

THE ROYAL CHRONICLES 1:

PRINCE OF DESIRE

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Chapter One

Summer, 1268

Somewhere in the Highlands of Scotland

After years of searching, he had finally found her.

After weeks of watching, he would now have her.

Lucian Sinclair inhaled the cool, crisp air of the Highlands. He had waited for this day for as long as he could remember. Ever since his father, King Urises, had told his sons they must find their mates before the fifth moon of the Harvest year, Lucian had prepared for this day.

Drahcir, his homeland, was deep in the heart of the Ben Nevis Mountains. A land so secret that no one knew of its existence, and it was essential to its survival that it continue that way.

Centuries ago, a scorned Fae princess cursed their small kingdom. Since that black day, the princes and princesses of the royal house had been forced to seek their eternal mates and convince them to return to the kingdom, or the city and its occupants would cease to exist.

Already Lucian had spent nearly two years searching for his mate, but now that he had found her, he wanted to make sure he treaded slowly in approaching her. Thankfully, time moved slower in his hidden city, allowing him the time he needed to accomplish his mission.

He watched as she finished cleaning the tables in the small tavern, her glorious brown hair hanging down her back in a thick braid. Her laughter drifted to him through the open window as she and the owner's wife talked and put the last chair atop the table.

Her aura, that had led him to her, glowed bright and solid despite her meager living and tired, slender body. Soon he would take her away from all this. Very soon.

His hand flexed on the hilt of his sword as she waved good-bye to the owners and walked from the tavern. She passed within strides of him as he hid in the shadows. Lucian waited until she had ventured down the road that led to her small cottage before he whistled for his stallion. His horse came immediately, and he hurriedly mounted.

It was everything Lucian could do not to snatch her up and carry her away with him to Drahcir, yet she must enter the gates of the kingdom willingly or all would be lost. Many times he had cursed that rule the Fae had put into place, but they were bound to it just as they were bound to the hidden city.

He kept a firm hand on the reins as Aled pranced beneath him, eager for a run. Lucian counted to ten then loosened the reins to give the stallion his head. He loved the night and everything about it, both the velvety darkness and the brightness of the moon, both the sounds and the peace.

They had traveled nearly halfway to his mate's cottage when he heard the male laughter ... and then the ear piercing scream.

He knew in his soul the cry belonged to his mate. With a growl, he unsheathed

his sword and nudged the stallion into a run.

The wind whipped at his hair and cloak as the ground raced beneath him. His blood froze in his veins as he realized because he had been so careful to give his mate time, he might have sealed her death.

What Lucian saw when he came upon the group made him break into a cold sweat. Four burly, filthy men surrounded his mate. Three held her while another unlaced his trousers.

White hot fury consumed Lucian. He leaned low over his mount and charged them. It was just the surprise he needed to scatter the men in every direction. He wheeled Aled around and waited.

One of the brigands recovered and attacked. Lucian kicked out his right leg, landing the toe of his boot square in the man's nose, smashing bone instantly.

The man howled and fell to the ground with his hands over his face. Lucian stared at the other three, waiting for their next attack. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted his mate hiding behind a tree.

Isabelle knew she should run and never look back, but she couldn't take her eyes off the huge man on horseback. Even in the darkness with only the full moon for light, he was intimidating and powerful. Yet, the fools that tried to rape her continued to attack him.

She stared, spellbound, as he used his feet, sword, shield, and horse to defeat the remaining three men. A smile pulled at her lips as she looked at the four men rolling around on the ground moaning in pain.

"Serves them right," she whispered.

And then her savior turned towards her.

Isabelle slowly came to her feet but didn't move towards him. She knew these woods, and she could lose him in them if necessary.

His cloak was thrown over his shoulders to reveal dark clothing of fine quality. Even if she hadn't seen his clothing, she would know by his mount that he wasn't a peasant. Besides, peasants couldn't fight as he had.

"Thank you," she said.

He bowed his dark head before dismounting and wiping the blood from his sword on the tunic of one of the injured men. Once it was sheathed, he again looked at her. "Are you hurt?"

The deep treble of his voice surrounded her, enchanted her. She slowly shook her head.

"I am not here to harm you," he said leisurely, as if speaking to a child or a frightened animal.

In truth, Isabelle was terrified. More than she cared to admit. She had lived in the small village all her life and never once came upon any ruffians who would do her harm until tonight. And though she should be glad someone was there to aid her, he was a stranger.

"Who are you?" she asked softly.

He smiled and bowed his head as if he were introducing himself to a queen. "I am Lucian Sinclair."

As soon as he had said his name, she felt a tremor run through her, though it wasn't from terror. It was almost like ... recognition.

Good manners or not, after her attack, she wasn't too eager to trust anyone. "I've lived here all my life and know everyone, so I know you are a stranger to this village. Where do you hail from?"

"From a land far from here."

There was nothing left to ask him other than to leave, but she knew he wasn't about to do that. She had no weapon. Her only defense was the forest, and though he was on foot now, he could mount his great horse and catch her before she was able to sufficiently use the forest to her advantage.

"Let me take you home," he said and took a step toward her, his hand outstretched.

Isabelle didn't move. She had seen first hand just how quick and deadly he was with his sword and body. He was a dangerous man, a stranger, and if she wasn't careful, she might find that she stepped from a group of attackers to one man who could do more damage than the four before him.

Though she could see part of his face from the light of the moon, the smile did not deter the power emanating from him. Was he her savior or her demise? Her decision could well cost her her life.

In response to her silence, he reached down and pulled a dagger from his boot. "Here," he said as he handed it to her hilt first. "Take this. If I do anything that you do not agree with, use it."

Only a fool would refuse a weapon, and Isabelle wasn't a fool. She reached out and grasped the dagger. The dagger wouldn't do much damage, but it was a weapon and could very well give her the chance she needed if she had to escape.

He smiled. "Good. Now, since you have had such a horrible night, why not allow me to escort you home? You may ride Aled, and I shall walk," he said before she could issue a retort.

Isabelle looked around her. The men were slowly gaining their feet and scurrying away, but who was to say they wouldn't return with reinforcements. She wanted to be away from there and in the shelter of her home. Safety was something she had always taken for granted in her small village. Never again would she assume she was safe. 'Twas just another reason she hated living alone.

As always, whenever she thought of living alone, she thought of her grandparents and how much she missed them. She was tired of being alone, but even she knew that was all she had to look forward to for the rest of her life.

Though she knew she shouldn't trust the dark stranger, he pulled at her with invisible fingers. It was as if her body knew what her brain did not.

To her surprise she found herself saying, "All right." She moved away from the safety of the tree to the horse and stared up at its great height. She wasn't a short lass, but the horse was the tallest she had ever seen.

"Let me help," Lucian said just before his hands grasped her waist.

Isabelle barely had time to gasp before she was perched on top of the horse that had the gall to turn and look at her as if she were a nasty fly bothering him.

She was given no time to do anything but hold on as Lucian grabbed the horse's bridle and began to walk. Tension had her muscles wound tight. She waited for him to speak, and when he didn't, she became even more nervous.

The sounds of the night echoed around them as the moon followed them. Lucian

didn't seem to mind the darkness or the sounds as he leisurely walked down the path.

Once more she decided to question his origins. "Where *exactly* do you hail from?"

"Deep in the Highlands."

Isabelle snorted, very unladylike, but some things called for a snort. Like vague answers. "I've lived in the Highlands all my life and know most of the clans. Which clan do you hail from?"

For a moment, he didn't answer. He stopped and turned towards her. "I do not belong to a clan."

She studied him silently. It was apparent by his fine clothing and speech that he was of noble birth. His brogue wasn't as deep as many Scotsmen, but it was there.

"Everyone in the Highlands belongs to a clan."

He shrugged and gave her another smile before he patted Aled's great neck and resumed walking. By the way he evaded her question she realized he wasn't likely to tell her anything more, which made her wonder at her sanity in allowing him to accompany her home.

They continued in silence, the clapping of the horse's hooves on the dirt road the only sound that intruded on the night's stillness. By the time they reached Isabelle's cottage, she was anxious to be rid of him and the fear he installed.

Fear and excitement.

Shut up, she silently told herself. Just because she lived a dull life didn't mean she wanted Lucian's kind of excitement.

How do you know? You might like it.

Isabelle was seriously doubting her sanity. Was it a sign that she had lived too long alone that she talked to herself? And argued with herself?

In all her years of working at the tavern, she had never feared living alone. In one night, that had changed. It would always be in the back of her mind that someone lay in wait for her, and it would give Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald more reason to push her to move into town.

At least if she lived over the tavern she would have Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald to talk to, which just might save her sanity. But, in truth, she didn't wish to live over the tavern. She liked her home. Mostly because it was the only home she had ever known, but also because she had known love within its walls. Her grandparents had given her all they had and worried endlessly of what would become of her once they were gone. Isabelle had never worried much, thinking she had plenty of time before she had such a decision to make. And then the fever had struck and taken her grandparents within days of each other.

Before she could dismount, Lucian was there to help her. He was a perfect gentleman as he set her on her feet. She tried to see more of his face, but, with his back to the moon, only shadows met her gaze.

By the way he patiently waited, she knew he wanted something. "Would you like to water your horse?" she offered.

He shook his head.

"Do you need oats for your horse?"

Again, he shook his head.

She wasn't about to ask him to come inside. Regardless of the fact he had saved

her life, he was a stranger, dangerous and unknown to her.

“Then what is it you need?” she asked, trying to keep the agitation from her voice.

“Your name.”

She swallowed. It was a small thing he asked, but for some reason, she wasn't sure she wanted him to know. She glanced at the ground between them before raising her gaze back to him.

“Isabelle.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

“Would you like to come in for some tea?” She couldn't believe the words even as they left her mouth. Hadn't she just told herself she wasn't going to invite him in? Yet, here she was doing just that.

Excitement. Admit you want it.

A smile pulled at his lips, and she had the urge to see what he looked like in the light of day.

“Another time,” he answered, his deep timber raising chills along her skin. “Until next time,” he said and vaulted onto his mount.

Isabelle bit her lip as she watched him ride away. She didn't understand why she wished he had stayed.

“But he's a stranger,” she murmured as she walked into her dark cottage.

But an exciting stranger.

* * * *

Lucian ground his teeth together. It had taken every ounce of control he had to walk away from Isabelle last eve. He had wanted to stay and tell her everything, but he knew that would have frightened her off. She had already been afraid after her attack from the men, and it was because of that attack that he was once more hiding in the shadows and watching her.

He had spent the day tracking the four men who had attacked her to make sure they were no longer in the village. After that he had stayed near her cottage and followed her into the small village. He would take no chances with her life now, not after finally finding her.

His stomach growled, and with the hours ahead until she left the tavern he knew he needed to eat now. A slow smile spread across his face as he tied off Aled and walked toward the tavern.

The anticipation of seeing his mate again made his hand shake as he reached for the door. He pushed open the door and stepped inside to the heavenly smell of food cooking. A quick glance around the brightly lit room showed a few men at the bar drinking while others sat at the tables eating and conversing.

Lucian found an empty table near the door and slid into the seat. His eyes raked the room until he spotted Isabelle walk from the back, her arms laden with trenchers of food. She smiled easily to the patrons and even joked with a few.

He knew the moment she spotted him. Her body jerked slightly, and he gave her a smile as she walked toward him.

“Good evening,” he said as she slowly approached.

She swallowed and licked her lips. “I never expected to see you again.”

Lucian had to forcibly move his gaze from her lovely mouth to her beautiful dark blue eyes. "I told you last night that I would see you again."

"I know, I just didn't think you meant it," she said softly.

He leaned back in the chair and regarded her. "You are still frightened of me."

She opened her mouth to deny it, then promptly closed her mouth. She stared at him a moment before she said, "I am. Strangers always make me nervous."

"Yet we are no longer strangers. We exchanged introductions last eve."

A smile pulled at her lips. "You are so proper. We don't have much of that around here."

