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Kirsten Saell

Dedication

To my mom and dad, for believing in me; to my kids for motivating me; and to my husband for putting up with having an obsessive, pajama-clad writer for a wife.

Chapter One

Gil sat in his usual booth at the Whore's Crown Pub, his favorite hussy, Viera, perched on the edge of the bench beside him. Though a fixture in the tavern, Viera was not the whore immortalized in the name of the establishment. Said dame, her crown of tin and glass beads listing atop her graying head of red hair, tended bar at the end nearest the fire. The nipple of one generous breast peeked above the lace of her *décolletage* like a wan sunrise. Aliannet had been famous in her day, a pampered toy of the city Reeve, but time had not been kind to her—nor yet to this tavern she had purchased ten years ago with the last of her dwindling wealth.

The ceiling beams sagged under the weight of the more respectable shops at street level, and the air was always cloying, even in the depths of a northern winter. At the back of the room, furthest the door, a fire burned cheerfully—indeed, it was the one thing that could be said to be cheerful at the moment. Winter did not tend toward merriment in the wharf district of Belthalas. Those with money were far outnumbered by those in search of it, and any with the wisdom the god gave them chose not to brave the bitter weather just to have their purses cut. A mere handful of patrons were in evidence tonight, sweating and drinking and trying not to talk to one another. Aliannet was mostly pouring for herself. As Gil watched, she took a swig from an inattentive customer's tankard, her crown teetering on its perch and threatening to topple.

Gil lived just upstairs, and Viera knew he had money, which was the main reason she was here. Gil always had money. Rat, who did not share in Gil's fiscal comfort, sat across from him, scowling down at the drak board between them, his close-set eyes narrowed in concentration. The greater part of Rat's red tiles lay in a pile on the scarred and stained surface of the table, having been removed from play by Gil's black ones.

A small stack of coins, mostly copper, sat to the other side of the board—as much as Gil deemed Rat could afford to lose. At the moment, Gil was three moves from victory.

There was no way Rat could salvage the game. He knew it, and had embarked on that last-ditch effort of losers the world over—stall until the bar closes, and then call it a draw.

Gil turned his attention from Rat's predicament to Viera's upthrust bosom, displayed so nicely mere inches from his face. She noted his change of focus and altered her posture, arching her back slightly to give him a better view. With a smile, he dipped one finger into her cleavage and pulled her bodice down. She giggled with practiced allure. Gil's other hand had wended its way down to her knee, rucking her skirt up and venturing underneath. She didn't play coy. She never did. He'd fucked her here in this room—on this table, in fact—on one of the busiest nights of last summer while the rest of the company cheered and called advice. Her pussy that night had been wetter than it had ever been, before or since. Now, as his fingers trailed up her inner thigh, she spread her legs so wide there could be no question in the minds of the other customers, had they been paying attention. Gil's cock began to strain against the buttons of his trousers.

He fingered her folds, finding them swollen and wet. She moaned and bit her lip, pushing her hips forward to bring his thumb up against her clit, and began to gyrate. Jerking her bodice further down, Gil tongued her nipples one at a time, then began to nip at them with his teeth. She mewled like a kitten, her fingers threaded through his hair, holding his face to her breasts. With a grin, he pushed three fingers into her channel, delighting in her breathless squeal of pleasure. His thumb kept up a steady rhythm on her clit until, in no time at all, he felt her pussy melt all over his hand, her inner muscles clenching and her juices flooding into his palm.

He leaned back and smiled down at her. Her face was flushed, her eyes glazed over as she hopefully scanned the faces in the room for someone—anyone—who might have seen her coming. Disappointed, she sagged against the back of the bench, but made sure her tits remained on display for the company, advertisement for her wares on sale.

Made for this business, was Viera. She didn't demure when Gil took her by the shoulder and nudged her down onto the floor under the table. Rat jerked as she bumped him, lifting his gaze momentarily to glower at Gil, but slid sideways on his bench without comment and returned his attention to his disastrous game board. Gil eased forward in his

seat, grinning with anticipation. Viera's nimble fingers unfastened the buttons of his trousers and a moment later her mouth was on his cock, sucking hard, her tongue swirling around and around the head. He shoved both hands into her hair and pushed her head down, until the tip of his shaft hit the back of her throat.

Gods, she was good at this, her tongue lapping and flicking with a delicious combination of practiced expertise and natural hedonism. It only turned him on more that she so obviously enjoyed her work. Even as she massaged his balls, cupping and rubbing and scratching lightly with her nails, he could feel her grinding her sex down on the top of his boot. Greedy wench! At the thought, his balls cinched up higher and the head of his cock swelled against the back of her throat. Clenching his jaw on a groan, he came in her mouth, shooting his seed down her eager throat, holding her head fast so her lower lip remained pressed against his balls until every last drop had spilled.

He looked down at her face peeking up at him from under the table. She grinned, her face-paint streaked with reflexive tears and her lips spattered with his come. He glanced over at Aliannet to find her watching with a degree of interest not precisely suited to a woman of her advanced years. Gil wondered absently just which of the men in the bar would be enlisted to purge the old woman's piqued lust tonight. He never actually heard any screams but hers emanating from the other side of his sitting room wall, but he did occasionally detect furtive footsteps descending the stairs afterward. He supposed she had a right. She was old, certainly, but not dead.

Libido and boredom both appeased, Gil scooped up the stack of coins from the table and slipped them down Viera's bodice. With a giggle, she emerged from her hiding place and kissed his cheek, then sauntered to the bar to try and drum up a little more business from the men there. Gil's attention returned to Rat to find him glaring indignantly. Or, as indignantly as possible when one possessed the facial aspects of a rodent.

"You can't honestly believe you were going to win that money, old boy," Gil laughed.

"That's beside the point." With exaggerated dignity, Rat flicked his fingers in the direction of the bar, catching Aliannet's attention and pointing meaningfully at his empty glass.

Aliannet, ever dutiful, abandoned her latest reluctant conquest and hustled over with bottle in hand to decant a generous measure of brandy into Rat's glass. Grabbing her wrist, Gil smiled up at her, noting how she flushed at the contact. "Leave the bottle," he said quietly.

"Certainly, Gil," she slurred, already half-drunk on her own merchandise. "Let me know when y'want supper." Her impressive hips swayed as she strolled back to the bar.

Gil grinned at Rat. "Another game?"

"What the hell." With a fatalistic shrug, Rat grabbed up a handful of his red tiles and started laying them out on the board. "Fucking nothing else to do."

Gil glanced up over the rim of his glass as the door at the top of the stairs slammed open, admitting a blast of frigid air and a swirl of snow. A young man ducked in under the low lintel, bundled tight against the cold. He jerked the door shut behind him before anyone could protest the draft, and stomped down the rickety steps to dislodge the crusted snow from his boots. Shoving back his hood, he exposed a head of lank blond hair half-covered by a knotted rag, and a face too young and innocent for surroundings such as these. He swept off his cloak, shaking the snow from its folds, and hung it on a hook near the bar. All he wore beneath was a thin, dirty linen shirt and loose, wool trousers that had seen better days. It was a wonder he wasn't frozen stiff.

He walked directly to the empty pair of overstuffed chairs before the fire and sat down.

Gil scowled. Those chairs were empty for a reason. The reason was that they belonged to Gil. He'd moved them down here when it became clear he spent more time at the Crown than he did in his own sitting room.

The entire company was staring with unconcealed interest at this newcomer, who had not thus far bestowed even a passing glance upon any man—or woman—in the place. For some reason, this annoyed the hell out of Gil. Certainly, most of the men here

weren't worth a moment's scrutiny, but Gil was used to drawing eyes. He had presence. He had looks. He had the kind of charisma that made him seem dashing, even when one knew how many men he'd killed and maimed. Women wanted him. Most men—those who didn't also want him—feared or envied him. No one simply disregarded him.

To Gil's further irritation, Viera had fixed her sights on the little upstart. Tossing back a shot of absinthe purchased with what she'd just earned from Gil, she tugged her bodice a notch lower than was decent and crossed to the chair opposite the youth. Smiling seductively, she leaned back in the seat and spread her legs wide, propping one knee on the arm of the chair, her calves showing above the tops of her boots as she hiked her skirts up.

The boy stared at her, eyes narrowed slightly, the ghost of a smile playing about his lips. Taking this as encouragement, Viera dipped a hand into her bodice and pinched one nipple, her other hand pressing against her pussy through the threadbare velvet of her skirt. "Ten coppers a fuck," she said softly, "but new customers get half-price the first time."

The boy grinned.

Gil rose and stalked to the chairs—*his* chairs, by god—and nudged Viera sharply with his boot. "Get up!"

She scrambled to her feet and scooted away from him, taking up a position beside the infant's chair. Somewhat mollified by her hasty retreat, Gil sank into the seat she had just vacated and aimed a tight smile at the newcomer. "No offense, but I doubt you'd know what to do with her."

The boy's grin hardened, and he reached back with one hand, sliding it under Viera's skirt and up her leg. "Are you her husband, or her pimp? Because that's the only reason I can think of that it's any of your business."

Gil felt his face draining of blood. Aliannet, seeing his expression change, bustled up and wagged a fat finger at him. "I don't want none of that in here, Gil, understand? You want to teach this puppy a lesson, you do it outside."

"Actually," the boy interjected, sobering, though his hand did not cease its upward slide under Viera's skirt, "if you would bring Master Gil a glass of his favored drink, I find I have some business to discuss with him." Fishing in his pocket with his free hand, the boy produced a gold falcon and tossed it to Aliannet. She fumbled it in her surprise at its value, then quickly recovered, snatched it from the air, and shoved it down her bodice.

"The Sylphaean brandy," Gil instructed her, his mood changing with the glint of gold and the mention of business. He had several high profile patrons who gave him steady work in return for decent retainers—the city constabulary and the Reeve's office among them—but he certainly wasn't above a freelance job now and then to pad his purse a little. Winter tended to be a season of prolonged inactivity for an Emissary. Gil had been idle long enough to look forward to something to do. "Two glasses," he added on an afterthought as Aliannet departed for the storeroom where she kept her better quality liquor.

Turning back to the boy, Gil was torn between amusement and irritation at the sight of Viera panting and flushed, one hand splayed across her breasts and the other clutching the back of the chair, while the boy's fingers visibly worked between her legs under her skirt. Gil watched her face transform as she came, and noted peevishly how much more she enjoyed it this time, with every eye in the room on her. Afterwards, she went as limp as a wet rag and staggered off to the bar, not even bothering to press the boy for some coin. No wonder she was broke so often—she liked her job too much.

The boy wiped his wet fingers on his trouser leg, and took the glass Aliannet offered him. Lifting it to his lips, he breathed deep through his nostrils of the brandy's fumes, but didn't drink. Gil took a long sip, relishing the burn as it hit his stomach. He let his gaze travel the length of the tavern, and those it touched deliberately and wisely sought diversion in places other than the pair of chairs at the hearth.

Gil cleared his throat. "Business," he prompted politely.

Fishing in his other pocket, the boy brought forth a small purse of coins. He tossed it casually to Gil, who was surprised by the weight for its size. Opening the ties and

glancing inside, he confirmed his suspicions—all gold coin. A fortune, in fact. Three months of fat living, with plenty left over.

He scowled. Something stunk. He stared at the boy, his eyes narrowed, and pulled the ties of the purse tight again. He'd been in this business too long to be blindly seduced by a juicy payday. No one ever paid this much for a legitimate job.

"Covert?" he asked flatly.

The boy shook his head. "A duel. Everything fair and above board."

Gil frowned. Duels never paid so well, unless...

"Exhibition, or-"

"To the death. No advance. That purse is yours upon completion. No fee will be paid for anything less."

Oh, this was just *so* not right. "I don't do duels, unless the opponent is a skilled swordsman. I'm not in this to embarrass some fop and then cut his throat."

The boy smiled darkly. "Would it help to know that I have offered this job to two other men of your profession?"

"Offered?" Gil asked, his heart doing an odd flop in his chest. "Or contracted?"

The boy's eyes dropped to his lap. "Hard to fulfill a contract with a dead man," he said at last. "I will say that many have tried to kill this mark, and none thus far have come close. I came to Belthalas seeking an assassin. I was told that Gil al-Moirae was the best of them."

"I am," Gil said with the certainty that comes with perfect confidence. "But a duel is not an assassination. It's a spectacle. There needs to be a genuine grievance to provide a pretext. Without that pretext, it's merely a public murder, and I'm not interested in putting my neck in a noose. What guarantee do I have that I won't end up in prison over this, or worse?"

"Every man in this room has heard my terms," the boy said softly. "Every man in this room is a witness in your defense. If you fail, you will die—this much I am willing to promise. If you succeed, though, there will not be one soul who will question your role in this transaction, or have cause to seek redress." "And how can you be so sure?"

The boy tossed back his brandy, his nostrils flaring in appreciation as the liquid burned his throat. His eyes, when he opened them, were glazed with liquor and an odd, feverish glow. "Because, like you, I'm an Emissary of Davnia. And the man I want you to kill is me."

Chapter Two

"I don't think I heard you correctly," Gil said softly.

The youth leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "I want you to kill me."

Gil tossed the purse back to the boy, who snatched it neatly from the air. "If you're looking to prove yourself with some exercise in ego, go somewhere else. I'm not interested."

The boy's gray eyes were hooded and smoldering as if from opium under the stained linen rag that covered his head. "I'm looking to die."

"So cut your own throat, like everybody else does," said Rat, standing at Gil's shoulder.

The boy's gaze dropped to his lap. "I've tried," he said at last. "I have. It seems I am cursed by an overblown instinct for self-preservation. It's stupid, really. I've sent so many to her, yet I cannot summon the courage to send myself."

Gil scowled at him, stymied. Stupid wasn't the word for this situation. Crazy was a better fit, but even that lacked a certain nuance of the absurd. "Just how many *have* you sent to the goddess?"

The boy pointed to his left ear, which boasted eleven gold hoop earrings running from the lobe all the way around the crest. "One for every lethal contract I have carried out." He tilted his head so that Gil could see the four diamond studs in his right earlobe, so small they had to be genuine. "These were not for money, but for my own honor, and for justice."

Not crazy, thought Gil. *Surreal*. There wasn't a chance in hell that this *puppy* could have acquired such an impressive portfolio at his age. He couldn't be more than eighteen, for the love of god! And he was claiming fifteen kills?

"This, of course, does not include the two professionals I employed in this present endeavor, who were unequal to the task."

Seventeen then. Seventeen kills. Gil himself had only half again as many, and he'd been in this business for nearly ten years.

"Were they also contracted for duels?" he asked, wondering why he was even still talking to this lying pup. He ought to have gone back to his game with Rat the moment the boy had named himself as the mark. But there was just something so odd in the youth's glittering gray gaze, something alien and unreal. It was so long since Gil had been intrigued by anything, yet this boy had his heart pounding like a fool's. For a moment, Gil wondered if there might be something sexual in it. He'd experimented plenty with partners both highborn and low, and though he'd never found himself actually attracted to another man, one memorable incident years ago had him considering the possibility now.

The boy shook his head no. "I had a proxy handle the contracts. The Emissaries weren't told who was paying for the job. They came at me the way I would have—a knife in an alley late at night, crawling in my window while I slept. I tried not to fight back, but..."

Gil nodded. If this boy had the kind of training he was beginning to suspect, defending himself would have been instinctive. "The body wants what it wants," he said softly. "So this is your new plan, is it? Straight money for a straight duel."

"I can see now that they failed because they didn't know it was me who'd arranged the contracts. Or that I knew they would be coming. And they didn't know I was one of their own."

Gil snorted. "They didn't know you for an Emissary? Forgive me, but I'm fairly certain I'm acquainted with every man in this city who shares my profession. I find it hard to believe the men you hired would not have known you, by reputation at least."

The boy dropped his gaze. "I had not been...active in this business for almost two years. I met a girl on a job. She didn't...approve of my work."

The boy spoke so coldly, but his fingers were clenched together in his lap, the knuckles white.

Gil felt an odd twist in his stomach. "So," he said, clearing his throat and shifting in his seat. "I know the who. Now all you need to tell me is the why. Why do you want yourself dead?"

It was a moment before the boy gave any indication that he'd heard the question. When he looked up at last his face was carefully blank, his eyes glittering but dry. Slowly he leaned across the small space that separated them, until his lips were inches from Gil's ear. As he spoke, his breath stirred the hair at Gil's temple, raising tiny pebbles on the skin along his spine.

"Three months after we were wed," the youth said, his voice flat and emotionless and pitched for Gil's ear alone, "four drunk, bored young noblemen broke down the door of our cottage. My weapons were put away in the attic. I never thought I would need them again. Worse, I had let myself get soft. Slow. One of them got behind me. When I came to, I was bound hand to foot, lying so close to Rhianna I could feel..." he faltered, recovered, "I could feel the heat from her skin on mine. It was clear she'd tried to fight them off. She was in worse shape than I was. They were taking turns...I screamed at them, begged, offered them every penny we had. They just laughed and beat me until I blacked out."

The boy leaned back and turned his face to Gil's, still close enough for his breath to fan Gil's bearded cheeks. His expression was blank and impersonal, as if he spoke of nothing, a night's lackluster entertainment or the price of a meal, but Gil couldn't seem to get his heart to slow down. The boy's eyes locked onto his.

"When I woke again, they were gone, and my wife was dead. They had left two pennies on the floor between us. As if she was a whore." His gaze went hard, his face draining of all color. "Six months later, when I was well enough, I tracked them down, one by one. And for all the many long, painful, final hours of their lives, I made them regret that they had ever come to my cottage."

The boy leaned back in his seat and turned his eyes to the fire. Gil watched him very deliberately unclench the hands that were clamped together in his lap, and lay them along the tops of his thighs.

Four noblemen. Four diamond studs. Despite the steadiness of the boy's voice and the stillness of his face, Gil felt an unfamiliar pang. He'd never been the sentimental type, but he thought he understood now why this boy was so determined to die he was willing to pay for it.

"The nobility live in a different universe from us, boy. If they caught you, they'd call what you did murder. They'd put your neck in a noose, and save us all a deal of trouble."

The boy shrugged. "I've been on the run since summer. I don't intend to let them take me. A noose is no fit end for one of us—you know that. Nor do I wish to go screaming in chains at the mercy of a rapist's vengeful kin. I'd as well die on the blade of an equal."

Gil nodded. "Then I suppose you might as well die on mine."

"You can't be serious!" Rat snapped, startling Gil with his vehemence. "The only thing you know about this boy is that he's not right in the head. His entire story could be a lie."

"And what if it is?" Gil countered calmly. "His gold is real enough." He turned back to the boy, who was still staring into the fire as if he saw absolution in the flames. "When?"

The boy didn't smile, but sighed as if a weight had lifted. He turned his eyes back to Gil's face, and the moisture that had been missing before was in them now. "No time like the present."

Gil stood, wondering why he suddenly felt on the verge of tears himself. He brushed his unusually damp hands on his trouser legs and forced his mind back to business. "Have you a blade?"

"In my cloak," the boy said, rising. "I...I want to thank you. Whatever happens."

Gil nodded and swallowed around the sudden tightness in his throat. "Have you a name to put on your grave marker?"

The boy smiled with half his mouth. "Best I go nameless. It will be as if I never existed."

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"All right. My sword is upstairs. I'll meet you on the street out front. The ground there is fairly decent."

"As you wish," the boy replied, taking down his cloak and settling it on his shoulders.

Chapter Three

There was already quite a crowd gathered in front of the tavern entrance by the time Gil came around from the back of the building, where the outer staircase led to the apartments above. Aliannet herself had abandoned her post behind the bar to officiate this unusual event. Rat stood with his arms crossed over his threadbare jacket, slapping his shoulders to keep his circulation going. Viera had appropriated some drunk's coat, but she had it half-wrapped about him as well, to compensate. He didn't look unhappy—he was probably too drunk to feel the cold.

And cold it was.

Gil had put on a good wool coat. A cloak was out of the question, of course, as was a scarf, but he had gloves, and a knit cap pulled low onto his brow. His beard—short though it was—kept the worst of the wind off his face.

The boy had only the rag that was carelessly wrapped around his crown and a pair of worn leather gloves. His cloak hung loose on his shoulders, but with the wind this strong, he would certainly remove it before the duel. He didn't shiver, though he had to be freezing. He was calm, reserved, merely waiting.

As Gil approached, Aliannet stepped into the center of the crowd, her jowly chin quivering in the frigid air. In the glare of the hissing street lamp, her cheeks carried an unnatural flush.

"Tonight we witness a fight to the death," she announced with the self-importance of those who live to hijack events greater than themselves. "These two men meet in combat with the sure knowledge only one will survive. To the victor—this purse of gold falcons." She held said purse aloft, and Gil found himself wondering if she had removed any of the coins yet. "To the vanquished—only death. Before Davnia the terms have been spoken. The fight will begin when you are ready, gentlemen."

She stepped back into the fringes of the gathering, her arms folded beneath her enormous breasts, her shawl drawn tight around her. Gil moved into the center of the ring of spectators. The boy followed suit, slipping his cloak from his shoulders and tossing it to Viera with a wink. She grinned and gave the drunk his coat back, shrugging into the boy's cloak. The boy held a scabbarded sword with a carved ivory hilt. A beautiful piece, Gil judged with a twinge of envy. Gil's own blade was a serviceable dueling sword with a leather-wrapped hilt—nothing special, but a well-balanced weapon that had done justice by him all these years. He'd never had to worry about anyone wanting to steal it, either.

The boy pulled his blade free and held it ready. The wind tore at the thin linen of his shirt, but it was as if he didn't even feel it. He was stoic, standing uncloaked in snow up to his calves without even a tremor in his arm to betray human weakness. Gil was normally a man who pressed any advantage fate chose to give him, but somehow, with what was at stake here, he was having a hard time remaining ruthless. Clenching his jaw at his own stupidity, he unbuttoned his coat and shrugged out of it, handing it to Rat who gratefully pulled it on. The freezing wind stabbed at Gil's unprotected torso. He shrugged. No matter—exertion would warm him momentarily.

The boy just waited. Watched. His arm held perfectly still. Gil liked to hold back at first—to let his opponent expend a little energy and expose some weakness—before he started fighting in earnest. This would be different. The boy would not be making the first move tonight, but that didn't mean he would be easy to beat.

The body wants what it wants. Gil's old sword-master had told him that eight years ago, as he lay dying of an inflammation of his pancreas. It clings to life as long as it can, without concern for pain or weariness. Without concern for the spirit's desires. This boy wanted to die. Between his training and simple human nature, he could not accomplish it without Gil's help. Gil had killed twenty-six men in his time—most of them hardened criminals. A few had simply been unfortunate enough to be deemed inconvenient by the local government. Regrettable, but it was part of the life he'd chosen. You hardened your heart and did what you were paid to do.

There was no reason that this time should be any different.

Pulling his blade free, he tossed his scabbard onto the snow-covered ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rat dart forward and pick it up. Setting his jaw, Gil raised his sword and brought it down in a tight arc toward the boy's shoulder, a first, tentative move. Parried, easily. Another lunge, another parry. With a smile, Gil launched into a series of moves he had drilled and drilled until the very muscles of his arm remembered them. The boy blocked, parried and danced to the left with the effortless grace of an acrobat, his head ducking within a finger's width of Gil's blade. And somehow, amid Gil's dramatic flourish, the youth's sword insinuated itself inside Gil's guard, and nicked his left bicep.

A murmur erupted from those watching. Any who'd had prior occasion to see Gil fight were marveling that an opponent could have touched him so quickly. Gil wasn't marveling, nor was he particularly surprised. This boy knew what he was doing, and then some.

A trickle of blood warmed Gil's arm, then froze on his skin. He lifted his sword-tip to his forehead in acknowledgement. The boy nodded. No smugness. Just the studied hyper-alertness of a thing hunted and hunting at the same time.

All right. No more play. Gil might feel sorry for this young man, but he was by no means prepared to lose to him. With a tight grin, he redoubled his attack, ignoring the cold and the ache that built in his elbow and shoulder as his blade was met, time after time. The boy matched him swing for swing, but Gil's greater size pushed him back by degrees to the edges of the crowd. Out of prudence, the spectators parted to allow the duelists onto the unpacked ground in the middle of the street, where the snow drifted up to their knees. In short order, Gil's boots were full, and the boy's could hardly be less so.

Gil continued to press his advantage, slamming his sword onto his opponent's finer blade, pushing him further and further into the deepest patches of snow. And then, with a series of moves that took Gil completely off guard, the boy dove under Gil's arcing sword and rolled twice in the snow, to spring to his feet back within the circle of watchers. His entire body was completely caked with white and he had begun to shiver at

last, but he had the better ground. With impatient swipes of his forearm, he cleared the worst of the snow from his face, knocking his headcloth off in the process. The wind immediately snatched at his damp blond hair and plastered it to his skin.

Shit. *Shit.* The timing of that dive was absolutely flawless—anything less than perfection would have resulted in a fatal cut. By god, this boy was an artist! Gil was seriously beginning to wonder if he would survive this duel. It was a rare feeling, and one not indulged lightly. He'd always known there would be someone better someday— Emissaries of his ilk did not usually live much past thirty-five or forty—but to be outmatched by this puppy? Rat had been right. Gil should never have let himself get drawn in by this fucking boy's story. Now he was stuck. He had accepted the terms. If he backed out at this point it would get around. His patrons would drop him like a hot brick, and there wouldn't be any more to take their place. His reputation would be worth shit. Less than shit.

His vision narrowing, he squared his shoulders and trudged back to the ring. The boy backed away and let him in, an extravagant courtesy. Not what Gil would have done, but there was no arrogance in the youth's face. Just wariness and the unmistakable beginnings of hypothermia. His teeth were chattering—he was probably soaked to the skin under that crust of snow. His eyelids had started to droop as his strength leeched away along with his body heat, but his sword was perfectly poised.

Gil crushed down the pity he couldn't afford to feel. Swept his blade up in a wide arc intended to provoke overcompensation. The boy was too cold and too weary to see it for the trap it was. Took too broad a step to the right, and couldn't quite bring his blade up to block Gil's backswing. The crowd oohed at the blood that flowered on the young man's sleeve, staining the snow that still clung to it. A good cut, clean and deep, to his forearm—more importantly, his sword arm.

With a muttered curse, the boy switched hands, hefting the blade in his left with unexpected proficiency. Blood dripped down onto the packed snow at his feet, but he ignored the wound and held his injured arm out behind him for balance. He smiled fiercely. "Come on, then!" he hissed.

With a salute, Gil obliged him, launching into an attack that should have hammered a weakened opponent to his knees. The boy, left-handed, parried and blocked like mad, heedless of the life that was now pouring out of his right arm. Sustained a second cut to his shoulder. Not severe—indeed, he didn't seem to have felt it. Was strong enough still to begin a complex assault of his own, all the more lethal because he fought with his left. His blade sliced a razor-cut along Gil's collarbone, just shy of his throat. A gasp rose and fell, but Gil wasn't listening anymore. Heedless of the sting at his throat, he stabbed in at an opening, waited for the parry, then hammered his left fist into the boy's face.

Between the blow, his weariness and the uneven footing, the boy went down, his sword tumbling from his numb grasp. Gil kicked it out of reach and moved to stand over him.

Gray eyes, filled with tears, met his. Dirty blond hair fanned out like a halo around a face already turning blue from the cold. His head lay at an odd angle, the fine cords of his neck standing out. At the sight, something clenched in Gil's gut, nagging at his memory. He glanced up at Viera where she stood with her hand at her mouth, a stricken expression on her normally amiable face. A memory of her with the boy's hand up her skirt. And the boy himself...that nagging sense from the very beginning that something just wasn't right.

"Do it," the boy whispered. "Send me to her."

Gil's cock had been hard, watching the boy bring Viera off. The boy's had not.

"Do it!" the boy hissed, his chest heaving with the beginnings of real panic.

Gil shook his head with wonder. His eyes raked up and down the youth's prone body—lean muscles, small feet, delicate hands, no throat-knot. The eyes, now pouring tears, only confirmed it.

"Fucking bitch," he said softly, tossing his blade into a snow bank.

Her face changed, became a mask of anguish. "No! *No*! It was agreed! Do it! You fucking bastard, do what you promised! *Do what you fucking promised*!"

The crowd had started to mutter in shock and glee, titillated by this bizarre turn of events. Gil turned to Rat, whose eyes looked like they might drop out of their sockets at any moment. "Help me get her inside."

"You fucking promised!" she shrieked, rolling to one side and dragging herself toward her sword.

"I don't kill women," Gil said coldly, stooping to retrieve her sword. Not sure why he was so unbelievably angry.

She grabbed his boot, tried to haul herself up his leg, hammering weakly at him with her fist. Furious, he shook her off, his boot-heel connecting solidly with her temple. She fell back in the snow, unconscious.

He turned back to Rat. "I said help me get her inside. And Aliannet," he added, addressing the flabbergasted barmaid, "I want water heated for a bath. We have to get her warm, or she'll die."

"I may be entirely out of line here," Rat said, "but isn't that what she wanted? To die?"

"*I said get her inside!*" Gil roared, tossing the sword aside and kneeling to grab the girl under her arms. With obvious reluctance, Rat took her feet, and between the two of them, they manhandled her dead weight to the stairs in the alley. The crowd hustled back into the warmth of the tavern, babbling with excitement. Aliannet was already inside, getting water on the boil if she knew what was good for her.

As they hauled the girl into Gil's apartment and settled her on the bed, Rat glanced up at him. "What are you doing, Gil?"

"She wants to die?" Gil shouted, more than a little unnerved by the anger he still felt. "I might just grant her wish. But I'm not going to let her get away with playing me! That fucking bitch picked the wrong mark. When she wakes up, I'll make sure she realizes that."

"Gil—"

"Make yourself useful, Rat. Go get some fucking bandages."

Rat stood for a moment, visibly measuring the wisdom of continuing the conversation, then shrugged and went to the door.

"Get some clean rags and brandy while you're down there," Gil said quietly.

Rat nodded and pulled the door shut after him.

Chapter Four

Lianon woke to a wonderful sense of warmth. The light was muted, firelight filtered through her closed eyelids and her naked body was enveloped by the softest fabric. Her breasts were unbound for the first time in forever. Did that mean it was done, then? Was this the realm of the dead? Tears welled and she heard a low moan issue from her own throat. She opened her eyes to see flickering firelight splintered by a dazzling haze of moisture, and let her eyelids drift shut once more. Stretching languidly, she encountered the warm softness of skin. As she slid her hand along the contours, she found a breast. The nipple peaked under her touch, and Lianon heard a soft sigh.

God, Rhianna?

Limbs shifted. A series of whimpering sighs as Lianon continued to tease Rhianna's nipple. Joy kindled in her heart, spreading outward until she thought she would burst. Easing up onto one elbow, she took the tip of Rhianna's breast in her mouth, suckling and lapping delicately. Her hand slid down Rhianna's ribcage and belly to find her pussy wet and swollen.

"Oh, god, I missed you," Lianon said as her lips sought out the other woman's. "I missed you so much!"

Her tongue dipped and darted at Rhianna's lips, and she felt her heart expand as her wife's tongue coiled around hers. God, she was so sweet, so beautiful, so feminine it was almost a crime. Rhianna's arms enclosed her, stroking up her back, raking gently with her nails, tiny little mewls of pleasure escaping her throat. Lianon's fingers slid inside Rhianna's sheath, massaging the walls of her pussy while her thumb rubbed back and forth across her clit. Rhianna's back arched and she cried out in delight as she came, her muscles clenching around Lianon's fingers as if trying to milk them.

