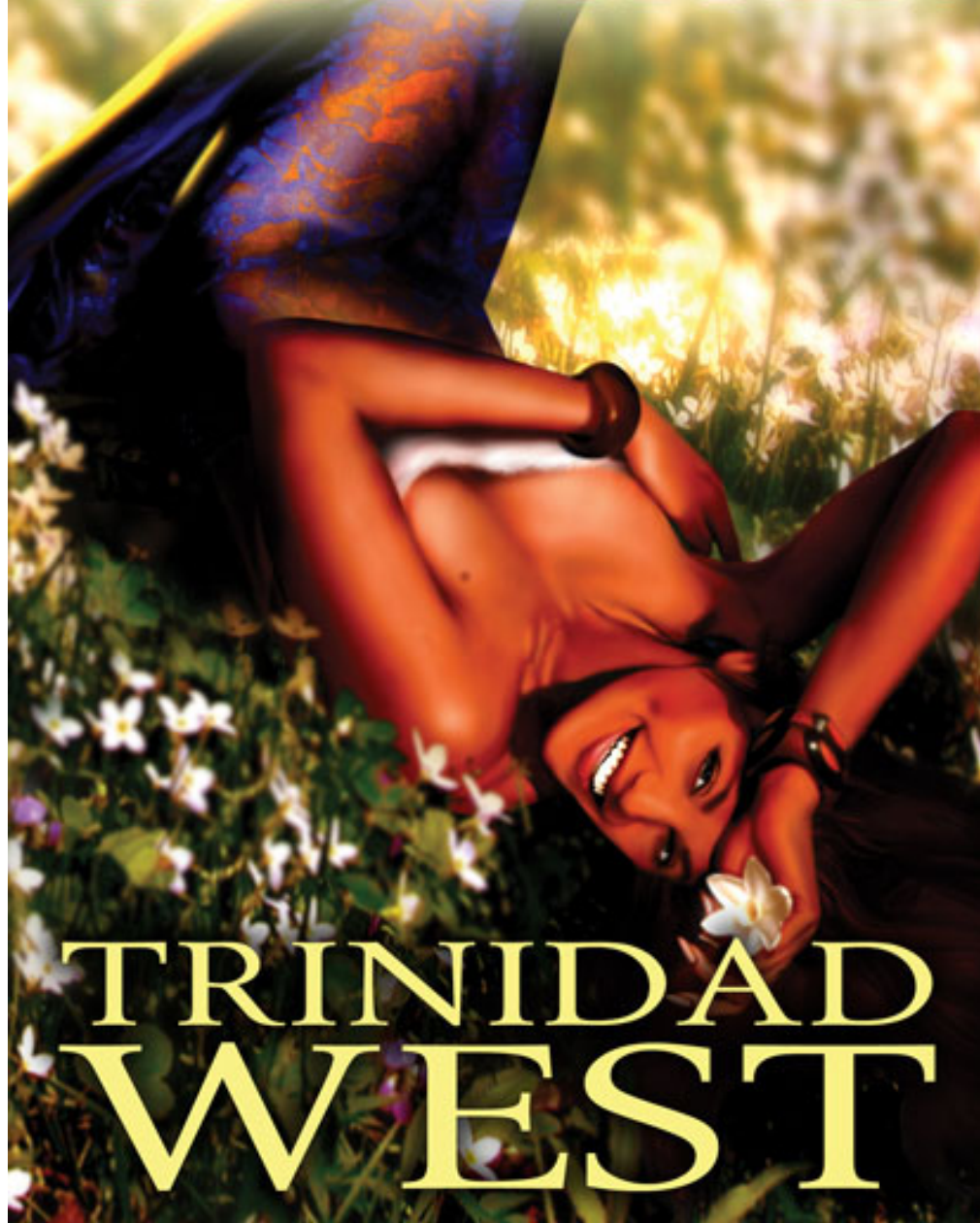


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Sorcerer's
DAUGHTER



TRINIDAD
WEST

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Sorcerer's Daughter

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Edited by Helen Woodall.

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SORCERER'S DAUGHTER

Trinidad West

Chapter One

Marina wore her resentment like a shawl. It protected her from the suspicious sidelong glances of the people from the village when they made deliveries and the loneliness of the long nights in her father's fortress, where it always seemed to get dark before the sun had set in the rest of the valley. It especially protected her from the mysterious looks the Beast was always throwing her way. She thought sometimes that she read pity in those looks, but sometimes he just seemed to be studying her. She hoped it was the latter. She couldn't bear the thought of him pitying her.

She may not have been happy, but at least she was herself. Unlike him, she had not been living under an enchantment for the past five years, unable to speak and unrecognizable. She may not have been pleased about who she was, but at least she knew who she was—the only child of one of the most powerful sorcerers in the Five Lands. She did not know if the Beast had even the most basic self-knowledge. Did he remember who he had been before her father had caught him spying and laid a powerful enchantment upon him?

There he was now, hauling firewood across the courtyard, just as he always did as dusk fell. And here she was, watching him, just as she always did as dusk fell. He was taking those odd careful steps made necessary by his big misshapen feet. She remembered him tripping over his new Beast feet almost constantly before he figured out how to walk on them when the enchantment was new.

Marina sighed and hugged herself against the evening chill. It was time to go down to the kitchen and prepare her father's supper, just as it always was as dusk made way to evening and the owls began to emerge from the broken roof of the ruined tower.

* * * * *

The kitchen was Marina's favorite room in the fortress, the only one that held any human comfort. The Beast was there ahead of her, chopping vegetables for the stew. The broth Marina had started earlier gave off a fragrant steam that reminded her she hadn't eaten since morning. There had been a feeling in the air all day that did not encourage a hearty appetite, a sense of foreboding that emanated from her father's workshop, where he had been locked up for the past two days. It always happened this way. First the sensation of despair or fear as her father worked away on Marina didn't want to know what. Then the visitor in the night and her father cheerful and sometimes even almost affectionate the next day and the air clear of whatever had seeped out of the workshop.

The Beast did not acknowledge Marina. He kept his attention focused on his work, but Marina could feel his eyes on her every couple of minutes as she strained the broth. It had taken her longer to get used to the way he watched her than to get used to the way he looked. The intense human intelligence that stared out from his round animal eyes was unnerving at first. He sometimes seemed to be trying to look inside her for something hidden that even she did not know about.

Now, especially with the foulness of her father's sorcery seeping through the fortress, it was a comfort to have a friend at her back, even if he was a friend who kept himself hidden within the fortress walls because of his ugliness. That was part of her father's hold on him, after all. As long as the enchantment held, the Beast had no choice but to stay and serve the sorcerer and hope that he might lift the spell one day.

They worked silently together. The Beast put the chopped vegetables into the strained broth while Marina began to melt butter in water to make the dumplings her father liked so much. As she beat the flour into the hot buttery water, concentrating on the task to keep from thinking about the heaviness of the air, the room wavered at the edges of her vision. She ignored it, thinking it was just another unpleasant effect of her father's magic. She focused on the wooden spoon in her hand and let out a cry. The spoon fell and bounced from the table to the floor, but Marina could not take her eyes

off her hands. They were not hers. The fingers were too short, the skin somehow older-looking.

The Beast was at her side before the spoon hit the floor.

"Look at my hands," was all she could say. Her breath was coming in shallow little gasps and everything felt wrong.

The Beast took her hands in his human hands, so perfect and so out of place on his bulky, hairy body. He turned them over and looked at the palms, tracing the lines with his fingers. Then he looked at Marina's face, studying her as though he was looking for a missing puzzle piece. He brushed some stray hair out of her face and his mouth twisted in a grimace.

Marina looked away. She hated it when he smiled. She ventured a quick look at her hands. They still weren't right.

"What's happening?"

The Beast turned away and sighed.

"You know, don't you?"

The Beast shrugged.

"But you have an idea."

He nodded.

Marina slumped down into one of the chairs by the fireplace, too tired to return to her work, too tired to even care what happened if her father's food wasn't ready when he expected it.

The Beast took up the task for her. He cracked an egg into the dumpling mixture and stirred it in. Then another egg.

"I wish you could speak."

The Beast gave a little grunt.

Marina smiled wearily. "You wish you could speak too, of course. Somehow I think neither of us would be here if you could speak."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of the Beast cooking, the thwack of another egg breaking against the kettle. Every day Marina had reason to be grateful for his human hands. He would not have been nearly so useful around the fortress with hands that matched his body, but that was not why her father let him keep his hands. She knew the way the sorcerer thought. The hands were an extra punishment meant to torment the Beast by reminding him of what he had once been and all he had lost.

It worked, as far as Marina could tell. The Beast seemed unhappy enough. But the hands had an effect the sorcerer cannot have anticipated. They reminded Marina every day that inside the Beast was a human man. They made it easier for her to be his friend.

They reminded her, too, of things she could not quite remember. Memories from that hazy time before the Beast's arrival at the fortress. She opened her eyes just enough to watch his hands as he cooked. From just the right angle, looking only at his hands, she could imagine he was fully human and she wondered if the rest of him had been as beautiful as his hands.

It was another pair of hands that came into focus as she drifted into a dream. The dreams always had different settings and the characters were usually different, but in every dream Marina felt like she was playing the same character, a confident woman of experience who had seen a great deal of the world and enjoyed every moment of it—somebody as different from Marina as it was possible to be.

One of the hands in the dream was holding a small book. The other hand was turning the pages.

"It's perfect," the hands' owner marveled. "How did you manage it? He always vowed he'd never sell it."

"I found a way to sweeten the deal," the dream Marina replied.

"I'm sure you did."

The book's new owner looked up from his prize and Marina, sitting in the rocking chair in the sorcerer's kitchen, smiled. She loved these dreams and this one was looking

to be as good as the rest. The man was gorgeous, yet he seemed to be completely unconcerned about his appearance. His hair was a mess and there were what looked like ink stains on his fingers and his shirt. His smile would have struck the waking Marina mute, but the dream Marina smiled back.

"I remember a certain bonus you offered last time I saw you."

"You do?" he said with mock innocence.

"It involved your friend Dante."

"Oh, yes. That offer."

"I'll only be in town a few days. Will you both be free tomorrow night?"

The man—Marina somehow knew his name was Gabriel—put the book down on his cluttered desk, opened the French door behind him and shouted out into the sunny garden.

"Dante! Are you free tonight?"

Marina stood up and strolled over to the door to peer around Gabriel's shoulder into a garden that looked like something out of a storybook, with a fountain set in the middle of a circle of grass, which was itself surrounded by fruit trees and flowerbeds. The main attraction, though, was the golden god standing at an easel, a paintbrush in his hand and a pencil tucked behind his ear.

Dante squinted through the sunshine and into the shadows of Gabriel's library.

"Is that our bookseller?"

"Yes and she's eager to collect her payment."

For some reason Marina slugged him in the arm.

"I'm ready if you two are," Dante said cheerfully. "Just give me a moment to clean my brushes."

Gabriel bent down and whispered in Marina's ear, "Are you ready now?"

"I just got into town and I've been on the road for three days. I at least need time to bathe," she protested, but Gabriel's lips lingered near her ear and she did not make any move to leave.

"We can take care of that for you," he whispered, his lips brushing against her ear.

Just then Dante squeezed past them on his way into the room, his brushes held up over his head and for a second Marina was pressed between the two men and she felt somebody's hand settle briefly on her hip.

The scene changed abruptly and Marina found herself soaking in hot water in a tub that was big enough for her to stretch her legs out in front of her, nothing like the little tub she was used to. She'd never felt anything more luxurious. It felt so wonderful that at first she did not notice the hands massaging her shoulders as she leaned back against the tub.

Another pair of hands reached into the water with a soft little splash and picked one of her feet up out of the water and began rubbing soap onto it. Marina opened her eyes and saw Dante kneeling at the foot of the tub with his sleeves rolled up above his elbows and his golden head bent over her foot. His hand moved up her calf and over her knee, the little bar of soap sliding smoothly over her skin. He raised her foot up high to soap the back of her thigh and then lowered it slowly and started back over with her other foot.

In the meantime, Gabriel had started on her arms, sliding his soapy hands up and down and around them and then dripping water from a wet cloth to rinse them. When Dante finished with her legs, she leaned forward and Gabriel applied a soft cloth to her back, rubbing away the last remnants of tension.

She leaned back again and Gabriel slid his soapy hands over her shoulders and down her chest and around to lift her breasts. He squeezed slowly, almost to the point of pain and then slid his hands down her belly to her thighs, where another hand was already probing, opening her up to the warm water, fingers stroking, just barely penetrating her pussy.

Marina looked down and it seemed like all she saw were strong masculine hands reaching through the water to touch her, squeezing her thighs, reaching underneath to squeeze her bottom, moving the water around so that it lapped against her clit. She watched the water soaking up their sleeves. She could feel Gabriel breathing against her hair. He lowered his face to her neck and opened his mouth against her skin.

"Ugh! She tastes like soap."

"Time for a rinse, then," Dante said, pulling his hands out of the water.

It took a moment for the mist to clear from Marina's mind when they took their hands away from her. When she looked up, Dante was standing next to the tub, holding his hands out to her. Marina gave her his hands and he pulled her to her feet.

"Don't move," he instructed.

"You might want to close your eyes," Gabriel added.

Marina did so just as the first bucket of hot water hit her head. The second bucket was poured over her shoulders and chest, running down her body to rinse off the soap. She wiped the water from her face with her hands and stepped out of the tub. One of the men wrapped a length of soft cloth around her and the other tied a piece of cloth over her eyes.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"Just to keep you guessing," Dante said.

"So you won't know which of us is better," Gabriel added.

Marina smiled. She might not be able to recognize them by touch, but she knew their voices.

"I see. A little something to protect your egos," she said.

Somebody unwrapped her and four hands went to work drying her off, rubbing the soft fabric over her back and stomach. One of them took special care with her feet while the other squeezed the excess water out of her hair and combed out the worst of the tangles with his fingers. They dried her breasts one at a time, two hands lifting and two

hands wielding the cloth. Then one of the men leaned her back against him as the other ran the cloth slowly up the front of her leg, seemingly determined not to miss a single droplet of water.

"Move your feet apart, love," the man she was leaning against said in her ear. Dante? She couldn't quite tell. His voice had gone husky and with the way he was running his fingers up and down over her pelvis, she couldn't quite think straight.

She stepped her feet apart and the towel moved up the inside of her right leg and down the left. It brushed against her pubic hair as it moved from one leg to the other, sending a little tingle up Marina's spine and hinting at the pleasures to come.

The man she was leaning against picked her up and carried her to the bed on the other side of the room. Whichever one he was had taken his wet shirt off and Marina ran her hands up his chest and over his broad shoulders. Now she thought he might be Gabriel, but it was hard to tell. The two men were about the same size and though she and Gabriel had whiled away a few nights in bed together during the past winter, she could not remember anything distinctive about his body that would help her identify him by touch.

As soon as she was deposited on the bed, she found herself alone there. She forced herself to be patient as she waited, listening to the soft sounds of fabric rustling against skin and hitting the carpeted floor. It took all her self-control to stop herself from adjusting the blindfold so she could peek. She would look her fill later. For the moment she was content to imagine the two men, dark and golden, playful and serious, perfect complements to each other. She had been fantasizing about this encounter for days, ever since she had purchased the book that Gabriel had been coveting for the past two years.

She waited. It sounded like they had moved away from the bed and were conferring in whispers.

"If you'd waited until tonight, you would have had time to make your plans," she told them.

She heard a stifled laugh and would not have been surprised if they had broken out in giggles.

“If you keep me waiting too long, I may have to —”

They never heard her threat. The bed lurched and two tongues flicked across her nipples. Marina forgot even that she was in the middle of a sentence, let alone what she was saying.

“That’s more like it,” she said, but the two hands running up and down her legs made it impossible for her to say anything more.

She spent a moment trying to figure out who was who. The mouth on her right breast was more teasing, kissing all around her nipple, seeming to avoid it intentionally except for the occasional light scrape of the teeth. Dante, perhaps. The one on her other side seemed more earnest, pulling her nipple into his mouth and pressing his face against her breast, but the hand that she was pretty certain had to go with that mouth had a playful way about it. The fingertips ran lightly over her skin, never stopping, marking a burning trail of little circles on her inner thigh.

Maybe they were confusing her on purpose, sending her contrasting sensations so she could not guess which was which. It didn’t matter. Whatever their aim, the effect was that Marina could not think anymore. Both mouths were pulling hard on her nipples now and the hands were moving up her stomach.

Without interruption, the hands replaced the mouths on her breasts and the mouths moved up to her ears. The hands kneaded her breasts and pinched her nipples while the mouths sucked on her earlobes and tongues swirled around in her ears. Marina dug her hands into their hair. Something was missing.

“Somebody kiss me,” she pleaded.

The thud was audible as their heads hit above her. They moaned in unison, just like they’d been doing everything else and both hands moved away from her body, no doubt to rub their aching heads.

“Are we all right?” Marina asked.

"A minor setback," Gabriel answered.

"We will persevere," Dante said bravely.

"I should hope so," Marina said. "Now, carefully, somebody kiss me."

She felt a brush of lips against hers and she opened her mouth to him, whoever he was. His tongue traced her lips and then her teeth. She sighed and slipped her arms around to his back and felt warm skin and contained strength. His fingers brushed against her cheek as his tongue explored her mouth. He ran the pad of his thumb along her lip and Marina reached out her tongue to lick his thumb and his fingers, any part of him that she could reach.

She was sure she would not have minded being kissed like that for hours, but another sensation demanded her attention—lips on her leg and a tongue, burning hot kisses into her skin, working up slowly from her ankle to her knee to her thigh, his hands pushing her legs apart as he ascended.

Marina tried hard to relax and enjoy, to not anticipate, to let them take their time. She whimpered against the mouth that was kissing her when she felt a tickle of breath against her pussy, followed by fingers that slid tantalizingly against her slick skin and spread her open.

"Like opening a book," the man nestled between her legs said reverently.

Gabriel. Definitely.

She felt the warmth of his breath on her skin and then he was gone.

Chapter Two

Both her lovers were gone and room had gone silent and she once again felt overpowered by the feeling of foreboding that permeated the kitchen like a fog.

Marina opened her eyes and sat up straight. The Beast was standing very still, sniffing the air. He looked at her and she saw an alertness in his eyes that she didn't often see. When he gestured for her to get up, she did, without hesitation and took a few steps toward him.

"What?"

The Beast reached out and took her hand. He pulled her to the outside door and pushed her gently outside. When she opened her mouth to protest, he put his fingers over her lips. He had never acted this way, but Marina trusted him. She would wait outside, at least until she figured out what was happening.

The Beast turned back into the kitchen just as the sorcerer entered from the interior door. He did not speak at first, but Marina sensed his presence. The air around him always hummed and crackled when he had been working hard at one of his spells. She edged along the cool stone wall, farther from the open door but still close enough to hear when he spoke.

"Where's Marina?"

Silence. The Beast was probably studiously concentrating on stirring the soup. Maybe he shrugged.

"Off sulking again, I suppose."

The sorcerer sounded like he was standing almost in the doorway, looking out into the little kitchen garden. Marina hoped he would not be able to sense her hiding so close by. She did not know what excuse she would give if he stepped outside and saw her or why it was so important that he not see her.

"Bring my supper up to me tonight," the sorcerer said, his voice turned back into the room. "I'm expecting a guest and I have some work to finish before he arrives."

The Beast grunted in acknowledgment. Marina heard a sound that might have been the door that led into the rest of the house closing behind the sorcerer, but she did not dare move. She turned her face to the wall and closed her eyes, relaxing a little against the sun-warmed stone. She had always been a little afraid of her father—only a complete fool would not be—but she had never before felt the kind of fear that makes it impossible to think clearly. Maybe she had been infected by the Beast's fear, but why should he be any more afraid now than any other time? Maybe it was just that she was getting sick. That would explain the way things were not looking quite right and the odd feeling in her belly.

The hand on her shoulder did not startle her. She knew it was not her father, so it had to be the Beast. She turned around and leaned her forehead against his chest. She had only been this close to him three times before, when he had led her home after she had tried to run away. Homey kitchen smells lingered on his clothes. His hand moved from her shoulder to her hair. She felt him wrap a strand of it around his finger. He felt more human than ever, standing there not quite holding her and she hated her father more than ever for enchanting him. It was a luxury, letting herself depend on him. She never knew when her father might send him away or do worse than he already had.

Marina leaned against the Beast and the memory of her dream flooded her mind, sending a flush to her cheeks. The dreams had been coming more frequently lately and sometimes they made it hard to concentrate. Right now, she was trying hard not to wish that the Beast would touch her the way the men in her dream had touched her.

The Beast stepped back and put his hands on her shoulders. He studied her face and Marina forced herself to meet his eyes and try to see the man hidden inside him. She had the uncomfortable feeling that he could see evidence in her eyes of what she had just been thinking. She wanted to tell somebody about the dreams and about the

woman she always played in them, but she could not possibly tell the Beast about them, not even if she left out the more intimate details.

"I wish— No. I'm sick of wishing. I'm sick of doing everything my father tells me to do. I know I can't leave, but I can at least do what I want now and then."

Marina looked away from the Beast. His hands were tense on her shoulders.

"Do you remember when you first came here and I tried to give you a name?"

The Beast nodded. He dropped his hands and took a step back from her.

"My father said we mustn't call you by any name, that taking your name from you was part of your punishment. Well, I think you've been punished enough. I don't know your name, but maybe I can guess it. Will you be able to tell me if I guess right?"

Marina glanced up at the Beast, but she could not read his expression as he nodded slowly. The animal contours of his face did could not show subtleties of emotion. Anger and his grimace of a smile were all she could ever identify.

"I've always liked the name Richard," she continued. "Is your name Richard?"

He shook his head.

"Edmund?"

He shook his head again.

Marina smiled. "This could take forever. I'll start tomorrow with A names. Right now I'm too tired to think." She turned back to the kitchen feeling genuinely good about something for the first time since she planned her last attempt to escape the fortress.

* * * * *

Marina hated leaving the kitchen each night, but the Beast had left some time ago and she was tired. Her little bedroom faced the courtyard and if she had lived in a normal family, she would have had an excellent view of the comings and goings of the household. As it was, only the Beast and Marina ever spent time in the courtyard and only when absolutely necessary, because her father's rooms also looked down on it. She

never saw her father when she glanced up at his window, but she always had the feeling that he might be watching her.

Marina had long ago given up trying to brighten up her room. It seemed that colors faded and flowers wilted abnormally fast. Her father's rooms were directly above and she wondered if the forces he worked with to create his spells seeped down into her room.

She sat on the edge of the bed, wondering if she dared ask him again if she could set up a cot in the kitchen, when she heard the sound of horses approaching. She got to her window just in time to see three men ride in through the open gate and come to a stop in front of the great carved double doors below her window. In the moonlight Marina could see weapons hanging from their belts and two of them wore metal helmets. The third man, who rode in the front, dismounted just as Marina heard the front doors bang open. She saw her father step outside with a lantern to greet the man just as her own bedroom door burst open.

The Beast was out of breath when he joined her at the window.

"Is it ready?" the man asked her father.

"Just the finishing touches to make and those require your presence."

"It had better be good."

"Oh, it will be far better than good," the sorcerer said with a chuckle. "For what you're paying, you'll get spectacular."

The sorcerer raised the lantern high and the light fell on the stranger's face. Marina had never seen him before, but the Beast growled deep in his throat.

"My men will wait outside," the man said as he and the sorcerer turned toward the doors.

The sorcerer laughed. "You've nothing to worry about. I never double-cross my customers."

Then the double doors closed behind them and there was nothing more to hear. The two soldiers got down from their horses and led them across the courtyard, where they sat down against the wall to keep watch for their commander's return. Marina stepped back from the window and closed the shutters.

The Beast was at her door, listening. She had not even heard him move from her side at the window. Sound never traveled far in the fortress. If her father and the stranger had gone up to the floor above her room, the walls had absorbed the sound of their footsteps. Marina joined the Beast across the room. He had the door opened a crack and he was listening intently, growling deep in his throat every now and then. Maybe he could hear things that her human ears could not detect.

He opened the door another inch.