He loved how her eyes sparkled mischievously when she teased. "I'm not so proper."

Isabelle stared at the man before her. To say he was handsome would be an understatement. His black hair, thick with a slight wave to it, stopped just below his shoulders, with a lock falling near his right temple. A regal nose and forehead went along with his regal stance. A strong jaw line and chin, just a shadow of a beard and wide, thin lips finished off a face a sculptor could only dream of. He had eyes nearly as black as his hair, fringed with long lashes that would have made a lesser man look feminine.

Silence grew between them until she cleared her throat. "Are you hungry? We serve some of the best food around."

"I'm famished."

Somehow she knew he wasn't referring to his hunger for food. She licked her lips, and chills raced down her spine as his eyes moved to her mouth.

Excitement.

She pushed her subconscious aside and shifted from one foot to another.

"What are you serving tonight?"

"Mrs. McDonald makes excellent haggis, but she has also made a big pot of stew that will make your mouth water."

Lucian's wide mouth pulled into a smile. "I'll take the stew and ale."

Isabelle nodded and turned toward the kitchen. She found her feet hurried to return to him. She told herself it was because he was different from the men in her village, but the truth was ... he excited her. It had been so long since she had found anything exciting that she was drawn to him like the flowers to the sun.

"Isabelle, lass, are you all right?" Mrs. McDonald said as Isabelle hurried into the kitchen.

Isabelle wanted to laugh. She was anything but all right when Lucian was around. Instead, she smoothed the strands of hair away from her face. "Another order of your stew, Mrs. McDonald."

"Ach, I'm glad I made a big pot this time, though I fear I just might run out again," she said as she spooned the delicious stew into a bowl. "Tell me who it is that has made your face glow."

Isabelle blinked. "Pardon?"

"You heard me, lass. I may be old, but I still remember what it was like to have a man notice me, especially when I was interested in that man."

Isabelle giggled. "Mrs. McDonald, I hope you're speaking of Mr. McDonald."

She winked as she handed Isabelle the bowl. "Of course, lass, of course. Now,"

she said as she walked to the door. "Point him out to me so I can tell you if he's good enough for you."

"I doubt you'll be able to tell me that."

"Why is that, darling?" Mrs. McDonald asked.

Isabelle reached the door and stared at Lucian. "He's new to the village."

"Ah, a stranger. The best kind of man." Mrs. McDonald leaned out and looked around the room. "'Tis the dark man by the door. I see the way his eyes search the room, as if he is looking for something," she straightened and looked at Isabelle, "or someone."

Isabelle smiled. "Just because he's added a little excitement doesn't mean anything."

"It does if he is the same man that rescued you last night."

"He is the same man."

Mrs. McDonald mumbled something to herself and went back to her cooking. Isabelle walked through the doorway to the bar. She set the bowl of stew down and reached for a goblet.

"We're busy tonight," Mr. McDonald said from beside her.

"Aye. I will sleep well, that's for sure."

"Who is the stranger?"

She knew he would ask. Mr. McDonald always made sure to know who it was that visited his tavern. "Lucian. He's the man that saved me last night."

His wrinkled face brightened. "Then give him his meal and ale free. Anyone that would put their own lives at risk to help you deserves no less."

Isabelle nodded and took the bowl and ale to Lucian.

"Smells delicious," he said as he lifted his spoon.

"You won't be disappointed," she said and turned to leave.

"Shall I walk you home tonight?"

His question, softly spoken, sent a wave of eagerness through her. She slowly turned to face him. "Why?"

His brows lifted. "Why?" he repeated. "Could it be that I worry for your welfare?"

"Could it be that you want to take advantage of me?" she retorted.

He lowered his spoon and looked into her eyes. "If I had wanted to take advantage of you, I could have done that last eve."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know."

"You shouldn't be walking home alone in the dark. I will even let you keep my dagger."

Isabelle gasped. She had completely forgotten to return it to him last night, but she did have it strapped to her thigh. "All right. We close up in a couple of hours if you would like to wait."

He nodded and took a bite of the stew. "Excellent, just as you said."

For the rest of the evening Isabelle felt his eyes on her, not that she minded. No man had ever noticed her before. He didn't just look at her, his eyes devoured her.

And she liked it.

When they finally began to close up she watched as Lucian tried to pay Mr. McDonald. After a few minutes, Lucian gave up trying to pay and put the coins away.

Isabelle found herself hurrying to finish her duties so she could be with Lucian again.

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Lucian couldn't wait to walk Isabelle home again. This time he would go inside if she invited him. This time he would speak of who he was and where he was from.

He just prayed she was willing to listen.

"I'm done," she said as she placed the last chair atop the table.

He nodded. "Stay here while I get my horse."

When he returned Mr. and Mrs. McDonald stood at the door with Isabelle.

"Thank you again for the delicious meal and fine ale," he told them.

"We want to thank you for happening upon our Isabelle as you did. Lord only knows what would have happened had you not been there," Mrs. McDonald said.

Lucian refused to think about that and instead held out his hand for Isabelle.

"Shall we?"

She waved good-bye to the McDonald's, and he lifted her atop Aled before he took the reins and started into the darkness.

"How long are you staying here?"

"Until I find what I came for." He knew that wasn't the answer she wanted, but he didn't wish to speak of such things until he could see her face.

"More evasive answers?"

He grinned into the night. She was feisty. "I will answer all your questions, just not right now."

"Fair enough, I suppose."

"Tell me of yourself," he said. "How long have you worked for the McDonald's?"

He heard the smile in her voice as she said, "It started out helping with odd jobs when I was smaller and my grandparents were in the village. Then, as I got older and realized that the extra coin helped my grandparents, I began working there whenever they needed help. It was about a year or two ago that I began working every day. They are very good to me."

"They love you."

"Aye, they do, and I love them. They are my family now."

He wanted to ask about her grandparents and parents but decided to wait. Somehow he knew it wasn't the right time to ask. All too soon they arrived at her cottage, and he wondered if she would ask him in for tea again. He halted Aled by the door and reached up to help Isabelle down.

It was a taste of rapture to be able to touch her again, even if it was just his hands on her waist. When her hands gripped his shoulders for balance he thought he heard a sharp intake of breath, but then realized he must have imagined it.

"Thank you for escorting me home."

Lucian bowed regally. "A pleasure for sure."

"Would you like to come in for some tea?"

He inhaled deeply, not realizing until that moment how much he had wanted her to ask. "I would love to. Let me see to Aled."

Isabelle exhaled as he walked away, then spun around and rushed into the dark cottage. She walked blindly to the hearth and hastily started the fire. By the time she had water in the kettle and over the fire, she heard the door open.

She smoothed her hands down her stained brown gown. Men never made her nervous, but this one set her on edge, made her worry about things like if her hair was neat or if her gown looked good on her. She wasn't a slob, but she had also never cared if men noticed her. Men of marriageable age in her tiny village were scarce. She had known for years that she would never find a man to spend her life with and have a family.

Slowly, she turned to face her rescuer.

Her eyes traveled from his face to his wide shoulders. She swallowed as she imagined what he looked like without those fine black clothes of his.

"'Tis as if you are of the night."

His eyes narrowed as he cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"You wear all black, your hair and eyes are black, and even your horse is black."

One side of his mouth pulled up in a smile. "What if I tell you that 'tis exactly what I am?"

"I may be a peasant, my lord, but I am not a fool," she said as she turned to the kettle. She did not like being mocked.

Lucian clenched his hands in fists as he watched her. It was everything he could do to talk to her instead of crushing her to him and tasting her plump lips.

He had never believed everything his father told him. Aye, he knew he would recognize his mate, but he never expected to feel such lust for her. He had thought his father told him that just to make things easier.

His eyes raked over her slender form, a form he watched from afar for too long. Now that she was so near to him, he devoured the very sight of her from her soiled, plain gown to her long fingers that gripped the kettle handle to the profile of her face, a face that was no more peasant than he was, with her high cheek bones and stubborn chin.

When she turned and handed him a cup of tea, he looked into her dark blue eyes and wished he could tell her everything without the fear of her running away.

"What is it?" she asked, her brow slightly furrowed as she stared at him.

Her question drew his gaze to her mouth, a mouth of the darkest pink, full and inviting. "Nothing," he said as he accepted the cup and sat down at the small table. "Have you always lived here?"

She nodded as she poured herself a cup. "'Tis the only place I have ever known and will ever know."

He took a drink, amazed to find he actually liked the brew. "Are you happy here?"

She laughed as she joined him at the table. "What a strange question."

"Not so strange."

"Do you like where you live?"

Lucian sighed as he recalled his beautiful home, a home that called to him even now. "Nay, I do not like it. I love it. 'Tis a wonderful place, and a more beautiful place I have never seen. The people are friendly, the game plentiful, and the town prosperous."

She smiled wistfully as she placed her chin on her hand. "I would love to see such a place."

Lucian's breath caught in his throat. "Then I will take you there."

She cocked her head to the side and regarded him thoughtfully as she gave him an indulgent smile. "If you love this place so much, why did you leave?"

"I had to," he said as he glanced down at the cup. "I am looking for someone."

She turned her blue eyes away from him and drank. "Have you searched long?"

"Nearly two winters."

"It must be someone of great importance."

"She is."

Her eyes flew up to meet his, and for a moment Lucian thought she might ask who it was he sought. Instead, she lifted her cup and took another drink.

His patience was about to run dry. But, he recalled the words his father had told him.

"Go slowly, son. Don't rush your mate. She has to realize the truth on her own. Bringing her here against her will is worse than never finding her at all."

Yet, even the reminder of his father's words didn't stop the impatience as it usually did. Now that Isabelle was here with him, he wanted to rush back to Drahcir, convincing her on the way of just who she was. But she wouldn't believe him, and in the end he would fail, sending his beloved kingdom to doom.

"Where are your parents?" he asked, needing to turn his mind away from his quest for a moment.

"I was raised by my grandparents who died last winter. My mother died giving birth to me."

"I'm sorry. And your father?"

She shrugged. "I have never met him. What of you and your family?"

"Both my parents still live. They wait expectantly for my return."

"And I suppose you cannot return until you find who you seek." At his nod, she continued. "'Tis your sister then?"

Lucian laughed. "I've no sister. Just three brothers. One elder and two younger."

His breath caught as she closed her eyes and smiled. "To have siblings. 'Tis something I have always wanted." She opened her blue eyes and looked at him. "Do you love your brothers?"

"Very much. We would die for each other."

She ran her finger around the rim of the cup. "Your village and your family sound almost like a dream. Do you never fight?"

Lucian chuckled, recalling the many and various arguments. "Loudly and frequently. 'Tis what brothers do."

"How much longer will you search before you return to this heavenly place of yours?"

Lucian watched her closely. He knew he had to earn her trust, it was the only thing keeping him on his own side of the table. "I have another cycle of seasons before I must return."

"What will happen if you do not find this woman?"

"That's not an option I even consider," he answered before he sipped the tea.

He lowered his gaze to her hands. One held the mug, and the other lay near his hand. He reached over and covered her hand with his. Her gaze snapped to his, but she didn't pull away.

"You have nothing holding you here. Come. Return with me to my home," he urged.

"Why?" she asked, her brows knotted. "I don't even know you, and what about

the woman you seek?”

Everything, Lucian’s family and the kingdom itself, hinged on his next words.

“I found her.”

Chapter Two

Isabelle didn't know what compelled her to ask about the woman, but somehow she needed to know. But 'twas the invitation to return with Lucian that held such promise to it that she was seriously contemplating it. After all, what held her in this tiny Scottish village?

Nothing.

With her grandparents gone, the only thing she had to look forward to was working at the tavern.

To give herself more time to think, she said, "You still haven't told me where this wonderful place is."

He smiled and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his massive chest. "Deep in the Ben Nevis Mountains."

"Now I know you're jesting," she said as she finished laughing. "There is nothing in those mountains but wild animals, snow, and ice."

