

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

CHARLOTTE  
BOYETT-COMPO

*WyndRaider*



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WyndRaider

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# *WYNDRAIDER*

**Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

### *Author's Note*

The world in which this novel is set is one entirely of my creation. It does not exist in *any* real place or in *any* real world or in *any* real time. Though the setting may look familiar, seem as though it belongs on Earth, trust me, it doesn't take place here. It is a parallel place that only vaguely resembles our world. The time period is neither medieval nor futuristic but somewhere in between. There might be similarities to our world's history but such likenesses are only there as reference points and are *not* to be taken literally.

As you read, you may come across what you take to be references to modern accoutrements, language and idioms. Likewise you may encounter things you are accustomed to seeing in historical novels or even in comic books. In this fanciful world I have created, this is simply the way its inhabitants speak and act and react. The words they speak are their own and not to be confused with the way the people of our world and of our time speak.

This work is a compilation of dreams and fantasies and wishes of my own fabrication. Their world is as I see it and is peopled with characters whom I labored hard to give birth to. These characters live in a mystical place crafted entirely from the darker reaches of my very vivid imagination. They don't know about your time or the time of your ancestors. To them, it is the here and now. To me, it is a world I long to visit.

So sit back and detach yourself from your here and now and journey to theirs. Suspend what you think you know and leave your mind open to the mystery of...what if?

*Charlotte Boyett-Compo*

## Chapter One

King Grayham Connors of Ceomhar had been pacing from one end of his council room to the other all afternoon, anxiously awaiting the visitor whose arrival he dreaded. Though he was a brave man, a competent warrior in his own right, his hands shook at the prospect of the meeting. Glancing nervously at the wide set of iron-studded double doors that led from the council room into the keep proper, he continuously licked his dry lips and ran an impatient hand through his thick blond hair. His pale blue eyes were narrowed with dismay.

"What could be taking him so bloody long?" King Grayham demanded of his lord high chancellor, a frail, elderly man with a shock of thick white hair.

"He operates on his own time, Your Majesty," Lord Keithton observed. "He will come when it suits him to."

"Aye, but did we not tell the messenger to stress to him that time was of the essence?" the king queried.

"He knows, Your Majesty," the lord high chancellor replied quietly, attempting to straighten his stooped shoulders.

The king stopped pacing and stomped to the window, flinging aside the heavy dark green brocade to look out at the winter afternoon. His hawkish nose quivered as he leaned his high forehead against the cold glass pane. "Many fear for her safety, Keithton," he said so softly the other man barely heard him.

"I know, Your Majesty, and I am sure he will agree to return her to us."

King Grayham lifted a hand to the glass to write his name in the fog of his breath that had steamed the window. Outside, snow was falling vigorously and the wind howled to rattle the pane. Closing his pale eyes, he listened intently, both anticipating and dreading what he might hear. At the sound of the jingle of harnesses, his eyelids flew open and he strained to see out the window, wiping away the condensation. "Is it him?" he asked.

"I shall see, Your Majesty," Lord Keithton answered, bowing slightly before going to the doors and opening one. He closed it gently behind him, leaving his monarch alone with the troubling thoughts that would not cease.

It seemed forever before there was a light knock at the door and both panels were pushed open by the uniformed guards who were never far from King Grayham's person. The two men stepped aside to allow Lord Keithton to enter the council room.

"He is here, Your Majesty," the lord high chancellor stated, and moved to one side. He swept back a hand in introduction as a tall man entered the chamber. "I present to you Duke Saxxon Kell."

King Grayham felt his stomach lurch and he had to grab the edge of the chair in front of him, his knuckles bleached white with the force of his grip. He lifted his head as his visitor strode in, the spurs of his boots jangling against the carpeted floor.

The sight of the Cuideag warlord was enough to frighten even the staunchest of fighting men, for it was rumored Saxxon Kell's personal kills numbered in the tens of thousands. No enemy stood long against the Duke of Baldemahr and it was said the moat of the *caiseal*—his tribe's keep—ran red with the blood of those who had tried.

Dressed in a long black wool cape that swept the floor, the cape's cowl had been thrown over the Cuideag's shoulder and obscured the lower portion of his face, the material coated with a fine layer of clinging snow. Only the warrior's glowing eyes could be seen in the shadowy confines of the cowl. One black-gloved hand rested on the stygian crystal hilt of the infamous *Sléacht*, the widowmaker that had claimed the lives of Kell's foes over the years. Kell's other hand rested clenched at his side, the gloved fingers still. It was a telling thing that the warlord had come alone to the king's presence, without a single bodyguard flanking him. Such brazen courage said he held no fear of those into whose midst he had walked. It was the mark of a very brave man or one singularly careless of his safety.

Realizing his visitor neither intended to speak first nor show fealty by bowing or dropping to one knee before him as the doors closed behind Kell, King Grayham raised his chin, willing his voice not to waver or break as he spoke. "We offer you our apology for bringing you out in such inclement weather, Lord Saxxon. Had not the circumstances been so dire, we would have..."

"Let us dispense with your insincere apologies and get to the meat of the matter," Kell interrupted, and reached up to push the folds of the cowl from his face, flinging it back over his shoulder to reveal a flowing mane of dark brown wavy hair. His dark eyes glowed brighter with feral light that set King Grayham's knees to knocking behind the protection of the chair. The six-pointed, starburst-shaped pupils were black as pitch but the irises were a mesmerizing copper color shot through with darker striations. "How long have the Dealachan held your woman?"

Unable to tear his stunned stare from those unusual deadly eyes, King Grayham attempted to swallow before he could speak, the dryness causing his tongue to stick to the roof of his mouth. He opened his lips but no sound would come. Shaking his head, he looked helplessly to his chancellor.

"She was taken a week ago, Milord, captured by the Dealachan laird himself, General Meilich Caisil-Chrò," Lord Keithton answered for his king, understanding the other man's hesitation. "While His Majesty was in the process of returning from the tourney at Lùchairt, the capital of our country."

"I know what Lùchairt is," Kell growled, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

"Aye, I know you do, Milord," the lord high chancellor was quick to assert. "We did not hear of Her Majesty's abduction until we were almost to Ceomhar." He

indicated the winter palace with a sweep of his hand that fluttered down as Kell continued to glare at him.

"Why was the woman left behind?" Kell asked. "Why was she not with the one sworn to protect her?"

King Grayham found his voice, angered at the silent implication in the question. "My lady was not feeling well," he said. "The journey to Lùchairt would have put too much strain upon her."

Kell narrowed his eyes. "What ails her?"

The king flung out a dismissive hand. "She has migraines. They plague her with such debilitating pain she must remain in a dark room where no light or sound may worsen the ailment. The headache came on a few days before we were to leave. We thought it best to leave her behind rather than make her suffer the trip."

The Cuideag warlord held the king's wavering look. "You know the Dealachan take women to feed from them?"

"Aye, I do know that," he replied in a small voice. "But we were told they would not defile our lady, that they would hold her for ransom. We..."

A harsh snort came from Kell. "Then whoever told you that bold-faced lie should have his tongue pulled from his deceitful mouth with hot pinchers! The Dealachan laird would have claimed the woman as his personal chattel before the first drop of her blood was taken."

All the blood drained from the king's face. "Surely he would not have dared lay hands to a queen of Ceomhar!"

Once more the muscle jumped in the Cuideag's lean jaw. "If he would dare fuck *my* woman—a man he has reason to fear—why would he think twice about fucking yours—a man at whom he laughs?" he demanded, strange eyes blazing with red flares of light.

It was common knowledge that the *folachd*, the blood feud between the tribes of the Cuideag and the Dealachan, had begun when General Meilich Caisil-Chrò of Oighre dared abduct the bride-to-be of Saxxon Kell on their Joining night. That the young woman had seemed more than willing to be taken had made no difference to the Cuideags of Grian. Kell's fury had burst its boundaries and the *folachd* had been declared, a blood bath between the two tribes turning the hillsides scarlet with shed blood before General Caisil-Chrò managed to escape to his mountain lair.

"Will you fetch her back for His Majesty, Milord?" Lord Keithton asked quickly before his king could address the direct insult that had been hurled at him by the Cuideag. "We will pay whatever amount you ask."

"That is a given," Kell said with a snort. His flashing orbs bore into the king. "Fifty thousand valins now and another fifty thousand when I return the woman to you."

The king's mouth dropped open. "One hundred thousand valins?" he queried, his voice unnaturally high with shock.

"It eases my mind to find you are capable of simple addition," Kell stated dryly. "I thought you mentally challenged but perhaps you are merely stupid."

King Grayham's mouth snapped shut, his temper flaring. No man had ever dared speak to him with such disrespect and though his eyes narrowed with anger, he could not voice it for fear of the Cuideag. He managed to nod his agreement to the terms, his fingernails digging into his palms.

Lord Keithton winced but remained silent. Saxxon Kell's help was sorely needed and no matter what the Cuideag did or said, his belligerent behavior would be overlooked for no man ever stood up to the warlord and survived the encounter. No sane man dared try.

"We accept your terms, Milord," the lord high chancellor agreed for his sovereign. "I will escort you to the treasury and have the monies handed over. The lord high treasurer awaits us." He glanced at the window where snow beat at the panes. "You will be staying with us this night, will you not?"

Kell's hand tightened around the hilt of his sword, his long, tapered fingers flexing along the hilt. "My men and I have no need of your hospitality, Keithton. Our main force has set up camp beyond the walls. We will bide there until the storm passes then be on our way."

"Will you not at least sup with us?" Lord Keithton encouraged.

"What we need, we already have," Kell quipped, and for the first time his lips spread back with a brutal grin, revealing the sharp inwardly curved fangs that marked him for what he was.

King Grayham made a strangled sound and tore his gaze from those wickedly pointed cuspids that bracketed Kell's very white teeth. The king gripped the chair back tightly to gather his courage to speak. "Then I will thank you now," he muttered, unable to return his attention to the Cuideag.

"You may thank me when I bring your woman back to you," Kell grated.

The king nodded and from his stiff-shouldered stance and constant nervous licking of his lips, it was obvious he wanted Kell to depart.

"If you will accompany me to the lord high treasurer's office, Milord, I will get your monies for you," Lord Keithton said, sweeping a hand toward the closed double doors.

Kell swept one final contemptuous look over the king of Ceomhar and pivoted on his booted heel, his black cape swirling behind him as he strode to the door the lord high chancellor opened for him. He paused in the corridor as his escort indicated the way to the treasury office.

"We are grateful for your help, Milord," Lord Keithton said as he walked a step or two behind the warlord out of deference for the man.

"Mayhap you are, but your king has no such gratitude in his cowardly heart," Kell replied.

Lord Keithton lowered his head. "Queen Lillian is my oldest child," he said softly.

The Cuideag came up short and swiveled his head around to face the lord high chancellor. He gave the man a hard look. "I was unaware that was the case. It was my understanding the woman was an orphan raised in a convent and given into Joining to Connors on her eighteenth birthday."

The lord high chancellor smiled grimly. "She was. Her mother died when Lillian was but a child. This was during the war between Ceomhar and Zaphnia. Unfortunately during the conflict, I was captured and spent twelve years in a prisoner of war camp on that hellish world. Lillian and her two sisters were placed in the Convent of the Blessed Lady for I had no other relatives with whom they could stay. I did not see my daughter again until after she was wed to His Majesty."

"And what think you of the Joining?" Kell inquired.

"It is an honor to have a daughter who is the queen of one's country," Lord Keithton said.

"That is not what I asked," Kell told him.

Glancing down the corridor, the lord high chancellor drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly before he answered. "My Joining to Lillian's mother was one based on love and mutual respect. It was my fondest wish that my three daughters enjoy like marriages of their own." He turned to look at the Cuideag. "Two of them have."

Kell held the other man's gaze for a long moment, respect for Lord Keithton forming in Kell's black heart when the lord high chancellor did not look away, meeting Kell's stare with an honest one of his own.

"I understand," Kell said, and continued walking.

"Forgive me, Milord, but I must ask. Do you truly believe Laird Meilich will have abused Lillian though she is our queen?" Lord Keithton asked, his voice revealing the strain of the question. "Our people have heard the horror stories of the Dealachan and the atrocities they perpetrate upon their captives."

"You are asking if I think he has raped her."

A silent nod was the answer.

"Is she pretty, your daughter?"

"She is lovely beyond words in my eyes," the lord high chancellor answered quietly.

Kell's footsteps slowed. He hated the answer he had been asked to give and when he spoke, the edge on the harshness of his voice was filed down a bit. "I will not lie to you. A beautiful woman in Meilich's hands would not leave them unsoiled."

Lord Keithton shuddered. "I was afraid that would be your answer. I was hoping since she was our queen..."

"That means nothing to Meilich," Kell snapped. "To him, a woman is a woman and nothing more."

"Will he kill her?"

Kell shrugged. "That I can not answer but my instinct tells me he will not simply because she is Grayham's woman and as such, offers him an opportunity for revenue should he decide to ransom her. Meilich is a predator but he is not a fool. He has been known to feed upon a victim until he has drained the last drop of Sustenance from his body and then again, I've heard it said he's released captives after he's had his fill of them. There is no predicting what a beast of his ilk might do."

"Beast," Lord Keithton repeated, his shoulders dropping. "Just knowing my child is in the hands of such a creature makes me ill."

"Yet you are entrusting her safety to one not unlike the Dealachan," Kell reminded him.

The lord high chancellor shook his head. "You are not like Laird Meilich, Your Grace."

"Make no mistake about it. I too am a blood beast, Keithton," Kell stated. "I take my nourishment from the veins of others just as does he."

Swallowing his distaste at hearing those words, Lord Keithton indicated a turn in the corridor down which they needed to travel. "Aye, but I know there is a difference between your people and his, though I have never understood that difference," Lord Keithton admitted. "So little is actually known about either race."

"There are telling differences between us," Kell explained. "We feed on blood but not on flesh. The Dealachan feast on both flesh and blood. We do not kill our providers. The Dealachan almost always do. We can take to the air for short distances. They are water and landlocked, unable to shift into anything other than the ponderous, slippery slugs on two feet that they are."

Despite his anxiety over his daughter's safety, Lord Keithton smiled at the analogy. "I take it there is no love lost between your people and his."

"We are superior in all things," Kell said with a lift of his cleft chin. "As high up the ladder of creation as you can get. His people have yet to even put a slimy foot on the lowest rung."

The door to the treasury was open with guards to either side. They snapped to attention as the lord high chancellor and the Cuideag approached.

"The lord high treasurer is awaiting us," Lord Keithton said, and held out a hand for Kell to precede him through the doorway.

A small, violently trembling man was standing behind his desk with his hands clutched tightly at his waist. His pale eyes were open wide—the pupils dilated—and his lips were quivering through a sick smile that came and went with each shuddering breath he took. He resembled a beached fish gasping for air, unable to look at the Cuideag.

"Please pay His Grace fifty thousand valins, Lord Neibert," Lord Keithton instructed. "Fifty thousand more to be given at the return of Her Majesty."

Lord Neibert's head bobbed up and down, his mouth opened and closed, but he did not move, made no sound whatsoever as he stood there shaking. He seemed incapable of any other movement.

Lord Keithton gave Kell an apologetic look and stepped up to the lord high treasurer's desk, lowering his voice to the frightened man. "Neibert, His Grace does not have all day for you to stand there and nod like a brain-damaged jackass. Give the man his money so he may be about his business before he takes the price of my daughter's rescue from your shriveled hide."

"Aye!" Lord Neibert squeaked, and the smell of urine became strong in the room.

"Bloody hell," Kell grumbled, his face puckered with distaste. "Did he piss himself?"

The lord high chancellor sighed. "I apologize, Milord, but it seems he did." He gave the treasurer a chastising glance. "Neibert, get hold of yourself, man!"

Nodding furiously, the lord high treasurer backed up a few steps then spun around like a top, slammed into the doorjamb and bounced off with a grunt before hurrying into the vault room to retrieve the payment, his spindly arms and legs thrashing as he moved.

"That one is an imbecile," Kell observed.

"I've always thought so myself," Lord Keithton agreed.

When Lord Neibert returned, he was trembling so badly his teeth were clacking together. He thrust the sack of golden coins toward Lord Keithton, still without meeting the warlord's gaze. The clink of the jiggling coins was loud in the silence.

The lord high chancellor took the bag and extended it to Kell. "I wish you would stay long enough to take a meal with us."

"If it were with only you, I might relent," Kell said. "But I've no desire to be in the company of your overlord." The sneer on his imposing face gave mute evidence of his feelings toward the king.

The two men left the treasury, Kell lagging a bit so Lord Keithton was obliged to match him step for step though the older man was inclined to walk behind the warlord.

"What manner of woman is your daughter?" Kell asked. He glanced at his companion and saw the lord high chancellor's face take on a soft look.

"She is a worthy woman, Milord. An honest and straightforward woman," he stated. "Lillian has made our people a good queen. She is compassionate but can be firm when she needs to be. Our people love her even if her husband does not." The last sentence was spoken from between clenched teeth.

"So it would not be a great loss to him if she is not returned to him."

"Had you asked me that an hour ago, I would have hotly denied it, but now I am not so sure," Lord Keithton replied. "When His Majesty believed his lady would not be molested, he was quick to want her back. Learning Laird Meilich may have laid hands to her..."

"There is no *may have* to it, Keithton," Kell interrupted. "He has as surely as night follows day."

Lord Keithton stiffened but his voice did not show his apprehension at being reminded. "If that is the case, His Majesty will surely decide he does not want Lillian returned to him," the lord high chancellor said. "To our land, aye, but not to the palace." He turned to look at the Cuideag. "Either way, I will see that you are paid what is owed you."

Kell made no comment to that statement. He clutched the purse with the fifty thousand gold valins in his gloved hand, hefting it as he walked. With the psychic sense that was his, he knew beyond doubt the money he held was the only coin he would see from the Ceomhar treasury for this day's work. Any other monies for the return of the woman would come from her father.

"Where do you wish me to bring her?" he asked.

"I have an estate near Karsgill. Anyone can direct you to it." He reached into the robe of his office and took out a medallion on a long chain. "Give this to her. She will know it was I who sent you."

Kell took the necklace, the intricate chain flowing like water from his palm. The medallion was an ancient symbol he recognized and when he closed his gloved fingers around it, he could feel heat pulsing from the shiny metal. "Is this hers?"

"Aye, Milord," Lord Keithton said. "It belonged to her mother and her mother's mother before her, handed down from daughter to daughter when the girl reached maturity. It is a..."

"Sciar-copar," Kell finished for the old man. The medallion pulsed in his hand. "The Scorpion of legend."

"You know the tale?" Lord Keithton inquired.

"I do," Kell said, and thrust the medallion into the front of his robe. He smoothed his hand over it as though making sure it was safe.

The old man nodded. "Aye, of course you would." He felt a shudder run through him, wondering if he had done the right thing in sending for the Cuideag to fetch Lillian.

"I will treat your daughter with the utmost respect, Keithton," Kell said, reading the chancellor's mind.

"I am sure you will, Milord," Lord Keithton responded.

"Because she is your daughter," Kell stressed. "Not because she is Grayham's woman."

Lord Keithton's footstep faltered. "May I ask why that makes a difference to you?" he asked.

"Zaphnia," Kell said.

A frown shifted over the old man's face. "I don't understand."

"Do you remember a warrior with a slashing scar from his left shoulder down to his waist at the camp?"

The lord high chancellor thought back to his long incarceration on the dust planet. "Beithir," he answered. "Baron Collin Beithir. I remember him well."

"You saved his life."

"As I remember, he saved mine first."

"That you remember it that way will please him," Kell told him.

"He escaped that hellhole?" Lord Keithton gasped. "I had heard he perished there!"

Kell's lips twitched. "The Zaphnians did everything they could to see that happen but they were denied their revenge. I personally went after him." He shot Lord Keithton a steady look. "Beithir is my blood-sire."

Lord Keithton drew in a quick breath. "I thought Portland Kell, the duke of Baldemahr, was your father."

"He was my mother's *husband*," Kell corrected in a hard voice, "but he did not sire me. He is merely the bastard who purchased my mother even as she carried me within her." His teeth clenched. "For a rather goodly amount I was told when he learned she would bear a male child."

Lord Keithton understood the females of the Cuideag race were thought of as nothing more than property by their menfolk, assets to be bought and sold and traded, bartered and discarded at will. He thought of Beithir—the only other Cuideag he had known—and remembered the warrior's words as they lay chained together one miserable night...

*"I once had a woman who was as dear to me as the air I breathe but they took her from me and gave her to another man simply because I bore love for her and did not consider her material goods."* The Cuideag had grinned mercilessly, vengeance turning his copper eyes a dark ginger color. *"But I left a little surprise for them."*

That surprise, no doubt, had been the man walking beside Lord Keithton.

"Since Portland Kell could not father children of his own, I inherited the bastard's title and position. On his death bed he cursed me for what it was worth."

"The man must have been very bitter," Lord Keithton commented.

"He was pissed that I survived childhood without being broken by his brutality, but that's neither here nor there. How will I know your daughter?" Kell asked as they arrived at the stairway that led down to the inner bailey.

"Come with me and I will show you her portrait," the lord high chancellor suggested.

Kell nodded politely though he was anxious to be gone. The king's palace made him jumpy and he longed to be out in the elements though he detested the cold—as did all his kind. He followed in the older man's wake as he led the Cuideag along the balcony and to a section of wall containing portraits of the royal family.

"This is our queen," Lord Keithton said with pride, pointing to a large painting that hung to the left of that of King Grayham's. "This is my Lillian."

A glance was all that was needed for Kell to imprint the woman's image in his quick mind for all time and he looked up at the somber colors, past the skirt of the dark purple gown to graceful hands clutched together lightly, past an ample bosom with lush cleavage to a slender neck, a softly rounded chin, and there his passing look stopped—fastened upon sultry red lips that bore just a hint of a smile.

His gaze lifted slowly, reluctantly from those sensuous lips, past a pert little upturned nose until he found himself lost in an unfathomable green gaze that kept him rooted where he stood. He was unaware his lips had parted and that he was staring at soft, beautifully put-together features that awakened a raging hunger deep inside him he had not known he possessed. His heart thumped hard against his rib cage, his blood raced unchecked through his veins, and he leaned closer to the painting, putting up a palm to touch the linked hands drawn there. A surge of energy moved from his fingertips to his shoulder and he pulled his hand back, stunned by the reaction.

"She does not love him," Lord Keithton heard the Cuideag whisper. "She fears him."

"Aye," the lord high chancellor said, knowing the warrior was referring to the king. "He has raised his hand to her many a time."

Kell turned his head and the deadly glower he sent the old man's way made Lord Keithton take a step back. "He'll not do so ever again!" he swore, and returned his attention to the painting. "No man will ever lay a hand to her as long as I draw breath."

The old man saw rage sparking through the strange eyes of Saxxon Kell a moment before the warlord turned on his heel and stalked to the stairs. He had to practically run to catch up with Kell's long-legged stride that took the stairs at a skipping stretch, the warrior's spurs hitting the stone risers.

"I will send word to you when I have my lady safe," Kell told the lord high chancellor and Lord Keithton stumbled to a halt midway down the stairs, grabbing for the banister to keep from plunging headlong to the bottom.

"Your lady?" Lord Keithton gasped, his face stark white.

"Mine," the Cuideag stated emphatically, and never broke stride as the two guards at the entryway doors jumped to open them for his exit. He was out in the violently swirling snow, his dark form swallowed up in the white-out conditions, before Lord Keithton could begin shivering with the terror that had snaked up a hand to clutch his heart.

## Chapter Two

Lillian paced the confines of the locked room into which Laird Meilich Caisil-Chrò had ordered her remanded. It was bitterly cold in the stone room where the only furnishing was a lumpy cornhusk mattress laid on the bare floor. Neither sheet nor blanket nor pillow lay upon the bed and Lillian doubted seriously that she could ever force her body down on the wretched thing. It reeked of mouse droppings and something even more unsavory. She eyed it with disgust and began another circuit of the small area that was her prison.

The gown she had been wearing the night she had been snatched from her bedroom lay in tatters around her. One shoulder had been ripped and now cascaded down her bare arm where ragged scratches marred her flesh. The hem was torn, the bodice gaping open and pinned together as best it could be with a barrette from her tumbled hair. Her petticoats were gone—as were her bloomers and hose and shoes so that her legs and feet were stinging from the chill, yet she disdained sitting down to draw the meager warmth of her ragged gown around her for fear something with four—or eight—legs would crawl up her limbs.

Pushing back a limp tress of her dark blonde hair, she thought she could feel vermin crawling over her scalp and hissed with futile anger. Her skin crawled and she hugged her arms around her, refusing to allow the tears to erupt.

“You’ll give in to me,” the Dealachan laird had sworn as he’d sat there while her clothing had been stripped by his servants. “Come to me of your own free will and I will see no harm comes to you.”

That the bastard hadn’t raped her yet left Lillian a modicum of hope to burn in her breast. Though he had surveyed every inch of her naked flesh as she stood there refusing to cower before him, he had yet to put his filthy hands on her. He had walked around and around her—his hawkish gaze intent on her bare body—but he had not touched her nor had he allowed his men to do so.

“You will come to me,” he said.

“Never!” she swore.

An evil smile had tugged at the corners of his full mouth. “Oh, you will.” He had taken up her torn gown, sniffed it then flung it at her. “When the cold becomes too hard to bear, you will.”

“I would rather die!”

“No, you wouldn’t,” he had predicted. “You would rather live if for no other reason than to try plunging a dagger in my heart while I lie beside you in bed.”

Her teeth chattering, Lillian put one foot atop the other to gain as much warmth as she could. She changed feet but there was precious little in the way of relief to her chilled flesh. Her breath blew out in a rush of trembling vapor. She choked off the whimper that strove to be born and dug her fingernails into the area above her elbows. Much more of this bone-jarring cold and she would be forced to surrender to the Dealachan.

Groaning, she slumped against the ice-cold wall and hung her head. She had no desire to leave this world. She longed to see her father and sisters again, her nieces and nephews, her homeland. She did not want to be buried beneath the frozen tundra of this hellish land.

"Give in to me and I will eventually ransom you," Laird Meilich had told her. "Once I have my fill of your comely delights."

"My blood, you mean!" she mumbled as she leaned on the wall. The thought of him piercing her neck with his fangs sent a hard shudder down her spine and bile rushing up her throat.

Weary of it all, dead-tired from nearly a week with little sleep and even less food than her husband fed the hounds in the keep, Lillian was rapidly losing what strength she clung to during the ordeal. She sank down to her haunches on the dirty floor and buried her face against her knees, a small keening sound coming from the depths of her hopeless soul.

Mayhap he would not hurt her, she thought as she hunkered there. It wasn't as though she were unaccustomed to being mauled by a man. Grayham was not a gentle man nor was he a considerate lover. His rutting—and that was precisely what it was—was painful at best, humiliating at worst.

And her husband was a good twenty years older than the Dealachan laird so he'd had that many years of practice of his particular brands of cruelty.

"I am not as evil as they say I am," the Dealachan had informed her. "Not nearly as cruel as some."

She had read the truth of that in his steady eyes and that had confused her. That and the way he looked.

The appearance of the dreaded leech had been one hell of a surprise to her. She had expected him to be hideously ugly with warty, slimy skin and foul breath, mangy hair and dirty fingernails curled down at the long tips. From the tales of his kind she'd heard all her life, she had been prepared for a squat, overweight old monster with snapping jaws, fangs dripping with ooze and glowing red eyes. She had been unprepared for the reality of the man.

Laird Meilich Caisil-Chrò was in his middle thirties. His head was bare of any trace of hair but the baldness did not detract from a sensuous, handsome face. If anything, the lack of locks drew the gaze to his face. He had a finely wrought chest that looked to be as hard as flint beneath the black leather jerkin he wore untied over that powerful expanse. His elliptical eyes were a pale, almost transparent blue framed by long, thick

lashes and there were no fangs in his mouth though his lips were fuller than any man's she'd ever seen. He was tall—at least six and a half feet—with slender hips, taut thighs and strong-looking hands that were even paler than his wan face. Handsome though it was, that face bore the unmistakable stamp of infinite nastiness that fanned down from a bold, straight nose to those plump lips.

Shaking herself to rid her mind of his image, Lillian crouched there on the cold floor and felt the burning pain radiating along the soles of her feet. She was so cold her extremities were growing numb and that was not a good sign.

*"Live if for no other reason than to try plunging a dagger in my heart while I lie beside you in bed,"* he had said.

She wondered if it would be possible to slay the heartless beast and gain her freedom. The thought of plunging a blade into his chest filled her with strange warmth.

The sound of the lock's tumbler disengaging brought Lillian's head up. She stared at the door as it swung open on its creaking hinges and the brittle glare of lantern light illuminated the room. She squinted against the invasion of the radiance and turned her head away.

"Are you ready to concede yet?"

It was his voice and it was a silken purr that brought gooseflesh to Lillian's arms. She turned her face toward him, not seeing the man behind the glow of the lantern. He said nothing more—simply biding his time, knowing she had no choice but to surrender to him. The draft coming in through the opened door made her colder still and her teeth began to chatter uncontrollably.

"Give in, woman," Caisil-Chrò demanded. "I promise you, frostbite is not something you wish to experience."

Sighing deeply, Lillian tried to get to her feet but her limbs were locked into position and she could not move. She could not stop the whine of frustration from slipping out.

"Here," she heard the Dealachan say, and the lantern was thrust into the hands of another. He stomped toward her, stooped and hefted her from the floor, cradling her high against his brawny chest. "Silly female," was his comment as he strode with her from the cell.

Unable to bear the harsh glow from the lantern, she buried her face against the leather of his jerkin and was surprised again at the clean smell of him. There was a faint aroma of tobacco and heady cologne mixing with the scent of the leather, but it was a comforting fragrance.

He carried her up two winding flights of steps—one cold and dark, the other warm and brightly lit—and along a long balcony.

"Prepare a tray for her," she heard him order someone close by. "And a hot bath. She fair reeks."

Lillian almost found herself laughing at that comment. That he found her malodorous was strangely reassuring unless he intended to eat her and wanted her flesh clean. That particular thought struck terror through her very marrow and she stiffened in his hold, her head popping up from his chest.

"Relax, woman," he said, intercepting her wayward reflection, and his voice held a hint of humor. "I've had my fill of flesh for one day. It's warm cunt I want now to keep my blood thawed in this frigid weather."

Fresh fear lanced through Lillian. Though she had no choice but to give herself to him if she didn't want to freeze to death in his arctic cell, the apprehension that he might hurt her started her to trembling all over again. When he tightened his hold on her, she bit her lip, his arms like bands of steel around her.

Caisil-Chrò sighed heavily. "Is it my arms or my cock that so frightens you, Lillian?" he asked, gazing down at her as he stopped at a wide door.

"It's you that frightens me," she mumbled, meeting his bold stare with one of her own.

He hefted her against him as though she weighed no more than a feather. "If I promise not to tear you to pieces with my immense appendage, will you relax and enjoy the ride?"

Lillian was stunned to see true laughter lurking in the Dealachan's eyes. His full lips were pressed together as though he were attempting to keep from grinning at her. "You are mocking me," she accused.

He shocked her by winking. "Mocking, fucking. Either way, I'll be having you before the sun rises."

Lillian flinched when he kicked the door open with his heavy boot and strode into the room with her. The cavernous chamber smelled of burning wood and spiced cider, and when he set her down on her feet, she swayed against him, breathing in a strange, heady scent that made her head reel.

"Out!" he snarled, and Lillian became aware that they were not alone in the massive room.

A woman a few years older than Lillian sat up slowly on the settee upon which she'd been reclining. Her bare feet making no sound on the thickly carpeted floor as she stood. In her hand was an odd-looking appliance from which a pale gray smoke was curling.

"You would bring your whore to our bedchamber, Meilich?" the woman hissed, her lips drawn back from gnashing teeth. "I can not believe you would dare!"

"I told you to get out, Daniva, and take that shit with you! This is not *our* bedchamber. Do you see any of your things here, woman? This is where *I* sleep. You have not shared this room with me for many months!"

Lillian watched the woman's hands curl into claws and she would have flung herself at Lillian had not the Dealachan moved with an uncanny speed. He grabbed her

around the middle and lifted her easily, swung her up with her back to him to carry her to the door—shrieking and cursing. Her feet drummed against his legs, her hands digging deep furrows into his bare forearms but he managed to deposit her outside, slamming the portal shut in her enraged face. The sound of the lock engaging, the woman's fists pelting the panel, her manic screaming, signaled her inability to get back in.

"Was that your lady-wife?" Lillian asked, her heart thundering behind her rib cage.

"Unfortunately so," Caisil-Chrò answered with a deep sigh. "I made the mistake of taking her from a rival just because I could." He pursed his lips. "I should have left the bitch with the Cuideag. He deserves her."

"The Cuideag?" she asked, another wave of fear rolling through her. "Do you mean Saxxon Kell?"

"That's the bastard," Caisil-Chrò grumbled. "If you think I'm bad, you haven't had the displeasure of meeting him."

Whatever was in the strange apparatus across the room was making Lillian sick to her stomach. Her vision was blurring and she felt so lightheaded she sagged against the foot of the bed, her hands wrapped around the tall four-poster.

"Opium," Caisil-Chrò told her as he walked over to the thing he told her was a water pipe or a *kalyan*. "It is an insidious drug, highly addictive." He opened the window and tossed it outside, snow fluttering in to billow the heavy damask drapes before he closed the portal.

"It makes me feel weak," she complained, putting a hand to her head, which was spinning crazily.

"Aye, well, it makes grown men feel weak," he stated. "That is part of its allure."

He caught her before she could pitch to the floor, swinging her up in his muscled arms to skirt the foot of the bed and lay her upon the silken coverlet. She felt his fingers grazing her cheek as he bent over her, but a firm knock at the door turned him away from her, his heavy footsteps plodding across the floor.

"Is she still out there?" he called before unlocking the door.

"Nay, Milord," a voice replied. "She is gone."

"No doubt in search of her toy," Caisil-Chrò murmured as he twisted the lock and pulled the portal open, standing aside as servants trooped in with pails of steaming water. He folded his arms as they marched into the bathing chamber to begin filling the big copper tub.

"Cook is preparing a light repast for Her Majesty," Lillian vaguely heard someone say. "Shall I bring it now, Milord?"

"Give me time to bathe her first."

Those ominous words made Lillian struggle to pry her drooping eyelids open but they refused to do so for her. Her heart was knocking against her breastbone and icy chills were undulating over her body as she plucked with trembling fingers at the

coverlet beneath her. This was a Dealachan into whose hands she'd been delivered and all her life she'd heard vile tales of the creatures, of how beastly and brutal such beings were, the atrocities they had perpetrated against her people. Yet this one had not hurt her, had not allowed any other to hurt her and had not laid hands to her for over a week while she slowly – and without any other recourse – bent to his assertion that she would eventually give in to him.

"I will not hurt you, woman," he told her as he came back to the bed. "But you will be claimed before I take the sleep." She could feel him bending over her as the door to the room closed as though from a far distance away.

One moment her clothing was in place and the next, air was drifting over her naked body. She felt his arms slide under her back and knees, and she was hefted against him once more and carried into the bathing chamber. Very warm, very soothing water closed over her body as he placed her in the tub and she sighed, luxuriating in the feel, and it helped her to wedge her eyelids open. She sucked in a breath.

He was peeling the dark jerkin from his body and the flex of his muscles were mesmerizing. The man had a well-honed warrior's body, his chest and arms bulging with muscles though not one single hair adorned either. She wondered if there was any hair on his sleek body.

"No," he said. "Dealachans are hairless." He smiled and arched a thick black brow. "All over except for around our eyes." He winked.

Lillian blushed and squeezed her eyes shut as his hands went to the waistband of his leather pants. His hunkering down beside the tub brought her lids open again and she found herself at eye level with him, looking into a face that held no trace of brutality. In his hand he held a fleecy rag and he dipped it into the water before taking up a bar of soap to lather the cloth.

"It has been many years since I bathed a woman," he said as he lifted her arm and began to run the soapy material down it. He stared into her eyes. "Many years since I desired to bathe one."

His touch was gentle—so incongruous to the stories she'd heard—and his eyes were warm as they held her gaze. She found herself drowned of all energy, all protest, and just lay there as he bathed every inch of her. She sat forward obediently for him to wash her back, looking away when he lifted each leg in turn to run the rag down it. The soft rag thrusting ever so lightly between her legs made her shudder all over and her head snapped around. She watched him grin.

"Are you going to t-take my b-blood?" she questioned, fear making her temples throb as she strove desperately not to feel the arousal his fingers were eliciting as he ran the fabric along her folds.

He shrugged carelessly. "It's what I do, but I can promise you, you will enjoy it." He probed into her soft sheath and Lillian gasped. "You will enjoy it very much."

Her face felt as though she had opened a hot oven and bent down close to it. Her teeth were chattering as he let go of the washcloth to let it float in the water. He got

lithely to his feet and for the first time she saw him naked. The jut of his rod made her jaw sag and she found she could not tear her stare from that massive organ.

"It will fit," he said as he leaned over and scooped her from the tub, water cascading down his taut body as he set her on her feet and reached for a towel to dry her.

Lillian's knees were weak as he worked the soft fabric over her body, drying every inch of her, running the towel between her legs to blot away the droplets of water. She stood there as still as a statue as he squatted down to dry her feet.

"Beautiful," he declared, stroking the arch of her right foot. He put his head back to gaze up at her. "I love a woman's feet."

A trill of desire ran through Lillian against her wishes, against all common sense and aspects of rightness. She was a married woman—though she had no more love for her husband than her husband had for her—and should not be having the odd, fluttering clenches low in her belly. Her flesh should not be tingling where the Dealachan touched her. If anything, she should be shuddering with distaste and cowering in fear instead of shyly slipping her arms around his brawn neck as he lifted her to carry her into the bedchamber.

"I will be gentle with you, little woman," he said in a voice that was low and deep and filled with passion.

She turned her face away, burying her head against the pillow, but he reached out to gently take her chin, quietly turning her face toward him.

"There is no shame in this," he said, and his fingers caressed her jawline, his thumb running over her lower lip. "You are my captive. What other choice do you have but to submit to me?"

What choice indeed? she wondered when he lifted a leg and nudged her hip with his knee, indicating he wanted her to move over in the bed. She moved like one in a dream, obeying him without as much as a whimper. He stretched out beside her on his side and trailed his fingers along the column of her throat.

"Did you gain pleasure from the weak one's touch?" he asked in a soft voice that sent gooseflesh pebbling on her arms.

It took her a moment before she realized he meant her husband. She tucked her lip between her teeth. "I..." She had no idea how to answer for in truth she had always suspected there was more to sex than the quick in and out Grayham visited upon her.

"I will show you," Caisil-Chrò whispered, and leaned over her. While his strong hand spanned her neck, anchoring her face, he took her mouth with a kiss that made her toes curl.

Her husband had never kissed her in that way. Grayham's bussing had been slobbering sweeps that had left her feeling a sense of disgust, his spittle flowing into her mouth. This kiss was something entirely beyond her scope of understanding. Caisil-Chrò's full lips plied hers with a firmness and knowledge that set her heart to racing. She was so entrapped by that kiss, she barely felt him moving over her, prying her legs

apart with his own as he settled against her body, the hardness of his cock stabbing along her belly.

He lifted his lips from hers. "Put your arms around me," he ordered, and Lillian did as she was told.

His flesh was smooth and silky soft beneath her palms, yet the ridges of his muscles were hard and filled with power. Such strength intimidated her yet it thrilled her too. It was overwhelming and the heat, the sublime weight of his body pressing down on her, finally broke through the hypnotic lure of his kiss to make her blood sing. Her arms tightened around him and she heard a low growl of satisfaction rumble from his throat.

The Dealachan's hand eased from Lillian's neck to her breast, molding it gently, kneading it, his palm rough upon the sensitive nipple. She arched her back, wanting his touch, and he squeezed her flesh before his mouth left hers and his lips closed on the puckered nub, his teeth grazing its swell.

"Oh!" Lillian cried out, for Grayham had never done anything more than roughly grope her breasts in a punishing clutch that had been far from pleasurable. The feelings Caisil-Chrò was instilling in her were making her writhe beneath him, her heels forced into the softness of the mattress. She was aware it was purely sensation—nothing deeper—yet she was enjoying this forbidden gratification, this illicit indulgence. It was wrong and she knew it, but she wanted to finally know for herself what other women found exciting about the act of sex.

A knowing tongue swept over her swollen flesh, stabbed at it, then full lips began to suckle strongly as though he were a babe. The pleasure that latched on to her sent waves of chills down her spine and her nails digging into his back. Her hips shot up from the bed and she felt his cock slide between her legs. Where it touched her, she felt moisture and hardness and a devilish heat that brought sweat to her upper lip.

"Milord!" she groaned, needing—what? She had no way of knowing. Had no idea what culmination could lie at the end of the pulsing need that was slowly building within her.

"Aye, woman," he said against her breast. "I know."

His lips slid lower—over her taut, quivering belly, across the spiky curls lush upon her mound and drew a part of her into his mouth. The feeling was nearly unbearable and she cried out, nearly levitating from the mattress. His snort of laughter made her squeeze her eyes tightly shut for she understood he knew what he was doing to her. It was exquisite torture, scintillating torment and it was driving her mad with an itch to which she could neither put a name nor reach to scratch for it was deep inside her and growing with every nibble of his masterful mouth.

"Please," she begged, not believing she could take much more. Her hips wiggled beneath his steady assault and just when she thought her sweet suffering could get no worse, he slid a finger inside her moistness and she shrieked with the sheer wondrous pleasure of it.

"That's it," he whispered, and his hot breath was like the blast of a furnace against her aching loins. "That's what I want you to feel."

Another finger wound its way up inside her and he slowly twisted the two of them – then a third – inside her until he had turned the pads of his flesh over within her and he pushed upward, touching something that sent Lillian into spasms of panting.

"There," he said, and pushed hard, holding his fingertips against her.

It started as a slight pressure midway her belly and slowly spread downward. It spiraled down with a grazing heat that enveloped everything in its wake until it was spidering out in an undulating web that tripped her up, ensnared her, trapped her and sent her plunging into wave after wave of the most indescribable, unbelievable enjoyment she'd ever experienced. Her hips shot up from the bed and in the time it took for that first pulse, that fledgling spasm to claim her, he was slithering up her, his cock thrusting powerfully deep, going fully inside her to fill her to capacity, stretching her with such delicious warmth and completeness that she screamed, her fingernails drawing blood from his smooth shoulders.

"Aye," she heard him say. "Let go, woman. Let go and live!"

Her body had taken over from her mind and she was one long feeling extension of him as he plunged into her hard and rapidly, seeking his own fulfillment in her climax-deprived channel. His lips went to the side of her neck and she felt a sharp stinging as the second tightening fluttered through her lower body—he was just that quick, nothing slow about a man the world considered nothing more than a leech.

Caisil-Chrò sucked the blood from the rich vein at her throat and swallowed convulsively as his orgasm rippled down his stony-hard cock and he spilled himself inside her. Spent, he relaxed against her, the rows of tiny teeth that had sprung from his lips retracting into the soft folds of his mouth. He licked at the oozing blood from her wound, knowing it could continue for several hours even though he had injected a clotting agent into the bite. He had no intention of remaining with her to see how long the oozing lasted for it was the habit of his kind to find a dark place where he could ingest the blood he had taken. Digestion was slow and already he was beginning to feel the lethargy the feeding brought.

Lillian felt his rod withdrawing from her and she winced for he had stretched her greatly. He slid from her and rolled away, the warmth of his body replaced with the coolness of air.

"Did you enjoy that?" he asked as he picked up his clothing and began to dress.

"Aye," she said, curling her body into a fetal position for she was embarrassed by her nudity.

"We will do it often," he said. "For now, sleep. This will be your chamber now."

She wondered where his lawful wife would sleep. Idly, she wondered if the woman would burst in on her and do her harm.

"She will not," Caisil-Chrò stated. "She will leave you be or I will drain the bitch until she is no more than a rustling husk."

Lillian shivered, knowing he meant what he said. She bit her lip and lay there as he went to the door, closing it firmly behind him. Low voices in the corridor beyond let her know he was instructing someone regarding either her safety or her imprisonment within his chamber. She got up from the bed and padded into the bathing chamber, feeling the slime of his juices easing down her thigh. With all her heart and soul, she prayed there would be no issue from what he had done to her that night. As much as she wanted a child, she did not want it to be half human, half Dealachan. The gods alone knew what a creature such an offspring might be.

After bathing the evidence of his passion from her body, she looked into the armoire for something to wear but there were no female clothes there. Pulling one of his shirts from the shelf, she put it on and went back to the bed, flinging the covers aside. It was then her neck began to itch and she put a hand to it, feeling the abraded skin. Going back into the bathing chamber, she went to the mirror and turned her head to one side. The wound was just at the juncture where her neck and shoulder met. It was a Y-shaped red blotch of tiny pinpricks that were oozing.

Her eyes widened for she remembered the sting on her neck.

"He fed from me," she said, and a cold shiver went down her spine.

But he had not hurt her and as she stood there staring helplessly at the marks he had left behind, she took some comfort knowing it.