"Don't you dare go up there and spy on him," Marina warned. "You have no idea what he might do to you."

The Beast looked at her.

"No. You may think he's done his worst to you, but he hasn't. You still have your mind, don't you?"

The Beast closed the door. He stood for a moment, gazing up at the ceiling, maybe wishing he could see through to the room above, Marina thought.

"What are you planning?"

He shook his head. Nothing. No plan. Just the same sense of unease that was twisting Marina's stomach into knots.

Marina sat down on her bed. She hated waiting, especially when she had no idea what she was waiting for. She looked down at her hands. They still looked wrong, but not quite so wrong as before, just slightly more used and maybe more capable of hard work. They looked like hands with a good deal more experience than she had, the kind of hands the woman in her dreams might have. When she looked up, she saw that the Beast had been watching her. As usual, she could not read his expression. He might have been thinking about breakfast, for all she knew.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

He shook his head and put a finger to his lips, shushing her. Maybe he could hear what was going on upstairs. He pointed to her pillow.

"You want my pillow?"

He shook his head and walked over to her and sat down next to her. Now he was the one looking down at his hands. Marina reached over and took one of his hands in hers. His hands were calloused from chopping wood and hauling water for her. They did not look like hands that had been meant for that sort of work.

"We have to find a way out of here. I don't think he intends to ever let you leave."

He stood up just as she started to lean against him and put a hand on her shoulder to push her gently down onto the bed, so that her head was on the pillow. She started to sit up, but he pushed her back down and pulled a blanket over her. When she protested, he put his fingers on her lips to quiet her. Then he snuffed out the candle next to her bed.

Marina relaxed into her bed and reached out to touch the Beast's hand, but he was gone, moving silently across the dark room and opening the shutter just enough to look out. Now she understood. He intended to keep watch until the strangers left and he thought she should get some sleep. He was right, of course. She was exhausted, as though her body had doing hard labor without her knowing about it.

Marina pulled the blanket tighter around herself and curled up. She was half asleep already, drifting into a dream about a stone building much like the sorcerer's fortress but also nothing like it. She wandered through empty rooms that she knew should have been furnished, if only she could remember what the rooms were used for. They all had tall windows set into one wall and when she entered each room she walked toward the windows to see what was outside, but no matter how long she walked, she could get no closer to the windows.

She moaned in frustration and was dimly aware of a hand stroking her hair, soothing her back into a deeper, dreamless sleep.

Marina woke some time later to near darkness. She could hear a steady wind blowing outside and sand whispering across the ground as the wind blew it along. She knew it was another dream and she smiled in her sleep, happy to put off waking to the real world a little while longer. She ran her hands down her body. It was the same body she usually dreamed in, with large breasts and full hips, a contrast to her own slight figure. It was also a completely naked body.

She was lying on a bed of cushions in a square tent whose roof came to a point in the center. The walls were striped in colors that were washed out by the darkness. Moonlight seemed to filter through the fabric, or maybe it was just the light provided by the dream. Marina knew she was waiting for somebody, a man. It was always a man in these dreams.

Of course, because it was a dream, she had woken in the tent just the moment before her lover arrived. He slipped silently into the tent, bringing with him an air of barely contained energy. He pulled off the loose robe he was wearing, revealing a lean young body and a massive erection. Just the sight of him sent a flare of heat through Marina's body.

"How long have you been like that?" she asked.

The young man smiled sheepishly. "Since I read your note. Did you know there are parts of the world where you can be thrown into prison for putting such thoughts on paper?"

"I make a point of avoiding those places. Won't you join me?"

She moved into the center of the pile of cushions and opened her legs, making it clear where she meant him to join her.

"I'm glad to see that you came prepared," she said as he settled in between her legs. "I'm wet as the southern swamps, myself."

"Been thinking about me?" he asked as he leaned over her, nudging her cunt with the tip of his cock.

"All evening."

The words came out as a gasp as he slipped just the tip of his cock inside her and teasingly withdrew. Marina ran her fingers lightly up his arms. She could feel them trembling and knew it was not easy for him to show such restraint. She wondered just how much restraint he was capable of.

"Do you want to know what I've been doing while I waited for you?"

He nodded his head slowly, looking a little afraid of what she might be up to.

"Sit back, then. I'll show you."

Marina's dream lover pushed himself back away from her and sat cross-legged at her feet, his cock standing proudly in front of him.

"I was thinking about you," the dream Marina said, trailing her fingers between her breasts and down her stomach, "and I got impatient."

She paused, with her hand hovering over her moist pussy. Her lover's eyes were locked on her hand, his lips parted.

"So I did this," she said, bending her knees and planting her feet flat on the cushions to give her audience a better view.

She slid her index finger over her clitoris and buried it in her cunt.

"And then I did this."

She raised her other hand to her breast and squeezed. She could feel her nipple harden against her palm as she stroked her finger in and out of her cunt. She closed her eyes and moved her hips in a counterpoint to the stroking of her finger. She could hear her lover breathing harder now. She expected him to jump on her at any moment, but in the meantime she could not bring her self to stop what she was doing.

She was sliding two fingers in and out of her cunt now and with each stroke, her hand rubbed across her clit, eliciting little moans that she knew her lover would not be able to resist.

She opened her eyes to assess the effect she was having on him, but instead of her beautiful young lover sitting on the opulent cushions at her feet, the Beast was standing

at the foot of her unadorned bed watching her. Other than that, things were much the same as in the dream. Marina had pushed her blankets aside and her nightgown was pushed up above her waist. One of her hands was under the nightgown, on her breast and the other was between her legs. Her fingers were wet with her juices and her pussy ached for attention, just as it had in the dream.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Marina felt herself blushing and she was grateful for the darkness. Never taking her eyes off the Beast, she slowly straightened her legs and reached for her blankets, but the Beast stepped around to the side of the bed and grabbed her wrist to stop her. He sat down on the edge of the bed. Now that he was closer, Marina could see his eyes as he looked at her and the look in them was all too familiar. It was the same look of naked desire that she had seen on her dream lover's face when she opened her legs to him.

Marina thought she should be afraid, but she wasn't. If anything, the way the Beast was looking at her made her feel the way she felt in her dreams. Her whole body felt hot and aching. She wanted him to touch her. She needed him to touch her.

Chapter Three

Marina could hardly believe that she did not object when the Beast pulled her up into a sitting position and pulled her nightgown over her head and tossed it to the floor.

Her nipples puckered in the night air and she longed for the Beast to cover them with his perfect hands. She wanted to feel those hands on her, doing all the things to her that her lovers did in her dreams. She wanted him to plunge his fingers into her welcoming cunt and she wanted to suck on them and taste herself on his skin.

Marina moved over to make more room for the Beast. She stretched out on the bed, with her arms up over her head, the way she remembered her dream self stretching, hoping she looked sinuous and feline. She knew the Beast was watching her, but she did not dare open her eyes to look at him. Just the thought of his hands touching her made her a little lightheaded, but she could not bring herself to look at his face.

The Beast stretched out next to her, accepting her invitation. He placed one finger lightly over her lips. Marina opened her mouth and flicked her tongue over his fingertip and he made a little sound that might have been a chuckle or might have been a growl. She smiled back at him. Then he moved his finger to her closed eyes, touching first one, then the other, then her mouth again.

The Beast leaned slightly away from her and waited for her to understand.

"No talking? No looking?" she asked.

The Beast gave a grunt of assent.

A little sliver of doubt snuck into Marina's mind and she started to wonder what she was getting herself into. She had no idea what the Beast looked like under his loose-fitting clothes, other than that he appeared to be quite hairy all over. Did he have a tail? She had never thought to wonder before. He did have a bit of a snout and thin dark lips that barely covered his sharp teeth. She certainly did not relish the thought of him

kissing her. Her flushed cheeks began to cool a little, but then he touched her face and she remembered about those hands and all the time she had spent watching them at work, not daring to let herself wonder what they would feel like on her skin.

“I can trust you?”

The Beast growled. The question was an affront. Of course she could trust him. She knew that.

“All right. No looking. And no talking unless it’s important.”

He replied with a caress that traveled from her face and down between her breasts and then circled back up as if he had changed his mind. His hand settled gently on her breast, enveloping it with warmth that spread all through Marina’s body. His fingers stroked lightly over the side of her breast for so long that Marina wondered if he was ever going to do anything else.

Finally, his hand moved farther down her body. He stroked her legs, from the tops of her feet to the inside of her thighs, where her skin was damp from her juices.

Again, his hand just rested on her, warming her whole body. She could feel the moisture seeping from her cunt. She wanted his touch so badly that it had become throbbing ache, just inches from his hand. She moved her hips restlessly, trying to will him to do something, anything, before he drove her mad with a hand on her leg.

“What are you trying to do to me?” she asked him.

Finally, he moved his hand, but only to put his fingers over her lips.

“Sorry.”

She kissed his fingers and was about to pull them into her mouth when his hand started traveling again, lightly, just brushing against her skin. He ran his fingernails over her collarbone and across her nipples. Marina grabbed his hand as it headed back to her belly and put it back on her breast and pressed it against her. She felt a little bit afraid of the rest of him, but she wanted to make love to his hands. She wanted them on every part of her at once.

He squeezed her breast and she moaned. He rubbed his thumb across her nipple and she arched up toward him. She reached her hand blindly to him, wanting to touch his face, but he took both her hands and put them above her head, where he held them with one hand while he teased her nipples with the other.

Marina struggled halfheartedly against his hold on her. She was perfectly happy to let him touch her, especially now that his hand was moving back down toward that persistent ache. Again, he stopped just short of it, running his hands along her sides and squeezing her hips. Marina pressed her legs together against the ache of her swollen pussy.

"Please," she pleaded.

The Beast's hand left her and Marina let out a little moan of protest. Then she felt the bed shift as he sat up and moved down toward her feet. When he put his hands on her knees and pushed her legs apart, she wondered why it had taken them so many years to get around to this.

Marina felt the Beast leaning over her. She felt his breath warm on her belly, just above the line of her pubic hair. She shifted her hips impatiently, waiting for whatever he was going to do next.

He kissed her just beneath her belly button. Then he kissed his way a little lower and across from one hip to the other, light kisses, just the barest brush of his lips on her skin.

But they weren't the lips she expected. They felt perfectly human, as perfect as his hands. They did not feel anything like they looked. It was impossible. She raised herself up on her elbows.

"Beast?" She kept her eyes closed tight, still afraid of looking at him.

Marina felt his fingers against her lips, pushing her gently back down onto the pillow and reminding her of her promise. She shook her head, trying to convey her confusion to him.

“Shhh,” he said, but that was impossible too. He had never made such a human sound before. How could he with his mouth that was shaped more like a dog’s than a man’s?

The mouth kissing her neck and moving down to her breast felt entirely human, though and so did the tongue tracing a circle around her nipple. Then he moved to her other breast. His kisses were light and teasing, but she wanted more. She wanted him to devour her. She put her hand on the back of his head, intending to push him more firmly against her. His hair was softer than she had imagined. She buried her fingers in it, but he pulled her hand away and put it back up over her head, out of his way.

But the Beast understood her intent. He clamped his mouth hard on her nipple and sucked. A hand closed over her other breast and squeezed, then pulled at the nipple. Marina arched her body toward his, trying to increase the amount of contact between them, but he would not let her body touch his. He buried his face between her breasts. Marina held her breath. She did not dare move. She felt smooth skin against her skin, cheeks that did not even have a hint of whiskers on them, let alone a thick pelt of fur.

Marina bit her lip to keep from speaking as the Beast raised his head and trailed his hand down her belly. He stopped, with his hand resting lightly between her legs. She opened her legs, but somehow he still evaded the touch of her body. She wriggled against his hand, trying to will him to move his fingers just a fraction of an inch, into the moist center of her.

The Beast moaned, but he did not move. It seemed like he was waiting for something or listening to something that Marina could not hear, but when she stilled her breath and tore her attention away from the warmth of his hand on her, she could feel it. She had only been aware of her own pleasure before, but now she sensed the distinct feel of magic thrumming about them, not her father’s dark oppressive magic, but something she imagined would look warm and golden, something that felt a little like the heat the Beast had aroused in her body.

Something was happening. Marina did not know what it was, but she knew that what they were doing had something to do with it. She moved one of her hands from where the Beast had so firmly placed them and set it over his. She let it rest there for a moment and listened to the Beast breathing. Even though she was only touching his hand, she could feel his whole body trembling. She wondered if he was afraid. She was, but her fear was nothing compared to her need for the Beast to touch her.

She curled her fingers down, making his fingers press down and through the tangle of her pubic hair until one finger made contact with hot, moist skin. Marina made a satisfied sound deep in her throat. She had been anticipating that touch. She made it happen, yet she had not anticipated how it would make her feel desperate for more.

Her hand fell away when the Beast began stroking her with his finger, moving slowly over her clit, sliding just the slightest bit inside her with each downward stroke. After a moment the strokes grew longer and slower, so that his finger swept over the hard nub of her clit and then down deep inside her and back again.

Marina knew herself to be completely in his control, just from the power of what he was doing with a single finger. He was pushing her so slowly toward climax she could hardly bear it, but neither could she bring herself to make him change what he was doing.

When he stopped, she was breathing heavily and her whole body was trembling. She waited while he moved about on the bed for a moment, then settled back next to her. Marina felt his skin against hers from her toes to her hips and his lips scattering light kisses all over her upper body.

She found his hand and ran her hand up his arm to his shoulder, feeling warm skin with no more hair on it than she would expect on any man. Still she kept her eyes closed, afraid to break the spell, as she raised herself up on one elbow and felt her way around him, from his lightly fuzzy chest to his hips and over the delicious curve of his buttocks, which she gave a satisfying squeeze.

The Beast moved quickly at that and Marina felt him hovering over her, hesitating. She put her hand up to his face and pulled him down so she could kiss him. As she traced his lips with her tongue, she ran her foot up his leg and he relaxed against her. The press of his cock hard against her belly made her smile as she kissed him and she felt his lips turn up in a smile, too. She explored his mouth with her tongue and wriggled her hips against him, making him groan.

“Marina.”

Chapter Four

Marina opened her eyes and saw a complete stranger looking down at her. He lifted his head so she could see him more clearly, but other than that he did not move a muscle. He had relit the candle at some point and in the flickering light she could see that his eyes were not as unfamiliar as the rest of his face. When she looked hard enough, she could see her friend the Beast in his eyes. She really was afraid now, afraid of the powerful magic that had done this, but she was also aware of his body against hers and the heat that was emanating from both of them.

"Let me see your hands," she said.

The man shifted his weight so he could hold one of his hands out in front of her. She looked at it for a long minute and then he turned it so she could see the back of it. It was the Beast's hand. There was no doubt that this man and the Beast were one and the same.

Marina took his hand and put it against her cheek. Then she kissed it, first the palm, then each fingertip. She finished with the thumb, drawing it into her mouth and sucking on it. She circled the tip of his thumb with her tongue until he moaned and pulled it away.

"How long do we have?" she asked as she wrapped her arms around him.

He shook his head. Perhaps it was not easy for him to talk yet.

"Let's use the time wisely then," she said.

She turned onto her side and slid her hand down his chest to his belly until she felt his cock against the back of her hand. She turned her hand and pressed her palm against his cock and wrapped her fingers slowly around it. The man shuddered.

Marina rolled onto her back, pulling the man along with her. She opened her legs and as he settled between them she guided his cock inside her and withdrew her hand. Their eyes locked as he entered her and for a moment he held perfectly still.

It was more than Marina could bear. She pushed against him, wanting him deeper inside her. That one little movement seemed to destroy the man's restraint and he started pumping wildly against her and the force of each thrust nearly knocked the breath out of Marina. She found herself clinging to him and gasping for air and wanting to laugh for the sheer joy of it.

It felt like he was everywhere in her. One minute his tongue was in her ear. The next, he was kissing her and his tongue was thrusting in her mouth as fiercely as his cock was inside her. Marina wrapped her legs and arms around him and held on tight, pressing herself against him as hard as she could.

It was only a moment before he came inside her with a shudder and a deep groan that sounded more like the Beast she knew. They were both panting and slick with sweat. The man rolled over onto his side, pulling Marina along with him. She wanted to look at his face, but he had it hidden against her neck. She stroked his close-cropped brown hair and the nape of his neck.

"Beast?"

He finally lifted his head to look at her and Marina saw that there were tears in his eyes.

"My name's Duncan."

"Duncan. Will it last, Duncan?"

"I don't know."

He kissed her before she could reply. Before she could do more than recognize the fear in his eyes. How would they bear it if he returned to his Beast form in the morning? How could she worry about anything when he sucked on her lower lip that way? Or when his mouth felt so hot against her neck and his hand rubbed slow circles on her belly?

He seemed determined to kiss every square inch of her skin as he worked his way slowly down her body. One hand had reached underneath her and was rhythmically squeezing her bottom while he kissed little circles around her belly button. Marina moaned when he pushed her legs apart and moved so that he was lying between them.

Now he was kissing and nuzzling the soft skin of her inner thighs and both his hands were under her bottom, squeezing. Marina pulled her knees up slightly and felt herself open up to him. His thumbs slipped inside her as he lowered his mouth onto her. The first light flick of his tongue on her clitoris took her breath away. He teased her at first, flicking his tongue over her hot skin until she reached down to pull his hair in protest.

He understood. He started stroking her clit slowly with his tongue while he stroked all around it with his thumbs. Marina bit her lip to keep from moaning, even now remembering that the sorcerer was probably just upstairs, but she could not hold back a long, low moan when she came. She turned her head and buried her face in the crook of her elbow to muffle the sound.

But Duncan wasn't done with her. He never even missed a stroke of his tongue as her hips pushed against him in release. He didn't miss a beat as his hand replaced his mouth and his mouth moved to her breast, not even when he slipped his cock inside her again. He moved slowly inside her while his fingers worked their magic and his mouth sucked and nipped at her nipple.

The trio of sensations brought Marina to orgasm twice more before Duncan caught up with her. She fell asleep with her legs still wrapped around him, her mind washed clean of thought. She felt like a creature of pure sensation, slightly sore and entirely limp in the aftermath of pleasure.

* * * * *

The first hint of morning light showed around the edges of the shutters when Duncan woke. Marina was sleeping with her back against his chest, her bottom pressed

snuggly against his crotch. Duncan sighed and unwrapped himself from her. He had broken numerous unspoken rules of wizardry last night, the worst being getting involved with a person who was under a spell.

Considering the result, though, he couldn't regret it. He did not have to touch his face or lift up the blankets and look at his body to know that the spell he had been living under for five years had been lifted, but he did anyway. He sat up and swung his legs out of the bed so he could look at his feet. He rotated them and flexed them and pointed his toes, admiring them. He stood up and took a few trial steps. After his big stumbling Beast feet, now he felt downright graceful.

He turned back to the bed to find Marina watching him. There was admiration on her face too, but she wasn't looking at his feet.

"Whenever I tried to imagine you before," she said, "I always saw you as a beastlike man. I never pictured you as completely human."

Duncan hurried back into the bed before she had the chance to see how much her appraisal aroused him. Or maybe it was her tousled hair and the way the blankets had slipped off her shoulders. Either way, he could not have a repeat of last night. Not until she knew who she was and could make an informed decision about whether she wanted to be with him.

Marina turned on her side and rested her hand on his chest. Duncan willed himself not to wish she would move her hand lower.

"How did this happen?" There was awe in her voice. At least she recognized powerful magic when she saw it.

"It seems that we stumbled across the back door to the enchantment the sorcerer put on me."

"What do you mean, the back door?"

"Every enchantment has a secret way it can be lifted. That's one of the first rules of wizardry. It can be anything the enchanter chooses and unless the enchanter decides to lift the enchantment, the back door is the only way to remove it unless you can find a

more powerful mage to reverse it. People usually only discover the back door by chance."

"Like we did last night," Marina said with a smile. "Sex."

Duncan frowned, considering. "Not just any sex, though, I think. Sex with you and you probably had to be willing."

"I'm still willing." Marina gazed at Duncan's bare chest and he could see her eyes grow hazy with desire. She slid her hand down to his stomach, but he grabbed it before it reached its goal. He kissed her fingertips and kept her hand in his.

"It was very clever of him," Duncan said. "He can't have imagined you would ever let me into your bed."

Marina turned her hand and linked her fingers through his. "I think he couldn't have imagined us becoming friends, either."

"No. He's isolated himself from people for too long. He doesn't understand that side of human nature."

Marina moved in closer to Duncan and nestled against him. "He always sleeps late after he's worked so long on a spell, but you'll have to leave soon. Before he sees you."

Duncan turned to her and turned her face so he could look at her.

"We leave together," he said firmly. "Whoever you are, you don't belong here."

Marina shrunk away from him. "What do you mean whoever I am? I'm the sorcerer's daughter."

Duncan shook his head. "No. Knut has no daughter. I don't think he could make a daughter if he wanted to. His whole essence has gone into his magic. You're under an enchantment, like I was."

"I'm the sorcerer's daughter," she insisted.

"Think, Marina. What do you remember of your childhood?"

"What is there to remember?" she said too quickly. "Nothing ever changes here. You know that."

"I wasn't always here. What was it like before I came?"

Marina looked at him as though she was searching for the answer in his eyes. She shook her head. "I don't remember."

"Why did you try to run away those times?" Duncan pressed.

"Because I hate it here," she whispered fiercely. "I don't know where I would have gone, but I had to try to get away."

"Do you remember yesterday when you felt sick? You said your hands didn't look right."

Marina nodded. "They looked old. It scared me. They look fine now, though."

Duncan sat up and tucked the blankets around his waist. "Even a powerful enchantment requires a little bit of upkeep. I think yours was wearing thin yesterday. Knut had been working hard for days. He probably hadn't been thinking about anything but the spell he was crafting. He had forgotten to renew your enchantment."

Marina held her hands up and studied them for a moment. Then she said, "So, that was my true self showing through yesterday? I'm old?"

"Maybe not so old." Duncan said with a smile. He wanted to tell her what he guessed, but he had broken enough rules already. It was never a good idea to tell a person whose memory had been taken by magic who her true self was. Besides, what if he was wrong? What kind of damage might that do? No. Best to keep her in the dark until they got to the university.

Marina looked around the room and said, "You've seen what happens to me when I get to the borders of his land. I can't go with you."

"I'll help you across. You won't be alone this time."

She gave him a sharp look. "You'll have to carry me, then. The last time, I was so weak I could hardly breathe when you found me."

Duncan put his hand on Marina's cheek and she leaned into it.

"You have to cross by your own power," he told her, "but I'll help you. I'll get you across or I'll stay with you."

"Then I'll have to manage it, won't I?" she said with a weak attempt to smile. "It would be a shame to have you turned into a beast again." She gave him a look that reminded him of everything that had happened the night before.

Duncan closed his eyes to shut out the image of her, but Marina leaned closer and kissed him. For just a minute he indulged in the feel of her mouth on his and her breasts brushing against his chest. He let her trace her tongue along his lips and he could not suppress a moan when their tongues met and she leaned closer to press her breasts firmly against him.

It took all Duncan's willpower to pull away from her and give her a stern look.

"You may not like me so much anymore when you know who you are."

Marina's face fell. "No," she said. "No. You've been my friend all these years. How can that change?"

Duncan shook his head. He knew that could change in so many ways. He did not want to think about how angry she was sure to be if his suspicions were right.

Chapter Five

Marina tried to look at everything in the seconds it took to walk through the kitchen. Of everything that she was leaving behind, this room might be the only thing she would miss—but not for long, she hoped. She was certain to find a new refuge wherever Duncan was taking her, a refuge that would not have her father's presence looming over it. She could not stop thinking of him as her father, no matter how certain Duncan sounded when he insisted that Knut had no daughter. Sitting snug in bed with him, it was easy to believe that she had been living under an enchantment—it certainly explained a few things—but now she wasn't so sure. She felt like herself.

Just because she wanted desperately to leave did not mean she wasn't really who she thought she was. All across the Five Lands unhappy daughters ran away from unkind fathers. It probably happened every day, but Marina knew it was not going to be as easy for her as it was for other men's daughters. Duncan had never tried to cross the boundary of her father's land. He did not know what it felt like to feel every ounce of your energy drain into the ground, leaving you without the strength to even call for help.

