



Kirsten Saell

# BOUND BY STEEL

Emissaries of Belthalas

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# Bound by Steel

*Kirsten Saell*

## Dedication

For my sisters, who from my earliest years “helped” me experience the gamut of human emotion: loyalty, jealousy, envy, angst, smugness, affection, guilt, anger, camaraderie, hate and love. Thanks, guys. And for Mikey, my tech-guy extraordinaire.

## Chapter One

Kaela was hanging out laundry when the dogs started barking. Bisio, the biggest of them, led the rest of the pack over the rise at a businesslike trot, his throaty *whuff* resounding amid the yipping and baying of his smaller cohorts. Squinting in the harsh light of a cloudless midday, Kaela scanned the horizon, her heart starting to trip over itself. The dogs were well trained, and wouldn't bark for Gil or Lianon.

The sound of hoofbeats reached her long before the lone man on horseback rode into view. Dropping her pegs back in the bucket, Kaela fussed with her skirts and hair, stepping out from behind the still dripping clothes. She didn't recognize him—if Gil or Lianon had been expecting someone, they would have let Kaela know. Her eyes darted toward the south, the direction Lianon had gone this morning with the flock and two of the dogs. Despite her fervent wish, the other woman was not to be seen strolling back up the path. Swallowing hard, Kaela squared her shoulders and forced herself to wave.

The rider pulled up amid a roiling sea of protesting dogs. A servant on a cheap horse—Kaela was not so far removed from her old life that she could no longer judge such things. Still, he looked down on her as if from the very seat of self-importance, when a year ago he would not have dared meet her eye.

“I’m looking for Gil al-Moirae,” he said without preamble, taking her for the housemaid she obviously was.

There was a time when she would have torn a strip from his hide over it. Now, she dropped her chin and pulled the lock she always left loose across her cheek to obscure her scar. “Master Gil is out.”

The man’s lip curled unpleasantly. “Obviously. If you might point me in his direction.”

“He does not answer to me, nor keep me apprised of his wanderings. He could be anywhere within ten miles.” She paused, knowing what courtesy demanded and trying not to be afraid. “Perhaps you would like to wait for him? There is bread and cheese inside, and good brown ale. Master Gil will certainly return in time for supper.”

The nag had begun to shift in annoyance at the dogs, snorting and showing the whites of its eyes. The man scowled and sawed hard on the reins, bringing the horse back under control. Feeling for the poor animal, Kaela hissed at the dogs, waving Biso toward the woodshed. The others followed the sullen mastiff, hackles raised but silent for now.

“I don’t have all day to wait upon Master Gil,” the man snapped.

Kaela twisted her hands in the folds of her skirts so she wouldn’t wring them. She knew it said something about what she had become that she was more relieved than offended by his dismissive attitude, but she refused to examine it close. “Have you a message?”

The man sneered at her. “His presence is requested by the Lord Chancellor Collin tomorrow, at his earliest convenience.”

“That is all?”

“Aye,” he growled. “That’s all.”

Without another word, the man wheeled his horse and plied its sides with his heels. Kaela stood rooted to the spot until he disappeared over the horizon.

The moment he was gone, little needles of cold began to pierce her skin, the trembling aftershock of a harmless encounter with a rude servant. Her heart thrummed with irrational fear and she fought off a wave of dizziness. Letting out a shaky breath, she

sank down to the ground. Sensing her dismay, Biso came and put his huge, jowly, black-and-tan head in her lap. Cursing herself, Kaela hugged him close and let the tears come.

“The duck is delicious,” Lianon said earnestly as the flavors of duck meat, red wine and shallots melted in her mouth. She stabbed another slice with her knife. Gil had bought a set of two-pronged forks from the Kurgan metal-smith last time he was in the city—the new implements were all the rage in Belthalas these days—but Lianon still preferred the uncomplicated convention of the dinner knife.

“Mmmph,” Gil seconded with his mouth full.

Kaela smiled wanly. “My mother’s recipe.”

“Oh?” Lianon took a spear of asparagus dusted with crushed almonds in her fingers and popped it in her mouth, trying to maintain the lightness of mood. “She must have been a wonderful cook.”

Kaela stared at her plate, her smile shriveling. “Not really. The housekeeper did most of the cooking.”

Lianon’s stomach did a little flip. That one statement was the most Kaela had ever shared about her life before they met. Judging by the young woman’s set face, there would be nothing more forthcoming this evening.

Gil pushed his chair away from the table, apparently oblivious to the nuances around him. Leaning back, he linked his fingers over his belly and sighed in appreciation. “Gods, Kaela, if you could bottle that, you’d be a rich woman.”

Kaela’s face colored, and she rose quickly to hide her discomfiture.

Lianon stood, her chair scraping loudly on the wood planks of the floor, and began to collect dishes. “Here, let me help.”

“No,” Kaela said softly, turning away. “You two will want to spend some time together, what with Gil leaving in the morning...”

“Never mind the cleaning, ladies,” Gil said gently, finally catching onto Kaela’s embarrassment. He rose and grabbed his coat from the peg. “Why don’t you have some

wine, instead? I'll go make sure my horse is fit for the ride into town tomorrow." He offered Lianon a tight smile on his way out the door.

Kaela continued to gather dishes, her eyes on her task, a stray lock falling across her cheek. Watching her, Lianon's heart twisted. She set her own dishes aside and went to the other woman. Slowly, as if approaching a frightened bird, she tucked the lock of dark hair back behind Kaela's ear.

Kaela froze, breathing fast, her eyes straight ahead.

"You don't need to hide it," Lianon said softly. "Not from me. Not from anyone." She ran the tip of her finger down the scar that streaked from cheekbone to jaw, watched how the quality of Kaela's stillness changed, infusing with tension. "Scars show the world what we are capable of surviving."

Kaela's eyes, filled with dismay and anger, flashed to Lianon's face. "I didn't survive, Lianon. I was rescued. If it hadn't been for you and Gil..."

Lianon stared, trying to be heartened by the other woman's anger. "That messenger today really spooked you, didn't he?"

"It's so stupid!" Kaela cried, throwing up her hands and sinking back down onto her chair. "I knew why he was here. I knew he meant me no harm. But you and Gil were gone, and I was all alone, and all I could think was what he might do to me..."

Lianon crouched in front of her, took both her hands and pressed them to her cheek. "That's why we got Biso," she sighed, at a loss. "So you would feel safe. Have the nightmares come back?"

Kaela looked away, jerking her hands from Lianon's grasp to scrub impatiently at her eyes. "I didn't want to bother you with my troubles."

Lianon's throat tightened. "Oh, Kaela. Oh, my dear."

"I wish I was strong," Kaela whispered. "Like you."

Gods, if only Kaela knew the price of that strength. Lianon pushed to her feet and poured two cups of wine from the cask on the sideboard. Going to the cabinet that held their medicines, she took some poppy extract and added it to one of the cups. She placed it in Kaela's hands, then closed her own around them. "Drink this."



“But the cleaning up—”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get the leftovers put away and we can do the washing up tomorrow.”

“But—”

“Drink it,” Lianon insisted, taking her own cup. “You could use a night without dreams.”

“All right.” Kaela took a hesitant sip, wrinkling her nose at the taste of the drug.

Lianon reached out a hand and helped the other woman to her feet. “Bed,” she ordered gently, leading her through the main room to the door of her small chamber.

“Really, Lianon, I ought to clean up.”

Lianon leaned in and kissed Kaela’s cheek. Inwardly, she was overjoyed that the other woman allowed the contact, when she might instead have flinched away. “Stop taking care of us for a moment and take care of yourself, my dear. I mean it.”

“Yes, boss,” Kaela said with a valiant attempt at a smile.

Lianon gave her hand one last squeeze and bade her good night.

“So have you worked for the chancellor before?” Lianon asked, dipping a dampened cloth in a bowl of menthol and soda and lifting it to her mouth.

“The old one, yes,” Gil said, loosening the laces at the neck of his shirt. “Fat old bastard with a sick sense of humor. I don’t know about this new fellow, though. He’s only been in office a few months. Take off your clothes.”

Lianon’s stomach flipped over. His tone hadn’t changed in the slightest—gods, he wasn’t even looking at her—but at his words her heart started to kick against her ribs. She gave her teeth one last scrub and set her cloth down. Slowly, she turned to face him.

“Do it quickly, would you?” he said lightly, his eyes finally coming to rest on her. The heat in them turned her knees to water. Without a word, she began to work her laces loose and pulled her shirt off over her head. His gaze fastened on her breasts, too small to really warrant binding of any sort, but his favorite part of her body, she knew. Smiling to

herself, she drew her fingers across her pebbling nipples to tease him. One glance told her his cock was hard and straining against the confinement of his clothes.

“Trousers,” he said, no lightness left in his voice now. He tugged his shirt free of his waistband and began to work it up his torso, but seemed reluctant to disrupt his view long enough to pull it off over his head. Smiling wider, Lianon unbuttoned her trousers and untied the drawstring of her drawers, and let them slide down her legs to rumple at her feet. Slowly she lifted one bare foot free, then the other.

His throat-knot worked visibly as he swallowed. “Every day I forget how beautiful you are,” he whispered. “Get on the bed.”

She obeyed the letter of his command, if not the spirit, sitting primly on the edge of the mattress with her knees together, grinning up at him. “Kiss me.”

His answering grin was wolfish, and he dragged his shirt the rest of the way off. “Open your legs, and I will, love.”

Her belly tightened, her nipples were aching points, and the place between her legs throbbed with awareness. Gods, she was on fire and he hadn’t even touched her yet. Glancing slyly up at him, she opened her legs a hand’s breadth. He dropped to his knees in front of her, reaching up to cup the back of her head and draw her to him. His lips toyed with hers, his tongue flitting between them. Her own joined his, chasing and playing until she was filled with his taste, salt and wine and an undercurrent of earthiness that was just him. His other hand crept up her torso and began to tug on her nipple, twisting and plucking, each touch sending a bolt of pleasure snaking down to her pussy.

“Wider,” he muttered against her lips. “Wide so I can put my mouth where you want it. Wide so I can push my tongue all the way inside you.”

Gods, that he could say such things and not even blush. She inched her legs another notch apart.

His lips left hers and kissed a path down her throat, pausing briefly on her collarbone before taking her nipple in his mouth. He sucked hard, his tongue flicking over the already rock-hard bead and she couldn’t suppress a moan as the pleasure hovered briefly toward the edge of pain.

“Wider,” he insisted. He pulled back and stared down at what he could see of her sex, his eyes dark and his face set. His chest was heaving, and she thought of teasing him a bit more. “I want to see your cunt. Show it to me, Lianon.”

All thought of teasing fled. Her sex was pulsating, her clit a straining, yearning bud that needed to be touched. Slowly she lowered her back to the mattress and spread her legs. Wide. She was as flexible as an acrobat, and by the time she reached her limit, her pussy was open to him like the petals of a freshly cut orchid. The cool air of their bedroom kissed her slick, heated folds. His gaze fixed on her swollen nether lips and he leaned in, his hands coming to rest on her inner thighs. Dipping his head close, parting her inner labia with his thumbs, he blew a stream of air across her, then licked her slowly from opening to clit. Her whole body jerked as his tongue hooked under the hood of her nub and wiggled, sending delicious ripples of sensation all the way to her toes.

She grabbed his head with one hand, her fingers tunneling through his dark waves, and tried to pull him closer, but he would have none of it.

“Greedy wench,” he scolded. “It’s bad manners to wolf down a meal.” His tongue slipped back between her folds, circling her clit. “A gentleman should take his time.” He sucked the hard nub into his mouth and nipped it with his teeth, and she bit her lip to keep from screaming as the walls of her cunt tingled and wept. “Savor.” God help her, he was savoring, shoving his tongue up into her channel and lapping up her juices.

She thrust herself toward him, scooting her bottom right to the edge of the mattress, but he only chuckled. Pulling his mouth away, he smiled up at her, his lips and whiskers glistening. “Such eagerness is hardly becoming in a lady.”

Gods, he could be infuriating! “Gil, please, god, just put your mouth on me. Make me come all over it. *Please.*”

He grinned from one ear to the other. “You ask so nicely,” he praised, then dove back in in earnest. Pressing his whole mouth onto her sex, he sucked and licked and teased and flicked and swirled and bit until she was writhing and bucking and moaning. She couldn’t control her movements, couldn’t control her breath. Inside she was coiling like a spring, tighter and tighter. Her clit was as hard as a pebble, standing straight up,

and his tongue lashed at it, over and over. Every touch added to the pressure building just inside the swelling, seeping walls of her cunt, and she knew he was purposely keeping her just at the threshold, damn him.

Opening her eyes, she looked down at him as his mouth worked her pussy. His gaze was almost worshipful as his eyes met hers. She felt her throat start to close at the sight, at the understanding that he was hers and always would be, and the light of the candles began to fragment amid a haze of tears. Blinking rapidly, she made herself look away.

And saw Kaela standing in the part-open doorway, peering in, her face a combination of horror and fascination. Her eyes met Lianon's and held, widening at having been caught peeking. But Lianon wasn't angry or embarrassed. God, no. The other woman's gaze on her was like pitch poured on a flame. Lianon's stomach clenched, her pussy began to pulse and without taking her eyes from Kaela's she was coming.

"Ahhhhh, god, Gil!" she hissed between her teeth, her hand pressing his face hard against her as her cunt spasmed and wept. And the bastard just pushed two fingers up into her and began to stroke the bundle of nerves on the upper wall of her channel, even as he sucked her clit into his mouth once more. Before the first orgasm had time to dissipate, she was plunged into another harder one. A high, keening wail reached her ears. In burgeoning mortification, she realized it was her own voice, a long, wordless cry of agonized pleasure.

In the doorway, Kaela watched silently, her face flushed a becoming pink, her lips parted on swift breaths, one hand raised to touch her scar as if to anchor herself in reality. Lianon saw her through a haze of pleasure that threatened to engulf her, to wring the life right out of her and leave her a limp and wasted scrap of flesh.

Gil stood and stripped off his trousers. Lianon's gaze briefly left Kaela's to smile up at him. His cock sprang free, pointing skyward, bedewed with a pearlescent droplet of fluid. Reaching up, she pulled him close as he settled between her legs and thrust. She felt her body mold itself to the shape of him, as if his cock belonged inside her, as if she carried the precise contours of him in her female flesh. His mouth seared a path from her

throat to her shoulder, then his teeth sank gently into the rounded muscle there as his rhythm increased. Her gaze lifted to the door again.

Kaela was gone.

Lianon frowned. Was it the sight of Gil's cock that had scared her away? Lianon could not have faulted her that after what the other woman had been through.

Lianon's thoughts fled as Gil's hand slid between them, his fingers seeking her clit. His mouth descended to hers, his tongue plunging deep and hard in rhythm with the motion of his shaft in her pussy and his fingers circling her nub. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she slid her hands down to his ass and clutched him tight to her, until she felt his muscles start to seize. His cock swelled inside her, the head slamming against her womb, his pelvic bone hammering her clit and she felt her body gather itself one more time.

"God, god, god, oh fuck me," he rasped in her ear. Her pussy convulsed and she bucked underneath him as his seed spurted deep within her. "Oh, god, Lianon, you've done it now," he gasped as if with his last breath. "You've done it, you've finally killed me."

"Nonsense," she panted, running her hands up and down his sweat-drenched torso as the world began to reassert itself on her overwrought senses. "I never work for free."

"I've been thinking about Kaela."

There they were. The words Gil had dreaded from the moment, a little more than half a year ago, when Lianon had suggested they take the girl on as a housekeeper. Scowling at the back of her head, he tightened his arms around her waist and fought to maintain his sanguinity. "What about her?"

"Oh, Gil, you should have seen her. I came back from the south pasture, and she was just sitting on the ground, hugging Biso and sobbing. It was ten minutes before I could get a coherent word out of her."

Against his will, Gil felt a bristling of protectiveness for the young woman. "Did he touch her? If he touched her, I'll—"

“He was rude, Gil, that’s all. Rude and abrupt. And it scared her half to death.”

He sighed. “So being here with us isn’t helping her.”

Lianon turned in his embrace and met his gaze. She was so open, he could see everything she was about to say written on her face. “She needs more than a place to be, Gil,” his love told him. “She needs to learn that her body isn’t just a vehicle for pain. She needs to learn that love and pleasure and happiness are things she deserves as much as anyone else does.”

Gil stared at her, his face carefully neutral even as every muscle in his body tensed. “And how do you propose to teach her that?”

She dropped her gaze, and he knew. Damn her, he knew.

“Are you in love with her, Lianon?”

“No.”

He pressed a palm to his forehead, still damp with sweat from their lovemaking. “Not yet, you mean.”

She frowned, but was too honest to argue. “She reminds me of Rhianna.”

He was shaking, he couldn’t seem to control it. Was he in competition with a dead woman now? Pulling away from her, he started to rise. “Shall I leave you alone to be with her?”

“No!” she cried, pulling him back. “No, Gil. I love you more than anything. More than my life. You know that.”

“Yet you would ask me to share you with another!”

Her eyes pleaded with him. “It’s not like that. I’m talking about healing her. I’m talking about making her whole again.”

“Take her back to Aru. He’s the healer.”

“He fixed her body. I think together, you and I can fix her heart.”

“Because Kaela’s experience of men will have her falling at my feet in love?” he snapped, pushing to his feet.

She sighed and sat up, hugging her knees and frowning down at his rumpled pillow. “During the war, Anthoril of Harrowsfail took four Darjhina to wife. It is said that they are still well content in their union.”

“Ask him how content he would be if his wives liked each other better than they did him.”

She met his gaze, her own unflinching and so open he knew she was earnest in every word she said. “Is that what you fear? That I would love her more than you?”

“Your first love was a woman, Lianon.”

She lifted her hands helplessly. “What would you have me say? I love you, Gil. You know this. You brought me back from the dead. There is nothing in this world or the next that could stop me feeling as I do. But I feel for Kaela, as well. And I’ve seen the way you look at her. I know there is a part of you that desires her too.”

He scowled and pressed his lips together, searching for the words to deny what she said. Kaela was a beautiful woman, sweet and soft-spoken, and there were times when he looked up to find the young woman’s eyes on him and felt his stomach clench at the tarnished innocence in her gaze, but that didn’t mean he wanted her. Lianon was beautiful and clever and generous and loving, and she didn’t need looking after. She was an Emissary—she had the brains and the skills and the muscle to look after herself. Certainly, Gil sometimes found himself wondering what it might be like to have someone to protect, someone who needed his shelter, but it did not follow that he desired Kaela.

He gazed down at his wife, her lean, whipcord body, her close-cropped hair and work-roughened hands. She’d killed men with those hands. She’d killed for him. And she lived for him too. He could see it in her face, the certainty of her love for him.

“And if she wants none of this? What then?”

Lianon lowered her gaze to her lap. “Then we must find her a better place. Somewhere she can heal.”

His heart twisted. Somehow, he was not as pleased to consider that possibility as he would have expected. “All right.”

She didn’t smile. As he watched, her eyes filled with tears. “Thank you.”

## Chapter Two

Kaela washed the dishes from today's breakfast and last night's dinner, and tried not to think at all. She felt bone-weary and frail in body and spirit, after a night spent mostly awake and in a state of remorseful confusion. When she had slept, her dreams had been harsh and terrifying, defying the deadening effects of the poppy milk she'd taken. But then, how could she have expected a dab of opium to make things all right? Yesterday had been a day of terror and emotional tumult, culminating in an act so outside her nature she could hardly believe what she'd done.

God in Antuine, she'd spied on them! Stood and stared at their most intimate of moments like some sick voyeur. She closed her eyes as heat flooded her face, but the image was there, waiting for her: The narrow band of light spilling across the hall floorboards from the partway open door. Gil on his knees beside the bed, his face buried between Lianon's wide-spread legs, his mouth—great god, his *mouth*—pressed right onto her sex. And Lianon, stretched out on the coverlet, her back arched and her face a portrait of delight as her fingers tangled in his hair to hold him closer still.

And then she'd spotted Kaela standing in the doorway and something terrible and ecstatic had seemed to take hold of her. Her back had lifted right off the mattress, her head flying back, her body twisting and jerking from the point where Gil's hands and



mouth anchored it. The sounds she made had torn through Kaela until she thought she might scream herself. But she hadn't screamed. She'd just stood there and stared as her blood surged and rushed in her ears and her heart slammed against her ribs.

A part of her still didn't believe Lianon's reaction. Couldn't credit the fact that a woman might find any pleasure at all in the act of sex. In the logical half of her mind, she knew it must be true. She knew because she could not imagine the gentle, loving man who was her father ever having forced himself in violence on her mother. She could even recall, like the vague residue of half-remembered dreams, how it felt to be courted, to be wooed and cajoled by a man in another time when such things were welcomed. The fluttering as of wing-beats in her belly, the blushes and stammering, and the awful, unbearable, wonderful self-consciousness. The first taste of a man's lips on hers, so light and fleeting and long ago she wondered if she had imagined it.

But those memories belonged to another woman, a woman who lived in a beautiful home surrounded by loving family and wanting for nothing. They had no place in the recollections of the person she had become the night Stefano sold her virginity to a monster.

Kaela's stomach had been in knots upon waking in the dark before dawn. It ached for the hour she lay in bed, miserably watching the sky turn coral and then golden, knowing what was to happen. Waiting for Lianon to come and tell her to pack her few things and leave. It was no more than she deserved for spying on them, for betraying their trust.

Her eyes burned as she dried her hands and began putting things away. She rubbed at the tears with her sleeve, trying to ignore the way her hands shook. Because Lianon had not sent her away, and Kaela had no idea how she would go on from this point. No idea how she would live in this house with them, after her eyes and Lianon's had met last night.

But it seemed like everything was changing. In the yard after breakfast as Gil saddled up his horse, his eyes had lingered on her, and the look in them made her wonder if maybe Lianon had told him what happened. His mood was pensive and preoccupied,

but he didn't seem angry. He had even kissed Kaela's cheek before he left, something he'd never done before. His lips had brushed ever so lightly across her scar, and she had held perfectly still, even though all she could see in her mind's eye was his cock, huge and brutal, emerging from his unbuttoned trousers.

"I'll take care of her, sir," she'd said more steadily than she'd expected.

He'd looked at Lianon, and it seemed to Kaela that there was a whole conversation in that glance. Then he had smiled down at Kaela. "Have a care for yourself, as well. You've become dear to us both."

Which was just such a strange and terrifying thing for him to say, she'd nearly burst into tears then and there. It was a huge relief when he mounted and rode away, and Lianon went off to move the sheep to a fresh pasture. But now that Kaela was alone, all she could think of was Gil's tongue working between Lianon's legs, and the unnerving, appalling, thrilling wail she'd made when she'd found her pleasure.

Pressing her palms to her eyelids, Kaela forced the images away and went to make some *jaffha* and biscuits. Lianon would be back soon, and would want something to eat.

It was some time before she realized she hadn't thought of the angry servant on his cheap horse all morning.

Lianon stamped the dirt from her boots and finger-combed her hair before heading back into the house. Biso followed her in—he was the only one of the dogs permitted inside—and she let her fingers trail along his thick, muscled neck as he passed her on his way to his favorite patch of sunlight under the window. Kaela was busy in the kitchen. Pretending to be busy, that is, industriously scrubbing a worktable that already appeared pristine.

"Hullo," Lianon ventured.

Kaela's glance lifted briefly to Lianon's, then dropped back to her washcloth. "I've made *jaffha*."

Lianon reached out and placed her hand on Kaela's vigorously scrubbing one. "Sit and have a cup with me?" The girl's face reddened, but she was brave enough to nod.

The lid of the *jaffha* pot rattled as Kaela lifted it. Lianon gently took it from her grasp and poured for them both. Kaela sank slowly down to perch on the edge of her chair and folded her hands in her lap as if she didn't trust them to hold her cup.

Lianon leaned back in her seat and took a long sip. "We have some things to discuss, you and I."

Kaela looked like she might throw up. "I—"

"Do you know why I asked you to come live with us?"

Kaela's brimming eyes met hers, and her hands twisted in her lap. "Because you felt sorry for me?"

"Yes. And because you reminded me of someone."

Kaela sniffed and dabbed at her tears. "Who?"

Lianon set her cup down and held the girl's gaze. "My wife," she said gently.

Kaela's eyes widened and her tears dried up. "What?"

"My wife. Rhianna."

"I...I don't understand."

Lianon smiled. "I was an Emissary in Sylphae. I lived as a man then—" she glanced wryly down at her trousers and shirt, "—though you'll probably realize I haven't changed so much. One afternoon I was collecting payment for a job—just a simple retrieval of a wayward son from a bad situation. The degenerate's father was a good man, wealthy, a landowner but not titled. He had me right into his salon, fed me Kahlia tea and little lemon cakes. The girl who served us, his niece—gods, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She leaned over the little table to pour and her hair tumbled over her shoulder in the sunlight, and I could just see the slightest curves above the lace of her bodice. Then she smiled at me, and that was all it took. In that moment I loved her."

Kaela stared, appalled. "But she was a woman!"

Lianon hid her smile behind her cup. "Yes."

"But, you and Gil—"

"Yes."

Kaela frowned in bemusement. "Oh."

Lianon set her cup down and leaned forward. “I have been blessed to know the love of three people in my life. The first was Samulo, my teacher.”

“The *Kurgan*?” If anything, Kaela was more scandalized by this than by Rhianna.

“Yes.”

“You...*loved* him?” From the look on her face, the word was like castor oil in her mouth.

Lianon smiled. “I still do.”

Kaela frowned. “What about Rhianna? Do you still love her too?”

*God help me, yes. More than anything. I love her so much, I still sometimes feel her there beside me when I wake.*

Even now, it took all Lianon’s will to keep her voice steady. “Rhianna is dead.”

Kaela’s hand flew to her mouth and her eyes filled with tears once more. “Lianon, I’m so sorry. What happened?”

Lianon took a deep breath and counted to ten in her head. “The man who raped you. Sur-Marus. His son Brian and three of his friends raped and killed her.”

“Oh, no!” Kaela whispered. “Oh, *Lianon*.”

