

DARK ELVES IV: Dissent

Loose Id

Jet Mykles



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Prologue

“Take the chance to rid yourself -- to rid the raedjour -- of the man you’ve hated, and take the woman you love...”

The woman we both loved, Savous thought, then spoke aloud, “I miss you.” He stared into the long-cold ashes in the firepit beneath his feet, hearing the echoes of the last words spoken to him by his master. His friend.

Radin. He remembered the man’s face so well: the smirk, the amused raised eyebrow, the teasing gleam in intelligent red eyes underneath the cup design etched into the black skin of his forehead. He remembered the hours upon hours of instruction in magic or conversation about nothing in particular, followed by hours of no talking at all. He remembered long hikes through starry nights and explorations in darkened caverns. Memories of more sexual lessons could still cause Savous to shiver in delight.

Savous stared through the unlit air at the ceiling above, his night vision allowing him to see the bumps in the stone ceiling, but not the colors of the mineral chips that caused them. “Although it’s probably better you don’t see the mess of things I’ve made without you.”

It had taken Savous less than a century to completely fracture a society that had been intact for four thousand cycles. True, the four *rhaeja* before him had direct access to their goddess, while he did not, but he didn’t consider that an excuse. After just a little over eighty cycles since the *vetriese* had imploded and taken away their access to Rhae, the *raedjour* now lived in splinter groups. For almost fifty cycles, Savous and his appointed council had managed to keep the majority of their people -- including the converted women and all of the children -- in the underground main city and had tried to conduct life as usual, but they’d been destined to fail from the start. Without Rhae’s guidance, more and more raedjour

lost heart or became frustrated with a life that seemed to have no meaning. Her will had kept them going for millennia, and without it they felt lost.

He heard footsteps on the staircase leading up to the workroom. Wrong rhythm to be Irin, his true mate. Longer legs. Heavier tread, although one would need raedjour hearing to even detect it.

Commander Salin entered. The torch he carried lit the abandoned workroom, illuminating the stone walls, three of them manufactured and one natural rock to match the natural ceiling. A pace inside the doorway, the tall man paused, scanning the space with an assessing look. "I haven't been up here in quite some time."

"Since that day?" Savous asked softly. The day Salin and Nalfien had arrived to find Savous and Irin kneeling in the cold firepit, newly marked by Rhae before She had thrust them from the vetriese and closed it for good.

Salin took a few steps toward him. "Perhaps not." He propped a hand on his hip, right beside one of the shortwords sheathed on either side of his waist. "Irin told me where to find you."

Savous crossed to the edge of the huge pit, toward Salin, noting that long-dead ashes did not even kick up to cling to the soft suede of his boots. "Rhicard is back?"

Salin nodded. He crossed to a dusty scone and set the torch in it.

"What did he find?"

"What we expected."

Savous sighed, gripping the edge of the pit, staring at the iron rim that had kept the long-ago fires from burning the stout wooden planks of the floor. "The humans have found us."

Salin's boots appeared in Savous's downcast line of sight. "They know of us, for certain."

"Did he talk to them?"

"He didn't get the chance. They prepared to attack, so he and his men left. As per your orders." Savous heard Salin's chide at having instructed Rhicard to retreat rather than fight, but it was mild. If Savous had intended a true confrontation, he would have sent Salin, the commander of the raedjour warriors. If he'd wished bloodshed, he would have sent Krael, Salin's second-in-command. Instead, he'd sent Rhicard, his only adult, unmated sorcerer, with instructions to observe.

Savous tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling again. "How far into the forest were they?"

"Approximately a league in."

"And we didn't sense them."

Salin declined to answer the obvious. In times past, before the collapse of the vetriese, the raedjour would have sensed the presence of humans in the forest. That sense had diminished and vanished over time.

Savous turned and sat on the edge of the pit. "They're getting bolder. How close are the houses now?"

"Rhicard had Tolen scale a tree to get a bird's-eye view. There's a small village within sight of Tongue River."

"Damn." Savous thought a moment. "How close is that to the rogue caverns?"

"Per Rhicard, humans were all over those caverns."

Savous turned to eye Salin. "Did the rogues abandon them?"

Salin shrugged. "One would hope."

"Damn."

Salin squatted down beside Savous. "You need to come and hear Rhicard's report for yourself."

Savous averted his gaze, staring at the cobweb-covered bookcases lining the wall in sight. He'd cleared his father's bookshelves decades ago. "What if the humans captured them?"

Salin said nothing. There was nothing he could say. Those on the council had speculated for cycles on what the humans would do if they captured one or more of the raedjour. After millennia of killing human men and converting human women for procreation, the raedjour were understandably concerned about revenge. True, their existence had been hidden by mythology and divine protection, and all the humans they had captured had been surprised at their existence. But with that divine protection gone, Savous and his council knew it was now only a matter of time before a true confrontation with the humans arose.

Savous turned his head to stare again into the ashes. Not for the first time, he cursed the destiny that had granted him the privilege of ruling in such unstable times.

"He gave up his life so you'd be here."

Savous shut his eyes over the immediate swell of guilt. As much as Savous loved him and missed him, Radin had been Salin's brother. The two of them had been closer than most brothers among a race of men. They'd shared a bond which had included a magical mind-link that Savous hadn't even known about until right before the bitter end. Savous had wondered if Salin would even follow Radin in death. He hadn't. Salin was made of stronger mettle than to give up his life just because his brother was gone. Salin was a warrior who served his race; he was truemate to a woman he loved and father to three hearty boys. He was an acknowledged leader among their race, and his support was an amazing blessing to Savous, even if they didn't always see eye-to-eye. To Savous's surprise and supreme relief, Salin had turned out to be one of his strongest allies and staunchest supporters in this time of

change. Savous didn't know if that was because of himself or because he'd been Radin's only apprentice. He didn't care. He'd take any help Salin cared to offer.

Salin stood. He nudged Savous with the toe of his boot. "Don't cheapen his choice with regrets."

Savous looked up to see Salin with hand extended to help him to his feet. Savous, too, had to be a leader among men. He also had a truemate whom he loved, and a daughter, the very first to the raedjour. As she was still just a child, they had yet to know the full extent of what her existence would mean to their race. It was Savous's duty to struggle, to persevere, for her and for all the other children, born and not yet born.

He took Salin's hand and allowed the taller man to pull him up out of the firepit. "Let's go talk to Rhicard."

Chapter One

Sighing heavily, Marisol reached up to see if she could tie her heavy ash blonde curls higher up on her head. The humid summer air was hot and thick like honey. She'd grown up in the heat, and she still hated it. She longed for somewhere cool, somewhere away from the dratted sun that beat down on her and made her dress drenched with sweat.

Moving, however, wasn't likely. Thanks to her recent marriage, it looked like she was destined to live in the hot, awful climate her entire life. They couldn't even live near the river, where there might be some breeze. No, their town was situated in a valley that seemed to cuddle the heat.

Grimacing, she slapped at a bug that took advantage of her newly exposed neck. She also wanted skin that was impervious to bugs. "Oh, and a life of leisure with plenty of handsome men to wait on my every need," she muttered to herself, bending to pick up the basket of laundry she was bringing back from the community wash house. "Why not wish for it all, since I can't have any of it."

But she didn't have it all that bad. Not anymore. Tonas wasn't perfect, but he wasn't such a bad husband. A blacksmith, he was a bit rough around the edges as well as rough in manner. But she'd learned the trick of dealing with him, so the admonishing cuffs came less and less often. This morning he'd given her a black eye, but that was because she'd come too close to the hot forge when she'd told him she was going to do laundry. That he'd apologized counted for something. His trade assured that they shouldn't ever go hungry. Although their intimate life together was nothing to brag about, she didn't hate it as much as Auntie Bette had told her she would.

Leaving behind the closer packed stores of the main cluster of their small village, she started up the dirt path that led off the main road past her house to the communal pastures beyond. She didn't hear the clang of Tonas's hammer as she approached the huge barn which

housed both Tonas's workplace and their home. Passing under the spreading oak that shaded the wide main opening of the smithy, she could see that no one was there, not even the little mule who was usually strapped in the carousel. It was eerily quiet.

A handsome black gelding dozed in the shade closer to the door that led into the section of the barn in which they lived. She recognized the animal and the old saddle well. But she'd seen her brother, Geriman, earlier that day at the tavern with his friends. Why was he here? Had he come to gripe at her about Tonas hitting her? She certainly hoped not. Talking about such things anywhere near Tonas wasn't a very sound plan.

She stepped up to the main door of the little house attached to the side of the smithy and entered. The back door, directly across the main room from the front, was wide open. Neither Geriman nor Tonas was in what she thought of as the house.

Strange. "Tonas?" she called, setting down the basket of laundry on the large, sturdy table that took up most of one wall of the long main room. "Geriman?"

It wasn't the big, burly form of her husband that appeared in the doorway. It was Geriman's slim, short form.

"Ger, what are you doing here?"

Eyes wide, he glanced over his shoulder. His curly hair, the same light ash as hers but cut much shorter, was wild and windblown about his handsome oval face. He wore his favorite brash blue tunic with the blousy orange undershirt. His sword and dagger were sheathed at his belt. He turned back to focus his big, bright blue eyes -- the match for hers -- on her. Which was when she knew something was horribly wrong. It always was when he was speechless like this.

She spread a hand over her chest, gripping the back of a chair with the other. "What's wrong?"

He swallowed, hands clutching either side of the open back door.

She stalked toward him, her hands fisting and releasing. "Geriman" -- she put their deceased mother's tone in her voice -- "you tell me what's wrong right this moment."

He dipped his head. "Marisol, I'm sorry."

Not good. Nothing good ever started with Geriman apologizing. Her headstrong younger brother had a tendency to act first and say that he was sorry later. Always when it was too late.

She stopped before him and reached up to cup his chin with her thumb and forefinger. He was a few inches taller than she, but at times like this he became the small five-spring-old to her nine-spring-old. "Geriman."

He frowned at the floor. "He asked for it."

"He who?"

His frown turned into a sneer. "He *hit* you! He called you a whore, Sol. *His* whore. I don't care if you are married to him, he can't just call you that."

Her blood ran cold. With effort, she suppressed the shiver that wanted to take her body and kept her eyes glued to her brother's. "What did you do?"

"He deserved it. He threatened me with an axe."

The shiver took her, but she ignored it as best she could. "What. Did. You. Do?"

He swallowed and glanced over his shoulder again.

"Oh, no." Her words were a whisper. She shoved at his shoulder, moving him out of her way. A step past him took her to the dirt yard behind the barn. The yard was entirely enclosed by a high wooden fence, with three large stalls at the back for temporarily holding horses or cattle. Currently, only Tonas's old bay nag was there, munching hay.

There was a pair of large boots lying on the ground just inside one of the empty stalls. The marks of dragging etched the dirt from the middle of the yard to where the boots lay. Dragging of something much larger than just the boots.

"What did you do?" she demanded, picking up her skirts and rushing toward the stall.

"Sol, wait!"

She didn't. She heard Ger behind her, but it wasn't that far to her destination. Reaching the opening before he could stop her, she saw her husband laid out on his back. A huge splotch of blood colored the tear in the dirty gray of his loose, sleeveless shirt.

Marisol's hands flew up to cover her gasp. "You *killed* him?" She'd hoped they'd just fought. She'd hoped he might have knocked Tonas unconscious.

She should have known Geriman never did things halfway, except think his way through a situation.

"It was for you, Sol," came the quiet voice behind her. "I couldn't..."

She rounded on him, hands fisted at her sides. "So my husband is dead because of *me*?"

He flinched at her tone. "What do we do now, Sol?"

We. It was always "we" afterward. For all of his twenty springs, Sol had taken care of him. For the last few, she'd been all the family he had.

She couldn't stop now.

She took a deep breath and let it out. What to do? Everyone in the village knew that Geriman and Tonas didn't get along. It was common knowledge that Geriman was protective of her and Tonas hit her. Although he was well liked in these parts, Geriman wasn't likely to be absolved of this. Which meant they had to go. "Go get your horse and bring him back here. And saddle the nag." She picked up the skirt of her plain, light woolen dress and headed for the house.

"What are we --?"

"Don't *argue* with me, Geriman," she growled. "Just do what I say."

She entered the house, inwardly calling herself all sorts of fool. She should let him pay for what he'd done. He was a hothead. He'd been in plenty of scrapes before. But he had

never killed anyone. What would have possessed him to do so *now*? Now, when things were almost going all right. When she was married to a man who made a good living. When Geriman was almost done with the training that would get him into the Gourдум city guard, with a chance to perhaps one day move to the capital and join the *royal* guard. He was good enough with that damn sword and dagger. Why did his talent lie in something so dangerous?

Fighting tears, Marisol snatched up the saddlebags that sat beneath a side table and put them on the main table in the center of the room. She bustled around, snatching up anything she thought they might need. She eschewed a lot of clothing, concentrating more on the bare essentials. She did, however, dump every last coin from Tonas's hidden stash underneath the oven into one of the bags.

She tried not to think of the future. By helping Geriman, she was getting into as much trouble as he. People might believe that Geriman did it for her, which would make her an accomplice. But she couldn't let him suffer. Long ago, her mother had made her promise to take care of him. He was all the kin she had in the world now. She couldn't let him hang.

"No matter how stupid he is," she muttered, dashing useless tears from her cheeks.

She finished with the saddlebags and laced them up. She grabbed the thick, rolled blanket she kept ready for Tonas when he left for overnight. As a last thought when she exited through the back door, she grabbed a sheathed shortsword. Tonas had taught her somewhat how to use it, wanting to make sure she could protect herself at least a little when he was gone on a trip.

She gulped over a lump in her throat. She hadn't loved him, but she hadn't hated him, either. He didn't deserve this.

When she got to the courtyard, it was late. The sky was slate gray behind the lingering oranges and pinks of the sunset. She thanked the heavens that no customers had come to call on Tonas after Geriman had arrived. It was a slow time, and Higard wasn't a large town.

Geriman's black gelding greeted her with a soft whicker. The nag stood beside him, that perpetual bored look in her eyes. Geriman was just cinching her saddle.

Marisol tossed one set of saddlebags over the black's rump, then went to Geriman's side. "We'll need to ride hard for a day or so," she said, pushing him aside, dumping the rolled blanket into his arms. "Go secure your horse." She slung the second set of saddlebags over the nag and checked the cinch of her saddle, then puzzled over the sheathed sword. The saddle didn't have a place for it. She'd have to carry it. *Bother*. "We'll take the road to Gourдум and sell the horses there."

"Sell? Sol, I just got Ink."

She glared over the horses' backs at him. "And you just killed a man. Don't you whine about losing your horse."

He glanced in the direction of the body in the stall.

Unable to resist, Marisol left her mount and went to the stall herself. She stared at the body that had once been her husband. "I'm so sorry, Tonas," she said, not quite brave enough to get close. "Someone will find you tomorrow. If nothing else, Harold has an appointment with you." She let a few tears drop. "I'm so sorry. You didn't deserve this."

She heard footsteps behind her and whirled, catching Geriman with his mouth open.

"*Don't* say a word. Not a word. I can't talk to you right now." She pointed at the horses. "Saddle up. We have to leave. Now."

Chapter Two

To the bottom of his heart, Jarak wished he wasn't very good at killing his own kind.

"Die, loyalist scum!" the dying man wheezed, fingers clutching with his last strength at Jarak's bare shoulders.

You first, Jarak thought. Fighting disgust -- or was it despair? -- he pushed the rogue off his right-hand sword before the hand clutching his shoulder could slide down and jostle the arrow stuck in the meat of his bicep. The rogue's lank white hair slid over Jarak's other shoulder as the man fell back. Dispassionately, Jarak watched him stumble and fall to his knees.

Black eyes glittered up at him from within an equally black face, feverish with zeal and shining in the little bit of moonlight that filtered through the tree canopy above. "Your rhaeja shut Her away," he told Jarak, one hand pointing while the other clutched at the oozing wound just below his ribcage. "She'll never forgive him for that. Or any of you who follow him."

Jarak should have argued. He should have laughed in the man's face. Most of the rogues had similar feelings. But he knew it wouldn't do any good. The man was dying, and convinced he was right. The lack of white marks etched into his skin said that he, himself, had never entered a vetriese to touch the goddess. All of the men who had done so stood firmly on the same side as Jarak, behind the rhaeja. But the rogues preferred to overlook that fact. So he said nothing, just stood there, watching a man who should have been like a brother to him slump to the ground in death.

Behind him, he heard only the soft rustle of footfalls, no rush and slash of fighting. He turned. The moonlight filtering through the thick canopy of leaves above played tricks with his night vision, showing him shadows and depth overlaid with murky color. Used to it, he had no trouble picking out his companions, despite their dark clothing and darker skin. Nor

did he have any trouble realizing that those standing *were* all his companions. Three of them, at any rate.

“Where’s Rysen?”

Vren glanced up from where he rummaged through one of the fallen men’s clothing. “Over there.” He turned his gaze toward the side.

Rysen, one of Jarak’s good friends from warrior training, lay dead within a pile of leaves. Someone had arranged him neatly on his back, his long, loose white hair fanned about his face. A gaping, bleeding slash severed the apple of his throat.

“Damn.”

He hissed as someone touched the arrow in his arm. He spun to see Uleanjen standing beside him, a solemn look on his normally smiling face.

The other gestured at the arrow. “Let me look at that.”

Jarak sighed and nodded. While Uleanjen prodded at the wound, Jarak distracted himself by counting the bodies of the rogues.

“There were only five of them?”

“Six,” said Kenth as he stood, brushing off his leather trousers. “One ran.”

“Wonderful,” Jarak grouched, wincing as Uleanjen’s strong fingers dug into the wound. “Gone to warn his friends.”

Kenth ran a hand through his chin-length hair. There wasn’t enough light streaming to truly set off the white, and night vision didn’t show him true color, but Jarak knew what his friend looked like well enough. “It’s very likely. We should go back.”

One side of Jarak’s top lip lifted in a silent growl. “We haven’t even sighted game.”

Kenth met his eyes. “We’re not likely to with rogues prowling about.”

There were people depending on the spoils of their hunt. “We’ll head toward the north hills --”

“You need to get this looked at,” Uleanjen announced. “It needs a healer’s touch.”

“Is it that bad?” Jarak asked, glancing at it.

“It’s barbed. I’ll have to leave it in or risk tearing the muscle.”

“Nine hells!” Jarak spat, glaring at the blood which formed a steady, liquid trail down his arm. “Fine. I’ll go back. You all can go --”

“With you,” Kenth declared.

Jarak turned to look at the other man. Jarak was nominally in charge of this hunting expedition, but he’d known each of these men most of his two hundred seventy-odd cycles of life. They’d listen to him and follow his lead, but they’d let him know if they disagreed with him. Feeling cantankerous, he argued. “Don’t be ridiculous. The three of you can make good time to the north and probably still find the yarin before they migrate any higher up the mountain.”

Vren stood, sliding one of the dead men's sheathed daggers into his belt. "We're not leaving you alone and wounded. Not with rogues about."

Jarak shut his eyes.

Uleanjen squatted to pick up Jarak's second shortsword. "They haven't been this close to the city before, Jarak." He stood, holding the blade up. "We need to let them know back home."

Jarak sighed, sheathing his right-hand blade to free that hand to take the one Uleanjen held. His left hand could hold it, but it would hurt. "Yes, yes, yes. You're right. You're all right. It's just..." He growled.

"We know."

Rogues. Less than a day away from the main raedjour city.

Life was hard since Rhae had left Her elves for the second time. Without their goddess as a binding factor, the disparate groups did not always get along. Those bands who ran the small farms -- or what constituted farms for the elves -- and the few domesticated animals lived far enough away from the main city underground that it was difficult for the loyalists to get food sometimes. Thus, the warriors spent less time learning combat in training and more time learning woodcraft and hunting. Their warrior skills did not go neglected, for many of the rogue bands would attack the loyalists.

He sat as still as he could while Uleanjen broke off the shaft of the arrow, then bound the wound.

Jarak could have waited to see Salin. He wasn't under orders to report in immediately on his return, especially since the trip was aborted prematurely. Yet he found himself knocking on the outer door of Salin's suite.

Pannoc, Salin's current squire, answered. The youth was all of Jarak's height but none of his breadth, a skinny boy who always made Jarak think of a stiletto blade. Even his hair was straight and thin.

"Jarak," the boy greeted with a smile.

"Pan." He nodded, glancing inside toward the closed bedroom door. "Is he here?"

"He is." Pan stepped back, giving Jarak room to enter. "But he might not come out for a while."

Jarak smiled, stepping inside. "Have they eaten?"

Pan indicated the tray set on a table by the door. "I was just about to see if they were hungry."

"Mind if I do it?"

Pan shrugged. "Nope." He turned toward a seat by the fireplace and a pile of mending.

As Salin's former squire, Jarak was quite familiar with the routine. He went to the door, casually unlacing the single tie that held his vest together, hoping Pan didn't notice. He knocked on the door as he picked up the tray, but didn't bother waiting before he opened it.

The room had changed very little in the seventy cycles of seasons since Jarak had been Salin's squire. It had changed very little before then. It wasn't the main bedchamber of the commander's suite. That room lay on the opposite side of the main chamber. This room, however, saw more use every five cycles, when Salin's truemate, Diana, went into heat. During that time, their normally active sex life got skewed out of proportion when Diana became nearly insatiable. The heat was part of the result of the change from human woman to raedjour.

When Jarak walked in, Diana lay sprawled in a sumptuous pile of furs on the bed platform, head thrown back onto the pillows bunched beneath her shoulders and neck. Her straight white hair lay in ragged disarray about her, testament to the fact that they had been lovemaking for some time. Salin stretched on his belly between her legs, his hands sliding over her thighs, his mouth pressed to her sex. Jarak, who had been Salin's squire for most of the couple's first cycles, judged they were at a lull, building up to the next climax. He watched overtly as he took the tray to a table along one wall.

Diana cracked her eyes open, then opened them wider when she realized who he was. Her smile was wide and inviting. "Salin," she purred, reaching down to lazily tangle black fingers in the short silver-gray curls atop her lover's head, "Jarak's come to visit us."

The commander grunted, taking one last lap of her juicy red folds before turning his head. He frowned, licking his lips. "You're back soon." He twisted onto his side, pillowing his head on his truemate's thigh. "Or has the wench caused me to lose track of time?" He barely flinched when she smacked the top of his head.

"No," Jarak admitted, briefly tearing his eyes from the attractive picture of them to set the tray down. "I'm back early."

"What went wrong?"

Jarak sighed, turning to prop his butt up against the edge of the table. "Rogues."

"Bastards," Diana muttered.

Salin grimaced, cursing. "Where were you?"

"Calpin Meadow."

"They're getting closer."

Jarak nodded.

"Casualties?" Diana asked.

"One. Rysen."

She scowled. "Rysen? Damn it!"

"Are you badly wounded?" Salin asked, noticing the binding on his left arm.

Jarak shrugged. "Not badly." The healer had removed the arrow's head and packed the wound, proclaiming it would be as good as new in a fortnight.

Diana pouted, holding out her arms to him. "Come here, precious. Let me make it all better."

Salin rolled his eyes, chuckling at his truemate's overly sweet tone. They all knew, after all, why he'd come. Yes, Salin would want a report of one of his warriors down and the rogues coming closer to the city, but it could have waited until he left the suite. Jarak's coming was a silent request that Diana had just answered in the affirmative.

Jarak grinned, shrugging out of his vest as he approached the platform. He tossed it aside and knelt on the padded surface, leaning toward Diana.

"Boots," she murmured, hands sliding up his shoulders.

"I'll get them," Salin offered, sitting up.

Jarak was a little surprised at the offer, but he didn't let it bother him. Diana's soft black lips parted as she smiled, beckoning him. He sank into her embrace, sealing his mouth to hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck, spearing fingers into his hair to guide his head to the angle she preferred. He let the drugging scent of her permeate his head from nose and mouth, inhaling her eagerly, needing her to forget his failed mission and the friend who was dead.

She might have sensed it, or perhaps not. Like most women, when Diana was in heat, she literally breathed sexuality. During the moons of her heat, she couldn't get enough of it and she'd take it where she could get it.

Salin was more than aware of this and, like most men, welcomed the help. Although they were of a race with more sexual stamina than most, even a male raedjour couldn't always completely satisfy his truemate during her heat. Most didn't even try. Without complaint, Salin tugged off Jarak's boots, then helped him remove his pants. When he had Jarak naked, he slapped his side, helping the younger man to adjust position so that he finally lay fully atop Diana.

"Mmm," she hummed, wrapping her legs around his waist. "I adore your lips."

He smiled, nuzzling her neck, lapping at the light sheen of oil that covered her velvety skin. He rocked his hips into hers, letting his cock slide in the bend between her thigh and her groin. "I'd hoped you'd adore other things more."

She chuckled darkly. "Oh, I adore that, too." She pulled his head back so she could look in his eyes. "But first, I want you to put those lips to good use. Tongue, too."

Jarak knew exactly what she meant. "Yes, my lady."

She sighed happily, spreading her thighs wider as he kissed his way down her body. "You're such a *good* boy."

Across the room, Salin laughed. "I knew you liked him best."

She cried out softly when Jarak's lips closed gently around her clit. Her entire groin was alive and engorged for sex, so there was no nuzzling to locate it. There was no amount of curly hair to protect it. There was only the delicious, juicy-red ripeness of her folds, such a startling, gorgeous contrast to the glossy black of her skin.

"Why wouldn't I like him best?" She purred. Jarak felt her fingers toy with his hair. "He's always been so attentive toward me."

"I seem to remember a few times he's helped me to tie you down."

She grunted and smiled wickedly at Jarak when he glanced up at her. "He was only following your instructions, bastard."

Smiling, Jarak rewarded her with a hard suck on her clit, just the way she liked it.

She laughed, tossing back her head into the pillows.

The platform moved beside Jarak as he enjoyed his tasty meal. Salin stretched out at Diana's side, holding small bites of fruit to her lips as she sampled from his fingers. There were many who wondered if Diana actually loved Salin. She was certainly close-lipped about it and rarely spared him the sharper side of her tongue, but those people never saw them like this, when the love in her face was patently obvious, even as another man pleased her.

He envied them. Of all the truemated pairs he knew, they were the ones he was both truly happy for and truly envious of. He wanted what they had. He lived with the common raedjour realization that the odds that he would have what they had were slim. Few women came through the Dark Forest anymore, not that many ever had. Caravans of humans would still occasionally bring some through, but those were becoming better and better fortified. Some even had a wizard or magic-worker aboard, which the wise raedjour stayed away from.

He bent his head to his task, enjoying the generous gift of Diana's body. He waited, knowing her body well enough now to feel the signs that it was time to use his fingers. He felt a wave of pleasure from her, as would any raedjour with a lover. It was nothing compared to what Salin would feel through their truematch bond, but it was a warm, welcome feeling nonetheless that hardened his cock and made it difficult to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. Fingers pulled at his hair, and he glanced up to see Diana clutching Salin's head, kissing him fiercely. Her hand's demand, however, was clear to Jarak. He knelt, pushing her thighs up and apart. She let her hand slide down his chest, found his cock, squeezed as she guided it blindly to her entrance.

Tight. He was amazed that any woman who had been fucked as often and as well as Diana could still be a snug fit. But that was part of the change, part of what Rhae's spell had done to her, a gift to make up for her lost humanity. He pushed into that hot sheath, closing his eyes and pausing when he was all the way in, just to savor the feeling.

She didn't allow him to enjoy it long. Always demanding, she slid her hand as far as she could around his hip and dug in her nails, urging him to grind into her.



Without looking, Salin reached down and gripped Jarak's other hip, urging him on. Since Salin's arm was longer, he was able to reach farther behind and slap Jarak's ass.

Jarak laughed. "Pushy," he growled, leaning forward on his good arm, shoving hard and deep into Diana's warmth.

Salin pulled back from Diana. She gasped, throwing her arms up above her head to grip the wooden headboard braced against the stone wall. She tilted her head back into the pillows and furs, biting her lush bottom lip as she rocked into Jarak's thrusts.

Head down, Jarak was still aware of Salin crawling around behind him. His skin tingled, hyperaware of his former master. There was no man Jarak admired more, no idol he strove to be more like. Just being near the man, even after hundreds of cycles of close association with him, was a thrill.

So when Salin's fingers sank into his hair and pulled his head back, Jarak's gasp was one of pure, hedonistic pleasure.

"Spread your legs," Salin murmured darkly into Jarak's ear.

Eagerly, he complied, leaning farther forward over Diana's writhing body.

Perhaps sensing what they were doing, Diana's chin came down and her sparkling hazel eyes opened, displaying vivid hunger. Grinning lustily, she gripped her own knees to pull them farther up and apart, tilting her hips up to give Jarak more room to bend over comfortably.

Salin chuckled, sliding his thumbs down Jarak's spine from the nape of his neck to the top of his ass. "She does love to see you get fucked," he murmured, thumbs continuing their journey downward, spreading Jarak's ass.

"I do," Diana purred, locking her gaze with Jarak's. "And you always *win* at wrestling." She pouted. "So I never get to see it anymore."

Rhae bless you, wonderful, wonderful woman! Jarak chuckled. "You can't -- ah!" -- the pressure of Salin's cock pressed into his opening -- "see it now."

Hard, hot heat forged slowly inside. Jarak shivered at the heat curling up his spine from the dual assault of penetration from behind during his own invasion from in front.

"But I can see your face," Diana murmured. Soft hands traced the cords of his neck, which were no doubt strained. "So hot, so beautiful."

She thought he was beautiful. She always said it. She was very careful to praise him whenever they had sex, very careful to let him know that she appreciated him. He knew he was one of the few to receive positive treatment from this woman.

Salin leaned into him, forcing him lower over Diana. Unconsciously, he tried to lean on his bad arm and hissed at the pain. Salin's strong arm wrapped around his chest from behind, yanking him off of the wounded arm and holding him steady. "Move." That hot, commanding voice caressed the sensitive rim of his ear.

Jarak rocked back, impaling himself. Then rocked forward, sliding into Diana. They stayed mostly still, letting him do the fucking, both of her and himself. Her eyes were closed in rapture, and the stillness in Salin's body told Jarak that his were likely closed as well. They were sharing the sensations of their bodies with each other, swapping the feeling of him, surrounding Jarak.

He hissed, moving faster. They got to him when they were like this. It was too much. He could almost feel the heat of their bond closing around him like warm velvet, hugging him closer than anything he'd ever known. He wondered if even a truematch could be this intense.

He may never know.

Pushing that thought aside, he rocked back and forth furiously, finally triggering them to move. They ramped toward climax and he held on tooth and nail, determined not to go before them.

He groaned.

Suddenly, Diana's hips shoved. Her back arched, her head digging into the pillows below her. A low, aching keen filled the air as her body convulsed.

The pressure on his cock forced Jarak to come.

Laughing softly, Salin shoved into him a few more times before finding his own release.

Happily sated, Jarak fell forward onto Diana's body and allowed her to croon him into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter Three

“You don’t wanna go there,” said the old codger, glancing at the empty mug on the table before him. “Leastwise not alone.” He eyed Geriman, then winked at Marisol. “There’s dangerous critters in that forest, and I don’t mean mountain cats.”

Marisol caught the eye of the tavern maid and flashed four fingers at her. After the woman nodded, Marisol folded her hands calmly on the table again. “What do you mean?”

The younger, stouter man seated beside the oldster sat back in his chair. “He means there’s man-shaped things in the forest. With black skin and moonlight hair.”

Marisol blinked at him. “Bandits?”

“No, no, no.” The old man waved his gnarled hand in the air. “Critters. We don’t know what they is, but they’s there.”

“Humanlike too,” added the younger man. Kile was his name. “Just a few months ago, I was with a huntsman team and we went in farther ’n we gone before. Found a cave with knives and clothin’ in a style nothing like we’d ever seen.”

Geriman snorted. “They probably are human.”

“Then how’s it they disappear into the night?”

Geriman opened his mouth, but shut it when Marisol laid a hand on his arm. They glared at each other a moment before she turned back to the men across the table from them.

The younger man gazed at Geriman coolly. “You’d do well to listen to us. Them’s that go into the forest outside one of the caravans don’t come back.”

“You just said you’d gone inside.”

“Yep. But we made sure we got back out before night fell.”

“How do you know the people who don’t come back don’t just stay on the other side of the forest?” Marisol asked agreeably.

“Cause the caravan masters never hear tell of them again, that’s how.”

The tavern maid arrived, setting mugs in front of all of them. “You should listen to them,” she advised, brushing her hand over Marisol’s shoulder. “They’re tellin’ the truth. People that go into the forest outside a caravan disappear.”

“All right. When’s the next caravan?”

“You just missed it,” said the codger, setting his mug down after downing half of it in a single gulp. “Won’t be another until spring.”

“That’s two seasons away.”

Kile shrugged. “Aren’t many men who’ll agree to take the route.”

They spoke for quite some time after that, both with Kile and his uncle as well as a few others who came through the tavern. The unanimous consensus was that it was too dangerous to try to travel the forest alone.

Marisol’s mind rolled over the possibilities as she monitored Geriman’s drink intake. When he started to spout off stories about places they’d been, she announced that they had better be going to bed since they had to travel the next day. Geriman glared at her, clearly wanting to stay and talk, but he took the hint and followed her to the room they’d rented upstairs.

“Don’t see why I couldn’t stay below,” he huffed, throwing himself onto one of the two narrow cots that took up most of the attic room.

“A few reasons.” Marisol opened the small window, hoping to get some air flowing. The room had been cheap because it was sweltering in summer and early autumn. “First, we’re almost out of money. I spent the last on that final round of ale.” She reached up to untangle her ponytail, hoping to rearrange it higher onto her head. “Second, you were about to start spouting off, and we know what happens when you do that.”

