

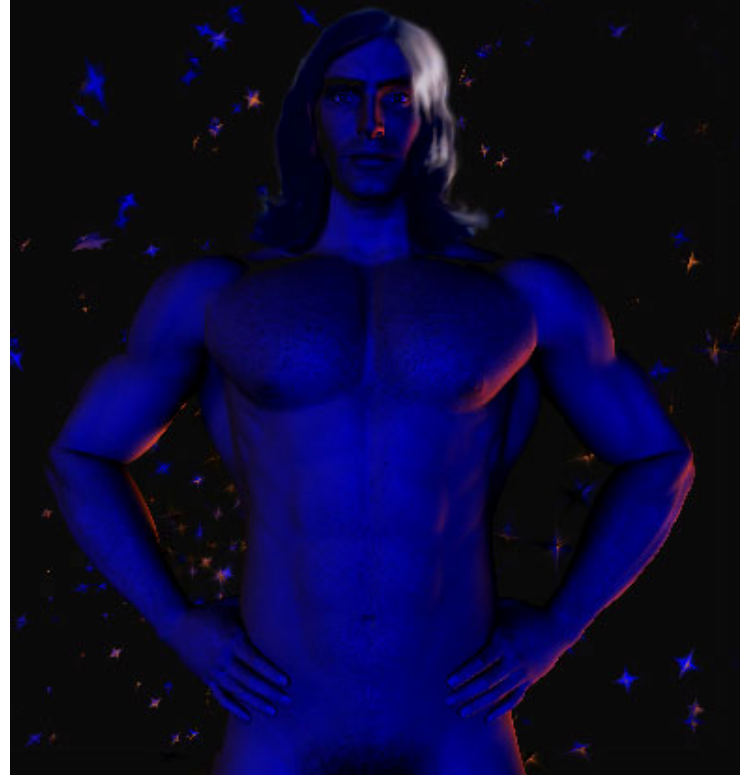
Eyes of Glass

by

Kaden Li

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To Kate, thanks for the encouragement!

Chapter One

She was the one.
She had to be—surely nothing less than her longing could have pulled him out of the sleep that had confined him for so many years. And if he was correct, if she was indeed the one he had waited for, then she would free him from this limbo he was trapped in. Soon, soon, he would taste again, touch again, feel again.

The woman lay in the center of a large, four-poster bed carved from dark wood. The windows were tightly shuttered, denying the entry of any moonlight, but that made no difference to his eyes. Long hair, the color of sweet honey, flowed across her pillow, framing a heart-shaped face with an upturned nose and a sprinkling of freckles. Although she had flung back the covers due to the heat of the night, she still wore a confining gown of heavy linen with long sleeves and a high, tightly-buttoned neckline.

He longed to undo those tight buttons, to expose the creamy flesh beneath. Her breasts would spill out and fill his hands with their lushness. But, to his

intense frustration, he couldn't, at least not yet. He was still caught in the limbo between worlds, only partially in her reality.

That had its advantages, though. If he could not remove the gown, at least it could not hinder him...

He drifted above her, ephemeral as a ghost. His lips brushed hers, tantalizing. She moaned in her sleep, lips parting for his exploration, and he smiled at the passionate nature that so clearly lurked within her. He wanted to seal his mouth against hers until those lips were swollen with kisses, but it was impossible in his current state. Instead, he kissed and licked his way down her neck, knowing that she felt only a light, erotic touch.

His hands slid over and through her gown, finding the nipples beneath. At his insistent ghost-touches, they began to harden into tight nubs of flesh. She whimpered in response, her back arching, demanding more. Pleased by her reaction, he lingered, teasing her by running his fingers lightly over the smooth mounds, approaching the taut nipples, then backing away again. The soft sounds coming from her throat became more insistent, and her head thrashed on the pillow in her sleep.

His mouth sealed over one nipple, and she cried out in pleasure. The salty taste of her sweat-soaked skin came to him faintly, and eagerness surged through him. Yes! Her desire for his touch was already drawing him closer to her world.

Even trapped in limbo as he was, his cock began to ache for her. Her body was so soft, so ripe, almost begging him to pin it beneath his own weight. Her

breasts would feel so good against the hardness of his chest, and he wanted to bury his cock in the tight, velvet heat of her.

A growl of frustration escaped him, and he left off teasing her breasts to trail a line of kisses down her belly. She moaned, spreading her thighs eagerly, and he turned his mouth to them, licking and nibbling his way up from her knees to the musky depths at the apex between her thighs. He ran his tongue up along her slit, tasting her—Goddess, even in this state he could taste her! She moaned eagerly, and he sucked on her swollen labia, then thrust his tongue deep into her. She cried out, her hips rocking, opening, beckoning him deeper, needing more, until he fastening his sucking mouth onto the engorged bud of her clit.

She cried out as she exploded in orgasm, her juices flooding out of her hungry cunt. He lapped at them frantically, wanting, needing to taste her. But he had spent his strength relentlessly, and he could feel himself being pulled back from her, back into limbo even as his heart and body cried out for him to stay.

His last glimpse was of her eyes fluttering open, their look one of satiation. They were green, he noted, hungry for any sight of her, any scrap of knowledge.

Until tomorrow night, my love, he thought.

* * *

Sasha awoke feeling drowsy and content. For a moment, she floated on a tide of well-being...until she became aware of the brush of her nightgown against

her tight nipples and the wetness between her thighs.

Blushing furiously, she sat up quickly, clutching the bedcovers. Thank Osan that she didn't have to share a room with anyone else like some of the other, less wealthy girls! If anyone realized that she'd been having impure dreams, she knew that the punishment would be harsh. Only last week, one of the male apprentices had been flogged in the courtyard for the sin of self-pleasure. Although she knew that it was for the good of his soul, Sasha had found herself pitying his pain and mortification. Certainly, she didn't want to end up like him.

Rising, she went to the small shrine in the main room connected to her bedroom. The statue of the God could not help but draw the eye of anyone entering the chamber, for no other forms of decoration were allowed to any member of the Order. The furnishings were simple, their cushions unadorned white, and no rugs softened the harshness of the stone floor. Kneeling before the shrine, Sasha bowed her head and prayed to Osan to take away these sinful longings that her flesh was prone to more and more often.

It was hard, though, to regret the pleasure the dream had given her. At the memory of the feel of a man's hands and mouth on her body, her nipples tightened again. Sasha bit her lip, hard enough to taste blood, and struggled to keep her mind on the repetitious chants that were meant to help keep desire at bay.

Her parents had been so proud when her magical talents proved great enough for her to be accepted

into the Order. The tester who had come to their estate had proclaimed her a Summoner, a rare talent that allowed her to draw objects to her in the natural world, and to draw elementals to her in the supernatural one. She had promised them that she would excel as an enchantress, that she would be as perfect as they had always expected her to be.

She couldn't do that with such evil thoughts in her mind. What sort of failure was she, to dream of being pleased by some anonymous man? If anyone found out about her base desires, she would be punished. Word would surely get back to her parents, and they would be horrified. Beyond horrified – Sasha felt sure that they had never had such wicked thoughts in their lives. What was wrong with her that she had them?

* * *

Sasha sat on the uncomfortable bench, trying to stifle a yawn, while the Hieromancer droned on from behind the lectern at the front of the enormous room. As with most of the rooms in the castle, there were no hangings or other forms of decoration to distract the mind from holy thoughts. The plain white marble of the walls, floor, and benches blurred in her tired gaze, and she wondered how much longer the Hieromancer could continue.

While in theory anyone was allowed to speak at a Gathering of the Order, these weekly meetings typically featured only the most powerful mages, who spent their time castigating the sinfulness of their underlings and extorting them all to greater heights of

self-denial. When she had first come to the castle where the Order lived and trained, Sasha had found the long, meandering speeches riveting. But after hearing the same thing week after week, the novelty had worn off, and now it was all she could do to stay awake.

Maybe if I fall asleep I'll have another dream.

That thought woke her up fast. Feeling a blush creep over her cheeks, she glanced around, trying to discern whether or not anyone noticed her embarrassment. Fortunately, the rest of the gathering seemed as listless as she. Despite the fact that it was high summer, the women around her were uniformly dressed in heavy white robes with long sleeves and high necks, elbow-length gloves, and demure headdresses that allowed not even a hair to escape from beneath them. A high wall split the room down the center, dividing the women's section from the men's so that the sight of the opposite sex couldn't serve as a distraction from the sermon.

Sasha sighed, wishing desperately for a nonexistent breeze that might at least dry some of the sweat from her face. Her best friend, Jacie, gave her a quick smile from where she sat at Sasha's side. Sasha grinned back, then hurriedly schooled her expression before anyone else could notice. Not paying attention when a higher-ranking mage was talking was almost as grave a sin as physical desire. By Osan, the way her sins were accumulating today, before long she'd fall in love and be truly damned!

Of course, the very idea was silly. Love—romantic love, anyway—was the Hag's greatest weapon to lure

the pure from the divine path, but to Sasha's relief she'd never felt even the faintest stirrings of temptation in that direction.

Uncomfortable with the path her thoughts were taking, Sasha returned her attention to the Hieromancer. He was a wizened old man, a contemporary of the great Arath himself, who had defeated the Dark Mage and purified the Order into the stronghold of righteousness it was today. A little to her surprise, the Hieromancer wasn't off on his usual rant about the evils of romantic love, but instead seemed to be recounting the climatic battle that had taken place between Arath and the Dark Mage.

"The Dark Mage called upon the powers of the Hag, the forces of Night, and led his depraved followers into damnation," the Hieromancer was saying. "Yet one among them repented, and came to Arath, who at that time was but the son of the First, the head of the Order. Arath saw a way to trap the Dark Mage, and gave orders for it to be done. The penitent returned to the Dark Mage, and Osan clouded the sight of the Dark One so that he did not see the true heart of the penitent, but saw only the reflection of his own depravity. Thus the penitent brought him within Arath's righteous grasp. The Dark Mage was bound, and his eyes gouged out, so that he might not bewitch any of the pure with his serpent's gaze."

Sasha suppressed a shudder. She'd always found the story of the Dark Mage's defeat a bit gruesome, to be honest. When she'd questioned her parents as a

child, asking why Arath had felt the need to torture the Dark One rather than simply kill him, she had been warned not to question the ways of goodness. Such questions could only come from the Hag, after all. Since then, she had not dared to repeat the query, even though it still vexed her mind to this day.

More proof of my impurity, I suppose, she thought with a mixture of regret and rebelliousness.

“But the Dark Mage escaped through treachery and fled to his citadel. There he replaced his lost eyes with two orbs of polished obsidian, as black as his foul heart.”

It was treachery for him to escape, but not for Arath to trick him into being captured in the first place, Sasha noted wryly.

“At last Osan gave a sign, and laid His hand upon Arath as His chosen warrior. Arath issued a challenge, demanding that the Dark Mage come to this very place, the heart of the Order, for his defeat. Unable to withstand the will of Osan, the Dark One came here and did battle with Arath. And lo, Arath thrust him bodily from the world, consigning him to hell for all time. The Dark Mage’s name was expunged from all records, and his likeness was destroyed, so that no taint of his evil could remain in Osan’s perfect world.”

The Hieromancer wandered on to other topics, but Sasha’s mind stayed on his tale. There were parts of it she had never understood—for example, if Osan could force the Dark Mage to come to the Order to be defeated, why hadn’t the God done it *before* the evil sorcerer had corrupted so many souls and sown such

discontent?

The ways of goodness are not for questioning, she reminded herself with a sigh. It was hard, though—her mind was active, and when she had no other task before her, it was difficult to keep it from wandering down such dangerous paths.

As soon as they were released from the Gathering, she walked briskly from the stifling hall, hoping to go to the women's gardens where she might be cooler. Not that she could remove any of her many layers of clothing, even in a portion of the castle reserved only for women, but at least she might find a breeze there. Before she had even left behind the common section of the castle that separated the women's wing from the men's, however, Jacie ran up and caught her arm.

"Come help me with my studies!" Jacie exclaimed. Her good-natured face was flushed bright pink from the sweltering heat, but excitement danced in her eyes.

Sasha grinned at her friend's good cheer. "Since when do you study on a Gathering day?"

"Since I was chosen to be tutored by Arath himself!"

Sasha gasped and clasped her friend's hands. "Jacie! That's wonderful!" To study under the First of the Order was a rare honor indeed. Truthfully, Sasha had never imagined that it would be given to Jacie. Not that her friend wasn't smart—she was—but Jacie had always preferred gossiping and strolling in the garden to studying.

"I know!" Jacie was practically bouncing up and down. One of the Matrons whose task was to watch

over the younger women and make certain that they stayed within the bounds of good conduct shot them a warning glare. Jacie immediately settled into a more staid gait, but was unable to quell the look of joy in her eyes. "My parents will be so pleased. I don't think they ever expected me to achieve all that much here, you know. I can't wait to tell them—they'll be here for the Downfall celebration, so I can tell them in person."

Sasha blinked. "The Downfall is soon? I'd forgotten."

Jacie rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Sasha, why do you think old Farius the Hieromancer was droning on about the defeat of the Dark Mage today?"

Sasha winced. "I guess I wasn't paying that much attention," she admitted, knowing that her friend wouldn't tell anyone and get her in trouble. The anniversary of the Dark Mage's Downfall, when he was banished to hell, was one of the most important holidays for members of the Order, and she couldn't believe that she had forgotten it.

Then again, she had been so busy with her studies lately that she could barely even recall what season it was, let alone what month or day. A brief flash of jealousy went through her—she spent all of her free moments studying, but it was Jacie who was chosen for tutoring by the First.

The sight of her friend's happy face caused any envy to disappear the moment it formed, however. She was genuinely pleased for Jacie. And, the truth was, Jacie probably deserved it more than Sasha. After all, did she really want to face the First knowing

what sort of wanton dreams she was having? She would probably die from embarrassment. No, far better that the honor went to Jacie instead.

Chapter Two

Sasha sat on the floor in front of her cold fireplace, rubbing tiredly at her eyes. Even though the Gathering day was supposed to be a time to pursue hobbies, renew acquaintances, or reflect on the strictures set down by Osan to guide their Order, she had spent it immersed in her studies. She and Jacie had been the only ones in the cavernous library, but her ebullient friend had been more than enough distraction from her uncertain thoughts.

This was her first year with the Order, the beginning of a lifetime of learning magic, but it was also the most difficult period in any mage's life. There were so many concepts that had to be learned and understood, so many strange symbols and arcane languages to be memorized, that sometimes it all made her head ache just to think about it. Even so, her mind eagerly devoured every new challenge that was set before it, and she found that she didn't want to abandon her books entirely even on rest days.

This evening, she had been studying the concepts surrounding the conjuration of elementals. Because of

her power as a Summoner, she was expected to be a powerful Conjuror as well—at least when she was allowed to try. The conjuration of elementals was not allowed until a student's third year, however, when they would be advanced enough to control and command the ephemeral creatures.

She looked up from her book and let out a small sigh as she realized that the sun had almost slipped below the horizon. Climbing to her feet, she reluctantly closed the heavy shutters that would keep the evils that lurked in the darkness at bay. Unfortunately, the shutters also cut off the cooling breeze and made the room even more uncomfortable than before.

With another sigh, Sasha walked back to her place on the floor, pausing to light a host of beeswax candles as she did so. Their flames would add to the heat, but there was nothing to be done about it if she wanted to be able to see what she was doing. Once she was back on the floor with the book in her lap, the stifling air and the long hours of study began to take their toll. Somnolence stole over her; her head drooped, and her fingers let the book slide wearily to the floor.

As if in a daze, Sasha felt something cool against her neck, as if someone blew air gently against her skin. Sighing with relief, she relaxed further, her mind drifting. The sensation of cool breath moved across the back of her neck, slipped lower, only to be foiled by the high neck of her robe.

Although they were allowed to take off their gloves and headdresses in the privacy of their own

quarters, further disrobing was severely looked down upon. But what harm could come from undoing just a few of the buttons? No one was likely to come looking for her this evening—Jacie was busy with Arath, and she had no other close friends. Her hands moving as if of their own accord, Sasha slowly undid some of the buttons, until her robe hung open all the way to the tops of her breasts. She sighed in pleasure as the breeze slipped lower, tantalizing the round mounds of her breasts, slipping down in the sweaty cleavage between them, moving over the hardening nubs of her nipples...

Sasha gasped in shock and jerked back. The breeze had changed from being a simple breeze—that had felt like a real touch! Startled, she looked around, and noticed for the first time that none of the candle flames wavered even slightly. The breeze—or breath—had touched only her.

“Who’s there?” she asked, feeling half alarmed and half silly. Surely the entire incident had been nothing but her imagination.

An insubstantial finger touched her cheek, slowly tracing its curve to the corner of her lips. “No one,” came a breathy answer, as much wind as voice.

Sasha’s heart beat more quickly, but in response to the touch rather than in fear. She was a mage, after all—even in her current untrained state, there were few things in the natural or supernatural worlds that she would ever have to fear. “Are you a ghost?” she asked uncertainly. The Order’s castle had served their kind for hundreds of years—no doubt it had seen more than its share of untimely deaths.

She sensed a moment of hesitation. "In a sense," came the answer. The voice was stronger this time—stronger, and undoubtedly male.

"You shouldn't be here," she gasped. Then she realized how ridiculous that statement would sound to a ghost, and a little laugh escaped her.

"I'm sorry," said the soft voice. She found herself straining to hear it, almost against her will. It was a beautiful voice, deep and melodious, and as soon as it fell silent she found herself wishing to hear it again. "I didn't mean to frighten you. You looked uncomfortable—I only wanted to help."

Sasha frowned. She knew almost nothing about ghosts, only that Exorcists were sometimes called upon to rid a place of them, just as they disposed of troublesome elementals. Because her power was the exact opposite—to draw things to her rather than send them away—she had never paid much attention to the sorts of things Exorcists dealt with. Of course, even she had heard tales of ghosts making odd noises or throwing things, but she had no idea how much truth there was to the rumors. Did ghosts ever converse with the living or try to help them?

"What's your name?" she asked curiously. This ghost, at least, didn't seem to intend harm.

"Elodan. And yours?"

"Sasha."

"Sasha." His voice made the name sound like a caress and sent a shiver down her spine. "You look so hot, Sasha. Let me help you."

The voice was low, seductive. The soft breeze touched her again, and Sasha felt her eyes close with

pleasure. A part of her wondered about how pure such an intimate touch could possibly be, even if it came from a ghost, but she couldn't quite force herself to button her robe back up. Instead, she arched her head back, unconsciously lifting her body so that her breasts were more exposed to the coolness he brought her.

Something cold and wet touched her skin, and she yelped in surprise. A small fragment of ice slid over her chest, across the hot pulse at the base of her throat. *Where did he get that from?* she wondered. *Perhaps ghosts retain at least some of their powers? If he was a Summoner in life, could he still call ice from the kitchen?*

Then the ice slid slowly over the tops of her breasts, causing all thought to disintegrate. An icy stream of melting water trickled down her cleavage, exquisite against her heated skin. Slowly, slowly, the ice dipped lower, until it pressed against the nipple, moving in little circles that kept the curious pain-pleasure from turning into real pain. She gasped, arching her back helplessly, and the ice moved to the other nipple. As it did so, sudden warmth closed over the first nipple, accompanied by a sucking sensation, as if her chilled flesh had been taken into a hot mouth.

