodan would not permit her to forget that she was his prisoner.

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Right now, as he watched her float around the room, she looked so innocent and pure that self-loathing boiled in his gut. At moments like this, when she smiled guilelessly at the masterful painting that hung over the hearth, or her eyes sparkled as she examined a crystal decanter, he could scarcely imagine speaking a harsh word to her. It seemed impossible to consider throwing her to a murderous crowd in the Village Square and watching while they rent the flesh from her bones as payment for the atrocities she'd committed.

What he *could* imagine, however, was no more wholesome than the torture he'd promised her.

In his mind, he pictured himself tearing the concealing robe from her body and pushing her down on the bed among the silken folds. He saw his hands glide under the hem of her chemise and push up the thin fabric to her hips as he drew apart her legs. He would settle his hard body between her thighs and trap her beneath him, her arms above her head, held fast, her body arching toward him as he explored her inch by inch. He would take her slowly, savoring the feel of her tight passage as it opened to him. And he would revel in the sound of her panting breath as she pleaded for him to—

“Hello?”

Her voice brought him out of his fantasy. Before turning to face her, he quickly adjusted the erection straining in his breeches.

“Someone's knocking,” she informed him. “Are you gonna answer it?”

“Of course.” Rodan shook himself free of the haze that clouded his vision and crossed the room. He opened the door a crack and peered into the corridor, irritation furrowing his brow.

It was Madran. The manservant craned his neck and looked into the room. When his gaze fell on the titian-haired vision, he looked away. “Master, breakfast for two has been set in your room as you requested. I can have one of the maids draw a bath for the...lady, if she wishes it.”

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“Did I hear him say ‘bath’?” Graciela’s hopeful tone sounded childlike.

Rodan suppressed a smile and nodded. “I vouchsafe the lady wishes it.”

“I shall have Anya attend her.”

“I can take my own bath,” Graciela announced from just behind Rodan. He became aware of the heat of her body and felt a surge of tension in his groin when her fingers brushed the collar of his shirt. She stood on her toes behind him and peered at Madran through the scant opening of the door.

The servant took a step back at her approach.

* * *

“I honestly don’t need a maid to help me,” Gillian insisted. The fear on Madran’s face was evident. He refused to look her in the eye. “Where I’m from, we learn to bathe all by ourselves.”

“You heard the lady, Madran,” Rodan said. “Anya need not be coerced into service. I shall stand guard for Graciela should she require anything.”

“I shall see to it that everything is prepared within the half hour.” Madran bowed and left.

Rodan turned to Gillian, a wry smile on his face. “I should be ashamed that I find amusement in the way he trembles before you, Graciela. Madran has fought the Saracen hoards, and even hunted gargoyles, yet he can barely hold his water when you look at him.”

Gillian frowned. That thought was disturbing on several levels. “Gargoyles?”

He dismissed her concern with a casual wave. “Those vile creatures trouble only the Saracen now. When Madran was a young man, before he came into the service of Keragar, he helped rid the Southern Kingdom of the last of the demon herds. I hear tell they still roam the northern plains, in small packs...nothing like years ago.”

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“That’s comforting.” Gillian banished the thought of gargoyles from her mind. Too much information. She moved toward the bed and let her tired gaze roam the mountains of shiny pillows. It would be heaven to sleep on those satin sheets tonight, and to take a bath!

“Come.” Rodan held out his hand to her. “Breakfast first, then your bath. Then I will show you some more of Keragar.”

Gillian fixed her curious gaze on Rodan as she took his hand. She ignored the jolt that went through her at the warmth of his touch and concentrated instead on the hesitancy she saw.

Rodan might find it amusing the way Madran quaked in his boots, but it was obvious he wasn’t so sure about her himself. She had to find out more about Graciela and discover a way to convince these people she wasn’t this Dark One that Rodan held in such contempt.

* * *

“There are more than a thousand volumes in this room alone, and several hundred more in my private collection,” Rodan explained later that day as he and Gillian toured the castle library.

The room was octagonal in shape and seven of the eight walls were lined, floor to impressively high ceiling, with ornately bound books. It was a bibliophile’s wet dream.

Gillian wore a flowing gown of sage green and dainty satin slippers, which allowed her to move as silently as a cat across the richly tiled floor. She swept from column to column of books, running her fingers along the gold-embossed leather spines. The letters were mostly familiar shapes, but none of the words made sense to her. With a nod from Rodan, she removed a slim volume and opened it to the middle. The text was a confusing jumble of letters, some backward and upside down. None formed recognizable words.

Now I know what dyslexia feels like, she lamented. Her hopes of scanning the library for information on Graciela and the Saracen collapsed. She gently closed the book and returned it to its place on the

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shelf.

“What’s wrong?” Rodan asked.

“I can’t read these.”

He raised an eyebrow at her confession. His eyes flickered with sympathy. “I imagine the life you’ve led hasn’t been conducive to proper schooling. As my wife, you will want for nothing. You will have a tutor in any subject that interests you.”

Gillian decided against listing her educational credentials. After all, in this world, a Bachelor’s in Business was as meaningless as her driver’s license or the *TV Guide*. “Thank you. I may take you up on that.”

“Since there are no windows in this room, you may come here any time you wish. There are several volumes of art books, maps and scientific drawings you might find interesting until such time as you can begin lessons.”

“I appreciate that, Rodan—Lord Rodan.” Gillian gauged his expression when she corrected herself. He seemed surprised.

He stared at her for a long moment, and once again Gillian had the impression he was sizing her up in some way, trying to see through what he thought was her carefully crafted façade. He wanted to peel away the layers and get to her core.

She feared that when he did strip away the outer layers, he wouldn’t find the woman he wanted.

* * *

Shortly after the tour, Rodan explained to Gillian that if she found the door to her room unlocked, she could leave it and go to the library or the music room. The latter was another windowless chamber, lit by sconces holding tallow candles and decorated in unimaginable opulence. All other doors were closed to her, and since she had no musical talent, and didn’t recognize any of the instruments in the music room, she confined her jaunts to the library and the frustration it held.

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Rodan was gone for the better part of two days, during which Gillian figured out that, though the servants avoided her as if she were Typhoid Mary, they were keeping tabs on her. Whenever she left the bedroom, she returned to find a meal, a new gown, or some other interesting item had been left for her.

She wondered where Rodan had gone, and suspected he'd left the castle but hadn't told her for fear she'd try to exploit his absence. At one point, she announced to her empty bedroom that she was thirsty, just to see what would happen. Within moments, there was a knock on the door. She rushed to open it in hopes that Rodan had returned, and instead found on the hallway floor a flagon of water on a silver tray.

"So I'm being watched and listened to," she mused as she brought the room service inside. *Great.*

On the third day, when she found her door unlocked, she left her pillows bunched beneath her satin coverlet in a vaguely human form and left for the library.

After her usual perusal of several rows of books, she chose a volume of maps and curled up on the overstuffed settee. It was slow going, trying to piece together the rudiments of this hodge-podge language. She had just deciphered what she figured had to be the words for north and south when she learned her experiment in deception had worked.

The door of the library opened briskly. A young girl bustled in, carrying a rag and a pot of wax for polishing. She closed the door behind her and immediately set to work on one of the low tables. She never glanced at Gillian.

Finally, after a few guilty moments of watching the girl work, Gillian cleared her throat.

The maidservant jumped a mile, and the wax pot crashed to the floor and shattered. She backed against the door, trembling. "I...forgive me...Milady. I didn't know you were in here." As the girl stammered,

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one work-reddened hand flew to her throat as if to protect herself from attack.

“What’s your name?” Gillian asked in a neutral tone. She forced herself to remain motionless on the settee so as not to frighten the girl further with any sudden movements.

“Anya—” The girl’s gray eyes fell to the shards of pottery littering the floor at her feet.

“Anya is a beautiful name. My name is...Graciela, so I’m told. I don’t like it very much.”

The girl said nothing.

“I have another name,” Gillian said hopefully. “One I like better.”

“You do?”

“It’s Gillian. You can call me Gillian, Anya. You don’t have to call me ‘Milady.’”

“It would be improper to do otherwise, Milady,” Anya whispered.

Gillian sighed. At least the girl was speaking to her.

“How about Lady Gillian, then?”

“Yes, Milady...Lady Gillian.”

“That’s better. Anya, I want you to understand that I won’t hurt you, okay? I promise.”

The girl took a deep breath and finally flicked her gaze up from the floor. Her hand dropped slowly to her side. “I’ve been warned, Milady, to be wary of you.”

“I know. And I’m not sure what I can do to convince you that I mean you no harm, but if you think of something, would you let me know?”

Anya nodded.

“Now, I have a favor to ask. Do you know how to read?” Gillian smiled when the girl nodded again. “Good! You see...I don’t.”

It pained Gillian to admit it. When she’d seen those jumbled letters she felt so helpless. All that knowledge at her fingertips and she

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couldn't unlock any of it. Nor could she wait for Rodan to marry her and provide her with a tutor. If there was something in these books she could use to convince him that she wasn't Graciela, she had to find it.

"Do you think you could read to me? Maybe in time you could teach me to do it for myself."

Anya looked utterly shocked. Apparently illiteracy wasn't a widespread problem in this world.

"I like history," Gillian continued, "but I can't even tell which volume I want. Could you find one for me and read to me about the Southern Kingdom? I would be grateful."

"I...could. Yes, Milady. Of course." Though the girl still looked like a deer ready to bolt, some of the tension drained from her posture.

"Thank you. You won't get in trouble, will you? It's just that I'm very lonely and bored with Lord Rodan gone. He is gone, isn't he? He's left the castle?"

"He's just gone to Verdan to—" Anya's hand suddenly returned to her throat. She had misspoken.

"It's okay, Anya. You don't have to tell me. Just come here and find me a book. While you do that, how about if I clean up that broken pot for you? We won't have to mention the mess to anyone."

Anya's pale eyebrows knit together. Obviously no one had ever offered to do her work for her before.

"Do we have a deal?" Gillian prompted.

"Yes, Milady...of course."

* * *

Later that night, Gillian lay in bed with another book of maps. Anya had read her a brief history of this world, called Cazastan. In piecing together what she had heard, along with the illustrations in the books, Gillian had come to the conclusion that Cazastan was similar to Earth in its landmasses, its seasons and year. It even had one moon. But whether this world was another planet entirely or some alternate reality

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eluded her.

Nearly eighty percent of the land belonged to the Southern Kingdom, currently under the rule of the wide-ranging Ackimar royal family. Lords and other noblemen took on the role of governors for smaller sections of the major territories that fell under jurisdiction of the King's dozen sons and daughters.

For the most part, the Southern Kingdom was a peaceful land, but to the north, a rebel tribe, the Saracen, ruled the colder climates. They wanted the more-temperate regions, and had long ago mounted an unceasing battle to win those coveted territories. The Saracen killed without remorse, and they advanced farther south every year, pushing the borders of the Southern Kingdom backward one village at a time.

Gillian let out a breath and put aside the book. It was so frustrating. She'd learned so much in one afternoon, but there was still so much left to uncover. She had asked Anya to look for a book about Graciela's people to try to find out why they were so persecuted, but Anya told her there were none. It was apparently forbidden to write about evil magick and the race that spawned sorceresses like Graciela.

Gillian stretched out under the sheets and contemplated how she could get more information.

She had no recollection of drifting off to sleep, but when she awoke, Rodan was standing over her, his eyes dark and his skin flushed. There was a sheen of sweat and a shadow of stubble on his face. He smelled like night air and musk.

"Get up!" The tone of his voice left no room for argument. Before Gillian could comply, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet. "I want you to see something."

She mutely obeyed, and stumbled across the darkened room in Rodan's wake, her wrist clutched in his iron grip. He pushed her through the door that adjoined his room to hers and dragged her to the wide balcony overlooking the circular lawn.

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A brilliant moon hung overhead. Despite her fear and disorientation, Gillian didn't fail to notice the unfamiliar patterns on its mottled surface. Green and brown mixed with large patches of gray and white attested to the fact that there was more on the lone satellite than lifeless rock. So Cazastan *was* some other planet. The realization didn't comfort her.

"Look there," Rodan pointed. A glowing line snaked through the distant trees toward the castle. "I rode half the night to get here before they arrived."

She glanced questioningly at him. "They?"

"Villagers from Verdan. They learned you were my prisoner and they're coming to demand your penance."

A drop of liquid fear slid down Gillian's spine. By the wild look in Rodan's eyes, she couldn't tell if he meant to turn her over to the angry mob or not.

He drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I could not leave Keragar unattended," he explained, sounding only slightly calmer. He leaned against the stone balustrade and bowed his head as he sucked in another lungful of cool night air. "Madran would do his best to protect you on my orders, but the others might too easily side with the villagers."

"You came back to save me from them?" Gillian's question came out as a strangled whisper.

"I came back to protect my home!" Rodan countered.

Gillian drew back a step. Her eyes flickered to the trees where the line of torches grew brighter. "What are you going to do with me?"

He stared at her, his eyes almost black. Gillian's heart thudded painfully. She wanted to run, but there was nowhere to go.

"I'm breaching our agreement."

"What?" She reared back again, and this time her hand went to her throat, mimicking Anya's gesture of fear.

Rodan lunged for her. He easily caught her and clutched her to him,

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trapping her arms at her sides. “We’ve no time to debate, Graciela. Look out there!” He spun her around to face the forest, crushing her to his chest with one arm. His free hand found her chin and directed her gaze to the approaching mob. “They will demand your blood. If I don’t give it to them, they may demand *mine*.”

A faint sound escaped Gillian’s lips. She hated herself for showing weakness, but she’d never been so terrified. “What are you going to do with me?” she repeated, her voice ghostlike. She felt dizzy when she realized the height of the balcony. Would Rodan throw her to the crowd when they arrived, to appease their bloodlust and rid himself of the Dark One?

“First, we’re going to strike a new bargain.”

Again, Rodan turned her in his arms. He brought down his lips on hers in a bruising kiss that stole her breath. Something welled up inside Gillian as his tongue breached the barrier of her lips. Whether terror or desperation motivated her, she couldn’t tell, but she clung to him and let him kiss her senseless. A small part of her brain vowed to be angry with herself later for enjoying it.

Her body softened and she opened to him. With a gentle pull, he drew her tongue into his mouth. He tasted sweet, like wine, and his scent enveloped her. She was still breathless when he broke the kiss and looked down at her. His expression was unreadable.

“Give yourself to me,” he said. “Trust me, Graciela. If you’ve trusted no one in your life, trust me. If you agree, I will protect you.”

Gillian’s heart climbed to the base of her throat, and she had to swallow hard to form an answer. “Yes,” she said, even as her mind screamed.

What choice have I got?

Her voice didn’t sound right to her ears. Some part of her psyche, the part bent on self-preservation at any cost, had taken over while the pragmatic side of her brain cowered in terror at the thought of what

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might happen if she refused him.

“I trust you.”

“Good.” He sounded relieved, and looked both victorious and grateful as he loosened his constricting grip on her waist. “Come with me.”

“Where? Are you going to hide me?” She could only hope that was his plan. She had no problem with hiding.

Rodan smiled wickedly. Gillian’s knees went weak. He pulled her from the balcony and hurried her across the room. “No. We’re going to show the villagers that I’ve broken your spirit through torture.”

CHAPTER 7

Each breath Rodan took caught in his throat as he watched the villagers surge across the once-immaculate lawn. They tore the delicate grass and dropped smoldering ash from their torches on their relentless march toward Keragar's front gate. Led by a wild-eyed pair of huntsmen, the mob looked worse than a phalanx of Saracen raiders. Rodan would have gladly faced an army of the fierce northern warriors before setting foot before this crowd.

When he and Madran met the villagers at the gate, he had a moment of doubt. Would they believe he'd made any progress with Graciela? Would they care if he had?

They had good reason to hate her, and a week earlier, he would have thrown her into their midst and considered it an act of justice. Now, with the taste of her in his mouth, and the memory of her body trembling against him, he could see no merit in her death.

Truthfully, he could see no merit to life without her. She was his

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hope for the future he'd so meticulously planned. She was his weakness embodied.

Good God. She'd probably managed to put a spell on him. What else would explain the blinding need he felt when he drew her into his arms? What else would explain why he'd thought of nothing else during his trip to Verdan, and why visions of her at the hands of the villagers had driven him to dangerous speeds during his ride back to Keragar?

He *had* come back to save her. He needed her.

He ran one hand through his sweat-dampened hair and licked his dry lips. Beside him, Madran partially drew his blade from its sheath in preparation to defend the castle. In the shadows beyond the gate, the stablemen waited with any weapons they could find, and inside, even the maids were armed should anyone breach the front door.

"Brethren!" Rodan formally acknowledged the villagers as they advanced to within an arm's length of the gate. "I know why you've come."

"If you do, Lord Rodan, then give her over. It's time to repay her in kind for her misdeeds."

Rodan centered his hard gaze on the man who had spoken—one of the huntsmen. He fought to keep his tone neutral and benevolent as he addressed the sea of angry faces. "I shall, good citizens of Verdan—however—"

The crowd surged forward at his hesitation. Madran's blade advanced another inch.

"I beg your indulgence for a moment. I agree that Graciela deserves punishment and *much* of it. But if you kill her tonight, her suffering will end tonight."

A murmur arose that might have been one of agreement.

The huntsman turned a suspicious eye on Rodan. "As will *ours*."

"How long have you suffered?" Rodan hoped the question didn't

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sound facetious. “How many lives did Graciela take from you? Just one?”

“Seven men last winter,” a disembodied voice yelled from deeper in the throng. “She drove them mad. She laughed while they gutted each other and plucked out their own eyes under her vicious spell.”

“Indeed.” Rodan knew all too well the Dark One’s atrocities. “Seven lives for her *one*. Is it a fair trade?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I say not. There were three men in Calais, burned. A family ravaged in Gerriset and a young coachman, his neck snapped, on the very road you walked this evening. Will one life pay for them as well?”

“No!”

The answer had been unanimous. It was the response Rodan wanted. His smile turned dark.

“Then why allow her to escape your wrath tonight in death? She’s weak and won’t last long. In truth, her punishment will be over swiftly if I hand her to you now. *But*, there are worse fates than death.”

The huntsman seemed skeptical. “What are you saying, Lord Rodan?” He thrust his torch forward to better illuminate Rodan’s face.

Madran stepped aside to reveal a huddled figure on the flagstone walk behind them. The manservant hoisted Graciela to her feet by the shoulder of the tattered dress she wore. The chains that bound her ankles and wrists clattered as she stumbled into Rodan’s rough grasp.

The mob surged again; several arms stretched through the iron rails of the gate. Dirty hands grasped at Graciela as Rodan drew back her burnished curls to expose her face—purple with bruises. Fresh blood trickled from her ruined mouth. She fell to her knees before the angry villagers when Rodan released her.

For a moment, the mob fell silent. Those closest to the gate stared with the same awe and fear that Madran showed when he looked at her.

* * *

Gillian kept her head down and her hands on the cold stones

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beneath her to steady the trembling of her arms. She felt the heat of the torches and smelled the combined sweat of the dozens of bodies pressed against the gate.

“There,” Rodan said, his tone icy. “She’s paid for one life with her blood. How many more will be avenged if you kill her tonight?”

Hopefully, only Gillian noticed the tremor in Rodan’s voice. Undaunted, the mob pressed closer to the rails. Those behind clamored over their fellows for a better look at the legendary sorceress. Gillian shivered.

“Go home, brethren. Leave her to me. Eventually she will repay all of her debts. I promise you.”

A wave of nausea washed over Gillian when the crowd cheered Rodan’s pronouncement.

“Kill her slowly!” someone rasped.

“She’ll never pay her way to heaven,” another voice cried.

At a silent signal from Rodan, Madran pulled Gillian to her feet and walked her toward the castle’s wide front door.

* * *

Rodan stood his ground, silent as stone, as the villagers began to retreat. He saw regret in some faces, relief in others.

The huntsman caught his eye. “Make sure she does repent, Lord Rodan. Or *we* will.”

Rodan said nothing. He remained, feet planted wide, hands on his hips, until the mob became nothing more than a murmur of distant voices on the dawn breeze.

Then, reluctantly, he went inside.

* * *

Anya soaked a thick sponge in the hot bath water, then squeezed it over Gillian’s hair. The girl smoothed back the copper strands into a sleek mass and gently sloughed away the soot and pig’s blood that

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marred her skin.

Gillian sank into the bath and scrubbed the fake bruises from her arms and legs. She spit the dried berry juice from her mouth and rubbed away the stain from her lips. Her fingers trembled, despite the heat of the bath.

Earlier, Rodan had seemed to think himself quite ingenious when he'd led her to the kitchen and began rummaging through the pantry, to the frustration of the scullery staff. They'd fled at the sight of Gillian, leaving Rodan and Anya to complete the complex recipes that left Gillian looking like something the cat dragged in. A mixture of mashed fruit, soot from the hearth and pig's blood became theatrical makeup. A torn dress from the pile of cleaning rags became the perfect costume.

Gillian hadn't bargained for real manacles, however, or being flung to her knees in the castle courtyard, but the whole effort had certainly been convincing. The villagers had gone away satisfied that Rodan would exact a pound of flesh for every sin Graciela had committed.

"Can I bring you something to eat, Milady?" Anya asked. "Maybe some hot tea when you're done here?"

Gillian shook her head. Nothing could erase the images in her mind. The hatred she'd seen on the faces of the villagers and the wild eyes of the armed men had been burned into her memory. In addition to what she'd seen, she also carried unwanted visions of the crimes Graciela had committed, images even worse than the reality of the terrible night.

She sighed. "You can go, Anya. I can finish this."

"Are you sure, Lady Gillian? You seem so tired."

"I'm sure." Gillian managed a rueful smile. Despite everything, it was good to hear her own name.

Obediently, Anya rose and left the room. When the door clicked shut, Gillian closed her eyes and let out the breath she'd been holding.

Tears burned under her lashes and spilled down her cheeks. Whatever had happened to bring her to this place must have been some

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kind of curse, she decided. How could she have ended up here, mistaken for this awful creature? She would be Rodan's prisoner forever. After what she'd seen this morning, it became clear that even if she ran from him, there would be no safe place to go.

"You did well."

Gillian jumped. She hadn't heard Rodan come in. He stood over the tub, his face pale, despite the warming glow of the candle sconces.

"Do you mind?" Gillian choked on a sob as she pulled a towel across her body. "I'm trying to get all this crap off me."

"Allow me." His voice was silk and steel. He retrieved Anya's discarded sponge from the bath water.

Gillian's protest died in her throat. She was too weary to complain. Instead, she closed her eyes and lay back against the cool porcelain.

Rodan slipped the damp towel off her; the rough texture of the fabric as it slid across her breasts produced an instant reaction. Gillian's nipples hardened and an unexpected jolt shot through her lower body.

When Rodan began to wash her skin, Gillian bit her lower lip. She arched a little as he slid the sponge down her neck, across her chest and over her shoulders. Warmth pooled in her womb and a pleasant heaviness settled between her legs.

Rodan eased her body forward and sloughed the warm water down her back. With firm strokes, he scrubbed away the all-too-convincing layer of dirt that Anya had smeared on her shoulders and neck.