He glared. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Mmmm. You’ve said that before. Yet we still had to hurry out of Camberton, didn’t we?”

“I said I wouldn’t do it again.”

“I know. I’m just helping you to keep that promise.”

He wasn’t convinced, but she didn’t care. Ger had a tendency to run off at the mouth and had managed to say enough wrong things at every place they’d tried to settle in the last three months that they’d had to leave in a hurry again. They’d changed everything, sold both horses, bought a wagon and a white mare. Marisol had a crate and a trunk filled with fabric with which she’d planned to start making and selling simple clothing. She was tired of moving, tired of being scared, tired of looking over her shoulder and watching everything she said. She was doubly tired of having to do the same for Geriman.

She busied herself with her hair, sitting on the windowsill so she could watch the sparse evening traffic on the street below. This town wasn’t a large one, and it was off of the

highly traveled roads. According to the people they'd met, their main contacts with the outside world were the small fairs that happened just before the biannual caravans through the Dark Forest. Merchants, craftsmen, and farmers would bring their wares, hoping to sell to the caravan master before his trip through the forest. Some merchants also arrived in hopes of catching the caravan's wares before they reached a major town. But as the locals had told them, it wasn't the right season for the caravan, so not many travelers were around.

"Are we really leaving tomorrow?" Geriman asked finally.

"Yes."

"Why can't we stay?"

"We can't be sure that the guard isn't still on our trail."

"We haven't seen or heard of them."

"If we had, we'd be dead," she snapped. "Or in chains. We have to keep ahead of them, Ger."

He sighed. "Where are we going? Cross country to the north? Head for the sea?"

"No," Marisol said slowly, fingering the end of one heavy curl of her hair. "We're going west."

There was a pause. Then a rustle of fabric that hinted Geriman had sat up on his cot. "But the Dark Forest is west."

"I know."

"They said it's dangerous."

"I know."

"We can't go there."

Marisol looked up, catching sight of the distant, snowy peaks of the Rhaen Mountains to the west. "We have to go there."

"Sol!"

"Keep your voice down."

He moderated his volume. "Sol, they said people don't come back."

"I know. But it's a chance we have to take."

"What for?"

She turned, putting a serious frown on her face so he'd know she meant business. "We don't have a choice. They're too close now. They're going to catch up with us soon."

His eyes widened, then shuttered, a pained look passing over his expressive face. Two days' worth of light brown growth covered his rounded jaw, but oddly, it didn't do much to make him look more of a man. He looked like a sulky teen trying to look older.

"Changing our names doesn't help, Ger," she continued calmly, grinding in her point. "Trying to settle is fruitless. They'll find us sooner or later if we stay in the area. If we stay

anywhere in Winston or the surrounding counties. We don't have the funds to hire passage on a ship, even if we sell what little we have. But if we can get through the forest and beyond, we have a chance."

"It's suicide!"

"So's staying here."

He sat back against the wall.

"I know it's risky, but at least we'd have a *chance*. And they said there was one if we stayed on the road." She'd listened very carefully to that part. Their talkative friends in the tavern had said that a human being's only chance to survive was to stay strictly to either the High Road or the Low Road and not ever, under any circumstances, stray from the path. Some long-gone goddess's protection extended only so far, and even adhering to the one rule didn't mean that you'd survive. The stories were both her reason for choosing their route and her reason for dreading it.

"If we do this, the members of the guard will most likely give us up for dead. They won't pursue us beyond, and they've no reason to. If we survive, we can make a new life on the other side." If they didn't survive, well...She didn't relish dying, but she would prefer to do so in a natural, wild setting rather than rotting in a prison cell or hanging from a noose.

Her brother was silent for some time, picking at the hem of his blue tunic. "I'm sorry, Sol."

Marisol drew in a breath, fisting her hands in her lap. "Stop apologizing, Ger."

She tried to remember that he was helpful. He was good at hunting, so they rarely went without meat when they were on the road. He was certainly good protection, so she didn't fear for her life when they were in strange towns. He was personable and got along well with the various types of people they met, sometimes *too* well. She did love him. But she didn't *like* him much lately, and for that she felt profoundly guilty. *I'm sorry, Mama*, she thought, closing her eyes briefly. *I'm trying*.

"But I --"

"I know you're sorry. I know that. If you keep apologizing, that's just going to keep making me think about it. Okay?"

He sat up suddenly, eyes wide. "You should stay, Sol."

She frowned. "What?"

"They don't want you. You didn't kill that bastard. I did. You shouldn't even be mixed up in this."

She stared, mouth falling open.

"You go back. You..." He glanced around the room at the few belongings they'd carted up from the wagon because they couldn't afford to have them stolen. "Take the horse and wagon. I'll just take the pack and some food, and *I'll* go through the forest. You can stay here or go back and tell them the truth. They'll --"

She sat on his cot beside him and put her arms around him. "Hush, Ger."

His arms came around her, fingers digging into the backs of her shoulders. "I mean it, Sol."

Her heart tore. No matter how annoyed she was with him, she couldn't help but be proud of him. The gesture was too little, too late, but he *did* think of it. "Thank you, but no." She sat back, leaving her hands on his shoulders. She gave him a sad smile. "It won't work. It's been too long. Even if I turned myself in and blamed it all on you, they'd convict me as an accomplice."

He reached up and swiped at his face, wiping away tears.

She squeezed his firm muscles. "We're in this together. You and me. Just like always."

"I'm sorry, Sol."

She gritted her teeth, feelings of benevolence chilling at the sound of those words again. "Ger..."

"I know, Sol, I know." He stared at her, letting the tears flow down his cheeks. "We're on the run because of me, not you. I've ruined your life. I'll go back and confess."

"No."

"Sol, it's the only way. It's all my fault."

She gathered a handful of his tunic's front and shook him, glaring into his guilty face. "Geriman, shut up! I am *not* going to watch you hang. Do you hear me? Mama would come back and haunt me to the end of my days if I let anything happen to you." She shoved him back and stood. "We'll see this through together."

* * * * *

Where was he? "Geriman!"

The underbrush crashed on the other side of the wagon, and she rushed around to see Ger emerge, a dead rabbit hanging from his hand and a proud grin on his face.

She scowled, heart beating furiously. "Ger, what were you doing out there?"

His grin faltered. He held up his catch. "Getting dinner."

She glanced nervously at the darkening brush behind him. "You're not supposed to go off the path, Ger!"

He laughed, waving the hand that held his bow. "It's fine, Sol. There's nothing out there but game. And a lot of it!" He set his bow on the wagon's seat and shrugged his quiver down from his shoulder. "The villagers are insane to leave this place untouched."

Marisol bit her tongue over a judgment of just who was insane. After eight days of traveling with no more excitement than spotting a large mountain cat once in the distance, Geriman had grown bold.

“Ger,” she warned, following him to the circle of rocks she’d carefully prepared for their night’s fire, “we don’t know enough about this forest. I wish you’d respect the warnings of those who know better and stay on the path.”

He sat heavily, reaching for the basket that contained the pots and knives. “We need to eat, Sol.” Unfortunately, the game that he caught was a welcome supplement to their stores, since a pack of rodents had broken into their salted meat three days into the forest. At first, he’d laid snares right beside the path up ahead of them, but the past two days had seen him wandering off into the trees.

She shut her eyes and counted to ten slowly. Opening her eyes, she sat beside him and started peeling the tubers she’d pulled earlier and washed in the stream when she’d gone to get water.

He whistled happily as he skinned the plump rabbit. “This skin will be a great addition for your collection, Sol.”

She glanced at the soft white and brown fur. “Yes.”

“You should make yourself a coat. You deserve something nice.”

“I could use it and the others to line coats for both you and me,” she agreed.

He sighed. “I wish you’d just do something for you, Sol.” She glanced at him, but he kept his eyes on his task. “You’re always looking out for me. You need to look out for you.”

I would, if you didn’t get into trouble when I’m not watching. What she said was, “You’re my little brother. It’s my job to take care of you.”

“We’ll find you a husband. Someone to take care of you.”

She swallowed the sudden anger that threatened to burst forth. *I had a husband, you fool!* Sometimes she didn’t understand how Geriman could be so callous. But he didn’t mean it. She knew that. He just didn’t think.

Thankfully, he stopped talking and became absorbed in his task.

Marisol worked beside him, letting her own thoughts wander. A husband. Tonas. As far as husbands went, he hadn’t been bad. The only times he’d hit her had been in frustration, normally something to do with Geriman. When her brother wasn’t there, they’d gotten along fine, as long as she remembered who was in charge. He hadn’t been what one would call handsome, but he had been a striking man. Large, with intense brown eyes. He also had amazingly dexterous hands. One wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he’d been a fine artisan in his chosen craft. She recalled some of the delicate metalwork he’d created, including a fine locket for her that she’d left behind.

She thought of him while their meal cooked, while Geriman climbed onto the wagon seat to oil his weapons. Tonas had liked to laugh. He hadn’t understood all of her joking, but when he did, he seemed pleased with her.

She thought of him as she knelt on the bank of a small brook that babbled alongside the path, washing the pots and utensils from dinner. Unexpectedly, she missed being held. Tonas

had been careful with her during lovemaking. Probably more careful than he wanted to be. He was a big man and had known it, so he'd tried not to hurt her. Not that he'd had much choice. The sheer size of him overwhelmed her. It had been too much at first, and she had only started to get used to it in the weeks before his death. His kisses had been rough, but his arms had always been strong and solid. His body had been warm, and he'd made her feel safe.

She thought of him as she settled into her blankets that night, in the back of the wagon. During those last weeks, she'd begun to see how lovemaking could be enjoyable. Tonas's fingers fumbling between her legs had stopped being alarming when he'd finally brushed against something exciting. She remembered the night. It was the first time he'd come to their bed with intent in his eyes that she hadn't been terrified at the prospect. She'd done a fair amount of exploring of him, hefting the weight of his cock in her hands when he encouraged her curiosity. She'd been so amazed with the feeling that his touching between her legs had taken her by surprise. The delicious warmth that spread up her spine had made her gasp. His thick fingers rubbing gently had brought more warmth, and he'd praised her for getting wet and told her that because of it the oil from the other times wouldn't be necessary. She'd almost enjoyed making love that night, and enjoyed it a bit more the next time they'd done it.

She rolled onto her back, staring up into the thinly laced branches above. But now Tonas was dead. For all she knew, she'd be dead soon.

Intoxicating warmth stole over her body. Dark and featureless, it crept through her muscles, creating an odd, languid restlessness. She stirred, pushing off the light blanket that covered her. The fabric of her dress irritated her sensitive skin, especially her breasts. Her thighs pressed together over a warmth that pulsed through her groin. She opened her mouth to pull in more air when breathing through her nose wasn't enough. Her back twisted, arched a little. She moaned softly, yearning, wanting...

Her eyes opened, tossing her from sleep.

Above her, shining white moonlight surrounded pitch-black darkness and glittering black eyes.

Eyes?!

Gasping, she shrank back, her confused brain trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

White. White hair, straight and glimmering like spun moonlight. Black. Black skin, glossy and shining where the sparse light caressed it. A face, long and thin and all of the same unrelieved, glossy black except for the whites of two glittering eyes and white eyebrows and eyelashes to match the straight hair.

"Hello, lovely," said one of the most deliciously dark voices Marisol had ever heard.

Dark denizens of the forest...

She opened her mouth to scream, but a large hand clapped over her mouth. The back of her skull pressed against the rolled blanket beneath her head. She could now feel the press of legs about her hips as this strange man pinned her to the bed of the wagon where she slept.

"None of that," chided the voice, the mouth it came from curving into a wicked smile that showed white teeth.

How had he gotten into the wagon without waking her? What *was* he? She struggled, making a claw with her finger and raking it toward his face. He caught her wrist with his free hand and squeezed with a firm, unbreakable grip.

He raised an eyebrow, shaking his head at her. "Now, now. Hurting you is not our intention. Don't give us a reason."

Us? Geriman! She screamed her brother's name behind the hand on her mouth.

A sound to the right, and her assailant raised his head, turning toward it. It was then that she saw one ear that held back his hair. It was delicately pointed at the tip. An elf? But the legends told of elves with milky pale skin, not blackest black. And weren't all elves from the eastern countries? What was he doing here far to the west?

The noise to the right sounded like a voice, and she rolled her eyes to see another man, equally dark-skinned, at the side of the wagon. They spoke in a language she didn't understand, the sound of which seemed to seep into her bones, making her want to relax beneath the man straddling her.

They spoke for a moment, then ended their conversation. The one at the side of the wagon glanced down at her. He grinned and waggled his thick white eyebrows, then hopped back and out of sight.

She screamed Geriman's name again behind the hand on her mouth. What had they done to her brother?

"Relax, lovely," crooned the man above her, his attention back on her. "Your man's still alive. For now." He leaned in until his breath was a warm gust on her cheek. "Is he your husband?"

A quiver of delight spilled down her neck despite her panic. "My brother," she gasped when the hand slid away, the edge of his palm hovering over her chin. "Don't hurt him! Where is he? What do you want?"

The dark look in his eyes made the answer to her last question abundantly clear. What she didn't understand was her body's reaction. Instead of fear or rage chilling her blood, something deep in her belly boiled, making her squirm for an entirely different reason.

The man slid his fingers along her jaw. The scent of him filled her like the mellow burn from a warm, exotic wine, and she fought to keep her eyes from fluttering closed in pure, hedonistic pleasure. "He'll be fine if he cooperates," assured that darkly beguiling voice. A

lock of shimmering white hair escaped its place behind his ear and fell forward to caress her temple. "The same holds for you."

"Wait..." She tried to turn her face aside from the lips closing in on hers. She pushed up against his chest, finding it bare and warm, satiny between the supple lapels of the leather vest he wore.

His fingers gripped her chin, turning her back.

She gasped into the kiss.

Spicy sweet heat poured into her at the first taste of the tongue that pushed through her lips, as richly decadent as the smell of him. He explored the contours of her mouth, languidly chasing her tongue with his.

"Stop," she breathed when he pulled back.

He smiled, hovering over her. His hands went to the ones she had clutching his soft leather vest. When had she done that? "Only for now, lovely," he assured her, prying her fingers from his garment. Chuckling, he sat back and quickly looked around. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he gripped her wrist, hauling her to a seated position as he stood.

"Wait!" she cried, trying to stop herself from admiring the toned male muscles under glossy black skin.

He pulled her up to her feet, cinching an arm about her waist. He called out over her shoulder in that other language. The wagon swayed, and he balanced them both effortlessly.

She twisted her head, desperate to catch a glimpse of what they'd done to Geriman.

He stood between two more of the elves. The one behind him had his hands pinned at the small of his back. The other pressed against him from the front, a hand gripping his jaw to force him to look up. Geriman looked so very small in between the tall, rangy elves. Each of them was dressed similarly to the one who held her. Each of them had hair in shades of white. If she hadn't known better, she would swear there was sexual promise in the way they pressed him between them.

"Ger!" she cried.

He started, and she saw his eyes cast toward her. "Sol!"

The one standing in front of Geriman glanced at her, smiling darkly.

She gasped when the one who held her lifted her easily and threw her over his shoulder. "Let me down!" she demanded as her world spun.

She didn't expect him to listen. She clutched his strong body instinctively when he turned and hopped down from the wagon's bed, carrying her as easily as a sack of grain.

"Leave her alone!" she heard Geriman demand.



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“Calm down, little man,” soothed a voice from that direction. A voice as richly decadent as that of the man who carried her. “We don’t intend to hurt either one of you.” His laugh was not at all comforting, even if it did make things low in Marisol’s belly tingle. “Quite the contrary.”

“Do what you want to me. Just let Marisol alone.”

“How noble, little man. You’re getting me excited.”

She twisted, bracing her hands on the back of the man carrying her as she tried to see what was happening to her brother. Ger was struggling, but the two elves held him easily, laughing at his efforts. She now saw Ger’s sword and dagger lying useless on the rocky dirt of the road. The sheaths for both blades dangled uselessly from his belt.

Their mare was nowhere in sight, her tackle lying useless on the ground underneath the hitch.

A hand caressing Marisol’s buttocks through her dress brought her back to her own plight. “Marisol,” murmured her captor, squeezing her familiarly. “What a pretty name.”

She pounded his back since he had a good grip on her legs. “Let me down!”

Laughing, he swatted her backside hard. “All in good time.” He turned and started to walk into the trees.

“No!” She reached a hand toward Geriman. “Ger!”

He struggled fruitlessly. “Sol!”

Her captor swung around, carelessly walking backward for a few steps as he called back to his companions in that other language. With wide, frightened eyes she watched the dense foliage approach and yelped in fright.

The yelp eased into a whimper as he turned back around just before stepping off the path.

“Don’t worry, lovely. I won’t let you fall.”

She swallowed, watching as the man in front of Geriman stepped back. Ger tried to kick him but got a cuff across the face for his efforts.

“Ger, no!”

Her last view of him was of the man behind him hauling him back by his trapped hands. She heard his cry of pain.

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded once the inky blackness of bushes and trees blocked her brother from sight. “Please, don’t hurt my brother.”

“Don’t worry about him, lovely. He’ll be fine if he cooperates.”

Knowing Geriman, that didn't make her feel any better. A branch cracked loudly to the left, and she turned, wide eyes trying to penetrate the darkness. "Where are you taking me?" How could he see? She could barely make out the trees around them, much less the hazards on the ground.

"Somewhere where we can get to know each other in a little bit more comfort."

She shivered, unable to misunderstand his meaning. "Please, don't hurt me."

A big hand smoothed over her backside. "Not to fear, lovely. Hurting you is the farthest thing from my mind."

She felt oddly comforted, which didn't make a bit of sense as the man had all but admitted that he was going to rape her. Although, could you rape the willing? She couldn't deny the moist heat that pulsed beneath her skin. "What have you done to me?"

He chuckled, ducking under a leafy branch. "Why do you think I've done something to you, lovely?"

True, inky darkness surrounded them as he entered the mouth of a cave beyond the branch. The feeling of closed-in space swallowed them up as they proceeded into what sounded like a tunnel.

She whimpered, fingers clutching at the buttery leather that draped his back. "You must have done...something. I feel strange." It felt like she'd developed a second pulse between her legs, and she could feel moisture pooling at the apex of her thighs.

"Strange?" he asked calmly, passing through the darkness without breaking stride. He *must* be able to see in the dark. "Are you ill, lovely?" He sounded amused.

She scowled, swallowing moisture that filled her mouth. "I feel strange. You've done something to me."

He chuckled as he stopped walking. She had a vague sense of more space around them, more than just a passage, but truthfully they could have been in a cavern the size of a closet or the size of a cathedral and she wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. She'd never been inside caves before.

She cried out when he swung her up and off his shoulder. His strong hands supported her easily as he lowered her to the ground. The warm, plush feel of a dry, soft bedpad surprised her. The rustle of it as well as the clean, green smell suggested a stuffing of grass.

His thighs bracketed her legs, and he caught hold of her wrists, sliding them up above her head, pinning them to the mattress. "Don't be frightened, lovely." His breath was warm on her forehead. Lips brushed her there. "Relax and we'll enjoy each other."

She swallowed, compelled to argue. But her heart was racing, and she caught herself arching up, trying to press into the solid wall of muscle braced above her. This wasn't right. "No. We can't..."

Lips trailed down her nose, then ghosted over her mouth. "Yes. We can."

His kiss was gentle but insistent, his tongue sweeping between her teeth to tangle with hers. He lowered himself so that some of his weight held her down, and she moaned from the gorgeous constriction. She squirmed, but that only made her aware of the hard plane of his chest pressing her breasts and the harder rod of his sex prodding her thigh. His tongue filled her mouth with a heady, intoxicating taste, and she couldn't help but kiss back, eager to swallow more of it.

He released her wrists, sliding his hands down her forearms as he pulled up. "There's nowhere to go," he breathed into her mouth. He nipped her chin. "No one but us." With the complete lack of light, she could well believe that. His tongue laved at the pulse beneath her jaw. His hands had reached her breasts, fingers molding around them for a firm squeeze. "I'm going to take *good* care of you."

She moaned, arching into his hands. She couldn't help it. She was drowning in the heated darkness, unable to make clear sense of the riot of sensation surrounding her. Consensual sex with Tonas had never been like this.

He tasted her neck as his fingers made quick work of the front lacing of her dress. Her breasts felt heavy and achy as he freed them from the confines of her bodice, and she moaned again when he tugged down her chemise to expose them.

She really should try harder to stop him. His head dipped down to allow his tongue to taste the upper swells of her breasts. Somehow the hands that she brought to his head seemed to be keeping his head close rather than pushing him away.

His hands kneaded her breasts, pushing them together, plumping them up. She could actually feel his breath tickling the sensitive tips. His tongue traced the edges of her nipples, one then the other. She dug her fingers into the meat of his shoulders, biting her lip to keep from begging. Finally his mouth closed over one nipple, and she cried out at the stab of fire that shot from that delicate point to the pit of her groin.

He sighed, sucking hard as his hands continued to plump the curves of her breasts. He tormented her nipple, then turned his head to give similar attention to the other. His hair was a whisper of fine silk on her shoulders and chest.

She tried to swallow her whimpers but was unable to stop her hips from rocking wantonly. This heat was already more than anything she'd ever felt with her husband. She'd never been as excited when Tonas gripped her breasts in his big, callused hands. His skin had never felt like velvet steel underneath her palms.

While suckling her breast, the man above her slid his hands down her arms, removing her dress and chemise. He pushed the fabric down to her waist, stopping only because his own legs hampered his progress. She slid her hands up his bare arms, marveling at the feel of warm satin over steely muscle.

He released her nipple with a pop and sat up. The cry of disappointment burst from her lips before she could swallow it.

“Patience, lovely.” He chuckled, his decadent voice now a succulent purr that moved things low in her belly.

She heard the rustle of leather and felt the shift of his hips, and she decided he removed his vest. She so very much wanted to see the result of bare, black torso but didn’t dare ask. A portion of her brain tried valiantly to remind her that this was wrong. That she shouldn’t want this.

But she *did*.

She felt him take hold of the fabric at her waist, and he shifted down her legs, taking the dress with him. When he encountered her bloomers, he hooked fingers in those and pulled them down as well. He ignored the garters binding her thighs and barely paused to pull off her shoes before tossing all of her clothing into the darkness.

Bereft of his touch, some sanity returned. She pulled her legs up, curling to her side in a silly attempt to cover herself. Her breath came in ragged spasms, and her skin tingled alarmingly. She covered her breasts with one arm while reaching with the other in a vain attempt to find the edge of the bedpad.

He chuckled overhead. “Where do you think you’d go, lovely?” he asked reasonably. She heard what had to be his boots dropping to the ground. “Human sight won’t allow you to see a thing.”

“You can see?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“I can. Such a lovely sight you are.”

“What are you?”

More rustling had to be his pants. She could only imagine what it must look like for the leather to shove down what had to be powerful thighs, covered with that same satiny black skin. “You won’t have heard of my kind.”

“You’re one of the humanlike creatures we were warned about.”

“You were warned about us?”

She nodded. “One of the rumors was that there were black-skinned devils that would kill people who wandered off the path.”

A hand closed around her ankle. “Not kill,” he purred, pulling. “Not you.” When she resisted, he stopped. She felt him crawl forward. The heat and scent of him were palpable as he loomed over her, bracing a hand on either side of her body. Lips brushed her shoulder. “Killing you is not what I have in mind.”

She started to shake. “How do I know that this isn’t what your kind does before eating someone alive?”

He laughed. A strong hand grabbed the arm with which she tried to hide her breasts and pulled, easily turning her on her back. Instinctively, she reached out with the other hand, her fingers finding the bare, hot skin of his shoulder. Hot. Hotter than before.

Slippery. Her fingers scrabbled for purchase in a fine layer of sweat that coated his skin. No, not sweat. It felt more like a light oil. But he hadn't had time to oil his shoulder and back!

She struggled to curl in on herself again, but he didn't allow it. Rather easily, he pinned her on her back. He got his hips in between her thighs to spread them, and the first press of the length of his cock against her sex shocked her into stillness.

"You'll have to trust me, lovely," he crooned, breath warm in her ear. He slowly rocked his hips, dragging that hard length across that painfully bright spot of sensation between her legs. "Killing you would spoil my fun."

She cried out, arching. Her head flung to the side. She bit her lip. Her breasts pressed into his chest. Her fingers dug into his back. She wanted it. Dear gods, how she wanted it! Without realizing, she rocked her own hips, pulling herself up, then shoving herself back down his length. Long, hard, hot. Whimpering, she rocked again, needing to feel the rake of pleasure as her drenched folds caressed him.

He slid his body down until the tip of him found her folds. Without reaching down -- Tonas had always had to reach down -- the man above her shoved forward, sheathing himself fully in her channel.

"Gods, yes!" she moaned, wrapping her legs around his hips to trap him inside.

"That's it, lovely," he murmured, dropping down to lean on his elbows, sliding his arms beneath her back. "Squeeze my cock. Just like that."

She gripped him and kept rocking, unable to help it. The friction inside her was glorious. She couldn't deny the ache that the friction both assuaged and flamed, and completely lost the desire to resist.

He began to rock with her, slowly, matching her rhythm. His lips brushed her ear. She curled up against him, burying her face in the bend of his neck. He was so tall, so big, that was as far as she could reach.

Her whimpering cries filled the darkness. She struggled to get him deeper, digging at him to make him go faster. She needed more. Groaning, panting, she opened her mouth on his shoulder and bit down hard, savoring the cinnamon-spice of the oil that covered him.

Grunting, he shifted, then held her down as he thrust even faster. She cried out, falling back, reaching up to grip at the padding beneath her head in a feeble effort to brace herself for the assault. It was wonderful and brutal, and it was going to tear her apart, and she needed it!

She unwrapped her legs so she could brace her heels on the pad beneath them, shoving with all her might into his thrusts. Pleading cries burst from her lips as the sweat of exertion coated her skin. White-hot fire ignited her spine and burst throughout her body as every muscle clamped down. Brutally, he rode her through it, pounding at her clenching channel. He didn't give her a chance to enjoy the sensation or revel in the aftermath as the climax released her.

“Wait,” she pleaded, collapsing beneath him.

He chuckled, marginally slowing his thrusts. “We’re not done.”

That was to be expected. She had never found her pleasure at the same time as Tonas, either. But she had also never experienced something that took her body apart before.

“I can’t...”

He ignored her, holding her hips as he continued to plunder her body.

She whimpered, holding on as she felt another climax building.

Geriman heard his sister’s cries from afar, and a piece of his heart ached. She was in trouble, and he couldn’t help her. He wasn’t there to kill the bastard who was most surely raping her. He couldn’t even cry out to let her know he was near, because of the fingers in his mouth.

“Bite,” demanded that demonic voice in his ear. “Bite me, little man. It’s what you want to do.”

Ger closed his eyes, although his sight wasn’t a problem. He couldn’t see a thing in the pitch dark of the cave they’d brought him to. He tried to bite again. He had bitten before. But his mouth went slack, saliva slipping from his lips as pleasure made him groan again.

Devils! Black-skinned devils with some kind of magic to turn his body for their perverse pleasure. His knees ached from kneeling for so long. His forearms ached from where they were bound together across his back. A strong arm banded his waist from behind, and the fingers from that man’s other hand were stuffed in his mouth just as firmly as the man’s cock was shoved up Geriman’s ass. He shuddered again as that cock dragged over something inside him, something that sent brutal pleasure up his spine. Pleasure compounded by the feel of a hot, demanding mouth milking his hard, burning cock.

He’d known of such things happening between men. He’d never met any man who’d done it, but he knew it was out there in the world. He’d never come close to wishing to experience it himself. So how had the two demons who currently had him between them gotten him to respond? What had they done to make him shake and groan with pleasure and need? It had to be more than the caresses, more than the kisses. No, there was that delicious taste of them, the taste they’d shoved into him with their tongues and their fingers. There was their relentless assault. The one held him, pounding into him from behind, while the other caressed him in front, kissing him, then laving at his sex. Geriman had already come twice, and his cock was soft and spent, but that didn’t stop the mouth from suckling, drawing out the pleasure until it was well-nigh pain.

The one behind him cursed. The fingers in Geriman’s mouth pressed down on his tongue, his lower teeth. The cock inside him swelled, and the hips behind it thrust hard, ragged. Geriman cried out as warmth filled his back passage.

The mouth released his cock. "My turn?" asked the dark voice that went with that mouth.

Fingers slipped from his mouth, and the arm about Geriman's waist loosened. A sigh gusted over the top of his head. "Yes."

"No," Geriman cried.

They paid him no mind. Hands gripped him from in front and the hands behind helped, and they lowered him onto the thick, stuffed pad beneath them.

"Oh, come now, little one," chided the one who tormented him most. The one who'd sucked him off. "You've come twice and Aurna has come. I get my turn."

He struggled, but his efforts were feeble. His arms were bound behind him, pinned by the weight of his body, and his legs didn't quite work, thanks to the vigorous pounding he'd received. "I don't..."

Lips closed over his, a tongue sweeping down into his mouth. He whimpered, kissing back before he could make himself stop. The delicious ache started to build within him again as he felt a pressure at his anus.

"See?" crooned the voice as a cock slid into him. "You're all stretched out." A devilish chuckle, then fingers closed around his wet, softened cock. "Your cock's even trying to wake."

He groaned, knowing it was true. This was wrong. But then the man draped Geriman's knees over his elbows and set to thrusting, and Geriman could do nothing but enjoy.

Chapter Four

Erid squatted before the remains of the cooking fire, his night vision thrown slightly off by the barely tangible glow from embers within the ashes. Using a thin, half-charred branch, he stirred the embers and fed them tinder until a small blaze burst forth. It took mere heartbeats for his eyes to adjust to the colors revealed by the soft illumination. Not that there were too many colors to see. The walls of the cave were unrelieved charcoal gray stone with veins of dull green and gray. The bags and equipment lining the floor along one wall were mostly in undyed browns and grays of leather and homespun. The only true colors in the small niche were the green of his leathers strewn across the knee-high surface of a rock beside him and the sumptuous rainbow of hues of the woman behind him.

He turned to face her, smiling possessively at the very thought that he'd gotten to fuck her and would continue to do so. She was disheveled, certainly. Curled on her side, leaning back on one elbow, her near hand up to shield her blinking eyes from the light she'd requested. Her skin was that marvelous pale gold of human skin, flushed pink in key areas from sexual exertion. Her full head of flaxen corkscrew curls was dark from sweat and fell in unkempt, tangled ringlets, cloaking her shoulders, back, and the top swell of one of her plump, delicious breasts.

"Hungry, sweetling?" Still smiling, he reached for the covered pot dangling over the fire pit. When she didn't answer, he glanced over his shoulder and had to bite back a laugh.

Her wide blue eyes studied him, a frown marring the smooth lines of her forehead. Her lush lips were swollen from kisses.

"Yes?" he asked.

"You're not the man from before." Her voice was rough, no doubt a result of screams of pleasure.

He raised an eyebrow, reaching up to push back a lock of his short hair behind his ear. "You can tell that?"

"Your hair is shorter."

He grinned, nodding acknowledgement before turning to untie the laces of the sack carrying the food. "True. I don't have Sayth's patience for long hair."

He could practically hear her mind flying with thoughts. She was probably wondering when they'd switched. Very likely, she didn't know. They'd had her in the dark for most of a full night and day now. Talking had been at a minimum, and the fucking was near constant, broken twice when she had quite literally passed out from the exertion. Her brother in the next cavern was in a similar state. A little worse since he kept trying to fight. Erid chuckled. Such delicious playthings humans were, so soft and pliable, even the males. Erid found it quite a treat to fuck a human's ass rather than one of his fellow raedjours', and he knew the others felt the same. There was just something about humans. Too bad they were so fragile.

"What are you?"

She'd asked Sayth that, and Aurna as well. Erid supposed it was his turn, and since he also was the one who'd finally decided to feed her, it looked like he got to answer. Light, also, seemed to wake a human's need to speak and think, while in the dark they were more amenable to following where led. Ah, well, if it were up to him to have the discussion, he should do it properly. It hurt nothing and it passed the time while he prepared a meal. "We call ourselves raedjour," he explained, using his knife to cut pieces of a thick carrot into the stew in the pot. "We've lived in Rhae's forest for millennia, long before humans were ever created."

"Are you elves?"

He judged the stew. There was a good lot left, but he should add some more of the yarin before it went bad. "Yes."

"I didn't think there were any elves this far west."

"We're not the same kind of elves as those you're thinking of. Different god. Different race."

"But you know of them."

"Oh, yes. We know a great many things. We learn of the world outside from the humans who try to cross the forest."

"Do you kill them? The humans?"

"Not all." He regarded her over his shoulder with a deliberately sultry look. "After what we've shared, sweetling, what do you think we might do with them?"

She winced, curling her knees closer to her chest. Did she realize that the position, while pressing her thighs together, exposed her swollen little cleft to him? Probably not. He wouldn't tell her.

"What are you going to do with me? Besides..."

He let her hear his soft laugh. "First, I'll feed you." He grabbed a water bag and stood. "Then more of the same." He took the three steps to cross the cavern and stood at the end of the thin but serviceable bedpad. He, Sayth, and Aurna had sewn together two of their blankets and stuffed them with fragrant grasses to create the best bed they were capable of, in preparation for the human woman they'd set their sights on. It would last as long as was necessary. He held out the water bag to her. "Thirsty?"

Her anxious gaze swept down his body. This would be the first time she'd seen any of them fully naked. Judging from the spat of warmth scenting the air from her delicious sex, she apparently, despite herself, liked what she saw. Not surprising. Few humans could resist the sight or touch of a raedjour. *At least Rhae's absence hasn't taken that from us*, he thought. Not for the first time, he wished they could do this properly. That they'd captured her and brought her back to the city. That a sorcerer had planted the change spell that would heighten her desire even more and ensure that she could survive their attentions. But that wasn't to be. The city and the sorcerers were ruled by the false rhaeja who had driven the goddess away and spawned a devil child. The joys of a proper nine-day with hopes of truemating were a thing of the past for Erid and his companions.