Instead of arguing with her, he continued to smile. "But what if I was right?"

"Nothing can survive in those mountains."

He leaned forward and placed his hands over hers again. For a moment, time stood still as she gazed into his dark eyes and something passed between them. Yet, as soon as it had come, it vanished, leaving her dazed but wanting to experience it again.

"Do you believe in magic?" he asked so somberly that she knew he was serious.

"Magic? Nay."

He frowned and sat back, releasing her hands. "That is too bad, Isabelle."

She loved the way her name rolled off his lips. Who would have thought her name could sound so wonderful. So sensual and alluring. How strange that just the sound of her name on his lips could have her contemplating things she would never dream of doing otherwise, things that made her blood heat and her heart skip a beat.

In order to try and regain some composure, she rose and faced the hearth. Either the man in her cottage was daft and needed to be put somewhere safe, or he was telling her the truth.

"You want to believe me," he said near her ear, his hot breath brushing the nape of her neck.

She had no idea when he had risen from his chair since she hadn't heard him. Chills raced down her spine at his words ... because they were the truth. She had always dreamed as a little girl that there would be more to her life. Her dreams had even gone so far as to make believe she would be taken away and made a princess.

"Let yourself consider the possibility."

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to imagine a place like the one he had described and, to her astonishment, was able to envision it clearly.

"I won't belong there," she whispered.

His voice, smooth and soft, replied, "You don't belong here."

Her eyes opened, and she turned to find his body nearly brushing hers. She inhaled and breathed in the scent of pine, sandalwood, and leather. It was a heady mix

combined with a man of such striking good looks as Lucian.

Suddenly, she found herself wishing what he said was the truth. She was tired of being alone, of having no one but herself to come home to. How she yearned to lean against him and give him all her troubles.

Yet, that wasn't reality. Reality was what was around her.

"I will take you away at first light. You need never to work in a tavern again or want for anything."

She laughed and stepped away from him only to have him gently bring her back, only this time, he left his arm around her. There was something in his eyes that told her he wasn't jesting, that he was begging her silently to believe him and give him a chance.

That something pulled at her heart, reminding her of her childhood and the fanciful dreams she had had. But her mind refused to allow her heart to rule. She was an adult now, with responsibilities like making sure she had food in her belly. Dreams were for the young and the naïve.

"Why? You only just met me. You know nothing of me."

"You are the woman I have searched for, the woman that I cannot leave here without."

His words sent a sizzle of awareness through her. He lowered his head towards her, but the thought of running from him never entered her mind. His hypnotic eyes held her spellbound. She lifted her hands to his chest, telling herself it was to help keep her balance, but really it was because she wanted to feel him. Even against the coolness of the leather jerkin beneath her hands, she felt the heat of him.

"Believe me," he whispered just before his lips touched hers.

His lips were soft, yet insistent as they nibbled and kissed her mouth. She moaned softly as she let him guide her against his body and his arms wrapped securely around her.

The kisses became more urgent, deeper with every taste, and Isabelle felt herself awaken, slowly ... fully. The fire started to burn, and her body trembled as she ached for more of Lucian.

Even her hands wanted more of him as they roamed over his thick chest, wide shoulders, and into his dark, silky hair. When his tongue swept into her mouth, she sighed as a rush of pure passion and excitement ran through her.

In that moment of such exquisite pleasure, she would have promised him anything.

Lucian knew he couldn't continue to kiss her as he was and remain in control. He was still amazed to find he wanted her as much as he did, yet "want" was mild compared to how he truly felt.

He ended the kiss and smiled to himself when he heard her groan in irritation. With his hands, he smoothed back the tendrils of hair that had come loose of the braid and tilted her head up to him.

"I know you felt what I did," he said.

She licked her swollen lips, nearly sending him to his knees with need.

"Oh, aye," she agreed. "I felt it."

Lucian tried to control his ragged breathing. "Then you also feel the connection between us."

He held his breath as she cocked her head at his words.

For several heartbeats, she didn't speak. He feared he had gone too far, said too much too soon and had lost her forever. But it wasn't just the fear of losing his home and sending the kingdom into nothingness, it was not being able to be with Isabelle as well. Though he was just coming to know her, already he felt as if he had known her his entire life.

When she stepped out of his arms, he clenched his jaw to keep silent and let her think. It wasn't in his nature to have patience, but more was at stake here than his pride.

"I do feel something," she finally said.

He sighed in relief but saw the look of doubt on her face that said she was far from convinced. How could he tell her that once they had found each other, they would forever yearn for the other, only to be whole together?

She walked around the small kitchen rubbing her neck. "I don't know who you are."

It was time, he realized. After a deep breath, he sank into a chair at the table and folded his hands over his stomach as he regarded her. "Then I will tell you. All of it."

"Really?" she asked, her brows raised. "Then, begin. Please," she said and took the chair opposite him.

"I am a prince of Drahcir."

Her lips flattened, and she shook her head. "I've never heard of it. I thought you said you were from the Ben Nevis Mountains."

This was going to be more difficult than he thought. "I am. You have never heard of the kingdom because 'tis hidden from the world."

"Why?"

"Because 'tis a special place, a place that cannot be opened for just anyone. What makes it special is the people that reside there. If the other kings, lords, and mercenaries find my home, the kingdom will be overrun with the worst kinds of people."

"And your people will be driven out, leaving Drahcir to the very people you are hiding from," she finished.

"Not hiding exactly," he said. "The kingdom has been in existence for centuries. It wasn't hidden on purpose, but its location makes it difficult to get to, which keeps it hidden."

She nodded. "That makes sense, I suppose. Yet, there is more, aye?"

"My family, the Sinclair's, have always led the kingdom. However, there was one of us that went too far."

Isabelle chuckled. "Which king did he anger?"

Lucian swallowed and glanced away. "Not a king. A princess."

She leaned forward eagerly. "Don't keep me waiting. I love a good tale."

"She was a princess of the Fae."

Isabelle laughed and then realized that Lucian hadn't joined her. Her smile faded, and she leaned back in her chair. "A Fae?"

"Aye," he said seriously. "They do exist."

This was too much for Isabelle to believe. First, a hidden kingdom and now the Fae. But, no matter how much she told herself to rise and demand that he leave, she couldn't do it. Everything about him intrigued her, but the tale, as fanciful as her best daydreams, urged her to discover more.

After a moment, Lucian continued with his tale. "The princess and my ancestor

fell in love, or so the Fae thought. In truth, my ancestor merely dabbled to see if he could.”

“Not a very noble gesture,” she murmured.

“True. He had no idea of the consequences of his actions until afterwards. Once the princess discovered his treachery, she cursed our kingdom from then until the day this world no longer exists.”

Isabelle found her gaze riveted on Lucian and the sadness in his black eyes. Even if she didn’t believe him, which she wasn’t sure of, he did believe it.

Every word.

“And the curse?” she asked. “What is it?”

“Every prince and princess of the Drahcir must find their mates and return with them by a designated time. If even one fails, the kingdom will vanish. For all eternity.”

Her heart hammered in her chest as she repeated his words in her head. *Mate. Mate. Return to Drahcir. Vanish. Mate.*

Slowly, her gaze found his and saw the truth in his eyes. “How do I know what you’re saying is the truth?”

“Come here,” he said and held out his hand.

She rose and took his hand. He pulled her onto his lap and cradled her head with one hand.

“Know the truth,” he whispered just before his mouth descended on hers.

In his sweet, intoxicating kiss, Isabelle let herself go. She then saw the truth of his words and their bond, a bond that was forged eons ago, a bond that even death couldn’t break.

Her blood heated and pooled between her legs, sending a fire through her. She squeezed her legs together in an attempt to end the growing pressure, but the movement only caused a ripple of delight to lance through her. Her nipples hardened, and her breasts became full as she wished for his hands to move over her body.

She knew she was wicked to want his touch, his kiss, but her body was in a near fever pitch as it craved more of him. And it frightened her.

This time she ended the kiss and pulled back to look at him. “How did you find me?”

He smiled and ran a finger down her cheek. “Though the princess cursed us, a Fae took pity on us and gave us the ability to see our mates by an aura. Yours is especially bright.”

She returned his smile and ran her hands through his silky hair. “An aura? What is that exactly?”

“It is a special light around you.”

“And what does it do?”

“Besides showing me who you were? Not much.”

Her body pulsed with need, and she squeezed her legs together again and nearly sighed at the pleasure that caused. “Then it’s worthless,” she said.

“Never,” he murmured and leaned close to her neck.

Just when she thought he would only tease her, his hot tongue snaked out and licked her, leaving a trail of hot, wet desire across her skin.

Her sex throbbed, and her mind forgot everything but the man before her. She inhaled his exotic scent and wondered if he knew how to ease the ache within her. No

man had ever touched her before, but now she wanted, nay yearned, for Lucian's touch.

She licked her lips and tried to concentrate on their conversation. "So all you had to do was go around looking for an aura?"

"Hmmm," he murmured as he nuzzled her skin behind her ear. "Isn't that enough?"

"More than enough."

He pulled back to look at her. "Then will you return with me?"

Isabelle saw the doubt and worry reflected in the dark depths of his eyes. She cast a glance around her small cottage before returning her gaze to Lucian. "As you said, there is nothing holding me here."

For a moment she worried if she was doing the right thing, then the desire coursing through her made her remember that no other man had made her feel this ... special or wanted before.

He smiled and pulled her against his chest. "I vow you won't regret your decision."

This time his kiss was possessive, demanding and erotic. It set her blood afire and singed her with its intensity. Her body cried out for more of his touch. One moment she was sitting in his lap, the next they were on her small bed, his delicious weight on top of her.

His mouth scorched a trail from her lips down her throat to her neck. Delicious sensations rippled through her body with his every touch, every kiss.

It was as if he knew exactly how to touch her.

And *where* to touch her.

Somehow her gown had been removed, leaving her only in her chemise, stockings, and shoes. With just a flick of her feet, Isabelle kicked off her old tattered shoes and leaned her head back so Lucian's mouth could continue to do wicked, delightful things to her.

Her body didn't seem to be her own. Never in her right mind would she have allowed a strange man into her home at night, not to mention into her bed. Yet, it seemed right to be with Lucian, almost as if it had been destined.

He rose up and kneeled beside her as his eyes roamed over her body. Her nipples puckered and hardened beneath his gaze. Her breasts grew heavy and full as if they awaited as anxiously for his touch as the rest of her did.

As if he knew exactly what she wanted, his hands cupped her breast and rolled a nipple between his fingers. Flames of desire lapped at her, pulling her already burning body beneath the flames. His fingers squeezed her nipples until the pleasure blurred with pain and she felt moisture run between her legs.

And then his hands were gone. She opened her eyes to see him grip her chemise at the neck with both hands, then with one yank, ripped it in two.

Now the only things shielding her were her thick wool stockings.

Lucian inhaled deeply as he gazed upon the perfection that was his mate. She was glorious. Her breasts were large, but not too large that they overfilled his hands. Her waist narrow, hips wide, and legs long and lean, just perfect to wrap around his waist as he thrust inside her.

His body shook with the need to bury himself in her, and her response to his touch had nearly made him spill himself several times.

He reached for her leg and lifted it towards him and placed her heel on his shoulder. Then he reached up and rolled her woolen stocking from her leg. He threw the stocking over his shoulder and gently placed her leg on the bed before he reached for the other and repeated the process.

Once she was completely exposed to him, he spread her legs and looked at her sex swollen and throbbing. He ran a finger lightly between the skin that joined her thigh and the first curl that hid her sex.

She sighed and opened herself further. Lucian grinned and repeated the gesture on the other side. Again and again his hands touched near her sex, but never on what ached the most. Moments later she was thrashing on the bed moaning his name and begging for release.

Lucian had her just where he wanted her.

He shifted his rod which had grown painfully hard as he teased Isabelle. His hands yearned to delve into her core. She was ready for him, and he was more than ready for her.