With one finger, he pushed a damp curl from her face and tucked the wet hair behind her ear. His touch electrified her, and suddenly, the steaming bath felt tepid against her burning skin.

"It's all gone now." His voice sounded so different from the commanding tone he'd used with the villagers. "You're beautiful again."

Gillian clenched her eyes shut. She didn't want to look at him, because if she did, if she saw the desire in his eyes, she would

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completely lose control.

“Come with me, Graciela. Let me show you something of your future.”

Rodan gently tugged her fingers, and when she rose from the water, he engulfed her in the soft robe that Anya had left for her. The emerald green fabric soaked the water from her skin when Rodan pulled it around her. He let his touch linger on her shoulders and finally brought up her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze.

“I’m not her,” Gillian said, her voice thick. “How can I convince you?”

He smiled. “You will be someone else one day. You can leave all of those awful things behind you and remake yourself. I’ll help you.”

Gillian sighed, but the sigh became a gasp when Rodan dropped his hands to her hips. Beneath her open robe, he molded his hands against her skin, exciting the sensitive muscles of her belly with the rough pads of his thumbs. Gillian moaned when he pulled her to him and scooped her into his arms.

“Let me show you who you can be.”

Gillian could do nothing but surrender.

He carried her through the doors, past her bed and into his adjoining room.

He settled her on his own bed, twice the size of hers, and covered in rich blue satin. Floating in the middle of the down mattress, Gillian felt adrift in a sensuous sea.

“Give yourself to me, Graciela. I’ll give you something in return that you never dreamed to possess.”

I’m not her, Gillian’s voice cried in her head. She held in the words. At this moment, it made no difference who she was. Right now, she wanted Rodan, wanted the comfort of his arms, the strength of his body. She wanted him to look at her with unbridled desire in his dark blue eyes. If that desire was for Graciela, then tonight she would be the

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Dark One for him.

She would be whatever he wanted if it meant he would love her just for tonight.

CHAPTER 8

Rodan let his hungry gaze travel over Graciela's creamy skin. She looked like an island in the center of a lush blue sea. The folds of her robe had fallen open when he'd placed her on the bed, completely exposing her body to him.

He took in the sight of her, starting at her toes and working his way upward. Her long legs met in a triangle of fiery curls. Her perfect navel dipped gently in the center of her belly, begging for the exploration of his tongue. The peaks of her breasts beckoned him, their tips already hardening under the weight of his stare.

The rapid flutter of a pulse in her graceful neck caught his attention and held it. Her anticipation of him heightened his desire. In the candlelight, her eyes looked like the color of the forest at night, and an alluring blush covered her cheeks.

He threw off his shirt and stretched out beside her, battling with himself over how to proceed. His fantasies of her had been rough,

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fevered couplings in which he'd tamed her anger and hatred with drugging kisses and claiming thrusts that wrung pleasure from her, despite her protests. He hadn't expected her to lie willingly in his bed and hold out her arms to him as she did now. She awaited his touch, and by her exquisite reaction when he finally brushed his fingers across her taut nipples, he understood that she needed him as much as he needed her.

He lowered his face to hers and kissed her deeply, drinking in the flavor of her. She tasted sweet, like the berries she'd eaten before their performance in the courtyard. She also tasted innocent somehow, so clean and genuine.

Graciela took him in eagerly, meeting his searching tongue with her own. His desire rose even higher when she brought her body against him. The feel of her soft breasts against his chest set him on fire.

He kneaded her flesh and gathered her to him, imposing one knee between her legs. She spread herself, and he felt her insistent fingers on his shoulders, drawing him over her.

Impatiently, he unfastened his breeches, freeing his erection from the suddenly tight confines of the fabric. He drew in a sharp breath when her hand closed around his hot shaft, massaging him with a gentle stoke that nearly drove him mad.

Was that how she did it? he wondered, surrendering to the sweet sensation of her warm hand caressing his most sensitive flesh. Did she seduce men and drive them insane with lust before she killed them?

To Rodan, it no longer mattered. If he woke with a blade at his throat, or a desire to leap from the balcony, it wouldn't matter, as long as he had her beneath him now. Accepting him. Needing him inside her.

With a half-moan, half-growl, Rodan pulled her lush body under him and took her in a swift, possessive thrust.

* * *

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Gillian gasped and clung to Rodan when he entered her. She clasped her still-trembling legs around his and arched her hips to meet him. His body felt slick under her hands, his muscles bulging and hard as steel.

His open breeches rasped against her thighs, creating a sensuous friction that drew a low moan of pleasure from her. She liked that he had remained partially dressed, so eager for her that he couldn't take a moment to remove all his clothes.

She clenched her thighs against his slim, rock-hard hips and began to move beneath him, taking his thick, hot erection farther and farther inside with each fevered thrust.

No, she told herself again, it didn't matter any more who she was or what he expected her to be. It mattered only that his body fit perfectly inside hers. He perfectly timed his movements to hers, urging her to a climax that rocked her.

When her inner muscles tightened around him, he breathed her name in a ragged whisper. She didn't care that he called her Graciela. She would deal with that later, when the fog of desire that clouded her thoughts lifted. Right now, all she wanted was more of him, all of him, buried deep within her, claiming her.

His movements quickened, heightening the sensation as her orgasm spread upward to dormant places deep inside her. She panted and cried out when he cupped her bottom and plunged one final time. She felt a hot, liquid rush and reveled when he moaned against her shoulder and bit the tender flesh, sending yet another electric wave to her core.

He held her for a moment, their bodies fused with the heat of their passion. Rodan nuzzled her neck, then her ear. He wickedly ran one finger across the taut flesh below her navel, inducing spasms that drew her up and forced her to curl herself around him.

"Close your eyes," he whispered. "Sleep for a while, then I'll show you more."

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Gillian smiled and succumbed to the overwhelming need to sleep. Rodan rolled off her and pulled her sated body into the warm curve of his own.

“So this is the future I have to look forward to?” she purred as his hand settled intimately across her belly.

“This and much more.” He kissed her neck and her skin tingled deliciously. “If our child grows within you, you will have even more.”

Gillian stiffened at his words, another unwelcome reminder that she could not fulfill his expectations. Her quarterly birth control injection would keep her infertile for another two months. What would Rodan do when he realized that creating his special child wouldn’t happen as soon as he expected?

She didn’t want to think about what might happen if, in two months’ time, she remained here. What about two years’ time? Could she survive that long pretending to be Graciela?

“Rodan...I’m weak. I may not have the strength to conceive a child right now, let alone carry one to term.”

He lay silent for a moment, and Gillian held her breath. In response, he drew her body even closer to him, his fingers warm and gentle on her flesh. He kissed her shoulder on the spot where he’d bitten her during his release.

“Then we will have to do this again when you are renewed. And maybe again before that...and maybe again very shortly...for practice.” He laughed softly. “Don’t worry, Graciela. In time, it will happen.”

She nodded, though her eyes burned. With her face turned away from him and her back sealed against his chest, he couldn’t see her tears.

I’m not her. The words echoed in her mind until she finally fell asleep. *I’m not her...*

* * *

When Gillian awoke, she found Rodan gone again, and felt oddly

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grateful for the solitude. She sat up, stretching her sore muscles, and pulled her robe around her. Her skin was still warm from him, and the memories of their coupling caused a tightening in her core.

She had needed it so badly. It had been too long. She felt a guilty twinge at the thought. She had to be shanghaied to another planet to find a man, and the one she found thought she was someone else, someone she could never be. Life was funny, in a pathetic way, sometimes.

She rose and stretched again, then took a brief tour of Rodan's magnificent chamber. In addition to the huge bed, which seemed to be carved of mahogany or some equally sumptuous wood, luxurious furniture and artwork crammed the room. All the pieces, from the settee at the foot of the bed to the huge sideboard and massive wardrobe, were deeply inlaid with gold filigree. Beautiful vases, decanters and delicate lacquer boxes adorned every surface. The walls held paintings, tapestries and a huge collection of weapons, including swords, knives and various other implements, all polished to a gleam and utterly free of dust.

Gillian ran her finger along a three-foot-long blade inscribed with a three-headed dragon. She wondered if Rodan had ever used it, or if it was merely a piece of art to be admired.

In her investigation, she found the wide balcony doors securely locked, as was the door to the outside corridor. Only the door to her own room remained open, attesting to the fact that, while Rodan apparently trusted her to bear his child, he still wouldn't allow her to wander the castle unattended.

Breakfast had been set on the sideboard in her room, along with a steaming washbasin. She thought of Anya and decided she would ask the girl to read her more of Cazastan's history. Maybe she would look for a local map so she could learn the names of the nearby villages. She still hoped she might uncover something about Graciela and her

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sorcery. If some kind of magick had brought her here, maybe magick could get her home before Rodan realized she could do nothing to help him fight his enemies.

She ate quickly, then washed and dressed in a gown of soft lavender she plucked from the impressive collection in her wardrobe. She brushed her hair and did her best to tame the unruly waves with a velvet ribbon she found in a small drawer next to the bed.

Once dressed, she regarded her reflection in the silver mirror hanging opposite the bed. The image surprised her. How could she look like a guileless, virginal medieval princess and feel like such a fraud at the same time?

“Who are you?” she asked the woman in the mirror. Gillian Lawrence had left her apartment on a rainy Friday morning more than a week ago, and for all she knew, Gillian Lawrence was still lying in a burned-out motel office on Route 259.

Whoever was staring back at her was *not* the bored, slightly overwrought real estate agent whose car perpetually needed a tune up and whose manicures never lasted more than a day and a half. She was no longer Gillian Lawrence, the chocoholic, romance-novel junkie with a wild crush on Mel Gibson.

But who was she?

Good question.

CHAPTER 9

Rodan felt the weight of a familiar stare on his back as he soothed his tired horse with a vigorous brushing. “Madran? How many times have I asked you not to lurk?”

The manservant joined Rodan in the stall. “My apologies, Milord. The stable hands can do that. You know you needn’t trouble yourself.”

The stallion nickered and shuffled restlessly. They’d had a good ride, Rodan and Joxon, but like his master, the horse seemed out of sorts today. The beast wanted something more to ease his unrest, just as Rodan wanted more of the amazing woman he’d left sleeping in his bed.

“This relaxes me, Madran, and gives me time to think.”

“Are you thinking that the people of Verdan are only a small portion of those Graciela has wronged? Are you wondering if we can convince the others who will invariably come that she deserves to live when so many have died by her hand?”

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Rodan sighed. Madran had an uncanny gift for reading his thoughts. “Yes. Practically word for word.” He accompanied the reluctant admission with a sardonic half grin.

Madran handed his master a pouch of dried fruits for the horse. The animal cast a knowing gaze at Rodan, who rewarded his cleverness with a small taste of the sweets. “Once we’ve defeated the Saracen, and the people know that Graciela’s magick bought the victory, they may begin to forgive her.”

“Do you think so, Milord? She’s captivated you, but can she bespell thousands of angry men and women all at once? If the Saracen threat were gone, the people would be at ease, but over time they would see her growing power as a danger.”

Rodan shook his head. “You’re wrong on two counts. One, I don’t think she has the strength to enchant me. I don’t sense any magick around her at all.” That was a lie. He felt it every time he looked at her. She possessed some force within her that he couldn’t ignore. He knew one thing for certain, though, whatever she possessed was not the cold, black sorcery he had expected.

“Even now you pine for her, Milord. I can see it. You’ve been in the stables less than an hour and you’ve glanced toward the castle twenty times.”

“Perhaps she *has* charmed me, but I’m still in control of my thoughts and emotions.”

The horse made a scoffing sound.

Madran snickered. “Even Joxon does not believe you, sire.”

Rodan patted the beast’s pale flank. “Your second error, Madran, is your estimation of the people. Over time, they will accept her penance. As my wife, she will command their respect, and if she can hold herself as well as she has these past days, they may come to see her as I do. There is a pure heart in her. I know it.”

“Do you believe she’s the last of her kind left in the world?”

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“I’m certain there are still others somewhere.”

“And if they band together?”

“Her kind don’t form alliances like that. They’ve no more love for each other than they have for us.”

Madran nodded thoughtfully as if weighing his responses. “You would create more? Continue her bloodline? Master, I fear for you.”

“Don’t, Madran. I do believe I have accomplished what I planned. I’ve tamed her. I’ve shown her a life she could never have imagined. She will change. *I know* she will.”

“I think she will change *you*.”

Rodan turned to reply, but the manservant had departed, leaving him with an uncomfortable thought to ponder.

* * *

“This symbol makes the beginning sound in ‘door,’” Anya explained, pointing out another unfamiliar letter in the Cazastan alphabet. “You can remember because of the small dot inside it. I think it looks like a knob.”

Gillian’s head was spinning. She and the girl had been at lessons half the day, first with Anya reading from a series of books on war with the Saracen, then paging through volumes of maps looking for familiar words. Finally Gillian had grown tired of hearing about the seemingly endless conflict with the ruthless northern tribe and begged Anya to help her learn the odd lettering system. It looked like a hodge-podge of Russian, Greek and standard alphabets with some letters backward, or upside down, and a few completely alien symbols thrown in.

So far Gillian could pick out the symbols for D, R and A, but since no words contained only those three odd symbols, she felt utterly lost.

She sighed as Anya droned on about cases in which the symbol in question also stood for a sound somewhere between Z and TH when used in proper names.

“I think I’m hopeless, Anya,” she said. “I’ll never get it.”

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Not when all I can think about is Rodan, she added silently. He'd been a distraction to her all day, even though she hadn't seen him. She kept hoping he would return, but she dreaded it also, because it meant she would become Graciela again. At least with Anya, she could be herself.

"You will understand in time, Milady. Don't worry. Maybe you're hungry. Shall I bring you something to eat?"

Gillian nodded as she closed the heavy book in her lap. "Actually that sounds like a great idea. Let's take a snack break."

"I'll return shortly. Would you like to eat here or in your room?"

"Here's fine." Gillian slid a pile of books off the small table before the settee and rose to the daunting task of replacing them on the shelves.

Anya curtsied daintily, and though she smiled at Gillian, a slight reticence in her manner remained. At least she didn't look at Gillian with abject fear any more. That gave her hope that maybe, in time, the rest of Rodan's servants would permit her to see them and talk to them. It was so disconcerting to exist in a castle full of people—according to Anya, there were more than thirty in Rodan's staff—and to have contact with only three. It frightened her to think that, given half a chance, the others might be just as inclined to tear her apart as the mob from Verdan had been.

Perhaps it was better that they avoided her.

* * *

The sun had climbed high in the cloudless sky when Rodan returned to the castle. Though Madran's words still echoed in his mind, he could concentrate on nothing but Graciela. He had plans for her that he could no longer wait to set in motion.

Anya told him Graciela was in the library. Her interest in books surprised him, as did her inability to read them. Again he supposed, with so few of her kind left alive, she had likely spent her childhood in

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hiding rather than learning the basic lessons normal children learned.

He helped himself to the small tray of food Anya had prepared and let himself into the library as quietly as possible. Graciela sat on the settee, her back to the door. She held a small crystal goblet in her slender fingers. He watched her turn the glass, admiring its deeply faceted pattern and the way the flames in the hearth shimmered through the fine design.

When he cleared his throat to announce his presence, the glass tumbled from her hands. She made a swift move to catch it and missed, sending the delicate object crashing against the jagged stone mantle before her. It shattered into glittering dust.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry!” Graciela jumped up and reached for the goblet’s remains. Her lovely cheeks colored as she bent to scrape the broken pieces off the hearthstone. “I bet that cost a fortune! I’m really sorry—I can’t believe I did that.”

Rodan set the tray of food on the sideboard and crossed the room in three large strides. He placed his hands over Graciela’s to stop her pointless attempts at sweeping up the sharp crystal shards. “Don’t trouble yourself. Anya will clean it up.”

“I’m really sorry. You startled me. I was expecting Anya. I’m really not usually that clumsy. I feel terrible about it.”

“It was a glass, nothing more.”

“But it was so beautiful. It’s such a shame it can’t be fixed.”

Rodan looked down at her and smiled indulgently. “You amaze me.”

“Why?” Her quirky smile intrigued him.

“You’re genuinely sorry for accidentally breaking a small bauble.”

“It looked expensive.”

“As is everything in Keragar. And I’ve the money to buy each item ten times over. A broken glass means no more to me than a broken eggshell in the kitchen, yet you apologize profusely. More than a dozen

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people have died by your hand and you give no thought to making reparations. Why does a crystal goblet mean more to you than a life?"

* * *

Gillian went cold by inches as Rodan spoke. His warm tone belied the dark undercurrent of his words. As the chill wrapped around her heart, she drew her hands from his grasp.

"I'm not her, Rodan. I don't know what I have to do to convince you, but I'm *not* Graciela."

"Stop this," he said, his eyes darkening. "Why do you—"

She put her hands on his broad chest and pushed him. She wanted to pound on him, shake him to make him see who she really was. "I'm *not* Graciela! I'm Gillian Lawrence. I'm a real estate agent from Pittsburgh. I don't know how I got here, or even exactly where *here* is, but I don't have any magical powers and I've never, *ever* killed anyone!"

Surprise washed over Rodan's face. Then, lightening fast, he grabbed her. Gillian cringed when his fingers closed around her upper arms. He drew her toward him with such force, they stumbled across the hearthstone. The shards of crystal littering the floor crunched beneath their feet.

"It's pointless to lie to me, Graciela. Your spells won't work!" Rodan panted in her ear as she struggled against him. "I see you for what you can be, not what you were. Why isn't that enough? Why do you waste your breath on these fantasies?"

Gillian screamed her frustration and broke from his arms. "You're impossible! Don't you get it? Don't you see? You've got the wrong person. I don't know how...I guess I look like her and I was in the right place at the right time, but I'm *not* her! I'll never be her. I can't cast spells. I can't have your baby and I can't help you fight the Saracen."

"You mean you won't." Rodan's voice sounded flat yet dangerous. He lowered his head like an angry bull.

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Gillian instinctively backed up until the cold edge of the mantle jutted against her spine.

This approach wasn't working. She had no proof to show him, no idea what would make this stubborn, arrogant man believe anything she said.

"I can't! I can't." She backed away again, just a single step and his eyes hungrily followed her. "I have no power."

Their gazes locked for a moment and heat blazed between them. Despite her anger and frustration, Gillian's body remembered the heights of passion to which Rodan had drawn her last night. The rising bulge in his breeches told her that he remembered, too.

"I'm not her." Her voice came out as a growl that escaped between clenched teeth. "I won't *be* her for you."

"You're right about one thing, Dark One, you have no power as you are." Rodan edged forward. "It's time you got some. Perhaps when you regain your strength, we can negotiate on equal ground...or perhaps one of us will die."

CHAPTER 10

Gillian's frustrated sigh rose to a shriek when Rodan lunged for her again. In the small library, there was nowhere to run, so he easily caught her. She struggled, all the while wishing she didn't crave his touch. She wanted to collapse into his arms but the fear overwhelmed her.

When the blade of his dagger flashed before her eyes, she went still.

"I'll give you a chance to prove yourself, Graciela. One more chance."

Gillian thought she saw regret in his eyes. She went limp against him, her heart pounding so fiercely she could barely breathe.

Rodan locked one arm around her waist and walked her to the door. Gillian's mind raced through every option she had, and there weren't many. She had no idea what he planned, but she knew if she didn't do something, anything that would prove to him who she was, he would make good on all his previous threats.

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She couldn't scream. Who would respond? Anya? The girl wouldn't dare defy her master. Gillian wouldn't beg. That was pointless. Rodan would think it only a ruse. She finally decided she had no choice but to go along with him.

Her hand shook when she opened the door on his command. She entered the corridor, painfully aware of the pointed dagger where it grazed the skin above the plunging neckline of her gown.

Rodan silently ushered her down the hallway and into the castle's ballroom. At the far wall, huge doors of rippled glass opened onto the gardens. Beyond the doors, brilliant sunlight slanted across the marble walkway and covered arbors led around the perimeter of the grounds. There, thick grapevines shielded the flagstone pathways from the heat of the sun.

Rodan turned Gillian to the left and pushed her under the arbor. Together they made their way down the winding, deeply shaded path under the tangle of snakelike stems and huge curling leaves.

As they walked, Rodan's grip on Gillian's waist relaxed, but his blade remained ready. He nudged her forward when she faltered, urging her deeper into the gardens under cover of the twisted canopy of vines.

Thick clusters of grapes hung down from above, their sweet scent intoxicating. A warm breeze stirred the huge, fuzzy leaves and lifted the hem of Gillian's long skirt. It seemed like they trudged for half an hour, and still Rodan pushed her deeper into the fragrant darkness. When they finally reached the end of the arbor, sunlight blinded her.

Gillian blinked as Rodan thrust her into a small clearing. He followed her across the circular flagstones that formed a radiating pattern in the center. There, he released her and turned her to face him.

Thick shrubs, at least twelve feet high, surrounded the clearing. Atop the highest branches of the bluish evergreens, the grapevines had begun to creep around the circle. Thin feelers extended to the blue sky,

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as if searching for something.

Gillian understood their need. She would have given anything to cling to Rodan, but the dangerous look in his eyes forbade it.

She remained motionless, waiting. He brought the blade toward her face, where it glinted in the light. One finger played at the neckline of her gown, swelled tight by the deep breath she held in her lungs.

In a swift movement, he pulled the soft fabric from her flesh and plunged the dagger through the lavender folds.

Gillian screamed, but the blade never touched her. With the neckline slit, Rodan tore the gown from her body. The ruined garment fluttered to a silken pool at her feet.

“As I promised you, Graciela, you may drink in your power. And when you’re sated, we will negotiate.”

Gillian’s breath came in ragged gasps. Standing naked before Rodan gave her a sense of power that she’d never experienced. She closed her eyes, doing as he commanded. She drank in the warmth through every pore and reveled in the soft caress of the warm breeze against her taut nipples and the aching bud between her legs. She threw back her head and let the sunlight beat on her face, then spread her arms and widened her stance.

When she arched her back, she heard Rodan’s feral moan.

Come on! Do what you’re going to do.

* * *

Rodan stared, unable to draw his gaze away from her. He hadn’t known what to expect, but he hadn’t imagined that her radiance would consume him.

In darkness, Graciela was like a porcelain vase, subtle curves of pale beauty. In candlelight, she was like golden honey, soft and liquid sweet. In sunlight...she was like a goddess with flaming hair and rosy skin.

When she arched her back, her pink-tipped breasts jutting forward,

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Rodan's body hardened immediately in response. He'd brought her out here to renew her, understanding it might give her the power to destroy him. He'd been prepared to kill her. Now all he wanted was to take her and love her until she understood there was so much more they could be if they were joined as one.

When she finally opened her eyes and gazed quizzically at him, his heart thundered. He held out the dagger to her, hilt first, and bowed his head.

"What do you want from me, Rodan?" she asked.

"An alliance," he said, hoarse with desire. He wanted much more than that. When she didn't reply, he shook his head. "That's not true. I want you. I need you, Graciela."

Her gaze turned hard. "Take what you want, but stop asking me for things I can't give you." Her voice, laced with defeat, cut Rodan as deeply as if she'd thrust the dagger into his chest.

* * *

Gillian reached out and pushed aside the weapon. This was it. She saw no other options. It was time to start telling Rodan things he *would* believe.