Shaking bitter thoughts, he knelt on the edge of the bedpad, unstopped the bag, and held it closer to her. "Come, sweetling. You must be thirsty. You've had a hard night."

Cautiously, she pushed from leaning on her elbow to leaning on her hand. Her rounded hips rolled as her ankles slid up closer to her bottom. She reached out a hand, eyes wide as she watched him watch her.

He smiled and handed her the bag. "It's just water. There's fruit juice too, if you'd like some."

She curled the water bag closer to her body. "Water is fine."

He nodded, unconcerned with her fear. He wasn't one of the sorcerers with their unhealthy attachment to humans, and he wasn't hoping for a truematch. He and his friends would care for her and her brother like the pets they were, until they were no longer useful. He stood and went back to the food, suppressing a sigh. Unfortunately, their usefulness wouldn't last very long.

He heard the footfalls approaching from the other cavern, although they were soft enough that he was sure the woman didn't. He looked up as Sayth rounded the corner of the room-sized niche. The man was naked and covered with the glittering sheen of sexual exertion. Erid had thought he'd heard the male human groaning from the other niche farther down the passage.

Sayth's black eyes went straight to the woman, studying her by the light of the fire. "She looks all right," he said, speaking to Erid in raedjour rather than commonspeak.

Erid responded in kind. "Wary and sore, but if we let her rest, she should be fine today."

Sayth nodded, sniffing. "That stew still good? I'm hungry."

"A little low, but if we add some to it, it should be fine for tonight. We'll need to hunt tomorrow." He glanced down Sayth's torso and past his softened cock. "You've got cum on your leg."

Sayth tore his gaze from the woman to glance down at his thigh. "Mmmm. So I do." He turned toward where his pack sat on a knee-high rock. "The boy comes hard."

Erid laughed, standing. "I'm surprised he can come anymore at all."

Sayth shrugged. "Not much, but we let him sleep for a bit."

Erid only felt marginally sorry for the boy. By mutual agreement, the three raedjour had decided the girl was a special treat. They kept wagering on who would get her, and none of them had chosen to share their time yet. By default, the boy ended up having to please two men at a time. Not likely something he'd ever done before, given the virgin state of his ass and his fruitless protesting.

Erid frowned at Sayth. "It's still my turn with her."

Sayth arched an eyebrow. "It is?"

"She's been asleep, and now we're going to eat. I get more time..."

Marisol watched the two of them, both horrified and fascinated. They were beautiful, sleekly sinister as they argued about something in that purring language of theirs. Both naked bodies were chiseled with muscle, the one with the longer hair only a little less so than the other. They both had white hair, but the one with the shorter had dusky gray streaks and a bit more of a wave. From the sound of his voice and his manner, she recognized the one standing, the one with the glittering black eyes, as the first elf who had brought her into the darkness. The one by the fire, the one with the blue eyes, had a slightly higher voice with more of a roll in it. Until the second man had arrived, however, she truly hadn't realized that they had switched. The near continual lovemaking was blurred in her memory. In the pitch darkness, she hadn't been able to tell that one lover had replaced another.

She took another sip of the cool, clean water, averting her eyes. She'd fallen into a dream, and she couldn't decide whether or not it was a nightmare. She should be more scared, but her sore, achy body had never felt more heavy and sated. But the one with the longer hair kept giving her an assessing look. It was the same look she'd seen Tonas turn on a horse or an ox, judging its mettle. Not the look she especially wanted to be on the receiving end of.

They spoke in low tones as the one with the shorter hair poked at a pot and cut tubers and fresh meat into it. The other brought what looked like a shirt out of a pack, but he used it to wipe shiny fluids from his chest and thighs, not to cover his naked torso.

She bit her lip, averting her gaze from what lay between his thighs, and waited for a lull in the conversation. "Where's my brother?"

They glanced at her again. Then the one squatting at the kettle looked up at the other standing over him. The latter gave her a none-too-comforting smile.

“He’s fine, lovely. He’s not that far away.”

“I want to see him.” She gulped when his gaze cooled over at her demand. She changed her tone. “Please. I’d like to see that he’s all right.”

He cocked his head to the side, straight hair brushing his massive shoulder. “Don’t you trust me, lovely?”

She met his gaze but couldn’t answer. They both knew there was no reason for trust, but she didn’t want to anger him by voicing it.

His eyelids dropped until his gaze was slitted. Then his smile grew even less comforting. He nodded, stepped back, and called out down the passageway through which he’d entered. “Aurna, bring the boy.”

Eyebrows rose on the one squatting beside the stewpot, and he murmured something in that other language. The one standing laughed and responded. A call from beyond the passage must have been from the third man. Were there only three of them, or were there more? Had only these two taken her, or had there been others? She had succumbed to sleep at least twice since being captured. They’d switched once; she had no reason to believe they couldn’t have switched twice. It frightened her that she had no clue what they’d done. The one standing called back, and there was that unmistakable tone of command. This one was in charge, at least nominally.

A few moments later, another naked man appeared, this one with a short white ponytail. She only briefly noted him, however, more interested in what he carried.

Geriman looked very small and very naked, held like a baby in the arms of the massive, black-skinned man. His short hair was mostly plastered to his head, the recognizable result of having been dampened by sweat, then dried.

She sat up, clutching the full water bag to her chest as the man set her brother down at the bottom edge of the bedpad. “Geriman?” she whispered, crawling closer as the elf stood. She ignored her nudity and the protest of her thigh muscles, sore from sexual activity, and knelt at her brother’s side. “Ger?” She reached out to cup his curved jaw. He looked so very young and innocent in his sleep.

“He’s a bit worn out,” laughed the man who had brought him. He turned toward the man with the food.

“What did you do to him?” she demanded, anger rising on top of her fear for her brother’s safety.

“Roughly the same we did to you, lovely.”

Her jaw dropped. Her gaze flew up to meet the black of the lead man’s. “But...he’s a man!” She’d suspected, but had they really...?

“We noticed.”

They all laughed, and she trembled. Had they...? Her glance took in the marks and bruises on Geriman's lightly haired torso. Similar bruises marked his thighs. His sex lay small and quiescent in its nest of fur. A part of her desperately wanted to turn him over and check his bottom, but she didn't dare. "Oh, Ger." She sighed.

The men went on preparing their meal, carrying on a discussion in the language she didn't understand. Her anger bubbled. They were treating this like it was nothing. Like it was their right to use Marisol and her brother at their whim. "When are you going to let us go?" she demanded, looking up, interrupting their fluid talk. She glanced at each pair of eyes, midnight blue, crystal teal, and settled on glittering black. "When are you going to have your fill and let us go?"

The leader put on that evil smile again. "We're not going to let you go, lovely. You're ours now."

"No! We're not. You can't do this."

"Why not?"

"It's wrong! We're not pets."

"In our world, you are."

She stared, mouth agape. She'd known there were parts of the world where one race kept others as pets or treated them lower than animals. She had heard of such things as slavery, but she had never seen it herself. She had certainly never thought to fall prey to it.

Trembling, she dropped her gaze back down to Geriman's face. *What now?*

"Don't be so upset, lovely," said that voice, nearing her. "You've enjoyed how we've treated you so far."

She flinched away when he knelt on the bedpad beside her.

He reached over and put a hand over the one she had clutching the neck of the water bag.

She looked up into what she now saw as cruel, unforgiving eyes. But if she knew that, why was her tired body responding to his nearness? She could feel moisture gathering between her thighs, and her breasts began to tingle.

"Do as you're told, and you'll have no cause to fear, lovely," he told her, calmly raising the water bag to his mouth and upending a stream of liquid into it. She watched a dribble of water escape the corner of his lips and cursed herself for wanting to lap it up.

He chuckled. "Now, to properly introduce ourselves so you know who your masters are."

She glared at him before she could help it, but closed her eyes on a retort when she saw the look in his eyes. Those black eyes were cold. Clearly the eyes of someone who could hurt her and her brother without any qualms.

He nodded slightly, watching her reaction. "I am Sayth." She knew by the emphasis that he meant her to know he was in charge. His cruel smile curved his lips, and he pointed toward the fire. "The one you woke up with is Erid, and the one who has been taking such loving care of your brother is Aurna."

One of the other men snorted at that.

She turned as Erid of the almost kind blue eyes knelt on the opposite side of the bedpad. He held out a wooden bowl half full of stew to her. "Eat up, sweetling," he encouraged, dropping a spoon into the thick meal. "You'll need your strength."

They all chuckled at that while she took the bowl, suppressing a whimper. It killed her to be the slightest bit obedient, but what could she do? The passage beyond this niche was drenched in complete darkness. She had no hope of escaping, even if she thought she could get past them. Besides which, Geriman lay before her, clearly unable to escape with her. She wouldn't leave him alone with all this.

She ate. They ate, again talking in words she couldn't understand. She was most of the way through her bowl when Aurna crouched with another bowl beside Geriman. He reached down and slapped Ger's face. "Hey, wake up."

"Don't do that!" she cried.

Sayth, still seated beside her, caught her hand and kept her back. She glared up at her captor, but those glittering black eyes brooked no nonsense. Miserable, she watched as Aurna kept slapping Ger.

Eventually, her brother stirred. His head rolled, his arms twitched, and his legs drew up. His eyes blinked open. The first thing he focused on was the man's mocking face, and Marisol's heart broke to see him cringe away in fear.

The man above him laughed. "Eat up, little one. Don't let your sister think we've treated you badly."

Geriman pushed up to his elbows, ignoring the bowl held out to him. "My sis--?" He turned his head and saw her. Obvious thoughts flew across his expressive face: surprise, relief, horror, guilt, embarrassment. Marisol saw them all before he lowered his gaze. But that let him see his naked state. Hurriedly, he sat up, drawing his knees into his chest to hide himself. She didn't miss his wince of pain.

"Oh, Ger," she cried softly.

His eyes shut with a grimace of pain, but she didn't think it was physical. At least, not wholly.

Aurna shoved the bowl at him again. "Eat up."

Ger slanted a glare at him.

Aurna glared back and cuffed Geriman's head. "Eat up, now. Or do you want me to *feed* you?"

Ger's eyes went wide. Anger and fear warred on his face.

“How would that look in front of your sister?”

“Stop teasing him!” she demanded.

Geriman took the bowl without further hesitation.

“Ger.” She leaned toward her brother, and her captor let her go. She reached out. She wanted to touch Geriman, hug him, but his body language warned her off. “Ger, look at me.”

He swallowed. “I’m so sorry, Sol.”

“Ger, this isn’t your fault.”

He winced.

“Ger.”

“How interesting,” Sayth drawled. “The little man is so quiet when his sister’s here. He’s been so loud before.” He laughed. “Of course, that was mostly whimpers and moans, wasn’t it, little man?”

“And begging for more,” said one of the others.

“Stop it!” she cried.

Geriman started to shake so hard that stew rattled over the edge of the bowl and onto his hands. He cried out, holding the bowl out to try to keep from getting hot stew onto the bare skin of his torso.

Aurna was there at his side, lifting the bowl away. He caught up Geriman’s hand and, to Marisol’s utter amazement, brought it to his mouth and lapped at the spilled stew with a shining black tongue.

Geriman glared at him, still shaking. “Stop.” A flush crept up his neck.

The man only grinned, white teeth then black lips closing around Ger’s fingers.

Ger glanced wildly at her and tried to yank his hand away. “I said stop.”

“Make him,” Sayth taunted.

Ger’s anger sparked. He kicked at Aurna. Marisol gasped, falling back against the cavern wall behind the bedpad as the third of their captors appeared to catch his legs before they landed a blow. Geriman cried out in pain, trying to yank away from the man who was now quite obviously biting his fingers.

Sayth clucked his tongue, shaking his head. “Naughty, little man. You still haven’t learned. Aurna should bite your fingers off for that.”

Ger yelled. Blood began to trickle down the back of his hand.

“Stop it!” Marisol cried. Sayth caught her when she tried to launch herself at the combatants at the edge of the bedpad. “Don’t hurt him!”

Aurna glanced at Sayth, then smiled and opened his mouth. He still held onto Geriman’s wrist, not allowing her brother to have his hand back. “You’re lucky your sister’s watching out for you, little man,” he said, eyes locked on her brother’s. Slowly, his tongue snaked out to lap at the blood.

Geriman sneered, but the string of curses she expected him to fling didn't come. He twisted in the grasp of the two men, but said nothing. His struggles had turned him so his backside was to her. She could now see the flushed, red state of his buttocks as well as what could only be fingerprint bruises on his buttocks and waist.

"Gods," she murmured helplessly, settling back.

"You see?" whispered a voice in her ear. Sayth slid an arm around her, cradling her back into his embrace. "There's nothing you can do. We're stronger and faster. You invaded our land, and we've taken ownership." He settled a big hand possessively over her breast. She gasped, unwilling to admit that it felt good. "You're ours."

Geriman glanced over his shoulder, saw what the man was doing to her, and started to struggle again. "No! Let go of her! Don't touch her!" Marisol had to close her eyes, unwilling to watch how easily the black-skinned devils subdued him.

Fingers dug into Marisol's hair, turning her head to the side. "Ours," he growled before taking possession of her mouth.

Chapter Five

Jarak glared at the dress he pulled from the mangled trunk. It was dirty, and bugs from the thick undergrowth of the bushes that had nearly hidden the trunk had gotten to it, but he could still smell the slight traces of the woman who'd once worn it. "They have a woman," he announced, fisting the fabric in his hand.

Five sets of eyes turned toward him. The others were inspecting the abandoned, partially demolished wagon and the crates and packs which had been in it. Jarak's group had found the wagon and its contents mostly hidden at the bottom of an embankment not far off the High Road. The only reason they'd found it was because of the mostly eaten carcass of the horse that had drawn it not far away.

Rhicard stepped up to him, the dimming glow of his red eyes indicating a fading spell. "I'm sensing traces of two humans. I suspected one might be female."

Jarak dropped the dress. "Judging from the state of the wagon and that carcass, this happened maybe five or six nights ago."

Rhicard nodded. "So it would seem."

"Do you suppose they're still alive?"

Glances were exchanged among the six of them, but no one spoke up. Jarak faced Rhicard.

The sorcerer was easily twice Jarak's age and had the look of having seen everything. Nothing seemed to affect him anymore. He met Jarak's gaze steadily. "Perhaps. If so, they may not be in very good condition."

"Nine hells," Jarak swore, kicking the trunk at his feet.

He knew what Rhicard meant. He'd seen it before. They all had. What had to be desperation had led the rogues to continue capturing humans who traveled the roads that crossed the forest and mountains. As hard as it was for humans to resist the raedjour, it was

equally hard for the raedjour to resist humans. However, all of the sorcerers among the raedjour remained with Savous, so the only people who could cast the spell to change human women to raedjour were unavailable to the rogues. For thousands of cycles, the raedjour had kidnapped humans for sexual pleasure. True, in those thousands of cycles, the sorcerers and rhaeja had seen to the relative safety of the women, at least. But now they lived in a time when many raedjour didn't believe in the rhaeja, and the humans suffered because of it.

"We need to find them," Jarak muttered, casting a quick glance around his companions to make sure they all agreed.

They did. Without discussion, they each set about examining their surroundings, trying to find clues to the direction in which the rogues had taken their captives.

They'd use them, Jarak knew. The rogues would fuck them. Few raedjour would even try to resist a human woman. They didn't have to mistreat their captives, either. But they'd keep fucking, and there was yet to be born a human who could withstand a raedjour's sexual appetite. The rogues would eventually fuck them to death.

They caught sight of one of the rogues the next night of searching. Only another raedjour could have both seen him and followed him without his knowing, and that was mostly thanks to Rhicard's magic. Among the six of them, they managed to track him back to a concealed cavern. It wasn't an unknown spot, but it was certainly little used.

Zenth had been in the caverns before. "They don't have another outlet," he told them when they all sat in a small clearing sparsely lit by shards of moonlight. "There are only a few small grottos big enough to be comfortable."

"Can you tell how many rogues there are?" Jarak asked Rhicard.

The sorcerer cast his gaze in the direction of the cave's mouth, even though it wasn't visible from where they sat. His red eyes glowed softly "No. There had to have been at least two to have taken the humans, but I can't tell how many more."

"We didn't see evidence of more than three or four at the wagon site," Uleanjen reminded them.

"Which doesn't mean that there aren't more in there," Zenth added.

"All true," Jarak agreed, staring at a patch of dirt between them. He thought for a moment, then looked up. "We should attack tonight."

"Shouldn't we alert Savous? Salin?"

Jarak shook his head. "It would take at least a few nights to gather more warriors. Those humans might be dead by then."

"So could we," Rhicard pointed out.

Trust the sorcerer to point out the bad. Jarak grinned at him. "We have you."

Rhicard's gaze swung around to meet his. He didn't crack a smile. "Even I am not impervious."

Jarak's smile grew. All of the sorcerers were like that in one way or another -- full of themselves even when they were being humble. "We'll chance it. Vren" -- he looked up at his friend, who happened to be the youngest of them -- "you'll go back and let Savous know what we're doing. Either they should come after us, or we'll be right behind you."

Vren grimaced, but he didn't protest. He nodded assent.

Jarak stood. "All right, men." He glanced at them all. Good friends. All warriors except for the sorcerer, who had his own uses. Jarak had recognized the rogue and knew that man, at least, wasn't one of Salin and Krael's specially trained fighters, so he felt pretty good about their chances. "Let's go."

The hike to the mouth of the cave took very little time. They paused long enough to light a few torches before entering. The sudden light would work in their favor, forcing their prey to adjust from night vision to light vision. It was only a few heartbeats of time, but that could make all the difference in a skirmish. They discussed briefly and appointed Uleanjen and Rhicard to carry the torches.

Checking to make sure they were all ready, Jarak unsheathed both of his short, narrow swords and charged into the cave, Rhicard at his heels. As Zenth had said, the passages were level and narrow, forcing his men to follow rather than run abreast of him.

They found the rogues and their captives in the first sizable cavern. The space was maybe eight or nine paces across, with smooth walls and a high, irregular ceiling. Jarak's first glance showed him three rogues, all naked, all scrambling for weapons in packs against one wall. A naked human woman and a naked human man lay on a makeshift bedpad. Neither responded immediately to Jarak's arrival. He hoped they weren't dead.

A blade flashing for his head took his attention from the humans. He countered, facing off with a man a full head taller than he. "You can't have them," the man snarled, black eyes full of the rage that drove many of the rogues.

Jarak didn't bother to answer. The rogue's blade slid off Jarak's right-hand sword, and Jarak swung the left-hand blade at his head. The rogue ducked, backing away. Two more attempted thrusts showed that Jarak was better at the blade. The rogue was outclassed and he knew it.

"Sayth!" yelled Rhicard. "Put down your weapon."

The rogue shuffled back, tossing a glance toward Rhicard. He sneered. "Shut up, traitor."

"Give up, Sayth," continued the sorcerer from behind and to the left of Jarak. "You can't win."

The rogue's eyes went wild. "Maybe not." He spun toward the captives. "But you can't have them!"

Shouting woke Marisol from an exhausted stupor. Her mind roused quickly, but her body was slow to follow. Every muscle ached from exertion. It didn't feel as though her hips and thighs functioned at all. Sudden light blinded her. She shied toward what she believed was the cavern wall behind the bedpad as she blinked her eyes.

Shuffling feet and the sound of blades clashing made her heart race. Fighting?! Grunts and shouts in what had to be the raedjour language filled her ears. What was happening? She reached up to rub fingers into her eyes, trying to clear them.

Elves filled her blurry vision. Far more elves than her three captors. Black skin grappling with black skin. Steel blades shining in the firelight that danced in the air on the tips of torches in the hands of the newcomers. Vividly colored leathers and flowing white hair. Heavy boots hit the side of the bedpad, shoving the corner up.

Where had the other elves come from?

Beside her, someone groaned. She glanced over to see Geriman's shoulder propped against the wall beside her. His eyes beneath the damp fall of his hair didn't look like they could focus yet. She reached over to grasp his hand, linking her fingers with his.

"Sol," he croaked, trying weakly to push from the wall.

She squeezed his fingers. "Stay still." Movement toward the foot of the bedpad got her attention. She turned. Sayth stood, a slim sword bared, arm poised to plunge the weapon into Geriman's belly. "No!" she screamed, grabbing Ger's shoulders and pulling.

Snarling, Sayth thrust, but Marisol had moved Geriman enough so that the tip of the blade sank into Geriman's thigh rather than his gut. Geriman screamed, voice hoarse in his well-used throat. Marisol echoed his cry, reaching for Sayth's hand on the blade, knowing there was little she could do but having to try nonetheless.

Sayth's arm suddenly stiffened. Then his fingers went loose, releasing the blade that stood up in Geriman's leg. Blood lightly splattered Marisol's face and shoulders as the tip of a sword shoved through the left side of Sayth's chest from behind. The face of another, shorter man appeared behind him, a bare black arm holding a second blade wrapping around Sayth's shoulders from behind. Sayth's body rocked, his mouth falling open in a soundless cry as the blade extended another thumb-length. The man behind him sneered something in his ear.

Marisol screamed as loud as her aching body would allow as Sayth's body crumpled to the ground.

Jarak pulled the corpse back as the woman screamed, making sure the body fell well away from her. Unable to attend to the prisoners for the moment, he turned to check on his men. Both of the other rogues lay unconscious. A quick fight, then, for which Jarak was glad. Unfortunately, that last had drawn a blade and had clearly intended to kill the prisoners. Now that the fight was over, it was time to contend with the mess the rogues had made.

Wiping his blades nominally clean on his pants, he sheathed them as he turned back to see the woman huddled over the body of the man. Her hoarse screams had turned into shuddering sobs. It looked like the man had fallen mercifully from consciousness.

Her hand went for the rogue's sword, still stuck like an oversized dart in the man's leg. "Don't touch it," Jarak snapped in commonspeak, dropping to one knee beside her.

Her liquid blue eyes widened, and she shrank back from him, her arms protective around the unconscious man's head, cradling it to her bare breast.

Jarak tore his gaze from those lovely breasts and their tempting, dark brown nipples and forced himself to look at the man's wound. Nasty puncture with the blade wedged in the bone of the man's hip. Oddly, that had probably saved his life, since it had taken just that split moment longer for the now-dead raedjour to try to pull out the blade before Jarak killed him. "Rhicard!"

The sorcerer knelt behind the injured man. "Here." He reached his hand toward the bloody wound.

"Don't hurt him," croaked the woman piteously.

Thinking to comfort, Jarak reached for her. "We're not going to hurt him, sweet."

When his hand didn't find her, he turned to see that she'd cringed away. He frowned at being denied her touch, then remembered himself. There was no reason for her to think he was any different than the men who'd used her. He forced himself to meet her frightened gaze, tamping down the anger that surged at seeing her thus. "We're not going to hurt you, sweet. We've come to rescue you."

"Jarak," Rhicard said, regaining Jarak's attention, "I need your help." The sorcerer's hands lay palms-flat on the unconscious man's hip, the thumb and forefinger of each hand forming a square around the blade and the blood. Rhicard's red eyes were glowing and trained on what he was doing. "When I say, you need to pull out the blade. Make sure to pull it up straight out of the wound and not at an angle."

Nodding, Jarak took hold of the hilt of the sword. His warrior's eye scoffed at the state of the blade, nicked and unoiled. Krael would have castrated Jarak if he'd let a weapon fall into such disrepair.

Rhicard tossed silvery gray hair from his face, his eyes never leaving his task. After a silent moment, he nodded. "Now."

Jarak yanked the blade free. The unconscious man moaned softly in his sleep. Blood spurted anew from the wound, but quickly slowed to a steady trickle.

"Uleanjen," Rhicard called.

The other man was there, a clean bandage already in his hands. Working with Rhicard, he wrapped the cloth about the man's hip and thigh.

Jarak stole another glance at the woman. She bit her swollen bottom lip, eyes rapt on Rhicard's actions as she smoothed a hand over the matted curls on the head of the man she cradled. What was he to her? "Is he your husband?"

She didn't hear him at first. Didn't pay him any heed until he moved a little closer. Then her eyes darted to him, albeit reluctant to lose track of what Rhicard was doing. "What?"

"Is he your husband?"

"He's my brother," she said, eyeing him warily.

Unreasonably, that made him feel better. He smiled, hoping she saw the warmth and comfort in his expression. "Don't worry. We won't hurt you."

She frowned, trembling a little. "That's what they said," she whispered.

His heart tore. Shame for her treatment at the hands of his race caused him to avert his gaze. "We'll take you somewhere where you can rest. Where you can heal." He gestured at her brother's hip.

"Will you let us go?"

Jarak looked up into Rhicard's gaze. The glow had subsided to his normal, calm red. "We'll see that you're safe," he said.

A small, warm hand touched Jarak's bare arm. Surprised, he turned to see the woman look up at him, exhaustion and desperation in her huge blue eyes. "Please. Just let us go."

Jarak opened his mouth but couldn't speak. How could he tell her that he'd let her go, when he knew that wouldn't be the case? She'd be safer back in the city under Savous's care, yes, but she wouldn't ever be let go.

Rhicard reached over the man's body to touch the woman's temple. She didn't see and didn't get a chance to flinch away. "Sleep," he murmured.

Jarak watched helplessly as those beautiful blue eyes fluttered shut. He reached forward to catch her limp body before it could fall. Small, warm, and soft, she was infinitely tempting, even given the bruised and unwashed state of her body. He reacted instantly, his skin tingling and his cock filling with blood.

"We need to start back," Rhicard said, standing. "I've done what I can for the wound, but I've only stopped the bleeding. He needs a healer."

"We're taking him?" Zenth asked, surprised.

Jarak looked at his friend, who had one of the unconscious rogues carelessly tossed over his shoulder, ready to depart. "Yes, we're taking him."

He saw it in Zenth's eyes. Zenth held the same opinion about human males as most raedjour. They were fun for a fuck or two and maybe as a personal slave for a while, but they were basically useless. At least to a raedjour. Human women were the truly valuable creatures.

But Zenth just shrugged. He turned with his burden and left the small cavern.

Uleanjen lifted the other rogue and followed Zenth.

Jarak stood, the woman cradled in his arms. Rhicard gathered up the human male.

The sorcerer sadly regarded the dead man beside the bedpad. "Sayth," he murmured as he stood. "I used to know him, many, many cycles ago." There was a tinge of regret in his tone. He took a deep breath, almost a sigh. His eyes glowed, and he cradled the human with one arm, extending the other over the corpse.

Jarak stepped away from the bedpad as Sayth's corpse started to disintegrate. He walked toward the passage entrance, catching up one of the torches on his way. A last-moment glance back showed that the body was nothing more than dust on the floor.

Rhicard murmured a few words that Jarak couldn't distinguish, then followed Jarak from the chamber.

Chapter Six

Marisol opened her eyes to find herself staring at a candlelit wooden ceiling. The planks were tightly fit together, showing fine craftsmanship. She turned her head slightly, realizing she lay upon a firm, thickly stuffed mattress with her head supported by soft pillows with a vaguely floral scent that she didn't recognize. Her head felt muzzy, as it might after sleeping too long. It took a moment to focus on the candle flame that glowed brightly from within a finely worked, low clay lamp that sat on a table beside the bed.

She blinked, trying to concentrate. Last she could recall, she was in a cave. She was at the mercy of cruel elves who were wearing both her and her brother out by constantly forcing them to have sex.

Her brother.

She sat up too fast, wincing at the rush to her head. The heavy quilt fell to her lap, making her aware that she wore a light linen shift that lay low over her shoulders. Pretty white lace edged the loose neckline. Self-consciously, she grabbed the material at her neck and held it beneath her chin.

She was alone in the small room, with the lamplight to keep her company. There was an open door in a dark corner to the left. A stout, shut door on the opposite wall looked to be an exit.

"Where am I?" she muttered. This was a far cry from the cave where she'd been held in the dark for an untold number of days. Her captors had only lit the fire at mealtimes or if they wanted to force Marisol or Geriman to watch while the other was being raped.

She swallowed, closing her eyes. It was bad enough to know that such things had happened to her brother, but to have *seen* it...No sister should have to watch such things. The act itself wasn't what upset her the most. From what their captors had told her and from the evidence of her own sight, she knew that there had been a certain amount of pleasure in

it for Geriman. But then, there'd been pleasure in what they'd done to her. A forced pleasure. A pleasure that was overwhelming and frightening in her inability to control it. No, it wasn't the act that had made her ache for her brother. It was the agony and the disgust in his face and the way he couldn't face her in the few moments of rest that they had.

Shaking off the memories, she again looked around the room. Where was Geriman? How had she gotten here? She forced her memory and finally started to recall the arrival of other elves in the cave. A fight. Geriman getting stabbed in the hip. Sayth, their main captor, dying. The new elves treating Geriman's wound. "*We'll see that you're safe,*" the one man had said, staring at her with the most amazing, large crystal blue eyes.

So, presumably, she was *safe*. Whatever that meant. Her former captors had thought they were keeping her *safe*, too. Safe for their own pleasures. Had she just been moved from one prison to another? If so, at least this one was more comfortable and warmer. Cleaner.

She laughed softly, bringing her hand up to rub at her tired eyes. "You're losing your mind if you're glad that your new prison is cleaner, Sol," she muttered to herself.

Her hand dropped back to her lap. She stared at the lumps under the quilt that were her legs. She recalled the pain of using them back in the cave. The lack of daylight hadn't allowed her to judge the time, but it must have been days that she had been at the mercy of those elves. Her captors had used her so much that her thighs were a constant ache, eclipsed only by the pain inside of her. The exhaustion and muscle weariness had drowned her mind into a state of continual hurt, which had made the unbidden lust all the more unbearable. But now, although she could feel the stiffness in her legs, she could tell that she had healed somewhat. Inside of her sex ached, but not nearly to the extent that it had.

"How long have I been here?" she wondered with surprise. She couldn't have healed that quickly, could she? Then she recalled the man with the red eyes stopping the blood flow in her brother's wound. Perhaps she had been healed magically.

She sat, fretting over what to do. Should she get up and approach the door? She wasn't afraid to admit to herself that she was frightened to do so. What if those elves were on the other side? She would rather avoid them as long as she could. But what if they *were* out there and they were hurting Geriman again? She needed to help him if she could. Not that she had been able to before...

The door latch clicked.

She looked up, and her heart raced as one of *them* entered.

He was clean and neat, with straight hair that shone whitely in the light. Her previous captors had possessed the look of travelers, grungy and unwashed after a few days. This one wore clean leathers in a soft olive green. Laced trews were tucked into slouched black leather boots. An embroidered vest to match the trews hung open over a muscled chest and abdomen. Bracers to match the boots surrounded his forearms, studded with silver. He had the clearest, bluest eyes she had ever seen.

He was the one she remembered. The one who said she'd be safe.

He smiled as he stepped inside. "You're awake," he said, his voice a soft purr.

Quickly, she drew up the quilt high beneath her chin. Despite the fact that this one's voice made her want to rub against him like a cat, she couldn't quite make herself relax. She backed up against the wall behind the bed, drawing her knees up.

He stopped just inside the room, his smile faltering beneath a wash of sadness. He held up one hand, palm toward her, in a placating gesture. In his other hand, he carried a clay decanter with a small cup fit onto the cap. "Relax, sweet," he soothed. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"The others said they didn't want to hurt me either." *Rude*, she thought, especially if he was telling the truth, but she didn't take her words back.

A pained expression closed his eyes briefly and killed the rest of his smile. "I'm not here to take advantage of you." He held up the decanter. "I brought you some wine. Thought you might be thirsty."

She tried to swallow in a dry throat.

He stepped toward her, taking a slight detour to grab a simple wooden chair by the door and bring it with him to the side of the bed.

"Where's Geriman?" she demanded as he set the decanter on the table beside the lantern.

"Your brother? He's fine."

"How did you know he's my brother?"

"You told us so when we rescued you."

"Rescued."

He sighed, pouring a light wine into the cup. "Yes. Rescued." He turned and held the cup of wine toward her.

She eyed it, then looked up his long, muscular arm at his face. "Are you going to let us go?"

"You need to heal. Both you and your brother were hurt pretty badly."

She noted that he didn't exactly answer her question. Dim recollection told her that he hadn't answered before either.

He gestured with the cup, nodding his head. "Here. It's safe. I promise."

Strangely, instinct told her to trust him. She'd memorized the looks of amused indifference on the faces of her captors from the cave. This one's face held none of that. But recent experience quashed her trust in instinct.

He nodded slightly, then set the cup on the table. He stepped back, well out of arm's reach, and turned the chair around so he could straddle it, folding his arms across the back. "I'm sorry for what happened to you. I know my apology doesn't mean anything or take back what was done. I can only assure you that what happened to you was wrong and the men

who took you and your brother will be made to pay.” He said it all staring straight into her eyes, trying to convey his sincerity. He was either that, or he was an exquisite actor.

She decided not to ask about her captors. Sayth was dead by this man’s hand. That would have to do for now. “Where am I?”

“You’re in our main city, under the care of the rhaeja himself.”

She didn’t know the word “rhaeja” but chose to address what she did recognize first. “We’re in a city?”

“Of sorts. Not one like you’re used to, though.” He nodded toward the cup of wine that still sat on the table beside the bed. “It’s really good. Light. It’ll probably make you feel better.”

She looked at the cup.

“Are you hungry?”

She held the quilt to her chest with one hand and reached out and took the cup, shaking her head. “No.” She looked into the clear pink liquid evident against the glazed white of the cup.

“I suppose that’s not really surprising. You were asleep a long time.”

She lifted the cup to her nose, sniffing it. It smelled lovely, lightly tart. “How long?” she asked, turning her eyes up to gaze at him through her lashes as she took a sip. The wine was tasty, fruity with just enough tart to make her tongue tingle.