“I was there. I saw it all, but I couldn’t help her. I’d been out of the business for more than a year. Rhianna, ah...” Lianon swallowed and started again. “She wouldn’t be courted by a man who made his living with a sword. She could even accept, when I finally had the courage to tell her, that I was a woman, but she would not wed an Emissary. So I gave up the life. For her. When we were married, her uncle gave us a small farmstead and thirty sheep. We’d only been living there for a few months when Brian and his friends...”

She stopped, clenching her hands in her lap. “It was a good life. Peaceful. I’d stopped training, lost muscle and reflexes. My gear was put away in a trunk, useless. As useless as I was. When they broke in...”

“Oh, Lianon. It wasn’t your fault. There wasn’t anything you could have done.”

*I could have died with her. I could have told them what I was and let them have me too, so she wouldn't have to endure alone.* Shaking herself, Lianon forced the conversation back onto stable ground. “There *is* something I can do for you, Kaela.”

The girl's cheeks turned bright pink and Lianon's stomach did a little flip. “What do you mean?”

“After yesterday—after the messenger scared you,” she clarified, feeling her own face go warm at the memory of Kaela in the doorway looking in, “I started thinking. Maybe you would like to learn how to defend yourself.”

“What, with a sword?” Kaela blurted on a laugh. Lianon thrilled inside to hear the sound of it. “I couldn't possibly—”

“No, not with a sword. With your hands and feet and whatever might be lying around that you could use as a weapon. It might not stop a man from attacking, but it might make him regret choosing you as a target.”

Kaela thought for a moment, her eyes narrowed on Lianon's face. “All right.”

Lianon stood, slapping the table with one hand as if to seal the bargain. “Good. Excellent. Let's get started right away.”

Kaela rose with considerably more caution, misgivings already surfacing on her face. “What do we do first?”

Lianon grinned. “First, we find you some clothes.”

Kaela stared into the brass mirror. The person staring back didn't look anything like her, as if she'd become a different person altogether, a stranger to herself. She'd expected to feel ridiculous in the shirt and trousers Lianon had dug out of Gil's trunk for her, but she didn't. She just felt...exposed.

Her curves were all there to be seen by anyone, from any angle. Twisting, she glanced at her bottom and grimaced, feeling a surge of heat rise to her face. Worse—if she squinted she could detect the bare hint of shadows where her nipples pressed against the fine linen shirt. The seam at the crotch of the trousers seemed to grope her intimately, and left nothing at all to the imagination. How could Lianon go about dressed like this?

Didn't she feel as if every nuance of her body, all her feminine secrets, were on vulgar display?

Lianon came up behind her and stood at her shoulder. "How do you feel?"

Their eyes met in the polished brass of the mirror. Kaela forced a smile. "Vulnerable."

Lianon grinned. "We'll work like this today. If you still feel the same tomorrow, I'll let you go back to your dress."

That sounded fair. "All right."

Lianon slid her hand into Kaela's. "Let's go."

As they left the house, Kaela could feel every bump and dip in the ground through the soft, padded soles of the boots Lianon had loaned her. They were snug-fitting, but made of such buttery leather that her feet didn't feel constrained at all. Lianon had said that her regular, wood-soled shoes were no good for training, that it was important for her balance to wear something less constrictive that allowed the feet to flex.

Together they entered the old cowshed, a building that hadn't housed cattle since the day Lianon bought this place. What it held now was a variety of training apparatuses, including a pair of man-shaped sparring forms. Both hung by heavy chains from the rafters, and were anchored to the floor with ropes. One was made entirely out of soft wood, fully articulated at the joints like a life-sized marionette. The wood of its torso was chipped and slashed as if a thousand angry woodpeckers had had their way with it. The other form was soft, padded leather on the outside, but Kaela knew from the several times she'd been required to mend it that it contained a "skeleton" of wood, steel and animal bones. The slightly misshapen head was formed around a bear's skull Gil had found in a Kurgan's curio shop, and someone with a sense of humor had painted on a face complete with wall-eyes, ears the size of rhubarb leaves and a green chin-beard.

Lianon led Kaela right to him. "Meet Marwic."

Kaela lifted her hand to her mouth to suppress a giggle. "You named him?"

“Not just named. Named *after*. The original Marwic was the priest in charge of the orphanage they stuck me in when I was little. Condescending bastard. Within five minutes of meeting him, I wanted to rip his face off and make him eat it.”

“Oh,” Kaela said, grinning.

“Hit him,” Lianon said.

“What?”

“Hit him.”

Kaela’s grin withered and she approached the form. It was strange how difficult it was making eye contact, even with a dummy. Forcing herself to glare right into Marwic’s skewed glance, she wound up and slapped him across the face. A second later, she was bent over, flapping her hand as if she could shake the pain out of it. “Ow, gods, that *hurt!*”

Lianon shook her head in disappointment, her arms crossed over her chest. “I told you to hit him. What you just did was pretend to swat a fly. Now close your hand, make a fist and *hit* him.”

Kaela clenched her fist and raised it.

“Unless you want to break it,” Lianon observed dryly, “your thumb should be on the outside of your fingers. That’s better.”

Kaela pulled her arm back and took a deep breath. And stared at Marwic’s foolish face. And stared more.

“Do it.”

“I will,” Kaela said defensively, shifting her stance.

“Pretend it’s sur-Marus.”

Gods, the mere mention of his name was enough to drain the blood from Kaela’s face. Her guts twisted and the dummy’s stupid face began to waver and fragment as her eyes filled. In her mind, she was back in that room, on the bed, sur-Marus’ teeth tearing at the tender skin of her back until the pain of it surpassed even that of his organ in her torn and tortured sex.

“There he is,” Lianon said softly, her breath fanning Kaela’s ear. “Chained immobile and unable to hurt you. You can do anything you want to him. You can hurt him as much as you like, in any way you wish. You can hurt him even more than he hurt you.”

Kaela didn’t even realize what she did. One moment she was standing there, reliving the rape. The next she was watching as the dummy shivered, its head snapping back and forth. Her hand hardly hurt at all. If it did, she was too angry and excited to feel it.

“Good,” Lianon praised, and Kaela felt something brightening within her, like sunlight filling a long-shuttered room. “Do it again.”

Another punch, right in the middle of Marwic’s—no, sur-Marus’ face. His head wobbled, then lolled to one shoulder. Another punch, then another, alternating hands. With a start, Kaela discovered she was grinning with savage enjoyment.

“You know,” Lianon said quietly, smiling, “there’s one place you can hit him that will make him feel even worse.”

*Yes. Oh, yes.* Kaela bent her legs to better reach the dummy’s groin.

“Use your knee, my dear,” Lianon instructed. “The impact will be much more profound.”

That made sense. Kaela walked up to sur-Marus and looked him right in the eye. Her knee came up hard, slamming into the dummy’s crotch. In her mind, she pictured him going white and crumpling to the floor as the breath wheezed out of him. Pictured him lying there at her feet in agony. She only wished the dummy had fallen from its chains so she could kick it while it was down.

Lianon’s hand squeezed her shoulder and Kaela turned to find the other woman’s eyes shining with approval. “Excellent, my dear,” Lianon whispered, leaning close enough that her breath fanned Kaela’s cheek. “But playtime is done. It’s time to get down to it.”



## Chapter Three

“I ought to get supper,” Kaela said wearily, looking at the kitchen as if it was a mountain she had to climb.

“Don’t be silly,” Lianon chided her, smiling with fond sympathy at her exhausted friend. They’d spent the whole of the afternoon pushing Kaela to her physical limits, running laps around the yard, doing push-ups, sit-ups, lifts, lunges, squats and stretches. When they weren’t exercising, Lianon was lecturing Kaela on all the most tender places on a man—the best places to hit—the eyes, nose, throat, groin and hamstring, and guiding her limbs to show her the proper techniques. By the end of the session, Kaela was willing to concede that working in skirts would have been impossible, and was feeling more comfortable in trousers. She had also begun to accustom herself to physical contact with another person, having parts of her body touched that hadn’t been since her rape.

As a result, she was as wilted as a trampled daisy.

“There’s plenty in the cold room for us to make do,” Lianon told her. “I think a hot bath is a higher priority.”

Kaela plucked at the shirt that clung to her sweat-damp skin. “Oh, Lianon, I have no energy to heat water.”

Lianon was already tossing wood on the embers in the stove. “You just sit. Leave everything to me.”

“Lianon, I couldn’t!”

“You’ll do as I say, Kaela,” Lianon murmured, feeling her belly tighten at the suggestion behind the words.

Kaela plopped down onto a chair and promptly wilted. “Yes, boss.”

Lianon hummed as she drew water from the pump and set a pot on the stove. A large cauldron hung from a hook above the fire in the main room, and Lianon filled that as well. Dragging the copper tub from its corner, she manhandled it right-side-up into the middle of the kitchen and went to get towels, soap and salts. Very soon she was pouring the steaming water into the tub and refilling her vessels to heat more.

She glanced over at Kaela to find her dozing in her chair. Clapping her hands, she put on a mock-stern face as Kaela started awake. “All right, we’ll have none of that,” said Lianon. “If you go to sleep now, you’ll be stiff as a day-old corpse come morning. Get your clothes off and into the tub with you.”

Kaela rose, her hands at the laces of her shirt, but her easy mood was gone. Her eyes darted from the tub to Lianon and back again. Obviously, the idea of being naked in someone else’s presence was something she just wasn’t ready for. Lianon went to get the freshly heated water from the stove and pour it in. “It’s all right, Kaela. I’m going to see about supper. You just get in when you’re ready.”

She fetched the cauldron from the other room and added it to the tub, bringing the water level to more than halfway, and sprinkled in a handful of mineral salts. Then she went to the pantry and began to poke around, doing her best not to turn and peek.

She listened as she prepared the food, peeling hard-cooked eggs from this morning, cutting thick slabs of creamy, white cheese to spread on rusks of stale bread. There was leftover duck, salted pork, smoked ham sausage, fresh mushrooms and enough spinach and dandelion leaves for a salad. As she worked, slicing mushrooms, she heard the rustle of garments and then the trickle and swirl of water as Kaela climbed into the tub.

“Ready?” Lianon asked.

“Yes.”

Lianon turned and carried their meal to the table, setting the tray down. Kaela sat huddled in the water, hugging her up-drawn knees. She looked so fragile, so lost, it made Lianon’s heart ache. “Let me help you with your hair?”

“All right.”

Lianon knelt beside the tub, just at Kaela’s shoulder. Reaching for the ewer, she filled it with steaming bathwater and poured it over Kaela’s unbound hair. The heavy black curtain plastered itself to her shoulders and back.

“Lean your head back.”

Kaela’s neck arched, the fine cords standing out. Her collarbones jutted, and Lianon imagined her mouth on them, her tongue dipping into the hollows. The girl’s knees were pressed tight against her breasts, but that only enhanced her cleavage. Lianon felt a familiar heaviness settle between her legs, but forced her eyes from the sight, and her mind from thoughts she knew Kaela would not be ready to acknowledge.

Gingerly, taking care not to startle her, Lianon washed Kaela’s hair and back, her hands skimming gently over the marks of her experience with sur-Marus. As she worked, the girl began at last to relax. The cooling water raised gooseflesh on the parts of her above the surface, and she hunkered deeper down. When Lianon finished with her hair, Kaela lay back, closing her eyes and resting the base of her skull on the contoured edge of the tub. Her crossed arms covered her breasts, but one pink nipple peeked from the crook of her elbow. Lianon’s eyes fastened on it as her belly coiled and tightened.

Gods, what was she doing? Her feelings were premature, to say the least. Even if she was able to guide Kaela toward an acceptance of her body and her sexuality, even if she helped her get past the rape, there was no guarantee that the girl would be remotely interested in any kind of liaison with another woman. If Lianon wasn’t careful, she’d end up with a broken heart.

“Hungry?” Lianon asked, flinching inwardly as her body responded involuntarily to the subtext of the word. *Gods, she was hungry. Ravenous.*

“Mmm,” Kaela sighed, smiling. “Starving.”

Lianon grabbed the tray and headed into the main room, where padded chairs and a settee would offer more comfort than the kitchen, and where there was no beautiful, naked woman in a bathtub to tempt her. She set their meal down on the low table and continued on into Kaela's room. "I'll bring you your shift and robe," she called over her shoulder.

When she returned to the kitchen, it was to see Kaela wrapped in linen, one foot propped on a chair, drying her calf with a corner of the towel. Her limbs were displayed in all their contoured glory, her sleek, black hair seeming to caress her shoulders and upper arms. As Lianon stood there, transfixed with desire, the towel slipped loose and Kaela scrambled to retrieve it. Her creamy skin was flushed pink from the bath, and trails of water from her hair wove their way down her naked torso. She straightened, staring in horror at Lianon, clutching the damp linen to herself as her face went red. With a start, Lianon realized the girl wasn't trying to cover her breasts so much as the scar above them.

"Don't look. Please," Kaela whispered, her chin starting to go wobbly.

Lianon turned her back, as much to dash the tears from her own eyes as to give the girl her privacy. The look on Kaela's face hadn't been the expression of violated modesty you'd expect in a young woman caught without clothes. It was a profound horror at being seen at all. And how could Lianon blame her? Kaela bore the marks of sur-Marus' brutality all over her body, from the crescent-shaped bite-marks he'd put on her back and shoulders, to the scars on her face and chest from his bodyguard's dagger. She didn't see her body as a thing of beauty or a source of pleasure and comfort. To her, it was a constant reminder of an event she had to get past, if she was ever to be happy.

"I'm sorry," Kaela whispered, clearly miserable. "I'm sorry."

Lianon turned back to find Kaela modestly wrapped in her towel, hugging herself. "I'm sorry, Kaela. I didn't mean to stare. It's just that..."

Reaching up to tug a sopping lock of hair over the scar on her cheek, Kaela looked away, blinking frantically. "I know. You don't have to tell me how ugly I am."

Lianon swallowed a startled laugh, her eyes stinging. She shook her head, bemused. “What are you talking about? You’re beautiful... Beautiful.”

Kaela looked dubious. “You’re just saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

“No it isn’t. I’m all covered with...”

“Scars?” Lianon shrugged, trying to sound casual, to take the power out of the word. “So am I. So is Gil. You ought to see some of them. Do you think it makes us want each other any less?”

“But—”

Lianon shook her head sternly. “I don’t want to hear another word about it. You’re a beautiful woman, strong and pretty and smart and kind. Now stop being foolish and put your robe on. I’m hungry.”

Tossing the shift and robe on the chair, Lianon went to the cask and decanted an ewer of wine. Behind her, she heard the rustle of cotton and velvet as Kaela hurriedly pulled on her clothes. When she was sure the other woman was ready, Lianon grabbed a couple of glasses and led the way into the main room.

Over their meal and a few glasses of wine they discussed some of the things Kaela had learned that day. After, they relaxed on the settee and Lianon brushed Kaela’s hair for her. Long after the tangles were gone, she continued to drag the brush through the long, black tresses, admiring the silkiness of them.

“How long has it been since someone did this for you?” she asked.

“Ages. My mother used to brush my hair every night when I was little. Before she died.”

Lianon squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“It was my brother Dael who killed her, but I guess you can’t blame a baby for something like that. The physician warned my parents after my sister was born not to risk another pregnancy. But she wanted to give my father a son.”

“Someone to inherit?”

“I don’t even think it was that. We were comfortable, but hardly wealthy, and there was no title to worry about. I think she just felt a family was incomplete without a boy.”

Lianon realized she’d stopped brushing and hastily resumed, not wanting to break the mood of openness. “Did your father remarry?”

“Eventually. Lara was nice. She had no children of her own, so she had all this attention to lavish on us. It was a good life. I’d just had my nineteenth birthday. My father’s business partner had a son my age, Carmac, and everyone assumed we’d get married. He was handsome and smart and charming—everything a girl could want. Except his father was a thief. He’d taken the profits from the last three quarters, and instead of purchasing inventory, he put them in his pocket and vanished. My father was ruined. We lost the house and everything in it.”

“I’m sorry, Kaela.”

“Lara went back to live with her parents, but they’d never approved of her marriage to my father, and they certainly didn’t have any room in their lives for another woman’s children. It was...like losing my mother all over again. My father got what work he could, but none of it paid very well. We went further and further into debt, and they finally arrested him and threw him in debtor’s prison.”

“What did you do?”

Kaela made a sound, not quite a laugh. “I think you can guess. My sister and brother ended up in a workhouse, but I was nearly twenty. An adult, responsible for my own welfare. I scrubbed pots for a couple of weeks, and didn’t even make enough to keep my own belly full. Then one day I went to visit my father, and Stefano was there at the gate of the gaol. He was well dressed and charming and...he had all this money. He said he could find plenty of work for me, work that would pay for my upkeep with enough left over to eventually get my father out of prison.” She was silent for a moment, her head hanging back and her eyes closed as Lianon drew the brush down through the curtain of her hair. “Even after I realized what kind of work he had in mind, I was prepared to do it. If it would get my father out of prison. If it would get my family back together. But then, well...you know what happened.”

Lianon set the brush down and leaned forward to lightly hug her. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner? Gil and I have money—more than we really need. You can have all you require for your father.”

Kaela sank back against her, and Lianon felt her heart expand to fill her whole chest that the girl was leaning into the embrace and not away from it. “Oh, Lianon, I can’t see him. I can’t see any of them. They’ll take one look at my scars and they’ll know how I got them. What will they think of me?”

“Oh, my dear,” Lianon sighed, squeezing her tight. “If they’re worthy of even a tenth of your love, they’ll understand. And if they don’t, you’ll still know in your heart you did everything you could to help them. That you did your duty by your family. And Gil and I will be here for you no matter what, never doubt it.”

Kaela shifted, snuggling closer, as if after six months of self-imposed alienation, she had finally rediscovered a longing for human contact. “I’ll think about it, Lianon. I really will. And thank you. For...everything.”

Lianon pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Think nothing of it, my dear.”

They sat like that, Lianon holding Kaela, enjoying the closeness of the other woman, until the sun was down and the dying embers were the only light in the room. It slowly dawned on her that Kaela had fallen asleep. Carefully extricating herself, Lianon tucked a cushion under Kaela’s head and fetched a blanket from the linen chest. She made sure the sleeping woman was comfortable, stirred the embers and added a bit more wood, and then went to bed.

## Chapter Four

Gil sat in the salon and tried not to let his anger get the better of him. Fucking bureaucratic whoreson. Called him all the way into the city, just to let him sit and stew all afternoon in the goddamn waiting room. No wonder the government never got anything done.

Pushing to his feet, Gil stalked to the window and glowered out on the busy street. People passed with the single-mindedness of ants, busy on their errands, while he remained trammelled in this sterile salon waiting on the pleasure of a man he had no real desire to meet.

It was unprofessional, that's what. Who did business like this? Deliberately unclenching his jaw, he massaged the tension from his brow. The last thing he needed right now was a headache.

"Can I bring you some refreshment, sir?"

Gil started and spun at the arrival of the steward, the same cool, diffident fellow who had ushered him into this godforsaken room three fucking hours ago. An offer of food could only mean a longer wait was forthcoming. Pinning the man with his glare, he hissed, "*What?*"



The steward's lips thinned, but he knew his place. "Would you care for some wine, or perhaps something to eat, sir?"

Son of a bitch. Three hours without even a glass of water—Gil was starving. But what he wanted was one of Judith's renowned meat pies and a half a bottle of brandy, and the last place he wanted it was in the house of some faceless bureaucrat. "I would care to see the chancellor, and the sooner the better. Unless his honor cares to compensate me for time spent waiting on his leisure. I can assure you, my hourly rates are costly enough to make even a civil servant of his high stature think twice."

The steward's blue eyes flashed briefly before he lowered them with obvious reluctance. *Cheeky bastard*, Gil thought, shaking his head.

"My employer begs your indulgence, Master Gil. Unexpected business has detained him. He wishes me to assure you that he will attend you at the earliest possible convenience."

"He has half an hour more, before I depart and refer this matter to my factor."

The steward blanched. Gil smiled inwardly. The only thing that scared a civilized man more than a trained killer was a lawyer.

"Very good, sir. If you'll excuse me." The steward bowed and left, pulling the doors gently shut. Within a couple of minutes, he was back in the room, bowing again. "My employer requests the honor of your presence for supper."

Gil wasn't sure whether to laugh or curse. On the one hand, he was pleased the chancellor had finally deigned to take him seriously. On the other, the last thing Gil wanted to do was sit in some formal hall with his best manners on.

He smiled tightly. "Tell your employer it is I who would be honored."

The steward bowed. "If you would follow me, sir."

Chancellor Collin rose as Gil entered the dining hall, coming forward to shake his hand. His grip was as forthright as his expression, and Gil found himself wondering how someone so young and seemingly affable had risen to become the highest judge in Belthalas. In general, it took a good deal of backroom maneuvering, an oily disposition, and years of careful bribery to make it in politics. Those who survived the journey tended

to shed their geniality along the way. The position of chancellor was an elected one, and elections didn't bring out the best in a candidate, either. Five years ago, Gil had been contacted for a job by the incumbent during the race for the Reeve's Office. When Gil heard the terms, he'd gone straight to the main contender for the position and encouraged him to quietly send his wife and children to the country until the election was done.

"A pleasure to meet you, Master Gil," Chancellor Collin said with a smile. "A pleasure."

"Likewise, chancellor," Gil lied.

"Please, have a seat. Will you take some wine?" As Gil sank into the well-padded chair, he surreptitiously inspected the heavy glass that sat to the right of his platter for haze or dust or anything suspicious. The bottle—well chilled, judging by the condensation on the sides—sat unopened on a cart by the table. "Yes, thank you."

While the steward uncorked and poured the wine, a pretty young servant brought in a platter piled high with prawns and scallops still in the shell. Gil waited until his host sipped before tasting the vintage. Crisp and dry, its tang refreshed his mouth before sliding down his throat to settle pleasantly in his empty stomach. The girl served him a generous helping of seafood and a salad of spinach leaves, orange slices and blanched leeks. He took a prawn, peeled it, and popped it in his mouth to discover it had been poached in the same vintage they were drinking. Very nice.

Chancellor Collin smiled. "The food is to your liking?"

"Delicious, thank you."

The chancellor waited until the serving girl had disappeared back into the kitchens before he broached more serious matters.

"Tell me, Master Gil, do you know much Fjorn history?"

"As much as any man who is neither Fjorn, nor a historian."

"Then you must be familiar with the fall of the Temple Knights?"

Gil frowned, wondering exactly where this was going. "What man isn't? High Prelate Eddard of Banebury wanted his brother Hillard on the Fjorn throne, despite the fact it was already occupied. His Knights would have succeeded, but for perfidy within

the ranks of the Temple priests. After the debacle, it was decided that the clergy had too much earthly power, and the Order of Temple Knights was disbanded.”

“A foolish knee-jerk reaction if there ever was one,” the chancellor concluded.

“How so?”

The chancellor deftly peeled a prawn and bit it in half. “They disbanded an entire order of elite fighters—fighters who had, up until that one incident, been unerringly loyal to king and country—who then had no choice but to turn mercenary and find positions in the private armies of the Fjorn nobility. In essence, the disbanding of the Templars only increased the chances of civil war.”

Gil sat back and took a long sip of his wine, intrigued despite himself by the man’s unorthodox politics. “What would you have done, chancellor?”

“The crown would have been better advised to enact measures to prevent nobility from rising to supremacy within the Temple. I will not need to tell you how such measures would have benefited Fjorg in its more recent troubles with the Dragon’s Head. And they ought to have written legislation consolidating all the armed forces of Fjorg under the aegis of the crown. A king cannot effectively rule if he must always tiptoe around his lords and their personal militias.”

Gil stabbed at his salad with a three-pronged fork cast from pure silver. “But allowances must surely be made for a lord to defend his land, his vassals and tenants, and of course his family. Even these days, the world is a dangerous place. The Bal-shar may be gone, but brigands and raiders still victimize the innocent, especially in more isolated regions. You can’t possibly advocate the total abolition of the traditional household guard?”

Chancellor Collin smiled with a dry humor that did not quite reach his eyes. “That is exactly what I advocate.”

Gil set his fork down on the edge of his plate, the delectable salad turning tasteless in his mouth. He may not be able to see quite where this conversation was leading, but he was beginning to feel the first stirrings of unease, and he’d learned over the years to trust his instincts.

The chancellor's smile widened, but did not grow any warmer. "It is my belief that a strong king, with the proper resources, must be the ultimate authority of the land. If he is granted sufficient wherewithal through taxes and manpower, it should be his sole responsibility to govern, and to protect his subjects. And the first rule of good governance is upholding the law."

"And if a man has a grievance with his neighbor?"

The chancellor lifted his glass in a salute. "A king who cannot smooth over a neighborly feud has no business being king."

"And what," said Gil, trying to maintain a certain lightness of tone and not entirely succeeding, "ought a man do when he has a grievance against his king?"

"Then that man has a problem," the chancellor said quietly, his smile gone.

Gil pretended a keen interest in his wine as the serving girl brought in the second course, a roast pork sirloin with pearl onions, baby peas and a loaf of white bread hot from the oven. Everything looked delicious, but Gil's appetite had fled. Over the course of the long wait in the salon, he had largely discarded the possibility of working with this man, and this...discussion only reinforced that decision.

The girl finished dishing out their meal and retreated. Gil picked up his knife and speared an onion, not with any real intention of eating it. All he wanted now was to finish this ridiculous conversation and get the fuck out of here. "Your interest in the topic seems more than a passing one, chancellor."

The chancellor's smile was back full force. "I'm a man of ambition. A such, I aspire to change the world for the better."

"Surely you have no royal aspirations? After all, Belthalas has no king."

"Belthalas may be a city-state," the chancellor said affably, "but it is more similar to Fjorg than you might realize. Scaled down, it possesses all those parts that comprise a kingdom—a ruler, his loyal nobility, the civil service, a strong clergy, the commons and a militia. Unfortunately, it also abounds with mercenaries who threaten the stability of its righteous governance."

And there it was, out in the open. Gil stabbed a second onion onto the point of his knife. “The Emissaries.”