She caught up with him at the door and they stepped out into the courtyard. As long as they stayed close up to the wall under the sorcerer's windows, there was little chance of him seeing them, but Marina knew he had other ways of knowing what was going on in his little domain.

Instead of going out through the front gate, which would have been faster, they went around past the deserted stables, which was safer. It looked like Duncan had planned for his day. The wood he spent so much of his time chopping had been stacked high against the wall. The wedge-shaped pieces of wood fit together to form what

looked like a secure stairway nearly to the top of the wall. How had this escaped her father's notice? Or did he know and think it would never be put to use?

"It's perfectly safe," Duncan said. "I've tested it. The logs at the bottom are lashed together."

Marina nodded. Her mouth was too dry to speak. Duncan went ahead of her and held out his hand. She grasped it tightly, more for the reassurance it gave her than for help climbing the wood pile. Halfway up she let go of his hand and clambered the rest of the way on all fours.

The wood pile stopped about five feet from the top of the wall. Duncan pulled himself up and reached down to help Marina. It was a less than dignified escape, but Marina was happy to set her dignity aside in order to put the fortress behind her.

Once on top of the wall, Marina kept a firm grip on Duncan's arm. The wall was deep, built generations ago to keep out raiding neighbors, but she was starting to feel a bit unsteady and she knew she would grow weaker with each step she took toward the border of the sorcerer's land. After a few seconds, Marina took a deep breath and ventured a look down to the ground on the other side of the wall. It was a sheer drop to rocky ground that fell away down a steep slope.

She turned to look at Duncan, who was watching her closely.

"Is that the only way down?" she asked.

Duncan smiled. "You're sitting on the way down."

Marina looked down and saw that while Duncan was sitting on the stonework of the wall, she was sitting on wood and hinges.

"The wall isn't solid?" she asked.

"Move over and I'll show you."

Marina crawled off the door and Duncan stood up and hauled it open.

"There's a ladder," Duncan said. "I'll go down first."

The morning light only revealed the first few rungs of the ladder and as Duncan climbed down, it seemed that the darkness swallowed him up. When he stopped, only his head and shoulders were still visible.

"Your turn," he said. "It's sturdy."

Marina backed up to the ladder and felt with her foot for the first rung. As soon as she had both feet on the ladder she felt a stirring of memory that she could not quite bring into focus. The ladder shook as Duncan climbed back up toward her until his face was level with her waist and his arms circled her legs.

"Everything all right?"

"Just a memory. Or almost a memory."

"To be expected," he said confidently. "I think you'll have more of those when we're away from here."

Marina waited for him to continue back down the ladder so she could too, but he did not move. He turned his face against her and nuzzled her waist. He let go of the ladder with one hand and rubbed it down her leg to the hem of her dress, then up her bare leg to caress the tender skin at the back of her knee.

Marina felt herself melting into the ladder as Duncan's hand moved up her leg. A bird flew overhead and its shadow flickered across the opening of the trapdoor. It was enough to remind her of what they were supposed to be doing.

"Duncan! We'll never get out of here at this rate."

Duncan sighed and removed his hand from her thigh. He stepped down the ladder to the ground. As soon as Marina was off the ladder, he went back up to close the trapdoor, leaving Marina standing in absolute darkness. When he stepped back down to the ground, she reached out for him and grabbed a fistful of his sleeve.

"I'd conjure up a light for you, but I'm afraid he'd sense it."

"It's all right," Marina replied, knowing the quaver in her voice did not sound very brave. "How far?"

"Almost to the front gate. Here, take my hand. It gets narrower just a few steps ahead."

Marina would have liked to wrap her arms around Duncan's waist as they felt their way along the tunnel within the wall, but they would have ended up tripping each other. She satisfied herself with holding on to his hand with both her hands.

"I don't think the sorcerer even knows about his passage," Duncan whispered.

Marina did not reply. She was fairly certain her father knew everything that went on, just as she was certain that he was her father, no matter what Duncan believed.

They moved on slowly through the tunnel. Marina had never been in such complete darkness before. It robbed her of her sense of distance and time. She had no idea if they had been walking one minute or thirty when Duncan stopped and turned around. He lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed them, then pulled them around behind him so that her arms circled his waist. His arms closed tightly around her and he took a deep unsteady breath as he lowered his head down to press his face against her neck.

The possibility of Duncan being afraid had not occurred to Marina until this moment and she did not like it. She raised one hand to stroke his hair and tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to her.

After a moment Duncan straightened up and released her.

"Close your eyes," he warned. "It's going to be bright."

Marina heard the door swing open and the passage was filled with light that shone through her closed eyelids. She opened her eyes slowly and squinted out at the hillside that sloped down from the fortress. She had half expected to find the sorcerer waiting for them, but there was not a living soul to be seen.

"We mustn't linger here," Duncan said softly.

"Let's go, then. I want to get it over with and find out if I really can cross the border."

They stepped out into the sunlight and Duncan closed the door behind them. He took her hand and they set off down the hill. The way was steep, so Marina kept her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her. It had been a long time since she had walked on anything but the hard-packed dirt of the fortress grounds. She only glanced up twice to see the green smudge of the trees that grew along the creek that marked the edge of the sorcerer's land. It was less than a mile away, but Marina thought it might as well be a hundred miles. She had not made it as far as the creek on her previous attempts to leave.

They paused at the bottom of the hill. Marina was out of breath, though she knew it had not been that difficult a descent. She rested against Duncan, but after a moment she felt even more out of breath.

She pushed away and turned to climb back up to the fortress. "I can't," she said. "I'm sorry. I just can't."

Duncan grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and put his cheek against hers.

"It's the spell," he told her. "It's not your body. It's the spell settling fear and despair on you."

Marina hardly heard what he said, but his voice was firm and soothing. After a few minutes she realized that she was breathing normally and that she believed him when he said he would help her across the border, that this time she would make it. She also realized that something had risen between them and she wiggled her bottom against his erection.

"I take it you're recovered," Duncan said, giving her earlobe a little nip. "Let's be off, then. The sorcerer will be wanting his breakfast soon."

Duncan set a gentle, steady pace for them, but it felt relentless to Marina, who grew wearier with every step. This was the feeling she remembered from her other escape attempts. Even so, she refused to stop and rest when Duncan suggested it, certain that if she stopped moving she would never be able to start again. As long as they were on the

sorcerer's land, if he found them, he could snatch them back. He could put a stronger, worse spell on Duncan and Marina knew she would not be able to escape on her own.

Marina kept wanting to look over her shoulder as they neared the border, but she had to focus all her energy on keeping her feet moving. She drew strength from Duncan, who kept a firm grip on her hand, but she did not see how he could help her once they got to the creek.

The shade of the trees that grew along the creek was welcome when they got there, but Marina was so exhausted she could not think beyond her desire to lie down and sleep forever. She started to sit down but Duncan pulled her back up.

"All you have to do is cross the water," he said. "Then you're free."

Marina looked from Duncan to the shallow creek and back again. She could see Duncan just fine, but when she looked at the creek her vision blurred. Even breathing required an effort. She had to concentrate just to shake her head. The creek was shallow and only about ten feet wide, but it might as well have been an ocean. There was no way she could drag herself that far.

"You have to," Duncan said firmly. "Otherwise I'll sit here with you until Knut comes for us. You're the reason I came here in the first place. I'm not about to leave you here."

Tears of frustration welled up in Marina's eyes. She could not bear to be responsible for Duncan being recaptured by the sorcerer. She took a deep, painful breath and whispered, "Help me."

Duncan put his arm around Marina's waist, letting her lean on him. He took a small step toward the creek and she followed. They made their way painfully slowly to the edge of the water this way. Then Duncan withdrew his arm and stepped away. Marina sank to her knees.

"I can't help you across the water," he said. "The spell he's put on you won't allow it."

Marina leaned forward until her forehead rested on the ground. A rock was digging into one of her knees, but she could not muster up the strength to move. She felt her mind starting to drift. She heard Duncan talking to her, trying to encourage her, but he sounded so far away. He was lost somewhere in the mist that seemed to be swirling around her.

His hands suddenly felt solid on her shoulders, lifting her to her feet. Then they were on her cheeks, tilting her face up. She felt his lips warm on hers and she realized that she was numb with cold. If she'd had the strength, she would have been shivering.

Duncan kept kissing her, igniting a little flame deep in her frozen body. He put his arms around her and pulled her back up to her feet. Then he stepped back, just enough to break the contact between them. Marina leaned toward him, but he pulled back so that she had to take a step toward him to find the warmth of his lips again. She opened her mouth against his and breathed in his strength.

She would never get her fill of him. It was the one thought that penetrated the fog of exhaustion she was lost in. When he pulled back again she had to take a step to find him again. The thought of being left alone without the taste of him on her tongue was worse than the fatigue that threatened to overcome her.

Another kiss. Another step. Another kiss. Marina heard the soft splash of water as she stepped into the creek, but all she cared about was the sensation of Duncan's tongue stroking hers.

Another kiss, another step and she felt cool water spill over the tops of her shoes. She leaned forward, trying to make contact with more than Duncan's lips, but he stayed just beyond her body's reach, never letting her touch him with more than her mouth until they had inched and kissed their way to the other side of the creek.

She felt the change as soon as both her feet were on the dry ground. It was like finally feeling well after a long illness. She opened her eyes and saw that the world was bright again and that Duncan was grinning at her and looking very pleased with himself.

Marina smiled back at him. "Very clever," she said as she reached for him. She grabbed a handful of hair at the back of his head and pulled him down to her. He gasped as his mouth met hers.

Duncan tried to pull back, but Marina tugged hard on his hair.

"Ow. Marina, what are you doing? We have to keep moving."

Or at least that was what he tried to say. With her tongue plunging deep into his mouth he doubted that she understood a word. He reached up and pulled her hands out of his hair. Keeping a firm grip on her hands, he pulled her away from the creek to the dry grasses beyond. They had days of walking ahead of them and he wanted to put Knut's fortress as far behind them as he could before night fell.

"You're right. This is better," she said as she twisted away from his grip.

Duncan tried to step away, but Marina moved fast. Her strength had returned and then some. Duncan laughed as she grabbed at him again. She pressed her lips against his throat and nipped and licked along his collarbone.

"We have to wait until I get you home, Marina," he protested.

Duncan twined his fingers in her hair. He meant to pull her away from him, but he felt enchanted by the press of her breasts against him and the little sounds she was making against his skin. His cock was hard inside his baggy beast pants and he knew Marina was aware of it. With a great exertion of willpower he took her firmly by the shoulders and pushed her back so she had to look at him.

"Believe me, Marina. When you're yourself again, you'll hate us both for this."

Marina smiled up at him. "How could I hate you, Duncan? You've set me free."

"You won't be truly free until the spell is lifted and I need help to do that."

Marina shrugged and slipped her hands inside his shirt. He closed his eyes, trying not to respond to the feel of her hands caressing the small of his back. Her hands moved around to his chest and she rubbed his nipples with her thumbs, sending the blood rushing from his brain straight to his cock.

"Marina." He meant it to be a protest, but it came out as a moan.

Marina pushed his shirt up and bent down to kiss his stomach. She circled his navel with her tongue and kissed her way up to his chest to take one of his nipples gently between her teeth. Her hands circled around behind him and cupped his buttocks.

"Marina, we mustn't. You don't understand," Duncan said helplessly.

"I'm free and I want you. What more do I need to understand?"

"A lot of things, actually," Duncan managed to say, but somehow he could not remember what those things were. Besides, they just did not seem quite so important anymore. Not now that Marina was pulling him down to the ground with her and one of her hands had slipped inside his pants and taken hold of his cock. The slightest squeeze of her fingers destroyed his capacity for rational thought. He knew this was not right, but there was no resistance left in him. After five years of celibacy, he doubted that he could have resisted any woman, let alone this one.

He cried out in protest when Marina removed her hand, but then she was on top of him, kissing him and grinding the length of her slender body against him. When she sat up and straddled him, Duncan tried to follow her to keep kissing her, but she pushed him down and untied the cord that held up his oversized pants. She hiked her skirt up to her waist and wriggled out of her underclothes.

Duncan reached down to stroke her bare legs, but she slithered down his body before he made contact, pulling his pants along with her. Her mouth burned a trail along the tender skin of his pelvis. She flicked her tongue over the tip of his cock and Duncan raised himself up on his elbows to look at her. She glanced up at him and gave him a mischievous smile. Then she swooped her head down and took him into her mouth.

He fell back and grabbed a handful of her hair. Her mouth felt perfect and she was doing the most wonderful things with it, swirling her tongue and sucking while she ran her fingernails up and down his thighs. Nothing existed for him except Marina's mouth and her hands. Nothing else mattered.

Then her mouth was gone and before Duncan could catch his breath, his cock was engulfed in her pussy and she was pounding against him and making little whimpering sounds. Duncan reached down to where their bodies met and positioned his hand so that her clitoris rubbed against his fingers as she rode him. Her eyes were closed and her mouth open in an expression of enraptured concentration. Duncan watched her mouth open wider as her climax crept up on her. She opened her eyes and their eyes met the instant before she cried out and collapsed on top of him and for that instant Duncan thought he saw, deep in Marina's eyes, the woman he had tried to rescue from the sorcerer. The thought of Anna on top of him, skin to skin, sent him over the edge and he came before Marina's orgasm subsided.

Marina relaxed against Duncan. He slid his hand under her dress and stroked her back, feeling both their hearts slow down and their breathing quiet.

"I hope he can see us, hidden up there in his tower," she whispered. "I hope he can see how wrong he was about us."

Duncan pushed the hair out of her face, but her face was buried against his neck, so he could not see her.

"Is that what that was all about?" he asked. "An act of defiance?"

"No. I was just so happy and I felt so strong, I had to do something. I wasn't thinking of the sorcerer at all until just now."

She sighed against his neck and sat up.

"All right," she said. "Now I'm ready to go."

Chapter Six

For two days Marina and Duncan walked eastward across the dry rolling hills, stopping each night at an isolated farmstead. People were eager to offer them food and shelter in exchange for Duncan's spells of protection.

"Dangerous times," one of the farmers said, shaking his head. "You never know what's coming next."

Marina was happy to sleep in their simple houses, where the close quarters made it impossible for her and Duncan to be alone together. When they were alone, walking in the hot sunshine, they did not speak to each other more than necessary. Marina supposed it might have been because for five years they had been in the habit of not speaking to all, but she knew it was really because of what she had done after they crossed the creek.

As soon as they had straightened their clothes, she had felt shy of Duncan in a way she had never felt with the Beast. What had possessed her to act that way? It can't have been pent-up desire, because the only desire she had felt when living in the sorcerer's fortress was the desire to escape and a vague longing sometimes when she woke from one of her dreams. Now she could not look at him walking next to her without remembering the way he had tried to resist her amorous attack. She smiled in spite of her embarrassment and looked sidelong at him, considering. No, she wouldn't do it again. At least not yet. Not until she found out why he had tried to resist her when he so obviously wanted her.

On the morning of the third day, a pillar of smoke to the south provided a distraction.

"Grass fire?" Marina wondered out loud.

"Somebody's grain field, more likely. Or maybe a village."

"A whole village on fire? That could only happen if a grass fire swept through it and there's not enough smoke for that."

Duncan turned away from the smoke and started walking again. "Maybe it's the sorcerer's latest spell at work," he said without looking back.

Marina trotted to catch up with him. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you ever wonder about the soldiers who buy spells from him? Don't you have any idea what's going on outside that fortress?"

Marina's feet faltered. "How can I? I never left and you certainly couldn't tell me anything."

"You went to the village sometimes."

"Yes and nobody would speak to me. The first time I can remember going, I asked people to help me. I thought somebody would help me escape, but they all turned their backs to me. After that I just told them what I needed and paid them for it."

"Of course. They're probably terrified even if he does keep them safe. Everybody's terrified. That's why those people paid for protection with twice as much food as we need."

Marina was out of breath from hurrying to keep up with Duncan. The sight of the smoke seemed to have given him an increased sense of urgency. She grabbed hold of his arm, the first time she had touched him since they left the sorcerer's land.

"Will you slow down and tell me what's going on?"

Duncan slowed down slightly, but he didn't answer her question. Instead he asked, "Did you ever wonder why I was in the fortress in the first place?"

"He told me you were trying to steal secrets from him."

Duncan laughed.

"It never occurred to me to doubt him," Marina said. "Things were the way they were and that was that. I didn't think about anything much, except for the times I tried to leave."

Duncan stopped suddenly. Marina was happy to stop too and catch her breath.

"I was there to find you and take you back home," he said gently. "You were there because he stole a book."

Marina looked back at the smoke. "I used to wonder if you remembered who you had been before. I felt sorry for you, but now it turns out that I'm the one who's lost myself. How can I have had a whole life that I don't remember?"

"It's the nature of the spell," Duncan said. "He's very good at what he does."

"I'm not sure I want to change back. Now that I'm free, I like being Marina."

Duncan took a step closer to her. Out of the corner of her eye Marina saw his hand move toward her, but he did not touch her. "Sometimes," he said, "With this kind of spell, if it's not kept up or properly removed, it just sort of fades away and the person under the spell fades away too. I doubt he'll bother to do a long-distance renewal. It takes a lot of energy and he has nothing to gain from it."

Marina nodded and started walking again. She did not trust herself to speak. She was more afraid now than she ever had been in the sorcerer's fortress. At least she knew what to be afraid of there. Now everything was unknown, even her identity.

Duncan sighed and followed her. After a while he said, "There are twenty-five barons in the five lands, five for each."

"I know that," Marina said wearily. "Everybody knows that." She did not look at him. She would not look at him.

"Usually the barons get along well enough. They form alliances, arrange marriages between their children. The decent ones usually prevail over the rotten ones. Then along came a sorcerer named Knut, who realized he could do a roaring business selling spells to armies if the barons didn't get along so well."

Marina glanced at Duncan. She had a bad feeling about where this lesson was leading.

"So he planted a few seeds of doubt," Duncan continued. "And he watered them and fertilized them and before long, the barons were at each other's throats, invading, taking each other's children as hostages, burning villages. They were all desperate to gain an advantage over their neighbors."

"So Knut opened up for business?" Marina offered.

Duncan nodded. "He sells spells to strike blind terror in an enemy, spells to dull an enemy's blades, spells to produce battle rage in your own soldiers. Anything you can imagine that could give one army an advantage over another. He's very creative and very much in demand, but he makes sure none of them gain enough of an advantage to win the war."

"Because then he'd be out of business."

"Yes."

"And he put spells on us because we were stupid enough to go wandering into his fortress."

Duncan smiled. "Not how I'd put it, but yes."

"I don't want to fade away, Duncan."

Duncan reached out and took her hand. "I won't let you. I'm not much good at lifting spells myself, but I'm taking you to the university where I teach. You'll be your old self within a day."

"I hope I like me."

"I don't know about that," Duncan said, "but I like you."

"Were we a couple?" Marina asked, not sure what she wanted the answer to be.

Duncan shook his head and looked away.

"Yet you put yourself in danger to come find me."

"It's complicated."

"Oh." That meant he did not want to tell her about whatever their relationship had been before. Fine. She could wait until she remembered it herself.

Later that day they reached a river that they followed north and they bartered a water-tightness spell for a ride on a barge. Marina sat on a pile of crates, watching the land spread out flat from both sides of the river while Duncan plied the bargeman with questions about what had been going on for the past five years. As they went, the scattered farmsteads became less scattered and they passed two villages. Both were bigger and more prosperous-looking than the village that huddled down the hill from the sorcerer's fortress, but they were also both ringed around by tents and campfires.

"The barons leave this valley alone," Duncan explained to Marina. "None of them want to take on a university full of mages. The refugees were just starting to come when I went after you. It looks like there's been a steady stream of them since then."

The bargeman had agreed to take them to the center of the city, which spread out from both shores of the river. Marina watched the people and the buildings pass by them, but she did not really see any of it. She could not shake the thought that all of this should look familiar to her, that Duncan should have looked familiar to her when she first saw him.

When the barge pulled up along a pier on the east side of the river, she had the mad hope that Duncan would forget about her and let her stay, safe from the unknown, on the barge while he went wherever he meant to go. Then he looked expectantly at her, so she climbed down from the crates and went with him into the city. They took so many twists and turns down the narrow streets that Marina knew she would never be able to find her way back again.

Had she ever known her way around this place? Duncan had called it home, after all, so she supposed it was her home as well. She realized that she should have asked him what she had been before the spell. A teacher like him? A barmaid? What kind of person would risk her life to retrieve a stolen book?

Duncan stopped at an unremarkable door set in a stone wall that looked like it ran the entire length of the street. He whispered a spell and scowled when the door creaked open.

"They're supposed to change those passwords now and then."

Marina followed him through the door and into a garden that somehow managed to be well-kept and overgrown at the same time.

"I thought it would be easier on you to slip in quietly," Duncan explained.

Marina nodded, looking around at the ancient-looking trees. She did not recognize most of them or the flowers that were blooming all around them in spite of the dry summer heat, but she liked the smell of the place, a combination of decaying vegetation and new growth. She closed her eyes and breathed in the lush aroma. A wave of dizziness washed over her and she swayed on her feet.

Duncan caught her around the waist and held her steady. She tried to take deep breaths, but her heart was racing and she could not fight a rising feeling of panic.

"Something's wrong, Duncan. Something's happening."

Duncan took her chin in a firm grip and tilted her face up. He studied her with an intensity that would normally have left Marina blushing, but now she locked her gaze on his eyes to hold the spinning dizziness at bay.

"The spell's disintegrating," Duncan said. "And you're going with it. I should have expected this. He designed it to fall away as soon as you set foot here."

Marina clutched at Duncan's arms to keep herself upright as nausea cramped her stomach.

"Come on. We've got to find Alistair."

Duncan dragged her at a run through the garden, past glittering fountains and students lazing about and studying on the lawns. He half carried her up wide steps and into a stone building that was even bigger than the sorcerer's fortress. Marina heard people calling out to him as he dragged her down a long corridor and up a winding flight of stairs.

At the top of the stairs Marina slid out of his hold and fell to her knees. Duncan did not even give her a second to rest.

"I didn't spend five years with a snout just to lose you on your own doorstep," he said as he hauled her back to her feet.

Marina clamped her mouth shut against another wave of dizziness and nausea.

"Fiona," Duncan roared.

Marina felt her feet leave the ground and found herself in Duncan's arms, pressed hard against him. They were moving again. It was not as smooth a ride as the barge, but it was very pleasant. She let her head sink onto his shoulder and she closed her eyes. If she could just take a little nap, she was sure she'd feel fine again.

Duncan shook her and she opened her eyes, but she could not focus them.

"Stay here, Marina," she heard him say from a great distance away.

"Spells and curses, Duncan!" A woman's voice cut through the fog. "Where did you come from? Is this our librarian?"

"Not for much longer. Where's Alistair?"

"In his study. No, his new one. It's right here."

Marina was trying to focus on the person named Fiona, but the fog was coming in from all sides, narrowing her field of vision. All she could see was a mass of red hair billowing out from under a green scarf.

"Fiona, run and get anybody you can," said a deep voice. "Whoever you find first, it doesn't matter. We need four mages to fight this. Here, Duncan. Set her down in my chair."

The world receded farther as Duncan settled Marina into a deep, soft chair. She tried to reach out for him, but her arms hung limp at her sides. She closed her eyes and let the sound of the two men's urgent voices flow over her. They were talking about her and about someone named Anna.

It was a very comfortable chair, but not as comfortable as Duncan. She definitely had to have him hold her like that again after she had a nap.

Chapter Seven

Anna woke in her own bed, too weak to even open her eyes, but blissfully comfortable and safe. Thoughts rushed in on her, memories of Knut's fortress and her escape with Duncan, memories of Duncan himself. She pushed them aside and forced her eyes open. Her room looked exactly as it had the day she left, down to the book she had been in the middle of reading left on the little table next to her bed. Love poems. Why on earth did she torture herself that way?

"Welcome home." With a rustle of her trailing dress, Fiona moved from the chair by the window and sat on the bed next to Anna.

Anna pushed herself up to a sitting position and just looked at Fiona. She was so happy to see her old friend, she was afraid she'd burst into tears if she tried to speak.