Lying back down with a weak sigh, Lianon opened her eyes, blinking away the blurry, painful halo that distorted her vision and feeling the cobwebs in her mind

dissolve. As the reality of her surroundings set in, she frowned in confusion. She did not know this place, but she was reasonably certain that the realm of the dead would not boast such tattered curtains. Her frown deepened as the memories came trickling back—the tavern, the duel, Gil al-Moirae standing over her, realization dawning in his gaze.

Lianon's eyes lowered reluctantly to the woman beside her. The whore from the tavern gazed dreamily back, a lazy smile curling her lips, her ruddy brown hair tousled on the pillow.

No. Oh, god.

"What are you doing in this bed?" Lianon demanded, her voice cracking. Her heart was cracking as well, shattering into razor-sharp shards that seemed to tear at her insides. "What are you doing here?"

The whore reached for her, her expression a sickening combination of desire and pity. "Tell me how to please you, miss. I've never been with a woman before. Tell me what to do."

Lianon shrank back, torn between grief and lingering arousal. "What are you doing here?"

"Gil had me lie with you to keep you warm."

Gil al-Moirae. *Son of a bitch.* She could still hear the coldness in his voice as he told his friend to help him carry her back inside. He hated her. She'd seen it in his face as he stared down on her in the snow. Well, she hated him, too, the dishonorable whoreson. She hated him with everything she had left.

"Where are my clothes?" she asked, terrified by the tremor in her voice. Was she finally breaking, now, after all this time? Would she let Gil destroy her, when those four noble pieces of shit hadn't been able to?

The whore sat up in the bed, arching her back to display her heavy breasts, running a hand over them and down to the curls between her legs. "Please, miss, just tell me what you want."

"*I want my wife!*" Lianon choked, her eyes blurring. "Give her to me if you can! If not, then go to hell. Now where are my clothes?"

The whore scrambled naked to her feet, putting herself between Lianon and the door. "Miss! You can't go! Gil will kill me if I let you get away!"

"Really," Lianon heard herself saying harshly, throwing back the covers, ignoring the pain in her forearm. "I thought Gil al-Moirae didn't kill women." The room lurched as she tried her feet, but she spotted her clothes laid out neatly on a chair by the window and staggered over to them. Freshly laundered. How fucking gallant. Her hands shaking, she drew on her trousers and tied them at her waist, endeavoring to disregard the nausea that threatened, and the way the room had begun to spin. Her shirt was mended—the stitches tiny and elegant—but the blood had not completely come out. She pulled it on over her head, trying not to jar the bandage on her forearm.

The naked whore just stood there, wringing her hands, unashamed of her nakedness. Looking at her body, Lianon didn't blame her. She had nothing at all to be ashamed of. Yet. The life would eventually destroy her, though. Her breasts would sag, her ass would fall and her waist would fill in. This would happen whether she bore children or not. But here and now, she had the body of a goddess, and a face not far behind. For a brief moment, Lianon wondered what it might be like to take such a woman. To claim her, and be claimed by her. If there could ever be healing enough to allow that. But then Rhianna's face intruded, turning desire to grief.

"Do you know where my sword is?"

The whore shook her head, then turned, horrified, to the door.

Lianon had no idea what the other woman saw there to so frighten her. Her own eyes weren't behaving altogether properly. Three beds converged and diverged in front of her, and her head was suddenly pounding. The room tilted, and her stomach rose to her throat. The floor seemed to be coming up at her, and she flailed desperately at a bedpost for support.

"Go." Gil's voice, rough with emotion. "Get out, now!"

In the narrowing, spinning periphery of her vision, Lianon saw the whore gather up her gown and leave, the garment clutched to her breasts. Lianon's befuddled eyes found

the window again, but it was too far to offer escape even if her limbs were on speaking terms with her brain.

And then there were arms around her, hands cupping her elbows, pulling her against the hard wall of a man's chest. Gil's voice, his breath, right next to her ear, thick as if with pain. "Shhh, easy now. I won't hurt you. Here. Lie down."

She sobbed, her heart breaking. Couldn't believe the sounds she heard were coming from her own throat. She just let him pull her back to the bed. Let her head come to rest on his chest, as if there was any comfort to be found there. Let him hold her like a lover until she slipped gratefully back into unconsciousness.

Chapter Five

Gil sat on his less than comfortable wooden chair and stared at the woman in his bed, an unwelcome tightness in his chest. She slept like the dead, only the occasional sigh telling him she lived at all. When he'd walked in the door, she'd reminded him so much of Samara that for a moment, his heart had stopped beating. Shaking his head now, he acknowledged the two women looked nothing alike—different coloring, different faces, different figures. But the wobbly, stumbling gait, the blind reaching for something anything—to anchor to, the sweat and the shaking and the pallor were identical. With this woman, it was grief, blood loss and exhaustion. With Samara, it had been opium.

He was still surprised at the tenderness that had overcome him tonight—an emotion that had played no part in his final encounter with Samara. But knowing what had come of his anger five years ago, the sight of this staggering woman on the verge of fainting had evoked something protective and gentle in him, awakened a part of himself he hardly recognized.

With a scowl, he reminded himself how furious he was with her, even as he was forced to acknowledge that that very anger was rooted in what had happened to Samara. Gil didn't kill women. Not for money or honor. Not with a blade.

He killed them for anger, and for jealousy. He killed them with his disregard.

He looked down at the pouch of gold coins he held, weighing them in his hand. He had sworn before the goddess five years ago never to harm a woman again. Because of this bitch's lies, he had nearly broken that vow.

His dinner sat on the little table beside him. A stew of pigeon, leeks and parsnips that was quickly going cold, with half a loaf of black bread beside. He was starving, but the thought of actually eating anything made his stomach churn in protest.

He wondered how on earth he could have ever believed this woman's disguise. Even with the bruises he'd put on her face, she was beautiful. Not soft and rounded, like the

women he usually found himself attracted to, but chiseled and angular, her chin pointed, her nose long and straight with gently flaring nostrils. Her cheekbones were high and cleanly carved, her eyes gorgeous in a distant, otherworldly way. But her mouth—now there was softness. Her lips were lush and pink, the upper as full as the lower, and deeply cleft in the center like a painted heart. He thought a Darjhina might look like her—pale and beautiful, but ice cold and hard at the same time, like cut crystal.

Her body, too, was lean and sculpted, with little spare flesh. Her breasts were almost nonexistent, but as he had discovered while undressing her and warming her in the bathtub, this only made her hard little nipples seem more delightfully prominent. His cock had stiffened from the mere brush of one against the back of his hand.

It was stiffening again, remembering. With a muttered curse, he forced his thoughts away from her body and concentrated on the betrayal he'd felt at the realization that she had nearly duped him into breaking his word to the goddess. On what price he might exact from her in return for her offense.

It was late—long past middle-night. His candle was beginning to gutter. He thought about lying beside her on the bed on top of the blankets, but he didn't want to sleep. He wanted to be awake when she finally came to.

He waited a long time. The lazy winter sun was its own width into a crystalline blue sky when she finally stirred. He watched as she opened her eyes and sat up, frowning at her surroundings, trying to remember where she was and why. She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them as if for comfort. It took a moment for her to notice him in the chair.

When she did, her eyes flinched away from his face.

Sneering, he tossed the bag of coins to her. She snatched it easily from the air, but held it with as much enthusiasm as if it were a dead rat.

"You should keep it," she whispered.

"I don't want your fucking money. Besides, you'll need it for the next dupe you seduce with your lies."

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"It wasn't lies," she said, her fingers tightening around the purse.

He looked her up and down, not hiding his disdain. "The evidence of my eyes tells me otherwise."

Her gaze flicked to his face, then away.

"What would you have done if I'd refused gold for the job?" he asked, rising to sneer down at her. "Fucked me for it?" To Gil's dismay, his cock began to stiffen at the mention of it. "Because if you're willing to bargain..."

She turned her face to the wall. "Gil al-Moirae doesn't kill women."

"Oh, I don't know," he said silkily, leaning down so his face was inches from hers. His heart was hammering with arousal and anger and something contemptible he didn't want to admit he felt. "If someone were to provide the right motivation..."

She glared at him, her eyes glittering with hate. Her hands went to the ties at the neck of her shirt, pulling them loose. His gaze dropped to the distinct outlines of her nipples through the linen and his mouth went dry.

"So do it, then," she said flatly, her voice as seductive as a physician conducting an examination. "If that's what it takes."

His cock was as hard as an ion spike, but he forced a cool tone. "I'd rather fuck a snake."

Her eyes darted down to his crotch, then back to his face. Her lip curled derisively at one corner. "The evidence of my eyes tells me otherwise."

His vision darkened and heat flooded his face. Before he realized what he was doing, one of his hands was around her throat and he was pressing her back against the pillow. She reached up to pry his fingers loose, twisting under his weight, but she was still weak from loss of blood. Her face was white, her eyes angry and frightened at the same time. If anything, his cock got harder.

He stared down at her mouth and had an insane urge to kiss her. Wondered what would happen. Would she struggle all the harder, or melt in his embrace?

For some reason, he wasn't ready to see her do either.

Snarling, he let go of her throat and took hold of her shirt, ripping the worn fabric right off of her. Ignoring her shrieks of protest, he threw back the blankets and dragged her trousers off, too, cursing as her kicking foot connected with his jaw. In under a minute, she was completely nude.

She sat up on the mattress, bruised and bandaged, her face flushed and her hair a mess, not even trying to cover her nakedness. She glowered up at him as if she was a queen and he was the lowest creature on earth. Standing beside the bed with what was left of her clothing in his hands, he felt oddly light, his blood rushing in his ears. God, with her hair in total disarray and her color so high, she was fucking glorious.

"Go ahead," she whispered, her voice dripping with loathing. "Get it over with."

He let his gaze travel down across her small, high breasts, sleek torso and demurely closed legs—her body was so lean, yet gently rounded in all the right places. For a moment, he actually considered taking what she offered, a moment that threatened to stretch to forever when she deliberately opened her legs to give him an unobstructed view of her pussy. He couldn't drag his gaze away from the folds of delicate, pink flesh obscured by her thatch of dark blonde curls. He wondered if she was wet. Some women liked sex rough, he knew. Samara had always enjoyed it most just after a fight.

At the thought of his former lover his libido died, his erection shriveling. His fists tightened, crumpling the girl's clothes, and before even he realized his intent, he had turned and thrown them into the fire.

"What the hell are you doing?" the girl shrieked, half-rising.

He wheeled on her, freezing her where she perched on the edge of the mattress. "Just in case you're entertaining any ideas of leaving," he snapped, watching with satisfaction as her face paled. "That's right, sweetheart. You're stuck here until I decide whether I should go against my principles and kill you, or call the city constables to do it for me."

"Don't take long deciding," she said coldly. "I'll cut your throat if you give me half the chance."

He grinned, heading for the door. "Darling, you're welcome to try."

"Where are you going?" she demanded, gathering up the blankets in front of her.

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He paused at the entrance to the main room, turning with one hand on the doorknob to look at her. "To get you some breakfast, sweetness," he laughed, enjoying her annoyance at the endearment. "Can't have you starving, now, can I?"

Before she could come up with a suitable reply, he slammed the door behind him, turned the key in the lock and left it there. If she was crazy enough to hire someone to kill her, who knew whether she was crazy enough to head down to Aliannet's stark naked? Best to be safe.

Lianon heard the key turn in the lock and muttered a curse under her breath. In the outer room, Gil had begun to whistle with exaggerated cheer. Fucking bastard. Lianon's heart still pounded, but her panic was receding fast and she shivered as the sweat started to dry on her skin. Now that her clothes had completely burned, the fire died back to embers. Carefully she rose to add more wood. She teetered a little on her feet, but managed not to fall.

Oh god, what the hell was she thinking? Baiting him was one thing, offering herself up to him quite another—especially when her own flesh seemed so eager to betray her. *The body wants what it wants.* Salgrim help her, it seemed that, for whatever reason, her body wanted Gil al-Moirae. She didn't need to touch herself to know she was wet between her legs.

She tossed another couple of pieces of wood on, poked them into place, then walked as quietly as possible to the door and pressed her ear against it. She heard Gil moving about in the sitting room, preparing to go out, then the louder noise of his booted footfalls receding, muffled further by the closing of a second door. A moment later, she heard him descend the outer stair just outside the window.

She sagged against the panels, relief washing over her in waves. Salgrim's blood, what a mess this had turned into! She looked down at her body, at the unfamiliar sight of her uncovered breasts, seeing them as Gil had obviously seen them. Pictured her sex spread wide open for his gaze. Had she really done that? Was she that desperate, that reckless? Her face heated, the memory raising gooseflesh all along her limbs. What he'd

said—*I'd rather fuck a snake*. Not remotely true, if the bulge in his trousers was any indication. And seeing it, Lianon, who hadn't had the slightest interest in sex since Rhianna died, had felt her pussy turn liquid.

She closed her eyes, but his face was there waiting, too handsome, too smug. He had the looks and confidence to guarantee a steady stream of female flesh in the direction of his bed. It had been so long since Lianon had even considered herself to be female she'd imagined herself immune.

But if she was honest enough to admit she desired him, she wasn't prepared to let him have his way with her. Not by rape. And not as part of some goddamn bargain. She would have fought him with everything she had.

Now that he was gone, though, she felt oddly empty—used up. And hungry. Really, truly, gnawingly hungry, for the first time in ages. For the first time since Rhianna died.

With a mental shake, Lianon pushed herself to her feet and made her wobbly way back to the bed. She thought about the last year, about how dead she'd been inside, even during those frenzied moments when she was fighting for her life. As if a pane of smudged glass stood between her and the rest of the world, dampening all she saw and heard and felt.

That glass had shattered the moment Gil saw her for what she was. The moment he'd seen she was a woman. And without the merciful haze of that shield in front of her, every moment his eyes were on her was like a physical touch, and every second he'd touched her was excruciating and exhilarating at the same time.

She could tell he wanted her, but that didn't mean he didn't hate her. She believed his threats—that he would as soon see her dead, even if not by his own hand. She believed them because men like him didn't make idle promises. They set goals and then set out to achieve them. If he was torn right now, it was because he couldn't decide if his desire was greater than his loathing. Eventually he'd figure it out, and she'd better be prepared, either way.

Crossing to the window, Lianon peeked out through a thin spot in the curtains. Outside, the world had come to life again after last night's snowstorm. Children ran in the

street throwing snowballs at each other, and frequently at passing adults, who responded with laughter or shaken fists. Gil stood across the way in the entrance of a bakery, talking to the man he'd been with at the tavern last night, the one he called Rat. An apt nickname, Lianon thought, with his eyes so close-set and his weak chin.

The bakery was busy at this time of day. Gil would be a while, even if he didn't talk long. With a renewed sense of purpose, Lianon left the window, crossed to the carpet before the fire and dropped to her knees. Her hands shook as she placed them shoulder width apart on the floor. She was sweating by the fifth push-up, her wounded arm burning. By the tenth, her vision was filling with tiny spots of light. After fifteen, blood was leeching through the tight-wrapped bandage on her forearm and she allowed herself the mercy of a break. Lying naked on her front before the now roaring fire, she let the sweat dry, then rolled onto her back and did thirty sit-ups. A quarter of her usual set of lunges, and she was utterly exhausted. Hardly able to drag herself back to bed, she pulled the blankets up around her shoulders.

If he didn't return soon, she'd get up and exercise more. There was no reason she had to let him keep his advantage. If he thought she would just lie here waiting in terror for his return, he was very much mistaken.

"Someone's looking for you," Rat informed him in lieu of a cheerful good-morning.

Gil gauged the other man's mood, then shrugged. "Let me buy you breakfast—you can tell me all about it."

Rat grinned, an unfortunate expression on his features. "If it's all the same, I'll take some coin. I find myself a bit short this morning."

Gil smiled and slipped a silver hart into Rat's palm. "So who's this someone?"

"Dalton something, from someplace down the Sylphae road. A bit touched in the head, judging by the little I saw of him. He's got money to pay, though. Gave me silver to let you know he's hiring."

Gil shook his head ruefully. "You greedy bastard, if he gave you a silver piece, why did I just give you one?"

Rat snorted. "I deserve something for the indignity of losing to you at drak last night while you got yourself sucked off under the table."

Gil laughed, mildly surprised after all that had happened that he still had the ability to do so. "So what's the job?"

Rat rolled his eyes. "Justice and righteous vengeance against the villain who killed his son, blah, blah, blah. I stopped listening halfway through. Said he followed the killer here all the way from Sylphae. Now he wants him taken out, slow and painful. He's looking for an artist."

Gil frowned and shook his head. "I think I'll pass," he said. "Torture's not my thing, and grief-stricken relatives don't make the best clients. Their sense of vengeance tends to make them offer more than they can afford to pay."

"He seemed rich enough for what he's offering." Rat tapped his temple with a gloved finger. "Just not quite right up here."

"So what'd you tell him?"

"I said you sometimes make a habit of taking dinner at Heffie's. Figured I'd keep him far enough from the neighborhood that you'd be able to avoid him if you want."

"I appreciate that. Sure you won't have a couple of biscuits?"

Rat pretended to ponder, then shrugged and preceded Gil into the bakery. "Well, now that you mention it, I am a little peckish. Just one or two, though. I don't want to take advantage of your friendship, after all."

With considerable difficulty, Gil maintained a perfectly straight face. "Why, I'd never think such a thing."

Still fighting a grin, Gil stood in the sizable lineup for *jaffha* and steaming biscuits, his mouth flooding with saliva and his stomach snarling like a ravening wolf at the delightful smells of bread and bacon. Tray in hand, he turned to find Rat already seated at a window table across from Viera. She was halfway through a stack of fried cakes drizzled in honey. Both of Rat's silver coins were in plain view, dancing across his knuckles, crossing and recrossing each other. Viera was smiling at Rat with a predatory air that would have sent a hungry bear running for cover.

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Gil shook his head and dragged a chair over with the toe of his boot. "Morning, Viera love." He set the tray down on the little table and straddled his chair.

She smiled less avariciously at Gil and popped a small cake in her mouth. "Good day to you."

Rat took his cup of *jaffha* and drank deep, the coins still rolling in constant motion along the backs of his fingers. They tugged at Viera's eyes like a lodestone at metal, but she forced her gaze back to Gil's face.

"So how is the girl from last night?"

Suddenly Gil's biscuit didn't taste so good anymore. Viera's face showed nothing but concern for the lying Emissary, and none of the outrage or resentment he might have expected from one of his friends.

"Yes, Gil, how is she?" Rat chimed in, grinning from one ear to the other.

Bunch of fucking turncoats.

Gil stared at him with one brow up. His smile shriveling, Rat reached for a biscuit while Gil's largesse lasted.

"Awake." He shrugged, trying to seem ambivalent. "Displeased."

"Displeased. Huh." Rat snatched another biscuit and shoved it whole into his mouth while he had the chance. "Can't imagine why," he added, amid a shower of crumbs.

"She said something about wanting to cut my throat."

Rat snorted, reaching surreptitiously for one of Viera's cakes and receiving a smart slap to his fingers for the offense. "Sounds like she's just your type."

Much to Gil's satisfaction, Viera swatted him. "That's a terrible thing to say! I can't even imagine what that girl is feeling right now. What she must have been through to want to hire someone to kill her..."

Gil scowled. Damn women always stuck together. Last night, Viera had been all over him, ready for whatever he asked of her, and now she was consumed with sisterly concern for a woman who'd shown herself to be a lying scam artist as well as an admitted murderer. Viera had no idea who they were dealing with. Two minutes in the same room with that little hell-spawn, and she'd be singing a different tune. Hmm.

He reached over and grabbed one of Viera's fried cakes—and noted with a touch of smugness that she didn't smack *his* fingers. It practically melted on his tongue, dissolving in a burst of honeyed sweetness. "Viera, darling. I was wondering if you might do me the smallest favor..."

Chapter Six

Lianon awoke to a knock at the door.

She sat up, blinking. "You left the key in the lock," she called, finishing with a muttered "idiot," under her breath.

"Miss?" It was the whore, not Gil. "May I come in?"

"What do you want?"

"I've brought breakfast for you."

He sent the whore. He actually sent the *whore*. Fucking coward.

Lianon gathered the sheets around her shoulders. "Might as well come in."

The whore entered the room as if it were a lion's den, her head down and her eyes on the floor. The tray she carried sent a delightful aroma before it—warm, honey-glazed buns stuffed with something spicy and savory, and steaming *jaffha*—Kahlian, not Qaranican.

"Put it on the table," Lianon instructed when the girl hesitated. The whore set it down gingerly on the table next to the chair, then straightened and clasped her hands before her.

"I..." she began, pulling a bundle of wadded cloth from a pocket in her skirts. "I know Gil burned your clothes. I thought—well, it isn't right for you to have nothing. To wear, I mean."

Stepping forward, she handed the bundle to Lianon, who shook it out to reveal a silk camisole and a set of lacy drawers. Holding up the camisole, she glanced at her own small breasts, then up at the whore's considerably larger ones.

"They're bound to be a little big, miss, but they're the best I have." She turned to go. "He wouldn't let me give you anything more...modest."

"Thank you," Lianon said softly, something twisting inside. "Please," she added, looking at the mound of buns on the tray and the pot of *jaffha*. "There's more than enough for two. Why don't you stay?"

The whore hesitated, then closed the door, locked it and put the key down her bodice. Lianon stared at the other woman's round bosom peeking over the burgundy fabric, thinking it might be rather diverting trying to retrieve that key. The whore smiled a little unsteadily, her face much prettier without all the paint she was wearing last night. "All right. You get dressed, miss, and I'll pour."

Lianon pulled on the lacy undergarments, cinching the drawstrings tight. Even so, the neckline gaped and the leg openings billowed. She felt flouncy and ridiculous, but at least covered.

"Here." The whore handed her a mug of black *jaffha* and a wooden plate with two buns. Lianon set them next to her on the mattress. The whore cleared her throat. "I, um...my name's Viera."

Lianon smiled and took a bite. The bun was sweet, a tasty offset to the filling of minced pork, onion and chilies. So good, she thought she might die of pleasure. "I'm Lianon." She sipped some *jaffha* and passed the cup back to Viera. "Only the one mug, so we'll have to share."

"Um, thank you," Viera said, startled by the courtesy. She took a sip and nibbled nervously on a bun.

"I like your hair like that," Lianon said, trying to put her at ease. She thought she knew enough about the society of women to understand such compliments were always welcome. And indeed, braided and pinned to her crown, Viera's hair this morning was as presentable as anyone's, and her freshly washed face seemed younger than before. Her dress, too, was more modest than last night's—pretty rather than sleazy.

"I keep it braided during the day," she explained. "That way, it's nice and curly at night."

"So, how long have you—" Lianon stopped herself just before the "been fucking strangers for money?" part slipped out. "Um, how long have you been in this...line of work?"

"Seven years," Viera answered readily enough. "When I was fifteen, the boy next door talked me into doing some things I shouldn't have. When my parents found out, they put me out on the street. I had a choice between begging, honest work or, well...*this*. At least a whore can earn enough to live on."

"So is Gil your pimp, then?"

"What?" Viera giggled, one hand fluttering at her bodice. "God, no! I don't have a pimp. Gil's just my best customer, that's all."

Lianon lowered her eyes and kept her voice casual, wondering why her belly did an unpleasant little flip at that news. "Why's that?"

"He's generous. And not just with his money. He always makes sure I'm, um...satisfied first, before he takes his own pleasure."

Lianon smiled, picturing Viera as she had been last night in the tavern, her head thrown back, hands kneading her breasts and her pussy so wet her juices had started to run down Lianon's arm. "No offense, but you don't seem that hard to please."

Viera actually blushed. Who'd have thought?

"So, uh..." Viera said, flustered, "how long have you been living as a man?"

Now it was Lianon's turn to blush. She glanced uncomfortably down at the feminine undergarments she wore, unable to help but feel silly in them. "Since I was nine."

Viera's eyebrows rose. "That's a long time."

"Plague took my parents when I was seven. I was an only child, and we didn't have any relatives in Sylphae. They stuck me in an orphanage run by Salgrim's Maidens. Awful place. It wasn't even a year before I ran away. A gutter-gang of thieves and whores took me in. They kept me because I was good at begging, and taught me how to cut purses and palm merchandise from market stalls." She glanced up at Viera, then down again at her lap. "It didn't take long for me to realize the girls all ended up doing one thing. No matter how good they were at stealing or begging or watching lookout, they

always ended up selling their bodies. And the boys in the gang just used them as if it was their due, as if a girl was just a body. A thing, no better than an animal. That wasn't a life I wanted for myself. So I stole some boy's clothes from a wash line, cut my hair and joined another gang across town where they didn't know me. I made myself so useful, they never had cause to question who or what I was."

"So how did you end up as an Emissary of Davnia?"

Lianon smiled. "I was caught cutting purses by a Kurgan named Samulo. Kurgae'in have an over-inflated sense of honor. He made me give the purses back—it was so embarrassing. Then he took me on as a servant."

"And you agreed?"

Lianon laughed. "You don't say no to a Kurgan, Viera. They have a very convincing manner. And besides, he was...nice. He was the first person since my parents to give me anything without expecting something in return. My boy's clothes didn't fool him for a second. I think that's the reason he apprenticed me—because I was a girl. In Kurgan society, a woman has all the rights and opportunities a man does. There's no prostitution, no rape."

"I couldn't make a living in Kurgan society," Viera said wryly.

"In Kurgan society, your parents would never have thrown you out of the house for being human."

Viera thought about that, sipping from the mug of *jaffha*, then topped it up and handed it back to Lianon. "So why didn't you start living as a girl again?"

"Kurgan society in Sylphae extended to the garden wall of Samulo's house, and not an inch further. It was easier in the outside world to be male. Easier to train, easier to find work in my chosen field. In his house, though, I was a girl. A woman. And he showed me that being a woman didn't have to be a curse."

Viera glanced over at her through her lashes. "You were lovers?"

Lianon nodded. "When I was ready," she said, a strange warmth building inside her as she spoke. There was a certain comfort to be had from sharing such memories, she

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knew. She already felt closer to this woman than she had to anyone since Rhianna. "For three years. Right up until the day I met Rhianna and fell in love."

Viera leaned forward slightly, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "What was she like?"

The question came out of nowhere, and struck Lianon like a blind-side blow. She stared at her lap, her stomach threatening to eject the honey-bun she'd just eaten. "She was the most beautiful woman I've ever known. The most beautiful person." Her eyes were stinging, and she tried to blink the tears back, but it was no use. Furious at herself, she scrubbed at her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said softly, turning away. "I don't feel much like company anymore."

Viera stood, straightening her skirts, then gathered the empty dishes and lifted the tray. She paused at the door, turning back to Lianon with a strange, vulnerable expression on her unpainted face. "If Rhianna was so wonderful," she said finally, "I don't think she'd want you to be sad forever. I don't think she'd want you to die. I think she'd want you to heal. To have a life. To be happy again."

Lianon didn't answer. She couldn't speak past the knot of grief in her throat. With a sigh, the whore pulled the door shut behind her and turned the key in the lock.

Lianon stared at the blank panel of wood until it blurred with moisture. Viera was right. Of course she was right. But that didn't make what she said any more possible than it had been six months ago. There are some things you can't come back from. Some deeds you can't undo. Sur-Marus wasn't about to stop looking for her, just because living had regained some of its appeal.

Lianon had taken her vengeance against the men who killed Rhianna, had extracted it from them with their life's blood, drop by excruciating drop, until they didn't have strength or sanity left to scream. She'd been cold as ice, doing it, and colder still after.

She'd been numb for so long, she could hardly remember anything else. But now, since last night's debacle, feeling was seeping back into her like warm blood flowing painfully back into frost-bitten flesh. It was something she dreaded with everything left in her, but she had no idea how to stop it. Even now, as tears streamed down her face, as her

stomach knotted and twisted and writhed, as her throat squeezed shut over the pain, Rhianna's face swam before her mind's eye, indelible and agonizing.

Samulo had told her the same thing half a year ago that Viera had said just now—in nearly the same words. Had held her and whispered what he thought were comforting words, had kissed and caressed her and tried to bring her heart back to life. He had offered her his unconditional friendship and the solace of lovemaking to set her on a path of healing.

She had refused him—worse, she'd accused him of taking advantage of her grief. Had spurned his friendship with words that still brought a flush of shame to her face, and left Sylphae.

Now this...this *whore* was making the first tentative overtures of friendship, and everything in Lianon was telling her to run. To get out of here before what was left of the ice in her finally broke apart and melted. But she was trapped here, half-naked and locked up like a slave in a pen.

Rising, she deliberately slowed her breathing, counted to ten in her mind, muffled the panic beneath a layer of self-discipline. With a burgeoning sense of purpose, she began to search the room for anything that might facilitate her escape. A bed, a fireplace, a heavy chair and table, a washstand. Gil must have removed his chest to the outer room, along with any fireplace tools there might have been. He'd chosen a meal for her that didn't require utensils of any kind—there wasn't even a spoon to twist into a lock-pick, no stoneware dish that she could break into shards to use as a weapon. She might tie the sheets into a rope and climb out the window to the outer stair, but she couldn't go halfdressed, without even boots, for god's sake! The snow lay a foot deep outside, and showed no sign of melting anytime soon.

No, if she wanted to get out of here, she'd have to get to the sitting room first. Gil would have stowed her boots there, and he'd have extra clothes in his trunk. She might even find her sword.

Crossing to the door, she pressed against the wood with her fingers, testing it for weakness, dry-rot or cracks. For all that this place was a dump, the door and frame seemed sturdy enough. She might be able to break it down, but not until she had her strength back, and that might be another two or three days. And with the key still turned in the lock, she couldn't pick it, even if she had the proper tools.

Her eyes went to the basket of firewood next to the hearth. Some of the quarters there were pretty big, with decent heft. She smiled. Pictured what Gil's handsome face would look like after an encounter with a piece of seasoned oak.

Feeling much better, she went to the hearthrug, dropped to all fours and did some push-ups. She made it to fifty this time before dizziness convinced her to stop. Three sets of sit-ups and then some lunges. She was sweating and nauseous, but it felt good to get moving again.

A draft caressing the heated skin of her bare legs made her turn, and she froze midlunge.

Gil stood in the doorway, a wide grin splitting his face, his eyes raking her up and down.

She glared back, mortified at the sensation of her nipples pebbling. Just the draft, she insisted. Her stomach was fluttering. She told herself it was embarrassment.

"I came up to see if you were feeling better," he said, his voice a low purr that seemed to resonate in her flesh. "I'm guessing you are."

"Fuck you," she said coldly.

His grin widened, and his eyes fixed on her breasts, hardly concealed by the translucent silk clinging to her sweat-soaked body. "Is that a curse?" he asked, stepping inside and pulling the door shut. "Or an offer?"

God, she felt stripped naked under his gaze, and knowing what ridiculously little she wore wasn't helping. With difficulty, she resisted the impulse to dive for the bed and cover herself with the sheet. It would only amuse him. Turning to face him square, she pulled her shoulders back, standing straight and tall, ignoring how her nipples jutted. Only the heat that rose to her face betrayed her discomfiture.