Chancellor Collin’s teeth flashed, but the coldness of his eyes lent his smile a predatory aspect. “The Emissaries.”

Gil’s fingers tightened on the haft of his dagger. Without being too obvious, he made a note of the exits, and where they were likely to lead. “What exactly are you proposing, your honor?”

“Nothing too radical,” the chancellor chuckled. “Certainly nothing as radical as was done with the Templars. Just a little practical reorganization.”

“You must forgive me, sir,” Gil said softly. “I’m afraid I have no head for politics. You will need to spell it out for me.”

The chancellor leaned forward, his food sitting untouched on his plate. His excitement seemed to reach its fingers across the length of the table and take Gil by the throat. “Right now, the Emissaries owe allegiance to none. You are freelance contractors available to anyone who can pay your fee and meet your conditions. Even taking into account your professional bias, you can surely see that such a system does not foster justice—or rather, it fosters one standard of justice for the poor and another for the rich. What I propose is to bring the Emissaries of Davnia under the aegis of the Reeve and his administrators. Within the confines of the law, they will be agents of justice, free from the petty feuds and bloated sense of entitlement of the rich.”

“The Reeve’s office and the Chancellor’s have always been welcome to engage the services of Davnia’s Emissaries.”

“And the Emissaries have always been within their rights to refuse them. And therein lies the rub. I propose to extend the authority of the judiciary to the regulation and deployment of the Emissaries. In essence, to make the Emissaries an elite branch of the city constabulary under direct command of the chancellery. Let’s face it, Master Gil, there will never be a shortage of those requiring the chastisement of Davnia’s finest. But I think we would all sleep more soundly knowing those who receive this chastisement actually deserve it.”

“With the chancellery as the sole determiner of who needs killing and who doesn’t?”

Chancellor Collin smiled and spread his hands. “Who better?”

*Oh, who indeed?*

“I assume you plan to do likewise with the city’s attorneys?” Gil asked tightly, reaching for his wine. “Will you consolidate them under the aegis of the government? Certainly if there is any one group that can claim responsibility for a lopsided standard of justice, it’s lawyers. After all, what are they but freelance contractors who charge fees for their services?”

The chancellor’s eyes narrowed, all pretense of pleasantness gone. “Lawyers do not kill people.”

Gil shrugged, feeling perversely more at ease as the chancellor’s mood curdled. “I would argue otherwise. No man is hanged whose death has not been influenced by at least two lawyers—one advocating for his part, the other against. Their competence and zealotry—or lack thereof—is often the deciding factor that puts the noose around a man’s neck.”

The chancellor stared bloodlessly across the table, his lips a thin line of disapproval. “You make light of an issue I take very seriously.”

And hearing those words, seeing the careful lack of expression on Chancellor Collin’s face, Gil suddenly knew. Damn it, just how deep was this pile of shit he’d stepped in? “Who was it?” he asked quietly.

“What?”

“Someone close to you was killed by an Emissary. Who was it?”

The man looked as if Gil had just forced him to eat bird droppings. Carefully, the chancellor set his knife and fork on the table next to his plate and linked his fingers. “My sister. She refused the attentions of the wrong nobleman.”

Gil winced inwardly. No matter how often he was reminded that not all Emissaries shared his standards, it always came as a bit of a surprise to hear of a woman being killed by one, especially over something as petty as spurned advances. From the beginning of

his career, he had always prided himself on asking not only “*who do you want dead?*” but “*why?*” Not everyone was so thorough.

“I’m sorry,” he said, meaning it.

“Don’t be. You didn’t kill her. Everyone knows Gil al-Moirae doesn’t do women—it’s the one reason I have suffered you to sit at my table.”

Gil sighed. “I understand now the nature of your prejudice. I can only remind you that there are remedies under the law for you to get justice for your sister.”

The man’s nostrils flared and his face paled. “Really? Remedies under the law? Are there any remedies you know of that will bring her back to life?”

Gil set his implements aside and slipped his dagger back into its sheath. “Why am I here, chancellor?” he asked at last. “What exactly do you want from me?”

The chancellor scowled. “This city is sick, Master Gil. The Emissaries may not be the cause of that disease, but they are a symptom, and one I am no longer disposed to tolerate. I could have asked any number of your associates here today. I chose you because of your moratorium against killing women and children, and because more than half of your portfolio involves work done for the government of this city. I asked you here to offer you employment as my representative within the guild, to act as a liaison between the government and your associates to facilitate the transition.”

*Well, shit.*

“What work I did for this city was freely contracted. I work on my own terms, your honor. If you have done any kind of research, you’ll know I have had occasion more than once to turn down a job proffered by the chancellery.” Gil stood, straightening his jacket. “You seem a man of determination, chancellor, else you would not have risen to such heights. I wish you every fortune in this endeavor, and have no doubt that you will be able to effect the changes you desire. But you will have to do so without my help. In truth, I am already semi-retired, and I have wealth enough to settle down for good in the country. I have no need of a steady job, nor any desire to join a political crusade, however just or well-meaning it might be. I am recently married. My wife and I hope to have a child within the next year. Simply put, I am not your man. I’m sorry.”

The chancellor stood, smiling coolly. "I appreciate your candor, Master Gil. You are welcome to stay for dessert."

"Thank you, but no. I have other business to attend to in the city, and the sooner I get to it, the sooner I can return home."

"I'm sorry we could not come to an agreement." The chancellor rang the bell, and the steward materialized in the doorway. "If you would show Master Gil the door?"

"Yes, chancellor."

As the doors of the chancellor's residence shut behind him, Gil breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been afraid for a moment that the steward wasn't leading him outside at all, but to a cell in the bowels of the manse, or a bevy of waiting thugs who would cart him off to prison. Certainly, Gil had had occasion to annoy those in power before, but never one who seemed so single-minded about dismantling the very rules that made it safe for Gil to do so.

A groom brought his horse from the small stable behind the house, and he mounted. Damn, but he was still hungry. Judging the angle of the sinking sun, he dug his heels into his horse's sides, hoping to get to Judith's before she closed for the night.

He left his horse at a livery about eight blocks from his old apartment, and walked the rest of the way. By the time he reached the bakery across from his place, Judith was covering her day's remainders with oiled cloth and getting ready to shut her doors.

"I don't suppose you've got a meat pie hiding in here somewhere?" Gil asked by way of greeting.

Judith looked up and grinned. "Well, well, if it isn't my former best customer." Coming around the counter, she hugged him warmly and kissed his cheek, her blue eyes sparkling. "How are you, Gil?"

"Well." He grinned. "Hungry."

"God in Antuine, nothing changes, does it?" she laughed, looking him up and down. "Skinny as ever, too, I see. So life in the country agrees with you?"

He thought of Lianon. "It has its consolations."



His stomach growled, and Judith chuckled, swatting him with her towel. “Sit, sit, we’ll have some wine and a bite of something.”

She disappeared into the back room and returned with a jug tucked under one arm and a pair of serviceable earthenware cups. While Gil poured for them, she went behind the counter and selected a couple of honey-buns and an onion loaf. He hardly waited for her to set them down before he was stuffing a bun in his mouth. Sweet, yeasty, honey-glazed bread stuffed with beef and peppers and Qaranican cinnamon—god, could this woman cook. He closed his eyes and just let himself taste it, then reached for the second one.

“Salgrim’s teeth, doesn’t that woman feed you?” Judith asked, swallowing a laugh.

“Lianon?” he muttered around a mouthful. “She can’t cook. Or rather, she shouldn’t ever cook. But Kaela has a fine hand in the kitchen. Nothing like this, though.”

She waved away the compliment but he could see her round face redden with pleasure.

“I was just at the chancellor’s residence. His cook has some skill, but the dinner conversation killed my appetite.”

Judith’s smile vanished. “What were you doing there?”

“He wants to hire me on steady.”

“You gonna take it?”

He shook his head, wondering at her sudden gravity. “Nah. Why?”

“Nothing much. You hear things, is all. He’s been stepping on toes at the chancellery—you know, firing the old guard and bringing in his own people. And his men were hereabout even last month, sniffing around. Asking questions.”

Judith’s wonderful bun suddenly lodged in Gil’s throat, and he took a good swallow of wine to wash it down. “What kind of questions?”

She frowned at her own cup. “Same as last winter. About you and your woman and that business at Flaxton’s.”

Gil’s appetite curdled. “What did they want to know?”

Judith's face was like a sheet and she took a long sip of her wine. "All kinds of things. Like who was the whore that killed those goons, and where was she from? Like was she a whore at all, or an Emissary, and was she under contract? And they kept asking after the girl, Kaela. Where'd she get to, afterward? Said they wanted to talk to her."

Gil scowled. What the hell kind of game was Collin playing? He'd sat there at dinner, spouting his bizarre political manifesto, even offered Gil a job, and mentioned nothing about Lianon, or Flaxton's, or Dalton sur-Marus.

"Did they find what they were looking for?"

Judith reached over and put her hand on his, holding his glance. "No one who knows anything would have talked, you know that. But there's been rumors ever since that girl first showed up in her boy's clothes. These men of Collin's, they knew without having to be told that Lianon al-Sylphae wasn't no man. It seems reasonable to reckon they might have put two and two together and put her name on that whore at Flaxton's."

"Well, shit."

"Is it bad?"

Gil shook his head, even as his stomach clenched with unease. "I don't know. Could be nothing."

She patted his hand and rose. "You'll want to ask Rat. He's always got one ear pricked to the gossip."

Gil stood and straightened his coat. "Thanks for the buns, Judith. Delicious as always. What do I owe you?"

"Pshaw!" She waved his money away. "Your coin's no good here." She went to unlock the door to let him out. The moment her back was turned, he slipped a hart under the edge of the platter. In the doorway, he kissed her cheek. "It's good to see you, Judith."

"Go talk to Rat," she said again, pinching his cheek, then shut the door and locked it behind him.

The sun was well and truly down now, and a scrawny youth in trousers two sizes too big for him was weaving from lamp to lamp with a torch. Lights glowed in the windows

of the apartments above street level, and the night life was just beginning to emerge—whores taking up position on corners, thieves scouting out the best pouncing spots. There was a time when Rat would have been among them, but he had steady digs house-sitting for Gil, now, and was mostly fencing these days, with a solid network of junior thieves picking pockets and giving him a cut to dispose of the goods. None of those on the street approached Gil. He had the kind of reputation that tended to stick to a place, even long after he'd left it.

Across the way, the door of the Whore's Crown beckoned, the noise of laughter and boisterous talk spilling out onto the street, but lights glowed in the windows of Gil's apartment. There was a Rat in his house. With a nostalgic grin, Gil headed for the stairs in back of the building. He was passing beneath his bedroom window, when the sound of feminine giggles drifted out to him. Grin widening, he kept to the inside rail where the treads were less likely to creak, and fished in his pocket for his key.

## Chapter Five

Lianon lay in bed and listened to the crickets outside her open window. It was well past the middle night and exhaustion dragged at her, but sleep would not come. She felt hot and restless and the ache between her legs wouldn't go away. The sleeveless tunic she wore when Gil wasn't here to warm the blankets clung to her skin, rubbing distractingly across her nipples whenever she shifted position. In her mind, she was not in her own bed, but kneeling beside a bathtub, letting her hands skim down Kaela's wet skin and under the water to slide between her thighs. She imagined her fingers slipping into the other woman's folds to find them slick and swollen. As she envisioned Kaela's arousal, her hand stole under the drawstring of her undergarment and between her own legs, seeking the aching bud of her clit.

God, god, *god*. With her free hand, Lianon shoved the blankets off of her, letting the cool night air bathe her bare legs. Her knees drew up of their own volition and she ground her bottom down onto the mattress as she rubbed teasing little circles around the place she throbbed. In her mind, it was Kaela's clit she stroked, Kaela's channel she filled with the fingers of her other hand. She pictured her mouth on the other woman's breasts, sucking her tight, pink nipples, lapping at them, grazing them with her teeth. Pictured Kaela on this bed, her back arched like a cat's as she held Lianon's mouth tighter on her

plump breasts. In her fantasy, Kaela lay back and splayed her legs, her pouting nether lips beckoning. And Lianon dipped her head to taste her honeyed treasure, sliding two fingers up into her cunt.

Lianon gasped and moaned, her head tossing on the pillow as her fingers furiously worked. With two fingers of her other hand, she pressed deeper inside and stroked the knot of nerve endings that pulsed on the upper wall of her channel. Her hips grinding and wriggling, she let out a thin wail as she rubbed her clit to a much-needed climax.

Sated, she lay there limp as a wet rag, letting the stars slowly dissipate from her vision and her breathing return to normal. Gradually, as the rush of blood slowed in her ears, she became aware of the sound of weeping from Kaela's room. Rising, she pulled on her robe and went to see what was the matter.

Kaela woke in a strange place. She squinted into the faint light coming from the embers in the fireplace of the main room. She could see the bulk that was Biso curled on the hearth, and heard his soft snores. Lianon had tucked a blanket around her, and a pillow under her head, but the settee's inadequate padding had done nothing good for Kaela's sore muscles. Sitting up, she stretched, feeling a soreness in her limbs that was not entirely unpleasant. Rising, she made to go to her room, when a familiar sound reached her ears.

Lianon's bedroom door stood halfway open, and from the other side of it Kaela could hear a series of sighs and moans that brought her mind back to what she'd witnessed last night. Her feet seemed to choose their own path across the floor, toward Lianon's door and away from her own. Almost mesmerized, she leaned toward the gap and looked in, but the moon was hidden in cloud and the dark in the bedroom was nearly perfect. Knowing her silhouette would stand out even against the meager light in the main room, she shrank back and pressed herself to the wall.

She told herself to go to bed. That she had no business spying on Lianon, that what she was doing now was at least as much a violation as watching the two of them last night. But she didn't move. Couldn't move. She stood and listened as Lianon's cries grew

ever more impassioned, and in her mind she was seeing Gil's face between the other woman's legs, lapping at her sex while she thrashed and screamed. And between her own legs Kaela felt an unwelcome pressure building as her body responded of its own volition.

Beyond the door, Lianon gave one last, wailing cry and was silent. Out in the main room, Kaela tiptoed past Biso, away from the other woman's bedroom door and in through her own. Before she had even pulled the blankets up, she was weeping—loud, shuddering sobs. She didn't know why. It was as if something had broken open inside her, and she couldn't slam it shut again.

And then, to her horror, she saw a flare of light beyond her door as Lianon lit a lamp. Burying her face in the pillow, Kaela tried to hold her breath, but the sobs wouldn't stop.

"Kaela?"

Lianon rushed in and set her lamp on the nightstand. Sitting on the edge of the mattress, she spread her arms, and Kaela, like a hurt child, let herself be engulfed in the other woman's embrace.

"Was it the nightmare again?"

And what was Kaela to say? *No, not the nightmare, I was just listening to you pleasure yourself and it made me cry.* Hiccupping, she forced a deep breath and tried to resist the temptation to wipe her wet face on Lianon's tunic.

Lianon lifted a corner of the sheet and began to blot away the tears. "I thought maybe you would sleep more soundly after today."

Kaela leaned back and met Lianon's concerned gaze. "It isn't that."

Lianon's hand came to rest on Kaela's cheek, her thumb brushing lightly back and forth. "What is it then?"

Kaela's eyes fell to her lap. "I could hear you." She flicked a glance up to see Lianon blushing and at an obvious loss for words. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to listen. I don't know what came over me."

"Did it upset you so much?" Lianon whispered, almost as if to herself.

“I just—I feel like I don’t even know myself anymore! I don’t understand what I do or why I do it! I didn’t want to spy on you, but I just couldn’t help myself. After last night...” There. She’d said it. *Last night*. She had courage for that, at least.

Lianon’s face softened as if with relief. “Why did you watch us?”

Kaela’s eyes dropped again. “I don’t know.” But she did.

“Why, Kaela?” Lianon’s voice was quiet and uninflected, but the command in it was unmistakable.

Kaela took a deep breath and gathered herself. “Because I couldn’t believe that you enjoyed being with him. With a man. I couldn’t see how any woman could take pleasure in what men do.”

Lianon smiled. “And what did you think after you saw us?”

Kaela’s eyes filled with tears.

“You were raped, Kaela,” Lianon said very gently, framing Kaela’s face with her hands and brushing the tears away with her thumbs. “It’s something terrible that happened to you, and nothing you do can change it. But it doesn’t have to be who you are.”

Kaela’s heart twisted inside her until she thought it would tear apart. “But I don’t know how to be anything else.”

And then Lianon was weeping as well. “Oh, love, don’t ever think that.” And hugging her close, she eased them both down onto the mattress and they just lay together until their tears dried up.

“Is it better with a woman?”

Lianon started awake to find her cheek pressed against the back of Kaela’s shoulder and her arms wrapped around her waist. Kaela’s bottom nestled snugly against her thighs, the position so natural and comforting, it had lulled Lianon to sleep. “What?”

“Is it better with a woman?”

Lianon determinedly doused the tiny knot of warmth that formed in her belly at the question. “Is what better?”

A silence. Within the circle of Lianon's arms, Kaela's ribcage rose and fell with increasing speed. "You know..."

Lianon grinned. "Making love?"

"Yes," Kaela answered in a tortured whisper.

"Not better. Different."

More silence. Lianon held her arms very still, not wanting to startle her.

"Different how?"

Lianon's grin widened. "Just different."

"What...um, what kinds of...things do you do? I mean, what do women do? Together."

"I don't know what other women do. I have only ever really been with my wife, Rhianna."

Kaela's voice when she spoke was barely a breath. "What kinds of things did you do with her?"

Lianon clenched her fists against the temptation to stroke her fingertips along the other woman's limbs. "We kissed. Caressed each other."

"Where?"

"All over."

Kaela's breath quickened even more. "Did you ever...did you ever put anything... inside...?"

Heat rose to Lianon's face as her body clamored for sex. Pressure built in her nether lips as they swelled with arousal. Her clit was so hard and aching, she had to stop herself from reaching down to touch it. "Sometimes."

"Like what?"

Lianon closed her eyes and squeezed her legs together, willing her body to be quiet. "My fingers." She swallowed, her breath beginning to gust against Kaela's robe as a dizzying lightness filled her head. "My tongue. Sometimes other things."

Kaela was silent for a long time, and Lianon held herself perfectly still, trying to slow her breathing and cool her excitement. Not easy, with Kaela's entire length pressed



against her, and the warmth of her in her arms. It was so long since she'd held another woman, she hadn't realized until now how much she missed it. She loved Gil more than life. He was everything she wanted in a man—intelligence and devotion and muscle and humor—but he was still a man. He couldn't give Lianon what a woman could, couldn't be soft or delicate or submissive without losing what made him a man. Was it greedy, to desire both of them? Did she really have to choose? It seemed cruel beyond bearing if, in order to have one, she must give up the other.

"Do you ever..." Kaela began, then halted on a strangled moan.

Lianon tightened her arms and pressed her forehead against Kaela's shoulder as her stomach knotted and coiled.

"Do you ever think about doing those things..." Kaela trailed off, then took a deep breath and hurled herself from the precipice, "...to me?"

Lianon closed her eyes and all the breath went rushing out of her as her sex began to melt. Every muscle in her body clenched against the urge to flip Kaela onto her back, pin her down, and take what she wanted.

And god, what was Lianon supposed to say? Now that she thought about it, Kaela's stilted questions could be interpreted more than one way. Was it a reemerging sexual curiosity, or a need to know Lianon would not push her into a form of intimacy she still found traumatic?

"Kaela—" She paused, choosing her words with extreme care. "I want you to know that I will never, ever ask you to do anything you don't want to do."

Kaela shifted in her arms, and for a moment, Lianon was afraid she was about to flee. But the other woman only turned to face her, frowning in the half-light of the lamp. Her cheeks were flushed pink, her lips parted, and though her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, there were no tears in them now.

"Then you have thought about it?"

God, god, god, in her mind, Lianon's hands were in Kaela's hair and her tongue was already deep in her mouth. Forcing the image away, she propped herself up on one elbow to put some distance between them, and removed her other arm from around Kaela's

waist before she did something she couldn't take back. "I never allowed myself to think about it. But then I saw you in the doorway last night."

Kaela's chest rose and fell. Excitement or fear? Her eyes were huge and round and innocent. "I never thought about it, either," she whispered. "Until last night."

Lianon closed her eyes for a moment and just let the words wash over her like cleansing water. She laid her hand on Kaela's cheek, her fingers splayed. The woman's pulse fluttered against the pad of her thumb, rapid as a hare's. Kaela's lips parted in expectation and Lianon slowly lowered her head.

Her lips delicately brushed Kaela's, their touch lighter than a butterfly's wings. The woman's breath rushed against Lianon's cheek in quick little puffs, but she didn't turn her face away. Trembling with the effort of restraint, Lianon deepened the kiss just a little, her tongue darting out to lap at Kaela's upper lip. With her lips and the angle of her head, she coaxed the other woman to respond to the kiss, and when she did, Lianon groaned into her mouth. Her hand slid from Kaela's cheek to tangle itself in her hair.

And then Kaela's tongue flicked against her own and she knew she had to stop.

Pushing away, she flopped on her back and threw one arm across her face, panting as if she'd run a marathon.

Beside her, Kaela stirred. "Did I do something wrong?"

Reaching down, Lianon took Kaela's hand and lifted it to her lips. "I'm afraid. I'm scared I'll move too fast for you."

Kaela shifted up onto one elbow, frowning. "Can I...can I touch you?"

*Oh, god, Kaela, what are you doing to me?* Lianon lay there and squeezed her eyes shut as her insides went wild, her pussy so hot and wet and swollen she thought she might come from a single touch. Her nipples were tight little points that yearned for contact, jutting desperately against the linen of her tunic. It was a moment before she could speak. "You may do anything you like to me, Kaela. I'm yours."

Kaela slowly lowered her hand to the thin linen covering Lianon's belly. Muscles flexed and tightened under her touch as Lianon arched her back. Heat poured into her

palm through the fabric, and Kaela felt a corresponding warmth begin to build between her own legs. The sensations were vaguely familiar, but Carmac's kisses had never made her feel quite so excited, or so imperiled. Her lips still tingled where Lianon's had teased them open, and her tongue still held the taste of the other woman's kiss. A part of Kaela—a part that seemed to get smaller and quieter every minute—screamed a warning. But the part that remembered normalcy and sanity, the part that trusted Lianon, reached with merciless hands to smother that feeble voice.

“What do I do?” she whispered.

Lianon's chest rose and fell like a forge bellows, and she gave a desperate little wriggle. “Touch my breasts.”

Heat flooded Kaela's face, but she obeyed. Her hand slid up the soft linen to cover one small, firm mound. So tiny, so unlike Kaela's own, but just touching it evoked a dramatic response. Lianon's hands clutched the blankets beside her, and she tensed like a drawn bow, pushing up against Kaela's palm. Fascinated, Kaela dragged her thumb experimentally over Lianon's protruding nipple.

“*God, Kaela!*” Lianon hissed. Kaela pulled her hand away, alarmed, but Lianon opened her eyes and pinned her with her gaze. “No, oh, don't stop, it's lovely.”

Feeling a bizarre thrill, Kaela covered Lianon's breast once more, this time taking her nipple between thumb and forefinger and tugging gently. Lianon closed her eyes once more and let out a sigh. “Ah, yesss. Just like that. Mmmmm.”

Smiling a little, Kaela slid her hand to the other breast and began to toy with it, as well, reveling in the other woman's response. Thinking back to what she'd seen last night, the things Gil had done, she bent and pressed a kiss to Lianon's chest above the neck of her tunic. A clean smell of sweat and soap filled her nostrils, and she licked at Lianon's damp skin, tasting salt.

“Ahhh, Kaela,” Lianon whispered, tugging the drawstring of her drawers undone. “Don't tease me.”

Kaela stared at the open flap and its trailing strings, at the band of taut flesh visible between the waist of Lianon's undergarment and the rucked hem of her tunic. The small

indentation of Lianon's navel seemed to wink at her, drawing her eye downward. And then Kaela was staring at her own hand as it slid down Lianon's belly. Hot skin seared her palm as her hand descended, and for a moment, as her fingertips first encountered the other woman's curls, she hesitated. She looked at Lianon's face, at the feverish desperation, at the wonderful combination of lust and tenderness and vulnerability. This woman—an Emissary—was entirely at Kaela's mercy. With a tiny whimper of frustration, Lianon closed her eyes and thrust up against the weight of Kaela's hand, and Kaela's fingers slipped ever so slightly into the moist furrow of the other woman's sex.

Kaela's searching fingertips encountered the resilient firmness of a protruding tag of flesh, slick and hot. Lianon pushed upward against them and wriggled, so that they slid back and forth over the hard bud. Between her own legs, Kaela felt a straining, aching pressure in the exact same spot, and thought maybe she knew what to do.

Pressing down, she rubbed the thick little bump with two fingers, making slow circles around it.

"Oh god, oh god, don't stop," Lianon whispered, grinding her hips in rhythm with Kaela's teasing fingers. "Just like that, yessss."

Kaela rubbed a bit faster, her eyes raking the other woman's length, from her head tossing on the pillow, down along the flexing muscles of her torso to her widely splayed legs. The linen of Lianon's undergarment was stretched taut over Kaela's working fingers, impeding their movement. With a little growl of frustration, Lianon lifted her bottom and shoved the offending garment a few inches down. Kaela stared, her eyes drinking in every detail, the soft, dark blonde curls crushed beneath her hand, the lips of Lianon's sex, plumped and wet, engulfing the bare tips of her fingers, the hollows at the junction of thigh and abdomen, shifting and undulating as Lianon squirmed and wriggled.

"Oh, faster, oh, *god*, Kaela...."

Her own breath quickening, Kaela obliged her, increasing the speed of her circling fingers, pressing just a bit harder on the rigid little button of flesh. She wondered, even as her excitement built, whether she would be able to make Lianon shudder and scream the way Gil had done last night, and then, almost at once, it was happening.