Then his finger lightly grazed her swollen clit. She cried out and gripped the covers in her fist as her back arched. Lucian repeated the move, except this time he swirled his finger around the nub before dipping a finger into her wet sheath.

It was pure torture for him to keep from removing his clothes and plunging in her, but his control was fast slipping with each moan and gasp that came from her lovely mouth.

He leaned up and took her pert nipple in his mouth and ran his tongue over the hardened peak. She groaned and ground her hips against his hand. He slipped another finger inside of her, stretching her tight sheath.

Isabelle knew she was going to split open at any moment. The sensations running rampant through her had her body spiraling into a frenzy of desire and passion. Each lick, touch, taste of Lucian had her panting for more. She never knew she could feel such emotion, and she never wanted it to stop.

She loved the feel of his fingers inside her, but wanted more of him, all of him. Her breath locked in her throat when his hands found her breasts again. His expert fingers plucked and pinched her aching nipples until she was mindless with yearning.

Then his hot tongue replaced his fingers. He began suckling and lapping at her nipples, bringing to a point where she needed him--deep inside of her. When she opened her eyes and found him feasting on her breasts, her stomach clenched, and she throbbed deep inside her sex.

Witnessing him at her breast was so ... erotic she found she wanted to explore him as he had done her. With great effort, she moved her arms and pulled his head up. His black eyes were glazed with desire as they gazed at her.

"My turn," she said as she pushed him up.

His fingers pinched her nipple once more, and she felt a moment's remorse until he took off his black leather jerkin. The neck of his tunic plunged deep giving her an ample view of his wide, sculpted chest.

She moved toward him on her knees and reached for his tunic. Slowly, she pulled the garment from his trews and lifted it over his head before she tossed it carelessly to the ground.

Her breath caught in her throat at the specimen before her. He wasn't just

defined, his muscles rippled and glowed bronze in the firelight. Her hand reached out and touched his warm flesh.

A sizzle of awareness passed through her. She raised her gaze to Lucian and found him watching her.

“’Tis as if my body already knows you,” she whispered.

“Because it does.”

She swallowed, not sure she could really comprehend just what was happening to her. Before he could say more, she leaned forward and placed a kiss on his collarbone. His quick intake of breath made her smile. She had no idea what she was doing, having never been with a man before, but her body seemed to know exactly what it wanted.

As she placed kisses along his neck and shoulders, her hands roamed at will from his thick chest to narrow waist to his bulging arms.

And never once did Lucian stop her.

Not even when she reached for the laces of his trews. She had never felt so in control before, and she loved it. When he rose to remove his boots and trews, she reclined on the bed watching each delicious inch of him revealed to her.

When he stood as naked as she, she sucked in her breath at the length and width of him that would push through her maidenhead.

“You’ve never had a lover,” he said.

She heard the excitement in his voice as she shook her head.

He leaned down until his hands were on either side of her and his face mere inches from hers. “Good,” he said just before he claimed a kiss that curled her toes and promised delights she had only dreamed about.

The kiss drained her of everything at the same time life surged within her, growing and consuming her until all she thought about, cared about was Lucian and the fire he had started in her body.

Her arms wound around his neck as she gave in to his kiss, releasing every doubt she had of him and his tales. His rod pressed into her stomach, its thick, hard length reminding her just what her body craved.

Yet, Lucian didn’t allow her that pleasure. Instead, he brought her body back to the frenzied peak with just his fingers and mouth.

This time his mouth found her sex. Isabelle nearly came off the bed when his mouth touched her sex. The cry of pleasure died in her throat as waves upon waves of bliss rolled through her. All she could do was hang on as Lucian continued his wonderful assault, her pleasure growing with each breath and lick.

And just when she was about to reach the pinnacle ... he stopped.

“Nay,” she cried and reached for him.

“Easy, love,” he whispered near her ear.

And then she felt the tip of him enter her. She opened her legs wider, eager to feel his fullness, filling her, stretching her ... completing her.

Inch by agonizing inch he pushed into her. Isabelle wrapped her legs around his waist urging him on, but he ignored her. When he reached her maidenhead, he stopped and rotated his hips.

Isabelle sighed and ran her hands down his arms. “I need you. I need to feel you inside of me.”

He responded by moving his hips again, rocking gently inside her. She knew he

wasn't fully sheathed, but the sensations his movements caused were too good to stop him.

Isabelle found herself rising to the summit again. This time she wasn't going to let Lucian stop. She wanted him like she had never wanted anything in her life.

He pulled out of her and rubbed the tip of his rod on her swollen sex, inciting her already trembling body. In and out he continued his torture until her body easily accepted him. By this time Isabelle was on the edge. Her body shook with anticipation, and to her relief, the next time Lucian drove into her, he pierced her hymen.

The pain was quick and fleeting. Her state of arousal had quickly pushed aside everything other than the feel of him deep inside her.

"My God," Lucian whispered in awe.

Isabelle silently agreed. Her hips rocked against his, and he quickly found a tempo. Only moments later, Isabelle's body exploded with her first climax as waves upon waves of pure delight pulsed through her.

Lucian watched in amazement as Isabelle's body clenched around him. Her eyes were dazed with pleasure and excitement. Knowing he had given her that allowed him to give in to his own desire. He pumped faster, harder, and felt his own orgasm coming quickly.

He wasn't ready to end the exquisite pleasure yet though. Even when Isabelle's body stopped clenching around him, she lifted her hips and met him thrust for thrust as he plunged into her.

Sweat glistened his body as his pleasure built. When he knew he was about to give in to the desire, he stopped and leaned down to suckle at her ripe breasts. Her sighs turned into moans, and her hips began to move against him.

He had to grab hold and stop her from moving lest he spill his seed before he was ready. And he wasn't near done with her yet.

Lucian pulled out of her long enough to move Isabelle until she was lying sideways on the bed. He stood on the side and lifted her legs until they wrapped around his waist and then he slowly entered her again. When he was fully seated, he pulled her against him until only her back rested on the bed as he began to thrust deep inside of her.

He knew with this being her first time she most likely wouldn't find pleasure twice, but he was going to make sure she enjoyed their coupling. He braced a hand on her stomach and let his thumb find her sex buried deep in her dark woman's hair. He stopped thrusting and slowly circled her clit with his thumb. Deep inside her sheath he felt her clench around him.

She cried out and moved her hips, begging for more.

Lucian wasn't going to deny her. He began to move his thumb back and forth over her swollen clitty as he began to move until her moans turned into gasps. He began to thrust faster, harder knowing he was on the verge of his own orgasm and all the while thumbing her sex.

Just when he thought he would reach his own pleasure without her, he heard Isabelle cry out. He smiled to know he had brought her to climax again, and before his own.

When his orgasm claimed him, he buried himself deep until he touched her womb. Only then did he pour his seed into her, claiming her body, heart and soul.

Chapter Three

Isabelle woke to the most amazing feeling of contentment. She opened her eyes and found herself gazing upon Lucian's handsome face as he slept. The morning sun's rays spilled through the cracks in the shutters, falling across his face and amazing body.

She thought back over the night to see if she had regrets and was pleased to discover there were none. As she rolled to her back she felt the soreness between her legs and smiled. She had opened herself up, allowed herself to do things she had never thought she would do.

And it had felt wonderful.

Slowly, so as not to wake Lucian, she rose from the bed and spotted her blood. Her virgin blood. She hastened to clean herself and found a new chemise before finding stockings, gown, and shoes.

She built up the fire and put another kettle of water on to heat as she walked outside to feed the chickens and Lucian's horse, Aled.

The small stable was in desperate need of repair, something she couldn't do herself, nor could she afford to hire someone to mend it for her. The meager living she made working at the tavern put food in her belly but left her with nothing in which to save. She knew it was only a matter of time before she had to leave the only home she had known and rent the small room in the attic of the tavern.

It wasn't that she didn't like Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald, but she was used to being on her own with no one to answer to. That would all change the moment she agreed to rent the room.

But even she had to face reality for it was closing in on her like a battering ram to a castle gate.

She patted Lucian's giant black horse as she passed by him to get the oats. After filling the bucket, she placed it in his stall and checked his water. Despite his size, he was a friendly fellow, and she stayed a moment to pet him.

That's when she spotted Lucian's saddle.

It was very unusual not only in the color, which was black, but in the design. The symbols were those of the ancient Celts that used to roam Scotland.

Her hand hesitantly reached out and touched the symbols. Heat met her fingertips, and she hastily jerked them away.

Magic.

Isabelle glanced around her. The word had been whispered in her ear as if someone had been standing right behind her. Yet it was only she and Aled in the stable. She swallowed and moved away from the saddle to find the horse staring intently at her, as if he were trying to tell her something.

His unblinking gaze unsettled her, and she quickly ran from the stall and out of the stable. She leaned against the outside of the stable and tried to slow her racing heart. Her gaze found her cottage as her thoughts turned to the mysterious man inside.

"I've made a dreadful mistake," she whispered.

* * * *

Lucian rolled over with a smile on his face. His hands searched the bed for Isabelle only to come up empty. He opened his eyes to find the fire lit and a kettle of water on to boil.

He stretched his arms over his head before he swung his legs over the bed. He had intended to make love to her again this morning, but realized she might be a little sore after the previous night. As he reached for his clothes, he spotted the marks on his arms.

His gaze was riveted on the black symbols that stretched from his elbow to his shoulder -- the same symbol that was on his saddle and on his parents' arms.

The symbol that meant he was now tied to Isabelle and she to him.

He had known it would happen, but seeing the mark on his body meant he had nearly completed his quest. He hadn't failed his family or his people. The sooner he returned home the better, which meant they needed to leave that day.

Finally he would return to his much-loved kingdom and his family. He washed himself off and thought of his mother's smile and his father's teasing that was sure to follow his return. As he pulled on his trousers he could well imagine all three of his brother's waiting to taunt him about being the last to return to Drahcir with his mate.

Just as he finished fastening his jerkin, his smile slipped. Something was wrong. Isabelle was frightened and anxious, as if she were running from something.

Lucian bolted for the door and jerked it open to see Isabelle dashing down the path to the village. He looked around and not spotting a physical threat realized that Isabelle was running from him.

For a moment he couldn't fathom why she would suddenly run from him after the night they had shared, but he didn't allow himself more than that moment.

He turned to the stables and ran inside to release his mount. Lucian took hold of his horse's mane and swung onto his back as he nudged Aled into a run. He didn't try to grab Isabelle, instead he ran Aled in front of her.

"I must get to the tavern," she said, not meeting his gaze.

Lucian's heart felt as if it had been ripped from his chest. Where had he gone wrong? She had agreed to return with him last night. Her cries of pleasure had told him she willingly took his seed and gave him her virginity.

So what had happened?

"Why do you run from me? Do I frighten you?" he asked, praying that he was wrong.

Slowly her gaze rose to his. "Aye, you do. 'Twas as if last night there was some type of spell on me, and this morning I saw everything as it should be."

"Meaning that you won't return with me, that you don't believe my words."

She shook her head and backed up a step.

Lucian slid from his mount. "You believed last night."

"I wasn't myself last night."

"So, you regret the passion between us."

She hesitated. "Nay. I never expected to experience anything like that in my life."

The mark on Lucian's arm began to throb signaling that what Isabelle said was the truth. She might have enjoyed the passion, but she would not leave her home.

"Is there nothing I can say that will convince you my words are the truth?" he

asked.

“Nay.”

He felt as if someone had just hurtled a dagger into his heart and twisted the blade. “Don’t run from me. ‘Tis your home. I will leave,” he said and started for the house.

There was no need to see if Aled followed him, for he always did. It was difficult for Lucian not to look at Isabelle though. He prayed she returned to the cottage so he could have one last time to convince her.

Lucian’s mind raced with possible alternatives for him and Isabelle, but if she refused to return to Drahcir then all would be for not. He entered the stable that was all but falling down and grabbed his saddle. His hand smoothed over the intricate symbols that had been chiseled into the leather. He and his three brothers had each been given such a saddle upon their sixteenth summer. The saddle reminded them of the curse and just what was at stake.