"My power is gone," she said. "I exhausted myself trying to escape from you that first night. I don't have anything left."

Rodan's brows lowered. "Is that possible?"

"I traded my last ounce of strength for a chance to escape to another world. My spell failed." *Think, Gillian. You've read enough fantasy novels. Think hard.* "You saw the circle on the ground. That was a...a portal to another place. I was too weak to finish the spell and now even sunlight won't restore my power."

Rodan looked skeptical, but Gillian also sensed his desperation to believe her.

"Can you keep me safe even if I can't fight the Saracen? Even if I can't give you a child?"

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In response, Rodan dropped the dagger. He took a step toward her and brushed his fingers across her jaw, then into her hair. He drew her to him and kissed her, gently at first, searchingly, as if he might probe for the deception he feared he would find.

Gillian thrust her hips forward and laced her fingers around the back of his neck. Her wordless invitation seemed all he needed to lose control.

* * *

With a moan, Rodan cupped her bottom and pulled her onto him. She wrapped her legs around him and settled herself against his erection. He clasped her tightly to him and walked to a patch of soft grass at the edge of the clearing. There, he knelt, placing her on her back. She reached for him as he reared up and stripped off his shirt and yanked off his boots. Her hands tangled with his when he tore at the fastening of his breeches and pulled them off. This time there would be nothing between them when he took her.

When he rose above her, he noted a stark sexual appreciation in her eyes. The wanting in her expression made him harder still until the ache drove him mad. He lowered himself over her, and she accepted his weight in the cradle of her thighs. She ran her hands down his back and to his hips, guiding him as he thrust into her. Her cry of passion let loose a torrent of desire in him. He gathered her close with one arm, using the other to brace himself on the ground.

He took her fiercely, driving in relentlessly, unable to temper his need even for a moment. She arched beneath him and threw back her head as her inner muscles spasmed against the onslaught.

“Harder!” Her ragged whisper nearly brought him to climax. “Harder!”

Rodan wondered if he could comply without hurting her. Each thrust produced a cry from her filled with both pleasure and pain, but she didn’t stop him. She raked her fingers up and down the muscles of

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his back, then tangled them in his hair.

He pumped his life into her, perhaps even his soul, and she urged him on until the moment when their bodies went taut together. Rodan hesitated only a moment as the pressure built. His final thrust wrung a cry from both of them. He covered her mouth with his and took her breath into his lungs. She writhed under him, rocking the last throbbing waves from the orgasm they shared.

After a moment of complete exhaustion, he rolled onto his back with her in his arms. She settled on him, straddling him. Though momentarily spent, he felt her wet heat against him, making him ache for her all over again.

Rodan met her gaze. Her expression was feral and satisfied, but sober as well.

“How can you say you have no power when you can make me worship you with a single glance?” He tangled his hands in the fiery tumult of her hair and kissed her hard. “I will do anything for you, Graciela.”

For a brief moment, he saw despair in her eyes. She pushed herself up and rested her hands on his chest.

“Then call me Gillian.”

He ran his hands up her arms and pulled her down against his chest, enfolding her in a protective embrace. “Gillian. That is who you will be from this moment on.”

* * *

It was twilight when Rodan led Gillian back to the castle through the grape arbor. She wore his shirt, which fortunately hung to her knees. He wore only his breeches and boots, and she saw the goose flesh produced by the chill of the early evening air on his damp skin.

She wanted to rub her hands on him and warm him, but considering how much sweating they'd done all afternoon, it was likely neither of them had the strength to produce much body heat.

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After their frenzied coupling in the clearing, he'd gathered what remained of their clothing and showed her to a beautiful pond, nestled even deeper in the wild section of the garden.

There, they bathed each other, swam and played in the cool water, and when the desire struck them again, he'd taken her twice on the mossy bank.

The first time had been hard and fast, and like before, she'd urged him on until her voice broke. For some reason, he drove her to heights of passion she'd never imagined.

The second time had been slow and infinitely more sensual. He'd used his mouth to bring her to a shuddering climax that left her barely able to breathe. Then he'd heightened her need by stretching her out beneath him and taking her with languid strokes again and again until she'd pleaded for a second release. When she lay panting, her skin practically sparking from the friction of their bodies, he'd poured cool water from his cupped hands onto her legs, her belly and between her thighs where the flesh still throbbed.

He drank the droplets from her fevered skin, then held her, his hand cupped possessively across her belly.

"A child will grow here one day...Gillian. I promise you." His husky whisper had sent tingles of longing through her. She'd only nodded. Eventually it would be true...she hoped...

Now, Rodan brought a finger to her lips as they entered Keragar's great hall. "Shhh." Every sound echoed in the huge room. "Hurry to my chamber and slip into bed. I will find Madran and request our dinner be brought up."

Gillian didn't argue. She was starving, not to mention anxious to get the grass stains off her knees. It had been a very energetic day.

She hurried up the stairs, and within minutes, had wrapped herself in the satiny blankets of Rodan's bed. She still wore his shirt, though, and found herself reluctant to take it off.

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The soft white fabric caressed her in much the way as he had all day long. The collar smelled of his warm, musky scent and she felt sinfully sexual in it. She'd never worn a man's shirt before. She'd never needed to. None of the men she'd been with had torn off her dress with a dagger and made love to her in the grass in broad daylight. Of course, none of them had thought she was an evil sorceress either.

She snuggled into the feather soft mattress and invoked the spirit of Scarlet O'Hara...

I'll worry about it tomorrow...tonight I don't give a damn....

CHAPTER 11

Stable hands, housemaids, cooks and coachmen stood ramrod straight in two rows that spanned Keragar's great hall. Gillian walked between the lines of servants, her hand clasped in Rodan's. He smiled reassuringly at her as Madran, trailing them, rattled off the name of each member of the staff for her benefit.

As Gillian passed, each pair of eyes turned down respectfully. The men bowed, the women curtsied, and at the end of one line, Anya beamed at Keragar's new mistress.

"After the new moon, Lady Gillian will officially become my wife," Rodan announced as they reached the end of their inspection. "You will all treat her as such, effective immediately. Any service you would provide for me, you will provide for her, unquestioningly. Am I understood?"

Murmurs of "Yes, Milord" came in varying degrees of conviction. Gillian scanned the faces and noted that not one of them seemed overly

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pleased to have a new lady of the house. Of course, Anya was the exception. She grinned at her student, seemingly unconcerned that those around her all looked vaguely terrified. Gillian noted that even Madran looked as if someone had pulled his collar a bit too tight.

Here I am, Lady of the Manor, a fairy tale come true, and they all look like they want to burn me alive.

She glanced at Rodan, and he grinned at her. He'd been "worshipping" her on practically an hourly basis for days, and while Gillian had never in her life felt so utterly sated, she still battled with a terrible doubt.

Rodan seemed to be able to put aside his belief that she was the Dark One, but no one else could. Again, with the exception of Anya, Gillian realized she had not a single ally in this world besides Rodan. And if he ever truly understood that she was not Graciela, his devotion to her would more than likely evaporate.

Gillian sighed. Maybe a remote chance remained that she would wake up back in her own world and find this was, after all, a dream. If that was to be the case, she hoped she would leave on a high note, before the tenuous fantasy began to crumble.

Rodan dismissed the servants and quietly spoke to Madran for a moment before he joined Gillian in the room's center. "It will take some time," he said, eyeing the last of the stable hands as they shuffled out of the room. "But eventually they will all accept you as Anya has."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Gillian leaned close to Rodan, drawing strength from his embrace.

"You're unaccustomed to having others wait on you," he said with a smile. "You need to become more comfortable with expecting others to serve you."

"I'll work on it. Right now, I'm late for my lessons with Anya."

"And I must go to Calais," he said, regret in his voice. He dropped a kiss on her forehead.

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“How far away is that?”

“A day’s ride.”

“You’ll be gone all day?” Gillian felt a stab of panic. She wasn’t sure she trusted Rodan’s servants. It seemed better when they’d been anonymous bodies doing their best to stay out of her sight.

“I’ll return tomorrow,” Rodan said. “I must speak to Lord Baygard. He’s raised an army to fight the Saracen and knows of my plan to enlist your help.”

Gillian’s nerves jangled. “He knows? What will he do when you tell him I can’t help?”

Rodan took her chin in his hand and looked her in the eyes. “I’m still not convinced you can’t. He and I will discuss the upcoming battle and devise a plan.”

“Rodan—”

He cut her off with another kiss. “Don’t worry, Gillian of Keragar. I’ll be back soon.”

Before she could protest, he departed. Gillian stood alone in the center of the opulent hall for a long time, wishing she knew what to do.

As strange as Cazastan was, she found herself getting used to the place. As much as Rodan kept her off balance, she found that she looked forward to every moment with him. Even thinking about their lovemaking made her hot, and she blushed whenever she remembered the raw, animal desire he’d stirred in her when he’d ripped the lavender gown from her body and taken her in the garden clearing. He was everything she’d always dreamed of finding in a man—strong, sure of himself and his purpose in the world, not to mention a slave to his lust for her. Who could ask for more? It didn’t hurt that he was wealthy, gorgeous, and a member of this planet’s nobility. In her world—well, they didn’t grow them like this in Pittsburgh. In her world, Rodan would be knee deep in super models and heiresses.

Now that she’d found him, how could she go back home?

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Yet if given the chance, how could she not?

* * *

When Rodan returned two days later at dawn, he looked exhausted. "I rode all night," he said, stumbling into bed with Gillian. "I couldn't spend another night away from you."

Still half asleep, Gillian rolled toward him and curled her body around his. "I'm glad you're back. I missed you," she said through a yawn and settled her head on his chest. "What did Lord Bar...Barclay say?"

Rodan chuckled and slid his warm arms around her body. "Lord Baygard. He says the Saracen are coming by barge across Glacier Lake. He suggested a storm on the lake would disrupt their plans. He's moving his men into position now."

Gillian rose on her elbow and glared at him. "I *can't* control the weather. I told you that."

"And I told Baygard that was unreasonable, even for someone as powerful as you are."

"*Were.*"

"Were. I suggested you might be able to divine the exact the time of their arrival and give Baygard's troops the advantage that way."

Gillian sat up, fully awake. Her nerves hummed with frustration. "I can't divine *anything*. I'm not a fortuneteller. I thought you understood."

Rodan grabbed her wrists and pulled her back on top of him. He smiled indulgently and kissed the hard line of her lips, softening them with the force of his desire. "I told him I would work on you and force you to come up with a spell that would help him. Together we will think of something."

"I don't want the lives of Baygard's soldiers to be in my hands. If they lose the battle, what happens to me?" Gillian gave in to Rodan's first kiss, but struggled up dizzily from the second. "Baygard will want

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my head on a platter if his soldiers are killed.”

“He won’t have it.”

“That’s easy to say now. What if he sends troops here?”

“We’ll think of something, *Gillian*. But not tonight.”

Rodan tugged her forward, guiding her hips across his. She settled against his growing erection and stared down into his deep blue eyes. She shook her head, letting her sleep-ruffled hair tumble across his chest. He groaned when she began a slow circular grind with her hips to ease the building ache in the flesh that rested on his hard shaft. But even as arousal clouded her vision, she had to wonder how Rodan could be so dense. He claimed to believe her, but he held on to the hope that somehow she would change for him and do the impossible.

And worst of all, she wished she could. In such a short time, she had come to trust him, to need him so desperately, that all she could think about was how they might find a way to defeat the Saracen. If he said they would find a way to appease Baygard, she believed they would.

* * *

At dinner the next night, Rodan gazed across the candlelit table at a vision in sapphire silk.

The dress Graciela had chosen—or rather, Gillian had chosen—for the evening, was stunning. The fine fabric, dark as the night sky, clung to her generous curves in all the right places and caused him no end of distraction.

When she noticed his lustful stare, a sweet blush colored her cheeks.

He raised his glass to her. “You are beautiful.” It still amazed him that so many people thought Graciela to be hideous. In his eyes, she was perfect.

She smiled at him as he sipped his wine.

“I know you’re still concerned about Baygard.”

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“Why shouldn’t I be? Believe me, if there was something I could do, I would.”

“I think you can.” Rodan watched her eyes change. They lit from within. His continued insistence that she could help sway the outcome of the looming battle irritated her.

“Rodan!”

“Gillian, I believe your presence alone will make a difference. I know it will be dangerous, but Madran and I will protect you.”

“What are you suggesting?” She leaned forward, her expression anxious.

“The Saracen fear you even more than the Southern tribes do. When they see you, leading the army next to Baygard, casting your spells upon them—”

“I can’t cast spells!” Gillian rose, upsetting her wineglass. The red stain spread across the linen like blood.

“The Saracen don’t know that. Their terror alone will cause them to falter in their resolve. Every loss they take will be attributed to your interference, even those caused by their *own* mistakes. If a horse stumbles, they will think *you* willed it. If a man falls, they will think *you* cursed him. You have only to act as though you *are* controlling the events and it will be believed.”

Gillian stared at him for a long, tense moment, her exquisite breasts rising and falling with her anger. “That’s insane!”

Rodan laughed. “You have far more power than you imagine, Dark One. Don’t dismiss it.”

She pursed her lovely lips. “I still can’t believe any of this is happening. You want me to trick an army—*two* armies—into believing I’m manipulating everything that happens in battle? That has to be the most outrageous—”

A knock at the door startled them both. The servants never disturbed the private dinners of their lord and lady.

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“Enter!” Rodan’s annoyance faded when Madran appeared, looking pale and nervous.

* * *

The manservant glanced at Gillian in a most curious manner. Though still loathe to make eye contact, his shrewd gaze lingered on her far longer than usual.

“Milord, Lord Varrick is here and he...has brought a prisoner with him.”

Rodan stood as quickly as Gillian had a moment before, excitement lighting his features. “Varrick? By God! That’s wonderful. Gillian, Varrick is my oldest friend.”

“What’s wrong, Madran?” Gillian noted how the manservant flinched when she addressed him. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Madran turned to Rodan, but stole a furtive glance at Gillian. “Milord, perhaps you should come at once to the foyer.”

Gillian sensed a serious problem, and that Madran didn’t want to say anything. She glared at the manservant, but he kept his eyes averted.

Rodan took her hand and gently tugged her across the room. Reluctantly, she followed both men out of the private dining room and down the stairs to Keragar’s reception area.

At the bottom of the main staircase stood a tall, regal-looking man, with coal black hair and tawny golden eyes. He had a vivid scar on his left cheek that did nothing to diminish his appearance. Rodan hurried down the stairs and clapped him on the shoulder. The two men hugged like brothers long separated.

“Varrick! I was beginning to wonder if you’d forgotten the way to Keragar!”

“Rodan, you look well. I could never forget the way to my second home.”

Varrick looked over Rodan’s shoulder and his golden gaze traveled

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from the swirling hem of Gillian's dress to her eyes, lingering for a brief moment on her cleavage. His smile widened at her demur blush.

"I daresay, the scenery was not so lovely when I was here last."

Rodan turned to Gillian, a possessive glint in his eyes. "We're soon to be wed, Varrick. I know it's surprising but—"

"Surprising? Certainly not. I'd wed her myself if you'd be so kind as to step aside." Varrick bowed deeply, his smile rakish. "May I be so bold as to ask your name, Milady?"

Gillian stared. Varrick had obviously been away a long time. He was the first person she'd met on Cazastan who didn't look at her as if she were the Devil incarnate.

Rodan's smile faltered and his gaze bounced from Varrick to Gillian. "Don't you recognize her?"

"We've met before?" Varrick seemed shocked. He advanced to stand on the step below Gillian and appraised her with a look one would reserve for fine art. "If I have forgotten an encounter with you, Milady, I'm obviously half mad. Please refresh my failing memory and accept my humble apology that your lovely name escapes me."

Gillian couldn't help but grin as Varrick swept and bowed again before her. He was just too chivalrous for words. And cute, too. She had a brief image of auctioning him off to the highest bidder among the single women at her office, knowing it would somewhat ease their jealousy after they got an eyeful of Rodan.

She opened her mouth to speak.

"Lord Rodan? The prisoner?" Madran's urgent voice cut off Gillian's reply. All eyes turned to the manservant.

"What have you done, Varrick?" Rodan asked with a sly grin. "Did you net a Saracen spy for Baygard?"

Varrick turned to Rodan, but managed a quick wink at Gillian before he did. "She's being held outside. I was loathe to bring such a vile creature into your home without your consent."

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“Her?” Rodan sounded suspicious.

Varrick beamed. “I’ve captured the Dark One.”

CHAPTER 12

The hairs on the back of Gillian's neck rose and her skin prickled uncomfortably at Varrick's announcement.

Rodan swung his eyes to her, astonishment on his face. "Varrick, you stand before Graciela," he said, his voice even.

The man laughed once, a harsh bark that caught in his throat when he saw the look on Rodan's face. "That might be funny if it were not such an insult to your betrothed. You shame her with that remark."

Gillian's throat tightened. This was the proof she'd been waiting for, someone who could convince Rodan that she wasn't Graciela. She wanted to cheer or maybe kiss Varrick, but her voice wouldn't work and her legs wouldn't move. The dark rage on Rodan's face told her this wasn't a moment of redemption for her.

On Rodan's signal, Madran hurried across the foyer to Keragar's front door. When he returned a moment later, his usually pale face had turned ashen.

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Two men followed Madran into the castle. They dragged a spitting, hissing creature with them and set her struggling body on the floor at Varrick's feet.

Bound in chains, her hands and feet manacled and her dress in tatters, she looked like a demon. A cloud of dirty auburn hair obscured her face and a faintly inhuman sound issued from her throat. It took both men and Madran to keep her still, despite her bonds. She nearly bit one of the men when he pulled back her head by a handful of matted hair to expose her rage-reddened face.

"Oh God." No one seemed to hear Gillian's strangled whisper. Her hand went instinctively to her throat when she looked into the woman's face.

Save for the dirt-streaked skin, one swollen lip and the wild mane of unkempt hair, Graciela could have been Gillian's twin. They differed only in their expressions. Gillian stared in astonishment, her jaw agape, while Graciela snarled, her features twisted by the hatred that seethed from her.

"I see you've done well for yourself, sister," Graciela said with a wicked gleam in her eye. Her satisfaction, though, didn't prevent her from struggling against her captors. "Rodan took you in and tamed you, just as we suspected he would."

Gillian gasped. Her heart thundered in her ears, and when her stricken gaze met Rodan's, the fury she saw there made her knees weak.

"*Sister?*" Rodan hissed the word. It sounded like a curse.

"No!" Gillian managed a strangled protest. "I'm not—"

"Good Gods! You mean there are two of them?" Varrick shook his head.

Next to him, Rodan seemed to deflate.

"I'm *not* her sister!" Gillian finally regained feeling in her legs and stumbled down the steps toward Rodan. "She brought me here. She

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conjured me somehow.” Gillian stopped and held herself just inches from touching him.

Rodan stared at her with contempt. “Madran! Take them both to a suitable holding cell. There shall be no light, not even a candle in that room.”

“With pleasure, sire.” Madran’s expression mirrored Rodan’s, while Varrick merely looked perplexed. The manservant reached for Gillian, but she whirled away. He lunged for her and she kicked, aiming for his groin. Unfortunately, she missed and fell against Rodan, who pinned her arms to her sides. His fingers bit into her flesh as he wrestled her into Madran’s rough embrace.

“Don’t make him hurt you, Gillian,” Rodan warned, his tone cold. “Madran will relish it.”

“Rodan, don’t do this! Don’t you see what I’ve been telling you all along?”

Rodan ignored her plea. He took a few hesitant steps and wearily clasped Varrick’s shoulder while Madran and Varrick’s servants dragged away Gillian and Graciela.

“Thank you, Varrick. You don’t realize the disaster you’ve saved me from.”

Gillian choked on hot tears when she heard Rodan’s words. She tried to look at him, but Madran pushed her head down and held it fast as the men led them to Keragar’s dungeon.

* * *

“You bitch!” Gillian screamed at Graciela when the door of their shared cell thudded shut. “You destroyed my life!”

This time there was no bed or warm washbasin for their comfort. Not even a sliver of light showed under the heavy wooden door.

Varrick’s men had chained Graciela to the wall at one end of the dank, stone cell, and Madran had manacled Gillian to the opposite wall. The length of their chains didn’t allow them to reach each other. With

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the darkness complete around them, they could locate each other only by the sound of their voices.

“Rest assured, sister, my thoughts were only to saving my own skin. The fact that you have suffered is regrettable, but unavoidable.”

Gillian understood by the woman’s cold, emotionless tone exactly what she was dealing with. “You’re everything Rodan thought you were. How did you do it anyway? How did you bring me here?”

“A spell to draw a suitable body from another dimension. It took years to perfect, and I must say, having seen you groomed and sparkling as Rodan’s concubine, it worked far better than I’d anticipated.”

Gillian struggled against her chains. She wasn’t sure who she wanted to hurt more, Graciela for using her, or Madran for his obvious enjoyment at manhandling her. He’d relished throwing her in the cell, probably thinking she should have never been set free in the first place. He’d never trusted her, and now that Graciela’s lie made it seem like they were in cahoots, he never would. Neither would Rodan, ever again.

“I’m no one’s concubine!”

“I’m sorry if he forced you, sister. Rodan is a rutting pig, as are all men. But I expected a modicum of honor from him.”

“He didn’t force me.” The thought of it choked Gillian. Rodan may not have offered her many choices, but he hadn’t assaulted her.

“Ah. You were willing? I can understand. He’s a strapping specimen. Time was, I might have wanted him to sate my urges as well. But any interest in men as bed partners has been beaten out of me over the years.” A tinge of regret laced the voice that sounded so much like her own.

“Don’t try to make me feel sorry for you. You’re a murderer.”

“I’ve killed in self defense, and I’ve killed for vengeance. What I am is a survivor, though none would believe it. These vile creatures

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have destroyed every one who cared for me all because of my power. I want only to give back in kind.”

“So it’s all about revenge?”

“Yes. It is.”

Gillian remained silent for a while, her thoughts in turmoil. What would Graciela have done to Rodan if he had captured her on the road that night? Would she have accepted his offer, then turned against him at her first opportunity? Probably.

“Rodan wanted to help you,” she said, working her way down the cold, slick wall behind her and sitting on the floor. She heard chains clanking and figured Graciela had done the same. “He was going to offer you a chance for a life.”

“Is that what he told you to lure you into his bed?” Graciela gave a harsh laugh. “Are all the women from your world so naïve? Do they all lie down for any man who makes them foolish promises? You’d deserve more respect if he forced you. At least then you could boast of some integrity.”

Gillian’s cheeks felt hot. “He wanted to give you a chance to redeem yourself. He wanted you to help him defeat the Saracen in exchange for his protection.”

“And you jumped at the offer, I presume?”

“What choice did I have? I don’t even know where I am. I was at work, minding my own business, and the next thing I know, I wake up with Rodan threatening to toss me to an angry mob unless I help him.”

“Then he *did* force you. You did what you had to do to stay alive, sister. I admire that.”

The words stung. She’d put aside the idea that she gave herself to Rodan because she *had* to and decided it was because she *wanted* to. She wanted him even now, and that realization made her cheeks burn with shame.