## Chapter Three

Snow swirled in thick eddies around Kell's pale gray horse, obscuring the mountain road over which he and his men were moving slowly, picking their way over the treacherous terrain. It was bitterly cold with a fierce wind bearing down on the warriors with raking claws that tore at their clothing. The first rays of the morning sun were spiking up from behind the tallest ridge and he knew they would be forced to seek shelter before the light reached much higher in the sky. The war party had lost two days due to the viciousness of the storm and now on the third night of traveling, of being blasted with bone-chilling cold and peppered with stinging shards of ice, the men were weary, grumbling among themselves.

"Our men will be ripe for Dealachan blood by the time we reach Fuachd," General Tremont Giles, Kell's second-in-command, told his warlord.

Kell thought of the Dealachan fortress and nodded, his lips so numb he could no longer feel them beneath the protection of the thick scarf he'd wrapped around the lower part of his face. His gloved hands were stinging from the cold and his fingers barely able to flex within the leather that was now brittle as he relaxed the fist he'd been clenching for the last few miles along the serpentine pathway leading up the summit of Mount Ilbhinn. Hunger beat at him for the last of his supply of Sustenance had been consumed upon his rising at sunset. He would need to feed from his horse at the next rising to maintain his strength.

"Why are we going after a woman whose husband doesn't want her back?" Giles inquired.

The Cuideag warlord turned hard eyes to the man whose horse was plodding along behind his own. "Because I want her," the warlord replied. "Besides, he paid us fifty thousand valins to go after her. We do not take money we do not earn."

"Aye, but we'll not see another valin for our trouble over this, Saxx," the general complained.

"It isn't the money we're going after," his warlord reminded him.

Giles shot his commander a quick look. "You're wanting this woman because the Dealachan took her? Is that it?"

"He'll take her and soon tire of her, Monty. You know that. When he does, he'll either turn her over to his men for their sport or kill her. I will not allow that to happen to Keithton's daughter."

"Yet Lady Daniva still lives after all these years," Giles said softly, and was rewarded with a fierce frown that practically melted the snow driving around them.

"He keeps her alive to spite me," Kell said through clenched teeth.

"All the same..."

"*We are going after the woman and that's all you need understand!*" came the brutal shout that made their horses prance nervously.

"Fine!" Giles snapped, and clamped his lips shut.

Kell drummed his spurred boots against his stallion's flanks and shot ahead, perilously ignoring the slippery bank along which the beast moved, digging its hooves into the snow-packed path. The warlord had a vicious headache that was like a band of fire around his temples and a sour stomach rumbling to be fed. His hunger had increased until it was fast becoming a living thing wedged in his gut. If it was not satisfied soon, he could go into Reversion and that was to be avoided if at all possible.

He thought of the woman in the portrait and his cock leapt, hardened with want. It had been months since he'd felt the urge to mate and now it was upon him in wave after wave of black lust. His palms itched to run over a soft, pliant body. His fangs ached to taste sweet, passion-driven blood. He could feel his four canines lengthening and he gnashed them together, grinding them against one another. He was so keenly aroused, he was becoming unbearably uncomfortable in the confines of the saddle.

"Lillian," he said aloud, but the name was lost in the howl of the wind and the maelstrom of snow.

He put his hand up and snared a finger of the glove between his teeth and pulled it off, baring his hand. Quickly, he thrust his hand into the pocket of his robe and wrapped his fingers around the medallion that belonged to the one he sought. Instantly, heat spread through his hand and the Sciar-copar pulsed in his palm. It would lead him to her like a lodestone.

Without knowing he was doing so, he reached out to her, searching for her amidst the teeming bodies in the Dealachan fortress still some five miles away up the treacherously winding mountain path. She was like a beacon drawing him to her even though he had yet to lay hands to her, touch her, kiss her, spread her beneath him as he longed to do.

Careful to conceal his search from the Dealachan—and especially Caisil-Chrò—so the bastards would not know the Cuideags were coming, Kell closed his eyes and let the medallion do the seeking for him. It would hunt for its owner and pinpoint her exact location.

"Find your mistress for me," he whispered, caressing the copper medallion and chain.

As it always happened, there was a soft flash of light that became a wavering mantle over his vision. It was like looking down into a vast depth of water and seeing a light undulating beneath the waves. The light's edges peeled back from the middle until a misty scene was revealed to Kell's searching eye.

She was asleep on her side, her hands curled beneath her cheek. The sweep of her long lashes fluttered and her eyes moved from side to side beneath the lids, heralding a

dream had claimed her. Probing that dream, he saw it was an innocuous little mind wandering from her childhood.

A secretive smile spread over Kell's craggy features and he slipped gently into that dream and subtly changed it, altering it gently, molding it, shaping it until it was of his own choosing, insinuating himself into her early morning reverie.

"Kell, the morning comes," he heard Giles warn.

The warlord's eyes snapped open and he winced against the invading brightness raying up from the zenith of Mount Ilbhinn.

There were caves along the mountain path and while one part of his mind led his men into the dark recesses, another still held the dreaming subconscious of the woman he sought. Lethargy was fast taking over his body but as he dismounted, allowing one of his men to see to his horse, his leaden footsteps took him deeper inside the cave, away from the killing light spreading over the land while his agile mind still kept contact with the object of his desire.

Going deep into the cave structure, he found the darkest place and sat down with his back to the stone wall. He closed his eyes—the better to hold Lillian's image—and tightened his grip on her dream.

*Lillian sat beside a crystal pool of water, her palm fanning the cool midnight surface. She was looking down into the depths at her own reflection. She smiled for her long hair was circled with a coronet of bright-hued wildflowers and above her the lacy branches of a weeping willow swayed gently in the night breeze.*

*Then he was there behind her, his face blurry in the water but his control and command so tangible, she felt as though she could reach out and touch them.*

*"What do you, Milady?" he asked, and his voice was deep and sensuous, filled with desire for her.*

*"I was awaiting you, Milord," she answered, and looked around but could not see his face for he was standing in the light from the bright moon hanging just beyond his wide shoulders.*

*"As I have waited for you," he said, and held out his hand.*

*She laid her fingers in his palm and he levered her gently from the mossy bank and into his strong, powerful arms, bringing her up against a sturdy chest with rippling muscles beneath his lawn shirt. One hand cupped the back of her head while the other spread hot fingers along her waist.*

*For the longest time they stood that way until he brought his hand around to slide a finger beneath her chin to lift her face. She strained to see his features but his face was in shadow, hidden by the bright glare of the moon behind him.*

*"I have waited so long for you," he whispered, and lowered his head.*

*The touch of his firm lips upon hers sent shock waves through Lillian's body and she clung to him, feeling that if she did not, she would fragment into a million pieces at his feet. Her fingers gathered his billowy shirt in fistfuls and she pressed her body hard to his. The kiss deepened and his tongue slipped sweetly between her lips to tangle with hers. The taste of him was as*

*intoxicating as a potent wine and made her head swim. When his lips released hers, she groaned with frustration.*

*"I am coming for you," he told her. "I will be there at the sun's lowering tomorrow."*

*"Hurry," she whispered against his mouth.*

*And then he faded from her touch.*

*"Don't go!" she pleaded, hands outreached, but he was no longer there and the darkness around her was cold and barren.*

*She fell to her knees and buried her face in her hands.*

*"Don't go," she sobbed.*

*"Look for me at the setting of the sun..." His whisper wound around her like a gossamer web.*

Kell stretched out on the rocky ground as the Day Sleep claimed him in its unbreakable grip and he slid down into the all-encompassing darkness where his kind needed to be to rejuvenate. He wrapped his robe tightly around him and buried his head in the folds of the cowl so not one ray of damaging light could find him. He had no fear of an enemy finding him while he slept for the weretigers would be posted at the cave entrance, their loyalty to his kind unshakeable, their laser claws and sharp fangs ready to take any life that threatened their masters.

In the keep high atop Mount Ilbhinn, Lillian sat up in the bed and shivered, snaking her arms around her to warm her. The room was frigid with cold and though a faint light showed at the crack between the heavy drapes, no other light lit the room. Even the fire in the hearth had gone out and her breath fogged the air in front of her. Though she longed to huddle into the covers, she knew the fire had to be relit. Flinging back the blankets, she eased her bare feet over the side of the bed, dreading the moment her soles touched the floor. As soon as they did, she bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out for the carpet beneath her feet was as cold as the stone walls. Dragging the coverlet from the bed, she wrapped herself in it and hurried to the windows to fling the drapes aside, letting in what meager light the snowstorm would allow. The gray morning pelted the windowpanes and added to the thick sheeting of ice already there. She could see nothing beyond the glass but knew from the sound the storm had not abated.

Restarting the fire took some doing but at last she had a feeble flame striving to stay alive. She squatted there at the hearth with her palms out to that limited warmth as it steadily grew into a column that lent some heat to her face. By the time the wood had caught and was blazing in the fire pit, the door opened and a slovenly servant shuffled in, a tray clutched in her pale hands.

"Food to break your fast," the blowsy woman said in a grudging voice then plunked the tray down on a table beside the settee. She gave Lillian a smirking look then left without another word.

Hunger made Lillian's stomach growl and she got up to see what was on the tray. It looked edible and smelled somewhat inviting so she picked up the tray and carried it back to the hearth, sitting down tailor fashion in front of the fire to eat. The fare proved to be hearty if not all that palatable but it was enough to sustain her. At least the pot of tea was hot and fragrant, helping to warm her. When she had consumed everything on the tray, she drew her knees up with the last cup of tea clutched in her hands and stared into the leaping flames.

The Dealachan would not bother her until the sun set, she thought. Their kind succumbed to the power of the day and hid from its light. She would be safe from Laird Meilich until then unless his thralls intended to harm her and she doubted that would happen. When she had been imprisoned in the cell beneath the lowest floors of the keep, those who were enthralled to the Dealachan had let her be though they had brought stale bread and brackish water to keep her alive.

"You are to receive no comforts," one of the servants had told her. "Not until you give in to His Grace."

At first Lillian had thought she would not give in but the unrelenting cold, the hunger, the need for human—or otherwise—companionship had taken its toll. She had had no other choice.

Glancing around her, she saw bookshelves across the room with tome after tome lining the shelves. There would be plenty to read to pass the time, but until she was as warm as possible, she had no desire to get up and pad over to see what offerings could be had for reading. At the moment, she needed to see to her morning ablutions and with a heavy sigh, let the coverlet drop and rose. She frowned as the cold stung the bottom of her feet.

As she washed her face, she thought she heard the bedchamber door open and close, and when she peeked around the bathing chamber door, saw clothing lying on the freshly made bed and slippers sitting on the hearth. A relieved smile tugged at her lips and she hurried to finish her morning bath before rushing to put on the underwear and gown, grateful for its heavy warmth as the room began to heat from the fire's roar. She also found a pitcher of water on the nightstand and another pot of tea on the hearth beside her slippers. A bowl of fruit, a wedge of pungent cheese and a small loaf of bread had also been provided for her.

"Thank you, Laird Meilich," she said softly, knowing it had been his thoughtfulness that had provided such largess for her.

With the slippers on her feet, she lit several lamps to brighten the grayness of the early morning light then walked over to the bookshelves to take down several volumes she had not read before. She carried them to the settee, sat down, curling her legs beneath her. Never one to sit idly or laze about daydreaming, she opened the first book and began to read. Soon she was absorbed in the comedy. She did not notice the door opening until the harsh snort brought her head up.

"So my husband's whore has made herself at home!" Lady Daniva Caisil-Chrò sneered. "Are you comfortable, bitch?"

Lillian stared into the glazed eyes of a woman whose face was chalky white from lack of sun and whose hair was in dire need of a good combing. A rat's nest of tangles bracketed Lady Daniva's pasty visage, giving her the appearance of someone quite out of touch with reality. Lillian's heart raced as the Dealachan's wife came farther into the room, eyes shifting from side to side as though she expected to be attacked. Lillian wondered if the woman was ill.

As if her visitor had read Lillian's thoughts, a harsh laugh peeled from between Lady Daniva's thin lips. "You'll look like me soon enough, my pretty," Lady Daniva hissed as she went to the hearth and began plucking the food from the tray, thrusting it into the loose bodice of her soiled gown. "When he's fed on you as long as he's fed on me."

Pity welled up in Lillian's heart for the other woman and she calmly laid the book she'd been reading aside, folding her hands in her lap. "I did not ask to be brought here, Milady," she said. "I am a prisoner in your home."

Lady Daniva's lips twisted. "My home?" she asked. "Nay, whore. It is not my home but his. It has never been a home for me." She took a sidling step closer to the settee. "Do you think to make it your own, you had best think again. Meilich will not allow it."

"I've no desire to make Fuachd my home," Lillian said. "My home is Ceomhar."

"Aye," Lady Daniva said with a mean grin. "You were queen there, but Grayham will not want you back now that you have been slimed with Meilich's squirting."

Lillian knew that was true and lowered her head. "Perhaps my father will ransom me," she said hopefully.

"And just who would bring the ransom?" Lady Daniva scoffed. "What fool in his right mind would risk the displeasure of the Dealachan to dare such a task?"

Her shoulders sagging beneath that question, Lillian had no answer. She knew of no one brave enough to undertake her rescue. Perhaps her father might have come had he been well enough to do so, but he was frail and old with one foot hovering over the grave as it was. If he could find someone, he would, but the chances of that happening were slim at best.

"I used to dream of being rescued," Lady Daniva said as she stood staring into the leaping flames. "I dreamed of my intended coming to fetch me until I realized he would not." Tears filled her eyes.

"You were betrothed to the duke, weren't you?" Lillian inquired.

A barking laugh came from Lady Daniva. "Aye, the great Cuideag warlord!" She turned a bitter, narrowed glare to Lillian. "By the gods, how I hate that bastard now!" She lifted her hand and slowly closed her fingers around a tight fist. "Had I that man in my grasp, I would make him rue the day he left me here to die!"

It was on the tip of Lillian's tongue to remind the woman that it was her very own machinations that had sealed her fate in Fuachd. She had heard the story of how Lady Daniva Kurst had bartered with the Dealachan to be Laird Meilich's consort and of how the blood feud between the two tribes had come into being. If anyone was to blame for Lady Daniva's predicament, the deed could be laid at her own doorstep and no one else's, especially not the warlord's. Wisely she kept her counsel.

Lady Daniva turned to rake Lillian with a hateful inspection. "What does Meilich see in you?" she snarled. "You are not worthy of his attention." But before Lillian could speak, the crazed woman bobbed her head up and down. "Aye, now I remember! He wants an heir and means to have it with you!"

Chills went down Lillian's spine and she put a hand to her throat, feeling the nausea rising there. The blood drained from her face, her bottom lip quivered.

"He could not get offspring from me so he stole you to hatch his little squirming!" the other woman cackled, slapping a hand to her thigh. "And he'll no doubt plump your belly soon enough!"

The door opened suddenly and two burly male servants came in, their faces set and hard. "Come, woman," the taller of the two commanded Lady Daniva.

Eyes shifting furiously in an obvious attempt to find an escape route, the unhinged woman darted past the two and would have made it had not one of them swept out an arm to snare her waist. He brought her up short—she was kicking and screaming—he slung her on his hip like a sack of salt. With her wild shrieks and pummeling fists beating against the servant's shoulders, the two brawny men left the room, closing the door behind them.

Lillian sat stunned, Lady Daniva's prediction tumbling through her troubled mind. She had no desire to bear the Dealachan an heir. As much as she would like a child of her own, she wanted that child to be human and not a beast of blood.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the watery crypt where he spent his days, Meilich Caisil-Chrò had heard every word his wife had thrown at Lillian. A snarl pushed from his throat and his fingers curled into claws at his side. Once more he vowed to get rid of the mad woman to whom he was tied. Over the years, Daniva had lost all reason—if she had possessed it at all. Her addiction to the *kalyan* and the opium had gotten out of hand and it was no longer an option to try to wean her from the drug. All efforts at doing so had failed. The only humane thing to do would be to end her miserable life yet he hesitated, remembering a calmer time, a sweeter time when she had been his all, when he had defied a Cuideag to possess her.

But that time had passed and contempt was the only emotion he felt for the woman now. She had killed what compassion he had borne her long ago. She was a liability.

Shifting within his stone bed, the Dealachan was restless, his sleep disturbed by his wife's insanity. He would not know the bliss of surcease anymore this day. Now he

would be forced to bide his time in the crypt until the sun went down and he could return to the silken body of his captive.

"An heir," he said, his upper lip crooked at the word. "What need have I of an heir?"

It had not been a lacking in the womb of Daniva Kurst that had failed to produce a son for him all these years. It was a steadfastness of the Dealachan leader not to bring a rival into this world with whom to contend for control. Sons grow to be men who grow to be warriors whose greedy, grasping hands would reach out for the throne and Meilich had no intention of letting the reins slip to any other warrior. He did not want a son to succeed him for he intended to live forever, as a Dealachan could.

He shifted his body again and opened his eyes to glare into the darkness. It had not been a desire for an heir that had prompted him to take the human but a surety that one man in particular would come after her if she were abducted from the Ceomharian palace.

"She is Lord Keithton's daughter and the Cuideags will come to Keithton's aid for Beithir owes the man," the Dealachan chief tribunalist had stated. "Kell himself will come. Mark my words!"

The thought of having Saxxon Kell chained in his dungeon filled Caisil-Chrò with unbridled delight and the smile that stretched across his mostly hairless face was evil incarnate.

## Chapter Four

The sun made one last feeble reach for the heavens then sank down behind the jabbed summit of Mount Ilbhinn. As darkness spread over the snowy mountains, Saxxon Kell opened his eyes and sat up, aching from the contact with the hard, cold, rocky ground beneath him. Cursing himself for not having taken the time to spread a blanket to cushion his bones from the unforgiving terrain, he pushed the cowl of his robe back and raked a hand through his unbound hair.

It had been months since he'd spent so much time in the saddle and longer still since he'd made his bed on the ground. He was stiff and hurt in places he'd forgotten he had. Getting wearily to his feet, he leaned against the rock wall for a moment then sighed with irritation. He pushed away from the cold barrier and headed out of the crevice in which he'd taken refuge.

"It's still snowing like a bitch out there," Giles reported. "Horses are saddled and seen to. The men have smeared on the ointment our healers prepared so the Dealachan will not scent us. We're ready to ride out when you are." He extended a small jar to Kell, who unscrewed the jar lid and dipped two fingers into the light green cream contained within it. "What else do you need?"

Kell rubbed the cream over his face and the backs of his hands. "Coffee," he demanded as he looked around to see if his men had changed their heavy capes. He nodded his approval of the preparations.

One of the weretigers in humanoid form came forward with a steaming tin cup clutched in his hand. Silently, the servant handed the coffee to his master then melted into the group of men waiting to leave the cave.

Kell took a long drag of the hot brew, his eyes narrowed against the steam, his tongue recoiling from the blistering heat before he swallowed, wincing only a little as the scalding liquid flowed down his throat. "I needed that," he said.

"I sent scouts out as soon as the sun began lowering," Giles reported. "The weather is so bad, it doesn't look as though the Dealachan have stationed guards at the archway."

"Why would there be?" Kell asked. "It is to their advantage that we get our mounts across then they drop the span of rock."

"What, and lock themselves on the mountain without a way to escape?" Giles countered.

"That length of rock is governed by a hydraulic lift," Kell said. "Caisil-Chrò can raise and lower it as he will. Once we're on his side of the archway with no way to retreat, we'll be at his mercy."

Giles frowned. "I did not know. What would you have us do?"

"Jam the mechanism so it can't be dropped out from under us," Kell answered, his star-shaped pupils glittering. "Then plant charges so when we come back across, we can blow the archway sky high."

A wide grin twitched on Giles' lips. "We can do that." He looked to four of his best men, instructing them quietly on disabling the archway, the natural stone bridge that connected the mountain trail to the beginning of Caisil-Chrò's fortress.

"You'll need to take out the guard in the barbicans," Kell advised. "The portcullis will be down so you'll need to Revert and fly over the walls, releasing as many guards as you can before allowing our weres in to join in the fighting."

Releasing the guards was a polite way of saying kill the Dealachans who stood in the Cuideag's way.

"Once the portcullis is raised, I can promise you the pathways will run red with leech blood," Giles predicted.

"Make sure little if any Cuideag blood is spilled in the process," Kell ordered.

"Where will you be while we're stomping leeches into slime?"

Kell's jaw tightened. "I'll be searching for the woman. With any luck at all, I'll encounter Caisil-Chrò on the way and rid the world of his plague once and for all."

A deep crease formed between Giles' eyes. "Shouldn't I go along with you? To be at your back?"

"Run the show as you should, General," Kell snapped. He tossed aside what little coffee was left in his cup then handed the cup to the weretiger who had given it to him. "I'll handle what I need to on my own."

Searching his friend and commander's hawklike gaze, Giles asked no other questions. He lifted his hand and signaled the men to leave the cave. "Look sharp," he cautioned. "Who knows what may be watching us."

Kell removed the Sciar-copar medallion from the pocket of his cape, shrugged out of the black garment then folded it carefully and tucked it beneath his left arm. He draped the medallion over his neck and tucked it inside his black shirt before walking to his mount, unbuckled a saddlebag and withdrew another cape, stuffing the black one into the saddlebag in its place. He stood there for a moment watching the steadily falling snow then reached inside his shirt to pull out the medallion. He drew strength from the pulses that vibrated along his fingertips from the ancient emblem.

"Be with us, Mighty Nathair. Lead your people to victory." He brought the medallion to his lips and kissed the blessed symbol of the dragon serpent. "Lead me to the one you have chosen for me."

Warmth flooded the serpent sign and made Kell's palm tingle as he tucked the medallion back inside the safety of his shirt. He could feel it there like a glowing brand though its fire did not burn but rather reassured him. Swirling the new cape around him, he fastened it then led his horse to the cave's entrance.

Swinging into the saddle, the warlord followed his men up the snowy path. In places, the accumulated snow was up to his mount's hock and the beast had to lurch through the obstruction. In other places, the wind had swept the rocky surface nearly clean. Thankfully such was the case with the archway and his keen senses told him Giles' men were already under the arch to make sure it stayed in position until after their retreat. As he rode over the incline of rock, he glanced up at the lights of the fortress far above him, glowing a dim yellow.

Though the shaman accompanying them on this trek had spread his protective magic carefully over the Cuideags, Kell was not so blindly obedient to his faith that he trusted entirely in the spells. He was a firm believer in what could go wrong usually would. The Dealachan might not sense their attackers coming, but they would be prepared just in case. Getting in and out of Fuachd alive would not be an easy task. That men were going to be lost was a given. It was all in making sure that number was small.

The last to cross over the archway, Kell saw his men fanning out on the wide plateau in front of the entrance to Fuachd. Since every horse his men were riding was pallid gray in coloring as were the capes the men wore, they were effectively camouflaged in the snow swirling around them. With the horses' hooves muffled in thick gray burlap, they made little sound. Even the harnesses and reins had been wrapped with burlap to keep them from jingling.

Giles walked his horse over to Kell and silently pointed to each of the towering barbicans to either side of the lowered portcullis. He held up three fingers to indicate there were three guards in each tower. He wiggled his thumb and little finger like a bird in flight to let Kell know he'd sent men up to take out the guards.

Kell trained his gaze on the barbican closest to him and when a lantern was brought to the arrow slit and waved across it, he knew the signal meant the guards had been neutralized. It would be only a matter of moments before he and the rest of his men would soar up over the battlements and into the fortress now that no alarm could be raised.

\* \* \* \* \*

Laird Meilich Caisil-Chrò was uneasy as he prowled the corridor on his way to the chamber he had assigned Lillian. Though he had consulted with his priests and they had assured him no sign of the Cuideags had been revealed in the entrails of the cock that had been sacrificed at the setting of the sun, he was edgy, his shoulders taut and aching—a sure sign trouble was lurking. Twice he had called his lieutenants to him and each time they had reported no activity. The barbicans were secure, the portcullis locked. There were no Cuideags leaping about from branch to branch, stone to stone, or creeping up the walls.

"The storm is such not even a Cuideag would be foolish enough to venture out in it," Count Felix Varne told his overlord.

Caisil-Chrò was not so sure. Saxxon Kell was a formidable opponent and the man had tenacity down to a science. The Dealachan doubted Kell would allow anything as mundane as a whiteout to slow him down. He rolled his stiff shoulders and once again felt the warning finger of uncertainty scraping down his backbone. Pausing with a foot on the lowest stone riser of the staircase, he sent his own psychic feelers. Specialized sensory organs concealed on his hairless head and body surface allowed him to detect changes in light intensity, temperature and the minutest of vibrations just as dedicated chemical receptors within his nostrils provided him with a highly evolved sense of smell. He drew in a long breath but could not distinguish any unusual odor that would suggest outlanders were nearby. Yet his apprehension continued to prod him. The normal evening movement within the fortress kept him from picking up anything out of the ordinary but still he felt as though all was not right in his abode.

As he climbed the stairs to the private apartments, he glanced over the handrail to watch the servants hurrying about their tasks. A deep frown marred his handsome face and his pale eyes narrowed as he sought out any face among the crowd he did not immediately recognize. Only one or two were strangers to him but they were as he was—hairless and though of a much lower caste than him, without doubt Dealachan. Gaining the landing, his frown deepened as he saw one of the guards he had assigned to his wife coming toward him. He held up his hand before the man could speak. “What the hell did the bitch do now?” he asked.

“My apologies, Great One, but your lady-wife got loose from her quarters and visited the Ceomharian queen.”

“Did she harm the queen?” came the roar.

“Nay, Great One.”

“You had better hope she didn’t! Make sure she does not get free again!” Caisil-Chrò hissed, his eyes blazing. “Or you will wind up on sea duty on a garbage scow for the remainder of your days!”

“Aye, Great One!” the man replied, lowering his head.

Slinging out a dismissive hand toward the servant, the Dealachan laird stalked off, cursing beneath his breath, fists clenched. “Imbeciles,” he mumbled. “I am surrounded by fucking imbeciles!”

By the time he flung Lillian’s door open, he was in a high state of pique but he came up short when he saw her dressed in the finery he had sent her, her waist-length hair braided and wound around her head in a sleek coronet. Her beauty took his breath away and he had to swallow in order to speak.

“You are...” His gaze wandered down her shapely figure, accentuated by the cut of the deep emerald green gown with its low décolleté. “You are lovely beyond words.”

Though Lillian was afraid of the Dealachan, she managed a wavering smile. “Thank you, Milord, and thank you for the clothing.”

“It fits you?” he asked, more to give himself time to study her lush figure.

"It does. I am most appreciative of the slippers. The floor was quite cold when I awoke."

"It should not have been," he said. He glanced at the fire, his eyebrows drawing together. "Had the fire been allowed to die out?"

"I am afraid so, Milord," she answered.

He lifted his chin. "That will not happen again, I assure you!" He took a few steps into the room. "Was your food palatable?"

"It was."

A look of relief flitted across his features. "I am at least glad to hear that. We Dealachans do not cook our food and..." He stopped when he saw her face pale and quickly changed the subject. "I hear my lady-wife intruded upon you today."

Lillian folded her hands together at her waist and looked down at the floor. "She came to call."

"That won't happen again either," Caisil-Chrò stated. "I fear the woman has become quite unmanageable."

"She seems a bit," Lillian bit her lower lip before looking up at him, "disturbed," she finished.

"She's more than a bit disturbed," he muttered. "The bitch is deranged and has been for quite some time."

Not knowing what to say to that, Lillian asked if he would like to sit and swept a hand toward the settee. She was nervous, fairly sure of his purpose in coming to her and she wanted to prolong what she felt was the inevitable. Though he had pleased her greatly, she was tense, not wishing a repeat of the night before so soon.

Caisil-Chrò read her mind and a tic began in his lean jaw. There was no reason why he could not throw himself upon her and take her against the wall if he so chose, but her fear of him acted like a tossing of cold water in his face. He found he wanted to gentle her, soothe her into accepting him and that surprised him greatly. Taking a seat on the settee while she perched lightly on the chair flanking it, he leaned back, his arm along the rolled edge.

"How did you occupy yourself during the day?" he heard himself ask, and winced at his effort to make small talk.

"You have a wonderful library here," she said, looking at the bookshelves. "There are dozens of books I have wanted to read."

He cocked his head to one side. "You are a reader then?"

"Voracious," she said with an engaging smile. "My husband has labeled me a bookworm."

"Your husband is an idiot," Caisil-Chrò snorted. "There is nothing bookish about you, Milady. You are too beautiful for such an insult."

Lillian felt the blood rush to her cheeks at his compliment. Her fingers were twisted in her lap. "You are too kind, Milord."

For a reason he could not understand nor explain, Caisil-Chrò wanted to court this lovely woman sitting beside him. Such a thing was as alien to him as raw meat would be to her but he found it was important to put her at ease, to keep her that way and have her comfortable in his presence.

"I too like to read," he said, plucking at a loose string on the settee's back. "Mostly warfare and strategy and history, but occasionally I will pick up a satire to cleanse my pallet." He smiled. "I imagine you prefer romantic tales."

"Most women do, Milord, but to enthrall me, the writing must be one of heroic proportions," she admitted.

"Damsels in distress and dragons breathing fire on the stalwart hero as his sword flashes to her rescue?" he countered with a grin.

Her blush deepened. "Something along those lines, aye."

Caisil-Chrò thought of Saxxon Kell and the last time he'd seen the Cuideag. The bastard had been pelting his Dealachan foe with fiery blasts of incinerating heat from some kind of glowing orbs, striving to pluck Daniva from his enemy's grasp. He shook the image aside, his frown returning. "Sometimes," he said, "the real thing is far from being romantic."

Lillian knew he was referring to his mortal enemy, the Cuideag warlord, and wisely remained quiet.

"Do you play chess?" the Dealachan surprised her in asking.

"I do."

Caisil-Chrò rose to his feet and held out his hand. "Let's see how good you are then," he suggested, and helped her stand then led her to a small gaming table where an elaborate chess set stood on a beautiful parquet board. He pulled her chair out for her then took his own.

Despite the hungry look in his pale eyes, Lillian knew the Dealachan was making an effort to entertain her. Though she knew well how the evening was likely to end, she strove to push aside her nervousness. As they played, she watched him covertly, thinking he was more polished and sophisticated than she had been led to believe from all the horrible tales told of his kind. Her gaze roamed over him—body still in contemplation of his next move—and it was hard not to be impressed with what she saw.

He had one elbow on the table, two fingers of that hand idly stroking his temple as he meditated. His other hand was braced high on a taut thigh. The leather jerkin he wore was sleeveless, left open to reveal his hairless chest, and the pectoral muscles flexed now and again as he lifted a hand to the board then returned it to his thigh. He was all lithe power and imposing presence as he sat there.

"What have you heard of my kind?" he asked. He did not look up at her as he waited for her to make the next move. Instead, he was staring intently at the board.

Lillian didn't know how to answer that question. "I'm not sure I understand what you want me to say, Milord," she replied.

"You've heard we drain our victims and devour their flesh?"

A shudder rippled through Lillian. "I have heard that, yes."

"That we kill all captives and consume them that way?" When she didn't reply, he lifted his eyes and looked up at her through the barrier of his eyelashes. "You have heard that, haven't you?"

"I have," she answered then moved her man.

Caisil-Chrò said nothing for a moment then took his own move. "It isn't precisely true," he told her.

Lillian forced her eyes to his. "What part isn't true?"

"We don't kill all our captives. Some we ransom."

She thought of what Lady Daniva had told her. "But not me," she said so softly he could barely hear her.

"Not you," he stated then leaned back, placing his elbows on the chair arms and steeping his fingers. "But not for the reason my lady-wife gave you."

She gathered her courage. "Then why not, Milord?"

A faint smile touched Caisil-Chrò's lips. "You are Lord Keithton's daughter," he said. "I knew this before you were taken." He arched a thick brow. "It was why you were taken, not because you were that fool Grayham's wife."

Lillian's forehead creased with confusion. "I don't understand. What has my father...?"

"Has he told you tales of the war with Zaphnia?" he asked.

"Only that he had been held captive there and that was the reason my sisters and I were sent to the convent," she answered.

"It was in Zaphnia that he met a man named Collin Beithir," the Dealachan reported. "They became fast friends under very trying circumstances. Such conditions will bond men in ways ordinary situations never could."

"My father never spoke of such a man," she told him.

"It doesn't matter," Caisil-Chrò said. "Suffice it to say they were thick as thieves when they were in the prison camp."

"What does...?"

"Collin Beithir is—let's say—a good friend of Saxxon Kell," he interrupted her. "Beithir's debt of honor became Kell's."

"What debt was this?" she asked.

"Your father saved the Cuideag's life many times over, fed him from his own veins." He grinned. "They became blood brothers, if you will."

"I still don't understand."

"I knew if I took you, Lord Keithton would convince Grayham there was but one man brave enough to come after you and that man was Saxxon Kell."

She stared at him as realization set in. "I am a trap to catch the Cuideag," she said.

"It started out that way, aye," he agreed. "I had intended to capture Kell, kill him and then send you back to your father a bit worse for wear but alive."

"And now?"

"Now you will remain with me until I have had my fill of you," he said brutally, "and I don't think that will happen for a long, long time." His tone softened. "If ever."

Lillian experienced a hopeless feeling going through her at his words. He was staring at her with an intensity that made it impossible for her to believe he would ever set her free of him. She did not want to stay in this frigid clime, spend her days locked inside a craggy fortress at the top of the known world. She wanted a husband, a home of her own, children...

"That will not happen," he told her, and she knew he had read her thoughts. He shrugged. "Not the children at least. I have no intention of allowing you to conceive. The other?" He shrugged again. "Is negotiable."

She could not prevent the statement from slipping out, "But you are already married."

"A slight problem that can be remedied with the flick of a pen across parchment," he responded. "It has long been on my mind to divorce Daniva. She belongs in a sanitarium anyway."

Shivering at his callous words, Lillian wrapped her arms around her, colder than she'd ever been in her life. Even the lonely cell into which she'd been thrust had not been as cold as her heart was at that moment. She had to hope Saxxon Kell would affect her rescue. The alternative was too horrible to think about.

Caisil-Chrò leaned forward in his chair, capturing her with his steady gaze. "He will not win the coming battle between us, wench, and you will remain with me as my consort for as long as I wish. Make no mistake about it."

Tears filled Lillian's eyes. "If you have any care for me, Milord..."

"I have lust for you," the Dealachan stated. "I will not abuse you but I will have you until you no longer tempt my desire. On that day, I will return you to Ceomhar. I..." He stopped, tilting his head as though he'd heard something.

Lillian gasped when he shot up from his chair and ran for the door. He jerked it open and slammed it behind him so quickly she barely had time to get to her feet. The sound of the lock engaging made her blood run cold.

"He's here," she whispered. "The Cuideag warlord is here."

The Dealachan laird was met at the top of the stairs by a trio of Cuideags coming up the steps at him with weapons raised. He took a step back and stepped up on the balcony rail, flinging himself off into space, aiming for the chandelier that hung a few

feet away. He caught the bowl of the massive piece and swung across the distance to another balcony, dropping down to sprint toward the room where he kept his weapons. As he ran, he heard the skirl of blade meeting blade, the cut-off shrieks of wounded men and the din of battle. How had he missed the arrival of his bitterest enemies?

Rushing into his room, flinging open the door to his weapons chest, he pulled out a dagger and the long sword that had cut its swath through many a Cuideag chest. Thrusting the dagger into the waistband of his pants, he took another before going out on the landing to meet the bastards who had dared invade his sanctuary. The three Cuideags were grinning lethally at him as he engaged them in a pitched battle to the death.

All around him men were dying, their blood making the floor underfoot slippery.

Slicing and dicing his way past the three men intent on slaying him, Caisil-Chrò thrust his dagger across the throat of one and stabbed the second in the belly. The third he headbutted and when the man stumbled back, the Dealachan nearly clove him in twain just beneath the warrior's rib cage. Lifting his foot, he shoved the dying man over the balcony rail and onto the marble floor below. Pausing just an instant, he headed down the stairs and toward the Cuideag who was making mincemeat of the Dealachan defenders.

Terrified servants had plastered themselves against the walls and hidden beneath tables, under chairs, in closets and wherever they could find shelter. Most were of the lower caste and had been treated so badly the majority of their lives, they had no real loyalty to their masters. Some—the braver and no doubt shrewder ones—took up arms in hopes of winning approval from their owners, but the others merely squeezed their eyes shut and tried not to be seen. Since there were no warrior women among the Dealachan, the few noble ladies at Fuachd were huddled in one corner of the great hall, clinging to one another, sobbing hysterically, terrified of what the Cuideags would do if they won the fight. Their terrified female shrieks as the fighting came in proximity to them was shrill and overwhelming, adding to the din.

Giles dispatched an opponent and turned to face Caisil-Chrò, who was coming toward him with burning eyes. The Cuideag flexed his sword, cocked a savage grin that promised death to the Dealachan laird.

But Kell's second-in-command did not get a chance to engage Laird Meilich in combat for at that moment the leech's head snapped around, his glare went upward and Giles followed the other man's attention to see Kell striding purposefully along the balcony overhead, a brutal grin on his face.

"Son of a whoring dragon bitch!" Caisil-Chrò howled, and spun around, racing for the stairs, arms and legs pumping as he took the risers two at a time.

Before Giles could go after the Dealachan, two more of the bastards attacked him, one scoring a shallow gash across Giles' hip prior to meeting his end at the lunging point of the Cuideag's sword.

Kell and his enemy met on the balcony, coming at one another with a fierce clash of swords, the scrape of the edges meeting shrill as the two men collided heavily with a grunt. Pushing brutally against one another, blades crossed, hilts grinding together, the warriors were evenly matched, their anger equally intense. Lips were drawn back over gnashing teeth, alien eyes flashing as each jockeyed for dominance. Realizing neither had the upper hand, the men sprang apart almost as the same instant, swords striking out with ferocious clang after clang, the heavy blows vibrating along flexing arms. Caisil-Chrò was driven back for a few moments then lunged forward to send Kell stumbling against the wall.

As the two combatants struggled on the balcony, Giles and his men had gained the victory over their own foes. Those who were not bleeding out on the cold stone were being rounded up and marched to the dungeon, their executions to be meted out beyond the sight of the terrified women and servants.

"Don't leave a one of them worms breathing," Giles commanded his men. "We want no leeches slithering after us when we leave this iceberg."

"What of His Grace?" one of Cuideag's inquired. Every eye not locked on the prisoners was watching the fight above.

"He'll be finished playing soon enough," Giles said, his voice sure, no doubt in his tone. "Get them prisoners below." Folding his arms, he tipped his head back and continued to watch Kell's fight.

Like his men, the Cuideag warlord had removed his cape before he Reverted, taking to flight as an owl, shirt and pants clutched in his talons, and flew over the crenulated walls of Fuachd. Quickly donning their clothing when they shifted into humanoid form once again, he and his men had taken weapons where they'd found them so the sword Kell wielded was not the one to which his hand was normally accustomed. It was a lighter-weight blade that did not cut as wicked a swathe as did the *Sléacht*, Kell's fabled widowmaker, so he wasn't tiring as quickly as the Dealachan was. Laird Meilich's heaving breath could be heard rushing in and out of him as he gave ground, the warlord's steady advance pushing Caisil-Chrò ever toward the far end of the stairs up which the Dealachan had rushed.

Perhaps the fight would have ended with Kell's blade carving a sizeable hole in his enemy's gut had not the door beside which the Cuideag was passing not opened and hell came rushing out with a wild, insane shriek. Startled by the noise, distracted, the warlord stumbled back as a flashing blade came stabbing toward him.

"Shit!" Giles hissed, and ran for the stairs.

It was a wild-haired virago who bore the dagger into the hollow of Kell's left shoulder, the sharp edge dragging down to slice deeply into a left arm raised defensively out of habit, forcing the arm down and the cut longer. Pain exploded as the blade struck. Staggering back, feeling the cutting edge going farther down into his arm to his elbow, aware of the blood gushing from the wicked wound, Kell stared at the bitch who had attacked him and had no idea who she was. Shrieking obscenities at him,

pounding him with her fists when she could not reach the hilt of the dagger to draw it out and stab him again, the woman kicked him brutally, spit on him, raked her sharp nails down his flesh and would have carried her arched fingers to his eyes had Giles not reached her first and drove her to the floor, flinging his body free of her thrashing gyrations.

"Mother of Nathair," Kell muttered as he felt his knees weakening, his legs threatening to buckle. He snapped his head around, looking for Caisil-Chrò but the Dealachan had disappeared. He let go of the sword and it clanged to the floor. He wavered and began to fall, the light dimming around him as agony spread along his entire left side.

"Catch him!" was the last thing he heard before the floor came up to meet him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lillian was at the locked door, her ear pressed tightly to the panel. She could hear nothing and had no way of knowing who—if anyone—was winning the fight beyond the portal or if they'd all died in the melee. Terrified no one would survive and she would be trapped in the room to perish, she had repeatedly slapped her palms sharply against the wood, hoping someone would hear her.

"Let me out!" she yelled. "Please let me out!"

But the wood was obviously too thick for sound to carry through it, too sturdy to rattle against its hinges, or no one was close enough to hear her cries for help. As the minutes dragged by she slid down to the floor, still hitting her palm against the wood. The palms of her hands were bruised and bloody by the time she heard the click of the key in the lock. She shot to her feet, afraid now of who might appear at the door. When it opened, she stumbled back, drawing in a harsh breath for the man standing there was an imposing sight in his flowing gray robe, his starburst eyes leveled on her.

"You are Keithton's brat?" the middle-aged warrior inquired, his face stony.

"Aye," she said. "D-Did he send you?"

"Come with me, wench," the man ordered, and pivoted on his heel, disappearing from sight.

Lillian hesitated, taking only a single step toward the door. She had tucked her lower lip between her teeth and was nibbling on it with agitation, not sure she should leave the safety of the room now.

"Woman, come!" came the bark of command that sounded farther down the landing.

Trembling, Lillian ventured slowly from the room, peeking her head around the door, expecting to see corpses piled upon one another, blood running in streams down the stairs. She saw none of that—only a very angry man standing at the end of the landing with his hands clenched and his teeth grinding.

"Don't make me come back there and get you!" he snapped at her, and stunned her by stomping his foot on the floor in obvious vexation. "Get your ass to me now!"

Shoring up her courage, Lillian left the room and came toward him with trembling steps. He was glaring at her with such fury, she wondered if he was going to kill her. When she got close enough for him to snake out a hand and grab her, she shrieked and clawed at his hold but he jerked through a doorway and into a room where several men were gathered around a massive four-poster bed. They all turned to look at her and their faces were grim and filled with a hard light.

"Over there!" the giant of a man pushed her toward the bed.

Now terrified these warriors were about to ravish her, she spun around and would have run out of the room had the burly man not grabbed her around the waist and carried her kicking and hissing to the bed. He deposited her beside the bed and pointed a rigid finger.

"Sew him!" he ordered.

Sew? Lillian heard the word but it made no sense to her until her frightened gaze fell on the man lying on the bed. A river of blood had stained scarlet the sheets beneath the warrior's left shoulder as a thin man bent over him, apparently trying to hold together flesh that had a deep, savage gash from shoulder to elbow. Bewildered, she looked up at the giant towering over her.

"The gods made you females with smaller hands meant to stitch. We would be clumsy with it," he pronounced. "Now sew him!"

As surely as she stood there, she knew who the man lying unconscious on the bed must be. She could not see his face for it was turned from her but he was big enough, muscular enough to be none other than their infamous leader. Someone had removed his shirt and her attention was pulled to the Sciar-copar—her precious medallion that had been handed down five generations from mother to daughter to her—hanging around his neck. Only her father would have known where she kept the sacred necklace in order for this man to have it in his possession.

"He is Kell?" she asked in a small voice.

"He is," the giant confirmed.

"Will he not mend on his own?" she inquired, having heard tales of the great healing abilities of the Cuideags.

"He will mend quicker than a human, aye," the large man replied, "but the wound is deep and he has lost much blood. Help is needed so get to it!"

She put her hands to the buttons on the sleeves of her gown to roll them up. "Then I will need hot water and whiskey to cleanse the wound. Thread and needle and—"

"All that is here," the man behind her said.

"And a better light by which to see," she continued as though she had not been interrupted.

A lamp was brought closer and when she bid the holder to lift it higher, he obeyed without question. She surveyed the wound carefully then turned to the giant, surmising he was in charge with his warlord out of commission.

"Laird Meilich did this?" she asked.

Giles' lips pursed irritably. "The witch did it," he snapped.

"Lady Daniva?"

The older man blinked, his face showing his surprise. "That was who that haglet was?" He glanced at a man beside him. "Go fetch that crazy slut. I'll beat her black and blue then—"

"That can wait," Lillian said, "until I have seen to your warlord."

Giles narrowed his eyes. "Are you telling me what to do, woman?"

"Aye," Lillian said, and pushed him aside to go to the basin to wash her hands. "I am, warrior."

Those gathered around the bed held their breaths, waiting for Tremont Giles' legendary temper to explode, but the large man lifted his head and his steely gaze followed the woman as she carefully washed then dried her hands. He appeared to be studying her.

"We'll discuss your disrespect of a superior male when you are through with that," Giles said, nudging his chin toward the bed. He pointed to a stack of fresh linens. "There are clean sheets for him when you are finished."

"Then make yourself helpful in the meantime, superior male, and use those beefy hands of yours to tear a sheet into bandages," she ordered him. She cast him a stony look. "You can pretend it is my body you are ripping to pieces if it pleases you."