“God, *Kaela*, oh god, I’m there! I’m *there*!” Lianon’s back lifted up off the mattress. Her head tossed, her eyes flying open, wide and unseeing, and a hoarse cry ripped from deep in her throat. As she bucked and thrashed, Kaela’s fingers slipped deeper into her slit, and she was astonished by the flood of slickness she found there. Pulling her hand back, she looked at the thick, translucent fluid that coated her fingers.

Dragging in huge lungfuls of air, Lianon snatched Kaela’s hand and brought it to her lips. As her tongue darted out to taste her own essence, Kaela felt the oddest sensation, like a snake coiling in her belly, wrapping tighter and tighter around itself. Lianon looked utterly spent, as if the will to move had been wrung right out of her. Her skin was flushed a beautiful pink and glistened with sweat, her limbs were limp, as if she couldn’t summon the energy to lift them. Tears wove their way from the corners of her closed eyes down into the hair at her temples. Their joined hands fell to Lianon’s chest, and Kaela could feel her heart still slamming against her ribs.

With two fingers of one hand, Kaela had done this.

She smiled. “Are you all right?” she asked softly, squeezing Lianon’s hand.

“Lovely,” Lianon answered with a dreamy smile, gazing up at her. “Exhausted. Wonderful. How do you feel?”

Kaela’s smile widened, a heady lightness expanding inside her. “Powerful.”

Lianon’s eyes darkened and she reached up to frame Kaela’s face between her hands. “Come here,” she whispered, pulling her down for a kiss. As Lianon’s tongue slipped tentatively into her mouth, Kaela’s own was there to meet it as the last of her doubts disappeared under a wave of tenderness, affection and something she had never thought to feel again in her life—desire.

Shifting, Lianon twisted out from under Kaela and lowered her gently down onto her back. Propped on one hand, she ran the other through Kaela’s thick, black hair, spreading it out on the pillow so it surrounded her head like a dark halo. With her fingertips, she traced the lines of the other woman’s face, the wide-set, arching brows, the soft roundness of her cheeks, the pale pink bow of her lips. Lianon’s hand slid down along the

slender column of her throat, pausing at her collarbone, just above the scar that ran from the center of her chest to her right shoulder. Kaela's breath was coming quicker, and though there was uncertainty in her eyes, they were dark with arousal and held Lianon's without fear.

"I'm going to touch you," Lianon whispered. "Everywhere a woman's body wants to be touched." Kaela's face flooded with color, and beneath Lianon's hand, her heart hammered. "If I go too fast, or too far, or if you just want me to stop, you have only to tell me. All right?"

Kaela nodded and wet her lips. Leaning forward, Lianon added her own tongue to the task, and they just kissed for a long time, their tongues darting and chasing each other. Lianon's hand stole down from Kaela's collarbone and inched toward her breast through the opening of her robe. She covered the perfectly rounded globe with her palm and Kaela moaned low in her throat. Her hands tangled in Lianon's hair and she tore her mouth away, panting hard.

Lianon waited for the word she dreaded. *Stop*. It didn't come. Instead, Kaela pulled her closer, and Lianon pressed her lips to the other woman's neck, her teeth lightly grazing the perfect, creamy skin, her tongue drawing a wet line down the length of her throat.

Kaela's nipple pressed delightfully against Lianon's palm, and she arched her neck, offering her throat up to Lianon's kiss. Lianon plucked at the nipple through the thin fabric of Kaela's shift, pulling it into a tighter, harder bud, drawing a husky whimper from the other woman.

"You like that?" Lianon whispered against Kaela's neck, her hand moving to tease Kaela's other breast.

Kaela gave a delightful little wriggle. "Yes."

Lianon smiled and pulled back, tugging the tied belt of her robe undone and opening the panels wide. Her hand slid back up to Kaela's breast, flicking her thumb across the nipple. "I like it too." Holding Kaela's glance, she reached for the laces at the neck of her shift and worked them loose. "I want to see you. Is that all right?"

“All right.”

Reaching down, Lianon pulled the hem of Kaela’s shift up her legs and over her hips, then helped her slip out of it and the sleeves of her robe. As the woman lay back, her breasts formed plump, perfect mounds, tipped in tight, pink nipples. Lianon stared, unable to drag her gaze away, feeling her pussy flood with moisture once more, despite two orgasms in as many hours. Kaela’s hand came up to cover herself, but it wasn’t her breasts she wanted to hide.

“Don’t,” Lianon chided gently, taking Kaela’s hand from her scar and pinning it loosely beside her head.

“Don’t look at it,” Kaela whispered, her face red with embarrassment.

Lianon’s heart twisted and her throat tightened painfully. “Foolish girl,” she said softly. “There’s no part of you that isn’t beautiful to me.”

Bending, she pressed a swift kiss to Kaela’s mouth then let her lips tease their way back down her neck to her chest. Dipping her tongue into the hollow at the base of Kaela’s throat, she returned her hand to her breast, twisting and plucking the nipple into a rigid peak. Then slowly, so as not to startle her, she took the jutting tip into her mouth and suckled.

“Ahhh,” Kaela sighed, her hands coming up to tunnel through Lianon’s hair.

Encouraged, Lianon slid her hand down Kaela’s soft belly and around her waist, lifting her back up off the bed, and nudged between her legs with one knee. At Kaela’s little whimper of alarm, Lianon released her breast, and smiled down at her. “Shh, my lamb, I need to feel your skin on mine.”

Very quickly she slipped out of her tunic and drawers. Kaela’s eyes fastened on Lianon’s naked breasts and she wet her lips. Lianon bent and kissed her, chasing her tongue in playful circles. Her fingers toyed briefly with the tips of Kaela’s breasts, then tickled their way down her belly to the curls at the apex of her thighs.

Pulling her lips from Kaela’s, Lianon kissed her way to the tender spot behind her ear, letting her tongue toy with the lobe. “Kaela.”

“Mmmm.”

“I’m going to touch you the same way you touched me. I’m going to give you the same pleasure you gave me. Do you trust me?”

A silence, punctuated by swift, shallow breaths. “Yes.”

Ever so slowly, Lianon’s fingers stole through the tightly curled hair and into Kaela’s slit.

“Kaela, oh Kaela, you’re so *wet*,” Lianon whispered against her ear. Sliding her fingers deeper into the other woman’s furrow, she reveled in the stiff, jutting resilience of her clitoris. “God, and your clit is so hard, it’s just begging for my touch.” Her own pussy clenching, Lianon rubbed Kaela in agonizingly slow circles, relishing every twitch of the other woman’s body. Kissing her way down Kaela’s throat and across her chest, she took a tight pink nipple in her mouth and sucked hard, swirling her tongue around the peak.

Kaela began to undulate her hips, pressing upward against Lianon’s fingers, and Lianon increased the pressure and rhythm, her fingers vigorously working the knot of Kaela’s clitoris. Her tongue drew a wet trail down from Kaela’s breast across the soft perfection of her belly, pausing briefly at her navel.

“Ahhh!” Kaela sighed, her stomach muscles clenching and her bottom lifting off the mattress, seeking more.

More than anything Lianon wanted to put her mouth on Kaela’s pussy, lick along the entire length of her wet valley, shove her tongue as far up into her as it would reach. The scent of female arousal filled her nostrils, clean and musky, and she imagined the taste of Kaela’s come on her tongue, salty sweet. She wanted to shove her fingers deep into Kaela’s cunt, and just fuck her over and over until she couldn’t take another moment of it, until she’d come so many times there was nothing left of her but a puddle of limp flesh.

Instead, she rubbed with her two fingers, harder and faster, and lifted her head to watch the combination of uncertainty and delight on Kaela’s beautiful, flushed face.

Gradually, a frown surfaced on Kaela’s brow, and her eyes opened wide. “Lianon?” she gasped.



“Shhh, love,” Lianon whispered, bending to press her lips to the fluttering pulse just under the other woman’s jaw.

“*Lianon?*” Kaela cried, her voice hoarse with burgeoning alarm.

Lianon kept stroking, quick little circles, pressing hard. “Don’t be scared, love. Just relax and let it come. Let it come.”

A few seconds more and Kaela stiffened, her eyes nearly popping from her head, her face contorting as her senses were overwhelmed. “Lia—oh, god! Oh, *god!*”

As Kaela’s orgasm rocked her, Lianon slid her fingers deep into her slit and pushed the bare tip of one into her shuddering, weeping channel. Her mouth closed over Kaela’s, swallowing her cries of surprised ecstasy. The muscles of Kaela’s cunt rippled and convulsed, as if trying to grab Lianon’s finger and pull it in. She resisted the urge to oblige it, knowing it would be too much, too soon.

As Kaela’s spasms finally began to fade, Lianon pulled her wet fingers free and dragged them up the woman’s torso, leaving a slick, deliciously scented trail along her heated skin. Pulling back to look down at her, Lianon drank in the sight of her flushed cheeks glistening with sweat, her panting breaths and the sated gleam in her beautiful brown eyes.

Cupping Kaela’s cheek, she brushed a wet thumb across her parted lips. “Are you all right, my dear?”

Kaela frowned, bemused. “I think so. Did I...did I do all right?”

Lianon smiled, her eyes stinging, and flopped down on the bed, hugging Kaela close. “Oh, love. You have no idea.”

Kaela’s arms encircled her waist, a miracle in itself that it should come so naturally now. Her head nestled in the curve of Lianon’s neck. “What about Gil?” she said at last.

Lianon squeezed her tight, then reached down to pull the blankets up over the both of them. “You let me worry about Gil.”

“Will he be angry at what we’ve done?”

Lianon lay back down, nudging Kaela to roll over so her bottom fit snugly against her thighs, and wrapped her arms around her waist. “No.” *Hurt? Jealous? Devastated? Maybe all three. But not angry.*

“But what—”

“Hush,” Lianon said quietly, her hand sliding down Kaela’s belly and into the cleft between her legs. As her fingers straddled Kaela’s clit, the woman drew her breath in sharply and shifted her hips to increase the contact.

“Again?” she asked with delightful innocence.

“Mmmm, why not?” Lianon answered, flicking her fingertips over Kaela’s straining little nub, her lips pressed to her shoulder blade. Her other hand, trapped under Kaela’s waist, wriggled up so she could tease the woman’s breasts, plucking at her nipples. With one knee, she parted Kaela’s legs from behind, and her folds opened slightly. Her labia were swollen and sopping wet, her clit a rigid tag of flesh. As Lianon rubbed and stroked, Kaela’s hips began to gyrate, her ass pressing delightfully back against the bend of Lianon’s waist.

“You’re so beautiful,” Lianon whispered, her tongue teasing Kaela’s earlobe. “I’m going to teach you every way there is to get pleasure. I’m going to love your body every way, and show you all the ways I want you to love mine.” As she spoke, she increased the rhythm of her stroking fingers, and Kaela’s hips pushed up hard against them. “I’m going to put my face between your legs—” The sound Kaela made hearing that, a hoarse groan of shock and need, made Lianon’s own pussy twitch and swell. “I’m going to put my mouth right on your cunt and lick you until you can’t even think straight. I’m going to push my tongue as far inside you as it can reach, and when you finally come, I’m going to drink up every last drop of you. Would you like that?”

“Oh, god, Lianon!” Kaela gasped, stiffening. With a wordless wail, her body started to convulse in the tight shelter of Lianon’s embrace and then she was coming all over Lianon’s skilful fingers.

Lianon slid her arms tight around Kaela and held her, feeling the rapid slam of her heart under her cheek. Kaela slid her hand into Lianon’s and squeezed it tight.

“Go to sleep, dove,” Lianon whispered, pressing a kiss to her nape. “Don’t worry. All will be well, you’ll see.” But as Kaela drifted into an exhausted sleep, Lianon thought about Gil and wondered just who she was trying to convince with her comforting words.

Gil stood in his bedroom doorway and stared, his jaw hanging halfway to the floor.

Giggles. Squeals. The slap of a hand on soft flesh.

In the glow of a half-dozen candles, his friend Rat lay spread-eagle on the bed, naked but for one sock hanging half off his big toe. Not one, but two whores shared the bed with him, seeing industriously to his pleasure. One lay on her front between his legs, her tongue lapping at his balls, one knee drawn up, her naked backside jiggling like twin puddings with her cunt peeking out beneath. The other knelt at his side, breasts spilling from her camisole, her bottom thrust high in the air as her head bobbed up and down over Rat’s thick rod. With a moan of pure bliss, Rat wound up and smacked her ass, evoking a squeal and a burst of laughter as she let loose his cock with a loud pop.

“Ah, that’s a good girl,” Rat sighed, slapping her bottom again. “Climb on for a ride, will you?”

Gil leaned one shoulder against the doorframe and watched, feeling his own cock harden, as she threw her leg over Rat’s waist and reached down to guide him into her pussy. Rat’s hands gripped her hips, his fingers digging into her soft, pink-tinged skin, and Gil’s clenched into fists at his sides as if of their own volition. The woman between Rat’s legs continued to tongue his balls, sucking them into her mouth, as the other plunged up and down onto his shaft.

Gil began to think maybe he should leave, but his feet didn’t seem all that interested in moving.

This was every man’s fantasy, wasn’t it? Two women with no purpose other than to pleasure you? Gil had to admit the notion, so explicitly played out for him in his own bed, held an appeal he’d never really considered before. But then he thought about Lianon and Kaela, tried to imagine what they might do in such a situation. He was fairly

certain Lianon would be at least as focused on Kaela's pleasure as on Gil's. And Kaela? She'd probably take one look at his cock and flee in terror.

*Ask him how content he would be if his wives liked each other better than they did him.* Gil had thrown the question at Lianon out of reflexive hurt and possessiveness, and even now it nagged at him.

Lianon loved him. It wasn't as if she was going to stop. But he also knew how strong her feelings of affection and protectiveness for Kaela were. She was already half in love with the other woman, and Kaela, well, she was young. Inexperienced. Damaged. Lianon had saved her life and given her a chance for happiness, a safe place to exist in the world. Gil remembered how Lianon was when they first met, how dead she had been inside. He'd pulled her back into the land of the living, and in return she'd given him her heart. What would Kaela give Lianon if she did the same for her?

The whore doing the riding had begun to moan, her head thrown back. The other moved from her position between Rat's legs and crawled up the bed to shove her tongue in his mouth. Neither woman seemed to want much to do with the other. Gil frowned, feeling his vicarious lust seep away. Every man's fantasy, but not his, apparently. He thought of Lianon, riding his face while his tongue and fingers drove her to the edge of insanity. Thought of Kaela, of the feel of her cheek against his lips, how he could feel the heat rushing up through her skin as if to meet his kiss. Sex was as much about giving pleasure as taking it. That was why Viera had always been his favorite whore—she loved sex, loved a man's hands and mouth on her. He wasn't interested in an arrangement like the one in front of him right now. He wasn't so self-centered.

But he didn't want to end up on the outside of what looked to be happening between his wife and Kaela, either. He didn't want to end up a useless appendage in his own marriage.

Rat's thin hips began to thrust, pumping up into the woman riding him, his fingers nearly disappearing in the soft flesh of her ass. She gave a passably convincing wail of delight just as he groaned and spent inside her. Gil straightened, his cock still hard, but not raging anymore, and clapped his hands slowly in mock appreciation.

“Very nice, ladies,” he said as three pairs of round eyes swung his way. “What do you do for an encore?”

“Gil!” Rat blurted, shoving both women aside with unseemly haste. He fished around the bedclothes for his trousers. With jerky motions, he dragged them up his legs and raked a hand through his thinning hair as his face flooded with color. “I wasn’t expecting you!”

“So there’s no cake?” Gil smiled at the two women, who rose with considerably more grace than their customer and began to slip their clothing back on.

Rat scowled at the sarcasm, punching one fist through an inverted shirtsleeve and wincing at the sound of popped stitches. “What brings you into town?”

“A meeting with the new chancellor.”

Rat’s brows would have met his hairline if the latter weren’t prematurely receding. “That lunatic?”

Gil tossed a couple of silver harts at the women—more than twice what Rat would have paid, he was sure—and moved to the side of the doorway so they could leave. “I think you and I need to talk, my friend.”

Rat jammed the tails of his shirt into his trousers and adjusted his nethers. He grinned at the whores as they let themselves out, then scowled at Gil. “I think maybe we do. You’re not actually considering working with Collin, are you?”

Gil grinned, unable to contain his amusement at his friend’s discomfiture. “No, not really. But I do want to know the kind of questions he was asking around here, and the kind of answers he might have gotten. You eaten?”

“Yeah.” Rat flashed him a grin. “But I could eat again. Think Aliannet’s got anything tasty on?”

Gil wrinkled his nose. “Pigeon, most like. The kind with wings or the kind without.”

Rat gave a prosaic shrug at the notion of eating his namesakes. “Meat is meat. Come on, let’s go. We’ll have a drink or two and I’ll let you buy me supper.”

Gil laughed. “An offer like that, how can I refuse?”

## Chapter Six

“Harder,” Lianon said, watching Kaela’s fists pound the sand-filled sparring bag that hung from the ceiling of the training shed. “Like you mean it.”

Scowling at the blank leather surface, Kaela hammered her bandaged fists into it, harder and faster. A patch of sweat plastered her shirt to the center of her back, and tendrils of her hair had escaped her braid to stick to her face. Her breasts jiggled enticingly with every blow, her nipples poking against the thin linen of her borrowed shirt.

Lianon dragged her gaze from them, and refocused her attention on the motion of Kaela’s arms. “From the shoulder,” she instructed. “Put your whole body into it.”

Another few punches, and Kaela sagged against the sparring form, panting. “Enough, Lianon,” she gasped with a weary smile. “I’m tired.”

“Are you?” Lianon asked. Her belly coiled at the sight of the other woman’s arms wrapped around the form, her breasts pressed against it, imagining them pressed like that against Gil’s chest. “How tired?”

Hearing the change in her voice, Kaela aimed a surprised glance at her, laughing giddily. “Lianon? Lianon, it’s the middle of the afternoon!”

Lianon grinned, remembering a lazy morning spent abed exploring Kaela's deliciously curvy body, before chores had forced them to rise. "I know what time it is. Come here."

Kaela's cheeks filled with color, but her eyes were suddenly all heat. She straightened, her smile evaporating as she stepped into Lianon's waiting arms.

Their lips met, parted. Tongues dueled and danced as an already familiar need leapt between them. Lianon plundered deep into the moist heat of Kaela's mouth, tilting her head to deepen the kiss. She wrapped her arms tight around the other woman, reveling in the feel of Kaela's heavy breasts pressing against her own smaller ones.

Stumbling a little, she walked Kaela backward toward the wall and pushed her up against it. Her hands slid down to cup Kaela's ass, so gorgeously outlined in Gil's trousers. Dipping low, her fingers brushed against the seam that covered Kaela's sex. She was rewarded by a sigh of sweet breath into her mouth.

Tearing her lips away from Kaela's, Lianon kissed a path across her cheek to her ear, then began a slow, torturous descent down the side of her neck. "God, you're so fucking beautiful," she whispered, echoing words Gil had said to her so often the last six months. This body, these curves, this woman in her arms felt like coming home. Like bread and wine and a kindling hearth after a long day of toil. Reaching down with one hand, she freed two buttons at the waist of Kaela's trousers and slipped her hand inside.

Swollen flesh slicked with lust greeted her questing fingers. Sucking the skin at Kaela's shoulder, Lianon found the rigid nub of her clit and flicked her fingertip across it.

"Ah, Lianon..." Kaela gasped, her bandaged hands buried clumsily in Lianon's hair, guiding her head down to her breasts. Through the linen of Kaela's shirt, Lianon took a pebbled nipple into her mouth, suckling delicately before moving to its twin. Her fingers slid further into Kaela's slit, circling her opening. Slowly, carefully, she pushed one finger inside. Paused as the other woman's inner muscles accustomed themselves to the invasion. Slid a little deeper.

"Lianon?" A thread of worry had woven into the arousal in Kaela's voice.

Lianon lifted her head, caught Kaela's gaze and held it. Saw the uncertainty there. She kept her finger where it was, and drew slow circles around Kaela's clit with her thumb. "Do you trust me?" she whispered.

Kaela stood very still, trying to will her heart to slow down. How could she feel so aroused and so terrified at the same time? Lianon's finger was still inside her, still there in that place where sur-Marus had defiled her. It felt like a tiny shard of terror, but the more Lianon's thumb toyed with her clit, the more Kaela's body seemed willing to accept the violation.

*Do you trust me?*

Kaela stared into those beautiful gray eyes and realized Lianon was the only person on earth she did trust. The things she had allowed this woman to do to her last night were proof of that, weren't they?

Lianon swept a butterfly kiss across her lips. "Am I hurting you?"

"No," Kaela answered immediately, her breath hissing in and her eyes drifting shut as Lianon's thumb pressed a little harder on the place she wanted it.

"This slickness," Lianon said, her voice husky with desire, "this lovely, delicious nectar is your body's way of preparing itself for this." She slid her finger a little further in, pressing up against a spot that sent Kaela's breath from her lungs in a hot rush.

"God!" she gasped, her hips thrusting forward of their own volition as a flood of moisture pooled around Lianon's hand. Her eyes flew open to find the other woman smiling smugly.

"You like that?" she whispered, leaning her face closer so her breath puffed against Kaela's parted lips. Her tongue darted out, delicately licking the corner of Kaela's mouth.

Kaela's legs buckled as Lianon continued to stroke her, inside and out at the same time. She could feel a hot pressure building in the knot of tissue between Lianon's finger and thumb, reaching its spreading heat through her entire sex. Lianon's tongue was in her mouth, flicking and lapping with the same rhythm as her working fingers, and Kaela felt her insides begin to melt. This was nothing like last night or this morning, nothing like



having Lianon's clever fingers stroke her clit to release. It was a deeper sensation, more immediate and encompassing. Internal. As Kaela felt her culmination building, her senses rendered down to her sex and the incredible, delightful, torturous things Lianon's hand was doing to it.

Lianon's other hand came up to toy with Kaela's breast through the damp fabric of her shirt, plucking at the nipple, teasing it to a jutting peak. "You're so beautiful," she whispered against Kaela's lips. "So soft and creamy and tight. Come for me. I want to feel your cunt milking my finger. I want to feel you shudder and swell, I want your woman's wet to fill my hand. God, Kaela, come for me."

It was as if Lianon spoke a charm over her. With a hoarse cry, Kaela felt her body gather itself and explode. Her legs went numb, her back arched, and her insides clenched and wept, sucking and pulling at Lianon's invading finger. And Lianon just covered Kaela's mouth with her own and swallowed her screams, her fingers rubbing and rubbing as if she could drag the crisis out forever.

But it couldn't last. There was a limit to the amount of bliss a human body could sustain. Kaela could imagine people dying of this. As she began to drift back down to reality, she opened her eyes to meet Lianon's warm, gray gaze, and it was like a tide crashing against her, the discovery of love there, unexpected and unbidden. Her heart twisted.

Pressing a tender kiss to Kaela's lips, Lianon slipped her finger out of her channel, but kept her hand where it was, gently cupping Kaela's mound as the last of her spasms eased. With a start, Kaela realized the wall at her back and Lianon's grasp were all that held her upright.

"Did you like that?" Lianon whispered between swift, feathery kisses.

Her eyes stinging, Kaela captured Lianon's lips and tilted her head, pushing her tongue into the hot cavern of the other woman's mouth. When she pulled back at last, Lianon didn't look so smug anymore. Kaela felt her lips curl up at the corners. "You could do that to me forever, Lianon."

Lianon's eyes widened, her mouth opened as if to speak, but whatever she might have said was doomed to remain unuttered when a voice made them both turn, appalled, toward the doors of the shed.

Gil stood there, limned in the afternoon light.

"Don't ever let it be said that my wife can't get things done."

Lianon made a tiny noise of dismay deep in her throat. Hand left trousers with a speed Kaela could hardly credit. Her mouth as dry as a desert and her heart lodged halfway up her throat, Kaela could only gape at Gil's expressionless face.

He took a few casual steps into the shed, his eyes raking Kaela as Lianon backed away from her. The absence of the other woman's warmth was swiftly replaced by the heat that rose to her skin under his scrutiny. "I must say, Kaela, you look prettier in my clothes than I ever have." His eyes fastened on her chest. "Especially my shirt."

Kaela looked down at herself, only to see a round patch of wetness over each of her breasts where Lianon's saliva had dampened the linen. Her nipples were as visible as if she was naked, and the air on the wet fabric made them tighten into hard points. Sick to her stomach, she covered them with her crossed arms.

A wave of lightheadedness hit her and she realized she was breathing much too fast. God, what was he going to do? And why wasn't he doing it yet? He didn't seem angry, but he wasn't quite right either. He strolled further into the training space as if he had seen nothing at all untoward transpiring. Was he purposely torturing them?

He approached as if at his ease, his fingers trailing along the contours of the sand-filled sparring form. Then his eyes locked with hers and Kaela felt her heart stop.

"Get in the house, Kaela," he said very quietly.

Lianon swallowed. Words rose to her tongue and died there. God, what was she supposed to say? She couldn't read him when he was like this—six months, and she still hadn't got the knack of seeing through his façade. He didn't seem angry, but that didn't mean he wasn't. It was one thing for a man to agree in principle to an unconventional

domestic arrangement. It was quite another for him to come home and find his wife's hand shoved down another woman's pants.

He paused at the sparring form, trailed his fingertips across it. In horror, she felt her nipples pebble as if it was her skin he touched. He looked Kaela right in the face and she seemed to shrivel where she stood. His lip quirked up at one corner. "Get in the house, Kaela," he said.

Her heart thudding, Lianon watched her do as Gil had so calmly suggested. Kaela sidled past him with her back against the wall, as if she thought he might leap across the room and rend her limb from limb.

When she was gone, Gil's gaze swung Lianon's way, pinning her in place. He stared at her for a long moment, his eyes hard and bright, his chest rising and falling with the force of his emotion. For an instant, as he stalked toward her, fear grabbed her by the throat and choked off her breath. But then Gil's hands shoved into the hair on either side of her face and his lips came down on hers, and fear transformed into something else.