He brought the saddle to Aled and began to fasten it. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Isabelle leaning against the stable watching him.

“If my words and the passion between us did not convince you that what I speak is the truth, I ask your forgiveness.”

“Why?”

His hands stilled. He didn’t want to tell her, but it was only fair after their night together and the symbols that now marked them. He turned to look at her.

“I did not tell you everything last eve for I had hoped you meant it when you said you would return with me. Now, I have no choice since we have shared our bodies. Not only will my kingdom cease to exist if you do not return with me, but you will never find happiness in another man’s arms.”

Her eyes widened at his words. “Are you so daft that you will resort to such hateful words just because I changed my mind?”

“I wish it were as simple as that. Look at your left arm, Isabelle.”

She heaved a great sigh and crossed her arms over her chest. “Nay.”

Lucian nodded his head and began to remove his jerkin and tunic. “Look,” he said as he pointed to the symbol on his left arm. “You will have one as well.”

“It must have been there last night,” she said as her arms dropped and confusion marred her stunning face.

Lucian hated the doubt and fear in her beautiful blue eyes. “You touched my body. You tell me. However, if you really want to know, check your arm.”

For several heartbeats he and Isabelle stared at each other. Silently, he prayed that she would look and then believe.

Isabelle could stand it no longer. The symbol on Lucian’s arm matched the one on his saddle, the swirls and knotwork an exact replica. She didn’t want to look at her arm for fear of just what she would find. And what would she do if there was a symbol that matched Lucian’s? Would she then agree to go with him?

If his words were true and she would never find happiness in the arms of another man, that meant she would spend the rest of her life alone.

All because of her fear.

Before she changed her mind, she rushed into the cottage, yanking her overtunic off as she went. With a vicious jerk, she pulled her chemise down to check her arm. She

gasped and fell onto the bed when she saw the black mark that ran from her elbow up to her shoulder.

“Do you believe me now?” Lucian asked from the doorway.

She slowly raised her gaze to him. “How?”

Lucian shut the door and sat beside her on the bed. “’Tis our mark, a mark that lets everyone know that our mates have truly been found. No matter how much you try to deny it, Isabelle, your soul knows the truth.”

Never had so much doubt filled her, not even when her grandparents died and left her alone. There was no denying the mark on her arm. It was as if her soul had branded her. And in a way, that’s exactly what it had done. She wasn’t ready to believe Lucian, or believe in him, but apparently her soul did.

Had this happened to anyone else, she would have dismissed the mark, giving any number of explanations as to how it could have appeared. But this was her own body. She knew her body, and the mark, a series of intricate knots and spirals that raced up her arm to her shoulder had never been there before she had given herself to Lucian.

Magic or not, she was most certainly branded. The question was, did she want to put to the test the possibility that she would spend the rest of her life alone? Though she might have told herself she had expected to be alone, after a night with Lucian, she knew she would never settle for a lonely life now.

He sat patiently waiting on her response. She knew what he wanted, but her apprehension stopped her from readily agreeing to go with him.

She opened her mouth to tell him just that when his head jerked up and his body stiffened.

“What is it?” she asked, but he held up a hand to halt her words.

Three heartbeats later, there was a light knock on her door. “Mr. MacDonald,” she exclaimed and hurriedly pulled up her chemise and threw on her gown. “I was supposed to be at the tavern already.”

“Fix yourself,” Lucian said and rose to go to the door.

As Isabelle hurried to make herself presentable, she heard Lucian’s deep voice as he opened the door.

“Can I help you?”

“Ah ... I’m looking for Isabelle,” Mr. MacDonald said, the uncertainty ringing loudly in his tone.

“She will be with us in just a moment,” Lucian said as he shut the door behind him and joined Mr. MacDonald outside.

Isabelle smiled as she ran her hands over her wild hair and hastened to put it into a braid to keep it out of her face. Her curiosity got the better of her, and she went to the window and peered at the men through the crack in the shutters.

“Is she all right?” Mr. MacDonald asked.

“She is.”

Mr. MacDonald’s eyes narrowed. “You haven’t harmed her, have ye? I might be getting on up in years, but I can still take a man down if need be.”

To give Lucian credit, he didn’t laugh in Mr. MacDonald’s face. Instead he smiled. “I have in no way harmed Isabelle, and as soon as she comes outside, you will see that for yourself.”

And then Lucian looked right at her.

Isabelle jerked away from the window and blinked. How could he really have known what she was doing? It troubled her more than the lie she knew she would have to tell Mr. MacDonald.

She walked to the door and found her hand shook as she reached for the handle. Mr. MacDonald's head swiveled to her as soon as she stepped out of her cottage. She gave him a smile and was relieved when he returned it.

"Isabelle, lass, we were worried about you," he said as he came towards her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. MacDonald. I was just about to send word to you and Mrs. MacDonald."

What few gray hairs he had on his head danced in the breeze. Though his face was wrinkled, his eyes still held an intelligent spark in them that said he could see past her lies.

"Just tell me that you're all right," he said softly. "You're like a daughter to us, lass, and we worry over you."

Isabelle looked over Mr. MacDonald's shoulder to Lucian who stood petting Aled. She knew he heard every word. She wasn't afraid of Lucian, and if she asked, she knew he would leave.

She returned her gaze to Mr. MacDonald. "Forgive me. Will you and Mrs. MacDonald be able to handle the tavern today? I need some time to ... think."

He waved away her words. "Of course. We have little Timmy. We'll put him to work," Mr. MacDonald said with an easy smile.

Isabelle laughed as she thought of Timmy, the baker's son, who was always looking for something to do that would keep him away from the hot ovens. "Thank you."

For a long moment Mr. MacDonald stared at her. "Be happy," he said softly and turned on his heel to walk away.

Isabelle watched him go. His parting remark echoed loudly in her head. Happy. What would make her happy? Would staying here working and living in the tavern with the hope of finding a husband very slim? She didn't mind the hard work, it was part of life, but the loneliness is what ate away at her, and Mr. and Mrs. McDonald were advanced in years. It wouldn't be long before they too left her. Then where would she be?

Happiness. It was something she had always had as long as her grandparents had been there. Up until that moment she hadn't even thought of what would make her happy, and it was a hard question to answer.

Lucian would make you happy.

Would Lucian?

She knew without a doubt that being in his arms and the passion that was so strong between them swayed her. Yet, was it enough for her to throw caution to the wind and leave with him--a stranger, because for all his words and their night together, he was still a stranger.

Chapter Four

Lucian watched Isabelle closely. There was no denying that Mr. MacDonald cared greatly for her and that she returned the emotion. It was a difficult decision that she had to make, one that would have to be made very soon. He hated to press her, but he wanted to return to Drahcid as soon as possible.

“Isabelle?”

Her gaze snapped to him. “Everything is all right. I told him I needed some time to think.”

He knew she hadn’t wanted to lie to the old man, so she had managed to work it to where she hadn’t needed to. “How much time do you need?”

“How much time do I have?”

Lucian stepped away from Aled and walked toward Isabelle and the cottage. In all honesty, he could stay with her for a few months before he had to head back to Drahcid.

“I will give you two days.”

“Two days?” she repeated. “How can you expect me to decide such a monumental decision in so short a time?”

He shrugged as hopelessness began to settle around him like iron shackles. “You know the answer now, you just refuse to say it. If you haven’t come to realize that now, you won’t in two days, two weeks, two months, or two years.”

“What you ask for is impossible,” she said and whirled around to return to the cottage.

Lucian gave it all of a heartbeat before he followed her. He had seen the fire in her eyes, the anger that sparked deep within her, but if she wanted anger, he could give her anger over the injustice of his kingdom and his family.

He threw open the door and found her facing the fireplace, her arms wrapped about her waist as she stared into the flames. With a jerk of his wrist, he slammed the door and stalked towards her. If her mind wouldn’t listen to his words, maybe her body would.

His hands itched to feel her satiny skin and his body burned to be buried in her. With his rod already hard and aching, he didn’t turn aside the desire that begged to be released.

With a growl, he gripped Isabelle’s shoulders and turned her to face him as he backed her up against a wall. Her wide eyes stared at him, watching him to see what he was about.

“If you won’t to listen to your heart, then listen to your body,” he said just before he ravaged her mouth. When she returned the intensity it nearly set him afire.

The more he had of her, the more he wanted. He feared that it would never be enough, and with that fear grew another--what if he had to return to Drahcid alone?

He pushed aside those morbid thoughts as he thrust his tongue deep into Isabelle’s mouth. He expected her to resist, yet she pulled her arms out of his grasp and wound them about his neck as she sighed into his mouth.

Lucian lost all thought as his hands moved quickly and efficiently to remove her clothes until she stood naked before him. Just as quickly, he shed his own and reclaimed her sweet mouth for another intoxicating kiss.

He took her hands in his and stretched her arms to the side as he molded his body to hers. Her full breasts pressed into his chest as he continued to kiss her, taking her lips again and again in kisses that were quick and light, long and sensual, and deep and demanding.

And she responded to each one in a way that had Lucian craving her, needing her so desperately that for a moment he couldn't breathe.

His hunger for her was quickly outweighing everything. So much so that if she refused to return with him, he knew he would find it next to impossible to leave her. He was hers just as much as she was his.

Mates didn't abandon each other.

Lucian pulled away from her. Her lips were swollen, her lids heavy and her eyes filled with such longing that in that moment, had she asked, he would have sworn to stay with her forever, forsaking everything.

"Lucian," she whispered and leaned down to rain kisses on his neck and chest.

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back. She was a temptress, a siren that lured him with her enticing face and alluring body.

"I need you," she said and rubbed her hips against him.

Lucian hissed at the contact of her soft body against his rod. It was enough to nearly make him spill his seed.

She looked deep into his eyes. "Take me now."

It was a request he couldn't refuse.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. As soon as she was on it, he rolled her to her stomach and began to kiss down her back to her round buttocks. His hands followed his mouth, touching every part of her.

With the slightest movement, he pulled her to her knees. He leaned over her, pressing his aching rod into her as his hands found her breasts. As he plucked at her nipples, Isabelle began to move her hips against him.

He shifted his hips and entered her hot, wet sex. He couldn't stop the moan of satisfaction at filling her. With his hands on either side of her hips to keep her still, he slowly moved in and out of her.

Her breathing hitched, and little cries of pleasure poured from her mouth each time he filled her. And each time he filled her, he was coming closer and closer to the edge of his own climax.

He reached around and found her sex and the hard nub. With the slightest touch, he ran his thumb across it and was rewarded with a tremor that shook her body. He repeated the movement and felt her clench around him.

She was close, but not close enough. He straightened and while he continued to move within her, his hand found her back and ran the length of her spine until he reached her buttocks. Then, his finger moved down between her rounded cheeks.

Isabelle was under a haze of pleasure so profound that she could barely remember her own name. Each time Lucian's hands or mouth touched her, she melted. He was an expert at lovemaking and knew just where to touch her to send her spiraling into bliss.

Even now as he pumped in and out of her, she ached for more of him. She was

mindless to where his hands roamed. Until his finger skimmed between her butt cheeks. She barely had time to register where his hand was before it was back again, this time a finger lightly pressing against the tight bud of her anus.

She didn't have time to ask him to stop and didn't know if she wanted him to, since his thrusts came faster, harder. And with it, his finger entered her.

A cry tore from her throat at the pleasure that splintered through her. With just the slightest wiggle of his finger, an orgasm so intense, so incredible consumed her.

As the last tremors of her climax faded, she heard Lucian roar, and his hands gripped her hips as he buried himself in her, giving his seed to her womb. He collapsed on top of her and for long moments they lay silently in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

Isabelle could still feel him inside of her. Each time they came together was more pleasurable, more intense. She had never thought of herself as wicked, but when she was near Lucian all she could think about was their bodies joining again.

When he pulled out of her, she turned and looked at him. "That was ... incredible."