A twitch of Giles' lips alerted the other men to the giant's state of mind as he took up a sheet and began rending it. "It surely would," he mumbled.

"I thought you'd like that," she quipped as she took a spool of thread and unraveled a long length. She threaded one needle then took a second to thread it. She glanced at one of the men, holding the threaded needles out to him. "Take these and drop them in a cup then pour whiskey atop them to sterilize them." She took two more needles and did the same with them.

"That will be a goodly amount of sewing," Giles commented as he continued to rip the sheet. "You'd best be about praying Kell doesn't wake while you're doing it."

"You'd best pray he does," she countered, and when she gave him a narrowed look, she shrugged. "He's lost a great deal of blood. How will he take Sustenance to replace it if he does not wake?"

All eyes turned to Giles. It was a logical question.

"Have you thought of how you will feed him?" she asked.

"From our veins," Giles declared, expecting her to wince, and when she did not, his frown deepened.

"Perhaps you should fill goblets with your blood and not expect him to have the strength to take from your offering," Lillian suggested. "He will be weak, don't you think?"

Once more Giles shot the woman an evaluating look, glanced at the man closest to him then softly instructed that goblets should be fetched. He gave her a hard glower. "You got any other smart-ass suggestions, woman?"

"As a matter of fact I do," she said as she went over to the man holding the cup of whiskey and fished within it for the first threaded needle. "I believe you should restrain the duke so my stitching will be sure and straight." She settled beside the man holding Kell's flesh together and smiled gently at him, receiving a hesitant smile in return. "Keep the edges pressed as tightly together as you can," she asked.

"Aye, Milady," the warrior agreed.

A groan came from the bed and all eyes went to Kell.

"Take hold of him, men," Giles ordered, and four warriors moved into position to hold Kell's ankles and wrists to the mattress.

"It will be this arm he tries to free," Lillian said. "Take care you do not allow him, sir."

The warrior holding Kell's left wrist nodded, flinging his hair back from his eyes.

She saw the warlord's head swivel toward her and then his closed eyelids slowly parted, a feverish red glow pulsing from his strange starburst pupils. He was looking right at her and she froze, unable to move, caught like a deer in lantern light.

"Lilly?" she heard him ask.

No one had ever called her that shortened form of her name—not even her father—and it seemed to enter her heart and wrap around it tightly.

"Aye," she managed to answer, her gaze roaming over his handsome face, and when his beautifully shaped lips tugged into a slight smile—something she knew was alien to him—she lost her heart and soul to him then and there.

"You are mine, woman," he told her.

Lillian felt a lurch of passion twist deep within her and she reached out to lay a hand on his naked chest, feeling the immense power gathered in the rock-hard muscles. "Aye, Kell, I believe I am. Now close your eyes and hold as still as you can so I may tend to your wound," she told him.

"Saxxon," he whispered, his voice husky.

"Saxxon," she repeated.

Giles' eyebrows had shot up at the exchange and when Kell obediently closed his eyelids, the older man shook his head in disbelief. "Now I've seen everything," he said under his breath. "I've never known the man to do anything he was commanded to do."

"Are you tearing those bandages, superior male?" Lillian asked as she placed the first stitch in the warlord's shoulder.

"Aye," Giles grumbled.

"Good," Lillian said, and winked at the man holding together Kell's torn flesh. She let her gaze follow the deep cut, her gaze narrowing as she saw the extent of the damage done. "Milord, I fear stitching will not close the wound entirely."

Kell opened one eye and regarded her. "Meaning?"

She held his gaze. "I fear a portion of it will need cauterizing."

He shrugged, flinching from the pain his careless action caused. "Do what you need to do, sweeting."

"Sweeting?" Giles echoed, his lips parting with shock. His attention shifted to Lillian and something odd passed over his rugged features.

Lillian glanced over at the older warrior. "Would you happen to have a flask of tenses with you, milord?" she asked.

A disdainful lift of Giles' chin, a sneering snort and the pursing of his thin lips gave her the answer.

"Then would you pour Lord Kell a goodly portion of that whiskey and help him drink it?" she queried. "There is some on the table by the hearth."

Giles blinked, his eyebrows shooting up once again, shock stamped on his rugged features. "Give whiskey to a Cuideag?" he gasped. "Hell no, I won't!" He shook his head. "Have you any notion what that stuff does to one of us?"

"Do as she says, Monty," Kell said in a hoarse voice, for the pain in his shoulder was starting to get to him. He would just as soon not be fully awake for her to lay a hot poker along the wound to enhance the agony already throbbing there.

"But Saxx..." Giles began to protest, but the warlord opened his other eye and gave his second-in-command a fierce stare. "It will intoxicate you. One drink and you'll be shit-faced. You know that!"

Kell closed both eyes and said nothing more.

For a moment Giles watched the up-and-down motion of the woman's hand as she sewed the shallow portion of the gaping wound. When a bottle was thrust toward him, he turned to glare at the warrior who had dared provide the hellish brew. "I want it noted that I am against this," he mumbled as he uncorked the bottle.

"So noted, Milord," Lillian said, not looking up from her work. "Would someone put the poker into the fire please?"

Giles saw one of the men jump to the order and ground his teeth, annoyed the men were obeying her without question. He moved into position at Kell's head and put a hand under his warlord's neck, lifting gently to put the lip of the bottle to Kell's mouth.

"This ain't a good idea, Saxx," he grumbled. As his leader drank, the older warrior glared at Lillian, a muscle working fiercely in his weathered jaw.

Kell was not a novice to the taste of hard liquor. As a boy, he had experimented with the potent potable as young males will do. His few tastes of the brew had convinced him it was a terrible liquid that caused more troubles than it was worth and

the aftereffects were worse still. He remembered well the violent headache he'd acquired from just two sips of the liquor.

"Drink as much as you need to pass out, Milord," Lillian said.

"It won't take much," Giles muttered.

She had reached a point in tending to the wound where needle and thread would be of little help. The flesh needed to be sealed. "I would like you unconscious, Saxxon," she said.

"I would prefer to be that way too," was the response.

"He's going to feel the pain either way," Giles told her through clenched teeth.

"Aye, but not as keenly," she said, and looked up at Giles. "I would make it as easy for him as I can."

There was the light of truth in the woman's face and Giles nodded. He looked away from her, watching his warlord consume nearly a third of the bottle before the tension in Kell's neck began to relax.

"Feeling loose, are you?" Giles asked with a twitch of his lips.

"As a fucking feast-readied goose," Kell said with a snort, the liquor having gone straight to his head. He was pleasantly numb, the pain in his arm fading.

"That's good," Lillian said. She looked around at the man by the fireplace. "Is it ready, Milord?" At his grave nod, she smiled. "Then would you bring it here?"

After a quick glance at Giles, the young warrior stepped forward with the glowing poker, its handle wrapped with a cloth. A look of surprise flitted over his face when the woman asked him to give it to her. "I can do it for you, Milady," he said.

"I will do it," she replied, and carefully took the hot poker in hand. "Ready, Milords?" she asked of the men who were restraining Kell's limbs.

The agony was much worse than Kell was expecting—though he thought he'd prepared himself for it. The stench was almost as bad as the burn. He gasped and bucked against the hold his men had on him as his flesh sizzled and the burn seemed to bore bone deep before the liquor invading his system tripped him up and sent him into a spiraling darkness.

"He's out," Giles said quietly, and gave Lillian a long, evaluating look as the scent of scorched flesh wafted over them. She had surprised him when she'd taken the poker and held it to Kell's wound. "Well done, Milady," he begrudgingly complimented.

"Let's hope he stays out for a while," she replied.

"With that much liquor in him, he will be, but when he wakes, he'll have one helluva hangover," Giles predicted.

"Hangovers we can cure," she said. "Had I a measure of tenerse, I would have administered that to him instead, but we were limited in how much help we could give him."

Giles looked at one of the men who had held Kell's wrists. "See if you can find that damnable drug in this hellish keep. I once heard the Dealachan use it on occasion for recreational purposes." He said the last two words as though such a concept were disgusting to him. "I'll wager they have a cask of it somewhere."

"You can let go of him, Milords," Lillian told the other three men, and when they stepped aside, she asked if someone would also make a trip to the kitchens for butter. "Or the aloe plant, if you can find it, would be better still."

"For what purpose?" Giles demanded.

"To aid in the soothing and healing of the burn," Lillian told him. "The medicinal powers of the aloe plant are quite remarkable. If we had run into trouble staunching the flow of his blood, spider web would have helped."

"Web silk we have plenty of," Giles asserted.

"I believe you most likely do," she said.

"You're not half bad for a female," Giles concluded.

She smiled at him. "And you tear a good bandage, Milord," she said. "As soon as I have either the butter or the aloe, will you help me wrap his wound?"

Giles gave a curt bob of his head then folded his arms over his beefy chest. "He's claimed you," he said. "You noticed that, didn't you?"

"Indeed I did," she replied.

"He'll take you to wife."

Lillian arched a brow at that. "I am already married, Milord."

Giles shook his head. "Doesn't matter. In Grian, Kell is the law. He has the authority and will set aside your Joining." He narrowed his eyes. "Your husband has washed his hands of you, I would imagine."

"I am sure he has," she said with a sigh, "but it was not a match happily met so for it to end is not a hardship for me."

"I figured as much," Giles stated.

When the man sent to the kitchen returned with an aloe plant he'd found on the windowsill, Lillian broke off a piece and squeezed the mucilage—the thin, clear, jellylike substance housed inside the leaves—onto the wound. Then she and Giles set about dressing Kell's wound and bandaging it. During the entire process, the warlord slept on, peacefully unaware and blessedly free of the pain the deep wound had wrought.

"What will happen to Lady Daniva?" Lillian asked as she finished tying off the last wrap of bandage.

"That will be up to Kell to decide," Giles answered. "I don't think he recognized the witch when she attacked him."

"Do you think he might order her death?" she inquired.

"Might do it himself. Wouldn't blame him if he did," Giles said with a grunt.

"She is mentally challenged. She needs help, not punishment."

Giles gave her a long, hard look. "Are you asking for the bitch's life?"

"She believes he left her here at Laird Meilich's mercy."

"He did," Giles told her. "After she made it clear to him she wanted the leech and not him."

"Laird Meilich escaped, didn't he?" she asked, changing the subject.

"The coward ran, aye. We figure he escaped along the miles of twisting tunnels beneath the fortress. Mayhap he'll freeze to death and we won't have to worry about him again."

\* \* \* \* \*

From the hidden access beyond the walls of the bedroom in which his mortal enemy lay, Caisil-Chrò listened to what was being said and fumed with hopeless rage. He could not hope to fight Kell's men alone and so he hid there in the cold, dank passageway, watching what was transpiring through the eyes of a portrait hanging across the room from the massive bed. Grinding his teeth, his fingernails digging into his palm, he stared at the woman he had claimed.

"You'll not keep her, Cuideag," he vowed softly to himself. "I have marked her as mine and I will have her back! I will take her back and crush you beneath my boot!"

He gave no thought to the deranged woman whose screams and shrieks and hissing could be heard echoing from the cell into which she'd been thrown. She was, after all, yesterday's flesh and what he wanted was at that moment lightly stroking his enemy's cheek.

"I will see you dead and burned to a cinder, Saxxon Kell, before I allow you to take her to wife!" he swore.

## Chapter Five

"He's dreaming," Giles commented to Lillian as they settled Kell into the bed of the wagon, thick furs draped around him, his face turned toward Lillian's flat belly, his head in her lap.

"We'll let him," Lillian replied. She too was wrapped in plush softness with a heavy fur great cape snug around her and her legs sheathed in a man's thick wool pants. Absently she snuggled the furs around Kell, wondering what dream made him smile now and again. She could see his face clearly in the sputtering torches atop the gatehouse arch while the wagon sat beneath the upraised portcullis.

The snow had not lessened and the roadway leading from the fortress was a foot thick in places, more in others. Cuideag warriors had gone ahead to clear a pathway, not a one of them wanting to stay longer in the Dealachan keep than was necessary despite the storm, each yearning for the hot clime that was their home.

"Are you comfortable enough?" Giles asked her.

Lillian agreed that she was. The wagon had a canvas cover on curved staves stretched atop it to keep out the weather. Several warming pans had been heated and were beneath the fur covers to keep her and Kell warm. "How is she?" she inquired.

Though she had done everything she could to have Lady Daniva accompany them in the wagon, the warlord's men had vetoed the suggestion. Most of them wanted to slit the witch's throat and be done with it, but Giles had decreed otherwise.

"If he wants to maim her when he wakes, so be it, but we'll give him the chance to decide her fate as is his right," the older warrior stated. "As for me, I'd just as soon drop her crazy ass over the side of the mountain and be done with it."

The woman who had tried to kill Kell sat astride a gentle-gaited palfrey, tied to the stalwart animal's back with thick rope, and though she was wrapped in layers of furs, the journey would be a frigid one for her in the falling snow. Her hissing and spitting and cursing did nothing to warrant sympathy among her captors, so it wasn't likely she'd be allowed in the wagon with their warlord even if the weather worsened.

"She must be cold," Lillian said sadly.

"She's well enough," Giles informed Lillian. "Don't ask no more about her, Milady."

Lillian bit her tongue to keep from arguing for she knew it would do no good with the warrior.

"We're off now," Giles said as he swung the wagon's gate into place. He pulled at the canvas panel folded to one side on the back of the bonnet. He gave Lillian a salute and then tied the panel shut to keep out the cold wind and blowing snow.

"Giddup!" the driver snapped to the two horses pulling the wagon, and the vehicle lurched forward with a squeaking of wood and rattle of harness.

Sighing deeply, Lillian settled back against the softness of the many pillows with which the men had lined the sides and bed of the wagon. She was as comfortable as possible under the circumstances. Only one thing concerned her and that was the sweaty heat coming from her patient. Though he was dreaming—and apparently enjoying whatever it was that held him in its grip—a fever had set in and she was beginning to worry.

The dream was so glorious Kell refused to allow it to end. Through the sheer force of his control, he held on to it with greedy hands. He drew it to him and caressed it, inhaled its sweetness and molded his body to it with every ounce of power within him. It mattered little that his body felt encased in fire or that his left arm hurt with a brutal vengeance. He simply lay there and pushed deeper into the fantasy, striving to push everything save the dream out of his mind.

*She was like warm satin beneath him, her body lush and rounded in every place that had ever intrigued him on a female. Her skin was scented with gardenia and he drew the smell deep into his lungs as he ran his fingertips down her silky-soft arm. He lay with his lower body bracketed by the spread of her firm thighs, the tickle of her nether curls mingling with those just beneath his bellybutton. Braced as he was on one elbow to keep his weight from crushing her, he was staring down into her beautiful green eyes, lost in the verdant heat that pulsed from those lustrous orbs.*

*"Are you happy, my little human?" he asked, and she purred her answer, raking her hand through his unbound hair, spreading it about his bare shoulders.*

*"Aye, Saxxon, I am."*

*Her voice was sensuous and deep for a woman and it pleased him. When she said his name, shivers ran through him and his cock pulsed with heated need. He wanted to run his hands, his tongue over every inch of her, lap her up, tuck her inside him and keep her there forever. He wanted to lie there beside her for eternity and know the peace that had evaded him for so long.*

*"I have great want of you, sweeting," he said in a husky voice, forcing his body to go slowly, not to cover hers and take what he so desired.*

*A slow, knowing smile teased the corners of her sensual mouth. "Then take what you will, Milord."*

*Something wild and unrestrained shot through him and he had to use the iron will for which he was known to keep it in check. His hand shook as he slid it from her wrist to the sweet globe of her breast where the dark nipple taunted him, called with its siren's song to be plucked, to be stroked.*

*He was no green, callow youth who had never lain with a woman. He had made many a conquest and left behind satisfaction—of that he was sure. But with this woman, with this precious possession lying beneath him, he wanted—nay, he needed—more than just physical*

relief. He ached not only to have her, to pleasure her, but to delve into her very soul and carve a niche for himself there. He wanted her to want and need him as much as he did her.

His fingers curled gently, tenderly around her breast and he growled low in his throat. The warmth of her soft flesh, the supple shape of her filled his hand to overflowing, her swollen nipple teasing the palm, stabbing into it with needful abandon. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the blood surging hotly through his veins, his shaft hardening even more as he tenderly caressed her.

"You are all I have ever dreamt of," he said in an awed voice as his fingers tensed upon her flesh.

She made him draw in a quick breath when she lifted her leg and ran the sole of her slender foot along the back of his calf muscle. The movement brought the apex of her thighs closer into contact with his and his cock oozed with anticipation.

"I am no fragile thing for you to be so careful of, Milord," she stated, her gaze holding his like a moth to the flame. "I ache to know your flesh inside mine."

Her words caused a surge of lust to race pell-mell through his body, settling deep in the pit of his belly to set fire to his loins. He ground his erection against her as his hand tightened on her breast. Once more he cautioned his unruly body to go slowly, lowering his head so he could take her stiff nipple into his mouth.

She groaned then sighed as his lips plundered her breast. Arching like a contented cat while his teeth nipped and grazed, his tongue laved and circled, his lips suckled, her hands clenched in his hair, her foot pressing down hard on his calf.

"Aye, warrior," she whispered, and she pressed her head hard into the pillow. "Devour me. Eat me."

Those words were almost his undoing and it took all his strength and willpower not to take hold of his shaft to thrust it hard into her silken channel, to plunge roughly, to take her with the fury that was building inside his blood. He pulled away from her breast for his teeth were grinding together with the effort and sweat had popped out along his forehead. His lips slid down her chest and over her taut belly, his body wriggling down hers until his mouth was slanted over her sex, drawing her clit deep into his mouth.

The instep of her foot was no longer on his calf but braced upon his shoulder. Her thighs fell wide part as she welcomed his fierce invasion and she lifted her other foot so it too was on his opposite shoulder, her toes curling over the ridged slope. She was open for him, her soft lips spread as he suckled and tongued her, licked at the folds of her labia.

He heard her sigh again and when she lifted her hips in offering to his greedy assault, he had to know the heat of her passage, the slickness of her, and eased first one then two fingers into her opening. She sucked in a breath and ground her body upon his probe, his cock straining to know the same wet feel of her his fingers were questioning.

"Please," was all she had to say before he pulled his fingers from her and slithered up and over her, covering her possessively as his shaft stabbed urgently at her center. Her hands fell from his hair to his neck as he entered her with one strong stroke.

*He thrust forward and settled in deep, feeling the core of her pulsing at his tip. He was stretching her to accommodate the width and length of him, her softness wrapped around him tightly.*

*His strokes were long and sure and they filled her with each passage of his flesh through hers. Her fingernails were digging into the points of his shoulders, her legs now wrapped securely around his hips, trapping him in her velvet prison – a sentence from which he never wanted parole.*

*Slipping his hand beneath her curvaceous rump, he lifted her high so his penetration could go as deep as it could. He felt her tensing around him, felt the gripping of her inner muscles and as the first wave of tightening pressure rippled through her, he could barely breathe for her legs had clamped so strongly around him.*

*She arched her neck as her climax shuddered through her and he buried his face against the hollow of her throat, delighting in the gasps that came from deep within her as her pleasure was unleashed. The violent tremor of her body as that last quickening took her brought forth his own liberation and it shot from him in hot spurts that completely drained his strength. With the last pulse of his organ, he sagged against her – into her waiting arms – and lay gasping with his cheek pressed between her sweat-glistened breasts.*

*“Ah, my sweet warrior,” she told him, stroking his damp hair back from his forehead. “I have never known such bliss as that which I have found in your strong arms.”*

*Kell smiled to himself, his eyes closed, his heart thundering, blood pulsing strongly and knew it would ever be so with him and his lady.*

*He would make sure of it.*

Lillian wondered what dream made him grunt with such satisfaction as the wagon came to a halt. She could not see his face in the darkness but she did not need to in order to know something had pleased him greatly. When the wagon’s flap opened and Lord Giles’ craggy face appeared in front of a raised torch, she looked up at the gruff warrior.

“We need to stop for the morning,” Giles said. “There is a large cave system into which we will drive the wagon.”

“Thank you for letting me know, Milord,” she said.

“Giles,” he said gruffly.

“Not superior male?” she teased, and was rewarded with him lowering her head and she would have bet a hundred gold valins that he was pivoting the toe of his boot in the snow like a small boy.

“Nay, just Giles,” he told her.

“Giles it is then,” she said with a gentle smile.

The warrior nodded without looking up at her and lowered the flap again, calling out to the driver to proceed. Jerking forward, the conveyance rattled and squeaked then the side scraped against what Lillian knew must be the cave opening.

Once they were inside, she heard men and animals moving past her, the rumble of many voices talking at once, the clatter of harnesses and saddles being removed, horses tethered. Lady Daniva's quarrelsome voice was raised in protest then grew fainter as she was no doubt carried into the depths of the cave. The flap was thrown back again on the wagon and the tailgate lowered by Giles. In his free hand, he still carried the blazing torch, holding it high to throw light into the interior of the wagon.

"I've sent men deeper into the cave to prepare a place for him," he said, his attention roaming over the still form of his warlord. "Once we have you..."

"Not me!" she said, shaking her head, her eyes wide and one hand out to stay him. "I can not go into the caves, Giles."

A mulish look passed over Giles' face and he was about to berate her for such nonsense when he noticed the pallor that had overtaken her face and the stark terror looking back at him from the green depths of her eyes. He saw her raised hand trembling, heard the harsh rasp of her breathing and recognized her fear.

"You are afraid of confined places," he stated.

Lillian could do no more than nod, her terror of being forced into the farther reaches of the cave making her heart race.

Giles stood there for a moment then shrugged. "The weretigers will be here to protect you then. You are to do as they tell you. Is that understood?"

She had to clear her throat in order to answer. "Aye."

"They will not hesitate to restrain you should you try to run," he warned.

"I have no intention of running, Giles," she said, a small amount of relief showing at his understanding of her fear.

Knowing his warlord would not approve of leaving the woman so vulnerable, Giles nevertheless decided it was best.

"All right then," he said begrudgingly. "But he will not be happy about this."

Two men came up behind Giles and the older warrior glanced at him. "All is ready for him?"

"Aye, Milord," one of the men agreed.

"Then be careful with him," Giles ordered, and stepped aside so the men could climb up into the wagon. "See that you do not jostle him nor cause him to waken." He swept Lillian with a quick look. "I must stay with him and see to his welfare, Milady."

"Lillian," she corrected.

Giles' lips twitched. "That is not your call to make, Milady," he said. "If he agrees, I shall be honored to call you by your given name but until he grants his permission, I can not."

She inclined her head. "I understand."

The men lifted Kell between them, carefully moving to the wagon's gate where two more men waited to take the unconscious warrior from them. With military precision

and tender care, the limp form of the Cuideag warlord was handed from one set of sure hands to another then he was carried deeper into the dark recesses of the cave. Still Giles hesitated.

"I will be all right, Giles," she said. "Go. Take your rest and see to our warrior." She fumbled in her thick furs until she found the vial of tenerse Saxxon's men had found at the Dealachan manse and scrambled to the opening to hand it to him. "He might need this."

Giles took the vile as though it were a slimy reptile and pocketed it. "Let's hope he doesn't."

"Where is Lady Daniva?" she asked, looking about and not seeing the quarrelsome woman.

"She's there," Giles said, pointing. "In the shadows where she's out of the way." He scratched his rough cheek. "She...ah...accidentally hit her head on the rock wall and is sleeping like the dead."

"Accidentally?" Lillian questioned.

"That was the way of it," he stated. "Mayhap she won't wake 'til morning if the luck of the gods is with us."

"But she's all right?"

"Unfortunately so," Giles muttered.

Shaking her head at that answer, Lillian moved back to the front of the wagon and settled beneath the warmth of the layers of furs. She was warm enough and grateful that a fire had been lit in the cavern close enough to the wagon to provide light and heat.

Hesitating a few moments more, Giles finally followed his men into the depths of the cave, every footstep away from his warlord's woman causing him concern and worry.

"Keep her safe, Ancient Ones," he mumbled, "or he'll have my hide."

\* \* \* \* \*

Caisil-Chrò was forced to take shelter in a cave closer to his fortress. Sunlight was already seeping into the dark recess as he made his way into the darkness. He was enraged that it had taken him so long to find his way out of the subterranean tunnels beneath his keep and onto the mountain roadway. By his reckoning, Kell and his warriors had at least a two-hour start on him, possibly even more than that, but he knew they too would need to hide from the killing sun and spend the daylight hours well beyond his reach. Through the blood he had taken from Lillian, he could see her in his mind's eye and knew her to be safe and warm, nestled down in furs and sleeping soundly. Such knowledge eased his fear for her and gave him hope that Kell would not allow any harm to befall her.

"*You are mine,*" Kell had proclaimed, and those words ate at Caisil-Chrò like acid, seeping into his heart to elicit rage such as he had never known. And that Lillian had agreed to that egotistical statement made the Dealachan's rage even stronger.

Wrapping up in his thick wool great cape, he stared into the deep darkness before him, feeling the effects of the rising sun, his sensitivity of its rays causing his body to sink into a lethargy from which he could not escape. Despite his anger, his eyes slowly closed and he was submerged into that steel-like sleep that claimed his kind. He mumbled then snuggled down into unknowingness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lillian turned over in her sleep and tucked her clasped hands beneath the soft pillow Giles had provided for her when he'd had the wagon prepared for their journey. She sighed deeply—lost completely in the land of Nod—and a small smile hovered on her lush lips. She was dreaming.

And what a dream she was having...

*The warm hand clasping hers was strong, powerful, a warrior's sword hand, his fingers laced possessively with hers. Walking at her lover's side, she felt fragile, totally feminine for he was so tall and straight and dominant in the moonlight. The bright glow from the moon lit his dark hair with midnight blue sheens and cast his ruggedly handsome face into intriguing shadows.*

*Somewhere close by she could hear the heavy cascade of water and it lulled her as she leaned against his heavily muscled arm, wrapping the fingers of her free hand around his biceps. She smiled when he bent his head to plant a kiss atop her head.*

*"What is it I hear, warrior?"*

*"It is called an eas," he told her in his deep, sensual voice. "The name our people gave it is Àlainn Baiseach. It means beautiful shower in our language."*

*He led her to a stunning waterfall that fell from the high mountains of his homeland into an ebony lake mirroring the rays of moonlight rippling upon the dark surface. Ringed around the lake were tall palm trees that swayed gracefully in the light breeze, the fronds clicking together. Low bushes she could not name were interspersed among the stately palms.*

*"Lake Rong Finiche," he called the vast expanse of water. "The Black Spark of Life."*

*A soft ground cover grew along the shoreline of the lake and he squatted down, drawing her with him to take a seat amidst the shiny green foliage. She ran the palm of her hand over the low growth and a delicate scent wafted on the night air.*

*"Keynnagh," he called the salmon-colored flowers that grew among the ground cover. He plucked one and handed it to her.*

*It was such a sweet smell and she inhaled deeply, pleasure flowing over her face. She looked up at him beneath the sweep of her eyelashes and found her heart skipping a beat.*

*He had one leg crooked, his wrist resting on his knee as he reclined there on one hip. His other hand braced his head while he watched her. The moonlight was kind to his strong good looks, lovingly touching his cheeks and chin with pale golden beams. His copper-hued eyes gleamed, the black starbursts almost seeming to undulate as he looked at her.*

*"May I have a kiss, Milady?" he asked, and before she could reply, he took his hand from his neck and reached out to cup the back of hers, drawing her face to his.*

*The sweet wash of his warm breath over her lips just before his mouth claimed hers sent chills racing down Lillian's arms. He caught her lower lip between his teeth to tug her lips apart, his tongue sliding expertly into her mouth when she opened to him. It was a sensuous assault of her senses, a parody of lovemaking with thrust and withdrawal, probe and departure. The power in the hand upon her neck could not be denied and when he moved so he was pressing her down into the softness of the mossy foliage, his body stretching out upon hers, she sighed deeply, his mouth greedily swallowing the faint sound.*

*She could feel the prod of his erection between as he nudged her legs apart. Her heart was hammering in wild cadence with the pump of her blood and she wanted him desperately, needing the pleasure she knew he could give.*

*His hand came up to close around her breast. "Let me love you, Lilly," he whispered against her mouth.*

*"Aye, Saxxon," she said.*

*In dreams, things like morals were tossed aside. Wedding vows mean nothing when all the body wants is relief. She ached with need and the cure for that malady was a breath away.*

*Their clothes seemed to melt away and they were lying flesh to flesh, breast to hard-muscled chest, soft nether hair to manly spikes, soft flesh to steely velvet, and when he slid into her, she arched her hips up to meet his powerful stroke. The depth of that entry made her cry out, her hands digging into the flesh of his upper arms.*

*"Come for me, my little human," he said, and spiraled his tongue along her ear, nipping the lobe with a playful growl.*

*And she did with such abandon, such unrelenting power that she saw stars in the periphery of her vision. His cock was hard and hot and ramming into her with commanding strokes that brought forth wave after delicious wave of mind-numbing pleasure. The weight of his body, the warmth of his skin upon hers, the feel of the rough hair on his chest scraping across her sensitive nipples, his strong hands gripping her buttocks, his breath fanning her ear as he pumped into her made her orgasm the most powerful she'd ever experienced. It seemed to go on and on as he slid in and out of her, his shaft filling her, stretching her, coating her until he went still while his seed spilled inside her.*

*"Mine!" he yelled as his head went back.*

*The word echoed back to them over and over again in the lush, tropical night.*

*Lillian's eyelids fluttered open and she sat up. The sun was going down and the weretigers were stirring. It felt strange to be waking when many a hardworking farmer*

was just going to bed. She stretched, realizing her world now would be one of nighttime hours to accommodate the man who had claimed her.

Throwing aside the covering of furs, she crawled out of the wagon and made her way to a darkened corner of the cave to relieve herself. When she was finished, she tiptoed over to take a peek at Lady Daniva, heaving a quiet sigh that the woman's chest was rising rhythmically with breath. Not wanting to wake the bitter woman, she moved away.

The snow had lessened but it was still frigid. The fire that had been built for her when the warriors had taken to their morning sleep had died down to embers but there was a pile of branches nearby. It would not take much to get the fire blazing again. She set about searching through the various saddlebags for a coffee pot and the makings of whatever meal she could find.

Deep in the cave, the Cuideags were stirring. There were low murmurs among them as they stood and stretched, scratched at their asses or crotches for none of them wanted to be the one to waken Lord Giles or their warlord. Quietly they made their way to the entrance of the cave, the smell of brewing coffee drawing them like a magnet.

"The Lady made coffee," a weretiger informed the Cuideags.

"Milady, you did not have to do this," one of the older Cuideag warriors told her as she extended a cup toward him.

"I would make myself useful, warrior," she said and winked. "In the hope one of you stalwart hunters would scrounge me up something to fill my groaning tummy."

Eyes widened in absolute shock and the men looked among themselves. The weretigers trembled visibly, their faces pale. Not a one of them wanted to be accused of not providing for the warlord's woman. That she was Saxxon Kell's private property, his possession, they did not question. Before another breath was taken, they were scurrying past their horses, ducking under the animals' necks and out into the snow. Behind them, the Cuideags were close on their heels, weapons left behind.

"Wait!" Lillian called out, but there was not a warrior in sight. She stood there with the coffee cup in hand and stared at the cave's opening.

"Bid them jump and they ask how high," came a snide comment from Lady Daniva as the woman glared nastily at Lillian.

"Would you like...?" Lillian began, only to have a haughty snort cut her off.

"I want you to eat shit and die, bitch," Daniva hissed.

Sighing deeply, Lillian brought the scalding hot coffee to her lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

Giles opened his eyes, frowning when he heard the soft snoring beside him. It didn't sound like his wife Anastasia, and when he turned his head toward the sound,

was momentarily stunned to find he had spent his day rest almost nose to nose with his warlord. The older warrior blinked and carefully moved back, being as quiet as he could so he would not waken Kell. Easing into a sitting position, he leaned back against the cave wall and tried to remember how he came to be where he was. When memory finally pushed through the lethargy of waking, he put up a hand to scrub across his craggy face. It was imperative that he go check on his warlord's woman. Getting to his feet, he almost groaned when he saw Kell's eyelids flutter open to stare blankly at the low ceiling overhead.

"How do you feel?" Giles asked as softly as he could, the volume little more than a whisper.

The Cuideag warlord flinched. "Do. Not. Yell. At. Me," Kell stressed, his face screwed into unbelievable agony.

Giles grinned. It might have been decades since he'd experienced one, but he knew a brutal hangover when he saw it. He fumbled in the pocket of his pants for the vial of tenses the lady had handed into his keeping. He hunkered down beside Kell and pulled the glass stopper from the vial. "Here, Milord," he whispered, sliding a hand under Kell's neck to lift his head.

To Kell's ears, the two words were like viciously peeling gongs and he slammed his palms to his ears, belatedly feeling the pain in his injured arm. He winced, his eyes going wide at the savage pain before something cold was pressed to his lips.

"Drink," Giles ordered, and Kell was hurting too bad not to do as he was bid. He swallowed the sharp cherry taste of the brew and winced but he managed to swallow it without gagging too fiercely. Almost immediately, the reverberation of the gong echoed away and the pain stabbing between his temples lessened to a degree he could tolerate.

Easing his warlord's head back to the soft roll of blanket upon which it had been resting, Giles closed the vial and put it away. He squatted there, watching Kell's face slowly leach of the awful agony that had been stamped on it. "How's your arm feel?"

Kell flexed his wounded arm. "Like ten colonies of fire ants are making a meal of it," he replied.

Giles frowned. "It should be healing," he said.

Full recollection of how he'd been injured passed over Kell's mind. "Mayhap the cut itself has but the muscles are knitting back together and you know gods-be-damned well how good that feels."

Nodding, Giles got to his feet. "All too fucking well. I'm going to check on your lady and..."

Kell bolted up, unmindful of the pain in his arm and head. He swung his head from side to side. "Why isn't she with me?" he demanded.

Giles' lips tightened. "A small matter of being deathly afraid of being underground and in a tightly enclosed place," he replied. "You couldn't have picked a woman for your true help-meet who likes spelunking?"

Surprise shifted over Kell's handsome face and he craned his head to look up at his second-in-command. "How do you know I have chosen her for...?"

"You said as much yesterday," Giles reminded him.

"I did?"

"You did."

Kell threaded a hand through his hair, he couldn't remember. "Where is she?"

"At the cave entrance," Giles replied, and before the explosion could come from Kell's drawn back lips, he held up a hand. "I made precautions to keep her safe." He eyed his leader. "Did you think I would not, Saxx?"

"All the same..." Kell said, frowning sharply.

"All the same, let me go check on her," Giles interrupted. "If you are up to it, can you join us on your own two feet or should I have the men come back to carry you?"

A fierce gleam entered the starburst eyes of the warlord. "I shall carry myself, Tremont."

"Then we'd best be moving out now that the sun's down. I imagine we're being tracked by the leech."

Being reminded of Caisil-Chrò, Kell nodded. "Aye, you're right."

"I'm always right for I am a superior male," Giles tossed over his shoulder as he sauntered away, stooping to pass under a low overhang of rock. "I'll send a man back for the blankets."

Kell's arm ached brutally but he managed to push to his feet. He stood there wavering for a moment, his head feeling twice its normal size, a dull ache making his eyes water. Vowing not to partake of any more whiskey, he made his way slowly after Giles.

Lillian was sitting at the campfire with the coffee cup in her hand when Lord Giles emerged from the deep part of the cave. She smiled up at him. "Would you like coffee, Giles?"

The older warrior came up short, looking around him with surprise. "Where the hell are all my men?"

"Out procuring me food, I fear," she answered with a sigh.

Giles swung his narrowed gaze back to her. "You dared order my men...?"

"I ordered no one," she was quick to tell him. "I merely mentioned I was hungry."

"And they hopped to do your bidding like a bunch of randy jack rabbits," he growled, dropping down to a squat as he grabbed up the coffee pot and one of the cups sitting by the ring of fire. "Every last one of them?"

"Would you rather they ignored me?" she inquired softly.

"Nay, but to leave you unattended to a man..." His hawkish look sharpened. "We'll be discussing that."

"How is he?" she asked to take his mind from chastising his men.

"He is fine. How are you?" a husky voice replied.

Lillian looked away from Giles' stony face to the handsome one that had appeared over the warrior's shoulder. "I am well, Milord." Her attention went to his arm where a red stain had appeared on the bandage. "We will need to change the dressing."

He nodded and came to sit beside her. "Whatever you did, it helped, but the thing hurts like a mother..." He actually blushed, lowering his head at the warning look Giles shot him. "Like a mother's spanking," he finished.

Having been on the receiving end of many of her husband's angry tirades, Lillian knew what the Cuideag had been about to say. She could not keep from teasing him however. "I doubt your mother ever spanked you, Milord." When he twisted his head toward her, she smiled. "Would she have dared?"

"She dared, wench, and on more than one occasion," he stated. "The woman had a helluva heavy hand when it came to applying a strap to my scrawny ass."

"Were you a bad child?" she asked, pouring out her tepid coffee before taking up the pot to refill the cup and handing it to him.

"He was hell on wheels," Giles answered for him.

"As befitting a future warlord," Kell mumbled.

Suddenly there was a rush of movement from the cave's entry and both men were on their feet, reaching for their swords and daggers—neither of which they had strapped on at that moment. The horses neighed in fright and milled about at the intrusion, but it was only the men returning with game they had somehow managed to procure though they'd fled the cave weaponless.

"Where the hell are your weapons?" Giles demanded with a stormy look. His voice thundered through the cave like a violent storm.

The men stumbled into one another, ducking their heads at the harsh reprimand. They stood there with their catches dangling from clutched hands, unable to look at either Giles or their warlord.

"You men have provided well for Milady," Kell said quietly. "I am grateful for your care of her while I was incapacitated."

Giles opened his mouth to rebuke his warlord's words but a look from Kell made the warrior hold his tongue. He eyed the game with a narrowed look. "How are we to cook all that meat over so meager a flame?" he growled, and grinned manically when those men who had not returned with meat rushed out to gather what they could to enhance the flame. He turned to Kell. "You know the leech will catch up to us while we're supping?"

"Let him," Kell said. "We are forty to his one. How much damage can the slimy bastard do?"

"He can rip your heart from your horny chest and gut you, you worthless prick!" Daniva shouted.

## Chapter Six

The Dealachan could smell the roasting meat and it made his mouth water. Though he'd brought down a mountain goat and drained it dry, he had not partaken of the gamy flesh for he did not care for raw meat. He preferred his food cooked though legend insisted otherwise. He licked his lips at the sizzling juices he could smell falling into the cook fire and hated Saxxon Kell even more for making his stomach rumble with hunger. Clenching his fists tightly, he imagined the Cuideag roasting over that spit and it helped to alleviate his anger and frustration at not being able to get to Kell.

He knelt above the cave entrance where his enemies had taken shelter during the daylight hours and wished fervently for two things—one, that Lillian was not in the cave and two, that he had a ton of explosives to bury his enemies alive.

"Not that they couldn't burrow their way out again," he grumbled, "but it would slow their thieving asses down!"

He thought of the damage the bastards had done to his property when they blew up a portion of his roadway. It had been by the grace of the gods that a small jagged portion of rock had remained over which he was able to perilously cross on foot.

"Cuideag dogs," he mumbled.

He had sent out a mental call to others of his kind and he knew they were amassing to come to his aid, but logic told him help would not arrive before Kell and his murderous troop had crossed over the mountains and taken to the High Plains of Dithyramb where they dwelt. The bastard would have Lillian behind the walls of Comhachagràtha, his desert fortress, before the next night came and breaching the walls of that massive citadel would not be an easy feat.

Aggravated beyond his ability to think clearly, he slid down to his rump and reclined there on the snowy mountain, oblivious to the snow in which he sat. He drew his great cape closer around him more for something to do than in actual need of its warmth. The cold was his element and he thrived in it. It took greatly plummeting temperatures to even make him uncomfortable. But the cold that had invaded his heart at losing Lillian was causing him great discomfort and it spurred him with careless rowels.

There was no doubt in his mind that the Great God Fer Lhee—Creator of the Dealachan Tribes—had sent Lillian to him to be his eternal mate. The woman fit his body as though they had come from the same mold. She was his and for her to be in the hands of his mortal enemy drove Caisil-Chrò nearly insane with jealousy.

His hand went to the bone-handled dagger at his hip and he caressed it. He ached to drive the weapon as deep into Kell's black heart as it would go then twist until that organ was nothing more than pulp in the Cuideag's chest.

"You should have killed me when you had the chance, Kell," he said, his lips skinned back from his teeth, "for I will see you in ashes soon enough."

\* \* \* \* \*

Belly full, eyes locked on the woman sitting beside him, Kell felt a shiver of cold pass down his spine and knew Caisil-Chrò had cursed him still again. He knew the leech was close by. Not that it mattered. There was nothing the Dealachan could do until he had garnered reinforcements and by then, the Cuideag knew they would be at Comhachagràtha and once behind those secure walls, Lillian would be safe. A siege could last for months but he had no intention of allowing the battle to go for that long.

"Are you ready to ride now, Milady?" he asked Lillian.

Lillian tore her gaze away from Lady Daniva who sat across the fire with a gag firmly clamped between her teeth. The woman had shrieked and cursed, threatening him with all manner of vile and gruesome death until Kell could take no more and had personally gagged her.

"You don't want to eat?" he'd snapped. "Fine, then you won't!"

"If you ask me, the witch is going through withdrawal," Giles suggested.

"Withdrawal from what?"

"*Kalyan*, I believe," Lillian told him.

"Well, she'll not get that shit from the Cuideag," Kell stated.

"Perhaps you should be more merciful to her, Milord," Lillian said. "She..."

"I wish to hear nothing more about the hag!" Kell snapped.

Though Lillian had continued to protest Daniva's treatment, the warlord had ignored her. She had suffered the curt look he'd shot her way before thrusting the rag between Daniva's lips. From that one look, she understood he would not tolerate her interference and she had lowered her head, keeping her comments to herself.

"That one does not need you championing her," Giles had warned. "And he will not take lightly you doing so."

"I am ready when you are, Milord," she told him as he got to his feet. She saw him wince and tug at the fresh dressing covering his arm. When she had removed the old bandage, she had been amazed to see the deep gash of the wound nearly closed, the silk stitches absorbed, and the place where she had applied the fiery poker nearly healed of the long burn. She knew the pain he was experiencing came from inside his flesh where the muscles were coming together again after being severed by Daniva's blade. For that, there was nothing to be done short of a few drops of tensesse to ease the discomfort, but he refused the drug.

Kell held a hand out to her to help her to her feet and when her fingers were clasped in his, she felt the strength of him cause a tightening deep in her belly as he drew her up. She saw his fleeting smile and knew he was aware of her reaction to his touch. It brought a light blush to her high cheekbones.

"Soon," he said in a low voice, "we will lie together as man and wife."

She looked up into his alien eyes and felt her knees grow weak at the hunger she saw emblazoned there. He looked as though he could gobble her up and that set her juices to flowing.

"Milord, I am married," she protested.

"Know this, sweeting, I would never dishonor you nor take you out of wedlock. After tonight you will be married to me," he stated firmly, and drew her to him. Ignoring the men who were studiously avoiding watching them, he crooked a finger under her chin and lifted her face then swooped down gracefully to claim her lips in a soft kiss that made her toes curl in her boots. When he released her mouth, his strange eyes were glowing with a heat she could not mistake for being anything other than what it was – pure lust.

"The wagon is prepared for your lady, Saxx," Giles said. "Will you ride with her or with us?"

Without taking his eyes from Lillian, the warlord replied it would be best he rode with his men. "Else I'll not wait until her Joining to Connors has been put aside."

Lillian blushed hotly, stepping back from his touch. She felt a tremor ripple through her at the thought of this powerful man's hands taking what he believed to be his. It set all manner of yearnings roiling in her very soul. When he turned away from her, some of the warmth seeped from around her. She watched him go to Daniva and reach down to draw the struggling woman to her feet. From behind the constriction of the gag, hisses of fury could be heard.

"I've no time to fuck with you, Dani," she heard him say. "Behave, else I've have you flung over a saddle and you'll ride that way."

Stunned to see the enraged woman kick out at Kell—who lithely stepped away from the violently delivered movement—Lillian could not help but smile when the warlord bent down and swept Daniva onto his shoulder, carrying her wriggling and bucking out of the cave and into the cold of the night. She had to hide a laugh when he put a broad palm to her ass with a loud smack.

"I said behave!" he snapped.

"She'll try his patience until we get her to Bàinidhòsda," Giles said as he walked with Lillian to the wagon's tail gate.

"Bàinidhòsda?" she questioned. "Why does that sound familiar?"

"It's the madhouse," Giles answered.

"Oh aye. Now I remember."

That Kell had agreed to take Daniva to a place where she could be helped was reassuring to Lillian. The poor woman was deranged and left to her own devices, she might well hurt herself or someone else. It would be better for everyone if she was where she could do no damage. Bàinidhòsda had a good reputation, the asylum run by the Sisters of Mercy.

Giles held out his hand to help Lillian into the wagon. "We will stop again when the sun is rising and that cave is much as this one is although larger." He frowned sharply as Lillian climbed up the two collapsible wooden steps that had been folded down for her use.

"What concerns you, Giles?" she asked.