Fiona picked up a glass of water sitting next to the poetry book and handed it to Anna.

Anna took a sip. It tasted like water, but she could feel the path it took, relieving her parched throat instantly and lifting her mood at the same time.

"Alistair's secret recipe," Fiona explained. "I've never had it myself, but I hear it works wonders."

Anna held the glass out to Fiona.

"No, thank you. He formulated it especially for you. It would probably turn me green or worse."

Anna smiled. "I think you'd look lovely green. It's so good to see you, Fiona. It's strange. I didn't miss you, because you'd been wiped from my mind, but I feel like I've missed you."

"I only just shooed Duncan out of here a little while ago. He fell asleep on the floor next to your bed. I had to appeal to his vanity to get him to go to his rooms and get some proper sleep. He looked a fright."

Anna took another sip of her drink, but it did not make her feel any better about Duncan.

"He's very devoted to you, you know," Fiona said.

Anna nodded. There was no denying that he'd saved her life.

"Before Duncan left, Alistair made it clear that there'd be no rescue attempt if Duncan didn't return. He couldn't risk losing another mage. Duncan didn't hesitate. He was determined to bring you back home."

"I didn't ask him to rescue me," Anna said with a defiance that she knew sounded childish.

Fiona sighed. "So even after all of that, nothing's changed?"

Anna forced down the tears as she remembered opening her eyes and seeing Duncan for the first time as Marina. "Everything and nothing. I'll tell you about it later. How's the library?"

Fiona looked hard at Anna for a moment before she answered. "All right, then. You're going to be busy. We never found an adequate replacement for you and Alistair's bought almost every book the merchants have offered. He's hoping one of them may help against Knut, but even he's not as good as you at finding hidden spells in books. He was very angry when you left without a word to anyone. If you'd returned much sooner, he might not have been so happy to have you back."

Anna leaned her head back against the wall and gazed up at the familiar cracks in the ceiling. "I'll get to work as soon as I've had a swim. If there's anything to be found in those books, I'll find it for him."

Fiona laughed. "I think even Alistair would grant you a day to rest after all you've been through."

Anna shook her head. "No, I want to work. I feel like I've been ill and idle and now I finally feel well again." She looked down at her hands, short-fingered and competent-looking, which had so frightened Marina.

"I did things when I was that other woman that I would never have done as myself, Fiona. But I remember them as though it was me."

"But it was you," Fiona insisted. "You know how those spells work. They take away your memory but not the heart of you. Marina could not have done anything Anna did not want. I'm sorry if that doesn't help you feel better about it."

"No, it doesn't, thank you very much." But she smiled when she said it. Fiona always spoke the truth. It was what made her such a dependable and exasperating friend.

Fiona leaned over and gave Anna a quick hug before she stood up. "I'll leave you to it, then. I promised Duncan I'd tell him as soon as you woke, but I think I'll let him sleep a while. At least long enough for you to have your swim before he starts bothering you with declarations of love all over again."

Anna winced. It would probably be even worse than before, after what Marina had done. She could not think of it as something she had done. No matter what Fiona said, no matter how right Fiona was, Anna could not think of Marina as herself.

When Fiona had left, Anna gulped down the rest of Alistair's potion. She felt a tingle of strength work its way up her spine and down her arms and legs, but what she really needed was courage. She went to the chest that doubled as a window seat and rummaged around for her favorite dress. She was glad she had not worn it when she set out to find Knut. She would have hated to have worn it out working in his kitchen. As it was, the dress was almost too shabby to wear, but it was soft and comforting and she loved the faded violet of it.

She pulled a sleeveless and almost new, cream-colored tunic over the dress to hide the ink splatters on the front of it and brushed her hair. The last time she had brushed her hair in this room, she had seen a few strands of gray in the front. This time she

made a point of brushing back, so she could not see it. She did not want to know how much more gray there would be after five lost years. She did not want to think about how time had passed here without her during those years.

At least the garden outside her window did not seem to have changed. It was still overgrown to the point of wildness in some places and a family of peacocks still lived within the safety of the garden walls, even if it wasn't the same family of peacocks as before. Around the corner, just out of sight, a fountain splashed, powered by a spell set generations ago by the first master of the school and renewed every season by the current master.

As badly as Anna wanted to get her meeting with Alistair over with, she had to look in on the library first. She dreaded seeing what kind of shape it might be in after five years without a librarian looking after it. She was grateful that the building was quiet at this hour, with students and teachers already busy in their classes. She ducked into the downstairs study hall and grabbed an apple from a bowl on one of the tables. Maybe by evening she would feel ready to face a little bit of socializing in the dining hall.

Anna paused on the front steps and looked across the lawn and paths of the quadrangle. It suddenly hit her that she was home. The library stood directly across from her, its pale bricks glowing almost golden in the morning sun. It was the oldest building in the school and, Anna thought, the most beautiful.

She made herself walk sedately across the lawn, even though she felt like running. She walked around the building to the back door, admiring the multi-paned windows, especially the colored panes scattered in among the clear ones. Anna's predecessor had wanted to replace the antique windows with new, clearer glass. Anna was glad the proposal had been voted down by the governing board. The old glass cast a lovely, quiet light inside the library.

Only a few students sat studying at the long, sturdy oak tables in the center of the library. Anna did not recognize any of them, but that did not bother her. The students

were mere background to the work she did. It was the books she cared about. She closed her eyes and breathed in the familiar smell of paper and parchment, with just a hint of dust. Even if there had been no librarian, at least somebody had kept the place clean.

A brief survey of the shelves of books and the cubbyholes that held the rolled parchments showed that the library had been well taken care of in her absence. Everything was where it belonged and it did not look like the books had been abused.

The workroom was another matter. The shelves lining the room were stuffed with new acquisitions and her desk was nearly hidden by a jumble of parchment rolls and books in need of mending. Anna pulled one of the new books off a shelf and looked inside. *Easy Cures for Commonplace Ailments* it was called. It held the predictable recipes for herbal remedies that every mother taught her daughters, but woven into each recipe was a spell, visible only to somebody with the proper training. "Cure for Snuffles" hid a spell to make an unkind husband impotent. "Soothing Ointment for Various Itches" hid a breast-enhancing spell.

Anna considered. Her breasts were big enough, certainly, but wasn't there a spell for lifting and firming hidden in a book on architecture? She was not concerned about attracting Duncan. He had been trying to get into her bed since he'd first come to the university. Something much more complicated had always made her hold him at arm's length and old hurt that had become such a familiar ache that it seemed a natural part of her.

But something had changed when the Beast made love to Marina. Anna could no longer pretend to herself that she did not desire him. Even so, she was not going to resort to using spells to hold his interest. She would just have to strengthen her resolve. She turned to the next page in the book. "Snail Poison" hid a spell to "melt any man's heart".

Anna smiled with satisfaction. She might be busy for months uncovering the secrets of the new books and cataloging them. She would be working so hard, she would hardly have the chance to see Duncan at all.

"I thought I'd find you in here."

Anna jumped.

"Alistair! I just wanted to look in on things before I went to see you."

"Perfectly understandable." Alistair strolled over to her and looked at the open book in her hands. "I hardly think you need that. The poor idiot's already lost his reason over you."

Anna snapped the book closed.

"I'm sorry we didn't get the grimoire back. What a waste of five years."

Alistair waved the thought away and moved a pile of books off a chair so he could sit down.

Anna began straightening books on her desk.

"You brought back something that may be even more valuable than the lost book," Alistair said. "We know how Knut works now. We know how he lives."

Anna turned around and gave Alistair her full attention. "He takes great pride in his work," she said. "He can spend days on a single spell. He's exhausted afterwards. Sometimes he lets his long-term spells slip."

Alistair smiled. "Yes, that's what Duncan told me, too. If we can know when he's working on a spell, we'll know when he's vulnerable and maybe we'll be able to stop him while there's still something left of the Five Lands worth saving."

"He's detected every spy we've sent. He saw through me in about five seconds. Would any of the barons help us?"

"We tried that route while you were away. They're all too reliant on his spells. None will risk being the only one he won't sell to."

Alistair ran his fingers through his long black hair, revealing the gray underneath, which had not been there five years ago.

"I've been through all these books," he said. "But I know you can find things I missed, especially the more powerful spells. Don't worry about cataloging just yet. I need you to search for anything that might help us against Knut."

"I should have been here all along. I might have found something years ago."

Alistair shrugged. "You behaved rashly, but not without reason. We all wanted to get that book back. At the time it was the only weapon we had to use against him, but there's never only one way. Rest today. Get reacquainted with your old colleagues and meet the new ones. Tomorrow will be soon enough to start working."

Anna nodded. She had expected a legendary Alistair lecture for abandoning her post and ending up needing to be rescued. Kindness and understanding were the last things she expected – and the last things she thought she deserved.

"One other thing," Alistair said as he stood up.

Here it comes, Anna thought, bracing herself for the lecture.

"Duncan risked his career for you, not to mention his life. You might want to consider taking him at his word."

Anna watched Alistair walk out of the room. Even after he was gone, she could not think of a reply.

Chapter Eight

Anna floated on her back. She had swum back and forth across the swimming hole until she was exhausted. Now she let the ensorcelled water cradle her, warm and soothing at the same time that it felt cool and refreshing. Her hair fanned out around her head and she imagined herself as some tragic character out of one of the old legends, but on further consideration the thought was less appealing. Drowned princesses made for lovely dramatic paintings, but she really did not want to be one.

Anna took a deep breath, then another and the thoughts flowed out of her mind—all but one, which clung on tenaciously, preventing her from relaxing completely, the memory of the second time she saw Duncan.

She had been in Alistair's office, cheerfully haggling over the price of a book he had commissioned her to acquire for him. A pleasant current of sexual tension ran through each look they exchanged. They had been flirting with each other off and on for years, whenever Anna stopped in at the university to sell him books that she had purchased throughout the Five Lands or to try to buy a book of his that she knew another of her regular customers was hoping to acquire.

She was seriously considering making him her newest lover, since had just lost one of her favorites to marriage and she needed someone to look forward to seeing in this part of the world. Her mind had wandered far from the task at hand when Duncan walked in needing Alistair's signature on a student's admission form. He did not reveal even the slightest flicker of recognition when Alistair introduced them and Anna did nothing to refresh his memory. True, maybe he had had a little too much to drink on the occasion of their first meeting, but even so, it was humiliating to be forgotten so completely, even if all they had shared was one dance and a kiss.

Anna unclenched her jaw. She should be rejoicing in being home and safe instead of rehashing painful memories. She tried again to empty her mind and succeeded. The world shrank until there was nothing but the water and herself.

She almost did not feel the spell as it settled around her. Once she was aware of it, she recognized it at once as one of Duncan's, a protective spell to keep out intruders. As unobtrusively as she could, she gave the short shift she was wearing a little tug to make sure she was more or less covered up, even though she knew the wet fabric would not hide much. She hated to think how what Duncan saw now compared to what he had seen when she was lithe, young Marina. She concentrated on relaxing, or at least on appearing relaxed. Duncan probably knew she was aware of him, but that did not mean she had to acknowledge him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked after she had ignored him for a few minutes.

She continued floating, but she opened her eyes and turned her head so she could see him sitting on the bank with his arms around his knees. She squeezed her eyes shut again. The sight of him was too disarming.

"It's good to be home," she said. "But strange."

"I know what you mean. It feels strange to be myself."

Anna nodded. She could not even describe to herself how it felt to be Anna again, to know who she was after years of not knowing, but she knew Duncan understood. Of all the people to share a life-altering experience with, why Duncan? "Because he's the one who cared enough to come after you," the irritating voice inside her head said.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Anna concentrated to keep her voice neutral. "Suit yourself."

She was ready to leave. She had had her swim and her float and she was done, but she was not about to let Duncan chase her away from one of her favorite places. She paddled gently with her hands to move to the shallower water at the far side of the swimming hole when she heard the soft splashes of Duncan stepping into the water. She would not look at him. She knew that if he was naked she would lose her resolve

and he would have his fill of her within a month and then she would not even have his friendship anymore.

"I like you better this way."

Anna opened her eyes. Duncan was standing waist-deep in the water next to her, fully clothed as far as she could tell.

"Do you always swim like that?" she asked.

"I'm not swimming. I came to talk to you."

Anna stood up. "I don't really feel like talking. I have work to do."

She made a little hop, to swim back to the other shore, but Duncan caught her around the waist and pulled her back against him. His other arm circled around in front of her and he lowered his face to her wet hair. Anna resisted the urge to turn around in his arms and return the embrace. Marina would have. Marina probably would have had his clothes off by now.

"I missed you," Duncan whispered against her neck.

Anna brought her hands out of the water and rested them on Duncan's arms. "It was different for me. I didn't remember anything. In a way, it feels like I've only been gone a few days."

"I saw you every day, but I couldn't say anything to you. I wasn't even sure it was you."

Anna pushed Duncan's arms away and turned to face him. She had to step back so she could think clearly and even then she had to force herself to look at him. She crossed her arms, then raised one hand to her shoulder when she glanced down and saw how her wet shift clung to her breasts.

"Thank you for coming after me," she said. "I don't want to seem ungrateful. I know I owe you my life. I know you could have lost your job because of it."

Duncan stared at her. "Do you really think I would have wanted to stay here if you were gone?"

"Of course you'd have stayed. And you'd have found somebody new to chase soon enough, too."

Duncan slapped his hands against the water. "Are you deliberately blind to every signal I send you?"

"I see them, Duncan. I just don't believe them."

Anna turned and dove fast, in case he tried to stop her again. She swam underwater toward her pile of clothes on the bank and tried to think of something firm but kind that she could say to convince him she did not want his attention. It had to be convincing. That was the hard part. He always persisted because he knew she did not entirely mean it. Maybe it was time to just humiliate herself and tell him how deeply he had hurt her feelings by not remembering her, deeply enough that she had no intention of being romantically involved with him—ever.

Nothing brilliant occurred to her and when she came up for breath, Duncan was standing in front of her.

"I hated teaching," he said. "I was terrible at it. I'd tried to quit once already, but Alistair talked me into giving it a second chance. I was ready to quit again when he hired you."

"What does this have to do with anything, Duncan?"

"I stayed because of you. I stayed because I fell in love with you."

Anna looked away. She was not going to let him sway her with that earnest look.

"I'm sorry I didn't just have sex with you ten years ago. Then you would have gotten over it and we could both have moved on."

"Aren't you hearing me, Marina? I love you."

Anna thought she could actually hear his heart pounding in the silence that followed.

"Who do think you love, Duncan? Me or Marina?"

When he did not answer, Anna waded out of the water and walked up to her pile of clothes, but she did not know what to do with them. She did not want to take off her shift and get dressed in front of Duncan, so she just stood there, feeling suddenly tired and sad.

Duncan sloshed to the shore and sat down, facing away from her.

"It's all mixed up in my mind," he said. "You and Marina. She was you. I convinced myself that I could see you in her."

"And if you'd been wrong," Anna asked gently. "Would you still have wanted her?"

Duncan sighed. "For five years, I saw nobody but Knut and Marina. I think I would have wanted her no matter who I thought she was."

"Well, that's understandable, I suppose," she said to his back. "The thing is, Duncan, I remember Marina. I remember what she looked like and what it felt like to be her. I just don't see you going from that to this and staying happy with it for long."

Duncan pulled off his wet shirt and wrung it out. Anna indulged herself in enjoying the sight of his bare back. The slight flex of muscles as he twisted the fabric like he was trying to strangle it and the little mole just above his right shoulder blade sent the blood rushing to every part of her body but her brain.

"You make it sound like there's something wrong with you," Duncan said, turning to confront her.

Anna could not even muster up the sense to look away. She had gone stupid with longing and she knew Duncan must have seen it. She tried to focus on replying to his comment.

"I'm getting old, Duncan. There's gray in my hair and my knees creak. That just doesn't compare favorably to Marina."

"I don't care that you feel like you're getting old." He stepped forward and took her hands and held them against his bare chest. His wet shirt fell forgotten to the ground.

"You're beautiful, Anna, and I want you more than ever. I can't think about anything else."

Anna felt dazed by the warmth of his skin and the softness of his chest hair against her palms. She made no attempt to pull her hands away, even though a distant voice of caution inside her head was shouting at her to run.

"No," she said after a tortured moment of gathering her thoughts. "If you didn't want me when I was twenty-five, how can you really want me now?"

Duncan did not answer right away. Anna did not dare look at him, but she curled her hands into fists against his chest.

"I didn't know you when you were twenty-five," he said slowly. "What are you talking about, Anna?"

Then she did pull her hands away. She had not even realized the slip she had made, speaking of the first time they met—the time Duncan did not remember.

"I don't know why I said that," she said, backing away. "I guess I'm still a little confused."

"We've reached a turning point. Can you see that, Anna? Whatever happens now, that's how it's going to be."

"All right. We decide now how we're going to go on from here on in. But we've never really agreed about that, have we?" Anna felt herself trembling with cold and something more. Fear? After all these years, did she really want Duncan to stop pursuing her? Wasn't what she wanted for him to remember that first meeting and apologize for forgetting? Or was that just what she had gotten into the habit of wanting?

"Just give me one chance to make you see how beautiful you are. One chance to prove that you're more than just a conquest to me. If I can't convince you, then I promise I'll stop bothering you."

"One chance," Anna repeated, not quite taking in what he was suggesting.

“Right now. Before you get buried in books.”

That brought Anna back to her senses.

“Right now?”

Duncan picked up her clothes from the ground and thrust them at her.

“Get dressed,” he ordered as he shook out his shirt.

Anna stared as he pulled the wet shirt over his head. Had she just agreed to what she thought she had just agreed to? Had he tricked her or used a spell? She felt the heat of his gaze on her skin as he waited for her to get dressed and she knew she had to admit that her own stupid desire had befuddled her thinking. If Duncan had recognized that and taken advantage of it, that was hardly deceitful.

Anna pulled her clothes on over her wet shift while Duncan whispered the words to dismantle the spell he had placed over the swimming hole. When she was dressed, she followed him down the wooded path toward campus. When the path widened he slowed down and took her hand and his grip was firm and determined. She felt more like a child being led to a serious scolding than a woman about to be seduced. She began to wonder if she had misunderstood him and she hated herself for feeling disappointed.

* * * * *

Anna’s teeth were chattering by the time Duncan led her into his room midway up the old guard tower near the front gate of the university. He knew that before anything else, he had to get her warm and relaxed. He led her around his huge curtained bed and handed her his heavy velvet dressing gown, one of the many things he had missed while trapped in Knut’s fortress.

“You’d better get out of those wet clothes before you freeze to death,” he said more brusquely than he meant to. The thought of Anna naked in his room, even if just for the moment it took her to exchange her wet clothes for his dressing gown made it hard to

think straight. He turned abruptly, afraid she would be able to read his thoughts on his face.

Duncan concentrated on pouring spiced wine into a pan and arranging wood in the fireplace. On the walk across campus he had first considered just bundling Anna up in his bed to warm her up, but it would have been a mistake to have her in his bed too soon. He had a rough plan and it required avoiding the bed at first. So he stacked kindling and logs and tried not to think of Anna's goose bump-covered skin just beyond the heavy curtains of his bed.

He felt her eyes on him as he set the pan of wine on the hearth. She must have pulled aside the curtain on the far side of the bed. He flicked his fingers and a little tongue of flame shot out from the wood. Some mages liked to start a fire with an instant inferno, a gratifying display of their power and proof of the hard work it took to master such a skill, but Duncan had never gone in for showmanship.

Anna came and stood so close to him that the dressing gown brushed against his arm. He stood up and realized too late that she was standing much too close for him to maintain his composure. All he had to do was bend his neck to kiss her and the way she was looking at him, he was pretty sure she would not push him away. His eyes roved across her face, then settled on her hair and he almost forgot about kissing her. He raised his hand and ran his fingers through her hair. Or at least he tried to. They caught in a tangle before they could move very far.

"I usually comb it out right after I swim," she explained. "For some reason, I forgot this time."

"Sit. I'll be right back."

Duncan went to a chest in the corner of the room and dug down past several layers of carefully folded clothes until he found his tortoiseshell comb with the silver inlay. He had accepted it in trade for a spell before he came to the university. He had intended to sell it, but then he forgot about it. Now he was glad he had it. His plain wooden comb just did not seem adequate for combing out Anna's auburn hair.

She was sitting cross-legged on the rug in front of the fireplace, gazing at the flames when he returned to her. Duncan sat down behind her. He lifted her hair off her shoulders and arranged it down her back. His fingers brushed against her neck and he wanted to kiss her in exactly that spot, but he dragged his eyes away from her skin and focused on the damp mess of her hair. He picked up a section at a time, holding it carefully so as not to tug at her scalp. It was really not as badly tangled as it looked, but he took his time, dragging out the contact between them.

Anna did not say a word as he combed out her hair, not even when he knew he had pulled too hard. Duncan searched his brain frantically for something to say. He could comment on how things had not changed during their absence or maybe on how they had changed, but he preferred to pretend for the moment that the past five years had not happened, that it had not taken the desperate loneliness of Knut's fortress to make Anna soften toward him.

He sensed the moment when she relaxed, when her neck became less rigidly upright and her shoulders less tense. He was glad then that he had not thought of anything to say. The silence between them was perfectly comfortable. They had spent hours of silence together almost every day in the sorcerer's kitchen. Marina could have carried on one-sided conversations, but she never did and Duncan was glad of it. It would have made her seem less like Anna, whose capacity for stillness and silence and always impressed him.

He did not notice right away that she was crying. He was too busy thinking about how to proceed to notice the first slight trembling of her shoulders. When the first little sob escaped her, it was so far from what he was anticipating that he was not sure of what he was hearing. She went very still after that and Duncan continued combing her hair, even though he had worked out the last of the tangles. With the second sob, he understood what was happening, if not why.

He said her name and put the comb down and moved closer to her so he could wrap his arms around her and pull her back against his chest. "You're home now, Anna. You're safe."

Duncan cupped one hand at the back of Anna's head and pulled her down to his shoulder. He wrapped his other arm around her and pulled her in closer. He could have wept himself when he felt Anna wrap her arms around his neck and hold tight while she wept. He bent his head and rested his face against her hair, but other than that, he was almost afraid to move.

As her crying quieted, her grip tightened and she moved closer, until her face was nuzzled against the hollow of his neck. Duncan could feel her tears against his skin and the shiver that ran through her. He wrapped both arms around her to warm her, one across her back and the other down around her curled-up legs, but her lips were not cold when they pressed against his neck. He felt her smile against his skin at his sharp intake of breath. Then she set a trail of light searing kisses up to his ear.

He leaned back from her then, so he could see her face, but she moved with him and ran her tongue along the rim of his ear.

"Anna, wait. This isn't what I intended."

She froze, her mouth still against his ear, then pulled slowly away.

"Sorry," she said softly. "I thought—"

She stood up, but Duncan grabbed her hand before she could move away. He stood up and Anna looked away.

"I'm an idiot," she murmured. "I completely misunderstood."

Duncan moved his hand hesitantly toward her face. When she did not shy away, he put his hand on her cheek and turned her face toward him. She did not look up and he did not try to make her look at him. He lowered his head until his forehead met hers.

"You didn't misunderstand," he whispered. "I misspoke. It's what I intended, but not how. I know you, Anna. If this just happens, you still won't believe you're the only

woman I want, the only woman I've really wanted for years. You'll tell yourself you seduced me, that I made love to you because you were here and willing and there was nothing more to it than that."

"Duncan," Anna protested.

"Am I completely wrong?" he insisted.

"No, not completely."

She turned away from him then, but he still held her hand so she could only take a couple of steps away.

He let her hand go and she stepped away from him again, but she stopped when he caught up with her and put his hands on her shoulders. His hold on her was light. She could have easily shrugged his hands away, but she stood still like a captured bird.

"I still have to show you how beautiful you are," he whispered hoarsely. He slid his hands down her arms, past the unrelenting angles of her elbows and covered her hands with his.

Duncan felt Anna quiver. There was no question now that she desired him. He'd suspected it for years. He never would have continued pursuing her if he had not thought he had some chance with her. At least that was what he liked to tell himself. He was not entirely certain it was true. He had been accused more than once of being partial to hopeless causes.