"No..." she managed to mumble. "Stop. We shouldn't..." Her words trailed off into a gasp as the ghostly mouth replaced the ice once again.

The gentle sucking that was driving her slowly mad stopped for a moment, and she almost cried out with her need for him to continue. "Why not?" he asked.

"It's...it's wrong...the First says so."

"Ah." The ice was back, moving over the aching points of her nipples, making her bite her lip against the urge to beg him to take them back in his mouth. "You like it, though, don't you? You enjoy this. Besides, I'm just a ghost...it isn't as if you were doing this with a man..."

She knew that his logic was faulty, but her desire to argue disappeared when his mouth closed urgently on one nipple, sucking hard. She cried out in pleasure, her entire body aching with need. Heat had begun to build in her center, between her legs, and it flashed through her mind to wonder what the ice would feel like *there*.

As if her ghost had read her thoughts, mouth and ice were both suddenly gone from her breasts. She felt the wet, cold surface of the melting ice slide lazily up her inner thigh—apparently the ghost was insubstantial enough that he had no problems reaching through her dress.

Unable to help herself, she spread her legs wider. The ice brushed against her clit, making her jump, then caressed the hot folds of her labia, melting even faster as it did so. A moment later, it slipped up in her. She gasped and wriggled, but before the sensation could become uncomfortable, she felt a mouth fasten on her, the tongue thrusting deep, sucking the ice back out.

She cried out in pleasure, hips bucking helplessly as she came. Ghostly hands cradled her hips, holding her through it until the spasms ceased. Gasping for breath, Sasha lay on her back, her robe unbuttoned to

her waist, her legs spread wantonly. A soft touch fluttered over her face, and she felt the unmistakable sensation of lips brushing her own.

“Until tomorrow night,” whispered the voice. And then she was alone.

Chapter Three

Sasha propped her chin on her fist and tried to pretend that she was paying attention to the lecture. The room she sat in was one of the larger ones in which teaching sessions were held, which meant that she could safely lose herself in the anonymity of the crowd. As with the communal Gatherings, the students were strictly separated as to gender, although here only a wide aisle separated the men from the women. When the lecture had first begun, Sasha had tried stealing covert glances at the men, wondering if any of them resembled what her ghost had looked like in life. But, although the clothing the men were required to wear was far less concealing and restrictive than that of the women, nothing she saw stirred any interest in her at all. Apparently, she was free from temptation with them—only Elodan fanned the slumbering fire in her to life.

And what am I going to do about that?

Sasha had no question as to what she *should* do. She *should* summon an Exorcist immediately to rid her quarters of the lewd ghost. But that would

destroy Elodan, and somehow she couldn't bring herself to do that.

And besides...she wasn't entirely sure that she wanted him out of her life. Although it was impossible not to feel a little guilt over the night before, the damning despair that was said to overcome the victims of lust had not yet made itself known to her. According to everything she'd ever been taught, she should feel degraded, shamed, and unclean. Instead, the feelings that the ghost had awoken in her had been ones of pleasure and comfort. She felt good, rejuvenated...free.

What's wrong with me? she wondered. It was said that good women fainted at the mere idea of a man's touch. After marriage they had to put up with it in order to bear children, of course, but certainly they weren't supposed to enjoy it. She, on the other hand, was counting the hours until her ghost came back.

At the thought of his return tonight, a little shiver of anticipation ran up her back. Struggling to repress it, she told herself sternly that she would have to send him away. She would have to tell him that last night had been a freak event, but that she would never consent to such an experience again. He would either have to comply with her wishes, or she would be forced to summon an Exorcist.

Or I could wait until afterwards to tell him not to come back...

The closing of books all around her woke her from her daydream. Startled, she looked around and saw everyone rising to leave. The lesson was over. Realizing that she hadn't heard a word of it, Sasha

put away her blank parchment quickly, before anyone else could notice her lack of note taking. What was happening to her? She had always been one of the most dedicated students—now she wasted an entire lecture thinking utterly impure thoughts about a ghost!

As she hurried out of the classroom, Sasha nearly ran headfirst into Jacie. Startled, she grabbed her friend's wrist to keep her from falling—then let out a gasp of shock.

Jacie looked terrible, that was the only word for it. Her face looked pale even against the white of her headdress and robes, her eyes were red and swollen from crying, and the unguarded expression on her face was one of such anguish that it drove Sasha's own troubles far from her thoughts.

"Jacie?" she gasped. "Oh, honey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Jacie said, a little too emphatically. She jerked feebly against Sasha's grip. "Let me go. I'm late to a lecture."

"No you aren't—I know your schedule just as well as you, remember? Better, it would seem."

Sasha's attempt at levity fell flat. Jacie's eyes darted wildly about, reminding Sasha of a trapped animal. For the first time since they had met, her friend refused to look her in the eye. "I have somewhere I need to go. Just...just let me be."

"But...can't you tell me what's wrong? I want to help you."

"Nothing's wrong!" Jacie shouted, pulling hard against Sasha's grip. This time, Sasha let go. Her friend spun in a swirl of white and fled down the hall,

shoving others from her path heedlessly. A group of young men stared after her, puzzlement clear on their faces.

Shocked and uncertain, Sasha readjusted the sling that held her books. Something was terribly wrong with Jacie, that much was clear. Whatever it was, her friend obviously did not feel comfortable confiding in Sasha. Yet something had to be done to help her.

Suddenly determined, Sasha gave the sling one last tug and started off down the hallway. She, a mere first-year apprentice, might not be able to comfort her friend. But there was someone who could.

* * *

“What do you want, child?”

Sasha stood with her head down, eyes fixed on her white shoes. They contrasted sharply with the severe gray of the flagstones and made her want to scuff her feet like an arrant child. Telling herself to regain control, she risked a quick glance up through her lowered lashes. Arath, the First of their Order, the man who had defeated the Dark Mage, sat on the other side of a ponderous desk. Tomorrow would mark the fiftieth anniversary of that great victory, and the years since had not sat easily on the man who led the mages. His face was shriveled and wizened, with pale, clammy-looking skin. Only a few strands of gray hair still clung to his head, and his mouth was set into a permanent frown of displeasure, as if he tasted something sour.

“Forgive me for disturbing you, First,” she said,

before she could lose her nerve. "It's about my friend, Jacie. I saw her today, and she seemed very distressed, but she wouldn't tell me why. I thought, since you had taken an interest in her, you might be able to help. Your first tutoring session was last night – maybe you noticed something wrong then?"

Arath glared at her impatiently, and Sasha wilted. "I do not have time for the foolish airs of silly girls," the First proclaimed in his querulous voice. "The temptations that beset the young are many, and women are far more susceptible to them than men. Perhaps it is her conscience that troubles her."

Sasha felt the blood rise to her face. Those words seemed to fit her far better than Jacie. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I just thought –"

"I will look into the matter," Arath added, surprising her.

"Thank you! Jacie is so sweet, I just can't imagine –"

"You'd be surprised." An odd look passed over Arath's sour face. "Perhaps our tutoring session was too much for her. She wouldn't be the first young woman to succumb to...fancies...about me."

Sasha just managed to prevent her shock from showing on her face. Was the First mad? Jacie was barely twenty, while he looked twice his seventy years. Surely it had been a long time since young women were unable to resist fantasizing about him.

An attendant opened the door, letting Sasha out. She murmured her thanks, but her mind was already far away. Whatever Jacie's problem, surely it wasn't what the First imagined.

Still, it is said that Osan speaks directly to the First's ears, she thought uneasily. Surely He will give Arath the wisdom to deal with this. Surely.

But the memory of their conversation sat uneasily, like the unpleasant aftertaste of some poison fruit.

* * *

"How dare you?" Jacie demanded over the evening meal.

Startled, Sasha looked up. Jacie had kept her voice low, so no one else tried to listen in on their conversation. "How dare I what?"

"Go to the First and tell him that I was upset?" Tears brimmed in Jacie's eyes, and her mouth twisted into an ugly snarl. "I've been ordered to report to him tonight!"

"Jacie, we only want to help you —"

"I can do without your help! I don't even want you to talk to me ever again!" Jacie leapt to her feet, shot Sasha a withering glare, and left.

A few curious eyes turned in Sasha's direction, but when she ignored them, they drifted back to their own conversations. Alone, Sasha continued to chew on the bland food that was all the Order was allowed to eat—after all, taking pleasure in any activity of the body was a sin, and that included eating. When she was done, she Summoned a glass of water from the kitchens and sat sipping it slowly, her mind in turmoil.

Why was Jacie so angry with her? What had she done wrong? And how in the world was she

supposed to make it better without knowing the answers to the first two questions?

Distracted by her friend's problems, Sasha didn't even give a thought to the ghost waiting for her as she climbed the long stair to her room. Her chamber was high up in the north tower, affording her a privacy few others had, if only because most people didn't want to hike up a flight of fifty steps just to drop in and chat. It also meant that no one had been able to hear her passionate cries from the previous two nights, something for which she was profoundly grateful.

As soon as she reached her room, she lit a candle with a simple spell word, illuminating the shuttered darkness. As her eyes adjusted, she became aware of a shadowy figure standing near the cold hearth.

"Elodan?" she asked uncertainly. He was not substantial...but neither was he completely invisible as he had been before. Rather, she got the impression of skin, of two eyes and a mouth, and a lean body, but all the details were blurred, like a vision seen through a rain-streaked window.

Her ghost flashed what might have been a smile. "I like hearing my name on your lips." His voice was stronger, more substantial, as well. Just the sound of its low, sensual tones caused her blood to begin to heat.

Feeling tired and depressed, Sasha sank down on a chair. "We can't keep doing this. Last night was wonderful, but I could get into real trouble if anyone finds out."

He made no move towards her, but she could

sense his curiosity. "What would they do to you?"

"I don't know. A public flogging at best, I would think."

He shook his head, and she got the impression of long, dark hair. "How terrible. We will have to make certain that no one learns, then."

"It's too much of a risk." She tried to glare at him, but he seemed less visible when she looked directly towards him, so she had to settle for keeping him in the corner of her vision and scowling at nothing. "Who are—I mean, who were you, anyway? How long have you been here? Do you seduce every young woman unlucky enough to be assigned to this room?"

"I am Elodan," he said, as if that explained anything at all. She sensed his presence draw closer. "As for your other question," he added, his voice going low, "I was nothing before you came. Asleep, waiting, trapped in limbo, until your longing awoke me. There's only you, Sasha. Only you."

Ghostly hands trailed warmth down her arms. Sasha closed her eyes, arching her head back to give him access. Insubstantial lips touched her throat, nipped gently at her ear, making her squirm. "My longing?" she managed to gasp.

"Yes, my Sasha." The kisses stopped, but the hands kept roving, teasing her through her robe. "Don't lie to yourself or to me. I could feel your passion, your need. If I understand you aright, the Order tells you to keep that passion bottled up, hidden away, but it is too strong for them. *You* are too strong for them."

She wanted to protest, but his touch felt too good. When he kissed her, she whimpered, desperately

longing for the heat and solidity of a living man's touch. If only he could kiss her like that!

Then, suddenly, both hands and lips were withdrawn. She opened her eyes in surprise, saw him standing a few feet away, nothing but a faint smear of color and shape in front of the dark fireplace. "Your garments are too heavy, too restrictive," Elodan said huskily. "Take them off for me."

Trembling, Sasha rose uncertainly to her feet. She had never imagined herself disrobing for anyone—even married couples were instructed to keep on as much clothing as was practical when engaged in procreation. Feeling as though she stood on the edge of a precipice, she slowly pulled her gloves off, then unfastened her headdress and set it aside.

"You're so beautiful, Sasha," Elodan whispered. "You make me ache to please you. I would do anything for you."

She would never have thought a ghost could feel such things, but the groan in his voice made it clear that the sight of her affected him. An unexpected feeling of power rushed into her at that. It had never occurred to her that a woman could exert such control over a man through such simple things. The feeling made her bolder, so she reached up and began to slowly unbutton her robe, deliberately lingering over each of the ivory fasteners, drawing out the moment. She could feel his eyes on her, feel his hunger like a physical thing, and knowing that she was the cause of it sent desire racing through her as well. Her nipples hardened, and the now-familiar tingling began between her legs.

The robe slipped to the floor, and she stood clad only in her hair. Elodan groaned softly, the sound almost lost in the wind. "Yes, my beautiful Sasha. Touch yourself for me. Show me that you know you are a goddess."

Sasha hesitated, a bit shocked by his words. Still, having already gone this far, what would it hurt to do as he requested? She would stop if it became uncomfortable.

Her hands slowly reached up to cup her breasts. Although she was used to touching herself when she bathed, any more thorough explorations were forbidden. Now she ran her fingers lightly over her own skin, reveling in the soft heaviness of her breasts, the silkiness of her skin. The hard nubs of her nipples peaked under her fingers; she squeezed one gently between thumb and forefinger, and a bolt of pleasure seemed to arc between breast and clit. She moaned, her explorations becoming rougher and more urgent, heightening her need.

Keeping one hand on her nipple, she slid the other down across her belly, reveling in the smoothness of her muscles, until she reached the thick tangle of curls between her legs. Only half conscious of her own actions, she spread her legs farther apart, sliding her fingers in between to fondle the turgid folds of her labia. Wetness covered her fingers as she slid one, then two, into her vagina, trying desperately to ease the ache there.

"You have no idea what you do to me," Elodan growled from directly in front of her. Truthfully, she had almost forgotten his presence, and now her need

was so great that it didn't seem to matter that he was watching her do such lewd and wanton things. Indeed, it occurred to her that his presence made the entire situation that much more erotic.

Whimpering with need, she thrust her fingers in and out, her entire body ablaze with desire. "Let me help you," Elodan whispered. Another pair of fingers closed suddenly on the hard button of her clit, tugging urgently.

His touch sent her over the edge. Ecstasy seemed to explode out from her clit, washing over her in waves, her vagina contracting around her fingers. For a moment the entire world seemed to go blank, all thought and vision overwhelmed in a torrent of pleasure.

When she came back to herself, she was sprawled languidly in her chair. Elodan was no longer visible, but she could sense his presence beside her.

A faint stirring of guilt broke through the pleasant afterglow. "I shouldn't have let you talk me into that."

"Why not? Listen to your heart, Sasha. You know that it was beautiful. You know that you are beautiful." Ghostly lips brushed her forehead tenderly. "Tomorrow is the celebration of the Downfall, is it not? Come to me in the evening, as soon as the sun has set. There is something special I want to do with you."

A part of her argued that she should say no, that she should call for an Exorcist and have Elodan eradicated from her tower. But the newfound sense of herself as a woman won out. "All right. I'll be here."

Chapter Four

Because the anniversary of the Dark Mage's Downfall was a holiday, all lectures were cancelled, and the apprentice mages were allowed to spend their time as they would. In the evening, there would be a grand Gathering, which would include a speech from the First himself. If she kept her word to Elodan, though, Sasha would not be there to hear it.

As she ate her tasteless breakfast that morning, she asked herself again and again whether she was doing the right thing. All of the precepts that the Order lived by taught that physical pleasure of any kind was a sin. The only thing worse that she could possibly do would be to fall in love, a state that she knew little about but had always imagined as heinous. If she truly believed the teachings of the Order, she would not rendezvous with Elodan while everyone else was at the Gathering.

Elodan said that the teachings of the Order went against her nature. And it was true that she had been discontent ever since coming to the castle, although as

a member of the nobility she had been raised in an environment that was scarcely less restrictive. But didn't that just mean that she was defective?

It might help if she knew more about the ghost. Who had he been in life? How had he come to haunt the castle? He had refused to give her a straight answer when she tried to ask him, which troubled her. Was there some reason he was reluctant for her to know the truth?

So instead of joining the other apprentices outside for the games and contests that marked the Downfall celebrations, Sasha found herself on the way to the library, determined to discover the identity of her haunt. As she passed by a large window, however, she paused and looked down wistfully. The students and elder mages alike made a splash of white on the wide lawn outside. In one corner of the yard, two young men tried to navigate glowing balls of light around obstacles and through traps set by their opponents, while in another, a group of chanting women forced writhing fire elementals to spell out Arath's name and title. Although her skills were not nearly so advanced, Sasha still found herself overcome with longing to join her friends outside. Perhaps her research could wait until another day?

But no—she had an assignation with Elodan tonight, and he had hinted that he had something special planned for them. Better to know ahead of time whether or not he was the sort of person she should be consorting with. After all, so far she had been going only on heart and instinct—it was far past time to get reason involved as well.

As she turned back to the cold interior of the castle, Sasha heard the sound of slippers on stone. It seemed that she was not the only one trapped inside today. Her welcoming smile died as the approaching figure rounded the corner.

Jacie moved like an old woman, and there was a grimace of pain on her face that she tried to hide the moment she realized someone else was present. What she could not conceal was the dead, hopeless look in her eyes.

"Jacie?" Sasha gasped, horrified. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

Jacie swallowed convulsively. "I fell down the stairs," she mumbled.

Sasha quickly ran her eyes over her friend, looking for injury, but of course the only patch of visible skin was Jacie's face, and that at least looked unmarked. "You need to go to a healer immediately!"

"No. No, I'll be fine," Jacie protested.

Sasha frowned. Something was deeply wrong here. She could think of no logical reason for Jacie to refuse a healer. It was clear from the panicked look in the young woman's eyes that no amount of arguing would get her to have her injuries tended to.

"I have to go," Jacie said abruptly, then fled as quickly as her body would let her. Sasha stared after her, all sorts of wild speculation running through her head. Was Jacie practicing forbidden spells? Or was she trying to do magic that was too advanced for her, and had been caught in the backlash when her conjuring got out of control? Was that why she had been angry at Sasha for going to Arath yesterday, and

why she refused to see a healer now?

Deeply puzzled, and more than a little frightened for her friend's sake, Sasha walked the rest of the way to the library in a daze. Once there, she tried to put Jacie's problems out of her mind, knowing that there was nothing she could do to help until her friend confided in her. But, between Jacie's odd behavior and her own secrets, it was hard to concentrate for more than a few minutes at a stretch. So at first, she blamed her inability to find even the mention of Elodan's name in any archive on her own distracted state. It was only after hours of searching through birth records, the lists of noble houses, and even old student lists, that she realized there had to be some other reason.

As far as she could discover—and the library records went back centuries—there had never been a mage named Elodan. It was as if he had never existed at all.

* * *

Elodan returned to awareness as the sun began to set, and the power of the Goddess waxed. His first thought was disappointment that he was still trapped in a half-real state, still not fully in any world. His next was that, if things went as he expected them to, this would be the last time he awoke thus.