The view was lovely. His black skin shone in the light as he lifted one hand to brush back snowy white hair from his face. “Most of six nights.”

She gasped, almost dropping her drink.

He folded his arm across the other over the back of the chair. “I’ll apologize for it, but it really was necessary. Neither you nor your brother was up for the trip if you were conscious, and you needed to heal.”

“Where is my brother?”

He averted his eyes, startingly white lashes hiding the crystal blue as he stared at the backs of his hands. “He’s still sleeping. He’s...under a healing spell.”

“He’s been sleeping all this time?”

“Please understand, he was damaged.” The man hedged, uncomfortable with what he was saying. “How much do you remember of what happened after we arrived?”

“I remember he was stabbed.”

The man nodded. “That on top of what else was done to him...He needs a lot of care.” He was being very careful with his words. Despite her misgivings, she was touched.

“I want to see him.”

“He’s not conscious.”

“I need to see him with my own eyes.”

Blue eyes rose to hers, and she made herself look stern. She knew very well she was at the mercy of this man and his kind, but she refused to act the simpering victim.

He took a breath. "Can you walk?"

She stared at him. "Should I not be able to walk?" Her hips did hurt and between her legs ached, but it was nothing, she thought, too serious.

Pained concern stretched taut over his sharp features. "After the way you've been used, it wouldn't be surprising."

Her hand began to tremble as memory surged. Helplessness in a flood of fierce, unrelenting pleasure. Too much. Too long. Brutal pain underneath her body's demand for more. Mocking laughter as huge, strong men held her down and took her again and again. Took her, then took her brother. Made her watch. A fine tremor in her belly turned into a full-body quake.

"Oh, no, sweet!" The man shot up, the chair tumbling from under him as he came toward her.

She shrank away from his sudden movement with a scream, flinging a hand up between them. "No!" She couldn't bear it! No more! She pulled herself against the headboard of the bed, using the quilt as a paltry excuse for a shield.

He froze, hands hovering over the edge of the bed, reaching for the cup that spilled wine in the spot where her lap had been. A look of pure agony passed over his sharp features as he watched her, his fingers curling into impotent fists. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She swallowed, trying to calm herself. *He hasn't done anything*, she told herself. *He stopped*. Still, she couldn't suppress the trembling and couldn't bring herself to lower her hand. "Step back."

He did.

Shaking, she picked up the cup from where it lay on the mattress beside her.

He watched her, a helpless look on his face when she peeked. Then with a mutter, he turned to head for the darkened doorway in the corner.

Marisol felt tears in her eyes as she set the cup on the table. Her hand still shook. She felt...broken. Battered. She'd felt perfectly normal one moment, then a complete wreck the next. She wiped tears from her cheeks with the gathered wrist cuff of her chemise.

He returned with a small bowl half full of water and two cloths. He set them carefully on the mattress beside her, then stepped back out of reach.

She took a deep breath, recognizing his attempt to help her. "Thank you." More tears spilled down her cheeks as she cautiously lowered the quilt from her chin.

"Please, don't cry."

She bit her lip, feeling the floodgates open to spill more tears down her cheeks. His show of concern seemed to release it. She reached for the bowl and one of the cloths.

“We brought you here to make you better,” he told her as she daubed at the wet spot on the quilt. “Our healers work with spells. The one who’s been watching you tells me that the damage wasn’t too serious. He said you might be sore and that you probably shouldn’t walk too much for another night or so.” At the sound of his soft boots shuffling on the floor, she glanced up to see him at the foot of the bed. He lifted the lid of a chest she couldn’t see from her vantage. “He said you would need to eat and drink as much as you could and that you should rest.”

“Why isn’t he here?” she asked, more to keep a conversation going than anything. If they were talking, then she could concentrate on his voice and not on the memories that wanted to surface.

“He’s watching your brother.” He lifted out another quilt and closed the lid of the chest. He grimaced, coming around to the side of the bed again. “I should have asked one of the women to come, but...I wanted to make sure for myself that you were all right.”

She took a deep breath as he set the new quilt beside her, staring at it and not him, all too aware that he was within reach.

He paused, then patted it. “I’ll let you change that.” He stepped back, and she peeked up to see his averted gaze, his face looked profoundly unhappy. It tugged at her heart, piercing through the fear. “And get you something to eat.” He turned and headed for the door. “I’ll have one of the women bring it to you.”

“Please!” she heard herself say just as he reached the doorway.

He turned, surprised. “Yes?”

“Marisol.”

He frowned.

She swallowed. “My name is Marisol. What’s yours?”

He smiled warmly. “My name is Jarak.”

She tried to return his smile, compelled. “Thank you, Jarak. I’m s-sorry for my...” She gestured at the stain on the quilt.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry about, Marisol.” Her name sounded so very beautiful slipping from his lips.

A pretty female with loose, waist-length, straight white hair and a wide, friendly smile came through the door, bringing with her a covered bowl that emitted fragrant steam from underneath its cover. She wore a simple, sleeveless shift in icy blue. It fastened with two brooches at her shoulders and was belted around her slim waist with a length of soft, thick cord, but otherwise it fell loosely about her body, exposing a good amount of her glossy black skin. Strange white designs like tattoos decorated her brow and some of what Marisol could see of her chest.

“Hello, Marisol,” she greeted, passing through the doorway.

Marisol looked over her shoulder to see Jarak's concerned face watching, just before he closed the door, staying on the other side.

"I'm Irin," said the woman as she set the bowl down on the table. She sat, turning toward Marisol. Her irises were a startling dark red, like the dying embers of a fire. It seemed natural. She reached over to pat Marisol's shoulder. "I'm so sorry for what you've gone through."

Marisol swallowed. "Thank you."

"I want you to know that we won't allow it to happen again."

But will you let me go? Marisol thought it, but didn't ask. She didn't want to hear bad news right now. Right now, she wanted to believe these people when they said she was safe. She needed to feel that. "Thank you."

The woman's smile seemed genuine. "Are you hungry? This stew is best eaten when hot." She reached for the bowl, lifting the lid. A delightfully rich smell filled the air. "Yarin stew with plenty of vegetables. It's delicious."

Marisol helped Irin to settle the bowl on her lap and accepted the spoon. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Irin turned back to the nightstand and poured some more of the wine that Jarak had left earlier. "Now, would you rather I left you alone to eat? Or would you like to talk?" She lifted the filled cup toward Marisol, then held it gently in her lap after Marisol shook her head. "I'll tell you anything you want to know."

The stew was, indeed, delicious. Flavorful and hearty, she imagined she could feel it seeping into her muscles and bones, renewing her strength. She thought while she chewed. Did she dare ask what she wanted to know? "When can I see my brother?"

Irin nodded. "I understand your concern. I do. Please believe me when I say that he's healing nicely. Adesty -- that's the name of the healer who's been watching both of you -- thinks he'll fully recover. But he also says it'll take more time for him. Geriman, right?" She echoed Marisol's nod. "Your brother is in a deep, healing sleep now, and Adesty is watching him. He thinks it best that no one else is in the room. Besides, if we were to take you to see your brother, someone would have to carry you and...we didn't think you'd want that just now."

Thoughts of Jarak sprang to mind. Part of her thought the idea of being carried by him would be wonderful, but the other part shivered in fright. "May I meet Adesty?"

"Certainly. He's planned to come and see you later."

Marisol nodded, back to chewing. "Jarak said we were in your main city. Where is that?"

"Ah, well, it's not a city as you know of them. At least not from what I've been told. You're several miles underneath the Rhaen Mountains in a city currently with a population of roughly seven hundred people."

"Underground?"

“Yes.”

Marisol stared openly at Irin’s dark skin and red eyes. Her white hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows were a startling contrast and somehow went with the white designs etched into her skin. “Can you see in the dark too?”

Irin smiled, not bothered by Marisol’s scrutiny. “Yes. We all can. Although we can’t see colors in the dark. It’s more like outlines and shadows.”

Marisol nodded. That had been what her captors had indicated. Unwilling to dwell on that, she said the first thing that came to mind. “No one told me there were people living in the Dark Forest or on the Rhaen Mountains. Why doesn’t anyone know about your city?”

Irin took a breath and let it out slowly. “Because few humans have been allowed to leave the forest once they’ve encountered one of us.”

That was it then. That was what Jarak had been unwilling to say. She stared into the stew. “I see.”

Irin held out the cup of wine, and Marisol took it. “The raedjour were created by the goddess Rhae as bodyguards and sexual consorts,” Irin began brightly. Clearly the words were spoken by rote, a well-known story to her. “She’s a goddess of sexuality, fecundity, and darkness. She created the forest, but made it close-knit so that Her favored darkness would be the norm closer to the earth. She also created a world of abundance beneath the surface of Her forest, and that’s where She spent most of Her time. She made Her consorts beautiful, exotic men with skin of Her favorite color, but gave them hair like spun moonlight. She also made sure that their sexual appetite was high. Certainly more than any other creature we’ve ever heard tale of.”

Marisol handed back the cup and picked up her spoon again. She could well believe that the elves -- the raedjour -- had a higher sexual appetite than any other living creature.

Irin set the cup down on the table. “When it was time for Her to leave the earth, She realized that She’d never created any women for Her consorts. Without any time to rectify Her error, She gave the raedjour gifts. She gave them Her innate sense of the forest and the mountains. With that, they’ve been able to literally sense the forest and know when something is wrong or if trespassers are crossing their territory. She also struck a bargain with one of the human gods and gave them a spell to convert human women into raedjour.”

Marisol’s mind had begun to wander, wondering why she needed a history lesson. The last sentence got her attention. “Convert human women?”

“Yes.” Irin nodded. “The raedjour capture human women and set that spell” -- she lifted her arm, holding it out toward Marisol -- “changing them to raedjour.”

“You were human once?”

“I was. A little over eighty springs ago.”

Marisol blinked. “Eighty...?” This woman looked to be Marisol’s age, certainly no older.

“Yes. The raedjour live about a thousand springs or so. The women they convert don’t live quite that long, but certainly we all live a few hundred springs, at least. Often more.”

“Have I...?” Marisol couldn’t help it. She looked down at her hand. It didn’t seem any different, no darker. “Did they set this spell on me?”

“No, and that was the problem with the men who took you. None of them was a sorcerer, so they didn’t have any means to set the spell.” Irin reached over to pour some more wine. “Without the spell, humans can’t possibly keep up with a raedjour sexually. By using you like that...” She grimaced. “Well, it was irresponsible at the least and reprehensible at the worst.”

Marisol started to shake. It all made a certain amount of sense. “Why did they...why didn’t they bring me to a s-sorcerer?”

Irin took the bowl from her lap and set it on the table. “They didn’t have access to one. All of the sorcerers are here in the city, and those men had left. They were rogues, self-proclaimed outcasts.” She took hold of one of Marisol’s hands and folded it around the cup. She kept hold herself, keeping it steady in Marisol’s shaky grip. “Here, drink up.”

Marisol glanced up and gasped. Irin’s eyes were alight, the red glowing softly like warm embers.

The woman smiled. “Don’t be afraid. I’m a mage. Not quite a sorcerer, but not too far off.” She winked. “You can tell by the red eyes.”

“A-are you...setting...the spell?”

“Me? Oh, no. I’m just doing something that’ll help calm you down a bit.”

Marisol drew in a breath, realizing that the icy cold deep in her chest had melted and her shaking had stopped. “Thank you.”

Irin squeezed the hands that held the cup. “It’s not much, and it won’t last long, but I know it can’t be easy to deal with this.”

Marisol let Irin raise their hands and took a sip of the wine. “How did you manage when you...were changed? Did you...adapt all right?”

“Oh, I actually had it easy. I grew up here. I was captured when I was just a tot. I don’t remember my parents.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Irin shrugged. “Thank you, but it’s not necessary. The only complaint I have about my childhood was that there weren’t any other little girls around to play with.” She laughed. “But I wouldn’t trade my life now if I could.”

They lowered the cup to Marisol’s lap. “Why is that?”

Slowly, Irin released Marisol’s hands. The soothing calm remained, for which Marisol was grateful.

“I have Savous. He’s my truemate.”

“Truemate?”

“My husband, but so much more. One of the drawbacks to the spell converting human women to raedjour is that the women end up being fertile with only one man. That man is her truemate.”

“Only one?”

Irin nodded. “Only one.”

That was something of a relief! Thoughts of pregnancy had haunted the corners of Marisol’s mind, but she’d dashed them aside, unwilling to face the possibility just yet.

“Savous. You love him?”

“Very much.”

Marisol had to smile. “That’s nice. Are all truematches love matches?”

“Unfortunately, no. More often than not, I’m happy to say, but not always.”

Marisol nodded, her gaze wandering over the quilt. She didn’t want to ask the questions poised at her lips and couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Irin took pity on her. She stood, gathered up the empty bowl, and covered it. “I think that’s probably enough for one sitting. Hope I didn’t bore you with the history lesson.” She laughed softly. “Are you comfortable? Can I get you anything? Adesty says you should be all right to get to the privy” -- she pointed to the dark corner -- “but do you need me to help you?”

“Actually...” Marisol looked at the door in the corner. She turned, bringing her legs closer to the side of the bed. “Could you stay just to make sure I can stand?”

“Certainly.”

Irin set the bowl back down and took the cup from Marisol while Marisol swung her legs over the side of the bed. She held Marisol’s arm and helped her to stand. Marisol was glad to find that, though her balance was shaky at first and her legs felt weak, she was able to hobble to the privy without too much assistance. Irin left her alone in the small little niche.

The privy was rather clever. A steady trickle of water emerged from a small opening overhead and slid down a runnel in the smooth rock wall until it reached one carved out basin that was about waist high. The water filled it about halfway before spilling out of a hole in the back to trickle down into another basin that was at about knee height. That one was carved to look like the seat of the fancy privy cover Tonas had made for their room. She easily figured out that the top was for washing and the bottom was for relieving herself. There were also a comb and brush sitting on a shelf beside the top basin, along with another dry cloth.

When she finished, she managed to cross the main room to the bed without Irin’s help, although the other woman hovered in case she was needed. Marisol did heave a sigh of relief when she sank back into the mattress.

Irin helped pull the quilt in place over her. “I’ll turn the lamp down low, and I’ll leave the wine in case you want it. Someone will be right outside the door. If you need anything, just yell.” She grinned. “Or go and open the door if you want to be polite, although it’s not necessary.”

Marisol smiled at the attempted humor.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“No. You’ve been very kind. Thank you.”

Irin stood at the bedside, cradling the empty bowl. “They’re not all like the men who hurt you, Marisol,” she said softly. “The majority of them are good men who wouldn’t dream of doing anything like that to you.”

“But still, they’re going to keep me. Aren’t they?” The question was asked before she could stop herself.

Irin’s eyes darted aside. “Yes.”

Marisol nodded, closing her eyes. *What about my brother?* she thought, but managed not to ask. She didn’t need to know right now. She obviously had days ahead of her. A lifetime. She didn’t need to know all of the answers in one night.

* * * * *

Black hands. Black lips. Black arms. Black cocks. Inky, utter darkness filled with men who seemed to be the dark made flesh. Men doing unspeakable things to Geriman’s body. Things that made his muscles spasm with cruel delight and kept his blood at an agonizing, anticipatory sizzle.

No! He didn’t like it. He didn’t! The warmth coursing through his veins had to be some sort of witchcraft.

“Geriman.” The voice was soft and low, very male, very decadent.

No.

“Geriman, wake.”

Consciousness wavered, dream images dispelling somewhat. Thoughts didn’t stick together.

“Where...?”

He half sat on something soft, back braced against something deliciously hard. A mattress the former, a body the latter, judging from the muscled arm surrounding his shoulders and the strong fingers holding up his chin. Rock-hard thighs beneath his lax hands bracketed his hips.

Something nudged his lips. “Open your mouth.”

Long and hard, the cock slid past his lips, gliding over his tongue. Whimpering, he sucked, bewildered to find the taste of the thing delicious. “No.”

“Food,” said the voice, brooking no nonsense. “You must eat.”

He opened his mouth to protest, and what must be a spoon thrust in, shoveling some thick broth into his mouth. He tried to wake up, but his eyes wouldn’t properly open. His limbs didn’t work. He floated in a haze where the only reality was the body behind him, the voice talking to him, and the spoon at his mouth. The hand on his chin moved to his throat, stroking it, encouraging him to swallow.

The heady, wonderful taste of the broth overrode all of his stray thoughts. He fought to think, but found he couldn’t, lost in the need for sustenance. Talk ceased, and spoonful after spoonful of the life-giving warmth eased through Geriman’s limbs.

“That’s it,” said the voice when Geriman was full. “That’s enough.”

Geriman frowned. This was familiar. They had done this before. “Where am I?” he managed to croak.

“You’re safe,” said the voice. The hand that had stroked his throat now spread flat on his bare chest. The other hand, now free of the spoon, started to stroke his hair. It was soothing. “Sleep.”

“Wait...”

“Shhhhh. Sleep. Heal first.”

He fought it, but the comforting gray of oblivion burbled around him. He managed to voice one clear thought before succumbing. “Marisol?”

“She’s safe. She’s here, waiting for you to heal.”

Heal. Marisol was safe. She was near. He had to heal to see her.

He slept.

Chapter Seven

Savous gripped the balustrade, staring at the bleached sand blanketing the ground of the arena below. The bodies were long gone, as were the tables on which they'd been held during their execution. The crowd was also gone, herded away by burly guards. He addressed the empty space with a soft, derisive voice. "All hail the first rhaeja to order the execution of one of his own."

He heard Salin's snort in the darkened niche behind him. "Hardly the first. Perhaps the first to do it openly."

"And fairly," Hyle added.

Savous glanced over his shoulder at the shorter sorcerer. "Fairly?"

Hyle nodded, calmly tucking straight, snowy white hair behind one pointed ear. "What they did was inexcusable. No one could argue that." Hyle had matured much in the past century, but he still managed to maintain a certain naiveté from when he was just Nalfien's youngest apprentice.

Beside him, his truemate, Gala, nodded.

Savous regarded them both gravely. "For that they deserved to die."

"Yes."

Savous glanced at Salin, who leaned negligently against the wall, watching him. He knew the commander had no qualms about what had just happened. If anything, he was of the opinion that it had taken too long to take their lives. Previously, rogues who had kept human women instead of bringing them for proper care by the sorcerers in the city hadn't survived the rescue of their prisoners. Savous was both sure that this had happened since he had become rhaeja and sure that he had been kept in the dark thanks to either Salin's or Krael's direct orders. Both the commander and his second believed Savous was too lenient in these matters. Savous couldn't entirely disagree with them.

Diana, Salin's truemate, shared his views. She leaned against the wall beside him, arms crossed over the supple leather of the top that covered her breasts but left a swath of belly bare. The conviction in her eyes matched Salin's.

He turned back to stare at the sand, imagining the ghosts of the men whom he'd ordered put to death in front of an audience of their peers. The audience had been Salin's idea, agreed on by the rest of Savous's council of twelve. It was better, they thought, to do it openly than to try to hide it as though the proclamation was wrong. The crime was clear. The rogues had knowingly put a woman's life in jeopardy by keeping her away from the city and away from sorcerers. This judgment, unlike some others he had to perform on a daily basis, was clear-cut with obvious evidence.

Still, he couldn't shake the guilt. "What I wouldn't give for a vetriese," he murmured.

No doubt they heard him. Although he'd spoken softly, their hearing was capable of hearing softer. But no one behind him chose to comment.

Historically, raedjour accused of crimes were forced into the vetriese. Within, they received Rhae's judgment. If they emerged unscathed, they were innocent. If they emerged deformed or otherwise marked, they had been suitably punished. If they never emerged again, She had chosen to remove them as a threat. That was the way it had been during all of Savous's life, until the battle with his father which had caused the implosion of the vetriese. He had never before realized how the burden of judgment was absent. Before, the hardest task was to convince others that there was a possible crime. Many men chose to enter the vetriese of their own accord, but the great majority was not that brave. Not everyone wanted to know what She would choose for them. But now, the burden of judgment lay squarely on Savous's shoulders.

In the past eighty cycles, Savous had been forced to make many a hard judgment. He had not, however, had to put a man to death for his crimes. Blood had been spilt, most assuredly. In the time with rogues viciously attacking the men still loyal to him, Savous and his men had killed quite a number of their kind. But this was the first time it was done by command, to men who had already been subdued. At least, it was the first time he'd had to give the order. He suspected Salin had shielded him from a handful of other incidents.

A soft hand slid over his bare shoulder, and he twisted around to face Irin's softly smiling face. Irin. His love, his other. One of the reasons for his being. Even after so many cycles together, he could still remember the pale pink of her human skin and the soft brown of the hair that was now silky white. He remembered her eyes when they were brown and not a dark red, and he remembered when she didn't have the white markings on her brow, chest, and belly. But either way -- as she was then, and now -- he couldn't imagine his life without her loving presence.

"She could be someone's truemate," she reminded him.

He swallowed, nodding as he placed his hand over hers. He'd had this discussion, both with her as well as with others. The point kept coming up that the woman who had almost

died could very well be someone's truemate, and by killing her, the rogues would have ensured that another of their race died alone and that at least one less child was born to a race with so few.

"So be it," he said, turning his back on the sand below. The deed was done. Although he was sure he'd feel the pain in his heart for some time to come, there was nothing to do but move on. He leaned on the balustrade, keeping hold of Irin's hand as he faced two of his chief advisors and their truemates. These five were the people he trusted the most. "We've punished the rogues. Now what do we do with the woman and her brother?"

"She needs time to heal," Irin said before anyone could speak. "She's up and about, but she's still skittish around any of the men."

"Has Jarak made any progress with her?" Salin asked.

"Some. They've become friends of a sort."

"What of Adesty?" Gala asked.

"She's a little better with him, but he tends to cast a calming aura when he's with her, so I don't think we can judge by that."

Savous squeezed her hand. "Do you think she'll get over what's happened?"

Irin met his gaze and stared at him for a very long moment. Then she shrugged. "Perhaps. Who knows?"

Savous looked up. He studied Diana's profile for a brief moment, watching her stare intently at the stone floor beneath her soft leather boots. He glanced at Salin, whose eyes were steadfast on Savous and not on his truemate.

"What do you think?" he asked the commander.

Salin shrugged. "Cast the spell but wait. Let Jarak and maybe Rhicard work on calming her; then let Jarak be first. It'll be easier since she's come to know him."

Savous dropped his gaze. "What do you think, Diana?"

Salin's eyes narrowed before he tilted his chin to regard the top of his truemate's head. It was significant that Savous asked Diana, and they were all well aware why. For over four thousand cycles, the raedjour had taken human women and made them their own. Most certainly, through the ages, a good majority of those women had been taken against their will and loudly protested their treatment. Diana was one of those.

"It doesn't matter what I think," she said softly, still staring at the ground, arms tightly folded beneath her generous breasts. "I'm not on your council."

"But I value your opinion."

Her nostrils flared. "Why?"

"You know." She did. He could tell by her reaction. Diana was headstrong and stubborn to a fault, but she was far from stupid. Savous, however, went ahead and explained. "As a woman who was taken against her will, I'd like to know if you think I should let

Marisol go.” There. The words that they had been dancing around for the past few days were out.

Silence. Gala, Irin, and Savous watched Diana. Hyle studied Savous. Salin’s gaze focused on a piece of the wall just above Diana’s head, his powerfully muscled arms bunching as he gripped his biceps tightly.

“Do you consider that an option?” Hyle asked after a pause. “Letting her go?”

Savous was a bit surprised to hear the question from Hyle, but supposed he shouldn’t. Hyle was not nearly so innocent and absentminded as he looked. “Yes, I do.”

Diana snorted. “You expect me to believe you’d let a woman go? Just like that?”

Salin nodded toward the arena behind Savous. “Letting a woman go like that would cause more of a stir than putting the rogues to death.”

Savous nodded. “Most likely.”

Salin’s dark red eyes snapped to him, anger simmering in their depths. But his voice was rational. “If you send her away, you’re denying a truematch just as certainly as the rogues killing her.”

Savous swallowed, dropping his gaze. “True.”

“The spell can be reversed before her truematch is found,” Hyle pointed out softly.

“Yes, I know.” Savous raised his head again, glancing from one to the other man. The women continued to watch Diana, who hadn’t moved. “But we’d have to erase too much of her memory, and it’s not fair to her to damage her. Also, I fear putting her with any of the men. She’s been through hell already. She may *never* accept any of us because of what happened.”

Diana barked a mirthless laugh. “It’s happened before. That’s never stopped you in the past.”

By “you” Savous knew she meant his ancestors, not him. She very well knew that, although women had been taken during his reign, none had been mistreated like Marisol. Not under his care. “Yes. And we’ve seen the women who suffer. Some of them reconcile to life with their truemates. Most of them get over it, yes, but not all. I’d dearly love to avoid causing another Iana.”

Iana was Nalfien’s truemate and Hyle’s mother. Her first encounters with the raedjour after her capture had been less than ideal, with rough treatment. By the time Nalfien returned and mated with her, she was thoroughly embittered toward their race. In nearly five hundred cycles, she had yet to lose her bitterness, despite having a loving truemate and a number of fine, loyal sons.

Irin squeezed his hand. “It’s not a decision that has to be made just yet, is it?” She glanced between the three men. “Surely it’s understandable that we wait until she’s fully healed before setting the spell. We can give her some time.” She smoothed her free hand

over Savous's upper arm, a soothing, petting gesture. "It will give you some more time to think about it."

Salin pushed from the wall. "Irin's right. We can give her some time without causing too much of a fuss."

Savous regarded the taller man. He'd never known Salin to put off a hard decision. Did this one hit a bit too close to home?

He nodded, but his gaze fell back to Diana. "I would still like to know what Diana thinks."

Finally, she raised her head, twisting her neck so that her sharp hazel eyes could focus on him. A lock of straight white hair fell across her cheek, and she angrily tossed her head to flip it back. "I know what you want me to say."

"What do I want you to say?"

"You want me to say it's all right to keep her. That she could be someone's truemate. That I, of all people, should know that even if she's against it now, letting her go could mean that she'll never know a truematch."

"You think he should let her go." Salin's voice was bitter and dry.

Savous was sorry to open an old wound between them, but he felt certain that Diana's input on this was crucial. He trusted her to speak her mind clearly, no matter how much it hurt.

Diana closed her eyes, chin tilting up as she sighed. "No. Not entirely."

Surprising.

Salin scowled, glaring at the back of her head. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She took a deep breath and turned to face him. "I love you. I wouldn't give up our life together for anything. Now."

"Now'?"

"Now. Back then..." She shook her head. "It was horrible, Salin, and I didn't have it as bad as some."

"You were never mistreated."

"No? I wasn't allowed any basic freedoms. I was passed from man to man like a pet or a toy. I was tied down and taken despite anything I said."

Savous still thought it odd that both she and Salin chose to wear bondage cuffs to this very day, seeing them now as tokens of affection rather than implements of restriction. Although, he also knew for a fact that the cuffs were often put to their original use.

Salin shook his head, grinding his teeth.

"Think what you want to think, Salin; it doesn't change a thing. Before you came into my life that day, I would have jumped at the chance to leave this place behind for good." She reached up to spread a palm over his forearm, squeezing slightly. "I almost accepted *after*."

Salin's eyes narrowed, and a fine tremor showed the tension in his shoulders.

Remarkably serious and sober, Diana stared at him. "I'm one of the lucky ones. I found a truemate and a love match. Not every truematch is like that. I couldn't imagine what it would have been like to truemate with a man I couldn't love." Keeping her hand on Salin's arm, she turned to face Savous. "If there was some way to know that she had a truemate she could love as I love Salin, I would say don't you dare let her go. But there's no way to know that. Is there?"

Slowly, he shook his head.

She shrugged, pushing from the wall to stand on her own two feet. "Anyway, it should probably be a moot point. If you let her go, there would be more riots, and things would be more dangerous than they are now." Her face drained to cold seriousness as she again regarded Savous. "You have to keep her."

"You accept that?" he asked softly.

"I can. I can't be happy about it, not until -- and *if*-- she finds a truemate, but things are shaky enough as it is. One woman's life isn't worth the safety of hundreds."

He was amazed to hear those words from this woman. For over a century, he'd heard her rail against the raedjour and their treatment of women.

Savous crossed the balcony to stand before her. He caught up her near hand and squeezed. "Thank you for that."

She grimaced. "I didn't say it to make you feel better."

He laughed. "I know. I meant thank you for being completely honest."

Her grimace turned into a rueful smile. "You asked. I owed you that much. Rhaeja."

Impulsively, he leaned forward to brush a quick kiss across her cheek. Standing back, he let go of her hand. "I'd still like to wait before setting the spell," he said, turning to face Hyle. "I'd like to talk to her myself first."

Hyle nodded. "It's probably best to wait until she's fully healed."

Savous nodded. He held his hand back to Irin, who came forward to take it. "All right, let's go. We've all got work to do."

Chapter Eight

“Jarak!”

Jarak glanced over his shoulder to see the two men hurrying up the stairs after him. “Go away.”

Vren and Zenth didn’t listen. A few more stairs, and they were abreast of him on the wide staircase. Judging from their shirtless, bootless, damp-haired state, they had just come from the common pools. Vren reached over to lift the cover from the tureen on the tray Jarak carried. “I thought you were done with squire duties,” he teased, inhaling the thick aroma of the roast and tubers. “Has Salin got you fetching again?”

“Put that back,” Jarak instructed calmly.

Grinning, Vren did, blue eyes glittering with mischief. “Is that for her?”

Her. Everyone knew about *her*. Marisol, as a newly acquired, yet-to-be-tried female, was naturally a popular subject. No doubt Zenth and Vren had been describing her in detail, since they were among the few to have actually seen her. Naked. Always an advantage.

“Yes.” Calmly, he continued up the stairs.

Unfortunately, they paced him.

“You need any *help* watching her?” Zenth asked.

Jarak turned and raised one eyebrow at him, fighting a smile. His friend didn’t play innocent very well. “No, I think I can handle one woman by myself.”

“Selfish bastard.”

Vren sighed. “I should have volunteered to be Salin’s squire when I had the chance. Then maybe I’d get to spend time with a new woman before her nine-days start.”

Jarak shook his head. “I *worked* for whatever few privileges I have. I didn’t spend all my time trying to get out of serving duties.” All young boys and men did their time as

servants. Jarak had gone above the call of duty to make sure he'd become Salin's squire, knowing that serving the commander would put him in the thick of things.

"So when do the rest of us get some time with her?" Vren asked, reaching up to tie his beyond-shoulder-length hair into a knot at the back of his head to keep it out of his face. "Savous hasn't even posted the bills at the brothel yet."

Jarak stared stoically ahead. "The rogues hurt her," he said softly. "She needs time to heal."

"Nothing permanent?" Vren asked, teasing tone suddenly very serious.

Jarak stepped off the last stair onto the landing down a long hall from Marisol's suite. Once this hall might have had more men and boys going about their business, but with the population of the city more than halved in less than a century, this tower was largely unoccupied. "Adesty doesn't think so, but she's not fully recovered yet." She almost was, but he was reluctant to tell them that.

Vren and Zenth continued to follow him. "But she will be."

"He thinks so."

Vren sighed. "Good. Goddess, it'd be awful if there was something permanently wrong with her."

"Damn bastards," Zenth cursed with feeling. "Didn't just delay everyone else's chances; they could have ruined her altogether."

"Or killed her," Jarak added softly.

"They died too quickly," Zenth agreed.

Jarak concurred. He still felt a certain amount of satisfaction from having witnessed their deaths earlier that night. It didn't make up for what had been done to Marisol or her brother, but it showed that Savous wouldn't tolerate such behavior. Jarak just wished Savous had let him be the executioner.

"What's she like?"

Jarak slanted a glance at first one friend, then the other. "You saw her."

Zenth snorted, reaching up to push curly white locks from his pale teal eyes. "When we saw her, she was near death and a mess. She's cleaned up now, yeah?" He breathed in, eyes fluttering. "I'll bet she smells good."

"Mmmm, and soft to the touch, yeah?" added Vren.

Jarak shut his eyes, fighting the images his friends put into his head. Marisol did indeed smell *very* good, like a subtle, aged fruit wine, smooth and sweet. Her rosy pale skin certainly looked soft. So did the riot of curly flaxen hair atop her head. He longed to sink his fingers into it as he tasted her berry red lips. He wanted her. Good *Goddess*, he wanted her! It wasn't easy keeping his hands to himself.

He shook his head and kept walking toward the guarded door at the end of the corridor. "I haven't touched her."

Both of his friends stopped in their tracks. "What?!"

He kept walking. "She was hurt."

Vren caught up to him, a look of shock making his wide eyes even wider. "But you haven't even *touched* her? Not even asleep?"

He grimaced. "No. I'm not going to take advantage of her."

"That's not taking advantage. That's...making sure she doesn't have a fever."

He frowned at Vren. "Besides, she's terrified." Well, she *had* been. She was coming around now, but that was something else they didn't need to know. "She needs to know we can be trusted, or she'll never enjoy the sex."

"Is that what Savous told you?"

"That's what Adesty told me." Adesty was one of the elders among them, so his word was nearly as good as the rhaeja's. In some eyes, sadly, better.

Zenth whistled low. "That must be rough."

Jarak groaned. "You've no idea."

Vren chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder. "Well, then you'll probably get her first nine-day. Savous has to give you some compensation for your fortitude."

He smiled. That was exactly what he was hoping for.

They reached the door. Two burly guards stood to the sides of the unmarked entrance. These men had once, for whatever reason, entered Rhae's vetriese, and She had judged them. They'd returned as huge hulks of men -- twice the breadth of a normal man, with beefy muscles -- without any sex drive whatsoever. Men who returned thus didn't seem to mind the change, but they also tended to keep to themselves. They were used for guard duty for women because they weren't a threat to their charges. Jarak chose to believe that they found the absence of the constant thoughts and need for sex to be a relief. They -- Hanolin and Trood -- eyed Jarak, the tray, then the two men with him.

