

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

MADISON HAYES

GRYFFIN STRAIN
HIS MISTRESS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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His Mistress

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GRYFFIN STRAIN:

HIS MISTRESS

Madison Hayes

Dedication

For talented author and good friend, Samantha Winston.

Chapter One

"What is it?" Promise asked, staring across her desk at the creature just inside her office door. His wide shoulders were slumped and his head hung loosely on his thickly corded neck but that didn't stop him from being the tallest male in the room. Two burly field hands propped the beast between them, sweat shining on their faces as they struggled to support his weight.

"It's a Gryffin, Mistress," Karleem answered.

Promise acknowledged her foreman's answer with a slight nod, momentarily transferring her gaze to Karleem's dark face. When she returned her eyes to the Gryffin, she focused on the thick ridge of glinting copper hair that swept back from his broad forehead. Absently she rose to her feet, nodding vaguely as she searched her memory for information about Gryffins.

The unusual creatures, descended from a long-extinct species of winged Gryffins, rarely ventured this far east. They were a reclusive race of able predators who shunned the company of humans. Although obviously humanoid, they were considered by most men to be little more than animals.

Her hands smoothed down over the short linen skirt that wrapped her hips before she leaned forward and rested her palms on the long pine desk. "Well, I suppose he might do," she muttered. "He's big enough. How much did I pay for him?"

"Ten gold, Mistress. He'll make you a good house guard if you can tame him. Otherwise, we'll collar him and put him to work in the fields."

Promise nodded. She'd sent Karleem to town with instructions to bring back a big man. He'd certainly succeeded in that endeavor...and then some.

Although most of the men who worked her farmhold were free men, Promise occasionally purchased a slave at auction. These were generally young, single men from distant impoverished lands whose families had sold them into a lifetime of bondage.

She considered the Gryffin's drooping head. The creature was having a hard time keeping his eyes open. "He looks tame enough," she observed with a short, cynical snort. "In fact, he looks a bit dull."

"That's only because he's drugged, Mistress."

Promise cut her foreman a sharp look of reprimand. She disapproved of drug use and Karleem was well aware of that fact.

Karleem shrugged apologetically. "He came this way from the auction block. Gryffins are poisonous, Mistress." Karleem grappled with the Gryffin's thick wrist, turning the creature's hand over for Promise's inspection.

Her gaze glided across the Gryffin's thick, hackled knuckles. "I can't see his barbs," she offered in mild argument.

"He's got them drawn. They'll stay that way unless he's provoked." Her foreman hesitated. "I suppose we should clip them?"

Promise nodded and frowned. "It won't hurt him?"

"I shouldn't think so. I'll just pull back the hackles and nip the barbs back a bit."

There was a sharp sniff from the Gryffin. His head jerked up. Eyes of neon green rimmed with silver fixed on Promise for an instant before the beast shook his head. His tufted brows drew together as his eyes blinked and narrowed then focused once more on her face.

"Tar!" Promise invoked the name of the dark god who ruled the lower realms as a small curse of wonder slipped from her lips.

He was a truly magnificent creature, his features broad, proud and hawk-like in a face weather-burnished to a dark bronze glow. Thickly hewed musculature ripped across his upper body, from his lean abdomen—stacked as tight as a brick house—to

the broad pecs on his chest. His nipples were tight spikes squeezed out of hard flesh. A ruff of feathered scales caught the light, gleaming between his nipples like polished copper. His broad shoulders were wrapped in bulging strength that spilled over into his round biceps where veins stood out like rivers on a map. On his hips hung a loose pair of dragon-skin leggings. Layered with the flexible scales that grew on the underbelly of the dangerous beast, the low-slung pants glinted with a grayish light. A sporran hung from his waist, the tightly woven spines protecting his groin triangle.

Fingering the ties on the front of her soft leather jerkin, Promise watched his hard, curving lips mumble a scrambled sentence of protest before his head started to sink again. As his chin dipped toward his chest, he continued to narrow his faltering gaze at her from beneath wild, craggy eyebrows.

Slowly, Promise let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Mistress?" Karleem queried expectantly.

Karleem's words intruded into her scattered thoughts as Promise realized her foreman must have asked her a question. She took a moment to collect herself, fighting her attraction to the incredibly male creature whose eyes burned at her in a narrow line of brilliant green. "Yes," she said, hoping that her answer would pass for some sort of reasonable response.

Her foreman gave her a shallow bow then crooked a finger at his two assistants. Trailing Karleem through the door, the two men led the Gryffin from her office and closed the door behind them.

Promise sank slowly back into her chair as she stared at the thick oak door where the handsome creature had recently stood. Several long moments passed before she returned to her accounting, tallying numbers in columns while the Gryffin's rugged male features haunted her every action, every thought. Promise blew out a sigh of impatience. That's all she needed, to take a fancy to something like that—something barely human. That would really set tongues wagging—the ones that hadn't already worn themselves out talking about her.

Absentmindedly, she loosened her long hair then reworked the cinnamon strands into a tight braid. She already had two husbands! And Micah would be joining that union as soon as he came of age. Bichen and Timoth wouldn't appreciate her inviting a Gryffin into their marital bed.

Not that she spent much time in that marital bed. She'd married the two men as a favor to their mothers. Lazy prima donnas. They weren't good for much of anything outside the bedroom. And for some reason, Promise couldn't get very excited about a man who had no other talents to recommend him. Promise sighed. At least when Micah joined the household, she'd have someone she could count on to help her run her farm.

Her thoughts returned to the Gryffin. It would be nice to bed a man who was taller than she. Not that Promise was actually taller than either of her husbands *or* her betrothed. But she could look Bichen and Timoth in the eye. Micah probably topped her by an inch and might grow some more...

Promise's abstract musings came to a sudden halt as a rising scream of agony scraped suddenly across her nerve endings, stilling her heart. Like a searing flash of lightning on a cloudless summer day and the ear-splitting crash that follows right on its heels, the scream filled her with freezing terror.

"Tar Below! What in Breeza's name—" Promise bolted out of her seat and across the room, flinging open the office door and racing into the hall. The whitewashed walls echoed with a roared anguish ripped from Tar's Pit as Promise skidded down the corridor past her frozen staff. "What is it? Where's it coming from?" she shouted as she raced for the stairs. A dark-haired young man appeared at the bottom of the stairs. "Micah, your sword!" she yelled. "My bow!"

The tall youth hurried to put a bow in her hand as he drew his steel and they raced through the villa doors together. Hurtling across the interior courtyard, they blasted through the open villa gates. Here in the outer yard, the agony of sound continued as they pelted toward a brick outbuilding. Micah reached it first, almost yanking the door

off its hinges to get it open for his mistress—then held out an arm to bar her path, stepping into the low room ahead of her.

Promise threw herself through the open door as Micah sheathed his sword. Her legs turned to water and she grabbed at Micah's arm as her knees gave out. Her mouth worked soundlessly as she tried to give the order to halt. But the words wouldn't come from her bloodless lips. Helplessly, she watched the steel snippers as Karleem took off the Gryffin's last three barbs in a quick, cruel bite. A thin line of blue poison and red blood ran along the sharp edge of the scissoring blades to drip from the cold metal steel and stain the hut's dirt floor.

Promise reeled backward, dropping her bow, her hands over her ears as she staggered from the shed and collapsed against the small building's mud brick wall. The harsh sunlight blasted down on her and she squeezed her eyes shut for several seconds. When she opened them again, Micah stood before her, his handsome young face concerned, his broad shoulders clipping off the sun's hard glare.

"I thought he was drugged," she whispered, shaken. "I thought he was drugged! What kind of drugs were they?" she babbled. "You'd have thought...you'd have thought they would have dulled the pain...a bit more."

"Don't blame yourself, Mistress. We couldn't have known," Micah soothed. "The barbs must be more like horns than claws." Micah reached his arm around her shoulder and Promise let her betrothed steer her back toward the house.

"Horns? What do you mean?"

Micah's deep brown eyes were filled with compassion. "You can clip a cat's claws or a dog's. It doesn't bother them any more than it bothers us to clip our fingernails." Micah shook his head. "But I'd never take a creature's horns if I could help it."

"Elk and deer lose their antlers every winter," she argued weakly. "It doesn't seem to bother them."

"Those are antlers," Micah explained. "Horns are different. It's a crime to take an animal's horns. Goats suffer when they've lost a horn, and buffalo as well."

"Suffer? It hurts them?" Promise turned her head as the shed drew her gaze backward.

Micah looked as though he was reluctant to voice the next words. "It's painful...and more," he finally admitted. "The Gryffin may be unwell for a time. He may be ill, Mistress."

Chapter Two

Micah was correct in his prediction. The Gryffin was ill. Very ill. Promise checked on him often, hardly able to face what she'd done to the exotic creature, praying to Breeza that he didn't die on her. It was a sin to cause any animal suffering, of this she had no doubt. But her sin and her guilt were compounded by the inescapable fact that this was no mere beast of burden she'd injured. This was perhaps the most beautiful male beast she'd ever set eyes on. A walking, talking, living, breathing Gryffin.

Promise crept silently into the small brick outbuilding, letting her eyes adjust to the shadowed interior before she approached her unfortunate new slave. Although the summer evening was only mildly cool and the interior of the shed was snug and sheltered, the Gryffin shivered on the flat cot that stretched a few inches above the dirt floor. He'd been sick for two days now, unable to take any food. It was all they could do to get him to take a little water.

Concerned to find him shivering when the room was not cold, Promise reached a hand to his forehead, smoothing it over his brow, checking for fever. Her fingers had barely touched his cool, damp flesh when he reacted in a blur of motion. The next thing Promise knew, his huge fist was locked around her neck, dragging her face down to his. His neon eyes—fevered and fierce, wild and feral—opened on hers.

Slowly, incrementally, his fingers eased the pressure on her windpipe until she could finally draw in a breath. "I'll kill him," the Gryffin rasped in a deep voice like heavy stones falling and scraping over rock. "I'll kill the man who did this to me." He held her gaze with his eyes as he clamped her face close to his. "But he'll suffer first."

As the Gryffin's hard, rough hand loosened around her neck, Promise tried to pull away from him. But his fingers tightened again, locking her in place as he studied her face. His fierce gaze seared into her, cutting a path of destruction as her senses

responded to the male heat burning in the shimmering green of his narrowed eyes. The creature's passion was vibrant, emanating from his neon gaze as his fingers brushed across the tender skin beneath her jaw. Shifting his fist, he trapped her chin with thumb and middle finger as his forefinger stroked into the corner of her mouth and his gaze dropped to watch his finger's tender trespass.

His touch was cool on her hot skin and Promise shivered with the sort of anticipation that accompanies arousal. As she gazed breathlessly into his eyes, her nipples tensed and tightened. She was acutely aware of the silky chemise beneath her jerkin, shifting across the hard pink knots that tipped her areolas.

She wanted to groan at the sheer, inconvenient absurdity of it all. She *had* two husbands. She was betrothed to a *third* man. The Gryffin was her *slave*. And of the four men, *he* was the one who took her breath away. The Gryffin had a rough, elemental sex appeal that glowed in his fierce green gaze and hovered at the edges of his perfectly molded mouth.

His eyes drooped in surrender to fatigue as a long sigh of discontent souged from his lungs. His fingers trembled as his eyes closed. As though she weighed no more than a light blanket, he tugged her body over his. "I'm cold, girl," he told her in a weakening whisper. "Stay long enough to warm me." One of his heavy arms draped across her back, holding her possessively while the big fingers of his other hand caged her face loosely.

The long, hard length of his body felt chilled as Promise lay atop him and it troubled her that he'd complained of the cold. Although she didn't know much about the Gryffin race, or what might be normal for his species, she wanted to feel him warm and alive beneath her before she left him. With her cheek against his chest, she tucked her hands against his sides, hugging his hard body as her heart thudded to a heavy cadence, giving herself over to the dark wash of lust that melted her limbs and tempted her to press her mound against the hard flesh beneath her.

Long after he slept, she lay in simmering heat, her cheek cushioned on the coppery, feathered scales that fanned across his chest. She drew in deep breaths scented with virile masculinity, musky and dark, like the deep woods after a cleansing rain.

When she finally worked her way out of his grasp, he was quiet. Concerned for his comfort, she considered building a fire in the small stone hearth against the brick wall but opted instead to bring him more felt blankets from the main house. She buried him in the soft, thick pile of wool and tucked the ends tightly around him.

In the morning, she rose early to check on the Gryffin. She found him tossing and muttering in his sleep. The blankets she'd so carefully arranged the night before lay scattered on the dirt floor beside his cot. When she touched his brow, his flesh felt warm and dry against her fingers.

"Cheelashay sharali," he mumbled.

Promise frowned at him as she tried to make sense out of the foreign words.

"*Cheelashay sharali*," he repeated with enough anguish to break a heart of steel.

"Shh," Promise murmured softly. "Shh." Searching his handsomely chiseled face, she held her breath as she tracked a glittering tear that formed on his lashes and trailed down his temple into the hair tufting above his ear. Hardly able to believe that the huge male was crying, Promise stretched a hand toward his face and drew her thumb down the same wet path the tear had taken, holding her breath the whole time.

Without opening his eyes, the Gryffin reached for her hand and covered it with his own wide palm. She felt a tremor in the great hand covering hers and realized the Gryffin was shivering. He was cold again. When she tried to draw her hand away, his grip tightened and his eyes opened.

"You're back," he murmured.

She nodded, her throat so tight it hurt. "I'm thinking of moving you. To a warmer place."

"That would be nice," he conceded in a worn voice as he shifted carefully onto his side. "In the meantime, come here."

Although obviously weakened by his illness, the Gryffin had no trouble pulling her onto the cot with him and fitting her against his body. With her bottom tucked into his groin and his hand tucked around her breasts, he nuzzled his nose into the thick braid at her nape. He didn't stop rooting into her hair until his lips brushed against her neck.

The touch of those lips, rubbing like rough silk on the sensitive flesh beneath her ear, pulled a wanton response from her body. Her breasts tingled and ached near their tips, her back arched instinctively as her bottom pillowed into the Gryffin's groin.

"Tar, you feel wonderful," he mumbled against her skin. "So warm. My lips were cold," he explained in a sleep-roughened voice.

Promise smiled. The big brute was teasing her. "And your hands?" she asked as a tremor of excitement shook her frame. "Are they cold too?"

"Not anymore," he mumbled. "But if you don't mind helping, I've a place for *your* hands."

A shivery laugh squeaked past her lips. "I'll just bet you do," she told him.

"I'm cold," he complained gruffly. "See for yourself." Taking one of her hands, he guided it behind her to his groin and pulled her curving fingers over the large mass of male flesh covered by his loose, dragon-skin pants. Shifting his hips, he covered her hand with his as he pushed his crotch into her cupped palm. With his other large hand, he squeezed her breast. And, like that, he fell asleep.

Carefully, Promise explored his sex as he slept. He wasn't hard. He was just huge, his cock quiet and at rest between his legs. Following the long length to its root, she stretched her fingers, reaching tentatively for his testes. But his sac was too far between his legs.

Chewing on her bottom lip, feeling more than a little guilty, she squirmed within the circle of his arms until she had turned herself around and was facing him. With both hands, she reached into his groin. Her eyes closed and her breath quickened as she

filled her hands with his sex. She'd never known a man who had so much to work with, packed away in his pants.

The Gryffin stirred. Without waking, he moved his legs apart. Promise stroked deep between his thighs, pulling her hand back up along his entire sex as he thickened and stiffened beneath her fingers, groaning as she caressed him. When she checked his face, she found his eyebrows crushed together in an expression of discomfort. Reluctantly, she withdrew her hands. She kept her hands to herself for the next several minutes as she watched him sleep, but it troubled her that the Gryffin was apparently in pain—in addition to being cold.

Later that day she had the Gryffin moved to the main house, to the small, empty room beside hers. It didn't take long before she realized that, in order for the Gryffin to be warm, the room had to be several degrees hotter than she'd have chosen for her own comfort. She kept a small brazier burning beside his bed day and night, tending to the Gryffin's needs herself.

After all of that effort on his behalf, her conscience might have given her a reprieve—she had the creature in her home, nursing him back to health, caring for him with her own hands though he was nothing more than a slave she'd bought for ten gold. But despite her attempts to lighten the load of her guilt, remorse still ate at her insides, especially when her gaze settled on the shed where Karleem had carried out her orders. In an anguished moment of self-recrimination, she called Micah to her office and ordered him to get rid of the offensive structure.

Micah's face was blank with surprise. "How should I do that, Mistress Promise?"

"I don't care how you do it," she informed him shortly. "Burn it down if you like. Take it apart brick by brick. When you're done, I want it to be as though it never existed."

Slowly, over time, the Gryffin improved. He slept, he drank and finally he ate.

One morning he woke relatively clear-eyed and sent a wan smile her way. His voice was deep and rumble with sleep—a bedroom voice if she'd ever heard one—a voice

that belonged tucked up alongside rumpled sheets, tangled limbs and naked, sex-heated skin.

"Thanks for your care," he told her. "I'm in your debt."

Promise settled herself on the edge of the bed, challenging him with a quiet smile, "Do you want to settle that debt now?"

"If I can."

"Then tell me *how* someone your size ended up on the auction block. You don't look like a man without means, or a man who could be easily convinced by his family to give up his freedom."

He grimaced as he levered himself up on one elbow. His burnished hair spilled over his brow and he shook the long, feathery spikes out of his green and silver eyes. "I sold *myself*."

"You sold yourself!" Promise shook her head as she gazed at him, curbing the urge to reach out and run her fingers through the riot of metallic copper that spilled across his forehead. "Why would you do that?"

He pushed out a short sigh. "A friend was injured. A Gryffin like me. I sold myself to pay for a year of her care."

Promise shook her head again. She couldn't keep her gaze from his deliciously curving lips. "What on earth were you thinking?"

There was a wry glint in his eyes. The edge of his mouth drew back, and a strong line appeared in his cheek to curl around his smile. "I was thinking I could probably escape whenever I'd a mind to." He glanced at the open bedroom door as his smile turned mischievous. "But don't tell my new owner."

Promise jerked her chin up on a wry smile of her own. "You're talking to your new owner."

He registered this information with a flicker of surprise. "Really. I assumed you were a servant. In that case, I...probably owe you some sort of apology."

"What for?"

The Gryffin tilted his head as the mischief-made smile returned to the corners of his mouth. "Well, if you don't know, I'm damned if I'm going to tell you."

Promise couldn't help but smile with him. Tar, the man was audacious! All male moxie and daring audacity. Despite herself, she wondered what it would feel like to skim her lips along the strong line of his square jaw. "You're to be my new house guard," she informed him. "Do you have a name?"

The amusement slipped from his face as his gaze hardened. Obviously insulted, he stared a warning at her. "Yes, I have a name. I'm not an animal."

She wasn't about to apologize to one of her slaves, no matter how damn attractive she found him. "I didn't say you were," she countered smoothly.

"I'm a Gryffin," he stated as though he'd just pronounced himself king. "My name is Tranth."

"And you sold yourself into slavery," Promise reminded him.

Tranth grimaced as he balled his fist in front of his face. Raw crusted flesh stretched over his hackles. "That was a mistake," he admitted.

"Why don't you tell me all about it?" she suggested quietly, taking a deep breath as she steeled herself to deliver the apology she owed the wounded Gryffin.

Tranth nodded his head, taking a moment to answer. "We were climbing out of the cauldron when Akela fell and shattered her leg."

"The cauldron?" she interrupted him. "What were you doing inside the cauldron?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "Crossing it. Why else would we be inside the cauldron?"

"But the heat! The Zards! Nobody crosses the cauldron. They go around it."

"Gryffins have a high tolerance to heat," he explained. "As for the Zards, though they're not the brightest species in the world, they're not stupid enough to pick a fight with an adult male Gryffin. They wouldn't have stood a chance against my barbs."

Promise accepted this information with a nod.

"I've set bones before on simple breaks, but Akela's leg was bad. I carried her to the nearest settlement, looking for a doctor. After being turned away at several doors, I finally found a man who would take a look at her. His name was Fieldnig. Do you know of him?"

"The name sounds familiar. Is he a doctor?"

"He's a doctor...of sorts."

Promise tilted her head. A long cinnamon strand escaped her braid and she tucked it behind her ear. "What do you mean?"

Tranth's smile was wry. "He cares for animals. He set Akela's leg and agreed to care for her during her convalescence. He accompanied me to the auction house where he was paid six gold. The dealer thought he could get eight for me."

"He got ten."

Tranth nodded. "I don't remember the auction. I...must have been drugged. The next thing I remember is...a man in a shed. My barbs being cut away." A deep ridge formed between his coppery brows. "The dealer must have drugged me and had me cut."

Promise was so surprised by his conclusion that she was momentarily struck dumb. Tranth went on again before she regained the ability to talk.

"He must have been afraid I'd try to escape before he had a chance to collect on his investment. But he wasn't the man in the shed—he wasn't the man who cut me. The man who removed my barbs must have been someone...in his employ."

"Would you have?" Promise asked somewhat distractedly. She was still trying to catch up with the idea that Tranth thought he'd been cut *before* he was delivered to her farmhold. "Would you have tried to escape?"

Tranth cut her a swift glance. "I wouldn't have cheated the dealer," he informed her shortly, "or the person who purchased me. In fact, I'd planned to either work off my debt or pay it off before my...escape."

Promise frowned at him. The man was an enigma, for certain. "Pay it off? How would you do that?"

"I'm not completely without means," he stated in a deep voice that was strong with confidence. "But I was a little short of options when Akela slipped down that slope."

Promise looked at her hands, clasped loosely in her lap. The Gryffin was being naïve if he thought he could just buy his freedom back. "Whoever purchased you probably wouldn't see it that way, Tranth. They'd consider you a...lifelong investment that they wouldn't want to lose. They wouldn't look kindly on your...escape."

Tranth waved a hand dismissively. "The way I see it, I owe you two years of my life...or approximately four emeralds."

"Emeralds!"

His gaze darkened. "On the other hand, the man in the shed owes me his life. And the dealer too, if he had anything to do with it."

For the moment she put aside the question of how he hoped to come up with his value in emeralds. "So you don't remember anything after you sold yourself and gave the money to Fieldnig?"

"Just the shed. My hackles." His voice rasped low, a note of pain fraying his words. Gingerly, he ran a thumb over his fisted knuckles. "You coming to warm me." He glanced around the bright, sunlit bedroom, frowning as though something were out of place. "This room," he said uncertainly. "Not much else. But I remember what the man looked like. The man in the shed." His voice dropped to a threat. "And I know where to find the dealer."

Promise nodded mutely, silenced by her guilt. She lowered her gaze to the oak floorboards. With her toe, she nudged at the edge of a braided rug. Tranth's intent was clear. He blamed her foreman for the injury he'd suffered and intended to exact his

revenge on Karleem—if he could find him—no doubt in slow, painful, bloody increments. She didn't doubt that the huge Gryffin could tear a man into five separate pieces without even breaking a sweat.

This would be a good time for a confession on her part. It wasn't her foreman's fault that Tranth had been butchered. He had only been following her orders. Although she'd sent Karleem to the coast to manage her affairs at the docks and though there was little chance the Gryffin would ever find him, this would certainly be a good time for a confession. But Promise didn't want Tranth to know she was the one who was responsible for his suffering. She couldn't face his rage. Or his hatred. More than anything, she couldn't bear the idea of the Gryffin hating her.

The Gryffin's deep voice cut into her thoughts. "As soon as I can get back to that auction house—"

Promise cut him short. "Which won't happen as long as I own you."

Tranth's eyes flared with green fire. For several seconds she thought he was going to argue the point. He gave her a tight nod then continued in a dangerous silken slide, "That will buy him a little more time—about as long as it takes me to come up with four emeralds."

"Would you like me to get in touch with this man, Fieldnig?" Promise asked, seeking to change the subject.

Tranth's expression sharpened with interest. "Do you think you could do that? I'd like to know how Akela is."