Sasha. He looked for her, but she had not yet come up to her quarters. His little Summoner. An involuntary smile curved his lips at the mere thought of her. She had proved to be everything he had hoped

for and more. Fiery, brave, possessed of a strong sense of self that was surprising in one who had been raised in the repressed society that Arath had created over the last fifty years.

If only I could tell her the truth, Elodan mused. But he didn't dare. Better to let Sasha labor on under her own false assumptions. Once she learned the truth, it would be too late for her to change her mind. He would be restored to the world, freed from limbo. As soon as that happened, he would explain to her why he had not corrected her assumptions. He would show her the careful web of lies that Arath had woven for the ugly fiction that it was.

Unless she rejects me utterly. The mere thought made him cold. What if Sasha turned away from him? What if she believed that he had used her only for his own purposes—that he didn't care for her at all? What if he returned from limbo only to lose her forever?

No! I won't let that happen. How he would prevent it, he didn't know—yet. He knew only that somehow he would.

He had to.

* * *

Sasha's hands trembled a little as she closed the door to her room behind her. Instantly, she was aware of Elodan's presence, knew exactly where he was standing despite having her back turned towards him. Her heart quickened immediately, and all her resolve began to come apart like cobwebs in her hands.

Ephemeral fingers trailed along her neck when she removed her headdress. The touch made her shiver with need. "We...we need to talk," she managed to say.

His arms slid around her, and she thought they looked even more solid than last night. For the first time, it occurred to her that what she was seeing was bare skin. The thought sent a bolt of desire through her even as his fingers slid over her breasts, tweaked gently at her nipples.

"We'll talk all you want...after," his sensuous voice breathed in her ear.

"You always leave after."

"Not tonight," he promised. Ghostly lips nibbled on her earlobe, making her jump. "I swear to you, I will answer any questions you have tonight."

She swallowed against a surge of desire. "But not until...after."

His fingers on her nipples were driving her mad. "Do you want to wait?" he asked, but there was a teasing note in his voice that said he knew just how aroused he was making her.

"No," she gasped.

"Take off your clothes and stand by the candle where I can see you."

She complied hastily. Every inch of her skin felt super-sensitive, and the touch of clothing against it was almost painfully restrictive. As soon as the last of her things fell away, she felt him running his hands over her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him standing in front of her, a creation of light and shadow. His fingers caressed her back, her shoulders,

then dove down to her breasts. A hungry mouth fastened on one nipple and she arched her back eagerly. His left hand slid sensuously over her buttocks, but she could feel the right delving lower, brushing lightly against her labia until her clitoris ached with the need to be touched.

"Lie down on the bed so that I can touch all of you," he whispered, his voice rough and urgent.

The sheets felt cool and rough against her bare skin. On fire for his touch, she lay back and spread her legs for him. His hands teased her nipples, cupped her breasts, then dropped lower. A moment later, she felt a ghostly tongue lick its way languorously up her swollen labia, then burrow amidst the folds.

"You taste so good," he whispered, lips brushing her skin as he spoke. "Open yourself for me so that I can taste more."

With a little moan, she reached down and held the folds of her labia apart for him; they felt hot against her fingers. His tongue dipped deep into her, drawing on the nectar flowing out, then swirled lazily over her labia, danced teasingly over her clit, then back in.

Sasha bit her lip and bucked her hips a little, whimpering. She wanted to come, badly, but he refused her, teasing with his tongue and lips until she thought she would go mad. "Please," she moaned at last, her voice ragged with desire.

"Please what?" he teased.

"I need you, I want you!"

"Do you want me in you, beautiful Sasha? Is that what you want?"

Surely that isn't possible. "Yes," she gasped. "Yes, I want you in me, Elodan!"

He shifted position, and she sensed that he was above her. Then she felt *something* brushing against her fingers where she still held herself open for him, pushing at the opening of her center...then slowly spreading it, pushing at the inner walls of her cunt.

It was similar to when she'd had her fingers in her yesterday, but different. The touch was too light, too ephemeral, could not penetrate deeply enough. She moaned frantically, her head thrashing on the pillow in frustrated desire.

"You need more, don't you?" Elodan gasped above her.

"Yes!"

"You want me, don't you? Tell me! Call out for me!"

"Elodan! I want you, I need you in me!"

He made an odd little sound, and she felt the pressure against her vagina increase as her opening was stretched wider. It felt as though he was slipping in deeper, spreading her more widely, but still it wasn't enough. She bucked wildly against him, needing more, desiring more. "Elodan!"

Deeper still, and it came to her distracted mind that he seemed more solid. She could see him now without having to look out of the corner of her eye. He was above her, hands braced to either side of her shoulders, his cock pushing urgently, insistently into her. She couldn't make out his expression, but she could hear the desire in his voice. "Yes, Sasha! We're almost there! Call me again, Sasha! Call me the rest of

the way to you! Summon me!"

"Elodan!" she screamed.

The cock in her finished the transition to full solidity, no longer a ghostly touch but a heavy, hard spear spreading open her body. She cried out in pleasure, beyond questioning what was happening, beyond caring that what she was doing was wrong by the Order's definition.

Elodan groaned and bent over her suddenly, his mouth coming down on hers. It was real, solid, and tasted of hot desire. His tongue slid between her lips, ruthlessly plundering her mouth, even as he shoved the engorged length of his cock all the way into her.

She would have screamed in ecstasy if his mouth hadn't sealed hers. She spasmed around him, the muscles of her cunt contracting around his hard length. He moaned against her mouth and began to thrust into her, pulling almost all the way out, then burying himself balls-deep in her tight wetness. Wave after wave of pleasure pounded through her, as if, once started, she couldn't stop coming.

He pulled his mouth free only to bury it in the crook of her neck, teeth scraping her skin. The hard muscles of his chest pushed aggressively against the burning peaks of her breasts, but they weren't half as hard as the cock he buried in her. She screamed with pleasure, back arching, then heard his moan.

"Sasha...oh, Sasha, you're so tight!" he growled in her ear. "I can't get enough of you! I want this to last...I want...ah, I can't stop!"

His hips went into a sudden, urgent rhythm, pounding desperately against hers. His back arched,

eyes closed, expression one of pleasure that bordered on pain. His stiff cock seemed to swell even larger in her—then she felt a flood of warmth deep within as he pumped his seed into her. The sight and feel of his pleasure overwhelmed her, dragged her over the edge into a shattering climax that wrung her entire body like a limp rag.

As Sasha floated gently down from her final orgasm, she felt a pair of very-solid lips brush her face tenderly. The mattress vibrated when he shifted off of her, as it had not when he first mounted her. Confused, she opened her eyes and found herself looking at a very real and un-ghost-like back. He sat on the edge of the bed, his pale, naked skin gleaming slightly in the light from the candle. Black hair tumbled past his shoulders, long and thick as a woman's.

"Elodan?" she asked, wondering if she had fallen asleep and was now dreaming. "What happened?"

"You did," he replied, his voice warm with what sounded suspiciously like affection. "I was trapped between worlds, my dear, neither in this one or the next. Your desire Summoned me from my prison and restored me to this world after five decades of limbo. Thank you."

She frowned at his back, but trepidation filled her heart. "I don't understand."

"I know," he said gently, and turned towards her.

Her first thought was that he was beautiful, although that wasn't a word she had realized could be applied to men until that moment. His dark hair tumbled loosely down around high cheekbones,

sensuous lips, and a straight nose—features that at first seemed flawless.

Until she noticed his eyes.

They were perfectly black—two smooth globes of volcanic glass, shaped and spelled to take the place of the eyes that had been torn from him.

“Osan, forgive me,” she whispered in horror. “You’re the Dark Mage.”

Chapter Five

"That is what they call me," Elodan admitted, rising to his feet, seeming unabashed by his nakedness. Not that his lack of clothing mattered—Sasha couldn't have torn her gaze from his false eyes if her life had depended upon it.

A terrible ache opened deep inside of her. Her ghost, whom she had befriended, whom she had trusted, was not a ghost at all. He was the Dark Mage, the terrible evil whose Downfall was being celebrated that very day.

A faint moan of denial tried to struggle up from a throat that suddenly felt too constricted for breath. Stunned, Sasha sank back, clutching the covers up over her body. He had tricked her, had lied to her, had used her. She felt unclean, dirty, violated. Arath was right—physical pleasure was a sin, only evil could come from it, and she was surely damned for what she had done.

"Sasha, please," he said, reaching out. She flinched back, and he dropped his hand with a sigh. "I can't

imagine what is going through your mind right now. I can only guess what lies Arath has told about me in the last fifty years, while I was stuck helpless in limbo where he left me. If you'll just give me the chance to explain—"

"No!" She surged to her feet, knocking him aside, and fled blindly from the bedroom. She didn't know where she meant to go, particularly in such a state of undress, but she knew that she had to get away from the demon in man's form who had tricked her. Most of the other mages would be in the great Gathering hall by now, listening to the story of the Downfall and celebrating Arath's victory over the very monster that she had unwittingly unleashed onto the world. Surely they would help her.

Her bare feet skidded on the stairs as she ran down the spiral from her tower. It flickered through her mind that she should find something—anything—to cover herself, so that she wouldn't appear before the assembled mages as she was, but she didn't dare stop for even a moment lest the Dark Mage catch her. If she stopped, if he found her before she reached help...she was only an apprentice, and there was no way her magic could stand up to his. He would surely kill her.

Blind with panic, Sasha dashed around a tight corner—and collided with a solid, warm body. For a moment, she was convinced that the Dark Mage had found her, and a startled scream burst out of her throat.

"What the—by Osan!" exclaimed a familiar voice, and Sasha almost wept with relief. The flickering light

of the torches along the walls showed her the Hieromancer's face. What he was doing in a part of the castle that should have been deserted, rather than attending to Arath during the celebration, she didn't know and didn't care.

"Thank the God," she gasped, grabbing at his wrist. "Please, my lord, I have done something terrible. You have to help me —"

"What is the meaning of this?" he snarled, tearing away from her. An odd light burned in his eyes as he raked his gaze over her naked form. "What do you think you're doing? Wicked temptress!"

The venom in his words broke through her haze of confusion and fear. "You don't understand — we are all in terrible danger," she began.

"What I understand is that you have rejected the Light of Osan by appearing before me thus!"

"But I —"

"Silence! There is no excuse for this!" The Hieromancer's eyes narrowed suddenly, and an odd little smile curved his mouth. "You women think you're above it all, pretending to be pure while all the time thinking impure things. You're all nothing but minions of the Hag, aren't you, sent by her to tempt men."

To her shock, he raised one hand and spoke a string of spell words. Light bloomed around his fingers as his will tore struggling fire elementals from their own world, forcing them to his service. Then he brought down his hand in a sudden, swift move, and a loud crack filled the air, accompanied by the smell of something burning.

Pain exploded in Sasha's shoulder, and she cried out, collapsing against the cold stone wall. Shock robbed her of her will, and she could do nothing but lay in a crumpled heap, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The Hieromancer let out a high-pitched giggle at the sight of her pain, and she saw an erection tenting the front of his robe. Then he raised his hand a second time.

"You will stop this immediately," said a cold, beautiful voice.

A tall, lean figure glided out of the shadows towards them. Ebony hair swirled around his face in an invisible wind, and the torchlight gleamed off obsidian eyes. He had conjured clothing from somewhere, Sasha noticed distractedly. A tight pair of black pants, that fit like a second skin, clung to his legs, emphasizing the bulge of his crotch. His black shirt was looser, but hung open to the waist, revealing pale skin over lean but well-defined muscles. Knee-high black boots tapped softly on the cold stone floor.

The Hieromancer's eyes widened in an expression of horror. "You – it isn't possible!"

"Hello, Farius," Elodan said malevolently. "I see that the last fifty years have not been kind to you. Or perhaps you have not been kind to them?"

The Hieromancer made a strangled noise, then attempted to fling the captive fire elementals at Elodan's face, screaming out the command for them to attack. Elodan countered swiftly: bluish elementals of a kind that Sasha had never seen before swarmed out of the air and eagerly attacked the Hieromancer's minions, extinguishing them in little puffs of smoke.

Those can't be water elementals, Sasha thought. Only elementals of fire and air could be conjured and coerced. To draw upon water or earth was strictly forbidden. Of course – he's the Dark Mage. What other powers would he use?

"I do not have time to play with you, Farius," Elodan said harshly. "Be warned, however – you have earned my wrath by harming this woman, and I will return to repay you."

The Hieromancer's face went pale, and he desperately began another spell. Before he could finish his conjuring, Elodan barked out a single, guttural word. The Hieromancer's eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed limply to the floor.

Silence fell over the corridor. Sasha sat pressed against the wall, staring blankly at the still form only a few feet from her. "You killed him," she said numbly.

"He only sleeps. You can check for yourself if you would like." Elodan crossed the space between them and knelt down by her. One hand touched her wounded shoulder tenderly. "Your injury is what concerns me now. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"N-no," she replied, trying not to look at him. So close, she could feel the heat of his body, could smell his masculine scent. The clothing he had conjured flattered his form in every possible way and sent warmth through her blood, so that she ached for him all over again.

"Good." His fingers were gentle on her shoulder. Coolness touched her burned skin, soothing it, and a moment later the pain was gone. Startled, she twisted

her head around to see unblemished skin where before there had been an ugly burn.

"What did you do?" she whispered.

A slight frown marred his features. "What do you mean? I healed you."

"With – with magic?"

"Yes. What else did you expect?"

"Our healers – that is, they use herbs, but nothing like this."

His frown deepened. "Healing is a gift of the Goddess given to her servants. You do not know this?"

"The Goddess? You mean the Hag?"

He stared at her a moment, clearly shocked. Then he closed his eyes and bowed his head, as if in sorrow. "Ah, lady, what have they done to you?" he murmured. She didn't know if he spoke to her or to his Goddess.

Sasha shifted slightly, uncertain whether she should take his moment of distraction as a chance to flee again. Her eyes went uncontrollably to the Hieromancer's slumped form. His attack had been so unexpected...but not as unexpected as her rescue.

"What do you want with me?" she asked uncertainly.

The Dark Mage sighed and rose to his feet. Clothing appeared in his hands, and he held it out to her. Startled, she took it. Even in the dim light, she could see that it consisted of a brightly-colored skirt and blouse, both far more revealing than anything she had ever worn. "I can't put this on!"

It was impossible to read the glassy orbs that took

the place of Elodan's eyes, but his tone was one of patience. "You must. It is what peasants wear—I conjured the clothes from the house of a washerwoman only a few miles from here. They will allow us to blend in once we are free of the castle."

"What? Are you insane? I'm not leaving with you!"

"You cannot remain here," Elodan said, infuriatingly reasonable. "The Hieromancer saw you with me. My spell won't last for long once I am gone from the castle—as soon as he awakes, he will tell everyone that I have returned and that you are my ally."

"I'm not your ally!"

Something that might have been disappointment or even pain flashed over his features. "As you say," he agreed neutrally. "But who will listen to your word against his?"

Sasha's heart sank. Elodan might have lied to her and betrayed her, but he was right about this. Everyone would think that she had willingly let the Dark Mage back into the world. She would be cast out of the Order at best. At worst...she had no idea what they would consider just punishment for such a crime.

She pulled on her clothes without responding, then accepted a pair of low boots that he conjured for her. As she took them, their fingers brushed together, and she found herself staring into his face. Hunger awoke in her; she longed to feel his lips bruising hers with kisses, longed to feel his hands on her breasts, his cock impaling her.

The Dark Mage had always been portrayed as a

monster, a heartless creature who sought only the destruction of all that was good and holy. It seemed impossible to reconcile that image of a ravening fiend with the quiet man in front of her now. The man who had saved her from further harm at the hands of one of her own. The man who had given her such pleasure.

The man who had, for all intents and purposes, ruined her life.

"I'll leave the castle with you," she said slowly, uncertainly. "Because you saved me from the Hieromancer. After that you're on your own."

He only nodded and gestured for her to lead the way. Feeling half-naked in her new clothing, Sasha crept down a series of hallways and stairs, avoiding any that led to the main hall where the Gathering would be held. As they walked, the Dark Mage stared about him with a sad expression.

"I remember when this was a place of beauty," he said wistfully. "There were paintings on the walls, colorful rugs underfoot, statues and vases in the nooks. Now it has been stripped bare, made cold and ugly."

"The things you speak of—paintings and such—they're just another sensual distraction," Sasha replied absently. "The God forbids them."

"That isn't true, and you know it."

Annoyed by his assumption, she shot him a glare over her shoulder. "I do not know any such thing, Dark Mage."

"Of course you do. Deep inside. In your heart." He reached out and ran his hand along her shoulders and

back, sending sparks of lust through her blood. "You have a passionate and sensual nature, Sasha. Why should you deny it? It is how the God and Goddess made you, after all."

"You speak as if Osan and the Hag are equals."

Elodan's mouth twitched into a frown, but it was not aimed at her. "You think that Arath's ways have been our ways for all time. That is not so. I was raised in this castle from childhood, young one. At that time, the God and Goddess were worshipped as they should be—as husband and wife. Osan ruled the day and Nyx the night, but they were parents to everything in the world they created.

"I followed the Goddess more closely than Osan, for that is where my heart led me, although I gave them both their due respect and devotion. But Arath has no love in his heart for any woman, mortal or Goddess. He succeeded in banishing me, and now that I have returned, I find that he has tried to turn the Goddess into a Hag, and has recast Osan in his own sick image!"

Sasha's heart beat faster, whether from fear of his heresy or some other reason she didn't know. "You lie!"

"I would never lie to you."

"That isn't true—you lied to me already. You told me that you were nothing but a ghost, not the shade of the Dark Mage waiting to be released back into the world!"

Elodan stopped walking. They stood together in a shadowy corner on the lowest level of the castle, near the side entrance that Sasha intended to lead him to.

"I allowed you to assume," he admitted. "If that was wrong of me, then I ask your forgiveness. You must understand how desperate I was. Fifty years ago, Arath and I fought. I was weak, and he was able to use his power to push me into another dimension. It didn't work—he only did it half-right. Arath was always careless when it came to anything other than himself.

"Instead of finding myself in another world, I was trapped between dimensions, in a sort of limbo. I had a physical body of a sort, but although my body did not age, it also did not feel. I tried to get free at first, but at length I realized that I could not do it myself—it would take a powerful Summoner to release me. So I fell into a sort of stasis and slept away the decades, waiting for the one who would call me. You."

He reached out and took her hands, raising them to his lips, then pressing them against his chest. She could feel his heart beating strongly beneath his warm skin. "It was your own longing, your own secret desires that woke me, Sasha. Yet I couldn't take the chance that you would still refuse the both of us, if you knew who I was. I am sorry—it was selfish of me. I swear by the Goddess that I will never lie to you again, even by a lie of omission."

Despite herself, she felt her anger melting away. *How awful it would be to be trapped in limbo like that*, she thought. But surely Arath hadn't known—surely a great man like the First wouldn't leave even an enemy in such a cruel state.

Uncertain what to do about her conflicted emotions, she turned from him and started off. "This

way. Or have things changed so much that you've forgotten?"

"Many things have changed," he said regretfully.