“It doesn’t matter any more, does it? You’ve ruined it. He thinks

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I'm one of your kind and that I planned all along to betray him. What *are* you anyway? How come you're so powerful?"

"I am Andar, a dying breed. We came to Cazastan looking for sanctuary, and in turn, we were hunted like animals."

"So you're aliens?"

"I suppose you could say that. Yet after six thousand years on this planet, are we really alien any more?"

"Can you send me home?" Gillian's request came quick and filled her with regret. She didn't want to plead and she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

After a long pause, Graciela sighed. "It took me years to perfect the spell that brought you here. Perhaps in as much time, I could figure out how to send you back."

"Years?"

"Just as you're not sure where you are, I'm not sure where you came from. My spell searched time and dimensions for a match...someone who was my twin. You could have come from anywhere."

"How can we be twins if you're an alien?"

"Oh, sister, the Andar have been here a long time. It's likely you have some of our blood in you."

"You've lost me. I'm not from Cazastan."

"How sure of that are you?"

The question sent a cold chill down Gillian's spine. This was another planet. It had to be. Right? "Well, if I have Andar blood, how come I possess none of your power?"

Graciela laughed again, and this time, with a hint of warmth. "How do you know you don't? Have you ever tried to cast a spell?"

"In my world, that's all hocus pocus—TV shows for teenagers and Vegas acts. Magick isn't real."

"That's why you have no power. You don't believe you do."

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Gillian sniffed petulantly. *Yeah, whatever.* “And if I tap my heels together three times and say, ‘There’s no place like home,’ just maybe I’ll get back there.”

The chains rattled and Gillian wondered if Graciela shrugged or merely stretched. “Maybe you will, sister. Maybe you will.”

* * *

“You planned to marry the Dark One?”

Varrick’s shock only deepened Rodan’s shame. What had he been thinking? Graciela, or rather Gillian, truly had bewitched him. He’d been a fool for her because she captivated him from the moment he first saw her.

“Rodan, I always knew that soft heart of yours would get you into trouble one day.”

“And you got me out of it, as I’m sure you always knew you would, Varrick.”

Rodan didn’t meet his friend’s gaze. He paced the sitting room where a tearful Anya had set a tray of spirits for them, along with a small meal.

Varrick picked up a morsel from his plate. “If she had agreed to help Baygard, her power might have swayed the battle in our favor...”

“I thought I offered her a reasonable prize. Her life.”

“I suppose this explains a lot. With two of them running loose—it makes me concerned there aren’t more.”

“An army of them?” Rodan laughed, but felt no humor. “Wouldn’t that be rich?”

Varrick smirked. “What now? Hang them both?”

Rodan’s gut twisted at the thought. The sour taste of bile made it impossible for him to enjoy another sip of wine. “If there *are* two of them to hang.”

“What do you mean?”

“Graciela conjured Gillian. I’m sure of it. If there had been identical

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sisters, there would have been rumors through the years. They could not have kept that secret for almost three decades. Gillian—*isn't* real. She *must* be a construct of Graciela's magick."

"She looked very real to me." Varrick's maddening smirk returned. "Did she feel real when you touched her? I imagine you touched her..."

"Yes. She...felt real."

"How could Graciela have the strength to create a living, breathing replica of herself and control it? You say she'd been in a dungeon in Galadrin for weeks before she was bound and sent to you. If she escaped the night you found Gillian, then spent several days roaming the countryside before my men and I came across her..." Varrick shook his head. "If Gillian were a creation, she'd have faded away by now, wouldn't she?"

"I've no idea. I don't think any of us really knows what Graciela is capable of doing."

"No, we don't."

In his gut, Rodan felt the stab of his friend's pointed words. Of course, Gillian had agreed to his offer. She had willingly given herself to him and made him think that perhaps she might one day actually love him. She was designed that way. The real Graciela would have killed him at the earliest opportunity.

"Tomorrow at sunset, we'll end this," Rodan said. His limbs grew heavy as he dragged himself toward the door. "Enjoy your meal, my friend. Sleep well. Madran will show you to a room when you're finished."

"Rodan..." Varrick said, his voice low and full of sympathy.

Rodan stopped with his hand on the door.

"You think you're in love with her, don't you?"

"No." The answer came quickly, like the slice of a well-sharpened blade. "I don't think I'm in love with her, Varrick. I *know* I am."

CHAPTER 13

Gillian ached all over. The throbbing in her head made her dizzy and more than a little nauseous. She sat up retching, and took an unsteady breath of the fetid air in the cell.

The clank of the chains must have awakened Graciela, because Gillian heard her stirring.

The sorceress hissed a curse. “The darkness kills eventually,” she said, regret coloring her words. “That’s why we left our world, so the legends say. The sun went dark, for some reason. No one remembers for sure, but it could no longer sustain us, so we came here. At first we blended with the population and hid our power, but after a time it was decided that we had to step in before the same thing happened here. When we showed ourselves, we became the enemy.”

“If you’re so powerful, why couldn’t you save your own planet?” Gillian was in no mood for a history lesson. She’s spent too many tortuous hours dreaming of Rodan and she hated herself for waking

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with him on her mind.

“I wish I knew. Our biggest mistake was coming here.”

“Dragging me out of my life runs a close second,” Gillian said through a cough. She smelled the mold that covered the damp stone around them and figured it was already growing in her lungs.

“I admire your self-involvement, sister. You must look after only yourself in this world. No one else will ever care for you.”

“Shut up. I really don’t want to hear any more of your—”

“Someone’s coming...”

Gillian stiffened. A scraping sound at the door preceded the opening of the heavy lock.

“I imagine our time together is coming to an end,” Graciela said, her comment laced with sarcasm. “Wait until they unchain you before you fight, sister. Let them think they’ve broken you. It will make them complacent.”

Gillian made no reply. She couldn’t believe her life would end in a damp hole in the basement of a castle on some distant planet. She also couldn’t believe that, despite everything, her last thoughts would be of Rodan.

* * *

Rodan spent an eternity in the corridor outside the cell. He couldn’t bear the thought of seeing Gillian in chains again, or looking upon Graciela and thinking about what might have happened if it had been her he’d found on the road that night. He’d spent too many hours pacing in his room after leaving Varrick and too much time reliving every moment he’d spent with Gillian. He would never sleep again if he didn’t talk to her once more.

Finally, fueled by rage at his own foolishness, he threw open the door and cast the light of his oil lamp inside.

In the far corner of the cell, a ragged figure scabbled toward the feeble glow. Graciela looked up at him, her eyes feral and terribly cold.

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“Come to torture me, Milord?”

He ignored her taunts and swung the lamp toward the other side of the room. His heart skittered, missing a beat when he saw the empty chains.

“I see you’ve banished your creation, Graciela.” The words burned his throat.

“My creation?” The Dark One laughed harshly. “Even I’m not so arrogant as to take credit for such workmanship. Gillian was no creation of mine, Rodan. I merely borrowed her from another place.”

Rodan glanced at the sneering face framed by dirty hair. It occurred to him that he would have never had trouble telling them apart. He realized now why Varrick hadn’t seen the resemblance right away. Gillian had kindness in her eyes. There was wonder there, and passion. She was radiant, even in darkness. Graciela, however, was a poor shadow of such magnificence. There was no spark in her eyes. There would never be a blush of sexual heat on her cheeks, or a genuine smile on her lips.

“So you didn’t create her. Did you at least do her the courtesy of sending her back where she came from?”

Rusty chains rattled as Graciela shifted her thin body. “Rodan, you fool. I wouldn’t send her back, even if I could. Your good friend Varrick kept me in darkness for three days. I can barely lift my arms with the weight of these manacles. I haven’t the energy to banish a moth, far less a human. Your concubine has escaped.”

It was Rodan’s turn to laugh, the sound as raw as the scraping of the chains. “That’s impossible.” He canted the lamp a few degrees and saw the manacles that had held Gillian’s wrists were still locked. She certainly could not have slipped from the bonds without injury, unless she was indeed of Andar blood.

“Normally I wouldn’t tattle, but if you promise to punish the one responsible, I’ll tell you how she got free.”

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“The one responsible?”

“A little slip of a thing. Gillian called her Anya. She stole in here and freed her mistress.” Graciela clucked her tongue. “The wench left me here to rot, despite my sincere promise to reward her for my freedom.”

Anya. Of course. Gillian had won her over, made a friend of her. That alone proved her different from Graciela.

“Where did they go?”

“Oh, no. You can’t have any more from me for free. I must have something in return now.”

“They can’t have gotten far.”

“Will you hang them both?” Graciela’s hopeful tone made Rodan sick. “Can I watch you make them pay for their disobedience? Consider it a last request of the condemned.”

Rodan swung the oil lamp before him and left the room. The sound of Graciela’s laughter followed him up the stairs and echoed in his ears for hours afterward.

* * *

“I’ll go west, you go east and circle around the gardens,” Rodan instructed Varrick. Their steeds pranced and whinnied under them, eager for the chase. “If you find nothing, meet me at the orchard and we’ll start on the road to Calais.”

“Verdan is closer,” Varrick said.

Rodan shook his head at the terrible memory of the mob. “Anya wouldn’t take her there. She’d be killed immediately.”

“Do you think the girl would be so bold as to take Gillian to *any* village nearby? Graciela’s deeds are too well known.” Varrick scanned the horizon as he spoke.

“I’m amazed she would be so bold as to enter the cell with Graciela inside. It speaks to her loyalty to Gillian. I think she would do anything to protect her mistress.”

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“Your lady inspires loyalty easily, it seems.” Varrick’s smile looked genuine, but sad.

“Which is why I must retrieve her, Varrick. She’s not safe in this world while there are people who will mistake her for Graciela.”

“Then let’s ride, and waste no more time.” Varrick urged his horse to the eastern road and took off in a cloud of dust. Rodan sped away with equal fury in the opposite direction.

While he rode, his mind raced and his inner voice berated him for his foolishness. Looking back, he realized he should have known Gillian was telling the truth. Having seen Graciela up close, he now understood that no alliance would have been possible with her. The things he’d offered Gillian would have meant nothing to the sorceress. She was cold inside. The sunlight on which she fed filled a dark hole within her, and was continually swallowed up into nothingness.

Gillian didn’t need the sun to renew herself. Her radiance came from within, and now Rodan had likely darkened that glow and crushed that spirit forever. He’d betrayed her and she would likely never shine for him again.

His self-loathing drove him faster and farther in his search. He had to find her and see that she was safe.

* * *

Gillian warmed her hands over the small fire Anya had built for them. The flames crackled, lighting the tiny lean-to they’d found in a densely wooded area just beyond the outermost reaches of Keragar’s extensive gardens.

When the first pink rays of sunlight filtered through the trees, Gillian realized she could see the tall hedges that shielded the circular clearing where she and Rodan had made love. It caused a pang of regret to think that he now believed Graciela had planned her every action to deceive him.

“Milady, I’m going to look for some elderberries for breakfast.”

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Anya's announcement interrupted Gillian's troubled thoughts. "When the sun is a little higher, we'll set out for my grandparents' home in Calais. You'll be safe there for a time."

The maidservant's smile seemed genuine, but still a little timid. It amazed Gillian that the servant girl had risked everything to free her from the dungeon.

"I'm not sure the villagers will want me around," Gillian replied. She briskly rubbed her now-warm hands on her bare arms to start the circulation flowing. "Don't you think they might want to lynch me, like those people from Verdan?"

"We'll disguise you for a time, Milady. I'll gather some plants to make a dye for your hair. Black might not suit you, but it will certainly change your look. Perhaps we'll stain your skin with some mud from the river and change your complexion. With some of my clothes, you'll look less like a noble lady."

"If only I *were* a noble lady. Thank you, Anya. I appreciate your help...I just wish...I wish I could talk to Rodan again."

"Maybe in time, Milady, but for now you're safer away from him. I couldn't have stood by and let him hang you with that evil creature."

"That evil creature is still my ticket home. Graciela brought me here, Anya. Once she's dead, there will be no way for me to get back, ever."

"I'm sorry, Lady Gillian. But I don't see how it would make a difference if she lived or died. She'd never help you just for the asking. It would have to benefit her to send you home."

Gillian nodded. It was time to give up on the idea that somehow she'd eventually get back to her life. She had to concentrate on surviving without Rodan's protection. Right now, that seemed next to impossible. She shivered as Anya crept off into the woods.

More deception, she thought as she tossed small twigs into the fire. *I'll spend the rest of my life in hiding because of Graciela.*

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When the sun had burned off the last of the morning mist, Gillian let the fire die. She stirred the embers with a stick and watched the last sparks fade.

Anya had been gone a while. The silence worried Gillian. How far had the girl gone in search of food?

“Anya?” Gillian’s voice wavered.

There was no answer.

Another few minutes passed and Gillian grew impatient. Something had to be wrong. She stood up, kicked some dirt over the ashes and left the lean-to.

She turned in the direction Anya had gone and saw Varrick standing before her. His horse grazed on wild flowers behind him and Anya sat on its back, contrite but none the worse for wear.

“I’m sorry, Milady.”

“It’s all right, Anya. I’m sure we’d have been found eventually.” Gillian sighed heavily.

Varrick regarded her with a benign glance that morphed into a self-satisfied smile.

“Let us go, Varrick. I’m no good to Rodan. I’m not like Graciela.”

“He knows that now, Gillian.” Varrick took a step closer and held out his hand to her. She looked at him, but didn’t move. “He wants you anyway.”

“Why? I can’t help him.”

“Yes, you can. You can come home to Keragar and be his wife. He loves you, Gillian.”

The words struck her like cold water. It couldn’t be true. She glared at Varrick, but she saw no deception on his face.

“How could he? I’m nothing to him. I’m not even real.” Gillian’s voice broke. She wished Rodan weren’t real. If she’d imagined him, it would be so much easier to convince herself that she didn’t love him, too.

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“He knows you’re real. He knows Graciela didn’t create you and she’s not controlling you.”

“Is she dead? Is that how he knows?”

“I think he realized that she couldn’t have created someone like you. She doesn’t know goodness well enough to imitate it.” Varrick inclined his dark head in the direction of the castle. “Come, Lady Gillian. Let me take you back to him.”

Gillian wanted to go so badly. She wanted to believe that Rodan could love her even if she had no power.

She glanced at Anya. “I won’t go back without her, and I won’t go back if he’s going to punish her for helping me.”

“He won’t.” Varrick bowed his head and rested one hand on the hilt of the dagger he wore at his side. “I’ve no doubt he’ll pardon her, and if he does not, I’ll defend her myself.”

Anya blushed at Varrick’s proclamation. Gillian would have done so herself if such a handsome man had pledged to defend her honor. She hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Reluctantly, she walked toward Varrick. He moved aside and offered his hand to help her climb into the saddle behind Anya. “What’s going to happen to Graciela?” she asked, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“She won’t help him fight the Saracen. She’ll betray him if he trusts her.”

“He knows that, Milady.”

Gillian wavered. Deception seemed to be the rule of the day, and she still wasn’t sure she could trust Varrick.

“I’ll ride back with Anya,” she said with a sidelong glance to gauge his reaction. “You can walk back.”

He sighed and squinted at her. “It’s a very long walk...”

“The way I ride, you’ll probably get back before we do. It’s a

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matter of trust, Varrick.”

“I understand.” He bowed as Anya gathered the reins.

“I hope you’re telling the truth, because if not, I’m keeping your horse.” Gillian managed a wink as she and Anya steered the beast toward the narrow path through the trees.

A moment later, Anya urged the horse to a full gallop, and Gillian could think of nothing but staying in the saddle.

* * *

Rodan found nothing along the trail he followed. With mounting apprehension, he turned back toward Keragar, hoping Varrick had had more luck.

As he urged Joxon faster through the underbrush, he began to worry that Gillian would find no quarter anywhere in the Southern Kingdom. Even with Anya to guide her, she would be in great danger almost anywhere they went. If they stumbled into Saracen territory, it would be even worse for them. He had to find her and bring her back to the safety of Keragar and the protection of his arms. He only prayed she would have him, and that one day she might come to trust him again.

* * *

“Milady, something’s wrong.” Anya reined Varrick’s horse. The animal reared slightly in annoyance.

Gillian locked her thighs and held on to the slender body in front of her. “What is it?”

“Horses...a number of them.”

They’d made it back to Keragar’s front gate sooner than Gillian had expected, and now their borrowed horse pranced nervously before the open gate. The muddied flagstones leading to the castle door held hoof prints, and a strong animal smell filled the air.

Anya urged the horse forward one reluctant step at a time. When they rounded one of the stone pillars that supported the gate, they

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gasped.

A phalanx of soldiers filled the courtyard. They stood at attention, lances at the ready and glinting in the morning sunlight. At Keragar's door, Madran stood with a tall, determined-looking man, obviously the leader of the regiment.

"Who are they?" Gillian whispered as Anya halted the horse. One more step on the stones and their approach might have been heard.

"It's Lord Baygard." The girl's slim body stiffened. "Get off the horse, Milady, and stay out of sight. I think he's come for Graciela."

Gillian immediately obeyed. She loosened her grip on Anya's waist and slid from the saddle. The impact with the ground caused a painful jolt in her sore legs. She made barely a sound, but a soldier in the farthest row turned. His shout brought the entire phalanx to bear on them.

"Run, Milady."

Gillian froze. Dozens of lances pointed her way, and on the steps, Madran said something to Baygard, and the man turned his brooding glance at her.

"Anya, find Varrick. Quickly!"

"I'll not leave you, Milady."

The horse shifted nervously as the soldiers advanced at Baygard's command. The man himself had begun to sprint through the ranks of his men. One hand steadied the hilt of his sword as he ran, prepared for battle.

"Go!"

Gillian slapped the horse's rump and got out of its way when it turned. The stallion took off down the road, likely glad for an excuse to flee the mob of soldiers. Gillian stepped forward past the gate, ignoring Anya's dismayed cry as the horse carried her back to its master.

Two soldiers immediately seized Gillian and held her fast while Baygard approached. He slowed, hesitated a moment, then took a

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stance before her, his hand still resting on the hilt of his weapon.

"This is the other one?" he asked over his shoulder.

Gillian guessed Madran must have told him there were now two sorceresses. Baygard towered over her. He was even taller than Rodan, but less muscular. His features were chiseled, hard and unyielding, and it seemed there wasn't a spare ounce of flesh on his lean frame.

He was, without question, a warrior.

His blue overcoat sparkled with buttons and medals, and like Varrick, a scar marred his once-handsome face, but gave him none of the character it did the younger man. His eyes were gray and soulless, and his lips were thin and cruel.

"Bring her!"

The soldiers on either side of Gillian complied without comment. Baygard whirled and strode back through the troops and up the steps. His men followed him inside Keragar as if they owned the place. Madran backed up, bowing officiously as they spilled into the foyer.

"I'm still waiting for Graciela," Baygard announced when the echo of his footsteps died.

"Yes, Milord. My stablemen are bringing her now."

Gillian locked her gaze on Madran. "*Your* stablemen? Shouldn't you wait for Rodan before you give away his prisoners?"

Apart from his contemptuous gaze, Madran ignored her.

"Rodan's prisoners are *my* prisoners," Baygard said, turning to face Gillian. "He has no right to hold either of you when I have requested your help."

"She won't help you, Baygard. She'll kill you the minute she has the chance."

"*She*? And what of you? Madran claims you are her sister."

"That's a lie, and Madran is a fool. If you bring Graciela outside now, she'll kill all your men and escape."

Baygard only shrugged haughtily, as if Gillian's words were of no

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consequence. The soldiers snickered, as if thinking they knew better. A phalanx of heavily armed men could certainly control one small, evil sorceress. How much more trouble could two be?

“Don’t do it, Baygard. If you’re going to take her, wait until nightfall.”

“Here she is, Milord,” Madran said in a dry whisper.

Two stable hands Gillian recognized from the meet-and-greet with Rodan struggled into the foyer with Graciela between them. Fresh blood spilled from her lower lip, and the rags she wore were so badly torn, they barely covered her body.

She was crying.

Oh God, Gillian thought. What the hell did they do to her? Despite everything, she felt a pang of sympathy for Graciela. Heaven knew what atrocities she’d suffered, and would continue to suffer. Maybe she had a right to her revenge.

“So it *is* true. Two of them.” Baygard seemed amused. “Chain them both and prepare our strongest horses to carry them. We have a long ride back to Glacier Lake.”

“No! Please...please, Lord B...Baygard. You must listen to me...” Graciela’s voice sounded odd. Gillian tensed as the sorceress lifted her head. “I’m not Graciela. Lord Rodan captured me because I look so much like her. I’ve no power...you must believe me. I’m just a servant in the house of Lord Tigart, Milord. My name is Gillian.”

CHAPTER 14

As the stablemen lowered Graciela to the floor in a sobbing heap, Gillian's jaw dropped in shock. She glared at Baygard. "Don't believe her! It's a trick."

"They'll both bewitch you, Milord. Take care," Madran said.

Baygard motioned for two more soldiers to take charge of Graciela. They moved forward at his command and dragged her to her feet.

Still sobbing, the sorceress pleaded with them. "I beg you, set me free."

Baygard strode across the foyer and lifted Graciela's bloody face in his hands. "I see Rodan has worked you over." He nodded his approval, then turned to Madran. "How did the other one end up outside the walls of the castle?"

"She's the stronger one, it seems," the manservant replied. "Lord Rodan had her out in the sunlight."

"And this one couldn't escape from her bonds, I see. Look at her

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wrists. The blisters are days old.”

Graciela shivered before Baygard and moaned when he gently traced the bruise on her cheek.

“She’s not one of them,” the general said. “Any fool can see it.”

Gillian choked on rage. “*She’s* Graciela. She’s manipulating you! Can’t you see that?”

“Please, Milord, let me go...” Graciela’s plea ended in a convincing whimper.

“Bring them both outside.” Baygard walked past Madran, his posture ramrod straight. The manservant hurried to open the door for him and the four soldiers followed him outside. They dragged Gillian and Graciela through the door, now manacled side by side.

“You won’t get away with this,” Gillian hissed at her twin. “Rodan will be back and he’ll tell Baygard who’s who.”

“Don’t speak to me, you vile thing. You’ve ruined my life!” Graciela cried, a knowing glint in her eye.

When the soldiers reached the courtyard, they threw both women to the ground. Gillian sat up immediately, her eyes on the small portion of the road that she could see. She prayed Rodan or Varrick would return to set things right. Graciela remained prostrate, her nearly bare shoulders shaking.

“Watch them,” Baygard commanded. “Sunlight will show us the difference, if there is one.”

Murmurs came from the assembled phalanx. Madran drew in an expectant breath.

Gillian brought her gaze up to Baygard’s. “Well? Do we look any different to you?”

“In fact, you do.” Baygard stood before her. “Madran said you were both imprisoned. How did you escape and she did not?”

“I...” Gillian wondered if Anya had reached safety. She couldn’t betray the girl. “My bonds were loose. I was able to get free on my

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own.”

“She used her...her magick,” Graciela whispered. “The manacles fell away...as though they hadn’t been locked.”

“And you left your sister to die at Rodan’s hand?” Baygard seemed disturbingly impressed by that thought and smiled coldly.

“She’s *not* my sister.”

Her admission provoked only a curt nod from the general. “Very obviously.”