Promise nodded resolutely, glad to have turned the Gryffin's mind from revenge. Then she stopped abruptly. "Who's Akela? Is she your..."

Tranth's neon eyes warmed as a slow smile curled the corner of his mouth. "Friend," he finished for her.

"Good friend?"

"Very good friend."

Promise's shoulders slumped a bit. That didn't tell her much. She wanted to know what the woman meant to him. He'd sold himself into slavery for her!

"I thought I was in love with her at one time," Tranth confessed quietly. "I even left The Spit — my home — to follow her east."

"You were in love with her?" Promise checked herself. She hadn't meant for it to sound like she was dissatisfied with the idea. "What happened?"

Tranth grimaced. "Evidently, I talk in my sleep."

Promise queried him with a slight frown.

He answered with a morose smile. "When I talk in my sleep, I talk about other females."

"Ah." Promise was quiet for several seconds, trying to hold back her next question, but the damn thing wouldn't cooperate. "What does *Cheelashay sharali* mean?"

Tranth flopped down on the bed, rolling onto his back and drawing a thick wrist over his eyes. He blew out a sigh. Slowly, his mouth ticked up again into a reluctant smile. "It means I still talk in my sleep."

"*Cheelashay* is the name of a woman?" She tried to hide her disappointment and what she could only describe as envy. Tranth had called out this name as he slept. There had been tears on his face. What would it take to move a man like Tranth to tears? What, besides a huge love? The sort of love that was probably insurmountable from her own point of view.

"Cheela, Shay and Sharali." His smile was melancholy. "They were my girls."

Promise's throat tightened as she forced out the next question. "Your girls?" she croaked.

He tilted his chin upward. "They were to be my females...my mates. I was to be initiated in the spring. They died in the winter, before the ceremony took place."

"I'm sorry," she managed to choke out on a whisper. "I shouldn't have asked."

He turned his head. His gaze was warm and sympathetic as he considered her. "It was a long time ago," he soothed. "I was barely a youth at the time."

His concern for her in the face of his own tragedy touched her deeply. She pressed her lips together and lifted her eyes to the ceiling as moisture brimmed at the edges of her lashes, threatening to slide down her face and embarrass her in front of her slave.

She concentrated hard, blinking as she stared at the beamed ceiling.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, moving back up to his elbow. "I didn't mean to make you unhappy."

She nodded and swallowed, giving him a game smile as she lowered her eyes. For several moments his brilliant green gaze held hers captive. Slowly, the thick ruff on his head lifted, curling his spiky hair over his forehead again. His voice was a husky murmur when he spoke. "Isn't it about time you told me your name?"

Promise shifted on the bed, sitting up a little straighter as she tried to tear her gaze from his. It didn't work. "You...may call me Mistress," she uttered in prim tones, trying to draw around her some semblance of authority.

A few strands of hair slipped from her braid again. This time Tranth reached for the stray locks before she had a chance to urge them back behind her ear. His knuckles swept her cheek intimately and his fingers slipped along the shell of her ear as he tucked the wisps back into place. "I may," he answered. His slow, sexy smile was enigmatic. "But I doubt it. Tell me your name."

"My name is Promise," she finally relented, feeling not so much the mistress as a star-struck young girl.

"Promise." He rolled the name over his tongue as though tasting it. "An honest name," he decided, "to go with your honest blue eyes."

Promise's eyes widened in dismay as her stomach gave a sick lurch. She stood suddenly, wanting to plug her ears, wanting to escape Tranth's words. He'd graced her with a fine nobility she didn't deserve and would quite possibly never deserve again.

Honesty.

Swiftly, she crossed the room and slipped through the open door.

Chapter Three

With Tranth on the mend, Promise returned her attention to the business of running her farmhold. Without her foreman, the job occupied most of her time. The fields were planted but had to be weeded and irrigated. She enlisted Micah's help. Even though the marriage contract was as yet unsigned, his family allowed him to move over to the villa full time—on the understanding that he was to have his own room. She set Micah to work, directing crews to the fields while she set about the task of finding Tranth's Doctor Fieldnig.

The Gryffin's health gradually improved and a few days later he was moving around her villa, padding around barefoot—spurred heels whispering against the oak flooring—darkening doorways with his huge physique and filling rooms with his quiet masculinity. Promise was acutely aware of him. She found the attractive male more than a little distracting. After she had ordered him to catch some sun in the courtyard, hoping to move his unsettling presence outside, she was surprised to find him fixing her pump in the kitchen.

"Thank you," she told him as she tried out the new lever on the temperamental old mechanism. The wooden handle he'd carved and installed was longer than the one that had broken away. A strong flow of fresh water poured into her sink for the first time in three weeks. "I was going to ask Micah to look at the pump," she explained somewhat apologetically.

"You could have asked one of your lace ribbons to look at it."

She turned swiftly to face him. "You mean one of my husbands?"

Tranth's response was thick with sarcasm. "If that's what you want to call them."

Promise gazed at him, surprised at his lack of respect while, at the same time, loving the aura of power and strength he exuded. The Gryffin wasn't subservient to

anyone. He'd met Bichen and Timoth the day before. The air had fairly crackled with animosity as she'd shown him to her husbands.

Promise waved a hand at the pump behind her. "They consider this the work of servants."

"Or slaves?"

"Or slaves," she conceded after a moment's hesitation.

"And what do they consider appropriate work for lace ribbons?" Tranth pressed her with a haughty lift of his copper eyebrow.

She gave him a wry smile. "I've yet to figure that out."

"Perhaps their expertise lies in the bedroom," he suggested after a long, heavy pause.

"That's impertinent," she snapped.

Tranth rolled his shoulders. Somehow, even the stiff shrug came across as aggressive. Aggressively male. Despite her pique, Promise couldn't stop herself from wondering what it would be like to bed the tall Gryffin. It had been weeks since she'd joined her husbands in the marital bed. In fact, she hadn't lain with either of them since the Gryffin had landed on her doorstep. She'd been too busy caring for him when he was unwell. Then she'd been busy with the farmhold and tracking down that doctor—who was expected to arrive sometime shortly after noon.

Inwardly, Promise sighed. That wasn't the only thing that had kept her from bedding her husbands. She'd kept herself busy caring for Tranth and now he was the only thing she cared about. Even her affection for Micah hadn't grown beyond anything more than just that—affection.

"When's the last time they practiced their expertise?" he demanded in a low, quiet growl.

She stared at the arrogant creature. He had no right to ask. But she wanted him to know. "Before you came," she answered quietly.

He leaned back against the kitchen sideboard, his gaze turning feral as his ruff gradually curled his hair over his forehead. For several moments he looked like he could eat her alive. Finally he grimaced, almost as though he were in pain. He broke his gaze, gliding the palm of one hand over the hackles of the other. "I think I'll catch some sun on the back step," he said, dismissing himself with a casual grunt.

Promise let her breath out in a long, quiet hiss, both relieved and disappointed that the exchange had come to a halt—wondering why the Gryffin had suddenly aborted what appeared to be the beginnings of a seduction. "I'll send Micah for you when the doctor gets here," she told him as he stepped through the door. She left him on the back porch behind the kitchen, sunning himself against the wall as she headed in the opposite direction.

Micah called out to her as she stepped into the courtyard. He led a slight, graying gentleman across the flagstones toward her. Promise hurried to meet the men, intercepting them at the tiled fountain in the middle of the courtyard patio. "Thank you so much for coming, Doctor Fieldnig. I hope you can give my Gryffin news of his friend."

The doctor bowed over her hand. "It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Mistress Promise. Akela is doing remarkably well. She should be back on her feet much sooner than I'd anticipated. If that's the case, your Gryffin will have some money coming back to him."

"He'll be glad to know of it," she answered. "Micah, would you fetch Tranth to the dining room? I left him behind the kitchen."

Promise led the doctor through the wide double doors then turned left into the dining room. Shaded from the afternoon sun, the room was cool and easy on the eyes. A large pine table presided in the center of the room, a pale contrast to the deep honey-golden floors. Pine chairs punctuated the table's long sides, their seats upholstered in black and gold tapestry. Against the wall stood the antique buffet she'd inherited from

her grandmother. On its widely spaced shelves, fine porcelain dishes painted with clusters of forget-me-nots stood behind rare pieces of blue glass.

Fieldnig pulled out a chair at the head of the table, seating Promise before taking one of the chairs on the side. A moment later, the doctor stood again as Tranth towered into the room. Fieldnig's tentative smile faltered as his gaze snagged on the Gryffin's hands. "Tar Below!" he exclaimed. "What happened to him?"

Promise felt weak as she tracked the doctor's gaze to Tranth's hackles. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Why, the poor brute's been emasculated!"

"Emasculated?" Promise echoed faintly.

Promise's middle-aged steward carried a tray of drinks into the room, setting a tall glass goblet in front of his mistress and another in front of the doctor. With a surly glance for Tranth, he left the tray on the table before leaving the room. Tranth reached across the table, helping himself to the final gooseberry cooler.

The doctor nodded as he pulled his chair beneath him again. "His barbs have been cut. For a male Gryffin, that's tantamount to...to taking his balls, Mistress."

Promise stared at the doctor in quiet horror as Tranth pulled out a chair and seated himself across from the doctor. Emasculated! She couldn't bear to think of Tranth in those terms. What had she done to the proud beast?

The doctor continued with animated interest. "In most primitive societies, a handicap of this sort would be catastrophic for a male such as this one. From his peers, he might expect jeering contempt or worse. Some primitive societies might even eject a male who'd lost the ability to hunt and fight and defend himself."

"Gryffin are *not* primitive," Tranth growled. "If my friends or family knew of my...handicap, they'd hunt down the man who did this to me and destroy him...assuming I didn't reach him first."

The doctor gave him a nod. "Gryffin males are a fiercely knit bunch."

“Can a Gryffin not use a crossbow for hunting,” Promise ventured tremulously, “as do humans?”

“He could,” the doctor answered with apparent reservation, “but you need to understand that a Gryffin’s barbs are not *only* necessary for hunting and fighting and protecting his flock—they’re also part of the Gryffin courting and mating ritual.”

“Mating ritual,” Promise breathed on a pale whisper. She felt the blood drain from her lips.

Fieldnig nodded, warming to his subject with a scholar’s enthusiasm. “Gryffin males fight amongst themselves for the right to claim females into their harems.”

“Folds,” Tranth corrected the doctor.

The doctor barely halted in his explanation. “In addition, female Gryffins kiss their males’ hackles and suck on their poisonous barbs. It’s an act of submission on the part of the female.”

“It’s an act of affection,” Tranth corrected him with dry irritation, “and very stimulating for the male.”

Promise turned her gaze on the copper Gryffin.

Tranth ran his calloused thumb over his broken hackles as his gaze focused on the middle distance. His neon eyes closed a moment then opened again. “It’s stimulating,” he repeated. “Pleasurable. As the male approaches orgasm, the pressure builds in his barbs, beneath his hackles. When he’s especially aroused, the poison will actually weep from his barbs. At this point the pressure is intense. His females perform him a great service when they suck him off.”

Promise just stared. Faced with the full barbarity of what she’d done, she couldn’t bring forth a single word.

Apparently unaware of Promise’s reaction to all this, the doctor continued conversationally. “Did you know that the Gryffin male takes several mates? Whereas in

our society, a wealthy woman may take on more than one husband, among Gryffins it's the *male* who takes several females."

Promise dipped her chin. "Two or three?" she managed to contribute.

Fieldnig shook his head. "Five to eight isn't unusual. Only one out of five Gryffins is born male. So naturally, each male keeps a large harem."

"Fold," Tranth corrected him again.

"Fold," the doctor conceded with a nod.

"But a fold is more than a harem," Tranth added somewhat defensively. "It's a family. There are usually many childings as well as several females."

"No doubt," the doctor allowed, lifting his eyebrow. "At any rate, perhaps it's just as well your Gryffin has been cut, Mistress Promise."

Promise shook her head in mute disagreement.

"Mistress, there's something you should know about Gryffins," the doctor told her matter-of-factly. "*You* might consider this creature nothing more than an animal. You might think you have nothing to fear from him...sexually. But you should know that Gryffin males treasure human women as mates." He shot an uncompromising look at Tranth, which the Gryffin returned coolly. "In fact, a Gryffin will go to incredible lengths to procure a human female. Even if it means taking her captive, holding her against her will, *mating* her against her will." He turned his open gaze on Tranth. "Is that not so?"

Tranth's jaw tightened. "That is not generally the case," he gritted. "Although it has been known to happen. There is villainy in every race. And there is nobility. My friend Jarrk rescued a human female from just such a fate when he fought another Gryffin for the right to claim her."

Ignoring Tranth, the doctor continued his argument. "But there's more, Mistress, and this is the reason why it might be just as well your male has been cut. Although

Gryffins treasure their human mates, the unfortunate women are often killed during copulation, when the male loses his head and marks his female."

Promise stared. "Marks his female?"

Fieldnig nodded. "With his barbs. If a Gryffin gets carried away during orgasm, he'll often revert to his baser instincts. He'll drag his barbs over the female's flesh—across her chest or over her buttocks. This doesn't harm the Gryffin females in the least. It leaves a blue tattoo-like trail on her skin. In fact, a female Gryffin will proudly flaunt these marks as proof of her male's interest in her. But when a Gryffin attempts to mark his human female, the result is fatal."

Promise gasped. "Fatal?"

"Not always," Tranth interceded quietly. "Jarrk's female—his human mate—built up a tolerance to his poison by drinking it in gradually increasing amounts. Over time, Chiarra became immune to the effects of the poison."

The doctor gave him a doubtful look before Tranth continued.

"Ingested in the stomach, the venom is far less deadly than when introduced directly into the bloodstream. Still, building up a tolerance is a long, slow process, starting with only a drop or two of poison per day. Eventually, however, Chiarra was able to accept Jarrk's venom into her bloodstream." Tranth caught Promise's eye. "She wears Jarrk's stripes curving around her breasts," he said in a soft voice.

Spellbound, Promise returned his gaze, at a loss to explain why she didn't find the idea either frightening or offensive. Somehow Tranth had made the act of a Gryffin striping his female seem both deeply sensual as well as tenderly romantic.

The doctor grimaced. "Why did your friend expose his mate to the danger in the first place? Was it *that* important that he follow his instincts and mark her? Is that why he fed her his poison and made her build up a tolerance?"

Tranth shook his head, lifting his eyebrows. "Not at all. He insisted she build up her tolerance in order to protect her against other threats. In fact, her tolerance to Gryffin venom ended up saving her life."

"The whole process sounds extremely risky to me," Fieldnig concluded with a disapproving shake of his head. "A situation best avoided at all costs."

Despite her earlier shock, Promise found herself curious. "Why do Gryffins find humans so desirable?"

The professor was happy to explain. "Their own females...climax quickly. And almost immediately afterward, they fall asleep."

Tranth shook his head. "The females don't necessarily sleep after sex, although they often do. It's the male who falls into a "sleep of completion", a sleep so deep nothing will wake him for about twenty minutes."

The doctor cast him a condescending glance of amusement.

Tranth shrugged. "But you're right. Gryffin females come quickly. After they come, they're no longer...tight. That's why the male moves to the next female in his fold."

The doctor grunted at this concession. "It takes a whole flock of Gryffin females to satisfy a Gryffin male. In fact a male can go through his entire harem —"

"Fold."

"—in a single night, trying to achieve satisfaction. So, whereas a Gryffin might go through six of his own kind before climax, one human female can bring the beast to his knees."

He gave Promise a sharp look. "But you can tell when a Gryffin is aroused. So you should get some warning if this one starts to get any ideas. When he's provoked or aroused his —"

"Doctor," Tranth interrupted in a sharp, quiet voice, "let me keep some of my secrets."

The doctor chuckled as he eyed the copper Gryffin then smiled at Promise. "Just be careful if that ridge on his head starts to lift."

Promise flicked an uncertain glance at Tranth then asked the doctor, "What does it mean?"

The doctor shrugged. "It means you need to be careful, Mistress. Hopefully, Tranth's human blood will have a civilizing effect on his behavior."

Tranth snorted. "I wouldn't count on it," he muttered snidely, his fist hiding his mouth.

Promise felt her eyes widen in surprise. "Human?"

The doctor nodded, arching one eyebrow and shifting his gaze to Tranth. "Unless I miss my mark, your Gryffin has some human ancestors somewhere in his family tree."

"What gave me away?" Tranth asked with a surly grunt.

"I've never heard of a Gryffin with green eyes," the doctor answered with a chuckle.

Tranth inclined his chin once. "My father was an Islander," he admitted grudgingly, as though his father had just been exposed in some shameful plot to kill the Benign Dictator.

Promise couldn't stop the warm affection from sifting into the gaze she slanted at him. For some reason, it was touching to see the Gryffin showing a vulnerable side, even if that vulnerability centered on his embarrassment over his human roots.

The tentative smile he gave her was tempered with a very uncharacteristic trace of humility.

She returned his smile warmly.

When they'd finished their refreshments and heard the doctor's report on Akela, Promise walked him back through the courtyard. Tranth accompanied her to the gates as though he was as much the master of the villa as she was the mistress.

"Doctor," he asked as they waited for the doctor's horse to be brought around to the villa's wide gates, "is there any chance that I might see Akela?"

Lifting an eyebrow at his hostess, the doctor waited for Promise's decision on the matter.

"Will you visit us again, Doctor Fieldnig? When Akela is well enough to travel?"

The old gentleman tipped his hat. "It would be my pleasure, Mistress Promise."

Together they watched the doctor mount his gelding and turn its head north. The tall chestnut cantered out of the yard.

Promise sighed as she turned her gaze to the man beside her. Determined to remind him of his place, she tried to overlook his strong jaw and hard, masculine mouth. "Tranth," she told him firmly, "you must call me Mistress."

When he trailed a knuckle down the side of her face, she didn't pull away though she knew she should. "I like Promise," he answered softly.

She shivered at the gentle caress of his rough fingers.

"You're cold," he murmured.

"Yes," she lied quickly, though the afternoon was too warm for anyone to be cold.

"Let's move out of the shadows," he suggested, guiding her with a hand on her arm.

"Are *you* cold?" she questioned him, suddenly remembering how warm she'd had to keep his room when he was ill.

"A little," he admitted. "I'm used to warmer temperatures. As a Gryffin, I have a high tolerance to heat," he reminded her.

"I'm sorry, I'll get a man in from the city to make you some clothes."

His smile melted her. "Thank you," he murmured in his wonderfully deep rumble. "Something with long sleeves would be nice. Maybe some vests to wear in the evenings."

Promise nodded up at him. She didn't normally find herself in the position of commissioning clothing for her slaves, or apologizing to them for that matter. But while she issued apologies for her minor indiscretions, she recognized it as an attempt to make up for the more difficult confession and apology she owed the Gryffin. It was a confession she doubted she'd ever have the strength to make.

Chapter Four

Bichen shifted the woman in his lap, grinding his hips against her plump derriere. “Why couldn’t my mother have married me off to something like this?” he sighed contentedly. Sprawled in a wide chair at Madam Madelaine’s, he winked at Timoth, his dark-haired companion, seated on the other side of the polished table.

Slouched against the wall behind Timoth, Tranth muttered, “Maybe because your mother knew you’d never be able to support something like that.”

Outfitted in one of the long-sleeved jerkins Promise had commissioned for him along with his recently cleaned dragon-skin pants, Tranth was a mite overdressed for the upscale brothel where the women were mostly undressed when you walked through the door and most of the men were undressed at some point before they walked out. The long, low-ceilinged appointment room was nothing more than a very wide hall. Around the edges, hugging the shadows, were scattered tables and groupings of plush couches nudged up beside overstuffed chairs. Lamps were scarce, dropping shaded pools of light onto the wine red carpets underfoot. There were doors at either end of the long room and every few minutes a woman would saunter down the length of the runway, swinging her hips provocatively for the benefit of the Madame’s male guests. Most of the time, the girl didn’t make it down the length of the room before she was motioned toward a table or couch. More often than not the girl led a man from the appointment room a few minutes later. What they did in the rooms upstairs was anyone’s guess but Tranth had to assume it depended on how much money was involved.

Promise’s husbands had insisted Tranth accompany them to the city as their bodyguard. He’d almost told them to go fuck themselves. Then changed his mind when

he realized they were making the trip on horseback and expected him to keep up on foot—an obvious attempt to make his life difficult.

Loping along behind the two mounted horsemen, he'd smiled contentedly as the men fought their mounts all the way to town. Evidently, Promise's lace ribbons didn't know that horses hated Gryffins. The horses' instinctual aversion to Tranth was a combination of a well-founded fear of the predator mixed with a strong distaste for anything with feathers. Not that Tranth actually had feathers. The ancient Gryffins, from which his race had evolved, were more closely related to reptiles than birds. The coppery tufts that grew on his chest and around the root of his cock were more like fringed scales. The ruff on his head was more like a thick brush of spiky hair.

Tranth shifted his broad shoulders against the wall at his back as another woman started down the runway. He crossed his arms over his chest as he slid one foot up the wall. Distaste curled his lip as he stood guard over Promise's husbands.

He and Bichen agreed on one thing, at least. His mother should have married him off to someone else.

Bichen's shoulders stiffened as the woman in his lap twisted a long strand of his blond hair around her finger. "A man in your position should watch his words," Bichen growled at the Gryffin.

Tranth took a step toward the table, glowering down on him. "My position?" he asked in a soft, menacing voice. "I'm looking down on you, Bichen. A man in *your* position should watch his feet lest they end up in his mouth...and shoved all the way down his throat."

Bichen's face reddened as he spilled the woman off his lap and rose to his feet. Standing in Tranth's shadow, he tilted his head back to address the copper Gryffin. "You forget your place, slave. I can have you whipped when we get back home."

Tranth snarled into the face he dragged to within inches of his own. "I belong to Promise. If you want to beat me, you'll have to tell your mistress why." With a shove, he put Bichen back in his chair.

Bichen glared up at the huge Gryffin. His mean eyes narrowed and his lips formed a smirk. "You fancy my wife, creature? Her long, fine legs? Her proud, round tits? Her hot, wet pussy?" Bichen paused. His tone was edged with cynicism when he continued. "Her cold, dry heart?" Timoth snickered as Bichen continued, "Would you like to know what she's like in bed?"

"Would you like me to kill you now?" Tranth shot back between clenched teeth.

The evil words slipped like poison from Bichen's mouth. "She doesn't come."

Tranth clenched his fists at his side. "She doesn't come for *you*," he hissed.

A malicious smile edged Bichen's mouth. He glanced at Tranth's balled fists, his torn hackles. "I could tell you something about my mistress that would cool your interest, Gryffin. But I've no intention of doing that while there's a chance you might fuck her for me."

Tranth bared his teeth, growling a low snarl before he reached for the highborn human. With one hand fisted in his fancy collar and the other bunched in the seat of his velvet leggings, Tranth used Bichen to clear the table. Two porcelain goblets splashed to the floor, staining the carpet a deep shade of burgundy as Tranth ground Bichen's face into the polished tabletop. When he was done, he threw the man back at his chair. Then he stalked from the brothel to guard his two charges from the other side of the front door to Madame Madelaine's.

Outside, he paced the sunny courtyard garden like a caged dragon, snorting with every turn of his heel. The males of his race took several females into their folds. It was natural—normal. No doubt humans felt it was just as natural for a female to take several males to bed. But it didn't feel normal to Tranth. It felt wrong. The very idea...disgusted him.

Tranth halted abruptly, bunching his fists at his sides.

But that wasn't what had made him lose his temper inside the brothel. He shook his head. The fact was, he couldn't stand the idea of either of the two men even *touching* Promise. He nodded, confirming this idea. But *if* the two lace ribbons were fortunate

enough to lie beside her, they should at least consider themselves the luckiest bastards on the face of the earth.

He would! *He* would consider himself lucky if he had a woman like that for his fold. A human woman! Gali Nigita, she was a luscious, saucy handful. Spicy, with her long cinnamon hair. Cool, with her evening-blue eyes and her smooth authoritative voice. Warm to the touch when he brushed his knuckles across her cheekbone. And...mysterious, somehow. As though there were secrets she kept deep and hidden—sweet, intimate secrets he'd like to spend a lifetime unfolding.