At last they reached a small door that let out into the orchards on one side of the castle. Even as they approached the door, Sasha realized her mistake and came to an abrupt halt. "I forgot. You'll have to go on without me after all."

He looked at her in surprise. "What has made you change your mind?"

"I wasn't thinking—I forgot that it's night out there."

A faint smile touched his sensual lips. "That it is."

"Humans can't go outside at night without protection. If the moon doesn't drive us mad, the Hag will send her servants to rend us to pieces!"

A scowl of annoyance creased his brow. "I understand that your head has been filled with lies of every sort, but you will not refer to the Goddess thus in my presence."

Although she sensed no real threat in the words, Sasha took a step back. A look of resignation passed over his face, and Elodan held out his hand to her. "People have walked in the night for thousands of years without hurt," he said wearily. "Dangerous things stalk in it, but that is just as true of the day. Trust me, Sasha. I would never do anything that might bring you harm."

She hesitated, torn between logic that said she couldn't face the darkness outside, and instinct that urged her to trust this man. *What do I have to lose?* she asked herself. *I'll never be welcome among the Order*

again, so I can't stay here. In the space of less than a week, my life has been reduced to shambles. Might as well add a walk in the moonlight to make the evening perfect. At least I'll find out whether it really does drive you mad.

He smiled when she took his hand, and the expression startled her with its sweetness. Strong fingers closed tightly over hers, and the pad of his thumb caressed her palm, sending a little erotic shiver through her. Without hesitation, he opened the door and led her out into the darkness.

The moon shone overhead, shedding its silver light over the landscape. Stars blazed with their own fire, like a million diamonds sewn into a black scarf. The cool air smelled of damp earth, and the branches of the trees whispered to one another in the breeze. Strange insects sang their mating songs, accompanied by the raucous croaking of frogs. The white flowers decorating the orchard looked like snow in the dim light, as if they had been transported to some enchanted winter.

Sasha turned and looked behind her as the Dark Mage led her deeper into the orchard. Moon- and starlight frosted the gray castle, transforming it from the structure she knew into something strange and magical. The shutters were pulled tight on every window, but the light of night candles seeped through the cracks around them. A sudden pang of grief touched her—she had spent most of her life preparing to come here, ever since her magical talents had been discovered as a child, and now she was leaving after less than a year of study. It didn't seem fair.

Elodan's hand tightened slightly on her own, as if he sensed her thoughts. "Don't you see, Sasha?" he asked softly. He tilted his head back, letting the breeze brush his long hair from his face. The blank glass of his eyes reflected the moonlight eerily. "The night is beautiful, magic, enchanting. There is nothing to fear."

At first, Sasha didn't reply. But when hordes of bloodthirsty goblins failed to appear, and she didn't run mad from the moonlight, and none of the other terrifying things she had been told haunted the night materialized, she gradually began to relax. Petals fell from the trees around them, reminding her again of drifting snow. Several settled in Elodan's dark hair, and the sight brought an involuntary smile to her lips. It was getting harder and harder to remember that she was supposed to be afraid of him, she realized. Harder and harder to remember that he was her enemy.

"It is beautiful," she agreed reluctantly.

He smiled and turned towards her. They stood beneath one of the oldest trees, the perfume of its flowers all around them. His long-fingered hands closed around her shoulders, pulling her to him, so that the tips of her breasts pressed against his firm chest. His erection pressed against her belly, hard and hot as it strained against the thin material of his trousers.

She thought that his kiss would be rough, demanding, so she was unprepared when his lips tenderly brushed against hers. All of her logic turned to ash, and she pressed back against him, rubbing her

body against his. He held back, though, deepening the kiss only slowly, taking the time to explore her mouth with such tender thoroughness that she wanted to scream with need.

"Ah, beautiful Sasha," he whispered when he ended their kiss. A part of her noted with pleasure that his breathing was rough and uncontrolled. "You drive me mad with desire. Even though I know it would be folly, I can barely keep from making love to you now."

She drew back from him, disturbed. "What do you mean, 'making love?'" It sounded terrible.

He frowned and tilted his head to the side, clearly puzzled by her question. "You don't know this term? It means...what we did earlier tonight."

"Sex."

He was touching her again, making it hard to think logically. "More than that," he murmured. "But yes." His mouth found her throat, wandered down to the juncture of neck and shoulder.

"Arath says...that is, Osan has decreed that romantic love is an abomination," she managed to say even as her breathing went ragged.

He stilled for a moment, then pulled back. The look on his face was a combination of outrage and fury. "What?" he snarled, hands tightening hard on her shoulders.

In that moment, she felt the power that lived in him. He was the Dark Mage: strong, dangerous, and skilled. His eyes were flat, black orbs, revealing nothing. She remembered how easily he had defeated the Hieromancer, and fear went through her.

Her fear must have shown on her face, because he let go of her and stepped back. "I didn't realize how deeply twisted Arath is," he said, running a hand through his long hair. "Damn him!"

She folded her arms over her chest, giving him a skeptical look. "Let me guess. Now you're going to tell me that romantic love isn't an evil curse."

Elodan sighed, and for a moment his weariness showed on his face. "It's not. It's the most wonderful thing that can happen to a person."

"So you claim."

"Was I wrong about the night?"

Sasha frowned. He had been right about that, as far as she could tell, anyway. But this...this went against her very upbringing. There were only so many beliefs she was prepared to overturn in one night.

"I don't expect you to take everything I say at face value," Elodan said, taking her hand and starting off once again. "Arath never wanted anyone to question his decrees, but I'm not like that. I'll welcome any questions you have, and do my best to answer them. And you need to listen to your own heart, analyze with your own mind. I only ask you to keep yourself open to whatever answers you might find, and not reject them out of hand."

His statements were so dangerously close to her own questioning nature that she wondered if he could see her thoughts. If so, he did not respond to them, only walked beside her wrapped in a brooding silence.

Chapter Six

They walked the rest of the night. On the other side of the orchard, they came upon a dusty road that ran through low farmland, and set out upon it. Sasha didn't know where they were going and was too tired to ask.

As dawn broke, a farmer's cart pulled up beside them. As the man approached, Elodan called upon air elementals to create a small illusion to hide his obsidian eyes. The incantation he used was unfamiliar to Sasha, for it contained no threats of punishment if the elementals should not do his bidding, but was rather an entreaty.

Sasha was too embarrassed by what to her seemed revealing clothing to look at the farmer at first, but as he chatted unknowingly with the Dark Mage, she slowly realized that he was barely giving her a second glance. Apparently, Elodan was right, and peasant women didn't routinely go covered from neck to toe the way the nobility did.

The farmer offered them a ride, for which Sasha was grateful. She curled up in the sweet hay in the back of his cart and fell almost instantly into a deep

sleep brought on by exhaustion. By the time she awoke, it was almost nightfall.

The cart trundled to a halt in the center of a small village square. Sasha sat up sleepily, pulling bits of hay from her hair. Elodan was perched up by the farmer, looking as refreshed as if he had not been awake for an entire night and a day. "Thank you," he said, hopping down with a wave, before turning back to help her out.

"And you—you made a long trip go much faster!" called the farmer, a smile on his broad face.

Apparently I'm not the only one Elodan can charm, Sasha thought sourly.

The village they found themselves in was tiny, nothing more than a few houses and an inn huddled around a central square. A large fountain stood in the center of the square, and women clustered about it, talking happily as they filled jugs with water for their homes. For the most part, they were dressed in bright colors, and their blouses certainly didn't come all the way up to their necks. Why, some of them were even showing off small amounts of cleavage! The thought of dressing like that made heat come to Sasha's face...but at the same time, it also made her feel curiously daring.

Elodan led her to the inn. "I Summoned some gold from Arath's personal vault," he said with a conspiratorial smile, then laughed at her scandalized glare.

The smell of baking bread filled the inn, making Sasha's stomach growl. The late sunlight slanted in through the windows, washing the warm wood of the

interior with gold. A few patrons sat at the tables in the common room, eating and drinking in small groups. Most of them paid no attention to her or Elodan, but one or two glanced up with interest. She wondered if they were locals, curious about outsiders come to their little hamlet.

A buxom young woman stood behind the bar, showing off more bare breast than Sasha had ever seen in her life. The maid's blue eyes were friendly, and her cheeks glowed with health. Looking at her made Sasha feel pale and flat.

As they approached, she leaned over the bar, revealing even more of her charms. "Good evening, love," she said brightly, all of her attention fixed on Elodan.

He gave her a charming smile. "Good evening," he replied in that melodious voice. "Have you a room?"

The woman's smile grew larger, and her eyes did a slow run over Elodan's figure. "Oh, that I do, honey," she murmured, licking her lips.

The realization that this—this *woman*—was showing an interest in Elodan's body made ice form in the pit of Sasha's stomach. How dare she, when he was clearly with Sasha? Without realizing it, she leveled a scowl at the barmaid.

Elodan's smile never faltered. "For myself and my companion," he corrected gently.

With a sigh of frustration, the barmaid nodded and began to negotiate payment. Sasha ignored their conversation, preferring to seethe in silence. When it was concluded, Elodan received a small key, took Sasha's hand, and led her to the stairs in the back of

the room. Their chamber was on the second floor, at the end of a long hall. Elodan unlocked the door and motioned for her to enter, and Sasha went inside, so angry that she barely saw the warm fireplace, cozy chairs, and large bed.

"You have nothing to be jealous of," Elodan said with amusement in his tone. He locked the door behind them and tossed the key casually on a small table.

His words shocked her. "I'm not jealous," she denied automatically.

The amused smile didn't leave his lips. "Aren't you? Then why do you care if another woman looks at me?"

"I—I don't," she protested. It sounded feeble even to her.

"Really?" He crossed the space in between them suddenly. She started to back away, but found her spine pressed against the back of a chair, blocking her retreat. The illusion had disappeared from his eyes, and she found herself staring into a pair of burning, black orbs. The heat from his body seemed to scald her even through their clothing.

Before she could protest, he had captured both wrists in one hand, holding them behind her back. His touch was light but firm, refusing to release her, although in truth her struggles were half-hearted at best. Elodan's hard body pressed against hers, and her nipples stiffened instantly under the thin fabric of her blouse. His erection felt hard and hot through the layers of clothing that separated them, and she rubbed against him instinctively, needing to feel his

arousal.

His free hand found the drawstring that held her blouse closed. It came loose, and he pulled the fabric down to reveal her breasts. She moaned helplessly as his fingers toyed with her nipples, teasing them into hard peaks of desire. "I think that you are jealous," he whispered. "I think you want to keep me all to yourself, isn't that right, young one?" When she didn't answer, he laughed softly. "You don't want to admit that you want me, is that it? But you do. I can feel it."

He dropped his hand from her breasts and caught up her skirt, sliding beneath it. Unable to stop herself, she spread her thighs apart for him, heard his low chuckle of triumph. His fingers caressed her, tugging gently on her clitoris, then parting her labia to slide deep inside. She groaned, grinding against his hand, desperate for the release she knew he could give her.

"I'm not going to make it so easy for you, my dear," he murmured, pulling his hand away. Holding her gaze with his own, he deliberately licked her juices from his fingers. "You taste so good. I want you, Sasha. Feel how I want you."

He let go of her wrists, guiding her hands to his erection. She rubbed at it through the taut fabric of his trousers, incredulous at its thickness and length. Surely it wasn't so big as it seemed.

He moaned at her touch. Enjoying the feeling of control, of power, that his reaction gave her, she slid her hands up to his shirt, pushing it aside to reveal his nipples. Experimentally, she tugged on one with her fingers, eliciting a gasp of pleasure. "Harder," he

whispered urgently, then moaned when she did as he asked.

In a single, swift movement he pulled his tunic over his head and discarded it onto the floor. Intoxicated by his scent, by the sight of his bare flesh, Sasha rubbed her face against his chest, then seized one nipple in her mouth. His skin tasted of salt, and she licked it enthusiastically before nibbling on it with her teeth. He groaned again and arched against her. "Goddess, Sasha, that feels so good!"

Emboldened, she slid her hands down to his trousers and began to undo the ties that held them about his slender hips. As she eased them down, his erection sprang free. Startled, she automatically ran her hand over its heavy length. "Surely all that wasn't in me last night," she said in disbelief. "It's too big!"

He grinned and stroked his cock, as if admiring its length and thickness. "More like a perfect fit, my Sasha."

Intrigued by his organ, she dropped to her knees to study it more closely. Fluid beaded at the tip, and he angled his hips towards her, gently brushing it across her lips. The skin felt like the finest velvet, and his precome tasted wonderfully salty. Unable to resist, she licked it off, then slid her lips around the flared head of his cock. Elodan groaned, gathering bunches of her hair in his hands. Pleased by his reaction, she took more of him into her mouth, enjoying the fit and taste. One of her hands caressed his balls, which were drawn tightly up in their little sack.

"Enough," he gasped, pulling her head away from him. Bringing her to her feet, he kissed her

passionately, his tongue thrusting aggressively into her mouth. Her skirt fell to the floor, puddling around their feet, and the hot tip of his cock pressed into her thigh.

Strong hands lifted her, carried her a short distance, and then set her down on the edge of the table. Spreading her thighs, he pressed the tip of his cock against her clit, moving it in small teasing circles. "Please, Elodan," she begged, wanting to impale herself on the cock that remained torturously just out of reach.

"Look," he whispered, leaning his body back a little so that she could get an unobstructed view of his cock. The head slipped lower, pressed against her opening, then began to penetrate her with an agonizing slowness. She moaned, feeling the opening to her cunt stretch to accommodate the flared head, then close tightly around his shaft once it was in.

He paused, then, just the head of his cock in her. "Still think it won't fit?" he asked teasingly.

"More," she gasped frantically.

He pushed in, maintaining a slow, steady pace that she thought might drive her mad. Deeper and deeper she felt the head penetrating, while his thick shaft kept her opening wonderfully stretched. "You're so wet, so *tight*," he groaned.

Then he was in her, totally in her, so that his hips pressed against her body. She felt stuffed, stretched, wonderfully filled. Then he withdrew slightly, pushed back in a short, hard thrust, his cock scraping the bottom of her clit as it passed, his hips pushing hard against the little button, and she exploded. Her

cunt contracted hard around his incredible stiffness, and he moaned, holding her hips still while he pounded into her. "God, I thought you were tight before," he managed to gasp as wave after wave of ecstasy poured through her, each one clenching her even harder around him.

Once her orgasms had eased, though, he slipped out of her. Before she could protest at the sudden emptiness, he dropped to his knees, burying his face between her legs like a man dying of thirst. His thumbs spread her labia, then she felt his tongue thrust into her stretched cunt, lapping at her wetness. She arched her back, thrusting her hips at him, and his mouth moved, sucking insistently on her clit until she thought she would go mad with pleasure.

"I need you...back in me," Sasha managed to gasp.

He drew back, a little reluctantly, then stood up and kissed her deep. The salty, musky taste of her own passion was on his lips, adding an erotic intimacy to the kiss. His arms slid around her, and he lifted her from the table, carried her across the room, and gently laid her back on the bed.

Elodan stood beside the bed a moment, looking down on her. The evening light through the window turned his skin into gold, making her want to lick every inch of it. The clean, strong features of his face were twisted into a look of such intense desire that it was hard for her to believe that she could have inspired it, and his cock jutted out proudly in front of him. At that moment, nothing else mattered except him and what his body could do to hers.

She reached for him, tugging him gently towards

the bed. A smile of satisfaction flitted over his lips at her eagerness. "Roll over," he murmured.

A little confused by his request, she complied nonetheless. His hands slid down the length of her back, kneaded her buttocks, then gripped her hips and lifted them off the bed. The hot tip of his cock pressed insistently against her slick opening, then slid back in, feeling even larger in this position. Sasha gasped and pushed back against him, her buttocks against his belly. His hands tightened gently on her hips, holding her steady as he began to thrust into her.

It felt incredible, but there was no pressure on her clit this way. She whimpered softly and heard his low, sexy laugh. One hand snaked around, found her hard little button and began to fondle it, tugging and stroking. The sensation, combined with the feel of his hard cock stuffing her, sent her over the edge again. Her hands clenched on the bed sheets, and she smothered a scream of ecstasy in the pillow.

Elodan made a noise like a soft growl, bending over her so that his chest pressed against her back. She felt the scrape of teeth against the skin of her neck; then he nipped at her gently, not enough to break the skin but more than enough to send another surge of erotic heat through her body. While one hand remained occupied with her clit, the other moved to clasp one of her swaying breasts, cupping it, fingers pinching the nipple.

The intense sensations of his teeth on her neck, his hand on her breast, his fingers on her clit, and the stiffness of his cock burying itself over and over in her

cunt were too much. As another orgasm tore through her, she could feel her vagina clenching his cock, milking it in wave after wave of pleasure. Elodan's thrusts took on a sudden, urgent rhythm, his cock seemed to swell even larger—then he froze for an instant, the warmth of his seed gushing deep in her as he pushed hard into her body. Forgetting all inhibition, she cried out, climaxing with him in an orgasm that seemed to wring her entire body. His hips moved in a series of short jerks, carrying her through it, until the final wave subsided.

Slowly, Sasha came back to herself. They crouched together on the bed, still connected, as if reluctant to be separated any further. Elodan's breath stirred the short hairs on her neck. His mouth kissed her where his teeth had bitten, gently, small kisses that unexpectedly stole her breath with their obvious affection.

She moved to pull away from him, suddenly confused. The Dark Mage cared about her, she realized, befuddled. But why should he do so? And did she care only about the pleasure he could give to her...or was there affection on her part as well?

Elodan slid out of her, and the fluids of their combined passion trickled down her thighs. He stretched out, pulling her against him. The gesture so surprised her that she obeyed, finding herself lying by him, her head pillowed on his shoulder and his arms around her. The embrace made her feel cherished, protected, even safe, although she didn't understand why it should. She fell asleep pondering the strange feelings that had taken hold of her.

Chapter Seven

E lodan awoke after sundown to see Sasha kneeling on the rug in front of the fire. It was still early enough in the spring for the occasional cool night, and a small fire burned brightly to take the edge off the chill. The windows stood open, he noted with pleasure, and let in a fragrant breeze.

He took the opportunity to study Sasha though half-closed eyes. She had dressed again—that was a bit disappointing, but hardly unexpected, given what he had learned about Arath’s pollution of the Order. She would not be entirely comfortable with her own body yet.

He wondered what she was thinking about as she watched the fire, and a shadow of doubt touched him. Perhaps she was considering how he had destroyed the life she had known. Even though the prison of the Order’s strictures had been strangling her generous and passionate nature, he still felt a surge of guilt that he had brought sorrow upon her. No doubt she had friends that she was missing, and who wondered

where she was tonight. And what about any family? They would certainly not approve of her liaison with the Dark Mage.

He ached to tell her that he loved her, small recompense that it might be. Yet even that was denied to him – Arath’s sickness had sullied even the concept of love in her mind. That more than anything made him regret his long-ago defeat. If only he had not been betrayed, if only he had not been hurt, if only he had been able to defeat Arath, then none of this would have happened. The Goddess would not have been banished to the status of a monster to frighten children, and the worship of the God would not have been perverted into a tool to subjugate women and make people afraid of the very natures that the deities had given them.