Gillian slid her eyes to Graciela. If the sunlight was doing anything for the sorceress, it certainly didn’t show.

“Let her go,” Baygard said finally.

“No!” Gillian struggled to her feet only to be pushed back down by the soldiers flanking her.

“Milord!” Madran stepped forward, a nervous squint creasing his brow. “They are equally dangerous, I assure you.”

Baygard looked askance at the manservant. “You are a fool.”

Gillian seethed. Where were Rodan and Varrick?

The soldiers uncuffed Graciela. Unbound, she lay panting on the cobblestones until they raised her to her feet. She glared at each in turn and the men looked stricken.

One shamefully bowed his head. “Forgive us, Milady.” His voice choked.

“No! No, don’t you see, she’s using her magick on you!” Gillian protested.

Baygard slapped her. She fell back, stunned and tasting blood.

“My men will escort you back to Calais,” Baygard told Graciela. “I will see that Rodan compensates you for your suffering.”

“Your soldiers will end up dead,” Gillian said through swollen lips. Tears burned at the corners of her eyes.

Graciela slunk away, her posture bent and her steps faltering. But Gillian caught the triumphant gleam in the woman’s eyes. She gave

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Madran a wide berth as she passed him. He shook his head in defeat, obviously not daring to say more to Baygard. Graciela nodded solemnly to her former captors and turned away.

Before Gillian could think of another plan, a commotion at the gate drew everyone's attention. Joxon bounded into the courtyard, scattering the assembled soldiers.

"Rodan!" She would have done anything to be able to run to him and fling herself into his arms.

"Bring her to a horse," the general ordered as Rodan dismounted and strode across the courtyard.

"Baygard, what are you doing?"

"He let Graciela go!" Gillian answered, earning another glancing blow from one of her guards.

Rodan whirled on the man. His dagger rasped from its sheath and sliced the air only inches from the soldier's face. "Touch her again and you'll lose a hand." He gave the man a scathing look.

Chastised, the guard dropped his eyes.

Rodan flicked his gaze to Gillian and her heart lurched at the broken look in his eyes.

"If they've hurt you..."

"I'm all right. But Graciela's gone."

She turned to point, but Graciela had slipped away, probably using Rodan's arrival as a distraction. The soldiers assigned as her escort had vanished as well.

"Rodan, I'm taking the sorceress with me," Baygard said. "You'll not stall any longer."

"The sorceress is long gone! You set her free."

"That woman was *not* the Dark One." He gestured to Gillian, who bristled at his attention. "Look at her strength. She's bewitched you. Your man told me of your cavorting with her. She's blinded you with lust, and in your foolishness, you kept that innocent servant locked in

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your dungeon in her stead.”

Rodan glared at his manservant, who bowed his head. “You served the Keragar line for decades, Madran. How could you betray your oath of fealty?”

Madran blanched but said nothing. His eyes glittered. He stiffened when Rodan turned away from him and focused his attention on Baygard.

“She belongs to me, General. She’s as human as you or I.”

“That’s not what you told me when we met last.” Baygard grinned sardonically. “What could possibly have changed your assessment of her...talents?”

“Varrick brought me the real Graciela, and as you saw for yourself, the difference is clear.”

Gillian fought not to comment. The difference certainly hadn’t been clear to Rodan on first glance, but she had already forgiven him for it. What was obvious was Graciela’s power of manipulation. Her greatest power, it seemed, was her ability to make people believe exactly what she wanted them to believe.

“Rodan, there’s no need to turn this conflict to violence. You’ve done your duty by capturing the Dark One. Now let me do mine and banish the Saracen. If there’s anything left of her after the battle, I’ll bring her back to you.”

Baygard punctuated his statement with a sharp gesture to the guards. In response, they yanked Gillian to her feet and dragged her across the courtyard toward a huge, black stallion.

She struggled against them, fear choking her as she watched Baygard and Rodan face off, their weapons drawn. It wasn’t a fair match. Baygard’s cutlass was thick and gleaming. It rang from its sheath, the point swirling dangerously close to Rodan’s face.

Rodan’s dagger was curved, and viciously sharp, but it extended his reach by barely a third the length of Baygard’s blade.

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The two men hesitated only a moment, sizing each other up. Gillian tried not to scream when the blades clashed. She never saw who made the first aggressive move.

The soldiers formed a circle around the dueling lords, blocking her view until her guards heaved her onto the back of the horse. From her new vantage point, teetering in the slippery saddle, she watched the battle that raged from one end of the circle to the other.

* * *

Rodan rushed at Baygard, trying to make up for the discrepancy in their weapons with brute force. He grunted in satisfaction when the older man backed up. Baygard parried wildly to avoid Rodan's skillful lunges.

But Rodan knew the odds were against him. If he succeeded in besting Baygard in front of two dozen of the general's men, they might attack to avenge their leader. He had to tire Baygard enough to make him cede, but not kill him.

Rodan abhorred the thought anyway. He and Baygard had been allies for years. Only the thought of him using Gillian, and perhaps punishing her for her inability to sway the battle, fueled his rage.

He slashed viciously and managed by sheer chance to avoid a blow from Baygard's sword. He heard Gillian gasp when the general took the offensive and rushed at him, plowing him to the far side of the circle of anxious soldiers. Baygard delivered a backhanded slash that sliced through Rodan's shirt and left a bloody line across his chest.

The pain barely registered. With the palm of his hand, Rodan pushed aside the flat of Baygard's blade and lunged forward. The tip of his dagger connected with the general's thick coat and popped through the protective material. Baygard grunted and pedaled backward, harmlessly drawing the blunt side of his sword across Rodan's palm. His free hand flew to the hole in his coat and came away dark with blood.

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“We were friends, Rodan...”

Baygard panted and staggered, then dropped his sword arm. For a moment, he seemed to hang in the air, as if suspended from his shoulders by puppet strings.

Could the cut have been fatal? Rodan didn't have time to wonder. He kept his blade at the ready.

“She can't help you, Baygard. Leave her with me and I will search for Graciela.”

Rodan felt the pain of his own wound now. Warm blood covered half his abdomen. How had it come to this?

“You are a fool, Rodan, a slave to your loins. She's stolen your soul.” Baygard's voice sounded dangerous. Pain clouded the man's eyes, but Rodan saw something else as well. “You're better off dead than in her thrall!”

Baygard lunged, his sword high. He brought down the blade toward Rodan's upraised arm. The steel hit bone and tore muscle as Rodan pushed it away. He let his own weapon fly, and heard the general's gasp when the tip again punctured his flesh.

Gillian cried out for him when he stumbled into the waiting arms of Baygard's men. They drew their own blades and held them ready, waiting for Baygard's order.

The general straightened, his left hand clamped over the dual puncture wounds in his side. His cutlass hung limply, Rodan's blood dripping from the curved blade.

“If she can lead us to victory, Rodan, she'll live. If not, I'll send you her remains.”

Baygard nodded to the men surrounding Rodan and one of them landed a vicious punch across his jaw.

* * *

The soldier's huge knuckles came away bloody from Rodan's face. Gillian screamed. The other soldiers stepped back as the men holding

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the now-unconscious Rodan lowered him to the flagstones.

In desperation, Gillian tried to throw herself off the horse, but strong arms caught and steadied her. A soldier held her in place until Baygard crossed the courtyard and mounted the stallion, sitting behind her.

He clamped one arm around her waist, and she felt warm blood seeping through the holes in his coat.

“I can make you beg for death, Dark One. I promise you I can, so prepare yourself to do my bidding.”

Gillian wanted to spit on him, slap him, anything to convey her disgust, but the sight of Rodan lying a few feet away, his white shirt completely soaked in blood, his breathing shallow and labored, unnerved her. If she resisted Baygard, what else might he do to Rodan?

She nodded and bit her lower lip to keep from cursing. Maybe Rodan’s plan would work after all. She would have to convince Baygard that she had power, and would use it to help his soldiers. If his men won the battle, she would take the credit.

If they lost...?

She had no doubt she would take the blame...and pay with her life.

CHAPTER 15

Rodan swam to consciousness through a haze of pain. His left arm throbbed, and with each pulse of agony, fresh blood spilled hot over his skin.

Madran's pale face floated above him. He scowled when the manservant's arms snaked beneath his back to hoist him up.

"Where...?"

The world canted dizzily around him. He registered only that the courtyard was empty, save for Joxon. The horse eyed him balefully and snorted at the indignity of seeing his master in such a sorry state.

"Baygard's men locked the other servants in the great hall, sire. Graciela is gone, with two of his soldiers in tow."

"Gillian..." The name spilled from his lips like a prayer.

"Baygard took her."

Rodan regained his balance and braced himself with a wide stance. He shrugged off Madran's touch. "You've no place here. Be gone."

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“I beg you, sire, let me help you. You need bandaging.”

“The cook can sew torn flesh. I’ll let her out of the great hall. Now go.”

Rodan dismissed his oldest servant with a wave. The movement caused a fresh surge of agony. He looked at his arm and drew in a surprised breath. Baygard’s blade had splintered bone. A flap of muscle hung loosely, and the sight galvanized him. If Baygard could do this to a former ally, what would he do to Gillian when she failed in her appointed task?

He stumbled up the stairs and leaned on the door to push it open. Madran followed.

“I said—”

Rodan’s rage carried him three steps across the foyer before he collapsed. The tile, dirty from many booted and trampling feet, came up to greet him. Only Madran’s swift catch saved him from further injury.

“You may banish me, sire, but only after you are healed. I’ve much to atone for and I’ll start by helping you reclaim your health, then your lady.”

Rodan mumbled a series of curses, then all went black.

* * *

It was nighttime when Rodan awoke. He lay in his bed, the room lit by an array of candles on the sideboard. Gillian’s scent lingered on the pillows, and a vision of her rising above him teased his mind.

He raised his arm and found it tightly bandaged. Though a spot of blood leaked through the layers of stiff linen cloth, the terrible pain had subsided to a dull ache. His head hurt. When he struggled to a sitting position, he felt the crackling of a dried herb poultice as his movements dislodged it from his chest.

The pungent crust of healing paste clung to him in places, flaked away and itched in others. Beneath it, the cut from Baygard’s blade had

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begun to close.

Rodan braced his injured arm as he swayed to his feet. He brushed the remnants of the poultice onto the floor and flexed the muscles of his chest to test their strength. He noted with some satisfaction that none of his innards had spilled out. While stretching the tortured skin proved painful, at least he didn't seem to be bleeding any more.

Gillian.

"Madran!" he called before realizing he'd dismissed the man.

Within seconds, however, the chamber door creaked open and the familiar face appeared.

"I thought I dismissed you."

"Then why did you call for me, Milord?" he replied with no hint of sarcasm.

"Habit."

"I've some soup for you, Milord. You should eat to regain your strength."

"I have no time for that. I must go after Gillian. Baygard will kill her."

"You're worried he may have already, aren't you? She's such a defiant creature. He'll tire of her quickly."

Yes, those *were* Rodan's fears. "If you know so much, Madran, why isn't Joxon saddled and ready for me? Why aren't my riding clothes laid out?"

"Only because I was praying you would rest longer. I've only to say the word and the tasks will be done."

"Consider the word said."

"Aye, Milord." Madran bowed. "Once you've eaten, all will be prepared."

"Where is Varrick? Please tell me he's gone after her already."

"I wish I could, sire. Lord Varrick never returned. Nor has Anya. I fear Baygard's men subdued them, or maybe Graciela came upon

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them.”

Rodan sighed. “Bring me the soup in a cup. I’ve no time for refined dining. Pack ten days’ rations and I want them ready the moment I’m dressed.”

Madran scurried across the room and brought out a fresh shirt and breeches from the wardrobe. He added a thick coat, a cravat for protection, and a heavy riding cloak. Rodan started pulling off his remaining clothes, grunting with the effort of doing the task one-handed.

“You’ll need someone with you, sire. In this state, you won’t last long on your own.”

“I’ll take Dirk. He’s the most hale of the stablemen.”

“Dirk is abed, Milord. He had a skirmish with one of Baygard’s men and took a blade to the thigh.”

Rodan hesitated a moment, one leg in the clean breeches Madran had handed him. He hated not having choices. The realization made him think of Gillian again, and a pain lanced through his chest that had nothing to do with his wound.

“Then see that your horse is prepared, Madran. But be warned. If you disobey my smallest order...” Rodan couldn’t finish the threat. He wanted to promise all manner of vile punishments, but truthfully, all he cared about at the moment was Gillian’s safety. Madran’s guilt, his shame, was of no consequence as long as she was in danger.

“My oath of fealty does stand, Milord. I’m pledged to protect Keragar and I will do that to my death.”

“Then don’t forget again that I am the judge of what benefits Keragar and what does not!”

Madran bowed. “Yes, Milord.”

* * *

Gillian was barely conscious when Baygard reined his horse and ordered his men to make camp for the night. The ride, at breakneck

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speed through the countryside, had left her dizzy and disoriented. Hungry, thirsty and shivering in her thin sapphire gown, she sank to a weary heap when the general yanked her from the saddle.

Baygard left Gillian, along with the horse, secured to the slender bole of a young tree while his men erected a circle of tents and cook fires in the forest clearing. Oddly, the stallion seemed to take pity on her, and nudged her several times while she huddled at its hooves. If she hadn't been so miserable, she might have enjoyed the equine attention.

It seemed like hours passed before Baygard returned. "Lorimer is an unusual animal," he said.

Gillian reluctantly dragged her eyes upward. The general looked pale in the dim firelight. His coat hung open and a bloody bandage secured his middle.

"He fears nothing. Snakes, cannon fire...even the vile likes of you have no effect."

"I haven't found many friends here," Gillian replied. "I'll accept a horse as an ally."

"Then I won't suffer guilt at leaving you with him for the night." With that, he turned.

"Wait! You're just going to leave me chained to a tree all night with no food, no—"

"One of my men will bring you rations and water. Here..."

Gillian scrambled away as far as she could when he approached. He cast her an amused glance, then removed the traveling pack from the stallion's saddle. A moment later, a heavy blanket, ripe with the aroma of horse, landed on her legs.

"Lorimer will share his bedroll with you. He's generous that way." He set aside the rest of the pack, just out of Gillian's reach, and patted the animal's flank. "He'll alert me if you try to get away. And I warn you, if you injure him, I will maim you."

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Gillian stared back venomously. “I’d *rather* injure you. You have my word, Baygard, I would never hurt an animal.”

“Loyalty in kind, I suppose.” He shrugged.

Gillian couldn’t hold back. She spat at his shiny boots. She’d never spit on anyone in her life and it surprised her that it caused her no shame to do so now.

She held her breath, waiting for the blow that never came. Baygard only limped away, his posture slightly bowed. Rodan had taken his pound of flesh, but it wasn’t enough.

She wondered what would happen to her if Baygard died from his injuries. She’d be left at the mercy of his soldiers, and they all looked at her with the same fear and contempt that Rodan’s servants had. She doubted any of them would waste time asking questions if their leader died. She’d be blamed and punished for it.

With a glance at Lorimer, she began to spread the thick blanket over her. The horse nudged her again, and this time, she reached up to pat his velvety nose. “Do me a favor, buddy,” she whispered with an eye on the creature’s braided tail. “If you have to use the facilities, could you make sure its way over there? This blanket stinks bad enough as it is.”

CHAPTER 16

Glacier Lake looked exactly as Gillian imagined it. At dawn, when the troops arrived, the far shore was lost in a cottony fog. Cold mountain slopes canted into the still water. Gillian could make out a colorful array of stones on the lake bottom. A few dark, elongated shapes that looked like eel flitted about in the shallows.

It was a desolate landscape, so unlike the rich green countryside and lush forest through which they'd passed to get here. Nevertheless, she found it hard to look away. That would have required more strength than she possessed.

They had ridden all of the previous day and night to get there and Gillian could barely stand. She leaned against Lorimer's warm flank after sliding bonelessly out of the saddle on the rocky moraine that led down to the icy water.

She shuddered when she felt Baygard's hot breath on the back of her neck. "Lovely, isn't it? Can you feel the temperature drop near the

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water? The lake is fed from the glacier on the far side, chunks of ice fall in continuously and keep the water just above freezing. Perhaps a dip would hone your senses?"

"You first," Gillian muttered. She hated to admit to Baygard that she found the stark vista so beautiful.

He moved off, barking orders at his men. When he returned, he removed Gillian's chains and draped the cold links over his arm.

"Your lips are blue," he said. "Perhaps you should come by the fire and warm yourself."

"I'm wearing silk. And it has to be forty degrees out here. Do you think I could get a cloak or something?" She tried to keep her tone defiant, but the relief of being unchained brought tears to her eyes. She gently rubbed her sore wrists and reached up to pat Lorimer when he snorted at his master.

"Yes, that can be arranged. I fear we've no dresses on hand for you, though. You may have to wear trousers."

Oh, God that sounds great! "Trousers will be fine."

Gillian watched him walk away again. His limp had grown more pronounced. Of course, she could barely walk straight herself after the tortuous ride, and she didn't have several holes in her gut. She wondered if the discomfort of his wounds had mellowed him. His manner toward her was certainly more chivalrous than it had been the previous two days.

He stopped mid-stride and glanced back. "You may come along."

"Oh..."

She forced her legs to carry her across the rocky ground and fell into step behind him. The suspicious stares of his soldiers followed her as Baygard led her to a small, chalk-colored tent. Gillian kept her eyes down and moved slowly. She didn't want anyone to think she had any strength left. If Baygard didn't fear she would try to escape, he might leave her unchained for a while.

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Inside the tent, a small brazier of sizzling coals created a wonderful warmth. The heat seeped into Gillian's pebbled skin and suddenly she felt too weary to move. A bare cot sat against the far side of the tent and she reached it just moments before her legs gave out.

"You will remain in here. Guards will be posted outside at all times. I'll be back with supplies for you."

"Thank you." She hated saying it. In fact she'd grown very tired of thanking people for treating her just a step above their horses. It pained her to have sympathy for Graciela, but if this is how the Dark One's entire life had been, the sorceress had every right to her anger and bitterness.

Rodan. The thought of him came unbidden when Gillian stretched out on the cot. A sob caught in her throat. The last image she had of him was as he fell into the circle of Baygard's soldiers, covered in blood. What if he was dead?

She thought of the last time they'd made love. His bed was a luxurious sea, and they'd floated in it, content just to touch each other for hours. Finally, after teasing each other with feathery touches of their fingers and tongues, he'd settled himself above her and loved her so thoroughly she could barely lift herself from the pillows for hours afterward.

It had been heaven. In the middle of this hellish dream, she'd found an oasis of perfect contentment. Then Varrick showed up with Graciela and everything shattered.

Without Rodan, what would she do? Where would she go? This world held nothing for her unless she could prove her worth to Baygard now, and even if she did, would that guarantee her protection once the battle ended?

Gillian hugged herself and closed her eyelids, squeezing away the last of the traitorous tears. When she opened them, Baygard stood in front of the brazier, warming his hands.

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“Clothing and food.” He pointed to a bundle of dark cloth on the ground. Beside it sat a metal tray that held what looked like a biscuit and a steaming bowl of something resembling oatmeal. “Once you’ve eaten and dressed, you will come with me to the north ridge. From there we can see a good distance across the lake. You can begin your work.”

“I told Rodan, I can’t control the weather, so if you’re hoping for a monsoon or tidal waves or something like that, you’re out of luck.” Gillian rolled to a sitting position, but kept her arms crossed tightly over her breasts to quell her shivering.

“I’m aware of the limitations of your race, which is why I’m allowing you to walk in the sunlight.” Baygard’s face turned ashen and his jaw stiffened. He delivered his words through clenched teeth and wiped sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his coat. “I do expect a demonstration of your power this day. If you show me nothing of value, I can promise you a swift, but painful end.”

Gillian ignored the death threat. She’d grown all too used to them to be overly offended. “Maybe I can do something to help you right now. Take off your coat.”

Baygard sketched a rueful smile. “Rodan became a slave to his lust for you, Graciela. I will not.”

She rolled her eyes. “As *if*. Take off your coat and let me look at your wound. Do you have a medic? Who bandaged this for you?”

Baygard looked at his tightly cinched midsection. Though he wore a loose white shirt, the dirty bandage was clearly visible through the soft material. Gillian noted how the bloodstains appeared larger than they had been the previous day.

“I bandaged the wound myself. Are you saying you have healing powers?” He seemed almost hopeful.

Gillian had to swallow a lump of guilt. She had only rudimentary first-aid knowledge, but she knew a bandage on a bleeding wound

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should be changed as often as possible.

"I can say a few...incantations that will help. Have your men bring some hot water and clean cloth and I'll do what I can. Do you have any...whiskey?"

"Whiskey?"

"Alcohol?"

"We have some wine."

"Forget it. Water will do. Come here and sit on the cot. I'm going to clean you up, cast a...healing spell on you and try to keep you from...going septic before the battle even begins. How's that for a demonstration of my power?"

"It will do nothing to stop the Saracen."

"Neither will you, if you keel over."

Baygard considered a moment. Gillian was glad he didn't completely trust her. *Let him be a little afraid of me.* She hated the idea of helping him, but again, he had left her few choices. If she defied him every step of the way, he'd kill her. He would probably kill her anyway, but at least she wouldn't die with a guilty conscience.

He leaned out the tent flap and called for hot water, then moved stiffly toward the cot. She saw the pain in his face when he removed his coat and winced when she saw that dried blood adhered the thick outer material to his shirt. With some uncomfortable tugging, they managed to remove his coat and shirt. Next she unwound the bandage and tossed aside the filthy linen strip.

The soldier who brought a pan of hot water eyed the scene, but said nothing. He left immediately and Gillian sighed with relief. He was likely telling tales to his compatriots, but she didn't care. Whatever bought her another day, whatever might bring her one step closer to returning to Rodan...

* * *

Madran had carefully bound Rodan's injured arm under his riding

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coat and tied Joxon's reins in a loose knot for one-handed control. Nevertheless, the pain was nauseating.

Every time Joxon's hooves hit the ground, Rodan's muscles clenched in agony. He refused to stop, though. He could think only of Gillian and what tortures Baygard might have in store for her.

At dawn, the two men reined their steeds by a thin stream and dismounted for a much-needed break. Madran gently lifted his master's coat and surveyed the bloody bandage.

"This will need to be changed, sire. I can do it quickly before we continue our journey."

"Leave it, Madran. We've no time. When the horses have rested, we'll continue. I need something to eat, that's all."

"You need a poultice on this. I trust the cut on your chest is fairing better?"

"It doesn't hurt, if that's what you're asking. My arm might as well be gone, for all the use it is." Rodan glared in disgust at the offending limb. It had been a score of years since a teenaged Rodan had suffered an injury this severe. A riding accident had left him with a broken ankle, and he recalled feeling then much the same as he did now. Utterly useless.

"Milord, you'll last longer if you allow me to help."

"You've done quite enough." Rodan didn't regret his bitter tone. His mind flashed back to the look on the manservant's face when he'd dragged Gillian off to the dungeon with her dubious twin. He'd been glad to be rid of her. There would be no place at Keragar for the man when she returned and took her place as Rodan's wife.

If she returned.

And if she *still* wanted him.