"The leech is hot on our trail," he replied. "You can count on that. Although he can't walk about in the sunlight any more than we can, there are those he can get to do his bidding. The weretigers remained in human form too long yesterday. They need to Revert to their animal state and sleep deeply. When they do that, you will be less protected. Having you unprotected does not sit well with Saxxon or me."

She smiled gently at the warrior. "You would worry about me, Giles?"

He shrugged as though it was of little importance though the kind gleam in his eyes said otherwise. "I would keep you safe for my warlord, Milady. It is best we stop in a mountain village to procure human men to watch over you while the weres recharge."

"Would those men be loyal to the duke though?" she countered.

"They would be loyal to whoever pays them the greatest amount of money and threatens them the most," he replied with a chuckle. "They will protect you well, Milady, or suffer the wrath of the Cuideags. You need not worry. They will be well armed and capable of seeing to your safety."

Settling down once more in the wagon, Lillian pulled the furs over her legs and leaned against the wagon's curved canvas wall. "Thank you, Giles."

Giles gave her a curt nod then settled the canvas flap over the back of the wagon. "Move out!" she heard him order.

The wagon jostled and creaked as the driver drove it out of the cave and into the still night air. The snow had stopped, the sky overhead was crystal clear and the air was frigid as the troop set out to descend the serpentine mountain pathway. A small village lay about four miles down the treacherous slope and that was where Kell planned on stopping to acquire daytime guards for his lady while he and his fellow Cuideags took their Day Sleep.

The Cuideag warlord's thoughts were on the beautiful woman riding in the wagon that was a third of the way back among his column of men. If he tried, he could smell the heat of her body, the sweet perfume that still emitted scent from the pulse points behind her ears and along the column of her slender neck and upon her wrists. It was a smell that made his cock hard. He pictured her lovely face draped in the folds of her dark purple cloak, the green of her eyes looking back at him with longing.

"Soon, my beauty," he whispered. "Soon I will make you mine for all time."

He ached to lie with her, to touch her, to mold her soft frame to his. His palms itched to know the sweetness of her flesh, the heat of it, to feel the beat of her heart against his fingertips. Though he longed to make her like himself, he knew that could never be. It was impossible to turn a human into a Cuideag or a Dealachan for that

matter. They were three different species and though legend said a bite from one of his kind could bring about the change, it simply wasn't true.

*I wish I could turn you, darling,* he thought. Finding out confined places frightened her did not bode well for their life together. Of necessity, he had to take to the deep reaches of a cave—or if that was not available to him, the ground when he was not in residence at Comhachagràtha—else a single errant ray of the sun destroy him. As it would on the trek to Comhachagràtha, precautions would have to be made to keep her safe during his Day Sleep from that night forward. Cunning, powerful human guards who did not need to replenish their strengths as the weretigers did would have to be stationed around her at all times while Kell slept and the men he chose would need to be as ruthless in her defense as he himself would be.

Else Caisil-Chrò would surely take her from him given the chance.

"If he survives our next encounter," Kell swore.

He had no doubt the leech had chosen Lillian for his own help-meet. Simply by the taking of her blood had the Dealachan set that into motion. Even now some residual spores from the bastard's tainted saliva tripped through Lillian's body, injected when Caisil-Chrò had bitten her. It would not take much—simply the minute ingesting of Cuideag blood—to kill off what lurked of the leech's foulness in her body.

Thoughts of the bastard having touched her before him, spread his slimy seed within her, given her pleasure made Kell's blood boil. Not even the cold night wind could cool the raging fluids roiling inside him. It was a building fever that infected not only his body but stabbed brutally at his heart.

"I will wipe out every last vestige of your presence," the Cuideag vowed. "You will be but an unpleasant memory when all is said and done!"

Begrudgingly he had to admit though, that Caisil-Chrò had treated her as honorably as the Dealachan could any human woman. Truth be told, she had fared better than Kell could have hoped. That thought led him to believe the leech had strong feelings for the little human and that could be used against the Dealachan if the need arose.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stopping only long enough to secure the services of six stalwart warriors from the mountain village, the Cuideag warlord and his party moved on, hoping to gain as much distance as possible before the sunrise, striving to make the mountain caves where they could spend the daylight hours. Giles himself had taken blood from the village men and two more takings during the night ride would bring them into quick thrall with the Cuideag second-in-command. Once that was accomplished, supreme loyalty to the Kell tribe such as Giles Tremont bore would be unbreakable, as strong as fire-forged steel for the new recruits. Though not of Cuideag power and ability, the young men would be formidable soldiers should their services be required beyond guarding their warlord's woman.

With nothing to do inside the wagon, Lillian dozed off and on, her dreams shaking her to awareness with palpitating heart, sweating palms and a body aching for a masculine touch. She wondered if Kell was directing such licentious thoughts her way but decided after some thought that he was not else he too would be suffering the pangs of longing. She realized had he been as aroused as she found herself to be, he would have climbed into the wagon to satisfy those needs, her legal binding to another man be damned. For some reason, that made her even more aroused.

By the time the caravan of men and horses stopped, the sun was scratching a pale yellow itch along the shoulder of the night sky. The interior of the wagon became darker as it was pulled into some vast cavern that bore the unmistakable whistle of wind moving through it.

"Last stop before home," Lillian heard Giles tell someone. "Fetch the lady and the new men some vitals to tide them through the day. Gather up plenty of wood to make do."

Smiling to herself, Lillian scampered out of the wagon and was surprised to find Kell leading his horse past. He glanced at her, his lips tugging into a quick smile as he handed the prancing animal over to one of his men.

"How is your arm, Milord?" she inquired.

Kell glanced down and flexed his biceps. "All but healed. Cuideag warriors heal very fast. There won't even be a scar by this time tomorrow."

"That is a relief."

"You will take care while I sleep?" he asked, reaching out to cup her cheek.

"I believe the guards you chose will see that I am well cared for during the day."

He snaked his free hand into the billowing robe he wore and brought out two packs of playing cards. "Something to occupy your time," he said, handing them to her. "I believe Giles has a small backgammon and chess set in his saddlebag if you are of a mind to try your hand at that with one of the recruits."

"I'll be fine, Milord," she told him, snuggling her cheek into the warm cup of his hand.

Kell could not go to his rest without tasting the sweetness of her and drew her to him, his mouth sliding sensuously over hers, his tongue slipping past her heated lips to delve inside. His warm breath fanned across her cheek, his body was pressed to hers, her hands lightly at his waist. When he had taken what comfort he could from her mouth, he released her to stare deeply into her eyes.

"I want you as greatly as I want my next breath," he whispered.

Though it might be wrong, Lillian wanted him just as much. Her vows to her husband had been taken under duress and marriage to him had not been something she had gladly undertaken. Lying with him had been a chore but she knew in her heart of hearts that lying with the man standing before her would be sheer bliss.

"It may be immoral, Milord, but I want you too," she said shyly.

"It is not wrong, wench. Nothing has ever been so right," he stated. He could not keep from yawning and moved back from the entrance that was steadily growing brighter. "Your pardon, sweeting, but I must find shelter from the light."

"Go," she said. "Don't worry about me."

"Giles?" he asked.

"I will see to your lady, Saxx," Giles told him.

After one long look at the men who were making pallets for themselves in the spacious cavern where they stood, Kell nodded at last and walked through a jagged crack in the wall, obviously knowing exactly where he was going in the depths of the cave system. He glanced back once at her before the shadows swallowed his muscular form.

"With your lives, protect this woman," Giles told the new men. "If one hair on her head is harmed, the entire enmity of my race will fall upon each of you and your families for nine generations."

With that said, Giles too disappeared into the deeper part of the cave along with his men.

A fire was built and a brace of rabbits were brought for the village men to skin and prepare for Lillian. The makings of a stew—as well as a big iron pot—had been obtained from the village along with several loaves of bread and a wheel of cheese. The pot dangled from a tripod constructed over the blazing fire and the vegetables and water were beginning to boil as the man who had been given the task of preparing the rabbits cut the meat into small chunks and dropped them into the pot. As he worked, Lillian carried on a conversation with him about his family and the life he'd led at the village.

"It is an honor to be asked to join the Cuideag militia," the young man told her. "I was hoping one day Lord Giles would recruit someone from my family." He lowered his head. "Never thought it would be me though."

Armed with bows and quivers, long swords and pikes, the village men had chosen lots to see who would stay outside the cave as lookouts and those who would stay inside to guard the warlord's woman. One fetched water from a nearby stream. They decided they would rotate their tasks every two hours.

"Do you not fear the Cuideags?" Lillian asked the young men who sat around the campfire with her as she stirred the meat into the pot.

"Aye, Milady, we do, but we respect them as well," a young man she discovered was named Samyel replied. "If you are their enemy, if you go against them, *then* you have something to really fear."

"The Dealachan are another matter," Samyel's younger brother Walys spoke up. "They are without honor and have been known to falsely represent themselves to the villagers."

"In what way?" Lillian inquired.

"In telling you one thing then doing another," Walys answered. "They are deceitful and can not be trusted. They are an evil race of men. Nothing good ever comes in being near them."

"You see what they do to the women under their control," one of the other men—the oldest of the six—observed. He pointed at Lady Daniva who sat glaring at them. Though the gag had been removed, she hissed whenever anyone came near her and had shaken her head at the offer of water Giles had extended to her. She trembled constantly and made strange sniffing noises, her tongue sweeping over her lips from time to time.

"Yet Laird Meilich treated me better than I could have expected," Lillian said.

The men exchanged knowing looks, nodding sagely.

"Aye, well, I suspect he had declared you his Chosen," Samyel pointed out.

"Just as the duke has claimed you for himself," Walys put in.

"You are a worthy woman indeed, to have the claiming of two such fierce warriors," Samyel added.

"And we will protect you with our last breath," Walys declared.

Lillian smiled. "Let's hope you don't have to," she replied.

Lady Daniva Caisil-Chrò listened intently to the conversation going on across the campfire from her. She had no desire to have the gag thrust into her mouth again so she was making an effort to keep from venting her spleen on the woman who had taken Meilich and now Saxxon from Daniva. Glaring at the pretty piece of fluff with her clear complexion and bright eyes infuriated Daniva and she twisted her bound wrists behind her until they were slick with blood, aching to wrap her curled fingers around the little bitch's neck and squeeze until the light faded from those precious green eyes. Hatred born of jealousy and spite was festering in Daniva's shriveled heart and vengeance was like a sharp spike digging into her brain. It blinded her to everything but her need to exact revenge on the woman she believed was at the heart of her problems.

"They won't keep me there, you know," she heard herself say aloud, and when the young bitch looked her way, Daniva grinned hatefully. "He can put me in that vile place but they won't be able to keep me there. Meilich will come for me."

Lillian stood and walked toward Daniva. "Would you like some water, Milady?"

Daniva cocked her head to one side. "What I would like is to reach inside you and pull out your thieving, lying heart," she crooned.

Going no farther, Lillian pretended she had not heard the threat. "The meal will be ready shortly. I know you must be hungry."

"I want your blood!" Daniva snarled, and would have clamored to her feet but her ankles were hobbled, Giles not wanting to take a chance the woman would flee. "Do you hear me, you slut? I want your fucking blood!"

"Come away, Milady," Samyel suggested. "It is clear the wench has lost her reason."

"Bitch whore!" Daniva screamed, her eyes wide, lips peeled back from her teeth. "Fucking bawd!"

Shaking her head at the insults, Lillian went back to the fire though Daniva continued to hurl vicious barbs her way, the air blue with the older woman's curses.

"Would you like me to shut her up, Milady?" Walys asked as the two outside guards stuck their heads in to see what was causing the commotion.

"Leave her be," Lillian said, sitting down and pulling the fur around her shoulders for she had become chilled with the evil spouting from Daniva. "She is to be pitied."

"The ugly old hag should be put out of her misery," one of the two guards at the cave entrance muttered before returning to his post. "Mayhap the duke will give me the honor of slitting her useless throat for him."

Daniva heard the words and shivered. She had no friends in this brutal bunch. She could see death lurking in their eyes as they glared at her, itching in their palms, and she quieted, suddenly afraid they would murder her if she made another sound. The smell of the cooking stew made her nauseous and she had no intention of eating anything the young bitch sent her way for it was sure to be poisoned, spat in at the very least. She would bide her time and get free when she could. Nodding at that decision, she slumped against the rock wall, her eyes steady on the woman who had caused her downfall.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Dealachan laird curled into the niche he had prepared for himself in the tight little cave a few hundred yards away from the one in which Lillian was being held and let the daylight drain him of his strength. His only consolation was that he knew Kell would be likewise incapacitated during the hours of light. He took comfort in knowing the Cuideags could not sense him for among his arsenal of powers was a cloaking spell to hide his presence from his enemies. But he knew Kell could sense he was near if not pinpoint his position. As he closed his eyes, he sniffed the air one last time and held Lillian's scent deep in his chest, taking her down with him into his dreamless slumber.

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After eight hands of cards and two games of backgammon, Lillian needed some time without the genial camaraderie of the young warriors. She pleaded weariness of traveling and stretched out on a pallet one of the men fixed for her. Lying there staring up at the craggy swirls of rock above her head, she wondered if Kell was dreaming again and if so, was the dream of her. The way he had looked at her, the way his eyes had traveled slowly and possessively over her made it clear to her that he was mentally stripping her, knowing her in his mind if not yet in body. Such a thought sent a delicate shiver along her spine and brought a fanciful smile to her lips.

Something told her he would be a gentle and caring lover. His hands would be sure on her flesh and forceful in a passionate way. He had a body honed for a woman's exploration. His hands were powerful and she ached just thinking about them stroking her, bringing her pleasure in places she so longed to have touched – places her husband had ignored in his rush to gain his own pleasure. She knew Kell would be a leisurely lover, eliciting as much enjoyment for her as he did for himself. She also suspected he would be a thorough lover and that thought made her sigh with anticipation.

Mayhap it was wrong, wicked to be eager for his touch. She knew the nuns at the convent where she had spent her early years would say her thoughts were impure and that she was sinning just thinking about a man to whom she was not legally or morally bound touching her. Yet if it was so wrong, why then did it feel so right? Why did it seem that this man was the one she had been waiting all her life to know? Why – when she had looked into his eyes – had she felt as though she was home, her destiny soon to be fulfilled?

Lillian turned to her side and closed her eyes. If she was to be a part of his world, she had to begin changing her habits. She would sleep when he slept, be awake when he was awake. Her life was to be turned upside down and the sooner she accustomed herself to his routine, the better it would be for them both.

## Chapter Seven

After a brief stop at Bàinidhòsda, the asylum where Kell had remanded Lady Daniva into the very capable hands of the Sisters of Mercy, the warlord had asked Lillian if she would prefer riding a horse for the remainder of the trip rather than inside the wagon. She jumped at the chance.

"It is getting rather heated in here," Lillian admitted, for once out of the mountains the outside temperature began to rise.

A gentle mare had been purchased from the good Sisters and with Kell at her side, Lillian was able to see the desert lands over which he ruled. The shimmering, undulating sands fascinated her for all she had seen of the world was the fog-shrouded shores of Ceomhar with its black dirt and the ice-laden mountains of Ilbhinn covered with snow.

"It is so warm here," she said, basking in the night air drifting around her. "I can not wait to see this land in the daylight." She looked to Kell. "Is it even more beautiful then?"

He smiled sadly at her. "I've never seen any land in the daylight, wench," he reminded her. "My world is of the night."

Lillian reached across to him. "I am sorry, warrior. I..."

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips. "There is no need to apologize." He rode with her hand in his. "I am told the temperatures can climb well over one hundred degrees in the desert when the sun is at its zenith. Perhaps you could ride out right after dawn to view the painted rocks. I am told they are very beautiful."

Knowing he would never see that beauty took some of the excitement and joy from Lillian. His was an existence in darkness and she had vowed to echo his world in her own.

"There is your new home," he said softly as they came over a rise.

Her first glimpse of Comhachagràtha, the Cuideag fortress, was under the soft yellow light of a full moon, its rays reflecting upon the sandstone walls to make the silica sparkle in the lambent glow. The citadel was massive and sprawling with towering turrets capped with golden conical roofs that shone brightly. Surrounding the stronghold to the north and east, the High Plains of Dithyramb sloped upward into the Tesqua mountain range through which they had traveled. Westward lay Lake Rong Finiche and in the moonlight the waters glittered. To the south lay Fàsach, the vast burning wastelands where it was said nothing lived. Even at night, she could see the ghosts of heat rising from the immense plain.

A trumpet sounded on the battlements of the fortress to announce the arrival of the warlord and his men. The creak of the drawbridge being lowered, the shriek of the chains, the rhythmic loud thump as the cables hit each tooth of the giant cog wheel lifting the portcullis broke the stillness of the night. Lined now upon the high walls were men at attention, the flare of torches lighting the way into the secure citadel.

"We take no chances here," Kell told her. "Comhachagràtha is home to thousands of our people, the last of our kind, and it is important they know their Day Sleep will not be disturbed by marauders. Those are elite weres on the wall. Highly trained warriors every one."

Lillian looked up at the warriors clad in their black and gray uniforms. "They are an imposing sight," she told him.

"Aye," he said. "That they are and as dangerous as they come."

The drawbridge settled over the wide moat and Kell kicked his mount into movement, releasing Lillian's hand as he galloped the horse onto the thick wooden planks, the first to cross as was his right as warlord. She followed him, feeling the curious glances of the guards in the towers as Kell and she traveled under the raised portcullis and into the outer bailey. Servants came toward them to take the horses and when Kell threw a leg over his mount's head and slid to the ground, a tall, imposing man dressed in the robes of the priesthood came forward at a quick pace.

"Thank the gods you are home, Milord," the man said. In the light from the torches overhead, his thin, cadaverous face was bracketed by dark shadows.

"Has something happened, Father Gerard?" Kell inquired.

"We have news a large troop of Dealachan have left Cadránta, headed this way," the *ard-saggyrt*, the high priest, said, glancing toward Lillian. "Would you know why?"

"Aye," Kell said. "Caisil-Chrò wants this lady back but she is mine. He'll have sent out a call for his kind to aid him."

The priest gave Lillian a hard look. "Does she belong to the Dealachan laird?"

"She belongs to me," Kell stated. "He held her captive for a while but she is the reason Grayham of Ceomhar sent for me." He walked to her and held up his arms to help her down from her horse.

Lillian put her hands to Kell's shoulders and leaned forward. She smiled when he slid her down his body before allowing her feet to touch the ground. "You will hurt yourself doing such things, Milord," she said in a soft voice.

"You weigh no more than a feather," he replied, and reached down to lace his fingers through hers then turned to face the priest. "Father Gerard, this is Queen Lillian. She is daughter to Lord Samyuel Keithton."

Thin salt and pepper eyebrows shot up until they were hidden by the cowl of the priest's hood. "The same Lord Keithton who is friend to Baron Beithir?"

"Aye," Kell acknowledged. "And she is to be my bride this night."

Respect entered the lanky man's thin face and he bowed elegantly to Lillian. "It would be an honor to perform the Joining, Milord."

"But first I must put aside her Joining to the Ceomhar king," Kell said, ignoring the priest's gasp of surprise. "Where is Beithir?"

"I believe he is most likely in the library with his nose in a dusty tome," Father Gerard replied with a twitch of his thin lips.

"I should have known." Kell tucked Lillian's hand into the crook of his arm. "Come, sweeting. Let's get this over with as quickly as possible."

"The grace of the gods be with you, Milord," Father Gerard mumbled.

As he walked her through the outer bailey and under a soaring arch, Lillian looked up at her soon-to-be husband. "What haven't you told me, Saxxon?" she inquired. She watched his mouth tighten as though he weren't going to answer. "Saxxon?" she prodded.

"Beithir isn't going to like me setting aside your Joining but that can't be helped. I am duke of Baldemahr, master of Comhachagràtha."

"And he is...?"

"My lord high councilor," Kell said then mumbled, "among other things."

"Other than the obvious, is there another reason he would object to what you plan?" she inquired.

Kell threw his free hand out with a snort. "He has great admiration for royalty and the old ways. He believes a king is entitled to respect no matter how good a ruler he is. He will object—not because of the legal issues of the Joining—but simply because you were chosen by a king to be his mate."

"If it will cause you problems with your people, Milord, I would..."

She got no further for he stopped and spun her around, bringing her against him.

"You will be my wife before this night is over and no man, woman or child will gainsay me." He shook her gently. "Do you understand, wench?"

"I would not be the reason a rift forms between you and your councilor," she said. "If needs be, I can be your leman instead."

Tenderness made his serpent eyes gleam. "You would do that for me?"

"If 'tis the only way we could be together, I would."

He drew her into his arms and held her tightly, his chin resting atop her head. "Nay, wench. You will be my legal bride not my whore. I would never ask that of you even if the Council of Baldemahr declares me an outlaw for it."

"You risk much saying that, Saxx," someone said. "Who is this woman for whom you dare make such an incendiary statement?"

Kell stiffened, his jaw clenched and he eased Lillian back from him. He looked down into her upturned face then released her, turning to confront whoever had spoken. His voice was hard and tight when he answered.

"'Tis no concern of yours what I do, Quinton," he said.

"Mayhap not," came the droll words, "but I'll wager it will matter to my mother."

Kell ground his teeth, his fist clenching at his side before he gave Lillian a tight look.

"Milady, this is Daniva's brother, Quinton, Lord Kurst," Kell introduced. "This lady is Queen Lillian of Ceomhar."

"The king's very own wife?" Kurst questioned then whistled rudely. "My, my, my, my, my! You have indeed set your aspirations high this time, haven't you, Saxx?"

Lillian could feel the animosity between the two men like an ice-cold blanket thrown around her. She stepped closer to Kell, sensing Kurst's hatred of him that had washed over to her.

"So am I to assume when you visited Ceomhar, you absconded with the king's woman then?" Kurst queried. "We will be fighting Ceomhar as we are about to fight the Dealachan hoard?"

"King Grayham no longer wants me," Lillian spoke up. "He'll send no war parties here to get me back."

"And why is that, Milady?" Kurst inquired. "Or need I ask?" He swung his amused stare to Kell. "Did you compromise the wench, Saxx?"

"She was a prisoner of Caisil-Chrò," Kell said. "I was sent to rescue her."

Kurst snapped his head around. "Is Daniva here? Did you bring her back with you?"

"You know gods-be-damned well I would not have left her with that Dealachan scum," Kell replied.

"Then where is she?" Kurst asked, searching among the riders for the sister he had not seen for many years.

"She is where she belongs," Kell told him. "We left her at Bàinidhòsda."

The color drained from Kurst's face and he slowly turned to stare openmouthed at Kell. "The asylum?" he whispered. "You left my sister at an asylum?"

"Her reason had flown, Quinton," Kell explained. "For her own safety, it was best..."

"You bastard," Kurst said in a low, deadly voice. His eyes had narrowed into thin slits. "By the gods you will pay dearly for such a cruel act."

"Your sister is ill, Milord," Lillian said. "She needed help."

Kurst paid no attention to her words. He gave Kell one last brutal glower then spun on his heel and stormed off, his shoulders hunched, fists clenched.

"Saxxon..." Lillian began, but he held up his hand to forestall her comment.

"There has always been bad blood between Quinton and me. One day that blood will be spilled," he told her.

"I am sorry," she mumbled.

"Quinton can not see—or refuses to see—how evil Daniva can be. You heard her on the journey here. Her reason has flown. She is a danger to herself and everyone around her." He caught up her hand again and brought it to his lips. "No more discussion of such troubles. I am anxious to show you your new home, Lilly."

"And I am anxious to see it," she said.

He led her across the lower bailey, moonlight glittering on the flagstone pathway that led past the communal well then up the short flight of stone steps to the massive oaken door that led into the keep. Two guards flanking the door saluted their warlord with a clenched right fist to their breast.

"Welcome home, Your Grace," the taller guard greeted Kell as the other guard opened the door.

"It is good to be home, Kirk," Kell replied. With a hand to the small of Lillian's back, he ushered her into the keep, explaining to her that he would assign a maid to see to her comfort while he conducted the necessary Council business before the Joining could take place.

"I can go with you," she said.

"Glenda," he called out to one of the servants who were covertly staring at Lillian. "Come and take Her Grace to my chamber so she can rest." He looked down at Lillian. "You'll have your own private chamber but for now, mine will have to suffice."

"I will not be sleeping with you?" she asked softly.

"Tonight of course," he said with a quick smile.

"I mean each night," she clarified.

Kell blinked. "You would prefer that, Milady?"

A deep rose blush spread over Lillian's cheeks and she lowered her eyes. "I had thought to be a true wife to you, Milord."

"You did not have your own chambers at Ceomhar?" he asked.

"I did, but I had no desire to spend any more time than was necessary with Grayham," she answered. "Such is not the case with you."

His smile widened. "Milady, you are most welcome to stay every waking moment with me when 'tis safe but still I think you should have your own chamber for when you wish to retire there." He put out a hand to cup her cheek. "Everyone needs their own private corner now and again."

She saw the wisdom in his words and nodded. "Aye, you have a point, but I would rather spend my sleeping hours at your side."

"My sleeping hours aren't the same as yours," he reminded her gently.

"They will be," she said.

He drew her face up to his, leaning over her so he could slant his lips across hers. The kiss was as sweet as summer wine and just as intoxicating. She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and sighed when he finally moved back.

"Tonight," he said huskily, and was gone before she could take another breath.

"Your Grace?"

Lillian turned to the servant Kell had bid take her to his chamber. She gave the girl a bewildered look. "He is rather like a whirlwind, isn't he?"

Glenda giggled. "His Grace would be more apt to call himself a tornado."

"I imagine that is an accurate description when he is in a warrior frame of mind," Lillian agreed.

"If you will follow me, Your Grace, I will take you to his chamber."

Everywhere Lillian looked, she saw servants spying surreptitiously at her but none greeted her. The male servants seemed even less inclined to welcome her than did the females. At least the women smiled hesitantly back at her when Lillian looked their way but the men only scowled and looked pointedly away.

"What ails the menfolk of Comhachagràtha?" she asked.

The servant seemed surprised at the question. "Nothing, Your Grace. Why would you think something ails them?"

"They are looking at me as though they could run me through with a blade," Lillian answered, and shivered at her own words.

"Pay no heed to them, Your Grace," Glenda said. "You are a stranger to them. They don't know you yet. They will take their lead from His Grace."

Lillian felt the eyes raking over her but did not look back down the stairs as she climbed. "Is it true Cuideag men treat women as though they are property?"

Glenda giggled again. "'Twas the way of it before the duke changed things," she said. "When he became warlord, he told the men of our clan that no woman would ever again be treated as chattel as his mother had been. He swore there would be no more forced Joinings. He has made good on his vow."

"I am relieved to hear it," Lillian said on a long sigh.

"You've nothing to worry about, Your Grace. The duke has always been good to his women," Glenda said.

Lillian turned to the girl. "Have there been many?"

"He's had his share," Glenda mumbled, but did not meet Lillian's gaze.

"How many is a share?" Lillian pressed.

"None of them are here now, if you are concerned over it, Your Grace," Glenda was quick to say. "The last was over six months ago and he sent her packing when she got a wee bit too possessive of him and what was his."

"How many are we talking about here?" Lillian wanted to know.

Glenda let out a long breath. "More than I could even name, Your Grace," she replied.

Lillian was quiet as she considered the girl's answer. It was a bit disheartening to know her husband-to-be had dallied with so many women. A part of her wondered if

she could measure up to the pleasure they had undoubtedly given him. Grayham had scolded her often about her lack of expertise in the lovemaking department. Now his remembered insults lay heavy on her heart.

They had reached the landing and the servant was leading her to the far end of the shadowy corridor where torches sputtered in thick iron sconces.

"I will fetch a few of the other girls so they can start cleaning the mistress's chambers," Glenda told her as they arrived at a huge black door studded with polished iron stars and wide iron bands. "They were his mother's rooms and connect to his."

"Am I remembering correctly that his mother died before he became warlord?" Lillian queried.

Glenda nodded as she pushed open the heavy door. "She died while the duke was fighting the Dealachan. When General Caisil-Chrò of Oighre had stolen His Grace's intended on their Joining night." She stepped aside so Lillian could enter the room. "That was when the *folachd* was declared."

"The blood feud," Lillian said.

"Aye, Your Grace."

Lillian stopped just inside Kell's chambers and her lips parted in surprise. The room was massive with a score or more of windows opened to the night breeze along the north and south walls so there was very good ventilation. Beside each window was a thick iron panel fashioned into a shutter that she knew would be closed tightly during the daylight hours to block out the sun. On the eastern wall a huge ironwork bed sat upon a dais of pale brown fieldstone. Four posts rose nearly to the ceiling above the intricately wrought headboard and footboard and were capped with a canopy of twisted iron rods laced together in a tight basket-weave pattern. Two dark oaken nightstands banded in polished iron accented with ornate pulls stood to either side of the enormous bed. Suspended above each nightstand was a large glass oil lantern, which cast a prism of colors on the magnificent tapestry hanging behind the bed.

"That is the telling of the *folachd*," Glenda said of the intricately worked hanging. "The old duke had it commissioned right after the present duke came home."

It was not something Lillian took joy in seeing upon the wall behind a bed where she intended to spend her sleeping hours. It was a grisly embodiment of a battle said to be the most fierce and bloody in the history of man and she had no doubt it would foster nightmares. Staring at the mangled bodies of men and their war horses, the streams of blood flowing out from beneath the feet of the central figure who stood with the head of an enemy grasped in his hand, the entrails of the slain spread upon the ground, made bile rise up in her throat and she had to turn away. In her mind she could hear the clash of swords, the shrieks of the dying and the triumphant howl of victory that had tipped back the head of that central figure as he held aloft the severed head. In her nostrils was the scent of blood, of decaying flesh, and she put a trembling hand to her mouth.

Glenda was too busy turning back the black fur covers on the bed and fluffing the large pillows to notice her new mistress's reaction to the tapestry. The servant was saying something about the woman who had woven the tapestry and it wasn't until the name Lady Daniva was spoken that Lillian swallowed the gorge rising in her throat and asked Glenda to repeat what she'd just said.

"It was Lady Kurst, the viscountess of Díoltas, who plied the needle though an artist by name of Chauston actually painted it upon the canvas," Glenda said.

Lillian frowned. "Lady Daniva's mother?"

"Aye," Glenda replied. "And Lords Quinton and Emile, but Lord Emile is no more. He died last spring."

"And Lady Kurst resides here at Comhachagràtha?"

"On this very floor," Glenda replied. "As befitting her station. Lord Quinton's chambers are one floor below this one."

"I saw other doors," Lillian stated. "Who else has a room on this floor?"

Glenda straightened from smoothing the fabric on one of the pillows and put a finger to her bottom lip. "Let's see. There's only the Baron Beithir, the duke's real father—I'm sure you know of him—and his lady-wife, the Baroness Helen." She smiled. "That's all who live up here on the top floor."

Lillian stared at the girl. Baron Beithir, the lord high councilor, was Kell's true father? Why, she wondered, had he not made mention of it to her?

"Would you like me to have a bath drawn for you, Your Grace?" she heard Glenda ask, and shook away the confused thoughts clouding her mind.

"Aye, that would be wonderful, Glenda," Lillian replied.

"It's actually Glenney, Your Grace," the girl said. "His Grace always gets my name wrong."

"Then Glenney it is," Lillian stated.

When Glenney had gone to fetch more servants to see to Lillian's comfort, the soon-to-be mistress of Comhachagràtha sat down on an overstuffed settee that perched beneath one bank of windows. She kicked off her slippers, tucked her legs under her and turned to look out into the desert night. A soft breeze ruffled the hair at her temples and washed gently over her face. She fingered the cool metal of one iron shutter as she thought of everything that had happened to her since Saxxon Kell, the duke of Baldemahr, had come charging into her life.

The warlord was like the shutter beneath her fingertips. He was hard to the touch yet smooth, and offered protection that she desperately needed. She knew he would stand unmovable between her and all else that might try to come between them. Unlike Grayham, who would run the other way and let her fend as she might, she had no doubt Saxxon would give his life for her if the need arose.

"You like the night breeze, wench?"

She looked around to see him standing a few feet away, a slight smile on his handsome face, his serpentine eyes glowing with a fire she could not mistake.

"I like the play of the wind over my face and through my hair," she admitted, lowering her feet to the thick pile carpet.

"A woman who cares not that the wind blows her hair astray?" he countered with an arched brow.

"Hair can be brushed and plaited. You will find I am not a woman given to preening, Milord," she replied.

"There is no call for you to preen, wench," he said. "One can not improve on perfection."

Lillian blushed, feeling the heat all the way down her neck. "Your business was accomplished?" she asked, needing to change the subject.

"It is done and preparations are under way for our Joining at the hour of midnight," he told her.

Tucking her bottom lip between her teeth, she nodded, not sure how to approach him with her concerns.

"Just spit it out, Lilly," he said as though he had read her mind.

She took a deep breath. "Why did you not tell me Baron Beithir is your father?"

He came to squat down in front of her with a grace that belied his height and size. He reached for her hand, which she gladly relinquished to him. "Because it wasn't to my father I was going. I told you how he feels about royalty. Had I gone to him as his son, I would have had more problems than I did."

Her brows drew together. "There were problems?"

"Aye, wench," he said with a laugh that showed the fine lines at the corners of his mesmerizing eyes. "I fear the old man raked my ass over the coals. At the moment, he is supremely unhappy with me."

"Why would he be?"

"My councilor believes I have overstepped my authority in wanting your Joining to Connors set aside. He questioned my motives and whether or not it was a wise thing for the Cuideag clan."

"So why not have spoken to him father to son? If..."

"I went to him as his warlord, the duke of Baldemahr. I went to him as my councilor with a legal matter and not a family one. As the duke, a man he respects and—truth be told—perhaps fears, he could do no other than agree with what I wanted. Had I gone to him as his son, he would have denied my petition out of hand by telling me I was not worthy of you."

Her back stiffened. "Why would he say such a mean thing to you?" she challenged, eyes flashing.

He stroked her hand gently. "Peace, wench. The old man loves me, but as he sees it, his son—the bastard son of a mere baron—is not worthy of a queen. Thankfully in his eyes, the duke of Baldemahr is. His son he could deny. His duke, he could not."

"But as the daughter of an old friend..."

"I haven't told him who you are and have asked our priest not to reveal your identity to anyone just yet," he said as he brought her hand to his lips. He kissed her wrist then placed her palm against his cheek. "I am saving that for after the Joining because I know it will please him greatly."

"And take some of the sting out of allowing you to marry me," she added.

"There's that, aye," he said with a grin.

"You are a devious man, Milord."

"I have been called worse," he said, and released her hand. He got to his feet. "I hear a troop of giggling women approaching so I will leave you to their capable hands and see you in the Temple."

She had heard nothing but did not doubt his word. Watching him walk to the door, she could not help but admire the shape of his ass and the length of his long, muscular legs.

"The better to wrap around you, wench, and the ass has staying power," he said in a throaty voice as he opened the door and walked out, glancing over his shoulder to give her a wink before closing the portal behind him.

Lillian's face turned beet red at his words and she put her hands to her cheeks, though she giggled like a teenager. She could barely speak when the knock came at her door and the servants entered in a troop, the women smiling and laughing even as the men carrying in the buckets of water were frowning sharply.

Accompanying the men was a tall, gray-haired man with eyes the same color as Kell's and she knew even before he introduced himself that this was the father of her husband-to-be.

"Your Grace," the warrior said, bowing deeply to her. "I am Baron Collin Beithir, the lord high..."

"You are the father of my beloved," she said, striding forward with her hand outstretched. "I am most pleased to make your acquaintance, Milord."

Beithir gave a start—his eyes wide—but he took the proffered hand and kissed it in the old, courtly manner of a knight. "Your Grace, it is I who am graced with the pleasure." He looked up at her through thick dark lashes that belied his age.

"Saxxon tells me you raked him o'er the coals," she said with a grin. "I reminded him he was a big boy and quite capable of bearing the heat."

The older man's lips twitched. "Did you now?"

She leaned closer so her words would be for his ears alone. "Have you noticed how sometimes he needs to be reminded he is but a man and not an invincible warlord?"

A wide grin took over Beithir's face. "Your Grace, you and I are going to..."

"Lilly," she said firmly. "My name is Lilly and you will be Papa Beithir or just Beithir if it so pleases you." At his look of shock, she shook her head. "No, we will not argue about it. That is a command, Milord. I will have it no other way."

He swallowed and she saw moisture gathering in his alien eyes. "C-Collin," he said in a cracking voice and had to start again. "I prefer just plain Collin."

Lillian looped her hand through his and led him toward the settee. "Then just plain Collin it will be." She drew him down on the cushion beside her. "Now be so kind as to tell me what I should expect at a Cuideag Joining."

The older warrior looked down when his son's betrothed slid her hand to his to lace their fingers together. He made a sound almost like a groan and had to clear his throat in order to speak.

"The duke..."

"Saxxon," she correctly, locking her eyes with his.

He smiled. "Saxxon has asked me to stand in for your father and escort you to the altar." His smile wavered. "If that is acceptable to you."

"Most acceptable to me. Who will be Saxxon's witness?"

"Witness?" The older man frowned then nodded as understanding shown on his weathered face. "Ah, his *Doninney-Moyllee*, his spokesman. That would be General Tremont Giles," Beithir replied.

"Ah," Lillian drawled with a giggle. "The superior male. I should have guessed."

"Superior male?" Beithir repeated. "Who made such a claim about him, Your—" At her stern look, he bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Lilly?"

"The superior male himself," she answered with a wink.

"Monty would say such a thing," he laughed. "I hope you put him in his place."

"He and I have done a bit of friendly sparring," she said. "He loves your son very much."

"As though Saxx were his own," Beithir agreed. "Spoiled the lad rotten when he was in short pants."

"And spoils him still," she stated.

The male servants had departed and only a few females remained behind, standing quietly to one side. Beithir cleared his throat again.

"If it would not be too much of a presumption," he said, "my lady-wife would be honored to serve as your *ben voiroil*, your witness. She asked that I offer her services to you in that regard."

"I would very much appreciate her standing at my side," Lillian declared. "I am sure she and I will become fast friends."

"She loves Saxx as dearly as Monty does," he told her. "Almost as much as his own mother did."

At the mention of the duke's mother, Lillian saw great sadness well in the eyes of the lord high councilor. She placed her free hand over his and patted him in a commiserating way.

"I should go," he said, and unthreaded his fingers from hers. He surprised her with how quickly he got to his feet.

"You don't have to," she said.

"There are things these women will be helping you. That being the case, I will take my leave now," he said, bowing to her once again. "When you are ready to go to the Temple, send one of the servants to fetch me. I will be in my room down the hall."

Lillian stunned the older man by standing on her tiptoes and planting a light kiss to his rough cheek. "Until then, Collin," she said.

"Until then, Lilly," he responded with a smile.

## Chapter Eight

Glenny led Lillian into the bathing chamber where a steaming copper tub sat behind an ornate screen. A thick layer of bubbles floated atop the water. The servant helped Lillian undress and climb into the jasmine-scented water then offered to scrub her mistress's back.

"That would be heavenly," Lillian said as she wound her hair atop her head and secured it with tortoiseshell combs Glenny provided.

As the girl soaped a washcloth, the duke's bride-to-be gasped as a thought came to her and she snapped her head around to look up at the girl. "What am I to wear, Glenny?" she asked. "I can't wear those rags I took off!"

Glenny smiled. "His Grace has sent the gown his mother, the duchess, wore to her own Joining. I think you will like it." She put the washcloth to Lillian's shoulder. "It is very beautiful."

"What color is it?" Lillian asked, knowing nothing of Cuideag custom.

"Blood red, Your Grace," Glenny told her. "It signifies warmth and life for mankind." She lowered her voice. "And it also signifies great passion."

Lillian felt heat creep into her cheeks. "And what will the duke wear?"

"All Cuideag males wear black on their Joining night for prosperity and luck," Glenny stated. "It also signifies His Grace's protection of you and fortifies his responsibilities toward you."

"Will there be many people there?" Lillian asked.

"Oh no," Glenny replied. "Only the members of the High Council and their lady-wives. That was the way His Grace wanted it."

"So how many people will that be?"

"Less than fifty, I think," Glenny told her.

Lillian breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't ready to greet scores of people—especially Cuideag men who might give her the same angry stares as the male servants had.

"And the ceremony?" she asked as she took the washcloth from Glenny and began washing her arms. "What will that be like?"

Glenny sat back on her haunches. "I've heard His Grace has asked the priest for the *banshey*, the ceremony from many decades past." She sighed. "The *banshey* hasn't been used since long before His Grace's great-grandmother was Joined to the one they called the Outlaw. Yours will be a true wedding as the word means and not the *kianglagh* we women must accept these days."

"Kianglagh?" Lillian repeated.

"Binding," Glenny explained. "Where the woman belongs to the man no matter how he treats her. With the *banshey* you have recourse if His Grace does not treat you as you should be."

"I don't think I need worry about how he will treat me," Lillian said quietly, fanning her hand over the bubbles in the bathwater.

"No, Your Grace," Glenny agreed. "I know you won't."

Lillian looked over at Glenny. "Would you let me have some privacy now please?"

"Of course, Your Grace," Glenny agreed. "I'll make sure the girls have everything ready for you."

Alone behind the screen, Lillian ran the washcloth over her breasts and stomach and down between her legs. She imagined her husband-to-be touching her there and felt the heat pulse in her cheeks. Moving quickly away from that telling spot, she lifted a leg from the water. It helped to hear the giggling from the bedchamber as the servants oohed and ahed over the gown. Anxious to see it for herself, she finished her bath and called out to Glenny to fetch a towel.

"I can't wait for you to see the veil the baron sent to you!" Glenny said as she came behind the screen and took up a large fleece towel hanging by the fireplace. "It is the most glorious piece of work I've ever seen."

"Is it lace?" Lillian asked as she stood in the tub.

Glenny averted her eyes as she wrapped the plush towel around her mistress. "Tatted from the finest silver thread and hanging from a circlet of tiny red satin roses and green velvet leaves," Glenny said with a sigh. "It was tatted by His Grace's mother but she did not wear it to her Joining."

"Why not?" Lillian asked as she took Glenny's hand and stepped out of the tub.

Glenny lowered her voice. "I hear it said she made the veil for her Joining to the baron but when she was sold to the duke instead, she hid it away to be given to His Grace on his Joining day."

Lillian smiled. "It will be an honor to wear it."

Glenny followed Lillian into the bedchamber where four women were standing by with clasped hands. She introduced them to her new mistress.

"This is Helga," she said, indicating the oldest of the four women. "She is the maid on this floor."

Helga bobbed a clumsy curtsy for she was a large woman with a heavy set of jowls wobbling beneath her chin. Her periwinkle blue eyes set within her pudgy cheeks sparkled with friendliness. "This is my daughter Nellie," the woman said, cocking her head toward a younger, slimmer version of herself.

Nellie sank into a graceful curtsy but when she rose, her unsmiling lips were pursed tight as she mumbled a greeting. A dark bruise marred the smoothness of her left cheek.

"Nellie is right good at doing hair," Glenny said.

"The viscountess wouldn't agree with you," Nellie quipped, putting a hand to the bruise.

"Hush, girl!" Helga whispered.

"It's all right, Helga. I like a woman who speaks her mind. The viscountess hit you, Nellie?" Lillian asked.

"Wasn't the first time she done it," Nellie muttered. "Won't be the last neither."

"Why did she hit you?"

Nellie shrugged. "Didn't do her hair the way she thought it ought to be done."

"Are you her personal maid?" Lillian queried, her eyes narrowed with concern.

"Ain't nothing to her, Your Grace," Nellie said. She gave Glenny a sour look. "Not like Glenny is to you."

"His Grace made me your personal maid," Glenny explained when Lillian glanced at her.

Lillian had figured as much. "Well, I'll have a talk with His Grace concerning the matter. I don't believe in mistreating those who work for me and I can promise you I will never lift a hand to you, Nellie."

The tightness of Nellie's lips eased. "That would be much appreciated, Your Grace," she stated.

Glenny pointed to the other two women. "The short one is Ione and the other one is Judith. Ione is a seamstress and Judith is right good at makeup."

"Don't do the viscountess," Judith said, lifting her chin. "She's got that half man what does hers."

"Spaulding," Glenny said in a low voice then rolled her eyes. "He's strange, that one."

"He dresses her too, but the prissy bastard don't know how to do hair," Nellie grumbled.

"Nellie!" Helga gasped then turned to Lillian. "Your Grace, I apologize for her language. She has..."

"A right to her opinion," Lillian said, and gave Nellie a considering look. "But perhaps we should be a bit circumspect in what we say, don't you, Nell?"

Nellie ducked her head. "Guess so, Your Grace."

"So," Lillian said. "Where would you like me to sit so you can do something with this rat's nest of mine?"

Judith grabbed a chair from the desk and brought it over. "Here, Your Grace. Your chambers is airing out so we can't use the vanity in there."

Taking a seat, Lillian looked down at her bare toes. "What about slippers?" she asked. "Did His Grace remember those?"

"Can't wear no shoes to a Joining," Nellie said as she moved behind Lillian's chair and reached out to take the combs from her mistress's hair.

"No shoes?" Lillian repeated.

"Cuideag custom," Glenny explained.

"Least you don't have to go like the rest of us did," Nellie groused as she took a brush from Ione.