Forgive me for failing you, he thought, offering it up both as a prayer to the Goddess and a more personal apology to Sasha.

He loved his little Summoner, desperately. That she could ever come to love him, even if she did learn that love was not the abomination she feared...he doubted. He’d had lovers before, and all of them had been friends – despite what Arath claimed, he was not one to treat sex casually – but none of them had awakened his heart the way Sasha did. What would he do if she turned away from him?

Trying to push aside his own morose thoughts, he yawned and sat up. As he did so, pain spiked unexpectedly through his skull, as if someone had shoved a pair of hot pokers in through his eyes. He gasped and clasped his hands over them, trying to let

the pain flow through him and out again.

"Are you all right?" Sasha gasped. In an instant, she was at his side, her hands touching his bare shoulders tentatively.

The pain was beginning to recede already. Taking a deep breath, he cautiously dropped his hands and nodded. "Aye. My eyes hurt sometimes, that's all. It's a small price to pay to see again."

She sat down on the edge of the bed, peering at his face with a little frown on her lips. He wanted to kiss it away, but it was obvious that she needed to talk, so he refrained. "Is it...true?" she asked hesitantly. "I mean...did Arath really have your real eyes gouged out?"

Desire wilted. Elodan frowned, not particularly wanting to remember the incident. "Yes," he said, his voice wooden even to his own ears.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. One of her small hands moved to rest on his, a gesture of comfort that heartened him. "I didn't mean to bring up painful memories. No matter what you did, I can't...I don't believe that you deserved that."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence."

"Your eyes are fascinating," she went on, ignoring his sarcasm. "I'm just an apprentice, so I don't know much about the fashioning of mystical objects, but I've never heard of anything like them before. How did you make them?"

"I didn't. I couldn't have—I was in too much pain at the time, not to mention blinded." He shuddered at the memory of that bleak time. "The elementals created them for me, as a gift."

Puzzlement showed on her lovely face. "The elementals? How? You speak as if they are sentient, but they're not."

Elodan remembered the struggling, suffering fire elemental old Farius had commanded when attacking Sasha, and anger rose in him like a dark flame. Sasha drew back just a little, perhaps sensing the dangerous shift in his mood. "Then what are they?" he asked coldly.

"The elementals? I don't know. They're...like bugs, I guess. Alive, but not really aware...."

"How do you know what an insect thinks? Have you ever been one? Spoken to one?"

"N-no."

He waved an impatient hand. "That is beside the point for now, though. The elementals are intelligent creatures, Sasha. A powerful mage can coerce them to do his bidding, yes. One can also ask them for help. Convincing may take more time and be less reliable in the short term than coercion, but I believe that the results are far better in the long run. Of course, Arath was never interested in the long run—he wanted results now, and didn't care who or what he hurt in the process. I see that he is passing on that attitude to the newer members of the Order as well."

Sasha was shaking her head, a look of confusion on her face. "I've never heard anyone say such things," she said, sounding so lost that his heart softened immediately.

He reached out and laid his palm against her soft cheek. "That's why I'm a dangerous man, my darling," he said with the most suave smile he could

summon. "Would you like to try a Summoning using cooperation rather than coercion?"

Although she couldn't hide the spark of eagerness that appeared in her eyes, Sasha shook her head. "I don't know. I'm just an apprentice—I've never worked with elementals before."

"Excellent. You won't have any resentment to overcome, then."

"I don't know if I should."

He caught her chin with one finger, tilting her head back so that she had to look at him. "You are afraid of committing some sort of crime against Arath's teachings. But look to your own heart. Is it better to force or to ask? Is it better to command through pain, or through loyalty? You know the answer, beautiful Sasha."

Reluctantly, she nodded her agreement. "I'll try, then."

For the next hour, he explained to her what she must do. It didn't take long to learn that she regarded the Summoning of earth and water elementals as evil—small wonder, considering those were the very ones Arath had never been able to easily control, even using coercion. So he suggested instead they Summon an air sprite. Although they could be capricious and destructive, even as the wind could blow down a tree or flatten a house, for the most part they were gentle and would make a good choice for a beginner.

Fortunately, Sasha was not far enough along in her studies to have acquired too many bad habits from Arath's way of teaching. Elodan led her through the Summoning spell step by step, first invoking the

sacred names of the God and Goddess to construct a protective circle, then showing her how to drop into a trance-state where her mind could touch other levels of reality. As soon as he felt she was prepared, he instructed her to call upon the air elementals. Because their need was not urgent, he made certain that she approached them only with curiosity and an open heart, a gentle Summons that would catch the attention only of those who had no other task at hand.

She was a marvelous student, and his heart rejoiced as a faint glow took shape above the palm of Sasha's hand. In a moment, the elemental had materialized fully into their realm of existence. It appeared in the form of a diminutive woman with sharp, elfin features, dressed in a gauzy outfit that blew and swirled in an unfelt breeze. A pair of tiny wings like those of a dragonfly beat steadily from her shoulders, their jewel-like tones catching the firelight.

Sasha's eyes opened wide in wonder, and only then did he realize how different the sprite must appear from the tormented creatures Arath forced to do his bidding. "I did it," she whispered, her voice barely audible, as if she feared disturbing the spell.

The sprite cocked her head to one side, her piercing black eyes like those of a bird. "I heard your call. I do not know you." Her voice was like the whisper of many voices twined together and blown along on a sweet breeze. Then her attention shifted to Elodan. "You I remember very well indeed."

There was a teasing note to her voice that made him smile. Air sprites were mischievous, unlike their stolid cousins of the earth. "It is good to be back

among friends," he said simply.

She laughed, her voice high and clear, and swirled closer to him. For a moment, they were almost face-to-face, and he wondered if she had been one of the elementals to help restore his sight. Then she was gone, vanished back to the realm she had come from.

"So, it isn't just mortal women you ensorcell," Sasha said with a wry smile. Her green eyes glowed with the pleasure of her accomplishment, and he felt his heart lift at the sight.

"Perhaps it is only you who find me irresistible," he suggested with an arched brow.

A smile flitted across her lips, too soon gone. "Right now, the only thing I find irresistible is food," she said wryly. "I didn't realize a simple spell could be so draining."

An idea took shape in his mind. "As my lady commands," he said, giving her a short bow and a smile. "Rest here a moment; I'll see what the innkeeper can provide for us."

* * *

While he was gone, Sasha straightened her clothing and sat at the table. The sense of pride that infused her over successfully Summoning the sprite without resorting to threats made her feel good, even though a tiny voice of doubt nagged at her about the wisdom of accepting lessons from the Dark Mage. He wasn't anything like the stories had claimed, and she was finding it harder and harder to remember that he was supposed to be a monster.

She found herself wondering how long it would take for him to bring dinner, and if the barmaid downstairs might be flirting with him while he waited. The thought made her scowl.

I shouldn't care, she chastised herself sternly. It shouldn't matter to me one bit whether or not she's making eyes at him. Or touching him. Or dragging him off to the cellar to have sex.

That last thought made her scowl deepen, and she clutched her skirt in her hands just to have something to mangle. She couldn't go down and check on him—it would be admitting that she was jealous, which she refused to do.

Just as she was about to give in and go downstairs anyway, she heard his boots on the steps. A moment later, he pushed open the door with one hand. The other was holding a platter laden with covered dishes. Even with the simple linen covers, though, the smells that wafted from the platter were like nothing she had ever experienced, and they set her mouth to watering instantly.

"What did you bring?" she asked, wondering if he could have conjured up some enchanted food. Surely nothing prepared by human hands could smell that good!

He smiled and carefully set the platter down on a chair beside the table. "I didn't know what you liked, so I got a bit of everything. What do you usually eat?"

She blinked, taken aback. "Gruel. White bread. Porridge. What else do people eat?"

His obsidian eyes widened in obvious surprise, but he said nothing, only removed one of the covers to

reveal a bowl of strawberries. Each one gleamed a deep, ripe red and she could smell their sweet scent in the air. He lifted a single one and held it out between his fingers, clearly intending to feed it to her. "Try this."

The strawberry looked so lush and delicious that she lacked any will to resist. Leaning forward, she took a bite, her lips brushing across his fingers as she did so. Sweetness exploded in her mouth, so intense that she almost moaned aloud. The rest of the berry was still in his fingers, so she took it from him, sucking his fingers as she did so, mingling the taste of his skin with the forbidden sweetness of the fruit.

"Good, isn't it?" he whispered huskily. She could see the outline of his cock against the tight fabric of his pants. "Now you need something to drink."

He reached over and uncorked what must be a bottle of wine, although she had never tasted such a thing herself. A pale, golden stream splashed into the delicate glass the innkeeper had provided, and within moments the coolness of the wine caused droplets of moisture to form on the glass. Holding it by the stem, Elodan offered it to her, and she drank. The flavor was tart, contrasting perfectly with the sweetness of the strawberry she had eaten before. She could feel Elodan's gaze on her like a fever, watching her throat work as she swallowed.

"Now it's my turn," he said mysteriously and rose to his feet. She automatically stood as well, and he reached out and quickly undid the laces holding her blouse closed. Her heart beating faster, she let him remove it and tug her skirt off just as swiftly. Then he

lifted her up and lay her full length on the table.

"There," he murmured in satisfaction. He picked up another strawberry, brushing it over her lips and letting her suck on it a moment before taking it away. She whimpered a little—then felt his hands between her legs, spreading her thighs wide. Something cool and round that must be the strawberry touched her labia, then spread her entrance, making her jump with a gasp. A moment later, he had tucked a second strawberry into her, then a third. The round, ripe berries spread her like a miniature cock, and she moaned, rocking her hips helplessly, with nothing to thrust against.

He smiled at her eagerness, then pulled up a chair and settled himself between her thighs. His hot tongue flicked at her swollen clit, teasing, then caressed her labia. Just when she thought she might go mad from his teasing, he suddenly fastened his mouth onto her, sucking hard. One of the berries slid into his mouth and he ate it, then delved for the next with his tongue. She cried out, her hands clutching at his hair, as a combination of her spasms and his sucking and probing retrieved the final strawberry.

Looking as if he had never tasted anything so sweet, he leaned over her and kissed her, sharing the mixed flavors of woman and berry.

He'll take me now, she thought, seeing the hard length of him through his pants. *He has to!*

Instead, he went back to the platter of food, and this time selected a small jar. With a sensuous smile he dipped his finger into the jar and withdrew it coated with honey. Holding his fingers to her lips, he

let her taste; she sucked frantically at it, and heard him let out a stifled groan. Pulling away, he held the jar up over her, drizzling the warm, golden honey over her naked skin. It made swirls around her breasts, glazing her erect nipples, then wandered down to pool in her navel, then again between her thighs.

Setting the jar aside, he bent over her to lick the honey off. He began with her left breast, first his tongue flicking the hard peak teasingly, then his entire mouth closing over it and sucking so that she arched her back for more. Moving slowly, so slowly, he followed the drizzle of honey, licking and sucking every inch of coated skin until it was clean. She moaned at this slow torture of lips and tongue, interrupted now and again by the light scrape of his teeth, startling rather than painful.

"Please," she moaned when he was done.

His smile was devilish, full of mischief and lust alike. "Please?" he asked teasingly. "Oh yes, that's right—you're hungry, aren't you?"

"Yes," she growled, knowing that it wasn't food he meant.

"Well, then, you should eat."

He stripped his clothes off with agonizing slowness, revealing his firm, well-muscled body. His cock was so stiff it stood almost straight out in front of him despite its heaviness. Seeing where her eyes were drawn, he sat down in a chair, reached for the jar—and very deliberately poured a stream of honey over his cock, coating the member thoroughly.

She licked her lips, unable to resist such a tempting

treat. Sliding off the table, she dropped to her knees before him and immediately set to licking the underside of his cock. The sweet taste of honey mingled with the flavor of his male skin, and she devoured it eagerly, licking and sucking until he groaned helplessly. Licking a path from base to head, she slid her mouth down over his cock as far as she could, savoring the taste and the feel of his heat in her mouth.

The ache between her legs grew, and she knew that it could only be soothed by the feel of his hard member sliding into her. Yet even as she sucked the last drops of honey away, he made no move to take her to table or bed and impale her. Rising to her feet, she looked down on him, staring hungrily at the erection that taunted her.

Well, if he would not take her...perhaps she could take him? She didn't know if it was possible in this position, but she was willing to find out if it would release her from the relentless desire that made her clit throb and her cunt ache. Feeling suddenly bold, she moved to straddle him, saw a smile cross his face that told her she was doing what he'd hoped.

Bending her knees, she slowly lowered herself. The tip of his cock nudged her hot, aching clit, then slid between her labia. Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she slid down further, feeling the head penetrate her easily, the shaft stretching her open. Moaning, she lowered herself all the way, until she was seated in his lap facing him, his balls pressed against her buttocks and his cock a lance impaling her.

“Yes,” he gasped, and his hands gripped her hips, encouraging her to move. Clutching his shoulders again for support, she pushed herself up until his cock was almost out of her—then slid down again, agonizingly slow. Control slipped as she took him fully, and she began to move faster, grinding her clit against his body as she rode him frantically. His hands tightened on her hips, guiding and supporting, and she felt him thrusting back against her. She arched her back, exposing her breasts to him, and he immediately sucked one nipple into his mouth. Her movements became even more frantic, twisting and grinding against him, until an explosion of ecstasy took her once again. She felt him stiffen as she tightened around him, and he cried her name as he pumped his seed into her.

Elodan slid his arms around her, and she leaned her head against his shoulder. His hands stroked her back gently, tenderly, and she felt...she wasn't sure what she felt, really. Content. Cherished. Safe.

Safe...with the Dark Mage himself? How can I feel this way?

Troubled by her own thoughts, she leaned back and looked at him. He smiled faintly, a satisfied, drowsy look on his face.

“Shall we finish dinner, then?” he asked.

Chapter Eight

The next day, they left the inn and walked through the village, heading into the countryside.

"We'll return this evening," Elodan said. "First there's something I have to do."

Sasha walked beside him, unable to keep herself from admiring his body as she did so. The muscles rippled on his strong thighs and buttocks, and his long, black hair blew around his face in the breeze. He had once again used illusion to disguise his false eyes, but somehow she found the semblance more disturbing than the awful truth beneath. She had gotten used to his black, gleaming gaze.

"Where are we going?" she asked, not certain if she really wanted to know the answer. Elodan seemed to be taking her cooperation for granted, when what she should be doing was running back to the Order and telling them where he was and what he was about.

Except they would destroy me as well, for a traitor, she thought. And even if they didn't...they would surely kill him. The idea made her feel sick at heart.

"I don't know if any of my old followers are still alive," he replied. "Even if they are, they would be very old. They had to live through fifty years that passed as a dream for me." A sad frown touched his mouth, and she had to restrain herself to keep from kissing it away. "But if any still remain nearby, undiscovered by the Order, they may know how to contact others who are discontent with Arath's perverted rule."

Sasha frowned, uncertain what to think about this. "There are none. Arath's rule is absolute." Even as she said it, though, she wondered if it was true. After all, didn't the peasantry dress and eat as they pleased, disdaining the strictures she had grown up with? Clearly, although the nobility supported Arath, not everyone had taken his laws to heart.

"So he'd like you to believe, my darling," Elodan said, confirming her thought. "One should never take the claims of a liar such as he without a good deal of skepticism."

He led her away from the farmer's fields and into a thick wood. Silence descended around them, broken only by the crunch of leaves underfoot and the occasional song of a bird. Sunlight filtered through the canopy overhead, streaking the world in green and gold. To her surprise, Sasha found a strange sense of peace stealing over her.

At length they stopped in a small clearing. Huge oaks ringed the glade, their outspread branches stretched over it like hands bestowing a blessing. Wildflowers dotted the thick, emerald moss that formed a living carpet. A small brook bubbled and

laughed as it made its way through the clearing, and its water glittered like diamonds where the sunlight found its surface.

In the center of the clearing was a stump where once a mighty tree had stood. The long years had worn away the bark, and many hands had polished the wood beneath until it glowed with an inner warmth. The tree had not broken off evenly, and two projections had been carved into a pair of human figures, their hands outstretched in greeting and benediction. The one on the right was a man, his head crowned with antlers, while the one on the left was a beautiful woman. Someone had laid garlands of fresh flowers on the pair, and their sweet scent perfumed the air like incense.

"What is this place?" Sasha asked, awe making her whisper.

"It is a sacred place," Elodan said. He, too, spoke in hushed tones, as if unwilling to disturb the peace of the glade. "I could not believe that everyone had abandoned the true ways for Arath's lies, and here is the proof. This altar shows the God and Goddess as I know them, not as the Order has made them out to be. You may approach and look closer, if you wish."

She hesitated, then took a tentative step nearer. No longer certain what to believe, she looked first at Osan. Rather than the stern, wrathful God depicted by the Order, he combined strength and gentleness. Although the artist had given him a serious expression, the God didn't look ready to mete out eternal punishment for the smallest sin.

The only pictures of Nyx that Sasha had ever seen

were that of a twisted Hag, full of evil. But the Goddess on the altar looked like a mother, holding out sheaves of wheat in one hand and a crescent moon in the other. Her face was beautiful, but wise and sad as well.

Before meeting Elodan, she would never have dreamed that anyone might be engaged in such blasphemy, let alone a goodly portion of the peasantry. *But it doesn't feel like blasphemy to me*, she realized. The carvings had been done out of love and respect for the pair of deities, that much was obvious.

Troubled, she drew away. Elodan touched her hand gently, a gesture of comfort that unexpectedly tugged at her heart.

"I know this is all very difficult for you, young one," he said. "I don't know that you can accept any of it, let alone all of it. I ask only that you think on it for a while."

"What will you be doing?"

He tilted his head gracefully towards the altar. "Praying, mostly. Afterwards, I'll try to Summon any who might be able to help us against Arath."

She pulled away from him sharply. "I don't recall agreeing to help you against the Order."

A look of pain flashed over his features, quickly hidden. He bowed slightly, his hair falling to conceal his expression from her. "Of course. Forgive me. You must follow your heart, in this as in all other things."

Turning away, he went and knelt before the altar, head bowed. Feeling afraid and uncertain, Sasha went a little way apart and sat beside the stream. Its cool water looked so inviting that she took off her shoes

and dangled her feet in it. Immediately she felt the heat of the day recede, and let out a grateful sigh.

I wish Jacie were here, she thought wistfully. *I could really use someone to talk to.*

Remembering the state of her friend when she had last seen her, Sasha felt a harsh stab of guilt. She hadn't even been able to learn what was wrong with Jacie—had, in fact, abandoned her by fleeing the Order with Elodan. How selfish she was to indulge in self-pity when her friend was obviously in more dire need.

At least for the moment. If she were caught with Elodan, then Sasha would be the one in danger. And that wasn't even touching on the fact that she might be courting eternal damnation.

