

A movie poster for 'The Dragon King' featuring Jaide Fox. The poster has a dark, fiery background. In the upper center, a muscular man with long dark hair, wearing a black loincloth and a black arm brace on his right arm, stands with his hands on his hips. He has large, dark, bat-like wings behind him. To his left, a bright fire burns in a red, ornate brazier. In the lower center, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a light blue, translucent, scale-like dress, lies on the ground. She has large, white, feathered wings behind her. The title 'THE DRAGON KING' is written in large, gold, serif letters at the bottom. The name 'JAIDE FOX' is written in gold, serif letters in the upper right quadrant.

JAIDE
FOX

THE
DRAGON KING

The Dragon King
by Jaide Fox

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Prologue

Before the birth of Shadowmere, at the dawn of time, when men and beast were one, a single, aged race ruled the land ... the dragons.

Magic flowed through their veins, their scarcity of numbers strengthened by their power, and the fear they invoked.

The race of man was not content with their lot. They craved the immortality of the beasts and dragons, and above that, their power. In great numbers, they swarmed their brethren born of magic, sweeping across the land as locusts, killing all who stood in the way of gaining that which they most coveted. Elusive was the beast's secret, however, forever remaining out of man's ken.

One by one the great dragon kings fell to the horde, betrayed by those they'd taught the essence of quickening to—their magic used against them.

Their kind overcome, the beasts fell back, until the edges of a dark land lay at their back, shielded by heavy mountain and desolate plains.

To survive, the ragged remains of these strange peoples banded together, led in force by a dragon king of immense power. There could be no other choice for freedom, for they would not be slaves.

In a final battle, the gods wept as their children lay dying, the sheer gray landscape awash with blood.

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A tremulous peace was struck amid the deafening cries of the dying, and the beasts of magic retreated to a land they called their own.

And the last dragon withdrew to the raging sea of lost souls, alone, his brethren lost for all time.

Chapter One

Time had never been his enemy, until now.

Sleet pelted Balian of Memnon, driving against his hide at the altitude he flew, slashing against the thick, protective lids covering his eyes. He raised his shoulders, closing his wings slightly to duck beneath the cloud cover. There, above the pitch black landscape, he hovered. His wings lazily stirred the air, crystals of ice tinkling as they broke from his scales with each beat of his wings.

He blinked his lids back as he looked down on the castle. The sheer rock of the valley protected its flanks. Its spires seemed to grow from the very ground itself. From the land, the fortress below him was impregnable—immune to any force that dared to assault it. Many had tried ... and failed.

His keen eyes picked up the glow of fires, the faint, frosted breath of horses in the courtyard, traced the movement of guards watching the lay of the land. He could hear the boasting laughter of one guardsman to another, the quickened steps of a servant rushing down cobbled hallways. Unaware that their oldest enemy hovered above them, life carried on there as it always had.

None expected attack from above, nor had they reason to. They could not reach such heights themselves, their own abilities having deserted them in a long ago age, leaving them barely capable of flight at all, and his race had died long ago—though the loss felt as fresh now as if it had only been yesterday.

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His lips pulled back in a semblance of a smile over jagged teeth the length and thickness of a man's leg—razor sharp, designed for one thing alone ... rending a foe to pieces.

They had everything to fear ... they just didn't know it.

Inside those stone depths, his bride awaited—in the tallest tower, in the land of Wyverns, at the stronghold of their domain ... so he'd been told. Here was a woman worthy of his claim, with a strength to match his own ... a mate for the last of the dragon kings.

He'd best not keep her waiting, he thought with a combination of amusement and anticipation.

Heaving a breath of thin air, he tilted and flattened his wings to his body, diving, his quarry in sight. He cloaked himself in darkness as he approached the tower, shifting into human form as he neared, landing with light feet upon the dark and lonely balcony. Fine glass doors opened with a soft push, and he was soon inside the black chamber.

The bed dominated the room, and his eyes were drawn instantly to its occupant.

With silent footfalls, he approached the bed, easing back the sheer drapery to better view her. She lay with an arm flung carelessly above her head, her fingers tangled in nut brown hair shot with streaks of gold. Silken sheets rode high upon her chest, obscuring the bounty of her figure but not wholly hiding her beauty.

His gut clenched with sudden, fierce desire, awakening the beast betwixt his legs with painful intensity. How long had it been since he'd lain with a woman, supped on the honey between her thighs, felt the heat of her body wrapped around

him? Ages of abstinence had honed his need until it felt like the thrust of a blade in his belly with each beat of his heart.

He groaned under his breath, gritting his teeth against the pain, against the savage desire to take her and ravish her where she lay. He welcomed the agony as an old friend, knew its nature and how to control it. He slid his fingers through the ends of her hair, and up, across supple, pouting lips that begged a taste. How easy it would be to steal such treasures, but conquering her mind and body until she succumbed willingly? 'Twas a test he was willing to engage.

She sighed and stirred in her bed, the sheets slipping down her body, constricting his strength of will. One taste would suffice, would tame the wild beast.

But no, it wouldn't be enough. He closed his hands into fists and thrust away from her, moving across the room before he could make a mistake. His chest heaved, his nostrils flared as he breathed the cool air flowing through the window. Blood rushed to his clenched fingers, pulsing like heartbeats, prickling with awareness. The memory of silken skin against his fingers seduced, warred with his mind.

He couldn't leave without a sample of her delights.

* * * *

A cold sigh of air caressed Kisah's skin, nipping her with cool teeth. The breathy coolness moved through the room, fluttering the netting about her bed until it crawled across her skin in slinky movements. Fingers seemed to glide through her hair, making her scalp prickle, drawing her up from the depths of sleep.

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Kisah awoke with a start, gasping, certain she'd been touched, certain she'd heard something move about in her room.

Darkness blinded her. The room was black as pitch without any relief. Not even her window revealed a speck of light. She knew the moons must have set hours ago for it to be so dark inside.

As if to give the lie to the reassurance that leapt so readily to her mind, light winked palely as something moved in front of the window, revealing the source of the darkness.

Kisah startled, nearly jumping out of her skin, sure her eyes were playing tricks on her. Perhaps she still slept....

"You're awake," a man spoke, the timbre of his voice deep and tinged with an accent from an unfamiliar land.

Kisah sucked in a breath to scream, but his next words choked the air from her lungs.

"No one can hear you. I have laid a muting spell on the room."

That explained the tingling feeling when she awoke, the feel of lightning dancing across her skin, raising the hairs on her arms and legs. "What do you want of me?" she asked, feeling beneath her pillow for the sheathed dagger she always kept there. Her fingers found nothing.

"I've taken care of your blade as well, princess." His tone was almost apologetic.

More startling than the knowledge that he'd done away with her blade was the fact that he could apparently see her in the dark as well as if it had been light. She wondered briefly what else he'd done while she slept.

Kisah stayed her hand, searching her mind for any other weapons she had nearby. She could think of none save throwing huge pieces of furniture, and that was not feasible.

"You didn't answer my question," she gritted out in helpless frustration, clutching her blankets in a tight-fisted grip. "What do you want?"

"You," he said, amusement tingeing his voice.

Kisah stiffened, glaring into the shadows. "I am not for the taking."

"If I choose it, I could take you now," he said, so quietly she barely heard the whisper of sound.

Nevertheless, the threat in his statement set her nerves on edge. "You will draw back but a nub if you come near." She gathered herself on her knees, preparing to make a run for the door.

He seemed to sense her intent, though her movements were subtle, for he moved deeper into the room. His footsteps were soft as he progressed. She lost track of him, couldn't place where he'd moved. Her hackles jumped with warning, her skin interpreting every breath of wind as his touch.

"I think Syrian to be right," he said, suddenly, his voice a few feet to her right—and blocking escape through the door. "You are worthy of me."

His audacity stunned her to silence for several moments. "I'm gratified to know that," she said tartly. "It changes nothing. Touch me and you will regret it."

He laughed, so deep and husky, it touched something inside her, warming her, as the affectionate laughter of a dear friend. What strangeness this was? She wondered, for it was

not a laugh of cruelty, but true amusement. Never had she heard a more pleasant sound. That in itself stoked the warning fire inside her, warned her that more magic surrounded her than merely a muting spell. Kisah shook the strange kindling off, curling her hands into talons.

“Easy, princess. I came only to look upon my future bride, to see for myself if you are the one.”

Knowledge dawned with that bold statement. He had to be one of the contenders for her hand, come to participate in the games that would decide her fate. Boastful bastard. She could not fathom how he'd managed to reach her room, but she would discover it on the morrow if she survived tonight. By his words, he intended to collect the bounty of her dowry, which meant he would not harm her—not yet.

The thought gave her little comfort.

“Until next time,” he whispered.

The bed dipped abruptly. Kisah shrieked and scrambled away. He was faster. He caught her legs just as she freed herself from her heavy covers and dragged her to him, underneath him. Suddenly she was trapped beneath a wall of hard male flesh.

Kisah slapped at him, squirming, kicking her legs. He pinned her with his body, locked her hips down as he straddled her. Two massive hands closed around her arms and brought them above her head, pinning her wrists to the bed.

Kisah growled in fury, biting at him. She tasted hair. It tangled all around her, choked her. She blew it out of her mouth just as he bent his head close.

His lips touched hers, and a wave of enraged heat enveloped her. The kiss was brief, more a flutter of air than a merging of souls. He pulled back before she could bite him.

He paused above her, silent as she fought the anger threatening to overwhelm her thoughts. He transferred her wrists to one huge hand and trailed his free one down her face, cupping her jaw, skillfully avoiding her teeth.

Kisah stilled, waiting to see what he would do, if he would finish what he had started. The men of this land were violent, not above rape. She would endure it if she had to, and when he was done, she would try her utmost to kill him.

He progressed no further than the column of her throat, explored the fine tendons, up and down, the curve of her jaw. She didn't understand what he was doing, why he didn't press his advantage, for she was powerless to stop him.

Her stomach fluttered as his thumb brushed against her bottom lip. She sucked in a sharp breath, ignoring the sudden, tingling throb of her lips. She wanted to bite him, but she couldn't. He threatened no violence now, only explored with feathery strokes.

She wondered for one insane moment what it would be like to allow him to steal a kiss....

"Another time," he said, as if in answer to her thoughts.

Kisah stiffened at the promise.

He stood abruptly, releasing her. Before she could sit up, he ran toward the open window. Kisah caught a glimpse of silvery limned, muscular shoulders and long dark hair, and then he leapt out the window and off the balcony.

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She gasped, hopped out of bed and ran through the portal, peering down over the balcony, expecting to see a broken body on the parapets. There was nothing but the patrol guard manning the walls, the fires of torches. She continued looking down in stunned amazement. It was as if he'd never existed, and yet her heart still pounded in her chest, her lips still tingled.

He was a sorcerer of some type, of that she was certain. Magic sparked in the air, tasting like flame on her tongue.

Kisah stepped back and closed the window, shivering from the cold.

Tomorrow, she would have the window bricked up, or new locks placed on the latches. She crawled back in bed, but she knew sleep would not come, not this night.

The games would begin with sunrise. She would find this man in the contests, and she would have him put to death for daring to touch her.

Chapter Two

By her father's decree, the best warriors in the land had gathered to compete for her hand in marriage. They cared naught that they gained a king's daughter as their bride, only for the chance at the riches of her dowry.

Women were of no value to them beyond the wealth they brought their husband and the ease they took of their bodies. These warriors felt no tenderness for their mates. They cared only for wars, for letting blood. At times, Kisah cursed her bloody, violent heritage. She had no desire to be any man's possession, and yet, by these contests alone, her father guaranteed that only the strongest and fiercest would win—the warrior who most personified that which she detested about her race. She would have no chance against a man such as that. She could not blame her father for his thinking—he wanted a strong man as her husband, one able to protect her as a royal deserved.

As a man, however, he was prone to overkill in every task he undertook, and finding her a husband was no different. Her protestations fell on deaf ears, and she was inclined to believe much of these games were for his benefit alone ... or rather, his entertainment alone.

She could not allow hopelessness to creep in. She needed her wits about her to formulate a plan to retain her independence ... or at least guarantee marriage to a man easily manipulated and controlled.

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As if fate chose that moment to taunt her hopes, she spied ahead of her one of the contestants waiting to waylay her. A faint smile curled his lips, his gaze raking her as if he had stripped her naked in the hall. She gave him a withering glare, and then promptly ignored him to allow him to know that he was beneath her notice.

He stepped away from the column where he had been lounging as she came abreast of him. "A token, my lady?"

Kisah would have brushed past him, but there was something about his voice that seemed unnervingly familiar. She turned a suspicious gaze upon him, measuring his height and breadth. Like most of the other warriors who had descended to claim the bounty of her father's kingdom, this one was tall, broad shouldered, muscular of build. Unlike his counterparts, he wore no armor. Beyond the loincloth that drew her eye, he was dressed only in boots and bracers. His long, inky locks of hair were not even restrained.

His build was suggestive of her night prowler, but she saw nothing of the swaggart in his expression. Nothing that suggested he had intimate knowledge of her. His features were pleasantly angular, well-defined, and would have come together to produce an attractive visage even if not for his eyes. His eyes were exotic, mesmerizing, with long, black lashes and deeply arched eyebrows. He should have looked feminine with those eyes, ridiculous—anything but devastatingly fascinating. Her belly fluttered with unaccustomed nervousness, and she laid a hand upon her breast to calm the sudden speed of her heart.

His lips curled at the thoroughness of her examination, her apparent absorption in his features. Irritation surfaced along with the determination to wipe that smirk off his face. She smiled at him coolly. "I've already promised my token to another."

To her surprise and annoyance, the faint smile widened into a grin, his eyes gleaming appreciatively. "This one who milady favors, by what name is he known?"

Kisah gaped at him blankly. She had lied and had not thought to cover her lie. "Why?" she asked, sparring for wind.

"So that I may kill him first."

Kisah felt her heart skip several beats. "You are so certain of your prowess, sir?"

He allowed his gaze to travel lingeringly down her body. A flush of heat followed in his wake and flickered in dark, secret places. "You will have to be the judge of that, my lady," he said with husky, sensual promise.

She glared at him, angry at herself for reacting to but a simple gaze, but more irritated that he had cleverly maneuvered her into a corner. The remark was *plainly* sexual, but she could hardly acknowledge that. And yet, if she pretended that his innuendo had escaped her, she would appear short on wit. She could not, in fact, think of any clever retort. A thought occurred to her suddenly, however, and she smiled sweetly at him. "Alas, but it is my father who is judging the contestants. After all, it is his..." she paused significantly, "...bounty that has enticed the treasure seekers."

Something flickered in his eyes. Empathy? Understanding? It disturbed her far more than his brazenly suggestive comments.

"There is only one treasure I seek," he murmured.

She studied him a long moment, but once again, he had rendered her speechless—something she was not accustomed to. "I am expected to take my place beside my father," she said abruptly. "If you will forgive me...." Without waiting for a response, she turned away.

"Most anything, my lady," he said quietly.

It took an effort to resist the urge to glance back at him.

* * * *

Kisah was still more than a little unsettled when she reached the boxseat that had been set up for the royals and their guests.

Her father glanced at her in irritation. "You are late, daughter. We could hardly begin the games without you."

Curtseying deeply in respect, she smiled at her father as she stood upright once more. "Pray, forgive me, father. I was detained by a minor annoyance."

Her father looked her over suspiciously as she took her seat at his side. He didn't question her further, however. "Will you choose a champion? It might make things more interesting."

Kisah smiled in genuine pleasure this time, that her father's thoughts fell in so well with her needs. "Anything to please you, father."

Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, he stood up, holding his hands out. At once, the crowds gathered in the

stands began to fall silent. "Princess Kisah has expressed an interest in choosing her champion for the day. Let the contestants come forward."

Kisah was not particularly interested, but still she found herself looking around for the encroaching oaf who had delayed her arrival, bringing her father's wrath down upon her head. She saw him at the very edge of the lists, mounting his horse as the others rode forward. A mixture of irritation and contempt went through her as she saw that the fool still had not donned his armor. Could any male be more cocky? Or more foolish? One thing was for certain, this contestant would not be one that she would need to concern herself with for long. Nevertheless, she waited until all of the men had lined up before the royal box.

Rising slowly, she moved to the front, examining each man carefully ... except the half-naked oaf in the loincloth. They were all the same to her, but she saw that Nkunda, a warrior known far and wide, both for his ferocity in battle, and the battle lust that rendered him brainless, was mounted on a horse near the center.

Untying one of her scarves, she leaned on the low wall, smiling at Nkunda as she waved the scarf at him, trying hard not to glance at the swaggering braggart at his side. Nkunda, grinning like the jackass he truly was, spurred his horse forward, skidding to a halt just below her.