He was a fool to think she might care for him. He saw now what he'd done to her. In addition to the burning pain in his arm, a dark hole grew in his gut. He'd given her no choice but to submit to him to save

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her own life. He had no right to expect her to want him if there was another option. He absently brushed Joxon's flank and hung his head while the horse drank from the stream.

He would have to give her another option. When he found her, he would offer her freedom as well as protection. There was a small, well-tended cottage nestled deep in Keragar's gardens where his mother had oft spent quiet afternoons alone. He would give it to Gillian and permit her to live there unmolested by him, or any other, for the rest of her life. He would give her Anya as a personal maidservant and any other staff she wished to see to her needs, and he would extend every kindness he could imagine to make up for the damage he'd done.

Before that, he would do anything, *anything* at all, to get her back.

"Are you ready yet, Madran?" Rodan asked impatiently.

The servant appeared from behind a thick tree, adjusting his trousers. "Aye, Milord, but you said you were hungry. I've yet to unpack the food."

"Then hurry. I'll wait here only until the horses are rested."

"Yes, Milord. If I may..."

"What now?"

"She's a wise woman. I trust that she will find a way to survive in Baygard's care until we reach her."

Rodan nodded. His gut roiled at the thought. He had forced Gillian to love him in exchange for her life. What would Baygard force her to do? The image of the general's callused hands on her flesh made the cool mountain air burn in Rodan's lungs. Rage numbed the pain of his wounds, and before Madran could open the saddle packs, Rodan had mounted Joxon again.

"Forget it, Madran. We'll eat later. We've wasted too much time already."

CHAPTER 17

Gillian's legs ached. She curled her toes, tensing ravaged calf muscles as she hauled herself up the flaking northern slope. The leather boots Baygard had given her kept her feet warm, but their soft soles did little to provide traction on the crumbling shale.

Behind her, Baygard had an easier time climbing in his boots of shiny, stiffened leather. She noted that he grunted with each step, though, and that had more to do with the fact that his punctured innards were slowly leaking out of the holes in his side.

She'd almost fainted when she'd seen the condition of his wounds. She had only a rudimentary knowledge of human anatomy, but she guessed Rodan's blade had pierced a vital organ, probably the small intestine. In a modern emergency room with a skilled surgeon on hand, Baygard would probably have a good chance of survival. Here, he would likely die.

The thought terrified her.

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She'd made up a few incantations while she cleaned and bandaged the puncture wounds, and thanks to the power of suggestion and the placebo effect, Baygard had reluctantly admitted he felt slightly better after her ministrations. She hadn't lied outright to him, but she hadn't told him he needed a lot more help than she could give him. The guilt weighed on her.

"You shouldn't be making this climb," she told him when he drew even with her on the slope. "The stress will aggravate the bleeding."

"Just this once. You need to see your enemy. Then I'll send a man up as lookout."

To Gillian's surprise, he pulled ahead of her, and with a sudden burst of energy, scrambled to the top of the slope. He'd pay for that display of bravado. His face was a shade paler when he turned to watch her make her way to the top.

Once they'd steadied themselves on the shifting rocks, he handed her a telescoping glass and pointed to what looked like a thin column of gray smoke on the horizon. The fog hadn't burned off at all, despite the relative warmth of the sun. The distant water looked eerie and lonely even from this height.

"Do you see that?"

"Yes." Gillian trained the glass on the smoke. With one eye, she could just make out a shape on the dark water. "Is that their barge?"

"Yes. They'll not come much closer during the day. Through the night they'll advance and try to attack at dawn when they think we'll be sleeping."

"If we can see them, can't they see us, too? You've got an awful lot of men on the shore."

"They know we're here. Their plan is to kill us, not slip by unnoticed."

"Hmm."

Something about the setup bothered Gillian. She wished she knew

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more about the Saracen. In her mind, they had taken on the viciousness of the ancient Huns. She imagined dark, savage warriors whose interest was more in destruction than in winning anything salvageable in battle.

“Have you thought of sending out a small boat to sabotage their barge? You could set it on fire in the middle of the night.”

What was she saying? Why was she giving Baygard battle advice when she couldn’t even win a game of Stratego? She’d been challenging her cousin Matt every Thanksgiving since they were ten and she hadn’t won yet.

“They never sleep,” Baygard responded wearily. “Even in the dead of night, no boat of ours will get near them. We can’t surprise them. We have to meet them in battle head-on and beat them back. They retreat only when they are outnumbered.”

“So we have to kill them one by one until there are more of *us* left than there are of them?”

“That’s the only way.”

“Well, they’re too far away for me to do anything.”

Gillian considered a hundred possibilities. She’d carefully watched Graciela, and it seemed that with her power partially restored, the sorceress was able to control the feelings and thoughts of those around her.

She decided she had to convince Baygard that wild displays of pyrotechnic magick were out of the question. She needed to take a lesson from her “evil twin” and pray that Baygard would buy her subterfuge. “Through the night I will...use some incantations to...confuse them. In the morning, I’ll try to give your men every advantage I can.”

Baygard hadn’t heard. He clutched his side and coughed miserably. Instinctively, Gillian offered her shoulder for support. When his gray eyes met hers, she saw the suspicion there, along with a grudging respect.

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“I’d expected less from you, Graciela. I imagined I’d have to torture your cooperation out of you.”

“That’s what they all say.” She laughed coldly. She tucked the telescope under her arm and helped him down the slope.

* * *

Rodan dreamed of Gillian. Her fiery hair lay against his chest as she pressed her ear to his wildly beating heart. Her warm body filled his arms and her long legs tangled with his under the down-stuffed blankets of his bed. His body hardened in response to her feather-soft caress, but when she rose above him, her sweet lips opened in a soundless scream.

He woke drenched in sweat and teetering in Joxon’s saddle. Good God, he’d almost fallen off his horse.

The stallion moved at a comfortable trot; the easy rhythm had lulled Rodan into a fevered sleep.

“Sire? Shall we stop now?” Madran and his mount were a shapeless shadow to his left.

“We’re almost there. I can smell the cook fires.”

“You’re too weary to fight for her tonight, Lord Rodan. Sleep now and at first light—”

Rodan silenced Madran with a gesture. They’d hunted together too often for the manservant to mistake its meaning. Rodan had heard something.

They slowed their horses to a walk and finally stopped. They’d reached the edge of the forested lands. A short distance away, the green hillsides blended into the rocky lowlands around Glacier Lake. If they left the shelter of the trees, Baygard’s scouts might spot them.

With a nod of his head, Rodan directed Madran off the well-traveled path. The terrain proved difficult, especially in the dark, but they crept along, heading east until Rodan gave the signal to stop again.

“Those are not Baygard’s men,” Rodan whispered, his exhaustion

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evident in his hunched posture.

For a moment, Madran looked at him as if he had gone mad. But then he also turned toward the same faint glow amid the trees that Rodan had seen. The smell of meat and men and horses filled the air.

“Saracen.”

Madran blanched. “How could they be here, Milord? Baygard expects them to cross the lake.”

“He expects wrong. It’s an ambush. While Baygard is looking over the water, waiting for their barge, they’ll be behind him, slitting his throat.”

“The lady...”

“Gillian won’t have a chance. We’ve got to warn them.”

“How, Milord? We dare not pass the Saracen camp.”

“No, *we* dare not.”

Madran shook his head. He reached for Joxon’s reins to stay his master. “You can’t outrun them.”

“Joxon can.”

The horse’s ears pricked at the mention of his name.

“Milord—”

“Head west, Madran, quietly, and wait for me in the forest. If I don’t return tomorrow, go home. If Varrick lives, Keragar will be his and he can decide your fate.”

“But, Milord—”

Rodan made no further comment. He silently turned Joxon and moved off, giving Madran no choice but to obey.

* * *

Something felt wrong. A nagging unease had settled between Gillian’s shoulder blades, slowly driving her insane. She’d never had such a strong feeling of dread, even during the nights she’d spent in Keragar’s dungeon.

The distant, blurry image of the Saracen barge plagued her. She’d

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seen the smoke rising amid what looked like softly billowing sails. Had she only imagined the faint ripple of dark water? It just didn't make sense. An enemy as ruthless as Baygard described wouldn't calmly sail across an icy lake in broad daylight. Would they? Were they so sure of victory that they didn't care about the element of surprise?

Gillian's mind offered her an absurd image of George Washington crossing the Delaware. She hadn't thought about that historic event since grade school. Though the famous painting by Leutze showed Washington's journey taking place at dawn, in truth, he'd crossed in the dead of night. High school history had finally come in handy, she decided. Wouldn't seasoned warriors like the Saracen take every advantage they could get?

Gillian paced the confines of her tent, stopping to warm her hands by the brazier. The remains of a meager dinner sat on the ground. She bent to move the tray outside the flap so one of the soldiers would collect it, since she wasn't permitted to leave. As she rose, she saw the moon again. It was three-quarters full, a mottled orb of green, brown and gray.

That also made no sense. The moon looked as if someone had rubbed smudges of color across its surface, blurring the different patches together. It looked so strange...and so familiar.

She lingered too long in the tent opening. The dark glare of one of Baygard's men caught her attention. He lowered his head like an angry bull and strode toward the tent.

Gillian stood her ground, but she toed the metal tray a few inches farther outside the flap.

"Go inside, woman. If you take another step, I've orders to kill you."

You and what army? The sarcastic thought would have gotten her a knife in the gut for sure. She bit back bitter laughter at her own joke. "The moonlight will help me work my magick against the Saracen,"

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she said with as much disdain as she could muster. "But I've forgotten its name. Do you know the moon's name, soldier?"

"The moon has no name."

"Are you sure?"

"I've never called it anything but 'the moon.' Who would bother naming such a wasted thing?" He snorted derisively as he retrieved her tray, his posture making it obvious he disliked acting as her servant.

"Is there a lookout on the slope tonight?"

"Of course."

"Are the Saracen any closer?"

The soldier shrugged. "He'd tell us if they were."

This was going nowhere. Gillian gave him a sour look and retreated inside the tent. She thought of asking for Baygard, but when he'd retired to his own tent with a number of his best men to discuss the battle, he'd looked bone weary. She felt the same way, but she refused to even try to sleep.

She sensed something would happen, she just didn't know what. Through the narrow slit in the tent flap, she watched the soldier join his compatriots around their campfire. He muttered something that produced a nervous laugh from his fellows. They all glared in her direction, and she closed the flap.

"Luna," a voice whispered hot against her ear as a dirty hand closed over her mouth. "The name of the moon is Luna."

CHAPTER 18

Fear jackhammered through Gillian's body as strong arms dragged her backward through the tent. Her heart fluttered like a captured bird, trying to escape her chest.

"Don't scream. It's me..." Rodan's lips grazed her ear and the flood of relief nearly buckled her knees.

He let go, and she turned in his embrace. She would have kissed him except for the haggard, dangerous look on his face. Strands of sweat-darkened hair hung in his eyes. His lips were pale and the golden stubble on his face was more than a day old.

Her heart lurched and thudded again when he caressed her cheek.

"How did you—?"

"Listen, there's not much time." He stilled her protests by placing his thumb over her lips. "The Saracen are in the forest. They're going to ambush the camp."

She nodded. "I sensed they weren't coming by barge. It had to be a

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decoy.”

“You have to warn Baygard.”

“Why don’t you? If you’ve seen them—”

“No. *You* have to do it. He thinks you’re Graciela. You have to prove your worth to him. If he sees me, he’ll know I’ve come to take you back and—”

Of course. How stupid could she be? Gillian indulged her longing and slipped her arms around Rodan’s waist. She laid her head on his chest for a moment and soaked in the warmth of his body. When he wrapped his arms around her, she noticed his one-sided grip.

“Your arm.” She swallowed. She’d seen him deflect Baygard’s weapon. The linen wrapped around the wound looked brown and stiff.

“Later,” he admonished. “Now, go to Baygard. Warn him, then I’ll take you back to Keragar tonight.”

“I can’t just go...if I leave the tent, his men have orders to kill me. I have to ask him to come here.”

Rodan scanned the meager furnishings in the tent, fruitlessly hunting for a hiding place. “I’ll wait on the ground outside, next to the cot.”

“Baygard...he’s dying. He may not live through the battle even if we win.”

Rodan’s jaw worked. He glared over her head and through the tent flap in the direction of the general’s tent. “If he dies, his men will kill you before the Saracen can get to you.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I know I’ll be blamed if anything happens to him.”

“That’s why I have to get you out of here.”

“I won’t be safe at Keragar. They’ll come looking for me.”

“Then I’ll take you somewhere else.”

“Rodan...” Gillian raised her cold fingers to his face and traced the strong line of his jaw. He turned his head and kissed her palm. “I can’t

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spend the rest of my life running. I have to see this through. My only chance is to make sure Baygard not only wins the battle, but he also survives it.”

“It’s going to be a massacre, Gillian. You’ve never seen the Saracen fight.”

“I’ve never seen *anyone* fight. I have no idea what it’s going to be like, but I can’t leave. I’ll never be safe if I do.”

Rodan growled something that might have been a curse, but he nodded. “I’ll be here.”

She smiled and kissed him. If she allowed herself another moment in his arms she’d never be able to leave the tent. Without a backward glance, she opened the flap.

The soldiers were still sitting around the nearest campfire with the remains of their evening meal scattered about. When they noticed Gillian, their quiet conversation stopped.

“Go back inside, woman,” one of them ordered.

She stood her ground. “I need to see the general, now.”

“He’s not to be disturbed.”

“If he wants to win this battle, he *will* see me, now!”

The men exchanged glances. They reached a consensus after a brief consultation and one of them got up and moved to Baygard’s tent. He emerged a moment later with his short sword drawn and a worried look on his face.

Gillian shivered as he strode toward the tent. She reeled back when he reached for her arm, but he caught her and dragged her forward into the circle of firelight.

“He wants you to go to him.”

She stumbled as the soldier threw her before him across the camp. He kept his sword ready. When they reached Baygard’s tent, he pushed her inside with such force, that she landed on her knees only inches from the general’s brazier.

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Beyond the smoldering embers, Baygard lay on a wide cot. He was propped on a pile of folded blankets. His white shirt, now gray from sweat, lay open, exposing the bandage she'd put on earlier. Two dark bloodstains merged on the fabric.

"The Dark One has come." His voice, though gravelly, had amusement in its tone. He lifted one hand and pointed to a chest on the floor near the brazier. "Bring the wine and have a drink with me to toast our impending victory."

"There's no time for that. I've come to tell you what I...saw."

Baygard raised one gray brow. His eyes had lost the diamond glint they'd held in the courtyard at Keragar. Now they looked watery and red rimmed. He blinked slowly as if he didn't comprehend her words.

"Baygard, it's an ambush. I've seen it...the Saracen will attack us from behind. They're in the forest, not on the lake."

"Impossible."

"No, it's not. In fact it makes perfect sense."

He pushed himself up on one elbow. "Show me."

"Show you? I...don't know how to show you. Send a scout into the forest. Send someone across the lake to check on the barge. I'll bet it's empty."

Baygard rolled to his feet, and for a split second, it looked like he would take her advice. He reached for his coat, which lay at the foot of the cot, but it dropped from his trembling hand. He staggered across the tent.

Gillian rushed forward and caught him, eased him back down to the cot. "You need to tell your men what to do. Then you have to get real medical attention. There has to be a doctor somewhere."

"Heal me, like you did before."

"I didn't do anything before. I changed your bandages. That's all."

"No, there was power. I felt your power. I should have died yesterday, but you gave me strength for one more day. Do it again. Let

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me lead the battle.” His eyes clenched shut in pain and a cough wracked him. He doubled over, clutching his side.

“Baygard, I can’t do any more for you. One day, that’s all I could do.” Gillian hated herself. She wished she had the power to give him one more day, or better yet, to heal his wounds. “Come on, you must get up and instruct your men.” She gently pulled him to his feet and steadied him. “They’ll have half a chance if they’re prepared.”

“The barge...is it here?”

Oh God. He’s delirious. Gillian looked around in panic. What could she do to bring Baygard back to his senses?

She left him teetering on the cot and opened the wooden chest. A brown bottle lay inside amid some other objects she didn’t have time to inventory. She grabbed the bottle and bit into the cork to pull it free from the tapered neck. “Here,” she said as she turned.

Baygard was holding himself in a sitting position, arms braced on the cot. His skin was gray.

“At this point, it can’t hurt.”

He accepted the bottle and the gratitude in his eyes pained her. He took a long draught and offered some to her.

“You need it more than I do. Come on, please. Go tell your men what’s happening.”

“How can I trust you?”

“Oh, please! Don’t pull this on me now, general. You wanted me to win your battle for you. You think I’ve got so much power. If that’s what you really believe, then you *have* to trust me. How did you think you were going to control Graciela anyway? Did you think torturing her would get her to help you? Treating her like an animal? It hasn’t worked so far. She wants to kill everyone she sees. If you don’t trust me now, what’s the point of any of this?”

Baygard stared at her. Faint comprehension seeped into his eyes. He took another sip of wine, coughed and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

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“You’re not her, are you?”

“If I was, you’d be dead already.”

“Then how do you know—”

Gillian glanced at the opening of Baygard’s tent. She bit her lower lip and sighed the answer. “Rodan told me.”

“Help me up...”

“My name is Gillian, by the way,” she said as she ducked under Baygard’s outstretched arm and helped him to his feet. He seemed heavier and she realized he had barely enough strength left to carry his own weight. Together they limped out of the tent.

When the soldiers saw Baygard, his arm draped heavily across the sorceress’s shoulders, they rose from their seats in unison, clutching the hilts of their weapons.

He held up a hand to halt their advance. “Gather the men,” he said, his voice deceptively low. “The Saracen will be coming from the south to ambush us. We need to turn the tide.”

For a moment, Gillian thought he meant it literally, but when the soldiers gathered, he began to explain what he wanted them to do. Finally, he straightened and one of his men took his weight for Gillian.

“Get Rodan,” he whispered to her. “I’ll need his help.”

She hesitated, fearing Baygard’s soldiers wouldn’t accept Rodan in their midst. She looked back at the general, but his men crowded around him.

He staggered and the soldiers helped him sit on the ground. “Get Lorimer,” he ordered. “I’ll meet the Saracen with my head above theirs.”

Gillian ran across the camp.

Her tent lay empty. “Rodan?”

She flung herself past the brazier and lifted the stiff canvas at the back of the tent. She saw his boots. A moment later, he crawled under the canvas.

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“He needs you.” She wanted to tell him she needed him, too, but there wasn’t time.

“Stay here, you’ll be safe—”

“I’m not going to sit in here and wait for the Saracen to find me. I’m going to ride with you.”

“Joxon is just beyond the rocks at the bottom of the slope. Get him. Meet me in the middle of the camp.”

Gillian nodded. She headed for the tent flap, but Rodan caught her wrist and pulled her back to him. He brought his face close, but instead of kissing her, he rested his forehead against hers. He held her for a moment, as if drawing strength from her. When he let her go, he smiled.

“You amaze me,” he said.

She smiled back at him before she left the tent. “I’m starting to amaze myself.”

CHAPTER 19

When dawn broke over Baygard's camp, everything lay still and silent, apart from the gentle rippling of a tent flap caught in the cold morning breeze that swept off the lake. The fires had all been doused and the remnants of the soldiers' last meal buried or fed to the horses.

One horse, a regal black stallion, stood at the southern edge of the camp, facing the dark trees. His rider sat high in the saddle, hands wrapped tightly in the reins. He didn't move. Didn't breath. Didn't see.

When the Saracen army charged into the camp, the first blade pierced the man's chest, running through a heart that had, only moments before, stopped beating.

The gnarled warrior who wielded the weapon looked up in surprise when the man he'd impaled didn't so much as utter a cry of surprise. The stallion shifted a few nervous steps, but held his ground as the rest of the hoard swirled around him.

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The leader raised a hand as he jerked his blade free of the dead man's chest. He didn't have time to give further orders. His momentary hesitation, that second of confusion, was all his enemy needed.

The men of Baygard's army swarmed from their hiding places, weapons drawn. A cannon, hidden behind that rippling tent flap, fired a flaming ball at the Saracen leader's head. When he hit the ground, his black stallion bolted, now free of the burden of its master's body. As the dark warriors approached, the horse reared and kicked viciously, downing several men before he raced off into the forest.

Behind him, the battle raged.

* * *

Gillian knew nothing of modern warfare, and even less about ancient battle tactics. Covered in a thick riding cloak, clutching Rodan's waist, she saw only gleaming swords and blood.

Baygard's men fought ruthlessly. In Gillian's estimation, they appeared more savage than the Saracen. The northern tribe had only a few horses, slow-moving, hairy beasts that seemed more suited to plowing. They proved no match for the likes of Joxon or poor Lorimer, who had done his part so well.

The battle ended quickly. A dozen soldiers lay dead, several more wounded, but Saracen bodies littered the camp and the eastern slope. Several tents had burned. One horse lay dead. The men still standing gathered at the water's edge to cleanse their wounds in the icy water.

Gillian slid from Joxon's back into Rodan's arms. She still clutched the dagger he'd given her to defend herself. He pulled it from her stiff fingers and sheathed it at his belt.

"Your first battle," he said with unmistakable pride. "You did well."

"I hope it was my last."

She looked around the camp at the bodies. The Saracen were not quite what she'd expected. They looked more like Vikings than Huns. Most were heavysset, with long beards of dark brown or reddish hair.

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They wore fur-trimmed coats and leggings and not a single face among them didn't bear scars of previous battles.

At least four had wounds that Gillian herself had inflicted while trying to protect Joxon's rear flanks. One had sliced open the breaches she wore, and a thin cut trickled blood down her right calf.

Rodan cursed when he saw it.

"It's shallow. I'll be fine," she assured him when he tried to lift her into his arms. "What do we have to do now? Shouldn't all these men go home to their families?"

"We'll need to search the forests to see if any Saracen stayed behind. They're far more dangerous roaming the hillsides."

A soldier approached. Gillian eyed him warily and was surprised when he nodded to her. "Lord Rodan, the men have wrapped Lord Baygard's body. He'd asked to be burned upon his death."

"Of course. We'll meet you at the water's edge."

"I don't know if I can watch that." Gillian lowered her eyes. Public cremation made her squeamish. Even in the movies, she always closed her eyes when funeral pyres were lit.

"Go to your tent and rest." Rodan gently rubbed her shoulder. "When it's done, we'll prepare to head south."

She nodded. "Did Baygard have a family?"

Rodan glanced at the men who carried the general's body toward the rocky shore. "He's surrounded by them."

* * *

A dozen men circled Rodan, each pointing the hilt of their best bladed weapons at his chest. With a deep nod, he accepted their combined oath of fealty.

"When the men return from burning the Saracen barge, we'll pack the camp and move on. We'll scour the forests as we go, just in case. Donnar, see to the Saracen horses. They'll make excellent pack animals."

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“Yes, Milord.” Donnar resheathed his short sword and moved off to attend his task.

“What of the Dark One, Milord?” another man asked. Rodan recognized him from the circle of warriors that had witnessed his defeat at Keragar.

“The Dark One is not here. *Lady Gillian* belongs to me.” The words made Rodan long for her. “You will treat her as my wife and afford her every courtesy.”

After a brief murmur among the remaining men, they all nodded.