If someone had told her even a week ago that she would be the lover of the Dark Mage—would even, Osan help her, go to him willingly!—she would never have believed it. In fact, she would have been outraged by the mere suggestion. Yet here she was, in this glade with its solemn, but generous deities that called into question everything she had ever believed to be the truth. Instead of feeling evil or unclean, she felt...peace. As if she had come home.

She spent the afternoon watching Elodan and dangling her feet in the water. He sat still for a long time, obviously deep in meditation. Then, at some signal she could not determine, he began his spell casting. Sitting up straighter, he tilted his head back and held out his arms to either side, palms up. As the golden sunlight gleamed off his ebony hair, he began to chant softly, the words too quiet for her to hear. He

went on for a long time, holding the difficult pose with apparent ease, and she could feel the energy building in the glade. It crackled along the ground, outlining every flower and blade of grass with green fire. The energy continued to build, and she could feel the fine hairs on her arms stand up, as if lightning gathered around her. A glow appeared around Elodan, outlining him in a pale blue haze that grew brighter and brighter.

Then, suddenly, he brought his hands together in a loud clap. The bands holding the magical energy in the glade snapped, and the aura around him exploded outwards in the form of a flock of white birds. Their wings were silent as they streaked past Sasha, and trails of light sparkled behind them like the fire of a thousand stars.

Before the altar, Elodan slumped tiredly. Concerned, she stood and went to him. Sweat soaked his brow, and his fair skin was flushed, as if he had worked a long time in a hot field. Even so, he managed a tired smile for her as she approached.

"I've done what I could," he said. "The rest is out of my hands."

"Are you all right?" She worriedly stroked the sweaty hair off his face.

"I will be. I just need to cool off." He rose lithely and took her hand in his. "This stream ends in a pool not too far away."

They followed the bubbling water through the forest, until it came to a sudden drop. A miniature waterfall foamed down over a lip of smooth stone, then spread out into a deep, still pool sheltered on all

sides by tall trees. Elodan walked to the edge and removed his clothing, carefully hanging it on a limb. His muscles rippled beneath his skin as he moved, every motion graceful and controlled, like a panther. Then he dived into the water, cutting through it cleanly and coming up halfway across the pool.

"Come in," he invited her. "There's plenty of room for us both, don't you think?"

Her heart beat faster as she watched his strong legs easily tread water. The pool was so clear she could even make out the dark thatch of curls surrounding his manhood. A lazy, inviting smile crossed his handsome face, and he kicked farther away from the bank before floating on his back.

Sasha quickly removed her own clothes, aware that he was watching her by the stiffening of his cock. Taking a deep breath, she leapt into the pool as well. The water was cool but not uncomfortable, so she dived deep. Elodan had gone back to treading water, so she paused a moment to suck his cock briefly into her mouth before surfacing.

"Little tease," he said with a pleased grin.

"Am I?" she asked and swam away from him. He gave pursuit and she evaded him, until at last he dove down with her and caught her around the waist. Pulling them both to the surface, he held her firmly against him. His erect cock rested between her thighs, hot in contrast to the cool water. With a hungry moan she kissed him, rubbing her clit against his hard length.

Elodan propelled them towards the edge of the pool, until she felt the water-smoothed stone against

her back. Grasping her beneath the arms, he lifted her up so that he could stroke her nipples with his tongue. Sasha groaned and gripped his hair, pushing her breasts against his mouth. Her legs wrapped around his waist, holding her in place, so he let go of her arms and used one hand to play with her other breast. The other hand he slid between her legs, fondling her engorged folds. Feeling her eagerness, he chuckled softly. "Wetter than this pool, aren't you, my darling?"

"Yes," she moaned, unable to deny it when it was so obvious that she wanted him.

Bracing his feet against the bottom of the pool, he lowered her towards him, pausing with just the tip of his cock lodged at her entrance. "Say you want me."

"I want you!"

He shoved into her in a single, smooth stroke. Her back arched as she felt him gently but relentlessly penetrating her, and her legs thrashed helplessly as he opened her completely, pushing into her until his cock sealed her entrance. "Goddess, you're so tight," he whispered huskily.

She moaned, expecting him to start thrusting. Instead he moved into deeper water, pulling her with him. "Lay back and let yourself float," he instructed.

Locking her legs tightly around him, she did as he asked. The water lapped the sides of her breasts like a hundred cool tongues, and she writhed in pleasure and frustration.

"Now touch yourself," Elodan said, and she saw that his obsidian eyes were fixed hungrily on the sight of his cock stretching and penetrating her.

Sasha ran one hand down her abdomen, until her fingers found the hot bud of her clit. It was impossible to touch it without also feeling his cock; it was hard and slick with her juices. A bolt of pleasure went through her as she fingered herself and him, feeling how stretched she was, and she could feel her climax starting to build. With a moan she tried to get him to thrust, but he shook his head, never taking his eyes off her hand. "Like this," he whispered.

She began to tug on her clit harder, faster, the sensation of the cock splitting her incredibly intense. A cry of pleasure tore its way out as she came around him, her cunt muscles tightening and milking him so that he groaned wildly.

She felt herself being pushed back through the water; then she was up against the stone side again. Even before the final spasms of her orgasm had ceased, he began thrusting into her. A second explosion took her as he pinned her against the stone, riding her hard, until he suddenly groaned. His cock seemed to swell even further, before warmth flooded her cunt as he released deep inside.

They floated for a while, holding each other, happy and content. *How odd*, thought Sasha, but it was true. Even though her life had been turned upside-down by this man, at the same time she could not deny that she was more at peace than she had ever been before.

Chapter Nine

The sun was close to setting by the time they reentered the village. Elodan had taken her hand on the walk back, and Sasha had found the gesture curiously comforting. But as they approached the large square that dominated the small town, Elodan's steps slowed, and a worried frown touched his face.

A great crowd had formed there—it looked as if most, if not all, of the village had gathered. As they drew closer, she saw that the crowd formed a loose, uneasy ring around a smaller tableau in the center. There stood a man, a small boy...and a mage of the Order.

Sasha's heart sank, and she shrank back instinctively. How had they found Elodan—and her—so quickly? Was there yet time to escape?

Then she realized that the mage was not there for them. His attention was focused on the small boy, who cowered in terror before him. A man who must be the boy's father was held by two burly guards who formed the mage's escort; his face was white with

fear.

"There can be no doubt!" the mage was proclaiming. Sasha thought that he looked vaguely familiar, but couldn't place a name to him. "The boy has shown magical powers!"

The boy's father cried out in despair and struggled wildly against the men holding him, while the other villagers shifted and murmured nervously amongst themselves. A puzzled frown crossed Elodan's face. "I don't understand – what is happening here?"

Sasha sighed, pity for the unfortunate boy welling up in her soul. "The boy is a witch."

"What do you mean?"

How could he not know, Sasha wondered in surprise. "The boy is a peasant," she clarified. "Only the nobility can use magic with Osan's blessing. Any others must get their power from the Ha—I mean, from the Goddess, and so are condemned as witches."

All the warmth drained from Elodan's expression, and his eyes glittered like black ice. "And what will they do to him?" he asked softly.

She winced. "He...they'll kill him."

Elodan went very still, and the dangerous anger on his face made her take a step back. "You should leave," he said quietly. "If things go awry, then hide yourself."

"What are you going to do?"

"Stop this abomination."

"You can't—you'll be caught—" she protested helplessly.

"I can't stand by and let them kill an innocent!"

He pulled away from her and strode towards the

square. The villagers parted before him, as if the sheer force of his will was a wedge that pushed aside all obstacles. The Order's mage had been speaking, but stopped, his eyes going wide with horror as he beheld Elodan's approach. "You – who are you?"

They haven't told everyone that Elodan escaped, Sasha realized in surprise. It must be Arath – he can't admit that he didn't perform the banishing spell correctly. Can't admit that his enemy wasn't defeated forever as he's claimed all these years.

Elodan stopped and stood before the mage. The last light of the sun gleamed off his shining black hair, outlined the tall, straight body under his ebon clothing. He had not bothered to put an illusion over his obsidian eyes, and they shone cold and angry. "Who am I? Someone who will not let you kill this child."

The mage's eyes narrowed in anger and hate. "I don't know you, but I see that you have taken the likeness of the Dark Mage on yourself. That is blasphemy of the highest level, and if you were not already condemned for using magic outside of the Order then I would kill you for that alone."

Elodan smiled lazily, clearly confident in his abilities. "You could try."

Uttering a curse, the mage quickly began his conjuring, sending hosts of writhing air and fire elementals towards Elodan. Calm and confident, Elodan countered with a host of willing elementals of his own.

"Look out!" someone shouted.

Distracted as she had been by the magical battle,

Sasha hadn't noticed that the mage's guards had let go of the father and were coming up behind Elodan, their swords drawn. Even as they did so, the father snatched up a length of wood and swung it at one of the guards. A moment later, the rest of the villagers had joined in the melee.

Faced with such overwhelming odds, the guards were quickly subdued. The forward rush of the villagers had blocked Sasha's view of the mages' battle, however. Afraid for Elodan's life, she struggled through the crowd to see what was happening.

The sight of him standing unharmed shook her to her core. With a cry of relief, she ran to him, flinging her arms around him. "You're safe!"

He seemed as surprised by her gesture as she was. "Yes."

A quick glance showed her that the other mage was unconscious. Unexpected fury rose in her—how dare he try to hurt Elodan! He was fortunate that this was the worst that had happened to him.

Elodan turned to the young boy he had saved. Dropping down by the child, he lightly brushed a hand across the boy's forehead. "Are you all right?"

The boy could only nod. His father bent down and put his arms around the youth. "Thank you," he said to Elodan. "My son's the only family I have left."

"Take him far from here," Elodan said. "I'm sure word of what happened will get back to the Order quickly, and I would hate to see either of you fall into their hands again."

"How can I repay you?"

"By remaining safe." Elodan rose and took Sasha's

hand. "Now, I fear that we must leave, and for much the same reasons."

The villagers parted to let them pass. Many of them bowed to Elodan, and one woman went so far as to grab his hand and kiss it in gratitude.

As soon as they had passed out of the village, following the narrow, rutted road that led through the countryside, Sasha said, "I never realized there was so much unrest in the villages."

"Fifty years is a long time to suffer under the Order's rule." He sighed, looking suddenly tired. "And to think how many lives have been wasted! To kill any peasant who shows signs of magical ability! How dare they!"

Sasha winced. "I was always told that only the nobility could receive Osan's blessing."

Anger simmered in Elodan's frown, but it was not directed at her. "Arath was always an elitist of the worst stripe. And no doubt the nobles liked hearing that they were special, blessed above all others. Why give the lower classes any avenue to better themselves if you can keep all the power for yourself instead? Damn them!"

Something in the way he spoke gave Sasha sudden insight. "You were not born to nobility yourself, then?"

A faint smile twitched the corner of his mouth. "No. Or at least, I highly doubt it. I was a foundling, left on the Order's doorstep. The mages raised me from infancy." He sighed and shook his head. "You must understand, Sasha. My views were not radical ones when I was young—many, many others felt the

same way. But Arath was the son of the First, and hungry for power. We grew up together, but we were never close, for even as children I could see the warped nature growing in him. Sycophants of every kind flocked to his side, knowing that he would someday rule over the Order. The erosion of our old ways began slowly, small changes that did not cause any of us undue alarm. But sadly small changes gradually accumulate into large ones. When we realized what had happened, it was already too late. Even so, we did our best to rebel and turn the Order back to what it had once been. Although I was their leader, I was not the only one who stood up to Arath by far."

"You were betrayed," she remembered.

He nodded unhappily. "Yes. So when I faced Arath for the final time, I was still very weak and ill, and all the advantage was his. Now I return to find that Arath's depravity has only grown in the intervening years. It sickens me to think that no one has opposed him in all that time. The villagers I don't blame—they have little hope to stand up against magic. Arath would destroy them, their families, their homes, everything. But the other mages...it is a sad day."

Sasha twisted her hands together uncertainly. Although she didn't think he meant his condemnation for her, she wondered suddenly what she would have done if she alone had chanced upon the scene they had just left. Would she have spoken out and protected the boy? Or would she have accepted Arath's decree that killing him was the right, the just, the holy thing to do?

"You did the right thing, saving that boy," she said at last.

He flashed her a smile that made her heart catch in her throat. "Thank you. I noticed that you failed to run and hide as I instructed."

She flushed and looked down. "I...didn't want to leave the boy in danger," she mumbled.

"Of course." Although his tone was neutral, she wondered if she didn't detect some disappointment hidden in its depths.

And I couldn't leave you, not when you were doing the right thing, she thought. But she couldn't quite bring herself to say it aloud.

Chapter Ten

They traveled as far as they were able that night, knowing that no one from the Order would dare set foot outside once the sun had set. Even so, they were forced to seek shelter around midnight, as their steps began to stumble with exhaustion. Sasha awoke to the dawn, aching, tired, and dirty. For a moment she missed her bed back at the Order's castle—it might have been hot and empty, but at least it was soft.

Elodan sat on a rock near her, watching the sunrise. Hearing her stir, he turned, a brilliant smile lighting his face. "The spell I cast yesterday has already borne fruit," he said in obvious excitement. Holding out his hand, he showed her one of the small, white birds made only from light that he had released from the glade the day before.

"Who returned it?" she asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes and wishing heartily for a bath.

"An old friend by the name of Githsed. He has been living in the guise of a prosperous merchant ever since my downfall, and has managed to escape

detection by the Order.” Elodan came to sit by her, grasping her hands in his. “I was so afraid that everyone who knew me had been killed. This truly gives me hope.”

She had to smile at his excitement. “I’m glad for you.”

“The good news is that he lives near here. We can be there by sundown.”

* * *

Githsed’s house was a large, though modest, structure on the very outskirts of town. A tall wall enclosed it, pierced by a single high, iron gate. Through the bars of the gate, Sasha could see a neat brick house surrounded by gardens and trees.

They were clearly expected—even as they approached, the gates swung open and an old man rushed out. Although he leaned on a cane, he moved quickly, and a happy smile stripped years from his face.

“Elodan! Dear Goddess, I can’t believe it’s really you!”

The two men embraced, clapping each other on the back. Then the merchant pulled away, taking Elodan by the shoulders and studying his face with a look of wonder. “You haven’t changed at all.”

“One of the consequences of being stuck in limbo, my friend,” Elodan replied sadly.

“Indeed? You will have to tell me everything. Come in, come in, and let me introduce you to my family.”

Elodan nodded, then turned and took Sasha's hand. "Githsed, this is Sasha, the brave woman who freed me." His mouth twitched in a wistful smile. "However unknowingly."

Githsed bowed as low as he could while maintaining a grip on his cane. "Thank you. We all owe you a great debt."

Flustered, Sasha could only nod her head. As Elodan had pointed out, she hadn't realized that she was setting the Dark Mage loose on the world once again. Indeed, if she had known at the time, she would not only have left him in limbo, but reported him to Arath.

It hurt her heart to think of what might have happened then. *I care about him*, she admitted to herself. Despite the upheaval of the last few days, she was no longer sure that she regretted anything that had happened.

Although the interior of Githsed's house was not ostentatious, he clearly had done well as a merchant. There was only a single servant, a man who had been with Githsed for many years and was privy to all his secrets. Githsed explained that his son was away on a trip, but that his granddaughter would join them at dinner.

After giving them an opportunity to wash some of the dust from their faces, he conducted them to a large dining room. A host of delicious smells wafted to Sasha from the dishes already set out on the table, and her stomach complained indelicately. The lone servant stood ready against one wall, and a young woman rose from the end of the table to greet them.

"This is Alyce, my granddaughter," Githsed said proudly. "She lives with me, as she's not yet wed, and her father hopes that she'll someday take over the business."

Alyce smiled and held out her hand to Elodan. She was a beautiful woman, Sasha realized. Golden hair tumbled loosely around a perfect face, and her breasts strained against her bodice. Clear blue eyes fixed on Elodan's handsome features, and she smiled at him with lush, full lips that looked as if they had been made for kissing.

"A pleasure," she murmured in a throaty voice.

Elodan returned her smile and accepted a seat beside her. Fuming silently, Sasha sat beside Githsed. Although the food set before her was delicious, she barely tasted it.

Elodan told his story over the first course, explaining that he had been freed and was now fleeing. After the incident of the night before, he felt certain that the Order would be looking for him, and that he would have to keep moving to evade them.

As he spoke, Alyce kept her eyes fixed on him. She let out little gasps at the correct times, and touched his arm lightly in a gesture of concern. Sasha's dislike of the other woman grew by the moment.

Once Elodan had finished, Githsed related his own tale. "I was one of the lucky ones," he admitted, a sad look passing over his lined face. "As you can imagine, your defeat was a crushing blow to those of us rebelling against Arath and his vision of the Order. Most were caught and killed. I managed to disappear, until at last the search for us died down. I think Arath

didn't want it to seem like he was less than omnipotent, and couldn't admit that some of us had continued to evade him. When I deemed it safe, I began a new life as a merchant. I fell in love and got married, and after that I didn't dare speak out against Arath for the sake of my family."

Sasha stifled her gasp of horror. Githsed had admitted to the sin of romantic love—and had done so without any appearance of shame. She searched his face for signs of guilt or remorse, but saw only sadness.

He seemed so nice, she thought, confused. How could he admit to such a thing? Elodan claims that love between a man and a woman is a gift, not a curse. Of him, I would have expected such a thing—he is the Dark Mage, after all. But it seems that others believe it as well.

Talk turned to other things over dessert. Sasha watched in annoyance as Alyce leaned over every time she spoke to Elodan, exposing large amounts of breast. At last the gathering wound down, however, and Githsed suggested they all go to bed.

"Shall I show you to your room?" Alyce asked Elodan, all but licking her lips as she did so.

"That won't be necessary," Sasha snapped. Rising from the table, she took Elodan's hand possessively in hers. "I'm sure we can find it with no trouble."

An amused smile played around Elodan's lips as the servant offered to show them to the room he had prepared. The Dark Mage kept his peace until they reached the room, which was on the upper floor. Wide windows let in the moonlight, and a host of candles of all shapes and sizes further illuminated the

chamber. An enormous four-poster bed dominated the room, its canopy drawn back to reveal a mountain of soft comforters and pillows. Sumptuous curtains, held in place by silk sashes, framed every window in a profusion of lace. A small vase on a table held an arrangement of flowers, which perfumed the air with their light scent.

As soon as the servant shut the door behind him, Elodan began to chuckle.

"I don't see anything amusing," she snapped.

"Ah, my Sasha." He slid his arms around her. "You have nothing to be jealous of."

"I'm not jealous."

"So you said at the inn earlier," he murmured, lowering his head. His hot breath touched her skin, and she felt his teeth graze her earlobe. "I don't believe you. Admit that you want me for yourself alone."

She closed her eyes, shocked that something as simple as his playing with her earlobe could be so erotic. "I won't," she whispered.

"I let you get away with that lie before, but not tonight, I think," he murmured.