Leaning forward until she was certain he had a clear view of her cleavage, she dropped the cloth. A glazed look had come into his eyes as she leaned over the wall until her breasts were on the verge of leaping from her bodice.

If not for the fact that the crowd roared with approval, the numskull would have simply sat there drooling on himself and missed her token entirely. Belatedly, he surged forward, catching it in his hand and then spinning his horse, holding it out like a trophy for all to see before he tied it around his upper arm. Smiling at her, he gave her a nod, turned his horse, and rejoined the group.

Her father stood up. "Let the contest begin!"

Almost immediately after her father's announcement, there was a commotion on the field. Her father irritably summoned one of the guardsmen from the field. "What goes on here?" he asked with a scowl that quaked most who saw it.

The guard's eyes widened, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed. "There is a contestant who asks to be first combatant against Nkunda."

"He's a fool then. He would do better to wait until the others wear Nkunda down. Who is this man?"

"It is the barbarian who wears no armor, your highness. He goes only by the name Balian."

Her interest perked with the guard's words. Kisah interrupted them. "Well, if he insists...." She deliberately allowed her words to trail off.

Her father stroked his chin, considering the matter. He waved his hand in annoyance. "Bah. So be it. Let Nkunda kill the simpleton."

To her surprise, Kisah felt a stab of alarm at her father's words. It was nothing to her, one way or the other, she assured herself, who won the match, or who was killed in the

rush. The truth was, her own battle began only when this one ended. Still, as the men took their places for the first contest, she couldn't restrain a flicker of disappointment. The barbarian, Balian, had seemed genuinely interested in her, not just her dowry. He, alone, had seemed different—clever as well as strong and capable as a warrior.

It was a shame she would see no more of him after today.

The first competition was the joust. This would eliminate the pure amateurs from the serious contests, which would become progressively more difficult and require more strength, stamina and skill as time wore on. In the center of the field, a half wall had been moved into place. The wall, breast high to the horses, would prevent the contestants from crossing into their competitor's path. Along the length, hazards had been placed to simulate field battle conditions which would have natural obstacles that the warrior and his mount would have to overcome.

Her champion was given the position nearest the royal box. She watched as the barbarian took up his position on the opposite end, accepting the lance and shield that were handed to him and moving them into position. Nkunda, she saw, when she finally glanced his way, had already received his lance and shield and had twisted on his saddle to give her a salute. Knowing it was expected of her, she pasted an insincere smile on her lips.

The master of the tournament gave the signal. Abruptly, Nkunda dug his spurs into his mount's sides and his horse lurched forward. Balian could have taken advantage of Nkunda's inattentiveness and gained ground and speed.

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Instead, to everyone's surprise, he waited until Nkunda had launched his attack before he spurred his own horse forward.

Down the length of the field they raced toward one another, gaining speed despite the obstacles the horses were forced to avoid, each man striving to reach a point of advantage—a straight away—at the crucial moment of impact. Despite Nkunda's delayed reaction to the signal to start, he reached the point of advantage first.

Chapter Three

Kisah found that she was gripping the arms of her chair tightly, holding her breath as she waited for the sound of clashing lances. She gasped as the blunted tip of Nkunda's caught the upper edge of Balian's shield. It slipped upward with the force of Balian's own impetus. A sigh of relief escaped her as the tip of Nkunda's lance slipped free, passing over Balian's shoulder. Both men rocked backward in their saddles as the lances caught them, Balian's shattering on impact.

After a moment, they recovered their balance, brought their horses around and returned to the starting position. Fresh lances were brought out and, again, the men were given the signal to attack. Kisah slid forward in her seat, watching as the two horses thundered down the field in a second pass. This time, Balian had the advantage. Nkunda's lance failed to find a mark. Balian caught him fully in the center of his shield, pitching him backwards from his horse.

The crowd roared their approval as Balian brought his horse to a rearing stop. They fell silent in surprise when he leapt from his horse and strode purposefully toward Nkunda, who was still lying stunned on the field. Placing one booted foot in the center of the fallen man's chest, Balian snatched Kisah's favor from the man's arm, and held it up triumphantly. For several moments, everyone merely gaped at him in disbelief, for the lady had bestowed her favor. Never had a warrior had the audacity to conqueror it. After a

moment a roar of laughter and approval erupted from the crowd.

Kisah blushed with a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment when he threw her a roguish grin and climbed onto his horse once more, trotting the horse around the perimeter of the field. She was still gaping at him when he passed beneath the royal box.

He winked at her.

Kisah could not believe his audacity, could not even think of how she should react to such a thing. Chuckling, he turned his horse and waited while Nkunda was helped from the field and a new contestant rode out to meet him.

The day passed in much the same manner, though Balian did not give up his position as her champion. Occasionally, a man would manage to remain seated through two passes, but none made it through the third and final pass and there were far more who were unseated in the first pass.

The crowd was mad for him. Each time the signal was given to begin a new match, they would stamp their feet, clap their hands and begin chanting his name. Each time he won a match and rode the perimeter of the field they would leap to their feet, screaming wildly, the ladies tossing their own tokens at him.

Kisah was torn between rising alarm, annoyance, admiration and a strange, suffocating weakness that overcame her each time he passed beneath her box and threw her a smiling glance. When, at last, the day's events were declared at an end, she sprang to her feet, desperate to remove herself from the watchful eye of the public. She was

the princess, however, and, ever aware of her position, she knew she could not simply dash from the box and rush to her room to hide. Pomp and ceremony were expected of the royals. To disappoint the crowd was unthinkable.

Stiffly, she moved to the front of the box, pasted a smile on her lips and, for the benefit of the crowd, blew her champion a kiss.

He stunned her once more. Leaping from his horse, he sprang over the low wall, landing beside her. She was still gaping at him in stunned surprise when he seized her shoulders, almost jerking her from her feet as he pulled her against his hard chest, bent his head and covered her mouth and kissed her thoroughly before she could even recover sufficiently from her shock to protest. The crowd went mad, but Kisah was barely aware of the screaming mob. She was too caught up in the feel of the rock solid body pressed so tightly against her, and the heat of his mouth as he explored her own with a thoroughness no one else had ever dared.

He smelled of battle and horseflesh, but the intoxicating taste of his tongue overrode all else, suffocating her senses until she aware only of the roughened slide moving in and out of her mouth. Prickles of heat burst along her nerves, surging through her veins with the potency of heavy wine. His touch felt like a summer storm, thrilling as lightning, frightening as thunder.

When he released her at last, her knees were so weak she swayed. The crowd roared their approval at Balian's prowess as both lover and warrior, and Kisah felt a rush of heat to her cheeks. It took an effort to smile for the benefit of the crowd.

She glanced at her father a little helplessly and saw that he was looking Balian over speculatively. He rose from his seat, held his arms up for silence. Slowly, the crowd complied.

"Well done, Balian of....?"

Balian merely bowed without volunteering his origins.

The king's eyes narrowed, but after a moment he went on, glancing around at the crowd. "We will all wait anxiously to see how well Princess Kisah's champion performs on the morrow. In the meanwhile," he returned his attention to Balian, "I hope you will do us the honor of joining us at table tonight for the feasting."

Smiling his acceptance, Balian bowed again.

Kisah excused herself, summoned her ladies and departed. She found by the time she reached her apartments, that she had a headache. Her ladies chattered excitedly and unceasingly about the barbarian, Balian, all the way there, giggling while they exchanged ribald comments about the length of his loin cloth and their curiosity as to what he might be wearing beneath it. One swore it was nothing at all, that she'd gotten a peek at the serpent that dwelt there.

Kisah gave her a look and the girl retreated into silence. When they reached her apartments, she dismissed them, saying she would rest for a while before she needed their help in preparing for the feast.

The maids exchanged uneasy glances, for they knew very well that the princess was expected to make an appearance in the great hall in short order, but they didn't dare argue. Instead, they closed the doors to her bed chamber and left

her in peace, tiptoeing around the day room while they prepared for her bath and laid out a selection of clothing for her to choose from.

Kisah rose from the bed the moment they had gone and began pacing, her nerves taut, her thoughts chaotic, her emotions vying with one another for dominance. She was furious at the man's outrageous behavior. She could still taste the wildness of him on her tongue, still feel the hard press of his muscles against her chest. Her knees went weak just thinking of how thoroughly he'd kissed her, how much he'd embarrassed her before the crowd.

How dare he manhandle *her*, Princess Kisah, like a common woman before their subjects? His boldness knew no bounds. Granted, she could not help but admire the way he had handled himself in the tournament. She had dismissed him as a country bumpkin, easily routed after their brief encounter on the way to the games. He had surprised her with his skill, his speed, his strength. Almost as surprising, he had come through the entire trial without so much as a scratch or even a bruise.

Despite her reservations over the entire tournament, and the objective of it, she had found herself enjoying watching him as he vanquished foe after foe, eliminating almost half the contenders on the first day of the tournament.

That had become a sticking point, however, as it dawned upon her that he was systematically eliminating the competition, that her choices were narrowing far more quickly than she had anticipated, when she had not even had the chance to observe the men vying for her hand or to decide

which man among them would be the least threat to her freedom.

Plainly, Balian was determined that he would win her. Just as clearly, she saw now that his chances of doing so were far greater than she had anticipated.

She couldn't decide how she felt about that. On the surface, he seemed to have a surprisingly sweet nature for a warrior, and infinite patience. He was not, unfortunately, stupid, though his easygoing nature might lead others to that mistaken conclusion.

He would not be easy to manipulate, she realized. He might, willingly, concede to her wishes, but she doubted very much that she would be able to trick him into doing anything that he was unwilling to do.

He was not, she was certain, a man whom she could rule. That made him dangerous, and undesirable, to her way of thinking, as a husband.

The word 'undesirable' had no sooner popped into her mind, however, before she remembered his kiss yet again and a raw flush of heat suffused her. He was certainly not unappealing in a physical sense. It would be no great sacrifice to perform her duties as his wife, but there, too, she found a flaw. She did not at all care for the way her body had responded so readily, and excessively, to his touch. It boded ill for her should she find herself in the position of having to try to exert control over him by way of sexual favors. She could not be certain that she would not be as much a slave to desire for him as he was to her.

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Unbidden, the thought leapt into her mind to wonder if it would even be possible for her to enslave him with the pleasures of the flesh without finding herself in the same position.

Chapter Four

The feasting and festivities were well underway by the time Kisa arrived in the hall. Her father favored her with a disapproving glare as she took her seat.

"You are late, daughter. Is this the impression you wish to give our subjects? That you are too spoiled and lazy to consider anyone but yourself?"

Kisa flushed. "I beg pardon, father. I had a throbbing in my head that would give me no peace and had lain down in the hope that it would pass. I must have been weary, for I fell asleep."

Her father looked her up and down frowningly. "You are a woman. Allowances can be made for a certain amount of weakness, but I would not like for our people to begin to think that you were not robust, for then doubts might arise as to whether or not you were capable of producing a strong son and heir."

Resentment swelled in Kisa's breast, but she bowed her head respectfully. "I am certain I will not fail the people in my duty, father."

Despite her discomfort, or perhaps because of it, she could not help but glance at Balian in the hope that he had not heard her father's comments. As her champion, and the winner of the day, he had been seated to her father's left, one seat down from her own.

To her surprise and dismay, he met her gaze. His expression was carefully guarded, but there was that in his

gaze that gave her to know that he had heard all. It was not condemnation, or sympathy ... but understanding, desire, and strangely, sadness.

The sadness surprised her, but, thinking back, she realized that each time she had looked deeply into his eyes she had seen it, lurking always in the background, even when he smiled.

She looked away, troubled by the observation, wondering if she had imagined it, wondering what terrible thing must lie in his past that he would carry such deep sadness with him like a well worn cloak, a thing so familiar that he was scarcely even aware of it any longer.

More troubling was the realization that it touched something inside of her that she could not discard or ignore.

"You have traveled far to take part in the tournament?" she asked politely.

He shrugged. "Nay. Not far."

Kisah frowned. She had only intended to make polite conversation. It seemed odd that someone who appeared so open should be so evasive in answering such a simple question. She lifted her brows questioningly, but he merely smiled and returned his attention to his food.

"It is fair, the land you hail from?" she prodded.

He frowned, slid a glance sideways at her and finally a faint smile dawned. "You must tell me when you see it."

Kisah felt her jaw sag. Irritation surfaced. "You are so certain that I will?" she asked primly.

His smile widened into a grin. "Yes," he said, and returned his attention to his food.

Kisah glared at his profile for several moments.
"Confidence is a trait to be admired, but cockiness so often spells disaster."

He chuckled.

The man had a hide like ten year old tanned leather.

"What have I done, I wonder, to earn the sharp edge of your tongue?"

Kisah glared at him. Before she could speak, however, her father spoke. "She has the tongue of an asp. Take care, barbarian, she can wither your manhood with it, or shred your hide to ribbons."

Kisah blushed. He'd spoken in a chastising manner as he so often did, but there was a note of pride in his voice, as well. Moreover, Kisah prided herself both on her intellect and her ability to smite with her words those she could not physically overcome. Still, for some unfathomable reason, she didn't particularly care to be cast in the mold of a shrew. "I am not so ill tempered as to use it against the unworthy," she responded a little stiffly.

"Then I take it as a compliment that you consider me a worthy adversary," Balian said with amusement, and then lower, for her ears alone. "I confess, I am anxious to discover what other uses you might have for your clever tongue."

Kisah's jaw dropped as she gasped in outrage.

"There is a problem?"

Kisah whirled to look at her father when he spoke, his words soft with threat. "Uh ... it was only that I suddenly recalled something I had forgotten—nothing of any importance." She slid a narrow eyed glare at Balian, fuming

inwardly. She knew very well that he had not misunderstood her comment, knew she'd meant 'undeserving' not 'capable' when she'd said unworthy, but he had twisted her words, again, to wring a compliment for himself from it. The blatant sexual innuendo of his other remark was even more infuriating. She could not address it at all without making it clear she knew what he was suggesting.

It made it worse that she was not offended—as she should have been—so much as stunned that he would risk making such a remark to her when he sat no more than a few feet from her father, who could have him executed on a whim. Was he foolhardy? Or just that fearless?

She glanced at him assessingly. "In kindness, I feel I should warn you that it is not at all wise to provoke my father," she said quietly. "You are a stranger here or you would know that."

He glanced from her to her father, but he seemed more pleased than alarmed. "Strong, beautiful, clever and kind—you are indeed a rare jewel."

Kisah blushed fiercely, torn between annoyance, amusement and pleasure. "I am a princess. If I were a drooling idiot with a squint and hunch back, I would still be considered a rare jewel of great beauty," she responded tartly. "Somehow, I had expected more sincerity from you. You do not strike me as a court fop."

He looked troubled. "I swear upon the graves of all I held dear that I am absolutely sincere."

"Then you are either blind, deaf and amazingly dull or laboring under the impression that I am. I am clever enough

not to be taken for a fool, but I am not beautiful by anyone's standards and I have never been accused of being kind."

"It is often said that love can produce that effect upon one, but, perhaps, it is not so much that I am, blind, deaf and dull as it is that I see you and not the position you occupy?"

Kisah frowned. "This is most unkind of you," she responded with a touch of humor. "To profess love on so short an acquaintance makes it impossible for me to enjoy your compliments as an honest observation."

"You do not believe in love at first sight?"

Kisah threw him a laughing glance. "I insulted you and you were instantly smitten?"

He chuckled, but sobered almost at once. "The moment I saw you."

The words sent a shiver of warmth and pleasure through her, but touched off a shock wave of warning, as well. Somehow, the way he said it brought to mind her night visitor. He was certainly bold enough to have done such a thing, but her night visitor had seemed far more dangerous—let alone, and despite the skill he had displayed on the field today, she could not think a man of his size would have been able to scale the wall and enter her room so swiftly and quietly. Then, too, her night visitor had spoken of magic—wielded it—and this man did not strike her as possessing the abilities of a wizard.

She shook the suspicion off, dismissing her pleasure as well. Even if she were inclined to favor him above the others—and she wasn't certain that she was—only his skill as a warrior would determine who won her 'heart' and hand.

"Unfortunately, you waste your time in wooing me," she said coolly. "The contests will determine who wins my hand in marriage."

He shrugged. "Why would I deprive myself of the pleasure of wooing you when the outcome is as certain as the fact that the sun will rise on the morrow?"

She didn't know whether to laugh or be outraged at his remark. "It is certain you do not suffer from self doubt."

"No."

Her eyes narrowed as her suspicions rose once more. "Skill, not magic, will determine the outcome."

"You doubt my skill?"