It was a simple matter to conjure up a full-length mirror on a stand in front of them. Anna took a startled step back and bumped into Duncan. When their reflected eyes met, he saw real fear in her eyes and knew that she understood his intention. She pulled the robe more tightly around herself and shrank away from the mirror, but Duncan would not let her back away.

She closed her eyes and said, "I don't think I want to do this, Duncan."

"You can stop it anytime you want, but you have to let me start. We made a deal. Besides," he added. "It's the only way to get me to stop chasing after you. Now open your eyes and look in the mirror."

Anna opened her eyes and looked at Duncan's reflection. He smiled when he detected the little blaze of defiance in her eyes.

"Look at yourself, you stubborn creature," he told her.

She did, but not before giving him a long stare.

Duncan gathered up Anna's hair and pulled it away from her face and for a moment his attention was riveted by the tender skin behind her ear.

"Right here," he said, stroking the spot with his forefinger. "This is what always drives me mad during staff meetings. When everybody thinks I'm a simpleton because I haven't been paying attention, it's because I'm wondering what you taste like right here."

He lowered his head and kissed the spot in question, lingering long enough to run his tongue up behind her ear.

"Lovely," he sighed. He hoped he was going to maintain his control at least long enough work down past her collarbone in his itemization of the parts that made up Anna's beautiful whole.

Without looking back up at the mirror, he pulled the dressing gown down just far enough to bare her shoulders. Her skin felt warm and yielding under his hands, even though he could feel the tension beneath.

"Your skin's so soft," he told her, willing her to believe him, hoping his voice conveyed the awe he felt.

He glanced up at the mirror and the look on her face nearly undid him. Duncan had always thought of Anna as more experienced than he could ever dream of being. He had only ventured once out of his native Allaria, to study under a mage in the city of Tusca in the southernmost of the Five Lands. Anna had spent much of her adult life

traveling from city to city throughout the Five Lands and Duncan knew she'd had lovers in most of those cities. She had seen more than he had, met more people and had a wider range of experiences than he probably ever would.

Right now she looked completely out of her element. Her eyes were wide and the expression behind them expressed fear as much as desire. When Duncan rested his fingertips against her neck he could feel her pulse racing. His confidence grew and he leaned in closer to her so that his erect cock brushed against her.

"That's what you do to me," he said huskily, "And you're still better covered than a farm girl on a summer day."

Duncan tugged the gown down a little more, uncovering her chest and the uppermost swell of her breasts. He wanted to tear it off her and see all of her reflected in the mirror, he wanted to pick her up and throw her across his bed and fuck her senseless, but he was determined to follow his plan. He forced his fingers to stroke lightly up and down her upper arms instead of grabbing and squeezing. He stroked down from her neck to the top of the dressing gown. Her skin was just a shade lighter than the redwood that he had grown up around in his father's carpentry shop. His finger circled a beauty mark at the top of her left breast.

"When have I seen this before?" he wondered out loud.

Anna shook her head. "You wouldn't have. Not since I've been here at the university." She sounded a little out of breath and her voice was lower than usual.

The sound of it aroused Duncan even more than the sight of her skin. He closed his eyes and lowered his face to her neck and an image came to him of a woman in a bright swirling skirt and a white blouse that was pulled down to expose her shoulders and a mind-numbing expanse of breast. She was spinning and laughing, dancing to music that was just beyond the reach of Duncan's conscious mind and just at the top of her beautiful left breast was a perfectly round beauty mark.

Chapter Nine

Duncan just stood there for the longest time, breathing hard against Anna's neck and trembling slightly. Something had changed the moment he noticed the beauty mark. Could he have finally remembered? When he looked back up at her reflection she saw a fire in this eyes that she knew he had been keeping carefully damped. Now it flared out at her and she felt an answering heat between her legs that made her want to lean back and rub herself against him.

Duncan reached around her and put his hands over hers. She let him pull her arms down to her sides and watched with anticipation that was as much fear as eagerness as he untied the sash that held the dressing gown closed. The fabric slithered down her body and she focused her eyes on the reflection of her knees.

"Look up."

Duncan's voice quavered, sending a thrill through Anna. A long-forgotten sense of power began to seep into her. She had forgotten what it was like to turn a man into a helpless mass of instinct just with the power of her body. She had not thought she could do it anymore.

Still, she was hardly eager to look at her naked self. She had lived without mirrors for years before running off to rescue the stolen book from Knut. She had been well aware of the softening of her body. She had not needed mirrors to tell her she was not young anymore. So she kept her eyes on the mirror's frame as her gaze moved up to eye level, but Duncan was not about to make this easy for her.

"Look at what I look at. See yourself the way I see you."

He looked desperate and vulnerable and, more than anything else, hungry. Anna knew he was laying himself bare in front of her and she felt a stirring of desperation. She wanted to please this man. She wanted him to know that she wasn't afraid of what

he offered her, so she let their reflected eyes meet and when he looked down at her, she followed his gaze until it rested on her breasts. She tried to see what he might be seeing—soft skin, there was no arguing that and a pleasant roundness, even if they were heavier than she would have liked and her skin had lost a little of its elasticity.

Anna realized then that Duncan's hands were resting on her hips and she made herself look farther down. Her hips were another part that had gotten noticeably bigger since her traveling days, but Duncan's hands fit very nicely on them. She could not drag her eyes away from those hands as he slid them up the curve of her waist and covered her breasts with them. Except that he could not quite cover her breasts, which overflowed from his hands. She liked the contrast of his fair skin against hers, but the sight was making her weak in the knees. She closed her eyes and let her head rest against his chest as he kneaded her breasts.

Then one hand moved down her body. Duncan spread his fingers over her belly and pulled her firmly back against him.

"Look," he said.

Anna looked—she could not help herself—and what she saw took her breath away. His hand trembled as it circled her belly. His other hand moved from her breast and both hands stroked the place where her legs met her hips, his fingertips brushing tantalizingly against her pubic hair. Her pussy was drenched and yearning to be touched. Anna felt sure Duncan must feel the heat emanating from it as he stroked down her legs as far as he could reach, then back up, pausing to give her hips a friendly little squeeze. He was worshipping her with his hands, not just exploring her. He lingered over each curve that Anna hated because it had not been there when she was twenty. How could anything touched that way not be beautiful? How could any woman touched that way not feel beautiful?

Anna looked up and saw that Duncan was watching her face. His eyes seemed to have grown darker than their usual light brown.

"Do you understand now?" he asked.

Anna nodded her head. She did not trust herself to speak.

"There's just one more thing I have to show you."

Anna bit her lip to stop herself from moaning in frustration. Her pulse was pounding in her pussy and she was ready to beg Duncan to touch her there the way he had been touching the rest of her.

Duncan took her hand and led her to the bed. The mirror followed them.

"Sit," Duncan said. "Facing the mirror."

Anna perched on the edge of the bed, her hands clamped between her knees. She watched in the mirror as Duncan climbed onto the bed behind her and pulled off his shirt. He settled in behind her, his legs on either side of her. Anna felt the tickle of his chest hair against her back as he leaned forward to put his hands on her knees.

"Don't hide yourself from me," he whispered as he nudged her legs apart.

Anna tried to relax. She did not want to seem prim, but it was not easy for her to watch in the mirror as Duncan opened her up to his gaze.

"Look at me if you don't want to look at yourself," he said when he felt her resistance.

That was easier. She watched Duncan as he stroked the insides of her thighs, easing them even farther apart. His rapt expression reminded her of the way some book collectors looked when they examined a new acquisition, admiring the art of it at the same time they exulted in the possession of it. She felt his heart pounding against her back and she ventured a glance at herself in the mirror. Her cheeks and chest were flushed with desire. She looked down, still avoiding the sight of her soft belly. Her legs were wide open, with Duncan's hands stroking and squeezing her thighs. Her pussy was just visible in the nest of her public hair, pink and glistening.

Anna closed her eyes. It was more of herself than she wanted to see. Duncan, on the other hand, could not seem to get enough of it. His hands came to rest on her thighs and he stayed that way for so long, Anna began to wonder if looking was all he wanted.

But then one of his hands moved and she felt a featherlight touch on her mound, a little exploration of a touch before his hand covered her and stilled. Anna opened her eyes and watched Duncan in the mirror until he looked up and their reflected eyes met.

“Touch me,” she pleaded.

“Will you look?”

Anna nodded. She was ready to do just about anything to get him to touch her.

Duncan didn’t move until he saw that she was watching his hand on her. He wound his ankles around hers, forcing her legs wider apart and spreading her open with his fingers. Anna felt like he was exposing her soul to view, exposing the certain evidence of her desire for him.

He ran a finger along the side of her clitoris.

“I’ve spent hours thinking about doing this,” Duncan whispered. “And this,” he added, burying his fingers deep inside her.

He pressed his mouth against her neck while his fingers caressed her, emerging now and then to slide over her clit. Anna closed her eyes. It was getting hard to focus on the image in the mirror. Pleasure seemed to be blurring her vision along with her ability to think beyond the fervent wish that Duncan never stop what he was doing to her. She was aware of his erection pressing against the small of her back and she thought it was probably a little selfish of her not to attend to it, but she was afraid of doing anything to interrupt the rhythmic stroking of Duncan’s fingers.

She moaned when he closed his free hand over her breast and arched her back, amazed that he could make her feel even more pleasure. She would have been happy to stay where she was forever if it hadn’t been for a sudden overwhelming desire to kiss Duncan. She untangled her legs from his and turned to straddle his lap, pressing her drenched sex against his cock and putting her hands on his face.

Duncan sank down onto the bed as Anna kissed him, pulling her along with him. She plunged her tongue into his mouth, trying to reach deeper into him than she possibly could, her whole body straining against him, trying to merge with him.

Duncan rolled her over onto her back and his body covered hers. His hands were everywhere on her, moving from face to breast to leg as though he could not decide what part of her he most wanted to touch.

Anna pulled his head down and pressed her open mouth against his as she wrapped her legs around him, but something was not right. She wanted to feel his skin against her, not the fabric of his pants, however soft it might be. It took all her strength to push Duncan off her so that she could kneel up next to him and unbutton his pants. She lowered her head to kiss his navel, but in a flurry of movement Duncan scooted out from under her and pulled his pants off.

Anna would have loved to take a moment to admire him, to discover if he looked any different to her own eyes than he had to Marina's, but he moved again and she found herself on her back, with Duncan on top of her, braced up on his elbows. He looked intently at her as the tip of this cock nudged her pussy.

"I don't think I can wait any longer," he said.

Anna wanted to say something clever. There had been a time when she was great fun in bed, keeping her lovers laughing when she was not driving them delirious with desire. But she could not think of a thing to say, so instead she locked her eyes on Duncan's and pushed her hips up, bringing him into her.

Duncan moaned and sank in the rest of the way. Then he kissed her, exploring her mouth with his tongue as he stroked slowly in and out of her. Anna wanted it to last forever. She tried to keep her body still while she touched Duncan wherever she could reach, from his head down to the delicious curve of his buttocks. But she could not stay still for long. She swiveled her hips against him and she realized she was wriggling and whimpering as he plunged harder and deeper into her.

Anna pulled her knees up so she could feel him deeper still. Duncan took hold of one of her legs and leaned some of his weight against it, pushing it out to the side. Anna cried out with pleasure. She felt split wide open under him, so open that he rubbed against her clitoris as he pumped against her and it felt like he was reaching the

absolute center of her. She was kissing him frantically now, plunging her tongue into his mouth and moaning. With each moan, Duncan's movements became less controlled.

Anna let her head fall back on the bed. Her whole being felt concentrated in the tiny nub of her clitoris. When Duncan lowered his head to her breast and clamped his mouth down on her nipple, her orgasm exploded through her, moving up her body until it escaped in a primal animal sound she had never heard herself make before.

Before she could catch her breath, a new sensation filled her. She felt Duncan in her mind, filling her with heat and a wildness that left her dizzy. She floated on the feeling, abandoning herself to it and an image formed in her mind of a room crowded with people who were dancing and laughing and drinking. Candles flickered from sconces on the walls and mage lights hovered overhead. Familiar music played in the background, just audible above the voices. Anna realized that she was seeing her friend Lara's house in Tusca, a place she had not seen in more than ten years.

It seemed an odd thing to be remembering at such a time. Anna tried to bring her mind back to the task at hand, but instead, the image of the party became more focused. It felt like she was there, standing in a circle of people who were watching a woman dance. She was spinning around, her bright skirt swirling around her, sparkling with spangles. The woman's auburn hair flew out behind her as she spun, making it hard for Anna to see her face, but she did not have to see her face to recognize herself. She recognized the skirt, which was now packed away in a trunk, a memento from another age. And Duncan was there, not just in her memory of Lara's birthday party, but in her mind. Because it was his memory, she realized.

Anna would have liked to be able to think about what this all meant, but she became aware of her body again and the remarkable sensations that filled it. A second later she felt Duncan grow even more engorged inside her and he came silently with a shudder that shook the sturdy bed.

Neither of them moved. Duncan lay with his face buried in Anna's hair. She was glad he was not looking at her.

"What was that?" she asked. Her voice quavered, but whether it was from joy that he remembered her after all or anger that he had not said anything before, or even fear of what had just happened, Anna could not have said.

Duncan did look at her then and it took all Anna's willpower not to look away.

"You've never made love to a mage before, have you?"

Anna shook her head. "Just students and not very apt ones at that."

"Invite a mage into your body and you've invited him into your mind as well."

"I didn't know that."

Duncan smiled. He seemed much more pleased with himself than Anna thought the situation warranted.

"And I thought you knew everything there was to know about carnal pleasures," he said. "To think that there was still an innocent corner of you left for me to fill."

"You remember," Anna said, not willing to let him distract her from what she most wanted to know about.

"I've always remembered. I just—" He sighed and rolled onto his back and flung his arm across his face.

"If you'd known me, Anna, you would have known I wasn't myself that night. I was coming down with a fever. I just wanted to stay home, but I let my friends drag me to that party. They convinced me that wine and music were all I needed to feel better."

Anna rolled onto her side and pulled a pillow under her head.

"It only made things worse, of course. The whole night was a complete blur except for you. You were so beautiful and so clever, but I just couldn't focus on you. Except for that mole. I couldn't take my eyes off it."

"So I was only a partial blur."

"I do remember the kiss though," Duncan said, rolling over to face Anna. "And I remember having a very intense conversation with you about something."

"Love," Anna said with a catch in her throat. "We talked about love and how sometimes it seems like the only way to find it is to stop looking."

Duncan closed his eyes. "Yes. I remember now. I struggled for years to remember that conversation. I hoped it might help me find you."

"So if I made such an impression on you, why did I see you on the street the next day with a beautiful woman on each arm?"

"You saw me?"

"Yes, you walked right past me. I was about to speak to you, but you looked straight through me."

Duncan reached out and twined a strand of Anna's hair around his finger. "I'm sorry. I was on my way to the apothecary. I was seeing double from the fever and all the drinking the night before, but I knew exactly what I wanted and I didn't trust anybody else to order it for me. I guess it didn't show how hard I was leaning on The Sisters to keep from collapsing on the street."

"The Sisters?" Anna wanted to be angry at him for all the grief he had caused her, but he was lying on his stomach now and she found herself hopelessly fascinated by the dimples on his lower back.

"I'm sure they had names but nobody ever used them because they were always together. All the young men in the neighborhood tried desperately to get one or the other, or preferably both, into bed with them, but The Sisters were too serious about their studies. They had very specific plans for their future. They were good friends, though. They took turns taking care of me all through that illness."

"I thought you'd slept with them," Ann said in a small voice. "I thought that after talking about love and kissing me, you'd slept with them and didn't even recognize me the next morning. It was humiliating."

"I looked for you as soon as I was well, but you were gone," Duncan explained. "My friends who dragged me to the party couldn't even remember whose house it had been at."

"I was traveling with a caravan. They left the next day."

"I spent almost another year in Tusca after that. I watched for you the whole time."

"I never went back," Anna said, running her hand down Duncan's back. "I was afraid of seeing you. You didn't recognize me at all that first time we met in Alistair's office?"

Duncan shook his head and moved closer to Anna. He slipped his arms around her and pulled her close so she could feel him along the whole length of her body.

"I did sense something, but I thought it was just one of those instant attractions," he continued. "It was strong. I hadn't felt anything that strong since Tusca. So when Alistair hired you as librarian, I was so happy. I was sure I'd seen attraction in your eyes. I thought it would be easy between us. I thought I'd finally stop thinking about the woman at the party in Tusca."

Anna rolled onto her back and stared up at the canopy of the bed. "It should have been easy. It would have been easy if I wasn't such an idiot. I'm sorry, Duncan."

"Shh. It doesn't matter now. I think I've made my point."

"Your point?"

"That you're beautiful. That you drive me wild. That you're all I want to think about and I'm not going to get tired of you or want to move on to somebody new."

"Oh. That point." She felt suddenly tired, but Duncan's gaze warmed her. She took his hand and set it against her face. "Yes, I believe you. How could I not?"

Anna sat up and looked down at Duncan. She felt compelled to touch him—the smooth strength of the shoulders, the soft fuzz of his chest hair, the contours of his stomach. She trailed her fingers down to his navel, then pressed her palm against his belly and began moving it in slow circles. Duncan went completely still under her touch, but she could hear his breathing change. She felt her own breaths coming faster and her heart pounding.

She let her hand move a little lower with each circle and she smiled when she saw Duncan's cock rising toward her hand like a plant growing toward the sun. She let her hand brush against it, as if by accident. Duncan moaned. Anna moved her hand down to stroke his legs as she bent over and began kissing little circles around his navel. She turned her head and brushed her lips against the head of his cock. She had meant it to be a fleeting touch, a little enticement to let him know what she had planned for him, but that brief touch shook her.

She rained light kisses down and back up the length of his cock. She ran her tongue along it and felt his leg muscles tense under her hand. When she finally took him into her mouth, she was so focused on Duncan that she hardly knew who she was. Anna or Marina – it didn't matter. She filled herself with him, taking him as deep into her mouth as she could, encouraged by his quiet little moans and his fingers clutching at her hair. Her jaw began to ache, but she did not stop. Duncan was in her power and she was determined to give him all the pleasure she could. She wanted him helpless with pleasure. She wanted to prove that she had been worth the wait.

It did not take long. He moaned when he came, a long, drawn-out sound that brought Anna more joy than any of the familiar sounds of home that she had been so happy to hear just that morning. She moved up his body, kissing along the way, until she reached his mouth.

"I don't think I can move," he said between kisses.

Anna smiled and pulled the blankets over them. She snuggled up to him and draped an arm and leg across him. Duncan put his arms around her and pulled her tighter against him.

"There," she said. "I didn't paralyze you, after all."

"I think you may yet," he murmured.

"Not a chance. What good would you be to me then?"

At least that was what she thought she said. A few seconds later, she was not sure if she had spoken at all or just thought it. She was thoroughly exhausted in body and mind and it was the most wonderful feeling.

Chapter Ten

Anna woke in nearly complete darkness. Duncan had pulled the curtains of the bed and somehow gotten her properly under the covers. He lay sprawled next to her, sound asleep. Anna stretched carefully. Her entire body ached deliciously. She reached across the bed and pulled the curtain aside. Early evening light filled Duncan's room. She knew she should get up and go down to the dining hall to let the rest of the faculty know she was really back and ready to work. She should let Fiona know she was all right. She might even start sorting through the books on her desk.

Later. Anna let the curtain drop and moved back toward Duncan's warmth. She had never much cared for curtained beds. She did not like not being able to see what was going on outside the curtains. This bed felt different. It felt safe and warm, a far cry from her narrow bed in Knut's fortress. She sent out her thoughts, but it did not seem that Duncan had cast one of his protective spells on the bed. The feeling of security came not from magic then but from Duncan's presence.

Anna rolled onto her stomach and let her thoughts drift away. She had nearly fallen asleep again when she felt Duncan move next to her. The warmth of his hand on her bottom brought her back to consciousness and sent tendrils of heat through her body. She stayed perfectly still, thinking he had merely moved in his sleep, but it felt like the hand on her had a sense of purpose. It was certainly affecting her. She was wide awake now and feeling a little breathless. She listened carefully. Surely the rhythm of Duncan's breathing had changed.

She bit her lip. All he was doing was resting his hand on her and it was sending her to the brink. She wanted to writhe under his hand, to rub herself against it, but his stillness kept her from moving. She turned her head slowly to look at him but could only see shadows in the darkness.

"Duncan?"

"Shh. Your skin's getting hot."

"You're killing me."

Then, finally, he moved his hand, but just the fingers, stroking her lightly while his palm pressed against her. She wanted throw herself on him, to beg him to touch more of her, but his touch had a hypnotic effect, draining her of free will and leaving nothing but scorching desire in its place.

She sighed and he moved his hand at last, rubbing her bottom and the small of her back and the tops of her thighs. She moved her legs apart and his hand swept up her inner thighs, stopping just short of her throbbing pussy. He leaned over her and pushed her hair out of the way to kiss the back of her neck. She tried to roll onto her side to face him, but he moved on top of her, pinning her to the bed.

"Stay like this. Please."

Anna nodded her head. She'd do anything he wanted, as long as he kept touching her.

Duncan kissed his way down her spine—hot, slow kisses that had Anna moaning into her pillow. He kissed her buttocks and her legs, all the way down to her toes, which he licked and nibbled.

Anna turned her head to look over her shoulder at him, but there was not enough light for her eyes to adjust to.

When Duncan was done with her feet, he pushed them away from each other, opening up her legs. He swept his hands up her body and reached under her with one hand to cup her breast. He was resting lightly against her, straddling one leg, so she could feel his erection against her hip. His entire body was trembling.

Anna pulled her free knee up and Duncan seemed to understand her silent request. He moved between her legs and pulled her hips up toward him so that she was on both

knees, completely opened up to him, but still he tormented her, stroking slowly up and down her thighs with both hands.

“What are you trying to do to me, Duncan?” Anna asked between moans.

Duncan’s hands paused, but that was even worse, they were tantalizingly close to her pussy.

“I’m just trying to give you pleasure,” he said innocently. “Should I stop?”

Anna shook her head. “No, don’t stop.”

“Hmm. What do you want me to do then?”

Anna would have liked to turn around and smack him, but she could not bear the thought of breaking contact with the hand that was resting against her thigh.

“Touch me,” she pleaded.

“Like this?” Duncan squeezed her thigh.

“That’s good.”

“How about this?” he asked as he knelt behind her and slipped his erect cock between her legs and rubbed it against clit.

Anna could barely take in enough breath to speak. “Even better,” she managed to gasp out.

A moment later the glorious caresses stopped and she felt Duncan’s cock nudging at her cunt, entering her just the slightest bit before pulling away. Then, without warning, he slammed into her. His hands gripped her hips as he pounded against her. Each thrust knocked the breath out of Anna. She felt lightheaded and a little bit helpless against the onslaught of Duncan’s passion. She let herself be swept away by it. She felt her sense of self disengage as she let him transform her into a purely physical being, one body taking pleasure from another.

It was over too soon and they collapsed onto the bed.

“What was that?” Anna asked when she could speak again.

Duncan chuckled. "I take it you've also never made love to a man who's spent years thinking about ways to please you."

"I don't suppose I have. So what other pleasures do you have in store for me?"

"None if I die of exhaustion, you greedy creature. I need food before I can conjure up more pleasures for you. I can scrounge something up and bring it back here if you'd like."

Anna sighed. "No, I should make an appearance, get back into the proverbial saddle."

"Too bad. I like the idea of you naked in my bed, waiting for me while I sneak food from the kitchen."

Anna wriggled deeper into the bed and allowed herself a moment to imagine sitting naked in bed with Duncan, enjoying a private picnic while the world went on without them. But the world had already been going on without them far too long. It was time to step back in.

"I don't suppose you know a spell to hide the smell of sex on me," she said as she sat up and crawled out of the blankets.

"Why not a bath?"

"Fine, if you feel like lugging the water up here for me."

"Why lug when it's already taken care of?"

Anna studied his face, but it gave nothing away.

"Perhaps you should take a look around," he suggested.

Anna crawled to the edge of the bed and peeked out of the curtains. In front of the fireplace, which was still burning hot, sat a tub full of steaming water. She sat back on the bed and looked at Duncan.