At the playful note in his voice, she began to wonder what he had in mind. "Really? How are you going to make me?"

He drew back and flashed her a wicked grin. "You'll see."

Going to the window, he leisurely untied one of the silken sashes that held back the curtains, then returned to her. Holding the sash outstretched between his hands, he lightly ran it over her face,

down her neck, and over the exposed tops of her breasts. It felt cool and soft and smooth, and she sighed in pleasure.

“Take off your shirt,” he instructed softly. She complied quickly, and he ran the silk over her nipples, making her arch her back. The sash slid over them, down to her belly, back up again, and then down one arm, where he gently looped it around her wrist. Before she knew what he had done, he had bound it there.

For a moment, worry flashed through her. But then she realized that she trusted him, as insane as it seemed. So when he tugged on the loose end, drawing her to the bed, she went willingly.

He pulled her down on the bed, then tied the loose end of the sash to one of the posts. Then he went back to the windows and retrieved three more, one of which he immediately used to bind her other wrist to the other post. Kneeling over her half-naked body, he ran his hands over her skin, tweaking her nipples so that they tightened.

“Beautiful Sasha,” he whispered, then grasped her skirt and slid it down and off. Using the other two sashes, he bound her ankles to the bedposts as well, then moved back to admire his handiwork.

Sasha tugged experimentally at her bindings, but they gave only a little. She lay spread-eagled and helpless before him, but the feeling of vulnerability that gripped her was startlingly erotic. Her heart beat faster, and she could feel her juices starting to flow between her opened legs.

He took a moment to admire her, his eyes

dropping to her spread thighs. Very deliberately he leaned over and looked at her there, then slid his fingers into her. She whimpered, hips grinding, wanting more.

"So wet. Are you ready to admit that you want me just for yourself?"

"No," she gasped, becoming aware of the rules of the game they were playing.

"Too bad." He removed his fingers from her, leaving her whimpering in frustration. Very slowly, he stripped off his clothes, the candlelight revealing his magnificent body. Standing close by her head, he stroked his hard cock with one hand. She moaned and tried to shift nearer, wanting to touch it, but it remained just out of reach.

"Poor girl," he teased. Climbing onto the bed, he rubbed the head of his cock over her breasts and belly. Turning his attention to her cunt, he stretched out and languidly began to play with her clit and labia with his fingers, stroking her just enough to intensify her excitement without letting her come.

She moaned in frustration, bucking her hips helplessly. "I want you."

"Do you? For your very own?"

It was hard to hold out, but she did. "No."

"Then anything might do instead of me, hmm?"

Before she could question him, he rolled off the bed. There were a number of unlit candles stationed around the room, and he selected two, one thin and one thick. He ran his fingers over the candles, checking their smoothness as he returned to the bed. Crouching between her outspread legs, he placed the

thin candle against her opening.

She gasped as she realized what he meant to do. Then the candle was sliding in, parting her just a little, as if a long finger invaded her. She groaned, arching her back as he pumped it in and out a few times – then pulled it out altogether.

“How wet you are,” he said, holding up the now-slick candle for evidence. Then he lowered it again – only this time, its slippery surface pressed against her anus.

She felt it pushing against her and tried to wriggle away, but she was bound too tightly. Slowly the thin candle invaded her rear entrance, opening up the tight ring of her anus. The feeling was strange, but also oddly pleasant. Torn between admitting that she was enjoying such an act, and denying that she could, she only whimpered.

Leaving the thin candle in place, he picked up the thicker one and began to slide it into her cunt. Sasha moaned as it opened her wider; it felt only a little slimmer than Elodan’s phallus. Between the two candles, she felt opened, stuffed. Both openings gripped their invaders tightly, while her swollen clit throbbed with the need to be touched.

Elodan leaned back to admire his handiwork, leaving the thick candle lodged in place. “Frustrating?” he asked.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Please, at least move it back and forth!”

“But it looks so lovely,” he teased. His fingers gave her clit a quick pinch, not enough to get her off, and she moaned. “I love seeing you stretched and stuffed.

It excites me."

Indeed, his cock looked almost painfully stiff, the head flushed a deep purple. With another wicked smile, he straddled her body. His hands cupped her breasts, pushing them together, and he slid his cock in between them and began to pump slowly.

"Oh, yes, that's better," he moaned.

Sasha groaned in frustration. The sight of his cock sliding between her breasts enflamed her further, but the candles stuffed in her couldn't bring any relief. Desperate, she flicked her tongue out and licked the tip of his cock as it thrust nearer.

"Good girl," he said, and let go of her breasts. Clasp her head between his hands, he lowered himself into her mouth. She sucked frantically, eagerly at his cock, the salty taste of his precome filling her mouth. He grunted and began pumping, fucking her mouth while her cunt begged for him.

"Shall I come in your mouth?" he gasped, face glazed with lust. "Perhaps I should, and leave you tied up as you are after, so that I can pleasure myself anytime I want."

The thought was incredibly erotic, and she would have groaned if her mouth hadn't been filled with his organ. With a gasp, as if in effort, he pulled away.

"Do you want me?" he demanded, stroking his cock with one hand.

"Yes! Oh Goddess, yes!"

"Do you want me just for your own?"

She couldn't stand any more teasing. "Yes! I want you just for myself! I want you to fuck me and no one else! I want your cock in me and yours alone!"

With a wild growl, he crouched between her bound legs and pulled both candles free. Before she could even cry out at the emptiness, he was shoving his cock into her. She started coming as soon as he did so, her cunt clenching hard even as he pushed inside. "Elodan!" she screamed.

"Yes!" He gripped her hips, lifting her off the bed, and began to pound into her. She wanted to wrap her legs around him, but she was still tied and helpless, unable to do anything but let him take her, let him have his way with her, let him do anything to her body that he pleased...

They both cried out at once, and through the blaze of her own orgasm she felt him thrust deep inside her, his cock seeming to spasm as jets of come filled her.

As Sasha gradually came back to herself, she felt him untying her. As soon as she was free, they curled up together, the soft sheets drawn up around them. "See? I knew you were jealous," he teased sleepily.

She thumped him lightly on the shoulder. "Doesn't it get boring, being right so much of the time?"

He chuckled and kissed her gently. "No. Never."

Chapter Eleven

When Sasha woke the next morning, the sun was already high. Elodan's side of the bed was empty, and a fresh set of clothing lay waiting for her. She rose and dressed languidly, then made her way downstairs.

Alyce was sitting in front of a window reading a book, but she stood when Sasha appeared. "Grandfather and Elodan are closeted in the study," she said with a wave at the closed door. "Breakfast was hours ago, but we saved some for you."

Sasha accepted a small plate of muffins and a glass of fruit juice. While she ate, she asked, "Do you know how long Elodan and Githsed will be?"

Alyce shook her head. "No. They asked not to be disturbed." She paused thoughtfully, then smiled. "I was going into town today to do some shopping—would you like to come with me?"

Sasha hesitated. Her initial impression of Alyce had not been positive, but that was most likely due to jealousy on her part rather than any shortcoming in the other woman. And although, in her heart, she was

glad that she had left the Order with Elodan, she missed her friend Jacie and the talks they'd had. Maybe it would be nice to have another woman to talk to.

"All right," she agreed with a smile of her own. "I'd be happy to."

The two women left the house and headed farther into town. The streets were neat and well-kept, and it was obvious that the hamlet was prosperous despite its relatively small size. There were a number of artisans who kept shop along the main street: jewelers, shoemakers, seamstresses, and the like. The daughter of merchants, Alyce had a great deal to say about price and quality, and Sasha learned more than she had ever wanted to know about the business of buying and selling.

They had left a dressmaker's shop and were headed to a small tavern to find lunch when disaster struck. Caught up in conversation with Alyce, Sasha didn't see the robes of an Order mage until it was too late.

"There she is!" came a shout. Startled, she turned, only to find her way blocked by two guards in the Order's livery, a mage standing on the other side of them. Her heart lurched, and in a sickening moment she recognized the danger.

"Surrender, or face the consequences," he warned, even as the guards drew their weapons.

Sasha began to marshal her powers, intending to Summon a host of elementals to protect her. Then she remembered where she was—a magical battle on a crowded street would inevitably cost the lives of the

innocents around her, who had no protection of their own. Glancing about desperately, she saw that there were too many people too near for their own safety. As for Alyce, she had vanished, and Sasha felt a flash of gratitude that at least the other woman would not be caught.

Realizing that the mage was waiting for her answer, Sasha held up her hands to show that she wasn't trying to conjure anything. Although the words stuck in her throat, she knew that she had no choice. "I...surrender," she murmured.

Within the space of a few instants, the guards had grabbed both her arms in tight grips. "We must hurry, before the Dark Mage can try to rescue her," the mage said, casting a worried glance around him.

Without ceremony, they dragged her to one of the small covered wagons that the Order's mages used to travel through the countryside as they imposed Arath's will on the populace. Pausing only long enough to bind her wrists with a rough cord, they shoved Sasha into the wagon's dark interior. The mage climbed in after, while the two guards whipped up the horses and set out at a breakneck pace.

"I heard what you did, whore," the mage hissed at her. "Don't think to try your wiles on me—I am pure of heart and cannot be corrupted by the likes of you."

I wonder what Arath has told everyone, she thought as she struggled to stay upright despite the jostling of the wagon. Her capture had been so fast and so unexpected that she'd hardly had time to be afraid, but now her heart began to speed. Whatever fate Arath had decreed for her, it would not be an easy

one. *Oh, Elodan, where are you?*

* * *

The weather had been good, and so the wagon made excellent time, particularly since it stopped twice to change horses. Despite their fear of traveling at night, the mage ordered the guards to keep going even after sundown. “Otherwise,” he warned, “the Dark Mage will find us on the road. Do you want to face him in the night?”

What little hope Sasha had kept alive up to that point died at his words. The wagon was going too fast; Elodan would never be able to catch up to them before they reached the Order’s castle. Once she was inside, surrounded by a host of mages loyal to Arath....

He’ll never reach me. And if he tries...they’ll kill him.

Osan and Nyx, don’t let that happen, she prayed quietly. Please keep him safe. Keep him away from the castle.

It was almost midnight when they pulled up in front of the castle she had thought never to see again. The wagon had barely halted before the guards were pulling her out the back. She tripped over a cobblestone, twisting her ankle, and they cursed her before all but dragging her inside.

Although the courtyard had been deserted – fear of the night was too strong for anyone to go outside without truly urgent need – the entry hall within was packed with bodies. Masters and apprentices alike jostled for a glimpse of her, and she could hear them

muttering to one another. Someone screamed a curse at her, and for a moment she thought that they might attack her en masse.

Then the crowd parted, and she saw Arath, walking slowly towards her with his most trusted advisors on either hand. A bright aura surrounded him, created by struggling, suffering fire elementals, and the look on his face was one of righteous displeasure.

"Bring the whore before me," he said in a thunderous voice.

Silence fell, broken only by the scuff of boots on the floor as the guards dragged her forward. Defiant, she met Arath's eyes, challenging him with her stare. She might be afraid for her life, but she would be damned if she'd let him see it.

"On your knees, vile one!" he cried, and the guards forced her down.

She winced as the hard stone connected with her knees, but forced herself to hold her head high. "I have done nothing wrong," she said, and was grateful that her voice didn't shake.

"Nothing wrong!" exclaimed the Hieromancer incredulously. "So speaks a lying tongue! You unleashed the Dark Mage upon an unsuspecting world! You attempted to use your wickedness to seduce me, then set your lover upon me when that didn't work! You helped a witch escape his proper punishment!"

"Enough." Arath held up his hand, halting the Hieromancer's tirade. "All the charges against her will be related at her trial tomorrow."

Sasha laughed bitterly. "Trial? Why bother? Surely you've already convicted me."

"It is true that your evil is beyond question," Arath agreed, not even trying to give the impression that there would be anything fair about her conviction. "But it is necessary for the Order as a whole to see and hear all that you have done...lest others be tempted to follow the same evil path."

Cold touched Sasha's heart. *They want to make an example of me. Which means that, after I'm convicted by their sham court, my execution won't be very pleasant.*

Struggling to conceal her terror, she stared stone-faced back at the First. He made a short motion, and the guards hauled her to her feet, dragging her away from the crowd.

They took her deep into the bowels of the castle, until at last they reached the old dungeons. The cells were normally used as punishment for those who had committed some minor infringement against the many rules, but even so the place had a damp, unused air about it. They shoved her into a tiny cell no more than ten feet long and wide. A small tallow candle sat on the floor, casting out a meager light. In the corner was a musty, moldy pile of straw that served as bedding.

The heavy oaken door slammed shut, and she heard the key turn in the lock. A small grate let her see their retreating backs as they headed off down the corridor, no doubt anxious to get away from the Dark Mage's mistress.

They're afraid of me, she realized. It made her want to laugh—she was an apprentice, not a master, and

was almost entirely in their power. And yet they were afraid of her.

It's all about fear, she thought suddenly. Arath, the Hieromancer, all of the ones who had perverted the Order's place in the world and its worship of the God and Goddess—they were afraid of anything they could not control, and so had to impose their will on others.

The insight was a small comfort, though. Sasha sank down on the straw bedding, wrapping her arms around her knees to hold in warmth. Tomorrow, they would give her a trial whose outcome had already been determined. Then they would carry out their sentence, and she would be dead.

Unless Elodan comes....

But Elodan couldn't hope to fight all the mages of the Order at once, could he? He had been defeated fifty years ago, after all. Of course, as he had said, he had been sick and weak from his earlier capture. Then, he had been locked in limbo; now, he might be killed outright to prevent any further miraculous returns.

Stay away, she thought worriedly. *Stay far away, please.*

Chapter Twelve

Elodan left Githsed's study with a feeling for renewed hope. They had managed to contact more of those who chafed under Arath's rule, and for the first time it seemed possible that the Order's hold over the world might eventually be broken. There was already great unrest amongst the peasantry, who were denied use of magic and killed if they showed any aptitude, and that would certainly help in the long run. In addition, Githsed suspected that not everyone in the nobility was happy with the severe restrictions placed on their private lives, either.

How could they be, when they are told that every good thing is bad, and vice versa?

Sasha might be able to help there, as well, since she was from a noble family. A smile lit Elodan's face at the thought of his beautiful love. Her inner strength had grown over the last few days as she stopped trying to suppress her own nature, and it was wonderful to see her come into her own. If he'd had a woman like her at his side fifty years ago, perhaps Arath would never have vanquished him.

A woman like her? There is no other like her. Not for

me. From the first moment he had seen her, even trapped in limbo as he was, he had known that she was his destiny. His love.

Musing on her, he felt his cock stiffen. *I wonder where she is?* In the bedroom, he hoped.

At that moment, the front door burst open. Alyce stumbled in, her hair in disarray, her hand clutching her chest as she gasped for breath. Githsed let out a cry of alarm and ran to her side.

"Alyce? What is it, my dear?" he asked worriedly.

She swallowed hard and pushed a tumble of hair from her face. "It's Sasha. Oh, grandfather, it was terrible!"

Fear poured through Elodan's veins. "Sasha? What's happened to her?"

Alyce's big eyes turned towards him, begging for forgiveness. "We went shopping—it seemed like a good way to spend the day. I thought Sasha might like a companion, another woman to talk to. At first everything was fine, but then someone from the Order came! He spotted Sasha immediately, before she had time to run. She was in the middle of a crowd—she couldn't risk fighting him. So she...she surrendered."

Even afraid and horrified, Elodan felt a spark of pride for her. It was so like Sasha to think of the safety of others before her own. "Then what happened?"

"I knew I had to let you know what had happened as soon as possible, so I pretended that I wasn't with her. The mage never even noticed me—he was too busy gloating over her. They took her and put her in the back of a cart, then drove off as fast as they could.

I didn't dare draw attention to myself by running, so I had to dally in the market before making my way back here." She shook her head in frustration. "It took too long! They have too much of a head start!"

Githsed patted her arm gently. "Don't blame yourself. If you had been captured, we wouldn't know what had happened, and the delay would have been even greater."

"Yes," Elodan forced himself to say. "Thank you, Alyce."

"What are we to do?" the young woman asked.

Elodan started for the door. "You two stay here. I'm going after her."

"No!" Githsed put one frail hand to Elodan's shoulder. "You can't. This is the same trick Arath used fifty years ago, using someone you care about as bait in a trap. You know he'll be waiting for you to come to her rescue."

Elodan gently removed his old friend's hand. "I know."

"Then don't go."

"I must. I love her. Without Sasha, I might as well have stayed in limbo forever. If the worst happens and we don't return, I leave it to you to do what you can against the Order."

"But without you, our chances will be so much worse!" protested Githsed.

"Without her, I have no chance at all," Elodan replied.

His friend sighed and shook his head. "Stubborn as ever. Then if you won't listen to me, at least take one of our horses. That way perhaps you won't arrive too

late to do anything."

Elodan grasped Githsed's arm in thanks, then turned and ran out.

They have a huge head start, he thought, even as he made for the stables. God and Goddess, if I ever needed your help it is now. Please let her be all right. Speed me to her.

Within minutes, a huge black horse raced out the gates, Elodan on its back. The sun was setting in a swath of blood, and the Dark Mage leaned low over his mount's neck and prayed that the color was not an omen of the future.

* * *

Despite her fear, Sasha's exhaustion got the better of her, and she dozed on the stinking straw mattress. Gradually, however, she became aware of a small sound at the door to her cell. Startled, she sat up, and saw Jacie's face peering in through the iron grate.

"Jacie!" she exclaimed and rose hurriedly to her feet. Then it occurred to her that her friend might not welcome too much familiarity, given the secrets that Sasha had hidden from her.

"Sasha!" Jacie called out, and the desperation in her voice dispelled Sasha's doubts. She ran to the grate and clutched at her friend's fingers through the small openings. So close, she could see the tears streaking Jacie's face, and she wished that she could offer a hug for comfort. "They say you're going on trial tomorrow! They say that you...that you unleashed the Dark Mage."

Sasha sighed. She could do nothing but tell Jacie the truth, even if it turned her friend against her. "It isn't that simple," she began. "Elodan isn't evil, Jacie, no matter what the First says. You have to believe me."

"I was so worried when you disappeared. Did he...kidnap you?"

"I'm sorry, dear one. I didn't want to worry you. Elodan didn't kidnap me—I went of my own free will." She leaned her head against the grate tiredly. "He had...come to me before. I thought he was a ghost. I wanted so badly to tell you, but I didn't know how to explain the feelings he awoke in me."

Jacie's lips trembled, and more tears spilled free to trickle down her cheeks. "There are things I wanted to tell you, too, Sasha. But I was too afraid. Things to do with...with my sessions with Arath. I feared you might think I was lying, or report me."

Fear touched Sasha's heart, and she remembered the sudden change that had come over her friend after her special study sessions with Arath had begun. "What is it? You can tell me anything, Jacie."

"Arath...he didn't want to help me learn to become a better mage. He...he touched me and...did things to me...and then he said that it was my fault, that I was an evil temptress possessed of the Hag. He said that I was unclean, and that only his touch could drive out the filth. And then, after you went to him about me, he turned violent. I'm so ashamed!"