That was not the response she had been angling for, but she wasn't really surprised. She hadn't truly believed he possessed magic, or that he would admit it if he did, but it had seemed worth a try to see if she could prod him into admitting, or disclaiming, sorcery. "It matters not, what I think. That is the point."

"It matters to me."

"Unlike you, I can not presume to judge on so short an acquaintance." She was relieved when their conversation was interrupted by the servants clearing away the remains of the feast. At her father's signal, the entertainment began and she did her best to focus on the succession of dancers, tumblers and singers, biding her time until she could retire, for she found she had developed the head ache she had claimed earlier. As much as she enjoyed the banter between Balian and herself—and she was surprised to discover that she had—

it only brought home more forcefully the unpalatable situation her father had put her in.

Looking about the room at the revelers, she studied the men who had come to vie for her hand, wondering which of those present would claim her. Not one among them, save, perhaps, Balian, looked the noble warrior this night. Most were more than half drunk before they had even finished feasting. Many were already slumbering with their heads on the tables before them, or stumbling about the room groping any maid who happened to pass within reach.

Revulsion filled her as she imagined their callused hands pawing at her, their soured breath in her face. She had never regretted that she had been born a woman, instead of the son her father desired and needed, quite as much before as she did now.

When the hall at last reached a crescendo of drunken revelry, she excused herself and rose, making her way from the room. She had reached the winding stairs and just released a sigh of relief when she was seized roughly from behind and slammed against the stone wall hard enough that she bit her tongue. The taste of blood filled her mouth, but the pain in her head far surpassed that discomfort. Dazed, she was only half aware of the rough hand that found its way up her skirt.

As abruptly as she had been seized, she was released.

Turning, she watched in stunned surprise as Balian slammed Nkunda against the wall hard enough that it shook loose mortar from the crevices where the stones were joined. With one hand around Nkunda's throat, Balian shoved him

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against the wall until he had lifted the man clear of the floor.

Chapter Five

"Did he hurt you?"

It was several moments before Kisah realized that Balian had turned to look at her, that he'd spoken to her. Gone was the smiling, amazingly even-tempered courtier. In his place was a cold stranger who seemed unnervingly dangerous. She looked from Balian to Nkunda, whose face was the color of ripe cherries, his eyeballs bulging. "No," she finally managed to say, still too stunned by the swiftness of Balian's attack to come to grips with what had happened.

Balian's eyes narrowed as he returned his attention to Nkunda. "You are fortunate, dog. Tonight I will allow you to live."

Kisah glanced from one man to the other, feeling alarm slowly seeping into her. "He won't if you do not loosen your grip upon his throat."

Balian turned to look at her for a long moment and finally allowed the man to slide down the wall until his feet were touching the floor. With an effort, it seemed, he loosened his grip on Nkunda's throat. "I should kill him anyway for daring to touch you."

Kisah was torn between pleasure at his misguided protection and irritation that he seemed to believe he had the right to assume such a role. Gripping her skirts, she moved around the two men. "You presume too much. It is not your place to act as my protector. I could have summoned the guard if I had felt the need."

The thud of a body hitting the floor was the first indication Kisa had that Balian had abandoned Nkunda. Assuming he had returned to the festivities, she continued without a pause up the stairs. She was half way to the top when she was abruptly seized for the second time that night. Instead of being shoved into the stone wall, however, she was whirled and brought forcefully against a chest that felt nearly as unyielding. Off balance, she could do nothing but lean against him, gaping up at him in surprise. "You did not feel the need?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Kisa gulped. "What?" she asked stupidly.

"His attention was welcome?"

Her jaw dropped, but anger surfaced. "You have no right to ask that!"

His eyes narrowed. "Aye. I do. You are mine and I will allow no other to touch you."

His audacity knew no bounds. Before she could think of a suitable retort, he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his own. His kiss was hard, angry, possessive, his mouth hot with dark desire and forbidden pleasure. The taste of his tongue as it raked possessively along her own, the scent that was his alone, flooded her senses with the headiness of strong wine. Waves of heated pleasure surged through her veins.

He cupped her buttocks and pulled her flush against him, until sudden hardness nestled in the crux of her thighs. A groan rumbled in his chest and he thrust against her, hard, rough, pushing her back against the stone wall until he trapped her.

Kisah gasped into his mouth as he ground against her, his tongue thrusting in her mouth with near uncontrollable appetite. Wetness pooled between her thighs, blood rushing to pound like a frightened heartbeat in her clit.

The strangeness of some force beyond her ken swallowed her in its maw, depriving her of the will to resist. Magic, her mind warned her as she felt herself split into two, the one outraged by his boldness, the other curious, pleased at his mastery, encouraged by the pleasure his embrace promised her to yield completely.

Before she could gather her wits to protest his brazen assault, he released her as abruptly as he had seized her. He breathed heavily, watching her with a black gaze brimming with rough sensuality. His hands clenched into fists, and there was about him an air of barely checked passion that terrified her as much as intrigued. "Know this, Princess Kisah—you are mine."

He released her as abruptly as he'd grabbed her, leaving her feeling strangely weak.

Kisah was shaking when she reached her room—and thoroughly confused. It was madness to find pleasure in the man's arms, in his kisses, in his demands. Her destiny was in fate's hands. It was not her decision to make—and certainly not Balian's. The tournament would decide who was to be her mate.

It was disturbing to realize that the desire he had awakened within her gripped her still, disordered her thoughts, ached between her thighs. Of all the men who had come to vie for her hand, Balian was, perhaps, the most

dangerous. It was foolhardy to consider even for a moment that she would have any control over such a man as he.

* * * *

Rest and composure had eluded her. Sleep had been slow to claim her and her night had been filled with dreams so real that she had awakened over and over, certain that she was not alone, that the lover who haunted her dreams with his tempting caresses lingered beside her still. A dull throbbing behind her eyes threatened to become a full blown headache by the time she had broke her fast and dressed to greet the day.

It took an effort to smile and pretend nothing had changed, in her, or in her world as she took her seat in the royal box. Fortunately, the excesses of the night before had not left anyone with keen senses.

The second day of the tournament was to be the turning point. The jousting the day before had eliminated more than half the lists and today only warriors of merit would do battle in single combat. The objective was not to deplete their warriors, and so the contest was not to the death. Rather, the men were to fight until they disarmed their opponent, or reached the point where a death blow could be dealt. The field had been divided into squares, a pair in each. Slowly, as the sun crawled toward its zenith, men fell one by one and were eliminated.

The men chosen to begin were given no respite, for the contest was to prove prowess, strength and stamina. Only those waiting on the sidelines for their chance in the competition arrived fresh.

Balian was among the first to be chosen to compete. Kisah did her best to ignore him, trying to concentrate on those contests nearest the box where she sat, but she found her gaze wandering to him over and over as the day progressed, found herself sitting stiffly erect, her fingers gripping the arms of her chair each time he stumbled or fell.

The servants brought refreshments, but Kisah found she was in too much turmoil to eat more than a bite or two. Despite the decree that none were to be slain, a half dozen or more were mortally wounded, and none were unscathed. Even Balian, who seemed to wade tirelessly through one match after another, was smeared with blood from a dozen small wounds and she found herself, quite against her will, watching for any sign of weakness.

By mid-afternoon, the lists had been cut down, almost literally, to a dozen men. With relief, Kisah watched as her father rose and signaled an end to the day's competition. The crowd roared their approval as the twelve men stepped back and raised their swords above their heads in triumph. Kisah didn't know whether to be relieved or sorry that Balian was one of the twelve. Rising stiffly, she took her place beside her father and forced a smile of approval, waved, and then turned away with relief to make her way to her apartments to rest until the banquet.

To her surprise, she rested. She was so tense that she had expected to find herself as wakeful as she had been the night before, but once she had undressed and bathed, she lay down on her bed and was almost instantly asleep.

Conscious of her father's displeasure with her the night before, she made it a point to arrive on time. Smiling his approval, he waved her to her seat. She discovered herself surrounded by the warriors of the day. Balian, to her relief, and his obvious displeasure, had been seated far down the table from her on the opposite side, rather than beside her as he had been the night before.

He rarely took his gaze from her, even to eat, and she quickly discovered that she had been far more comfortable when he had sat beside her the night before, for his watchfulness was unsettling. She knew it was expected of her to behave graciously toward the warriors seated around her. Good manners compelled it, and yet she could not bring herself to flirt, as she had fully intended, to pit the men against each other, to draw them out to discover which among them seemed most promising as a future husband.

Nkunda, seated at her right, was at his most provoking, proving that he was even more stupid than she'd surmised, stroking her hand or touching her at every opportunity and then sending a triumphant smile in Balian's direction.

She should be glad. Of all those present, Nkunda had seemed most likely to succeed—at least until Balian had arrived. Now, she wasn't nearly as certain. Of the two, however, she rather thought Nkunda most nearly matched the qualities she had been looking for. He was a fierce warrior, too dull-witted to be a ruler and fairly easily manipulated. If he won, he would be gone more than he was with her, for he was the perfect Wyvern warrior, far more interested in fighting than anything else and she would be

free to rule when her time came to ascend her father's throne, unencumbered by his unwanted attentions except upon rare occasions.

Balian's assault upon him the night before had pricked his manhood. He had fought fiercely throughout the day, dispatching his competition quickly and viciously in each match, mortally wounding three men and killing two others outright.

He should have been disqualified on those grounds alone. Instead, her father had seemed pleased at his ferocity.

It seemed probable that the competition between Balian and Nkunda was destined to be a death match. It disturbed her to realize it, and disordered her mind that she should care one way or the other. The fact remained that she did, however, and, that being the case, she did not want to encourage the animosity already brewing between them by seeming to favor one above the other.

Nkunda was either immune to her attempts to discourage him, however, or more likely, completely oblivious to everything beyond taunting his rival.

Kisah found that she was looking forward to the final day of the tournament with far more dread than she had expected. On the morrow, her fate would be decided. On the morrow, one man would die.

Chapter Six

Her father seemed as bent upon provoking a deadly rivalry as Kisah was in preventing it. Once the food was cleared away, he summoned musicians and leaned close so that none would hear save Kisah. "It is time to remind your suitors that you are the greatest of the gifts that will be bestowed upon the winner. You must choose a dance partner."

Kisah glanced at her father, but kept her expression carefully neutral. It was an order, not a request, she knew. Nodding, she rose, taking care not to glance at either Nkunda or Balian, she smiled at the warrior seated directly across from her. "Sir, I find I have a wish to dance tonight."

The man, she could not seem to summon a name to place with his face, leapt to his feet immediately. "Princess! Would you do me the honor?"

She smiled a little more comfortably, feeling for the first time in a long while, more like her old self. "Thank you. I'd be delighted."

It took no more than a few moments once they'd reached the dance floor for her to realize the man was no courtier, for he could not carry on a conversation and mind his steps at the same time. Each time she distracted him by trying to draw him into conversation, he trod upon her foot or her gown. It was a relief when the dance ended.

She quickly found that her relief was premature, however. The dance had no more than ended when yet another of her suitors was bowing before her.

Balian, she discovered, merely watched as his rivals presented themselves one by one for their turn around the dance floor, and she began to feel a swell of resentment. He behaved, for all the world, as if she was indeed his already, so that she could not even relax sufficiently to flirt even a little, not that she was inclined to—but she knew very well that her father expected it of her, that he was not so interested in allowing her to get to know her suitors as he was in provoking a more fierce competition for the final test of the tournament.

It irritated her even more when she realized that she was becoming anxious as time progressed, anticipating the moment when Balian would approach her.

Nkunda, although he had seemed miffed for a time that she had chosen another to bestow her first dance upon, was not slow in approaching her. Before she had even finished her second dance, he was elbowing the others aside to reach the front of the line. For several moments, it looked as if a battle would break out among the men at the edge of the dance floor. Kisah glanced at her father, but he merely lifted his brows and looked away.

She had to rethink her previous assessment of Nkunda when he seized her without so much as asking and began to drag her about the dance floor. He was no less, nor any more, graceful than the others. Moreover, he was determined to hold her far too close for decorum, try though Kisah might to force some distance between them. The battle of wills distracted her, at last, from her preoccupation with Balian, but she found very shortly that that was not necessarily a

good thing, for she was not prepared when Balian abruptly appeared beside them.

Nkunda stopped abruptly, glaring at him balefully. "My turn, dog! Take yourself off."

Balian's eyes narrowed. His expression, if possible, became more stony. "Not without my leave."

Nkunda gaped at him for a moment before his face darkened with rage. "Yours? That blow to the head today has rattled your brains. The princess is all but mine now."

Balian leaned forward until he was looking directly into Nkunda's eyes. "Go. Now. Or I will not wait till the morrow to rip your heart from your chest."

Nkunda blinked. Abruptly, a vacuous look descended over his features and he turned away. Moving unsteadily toward the table, he sat, lowered his head to his arms and began snoring.

Smiling, Balian bowed and offered his hand. In a daze of confusion, Kisah held her hand out. Slipping his arm about her waist, Balian whirled her about the dance floor as the musicians struck up once more, almost frantic now that it seemed the offer of violence in their midst had passed.

"You ensorcelled him," Kisah said accusingly.

Balian shrugged. "I did not think that you would care for a violent confrontation, and I did not wish to do anything that might result in injury to you."

Kisah gaped at him. "You don't deny it?"

"I do not admit it."

"It was you," Kisah gasped.

He looked at her questioningly.

"You stole into my room the other night. You placed some sort of spell upon me!"

Balian chuckled. "Have I?"

"What?"

"Placed a spell upon you, beloved?"

Kisah's eyes narrowed. "You will not distract me with sweet words! You did not answer my question."

"You asked a question?"

"You came into my room. You placed a spell upon me."

"I never like to argue with a lady, but that is not a question."

Kisah ground her teeth in annoyance. "Did you place a spell upon me? Is that why I feel so strangely? Is that why I have dreamed such ... unusual dreams?"

A slow smile curled his lips. A gleam entered his eyes that was part desire, part triumph. "Do you feel strangely, my love? Tell me, what have you dreamed."

Kisah found that she was blushing profusely. "You must know, for you put them there!" she said tightly.

"Alas, not by some magical spell, for I would have enjoyed them myself, I think."

She would certainly not tell him that he was the lover who haunted her dreams. "It is forbidden to use sorcery in the competition."

His brows rose. "I've no need of sorcery to best the bumbling morons that have pitted themselves against me. As you see, I am unscathed."

Briefly, surprise filled her and she spoke without consideration. "But ... you were wounded. I saw...."

A pleased smile dawned. "You watched me then? I confess, I had been positioned so far back upon the field that I had thought my efforts went unnoticed."

The blush that had barely died, washed into her cheeks once more. "I caught a glimpse, no more," she lied irritably.

He chuckled. "You need have no fear for me, love. I have promised that you will be mine."

* * * *

As if their conversation the night before had settled into her subconscious mind, Kisah dreamed of Balian when at last sleep claimed her that night. Unlike the dreams the night before, where she had only believed in her mind that the shadowy lover was Balian, she saw and felt and heard him as potently as if he lay with her, stroking her body and kissing her until her body was alive with sensations she had never felt before, never imagined, and she moved restlessly, begging him with sighs and moans of pleasure to cease tormenting her and give her surcease.

She was bare but could not remember disrobing. Her skin tingled as though stroked with lightning, prickling fine hairs along her body. Silken sheets slid over her skin like rose petals, as warm as soft lips. They caught on her breasts, pulled tight against the peaks, drawing over her. Hands joined them, their callused palms cupping the curves of her body, smoothing across her nipples until they hardened painfully, pleurably.

Kisah arched her back, pushing toward him, wanting, needing to feel more, hovering on the edges of consciousness, in a drowsy state of arousal. She wanted to

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open her eyes, know if it was real or not, but a longing engulfed her, spread through her belly, making her fear to dispel it if it was indeed just a dream. Her cleft spasmed with achy need, growing wet with desire, until it dampened her thighs. She clutched at the bed sheets, needing something to hold on to, wanting to touch him, but afraid.

Palms skittered down the line of her belly, lower, on her hips. She gasped in surprise, jerking as his thumbs skimmed her bare cleft and moved to push her thighs gently apart.

Fingers nudged her nether lips apart, smoothing the cream of her arousal up around her clit. She moaned and jerked on the bed, tried to hold still.

Hair roughened thighs grazed her own, abrasive against the soft flesh of her inner thighs. She felt his heat, felt his fingers stroke her clit, rounding the nub with deliberate strokes. A foreign hardness suddenly pushed against the opening of her core, burning like fire, searing her nerves. Her eyes flew open on a strangled gasp.

She was alone.