"And how was that?" Lillian asked. When none of the women answered, she twisted her head and looked up at Nellie. "Nell? How do Cuideag women go to their Joinings?"

Nellie lifted her chin. "As naked as the day they was born," she replied.

Lillian's mouth dropped open. "You're joking!"

A chorus of denials came from the women.

"But why?" Lillian

"A woman can only have what her man gives her," Helga provided. "When she leaves her father's house, she can't take nothing with her for everything she had belongs to him. It is up to her husband to provide for her."

"Aye, and if he wants to keep her butt-nekkid," Nellie snapped as she gently applied the brush to Lillian's long hair, "ain't nothing she can do about it."

"That's one of the things His Grace has asked the High Council to change," Glenny said. "He don't like it any more than us women do."

"He stopped our menfolk from buying and selling us," Helga said. "Said he wasn't going to have women be treated like cattle as his own mama was."

"The high council ain't ruled on the *kianglagh* though," Judith said.

"The binding," Ione supplied the meaning.

"But it will," Glenny said. "What His Grace wants, the High Council usually gives him."

"There are men who argue that it is their place to do with their women what they will once the Joining is done," Nellie said. "Some will defy whatever the High Council decides."

"Aye, but they'll only defy His Grace once before he sets them to rights," Glenny said.

"So I'll still have to go to my Joining barefoot?" Lillian asked, and when the women nodded, she sighed.

"How would you like me to arrange your hair, Your Grace?" Nellie asked after she'd smoothed all the tangles from the long tresses.

"Better put it up with as few pins as possible so His Grace can take it down with ease," Glenny suggested as she walked over to the bed. "You know how men like to do that."

"They do like to watch it fall, don't they?" Judith inquired in a dreamy voice.

"Almost as much as they like watching a chemise drop to the floor," Ione said with a giggle.

Lillian felt the color rushing to her cheeks.

"Fix it so's we can put this veil on easily too," Glenny said as she came back to stand before Lillian. "See what I meant about the veil, Your Grace?"

Lillian reached out to touch the gossamer-thin strands of silver silk thread, stunned by the beauty of the tatting. The veil fell in scallops and resembled a delicate spider web falling from a circle of roses.

"It is spectacular," she said, fingering the intricate tatting.

"It is, ain't it?" Helga said. "It's prettier even than the *gúna*."

Lillian assumed the older woman meant the wedding gown she would be wearing.

"There," Nellie said. "Judith, fetch a hand mirror so's Her Grace can take a look."

When she saw the artfully arranged hairstyle Nellie had created, Lillian smiled. "It is lovely, Nellie." She twisted around in the chair and put a hand to the servant's arm. "Thank you."

Nellie almost smiled then mumbled something no one understood, ducking her head quickly.

"We'd best get you dressed now or His Grace is gonna put a hand to our wide-loads," Glenny said, and the other women—even Nellie—giggled.

Lillian stood, her eyes widening as Helga brought over a chemise that had been fashioned in black lace. "Oh my!" she exclaimed, and once more felt the sting of embarrassment flare across her cheeks.

"Wicked, ain't it?" Helga asked of the sleeveless chemise that dipped from wafer-thin straps into a low V in the front and was long enough to sweep to the floor. Tatted in a fine lace pattern that resembled the customary spider webbing patterns of the Cuideag, it would be possible to hide very little once the garment was in place.

"It's called a *lheiney ven*," Ione told her. "Here, let me take this, Your Grace."

Allowing the woman to unwrap the towel from around her, Lillian drew in a wavering breath as Helga slipped the chemise over her mistress's head. The garment flowed like water over Lillian's body and settled against her flesh in a wave of silky smoothness.

"It's so fine," Lillian said as she ran her fingertips over the tatting.

"The better for him to rip," Nellie said with a snort.

"He'll not rip this!" Lillian stated, her eyes flaring.

The women looked at one another knowingly.

"He won't!" Lillian protested then raised her chin. "I might have to distract him with a dance or the like, but he will not rip this lovely thing!"

"He ain't easily distracted when he's horny," Glenny said, and when every eye snapped to her, she lifted her shoulders. "Or so I've heard."

"Where's the gown?" Helga asked, slanting Glennie a warning look that Lillian did not miss.

"Here," Judith said. She and Ione were holding the glorious red silk gown out for Lillian to see.

"Sweet Mother of Sciar," Lillian said in a breathless voice. She reached out to stroke the glistening silk. "It is unbelievably beautiful."

The scarlet-red wedding gown had been created from yards and yards of the finest silk the Cuideag seamstresses could find. From the high scooped neckline, down the bodice of the gown, across the wide skirt and flowing four-foot-long train an intricate spider web had been embroidered in fine silver thread, standing out against the bold color of the material. Where each thread crossed another, a tiny crystal bead had been sewn so the facets caught the light to make it sparkle. The long fitted sleeves had been done in scarlet lace and ended in dramatic points that would hug the backs of Lillian's hands. A long train fell behind the gown's deeply scalloped hem.

"It's sure the prettiest I've ever seen," Helga said as Ione and Judith bent down so Lillian could step into the garment.

Once the lovely gown was settled on her shoulders, Lillian felt the prickle of tears. What she had not felt on the day she had been joined to Grayham, she was feeling now. Her heart swelled in her chest as Glennie stepped forward to begin working row after row of tiny crystal buttons that would close the low back of the gown.

"I feel like a fairy princess," Lillian whispered as she traced the delicate stitching of the web at her bodice with a fingertip.

"And you look like one," Helga complimented. She lifted the veil and settled it gently over Lillian's head, smoothed the tattering into place.

"Merciful Nathair," Judith whispered. "You surely do."

"I heard His Grace went to the vault and fetched his great-grandmother's *brashleid bondagh*," Glennie said, to which the other women—even Nellie—ahed.

"What is that?" Lillian asked.

"It means slave bracelet in Cuideag high speech," Glennie explained, "but that isn't what it signifies."

"It means His Grace has lost his heart to you, is what it means," Nellie said in an awed voice, and for the first time, she smiled warmly.

"The *brashleid bondagh* ain't been worn in all these many years," Helga said, reaching up to wipe at a tear that had formed in her blue eye. "What an honor, Your Grace. What a wonderful honor for you!"

"I've never seen it, but I was told it's a cuff bracelet that is connected by a fine golden chain to a ring you'll wear on the middle finger of your left hand," Glennie said. "It will tell the world that you belong to His Grace and he to you."

"Oh my, look at the time!" Ione gasped. "We've got to get Her Grace to the *Chiamble*!"

Lillian felt a shiver go down her and she reached a hand out to the women. "Please, would you give me a moment alone?" Her lips quivered. "I need..."

"The mirror's over there," Glenny said, nodding toward the cheval mirror. "We'll go fetch the baron for you."

Once the women were gone and she was alone, Lillian turned to face the mirror but she made no move to walk over to it. Before she could, she took a deep, steady breath, tucked her bottom lip between her teeth and padded slowly over to the floor-length glass. Her breath came out in a wavering sound when she saw herself framed in the mirror. She barely heard the door open behind her, she was so entranced with the gown and her face behind the gossamer veil. Thinking it was her future father-in-law, she turned with a radiant smile but the smile faded when she took in the glaring face staring back at her.

"I curse you and this, your Joining day," the middle-aged woman standing in the doorway hissed. "May all your issue wither in your womb!"

Lillian gasped, was taken back by the venom spewing from the woman's twisted mouth. "Who are you?" she asked, putting a hand to her breast.

"Lady Constance Kurst," the woman proclaimed with narrowed eyes. "Viscountess of Díoltas and your very worst nightmare!"

"You are Daniva's mother," Lillian said.

"And you will rue the day you had Saxxon Kell imprison my daughter in the hellhole of Bàinidhòsda," Lady Kurst snarled.

"Your daughter's mind is not right, Milady," Lillian told her. "She..."

"Lying whore!" the other woman shouted, and rushed toward Lillian only to be brought up short by a hand snaking out to grab her by her hair. Shrieking, Lady Kurst whipped around to rake her fingernails down the restraining hand only to have her hand batted away.

"Behave or I'll beat you within an inch of your life, bitch!" Beithir ordered. When she tried to knee him in the groin, he twisted his hand brutally in her hair and shoved her to the floor where she landed in a heap, her face pressed to the carpet.

"Collin, please don't hurt her!" Lillian said, rushing forward.

"He belongs to Daniva!" Lady Kurst yelled, trying to push herself up. "This *byddage* can not have him!"

"The only whore here is you," Beithir snapped, and released the woman's hair. He held up a hand to stay Lillian's advance. "Stay back from her, Lilly. She's as crazed as that ugly daughter of hers."

Lady Kurst scrambled to her feet and would have attacked Lillian had Beithir not grabbed her and spun her around. He brought his hand up and slapped the woman with enough force to stagger her.

"Touch his woman and he'll have your head on a pike!" Beithir warned.

"Daniva is his woman," Lady Kurst cried, tears welling in her angry brown eyes. She was trembling violently as she held a hand to her cheek. "He belongs to my daughter!"

"Get out of here before I take your head myself!" Beithir commanded.

Lady Kurst sent Lillian a withering look. "You aren't worthy to suck Saxxon Kell's cock, you *byddage*!"

"Call her a whore one more time and I swear I'll relieve you of your tongue!" Beithir bellowed, and raised his hand to hit her again, but Lady Kurst darted around him and ran from the room.

Lillian too was trembling, dragging quick breaths into her lungs. She stared at the baron, unaccustomed to such violence in a man. "Please don't ever do that again," she asked.

"Cruelty is the only thing that bitch understands, Lilly," he said. He raked a hand through his hair. "There are seven marble headstones in the Ruillick with the names of seven good men who made the mistake of taking that viper to their breasts. They don't call her the *Ben Treoghe Gorrym* – the Black Widow – for nothing."

Lillian's eyes widened. "She murdered her husbands?"

"It can't be proved but everyone knows she was the one responsible," he said.

Swallowing, Lillian shook her head, looked down at her bare toes. "I believe I have made a very bad enemy." When Beithir did not reply, she looked up to find him staring avidly at her. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Beithir's alien eyes swept over her gently. "You make a lovely *ben ny banshey*, Lilly," he said, calling her a bride. "You will do Saxxon proud."

"Thank you for the veil," she said, reaching up to touch the silver covering.

"I had hoped to see Breeshey wearing it on our Joining day," he said quietly. "It was not to be." He went to her. "Instead, I will see our son's bride doing it justice." He offered her his arm and though his voice broke when he spoke, his gaze was filled with merriment. "What say you, Lilly-fair? Shall I escort you to your *aarlaghey*, your groom?"

Lillian looped her arm through Beithir's. "Aye, Collin-bold, you surely can."

## Chapter Nine

Kell was nervously pacing the sacristy as the *ard-saggyrt*, the high priest, gave his warlord an amused look. Father Gerard sat calmly sipping a small glass of plum brandy with his white robes of office spread around him. In the background, four acolytes, or *guilley erin*, bustled in and out as they made ready the altar.

"You are wearing a hole in the carpet, Your Grace," Father Gerard commented.

"I'll buy you a new carpet," Kell mumbled. He looked up at the clock then gave the priest a pleading look. "What the hell is taking her so long? 'Tis nearly midnight!"

Father Gerard grinned. "You would do well to learn patience when it comes to a wife, my son. Especially one to whom you are about to give such unchecked authority."

"Don't tell me you aren't happy to return to the old ways," Kell replied as he made another circuit in front of the older man.

"Oh, I am thrilled we are. I am merely reminding you that you are opening the door but might have to stand on the threshold many a begrudging minute waiting henceforth for your lady-wife to present herself." The high priest chuckled. "Just a reminder, you understand."

"The demons take your reminder, Father," Kell growled, and stopped long enough to drop his head to his chest with exasperation, his hands on his hips. "I don't think I can take much more of this infernal waiting!"

"You've never had to but I believe you can," Father Gerard told him. "Patience, Milord. Patience."

"I am not a patient man," Kell stated, and when the high priest did not reply, the warlord commenced to pacing again.

"They are here, Your Grace," one of the acolytes said softly from the sacristy entrance.

Kell's head snapped up, his eyes sparkling. "My bride?"

"Your guests," the acolyte answered.

"The hell with the guests!" Kell grunted. "I want my bride!"

The acolyte looked to their spiritual leader.

"Seat them according to rank, Brother Eaichid," Father Gerard ordered. "Leave a chair for the lord high councilor."

"Who is taking his own sweet time getting my woman to me!" Kell growled.

Father Gerard sighed loudly. "Your Grace, please calm yourself. Leave some energy for your bridal bed."

That stopped Kell in his tracks. A bemused smile tugged at his lips and he ran a shaky hand over his face. "Aye, there is that," he said.

"The guests are seated and the musician has arrived," one of the acolytes reported.

The bemused smile fled. "Who the hell ordered music?" Kell barked.

"Your Grace, honestly," Father Gerard began, his voice filled with irritation. "Please. There must be music to welcome the *ben ny banshey* to the Joining and to chase away any evil lurking in her wake. When the bell chimes, it will signal her arrival and—"

Kell threw his hands into the air. "Fine," he snapped. "Fine! Go ahead and play that stupid music then!"

At that moment a bell began to chime in the recesses of the Temple and Kell looked as though he were about to throw up. He staggered and reached out to grab the closest acolyte. "She's here," he whispered.

"So it would seem," Father Gerard acknowledged. "Now be a good warlord and let go of poor Brother Stanton. He is turning a most peculiar shade of purple."

Kell snatched his hand from the arm of the acolyte and ran it down the leg of his black trouser for sweat had gathered in his palm. He was all too aware that his hand shook and he was beginning to feel lightheaded as the bell continued to chime, telling him Lillian was being escorted down the white ermine pathway to the altar.

"If you wish to change your mind, Your Grace..." Father Gerard said gently.

"No," Kell said, shaking his head firmly. "No, I want this."

Father Gerard laid an encouraging hand on his duke's shoulder. "Then pray don't look as though you are going to a horrific death at the hands of your worst enemies."

Kell nodded then straightened his shoulders when the high priest moved away. "I'm ready for this," he said then repeated the words—louder this time and with more purpose. "I am ready for this."

"Then let us go to meet your bride," Father Gerard suggested.

Taking one last long, deep breath, Kell fell in behind the priest, striving to keep from trembling as he exited the sacristy and saw the sea of expectant faces looking his way. He swallowed hard, his gaze flicked over those assembled then settled like iron filings to a magnet on the lovely vision being led toward him.

"Mother of Nathair," he breathed, his heart doing a funny little jump in his chest, his groin tightening to the point of pain.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and the blood-red gown fit her as though she had been poured into it. The gleaming silk clung to her breasts and small waist and flaring hips and fit snugly along her thighs. Light from the hundreds of tapers placed about the Temple was caught in the facets of the tiny crystal beads sewn onto the *feegan*, the formal spider web pattern that adorned the gown.

"She is surely worthy of you, Your Grace," Father Gerard pronounced.

Kell could not take his eyes from Lillian but the thought that kept pounding through his brain was that he was not worthy of her.

Lillian had felt the eyes of those gathered settle upon her when the bell chimed. In tandem, the Joining guests had turned to look behind them then rose respectfully as Beithir began escorting her down the white ermine pathway. Her bare toes sank into the thick fur, making it feel as though she were floating toward the altar. Nervously she took a look about the room and was shocked at the wealth of beauty surrounding her.

The walls of the sacred *Chiamble*—the Temple—had been carved from pale green quartz and sparkled brilliantly, the smooth surface mirroring the guests seated within them. Hundreds of black tapers were alight in crystal candlesticks ranged in a semicircle behind the altar. The long black granite altar was so highly polished the light reflected brightly from its sleek surface and upon its top sat two five-armed candelabras lit with tall red tapers. On the stone wall behind the altar was a giant spider web—at least thirty feet in circumference—fashioned from thinly wrought strands of pure silver. The strands caught the flaring light from a multitude of torches and the sea of red tapers flanking the altar. In the center of the web was a spider with obsidian legs and a head and body honed of bright red ruby.

“It is called the *Sneeuane*,” Beithir told her. “It is the Sigil of the Cuideag.”

Scattered about the huge room were tall two-armed candelabrum holding one red and one black candle in sparkling crystal votive cups, the black candle being taller than the red. Overhead, the circular ceiling was faceted like a giant crystal with the center open to the night air so the stars shone like jewels set upon black velvet.

Halfway down the pathway, Lillian became aware of her husband-to-be appearing from a doorway to the left of the altar and her heart missed a beat.

“Oh Collin,” she said, taking in the splendid attire in which Kell was dressed.

“Cleans up nicely, don’t he?” Beithir leaned down to whisper.

Dressed all in black, Saxxon Kell was without a doubt the most handsome man she had ever had the privilege of viewing. His broad shoulders filled the long-sleeved shirt to perfection and his long legs looked powerful in the tight fit of his trousers. She could not keep her gaze from dragging down his tall frame and lingering here and there—at his lips, at the center of his legs where she could swear she saw a bulge had formed. Mentally shaking herself, she snapped her eyes back to his handsome face and felt as though she were drowning in the black fire of his heated stare. The star shapes of his copper irises seemed to be glowing and were pulling her toward them. All thought left her and when she was within a few feet of him, she felt a sexual stirring she had never experienced before.

“Who brings this woman to her Joining?” she heard the priest say as though from far, far away.

"I, Baron Collin Beithir of Grian, lord high councilor of the Cuideag, have come as surrogate father to her, to bring this woman to her Joining." Beithir's voice seemed to fade into the background as she locked gazes with Kell.

"I call forth he who is the *Doninne-Moyllee*," the high priest called out.

Giles came forward, bowing respectfully first to his warlord then the priest and finally to Lillian. "I, General Tremont Giles, have come to speak as representative for my overlord."

"And is your overlord free to legally Join with this woman?"

"I vouch that he is," Giles answered.

Father Gerard looked to Lillian. "Please state your full name before this assemblage, Milady."

Lillian cleared her throat. "Lillian Jonelle Keithton-Connors of Ceomhar," she said. She glanced at Beithir to see his reaction to the name but Kell's father seemed not to have made the connection.

"I call forth she who is the *ben voiroil*."

A lovely older woman with a sparkling smile came quickly to the altar. She curtsied to Kell, to the priest then Lillian, her smile becoming even wider when Lillian put out both hands to welcome the woman she knew to be Beithir's wife.

"I, Baroness Helen Rosdam-Beithir of Grian, have come to stand as representative for my overlord's bride," Beithir's wife said proudly.

"Because this is not a first Joining for this woman," Father Gerard began, "I will forego the customary assertions of purity from the *ben voiroil* and declare Lillian Keithton-Connors is worthy to Join with this man." He turned to Kell. "Now who has come to seek this woman for the Joining?"

"I, Saxxon Viraidan Kell, duke of Baldemahr, regent of the Cuideag, have come to seek a mate for the Joining."

"And do you accept this woman standing at your side?"

Kell's serpentine gaze flowed like warm honey over her. "Aye, for I have chosen her as my own."

Lillian felt his words to the depth of her being. The smell of the burning wax, the variety of perfumes worn by those assembled and the unique scent of Saxxon Kell that was like an aphrodisiac swirled around her in a sensory kaleidoscope. She felt him take her hand and looked down at their laced fingers as though she were in a trance. Her gaze traveled up to his hypnotic eyes and she was lost beyond redemption. She said all the right words at all the right times but she did so spellbound, caught up in the force of the personality of the man standing with her before the altar.

"It has been many years since a bridegroom of the Cuideag royal house has bestowed upon his intended the seal of his heritage," Father Gerard declared. "His Grace has chosen to gift his bride with the Sigil of the Cuideag."

Behind her Lillian could hear the guests whispering, shifting positions in their seats, and she wondered what they were thinking. She worried that they were not pleased that Kell was breaking a long-standing tradition and that she was to be the recipient of such a powerful symbol of his legacy. As an acolyte came toward them carrying a black velvet jewel case, she looked away from him and lifted her eyes to her soon-to-be husband.

"Are you sure?" she asked softly.

"As sure as I am of the next breath I am about to take," he replied, squeezing her fingers.

Father Gerard nodded to the acolyte to open the jewel case then lifted his hands over it to bless it.

"From decades past has come the *Sneeuane*, the Sigil of the Cuideag. It was created by Syn-Con Kell, the first duke of Baldemahr, for his lady-wife Mairrey, and has been handed down into the keeping of the present duke, who wishes to restore the full glory of the *banshey* so the Cuideag will understand the depth of his devotion to the woman who will rule at his side—not merely as his consort but as his equal."

Lillian jerked for this was the first she had heard of this. Her startled eyes flew to him and she saw him smile though he did not look down at her.

"Saxxon?" she questioned in an urgent whisper.

"Shush," he told her, and his lips twitched with humor.

Lillian stared down at the white gold *brashleid bondagh*, the slave bracelet, as Kell clasped it into place around her wrist then slid the signet ring onto the third finger of her left hand. The cuff bracelet held the *Sneeuane*—a miniature replica of the one hanging behind the altar—and the open-weave band ring was fashioned with a smaller spider with white gold legs and an obsidian head and body atop it. Linking the cuff and ring together were two delicately wrought chains.

"Look closely at the *Sneeuane*," Kell told her in a low voice.

When she did, she realized the body of the spider was a heart-shaped ruby.

"You will hold my heart from this day onward," he whispered. "Protect it, Milady, for I willingly entrust it into your keeping."

Tears welled in Lillian's eyes. This man was giving her tremendous control over him, offering himself to her in ways her first husband had not. He was laying himself bare, opening his heart—his very soul—to her, allowing her powers she would rather die than abuse.

"Your Grace," Father Gerard said with a smile, "with the placing of the *brashleid bondagh* this woman is now a part of you, and this man, a part of you, Milady. As your wife and your husband may not be taken from you, so shall this bracelet not be removed until the Gatherer has called you home. It is the symbol of eternal union blessed by the gods, sanctioned by Tribunal Law, acknowledged and accepted by you, witnessed by those gathered and blessed by myself as a representative of the Great God

Nathair on this earth. You are now bound as husband and wife for as long as you each draw breath."

When the high priest declared them man and wife, Lillian could barely draw breath as her new husband turned to her, his alien eyes glittering with copper light. She noticed his hands shook as he slid them beneath the scalloped edge of her veil and lifted it over her head with the backs of his fingers, laying it gently atop her hair. His palms went to her cheeks and he lowered his lips to hers, claiming her as his mate before gods, man and country. The kiss was as sweet as honey, as potent as mead and she felt it to the tips of her toes.

"People of Grian, I present to you the duke and duchess of Baldemahr," Father Gerard called out.

Those gathered rose and thunderous applause shook the Temple. Beithir and his lady-wife were smiling broadly and Giles reached up to gruffly swipe away what appeared to be a tear. Father Gerard shook hands with Kell then stepped back—as did the others gathered with the couple at the altar—and lively music began somewhere in the recesses of the huge room.

"To the *giense poosee*!" everyone save Lillian shouted.

"To the what?" she asked her new husband as he began leading her back up the ermine carpet.

"The wedding feast," he explained, her arm tucked into his. "A necessity I fear but we'll be there only long enough to share a toast of mead, for us to feed one another a *slig* of *broit* and then I intend to rock your world, my love."

"What is *b-broit*?" she queried, blushing furiously beneath the heat of his lusty gaze.

"Broth," he told her. "The exchange between groom and bride is one of our most sacred traditions."

"And a *slig*?"

He grinned. "It is a mussel shell we use as a spoon for the *broit*."

"The *broit* is made from cooking together a shin of beef and a marrow bone," Helen explained from behind her in a low whisper. "When 'tis cooked, the meat is removed then soaked pearl barley is added to the liquid. Turnip, carrot, parsnip, leek, beans, cabbage, celery and whatever vegetable is in season goes in the pot next and simmered with parsley and thyme. It is served from wooden bowls called *piggins*."

Lillian nodded, unable to say anything more for a lump had formed in her throat. Thoughts of what would happen after she and Kell left the feast brought sweat to her palms. Though she was no virgin, knew all too well what sex entailed, she was nervous about what would happen between her and her groom. She'd cared nothing at all for Grayham, had feared the Dealachan but her new husband was a different kettle of fish. She wanted desperately to please him, to give him as much pleasure as she instinctively knew he would strive to give her.

"Just having you lie beside me will be pleasure such as I've never known, *Y chree*," he said, calling her his sweetheart.

Reminding herself that Kell could easily read her mind, she leaned against him. "I want to make you happy," she said.

"You have and you always will," he assured her, and lifted her hand to his lips. When he turned to look down into her eyes, she felt her heart thud heavily in her chest. His smile, the desire in his serpentine eyes made her feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

The *shamyr chuirree* or banqueting hall to which he led her was spacious and well appointed with a long trestle table that could easily fit a hundred diners sitting along the north side of the long hall. A small dais sat off to one side and upon it were a group of musicians playing a lively tune as the revelers entered. Servants in black gowns with long white aprons carried massive amounts of food in from the kitchen—or *shamyr aarlagh* as Lillian was told. Overhead the largest, most intricately wrought copper chandelier spread out over the table with hundreds of fat red pillar candles casting light upon the gleaming china, crystal and silver bedecking the fine linen tablecloth.

"We are not expected to stay long," Kell said as he escorted her to the center of the long table then held a chair for her. "The *broit* will be served right away, each guest will take a sip from their own small bowl, Monty will make a toast then you and I will retire and leave them all to their revelry." He sat down beside her. "We'll have a tray ready for us in our room for when we wish to eat."

Lillian doubted she'd be able to swallow even a sip of the broth or the wine for she was as nervous as a virgin and already feeling lightheaded with knowing what was to come when they departed their guests. She stared at the wooden bowl that was placed between her and her groom, looking at the rich liquid that smelled divine, marveled at the large mussel shell that resembled a squat ladle. She became aware of the sudden silence that had settled on the room and looked up to find every eye trained upon her new husband.

Kell twisted in his seat so he faced her. He lifted the *slig*—the mussel shell—and scooped a portion of broth. With his free hand under the shell to catch any drips, he looked deeply into Lillian's eyes.

"Since the beginning of time, man has risked his life to provide meat for the cooking pots of his mate. Since man and woman first Joined, she has prepared the *broit* to strengthen her man so he could provide for her and the progeny that followed. Before the sharing of their bodies, man and woman first shared *broit*. It is a food of comfort, a food for health to cure ills and to fortify bodies. It fills our bellies, it nourishes our young and it enriches our blood." He brought the *slig* to her lips. "Accept this offering as a token of my willingness to provide all you will ever need in this life and know that I would give my own life for yours."

Through a mist of tears Lillian opened her mouth and took a sip of the delicious broth. Feeling its warmth, the full body of its strength trickling down her throat, the

comforting taste of it, she knew a joy she had never expected to experience. As she swallowed, a single tear slid unheeded down her cheek.

Kell turned the *slig* so the handle of the pale pink shell was pointed at her. She took it up and ladled a portion of the rich broth into the cup of the ceremonial utensil. She had no idea what a Cuideag bride responded to her husband's words but she knew exactly what she wanted Kell to hear from her own lips.

"Accept this offering as my pledge to you to be a loving, loyal and respectful wife to you," she said, and saw the starburst design of his irises pulse. "As you take this nourishment into your body, know that I will do everything that is within my power to care for you in sickness and health, in good times and in bad." She brought the shell to his lips.

Kell solemnly sipped the broth then when she lowered the utensil, he reached out to place his palm against Lillian's cheek. "As I will do everything that is within my power to make you the happiest woman on the face of this earth," he said softly.

"If I were any happier, Milord, I don't believe I could bear it," she replied.

He cupped her cheek then removed his hand, sending a pointed look toward Giles.

"Ah, aye!" Giles said, getting to his feet and with him the others gathered at the table. As Kell and his bride remained seated, the general raised his glass of wine. "To the duke and duchess—*Slaynt as shee as eash dy vea, as maynrays son dy bra!*"

Lillian turned to her husband who translated the words as he lifted his wineglass to her. "Health and peace and length of life and happiness for ever." She toasted him as well then took a sip of the heady, potent wine that flowed like honey over her tongue.

"One dance," Beithir said quietly, gaining his son's attention. The older warrior smiled. "For your mama's sake."

Kell nodded and pushed his chair back, stood beside his bride and extended his hand to her. "Would you do me the honor, *Y chree?*"

Lillian put her hand in his, rose, sweeping the long gown of her scarlet dress aside as she followed him to an area of the room obviously set aside for dancing. She melted into his arms and with her hand in his, his other hand at her waist, the musicians struck up a song that would haunt her with its beauty for the rest of her days.

"What is this lovely song?" she asked as he whirled her gently about the floor.

"*Mairi Ban Og*," he said then began to sing to her in a clear, strong voice that was as mesmerizing as his alien eyes.

"My love to my bride with dear caresses,

"And pride, shall ever be shown,

"Each virtue most rare her soul possesses,

"And fair and sweet has she grown.

"My thoughts used to rove in boyish folly,

"Ere ever her love I had known,

"But now I'm her own,

"My heart is wholly my darling's alone, alone."

The music stopped. Her husband ceased to waltz her across the floor. No sound could be heard in the *shamyr chuirree* as he stared down into her eyes. The light from the candles above them and the bold sconces scattered about the walls blazing with torchlight faded from view until there was only the two of them standing together with her left hand upon his shoulder, his right hand at her waist, the fingers of their other hands laced lightly. He lowered his head and his warm, firm mouth captured hers in a kiss that made her head swim.

Lillian's entire being was filled with sudden need and when he moved back, his lips left hers and he spoke to her, a soft sound of surrender escaped her aching throat.

"I love you," he said, and with bold assurance and sparkling gaze filled with desire, swept her up in his arms – high along his chest – and to the sudden thunder of applause carried her from the banquet hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Laird Meilich Caisil-Chrò, General of the Dealachan, looked out over the thousands of his kind gathered to aid him in retrieving the woman he had claimed as his own. His men were attentively watching him, awaiting his words. It was only a few hours to sunrise and it would be necessary for him and the other Dealachan to take to the *comairces* and let the weres under his command continue on toward Comhachagràtha – only five miles away now.

"Dubois, instruct your weres to ready the *comairces*," Caisil-Chrò ordered. "Make it clear to them that they are not to stop until we reach the Cuideag stronghold."

"Aye, General!" Colonel Dubois replied and turned to speak to the leader of the weres.

The Dealachan knew Kell's own weres would not attack without their warlord's leadership. He smiled brutally. It would be exhilarating come nightfall to open the hatch of his *comairce* and look up upon the battlements of Comhachagràtha to see his enemy's stunned face when Kell realized the extent of the force that had come to destroy the Cuideag.

"You took what was mine and I will have her back," Caisil-Chrò vowed. For a moment, he heard the shouting and pounding going on inside one of the *comairces* and cursed.

"It might have been best had you left that one where we found her," Count Andre Renault told his laird.

"Aye, well the bitch is still my wife whether I like it or not and for that fucking Kell to have dropped her like a pile of offal into that asylum offends me," Caisil-Chrò stated.

"It is the best place for her," Renault suggested. "Need I remind you that you've said as much many times?"

"I need no reminder," Caisil-Chrò snapped. "But I can not have her in such a place. There are Dealachan sanitariums that would better suit her."

Renault shook his head. "None as merciful as the one in which we found her," he ventured.

"A sanitarium is a sanitarium," the Dealachan laird mumbled. He flexed his shoulders, feeling the coming of the sun. Light was their greatest foe and they had to be in darkness – preferably wet darkness – long before the sun rose in order to survive the daylight hours.

Striving to block out the screams of fury and discomfort he heard coming from Daniva's throat, the incessant pounding of her fists upon iron, he struck out for his personal *comairce* and the protection it offered from the sun.

## Chapter Ten

Lillian curled her arms around her husband's neck as he carried her up the winding stone stairway to the chambers above. She felt safe and secure in his embrace and realized he wasn't even breathing hard as he climbed.

"You weigh less than a feather, wench," he said, reading her mind. "I'd not break a sweat had I to carry you a mile or two."

"Is that brag or compliment, Milord?" she asked shyly.

"A bit of both," he acknowledged with a grunt of humor.

There were a few servants about who quickly dipped into curtsies as they made the landing and he carried her toward his quarters. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Helga smiling and Lanelle frowning and then Kell was striding across the threshold of his room as Glenny held the door open for him.

"That will be all," he said and Glenny was gone like a shot, closing the door firmly behind her leaving.

"Are you going to play lady's maid to me?" Lillian teased him.

"I am."

He took her to the bed and sat her on the high mattress, stepping back to give her a long, assessing look. He stared intently at her as she reached up to remove her veil then tilted his head to one side as the delicate silver lace came away. "Have you any idea just how beautiful you are, *Y chree*?" he asked.

She lowered her head. "I am pleased you think so," she whispered.

He reached for the pins that held her hairdo in a soft pile atop her head and pulled them out, letting the long waves tumble over her shoulders, arranging the curls so they spread over her chest.

Kell put a hand to her chin and lifted her face. "From the moment I saw your portrait at the keep in Ceomhar, I have been haunted by your beauty." He put his free hand to his chest. "Beneath my shirt, I wear your medallion."

"The Sciar-copar," she said. "I saw that you wore it when I tended you at Fuachd."

"It led me to you," he told her.

"The medallion is very special to me. It has been handed down five generations."

"I hate to give it up," he said, removing his hand from her face and putting it to his shirt. He began unbuttoning the black silk garment.

"Then don't," she said. She looked down at the Joining bracelet he had given her. "Consider it my Joining gift to you."

His fingers stilled. "You mean it?"

She nodded. "I like knowing it is close to your heart. It has very special powers, you know. It will protect you."

"With the power of the Scorpion," he said, tugging the shirt from the waistband of his black trousers. "They are deadly to my kind as well as to the Dealachan, but to humans they are not."

"Do you know why? Have you heard the legend of Sciar?" she asked.

He sat down beside her to pull off his boots. "Sciar was once a fierce human warrior, the seventh son of a seventh son, and his mother was the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter so he was born with magical powers that were even greater than his warrior abilities." He tugged off the first boot and placed it at the foot of the bed. "It was said Sciar was the most handsome man to ever draw breath and that Heterometrus, the queen of the Scorpions, fell hopelessly in love with him when she saw him bathing in a river near her fortress." He removed the second boot and set it beside the first. Peeled off his socks and stuffed them into the top of one boot. "But he spurned her advances for he was in love with a human girl with long copper-colored hair that swept the ground as she walked."

"Copar," Lillian named the girl of legend.

"Aye," Kell said, and stood to unbuckle his belt. "And because he would not return the queen's affection, Heterometrus sent assassins to rid her of her rival. One man was a Cuideag and the other a Dealachan." He stripped the belt from his waist. "Until that time, all five species—the humans, the were orders, Scorpion, Cuideag and Dealachan—had lived in harmony together. One would not harm the other. All that ended when Copar was murdered though it is unclear exactly which assassin actually did the deed. We Cuideag believe it was the Dealachan and the Dealachan believe it was a Cuideag who slew Copar. It didn't matter to Sciar, for when he learned his love lay dead, he became crazed and cursed both the Cuideag and Dealachan. Using his magical powers, he transformed himself into a scorpion, wrested the throne from the queen, devoured her and her offspring and then swore vengeance on the two species who had been sent to murder Copar." He began to unbutton the fly of his trousers.

"For love of me she died and for love of her I declare death to those responsible," Lillian quoted, trying not to stare so boldly at her husband as he worked the buttons. The moment she saw the thick curls peeking out from the opening, she tore her eyes away.

"Since Copar was human, Sciar declared his protection for those of that species and had medallions minted that each human was to wear so no scorpion would ever harm him or her. In his grief, he eradicated millions of Cuideag and Dealachan alike until he had all but decimated the two species. The remaining Cuideag fled to Grian and the Dealachan to Mount Ilbhinn. He declared himself a god and ordered his people to worship him as such. The humans—fearing his powers and his growing madness—dedicated a temple to him lest he turn on them as well."

"A great-grandmother of mine was among the first priestesses to man the temple at Sant Germaine," Lillian said. "That is why that particular medallion has been handed down to me. It is the medallion of the Temple Guild." Color crept into her cheeks. "Should we have a daughter, I would ask that you give it into her keeping when she comes of age."

"A daughter," he said and smiled. "One who will be a miniature copy of her mother."

"Or a son who will look like his father," she countered.

"Many sons who will do us both proud," he said, chest swelling. "I will give you all you can handle, wench."

Lillian laughed and the sound of her laughter had a strange effect on Kell. He swooped her up from the bed and crushed her to him, burying his face against her neck. She could feel him trembling against her.

"I have needed happiness in my life for so gods-be-damned long," he said, his voice breaking. "I have needed you in my life."

She pulled back so she could lay a hand to his face and was surprised to see tears in his starburst eyes. "And I have waited all my life for you, my husband."

"Do you love me?" he asked then gave her a look that almost broke her heart. "I need to hear you say it if you do."

She moaned softly at his words. "Of course I love you, Saxxon," she said, her voice husky. "I believe I have loved you from the moment I first saw you. That may not be possible but..."

"Aye, I know it is," he stated firmly. "It felt as though lightning struck my heart as I looked up at your portrait."

"Then we were destined to be," she said, caressing his cheek, tracing with the pad of her thumb a single tear that crept down his flesh. She lifted her chin and held his gaze. "Now undress your wife so she can show you with her body what her heart is striving to say."

Kell couldn't seem to move as his wife lowered her hand and turned her back to him, gathering her hair in a loose queue that she pulled to the front over her shoulder so she could present him unimpeded the long rows of tiny buttons on the back of her gown. She heard him groan and twisted her head around to give him a curious look.

"It's all these infernal little buttons, Lilly," he said, his face screwed up with annoyance. "Can't I just rip...?"

"No, you can not!" she stated. "You be very careful with this dress for it will be handed down to our daughters for their Joining days."

"So many a man will curse me soundly for not having ripped it to shreds," he grumbled as he set about trying to push the buttons through the loops with large, clumsy fingers.

At the mention of a curse, Lillian thought of the woman who had barged into this very room and laid down a curse upon Lillian and her Joining day. She shuddered.

"I'm hurrying as fast as I can, wench," her new husband said, no doubt mistaking her tremor for anticipation.

It took him a while to work his way through the buttons amid many a long, aggrieved sigh, countless shifting from one foot to the other but when he was done, he thrust his hands into the back of the gown and around her waist, bringing her against him as he put his lips to the soft curve of her shoulder.

"That was torture I never want to endure again," he told her.

"I promise to make it worthwhile for you, Milord," she said.

Kell covered her breasts with his hands that shook. "I feel like a damned adolescent touching a girl's tits for the first time."

Lillian laid her head against his chest and sighed, loving the feel of his hands on her, his thumbs easing gently over her swelling nipples.

"I wish I still had a maidenhead to offer you," she said softly. "In my heart, I feel by rights it should have been yours to take."

Her warrior moaned lightly and his hands slid to her waist again, his arms enfolding her in a tight embrace. "Woman, you fill my soul with such peace."

The feel of his hard body along hers started an ache between her legs. Not once had she ever felt passion in Grayham's arms and not until the Dealachan had shown her what delight there could be in the act had she known a woman could find pleasure in mating. With her husband's lips upon her shoulder then his teeth lightly nipping her, she felt desire thundering through her blood.

"Saxxon, please," she pleaded with him, her knees growing weak as he traced a pattern on her flesh with his tongue. She heard him chuckle and then he withdrew his hands from inside her gown. He took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face him.

"Are you in a hurry, wench?" he asked, wagging his brows at her.

"Well, if you are not up to the task..." she began, and her eyes widened when his flared. Her mouth dropped open for she feared he'd ripped the gown as he shoved it down her shoulders and arms. "Kell!" she protested, barely getting her arms out of the long, tight sleeves without hearing a telltale rip.

The Cuideag warlord pushed the gown over her curvaceous hips and let it pool at her feet, a gasp sucking through his clenched teeth as he beheld the see-through black lace that comprised her chemise. "Mother of Nathair," he breathed, sweat suddenly forming on his forehead.

Lillian knew he could see her nipples through the delicate working of lace. Her breasts were swollen, aching for his touch, and when he put a hand up to cover one, she groaned softly.

"You are..." He swallowed hard. "I am..." He swallowed again. "We..."

She brought her arms up and laced them around his neck, pressing her body to his, feeling the hard bulge of his erection pressing at the front of his black trousers. The nest of dark curls that could partially be seen in the open fly of those trousers seemed to catch in the fine lace where it pressed against his groin.

"Saxxon, just hush," she said, and stood on tiptoe to slant her mouth across his. For the first time in her life, she thrust her tongue past the lips of a man and the feel of it was so powerful, so all-encompassing that it made her head spin for Kell growled low in his throat and his arms went around her like steel bands. When she caught his bottom lip between her teeth, she felt a hard shiver travel the tall length of him and he growled again. She released his lip, eyes wide.

"You want to keep that piece of fluff you're wearing intact?" he asked, his voice husky and his eyes bright with desire.

She nodded, unable to speak.

He nodded too then moved back from her, hooking his fingers under the thin straps over her shoulders and easing the chemise down carefully. She was staring into his handsome face and could see the effort it was taking for him to be gentle. A muscle was working fiercely in his lean jaw and she knew his teeth were clenched. He pushed the delicate lace all the way to the floor—squatting to maneuver it past her knees. Before she could step out of it, he had pressed his face to her nether curls and Lillian gasped, her hands going into the thickness of his dark hair.

"Saxxon!" she protested, shocked at the heat of his mouth covering her. When his tongue slid over her clit, she dug her fingernails into his scalp and squealed.

Kell laughed and shot to his feet, shoving his trousers off in one move. He kicked them away and snaked his arms around her, swinging her up and onto the bed, falling with her and rolling until he was lying on his back with her atop him, her legs to either side of his, his jutting cock trapped between them.

"Woman, I had no food save that sip of *broit* and I am starving," he said, eyes glittering. "You are going to be my meal so you'd best prepare yourself!"

Lillian squealed again as he flipped them over until she was beneath him and he was sliding down her body like a serpent, wiggling until his mouth was feasting upon her sex, his tongue lapping at the juices that had suddenly oozed from body.

She buried her hands in his hair once more and closed her eyes, reveling in the absolute delight with which he was plying her. He was licking her along one crease and then the other, stabbing the tip of his tongue into her slit briefly then dragging it along the folds where her thighs curved into her mons. The moment he insinuated first one finger then another into her heat, she arched her hips to accommodate his entry.

He probed gently and then twisted his fingers inside her until Lillian was panting, beginning the rhythm of raising and lowering her hips. "Not yet," he said, and withdrew his fingers, smiling at her groan of objection. "I've something almost as good to give you."

With that, he slid up her again until his lips closed around one firm breast and his tongue went to work on flicking and licking and his teeth to nibbling the sensitive peak.

"You are killing me here, Kell!" she protested, running her hands over his sleek hair.

"Then you'll die a happy wench," he told her.

He suckled her nipple hard even as he stabbed at its tip with his tongue and Lillian moaned, her hips shooting upward in invitation.

"I need you in me!" she declared.

"I'm getting there," he said around the hold he had with his teeth upon her nipple. "Patience, wench. Patience."

"Patience, hell!" she hissed through her own clenched teeth, and shoved at his shoulders. "I am on fire here, warrior!"

Kell grunted as her legs came up and clasped around him, clamping him to her and giving his straining cock access to the slick heat beckoning between her legs. The tip of his cock touched that velvety chasm and the Cuideag was lost.

"You want me?" he asked, and reached down to guide himself into her.

"Aye!" she said as she clawed her nails into his broad back. "And I want you now!"

Lillian was shocked at her behavior but having once known what true release was, she was yearning to know what it felt like with the man she loved, with her husband. She tightened her grip around his hips and at the moment the head of his cock entered her, she stiffened, aching to know the full length of him pressed inside her.

But nothing she had experienced with either Grayham or the Dealachan could have prepared her for the reality of Saxxon Kell. Her eyes went wide as saucers as he sank into her cunt—filling her to the point of pain and stretching her so fully, she thought she would burst.

"Kell!" she gasped as he pressed into her as far as his large cock could go and she could feel the very tip of him against her womb.

"Lie still," he told her. She could feel his heart thundering against her breast. Could see the rapid tattoo of the vein in his neck as he strained above her. Was more than aware of the hands he had shoved beneath her to grip her ass, for his fingers were digging into the soft flesh.

"Kell," she moaned, already she could feel her climax rushing up to claim her. His cock was so huge, so broad, and she felt like a sacrifice to his lust as she lay there. She tightened her legs instinctively.

"Lie still!" he warned again, and she saw sweat popping out all over his face. He was trembling as he struggled to keep as immovable as he ordered her to be. She heard him moan.

Then it came like a white-hot burst of light—spreading over her with such heat, with such all-invasive delight, that she cried out. Little spasms of sheer enjoyment rippled through her and trembled around the swollen shaft buried so deeply within

her. The quivers seemed to go on forever until her body was nothing more than a mass of boneless ooze and every muscle in her body collapsed in a pool on the mattress yet her fingernails were clinging to her husband's back.

Kell's own release shot out of him with the same speed of abandon and he growled, throwing his head back as the first spurt left his cock. His fingers dug into her ass and he began pumping mindlessly, furiously, growling with teeth tightly clenched as he thrust and thrust and thrust with such powerful strokes the bed shook beneath them, the headboard banging against the wall. He grunted with each fierce push until the last of his seed left his body and he buckled atop her, gasping for breath, his thundering heart beating so loudly she could hear it. He was shuddering as though with the ague.