His tongue was in her mouth, his teeth nipping at her lower lip, and her heart leapt with elation that he was on fire with arousal, not jealousy. His breath exploded from his nostrils, fanning her cheek, and the growl he gave low in his throat made moisture pool between her thighs. Her hand went to her trouser leg to wipe Kaela's wet from her fingers, but he caught her wrist and brought it up between them, his grip hard enough to bruise.

"Is she watching?" he pulled back long enough to whisper before his teeth clamped onto her earlobe.

*What?* Lianon's eyes flicked to the open doors. Sunlight spilled across the rough planks of the floor, and there, to one side, the bare edge of Kaela's shadow where she hid and watched through a knothole in the wall.

Gil pulled back to look at Lianon and she nodded subtly. Gil grinned and shoved her against the wall, lifting her fingers to his mouth and licking Kaela's cream from them. "Mmmmm," he hummed, sucking her thumb deep into his mouth.

A flood of wetness released from her tingling pussy at the sight of him tasting Kaela's musk. The knowledge that Kaela watched him do it only made it more erotic. With her free hand, Lianon began to work the buttons of her trousers. Her fingers shook with urgency—god, she needed his mouth on her. Now. Lifting her saliva-dampened hand, Gil pinned it to the wall above her head, leaning into her so his cock pressed against her mound, making it impossible for her to undo her buttons. She gave a whimper of dismay, but he only grinned, his eyes drinking in her face, the heat in her cheeks, the swelling of her lips from his kiss.

His free hand slid up her torso and cupped a breast, squeezing the nipple between his thumb and forefinger, pulling it into a hard, hypersensitive point and sending a bolt of sensation shooting straight to her cunt. Bending, he pressed his mouth to it, sucking the tight bud through the fabric of her shirt, nipping at it, spreading his saliva in a wide, wet patch across the linen. Just like she had done to Kaela. Lifting one leg, Lianon wrapped it around his waist, trying to bring her clit back up against his cock, but he only chuckled at her eagerness.

"Always in such a hurry, Lianon," he chided, raising his head to look at her. She offered no argument—she needed his mouth on her cunt, she needed his cock buried deep between her thighs, needed his come spurting up against the entrance to her womb. The sooner the better. Chill air kissed her breast under the wet linen, tightening the nipple even more, raising gooseflesh all down her torso. Her hand went back to work on her trouser buttons, finally prying them free.

"Have you tasted her?" he asked, his teeth flashing in a tight smile. She stared into his eyes, saw lust there, and possessiveness, but no anger. "Have you put your mouth to her nether lips and sipped her sweet nectar?"

Lianon's belly twisted and coiled, her heart slammed against her ribs, her clit throbbed so hard she thought it might explode. "No."

"Not yet, you mean," he clarified, lapping at her lips with his tongue.

Lianon felt every shred of awareness in her drop to her core—her cunt, her clit, her womb. His cock humped against her mons with a primeval rhythm, a cadence that was understood in every cell of her body. “Not yet,” she said.

His eyes darkened until they were nearly black. “I want to watch when you do,” he rasped. “I want to see you flay her clit with your tongue. I want to watch you lap up every drop of her, shove your tongue deep inside her pussy, make her come all over your face. I want to watch you bring her to the pinnacle of pleasure.”

“Oh god, Gil!” Lianon gasped, her inner muscles clenching. If he kept talking like that, she’d come from his words alone.

With a self-satisfied grin, he dropped to his knees, dragging her trousers down her legs. The splintered wood of the shed wall scraped her naked buttocks as he parted her thighs as wide as the confinement of her bunched trouser-legs would allow. Sliding his palms up her inner thighs, he spread her labia with his thumbs. Whimpering in desperation, she angled her hips forward, shoving herself into his face.

“Shhhhhhh.” It was half admonition half torture, as his breath fanned her straining clitoris.

Leaning her head back, she squeezed her eyes shut as fluid oozed down her inner thighs. “Gil, *please—*”

“Such nice manners,” he murmured, just before he pressed his whole mouth onto her pussy.

“Ah, god!” she hissed, gripping his head, needing something to hold onto as her knees turned to water. He swirled his tongue around her aching clit, then drew it in deep and sucked. As she felt the tension focusing in the tiny tumult-filled universe of her sex, she opened her eyes and sought out Kaela’s unblinking glance through the knothole. Just knowing the other woman watched sent a shiver running from her limbs inward, to the part of her that was about to explode.

Gil knew exactly what he was doing to her, and with maddeningly perfect timing, he drew his face away at the very moment of her crisis. *Son of a bitch.* She glared down at him in an agony of frustrated need, and he just grinned back up, his whiskers wet with

her cream, his lips slick with it. Slowly he rose, his face coming even with hers, and he covered her mouth with his. The smell of her own musk filled her nostrils, inflaming her, and thank the gods, he was working the buttons of his trousers. In no time his cock was out, and then it was right where she wanted it, buried deep inside her cunt.

His pubic bone slammed against her aching nub, the head of his shaft stroked across the most sensitive spot inside her channel. One thrust, then another, and she was coming, screaming his name into his open mouth, every nerve in her body flying into a chaos of sensation. It wasn't long before Gil followed her, his entire length going rigid as his cock bucked and spurted against the entrance to her womb.

He continued kissing her, his tongue stroking lazily in her mouth as they let their breath slow. Leaning back, he gazed into her eyes, his own shining with emotion. Reaching up to smooth the hair from her sweat-damp face, he pressed a tender kiss to the tip of her nose.

“I love you, Lianon.”

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her head in the crook of his neck as if she could crawl inside his skin. “I love you too. More than you can ever know.”

He squeezed her for another moment, then delicately eased his softening cock out of her and pulled his trousers back up. Lianon bent to gather up her own, her eyes going to the knothole. A bar of light poured in through it, illuminating a million motes of dust that swirled and danced in the air. Kaela was gone.

Her first instinct was to follow the other woman, but Gil grabbed her arm. “Give her a few minutes to compose herself, Lianon.” His hand came up, knuckles grazing tenderly down her cheek. “And then let me talk to her.”

Lianon met his glance, tried to read his intentions. He was solemn. Reserved. Shuttered.

But she trusted him, and it was enough. Catching his hand, she brought it to her lips and kissed it. “All right.”

## Chapter Seven

When Gil finally entered the house, Kaela was back in her usual dress, her hair straightened and replaited. She appeared busy, scrubbing at the scarred top of the worktable in the kitchen, her eyes on her task, but from the way her shoulders stiffened when he entered, he knew she recognized his footfalls. He stepped further inside, carelessly tossing his traveling satchel onto a chair. Color suffused her cheeks, but she refused to look up at him.

“Hullo, my dear,” he said gently. “What’s for supper?”

Her eyes flicked to his face, then away again. She kept wiping at imaginary stains on the table. “I’m sorry, Gil. In truth, I hadn’t given any thought to supper.”

He smiled. “You’ve been preoccupied.”

If anything, her face got redder. His eyes lowered to her breasts, the way the fine cotton of her dress pulled taut across them with her movements. To his chagrin, he felt his prick start to stir again.

“I’m sorry,” she said, clearly miserable. “I...that is, Lianon and I...we...” She finally gave up all pretense of cleaning and straightened, hugging her stomach as if it pained her. Her eyes were bright with moisture as they met his. “You have both been so kind to me, I would not offend you for all the world.”

His heart did a little flop in his chest. “What makes you think you have offended me?”

“I—I just...” She shrugged nervously, at a loss. “You’re not angry?”

He thought back to that moment, standing in the doorway of the shed, seeing his wife making love to this woman. The surge of possessiveness he felt had surprised him, because he felt it for both women, not just Lianon. Somehow, through the months of their relaxed domestic arrangement, he’d stopped thinking of Kaela as a servant. She called him and Lianon by their given names. The three of them shared chores and leisure, ate at the same table. She had become an equal partner in his household. And when Lianon had forced him to look at it, he realized Kaela had earned a place in his heart, as well. The evolution of his feelings for her had been so gradual and quiet, he hadn’t even seen it until he’d been made to confront them. He felt now like a young boy who has found an unexpected treasure in his own yard.

He stepped closer, taking care not to startle her. “Of all the things I felt when I saw the two of you together, anger wasn’t among them.” Her chest began to heave as he approached her, and she hugged herself tighter. “You’re too beautiful a person to live a life without love.”

He was standing right in front of her now, and to his surprise, she stood her ground and held his gaze. Slowly, he set his hands on her shoulders, leaned forward and pressed his lips to her cheek. She breathed in sharply through her nostrils and he smiled, knowing it was Lianon’s musk she smelled, clinging to his beard.

Her breath puffed against his ear, swift and warm, and tremors shook her under his light grasp. His cock pressed against the buttons of his trousers, wanting out.

He leaned back. She stared up at him like a doe in a hunter’s sights. Scared. Uncertain. But aroused, as well, he could swear it.

She took a step back so his hands fell away from her, her eyes dropping to her feet. “Gil, I can’t—”



His heart twisted. Reaching out, he tucked her stray lock back behind her ear. Looked at the scar on her cheek, at what that bastard and his thugs had done to her. “I know.”

Her eyes, brimming with tears, flew to his face. “I’m sorry. You’ve been so good to me, but I—”

“Stop,” he chided gently. “You have nothing whatever to be sorry for.”

“But—”

“You and Lianon are awfully alike,” he interrupted with a wry half-grin. “Neither of you seem inclined to listen to me. Have done, Kaela. You have not given offense. Now what are we to do about supper?”

She frowned at him as if he spoke an alien tongue. His grin widened. She might be perplexed by him, intrigued, utterly stymied, but he was willing to wager she wasn’t so afraid of him anymore.

“I, ah, have not had the opportunity to plan the meal.” She lifted one shoulder in a chagrined shrug. “There are eggs in plenty, and mushrooms.”

“Eggs and mushrooms,” Gil muttered, pouring himself a cup of wine from the cask. “Sounds delightful. Why don’t we all go out, instead?”

“Out?” She said the word as if he’d suggested they grow wings and fly to the moon.

“There’s a tavern in Fenmore—it’s not more than a half hour’s ride. Food’s passable, the company’s not too rough. Sometimes they even have music.”

She shook her head, flushing, her shoulders going all tense again. “I couldn’t. I...I have nothing to wear, and I haven’t ridden a horse since I was ten. But you and Lianon should go. I don’t want to keep you from a pleasant evening.”

“Nonsense!” he chided over the rim of his cup. “Fenmore’s no haven of sophistication. What you have on is more than good enough for the company there. You deserve a night off.”

She twisted her hands together, starting to panic. “Gil—”

He drained his wine and set his cup on the table. “I’ll go saddle the horses.”

He turned and left before she could find the words to refuse him.

“Come on, Kaela!” Gil called from the yard.

Alone in the house, Kaela straightened her skirts and lifted a hand to her hair. Such feminine gestures, she thought, so normal. So mundane. As if she were any other woman, her only concern her appearance. A foolish pretense. Kaela was not any woman. She was a wounded thing, soiled with the vilest filth, her maidenhead the trophy of a cruel and twisted monster. And Gil expected her to go out in public and enjoy herself, as if such a thing could ever be possible for her.

She could recall a time when the prospect of an evening out held a singular appeal, a time when she would have worn her finest silk and braided colored ribbons into her hair to catch the light and as many eyes as possible. Now she faced the idea with a sick and creeping dread, taking care to wear clothes that would attract no attention, even as her mind raced to find some excuse Gil would accept.

“Kaela!” he shouted, his patience wearing thin, and her body responded to the displeasure in his tone as if of its own volition. Before she even realized it, she was out on the porch, pulling the door shut behind her.

Gil stood holding the reins of his horse. Lianon was already mounted on her smaller mare. She wore a dun-colored cloth tied about her crown, covering her hair, and with a start, Kaela realized her breasts were bound beneath her shirt and wool jacket. It would be hard—next to impossible, really—for a stranger to tell she was a woman. For some reason, the idea was soothing.

Gil smiled reassuringly as Kaela started down the steps. She went automatically to Lianon’s horse, but Gil grabbed her arm. “Mora is too dainty to carry two,” he said, his voice pitched low.

“But—”

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

She searched his face, seeing nothing untoward, but all the while a voice inside her cried he was a man, and that was reason enough to fear. Her eyes swung toward Lianon,

but she saw nothing in the other woman's expression to alarm her, only gentle encouragement.

In any case, Gil wasn't about to give her the opportunity to refuse. Before she could protest, he had grabbed her around the waist and lifted her into the saddle. She sat there, perched on the hard leather too high off the ground, her heart slamming against her ribs. A moment later, he swung up behind her, crowding her into the pommel of the saddle, his entire length pressed against her back. She bit back a cry as his arm wrapped around her waist, holding her steady as he nudged his stallion into an easy walk.

The brightness of the afternoon began to dim as panic swallowed her up, the horizon lurching as if she was drunk. In burgeoning fear, she grabbed the saddle pommel in both hands, clinging to it as if for dear life. Her ribs were like a bellows, blasting air in and out of her lungs until the world spun around her.

Gil's arm tightened around her waist, and his breath fanned her ear. "Shhhh. It's all right, my dear. Calm down. No harm will come to you."

"Gil?" she gasped, her skin tingling with little prickles of cold, even as sweat beaded on her face and pooled between her breasts.

His voice was warm in her ear, devoid of judgment or menace. "Lean back against me and concentrate on breathing out. Count in your head—ten, nine, eight..."

She did as he said, resting her head on his shoulder, feeling her back mold itself to his front, and let out a long, slow breath. By the time he reached "one", the clinging fingers of panic began to fall away from her. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the motion of the horse's gait under her, relaxed and natural. Calm settled about her.

Gil kicked the horse into a trot, but made no further motion. His arm draped her waist, unmoving, his chin rode at her temple, the scrape of his beard rasping her skin. It was six months since she had felt a man's body against hers. Six months since Dalton sur-Marus had raped her. Her sex was pressed hard against the pommel of the saddle, Gil's arm snug under her breasts, but with each step the horse took, her stomach settled and her fears ebbed. She glanced over at Lianon to find the other woman watching her solemnly, but without apprehension.

With a start, Kaela noticed that Lianon wore a sword at her hip. She thought back to that night, when sur-Marus' bodyguard left the mark of his knife on her face and chest, thought of what Lianon had done with only her wits, a razor blade and the will to do what was necessary. Three men had died under her hand that night. Three men sent to the merciless embrace of the goddess.

Lianon would never let anything bad happen to her. Neither would Gil. Kaela knew this. And as the miles went past, she began to understand it in all the cells of her body—she was safe here with these two people.

It was nearly dark by the time they arrived in the village. The streets were deserted, the houses quiet as the people of Fenmore gathered at table for the evening meal. The tavern was already full, a cacophony of conversation, music and laughter spilling from its open windows. With some considerable regret, Gil slid his arm from around Kaela's waist and dismounted. He pulled her down after him and set her on her feet then wrapped Balon's reins around the post. It had been a nice ride, once her panic faded. She'd leaned back against him, her head a welcome weight on his shoulder, and relaxed in his embrace.

Now, she was all nerves and jitters once more, her eyes darting between him and Lianon and the door of the tavern. Gil winced at the strident clamor of masculine laughter that suddenly erupted inside. That would be Willem, the Chandler's apprentice, a brash, dunderheaded lummoX if ever there was one, but essentially harmless.

Kaela stiffened, her eyes widening. Gil reached for her, but Lianon was there first, taking the woman in her arms, running a hand down her hair and pressing a swift kiss to her lips. As he watched, his cock twitched, filling with blood.

"Shhh," Lianon whispered against Kaela's lips, and kissed her again, her tongue lapping delicately. All the stiffness seemed to melt right out of Kaela, and she leaned into the embrace. "I won't let anything happen to you. You're safe with me and Gil."

Gil glanced down at his recalcitrant appendage, willing it to be still. To any unfamiliar eyes, Lianon and Kaela would seem nothing more than a normal couple

sharing a small intimacy in public. To Gil, they were two women he desired, tongue-kissing each other right in front of him. His cock swelled, and he muttered a curse, grabbing Lianon by the arm and jerking her in the direction of the tavern door.

She grinned at him, unabashed, and followed with one arm wrapped around Kaela's shoulders.

The odors of sweaty bodies, fermented drink and smoke assailed them as they entered. About thirty people crowded the tavern, but the space was so small it seemed a veritable throng. The noise was no less oppressive than the smell, a clangor of banging crockery, laughter, shouting and poorly played music. Gil ducked under the low lintel, returning the greetings thrown his way, and drew the women into the crowd, scouting the room for a place to sit.

There was space in plenty at a distant corner table, far from the windows and hard against the kitchen door—the worst spot in the house. It suited Gil's purposes, though. It would allow Kaela to see the whole room while remaining relatively sheltered and unobtrusive. Turning sideways to sidle between rowdy patrons and serving girls, he led the women to the table.

Lianon slid onto the bench with her back to the wall, and Kaela scooted in beside her. Gil was left with no option but to sit opposite them. He studied Kaela from the corner of his eye, trying to gauge her mood. She seemed understandably nervous, pale and hyper-alert, but otherwise all right. Lianon craned her neck and waved a girl over. Gil ordered them all a round of ale and inquired what was on the fire.

The serving girl smiled, making eyes at Lianon. Gil wondered what she'd do if she knew the young man she fancied possessed the same anatomy she did. "You get a choice tonight—rabbit or trout."

"Fish caught today?" Lianon asked.

"Just this morning."

Gil's mouth watered. "Make it three, then, with all the fixings."

The girl left to fetch their drinks, but not without flashing Lianon one more inviting glance.

“She likes you,” Gil teased, waggling his eyebrows at his wife.

“An unfortunate consequence of being the most handsome man in the place,” Lianon replied airily, winking at Kaela.

“Too bad for her, you’re taken,” Kaela said tartly, and Gil saw her hand move toward Lianon’s lap under the table. Lianon leaned over to whisper something in Kaela’s ear, nipping at her earlobe, and Kaela’s face flooded with color.

When the girl returned with their beer and saw the affection between her erstwhile beau and Kaela, she looked so disappointed Gil slipped her an extra copper. Watching the two women, he couldn’t help but feel a certain kinship with the girl. He felt excluded, himself, an observer watching from outside.

He took a long pull of his frothy ale. Kaela did the same, and promptly gave herself the hiccups. When she couldn’t rid herself of them, they evolved into a fit of uncontrollable giggles.

Gil’s heart expanded to fill his whole chest as the sound washed over him, and it dawned on him that he had never really heard her laugh before, and had only rarely seen her smile. When her eyes flicked to his and stuck, he realized he was staring, but he resisted the urge to look away. So did she. As they locked gazes across the table, her giggles subsided and a beautiful, feminine softness came over her. She lowered her chin so her gaze slanted up at him through her lashes, and her cheeks flushed like the skin of a ripening peach. Even as he watched, her pupils dilated, turning her brown eyes nearly black. In the space of a few moments, the residue of her past trauma seemed to retreat, and she was a woman again, flourishing under the appreciative gaze of a man.

Then she hiccupped again and he practically choked on his own laughter.

The girl returned with trenchers for all of them, and a platter of fried fish, roasted fennel and parsnips. Gil’s stomach rumbled almost loudly enough to be heard over the screech of the musician’s viol.

“Hoy, Callas,” he called across the room to the player by the hearth. “I think your viol’s been drinking!”

“Eh, she’s a shameless boozier!” Callas hollered back over the collective mirth of the crowd.

The trout was excellent, the fennel a nice complement. Gil devoured it as if starving, and he noticed the women were doing the same. Lianon spit the bones onto the floor, crass as a man born, sucking the juice from her fingers with a decided lack of delicacy. It was more than six months since Gil had seen her really play the part—not since the night they met and he’d nearly killed her. He knew she’d lived longer as a man than otherwise, but still it surprised him just how easily she had slipped back into her old identity tonight.

She glanced up and caught him staring. With a grin, she dragged her sleeve across her mouth and stood. “Got to piss,” she announced and headed for the exit.

The moment she left, Kaela’s tranquil façade evaporated. She took a long pull of her ale, her eyes following Lianon out the door.

Gil leaned forward across the table, reaching toward her hand, but not quite touching it. “Are you having a good time?”

She forced a smile, taking a piece of flaky trout in her fingers and lifting it to her mouth. “It’s nice not to have to cook.”

He looked to his own trencher and found it empty. Disappointed, he tore off a piece of the stale bread, now softened with the juices of fish and fennel and a good deal of melted butter, and popped it in his mouth. “I’m sorry the music is so god-awful. Usually Callas isn’t drunk until near middle night. He’s a fair hand on his fiddle when he’s sober.”

Her teeth flashed briefly, and her eyes stopped straying toward the door. “It’s not so bad. You should hear my brother practice—like a sick cat that refuses to die.”

Brother? With a start, Gil realized he knew next to nothing about her life before they’d met. “Do you play an instrument?”

She nodded, licking her fingers. “The gittern.”

Gil reached across the table, and this time he did take her hand. Her smile wilted, but she didn’t pull away, and after a moment of indecision, she laced her fingers with his. Gil was amazed that his heart could pound so hard at the mere touch of a woman’s fingers on

his. He felt like he was fourteen again, and off behind the cowshed stealing kisses with the farrier's daughter. "We shall have to get you one. I'd like to hear you play."

The barest hint of a smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "I do not claim to any great artistry, but I will venture to say I am more proficient than our friend Callas." She frowned down at their joined hands, as if the sight was alien somehow. Her thumb rubbed across his knuckles, worrying an old scar. "Gil, I just...I don't understand... You love Lianon, don't you?"

He squeezed her fingers gently. "More than anything."

Her eyes lifted to his, bright with moisture. "I can't make sense of any of this. I don't understand why you aren't angry."

He pressed her hand between both of his and leaned closer. "I love my wife. I want what she wants."

She stiffened as if with affront, but did not pull her hand free. "Would you be so open-minded if I was a man?"

"A moot question, as I don't find myself attracted to men."

She stared at him.

He sighed. "Kaela, I will never, ever do anything to hurt you, or to give you cause to fear me. And I will not ask you to end this...understanding you have found with Lianon. To be honest, if you ever come to my bed—to *our* bed—you will find a welcome there from both of us. But I won't have you do so out of gratitude or obligation or guilt. If I am ever to be included in this arrangement, it will be because you wish it."

Her hand began to tremble in his grasp. "You...desire that?"

"More with each day that passes."

Her chest had begun to heave, but he couldn't tell anymore if it was anxiety or uneasy excitement. With her free hand, she grabbed her tankard and took a huge swallow. A rivulet escaped the corner of her mouth and ran down the fine arch of her neck to soak the upper edge of her bodice. His mouth watered just imagining how it would feel to lap that trail of froth from her skin. With growing exasperation, he willed his stiffening cock to soften.



She set the tankard down, gently tugged her hand free, and swiped at the spill with her sleeves.

“It’s too soon,” he said, cursing himself. “I’m an idiot.”

She shook her head. “Please, Gil, don’t say that. It’s just that everything is so confusing now! A few days ago, I could not have imagined ever wanting to be touched by anyone. I wouldn’t have thought myself capable of sitting on a horse with a man’s arm around me. I couldn’t have conceived of finding pleasure in...the things Lianon and I have done.”

“So what changed between a few days ago and today?”

Her face went red all the way to her hairline and her eyes dropped to her hands. “I watched you and Lianon together, the night before you went to Belthalas.”

Gil stared, his own face warming. She couldn’t have shocked him more had she announced she was the Queen of Fjorg.

She saw his expression and hastened to explain. “I was just so overwhelmed by the messenger that morning, and then Lianon gave me some opium to settle my nerves, and it just made me feel so...odd. And when I heard the two of you...making love, I don’t know what came over me. Part of me was sure you were hurting her. But when I saw what you were doing...”

Gil grinned. He couldn’t help himself. Their lovely, innocent Kaela was a voyeur. He only hoped he’d given her a decent show.

“I’m so sorry to have violated your trust,” she went on.

He waved her apology away. “Lianon saw you peeking?”

Kaela nodded, looking positively green. “When she did, it was like something just exploded inside her.”

He grinned harder, thinking he remembered the exact moment. “I can imagine.”

She scowled at him. “I don’t know how you can find this so amusing.”

He nodded back, trying to wipe the grin from his face. “You’re right, this is serious. I’ll have to remember to hold in my stomach from now on. Never know who might be watching.”

She spluttered for a moment, the very picture of offended dignity, then threw her sodden trencher at him. It struck his shoulder, sending flecks of fish and soggy bread into his hair, before rebounding into the crowd. Making a moue, he picked a piece of fennel off his whiskers, inspected it thoroughly, then ate it with relish. Kaela's hand clapped to her mouth, but couldn't keep the laughter from bursting forth.

Laughing with her, he caught her other hand and drew it to his lips. Her humor seeped away into the ether, but her eyes still sparkled. When he released her hand, she leaned closer across the width of the table and brushed the bits of trout from his hair.

Encouraged, Gil waved discreetly at the serving girl to bring another round of beer.

"Looks like your woman's got a wandering eye," the serving girl murmured smugly in Lianon's ear as she breezed by with a tray.

Lianon barely heard her. Standing just inside the door, she was captivated by the sight of her husband lifting Kaela's hand to his lips. For some reason, he had food all over him. Must have said something stupid, she thought. Kaela's other hand was at her own mouth, and to Lianon, this indirect connection of their lips seemed almost a kiss by proxy. As she watched, Kaela reached over and began to brush the bits of food from Gil's hair, her fingers lingering in that unexpected softness a little longer than precisely necessary.

Lianon fought a wave of dizziness as she imagined those pale hands of Kaela's tunneling through Gil's hair and pulling his mouth to her breast. Imagined sleek thighs opening so Lianon could guide Gil's hardness into Kaela's moist and welcoming heat. She could feel her nipples pebble under the ruthless binding around her ribcage as she watched their tentative courtship. Gil was staring at Kaela as if he had discovered something wonderful, and Kaela's returning gaze was filled with the budding understanding of her own womanhood.

Lianon looked inside herself, but found no hint of jealousy over the growing affection between her husband and her lover. How could she be jealous? She wanted them both.

Kaela's eyes found her across the room, and her smile shriveled. She ducked her head and jerked her hand back from Gil as if she'd been caught at something forbidden.