Chapter Seven

The tension that had gripped Kisa from the moment she arose tightened as she reached the box and took her place beside her father. The last of six poles were being erected. Once it was secured, heavy chains were brought out and lain out at the foot of each. A peg, bent to form a horse shoe shape, was driven into the ground at the foot of each pole that grounded the chain while still allowing it to slide back and forth.

The objective was to reach the top of the pole and retrieve the pennant there. There was only one way to do so, however. The contestants must shift and fly to the top. The only way they would be able to reach the top, given the length of the chain and the peg, was to immobilize their opponent.

There had been a time, according to legend, when the Wyvern had been capable of shifting into great birds and they had become rulers of the skies, but that had been long ago and the ability had been lost. Now, although most were still capable of shifting wings, their ability to fly was extremely limited. The contest was designed to prove they had that trait to pass to their offspring.

Once the preparations were completed, the contestants began to file out onto the field, pairing off according to their positions attained during the contests on the preceding days of the tournament. As Balian walked onto the field, the people crowding the stands leapt to their feet and began to chant his

name. Kisah's heart seemed to hammer in her chest in time to their praise. As he reached the pole that had been designated, he halted, holding up his arm to show that he wore her favor still.

The chant disintegrated into screaming, clapping, stamping feet and whistles of approval before it slowly began to peter out as the servants came forward and fastened the heavy manacles at each end of the chain to the two combatants facing off.

When all had been secured, the warriors turned to face the royal box, saluted with their swords and shifted.

Kisah's heart seemed to stop in her chest. She was scarcely aware of the collective gasp of shock that went through crowd, but her gaze was turned upon Balian just as all eyes had been.

He had shifted wings, but they were unlike anything anyone had ever seen. Instead of the beautifully feathered, elegant wings all were familiar with, Balian's were dark, leathery. Spines ran the length of the wings, sprouting sharp talons at the tips of each.

Kisah could only stare at him in dismay, a sense of foreboding slowly swelling inside of her. Finally, she turned to look at her father. His face was chalk white, his expression a mixture of terror and rage that she found incomprehensible. A deadly silence fell over the amphitheater. Almost in slow motion, he rose from his seat and moved to the front of the box. For long, agonizing moments, he simply stood there, staring down at Balian. Finally, to Kisah's relief, he gave the signal that the games were to begin.

Kisah gripped the arms of her chair in white knuckled fists as the heavy clang of metal against metal echoed through the unnatural silence of the theater. Balian seemed unperturbed by it, focusing his attention completely upon the battle at hand. Within moments, he had disarmed his opponent. For several moments, everyone watched the two men, waiting to see if Balian would strike the unarmed man. Abruptly, he launched himself into the air, ascended to the top of the pole and snatched the pendant from its perch. Everyone simply stared as he circled the pole, holding the pendant triumphantly, unable to take their eyes from the wings that spread and flapped above him. Belatedly, a half hearted cheer went up, swelling slowly through the crowd.

There was an air of slowly growing hysteria, however, that was nothing like the thrill of blood lust that had gripped everyone before. Sensing it, Kisah glanced around at the people, seeing the fear written on their faces despite their efforts to retain the gaiety of before.

The captain of the guard approached her father at a signal from him and bent low as her father spoke quietly to him. Nodding, he stood at attention, saluted her father and left the box.

A cold fear swept through Kisah. She felt as if a band were tightening around her chest, making it difficult to breathe, squeezing her heart so that it thudded painfully against her chest wall.

Returning her attention to the field, she saw that, one by one, the combatants had subdued their opponents and

retrieved the pennant atop the poles, eliminating six of the remaining twelve.

A roar of half hearted approval went up from the crowd as the winners held up their swords for acknowledgment. Long moments passed, and everyone had begun to look at each other curiously, but finally the servants came forward and unlocked the manacles. Those defeated walked, or were carried from the field. The six remaining were pitted against each other, their manacles replaced. At her father's signal, the combatants clashed.

Kisah was scarcely aware of the battles being waged between the men, however. Movement at the edge of the field had caught her eye. As she watched, soldiers began to enter the field through the gates, lining up on either side of the field.

She glanced at her father, but his gaze was focused on the fighting men, his expression unreadable. The people crowding the stands began to fall silent as they, too, watched the soldiers line up in battle formation on either side of the field. Pages began running from the gates, each loaded down with shields. Kisah frowned, watching curiously as they scurried down the line of soldiers, handing out the shields they carried, but she was more puzzled, not less so. The shields looked nothing like those the soldiers usually carried. These were nearly as high as the men themselves, and as broad, covered by some strange material she was unfamiliar with.

Again, she glanced at her father, but she could tell nothing from his expression.

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He stood abruptly. In the field below, the combatants, increasingly aware of the activity around them, had ceased to fight.

"Leave, daughter. It is not safe for you here."

Kisah leapt to her feet. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He turned to glare at her. "Do as you're told!"

Kisah gaped at him, stunned, but finally signaled for her women to move toward the exit at the back of the box. Shooing them ahead of her, she, too, moved toward the back, but she did not leave. Instead, as her father moved toward the front of the box, she slipped surreptitiously closer.

Lifting his hand, he pointed straight at Balian. "Seize him! He is a dragon!"

Kisah turned to look at Balian in horror as the soldiers, holding their shields before them, rushed upon him. He made no attempt to defend himself. He made no attempt to escape. He merely dropped his sword and waited, his gaze on her as he disappeared beneath the wall of soldiers.

Chapter Eight

Shock permeated every part of Kisah, cutting her off from emotion, corrupting her thoughts as she paced her room. Balian had been taken to the dungeon. Tomorrow, he was to be executed as an enemy of the people.

She shuddered at that thought, trying to shield herself from the horrible visions that swarmed through her mind. They would not give him a quick, clean death. His torture and execution would be a public display and they would draw his execution out as long as possible for the entertainment of the crowd—the same people who had showered him with honor with each battle he had fought and won would be there to enjoy his execution.

Revulsion filled her.

She hated them, all of them, she realized with a jolt of surprise. He was not Wyvern—he might well be dragon, as her father claimed, though she could scarcely believe it when she had been told her whole life that the race of dragons had been wiped from the face of their world. He had not come to them as an enemy, however. He had done nothing to deserve what her father had planned for him.

Why had he done nothing to defend himself? Why had he not tried to escape? The dragon of legend had possessed unimaginable magic. They had been a fierce, mighty beast people. The Wyvern had only triumphed over them through trickery, overcome their magic with the aid of the most powerful wizard of all time and slain them as they slept

beneath the wizard's spell. Surely, if Balian was any of those things he could have saved himself?

Just as importantly, why would he have come at all to the land of his enemy ... alone?

Fear stabbed through her at that thought, but she dismissed it. He must have come alone. If others had been with him, they surely would have revealed themselves when Balian was captured.

It was ludicrous, she finally decided. Despite the strange wings, no dragon had been sighted in her lifetime, nor for many lifetimes before her. Even if it were remotely possible that he was dragon, of what threat was he to the Wyvern? If there were enough of the dragon people left to be a threat, they would have known it long since.

Moving to the window, she stared out into the night. The sun had set long since. How long until he would die? She wondered. How many hours of peace would he be granted before they began to drain the life from him, bit by bit, stripping his flesh from his bones inch by inch?

She felt ill at the thought and it occurred to her that she simply could not stand by and do nothing. Indecision assailed her almost immediately. Her thoughts were treasonous. Princess or not, she would very likely take his place on the executioner's block if she helped him to escape.

She shook the thought off. If she was clever enough, no one would discover her treachery.

Turning away from the window, she began pacing once more, formulating and discarding plans. Her chatelaine would gain her access to the dungeon, but only the dungeon master

held the keys to the cells, and Balian would almost certainly be locked in a cell as well as manacled considering their fear of him.

She would have to have some sort of distraction, she saw. She might also have to try to pick the locks she had no key for—unless she could get her hands on the dungeon master's keys.

She decided she could not count on getting the keys. She would have to take something she could use to pick the locks.... And what then? Assuming they had not beaten and tortured him already to the point where he could walk out—how?

She suspected he had some ability, but she was not certain. There was only one way in or out of the dungeon. If he could not use magic, he would have to fight his way past the guards. Once past them, she could lead him out through the servants' passages. As late as it was, they would almost certainly be deeply asleep.

She stopped in the middle of her room. If, if, if—he would die while she if'd. Moving to her dressing table, she found a long hair pin and tucked it into her bodice. She had no weapon to give him beyond her eating knife. She did not dare go to the armory for anything else.

Moving into the room beyond her bed chamber, she shook Edna awake, cautioned her to silence and led her back into her own room. Edna blinked at her owlishly, looked at the darkness beyond Kisah's window, and then around the room curiously.

"I have always felt you were most loyal to me of all my ladies?" Kisah said questioningly.

Edna's eyes widened, but she nodded. "Yes, my lady."

Kisah studied her a moment. "How loyal?"

Edna looked taken aback. Again, she looked around the room, as if she was searching for some clue of Kisah's meaning. "I would give my life for you, lady."

Kisah nodded, wondering if she dared trust her life to the maid, but she had no choice, really, except to abandon Balian to her father's mercy. "I find I must see Balian ... tonight. I must know if what my father says is true."

Edna's eyes widened. "But.... if it is true, it would be dangerous for you, mistress!"

Kisah began pacing again. "I do not believe he would harm me ... but I can not let him go to his death without knowing."

Edna looked at her doubtfully. "What would you have me do, mistress?"

"Go with me. I need you to serve as a distraction so that I can have a few moments alone with him.... To speak with him."

Edna thought it over for a moment, realizing that Kisah had undoubtedly noticed that the dungeon master, Kilan, was sweet on her. She found him revolting, but she did not like to think that she might bring about his death. Finally, she nodded.

They took the back way down, the stairs and hallways designed for the servant's use. With relief, but little surprise, they met no one, though, from the sounds filtering through to them, there were still a great number of castle folk lingering

in the great hall, reveling ... and still Kisah's fingers shook when they reached the dungeon till she could scarcely fit the key into the lock.

A soldier came to attention the moment the door was opened. From the look of him, he had been sleeping. "Who goes there?"

Kisah flipped the hood of her cloak back and his eyes bulged. He bowed. "Princess!"

She nodded at him. "I have come to see this man my father says is dragon."

He paled. "I have orders to allow no one to go near him, lady! It is far too dangerous. He could shift, burn you to cinders! He might use magic against you."

Kisah summoned a depreciating smile. "That is absurd! If he had those abilities, wouldn't he have used them to prevent his capture?"

The young man frowned. "I had not thought of that ... but my orders...."

Another man, obviously awakened by their voices, staggered to the entrance of the tiny cell just off the main room. "What's this?"

Edna surged forward, smiling. "My lady wishes to see the prisoner, Balian."

Kilan's chest swelled with self importance. "Alas, this can not be. No one is to see him."

Edna's smile became coaxing. "But ... surely it can not hurt only to get a peek? He is to be executed in the morning. We will never get the chance to see another dragon!"

Kilan looked torn. Finally, he glanced sharply at the guard. "You were sleeping!"

The guard paled. "Nay!"

"Indeed you were, useless dog. Sleeping so deeply you did not see anyone pass this way."

The young man gulped. "I might have gone to relieve myself and missed them."

Kilan nodded. Reaching up, he took a ring of keys from the wall and nodded for the women to follow him. Kisah frowned. She had hoped to leave Kilan and Edna in the main room, but she saw no way to manage that. Feeling as if her plans were already crumbling, she trailed along behind Edna and Kilan, trying desperately to hatch a new plot while Edna chattered gaily to Kilan.

She had no time to formulate one, for they had not gone far when they reached the tiny cell where Balian was being held. Kilan removed a torch from a sconce nearby and held it so that it illuminated the cell and Kisah surged forward.

As she had thought, he was manacled to the Traitor's Cross, an x shaped configuration of beams used to secure the most dangerous captives and designed so that it could be positioned for optimal torture, either raised completely vertical, or horizontal or any point in between. The Traitor's Cross was fully vertical and Balian hung limply from it, held in place by the wrist and ankle manacles.

Her heart sank. He could not be merely sleeping, or he would have awakened at their approach.

"Oh!" Edna gasped. "But ... this can not be the dragon, surely? He does not look dangerous at all!"

Chapter Nine

"Indeed," Kilan said. "It is the one they call dragon. For myself, I can not see it. He has been like this for hours, and if he were dragon, he would have healed himself."

"You have tested him then?" Edna asked with pretended interest.

"Aye. I tested him myself."

Edna feigned disappointment. "Well, there is not much to be seen here. Have you no more interesting prisoners?"

Kilan thought it over and finally shrugged. "I am not sure you will find any of our 'visitors' interesting, but I would be most happy to show you around."

Edna slipped her arm through his. "Would you? I have never been down here. It gives me shivers."

Kilan chuckled and patted her hand. "You've no need to fear, my dear. I would allow no harm to come to you."

Edna turned to glance at Kisah as Kilan led her away.

Kisah nodded. As soon as they had turned upon another corridor, she fished the hair pin from her bodice and began working at the lock. Fortunately, it was a simple lock, since it was not necessary for any elaborate device to prevent escape. Most prisoners were manacled to the floor inside their cell and since the cells contained nothing more than straw and a bucket to relieve themselves, they would have no means of picking the lock themselves. Moreover, the only entrance to the dungeon was inside the main keep. Even if a

prisoner could escape his cell, he would have little chance of escaping the castle itself.

Dismissing the thoughts, Kisah opened the door cautiously and moved quickly inside, but, even as she did so, she wondered what the point was. Balian was in no condition to escape even if she removed his manacles. She could not carry him out. She was no weakling, but the man was easily twice her size.

She moved toward him, feeling a mixture of pity for his state, and his situation, and frustration that she could do nothing to help him. Perhaps all that she could give him was the means to a quick death.

Moving closer, she touched his cheek. He did not so much as stir.

She glanced over her shoulder, listening. She could still hear Edna, but her voice was distant now. "Awake!" she whispered fiercely. "I can not carry you from here!"

Still he did not stir and she reached for his shoulder, shaking him slightly. A sigh of frustration escaped her when he did not react and she stood indecisively for several moments. Finally, she knelt and, using her hair pin, unlocked the manacles around his ankles. She looked up at him when she had released his ankles, wondering if a good dousing of cold water would bring him around. But, perhaps he was beyond even that.

Almost absently, she stroked the bruised skin where the manacles had bound him, realizing his state alone gave the lie to her father's accusation. Even with their own limited shifting abilities, they healed quickly. If Balian was dragon, as

her father claimed, he would be capable of shifting fully—and he would heal far more quickly than the Wyvern.

Slowly, she rose, tracing a soothing finger along the welts and bruises that adorned his calves and thighs. He was completely naked save for the loin cloth he always wore. She hesitated, staring at it curiously, blushing at the impulse that assailed her.

Her maids had been giggling about his wondrous manhood. She could not help but be just a little curious ... all right, more than a little.

It could not hurt just to take a peek, to assuage her curiosity, surely? Who would know?

She could just 'accidentally' flick it back, maybe brush it with her fingers.

She had already reached for the edge of his loin cloth when he spoke. "No peeking."

Kisah jerked her fingers back as if burned, nearly jumping out of her skin.

Balian was looking directly at her and there was no sign at all that he had been anything beyond completely alert. As it dawned on her that he had been neither unconscious nor sleeping, anger replaced her shock. "You were feigning!" she snapped accusingly.

A slow smile tipped the corner of his mouth up. "I was."

Kisah gaped at him. She'd expected him to deny it. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I was enjoying it."

Rage surged through her. For several moments, she could do nothing but stammer half sentences. "I risked my life to help you escape," she hissed at him, "and you waste time...."

He looked pensive. "I did not consider it a waste of time. Besides, you were curious. I did not want to discourage you."

Kisah was tempted to box his ears. "You are *insane*! They are bent on torturing you to death come sunrise! I've a good mind to simply leave you to their tender mercies!"

"I was never at their mercy.... Only yours."

Kisah gaped at him blankly, her anger deserting her. "What?"

"I've been waiting for you to come to me."

She stared at him in confusion. How could he have been waiting when she had spent hours pacing and wondering if she even dared attempt it? A suspicion arose. "Have you placed a spell on me?"

He frowned. "I would not, even if I could. You must accept me of your free will."

Kisah plunked her hands on her hips. "Accept? You presume far too much, barbarian! I came because ... because this is unjust, not for any other reason!"

He frowned, doubt flickering across his features. In a moment, however, the doubt vanished and determination took its place. "It is enough ... for now, that my life has value to you."

He frowned, clenching his fists and his manacles popped open.