"Milord," she said, smoothing the damp hair back from his forehead. "Pace yourself. We've all night."

"Dawn is coming in a few hours," he said.

"Aye, but that's a few hours away," she said. "And I'm not going anywhere."

"Damned straight you aren't," he grumbled, and fell to his side, drawing her with him so that she lay along his hard length. His arms were clamped around her like shackles and he had thrust one knee between her legs.

She stroked his hair, ran her hands down his sweaty back and loved the way his natural masculine scent clung to her body. The heat of him filled her with contentment as she snuggled against him, her head on his shoulder. She moved her hand to the crisp mat of curls spread over his chest and twirled the tip of one finger in a dark strand.

"I like this," she said, spreading her fingers over his chest. "It tickles my nipples." Her fingers moved to his nipples. "And these intrigue me."

"I believe that may be the only reason the gods fashioned them," he acknowledged. "They surely serve no other purpose that I can see."

"Why do you think men have nipples?" she asked, running her fingertips over one pap and smiling as it immediately grew hard.

"Huh," he said, obviously mulling the question over in his mind. "I've never thought about it." He kissed her atop her head. "Unless it's for a woman to suckle."

"Like this?" she asked, and leaned in to draw the dark little nubbin into her mouth.

Kell sucked in a breath as she plied her tongue over his flesh and clamped him lightly between her teeth. "Wench, that..." He put a hand to the back of her head and pressed her against him. "Harder. Do it harder."

Lillian rose up and pushed him flat to his back, and in the doing, increased the clamp of her teeth upon his nipple. Against the flare of her hip, she felt his cock stir and knew she was pleasuring him.

"Aye," she heard him sigh as his fingers tangled in her hair.

She put her fingertips on his free nipple and in tandem pinched lightly as she nipped at the other.

Kell drew in another ragged breath and held it, his hips undulating on the mattress. He was digging his heels into the bed and the taut column of his thigh presented an allure Lillian could not forego. She swung her leg over his and slid her heated crotch upon his hard, muscled flesh. She squeezed her legs together.

"Oh," she said, and did it again.

"Uh-huh," he said. His hands went to her hips and he began to guide her in a rhythm she mastered with ease.

"I like that," she said.

Kell lifted the leg she was riding higher. "Then ride me, wench," he said.

The combination of the hardness of his thigh, the crisp hairs scratching across the softness between her legs and the firmness of her husband's hands on her hips showing her what to do should have brought a blush to Lillian's cheeks but instead she clamped her lower lips between her teeth and increased the speed of her back-and-forth movement, feeling heat gathering in just the right place. The friction was sheer heaven.

"That's it," she heard Kell say. "Tighten your hold on me."

She squeezed her thighs tighter together and felt the sublime pleasure that action brought. Her husband's hands were urging her to a quicker rhythm and she accommodated him, giving her a goodly amount of pure delight. Against the side of her thigh, she could feel his cock becoming rigid and wanted that long, hard shaft inside her.

"Take me, Kell," she said in a throaty voice. "Take your woman."

He needed no further urging. He lifted her away from his thigh so her cunt was paused over his cock and then shot his hips upward, impaling her upon that rigid tool. He put his hands to her shoulders and pushed her erect so she sat on him, her long legs folded beside his hips.

"Up and down, wench," he said with teeth together as he lifted her hips then sat her down upon him once again. "Like so."

Lillian was amazed that his entire length could fit inside her and that it was only marginally uncomfortable as she took up the new rhythm he was teaching her. She could feel herself stretching around him and as she rocked up and down, back and forth and then began to swivel her hips on him as he showed her, she looked down at his hard little nipples and grinned.

"Wench!" he growled, seeing where she was looking, but then he could do nothing else save gasp as her fingers went to those tight nubbins and she began to pinch them almost cruelly.

Though he would later swear to her that he had not thought it possible to come so quickly after the first time, he shot into her almost instantly when she plucked hard at his nipple. With her tight little cunt snug around his shaft, sliding up and down that rigid length, and her hips slapping against his groin, her beautiful breasts bouncing

enticingly with each upward thrust, he told her he had lost what little control he'd tried to hold on to.

Lillian gave herself up to the quick little clutches that claimed her cunt and milked him thoroughly.

"I'm drained," he told her as she fell upon him and he wrapped his arms around her.

"It's still awhile until dawn, warrior," she warned, and at his groan, she giggled.

"Are you going to waste me completely then, wench?" he asked, nuzzling the side of her face.

"I'm going to deplete you to within an inch of your life," she replied.

"Will you not save something for tomorrow eve?"

"We'll see," she said, and lifted her head so she could kiss him.

Five times he had counted as he felt the coming of the sun. Three times he had taken her and twice she had taken him, and he couldn't keep the smile from breaking over his face as he thought of it. Not even the lassitude that was quickly stealing over him could break into the pleasure.

"I don't believe the servants are going to intrude so I need to get up and close the shutters," he told her as he untangled his long body from hers and threw back the sheet from his side of the bed.

"All right," she said, sighing deeply as the warmth of his flesh left hers. She propped her head in her hand and watched as he got out of the bed.

"Are you ogling my ass, wench?" he asked as he padded over to the window.

"It is such a hard, tight ass, warrior, and I love the way the muscles bunch and loosen as you strut," she said. "Aye, I am ogling it."

"I don't strut," he said.

"Aye, you do. Like the cock you are," she countered, and then giggled at her own words.

Kell groaned, reaching for the shutters. As he was about to close the first one, he looked out and what he saw brought him up short.

"What is it?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing," he said, though his face had lost its softness.

"Kell?"

He closed the shutter, settling it in a niche that would prevent any light from seeping around the edges. "Aye?"

"Please don't ever lie to me," she said quietly.

The warlord looked around to see her flinging away the sheet that had covered her. She padded to the chair beside the bed and picked up a silk wrapper Glennie had

thoughtfully provided for her. She swung it around her shoulders and belted it as she walked toward him.

"What's out there?" she asked, staring into his serpentine eyes.

"Your favorite Dealachan," he answered, and stepped aside so she could look out one of the windows.

Lillian held her husband's gaze a moment longer then turned to the window.

It was the largest encampment of men she could imagine and it stretched out across the plains before Comhachagràtha in a blanket of men, horses, tents and the strangest contraptions she'd ever seen.

"What are those ugly things?" she asked, staring at the oval-shaped iron constructions that sat on the beds of lightweight wagons.

"They are called *comairces*," he replied. "For lack of a better word, they are marsh vats where the leeches can hibernate during the daylight hours. I've never seen the inside of one but I've heard there is a layer of night-growing vegetation into which they can burrow to stay cool. The lids close tight so no light can enter the vat."

"They are in those things now?"

"I would imagine so," he said.

"But what of air?" she asked. "How do they breathe in those things?"

"They take oxygen from what the plants give off. I'm guessing they don't need a lot," he replied. He looked out across the Burning Desert. "They don't like heat and this has to be miserable for them. It shows how steadfast Caisil-Chrò is in wanting to get you back."

"Are those weres with them?" she asked, staring at the soldiers milling about.

"They are wereverines," Kell answered. "A mean bunch of bloodthirsty bastards and the only species of weres who can give our own weretigers a run for their money."

"Will they attack while you sleep?" she questioned.

"Not until their masters are able to direct them," he told her. "And that won't be until nightfall." He reached to pull the shutter over the window. "Neither of us can fight during the daylight hours."

"Saxxon, I..."

"There is no need for you to worry," he said, easily reading her mind. "We'll be safe until the sun goes down."

"I won't be able to sleep knowing they are out there," she said.

As much as Kell wanted her beside him as he took his Day Sleep, he knew she would only fret and lay wakeful, tossing and turning, fearing the worst.

"Then go below and have someone make breakfast for you," he said, laying his palm on her cheek. "I have heard your stomach rumbling and you need your strength."

"What of you?" she asked, searching his alien gaze.

"I need to sleep," he said. "My stamina is flagging." He shoosed her toward the door. "Go. I'll see you at sunset. I'm sure your room has been prepared for you by now so if you need to rest, you can go there."

She hesitated, turning to face him again, but he was already climbing back into bed, pulling the sheets over his shoulder, dismissing her as easily as if she meant nothing at all to him, though she knew better.

"Sleep well," she said, and heard him grunt his thanks.

Closing the door firmly behind her, she stood out in the hall for a moment then headed for the stairs.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I am Anastasia," the imposing woman greeted Lillian when the new duchess of Baldemahr entered the kitchen in search of non-Cuideag servants. "I am Monty's wife and châtelain for the duke. There are only a few of us humans among the Cuideag and weres."

Lillian smiled warmly at the woman who was surely as tall as Kell and whose arms bore nearly as much hard muscle. "I have never heard of a woman holding such an exalted position with a household," she said, marveling at the thought.

"I am Amazeen," Anastasia said proudly. "I met Monty upon the battlefield and bested him. I would have taken him back to our family's breeding farm had not the duke knocked me unconscious and taken me prisoner." She shrugged. "I have not regretted him doing so for I was taken with Monty, else I would have slit his arrogant throat when I woke."

"Your family did not ransom you?" Lillian asked. She had never met an Amazeen warrioress before and was awed in the woman's presence.

"They would have but I was content to stay in Grian with my chosen mate. I am happy with the job the duke offered me." Her pale blue eyes glowed. "And I am looking forward to the coming battle with the leeches."

There were only two other women in the kitchen and Anastasia explained they were both human wives of two of the weres. "Glenny and the others are down for their Day Sleep," she told Lillian. "Are you hungry?" She hefted one blonde brow. "I imagine Kell wore you out last eve if the look in his eyes at the Joining was any indication."

Lillian's cheeks burned and she dipped her head, unable to make any comment to that assertion.

"Prepare a hearty meal for the duchess, Yolanda," Anastasia ordered. "And stout cups of coffee for us both."

"You do not share your sleeping hours with Monty?" Lillian asked as she took a seat at the long wooden harvest table that ran down the middle of the kitchen.

"Would you not prefer to break your fast in the fancy dining hall?" Anastasia inquired.

"It is more comfortable here," Lillian replied, and motioned the other woman to sit with her.

"Even after all these years, I find it hard sleeping during the daylight hours," Anastasia confessed. "It seems wrong. I've never needed much sleep. Warriors very seldom do for we generally don't get the opportunity. I can make do with four hours' sleep a night but Monty requires from sunup to sundown of course." She shook her head. "That is entirely too much time wasted as far as I'm concerned." She shrugged. "Besides, someone needed to be here with you this morn. Would you like a tour of the keep while all is still quiet?"

"I would," Lillian answered. She thought of the coming battle and felt cold.

"We'll win," Anastasia said. "Cuideag always win against the Dealachan."

"But there are so many," Lillian protested. "Their camp stretches as far as the eye can see."

"And they believe there is safety in numbers," the other woman said then snorted, waving a hand in dismissal. "There are more of the Cuideag in this keep than there are Dealachan out on the plain. Trust me." She lowered her voice, leaning toward the new duchess. "Beneath the foundations of Comhachagràtha are thousands upon thousands of harvestmen warriors the likes of which the Dealachan have never encountered. And those warriors are far deadlier than any leech will ever be. Unlike their cousins the Cuideag, the harvestmen eat their prey. When they come up from the foundations, the battle will be all but over."

"Harvestmen warriors," Lillian repeated, unable to fathom what the mythical creatures must look like. She had to suppress a shudder at the thought of such beings consuming their prey.

"Their leader is Count and I believe even Saxxon Kell fears him," Anastasia said.

Lillian doubted her husband feared any man but kept her thoughts to herself. She looked at the cup of steaming coffee placed before her and reached out to wrap her hands around it. "Many will die, won't they?"

"Many," Anastasia agreed, "but they won't be from among us."

"How can you be so sure?" Lillian questioned.

"His Grace will unleash Count Araneae and his men when the sun goes down. Beneath the cover of moonlight, the harvestmen will flow out from below the sand under the very feet of our enemies and death will suck those fools dry before they know what has come among them."

"The inhabitants of Comhachagràtha won't be harmed?"

Anastasia shook her head. "Not a single one."

Lillian let out a wavering breath. "That is why he wasn't concerned. Why he could go to sleep without worry."

A plate was set before her and the smell of food made her mouth water. She picked up the fork the servant had laid on the table and scooped up a forkful of creamy scrambled eggs.

"Enjoy your meal, Your Grace," Anastasia said, sipping her coffee. "You've nothing to worry about."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the swelteringly hot *comairce* in which she'd been locked for six excruciating hours, Lady Daniva used the last of her flagging strength to take one more swing at the iron side of the beastly contraption. Even that brief contact burned the edge of her palm and she snatched it back, sweat dripping down her forehead to sting her eyes.

"You are an idiot, Meilich Caisil-Chrò," she said, panting for breath. Though there was plenty of air in the steaming environment in which she had been forced to recline, the atmosphere was thick with humidity and the heat nearly unbearable. Her clothing was drenched with sweat and even the jugs of water the Dealachan had left with her were no longer tepid but hot, scorching her tongue when she partook of the liquid.

She thought of the creatures who lurked beneath the foundations of Comhachagràtha and wondered if the Dealachan laird remembered the tales. If she knew him as well as she thought she did, she supposed he would have dismissed such stories as folklore, the fantastical ramblings of a talespinner's imagination. Not until it was too late would he know the real defense of Comhachagràtha lay not with its warriors who could be seen but with those the eye could not detect.

Once more she lifted her hand to beat against the side of the *comairce* but did not have the strength. Her hand fell to her lap and she lay there staring up into the darkness. Her voice had long since fled her from her incessant shouting in trying to gain Caisil-Chrò's attention until now she could make no more than a croaking sound.

Before exhaustion and the unbridled heat drove her into unconsciousness, her last thought was of her mother and brother.

At that very moment, Lady Kurst, the viscountess of Díoltas, mother of Daniva, was easing the door to Lillian's private bedchamber open and slipping inside. Since she was not a Cuideag, she could roam about the keep during the daylight hours and often did her dirtiest work while the rest of Comhachagràtha lay sleeping.

She hurried to the vanity where all the accoutrements a young bride would need to maintain her beauty lay upon a freshly starched linen table scarf. The silver-backed hairbrush drew her attention and she picked it up, ran her palm over the soft bristles with a tight smile. She laid the brush down with its bristles up and then reached into the pocket of her day gown for a small vial, the contents of which she sprinkled over the bristles. From the other pocket, she withdrew a white milk-glass sachet pot, cracked open the lid so its lovely fragrance could spill out and then placed it lovingly among the cosmetics arranged neatly on the vanity.

"There," she said, patting the top of the little pot. "That should do it."

After glancing quickly around the room, Lady Kurst left as quietly and as unobserved as she had entered, her eyes dancing with evil as she returned to her own room.

## Chapter Eleven

The Dealachan laird woke at the same moment his rival Saxxon Kell did and each was keenly aware of the other. There had long since been bad blood between the two and that animosity had started over a woman.

"And will end over one," Meilich Caisil-Chrò growled as he sat up within the confines of the *comairce*.

Caisil-Chrò had slept naked in his humid environment and upon pushing open the door that was locked from the inside so no enemy could catch him unaware, the Dealachan stood, his bare feet planted in the foot of water that lay in the bottom of the vessel.

"The weretigers are on the prowl upon the battlements," Colonel Dubois informed his leader, "but the Cuideag have yet to show their faces."

That news caused an immediate ripple of concern along Caisil-Chrò's spine and he shifted his broad shoulders, ran a hand over his bald pate. "No sign at all of them?" he asked, looking up at the moon that was well up in the heavens.

"Nay, Sir," Dubois replied.

"They should be up," Count Renault suggested as he joined his laird and the were.

"I felt that bastard Kell when he opened his ugly-ass eyes," Caisil-Chrò snapped. "I would lay a bet he fucked my woman all night long, prick that he is, and drained his stamina!"

"The better to lose to us, Sir," Dubois boasted.

"I don't like it," the Dealachan said. "Something isn't right."

Though his closest men and he were not within range of Cuideag arrows and quarrels nor—hopefully—within the range of the strange exploding spheres Kell had thrown against the Dealachans during the *folachd*, Caisil-Chrò kept well back from the perimeter of the Cuideag's stronghold.

"Kell, you spineless pustule from the withered sac of your father, show yourself!" he yelled.

"Fuck you and your mangy weres, you slimy leech!" a voice called from the battlements and the Dealachan saw Baron Beithir standing there.

"Where is he, old man?" Caisil-Chrò demanded. "Where is that thieving bastard who steals women belonging to other men?"

"You look at him in the mirror every morn when you shave that butt-ugly head of yours!" Beithir called down. "Don't you recognize him yet?"

"I want my woman returned to me!"

"You can want in one hand and shit in the other. See which one works out first for you!" Beithir returned, and laughter rang out over the battlements.

"She is mine!"

"Who? Daniva?" Beithir asked. "Aye, she's yours and you are welcome to the crazy bitch!"

"I want Lillian Connors!"

Beithir grinned. "Oh, you mean Lillian Kell, the new duchess of Baldemahr?"

Caisil-Chrò's hairless face turned red with fury. "Don't fuck with me, old man," he roared. "Give me back my intended and I will not pull these rocks down upon your hairy ears!"

"The woman of whom you speak is my legal bride, leech. She will remain where she wishes to be. With me."

Every eye shifted to the highest crenulations of Comhachagràtha where the warlord stood braced with legs apart and hands upon his hips. His black shirt billowed in a stiffening night breeze and his dark hair rippled back from his stony face.

"You will die, Kell!" the Dealachan swore. "Your bride she might be for the nonce but your widow she will be before this night is o'er!"

"In your fevered, self-creaming dreams perhaps, but never in reality," Kell told him. "Long before the sun's rays fall upon Comhachagràtha, you will be gone from this life and knocking on the door of hell, begging to be let in!"

Knowing it was futile to continue swapping insults, the Dealachan whipped around and fixed the were leader with a steady, furious glare. "Let the attack begin!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Lillian was walking beside Anastasia along the landing leading to the duchess's bedchamber when the first volley of arrows arched high into the air from the Dealachan encampment to sail over the battlements of the keep. Unaware the battle had begun for nary a sound penetrated the thick stone walls, the new duchess of Baldemahr stifled a yawn, her eyes watering with tiredness.

"Perhaps you should take a short nap, Your Grace," Giles' wife suggested. "I am sure His Grace will come to you when he awakens."

Since there was no clock where they walked and neither woman carried a bodice watch, they did not know the time. There were no windows on the landing and no servants scurrying about to ask if the sun had set as yet.

"I am tired," Lillian admitted as they came to her door. She opened it and went inside, inviting her new friend to join her. The room smelled strongly of some exotic perfume.

"Oh good, the candles are already lit," Anastasia said. She glanced at the windows, relieved to see the shutters had been locked in place in advance of the coming battle so no fiery missile could be shot into the room.

"What is that delightful scent?" Lillian asked, sniffing the air.

"I don't know," Anastasia admitted. "But it is heavenly, isn't it?"

"The candles perhaps?"

"I wouldn't think so," Giles' wife said. "Most are merely beeswax. That smells too flowery to be wax."

Lillian looked about the room and upon spying the vanity, saw a sachet pot with a lid askew. She walked to it. "I believe it is coming from this little pot," she said, and reached for the white milk-glass container. She removed the lid and brought it to her nose, inhaling deeply. "Aye, this is it."

"A pomade of some sort?" Anastasia queried. "Face cream?"

Lillian put a fingertip to the velvety contents of the sachet pot and rubbed a bit of the cream upon the pulse point at the underside of her wrist, sniffing at the perfume that was released upon her flesh. "That is so precious," she proclaimed.

"The scent is intoxicating, isn't it?" Anastasia inquired then frowned, watching as an expression of sudden pain shifted over Lillian's features. "What's wrong?"

"I can't..." Lillian said, and the sachet pot fell from her fingers as she reached up to claw at her throat. "I can't...breathe!" She looked down at the pot. "The cream..."

Anastasia's blue eyes widened. "By the gods, no!"

Lillian's face was turning a strange shade of blue and she staggered back. The older woman caught her, picking Lillian up as easily as if the duchess had been a child. Carrying her quickly to the bed, Anastasia started bellowing for help at the top of her lungs.

Pulling at her closing throat, eyes bulging, mouth gaping wide as she struggled to draw air into her depleted lungs, Lillian was trembling from head to toe. She barely flinched as Anastasia bent over her and breathed quickly into her mouth.

"Help us!" Anastasia bellowed again so loudly the lantern on the bedside lamp rattled.

Her entire body was stiffening, Lillian realized she could not move. Her legs and arms felt like lead weights were anchoring them to the mattress and she couldn't even bat an eyelash as Anastasia once more pressed her mouth over Lillian's and forced air into the younger woman's throat.

"What is happening here?" It was the Baroness Helen who spoke as Beithir's lady-wife rushed to the bed. "'Stasia, what has happened?"

"She's been poisoned," Anastasia stated. "Take over here while I fetch the duke!"

"Take over how?" Helen asked, fear turning her face as white as a sheet.

"Put your lips over hers and force air into her mouth. Breathe for her else she'll suffocate. Her lungs have stopped moving and I fear her heart may do the same. Do not touch that pot of brew on the floor. It is deadly!"

Other women came hurrying into the room, arriving at the loud call of the chatelaine. As Lanelle bent to retrieve the sachet pot, Helen screamed at her not to put her hand to it.

"It's poisonous!"

Lanelle snatched her hand back and stumbled away, staring at the pot as though it would strike out at her.

"Lock this door behind me and the one into the duke's room as well. I'll send armed men to guard her. By all that is holy, keep Kurst out of this room!" Anastasia told Glenny as that one came through the door. "I'll wager she's the one responsible."

"Responsible for what?" Glenny asked.

"For trying to kill Her Grace," Helga said as she stood at the foot of the bed wringing her hands.

\* \* \* \* \*

From her room, Lady Kurst could hear the commotion and continued to read her mystery novel. Her feet were planted firmly on her footrest, a light afghan thrown over her legs to ward off the night chill. She had barricaded her own door just in case the Dealachan overran the keep but she had no concern whatsoever about anyone connecting her to the murder of the woman two doors down. Humming gently to herself, she licked her middle finger and turned a page, completely enthralled with the words she was reading.

\* \* \* \* \*

"General Giles asked if we should let fly the incendiaries, Your Grace?" one of the weres asked as Kell came skipping down the stairwell from the roof.

"Nay, there is no need. The harvestmen have been summoned and are awakening," Kell replied, ignoring the shudder that rippled through the were. "Tell Giles to hold off unless he is bored and wishes to piss off the leeches."

The were grinned. "He's itching to unleash a few."

"Then tell him to have at it if he's so inclined. I'm on my way to..."

"Your Grace!" a young Cuideag warrior shouted from the bottom of the staircase, waving his arms so the duke would see him. "Come quick. It's your lady!"

Kell's face drained of color and he shoved the were out of his way, thundering down the remainder of the stairs. He plowed past the young warrior who fell in behind him, running nearly on his warlord's heels as they sped across a covered walkway and thundered down another stairwell.

"What's going on?" Kell heard Giles ask but did not take the time to answer. He was running as fast as he could toward the keep, his booted feet crunching stone as he streaked across the lower bailey, took the stairs up to the keep's main door two at a time and slammed through the doors that jerked open at his approach.

Sprinting up the stairwell, Kell was dragging great gulps of air into his lungs. Fear had turned his normally dark complexion pale and he was sweating before he reached the door of his lady-wife's private chamber, stunned to see armed guards with weapons drawn. He barely broke his running stride as the door to Lillian's chamber was shoved open for him.

"Get the fuck out of my way!" he bellowed as he encountered a wall of women milling in his path. They jumped out of his way and he came up short as he saw his stepmother leaning over the bed, her mouth pressed to Lillian's. "What the hell are you doing?"

"She can't breathe on her own," Anastasia Giles told him, reaching out to grab his arm in a firm effort to get his attention. "She's been poisoned."

Kell's head snapped up. "What?" he asked.

"We believe it to be Maiden's Briar," Father Gerard spoke up from the other side of the bed. "She is awake, her eyes open, but she is unable to move."

"We are breathing for her," Glenny said. "We take turns."

Unable to get his head wrapped around what was being said to him, Kell stood where he was with the Amazeen's hand clutched around his upper arm and wavered on his feet. He felt the room tilt beneath him for a moment then he was bending over, retching. But when someone called for a chair, a chamber pot, he shook his head violently.

"Get the hell away from me," he growled, flinging his free arm and jerking the other away from Anastasia's grip. He went to the bed but dared not push Helen out of the way. The woman was once again bent over Lillian, blowing breath into the still woman's mouth. He was vaguely aware of pounding feet coming to a skidding halt behind him but he didn't look around.

"What's wrong?" It was Beithir's voice that spoke.

"Her Grace smeared some of the cream from the sachet upon her wrist," Anastasia replied.

"We believe someone put poison in that pot," Glenny told him, pointing to the container on the carpet.

"Someone?" Beithir repeated. "You mean the Black Widow?"

"Who else?" Helen asked her husband in between puffing breaths into Lillian's mouth. "She threatened her, didn't she?"

"She threatened her?" Kell echoed, and his glower went to his father. "What is she talking about?" He was standing there with his fists clenching and unclenching, unable to move any closer to the bed for fear Lillian would cease to be able to take in air at all.

"I hadn't had time to tell you," Beithir said. "Kurst came to her before the Joining and laid a curse on her and on your Joining. I warned her to stay away from Lilly but..."

"And you did not have the time to tell me this?" Kell yelled.

"I did not think she'd act this quickly," Beithir defended his actions.

Kell spun around and fixed one of the guards with a hard, flinty glare. "Bring that bitch to me."

The guards bowed quickly then hurried from the room.

"I'm sorry, Saxxon. I..." Beithir began.

"Where the fuck is the healer?" Kell demanded, cutting off his father's apology. "Why isn't that bastard here?"

"I am here in his stead."

At the sound of the low, soft voice, those gathered in the room staggered back, pressing themselves as far away from the advance of the man who had just entered the room as the confines of the space would allow. Eyes were lowered—even closed—and the high priest began mumbling a protection prayer that no one could understand.

"I felt your fear, Milord, and came as soon as I could."

Saxxon Kell was as unnerved by the man standing just inside the room as everyone else was but he managed to gather his wits about him long enough to bow his head in greeting. "Thank you."

The tall man with eyes the color of dark rubies took another step toward the bed. "May I look upon your bride?"

It was on the tip of Kell's tongue to deny the harvestman warrior permission but he could not. "Aye, if you wish."

Helen had paused in her breathing for Lillian and couldn't scramble away fast enough as the warrior walked slowly to the bed.

"My warriors are awaiting your command," Araneae said as he hunkered down beside the bed, his clenched hands between his spread knees. He gazed at Lillian for a long moment then hung his head. "Aye, this is the woman from my dreams." He lifted his head. "The one the Great Nathair sent to heal old wounds."

Kell was sweating profusely as he strained to see Lillian's chest move. His eyes were filled with tears and though he was loath to rush the harvestman, he couldn't stop himself. He cared nothing about the threat outside the gates of his fortress. "She isn't breathing."

"It is the effects of the poison," Araneae stated. "It paralyzes the muscles so the lungs can not expand and contract."

"Can you help her?" Beithir asked for his son. "I know your harvestmen have the ears of the gods..." His voice trailed off.

"There is an antidote for every poisoning but it will be difficult to obtain," was the reply. Blood-red eyes settled upon Kell. "May I place my lips to hers to give her air?"

Every instinct in Kell's body screamed in denial but all he could do was nod. Jealousy rode him like a cruel master as he watched Araneae stand and lean over Lillian, gently put his mouth to hers. Digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands, he clenched his teeth so hard together he could hear them grinding.

A loud noise out in the corridor was followed by a loud shriek then cursing, furniture falling and more cursing then a wildly kicking, hissing, struggling Lady Kurst was dragged into Lillian's bedchamber by two muscular guards.

Kell strode to her and wrapped his hand in the woman's hair. "What did you do?" he snarled at her, pulling her hair brutally.

Despite the obvious pain she was feeling, Lady Kurst laughed. "Has something happened to your whore, Saxx?" she asked.

"What. Did. You. Do?" Kell repeated, and his serpentine eyes blazed with cruelty.

"I did *nothing* to your tart," Lady Kurst told him, gritting her teeth to the agony in her scalp.

Kell forced her forward and pushed her head down. "Pick up the container," he said, shoving her closer to the floor.

"You are hurting me," Lady Kurst complained, but she plucked the sachet pot from the floor.

"You haven't begun to see hurt yet," Kell promised. He jerked her upright, ignoring her yelp of pain. "Take some of the cream and smear it on your ugly face."

Lady Kurst shot him a hateful sneer but she dug two fingers into the pot and extracted a glob of cream then wiped it on her heavily painted face. "There," she said, triumphantly. "You satisfied?"

The harvestman warrior straightened and turned to Helen. "Please continue what you were doing, Milady. It might take an hour or longer for her lungs to begin functioning again but they will as the toxin disburses. Unfortunately she will remain paralyzed until the antidote is given." He looked to Kell. "You have heard the tales of the one called *loaghteyder*?"

"The handler? Aye, why...?" Kell asked then memory turned his face hard as stone. He turned to Giles. "Fetch this bawd's son. Now!"

"Leave Quinton out of this!" Lady Kurst shouted. "He hasn't been anywhere near your whore!"

"What was the *loaghteyder*?" Anastasia asked Glenny.

"She was a woman who killed her husbands' by rubbing Maiden's Briar upon their privates during lovemaking," Glenny responded.

"But wouldn't that have killed her too?"

"The woman built up a tolerance for the poison," Helga whispered. "She rubbed a little into her palms until it wouldn't hurt her."

Giles didn't have far to go in search of Lord Kurst. The young man was out in the hall along with a crowd of onlookers. His face drained of color as the general's hand shot out to grasp his arm and pull him into the bedchamber. He stumbled in Giles' wake.

"Mother?" Quinton questioned. He was shivering violently.

"Put the cream on his face," Kell ordered. His hand was still clutched in Lady Kurst's hair and he shook her like a terrier would a captured rat when she made no move to do as he told her. "Now, bitch!"

"No!" Lady Kurst screamed, and threw the sachet pot across the room. Her aim was unerring and the pot crashed into the fireplace.

"So that's how she killed all them men," Giles said. His hold tightened on Quinton's arm. "She smeared it on their cocks! No wonder they could find no evidence of foul play."

"Put on gloves and search every inch of her chambers," Kell said. "She's bound to have more."

"Chances are she's got some on her," Beithir suggested, and reached out to pat the pockets of the viscountess's gown. "There's something in this one."

Kell would have reached into the woman's pocket but Araneae moved so fast no one saw him until he stood with his fingers clamped around Kell's wrist.

"Let me," the harvestman warrior said, and dipped his hand into the pocket. He brought out an empty bottle, which he uncorked and sniffed. "*Moidyne-dress*. Maiden's Briar," he stated. He put a hand to the viscountess's chin and anchored her face. "Where did you put the contents from this bottle, wench?"

Her eyes darted away from his steady stare but she said nothing, clamping her lips tightly shut.

Araneae looked to where her guilty gaze had gone and nodded. "Whatever is on Her Grace's vanity is to be thrown into the fire," Araneae said.

"Bastard," Lady Kurst snarled, and spat in the warrior's face.

Gasps rang out through the room.

The harvestman warrior released her and turned to Kell. "Would you walk with me, Your Grace?" he asked.

Kell's brows drew together. "My lady..."

"Is in the capable hands of your people. They will not let her succumb. I must insist you accompany me for there are things you must be told."

After a moment's hesitation, Kell released a long breath. "Of course, Count Araneae."

Those who had gathered at the door moved out of the way as the two warriors left the room. No one looked their way and no one would ever say a word about what had transpired in Lillian's bedchamber.

"Our sleep has been long," Araneae said. "My warriors and I are well rested and at the ready to do your bidding."

"The Dealachan is here to take my lady from me," Kell said, unable to look at the tall man striding so gracefully beside him. Towering a good two feet above the warlord, the harvestman warrior seemed to dwarf him. The long, lanky and – some would say – spindly arms and legs moved fluidly as the warrior walked. "I will not allow that."

"Neither will we," Araneae declared. "Say the word and we will wipe the leeches from the face of the earth but..."

Kell forced his gaze to the man beside him. "But?"

"You will need first to work with the one called Caisil-Chrò to obtain the antidote and bring it back to Comhachagràtha. It will take the two of you to fetch it. We can not kill him until then."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What the fuck are they waiting for?" the Dealachan laird snarled. He had stopped the bombardment of his archers since it appeared they were not encountering targets. The battlements were lined with weres whose bows were trained on their enemies but not a single missile had flown from the Cuideag devils. Steam rose in the air from what the laird knew was most likely pots of tar and boiling water. Torches burned brightly atop the fortress.

From their side of the walls, the battering ram and catapults, many engines of destruction primed and loaded sat ready to begin the actual siege and Caisil-Chrò did not know why he was hesitating giving the order to commence the actual battle. He had shown no such hesitation at the first encounter he'd had with Saxxon Kell – when rivers of blood had flowed like honey on a warm day. Why he should delay now made him jittery.

"I do not see Kell," Count Renault commented. "Nor Beithir or Giles."

"I know that!" Caisil-Chrò barked at him. "Where did they go?"

"Give the order and we will begin the assault against the drawbridge," Colonel Dubois suggested.

"Something is happening in there," the Dealachan leader said. "I can feel it." The receptors on his body were tingling and his heart was thudding recklessly in his hairless chest. "I can feel it and I don't fucking like it!"

"Perhaps calmer heads have prevailed and have convinced Kell to hand the woman into your keeping, General," Count Renault put forth.

"Nay, the bastard wouldn't do that," Caisil-Chrò snapped. He ran a hand over his slick face, rubbing at his eyes. The almost colorless elliptical irises were expanding as his nervousness grew and had taken on a deeper hint of blue.

The Dealachan laird began pacing, keeping an eagle eye upon the battlements, feeling the stress of waiting growing among his men. They were watching his every

move and that did not help his edginess. As he paced, the black leather jerkin and pants he wore made a creaking sound that was a symphony to the crunch of his heavy boots upon gravel. His muscular arms flexed as he clasped his hands behind him, his thick neck twisting and turning with each circuit as he kept his attention riveted to the top of the fortress.

"There he is," Dubois said, pointing.

Caisil-Chrò stopped pacing and stared where Dubois indicated. His eyes narrowed.

"Who is that with him?" Count Renault asked uneasily.

"*What* is that with him?" Dubois countered.

"Harvestman warrior," the Dealachan laird whispered. "By the gods, I thought they were a myth!"

Dubois backed up, his wide gaze sweeping the ground underfoot. Likewise, Renault was searching the ground with his mouth agape.

"We need to parlay, Dealachan," Kell called down to them.

"I've no reason to speak with you. Send my woman down and I'll be on my way," Caisil-Chrò replied.

"She is not your woman!" Kell bellowed. "She is my wife!"

The Dealachan started to answer but he saw the harvestman warrior put a restraining hand on the Cuideag's shoulder, and though he could not hear what was being said, watched Saxxon Kell reach out to grip the edge of the stone barrier wall.

"You know what I am?" the man standing beside Kell asked.

"I do," Caisil-Chrò answered.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Someone the Cuideag consider important, I suppose," the Dealachan laird acknowledged.

"I am Araneae."

Although the men who had accompanied Caisil-Chrò were still and silent as they listened to the exchange, as soon as Araneae introduced himself, a moan rose up from those gathered and men began shuffling back, their heads moving to and fro as they inspected the ground around them.

"You know what I can do," Araneae said, and a tight smile formed on his lean face. "You know what I *will* do if it is the duke's desire."

No man could ever call General Meilich Caisil-Chrò a coward or a fool. He was as brave a warrior as any among those at Comhachagràtha that night. He feared his gods but no man brought terror to his heart. There were things he dreaded—like a visit to the tooth worker. There were things that made him apprehensive—like an avalanche roaring down the mountain. But nothing living had ever elicited alarm or had ever caused him nightmares.

Until now.

"What is it he wants?" Caisil-Chrò asked.

The Dealachan watched Kell drag a hand through his wind-tousled hair, but before the Cuideag could speak, the crazed one set up a renewed commotion inside the *comairce* in which she was being held and he saw the warlord's attention shift to that section of the plain.

"Is Daniva inside that gods-be-damned kettle?" Kell shouted.

"Leave my wife out of this," the Dealachan snapped. "What do you care about her anyway?"

"Get her the fuck out of that cauldron! Now!" Kell yelled back at him.

"Don't tell me what to do with my fucking wife!" Caisil-Chrò barked. "You left the bitch in an asylum and..."

"Release the woman," Araneae broke in, "or I will send my men to free her."

"Get her out of there! Do it now!" Dubois shouted to one of his were lieutenants, not even waiting for his general to issue the order.

Caisil-Chrò shot Dubois a look that said he would deal with the man's insubordination later then returned his attention to Kell. "Conscience bothering you, Cuideag?" he sneered.

"Lillian has been poisoned," Kell said, tired of bickering with his enemy. "She could die."

"What?" the leech laird whispered. He took a step or two closer to the fortress, his face ashen. "Who would have dared such a thing?"

Kell looked out past Caisil-Chrò as Daniva was helped out of the *comairce*. His jaw tightened as the young woman was dragged toward the Dealachan leader. "Daniva's mother poisoned Lillian."

"Oh ho!" Daniva shrieked when she heard the news. "My mother saved me the trouble of slitting the whore's throat!"

Throwing his hand back over his shoulder, the Dealachan made as if to backhand his wife but Daniva jerked away, putting the were holding her arm between her and her irate husband. She cowered behind the warrior, her eyes round, muttering to herself.

The Dealachan spat on the ground at her feet then whipped around, pointing a rigid finger up at the Cuideag warlord.

"Why weren't you watching her, you slimy prick bastard? Caisil-Chrò demanded and saw Kell flinch. "Lillian was in your care, under your protection. How could you allow...?"

"Placing the blame on the one responsible for this is not the issue," Araneae interrupted. "We must get the antidote for the Maiden's Briar."

"Maiden's Briar?" the Dealachan laird gasped, his face crinkling with despair. "There is no cure for that!"

"Believe me when I tell you there is," Araneae said. He too lifted a hand and pointed – out into the Burning Desert. "Out there."

Caisil-Chrò digested that for a few seconds then shook his head. "And how in the name of the gods are we to get it? No living being can survive a trek through that hellish land."

"The gods spoke to me long ago," the harvestman warrior said. "They foretold of a woman who would one day bring peace to us. They said I would know her the moment I saw her. She would be the greatly beloved of two mortal enemies. Together, those men would be needed to save her from the arms of the Gatherer."

"No one can survive the Fàsach," the Dealachan repeated. "There is no water, no shelter from the heat and light."

"He says we can," Kell told him. "I believe him."

"You would," Caisil-Chrò snapped.

Araneae straightened to his full eight-foot-three-inch height. "Do you dare call me a liar, leech?" he hissed, and the sound echoed through the night with such force it bounced off the mountains beyond.

"Nay, he did not say that!" Count Renault insisted for his leader.

"Shut the fuck up, Renault," his laird insisted. "I can speak for myself!"

"We are wasting time, Dealachan," Kell said. "Every minute we stand here arguing, Lillian is struggling to live. Will you let her die because you hate me and mine?"

"I want to see her," Caisil-Chrò replied.

"Milord, no!" Count Renault and Dubois said at the same time, reaching out to their leader, though neither came any closer to him.

"I want to see her before we do anything else!"

"But to go inside the fortress?" Dubois countered. "General, we can not protect you. It could be a trap. A..."

"You have my word as a harvestman warrior, a messenger of the gods, that no harm will come to you, leech," Araneae vowed.

Before anyone could stop him, Caisil-Chrò struck out for the drawbridge. "Lower that fucking piece of shit!" he ordered.

"No," Kell snapped. "I won't have you in..."

"Let him see her," Araneae told Kell.

Kell swung his head toward the harvestman. "If we lower the drawbridge, the leeches will pour across it and..."

"They will do nothing," Araneae cut in, "for they know my men and I would swarm upon them like locusts and pick the very marrow from their bones." He held Kell's worried stare. "They will do nothing, Your Grace. Trust me."

Kell searched the warrior's eyes for a long moment then reluctantly issued the order for the drawbridge to be dropped and the portcullis rose, adding that the Dealachan

was to be accompanied into the keep under heavy guard. "I don't trust him," he told Araneae.

"Nor should you," the harvestman replied. "Now let us return to your lady."

Caisil-Chrò ignored the hiss of fury that issued from Kell's lips as the Dealachan knelt beside Lillian's still body and put a hand to hers. He blocked out the snarl of rage that Kell could not contain when his enemy spoke softly to his bride.

"I am here, beloved," the laird said gently. He stroked Lillian's pale hand.

"If you don't take your hand off my wife..."

The Dealachan twisted his head around. "You'll what? Run me through? Behead me? You'll do nothing, you malodorous arachnid, because the sworn word of Count Araneae means something even to a perverted scumbag like you!"

Kell would have attacked his enemy had not Giles and Beithir rushed to grab him and keep him back. Despite his curses and struggles, Caisil-Chrò stood, leaned over Lillian and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"We'll do what must be done, Milady," the Dealachan vowed. "This is my oath to you." He smoothed the hair back from her cheek then turned to face Araneae. "Where do we go, Milord?"

"There is a sorceress who lives two days' walk from Comhachagràtha," the harvestman answered. "She will have the antidote ready for she will have had the same dream as I."

"Two days' walk?" Kell gasped. "How are we to...?"

"We can't journey through the daylight hours even if we could survive the heat," Caisil-Chrò protested.

"You have your *comairce*," Araneae declared.

"And just how are we to move it through the sand without horses?"

Araneae smiled and crossed his arms over his chest. "The test is for the two of you as much as it is for the saving of the lady. One will pull and one will push. It will not be easy. It will not be painless. You will both suffer but you will both survive."

"Under the best of conditions the *comairces* can be sweltering," Caisil-Chrò reminded the harvestman. "But in the Burning Desert, beneath the blazing sun..." He shook his head. "I might be able to endure it but this one..." He gave Kell a scornful look. "He won't make it."

"What the fuck do you care if I do or not?" Kell challenged.

"I don't," the leech laird sneered.

"You will both make it or the lady will die," Araneae said. "It is as simple as that."

"If one of us..."

"Both of you must return with the antidote," the harvestman said. His eyes rolled back in his head and his voice took on a strange timbre, coming as though from far, far

away. *"Two drops from the hand of the man who made her his wife and two drops from the hand of the man who loves her more than life. When it comes to pass, by her hand will be laid all to rest all hatred and strife."*

Araneae staggered and he blinked, coming out from under whatever momentary trance had gripped him. He looked from one warrior to the other. "You must leave quickly and make good time. Two days there and two days back. Any longer than that and you will be attending her funeral."

Kell and the Dealachan stared at each other for only a second or two then each nodded, both realizing they had no other choice and that the ordeal to come would be hellish.

"What do we need?" Kell asked.

"We'll need food and Sustenance, copious amounts of water for the two of us," Caisil-Chrò said. "More vegetation needs to be added for the air supply will need to be twice as great for each of us." He gave Kell a steady look. "I will warn you now, Cuideag. Inside the vessel it will be trying to breathe fire."

"I will handle it, Dealachan," Kell stated.

"You think you can," the leech laird sneered. "We'll see."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kell placed his lips gently to Lillian's and smoothed the hair back from her forehead. "You're going to be all right, Milady," he promised. "I will move heaven and earth to make it so."

Everything was ready. The drawbridge was down, his troops lining the massive plank pathway. Caisil-Chrò's men stood well back from the *comairce* Kell and he would be pushing and pulling through the thick sands of the Burning Desert. Despite fierce arguments from the tactical leaders from both sides, the two warriors would not be swayed from their mission.

"No weapons can be taken with you," Count Araneae had told the men. "There will be no temptation to kill one another. Both of you are needed if the lady is to survive this."

"You are sure the sorceress has an antidote?" Beithir asked again.

"She will have two vials," the harvestman insisted. "One she will give to the duke and the other to the Dealachan. One vial must be given to the lady from His Grace's hand and the other vial from the hand of the leech. That was in the dream I had and it will have been in the dreams that visited her."

"And that's all there is to it?" Caisil-Chrò had asked.

Araneae had given the Dealachan general a hard look. "She will have her own requirements of you both that each of you must be prepared to meet." He held up a hand when the leech laird would have asked what those requirements would entail.

"All I can tell you is if you do not meet her requirements, you will not be given the vial. It is as simple as that."

"The evening wears on, leech," Kell said. "I will meet you outside. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can come back."

Now as he straightened and stood looking down at his bride, Kell's heart ached with having to leave her. His soul burned with panic, with debilitating fear that she would leave him before he could return with the potion that would save her.

"Hang on, wench," he said, tears clouding his vision. "I will return. As the gods are my witness, I swear to you I will not let you die."

"You push and I'll pull for the first hour then we will switch," Caisil-Chrò told Kell when the Cuideag warlord joined him at the stripped-down *comairce* that stood waiting in a newly rigged version of the harness used by the team of horses needed to pull the heavy iron contraption. Every spare ounce of weight had been removed from the conveyance but still it weighed as much as it would have had nothing been taken from it for inside there were water and Sustenance jugs, food and the marshy vegetation from three other *comairces* had been added to the floor of this one. To be on the safe side, two extra wheels for the wagon had been strapped to the sides of the tank.