Crossing to them, Lianon gave Gil's shoulder a squeeze, more for Kaela's benefit than his, before scooting back onto the bench. The serving girl brought three full tankards of beer, and Kaela reached for hers, taking a long drink. Lianon slid her hand onto Kaela's lap and down her thigh, the touch meant more to reassure than arouse.

Smiling, she examined Gil's spattered shirt. "Lost a fight with dinner, did you?"

Next to her, Kaela guffawed, slapping her hand over her mouth once more. "I'm sorry," she said when she could. "I threw my trencher at him."

"Don't let it worry you," Lianon said, patting her knee. "I'm sure whatever he said was idiotic enough to justify it."

Kaela's giggles only increased as Gil stiffened, putting on his dignity. "I'll have you know, I was nothing but pleasant."

As Lianon's laughter joined Kaela's, he pushed to his feet. "I'm feeling very ill-used at the moment. Go ahead and laugh. I think I'll go freshen up," he said coldly, but his twitching lips betrayed him. He nodded to them both and headed outside. Lianon turned to Kaela, drinking in the sight of her so relaxed and mirthful, her color high, her eyes glowing. Unable to stop herself, she reached over, took Kaela's braid in her hand and pulled her closer. Their lips met. Small bursts of laughter puffed against Lianon's mouth but subsided at the first stroke of her tongue. By the time they broke apart, they were both breathless with arousal.

"I think I have had altogether too much to drink," Kaela murmured with the careful articulation of the moderately inebriated.

Lianon ran the backs of her fingers down Kaela's cheek and throat to the top of her bodice, watching how much swifter the other woman's breaths got the lower her hand ventured. "Shall I get you drunk and have my way with you?"

Kaela's hand came up to clasp hers, holding it against her heart. "You don't need to get me drunk to do that. I'm yours."

Lianon's skin tingled all over, her breasts beginning to swell under the binding, needing to be touched. Her other hand was still in Kaela's lap. She had only to move it just a tiny bit, and her little finger was nestled at the juncture of the other woman's thighs. Lianon leaned her face close enough that the stray tendrils escaping Kaela's braid tickled her brow. She splayed her fingers so the little one pressed just where Kaela would be aching. "Mine, are you?" she whispered, feeling something wicked take hold of her. "If I bade you go outside with me right now, would you?"

Kaela's eyes fluttered shut and her breath stopped for a moment. Her heart thumped up against the back of Lianon's hand. "Yes."

Lianon thrilled at the submission inherent in that one syllable. With just the touch of one finger and the caress of her voice, she held this woman in thrall, a slave to her will. "If I bade you let your hair loose and slip from your clothes under moonlight and starlight and any mortal eyes that might see it, would you?"

"Yes." The word was no more than a breath, but Kaela's grip on her hand tightened and she pushed forward on the bench so her mound pressed harder against Lianon's wriggling finger.

Lianon leaned closer, her tongue darting out to stroke along the upper curve of Kaela's ear. "And if I bade you lie on the grass and spread your lovely thighs so that I might lap up your woman's wet, would you?"

"God, yes, Lianon," she whispered, beginning to grind her hips down onto the bench. "Yes, I would do it."

Lianon closed her own eyes, and it was like they inhabited a bubble of space, sealed away from the noise and smells and sights of the tavern. As her finger circled slowly around Kaela's magic spot, Lianon wondered if she'd be able to make the other woman come right here in the crowded tavern. "And if I bade you splay your body open like the pages of a book, that my husband might watch as I take you with lips and tongue and fingers, would you?"

All of Kaela's breath left her in a rush, and she had begun to tremble, but her hips still ground down onto the bench. Lianon didn't expect an answer. The continuing

escalation of Kaela's arousal, even with Gil's presence in their shared fantasy, was answer enough.

"If I bade you pleasure my husband with strokes of your hand until his seed spilled like a strand of beads onto my waiting tongue? Would you, Kaela? Would you do this? Are you truly mine?"

"I was going to ask if you missed me," Gil said, shattering their bubble of intimacy, "but I think I'll spare you the need to hurt my feelings."

Kaela practically leapt from her skin at the sound of his voice, but Lianon recognized the tension under his dry tone. He was as aroused as an adolescent in a brothel. The darkness of his eyes when she dared to look up at him confirmed it, but she couldn't resist a peek at his groin for further evidence. His erection was so prodigious it was little wonder he was reluctant to take his seat. Feeling merciful, she pressed a peck to Kaela's cheek and slid her hand to her own lap.

"Actually," she said over the rim of her tankard, "we were just talking about you."

"Nothing pleasant to say, I hope," he replied with a tight smile, clinging to glibness as if his life depended on it.

"Are you having some difficulty, Gil?" Lianon asked with a grin. "Why don't you sit down?"

He grimaced. "I thought perhaps we ought to get going." He flashed Kaela a pained glance. "Before Callas picks up his viol again."

"We might as well," Lianon agreed. "Our Kaela has had more beer than is good for her, I think."

Kaela slammed her tankard down guiltily, mid-quaff, sloshing beer all over Gil's trouser-front. He closed his eyes with a look of patient martyrdom.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Kaela wailed, but her voice trembled with humor.

Lianon watched the patch of wet spread across the wool covering Gil's magnificent and still-burgeoning cock, and raised an eyebrow. She pushed to her feet, feeling oddly light inside, like a house with every door thrown wide. "Well, it's clear we'd better leave

before you find some other foodstuff to wear. We'll have a dozen stray cats following us home as it is."

The ride back home was easier...for Kaela. Soothed and softened by too much beer and his gentle wooing, she made no protest when Gil lifted her into the saddle. But looking up at her swaying slightly on her perch, her legs spread wide across Balon's back and her skirts rucked up to her knees, he felt another surge of blood rush to his already aching cock. He was in such a state, he almost asked Lianon to ride with her. His prick was so hard he wondered if he'd ever be able to pass water through it again. It was only going to get harder once it had Kaela's round bottom snugged up against it.

Lianon grinned at him, shameless in her gloating. He could remember a time when she respected him as a woman should, doing his bidding as docile as a dove. All right, he *wished* he could remember a time like that, because the only time she was ever really biddable was when he had his face buried between her thighs. At least she wasn't trying to kill him, though, like in the early days of their dubious courtship. All things considered, a hint of smugness now wasn't so bad.

She raised her brows and jerked her head in the direction of Balon's saddle. Her eyes flicked to his crotch, and she grinned obscenely, then turned and mounted Mora. "Better get up there before she tumbles."

Salgrim help him, she was pitiless.

Cursing all women, he put his foot to the stirrup and climbed up behind Kaela. No matter how careful he was, he couldn't avoid the glorious agony of his cock pressing between the soft cushions of her buttocks. Unlike on their first ride, she didn't stiffen at his nearness, but melted back against him, her head leaning heavily on his shoulder. When he wrapped his arm around her waist, she held to it instead of the pommel, her fingers seeking out his. His own hand shook as he laced their fingers together, and he closed his eyes as the scent of her hair enveloped him like a heady cloud.

God, he wanted to bend his head and drag his tongue up her neck from nape to jaw, wanted to grab her braid and jerk her head back and devour her pink bow of a mouth until

she was breathless from it. He wanted to cup her heavy breasts, feel their weight in his hands, crush their softness, suckle their tips. He wanted to drag her from the horse's back and press her down onto the grass next to the road and...

He forced his eyes open, pushed his mind away from thoughts of Kaela's nude body splayed wide beneath him, thought instead of what sur-Marus had done to her. Thought of how gentle and restrained he must be now to make up for what other men had done. Without thinking, he tightened his arm around her waist and pressed his lips to her forehead. She surprised him by sighing and snuggling into him, nestling her brow against the side of his neck.

He kicked the horse to a gentle walk, his eyes meeting Lianon's. The smugness was gone from them, and her face now shone with love. An uncustomary tightness started in Gil's throat, and he felt his chest expand.

She held his gaze for a long time, then rode ahead to pick their way in the dark.

Kaela hadn't felt so relaxed for as long as she could remember. Her head was pillowed on Gil's shoulder, her back warmed by his length, his arm holding her safe from harm. The pommel of the saddle nudged her sex with each step of the horse, adding to the warmth that was already there. She could feel the hard length of Gil's member against her bottom, but it had no power to frighten her tonight.

Too much beer, certainly, but the deeper truth was that she trusted him. For six months she had lived under his roof, slept with only a thin wall separating her room from his, and he had never been anything but kind and respectful to her. He wanted her—very much so, if the stubbornly unfailing hardness against her buttocks was any indication—but he wouldn't force her, or make her feel obligated. He had said it was her choice, and she believed him.

She closed her eyes and thought of sitting in that crowded tavern while Lianon's clever finger danced across her lap. Thought of the unbelievable things the other woman had whispered while that finger brought Kaela closer and closer to the edge. Her sex wept as the images passed again across her inner vision, wetness pooling on top of wetness.

She wondered if it was a disease of the mind, this sudden preoccupation with the sensual. Her old life had been spent in a state of innocent oblivion until the night that stole her innocence, and ever since, she'd been dead from the neck down, the very thought of being touched enough to make her retch.

Two days with Lianon had changed everything.

Kaela thought about taking Gil's member in her hand, as Lianon had whispered. Thought about stroking it up and down until thick white froth exploded from the end of it. Thought about Lianon catching it on her tongue, drinking him down as she had promised just last night to do to Kaela.

She knew she wasn't quite ready to do that. She wasn't afraid anymore, but she wasn't ready to take that step. She was ready to think about it, though, to let the images flood her mind while an already familiar slickness flooded her sex.

She was ready to want it.

Gil drew a mostly limp Kaela down from the saddle and led her inside while Lianon stabled the horses. Biso followed them in and curled his huge frame up on the rug by the hearth while Gil lit a lamp. As it flared to life, he turned and looked at Kaela where she leaned one shoulder against the wall, smiling with her eyes half-shut. He thought about kissing her, wondering where it might lead.

Drunk, he thought. Not so drunk she wouldn't know what she was doing, but maybe drunk enough to do something she normally wouldn't.

He crossed to her and took her gently by the shoulders, turning her in the direction of her room. "To bed with you, my dear," he said.

"I'm not tired," she protested.

He smiled, nudging her forward. "Of course you're not. You're drunk."

She reached her door and turned to face him, nearly spinning all the way round and toppling. "Pshaw!" she said, jabbing a finger into his chest.

He grabbed her hand and kissed it. She gazed up at him, swaying slightly on her feet, her eyes warm with beer and expectation and the smallest flare of excitement. He bent to



kiss her cheek, lingering, letting her skin accustom itself to the rasp of his beard. Her breath struck his ear in swift bursts. Her fingers squeezed his hand, and she stood unmoving as he backed away just far enough that his lips were right next to hers. He stayed like that, his heart slamming against his ribs so hard he could barely breathe, for just a moment. Just long enough for her to turn her face toward his.

Their lips touched, ever so briefly. Separated, then touched again. Her breath was swift and shaky, and her hand clung to his as if it was her sole anchor in the universe. Heat flowered in his belly, shooting along his limbs and down the shaft of his cock. Her breath tasted of beer and honey, of innocence. Unable to help himself, he licked at her upper lip. She jerked at the contact, but then leaned in closer as if for more. He tipped his head to one side and deepened the kiss, stroking the seam of her lips with his tongue. Her own tongue emerged shyly to meet it, and as she let herself taste him, she groaned into his mouth.

Panting, he pulled away, forcing himself to ignore the way she leaned forward as he retreated, her every motion telling him she wanted more. She was drunk enough to do whatever he asked of her. Drunk enough to hate him for it tomorrow. He closed his hands on her shoulders and set her away from him. "To bed, Kaela."

She smiled dreamily up at him, looking like any maid who has just been properly kissed. "Good night, Gil."

"Good night, my dear."

## Chapter Eight

Gil grabbed Lianon the moment she stepped into their room, taking her lips in a hungry kiss, his tongue delving deep. He tore the cloth from her head and tangled his hands in her hair, pulling just hard enough to hurt. Faintly, she registered the feel of hot, bare skin under her palms. Skimming her hands downward, she gripped his naked buttocks and pulled his erection tight against her mound.

He pulled his face away, panting through his open mouth as if there wasn't enough air in the world to fuel his excitement. He leaned his forehead against hers and ran his hands roughly down her body. "Get them off, Lianon. Hurry." She could feel him trembling as he started to unlace her shirt and nudged him away at the first sound of seams popping.

"Don't be impatient," she said smugly, knowing how irksome it would be to him. Didn't he always say the same thing to her, again and again, while she burned under his skilful touch?

He glared at her, his eyes so dark, she thought better of teasing him. With jerky motions she unfastened the buttons of her trousers and the drawstring of her drawers, then shoved both garments down her legs. She batted his hands away as he came at her

again—she didn't need another torn shirt. When she pulled it off and his eyes fell on the bandages wrapped around her ribcage, he let out a howl of frustration.

“Off! Get it off,” he hissed, pulling her into his arms once more, his hands almost mauling her, his mouth coming down hard over hers. His fingers slipped under the edge of the binding, jerking downward so hard she flinched.

With a muttered curse, she pushed him away. Kept her eyes on his as she fumbled to find the small clasp that fastened the end of the bandage. As she began to unwrap herself, his hand encircled his shaft, sliding up and down the hard length of it, his gaze fixed on each inch of skin she revealed.

She knew what she looked like. The tight wrappings always left harsh red lines across her ribs and breasts. She winced as the pressure left her skin and blood rushed stinging into the cruel indentations, but it was a good pain. It was like the ache in her pussy, the throb that had plagued her clit all evening. Her pulse leapt at the memory of Kaela at her mercy in that crowded bar, and she thought about the other woman alone and wanting in her bed right this moment, but it was Gil who needed her now.

When she was finally naked, she stepped into his arms, telling him with her eyes she would tolerate no more roughness. He trembled all over as his hands skimmed her sore and sensitive torso, and her heart twisted at his impossible restraint. She ran her hands across the heated surface of his skin, reveling in the way his muscles tensed and flexed under her touch. His breath blasted from his open mouth, hot as if from a furnace.

“Lie down, my love,” she whispered against his lips. “Let me take care of everything.”

He lay on his back on the bed, his hand still working his cock, his eyes drinking her in. She climbed up beside him, straddled his waist and set her hands on either side of his head. Leaning forward, she lapped at his open mouth like a kitten at a bowl of cream. His free hand slid down her back and over her bottom where it thrust high, pulling her wet nether lips open to the chill in the air.

“Ah, my love,” she breathed into his mouth, “did it excite you to see me touch her like that? Did it make you ache? Did you want me to spread her out on that table in front of all those men and take her with my hands and mouth?”

With a growl, he caught her under the arms with both hands and pulled her forward, lifting his head off the pillow to take one tender nipple between his lips and sucking until she could hardly think straight. Her eyes drifted shut and she gasped as he switched to her other breast, drawing the nipple into a tight, agonized peak.

“Shall I tell you of her charms?” she went on, not even recognizing her own voice. “How round and firm her breasts, how pink her nipples, how sweet her glistening cunt?” She drew back and her nipple popped out of his mouth with a pang of pleasure-pain. Sliding down his torso, she dragged the hard peaks of her breasts across his chest and pressed her weeping slit against the length of him, coating the underside of his shaft with her wetness. “Shall I tell you how tightly her cunt grasped my thrusting finger when she screamed her pleasure?”

He put his hands over his face as if in agony. “Don’t torture me, Lianon. No more, I beg you,” he groaned, thrusting his hips up against the wet lips of her sex. “Kill me and have done.”

“Oh, I’m not finished with you yet,” she laughed, sliding lower until her face hovered a bare inch above his cock. Her nostrils flared as she smelled her own musk on his shaft, and grinning, she licked him from base to head, loving the salty sweet taste of her own wetness. His organ leapt under the heavy stroke of her tongue, and he spread two fingers open over one eye so he could watch what she was doing.

“You taste good, my love,” she said, and licked his length once more before pulling the head of him in her mouth and sucking hard.

“God, Lianon!” he hissed, shoving up with his hips to push more of himself into her mouth. “God, you’re killing me.”

What on earth was she becoming? Kaela wondered as she pressed her face close to the crack in the door and watched them. A deviate? A pervert?

She shook her head, her eyes devouring the scene in front of her. Lianon wanted her to watch, that much was clear. After being spied on twice, she would not have left the door ajar if she didn't want an audience.

On the bed, Lianon had wrapped her lips around Gil's cock and was sucking it deep into her mouth. Her bottom was lifted high, and as she wriggled, Kaela caught brief glimpses of dark curls peeking from beneath her buttocks, glistening with wetness. Gil had his hands over his face, his entire body tense as Lianon enthusiastically fellated him.

Kaela thought back to that awful night at Flaxton's, to the feeling of being on her knees with the organ of a brute in her mouth, gagging her. How could she reconcile that terror-filled experience with the tableau before her, with the pleasure Lianon obviously felt as she pulled her husband's member deeper and deeper into her mouth?

With a loud, wet pop, Lianon released Gil's cock and smiled up at him. "Will you beg?" she asked him, running the backs of her fingers up and down his shaft as he squirmed beneath her light touch. Kaela watched as if mesmerized. She had wondered after that first night watching if perhaps her fear had made more of him than was really there, but seeing it now leaping and jerking under Lianon's clever ministrations, Kaela could not conceive how such a thing could possibly fit where she knew it must.

"*God*, Lianon," Gil groaned, reaching down to grab fistfuls of her hair and pull her face to his. He kissed her hard, his tongue shoving deep into her mouth. "God, yes. Yes, I will beg. *Please*. No more teasing, just take me inside your sweet cunt and fuck me."

Kaela forgot to breathe as Lianon took Gil's cock in her hand and reared up above him, holding herself poised and ready. Slowly, agonizingly, she sank onto his hard length, and Kaela watched, amazed, as he disappeared inside her, inch by inch. His hands clutched her hips, his fingers digging deep into her flesh, and his breath left him in one long exhalation. At last, she was sitting astraddle him, his balls nestled snug between the cheeks of her bottom.

With a start, Kaela realized her hand had crept between her legs, holding tight to the ache there, pressing up against the throbbing knot of flesh hidden between her swollen labia. And as she watched, Lianon's hand slid down her own torso and disappeared

between her legs. Kaela couldn't see everything, but the flexing muscles of Lianon's forearm left no question as to what her fingers were doing.

And then Lianon glanced over her shoulder toward the place where Kaela stood peeking through the crack in the door. Her smile was full of sensual promise, and Kaela felt her blood begin to rush in her ears. Her eyes locked on Kaela's, Lianon rode Gil, her hips rising and falling as she speared herself on his shaft again and again. Dragging her gaze away, Kaela looked at Gil's face. His eyes were squeezed shut, his mouth open on a grimace, dragging in huge gulps of air. He looked like he was in agony, but at the same time he seemed eager for more. As Lianon rode him faster, his hips pushed up to meet her downward thrusts.

"God, I'm dying," he hissed between his teeth, shoving up harder. "I'm *dying*!"

Lianon threw her head back and laughed, a sound of pure, carnal joy. And then she pushed herself off, scrambled to the far side of him and grabbed his bucking cock in her fist. His seed spurted in thick, milky arcs to land on his chest, and Kaela felt her sex release a hot flood of wetness as she watched Lianon lovingly lap up every last, pearlescent drop of it.

After, Gil grabbed a handful of Lianon's hair and drew her face back up to his. As they kissed, Kaela backed away from the door, stepping silently on the balls of her bare feet. Biso lifted his head and let out a long, low groan of irritation, obviously unaccustomed to such nocturnal wanderings among his human masters. Flapping her hand at him, she willed him to silence, and he set his jowly head back on his forepaws, staring up at her in bewilderment.

Alone in her room, she climbed back into bed and pulled the sheets up. Moonlight spilled in through her window, painting shadows on her walls and bed linens. Closing her eyes, Kaela tried to relax, but her sex still throbbed with awareness, and her heart thrummed at the memory of what she had witnessed. Almost without thinking, she ran a hand across her breasts, her fingertips stroking her nipples through her shift, feeling them tighten into hard little beads. Her other hand skimmed down her torso until it found her clitoris nestled between the swollen lips of her sex. Through the fabric of her shift, she

pressed her fingers into her slit, opening her lips, rubbing circles around the pearl Lianon had found for her. In Kaela's mind, Lianon was lapping up Gil's come from the flat plane of his chest, her lips glistening with the milky fluid. The linen of Kaela's shift was soon soaked through.

The creak of the door opening startled her, but not enough to deflect her hands from their pleasant pastime. She looked up to find Lianon standing there naked, the moonlight garbing her in an intricate filigree of light and shadow.

"Let me help you, my lamb," Lianon said softly, pulling the door nearly shut behind her.

Kaela reached for her, and Lianon crossed to the bed, climbing in beside her. Gazing down at the sweet innocence shining in the other woman's face, she lowered her head. Their lips met briefly, Kaela's tongue darting out to stroke Lianon's. She sighed into Lianon's mouth and shifted, pressing her entire length against her.

"Can you taste him on my lips?" Lianon asked, kissing a path down the woman's throat, pulling the sheet down as she descended. Her hand sought out one round breast, her thumb stroking across the hard nipple through thin linen.

"Yes."

"I thought of you watching me as I pleased him," Lianon whispered. Her fingers plucked at the tortured peak of Kaela's breast, making her shudder. "Did it excite you to see me do that?"

"Yes."

Lianon bent her head and took the other woman's nipple in her mouth, suckling gently through the linen until a wide patch of wetness spread across her whole breast. Shifting, she tugged the sheet all the way down and let her hand slide between Kaela's legs under the hem of her shift.

"I think you're right," she murmured, her fingers encountering a flood of slickness in the woman's swollen slit. "It did excite you. Open your legs, my lamb, as wide as they will go. I want to see you."

With a whimper of burgeoning need, Kaela did as she bid, until her thighs were splayed wide in the moonlight. Propping herself up on one elbow to watch, Lianon stroked her fingers through the other woman's furrow, dipping down low to slide the bare tip of one into her channel, then sliding up to circle the straining nub of her clit.

"Tell me what you want, Kaela," Lianon said, teasing and torturing that poor, aching pearl, now circling fast, now pulling away.

The woman writhed and moaned, pushing her hips up toward Lianon's taunting fingers. "I want..."

Lianon pulled her hand away, leaving Kaela aching and desperate. The woman's dark eyes begged for release, but Lianon only smiled down at her. "Tell me."

"I want..." She bit her lip, closing her eyes, the sheets clutched in her fisted hands. "Make me come, Lianon."

"Mmm, I will." Lianon rewarded her by resuming her teasing strokes. "Shall I kiss it?"

Kaela thrust her mound up toward Lianon's hand. "God, yes!"

"If you insist, my lamb." Smiling, Lianon slid down the bed until she was positioned between Kaela's parted thighs. Her eyes drank in the sight of Kaela's cunt open wide in front of her, the curls glistening with her own wetness, the lips puffy and swollen, the rigid bud of her clit standing tall amid the soft cradle of her mound. The scent of arousal filled Lianon's senses, and she felt a corresponding release of wetness in her own pussy.

Leaning in, Lianon blew a stream of cool air across the hot, wet flesh of her. Kaela wriggled, squealing in an agony of wanting. With a smile, Lianon dragged her tongue across that tortured flesh, from her opening to her clit, grabbing Kaela's hips between her hands when she bucked upward. The taste of woman burst upon Lianon's tongue, filling her with a joy she hadn't thought to know again since she lost Rhianna. Her heart expanding in her chest, she pressed her lips to Kaela's lovely pussy and suckled her clitoris, flicking her tongue rapidly across it.

"God, god, Lianon!" Kaela hissed, her hips surging up from the bed at the new sensation. Sucking harder, Lianon slid one hand around between Kaela's thighs and



slipped a finger inside her. Her lover stilled but for the tiniest of tremors, waiting. Lianon stretched the moment as long as she could, tongue flicking rapidly across the trapped flesh in her mouth, then stroked her fingertip across that magic bundle of nerve endings on the upper surface of Kaela's channel.

With a keening cry, Kaela started to come, her muscles spasming around Lianon's finger. As the woman bucked and thrashed, Lianon slid a second finger inside, then a third, stroking the silky lining of her pussy, lashing her tongue across Kaela's throbbing clitoris. A flood of slick cream poured from Kaela's clenching tunnel over Lianon's fingers, and what she couldn't catch on her tongue dripped down to soak into the sheet.

As the woman's shudders subsided, Lianon pressed a last, lingering kiss to her sex and crawled up the bed to kiss her mouth. Kaela's lips joined hers in a lazy dance, but as Lianon kept up with long, tender strokes of her tongue, Kaela started to realize they weren't finished yet.

She pulled back and looked at Lianon. Her hand slid down between them and slipped into Lianon's wet furrow. Her fingers flicked across Lianon's aching clit, rubbing back and forth over the resilient tag of flesh. "Tell me what you want."

Lianon's stomach coiled as she pushed her hips forward. "Put your fingers inside me."

Two fingers slid up into her heat, and Lianon let her eyes drift shut. She thought about Gil, watching through a crack in the door, and opened her thighs so he could see better. She could feel his glance licking across her skin as Kaela's fingers began to pump slowly in and out of her cunt.

"That's it, my dove," she whispered as Kaela's fingers found the perfect rhythm. "Will you kiss my breasts?"

Pliable as clay, Kaela bent her head and took one of Lianon's nipples between her lips, her tongue flicking across it as she gently suckled, sending a shaft of pleasure straight through her core. "Mmm, that's nice, love. Lower now."

Kaela's tongue drew a wet line down Lianon's ribs to her navel, pausing briefly there to explore its contours. "Lower still, my lamb," Lianon whispered.

Kaela raised her head, her eyes searching Lianon's face, a crease of uncertainty forming between her brows even as her fingers continued their steady rhythm. With a reassuring smile, Lianon reached out and smoothed Kaela's hair back from her face, putting all the gentleness she could into the caress. "Please, my love. Will you make me beg? Kiss me."