Kisah gaped at him as he stepped away from the Traitor's Cross, rubbing his wrists. She shook herself after a moment. There was no time to waste in further argument or speculation. She could allow it to tease her mind later—that he had pretended unconsciousness when he was not, that he

had allowed himself to be captured, tortured, manacled when it was obvious he could have prevented it at any time he chose.

Pulling her dagger from her belt, she held it out to him. "This is not much, I know, but I could not get weapons for you without risking capture before I could even free you. Come. I will show you a back way out of the castle. We must move quickly if you are to win your freedom."

Balian's eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline as he stared in bemusement at the tiny dagger. His lips quirked, but he refrained from smiling. Instead, he took the dagger and slipped it into the band that secured his loincloth. He caught Kisah's arm as she turned to lead him from the cell, tugging her back so that she half fell against him. Capturing her face in his palms, he leaned down and kissed her lightly on the lips. Heat went through her at his touch and for a moment, Kisah clung to him.

With an effort, she opened her eyes to look up at him when he lifted his head.

"Sleep, my princess," he murmured softly.

Chapter Ten

Kisah felt a darkness descend over her, felt herself falling, as if she were drifting into sleep. Only half conscious, she felt him lift her into his arms. She wanted to protest, but found she could not give voice to the words clamoring to free themselves from her lips. She could not fight off the strange lethargy that had fallen over her.

Dimly, alarm surfaced when they reached the outer room of the dungeon and she heard the guard shout a command to stop.

Balian murmured something and the man dropped like a stone.

In a dream like state, she was aware of Balian climbing the stairs and moving toward the main hall. "No," she managed to murmur with a great effort. "Kill you!"

Either she did not manage to say the words aloud, or he ignored her, for the doors to the great hall burst inward with a resounding clatter that drew an instant, deadly silence over the room.

For several moments, Balian merely stood in the doorway, surveying the assemblage.

"To arms! Stop him!"

Abruptly, Kisah became aware of a tingling heat that seemed to vibrate around her. With an effort, she lifted her heavy lids to look around her. The chest she was cradled against was no longer that of a man, but instead the scale

hide of a dragon. He had shifted, her mind screamed, but she could not force herself to feel alarm.

"Be still!" Balian roared, looking about the room. Around him, everyone froze, captured by his spell, alert, but unable to move so much as a hair's breadth. "If not for my love for my princess I would slay you all for what you have done to my people, but I will not hurt her by taking my revenge, nor will allow you to bring harm to her by attacking me.

"Be assured, however, that you will die if you think to take her from me."

He strode through the room then. The outer doors of the castle burst open as he approached them, and then darkness washed over them and the chill of night as Balian held Kisah tightly to him and launched himself into the dark sky.

Kisah shivered, cold, frightened by the nightmare that held her in its grip.

"You need not fear, my love. I will keep you safe."

The words were soothing, but they rumbled from the chest of a great beast that held her in a taloned grip. She struggled, trying to shake the nightmare from her mind, trying to awaken.

"Sleep deeply, love."

* * * *

Despite the nightmare that had gripped her the night before, Kisah found that she was reluctant to leave sleep behind and face the morning light that nipped at her eyelids.

Finally, unable to escape into sleep once more, she opened her eyes and looked around.

Her heart slammed into her chest when she realized nothing around her was familiar. The bed she lay upon was enormous, far larger than her own, and covered with creamy, silken sheets. Above her, she saw that the bed hangings were of a similar material. Slowly, she sat up, realizing only as the sheets fell away that she was bare to the skin.

It had not been a nightmare then. She had not dreamed that she had been captured by a dragon—she had been.

She must have been.

Almost reluctantly, she moved to the edge of the bed and drew the drapery back. To her relief, she saw that she was alone in the room. Sliding to the floor, she was instantly aware of the chill of the stones against her bare feet. Looking around, she saw her shoes had been discarded beside the bed and slipped her feet into them.

The gown she'd worn the night before when she had gone into the dungeon had been lain out carefully on the foot of the bed and she snatched it up and quickly dressed herself. Without a maid to assist her, she had some trouble securing the ties at her back, but finally managed it to her satisfaction.

Who, she wondered, had undressed her? And how, when she had no memory of it?

A fire roared in the hearth across the room and she moved toward it, warming herself as she looked around curiously. The room was stark. Beyond the bed, a single chair before a small dressing table which held a comb and brush, and the mirror above the table, it stood empty. Frowning, she moved at last to the single door in the wall opposite the bed and tested it. To her surprise, it opened readily. She peered

outside. A wide corridor lined with burning sconces and bereft of anything else, greeted her vision. After a moment's indecision, she stepped outside and turned to her left, wandering along the corridor for some time. She came upon several doors, none of which were locked, but all were empty. The corridor ended at a wide, arched window, but it was covered with colored glass and she could not see outside.

After a few moments, she turned and retraced her steps. When she reached the room she had awakened in, she hesitated and then moved on, coming at last to a wide stone staircase that wound downward. Keeping close to the stone wall, she followed the stone stairs. When she reached the bottom, she found that the stairs ended at a wide, arched doorway. Beyond the stone arch lay a cavernous room. At the far end, two great windows had been set into the wall that looked like eyes—dragon eyes.

Below and between the windows sat a throne on a raised dais—a throne carved of stone and fashioned like a great, crouching dragon.

Balian sat upon the throne, staring into the fire in the brazier beside the dais. At her entrance, he lifted his head and looked at her.

Kisah's heart executed a little free fall, though she wasn't certain whether it was fear, or something else. After a moment, she moved toward him, coming to a halt as she reached the dais.

"You slept well?" he asked, his voice and expression neutral.

Kisah frowned. "Why have you brought me here?"

Balian looked away, staring at the leaping flames for so long that she wondered if he would speak at all. A shiver went through her. He seemed ... different, not like the suitor who had wooed her, or yet like the dangerous warrior who had so unnerved her when he had nearly choked the life from Nkunda for daring to touch her.

"Beyond concealing my identity," he said pensively, "I used no subterfuge in wooing you. I went to win a bride. I won."

Kisah blinked. She could hardly dispute his claim. Her father had offered her up as prize to the winner, and though he had been captured before he had fought his final battle, there could have been no contest, no doubt that he would have won, that he had every right to claim her. Nor did she see any point in arguing the matter. "Where is everyone?" she asked instead, curious and more than a little unnerved that she had seen no one at all since she'd woke.

"This is no one here save me ... and now you."

Not even servants? But then, if what she'd dreamed was true, then it could not have been a simple matter to acquire servants. "You are a dragon?"

"You are still in doubt? Or, perhaps, it's denial?" He did not look at her, but continued to stare musingly into the flames.

Kisah bit her lip. Maybe it had been denial, but she still found it difficult to accept. "It's just ... I don't understand. I had always heard there were no dragons left."

He turned to look at her then, studying her for several moments. Finally, a wry smile curled his lips. "Behold—the last."

Try though she might, she could not prevent the empathy that swelled inside her in a suffocating wave of pain. Finally, she understood the deep sadness she had sensed in him. She had not imagined it then—it must have been nearly unbearable. How long, she wondered, had he been alone in this vast, empty castle? It would have been a mercy to have slain him, as well.

Maybe that was why he had not struggled? Maybe that was why he had not tried to elude capture? Had he gone to the heart of his enemy to seek peace? Or for revenge?

"That does not explain why you have brought me here. It is revenge, is it not? For what my people did to yours?"

"My need for revenge died with my youth."

She stared at him, but she could see no reason for him to lie—and yet, nothing else made any sense. Why would he choose the daughter of his most hated enemy if not for revenge? Particularly since she was not even of his kind? "We are not the same."

His gaze wandered her length, lingeringly, and she was reminded of the fact that she had been naked when she woke. He had said there were no servants. "Curiously enough, the Wyvern were our brothers—the closest beings on this world in kinship. No. We are not the same, but we are ... compatible ... at least in the sense necessary to me."

Kisah flushed, but it was not altogether from insult. As denigrating as it was to be considered of no importance beyond breeding offspring, it was also inescapable when one was born female. Regardless of who had been chosen as her spouse, she would have been of no more importance.

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Surprisingly, however, the blatant sexuality of his inspection also sent a shaft of desire through her.

She ignored it. She must remember that he was her enemy. However much he might protest it, there was no doubt in her mind that revenge was his underlying motive for stealing her away. Fool that she was, weakened by sympathy for his plight, she had placed herself at his mercy.

Chapter Eleven

Balian's castle was enchanted. Kisah had been mystified that Balian could live in such a monstrous place with no servants whatsoever and maintain it, but when he had taken her arm through his and led her around to show her his domain, it became almost immediately apparent that he had no need of them. Magic permeated the very walls and all that needed to be done was done instantly, perfectly, without fuss.

It unnerved her. She had never seen more than silly tricks performed with magic. Mortiver, the legendary wizard who had once served her father, who had been so powerful that he had been able to overcome the magic of the dragon folk, had died long ago. Ironically, it was said that it was the destruction of the dragon folk that had brought about his own mortality, for the effort had drained his magic away and left him vulnerable to the aging of mortals.

It was almost as unnerving to hear nothing but the echo of their own footsteps through the halls, the rustle of their own clothing, their voices and no others. She, who had always been surrounded by people, had valued the few, precious moments of solitude she was only occasionally granted, but she had never, truly, been alone, for there was always someone within the call of her voice.

Perhaps his grief and solitude had made him mad?

If she had nursed any doubt at all that Balian was by far the most powerful being she had ever met, she could doubt it no longer. He was physically strong in his human form, and

many times that when he shifted into his beast, and beyond that, he possessed inconceivable magic. Why bother with the charade of competing with beings so inferior in so many ways to himself? If he had merely gone to find a mate for himself, as he claimed, then why had he not simply taken her that night when he had come into her room?

The only answer that came to mind seemed ludicrous.

He had courted her. Could it possibly be that he had thought to win her heart? To win acceptance?

Was it conceit that made her think so?

She was uncomfortably conscious that that seemed likely, despite his protestations of love. She did not think it too farfetched that he had found her attractive. She was not beautiful, but neither was she plain—to a man who had lived alone for so long, it was hardly flattering, but very conceivable that he might consider himself smitten.

She could not escape the fact, however, that he had come to join the tournament, never having set eyes upon her before. It seemed far more likely that he had heard of her father's proclamation and considered competing for her hand a form of entertainment as well as revenge.

It should not bother her so. The others, she knew, had come for her riches. His motives had been no more pure, but no more insulting.

The question was, what, if anything, was she to do about it? What could she do?

She had no idea where she was. Balian had put some sort of spell upon her and she could only recall the events afterward hazily, as if she had dreamed it. Even supposing

she could escape the enchanted castle, how would she find her way home?

And what dangers lay between here and her home?

She had never left her own land. Shadowmere was peopled with immortals of all sorts, and abilities—they were allies against mortals, but enemies still because of their varied natures. She could not travel alone in safety through the lands of other peoples. She could shift, but she could not fly for any appreciable distance and she felt certain that Balian had taken her far away from her own land.

It went against the grain to merely wait docilely and hope for rescue, but she was no fool. In truth, she had no option, at least not at the moment.

The day passed pleasantly enough. In truth, despite her best efforts, she found, once Balian had shaken his strange preoccupation, that he was an entertaining companion. As he escorted her around the castle, he told her the history of his people, but she could not help but notice that he spoke only in generalities, that he told her nothing of his own youth, or of his family. He became withdrawn and pensive once more as they shared the noon meal, but he shook off the mood afterwards as they left the castle and wandered the grounds.

Kisah's interest perked as they left the gloom of the castle and she looked around with keen attention, wondering if she might see an avenue of escape. To her disappointment, there was only one horse in his stables, a great, dangerous beast that eyed her with threat in his eyes and nuzzled upon Balian as if he were a kitten. She doubted very much that the stallion would allow her on his back, let alone carry her away.

"You can not leave this place," Balian said abruptly when they left the stable.

Kisah glanced at him sharply. "You brought me here against my will," she reminded him. She knew, even as she said it, that that was not entirely true. He had brought her without asking what she wanted, but she was not altogether sorry that she had been whisked away from the intolerable situation her father had placed her in. Particularly when she realized that, if he had not, she would have been forced to accept Nkunda. She had seen enough of his nature to know without doubt, that she had not wanted Nkunda for her husband.

"Was it? You came to me."

Kisah's lips tightened. Nothing was more annoying than having someone throw the truth in your face when it threatened your pride to admit it. "You have twisted my pity against me."

He caught her upper arms, hauling her against him, his face suddenly stony with barely leashed rage. "Pity?" he demanded through clenched teeth. "You feel nothing for me beyond pity?"

Frightened as she was by the abrupt, dangerous shift in his mood, Kisah felt her own anger surge forth. "Not even so much as that ... now!" she retorted bitinglly.

For a moment, she thought she had gone too far, that she had goaded him past his rein on his temper. Then, before she could think to say anything else, he leaned down, capturing her mouth beneath his own. Forcing her lips to part, he thrust his tongue into her mouth, invading her—her body, her

senses. His mouth was hot, moist, his taste and scent intoxicating, disorienting, so that she felt drained, weak. A bolt of pleasure shot through her at the first, possessive rake of his tongue along hers. Waves of heat and desire permeated her entire being as he explored the sensitive inner surfaces of her mouth thoroughly so that she felt more fully aware of every inch of her flesh than ever before, yearned for the caress of his hands like nothing else in the world.

Weak, needy, unable to think, incapable of anything but reveling in the sensations he had awoken, she clutched at his tunic as he carried her to the ground, rolling so that he was half atop her. She was barely aware of his knee forcing her thighs apart until she felt it pressed against her aching femininity. Pleasure, so sharp it made the muscles low in her belly clench, knifed through her as he nudged her there and she arched against him instinctively.

Releasing her mouth, he bit gently at the sensitive skin along her jaw, along her throat, moving downward until she felt the heat of his breath caressing the tops of her breasts. Her nipples tightened, stood erect, pushing against the fabric of her gown. She felt a tug, and then heard the rending of cloth and the coolness of air as he bared her breasts impatiently, but her protest became a moan of encouragement as his mouth covered one pouting peak. He nudged the sensitive tip with his tongue, cupped it around her nipple, suckled. She gasped as heat and moisture flooded her womb.

As abruptly as he'd begun, he pulled away, staring down at her, his breath harsh, labored, his face a mask of desire and

hard won restraint. "I would rather have your hate," he snarled angrily.

Kisah blinked, still too wrapped up in the sensations he had created inside of her to react at first, but the disappointment that filled her brought with it a wave of outrage as she realized he had only aroused her desire to prove a point. "*That*, I give you freely!" she snapped.

She could have bitten her tongue the instant she gave voice to her childish petulance at having her treat so abruptly withdrawn, for the pain she saw in his eyes, however briefly it flickered there before he hid it, was not feigned.

As badly as she wanted to, she could not call it back and, in any case, she saw he would not listen. Thrusting himself away from her, he got to his feet and strode away.

Kisah sat up and watched him, so confused by the emotions roiling through her that she could not sort them. The remark had been stupid and thoughtless, however angry she had been at that moment. There was no use in lying to herself. She knew, in her heart, that he cared something for her. She had known it would hurt him, else there would have been no point in saying it.

She was still angry. He had made her feel things she had never imagined—things she had not wanted to feel—and then he had simply stopped, as if it had had no effect on him at all.

He had ripped her bodice! Never mind that she hadn't cared at the moment he had done so, that she would have torn it away herself only to feel his touch.

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What was she to do now? She had nothing else to wear. He had stolen her away. He had not been thoughtful enough to pack her bags for her.

Pulling the tatters of her bodice together, she stalked into the castle, lifted her nose and stomped through the great hall and climbed the stairs.

She wasn't at all certain that he had returned to the great hall—she hadn't wanted to be caught looking for him—but if he was there she wanted him to know she was insulted and furious with him.

She was a princess. How dare he roll in the grass with her as if she were nothing but a kitchen maid!

She sulked until darkness fell and her stomach began to gnaw at her backbone. She was still angry enough to torture herself, however. The hunger would pass. She would stay in the room until she starved to death before she tucked her tail between her legs and went begging for food.

The uplifting sense of martyrdom had begun to wane, however, by the time the door crashed open, slamming against the wall. Kisah jumped reflexively and then turned to glare at the fire breathing dragon that stood upon the threshold.

Chapter Twelve

"We dine at dusk," Balian said coolly.

Seated before the dressing table, the brush still in her hand, Kisah didn't bother to turn, but her eyes narrowed upon his reflection. "I do not read minds," she retorted icily.

His anger vanished abruptly. For a moment, he looked sheepish. "Your dinner awaits, Princess."

She was slightly mollified, but not enough to allow him to get off so easily. "You have ruined my gown. I have nothing to wear."