Trood raised an eyebrow at Jarak.

He shook his head. "Just me. I don't expect to bring them in with me."

Zenth groaned.

Vren slugged his arm. "Bastard."

The tray jostled from the punch, but Hanolin's quick hand helped him steady it.

Jarak glared at his friend. "Get out of here!"

"Yes, yes, yes," Zenth sulked, turning back the way they'd come.

Vren followed him, walking backwards to ask, "You coming to wrestling tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

Vren waved. "See you there." He turned and left with Zenth.

Trood opened the door for Jarak.

He entered the two-bedroom suite to find Adesty seated at the table in the main room beside the fire, mending what looked like a jacket. The door to the bedroom where Geriman slept was closed as usual, but the door to Marisol's room stood open and the soft murmur of voices drifted on the air.

Adesty glanced up and saw Jarak's surprise. He nodded toward the door. "Savous and Irin are here."

"Oh?" Savous came? Jarak's heart raced. Had he come to see if Marisol was well enough to begin her nine-days? So soon? Adesty hadn't even allowed her brother to rouse to full consciousness yet. Jarak had hoped for more time.

Swallowing nervousness, Jarak used the training Salin had drilled into him to remain calm and steady as he entered the room.

All three of them looked up as he entered. Marisol sat in her accustomed place among the pillows, her small hands folded in her lap and hidden by the long, loose sleeves of the lacy white chemise she wore. Her big blue eyes looked a tad bewildered, but her precious lips were smiling a little. Irin sat beside her, one leg folded on the bed and the other draped over the side. A brief halter top held her breasts but left her belly bare to the wrap about her waist. Savous sat facing them in a chair set near the foot of the bed. Faded brown trousers that looked comfortable and worn covered his long legs down to his calf-high boots.

He grinned, red eyes sparkling. "Ah, and there's Jarak. Did you hear us talking about you?"

"About me?" He put down the tray on the table beside the door. His hands were steady now, but he wasn't sure they'd continue to be.

"Yes. I was asking Marisol if you've been treating her well."

Jarak glanced over his shoulder, relieved to see Savous's continued smile. "She's vouched for you. Claims you've been nothing but a gentleman."

Jarak would have replied to the teasing, but Marisol tilted her head down, smiling as she blushed a becoming shade of pink. Beguiled, he drank in the sight, momentarily oblivious to their audience. A thick curl of her hair fell forward from behind her tiny ear, caressing her cheek. He swallowed, turning away as she reached up to tuck it back. "I've just helped to make sure she was comfortable," he muttered.

"Well. You've done an admirable job, it seems," Savous said as he stood. "We should let you eat in peace," he said, reaching a hand for his true mate.

"Oh, no, you don't have to go," Marisol said.

Irin stood, patting Marisol's shoulder lightly. Her black fingers stood out in vivid contrast to Marisol's pale skin, bared by the loose shoulder of her chemise. "We really should go. We haven't seen Eyrhaen all night. She gets positively unruly if she doesn't see her da."

Savous laughed. "A strict taskmistress, my daughter," he agreed.

"Daughter?" Marisol frowned up at Irin. "But I thought you said only boys were born to the raedjour."

Irin smiled, nodding. "Eyrhaen is the only girl so far." She rubbed her flat tummy, just above the circular white design etched into her skin. "We're hoping this one is a girl too, but we won't know for over a cycle."

Marisol blinked, confused. "I don't understand."

Irin turned her smile to Jarak. "I'm sure Jarak would be happy to keep you company and explain."

Jarak glanced from Savous to Irin suspiciously. They knew being alone with her would be hard for him. It would be hard for *any* man who wasn't one of the guards or already truemated. Were they testing him? "It's not my story to tell..."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Savous said breezily. He turned to Marisol and bowed his head. "Marisol, I thank you for letting me speak to you. I hope you'll let me visit again."

Marisol smiled brightly and nodded. "You'd be welcome, rhaeja."

He winked at her. With one more mysterious smile for Jarak, Savous and Irin left.

Jarak busied himself with filling a bowl with a healthy portion of roast, tubers, and vegetables for Marisol, schooling his body and mind. The door had been left open. Adesty was still in the other room. She was safe from him. Darn the luck!

Those big blue eyes locked on him when he brought the bowl and spoon to her. "Was that man *really* your king?"

Did she notice that their hands touched as she took the bowl? He certainly did. The soft brush of her fingertips tingled like magic as his skin memorized her touch. "Yes. He is." He turned back to the tureen to fill his own bowl. "Although I'm told we're not as strict about his position as among humans."

"No. I can see that."

He sat in the chair at the end of the bed, turning it to face the mattress. This would be the second night he had spent eating the main meal with her, keeping her company and answering questions that she had. Last night had been mostly about the city and culture.

"He's a nice man." He admired the way her small hands held the spoon to her lips as she chewed thoughtfully. "I didn't even know who he was until I remembered you told me about the white designs on his skin. I asked him what they meant."

Jarak grinned. "Savous isn't anything like our past rhaeja, his father. Valanth was all pomp and circumstance." He decided not to mention the former rhaeja's cruelty, especially toward women. "Savous is just another man whom Rhae happened to mark as our leader. Of course, he's also pretty young and new to the position."

"How old is he?"

Jarak thought about it. "I think he's around six hundred fifty."

She sighed. "It's so strange to think that he's that old. I'm barely twenty-five. My great-great-great-great" -- she thought about it, then flapped her hand -- "and however many *grandparents* weren't even born when he was!"

He shrugged.

"How old are you?"

"Two hundred sixty-one this spring."

He looked up when she was quiet to find her staring at him.

She smiled, revealing an adorable dimple just below the right corner of her mouth. "You don't look a day over two hundred."

He laughed, delighted by her joke. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Oh, he *did* like this woman! Beautiful, soft, smart, and fiercely protective, at least of her brother. She'd been through a rough time, and yet she faced her situation with her eyes wide open, choosing not to panic or rail but rather to understand.

She curled up against the headboard, resting her bowl on her upraised knees. Thick ringlets of hair somewhere between blonde and brown draped slim, sloped shoulders. The breasts beneath her chemise were heavy and well shaped. He remembered the dip of her waist and the generous swell of her hips from when he'd carried her to the city unconscious.

"So tell me about Savous's daughter. Irin said the reason you --" She stopped, frowned. "She said only boy children are born to the raedjour."

Guessing the general idea of what she'd been about to say, Jarak let it pass. He chewed as he thought how best to tell this story. "Did Irin tell you about the vetriese?"

"No. What's that?"

He laughed. "I don't entirely know. A vetriese was an opening into the realm of the gods."

Her eyes got wider in shock. "Really?"

"Yes. It looked like a big black hole with flickers of lightning around it. There were two of them, one here in the city and one on sacred ground to the north." He grimaced. "Actually, there was a third, but we didn't know about it until after Valanth's death. Somehow he'd managed to open another vetriese. That's the one Irin and Savous went into."

"Went into?"

He nodded. "For thousands of cycles, we've used the vetriese to accept Her judgment. Men guilty of crimes would be sent into the vetriese, and if they emerged unscathed, She had proclaimed them innocent. Other men would willingly enter a vetriese as a way of asking Her to guide them in an important choice. Those who came back were changed. Usually by

those white markings you saw that Savous and Irin have. All of the sorcerers used to visit Her, and some warriors, too.”

“Used to?”

“All of the vetriese closed when Valanth died. Savous says Rhae closed them after pushing him and Irin out to keep another god from getting through to us. We haven’t had direct access to Her since.”

“That must be awful. To have been so close to your goddess, then not be.”

He nodded. “It’s the main reason there are so many rogues. Many men left the city after the vetriese were gone.”

“Did you ever go into one?”

“Me? No. I never had a reason to.”

“What kinds of reasons were there?”

They spoke for a time about the vetriese, Jarak telling Marisol what he knew. She was pleasant to talk with and showed interest through asking questions. He was able to concentrate on their conversation and ignore his body’s reaction to her nearness. It wasn’t an easy thing, but it was bearable. As long as he kept himself distracted, he could ignore the quietly throbbing erection in his pants.

Eventually his narrative slowed, and they sat together in companionable silence. He sat with his elbows on the edge of the bed, his empty bowl on the mattress between his hands. She was still seated against the headboard, holding her empty bowl on her knees. She studied him thoughtfully over the rim of the cup of wine he’d poured for her. He swallowed. That one speculative look underneath hooded eyelids, and his cock jumped to life. Would she look that sumptuous lying underneath him as he thrust into her?

“Jarak,” she started slowly, lowering her legs, “tell me about the nine-days.”

He froze. Swallowed. “Who told you about the nine-days?”

“Irin. Then Savous mentioned them, but only to say I shouldn’t worry about it yet. He wouldn’t explain any farther and seemed upset that he’d even mentioned it to me.” She cradled both bowl and cup in her lap. “Is it so bad?”

What could he tell her? Did Savous want to keep it a secret? He couldn’t imagine why. Taking a chance, he told her. “You know about the spell to change human women?”

She nodded.

“Once the spell is set, a woman stays with a man for nine days and nights. The tenth day is given for rest; then she spends time with the next man for nine days and nights. At the end of each nine days, the sorcerer sponsoring her tests her to see if she’s pregnant, because if she is, the last man she was with is her truemate.”

She said nothing, so he went on.

"The men put themselves on a list to be with her. It's an honor to be allowed..." He swallowed again. "Marisol, you'll be treated well. No one would use you to hurt you like they did."

A small smile curved the corner of her mouth. "I believe you. You and Adesty, and now Savous, have been nothing but kind." She peeked up at him from beneath her lashes. "Irin mentioned that yours is a very sexual race. It...must be hard for you to be around me."

His erection throbbed, at full life now. His skin tingled. He forced his voice to be calm. "I wouldn't hurt you, Marisol. And I'll kill anyone who does."

Her head jerked up, startled. He was rather startled himself, unsure where his last words had come from. But he meant them.

Her warm, wide smile was ample reward. "Thank you."

Where the silence between them before had been comfortable, it was now suddenly charged with sensual awareness. At least, it was for his part. He could hear her breathing and tried to fight a fascination with the soft shadow a thick ringlet of hair caused across her neck. Sweet Goddess, he could smell her now, light and subtle under the more obvious aroma of the meal they'd just shared.

"Is the sorcerer's test the only way to find out if a man and woman have truemated?"

He cleared his throat. "The test is to see if the woman is pregnant. It's the pregnancy that's the evidence of a truematch."

"They can tell if a woman's pregnant after only nine days?"

"Yes." He barreled on, compelled to keep talking over an urge to crawl over the edge of the bed and lie beside her. "Many truematched couples claim to have known ahead of time. My former master, Commander Salin, knew Diana was his truemate right from the start. Of course, he's got magic in his blood. Everyone thinks that's how he knew."

"Diana. Salin. Savous mentioned them. He says he'd like me to meet them."

Jarak blinked. Meet Diana? They didn't allow Diana around newly captured women, as a general rule. What was Savous thinking? "Really?"

She shrugged. "He didn't say why. I'm not sure why he mentioned it. Oh, I guess he wanted to see if I was all right with meeting another man."

"Are you?"

"I think so. None of you have hurt me since I've been here." He saw the bravado in her grin and admired her all the more for it.

She blinked at him, and he realized he'd been staring for a long moment. Embarrassed, he looked down at the remains in his bowl. "Where are you from?"

"How much do you know about the world outside the forest?"

"Quite a bit. The women who come to us are from all over. They're the ones who raise us when we're very young, so we hear all sorts of stories."

"Oh. Well, I don't suppose you heard much of my hometown. We're originally from Higard within the county of Winston."

"Is that north or south of the Harden River?" he asked with a grin.

"You've heard of Winston."

"I have."

"It's south. We lived in a farming town."

"Did you live with your parents?"

"We did. They died a few winters ago, right before I --" She stopped, pursing her lips.

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, Marisol."

She laughed. "I suppose it doesn't matter now. They died right before I got married."

His heart sank. There had been married women in the raedjour past, women with commitments outside of the forest that meant nothing within. But it didn't sit well with Jarak that another man lived as Marisol's other. "Where is he?"

"He's dead." Her answer was clipped.

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged, avoiding his gaze, cradling her empty bowl in her hands. "Thank you. I'd rather not talk more about it."

He nodded. Standing up, he reached for her bowl and she gave it. "Would you like more?"

"No." With a fetching smile, she held up her empty cup. "But some more wine would be nice."

He took the bowls and cup to the table and poured more wine.

"You mentioned a list of men waiting to be with me."

Startled, he glanced over his shoulder.

She was staring at him. No, *stare* was too light a word for the weight of her searching gaze. "Is the list very long?"

"The list hasn't started yet. Savous has named himself your sponsor, and he hasn't posted the bill yet."

She nodded, accepting that as he crossed the room to hand her a filled cup. Her fingers brushed his as she took it from him. Her gaze quickly raked his bare chest, and he had reason to be thankful that he'd chosen not to wear a vest that day. Her eyes widened when she saw the bulge he couldn't possibly hide in his trousers. Her gaze stayed there, and his cock twitched in response. He told himself he needed to move away, but he couldn't. In agony, he watched her small pink tongue flick out to moisten her plump lower lip.

She shook herself and averted her gaze, raising the cup to her lips. "Will..." she muttered, her words a bit slurred by the cup, "will you be on the list when it's posted, Jarak?"



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Words died in his throat. Every fiber of his being told him to take her *now*. Did he imagine the fine tremor in his muscles as his reason fought his impulse?

She looked up when he didn't answer, endless blue eyes fearfully curious.

"I want to be the first on the list, Marisol." His voice has a rasp to it.

She smiled, biting her lip in an innocently seductive look. "I'd like that."

He leaned toward her, bracing a hand on the headboard behind her. She continued to stare, her plump lips parting as she tilted her little chin up, angling her face perfectly for a kiss. No fear in her face, only an echo of the heat surging through his veins.

"Jarak."

Adesty's voice stopped him. He very nearly dropped the cup that he cradled against his chest. He stared at Marisol's lips, knowing he needed to back away but...she was so close! At the bottom of his vision, he could see the dark valley between her breasts and wanted nothing so much as to bury his face there.

"Jarak." The healer was closer now, walking toward him.

Jarak closed his eyes, shutting out the sight of those breasts, those enormous, pleading eyes, and those sweet, seductive lips. "Yes." Biting off a groan, he stood straight.

"Jarak." His name sounded delicious in her breathless voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

He shook his head.

"Don't worry, Marisol. Jarak is fine. Aren't you, Jarak?" A hand landed on his shoulder.

"Fine. Yes. I'll..." He stepped back, still unable to look at Marisol. If he looked, he'd pounce. "I'll be back later, Marisol."

"Jarak," she called.

But he had to go. Had to get away. He needed her, and he couldn't have her. Not yet. But now he knew that she wanted him. Which made it all better and worse.

He paused in the hallway outside of the suite as Trood quietly shut the door. *Brothel*, he decided, taking that determined first step. He needed release.

Marisol grabbed Adesty's hand. "Please, I'm sorry. It was my fault. He didn't mean to..."

The healer smiled down at her. "It's all right. He stopped himself."

Barely. It was still a relief. What had she been thinking to entice him like that? "Will he be back?"

Adesty chuckled. "It might be a while, but I imagine he'll be back." He pulled his hand from hers, then reached behind her to plump the pillows. "Now, you should rest."

She nodded, settling back, her eyes on the door.

Why had she done it? Why had she tempted him? Her own less-than-ideal experience with the rogues was evidence that the raedjour were not to be trifled with, especially in sexual situations. How many races could kill by sex? Although she sensed Jarak was a good man and that he meant it when he said he wouldn't hurt her, she'd deliberately taunted him.

But she'd *wanted* him to kiss her. She wanted to know if he felt as warm and beautiful as he looked. She needed to know if she could enjoy his touch, because she believed she could. Jarak's presence comforted her, but he also sent delicious warmth through her blood. She'd thought the men who'd taken her exotic and enticing before they began to mistreat her. It stood to reason that a man who looked similar but actually treated her well would be beguiling.

Adesty lowered the flame in the lamp and left her, closing the door behind him.

She stared at the ceiling. Jarak had said he wanted to be her first. That was comforting. She felt certain if she could spend time with him, then she'd be all right spending time with others. Perhaps that was just wishful thinking on her part, but she clung to it.

Chapter Nine

"I'm going to wake Geriman fully tonight," Adesty told her the next night. "I think it would be good if you were there for him."

"Yes, please. Thank you. Is he...all right?"

"*Physically*, he should be perfectly fine in another few nights."

She nodded, averting her gaze. She understood his meaning. Geriman's body would be fine, but would his mind recover from what had happened to him? "You've not talked to him?"

"Not anything that would make up a conversation, no. I've fed and cleaned him, but he was largely unconscious during much of that."

Jarak returned from the outer room. Silently, he set down a fresh bottle of the light wine on her nightstand and picked up the empty plate she had set there. She watched him, trying to seem casual about it. He'd barely said two words to her since he'd shown up that night. She'd been so glad to see him that she hadn't noticed until she realized that it was Adesty who sat with her while she ate.

Empty plate in hand, Jarak finally looked at her. His gaze was carefully calm and devoid of any of the heat she'd seen the previous night. "Do you need anything else?"

You. The thought sprang unbidden to her mind. Of course, she didn't voice it. "No." She gave him a smile, wanting to see his in return. "Thank you."

He nodded, not smiling, and raised a brow at Adesty.

The older man shook his head and stood, tossing his short white ponytail from his shoulder to his back. "All right. I'll go see to Geriman. It will take a bit for him to wake, so you've plenty of time to tidy up if you like." He bent to pat the chest at the foot of her bed. "There's some other clothing in here for you to choose from." Straightening, he put his hand on Jarak's shoulder, turning him toward the door. "We'll give you some privacy."

She admired the snug fit of Jarak's trousers from the rear as the two men left and closed the door behind them. Once alone, she raised her hands to her face and sighed. What was *wrong* with her? She'd been *raped*, for gods' sakes. *But then*, she reasoned with herself, dropping her hands, *even that wasn't so bad until they just wouldn't stop*. When she could be honest with herself, she vividly recalled enjoying the touch of the men who'd used her.

It was the attraction, she told herself sternly, turning to get out of bed. *You couldn't help it*. What a marvelous thing Rhae had provided for Her raedjour. An attraction for humans that was so powerful that it could make them enjoy being forced.

Shaking helpless thoughts from her mind, she crossed to the foot of the bed and rummaged through the clothing in the chest. All of it was very fine, just like the lacy chemise she currently wore. She could have lived for months by selling just one of the dresses she found. Of course, that was in terms of her life among humans. Clearly, life among the raedjour was different.

What will it be like? she mused, selecting a simple, sleeveless shift in pale green. Being taken by strange men, living for sex until her truemate was found. What if she never found a truemate? She'd have to ask about that one.

She winced as she walked slowly toward the privy. Her legs felt much better, but she knew she still wasn't up to a long walk. That, she felt, was from having spent most of her recovery lying in bed, rather than any lingering injury.

A short while later, after she'd changed and brushed out her hair, a knock sounded at the door. "Marisol?" came Jarak's voice from the other side.

"Come in."

He opened the door as she slowly crossed the room. "Adesty says that Geriman will be awake soon. Are you ready?"

Self-conscious at her stiff, slightly shuffling gait, she nonetheless looked up and smiled at Jarak. "Yes. I'm ready."

He smiled back, waiting patiently.

She'd never worn anything sleeveless in front of other people before, so she felt rather risqué. His appreciative gaze, even though he tried to hide it, was worth it.

It was, perhaps, immature of her, but she let herself stumble a bit as she reached the door.

Jarak reached out immediately, his large, warm hand closing around her bare arm to steady her on her feet.

She closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. Such wonderful warmth. She wanted so very much to sink into his embrace and know what it felt like to have those muscular arms close around her. She wanted to investigate the intriguing aroma that ticked her nostrils.

But no. She righted herself, smiling her thanks. First, Geriman.

Releasing her arm, Jarak held the door for her, stepping back to allow her to pass.

She shuffled into the main room of the suite. It was the first time she'd seen it. The room was larger than her bedroom, but not by much. A fireplace big enough to cook in took up most of the outer wall, an open window set beside it. There were a few linen chests, a table and chairs, and a lot of furs and rugs strewn across the stone flooring.

Adesty stood beside a door at the other side of the room, waiting patiently.

"How is he?" she asked as she crossed the room.

He came to meet her halfway, taking her hand. She felt an echo of the thrill she'd felt when Jarak touched her, but it wasn't nearly as powerful. Perhaps it was because he was older? Or maybe he'd used some of his powers to dampen his effect on her.

"He's doing well," the healer replied. "He's almost awake. He'll be very groggy and a little disoriented, which is why seeing you should help. He'll also be a little stiff and sore, but that will fade in the next few nights."

"All right." She reached for the doorknob.

Adesty placed his palm flat on the door, stopping her. "I'll bring his meal in a little while. Get him to drink some wine if you can."

"I will."

He held up a small folded packet and held it toward her.

"What is this?" she said as he placed it on her upturned palm.

"It's a sleeping draught. Put it in the wine if you need it. It will work very quickly."

She turned a confused look up at him. "Need it?"

He took the packet from her hand and slipped it into the wide sash of her dress. "I hope that you won't, but it won't hurt to have it. Also remember that we're just a shout away."

She glanced from him to Jarak and back. What did the healer expect? She was afraid to ask. Instead, she turned the knob and entered.

The door closed softly behind her.

Geriman's room was the mirror image of hers. Stone walls were draped with colorful weavings and a large, intricate quilt with a design reminiscent of the moon. The bed was set in the far corner underneath it, so the face of the moon, or perhaps the raedjour goddess Rhae, watched over the patient. It was a wide bed, as she imagined most of the elves probably had. The bedclothes were all in light ivory except for the deep blue swirl pattern on the main quilt. Most of the light came from a lamp on the wall beside the bed and a matching one on the wall beside the door she'd just come through.

Geriman lay on his back with his eyes closed, in the middle of the mattress. She watched him for a moment. She'd always liked how innocent he looked when he was asleep. It reminded her of when they were growing up and he'd sneak into her bed when he was frightened. She'd watch him when the sun came up and made his light ash hair almost gold.

She sat on the edge of the bed, near enough to the bedside table to reach the wine carafe and matching cup.

He stirred as the bed jostled. “No,” he murmured, edging away from her, retreating even before he fully woke.

Her heart pulled. “Ger.” She reached out to catch his hand, holding it between both of hers. “Ger, wake up. It’s me. Marisol.”

“Sol?” His head rolled on the pillows, his eyes blinking open. It took him a moment to focus. When he did, his sleep-crusted eyes opened wider, his hand grasping hers. “Sol?”

She smiled, wincing only slightly at the pain in her fingers. “It’s me, Ger.”

“Sol!” He reached for her, awkwardly sitting.

She reached out to help him steady himself, but instead he pulled her into an embrace.

“Ger.” She smoothed her hands over the back of the simple white nightshirt he wore. “It’s all right. It’s me.”

“Oh, Sol.” He crushed her to him, burying his face in her neck. His strong body started to tremble, and she felt the tears moisten her shoulder. “Sol.”

She held him tight and rocked him, knowing that conversation wasn’t immediately possible. Tears of her own seeped from her eyes as the weight of the situation again hit home. They’d almost died. Those men had been killing them, both of them. The use and exertion would have caused the slow, awful erosion of their lives. Breaking into sobs, she clutched at Geriman, spearing her hand through his hair and holding him just as fiercely as he held her.

Her sobs did not last long. She, after all, had come to terms with what had happened. At least, she believed she had. They were safe now, even if their lives were irrevocably changed. They would just have to deal with that change.

“It’s all right, Ger,” she soothed when his sobs subsided into small little hiccups. “We’re safe.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Firmly but gently, she pulled back from his embrace. On seeing his face, she reached over for a dry cloth that was sitting on the nightstand and used it to wipe his eyes and nose. “The men who hurt us are gone.”

He closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“Shhh. Lie back.” She eased him back into the bed. “Here, have some wine.”

He clutched her hand, not allowing her to pour. “No. They drug it.”

That startled her. Hadn’t he been asleep? “Who?”

“Someone’s been feeding me.” He rubbed his fingers on his eyes. “I don’t know who. It’s all a blur.”

"Oh. Well, this wine isn't." She shook her head, guiltily remembering the sleeping draught tucked in her sash.

"You don't know. They've kept me under. They've kept me..."

"I do know. Adesty said --"

"Adesty?"

"The healer who's been taking care of you. He's been taking care of me, too."

He snorted. "Taking care of me. He's kept me asleep."

She pulled at her hand. "Yes, he has. But it's been to help you get well. You were...hurt badly."

He held on to her, sneering down at the quilt bunched in his lap. "Because *they* hurt me!" he hissed.

She shivered, then placed her free hand over the one that clutched hers. "Ger, listen to me. They're not *all* like that. The ones here in the city, they're --"

"City?"

"Yes. We're here in their main city. It's all underground."

"Underground?"

"Yes. The raedjour live underground. I haven't seen it yet, but they tell me the city is beautiful. Now that you're awake, maybe we'll --"

He snapped his head up, his glare stopping her words. "How long have we been here?"

"Nine nights," she replied, using the raedjour terminology of "nights" rather than "days" without thinking.

"Nine?" He released her hand to reach up and clutch both of her upper arms.

"Ger!" she cried, his fingers painfully cutting into her arms.

"You've been alone with them for nine days?" He searched her face anxiously, his eyes wild and still not entirely focused. "Are you all right? Have they...*done* things to you?"

She started shaking her head before he even got to his question. "No. No. No. Ger, no. I'm fine. These men haven't done anything to me at all except care for me. The other ones, the ones who took us, they..."

"Don't spare me, Sol. Not with this." He shook her, staring determinedly. His gaze raked down her pretty green shift, suspicion clear in his grimace. "I was supposed to protect you. I need to know if they raped you."

"They haven't, Geriman," she said, making her voice firm. "Not *these* men. These are good men."

"Elves."

"Elves, yes. Men."

He shook his head, the expression on his face frightening and manic. “Devils. Demons. They’re evil, Sol! You were there! You know what they did.”

He shuddered, and she cried out again when his fingernails, longer than usual, dug into the tender skin of her bare arms.

The door opened. “Marisol? Are you all right?”

She turned, relieved to hear Jarak’s voice. Then immediately felt guilty for it. “Jarak. I’m fine. I --”

“Get out!” Geriman screamed. She gasped when he hauled her bodily across his lap, scooting with her to the far edge of the bed. The room tumbled end over end as he shoved her behind him into the corner formed by the wooden headboard and the stone wall.

By the time she righted herself, scrambling to her knees, she saw Jarak and Adesty standing halfway between the door and the bed. Adesty’s hands were on Jarak’s shoulders, clearly holding him still. Jarak’s crystal blue eyes riveted on hers as soon as she faced him, his face angry and waiting.

Waiting. Waiting for her to say something. Waiting for her to ask for his help. To her dismay, she very much *wanted* to ask. Geriman’s behavior frightened her. Even at his most excited, he’d never acted like *this*. He’d never gripped her so hard that he’d hurt her, even when he’d been at his most upset. But she couldn’t ask for help. Not for protection from her brother.

Geriman’s back crowded her roughly, one muscular arm back, bracketing her behind him. The other was poised before him, hand clutching for the sword that wasn’t there. “Stay back!” he warned.

Jarak ignored him and stared at her, arms in a pose she recognized as ready to pounce.

She lay her hands on Geriman’s shoulders, shocked to find them trembling underneath his nightshirt. “Ger, please. You don’t have to do this.”

“Shut up, Marisol. I’ll protect you. I haven’t and I’m sorry, but I’ll protect you now with my life.”

Panicked, she gaped at Jarak.

He fell forward another step.

Adesty’s grip on his shoulders tensed.

Geriman tried to shove her farther back into the wall. She gasped for air behind his bigger body, having nowhere further to go. The smooth stone of the wall pressed into her back.

“Stay back, Sol,” Geriman demanded. He shifted, and she felt him falter when he tried to get his legs underneath him.

“Ger, stop. You’re in pain. Adesty’s a healer. He’s been helping you.”

"He's kept me under. He's made me sleep. Who *knows* what he's done to me when I'm unaware. When I can't protect myself." She heard the small sob in his voice through the unreasoning anger. "When I can't protect *you*."

"Geriman, no. Adesty wouldn't..."

"Don't you dare defend them, Sol. No. Not you. You *know* what they did to me. Did to us."

She leaned over Geriman's shoulder, pointing at the men who'd yet to say a word. "Not *these* men, Ger. You need to listen to me. You need to understand..."

"I understand. I understand that they're raping *devils* and I'll *kill* any one of them who tries to get near you. I swear it."

"Ger, stop. You can't..."

"We'll leave," Adesty announced loudly.

She looked up to see him pulling on Jarak's arm.

The younger man didn't want to be moved, his eyes still locked on Marisol. She saw in his eyes that he'd gladly hurt her brother to see her safe. She couldn't let that happen.

She swallowed, shaking her head, pleading with him silently. *Please understand.*

"Marisol?" Jarak asked, stumbling backward as Adesty yanked.

Jarak, she mouthed.

"Don't you speak to her!" Geriman shouted, trying again to roll to his knees. He halfway succeeded this time, but he couldn't contain the gasp of pain.

Go, she mouthed to Jarak behind her brother's back.

Pained, he bit his lips together, then spun and left. Adesty trailed in his wake.

The door clicked shut, and Geriman's strength gave out. He fell heavily forward on his arms, gasping.

Marisol hurried forward, hovering at his side. "Geriman, are you all right?"

A fine sheen of sweat dotted his brow and neck. "I'm fine." His shoulder, when she reached to touch him, was clammy, dampening his thin shirt.

"You're not fine." She scrambled toward the side of the bed.

"Sol, don't!" He grabbed her ankle.

She sat hard, spinning around to face him. "Geriman, enough. Stop being ridiculous."

He glared at her, impotent rage heating his face. His grip bit into her flesh. "I'm trying to protect you."

A chill of fear washed through her. She did her best to ignore it. Geriman had never hurt her before; she had to believe he wouldn't now. "You're being a stubborn ass. I'm trying to tell you that you're safe." She shook her leg. "Let go."

"They're right outside."

“Yes. They are. And how do you propose to fight them?”

His eyes widened.

“Geriman, you’re still injured. You probably can’t walk. You can’t even kneel. You don’t have your sword.”

Anxiously, he scanned the room. “What have they done with it?”

“*Stop it!*” That strange demeanor wasn’t fading, and it scared her. “Damn it, stop it! Let go of me.”

Maybe it was the hysteria in her voice that got through to him. He flinched, his grip on her ankle loosening.

She shook her leg to get free and scrambled off the bed. She forced herself to be calm and stay at the bed’s side. She reached for the carafe of wine. “Lie down and have some wine.”

“I can’t.” The anger in his voice was gone, replaced with confused petulance. He was still shaking. “I’ve got to protect you.”

“I don’t need it right now. We’re all alone.” She glanced at him.

He was staring blankly at the door.

She reached in her pocket and palmed the little packet with the sleeping draught.

“I failed you.”

“You didn’t fail me.”

“They raped you.”

“No, Ger.” As he was distracted, she thumbed the packet open. “Those two men you just saw didn’t rape me, and they didn’t rape you. Jarak and his men rescued us.”

Ger frowned. Carefully, he eased himself into a sitting position, wincing as he moved his legs out from under him.

She quickly dumped the powder into his cup. “Adesty is a healer. You’d probably be dead now if it wasn’t for him.”

Geriman mumbled something, of which she only heard “better off.” He hung his head, fingers digging into his thighs through the bunched-up quilt and sheets.

She poured the wine, glad that the dark reddish-brown clay of the cup and the color of the wine covered up the powder. Feeling only a twinge of guilt, she handed the cup to her brother. “Drink this.”

He didn’t move.

“Geriman” -- she put all of her mother’s tone into her voice -- “drink this.”

Sullenly, he turned his neck toward her and stared at the cup, then reached for it.

He stared at her belly. “They...raped...me, Sol.”

She swallowed over the pain in her heart. "The men who did that to you are dead, Ger."

"Dead?"

"Yes. Jarak killed one of them, and the rhaeja had the other two put to death for what they did to us." She cupped her hand beneath his and the cup and urged him to lift to his lips. "Drink."

His eyes flipped up to hers. A hang of overlong hair obscured one of his eyes. "Rhaeja?"

She nodded, nudging the cup closer to his lips. "He's their ruler."

He tipped his head down slightly to stare blankly into the wine. "They're dead?" He looked very much like the nine-spring-old boy who had once looked at her with the exact same expression and asked, "*Mama's gone?*"

She reached out and smoothed the hair back from his face, dismayed to feel the damp of cold sweat at his hairline. "Yes, Geri-mine," she murmured, using the nickname she'd called him when they were children. "They're dead. You're safe. I promise." *At least for now.* She nudged the cup again. "Drink up."

This time he obeyed.

She made sure he drank the whole thing, then took the cup and poured him another.

He shook his head, trying to push it away. "No."

She batted aside his hands and held it closer. "Yes."

Wearily, he obeyed. He cradled the half-finished cup at his lips. "I'm sorry, Sol."

She shut her eyes, biting back a disappointed sigh. He was always sorry *after*. "Geriman, I want you to listen to Adesty."

He scowled.

"No, listen to me. I promise you that he means you no harm. If you behave, he won't have to keep you drugged. And you'll probably heal faster."

"What then?" He took another sip. "Are they healing me just to rape me again?"

"Stop it. Just stop it."

He hung his head.

She took the cup and set it on the table. "Sit back and be comfortable."