A soft smile tugged at his mouth as he thought of her, remembering how she'd cared for him during his recovery, recalling how her eyes had teared up in sympathy for his youth's lost love. Despite the strength she projected, Promise had a tender heart and a kind, generous nature.

How could a man not prize and treasure a woman like that?

Hitching his butt up against a stone flowerbox, Tranth leaned back and pushed out a sigh. Impatiently, he eyed the brothel's front door. The auction house, from which all his present troubles sprang, was on the other side of town. He wondered if he could get there and back before the two men were finished inside. He swept the idea aside with a sour curl of his lip. He doubted either of them had an ounce of stamina. That idiot Bichen had as much as admitted the two men hadn't been able to satisfy their wife. As though it was Promise's fault! It was a male's duty to satisfy his females, not the other way around. He sighed again. Besides, he'd more or less agreed to steer clear of the auction house as long as Promise owned him. He wouldn't break her trust.

Which meant he needed to get his hands on some stones.

With his arms crossed over his chest, he lifted his gaze, purposefully scanning the low hills on the north side of town.

* * * * *

Promise shifted in her seat as she considered Bichen's report. His frilled collar was torn, his fine linen shirt stained and dirty, his fine high cheekbone bruised below his left eye. His normally well-groomed hair was in disarray. She wasn't sure she believed her husband's story that the Gryffin had tried to escape while they were in town. On the other hand, she knew Tranth had a strong interest in pursuing his revenge – finding the dealer and the man who had removed his barbs.

The idea that Tranth might run off filled her with an icy surge of panic. She didn't know if she believed Bichen's story but she *did* know that she didn't want to lose the Gryffin. Neither did she want him to get hold of that dealer at the auction house. She didn't want the dealer's death on her conscience along with the rest of her crimes.

Damn Bichen, anyway, for putting the Gryffin within reach of his goal. "You had no business taking the Gryffin to town with you," she informed him coldly.

"Your husbands shouldn't have to go abroad without a guard," he griped. "Or do you *want* us to look like paupers?"

"Paupers!" Promise exploded. Her gaze skimmed his fine clothing, his soft white hands. "You'll never be mistaken for a pauper, Bichen. You'll never be mistaken for *any* man who ever did a day's work in his life, let alone a man who's had to struggle for a living!"

Bichen demanded that she collar the beast.

Promise squirmed in the chair as she considered her options. She didn't want to collar the proud creature. She'd already done him a cruel injustice when she'd had his barbs cut. Now she was contemplating collaring him like an animal.

Bichen's angry voice cut at her. "You paid good money for him. If you don't want to see your investment tail-it down the road, you'll collar him and give me the control ring."

"I'll wear the ring," she countered swiftly.

Spite and triumph flashed in his eyes. "Okay," he growled. "But I'd keep him on a tight leash if I were you."

"I'll put him out in the fields with Micah."

"Write the order," he demanded.

"What?"

"Write the order for the collar work," he insisted. "I'll deliver it to the forge. The blacksmith is due in sometime tomorrow."

Like most of her neighbors, Promise's farmhold didn't have enough work to employ a blacksmith full-time. Instead, the ironworker made the rounds of the adjacent properties, dropping by her farmhold two or three times a week.

Promise didn't want to write the order. Her gaze narrowed on her attractive husband. "What do you have against the Gryffin, Bichen?"

Bichen was a moment formulating his response. "I don't like the way he looks at you."

Promise snorted. Bichen's answer hadn't exactly rolled off his lips. And she'd heard stories of her husband's escapades in town. Tar! She'd paid his tab at Mistress Madelaine's! She doubted Bichen was jealous, *per se*, but it *was* possible that her husband saw the Gryffin as a threat.

"Are you afraid that he'll replace you in my affections?"

"A beast like that? Don't make me laugh."

Leaning back in her chair, Promise gave him a quietly pointed gaze.

Bichen glared back at her. Slowly, threateningly, he leaned over her desk. "*Don't* even think it," he warned. "Timoth and I *won't* share our bed with a fucking animal." His voice was quiet with malice as he said, "He doesn't know what happened to him, does he?"

Her gaze sharpened on him.

His blue eyes burned back at her. "He doesn't know what happened to his barbs."

Promise just stared at her husband, angry that the pampered creature would hold this over her head – and that he'd use it against her.

"If you want to fuck the Gryffin, be my guest. But don't you dare try to bring him to the marital bed. If you're that twisted, you can build a cottage for Timoth and me. Buy us a girl and leave us to our own devices while you have your way with the Gryffin. In the meantime, put a collar on the beast so he can learn that his place is *below* his master's!"

Promise reached for a slip of thick paper, scrawled an order across it and pushed the blacksmith's orders toward Bichen. "Draw up the plans," she instructed him as he strode toward the door.

He turned, querying her with his uncertain expression.

"Draw up the plans for your cottage," she told him bluntly, "so I can order the materials."

Bichen didn't look nearly as pleased with himself as he walked through the door. He knew he'd angered his mistress.

* * * * *

Promise couldn't face the idea of Tranth running off. But she was damned if she was going to watch the proud creature humbled. She shuddered at the memory of his clipped barbs, the blood and venom running down his fingers in red and blue ribbons to soak into the ground. She wasn't going to watch the blacksmith collar him. But halfway through the next afternoon a winded servant summoned her to the forge.

The small brick structure, enclosed on three sides and open on the final one, was a complete shambles. Tranth stood with his back to the wall, his legs braced for fighting. A heavy length of chain rattled in one fist while the other gripped a long iron shovel as lightly as a rapier.

Tar and Breeza! The Gryffin looked sexy when he was mad. Tranth in a fury was the most provocatively male thing that she'd ever laid eyes on. As Promise stared at the angry Gryffin, she willed her racketing heart to slow again. "What's going on?" she yelled above the scrape of metal on stone.

The thickset blacksmith glowered at Tranth. His darkly stubbled face shone with moisture. "Mistress, the creature demanded we summon you. He refuses to be collared."

Promise forced a calm note into her voice, set on convincing the Gryffin that the practice of collaring a man was an everyday event. "Tranth," she started gently, "what troubles you?"

A green fire leapt to burn in his eyes as his gaze narrowed on her. "Don't patronize me, Promise. I'm not a child and I'm *not* your fucking pet."

Promise's jaw clenched at his impertinence. "You'll call me Mistress when you speak to me. I can't allow this sort of familiarity in front of my people."

"Then tell *your people* to leave!"

Promise hesitated. "Leave us," she commanded.

The blacksmith widened his stance, his dark jaw jutting belligerently. "The creature is armed," he argued with a harsh growl.

Tranth opened his hands. The makeshift weapons banged to the flagstone floor with a heavy clang of iron. "Leave us," he snarled at the blacksmith.

"Explain yourself," Promise commanded after the blacksmith had backed away from the forge, taking with him the servant he'd sent to her with his message.

Tranth crossed his brawny arms over his wide chest. "I refuse to be collared like the lowest slave."

"I don't collar my lowest slaves," she answered matter-of-factly. "I collar the ones I most value, the ones I don't want to lose."

Tranth snorted, rolling his eyes then pinning her with a sharp glare. "How would you *lose* a six-foot-nine Gryffin?"

Promise lifted her chin resolutely. "Bichen told me you tried to escape when you accompanied him and Timoth to town."

Tranth's bronze eyebrows winged upward. "Really? I tried to escape? And exactly how did he manage to stop me?"

Promise felt her cheeks flush. Pressing her lips together, she lowered her gaze to the stone floor.

"Do you think either of those lace ribbons could have stopped me if I'd decided to run?"

Promise hung her head. "No," she mumbled, "but Bichen's shirt was torn. He looked like he'd been in a fight."

Tranth snorted again. "I cleaned a table with him."

Promise's chin came up again. "You were supposed to be guarding them," she rebuked him.

"I brought them back alive," Tranth growled, "which was more than I wanted to do."

Promise gave him a wry nod, certain that it was more than her elegant husbands deserved. But she still didn't want the Gryffin running off and confronting that dealer at the auction house. Damn Bichen to Tar's Pit and back!

Tranth glowered at her for several seconds before his gaze dropped to the stone forge. Metal scraped on stone as he slid the iron collar off the fire pit's low wall. He balanced it on his open palm. "Come here," he commanded softly.

Promise moved toward him without thinking, a slave to his will, a servant to his powerful magnetism. She stopped before him, envying the inches that separated their bodies. He pulled her closer 'til their bodies touched. She melted with warmth. Her lips parted longingly, yearning to be kissed as her heated breath washed across the tingling wet opening of her mouth.

He ran a finger along the band of iron. "What are these marks?"

"They're...letters," Promise explained, gazing blankly at his mouth.

"I won't wear the mark of a slave," he told her. "What do they say?"

"Say?"

"What do the letters say?"

"They...it's my name."

He ran his open mouth across the smooth curve of her forehead. His humid breath dampened her brow. His lips scored a frisson of warmth across her flesh. "I won't wear a slave collar," he murmured against her skin, "but I'll wear an iron necklace with your name on it. Call your blacksmith back over here."

Promise faltered, reluctant to add another lie to their relationship. "Tranth. It *is* a slave collar. It will stop you from leaving. If you move too far away from me it will start to bother you. It will heat up. It's made of janustone."

When he answered his voice was as smooth and rich as fine old port. "Janustone. The rock that falls from the sky? It's very rare. You honor me."

Promise wanted the earth to swallow her. It wasn't an honor! Why was he being so damn...strong about all this? She persisted in her confession. "The collar is made from the metallic half of the stone. I'll wear a ring carved out of the crystalline side. When the stones are separated, the metallic half will heat up. The farther you move away from the ring and from me, the hotter your collar will get, the more pain you'll experience."

He laughed softly. With the edge of his fist, he tilted her chin upward. His liquid green gaze was warm as he smiled down on her. "Don't look so worried, Promise. When I'm ready to leave, nothing in the world will stop me. And as long as I stay, nothing will keep me from your side. In the meantime, I'll wear your name. Call your blacksmith."

He captured her hand in his fingers and pulled her down to sit beside him on the edge of the cold forge, forcing her to watch while the heavy-browed blacksmith sweated at the end of a long pair of pliers. Slowly, the collar cinched closed around Tranth's thick neck.

When it was done, Tranth stood and ran a calloused fingertip along the collar's top edge. "How do I look?" he asked with a roll of his wide shoulders.

Promise gave him a tiny, wry smile. "Very handsome," she told him sincerely.

Together they sauntered back toward the villa. "Why do you stay with your mates?" Tranth asked quietly.

"You mean, why do I keep them?"

He gave her a stingy smile. "Yes. Why do you keep them? I wouldn't permit...my females that kind of behavior."

"That kind of behavior? You mean their infidelity?"

"They dishonor you." His voice was casual but the thin lines of tension that marked his mouth made her heart feel full to brimming. Here, at least, was a man who cared more for *her* wellbeing than for his own. That wasn't being fair to Micah, she realized. Still, it was heartwarming to see a man get angry on her behalf.

"Honestly? I don't care," she said as she allowed her gaze to linger on his hard mouth, knowing she'd feel different about him, were he her husband—that if it had been Tranth bouncing another woman on his knee, she'd have wanted to take a rusty knife to his balls. "Do you understand that?"

"Maybe," he allowed with a grunt. "But I don't know how you could possibly stand to mate them."

Promise chuckled. "I don't know how I could possibly stand it either."

"Perhaps I should guard your bed at night."

She gave him a sharp look. The idea drove all the breath from her lungs.

"You bought me to guard your house," he reminded her with a purring growl. "I think the bedroom would be a good place to start."

Promise smiled. "Fortunately for me, Bichen and Timoth would never presume to come to my room. They await my pleasure in the marital bed...down the hall."

He frowned as his steps slowed. "Humans are strange," he decided.

"How so?"

His eyes smoldered with dark heat. "If you were my female, I wouldn't wait for you to come to me. I wouldn't wait for you in my room. I wouldn't wait for you to favor me with the gift of your sex."

Promise almost swallowed her tongue. "No?" she squeaked.

He shook his head slowly as his ruff lifted the hair on his scalp. "No. If you were my female, I'd come for you. I'd stake you out in my pit so that you'd be there with your legs spread wide, ready for me should I get the urge to taste your pussy shivering around my tongue or wrapped around my cock."

Promise fell a step backward, her fingers fluttering in the ties at her breast. "Tranth!"

He gave her a slow, wicked smile. "Are my comments out of line?"

"Are...are you serious?"

He tilted his head back and looked down his nose at her. The arrogant creature was apparently dead serious.

"Yes, they're out of line! You're not my...husband."

He nestled his hand into the small of her back as they resumed their stroll toward the house. After a few seconds, he flicked an evil smile at her. "We could fix that," he suggested.

She tried to quell the smile that tugged at her lips. "We could?" she challenged him lightly.

"Hmmm," he rumbled agreeably. "We could stake them out in the sun. Drown them. Tip them over a cliff."

Promise couldn't help but laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"Your males."

"Oh," she waved a hand dismissively. "It wouldn't require anything that drastic. I could probably buy them out of their marriage contracts for a hundred gold."

Tranth whistled a low note. "A hundred gold. That's a lot of money."

"Yes it is," she agreed with a chuckle.

"Approximately forty emeralds," he mused.

"And emeralds don't exactly grow on trees," she pointed out.

"No," he agreed, his expression a bit distant, "they grow on rocks."

Chapter Five

One week after the incident in the forge, Promise was sitting at her desk arguing with Micah. "You're young," she told him.

Micah's expression was grim. His dark eyes flashed. "I'm old enough to know that you have a collar on the most able man in your household!"

"Micah!"

"While your two lapdogs run free all over the countryside, fucking any woman who'll lift her skirt for them!"

"Careful, Micah. You're talking about the two men you'll be sharing your bed with one day."

Micah's face was darkly fierce. "I'd rather die a spinster! When I agreed to your marriage proposal, I thought you had more sense! I *refuse* to marry you as long as the Gryffin is in chains. And you might as well know right now, Promise, you're *never* getting me into bed with those two Pekinese you call your husbands."

Promise slumped back in her chair. She stared at her betrothed. "Where is this coming from, Micah? What's gotten into you?"

Micah hung his head as he pulled a hand back through his midnight hair. "I don't know," he mumbled. "I admire the Gryffin. He's strong. Not just physically. He's *strong*. When he's working, everyone turns to him, looks to him for leadership. He does twice the work of a normal man, whether it's digging irrigation trenches or sinking postholes for a new fence. When he sees others struggling, he's beside them lending a hand. When we run into a problem that seems insurmountable, he finds a way around it." Micah shrugged helplessly. "He's just...strong."

"You're strong too, Micah! And I count on *you* – your help here on the farmhold, as well as your advice."

Micah gave her a tentative smile. "Thanks, Promise."

Promise drummed her fingers on the buttery-pale surface of the pine desk. "I'll free the Gryffin when the blacksmith reports in at the end of the week. But I want you to know that Tranth isn't collared through any lack of respect or admiration on my part. He's only collared because —"

She stopped suddenly as Tranth appeared in the doorway. Struck dumb, she pressed her lips together as she stared at him. The week he'd spent outdoors with Micah had toasted his skin to a robust copper sheen. He positively glowed with health. His liquid green eyes burned in his bronzed face. "Tranth." His name slipped from her lips, soft with longing. "You look good."

He gazed at her as he spoke, "Micah. I'd like a few minutes alone with Promise."

"Of course," Micah answered as he strode toward the door. He smiled at Tranth as he slipped through the opening.

Promise sighed as she gave him a wry smile. "You're ruining him."

He flicked his gaze backward at the door through which Micah had departed. "How so?"

"You've got him calling me by my name, instead of using Mistress. *And* he insists that I should remove your collar. I'm not sure he isn't right." She lifted an eyebrow as she gave him an appraising look. "Why don't we make a deal, Tranth? You call me Mistress, I remove your collar."

Tranth's lazy smile was powerfully seductive. "I like the necklace." He lifted his hand to finger its thick edge. "When I'm far from you, its warmth reminds me of you. When it starts to sting, I know I'm farther from you than I want to be. It shows me the way home. I wouldn't wear it if I didn't like it."

Promise hesitated, uncertain what he meant or how he might propose to remove the thick band of iron that shackled his neck. She'd seen her bulky blacksmith straining to close the collar with the help of a very long pair of pliers.

"I wear it because it bears your name. Promise," he drew the word out, lingering over it, taunting her with the possession of her name. A possession he obviously didn't intend to relinquish.

Promise groaned. "Tranth. I need you to show me due respect. You must call me Mistress, at least when others are around."

Tranth's eyes glowed with verdant heat. "And what do you want me to call you when we're alone? What do you want me to call you when I'm making love to you? I'm willing to make a deal. Will you call me master when I'm kneeling behind you? With my cock buried between your legs?"

Promise stared up at him, swallowing hard. "You're impossible," she croaked in a hoarse laugh. "What can I offer you that would make you call me Mistress?"

His shrug was an arrogant shift of the shoulders. "Nothing that I can't take on my own."

She shook her head as she eyed him. "You look good," she repeated.

"You said that," he pointed out with a smile.

She nodded, looking around for something else to say. The Gryffin intimidated her, overpowered her with his rough masculinity and raw sensuality. "How are your hands?"

He closed the distance between them in long, sauntering strides. Hitching his butt on the edge of her desk, he curled his fingers and brushed them around the curve of her cheek. Automatically, she turned her face into his palm. His hackles were an angry shade of red, hot where they touched her skin.

"It only hurts when I laugh." A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "When I'm aroused, actually. Which is most of the time when I'm near you. Oh fuck," he admitted. "Pretty much all the time when you're around."

She shook her head, questioning him with her expression.

"Fieldnig tried to tell you," he explained. "When a Gryffin is angry or threatened, his ruff lifts and his hackles pull back to expose his barbs. It's an instinctive reaction to danger, causing him to look intimidating and preparing him to fight."

"I understand," she told him when he paused for her reaction.

"But when a Gryffin is aroused—particularly aroused—his reaction is almost the same. His ruff lifts and his barbs extend. This is probably because, in the past, Gryffin males fought each other for the right to take a female into their fold. Thus, the instinct to fight and the instinct to mate are closely coupled. Although Gryffin males rarely fight over females nowadays, our initiation ceremony still includes ceremonial challenges."

Promise cocked her head to one side, trying to understand. "Initiation ceremony? Ceremonial challenges?"

Tranth's lips kicked up in a reminiscent smile. "When a young Gryffin male is initiated and selects the first females for his fold, the other males in the clan will often...challenge him for the right to claim them. A challenging male will stand and growl and approach the initiate as though he might start a fight. After a few turns around the ceremonial fire, the challenger will invariably back down, although not always. At my brother Gerak's initiation, he was challenged by one of the biggest Gryffins in our clan. It wasn't a polite challenge. It was the real thing." Tranth's mouth tightened into a hard line. "Grat was trying to claim Jani for his own fold."

"What happened?"

Tranth lifted his chin. "He was distracted by another female. She offered herself to Grat as a favor to our family." He let out a rough sigh and winced at the end of it, pulling his hand away from her face and frowning at his raw, fisted knuckles. "At any rate," he murmured, "I get ruffed up whenever I'm near you."

"Ruffed up?" Her eyes flicked to the high ridge of hair on his head.

He blinked slowly, nodding as he cupped her cheek in his palm again and gazed down at her. "Everything is up," he told her in a deep, seductive murmur. "Including what's left of my barbs." He smiled softly. "It wouldn't be so bad if you weren't so

desirable. I could probably mate another female without involving my barbs. But if I were to mate you, they'd try to cut their way out beneath my hackles."

Promise stared at him, wondering at his quiet confidence. He spoke as though it would be the most natural thing in the world for a slave to mate his mistress. Maybe he was some sort of aristocrat within his own clan. Or perhaps his animal instincts allowed him to sense her attraction to him. Perhaps he could hear her heart's dull thudding whenever he was near. Perhaps he noted the change in her breathing or the warm flush that coursed beneath her skin. Maybe he could even scent her arousal as her body responded to his presence and her pussy softened with wet heat.

As though he'd read her mind, he asked her softly, "You'd like that wouldn't you?"

"Like you to mate another female?" she hedged.

He pulled her suddenly to her feet, covering her mouth with his as his tongue plunged between her lips. His tongue was smooth and slid easily across the rough, wet surface of hers. The root was thick, the tip like a blunt chisel as he dipped more and more deeply into her mouth. "You'd like me to fuck you," he murmured in between the thrusts of his tongue.

She fed a moan into his mouth as her back arched beneath his spread fingers.

"Tell me," he murmured, trailing his lips down the side of her face then branding her neck with the nip of his teeth. He grasped her face when she didn't answer. "*Tell me.*"

Gently, she skimmed her fingers over his hand and across his hackles. They were hot. She could feel his pulse throbbing beneath the wounded flesh. "I'd like you to get better," she said quietly.

He shook his head and snorted out a short, painful laugh. Looking down on her, hunger flared in his eyes before he conceded defeat. "I'd better get out of here while I still can."

She tilted her face, rubbing her cheek into his palm. "Where are you headed?"

"The west barley. We'll check in again at the end of the week."

"The end of the week," she echoed in a low voice.

He tugged her against his long frame, giving her a taste of his erection stiffening behind his sporran as he held her bottom and ground his lower body into hers. "It's hard for me to be with you," he whispered. "You just get me so damn...ruffed up. It's hard for me to be away from you," he followed up in a hollow voice. "I feel like I'm caught between Breeza's Paradise and Tar's Pit. If I ever catch up with the bastard who cut me..."

Promise swallowed the words of confession that tried to make their way up her throat. There were a lot of them. And they hurt like Tarfire going down. "Tranth, I—"

He waited, his gaze roving her face hungrily.

"Be careful," she told him lamely.

She watched Tranth turn and stride through the door. Drifting over toward the window, she watched the Gryffin's broad back as he joined Micah outside the courtyard. Micah threw a satchel at him and together they headed out across the fields. Promise wrapped her arms around herself in a lonely hug as she watched the two men until they disappeared on the horizon.

That was close. She'd come very close to confessing her interest in the Gryffin, and not close enough to confessing her crime against him. If it hadn't been for the fear of reopening the wounds on his hackles, she'd probably have bowed to the dynamic male force of his animal magnetism, wrapped her legs around his hips and climbed on his cock, murmuring pleas for completion as he crushed her against the wall and threw his hips at her.

At least that's the way she imagined it would be. She had to assume that a man with that much animal intensity wouldn't take her gently. He'd drive into her with long powering strokes and ride her with a simple ferocity spurred by his primal instincts. Promise sighed on a low moan, shivering as a tickle of excitement feathered the base of her spine and tingled inside the lips of her sex.

She rubbed a hand over her mound then dipped her fingers between her thighs, pressing hard against the pouting heat that burned along the seam of her pussy and inflamed the excited little center of her interest, willing her naughty clitoris to behave its greedy little self.

With a shake, she roused herself enough for a walk to the stables. After throwing a word at her steward on the way through the front doors, she saddled her favorite mare, a freckled gray. Spurring the horse out of the stable, she took off at a gallop into the east.

With her legs spread wide and her parted sex rocking against the slick silk shorts that separated her pussy from the saddle's soft leather, she rode herself into a brief, tight orgasm, grinding her voracious clit into a second and then a third shuddering climax, her eyes glazing with hard dissatisfaction as her horse took her eastward toward the fields of corn.

* * * * *

The two men hadn't traveled a mile from the villa when Tranth stooped suddenly, two fingers sweeping the sandy earth as he crouched low to the ground.

"What is it?" Micah asked, frowning at the narrow traces in the soil at his feet.

"Zards," Tranth muttered.

"Zards!" Micah echoed. "What on earth? They never leave the cauldron!"

"They're nesting," Tranth growled. "It's a gang of nesting males." He stood suddenly. "We have to get back to the house!"