"I thought I made that offer this morning," she said icily. "Does this mean you've grown the balls to take me up on it?"

His grin disappeared, replaced by a clenched coldness. He walked forward slowly, eyes glittering with anger, until he stood right in front of her. Her chest had begun to heave—panic or dread or excitement, or all three. He was staring at her chest, couldn't help but see how swift her breath was coming. One hand lifted, found her breast. It filled his palm perfectly. Lianon bit the inside of her cheek as his thumb flicked across her nipple through the thin silk. Her body responded of its own volition, her nipple peaking, a heaviness settling in her nether parts, her breath catching.

His other hand came up to rest on the side of her neck, his thumb caressing the sensitive spot behind her ear. Oh, god, what was he doing to her? Her heart was hammering, her face hot, her lungs suddenly starving for air. How could she be attracted to this man? How could her traitorous body have chosen *now* to come back to life?

His eyes had softened. Not a good thing at all. His anger she could deal with tenderness was another matter altogether. He leaned closer, his lips almost touching hers before they descended to her throat. At their first caress, her eyes drifted shut and her head fell back as a wave of languid warmth washed over her. He kissed her fluttering pulse-point, his tongue licking delicately, sending heat snaking down her torso to settle between her legs. He was still toying with her breast, gently pinching the nipple between his thumb and forefinger, twisting and tugging. God. *God.* She couldn't let him do this. She couldn't afford to feel this, to feel anything.

Her breath caught on a ragged sob, but she clamped down on it. Clamped down on herself. Forced words out of her mouth that she knew would get his attention.

"Don't forget your part of the bargain," she said unevenly, even as she cringed inside.

His hand stilled, his mouth ceased its caresses. "What?" She couldn't believe how much coldness he could inject into that one word.

"I let you fuck me, then you send me to the goddess. Clean and painless."

He stepped back, his gaze sweeping up and down her body, filled with contempt. "You're a piece of work, aren't you?" he snapped. "I'd call you a whore, but I wouldn't want to insult Viera."

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Her hand swung out before she realized it, connecting with his bearded cheek. A little surprised at herself for enjoying it so much, she raised her hand for another blow, but he snatched her wrist out of the air. "Let's get one thing straight," he hissed, his grip on her wrist tight enough to bruise. "We don't have any *deal*. If I ever decide to lower myself to fucking you, I'll do it."

She wet her lips, refusing to struggle in his grasp, knowing it would only make her look weak. Instead she forced her features to coldness. "Rape doesn't seem quite your style."

His eyes darkened, his smile half derision half lust. His free hand slipped between her thighs, one finger inching inside the leg-opening of her lacy drawers. She held herself perfectly rigid, refusing to respond, but her sopping pussy betrayed her. He lifted his wet finger to his lips, his nostrils flaring at the scent, before tasting her cream. "Oh," he said silkily, "it won't be rape, I assure you."

She glared at him, unable to think of anything to say. The scent of her arousal hovered between them and said it all. He only laughed at her dismay, and swaggered to the door. "I'll see you tonight," he promised with another laugh, before shutting her in.

She stared at the door and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming. That fucking son of a fucking bitch! Her hands were clenched at her sides, refusing to move to the places she really wanted them. Her nipples still protruded, aching for contact. Her cunt was so heavy and wet, she thought she could come just by squeezing her legs together.

Damn it, what was happening to her? She'd gone nearly a year without sex—without even *wanting* it. Now every nerve in her body was screaming to be fucked.

And by a man she hated. A man who went out of his way to shame her, who thought less of her than a whore. A man who would rather fuck a snake.

The body wants what it wants.

Well, Lianon was more than her body. Crossing to the tin washbasin, she took the cloth and scrubbed the wetness from between her legs, and washed his touch from her breasts.

Gil's final words echoed in her mind. I'll see you tonight.

Lianon's eyes drifted to the basket of wood, lingering on a hefty wedge of oak. Her lips curled in a vengeful smile. Let him come. When he did, he wouldn't know what hit him.

Chapter Seven

The crowd was out in full force after the events of the night before. Aliannet's was full well before the dinner hour, and by dark it was packed to its sagging rafters. Gil sat in his usual booth with Rat opposite, hemmed in by a sweating, gossiping horde. A drak board sat between them, as always, but for a change it was Rat who was winning. Four times in a row, as evidenced by the growing stack of copper on his side of the scarred wood tabletop.

Viera scooted onto the bench, and Gil slid over to make room. Leaning close, she took his arm and pressed her breasts against it, licking at his ear like a kitten lapping cream. Scowling at the drak board, he leaned away from her, shrugging off her attentions. God, did she ever think of anything but sex? She retreated with a pretty pout, but glancing over at her, Gil could see an uncustomary sheen in her eyes. With a sigh, he took a hart from his pocket and pressed it into her palm.

"Go get yourself a drink or eight, sweetness," he told her, slapping her thigh with forced playfulness.

Brightening, Viera kissed his cheek and made for the bar, and Gil returned his attention to the game.

Just in time to see Rat claim another of his pieces.

"Fuck me," Gil muttered under his breath.

Rat glanced up at him, one corner of his mouth quirking unforgivably. "Something bothering you?"

Gil shot him a look that should have had him withering.

"Somebody?" Rat prodded, his grin spreading to the other side of his face.

Gil had no reply—none that wouldn't be a complete fabrication. Goddamn it, what was wrong with him? He couldn't keep his mind on anything, couldn't even win a fucking game of drak against *Rat*. That witch upstairs was driving him crazy.

"Are you going to move?" Rat said, his lips twitching.

"Aliannet!" Gil shouted over the roar of the crowd, sliding one of his drak pieces into a suicidal position just to get the bloody game over with. "More brandy!"

As he searched the bar for Aliannet, his eyes fell on an easily recognizable, scarred and stubble-covered face. What the hell was Karl sur-Stanlic doing in this neighborhood? Especially in the Whore's Crown—Gil's favorite haunt. It was bad form for an Emissary to turn up in another's territory. Karl might not be exactly genius-material, but he'd know that much.

"Ho, Karl!" Gil called. The fellow Emissary turned and raised a beefy hand in greeting. "What brings you to this neck of the woods?" Gil asked, waving him over.

"Not much," Karl replied, collecting his tankard and heading over to Gil's booth. Rat obligingly scooted over and the burly newcomer folded his huge frame onto the bench. "Just took on a job. The mark needs a bit of sniffing out."

"Oh yeah?" Gil said absently, still trying to get Aliannet's attention. After some undignified flailing, he managed to signal his desire to the fat old bird, and she grabbed her brandy bottle and bustled over to fill his glass. "What job's that?"

Karl's eyes narrowed, his mouth thinning amid what seemed like acres of black whiskers. "You interested? I mean, I'm not looking to step on any toes here, but—"

Gil understood the other man's concern. No Emissary wanted to give details if there was a chance another wanted to steal the job. "Not professionally."

"Aye!" came a shout from beside them. Gil cringed as he recognized Brand sur-Anduar's strident tones. Apparently the idiot was mired in that most uncomfortable of states—too drunk to shut up, but not drunk enough to pass out. "Gil don't want your job," Brand went on with a lopsided grin. "He's got enough of a han'ful with the last one!"

There was a scattering of laughter at that from those near enough to hear. Karl glanced a question at Gil, who just shrugged, clamped his lips together, and pretended a keen interest in the drak board.

Karl smiled behind his hand, enjoying Gil's discomfiture way too much. "Oh, yeah? I heard there was some mischief out this way last night."

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Brand needed no further encouragement. With a confidence borne of about six tankards of Aliannet's best brown ale, he planted his fat ass on Gil's bench and nudged him over, sloshing beer all over the drak board. "So's this boy comes in here, see?" he began, leaning forward with the dramatic flair of a born raconteur.

Gil rolled his eyes. "Here we go."

"A real piece o' work," Brand went on, "all high and mighty and airs coming out of his arse as if his shite don't stink. He sits hisself down on Gil's chair as if he owns the fucking place, he does. And Viera, she just struts over there and starts hiking up her skirt for him, like she's gonna give it away for free."

He paused to take a long swig of beer, ignoring the rivulets that escaped his big fat mouth and ran down onto his filthy tunic. Gil leaned as far into the wall as he could without looking like a fucking doormat. He kept his eyes on the crowd and away from Karl's enthralled face.

"So then Gil comes up and says, 'Lookit, puppy, you wouldn't know what to do with a whore,' and then the boy just reaches up under Viera's skirt and makes her come right then and there!" Brand closed his eyes as if in memory, and sighed, one hand on his heart. "Ah, Viera, a sweeter slut there never was."

"Quite the charmer, then, this puppy," Karl laughed, his tankard hovering just below his twitching lips.

"Oh, you dunno the half of it, man!" Brand shouted on a laugh, warming to the attention of the quieting crowd. "So then the boy, he pulls out this bag of gold and says, 'I gots a job for you, Gil. I want you to kill this bloke in a fair duel.' Gil says, 'What guarantee do I have that the law won't come after me?' and the boy says, 'Cause the man I want you ta fight is me!'"

"No!" Karl exclaimed, slamming his tankard down, shocked at last. His eyes finally trapped Gil's, but Gil refused to add to the debacle by responding. He even managed not to flush.

"Oh, aye!" Brand insisted, with half the crowd rushing to vouch for his account, even though less than a tenth of them had actually been witness to the fiasco. "So then we all

go out front o' the place, and they fight, and you've never seen the like. The puppy touched Gil first! First, by god! You might have noticed the blood on the snow out front when you come in tonight, Master Karl, though I'm figuring it's mostly tracked away by now. Suffice it to say that blood was spilt, and that cut on our Gil's collar there weren't from nickin' hisself shavin', if you get my drift. Gave our Gil a run for his money, did that boy. It was touch and go there for a bit, touch and go. But finally our Gil gets the bastard on the ground and his sword away from him, and he's standin' over the boy readyin' hisself for the death blow. And then—"

Brand paused for effect. As if on cue, the crowd performed an extraordinary, collective leaning-in. Even Karl seemed utterly rapt by the drunken fool's account.

Gil stared at his brandy and caught himself lifting a hand to his face, as if he might still be able to smell her musk on his fingers. With a scowl, he clenched his fist and rested it on the table. His eyes met Rat's and the other man grinned unforgivably.

"And then," Brand said, "Gil says, 'Fucking bitch'."

Karl was silent a moment, then shook his head. "Yeah? So?"

"So the fucking bastard's really a chickadee!" Brand delivered the punch line with wild-eyed enthusiasm, slamming his tankard down with a dramatic flourish and bursting into peals of laughter.

Gil just sat and stared into his brandy, his face finally going hot, and tried to think of a way to extricate himself from this situation while maintaining some semblance of dignity. The laughter of the crowd broke over him in humiliating, infuriating waves, and he was hard pressed not to slam his glass of brandy straight into Brand's gaping, laughing, moronic face.

"A woman?" Karl said softly, once the hilarity of the gathering had ebbed.

"Aye, a woman!" Brand howled, clutching his belly as if it would split. "And he's had her up in his rooms ever since. Probably been sticking his 'sword' in her whenever he gets the chance! Not that I'd blame him, mind you. She made a pretty enough puppy, all right, and a prettier bitch, if you get my meaning."

"Oh, I think I do," Karl chuckled, staring into his tankard. The attention of the throng began to wander at last, and the audience went back to its gossip. Karl waved for another beer and cleared his throat. "So, what's she look like, this puppy?"

"Blonde," Brand replied. "Skinny, but not too skinny, if you get me. No tits to speak of, but she likely tied 'em tight against her. Legs that looked like they could ride a man but good. She'd a dozen hoops in one ear, four diamonds in t'other. Never seen nothin' like it."

"And she was wounded?"

"Bled half to death, I should think, and the other half froze solid," Brand confirmed. "Took a good cut to her sword-arm. But the bitch was just as canny with her left, rot her eyes."

Karl sat pondering for a moment, his frown deepening. Gil watched him from the corner of his eye. "So you took a job," Karl asked at last, "and then didn't follow through?"

There it was. The one humiliation that outweighed all the others. Gil shrugged, keeping his expression carefully neutral. "I don't kill women," he said. "I took a vow before the goddess that I never would. A contract is just words. A vow before the goddess means my soul. So no, I didn't follow through."

Karl poured the last of his tankard down his throat and handed it to Aliannet, taking the fresh one she brought. "Fair enough, I guess."

Gil met his gaze for the briefest moment, a glance of mutual respect. Karl knew what was what. A vow before Davnia took ultimate precedence in the lives of her Emissaries. Tossing back a good swallow of brandy, Gil shoved Brand off the bench. "Shit, Brand, a man's got to piss sometime."

Brand staggered to his feet, hefting his tankard to his mouth and wobbling off toward the bar for a refill. Gil rose and began to make his slow, agonizing way through the throng toward the stairs. Salgrim's bloody balls, didn't they all have something better to do? He stoutly ignored the attempts of others to snare his attention and mounted the rickety, wooden steps.

Outside it was fucking *cold*. Anyone with brains was indoors—only a scrawny, underage whore stood under one of the few street torches, waiting for someone drunk or bored enough to purchase her wares. Gil tromped over to her through an inch of fresh snow and tossed her a falcon. "Get inside before you freeze stiff," he said before she could offer her services. She looked at the coin as if she didn't trust her own eyes, sobbed a quick thank you, and hustled off down the street toward whatever hovel she claimed as her own. Gil smiled. She couldn't have earned that coin in a month on her back.

A moment later he shook his head. Who was he kidding? He hadn't spared her anything. Even if she managed to squirrel that coin away where her pimp couldn't find it, she'd probably be back on her corner in an hour. When he thought about it, his generosity would likely only cause problems for her. The moment anyone suspected she had that kind of money it would be taken from her. And if her pimp caught her holding out, it would earn her a beating, or worse.

This wasn't civilization. It was the street. Nothing changed here. The denizens of the wharf district lied, cheated, stole and whored their way through life, because that was their best chance of survival. The only ones with any sense of honor at all were the Emissaries.

The shuttered windows of the buildings seemed to sneer at him with heavy-lidded amusement, leaning together like mean old vagrants fending off the cold. This was a shitty neighborhood, filled mostly with shitty people, the buildings ill-made and falling over, the streets narrow and crooked. One of the nearby torches hissed and guttered and then went out—someone had stolen the oil. Again.

Gil sighed and trudged to the alley across the street then faced the wall, unbuttoning his trousers and sending a stream of steaming yellow against the bricks. Behind him, a group of drunks noisily left the tavern, and another gang materialized as if by providence from down the block to replace them.

Refastening his trousers, he wandered back toward the shop fronts that camouflaged the entrance to the Whore's Crown, refusing to consider heading up the back stairs. All in all, he'd rather face the amusement of Aliannet's customers than the single, scornful woman who waited in his room.

God help him, he wanted her so fucking bad that despite the cold, his cock was getting hard just thinking of her. Disgusted at himself, he lifted his fingers to his nose once more, trying to catch her scent, but it was long gone. What was he supposed to do? What was a sane man to do when faced with a woman who would literally rather die than fuck him?

He scowled up at the window that was his bedchamber. Not even a glimmer of candlelight. He tried not to think of what she looked like with her features relaxed in sleep. Tried not to remember the feel of her slick folds against his fingertips.

He sighed, pressing the heels of his hands to his temples. What was he doing, mooning over her? She was a liar and a fraud. Worse, she was colder than the snow under his boots. And he didn't even know her name, for god's sake!

Taking himself in hand, he walked with renewed purpose back to the tavern. A blast of hot humidity and a smell of sweat and yeast struck him in the face as he entered, getting worse as he descended the stairs. Turning sideways, he shimmied through the crowd and back to his booth. Rat glanced up at him with a hopeful look. "Another game?"

"Why not?" Gil agreed, his natural good humor beginning to reemerge. "I'm not in the poorhouse yet."

Rat set about replacing the tiles on the board, and Gil took a sip of his brandy. Glancing around, he wondered, "Where'd Karl go?"

"Hm?" Rat's attention was focused on the drak board, and the unprecedented possibility of a continued winning streak. "Oh, he left just after you did."

"He didn't finish his beer?"

Rat shrugged. "Didn't start it. I think he gave it to Brand."

Gil frowned. Watched Rat's nimble thief's fingers arrange the red and black pieces on the inlaid wood squares. Felt a queer falling sensation, as if the floor was moving beneath his feet. His head was suddenly throbbing. A fragment of a memory. Just took on a job. The mark needs a bit of sniffing out.

And Rat's words, earlier today: Someone's looking for you... Said he followed the killer here all the way from Sylphae. Now he wants him taken out, slow and painful. He's looking for an artist.

Gil's stomach twisted into a knot. Righteous vengeance for a slain son. And Karl's interest that had seemed so offhand. *So, what's she look like, anyway? And she was wounded?*

Gil pushed to his feet so fast he nearly overset the table.

"Hey, what the hell?" Rat shouted in outrage as his drak pieces went flying. But Gil was already shoving through the crowd, back toward the door. Shit! Shit, shit, shit, how could he have been so thick? Shouts of protest followed his progress through the multitude, but he pressed on. Goddamn, was everyone in the place a moron? Couldn't they see he was in a hurry?

"Get out of my way!" he snarled, shoving bodies aside without bias. "Move! *Move*, goddamn it!"

It took forever to get to the stairs. He took them two at a time, then burst out the door, nearly knocking over a couple staggering by arm in arm. He should an apology as he ran around to the alley. His heart leapt into his throat at the sight of fresh boot prints in the snow, from the mouth of the alley all the way to the outer staircase that led to his rooms.

Chapter Eight

She heard him on the stairs, earlier than she'd expected. Her heartbeat quickened, her limbs suffusing with nervous strength. Tiptoeing to the basket by the fire, she picked up a wedge of gnarled oak as thick as her calf and longer than her forearm. Splinters jutted from the split edges, and she smiled, hefting it to test its weight and balance. One square blow ought to knock him for a loop, and a second, well-placed, should have him laid out cold. Then she'd search the sitting room for clothes and coin, find her boots and sword and get the hell out of here.

She took up a position just to the side of the door. Gooseflesh rose on her skin from the chill—she'd let the fire burn low all evening, to make his vision uncertain. She pictured him as he'd be on entering—opening the door and stepping inside, searching the room and frowning when he couldn't find her. Seeing the block of wood coming for him, but too late. She shivered. What was taking him so bloody long? She ought to be able to hear him stomping about in the other room by now.

Holding her breath, she leaned her ear closer to the wall, straining to hear over the thrum of blood against her eardrums. There it was, a furtive click as he shut the outer door. Lianon tightened her fingers around the rough-hewn wood and bent her knees in a fighting stance. Why was he being so quiet? Was he planning to sneak up on her? Her lips pulled back from her teeth. That fucking bastard.

The key turned in the lock, slowly, stealthily. She closed her eyes, sent a swift, silent prayer to Davnia.

The door thundered open, slamming back against the wall, and he leaped inside, his eyes scanning the dimness of the room for her. Lianon, shocked immobile, noticed two things at once.

It wasn't Gil. He had a knife.

Instinct took over. First things first. With a brutal overhand swing, she cracked the length of wood down on his forearm. His knife went skittering across the floor to end up under the bed. Howling a curse, he started to turn, his black-stubbled face twisted in pain. She was already swinging the piece of oak back up at his head. Splintered, gnarled wood tore into his cheek, dragging skin with it, but with his head turning toward her, the blow didn't connect hard enough to knock him out. A fist the size of a ham slammed into her face and she felt her feet lift off the floor. A second later, her back crashed against the wall, then her front met the pine floorboards. A swarm of tiny stars filled her vision.

"You fucking cunt!" the man roared.

Lianon focused her wandering eyes as well as she could, located the knife and made a dive for it. His boot took her in the ribs, driving the breath from her. Pushing to her hands and knees, she forced the pain to a corner of her mind and closed the door on it. She locked gazes with the man. He glared his hate at her, one hand on his bleeding cheek. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy this job, bitch," he promised, coming slowly at her.

She searched the room for something to use against him. Goddamn that fucking bastard Gil, he'd left her helpless! Forcing herself to her feet, she grabbed the lightweight tin washbasin, half full of soap-scummed water, and flung it at the man's head.

Startled, he raised an arm to block the basin, knocking it aside but getting drenched in the process. She was already through the door and staggering into the sitting room. Her stomach turned to water as she felt his hand fist in the back of her hair. Dragging her from her feet, he hurled her through the air. The sitting room was crowded, with Gil's trunk and an armoire moved from the bedroom. She crashed into the trunk, taking the worst of the impact on her shoulder and hip. Her ankle hit the racked fireplace tools with blinding pain and an audible crack of bone, scattering them.

Bones and muscles aching, head swimming, she pushed to her hands and knees, gathering herself to tear barefoot and half-naked out the door and into the freezing night. But suddenly he was there, kneeling right next to her. His huge hand wrapped around her throat, forcing her back against the threadbare carpet. Her hands went to his face, shoving frantically, but he was more than twice her weight, and brought all of it to bear on her.

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Straddling her waist, he grinned, blood from his cheek dripping onto the gaping neckline of her camisole.

"I'm going to love paying you back for that, bitch," he purred, tearing her camisole open with his free hand and mauling her breasts. "Oh, this is going to be *good*."

He was going to rape her. Of course he was. His hand was clamped like a vise around her throat, but she could still breathe. Of course she could. He'd want her to suffer before she died. His leer told her everything she needed to know.

She thought of Samulo and her training, and did a slow count of ten in her head. With what was left of her wits, she conjured an image of the room as she'd entered it. How she'd collided with the trunk and the tools, how they'd scattered across the floor. A familiar calm settled on her, and she forced herself to smile scornfully up at the assassin.

"What are you waiting for, then?" she rasped through the pain and tightness in her throat. "Or aren't you man enough? Maybe you were just planning to fuck me with that knife of yours. Too bad you dropped it."

His look turned murderous. Good. Anger made men stupid. So did their cocks. She didn't even feel his free hand or what it was doing between her legs. She'd shut that out of her awareness, dismissed it as unimportant. The entire world had rendered down to nothing—just a man who was going to kill her and Lianon waiting for the right moment to stop him.

He moved so he was kneeling between her thighs. She let him. He spread her legs as wide as he could, and shoved the crotch of her drawers to one side. She let him. He fumbled one-handed with his laces until his cock finally fell free, stiff and huge. She lifted her knees as if to invite him in. He shoved against her, cursing at his poor aim and the silk that wouldn't stay out of the way. His eyes were focused on her nether parts as sweat and blood and wash-water dripped from his face down onto her torso. His hands shook.

He didn't even notice how her legs came up between them, like a lover about to wrap her ankles around his head. He had no idea who he was dealing with.

He was still muttering curses and shoving ineptly when she kicked him in the throat. Not hard enough to really hurt him—the angle was all wrong and she had no leverage. Just hard enough to throw his head back, for his teeth to slam together with a sharp crack, for his hand to come away from her neck.

For her to be able to reach the fireplace poker that lay exactly where she knew it would be, an arm's length above and to the left of her head.

Her fingers wrapped around the cool, smooth, iron shaft and she swung it with all the strength she had. It struck his forehead square in the center. Lianon didn't even wince at the wet, crunching noise it made. The man stared at her a moment as if in confusion, then a river of blood began pouring from his hairline down the middle of his face and he fell forward onto her. Good. *Good*.

With the last of her waning strength, she wormed arduously out from under him and heaved herself a little distance away. It was cold. Shivering, she sat up, hugged her knees and waited for someone to come and deal with this.

Chapter Nine

Gil stood in the doorway, gasping for breath and couldn't believe his eyes.

There on the carpet in his sitting room sat the woman, her arms wrapped around her knees and her chin resting on them. Karl lay face-down next to her, a growing pool of blood framing his head like an obscene halo.

Gil stepped inside and shut the door, willing his heart to stop hammering. Holy shit. She'd actually killed the bastard. Of all the possibilities racing through his brain on his way up the stairs, this was one he hadn't even considered. Karl was huge—almost twice Gil's size, for the love of Salgrim! How on earth?

With a nagging sense of unreality, he walked quietly over to her and knelt at her side. Her eyes followed his movements, but registered no emotion. The entire right half of her face was a mess, new blows overlaying the ones he'd dealt her last night. Her eye was nearly swollen shut, and a trickle of congealing blood from her nose smeared her upper lip.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a whisper, not wanting to disturb the bizarre calm that lay over the scene—frightened, actually, of what might happen if he did.

"I'm fine."

Gil wasn't fooled. Her voice was too calm. Her eyes empty. He looked more closely and saw the tremors that shook her. With one hand, he reached ever so slowly out to touch her shoulder. She was vibrating like a hummingbird's wing-beats. And *cold*.

"Can you stand?"

She frowned at him as if he was an idiot. "Of course."

He took her by the elbow and urged her upright. "Come on. Come on. Let's get you somewhere comfortable."

She drew in a hissing breath as she took a first, tentative step. Looking, he saw her right ankle was purple and swollen on the outside. Maybe broken. Why wasn't she

screaming? "Come here," he murmured, lifting her up into his arms and carrying her into the bedroom. He flushed with chagrin as his cock stirred, but what did he expect, carrying a woman he lusted after to his bed?

He sat her on the edge of the mattress and tried to reestablish eye contact. She looked at him expectantly. Satisfied that she was at least coherent, if not quite...right, he pulled the blankets around her shoulders. Her camisole was ripped to tatters and soaked with blood—mostly Karl's, thank the god. Gil pulled the edges of the blanket together under her chin and lifted her hand to hold it there. She was as pliable as clay.

"Stay here," he ordered gently, then rose and went to deal with Karl.

Salgrim's teeth, the man was big! With both hands fisted in the back of Karl's coat, Gil dragged him out the door and onto the landing. With a grunt, he heaved the body over the top step and watched it tumble and skid down the icy stairs. Karl sur-Stanlic landed on his back in the trampled snow at the bottom with his arms and legs spread wide, as if frozen in the process of making a snow-maiden. His cock lay against his open trousers, still erect.

Gil left him there in the alley. Someone would find him and alert the constables. There might be questions, but no real repercussions. Karl was a known member of the guild. His death wouldn't raise an eyebrow among the city government. Perpetrator or victim, an Emissary of Davnia rarely merited an investigation by the constabulary.

Stooping on the landing, Gil collected a couple handfuls of snow and went back inside. The woman was exactly where he'd left her. Sitting gingerly beside her on the mattress, he lifted a wad of snow to the swelling on her face.

"That's some bruise," he commented, knowing that conversation, no matter how inane, would help draw her from her numbness.

"The one shaped like his fist?" she asked. "Or the one shaped like yours?"

His cheeks heated. "I'm sorry now I did that."

She frowned. "Why?"

He pressed the cake of snow onto her bruises. "I just am."

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Her eyes flicked to the door. "You learn something new every day in this business. Have to say, I never thought of subcontracting."

"What?" It took a moment for her meaning to sink in. "Wait a minute. No! You think I hired him?"

"Why not?"

He stared at her, his chest tight. Took a chance. "Because I don't want you dead."

Her eyes were so huge he thought he might fall into them. "Funny. I think I might have changed my mind about that, too."

He took her leg in his hands and lifted her foot onto his lap. Her ankle was a fucking disaster, puffed up to twice its normal size. He held the dwindling wad of ice against it. "You mean that?"

She nodded. "I think I do. Why?"

He kept his eyes on her ankle, away from the danger of her gaze. "My last girlfriend had a death wish. It's a bad thing to base a relationship on."

She was silent a moment. "A relationship?"

He chickened out. "Never mind. Forget I said it."

She turned her face from him. Reached across and took the melting ice from his fingers, and pressed it firm against her ankle with a wince. Effectively drew away from his touch and changed the subject. "I think it's broken."

He sighed. "Maybe. I know a healer—a Darjhan. He doesn't charge, and he might be able to get you back on your feet."

"All right."

"Here, lie down. I'm going down to Aliannet's to get you some brandy. Promise me you won't try to go anywhere."

She smiled, her demeanor almost maudlin. "I'm half-naked with a broken ankle. Where would I go?"

He frowned. This was an odd departure from her previous rancor. Maybe that bastard Karl had concussed her? Head wounds could have unexpected complications, Gil knew.

He left her with some reluctance, and locked the outer door behind him. From the top of the stairs, he saw a handful of murmuring bystanders next to Karl's corpse, Viera and Rat among them. Viera's look, when she saw Gil descending, was grim.

"Is Lianon all right?" she asked.

A few heads perked at her query, and Gil opted for discretion. With a glance at Rat, he moved a little distance from the group, his two friends following. "It's not good," he told them in an undertone. "Karl did a real number on her. Broken ankle, maybe some cracked ribs. And she's not behaving exactly...right. I think maybe she's got a concussion."

"Why'd he go after her?" Viera asked, shivering.

Gil sent Rat a meaningful look. "Justice and righteous vengeance against the villain who killed a man's son."

Rat's eyebrows lifted and he whistled softly between his teeth. "Oh dear."

Viera scowled, hugging her cloak about her. "Would either of you care to tell me what's going on?"

"Some rich bloke in the neighborhood, putting out feelers for a job. Gil opted out. I guess Karl took the offer."

"And when word gets out that Karl's dead, he'll be sending another to take up the cause. Maybe more than one."

Viera squared her shoulders and turned to Gil, her chin lifting. "You'll protect her like you did tonight."

Gil grinned wolfishly at her. "You think I did that?" he laughed. "A little messy to be one of mine, and I'll thank you not to go giving me credit for such sloppy work."

"You mean she..." Viera smiled as if delighted.

"He was going cold before I ever got there, sweetheart." Gil glanced up at the growing crowd. "D'you mind sticking around, Rat? Keep an ear open for the gossip? And Viera, dear, if you could procure a bottle from Aliannet—it doesn't really matter what, just as long as it's got some bite to it—and take it up to, ah...Lianon? Here's the key." He

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watched as she stowed it down her bodice. "Maybe your boot would be safer," he suggested wryly. "Not so many hands groping in there."

She swatted him with her purse, then spun on her heel and swiped her free hand across her bottom in the preferred crude gesture of prostitutes in Belthalas.

"Don't forget to lock yourself in," he called after her as she sauntered away. "Don't open the door for anyone but me or Rat. And if someone breaks in, scream your pretty head off."

"Where are you going?" Rat asked.

"To Aru's."

Rat's brows inched a notch higher. "You know what he does."

Gil knew. He'd been on the receiving end once, and though the experience was sublime, he had no real desire to have a woman he lusted for feel...*sublime* under another man's touch. "What choice do I have? She can't defend herself with a broken ankle. And that bastard's sure to send more men. I have the feeling what she did to his son was...memorable."

"Fair enough."

Chapter Ten

Lianon awoke to see a demon above her. Her gaze locked onto a pair of eyes that were huge, cat-like and freakishly mismatched—one golden, the other a dull slate. His features were nothing but planes and angles—cheekbone, jaw and forehead. A devil's visage. Her only comfort was that the face was unmistakably male, and therefore could not be Davnia come to carry her off.

She tried to convince her limbs to obey the urgency of her flight instinct, but the man's gaze pinned her to the pillow. And—oh, *god*—was that his hand on her belly? Her *naked* belly?

Terrified, she tore her eyes from him and searched the room. Gil stood by the hearth, the flames casting his too-handsome face in relief. She tried to let that calm her. Gil wouldn't let anything horrible happen to her, would he? Not after what he'd said earlier. Not after they had begun to find a way to coexist.