“We’ve work to do, men. Let’s move.”

* * *

Gillian examined the wound on her leg and sighed. Worse than the cut was the fact that she’d gone without her Lady Chic for weeks. With all these men around, someone had to have a razor she could borrow. They didn’t all have beards.

She settled for fashioning a bandage out of the remains of her sapphire gown. *What a waste of a great dress.* The mundane conversation in her head took her mind off the horrors going on outside the tent. Earlier, smelling smoke, she’d peeked out and caught a nauseating glimpse of the bonfire consuming Baygard’s remains. That had been enough to sate her curiosity. Shouts from the men and snippets of conversation as they passed told her they were now engaged in burying the dead and distributing their possessions such as weapons and clothing among the survivors. Concentrating on the state of her skin and mourning the loss of a silken gown kept her from going insane.

She stretched her dark breeches over the cot and swatted dirt from the rump and the knees. At least they were comfortable. She bent over, carefully guiding her injured leg into the pants, when a brief draft told her someone had opened the tent flap.

“I’m getting dressed—” She finished shimmying into the pants

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before turning, figuring if it was Rodan, he deserved a good look.

She froze.

Madran removed one hand from his eyes. "My apologies, Milady. I was looking for Lord Rodan."

"He's...out there somewhere. What are *you* doing here?"

"Looking for him. He told me to go back to Keragar, but I couldn't."

Gillian dropped her eyes. She may have gotten past the Graciela thing with the soldiers, but she still didn't trust Madran. He'd been too quick to toss her in the dungeon and far too happy about it.

"Like I said, Rodan is out there with the men. Go find him."

"Yes, Milady, but if I may, I'd like to apologize to you."

"Save it." She held up one hand. "I understand that you had to obey Baygard's orders. But I'm not in a charitable mood. Go find Rodan."

Madran lowered his head. "Aye, Lady Gillian."

She watched him leave and struggled with guilt again. It wasn't her way to be bitchy, but after all she'd been through, wasn't she allowed to be a little petulant with the man who couldn't wait to see her locked up? If Rodan was angry with Madran, *she* certainly had a right to be as well.

She sighed and threw herself down on the cot. "Stop acting like the lady of the manor," she told herself. "Around here, you're still no better than Graciela. Just because everyone thinks they owe you a favor now, doesn't mean they like you any better."

* * *

The ride back from Glacier Lake took three exhausting days while the soldiers searched every hollow in the forest for hiding Saracen. They found nothing except Lorimer, whose reins had snagged in a prickly bush. He snorted indignantly at them as they freed him from his captivity.

After the men fed and watered him, Gillian visited the horse. He

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gratefully nuzzled her as she spread his saddle blanket over his back.

"He seems to like you," Rodan said.

He watched her from a few feet away, his back against a slender tree. With a clean bandage on his wound and some food in him, he looked a hundred percent better. Gillian felt warmth pool in a spot just below her navel when he smiled at her.

"We spent the night together," she admitted with a grin. "If he hadn't kindly offered to share his bedroll with me, I'd have frozen to death."

* * *

Rodan scowled. He'd been so full of rage over Baygard's harsh treatment of Gillian that he'd barely been able to watch the funeral pyre. His thoughts had been with Gillian while the soldiers stoically witnessed their leader laid to rest.

He'd thought of nothing but her safety for days. Fevered images of her, broken and bleeding, had tortured him in his dreams. To have her standing before him now, suffering no more than a slight cut, flooded him with dizzying relief.

The tight breeches she wore caused other feelings in him, which he fiercely pushed aside. He'd used her enough. He had no right to lust for her now, and reminded himself he should be grateful she was even speaking to him.

"Since his master is gone, perhaps you'd like to keep him?"

Her eyes lit. "Oh...I'm such a bad rider."

"With practice you'll improve, and I could certainly exercise him for you until you're more confident in the saddle."

A pang of jealousy settled in Rodan's gut as he watched her murmur to Lorimer. The horse nudged her shoulder and licked sweet nothings from her outstretched palm as if the taste of her skin alone would satisfy him. Rodan remembered the taste of her skin and his mouth watered for more.

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“In my world, it’s so expensive to keep a horse. I never thought about how nice it would be to have one. I guess, it’s not such a big deal here.”

“Horses are a necessity. But a fine horse like Lorimer is still a luxury. It will be a pleasure to keep him. Perhaps we can mate him with some of my mares.”

“I bet he’d like that.” She laughed as she adjusted the saddle blanket, then turned a sober glance on Rodan. His chest tightened. “How is your arm?”

“Throbbing. Madran insisted on putting some foul-smelling poultice on it. You may want some for your leg.”

“Oh my God, that smell is *you*?”

Rodan felt an uncharacteristic heat in his face. He nodded sheepishly. Her smile turned him inside out and it widened when he self-consciously backed up a step.

They foolishly grinned at each other for a few moments, then she sobered again. “Madran...apologized to me.”

“As well he should. Once we return to Keragar, I’m turning him out.”

“You don’t have to do that for me. I think, in time, he and I will reach an understanding.”

Rodan considered this. If Gillian could forgive Madran’s transgressions against her, perhaps he could, too.

“Time will tell. I’d like to spend a night in my own bed before I make any more difficult decisions.” Of course, a night alone in his bed would be meaningless. “I’ll get one of the men to brush Lorimer for you, if you like.”

“I’d like to do it. It relaxes me.”

Rodan nodded and shrugged, a wry smile hiding his desperate need for her. “I imagine I’ll find a comfortable spot well *down wind* until this poultice dries.”

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* * *

The warm brown stone of Keragar's walls shone reddish in the afternoon light. Gillian had never been so glad to see any place. A line of servants waited in the courtyard when their weary entourage approached. She dropped from Lorimer's back and handed the reins to a waiting stableman.

"Lady Gillian?" The young man seemed surprised to see her.

"Yes, it's Lady Gillian," Rodan answered forcefully as he dismounted Joxon. "Not Graciela. Is there any word on the Dark One since we've been gone?"

"None, sir."

"Where's Anya?" Gillian asked. A sudden dread dampened her enthusiasm. "Did Varrick bring her back?"

"No, Milady. They've been gone as long you have."

She turned a pleading gaze to Rodan. "What if Graciela found them? She might take revenge on Anya for setting me free and leaving her in the dungeon."

"No doubt. But if Anya's with Varrick, he'll protect her. There's no more honorable man in the Southern Kingdom."

Rodan's words were a small comfort to Gillian. She let her gaze linger on the heavy-limbed trees that lined the road and wondered if Graciela would be back to exact her revenge on all of them. The Dark One still had a score to settle.

"Don't worry, Milady. You'll always be safe within these walls," Madran whispered as he walked past with the other servants.

Gillian glanced at his back. How had he known what she was thinking? How could he be certain of her safety?

She turned to Rodan, but he hadn't heard the comment. He was busy giving orders to those on hand to prepare baths, clean clothes and hot meals for everyone. Of the soldiers who had not broken off to return to their own villages, at least a dozen had followed Rodan to

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Keragar as a stop on their longer journeys. There would be much to do to care for them until they left.

Disconcerted by Madran's comment, Gillian followed Rodan inside. It shocked her that in her mind and her heart, she felt like she had come home.

* * *

That night after a noisy banquet with the soldiers in the great hall, Gillian climbed the stairs in a weary haze. She'd nearly fallen asleep twice at the table before finally begging off. All the talk of war and upcoming battles to maintain supremacy over the coveted lands north of Keragar bored her. The only thing that kept her going was watching Rodan.

As lord of the manor, and now the de facto leader of the army, he commanded the respect and admiration of his men. They treated him like a king, and Gillian couldn't help but think of him as Arthur, holding court over the Knights of the Round Table.

Did that make her Guinevere?

She laughed wryly as she stumbled to her bedroom door.

Cazastan was no Camelot, that was for certain.

* * *

Three days later, the soldiers departed. Gillian sat in the library, staring at the gibberish in a book about horses. She missed Anya terribly. Though she could have asked another of the servants to read to her, and they would dare not refuse, she felt self-conscious around the others. They treated her with great respect, but still looked askance now and then, obviously still wondering about her. She supposed she could get used to it, but one thing she couldn't get used to was the distance between her and Rodan.

He hadn't touched her since they'd crossed the castle threshold. He'd been achingly polite, attentive and charming. She'd overheard

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him telling the servants they should hasten to fulfill her every small request. He'd even given her full run of the castle and grounds, and informed everyone that no door would be locked to her.

Except the door between their bedrooms.

She'd tried it the second night after their return, when she'd regained some of her strength. The heavy oaken door hadn't budged. She'd thought of knocking, but something stopped her. Rodan's manner had been so perfect these last few days. He was killing her with kindness.

Oddly enough, she missed the man who'd dragged her from her bed in the middle of the night and kissed her fiercely, promising his protection in exchange for her trust.

She missed the man who'd torn off her gown and made love to her in the grass, the man who gave her no choice but to obey every movement of his body.

She wanted him so badly it hurt. But she realized now that everything he'd wanted from her in return was impossible. He'd wanted Graciela's magick, her Andar blood in his child. Gillian couldn't give him that, and now that he was completely certain she was not the Dark One, he had no use for her other than as a houseguest.

Tears blurred the already incomprehensible page in front of her and she angrily swiped them away. She refused to pine for him, refused to admit to herself that she would have begged him to love her. She had some pride left. Not much, of course, but enough to refrain from demeaning herself like a lovesick teenager.

If he didn't want her, that was just fine.

* * *

Rodan came upon Gillian in the music room and silently watched as she fingered the keys of a delaphone. His mother had played the delicate instrument and he longed to hear its gentle strains again. Gillian plucked a key and hummed something to herself. He sighed.

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The faint sound startled her. “Oh! Sorry. I was just curious what it sounded like.”

“It’s a beautiful instrument when played by a master. My mother was very adept. If you’d like lessons...?”

“Oh...” She smiled and a sweet blush colored her cheeks. “I’m not musical. Animals cry when I sing and I’ve broken a few instruments. They banished me from the High School band after a saxophone incident I prefer not to discuss. I should probably just stay out of this room altogether.”

“You’re welcome in any room of Keragar. Everything I have is yours to enjoy and I will not banish you, no matter what you break.”

She gave him a skeptical look and shrugged. “Maybe one day you could invite someone here who could play. A concert would be wonderful.”

“I will. Perhaps that will entice you to take some lessons.”

“I’d like to learn to read first. Without Anya...”

Rodan straightened. He’d promised her a tutor when she became his wife. “There will be a qualified teacher here tomorrow. I’m sorry for the delay.”

“What delay? It’s not like we had a lot of free time over the past week.”

“There are also several maids awaiting your approval. I know Anya served you well, but while she’s gone, you’ll need someone to tend to you.”

* * *

Gillian wanted to protest. She didn’t need another maid. She needed a *man*.

“Right now,” Rodan continued, “I’ve got something to show you. Come for a walk in the garden with me.”

The unexpected invitation started a tingle of excitement at the back of Gillian’s neck. The garden was their place. She thought of the

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circular clearing and hoped it wasn't too cold for another mid-day romp.

Rodan didn't offer his arm. He merely turned and headed for the arched doorway of the music room. Gillian found herself hurrying to keep up with him as he stalked through the corridors to the great hall.

"What do you want to show me?" she asked, not caring about the hopeful tone in her voice. "Don't keep me in suspense."

"I want to show you the cottage I've had the servants prepare for you. It's time you moved into your new home."

CHAPTER 20

Gillian felt like she'd been doused with cold water. Her new home? He was kicking her out of Keragar?

She slowed and fell behind as she contemplated this ultimate humiliation. Rodan didn't seem to notice. He reached the open doors of the great hall before he turned to look for her.

"There's a small but very comfortable cottage at the south end of the garden. My mother used it for reading and sewing. She spent many afternoons there, especially when my father was away. It has several rooms and a sunny veranda. The kitchen is adequate, so you won't be forced to take every meal here, but of course you're always welcome. Once you see it, you can decide how many servants you think you will need."

His words tumbled out flawlessly, as though he'd rehearsed them. He sounded like he was pitching a prime piece of real estate to a reluctant client. If Gillian had been in Pittsburgh, she'd probably be

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writing the check for the down payment.

Instead she put her hand on the wall to steady herself. “I thought you said I...any room in Keragar...” Her cheeks felt hot. What was she doing? It sounded faintly like begging.

Fortunately, Rodan didn’t seem to see it that way.

“Of course, you’re welcome here any time. I just thought you might like a home that was entirely yours. Here, you’re my guest. There, I would be your guest if you chose to invite me. Gillian, with Graciela free, it still may not be safe for you outside the walls of the estate...otherwise I would take you on a tour of the surrounding villages and buy you any home you desired. I owe you that much.”

“Huh? You owe me?”

Rodan didn’t seem to hear her strangled question. He was already striding down the right-hand arbor path. Gillian ran after him. His long legs carried him twice as fast as hers. She didn’t catch up to him until he’d emerged into another clearing.

This one was larger than the other. The shrubs that surrounded it were not as tall, but there was plenty of privacy. Several graceful trees shaded a fairy-tale cottage of mossy stone. Creeping ivy dotted with small lavender flowers partially covered the walls. A fountain gurgled beside it. A stone terrace lay to one side, its slanted roof held up by white trellises thick with climbing roses. Their lacy petals ranged through every shade of yellow from butter cream to amber.

The beautiful cottage reminded Gillian of paintings she’d seen by the artist Thomas Kinkade. His pictures of ethereal country splendor always made her a little homesick for a place she’d never been.

This was that place.

“It’s...very n-nice.” She couldn’t disguise the tremor in her voice.

Rodan turned and regarded her with a curious expression. “You don’t sound like you mean that.”

“Of course, I do. It’s beautiful. I’m sure I’ll be ...comfortable here.”

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Gillian took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. She walked past Rodan, careful not to brush against him, and stepped onto the terrace. The aroma of sun-warmed roses overwhelmed her.

"There are two hearths. The winter months get very cold, but there's little snow. If you like, I can have a small stable built so you can keep Lorimer nearer to you."

"Stop with the sales pitch," she retorted. The last thing she needed was a spiel.

"Sales pitch?" He looked so innocent when he repeated her words.

She wanted to smack him. "I'm sold. You don't have to convince me to live here. Who wouldn't want to? Hey, it's no castle, but it beats the dungeon, right?" Her voice turned brittle. When he followed her between the trellises, she fought the urge to run at him and shove him off the terrace.

"Gillian? You seem angry..."

"I seem angry? I only *seem* angry? You mean you're not sure if I'm angry or not?" She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. It didn't matter what world she was in, men everywhere were clueless. "Let me clarify for you. Yes, I'm angry."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not Graciela. That's why." She hadn't meant to be so candid. In fact, she hadn't wanted to answer him at all.

He sputtered. It sounded like he started a reply several times, but no words came out. "She bewitched you, didn't she?" he said finally. "That's the only logical explanation—"

"She didn't—you did. You...you had me believing that if *I* could do what you wanted *her* to do, you would love me. At first I was scared. I didn't know what to think. Now, I actually envy her. If I had been her, you would have gotten what you wanted, everything you wanted. Now that you know I'm just a regular person, you're going to stash me out here in the garden where you don't have to look at me."

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Rodan's eyes widened as she ranted. He looked like he'd swallowed something prickly. "Is that what you think I'm doing? Hiding you away, fulfilling my obligation to protect you in the least intrusive way I can?"

Gillian dropped her arms and her head, and sighed. "You said it better than I did. That's exactly what I think. I'm not Graciela, so what good am I to you?"

"You...I...I wondered why you were so cooperative early on. Now I know why. You were saving your madness to confound me later. If I didn't know better, I'd believe you *were* Graciela's sister. You've proven far more trouble than she would have!"

Gillian gasped. She hadn't expected a frontal attack. When she considered his words she realized, in a roundabout way, he'd called her a lunatic. "You think I'm more trouble than...?"

"Yes. If I'd found *her* in the woods that night, either she or I would be dead now and I wouldn't be defending my kind gestures to a raving madwoman."

"I haven't begun to rave! I put up with you throwing me in your damp little dungeon not once, but twice! You chained me to a wall, you dragged me around like I was some kind of criminal. Then Baygard did the same thing. Now you give me a guesthouse tucked away behind some conveniently tall trees and I'm supposed to consider that a kindness?"

"If you want Keragar, just say so. *I'll* live here." Rodan punctuated his retort by crossing his arms over his chest and glaring back at her. She had the impression he was mocking her, and once again, the urge to shove him almost overpowered her.

"Why don't you—"

"Why don't I what?" He leaned forward with a smug look. His eyes narrowed.

"Why don't you go live in the stables? You should feel right at

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home knee-deep in horse shit!”

Rodan crossed the space between them so quickly, Gillian backed up. She hadn’t feared him since the day he’d held his dagger at her throat, but she sidestepped now. He grabbed her arm and spun her to face him.

A bolt of erotic sensation arced through her. She’d missed his hands on her more than she’d realized. She’d missed his demanding touch, and her body’s instinctive response to him.

She clung to him when he kissed her and let him take what he wanted. Welcoming his tongue into her mouth, she surrendered to him.

* * *

Rodan’s frustration only built when Gillian melted into his arms. He’d held himself back too long. He’d tried to act as though he didn’t already think of her as belonging to him. He wanted to give her a choice, and now he understood. She’d already made that choice.

He slid his fingers into the neckline of her amber gown and yanked the material off her shoulder, exposing the pink tip of one breast. She arched in his arms, and he caught her and bent his head to draw the erect nipple into his mouth.

She moaned and tangled her hands in his hair.

“You’re not Graciela,” he said. It was a command. “You will *never* be Graciela.”

“But you wanted her...you wanted her magick.” Gillian panted.

Rodan freed her breast from the constricting fabric and teased the sensitive flesh with his thumb. He moved his lips to her neck, scraping the skin with his teeth. The sweet, salty taste of her made him rock-hard. “I wanted an alliance with a woman who would challenge me. I wanted someone who could give me something I didn’t have.”

“What can I give you? Rodan—” Gillian reared back and took his face in her hands. “I don’t know if I can give you a child.” She studied his face for a moment, and he lost himself in her earnest brown eyes.

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“I want you. Nothing more or less.” He hesitated only a moment, hoping his words would sink through her incredibly thick feminine skull and into her obviously addled brain. He wondered if he should tell her that her ability to render him speechless was enough of a challenge for him. No woman had ever been able to do that. “I love you, Gillian. And I want you now.”

He pulled up the hem of her gown and slid his hand up her thigh. Beneath the soft fabric, she wore nothing. His groin tightened. There wasn't time to undress her properly, so he pulled aside the layers of fabric and thrust his hand between her thighs to part them. The force of his movements propelled her toward the cottage wall, and the rounded stones provided a natural arch for her back, forcing her breasts against him.

He growled into her ear when she reached for the fastening of his breeches and tore them open. Her hand closed around him and guided him beneath the layers of sheer satin bunched around her waist.

He felt her warmth and thrust into her, claiming what was already his. She wrapped her legs around his waist and took him in. With her neck exposed, her head tilted back and her full breasts spilling from the top of her gown, she looked wanton and wild. Her lips parted on a gasp as he pushed deep. A moment later, the slick flesh around him began to tighten. When her inner muscles tensed and throbbed, pulling him in, caressing him, he lost all reason.

He came with her name on his lips. “Gillian...”

* * *

The only bed in the cottage was narrow and the wooden frame creaked and groaned pitifully when Gillian and Rodan made love again. Finally, hours later, they ended up on the soft braided rug before the bedroom hearth, pillows and blankets piled around them.

Gillian stretched, pointing her toes at the fire he'd built for them. “This place is really very cozy,” she said sleepily.

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Her fingers traced patterns in the golden hair that trailed from his abdomen to lower, more interesting places. With a dark grin, she noted he was growing hard again. She teased him with the moistened tips of her fingers until he rolled on top of her.

His reply came with the sensuous connection of their bodies. "It's a shame you won't be living here."

He glided into her and settled himself. She resisted the urge to move beneath him. Just the feel of him inside her was so good. She didn't want it to end, even though they had all night to do it again and again.

"I thought the place was mine!" Her protest was halfhearted. She sighed when he closed his lips over a spot just above her collarbone.

"You can use it for sewing and reading. You'll be spending your nights in my bed. In *our* bed." His voice thrummed through her as he spoke against her skin.

"What makes you think I sew?"

He raised his head, his jaw slack with mock surprise. "What else can't you do?"

She shifted just a little. The movement caused a delicious pressure where their bodies fused. "I can't possibly share a bed with a man who expects me to wear dresses all the time. You'll have to hire a tailor to make me some more pants and shirts."

"You can wear mine. My shirts, at least. I prefer you with no pants."

"I think we need to negotiate." Gillian pushed him over and, in a moment, sat astride him. She braced her hands on his chest and pumped up and down twice. He moaned. "You were saying?"

"You can torture me all you want. I'll never give in."

"I can torture you all I want, huh? Okay."

She did things to him that she'd only read about in books. By the time she finished, he'd agreed to a full-time tailor on staff at Keragar, as well as central air and indoor plumbing, even though he obviously

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wasn't quite sure what that meant.

Long after, when they lay side by side, breathing raggedly, she turned to look at him. His profile in the firelight was beautiful. She placed her hand on the bandage on his left arm, careful of the still-tender flesh beneath it.

"I need to know something..."

He glanced at her curiously.

"You said the name of the moon was Luna."

"So the legends go."

"What is the name of Cazastan? Was it called something else once?"

"Thousands of years ago, it was called...Yrth or Erth...I can look it up for you."

Gillian nodded. "How many thousands of years ago?"

Rodan shrugged. "Four, maybe five."

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did it change? Was there a war?"

"There have always been wars, Gillian. And there always will be."

"What about the moon? What's up there?"

Rodan smiled sideways at her. "All this is written in books. The tutor will be here tomorrow."

"What's up there?" she insisted, her throat dry.

"There were men there. A colony made up of several villages. Some say they all died. Some say they still live there, but we have no way to tell."

Rodan's fingers closed over hers in a strong but gentle grip. "Do you think that's where Graciela found you?"

"The moon? Oh, no. She took me from right here...I think I've always been right here..."

Rodan rolled onto his side, then propped himself up on one elbow

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to look down at her. "In Keragar?"

"In Pittsburgh."

"So then you're home?" His voice sounded hopeful and she loved him for it.

"Yes, I think I'm home."

CHAPTER 21

Gillian regarded her inverted reflection in Lorimer's huge brown eye. She had the distinct impression that the horse was grinning at her.

They stood on the south lawn next to the courtyard. Gillian wore a brand new pair of riding pants, shiny brown boots and a smartly tailored cloak that she thought made her look like English royalty. Lorimer wore a new saddle and bridle trimmed with the blue and gold of Keragar's standard.

They made quite a pair. A horse with an attitude and a woman with a bone-deep determination to prove to the man standing behind her that she could manage to get herself into the saddle.

"Give me a break here, Lorimer. Stand still." She gently patted the animal's velvety nose but gave him a stern look. Each of her four previous attempts to mount him without any help from Rodan had ended with the massive creature taking a neat side step. He was teasing her. She just knew it.