Together they sprinted for the villa. Tranth's long stride put him there a minute ahead of his young supervisor. "Where's Promise?" Tranth demanded as he slammed through the villa's wide double doors.

Startled, Promise's steward stood at the bottom of the stairs. The officious man's eyes went round with indignation. "I beg your pardon?"

"Where's your mistress?" Tranth shouted, tugging at the iron collar that was beginning to sting with a mild bite of discomfort. "Promise," he roared, starting up the stairs.

"She's riding," her steward protested, hurrying after Tranth and plucking at his sleeve.

"Where?" Tranth yelled, turning again and grabbing the steward's linen shirt in his tight fist.

The steward goggled up at him. "The east corn," he sputtered to explain.

"Damn!" Tranth cursed viciously as he dragged the steward outside and banged down the veranda steps. Micah was just jogging into the courtyard.

"Gather your females," Tranth shouted at the steward. "Get them inside—now! There's a gang of nesting Zards on the loose."

The steward paled as he scurried away to do the Gryffin's bidding.

Tranth cut a look at the stables. Frustration tore at him, knowing he couldn't ride, knowing the horses could reach the distant fields of corn before he could. "Saddle the horses and form a search party as quickly as you can," Tranth instructed Micah. "Bring along every able rider you can put on a horse. Send someone to find Bichen and Timoth.

"Go!" Tranth backpedaled across the yard as he shouted. "I'll cut through the fields on foot. You'll probably get to her before I do. Bring her back here first, before you run down the Zards."

Micah hesitated. "What...what if the Zards already have her? Should we wait for you?"

Tranth shook his head. "Follow her trail as quickly as you can. I'll catch up eventually, when the horses tire." Turning his back, Tranth cut across the yard, hurdling the fence and slicing across the fields of young wheat.

Gryffins were built for running. Tranth's long legs ate up the ground as he pushed his lungs to outperform anything they'd ever delivered in the past. He streaked across the fields and into a small wooded glen, breaking out on the other side and tearing through long rows of young corn. He leapt an irrigation ditch and continued, his feet digging into the rutted ground, propelling him forward.

Against all odds, he reached Promise's mare before Micah and his horsemen. The freckled gray lay on its side, its throat torn out. Tranth didn't slow his stride. With one glance, he took in the Zard that Promise had managed to pick off with her bow. A feathered arrow flagged the body tucked between two rows of green corn. Tranth allowed himself a grim smile of approval. With only three Zards left out of the original gang of four, Promise should be able to drag a hand or foot and leave some sort of a trail to follow. Thank Tar for that.

He took up her trail again and cursed when he heard the horses approaching from behind. Veering twenty paces from the trail and continuing to run alongside its course, he let the horses get by him before he closed in behind the search party. Frustrated, he watched the horses pull away from him, anguished that he was behind them, thankful that they were ahead of him, praying that they reached Promise before the Zards dropped into the cauldron.

"Hang on, girl," he muttered as he ran. "Just...hang on."

* * * * *

At the edge of the cauldron, the riders pulled their mounts up short. The horses shook their heads, snorting as they pawed the ground and backed away from the cliff. Before them, the ground fell away in a near-vertical drop that curved to meet the ground at the bottom of the fifty-foot wall. Sulfurous streamers ribboned into the air and twisted upward to burn their nostrils.

"Why are we stopping?" Micah shouted, urging his mount to the head of the pack where Timoth and Bichen peered into the chasm below.

"We can't take the horses down that slope," muttered one of the riders.

Promise's husbands hesitated, exchanging wary glances. "We can't go into that boiling cesspit on foot," Timoth stated carefully. "A man wouldn't last two hours down there in that heat."

Several riders nodded uneasily.

"She's as good as dead," Bichen declared after a long, edgy silence.

Micah cursed as he slung a leg over his mount's neck. Hitting the ground, he strode for Bichen and grabbed his reins. "She's not dead yet. They can't have more than twenty minutes on us. We can track them down and make it back here in a few hours." His gaze cut to Timoth with a demand for support. The stolid look on Timoth's face made him want to scream. "You leave her in there and she'll be *worse* than dead and you *know* it!"

A heavy silence followed. "What do you mean?" queried one of the younger farmhands.

Bichen answered the young man's question as he glared down at Micah. "The Zards will rape her first," he explained without feeling. "Their penises are very long, thin, snake-like and razor tipped. All three of them will take her at once, cutting into her womb. They'll leave their eggs inside her. She'll die slowly as the larvae feed off her body from the inside out."

The young man blanched first then slid quickly from his saddle and coughed up the last meal he had eaten. When he was finished, he straightened and faced Micah bravely. "I'll go with you," he said.

The two young men hurried to loose their sword belts from their saddles.

"What the fuck!"

Micah heard Bichen's quiet curse of wonder. He followed Bichen's gaze back along the trail, raising his hand to shield his eyes as the sun caught and gleamed on the Gryffin's copper hair.

"It's her beast," Bichen voiced in amazement. "Fuck me! Look at him run."

The horses shied and whinnied, sidestepping along the edge of the cauldron's precipice as they struggled to distance themselves from the rapidly approaching Gryffin. In a rush of flowing sinew and streaming copper, Tranth tore down the trail, raced through the dancing horses and leapt.

As Micah watched, the Gryffin hung in the air then dropped. His feet hit the steep slope, his spurred heels digging into the crusty soil like rudders, helping him to keep his balance as he skied down the scarified white slopes of the cauldron's bowl. Micah had *just* the presence of mind to draw his sword from its scabbard and fling it like a javelin into the pit. It arced and flashed in the sunlight then shivered as the tip cut into the hot white soil a few paces ahead of the running Gryffin. Without slowing his stride, Tranth swept it into his grasp and carried on. Micah watched him until his back was a small streak of copper in the heat-smeared wasteland.

With his mouth hanging open, the young farmhand swung his gaze to Micah's face. Micah nodded at him. "I'll wait here. You go back to the villa and bring water. Lots of water. As much as you can carry." Micah turned his narrow gaze on Bichen. "He'll bring her back," he warned the older man. "When he does, you'd better not be here."

Bichen's jaw tightened as his mouth flattened into a thin line. "He'll never find her. He won't be able to track her over the hard mineral flows down there. He'll die looking for her."

Micah snorted out a harsh note of amusement. "Oh he'll find her," he stated with great certainty. "That collar you put on him will lead him right to her. All he has to do is follow the path of least resistance—the path of diminishing pain."

Chapter Six

Racing across the cauldron's white-hot bowl, Tranth swept the ground with his gaze. Occasionally he picked out a whisper of the Zards' trail in the hard crust of baked mineral deposits, but it was the collar that let him know when he veered too far off track. When it stung his flesh, he adjusted his course until the iron band cooled again.

As Tranth sped after Promise, he wished for a horse to carry him more quickly, even knowing that a horse wouldn't last long inside the cauldron's hot, sulfurous bowl. The high temperatures would finish off a horse in an hour, a human in another one or two. Tranth stripped his jerkin over his head as he ran, using the long sleeves to tie it off around his waist. His sweat dried on his skin, cooling him as he raced on.

Inside the cauldron, it was warmer than it was on The Spit where he'd grown up—where steaming geyser pools fed the willows that his people used to build their homes. Tranth was used to the heat. It wouldn't kill him. But he had to get to Promise before it killed *her*. He focused on what the heat would do to her, refusing to think about what the Zards would do to her after they stopped. He had no idea how far they would drag her into their territory before stopping, he only hoped they hadn't gotten there yet.

She had to be all right. She *had* to be.

The Zards were still scurrying east with their prize when he caught sight of them fifty feet ahead. Three ugly green abominations. He'd just rounded a gnarled spire of white rock. Frozen into a fountain of stone, gypsum sparkled like jewels on a bed of dull calcite. As he closed on the Zards in a sudden burst of speed, they dropped Promise and turned to face him. In an instinctive attempt to appear larger and more threatening, the Zards rose onto their rear legs, balancing on their long, slim, whip-like tails, exposing their pale yellow bellies. Tranth got one glimpse of Promise's legs before

his reasoning left him in a blinding surge of rage. Thin lines of scarlet crisscrossed her calves and thighs where the beasts had whipped her legs with their razor-thin tails.

Tranth attacked.

The cagey creatures separated to surround him. As Tranth straddled Promise's limp body, the Zards dropped back down onto all fours, slashing at him with their tails. He wasted a second wish cursing the loss of his barbs. A few slashing blows from his poisonous barbs and the slithering monsters would have been shoe leather. As it was, he did the best he could with Micah's sword. It was clumsy work though. The Gryffin had never had a sword in his fist before. With his deadly barbs serving as his main line of defense for the past thirty years, Tranth had never needed a weapon before—other than a bow to bring down small game. Although he was able to score the occasional wound on the darting reptilianoids, none of his blows were damaging enough to turn the greedy creatures from their prize.

With a lucky swing, he managed to lop off one of the Zards' whip-like tails. But the bloodless stump of the severed appendage writhed on the ground, blindly coiling itself around Tranth's ankles, almost tripping him. As Tranth struggled to stay on his feet, a second slim green tail wrapped, snakelike, around his neck and squeezed. Provoked into a rage of pure animal fury, Tranth's tattered barbs tried to break through his scarred flesh. The crippling pain almost sent him to his knees. He shouted in agony and frustration, yanking at the scaled, serpentine flesh that tightened around his windpipe, steeling the muscles that corded his thick neck.

The tailless Zard closed on him. No doubt the greedy creature had sensed the Gryffin's vulnerability inasmuch as Tranth hadn't attacked with his barbs. Its wide maw was open and several rows of viciously serrated teeth glinted in the harsh sunlight. Tranth brought his fist down on the slimy monster's snout and sent it crumpling to the ground. At the same time, the long muscle of choking flesh tightened around his neck, closing off his windpipe and cutting off his air.

The pain in Tranth's knuckles was blinding as his hackles tried to rise and his stubby barbs tried to shoot into position. The precious poison that would save both him and Promise lay trapped just beneath his skin. His vision was darkening as he brought the sword up and drew the gleaming blade just beneath the ridge of his hackles, grunting a low sound of agony as he sliced through the tender skin. He glimpsed a thin line of blue edging the blade before he sank the steel into the scaly flesh wrapping his neck. Immediately, the Zard's death grip loosened. Like lightning, Tranth struck out at the remaining Zards. This time the sword worked with deadly efficiency. A nick was a win, and a wounded Zard was another Zard dead.

Then he was tearing the tail away from his ankles, scooping Promise into his arms and running again, shading her limp form against his body. The heat that Tranth found only slightly uncomfortable would kill off a human in a few hours. It didn't help that the Zards had dragged Promise along the baking-hot surface of the hard ground, thereby accelerating the rise in her body temperature. He had to get her to cool ground and water. He had to get her out of the cauldron. Tranth raced on, ignoring the dull, throbbing pain in his hackles, eating up the ground in long strides.

Curling his arms, he lifted her higher on his chest, dipping his cheek to brush against hers. Her skin, normally a deliciously warm confection of cream and peach, was terrifyingly hot. "Hang on," he prayed in a soft murmur. "Hang on, love."

He could have cried with relief when he marked a figure up ahead. A wavering blot on a steamy white backdrop. Water. Micah had dropped into the cauldron with two large canvas water bags looped over his shoulders.

Tranth fell to his knees in front of his young friend. Without speaking, Micah emptied one of the canvas pouches over Promise. The cool water soaking her clothing would lower her body temperature even further once Tranth started running again. "Is there more water up above?" Tranth demanded.

"Yes," Micah answered, "and a rope hanging over the edge to help you climb back up the cliff. Get her out of here."

Tranth lifted his gaze to Micah. "Will you be all right?"

"I'm fine. I'll be right behind you. Here," Micah insisted, pushing a water bag at him, "drink before you go."

Tranth shook his head. "I can make it to the edge. Save that for yourself." He pushed the sword into Micah's hand. "It's not far now but take your sword again...just in case. I'll be at the top, waiting for you."

Micah stopped him with a question. "Tranth. Is she going to be all right?"

Tranth gave him a curt nod. "I need to get her out of the cauldron."

* * * * *

There was only one man at the top of the cauldron. One of the farmhold's young hands. Tranth cursed. Promise's useless mates had pulled the rest of the men back to the villa. He felt the ridge on his head lift in anger while his barbs surged painfully at the same time. Forcing a smile onto his lips for the benefit of the white-faced youth, Tranth eased Promise to the ground, cradling her shoulders in his arm as he knelt beside her. Taking the canvas bag from the young man, Tranth trickled a thin stream of water into Promise's mouth.

"Come on," he commanded while grinding his teeth. "Drink for me, Promise. Do it for me, precious."

When she swallowed convulsively, he buried his face in her neck a moment before he fed her more water then waved the youth away. "Watch for Micah," he ordered. "Help him up."

When Micah caught up, they headed back to the villa, Tranth carrying Promise while her farmhand trailed them with the horses.

"I'll kill her mates," Tranth stated with cold, deadly efficiency.

Micah nodded. "If they have an ounce of sense between them, they'll be gone by the time we get back to the villa."

“An ounce of sense?” Tranth growled. “That’s at least an ounce more than either of them have.”

Promise stirred in his arms. She opened her eyes, blinked a few times and murmured his name. Then she snuggled her nose into the soft, feathered scales on his chest. Tranth smiled down at her, tightening his hold on her, sharing a quick grin with Micah as they strode quickly homeward.

* * * * *

Tranth released a long breath of relief as they stepped into the cool, shadowed interior of the villa. Gingerly, he put Promise on her feet. When she stumbled, he steadied her, pulling her to him gently, cupping her chin in his hand and rubbing his thumb over her moist bottom lip.

He experienced the heart-bursting sensation of tender affection blending with the sharp bite of lust and was glad of it. It seemed like forever since he’d felt that wonderful mixture of emotions.

After his girls died, Tranth hadn’t looked at another female for years. When he had finally acted on his affection for Akela he’d learned that affection wasn’t enough. And when he’d first opened his eyes on Promise, he’d certainly felt a primitive, driving attraction. But it had been a long time since he’d felt those two emotions blended together into anything like what he was feeling now.

From Tranth’s way of thinking, he’d saved the human. She was his. And one day he would claim her in every way a male could make a female his mate. The idea sent a stiffening surge through his cock and into his ruff, along with aching waves of pain through his wounded hackles.

One day, he promised himself, grimacing. One day when his hackles had healed.

“I’ll get more water,” he announced on a soft murmur, heading for the door to the kitchen. But a slim figure darkened the opening ahead.

Tranth lunged at Bichen, fisting his huge hand in the front of the human's fine linen shirt, yanking him from his feet and banging him into the whitewashed wall beside the kitchen door. Promise's porcelain rattled in the antique buffet that shared the same wall.

Micah was at his elbow, tugging at Tranth's thick biceps. "No!" he shouted. "Don't do it, Tranth. Don't give them an excuse to hunt you down like an animal."

Tranth bared his teeth as a deep rumbling snarl built in his chest and his hand tightened in Bichen's shirtfront. Bichen returned his gaze, frightened but defiant as Tranth stood at the brink of murder.

"Fuck!" Tranth growled under his breath. He released his hold on Bichen, shoving him back against the wall a second time. "If you can get him out of here in five seconds, I'll let him live for your sake, Micah." His angry gaze blazed at Bichen. "The next time we meet, you won't be so lucky."

Bichen tugged at his shirtfront, shaking free of Micah as the younger man tried to take his elbow and hustle him across the room. There was a resentful glint in Bichen's eye. He forced out a hard little laugh. "You wouldn't kill the man who could tell you where to find the person responsible for neutering you."

"Get out!" Tranth roared, reaching for him again, yanking him out of Micah's grasp and wrapping his long fingers around Bichen's throat.

"It was Promise!" Bichen choked out on a strangled gasp. "Promise gave the order. She ordered her foreman to take your barbs off. Then knocked down the shed where Karleem butchered you!"

There was a splintering crash as Bichen hit the window on the other side of the room. He disappeared through the ragged opening of shattered glass. "Liar!" Tranth shouted. "Truthless, motherfucking Zard of a lapdog!"

Micah rushed from the room, hissing a curse between his teeth as Tranth stood in panting rage. He watched through the broken window as Micah dragged Bichen across the yard to the stables.

Tranth spun to face Promise but her back was turned to him. Glass tinkled and clinked, spraying the room with shards of light. Like evil sprites, they danced on the walls and ceiling. For a moment Tranth watched her silent silhouette. He moved slightly, sliding his foot a few inches, tilting his head in an attempt to catch her gaze. But her face was averted. Her shoulders were stiff, hunched slightly as if to ward off a blow or perhaps the truth. She clutched her upper arm in one hand. The skin that rimmed her fingers was white, like the bright, hard ice that forms at the edge of northern fiords.

"Promise?" he ventured.

For several moments he stood watching her, feeling suddenly empty, as though he'd been sucked dry. Reaching for the closest chair, he fell into it. All at once, it seemed cold in the villa's shadowed interior. Absently, he plucked at the long-sleeved jerkin tied around his waist. After loosening the knot, he pulled the leather shirt over his head. He rubbed his arms then waited. Waited for anything that could possibly make sense. His fists clenched into balls of iron as he watched her back and tried not to hate her.

Finally she turned and met his gaze. "I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't paying attention when I gave the order for your barbs to be cut. I didn't know it would harm you. I didn't know what I was doing or what it meant. I thought the barbs were nothing more than claws that would grow back to be trimmed again." She pulled in a deep breath. "I could make a thousand excuses, Tranth, and it would never be enough. It would never make up for what I've done to you. I'm sorry."

She extended her hand toward him, palm up, a human gesture of apology and submittal.

His voice was dull as he stared coldly at her hand. "You knocked the shed down...to hide the truth from me."

She shook her head. "I couldn't *face* the truth."

"You *hid* the *truth* from me!" he shouted as he shoved to his feet.

Promise blinked several times, flinching in the face of his anger. Her hand dropped back to her side. "I just didn't want you to hate me."

"You're right," he cut at her in a hiss. "You're right! A thousand excuses would never make up for what you did to me." His jaw worked slowly as ice pumped through his veins and filled him with cold, meaningful purpose. Slowly, his hands moved to the wide metal band that circled his neck. "Watch carefully, Promise." Ropes of muscle corded into thick knots in his shoulders and forearms, expanding his biceps as he pulled the thick collar open with his bare hands. "I wore this by choice," he told her. "Because it bore your name. Because I was proud to belong to you. Now," he said, "*you* can wear it."

Tranth slipped the thick metal band around her neck and flexed his arms wide as he pressed the iron ring closed. The collar that had barely closed around his own neck lay low across her collarbones. He pulled the ring off her finger next and bounced it in the palm of his hand. "I'll be moving away from you as quickly as I can. I suggest you have your blacksmith remove the collar as soon as possible. If you can have it off in the next few hours, it shouldn't hurt you...too much."

With those words, he slipped the ring onto the top joint of his little finger then turned. Striding through the villa's wide doors, he took the steps in a single leap and started across the courtyard at a jog. But he went through the gates at a dead run.

Tranth ran. He ran and he ran and he ran. For the next several hours he ran hard and fast, hoping that his lungs would burst. Everything he had believed had been false. Everything he had thought true was a lie. Everything he had cared about had betrayed him. And for the third time in his life, love had deserted him to leave an empty shell where a man should carry his heart.

He had let the bitch collar him like an animal, making excuses for her, telling himself that humans didn't know any better. He had let her collar him just because he wanted to be near her, telling himself that the collar could come off whenever he chose to remove it.

He ran, hoping the pain in his lungs would somehow match and exceed the pain that crushed his heart. But Gryffins were built for running. His huge lungs bellowed as his long racing strides widened the distance separating him and the female he'd left behind. Promise.

* * * * *

Hours later, when the sun had settled on the horizon and the afternoon shadows had lengthened then melted into dusk, he finally stopped beside a small stream. Pacing out a circle, his spurred heels scored a trail in the soft earth. He scraped his fingers back through his tufted hair then stared at the backs of his big hands. He glared at his broken hackles, the tattered remnants of his barbs. She'd done this to him.

He built a small fire and sat before it, brooding. Vaguely, he realized he should eat but he'd left the farmhold without a bow. Lifting his head, he drew a breath in through his nose, sifting the air for the scent of game.

He scented the horse before he heard it and heard it before he saw it—heard its impatient snort and its stamping hooves as the animal balked at the edge of his camp. Gliding into the cover of the trees, he watched his small clearing from a distance. His fire washed the tree-ringed space with an uncertain light. The rider left her horse and ventured into the clearing alone. Promise.

She wore a short blue wrap around her hips and a sleeveless linen jerkin. The ties were loose across her chest, revealing a thin chemise of pale orange underneath. Over her shoulder hung a small bag of water. Around her waist was tied a money pouch. The coins clinked softly as she walked.

As he watched her standing in the fire's flickering glow, his heart expanded longingly. If he could have reached the damn traitorous organ, he would have torn it out and crushed it in his fist. He still wanted her, damn it. Despite everything, he still wanted her. His blood surged in his veins and pooled in his groin, stiffening his cock. He dug his fingers into the ridge on his head, fighting the tide of spiky hair that slipped

through his fingers and spilled across his forehead. His barbs throbbed with a dull ache. Balling his fists, he pressed his hackles against the steel-hard muscles of his thighs.

Silently, he circled the clearing, making his way toward her mount. When the horse caught wind of him, it tried to bolt. Hurrying to help the beast, Tranth untangled its reins then watched its back end disappear into the forest, crashing between the dark trees. With a malicious smile curving his lips, he turned back to the clearing. For several moments he just watched the female as she turned slowly, searching the darkness with those wide, honest eyes.

Honest eyes that lied with every breath she drew.

"Tranth?" she whispered tremulously as she cast her gaze about the clearing's dark-shadowed edges.

Stepping out of the trees, he paused an instant then paced toward the fire. Without looking at her, he squatted before the blaze's bright, bundled heat, extending his palms to absorb its small warmth. "Go home," he told her.

Her feet made a light sound, hesitant and unsure as she approached him. When she was beside him, she dropped to her knees.

"Go home," he reiterated.

"I can't," she answered in a low voice.

When he cut her an impatient glance, he saw she still wore the collar. She'd used the janustone to track him, just as he'd used it when he'd entered the cauldron and rescued her from the Zards. He hadn't expected her to use the collar as a means to follow him. He'd only meant to give her a taste of her own medicine as he raced away from her with the ring. He'd thought it would be poetic justice to let her experience the collar's sting as she rushed to find a blacksmith who could undo her own evil work.

He shook the tracking ring from his finger and dropped it on the ground at her knees. "Now you can. Go home, Promise. It's over. It was over before it started. The sight of you...makes me ill. Go home."

Chapter Seven

It took a lot of courage. Promise was almost certain of Tranth's rejection but she reached for him anyway. What she had done to him was beyond terrible, beyond reprehensible, beyond the hope of pardon. She knew she deserved his scorn and his hatred. She'd had him butchered then hidden from him her role in the crime. She deserved his disdain. She deserved to pay. And if there was any way she could pay for her mistake and somehow set things right again, Promise wanted to make that payment. The knowledge that he'd once wanted her provided her with a place to start.

Her fingers trembled as they landed above his knee and stroked up the hard length of his thigh. He drew in a sharp breath and froze, his muscles turning to steel beneath her touch as he stared at her trespassing fingers, his face twisted in a mixture of fear and loathing. His hand whipped to lock around her wrist, twisting her arm until a whimper chased up her throat and broke through her clenched teeth. "Don't *touch* me," he snarled in a rough whisper.

"Tranth," she pleaded in a low voice, "I'm sorry. How can I make you understand?"

"How can you — I'm not the one who needs to understand, Promise. You are. The sight of you makes me sick."

A tear coursed down her cheek.

"You're the one who needs to understand," he repeated in a venomous growl. With a grim laugh, he pulled away from her and shoved to his feet. His eyes were burning as he glowered down on her — burning with liquid green malice and dark, predatory lust. His ruff stiffened, spilling his spiked hair over his forehead in a riot of brilliant copper. "Do you want me to make you understand? What you put me through? How your

mere unwelcome presence tortures me?" With a hand fisted in her jerkin, he yanked her to her feet.