He looked her over and the beginnings of a smile tilted the corners of his mouth. "Nothing would suit me."

Kisah turned to glare at him, but the effort was wasted, for he had turned upon his heel and strode away. Her eyes narrowed, she stared at his retreating back for several moments, unwilling to let go of her anger. "It would serve him right," she muttered, drumming her fingers on the dressing table.

A wicked thought entered her mind and she chuckled. The idea refused to be shaken, however, and the more she thought about it, the more it pleased her. After a moment, she stood up, loosened the tie at the back of her gown and pulled it off. The loin cloth she wore beneath it was little more than a scrap of cloth, tied at the waist with a thin length of leather. She studied herself in the mirror for several moments and finally pulled the pins from her hair. Unbound, her hair fell to her hips in deep, golden brown waves. Truthfully,

considering the state of her bodice, she was nearly as well covered with her hair—maybe more so, but it would never have occurred to her before to do anything so brazen.

She was torn between delight at the prospect of shocking Balian, the pleasant notion of teasing him with what he'd so callously discarded earlier, and the unnerving thought that he might decide to finish what he'd started.

She almost lost her nerve then.

Sternly, she reminded herself that she was Princess Kisah. She might be his prisoner, but she would not allow herself to be treated as he had done earlier.

He was sorely in need of a lesson.

Lifting her chin, she strolled from the room, resolutely ignoring the chill in the air.

Balian's reaction was all she could have hoped for. He had been pacing back and forth before the brazier, so deep in thought that she was halfway across the room before he noticed her presence. He turned and froze.

A jolt went through him and his face sagged with shock.

Pretending an ease that she was far from feeling, Kisah approached the small table now set before the brazier and stood waiting for him to pull out her chair for her. Balian only gaped at her, obviously too dumbfounded to kick his brain into gear. Finally, a deep blush rose from his chest, climbed his throat and then his face, all the way to his hair line. He opened his mouth, closed it, cleared his throat and opened his mouth again.

Kisah smiled at him coolly, but she saw he would not take the hint and pull out her chair. She lifted a brow and glanced at the chair.

He looked at the chair. After a moment, he moved around the table and pulled the chair out for her. Kisah sat, trying to ignore the fact that he remained where he was, unmoving. Finally, she leaned forward and looked over the food. "Mmm. I'm starving. This looks good," she said casually.

Balian moved around the table and gripped the back of his chair. He did not pull it out, however. He merely gripped the wood in white knuckled fists for several moments, his eyes narrowing as anger warred with rising desire. "You will find, my love, that it is not at all wise to tempt a starving man," he growled. "You may discover that you are not at all happy with the results."

Kisah gave him a feline smile. "You will find, my beast, that a princess can not be treated in the manner of a low born trollop."

Growling, he pushed away from the table. As he stalked toward the door, his dragon wings sprouted from his shoulder blades, unfurling, lengthening. He lifted his hands and the great main door burst open, slamming back against the wall resoundingly. Before she could do more than gasp in surprise, he launched himself into the air and, with a flurry of flapping wings, disappeared into the darkness beyond.

"He might at least have closed the door," Kisah said with a sniff.

At that, the door slammed shut.

A shiver went through Kisah. She found that both her appetite and her anger had vanished, leaving a strange hollowness in its place. She ate anyway, though it tasted like ashes, wondering why it was that she felt so absolutely dreadful. She was a captive. She was well within her rights to torment her enemy.

She supposed, after a while, that she felt horrible because she did not feel like Balian was her enemy. She felt badly because everything she had done, and everything she had said, was a lie. She had not come naked to his table to taunt Balian. She had hoped to tempt him beyond reason. Instead, she had only driven him away.

His self-restraint in the face of her lack of it had challenged her to push him beyond it, but she had not intended to retaliate in kind, as he must have thought. She would have yielded to him gladly, wholeheartedly. She might have many doubts, but that was not one of them. She wanted him. It might be no more than pure animal attraction, but that alone was as potent and impossible to ignore as the strongest magic.

He had earned the right to claim her. She was willing to accept it. Why did he hold himself back?

Because she had wounded his pride to save her own?

In truth, she had not meant it the way it must have sounded to him. She supposed, though, that she could not have chosen a poorer choice of words. He was a proud man. He had every right to be, for he was exceptional in every way. How could she have guessed that one word would prick him so deeply? He had seemed so self-assured, so thick

skinned, that it had not occurred to her that she *could* wound him.

After a while, when she saw that he would not return, she left the table and climbed the stairs once more. She sat at the window of her room for a while, uncaring that Balian might think she was watching for him—which she was—but finally, dejected, she climbed into the bed and slept.

She woke the following morning determined to find a way to make amends. Balian, she discovered, was not to be found, however, and she spent most of the day wandering the castle in search of some task to occupy her mind. To her dismay, she discovered there was nothing that needed attention. Thwarted of honest occupation, she began exploring exhaustively. By the time she fell into bed that night she had arrived at only one certain conclusion—it was nothing short of amazing that Balian had lived so many years alone in this great heap of stones without going mad.

He returned the following day, but he remained coolly distant and Kisah could not bring herself to bend her pride enough to approach him more than once. When her one attempt to draw him into conversation failed, she withdrew into her own cold silence and her remorse degenerated into anger once more.

Almost a week had passed when she awoke one morning to discover that everything had changed. Her first thought was that she had dreamed everything that she had thought had happened since that fateful night that she had decided to free Balian—or that Balian had rethought her desirability and returned her. Surrounding the bed in which she lay was every

stick of furniture, every cushion, wall hanging, even down to the smallest, most insignificant object that her room had contained—and all arranged exactly as it had been in her own room.

The exception was Edna, who had never slept on a pallet in her room, but who lay curled in a tight little ball in one corner, shaking as if she were freezing to death. Kisah's heart leapt joyfully at the sight of her maid. "Edna?"

Edna's head jerked upwards. She stared at Kisah for several uncomprehending moments and finally leapt to her feet and rushed across the room. "Princess Kisah! Oh, my lady! I am so happy to see you!" she said, laughing and crying at once as she fell to her knees beside the bed.

"How...." Kisah stopped. She knew how. She just wasn't certain why.

Sliding to the edge of the bed, she patted Edna's shaking shoulder consolingly. "Were you very frightened?"

"I thought I would *die* of fright, mistress! His *is* a dragon! Oh mistress! Will he eat us?"

Kisah gave her a look. "Don't be absurd! He will not harm you."

"But—"

"Hush! I will not hear you speak ill of him!" Kisah said sharply. "He is my lord."

Edna's jaw dropped. "But ... he stole you away."

Kisah slid off the bed, knelt beside her trunk and pulled out a robe, then drew it around her and moved to the dressing table. "By my father's decree, I am his," she said sharply.

"You will wed that...." Encountering Kisah's narrow eyed glare, she stopped mid-sentence. "Man?" she finished weakly.

Kisah frowned. In truth, Balian had said nothing of wedding her. Perhaps it was not a custom the dragon folk practiced? When she glanced up, she caught a glimpse of Balian's reflection in the mirror and her heart fluttered uncomfortably in her breast. He was standing in the doorway, studying her, his face expressionless. She had not heard his entrance, had not heard the door open nor his tread. How long, she wondered, had he been standing there? "I will honor my father's word ... even if he did not."

Was it her imagination, or did some of the tension ease from his stance?

"You are pleased?"

Edna shrieked when Balian spoke, scurrying into a corner. Distracted, both Kisah and Balian turned to look at her, Kisah with irritation, Balian with a good deal of surprise.

Frowning a warning at the maid, she turned to Balian. "I am ... most grateful for your thoughtfulness."

He nodded. "Will you break your fast with me?"

Kisah smiled wryly. "If I can coax my silly maid from the corner to help me dress."

Balian glanced toward Edna once more, nodded, and departed, closing the door behind him. When he had gone, Edna darted from the corner and rushed to Kisah's chest, nervously jerking first one gown and then another from it. "I will wear the blue, Edna," Kisah said coolly, wondering if it would be more comfortable if Balian simply returned the poor thing. As thoughtful as it had been for Balian to bring the girl,

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Kisah was not certain she really wanted Edna around if she was going to quake like a mouse and squeak every time she saw Balian.

Glancing nervously toward the door, Edna carefully laid the dress that Kisah had chosen out on the bed and smoothed it, then rushed across the room and took the brush from Kisah's hand and began brushing her hair. Trying to contain her impatience, Kisah bore with her, though the girl created almost as many tangles as she removed—some forcefully—from Kisah's scalp.

“Peace, Edna! Or you will have me bald.”

Glancing toward the door once more, Edna leaned close. “They are coming for you, Lady,” she whispered.

Chapter Thirteen

Dread was not something Kisah would have guessed that she would feel to learn that her father intended to rescue her, but it swept through her in a cold tide. A dozen questions collided in her mind making it difficult to decide which to ask first. "Who? How? How do you know?" She didn't bother to ask why. Her father would have had Balian slain rather than to allow his enemy to take his daughter.

"I overheard your father speak of it to Nkunda—for you must know that it was he who triumphed at the tournament."

Kisah felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. "They went on with the tournament after I had been ... after I left?" she demanded, outraged.

Edna gaped at her. "The dragon was disqualified. A winner had to be chosen," she said reasonably.

Kisah's eyes narrowed. There was nothing reasonable about it to her way of thinking. Obviously, her father had been devastated by her loss, she thought sarcastically. "So ... my father plots with Nkunda to ... rescue me?"

Edna nodded eagerly.

"Nkunda is no match for Balian."

Edna cast another look toward the door. "Nay, not as he is, but the king knows of a way wherein Nkunda can use the powers of Mortiver to overcome the dragon."

Kisah gaped at her. "And he dead and buried nigh three centuries ago? What do they expect to do, resurrect him?"

"T'was a secret your father kept close to his heart these many years, should the need arise for the powers once more. For it may only be used once, and briefly at that. The essence of Mortiver's powers remain. Once consumed, they will give his power to whomever does so. And though it would only be for a day and a night, Nkunda would need no more than that, surely, to defeat such a one as Balian?"

Kisah got up, pacing, but she knew there was no point in railing against her father. He would not listen to any plea she might think to make even if she had been able to speak to him directly. It was worse than useless to consider sending a message to him, even if she had the means to do so.

"Even if what you say is true," Kisah muttered, more to herself than to the maid, "they can not know if it will even work. Mortiver, from what I have heard, was boastful. It may be nothing more than a story put about to ensure his immortality in the memory of the people. And Mortiver had been so weakened by the spells he cast upon the dragon folk that it led to his death. What might he pass along beyond the little he had left to him? Which was not even enough to preserve his own life."

Edna shrugged. "Your father the king did say that Mortiver had not exhausted his powers, he had merely weakened his physical self ."

Kisah wasn't certain whether she did not believe it, or if she was afraid to believe it. For, if it was true, then Balian would die.

She did not think that she could bear that, but was it within her power to do something about it? Finally, she

decided that she must try to reason with Balian, warn him at the very least, if he would not listen.

Dressing quickly, she made her way downstairs. He was standing before one of the windows staring down at the sea beyond when she crossed the great hall. At the sound of her tread, however, he turned to look at her. Fleeting, a look of pleasure crossed his features, but then he seemed to recall the discord between them and the pleasure faded, replaced by a look of polite coolness.

Kisah bit her lip. He had not forgiven her, she thought, but as he came forward to help her with her chair she realized that she was wrong. It was not so much that he had not forgiven her as it was that he had erected a barrier and withdrawn behind it. She had not realized until his withdrawal that he had never shown her anything other than openness and honesty.

She had lost—no, thrown away, something of great value, she realized with a sinking heart.

The food, as usual, was delicious, but it might as well have been mud. She saw now that his peace offering had not been an attempt to thaw her heart, but merely a courtesy to her comfort. He must think her heart wrought of ice and impervious to warmth.

They had finished their meal before it occurred to her that she had come down with the intention of warning him of her father's plot. Somehow, she could not bring herself to simply blurt it out. Now, they had a truce of sorts. If she told him, would he not interpret it as doubt of his ability to protect himself? Might he consider it a threat, instead of a warning?

She had not thought to ask Edna when they planned to come for her. Perhaps the maid knew, perhaps not. In any case, she had no notion of whether or not she had time to consider how she might break the news.

If she said nothing, and Nkunda attacked, catching him off guard....

She stood up indecisively. "Will you walk with me in the garden?" she finally asked.

Something flickered in his eyes that she could not read, but he nodded and offered his arm. She took it, but her mind was so filled with how she might broach the subject of her father that she could think of no polite chitchat to offer and an uncomfortable silence settled over them as they left the castle to walk in the garden.

When they had taken several turns around the garden, Balian led her to a garden bench and urged her to sit. Only a little beyond the bench, a low wall edged the cliff edge that fell sharply into the sea. Kisah looked down at the crashing waves below for several moments and finally sat.

"You are very quiet," he said, breaking the strained silence at last.

Kisah glanced up at him and decided to simply take the plunge and hope for the best. "My maid brought news of home."

Balian frowned and looked away. "This is your home."

"I meant...."

"I know what you meant." His lips twisted. "I had thought that I had learned patience, but perhaps I have been alone too long."

Kisah reached for his hand when he started to rise. He looked at her in surprise, aborted the movement and lifted her hand to his lips. Brushing his lips along her knuckles, he lowered her hand to her lap and released it, then stood abruptly and moved to stand looking down at the sea.

Frustrated, Kisah turned to study his back, clasping her hand where it still tingled from his touch.

"I had so little time, you see."

Kisah felt a stab of anxiety at his words, though she had no idea of what he spoke. She was on the point of prompting him to continue when he spoke again.

"In but a few days the time will be upon me when I might breed offspring. Another century will pass before my time comes again and.... I feel a desperation to know that I will not die, knowing that my kind has passed from this world forever."

The urge to weep for his pain was nearly overwhelming. She supposed she could not truly understand or feel what he felt, for she had not endured the life that he had, but she had been in the dragon's lair fully long enough to have a taste of what that loneliness must have been like.

Rising, she moved to stand beside him. "I will honor my father's decree. I will bear your children gladly, but...."

He looked down at her, smiling faintly, but there was great sadness in his eyes. "You are Wyvern. We are not the same."

If he had slapped her, she could not have felt more rejected. "It did not seem to matter to you before," she said stiffly, and turning, began to walk quickly back to the castle.

He caught her before she reached the garden gate, forcing her to turn and face him. "You do not understand."

"No," she said tightly. "I do not!" She tried to tug her hand free, but he would not allow it.

"We mate for life ... and only when love is mutual. It can NOT be otherwise, else I would happily accept what you offer."

Kisah discovered that there were tears streaming down her cheeks. She dashed them away angrily. "I do not understand!"

"And I can not make you understand, any more than I can make you love me!" he said harshly. "It happens ... or it does not."

He released her then, so abruptly that she staggered back a step before she caught her balance. "Then take me home!" she cried in frustration, in too much turmoil to make any sense of his words, unable to think at all beyond the blow to her pride. It was unthinkable that she, Princess Kisah, had offered to bear his child and been flatly rejected, only because she was no starry-eyed child who imagined respect, admiration and lust equated to some higher emotion.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I am a selfish monster," he snarled. "Because I want you and I will not allow another to have you."

Chapter Fourteen

Rage was welcome, for it forced out all other confusing emotions. "They will come for me!" she said.

A stillness settled over Balian. "Who?"

"Nkunda!" Kisah snapped, flinging the name in his face like a challenge.

"The one whom you favored?" he asked, his eyes narrowed, filled now with an anger that seemed to surpass her own.

It was, perhaps, the last thing that she had expected him to say and it sent a jolt of surprise through her. Quite suddenly, however, she recalled that she had done just that, though it had not been her intention to favor Nkunda so much as it was her determination to show Balian that she would not simply drop into his hands like a ripe plum because he demanded it.

It was unfortunate that she had not been born with the gift of foresight. She had not expected when she had done it that it would come back to haunt her. Faced with the prospect of angering him even more, however, she could not bring herself to answer.

Apparently, he took her silence as an affirmative, for he leaned close. "I will take pleasure in killing him."

Kisah paled, realizing abruptly that she had, once more, completely bungled everything. Instead of warning him as she had intended, she had thrown it out as a challenge in her anger. "I do not care," she said a little weakly.

"You lie," he said through gritted teeth.

Kisah gaped at him. Reaching out as he turned away, she grasped his tunic. "Nay! It is not a lie. I only meant to warn you."

He pulled her hands free and thrust her away from him. "You beg for his life."

"I swear to you on my mother's soul! He means nothing to me! Balian! Do not be careless because I have made you angry! They have found a way to endow him with the powers of Mortiver!