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Rodan's poorly disguised amusement at her difficulty compounded her frustration. She wanted desperately to teach him a lesson. Unfortunately, it was clear that, where Lorimer was concerned, Gillian was still the student.

"Is it too late to turn him into a *gelding*?" she asked with a pointed glance over her shoulder.

Lorimer snorted.

Rodan laughed. "I'm afraid so. And talk like that won't make him any more cooperative, you know."

"I thought you liked me," Gillian whispered into Lorimer's pointed ear when the horse dropped his head to examine the grass between his front hooves. "I guess you just felt sorry for me and you're over it now?"

Lorimer ignored her.

She sighed. "Maybe we've had enough for today." Gillian turned to Rodan with a hopeful smile that froze on her lips.

When Rodan saw her expression change, he turned in obvious concern toward Keragar's gate.

A horse stood at the entrance to the courtyard, its head low. On its back, a pale slip of a girl teetered in the possessive grip of a dark-haired man. Both looked utterly exhausted.

Gillian dropped Lorimer's reins and raced past Rodan. "Anya!"

"Varrick?" Rodan said, following her toward the weary travelers.

When Gillian reached the gate, Varrick dismounted. He landed heavily on the flagstones and raised his dark eyes to her. "Lady Gillian, it's good to see you safe. Help me with her, please..."

Gillian nodded. "What happened to you?" she asked, grabbing the horse's reins.

Rodan pulled Anya down from the saddle. She lay limply in his arms.

"We chased Graciela all the way to Ermine," Varrick said. His eyes

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followed Anya as Rodan swung her around and headed toward the steps of the castle.

“Madran!” Rodan yelled.

Gillian pushed open the door and stood back to allow the others through.

“The Dark One set a trap for us. She planned to kill me, but Anya...saved my life. She’s been ill with fever since Graciela touched her.”

Gillian caught the tortured look in Varrick’s eyes when Anya moaned.

Madran met them in the foyer, breathless. His eyes widened when he saw Anya hanging in his master’s arms. “Lord Varrick! It’s good to see you well, sire.”

“I’m far from well, Madran,” Varrick said, his voice tight. “Rodan, don’t put her in the servants’ quarters, please.”

Rodan shared a look with Gillian. “Of course. I’ll bring her upstairs.” He headed up the staircase with Madran at his heels.

Gillian put her hand on Varrick’s arm. “We’ll get her a doctor. It’ll be all right.”

* * *

“How is she?” Varrick asked when Gillian joined him and Rodan in the private dining room. He sat forward on his chair, his expression eager. Though he looked much better than he had a few hours before, there were deep circles under his eyes and his scar stood out boldly against his uncustomary pallor.

There was no doubt in Gillian’s mind that the dashing Lord’s concern for Anya was borne of more than noble chivalry. They’d been missing for three weeks, and she knew from experience a lot could happen between a man and a woman in that time.

“She’s sleeping. Her fever seems to have broken.”

Varrick sighed and leaned back. His tawny gaze remained guarded.

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“What did Graciela do to her?” Rodan asked as Gillian took a seat next to him. His hand sought hers under the table, and he squeezed her fingers when she settled in her chair.

“We’d been on her trail for days. Anya, it seems, is a better tracker than I am. But the Dark One doubled back one night and lured Anya away from our camp...”

Varrick kept his eyes averted. Gillian guessed he didn’t want to divulge some details, and that worried her more than Anya’s strange malaise.

“The sorceress disguised herself and tricked me. By the time I realized my foolishness, she had a blade at my throat.”

“Anya saved you?” Gillian’s gentle prompt made Varrick blush. He’s so sweet, she thought, returning the gentle pressure of Rodan’s fingers. *He looks like he’s in love.*

“She found her way back to camp, having realized Graciela was responsible for leading her off. They fought, and Anya won.”

Gillian had to smile at the pride in Varrick’s deep voice. She glanced at Rodan, noting a troubled expression in his dark blue eyes.

“Then Graciela is dead?” he asked.

Varrick shook his head. “She ran off and we’ve seen nothing of her since. Almost from that moment, Anya has been growing weaker. Graciela cast a wasting spell on her.”

“Varrick, I honestly think it’s just exhaustion,” Gillian said. The two men looked at her with blank expressions.

“I wish I could believe that, Lady Gillian, but she’s been hallucinating for days, talking in her sleep...rushing off into the woods after a man who isn’t there.”

Gillian sipped her wine and regarded Varrick curiously. In addition to his sunken eyes and pale skin, his lustrous hair hung limp, one strand falling across his eyes. His sensuous lips were thin. She recognized all the signs of stress. Varrick’s worry for Anya was taking an immense

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toll on him. “A man who isn’t there?” she asked.

“She claims to have seen a man following us. She says he appears and disappears. She believes he may be watching Graciela.”

“And I gather you’ve not seen him?” Rodan asked.

“No. At first, I thought perhaps you’d sent someone after us.”

“I did, as soon as I returned, but my men found no trace of you.”

“Maybe Graciela has an ally,” Gillian offered.

“Impossible,” Rodan said. “There are none of her kind left in this area.”

“He doesn’t have to be from this area,” she said, “and he doesn’t even have to be one of her kind. I saw the way Graciela manipulated people. I’m sure she could find someone to do her bidding.”

Both Varrick and Rodan seemed skeptical. Gillian sighed. *Men*. She rose and trailed her fingers through the short hair at the back of Rodan’s neck.

“I’m going to check on Anya again. Then I’m going to bed.” She gave Varrick her sternest look. “You need to get some rest, too. Anya’s safe now, so you can relax.”

* * *

Varrick nodded as Gillian left the room. His eyes tracked Rodan’s, who followed Gillian’s departure with a stark hunger in his eyes.

“Where might Graciela have been headed?” the Lord of Keragar asked.

“You’re not thinking to continue pursuing her, Rodan? Trust me when I tell you that the Dark One is best left alone.”

“I’m thinking of Gillian’s safety. Graciela brought her here, and as much as it pains me to admit it, that’s the one good thing she’s ever done. While she’s told Gillian it would be impossible to return her to her own time, I still fear she might try.”

“Then we’ve something else in common,” Varrick whispered. He looked at Rodan and knew his friend’s expression all too well. “We

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both fear Graciela will take away the women we love.”

* * *

“Anya, stop polishing and sit down!” Gillian patted the settee next to her. When Anya meandered over, Gillian took the wax pot and polishing rag from the girl’s hands and tossed them onto the bed.

Anya curtsied before taking a seat.

Gillian regarded her for a long moment before she spoke. “I’ve been looking for you all morning,” she said in her best Lady-of-the-Manor tone. “And you’ve been hiding in here, polishing things that don’t need to be polished.”

The swords on the walls of the master suite gleamed as usual. Gillian was certain they had more wax on them than the row of fresh candles that lined the sideboard. The pillows on the bed were so well fluffed they looked ready to explode.

“Your pardon, Milady. What would you have me do?” Anya folded her hands in her lap and studied them, prim and properly chastised.

“You don’t have to do anything but rest. You’re not an employee here right now. You’re a guest.”

“Oh, no, Milady...” Anya shook her head. “I beg you, don’t take away my position on the staff.”

“Why don’t you tell me what’s wrong. You’ve been so jittery since you woke up. And you’ve been avoiding poor Varrick. He’s dying to talk to you, and you practically run out of any room in which he shows his face.”

Anya remained silent for a moment. She bit her lower lip and twirled the hem of her apron in her slender fingers.

“Anya?”

“It’s pretentious, Milady, I can’t—”

“What’s pretentious? I’m confused. Varrick told us you saved his life. Is that true?”

Anya nodded so slightly, Gillian couldn’t be sure she’d actually

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responded at all.

“He said Graciela had a knife at his throat.”

“Yes.”

“You stopped her.”

“I attacked her, Milady. I was angry.”

“Well, of course you were.” Gillian squinted at Anya’s delicate profile. “I’d have been, too, if I found Graciela trying to kill the man I...a man...anyone.”

Anya’s face colored. She tried to hide the sudden, furious blush by letting her hair fall across her face.

“Am I missing something?”

The girl nodded, and a moment later, a strangled sob broke from her lips. “She...he...I caught them. They were—” Anya’s hands fluttered in front of her in an oddly recognizable gesture.

Gillian raised an eyebrow. “Tell me exactly what happened. Why won’t you speak to Varrick?”

“I found her sitting...astride him, Milady. Naked.”

“Oh.” Gillian rested her chin in her hand. It was a disturbing mental image to say the least, especially considering her own resemblance to the Dark One. No wonder Anya could barely look at her as well. “So you thought they were...”

Anya’s blush darkened. “*Kupping*.”

“*Kupping*? Is that what they call it now?”

The girl launched herself from the settee, swiping at her red-rimmed eyes. She paced restlessly black and forth through the master suite, clutching the hem of her apron.

Gillian’s heart contracted in sympathy. “It had to be a mistake, Anya. Varrick would never...I can’t imagine him *kupping* with Graciela.”

“He wasn’t—he...oh, it’s worse than that.”

“She *forced* him? No wonder he didn’t want to talk about it.”

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Anya openly wept.

Gillian rose and put her arm around the younger woman's shoulders. "There's more, isn't there?"

The girl nodded, sniffed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "He thought it was *me*!"

Now Gillian bit her lower lip. *Oh boy*. "How?"

"Graciela must have cast a spell. She made herself look like me and she went to Varrick and he...he..."

Gillian smiled gently and smoothed Anya's hair from her face. "You can't hold that against him, can you? If he thought he was with you...he obviously cares about you. I could see it in his eyes the moment you two returned. He must feel terrible."

"So do I, Milady. I...forgive him, of course. I know Graciela tricked him, but he's asked me to...he wants—" Anya's choppy explanation deteriorated into wracking sobs. Gillian led her back to the settee and guided her lithe body to the cushions. "I can't say it, Milady."

"Anya, let me tell you something. In the world I'm from, I've heard a lot worse. I can take it, so just spill it. Varrick wants you, right?"

Anya nodded.

"What's wrong with that? Don't you want him, too?"

"It's not proper."

"Why not? Oh, wait a minute, maybe it's *not* proper. How old are you?"

"Twenty-one summers, Milady." Anya sniffed again.

"Oh, well. In my world, that makes you a consenting adult. So it's okay."

Anya shook her head. Her hair fell in her eyes again. "I'm a servant. He's a lord. It's improper. To marry him—no one of nobility would accept me. They'd call me a *trot*."

"*Trot*? Tramp? Gold digger?"

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Anya only blinked. “A thief of a title. A...whore.”

Figures they'd still have that word around. Gillian rolled her eyes.

“I see.”

“To not wed him and be just his—”

“Mistress?”

“That would be worse. Then I would deserve the names they'd call me.”

“Do you love him?”

The question seemed to hit Anya like a brick wall. She looked up quickly, her eyes huge and stark. “I have no right to love Lord Varrick.”

Gillian stood, put one hand under Anya's chin and the other on the girl's shoulder. “You have every right to feel *anything* you want. Do you *love* him?”

Anya nodded.

“And he loves you. We'll find a way to work it out.”

“How, Milady? It's impossible.”

Gillian hugged Anya and wiped her tears with the hem of the long sleeve of her gown. “Anya, technically I'm about five thousand years old. A sorceress brought me here in a circle of fire. Trust me when I say *nothing* is impossible.”

CHAPTER 22

“Can we discuss this later, Gillian?” Rodan murmured against the soft skin at the nape of Gillian’s neck. His skilled fingers teased at the row of pearl buttons fastening the back of her new azure gown.

As pleasant as the distraction, she refused to let him put her off. In the intervening week since Anya’s confession, Varrick had grown morose. The maidservant’s unwillingness to speak to him was compounded by his shame. He’d told them he was preparing to leave and if something didn’t change soon, Anya would lose him to the barbaric rules of Cazastan’s feudal society.

“We don’t have to discuss it at all.” Gillian leaned back into his arms. She tilted her head to give him better access to the sweet spot where her shoulder met her neck. “I want to make Anya our ward. She’s been helping me read up on customs, and I discovered that if we take her in as a ward of Keragar, she’ll have the benefit of a title. That will make it acceptable for Varrick to marry her.”

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Rodan placed a line of kisses from Gillian's ear lobe to the neckline of her gown. Her skin tingled where his lips touched her, but she managed to keep focused. The cool breeze of twilight stirred her hair, and Rodan ran his fingers through the coppery strands.

"You'd have to marry me first," he replied as one of his hands settled at her waist. "As an unmarried man, it would be improper for me to take a female ward unless she were a blood relative."

Gillian gave a mock sigh and rolled her eyes. "There's always a catch, isn't there?"

"Yes." He kissed her shoulder again and pulled the gown a few inches down her arm. "But this is a catch that greatly benefits me."

"Is that supposed to be a proposal?"

"No." He twirled her in his arms. "Come to bed and I will properly propose."

"All right...all right." Gillian caught movement out of the corner of her eye. "Wait, what's that?" Reluctantly she disengaged herself from Rodan's embrace to peer over the balcony. "Who's that?"

Below them, a shadowy figure in a gray cloak moved through the south lawn toward the trees.

Rodan drew his dagger. "I'll find out."

"No, wait." Gillian grabbed his arm before he could leave the balcony. The slender figure had a familiar gait. "That's Anya."

Rodan leaned over the balustrade for a better look. "Is she running away?"

The lengthening shadows at the edge of the forest gave away no further secrets. "She shouldn't be out there." Gillian turned and headed for the door.

Rodan caught her wrist. "We'll alert Varrick. Let him go after her."

"No, no, she'd never get over that. She's so upset about the whole situation. Let me talk to her."

"I'll go with you."

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Gillian placed her palms against his chest and lowered her voice to a purr. “Let me handle this. You wait for me—in bed.”

He raised one eyebrow. “Don’t be long. I’ll not have you wandering alone in the woods at night.”

“I’ll hurry.”

Gillian pulled her new cloak over her gown as she left the room.

* * *

Rodan smiled after her, but as the heavy door of the bedroom shut behind her, a strange sensation tangled his gut. He returned to the balcony and squinted into the growing darkness. This time, under closer scrutiny, he saw more than the shadowy slip of a girl in her gray wrap. At the very edge of the forest, just within the tree line, he saw additional movement—a swift figure, stealthy and black as night.

Rodan didn’t waste a moment wondering who or what it was. He clutched his dagger and ran.

* * *

“Anya! Anya!” Gillian’s stage whisper cut through the quiet of twilight like a shout. The sylphlike figure before her didn’t even turn. “Anya?”

Gillian fought a sudden chill. She remembered Anya’s confession about the events that transpired between her and Varrick. Graciela had disguised herself as Anya once, what if...

She slowed her pursuit of the gray-clad figure and watched through narrowed eyes. The ghostlike shape disappeared into the shadows. Gillian hesitated at the edge of the lawn. She glanced back toward the spired silhouette of Keragar and considered going back for Rodan. But by then, if the sorceress had lured Anya away again, it would be too late to save her.

With a tremulous breath, she headed into the woods.

“You’re not alone this evening, are you?” The pleasant voice

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floated on the evening breeze.

Barely a yard behind the figure, Gillian froze.

“Why have you come here? Graciela is not here,” Anya replied sternly, so uncharacteristic of the shy maidservant.

“I’ve come to see how you fared. I see the medicine I gave you helped.”

Gillian stumbled through the darkness. She tripped over a stone and caught herself on a rough tree trunk.

When she looked up, she saw him—Anya’s magnificent hallucination.

He stood well over six feet tall, a wall of lean muscle. His bottomless black eyes sparked with an utterly unexpected humor. The seductive tilt of his smile caught Gillian off guard. No wonder Anya had been sneaking off into the woods.

“Who are you?” Gillian didn’t care if she interrupted a private conversation. Whatever his intentions, he didn’t belong on the estate.

“Lady Gillian.” His deep voice held a lilt of amusement.

Anya turned a worried glance at her mistress. “You see him, too, Milady?”

“Of course—who could miss him?” Gillian’s gaze never left those strange, dark eyes. “I’ll ask again, who are you?”

“I’m Andros, a Guardian of the Andar.” His tone belied that, somehow, the answer should have been obvious.

“Graciela’s people?” Gillian’s gaze slid sideways when she heard footsteps approaching from the direction of the lawn.

“Yes. I’ve come to collect her.”

“She’s not here,” Anya said. “I thought you nearly had her last time.”

“Last time?” Gillian asked.

Anya seemed so small standing before Andros. With her hands on her hips and her head titled back, she defiantly looked as though she

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faced off with a giant.

"She's resisting me. But you needn't worry, Lord Rodan. She won't be back to hurt Lady Gillian or your future ward."

Gillian spun around and found Rodan standing behind her. His blade rang from its sheath.

Andros held up his hand. "There's no need to protect anyone right now, Lord Rodan. Everyone here is perfectly safe."

"Why have you been following Varrick and Anya?" Rodan's hand fell on Gillian's shoulder. She felt the tension in his muscles as he pulled her backward against his chest. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here for Graciela, and I will take her with me soon. I'm also here to bid Anya good-bye. She's been most helpful. And finally, I'm here to send Lady Gillian home."

Rodan stepped in front of Gillian, imposing himself between her and the intruder. The two men stood nearly even in height. One light, one dark, they opposed each other like the sides of a coin.

"You won't touch her." Rodan's punctuated his warning with a subtle movement of his blade.

Andros didn't flinch. In fact, he smiled. "No. I won't."

He waved his hand. Beside him, flames arced above the forest floor. Anya stepped back, yanking away her cloak from the blue tongues of fire.

"They'll cause no damage," Andros said. "You needn't step back."

* * *

Within the crackling archway, a misty scene took shape. Rodan felt the dampness of a heavy rain. He smelled a strange, acrid smell, and he did step back when two blinding lights pierced the mist and illuminated the forest around them.

Claxon's blared. A jumble of urgent voices played through the air, and red lights flickered against the dark trees.

Gillian's fingers clutched his shoulder. He reached around to pull

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her safely toward him. "Is that your world?" he asked as thick smoke wafted through the arch. How could Gillian have come from such a foul place?

"It's...the firemen. I called them..." Her voice sounded distant.

Rodan felt her body trembling. Why would she want to return to a place that obviously frightened her so? And why would she have summoned men of fire?

"Just step through, Gillian," Andros said. "I've arranged it so you'll have only been gone a few moments."

* * *

Gillian's throat closed. Was that really what her world looked like? It had been so long, she'd forgotten the bright lights and loud noises of the city. Had she actually missed the smell of exhaust and the ever-present blaring of sirens?

She looked up at Rodan, into his haunted eyes.

"You can trust Andros, Milady. He's not like Graciela." Anya's voice reached Gillian over the pounding of her heart.

"How do you know?" she whispered, her eyes locked on Rodan's.

"He helped me save Lord Varrick. He's trying to fix things."

Gillian finally tore her gaze away from Rodan. "Do I have to go?"

Andros responded to her plea with a perplexed look. "Don't you want to go home?"

"Home?" She took Rodan's hand and squeezed his fingers. "Yes, I do."

She stepped back, pulling Rodan with her. Together, they turned their backs on Andros and walked toward Keragar.

* * *

On the night of the next new moon, Rodan and Gillian stood in the candlelit gardens of Keragar before all the servants, the soldiers who lived nearby and their wives and families, and dozens of villagers from

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Calais, Verdan and Galadrin.

They recited ancient vows of love and promise and pledged themselves to each other. The party continued for days.

* * *

Two months later, Gillian stood on the terrace of the garden cottage. A huge amber rose rested in her palm. The weather had turned cold and only a few glorious blooms remained.

She buried her nose in the soft petals and drew the soothing perfume into her lungs. It was the only thing that eased her nausea. After another deep breath of cool autumn air, she walked to the fountain and splashed water on her face. Her skin felt clammy, and when she closed her eyes, she seemed to tilt.

“Are you ready to ride?” Rodan’s voice grounded her.

She wiped cool drops from her cheeks and turned to face him, forcing a smile.

He stood at the edge of the path with Lorimer and Joxon behind him.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather skip my ride today.” Her voice shook a little. “I’m tired.”

Rodan’s eyes narrowed. “You look pale. Have you been ill again?”

“No,” she lied, afraid of the truth.

For more than a week, she’d been off. Too tired to get through a late dinner without nodding off, too nauseous to eat breakfast or lunch. She felt shaky all the time, and dizzy if she stood up too quickly. She’d slipped on the stairs yesterday when a wave of vertigo took her by surprise.

Rodan left the horses and joined her by the fountain. He took her hands in his and rubbed warmth into them. “It’s time we called a doctor. Get on Lorimer and I’ll lead you back.”

“No.” Gillian slowly shook her head. “I think I need to smell the roses again. The scent makes me feel better.”

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“I’ll have one of the maids cut them and bring them to your bedside.”

“No, they’ll die too soon. Let me stay here a while.”

Rodan caught her as she slid to the ground. She looked up at him.

“I’m sorry, Rodan. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“We’ll find out, love. We’ll find out.”

* * *

“Could it be one of the Dark One’s curses?” Varrick asked as he and Rodan paced outside the master suite.

Anya had accompanied the doctor from Calais inside the room, and there had been too long a silence.

“If it is, we’ll hunt her down, you and I,” Rodan replied, raking his fingers through his hair. “I no more believe Andros could capture Graciela than I believe he could have sent Gillian back to her time.”

Varrick nodded, discomfort in his expression. The look intensified when Anya appeared at the door of the master suite. She regarded him coolly before turning to Rodan.

“Milord, the doctor is finished. Lady Gillian has asked for you.”

Rodan spared a quick glance for Varrick and rushed inside, leaving his friend and his ward to likely share an awkward silence in the corridor.

Gillian lay propped on the bed, pale but smiling. The doctor excused himself and left the master suite after a brief nod from the Lady of Keragar.

* * *

“You look better already,” Rodan said, lowering sitting on the bed beside Gillian.

“I feel better. The doctor gave me something to settle my stomach.”

“Then perhaps it was bad food that made you so ill?”

She smiled at Rodan’s troubled look and shook her head.

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“A spell?”

“Nope.” She took his hand and laid it across her stomach. “I believe I’ll be able to fulfill the last part of our bargain after all.”

It took a moment to sink in, and Rodan’s eyes lit when he realized what she meant.

“Do you see what you’ve done, Gillian?” he asked drawing her into his arms and kissing her. “You’ve given me everything Graciela could not. Do you see how your power exceeds hers?”

Gillian smiled and settled into her husband’s arms. “Not only that, but I can see the future, too, and it’s beautiful.”

JENNIFER COLGAN

As a child, Jennifer Colgan (who also writes as Bernadette Gardner) regularly spent all her allowance on books. She quickly progressed from Carolyn Keene's *Nancy Drew Mysteries* to Nora Roberts and Gary Jennings. Her search for the perfect mix of adventure and romance finally took her from the bookstore to her computer where she began writing the kinds of stories she loves to read.

"I'd been experimenting with different genres and decided to try a romance novel. Now I can't imagine writing a story without romance in it," she says.

Jennifer is a native of the NY-NJ Metropolitan area, but her travels have taken her as far from home as Sydney, Australia. Her writing regularly takes her far into the future and deep into distant galaxies.

You can learn visit her websites to learn about her works in progress at www.newoa.com/bgardner and www.newoa.com/jcolgan.

* * *

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