Promise gazed into the smoldering depths of his neon gaze. Unable to croak out any sort of response, she lowered her eyes and inclined her chin in a small nod of assent.

He lifted his narrow green gaze to the trees that edged the clearing. "Do I have to worry about any of your men showing up here?" he questioned her, his voice accusatory.

Swiftly, she shook her head. "Bichen and Timoth are no longer my husbands. I bought them out of their contracts."

Tranth snorted. "I asked about your men, not your husbands." He took a breath, obviously miffed that she was making him go to these lengths to explain himself. "The only man you have who's worth his salt is the only man I wouldn't want to harm."

She nodded. "Micah has orders to take care of the farm."

"Good," he grunted.

This time he pushed up against her. Her water bag slipped from her shoulder and her body reacted with a warm rush of longing as his hard chest came into contact with hers. She lifted her gaze again, hopefully. But the light in his eyes was cruel as he glared down at her. Slowly, he drew a finger under her jaw and lifted her chin. She returned his gaze bravely, holding her breath as he lowered his lips. His mouth brushed across hers in a cool, taunting pass. Sensation exploded across the surface of her lips as his mouth moved to the corner of hers and rested there, tormenting her with its soft caress and the warm invitation of his humid breath. When she turned her head and moved her mouth toward his, his lips slipped away toward her ear. "Don't move," he commanded in a cold voice.

When she settled her hands on his hips, he brushed them away. "Don't touch me," he cut at her. "This is about you, not me. This is about making you understand."

Promise clenched her fists at her sides.

"Close your eyes," he insisted in an unkind voice.

Promise squeezed her eyes closed. For several seconds nothing happened. Still she waited, eyes closed, fists clenched into tight balls of tension.

A soft breath soughed from her lungs the first time he touched her, the side of his knuckle tracing the line of her jaw. With infinite slowness, he marked the outline of her face then pulled his thumb across her lower lip. Her lips parted to give him access and for several moments he played his thumb across the moist opening. Her lips tingled beneath his grazing thumb. She longed for him to kiss her. But she didn't move. His hand left her face and she waited self-consciously in silence.

Something brushed across one of her nipples. A finger or a thumb, perhaps. A spike of desire hit her hard just below the belly and she reached out to steady herself. One of her hands touched his flank.

"I *told* you not to touch me," he gritted.

She nodded nervously. Then nodded again. For several seconds she stood waiting for his touch. She felt his fingers stab beneath the bottom edge of her linen jerkin. His knuckles skimmed across her belly. Then with one hard tug, he ripped her chemise out from beneath her jerkin, the fragile fabric parting at the shoulders and slithering over her breasts as he yanked downward. The harsh sound of tearing silk followed a moment later as she stood licking her lips. He was ripping her chemise into pieces. She resisted the urge to open her eyes and find out why. The answer came soon enough—when he used the silken strips to bind her.

Roughly, he grabbed her wrists and pulled them behind her, before tying her hands together. She swallowed hard and nodded resolutely. She could do this. She had to do this. If she could somehow get through the punishment maybe they could start over. But even as she dreamed of forgiveness and new starts, Promise's heart fell. She didn't really believe it was possible. Nonetheless, she was determined to make restitution in whatever way Tranth demanded.

She felt his hands fumbling at her jerkin. Pulling the crisp linen just high enough to crest her nipples, he tied the jerkin into a tight knot above her breasts.

“Open your eyes,” he demanded.

With a whispered prayer of relief, Promise complied, searching his gaze for some hint of tenderness. He didn’t return her look. For a long time, he stared coldly at her chest, watching her breasts lift with every anxious breath she pulled into her lungs. White lines of tension etched his mouth—lines that used to curl around the edges of his confident smile.

“Close your eyes,” he rasped. “Don’t open them unless you want to be blindfolded.”

She closed her eyes again with as much relief as she’d felt when she’d opened them, glad to shut out Tranth’s frigid gaze. She squeezed her eyes tight but couldn’t erase from her memory the image of Tranth’s cold stare. An instant later she gasped as Tranth dragged his smooth tongue over one of her nipples. The slick surface of his tongue was like a touch of satin, the warm friction pulling at the puffy rose flesh that puckered around her anguished nipples. Slowly, thoroughly, he worked her over with his tongue, lapping at her nipples until they were hugely erect.

He caught the distended pink knot between his teeth. With the nipple caught in the clamp of his blunt incisors, he thrust his tongue at the captured flesh with quiet violence, battering the tender rose as he fucked her nipple with his blunt chisel-tip, forcing the shocking pulses of sensation through her body in a steady stream. With each rough attack on her nipple, her hungry pussy throbbed with a dark, voluptuous need and thick anticipation. He continued with the sweet torment to the point of discomfort, until her nipples were sore and her sex was wet. Then he walked away from her. She heard his footsteps receding. Restlessly, she waited.

And waited.

Promise strained within the bonds wrapping her wrists, her body twisting in need as she panted. "Tranth?" She turned her face, cocking her head, listening for him. "What are you doing?" she murmured uneasily.

"Making you understand," he growled from closer than she'd expected. "Don't talk."

"Tranth, I never meant to hurt you."

"Damn you, I said don't talk."

Moments later a silk gag was pulled tightly across her mouth and tied off behind her head. He brushed his lips over the fabric that covered her lips. "Don't talk," he rasped, his voice strained. "You had plenty of time to talk to me, Promise. Plenty of time to tell me the truth. Now it's too late. Open your eyes," he commanded.

Promise shook her head, gritted her teeth and forced her eyes open.

Without looking at her, Tranth reached for her water bag. He tipped the narrow mouth over one hand, wetting his fingers. He returned to stand before her, watching her breasts lift several times before he slowly reached out with a single finger. He pressed his wet finger on her nipple. The water burned on the raw, chafed tip of her used flesh and she almost screamed. When he blew on the tight puckering skin, she sobbed. Then he wet her nipples again and left. She watched him as he collected wood from the edges of the clearing and built up the fire into a strong blaze. Then, as though he'd forgotten that she existed, he sat down and watched the fire.

When he finally stood again, he moved suddenly. Her whole body throbbed at that one action—just his standing up. Her heart raced and her blood pounded as he sauntered over to stand in front of her again. Her pussy surged, pushing out enough juice to wet the curves of her inner thighs.

With a ruthless smile, Tranth skimmed his lips across the damp silk stretched tight across her mouth. He rubbed his fingers across the gag, collecting her moisture. Then his damp fingers were on her tender nipples, twisting and rolling the anguished bits of flesh. Behind the silk gag, Promise hummed a low sound of hunger.

He leaned into her as she sucked up a gasp.

"Would you like me to fuck you?" he murmured against her ear. His breath caught at the whorl of her ear and her eardrum shuddered. She answered with a growl.

"Spread your legs for me if you want me."

Promise shifted her feet apart, determined to see this thing through to the end, hoping the end was near, hoping the end would bring about her release as well as her pardon.

Tranth took a long time baring her sex, his hands lingering over her hips as he loosened her money pouch and threw it aside then unwound her skirt, letting his hands trail down the silk shorts that covered her flesh. She trembled beneath his touch, the arousing brush of warmth in his palms. She was so on edge, hungry with desire. He stripped her shorts down her legs, carefully avoiding the fresh wounds striping her thighs and calves, then smoothed his calloused palms over her naked ass.

His fingers' first foray across the curls on her mound was almost enough to make her swoon as a crushing wave of arousal chased up her spine. His hard hands cased her hips briefly then moved to the crease beneath her buttocks where she sweated in damp need. Several times he pulled his fingers through that warm trail between her ass and the top of her legs then he cased her hips again, pulling his thumbs over her pelvic wings as she shuddered in his grasp.

She gasped again when he fingered her labia apart, barely touching the needy flesh tucked inside her thick pussy lips. The fleeting contact was meant to torment. For an instant, his finger scraped across the top of her clitoris and she bucked as wet heat spilled between her thighs. Her flesh was slick where her thighs slid against one another.

"You're damp," he murmured. "I'd better stop."

She groaned as she shifted her feet and squeezed her thighs together. Damp! She was running like a spring.

"Don't *move*," he snarled, using his foot between hers, forcing her stance open again. "Don't you fucking *move* unless I tell you to."

She nodded quickly, licking her lips beneath the silk. The damp fabric rubbed against her mouth, chafing the sensitive rose that rimmed the moist opening.

"Back up against that tree," he told her, indicating a tree ten feet behind her. "Get on your ass."

She hurried to comply, backing up against the wide, smooth trunk and sinking down to the ground.

"Put your back against the trunk and spread your legs," he commanded harshly as he turned away from her. "Spread them wide."

Promise swallowed hard and spread her feet then let her knees fall open.

He stared at her from across the fire, his blunt gaze fixed between her spread legs while her parted sex clenched with every breeze that teased across her aching nipples. Eventually, he stretched out on the ground. With his wrists folded beneath his neck, he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Promise was just nodding off when he came to her. Her chin had dropped down onto her chest and her knees had angled together to rest against one another. Yanked out of her sleepy stupor, she came to with a start.

Kneeling between her legs, Tranth pressed her knees wide again. Tilting his head, he watched her pussy with hooded eyes. Her sex felt full and heavy but the burn of her earlier, intense arousal had dissipated to something thick and dull. He sharpened it. His fingers played at the nick of her cleft and just the idea that he might rub a finger over her clit had her panting lightly. Closing her eyes, she prayed for deliverance as she let her thighs fall wide. "Don't *move*," he reminded her roughly.

She nodded as she pulled her trembling knees together an inch. Perversely, he pushed them wide again. She moaned when his finger trailed down through the seam of her sex, nudging her lips apart, touching tentatively here and there, gliding toward her clitoris then beneath it. Dark pleasure swirled to possess her body and blacken the

edges of her vision. He stroked through her folds as she tensed in pleasure. His finger settled on her clit and he played with her until her juices were gushing in small pulsing waves from her vulva.

Then he left her again. "Keep your legs spread," he told her, "so I can watch you when I want to."

Four more times in the night, he returned to torment her. Every time Promise started to fall asleep, he woke her. Each time the sharp edge of need finally dulled down to something less than a full thundering inferno, he pulled her legs wide and played with her sex, dragging his fingers through her dark, swollen lips, squeezing her clit between his thumb and forefinger. Every time he left her, her sex hammered and throbbed in deliciously pulsing ebbs of near-completion.

The next time she opened her eyes, it was his voice that roused her. He muttered in his sleep, shaking his head in response to some sort of internal argument. Promise's heart sank as she struggled within her bonds, wanting to cover her ears before he could voice the names of his three Gryffin lovers. Three lovers who hadn't betrayed him as she had done. Three lovers he still yearned for. She squeezed her eyes closed, unwilling to witness the tears he shed for the three girls who deserved his love.

"Promise," he muttered.

Her eyes blinked open, staring at him through the gray light of early dawn. He shook his head and groaned. His hand moved in his sleep, shifting his sporran aside, rubbing at the thick bulge ridging the front of his leggings. "Promise," he groaned.

Her heart stirred with hope. There were no tears on Tranth's face—no sorrow for his lost girls. Instead, he grimaced as he pushed out a rough sigh. For several seconds, Promise dared to hope that, on some level, he still cared for her. But that budding hope was crushed a second later when he twisted on the ground. "No!" he guttered, "No! Don't cut me!"

Tears spilled onto her face, rolling down her cheeks to dampen the silk covering her mouth. The makeshift gag muffled the soft sobs that caught in her throat. He didn't

dream about his girls anymore. He didn't even dream anymore. Instead, he had nightmares. Nightmares about her.

Chapter Eight

Tranth bolted into a sitting position. For several seconds he stared blankly, apparently unable to break loose from the nightmare that clung to him in tangled wisps of horror. Slowly, he shook his head, finally flicking his gaze toward her. "Are you hungry?" he muttered.

She nodded in answer.

"Good," he growled, getting to his feet. "That will make you hornier."

He walked off into the forest to relieve himself. When he returned, he washed his hands in the stream and filled the water bag. She watched him squatting at the water's edge, his sex making a heavy bulge between his spread legs. When he stood, he sauntered over to stop in front of her. "Legs apart," he reminded her brusquely. With one finger, he dragged her silk gag away from her mouth and hooked it under her chin. He touched the narrow spout of the water bag to her mouth, wetting her lips. She didn't even get enough moisture in her mouth to swallow before he pulled it away again.

Her eyes shot to his face as her heart thudded painfully. Surely he would let her drink! She understood that he hadn't finished with her, that he still had more revenge he wanted to exact upon her. And she was still willing to pay for her sins...up to a point. But he couldn't deny her water!

He wasn't a cruel man, she reminded herself. He was just angry. He'd been hurt. She was the one who had hurt him.

He gave her a small, spiteful smile. "Do you want some water?" he asked. His voice was slick with malice.

She nodded cautiously, her eyes moving from his face to the water bag then back again.

"Which do you want more?" he tempted her cruelly, "the water...or a kiss?"

Promise hesitated. She wanted the water. But she didn't dare offend him. "A kiss," she croaked out of a parched throat.

His smile flattened. "Don't talk," he insisted coldly.

Tears sprang to her eyes. It was a mean trap to set for her, one meant to confuse her. Closing her eyes to cover her tears, she pursed her lips for a kiss.

Lightly, his lips brushed against hers.

She kept her eyes closed until she felt the water bag nudge against her lips. Greedily, she sucked down the cold liquid for as long as he would let her. He pulled the bag away abruptly, elbowing her knees wide and trickling the icy stream into her sex. When she shouted in surprise, he pulled her gag back up over her mouth. Then, throwing the water bag aside, he pressed three fingers against her pussy opening and pumped slowly. When she was groaning with need, he walked away from her. Promise cried in frustration and misery as she watched his back.

He leaned over and picked her money pouch out of the dirt, tying it around his own strong hips. "We should make Maliherra before noon. There're a couple of taverns there that serve food."

Promise sniffed as she turned her head and wiped her wet cheek on her shoulder.

"Would you like me to fuck you before we leave?"

Promise's chin came up quickly. Holding her breath, she shifted her wary gaze to him, suspicious of another trick.

"Would you?" he barked.

Swiftly, she nodded.

His expression was flat as he approached her. Squatting beside her, he untied her wrists. "Get on your hands and knees," he tossed at her. "I'll take you from behind."

Biting back a sob, she scrambled to her hands and knees.

Slowly, he scuffed around behind her. "Don't move," he murmured.

For several moments he left her there, on her hands and knees, with her legs spread and her moisture trickling down the insides of her thighs. In an attempt to entice him, she widened her legs and arched her back, flexing her backside.

"I told you not to move," he sliced at her. "If you can't do as you're told then you don't get fucked."

Promise stifled a small groan of frustration.

"Roll over onto your back."

Promise dropped to the ground and rolled, spreading her knees for him.

"I didn't ask you to spread."

She snapped her knees together.

"I didn't tell you to close your legs."

Promise whimpered.

He dropped to his knees and pushed her legs apart. The ridge on his head was painfully erect. But Promise had no way of knowing whether anger or lust lifted his ruff. When he tried to brush his copper hair away from his face, the fountain of feathered strands immediately arched back over his forehead again. "Close your eyes," he growled impatiently.

Promise closed her eyes and waited. For several moments all she could hear was his shallow, ragged breathing. When he finally spoke, his voice was rough with lust. "You're so rosy and dark. Your pussy lips so swollen and thick. And your poor little pearl looks like it might burst. I wonder what would happen if I were to squeeze it."

Promise groaned as she felt more liquid ease from her slit and trickle down between the globes of her ass.

"Open your eyes," he grunted.

Promise opened her eyes and fixed them on this chest.

"Look at me!" he barked.

She took a deep breath and met his cold, blunt stare.

"Do you still want me?" Tranth growled.

Promise nodded vigorously.

"If I take the gag off, will you beg me?"

Again she nodded.

"Sit up."

When she sat up, he removed the silk gag and tucked most of the pale orange fabric into the top of his leggings. Rolling back on his heels, he gave her an expectant look.

"Please," she murmured hesitantly. "Please fuck me."

His gaze hardened. "I didn't tell you to speak."

Promise snapped. Rolling up to her knees, she launched herself at him, hammering his wide chest with her small fists, screaming and cursing as she landed as many punches as she could. For a minute he let her rage, then he grabbed her wrists and pinned them behind her.

"I think you're beginning to understand," he told her without feeling.

Kneeling in front of her, he pulled the long ragged length of orange silk from his pants. Promise sucked at the air, panting in the wake of her exertions. He shook the silk out in front of her face. The fabric was streaked with iridescent streamers that glimmered in the thin light. She frowned, wondering what it was. When he tied the silk around her mouth his taste was on her lips. It was his semen – or probably his pre-cum. During their tussle, he had started to come, at least a little. Despite his cold outward behavior, the Gryffin was aroused.

After tying the silk off behind her head, Tranth brought a corner of the fabric around to wipe his cum into her damp, tear-stained cheeks. Resentfully, she watched his eyes, hungry for a hint of tenderness. But if Tranth found her arousing, it was only lust. There was no love behind his hooded gaze.

He finished wiping her face and looked away. "Stand up," he told her.

When she was on her feet, he untied the knot in her jerkin and let it fall to cover her breasts. Then he wrapped her skirt around her hips. He tied her wrists again. After collecting the water bag he stopped beside the cold remnants of the previous night's fire and pointed at the ring he'd left in the dirt, indicating that she should pick it up. "Let's go," he told her in a raw, curt voice.

When she stood up to walk, Promise realized what bad shape she was in. Her swollen sex felt huge between her legs. With each step she took, her heavy, sodden lips slid across one another. Each step aroused her further as she stumbled over to the blackened fire circle and scooped the crystalline ring out of the dirt. Looking around her, she located her silk shorts and took a step toward them.

"Leave them," he snarled at her, his command venomous and sharp.

* * * * *

As she followed Tranth down the path, Promise couldn't *drag* her mind away from sex. Every so often he'd stop and test her, reaching under her skirt and drawing a finger through her folds. If his finger slid easily, he left her alone. If not, he pressed her up against a tree and used his fingers on her, kneading her clit, drawing her to the peak of orgasm then leaving her there. In a dark haze of arousal, she plodded along behind him, aching with need, a dumb animal with one intent only—to reach satisfaction and release. When he got a little ahead of her, she stopped beside a smooth chestnut, rubbing her mound against the gray bark until he retraced his steps and dragged her away. She threw herself against him, writhing, her body flexing in spasms of need as she tried to put her swollen pussy against his hard form. She knew it wouldn't take much. She'd been aroused now for more than twelve hours.

His nostrils flared as he held her at arms length and watched her hips rock in helpless urgency. Her pleas for help were muffled beneath the silk scarf. He scooped her into his arms and held her tightly, held her until her convulsing body calmed.

"We should be reaching the outskirts of Maliherra soon," he told her after she'd stopped shaking. "We'll be running into people as we approach the town. Do you think you can act like something less than an animal?"

Promise groaned.

"If I take the gag off, can you be silent?"

Gazing up at him, she nodded.

"I'll untie you as well. Don't touch yourself."

With the strips of silk tucked into the top of Tranth's leggings, they headed west again. Promise had thought it would be better with her arms swinging free. But the temptation to draw her hand across her mound a few times was absolutely maddening. Her hand kept sneaking in front of her body to rub her mons and she knew if Tranth caught her, he'd tie and gag her again. Her lips burned, chafed by the wet silk. They tingled each time she drew the tip of her tongue across the smooth, hard flesh. Her jerkin felt like it was made of sandleaves as it slid over her dry, cracked nipples. She was at the absolute pinnacle of sexual awareness—from the prickling flesh of her mouth to the thick, sodden lips between her legs.

Still, she stumbled on, determined to pass this test—run this gantlet that Tranth had set for her—to earn his forgiveness. She fixed her gaze on the ground, trying to concentrate on getting one foot in front of the other. She was so lost in a dull fog of sexual misery, she didn't even notice when they reached Maliherra. She followed Tranth, staring at the ground, aching with hunger, burning to be fucked.

There was a low flight of stairs ahead. She climbed three steps and followed Tranth into a darkened tavern. It smelled like men—musky with sweat and spilled ale. She dropped onto a wooden stool but Tranth dragged her back to her feet, towing her behind him as he headed toward the bar.

He ordered something. Food she hoped. Something to drink would be all right as well. Then he turned to face her. With one elbow propped on the bar behind him, he pulled her against him. She almost gasped as he bowed her body into his.

She almost came.

"Open your legs," he whispered against her ear.

She obeyed without thinking.

He pressed a knee between her legs and pulled her onto his hard thigh. The taverner put a cup on the counter beside him and he drank off its contents without offering her any. She didn't care. All she could think about was the need burning in her pussy and eating at her core.

Moaning softly, she pushed her pussy up against the wide thigh that spread her legs. When Tranth didn't immediately stop her, she drew back and pushed again. Already she could feel her own moisture, slicking his dragon-skin pants. His sporran covered his groin triangle, leaving her in the dark as to his own interest. But when she started rocking against him in earnest, he stopped her with his thick fingers clamped around her upper arms.

He glared down at her. "You're embarrassing yourself," he told her in an icy whisper.

"I don't care," she whimpered back.

"Did I say you could talk?"

She bared her teeth, snarling like an animal. "I'm going mad, Tranth. All I care about is my need. It's consuming me. I can think of nothing else. Nothing but a man and my own satisfaction. Nothing but a man fucking me."

He laughed—a cold, hard sound. "You're behaving like an animal. The sort of animal that Gryffins are accused of being."

"I never treated you like an animal," she returned in a brief, fiery surge of bravery.

"You *collared* me! You cut off my barbs like I was some kind of *dog*! A dog you owned."

For a moment, she stared back at his cold, stony facade. He was right. She dropped her head in weary defeat. "Why are you torturing me, Tranth? You're not a cruel man."

"I'm not a man. I'm a Gryffin," he shot at her. "And you've proven *many times over* that you know *nothing* about Gryffins."

Her voice was low but defiant. "I'm sorry for what I did to you, Tranth. I'm sorry a thousand times over. But I don't know how I can make it up to you. And I don't see how punishing me fixes anything."

"I'm not punishing you," he told her, reaching between her legs and drawing a finger up through her wet slot.

Her eyes closed and she shivered as he played her deliciously close to the edge. His touch running through the intimate folds of her pussy was like a prayer about to be answered. The fact that they were in a crowded tavern was unimportant as far as she was concerned. Release hovered at the end of those wonderful long fingers sliding through her pussy, teasing her hungry opening and plucking at her clitoris.

"I'm just trying to make you understand," Tranth rasped. "You *will* understand before I'm through with you."

"Understand *what*?" she cried in a whisper.

"Desperation," he answered quietly. His eyes were haunted pools of darkness. "The desperation I've lived with ever since you bought me. The desperation I feel now. You're going to have to be as desperate as I am before you'll let me fuck you. Absolutely, irreversibly, frantic with need."

A small groan made its way past her lips. She was ready to jump on his cock the moment he gave her an opening. "Before I *let* you—I would have let you take me at any time! I've...I've...begged you to take me."

"That's only because you don't yet have a full grasp of the situation. When you do," he hissed, "you're going to have to be desperate before you'll let me take you."

She stared up at him, confused, unable to imagine anything that would make her refuse him.

"So the question is," he murmured in a sharp slice of quiet, "how desperate are you, Promise? How badly do you need this fuck?"

A low throaty moan crawled up her throat—a sound heavy with overpowering need. Through the haze of her lust, she vaguely recognized that he echoed the carnal sound.

Tranth growled. "How desperate are you, Promise? I need to know. If I turned you on my lap and put you on my cock would you ride me—here in the tavern—in front of everyone?"

"Would you let me?" she countered after a moment's hesitation.

His green eyes burned down at her. His ruff was up, spilling his copper hair across his brows. "Just answer the question."