She fussed over him as he eased back into the pillows. She could see his eyes blinking sleepily as she arranged the sheets and quilt over his lap.

She sat beside him, holding his hand, stroking the back with her fingers. "Something terrible happened to us, Ger," she said, looking into his eyes. "But we survived. Just like we survived Mama's death and Papa's death. Just like we survived what happened to Tonas."

He winced, averting his gaze.

“We’ve been through a lot, and we’ve survived, Geriman. Please tell me that we can survive this.”

He twisted his wrist so he could hold her hand properly. “I love you, Sol. Don’t ever leave me.”

She stopped herself from making the promise, not altogether sure why. It simply felt wrong to say. “I’m right here, Ger. I love you, too.”

She stayed with him as he drifted off.

Geriman woke when hands gathered him into a familiar lap. He recognized this position from snippets of recent memory. This time, however, he was very nearly conscious. He was aware enough to make out the details of the room around him and the smooth, satin skin of the arms that held him.

“No.” He tried to fight. He had more control over his limbs, but they still felt lethargic, like he was moving through water.

“Hush, Geriman,” chided the voice. The man held him easily until his struggling subsided.

“Let go.”

“No.”

He watched the hand reach for the bowl on the table, bringing it to hold it under Geriman’s chin.

“You need to eat.”

“I can feed myself.”

“I know. And I’ll let you from now on. After this last time.”

Geriman eyed the spoon that was brought to his lips, trying to ignore the heady feel of a solid chest pressed to his back. “Why?”

“Eat, and I’ll tell you.”

Grimacing, he opened his mouth, feeling like a three-spring-old being fed by his mother.

“Not all of us will hurt you, Geriman,” murmured the voice.

Despite himself, he shuddered at the delicious feel of breath caressing his ear.

“Also, the attraction you feel is not something you can help.”

Ger stopped chewing, listening.

“One of the gifts our goddess granted to us was that humans are profoundly attracted to us. Just by being near one of us, by scenting our skin, you’re going to be aroused.”

The spoon tapped his lips, and Geriman opened without thinking, considering what was being said.

"Your abductors abused that and used you. For that, they have been executed."

Marisol had said as much. Could it be true? Or were the devils lying to both of them?

The man -- the elf -- fed him as he thought.

"You're Adesty?" he asked, recalling the name his sister had mentioned.

"I am."

"You healed me?"

"I did."

"Will I be...?" He swallowed.

"You will be perfectly fit and able in a few days' time. You were rescued before any permanent damage was done."

A certain amount of relief flowed through his bones. He ate another spoonful of rich, savory stew before asking, "What happens now?"

"That I don't know. I'm sorry. The rhaeja has yet to decide what will become of you and your sister."

Geriman sneered as best he could. "I won't let you hurt her."

"Rest assured that hurting her is not what we have in mind. As a woman, she is very special to us."

"As a woman? Why did you say it like that?"

"She will be treated well, Geriman. On that you have my word."

"What about me?"

"I can assure you that you won't be mistreated as you were before. *I* will see to that."

Geriman didn't miss the emphasis on the pronoun. He got the impression that this unknown rhaeja may feel differently.

"I didn't heal you to have you abused again, Geriman." Adesty set the mostly empty bowl on the nightstand. The hand came back and rose to brush back Geriman's hair.

A warm liquid feeling burbled low in Geriman's belly. He squirmed. "Let me go."

"Shhh," murmured the voice behind his ear. Such a soothing sound. "Relax. You could learn to like my touch." The arm about his waist shifted, palm flattening over his chest, lightly rubbing one of his nipples through the thin shirt he wore.

Geriman shuddered. *That* was exactly the problem and had been the problem before. It wasn't that he *didn't* like the touch of the men who'd used him or this man who held him. It was that he liked it entirely too *much*. "Let me go."

There was a pause, during which the hands that stroked him stilled. "Very well."

He helped as much as he could as those hands lifted him easily from Adesty's lap and laid him down on the bed. The man treated him with utmost care, which would have felt marvelous if the caregiver had been a woman.

It still feels great! Geriman closed his eyes on a moan.

“Rest,” said Adesty. “Marisol will wake come nightfall and come to keep you company.”

Chapter Ten

Marisol finished with her hair and set the brush on a little chest near the privy door. Taking a deep breath, she turned, smoothed the lines of the green shift over her hips, made sure the sash about her waist was tied snugly, and then went to open the door to the main room.

Only Jarak was there, seated at the big table. An array of leather swatches of varying sizes and colors were set before him, along with two long, smooth pieces of wood. In his hand was a stitching awl, and a spool of lacing was at his elbow.

She took a few steps toward him, her heart racing. She hadn't spoken to him after leaving Geriman's room the previous night. Seeing Geriman like that had been too much. She'd gone directly to her room and cried herself to sleep.

"Hello."

He sat up straight, eyes wide and uncomfortable. His torso was bare and gleaming black in the bright light from the fire and candelabra in the corner. "Hello."

"Where's Adesty?"

Jarak glanced at the main door. "He had something he needed to do tonight. He'll be back later."

She glanced at the door, too. What was on the other side? The view from the window in her room overlooked a rather interesting rock and mineral garden in between the tower she was in and the far stone wall, but nothing of the city. The far wall of that garden looked to be a side of a huge cavern and it soared into blackness above, not giving her any sign of a ceiling. She didn't even know if the city contained buildings or if everyone lived in caves. She really knew so very little.

A chair scraped. She turned back to see Jarak standing. "Marisol, are you all right? Geriman's only sleeping if you wanted to..." His words trailed off as he drank in the sight of her.

She stared back at him. So very beautiful. Truly exotic. Tall, strong, and muscular, but his body had a sleekness that made him look slim. His face was long, his jaw strong but rounded. His eyes and cheekbones both slanted up and out from the center of his face, the elegant sweep continued by the point of the ears that held back the white silk of his hair. His skin was such a black that the glossy surface reflected amazing tints of blue and violet. Skin she knew was warm and satiny to the touch. Skin she felt compelled to touch, while burying her face in the bend of his neck to breathe in the delicious smell of him. Yes, the attraction she felt for him was enhanced by some sort of magic, but was that so very bad?

He took a step toward her and she stumbled back a step of her own, shaking her head to break the spell. He froze.

She swallowed, retreating behind a chair. "What happens now?"

"Now?"

The carved wood felt nice and solid beneath her trembling hands. "Yes, now. Geriman's awake."

"You can go in and see him if you like," he said softly.

"No. I mean, what happens to us? Me and Geriman."

He began to gather up the leather scraps on the table, averting his eyes. "He still needs to heal."

"Yes, I know. And I am grateful that you -- that the rhaeja -- is allowing that. But what happens after he's healed?"

The two slim pieces of wood clacked together as he picked them up and set them carefully aside. "That's Savous's decision."

She took a step around the chair toward him. "I realize that. But surely you have some idea."

She gauged that the blank, stoic look on his face hid his reluctance to answer. "I would imagine you'll begin your nine-days."

I want to be the first on the list, Marisol, he'd said. Her face and neck heated at the mere thought of spending nine full nights with Jarak, sharing their bodies.

Are they healing me just to rape me again? The memory of Geriman's words chilled the heated flush.

"And Geriman?"

A pause. Then he shrugged. "I don't know." He stepped around the corner of the table to set the pile of leather down.

"What usually happens to human men that you capture?"

"This isn't a usual occurrence."

"No?"

"No." He opened a battered leather case and tucked the awl away within it, alongside a number of other tools. "We don't usually have to rescue humans from our own."

"All right. But what would you normally do in the past when you captured a human man?"

The fact that he still wouldn't look at her did not bode well. "We don't usually capture human males."

"But you have. What did you do with them?"

"Most of the men in the caravans were left to go on their way after the sorcerers had wiped their memories of seeing us."

"The sorcerers can do that?"

"In most cases, yes."

"Is that what they'll do to Geriman?" How much would he forget? What would he think had happened to her? Would he even remember the rape?

Bereft of things to keep his hands busy, he sat. Elbows on thighs, he laced his fingers between his knees. "I'm...not sure that they can. Too much has happened to him. Erasing so much from his memory might damage him."

Her dim flare of hope fizzled. She stepped up to the table, setting her fingertips on the aged, pocked tabletop. "All right. So what would normally happen to a captured human man whose memories couldn't be erased?"

He sighed softly. "Sometimes, we kept them."

"Sometimes?"

"Most times we killed them."

She drew in a breath.

He looked up, giving her a bleak look. "They aren't necessary to us." His voice was flat.

She slowly expelled her breath, trying not to shake. "What happened when you kept them?"

He sat back, the new position displaying his broad shoulders and sculpted chest to fine advantage. "They remained human, with a normal human lifespan."

Her gaze caught on his nipple, fascinated by the small, hard peak. "Did they become servants?"

"No. The younger boys take care of all of that."

Finally, she braved a look at his face. His clearly unhappy expression made her blood run cold. "What happened to them, Jarak?"

He shook his head. "We should make sure what Savous has planned before we even speculate..."

"What happened to them?"

"Marisol, I don't know what Savous has in mind for Geriman."

She fisted her hands and turned to face him fully. "What happened to those men in the past?"

He closed his eyes, sighing. Then he spread his palms over his thighs and faced her, those clear blue eyes saddened. "We used them. For sex. Kept them in the brothel with the women who'd gone through their time of nine-days without truemating. Kept them until they died."

It was no more than she expected once she heard the words. She had just so hoped *not* to hear the words. "Just like the men who already used him."

He closed his eyes again. "Some of them were cared for."

"As pets."

Another sigh. "For the most part, yes."

It was like the moment when the sun first rose in the morning. That moment that took you from night to day when the light was suddenly different and details were revealed that had not been there before. Jarak looked the same. Her lust for him was present. But this new information cast it all in a different light. The warm attraction she had been enjoying took on a sinister cast. It was a trick, a ploy. Like bait in an elaborate trap or like a balm for the captured victim. And she had nearly fallen for it. These men intended to take over her life and change it, intended to keep her. The cage, such as it was, seemed a nice one. The benefits of indulging in the treat of sexual ecstasy were enticing, but it was a cage. Savous had seemed a nice man -- could very well *be* as nice as he seemed -- but, regardless, he intended to change her life, and she had no say in the matter. Meanwhile, they'd draw out her brother's pain, keeping him entrapped as well, but he wouldn't enjoy any of the benefits.

She stepped back, again using the chair for support. "He doesn't...Geriman isn't a lover of men." There was a term for such men, but she couldn't think of it at the moment.

Jarak shook his head, the sad look still fixed firmly in place. "It doesn't matter."

"That's cruel."

For that, Jarak had no answer.

"No. You can't."

"Marisol." He sat forward, reaching a hand toward her. "I don't know what Savous has in mind."

She slapped away his hand, sneering. "You do." Tears blurred her vision. "You just don't want to admit it. That's what's going to happen to him, isn't it?"

"I don't know that. Savous makes a lot of decisions that don't fit with the past."

"But this isn't one of them. He's just one human man." She almost forgot to keep her voice down. Geriman, after all, was on the other side of the door. "You're going to take him to some brothel and make him have sex with other *men*. And you're going to lock me up and change me into a broodmare!"

He gritted his teeth, anger burbling as he stood. "It's not like that."

"Isn't it?" She glared up at him, wishing she didn't have to fight the urge to kiss him. "I'm the *lucky* one because I'm female. You're likely to treat me a little better because I was born able to have babies. That's the only thing that saved my life. Isn't it?"

"Don't do this."

"Do what? Tell the truth? It *is* the truth." Tears of fear and frustration rolled down her cheeks, but she didn't care. She covered her face with one splayed hand and let them come. Her chest burned with anger and guilt. "You're going to pass me from man to man until someone plants his seed. And if they don't, then you'll put me in a brothel!" Oh, yes, she'd heard that little tidbit.

"Marisol."

"How *dare* you!" She launched at him, fists flailing.

Surprised, he fell back, overturning the chair behind him. She fought, throwing her fists at him, but knew her attempts were woefully inadequate. The little self-defense she'd learned from Tonas and Geriman was nothing against an obviously trained warrior.

"Marisol, stop."

"Damn you!" Half blinded by tears, she sobbed, continuing to rail against him. It was ridiculously easy for him to catch her arms. Infuriated, she lashed out with her feet. But bare feet were not much against the solid muscles of his legs inside those snug leather trousers and boots.

Grunting, he fought to restrain her, so very careful not to hurt her despite her flailing limbs. Finally, he spun her, catching hold of her arms and pinning them to her chest, his second arm banding her middle and pressing her back against him.

She gasped, freezing. The thin shift did nothing to disguise the velvet heat of him or the steely strength of his body. Not to mention the *smell* of him, darkest midnight wrapped in honey. She'd known he was strong but only now realized *how* strong. Her breasts fairly throbbed, nipples aching for attention. The sensitive folds between her legs wept and burned with a fire she *needed* him to quench. Damn her body's reaction! Damn *his* body's reaction, for she couldn't fail to recognize the press of his erection against her backside.

"Don't do this." His cheek pressed against the side of her head, his breath a soft, harsh caress above her right ear.

She shuddered, infuriated with herself for enjoying his touch. Like a cat wallowing in a soft nest of warm laundry, she wanted to lie with him and press her naked length against his. The thin fabric of her shift almost gave her the feel of that reality. The vivid clarity of that

compulsion erased her thoughts for a moment, and she moaned, rocking her hips to caress the hardness of him.

He hissed, hands and arms clutching her. "Marisol."

She bit her lip, refusing to moan his name.

The soft silk of his hair brushed her jaw as he bent to nuzzle her neck. Warm lips caressed her fevered skin, parting to let his wet tongue taste her. "Marisol, please," he rasped, teeth grazing her. "I don't have any control over this." His tongue lapped at her skin, the wet doing nothing to ease the heat that poured off her. "I'm going to let you go, and you need to go into the bedroom and lock the door."

She heard his words, and a part of her agreed, but her fingers dug into the arm that banded about her chest. The feel of him drowned her in need, and coherent thought abandoned her. She pressed her bottom into him again. His name spilled from her lips.

He groaned. "Marisol."

"Jarak. Please."

Then suddenly, the world spun as he turned her. Fingers dug into the heavy fall of her hair and gripped, tipping her head back to accept the bruising pressure of his kiss.

His kiss. Lips of fire, torching her body hotter than before. Mewling, she opened underneath him, her arms clutching his back, fingernails digging into the solid muscles. His tongue tasted better than anything she'd ever tasted, and she eagerly sucked it in, demanding more. The table scraped against the floor when he pushed her back against it. Toppled off balance, she trusted his embrace and clutched him for dear life. *Yes, yes, yes!* kept repeating in her head

He lifted her easily so that the tabletop was beneath her bottom, then pushed back until she was lying supine. The stout piece of furniture trembled under his weight as he climbed above her so he mostly straddled her. The two pieces of wood that he'd set aside clattered to the floor. He devoured her mouth as though it was his last meal, pressing so hard that his teeth bruised her lips. One hand stayed in her hair, controlling her head, but the other wandered, squeezing her breast through the shift, sliding down her side, digging into her thigh to push it out, spreading her.

Then abruptly his lips were gone, and she cried out from the loss. Blearily, she stared at the ceiling, thoughts a jumble. This was wrong. She should stop. But why, when it felt so good?

She screamed, arching into herself when those lips that had just devoured her mouth closed on the sensitive folds between her legs. She had not been aware of when he'd lifted the skirt of her shift, nor did she care. She was exposed to him now, and all that mattered in the world was that his tongue caressed that brutally alive little part of her.



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"Jarak," she cried, fingers spearing in his hair, knowing for some reason that she should pull him away but unable to think of why or force herself to do it. Something this right could not possibly be wrong.

A door opened. "Jarak!" shouted a deep male voice.

Marisol opened her eyes. There was a confusion of black-skinned limbs, and then Jarak's mouth was gone. Marisol screamed, shoving forward, reaching for him, desperate to have him back. Arms bigger and beefier than Jarak's caught her.

It took moments, but sanity finally returned. Jarak hung from the hold of a huge man, a man easily twice his breadth. Breathing heavily, he clutched at the man's arms, eyes closed, feet braced apart in the manner of a man trying to regain his senses. She sat in a similar state on the table, the beefy arm of another huge man banding her waist, holding her in place. Her shift was still rucked up around her hips, but the fabric had fallen to hide her pulsing sex.

Jarak tilted his head up, eyes opening to meet hers. The hunger in his gaze was clearly evident and threatened to rekindle a matching spark in her. But without his touch, she could think again. She remembered their conversation. She remembered what would likely happen to her brother. As memory returned, the horror of what had almost happened helped to calm her. And she'd *wanted* it.

"I'm sorry, Marisol," Jarak breathed. "I didn't...I wouldn't have..." He licked his lips, eyelids falling mostly shut as though he tasted something divine. "But I *had* to taste you."

"Come," said the man holding him, jostling Jarak like he was a child rather than a fully grown man. "Time for you to leave."

Jarak nodded, stumbling back as the man walked toward the door. "I'm sorry," he said again before they left and the door closed behind them.

"Are you all right?"

Startled, she looked up at the man who held her. She felt none of the compelling attraction toward this man, not even an echo of what she'd felt for Jarak, Adesty, or the men who had first captured her. All she saw in his face was calm, and all she felt in his arms was protected. He dwarfed her, and she felt like a child in a beloved father's embrace.

He searched her face for a moment, then nodded. He released her and stepped back. "Adesty will be back soon," he said. Quickly, he bent to gather the leatherworking tools and the two pieces of smooth wood. He left the scraps on the table or on the floor where they'd fallen, then turned and left.

She curled her knees to her chest and hugged them, sitting there on the table. Tears had dried on her cheeks, but her sex still wept, still pulsed, still wanted Jarak. "Gods," she cried softly, thumping her forehead against her knees. She shouldn't want him, but she did. The situation he and his race put her in was impossible, and the attraction was a balm, but she still hated that she fell for it. He'd as much as told her that her little brother was going to

be a sexual plaything for the rest of his life, and she *still* had not been able to control herself when Jarak touched her.

Helpless, frustrated, alone, she did what couldn't remotely help her. She sat curled into a ball on the table and cried.

* * * * *

Jarak stood at the end of the long table, aware of the three gazes trained on him but meeting only one. Savous sat at the other end of the table, leaning on arms folded before him, watching Jarak thoughtfully. Salin and Hyle flanked him to either side. The remainder of the council seats were empty, and the door to the outer room had been closed.

"Are you all right now?"

Jarak blinked, clenching the hands he held at the small of his back. "Yes."

Savous nodded. "I owe you an apology. I shouldn't have asked you to stay with her so long. That was cruel of me."

Jarak shook his head. "No, rhaeja. I didn't mind. I wanted to be there. I apologize for losing control."

"No. It was bound to happen. Adesty has some measure of control due to his age and his talent. You shouldn't be expected to." Savous pushed back a lock of hair that shadowed one of his vivid red eyes. "What happened to trigger it?"

"She asked me what we had planned for her brother."

Savous raised an eyebrow. "And that triggered it?"

"She got angry when I told her what was likely possible. She lashed out, I had to restrain her, and..." He swallowed, remembering the feel of her lush curves pressed to him all too well. Kissing her, tasting her, hadn't been a choice. It had been a necessity.

"Ah." Savous sighed, sitting back in his heavy wooden chair. He laced his hands in his lap, leaning to the side to brace his elbow on one arm of the chair. "What did you tell her about her brother?"

He recalled his feeble attempts to dance around the issue but was too embarrassed to describe those to Savous or in front of Salin. "I told her that he'd likely end up in the brothel."

"You said it more nicely than that, I hope."

Jarak dug his fingernails into his wrists. "I tried, rhaeja. But there isn't much of a way to honey-coat the facts."

"True." Savous turned to gaze to the side, reaching up to trace his bottom lip with his index finger.

Jarak glanced at Salin, who was watching Savous, then at Hyle, whose gaze was on the table before him. "Rhaeja?"

“Yes?”

“Is that what we’re going to do with him?”

Savous glanced at Salin, a look suggesting to Jarak that they had discussed this. “I haven’t decided.”

Salin blinked slowly, a small sneer curling his lip, then fading.

“May I ask what the choices are?”

Savous turned back to him. “Have you begun to care for these people, Jarak?”

He cared for Marisol far too much, which confused him. He would admit to himself that he cared about the man mainly because of her. “They’ve been used harshly, rhaeja. I don’t wish for either of them to come to further harm.”

Savous sat forward again, folding his hands on the table. “What would you do, Jarak?”

“Savous,” Salin warned, glaring at the rhaeja through the heavy fall of his wavy silver-white bangs.

Savous glanced at him. “I can hear Jarak’s opinion.”

Salin’s sneer was back, and this time it stayed.

Jarak glanced from one to the other, noting that Hyle finally looked up, concern on his expressive round face.

Savous turned back to Jarak. “Well?”

“It’s not my decision to make.”

“If it was.”

He shook his head.

“Don’t worry, Jarak. The decision is mine; I accept that.” A brief glare at Salin. “But I would like to know your opinion since you’ve spent so much time with them.”

Jarak stared at Savous, then Salin, then Hyle, then Savous again. He took a deep breath. “Truly? I would let them go.”

Salin’s dark red gaze landed on him. “And why would you do that?” he asked, incredulity lacing his voice.

“It’s not right to force them to stay.”

“That’s been our practice for thousands of cycles.”

“I realize that.” He braced himself, trying to act the man and quell the urge to bow like a squire. Salin would prefer he didn’t, he knew. Jarak was one of his prime warriors now, not his squire. But long practice was hard to overcome. “But they’ve been hurt. The man’s likely to have nightmares for life. We should let them go and live their lives as they see fit.”

“So they can tell the world at large about us?”

Jarak frowned. He hadn’t thought that far.

“Not to mention that you’d be denying someone a truemate.”

That he had considered. But could Marisol truly accept any of them, knowing what kind of life her brother was forced to lead? He met his commander's gaze. "The rhaeja asked my opinion."

"And you gave it truthfully," Savous said. "For which I am grateful. You don't have to justify it, Jarak. Now, about the recent situation. You're not to go back to that room."

"Rhaeja, no. I can control myself."

Savous shook his head. "No, Jarak, I'm sorry. It's not fair to you."

Jarak ground his teeth, feeling a pull below his heart to realize that he wouldn't see Marisol again, at least for a while. "Are you going to keep them?"

"I've not yet made the decision."

Jarak glanced at Salin, who was now staring at the tabletop, his mask of icy calm back in place. "May I make a request?"

Savous cocked his head, curious. "You may."

"If you do post the bills, may I be on the list?"

Salin glanced at Jarak, then back at the tabletop with a small smile and a shake of his head.

Savous blinked. Then smiled. "The first position on the list is yours, Jarak."

So, at least he could do that for Marisol. There was a clear, undeniable attraction between them. At least she'd *want* the first man she was with. He could induct her into her nine-days and help her as much as he could. He bowed his head. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Jarak. Thank you for your loyalty and for controlling yourself as long as you did. It's appreciated."

Jarak heard the conclusion of the audience in his tone.

Head still bowed, he said the heartfelt words: "My life is yours, my rhaeja."

He didn't look up to see the uncomfortable look Savous got whenever any of the loyalists repeated that phrase. He was better now at disguising it, but it was there if you knew him well enough to recognize it.

"And my fidelity yours, warrior." Thus dismissed, Jarak left.

Instinct turned him in the direction of the hallway that would take him to Marisol, but he stopped himself. With a surprisingly heavy heart, he went to find his friends, now willing to be diverted.

Chapter Eleven

“Ger, be careful.”

“I’m fine.”

You’re not fine, Marisol thought angrily but chose not to voice it. She stood by the door, watching her brother shuffle stiffly from bed to table to chest, on his way to the privy. Three nights after he’d been fully wakened, he was much better at walking by himself, but there was still a stiffness and an occasional lurch that had her holding herself back from going to help him.

Finally, he made it into the privy, and she took a relieved breath. In just the three nights since she’d seen Jarak, Geriman had improved quite a bit. Adesty was pleased with his progress.

Marisol took her accustomed seat at the foot of Geriman’s bed, spreading the length of cut fabric before her. Busily, she found her needle and began to work on the seams of the dress. Irin, when she had visited, had protested that Marisol didn’t need to sew her own, but Marisol had convinced the other woman that she needed something to occupy her hands and mind. Talking with Geriman threatened her fragile hold on her good temper, and Adesty had started to absent himself more and more. Meals were now brought in by one or the other of the two huge men who were normally on guard outside the door. Although they were nice enough, they never stayed to talk with her like Jarak had.

Of course, they’ve never touched you like Jarak. She ruthlessly stomped out that train of thought, determined not to acknowledge the ache between her legs that Jarak had left behind.

“Have they said anything about my sword?” Geriman asked when he reappeared.

“No. I don’t think they have it.”

He snorted. "They probably do. They just won't give me anything sharp, for fear I'll run them through." There was an emptiness to the tone of his voice that told her he knew his threat was meaningless.

She didn't bother to respond. She was relatively certain that his weapons had been lost on the night of their first capture, so she assumed their current captors didn't have them.

Geriman sat heavily on the bed. Marisol glanced up to see his bored, disgusted look as he surveyed the bedroom. His hands closed into fists and opened convulsively. "How long are they going to keep us trapped here?" When she didn't respond, he turned to her. "Marisol? How long?"

"I don't know, Ger. You were with me the last time I spoke to any of them."

That would have been Adesty, who'd come to check on them earlier that night. He had glanced them both over, smiled, and said he would be back later, then left.

"I thought you were friends with them. With that one, at any rate."

"With as rude as you were to Irin, I'm surprised any of them speak to us." Irin had visited briefly the previous night, but Geriman had been unspeakably rude, so she hadn't stayed long.

"I wasn't rude. I just asked what the hell they expect to do with us."

Marisol gripped the fabric in her hands, knuckles white, glaring at her brother. "She's the wife of their ruler. She deserves some respect."

"I didn't know that *then*," he countered petulantly. "And they're a race of kidnappers and rapists."

"Stop it! You'll only make things worse."

"How much worse can they get?"

She averted her gaze. She hadn't told him everything Jarak had told her. She'd said that they would likely not be able to leave and had left the implication open that Geriman would probably become some sort of servant. She could not tell him that he might end up being a sexual plaything. His present upset was from what she had told him would happen to her. She'd divulged all she knew about being changed and kept, deciding if he could concentrate on her fate, then he wouldn't have to think so much about his.

"Antagonizing them won't help anything."

"If I had my sword," he muttered, "I'd kill any one of them who tried to get their hands on you."

"But you don't, and you're not likely to get it back. Geriman, you need to realize that if you antagonize these people --"

A knock at the suite's outer door interrupted her. Willing to be distracted, she set down her needlework and crossed to the open door of Geriman's bedroom.

The outer door opened, and Savous took a step in. He looked around and saw her. “Ah, Marisol. May we speak to you a moment?”

Startled, it took her a moment to realize Irin was with him. “Yes. Certainly.” She stepped into the main room, hearing Geriman shuffle up behind her.

Savous came in far enough to let Irin enter, stepping aside to give her room. The shoulders and backs of the two burly guards could be seen just outside the open door. Savous’s gaze fell on Geriman. “Ah, you’re awake. Geriman, is it?”

When her brother didn’t answer, Marisol did. “Yes. This is Geriman. Ger, this is Savous. He’s the rhaeja, the ruler here.” She glared at her brother’s sullen grimace, willing him to stay silent.

For the moment, he did. She had futile hopes that he would stay that way.

Irin closed the door behind them, hovering near it. The small smile around her lips indicated that she had forgiven Geriman’s treatment of her the previous night. But Marisol did note that Savous stayed close to her.

He spoke. “Marisol, I’ve spoken with Jarak and Adesty. They have indicated that you have concerns regarding your situation here.”

Her eyes went wide. Jarak went to the rhaeja with it? But then, it was ultimately Savous’s decision.

“Yes, rhaeja. We...I’ve heard suggestions of what might happen, but I would like to know for sure.”

“Your concerns are understandable. We’ve come to inform you of my decision.”

The rhaeja’s red eyes sparkled, and Irin had a small smile on her face. Both of these indicated good news. Were they going to let Geriman go?

A grin blossomed on Savous’s dark face. “We’ve decided to let you both go.”

She blinked, misunderstanding his words at first. Afraid to expect that he would say it for Geriman, she certainly hadn’t expected him to say... “Both of us?”

“Yes. Both of you.” His grin twisted sardonically. “I’ll let you know that this isn’t a popular decision, so we will need to implement it as soon as possible.” He looked to Geriman. “Will you both be capable of travel? It’s easily a four-night trip from here to the western edge of the forest, and that’s at our speed.”

She was still reeling from what he had said. “You’re going to let us go?”

His smile deepened. “Yes.”

“Why?”

Geriman gripped her shoulder. “Sol!”

Irin laughed softly, with a fond look for her truemate.

"You were treated very badly," Savous said. "Both of you. Because of that, even if we converted you, Marisol, there's no guarantee that you could truly accept one of us, even if he was your true mate."

"But..." She shook her head. She knew she shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, but she felt the need to know. "You capture women all the time."

"Capture, yes. But Rhae's presence among us assured that the women were always cared for, even when they were unwilling. What happened to you was an abomination and an act against our goddess. Because of that, I've decided to let you go."

She gaped, overcome with something that she couldn't identify. Relief. Excitement. Dread? "Thank you," she finally said, realizing that the situation warranted it."

Savous tipped his head slightly in acknowledgement. "You're welcome. I can only hope that you won't think too unkindly of us in the future."

"You...you won't erase our memories?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Jarak told you about that?"

"H-he said that it was possible. But he did say that so much time had passed that it might be dangerous."

Savous exchanged a brief glance with Irin. "It is. You have been conscious around us for nearly a fortnight. To erase that much from your memories would likely turn you into gibbering idiots. If we were going to do that, I'd be compelled to keep you, for your own safety." He took another step toward her. "So, as I said before, we must make haste to get you out of the forest. Can you travel?"

"Yes!" came Geriman's answer over Marisol's shoulder.

She glanced at him dubiously.

He scowled at her. "Yes."

She looked down his body, at his legs. She wanted to protest, but had a feeling that she should let it go. Sighing, she nodded and faced Savous. "Yes."

"Good. Irin will order some clothing and supplies brought to you. Jarak and his men managed to salvage some of your possessions from your wagon, but I'm afraid most was lost."

"My sword and dagger?" Geriman asked.

Savous eyed him. "They are among the found possessions, yes. You'll understand if Jarak holds them until he sees you safely to the forest's edge."

"But --"

Marisol flung her arm to backhand her brother's chest. "Yes. That is perfectly understandable."

Savous smiled slightly. "Very well. You should take this night to rest. Jarak and his men will come for you at tomorrow's eve." He turned to leave.

"Jarak?" She blurted the name without meaning to.

Savous glanced over his shoulder at her. “Do you object to Jarak taking you to the forest’s edge?”

“N-no! But I...”

Irin intervened. “He asked for the duty. We thought him best since you already know him, but Savous can assign someone else if you’d prefer.”

“No. No. I...that’s fine.” She would see Jarak again. For some reason, that made her oddly lightheaded.

Both Irin and Savous studied her for a moment, then exchanged odd glances.

Savous nodded. “Very well.” He faced the door, then stopped. After a brief heartbeat, he turned back and stepped up to Marisol. He extended his hand.

Hesitantly, Marisol took it. It was warm and strong, and it sent a small thrill through her, but nothing like what she’d felt when Jarak touched her. It was as though the attraction was muted. But then, Savous was truematched. Likely his appeal really was dampened.

“I am truly sorry for what has happened to you, Marisol, and to you, Geriman,” he said, looking over her shoulder. He didn’t try to shake Geriman’s hand, but rather squeezed Marisol’s gently. “I hope that you will come to think fondly of us in the future. Or, if not, at least not ill of *all* of us. Like any living creatures, we are not infallible.”

He released her hand and turned toward the door.

Irin stepped up and took Marisol’s shoulders, pulling her in so she could kiss her cheek. “I’m sorry to see you go. I was looking forward to having a new friend.” She smiled as she stepped back, dropping her hands. “But I wish you all the best in the world outside the forest.”

Why did Marisol feel the urge to cry? The best of all possible chances had happened. The rhaeja had a sympathetic heart and enough power to act on what he thought was right. She and Geriman would be free.

“Sol?” Geriman asked, coming up behind her after the door closed behind the rhaeja and his truemate. Excitement was in his voice as his hands landed on her shoulders. “Are they really going to let us go?”

“Yes.” She stared at the door. *Be happy!* she told herself sternly. “It seems so.”

He whooped and pulled her around and into a hug.

She laughed, forcing gaiety as she hugged him back.

This was the best of all possible worlds. Her heart should *not* be breaking!

Chapter Twelve

“I’m not going to *ride* him!”

Shocked, Marisol watched Geriman stand up to Jarak. Off to the side, two of Jarak’s men snickered softly. She was both impressed and irritated at Geriman’s attitude. Impressed that he was over his fear enough to stand up for himself, but irritated that he was delaying their progress. Geriman was still breathing heavily due to the arduous hike they had just stopped, and Marisol’s heart was pounding, her legs shaking. The elves were far more fit and able to travel much faster than either of the humans.

Eight people stood in the middle of a wide tunnel: Marisol, Geriman, Jarak, and five raedjour under Jarak’s command. The ground was level, and the walls and ceiling were irregularly veined stone but mostly smooth. This was a well-traveled avenue, and Marisol had been told they were about half a night’s journey from the city they had left behind. They were stopped now because of Jarak, who’d decided that they would make better time if the two humans were carried. Geriman objected.

Jarak was not as amused as his men. “Listen, Geriman.” Only he, among the elves, ever called Geriman by name. The others tended to call him “little man,” if anything at all. Jarak pointed at the big guard, who stood beside him wearing a sling with a pouch in back that was plenty large enough to hold Geriman. “Either you let Hanolin carry you, or it will take fourteen nights to reach the forest’s edge rather than just four.”