"Please." The stranger's voice was like hot-spiced milk—rich and warm and deep. Soothing. "Don't fear. I'm a healer. My name is Aru."

She frowned up at him. "I…" Her throat was still raw from Karl's grip, and her words came out in a croak. "I thought you were supposed to be a Darjhan." A foolish thing to say, since she had never met a Darjhan, and therefore had no real idea if Aru resembled one or not. Perhaps they all looked like demons?

He smiled. It transformed his face from a demon's visage to the glowing countenance of an angel. "I was once a Darjhan, yes."

"I didn't know you could stop being one."

"You are Andun," he said simply. "There is no crime you could ever commit that would negate your god's love and acceptance. This is not true for my people, or my god. I killed during the war. Very many, both Kurgan and Bal-shar. My immortality was forfeit with the very first life I took. I am now Omahru-azhi, the walking dead."

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She frowned, feeling oddly sorry for him. "But you can still heal. Paldir left you that much."

The Darjhan shook his head and smiled sadly. "All pure things are corrupted when a Darjhan falls. There was a time I could heal hundreds without tiring. For a thousand years it was thus. I have little real power now, only a talent for guidance. The power to heal your wounds must come from you."

"But I'm not Gifted."

"But you are," he whispered, winking his gold eye. His hand slid down her belly to rest just above her pubis, his palm flat. "Such power you have! Your god Salgrim lives here." He pressed down on her womb, and she felt a clenching within, and a strange drawing out, as if part of her was being pulled through her flesh and into his hand. To her embarrassment, moisture flooded between her thighs and her clitoris began to ache and swell.

His other hand slid down her naked leg to her injured ankle, stroking lightly, leaving behind a trail of tingling heat. Her cheeks warmed and she flicked a glance at Gil. He was watching with his jaw clenched, his eyes glittering. She saw anger in them, and possessiveness, and unmistakable arousal.

"Do you wish him to leave the room?" the Darjhan asked as if reading her mind.

She thought about being alone with this strange man, of being entirely at his mercy. "I want him to stay." Her eyes were filling with tears, even as her body came painfully, deliciously alive under the Darjhan's touch. Rhianna's face kept swimming before her mind's eye. "If he could... If he could hold my hand. Is that permitted?"

Aru smiled. "Not just permitted, but helpful."

A second later, Gil was at her side, her hand engulfed in both of his and his lips pressed to her knuckles.

She started to writhe. Her breath came in huge, swift gasps, and her whole body was flushed. As Gil watched, her eyes rolled back, her lashes swept down and she fell into a state of altered consciousness.

Oh, Gil knew the feeling that came with the laying on of hands, remembered how ecstasy and shame twined like two serpents within him as his treacherous body responded to another man's touch. At the memory, his cock was like a steel spike.

The Darjhan's one hand remained just above Lianon's mons. His other stroked her ankle, keeping contact even as her limbs thrashed and twisted. Her back was arched, her breasts jutting, the nipples tightened into hard little buds, and her fingers gripped Gil's hands as if he was her sole anchor in the world.

A strange humming surrounded them, a sound that was more felt than heard. It was Aru's heal-song, coming not from his voice, but from deeper within him, like a cat's purr. Gil watched as Master Aru took Lianon's pain and transformed it into something else, something heavy and needful. Her pussy would be soaking, he knew. By this point in his own healing, Gil had already shot his seed twice, without anyone laying a hand on his cock. In truth, he was starting to think he might do the same right now. Part of him was on fire with jealousy, but another couldn't help but be inflamed by the sight of the Darjhan's hands on Lianon's sex-starved flesh. His cheeks heated as an image sprang to mind of their three bodies coiling together on the linen sheets of his bed.

"You may touch her, if she consents," Aru said, his eyes locking with Gil's.

As if she had been merely waiting for this cue, Lianon pulled Gil's hands to her breasts, rubbing and squeezing to show him what she wanted. He took her nipples between his fingers and twisted them gently, inducing a shudder and low, growling moan. Her own hands were at her cunt, her palms pressing on the back of Aru's hand, her fingers stroking her clit. Her body bucked and shuddered and she gave a hoarse, coughing cry as she came. Gil looked, and saw her ankle was nearly mended, the swelling only slight and the bruises taking on a yellow tinge.

Lianon's eyes were closed, her face a gorgeous combination of satisfaction and burgeoning need. Gil bent and took one of her nipples into his mouth. A moment later, she reached up and pulled Aru's face to her other breast. The Darjhan's nostrils flared for a moment, then he laid his cheek on her breast and closed his eyes. "Bring her again to completion," the healer instructed softly. His stroking hand was on her bruised ribs, and his heal-song was getting louder. Gil could feel it resonating in his own chest. "As many times as you can."

Gil's cock was ready to burst from the seams of his trousers, but this wasn't about his pleasure. The healing depended on Lianon's satisfaction, on the amount of energy that coursed from her center into Aru's hands. The more times she came, the more thorough her recovery would be.

Gil left Lianon's breast and kissed his way down her belly, then rose and crossed to the foot of the bed. She cried out in dismay at the abandonment, then sighed with relief as Gil positioned himself between her legs and buried his face in her delectable cunt. He held her labia wide open with his fingers and dragged his tongue over the tortured bud of her clit, then sucked it hard into his mouth.

"Ahh, god!" Lianon's voice was ragged as her back arched off the mattress. She was coming already, her juices pouring into Gil's waiting mouth. Her come was like honey—no, like mead, sweet and heady and intoxicating. Seeking more, he thrust his tongue inside her and lapped up her cream, savoring every sweet, salty drop of it. She jerked as his tongue hit the bundle of nerves just inside the walls of her channel, and buried her hands in his hair to press his face harder on the place she needed it. Pinching her clit between his thumbs, he fucked her with his tongue, relishing how her entire body quivered in response. He realized with chagrin that he was grinding his cock into the mattress, unable to stop. God, he thought he might come right in his trousers.

With a smile, he sucked her clit into his mouth once more, swirling his tongue around the swollen nub. One hand held her lips open while the other slipped downward, pausing at her pussy to coat one finger in her wetness, then descending to her puckered little rosebud.

"God! *God*!" she rasped through her raw throat as his finger dipped inside her ass, just to the first knuckle. Sucking her clit, he pressed up with his finger on the rim of her rosebud, and she screamed, the snug ring of muscle clenching around his finger, her body convulsing. He slid his finger further in, massaging the ultra-slick, super-tight walls of

her anus. His tongue jabbed into her pussy, even as he pinched her clitoris with his free hand. She came three more times in quick succession, riding one orgasm into the next. All the while, Aru's hand stroked and skimmed the length of her body, from the bruises on her face and neck to the fracture at her ankle.

And then Aru's hand was on Gil's shoulder, gently insistent. "It is done. She can withstand no more."

Slowly, as if half-asleep, Gil raised his head from Lianon's sated flesh. Blinked in the dimness of the guttering fire. His cock throbbed. Her juices covered him, his face and hands anointed with musk. He looked at her. She lay pliant, unconscious. Her face was mostly healed, her ribs a mottled yellow, her ankle pristine. Her body lay open to his gaze like a morning glory after sunrise. She was so vulnerable, so beautiful, he felt as if he'd been stabbed through the heart.

"She will sleep the night and most of tomorrow," Aru was saying. "Her woman's blood may not come for several months, and her womb will be barren for at least a year."

Gil started, his chest tightening. He hadn't realized how deeply or enduringly a woman could be affected by a healing. "What about...?"

The Darjhan smiled with understanding, rising with the fluid grace of his kind and straightening his garments. "She will still be able to find pleasure in sex. The more oft, the better, in truth. Each time she reaches completion, her body will come closer to its former strength."

Gil sighed in heartfelt relief. "Thank you, Aru," he said softly. "Will you take a token?"

"I charge no fee," the Darjhan said with mild reproach. "You know that, Gil al-Moirae."

"I do," Gil said, leading the way to the sitting room and crossing to his trunk. "But a gift is not the same as a fee." He rummaged for a moment, then emerged with a tiny ruby, cut in the shape of a heart and set in a pendant of silver. A gift from a very grateful former client.

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"You ought to give this token to Lianon," Aru said with a smile. "There were two faces in her mind during the healing, and one of them was yours."

Gil frowned. "Please take it. It would please me for you to have it. To have something of this night."

"Gil—"

"A memento."

Aru sighed and reached out one hand. "All right. A memento."

Gil pressed the ruby into Aru's palm and walked him to the door. "I can't thank you enough for coming here tonight," Gil said earnestly.

"You may call upon me any time. Not only for my services, but also as a...dare I say friend?"

"I will say it if you won't," Gil said, clasping the Darjhan's hand. "Thank you, my friend."

The Darjhan took his leave and Gil shut the door. He turned and surveyed the disaster that was his sitting room. Furniture was knocked askew, fireplace tools scattered. The poker still had a wad of Karl's flesh and a few stray hairs stuck to it. The carpet may not have been Kahlian, but it had cost him a pretty penny. Now it was ruined.

He thought of the woman asleep in his bed and his heart did an odd little hitch.

With a sigh, he started to straighten up.

Chapter Eleven

"It's a little early for dinner, isn't it?" Rat asked, sipping his *jaffha* and frowning blearily. His small, black eyes were shot through with broken veins and his color called to mind that of overcooked cauliflower. From what Gil gathered, Viera had kept Rat up drinking last night, resulting in a bastard of a hangover and a high degree of financial embarrassment.

"Luncheon," Gil corrected, poking with his fork at a wad of soggy spinach that sat forlornly to one side of his plate. A puddle of green had spread from the pathetic mound, staining his veal medallion a hue nature never intended. "I think. Explain to me again why you told him Heffie's?"

Rat grinned unpleasantly, nibbling on a dry rusk of bread—the only thing he could stomach right now. "Because you never come here."

Gil cut a small slice of meat off the medallion and raised it suspiciously to his nose for inspection. "Remind me to never go to a decent restaurant, will you?" Against his better judgment, he took the bite in his mouth and chewed. And chewed. And chewed more. The texture was…unexpected, but not entirely revolting.

"So you're going to stay here how long? All day?"

Gil delicately extricated a segment of recalcitrant veal from his mouth and set it on the chipped edge of his plate. "Master Not-quite-right's got to show up sometime."

"You'll forgive me if I don't wait with you?" Rat glanced down at the congealing mess on Gil's plate and winced. "I can only look at that for so long, you know."

"Actually, I was wondering if you could run an errand for me."

Rat wisely waited for embellishment before offering his cooperation. He'd had occasion to run errands for Gil in the past, and not always with pleasant results.

"If you could pick up a few things at Filik's and drop them off at my place?"

"The clothier's?"

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"Yeah. I've got a list." He reached into his pocket and handed Rat a crumpled slip of velum.

Rat scowled at the list, visibly torn between raging curiosity and a natural tendency for discretion. Gil knew he couldn't read and was dying to know what was written on that bit of paper.

"Clothes for Lianon."

Rat raised his eyebrows.

"I, um, burned her old ones."

"Ah. Lice?"

"No."

Rat's brows reached their acme, and Gil forced himself to take another ill-advised bite of his veal to avoid elaborating. Actually, upon further sampling, he was reasonably certain that the "veal" was probably dog. Hopefully horse. And considering that, there was no *way* he was taking a chance on the "spinach".

The girl came around with a tin ewer of *jaffha* and filled their cups. Rat raised his to his face, as if the hot, black liquid was the only tolerable aroma in the entire eatery. Gil shifted his attention to the crowd, examining the faces through the steam rising from his own cup. A meager handful of diners—a mélange of those poor, unwary souls new to the neighborhood and knowing no better, and an unfortunate few who wanted to bed the serving girls. No one seemed interested in anything other than surviving his lunch.

"She's not going to attack me when I drop off the clothes, is she?" Rat asked.

"She knows you for a friend of mine," Gil assured him. "Though I'd advise you to enter more courteously than our dear, departed Karl."

"Will do," Rat replied with a wan smile. His eyes lifted as the door opened behind Gil. "Oh, would you look at that. The man of the hour himself."

Gil felt himself go still inside. He didn't look up, but from the corner of his eye he saw an older man enter with a small, wiry bodyguard. "Why don't you go right now, Rat?"

"Right." Rat pushed his chair back and slipped his coat on. "Might need some scratch, though. Find myself a bit short this morning."

Gil slipped him five silver harts—at least twice what his purchases were worth which Rat palmed with professional flourish. The thief's eyes darted to the newcomers, who were being seated at a nearby table, then back to Gil. "Good luck."

"I'm not the one who's going to need it," Gil replied coldly, watching his friend make a swift get-away.

Glad of the excuse, Gil pushed his plate aside. Leaving a handful of copper on his table, he rose and crossed to the newcomers', and sat down uninvited.

He ignored the icy stare of the younger man, dismissing him for the servant he obviously was, and met the gaze of the old man. Water-pale blue eyes sunken in pouches of wrinkled flesh peered up at him with haughty disdain. "And just what might I do for you, sir?"

Gil studied the man, the sagging folds of skin on his face and neck, the wispy gray hair, the fine but not-quite-fashionable velvet waistcoat. There were rings on every finger, but nothing more valuable than an opal. A jumped-up merchant, or fallen nobility. No one of real consequence.

"I'm Gil al-Moirae."

The man looked him up and down, the eyes missing nothing. "A bit slow to show, aren't you?"

Gil shrugged. "I was busy with another job."

The old man sniffed derisively. The serving girl brought a goblet of red wine and set it in front of him. Gil's nostrils flared—he could smell the poor vintage from across the table. The man didn't seem put off by it, and took a long drink. "I contracted another Emissary, but he turned out to be a moron."

Gil clenched his fists in his lap and forced a casual façade. "Really? Do tell."

"Idiot got himself killed."

Gil leaned forward, his elbows on the table, hands clasped. "So, tell me who you want dead, and why."

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The man glowered at him and drained his sour wine. "A cowardly bastard called Lianon al-Sylphae. The man who killed my son."

"Hmmm." So the whoreson didn't yet know that Lianon was a woman. Good. Gil deliberately unclenched his fingers and adopted a light tone. "And just what did your son do to earn the malice of Lianon al-Sylphae?"

The man's eyes dripped icicles. "My son and a few of his friends indulged in the services of a common whore. The whore's pimp, Lianon al-Sylphae, upped the price after the fact, and my boy and his chums gave him the thrashing he so richly deserved."

Gil felt his face drain of color. "Indeed?"

"Oh, yes."

"Perhaps you did not know your son quite as well as you believe."

The man's eyes, dead like a reptile's, fixed on Gil's face. "My son was innocent."

"Let me tell you what your son did," Gil spat, his gaze narrowing until the only thing he could see was the smug, arrogant, hateful face of the man across from him. "Your son and his friends gang-raped an innocent woman and then killed her. When her *husband* protested, they beat him to within an inch of his life. Then they each left half a copper penny on the dead woman's body as recompense for their crime. Your son earned the death he received. If it had been me, he would have screamed for days, not hours."

The man's eyes flashed. "How dare you speak to me like—"

"Oh, I dare," Gil hissed, pushing to his feet, his palms braced on the table. Slowly, he leaned his face in until it was mere inches from the other man's. The bodyguard began to rise, but the old man stayed him with a raised hand. Gil almost wished he hadn't—it would be good to let some of his anger find an outlet.

"Go home, sir," he said in a whisper. "Go back to Sylphae, or wherever it is you come from. Accept the fact that your son was less than a man, and died a coward's death, just as he deserved. Please, for your own sake, do this. Because if anyone—and I mean *anyone*—comes after Lianon al-Sylphae, I will hold you responsible. I will hunt you down and make your son's death look like a gentle passing. And then I'll find every child

of your seed, trueborn and bastard, and kill them all. Do you understand? I will wipe all evidence of you from the face of the earth."

The man stared, his jaw gaping, but he recovered quickly. "You don't know who you're messing with."

Gil smiled. His face felt like it might crack under the strain of maintaining his calm. "You can't imagine how little I care. For all I know you could be the king of Fjorg. What I do know is that I will not tolerate further threat to Lianon al-Sylphae. I have told you what will happen if you persist. Make your own decision."

Before the old man could reply, Gil rose and stalked out of the restaurant. His palms itched with the desire to go back in and cut that bastard's saggy throat right there at his table. As a professional, he liked nothing more than a clean, discreet job, but there were times when an enthusiastic mess presented a certain, tactile appeal. As he crossed the street, he pictured Lianon cutting this man's son to pieces, bit by bit, and thanked Salgrim he had opted not to bring a weapon with him today.

Chapter Twelve

He inserted the key in the lock, his burdens shifting dangerously, teetering toward a three-story fall to the alley below. Grappling frantically before catastrophe could strike, Gil kicked the door open and lurched inside. The meat pie, still warm in its basket, went on top of his trunk, then the bottle of wine beside it. The costly loaf of white bread was mostly squashed under his arm, littering crumbs across his bloodstained carpet. His sack of pathetic, wrinkly apples fell open, spilling half its contents on the pine floorboards. From the corner of his eye, he saw the round of yellow cheese roll under his armoire, and bit back a curse.

Muttering, he left the apples to roll where they would and went to retrieve his key and slam the door shut. When he turned back to the sitting room, he was arrested by the sight of Lianon crouched down, gathering up the apples. She was dressed in the new clothes Rat had delivered—trousers of fine, tan wool and a white linen shirt loosely laced at the throat. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was pulled back and tied with a strip of leather at her nape. The right side of her face was still discolored, a mottle of brown and yellow, but the swelling had gone down. His eyes strayed down to her neckline as she stretched to reach the last apple. Her collarbones stood out in sharp relief, and her posture allowed him just the barest glimpse of her shape. His stomach clenching, he crouched down before her and took up the fallen sack.

"Did I wake you?"

Color flooded her cheeks as her eyes briefly met his, then slid away. She dropped the apples into the bag and gracefully straightened, retreating to the far corner of the room. "I wasn't asleep."

He tried to capture her glance, but she was staring doggedly at the window, her face set.

"Are you hungry?"

"Rat brought some more of those honey-buns when he delivered the clothes," she said. "I ate five, but I'm already starving again."

Gil nodded. "It's the healing. You'll be hungry for a few days."

She realized she was wringing her hands and visibly forced herself to stop. "Rat said you were meeting with the...father of one of the men who killed Rhianna." She sounded so cold saying it, but Gil could see her knuckles were white where she clenched her fists at her sides. "What was his name?"

Gil pushed to his feet and set the sack of apples on the trunk next to the crushed loaf. "I never bothered to ask."

Her gaze flicked to his face, and back to the window. She nodded. "Anonymity. Always a good idea in this business."

He scowled. What the hell was she talking about? "I have no business with him. I went there to tell him to leave the city. That if another Emissary raised a hand against you, I would track him down and make him regret it."

He saw her scrubbing at her face with one hand, and with an inward groan realized she was crying. Stepping up behind her, he laid a hand on her shoulder, stroking her nape with his thumb. "Lianon."

He envisioned her as she had been last night, naked on his bed, her back arching, her entire body shuddering, a scream tearing from her throat as she came all over his mouth. That delightful, sensual creature bore no resemblance to this cold, reserved figure who made no sound even as she wept.

"Lianon, don't you remember what it's like to feel good?"

Her chest rose and fell, as rapid as a hare's, but she held herself rigid. "I remember what it's like."

"Lianon."

"What happened last night..."

He let his hand creep up the back of her neck, and started to massage her tense muscles. "Forget last night," he whispered next to her ear, his cock twitching. "It meant nothing."

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"It meant everything," she murmured, leaning her face away from him. Taking advantage, he let his lips feather across her nape. She wouldn't shrink from him, he knew this already. She wouldn't let herself do anything so undignified as to flee. She would endure his touch and try to maintain her coldness, just as she had yesterday. The thought of how she'd stood so still while his fingers stroked between her legs only inflamed him further.

"It meant everything," he agreed, his free hand coming to rest on her ribcage, just shy of her breast.

"Gil—"

"Stop," he ordered softly, his hand sliding up across Filik's finest linen and covering the gently curved mound. "Let me touch you."

"Gil—"

Her voice died as his other hand descended to her sex, cupping her through the wool of her trousers. "Be silent."

She drew in a sharp, hissing breath. He pressed his fingers against her clit, and she shuddered. "Don't say anything, Lianon. Just let me touch you."

Her breath was coming even faster, and he lifted his hand briefly to the waist of her trousers. He released a button. Two. Then slid his fingers inside, down to her slick pussy. His lips and tongue teased the flesh behind her ear. His first two fingers straddled her clit, stroking up and down.

With a broken cry, she melted back against him, her hands gripping his forearm as he fondled her. Aching, he pressed his stiff cock against her, seated himself between her buttocks and thrust against her. God, he thought he'd come right then.

"Gil—"

"Be silent!" he hissed, stabbing a finger into her cunt. God, she was so fucking *wet!* The walls of her pussy clenched around his finger, and he pushed it the rest of the way in.

"I remember how you tasted last night, sweetness," he murmured in her ear as he fucked her with his finger. "God, you were so fucking sweet, I could drink you forever."

She moaned low in her throat, and the hand teasing her breast skimmed up to her mouth, pressing a finger against her lips. "Hush." His other hand still fondling her pussy, he tugged her shoulder. "Turn around."

She turned to face him, her eyes heavy-lidded and dark, her face flushed, her skin glowing with a film of moisture. Her lips were parted, her teeth clamped around the lower lip. "Don't move," he ordered softly. "Stay absolutely still. Don't make a sound."

Her eyes were locked on his. He leaned in as if to kiss her, then turned away and pressed his mouth against her neck, then the linen over her breast, then her belly. As he lowered himself to his knees in front of her, he withdrew his cream-covered hand and dragged her trousers down. "Don't move," he said, his face hovering just in front of her sex, his nostrils flaring at the scent of her. With his thumbs, he gently parted her nether lips. Blew a stream of cool air across her engorged clit.

She jerked and bit back a cry.

"Hush!" he admonished. "Say nothing. Just feel." Her eyes met his briefly, and he smiled up at her. She grabbed the window sill for support, and he pressed his mouth to her sex.

She threw her head back, but clamped her lips shut on a cry.

Lianon had never been in such a position before. In her courtship with Rhianna, she had always been the aggressor, been the *man*, even after Rhianna knew differently. Even with Samulo, it was she who had initiated their affair—he had simply made himself available to her. But to stand unmoving—unspeaking—and let this man ravish her, this was a thing entirely new to her. As he sucked her clitoris into his mouth, she bit the insides of her cheeks to keep from screaming.

She had thought it would end with Master Aru's healing. That the Darjhan would drain her of the ability to desire, and that Gil, seeing that, would leave her alone. She had hoped her feelings for Gil had arisen out of confusion and vulnerability and desperation, that when she recovered, they might simply go away. But as his fingers toyed with her

pussy and his lips and tongue lashed at her aching clit, she realized that nothing had ended. Her body responded to his touch as if they were two halves of the same soul.

She watched him through hooded eyes as he worshiped her sex with his mouth, and reached down with one hand to touch his thick brown hair. It was softer than it had any right to be. She let her fingers slide down to his face, caressing the closely trimmed beard he wore, relishing how it tickled and scratched her inner thighs as his tongue swirled around and around her throbbing nub.

"Touch yourself," he whispered against her sex. "Fondle your tits."

Her hand moved to obey as if he spoke a charm over her. She reached beneath her shirt and stroked her breasts, dragging her work-roughened fingertips across her nipples, pausing to roll the tight buds between her fingers. Her belly tightened, her sex filled with heaviness and she thrust herself against his face, not caring what he would think of her. Why should she care when he could do these things to her, when he could make her feel like this? Every swirl of his tongue sent a shock of sensation through her. Every word he uttered stroked her will and made her long to succumb. His finger was circling her opening, stretching her, then it dipped in to massage the throbbing bundle of nerves just inside. The tension built relentlessly, her entire sex pulsating, filling with blood and pressure. And suddenly she was coming all over his mouth, pushing herself shamelessly against his face, biting her lip until she could taste blood.

She leaned back against the window, her buttocks pressed against the icy pane with only a threadbare, linen curtain between, and let her breath and her heartbeat resume their normal cadence. By degrees, she became aware that Gil wasn't doing what might be expected, wasn't nudging her in the direction of the bedroom or tugging her clothes more completely off her limbs. In fact, he took great pains to pull her trousers back up and fasten the buttons, and then he wasn't touching her at all anymore.

"You said you were hungry."

She blinked and stared incredulously at him. He smiled a bit tightly and held up a meat pie.

"But, I don't-Gil? What are you talking about?"

He only walked past her into the bedroom, setting the pie on the table. "Bring the wine, would you? There're glasses in the cabinet."

Bemused, Lianon found the cabinet that served as a pantry and searched its contents. The glasses were chipped but serviceable, and in a haze of unreality, she collected them and the bottle of wine and followed him into the bedroom.

He was dragging the table and chair over to the bed. "There's some cheese if you want it," he said casually.

She stared, not knowing quite how to take him. "Thank you."

He disappeared back into the sitting room. She just stood there, uncertain. How do you face a man you hardly know, right after he's had his whole face buried between your legs? How do you manage the transition from the shameless, wanton taking of pleasure to sitting and having a civilized meal? He wasn't going to expect them to converse, was he? She couldn't imagine anything they could possibly discuss, so soon after he'd...

She inched toward the door to see him on hands and knees, fishing the round of cheese from under the armoire. "Gotcha!" he muttered, brushing dust off the rind. He caught her looking and flashed her a wolfish grin. "Good as new."

Grabbing a couple of wooden platters and the poor, battered loaf of bread, he joined her in the bedroom. "Would you rather the chair or the bed?"

Her stomach did a little leap at the mention of bed, and she swallowed with difficulty. "Please, you sit where you like," she said.

He shrugged and took the chair. She sank slowly onto the very edge of the mattress and attempted a wobbly smile. He cut her a wedge of meat pie and a couple slices of the sharp, crumbly cheese and handed her the platter. She took a tentative bite of the cooling pie as he dished out for himself. Her eyes closed in ecstasy at the first taste of the spicy, savory filling.

"Judith makes the best meat pies," Gil said, noticing her expression.

Lianon felt her cheeks fill with heat. "Is she also responsible for those amazing honey-buns?"

"Oh, yes. That woman can't decide if she's a butcher or a baker, so she does a little of both. She's half the reason I live here—her place is just across the way."

"I don't blame you. It's delicious." It was also already gone. With a grin, he cut her another piece.

"So why'd you pick me?" he asked.

She blinked at him. His voice was carefully modulated, but his expression was almost too calm.

She forced down the lump of food that had seemed to turn leaden in her mouth, and cleared her throat. "What do you mean?"

He kept his eyes on the round of cheese, his fingertips drumming on the little table. "You had to have known I don't kill women. It's not like it's a secret."

Of course it wasn't. When Lianon was inquiring, no less than four people had informed her that Gil al-Moirae didn't *do* women. "It was mentioned," she allowed. "But not half so often as the fact that you pride yourself on a quick, painless kill." Her eyes dropped to her half-eaten pie, which had suddenly lost all its appeal. "I didn't want to end up like..." She pushed away the thought of sur-Marus' son, but the ghosts of his screams echoed in her memory. "I didn't want to die like that man last night, with my brains bashed in and my blood splattered everywhere. Or at the end of a rope, with my face turning purple and my tongue all swollen. I just wanted it to be clean. If I had known it was a vow, and not just professional preference, I would have chosen someone else. And to be honest, I never thought you'd realize..."

"Are you glad I did?"

She met his gaze, but couldn't read anything of import in it. He was very good at hiding himself. "After Rhianna, the only thing keeping me breathing was vengeance. But then—what I did to those men—I knew I'd never get away with it. That the constables would eventually track me down and they'd put me in prison or hang me. Or that sur-Marus would find me and...I wasn't even afraid—not to die. But I couldn't endure prison. And sur-Marus is a monster. I knew what he would do if he took me and I just couldn't...I tried to finish it myself, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Then I realized I

could hire someone to kill me clean. Getting it done was like having a purpose again. Then, when you and I fought...I don't know. Something changed."

He watched her steadily. "I was pretty angry when I realized how you'd deceived me. I behaved like a self-centered bastard. You didn't deserve that." He reached over and placed his hand on hers, squeezing gently. "I'm sorry, Lianon. For all of it."

Her throat was closing up, her eyes stinging. "I'm sorry, too. If I had realized...Gil, why did you take that vow?"

His face went still, but he forced himself to answer. "I used to live with a woman. It ended badly."

"What was she like?"

"Samara?" he said flatly. "She was a whore. A liar and a thief and a slave to the poppy." His eyes fell to his own uneaten food. "Didn't stop me from loving her, though. I even got off on the upheaval, like it was a game or something. Except it wasn't a game to her. It was addiction. I caught her stealing from me to pay for her opium. I didn't even get angry. I just made sure I never left anything valuable where she could get at it." He took a deep breath. "Then one day I came home and found her passed out in bed. Her opium dealer was with her. In *my* bed."

Lianon's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, no, Gil."

He gave a harsh laugh. "She had to pay for her drugs somehow, didn't she? Her dealer considered himself fortunate that I only took his ear. I threw Samara out. I was so sure she'd be back at my door the next day, suitably chastised and begging me to take her back. I thought it would teach her a lesson. But she was a street creature. She had enough contacts out there, she just went back to whoring. They found her dead in an alley a few weeks later. She'd been strangled. That afternoon, I took my vow before Davnia that I would never harm a woman again."

Her heart twisted. "It wasn't your fault, Gil."

"It was."

"Gil—"

"I could have helped her more. I could have loved her more."

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"She died the same death as a thousand like her," Lianon said. "I saw it all the time when I lived on the street. No one cares about a whore—certainly not the people in charge of things. On the street, a woman's life is worth what a man will pay, and not a penny more."

He looked up at her, drawing in a long, shaky breath. His face was like stone, but there was a sheen to his eyes that made something crumble inside her. "Is that why you live as a man?"

She smiled. "That's how it started. I promised myself that I would never, ever sink so low that I had to earn my living between my legs. The only way I could think of to do that was to not be female. After Samulo took me in and trained me, it was just easier to keep up the pretense. Easier to find work as an Emissary."

"There are plenty of female Emissaries, Lianon."

She drew herself up. "Who hires a woman to fight an honest duel, or to bring a felon to justice? Who hires a woman to cut a man's throat in an alley? No one. They hire a woman to seduce a man and then kill him with poison or a needle in the ear. A female Emissary is nothing but a whore with homicidal tendencies. I was trained by a Kurgan, Gil. Not just any Kurgan, but a *shahar*. There was no way in hell I was going to stoop to what a female Emissary does."

"So what will you do now?"

She shook her head and shrugged helplessly. "The man who hired that Emissary last night, he won't stop just because you threatened him. People like him are used to getting exactly what they want, no matter who they hurt. And there's always the chance the authorities will finally get me. Stretch my neck."

"Will you stay here with me until you figure it out?"

"Oh, Gil, I don't know."

He rose and came over to sit beside her on the bed. His hand covered hers, warm and reassuring. His eyes were open now, hiding nothing, and she felt her heart begin to hammer against her ribs. His other hand lifted to her face, leaving a trail of heat across

her bruised cheek. His lips were so close to hers, she could feel his breath fluttering against her skin.

"You know," he murmured, his thumb sweeping across her lower lip. "Of all the places I've kissed you, this isn't one of them. Yet."