"You've been busy."

He shrugged. "When I'm happy, the magic just sort of spills out of me. I thought I should channel it into something useful."

Anna pushed the curtains aside and climbed off the bed. She approached the bathtub cautiously. "Useful doesn't even begin to describe this. This is glorious."

"No," Duncan contradicted. "A bath is pleasant. You're glorious."

Anna smiled and looked at him over her shoulder. He was lying on his side, watching her. She felt a brief urge to suck in her stomach, to try to make herself look a little bit more like Marina, but she realized she did not need to. One glance at Duncan's rapt expression told her he found her completely desirable, mid-life sag and all. Even more amazing than him finding her desirable, she felt desirable. She enjoyed the sensation of his eyes on her as she stepped into the tub and settled into the hot water.

It was scented with herbs, a mixture that somehow managed to be relaxing and invigorating at the same time, even though she could see no herbs in the water. Anna did not know how he had managed that. She had never really understood conjuring magic, even though she had lived much of her life surrounded by it. Her own skill was not magic, but an innate ability to see patterns hidden in words and images, to find spells in treatises on botany and in recipes for blackberry jelly. It was a useful enough skill for a librarian, but right now she thought a hot bath was much more impressive.

"Scrub up."

A splash of water in Anna's face startled her out of a contented daze. Duncan stood next to her, half dressed and grinning.

"Get clean, so we can go down and eat. Before I pass out from hunger, please. I've been working hard, you know."

Anna kept an eye on him as she retrieved a bar of soap from the water. More wonderful smells of a vaguely floral sort floated around her as she rubbed the soap on her skin. By the time she emerged from the water, she thought she must be the best-smelling creature in the Five Lands.

Duncan handed her a towel that had been warming by the fire and watched her dry off and dress. During the time that it took for her to pull her dress over her head, the tub of water had disappeared.

"Do you live like this all the time?" she asked him.

"Only on special occasions. It would be exhausting all the time."

Anna walked over to Duncan and kissed him softly on the lips. "I'm glad you think this is a special occasion."

Duncan set his hands on her waist and bent his head to deepen the kiss. Anna swayed as she felt Duncan's whole being focus on her mouth. In that one kiss she felt all the longing that had built up inside him while they were Knut's prisoners. She put her hand on his face and ended the kiss so she could look at him. Nothing of the Beast remained. Not even their eyes were the same, but the look in his eyes reminded her of the way the Beast had looked when he watched her at work in Knut's kitchen.

"Food," Duncan said.

Anna nodded. There would be time enough later for delving into Duncan's soul.

Chapter Eleven

Even this late in the evening, the noise in the dining hall seemed overwhelming because it had been so long since Anna had been around people. She was grateful for Duncan's quiet presence at her side as she made her way across the room, greeting old friends and being introduced to new staff members. The faces at the students' tables were almost all new to her. She only recognized a dozen or so and they had grown up considerably since she had last seen them.

Fiona's red hair stood out like a beacon at the far end of the room. When Anna finally reached her, Fiona stood up and pulled her into a tight hug.

"I'm glad you finally relented," she whispered. "You look happy."

"I am happy," Anna whispered back.

She sat down between Fiona and Duncan at the round table and smiled at Bernard the history teacher, who sat across from her.

"Welcome home, Anna," he said.

Fiona set a plate in front of her and began heaping greens and a delectable-smelling chicken stew onto it.

"No arguing," Fiona said firmly. "Alistair says you're to eat and get your strength back."

"I think I have my strength back already," Anna protested, thinking of all the energy she had expended in Duncan's bed.

Fiona gave her a sharp look. "Yes, I don't doubt that. Still, it won't hurt to make Alistair happy." She pushed the serving dishes toward Duncan when she was done with them. "Besides, we have news. You can eat while we tell you."

"Rumors," Bernard corrected her. "It's hardly news."

"Well, rumors have a way of turning into news these days," Fiona said.

"I take it it's not good news," Duncan commented as he spooned stew onto his plate.

"No, but it's interesting news. The word is that three of the barons have entered into an alliance."

Duncan snorted. "Not likely. After all the years they've been at each other's throats?"

Anna took a bite of stew and wished she could have had just one day that was perfect from start to finish, without the world intruding.

"Rumor has it," Bernard elaborated, "that Knut has been calling in favors and that he's leading this alliance."

"That doesn't make sense," Anna said. "He's worked so hard to play them off each other."

"Yes, to weaken them and make them biddable," Bernard said, pushing his empty plate away and leaning forward on the table. "I've been thinking about this all day. If it's true, it makes sense. We always thought he was just amassing wealth from the barons' wars, but what if he's been working toward something else?"

Anna put her fork down and looked hard at Bernard. "Working toward what?" She didn't really want to know, but she knew his answer would be rational. He was an expert on mages who lost control of their power.

Bernard shrugged. "Who knows? We have to wait and see. First we have to confirm the story about these three barons."

"There are two stories circulating around the city," said Fiona. "One is that Knut wants to take control of all Five Lands."

"It's impossible," Duncan protested. "No one's ever succeeded before."

"What's the other story?" Anna asked, knowing Fiona was saving the worst for last.

"People are talking about leaving the city because they're afraid Knut's getting ready to move against the mages."

"You mean us? The university?" Anna felt Duncan's knee press comfortingly against hers, but it didn't completely dispel the chill that ran through her.

"It's just a rumor," Bernard said firmly. "It will probably be replaced by another one tomorrow."

"We shouldn't have left without the book. Whatever he's up to, he wouldn't be able to achieve without that book."

Fiona put her hand on Anna's and said, "We don't know that. We don't even know if he's unlocked the book's secrets. Now eat your food or I'll get in trouble with Alistair. He wants you in the library first thing in the morning, hunting for something we can use against Knut."

Anna took a bite of food and was surprised to find that it made her churning stomach feel better. By the time she took her last bite she was feeling almost optimistic. She was also feeling a lovely warm glow from Duncan's hand resting on her leg and as much as she enjoyed catching up on the news and gossip of the university, by the end of the meal, when Duncan's hand had moved farther up her leg, she'd done as much socializing as she felt she could handle.

As they walked through the dark, quiet campus, it was easy to forget about the frightening rumors swirling around the city just outside the university gates. Duncan's arm around her waist made Anna feel safe and cherished. They were just about to cross the quadrangle when a group of laughing students emerged from around the corner of a building and Duncan pulled Anna into the shadows of a recessed doorway.

She giggled at the thought of hiding from students.

"Shhh." Duncan quieted her with a kiss and pulled her up hard against him. "I don't know how I'll get through tomorrow without kissing you," he paused to say.

Then his mouth was on hers again and his hands were on her face, holding her steady while his tongue plundered her mouth.

Anna moaned when Duncan moved one of his hands from her face to her breast. Her nipples were hypersensitive, longing for his touch and when he ran his thumb across one, it sent a jolt of heat straight to her pussy. She wished her clothes would just fall away so he could touch her skin, but even through her clothes, he was making her lightheaded with desire.

She broke away from him and said, "Let's get back up to your room, Duncan."

He lowered his head and took her nipple between his teeth. "Can't wait."

To prove the point he pressed her against the door and she felt his erection against her belly, hard and insistent. Anna could hardly think. Duncan's mouth was on her neck and one hand was inching her skirt up her leg while the other roamed across her body.

"Not here, Duncan," Anna protested. "Anybody could walk right past us."

Duncan didn't argue. He smiled and reached around Anna to open the door behind her.

Anna stared into the dark building.

"You can't be serious."

Duncan took her hand and said, "I told you. I can't wait."

He led her confidently across the foyer and Anna stumbled after him. A little bit of moonlight spilled out from the open doors of the classrooms on one side of the building, but it only made the dark places seem darker.

"Can't you cast a light?" she asked.

"And risk discovery? Don't worry. I have excellent night vision."

With Duncan on one side of her and the banister on the other, Anna felt almost secure walking up the curved stairway. She followed Duncan into a classroom on the moonlit side of the building and paused to look around the room, with its untidy rows of desks and its ancient wood paneling. For a moment, the simple beauty of the room made her forget why she was there. She walked slowly between the desks toward the

tall windows that looked out across the quadrangle to one of the dormitory buildings and the library.

"I don't ever want to leave again," she said to herself.

Then Duncan came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist and Anna remembered why they were there in the darkened classroom. She leaned back against him and closed her eyes, shutting out everything but him, his breath warm on her neck, then the tug of his mouth on her earlobe, his hands on her breasts, teasing her nipples to taut peaks, his cock pressing against her rump, reminding her that he couldn't wait even the short walk to his rooms.

Anna turned around and pulled Duncan's head down so she could kiss him. She was on tiptoes, relying on him for balance. Duncan's fingers dug into her hips, pulling her hard against him, so when he took a step forward, she had no choice but to step back. She hardly even noticed that he was guiding her across the room. All she cared about was kissing him, learning every contour of his mouth, every nuance of texture and taste. When she felt the teacher's desk at the front of the room bump up against her legs, she sat down on the edge and wrapped her legs around Duncan, happy to be able to pull him in even closer. She slid her hands under his shirt and ran them over every inch of the smooth skin of his back.

Duncan's hands were roving up and down her legs, searching for a way under her dress.

"Anna," he said, "unwrap your legs for a second. You're all tangled up."

"I don't want to let go of you," Anna said and tightened her legs around him.

"I'll have to do this the hard way, then."

Duncan pulled away from Anna's kisses and closed his eyes. Before Anna could pull him down for another kiss, she felt a warm tingling on her nipples, as though somebody was touching them. The tingling moved down between her legs, where she was locked against Duncan. She was already wet with arousal. This feeling was something more than that, something she had never even imagined, like being caressed

by pure heat. She leaned her forehead against Duncan's chest. The heat traveled through the moist folds of her heated skin, then it coalesced into a tiny point of energy swirling over her clitoris.

Anna gulped in air. She'd forgotten to breathe.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh. I have to concentrate."

Anna didn't ask again. However he was doing this, the last thing she wanted to do was break his concentration.

"Oh!"

The heat had moved up inside her. Anna leaned back and looked at Duncan, but he was standing perfectly still, eyes closed and lips slightly parted. The only sign that he was expending any effort was the rapid rise and fall of his chest.

Anna leaned back on her hands and let her legs drop from Duncan's waist. She didn't have the strength to hold on to him anymore. The heat pulsed and swelled inside her, filling and overflowing from her, spreading over her entire body. It felt almost like a hand under her clothes, but it could reach everywhere, touching every part of her at once.

Her legs moved apart, inviting the warmth into her. Duncan pushed the skirt of her dress up to her waist and slid her farther onto the desk. Anna couldn't think. She couldn't open her eyes to see what Duncan was doing as he stood over her. She felt his hands on her bare hips.

"Wait a minute!" She opened her eyes and sat up, nearly slamming her head into Duncan's in her surprise. "I was wearing underclothes! How'd you get them off?"

She caught the flash of a grin just before he ducked his head down to bite her earlobe and pulled her toward him by the hips as he drove into her. For an instant she felt the heat inside her at the same time she felt Duncan's flesh and blood self and then there was only Duncan, pounding into her with an urgency that took her breath away.

She wrapped her legs back around his waist and held tight to his shoulders to keep from sliding right off the desk. She wanted to laugh, but she couldn't catch her breath.

When Duncan stiffened and moaned, Anna tightened her legs around him so he could not pull away from her. She hoped he didn't want to, but just in case, she was going to hold on to him until she was finished.

"What was that?"

"That was wonderful. That was incredible," he answered with his face buried in the crook of her neck.

Anna slapped him on the back.

"Not that. Before. What was that you did to me?"

Duncan leaned back just far enough to look at her.

"I don't know what it's called. I'd never even done it before now. I read about it in a contraband book one of my friends snuck out of his father's library when I was a student."

"But what was it?" Anna asked again.

"I just thought very hard about the places I wanted to touch. It was easy, really, once I saw that it was working."

Anna wriggled against him. "Do it again. Just one place."

Duncan smiled. "You're certainly a demanding creature. All right. Let's see if I have enough strength left."

Anna locked her arms around Duncan's neck and snuggled against his chest.

"I hope you're comfortable," he remarked.

Anna answered with a satisfied sigh and a kiss to his chin. She wished they didn't still have most of their clothes on so she could feel more of his skin against hers. That would have been more comfortable, but this would do.

It would do quite well, she decided when she felt the first little tendril of heat snake between their locked bodies. It felt like little waves of warm water pulsing against her.

As the heat became more focused, it felt more like a tongue, hot and insistent, stroking her up and down, never pulling away, never breaking contact.

Anna moaned against Duncan's chest. Her hips pushed against him in little jerking thrusts. She could feel his cock swelling inside her again. *This is what you do to him*, she told herself. *He's ready again five minutes later, like an eighteen-year-old.*

The little circle of heat pressed against her, not moving but pulsing. Warm. Hot. Warm. Hot.

"Hold on," Duncan panted.

He reached both hands underneath her, right where her legs met her buttocks and squeezed, pulling her tighter against him, pushing just a little bit deeper inside her. The combination of sensations exploded inside Anna and a long, deep moan escaped from her.

Chapter Twelve

It took all Duncan's strength to keep his thoughts focused after he started moving inside Anna. Part of him wanted to forget everything except the slow, hot slide of his cock inside her, but another part of him was determined to prove himself to be the best lover she'd ever had. If he could do something she'd never experienced before, so much the better. So he focused his thoughts on giving her pleasure and let his body act on its own accord, taking its own pleasure. He imagined himself on his knees in front of her, pressing against her clit with the very tip of his tongue, then pressing his mouth against her and sucking on it.

Anna whimpered. He hadn't given her a chance to recover from her first orgasm before he started her on the way to another. He ran his tongue along her ear, matching his real actions to his imagined actions. His tongue swirled in from the rim of her ear to its center and he thought about licking her from clit to cunt, plunging his tongue inside her with each downward stroke.

Then Duncan felt it too. When he imagined his tongue delving into her, he felt the heat, the manifestation of his thoughts, inside her. He pulled back just enough to look at her, but he kept the image of himself with his face buried between her legs, firmly in his mind.

"Anna."

She opened her eyes and gazed up at him. The hazy look in her eyes and the way her open mouth moved with every gentle thrust of his hips nearly killed him, but somehow he managed to stay focused as he lowered his mouth to hers and circled her tongue with his as he imagined circling his tongue around her clit. Anna moaned into his mouth and he imagined sliding his fingers inside her, pushing as deep as they would go, stroking them in and out with the same rhythm that his cock was moving in

and out of her. The heat of her body plus the glowing heat of his magic enveloped him. He didn't know how much longer he could hold on, but he was determined to wait for her.

He didn't have to wait long. He felt Anna's entire body tighten all around him as a long low moan escaped from her lips. Duncan had a split second to feel pleased with himself before his mind went stupid with pleasure and his climax washed over him, leaving him completely spent, his magic dissipated. Yet somehow, when he opened his eyes, he saw the red glow of his magic flickering against the walls of the room. He looked over his shoulder to the windows, which were bright with red light.

"Fire!" He disengaged himself from Anna and pulled his pants back on as she hurried back into her underclothes.

They ran to the window, weaving around the desks and chairs. On the other side of the quadrangle, the roof of one of the buildings was alive with flames.

"The library," Anna whispered next to him.

"The alarm's already been raised," he reassured her. "Look." He pointed to the lawn, where Alistair was striding toward the fire like a hero out of legend, his dressing gown flowing out behind him. Fiona was running along next to him, taking two steps for his every one. A crowd of students followed in their wake.

"Maybe we can help," Anna said, turning to run from the room.

Duncan followed her and threw a mage light out in front of her, scared to death that she'd tumble down the stairs in the dark.

By the time they joined Alistair and Fiona in the middle of the quadrangle, Alistair was standing with his arms extended toward the burning building and the fire had died down to a smolder. The students were staring at him in awe and whispering to each other.

"Nothing magical about it, then," Duncan said with relief when Alistair lowered his arms and looked around. "Just an ordinary fire."

"Yes," Alistair replied, "but not necessarily an accident. The air's too damp for a fire like that to have started on its own."

"A warning from Knut?" Fiona asked.

"More of a calling card than a warning, I think," Alistair replied. "Maybe even a declaration of sorts if the rumors are to be believed."

"Do you think he targeted the library for a reason?" Anna's voice was shaky.

Duncan moved closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

"You're wondering if he knows about something that we have on our shelves and he's worried about it now that you're back?" Alistair asked her.

Anna nodded and leaned in closer to Duncan. Her hand slid up his back and her fist closed over a handful of his shirt.

"If he's too far away to have used his magic to set the fire, I doubt he has any idea what we have in our library."

"Unless we have something that he's put his mark on," Fiona added.

"All the more reason for you to get back to work tomorrow," Alistair said to Anna.

"I should start now," Anna said.

"Not until we've inspected the roof to make sure it's safe. And not until you've had some sleep."

Duncan was having a hard time following the conversation. Try as he might, he could not stop himself from being distracted by Anna's warmth pressed against his side. Her nearness befuddled him, sending his body memories of the feel of her skin against his and the sound of her moaning softly in his ear. How was he going to get anything done with her around? How did anybody ever manage to accomplish anything when their bodies overtook their brains?

"I have an idea," he blurted out. "I think I know of the perfect weapon to use against Knut."

* * * * *

Minutes later, sitting on the couch next to Bernard, who had joined them in Alistair's cozy sitting room, Duncan took a sip of the sweet cordial Alistair had passed around. It was one of his carefully guarded recipes, designed to relax the body while it sharpened the mind. He looked across the room at Anna, who sat in a rocking chair next to the fireplace. He had put some space between them so he wouldn't be distracted by her, but even across the room, watching her running her finger along the pattern etched in her glass, he felt a little shiver of desire. She had touched him just that way earlier in the day, from his wrist to his shoulder and back down again.

"What's your idea, Duncan?" Alistair asked.

Duncan tore his eyes away from Anna's hands and focused his attention on Alistair. "With the information we have, the spells we know, if Knut let down his guard, could we move against him?"

Alistair nodded his head. "If several of us focused our energy against him. Yes, I think so."

"But he doesn't let down his guard. You know that, Duncan," Anna objected. "He resets his spells every day."

"Not when he's working on something special for one of his military customers. Those spells weaken him. That's how we got away."

Fiona cleared her throat. "Sneaking away while he's recovering his strength is one thing, Duncan. Launching an attack on him is quite another."

"That's why we have to distract him while his powers are diminished."

"What exactly are you thinking, Duncan? He'll spot a trick," Alistair warned.

"Not if it's pretty enough."

"No," Anna said. "It won't work. He has no heart."

Her voice had fallen to a whisper and Duncan could see that just talking about Knut frightened her.

"You never saw the way he watched you when you were Marina," he said gently. "He hides it well, but he does have a heart. Besides," he added with a grin, "It's not his heart we're concerned with."

Anna blushed and said, "Maybe there's enough humanity left in him that he still longs for love in some secret corner of his being, but all his energy is focused on wielding power over the barons. I doubt he's interested enough in sex to let it distract him from that."

"Everybody's interested in sex," Bernard said quietly. "Some maybe not as much as others, but everybody's interested at some level. I think it's a good idea, especially since it's the only one we have. I'm concerned that if we don't act soon, before he accumulates more power, it will be too late."

"That leaves just one question," Alistair said after a moment's silence. "Who do we send into this lion's den?"

"Not a mage," Bernard said. "We couldn't hide that level of magic from him."

Duncan looked at his hands. He knew what he thought would work, but he could not bring himself to say it out loud.

"A prostitute, then," suggested Fiona.

"No."

Duncan looked up at the sound of Anna's voice. She was sitting up straight with her hands clenched on the arms of her chair.

"I think it has to be me." She threw Duncan a look that he couldn't read. "I'm not a mage and I know Knut. I think I would know how to appeal to his vanity."

"He'd recognize you," Fiona protested. "Besides, you just got home. You can't put yourself at risk like that again."

"A little bit of cosmetic magic to lighten my hair and my skin. He'd expect to find that kind of magic on somebody sent as a thank-you gift from one of the barons." Anna looked at Duncan. "Is that about what you were thinking?"

Duncan nodded mutely.

"He'd know you were deceiving him. It would be much safer for one of us to pose as an emissary of one of the barons, hire a prostitute and send her to him with no knowledge of why she's really there. He'd be just as well distracted."

Anna put her glass down on the little table next to her chair and ran a trembling hand through her hair. She didn't look happy about the turn of events, but there was a determined set to her chin that Duncan recognized all too well. He wished he didn't feel so sure that she'd be able to convince them.

"He might be just as distracted by somebody else, but I can't let anybody else take the risk. I shouldn't have left without the book. It was even stupider than going after the book in the first place. I messed up. I can't ask somebody else to take that risk to fix my mistake."

"Duncan left without the book, too," Fiona said with an exasperated flourish of her hands. "Do you suggest we disguise him as a woman and offer Knut a threesome?"

"If I'm not mistaken," Alistair said slowly, "Anna's risk is also Duncan's risk."

Duncan sighed. "If I'm willing to let her go, Fiona, you should be too." He ventured a glance at Anna, who gave him a grateful smile. "I don't like it, but I support her decision."

"Well, then," Alistair said, standing up. "I think we should all get some sleep now that that's more or less settled. In the morning I'll arrange to keep an eye on the movements in and out of Knut's fortress and we can make our plans."

"And we'll check on the damage to the library," Fiona added. "I still hold out hope that Anna will find something in one of those new books that will make this all unnecessary."

"Oh, I haven't given up on that yet," Anna assured her. "I'll have no objection if I don't have to venture any farther than the library to stop Knut before the barons completely tear apart the Five Lands."

Chapter Thirteen

A week of long days spent studying the books in her office yielded a great deal of interesting information, including a spell to ward against paper-eating insects and a collection of love potions specific to every imaginable circumstance, but nothing that would be of any use against Knut. Alistair's spies, on the other hand, reported that an emissary sent by one of the barons had commissioned a spell. Within twenty-four hours, Anna found herself on a barge with Duncan, Fiona and Alistair, headed back to the one place she never wanted to see again. Two days later, they were camped out in the hills just beyond the border of Knut's land, hidden by a grove of oak trees and one of Duncan's spells. Three other mages had arrived to help Alistair and Fiona weave a spell against Knut. Now all they had to do was wait for the return of the baron's emissary from collecting the spell. Then it would be time for Anna to create her diversion and the mages to attack.

She was lying in the tent she shared with Duncan, wide awake while he slept, when she heard the sound of a horse and urgent whispering. She pulled on her clothes and slipped out of the tent without waking Duncan.

Alistair was pacing between the tents.

"It's time?" she asked him.

"A group of soldiers visited the fortress for an hour just after sunset. Yes, I think it's time."

"He'll sleep most of the day away tomorrow unless he's interrupted," Anna said. "He probably won't work any magic until the next day."

"We should do it now, then, so you'll be ready in the morning." He looked beyond Anna and said, "Wake Fiona, please. This will take a woman's touch."

Anna turned around and saw Duncan standing behind her, almost managing to hide how unhappy he felt about what she was about to do. He nodded to Alistair and strode across the camp to Fiona's tent.

"You're sure about this?" Alistair asked Anna for about the twentieth time. "It's not too late to change your mind, you know."

"You've known me for almost fifteen years, Alistair. Have you ever known me to change my mind?"

"Only once," Alistair said, looking toward Duncan. "And it took you ten years to do it. You're ready, then?"

Anna shrugged. "I guess so."

"We'll all fit in my tent."

He gestured for Anna to precede him and when they arrived at the tent, Alistair held the flap open for her.

"Not a comfort missing, I see," she said, looking around the tent, which was as comfortably arranged as Alistair's rooms at the university, with thick rugs on the floor and mage lights bobbing just above head level.

"What would be the point in spending a month learning packing spells if I didn't use them?"

He went to a trunk in the corner of the tent and pulled out a leather-bound flask.

"A sleeping draught," he explained as he poured a small amount of golden liquid into a glass. "It's easier to work this kind of magic if the subject is sleeping."

Anna nodded and accepted the glass from him. Its contents sparkled as she swirled it.