Geriman glared, hands fisted. Jarak was only a little taller than him and wasn’t as broad, but he still looked much bigger than her brother. Maybe it was the way he was dressed. His snug trousers were dark violet leather with gorgeous gold embroidery up the sides of his legs. The vest that covered his back and some of his chest matched, as did the bracer he wore about his left wrist. His boots were the same shade as his skin but not nearly as glossy. By comparison, Geriman’s plain blue tunic and light brown trousers seemed dull,

and his bright hair just didn't seem as golden in the dim light of the torches. His pout didn't make him look any more mature. Then again, Jarak was many times older than Geriman.

"What'll it be?" Jarak stood back, crossing his arms over his chest. His vest parted, revealing some of his fine, muscular chest. Marisol bit her lip against a sigh of appreciation.

Geriman eyed Hanolin. The big guard just stood calmly, his square face a mask of calm under his short, thick mop of silvery hair. The rest of the men watched quietly a few paces away. Marisol sensed Trood behind her, a big, solid, protective presence.

"Or," Jarak continued darkly, drawing out the word, "we go back to the city. If you'd rather stay."

"No!" Geriman snapped, hands fisting at his sides. "All right," he grouched. "But I want my weapons."

Jarak's jaw clenched. He had both Geriman's sword and dagger, tucked away in one of the packs that his men carried. He'd shown them to Ger before they'd left. "No. You'll get them back when we let you go."

"Why can't I have them now?"

Marisol opened her mouth to protest. Jarak had already had this conversation with Geriman before they had set out.

Jarak's voice remained stern. "It's not negotiable. I don't trust you with weapons around my men. Stop acting like a child, give me a reason to trust you, and we'll talk."

Marisol's jaw clicked shut, eyebrows arching. Jarak clearly didn't need her help.

"A child?!"

Shaking his head, Jarak turned his back to Ger. "Start making camp," he told the other men. "It doesn't look like we're going anywhere for a while."

"But we just started out!" Geriman blurted.

Jarak glanced at Ger over his shoulder. "And if you're going to argue every step of the way, we might as well be comfortable." He slowly turned the rest of the way around to fully face Geriman again. "You've seen that we can travel faster than you. You're already worn out from half a night's walk and we've been going slow to accommodate you. If you do this *my* way, we can get you away from us much faster."

Ger fumed, hands clenching.

Marisol stepped forward. "Ger, please. It's faster this way." She studied him closely as he again looked Hanolin over. He didn't *look* scared, but...She shook his arm to get his attention. "Ger?" She searched his face when he finally turned toward her. "Is there something else?"

He frowned. "No."

"All right. Then, please, let's do it this way."

He took a deep breath and let it out. He wasn't shaking, which was a good sign that he wasn't frightened. "All right."

A short time later, Marisol hugged Trood's back and Geriman was strapped to Hanolin's. They hung with their legs dangling to either side of the big men's hips and their arms over beefy shoulders. Marisol had been given a traveling outfit of trousers and a knee-length tunic and was now thankful for it. She wondered if the raedjour had planned for her to be carried all along and had only let her and Geriman walk at first to show that they couldn't keep up. Not that she minded. Riding Trood's back was an embarrassing position, but it was actually pretty comfortable. She felt very secure. She wondered if Trood even felt her weight.

Scratching at her leg, Marisol felt a moment of odd heat before looking up to see Jarak walking beside her. Startled, she sat up as straight as she could in her sling.

Jarak's eyes were on Geriman and Hanolin, who walked ahead. "Will he be all right?" Jarak asked, keeping his voice low.

"Ger?"

"Yes." He glanced at her briefly. "I'm sorry to do this to him, but it *will* be faster."

Her heart swelled at Jarak's caring. "I know. I *think* he'll be fine. Hanolin doesn't affect him like the others."

Jarak nodded, patting Trood's bare arm. "The guards don't have the same effect on humans." He finally met her gaze. "It's safer for the humans that way."

She swallowed, drowning in the heat of Jarak's nearness. It wasn't her imagination that she was leaning toward Jarak, as much as she could trussed in the sling. She tried to sit back without drawing attention to it. "That's certainly a good thing," she agreed, her voice gruff.

Jarak slowly licked his lips, black tongue leaving behind glossy black lips, white teeth flashing. Marisol recalled all too well what that tongue felt like.

Trood nudged Jarak's shoulder with a finger. "Vren is calling for you."

Jarak glanced over and saw one of his men waving from a spot just before a turn up ahead. He waved back. "Yes." He turned briefly back to Marisol, a look of serious concern on his handsome face. "You let me know if you think he needs help."

She nodded. "I will."

He gave her a smile and left. She watched the intriguing strip of black skin that flashed between the hem of his vest and the waistband of his snug trousers as he walked off. He was back to not touching her, which was probably wise. But she very much wanted to feel the heat of him again. Too well she remembered the feel of his glorious warm skin and the agonizing pleasure of his tongue on her. She braced her forehead on the back of Trood's shoulder. Heat flooded her body at just the *thought* of what Jarak had done to her. Her sex

wept, and she wondered if there was any way for her to reach down and try to ease the ache with her fingers. But no. The elves would know. *Darn it!*

“Marisol?”

She jumped, belatedly realizing Rhicard had come to walk beside them.

The sorcerer smiled at her, red eyes shining with mirth.

She flushed. Did he know what she was thinking? Surely he could scent her reaction to her own thoughts.

Thankfully, he said nothing about it. He tossed his head, indicating Hanolin and Geriman up ahead. “I could put your brother to sleep if you think it will help,” he offered in a voice far too low for Ger to hear.

“Thank you, but no. I think he’ll be fine.”

Rhicard nodded, his chin-length white hair caressing his cheeks. “Very well. The offer stands if you think it’s necessary.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

With another smile, he fell back.

Sometime much later, they made camp in a wide cavern. Sand covered a good portion of the floor, providing a soft foundation for the blankets that were laid out for her and Geriman. Two fires were lit, one toward a back niche where she and her brother were placed, and one farther out in the open, closer to the passage. Jarak, Rhicard, and the others settled out there. Trood and Hanolin sat between them and the humans, providing a protective barrier.

“Do they think we’re going to try and escape?” Geriman asked her, eyes on the quiet, hulking giants who were rummaging through a sack of food.

They sat on a blanket before the fire, facing the elves.

His voice was plenty loud enough for a human to hear, so there was no doubt Hanolin and Trood heard. The men at the other fire probably did too. Hadn’t she warned him about raedjour hearing?

She pulled off one of her boots. “They’re not here to keep us from running, Ger,” she said, keeping her voice low, although she knew it was useless. “They’re here to keep the others from us.” She set the boot on the sand beside her.

He blinked. Obviously, this thought hadn’t occurred to him. “Are they likely to?”

She sighed. “Geriman, you haven’t been paying attention.” She gestured toward the other fire. “Those men are unmated. The raedjour are a very sexual race. I’m a temptation to them.” *And so are you*, she thought but didn’t say.

His fair skin flushed red. He tipped his face toward the fire, staring at the flames over the hands he loosely laced between his bent knees. "Why did they send unmated men with us?" he grumbled.

She tugged off the other boot. "They're not likely to risk mated men on us."

"What's the risk?"

She stared. He really hadn't been paying attention when she had tried to explain what she knew of raedjour society. "Their people are divided, Geriman. There are those who don't believe in the rhaeja, and there are probably plenty who'll be upset by his letting me, in particular, go." She saw the angry look in Ger's eye and kept talking in hopes of stopping him from saying what was on his mind. "He's taking a big chance by letting me go, and I, for one, am grateful to him. He's going against thousands of cycles of tradition." She waved her hand at the men at the other fire. "These men are proving their loyalty by obeying him at all. They're here to make sure we don't get abducted again."

Ger frowned. He clearly didn't want to see her point, but something must have gotten through because he just sat there, thoughtful, for a moment. He gestured toward the other fire with his chin. "But isn't the leader your friend from before?"

"Yes." She didn't look Jarak's way. "And he's good at suppressing his natural desires, but there's no sense in testing him further." Although she'd begun to wonder if there wasn't a way to tempt him just once before she had to leave him behind forever.

She has no idea, Jarak groaned inwardly, keeping his head down. He heard every word she said perfectly, especially since everyone had stopped talking except the humans.

"And just how close did you *get* as you were becoming her *friend*?" Zenth asked, nudging Jarak with his shoulder.

Jarak smirked at him. "Closer than *you*."

Zenth grimaced. Then sighed, glancing toward where Marisol sat. "Such a shame to let a perfectly beautiful woman go."

Perfectly beautiful. Yes, she was that. And more. Perfectly smart, perfectly scented, perfectly warm. He had haunted the brothel and spent quite a bit of time with Salin and Diana before seeing Marisol again, and it hadn't helped. The moment he'd laid eyes on that abundance of curly hair and enormous blue eyes, the taste of Marisol had resurfaced in his mouth and he'd salivated for more than just a memory.

Vren dropped a single packet of travel rations on the rock between them. "She smells divine." He groaned, biting into a strip of dried yarin. "I'm sure if I could have one night with her, I could convince her to stay."

Jarak laughed along with the others and ceased to listen to their banter. He stared into the fire, recalling the feel of her skin and the taste of her sex. He'd only ever wanted one

other woman with a fever even close to this, and he'd always known Diana couldn't be his. But then, neither could Marisol.

Could he have convinced her to stay, given a little more time? If they hadn't been interrupted that night, could he have shown her that life among the raedjour was a worthwhile sacrifice of her humanity? Then again, could he stand it if she stayed and passed from him to another man? Then to another, and another...

"Jarak?"

He blinked and jerked his head up. Rhicard held a water bag toward him, watching him curiously. He wasn't the only one. A few of the other men around the fire were looking at him. "What?"

Rhicard laughed. "Where were you?"

"Nowhere." Unbidden, his neck twisted and his eyes sought her out. As it happened, she looked up and their eyes met. A lightning strike could not have been more painful.

Rhicard nudged him with the water bag, forcing his attention back. "It's understandable," he murmured.

Was it? Was it understandable that the thought of losing this woman caused him physical pain? If the change spell had been cast, he'd wonder if they were truemates. He upended some of the wine into his mouth. No. Truemating didn't happen before the change spell.

Chapter Thirteen

Marisol gasped at the feel of the cool breeze lifting the curls from her neck, carrying with it a bite of forest pine. She lifted her cheek from the back of Trood's shoulder and peeked around his neck. The air definitely felt different. Less musty.

"Is that trees I smell?"

"Yes," Trood answered in that low voice that rumbled through his back. He pointed with one thick finger, "A cave mouth is just up ahead, around that corner."

Jarak and a few of his men stopped at said corner, raising their hands to shield their eyes. The flickering orange of their torches blended with a bluish splash of light over the walls. After a brief discussion, they extinguished their torches and walked back to meet Hanolin and Trood and their cargo.

"Let them down," Jarak told the guards.

Ever careful of her, Trood unbuckled the sling and lowered her to her feet in a move they'd practiced over the past few days. His big hand was there to steady her when she wobbled.

She smiled up at him, having grown fond of the big man.

A tingling awareness had her turning to face Jarak as he stopped at her side.

He pointed ahead. "Around that corner is a cave's mouth. It's maybe half a night's walk for you to get to the forest's edge from there. We'll wait here until the sun's set, and I'll give you directions."

She stared at him. She knew she should be delighted by what he told her. But she wasn't. She felt empty. She longed to reach out and take his hand, let him hold her, but she knew that was not the best of ideas.

Feet shuffled beside her, and she turned to see Geriman headed for the opening. "Ger!"

"It's all right," Jarak said, low voice making her look at him again. Did she see sadness in his beautiful blue eyes, or was that a reflection of her own feelings? "As long as you don't go too far into the trees, you should be fine until nightfall." He tried a smile, but it was wan. "Just don't get lost."

She swallowed and tried to give him the smile he'd failed. She knew she failed as well. "All right." She headed around the corner after her brother.

After so many days underground, seeing the sun, even on the verge of twilight, was a shock. Marisol shaded her eyes, blinking back the sharp pain as they refocused. The cave opened onto a brief level space which abruptly dropped down a steep cliff about ten paces from the opening.

"Ger, be careful," she chided, finding him at the edge of the drop-off.

He held his arms out wide, breathing in as though he couldn't get enough air into his lungs. "Sunlight, Sol!"

She stood beside him, staring out over the trees. They stood on the edge of a small cliff, perhaps thirty feet up, high enough to let her see over the tops of most of the fat, spreading oaks that hid the ground. In the distance, she could see where the trees thinned and a clear meadow blanketing a hill beyond which the sun was spilling its last shining rays for the day. The sharp definition of the tree line and the way it wavered suggested an unseen river. It was beautiful, and the gentle heat did settle nicely through her tunic and into her skin.

"Let's go."

"Ger!" He was headed for a very narrow trail that wound from the left side of the cave mouth down to the forest floor.

"Come on, Sol." He glanced into the darkness within the cave.

"Absolutely not! We don't know where we're going."

He pointed toward the sun behind her. "We head for that meadow. He said it was less than a night's travel."

"And we have no idea if there are any pitfalls between here and there." She stuck her fists onto her hips, glaring. "Have you forgotten your *sword*?"

That stopped him. He sneered.

"Ger, they've brought us this far. I can't imagine that they'd turn on us now."

He sulked past her, back to the lip of the precipice.

She came up behind him, laying a hand on the back of his shoulder. "It won't be long now."

They stood in silence, watching the sun set. Twilight spread over the trees, changing verdant green to shadowy gray. The pink and orange spanning the blue sky faded to watery blue and, finally, inky indigo.

As the moon was rising, spreading bright, silvery light over the darkened forest, the raedjour emerged from the cave's mouth. Marisol, watching for their arrival, saw the moonlight hit the white of their hair first. As they each wore dark trousers and vests, it was the gleam of their skin that next became evident.

With a jaunty smile and a wave for her, Vren followed three of his companions down the rocky trail.

Barely looking at either her or Geriman, Jarak walked to the edge of the drop-off to stand beside Marisol and her brother. He pointed to the distant meadow. "On the other side of that hill and a day's walk, I'm told, is a village." His arm swung toward the right. "There's a tributary not far to the north that flows past the village." He pointed straight ahead. "The High Road's bridge is down there. You can either cross and cut over the hill, or cross and hike north until you come to where the river splits. Either way will take you where you want to go."

Want to go? she asked herself as Jarak looked at them, making sure they understood his directions. She tore her gaze from his, nodding. She let Geriman ask questions about how far and how large the village was and followed quietly when the men led the way to the start of the narrow trail leading down.

Trood approached as she glanced down with trepidation. She wasn't particularly afraid of heights, but the uneven rocky path didn't look stable to her.

"Should I go first?" the gentle giant asked.

Biting the inside of her lip, she nodded.

"Can I have my sword?" she heard Geriman ask from where he followed Jarak farther down the track.

Jarak made the path look perfectly safe, nimble as a cat as he picked his way across the rocks. "When we get to the bottom."

She stepped onto the trail, holding the hand Trood extended toward her. A glance back showed her Rhicard and the three remaining raedjour waiting patiently to follow.

"Really?" Geriman asked.

She looked up at the sound of rocks falling and gasped. Ger's foot hovered in midair over the rocks and dirt crumbling away beneath him.

Jarak spun and hauled him to relative safety, closer to the rock wall to the right. He glared at her brother. "Watch out!"

She couldn't see Ger's face but could well imagine his scowl. "All right. Sorry."

She ground her teeth, willing him to voice an apology she knew that he wouldn't. *At least he's being civil*, she thought. No doubt being in the open air so close to their destination had him in a good mood.

She picked her way carefully, thankful for Trood's solid presence in front of her. How such a big man managed on such a narrow track, she didn't know, but she felt clumsy. She

clutched the rocks of the cliff face when she could, needing something else solid to assure her she wasn't going to fall. *If I fall, could I stay? Would they take me back to see Adesty?* The idle thought was loud in her mind. Angrily, she banished it.

Marisol breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the bottom without further incident. She watched, amazed, as Jarak retrieved a long pack from one of his men and pulled out Geriman's sword and dagger.

Her brother all but pounced, snatching the sheathed weapons from Jarak's hands. She didn't miss the wariness of Jarak and his men or the wise step backward Jarak took as Ger drew the sword. The glee on Geriman's face almost matched the one she'd seen when he'd first acquired the blade. After a few experimental slashes through the air, he eyed the closest raedjour.

Thankfully, he looked away and resheathed the blade. He frowned at the scabbard itself. "This isn't mine."

"No." Jarak tossed him a belt that Marisol didn't recognize. "Yours was ruined by the time we found it."

Marisol blinked, then rushed to her brother's side to inspect the scabbard. It was clearly new, although it had been oiled expertly. Gaping, she looked up at Jarak, remembering leather scraps and two long, thin pieces of wood. "This is what you were making...that night?"

If his skin were not black as night, she believed he would have blushed as he averted his gaze. "The blade needed a scabbard."

"You made this?" Geriman asked, skeptical.

Jarak turned, scowling at the raedjour who watched. "What are you looking at?" He pointed into the trees. "The night's wasting away." He looked to Marisol, gaze hooded. "Let's go."

She bit her lip, feeling tears in her eyes, although she wasn't sure why. He'd made a replacement scabbard for her brother. He might have made the belt that Geriman now belted around his waist, since that was clearly also new. Trying to hide tears, she scrubbed at her forehead, tilting her head down. What else had he done to take care of them that she wasn't aware of?

She began to walk when Trood's big hand landed softly on her shoulder. She let the big man lead her, hardly watching where she stepped as they entered the trees, following a path through the bushes as narrow as the one they'd taken down from the cave's mouth.

Gaining control of herself, she concentrated on following Geriman, who followed Hanolin. The path was uneven enough that it took most of her thoughts, not allowing them to stray back to Jarak. Much. Thick foliage brushed against her trousers and boots. She had to duck some low-hanging branches that swung back after Geriman released them.

They'd come quite a way and she was breathing hard from exertion, her legs aching from extended use, when Rhicard shouted, "Jarak!"

Confusion. Glancing right, toward the crashing sound of someone thundering through the brush, it seemed that the shadows of the trees coalesced into shouting raedjour. It took her a heartbeat to realize that these weren't any familiar faces from the past few days.

Horried, she locked gazes with one as he bounded over a decaying log toward her, a bared sword in one hand, the other extended and ready to snatch her. She screamed, ducking against Trood's massive chest as he hauled her back into his arms. He huddled over her, providing a shield with his body as another black shape dove into the one hurtling toward them.

"Jarak!" she cried, recognizing him just before he and the other tumbled into the brush.

The clang of blades surrounded them. Reluctantly tearing her gaze from where Jarak had disappeared, she whimpered at the sight of her brother with his sword and dagger drawn, slashing at the head of a sneering elf while blocking a thrust with his dagger. Hanolin hovered behind him, faced away toward yet another man, who crouched before him.

How many of them are there? she thought, panicked. "Where did they come from?"

She crumbled to her knees when Trood hunched over, kneeling beside and over her. "We expected they might try this," he muttered, bringing a huge hand up to cradle her head.

Something flashed white and bright behind Trood, and she heard at least three screams of agony. A moment later, she recognized Rhicard's dark burgundy pants as he stepped up beside the big man. Glancing up, she gasped, horrified to see an arrow protruding from his right shoulder. He didn't pay any mind, however, his left hand raised with a blaring white ball of light roiling in his palm. His red eyes blazed, the glow obscuring half his face as he muttered, then threw the ball of light.

More cries of pain.

He muttered again, and another ball of light grew in his palm. She heard shouts and the abrupt cease of clashing blades. The rustle of foliage that had to mark the attackers retreating. He threw the ball with a snarled curse.

This time the cries were very far away.

"Is that all of them?" he asked, turning.

Trood shot up from protecting her to grab the sorcerer's arm, holding him steady as he wavered. Dark liquid streamed down his right arm.

"You're wounded." She tried to get up, the better to see.

Trood's other hand, however, kept her kneeling before him.

Rhicard glanced down at her, face ominous, red eyes still glowing. The white etchings in his skin seemed brighter, but that might have been her imagination. "I'm fine," he said. Then glanced beyond her. "Was anyone else wounded?"

She glanced behind her to see two of the others come up. They shook their heads. Glancing around, she saw everyone, even her brother, except... "*Jarak!*" She shot up, breaking Trood's hold. Her gaze went toward the brush where Jarak had disappeared. "Jarak?!"

"Marisol, hush," Rhicard said, reaching for her. "He's --"

She didn't hear. As he spoke, the shadows solidified into a form she'd come to crave over the last few days. He strode toward them, expertly sheathing his long, thin swords in the scabbards at his hips. Heedless of anything else, she scrambled away from the two startled raedjour and hurtled toward Jarak. She *had* to hold him.

Jarak caught Marisol, grunting as her negligible weight hit him, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck. His own arms curled around her body instinctively, his head bending so he could bury his nose in the intoxicating scent and warmth of her neck.

"You're alive," she muttered, lips and breath caressing the sensitive skin underneath his ear. "You're alive."

Shaking with the effort, he restrained himself from hugging her tightly, but he couldn't resist sliding his hand up her back to sink into that glorious wealth of curls she had for hair. "I'm alive," was all he could think to say.

He felt a wet warmth on his skin and smelled the salt of her tears. "You're alive," she sobbed softly. Fingers dug into the back of his skull, cradling his face to the bend of her neck. "Gods, Jarak."

He swallowed, shutting his eyes. His body rebelled against what his mind was thinking, not wanting to obey. But he had to. "Marisol, let go."

She froze, perhaps just realizing their position.

He dropped his hands from her hair, from her back, holding them out to his sides. He wasn't quite strong enough to lift his head. "Sol, let go."

"I..." Her fingers loosened in his hair, her arms losing some of their clinging strength.

Using every ounce of discipline Salin and Krael had thumped into him for decades, Jarak tore himself away. He stepped back, eyes wide as he caught sight of her.

She held her arms out, still open toward him, fingers poised to snatch. Her huge blue eyes were full of desperation and longing.

He shook his head. "We...can't."

She nodded, but otherwise didn't move.

Swallowing again, he took another step back. "Vren? Zenth?"

He heard their footsteps but couldn't tear his gaze from the woman before him. "We're here," Zenth said.

Closing his eyes, he took one more step and forced his head to the side. He opened his eyes on his friend, refusing to look at the woman who still hadn't moved. "How many got away?"

"Two, maybe three." He saw the knowledge of his struggle in his friend's eyes. "Depends on how many Rhicard got with that last volley."

He pointed. "Let's go. Rhicard! You take over and get the humans to safety." *The humans*. He couldn't think her name right now. It would ruin him.

"No!" she cried, stepping forward.

He didn't wait to hear anything else. See anything else. If he didn't leave now, he'd grab her and take her back to the city, to his rooms, to his bed, and he'd never let her go. "Go!" he barked at Zenth, dashing toward him even before he turned. They were in the trees, and he could hear Vren following before she had a chance to cry out.

"Jarak!"

Not responding to that cry was among the hardest things he'd ever had to do.

Rhicard would only allow them to pause long enough to bind his wound. It wasn't bad, and he said his magic could heal it before the next night was through. Once that was done, he set them all at a brisk pace down the path, which widened a little not far from where they had been attacked. They all kept close this time, surrounding Marisol and Geriman, blatantly watchful of another attack.

Rhicard chatted with her as they walked. Or, rather, chatted *at* her, since she had nothing to say. He surmised that she was particularly susceptible to the attraction of the raedjour. He said it was probably centered on Jarak because he was both the one who had rescued her as well as the one who'd spent the most time with her.

Geriman was just as silent as he walked beside her. She couldn't look at him. Didn't want to explain her actions with Jarak when she was having difficulty explaining them to herself. She hadn't thought. She'd acted on instinct. So what did that mean? Was Rhicard right?

True to what Jarak had originally told them, before the night was half over, they had reached sight of the river. They had come across the High Road not long before, so they walked down the wide, cleared avenue toward the bridge.

The raedjour stopped about a hundred feet from the near side of the bridge. The trees were thick and close enough to still shadow the road.

Rhicard turned and met her gaze. For a long, quiet moment, he studied her. Then he smiled softly. "Once you're on the other side, you'll be safe from rogues. It's too close to dawn for any of us to risk being here for long."

She thought of Jarak. Had he already started back toward the caves?

Two of the men came forward, each handing a pack to Marisol and Geriman. She summoned a smile for the one before her and thanked him softly.

Her heart was too dead to be more than marginally surprised to hear Geriman echo her thanks.

A third man came up and handed a small, tied leather bag to her. She hefted it, knowing she should be curious.

“What’s that?” Geriman asked for her.

“Raw gemstones,” Rhicard answered. “You should be able to sell them to support yourselves for some time to come. I hear they’re quite valuable.”

Geriman snatched it from her and opened it. From his small, excited murmur, she gathered that Rhicard was right about the worth of the contents, at least from Ger’s perspective.

Rhicard dipped his fingers into a pouch attached to his belt. He pulled something out by a cord and held it up before her. It was an amulet dangling from a slim leather thong. “I also would give you this.” It was a small, smooth oval of what looked like obsidian, shining and jet black, with an eerie moonlight glow. Filigree of silver molded to the top, through which the thong was strung.

Again, Geriman spoke for her. “What is it?”

“With this amulet, you will have the ability to call to us.”

That made her look up at him.

He avoided her direct gaze, eyes on the amulet. “This is a first for us. We’ve never released a human without erasing or blurring their memory of us. Savous realizes that you will probably speak of us to the outside world. If you do, he’d like for you to have a way to open communication with us.”

She held out her hands, palms cupped, and he slowly set the amulet’s warm weight in them.

“We also realize that not everything you have to say would be complimentary.” Rhicard said this with a wry twist to his voice. “But we hope that you’ll remember that some of us tried to treat you fairly and look out for your welfare.”

Tears blurred Marisol’s downcast eyes. She hoped her forward-falling hair hid them as she closed her fingers around his present.

“You need do nothing special to activate the amulet. If you bring it to the High Road bridge, we’ll sense it, one of my brother sorcerers or I. Please remember that it may take us a few days to get to you.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

Warm, dark fingers reached up to brush her hair from her cheek. She looked up into Rhicard’s smiling face. “It’s time for us to leave.”

“What happens to you if daylight comes?” Geriman asked.

Rhicard chuckled. “I’m not willing to give you *all* of our secrets.”

His gaze returned to her. “Be well, Marisol. I am truly sorry for some of what happened to you while you’ve been with us, but please believe me when I say that you will be sorely missed.”

She scrubbed at a tear that tracked her cheek. “Thank you,” she said, voice rough, wishing she had something more profound to say.

Rhicard nodded and stepped back. With a wave, he indicated the other men to precede him up the road, back into the heart of the forest. “Be well,” he said, waving before he turned and followed.

Within moments, the shadows had swallowed the raedjour.

They were gone.

Chapter Fourteen

“Good afternoon, Sol.”

Marisol looked up from the table she was wiping with a rag and summoned a smile for the man leaving the brightly lit afternoon to enter the tavern’s relative darkness. “Afternoon, Grundy.”

She noticed he was dressed in his best trousers and a clean shirt. Some attempt had been made to tame the curly mop of brown hair on his head. He’d shaved.

She sighed inwardly, knowing what that meant. So early?

He sat on a chair at the table she was cleaning and smiled up at her. He was a handsome man, a good man who treated her with a measure of respect.

“You here for lunch?” she asked, tucking the rag into the pocket of her apron.

He nodded, eyes locked on hers. “Will you join me?”

She laughed. “You know Marcus won’t approve of that. You wait here, and I’ll bring you some ale to start.” She picked up the empty mugs from the table and deliberately walked away from him.

Serena met her behind the counter, a wicked gleam in her sea green eyes. “He’s early,” she murmured.

“I know.” Marisol grimaced. Her back was to him, her expression hidden, as she tucked a mug underneath the tap of one of the huge barrels set behind the counter.

“Well, he doesn’t have midnight skin and white hair, but he’s good-looking for a human,” the other woman teased with a chuckle.

Marisol bit back a sigh as the memory of velvety black skin, silky white hair, and clear blue eyes filled her mind. She shook the vivid image as she turned with the full mug. “They can’t all be perfect.”

Serena's eyes widened; then she laughed. "One of these days, I should just head into that forest of yours and see what's got you so convinced."

Marisol didn't even bat an eye as she passed. "Just be careful of the rogues."

Geriman appeared through the back door of the tavern, tunic slung over his shoulder and shirt unlaced halfway down his chest. His curls were wet and tight to his head, leading her to guess that he'd been out back practicing with the sheathed sword that he carried in his hand.

"Grundy!" he greeted, sitting down beside the shopkeeper.

The other man smiled at him. "Geriman."

He liked Geriman. Everyone in the small town liked Geriman. They completely forgot that they'd first thought he was insane.

Geriman hooked his belt and the sheathed blade over the back of his chair.

She stared at the belt. At the scabbard. The ones Jarak had made for him.

She set Grundy's mug before him, then turned toward the kitchen. She nodded thanks to Serena, who already had another mug in hand, taking it to Geriman.

Geriman broke off his excited chatter with Grundy when she returned after a brief wait with two platters of roast hen and vegetables. "Sol! There's a caravan just set up camp outside of town. They're headed east through the forest. The caravan master's asked us to join him for dinner in his tent tonight."

"Why?"

He dug into the meat with his fingers. "He probably wants to hear about the elves."

Grundy grunted, avoiding Marisol's eyes when she looked at him. He, like the three or four other men who'd shown a lasting interest in her, didn't like to hear about her time in the forest.

In late summer when they'd first arrived in town, Geriman had been eager to tell his abbreviated tales of the elves of the Dark Forest. No one had believed him at first, but they had listened. It was a wonder, after all, for two lone people to survive the trip across the forest. They'd sat in this selfsame tavern and scoffed at him while happily taking the gems the raedjour had given them and exchanging them for outrageously low sums of money. Listless and hardly concerned with life in general, Marisol hadn't taken charge until it was too late and they were broke again. Marcus, the man who owned the tavern, hired Marisol on as one of his girls and kept Geriman around as a handyman.

Then a caravan had arrived fresh from the forest with similar tales of elves. They'd seen the raedjour, although they hadn't spoken with any. The men in their stories matched the ones in Geriman's, and suddenly her brother had taken on more credibility.

Strangely, Geriman's stories of the elves weren't as harsh as Marisol had expected. He made no mention of his rape and glossed over hers, but he was careful to point out that the men who'd hurt them were rogues. He did mention that they had a spell to convert women,

but was quick to say that the rhaeja himself had let Marisol go because of what had happened to her.

"I told him we'd meet him after sundown," Geriman continued, shoving greasy meat into his mouth.

She shrugged. "All right."

"Marisol! I'd hoped that we could have dinner," Grundy said softly.

She smiled at him. "Another time?"

She would have been blind not to see the crestfallen look. But he tried to cover it. "Absolutely."

"You should marry Grundy."

Surprised, Marisol glanced up at her brother's profile. They were alone in the twilight, headed toward the ring of wagons where the caravan had made camp. She had come to love the twilight and the lavender blue that blanketed the air. She preferred twilight only a little less than she appreciated full night. She had come to crave true, inky darkness lit only by silvery moonlight. Luckily, her preference to be a night owl fit nicely with her schedule at the tavern.

"He'd be good for you," Geriman added, herding her thoughts back to what he'd said.

"You think so, do you?"

"Yes. You don't need to be...alone."

She laughed. "I'm hardly alone, Ger. I've got you."

"Yes. Well. That's not enough, is it?"

She stopped.

He walked a few steps, then turned to face her.

She waited, then put her hands on her hips, grimacing. "What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

She arched a brow.

He scowled, averting his gaze. "You're not happy."

"And you think marrying Grundy will make me happy?"

"He'll take care of you."

"I'm taking care of myself, Ger."

He sneered softly. "As a *tavern* girl."

"Why don't you just say 'whore'?"

He gripped the hilt of his sword, glaring at her. "You're *not* a whore."

"Oh, but I think I am, Ger." When it had first happened during the winter, she'd been so wrapped in her own needs, she hadn't thought of the possible dangers if Geriman found out what she was doing. But he'd chosen to turn a blind eye.

His jaw must have hurt from gritting his teeth so hard. "You're not."

"I think sleeping with men and accepting their money for it makes me a whore."

"*Damn it*, Sol! Why do you do that?"

She'd known this conversation would come someday soon. She'd seen the signs of his frustration.

"We had to make money somehow."

"You have the job at the tavern."

"And you know very well that part of that job is sleeping with a customer or three."

He was visibly shaking from anger. "Damn it."

"What does it matter?"

"What?"

"What does it matter?" She shrugged, remaining deliberately calm. "It's not like I care."

"You've turned into exactly what *they*" -- he flung a pointed finger toward the east, toward where the forest lay beyond a hill, toward the raedjour -- "were going to make you! A whore!"

She considered calmly. Then nodded. "I have, haven't I?"

His anger deflated into confusion. "I don't understand you."

She sighed, letting some of her frustration show. Her gaze turned in the direction he pointed, trying to see the forest even though it wasn't visible. "I don't understand myself most times."

"You want to go back."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I miss him."

"Him"? Just Jarak?"

"You remember his name?"

Did he know he fingered the scabbard Jarak had made for him? "*Him*, I remember. Because you seemed to like him more."

"Yes. I did."

Rocks crunched under his feet as he stepped up to her.

She met his gaze squarely.

He searched her face in the darkening light. "If you go back, you know what will happen."

She nodded. "Yes."

"You accept that?"

"Yes."

He shut his eyes.

She reached up to caress his cheek. "I'm sorry, Geriman. I tried. I tried to be...*human* again, but I can't. Something's missing."

He shook his head. "I can't believe you're saying this."

"I've given it a lot of thought."