Slipping his muscular arms into the harness, the Dealachan strapped the thick chest band tightly around him. He adjusted it, wrapped his beefy hands around the horizontal pole against which he would push and dug his heels into the shifting sands. "I'm ready," he pronounced.

Kell was at the back of the vehicle, his hands pressed to the wide plank that ran the width of the wagon's back. He took a deep breath, flexed his leg muscles and pushed. "Go!"

"Fucking Nathair!" Caisil-Chrò hissed as he strained in the harness. The weight pulled like a burning brand against his arm and calf muscles. The wagon didn't move. The wheels had settled into the shifting sands.

"Rock it!" Kell yelled.

"Rock it," the leech mumbled, pushing as hard as he could.

"Help them get it started!" someone yelled, and several hands were suddenly against the wagon until it rolled free of the ruts into which it had sunk.

The heavy conveyance began to roll but everyone there could see the difficulty the two warriors were going to have.

"The gods help them," Giles whispered.

"They are going to need it," Dubois, his Dealachan counterpart, responded.

## Chapter Twelve

Pain was not something Saxxon Kell had ever thought that much about. It was something to be endured when it was handed down then blocked and forgotten. He had been taught to wear discomfort like a mantle and cast it off when he could. He'd been told he could tolerate just about anything as long as he pushed whatever was causing him grief to the back of his mind and carried on as though it weren't there.

But the intense heat beating down on him from a midnight sky devoid of clouds and wind or relief of any kind was taking its toll on him. It actually hurt to draw breath into his lungs and he had long since stripped down to nothing more than a breechclout and his boots.

"What is that you are wearing?" the leech laird had demanded upon seeing the Sciar-copar hanging around Kell's neck. "Is that what I think it is?"

"It belongs to Lilly," Kell replied. "Handed down to her by the women in her family. She entrusted it to me as her bride's gift."

"Mayhap it will protect you even if you Cuideags killed the Great God's lady-love," Caisil-Chrò sneered.

"It wasn't one of us who killed her," Kell threw back at his enemy.

"Well, we didn't!"

Kell rolled his eyes and kept his thoughts to himself. The palms of his hands had blistered from coming into contact with the hot wood and now his chest stung from the constriction of the harness. He was as miserable as he could ever remember being.

"Stop," he heard Caisil-Chrò call out.

Kell's only comfort was that the Dealachan was suffering as greatly as he himself was. Sagging against the harness, he barely noticed the leech staggering up to him.

"Wheel. Loose," Caisil-Chrò stated in between heavy pants.

Hanging his head and groaning, Kell reached up a trembling hand to wipe at the sweat drenching his face. "Which one this time?" he asked.

"Right. Rear," came the croaking answer.

"Fuck," Kell snarled. "That's the one we fixed only an hour ago."

"Didn't. Get. It. Tight. Enough."

Kell snorted. "You think?" He began unbuckling the harness for it would take both of them to tighten the wheel since one had to put his back under the base of the wagon.

"You need to put salve on those," the Dealachan managed to get out in one breath as he pointed to the abrasions on Kell's chest cause by the harness straps.

"When we stop for the Day Sleep."

"Which won't come any too soon for me," the leech laird said with a heavy sigh.

"Four hours," Kell reminded his enemy and half smiled when the Dealachan groaned.

The two men were thankful they had found a long stretch of ground that was hard-packed and dry as bleached bone. The wagon wheels would not sink down and that made for easier starting once the problem was remedied. It didn't take them long to tighten the wheel and when they were done, they had exchanged places again with Kell at the back, straining.

For an hour the men struggled onward through the broiling desert, both silently cursing not having taken the time to take a few swigs of water to replace the sweat that was pouring from them. By the time it was Kell's turn to strap himself into the harness, they were both parched and each had a violent headache that did nothing for their tempers.

"This is all your fault," Caisil-Chrò complained as he slumped against the wagon. "If you'd just left her where she was..."

"If you hadn't stolen her in the first place..." Kell cut him off with a hateful glower. He arched the sweat from his brow, hating the stink that rose up to him from beneath his arms. "But then you've made a profession of taking what you've no right to."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you," Kell countered wearily. He wove his way to the harness and stepped into the leg braces that were wearing a ridge along the tops of his thighs. Grinding his teeth against the agony of the straps over his chest, he buckled the heavy leather into place and waited stoically for the leech to begin pushing.

Another hour and the positions were reversed.

"I hate you," Kell snarled.

"I loathe you," Caisil-Chrò shot back as they switched places.

One more hellish hour and it was time for them to swap. This time, neither man spoke as they passed. Each was too tired and hurting too bad to even shoot an angry glare at the other. They simply settled into their niche and put one foot ahead of the other.

Each could feel the dawn approaching and both dreaded it—Kell more so than his enemy for he had no idea just how bad the interior of the iron contraption was going to be. He had a good idea that it would be nightmarish and he only hoped he could endure the torment of it.

"Take your boots off but don't leave them out here," Caisil-Chrò said.

"Why not?"

"Well, if you don't mind putting your feet in the little ovens they will be by tonight, then go ahead."

Grumbling, Kell sat down on the wagon bed and pulled off his boots, wincing at the blisters on his heels and instep. He had to clamp his jaw tightly shut to keep from crying out when the soles of his feet touched the hot sand.

As they climbed up onto the wagon and the heavy iron hatch was thrown back, the stench of the watery vegetation inside made Kell's stomach roil. It smelled like decaying fish and seaweed. They had to bend down to enter the hatchway for the tank was only five feet in height.

And inside was as horrible as he had imagined it would be.

"Don't touch the sides," the Dealachan warned him. "Just stretch out as best you can in the water."

Bent over with his lip cocked at the smell and the feel of the slimy growth beneath the soles of his feet, Kell waded through the foot of water that was as warm as bathwater. The interior of the *comairce* was so thick with humidity he had trouble dragging breaths into his lungs.

"Ever heard of drinking your air?" Caisil-Chrò joked grimly. "Well, now you know what it feels like." He pulled the door shut behind them. "And it's only going to get worse."

"Oh you're just full of encouragement, aren't you?" Keel grumbled.

"You know how bad it was out there tonight," the leech said. "We will be baking in here during the day."

"Just shut the fuck up," Kell snapped. He squatted down in the murky liquid and hissed for the water was overly warm and it made him want to take a piss as it washed over his thighs and hips.

"If you have to whiz, go ahead and do it," Caisil-Chrò said as he settled down in the water on his back, putting his head on a thick roll of cotton batting that would serve as a pillow. "It can't be helped."

Just thinking about lying in his own piss—not to mention the leech's—made Kell want to bellow with rage. Once more his stomach lurched and he had to swallow hot bile that threatened to spew. It was all he could do to stretch out in the water.

The *comairce* was eight feet in length and half that in width. It could easily accommodate one warrior but two—especially tall, muscular men—was going to be a challenge. Their bodies were touching and that didn't set well with Kell. He tried to move over and his shoulder touched the iron side of the vessel. He yelped.

"I told you not to touch it," Caisil-Chrò drawled. "Maybe now you know why."

Cursing beneath his breath, Kell wedged his body away from the heated side. His head was throbbing miserably from the heat and he was hungry but their ration of food would have to be handled carefully. The Sustenance was within reach and he had watched Caisil-Chrò open one jug and take a long, hard pull on the liquid before lying down. He sat up, took his own jug and uncorked it. When he placed the jug to his lips, he winced for the Sustenance was too warm and thick and it made him gag.

"Drink as much as you can because I've a feeling it is going to congeal quickly in this heat," the Dealachan told him.

"Lovely," Kell muttered, and ran his arm over his lips.

They said no more to one another for the Day Sleep was fast approaching. Though the conditions were miserable – torturous – they fell under the thrall of the approaching sunlight. The exhaustion of spirit, the agony it took to draw air into their bodies, the ache in their muscles and the bone-deep fatigue that made the overpowering heat inside the *comairce* a living hell could not delay the sleepiness that stole over them. They sank beneath waves of hot air and were soon lost in tormented dreams that made each of them groan.

The moment the sun lowered behind the distant mountains thirteen hours later, Kell's eyes popped open. He gasped loudly and sat up, shuddering at the superheated agony of the *comairce's* interior pressed down on him like a ton of hot rocks. He clawed at his throat and scrambled to his knees, needing desperately to get out of the claustrophobic, punishing heat. His eyes felt as though they were swimming in hot water and his lungs felt singed.

"Don't touch the handle with your bare..." Caisil-Chrò started to say but it was too late.

Kell screamed as he wrapped his hand around the hatch's handle and snatched his hand back, leaving a layer of flesh on the red-hot metal.

The Dealachan sat up. "You are going to have to be more careful, Kell," he said.

Cradling his injured hand to his sweaty chest, Kell wasn't even aware he was crying – not from the pain in his palm but from the helplessness he felt. He hadn't known tight, enclosed places could affect him as this one was and that knowledge didn't set well with him.

Caisil-Chrò took a piece of wet cotton and wrapped it around the handle. The material sizzled and he grunted, obviously feeling the heat through the wet material.

"Let me out," Kell pleaded, gasping for breath. "For the gods' sakes, let me out!"

"Easy," the Dealachan said as he sensed the terror building in the Cuideag. He slid open the hatch and barely made it out of the way before Kell scrambled over him and climbed outside. Shaking his head, he gathered up his boots and Kell's, stuck them under his arms, hooked a finger through the handle of a water jug and grabbed from one of the many elevated niches inside the tank a wrapped loaf of bread, which he clamped between his teeth.

Kell was hunkered down a short ways from the *comairce*, his arms wrapped tightly around himself, rocking back and forth, making a keening sound low in his throat.

"It can do that to you," Caisil-Chrò said as he sat down on the tail of the wagon to slip on his boots. His boots on, he slid off the wagon and carried the jug of water to his enemy and uncorked it. "Here."

Panting as though he'd run a long race full-out, Kell took the offered water with his unharmed hand and swilled down a few mouthfuls and would have continued to drink had the Dealachan warned him against doing so. Swiping his arm over his mouth, the warlord squeezed his eyes shut. "Thanks," he managed to croak.

"Don't do that," the leech laird snapped, dropping Kell's boots beside him. "I don't want or need your thanks so don't be doing the gentlemanly Cuideag thing. Just take what's given and shut the fuck up."

Kell opened his eyes and looked up at Caisil-Chrò, but refrained from making a comment about the man's words. He handed the jug back to the leech laird, wincing as he unthinkingly closed his injured palm.

"That will need seeing to," the Dealachan grumbled.

"By my calculations, we're five hours from the sorceress's abode," Kell said. "She can see to it when we get there."

"Well, you sure as shit aren't going to be able to push so I guess you've got five hours in the harness staring you in that ugly arachnid face of yours," Caisil-Chrò declared. He glanced down at his enemy's palm, which lay face up on Kell's crooked knee. "And that is going to hurt like a motherfucker if you don't put some salve on it and wrap it. If you get some of this silicon into the wound, you'll wish you fucking hadn't."

Kell stared at his burned palm, a muscle working in his jaw. "Aye, I suppose you're right."

"You'll learn I'm always right," the Dealachan proclaimed, and hopped back up on the wagon and ducked into the *comairce*, emerging with what appeared to be a first-aid kit. He threw it to the ground at Kell's feet.

It took some doing but Kell managed to salve and bandage his right hand then grunted when Caisil-Chrò tore off a chunk of bread and held it out to him. That was the closest he would come to thanking the man again, he vowed to himself as he chewed off a mouthful.

"The Sustenance looks like pudding," the Dealachan said. "I know I don't want any of it."

"Nor I." He stuck the remaining portion of the bread in his mouth and reached for his boots, striving not to cry out as he struggled to put them on.

"Mayhap the sorceress will be able to provide some for us."

"From where?" Kell questioned, pushing wearily to his feet, his head swimming from the heat that had only slightly decreased with the coming of night. "I can't imagine how she can live in this fucking inferno. How can she possibly have anything living with her from which we can take Sustenance?"

Caisil-Chrò shrugged. "How the fuck would I know?"

"I thought you knew everything," Kell mumbled.

"I know you're a diseased prick," the Dealachan snorted.

"Takes one to recognize one, I guess," Kell threw right back at him. He headed for the front of the wagon and the accursed harness he was gods-be-damned sure he wouldn't be able to buckle with one hand. He stepped into the leg braces and reached down with his good hand to pull the harness up his body.

"Thanks to you, I've got to do half your shit-ass work," Caisil-Chrò growled as he stormed up to Kell and took the job of buckling the harness from his enemy. "Just stand still so I don't touch any more of your greasy body than I have to."

Clenching his teeth to the insult, Kell looked out into the darkness of the desert. There was a darker line of ebon hulking there and he nudged his chin toward it. "Does that look like mountains to you?"

Caisil-Chrò turned and looked that way. He narrowed his gaze as he contemplated the darker area. "Maybe. That could be where the sorceress lives." He finished buckling the harness. "Witches like caves and the sort."

"Aye," Kell agreed. "So I've heard."

"Caves could mean night creatures," the Dealachan suggested. "Could be Sustenance there."

Kell nodded. He shifted his shoulders against the harness, grimacing as the abrasions on his chest already were rubbed against the leather.

"Too tight?"

"It's all right," Kell replied.

"Then let's get this show on the road," Caisil-Chrò stated.

Six miserable, grueling hours later the two warriors were within a hundred yards or so of a low range of mountains sitting on the barren, scorching plain like a giant black squid with trailing tentacles reaching out to the even more barren plains farther south. From the smaller rises that resembled those tentacles, ugly, warty growths extended and from those issued a strange pale blue smoke that rose almost vertically from what were obviously jagged vents.

"By the gods that stinks," Kell observed, sniffing the air. He wrinkled his nose at the vile stench.

"Smells like a Cuideag with the runs to me," the Dealachan sniped.

Kell snorted in answer to that. He was so tired he didn't think he could make another step in the harness. He plucked at the buckle with his uninjured hand, quickly becoming frustrated when he couldn't get the tang to part from the hole. He let loose a particularly base curse then hung his head. "Leech, will you...?"

"I ought to leave you hooked up to the fucking thing," Caisil-Chrò groused. "Let the sun fry you like bacon on a hot rock."

His head throbbing worse than he could ever remember it doing, Kell had no choice but to give the Dealachan a long, steady look.

"Oh please," the leech laird sneered. "That might work on a defenseless woman like Lillian but all it does is make me want to plow my fist through your ugly face." He reached out to tug the harness loose.

"I've come to realize your bite isn't nearly as bad as your bark," Kell told him as he shrugged out of the harness.

"Make no mistake about it, Cuideag," Caisil-Chrò growled. "When we get back to the fortress and I know Lillian is going to be all right, I am going to make you eat those words."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Kell said tiredly. "I'm quaking in my boots, leech." In stepping out of the braces, he stumbled and would have fallen had not the Dealachan caught him and shoved him upright again.

"Can't you even stand up by yourself?" Caisil-Chrò demanded.

"We've got company," Kell said softly.

The Dealachan turned around and what he saw made his testicles draw up. "Holy shit," he whispered.

"My sentiments exactly," Kell agreed.

Walking toward them was the ugliest woman either of them had ever seen. Short, squat, her legs were so badly bowed beneath a distended belly hanging over her belt that she bobbed back and forth as she walked. It was almost painful watching her navigate toward them. Sparse white hair fell in matted clumps from a large misshapen head that was bracketed by two long ears ending in sharp points and as she got closer, they could see the myriad hairy warts and lumps that covered her wrinkled face. When she smiled at them, twin rows of rotted, darkly stained stumps of teeth gaped from a pale pink mouth. Rubbery lips moved and a voice like that of a cackling hen came forth.

"So you are my Cuideag and Dealachan warriors," she said, wobbling closer so that the stench of her rolled over the men like a crashing wave. She pointed a crooked finger that was capped with a long, curving fingernail caked with grime at Kell. "You are the warlord, rightful husband to the *jesheyder*, she who stops the feud."

"I am," Kell said and swallowed. The woman's odor made his eyes burn and brought bile racing up his throat. "You have the antidote?"

"I am Magda," the woman declared, and waved her fingers at the men. "Come, enter my dwelling and rest. You will stay the night with me and take your Day Sleep."

"We can't," Caisil-Chrò was quick to respond. "We have to..."

"You will stay the night with me!" the sorceress said, her beady black eyes blazing. "That is one of my requirements, leech!"

"How many requirements do you have, woman?" the Dealachan asked, wincing as Kell dug a warning elbow into his side. He snapped his head toward Kell. "Don't tell me you didn't want to ask the same thing!"

"He knows to do so would anger me," Magda stated. "Now come."

"Whatever she wants, we have to comply," Kell whispered urgently to the Dealachan. "We can't afford to piss her off so watch your fucking tongue!"

Caisil-Chrò grumbled but he fell into step beside Kell, both men's footsteps lagging as they followed the sorceress toward her mountain abode.

"The stench is getting worse," Kell said, putting a hand up to cover his nose and mouth.

"You will get used to it," Magda said. "It is just the souls of my enemies burning in the eternal pit beneath the mountain." When neither man responded to her words, she looked around and winked then cackled to let them know she was poking fun at them.

"I don't like this," Caisil-Chrò said. "Not one fucking bit!"

She led them beneath a low overhang and into the relatively cooler interior of a small cave. Torches lit the area and in the light they could see the full extent of her countenance and it made them both shudder. Taking a hard look at her, they realized the lumps on her face they had given a cursory look at in the faint moon glow were in actuality puffy pustules and her skin was a sallow yellow that contrasted sharply with her brown-tinged teeth. Up close, her unspeakable odor nearly took away their breath.

"Through there," she said, pointing to a crack in the cave wall that was just big enough for the men to slip through sideways. "Go on."

Kell looked at the crack then back at her. There was no way her bulk could slip through that small a space. His brow furrowed. "Milady, how...?"

"Through there," she repeated, and her stern look brooked no further argument.

"I don't like this," Caisil-Chrò repeated.

Hitching up his courage, Kell went to the crack and forced his body through it, having to suck in what little gut he had in order to make it through. As it was, the stone walls scraped against his flesh and he was very careful not to touch his injured palm to the rough rock.

Popping out on the other side of the crack, he was stunned to feel cool, invigorating air suddenly playing over his sweaty face and to see a pool of shimmering water into which a small waterfall fell a few feet away. He licked his lips, wanting to dive into the pool and stand beneath the falls.

"By the gods," he heard the Dealachan say as he too squeezed through the crack. "Look at that!"

"Strip and enter the sanctuary of the water, warriors," Magda told them, and they both spun around to see her sitting atop a rock, her chin propped in a filthy hand, knees spread wide beneath the hem of her dirty gown. "When you are clean, I will provide Sustenance and food for you."

Kell and Caisil-Chrò exchanged a look but neither questioned her command nor how the woman could possibly have entered the grotto ahead of them. They sat down on the cave floor and tugged off their boots. The only other thing either of them wore was a breechclout and those came off without a moment's hesitation. Wading out into

the pool, they were soon chest deep in the sweet, sparkling water, scooping it up in their hands to take a long drink.

"Beautiful," Magda proclaimed as she stared avidly at the warriors. "Absolutely beautiful. Both worthy specimens at last." Her eyes took on an unholy gleam that would have unnerved the men had they witnessed it.

"She ain't wearing nothing beneath that gown," Caisil-Chrò griped as he ran his hand up and down his arm to rid himself of the sweat and grime. "I can see right up to her bushy nest."

"Enjoying the view, are you?" Kell quipped. He was scrubbing at his hair, sighing with pleasure as the water fell over his face.

"I'd rather be staring at the carcass of a muskrat flattened by the wheels of a pumper wagon," the leech laird replied.

"Then stop looking," Kell told him.

"How the deuce did she get in here so fast?"

Kell shrugged. "She's a sorceress. How do you think?"

"I don't like this."

"I don't like hearing you repeating that fucking phrase either," Kell snapped. "Leave off, will ya?"

Caisil-Chrò turned his head so he could watch the woman. "She's staring at us like we're to be her supper this eve."

"Better us be hers than her be ours," Kell countered. "Can you imagine putting your lips to that?"

"Finish up, boys," Magda said, getting to her feet. "When you're done, I'll have your repast ready for those sweet lips of yours."

Both men jerked around, their mouths gaping as the sorceress let out a cackle that made the hair stand up on their arms. They watched her scamper down from the rock and exit the grotto through a low opening.

"You see?" the Dealachan whispered. "She's up to no good, Kell!"

Kell ducked beneath the water one last time then trudged out of the water. Once upon the stony floor of the cave, he looked for his breechclout but it was gone. "Ah, leech? She took our *breid ghoals*."

"Our what?" Caisil-Chrò asked as he waded out of the water. As soon as he realized his breechclout was missing, he gave Kell a withering look. "She took my fucking kilt?"

"Do you see it anywhere?"

Fury lashing his hairless features, the Dealachan strode angrily to the opening and ducked down, calling out to the sorceress as he went.

"Magda, I want my fucking kilt back!"

Drawing in a long breath, Kell held it for a moment then released it slowly, hoping the uneasiness he was beginning to feel would leave him. All he wanted to do was get the antidote and get back to his lady, but he was beginning to have the feeling that there was going to be more to this encounter with the sorceress than either he—or the Dealachan—was going to like.

It took the men nearly an hour of following a twisting, turning corridor winding ever deeper into the cave before they came upon a huge cavern where the sorceress obviously made her home. There was expensive furniture placed about the stony room—a long settee, four comfortable-looking overstuffed chairs, a table with four chairs, a huge brass bed sitting beneath a hanging mirror that reflected the thick fur coverlet.

“What the hell?” Caisil-Chrò asked as he came up short at the sight. “By the gods please tell me she doesn’t lie there and watch herself.”

“How did she get all this stuff down here?” Kell questioned, taking in a large copper tub and all the accoutrements of a well-appointed lady’s sitting room.

And there were cats. Dozens and dozens of cats roaming around the room, sitting on every available surface, lounging on the floor, perching on rocky ledges, eating from a seemingly endless amount of bowls, and all of them looking at the men with unblinking eyes that missed nothing.

“I hate fucking cats,” Caisil-Chrò stated.

“You don’t have a monopoly on the attitude. Cuideags hate cats too,” Kell said, eying the felines warily.

“That one is staring at my cock,” the Dealachan protested, and gave the offending tabby a deadly glare.

“Can you blame her, Milord, when it is well worth staring at?”

Caisil-Chrò winced and turned slowly, covering his privates with his hands. “I would like my kilt back.”

“And I am not yet finished looking my fill,” Magda informed him. She was lounging on a chaise in the shadows of the room as naked as the day she’d been born.

“Oh gods,” Kell said, swallowing hard. Despite his excellent eyesight, he couldn’t see her misshaped body all that well but he knew she was bare of clothing for the paleness of her skin stood out in the low light.

“Woman, if you expect me to fuck you...”

“Did I ask you to fuck me, General?” Magda interrupted.

“Aye, well, if it’s Kell you want...”

“Oh indeed I do,” Magda said. “Look at him. Who would not?”

Caisil-Chrò shot his enemy a triumphant look. “She wants your body, Cuideag. I guess that’s one of the requirements, eh?”

"Not only his, General. I want yours too," Magda said.

The Dealachan made an ugly hissing sound. "I'd rather cut my own throat than let you put your filthy hands on me!"

"Oh please, let me do it for you and save you the trouble," Kell snarled at him. "Will you keep your fucking mouth shut?"

"You would do well to listen to him, General," Magda said, stretching her stubby arms over her head, causing her withered breasts to swing. She grinned mercilessly at the Dealachan. "You I will have first and he I will save for dessert for he is the one I truly want anyway."

"You'll not get *me* at all, bitch!" the Dealachan swore. His face was beet red with anger and his eyes flashing with deadly intent. He looked about him as though searching for a weapon.

"Leech, please keep quiet!" Kell warned.

"You want the vials of antidote?" she cooed, and crooked one leg in what would have passed for a provocative pose for a prettier woman.

"Milady," Kell said, taking a step forward, his hands providing the only protection he had as he attempted to hide his loins. "We are married men and honor bound..."

"There is no honor in the Dealachan else he would not have stolen one woman from you on your Joining night and another from her legal husband then tried to take her yet again from her new husband," Magda told him. "Do not speak of honor for a man who has none."

"Aye, you are right," Kell agreed. "He bends honor like a candy maker bends taffy but I have honor and I will not betray my lady-wife. I..."

"You will if you want her to live, Your Grace," she responded. "You will gladly loan me the use of your superb body or you will go back to Comhachagràtha a widower 'ere you've truly been a husband."

Kell heard the harvestman's words slithering through his mind, *"She will have her own requirements of you both that you each of you must be prepared to meet. All I can tell you is if you do not meet her requirements, you will not be given the vial. It is as simple as that."*

"Unlike the man beside you, Saxxon Kell, you know I will have what I seek or you will leave this place empty-handed." Magda smiled brutally. "What's it to be, handsome?"

The mere thought of putting his hands on the woman was bad enough but just knowing he'd be forced to join his flesh to hers, put his cock inside her, put his mouth to hers, brought a hard shudder to the Cuideag warlord. His face turned ashen and he ran an unsteady hand through his hair.

"I beg you, please," he began but knew his protests, his pleading would do no good. She was looking at him as though he were a piece of meat and she had her knife and fork prepared to skewer him.

"Think of it as a test of your manhood," Magda told him.

"What fucking manhood?" Caisil-Chrò shouted. "You'd take the steel out of any man's sword, witch!" He flung out a dismissive hand. "How can you expect either of us to get it up and keep it up when just looking at you makes my balls shrink to the size of walnuts?"

It had been the wrong thing to say for no sooner had the words left the Dealachan's lips than his cock sprang out like a steel spring and locked rigidly, so hard and so painful it nearly drove the leech to his knees with the force of lust that shot straight through him. He stumbled back, staring down at his treacherous shaft as though it were an alien life form stuck to his crotch.

"As easily as that, General," Magda said. She swung her legs from the chaise and stood, came toward them with that rolling, painful gait that made Kell want to gag even as his cock throbbed with the most intense need he'd ever experienced.

"Witchcraft," Caisil-Chrò whined, unable to move. His hands had gone to his sides and he stood there like a deer caught in the lantern light of a hunter.

Magda walked past him and looked up into Kell's troubled eyes. "Let me see your hand."

Kell blinked at the quick change of subject. "I'm sorry?"

"Your hand, warrior," she said, holding out her own dirty, filth-encrusted hand.

He had no choice for seemingly of its own accord, his arm rose and he found his injured hand in her grasp.

Making a tsking sound, the sorceress unwound his bandage then laid her other palm over his and a warm, tingling sensation spread through his flesh. When she removed her palm from his, the burn was healed, no trace of the scarring left. He looked down at it with wonder, flexing the fingers inward to test the strength.

"I have powers neither of you can even begin to comprehend," she said then turned her back on Kell, went to stand in front of the Dealachan.

Even as great a warrior, as brave a man as he was, Caisil-Chrò seemed unable to stop the whimper that pushed from his throat as she reached for him and put a filthy, cold hand to his chest.

"Now kiss me, General, and use your tongue for something other than complaining."

Kell could not look away though he wanted to do so. He felt himself growing hard as the Dealachan's hands came up to drag the hideous woman to him. He saw the leech quiver, heard him moan, and then was forced to watch as the couple sank to the floor. Sickened by what he was witnessing, unable to turn his gaze aside, feeling shame to the depths of his being, he was forced to watch something he'd never wanted to view. Though he'd often been in hearing range of men having sex, he had never had the desire to watch. That he had no choice only added to the sense of degradation he was feeling at that moment.

With growing horror, he watched as the Dealachan thrust his tongue into the hag's mouth and fastened his lips greedily to hers. The warrior's hands were fumbling at her sagging breasts, his thumbs raking over the withered nipples, spreading down her pot belly and over her bony, malformed hip to snake between her flabby thighs. A powerful leg lifted and Caisil-Chrò used his knee to spread the witch's thighs wide, stabbing at her stinking center with a shaft that was hard as rock. All the while the leech laird was making a keening, disgusted sound deep in his throat and now and again would shudder uncontrollably as his mouth still clung to hers.

The sound of the brutal sex that followed, the slap of Magda's legs coming up to clamp around the Dealachan's waist, the stench rolling off her putrid body, the sight of her loose skin wobbling as Caisil-Chrò drove relentlessly, savagely into her body sickened Kell yet still he could not tear his gaze from the horrific sight. He stood with his fists clenched tightly, his jaw muscles flexing, his heart pounding dangerously in his chest for he knew when Meilich Caisil-Chrò's ordeal was over, his would begin.

Kell sat down beside the leech laird. He had found Caisil-Chrò at the bathing pool, sitting on a rock that jutted out near the waterfall with his head in his hands. Clothed once more in the leather breechclout he called a kilt, the warrior seemed diminished, crushed, and he could not meet the Cuideag's eye.

"She has prepared a feast for us," Kell said softly.

"I'm not hungry."

"At least take Sustenance," Kell suggested. "When we leave at sunset tomorrow, you will need your strength."

"I may never be able to eat again," Caisil-Chrò whispered. He lifted his head but still could not look at Kell. "Have you...? Has she...?"

Kell winced. "Not yet." He glanced down at his breechclout. "At least she let me dress. I was beginning to think she wouldn't." A fleeting smile touched his lips. "I never again want to peel spuds while squatting with the boys hanging down and my long john cringing with every pass of the blade against the spud skin."

Caisil-Chrò made a noise that might have passed for a snort or it might have been an exclamation of sympathy.

The two men were silent for a moment then the Dealachan sighed heavily. "I near puked my guts up, Kell," he said then turned his head, his elliptical eyes filled with a defeat Kell had never thought to see. There was a haunted look there Kell strongly suspected would remain for a long time to come. "She tasted like rancid meat."

"It's over," Kell said. "I know it is difficult," a muscle worked in his jaw, "Meilich, but you have to try to put it aside."

For a long time Caisil-Chrò stared into the Cuideag's eyes then he looked away. "You will soon know why I never will," he said quietly then added, "Saxxon."

"Come eat."

The warriors looked around to find Magda standing with her hands on her hips, her filthy dress once more in place.

"That is not a request. That is an order," she said, and hobbled around, disappearing from sight as suddenly as she'd appeared.

"I don't think I can," the Dealachan said.

"All you can do is try," Kell said, and moved away, sliding down from their perch and – balancing precariously – walked across the rocks ringing the pool.

When Caisil-Chrò joined them, Kell and Magda were already seated at her table, a large selection of mouthwatering foods placed atop. Despite the wounded look on his face, the Dealachan licked his lips as he pulled out a chair and threw a long leg over the back before sliding onto the seat.

"Do not stand on manners, boys," Magda said. "Dig in." She reached for a platter of crisply seared beef steak and forked a healthy portion onto her plate. She passed the platter to Kell.

Kell took it. "Where do you obtain food out here, Milady?" he asked, his curiosity having gotten the better of him.

Magda wiggled her fingers. "I want? I call forth what I need. It disappears from a fat lord's larder and appears here." She took up a bowl of the potatoes Kell had been forced to peel and plopped several onto her plate. "I have little else to do so cooking is one of my pleasures."

"That and raping the occasional stray traveler," Caisil-Chrò mumbled as he stared at the food he had put on his plate.

Magda paused with a forkful of spinach to her lips and gave the Dealachan a steady look. "You are the first talking beings I've seen in twenty years," she said, "and the first man I've ever raped, as you so sweetly put it." She ladled cooked greens into her mouth then smiled nastily. "Tell me, General. How many women have you raped in your day?"

Caisil-Chrò did not answer. Instead he began shoveling the food into his mouth, chewing with his face set in a hard scowl, eyes cold as the ice of his homeland.

"What of you, Your Grace?" Magda asked as she scored a piece of beef with her knife. "How many women have you taken against their will?"

"None," Kell stated. He found the beef tender and just bloody enough for his taste. The creamed potatoes were excellent and the greens had a slight bite to them he found interesting.

"I would not imagine you'd have to," Magda said as she took a sip of the mead she had poured for them. "Instead a man who looks like you would have to beat the women off."

Uncomfortable with the turn in the conversation, Kell poked his fork in the greens. "What is in these greens?" he asked as he scooped up a forkful.

"Pepper vinegar," she said. "Cooked in with the bacon grease and salt I use to season them then liberally sprinkled on after they are in the bowl. You like?"

"Very much," he said.

"Tell your cook to pick hot peppers and pickle them in boiling hot vinegar with a quarter cup of sugar added to sweeten it."

"My thanks. I..."

"How can you sit here and carry on a civil conversation with this bitch when you know what you're going to be forced to do to her, Kell?" the Dealachan demanded, shoving his plate away.

"Because he knows it will do him no good to rail against his fate, General," Magda said. "He has accepted what must be and will not dwell on it once it is done."

"Oh he'll dwell on it, believe me he will!" Caisil-Chrò snarled. "He'll dwell on it and it will come back to torment him for as long as he draws breath! He'll gag every time he thinks of your vile tongue slurping around inside his mouth and your diseased cunt..."

One moment the Dealachan was sitting at the table with them and the next he had vanished. Kell shot out of his chair—eyes wide—gasping. "W-What did you do to him?"

"Sit down, Saxxon," Magda said with a laugh. "I've only put him in a little room far enough away from us that I won't have to listen to any more of his insults. He is perfectly fine. There is a soft pallet for him, Sustenance and water. If I sense he grows hungry between now and the time for the two of you to depart, I will provide him with food." She smiled up at him. "Sit, Saxx. He's in no danger." When he remained standing, she sat back in her chair. "Do you think he'd be concerned about your safety if the tables were turned?"

"Most likely not," Kell had to admit.

"Most definitely not," she countered. "Meilich thinks only of himself and always has for that was the way his bastard father brought him up but at least he has genuine love for the lady you two share in common. That is the only reason he still lives and isn't a pile of cinders along with the others wafting out of the vents on the plain."

Kell thought it best not to question that cryptic remark. Gingerly he sat back down again although his appetite had fled. He reached for the cup of mead and took a healthy swig, keeping his eyes down, feeling hers raking him as though with sharpened claws.

"Look at me, Saxxon."

He steeled himself then set the cup aside, lifted his gaze to her and froze.

She smiled. "Tell me what you see, my Cuideag."

Kell shook his head to clear it and put up a hand to scrub at his face. He stared long and hard at her then leaned back in his chair. "Not what was there but a moment before," he finally responded.

Magda laughed but it wasn't with the cackle he'd expected. It was with a merry, tinkling tone that was very pleasant to hear. Gone were the rubbery lips that had made the cackling sound so horrendous.

Gone too was the ugly, misshapen hag with greasy patches of unkempt and matted hair. Gone were the violent eruptions over yellowed skin and dark stains upon stumps of teeth. Gone too were the drooping bosom and—he was sure—the deformed lower portion of a short, squat body. What sat in its place was a comely woman of middle age with laughing green eyes, a very warm smile that showed even white teeth and hair the color of polished steel and a sleek white gown that did her bustline ample justice.

"What happened to the crone?" he asked.

"Her job was done and she has gone back to her hovel," Magda answered with a wink.

"And is the woman I see the real one?" he asked, glancing at the empty mug that had held the mead.

"What you see before you is the real woman."

He found himself smiling at her infectious grin. "Why?"

"Why did Repulsive Magda visit you?" At his nod, she shrugged. "A very wise man once told me you reap what you sow. General Caisil-Chrò deserved no better than Repulsive Magda and it was Repulsive Magda he received."

"Aye but I fear you've scarred him for life," Kell said.

"Too bad," she countered. "What goes around comes around, Your Grace." She pushed her chair back and stood, Kell rose to his feet like the gentleman he was. She indicated the settee and he followed her to it, sitting at the opposite end from her.

"You are a devious woman," he told her, staring at the lovely figure that was graced with high, rounded breasts, sleek legs tapering from curving hips and a flat belly.

"I am what the gods have made me, sweet Saxxon." She snapped her fingers and a snifter of brandy appeared in both her hand and his. "It is a very good vintage, trust me." She took a sip of the golden brew.

He took a sip as well and arched a thick brow. "Excellent."

"Only the very best for you," she said. She watched him over the rim of the snifter. "But you must still lie with me, warrior. That is my final requirement."

"I have accepted that, Milady, although I will still do so reluctantly."

Her smile was radiant. "Aye, but it will no longer be the chore it could have been."

He smiled too. "No, I don't believe it will." He leaned forward and placed the half-empty snifter on the coffee table before him. "I would, though, ask why it is necessary."

Magda kicked off the silk slippers she wore and tucked her legs beneath her on the seat. "Which would you prefer I relate—my reason for wanting you or my motivation behind that wanting?"

"Both," he said, stretching a muscular arm out along the back of the settee.

"So be it. I'll give you both."

Kell was surprised that he felt so comfortable in her presence. Although he was nearly naked with nothing more than a breechclout between him and her observant green eyes, he was oddly at ease, feeling no embarrassment. He relaxed against the cushion as she began her tale.

"I am from a world many millions of miles from yours," she said. "It is a world of magic and myth, where the most exceptional creatures in the megaverse call home." Her face took on a dreamy cast. "There are unicorns and dragons and behemoths that swim the oceans in pods so large they look like a small continent as they migrate. Beasts that have long since died out or have been hunted to extinction here are amassed in plenty there. It is a wondrous, mystical world and I miss it dearly."

"What brought you here?" he asked.

Magda sighed heavily. "A very jealous woman's spite," she replied. She lifted a hand and swept it around her. "This hot, scorching place is part of my punishment." Her hand fell to her lap. "That and the terrible loneliness that has become a way of life."

"You reap what you sow?" he asked softly.

"Aye, warrior," she agreed. "That you do."

"What did you do to incur that woman's wrath?"

She grinned—unrepentantly he thought—then laughed huskily. "Can you not guess? I stole her man!"

"Was he willing?"

"Oh aye, he was!" she replied. "I opened the door and he came barreling through!"

"Then it wasn't really stealing," he said.

"True," she acknowledged. "It was more like borrowing but to the Council I was the whore Lady Ailia labeled me and was made to atone for my transgression." She sighed again. "And I've been paying for it ever since."

Kell's eyebrows show up. "You are the *kerreyder*, the vengeance of the gods against men who betray womankind," he said with awe in his tone.

"In a manner of speaking," she said. "I offered my services and They accepted."

"I don't understand."

"When I was sentenced by the Council for acts contrary to morality—another name for fucking without permission—I was sentenced to banishment," Magda explained. "Since Lady Ailia was somebody on my world and held great sway with the Council, she insisted that I be remanded to a place as hot as my passion and twice as scorching."

"So they found my world."

She nodded. "They found your world and shipped me here in the blink of an eye. At that time, this world had just been newly formed by your gods and had as yet to be populated with any living thing. There wasn't even a mite crawling around anywhere."

"That must have been horrible for you."

"It wasn't pleasant but I had my powers and I fashioned a decent living place for myself. The Council showed some leniency in dropping me here where there was sufficient water and coolness. They sent books to occupy my mind and now and again supplies would simply appear. They didn't mean for me to starve or go stark-raving mad. When humankind developed, I began to use my inherent powers to take from them what I needed. Over the years, I have made myself a very comfortable abode."

"But you are still alone," he said gently.

She lowered her head. "Aye, warrior, that I am."

"Can you leave this place?"

"Never," she replied. "It is my prison and I am here for the duration."

"Which is?"

"Until time is no more on this world and that, I fear, will be a long time in coming."

Kell felt sorry for the woman. "I am sorry, Magda."

"As I said, you reap what you sow," she said in a fatalistic tone. "It is the companionship I miss most and when your gods offered me a way to know brief respites from my loneliness, I eagerly accepted." She snorted ruefully. "Mistakenly thinking those respites would come far more often than they have. As I said, I have not seen a living, speaking thing for over twenty years until you and the leech arrived on my doorstep—humble as it is."

"The gods set the punishment and you carry it out," he said.

"That is the way of it."

"I suppose my next question is what did I do to warrant my punishment. The leech's I understand. My own?" He shrugged. "What did I do to anger them?"

"Sometimes it isn't punishment, warrior, but a test. In your case, it is a test."

"A test of what? My loyalty to them? My love for Lillian?"

"Both, I think," she replied. "But more importantly, a test of how well you and the Dealachan deal together when you are asked to work toward a common goal, for a common purpose."

"Count Araneae said the gods had told him Lillian is to reunite the tribes."

"She was born to bring peace between you," Magda stated. "I have seen the future and I see happiness and prosperity for your people."

"And Caisil-Chrò?" he asked. "What do you see for him?"

Magda gave him a respectful look. "It says much of the man you are that you would ask, warrior," she said. "As for the Dealachan and his? He will return to the land of the snows, taking his lady-wife with him. He will keep her with him—though he would like to rid himself of her. Because he does possess a small amount of honor, he will be obliged to take care of her if not care *for* her."

"I can't say I blame him. The woman is crazy," he said.

"Nay, warrior. The woman is not crazed. She is bitter. She chose the wrong man and now regrets it deeply. She is like a careless better who backed the wrong horse then blames the man riding it for her problems. With women like her it is always the fault of the other and never her own."

"I have no love for her but I would see her at least content if not happy," he said.

"She will never be either, but that is her problem, not yours," Magda told him.

"As long as my lady survives this..." he said, his voice trailing off.

"She will."

They were silent for a moment then she uncoiled her legs from beneath her and stood. "It is time to meet that last requirement. Dawn is not far away."

Kell flinched. He had been so engrossed in her tale and in the sorrow he saw emblazoned across her pretty face, he had let the slide of time escape him. It was only then he felt the coming of the light and the pull of the Day Sleep.

He lowered his arm from the back of the settee and rose to his feet. He lifted his chin. "I will not take you on the floor like a rutting stag, Milady."

Magda held her hand out to him. "Will yonder bed suffice for your ravishment?"

Kell could not stop the smile that came unbidden to his lips. "I suppose I can endure it if I'm comfortable enough." The smile slipped away as quickly as it had formed. "But I will do so under protest."

"Duly noted," she said, her hand still extended toward him.

He stepped forward and slipped his hand into hers. It felt warm and soft, so unlike the cracked, filthy hand of the crone. "I love my wife, Magda."

"Don't belabor the point, warrior," she chastised, and turned her back to him, leading him toward the bed.

## Chapter Thirteen

The Dealachan looked up from the lumpy pallet where he'd spent many hours—including the Day Sleep. He wasn't surprised the hag had sent the Cuideag to roust him. No doubt she knew had she shown her ugly face, he would have done his best to strangle her. "Is it time for us to leave this hellhole?" he asked.

"Aye," Kell said.

"What of the antidote?" Caisil-Chrò asked. "When will she give it to us?"

"I have them both," Kell answered. He put a hand to his neck where two rawhide pouches hung. He peeled one over his head and handed it to the leech laird. "She said to guard it carefully."

Taking the pouch, the leech laird hung it around his neck "Where is the bitch?"

"I've not seen her since last evening," Kell said. "When...when..." He couldn't bring himself to say what had happened between him and Magda.

"Aye, I know when," Caisil-Chrò grumbled. "All too well I know when."

"She told me the *comairce* would be re-provisioned for us and that she changed the wheels for ones better suited to the terrain."

The Dealachan snorted. "She thinks she knows better than one who designed the fucking thing in the first place? Arrogant crone."

"She also said she would include something called a cooler with dry ice inside it so the Sustenance will not congeal. She said we would need the Sustenance more so now than on the trip out here."

"Dry ice?" the Dealachan repeated, ignoring the rest of what Kell said. "What the fuck is that?"

"I don't have a clue but she said not to touch it for it would burn us."

"Slap your palm against any kind of ice long enough and it will burn you," Caisil-Chrò grouched. "And I'm not the one with the tendency to get his fucking hand burned. You'd best remember what she said."

"We need to get going. She says a solar storm is headed our way and that will make for worse conditions," Kell told him. "She says there will be a severe dust storm."

"Oh that's fucking great!" Caisil-Chrò snapped. "That's just what the hell we need!"

Kell turned and headed out of the small cave, pushing wider the door that had kept the leech laird locked inside. He led, steadily climbing at a comfortable incline as they worked their way out of the cave system. They could feel the heat pressing down on them the higher they went until the air was once more so thick and windless they had trouble drawing breath.

"If Lilly wasn't worth every drop of sweat pouring off me, I'd cut my own throat before having to drag the *comairce* back through that inferno," the Dealachan complained as they exited the mountain and stepped out into the darkness of a moonless night that was so hot their skin felt as though it were baking onto their bones.

"Does it seem hotter to you?" Kell asked.

"Aye, and I wouldn't put it past that diseased cunt to have made it so just to punish us the more."

"I don't think it's her, leech. I believe it's the gods doing this to us."

"Either way, it fucking makes me want to kill something," Caisil-Chrò snarled.

They trudged across the sand to the *comairce* and stood staring at the wagon whose taller wheels now were broader and heavier, thankful she had provided two extra as had the wheelwright before they left Comhachagràtha.

"Might as well get to it," Kell said. "I'll take the first hour at the harness."

"Nay," the Dealachan said. "You had five hours of that shit. I'll take at least that much."