He leaned in closer, and then his mouth was on hers, a gentle pressure that coaxed, rather than demanded. Her breath stopped for a moment as she just let herself feel it, let herself be cajoled and comforted by the tender motions of his lips. Then the air rushed out of her lungs at the first touch of his tongue.

God, he was shaking like an adolescent. It was a kiss, nothing more, but it was sending ripples of pleasure rushing from his mouth all the way to the tip of his cock. His hands framed her face, holding her still as his lips and tongue explored hers. His little finger rested on the pulse-point of her throat, and he knew by its rapid flutter that she was as aroused as he was. Tilting to one side, he deepened the kiss, his tongue pushing further inside the moist heat of her mouth. Her breath fanned his cheek, coming in quick, hot little bursts, and she made the smallest of whimpers in her throat, her tongue coiling with his. God, how could a simple sound stab like a blade straight through to the place where he lived? How could one kiss make him burn like this?

Her hands came up to touch his face, her fingers combing through his short beard and into the hair at his nape. Her mouth opened wider, offering him access to every nook, her head falling back. He increased the pressure, his tongue plunging in deeper, feeling her, tasting her, his head swimming as if he were drunk.

Ever so slowly, he slid one hand down the slender column of her throat to her shoulder, then her collarbone. She arched, offering her breast to him. His heart slamming against his ribs, he covered the gentle swell with his palm and squeezed. She groaned deep in her throat as her nipple hardened and jutted under his touch.

With a gasp, he broke the kiss, pulled his face away and met her gaze. Her eyes were cloudy and dark with desire. Her breath rushed in and out of her lungs like she'd run a mile, her cheeks were flushed a beautiful pink, her lips swollen from his kiss. He was

shaking all over with the effort of going slowly, of being tender and considerate. He didn't want to be patient or gentle. He wanted to shove her down, slam his aching cock in her and just fuck her forever. God, he just *wanted* her! He couldn't remember if he'd ever wanted a woman this badly.

"Lianon," he panted against her mouth, his thumb skimming across her pebbled nipple, back and forth, back and forth. "If you're going to tell me no, do it now. Because if I kiss you again, I won't be able to stop."

Her eyes dropped to his mouth and her own quirked up at one corner. "I don't want you to stop."

With a groan, he crushed his lips against hers, all the pent-up lust of the last two days finally bursting forth. His tongue plunged inside the moist cavern of her mouth, mimicking the motion his cock wanted to do to her pussy. One hand in the hair at her nape, he tugged her back until she was lying on the bed, then he stretched out on top of her, his chest pressing against her breasts. His lips left hers to kiss their way down her throat as his shaking hands pushed her shirt up to expose her breasts. Her hands buried themselves in his hair as he took one nipple deep in his mouth, sucking hard, flicking his tongue across the pebbled tip. Her breath hissed in and her back arched. His cock was throbbing, his balls so tight he thought he might come at a touch. With regret, he abandoned her breasts, wrestling with the buttons of her trousers and then yanking the uncooperative fabric down her legs and flinging it across the room. He stood briefly to drag his own trousers off, then fell back upon her, not even bothering to remove his shirt.

Her arms embraced him and her legs opened, the slick folds of her pussy cradling the head of his cock. That was all the invitation he needed, all the provocation he could stand. Gritting his teeth, he whispered, "Sorry," and shoved into her, all the way to the hilt.

She gasped, half pain half pleasure, as his shaft filled her, the walls of her cunt stretching tight around him. He tried to wait, to let her body accustom itself to his, but he was too far gone. Two days of longing, and a long night of pleasuring her over and over again, had him in a fever state. He couldn't wait, couldn't go slow. Pulling out until his

head was poised at the narrow opening of her sheath, he thrust in again, and then again. Burying his face in her neck, he pounded into her over and over, one hand gripping her ass and holding her up off the bed to meet his plunging cock.

Her legs wrapped around him, her arms held him tight, her nails digging into his back. Her gasps fanned his ear in rhythm with his thrusts, and then her teeth clamped down hard on his earlobe and that was it. He gasped, tears seeping from behind his closed eyelids, as he shot his seed straight into her heated core. And just when he thought he'd left her behind, he felt her pussy clench and spasm around him, milking the last drops from his cock.

For a few moments, he couldn't even see. Gradually, the swarming sparks that filled his vision dissipated, his heartbeat slowed, his limbs stopped tingling. Her arms were still wrapped around him, one of her hands stroking and playing with his hair. Her feet slid down his thighs to nestle in the backs of his knees. He thought about moving off her, but then decided maybe in a minute.

"You're forgiven," she said in his ear.

He raised his head and looked down at her. She was gloriously tousled, her smile lopsided.

"You said sorry. Before. I'm assuming it's because you didn't, um...attend to me properly."

He grinned, his heart strangely buoyant. "If I recall correctly, sweetness, I have, ah, *attended* to you numerous times last night and today, with precious little reciprocity forthcoming."

She feigned a look of innocent disinterest. "You know, I'm starting to feel a bit hungry again."

He laughed. "Changing the subject, eh?" He slid off her and reached down for his trousers. "Feel like dessert?" he asked as he pulled them on.

She sat up and smiled shyly, her cheeks still rosy. Her shirt was askew, hanging off her shoulder, the neckline gaping open so that he could see just the bare edge of one pink nipple. His stomach clenched and blood began to pool in his cock once more.

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"What have you got?" she asked softly.

"Pour some wine," he instructed, and went to get some honey from the cabinet in the other room.

When he returned, she was back in bed, sitting cross-legged with a glass of wine in her hand. If her shirttails weren't dangling, he'd have a perfect view of her pussy. He sat on the edge of the bed, tore a piece of bread off the loaf on the table and dipped it in the honey jar. Leaning close, he lifted it to her mouth, waggling his eyebrows when a dollop dripped off to land on her inner thigh. As she savored the honey-soaked bread, he bent and lapped the errant drop from her flesh, his nostrils flaring at the smell of sex that lingered between her legs. She squirmed and giggled, and he felt a drizzle of wine on his back and shoulder.

A second later, her tongue was on him, licking it up.

He raised his head slowly to look at her, his breath hitching at the look on her face. With one hand on his shoulder, she pushed him back until he was lying prone, his head at the foot of the bed. His heart began to pound again, and his cock was hard and throbbing.

"I thought you were hungry, minx," he said, straining to keep his voice from cracking.

She grinned wickedly and set her glass on the table. With one hand, she pushed his shirt up, exposing his belly. With the other, she reached for the honey-pot. "Shut up and let a girl eat, would you?"

His stomach was rippled like a washboard, the muscles flexing as she drizzled honey from his waistband up to his chest. She dragged one finger through the sticky, amber liquid, across one of his nipples, then the other, then brought it up to her mouth and sucked it clean. His eyes were fastened to her lips, his chest heaving, and she felt a little thrill of power that she could make him burn like this, even as she felt her clitoris start to throb. Painfully slowly, she lowered her face to his torso and tongued one of his honeyanointed nipples.

His eyes drifted shut and he groaned low in his throat. His hands came up to tangle loosely in her hair, and she smiled, lapping her way across his chest and licking every last drop of honey from his skin. His hands gripped more tightly as her mouth worked its way down across his abdomen and her fingers began to undo the buttons of his trousers.

"Lianon—"

"Hush," she said smugly, freeing his cock. It was hard as a steel spike and already bedewed with a drop of translucent white fluid at the tip. She reached again for the honey jar. Holding his shaft upright, she poured a generous amount directly on the head.

His entire body jerked. "God, Lianon!"

"Honestly," she chided with a wide grin as moisture pooled between her legs. "I don't know how I can eat with all the noise in here." And then she took the head of his cock in her mouth and began to suck. Her lips slid down his shaft, all the way to the base, then back up. She paused to smile at him, licking her lips. "Yum," she said silkily, her eyes locking with his.

With a moan, he pushed her head back down and she engulfed him again, taking him into the moist heat of her mouth until the tip of his cock nudged the back of her throat. Her tongue swirled around him as she drew back, circling the head, lapping every drop of honey from him. Then she started fucking him in earnest with mouth and hand, sucking hard, her head bobbing up and down his shaft in swift strokes until his hands fisted in her hair and he dragged her up his body.

His tongue was in her mouth, thrusting deep, his grip on her hair sending shocks of pleasure-pain right through to her center. She straddled him, her cunt dripping, her clit pulsing. With one hand, she took him and guided him inside her tight sheath, lowered herself down until his balls were nestled against her ass. Then slowly she began to slide herself up and down his cock.

Pulling back, she sat upright and looked down at his face. With excruciating slowness, she pulled her shirt off over her head and then ran her hands across her breasts and down her torso. His eyes burned, his teeth were clenched, breath exploding in and out of his flared nostrils. With a wicked grin, she reached behind her and teased the tender

skin of his balls with her fingernails, scraping lightly as her pussy engulfed his cock again and again.

"Ahhh, God, Lianon!" He jerked and shuddered, grabbing her ass and thrusting upward. She could feel every inch of him inside her, filling her, stretching her, nudging against her womb. Her hand slid down to rub the tortured little nub of her clit, and his eyes fastened on it as if he couldn't look away. Her fingers wet with her own juices, she trailed them across her nipples, loving the sensation of cool wetness on them as they tightened even more. Then she lifted her fingers to her lips and tasted her own musk, feeling a thrill of power as his eyes widened even more.

"God, what are you doing to me?" he groaned, and then his hands were all over her, on her breasts, on her ass, on her clit, and everywhere they went they brought fire. Her pussy was stretched so tight around him every motion of his cock sent a ripple of pleasure straight through her. As their rhythm increased, she felt the head of his shaft ramming up against the entrance to her womb, and with each thrust her clit slammed down against his public bone. Pressure began to build in her cunt, her lips swelling, her clit hardening into a tiny pebble of aching flesh.

His fingers dug into her buttocks, pushing her down onto his cock, thrusting up to meet her. With his other hand he reached up for her, his face a mask of agonized pleasure, and pulled her mouth down again for his kiss. She could hardly see, could only feel and taste and smell him under and inside and all around her. Reaching back, she massaged his balls, felt them tighten in preparation.

"Ah, Lianon," he hissed between his teeth, his body starting to shudder as his cock swelled deep inside her hot, wet channel. Within her, something burst open and smashed into a million tiny shards and she cried out against his lips as the muscles of her pussy clenched around him.

"Gil, oh, god!" she sobbed as her orgasm pounded through her, and then felt him stiffen underneath her as he shot his seed deep inside her welcoming warmth.

Chapter Thirteen

He really was a beautiful man. Lianon trailed her fingers across the lightly furred contours of his chest and abdomen, smiling a little that even as he slept, his cock stirred at her touch. Scars covered his arms and torso—a particularly impressive one ran from his left underarm all the way down to his hipbone. The fresh wounds she'd given him the other night glared redly at her. He'd had the cut to his bicep stitched, by someone not especially skilled from the look of things.

She looked down at herself, at the mostly healed cuts from his sword on her forearm and shoulder. Aru's healing had taken care of them. She found herself blushing at the memory. Only brief flashes of that night remained clear in her mind, most of them involving Gil's mouth and the unbelievably pleasurable things it could do to her. Part of her was grateful she could remember so little—from what she did recall, she'd behaved like an utter wanton.

Which was becoming something of a habit, she thought wryly, judging by her behavior this afternoon.

His hair stuck up in charming disarray, and now that she had the luxury to look closely, she could see scars snaking along his hairline and down one cheek beneath his beard. Marks of the life they'd both chosen. She had her share, too, on her torso and limbs—none to speak of on her face, mostly due to blind luck and Samulo's talent with needle and thread. There was a burn-scar on her back from five years ago that still tingled in the heat of summer. She had learned from that job—never try to kill a blacksmith while he's actually working hot metal.

She wondered if Gil had noticed it—in truth, he had never really seen her entire body in decent light. She wondered whether he would still desire her once he had a better look at how...damaged she was.

With a sigh, she lay back down, nestling along his length and resting her head on the flat plane of his chest. A stupid thing to wonder about. How he might feel an hour or a day or a week from now was irrelevant.

Because she had to leave him.

She'd known it the moment that man had burst through the door last night and attacked her. The fact that Gil had met with Dalton sur-Marus—it *had* to be him—and warned him off meant nothing. Dalton wouldn't let something as trifling as a threat stop him from getting his revenge. Lianon supposed she could understand that. Dalton's son Brian had taken great pains to impress on her what would happen if she went through with her plans for him. Even strapped naked to a table with a knife at his throat, he'd managed to sound like he was the one with the power. She hadn't let that stop her. She'd extracted payment for the life he'd taken, bit by bit, drop by drop. The death of a thousand cuts, Samulo called it. She could only imagine a similar death lay in store for her if Dalton ever got his hands on her.

Brian's three friends had been lesser sons of unimportant men—one had even been an orphan leeching off rich relatives who were likely more than glad to be rid of him. Brian was different. Not just the eldest child of a lord, but the only son. With Brian's death, Dalton sur-Marus was faced with the unbearable certainty that the male line of his family was no more. The man was famous in Sylphae for his misogyny—a philosophy he had all-too-successfully passed to his despicable son—and he would be livid at the thought of one of his daughters inheriting all his wealth. He was probably fucking anything in a skirt in his desperation to conceive a son to replace Brian.

That is, when he wasn't hiring Emissaries to kill Lianon. She had done her research when she arrived in Belthalas. There were nineteen Emissaries in the city—eighteen after last night. Dalton had a ways to go before he'd exhausted all his options. He'd keep trying until he finally got her, and when he did, the fact that she was a woman would only make his revenge the sweeter.

And if Gil got in the way, he'd be dead.

A few days ago, she couldn't have imagined caring enough about someone that such a thing would have mattered. But lying here in his arms, feeling like a living, breathing human for the first time in nearly a year, she knew she couldn't bring herself to put him in danger.

She wrapped her arms around him, reveling in the feel of his lean body and the warmth of his skin. Still asleep, he shifted slightly, nuzzling her neck and tightening his embrace. Her eyes prickled, but she closed them and breathed deep, counted silently in her head until the ache in her throat went away. In a day or two she'd be strong again, and she would leave him. She would leave him because she must.

As if to prove to herself that she could, she carefully disentangled herself from his slumberous embrace and rose. In the light of the dying fire, she found her shirt amid the bedclothes and pulled it on. Her glass of wine still sat on the table, half-empty. She carried it to the window and stood there, looking out into the darkness of the alley and sipping the mellow red. Outside, silver moonlight on snow lent the shabby surroundings a pristine glow.

After a while, she heard him stir and sigh, then a rustle of fabric as he rose. His bare feet padded across the pine floorboards to the hearth, and he threw more wood on. A moment later, she felt him against her back.

"What are you looking at?" he asked softly, pressing a kiss to her nape.

She forced a smile, meeting his gaze in the mullioned panes. "My reflection in the window. What are you looking at?"

He reached around her to take her glass and drained it in one long draught. "Your reflection in the window."

He set the wineglass down and encircled her waist with his hands. Before she realized what he was doing, he had taken her shirt by the hem and pulled it off over her head. Her eyes dropped to the flickering reflection of her breasts in the irregular facets of glass. Her nipples were already tightening as the cool air hit them. Her sex began to weep at the sight.

His hands returned to her belly, skimming from her waist down to her mound, his fingers slipping between her slick folds. She shifted her stance, trying to bring her aching clit into contact with his questing fingers. His teeth bit into the flesh of her shoulder as if in admonition.

"Don't be impatient," he scolded. Their eyes met in the glass and he smiled at her. Taking her hands, he lifted them to the lintel of the window, and she grabbed the thick, rough-sawn wood of the frame. He stepped slightly away from her, looking her up and down. "Arch your back."

She did as he bid, taking a step back from the window and thrusting her small breasts forward. She felt a delightful pull in the muscles of her shoulders as she stretched cat-like in front of the window, in full view of anyone who might pass by. She knew what she looked like—not voluptuous, not even particularly feminine, but strong and lean and sculpted. She could picture the expression on Gil's face as he watched her, but kept her gaze carefully averted.

He put his hand on her ass and stroked upward, his fingertips skimming between her cheeks, and then slid his palm up her back, not even pausing at the puckered, stiff surface of her burn-scar. Except for the swiftness of her breath, she held herself perfectly still as he walked to her other side, his eyes inspecting her from head to toe.

His foot nudged the inside of her ankle. "Open your legs."

She positioned her feet wider apart, hyper-aware of every inch of her body, the soles of her feet feeling every notch and flaw in the wood floor beneath them. The wet lips of her cunt opened slightly to the chill in the air. His hand was at her nape, his fingers toying with her hair, tugging her head further back.

"You're so fucking gorgeous," he whispered. "Artists should paint you. Sculptors should sculpt you."

She bit back her instinctive denial and just let his words wash over her, filling her with heat. His hands slid back down her spine to her ass, and he knelt behind her. With her back arched and her legs spread, her pussy was wide open to him. She moaned as he slipped one finger inside her, felt her muscles clench around him as if to hold him there.

Then his mouth was on her nether lips, his tongue pushing in to join his finger and his other hand parted her cheeks and began to stroke the super-sensitive, puckered skin of her anus.

"Ahhh!" Her back arched more, her muscles stretching, as she pushed herself closer to his mouth and hands. She felt one of his fingertips slip inside her ass, and shivered at the sensation. The walls of her cunt tingled and ached as more of her juices poured out to his waiting tongue.

"You like that?" he murmured, his breath fanning her clit.

"God, yes," she hissed between clenched teeth.

"Want more?"

"Yes."

His finger slid further into her anus. She'd never felt such a thing before, had never let Samulo or Rhianna ever touch her like this. Gil's finger stroked her gently, stretching her, and his tongue was back where she needed it, on her throbbing clitoris. And then finger and tongue were gone and he was back on his feet behind her. She bit her lip in frustration, barely suppressing a moan. His member was rubbing along the furrow of her cunt and between her buttocks, up and down.

"Tell me what you want, Lianon," he said, slapping her ass with his cock.

She swallowed hard. "I want you inside me."

"Where?"

Her breath coming in gasps, she pushed backward, thrusting her pussy shamelessly at him, her body stretched taut like a drawn bow. "*Inside*."

"Where?" he demanded.

"In my cunt. I want you in my cunt."

A second later, he was sheathed to the hilt just where she wanted him. His hands slid down her belly to her sex, one hand spreading her lips wide open, the other flicking her clit over and over, driving her mindless with lust.

"One day, I'm going to fuck your lovely ass," he said, his teeth nipping at her shoulder blade. "Would you like that?"

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"Yes."

"Would that make your pussy wet?"

"God, yes," she moaned, feeling herself ooze even now at the mere thought.

"Look at yourself in the window."

She obeyed him, her eyes roaming across her disjointed image in the diamonds of glass, from her tiny breasts with their rock-hard nipples, down the flat, muscled plane of her stomach to where his fingers worked her throbbing clit. Her whole body writhed in rhythm with his thrusts, with only her hands on the lintel and his at her cunt holding her upright. His face hovered at her shoulder, half-obscured by the steam forming on the cold window, his eyes raking her. The flickering firelight and the irregularities of the glass gave him an almost diabolical mien. He grinned wickedly at her and moved one hand behind her, his finger toying with her anus.

"Anyone could see you," he whispered, his voice strained with his own burgeoning climax as he began to drive faster and harder. "Anyone walking by. Does that excite you?"

"Yes."

His finger slid deeper into her anus, massaging the tight walls. She started to shudder, felt that familiar focusing of her senses. His fingers flicked across her clit, sending a bolt of pleasure straight to her core. Deep in her cunt, his cock began to swell. His eyes in the windowpane squeezed shut and he gasped, pounding into her.

She tried to swallow her cries, but it was no use. She felt his come shoot in hot spurts against her womb, her cunt spasmed around him and she screamed his name as her climax washed over her in blinding, pulsing waves.

She felt him slide, panting, down to the floor, his arms wrapped around her thighs and his head resting against her buttocks. She lowered her arms, flexing them against the painful, tingling stiffness of overuse. She longed to let herself crumple to the floor and sink into him like hot bathwater, but she knew herself too well. She couldn't do that and still keep her resolve.

She reached back and touched his head, nudging him away, disguising it as a caress. His arms fell away from her and she stepped out of his reach. Went to the washstand and splashed icy water on her face. She turned to find him sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, elbows braced on his knees, watching her.

"Did I push you too far?" he asked quietly.

Oh, yes. "No."

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

She forced herself not to look away. "You didn't." You do. You make me want to live.

He closed his eyes as if pained. "Lianon-"

She resisted the urge to cover herself. Forced words past the constriction of grief in her throat. "Gil, I can't stay here with you."

His eyes fastened on her and she felt herself coloring. To her surprise, he didn't argue. "Where will you go?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure. Andutheren, maybe. If I can draw him that far."

His lip curled up at one corner. "You going to run all your life, then?"

She shrugged, trying to ignore the pain flowering in her chest. "He's got to die sometime."

"I never had you pegged for a coward."

She felt herself bristle involuntarily, and had to fight to keep her tone level. "I'm not."

He surged to his feet with practiced agility, his smile gone, replaced by a look of clenched anger. "Not until you met me, is that it? Well, fuck you. I don't need you to sacrifice your happiness for me."

Her eyes prickled, her throat so tight she couldn't talk. Cursing herself, she folded her arms across her heaving chest. In another time, another life, she might have leapt at him in a rage, hit him, scratched his eyes from his head, but all she felt now was a smothering, wailing anguish. What was wrong with her? Had she become the coward he claimed?

His expression softened and he crossed to her, framing her face between his hands. "Lianon, I know what you're trying to do. If leaving is what you really want, then I won't stop you. But if it's because you think you're doing me some favor..."

She tried to speak but all that came out was a bizarre little sob, and then she couldn't seem to control anything, not her breath, not her tears, not her arms that clung to him as if her life depended on it.

Chapter Fourteen

The worst part was he understood exactly what she was feeling.

He held her tight, his lips pressed to her hair, as she fell to pieces. When her tears were spent, he carried her back to bed and tucked the blankets up around her. Exhaustion claimed her almost immediately, and her eyes drifted shut.

He sat in the chair beside the bed, too tense to sleep. For the first time in forever, he had no idea what he should do. He knew what he wanted. He wanted Lianon—more intensely than he'd ever wanted a woman before. He just didn't know how to make it happen. Part of him thought he ought to just track down the man who wanted her dead, and cut his throat. But deep down, he knew it wasn't that simple. An Emissary operated parallel to the law. He was safe only as long as he was under contract. As long as he was acting on behalf of a client, it was the client who would bear the brunt of any consequences. Lianon had done the unthinkable by exacting her own revenge against the men who had killed her…wife. If the authorities ever found her, she'd be put on trial for murder and almost certainly convicted. It was one thing for a trained killer to commit a murder endorsed by government or nobility. It was quite another for a commoner—and a woman, at that—to go around passing her own lethal judgment on the elite of society.

Gil thought briefly about paying blood money to the old man, but from the look in his eyes that afternoon, his need for vengeance ran too deep. He wasn't someone to be reasoned with, to be warned away or paid off.

Gil buried his face in his hands and tried to rub his scowl away. It was an impossible situation. He looked over at Lianon, his eyes drinking in the sight of her sleeping face, her lean, athletic body. Pictured her as she had looked the moment she'd walked into Aliannet's the night before last. Goddamn. Not even three days, and already he couldn't imagine life without her.

With a sigh of resignation, he rose and pulled on his clothes and boots, careful not to wake her. Crossing to the sitting room, he opened the armoire, found his sword and strapped it on. As he shrugged his coat on and settled it on his shoulders, he peeked around the door to ensure she still slept. Then he silently let himself out onto the landing and locked the door behind him.

It was still cold, but the wind had died down since the night they'd fought their duel, and the sky was crystal clear and filled with stars. He tiptoed down the stairs, hugging the left rail where the treads were less likely to creak. At the mouth of the alley, he turned north and headed toward the genuine squalor of the waterfront. Aru lived a little more than five blocks away, at the point where the neighborhood shed its last frail pretense of respectability. As Gil walked, the buildings became more decrepit, windows broken or boarded up, bricks crumbling or missing altogether. Alleys vomited refuse and offal onto the main thoroughfares, and no one seemed inclined to cart it away. Only the freezing weather kept down the stench. There were no shops to speak of—only bars, brothels and pawn shops. And a single house of healing.

For an outsider like Aru, there was a degree of acceptance to be found among the lowest in society that was not evident in the circles of the powerful. Gil understood that it was the main reason that, despite his wealth, he also lived in the wharf district.

The moon rode high in the east—it was just before middle-night. Gil knew Aru well enough to know he wouldn't be sleeping, even at this hour. Tugging his collar up to shield his neck from the cold, Gil shook his head. He didn't know what Aru would be able to do to help him. He only knew he needed to talk to a friend.

He was still two blocks from Aru's when he realized he was being followed. Fucking cutpurses. His hand went to the hilt of his sword and he prepared to turn and confront whoever it was, but then movement in several doorways up ahead drew his eye. His heart began to thud. His awareness spread to encompass the entire area, ahead and behind. Five men, maybe six, armed with cudgels. That fucking whoreson from Sylphae apparently wasn't taking any chances.

Gil let his hand fall away from his sword-hilt and broke into a run.

Aru wasn't sleeping. This was not for lack of trying. But the condition that Aru had, over a thousand years, come to think of as sleep was entirely lost to him. In the eighteen years since the Great War, he hadn't actually slumbered a single moment. Each night, he climbed into his bed, closed his eyes and entered a state of altered—but not *un*— consciousness. His dreams, when he could remember them, were muted and monochromatic—a mockery of what they had been when he was still immortal, still truly Darjhian. The harsh effects of his fall overlaid everything, blunting edges and washing all the color out of his dreams, but rendering his new reality almost painfully sharp.

The face of his wife Zharina—whom he had not seen in more than eight hundred years—was now nothing more than a diminishing blur in his mind. His heart yearned for her as if for a place half-remembered. The ache was so constant he didn't even feel it most of the time. It was as natural as breathing now.

He tried to make a picture of her in his head—a heart-shaped face with high cheekbones, eyes huge and slanted, one emerald green, the other indigo. Her hair was the red of strong-wine, shot through with streaks of copper and bronze. Her skin like cream, her lips like rose petals, invited a man's touch. Her body was perfect and unblemished.

But it was all wrong. The picture was just parts assembled by a blind sculptor who worked from hazy memory. It didn't live. It wasn't real.

It would never be as real as the life he had now, as real as the minuscule cracks in the plaster over his head, the pattern of wrinkles and stains on his linen sheets, the tracks of mice in the snow on his window ledge. If he closed his eyes, he saw not the delicate beauty of his beloved's face, but the painted faces of whores and the squalor in which they lived. He'd finally forgotten what paradise looked like.

With a sigh, Aru rose and walked naked down the stairs to the room that served as both kitchen and infirmary. He didn't light a candle—his vision in the dark was one thing that had remained unchanged since his fall. High shelves lined the walls, filled with jars and bottles of healing herbs and extracts. Several were useful for the treatment of insomnia. He ignored them in favor of the cask of mead on the table. He poured himself a generous cup and drank it down, relishing the sweetness. He didn't know why he was so restless tonight. Even the pathetic facsimile of what had once been sleep eluded him. Inside, he felt scoured raw, an empty cavern eroded by the bitter acid of memory.

With a fatalistic shrug, he poured himself another cup of mead and returned upstairs to his bedchamber. In the perfect dark of his room he stood at the window, looking out at the moonlit street below. A gaunt whore stood across the way, calling offers to the drunks passing by. After a while, one of them took her up on it and they retreated to a nearby alley where the shadows would hide them.

There was no hiding from Aru's faultless night vision, though. He watched as the man shoved the prostitute up against the wall and freed his cock from his trousers. With perfect clarity, Aru saw him gather up the woman's skirts, push his stiff organ into her cunt and start to thrust. Her face was blank like a doll's.

To his chagrin, Aru felt his own cock stiffen at the sight. Feeling bleak and maudlin, but still aroused, he drained his mead, his free hand gripping his hardened shaft. He shuddered with self-reproach, even as his hand began to work, arousal vying with revulsion. He had once been renowned among his kind, an object of admiration and envy. Now he was nothing more than a pathetic voyeur spying on the petty sins of the lowest gutter trash. Was this all there was for him? Had he fallen so far?

He set his empty cup aside and worked his hand up and down the length of his shaft, watching the couple across the street. His breath frosted the windowpane and he swept his free hand across it, everything inside him bent on what was transpiring across the way. The man was shoving into the whore's pussy, his face a mask of lust. The whore let him, her eyes fastened dully on one of the few street torches. Every bead of sweat on the man's brow was visible to Aru from his vantage point. He felt a bizarre thrill at how excited the man was, and how bored the woman. As the man's enthusiasm grew, Aru felt his balls tighten, felt his senses gather and focus on the motion of his fisted hand on his cock. A second later, his seed spurted from the tip of his shaft, spattering the cold windowpane with flecks of white, a mockery of the spotless snow outside.

He stood for a few moments, one hand on the window-frame, and let his breath return to normal. He watched as the whore collected her coin and the man sauntered away. Despite having just come, Aru was dissatisfied and filled with chagrin. What he'd just done wasn't sex. It wasn't even really masturbation. It was pointless. Taking a cloth from the washstand, he cleaned the evidence of his weakness from the window.

A low, gurgling growl erupted. Aru put one hand to his suddenly cavernously empty stomach. Taking his trousers and shirt from the trunk at the foot of the bed, he put them on and went back down to the kitchen. Orgasm—satisfying or not—always made him hungry.

Halfway through a loaf of oat bread and a round of soft, white cheese, he heard something fall across his kitchen door. There was no knock, no voice hailing him, just a sliding thump and then silence.

His heart hammering, he crept to the door and pulled it open. On his step was the crumpled heap of a man, covered with blood and bruises. It took Aru a few moments to realize he knew who it was.

Stooping, he lifted Gil's face, fingers feeling at his throat for a pulse. Weak and fluttering, but there. Carefully, he gathered the wounded man up and prepared to bring him inside.

"No—" It was more a croak than a word.

Aru looked down at his friend's battered, bloody face. "It is all right, Gil al-Moirae. I'll help you."

"Lianon...she's alone."

Aru tensed. "Where?"

"My place..."

Aru scowled into the dark of the street. He oughtn't move Gil farther than the examining table behind him, but...

"Is she in danger?"

Gil tried to nod, but the motion turned into a flinch. "Maybe..."

With a grimace, Aru dragged Gil inside and shut the door, leaving him half-propped against the wall. "All right. All right. I'm going to get my boots. Don't move."

Gil's puffy, scabbed lips stretched in a wan smile. "Never fear."

Aru took the stairs up to his bedroom three at a time, jerked his boots on without bothering about socks, and snatched up his coat. He was still fastening the frogs when he skidded to a stop back in front of Gil. "You must forgive me," he apologized tersely, crouching down to gather up Gil's droopy limbs. "This is going to be bumpy."

With the barely conscious man hugged against his chest like a child, Aru straightened. Though Gil was larger and heavier than Aru, it wasn't hard to hold him. Were he still immortal, Aru would be able to easily bear twice Gil's weight for an indefinite length of time. Even fallen, he could run six blocks with a grown man in his arms.

He set off at a trot, following Gil's blood-streaked trail in the packed snow, ignoring the stares of those abroad—whores, drunks and pimps, and the thieves who preyed on them. To them, he was largely still a freak, even after several years in the neighborhood.