"You should marry Grundy."

"Are you going to force that on me?"

She saw it in his face. He would dearly like to say yes. The petulant boy he'd always been surged to the surface, brimming in big, expressive eyes gone black in the lighting. Then he took a deep breath, blinking slowly. He reached up to take her hand from his face, held it in his own. "No. I..." He grimaced. "Every decision I've ever made for you has been wrong. This one feels bad, but" -- he shook his head -- "I won't stop you."

She slid her arms around his neck, pulling him into a hug. "I'm sorry, Ger. I don't want to hurt you."

He gripped her roughly and said nothing.

Chapter Fifteen

Marisol stood a quarter of the way across the High Road bridge. The structure was large, plenty big and wide enough to allow any of the wagons in the camp behind her to cross easily. It had been built hundreds of cycles ago, sturdy and strangely beautiful with its gray-green stone and clean arches. She sat on the thick railing to one side, eagerly scanning the dense foliage on the far side of the river.

“Marisol.”

She turned to watch the man approaching her. Tall and fair, Master Waeldiss carried himself like a lord. Or what Marisol had seen of lords. Head high, shoulders back, he tended to hold one arm bent at his side with the hand either preceding him or hovering over the buttons of his fine silk vest. His gold hair was pulled back into a neatly trimmed tail that hung a third of the way down his back. His slightly darker brows were arched and far too sharply defined to have grown that way naturally. Despite the looks that made him seem a standoffish, self-absorbed fop, he was a man of humor and intelligence, with a good understanding of others. He was a compelling man with an endless cadre of stories and experiences to fill the time. Marisol had liked him instantly on meeting him.

He came to stand beside her in what she’d decided was a pose that was ingrained. “I must confess that I am very curious to meet these raedjour who so captivate your interest.”

She smiled, hopping down from the railing. “It shouldn’t be long now.” Her gaze went back to the trees. “It’s been four nights. That’s how long it takes for them to reach the forest’s edge from the city.”

He studied the trees with her. “And I have never seen them before,” he mused.

That is what bothered him, she suspected. He had been the caravan’s master for over ten cycles and had prospered as one of the few masters who could take a caravan through the forest. He had confessed that he wasn’t sure why his train was allowed access where others

were not, but he had never looked a gift horse in the mouth. He now suspected that the elves had singled him out, allowing him to pass. An abundance of questions awaited in his mind, and he was probably trying to decide what to ask first.

After a long pause where only the cool night breeze whispered between them, he turned to her. "Supper will be ready by now in my wagon, my dear." He held out his hand to her. "If you would care to join me."

She suppressed a sigh. This supper, like the ones on previous nights, would be followed by an invitation to while away the remainder of the night with him. She'd experienced his sexual skill the night before and found it rather extensive. For a human.

But humans no longer interested her.

Still, he'd agreed to bring her and Geriman with him to the forest's edge, and he had treated them well. He could have demanded the amulet from her neck and left her back in the village.

Although she would have followed.

"Thank you, Master Waeldiss. But if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to..." She glanced back at the trees, and her gaze snared on movement. Was that what she thought?

Dark bodies clad in vivid jewel colors emerged from the shadows beneath the trees. White hair caught the moonlight first, beacons to locate them while the eyes adjusted to the shine of their skin. Witnessing their approach, Marisol could plainly see that they were created by a goddess of the night.

She raced toward them, stopping just shy of the middle of the bridge.

Seven...ten...twelve of them came into view. Those in front continued walking when they reached the bridge, but some stopped. The latter were armed with bows, strung and held at the ready, defensive. Five strode toward her. She recognized Commander Salin's height and short hair first, his very stride conveying command. She'd met him and a few of the other council members briefly before Jarak had taken her away from the city. Salin's trousers were black, with white embroidery, and his boots were soft leather to match. Two thin, long blades were sheathed at his narrow hips. The weblike white design that was etched across his bare torso gleamed as pure as the moon above. Sorcerer Hyle walked to his right and slightly behind him, body mostly shrouded in a vivid violet robe that swept his body from shoulders to ground. His snowy white hair was loose and flowing about his rounded face and shoulders. The robe was open in the front, revealing a bare chest that, while not as chiseled as the commander's, was no less impressive for its definition and gleaming white design. An elf unknown to her strode to Salin's left, his stride proclaiming him a warrior. Gorgeous white hair hung in a heavy curtain from the top of his head to his hips, blowing in the wind like a cape. When she saw the whip strapped to one side and the blade strapped to the other, she remembered that she had seen him once, just before they left the raedjour city. Krael, she believed was his name, the commander's second. The man behind Hyle she didn't recognize, but the man behind Krael she did, and seeing him made

her smile. Rhicard wore a crimson robe somewhat like Hyle's, open to reveal matching trousers and darker red boots.

No Jarak. Her heart sank. She hadn't expected him to come, but there had been a small hope.

"Impressive," Master Waeldiss murmured, stepping up to her side.

She couldn't contain her joy as the elves approached. Behind, she heard shouts from the camp.

"You say the ones with the tattoos are the sorcerers?" Waeldiss asked softly.

"Not all. It's the red eyes that mark the magic workers, although the commander -- the man in front -- doesn't practice magic." She didn't bother to remind him that the men approaching could probably hear them.

Rhicard grinned, red eyes locked on her as he stopped with Salin and the others a few paces before her and Master Waeldiss.

Salin inclined his head at her, a small smile curving his generous lips. "Marisol. It's good to see you well."

She couldn't help the smile that split her face. "Commander Salin. It's an honor." She looked to Hyle, then back to Salin. "I realize the honor you and Sorcerer Hyle do us in coming." Indeed. Savous had not only sent two truemated males, but two of his most trusted council members, a sign that he took this meeting quite seriously.

Remembering herself, she held a hand, palm up, toward the man beside her. "May I introduce Master Waeldiss? He is master of the caravan camped behind us, and he's also received special dispensation as an emissary of Baron Throothlor, vassal to the queen of Nadrid."

Master Waeldiss bent into a very elegant, very practiced bow. "Gentlemen, on behalf of Her Majesty, I greet you."

Salin quirked an eyebrow at her while Master Waeldiss was bent, and she stifled a giggle. His teasing look was gone by the time the caravan master straightened. "It's an honor, Master Waeldiss," Salin replied in his deep midnight voice. He raised one massive arm, bicep bulging impressively as he bent his arm and thumped a fist over his heart. "My rhaeja sends his regards."

Some of Master Waeldiss's men approached behind them. Marisol was a little surprised when Geriman stepped up to her side. She glanced at him, and he gave her a smile underlined with fear and sadness. Seeing it, she took his hand and squeezed.

Once introduced, Master Waeldiss didn't need Marisol there, but she stayed and he didn't protest. He and Salin exchanged pleasantries, then started to set the ground rules of communication between them. Salin had come, it seemed, with an offer of escort for the caravan through the forest. He openly acknowledged the rogues and expressed concern for the safety of the humans. Master Waeldiss looked ready to ask about how caravans had

survived in the past, but he held his peace. But then, after they finished making arrangements, it looked like Master Waeldiss would have all the time it would take to cross the forest to ask questions and get to know his escort. Salin explained that he, himself, had to return to the city, but Rhicard and Dreiden -- the fifth man with them -- would remain to lead the raedjour.

When all was said and done, Master Waeldiss and Salin shook hands, and both parties moved to leave. The elves would depart for the night, giving the caravan all of the next day to prepare for travel before meeting them on the forest side of the road the following night.

Panicked, Marisol stepped forward, catching one of Rhicard's voluminous sleeves. "May I speak to you?"

He looked at her in surprise, then glanced over her shoulder.

Geriman stepped up beside her.

Rhicard smiled at him. "Geriman. You're looking well."

Ger nodded. "Thank you. You also."

The twist to Rhicard's smile showed he knew what that cost her brother.

She squeezed his wrist. "Please, may I talk to you?"

"Certainly. If your brother doesn't mind."

She met Geriman's eyes. "He doesn't."

Nostrils flared and eyes narrowed, but then he sighed, resigned. "No."

She pointed. "Go over there."

"Why?"

"I want to talk to Rhicard alone."

Grumbling, he went to the side of the bridge.

Rhicard, meantime, nodded at Salin, Hyle, and the rest, who went ahead without him.

She stood alone in the middle of the bridge with a man she found she'd sorely missed. She didn't know him well, but he'd been kind to her. He'd helped to save her life at least twice. He was a connection to the man she *really* wanted to see.

Rhicard stood patiently, waiting.

She briefly considered beating around the bush, but then discarded the idea. What was the point? "How is Jarak?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Jarak? He's back in the city."

"He didn't come."

"No."

"Why? Isn't he one of Salin's captains?"

Rhicard tilted his head to the side, studying her. "He is."

"Why didn't he come?"

"He has other duties. And Dreiden is his senior and more experienced."

"Oh." She swallowed. "How is he?"

"Why do you ask?"

Frustrated at his evasion, she took a deep breath. "He was nice to me. I'm...fond of him." She licked her lips. "I miss him."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"I likely shouldn't say this, but he misses you, too."

Her heart soared. "He does?"

He searched her face. "Marisol...how have you been feeling lately?"

"Feeling?"

"Yes. Have you been well? Have you been getting on with your life?"

Courtesy dictated that she demur and say yes. Damn courtesy! "No. I haven't. I think about him *every* day." She hadn't meant to say *him*; she'd meant to say the raedjour or something like. But the truth came out.

Rhiscard's lips parted. "Is it a longing? So much that it clouds the rest of your life?"

"*Yes.*"

He shook his head, scowling. "Tell me true, Marisol, this is important. Did you have sex with Jarak?"

She licked her lips again. "Well, no."

"Was he inside you?"

"No."

"He touched you?"

She flushed. "Yes."

"But he didn't enter your body?"

"No."

He gaped.

"What?"

Confusion wrinkled the white design on his forehead. "I don't understand."

"What?"

"What you've described and what I've seen Jarak going through these past moons...I would swear that you're truemated."

It was her turn to gape. "Is that possible?"

"I would have said no, but what you're feeling..." He shook his head. "Even if you had been particularly susceptible to our attraction, I would have thought it would have worn off by now."

Truemated? With Jarak? Could it be possible? "Take me back with you."

Rhicard frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I could be wrong."

"I don't care."

Salin stepped up behind Rhicard, towering over them both. "What's this?"

Before Rhicard could speak, she reached out to grab Salin's hand. "Commander, take me back with you."

Startled, he didn't immediately respond. He looked at Rhicard.

The sorcerer shrugged. "According to her, she's been acting like Jarak."

Salin frowned. "You don't think...?"

"We may be *truemated*," she said for them. "Please, Commander, take me back."

"Listen, Marisol," he said, taking hold of both of her forearms. He had to bend to bring his face anywhere near close to hers. "No matter what Rhicard believes to be true, no matter what you've gone through, this is unprecedented. No *truematch* has ever happened before the change spell."

He was a head and a half taller than she, and she felt dwarfed by his very presence, but in his face she saw the demeanor that demanded respect and had earned the everlasting loyalty of the man she loved.

Loved. Yes.

"I have thought about this, Commander," she said, willing him to believe her. "Since winter's thaw, I haven't thought about much else. I want to go back."

He searched her face, just as Rhicard had searched it. "Are you positive that you don't want think about this?"

"I'm positive."

He let a small smile take his lips. "Then I'm sure I speak for us all when I say that we'd be delighted to have you back."

Chapter Sixteen

Jarak lay back on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He hadn't lit the fire or any candles, so he couldn't see the colors above him, but he knew the whorls and colors of the wooden planks above his bed by heart now, having stared at them listlessly a lot over the past few moons. He tried to keep his mind carefully blank. There was nothing to occupy it. Nothing he *should* be thinking of, at any rate. He'd completed every conceivable chore. His friends had gone with Salin to meet with the humans. He couldn't face the brothel. He'd intruded on Diana too much.

A knock sounded at his door.

"Come in."

The door opened, spilling in light from the corridor. A small head with closely cropped white hair popped through the crack. "Jarak?"

"What is it, Brevin?"

"Da's back and he's asking for you."

Jarak sat up, looking at Salin's son. "Where is he?"

Jarak thought it slightly odd that Salin called him to the main tower and not to either Savous's tower or to the enclave where his own suites were. But if the commander wanted him, he'd come. With any luck, Salin would send him somewhere so he could take his mind off of *her*. Two seasons had not lessened his attraction to her, not when he thought of her every day.

Brevin led him to a room on the third floor and knocked.

"Come," said Salin's voice from within.

Brevin opened the door and moved aside for Jarak to precede him. Jarak stepped into the main room of a bedroom suite, and the world faded away. With a screech and a patter of booted feet, he suddenly had his arms full of the most welcome weight he could have imagined. "Marisol?" he breathed.

"Jarak," she moaned, pressing her curvy little body to him, wiggling in his arms in an effort to get closer. "Oh, Jarak."

"Marisol, what are you doing here?"

"I had to come back." She pulled away only enough to reach up and cup his jaw in her small hands. She searched his face with those amazing blue eyes. "I missed you so much."

He would have responded, but she cut off his words with her lips. Failing to respond to her kiss was not an option that he could consider. A groan vibrated in his chest as he opened to her, plunging into the delicious cavern of her mouth, stroking her tongue with his. Awareness spun down to the taste of her mouth, the heat of her skin through the tunic covering her back and the curve of her ass where he cupped it in order to press her groin more firmly to his.

He heard Savous's voice as though from far away. "I think you might be right."

Gradually, he remembered that there were others in the room and realized they were talking. Confusion superseded desire. Reluctantly, he pried his lips from Marisol's so he could look over her shoulder. He couldn't quite make his hands release her.

Salin, Rhicard, Savous, and Irin were in the room, watching them. He glanced from one to the other and saw thoughtfulness. Happiness. No anger.

He looked down at Marisol, who was devouring him with her eyes. Her hands stroked his jaw, his temples, his neck. "Why are you here?"

"I asked to come back."

"Why?"

"I love you."

He heard Irin's muffled "Oh" but couldn't look away from the woman in his arms. He shook his head. "No, Sol, you shouldn't say that."

"But it's true. I couldn't think of anything but you since I left."

He frowned. The same had been true for him. He turned the frown up to Savous and Rhicard. "How could this be?"

From his seat on a plush covered stool, Savous shrugged, an indulgent smile on his lips. "I haven't a clue. But if this isn't a truematch, I don't know what is."

"You know that for sure?"

Savous glanced up at Rhicard, who frowned. "No. I tried to see if I could tell on our way through the forest, but I couldn't because she's still human." He laughed. "But there's one sure way to find out."

He shook his head, even though his fingers dug into her back as he hugged her close. “Goddess, Marisol, you should go away. Live your life. We don’t know that we’re truemated.”

“But we could be. I’ll be happy to take that chance.” She tucked her head into his neck, wrapping her arms securely around his neck. Her fingers tugged gently at the ends of his hair. “Even if it’s not, I’ll be happy with you for nine days.”

Nine days. Even that paltry sum seemed like the most welcome beacon from the heavens.

“Right, then,” Savous said. Jarak peeked up over Marisol’s abundant curls to see Savous standing. “We’ll leave you alone to get started.” Smiling, he indicated the room. “You can stay here.” He nodded at the boy who stood quietly by the door. “Brevin’s been assigned to look in on you.” He turned to Rhicard with a knowing tilt of his head. “I take it you’ll do the honors of the change spell?”

“With pleasure.”

Jarak’s head spun. This was all going too fast. “Wait.”

Salin stepped up, slapping his shoulder. “No waiting, man. I know what a truematch is like. The longer you wait, the more painful it is. And you’ve waited long enough.”

He stared up at his mentor’s deep red eyes. “But, Commander...”

“No buts. Take a chance, boy. She’s willing.” He winked. “Besides, I have a good feeling about this.”

He gaped. Salin’s instincts were near legendary. “Really?”

“Yes.” Salin stepped past them, opening the door. “Be sure to send word to Diana as soon as you know,” he tossed over his shoulder. “She’ll kill you if you don’t.” He paused to ruffle his son’s hair, then left.

Irin’s arms came around both Jarak and Marisol, her cheek pressed to Marisol’s. “I’m so happy for you! Even if...” She shook her head. “No. I won’t think that way.” She grinned at Jarak and kissed his cheek briefly. “Be happy.”

Grinning, Savous slapped his shoulder as he followed his truemate out the door.

Brevin closed it behind them.

“Now then,” said Rhicard, heading for the open bedroom door to the right. “How do you want to do this?”

Jarak met Marisol’s laughing gaze.

“Are you all right?” she asked, blue eyes dancing with mirth.

His cock ached where it was pressed tightly to her belly. His head spun. “I don’t know. Am I dreaming?”

“If you are, please don’t wake up. And don’t wake me up, either.”

He smiled. “You’re really here.”

"I'm really here."

"And you're willing to do this? Even if we're not true-mated?"

"Yes. We can..." She shook her head, much like Irin had. "Let's not think about that. I want you. I've wanted you the entire time we've been apart. Please?"

"Are you two coming?"

Jarak held her close and kissed her again, ignoring Rhicard for a moment. Marisol was here. Marisol was in his arms and she wanted him.

So why was he standing by the door?

Unwilling to let her go, he instead reached down to cup the plump curves of her bottom and plucked her off her feet.

She squealed, wrapping her legs around his waist as he walked with her. He was glad she was wearing traveling trousers instead of skirts. It let her sex snug up against his as she rode him.

"Do you know how the change spell is set?" he asked, passing through the bedroom door.

"No."

He smiled, hearing the door snick softly shut behind him. "Do you have any objection to Rhicard touching you?"

Shyly, she glanced at the sorcerer as they passed him in the bedroom. He sat in a chair, peeling off his crimson boots.

A slight frown marred the creamy perfection of her forehead. "No. But I want you."

"Oh, you'll have me. But he has to touch you to set the spell."

"Oh." She pondered that as he set her down on the mattress. "Touch me how?"

"It's easiest to just explain that the spell is set at the height of orgasm," said Rhicard from his seat.

Her eyes went wide. "Really?" She glanced from Rhicard to Jarak. "So...?"

Jarak shrugged out of his vest, letting all of his molten desire for her show in his eyes. "Still want to do this?"

She licked her lips and switched her glance again. "Yes."

He sat on the edge of the bed, reaching for his boots. "That's my girl."

Giggling, Marisol reached for her own feet.

"Stop," Rhicard admonished, kneeling at the bedside before her. He held out a hand toward her foot. "Undressing you is one of the best parts."

"Oh?"

"Mmmm, yes," he said, loosening the laces across her calf.

Jarak was faster with his own footwear. Rhicard only had one of her feet bare when Jarak nudged up beside her, pressing his chest to her shoulder. She closed her eyes, nearly swooning at the heat and spicy-hot smell of him. Eagerly, she settled into his embrace as he lay at her side. "If any of this makes you uncomfortable, just say the word," he murmured into her ear.

She reached up to slide her fingers through the silky hair over his right ear. "As long as you're here, I'm fine."

"What a wonderful girl," Rhicard murmured, caressing both of her bare feet.

"Yes," said Jarak, nuzzling behind her ear. "She is."

Wonderful warm heat burbled up inside her. She let her eyes fall shut, the better to enjoy the sensation of one beautifully exotic man slowly massaging her feet while another traced her ear with his tongue. Her hand fell from Jarak's hair, and she let her fingers drift over his cheek and chin before dropping her hand to his thigh. His hand, meanwhile, toyed with the laces of her top, loosening them around her breasts.

Rhicard moved up to rub her calves, then her thighs, strong fingers digging into muscles that still ached a little from the arduous trip from the forest's edge. She felt his fingers creep up under the high hem of her tunic. Just as he found the ties to her trousers, Jarak freed her bodice and loosened the chemise beneath enough to dip his fingers in to pluck at a nipple.

Oh, yes! she thought. This was what she needed. No human lover could hope to match up to this kind of sensuality. It wasn't so much what they were doing, just that it was them. Or, rather, *him*. With Jarak beside her, his hard muscles pressed to her shoulder and his mouth teasing her ear and neck, she could happily melt away. She was more aroused during this little bit of foreplay than she had been during entire sessions with her human lovers. And they hadn't necessarily been bad lovers. Master Waeldiss had certainly been skilled. But he couldn't hope to match up. He didn't have the exotic quality that was embedded into the very bodies of the raedjour.

Rhicard made quick work of the ties at her waist and started to tug her trousers down. Jarak shifted. Looming over her, he smiled and kissed her while his fingers tugged to open more of her bodice.

She didn't mind that Rhicard saw her. It was exciting. The fact that the sorcerer soon had her bare from the waist down, with her tunic and short chemise shoved up over her belly, didn't upset her in the least. On the contrary, she squirmed, unable to keep still, knowing that those red eyes were watching her.

She heard a smack. "Up, Jarak," said Rhicard. "Let's get you naked for the lady."

Chuckling, Jarak drew back. "Sounds like a good idea," he said, eyes on her.

Eagerly, she propped up on her elbows as both men stood.

Rhicard was clearly hard in his own trousers, but he ignored his own state in favor of reaching for Jarak's belt.

"Just me?" Jarak asked, amused, holding his arms out while Rhicard worked at his buckle.

"Just you. You're the one she's been wanting for moons."

Jarak turned his head to look at her, those crystal blue eyes dark with lust. "You thought of me?"

Surprisingly turned on by the sight of a man undressing Jarak, she had to swallow and drag her gaze up to his to answer. "I thought of *nothing* but you."

His gaze raked her body, and she edged her thighs a little bit wider apart, exposing her wet, aching sex to him. It was terribly wanton, but he didn't seem to mind one bit.

She would have enjoyed watching him watch her, but she more enjoyed the sight revealed by Rhicard as he tugged open Jarak's trousers, then peeled them down his thighs. She sighed in appreciation of Jarak's lean hips and muscular thighs, but what made her squirm was the rampant, erect cock that sprang up and nearly slapped his belly. She moaned, rolling forward onto her knees, eager to get to that succulent treat. Chuckling, Rhicard backed off as she grabbed Jarak's hips, hauling him forward. She licked her lips, watching a drop of milky white seep from the opening at the tip of the smooth head of Jarak's cock.

"Do you like what you see?" Jarak murmured, fingers brushing through her hair.

"Very much." She wrapped one hand around the base. Her fingers barely met! Imagining all that sliding inside her had her pussy weeping. She lowered her head and swiped at the precum, lapping up the taste of him.

"You don't have to do this," Jarak mumbled.

"Oh, yes. I do." She slid him between her lips and deep into her mouth.

They both moaned. His fingers dug into her hair, holding her head where it was. Eagerly, she laved her tongue at the prominent veins underneath the shaft, swallowing around him.

She whimpered, annoyed when she thought Rhicard's hands on her shoulders intended to pull her away. She dug her fingers into Jarak's hips and sucked hard, intent on not letting go.

Rhicard chuckled. "Relax, sunny lady," he murmured, kissing the bare skin of her shoulder as his hands pushed her loose top down her arms. "I'm just trying to make you more comfortable."

That was all right, then. She allowed him to maneuver first one of her hands, then the other, letting him deal with the fabric as she suckled the meaty hardness within her mouth. The loose velvet skin around Jarak's cock moved with her lips, and exciting bursts of warm, dark flavor trickled down her throat.

“Ah, Goddess, Sol,” Jarak grumbled, fisting his hand in her hair. “You’ve got to stop, or I’ll spill in your mouth.”

She peeked up at him and let all of her longing shine in her eyes. By gripping his hips and encouraging him to pump into her mouth, she hoped she conveyed that his coming was exactly what she wanted.

He groaned, fingers tight in her hair. His other hand lay over hers on one of his hips, pressing her fingers against the muscles that worked as he rocked in and out of her mouth.

Blissfully happy despite the empty ache between her legs, Marisol relaxed and let him take her mouth. Sucking, licking, almost gagging when his thrusts lost their smooth rhythm and pushed too far. She loved it, gripping him, sucking him, until he shouted and filled her mouth and throat with smoky, hot, thick liquid. Eagerly she swallowed, but it was hopeless to try to get it all. Some dribbled out of the corner of her mouth.

She would have held on, would have kept suckling him, but he pushed her back. Hand still tight in her hair, he hauled her back, crawling over her as her back lowered to the mattress. His mouth took hers in a rough, possessive kiss, his tongue invading her mouth and sweeping out any lingering cum within. Groaning eagerly, she sucked his tongue, reaching up to clutch his strong arms.

Hands on her thighs confused her, until she remembered Rhicard. Without losing Jarak’s kiss, she obediently spread. Warm lips kissed the inside of one knee; then lips, tongue, and teeth blazed a wet, sizzling trail up toward her sex.

She had to break from Jarak’s kiss to breathe, just as her body had to squirm beneath the dual assault from the men. She stared blearily up at the ceiling, breathing hard, as Jarak bent his head to sample her throat. His teeth dug in, and she shuddered.

Rhicard’s breath gusted over her sex, his palms flat on the inside of her legs just under the juncture to her hips. He pressed her even wider and nuzzled the curls above her opening. As Jarak kissed his way down her throat, his hand plumping her breast, Rhicard’s thumbs parted her throbbing folds. When Jarak’s mouth closed over her nipple, Rhicard’s tongue swiped up from her opening to her clit, swirling around the latter.

She screamed. The combined weight of the two men was the only thing that kept her on the mattress. Her body was aflame with pulsing sensation, feeling warmer and more desperate than it ever had before. Rhicard feasted on her sex, tongue alternately probing and teasing that aching nubbin above it. Jarak pulled her nipple between his teeth, the small pain heightening the sensation when he sucked hard. Whimpering helplessly, Marisol thrashed her head from side to side. She braced her heels on the mattress, the better to shove her hips into Rhicard. The sorcerer rode her, rocking with her, relentless. Wordless cries and mangled begging spilled from her lips. She grabbed at Jarak’s back and neck, squeezing hard, holding on to him for dear life as her world exploded. Black stars detonated in her head, surging up from her chest, making every muscle in her body clench. She screamed at them to stop, but neither would, torturing her through her climax.

She collapsed on the bed, panting, eyes closed as she tried to recover.

Her nipple popped from Jarak's lips. "Is it done?"

Wet lips caressed Marisol's belly. "It's done." A sigh, and the hands on her thighs slid away. "She's yours."

She cried out softly when Jarak manhandled her hips, turning her in the bed. She managed to get her eyes open as he cupped his hands beneath her ass, pulling her closer. When she saw that his cock was again erect and full, the exhaustion from her climax drained away. Eagerly, she pushed up on her elbows, trying to help him position her.

"You're welcome to stay."

Confused, she looked up to see Jarak looking to the side. *Rhicard*.

She glanced at the sorcerer, who was grinning down at them from where he now stood beside the bed. "Yes."

He laughed. "No. I think I'll let the two of you enjoy one another. You've waited long enough." He turned, palming the prominent bulge in his pants with a sigh. "I'll check back on you later. Perhaps, if you're still willing, I'll stay then."

She watched him go, feeling a twinge of guilt. He'd helped to bring her to the most amazing climax of her life, and yet he was leaving unsatisfied.

A dark shadow looming over her regained her attention. She turned back as Jarak's black hand reached down to cup her chin. He thumbed her bottom lip, regarding her with narrowed eyes, his grin full of promise. "We'll make it up to him later. It's just you and me now."

Guilt evaporated, stored away for another time. She clutched his arms. "Yes!"

He sat back, and she willingly draped one leg over his elbow. He pulled the other straight against his chest so that her calf rode his shoulder.

"Marisol," he breathed, reaching down to nudge her sex with his cock.

Her head fell back at the sheer joy of feeling him where she wanted him. Rhicard's attentions had primed her, but the very notion that she was about to have Jarak fully made her skin sizzle. Her hips rocked. "Jarak, please."

"Yes." He surged inside in one long thrust, and she gasped at the sheer white-hot lightning that shot from her sex to her brain. Jarak froze above her, head thrown back, a groan torn from his chest. "Goddess, Sol!"

"Jarak!"

Slowly, he rocked his hips, dragging that gorgeous, thick rod through her channel.

She bore down on him, anxious to feel the friction of every bit of his length.

He tried to stay slow, pulling out and pushing in with frustrating calm. She tried to match him, wanting to draw out the agonizing pleasure as much as he. But their bodies wouldn't obey for long. Gritting his teeth, he let her leg fall from his shoulder and leaned in.



She gasped, the new position allowing him to rub more firmly against that exciting spot just inside of her. Soon, he had to unhook her other leg from his elbow and shift his legs out from under them so that he could lean farther forward. When he was in reach, she clutched his shoulders, then his neck, drawing him down until he was flush atop her, a most welcome weight.

“Fuck me,” she whispered against his lips, using a word she had only learned in the last season.

He groaned, hands clutching her shoulders from where his arms crossed beneath her back. “Goddess, Sol.”

His body took over, disallowing any more slowness. He shoved into her, and she pushed up to meet him with force. Lips hovering close, breath mingling, their bodies rocked in perfect harmony, each move of one spurring the pleasure of the other.

“Jarak!” she cried, panicked. “I’m...oh, Goddess!” She screamed as her flesh again contracted, forcing her to shaking stillness as her channel gripped him.

He groaned, pushing into her, fucking her through the stillness of her shaking climax. Before she collapsed, he screamed through his teeth, thrusting raggedly as he poured into her body.

Epilogue

Rhicard knocked on the door.

The soft patter of feet on wooden floor preceded the door opening. The short, slim frame of a young woman stood there, her long, abundant white hair pulled back from the shining black skin of her face. She smiled, red eyes twinkling. "Hello, Rhicard!"

He returned her smile. "Hello, Eyrhaen. Is your da here?"

"Yes." She stepped back, pulling the door wider as she did. "Da, Rhicard's here to see you."

He stepped into the workroom. Rhicard had never been there when Savous's father, Valanth, the former rhaeja, had ruled. He'd heard stories since, of course, of the unknown vetriese Valanth had created above the large firepit in the center of the room. Tales of the women he'd tortured and finally killed in an effort to restore his long-dead truemate's soul in another body. It was rumored to be a dark and haunted place, and he knew Savous had avoided it.

It seemed that time was past. A cheery fire crackled in the center of the firepit, occupying a ring of stones set in the center rather than the entire ten-foot-wide circle. A half-dozen sconces were mounted at even intervals along the walls, supporting fat candles that helped to brightly illuminate the windowless space. Two large bookcases were filled with hide-bound books, scrolls, and various pieces of magical and historical paraphernalia.

Savous stood at a table set before a third, half-filled bookcase, rummaging through a pile of objects and scrolls. He looked up as Eyrhaen closed the door. "Ah, Rhicard. What news?"

Eyrhaen rushed past him toward her father, the knee-length skirt of her simple blue dress fluttering behind her.

A negligible weight pressed against Rhicard's leg and he looked down, then bent to pick up a fat, gray-striped cat. He carried the purring feline with him as he rounded the fireplace, following Eyrhaen. "They're true mates."

Savous paused, open scroll in his hand as he turned to beam at Rhicard. "Truly?"

Rhicard laughed, licking his lips. He'd just come from testing Marisol on her ninth night with Jarak. The blessed couple had even invited him to stay with them to celebrate the news. His muscles were still marvelously achy. "No doubt."

Eyrhaen clapped her hands, squealing softly. "That's *wonderful*."

Savous shared Rhicard's laugh. "It is. Irin will be pleased. Eyrhaen, why don't you go downstairs and tell her."

The girl looked at her father, a brow arched. "Are you going to talk about something that I shouldn't know?"

Savous grimaced at her. "No." He reached over to smooth a wayward lock of hair from her round face. "But I'm sure your ma would love to know this as soon as possible."

The girl weighed his words carefully, then smiled. "All right." She bounced to his side, grabbing his arm to pull him down so she could kiss his cheek. "I'll be right back," she told him before scampering across the room and out the door.

Rhicard watched her. "It's true. Little girls are different from little boys."

"They are," Savous assured him.

A wealth of words went unsaid between them. Because of her young age, the raedjour had yet to know what her presence would mean to them. By Savous and his council's decree, she was to be guarded carefully but otherwise given as happy a childhood as they could provide. Everyone knew the true test would come when she reached sexual maturity. But that was at least a century away.

Savous held out the scroll to Rhicard. "Have a look at this."

Rhicard looked. It was a map. A dark mass on the right side was labeled in a language he barely recognized. But he knew one word: *forest*. "Is that new?" The parchment was barely cracked at the edges.

"It is. A gift from our new friend Master Waeldiss."

"Things are going well?"

"It seems. One of Dreiden's men arrived with this earlier tonight. Master Waeldiss sends word that he can procure another from the east, as well."

Rhicard scratched the cat's head. "Remind me to thank Hyle." The younger sorcerer had offered to take his place escorting the caravan so Rhicard could return to the city with Marisol. At least one sorcerer had to accompany the caravan, if for nothing else than to keep the sexual urges of both humans and raedjour at bay.

Savous waved a hand. “No doubt he’s enjoyed himself. He’ll return with any information he could have possibly gleaned from Master Waeldiss. I spoke to Gala. She understands.” He chuckled. “Although she’s a bit miffed that *she* can’t go travel with the caravan.”

Rhicard smiled, dropping the cat gently at his feet. He fingered the map Savous continued to study. “Times continue to change,” he murmured.

Savous stilled. “Indeed.” He reached up to pat Rhicard’s arm. “Let us hope we can survive it.”

 THE END 

Jet Mykles

Jet's been writing sex stories back as far as junior high. Back then, the stories involved her favorite pop icons of the time but she soon extended beyond that realm into making up characters of her own. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now occasionally uses this art to illustrate her stories, or her stories to expand upon her art.

In real life, Jet is a self-proclaimed hermit, living in southern California with her life partner. She has a bachelor's degree in acting, but her loathing of auditions has kept her out of the limelight. So she turned to computers and currently works in product management for a software company, because even in real life, she can't help but want to create something out of nothing.