"Take me home, please! I can not bear the thought of having your blood on my hands."

He studied her a long moment. "I could almost believe that you think that would be an end to it."

Kisah stared at him in dismay, but she knew he was right. It would change nothing. Her father's hatred of the dragon folk was absolute. He would not rest knowing that even one had escaped. "It would be," she said, almost to herself, trying to convince herself that, if she only had the chance to speak with her father, she could end the blood letting.

He shook his head. "You truly do not know, do you?"

"What?"

"We were allies once ... brothers. It was my kind that taught yours how to shift into their human form, for the Wyvern did not know this power. For centuries we lived side by side, in harmony ... until the king of the Wyvern fell in love with a dragon princess. But she had already given her heart to another—the dragon king.

"Enraged, he slew her mate, thinking, perhaps, that he could win her heart if only he could be rid of the one she truly loved. Instead, he found that he had slain her, as well, for dragons mate for life and when she had lost her mate, she lost her will to live.

"When she died, he turned his rage upon my people, and slew them one by one until he believed he had slain them all."

Kisah was shaking her head. "This is not true! It can not be true! It was my father who...."

"It *is* true. I know because it was my mother he coveted, my father whom he slew."

"But ... you could not have been more than an infant! How could you know this? How could you have survived?"

He shook his head. "I was a boy. I remember it all quite well. I survived because my mother hid me, placed a spell upon me that kept even Mortiver from finding me. Centuries passed, the world changed and I with it. My mother was wise to bind me so long, else I would have sought out your people and destroyed them as they had destroyed mine ... or died in the trying. By the time that I was released, my need for revenge had burned itself away and acceptance for what I could not change had taken its place."

Kisah found that, as badly as she wanted to deny all that he'd said, she could not doubt him. Another thought occurred to her, however, and she found she needed to know the truth of it. "Had it?"

His brows rose questioningly.

"This need for revenge? Did you not seek me out to have your revenge upon my father?"

To her surprise, a faint smile curled his lips. "I sought you out because the seer, Syrian, told me you were my destiny. I knew when I first beheld you that he was right. There could be no other for me. Alas, it seems the rest of his prophecy was true, as well."

"What did he say?" Kisah asked fearfully.

"That you would bring me great joy—or sorrow. That, in loving you, I would give my life into your hands."

Kisah stared at him for several moments, feeling desperately unhappy that she had made such a mess of everything. It gave her no solace that she had never intentionally caused him pain, that she was not directly responsible for much of it, for she had spoken thoughtlessly, said things she could not call back. How, she wondered, could she convince him that she cared nothing for Nkunda? No matter what she said now, her actions before gave the lie to it.

Perhaps actions, not words, were what she needed now?

The thought had no more than crossed her mind when she moved toward him. Stopping only when she was standing toe to toe with him, she placed her palms against his chest and slid them upwards, rising up on her tiptoes and lifting her head so that she could brush her lips against his. He caught her waist in his hands. For a moment, she thought that he would push her away. She slipped her arms around his neck, tightening them, pressing more fully against him.

In the next moment, his arms closed tightly around her, his mouth opening over hers hungrily. A thrill of triumph went through her even as a heady rush of desire flooded her. She

kissed him back with equal fervor, entwined her tongue with his when he thrust it into her mouth.

Abruptly, he pulled away. Before she could protest, he scooped her into his arms, bent his knees and launched them both into the air with the flurry of flapping wings. Landing upon the balcony that overlooked the sea, he thrust the doors open with his mind and strode inside, down the corridor and into her room.

Edna shrieked when the doors flew open.

"Out!" Balian commanded and she ran from the room.

Kisah tilted her head up, gazing into Balian's eyes as he strode into the room and laid her upon the bed. His eyes blazed with need, his muscles bunched with restrained power. He wouldn't release her, couldn't cease touching her, just as she could not cease touching him.

She feared if she let go, the spell would be broken, that he would somehow leave her in anger.

Balian sank with her onto the bed, his arms propped on either side of her, crushing his body against hers, down into the mattress. She was surrounded by him, by his scent, his skin, the warmth of his flesh. One hair roughened thigh fell across hers, trapping her to the heat of his groin pressed into her hip. She felt melded to his body, the hard planes of his chest, the rippled muscles of his stomach. She ran her hands up his back, marveling at the musculature, the silken strength, craving to touch him everywhere, to feel him everywhere.

Her gown was little barrier to the heat and strength of his body, but suddenly it was too much, too much covering her.

As if reading her mind, he lifted and tore the gown away as his mouth came down on hers.

Kisah gasped in surprise, allowing him entrance. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, possessive, sweeping aside her small protest. Kisah whimpered into his mouth as he ravished her tongue and cupped a breast, pinching her nipple as his tongue tangled with her own.

Kisah felt dizzy, assaulted from all angles by swift, searing desire. He tasted sweet and wild, dangerous, intoxicatingly exciting. When he groaned into her mouth, she consumed his breath, his life force. Her senses heightened, raging out of control. Her blood sizzled as though on fire, burning down to her core. What had begun so simply was escalating farther and faster than she ever dreamed possible.

She couldn't think straight, knew only that she needed him inside her, plumbing that empty space that begged for satiation. Liquid heat trickled in her sex, soaking her, dampening her thighs, molten moisture that increased the burning of her loins instead of quenching the fire. He broke suddenly from her mouth, and she groaned at the loss of wet heat, moaning as he blazed a trail of kisses along her jaw to her ear. He nipped the sensitive lobe, swathing her with his tongue, breathing hotly into her ear. Goosebumps chased across her flesh, making her shudder beneath him.

Her thighs parted of their own accord, instinctively allowing him nearer, nudging him closer as he moved between her splayed thighs. She squirmed, unable to lie still another moment, needing something ... something she couldn't name.

He suckled her neck, hard, kneeling between her legs, moving forward until the foreign length of his cock nudged her bare cleft, parting her swollen folds. Kisah stiffened at the hot, hard invasion, wondering when he'd lost his loincloth, wondering how she could be so crazed as not to notice they were both naked.

He sensed the change in her, and he went rigid, ceasing the caress of his hands at her breasts, his mouth at her throat. A shudder went through him, called forth from his bones and very soul. His voice guttural, pained, he asked against her ear, "Do you want this to stop?"

"No, please don't," she whispered, cupping his neck, urging him for another kiss. He lifted his head, gazing into her eyes, unreadable save for the dark flash of passion and pain. Would this be their only chance? How much time had she wasted acting like a child? She could not go back now—there was no going back.

He bent and kissed her lightly, nipping her lips in a teasing nibble that stoked the flames of need high in her belly. Her sex felt drenched with it, and she couldn't imagine waiting any longer. She clutched his shoulders, eager for him to proceed, but he pulled back, moving down her body, denying her.

He slid his tongue down her throat, down the valley of her breasts, nipping her breasts with lips and teeth. She reached for him to beg him to stop, to not torture her, but he grasped her wrists and pinned them to her sides as he closed his mouth around one taut peak.

Wet heat latched onto her nipple, sucking hard, burning and aching and bliss in one potent combination. It lanced through her breast, deep in her belly, pulsing between her legs. Ecstasy nudged her, teasing the edges of her mind. Kisah gasped as pure pleasure arced through her body. Her insides coiled around it, begging for surcease.

He raked his teeth over her distended flesh, freeing one wrist as he thrust one hand down to cup her sex roughly, plunging into her cleft to find that swollen, achy bud. She groaned as he stroked her, suckled her. Her nails dug into the mattress trying to hold on as lightning jumped through her veins and scorched the shroud of sanity.

"Please ... no more ... I cannot take it," she gasped, writhing beneath him, desperate for completion.

He tore his mouth from her breast, freeing her other wrist to cup her buttocks, raising her hips from the mattress. "As my lady commands it," he murmured huskily.

Kisah wrapped her legs around his hips, jerking toward him as he propped on his arms, looking down at her with smoky, passion filled eyes. His cockhead nudged the opening of her womanhood, stretching the edges. He closed his eyes, his brow furrowed with pain, damp with perspiration. He pushed forward and the dull ache became pain, burning, damning pain.

He was huge, too large to fit. Kisah panted with exertion, trying to hold back her gasp of agony, trying to hold on to consciousness.

He whispered strange words that tickled her mind, twisted in her ears like cobwebs. Words of magic....

The pain eased, became no more. Only pleasure hovered now ... and the vast emptiness of her soul. The slickness of her cleft eased his passage, and he edged inside her, moving infinitesimally.

His arms shook as he stood above her, sliding inside her, so slowly she thought she would die before he was fully inside.

"Balian ... hold not back. Give yourself to me," she breathed, smoothing her palms up his taut arms and the tense line of his shoulders.

Her words broke him. A strangled groan tore from his throat as he plunged deep inside her. Kisah arched her back, screaming with the ecstasy, the stretching fullness.

He breathed brokenly above her, holding still, his breath so ragged, her heart ceased to beat. He lifted his head, staring into her eyes. She shuddered at the sadness there, the longing.

She felt wetness on her face, her own tears.

She cupped the back of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss, moving her lips tenderly across his.

He nibbled her hungrily, rotating his hips. She whimpered, her muscles spasming, clenching his cock. He withdrew, sliding out and then in with long, torturous strokes, grinding his pubic bone against her swollen clit, making her jerk with the sensation.

"I will never let you go," he breathed against her lips, watching her with eyes aglow with passion, plunging into her.

He set a tempo, short and fast, potent. Each stroke had her arching, quivering with sensation. Her muscles twitched

as he withdrew, gushed with wet arousal, and welcomed him inside her core with pulling, sucking muscles that clenched hard around his engorged cock. She could feel every rippled vein, the taut muscles of his thighs and hips, the hardness of his buttocks against her crossed calves.

He moved faster and faster, never taking his eyes from her, until she felt he captured her soul with but his eyes. Kisah couldn't look away, watched him as tremors climbed inside her with each pounding second.

A stillness engulfed her, blocking out sound, obscuring her vision save for the glow of his eyes, dulling touch save for the ecstasy pounding deep inside her. Her heart galloped, her lungs froze. Sudden, soul shattering bliss stole through her like a lightning strike. It echoed inside him, she could see it on his lips as he threw back his head. His skin glowed golden, blinding her with light. Light all around, everywhere. It came from him, her own skin, surrounding them as the waves of orgasm crashed and engulfed them in searing, painful pleasure.

Kisah tried to scream but she'd lost her voice, lost everything but Balian. He anchored her to the world. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight as he plunged into her and spewed his hot seed deep in her belly.

Kisah found her breath, breathed weakly against his temple, dropping her arms from his body as she collapsed feebly against the mattress.

The tears renewed themselves in her eyes, streaking her face. Balian lifted his head, his expression unfathomable.

The Dragon King
by Jaide Fox

He raised a hand, stroked his thumb across her bottom lip, calming the rage of emotion in her soul. She didn't know what to say, didn't know what to feel anymore. Her heart tripped over itself, her breath caught in her throat.

His eyes grew dark, shadowed by pain. "I will never let you go," he whispered.

Chapter Fifteen

Kisah was not so naïve as to believe that their coupling, however wonderful, had erased past mistakes, or would ensure harmonious future between them, but she was deeply reluctant to allow the world to intrude so quickly upon the heels of such a wondrous experience. As important as she knew it was to decide what was to be done about the trouble brewing upon the horizon therefore, she set it aside for a later time.

"You shift with such ease I find that I am impressed. I can barely shift at all."

Balian rolled onto his side and propped his head upon his hand, studying her. "This is something my parents taught me when I was very small. Your people have forgotten what they were taught and can not teach it to their young. Or, perhaps, they did not feel that they wanted, or needed, the gift.

"There are strengths, and weaknesses, to both forms, the human and the beast. You have it still, but you make little use of it. It is the gift of shifting that allows you to heal yourself, and slow aging—else you would live no longer than any mortal man."

Kisah rolled over so that she was facing him. "That much, I know."

Rolling from the bed, Balian held out his hand to her. After a moment, Kisah slipped to the edge of the bed and placed her hand in his. He led her from the room and to the balcony they had entered by, then faced her once more.

"You will find your beast inside of you if you but look for it. Close your eyes, seek it."

Obediently, Kisah closed her eyes, but she was not certain of what she was seeking. Finally, she opened her eyes again and shook her head. "Perhaps I was born without my beast?"

Balian shook his head. Lifting his hand, he brushed it lightly over her eyes, leaned close and whispered in her ear. "Close your eyes to the world and open your inner eye. Allow your mind to seek what lays dormant, waiting to be awakened. It is that part of you that yearns for freedom, that feels a fierce need to soar through the skies in search of prey."

Something stirred inside of her, an excitement not unlike the thrill of pleasure that washed through her when she and Balian coupled, but there was a wildness to it that went beyond. Her heart thundered in her chest as she felt it growing, consuming her. Frightened by the strange sensations, she jumped back, blinking at Balian in surprise. "You placed a spell upon me."

He shook his head. "Nay. I did not. I merely showed you your beast."

"I am not certain I want to yield to it," Kisah said shakily.

"You must free it from restraint before you can learn to control it."

Turning away, Balian climbed atop the balcony rail. Before Kisah even knew what he was about, he leapt into space. Shifting even as he plummeted toward the ground below, he swooped away, caught a current of air and soared upward.

Kisah's heart thundered in her chest as she watched him, but it was not all fear. Partly it was admiration, for he was a noble creature—and partly it was a yearning to soar as he soared, to feel air beneath her wings. With an effort, she climbed upon the balcony as he had. Balancing precariously, she closed her eyes once more, seeking that part of herself that Balian had shown her. Slowly, it built inside her once more, filling her with a fierce excitement. Heat rushed over her. Her skin prickled almost painfully, fire shot through the muscles of her body, so intense it almost seemed that she was melting. She shied away from it, closing her mind to the pain.

At once, she felt it receding, felt fear fill her mind in the place of the fierce excitement she had felt before. She wobbled on her perch, knew the moment that she lost her balance and screamed as she felt herself falling.

Balian caught her. In the blink of an eye, the talons that had gripped her became human arms, the plated dragon's chest was transformed into the smooth flesh of the man. Gently, he set her on the balcony once more. "My baby bird has not learned to fly from her nest," he said teasingly.

Amusement lit his eyes when she looked up at him, but she saw something beyond that—love. Why had she not realized it before? Why had she not believed his words of love?

Because, she realized, she had not felt it herself and had not recognized it for what it was. When, she wondered, had her feelings for him changed? She could recall no moment in time when she had felt something that should have told her

that she loved him, but she realized that she should have known it when she realized that she could not bear it if her father executed him. Instead, she had dismissed it as nothing more than sympathy. She had convinced herself that it was merely the injustice of the situation that had driven her to commit treason and plot to free him instead of accepting that he had stolen his way into her heart.

Balian frowned. "What is it, love? I did not mean to frighten you. I would never allow harm to come to you."

Kisah smiled with an effort. "I know you would not."

He caressed her cheek. "What then?"

"I am afraid."

Wrapping arms around her, he held her tightly a moment. "You said you trusted me."

Kisah shook her head, gripping his arms tightly. "Fool! I am not worried for myself."

Balian pulled away, looking at her in surprise.

"If you were not blind, you would have seen what I took such great care to hide even from myself. I love *you*, Balian. I am afraid for you."

His lips tightened. Releasing her, he stepped away. "You say this to protect Nkunda."

Kisah stamped her foot. "That is not true! Do you think I went to free you from my father's dungeon because of my concern for him?"

"Did you?"

Kisah gaped at him. "How could you even think that?"

He frowned. "I could not meet him in the final match when I was seized and imprisoned."

"Exactly! And if my concern had been for him, then I need not have concerned myself further. If I did not love you, I would not have warned you of my father's plot."

"You said that it was pity for my plight that drove you."

"I *lied!*" Kisah snapped angrily.

His lips twitched, but he shook his head. "I could not tell. How am I to know you are sincere now?"

Kisah gasped in outrage. "You want me to *prove* it!" she demanded.

"I would like that, yes."

She didn't know whether to laugh or hit him, but, despite his banter, she saw that he still doubted that he could trust her. She stepped closer to him, slipping her arms around his waist. "How am I to do that?" she asked, laying her cheek against his chest, listening to the comforting beat of his heart.

"Wed me ... in the ceremony of my people."

She pulled away to look up at him, smiling. "Yes."

To her surprise, instead of looking relieved, he frowned, looking away from her. "No. I should not have suggested it," he said, pulling away from her and pacing the length of the balcony.

She stared at his back, rigid now with tension as he stared at the sea. "Why?"

"Because, if you lie ... you will die."

Chapter Sixteen

Kisah's heart seemed to stand still in her chest. "What are you talking about?"