A satisfied smile pulled at his lips. "Liked that did you?"

"Very much," she admitted and pulled him down next to her. "Is there more?"

He nuzzled her neck. "So very much more it would take me a lifetime to show you."

She didn't respond to his words, but they stayed with her, even as she dozed in his arms.

A lifetime.

Wasn't that what she wanted?

* * * *

Lucian held Isabelle tightly to him as her breathing evened into sleep. It was only the second time they had made love, yet it was more intense than the first. And still he hungered for her. He wanted her again, right now, but couldn't wake her so soon after their bout of lovemaking.

He had thought that making love to her again would show her that she couldn't live without him, but all it had done was show him he couldn't live without her. He was going to have to face the truth, that if she decided against returning with him to Drahcir, he would have to choose whether to stay with her or return to certain death.

His family and kingdom or his mate?

The mark on his arm, that even now glowed nearly blue, dictated that his life was now in the hands of his mate. He couldn't ignore that. He was bound to his mate through each lifetime. To forsake her now would have dire consequences, but so would forsaking his family and Drahcir.

His thoughts took him to his family. He missed his family, his brothers and all their fighting, his mother and her calming effect on the family, and his father and his incredible way of knowing just what to do.

How he wished he could talk to them now, to share his troubles and hear their advice. Yet he knew that was impossible. His father had warned him that he might have a difficult decision to make. Lucian had been fool enough to never consider that possibility.

It was a lesson well learned, but had it come too late?

Chapter Five

It was time.

Isabelle could no longer wait to give Lucian an answer. He deserved at least that from her. But even now as she walked to him as he brushed down Aled, she still didn't know what her decision would be.

She had hoped that after a full day of getting to know Lucian better she would be able to make her decision, when all it had done was confuse her even more.

There was no doubt she couldn't get enough of his body and the pleasure he gave her, but was it enough to give up her life and travel with him to a kingdom made up with the same magic that put the mark on her arm?

She stood back a moment and watched as Lucian brushed his mount, she could tell the time he had spent with her had taken a toll on him. He didn't belong with her, but could she let him go?

She knew the moment he realized she was there. Their eyes met over Aled's back. Lucian set down the brush and walked around the horse to her.

"I promised you a decision," she said, her tongue thick in her mouth. How she longed to return to the night before and their exquisite love making.

"You did."

She couldn't look him in the eye and see the doubt reflected in his dark depths. That's when she realized she needed to stop asking herself what she could do and ask what she couldn't do.

Could she allow Lucian and his kingdom to die? Could she allow him to walk out of her life with the knowledge that she would never see him again? Could she live without him?

The answer was a resounding nay to all questions.

She wanted to dance around and sing her answer to the world. Instead, she raised her gaze and gave Lucian a smile as she said, "Will you take me with you?"

"Do you mean it?" Lucian asked, his voice breathless, as if he expected her to change her mind again.

She nodded and found herself enveloped in his arms as he swung her around and around. He stopped and buried his head in her neck.

"Thank you," he whispered.

She smiled up at the sky at his words, and she could have sworn the mark on her arm sizzled.

* * * *

Lucian, with the help of Mr. MacDonald, had secured another horse for Isabelle, one that was surefooted and steady. Lucian had wanted to leave immediately, fearing Isabelle would change her mind once more, yet every time he asked she just laughed and kissed him.

And even now, a day later as he finished tying off the bag holding her possessions, he had to stop himself from dragging her away from Mr. and Mrs. MacDonald. They were the only family she knew, and she needed to say her farewells.

"I'm going to miss you, dearling," Mrs. MacDonald said as she hugged Isabelle again.

Lucian saw the moisture in Isabelle's eyes as she kissed Mrs. MacDonald's weathered cheek before turning to Mr. MacDonald.

"You were the daughter we never had, lass. I hate to see you leave but know 'tis something you need to do," Mr. MacDonald said. "We'll be here if you ever need us. Take care of yourself."

"I will," she said.

Lucian was surprised to find Mr. MacDonald turn to him. "I better not hear of you mistreating her," he threatened.

"Never. I pledge my soul on it," Lucian answered solemnly.

Mr. MacDonald seemed to be satisfied for he turned and pulled his weeping wife into his arms. Lucian helped Isabelle on her horse before he mounted Aled.

At long last, he was finally returning home.

"Ready?" he turned his head and asked Isabelle.

"Ready."

With one last wave to the MacDonald's, Lucian nudged his horse into a walk.

* * * *

The weeks of travel had been decidedly hard on Isabelle, though she made a point to never complain. Lucian had made sure to travel slow, but it was obvious he was more than anxious to reach his home. She was just as anxious about meeting his family.

She had heard several tales of his childhood and his family. His parents were good people who had done an amazing job of raising such a good man.

After another hard day of travel in the mountains, she reclined in Lucian's arms as they stared at the fire in the coziness of a cave. Her gaze was drawn to his bare arm and the intricate symbol. The more time they spent together, the more she realized they had always been meant for each other.

It wasn't something she could explain to anyone, more of a feeling deep within in, and it was all somehow connected to the symbols.

She moved her left arm near his and looked at the marks. The firelight played across their arms, but her eyes only saw the symbols.

"Do they bother you?" Lucian's deep voice asked near her ear.

She smiled though he couldn't see her face. "Not anymore. At first they seemed strange, but now ... now 'tis as if they had always been there."

"They have. They just needed to be awakened and brought to life."

Isabelle leaned her head back to look into his black eyes. "Like me."

His smile was devastating as he hugged her to his chest. "Just like you, my love."

"I have to admit, I'm more than a little frightened of when we reach Drahcir."

"Why is that?" he asked as he smoothed back her hair and kissed her neck.

"You're royalty, Lucian," she said as she sat up and turned to face him. "I'm a commoner."

"There is nothing common about you." His eyes narrowed and he asked, "Are you afraid my family won't accept you?"

Isabelle couldn't hold his gaze. Her eyes fell to the ground. "That thought has crossed my mind."

She felt his fingers under her chin and allowed him to raise her face until she

looked him in the eye.

“Don’t,” he said softly. “We do not hold to the convictions that have plagued the rest of Scotland. Royalty or commoner, ‘tis the same in my kingdom. No one will look down upon you. You are my mate, destined to be a princess of Drahcir.”

“Destiny or not, people still view outsiders as threats, and regardless of what you say, people will look at me differently because I’m not royalty.”

He chuckled and ran a thumb across her cheek. “Ah, Isabelle. None of my words will ease your fears, but I will tell you that my kingdom has had to accept outsiders every generation. ‘Tis part of our life. Believe me when I tell you the people of Drahcir will be thrilled to see you because it means that they are that much closer to seeing their lives continue.”

As his words sunk in, she realized just how foolish she had been. She turned and resumed her place against his chest and threaded her fingers through his. “Thank you.”

“‘Twill be all right,” he said as he nuzzled her ear.

She sighed and closed her eyes as he found a particularly sensitive spot just behind her ear. Her entire body melted against him.

His hands moved to hold her breasts and soon his fingers had her nipples hard and aching. While his hands caressed and kneaded her breasts, his mouth left a trail of fire that blazed right to her core. She burned for him as she did every night and as with each time their bodies joined, the need for him grew.

Isabelle pulled out of his embrace and turned to face him as she straddled his hips. Her hand found his rod, thick and hard, as she guided him inside her.

“By the heavens,” Lucian moaned and took hold of her hips. “I want to taste you.

She barely had time to register what his words said before she was on her back, and he knelt between her legs, licking her stomach. His hot tongue trailed from hip to hip, stopping to dip lightly into her belly button before nipping the inside of her thigh. Isabelle’s lungs seized when she felt his hot breath on her sex.

Could it be? Did he really mean to kiss her ... there?

No sooner did she ask herself that question than his tongue licked her sex, slow and soft.

She sighed and fisted her hands in the blankets as he settled between her legs and parted her woman’s lips. She opened her eyes to see him staring at her.

“Lucian?”

“You have no idea how beautiful you are,” he said before his tongue snaked out and lightly brushed back and froth over her clit.

Isabelle bit her lip as hot, molten desire licked their wicked flames around her. Instinctively, she opened her legs wider, giving Lucian more access to her sex. Almost immediately, his tongue delved deeper, tasting her as no one ever had. Her passion was growing so fast that she knew she couldn’t hold back her climax, and she wasn’t ready for it to end yet.

Not until I taste him.

With great effort, she managed to sit up. At Lucian’s look, she merely smiled and rolled him onto his back.

“My turn,” she said and loved the way her stomach clenched when she saw the desire in his eyes.

She gripped his rod gently, loving the feel of its heat and softness. A bead of

liquid formed at his tip, and Isabelle leaned down and licked it off. Lucian's breath hissed from between his lips, but it only urged her on. The taste of him was delicious, and she wanted more.

Much more.

Growing bolder by the moment, Isabelle brought him into her mouth as she moved her hand up and down his shaft. With her free hand, she reached down and cupped his sacs. She was just beginning to take him deeper when Lucian's hands gripped her waist.

Isabelle raised her head to tell him to stop when he said, "Wait."

She trusted him completely and loved anything new he showed her, so she eagerly waited as he positioned her on top of him with her legs straddling his head and her face mere inches from his rod.

She didn't need to be told what to do. Her hands found his sacs and rod as her lips licked his rod from bottom to tip. She had just taken him in her mouth again when she felt his tongue moving across her clit. For a moment she couldn't move as the pleasure poured through her. To be able to receive such pleasure as she was giving it was a wonderful experience, one she intended to make sure they repeated often.

Lucian bit back a groan as Isabelle took him into her hot, wet mouth. Her sweet hands knew just where to touch and how hard or soft as she cupped his sacs and moved her hand up and down his shaft. It wanted release right then but could tell she was fighting her own climax. He would hold off as long as she did, no matter how much it nearly killed him to do it.

His tongue darted through her sex and found her clit again. He loved the taste of her and how her body trembled each time his tongue licked her. She was wet with her own juices, which only spurred his desire to new heights.

She had shown him heights of pleasure he had never known, and he wanted to take her on one again. His hands, which gripped her hips, moved over her back and rounded behind. He loved to touch her cheeks, and he loved the treasure he had found between them that drove her wild.

He let a finger run from her spine down between her cheeks until he found her anus. He just skimmed her bud but felt her body clench just the same. With a smile, he dipped a finger into her sheath and felt her hot breath expel from her mouth as she moaned, deep and long.

"Want something?"

She moaned again and moved her hips against his chest. "You know I do."

"Not yet."

Lucian withdrew his finger from her sheath and moved to her anus where he skimmed it again. This time, Isabelle whimpered and pumped her hand faster on his rod.

He closed his eyes and found her clit again as his finger dipped into her tight bud. For the longest time, he didn't move his finger. Not until Isabelle's body relaxed did he move it, and when he did she gasped and lifted her head from his rod.

"I'm not ready," she moaned.

But Lucian knew her body well enough to know that he could push a little more before she reached her climax. When he didn't let up his assault, she took him into her mouth and began to kiss and suck him as if her life depended upon it.

Lucian took them as far as he could before he released her and rolled her onto her

back. Her eyes were glazed as she stared up at him, and he felt a rush of pride to know she was his.

He held out his hand and pulled her to her feet then turned her to face the wall of the cave.

“What are you doing?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Shhh,” he said as he kissed her shoulder. “Trust me.”

She moaned and leaned her head back against his shoulder. “I do, I’m just not sure my legs can hold me.”

Lucian chuckled as he gripped his rod and found her sex. He rubbed his rod against her sensitive sex and reveled in each cry and moan that tore from her throat. When he could take it no more, he buried himself deep within her.

Isabelle gripped the cold stone of the cave as Lucian began to move slowly within her. She wanted him hard and fast to reach her fulfillment, but she knew Lucian would show her pleasure like she had only dreamed about. So, with each withdrawal and thrust, she moved against him, creating more friction as the tempo increased.