A block away, he came upon the place where Gil was attacked. Blood spattered the snow in a wide swath—and not just Gil's. Three bodies sprawled lifeless in the middle of the street. Oak staves were strewn nearby, stained red. Gil's sword lay next to them, the blade snapped in two.

Gorgorn's seven Hells.

"Fucking scum..." Gil murmured, rousing briefly. "Couldn't find a professional...to go up against me...so he sends scum..."

His stomach clenching painfully, Aru increased his gait.

A block from Gil's, Aru spotted a familiar face in the meager shelter of a doorway. The whore Viera was entertaining a client—with considerably more enthusiasm than the whore he had watched from his window, Aru thought wryly. Her cheeks were rosy from more than the cold, and her hands rubbed vigorously between the man's legs—and her own—as he buried his face in her bosom. Aru had to call her name three times before she

heard him. When she did, her face went white and she squirmed out of her indignant customer's embrace to rush over.

"Master Aru?" she squeaked, stuffing her breasts back in her bodice, her eyes wide and terrified. "My god, what *happened*?"

Aru ignored her question. "Where is Rat?"

She reached out as if to touch Gil's injured face, then snatched her hand back. "In the Crown, like always."

"Fetch him now. We must make certain that Lianon is safe."

Her eyes flew to Aru's, round with new fear, then she turned on her heel and tore for the tavern entrance. Before Aru had reached the landing outside Gil's door, Rat and Viera were pounding up the steps.

Aru turned to them, his face grim. "Have you a key?"

Rat rooted though his pockets and in a moment had the door unlocked.

For a second, Lianon thought she was under attack again. Heavy boot-falls sounded in the other room, and she shot out of bed like a comet. Unconsciously, she adopted a defensive stance, shoulders square, feet apart, knees bent.

"Lianon? Lianon!"

By degrees, she recognized Viera's voice and closed her eyes, counting backwards until her heartbeat returned to normal.

"I'm in here," she answered, dragging the sheet off the bed to cover herself.

She glanced up to see the Darjhan Aru walk into the bedroom carrying...something.

Her eyes blurred, but she blinked the tears away and forced herself to look. *Oh, god, Gil.* She lifted a hand to her mouth, swallowing against the sudden urge to retch. She'd known this would happen—she just hadn't realized how quickly sur-Marus would act.

"He lives," Aru said, sensing the question she couldn't bring herself to ask. "Maybe not for long."

Grief and remorse gave way to relief, then renewed fear. She grabbed the bedpost as her knees threatened to crumple. "Please, help him. Do...whatever it is that you do."

Aru laid him gently on the mattress, took the pillow from under his head and tucked it beneath his feet. "It isn't that simple. I cannot draw from him. He's too weak. It would kill him." He looked up at Lianon, his eyes glittering. "I will need a surrogate. A proxy."

She squared her shoulders and stepped forward, keeping her legs stiff lest they buckle. "I'll do it."

He shook his head. "It is too soon since the last time. I cannot take more without permanently damaging you. It would age you, and wither your womb. I can't do that, not even to save the life of my friend." His gaze flicked toward Viera, who had busied herself lighting candles.

Lianon approached her, reaching out to touch her hand. She didn't speak—simply let the tacit question hang in the air between them. Viera's eyes met Lianon's and held for a long moment. Then she straightened and turned to Aru.

"Would it affect me the same way?"

"Not if I am cautious."

The whore nodded, her face grim. "What do I do?"

"Lie here on the bed, where I can reach you both."

She took a hesitant step in the direction of the bed, then paused. "Should I undress?"

"You needn't do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

She laughed at the absurdity. "Master Aru, taking off my clothes never makes me uncomfortable." The Darjhan bared his teeth in a semblance of a grin, and Viera began to unlace her dress. Aru drew a dagger from his belt and started to gingerly cut away Gil's clothes.

Feeling raw and fearful, yet oddly aroused, Lianon dragged her eyes from the three of them and went to Rat, who stood in the bedroom doorway, leaning on the frame. She glanced up at his face, cringing inwardly at his expression. He was cold, closed, reproachful. She didn't blame him for feeling that way.

She took a deep breath and somehow managed to keep her hands relaxed at her sides. "I can only assume this happened because of me. I need a favor."

He stared coolly down at her. "I'm listening."

"The man who did this—his name is Dalton sur-Marus. He wants me dead. He won't let Gil stand in his way, and he won't stop. You know the city, Rat. You have contacts. I need you to find out where he's staying. Whether he has anyone protecting him. Where he eats. Does he indulge in the services of whores?" She paused, swallowing her natural distaste. "And I need you to get me a dress. Expensive, but revealing. Nothing too gaudy—I want him to take me for the kind who services gentlemen, not a half-penny slut."

A reluctant smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. "You're going to kill him."

"Oh, yes."

He nodded his approval. "I'll get started now, then, before the drunks sober up enough to stop talking. I have a key to let myself back in."

She touched his arm. "Thank you."

He let himself out and locked the door behind him. Lianon closed her eyes for a moment and steeled herself against what she would see when she turned.

Viera had already stretched out naked on her back. Aru knelt between her and Gil, who was also naked, his wounds exposed in all their horror.

"How many men attacked him?" Lianon asked unsteadily.

"Three at least."

"How do you know?" Viera asked.

"That's how many he killed. There were two sets of tracks leading away, but I didn't look long enough to determine if they belonged to other assailants." Aru put his palm on Gil's forehead and closed his eyes. "We must begin." Reaching out with his other hand, he touched Viera's belly. He recoiled for a second, his eyes opening wide in surprise. "You have much power, beautiful one." He settled his hand back on her skin slowly and gingerly, as if she was too hot to touch without pain, and his eyes drifted shut once more.

Viera sighed and stretched, cat-like, smiling. Lianon knew what she would be feeling, and her own sex started to melt at the sight. Her eyes heavy-lidded, Viera gazed up at Lianon, her breath starting to come swift and uneven. "Lie with me," she

whispered, one hand reaching, the other sliding down her own torso to dip between her legs. "Ah, *god*, Lianon, come here. Please..." Her back arched, her eyes fluttering shut.

Lianon thought about how Gil had helped her before, even as desire made wetness pool between her own thighs. Viera was gorgeous—curvy and soft in all the places Lianon wasn't. She remembered how quickly the whore had come for her—both times. She had a body made for sex. And it would help Gil.

Lianon looked over at him. Already the swelling around his eyes and mouth had begun to shrink. Aru's hand skimmed lightly over his battered flesh, stroking almost sensually. Lianon's belly tightened and she felt her nipples go hard. She let the sheet slide down her body and knelt on the floor next to Viera. Lianon placed her hand on Aru's for a bare second, then let it sweep up to Viera's breasts. Rolling one nipple between her fingers, she bent her head and sucked hard on the other, relishing the other woman's instant and dramatic response.

"God, god, *god*, Lianon!" Viera rasped, her hands burying themselves in Lianon's hair. With amazing strength, Viera dragged Lianon's face up and ground her lips onto hers. Their tongues coiled and lapped at each other briefly, then Viera tore her mouth away. Her body tossing on the mattress, she shoved Lianon down toward the foot of the bed. "Ah, Lianon, kiss me. *Kiss me*."

Her hands sliding down Viera's torso, Lianon positioned herself between the whore's legs. She pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, breathing deep, Viera's scent filling her nostrils. She had been afraid that the other woman's sex might be soiled with the seed of her customers, or worse, diseased. But the only scent that struck her senses was the clean, familiar musk of feminine arousal. Lianon wet her lips. This was a thing she had done for only one woman. A thing she had only done for love. She looked up along Viera's length, past her breasts where she toyed with her own nipples to her head, tossing back and forth on the pillow. Writhing, Viera thrust her pussy at her face, and Lianon felt her own clit begin to throb at the thought of putting her mouth there.

With her thumbs, she opened Viera's swollen labia. The flesh parted like the petals of an orchid, and the most delicious scent poured out. Lianon's tongue darted out,

stabbing at the other woman's clitoris, and Viera's entire body spasmed. Smiling, Lianon pushed two fingers into Viera's wet channel and sucked her rigid little clit into her mouth, pulling hard on it, as if suckling on a breast. Viera's back arched right off the mattress and she screamed hoarsely. Cream flooded into Lianon's waiting mouth as Viera's pussy clenched and pulsed around her fingers.

"Yes," Aru said softly. "That's it."

"Like this?" Lianon asked him, sliding up Viera's body to devour her breasts, her fingers plunging in and out of Vera's hot flesh while her thumb rubbed her clit. Very quickly, she had driven the other woman to a second shuddering, screaming climax.

She looked at Aru. The Darjhan knelt between Viera and Gil, absolutely motionless. His eyes were open and staring, but Lianon could tell he was blind to the world around him. Her glance flicked to his crotch. His cock was hard, the bare tip protruding from the waist of his trousers, adorned with a single bead of fluid. She wondered if he enjoyed sex, or if it was simply work to him. She knew the Darjhi could mate with Andun—that was, after all, how the Kurgae'in had come to be—but she had no idea whether he would find such a thing pleasurable.

Her lips working down the other woman's belly, Lianon pulled her fingers from Viera's pretty pussy and stroked them down into the crease between her cheeks. She remembered how Gil's finger had felt in her own rosebud and thought Viera might enjoy it as much. Pressing her mouth back onto Viera's swollen folds, she slipped one wet fingertip inside Viera's anus.

"Oh god, oh *god! Lianon!*" Viera screamed, her body shuddering, her back lifting off the mattress as she came once more.

With a smile, Lianon pressed a tender kiss to the other woman's clenching pussy and prepared for more. Aru's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"She must rest," he whispered, leaning his face so close, his breath stirred the hair at Lianon's nape. "He is safe for now."

With a shaky sigh, Lianon dragged her gaze away from Viera's beautiful, curvy body and over to Gil's still-battered one. She scrubbed a hand across her mouth. "He looks little improved," she said softly, trying to contain her worry.

Aru carefully climbed out from between the unconscious Gil and the exhausted, semi-conscious Viera, and stood. "His skull was fractured, and there was blood gathering on the brain. This wound would have killed him before morning, so I mended it first. His right kidney was crushed, reduced to pulp, and bleeding into his abdomen. Within days, it would have leeched his life away. This wound I mended next. The swelling on the left of his face was from a pulverized eye socket and cheekbone. Had I left it, he would have lost the eye. That wound was third. His collarbone and shoulder-blade were shattered on the right, as were three bones in his wrist. This was his sword-arm, necessary for his livelihood. I mended these wounds next. The rest of his injuries will cause him pain, but no lasting damage. We will let Viera rest, and try again later."

Lianon blinked. It took a moment for his words, the true horror of Gil's injuries, to sink in. She waited until she knew she could speak without breaking down. "Thank you, Aru. Thank you for his life."

Aru rose and walked to Viera's side, retrieving the sheet and spreading it over her and Gil, then pulling up the blankets. His fingers trailed along the edge of the coverlet and the stray curls that had fallen across it. "Before I fell, I could do so much more. I could drag a man out from the very throat of death and leave no trace of his wounds. If I were still pure, still Darjhi, Gil would be walking right now. He would have no pain, no scars, no lingering weakness." His eyes flicked briefly up at Lianon and he pulled his hand back from Viera's hair as if he only then realized what he was doing. "It makes me ashamed how little I can do."

Lianon went to the washstand and splashed water on her face, then found her clothes and started to pull them on. "You saved his life."

Aru's gaze was still on Viera's face as if he couldn't bring himself to look away. "Yes. I might not have. Tonight was exceptional. This woman is...exceptional."

Lianon's fingers paused on the buttons of her trousers. "Do you desire her?"

His eyes met Lianon's, bright and slanted as a cat's in the dimness of the room. "It is not my place to desire her."

"Why not? You are a man. She is a woman."

He smiled sadly and shook his head. "I am pledged to another."

Lianon blinked. "You're married?"

"I am. Her name is Zharina."

Lianon found the half-full bottle of wine on the table and poured a cup for Aru, and another for herself. "So, what does your wife, ah...how does she feel about the nature of your work?"

Aru took his cup and drank deep. His hand was visibly shaking. "I don't know what she thinks of it. She resides in the Deathless Land."

Lianon raised her brows. "When did you last see her?"

"After the Holocaust. Those of us who survived the genocide fled to the Deathless Land. But Paldir god would not permit us to abandon you Andun to Mordraghil's vengeance. He decreed that six thousand of us return to Serpere and use our Power to hold the western border of the Dragon's Head. During the choosing, my lot was drawn. Zharina's was not."

Lianon couldn't believe what she was hearing. "But that's more than eight hundred years!"

"Yes."

"And in all that time, you've never..."

He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. "I have remained faithful to my wife."

Lianon felt an odd tightness in her throat, her eyes and nose prickling with sudden tears. "Mordraghil is dead. The Kurgae'in no longer serve him. The Dragon's Head is an empty wasteland. Why don't your people return home?"

He looked away, but not before she saw the glitter of moisture in his eyes. "Most have done so. I cannot. I am no longer deathless. That way is closed to me."

Her fists clenched at her sides and her face flushed. She couldn't understand how he could be so accepting. Or how a woman could be so selfish that she would send her husband into exile and remain in paradise without him. "Will she ever come to you?"

He made a sound—half laugh half sob. "Why would she? In the Deathless Land, she has all she could ever need."

"Not her husband."

"I am fallen. I am not the man she married. But she is my wife still."

At his helpless, hopeless words, Lianon felt her anger drain away until all that was left was a bleak sympathy. She reached over, took his hand and squeezed it. "Oh, Aru. You deserve some happiness. It wouldn't hurt her. She wouldn't even know. And even if she did, after all this time, why would she care?"

He stared down at their joined hands. "I would know. I would care."

Lianon's breath caught on a sigh. Aru's hand held hers firmly, but without warmth or enthusiasm. She gently pulled her fingers from his grasp and turned away before she did something that would embarrass them both, like start sobbing like a baby.

Aru went to the table and poured more wine for both of them. "You know who did this to Gil?"

Absurdly grateful for the change of topic, Lianon nodded. "A man named sur-Marus. It's me he wants dead. His son killed someone I loved. So I killed his son. I...did not aspire to be merciful in the task. After I was attacked last night, Gil saw the man and tried to warn him off. I guess it didn't work."

"What will you do?"

"With Rat's help, I'm going to kill him."

Aru nodded. "That is wise. If it is helpful, I know of a Kurgan apothecary who is very knowledgeable about toxins."

Lianon smiled. "Have you his address?"

"I do. But for now, you should rest. If you like, you may lie between them. It will help Gil heal to have his lover's warm flesh against him. Viera, as well, will benefit from your nearness."

Lianon gazed longingly at the bed. There was just enough room for her down the middle of the mattress, and the intimacy of lying between Gil and Viera was very appealing. "What if more men come?"

Aru pulled the chair up close to Viera's side of the bed and sat. "I will sit watch. I can promise you, no harm will come to any of you while I am here."

He was so somber Lianon couldn't help but believe him, Darjhian pacifism notwithstanding. Still she kept her clothes on as she crept up the center of the mattress and wiggled under the blankets, trying not to jostle Gil in the process. Aru might be able to defend them against assault, but Lianon would sleep better knowing she could leap from the bed and help, if she had to, with her both her clothing and her dignity intact.

Aru let the candles gutter and the fire burn low. He didn't need the light, and the cold had no power to touch him. He sat for a long time, trying to summon an image of Zharina's face, but each time, his wife's beloved features faded as if in a mist, to be overlaid by those of the whore Viera.

In the eighteen years since his fall, Aru had laid his hands on many Andun—both the injured and the surrogates who were sometimes necessary to heal them. He had never encountered anyone as...ardent as this woman. As open and uncomplicated in her responses. When he'd first placed his palm on her belly, he'd felt a crackling surge of power leap from her flesh and into his, so strong it almost made him afraid. He had done more with that power tonight than he would have thought possible.

And now, he could not banish her from his mind.

As if of its own volition, his hand reached out to hover in the air above her sleeping form. His eyes roamed across her slumbering features—the softly rounded cheek, the full, pink lips, the delicate, intricate shell of her ear. One arm was bent, her head pillowed on it. The other lay on Lianon's hip as if reaching for comfort. The sheet was pulled taut across Viera's full breasts, and the growing chill in the room had affected them in predictable fashion. Her nipples thrust up against the linen as if inviting his touch. He resisted, as he must.

Closing his eyes, he tried to focus on something else, but he should have known better. Cut off from physical sight, his inner awareness sharpened, yearning toward her. His hand still hovered inches from her skin, but now his consciousness was descending even closer, skimming over her sleeping form. The fingers of his thought caressed creamy soft skin dotted with freckles and minute imperfections, each one fascinating to the Darjhan. He drew in a deep breath, the scent of her arousal filling his nostrils, even as his spirit reveled in the unique redolence of her soul.

Beneath the clinging blanket of his consciousness, her body began to respond, her heartbeat quickening, her breaths deepening. He sank partway into her and felt her muscles flex and shift around him as she stretched, her chest rise and fall on a sigh. In the air above her, his hand began to tremble.

And then it was grasped.

With a vertiginous feeling of being drawn across a chasm, he returned to himself and opened his eyes.

Viera stared up at him, her eyes wide and vulnerable, his hand cradled between both of hers and held to her breast. He felt suddenly breathless, unable to drag his gaze from the woman's. Heat poured from her hands into his flesh, and his cock hardened at the sensation. Ruthlessly he willed the erection away. What had he been thinking? To touch her uninvited—even in spirit—was a presumption, an abuse. He was no better than a lecher pinching the bottoms of tavern girls. He tried to think of something to say that might excuse his behavior, but what excuse was there? Weakness and loneliness could not pardon his trespass.

She lifted his hand to her mouth, and his stomach tightened in an agony of selfrestraint as she pressed a searing kiss to it. Her face blurred for a moment, then the tears slipped free of his lashes. He kept perfectly still, but for the air that rushed in and out of his lungs.

She took his hand and placed it over her heart. Even through the sheet, the feel of her was unbearably hot. Her eyes closed and she drifted back into dreams, but she did not release her hold on him.

He sat beside her and felt her heart beating evenly beneath his palm. He thought about his wife. Thought about what Lianon had said to him tonight. Thought about what he had become.

He gazed down at the sleeping woman's face for a long time. Then, ever so carefully, he made himself draw his hand from her grasp.

Chapter Fifteen

Rat brought breakfast with the first light of morning. Rising unsteadily from her place between Viera and Gil, Lianon took up the duties of hostess, rummaging through the pantry cabinet for chipped *jaffha* bark while Aru started a fire in the stove in the main room and set water on to boil. Soon the aroma of brewing *jaffha* filled the apartment. Lianon and Aru took the settee, and Rat dragged Gil's trunk up to the table to sit on.

"How's Gil?" Rat asked as Lianon poured him a cup. He sipped gratefully, closing his eyes and taking a deep whiff of the steam.

"He is out of danger, but far from healed," Aru said, breaking a chunk of bread off the loaf and laying a slice of soft white cheese on it. He set it carefully on the stovetop so the cheese could melt. "He will not be able to resume his usual activities for some time. When Viera recovers, we will try again."

"What did you find out?" Lianon asked Rat around a mouthful of fresh, warm bread.

"Dalton's staying at an inn at the edge of the merchant district—about eight blocks from here. Flaxton's. He has two men guarding him—that I know of. Tough men, wellbuilt. They look experienced. I watched all night," he added, rubbing his red-rimmed eyes. "He had three girls in the room with him. Young, pretty, expensive. They didn't look happy when they left." His eyes met Lianon's. "Torn clothes, bruises. One was bleeding from the nose."

"From him or his goons?"

"I can't imagine he's the type to share. Unless he's a voyeur. He's a bit long in the tooth to stick it in three girls in one night."

Lianon refused to consider that unhappy possibility. "I need to know where I can find a decent dress. I've got plenty of money."

Rat scowled into his *jaffha*. "I don't know, Lianon. If you're considering what I think you are..."

"You'd rather have me fight my way through his bodyguards?"

"Just take some time to think about it. I'll track down those girls and see what information I can get from them. You'll need time to plan anyway."

"I need to get this done before he sends someone else against us."

Rat picked a piece of imaginary lint from the sleeve of his jacket—it was so threadbare, even the pills had worn off. "At this point, no one outside this apartment knows if Gil will even live. For that matter, as far as the outside world knows, you're on your deathbed as well. I'll indicate as much, the next time I'm out and about. Sur-Marus isn't going to pay more men to kill you if there's a chance you'll just expire on your own. That might buy us an extra day."

She shook her head. "This isn't business with him, Rat. He doesn't want me to die in my sleep. If he hears I'm laid up, he's just as likely to redouble his efforts. Spread what news you will of Gil, but I would ask you keep your own council about me. And I need you to keep your ears open. If he contracts another Emissary, I want to know who, and when."

Rat made a face. "That will require some money. I can't be everywhere at once, and I'll need something to pay my informants."

"You let me worry about that. What about a gown?"

Rat squinted at her, his eyes roaming up and down her length. "I think I can find something ready made in your general size. We'll likely have to take it in across the bust, but that won't prove too difficult."

"Ha!" Lianon snorted. "The only thing I've ever stitched together is a wound—and let's just say the resulting scar was spectacular."

"I'm fair with a needle," Rat said, lifting his chin. "If I wasn't, I'd be walking around naked by now. It was me who mended your shirt, before Gil threw it in the fire."

Lianon stood on the street outside Flaxton's and scolded herself for a coward. She was an Emissary of Davnia, trained by a Kurgan *shahar*, by god! She had killed men twice her size in fights both honest and horribly lopsided, had survived a childhood of

squalor on the streets of Sylphae when most would have curled up in a gutter and died. Surely she had courage equal to that of a common whore, to enter this building and make her way down a hallway to a man's room.

She resisted the impulse to check the drape of her dress. Rat had chosen well—the deep blue velvet complemented her fair features and brought out the little bit of color in her gray eyes. It was trimmed with silver piping, not lace, and the effect was an understated, but feminine, elegance. The dress was form-fitting through the midriff and hip, flaring out naturally in the skirt. Depending on how she walked, she could give a decent glimpse of the shape of her legs through the fabric. As Rat predicted, it had required some adjustment in the bust, but he wasn't lying about his skill with a needle and thread. She couldn't even see his stitches.

With a muttered curse, Lianon lifted a hand to her hair. The comb felt like it was going to fall out any second.

"The more you poke at it, the likelier it will dislodge," Rat chided gently from beside her.

Lianon turned and glared at him. "I hate this paint," she muttered, resisting the impulse to press her fingers to her heavily rouged cheek. "It's so stiff and greasy. I can't believe I let Viera talk me into it." She kept wanting to drag her sleeve across her mouth, but that would ruin both her dress, and the rosy lips Viera had so painstakingly tinted.

Rat shrugged and sucked his teeth. "Best listen to Viera. She's the expert on whores." With an impatient flourish, he threw one end of his scarf over his shoulder. "Ought to get on with it, Lianon. I'd as soon get back indoors before middle-night."

"How long has it been?" Counting in her head, Lianon tried to gauge the time that had passed since she'd drank the vial of bitter black liquid. Was it a quarter-hour yet? The Kurgan had warned her that the window of opportunity was narrow, but that the serum needed at least that long to work. Any major deviation on either side of the window could kill her.

"Long enough," Rat grumbled. "Best get on with it."

"The Kurgan said—"

"I heard what he said." Leaning to one side, Rat spat in the snow. "Fucking Kurgan. They should all have stayed in the Dragon's Head, where they belong."

Lianon bit her tongue on a nasty retort. She had been seven and living in an orphanage in Sylphae during the year of the Great War. For her, the battle that decided the fate of the world had passed entirely unnoticed. Rat had lost his father and two of his brothers to Kurgan steel. He was entitled to nurse his grudge.

With a mental shake, she forced her doubts aside. Fishing in her sleeve for the capsule, she popped it in her mouth and tucked it between her cheek and gum. It sat there like a little fragment of doom. "All right. I'm ready."

"Room 26," he said, keeping his voice low. "Two floors up, and at the very end of the corridor. Way back there—you scream, no one's likely to hear you. He's got two men with him. The big one's just smart enough to be dangerous, but it's the wiry little one you need to be wary of. Cold and clever. Do your best to steer clear of him."

Lianon nodded, squaring her shoulders.

"You won't be able to see me, but I'll be in the courtyard, right below your window. You need me, holler your head off. I'll find a way in."

"All right," she said, starting up the steps.

"Wait." His hand on her arm stopped her. "Are you sure about this?"

"Now is hardly the time to ask."

He shifted his feet and frowned up at the inn. "It occurs to me that Gil might not be pleased I helped you do this."

She jerked her arm free and scowled up into his face. "This is my problem. My business. I should have killed this son of a bitch before I left Sylphae. I'm not about to give him another chance to hurt Gil." She turned back to the stairs.

"Lianon. Be careful."

In reply, she brushed one hand across her backside as she mounted the steps, a favorite gesture of prostitutes that, loosely translated, meant, "Kiss my ass". She smiled at his stifled guffaw. Then she was standing on the landing outside the gaming room door.

Heads turned as she entered, but within moments, she was judged and pigeonholed. Girls in the sex trade all used the game room entrance—less chance of running into a respectable female in here than in the main foyer. Lianon's face-paint more than adequately announced her vocation, despite the elegance of her dress. With hardly a second glance, most of the men in the room went back to their drinking and gambling.

Lianon scanned the floor and, unable to find sur-Marus, headed for the stairs at the back of the room.

A hand on her arm stopped her. "Might I ask where you're going, miss?"

Her eyes met those of a burly but decent-looking fellow in shirtsleeves and an apron. She felt herself tensing, and took a deep breath. The man's smile was polite, if cool. It was obvious he meant her no harm. It was this cumbersome, female get-up she wore that had her skittish as a doe-rabbit in a room full of wolves. Her stomach in knots, she forced a smile and a relaxed tone. "I'm here for the Lord Dalton sur-Marus."

The man's appreciative gaze roamed over her. She wasn't unaccustomed to men looking at her that way—there was no shortage of lechers in the world who enjoyed the charms of boys—but it had never made her feel so imperiled before. She could feel her face warm under his scrutiny and hoped her rouged cheeks would hide her discomfiture. "New, are you?" he said softly.

"I—" She bit her lip, her hands clenched together at her waist. "This is my first time, sir. Stefano sent me because Krista and the others didn't please milord last night. He said they were too...well seasoned."

"Kaela's already in there with him," the man said, his smile warming. "Perhaps you'd like a drink of something? You know, to help your nerves?" His thumb had begun to rub across the soft skin at the inside of her elbow. She fought the urge to cringe.

She pulled her arm delicately from his grasp and shrugged an apology. "If Kaela's there, that means I'm late. I'm sorry, sir. Perhaps when I'm, ah, done."

He winked. "If I'm not here when you get out, just ask for Virgil."

She didn't reply, but kept her smile fixed until her back was turned. Then scowling, she mounted the staircase to the upper gallery, and followed it to a private hallway, away

from the noise and smoke—and eyes—of the gaming room. Ascending a second, enclosed stairway, she found herself in a dimly lit corridor. It didn't look like anyone else was lodged on this floor. Number 26 was at the very end of the hall.

Outside the door, she lifted a hand to check her hair. It was pulled back from her face with the infernal comb and had been curled with a hot iron to fall in a tangle of waves over her ears, obscuring the pinprick holes from her many piercings. With swift economy of motion, she smoothed the soft velvet of her dress, shook her skirts until they draped nicely and pulled out the tiny mirror of silver Viera had loaned her to examine her makeup. With her tongue, she gently prodded the capsule tucked in her cheek. The thick, gelatin coating was beginning to soften. No time to dawdle.

She put the mirror back in her reticule, took a deep breath, counted silently to ten and knocked.

An irritated, ginger-haired giant answered. Eyes narrowed in derision, he raked her from head to toe with his gaze. "What do you want?"

"I...um," she stammered, her eyes flicking from the scars on his face to the short sword he wore at his hip. "I'm late. I was supposed to be with Kaela. Stefano, well, he said milord was weary of sluts. Said he wanted something innocent."

The man's hand shot out and grabbed her breast, squeezing hard. "And that would be you, would it?"

Lianon stiffened reflexively, not needing to feign her dismay. "I—I mean, I have *done* things, of course, but never...*that*. Not yet. I was supposed to go to the Lord Reeve, but Stefano does appreciate milord sur-Marus' business..."

The man's touch grew gentler, but at the same time more purposeful. One thumb hooked under the edge of her bodice, pulling it down to expose her breast, all while she stood in the doorway, in plain view of anyone who might come down the hall. He grinned, displaying yellowing teeth and speckled gums, and flicked a finger across her nipple.

She gasped at the sting, jerking backward and tugging her dress back into place. "Please, *sir!* I am for your employer. I might not know much about highborns, but I do know they don't like to take second-hand goods!"

The man's grin turned black. "And I know plenty about whores, enough to know that even the ones as claim to be virgins 'ave been fucked a time or two. You're already second-hand goods, and you know it. Now come in here and give me some, darlin'."

Oh, shit, she so did not need this. She could practically feel the capsule dissolving in her mouth, and this hulking, surly ape was going to ruin everything for a cheap grope in the goddamn hallway. His hands were reaching for her, and he was big enough to get his way. Even as she backed away and gave an appallingly realistic fearful, girlish squeal, she was resigning herself to letting him fuck her up against the wall. If he was fast, she'd still make it in time for the poison to do its work on sur-Marus.

"Wilt, what the fuck are you doing, now?" came a growl from inside the suite.

Her attacker's enjoyment suddenly curdled. "Nothin'," he snapped over his shoulder, glowering at Lianon.

A second man emerged in the doorway. His head hardly reached Wilt's shoulder and he couldn't be much heavier than Lianon, but from the coldness of his eyes, she thought he could probably eat Wilt for breakfast without a single, ginger hair getting stuck in his teeth. His pale blue gaze seemed to measure her in a heartbeat, and dismissed her just as quickly. He turned to Wilt. "Quit playing, shite for brains."

Wilt reached out and grabbed Lianon's wrist hard enough to bruise, and jerked her inside. "Just wanted to get me a taste, is all," he mumbled.

"You'll get a turn, never fear," the smaller man promised, his lips smiling, but his eyes dead. He turned to Lianon. "You're late."

"I know," she said, her hands clasped at her waist. "I'm terribly sorry. Stefano wanted me to look just right..." She glanced around the room, trying to appear nervous, but not curious. A standard sitting room—a settee, a sideboard, a table and four chairs. The two men were in the middle of a game of drak. They were drinking wine, but it

looked well-watered. Two doors led off from the main room, one presumably to the bedchamber, and the other to the servant's room, perhaps, or a parlor?

The smaller man bared his teeth in what could only loosely be described as a smile. "You look like a whore." He nodded in the direction of the door opposite the one she'd entered through. "Go on in. I'm guessing he's mostly done with the other girl by now."

Lianon stared at the heavy, paneled oak, her heart hammering. Now that she was paying attention, she could hear an unmistakable rhythmic thumping from inside, then a harsh slap, followed by a squeal of pain. Wilt took a step closer to her, one hand rubbing his cock through his trousers. "You could always stay here with me…"

Lianon ignored him and looked at the other man, his cold, dead eyes, his pale skin and the thin dueling sword he wore on his belt.

"Go on, girl," he said softly. "You're missing all the fun."