Kaela said nothing, only slid down the mattress into the vee between Lianon's spread legs. The first touch of her lips on Lianon's sex was tentative, a hesitant foray into the unknown. At Lianon's hiss of indrawn breath, her confidence seemed to grow, and she lashed out hard with her tongue.

Lianon felt her back leave the mattress as a bolt of pleasure shot from her cunt straight up her spine. "Ahhhhh, yes, like that."

Kaela's touch was inexperienced, almost clumsy, but she was beginning to understand the nature of her own body, what pleased it and what did not, and she didn't hesitate to put that understanding to use on Lianon. Warming to the task, she sucked Lianon's clit hard into her mouth, biting gently, flicking with her tongue, and all the while, her fingers plunged into Lianon's sopping channel and back out. It wasn't long before Lianon felt her culmination building, blood pumping into tissues already engorged, muscles gathering tension in preparation for the perfect explosion.

"More, more, ah, god, Kaela!" she cried, her own hands plucking at her nipples under the palpable weight of Gil's gaze. And then she was coming, coming, coming, her cunt grabbing Kaela's fingers as if it never wanted to let go of them, her entire body shuddering with release.

As her spasms eased, Kaela gathered her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead, pulling the sheet up over them both. It was a few minutes before Lianon realized she was weeping.

"Did I do something wrong?" Kaela asked, brushing Lianon's tears away with a corner of the sheet.

With a hoarse laugh, Lianon hugged her close. "Don't even think that, my lamb. You're perfect."

“Did I please you, as well, Gil?” Kaela called sweetly, turning toward the door.

Lianon’s heart tripped over itself as reality dawned on her: Kaela knew that Gil had watched—and knowing, she still had found pleasure.

The door opened slowly to reveal a very intense-looking Gil, with an intensely confused-looking Biso sitting at his heels. His eyes glittering, Gil stepped inside and crossed to the bed, his chest bare, his trousers looking uncomfortably tight in front. He bent and kissed Lianon, long and lazily, then pressed a gentler kiss to Kaela’s mouth. Lianon watched as his nostrils flared—he could taste each woman’s nectar on the other’s lips. “You both please me very much.”

“Shall we—” Lianon started to ask, but he shook his head.

“Not yet, my love.” His eyes studied Kaela, her face, the outline of her body under the sheet. “Best to take things slowly. There is time enough for the three of us to share each other.”

“Tomorrow and the next day,” Lianon said, “and the next.”

Kaela smiled up at Gil, her eyes sparkling. Lianon felt her throat grow tight again at the sight of her budding desire for him.

Gil drew his fingertips down Kaela’s cheek and turned to go.

“I’ll be there in a few moments,” Lianon told him.

He turned back and looked at them where they lay together, limbs tangled. “Stay here with her, Lianon.” She studied him, but he was shuttered again. He didn’t seem upset, but Lianon felt oddly rejected at his words.

“Lie with us,” Kaela said, saving her.

Gil’s brow rose. “’Tis a narrow bed.”

Lianon snuggled up closer to Kaela, leaving a narrow strip of mattress, just enough room for Gil if he didn’t mind lying stretched straight out. A moment later, she felt him crawl in under the sheet, the heat of his chest pressed onto her back, his trousers faintly scratchy on her bare bottom. His cock was hard, but not insistently so. He wrapped his arm around her, and with a swiftly kindling joy, Lianon felt Kaela reach up to take his hand in hers.

His breath fanned warm on her nape, and Kaela's blew softly across her face, and Lianon closed her eyes, cradled in a cocoon of love and contentment.

A moment later, Biso groaned in disgruntlement as he realized there was no room for him on the bed again tonight. Lianon grinned. If all went well tomorrow night, poor, downtrodden Biso would have the whole feather mattress to himself, and Kaela would be bunking with Gil and Lianon for good.

## Chapter Nine

A full bladder woke Lianon in the gray before dawn, and taking care not to jostle anyone, she slid out from between Gil and Kaela. Hurrying to her bedroom, she pulled on a robe and then slipped silently outside with Biso at her heels. Wet grass caressed her ankles as she crossed to the edge of the yard and squatted. Biso watched her with canine disinterest before lifting his leg against a rock, a couple of trees, a half-dozen tallish stalks of grass and one extremely peeved spider who'd had the misfortune to build its web in the wrong place. Pleased with his efforts, the mastiff headed off to see if he could nose up some small game or something well rotted and not necessarily identifiable for his breakfast.

Back inside, Lianon headed for the kitchen. It wasn't quite time to get up, yet, but it seemed foolish to go back to bed now. As quietly as she could, she lit the stove and filled the kettle from the pump, then reached for the canister of bark chips and their Kurgan *jaffha* pot. While the water heated, she went to the washbasin in her room and got cleaned up. Returning to the kitchen, she poured boiling water on the chips, inserted and depressed the plunger, and let the sharp smell of brewing *jaffha* fill the house.

A few minutes later, she was carrying three steaming cups of black heaven on a tray into Kaela's room. Tray, *jaffha* and all nearly went crashing when she stepped through the doorway and saw what was going on in her absence.

Gil awoke to teasing, feather-light strokes on his torso and the delightful memory of what had gone on the night before. Smiling, he snuggled closer to the source of that delicate touch, finding the bed much bigger than when he'd entered it.

Her fingers drew back for a moment then returned to trace the line of the scar that ran in a ragged white line from his armpit to his hip.

"How did you get this?" Kaela asked.

He opened his eyes to see her studying the scar, trailing her fingertips down along it. Her hair was tousled, her shift twisted about her and a little bunched at the waist. The shadows of her areolae were clearly visible through the wrinkled linen. He resisted the urge to reach for her, reluctant to break the mood. Of Lianon, there was no sign, though he thought he could smell *jaffha*.

"A job," he said. "I was careless. If not for Aru, I'd have been dead."

Her hand moved to a smaller scar, a fine slice along his collarbone. "And this?"

He smiled, remembering the night last winter that had changed the course of his life. "Lianon gave me that one."

Her eyes flicked to his face as if to judge whether he was teasing. He pointed to the nick on his biceps. "This one, too."

"Oh."

His eyes dropped to the scar on her chest as his mind flashed back to that night at Flaxton's. Had it not been for Gil's timely arrival and Rat's flawless instincts, that thug's knife would have plunged straight into Kaela's heart. Shifting onto his side, he propped himself on one elbow and ran the backs of his fingers along the pale line, feeling the tiniest of quivers shake her at the touch.

"Not all of my scars come with fond memories," he said gently. "But I've learned to live with them."

“It isn’t fair,” she said.

“What isn’t?”

“A man is more attractive because of his flaws. A woman can only be beautiful despite hers.”

“That depends on the man,” he said, thinking of Lianon, of how beautiful he found every inch of her body. “And the woman.”

Her hand pressed flat on his chest, her thumb brushing back and forth across his nipple. If his cock hadn’t already been hard upon waking, it would certainly have been so by now. He thought about touching her, but instead lay back and let her explore him at her own pace. Her nails ruffled the light dusting of hair on his chest, then scraped their way gently down his stomach to draw a circle around his navel.

Footsteps at the door had her pulling back guiltily. Gil turned to see Lianon standing in the doorway with a tray of *jaffha*. Her gaze, filled with a strange, hard light, seemed to pin Kaela in place.

“Don’t stop,” she said.

Kaela made a muffled sound of relief and then her fingertips were back on him, gliding up and down his torso. Lianon crossed to the nightstand and set the tray down on it, then folded her arms over her chest. Her gaze fixed on the sheet where it lay across his groin. His cock felt her glance as if it was a physical touch, and it twitched against the crisp linen.

“Uncover him, Kaela,” Lianon said evenly.

Kaela flushed to her hairline, but she was the very picture of obedience. Plucking at the sheet well below the place where his organ screamed for liberty, she drew it down by minute increments. The fabric dragged at his hot flesh, and he shifted his hips against it in growing need. Salgrim’s teeth, he hated these teasing games—unless he was the one with the upper hand, that is. It occurred to him in that moment that he was outnumbered now, that he might well never have the upper hand again. Perhaps it had not been so wise to let Lianon talk him into this arrangement with Kaela?

“Touch his cock,” Lianon said.

Then again, perhaps he could find a way to live with it.

Kaela lifted her hand, and Gil's cock fairly leapt towards it. Seeing how his organ moved, as if a creature unto itself, she hesitated, that familiar crease appearing between her brows. Her eyes lifted to Lianon's face, seeking reassurance, but if she was hoping for a reprieve she was looking in the wrong place.

Lianon's mouth thinned with disapproval. "You'll do as I say, Kaela."

Kaela's throat worked as she swallowed, and she closed her eyes. Her hand dropped the last few inches until it lay like a dead thing on the shaft of his cock. Her lips were pressed tight together, her brows gathered over her closed eyes, air blasting from her flared nostrils. Torn between the need to keep Kaela's hand where it was and a growing impression that this was just too much for the poor girl, Gil turned to Lianon to ask her to stop. One look at her face, and the words withered on his tongue.

Her eyes glittered with something eager and terrible he had never seen in them before, something that ought to have discomfited him, but instead only increased his excitement. Her nipples stabbed against the fabric of her robe, and her legs were closed tightly as if to hold to a sensation between them. He wondered how wet she was.

"Feel him, Kaela," she said, her voice calm, nearly cold. "Feel how he wants you. Feel how hard he is, and how soft."

Her eyes still shut tight, Kaela slid her fingertips along his length, examining by touch every nuance of his shape, from the vein running up the underside of his shaft, to the flare of his head, to the tiny slit that had already started to seep. Gil lay there helpless, letting her explore him as more blood pumped into his already throbbing flesh.

"Wrap your hand around him." Lianon's voice was beginning to manifest a certain degree of tension, and Gil risked a glance at her. A flush had spread from her face to her chest. With a thumb, she stroked absently at one nipple above her crossed arms. Gil briefly wondered if she even realized she was doing it. Then he had no more opportunity to wonder about anything, because Kaela had encircled his aching cock with her hand.

He held himself motionless against the urge to buck upward, knowing how it would scare her. But, oh, how her hand felt, wrapped around his shaft.



“Pleasure him, now, my dove,” Lianon said quietly.

“But I don’t—”

“But you do, Kaela. You do know how. You made a cock of your fingers for me last night. Now, you will make a cunt of your hand. Do you understand?”

“I—”

“Do you understand?” Lianon repeated, no more loudly, but with a sternness that had Gil squirming. Not unpleasantly so, mind you.

“Yes,” Kaela whispered, and her hand began to move, sliding up from the base of him almost to the tip, then back down, slow and teasing. He felt a drop of fluid emerge and drip down from the head to find her fingertip, and she made a startled sound, maybe dismay, maybe not.

When he looked, he saw her eyes were open, watching the motions of her hand. She seemed intrigued with the entire business, the three of them caught up in a circle of sensuality made up of his member, her hand and Lianon’s guiding voice.

“Very good, Kaela,” Lianon said, stepping a little closer. “But I think Gil would like it faster, don’t you? There’s a good girl.”

Mmmm, that was just the thing. Tipping his head back on the pillow, Gil closed his eyes and let himself drift on the sensations, the feel of Kaela’s stroking hand, of Lianon’s watching eyes, of his balls pulling taut against his body in preparation. He gripped the sheets at his sides so he wouldn’t grab Kaela, shove her onto her back and push his cock up into her. His hips began to thrust upward to meet her strokes.

“Harder still, Kaela,” Lianon instructed. “Squeeze your fingers around him as you pull. Faster now. That’s it. See how his sac snugs up tight, how his breath comes harder. Keep going. He’s going to come.”

He *was* coming, shouting wordlessly, his cock bucking in Kaela’s grasp as a burst of pure bliss tore through him like a bolt of lightning. His seed spattered his chest and belly, even his chin.

A second later, Lianon was on her knees beside the bed, her lips on his, her tongue lapping slow and lazy across his own. She pulled back and rewarded Kaela with a

brilliant, warm smile. Kaela released Gil's softening cock and trailed a finger up through his come, then brought it to her mouth and tasted him. She made a moue and shuddered in offended sensibility.

Lianon laughed. "Not quite your thing, my dear?" she asked.

"It's absolutely vile," Kaela declared, then slapped a hand to her mouth, her eyes flying to Gil's face. "I'm sorry, Gil! I didn't mean—"

He chuckled and reached for her, pulling her to him for a long kiss. Her lips parted automatically now, her tongue slipping out to play with his. "Never fear," he said at last. "I feel much the same way. I would far rather taste a woman's sweet honey." She shivered under his hands, and he stroked them down her shoulders to her breasts, gently dragging his thumbs across her nipples. "Have you any honey for me, Kaela?" he asked against her lips, and let one hand tickle its way down her belly to her cunt. She tensed as his fingers toyed with her curls, then relaxed at their first tender probing of her slit.

Rolling to his side, he nudged her onto her back and let his fingers explore her wetness, getting to know every curve and contour of her sex from the swollen inner lips guarding her entrance to the turgid bud of her clit. She watched his face as he fingered her with a trust that humbled him, her breath coming quicker, her pupils dilating with increasing arousal.

The mattress sagged slightly as Lianon climbed on the bed and added her hand to Gil's, their fingers entwining against the slick heat of Kaela's pussy.

"Taste her, my love," Lianon said, her voice husky as her other hand ventured between her own legs. "I want to watch you drink her up."

Kaela made a tiny whimper as Gil slid down the bed and spread her legs with his hands. Lianon was busy at Kaela's breasts, suckling and pinching until the girl was arching high off the mattress with her fingers threaded through Lianon's hair. Gil stared at Kaela's flushed, swollen pussy. Even as he watched, a surge of translucent fluid seeped from her opening and down the seam between her buttocks. Her scent assailed him, similar to Lianon's but so very different, lighter, sweeter, like the smell of pears. With his

thumbs, he parted her labia and then he leaned in and dragged his tongue across her, over and over and over until she was squirming and writhing under his mouth.

Glancing up from his work, he saw Lianon watching him from where she devoured Kaela's breasts. Kaela's hand had slipped between Lianon's thighs, her fingers pumping in and out as Lianon furiously worked her own clit. A moment later, Lianon was shuddering, her hips angling forward and rocking against Kaela's hand. She came utterly silently, only the transported expression on her face and the violence of her tremors hinting at the strength of her orgasm. And then a moment later Kaela was screaming, her hips surging upward under Gil's sucking mouth, and her cunt poured nectar in hot, rhythmic gushes onto his lapping tongue.

He held her tight, drinking her sweetness until her spasms subsided. With a final, tender kiss to her sex, Gil clambered up the bed and took Kaela in his arms. On her other side, Lianon stretched out, languid as a cat, and slid one arm across her waist. Her eyes met his across Kaela's profile, filled with a happiness he had never seen there before.

*I love my wife. I want what she wants.* That's what he had told Kaela just last night. Lying here with the two of them, sated and enveloped in a cloud of mutual contentment, Gil felt the absolute truth of those words. He found himself thinking of Anthoril of Harrowsfail and his four Darjhian wives. Did they all come together like this, in a circle of love and shared sensuality? Or did the man simply choose one bedchamber door over another each night? It couldn't be the latter, Gil thought, shaking his head. If it was, then he felt sorry for Anthoril of Harrowsfail.

Between him and Lianon, Kaela squirmed. "I, um..."

Feeling a suddenly pressing urge himself, Gil sat up and helped her disentangle herself from limbs and linens. While the two of them purged their bladders, Lianon straightened the bed and sweetened their *jaffha*. When they returned, they all sat on the bed together, sipping the strong brew. It was long gone cold, but somehow Gil could find no fault with that. In truth, he could find no fault with anything just now.

“So what did the chancellor want?” Lianon asked some time later, as the three of them sat eating fried eggs, bacon and barley porridge.

Gil grimaced and tried not to let the question sour his pleasant mood. “He wants to drag me into politics.”

She frowned at him.

“He’s got it in his head that the Emissaries’ Guild is in need of reform. He wants to regulate us until the only people legally entitled to our services are the Reeve’s Office, the Chancellery and the Constabulary. He was looking to hire me as his representative, to facilitate the change.”

“You declined.”

“Didn’t have much choice. The whole thing is more a personal grudge than anything else, I think. His sister was killed by an Emissary, and now he wants to bring the whole system down. The guild will never stand for it. If he pushes too hard, things are bound to get ugly. No way I want to be caught in the middle of that. It’s not like we need the money.”

“Good.”

“There is one other thing, Lianon,” Gil said carefully.

“Mm?”

“He’s been sending his snoops around the old neighborhood, asking all sorts of questions about what happened at Flaxton’s.” His gaze flicked to Kaela to find her listening intently while pretending a keen interest in her porridge. “I talked to Rat. He’s concerned. They know more about you than I’d like. And they’re looking for Kaela.”

Kaela’s spoon clattered to the table. “Me? Why are they looking for me?”

“You’re the only other witness to what happened at Flaxton’s that night. You might be able to tell them whether the woman who killed those men was Lianon al-Sylphae.”

Kaela’s eyes flew to Lianon. “I would never tell them anything, Lianon. I promise you that.”

Lianon smiled at her as if there were nothing in the world to worry about then dashed the impression with her next words. “Such promises are rarely as easy to keep as they are

to make, my lamb. And men like Chancellor Collin are often terribly single-minded. I would not expect you to remain silent if he should put the pressure on you—in fact, I should rather you speak and spare me the pain of knowing I had caused you harm.” She turned to Gil. “And what did the chancellor want to know about me?”

Gil winced. “That’s just it. He didn’t ask me anything about you.”

Her brows drew together. “But surely he must know you were there.”

“I’m positive he does.”

“Does he know we’re married?”

Gil scowled. “It seems entirely likely.”

“Oh dear.”

Kaela’s glance darted back and forth between the two of them. “What?”

Gil looked at her grimly. “It means he already knows everything he needs. He’s just waiting for the right moment to use it.”

“Oh.” She looked like she might puke up her breakfast.

“Don’t worry, my dear,” Lianon said, reaching over and taking Kaela’s hand. “Gil and I can take care of ourselves, and we won’t let anything happen to you. That much I can promise.”

“All right,” Kaela said, though she still seemed dubious.

“We’ve more important things to worry about, like your family.”

Kaela’s face went paler than ever.

“Oh?” Gil asked, leaning back in his chair.

“My brother and sister are in a workhouse,” Kaela said, her voice a bare whisper. “And my father is in prison until his debts are paid.”

Gil grabbed his fork, closing his fist tight around the handle, needing something to hold as his throat tightened. “Why did you not tell us this before?”

Kaela stared wanly into her porridge. “I was ashamed for you to know of our misfortune. And I am ashamed for my father to know of...”

Gil felt the handle of the fork bend in his grasp. “Of us? Of this arrangement we have come to?”

Her eyes flew to his face, filled with chagrin. “No! Of what happened to me. That night. Of what those men did to me... I would not have him hold himself in blame for it.”

Gil looked at Lianon, searched her face. She nodded, almost imperceptibly. He turned back to Kaela, noted the veiled hope in her gaze. “We’ll take care of your father, Kaela, whatever it takes.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, her chin going all wobbly. “But what of the chancellor?”

Lianon popped her last bit of bacon into her mouth, drank down her milk and stood. “Don’t worry, love,” she said, bending to first kiss Kaela’s cheek, then Gil’s. “Gil will stick close to home for the next little while, just to make sure you’re safe.” She went to the door, grabbed her jacket from the hook and settled it on her shoulders. After a moment’s thought, she took down her sword-belt and buckled it on. “I’ve got to move the sheep. East pasture today.”

Gil nodded grimly. She never bothered to tell him which direction she was going. Neither did she make a habit of wearing her sword to tend sheep. He knew he didn’t have to remind her to be careful.

When she was gone, Gil turned his attention to Kaela, who was looking positively green. “Come on,” he said gently, pushing to his feet and beginning to gather up dishes. “I’ll help you clean up.”

Kaela scowled. “What if I told them everything?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What if I told them about what happened at Flaxton’s? About what sur-Marus did to me, and what those other men were going to do? They deserved to die, the lot of them. Maybe they’d leave her alone if I said she did it for me. To save my life.” She lifted a hand to her chest. “I have all the proof we need right here. And no one needs to know that sur-Marus died of anything other than apoplexy.”

Gil shook his head, pulling her to her feet and wrapping his arms around her. “Ah, it wouldn’t help, love. Killing sur-Marus is the least of her crimes.”

Kaela leaned back in his embrace to frown a question up at him.

“There were other murders, Kaela.”

Her brows drew down even more and he resisted the urge to smooth away that tiny crease with his thumb. “You mean the men who killed her...wife?”

He felt his brows go up. So Lianon had told her about Rhianna. He wondered what else the two women had shared while he was away. “Yes.”

“They deserved to die too.”

“Yes they did. But...” He hesitated, unsure of how much to tell her. He’d had Rat do a little snooping of his own after the debacle at Flaxton’s, and what he’d reported wasn’t a tale for the faint of heart. “Kaela, what she did to sur-Marus is one thing. Those others, though...she crossed a line. Crossed it by a mile. She wanted to make a point—a very loud, very clear point that no one could possibly miss. I don’t think you realize the kind of brutality she is capable of, Kaela. She killed those men a piece at a time, and she made sure they felt every single cut, right to the end. It would give me nightmares if I let myself think about it.”

Her lips thinned. “You get nightmares thinking about what she did to those men,” she snapped. “What about what they did to Rhianna? What about what they did to me? Do you get nightmares thinking about that?”

He stared down at her flushed face and counted in his head until he could make his voice steady. “I try not to think about it, Kaela. When I do, it’s like a knife in my heart.”

Her eyes filled with tears and she reached up to impatiently swipe them away. “What will they do to her?”

“If they catch her there will be a trial. She’ll almost certainly be found guilty. Then it will be a choice between prison and a noose. She’ll choose death over imprisonment, I know that much.”

Kaela sniffled, putting her forehead against his chest, her hands fisted in his shirtfront. “How can she be so calm about this? How can you?”

He held her close, pressing his lips to the top of her head, his worry like a stone in the pit of his stomach. In his memory, he was back at the Whore’s Crown on a freezing

winter night, negotiating a contract with a suicidal young Emissary with eyes like bruises and a story that had stripped all his cynicism away.

“Not much we can about it, one way or the other,” he said, his throat aching. “In truth, she never meant to live beyond her vengeance. She knew they would find her someday, and knew what kind of end they would give her. We only met because she hired my sword to cheat the hangman.” A perverse remorse tore at him, guilt over giving Lianon something to live for. *What’s worse?* he wondered. *To go on living when you long for death, or to yearn for life when the wolves are closing in and there’s no longer any real hope of survival?*

“She hired you?”

The incredulity in her voice brought a reflexive smile to his lips. “Yes.”

“To kill her?”

His arms tightened around her, his hands rubbing up and down her back. “Yes.”

“Oh.”

He chuckled, taking her face between his hands and bending to kiss her. Her lips tasted of tears. “We had quite the courtship, if you can imagine.”

“I’ll try not to,” she said stolidly, squaring her shoulders. “It might give me nightmares.”

“Come on,” he said, laughing around the tightness in his throat, moving away from her. “Let’s get this cleaned up.”

She frowned and twisted her hands together in front of her. “Gil?”

His hands paused on a stack of platters. “Mm?”

“If they get her—if we lose her—what will happen with...I mean, it was Lianon who, um...that is, will you—will *we*...?”

He looked at her, at the uncertainty evident in her expression and posture and the wringing of her hands. “Oh, Kaela,” he said softly. “If they get her, if we lose her, all we’ll have left is each other.”



Lianon walked down the path with Jak and Sabbah cavorting at her heels, heading for the fenced field where she'd left the sheep yesterday. The morning sun shone right in her face, and she squinted against the glare, keeping her attention on the sparse copses of alder and hemlock that broke up the pastoral landscape. Though it wasn't more than an hour or two past sun-up, she already felt the warm promise of the day, and slung her jacket over one shoulder.

The flock milled in the middle of the field, unharried by any night visitors as far as Lianon could tell. She whistled up the dogs and snapped a sharp command. They ducked under the fence rail to gather the sheep into one dense mass while Lianon dragged the gate open. The sheep began to clamor and bleat in protest at the ill treatment, but the dogs knew their jobs. In no time, the flock was out of the pen and trotting in an orderly procession down the path to the eastern pasture.

They stopped briefly at a stream so the animals could drink and Lianon could splash her face with cool water, then moved on. Daisies and purple coneflowers bobbed in the breeze, the leaves of the alders rustled and hissed, and the air was filled with the familiar droning and honeyed fragrance of summer. And as Lianon glanced to one side, she saw shod hoof-prints in the dirt—horses, not ponies, from the depth of the imprints. An instant later, Jak's shrill yip rang out, then Sabbah's deeper bark of alarm.

Her stomach tightened on a surge of pain. *Already.*

Lianon's hand went to the hilt of her sword. From the trees to her right, three men walked. There was nothing terribly remarkable about them—they were neither overly tall nor short, not heavily muscled nor thin, their features bland and their clothing nondescript. Their weapons were more impressive. Long swords on the left hip, short on the right, and in their hands, crossbows with bolts nocked. As Jak ran up, a bristling bundle of wiry hair and bared teeth, one of the men calmly shot him through the throat. The bolt sank deep into the dirt, pinning the writhing but now-silent dog on the path.

Smelling blood, the sheep scattered, bleating their terror. Sabbah stood at Lianon's side, her hackles up, snarling savagely until Lianon silenced her with a motion of her hand. She ought to let the dog at them and force a second man to loose his bolt, but as she

studied the face of the tallest one, she knew it would be no use. She could tell what he was. That peculiar agelessness—he could be anywhere between twenty and fifty, though Lianon knew he was probably much older than that. Even with all her training, she didn't stand a chance against a Kurgan.

Her hand fell away from her sword hilt. She found she could almost laugh. The chancellor apparently didn't believe in wasting time.

“Lianon al-Sylphae?” asked the one who had shot Jak.

Lianon spread her hands with a wry smile, even as reality settled heavy upon her. She thought about denying it, but then realized they were just as likely to kill her, even if they believed she was someone else.

She thought of Gil. Of Kaela. Of Rhianna.

“Yes,” she said.