From her position at the mouth of the cave, Magda watched the leech laird step into the braces and hoist the harness to his broad shoulders. She stared at his handsome face—seeing it as clearly as though he were right in front of her—and memorizing it for that time when he would be brought to her for judgment. There was no doubt in her mind that one day he would and that his ashes would mingle with those already in the Abyss. As he strained to turn the heavy iron conveyance to begin the trek northward, her gaze fell on the warrior whose face she had spent an entire day studying, a man she had lain beside and touched even as the Day Sleep claimed him.

She had trailed her fingertips over every inch of his muscular body. There was not a mole or a freckle or a shaving nick she had not committed to memory. She would remember for all time the way his dark brown hair fell in thick waves to his brawny shoulders. She could close her eyes and see precisely the six-pointed, starburst-shaped pupils as black as pitch with the copper streak running through the irises, the way his dark lashes fanned against his high cheekbones, the patches of gray growing in at his temples, and the thick pelt of hair covering his broad chest.

She would remember it all—every nuance of his brogue, every expression on his handsome face, every touch of his strong hand upon her, his hard cock thrusting into her body.

Magda sighed deeply.

Aye, she would remember it all...

\* \* \* \* \*

*"I love..." he had begun to say, but she placed her fingers against his lips.*

*"Shush," she whispered.*

*She knew he was resigned to his fate and that hurt her in ways she could never admit. She would have preferred he come to her bed joyfully but that was not to be. He was as much her captive as she was a captive of the Burning Desert. His hand in hers as she led him to his destiny was warm and dry but there was a slight tremor that bespoke his anxiety.*

*"I promise to be gentle with you, warrior," she teased as they reached the bed.*

*"I certainly hope so," he countered.*

*With a twitch of her slender shoulders the white gown dropped like a delicate flower petal to the floor at her feet. She stood before him in all her wondrous glory – a luscious woman whose body had been made by the gods to please men.*

*"You are lovely," he complimented her, eyes sweeping down her.*

*"I am glad you think so," she said, and put her hands to the leather tie that held his breechclout in place.*

*He did not move as she relieved him of the simple garment. Though he looked relaxed, she knew he was not. His cock flexed as her gaze zeroed in on it but other than that reflective move, he was as still as a statue.*

*"This is not an execution, warrior," she said, and stepped closer to him, sliding her hands up his muscular chest and over his shoulders to wrap her arms around his neck.*

*"It feels like one," he said.*

*She smiled. "Let's see if we can not make you feel otherwise."*

*She had bid him put his arms around her, hold her, bring her body to his and he had obeyed like the disciplined soldier he was. The heat of his flesh was like heaven against hers and the hardening shaft over which he had no control jumped against her belly, causing her womb to clench.*

*She pulled his head down to kiss him. It was a soft touching of mouths – tentative, exploring and gentle. She flicked her tongue across his upper lip then drew the bottom between her pearly teeth, smiling playfully at him. His irises darkened a shade then the long spiky lashes closed of their own accord. His arms tightened and she knew he was lost.*

*She cradled the back of his head in her hand, her fingers spiked through his thick hair as he fastened his mouth to hers, his tongue invading like a conquering army. Against the side of her arm, she felt the wild beat of his racing heart through the heavy vein at his neck. She ground sensually against him and he groaned.*

*Dipping his knees, he swept her up in his arms and placed her on the bed, covering her body with his, nudging her legs apart so he could lie between them. She anchored his head between her hands and brought his mouth to hers again, dueling tongue probing deep.*

*He was rock-hard as he pushed her thighs wider. His body undulated over hers and he tore his mouth from her kiss to slide his lips to her breast. She arched upward, sucking in a breath at the glorious feel of his hot breath and wet tongue licking, his teeth nipping, his lips drawing upon her flesh. She held him to her like a mother her newborn and closed her eyes to the sweet sensations that were pebbling her flesh.*

*His hands smoothed over her arms, her sides, her hips. He reached between them and gripped his cock, placed it at her wet entrance. With one smooth stroke he entered her, going deep, settling within her as he thrust his hand beneath the crook of her knee to lift her leg over his hip, his shaft going deeper still inside her creamy sheath.*

*Her fingers dug into his shoulders and he put his hands to her to lace their fingers together then drew her arms up to hold them over her head. He rose up – the better to begin his strokes – and stared down into her eyes.*

*She studied his handsome face with its strong chin and high cheekbones, the uniqueness of his alien eyes, the fullness of his sultry lips and the way his dark hair framed it all. An ache began in her heart for she knew this man was everything she had ever wanted, dreamed about, craved. Her fingers tightened on his.*

*But he was more than just a handsome face. He was more than the broad shoulders and ripped muscles. He was more than the deliciousness of his weight pressing hers into the mattress. He was more than the long, hard, fulfilling breadth of his shaft and the expert way he applied it. He was more than the long legs that held hers apart. He was all male but he was also an honorable man and that alone made her desire him above any man she'd ever known.*

*As his thrusts grew in speed and force, she let her psychic powers invade his mind. She saw things there that brought tears to her eyes for she realized he was equating what he was being forced to do to torture – gentle though it was. And above all the other emotions and feelings he was experiencing, the betrayal of the woman he loved was at the forefront, ripping a wide scar into his heart.*

*"No," she had said to him. "No."*

*He stilled though the vein in his neck throbbed wildly. He was close to coming but her words had stopped him in his tracks.*

*"Too rough?" he asked. "Am I hurting you?"*

*She shook her head. "No, never that," she replied.*

*"Then what, Milady?" he asked, and she could tell he was striving hard not to allow his release to come.*

*"You are not betraying her, Kell," she said, staring deeply into her eyes. "You are doing what needs to be done to save her life."*

*Yet her words had no effect on him. She could see they did not. He could not – would not – accept the forgiveness from her for in his soul he knew he was as guilty as sin. He mentally shrugged aside her attempt to mesmerize him with those words.*

*"I am not hurting you then?" was all he asked.*

*She looked at him a long time and she knew had she a mirror to see her face, she would see sorrow and guilt of her own written there. "No," she said at last. "You are not hurting me, warrior."*

*He had continued his long, deep strokes, his mouth set into a firm line as though he were concentrating. Sweat had come to his handsome face and dotted his forehead and upper lip as he thrust into her.*

No, she thought as she felt the beginnings of her own release tickling at her center. He had not hurt her. She had hurt herself by wanting him, demanding of him something she knew would haunt him the rest of his life.

It was well within her powers to sweep it all from his mind like cobwebs from the great keep at Comhachagràtha, to wipe away all memory of her and what they were doing, but she knew it would do no good. The gods Themselves had decreed this be the warrior's destiny and she was but a tool to be used by them. That she gained pleasure and satisfaction from it was a secondary benefit. Were she to relieve him of the memory, the gods would only place it back again. It was a torture she had to endure that when this glorious man thought of her, he would see her with the eyes of a man being punished.

He came hard, spilling into her with a grunt that thundered through his wide chest. His fingers clamped tightly to hers and his hips shot forward again and again until she knew he felt her own climax pulsing around his softening cock.

Her legs had clasped him to her with such strength she knew she would leave bruises on his flesh. Her hips met his and her inner muscles squeeze every drop of cum from his shaft. She dug the back of her head into the pillow and arched her throat, crying out as the sweetest pleasure she would ever know shot through her from head to toe.

Depleted, he released his hold on her hands and sagged against her, laying his cheek to her breast. She enfolded him within the perimeter of her arms and stroked the damp hair from his forehead.

She felt his tears easing down the side of her breast.

"Shush," she said.

For a long while she simply held him as he cried. The silent sobs shook her to the core of her being and hurt her worse than anything she could have ever imagined. She knew she would have to live with her sin far longer than this wondrous man would draw breath...

Magda shook herself, tamping down the memory, storing it in that secret part of her heart no other would ever touch but his face she kept before her.

His image in her mind had to last her until time was no more.

Gently she put a hand to her belly where the spark of life had struck and smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Around them the wind howled with a fierceness that threatened to pluck the *comairce* off the wagon. Had the heavy iron not been bolted down sufficiently to the bed, that might well have happened. As it was, they worried about being flipped over and the wagon harmed in some way so it could not be used. With every punishing blast of sand-scouring wind, the conveyance rocked.

"You know, it could very well bury us beneath the sand," Caisil-Chrò reminded Kell. "We'd have to dig our way out."

"Let's hope that doesn't happen," Kell said. He was sweating worse than he had the first time in the torturous tank and was panting with every breath he forced into his overheated lungs. His head throbbed unmercifully to add to his discomfort.

"Want me to open the cooler again?" Caisil-Chrò asked as Kell put his hands to his temples and rubbed.

It had been a blessed surprise when they had opened it the first time and cool air had poured out from a heavy white mist. The Sustenance was being kept ice-cold and that too was a relief.

"No," Kell reluctantly replied. "We don't know how long that dry ice will last." He was afraid every time they opened the cooler, the shorter the life expectancy of the coolness.

"You're pale as a ghost, Kell. I swear this is harder on you than before."

Kell thought so too. It might be because they'd been in the damned torture chamber longer than normal. They had spent the Day Sleep and now half the night rising in the thing and with each passing minute—minutes they were exceedingly conscious of because of Lilly's plight—they cursed the storm that was pitching around them. But until the winds lay, they dared not venture outside. A man could get swept away deeper into the Burning Desert, lost in the sea of hot, undulating sand, covered up and suffocated in a matter of moments.

"How's your feeling of being cooped up?" Caisil-Chrò inquired.

"I'm all right," Kell replied. Being locked in the small space was the least of his worries at the moment. The intense heat, the blistering air burning in his lungs, the excruciating headache was at the top of his list of complaints.

"Well, just so..."

And then the wind stopped. The silence was deafening. Listening intently for fear the howling, screeching, clicking sound of sand striking the iron would start up again, the warriors held their breaths. When after five minutes had passed and it was still quiet, they scrambled up from the murky water in which they'd been sitting for several hours, grabbed their boots and opened the hatch, Kell careful this time to use the wet cloth to handle the latch.

It took both of them giving the hatch a mighty shove before the sand blocking the opening began to shift away and hot air could pour into the interior of the *comierce*. They climbed out of the conveyance and stood on the wagon bed, staring at the landscape that had changed so drastically.

"Do you think the wagon moved any?" Kell asked.

"I can't be sure but no. Why?"

"We were facing south when the dust storm came toward us from the west," the warlord said, pointing to where he believed that direction to be. "I see none of the signs that were there before, do you?"

Caisil-Chrò frowned. "No, and I understand your concern." He rubbed his bald head. "I have no compass and I am guessing neither do you."

"Something we didn't think to bring along," Kell admitted. He sat down to pull on his boots. "We've lost enough time so let's hope we're still headed in the right direction."

The Dealachan also sat down to put on his footwear as Kell hopped off the wagon bed and moved a little ways away to relieve himself.

"I hope to the gods we didn't catch anything from that hag," the leech laird said. "My cock has felt strange ever since I poked her."

"She wasn't what she seemed," Kell told him. "I don't believe you have anything to worry about."

"Maybe you don't but she despised me," Caisil-Chrò complained. "It would be just akin to a bitch like to her to give me something I'll have the rest of my miserable life."

Kell smiled as he finished emptying his bladder. He had come to the conclusion that the Dealachan lived to whine and nitpick. The warrior was more talk than act, which was just as well considering the feud between their two tribes.

"What if she cursed me in some vile way, Kell?" the Dealachan queried. "Hell, my dick could even fall off."

The griping made Kell laugh.

"I'm glad you find this amusing, arachnid," Caisil-Chrò growled.

"You want some Sustenance before we have at it again?" Kell asked as he hopped back on the wagon.

"I want you to eat shit and die," the Dealachan grouched. "Did you hear me?"

Kell was back inside the *comairce*. He reached for the lid of the cooler. "I don't really think you..."

Whatever it was struck so quickly Kell didn't even see it. All he felt was an intense, incomparable pain that literally drove him to his knees and snatched away his breath. Almost immediately the wound began to burn and itch with an intensity that made him scream in agony.

"The gods-be-damn it!" he hissed, grabbing his left forearm. He began to shake uncontrollably and sweat popped out all over his body. Nausea rushed up his throat and he pitched sideways just as Caisil-Chrò came bounding into the *comairce*.

"What happened?" the Dealachan shouted.

Unable to speak for the agony was spreading quickly up his arm and into his shoulder, his flesh swelling and turning red, Kell writhed in the water at the bottom of the tank. He stared up at the leech laird with eyes wide in his torment and then he began to convulse.

"Holy shit!" Caisil-Chrò hissed and grabbed for the Cuideag, struggling to get his thumb hooked in the corner of Kell's mouth, afraid the man would swallow his tongue as he thrashed on the floor. He managed to hold Kell's tongue down as the warrior

whipped about the floor but it took all the Dealachan's strength. He threw a leg over the Cuideag's lower body and clamped his legs across Kell's. "What in the name of the gods happened to you?" he asked.

And then the Dealachan saw what he knew had to be the culprit and he jerked back, dragging Kell with him, cursing and spitting as the thing sat perched on the lid of the cooler, glaring back at him with beady black eyes that promised retaliation.

"How did you get in here?" the leech laird snarled. He knew precisely what was glowering at him and he had no intention of letting the brutal thing take a bite out of him too.

Every muscle in Kell's body was slowly contracting, the severe pain flooding his body as the creature's venom spread through his veins. The warlord was unable to speak, to breathe properly and he was gagging, his body writhing in pain.

"The plants," he said, staring at the fresh tropical plants the hag had so thoughtfully provided for them for the trip back to Comhachagràtha. A part of him wanted to believe she hadn't known the creature would be among the plants—its colony at the base of some jungle tree disturbed—but another part cursed her for that component in his brain was sure the incident had been well orchestrated and that the venomous little beast had been meant for him and not Kell.

Sitting atop the cooler, the creature preened, dragging one of its front legs up to stroke its antennae. The size of a large man's thumb, the ebony *sneigen-bullad*—the vicious, poisonous insect known in the Dealachan world as the black bullet ant—was greatly feared through the world. Its bite was thirty times worse than that of a wasp and felt like a piercing wound with pain typically lasting for as long as twenty-four hours, the more severe reaction taking three to five hours to begin to subside. In that time, the victim suffered severe, long-drawn-out pain. Paralysis of the injured arm or leg could last equally as long.

"Damn, Kell," Caisil-Chrò said as he continued to struggle with the warlord as he thrashed, convulsing in what the Dealachan knew from experience was an unbearable reaction to the venom. He snarled at the ant, hoping it was the only one in the *comairce*.

There was only one way to find out. The sensory organs on his hairless body surface would allow him to detect even the slightest vibrations among the foliage and within the *comairce*. Additionally, the chemical receptors within his nostrils provided him with a highly evolved sense of smell.

"You rat-bastard little fucks stink like nectarines," he said, and then inhaled deeply. He caught the whiff of the formicid glaring back at him immediately but he did not detect the stench of another like it. Channeling the sensory abilities along his flesh, neither did he perceive any movement other than that of the preening ant on the cooler.

He had no choice but to let go of Kell if he was going to send the bullet ant to insect hell. Grabbing the cloth used to open the handle, he managed to wad it up with one hand and thrust it between Kell's lips so the man wouldn't swallow his tongue. Moving

quickly, he released his hold on the warlord, grabbed a jug of water from its rack and brought the thing down on the ant, squashing it flat.

"How do you like that, you shit-ass motherfucker?" he snarled. "Bite my friend, will ya?"

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than Caisil-Chrò wished to the gods he could snatch them back.

"Where the hell did that come from?" he questioned himself.

The Dealachan slowly turned his gaze to the man struggling against the back of the *comairce*. He winced, knowing Kell's skin was most likely burning from contact with the hot metal. He sprang at him and snatched the warlord away from the wall, enfolding the convulsing man tightly in his arms, knowing full well there wasn't much he could do for him.

"It's gonna be okay," he said. "You're gonna be all right. I'm here, Kell. I'm here."

Had he thought he had known pain before? Kell wondered as he lay trapped in the unending agony that was rippling through him like molten lava. He hurt so badly he wished to the gods he could die. Unable to make a sound save the panting as he struggled to breathe, he could not control the movement of his muscles though his left arm was totally immobile and flopped like a dead fish against his side. The foul taste of the wet rag stuck in his mouth did nothing to help the unremitting nausea that threatened to erupt at any moment and drown him in his own puke. His shoulder had come into contact with the superheated metal of the conveyance and was a small agony unto itself but so great was the pain rattling around inside him it didn't matter.

Strong arms were holding him and a gentle hand was smoothing the hair back from his forehead. A soft voice was speaking to him but he couldn't make out the words. The blood was rushing through his ears, drowning out the actual words.

*Let me die*, he silently begged his gods. *Please stop this pain and let me die.*

Images of his life passed in front of him and he stared with wide eyes, unable to blink, to close his eyelids against the scenes, and they were not pleasant scenes. They were filled with blood and gore and death. Everything bad thing he'd ever done or thought or imagined flitted across his mind to shame him, to humble him. Everything mean or hateful or nasty or insulting he'd ever uttered came echoing back to him and with it the hurt or angry expressions of those at whom the remark had been aimed. Every lie he'd told. Every dishonest thing he'd ever done. They all came back to haunt him, his soul laid bare before his very eyes.

And there was Daniva.

He hadn't loved the woman but he had been content to make her his bride, to accept what was expected of him in Joining and mating and bringing progeny into the world to replace him. He hadn't courted her, hadn't spoken sweet words to her, hadn't given her flowers or chocolates or done the things a man wanting to share the rest of his

life with a woman should have done. He had all but ignored her so was there any wonder she had given her affections—such as they were—to another man?

Then there was the *folachd*.

Whose fault had that been where thousands of men had died for the arrogance of one? Where rivers of blood had seeped into the ground and a blood feud had been born that had since taken more lives well after the battle had ended. The tribes had split apart and lives had been torn asunder because the warlord of Grian could not accept defeat in any form and having his woman stolen from him on the very night of their joining had been an insult with which he could not live. And because he could not live with it, innocent men had died.

Groaning inwardly at all the crimes—remembered and perceived—drifting across his fevered mind, Kell managed to force his eyes shut, gritting his teeth to the agony speeding through him.

*Forgive me*, he thought to the gods. *Forgive me for all I've done.*

"Pass out," Caisil-Chrò whispered urgently to the man he held so fiercely. "Damn it, Kell, just pass out!"

The Dealachan remembered all too well what a bullet ant's bite felt like. He'd only been twelve at the time and had nearly succumbed to the poison. Had not the healer packed him in...

Straightening up as though someone had rammed a steel rod up his spine, the leech laird dragged Kell with him over to the cooler, glaring down at the smashed body of the little bastard that had caused their present predicament.

"Bet you don't feel so powerful now, you little motherfucker!" he growled as he threw open the lid. The white wash of steam rose up to cool his face.

*"Wait! You can't put the dry ice on his flesh."*

The words came at the Dealachan in a stern tone but loud enough it seemed as though the speaker were right inside the *comairce* with them.

"I wasn't going to, you ugly crone!" Caisil-Chrò growled.

*"Let me fill the cooler with ice instead!"*

As he stared into the cooler, a solid chunk of ice formed along the bottom then water suddenly sloshed almost to the rim.

"You do have your uses, bitch," the leech laird grumbled.

He snagged his shirt from one of the niches and thrust it down into the water, pushing some of it onto his thigh. He sighed with pleasure then began rubbing the cold cloth over Kell's face and chest, repeating the procedure as a soft, cooling wind began wafting through the opened hatch.

"That's more like it."

*"I didn't know the pest was in the plants,"* the ghostly voice whispered. *"I am sorry."*

"Aye, well you should be!" the leech laird hissed.

*"Be careful with your words, General,"* the disembodied voice reprimanded.

"Blow it out your ass, baby. I've got more pressing problems here than worrying about your fucking ego," the Dealachan snapped.

Kell's body temperature was so hot that one pass of the wet shirt over his chest nearly dried the material. For over an hour Caisil-Chrò struggled to get that temperature down. The warlord was convulsing still but the tremors had lessened to a degree. His breathing was no better and his left arm was swollen to nearly twice its normal size.

*"He needs Sustenance. It will help heal him."*

Caisil-Chrò plunged the shirt beneath the icy water again, realizing that when the sorceress had taken away the dry ice, she'd also taken away the jugs of Sustenance.

"I know that," the Dealachan agreed. "How 'bout doing your magic shit and provide us with some?"

*"There is nothing wrong with you. Feed him."*

For once in his life, Meilich Caisil-Chrò did not think of himself. He did not question an order given to him by a woman for whom he had developed an intense hatred. There were—as he had said—more pressing matters on his mind. Without another thought, he brought his wrist to his mouth and sank his teeth into the flesh, put the wound over Kell's dry, split lips and let the crimson fluid flow down the warlord's throat.

"You moved all the furniture into your cave?" he asked as he watched Kell swallowing.

There was a long pause then, *"Aye."*

"Can you move living things?"

Another long pause then, *"I brought my cats to me."*

"Anything bigger?"

*"What are you asking, General?"*

"The time grows short and Lilly needs the antidote. There is no way I can pull this wagon by myself and Kell won't be able to help me for at least a day. That's a day we don't have. Can you take him up and drop him at Comhachagràtha?"

This time the pause was longer still. At last the reply came, *"Even if I could, it will take the both of you to cure her. Both vials of antidote are needed. You must each give her the potions in your vials."*

"By my hand, right?" he asked.

*"By your hand, aye."*

"Then take my hand with you when you take him." When there was no answer to that statement, Caisil-Chrò gave an irritated snort. "Hey, nothing says I have to be there to actually put the drops in her mouth. The rhyme said, 'two drops from the hand of the

man who made her his wife and two drops from the hand of the man who loves her more than life’.”

Another long pause then came the question, *“You would sacrifice your sword hand, General?”*

Not a moment of hesitation came from the leech laird.

“If it has to be that one,” was the reply.

Silence. Deep, penetrating silence. Not a breath of sound. Not a hint.

“Hello?” Caisil-Chrò called out. He waited a moment, rolled his eyes and spoke louder. “Hel...lo...ooooo? Anybody up there?”

The stillness remained.

“Fucking shit-ass bitch,” the Dealachan spat, and adjusted his hold on Kell whose struggles had subsided to a shudder now and again. He looked down at the warlord. “You with me, Saxx?”

A slow nod of the head was an answer that made the leech laird heave a heavy sigh of relief.

“You know you’re more trouble than you’re worth, don’t you, spider boy?”

“Not. Your. Hand,” was Kell’s reply.

“I can still whack off with the other one,” Caisil-Chrò growled. “What the fuck you worried about?”

“Not. Your...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I heard you the first time. Now shut the fuck up,” the Dealachan commanded. He rewet his shirt and blotted at the decreasing sheen of sweat on Kell’s pale face. “Feel good?”

“Aye.”

“Well, don’t get used to it. I’m not your maid, you know.” Caisil-Chrò adjusted Kell’s limp body against his own yet again, thinking the man’s temperature was coming down at last. “You really know how to take advantage of a friendship, don’t you?”

There it was again, the Dealachan thought, and could have bitten his tongue clean off.

“Go.”

“Go where?” Caisil-Chrò questioned.

“Take my hand and go,” Kell whispered, though it was obvious speaking drained him. “You can make it if you run.”

“I’m not leaving you here to die!” the Dealachan snapped in a disgusted tone.

“Go, Meilich. Now.”

“Aye, well, don’t you fucking telling me what to fucking do, arachnid!” the leech laird snarled. “I ain’t going nowhere and if that ugly-ass, pimple-popping, diseased cunt of a...”

One moment they were in the *comairce* and the next Caisil-Chrò was standing in front of the Cuideag fortress with Kell in his arms.

"Motherfucking shit of Nathair!" the Dealachan breathed, looking back at his own men who were staring openmouthed at him.

"Lower the drawbridge!" someone bellowed from the battlements. "Open the gods-be-damned drawbridge now!"

"General!" Colonel Dubois shouted as he ran up to his laird. "Sir, how did you...?"

"Don't bother me now, Dubois!" Caisil-Chrò snapped. "Can't you see I'm otherwise engaged here?"

The drawbridge fell with a resounding thud and even before the dust had settled, the leech laird was all but running across the wide planks, ducking down beneath the portcullis as it moved upward.

"Let me have him!"

It was Giles who came thundering up to the Dealachan but Caisil-Chrò ignored the man.

"I said let me have..."

"Fuck off!" the leech laird snapped.

"Listen, you slimy..." Giles began, his face turning scarlet with rage.

"Get an ice bath ready. He's been bitten by a bullet ant," was all the Dealachan said as he strode across the fixed bridge and into the outer bailey.

"How in the name of Nathair...?" Giles demanded.

"I don't have time to fuck with you. Just do it, man!" the leech laird barked. His long strides were eating up the distance toward the keep.

Giles ran on ahead, shouting for the servants. No one stopped to question Dubois and Count Renault running close on the heels of their laird. As Caisil-Chrò took the steps up into the keep two at a time and blasted past the guards, it was all the leech laird could do to stop his headlong rush as Beithir pointed to the stairs leading down to the dungeon.

"There is an ice pool in the torture chamber," the Baron explained, leading the way. "It hasn't been used in years but it should do for what we need."

All the Dealachan could do was nod for his strength was evaporating fast. Kell was a dead weight in his arms although the warlord was striving to hold on to Caisil-Chrò's neck to take some of the burden off the warrior.

Going carefully down the winding steps was hard but the leech laird was surefooted. Beithir was ahead of him with a torch held high and as they reached the lower level and passed three cells. From the corner of his eye Caisil-Chrò saw first Daniva then her mother and finally a man he surmised was Lord Quinton Kurst.

"Why isn't that bitch dead?" the Dealachan demanded of Beithir though it took some effort to force words from his lips.

"If you mean the viscountess, I'm leaving that to the duke to decide," Beithir answered.

Caisil-Chrò knew that wasn't so much the case than if Lillian succumbed to the poison administered to her by Lady Kurst. If that happened, he'd devour the bitch himself, Kell and his Cuideag justice be damned.

"Through here," Beithir instructed, and led the Dealachan into a small, dank room where Giles and two other men were pumping fresh icy water from the underground artesian spring that fed the fortress into a pool sunken into the floor.

Stepping down into the pool with his burden, Caisil-Chrò sucked in his breath for the water was as frigid as the fjords of his homeland. Though he was sweating, his muscles quivering from the strain of carrying Kell, the Dealachan did not want to stay long in that arctic water. Easing his burden into the sloshing liquid, he saw Kell's gaze was riveted on him. "You're going to be all right," he told Kell.

"Thanks to you," Kell said.

The Dealachan straightened up with a scowl. "There you go again insulting me. Knock it off or I'll be forced to hurt you, Saxxon, and I don't believe you're up to it."

Giles and Beithir exchanged a look. Dubois and Renault exchanged a look. All four men turned appraising eyes to Caisil-Chrò, who shrugged nonchalantly.

"The bastard's out of his head with pain. Don't listen to a word that comes out of his lying mouth."

With that said the leech laird climbed out of the water and strode away without a backward glance.

## Chapter Fourteen

They brought Lillian down to him on a stretcher and Kell was stunned to see how ashen her complexion was, how still she was. Beithir explained that she could now breathe on her own without help but had yet to move even so much as an eyelash. They set the stretcher down on the rim of the pool.

“Count Araneae and his men have gone back to their nest but said if you decide you need him, they will return and eliminate the Dealachans,” Giles said, glancing at the leech laird.

Caisil-Chrò had accompanied the stretcher and now hung back, waiting with his arms crossed over his broad chest as Giles and Beithir helped Kell to stand so he could lean over Lillian’s litter and administer the antidote to her.

With hands that shook, Kell took the leather pouch from around his neck and opened it to extract the vial. He had difficulty uncorking it but when Beithir offered to do it for him, the warlord shook his head.

“It must be at my hand,” he said tiredly.

Though he was still in a great deal of pain, he managed to pour the two drops of fluid into his wife’s mouth then kissed her gently on the lips before the last of his waning strength left him. He allowed them to ease him back into the water then lifted his head to look at the Dealachan. “Meilich?”

Caisil-Chrò nodded and came over to hunker down beside Lillian. He pulled the pouch from his neck and repeated what Kell had done—even down to the soft kiss upon the lady’s still lips.

Though every man there save Kell and the Dealachan gasped at the audacity of the move, Kell said nothing. As far as he was concerned, Meilich Caisil-Chrò had earned the right to do as he had.

“Take her back to bed,” Giles said. “Mayhap she’ll wake now.”

“Take me as well,” Kell ordered “This water has shrunk the boys to the size of peas.”

There was a loud snort that made all those assembled look to the leech laird.

“They weren’t that big to begin with,” the Dealachan grumbled, and shoved Giles aside as the man made to step down into the water to scoop Kell up.

“They are bigger than yours,” Kell stated.

“In your dreams, spider boy,” Caisil-Chrò scoffed as he went into the pool and bent over to sweep Kell into his brawny arms. He looked pointedly at Kell’s naked body. “The size of peas, my tight ass. More the size of gnats.”

Staring after the two men who were merrily insulting one another all the way up the stairs, Beithir and Giles turned to Dubois and Renault.

"What just happened here?" Beithir asked.

"What the harvestman predicted, I think," Renault answered. He held out his hand. "I am Count Andre Renault."

"Baron Collin Beithir, the duke's councilor," Beithir said, reluctantly taking the Dealachan's hand.

"And his father," Renault acknowledged.

"And I am General Tremont Giles, His Grace's second-in-command," Giles said, and took the hand of his counterpart who introduced himself as Colonel Andre Dubois.

Caisil-Chrò carried Kell first to the warlord's chamber where he helped him dress in a loose pair of white trousers then—despite Kell's objection—carried him into Lillian's room and around to the far side of the bed, placing him beside his lady-wife.

"Don't you be getting frisky with her until she's mended," the Dealachan warned.

"As if I could," Kell muttered. The moment his head hit the soft pillow, much of the ghastly pain that had been plaguing him settled down to a quiet, steady throb. He turned his head and looked at Lillian. "Does she seem pale to you?"

"Of course she does," Caisil-Chrò replied with a roll of his eyes. He looked around as a tall, lanky man in the white formal robes of a healer came bustling in with two blue-clad assistants. "That's my signal to hot-foot it. I detest healers almost as much as Cuideags."

Kell smiled even though the Dealachan glared back at him. "Go rest, Meilich."

"Don't tell me what to do," the leech laird snapped. "You're not the boss of me."

Kell held up a hand before the healer could start asking him questions. He waited until Caisil-Chrò had left the room before giving in to the press of the pain. "I hurt, Milord Healer," he admitted.

"And we will remedy that, Your Grace," the healer stated firmly.

The healer forced him to drink something truly foul that numbed his mouth seconds after ingesting it, and within a matter of moments, Saxxon Kell was unconscious. His breathing was easy and slow and he was at peace for the first time in hours. The swelling of his left arm began to lessen and his temperature went down. He snuggled into the clean, fresh scent of the linen pillowcase and soon began to walk the pathway of dreams. He did not feel the touch of his lady-wife's hand as she gently threaded her fingers through his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lillian was walking through a field of daisies as she dreamt. The wind was cool as it wafted around her, billowed her soft blue gown. She stooped to pick a small bouquet then continued on unhurriedly toward the tumbling stream that stretched up into the

dark green mountains above her. A soft scent of honeysuckle permeated the early morning air and the serenade of songbirds in the branches of the sweeping oaks with their beards of dangling moss added peace to her day.

She reached the stream and stared longingly at the silver-shot water, sunbeams reflecting off its surface like twinkling diamonds. A fish jumped, a frog croaked, a deer eased from the stand of trees to pad carefully, gracefully to the water's edge.

"Hello," she said, and the deer flexed its ears but apparently did not consider her a threat for it lowered its head to the stream and began lapping.

Sinking to the clover-strewn bank, Lillian began working the daisies into a chain, humming softly as she plied her nimble fingers over the delicate stalks. Now and again she would lift her head to watch the deer's progress as it ambled along the stream's course then faded into the greensward as gently as it had appeared.

She smiled and put the completed daisy chain upon her head, leaning back on her elbows to look up through the lacy branches at the fleecy white cloud patchwork on the startlingly blue sky.

"Are you well, Milady?"

Lillian turned her head and was not in the least surprised to see the beautiful woman standing a few feet away.

"I feel well enough, Magda," she replied.

Not corporeal the woman's form shimmered, wavered as it poised there. Her face rippled with every breath of wind.

"And our love?" Magda inquired.

"He was sleeping easily when I left his side," Lillian answered.

"I carry his son."

"I know," Lillian said, and looked away for a moment. She studied the stream for a moment then looked back at her visitor. "Will he ever know?"

The lovely vision shook her head. "He is not to be told nor will his son be told of him."

Lillian's gaze turned sad. "What will you say when he asks of his father?"

"That he was a stalwart warrior who stumbled upon our home and whose body I took in payment for saving his life."

"That makes it sound like rape," Lillian said softly.

"It was rape," Magda stated.

Lillian looked down at her hands, folded in her lap. "He will always feel the guilt of what he believes is a great sin."

"Aye," the sorceress agreed.

"But I do not see it as such."

"I knew you would not."

A single tear eased down Lillian's smooth cheek. "I hold no blame for what he was forced to do."

"The key word there is forced, Milady," Magda reminded her.

Kell's wife raised her head and looked into the gentle eyes of her visitor. "You were good to him, Magda, and for that I am grateful, but I will hold anger in my heart for you all the days of my life."

"I know."

"I can and will and do forgive him his part in this."

"As rightly you should," Magda said, and with a soft sigh dissolved into the whispering wind.

Lillian took one last look at the bright stream. She took one last look at the sky and the sun and the play of shadows across the meadow. She took one last look at the flowers that bloomed only during the daylight hours then heaved a tremulous sigh.

She journeyed back to the bed upon which her physical body rested—spooned against the man she loved more than life itself—and settled there with her arm over his chest.

There where she belonged.

Kell's dreaming was taking on a far different tone.

*He lay flat on his back, completely still, eyes open, taking long, deep breaths that hurt with each rise and fall of his chest. He hurt in places he didn't know he had and in some he wished at that moment he didn't have.*

*He tried to get up and groaned.*

*"Had enough or do you want more?"*

*Slowly, he shifted his tired eyes to the speaker. "Get bent," he whispered, unable to speak any louder.*

*Caisil-Chrò grinned nastily. He was hunkered down beside Kell with one arm resting on his bent knee, the hand of the other arm braced on a sweaty thigh. "I can keep this up all night." He cocked his bald head to one side. "How 'bout you, spider boy?"*

*"Get. Bent," Kell repeated.*

*The Dealachan laughed and pushed to his feet. "Hows 'bout I kick your ass some more? How would that be?"*

*With every ounce of waning strength he had left, Kell twisted to the side then over to his belly. He lay like that for a long moment then levered his chest from the rocky ground, scooting his ass up as he rocked to his knees. Wearily, he knelt there with his head hanging, his arms trembling, wanting nothing more than to lie down and die.*

*"You do and she's mine," the leech said cheerfully.*

*"In your dreams, you slimy prick," Kell mumbled, shoving himself up so he was kneeling, hands on his hips as he dragged in painful breaths that seared his lungs.*

*"How do you know my prick is slimy?" Caisil-Chrò challenged. He stood and then stared down at Kell with a crooked grin on his hairless face. "Last time I looked, it was bigger than yours."*

*Kell snorted at the insult and managed to gain his feet, staggering then managing to stay upright though he wobbled in place and the night world around him shifted in unpleasant ripples that made him nauseous. Very slowly he turned to face his foe and brought his fists up in a fighting stance.*

*"Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" the Dealachan hooted. "You still think there's fight left in you, ass-wipe?"*

*Though Kell continued to wobble, he took a swing at the jeering man and went down hard on one knee, grunting as he hit the rocky ground.*

*"Well," the leech laird said, "I'll give you one thing. You don't quit."*

*"She's mine," Kell stated.*

*"Only if you stay here to claim her," Caisil-Chrò told him.*

*Kell's shoulders sagged. "I'm tired, Meilich."*

*"You're a sissy-boy, Kelly," the Dealachan sniped. "Lillian needs a man, not a boy." He stuck out his leg to nudge Kell's hip with a dusty boot. "Now get the fuck up and fight for her."*

*Struggling to his feet, Kell gasped as the world shifted brutally around him and a whirlwind of hot air whipped his hair into his face. He put up a shaky hand to push it away, feeling sweat dripping down his chest, and his eyes rolled back in his head and he started to pitch forward.*

*"Oh no you don't!" the leech laird hissed, and snaked out an arm to wrap it around Kell's bare chest.*

*Kell felt the warm body press to his back, felt the breath fanning over his neck and tried to push the arm away. "Get off," he demanded.*

*"Be still and let me hold you," came the reply.*

*Shuddering at the thought of the leech wrapped around him, Kell put his hand to the arm curled around him and wondered at the softness of his enemy's flesh. "Stop that," he ordered.*

*"You're dreaming."*

*Once more the night whirled around him – shifting in slow motion with jerky movements that disoriented him even more. He plucked at the offensive arm then grasped it hard as he spun off in two directions at once.*

*"Gonna be sick," he mumbled.*

*"Giles!"*

*Kell's eyes flew open at the sound of that name. His grip tightened even more on the arm around him and he realized it was too small, too smooth to be Caisil-Chrò's. He lowered his gaze to that slender appendage.*

*"Giles!"*

It was Lillian's voice that called out, and when a door opened and heavy footsteps approached, Kell knew where he was. He could feel her sitting up behind him as he lay on his side with his head half off the bed.

"He's sick to his stomach again."

Almost immediately a bedpan was pushed beneath Kell's cheek and he winced, repelled by the odor wafting up from the porcelain receptacle.

"Get that fucking thing away from me," he ordered, and reached up to shove the bedpan.

"He's better," he heard Giles say. He heard relief mixed with humor in the older warrior's voice.

"Saxxon?"

A soft hand was laid to his forehead.

"Are you at yourself, beloved?"

"I'm home," he answered, feeling as though a weight had been lifted from his chest.

"Aye, love," she said. "You are."

"But still causing trouble, I see."

Kell recognized that voice too, and he frowned. "What is he doing here?" he asked.

"Meilich has been very worried about you," Lillian chastised. "He has been waiting for you to fully wake."

"Leech?" Kell questioned, seeing only Giles' broad chest in his view.

"What, spider boy?" the Dealachan asked. He came to stand where the warlord could see him.

"Go home."

"Saxxon!" Lilly gasped. "You..." She stopped speaking when her husband held his hand up.

"You have my permission to go now," Kell told the leech laird.

"As if I needed your permission to do shit," Caisil-Chrò stated with a snort.

"And take that crazy bitch with you."

"Saxxon!" This time there was outrage in Lilly's voice and she shoved at his shoulder.

"I will and her hag of a mother too," came the reply. "Or would you prefer to keep her in your dungeon where she's currently battling rats and vermin?"

"If she stays here, I might be tempted to strangle the old bat. Take her with you and drain her dry for all I care."

"Saxxon Kell," Lilly protested with a heavy sigh. She squeezed his shoulder.

"She tried to kill you, wench," Kell reminded her.

"I've forgiven her."

"I haven't nor will I ever," her husband declared. "It's best she be gone along with her crazy daughter and silly-ass son."

"Oh no," Caisil-Chrò said. "I said nothing about taking him with us."

"Then I'll send him somewhere so I won't be tempted to shed his blood," Kell said.

"Send him to Aristallee," Giles suggested. "A little hardship duty might do him good."

"Okay, if that's settled, then I'm outta here," the leech laird said, and turned to go.

"Meilich?"

Caisil-Chrò looked over his shoulder. "Aye, Saxx?"

Kell pushed himself up so he could extend a hand to the Dealachan.

"What the fuck is that?" Caisil-Chrò asked as he faced the bed again, coming closer, giving Kell's hand a suspicious look.

"My hand in peace," Kell replied.

The leech laird's lips pursed but he took the proffered hand, gripping it warrior style and holding it just perhaps a little longer than was necessary.

"And thank you," the Cuideag said quietly.

When he stepped back, the leech laird shrugged carelessly. "You were more trouble than you were worth but what the heck, eh? I had nothing better to do."

"I'll walk you out, Milord," Lillian said.

"No, you stay here," Caisil-Chrò replied. "The man needs a keeper, you know? Else he will get his ass into trouble."

"I heard that," Giles agreed. He thrust his own hand out. "The Wind be at your back, General."

For a moment it seemed the Dealachan would refuse the offer but then he slapped his hand loudly to Giles' arm, pumped once, and then snatched his hand back as though the contact had burned him. He shot a parting glance to Kell. "Stay out of mischief, spider boy," he ordered.

"Stay safe, leech," Kell replied.

Caisil-Chrò looked to Lilly. "Have a good life, Milady."

"I will. Take care, Milord."

Kell saw true regret enter the leech laird's gaze then the man was gone.

## Epilogue

Lillian threaded her fingers through her husband's dark hair and sighed. It was well after midnight as they sat beside Lake Rong Finiche. The waterfall that fell for hundreds of feet from the summit of Mount Tesqua splashed into the black expanse of the lake and in the moonlight, the high-rising spray looked like fog along the banks.

"The Black Spark of Life," he had told her.

"I dreamed of this place," she said softly.

"Umm," her husband replied. He lay with his head in her lap, eyes closed, ankles crossed, hands folded on his flat belly.

"And the little flowers."

"Flowers," he repeated, words slurred as though he were on the edge of falling asleep.

"Flowers, Saxxon," she said, tugging lightly on his thick curls.

Kell wedged one eye open and looked up at the underside of his wife's chin. "*Keynnagh*," he called them.

"Aye, so you said in my dream," she acknowledged, looking down at him. She smiled.

"When did you have this dream, wench?" he inquired, for this was the first time he had brought her to this wondrous place with its tall palms swaying in the gentle breeze.

"Awhile ago," she replied.

"Huh," he commented.

"We made love here."

Interest sparked in his gaze and she saw the tiredness disperse. He blinked then she pursed her lips as his stretched into a knowing grin.

"I know what you're thinking," she said.

"You're reading minds now, are you?" he countered.

"I don't need your abilities to know what you're thinking, Milord," she answered. "It's what's always on your mind."

He unlaced his fingers and put a hand up to cup her cheek. "And what is it I'm thinking?" he queried in a husky voice.

"That you are going to make my dream come true," she replied smugly.

"Aye, that I will."

He snaked his hand behind her head and pulled her face down to his, capturing her lips gently then with more pressure as he slipped his tongue between her lips to taste

the honey of her mouth. Her long hair fell around him like silk and he inhaled the jasmine scent of it, his groin engorging with blood, need surging thickly through his entire body.

His arms went around her and he rolled her over him and beneath him, pressing his body atop hers as he deepened the kiss. He wedged his knee between her legs to spread her thighs, reaching down to tug the hem of her gown up so he could lay his palm against the heated core of her. He levered himself above her, looking down into her face, the moonlight haloing the dark fall of his hair.

"I can smell your need, Lilly-fair," he said in a tone that set butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

"I can feel yours," she returned.

He ground that hardness against her thigh. "Want it?"

"Have I ever denied you?" she asked.

He swooped down to capture her mouth once more, shifting his hand so his fingers entangled in the flimsy silk of the only obstacle between him and what he craved. The delicate fabric tore as he snagged it in his grip and tugged it away. He shifted his body, releasing her mouth as he slid his hand between them.

"That's the third pair this week," she reminded him as he fumbled to free himself from the confines of his pants. "You're going to single-handedly keep the silk merchants in business if you keep that up."

Wrapping his hand around his cock, he pulled it from his fly then positioned it at her entrance. "Well, wench, since I intend to keep it up, I suppose I should invest in a silk factory, eh?"

"Might be a good idea," she said, catching her bottom lip between her teeth as he pressed the broad head of his shaft into her sheath. As it always did, his large member stretched her fully as it probed deeper, filling her with a delightful warmth that spread all through her loins.

"Then consider it done," he said, and went as deep inside her as her body would allow.

Seated completely within her, he entwined his fingers with hers and imprisoned them to either side of her head, his hips beginning a slow rhythm that made him ache.

"You are a bad man," she told him with a sigh.

"Mayhap, but I am gods-be-damned good at what I do," he said, his thrust increasing in speed.

Lillian lifted her legs to trap his hips. "That you are, Milord," she whispered.

He lowered his lips to hers and impaled her mouth with his hot tongue, pressing deep into her as he did. He felt her clench around him and released all restraint he had upon his body.

Lillian arched her hips up to meet his hard, deep thrusts, welcoming the invasion, the conquering and the fulfilling size and length of him, the weight of him upon her.

His mouth was sweet, his tongue a wicked little tool that set her pulse to racing as he swept it across her bottom lip then beneath the upper and along her teeth.

"A bad, bad man," she mumbled against his mouth.

"Um-hmm," he agreed. "But I'm your bad man."

Lillian smiled as the first squeeze of release began, gripping him with sweet little pulses that drew a hot liquid response from him. She felt him spurt deep – once, twice, three times – then he stilled, allowing the last of her own little ripples to slowly fade away before he lowered his entire weight upon her, knowing how much she liked that.

"I love you," he said.

"As I love you," she replied.

In the moonlight, there beside the ebon waters of Lake Rong Finiche, in the shadow of Mount Tesqua with the Plains of Dithreabh stretching beyond, another spark of life was struck.

His name would be Sabert but his mother would call him Saba.

## **About the Author**

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married forty years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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