Another slap, another sob, resounded from behind the door.

Lianon closed her eyes, straightened her shoulders, counted in her head. When she opened her eyes again, her hand was on the doorknob and she was pushing it open.

Sur-Marus was on the bed with the girl, Kaela. She was young, could not yet be twenty. She was on hands and knees, sur-Marus' hand fisted in her black hair, her head pulled back at a painful angle. Sur-Marus was behind her, pounding in and out. His free hand had already done a number on the poor girl's buttocks, tanning them a raw, livid red. As Lianon paused just inside the room, Kaela's eyes met hers, pleading. Her left eye was going black, and blood stained her nose and lips. What looked suspiciously like bite marks scored the girl's naked back, some of them seeping blood.

Sur-Marus saw Lianon standing there, and smiled like a sunrise. Viciously jerking Kaela's head back, he slapped her cheek with the flat of his hand. She groaned, too exhausted to cry out, as a fine spatter of blood hit the white linen sheets.

Lianon stepped further inside, shut the door behind her and pushed the bolt quietly home. Her heart no longer raced. Her stomach was steady as a rock. She had entered the part of her psyche that Samulo called the "place of surety". She knew what she was here to do. She would either accomplish it, or not. She didn't allow herself to consider what

might happen if something went wrong, if sur-Marus discovered who she was, if she failed. The price of failure was immaterial. So was everything that was riding on her success.

Do.

Or do not.

She unfastened her cloak and let it fall. She didn't even have to force her smile.

Sur-Marus shoved Kaela's face down into the mattress and pulled out of her. His shirttails parted by his erect cock, he climbed down off the bed and left the girl lying there, sobbing. His eyes, couched in their wrinkled pouches of fat, never left Lianon's face. She stood with her hands at her sides, and kept smiling.

Sur-Marus stood in front of her. His oily gaze traveled her length. One hand grabbed her between the legs through the blue velvet of her skirt and squeezed her mound, his fingers digging brutally. She hardly felt it.

His other hand slammed into her face. She felt the capsule pop under the blow, filling her mouth with a slick, tasteless fluid.

"Lower your eyes, you fucking cunt." His words were all the more malicious for the fact that they were spoken so calmly.

He slapped her again, the impact on her nose bringing a flood of moisture to her eyes.

She dropped her gaze to her feet and didn't fight her tears. Under the insulating blanket of her purpose, fear twisted in her gut. She let it work for her. Let herself play the innocent, the weak female, the victim he longed for. "Your pardon, milord," she whispered.

He grabbed her bodice and jerked it down, pinching one nipple so hard her legs gave way. With a start, she found herself on her knees in front of his crotch. "You'll speak when I give you leave, whore," sur-Marus said gently. "Now put your mouth to better use."

His cock, not flaccid, but not quite hard, hovered before her face. *Good,* she thought. Sur-Marus didn't seem the kissing type, but the Kurgan had provided her some other

suggestions. She could smell Kaela's scent on his organ, but there was no trace of the wetness that would indicate any pleasure on her part. Between his enthusiasm and the dry fuck, the fine skin of his shaft would be covered with tiny tears and abrasions. Glancing past his hip, she saw the other woman still lying on the bed, sobbing quietly, a pillow hugged to her chest. Lianon parted her lips.

Sur-Marus' organ slammed between them. His fist in her hair held her head in place as he fucked her mouth. She fought the urge to gag as the tip of his cock nudged the back of her throat. Instead, with every thrust, she swirled her tongue around his shaft and across his head, distributing her lethal saliva all over the thin, translucent skin of his sex.

"You like that, don't you, slut?" he asked, his voice losing a measure of its composure as he thrust faster and faster. "*You fucking bitch*." With a snarl, he pulled his cock from her mouth, jerked her partway up off her knees by her hair and brought his fisted hand savagely down on her cheekbone. Her head would have snapped back, deflecting some of the impact, but he held her immobile and the blow hit full on. Stars filled her vision, seething, then dispersing. His hand twisted again in her hair and she gasped. As her lips parted, his cock pushed between them once more.

Do, or do not.

She closed her eyes, forcing her seizing, retching throat to relax and absorb the assault. Her mouth had begun to tingle. Poison still mingled with her saliva, coating the thin skin of his penis with every stroke of her tongue.

He was gasping now, but his thrusts were becoming mechanical and stilted. She dared a glance up through her lashes. His face was like a sheet, but his eyes were shot through with broken veins. As she watched, a trickle of blood inched out of one nostril.

He abruptly went rigid, shoving into her mouth as if on the verge of orgasm. His lips moved, trying to form words, but all that came out was a pink froth of bloody saliva. Lianon drew her face away from his penis and reached up to extricate his hand from her hair, wincing as she pulled it free, vaguely aware of her comb clattering to the floor. Sur-Marus didn't move to stop her. He couldn't move at all.

She clambered to her feet and caught him as his legs finally failed. His hands curled into stiff claws, he clutched at her. Gritting her teeth, she heaved him toward the bed before his weight could hit the floor.

The girl Kaela's tears had dried up. She scrambled off the bed and stood on its other side, staring. "What's the matter with him?" she asked in a worried whisper.

"He's dead," Lianon answered flatly, straining under the old man's weight. "He just doesn't realize it yet." As quickly as possible, she arranged his stiff limbs on the mattress and covered him with the blankets. His eyes met hers, round and terrified, while his mouth worked futilely to produce a sound. Lianon smiled sweetly at him. "Do you know who I am?"

He only gaped, the froth in his mouth rising and falling as his throat convulsed. He was drowning in his own blood and saliva, and couldn't do anything about it.

She reached out and touched his parchment cheek almost tenderly. "I'm Lianon al-Sylphae."

His breath wheezed to a bubbly stop and he shook his head in fervent denial. His bloodshot eyes fixed on her in horror.

"Oh, yes," she said, her voice like silk. "The man who butchered your piece of shit son like the pig he was, is really a woman. My only regret is that I didn't get to make you squeal like I did him. You have to admit, though, death by fellatio has a certain, poetic justice."

She watched him until the convulsive motions of his throat ceased and his pupils opened wide. Then she took a corner of the sheet and wiped the blood and foam from his face, rolled him onto his side facing away from the door, and pulled the blankets up over his shoulder. To anyone looking in, he would seem soundly asleep.

Kaela hadn't moved—indeed, she seemed rooted to the spot. "You're Lianon al-Sylphae?" she breathed.

Lianon started. Had the gossip spread so far? "You ought to forget that name," she said, her eyes locking onto the other woman's. "The sooner the better."

"What—" The girl paused and wet her swollen lips. "What are you going to do?" There was a world of fear in that one question, and Lianon felt a pang in her chest.

She rose and came around the bed, keeping her hands in view, trying not to scare the girl any more than she already was. Kaela's face was a mess, and congealing blood streaked her inner thighs. A virgin, then, before tonight. Tears stung Lianon's eyes. To lose a maidenhead to such a monster... Gathering Kaela's rumpled dress up from the floor, Lianon gingerly helped her into it. Then she went to the window.

"I'm going to open this window," she said calmly, "and then we're both going to climb out."

Kaela shook her head frantically. "We're on the third floor!"

"Shh!" Lianon scowled, her eyes flicking to the door. "We try to walk past those two thugs out there, we're both in for more of what sur-Marus had to offer."

"Better that than break my neck!" Kaela hissed. For all the girl's stubbornness, it heartened Lianon to see her show some spirit. But it wouldn't do.

Lianon slipped the casement open and leaned out. "See? There's a nice, wide ledge, with hardly a bit of frost on it," she lied outrageously. "It's not even a dozen paces between us and the roof of the stable. Then there's the haystack to break our fall."

Kaela took a quick peek out the window, then shrunk back inside. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm no good with heights."

Lianon pulled her upper body back inside and eased the window mostly shut. Keeping her voice level, she took the girl's hands in hers and said, "This is very important, Kaela. I need to know if there's any chance at all that you can do this."

Tears streamed from Kaela's eyes. "Just...just leave me here. I won't tell anyone who you are. You can...you can send Stefano for me. He'll see I get out all right. Maybe he won't be too mad."

Lianon squeezed her hands and cursed inwardly. "You would rather face an angry pimp, or Wilt and his...friend, than a climb on a stable roof?"

Kaela's chin went up. Under tear-streaked makeup, blood and bruises, her face took on a surreal dignity. "What more can they do to me?" she asked softly. What more could they do? *God in Antuine*. This girl was the very soul of naivety. Lianon's throat tightened as if a fist had closed around it.

This was ridiculous, she told herself sternly. She had come here to do a job, and she'd done it. It was time to leave. She owed this girl nothing. Sur-Marus' death, seemingly by heart attack, probably wouldn't even be discovered until morning, and would pose Kaela no danger. She would almost certainly be forced to...service the men in the sitting room, but it would be no worse than what she'd face every night of her life until she was too gaunt or pox-ridden to interest anyone.

Shit, shit, shit.

Lianon took a long look at the window and the easy path to freedom it offered. Turned her face away from it and back to the girl. "I'm not going to leave you here," she said. Kaela practically sagged with relief, but Lianon held up a hand to forestall her. "That doesn't mean I'm about to let them rape me. Understand me, Kaela. If we walk out through that door, it's them or us. I'll kill them, too, if I have to, but I'm not letting them touch me."

Chapter Sixteen

Gil awoke to a blissful absence of pain. For a moment, he tried to ascertain why a lack of agony might be so unexpected, before memory came pouring back. The last clear image he had was of Aru scooping him up and beginning the long, excruciating jog back to his apartment.

With a sigh, Gil flexed his muscles experimentally and, free of twinges, aches or pangs, rolled over. He drew a deep breath through his nostrils, recognizing the familiar scent of his bed, his room, his home. Reaching, he wrapped his arms around the woman beside him, pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her lips.

And opened his eyes to see Viera's face.

He frowned. "Where's Lianon?"

Viera smiled. "Nice to see you, too."

"Wait!" he stammered, flushing. "I didn't mean—I just wasn't expecting to find *you* here. Not that I'm disappointed, mind you...but, ah..."

Her smile widened inexplicably. "Gil," she said, leaning close to kiss his cheek. "It may surprise you to hear this, but—" her eyes flicked briefly up to someone behind him, then returned, filled with a teasing light, "—I'm not in love with you."

Gil felt his chest expand with the sudden urge to laugh. "I'm shocked," he said soberly. "Shocked and appalled."

"You have been a very good friend to me all these years," Viera continued, growing serious. "You have no idea what it meant to me, how you kept Stefano and the other pimps at bay. You could have taken advantage of my gratitude, made demands, put all kinds of conditions on our friendship, and you never did. I just want you to know how much I appreciate it, and that I could never be hurt by the fact that you're in love with Lianon."

He blinked. In love? "What?"

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She only grinned.

"Perhaps, Viera, it is best to allow a man to come to such a realization in his own time," Aru said from behind him.

Viera rolled her eyes. "Spoken like someone who has a few millennia to waste waiting."

Gil sat up, endeavoring to dismiss the entire conversation. Women were all the same—even whores, apparently. They had to romanticize everything. There was plenty of time later to consider whether she had any clue what she was talking about.

Squinting in the wavering light of candle and hearth, he tried to gauge what time it might be. The moon was still shining behind the tattered curtain—it was not yet middle-night, but of what day he had no idea.

"How are you feeling?" Aru asked, touching his shoulder.

"I'm not sure," Gil said slowly. "I don't seem to hurt anywhere." He gripped the bedpost and pushed to his feet, bracing himself for some dizziness. "Why don't I feel weak, like last time?"

Aru relaxed visibly and smiled. "Last time, I used your own energy to heal you. This time, I had Viera."

Gil frowned at Viera, who grinned back at him, unabashed. "Apparently I'm some kind of natural wonder or something," she said dryly, sitting up and tugging the sheet across her breasts. "A veritable font of healing, sexual energy."

Gil grunted, crossing to the chair where a stack of clothes sat. "That doesn't exactly come as a surprise, love," he teased. Shaking out the shirt, he stared at it in confusion. It was Lianon's, the one he had bought for her. So were the trousers. His heart began to pound. Had she really done it? Had she run away to keep him safe?

Then a second possibility intruded and his blood turned to ice.

"Where's Lianon?" He didn't raise his voice, didn't even turn to the others, but there must have been something in his tone. The quality of the silence behind him altered.

Aru cleared his throat. "She's at Flaxton's Inn."

Not gone, then. Not...gone. Gil crushed the fine linen shirt in one fist, refusing to let the knowledge comfort him. Tried to figure out why on earth Lianon would have gone to Flaxton's, a lodging house with a moderately respectable gambling den, and without the only set of clothes she had.

"Dalton sur-Marus is staying there," Viera whispered.

Gil closed his eyes. Oh, shit.

"She had Rat find her a dress, and she bought some poison from that Kurgan on Clove Street. She said she wasn't going to wait around for sur-Marus to send someone else."

Gil whirled to face them, disbelieving, heedless of his nakedness. "She went in a dress?"

Viera rose from the bed, the sheet hugged to her breasts. "Rat did some scouting. Sur-Marus has two bodyguards watching him. Lianon decided it would be easier to go, well, as a woman. As a whore. To get past the guards."

His heart began to hammer, and he stalked into the other room to fish some spare clothes out of his trunk. "Why didn't someone stop her? Why didn't she wait, damn it? I'd have gone with her, she knew that!"

"She insisted it was her problem. She said enough innocent people had been dragged into this already, and she was going to end it herself, one way or another."

Gil dragged his trousers and shirt on, raking a hand through his hair to dislodge the crusted blood. *One way or another. Fuck me.* "Did she at least take a weapon with her?"

"A razor in her boot. She didn't want it at first, but I told her that most working girls carry them. Gil." She reached out to him, her eyes pleading. "Gil!"

He shrugged off her hand, pulled on his boots and fixed her with his glare. "What?"

"You have to understand! You almost died. You would have died if I hadn't been here to act as a surrogate for Aru."

He tried to modulate his tone, but she still winced when he spoke. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

She sighed and stared at her hands, twisted in front of her. "I suppose not. But you might try to see it from her perspective. She's lost everyone who ever meant anything to her. I guess she'd rather die than lose you, too."

His vision started to blur as he stared down at her, his throat tight and his nose stinging. Of course the stakes were higher for Lianon than for him. Though Gil had left his disapproving family back in Moirae, he had friends here in Belthalas, a people, a tribe. Lianon had come here empty and friendless, seeking death. As yet, the only thing she had to live for was him.

Bending, he pressed a kiss to Viera's cheek. "Stay here. I won't be long."

Crossing to the armoire, he reached for his sword, then remembered it was broken during the attack. Lianon's ivory-hilted blade hung from a hook inside. Grabbing it, he strapped it to his waist and pulled on his coat.

"I'll go with you," Aru said, pulling his own jacket on.

"I'm sure she's all right. She's an Emissary." Gil wasn't exactly certain who he was trying to convince.

Aru shrugged, carefully casual. "Just in case."

Gil met his eye and nodded. "Just in case, then."

Rat stood in the shadows of the stable, staring up at sur-Marus' bedchamber window. It was the only one in the entire wing of the inn that was illuminated. Rat knew why that was. The reason was apparent in every muffled cry he'd heard from the old bastard's room while he watched the last two nights. Listening, he'd arrived at the conclusion that Dalton sur-Marus was less than human, and his bodyguards were no better. Rat had seen girls go in, and he'd seen them when they came out, too. Even the older ones, street-toughened and jaded, seemed shaken by the abuse.

The more Rat had seen of it, the more he'd tried to convince Lianon not to do this. He'd grown fond of her the last couple of days they'd spent together while Gil slept off his injuries. She was kind, honest to a fault, and possessed a core of resilience he found hard to fathom. She had told him what happened to Rhianna, her wife. The fact that she

could have sympathy left for his father and brothers, lost eighteen years ago among the battle-dead of Fjorg, touched him in a place he'd almost forgotten he had.

She would be in the room with him by now. He could see shadows moving beyond the smudgy glass, but the angle was wrong for him to actually witness what was transpiring. His throat tight, Rat closed his eyes briefly and sent a swift prayer to Salgrim, father of all Andun, to protect her.

Rubbing his hands together, he blew warm air against his palms and turned his eyes back to the window. It wasn't long before he saw Lianon there. She was talking to someone, then she opened the casement and leaned out. She and Rat had agreed that this was the safest route to the ground once her task was done. With a sigh of relief, he prepared to step out and guide her as she made the descent.

Another woman's head appeared in the window, looked around briefly, and then disappeared. Rat watched in stunned disbelief as Lianon pulled the casement shut again.

What in Salgrim's name was she doing?

And then it hit him. There'd been another prostitute in the room when she got there, one who was unwilling or unable to climb out the window to the ground.

"Leave her!" Rat hissed under his breath, even as he jogged across the courtyard. A rain-barrel stood at the corner of the stable. Rat hoisted himself up onto it, and then onto the steep, snow-covered roof. He could hear the horses shift and whicker nervously as his footsteps passed above their heads, fleet and quiet, yet plain to their sharp ears. On the inn wall close to the edge of the stable roof, an iron trellis supported a winter-dead clematis. Rat leaned across the gap, grabbed the filigreed metal rail and climbed spider-like up the wall. Hauling himself up onto the third floor ledge, he pressed his back flat against the smooth stone of the wall and slid one boot on the narrow shelf, testing the footing. Bit by bit, he inched along the frosted ledge until he stood just beside the window.

Leaning, he peeked inside out of the corner of his eye. Nothing moved. Sur-Marus lay on the bed facing the window, his mouth agape in a deathly rictus, his staring eyes

fixed on eternity. The women were gone, the door closed. The window casement, on the other hand, was slightly ajar.

Clever Lianon.

Rat turned and eased the window open, bending to duck under the lintel.

Behind the door, a woman screamed.

Chapter Seventeen

"It's about time," Wilt said with a huge grin as the two women emerged from the bedroom. He was sprawled on the settee, his legs shoved out and his arms crossed over his chest. His eyes met Lianon's. "Time to settle accounts, love."

Lianon pulled the door shut behind her and wrapped her arm around Kaela's waist. "Please," she said, keeping her gaze lowered and her voice meek. "Let us go. She needs a physician."

Wilt laughed, pushing himself upright and sneering down at the women. "She'll need more than that, once Jon's had his fill of her."

"It's Jem, you idiot," the smaller man snapped from where he sat at the table.

"It's Jem, you idiot," Wilt echoed in a sullen undertone.

Jem stood and approached the two women, his eyes on Kaela. He'd changed his clothes and replaced his sword with a dagger. One hand shot out and grabbed Kaela's battered face, his fingers digging into her cheeks. She whimpered and shrank back. Lianon couldn't tell whether Kaela's terror pleased him or not—his face was as expressive as a snake's.

"I think this bitch has another round or two left in her," he said quietly, jerking her out of Lianon's embrace. "The young ones always need a bit of softening up before they're any good."

Kaela's entire body went rigid as he pulled her over to the table. Tears streamed down her face and tiny mewls of fright escaped her throat. Her eyes, round and desperate, met Lianon's over Jem's shoulder as he shoved her against the edge of the table. He immediately busied himself gathering up Kaela's skirts and hiking them past her knees.

Damn it. Lianon had hoped Jem would pick her. He was less predictable and, therefore, more dangerous than the larger Wilt. She'd had the entire scenario laid out in her mind before they'd left the bedroom—she would cut the small one's throat, and when

Wilt came after her, she'd use the dead man's sword against him. It was a decent plan better than even odds of survival. Even armed with only Jem's dagger, there was a fair chance they'd make it. But Jem had chosen Kaela, and he would certainly be smarter than to abandon a perfectly good hostage to deal with Lianon. There was no plan now, and no way in hell they were going to get away clean.

Lianon thought about submitting. About just letting Wilt do what he would with her. Rhianna's face hovered in the back of her mind, clouded with reproach, but Lianon pushed it out of her awareness. There were times when you have to do a thing, when the options are so few and so narrow that the unthinkable suddenly becomes bearable. When surrender becomes the obvious choice. If she made the decision within herself to submit, it wasn't really rape, was it? Deliberately, Lianon turned from Kaela to Wilt. "Well," she said, trying to inject a thread of sexual invitation into her voice, "I suppose if we're staying awhile..."

Wilt's grin encompassed his entire face. Grabbing her by the hair at her nape, he dragged her face up to his and planted a wet kiss on her mouth. Part of her was revolted at the thought of his stained, decaying teeth and diseased gums, but that part was eclipsed by necessity. Without even cringing, she shoved her tongue past his lips, hoping some trace of the poison lingered in her saliva. His hands groped clumsily, pawing her breasts and rubbing hard between her legs. She ignored his touch, her own hand cupping his sex through the dirty wool of his trousers.

"Lie down, whore," Wilt snarled at her, tugging at his clothes. "And lift up your skirts."

Lianon sank down onto the settee, easing herself back so that she reclined across the cushioned seat, propped on one elbow. She trailed her free hand across her neckline, stroked over her breasts and midriff and slid her palm briefly between her legs before reaching for the hem of her skirt. Wilt's eyes followed her every movement as if mesmerized, his hands stilled at the half-undone buttons of his trousers. He wet his lips.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lianon watched the others across the room. Jem was facing Wilt and Lianon, probably so that he could keep an eye on them. Kaela was on her

knees in front of him. Had he seen all the blood between Kaela's legs? Was it pity or disgust that made him opt for fellatio rather than intercourse? With one hand in Kaela's hair, he thrust his cock in her mouth. His other hand rested on the hilt of his dagger. He observed through hooded eyes as the girl serviced him, no hint of pleasure or displeasure on his face.

Not pity, then.

Lianon returned her attention to Wilt. Lifting one knee, she propped it on the settee's backrest and drew her skirt slowly up to her thighs. The new boots Rat had bought her showed the shape of her calves and ankles, and her legs were bare above them. She inched her hem higher and Wilt's eyes bulged as he realized she wore no underlinens. His hand began to rub at his organ through his half-open trousers.

"Well?" she asked him, licking one finger and dragging the moistened tip down her throat and across the small, pushed-up mounds of her breasts. "Are you just going to stand there and toss yourself off, or are you going to fuck me?"

Wilt blinked as if a spell had broken, then laughed. Wrenching the last buttons free, he kicked his trousers off and lowered himself to kneel between her legs on the settee. His cock was huge and thick, pointing at the ceiling. "Show me your cunt."

She smiled sweetly and obliged him, opening her legs wide. He grabbed her more gently than she expected, and seemed delighted at the slickness he found there. Extract of *eltharra*, an old whore's trick. Viera had found some for Lianon, though she boasted of never needing it herself.

Bending, Wilt jerked her bodice down so that just her nipples showed over the edge, and leaned forward to take one in his mouth. One hand on his cock, he began to nudge against her opening.

Lianon closed her eyes, but couldn't summon a memory of Rhianna's face behind her eyelids, as if the other woman's shade had fled in horror. Only a few days ago, Lianon had paid someone to help her commit suicide. And now she was willing to barter her honor for a few more minutes of life?

Lianon reached for the razor in her boot, sliding it silently from its makeshift sheath. She waited until Wilt's teeth were well away from her breast, cringing inside at every tentative push of his cock at her channel. Then she dragged the blade across his throat, from one ear to the other, opening both the veins and the deeper arteries and slicing deep into his larynx to silence him. A warm, red flood poured onto her face and chest.

There would be no hiding it from Jem. Lianon's only hope depended on timing, silence, Jem's inattention and luck.

She slid sideways as Wilt fell face-down on the seat cushion. Wet, sucking noises issued from his cut throat, but they were not sufficiently different from the sounds of vigorous sex to attract notice yet from the other side of the room. Lianon was utterly silent, the carpet absorbing the impact of her boots, her movements like a cat's. Jem's eyes remained on Kaela's face as she sucked him. Lianon held the razor in her hand, ready to pounce.

She didn't let herself think. She just leapt.

Only to be dragged to a stumbling, cacophonous halt. By her fucking skirts.

She didn't even have time to curse, or drag the trailing fabric out from under Wilt's pinning bulk. Jem's eyes met hers and took in the entire situation at a glance. His expression ventured from blank to vaguely irritated. Dragging Kaela to her feet and spinning her to face Lianon, he drew his knife and held it to the girl's throat.

"Jon!" he called, pitching his voice toward the third door. "Come and play, brother mine."

When the other man entered, for a moment Lianon could only stare. It was as if Jem stood before a mirror—lank, dark hair hanging to the shoulder, pale eyes as cold as a reptile's. His clothes were different, and he wore a sword at his hip. This was the man she'd met when she first arrived.

An instant later, his fine, dueling sword was in his hand.

Jerking her accursed skirts from under his body, Lianon grabbed the hilt of Wilt's sword and drew it clear. Jon narrowed his eyes and began to sidle toward the entry door.

Lianon moved to stop him, her blade slamming into his, but it was too late—he stood between her and the only way out.

Behind her, Kaela screamed. Lianon whirled to see Jem's knife carve a path down the other woman's cheek, from just below her right eye all the way to her jaw.

"Drop your sword, bitch, or I'll take her eye as a souvenir."

Kaela's frantic gaze met hers, her chest heaving like a forge bellows, sucking in air to fuel her terror. The sword fell from Lianon's nerveless fingers and clattered on the floorboards. She turned back to Jon just in time to see his fist coming at her. Twisting, she took the blow on the ear and stumbled, reeling, toward the settee, catching herself on Wilt's motionless bulk before she hit the floor. The icy draft from under the bedroom door was oddly comforting, but she couldn't quite figure why. Her head was still swimming and she fixed her gaze on the floor. Her razor peeked out at her from behind one of the settee legs—Wilt's congealing blood camouflaged it against the burgundy carpet.

There was no way. No way for Lianon and Kaela to get out of this without one or both of them dying. Lianon could make a dive for the razor, but Jem would have Kaela's throat cut before she could ever bring it to bear. The certainty of death sat like a ball of lead in her stomach. The only question she needed to address was whether she would die before they raped her, or after.

Jem dragged a whimpering Kaela over to the bedroom door and kicked it open. "Sur-Marus! My lord?" He stared into the room for a moment, then turned his icy gaze on Lianon.

"What is it, brother mine?" Jon asked softly from his place by the exit.

"It appears our employer has gone to the goddess."

At that moment, several things happened. Lianon saw them all as if time had slowed like cold treacle pouring from a jar.

The door behind Jon burst open. He spun on his heel, bringing his sword up. Gil pushed inside and slammed his blade onto Jon's.

Cursing, Jem slashed down with his dagger, aiming for Kaela's heart.

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Rat darted out of the bedroom and seized Kaela's wrist. Jem's blade bit into the woman's chest above her bodice and drew a ragged, red line all the way to her shoulder as Rat yanked her from Jem's grasp and into the doorway.

Jem spat an obscenity and went after them.

Lianon wrapped her fingers around the handle of her razor and lunged to her feet, screaming to draw his attention from the others and onto her. He whirled, slashed out with his dagger. She ducked under his cut and rolled, her blade slicing up toward the semi-erect cock that still protruded from his open fly. Scrambling to a safe distance, Lianon staggered to her feet, treading over her hem and muttering profanities at the stupidity of female attire.

Jem glanced down at his still-attached genitals and laughed. "You missed, whore."

Lianon smiled. "Did I?"

He looked again at his crotch, then his eyes flew in horror to her face.

She watched blood saturate Jem's pant leg as his life poured out through the severed artery in his inner thigh. It took no time at all. If he hadn't seen it, he might not even have realized what happened.

"It's like cutting an onion," she said as his legs gave way. "Sharp knife, no tears."

She turned from Jem's limp corpse to find Gil standing over the inert form of Jon, her own sword reddened in his hand. His eyes met hers, wild at first, then infusing with a steely calm.

"Darling," he said evenly, "this blade is something else again."

She barked a laugh. "You like it? It's yours."

"Ah...I hate to interrupt the discourse," Rat said wryly, staggering to his feet in the bedroom doorway with Kaela in his arms, "but this girl needs help." The entire front of her gown was soaked in blood and she sagged placid in his embrace, barely conscious.

Gil's grin vanished and he slid his sword back in its scabbard. "Aru is waiting out on the street. Flaxton's goon wouldn't let him in."

"Take her." Rat gingerly transferred the girl into Gil's arms and crossed his own over his chest. "I came in the window. If I want to stay out of the gaol, I'd best leave the same way."

Lianon reached over and tested the pulse that fluttered at Kaela's throat. Fast but strong. She inspected the blood seeping from the wound on the girl's chest. The slash was ugly, but hadn't severed any major vessels.

"She's not in any real danger, but her injuries do need attention. We need to get her to Aru's."

Gil nodded. "Let's go."

Lianon turned to Rat, who had already begun to shamelessly rifle through the pockets of the dead men. "Would you stop at Gil's and fetch Viera? I think Aru might have need of her...services."

Rat nodded, slipping Wilt's jingling purse up his sleeve. "I'll meet you at Aru's then."

Gil was already out the door. Lianon hurried to catch up, hiking her cumbersome skirts past her knees and skidding around the corner on her wobbly-heeled boots. As they descended the first staircase, she glanced down at herself and grimaced. Wilt's blood covered her bodice and sleeves, her skirt was torn and rumpled and her face must be a mess. The tightness of the skin on her cheekbone testified to the swelling, and she could taste and smell the coppery tang of her own blood.

As they emerged at the bottom of the stairs, she paused on the gallery to survey the gaming room. The men below returned her glance, and this time their gazes did not slide away in disinterest. Conversation came to an abrupt halt. Lianon squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. She descended the second, open stairway more slowly than the other, refusing to let them see shame or embarrassment in her bearing. Preceding Gil to the bottom and crossing the floor, she met the curious stares of every man in the place—including Virgil, whose mouth opened and closed as if he was a landed fish. There was no sound but Lianon's and Gil's footfalls marching in unison across the wood planks.

As they passed Virgil, Gil paused long enough to say clearly, "Master Flaxton would be well advised to exercise more discrimination in his clientele."

Virgil cleared his throat noisily, but had no reply.

"And you must forgive me, dear Virgil," Lianon added sweetly, smiling at the stunned barman through her lashes, "but I'm going to have to pass on that drink you offered."

The man went red to the roots of his hair. With a laugh, Lianon opened the door for Gil and followed him outside.

As they emerged, Aru sprang up the steps and hastened to take Kaela from Gil's arms.

"I tried to engage a hack," he told them, his eyes raking Lianon from her bloodcovered dress to her bruised face, assessing the extent of her injuries. She offered him a reassuring smile, crooked though it was with the swelling beside her mouth. He turned back to Gil. "The driver refused to take my money."

"Fucking bigot," Gil muttered.

Aru grinned wryly. "I'm afraid no driver will take us now, when he gets a look at these two."

"Can you carry her as far as your place?"

Aru shrugged, settling the girl more comfortably in his arms. "It's only twelve blocks. Let's get going."

He turned and jogged down the steps as if the girl weighed nothing. Lianon, who'd had some difficulty believing the Darjhan could have carried Gil five blocks on the night he was injured, now shook her head in amazement. The man was slim and less than tall, his bearing almost effeminate, yet he was easily as strong as a Kurgan.

As Lianon started after him, her boot-heel slipped on the icy stair and only Gil's hand at her elbow kept her on her feet. She offered him a shaky smile of thanks. He gazed back at her with a pensive frown. Her stomach lurched as she tried to read his expression. Not angry, but not pleased, either. And he'd likely be less pleased when she told him later of some decisions she'd made tonight.