"Yes," she breathed out. "Yes. If you'd let me, I'd do it. I'm that desperate. I wouldn't care who was watching."

"You wouldn't care?" he murmured. He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. There was an evil challenge in their neon depths. "And what if I let one of these men take you?"

"What?" she asked, stricken.

"What if I let one of these men fuck you? Here and now, with everyone watching."

Trying to draw away from him, she shook her head in disbelief. But he manacled her in his uncompromising grip, his fingers tightening around her biceps like iron.

"What if I let one of these men take you from behind while I held your face?" he asked softly.

"I...while you held my face?"

"While I held your face and kissed you," he tempted her quietly.

Promise had vowed that she would endure this punishment, that she would make retribution. "I...don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

Her throat tightened to the point that she thought she would choke. "Maybe. If I...if you were kissing me. If I could imagine it was you inside me."

His gaze left hers and roved the tavern. Eventually he lifted his chin. Behind her, Promise heard the sound of a wooden chair scraping on the stone floor. Heavy footsteps approached the pair.

"How much?" a voice growled in a thick foreign accent. "How much to fuck your woman?"

Tranth smiled at the man standing behind her then smiled down at Promise.

Promise shook her head swiftly, clinging to Tranth as she buried her face in his soft leather jerkin. "No," she whispered. "No. Please, Tranth. Don't make me do it. I won't do it! You'll have to force me!"

Tranth gave the man a slow smile. "More than you can afford," he answered.

Promise chanced a nervous glance over her shoulder. The big foreigner snarled, furious to find himself the victim of Tranth's perverted joke. Tranth snickered as the brute shuffled back across the tavern toward his table.

He trailed a finger around the curve of her jaw. "Do you still desire me, Promise? Despite everything I've put you through since last night? Despite your fear that I might turn around at any moment and peddle your ass to a complete stranger?"

She faced him without flinching. "You know I do, Tranth."

"Animal that I am?"

"You're not an animal," she gritted. "No more than I am!"

He nodded and his expression darkened before he lifted his gaze to burn into hers. "What if I took you upstairs and nailed your hands to the walls? What then? Would you still desire me? Would you still want me to fuck you?"

She didn't answer but only returned his gaze with uncertain horror. "You're not a cruel man," she insisted finally, though her voice was faint.

"No?"

She shook her head.

“What if I took you upstairs and nailed your hands to the wall...with ten thick, sharp nails driven right through each of your knuckles? Do you think you would still desire me?”

She stared at him. “Tranth, I’m sorry for what I did to you,” she whispered with dread. “I’ll always be sorry. I’ll never forgive myself. It...will never be over for me.”

He laughed without mirth. “That’s just as well,” he muttered. “Since it will never be over for me either.”

Helplessly, she shook her head. “What do you mean?”

His expression sharpened with pain. “You still don’t understand, Promise. Every time I look at you,” he whispered in a raw hoarse voice that threatened to break, “I want you. Every time I look at you, I ache. Here,” he said, grinding his erection into her belly. “And here,” he said, fisting his hand before her mouth. “And every time I take you, it will be torture as my hackles lift and my barbs try to cut through my scarred flesh. Which means—every time I take you, I’ll have to want you enough to be willing to endure that kind of pain. Are *you* that horny, Promise? Are you aroused enough? Would *you* be willing to suffer the kind of torment I’m talking about?”

She shook her head quickly, catching his meaning, finally understanding. He’d never stopped wanting her. But wanting her was agony for him. That’s what he’d been trying to make her understand—the frustration of wanting her when it was almost impossible for him to follow his instincts, to take her, to have her, to make love to her. He wanted her to know the frustration he felt when he was continually forced to turn away from her at the height of his arousal. He’d need to be absolutely mad with desire before he’d be able to ignore the pain of his broken barbs trying to force their way through his wounded hackles. The pain that would sharpen into utter agony as he approached release.

“No? You’re not aroused enough to endure that sort of punishment yourself?” He snorted softly. “Fortunately for you, you don’t have to. So the next question is—are you

aroused enough to *witness* that kind of torment? A Gryffin broken and screaming? Screaming as though white hot nails were being driven through his hackles as he orgasms?"

"No!" she shrieked quietly, struggling to separate herself from him while her wet pussy rubbed against the scales of his dragon-skin pants.

He gave her a small, tight, cruel smile. "Well, I am."

Chapter Nine

Tranth tucked his fingers inside Promise's iron collar. Turning, he dug two silver coins from the money pouch around his hips. He threw them on the bar.

The taverner regarded the couple with ill-concealed disgust, the idea of a Gryffin male fucking a human woman obviously not sitting well with him. He jerked his head toward the stairs. "Room four. Twenty minutes."

"Forty minutes," Tranth told him.

The man hesitated before he met Tranth's volatile gaze. "Forty minutes," he relented with a surly growl.

With his fist locked on the collar, Tranth dragged Promise across the room toward the stairs and pushed her up the long dark flight to the upper floor. At the top of the stairs, they turned into a narrow hallway and stopped a few doors down. Tranth shoved her through the door into the tiny room. A bare mat of reeds had been slapped down on the stained floor. A plain wooden chair cowered in one corner as though afraid to witness yet another act of carnal depravity. No doubt this room had seen men at their most base, serviced by the sort of women who catered to the most bestial of male needs.

"No," she insisted in a low voice as he turned her to face him. She backed away from him until she felt the wall bump against her shoulder blades. The plaster, cracked with dry wounds, was rough against her back. "No. I don't want to do this. I won't *do* this!"

He pulled the tattered remains of her chemise from the top of his leggings. He shook the silk out and handed it to her. "You can stuff this in my mouth if I make too much noise."

"No!" she shouted, hiding her hands behind her back, refusing to take the gag.

"You'll do this," he grated, "if it's the *last* fucking thing you do. When it's over, I'll sleep. You'll be doing yourself—and me—a favor if you can get out of here before I wake." He tossed the money pouch, along with the gag, at her feet. "On your knees," he demanded as he followed her. "Now!"

A wide hand closed on her shoulder and forced her down to her knees. She watched his fingers as he untied his sporran and threw it across the room to slide across the uneven floor. His dragon-skin pants stretched easily when he hooked his thumbs over the top edge and pulled them down past his jutting cock. She barely got a glimpse of his massive girth and dark swollen crown before he pressed the thick bronze head against her lips. When she pressed her lips together and tried to avert her face, he cupped her nape in one hand while he forced her mouth open with the thumb of his other. His hips drove forward and her lips stretched wide as he forced his shaft to the back of her throat.

Tears squeaked from the corners of her eyes as she tried to adjust to the thick flesh stretching her lips. When she gagged, he drew back an inch then nudged carefully forward again. Her mouth was full of cock as she stared into his groin and tried to apply a little suction to the shaft filling her mouth. A brilliant collection of copper scales glinted above the root of his cock, lifting and riffling as she watched. His cock expanded in her mouth, forcing her lips wider. She watched the fringed scales lift at the same instant. When the scales settled again, the mass of flesh straining her mouth diminished a heartbeat. Then it expanded again. And again. Wider this time. Thicker. Hugely thicker. Tranth stood motionless before her, his hips still. After the initial seating thrust, he didn't rock into her again. Instead his Gryffin cock expanded and eased off then swelled again to an even wider diameter.

Determined to take part in this carnal act he'd chosen to force upon her, Promise tried to slide her mouth off his shaft a bit so that she could tongue his cock head. But he clamped the back of her skull with two hands, his fingers threaded through her hair and digging into her scalp as he held her in place. Frustrated to the point of anger, she

snarled deeply as she yanked on his thick wrists. When he pulled out an inch or two, she moved her head back another two inches then wrapped her tongue around his shaft and pushed her mouth back over his smooth cock.

He stilled, suddenly interested. He pulled back another few inches and gave her a little room to work. She wasted no time, sliding her mouth down over the length of his shaft, sucking him hard as she pulled back, licking the rough tip of her tongue over the great copper head of his cock, then taking him deep again in a long, slow slide, followed by small quick sucks and the sharp jab of her tongue teasing the small slit on his cock head. She heard him groan and would have smiled if her mouth weren't full of cock.

She dragged her mouth slowly down to his crown and caught his rim between her teeth then let his cock slip wetly from her mouth. She cupped his balls carefully in one hand, fingering the heavy sac as her eyes skimmed down his wide length, gleaming with her saliva. His shaft strained full and dark—not purple so much as a warm, bronzed shade of red. Smoother than a human's cock, without the ridges or veins erupting along its length, his cock was like an erotic work of art cast in flawless copper metal.

Tranth's hand fisted in the back of her hair, guiding her mouth back over his cock, rubbing her lips into the taut flesh stretching over his throbbing erection. "Do it again," he murmured hoarsely. "Move your mouth over my cock."

Starting at the root of his cock, Promise drew her tongue up the thick shank to the slit nestled on the wide crown where she tasted his pre-cum, the musky salt flavor oozing from his cock head in a delicious male wash of moisture.

Again he groaned, the sound a mixture of pain and pleasure this time. Promise's urge to smile faded as Tranth loosened his grip on her hair. He was in pain. She glanced upward to find him with his fists doubled against the wall. His body was stiff as she used her mouth and fingers on his cock, squeezing the root in her hand and dragging her tongue up his pulsing length then swallowing him whole again.

She heard him grunt in anguish, saw the sweat standing out on his arms, heard the dull crash of his fists as he smashed his broken hackles against the plaster walls. A muffled cry of suffering escaped the tight line of his lips. His eyes were vised closed and he ground his teeth as he whispered, "Tar, help me."

With a final kiss for the tip of his wet cock head, Promise straightened between the wall and the straining Gryffin. Wrapping two hands around the fist he had planted against the wall, she pulled his hackles to her mouth. She dragged her mouth over his broken barbs, stroking with her tongue, sucking with her lips.

Tranth expelled a sharp breath as his eyes opened suddenly. "No," he said uncertainly. "No. You mustn't." At the same time he voiced this protest, he turned his fist slightly to give her better access to his hackles. "No," he told her hoarsely as he fed his tattered barbs into her mouth.

Feverishly, she worked her mouth over the hackles, sucking for all she was worth, sucking and laving until she felt a spurt of warmth on her tongue.

"Tar Below," Tranth eased out in a deep voice that ached with pleasure. "Spit it out," he insisted in the next breath. "Promise. Spit the poison out."

She did. Then she went to work on the next wounded knuckle. Tranth braced himself with one hand on the wall and fed the other between her lips. She got the poison flowing in the second hackle as she worked her short, tight skirt up to her waist. She felt Tranth's thick girth prodding between the supple flesh of her thighs and she shoved her pussy at his cock head, painting his length with her slick moisture, guiding his cock over her clit and through her folds as she rode the shaft straining hard and stiff between her thighs. She worked on the next two hackles as he twisted his wrist and fed her more.

She moaned as she sucked and spat and shoved her wet pussy against his cool, bronzed cock. She wanted him inside her but that wasn't going to happen from this angle. Not unless he lifted her and seated her on his shaft.

The poison was flowing from four of his hackles now and she turned in the space between Tranth and the wall, forcing him back a foot as she pushed her bottom into his groin and sucked at the final broken barb on his thumb.

She felt his fat tip prodding blindly at her anus then slipping down across her hungry opening and plowing into her clit. With a needy gasp, she bent over, bracing her forearms against the wall, presenting her hot, wet sex for his entry. She felt his cock head again, blunt and demanding as he notched into her tender opening. She moaned with anticipation, ready for his seating drive, ready to be stretched and filled with the luscious weight of his massive cock. She rotated her hips and pushed back, inviting him to bury his cock inside her wet pussy. At the same time, she wrapped her lips around the hackle on his thumb and drew hard.

As she sucked, he took her with a rear entry, driving the copper stake of his cock all the way to her limit. He banged up against her core and she gasped, accidentally swallowing some of the icy-hot venom that seeped from his barbs. She choked and coughed as his cock expanded inside her in excruciating waves of intense pressure that moved her swiftly toward orgasm. She forgot her work and braced her arms against the wall. A watery blue line drooled from her slack mouth and made two small spots on the floor below her as she stilled beneath the man pressed against her ass.

He didn't move. He just got bigger and wider in massive surges that teased the rim of her opening, stretched the tender walls of her vagina and battered the back of her cervix. She could feel his fringed scales brushing against the sensitive wet flesh that rimmed her sex. The gently abrasive strokes scraped between her cheeks, intruding into her cleft to tease and excite her puckered anus.

She panted as she spread her legs and canted her hips to receive all of him as deeply as she could, lost in pleasure, barely aware of the hand he fisted at her mouth, nudging against her slack lips. Faintly, distractedly, she played her tongue over his barbs then lost her concentration completely when his other hand clenched in the hair

at the crown of her head. He pulled her spine into an arch as his blunt fingers dug into her scalp and his fist clenched and unclenched in her hair.

Vaguely, she realized his behavior was probably prompted either by instinct or habit since his own ruff was an erogenous zone for him. But whatever the reason, she liked what the powerful male behind her was doing to her. She liked his strength pulling her back into an arch, his hand fisting in her hair, commanding her body with ferocious intensity, demanding her submittal as he filled her pussy with his surging, stretching, ever-expanding girth.

She was close to climax, poised on its edgy precipice. She'd never orgasmed on a man before, although she'd come close. She was afraid of missing it again. She was *damned* if she was going to miss it this time, even if it meant cheating. She sneaked one hand down to her pussy, hoping Tranth wouldn't notice as she rubbed her soft labia over her clit.

Tranth stiffened behind her. "That's for your male to do," he informed her harshly.

His hand fell away from her mouth, dipping between her legs to hold the front of her mound. One thick, calloused finger parted her lips with surprising gentleness and settled lightly over her clitoris. Then he moved his hand. He moved his hand over the thickness of her pouting labia while the rough tip of his finger found her clit again and again.

The world went black as she came on him, pushing back to take all of him as she shouted his name. Her vagina clenched around the impossibly huge surge of flesh that filled her cunt, stretching the rim of her vagina, shoved up tight against the perfect place of pleasure. She came long and hard as he roared behind her, his fringed scales crushed between their bodies, his groin packed up against her ass as his cock pulsed and throbbed, pulsed again, expanding into her clutching channel and forcing her open, forcing her open to accept every shred of pleasure that could be pulled out of her climaxing cunt. Long after her last contraction, he continued to pulse inside her tender

channel, pulling her vaginal walls open in ultimate expansion before she finally felt his cum surging in a delicious cool wash against her limit.

He grunted as he finished spurting inside her. It was a heavy, sated sound. He growled as he slid to his knees, his eyelids drooping to cover his neon gaze for a moment. Then his eyes flew wide and his nostrils flared. He'd told her to leave him as he slept. His eyes filled with a mixture of panic laced with regret. Tranth's hands loosened on her hips, his palms dragging down her long legs as he slumped to the floor.

"Promise," he whispered as his eyes closed, "Don't—"

Tranth slept. He slept the Gryffins' sleep of completion.

They'd gotten through their first mating. Tranth's powerful masculinity and brutal animal intensity had brought her to the first orgasm she'd ever shared with a man. She hadn't known it would be like that—that good. She hadn't prepared herself for the emotions that blossomed inside her or for how she'd feel toward the man with whom she shared that dark intimacy. She hadn't known it would feel so much like love.

He'd climaxed as well, not without pain but certainly with less torment and a greater degree of pleasure than he had expected. She'd been able to release some of the pressure in his hackles and had gotten the poison flowing through his barbs. Perhaps next time it would be easier for him...even though he might be with someone else when that happened. Despite this sobering idea, a frail bloom of hope took root in her heart.

Maybe she could still fix this.

Promise's head swam as she dropped to her knees beside him. Her vision swirled, her head pounded with sharp, withering heat. Although she'd tried to be careful and had spat Tranth's venom from her mouth as he'd urged, it occurred to her that she might have swallowed too much of the deadly poison.

If that were the case, it was probably too late now. And there was still work to be done.

Reaching for his great paw, she went to work on his other hand, sucking at his barbs, scraping at his broken flesh with her rough tongue, drawing at his flesh until the venom ran freely.

She blacked out before he woke. A long stretch of dark, blank time passed. She was sick and hot and when she wasn't sick, someone was forcing her to drink, pouring water down her throat as he stroked her neck and murmured in a rich, gravelly male voice. Too weak to do otherwise, she drank as the deep voice instructed. And she slept.

* * * * *

Pacing over to the thick log he'd dragged to within four feet of the fire, Tranth sat down, stood up, paced a bit more and sat down again. He reached into the stack of wood beside him, scooped up a narrow log and threw it on the blaze. With a thin stick he'd stripped clean of bark, he leaned forward to stir the dark broth that steamed over the fire. His gaze slid to the quiet form wrapped up in a cloak and lying at the edge of the fire's orange glow. The rich light licked along the tightly wrapped curves of the sleeping woman.

He lifted the stick to his mouth and touched it to his tongue, shrugging his shoulders in a sharp, impatient jerk. He wasn't a good judge of human food—too much meat, not enough bones or skin—but he guessed it would do. He lifted the tripod away from the fire so the broth could cool inside the hardened leather bag.

He sat before the fire, running a thumb over his hackles. The flesh, previously cracked and crusted, was now a healthy shade of coppery pink, definitely healing. His barbs would never be razor sharp again. He would never slash a tearing line across an opponent's face nor drag a thin trail of delicate blue over a female's ass. But the barbs would be functional. He stared at the ragged claws he'd been left with. They'd rip a man wide open and leave him swimming in an ocean of deadly blue venom.

As for females, he'd have to be careful with them. Gryffin females would be reluctant to wear the marks of his passion—regardless of how highly they regarded him

as a mate. The wide bands that his barbs would leave on a female's skin would never be considered feminine or pretty.

As for Promise?

Tranth shook his head, impatient with the tender emotions that softened the hard edge of his anger. As for the *human* female, he corrected himself – she'd never be able to take that much poison into her bloodstream. Not all at once. Not even *after* she'd built up a resistance. He'd have to be careful. He'd have to be careful when he took her, every time he took her. He'd never be able to stripe her. He'd be lucky if he could allow his claws to puncture her skin even a small fraction of an inch.

Tar! He stood again, twisting on his spurred heel and dragging his hands back through the metallic copper on his head. Nothing could have prepared him for the pleasure of a human female. Nothing! Now he understood Jarrk's passion for his little human. He could almost understand how that idiot Grat had killed his human in a fit of passion. Overcome with animal lust, Grat had followed his Gryffin instincts, trying to stripe the female and mark her as his own...for every male in the world to see.

Humans were so wet. Promise was so wet and hot – everywhere – unlike females of his own race who were dry and smooth inside their mouths, slick and cool inside their vaginas. A Gryffin female tightened quickly, clenched once as she came then loosened immediately, leaving no room for pleasure inside her open cunt. But a human! Promise. The hot wet heat of her gripping channel had wrapped around his cock and sucked and milked and dragged on his flesh, tightening and clenching, opening and tightening again, over and over while he climaxed in a long series of bursting surges inside her. He had come forever, emptying his seed into the sweet sheathing glove of her liquid sex.

Tranth knew nothing was ever going to be the same. No female was ever going to be her equal – or enough. Orgasming inside Promise had been worth the pain and pressure that had built behind his hackles. As his barbs had tried to force their way to the surface of his skin, the pain had been exquisite. But despite his fears that the barbs were too closely cut to ever function again, his hackles were apparently healing.

Evidently, Promise had managed to pull the poison through the damaged barbs and helped the thick claws slip through the skin just below his hackles. The next time his barbs tried to extend, he was certain it would be less painful, that the poison would flow a little more easily.

He watched her, thanking Tar and Breeza that she'd been too sick to leave him at the tavern, as he'd callously instructed her to do. If he'd known then what he knew now...he'd never have given her a chance to leave him.

She stirred and his long legs took him the distance that separated him from his female. "How do you feel?" he asked gruffly as he crouched beside her and helped her into a sitting position.

"Thirsty," she whispered. "What happened?"

"You swallowed too much venom," he told her, nudging his nose into her hair, drawing her uniquely human scent deep into his lungs. "I'm sorry. I should have stopped you."

She shook her head as her gaze slipped down to his hands. He raised a fist to her face. "I think," he told her softly, "that they're going to heal."

She let out a long breath and closed her eyes. Tears glittered in her spice-dark eyelashes, flashing in the moonlight like a sprinkling of tiny diamonds.

After she drank from the water bag, he scooped a small, flat jar from the ground beside her. Rubbing his thumb across the shining surface of the thick ointment, he slipped his hand beneath her jerkin. She jumped when his thumb grazed across the crusty tip of her nipple. She opened her eyes and questioned him with her gaze.

"Lanolin," he explained. "It will help you to heal more quickly."

She nodded, relaxing slightly as he dipped his thumb into the jar again and applied the thick cream to her other nipple.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, "if I'm hurting you."

More tears leaked from her eyes as she pressed her lips together.

After all the cruel tricks he'd played on her, she was probably wary of his kindness. Tranth understood that. He even regretted it. He looked around the small clearing as he rose to his feet. "This is our second night here. Are you hungry?"

"A little." She shifted into a more comfortable position. The cloak slid down her arms a bit, exposing the pale outline of her shoulder.

"I bought a bow with some of your money," he explained, "along with the new chemise you're wearing. A few other necessities. I hope you like stewed rabbit."

She watched him, caution shadowing her gaze. Her braid had worked loose, spilling several strands of cinnamon hair over the side of her face. Her chapped lips were a painfully deep shade of rose. They parted slightly, revealing a brief glimpse of pearl before pressing together again.

Tranth ran his tongue over his bottom lip as he stared at her mouth. "I carved a spoon. Let me just bring the tripod."

"Tranth. I'm...still sorry."

"Just get better quickly. I need you. I need you on my cock," he told her more callously than he felt. He forced his lips to curve upward. "We should probably wait a few days for you to get better. It will give my hackles a chance to heal more completely. But I'm aching to fuck you again."

Chapter Ten

When Promise was well enough to travel, Tranth packed up their camp and set his face toward the west again. He carried his new bow over one shoulder, along with the leather firepot which served as both a satchel and a quiver for his arrows.

Promise hesitated behind him, casting her gaze eastward, over her shoulder.

"I'm going home," he informed her after clearing his throat. "You're coming with me."

Her smile was wan. "Is that an invitation?"

"No," he answered in one short word. A small, troubled ridge formed between her expressive brows. He averted his eyes when she sought his gaze.

"But...you told me to leave you...when we were at the tavern."

"That was before I fucked you," he stated without looking at her. "I'm taking you home with me."

As they traveled, Tranth tried to keep his distance, both emotionally and physically. But it was difficult to harden the tenderness in his gaze. And even more difficult to keep from touching her. He wanted to touch her. To feel her feminine warmth against the palm of his hand. He found himself reaching for her throughout the day. Many times it was sexual but many times it wasn't. He used any excuse to take her elbow on the pretense of guiding her in the right direction. His hand found many occasions to linger in the small of her back as he steered her along a path or through a slippery river crossing.

As the next few days passed, he struggled to deny the emotions that flared up every time he cast his eyes in her direction. He found himself waking her early to join him in the dawn's hunt—he was uneasy about leaving her alone. Tar only knew what he thought would happen to her, but he didn't want to be parted from her.

He did leave her once though.

They were covering a long, open stretch of land when a thin column of rock pulled his gaze northward. The straight spike of gray stone fisted into the sky like Tar's dick. A wide skirt of rough talus flared around its base. He led her to within a mile of the rocky outcrop and hoisted her into the high branches of a thickly limbed tree springing from the edge of a shallow river. After prowling the area for a few minutes, he told her to wait for him before he jogged away.

When he returned about an hour later, he was so anxious to touch her that they ended up making love against the tree's thick trunk. She climbed down to the lower branches and let him ease her to the ground. Immediately, he pressed up against her. Capturing her head between his forearms, he tilted his face and kissed her tentatively, holding his breath, waiting to see if she accepted his kiss, if she returned it. Up until that point, she'd had no say. Up until then, he'd forced himself on her. This time he waited to learn his fate.