Fury burned Sasha. "Listen to me, Jacie. You don't have anything to be ashamed of. Arath took advantage of his power as the First to rape you! He's

the one who's evil, not you."

Jacie had turned her face aside, unable to meet Sasha's eyes. "Then why do I feel so unclean?"

"You're blaming yourself for something that isn't your fault." Sasha gently tightened her grip on Jacie's fingers. "Arath is a liar and a monster. You probably aren't the first girl he's raped, but no one has ever dared to accuse him because of his power. He'd destroy anyone who did so. I'm so sorry, honey. I wish I could have been here to help you."

Jacie smiled wanly. "I don't know what you would have done. I just wish you hadn't been caught, or that I could free you now. I can't open the door, though—the spell on it is too powerful."

"It's all right." Sasha tried to summon a smile of her own. "If you can, flee this place. Go to Elodan. He'll help you." Her throat tightened with sudden grief. "H-he's a good man."

"I will. Thank you." Jacie wiped tears away. "I have to go before someone finds me here."

Sasha nodded, knowing they would put Jacie on trial beside her if she was found here. "Good luck, Jacie. Just...believe that there is happiness in the world. There is joy. And that all men aren't like Arath."

After her friend left, Sasha sat back down on the straw, but sleep was now far beyond her. She had seen the signs that all was not well with Jacie—if only she could have done more, either before or even now. *Poor Jacie*. Perhaps, if all went well, she would someday find a man who would treat her the way she deserved and who would help heal her pain. A man

like Elodan.

Elodan. Sasha sighed and leaned back against the wall. She ached to see him one last time. Closing her eyes, she pretended that his arms were around her even now. He would hold her close, make her feel safe and protected no matter what the circumstances. His long-fingered hands would clasp her shoulders gently, while he placed teasing little kisses on the back of her neck. Then he would slide his hands down to her breasts, tweaking her nipples lightly between his thumb and forefinger.

Eyes still closed, she let her own hands trace the path she imagined for his. There was no one to see, so she unlaced her top, caressing her breasts beneath the loose fabric, circling her nipples with her fingertips, scraping the nail very, very lightly against sensitive skin. Imagining all the while that it was Elodan's touch.

Deliberately teasing, she slid her hands down to the hem of her skirt, drawing it up slowly. Her fingers brushed the soft skin of her thighs lightly, sensuously. She pretended that she could feel Elodan's hot breath there, the quick caress of his tongue as he worked his way higher and higher. With a soft moan, she parted her thighs, fingers finding the swollen bud of her clit and tugging gently. Her folds were soft and slick, and she delved the fingers of her other hand into them.

She imagined Elodan's arms around her again, his erection hard and hot against her back, his legs wrapped around her as he played with her. Her back arched as she tugged more insistently on her clit, the fingers of her other hand slipping between her labia

to penetrate her slick cunt. Elodan's teeth would scrape the back of her neck as he bit her, gentle but possessive, relentlessly bringing her to orgasm –

She cried out, body thrashing in a final spasm of pleasure. After, she lay still for a while longer, trying to sustain the fantasy of being held by Elodan for as long as she could. Then, with a resigned sigh, she straightened her clothes and stretched out on the paltry straw mattress. Elodan wasn't there, would never be there for her again. But at least in her final hours she could remember all that they had shared.

Chapter Thirteen

"Up with you, vixen!" shouted a harsh voice. Sasha blinked awake at the sound. She had not imagined that she could sleep, but sheer exhaustion had overcome her somewhere in the early hours of the morning. Her body ached from the uncomfortable bed, and there was straw stuck in her hair. Her mouth tasted like the bottom of an old boot, and her eyes felt full of grit.

Underground in the cells, it was impossible to guess what time it was or how long she had slept. Five Order mages stood on the other side of the door, two with torches and the other three holding chains. At a signal from the leader, a guard came forward and opened the door.

"Do not try to raise your magic against us," one of the mages warned.

Sasha would have laughed had the situation been different. "I can't believe you are so afraid that it takes five of you to restrain me."

"Be silent!"

She shrugged. Trading barbs with a bunch of

lackeys would make no difference. Although she doubted they intended for her to speak overmuch at her trial, she wouldn't give them the excuse to silence her before it even began. Perhaps, if she had the chance, she might at least plant seeds of doubt in a few minds. It seemed the only thing she could do.

They shackled her hands in front of her, then her feet. A last length of chain connected the restraints, shortening her steps and her reach even further. Even though she was restricted to a shuffling gait, she forced herself to walk with her head held high, as if surrounded by an honor guard rather than one meant to subdue her. The mages exchanged uneasy looks; clearly, her attitude was unexpected and they weren't sure if they should do anything to quell it or not.

Sasha had assumed that they would take her to the Gathering Hall, but instead she found herself being led outside into the courtyard. The sun was already high; birds sang, and she caught the scent of the flowers from the orchard. Two raised wooden platforms had been hastily put together; Arath and his cronies sat on one, while she was led to the other. Still determined to maintain her composure, she looked out over the crowd. Although those nearest to the platforms were members of the Order, to her surprise villagers and peasants made up the remainder of the huge gathering.

Jacie stood close to the platform, her eyes desperate. Sasha met her gaze, and for a moment it shook her. Tears gathered in her eyes, blurring her sight. Blinking them back, she forced herself to take strength from her friend's presence. She wondered if

every other gaze on her was hostile, or if there were any who sympathized with her plight. Even if there were, she could not count on them for help. She was in this alone.

Arath rose slowly to his feet, his white robes blowing around him in the spring breeze. His small eyes scanned her body, and she saw a smirk of pleasure on his mouth. No doubt he was enjoying the sight of a young woman afraid for her life. Determined not to give him any satisfaction if she could help it, she met his gaze coolly and saw a scowl darken his face.

"You have been called here to witness the trial of Sasha, former apprentice of the Order," Arath declared loudly, his forbidding gaze sweeping over the silent crowd. "Because of the grave nature of her crimes, I have opened this trial to those outside of the Order, so that you may all see the consequences of disobedience. Hieromancer Farius, please proceed with the charges."

Arath sank back into his chair, and Farius stood up. The look on his face was one of cruel pleasure. "The vile creature before us has committed so many crimes it will be difficult to name them all; therefore, I will restrict myself to the most grave. She has called upon the Hag to give her forbidden magic, allying herself with witches and demons. She has used this magic in an attempt to seduce her superiors within the Order, and when they proved too holy for her wiles, she then used her evil powers to call back the Dark Mage from his exile."

The gasps that came from the crowd seemed oddly

contrived, as did the shouts of outrage denouncing her. Sasha scanned quickly for the faces of the loudest, and recognized the Hieromancer's most loyal students and friends. They had been dispersed throughout the crowd, perhaps to make their condemnation seem universal. A few other voices took up the cry, particularly within the Order, but the peasants were shifting uneasily.

The Hieromancer smiled at the sound of angry voices. "Yes, the Dark Mage," he said slowly, as if he relished the words. "I have seen him myself. Of all the evil that this woman has done, surely restoring him is the greatest. She is a traitor to the very human race! The Dark Mage is evil incarnate; he will seek to destroy the Order and damn all others to hell on earth! He—"

"You lie!" Sasha shouted, unable to contain her outrage any longer.

Silence fell. The Hieromancer looked almost comically shocked that she had dared to interrupt him. Seizing the opportunity, she turned imploringly to the crowd. "Elodan is not evil. It is the Order that has gone astray! They—"

"Silence!" shouted one of her guards, raising his hand threateningly.

"No," called the Hieromancer. "Let her answer my questions, then, if she is so eager to speak. You do not deny unleashing the Dark Mage?"

Her heart beat hard with fear, but she held her head high. "I do not."

"So. You released him from his prison. If that was not an evil act, then why did you flee afterwards?"

Why were you so ashamed that you could not stay and face the rest of the Order?"

"Because I knew what your reaction would be."

"Wrong. You knew that your own actions would condemn you in Osan's eyes. You knew that what you were doing was against all goodness! Yet there is still time to redeem yourself." A cunning light entered the Hieromancer's eyes, and he smiled thinly. "All is not lost. Repent of your wickedness and forgiveness may still be had."

Her heart went cold. "In exchange for what?"

"Simple, child. An act of contrition, nothing more or less. You will tell us where the Dark Mage has fled to. Tell us who has sheltered him." He held up his hand quickly, before she could reply. "Think carefully. Do as I ask, and we will be lenient, for you will have shown your remorse beyond all doubt. Refuse...and things will go badly for you."

A dozen writhing, screaming fire elementals appeared above his head, their eyes filled with rage, their flaming wings beating impotently. Sasha swallowed hard, recognizing his threat. If she did not comply, she would be burned alive.

Dear Osan. Dear Nyx. It was difficult to imagine a more horrible end.

Taking a deep breath, she looked one last time out over the crowd. "I will not recant," she said, her voice strong and clear despite her terror. "I will not betray Elodan. He is a good man and I...I love him."

Shrieks of outrage exploded all around her. The Hieromancer's face flushed an ugly shade of red, and he lifted his hand to command the elementals. "Then

you will burn for your crimes!"

The guards who had been standing to either side of her dove frantically away before they could be caught by the Hieromancer's rage. A hot wind came up in advance of the elementals, whipping Sasha's hair back from her face. Bright sparks of fire streamed towards her, turning into a whirling maelstrom that would consume her utterly.

Power crackled through the air, and a cool breeze cut suddenly through the hot blast. For a moment, the fire elementals wavered, their cries of torment fading as they hung in the air. Then, with an abrupt pop, they vanished.

Sasha staggered against the rail around the platform, amazed to be alive. The Hieromancer stared at her in horror and rage, his eyes practically bulging out of his head. "You! How could you do that? You're but an apprentice!"

"But I am not," said a deep, clear voice from the edge of the crowd.

Her heart leaping into her throat, Sasha turned. A huge black horse pranced at the entrance to the courtyard. On its back sat Elodan, his long hair streaming around his face, his black eyes fixed unwaveringly on his enemies.

"You dare!" cried the Hieromancer, aghast. "By the power of Osan, I bind thee, serpent of evil—"

"Spare me," Elodan interrupted. "I have come here to unmask you, Farius, and all those like you."

"Do not listen to him! He is the Dark Mage, the greatest of liars!"

"They have no need to listen to me—they need

only remember what they have seen!" Elodan said, his voice carrying clearly over the crowd. He turned towards the gathered peasantry. "You who have suffered the most under Arath's rule know the truth better than any. How many of your children have been killed as witches because the Order's rulers wished to keep power in their hands alone? How many have hidden in your homes whenever a mage rides past, afraid of being denounced and punished for some imagined sin? How many of you have fallen in love, deeply so, only to be told that your feelings are somehow wrong and offensive to the Gods?"

There came an angry murmur from the crowd. Even some of the younger mages looked troubled by his words.

"He is nothing but a tempter!" shouted Arath, rising to his feet. "As he has corrupted this young woman before you, so he seeks to corrupt you all!"

"And is what he has done somehow worse than what you've done to me?" cried Jacie.

Sasha gasped, afraid for her friend. There was a determined look on Jacie's tear-streaked face as she clambered onto the platform to stand by her. "Arath raped me!" she shouted, anger and shame and pain all twisted up in her voice. "He attacked me, and then made me feel like it was my fault! My fault, because he was more powerful than me, and older than me, and I trusted him!"

Jacie's voice broke into helpless sobs, and she buried her face in her hands.

"Another liar!" Arath cried, but now he had to struggle to be heard over the roar of the crowd. "Kill

them! Kill them all!"

A storm of elementals suddenly appeared: fire, earth, air, and water, all struggling and battling one another while the shouts of mages rang out. Jacie gasped, and she and Sasha both ducked down, making themselves smaller targets.

"We have to get out of here!" Jacie whispered. Sasha nodded, even though it would be difficult with her hands and feet bound. They both rolled off the edge of the platform; Sasha would have fallen had not Jacie caught her elbow as she stumbled.

All around them was confusion. Mages fought one another and peasants alike. Many of the peasants had come armed with simple weapons, pitchforks and scythes. Although they were taking heavy losses, they were still able to inflict terrible wounds against some of the Order.

The two women clung to one another, stumbling through the chaos, confined to a shuffle because of the chains around Sasha's feet. Sasha ducked out of the way of a pair of young men she recognized as fellow apprentices, now locked in a life-or-death struggle with one another.

"We're almost at the edge of it, I think," she said encouragingly. "Just a few more feet and—"

A heavy blow knocked them both to the ground. Frantic, Sasha rolled onto her back, determined to fight even though she couldn't use her power to Summon with her hands bound. Arath stood above them, his thin strands of colorless hair blowing in the wind. His eyes were lit with the fire of a fanatic, and a maddened grin stretched his mouth.

"You will not harm them!"

Elodan appeared as if from nowhere, on foot now. His clothing was slightly charred in places, but otherwise he looked unhurt. His eyes were narrowed dangerously, their obsidian orbs glinting.

"So here we are again," Arath hissed, all his attention on Elodan. "Raise a hand against me, and I will kill these two. History repeats itself. What a fool you are, to fall for the same ruse twice."

Elodan's fine mouth was pressed into a furious line, but he made no move towards Arath. "Perhaps. But at least I have learned a few things since last we met."

"Have you now? What would those be?"

"Many things, not least the power of love." Elodan smiled suddenly. "Also I have learned patience. Patience, and the ability to step back and allow others to act when they are better suited to the battle than I."

Arath threw back his head and laughed, incredulous. "So! You abandon this woman you claim to love, leave her and the other bitch to die in your stead while you flee!"

Elodan shook his head. His eyes went briefly to Sasha, and she saw fierce love burning like a fire in their obsidian depths. "You mistake me," he said.

Then he turned towards the swirl of elementals swarming above Arath's head. Flinging out his hand, he cried, "In the name of Nyx, Goddess of the Night, and Osan, God of the Sun, I unbind you! Go free, and do as you will!"

A deafening crack shattered the air as the binding Arath used to control and torment the elementals

broke. For a moment, the cloud of fiery beings stilled, their shrieks silenced at last. Then, howling in rage, they turned and flung themselves on their former tormentor.

Arath's screams rose above the din of the battle as the elementals transformed him into a living torch. The freed spirits attacked without mercy, leaping from mage to mage, seeking out those who had enslaved them and freeing their kin who were still held in cruel bondage. Shrieks of terror filled the air, and in a moment the battle had become a stampede.

Elodan touched Sasha's chains, and they shattered like glass. Pulling her and Jacie to their feet, he dragged them out of harm's way. Relieved beyond all words, Sasha flung her arms around him. His own arms tightened around her, crushing her to him. His mouth was hot on hers, lips and tongue frantically exploring hers, as if to make certain she was real.

"I was so afraid I wouldn't make it in time," he gasped.

She leaned tiredly against his chest, remembering how certain she had been that she would never know his touch again. For a moment, she wanted only to shut out the entire world and hide herself away with him. Then, sighing, she reluctantly lifted her head and looked around.

The battle was over. Little remained of Arath and his chief mages save for ashes that vengeful wind sprites were even now scattering. Those of the Order who remained stared blankly, their entire world crumbled into ash along with the First. Behind them, the peasants sent up a ragged cheer.

“Now what?” Sasha asked, echoing the thoughts of many of her peers.

Elodan settled his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “Now we begin anew,” he said.

Chapter Fourteen

Sasha leaned against the windowsill and watched the sun go down. The shutters were flung wide, letting a cool breeze into her old tower room. That small change was just one of many that had overtaken the Order in the days since Arath's defeat, and there would soon be even more. Those gifted with power but not of noble blood had already begun to come to the castle, cautiously seeking the training they had long been denied. No longer were restrictive head-to-toe coverings required for women, although a few still wore them, as was their right as free people. Old statues of the Goddess—many of them very valuable—had been found locked away in the personal vaults of Arath and some of the others of the old regime. The last of these had just been restored to a place of honor at Osan's side in the main chapel.

Elodan's boots tapped softly on the stone floor as he came to stand behind her. "What are you thinking, my love?" he asked, his breath stirring the fine hairs on her neck and making her shiver.

She smiled wryly. "Just how much things will

change. And how some will always resist that change."

"True enough." He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against him so that the bulge of his erection pressed against her rear. "But we'll face them when the time comes. With you at my side, how can I worry about the future?"

She grinned and rubbed her body suggestively against his. With a muffled moan of passion, he turned her around and kissed her deeply. His mouth left hers, trailed kisses down her neck, nibbled on her earlobe until she whimpered.

She ran her hands over his strong shoulders, then found the laces of his shirt, untying them eagerly. He took a step back, smiling seductively, and stripped off the shirt. His skin was hot and tight against his muscles as she ran her hands over his chest, then down over his belly. Dropping to her knees, she tugged at the ties of his trousers with her teeth. He moaned as she slowly pulled them free, brushing her lips over the bulge of cock as she did so. Once done, she tugged off his boots, tossing them casually aside.

Standing up, she pushed his pants free of his hips, so that he stood before her naked. His cock pressed into her belly as she leaned against him, winding her arms around his shoulders and sliding her hands through his hair. His hands roamed freely over her body, pulling at her clothing until skin met skin. The hard peaks of her nipples rubbed against his chest, sending shivers of pleasure through her.

"Do you want me?" she asked teasingly. He moaned and kissed her again, plundering her mouth

with his tongue.

Leading him to their bed, she gently pushed him back onto it. Straddling his hips, she held herself just away from him, slowly stroking his erection with her hands. "Do you want me?" she asked again, grinning wickedly.

He gasped and his hands tightened on her hips, trying unsuccessfully to draw her down onto him. "Yes!"

"I don't know...I'm not convinced."

"Yes, I want you, Sasha! I need you! I need you to be my lover, my friend, my heart, forever!"

Placing the head of his cock against her entrance, she lowered herself with excruciating slowness. The thick head opened her slowly, sliding deeper as his shaft filled her. Waves of pleasure shook her as she at last came to rest against him, utterly impaled on his cock, and she flung back her head with a moan.

"Yes," he groaned, his hands sliding up over her breasts, squeezing and tugging at her sensitive nipples.

She started to rock on him, grinding her body against his. The tight friction was wonderful, driving her higher and higher, until she spasmed hard around him. His hands gripped her hips, and he began to thrust up, meeting her pace, driving deeper and deeper until he suddenly arched beneath her. They cried out in unison, and Sasha felt a final orgasm grip her body, rushing through her in waves until she was completely spent.

With a happy sigh, she slipped off him and lay down, her head pillowed against his shoulder. He

kissed her gently on the forehead. "I love you," he whispered.

She smiled, no longer ashamed or afraid of her feelings. "I love you, too," she said, and settled down to a peaceful sleep in his arms.

The End

About the Author

Raven Li once wanted to be an exotic dancer, but her dream was doomed by a complete lack of coordination. She now lives in North Carolina with three neurotic cats, two motorcycles, and a husband who inspires all of her sex scenes. She loves to hear from readers, so you can email her at raven@ravenli.com.