"Only two, pure of heart because of their love for one another, can stand upon the joining stone and exchange their vows. They must become as one, and that can not be when their hearts are divided."

Dismayed, Kisah could only stare at him blankly for several moments, but she no longer had any doubts. Perhaps it was he who doubted?

"I am willing."

He shook his head. "I can not chance it. You are too dear to me."

"You can not deny me this!" Kisah said angrily. "You doubt me, and yet you will not even give me the chance to prove that you are wrong?"

He turned upon her angrily. "If I am wrong, you will die!"

"That is my choice!"

"It is *my* life! I would rather live with doubts than lose you forever."

Kisah studied him for several moments. "You will lose me forever if you do not. I will not suffer your doubts. I will not stay with you."

"You can not leave!" he roared angrily.

"I can and I will!" she shouted back at him.

Surprised at her vehemence, he was silent for several moments. "Then we will go together tonight ... and we will

leave together as one ... or remain together in death as we could not in life, for I am weary past bearing of existing alone."

* * * *

The full moons had risen high in the sky when Kisah met Balian in the great hall. She was nervous, but she was excited, as well. Tonight she would wed Balian before his gods. Somehow, she would convince her father to accept her choice of husband.

Taking her hand when she reached him, Balian pulled her to him and simply held her for several moments. Finally, he pulled away and turned to the throne. It quivered as he stared at it and began to move backwards, revealing a stairwell that wound down into darkness. The absolute blackness of the pit unnerved her, but in a moment, light flickered, almost seeming to beckon to them.

Balian led her to the stairs and they began to descend, on and on it seemed until at last, when it seemed they must have gone down into the very bowels of the world, they at last reached the bottom. A single, arched doorway led out from the stairwell. Beyond it was the same utter darkness that had greeted them when the stairs were first revealed. As before, however, torches sprang to life, illuminating the cavern beyond ... for it was a cavern, rough hewn, lined with stalactites and stalagmites that jutted from the floor and ceiling like great, sharp teeth.

Kisah shivered slightly as Balian led her through the cavern, and then through a tunnel and into yet another, smaller cavern. Beyond that, lay yet another cavern, this one

far larger than the first. A river of molten fire flowed through the heart of the cavern, forming a pool at one end. Beyond the pool, the wall of the cavern had been carved into the shape of a crouching dragon. A rough hewn altar stood within its gaping jaws.

Balian led her to stand upon the altar. Facing her, he grasped both of her hands. His face was ashen, his hands as cold as her own. "I invoke thee, Hermantee, goddess of the dragon folk. Look down upon us and give us your blessing to unite."

Kisah's heart skittered painfully, fearfully, at his words, but that was as nothing when she saw what rose from the pool beside the altar, for it was a creature of fire, as beautiful as it was deadly.

Balian closed his eyes. "Hermantee, I love this woman with all of my heart, with all that I am. I give to myself to her, without reservation, beseeching you to make us as one."

Kisah swallowed with some difficulty when he opened his eyes once more and looked at her, waiting. "Hermantee," she said in a quaking voice, "I love this man with all of my heart, with all that I am. I give myself to him, without reservation, beseeching you to make us as one."

Silence fell. Kisah had begun to wonder what would happen next when the creature spread its arms, reaching out to them. Balian gripped her hands tightly as Hermantee's arms closed around them. Expecting to burst into flame the moment it touched them, Kisah was surprised to find instead that peace and joy filled her, and beyond that, something far more extraordinary. Her beast rose within her, without her

summoning. The pain she'd felt before as her body contorted, rose, but she closed her mind to it, allowing it to engulf her.

You are no maid, said a chiding voice.

Kisah looked around before she realized that the voice was inside her head. *Nay,* she replied in kind, *for I gave myself to the man I love.*

Balian.

Aye.

I sense doubt.

I am afraid for him. I fear my father will have him slain, as he slew Balian's father.

Your love for Balian will overcome that and bring peace between your two peoples.

Hope surged through her. *How? Please ... tell me what I must do!*

When the time comes, your heart will tell you.

Frustration surged through her. She needed wise counsel.

Amusement flooded through her, as if she could feel the laughter of the god Hermantee. *You will give birth to a new race, Kisah. You must be strong. Use the gift you were born with and all will be well.*

What gift? Wait! Tell me! But she sensed the goddess had withdrawn. To her surprise, when she looked down at herself, she saw that she was human once more. Or, perhaps, she had not shifted at all?

Balian, she saw, had dropped to his knees. He looked up at her for a moment and then pulled her to him, holding her tightly. "I thought she would take you from me," he said hoarsely.

"You should not have doubted me," Kisah told him, but it warmed her that he had been so fearful for her safety.

He chuckled. "I should not have." Releasing her at last, he rose and pulled her to her feet. "We have faced death together. Now we must face life."

Kisah smiled at him, but her heart clutched painfully in her chest at his words. He seemed to have no reservations that he could face the powers of Mortiver and triumph, but she had plenty enough for the two of them.

He led her back the way they had come, up into the castle and her room.

He faced her toward the mirror, sliding the sleeves of her gown down her shoulders, following the path of the fabric with his mouth.

"You are beautiful, wife. I want you to see yourself as I see you when we make love."

Kisah shivered, watching as he drew the gown down and let it drop to her feet. His lips trailed warm, moist kisses down her back, along the curve of her buttocks, his hands following around her belly, moving low on her hips.

He touched the top of her slit, nuzzling the bottom cleft of her buttocks as he dipped a finger inside her cleft to touch her clit.

Kisah bit her lip to halt the moan from escaping, breathing sharply through her nose as he nudged her legs wider with his face and fingers. His tongue snaked out, shockingly hot and wet against her folds, spurring a gush of liquid arousal to dampen her sex.

She gasped as he found her core and plunged his tongue deep inside her, flicking his fingers across her nub as he lapped the edges of her womanhood. Kisah jerked back against his mouth, arching her head back, clenching her hands into fists.

Pleasure climbed in her body, threatening to buckle her knees as again and again, he plumbed her core. He released her suddenly, rising on his feet, whirling her around. He bent and kissed her, and she could taste herself on his lips, smell her sweet arousal and his own heated response. He cupped her buttocks and lifted her, spreading her legs and guiding his cock to her opening.

He hovered a moment, building the anticipation, making her insides squirm with expectation, until she was desperate to feel him.

He plunged deep inside her with one stroke, and she cried out, tears blinding her as her muscles were stretched to the very brink of acceptance. She arched her head back as he blazed a molten trail down her throat, lifting her up and down on his cock, grinding against her in short strokes that had her orgasm racing toward her femininity. She caught it, spiraling out of control as the exquisite nirvana wrapped her in its arms, shimmering through her veins with blinding intensity. He came inside her at the same instant, his body in tune with hers, his cock pulsing and jerking deep in her core.

He held her there, against him, protective, loving. The high of pleasure receded, warming her muscles with residual heat.

Kisah trembled, kissing him, touching his face, loving the feel of him still inside her. She couldn't get enough of him. She felt starved, thirsty ... for him and only him.

He carried her to the bed, easing them down, massaging her cheeks as he laid them down on their sides.

"I hungry for you, Kisah. My soul was empty until I found you," he murmured huskily.

"As was mine, my love," she whispered.

He made love to her again that night, and every time she awakened. She felt no weakness from his loving, only exhilaration, and on the third night, she felt the quickening that told her Balian's child had found a home in her womb.

Chapter Seventeen

The chill that brushed Kisah's skin woke her and she sat up groggily, looking around. Balian, she saw, was standing before the window, staring out into the night. "What is it?" she asked fearfully, dreading his answer.

He turned to look at her. "They have come."

He strode toward her when she would have leapt from the bed, pulling her into his arms. "Nay. You can not see. They are beyond the boundaries yet, but I sense the barrier weakening."

"Let me go. I can speak to my father, make him see reason."

"You can not! He is more like to slay you for what he sees as your treachery than to listen to anything you have to say."

She would have argued with him if she had not feared as much herself. "You must at least let me try. He is not an evil man ... and I do not want harm to come to him anymore than I would have him harm you."

"I know this. I promise that I will do all that I can to make peace ... or if that can not be had, I will try to do him no lasting harm."

Kisah clutched at him. "Nay! Don't promise me that! Promise me that you will do what you must to protect yourself."

He caressed her cheek. "I will promise ... if you will make a promise to me."

"Anything!"

"Then promise me you will guard the life of our child. No matter what happens, promise that you will do all that you can to see him into this world and into manhood.

"Anything but that!" Kisah gasped, horrified. "You would not ask me that if you planned to keep your own promise!"

He smiled faintly. "I will not yield my life willingly. I've a mind to give my son siblings to grow up with."

Kisah relaxed fractionally, leaning against him. "Take me with you. At least, if I am there, there is a chance that we can make peace without bloodshed."

Balian stroked her hair. "Sleep, my princess. All will be well."

The moment he murmured the words over her, Kisah felt her consciousness slipping away, felt as if she were falling through a dark tunnel. Distress filled her, for she knew that he had placed a sleeping spell upon her. She struggled against it, but it seemed the harder she struggled, the deeper she fell.

She drifted for a time, aware that Balian had left her side. Faintly, a voice seemed to whisper to her. *Use the gift you were born with and all will be well.*

The gift? What gift? She wondered, trying to jog her sluggish mind to solve the puzzle.

Her beast! She knew suddenly that that was the answer, but she had never summoned her beast. She wasn't certain that she could. She could not see how it would help her even if she managed to do so.

She could not awaken from the spell Balian had cast upon her, however, and it occurred to her finally that she had

never been more distant to her human consciousness than she was now. Searching, she found her beast, rousing it, summoning it to take her. Dimly at first, and then more strongly, she felt her flesh prickle, felt the burn in her muscles as they changed shape and as the pain built, so did her consciousness, the lethargy lifted as energy surged through her.

She woke abruptly, as if from a nightmare.

Looking down at herself, she saw her arms were now tipped with three talons instead of five fingers and covered with feathers that gleamed palely in the dim room. Rising from the bed, she strode quickly across the room, freezing as she caught her reflection in the mirror on the wall. Her figure was much the same, but covered with feathers. Great wings had sprouted from her shoulder blades. Her head was not hers at all, but the head of a bird of prey, her eyes now golden, fierce.

Turning away, she ran from the room to the balcony at the end of the corridor, leaping from it without thought and flapping her wings. The wind raced past her as she gained speed and altitude.

In the distance, much further than her human eyes would have seen, she saw a great dragon locked in battle with two beings much like herself. On the ground below them lay dozens more and the ground was red with blood.

Her father had brought his army.

Uttering a cry of rage, Kisah flapped her wings, searching for and finding air currents to help speed her along, but she saw Balian fall even before she came close enough to realize

her brethren had not shifted as she had. Instead, they were merely winged men, armed with swords.

Contempt filled her. The blood lust of her beast consumed her as she burst into their midst with a flurry of wings, ripping at them with her talons, diving at them and rending their flesh with her hooked beak.

They cried out, turning upon her, but she was fully shifted, far faster, and far more deadly. Within moments she had sent three plummeting toward the ground. As she looked around for more prey, however, she saw Balian and her father below her. As she watched, horrified, the great dragon's knees buckled and he fell to the ground, shifting, becoming a man once more.

The ragged remains of her father's army surged forward, swords drawn and as they did so, Kisah dove for them, crying out her rage and agony, for she knew then that Edna had not lied about that much at least, her father had somehow summoned Mortiver's sleeping spell to drain Balian's strength.

The soldiers ducked and ran as she swooped down upon them over and over, tearing at them with her talons and beak, but she knew in her heart that there were far too many for her to overcome them all. Finally, having chased them to a safer distance, she landed by Balian's side. Already he was cut and bleeding, unable to heal himself because he was unable to shift.

Kneeling, she lifted him into her arms, hoping that she might carry him away, but he was far too heavy for her to lift. Wrapping her arms around him she held him to her, rocking him, weeping as she felt the life blood seeping from him. She

didn't even notice when she shifted, becoming human once more.

"Daughter?"

She lifted her head at the sound of her father's voice, looking up at him with hate in her eyes.

"We came to rescue you!" he cried out in anguish at the look on her face.

"You did not! You came to slay my husband! And you have done it! He grows cold. I feel his life flowing through my fingers and I can not stop it!"

"You have wed him?"

"I carry his child! Slay me, as well, father, for you can not slay the last dragon without putting your sword through my heart."

Her father dropped his sword arm to his side and fell to his knees. "Daughter, I would sooner fall upon my own sword than hurt you."

Kisah shook her head. "Can you not see that you have hurt me past bearing? I love him!" Turning away from him, she tilted her face to the sky. *Hermantee, help me!*

Tell me what I must do! You said that I would know!

You do know, Kisah. Look into your heart and you will find him there.

Kisah's heart skipped a beat. Balian had told her that they would become as one once joined. Was that it? Could she help him to find his beast and break the spell as she had broken the spell he had placed upon her?

Clutching him more tightly to her, she turned her mind inward, seeking her beast, summoning it, calling to his. She

felt her beast awaken, straining to break free of her human form. Slowly, almost distantly, she heard her mate's call as his beast stirred.

Come with me, my dragon! Awaken! Come to me!

She felt it more strongly then. Even as her own body shifted, she felt the coolness receding in his human body, replaced with a growing warmth. He stirred against her and she lifted her head to look down at him, watching with growing hope as his muscles rippled, elongated, changed structure, watching scales appear where only human skin had been before. The bleeding slowed, ceased. The gaping wounds began to close, the flesh to seal itself and then become whole, as though it had never been pierced.

He groaned, opened his eyes at last and looked at her uncomprehendingly for several moments. "My love?"

A gurgle of relieved laughter fought its way up her throat. "Yes, husband?"

He frowned, slowly pushing himself up, looking around at the soldiers who moved back nervously, at the king, who eyed him distrustfully. "You broke the sleeping spell?"

Kisah gave him a look. "Aye, love, I did. But I will slay you myself if you ever try that on me again! For I was almost too late to save you!"

He grinned a toothy dragon's grin, his eyes narrowing. "Nay, love. Next time I'll pull the covers over my head and send you in my stead!"

Kisah laughed, throwing her arms around his neck. "I love you, Balian! Take me home!"

Epilogue

Balian paced the floor like a caged beast. In all his life, he couldn't recall a single time when he'd been as frightened as he was now.

Kisah had been holed up in her room with her maid for most of the day. The maid had been in and out a dozen times or more, but she was always in a hurry and would only tell him that everything was going as expected.

That left a lot of room for his imagination to torment him. Although, he supposed her comments were supposed to reassure him. He hadn't been allowed in the room with Kisah. The one time he'd tried to stick his head in to have a look at her, Edna had slammed the door in his face and nearly took his nose off.

He was certain he couldn't take much more of this, but he also knew if he left, Kisah was almost certain to call for him, and there would be hell to pay.

Faintly, a strange noise filtered through the door.

He stopped in his tracks, listening intently. It came again, more pronounced now. He moved to the door, reaching for the handle, wondering if he dared open it.

The door was snatched open before he could turn the knob. Edna stood, beaming in the doorway. "You've a fine son, my lord."

Balian felt a knee weakening relief. "Kisah?" he asked.
"She's fine too. You can come in now."

Now that he'd been invited, he wasn't absolutely certain that he wanted to go in. He moved into the doorway and peered around the edge of the door. Kisah was sitting propped up in bed. She looked exhausted but happy as she studied the bundle in her arms. As if she sensed his presence, she looked up and smiled at him.

Relief flooded him. He strode across the room and knelt beside the bed, taking her hand. "All is well?" he asked.

Kisah chuckled. "Now it is. Would you like to see your son?"

Balian nodded. She held the bundle out to him, urging him to take it.

A cold sweat broke out on his brow. He smiled at her a little sickly. "He's beautiful," he said, refusing to take the tiny bundle.

Kisah gave him a look. "You can't even see him."

Thus urged, he reached to twitch the bundling back. A red-faced urchin met his gaze. Sprouting from his forehead was one thin lock of hair that curled over his brow.

Balian tried, really hard, to think of something positive to say. "He's got good lungs."

"He's beautiful," Kisah said challengingly.

Balian forced a smile. "Uh huh."

"He looks just like his daddy."

"Uh ... what? Think so?" He peered at the squalling, red-faced thing more closely. In truth, it resembled nothing so much as an over-ripe tomato. Beyond the gaping, squalling mouth, he could see nothing but a tiny button for a nose and wrinkles for where the eyes would be if they'd been open. He

The Dragon King
by Jaide Fox

knew Kisah was waiting, however. And she would expect her effort to be appreciated, regardless of the outcome.

"Thank you, love," he said.

The End

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