It was a long moment.

His heart thumped painfully as he fought to restrain his natural male instincts. He wanted to take her mouth rapaciously, crush her lips beneath his, thrust his tongue against hers, grind up against her body and scrape his throbbing shaft into her sweet, cushioned mound.

When her mouth yielded softly beneath his, he fed a groan between her lips, tilted his face in the other direction and settled his mouth over the delicious damp heat of hers. Relief weakened his limbs and the next kiss lasted a long time as he explored her mouth carefully with his tongue. When he finally broke away from her, he returned an instant later, cupping her face in his palm as he tasted her lips in small fervent sips, panting out short, raw breaths, returning to her mouth over and over again, finally bowing to the intense emotion that was catching at his insides. He wanted to love her. He just wanted to *love* her and he didn't want to pretend anymore. He didn't want to pretend that she wasn't the most important thing in his life.

He stripped her clothing from her then kicked off his own. He wanted to feel her heat searing his flesh, her breasts crushed against his chest, her heart fluttering beneath his own wild pulse. He took her against the tree with his mouth covering hers as she wrapped her legs around his hips. That was a first for him. Although he'd heard stories of humans mating face-to-face, he'd never taken a female except from behind. Humans were built differently than Gryffins. Their sex was placed farther forward on both males and females. One of the beauties of the human female, in addition to being deliciously hot and wet, was the fact that they could be mounted from either the front or back.

He picked her up by the waist and impaled her on his shaft, pulling her heat down to sheathe his dick. He stroked the underside of her thighs as she locked her ankles behind him, bruising him with her heels as she tightened her hold on his hips. His cock started expanding as soon as he was inside her and she rolled against him, her body undulating in waves — probably a human instinct.

"Be still," he whispered against her mouth, smoothing his hands down between their bodies. His scales were lifting and falling with every expansion of his cock. He smoothed his palms over the feathery bed in his groin then tucked his fingers inside her damp pussy. He spread her pussy lips wide and let her feel his scales brush her clit a few times.

"Oh!" she murmured. Her eyes went round with surprise. After that, she was still, letting his scales work on her clit while his ever-expanding cock stretched the rim of her vagina in pulsing waves of pressure. "Oh!" she shouted suddenly.

Then her eyes closed and her head snapped back. She'd have cracked it against the wide tree trunk behind her except that his hand was there, cradling her skull as he pressed a long, quelling kiss over her mouth. She writhed beneath him as he pushed her into the tree. Her breasts rubbed into the fringed scales on his chest and her wet lips slipped beneath his as she screamed into his mouth. But the best part was when she came around him, her cunt clenching and throttling and squeezing his shaft like a sweet, tight fist. He savored several seconds of her orgasm as he grew steadily thicker.

The pressure and heat that bathed his cock was beyond exquisite. There was a dull ache in his knuckles and he let go of her head. Grasping her bottom, he fought the urge to bury his claws in her ass, knowing that to do so would mean her death. She hadn't yet built up a resistance to his poison. Venom wept from his barbs and trickled over the backs of his hands. He closed his eyes and groaned.

"Give me them," she whispered.

He opened his eyes and checked her face. With one hand still clutching her ass, he lifted the other fist to her mouth. "Be careful," he reminded her softly. "Spit most of it out and swallow only what remains on your tongue."

When she sucked on his barbs, he came.

Tar Below, he came. He came in long, hot spilling surges, filling her with his cum, choking with pleasure as he pumped into her so much of his seed that it forced its way out again and trickled down over his balls.

* * * * *

When he woke from his Gryffins' slumber, she'd washed in the river. Dressed only in the new chemise he'd bought her, she was nude from the waist down. The blue silk clung to her breasts where her skin was damp. Stretched out on the ground beneath the tree, Tranth watched her lazily from half-closed eyes. The Zards' wounds that had striped her thighs and calves had healed. Her long legs were slender and beautifully formed, swelling softly in all the right places, dimpling perfectly behind her knees, narrowing elegantly at the ankles. Her pretty, rounded ass was unspeakably adorable. She pulled her hair in front of her shoulder, wringing the water out of it. She was so beautiful. She was perfect.

Jarrk was right about humans. There was nothing so beautiful as fucking Promise.

He rolled up to his feet and met her. With a smile on his lips, he raked his fingers through her tangled brown hair. "What's this?" he murmured, picking a diamond out

of her hair and bouncing it in his palm. He lifted her hand and put the diamond in it then pulled two more out of her hair, each one larger than the one before.

He'd thought she'd be pleased, delighted. But her reaction was guarded.

"Where did you get these?" she asked him.

He let his gaze drift to the spike of rock in the distance. "It's easy when you know where to find them."

"Are they meant to be a payment – your slave price?"

"No," he answered swiftly. "No. More of a peace offering."

She dragged her teeth over her bottom lip and gave him an uneasy nod. Then she turned away and started dressing.

He'd missed his chance. He could have told her then. He could have told her that the diamonds were a lover's gift. But somehow the words failed him. If she realized his weakness for her, she might ask him to let her go. It might be the first thing she asked for! He didn't want to hear her ask for her freedom...but he *could* get rid of that damn collar. When he offered to remove the iron band from around her neck, however, she backed away from him, shaking her head.

"If you ever lose the ring," he argued, "the collar will start to heat up."

"I won't lose the ring," she told him, nervously scraping her teeth over her bottom lip. "If I do, you can take it off at that point."

"What if we get separated?" he pressed her.

She gave him a sharp look of panic before she glanced behind her. "I need the necklace," she claimed, "so that I can wear the diamonds you gave me." Swiftly, she turned and strode toward a boulder beneath a tree. Plucking some Sticky Lichen from the rock, she used it to anchor her diamonds to the wide iron collar.

His gaze softened as he looked at her, standing there dressed in nothing but the short undergarment that didn't quite reach her bellybutton, her wet hair staining the pale silk a dark blue, the diamonds peeking from behind her tangled hair.

Grunting disagreeably, Tranth let her have her way.

* * * * *

As they traveled west toward Tranth's home on The Spit, they shared information in a tense sort of truce. As the manager of a large farmhold, Promise knew a lot about the land, plants, grasses and domesticated animals. As a hunter, Tranth knew the forests, rivers, plains and the wild creatures that inhabited them. In many ways, they completed each other. Or they might have—if there hadn't been a wall between them. A wall she'd accidentally set the foundation for. A wall he'd carefully constructed on that foundation—brick by cold, fucking brick.

Tranth stopped in mid-stride one morning, halting at the top of a boulder-strewn slope.

"What is it?" Promise asked, searching the plain below them. It was empty except for a family of shovel jaw beejer. The male was collecting his small offspring, scooping them up in his wide jaw and delivering them to his dam for feeding. His glossy black coat shone like obsidian.

"I've just remembered Akela," he answered.

"What about her?"

"Fieldnig was going to bring her to the farmhold."

Promise shrugged one stiff shoulder. Her hair was loose today, spilling across her back. The sun painted the cinnamon curtain with strands of brilliant gold. "Micah will be there to greet her."

Tranth nodded thoughtfully, surprised it had taken him so long to remember Akela. With a start, he realized it had been even longer since he'd thought of his girls. There was a time when he'd thought the pain of their loss would never leave him. Briefly, he wondered if his return to The Spit would renew old sorrows. He glanced at the female beside him and knew with sudden certainty that he'd be safe from the old suffering. Cheela, Shay and Sharali were tucked away with love into a small corner of

his heart—a heart that was now full of Promise. “Do you miss your home?” he asked her.

“Not yet,” she responded quietly. “Do you miss yours?”

He blew out a breath. “Yes.”

“Micah can run the farmhold until my return.”

“What if you don’t return?”

Promise’s voice was a brittle challenge. “Do you plan to keep me captive?”

Yes, he thought, *if it comes down to that*. He gazed at the perfect oval of her face. Her chapped lips had healed and softened to a luscious dewy peach. “No,” he answered.

She gave him a look that told him she didn’t exactly believe him. Evidently, he wasn’t fooling anybody.

Taking her hand in his, he guided her down the rocky slope. When they reached the plain’s edge, he slid a glance sideways. He couldn’t help wondering and couldn’t help asking the next question. It had been plaguing him ever since she’d first tasted his venom. “Have you had any...dreams lately?”

He tried to make the question sound casual. In fact, he felt anything *but* casual about it. Jarrk’s female had premonitions. The bond Chiarra shared with Jarrk was so intense that his venom caused her to see the future in dreams and visions. As Tranth looked at Promise, he wondered if the damaged remnant of their fledgling love could possibly rise to that sort of pinnacle.

Tranth’s feelings for Promise were...strong. They’d always been strong. The horror he’d felt when he’d discovered her part in his mutilation had faded since that first blinding moment of hatred. Her determination in following him and enduring his trials, her care in reaching for his hackles at the tavern and taking them into her mouth, her sacrifice when she risked death by poison and as much as anything, the wonderful release he took inside her body—all of those things had gradually softened his resolve to despise her.

It was inevitable that Tranth would arrive at this point. What Promise had done to him was terrible. But it was a mistake. Such a terrible mistake that she hadn't been able to face up to the nightmare of her actions. He understood that. Up for scrutiny at this point were *his* actions and behavior. Now he feared he'd managed to finish off what Promise hadn't been able to destroy—the barely kindled love that Bichen had jeopardized with his spiteful revelation.

"Have you?" he pressed her.

Her chin came up sharply, scattering the light that played in her hair. "What kind of dreams?"

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Any kind of dreams. Anything...out of the ordinary?"

She took a moment answering while Tranth held his breath. "Yes," she finally admitted. "I've been having some pretty strange dreams, actually. Nightmares."

"Nightmares?" he asked, trying to hide the disappointment in his voice. "What kind of nightmares?"

"Dragons."

He stopped in surprise. "Dragons? You've been dreaming about dragons? That's all?"

She lifted her gaze to his face. Her wide blue eyes wary. "They're pretty frightening."

"That's it?"

Promise frowned at him, her eyes flickering with uncertainty.

Tranth held back his sigh. The questions were making her nervous. She was probably afraid that he was leading her into another one of his traps. "Do you never dream of me?" he finally asked.

"No," she answered quickly.

His eyes narrowed at the abruptness of her answer. There was something she wasn't sharing. A soft sigh of frustration hissed between his teeth. There was a lot she wasn't sharing. That was his fault. It was going to take time to tear down that wall he'd so painstakingly constructed, and win back her trust.

"We should reach the maelstrom's channel before dark," he told her.

"I've heard about that," she answered. The breeze caught her hair and whipped it across her face. She pulled it behind her shoulder. "The high winds run through the chasms either side of The Spit, isolating it from the rest of the world. How will we cross it?"

Tranth looked at the sky. "The maelstrom should be near the end of its meteorological phase. We might be able to make an early crossing when we get there."

Again, he offered to remove the iron collar she wore, promising to knot the diamonds into a string she could wear tied in her hair. Again, she refused to part with the slave collar.

Promise saw the collar as a symbol of her own slave price—the price she paid for her crime. Tranth had put the collar on her. He had demanded that she accompany him to his home. There, she assumed she would face the contempt of his people—the same sort of contempt that her husbands had shown Tranth. The same sort of contempt her servants had shown him! Promise flushed as she recalled her steward's rude conduct toward Tranth and how she'd done nothing to correct his behavior.

Certain that she hadn't yet won Tranth's pardon, Promise was determined to wear the collar as bravely as Tranth had, right up until the moment she knew he'd forgiven her. Until she could stand to face the weight of her own guilt and was able to finally shed that burden once and for all, she was glad for the weight of the collar around her neck. It was perverse, she knew, but she would shed the symbol of her guilt only when she finally knew she was forgiven. Dully, she wondered if Tranth could ever forgive her enough to love her. In her heart, she still didn't believe that was possible.

Promise took his hand when he offered it, albeit cautiously. She didn't for one moment think her trials were over. In fact, she wondered if her punishment would start in earnest when they joined his people on The Spit. She knew Gryffin males coveted her kind as mates but she wondered how long that would last after they'd learned what she had done to Tranth.

Then there were the nightmares, an additional source of misery, which she didn't, for one moment, think were undeserved.

Chapter Eleven

After descending into the smoothly scooped chasm of the maelstrom's channel, they hurried across to the other side. The wind gusted in small driving bursts that tugged at their clothing and riffed through their hair.

"This is what it's like when the winds are down?" Promise shouted above the whistling rush of air. "What's it like when the winds are up?"

"At its height, the maelstrom is like a river of air," Tranth answered, collecting her in one muscle-hard arm and shielding her with his body. "A torrent. Or a flood. Nothing survives inside the maelstrom. Not even small plants can gain a foothold. Though they sometimes sprout in the rocky joints and cracks, they're torn from their perches and flung downstream along with anything else that falls or slides into the chasm."

They'd hardly climbed out of the chasm and gone another five hundred feet before they were spotted at the edge of a forest clearing. Gryffins converged on Tranth, streaming through the trees and into the grassy clearing from every direction. They glimmered as they moved, the sunlight catching on the metallic colors feathering their chests and glinting in their ruffed hair. Neither sex wore anything above the waist. While the males wore dragon-skin pants, the females wore shorts that rode low on their narrow, boyish hips.

The first Gryffin to reach Tranth was a silver male. Although the handsome Gryffin was tall by human standards, Tranth topped his friend by half a head.

"Jarrk!" Tranth shouted as the men clasped each other in a rough embrace.

Tranth's friend hammered him with a dozen questions as the mob of Gryffins crowded around, shouting their greetings. Coming up behind Jarrk was a Gryffin with copper coloring. Although not as tall as the Gryffin at Promise's side, he was obviously

Tranth's brother Gerak. The young man's eyes were lit with pleasure and excitement as he pressed through the crowd toward them. Then his gaze caught on one of Tranth's hands. Promise watched as the smile left his face. His eyes widened, horror darkening their depths, as his gaze shifted quickly to Tranth's other hand. Slowly, the Gryffin's neon eyes narrowed in anger.

Promise winced, wishing for a place to hide. She fought the urge to cower behind her tall companion and swallowed hard as she pushed back her shoulders.

Tranth moved suddenly toward his brother, shouting his name and drawing Gerak's forehead against his shoulder. "Don't say a word," he muttered against his brother's ear.

Gerak choked. "Just tell me who did this to you," he grated between his teeth, "so that I can find the fucking bastard and kill him."

In a heartbeat the clearing's atmosphere turned from jovial to subdued. The females were silent. The males growled in quiet anger.

Promise held her breath as she watched the two brothers, bonded by a love both powerful and fierce. She could hardly believe that Tranth hadn't announced her crime to his clan. Wasn't that why he had dragged her all these miles?

"Please, Gerak," Tranth soothed his younger brother. "It's over and done and forgiven." He grasped Gerak by the shoulders. "Are you not glad to see me?"

Gerak ducked his chin and forced a smile onto his grim mouth.

"Jarrk!" Tranth turned to his friend for help.

Quickly, Jarrk turned his own troubled frown into a smile as he cast his gaze at Promise. "That depends," Jarrk improvised. "Did you bring the female for me or Gerak? After you answer that, we'll decide whether we're glad to see you or not."

Tranth gave his brother a bracing smile. "Please," he hissed between his teeth.

Gerak lifted his chin and smiled. He slung an arm around Tranth's shoulders and pulled him through the crowd as Promise was jostled along behind.

When they reached Jarrk's lodge, Tranth left Promise with Chiarra, although somewhat reluctantly. After brushing a kiss onto her cheek, he watched Jarrk's female lead Promise off through the woods, no doubt on the way to one of the geyser pools.

"Let them gossip," Jarrk advised as he ushered Tranth and his brother through the curtain of periwinkle vines that hung down over the doorway of his lodge. Fashioned out of live willows bowed and woven together into an overhead arch, the interior walls of Jarrk's lodge were alive with greenery. "They just want to talk about you."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Tranth muttered as he settled on the edge of Jarrk's pit. The floor of the pit, cut a foot deeper than the rest of the lodge, was covered with a carpet of soft furs. Gerak lowered himself to sit in the center of the sunken floor.

Jarrk laughed after putting an earthenware jug in Tranth's hand. "You've always come off well in the past...where females were concerned."

Tranth took a swig of the honey ale and passed the jug to his brother. "That was the past," Tranth grumbled.

Jarrk settled down beside him. "You don't think your female will speak well of you?"

Tranth thought about this. He wasn't altogether certain.

Gerak's question was unsettlingly blunt. "I take it the girl had something to do with your...mutilation?"

Tranth threw him a sharp look. "Why would you assume that?"

Gerak gave him a condemning look. "The way you cut me off back there in the clearing. Before I could say something you didn't want the whole clan to hear."

"It was a mistake," Tranth explained shortly. "Akela shattered her leg and I sold myself to pay for a year of her care. Promise's foreman purchased me at the auction block." Tranth struggled a bit with the next words, altering the truth slightly. "He clipped me before she could intervene."

Gerak scowled darkly, clearly dissatisfied with Tranth's explanation.

Even Jarrk seemed skeptical. He lifted one silvery eyebrow. "That's it?"

"She...feels guilty about it," Tranth added. "She left her farmhold to follow me. To try to make things right."

"She's a farm holder? A wealthy human?" Jarrk whistled. "With all that, and a beautiful female as your mate, why did you bring her back here?"

"I want my initiation," Tranth said quietly.

Jarrk looked at the ground and nodded.

Tranth laughed softly. "I know I'm getting on a bit."

"I understand," Jarrk told him swiftly. "Everyone should be initiated when they start their fold." He lifted his eyebrows. "When are you hoping to have the ceremony?"

"Tonight," Tranth answered, looking at his brother. "If it can be arranged. I know it's a lot to ask on such short notice."

Gerak averted his fierce gaze, jerking his head with impatient disapproval. When he spoke, it was from between clenched teeth. "You know I'd do anything for you, Tranth. And I've looked forward to the day you would finally start your own fold. But...this female. I think you're making a mistake."

Tranth rubbed a hand over his eyes. "You don't know what she went through, Gerak, to...make things right."

Gerak lifted his gaze to his brother. His eyes were full of unspoken disagreement. His mouth was pressed into a hard line, obviously repressing the argument that hovered on his lips. "I'd better get to work," he growled as he got to his feet and stalked from the lodge.

Tranth's troubled gaze followed his brother out the door before returning to question Jarrk.

Jarrk shrugged. "He'll be okay. You're putting a lot on Gerak, asking him to host your initiation ceremony tonight, but I imagine he'll rise to the occasion. He has five females now. I expect they can throw something together for you. Your lodge is still

weather-worthy. I was in there last week, cutting back the orchids." Jarrk paused. "Have you asked Promise yet?"

"Asked?" Tranth uttered the word uneasily.

"Asked if she'll have you...as a mate."

"That's not our way," Tranth parried evasively. "She'll have her chance to accept or refuse at the initiation ceremony."

"And if she turns you down?"

A cold shiver of apprehension wrapped around Tranth's spine. He wouldn't let her go. If she turned him down, he'd start all over with her, stake her out in his pit and pleasure her until she cried for mercy, then begged him to keep her for the rest of her life. He'd spread her legs open and part her sweet, succulent folds with his fingers, lap at her ripe bud until it was thick and hard, prod at her precious opening until it quivered around his tongue. Then he'd feed her his cock as he lay above her, his weight pinning her to the ground, fucking her like a human male.

"Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" Jarrk asked.

Tranth brought his chin up quickly. "What do you mean?"

Jarrk's shrug was casual. "Are you sure you want to make Promise your female? You seem...a little uneasy together."

Tranth stood suddenly, pacing over the furs that littered the floor of the pit.

"Are you sure you've forgiven her? For what she did to you?"

"Yes," Tranth cut back without hesitation.

"Have you told her?"

"Not in so many words."

Jarrk was silent for several seconds, trying to hide the smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. "How many words did you use?"

Tranth put him off with a growl. "I love her," he snapped.

"That's better," Jarrk told him encouragingly, "although it's not supposed to sound as though it hurts."

Tranth hung his head as he muttered, "The fact is that it does hurt. She evidently doesn't return my love. If she did, she'd have the visions." Tranth's jaw worked for several seconds. "She doesn't have the dreams," he told his friend.

Jarrk jerked his chin. "Not everybody finds *the one*," Jarrk allowed.

Tranth nodded disagreeably. "I can't imagine being more attracted to anyone," he finally ventured.

Jarrk chose his words carefully. "There's a big difference between attraction and love."

Tranth lifted his gaze to Jarrk. "I love her," he said quietly. The words tugged at his heartstrings and his chest felt suddenly aching full. "I love her," he repeated.

Jarrk shrugged. "Don't tell me." He stood and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Tell Promise. Tell her you love her. Tell her you've forgiven her so that she can forgive herself. Then tell her you're sorry."

"Sorry! What do I have to be sorry for?"

"Who put that collar on her?"

Tranth rolled his shoulders as his gaze hugged the ground.

"And why is she afraid of you?"

Tranth gave him a guilty look. He felt like he was choking on his Adam's apple. "Afraid?"

Jarrk nodded. "When she's standing beside you, she reminds me of Grat's females. Remember the way they used to act? Always on guard? Like they were tiptoeing across hot coals?"

Tranth scowled at the idea. Grat had mistreated his females. The huge golden Gryffin had left one of them dead before his own violent end. Tranth didn't like to think he was anything like the unpopular, belligerent male. "I'm not like Grat."

"I know that. But I've known you since we were childings. Everyone here on The Spit knows you for a gentle giant. What did you do to convince Promise otherwise? I'm not saying she isn't in love with you. I'm just saying she's guarded when she's with you, like she's afraid you're going to yank the rug out from under her feet or smack her upside the head. Tranth," he ventured softly, "she...flinched when you kissed her."

Tranth blinked as a surge of panic swept through him. "I need to apologize," he admitted in a troubled rush of words.

Jarrk's lips twisted in a wry smile. "Do it before your initiation tonight."

Tranth paled at the word *initiation*.

Jarrk clasped his shoulder. "Steady, man," he teased.

Tranth shook his friend off. "She might not accept...our ways. She's human."

"Chiarra will explain."

"She might not agree to a public mating."

"It's just a ceremonial mounting," his friend soothed.

Tranth balled his fists, tried to relax then balled his fists again. "Will you challenge for her?" he asked suddenly.

Jarrk gave him a bracing smile. "Of course, if that's what you want."

"Chiarra won't mind?"

"Chiarra will understand," Jarrk reassured his friend.

"You'd honor her if you'd do that for me. She...doesn't know anyone here."

"She doesn't need to," Jarrk muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she's a human. I don't think you'll have any shortage of challengers, Tranth. Did you miss the way Blade was looking at her?"

Tranth growled deep in his chest. He'd noticed the titanium Gryffin. And he didn't appreciate the dark male's interest in his female. "How many females does Blade have now?"

"Seven." Jarrk smiled. "And they're all happy."

"He's added three since I left?"

"He took two of mine for me, after I met Chiarra."

Tranth glared at his friend. "You think he'll challenge for her?"

"If he does, he'll keep it polite," Jarrk laughed. "But I'll stand up for her as well. Will you pick any others besides Promise?"

Tranth snorted softly. "You have to ask me that? Would you have another besides Chiarra?"

Jarrk shook his head.

"She'll be my last picked," he said quietly, using the term that referred to a male's favorite mate, the one most likely to receive his seed and carry his childings.

Jarrk gave him an understanding nod just before a rustle of sound turned his head. He watched the door as the curtain of blue periwinkle parted.

Chiarra stepped through the opening. Jarrk's mate was several inches shorter than Tranth's female, her brown hair wavy and glinting with red highlights, her eyes a calm green as opposed to Promise's vibrant blue.

"Jarrk. You need to hear this." Chiarra gestured to the female who followed her – Promise.

Promise looked uncertain and self-conscious as she dragged her gaze from the pounded earth floor. "It's nothing," she argued dismissively, her shoulders stiffening as she glanced at Tranth.

"Tell them," Chiarra encouraged her gently.