She was mindless with wanting, her body needing release but not ready to let go yet as Lucian plunged deep within her. Their bodies were slick with sweat, and she could feel the climax building as he pumped hard and fast. She felt his hand move around her to find her sex, slick and throbbing.

His thumb moved over it once, twice ... three times, and her world splintered around her as her orgasm claimed her, as waves upon waves of pleasure rolled through her body. And with each continued thrust of Lucian’s rod, he prolonged her climax until she could barely stand.

Dimly she heard a roar behind her and realized Lucian had also found his release as the tip of his rod touched her womb.

Chapter Six

Lucian couldn't believe he was nearly home. He hadn't wanted to tell Isabelle last night that they would arrive today. He knew she was nervous, but he wanted her to get a good night's sleep and keeping their arrival from her had given her that.

He readied their horses and turned to find her plaiting her hair. He loved her glorious mane of dark brown hair. 'Twas thick and silky, and he loved having it draped around him when they made love.

As he tightened the saddle on Isabelle's mare, he thought of their time together. They had used their time to learn more of each other, and with each passing day, he wondered how he had ever lived without her. She had a wicked sense of humor that kept him laughing and seeing the world in an entirely different light.

His family and kingdom would be much richer with her.

He sighed and looked at the pass they would take that would take him to Drahcir. *Home.* How he had missed it, but most especially his family.

A smile pulled at his lips as he imagined the homecoming with his brothers. They were a loud, rowdy lot, but they were loyal. What more could a brother ask for?

"What are you looking at?" Isabelle asked as she came to stand beside him.

"The pass home."

She stiffened beside him. "You knew this last night?"

He nodded. "I did, but felt you could use a good rest instead of staying up worrying."

"You were right, of course," she said and chuckled while she clasped her cloak around her.

"Are you ready?"

"Aye," she said and kissed him before he sat her on the mare and ventured into the snow.

They talked for hours about everything, and by the time they neared the gates of Drahcir, Lucian knew whatever time he had left with her would be the most wonderful time of his life.

The entrance to Drahcir was just over the next rise. Lucian was so full of excitement upon seeing his family again that for a moment he almost missed the fission of warning that ran down his spine.

He jerked on Aled's bridle and reached to halt Isabelle. Once she was stopped, he looked around hoping to see who, or what, endangered them.

"What is it?" Isabella whispered.

Lucian knew without a doubt that something was about to attack them, he just didn't know from where. He had to get Isabelle to safety, but in the thick snow and walls of mountains, there was no place for her to hide.

"We're about to be attacked," he said casually as he leaned over and kissed her.

Thankfully, she stayed calm as she asked, "Who?"

"I don't know. There isn't a place for you to hide, but make sure that you stay out of the way. Take this," he said, and placed the dagger he had given her on their first

night in her lap. "Keep it hidden, and use it if you must."

She nodded and gripped his hand. "I'm not going to lie and say I'm not afraid."

"I know." Lucian looked over his shoulder and saw the top of the castle through the pass. If there was anyway they could ride to the gates safely, he wouldn't hesitate, but the ground didn't allow for the horses to do anything other than steadily climb.

He turned back to Isabelle. "I will protect you. I didn't come this far to lose you and fail my family."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than an eerie scream echoed around them. Lucian's blood froze in his veins. It had been generations since any Sinclair had come across a Tnarg.

His eyes scanned the frozen area until he spotted the vile creature. Quickly, he palmed his sword and picked up his shield. He twisted the reins until Aled now faced the Tnarg. His mount pawed the frozen earth and snorted.

Lucian looked over his shoulder at Isabelle. "Remember what I said. Find some cover," he warned as the Tnarg let out another loud growl.

Once he was sure Isabelle had sufficiently hidden herself, Lucian nudged Aled, and they raced toward the Tnarg. The nasty creature jumped from the cliff above them and landed with a loud thud just lengths from them.

"What do you want?" Lucian demanded.

The Tnarg smiled revealing a mouth full of long, pointed teeth. Its beady red eyes glowed, and the short, thick reddish hair covering its entire body left an unmistakable odor. The creature stood about the same height as a man, but its elongated arms and vicious claws prevented anyone from getting too close.

"I want your bride," it said in a voice that sounded as if someone had a hand around its throat.

Lucian couldn't believe his ears. After all the searching and convincing he had done, he wasn't about to lose Isabelle to a Tnarg just moments from the gates of Drahcir and his family.

He gripped the pommel of his sword and narrowed his eyes on the Tnarg. "You'll have to come through me to get her."

"I was hoping you would say that," the Tnarg said just before it leapt with its thick hind legs.

Lucian jerked Aled to the side so the Tnarg's sharp talons wouldn't blind the horse. The second left no time for Lucian to do anything other than brace himself for impact. The force of the Tnarg slamming into him knocked the breath from his lungs as he was yanked off Aled.

It seemed an eternity from the time he was pulled off his mount until he finally landed in the thick snow. It was only the snow that saved him, he knew. And while he struggled to get his breath back, the Tnarg straddled him and lifted one of its arms. Through his haze, Lucian saw the talons extend from the Tnarg's hand and knew he had mere heartbeats to live.

He jerked up his knees and brought them against the Tnarg's back. It was enough force to knock the creature off him. Lucian rolled to his feet and looked around the snow for his sword and shield. He tamped down the panic that threatened to rise and palmed his other dagger in his boot as the Tnarg jumped to its feet.

"You plan to kill me with that?" the Tnarg taunted.

Lucian shrugged as they circled each other. "I'll kill you anyway I can."

"I can tell you that won't do anything."

Lucian didn't know if the creature was lying or not, but he refused to allow the beast to see any hint of fear or worry. Instead, he beckoned the Tnarg. "I've had enough of this. You want a fight, come and get me."

The Tnarg cocked its head to the side. "A feisty one. You'll be a tasty snack."

Lucian dove and rolled as the Tnarg swung a meaty arm at his chest. As he hit the ground, Lucian felt his shield beneath him and quickly grabbed it as he came to his feet. When he turned to the Tnarg, the creature had narrowed its eyes on his shield.

"Fine weaponry."

"Aye, it is."

The Tnarg snarled and stepped closer to him. "Where did you steal it?"

Lucian laughed. "I'm a prince of Drahcir, you filthy maggot. 'Twas given to me as a gift."

With a loud scream the Tnarg stumbled back and bared its teeth. "You lie."

"I don't lie."

For several heartbeats Lucian and the Tnarg stared at each other. Finally, the Tnarg said, "Friend of the Fae or not, she must die."

In a blink the Tnarg had moved around Lucian and was headed toward Isabelle. Lucian shouted Isabelle's name to try and warn her as he raced after the Tnarg. He watched in horror as the Tnarg was about to reach Isabelle.

"Nay," he bellowed as he hurtled his dagger at the offending beast.

The blade embedded in the Tnarg's back, yet the creature continued on its course to Isabelle. Lucian knew he had to turn the Tnarg's attention from Isabelle back to himself, but without his sword he had no weapon.

Lucian dove at the Tnarg and wrapped his arms around the creature's chest as he swung it around. Using every muscle in his body, Lucian slammed the Tnarg against the mountain.

He turned to Isabelle and shouted, "Take the mare and make for the pass. Don't stop and don't look back," he said.

"Lucian," she said, but he stopped her words with his hand.

"There's no time," he said and placed her on her mare. "I love you," he said just before he slapped the mare on her flank.

The Tnarg screamed and tried to get around Lucian, but Lucian brought his knee up and into the creature's gut right before he planted his fist in the Tnarg's face.

The beast fell back into the snow as blood gushed from its nose. "You will pay for that," it said.

"I warned you that you would have to kill me first," Lucian said as the Tnarg picked itself up and glared at him. "Come slake your thirst on me."

The Tnarg laughed then, the sound menacing and evil. "I will most certainly have your blood, but before I do, know that I will have your bride. No matter how far she runs, she will die."

Since it had been generations since anyone had seen a Tnarg, Lucian himself only having seen pictures, he was curious as to why the beast had come out of hiding. Not to mention, he still needed his sword.

"Why?"

“Why?” the Tnarg repeated. “Why do you think?”

“Isabelle has done nothing to you. Your quarrel lies with the Sinclair’s.”

The Tnarg wiped the blood from its face. “She is your bride, therefore a Sinclair.”

Lucian seethed with fury. The Tnarg’s were vile creatures, but to attack a woman instead of a warrior--that took the lowest of the low. He stepped to his left and felt something hit the toe of his boot.

* * * *

Isabelle’s heart pounded furiously in her chest. She hadn’t been able to leave Lucian alone, regardless of what he had said. He might need her.

She had stopped her mare on the pass and hid behind part of the mountain wall. Seeing the awful creature still didn’t make it seem real to her. And it could talk. A shudder ripped through her as she recalled it saying it wanted to kill her.

Somehow it was connected to Lucian and his family, she was sure of it. Lucian had spoken of magic, and though she didn’t know much about it, the creature had to come from some sort of magic.

As Lucian and the creature spoke, she fingered the dagger in her hand, ready to aid Lucian in anyway she could. Her breath lodged in her throat as Lucian rolled and came up with his sword to face the beast.

She blinked, and Lucian and the creature attacked. Lucian’s arm moved with lightening speed as he kept the beast’s claws away from him. She had seen Lucian fight once before, but in the light of day, she saw just how excellent a warrior he was as he battled a creature made of magic.

Yet, powerful warrior or not, the creature was wearing him down. Isabelle could tell Lucian’s movements had slowed where the Tnarg’s had increased. By the resignation on Lucian’s face, he knew it was simply a matter of time.

“Nay,” Isabelle whispered. She could not lose Lucian after just finding him.

She rose and started down the pass. Her feet slipped on the ice and snow, and she started to fall. She kept her eyes on Lucian as she slid down the rest of the way, ignoring the cuts and scrapes on her legs.

“Lucian,” she said through her tears as she saw him crumble to the ground under the onslaught of the Tnarg’s assault. She climbed to her feet, her only thought to save Lucian.

“Get away from him,” she cried as she raced toward the Tnarg.

The Tnarg didn’t pay her any mind as it went in for the kill. Isabelle dove at the creature and buried the dagger in its arm.

It screamed and threw her off as it clawed at the dagger. Isabelle’s stomach fell to her feet as the Tnarg turned to her and hissed, its teeth bared. And just as quickly as it had come, it was gone.

Isabelle closed her eyes as she said a quick prayer of thanks. Tears gathered in her eyes at the terror she had just witnessed.

“Isabelle.”

Her eyes flew open to see Lucian crawling toward her. She cried freely now as she rose up on her knees and embraced him. “I thought I had lost you.”

“You were supposed to leave,” he said, his breath still coming in huge gulps.

She leaned back to look into his eyes. “I couldn’t leave you. I knew you would

need me.”

He smiled then and wiped her damp hair from her face. “Thank you.”

They rose to their feet, and Isabelle took inventory of him. Fortunately, he had only flesh wounds and nothing that couldn’t wait to be tended to once they reached Drahcir.

“I’m fine,” he said as he stilled her arms. “Are you hurt?”

She started to shake her head then felt her legs begin to sting. “Nothing that cannot wait until we reach the gates.”

“Then let’s go home,” Lucian said.

Isabelle was more than ready now.

* * * *

Lucian looked over at Isabelle and smiled as they entered the tall gilded gates of Drahcir. He never tired of looking at Drahcir, and he could only imagine what it was like seeing it for the first time. He wanted to nudge his horse faster but held back so Isabelle could take it all in.

The road that led to the castle that stood high atop the mountain was steep and lined with cottages and other structures that bespoke of their kingdom with the intricate symbol the Fae had given them. That same symbol was carved in the all the woodwork and stone and even sewn onto the clothes.

The knotwork was literally everywhere, but instead of growing tired of it, it began to become a part of Isabelle.

“You said ‘twas beautiful, but I didn’t expect this,” Isabelle said as she looked around in awe.

“‘Tis more beautiful than words. Just like you.”