She was raising it to her lips when Duncan and Fiona stepped into the tent. She held the glass out toward them.

"Cheers."

She emptied the glass with a single swallow, tasting Alistair's magic sharp and tingling on her tongue. Then she felt its effects and she slumped on her feet. Alistair rescued his glass from her limp fingers and Duncan caught her around the waist to keep her from falling. He lowered her gently to a pile of cushions on the floor. Anna was dimly aware of his hand brushing the hair out of her eyes and Alistair and Fiona arguing in whispers.

She dreamed about magic, about tangible spells that swirled around her while she danced around a fire and people just beyond the fire's light clapped to the music. Duncan was there, stepping in and out of the darkness as she circled the fire and so was Knut, sitting in a chair with the stolen grimoire open on his lap. Anna reached for the book every time she danced past him, but it was always just beyond her reach, as if it wanted to elude her touch.

When she woke, just for a moment she forgot where she was and she expected to open her eyes and find herself in her bare little room in Knut's fortress.

Then she heard Fiona say, "That'll have to do. She's waking up."

She felt like herself, but there was a charged-up energy running through her that she had never experienced before. She turned her mind inward to try to discover the spell at its source, but it was too well disguised, or maybe it wasn't magic at all. Maybe it was just nerves.

Anna opened her eyes reluctantly and looked around the tent. Fiona and Alistair were sitting on the floor next to her. Both of them looked exhausted.

Fiona smiled. "Oh, splendid. The eyes are just the right touch, Alistair. I can hardly resist her, myself."

Alistair cleared his throat. "Yes, I think she'll do."

He stood up and turned away and busied himself by gathering up mugs and a ceramic pitcher from around the tent. Anna was certain he was avoiding looking at her.

"Don't mind him," Fiona said. "I think he's a little overwhelmed by his own handiwork."

She stood up and held out her hand to help Anna up. When their fingers touched, Anna felt a rush of desire so strong it made her gasp.

Fiona smiled and pulled Anna to her feet. "We thought it might help to boost your libido a bit. With luck, it will help distract Knut."

"It's distracting me," Anna replied, taking a step back. The desire to pull Fiona down onto the cushions with her was making it difficult to think clearly. "You don't think you might have overdone it?"

Fiona ran a finger down Anna's cheek, sending a shiver through her body.

"I think this will make it easier for you," she explained. "Desire will overcome fear. More importantly, it will hide your fear from Knut."

"Let's get it over with, then," Anna said, trying to sound brave.

"There's just one more thing. Alistair, where are those clothes?"

"In the trunk," Alistair said, on his way out of the tent. "Toward the left."

Anna chuckled at the speed with which he disappeared through the tent flap. "I must be quite a fearsome sight."

"I can't wait to see what Duncan thinks of you," Fiona said from the depths of the trunk.

She emerged with an armful of rich autumn colors in velvet and damask and held them out to Anna.

"The Baron of Surian would never send a shabby-looking thank-you gift to a powerful wizard like Knut. Only a very prosperous prostitute could afford to dress like this. And prosperous in any business means skilled. It may put ideas into Knut's head that will help distract him."

Fiona dumped the heavy garments into Anna's arms.

"I'll lace up your corset," she offered.

"Corset? I haven't worn a corset for years."

"You'll have to for the dress to fit properly. Besides, no self-respecting prostitute leaves her house without one."

Anna sighed. "One more thing to distract me from being afraid, I suppose."

"That's the spirit. Now, out of those dusty librarian clothes, so we can finish transforming you into Clarissa."

"Clarissa?"

"My great-aunt Clarissa was the black sheep of the family for two generations. She was one of the most well-known courtesans of her day and a formidable old woman by the time I knew her. Besides, I think you look like a Clarissa."

"Clarissa I am, then," Anna said as she pulled her clothes off over her head.

The cool morning air raised goose bumps on her skin and hardened her nipples. She resisted the temptation to run her hands over her body to see if the spells that had been worked on her made her feel any different. She rummaged around in the heap of clothes and found the corset, not the practical sort she was familiar with, but a frothy affair all decked out with ribbons and lace. She realized as soon as Fiona laced it up tight that it was much more sturdy than it appeared.

"Can you breathe?" Fiona asked.

"Almost."

Fiona untied the stays and loosened them a little. "You need enough air to think straight."

"Much better. Thank you."

Fiona stepped back and gave Anna an assessing look.

"I think those have to come off," she said, pointing to Anna's underclothes. "Aunt Clarissa never wore anything but a corset under her gowns until she retired."

Anna put on the gown and reached under to remove her underclothes. The heavy velvet skirt puddled around her feet in a wide circle, but the bodice fit snugly and Anna understood why the corset was necessary. Once Fiona laced up the side of the

gown, it fit like a second skin, at least up to the plunging neckline, which was made all the more dramatic by the way the corset pushed her breasts up. Anna took a deep breath—or at least she tried to, but the corset wouldn't quite allow it. She stepped into the soft leather boots that Fiona set out for her and when she bent to lace them up, she nearly popped out of dress.

"Did we bring a mirror?" she asked when she stood up.

"Right behind you."

Anna turned around to see herself reflected in a full-length mirror that had not been there a moment before. She barely recognized the fair-skinned, golden-haired woman looking back at her. She leaned in closer and saw that her eyes were a deep blue, almost violet. She turned this way and that, admiring the way the gown slimmed her full figure and enjoying the feel of the velvet moving against her bare backside.

"You and Alistair have outdone yourselves. I don't think I'd recognize myself if I didn't know. I'm sure Knut won't."

"We'll do your hair and then you'll be ready," Fiona said, rummaging in the trunk again and setting out a hairbrush and a variety of hairpins and ornaments.

Anna sat down on a stool, the beginning of panic rising inside her as Fiona started brushing her hair, but within a minute all her awareness was focused on the sensation of the brush running through her hair and Fiona's hands lifting sections of her hair and her fingers trailing against her scalp as she brushed. Anna closed her eyes. What would she do, she wondered, if Fiona's hands drifted past her hair and brushed against the skin exposed by the low neckline of her dress? She had never thought about another woman that way, but the magic that had been worked on her had a powerful effect.

What if Fiona leaned down and brushed her lips against Anna's neck? Would she jump up in surprise or would she bend her neck to the side, exposing her neck more completely to Fiona? Maybe she would even lean back and rest her head on Fiona's breasts and let Fiona run her hands from her neck down across her chest to linger on the soft swell of her breasts.

"All done."

Fiona patted Anna on the back and stepped around in front of her to admire her handiwork.

Anna opened her eyes, but she couldn't look at Fiona.

"It makes you forget to be afraid, doesn't it?" she asked gently.

Anna nodded, venturing a brief glance at Fiona's face. "Whose idea was it?"

"Mine. Alistair didn't like it, but he couldn't come up with anything else that overcomes fear quite as effectively. Aunt Clarissa taught me the spell. It used to be very popular with wealthy women who wanted to smooth the way for their virgin daughters on their wedding nights."

"I'd imagine some of them never made it past the wedding breakfast," Anna said, trying to shake off the torpor of desire. She tried to stand up, but fell right back onto the stool.

Fiona knelt down in front of Anna and looked at her. "Your pupils are dilated. Maybe we did make it a little too strong."

Anna nodded her head in agreement. "I don't suppose there's an antidote?"

"No, but I have an idea. I'll be back in a few minutes."

The second the tent flap fell closed behind Fiona, Anna jumped up and began pacing, thinking that moving around might help make her feel a little more like herself, but all it did was cause the skirt of her dress to swish against her skin, making her think of lips and tongues and strong hands.

She sat back down to think, and before she quite knew what she was doing, she realized that she had pushed the front of her dress up and she was stroking her leg absentmindedly. She figured she had maybe two minutes before Fiona returned, and considering that she could almost feel the blood rushing to her already-engorged pussy, she thought it would probably be plenty of time.

Anna moved her hand up between her legs and worked a finger through the damp tangle of hair and pressed it against her clit. That was all it took. She clamped one hand over her mouth to contain her moan as she came with a great shudder and jerked her hips forward to press herself against her other hand. When it was over she felt lucky that she hadn't fallen off the stool.

She had just enough time to straighten her dress back over her legs before Fiona returned.

Fiona stood in front of the doorway looking at her. "Better?" she asked.

"A bit."

Anna stood up on shaky legs and tried to ignore the ache between her legs. Even after a toe-curling orgasm, she was longing for more.

"So, how long does it last?"

Fiona walked over to the tent flap and pulled it open. "Days usually. Shall we?"

She held the flap open for Anna, not giving her the chance to contemplate the prospect of spending days in such a heightened state of arousal.

Anna stepped outside to find an audience waiting. Alistair stood just outside the tent, with the three other mages ranged behind him. Directly in front of the tent stood Duncan, holding the reins of two horses and staring determinedly at his feet.

Alistair stepped forward and took Anna's hand. He seemed to have overcome the discomfort he felt earlier in her presence.

"We'll all be close by," he assured her. "Just outside his border, but we have to be very careful in probing his wards. If he notices us too soon, he'll be on his guard and you'll be trapped there."

"What he's trying to say," Fiona said, "is be patient. You can't be afraid to take things as far as you have to. We're counting on you to keep him busy until we step in."

Anna nodded. "I understand. No holding back."

Fiona put her hand on Anna's arm and led her toward Duncan and the horses. "If you leave now, it should be almost noon when you knock on his front door. His power will still be at low ebb, but he'll have the strength to be distracted by you. Duncan will go with you as far as the village."

"Let's get this over with, then," Anna said.

She forced herself to look at Duncan, who managed to avoid looking at her even as he helped her up into the sidesaddle, a device of torture that Anna had never encountered before a few practice sessions just prior to leaving the university. He kept his head determinedly down as she stepped into his linked hands and he boosted her up into the saddle. He lingered by her side just long enough to make sure she was settled, then turned away and mounted his horse. He kicked the horse into a trot and headed out of the grove of trees toward the open fields without a word.

Chapter Fourteen

Anna followed Duncan through the field, bouncing ungracefully in her saddle.

"I'm not going to try to keep up with you," she shouted at him after they had crossed the fields and reached the road. "I can't trot in this thing."

Duncan wheeled his horse neatly around and circled behind her to pull up next to her.

"Was that supposed to be some kind of punishment?" she asked.

Duncan finally glanced at her. "I just thought you'd want to get there and get it over with."

"It won't do any good if I can't stand up by the time we get there."

Anna rode on and tried to keep her eyes off Duncan's hands. One lightly held the reins and the other rested on his thigh. She wanted to reach over and set her hand where his was and feel his muscles work as he rode. She glanced up and caught him looking at her. Did he know about Aunt Clarissa's spell?

"Were you there last night when Alistair and Fiona set their spells on me?"

Duncan nodded.

"You heard them speak all of the spells?"

"Are you asking me if I know that when you come face-to-face with Knut you'll be burning so hot with lust that you'll be willing to do anything to get him to touch you?"

Anna blinked away a sudden surprise assault of tears. She knew he wasn't happy about what she was about to do, but she hadn't expected such bitterness.

"It won't be like that," she assured him, but she wasn't really so sure.

"You think you'll be able to control it? It's a powerful spell, Anna. It's working on you right now. It's going to keep working while we ride, building up its power. By the time you have Knut within your reach, the spell will demand release."

She wanted to deny it, but she knew he was right. She could feel the spell working on her. She could feel the movement of the horse teasing her body in ways that it had not done when she had practiced with the sidesaddle. The sensation of the soft velvet of her gown and the lace of the corset made her want to reach down and touch herself, or better yet, slide off the horse and pull Duncan down with her and make love to him right there on the dusty road. It would be fast and frenzied. They'd hardly lose any time at all. She glanced at him, wondering if she dared.

He was watching her again and she had the feeling he knew exactly what she was thinking.

"You'd screw a muck-covered stable boy if you had the chance right now, wouldn't you?"

Anna raised her chin and looked straight ahead. "There's no need to be vulgar." She felt like a prig the instant she said it, but she wasn't about to take it back.

She rode on silently for a while, waiting for him to apologize. When she realized that there would be no apology, she said, "You can't blame me for Fiona's spell. She didn't exactly consult me beforehand."

Duncan sighed. "I know. It's not your fault. It's not even Fiona's fault. She used the best tools she had and she was probably right to do it. I just hate to think of you panting over that bastard Knut after all he did to us."

Relief briefly overpowered desire. "Anyway," she said with a sly smile and a sideways glance at him. "I'd much rather screw you."

Duncan laughed so suddenly and so loudly that it startled his horse. He leaned forward to pat the horse on the neck and murmur something in its ear. Then he turned and looked Anna straight in the eyes for the first time all day.

"You'll have your chance just as soon as this is all over."

Anna squirmed in her saddle, feeling the warmth of Duncan's gaze all through her body.

"I like the sound of that," she said, more than happy to let herself be distracted by the thought of what would come when the day's dangerous, distasteful work was done.

"I don't think we'll want to take the time to ride all the way back to camp," Duncan said.

"I'm sure I wouldn't survive the wait."

"We'll go to the village and take a room at the inn."

"I've seen the outside of that inn," Anna said. "Even if the inside is only half as bad, I don't think I'd wish a night there on my worse enemy."

"Someplace, then. It doesn't matter, as long as it's private."

"And clean," Anna insisted.

"You're going to be so far beyond caring by then, my love. Trust me. I heard the words of Fiona's spell. You'll be beyond rational thought."

Anna knew she should be frightened by the prospect of being so ravaged by desire that she didn't care how or where she found satisfaction, but somehow the thought only aroused her more.

"All right, then," she said, licking her dry lips and tasting the dust of the road on them. "We find someplace, anyplace. Then what?"

Duncan smiled at her. "Has your imagination completely failed you?"

"I just want you to tell me." She really didn't know if she could bear to hear him talk about it without reaching out to touch him, but it was as close as she could get to the real thing at the moment.

"Well," he said thoughtfully. "I'll back you up against the wall, if there is a wall and I'll hold your hands over your head so you can't touch me and I'll kiss you until your legs give out, but I'll have my knee between your legs and I'll be leaning hard against you, so you'll be pinned against the wall and you won't fall."

He paused, but Anna didn't dare look at him. Her breathing was already shallow and rapid and she was regretting the corset.

"You'll be pushing against my leg," Duncan continued. "Rubbing yourself against me. I'll reach up under your dress and— What are you wearing underneath that, anyway?"

Anna turned and looked him in the eye. "A very pretty corset."

"And?"

"And nothing. Just the corset."

Duncan stared silently ahead for a moment as the horses calmly carried them closer to Knut's fortress. Anna could not tell if he was gathering his thoughts or trying to control his own libido. She hoped it was the latter. She liked the idea him suffering along with her.

His next words were not what she expected.

"There's the village."

Anna's felt suddenly sick to her stomach. She tried to take deep calming breaths as they drew nearer to the sad-looking huddled buildings, but the corset prevented that, so she focused on the burning sensation in her body instead. Fiona was right. Desire trumped fear.

"The only other time I saw the village from the road like this was when I came to steal the book back," she said when she trusted her voice to be steady. "It doesn't look much different."

"A little sadder maybe," Duncan said. "It can't be pleasant, living in Knut's shadow like that."

"No worse than living under his roof."

Duncan said nothing but he angled his horse in a little closer to Anna's.

As they got closer to the village, Anna remembered what it had felt like on the few occasions when Knut had sent her there to shop. The first time, she had expected to find

friendly faces and neighbors to chat with, but the villagers were too terrified of anything having to do with Knut to even acknowledge her greetings. Even the shopkeepers avoided speaking to her until it was time to tell her what she owed them. Maybe there had been a time when the fortress on the hill had supported and protected the village, but after Knut's arrival it only cast a pall over the village and kept away travelers who might once have spent their money there.

Anna looked at the people stopping to stare and the curtains being pulled aside in widows as she and Duncan rode through the center of the village, what should have been the bustling heart of the place and the people's fear strengthened her resolve. Knut's proximity had sapped the life out of this place. Helping Alistair and the other mages could only help these people.

After they had passed the last of the tumble-down little houses at the outskirts of the village, Duncan stopped his horse.

"This is as far as I can take you. Even weakened, he might sense another mage approaching his front door."

Anna looked down at the beautifully made riding gloves on her hands, the kind only a very well-paid whore could afford. "Will you be with Alistair and the others?"

"They should be moving in closer to Knut's borders already. I'll join them there."

"I don't know how long this will take."

Anna looked at Duncan. He did not look angry anymore. Just worried and unhappy. He sidled his horse up to hers and reached out to touch her cheek. She leaned into his hand and kissed his palm. Even now, as the reality of what she had agreed to do settled heavily on her, Fiona's spell was sending tendrils of heat through her.

"I don't think I dare kiss you for luck," Duncan said.

Anna forced a smile for him. "No. I'd be all over you."

"Good luck, Clarissa."

This time Anna's smile was real as she blew a kiss at him and kicked her horse into a walk.

"And remember. I have an appointment with you after this one."

"If you're lucky, I might not even charge you," she said over her shoulder.

Her smile faded as soon as she turned back to face forward. The morning had gotten warm and the velvet gown was seeming like less of a good idea. She wanted to pull it off and let her skin breathe. She urged the horse into a faster walk so that the air moved against her skin a little bit and she reminded herself that Clarissa was quite used to putting up with a little discomfort in order to look beautiful. It was part of the job, after all.

For the first time since she had caught up with Duncan, she made herself look farther ahead than the road immediately in front of her horse. There was the hill and the road winding up it and the wall that surrounded the fortress. She could even see the top of the old tower where she used to go to feel a little less trapped and where she used to stand and watch the Beast chopping wood. But that was Marina. Now she was Clarissa and Clarissa had a job to do and a fire to quench.

Chapter Fifteen

Nothing had changed in Knut's courtyard. Anna had not really expected it to have, but even so, she was struck by how it looked precisely as it had during her time as Marina. She wondered if Knut had found somebody to do his cooking and housework for him. It had not occurred to her before to wonder how he had managed before she snuck so stupidly into his lair. She fervently hoped that what she was attempting now was a lot less stupid.

She slid down from the horse and shook the stiffness out of her legs. She secured the reins to a post near the front door, where she had often seen the soldiers who came to collect Knut's spells tie up their horses.

Then she was at the front door, pounding the heavy knocker against the door. The sound broke the stillness of the courtyard and Anna imagined it echoing through the sparsely furnished rooms of the lower floor.

She knocked again after a few minutes and this time the door was opened almost immediately and Knut stood in front of her.

If he had been sleeping, it did not show. He did not at all look rumpled or bleary-eyed—only mildly curious. Anna knew as well as anybody that he rarely had unexpected visitors.

Anna forced herself to look him in the eyes with her chin held high as she spoke her rehearsed greeting.

"Edrich of Surian sends a gift to the sorcerer Knut, most powerful in the Five Lands."

This was the most dangerous moment, when Anna would find out if Knut had communicated more recently with Edrich than Alistair knew about.

"Let's see this gift then," Knut said, leaning against the doorframe.

Anna curtsied low but kept her eyes on his face. "You see her before you."

Knut let out a great whoop of laughter, which so startled Anna that she nearly toppled over. She had never heard so much as a chuckle out of him before. She straightened up slowly and put on a questioning smile to hide her surprise.

"Edrich greatly misunderstands me if he thinks you're the sort of gift I would ask for. Still, I suppose I must offer you hospitality since you're here."

He stepped aside and extended his arm to invite her in.

"I'm sorry I don't have anybody to take care of your horse," he said as he closed the door behind them. "I'm woefully understaffed at the moment."

Anna waved her hand gracefully to dismiss his concerns and looked around her as if she was seeing the place for the first time and in a way she was. Inside the house, nothing was as she remembered it. Where it was dark and heavy with unpleasant magic in her memory, now the old-fashioned great hall was full of dusty sunlight that came from the high windows and the air felt fresh and fragrant with lavender and beeswax. Had the spell that made her Marina caused her to see everything through a veil of fear and misery? Or was there some spell at work now that caused her, an intruder into Knut's domain, to see things as he wanted them to be seen?

Anna realized that he was watching her, waiting for her to speak.

"You could really make something of this place if you wanted to," she mused, gazing up at the huge beams of the rafters high above and the shafts of sunlight crisscrossing each other.

"It suits my bachelor existence well enough as it is," Knut replied. "Come sit down and I'll bring you some refreshment."

He led her across the empty expanse of the hall to a pair of chairs next to the enormous fireplace. Anna sat down and settled her full skirt around her and watched him walk off toward the kitchen. If she didn't know better, she would suspect this man of being Knut's much more pleasant identical twin brother. Again, she wondered if what she was seeing now was real or the workings of magic.

She wished he hadn't left her alone. After a minute her focus turned inward and the effects of Fiona's spell demanded her attention. She closed her eyes and tried to will the nearly overpowering arousal to subside, but a moment later she realized that she was running her fingers along the exposed tops of her breasts, enjoying the softness of her own skin.

Knut returned within a few minutes, a little smile playing across his face that made him look actually attractive. Maybe this wasn't going to be such an odious chore after all, she thought. No, that had to be Fiona's spell talking. She would never have found Knut attractive if she were herself.

On a little table near the chairs he set down a tray laden with two cups and a plate full of various kinds of fruit tarts—not Knut's usual fare, so it was probably magically produced. That was good. It meant another expenditure of his strength.

"Lovely," Anna exclaimed, reaching for a strawberry tart and wondering if Alistair's promised protection against spellbound food was about to come into play.

She took a dainty bite and felt crumbs of the flaky pastry fall onto her chest.

"Oh dear, how messy of me."

She brushed the crumbs away and Knut's eyes followed her hand and lingered on her breasts when she lowered her hand back to her lap. She wanted to fill the silence with words, but she forced herself to finish the tart while he watched her. Then she reached for the cup and took a slow sip while she tried to decide what to do next. Whatever he had given her looked harmless enough, but it burned a path down her throat and that single sip made her limbs feel heavy and relaxed. She might be protected against spells and poison, but she wasn't protected against alcohol.

"I don't know exactly what it is, but the previous inhabitants left several barrels of it in the cellar. Quite potent isn't it?"

"To be used with caution, I think," Anna said, setting the cup back down. "But you've no need to ply me with alcohol," she added with what she hoped was an inviting smile.

Knut picked up the other cup and took a hearty gulp of it. Anna saw his little shiver as he swallowed. So he wasn't accustomed to it, then. But maybe he had his own protections against alcohol.

"Why are you really here?" he asked.

Anna forced herself to relax into the chair. "To ply my trade. I don't need to explain that to you, do I?"

She took another tiny sip of her drink, relieved that her hand did not shake.

"Do you enjoy your work?"

"Oh, yes."

Anna stood up and crossed the space between them in two steps. She bent down and, leaning on the arms of his chair, put her lips to his ear.

"I'm very much looking forward to getting this job started."

She lingered for a moment, her mouth almost touching him, her breasts almost fully exposed as she leaned forward and well within his reach. Her cheeks felt flushed and she was deliciously aware of the teasing sensation of her gown against her bare skin.

"Would you like to touch me, my lord?"

She let her lips brush against his ear. She wanted to open her mouth against him and taste him, but she restrained herself.

"Sit back down," he commanded softly, sounding perfectly calm and collected.

Anna backed slowly away from him and sat. She took another sip of her drink and felt the warmth from it seep down into her belly and spread out, mingling with the heat she already felt from Fiona's spell. She tried to remind herself of why she was here, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. All that mattered was that she successfully seduce this man and take all the pleasure from him that she could. And it didn't look like he was going to make it easy for her.

"Do I displease you?"

Knut smiled and ran his hand through his hair. The gesture made him seem younger and more vulnerable than Anna knew him to be. Could she actually be making him nervous?

"I'm surprised how much you do please me," he admitted. He took a deep breath, seeming to gather himself. "What's your name?"

"Clarissa, my lord." Anna tried hard to keep from looking satisfied. He'd taken the bait.

"Well, Clarissa, I don't generally allow myself to be distracted from my work, especially by women. Anybody who knew me well would swear that I'm not even interested in women. In fact, I've been quite happy without any, shall we say, social interaction, with women for years. So why should I suddenly find you so tempting? I must admit," he said, an icy undercurrent running beneath his warm tone, "that it doesn't seem quite natural."