They traveled the twelve blocks in silence, her grip on Gil's forearm keeping her steady. She had no idea how women walked all day in such constricting, wobbly footwear—her feet were practically screaming their indignation at the abuse. When they arrived at the Darjhan's house, it was to find Rat and Viera already waiting for them in the kitchen.

Aru raised his brows, his huge, slanted eyes growing even bigger as he noted the freshly lit fire in the stove and the burning candles. Rat grinned, unabashed. "Picking locks is my living, friend. And I figured you wouldn't want to come home to a freezing house."

"And just how did you two get here before us?" Gil asked, his lips twitching.

"Well, those boys back at Flaxton's were pretty flush. I took enough off the bodies to hire a hack."

Gil laughed and shook his head, crossing to the cupboards and rummaging, probably in search of wine. Aru laid the girl down on the large, oak table in the middle of the kitchen. As Viera helped settle the girl's limbs more comfortably, she began to stir, moaning in pain. Aru reached to set his hand on her belly.

Lianon grabbed his wrist. "Don't," she said quietly. Aru's eyes locked with hers, almost menacing in their intensity, and she withdrew her hand. Her heart was hammering, and she couldn't help but wonder how many he had killed during the war, in defiance of his god's law. She lowered her eyes. "She was a virgin before tonight. Sur-Marus was an animal."

Aru's brows inched higher. "Why is this relevant?"

Viera moved to stand at Lianon's shoulder. "If you...draw out her energy now, so soon, she may always associate sexual pleasure with what happened to her tonight."

The Darjhan pondered a moment. "Do you truly believe this?"

"I know," said Lianon, fighting to keep her voice steady, "that if I was raped, the last thing I would want to feel right afterward is desire." Aru sighed, frowning. "I don't know what to do. I cannot draw from either of you. I have already rendered Lianon barren for at least a year. I would not have you suffer the same, Viera."

Viera stared at him, nonplused, then burst out laughing. "Oh, you *are* a fool, Master Aru! I'm a *whore*. I've been forced to abstain from the most lucrative of my services for the last week, as I do each and every moon, to avoid getting with child. Now you tell me you can make me sterile? Oh, Aru, where have you been all my life?"

Lianon hid her smile behind her hand as Aru frowned in bemused consternation. The Darjhan cleared his throat, seeming out of his element for the first time since Lianon met him. "Ah…I see. Well…ahem…in that case, perhaps we should get started…"

Gil finally pulled his head out of the cabinets, having failed in his quest for drink, and turned to Lianon. "It's late. We ought to be going."

She nodded, putting a hand on Viera's arm. The other woman's fingers stilled in the process of loosening the laces of her bodice. Lianon's gaze flicked to Kaela. "Don't let her leave. Don't let her go back to Stefano."

"I won't."

Lianon clenched her hands together in front of her and shifted her feet. "How much do you think it would take for him to let her go?"

Viera scrutinized the unconscious woman and sighed. "Before tonight, it would have been plenty. But she'll be scarred after this. Her face, her chest. Make him a halfway decent offer, he'll take it. He's a businessman. Twenty falcons, and he'll be glad to wash his hands of her."

Lianon smiled. "That's what I would have paid for my death. It feels right that it should go to buy her a life."

To Lianon's surprise, Viera put her arms around her and hugged her warmly. After a moment's hesitation, Lianon returned the embrace. "You're a good person, Lianon."

"So are you, my dear," Lianon replied, her voice less than steady. Screwing up her face, she counted in her head and blinked back her tears.

Gil cleared his throat and Lianon pulled back. His hand under her elbow was reassuring and vaguely disquieting at the same time. "We really should let Aru and Viera get started," he said gently.

Lianon glanced up at Gil, grateful for the coolness of his expression—if he'd moved to comfort her, she'd totally fall apart. "You're right." She turned to Rat. "Will you walk with us?"

Rat glanced over at Viera, who was sliding her dress up and over her head, revealing a silk chemise and shapely, stocking-clad legs. "Um, if it's all the same to you two, I think I'll stay and...ah...help."

Gil laughed. "You're a paragon of self-sacrifice, my friend."

Rat smiled blandly. "I do what I can."

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Chapter Eighteen

Lianon sagged down onto the trunk that still sat in the main room of Gil's apartment and began to work the laces of her boots free of their hooks. Dragging off one, then the other, she wiggled and flexed her feet, wincing at the agonizing sensation of bones and muscles returning to their natural deployment. Gil took her cloak and went to hang it in the armoire.

"You hungry?" he asked, one hand squeezing her shoulder.

"No, thank you."

"Feel like some wine?"

"God, yes."

"Go on and get cleaned up," he said, helping her to her feet. "I'll see if I can unearth a bottle."

Lianon left him rifling through his pantry and went into the bedroom. She filled the basin from the ewer and began to delicately wash the blood from her face.

"Well, you bunch of drunks cleaned me right out while I slept," Gil called from the main room. "If you like, I'll run down to Aliannet's and get a bottle."

"All right."

She waited until he'd shut the door behind him before she began to strip off her dress and chemise. Dried blood made the fabric stick to her chest and arms. She peeled the layers of velvet and linen gingerly away and let them fall in a rumpled heap on the floor. Bending, she ignored the aching protests of her muscles, unhooked her garters and pulled her stockings off. Standing naked in the scant light trickling in from the sitting room, she took the cloth from the washstand and began to scrub. The crusted blood from her torso and arms turned the wash water a vibrant red as she wrung out the cloth. When she'd cleaned away the worst of it, she dumped the basin into the chamber pot and refilled it

with fresh water. When the blood was all gone, she gently wiped the false wetness from between her legs and went to find her clothes.

She never would have thought that simply donning a pair of trousers and a shirt could feel so empowering.

When Gil returned with a bottle of Aliannet's finest vintage, he was brought up short at the sight of Lianon, clean and dressed, standing before the bedroom fire. Frozen in the doorway, the bottle in one hand and a pair of glasses in the other, he was suddenly at a loss as to how to proceed. Images had been creeping into his mind all night, of what sur-Marus might have done to her, of what that ginger-haired thug might have been able to do before she'd managed to cut his throat. Had she been raped? Or had witnessing the other girl's suffering dredged up painful memories of Rhianna? She seemed all right, if a little distant, but he already knew how she hid her vulnerabilities behind a veneer of cool reserve.

The fact that she'd put on her clothes rather than climbing into bed spoke volumes. She wore her shirt and trousers like plate mail and boiled leather.

"Hullo," he said, setting the glasses down on the table and pouring.

She smiled a little wanly as he handed her a glass, and took a long sip. "Is something the matter?" she asked.

"No," he said carefully. "I just wasn't expecting to find you quite so...dressed."

She just watched him over the rim of her glass.

"Lianon, did sur-Marus...I mean, did something happen...? Did he hurt you?"

Her gaze dropped to her bare toes. "Nothing like that. In fact, if it hadn't been for Kaela, the whole thing would have gone without a hitch. She wouldn't go out the window."

He stared down at her feet, still striped with cruel red lines from her stockings and the snug ladies' boots she'd worn all evening. He thought about how she'd looked in that dress—sexy and feminine, but diminished somehow, as if merely wearing the garments of a woman undermined her confidence. "You should have left her," the Emissary in him said.

"I thought about it."

"You didn't know her. Her life was nothing to you."

She stiffened, her eyes glistening as if he'd stuck a knife in the tenderest possible spot. "You didn't know me, either. You could have put your sword through my heart that night, and not even the goddess would have held you in blame for it."

"Lianon—" he said, taking her glass from her unresisting fingers and setting it on the mantel. With his other hand, he caressed the curve where her neck met her shoulder. Her breath quickened and a flush rose to her cheeks—anger or desire, maybe a bit of both. His eyes traveled down her length, and as they fell on her breasts he saw the nipples reflexively pebble. Her pulse thrummed against his palm, and he felt his cock stiffen in anticipation. He didn't feel like talking. All he wanted to do was fuck her until she couldn't think or feel or remember anything but him. "Come to bed."

"Gil, I—"

He pressed his mouth to her throat, teasing her skin with lips and tongue and teeth, and he reveled in the helpless little moan she gave. His hands slipped under the hem of her shirt and skimmed up over her firm, heated flesh to toy with her nipples, which tightened further into hard little nubs. Her back arched, offering him more. "Come to bed, Lianon. Let me touch you. Let me see you."

"Gil—"

"Shh," he said against her neck, nuzzling her earlobe.

"Gil, I can't!" she cried, her hands pushing against his chest. "I can't do this anymore."

He froze, his face next to hers, his hands still cupping her breasts, his cock so hard and hot and full of blood, he thought it might split open down its length. "Can't do what?" He was amazed how level his voice sounded, when everything in him was on the verge of an explosion.

She stepped back out of his reach, her breath coming in gasps, her eyes wide, almost wild. "I can't be in this business anymore, Gil. Being an Emissary—it's a good living, but it's not the life I want, not anymore."

"So find different work," he said evenly. "Or don't. Spend your days shopping and gallivanting on my penny. It isn't as if I'm short on coin."

She shook her head, her eyes tearing up, and crossed her arms over her chest, closing herself off. "I'm sick of the city, Gil. I'm sick to death of it. When I was with Rhianna, her uncle gave us a parcel of land with a cottage. That's the kind of life I want. I've had enough of killing. I want to build something. I want to make things grow."

Gil's heart twisted. Had she decided she didn't want to be with him after all? Was this her way of leaving him? He gazed at her, trying to contain his dismay. She was still flushed, her lips parted, her nipples pebbled, her eyes dark with lingering desire. He'd be willing to bet she was wet and swollen between her legs. She wanted him, he knew it. So why did she seem determined to push him away?

"You don't need my permission to leave Belthalas, Lianon," he said very calmly.

Her lungs burned with the effort of breathing normally. She'd known this would be hard—excruciatingly hard—but she hadn't counted on her body's interference. Her pussy felt heavy and slick with arousal, her nipples tingled as if his fingers still tugged at them. In desperation, she forced her awareness away from the treachery of her own senses. As if she needed more reasons to avoid doing this thing that already had her scared half to death.

His eyes were shuttered, his emotions lurking behind them where she couldn't see. She felt more exposed, more vulnerable than when she'd first entered the gaming room at Flaxton's. His gaze bored into her, but he already seemed to be distancing himself. God, she couldn't do this, couldn't ask. If she stuck her neck out and he gave her the wrong response, she didn't know what she'd do.

Don't be an idiot, she told herself sternly. You'll go on. That's what people do, even when they're broken inside.

She counted to ten. Took a deep, strengthening breath. Found her place of surety.

"Come and live with me, Gil."

He only stared at her, as if stunned. She felt her arms tighten across her chest as if of their own volition, felt her place of surety implode under a crushing weight of doubt. It was too much. She knew what his answer had to be. He would never leave his work, his friends, his life, to endure a boring existence in the country with her. What was she thinking, even asking it?

Her throat closed up with disappointment and his face blurred and wavered behind the moisture that flooded her eyes.

"I suppose," he said quietly, "if it wasn't far from the city, I could live there with you most of the time. I'd still have to keep this place, of course, for when I'm actively working, but—"

The rest of his words were silenced by her mouth, crushed against his, her tongue pushing between his lips, while her arms twined around his neck. She wrapped her legs around his waist as his hands gripped her ass and lifted her off the floor. Her heart felt so huge, she wondered how her chest could possibly contain it.

His lips tore away from hers to blaze a path across her cheek and down her neck, his fingers digging into her buttocks, his hard shaft pressing delightfully against her clit through the layers of fabric that separated them. "I feel I must warn you," he murmured against her ear, "if you aren't naked in the next ten seconds, I'm going to rip your clothes right off." He chuckled, the sound sending shivers down her spine. "I'd rather not have to replace them again."

His words, the composure with which he'd spoken them, made her dizzy as all the blood in her body seemed to pool in her nether parts. He set her roughly on her feet and she nearly fell, but her hands were already at the buttons of her trousers. She shoved them down past her hips to rumple at her feet, and jerked her shirt off over her head.

His eyes raked her up and down, missing nothing, raising gooseflesh all over her body. "God, you're so fucking beautiful."

Heat flooded her face and pussy at his words, at the roughness of his voice, at the dark, ravenous heat in his gaze. She stood with her shoulders back, her spine slightly arched, her hands at her sides, and just let him look his fill.

"Get on the bed," he rasped, pressing one hand to the erection straining against the fly of his trousers.

She walked as if under a will not her own to the bed and climbed up onto the mattress. Settling on her back, she watched as he approached. He stood next to the bed, his eyes traveling slowly from her face, down her body to the apex of her thighs. "Open your legs, Lianon."

Her breath rushed in and out of her lungs, but there wasn't enough air in the room to fuel her excitement. Her stomach clenched almost painfully, and she could feel tiny, preliminary spasms in the seeping walls of her cunt. Very slowly, relishing the way his gaze locked onto her mound, she spread her legs. Wide. Cool air washed over the hot, wet lips of her pussy, caressed her swollen clit. She closed her eyes and imagined his hands on her, his mouth.

"Touch yourself." His command was barely a breath, but it brooked no refusal.

Her hands touched down on the taut skin of her belly, then slid up to play with her breasts. She opened her eyes and found him watching her as if mesmerized. His hand slid up and down his cock through the wool of his trousers, but it was as if he was completely unaware of what he was doing. All his attention was fixed on her hands, her fingers tugging and twisting her nipples, sliding back down her belly and spreading the lips of her sex wide open for his view. She flicked a fingertip across her clit, her back arching up off the mattress as a shock of need shot through her. She slid two fingers into her cunt and fucked herself slowly as he watched, and his face went so brittle she thought it might crack.

With a growl, he began to tug at his shirt, struggling briefly with it before finally yanking it off over his head. His cock sprang free the moment he released the buttons of his trousers. Hard and thick, it jutted from the thatch of hair at its base, its tip adorned with a single, pearly bead. The bed creaked as he climbed onto it and knelt. Lianon

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reached for him, her wet fingers encircling his shaft, covering his hardness with the slickness of her desire. His cock twitched in her grasp, and she tightened her fingers. He groaned, his shaking hands taking her by the wrists and guiding her movements, hard and fast up and down the length of his prick.

His expression was transformed, transported, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth gaping open to drag in huge draughts of air. With a wicked smile, Lianon shifted her position so she could take the tip of his cock between her lips. It nearly leaped in response. She swirled her tongue around and around the head, sucking hard.

"Ahhhh, god, Lianon!" he hissed, his hands shoving roughly into her hair and pressing her mouth further down his length. She glanced up to find him watching her, sweat standing out on his forehead, his face set in rigid lines of self-control.

With a final flick of her tongue across the head, she released his cock and rose to kneel facing him. One hand reached down to cup his balls, the other slid behind his head. His lips ground down onto hers, his tongue fucking her mouth even as his fingers slid between her nether lips and deep into her cunt. His thumb stroked her clit in rhythm with the thrusts of his tongue and fingers, and Lianon felt a flood of hot wetness seep from the clenching walls of her channel.

Sidling closer, she wriggled up onto his lap so his shaft was seated in the cleft of her pussy and wrapped her legs around him. With a groan, he reached down and guided his cock inside her cloying tunnel.

"Ahhh, god!" she hissed as he filled her to her womb, her clit pressed hard against his pubic bone. His arm was a solid band across her lower back, holding her in place as he began to thrust up into her. She leaned back against it, her body arched like a bow drawn to its limit, as if the only thing anchoring her in the world was his cock deep in her cunt. His teeth raked across her neck to her shoulder, then bit deep, sending a jolt of pleasure-pain straight through her core. A second later, his mouth fastened on her nipple. Swirling his tongue around it, he thrust harder into her pussy and lowered her down to the bed. His chest pressed against her breasts and his lips were on hers again. He drove into her, harder and harder in a burgeoning frenzy of need. She held his ass, her fingertips

digging in, pulling him more firmly against her, wanting to feel him so deep inside her that the imprint of his body would never leave her flesh.

"God, Lianon, I could fuck you forever..." he muttered against her neck as his cock began to swell and buck. His pelvis pounded against her clit one more time, and she felt a spasm begin in the walls of her cunt and spread through every nerve and muscle of her body.

"Gil, ah, Salgrim help me...Oh, god!"

Above her, Gil stiffened, then was still, save for his ribcage heaving like a forgebellows, and his cock deep in her channel, twitching as the last drops of his seed spilled against her womb. "Oh, god, Lianon, what you do to me. I'll never survive you."

She threaded her fingers into his sweat-damp hair and pulled his head back so she could look at him. His warm brown eyes smiled down into hers, his look so tender she felt her heart skip. She smiled back, feeling as if a sun was rising inside her. "I promise, from now on, I'll be gentle with you."

He laughed breathlessly and kissed her. "Don't you dare."

"Gil?"

He stirred, pulling her closer against him, so that her bottom nestled snugly against his loins. His palm brushed across her hip, back and forth, back and forth. "Mmm?"

"I was thinking of asking Kaela to come and live with us."

His hand stilled. "The girl from Flaxton's?"

"Yeah. I thought maybe she could help run the house."

She felt all the air rush out of his lungs, and only then realized he'd been holding his breath. "A housekeeper." He sounded relieved.

"I haven't the vaguest idea how to dip a wax candle, and I couldn't stitch a pillowslip to save my life," she said wryly. "Forget housekeeper. What I really need is a wife."

He was silent for a moment. Then, "So do I. Marry me."

Her heart stopped beating, then resumed on a painful thud. "What?" she blurted. His arms tightened around her. "Marry me."

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She turned in his embrace and stared at him, bemused. "You're a lunatic, Gil," she said on a giddy warble.

He gazed back at her, his expression as sober as a priest's. "A very great one, I think. I'm in love with a woman who can't dip a candle or sew a pillow-slip. Marry me anyway."

Her eyes stung and her nose prickled, and suddenly Gil's face turned into a hundred shards of fragmented light.

"Ah, don't cry, sweetheart," he murmured, pressing his lips to her brow. "It won't be that bad. I'm really quite a tolerable fellow, once you get to know me better. And in five years or so, if I live that long, I'll retire and become truly countrified. Maybe Kaela could teach me how to churn butter. I could milk the cows, too. I have some small experience with teats—"

"Gil!" Lianon giggled, her heart overflowing.

"Perhaps you need a bit more convincing..." Gil added, pressing her back against the pillows and sliding down her belly until his face hovered above her mound. With a grin, he nudged her legs apart. "Whatever will we do to fill the hours when we're not churning butter and dipping candles?" His tongue lapped against her pussy from her opening to her clit, and her blood began to burn. Two fingers slid up into her cunt, prodding at the bundle of nerves just inside. Lianon's back lifted right off the mattress. His tongue worked her clit, flicking across it, then he sucked the tortured little bud right into his mouth and nipped at it with his teeth.

"Ahh!" she cried, feeling all her senses centering on her cunt and the unutterably delightful things he was doing to it, feeling her culmination building.

"Marry me. Marry me, or I'll stop. What do you say, sweetness?" he asked, then pressed his whole mouth on her cunt and fucked her with his tongue, pinching her clit between his fingers as her sex began to flood with come.

"Ah, god, yes!" she screamed. "Yes, yes, yes!"

As the shudders of her orgasm subsided, Gil lifted his face from between her legs and smiled up at her. "Well," he said happily, "if you're absolutely sure..."

About the Author

Kirsten Saell lives a thrilling life that parallels those of her characters, her days full of peril and trepidation, her nights overflowing with steamy encounters with exciting men (and women) in dangerous, exotic worlds. Or she would, were she not so comfortable and satisfied living in a small town in coastal British Columbia with her husband and three wonderful kids. Still, a girl can dream. More importantly, she can type. To learn more about Kirsten Saell or read more of her words, please visit <u>www.kirstensaell.com</u>, or send an email to <u>kirsten@kirstensaell.com</u>. She'd be delighted to hear from you.

Their uneasy alliance could lead to love—if the demon will allow it.

Serenity © 2008 D. Reneé Bagby

Melchior, King of the Bhresyas, is quickly growing tired of the war between his kind and the humans who view them as demons. He proposes a peace treaty with the most powerful human kingdom. His only stipulation? Once she comes of age, the human queen's daughter must be his bride.

Serenity has spent her entire life preparing for her role at Melchior's side. Other women might be frightened, but she embraces her destiny, knowing in her heart that she and Melchior have been twined together by fate.

While he wants cooperation between their two peoples, his union with Serenity cannot and should not lead to love. The more she tries to bring them together, the harder he pushes her away—until she lands in the arms of those who would do her harm.

Love is the answer. But before Melchior admits to his, it may be too late.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Serenity:

Serenity's voice shook when she asked, "Was that all you wished of me, King Melchior? A legal marriage and nothing else?"

"My intentions were to solidify the peace, nothing else. You said on our wedding day you understood marriages of state, Serenity."

"I understand a loveless marriage where heirs are still expected," Serenity replied in a breathy voice. "I understand a marriage of convenience to unify two kingdoms into one. I do not understand why I needed to leave my home. I do not understand my place in this kingdom."

"Cheslav is more inclined to keep and maintain the peace so long as you reside in Nexeu."

"I'm a hostage."

"If you choose to see the situation that way, then so be it. You are my wife and you are queen because of it."

"I am only the queen of Nexeu because Queen Asha was killed before you wed me. It is within your power to take the title away from me and grant it to your second wife, when you marry her. You will marry another, I know that. Nexeu needs an heir."

Melchior moved away from his desk, turning his back on Serenity. He sat in his chair but didn't look at her. "I will not speculate on the future with you, Serenity. Ruling my kingdom and ensuring your safety have kept me from considering another wife."

"What is there to consider? I'm sure Keran will say yes the moment you ask her. Traditionally, the king would wait for his first wife to bear him an heir before wedding another, but this is an untraditional marriage. There is no need to stand on ceremony in this—"

"Stop, Serenity! Even if I planned to marry another tomorrow, Keran would not be whom I chose."

That surprised her. "She is your current favorite and she occupies your bed almost every night. The whole of the palace thinks it's only a matter of time before you make her your wife and then queen shortly thereafter."

Her gaze searched his for some hint that the rumors were true. She only saw his annoyance.

"The people of the palace also think you go against my orders and take Hell Hound Chigaru *and* Hell Hound Haige to your bed. The change in the color scheme of your wardrobe—" he gestured to her orange dress, "—concurs with their suppositions. Shall I believe them in this as you do in the other?"

"It would be the truth if you allowed me to take a lover."

"My answer remains no."

"Why?" Serenity yelled.

Melchior yelled back, "Do not question me in this, Serenity. I have told you already you will not be allowed a lover. Do not mention it again. Ever."

"Then I wish to return to your bed, Melchior." Her statement was bold and it shocked her that she had said it aloud. She hadn't meant to say the words, but there they were.

Melchior seemed as shocked as Serenity. He stared at her.

Serenity took his silence as incentive to continue. She moved closer to him and clasped her hands in front of her in a pleading manner. She whispered, "I love you, Melchior. I want to be with you. I've always only wanted you."

"That is a lie. Your requests for a lover are proof of your lie."

"I thought to make you jealous. I thought if you knew another bhresya male wanted me then you would return me to your bed...that I would become attractive to you, as well."

Melchior said nothing.

"I know I may never arouse you as Keran does, but I also know with time I could learn to satisfy you. Please, Melchior. I want only to be with you again."

He closed his eyes and Serenity thought he might actually be considering her words. Instead of roundabout tactics, she should have confessed herself from the start. Had he known of her emotions for him she could have enjoyed his touch all the sooner.

"I will not take you to my bed, Serenity."

"Melchior, I—"

"I cannot return the feelings you think you have for me." He opened his eyes and looked at her.

"I don't think I have feelings for you, Melchior. I know I do."

"You cannot—"

"Yes, I can!" she yelled over his words, hurt by his insult and finally showing it.

Melchior replied in a calm manner, "You *cannot* love me, Serenity. Your ability to lie, even to yourself, hurts you with each passing moment you give this falsehood credence. You haven't known me long enough to love me."

"I feel as though I have known you forever. I knew it from the moment I looked into your eyes."

"Love is not so quick."

"It was for me!"

He gestured to her. "This is my point. You do not love me but an image of me you made up based on information your Hell Hounds imparted to you over the years. You *prepared* yourself to love me as a way to cope with the new life that would be soon forced upon you."

While his words made sense, Serenity refused to believe them. She hadn't imagined the spark of recognition, the meeting of two souls that happened when she met his gaze for the first time. His touch felt familiar to her and she knew his feel even before he introduced himself to her. She knew Melchior to be hers with every fiber of her being. There was no way he hadn't felt the same. She thought she saw it during their wedding ceremony and didn't understand why he denied it.

She said, "Destiny placed us together because she knew of the love we would have for one another."

"Your obsession with Destiny is the reason you cannot grasp reality, Serenity. This emotion you claim to have is not based on any truth. You do not know me."

"Love cannot be rationalized or measured in time."

"Love also cannot endure when it is false. Time is on my side. When enough of it passes, you will come to realize your feelings were nothing but a delusion."

"The only person in this room who is deluded is you, Melchior." She spun around and stormed out of the room. A not-ready-for-Disney fairy tale.

A Spell for Susannah © 2008 Jody Wallace

Princess Susannah's discovery that she can work fairy magic unlocks the door to a delicious secret: Beneath the castle where she and her eleven sisters live, there's an enchanted palace that has an edge over the Middle Kingdoms. It's chock full of princes who just love to dance. In a world where the nobility have been fairy-cursed to bear no more male children, it's a secret they enjoy to the fullest.

But without male heirs, the human lands are on the verge of anarchy. The King and Queen hire Jon Tom, a detective, to find out where their daughters are disappearing to every night. Susannah finds herself wanting to tell Jon Tom all her secrets—and give him her heart.

But if Susannah's secrets go public, her parents won't be happy. Worse, the fairies won't be happy. And the enchanted princes will be in danger.

Enjoy the following excerpt for A Spell for Susannah:

As soon as her escort left, a husky voice on the other side of the balcony spoke. "Bravo, milady. I'm impressed with the way you handled that rabbit boy."

Every nerve in her skin prickled. Mysterious whispering, no body—must be that sneaky Prince John. Had he been here all this time?

Susannah resisted the urge to raise her hands into a defensive stance. "Where are you? How long have you been watching me?"

"All night. You certainly made up for your lack of dances the night we met."

"I told you I came here to dance." Susannah tossed back her dark ringlets, suddenly conscious she was wearing one of her old red shifts and not a newer, more flattering one.

The voice spoke again, much closer to her. "Then you should dance with me." She felt a touch on her bare arm.

She edged away. "Prince Siselwade will be back any moment."

"You'll be lucky if Prince Sissy comes back at all."

Susannah stifled a laugh. "That isn't true. He's been an excellent companion."

"Some escort—leaving you out on a dark balcony at the mercy of any passing prince."

"At your mercy, you mean? I think not."

"I could be upon you before you knew what was coming," whispered a warm voice in her ear, but when she reached to fend him off, he wasn't there.

"I had little trouble with you last time, as I recall." Susannah flattened herself against the balcony railing so he couldn't approach her from behind. The cold marble chilled her lower back through the silk of her garment. "I wish to interview you."

"Your pulse races at the base of your neck." A quick finger stroked her collarbone. "Is that not fright?"

"No." She turned her face away from a touch upon her cheek.

"Are you frightened to be alone with me?"

"You don't frighten me."

"Then what do you feel?"

Susannah crossed her arms over her chest. If the prince was going to use his invisibility as an excuse to fondle her, she wasn't going to make it easy. She'd come here to interview him, not flirt with him. "Fatigue, of course. From all that dancing."

A leg brushed her calf. "We can go to the Divan Room, where you may rest in comfort."

"My prince will look for me here," she protested, even though the thought of sinking into a cushioned sofa was tempting. Perhaps Prince John would rub her feet, as the other princes sometimes did.

And perhaps not.

"He's already forgotten which balcony he left you on." Susannah glanced through the elegant glass doors into the ballroom just as Siselwade wandered past, a silver chalice in his hand. Light from the chandeliers that graced the ceiling of the ballroom poured through the doors in a perfect yellow square, but she stood to the left, in shadow.

"I've no wish to row myself across the lake again tonight, sir. I should remind him where I am, unless you'll man the oars yourself?" She smiled sweetly. "Alas, I'm not allowed," the prince replied. Susannah scooted along the balcony toward the light to call for Siselwade.

A strong arm held her back. From the position of the arm and the hand at the back of her neck, from the warmth in the air, Prince John must be standing right...in front...of her.

Susannah closed her eyes, and every nerve along her body tingled with awareness. When one relies upon sight, the other senses fade. Now she could feel the outline of the man, inches from her body. Now she could smell his scent, a peppery tang, with fruit on his breath.

"Ah, Susannah." A pair of warm lips feathered along her brow. "Don't call him. Stay with me." His cheek pressed against hers, and the hand clasping her neck threaded into her thick, heavy hair.

"I didn't tell you my name," she whispered. "I've been meaning to ask you—"

The tentative touch of his mouth upon hers cut her off mid-sentence. He rubbed softly against her lips, once, twice and lingered the third time with a moist pressure. When his tongue parted her lips, she tasted apples.

How long they stood on the balcony, with their mouths and tongues touching, with his palm cradling the back of her head, she didn't know, but it was long enough for her heartbeat to quicken and her nipples to tighten, long enough for her to fantasize about further indiscretions. She stroked his velvety face. His hair was silky, with locks across his forehead.

Prince John took her hand and halted her tentative exploration. "Princess," he said, his voice even huskier, "let me take you somewhere more comfortable. We'll fetch wine and fruit and talk."

"Talk," she said. She opened her eyes and saw nothing. A flood of cold air rushed along her front, restoring her sanity. "Yes, I wanted to talk."

"Then we shall."

She hadn't conversed with men one-on-one much in her life until recently. Jon Tom talked to her. He listened as well. The princes, on the other hand, did not.

"The princes never want to talk," she said.

"I'm not like—"

"The other princes, I know. You told me last time. Or do you remember?"

"I remember every moment I've ever seen you, in detail. I love to watch when you don't know I'm there."

His quiet intensity jolted her. She crossed her arms over her chest again to hide her taut nipples. "How...disturbing."

He chuckled. "We should definitely talk."

"What do you want to know?"

"I want to know how you came to find me, my dove. How you came to find the enchanted land and all the princes in it. What drives you to return, night after night."

His questions had a familiar tang. They reminded her of the questions she herself had asked the princes, back when she thought she could get a reply.

They were not, however, questions she cared to answer. And it was late. "The night is half-gone already. We must return to our own castle by a certain hour."

"Tell me other things about you. How do you spend your days in the land above?"

"You know about the land above?" she asked, intrigued.

For a moment he didn't respond. Then he said, "I know it exists but little else. My memories were erased by this damned curse."

"Why do you think you're different from the other princes?"

"Perhaps in my other life, my life before the enchantment, I was a truly wicked man." He traced a fingertip down her forearm and ended at the back of her hand.

"Fairies don't have the same concept of wickedness as humans. Their motives cannot always be comprehended." Such as, why would the fairies have trapped all these men here in the land beneath? And why would they allow the Female Curse to ruin the Middle Kingdoms, which supplied most of their gold?

The prince took Susannah's hand and squeezed it gently. She stared into the emptiness as the press of his lips warmed her knuckles. "Come," he murmured. "Why do you resist? You've nothing to fear from me."

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