She turned her blue eyes on him and smiled. “You do know how to charm.”

Her eyes drank in the allure and beauty of Drahcir. Nothing had prepared her for the exquisite, quiet beauty of neither the city nor the smiling, cheerful inhabitants. A woman with a small child playing at her feet outside of their home caught Isabelle’s attention. The little girl with her blonde ringlets gave Isabelle a bright smile before jumping up and following her mother.

It was hard for Isabelle not to notice that her shabby, older clothing was nothing like the simple, clean style the inhabitants wore. Unlike her over gown with open sides and train, they wore gowns of solid colors with long flared sleeves and a deep border on the bottom of their skirts. Instead of barrette and wimple of her day, their hair was plaited and bound with metal ends.

She found it lovely and enchanting, so much so that she couldn’t wait to get out of her soiled, stained gown and into one like theirs.

The men’s clothing was just as simple and out of date as the women’s. Instead of the coif, they went bare headed. Instead of the overcoat, gauntlets, painted leather boots, and hose, they wore long tunics, trews, and tall leather boots.

It was as if Isabelle had stepped into another realm.

Her gaze moved from the people to the structures. She recognized a blacksmiths shop, a baker, and even a clothes makers shop. Everything was clean and beautiful. That’s when she noticed how warm she had become.

“Something wrong?” Lucian asked.

She turned her head to him. “‘Tis warm.”

He smiled and reached over to help her remove the thick woolen cloak. "Though we were cursed, the city has also been blessed. Nothing could live in these mountains with as cold as it is. The Fae bespelled the city to keep it warm."

"Amazing," Isabelle whispered. "Anything else you didn't tell me?"

His hearty laugh brought a smile to her lips.

"There are some things that are better left experienced rather than being told."

Isabelle shook her head as she laughed. "I've got more surprises."

"Here's another one," he said as he stopped in front of a massive water fountain.

She could only gawk at the sheer size of the fountain and the sparkling stone it was constructed of. Dimly, she was aware that Lucian helped her dismount, but she quickly walked to the fountain and ran her hand over the amazing blue rocks the fountain had been created of.

"They are smooth. And I see no cracks where the stones meet up," she said and raised her gaze to Lucian.

"Another gift from the Fae," he said in answer.

Isabelle turned back to the fountain and dipped her hand into the clear, cool water and brought it to her hand. It tasted as fresh and enchanting as the city.

It wasn't until she took Lucian's outstretched hand and turned to her mare that she saw the castle.

The structure was as similar as it was different from the castles in Scotland. The round turrets, battlements, and soaring towers mimicked the castles she knew, but the stone it was constructed of was similar to that of the fountain and shown brilliantly in the sun. There was no drawbridge, and the many stairs leading up the castle was something she had never seen before. Her gaze caught the many balconies over looking the city from various chambers in the castle made her eager to investigate each room.

"Want to take a closer look?" Lucian asked in her ear.

She couldn't turn back now if she tried. She was bonded with Lucian, with Drahcir, and with its people.

"Aye," she answered.

* * * *

People began to move towards them, lining the road leading to the castle set atop the mountain. The road was long and winding as it rose to the highest peak. Lucian waved and talked to the people as they passed, but he couldn't introduce Isabelle. Not before his parents met her.

By the time they reached the top, Isabelle was breathless and eagerly fell into his arms as she dismounted.

"I think next time I would prefer to walk. I'm still not used to riding."

Lucian laughed and smoothed back tendrils of her hair that had come loose in the rough winds of the mountains. "You'll get used to it."

She rolled her eyes and stepped out of his arms to smooth her skirts. Over her head, Lucian spotted his parents as they emerged from the castle.

In the years of his absence, his father had aged greatly. Where once his beard had been as black as the night, 'twas littered with gray. And his mother hadn't fared much better. Her flawless face now had lines of worry around her mouth and eyes.

As soon as they spotted him, his mother began to cry and his father slowly walked towards him. Lucian met his father half-way and embraced the man that had been his

hero.

“’Tis glad I am you have returned, son,” his father said as he stepped back and gave him a once over.

Lucian smiled and moved to embrace his mother. Words weren’t spoken. His mother couldn’t stop crying, and his own emotion nearly choked him. Finally, Lucian moved to the side and motioned for Isabelle to come forward.

For the first time since his arrival, his mother ceased her tears and his father turned his dark eyes to Isabelle.

“Mother. Father. I would like to introduce you to Isabelle. My mate.”

“Saints be praised,” his father shouted and pulled Isabelle into his arms.

Lucian sat back and watched his parents fuss over Isabelle, welcoming her into the family. They shared a smile, he and Isabelle, as the people of Drahcir began to cheer.

“The wedding will be three days hence,” his mother said as she began to walk toward the castle doors, her arm firmly locked around Isabelle.

Lucian turned to his father. “Where are Elric, Sorin, and Keiran? I expected them to greet us.”

His father lowered his eyes. “You’re the first to return, son.”

Lucian was stunned at the news. He had thought to be the last, not the first. No wonder his parents had aged so greatly in his absence. “They will return, Father. I know it.”

His father nodded. “Enough talk of that. Let us celebrate your return.”

“Wait,” Lucian said. “There’s something you should know. We were attacked.”

“What?” his father exclaimed.

Lucian sighed. “’Twas a Tnarg, Father. It was after Isabelle.”

“Ye saints,” Urises said. “Are you sure? None have been encountered in....”

“Generations,” Lucian supplied. “And I’m quite sure. The books that foretell our history have several depictions of the Tnarg’s in them. I used to have nightmares about the beasts. It disappeared as suddenly as it appeared.”

Urises ran a hand down his face. “Don’t tell your mother. She’s worried enough as it is.”

They walked into the great hall, and Lucian’s eyes instantly found Isabelle. She and his mother sat in front of the massive hearth as they talked. Of a sudden, she turned her eyes to him and met his gaze.

She said a word to his mother, then rose and walked toward him. He held out his arms as she drew close and pulled her against him.

“Do you like it here?” he asked.

She tilted her head up and grinned. “’Tis amazing, unlike anything I could have imagined, but I would be happy anywhere as long as you were with me.”

It suddenly hit him then. He had done it. He had accomplished a quest, a quest where many had depended upon him. He should be proud of that, and he was, but it paled in comparison to what he held in his arms.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“And I you, my prince.”

Chapter Seven

Isabelle looked out over the people of Drahcir. In just a few moments time, the wedding would commence. She still didn't know how the seamstresses had finished her gown in time. It was a gown fit for a princess.

The gold thread glittered in the deep burgundy material of her gown. The bottom had the large border that held intricate designs that were similar to the ones on her arm. There were also gems sewn in, pearls, diamonds, and the most expensive of gems--garnets.

She turned to look into the mirror again. Each time she looked at the expensively gowned woman with her hair in two long plaits and wrapped in the same deep burgundy as her gown, she couldn't believe it was her reflection.

"Anxious?"

Isabelle turned to find Morag, Lucian's mother, in the doorway. "More than you know," she admitted.

"There's nothing to be anxious about, dear. You and Lucian were meant for each other. Now," she said and held something up for her, "you're going to need this."

"What is it?" Isabelle asked as Morag walked behind her.

"Every princess of this kingdom has worn this," she said after it was placed on Isabelle's head.

Isabelle looked in the mirror and gasped as she spotted the small crown on her head.

"Wear it with pride, dear," Morag said with a smile. "Now, come. 'Tis time, and Lucian grows restless."

Isabelle followed Morag from the chamber, down the long hall and stairs to the great hall where Lucian waited for her. She drank in the sight of him in his royal finery. He still wore black, but she noticed his tunic was trimmed to match her gown.

"A lovelier vision I have never beheld," he said as she approached and took her hands. "Shall we?"

"I've been waiting for you my entire life."

"Then you shall wait no more, my love," he said and guided her from the great hall.

Lucian wanted to run to the tower. After the assault from the Tnarg, he had been more than a little nervous about another attack. If he had had his way, the wedding ceremony would take place in the great hall or chapel, not on the tower for the kingdom to see. Isabelle's life was more important than tradition, but he hadn't been able to talk his parents into it.

Much to the annoyance of his parents, he had worn his sword. There was no way he would allow himself not to be prepared if there was an attack. For whatever reason, that Tnarg wanted Isabelle dead, and Lucian had a feeling it would come back until the deed was done.

By the time they reached the top of the tower, he was more than ready for the ceremony to be finished. His mother had refused to allow him to spend more than a few

moments in Isabelle's company since their arrival. He wanted to kiss, touch, and taste his woman, and after today no one would be able to stop him.

The priest stood patiently awaiting them as Lucian and Isabelle came to stand before him. Below them, the entire kingdom of Drahcir had come to witness the ceremony.

Lucian felt Isabelle's hand shake on his arm, and he quickly took hold of her hand and gave her a gentle squeeze. He listened to the priest's words with half an ear as his eyes looked for any signs of an attack.

"Do you, Isabelle Ferguson, agree to take Prince Lucian Sinclair as your husband? To love, cherish, and obey?" the priest asked.

Lucian looked down at Isabelle and watched as her mouth spread into a wide grin.

"I do," she answered.

The priest then turned to Lucian. "Do you, Prince Lucian Sinclair, agree to take Isabelle Ferguson as your wife? To protect, cherish, and love?"

"I do."

The priest gave them a smile and motioned someone to him. To Lucian's surprise, a Fae moved to stand before them. The Fae's unusual, mystical blue eyes swirled in the morning sun, and his white blond hair hung down his back and was held back from his face by many tiny intricate braids.

"Lucian. Isabelle," he said. "Today is a magical day, a day that puts Drahcir one step closer to continuing. I am here as emissary from King Theron and Queen Rufina who send their approval and blessing for this union."

He inhaled deeply and gave them a smile as he raised his hand over them and said something in what could only be the Fae's language.

"Enjoy your life together," he said with a wink.

The citizens of Drahcir erupted in cheers. Lucian wasted no time in taking Isabelle in his arms and tasting her sweet lips again.

"Princess Isabelle. I like it."

She giggled and smiled up at him. "I do, too."

While his mother came to congratulate them, his father moved to the edge of the tower and said, "Let the celebrating begin."

They all laughed as the music and drinking began immediately.

The Fae stopped Lucian before he could leave the tower to celebrate. "I heard you were attacked."

Lucian nodded and felt Isabelle take his hand. "We were."

"Who was it?"

"A Tnarg."

The Fae mumbled something that Lucian was sure was a curse of some sort. "Are you sure?"

"Most positive. It tried to kill Isabelle."

Isabelle nodded as the Fae's gaze turned to her. "It didn't leave until I used Lucian's dagger on it."

"A weapon of the Fae," the Fae mumbled. "Interesting. And you say you stabbed it?"

Isabelle glanced at Lucian. "I did. It was about to kill Lucian. I had no other choice."

“Nay, you didn’t,” the Fae agreed. He looked from Isabelle to Lucian. “You two have no idea what you’ve done, do you?”

Lucian eyed the Fae. “And what exactly is it that we’ve done?”

“The Tnarg’s only goal is to kill any and all men and women that the children of Sinclair claim as their own. Very few have escaped it when it has decided to venture from its lair.”

Lucian pulled Isabelle against him. Nowhere in the texts of Drahcir’s history does it state what the Tnarg’s are for. “We were lucky. Will my brother’s be?”

The Fae looked away. “That I cannot tell you. I must go now.”

And then he was gone.

“I didn’t even know his name,” Isabelle said.

Lucian hugged her and ran his hands down her back. He looked out of the kingdom to the gates and farther below, to the pass that led to the city. His thoughts turned to his brothers.

“They will come,” Isabelle said.

He looked down into her sweet face. Her smile chased away his melancholy.

“Aye, they will, my love. We Sinclair’s don’t give up easily.”

“Thank God for that,” she said.

Lucian glanced once more to the gates of the city. He had found his mate. He just prayed his brothers did as well.

The End