Promise shrugged. "It's nothing," she repeated. "You'll think it's silly. Chiarra asked me about dreams and I mentioned the nightmares I've been having."

"Nightmares?" Jarrk queried, inviting her to continue.

"I dream about dragons," she explained.

Jarrk shifted his gaze to question his mate. Chiarra gave him a significant look.

"What are the dragons doing in your dreams?" Jarrk pressed her.

"Well," Promise answered, nervously tucking a few strands of hair behind her ear, "I didn't realize it until I got here, but the dragons I dream of are *here*, in your village." Promise hesitated then tried to explain. "*This* is the setting for my dream. In my nightmares the dragons are crashing through the lodges, their tails swinging. I see a lodge destroyed and a woman pulling her child out of the wreckage. I see men, Gryffin men, running at the dragons in pairs, trying to draw the beasts off while the females carry the little ones out of the lodges and hurry them into the forest."

For several moments there was silence as the two men stared at Promise.

"Where am I," Tranth asked hoarsely, "in your dream?"

Promise swallowed hard. "You're standing before me, between two circles of fire. Your back is turned to me and a dragon is rushing at you, its mouth open. You're alone. You're cursing as you glance at your fist."

"And then?" Jarrk prodded.

"Then I wake up," she said, "as the dragon bears down on Tranth. That's what makes it a nightmare," she told the men with an uneasy laugh. Tears glazed her eyes suddenly. "There's a dragon two feet from Tranth's face and he...he...can't fight the thing off...because he...because I—"

Tranth stepped across the lodge and folded her into his arms. "Why didn't you tell me about this?" he murmured. "Promise, my love, why didn't you tell me?"

"I did!" she argued, knuckling the tears from beneath her eyes.

He nodded. She had. But he hadn't appreciated what the dream had meant. The good news was that she was, in fact, *the one*—his perfect mate. The bad news was that, according to her dreams, she might not be the one for very damn long.

Promise shuddered in his arms. "It's...it's just a dream, right?"

Tranth held her more tightly, cutting a sharp glance across the lodge to his friend. "No," he murmured. "It isn't just a dream. It's a vision, a premonition. You're seeing

tonight's initiation ceremony." He stroked her hair and brushed his lips across her forehead.

"A premonition? What makes you think it's a premonition?"

Tranth smiled into her hair. "My poison acts as a hallucinogen when the conditions are right. Those hallucinations allow my mate to see the future. You've seen the future, my initiation tonight."

"Tonight? You're going to make me your mate tonight?"

"You're already my mate. Tonight I'm going to select you for my fold," Tranth murmured. "Those two circular fires you saw are lit just before the ceremony."

She pulled her face away. "That means you're in danger. We're *all* in danger. The whole *village*."

He nodded calmly.

"Shouldn't you be more concerned?"

"Probably. We'll make plans in a moment." He gave Jarrk a smiling nod as the silver Gryffin guided Chiarra back out through the periwinkle-draped door. "Just give me a few minutes to adjust."

Promise's blue eyes were wide as she stared up at him. "To adjust to the idea that your life might end tonight?"

He smiled. "No. To adjust to the idea that you love me."

"Of course I love you!" She sniffed as she stared up at him. "Are you only just realizing it?"

"I was afraid I'd ruined it," he told her in a low voice. "After what I did to you, I was afraid your love couldn't have survived. But now I know otherwise. Let me explain." Casting a glance behind him, Tranth hooked a stool with his foot and dragged it beneath him. Lowering himself to the stool, he pulled Promise into his lap.

"Not every female enjoys your gift of foresight, Promise. Chiarra does but many females never do. In order to see the future, a female must love her male unconditionally, heart and soul."

Promise shook her head. Her silken hair sifted across her slim shoulders. "There must be many such women in your clan."

"Probably," he agreed. "But the feeling must be returned by the male. He must love his female just as deeply."

Promise just stared at him but he felt the stiffness go out of her shoulders.

"I knew I loved you that much," he continued. "I didn't realize you felt the same way. I wanted to believe it. But I hardly dared to hope..."

The tension left her body as she laid her cheek against his chest. "You've forgiven me?" she asked in a small voice.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "Now you must do the same for me. You must forgive me for what I did to you."

Promise shook her head again, this time in remonstrance. "You didn't hurt me, Tranth. My pardon isn't required. It's not the same. It's not nearly the same!"

He gazed into her eyes. Her tears had deepened her cornflower gaze to cobalt. "You knocked down the shed because you couldn't face what you'd done to me."

"Yes," she replied uncertainly.

"Try to understand, Promise. I feel the same way. Help me erase my errors. Tell me you forgive me."

"Of course I do."

"Say it," he commanded.

Her gaze softened. "I forgive you, Tranth. And I love you."

He laid his hand, palm up, in her lap. When she covered his hand with hers he pushed out a sigh of relief. Something occurred to him at the same time. She'd knocked

down the shed. He felt the same way about the collar. "Will you let me remove the collar now?" he asked her.

Wiping more tears from her face, she nodded at him.

Chapter Twelve

As the Gryffin clan prepared for the dragon attack, Promise wondered why they didn't just temporarily desert the village. Tranth explained that, in trying to avoid their fate entirely, they might exacerbate the situation—they might run into the dragons as they fled the village, for instance. Long accustomed to the idea of foresight, the Gryffins believed the gift must be carefully managed. Jarrk called together the Gryffin Council where Promise repeated her story several times for her hosts. The Council pulled as many details from her as she could remember.

The members of the council paled when she led them to the lodges she'd seen crushed in her dream. One of them was Blade's home. The fold had five childings, all of whom would have been asleep in the lodge during Tranth's initiation ceremony.

Then the Gryffins prepared. According to Promise's dream, the dragons would attack from the west and veer off to the south. Females shepherded their childings to the lodges on the north side of the community. Jarrk's pit was turned into a playpen for a dozen youngsters, their mothers forgoing the ceremony to watch over them.

An adult male Gryffin could kill a dragon, although it wasn't easy. The thick scales that covered a dragon's body protected the creature from attack. Generally, Gryffins hunted the large creatures in pairs, one male distracting the beast while a second tried to get his barbs beneath the dragon's scales.

Female Gryffins were not included in these hunts. While the female of the species sported hackles similar to their males', they harbored no barbs beneath their calloused knuckles. And only the luckiest crossbow shot would inflict any damage on a dragon. The beast's tough scales protected everything but its eyes and snout.

The initiation went forward as planned, albeit with an uneasy, hurried edge.

The ceremonial fires were lit at dusk. Food was passed quickly around, offered by Gerak's mates on behalf of his brother. Tranth sat with Gerak and his fold while Promise knelt between Jarrk and Chiarra on the other side of the fires.

The firelight's warm color gleamed across Tranth's muscle-ripped chest and wrapped flickering fingers around his bulging biceps. Now that he was home on The Spit where temperatures were higher than back east, he'd dispensed with his long-sleeved jerkin and was dressed in only a new pair of gleaming grayish-green dragon-skin pants. The copper Gryffin looked wild and fiercely masculine, at home amongst his colorful people, his brother at his side.

Gerak's expression was severe whenever he caught Promise's gaze and she found herself avoiding that tight-lipped, accusatory glare, her stomach churning with tension and worry. It appeared as though there was at least one male amongst the Gryffins who would never happily accept her presence.

The meal was cut short and the music started up early. The toned drums pulsed alone for several seconds before they were joined by the deep notes of the bowls. That was Tranth's signal to rise and perform his mating dance.

"Here goes nothing," Jarrk muttered as the drums started into a deep, sensual rhythm.

"What do you mean?" Chiarra murmured at him from the side of her mouth.

"Tranth can't dance," he told her from behind his fisted hand.

Turning her head slowly, Chiarra stared at her mate for a few stunned seconds. Then she started laughing. "Well, he can nod, can't he?"

Promise laughed with Chiarra, glad for the release from the tension that had been building since early afternoon. Chiarra had explained earlier that a nod from a Gryffin was an invitation to mate. She'd described her first fight with Jarrk, which had come about due to her ignorance of that fact. Evidently, while listening to music – tapping her foot and nodding her head – Chiarra had accidentally "noddod up" the entire clan's

male population. Promise had been cautioned against nodding at anyone, but especially Blade, the Gryffin with the dark, piercing gaze and the gleaming charcoal hair.

“Of course he can nod,” Jarrk remonstrated with a snicker. “And it’s a very sexy nod too!”

That just set off a new round of giggles from the two females at his side.

Across the clearing, Tranth looked suddenly nervous. The first bar of music passed and then the second. The Gryffin audience shifted impatiently, watching Tranth as the musicians worked their way through several more bars. The toned drums and the music of the bowls swirled together, calling him to dance for his female. He swept to his feet abruptly and strode swiftly between the fires. Skipping the dance entirely, he stopped squarely in front of Promise, reaching out a hand as he nodded down at her.

Pressing back a mischievous smile, Chiarra whispered in Promise’s ear. Following her instruction, Promise nodded back at Tranth, matching the beat of the music as she took his hand. As she rose to her feet, several males in the crowd started growling. Chiarra had prepared Promise for this part of the ceremony. Her own mate Jarrk would issue a friendly challenge for the right to claim her. Chiarra suspected Blade would challenge Tranth as well.

After the challenges were out of the way, Promise would drop to her knees as she’d been instructed, preparing to remove Tranth’s leggings. Chiarra suggested that Promise might kiss his sporran beforehand and maybe run her lips over his hackles. After that, she’d turn on her hands and knees and offer her bottom to Tranth. As Chiarra had instructed, Promise wore nothing beneath her short wrap. Kneeling behind her, Tranth would pull her skirt up and penetrate her for all to witness. It was considered bad form for the female to come at an initiation ceremony...although it *had* been known to happen, Chiarra had explained with a very human, very superior little smile. Everyone would be impressed by Promise’s ability to restrain herself during the brief copulation.

Promise continued nodding as Tranth drew her back between the fires. He rubbed his naked chest against her breasts and pulled her close, his hands clamping her ass as he ground his erection into her smooth belly.

That's when she heard the distant crashing.

Fully prepared for the dragon attack, Tranth shoved Promise behind him. The women who were not already safely tucked away with their childings picked up the crossbows they'd brought with them and glided toward the north side of the clearing. The men paired off, ready to intercept the rampaging beasts. Jarrk and Gerak raced to Tranth's side, hoping to draw away from him the charge that Promise had foreseen.

The air was permeated with deep rumbling growls as the dragons broke into the clearing. They were every bit as terrifying as Promise had foreseen, as huge as mountains, swinging their tails like clubs as flames shot from their cannon-like nostrils, and they careered toward the fires.

Jarrk shouted as he raced left. Distracted by the silver Gryffin, the foremost dragon veered aside. Gerak dove after the beast as it turned.

For approximately one second, Promise thought the plan to change Tranth's destiny had worked. But almost immediately, a younger, sleeker creature shot through the opening straight at Promise's lover. Glancing at his doubled fists, Tranth cursed in sudden realization. Then he planted his feet and struck out with one mallet-like fist, catching the beast on its snout. Blue poison splashed into the air as his fist tore into the tough dragon hide, connecting with a smacking thud. The huge creature crumpled into a towering mound before him.

For a few seconds, Tranth stared as though stunned. Then he leapt into action, going after the remaining dragons. While his peers danced carefully around the clearing, waiting for an opening to slip their barbs beneath the dragons' thick scales, Tranth attacked them head on. When a second beast swung its head toward the copper Gryffin, he nailed it with a huge, swinging blow. Gerak and Jarrk brought down a third

beast before the remaining dragons crashed into the forest at the southern edge of the clearing.

Moments later the clearing was quiet. The Gryffin males drew slowly together, glancing at their kills, frowning with interest as they approached Tranth.

Gerak's expression was stunned as he cautiously skirted one of Tranth's kills. Tilting his head to one side, Gerak checked the animal's glassy stare. "Usually they thrash around a bit before they go down," he stated in quiet awe.

Tranth gave him a tight nod. "Evidently, my barbs deliver a lot more poison a lot faster."

Blade rolled his thick fingers into a ball and stared contemplatively at his hackles for a few seconds before transferring his gaze to Tranth's hammer-like fists. Tranth's thick, clipped barbs oozed phosphorescent blue venom.

"Well," the charcoal-colored Gryffin sighed with a crooked grin, "I guess I won't be challenging you for your female tonight, after all."

A light rumble of male laughter filled the clearing. And in that relaxed moment of shared humor, there was also a moment of forgiveness for Promise as Gerak snagged her gaze and gave her a warm smile of welcome.

The males converged on Tranth, slapping his back with deep grunting sounds of approval before moving on to start the work of cleaning their recent kills. The dragons were an unexpected windfall for the Gryffin village. Normally the clan was lucky if they brought down one of the dangerous animals in a year. They'd been gifted with three. They wouldn't have to hunt again before spring. They would, however, be kept damn busy drying and tanning.

Tranth turned to find Promise. When he gave her a grin, she threw herself into his arms.

* * * * *

After gutting their kills and performing the minimum amount of work required to keep the meat from spoiling, the Gryffins returned—under Jarrk’s prodding—to Tranth’s initiation. Tranth was thankful. He’d waited a good ten years more than was normal to finally have a female in his lodge. He was anxious that something would yet go wrong. He was so thankful to know that Promise’s love belonged to him, along with her beautiful body. Together, they returned to their place between the fires as the music started up again. But Tranth wouldn’t let Promise go down on her knees before him. Instead he knelt in front of *her*, clasping her hands as a round of startled gasps rose from his clan.

He kissed her palms then curled her fingers and brushed his lips across her knuckles. For her ears alone, he murmured, “Thank you for agreeing to be my female and for being the first, and last, female in my fold. I am so...grateful.” He released her hands and placed a soft kiss on first one breast then the other. With his hands on her hips, he turned her outward. “May I show my clan what a treasure I have in you?” he asked.

He wasn’t certain how she would respond. She knew little of their ways, other than what Chiarra had told her. And with his suggestion, Tranth was stepping outside the boundaries of Gryffin norms. He just hoped she would be able to detect the tender care in his hands, the love in his voice.

When she nodded bravely, he moved to his feet behind her, undressing her slowly, pulling away her garments until she stood exquisitely nude in front of him. Then he turned her, pulled down the front of his pants himself and lifted her onto his cock. Promise’s deep blue eyes were heavy with desire, her gaze locked on his as though he was the only person in the world. Oblivious to the deep male grunts of surprise and the romantic feminine sighs that issued from the crowd, Promise wrapped her legs around his hips. Together, they shared a long, achingly tender kiss.

When the kiss ended and she burrowed her face into his neck, he lifted her away from his cock, cradling her in his arms while Jarrk introduced Tranth’s brother with a

short speech. After Gerak's toast and a lifting of cups, Tranth carried her out of the clearing, finally slowing when they approached a dense waterfall of blue periwinkle intertwined with fragile white orchids. He stooped as he entered his lodge.

Promise pulled her face out of Tranth's shoulder and glanced around. He checked her eyes. In her gaze, he found no disapproval. Instead, she appeared to consider her new home with warm interest.

Tranth's lodge was smaller than Jarrk's. A pounded earth floor surrounded a central pit that sank a foot into the ground. Inside the pit stood a low table for eating surrounded by furs for sleeping. Tranth laid Promise on the furs then skimmed his pants down his legs before stretching his long body out beside her.

"I can hardly believe you're mine," he murmured. He propped himself on one elbow as he threaded his fingers through her long, loose hair. "I want to make love to you, to fuck you," he whispered, "as a human does." His voice was a soft murmur but there was a belying shudder of urgency that rode his words.

Promise palmed his spike-hard nipples before she smoothed her hand over his thick biceps. She gave him a little tug and he rolled on top of her as she opened her legs either side of his.

"I'm not too heavy for you?" he panted, slipping his forearms beneath her shoulders as he searched her face.

She shook her head, smiling softly up at him. Her eyes welled with emotion. "I love your weight on me, pinning me to the ground. It feels good."

His cock thickened between her legs as she uttered those words. Jutting perpendicular to his taut belly, the wide shaft fit into the hollow between her thighs. Promise reached down between their bodies, grasped his heavy shaft and guided it to her opening. He thrust against her once, seating his cock head at the back of her vagina.

"Tar," he groaned, "I can't believe what your body does to my cock. You rack me out to the point of no return. It's...torture."

"Torture?" she murmured as she stroked her hand into his ruff.

Somehow, he managed a short nod. "Very good torture," he muttered, staring down at her lips.

She dragged her fingers through his ruff.

"Very good," he rumbled like a purring dragon. He lowered his forehead to rest against hers. "Harder," he rasped.

When she raked her fingernails across his ruff, he dipped his mouth to hers, biting at her lip. Immediately, he started expanding inside her. When she rolled her hips, he drew in a sharp gasp.

"Be still," he whispered in a soft, tearing graze of sound.

Promise giggled softly. "Do you want to try something new?" she challenged him with a warm chuckle. "Something human?"

His unfocused gaze narrowed with interest.

"Move," she told him. "Move your hips. Thrust your cock at me a few times."

He stared at her uncertainly. "Are you serious?"

She nodded slowly, licking her lips suggestively, taunting him with the pink tip of her tongue.

"Stop that," he groaned. "I'm trying to concentrate."

She parted her lips and ran the tip of her tongue along the edge of her teeth. "I thought you were trying to fuck me," she murmured.

Again he groaned. "That too."

She palmed his buttocks. They were tight and hard, dampened with a light dusting of sweat as he strained for control. When she sank her nails into his ass, he pulled his hips back a few inches then drove forward again. The sensation was pure searing delight. The friction of her skintight sheath dragging against his flesh almost made him come then and there. He had to stop for a moment and gather himself. As soon as he could, he pulled his hips and thrust again. Slowly, he smiled. His lips pulled back and

he clenched his teeth as he started driving against her in earnest. "Gali Nigita," he ground out.

As he pounded between her legs, Promise opened wide, spreading her thighs for him, drawing her legs up alongside his body as he fucked her hard and deep, and she rocked to meet him, submitting to his rhythm as she fed him her soft, greedy pussy.

"When are you going to come?" he grunted. "I want to be there with you."

"Oh," she panted back, "it shouldn't be long now." Her knee nudged up against the back of his biceps and he reached for her as automatically as a human male would, hooking his forearm under her thigh and pulling her leg high and wide as he continued to shove into her.

"That should do it," Promise guttered as her eyes rolled back in her head and she started to come.

Tranth uttered a low, dark sound of victory, a mixture of deep rasping pleasure and snarling dominance. Beneath his body, she thrashed and struggled and strained. He watched her for a few seconds, smashed hard against the back of her cervix as her supple body writhed and her sweet cunt fluttered and clenched and swallowed his dick whole. Then he came as she twisted on the end of his cock.

He pulled out of her before the final surge, letting his cum spit into the puff of curls on her mound, then rubbed his cock into the iridescent puddle and spread it over the sweet cloud of cinnamon wisps. His gaze caught hers just as she was opening her eyes. His eyes would soon be closing.

"Thank you," he sighed as he gave her a crooked smile. "Thank you, my Mistress."

Promise smiled wryly as he slumped over her. She wove her fingers through the damp copper hair fanned out on her shoulder. "Tar Below," she muttered. "That's all it would have taken to get you to call me Mistress? A little human sex? I wish I'd known that three weeks ago!"

Epilogue

Promise collected her streaming hair in front of her shoulder as she climbed out of the warm geyser pool. She wrung the water from the long swathe of cinnamon silk and smiled at Chiarra.

Chiarra perched at the edge of the pool, dangling her feet in the heated water. The smooth, rounded rock on which she sat was crusted with a pale rainbow of hardened mineral deposits. She handed Promise a long string of frosty diamonds and green emeralds. Chiarra quirked a grin at her friend. "Did you see Sheena?" she murmured under her breath.

"Imitation is the best form of flattery," Promise chided her companion with a gentle smile. She tilted her head sideways as she tied Tranth's jewels into her wet hair.

On the other side of the pool, Sheena knelt beside her shorts. On her naked derriere were the marks of Blade's devotion, tattooed onto her bottom in small, curling half-moons. The crescents were an obvious attempt to reproduce the marks that Promise wore on her upper thighs. But whereas Promise's tattoos had been punched into her skin by Tranth's rounded claws, Blade must have etched them out carefully with his needle-sharp barbs.

"Are you two whispering about me?" Sheena called from across the pool. Water beaded like pearls in her pink and silver ruff.

"Just admiring your tattoos," Chiarra drawled back with a smile.

"I like 'em," Sheena defended her markings. "They're not as nice as Promise's but Blade worked hard at them. I think he deserves extra points. It's hard to concentrate at a time like that. It would have been much easier for him to just stripe me."

"They're very nice," Chiarra allowed with a grin.

"They're beautiful," Promise insisted.

"When are you going to get some?" Sheena taunted Chiarra.

Chiarra shrugged. "I'm old-fashioned," she insisted. "I like my stripes." Chiarra flopped down onto her back, fingering with one hand the wide band of thin blue lines that curved around her breast. Her eyes closed and, with her other hand, she gave her swollen belly a loving pat. "Think you'll ever go back to your farmhold?"

Promise shook her head then realized her friend's eyes were closed. "No," she answered.

"That's a lot to give up," Chiarra pointed out.

Promise shrugged. "Maybe. But I've gained a lot here on The Spit. I have friends here that I never had back home. Real friends. And while you and I have been fully accepted into the Gryffin clan, Tranth would never find the same acceptance among our people."

Chiarra rubbed her belly slowly as she nodded.

"So," Promise asked with a sneaky grin, "what are you going to name your boys?"

Chiarra squinted one eye open. "How did you know they were going to be boys?" she challenged Promise suspiciously.

"They same way you did. I dreamed about them."

A few seconds passed before Chiarra sat up suddenly, her expression concerned. "They're going to be okay, aren't they? You didn't see anything...bad, did you? Why would you dream about my boys?"

Promise smiled. "Because they're going to fall in love with my girls."

"Ah." Chiarra smiled slowly as she arched one shapely eyebrow. "Do you have any other revelations to impart?"

Promise shrugged as she picked up her clothing and backed toward the leafy fronds at the edge of the forest. "Did you know Akela?"

"Yes!" Chiarra's eyes glittered with interest.

"Well," Promise told her with a smile, "she ends up with Micah."

“Micah! Who’s Micah?”

Promise stepped into the leafy brush that circled the geyser pool. She disappeared into the forest’s many shades of green.

“What? Hey, Promise! No fair! Promise, wait up!” Chiarra jumped to her feet and hurried after Tranth’s female. “Who’s Micah?”

Promise’s voice lifted faintly from the green sward. “I already told you. He’s going to be Akela’s male.”

About the Author

I slung the heavy battery pack around my hips and cinched it tight – or tried to.

“Damn.” Brian grabbed an awl. Leaning over me, he forged a new hole in the loose belt looped around my waist.

“Any advice?” I asked him as I pulled the belt tight.

“Yeah. Don’t reach for the ore cart until it starts moving, then jump on the back and immediately duck your head. The voltage in the overhead cable won’t just kill you. It’ll blow you apart.”

That was my first day on my first job. Employed as an engineer, I’ve worked in an underground mine that went up—inside a mountain. I’ve swung over the Ohio River in a tiny cage suspended from a crane in the middle of an electrical storm. I’ve hung 30 feet in the air over the Hudson River at midnight in an aluminum boat—suspended from a floating barge at the height of a blizzard, while snowplows on the bridge overhead rained slush and salt down on my shoulders. You can’t do this sort of work without developing a sense of humor, and a sense of adventure.

New to publishing, both my reading and writing habits are subject to mood and I usually have several stories going at once. When I need a really good idea for a story, I clean toilets. Now *there’s* an activity that engenders escapism.

I was surveying when I met my husband. He was my ‘rod man’. While I was trying to get my crosshairs on his stadia rod, he dropped his pants and mooned me. Next thing I know, I’ve got the backside of paradise in my viewfinder. So I grabbed the walkie-talkie. “That’s real nice,” I told him, “but would you please turn around? I’d rather see the other side.”

...it was love at first sight.

Madison welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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