"Perhaps you've just reached your limit," Anna said with an unconcerned shrug. "A man can only deprive himself for so long."

"I might believe that if I'd been thinking about women lately, but I haven't. Can you explain your unnatural appeal to me, Clarissa?"

"How best to explain it?" she said with a sigh to buy a few seconds to think. It was hard to think, though. Her body was screaming to her for release, her nipples hard and aching to be touched and the heat of her pussy threatening to overcome her every effort at rational thought. Best to let her body speak for itself, she decided.

"I like men," she said, settling into the role of Clarissa. "I didn't become a whore out of desperation, but because I absolutely adore men."

She paused, but there was no reaction from Knut. He watched her with suspicion in his eyes and maybe something softer, deeper down.

"I like the way they all taste a little bit different," she said slowly, gazing at the empty fireplace and trying to ignore the images her words conjured up. "I like the way their voices change when they're aroused and the way they're soft and hard at the same

time. I especially like the way they make me feel, like there's never been anything like me before and never will be again."

She was breathing hard now, or at least trying to, her breasts straining against the corset each time she inhaled. She looked at Knut, whose eyes were locked on her heaving breasts.

"Men respond to that," she continued. "They know it's real when they're with me. It's not only about the money. It's a purely animal response and even an intelligent man such as yourself is susceptible."

"So you want me, just because I'm a man?"

He sounded doubtful, but Anna thought he looked like he wanted to believe her.

"Yes, I want you," she whispered, "because you're strong and masculine and I like the way you smell."

"Show me how much you want me," Knut said raggedly.

Anna started to stand up, but Knut held out a hand to stop her.

"No. If you want me so much, show me how it affects you. Without touching me. Sit there and show me."

Anna smiled when she understood. Maybe he did not trust her and he really wanted proof, or maybe he just liked to watch. Either way, she was happy to oblige. She reached down and started to pull up her skirt, slowly revealing her legs, up past her knees and to her thighs, opening her legs a little bit more with each elevation of the skirt.

Knut watched her avidly, his lips parted, his hands clenched on the arms of his chair. How had she ever been afraid of him? Anna wondered. His eyes widened when the skirt was high enough to show that she was wearing nothing under it and Anna thought she detected a faint sheen of sweat on his brow.

When the bulky fabric was all bunched up at her waist, she hitched her knees over the arms of the chair, opening herself up to his view, letting him see how glistening wet

and engorged she was. She leaned her head against the back of the chair and sat perfectly still, wishing he would come over and touch her, but he did not move.

"Show me," he said again.

His voice had gone deep and breathy and the sound of it made Anna shiver with pleasure. Any other time, she would have been mortified, but the urgency of her need blocked out all modesty. It felt like nothing existed beyond herself and Knut and the little space around them. If there had been some other reason for her being there, her awareness of it was drowned out by the pounding of her heart.

She locked her eyes on Knut's face and ran her hand languidly down her inner thigh, straight to the source of her need. She heard his sharp intake of breath when she slipped two fingers inside her cunt and drew them back out.

"Don't you want a taste?" she asked in a voice even huskier than Knut's had been.

He shook his head. He seemed to be unable to look away from her pussy. Something in the farthest recesses of Anna's mind told her this was a good thing, but she could not bring herself to care.

She ran her fingers lightly across her clit and shuddered. Her eyes closed and her head fell back as she fingered herself. She was aware of movement, but it didn't mean anything to her until she felt a pair of hands plunge into the top of her dress and squeeze her breasts hard.

Knut's breath was warm against her scalp.

"Let me see you come."

It was a plea, desperate and raw and it was all that was needed to push Anna over the edge. She cried out as pleasure engulfed her, but even before the last shudder racked her body, she knew it wasn't going to be nearly enough to satisfy her.

When the pounding of her heart abated a little, she opened her eyes. Knut was sitting down again, with his legs wide apart, watching her. Her gaze moved slowly down from his face to where his erection strained against the dark fabric of his pants.

Anna crossed the space between them without thought and knelt in front of him with her hands on his knees. She forced herself to move slowly as she ran her hands up his thighs. She pressed one palm against his cock and looked up to see his face awash with amazement, as though he had never experienced such a thing before. She reached her other hand up and touched his face, feeling an unwelcome wave of tenderness toward him.

Her fingers fumbled at the buttons of his pants. She was actually trembling with eagerness. When finally she managed to unfasten the last button and pulled the fabric aside to release his cock, she bent her head and planted a gentle kiss right at the top of it, rubbing her lips against the droplet of moisture that had gathered there. Knut moaned and Anna felt his hands come to rest on her shoulders.

She ran her tongue around the head of his cock and wrapped one hand around it. He tasted almost like honey. It had to be magic, but she didn't care. She licked up and down the length of him and explored every contour with her tongue. He was delicious. And he was enjoying it. By the time she took him full into her mouth, one of his hands was clenched in her hair and his legs were tense and trembling.

As soon as her mouth closed over him, his whole body stiffened and he pulled roughly at her hair.

"Stop, damn it," he gasped.

But Anna did not stop. She remembered now why she was here and she felt magic tingling around her. Alistair and the other mages had made their move. She had to keep Knut vulnerable. She took him deeper into her mouth and ran her fingernails down his thighs.

Knut pushed ineffectively at her shoulders. Too great a part of him did not really want her to stop. He moaned and tangled his hands painfully in Anna's hair. She wanted to drag it out, to give Alistair as much time as possible. She tried to move her mouth slowly up and down Knut's cock, but he was thrusting himself at her with rapid movements of his hips and holding her head firmly in place.

Knut made a sound that sounded halfway between a moan and a sob. Honey flooded into Anna's mouth and Knut shoved her away from him so hard that she fell back, sprawled on the floor.

"Bitch!"

Chapter Sixteen

He had to push hard against the arms of the chair to stand, but even so, he fell right back down, weakened by the spells that were being cast from a distance and by Anna.

"Now I recognize you. You're that fool of a librarian, aren't you?"

Anna stood up and dusted herself off. She could not bring herself to look at him. She knew he would look different. He sounded different. He sounded like the Knut she remembered – the Knut she had been terrified of.

"Very clever, waltzing in up to my door smelling of sex to distract me."

Anna walked over to the little table, keeping a wary eye on Knut's feet. She was grateful that her full skirt hid the trembling of her knees. She picked up her drink and gulped down the last of it to wash the taste of him from her mouth.

"Show your faces, cowards!" Knut shouted out to the mages he must now know were somewhere within the borders of his land. "How brave of them to send a woman to keep me busy while they snuck around behind my back."

Anna glanced at his face. It was almost the same face as he had been wearing five minutes ago, but now it looked like Knut, not like some stranger who resembled Knut. The features were the same, but the humanity was gone.

"It worked, though, didn't it?" she remarked.

"One act of charity and look what it gets you."

Anna clamped her mouth shut. She wasn't going to ask, but it didn't matter. Knut was determined to tell her anyway.

"I shouldn't have let you live, but I felt sorry for you. And this is the thanks I get for my kindness."

"You call that kindness? Stealing five years of my life?"

Knut opened his mouth to reply, but Anna didn't want to hear it. She turned around and started walking away from him across the hall, shutting out his words. She could feel the magic at work growing stronger, pressing down on her and she ran the last steps to the door.

Outside, she could hardly believe that everything looked exactly as she had left it. Her horse stood quietly where she had tied it up, waiting for her return. It gave a little toss of its head in welcome and Anna leaned against it. Its solid presence reassured her and gave her something to anchor herself to as the magic flooded the fortress. She would have gladly ridden away, except that she could not climb up into the sidesaddle without help. Besides, she felt like she was supposed to stand guard—not that she would be able to do anything if Knut tried to leave.

The worse part of it was that her body still clambered for relief from the arousal caused by Fiona's spell. She pressed against the horse's neck and clenched her jaw. What had happened inside had done nothing to assuage her desire. If anything, it had only made her hungry for more.

It was no wonder then that she was doubly relieved to hear the sound of horses approaching down the road. Alistair led the little group that rode in through the open gates, looking nothing short of heroic, his face set with a soldier's grim determination. Fiona rode almost at his side, just a step or two back. Her red hair hung loose down her back and she looked to Anna like a warrior queen riding to battle.

Finally, riding between the other mages and Alistair's guardsmen, came Duncan and once Anna set her eyes on him, she did not care about anything else going on around her. She wanted to run forward to meet him, but her legs wouldn't work.

Alistair said something as he strode past her and on up the steps to the wide-open doors. Anna nodded vaguely in response, but she wasn't sure if he was even talking to her. She felt a light touch on her arm and there was Fiona, standing in front of her and looking concerned.

"Are you all right?"

Anna nodded. She wanted to reassure Fiona that it really hadn't been that bad, but her brain wasn't sending the words to her mouth.

Fiona smiled and looked over her shoulder. "I think she needs your help, Duncan."

Then she joined the other mages to face down Knut and Duncan was there, pulling Anna into her arms and holding her close. It wasn't the kind of embrace Anna had been longing for, but she allowed it for a moment. He had been understandably worried about her and he needed to be reassured that she had not been harmed by her encounter with Knut. It wasn't easy, though. The press of his body against hers fanned the already raging flames of Fiona's spell.

"Duncan," she said when she could not stand it any longer.

He loosened his grip on her just enough to lean back so he could look at her.

"He didn't hurt you?"

"No." Anna grinned and a surge of triumph swept over her as she finally realized what she had accomplished. "He didn't have a chance."

Duncan looked less than convinced.

"I hardly even had to touch him," she assured him.

Maybe that stretched the truth just a bit, but he relaxed and pulled her back against his chest.

"You had a plan, as I remember," she reminded him.

"Mmm," he murmured against her hair. "I vaguely remember something of the sort."

Anna felt the nature of his embrace change and she resisted wriggling against him. She did not want to pull away from him to turn and see if the guardsmen were still in the courtyard, but she did not want to put on a show for them if they were there, either.

"Don't tease me, Duncan. Where can we go?"

"Follow me."

He took her hand in one of his and his horse's reins in the other and led her around to the stable. Anna could hardly focus on where he was taking her. Her imagination was already moving ahead to what would happen when they got there. She felt like every nerve ending in her body was alive and yearning to be touched. Her clothes, which had earlier felt so soft and sensuous against her skin, now felt like a prison. She wanted to tear them off and let her skin breathe.

Duncan stopped outside the stable door and pulled a bundle from his saddlebag. Anna followed him inside, where he paused to cast a spell that would keep intruders out.

"Wait here," he said when his spell was cast and he disappeared with his bundle into the dappled shadows at the far end of the stable.

Anna leaned against the door and closed her eyes. The combined effects of Knut's mystery drink and Fiona's spell were making her lightheaded and little unsteady on her feet, so when Duncan reappeared and flung her over his shoulder, she made no objection. Between the corset and Duncan's shoulder digging into her stomach, she could hardly breathe, but she didn't care. The hand he had placed firmly on her bottom to keep her balanced as he carried her to a stall in the back of the stable felt lovely and she was a little sorry when he lowered her carefully to her feet. For a moment Anna kept her eyes closed and stood where he had set her, feeling a wall solid against her back and breathing in the scent of fresh hay.

When she opened her eyes, she saw the hay heaped up into a deep pile with blankets spread over it.

"When did you have time to arrange this?"

"I didn't. The hay's enchanted. Knut kept it here in case any of his customers needed to spend the night."

Anna didn't know what to say. It seemed somehow appropriate that Knut's foresight would provide her and Duncan with a comfortable place to make love. She said his name—it was all she could think of to say—and a second later he had pushed

her against the wall and his mouth was on hers, drawing little whimpers out of her and making it impossible for her to think about anything but the taste of him and the urgent press of his body against hers.

Duncan ran his hands down her arms and twined his fingers in hers for a moment before raising her hands over her head and holding them there against the wall with her wrists gripped in one of his hands. He pushed his knee between her legs and just as he had promised on the ride to Knut's fortress, she found herself helplessly moving against him, striving for a more intimate touch than could be achieved through the heavy velvet of her gown.

Anna turned her head away from him and gasped for breath and Duncan pulled back so he could look at her.

"You're on fire," he said hoarsely. "I can feel your heat through our clothes."

Anna pushed hard against his leg and wriggled. She was going to die if he didn't touch her soon, but she couldn't speak. The magic of Fiona's spell had overpowered her, turning her into a being of pure desire, almost without any intellect or ability to communicate. All she could do was nod her approval when she felt Duncan's free hand unfastening the laces of her gown and then the air on her skin as the gown fell open along her side.

Duncan released her hands and pushed the gown off her shoulders and down her arms. He stepped back to let it fall to the floor when the sleeves cleared her hands. Anna wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him back to her. It turned out that she was much more interested in feeling Duncan against her skin than feeling the air. She feasted on the hollow at the base of his throat. She wanted to get his clothes off him, but his hands were on her bare buttocks now, pulling her hard against him. She tugged ineffectually at his shirt. Her limbs weren't working quite right. Her legs didn't want to support her anymore, but pressed between Duncan and the wall, she managed to stay on her feet. Besides, if she didn't stay upright, he'd stop kissing her neck that way,

working slowly up toward her ear. She was sure she'd die if he stopped before he got there.

She forgot all about her ear as Duncan's hands moved lower and his fingers pressed into the tops of her thighs, working their way between her legs and stroking the tender skin, which was slick with her arousal. Her eyes sank closed and she let herself sink into a realm of pure pleasure as darkness engulfed her.

"Anna!"

She opened her eyes. Duncan's hands were on her waist, holding her up against the wall. The strong thigh pressed between her legs somehow felt less arousing and more anchoring than it had a moment ago. He was studying her face, no doubt looking for evidence of a spell laid by Knut.

Anna blinked. She was having a hard time finding the words she needed to explain the situation to him. She tugged at one of the lacy frills of her corset.

"I can hardly breathe in this thing. I think I almost fainted."

"Fainted?"

Anna nodded, feeling stupider by the second. "Occupational hazard, I guess."

She turned around carefully, keeping a hand on the wall to steady herself and looked at Duncan over her shoulder. "Could you get it off me, please?"

"With pleasure."

Anna sighed happily as Duncan struggled to work Fiona's knot loose. It probably would have been a lot easier if he had stepped back a few inches, but Anna wasn't going to complain about the solid press of his legs against hers. She was finding it difficult to think again, but this time it had nothing to do with a lack of oxygen and everything to do with the way Duncan's fingers kept brushing against her skin as he unlaced the corset and the teasing kisses he was scattering across her shoulders.

When the laces came free from the final eyelet, Duncan tossed the corset aside and pulled Anna hard against him. She felt his cock, erect and insistent, against her bottom

and she wanted to do something about it, but the fingers that Duncan had just slipped between her legs and into the moist tangle of hair there held her captive. If she turned around to touch him, his fingers would stop stroking her in that glorious way and she couldn't allow that, so she reached behind her and felt the planes of his pelvis against her palms.

Duncan set his free hand flat against her stomach, keeping her pressed firmly against him. One finger of his other hand was moving in slow circles, shrinking Anna's world down to a single point of pleasure. For a panicked second she thought she was going to faint again. Then every muscle in her body contracted and released as that little point of pleasure exploded through her with such force that she would have sworn that her pinky toes had orgasms.

Now her legs really did give out under her and Duncan swept her into his arms and carried her to the bed in the hay.

"Magic," she gasped once she was able to speak.

"Why, thank you."

She would have swatted at him if she'd had any strength left, but she could hardly lift her arms and besides, the sight of him peeling off his clothes made her momentarily forget what she had just said.

"Fiona's spell," she explained, closing her eyes so she could think at least somewhat straight. "I've never felt anything like that before."

"Let's see if we can do it again, shall we?" he said as he settled down next to her on the blanket.

Anna was about to tell him she didn't think she had the strength to repeat the process when she felt the warmth of his breath on her nipple. Without even making contact with her, he brought back the full force of the spell and a burst of energy with it. Before he could lower his mouth onto her, Anna pushed against his shoulder, taking him by surprise and forcing him down onto his back. She straddled him and leaned

over, brushing her breasts briefly against his face, feeling the flick of his tongue on her nipples as they moved over his open mouth.

Anna slithered down Duncan's body until she felt his cock nudging against her. She moved against him, rubbing her clit down the hard length of him and back up again. As good as that felt, suddenly nothing mattered more than feeling him inside her. She sat up and lowered herself onto him, forcing herself to go slowly so she could relish the sensation of being filled by him, inch by fabulous inch.

For a moment she stayed perfectly still, running her fingertips over his stomach and watching his face.

"Duncan, look at me."

Duncan opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Keep your eyes open."

He nodded his head, his eyes locked on hers.

Only then did Anna start moving, keeping to a slow rhythm, punctuated now and then by little wiggles of her hips that drew the most satisfying moans and gasps from Duncan.

His hands stroked her thighs and his hips rose to meet her with each down thrust. Anna smiled when she realized he was trying to speed her up and part of her was more than ready for fast and furious, but there was something so perfect about this moment that she wanted to make it last for as long as possible.

Anna couldn't look away from Duncan's face as he watched her. His eyes moved from one part of her to another and everywhere they looked, his hands soon followed, reaching up to her breasts, then sweeping down her arms. When he raised himself up on his elbows and his gaze locked on the merging of their two bodies, the heat Anna felt there seemed to double. For the longest time he just watched her moving against him as she rode him slowly, drawing out their pleasure for as long as she could.

"I wish I could lick you from here," he said breathlessly.

The very thought of it threw off Anna's rhythm.

Duncan groaned and collapsed back down, setting his hands firmly on her hips to hold her still. Then one hand moved lower and he set his thumb against the aching nub of her clitoris—and waited.

Anna moved tentatively, rubbing herself against his thumb as she found her rhythm again. In a moment she had lost herself in the hot slide of his cock inside her and the friction of his thumb against her clit. She smiled, realizing what he had done. There was no way she could hold herself to the slow, tortuous pace she had set before. She didn't care about drawing out the pleasure anymore. She only cared about increasing it and the only way to do that was to pick up the pace, to increase the heat and the friction that was building at every point where their bodies met.

Thought fled as the heat built up like a hungry fire, spreading through Anna's body, down her limbs and into her belly until she couldn't contain it anymore. She cried out and collapsed onto Duncan in uncontrollable spasms of pleasure that went on and on as he continued thrusting his hips against her.

Anna felt Duncan's hands on her face, lifting her head from his shoulder and guiding her mouth to his. Their tongues touched and a fresh orgasm engulfed her, or maybe it was still the same one. It had to be Fiona's spell at work, but even so, Anna was certain it would not have worked so well with anybody other than Duncan.

His hands were on her buttocks now, squeezing her, holding her securely against him as he bucked wildly beneath her and finally came with a long, low groan that Anna felt rumble up from his belly.

They did not move for a very long time. Anna felt ready to drift off to sleep when Duncan rolled her gently off him.

"Time for me to drive you mad now," he said.

Anna shook her head sleepily. "You don't have to. I think that was enough to satisfy even me."

Anna felt Duncan's hand in her hair pulling out the stray pins that were all that was left of her Clarissa costume. She kept her eyes resolutely closed when he bent his head to kiss her. When he drew her lower lip into his mouth, she resisted the desire lift her hands to touch him. She really did want to sleep. She even ignored the feeling of anticipation as he ran his fingers down between her breasts to her stomach, which he began rubbing in slow circles.

"I can feel your skin heating back up," Duncan said as his mouth moved down to her neck.

"Aren't you tired?" Anna asked in a last feeble attempt at a chance to take a nap.

"Of course," Duncan said, kissing his way along her collarbone, "but I wouldn't be able to look myself in the mirror tomorrow if I didn't give as good as I got."

He kissed a line along the tops of her breasts and the hand that had been circling her stomach closed around one of them.

Anna stopped herself from arching up against his hand, but when she felt his tongue circle her other nipple, she allowed herself a little sigh and when he nipped gently at it, she could not hold back a soft growl of pleasure. When Duncan closed his mouth over her nipple and began sucking on it while he pinched and pulled at the other, Anna gave up the battle. Sleep could wait. The sensations spreading from her breasts through the rest of her body could not be denied, so she gave herself up to them. She stretched her arms up over her head, opening herself up to Duncan and surrendering herself to whatever he wanted to do to her.

He moved away from her breasts before she was ready for him to, but the winding trail of kisses he started planting down her belly quickly made her forget her disappointment.

Then he sat up.

Anne opened her eyes. Duncan was looking at her, studying her, but not touching her.

"I can't quite decide what to do next," he mused.

Anna felt that this might be the right time for a joke, but her body was screaming out for him to touch her. She licked her lips, but her mouth had gone dry.

"I recall you saying something a little while ago about licking me."

"Hmm. It's a possibility," he agreed. "Then again, your feet are looking especially enticing right now."

"Duncan," Anna pleaded. "Driving me mad is one thing. This is verging on killing me."

Duncan smiled, but he did not look particularly chastised.

"Kiss me, Duncan."

He obliged with satisfying speed and Anna tangled her fingers in his hair and kissed him back until he broke away, gasping for breath.

"Now," Anna said firmly. "Keep kissing me, but move down until I tell you to stop."

Duncan obediently kissed her chin, then her neck and on down until Anna could no longer find her voice to tell him to stop. Fortunately, he knew where she wanted him to stop. He slipped his hands under bottom so that his thumbs were perfectly positioned to stroke the outer lips of her cunt while his tongue stroked her clit with long sweeps and tiny circles, pushing her to the brink and then retreating more times than she could keep track of.

When she was sure she could not bear any more, he pulled one of his hands out from under her and plunged his fingers inside her creating a combination of sensations that left her screaming with pleasure as her climax ripped through her body.

Duncan touched her lightly once more with tip of his tongue and Anna shuddered uncontrollably.

"Now we're even."

"Even," she repeated. Stringing words together into a sentence seemed like too difficult a task to even try.

Anna was dimly aware of Duncan rummaging in his saddlebags while her mind drifted back toward sleep. She made a sound that she hoped would pass for a thank you when he spread a blanket over her and curled up against her.

The stable was dark when she woke. Duncan had wrapped himself around her, with one hand nestled between her breasts. It reminded Anna of the night they had slept together in her narrow bed in Knut's fortress. The memory seemed to stir up Fiona's spell again and Ann felt a tendril of desire begin to snake through her body.

"Duncan?"

"Mmm?"

Anna rolled over and brushed her lips against his.

"You're not asleep, are you?" she asked.

She draped her leg over him. The single tendril of desire began to multiply and it started getting very warm under the blanket.

"Already?"

"Not complaining, are you?" she asked.

"I'm just not sure I'll survive two or three more days of this."

Anna pushed herself as close to him as she could get. She just wanted to feel him against her, to rub her skin against his.

"We'll be on the road and on a river barge all day tomorrow," she said. "Waiting until we get home may kill me, but at least you'll be able to rest."

Duncan pulled her even closer against him.

"We can sneak in the back gate like before," he suggested.

"I may want you to make love to me right there in the garden," Anna said against his mouth, just before their tongues met.

After a minute Duncan broke off the kiss and said, "And then we can move your things into my rooms."

It was a statement, but one that required an answer.

“I’m sorry we have so much lost time to make up for, Duncan. I’m sorry —”

He put his fingers on her lips to stop her.

“It’s planning time, not apologizing time.”

Anna nodded. “We’ll move my things and then we’ll crawl into that wonderful big bed of yours and close the curtains and not leave until this spell has worn off.”

Anna ran her tongue along the rim of his ear. “It’ll probably be a relief for you to get back into the classroom.”

She felt his cock stir against her leg. “And I’ll be so happy to get back to my books, you’ll hardly see me all day,” she reassured him.

“As long as I see you at—mmm—at night.”

“That I promise,” she said, but he was kissing her neck now and she had already forgotten what they were talking about.

About the Author

Trinidad West is just about the last thing she ever expected to be—a suburban mom raising her kids in the town she grew up in. She is old enough to remember when the high-tech sprawl that surrounds her was still full of orchards and fruit packing plants, and color televisions were pretty special.

Trinidad enjoys men, dogs (the subject of her earliest attempts at writing) and, well, really, who has time for long walks on the beach? When she is not writing *Romantica*®, she is copyediting technical books or trying to avoid housework.

Trinidad welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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