Then the Kurgan raised his crossbow and shot her, and the warm promise of the day was swallowed by a mute and swirling blackness.

## Chapter Ten

Kaela clung to Gil's arm and tried to blank her mind. Under her, Balon's flanks moved in a steady rhythm as he carried them west in a ground-eating canter. Behind her, the solid wall of Gil's chest was like a bastion holding her together when all she wanted to do was fall apart.

Her head was dizzy and her stomach clenched in dread, and the pain of it wouldn't go away. It had been like this for hours, ever since Sabbah had returned to the house alone and howling with a bolt sticking out of her leg.

Gil had snapped the fletched tail from the shaft, then pushed it through the leg and out the other side while the dog yelped and squealed her agony. Sabbah, trouper that she was, hadn't even paused, but had taken off at a limping run to lead them to the place where Lianon was taken.

Jak lay there, pinned to the earth with a bolt through his throat. He was alive, Kaela didn't know how. Again, Gil paused long enough to see to the dog, though Kaela was beside herself with the need to go after the men who had done this.

"Gil?" she gasped, hugging herself, feeling her entire world disintegrating all around her. "Gil, we have to find her. Now, please. *Please.*"

He stood, his arms enfolding her, and even as her mind screamed that they had no time to take comfort, her body leaned into the embrace, sank into him and pulled his presence around her like a blanket of calm.

She felt his lips on the top of her head, felt his breath against her hair, his heart thudding fast beneath her ear.

“We’ll find her.”

Kaela leaned back and forced her eyes to his. How could he look so calm? Why wasn’t he breaking like she was? “What if we’re too late? What if she’s dead?”

He swallowed hard and shook his head. “They want her alive. Otherwise they would have left her body and taken just her head.”

Kaela fought the wave of nausea that image evoked, her head swimming. “What are we going to do?”

Gil’s face turned grim, his eyes dead. “We’re going to get her back. And then we’re going to find whoever took her and make them regret it.”

She could only nod. He lifted her into the saddle and mounted up behind her. They returned only long enough to turn the other horses loose and pack a change of clothes, then they rode for the city, leaving the sheep to wander as they would and the dogs to fend for themselves.

The sun was low in the sky when they arrived in the old neighborhood. By that point, Gil knew what he was going to do, his plan already half-formed in his mind. There was an hour or two to wait before he could get started, so he left Kaela in his apartment, then took Balon to the livery. On the way back, he ventured downstairs to order a bite from Aliannet. One glance in her cook-pot had him changing his mind—he wasn’t interested in eating anything that still had toenails. He settled for a bottle of brandy. He doubted Kaela would be able to stomach anything solid, anyway. She was a total mess, hadn’t stopped trembling the entire ride here.

Rat was not in attendance at the Whore’s Crown tonight. Gil left very firm instructions for him with Aliannet. The last thing he needed was for the thief to arrive

home with a whore—or two—in tow. And if he was drunk and walked in to find a girl asleep in the big bed, there was no telling what he might think or do. And Gil had to leave within the hour if he was to keep to his schedule.

Tromping up the back stairs, he thought of the woman who waited in his apartment and dread filled him. The Emissary in him knew what to do about Lianon. The lover in him had no idea how to help Kaela.

She was standing just where he'd left her in the main room, her hands clutched together before her, her face stark white. Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed—she'd been weeping on and off since they'd discovered Lianon was gone.

Gil set the bottle down on the table and shrugged out of his jacket. Kaela stared at him, her chin wobbling.

His heart clenching, he crossed to her and pulled her close, holding her steady while she cried. As her tears soaked into his shirt-front, he began to think maybe he did know how to help her. Maybe just being here right now was enough.

Then he felt her lips on his neck, her tongue licking at his throat-knot, and he fought down a wave of desire. Her mouth traveled up his neck to his chin, nuzzling at his whiskers, seeking his lips.

“Kaela—” he began, setting her away from him.

Fat tears hovered on her lashes, then spilled onto her cheeks. “Please,” she whispered. “I need to feel something. I need to feel something that isn't...*this*.”

He shook his head, biting back a curse. She didn't know what she was asking. She didn't understand that if he took her tonight, there would be no gentleness in it, no caution. He was too full of anger and fear to be tender or patient. He'd spread her wide open and take what he wanted, and once he began, he wouldn't be able to stop.

She went into the other room and sat on the edge of the bed. Her head drooped and fresh tears poured down her face at his rejection.

Sighing, he went to her, crouched down in front of her and took her hands in his. She drew in a ragged breath and tried gallantly to smile and his heart snapped in half. She trusted him, relied on him. She had become a part of his family, an equal partner in his

marriage. Lovemaking was about giving—Lianon had taught him that, and he knew it in every cell of his body. How could he deny Kaela the comfort of his touch?

He leaned up and kissed her mouth. Her lips parted and she sank back, drawing him with her until he was stretched out beside her on the bed. His hands framed her face as he teased her lips with his tongue, coaxing her own out to play. A sigh escaped her and he breathed it in, drowning in the taste of her sweet breath.

She arched beside him, pressing herself along his length and he let his hand descend to cup her breast through her bodice. The nipple was already pebbled, straining toward his touch. With his thumb and forefinger he teased it into a tighter peak, then moved on to the other, his lips still slanting across hers.

She wrapped her leg around him, pulling him tight against her mound, and he felt his hard cock release a trickle of fluid at the contact. With a groan, he reached down and hiked up her skirts, slid his hand up her inner thigh and into her furrow. Her nether lips were full and plump and left a coating of slickness on his probing fingertips. Her gasp of need made his heart twist inside him. His tongue dancing with hers, his fingers found the pearl of her clit. Her hips began to rock as he rubbed her in little circles, round and round, gradually increasing the pressure of his caresses.

Pulling back, he looked down on her face, her flushed cheeks, her parted lips, the little frown that had formed between her brows as she focused her concentration on the feelings he was stirring up between her legs. Her eyes were shut tight. He kissed the tip of her nose, and they fluttered open to gaze up at him. His fingers continued to strum her clit, and he stared down into her eyes as her moment approached.

She came silently, her whole body shuddering in his arms as her pussy spasmed and poured nectar onto his hand. She was beautiful, heartbreakingly beautiful as she found her pleasure. Humbled, he lazily stroked her folds until her body floated back down to earth and her eyes again sought out his face. His cock ached, but it was an ache he could live with. He'd given her what she needed, and his turn could wait. She wasn't ready to give herself up completely to a man, not even to him, and he wouldn't use her distress over Lianon to pressure her into it.

He settled her skirts then brought his hand up to cup her cheek. The scent of her come filled the air between them. Tenderly he kissed her, not a kiss of seduction but one of reassurance.

Her hand stroked his bearded cheek, pulling him closer. "Gil?"

"Try to get some sleep," he said, rolling away.

"But what about—"

He sat up on the edge of the bed and took her hand, rubbing his thumb along the backs of her fingers. "It's not right yet."

She seemed to wilt before his eyes, the sparkle in her face vanishing. "You don't want me."

He chuckled and shook his head, guiding her hand to his groin and holding it against his stubborn erection. "Nothing could be farther from the truth, Kaela. But I want it to be right. When I take you, I don't want there to be anything but desire between us. Not fear, not anger, not grief. Just my need for you, and yours for me. Do you understand?"

She nodded and offered him a wobbly smile.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, the backs of her fingers, the center of her palm. "Good. Try to get some sleep. I have to go in a few minutes, but you won't be alone for long. You remember Rat? From Flaxton's?"

She nodded. "He's the one who pulled me away from...that man."

"He'll be back here before middle night, I'm sure. I've left a message so he'll know you're here. He'll keep you safe 'til I get back."

"All right."

He rose and went to the ewer and basin to wash his hands and face. "Gil?" she asked as he shrugged his jacket back on and adjusted his sword belt.

"Mm?"

"She's alive, isn't she?"

He looked at her, his eyes stinging and his throat tight and tried to will his own dismay back down into a manageable ball in the pit of his stomach. "Yes."

“They would have left her body if she was dead,” she went on as if trying to convince them both.

“Yes,” he said. He didn’t tell her about his own fears, that trying to take an Emissary alive and actually doing it were two very different things. Or that those who are taken alive do not necessarily stay that way for long. He forced a smile. “Don’t worry. We’ll get her back. Get some rest.”

She smiled back with a confidence in him that he didn’t share.

The scent of an unfamiliar perfume filled Lianon’s nostrils as she woke. Her body sank deep into a luxuriously thick, feather-stuffed mattress, and soft sheets slipped across her bare torso as she shifted. Her shoulder ached, but other than that, there was no pain. She felt languid and calm.

She opened her eyes. The chamber was as luxurious as the bed, the walls hung with draperies of velvet, the furniture intricately carved and inlaid with exotic woods, lapis lazuli and mother-of-pearl. The windowpanes were decorated with colored glass, an extravagance usually reserved for temples and sanctuaries. In a wheeled chair a man sat with his back to her, staring out the window, his wisps of white hair glowing green and blue in the multihued light pouring in.

A woman sat next to the bed on its other side, her golden hair coiled and gathered at her nape, her pretty face set in concentration as she plied an embroidery needle to a length of cloth in her lap. Her gown was an exquisite celery green confection of watered silk trimmed with a mile of lace and adorned along the bodice with a fortune in river-pearls. She was a vision, stunning, and against her will, Lianon felt her stomach flutter with the beginnings of attraction.

Then she saw the Kurgan standing like a pillar to one side of the chamber door and memory came flooding back.

Lianon glanced down at her bare shoulder. The wound was so inconsequential, they hadn’t even bandaged it. The bolt had to have been drugged, which would explain the



fact that despite the sudden realization that she was tied hand and foot to the bedposts, she couldn't quite bring herself to be worried about her predicament.

She swallowed through a throat stuffed with cotton. Where the hell was she? This certainly wasn't the chancellor's doing, or she'd have awakened in an entirely different environment than this.

"She's awake," the Kurgan said, his voice ringing hollow in Lianon's ears, a lingering effect of the drug.

The woman set down her embroidery and poured a cup of water from the ewer on the nightstand. Reaching, her lovely breasts hovering close to Lianon's face, she supported her head and helped her drink. The water eased the dryness in Lianon's mouth and cleared her head a little.

"Not that I'm not flattered," she murmured, her words a bit slurred, her gaze roaming over the woman's décolletage. "But I've never enjoyed bondage games, and in any case, I'm spoken for."

The woman's cheeks filled with color and her pouty lips thinned with displeasure as she leaned back in her chair. Not the flirtatious type, apparently.

"Why am I here?" Lianon asked, her grin slipping. "It seems evident you don't want me dead. Unless you want to make me suffer first. Not that torture doesn't have its appeal, but speaking from experience, you don't want to do it on anything you can't throw away. You might want to put down a drop-cloth."

The Kurgan made a stifled sound, and Lianon turned just in time to catch his grin before the woman's glower shriveled it. Most people thought Kurgae'in humorless, but you just had to find the right note of morbidity. Still, as Lianon came more fully awake, the humor in the situation seemed to evaporate along with the mist in her mind.

"My husband will not tolerate this," she said.

"My dear," the woman replied with a smirk, "that's what I'm counting on."

It took longer than it should have for Lianon's brain to make the proper connections. When it did, she felt the blood drain from her face. Gil would assume the chancellor's men had taken her. When he did...

There was no way he'd get away with it. If he wasn't killed by the chancellor's guards, they'd track him down and hang him, and all for nothing. These people would keep Lianon alive as insurance in case something went wrong, but once Gil had played his part, she'd be nothing but a liability.

And they'd get away with it, that much Lianon was certain of. Gil would be assumed to be an angry husband avenging his wife's arrest, or an offended Emissary putting a stop to Collin's political agenda. Lianon had no idea who these people were, and even if Gil did he'd have no reason to connect them with her disappearance.

Lianon closed her eyes. How long had she been asleep? How long would it take Gil to discover her gone and get to the city? Had he already killed the chancellor?

Was Kaela in Belthalas with him? She must be—Gil wouldn't leave her alone on the farm to fend for herself. But he might be leaving her over this, whether he wanted to or not. And so might Lianon. And that thought scared her more than the prospect of death, more even than the idea of living without Gil. What on earth would become of Kaela if Gil and Lianon did not survive this?

Silk rustled as the woman rose. Lianon watched her go to the man in the wheeled chair, but kept her curiosity to herself. The less they thought she knew the better, and the very nature of her questions could be more telling than any answers she was likely to get.

The woman took the handles of the man's chair and pulled him from his place by the window, then wheeled him across the room. Lianon studied him, how his wasted arms lay limp and useless in his lap, his legs bent like fleshless sticks, his lolling head propped on a cushioned headrest. As the chair passed by the bed, a thin trickle of saliva trailed from his slack mouth and down his chin. The only part of him that seemed alive was his eyes. Deep brown and filled with malice, they glared at Lianon as if from the depths of an abyss. Tied prone to the bed, she tried not to shrink under his scrutiny but couldn't help the thrill of unease that filled her, raising the fine hairs on her arms and legs. Even covered by blankets, she felt naked and exposed, almost imperiled.

Which was stupid, considering the old man couldn't so much as lift his hand to wipe away the drool that now hung in a glistening strand from his chin.

The Kurgan held the door open so the woman could push the chair through. He shut it again after them, then turned impassively back to the room, his eyes fixed on the air just before his face, his features blank and expressionless.

Lianon stared up at the ceiling, surreptitiously tugging on her bindings to test them. It was clear she had to get out of here—and before the chancellor met the unpleasant fate these people intended. The woman seemed entirely pitiless, the old man a veritable font of baleful meanness. But the Kurgan...

She studied him from the corner of her eye, the man who had shot her. That he remained in the room led Lianon to believe they were well aware of her former profession and therefore knew to keep their guard up. That could be a problem, but not necessarily. He may be working for this family, but he wasn't one of them. That same sense of honor that had enslaved all Kurgae'in under Mordraghil's thrall for more than a thousand years prevented them from ever again swearing fealty or allegiance to anyone. His loyalty would extend only as far as they paid it to.

The Kurgae'in were entirely mercenary now, but Samulo had taught her that a Kurgan's rigid nature often hid a righteousness and a softness of heart that could rival any Andun's.

She'd have to think on it.

In the meantime, "I don't suppose you could scratch my nose for me?"

He grunted, not even glancing her way.

Hiding a grin, she wriggled, rubbing the end of her nose on her shoulder while working the blanket down until it just barely covered her breasts. With a muttered curse, she switched shoulders. The blanket slipped down another notch. After a few moments of this display, the Kurgan swore eloquently and trudged over to the bed. Scowling down at her, he scratched the end of her nose with a thoroughness that was entirely in keeping with his heritage. Then, smirking as if to say "nice try", he jerked the blankets back up without even one glance at her breasts peeking from beneath.

Lianon resisted the urge to sigh. "So," she said casually. "These people seem lovely. What's the pay like?"

He turned and stalked back to his post, but not before she'd seen his lips twitch.

## Chapter Eleven

It was pathetic just how easy it was for Gil to break into the Chancellery. After a two-hour reconnoiter, it took him all of ten minutes to get inside. The garden wall was topped with shards of broken slate embedded in the mortar, but anyone with a little agility, a pair of decent gloves and a padded coat could get past that obstacle. Two guards flanked the main entrance, and he assumed more were posted inside, but none patrolled the garden in back of the house. No dogs, either.

The servant's entrance was locked but unmanned—a few twists of his lock-picks and he had it open. The kitchen stood empty, its fires banked. At this hour, there were no household staff awake to bother him. He passed silently through the narrow, unlit warren of servants' passages and up a set of steep stairs to the second floor. At a closed door he stood and listened for any sign of life outside. Nothing at all, not even snores or the creak of bed-ropes.

Cringing at the tiny noise it made, he turned the latch, eased the door open a crack and peeked out—polished wood planks at his feet, tapestries hanging on the wall opposite. A single sconce with a taper lit the second-floor hallway. Slipping through the door, he gently pressed it shut behind him and it seemed to disappear amid the carved

paneling. He memorized its position in relation to the sconce, in case he had to leave the way he'd come.

One hand on his sword hilt, he hugged the wall and crept down the hallway on the balls of his feet. Rooms branched off on either side, all of them open but one. A narrow strip of light spilled across the floor beneath that closed door. Gil stood to one side of it, his ears straining to hear the voices within.

Chancellor Collin, easily recognizable. "Harral, if you would bring the wine?"

A second voice answered, but it was muffled as if coming from an adjoining room.

Gil slid his sword free of its scabbard, cursing inwardly at the slight ring of steel. Closing his eyes, he offered a quick benediction to Davnia, the goddess whose code he lived by. He placed one hand on the knob and began to rotate it on its stem. The door swung inward on silent hinges.

Then he was in, his sword before him, taking in the room at a single glance.

A bedchamber, well-appointed. A huge bed, hung with red velvet, dominated the space. A table stood to one side, laid out with fruit, cheese and cold meat. The only light came from a fire that burned in a deep hearth—a second room was visible on the other side of the flames, and through an open door that stood to one side of the fireplace. Chancellor Collin lounged in one of two deeply padded chairs before the fire, his back to the door where Gil had entered. Gil approached quietly, his movements masked by the pop and crackle of the logs, and Collin was oblivious. He seemed ready for a relaxing drink before bed, his dark hair unbound, hanging to his shoulders, his shirt unlaced and his feet bare.

Gil crept noiselessly nearer, until his sword-tip hovered next to Collin's neck.

From the sitting room-doorway, the sound of glasses clinking. Cursing silently, Gil brought the tip of his blade up against Collin's throat. The man turned his head, met Gil's glance and froze in shock. Gil shook his head and brought a cautioning finger to his lips.

"It's not chilled but it'll have to do," the steward from the other day apologized as he walked into the room.

Gil stared, trying to reconcile what he was seeing. The steward was naked but for a pair of loose drawers and a knee-length robe that hung open at the front. His thighs were corded with muscle, his chest broad, his abdomen ridged like a washboard.

No steward had a body like that.

No steward would go so still or so cold at the sight of a bared sword in the room, not out of fear, but as if he had become steel himself.

No steward would be walking half-naked into his employer's bedchamber, carrying two glasses and an open bottle of wine.

Gil pressed the flat of his blade harder under the chancellor's chin, nearly breaking the skin. Seeing it, the steward/bodyguard/lover's eyes flashed with leashed anger and his grip on the bottleneck turned his knuckles white. Gil's lips thinned. That bottle could become an issue if things did not go perfectly.

"Do sit," Gil said quietly, tipping his head toward the other chair. "And please, don't try anything foolish. I'm sure you know just who I am and what I'm capable of."

His face bloodless but his eyes blazing, the steward stalked to the empty chair and sat. The way he moved, the tension in his limbs even sitting betrayed his true nature. If he wasn't an Emissary, it was because he didn't want to be one, not because he didn't have what it took. He moved with a predator's lethal grace, and Gil could see nothing but anger in his glare.

The chancellor cleared his throat, his head held at an odd angle to keep the blade from cutting him. "I thought we parted on good terms, Master Gil."

Gil let his lip curl at one corner, his gaze never wavering from the steward's face. "Funny, that. So did I."

"What do you want?"

"Where is my wife?" Gil snapped, irked at the note of affronted innocence in Collin's voice.

A silence. "Your wife?"

Gil jerked his sword up a notch and a drop of blood pooled at the tip of it. The steward gathered himself, ready to intervene, but Collin lifted a hand to forestall him and

he sank back into the cushions. The chancellor was obviously terrified—beads of sweat stood out on his brow and upper lip, and his face was the color of poached whitefish—but he was smart enough to keep his dog on a leash.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.” Gil’s voice was a low rasp, hardly recognizable as his own. “I’m aware how thorough your investigations have been, and I do so hate being lied to. So I’m going to ask you once more. Where is my wife?”

Collin’s eyes flicked to Gil’s face, then away.

With a snarl, Gil rotated his wrist, bringing the edge of the blade more firmly against the skin of Collin’s throat. His voice was nothing more than a hiss. “*Where is she?*”

The chancellor looked him right in the eye. “I don’t know.”

Gil fought down a surge of rage, relaxed his shoulders and counted in his head. “Now didn’t I tell you I hate lies?”

Chancellor Collin frowned, but it wasn’t the frown of a guilty man. “Perhaps if you could tell me, what has happened?”

“This morning, mounted men rode onto my land, shot my dogs and took my wife.”

“Lianon al-Sylphae?”

“Yes.” The word was nothing but a breath as the blood drained from Gil’s face. “Go ahead and deny it was you who sent them. Give me an excuse.”

“I have no interest in your wife, Master Gil.”

Gil could hardly see for rage. He didn’t want to kill this man, really he didn’t, but he was beginning to think he would have no choice. “So little interest that your men were all over the wharf district last month asking questions about her.”

The chancellor closed his eyes. “It is my duty to investigate incidents like the one at Flaxton’s. After looking into the matter most rigorously, I came to the obvious conclusion. An old man dead from apparently natural causes. Three thugs, known to be of the most savage and violent sort, cut down—two of them with their trousers unfastened. Two women visibly battered and covered in blood, one of them unconscious. Certainly we would have liked to speak with those women, but the nature of what happened seems clear enough. I decided not to pursue the investigation any further.”



Gil stared, not quite able to believe Collin—a bureaucrat with high political aspirations—could possibly be this reasonable. “Even knowing the history between my wife and Dalton sur-Marus?”

Collin’s gaze held Gil’s with steady conviction. “I’m aware of what your wife did in Sylphae, and why she did it. Though I am officially required to condemn her actions, on a personal level I have nothing but admiration for her.”

Gil laughed, a harsh sound in the quiet of the room. “You might not feel that way if you knew all the gory details.”

The chancellor sighed, beginning to be less afraid and more exasperated. “Master Gil, had sur-Marus come to me upon his arrival in Belthalas, had he presented his case against Lianon al-Sylphae, I would have been obligated to act, despite any reluctance on my part. Instead, he chose personal vengeance over justice, a fact that pleases me no end. I am not duty-bound to prosecute crimes committed outside my jurisdiction. What happened in Sylphae lies under the purview of the Sylphaean Chancellery and unless I receive an official request from them, I am under no obligation to act in this matter. I am content to leave in their hands the question of prosecuting someone who punishes rapists and murderers.

“As for the night sur-Marus died—it may well be that those men at Flaxton’s were killed in something other than self-defense. But considering the available evidence, it would be next to impossible to prove. The resources of the Chancellery only stretch so far. I’m not inclined to waste them on something like this.”

Gil narrowed his eyes. “Not every lawman would be so magnanimous.”

“Not every lawman’s sister was viciously raped by one of our society’s untouchables, and then murdered by him when she refused his continued attentions.”

*One of society’s untouchables?* There it was, the reason Collin harbored no animosity for Lianon—he’d been faced with the same impossible challenge, to find justice in a world disinclined to permit it, a world where the very rich and politically powerful had impunity to hurt whom they pleased, and those who took them to task mostly found their necks stretched for their trouble.

Gil lowered his sword a few inches and the chancellor sagged with relief. “Did you ever find justice for your sister?”

It was the steward who spoke, his blue eyes cold as ice. “He is in a prison he cannot possibly escape now, and from which no appeal can ever release him.”

Gil nodded, suddenly weary. With the edge of his sleeve, he wiped the blood from his blade and slid it back in its scabbard. As soon as the weapon was sheathed, the steward was on his feet, not to attack Gil, but to attend his lover. Crouching beside Collin’s chair, he drew a handkerchief from his robe pocket and pressed it against the seeping cut on the chancellor’s throat, his touch as tender as a woman’s.

“It’s all right, dear one,” Collin murmured, his hand brushing the other man’s. “Just a nick.”

Gil cleared his throat, feeling suddenly awkward. “I cannot apologize enough for this intrusion, gentlemen.”

“What will you do now, Master Gil?” Collin asked.

Gil smiled wryly. “Assuming you don’t summon your household guard and have me clapped in chains, I suppose I’m back to the beginning.”

“You’ve nothing to fear from me, Master Gil,” Collin said quietly, his eyes flicking to the face of the man who crouched at his side. “You will surely realize how delicate my situation is. My position as chancellor depends on the goodwill of the city council. How long would that goodwill last if word got out of my...unconventional appetites?”

Gil nodded, thinking of Lianon, and of the budding love they both felt for Kaela. “If word gets out, it will not be by my tongue. My own marriage has its unconventional side.”

“Have you any idea who took your wife?”

Gil frowned. “None. I was sure it was you. After the other day, all that talk and not one mention of Lianon—I’m sure you can see how I might have come to the conclusion you weren’t being entirely candid with me.”

Collin frowned down at the streaks of blood on the white cotton of the handkerchief. “I said I had no interest in your wife, but that is not precisely true. I have no official

interest, but I...think very highly of her. And when I consider her first marriage to Rhianna sul-Allard, I cannot help but feel a certain kinship with her, as well. It distresses me to think she might be in danger.”

“It distresses me as well,” Gil said blandly, impatient now to leave.

“It occurs to me that the reason she was taken may have nothing whatever to do with her, and everything to do with you.”

“Me?”

Collin’s lip curled in a half-smile. “Is it so hard to imagine that in your years as an Emissary you might have made an enemy, Master Gil?”

Gil felt his shoulders tighten with annoyance. “I’m certain that I have, chancellor. I just can’t believe anyone would be so stupid as to try something like this. The man who comes after me would be well-advised to strike once and hard, and not leave me alive to find an outlet for my affront.”

The chancellor chuckled, dabbing at his still-seeping cut. “But you seem such a genial fellow.”

“Right up until the moment I cut your throat,” Gil agreed.

Collin laughed, though Harral’s face went taut with displeasure. “Humor me a little longer, Master Gil,” the chancellor said quietly. “The timing of this seems a bit fortuitous for my taste. Two days after I invite you into my home, break bread with you and offer you a position of honor on my staff, your wife is kidnapped. Though I had no part in her abduction, I am not prepared to dismiss the possibility that it might have had something to do with our meeting.”

Gil stared at him, his mind working. “You think it might be one of your enemies.”

“A man in my position has no shortage of them. Think how certain you were that I was responsible for your wife’s disappearance. A less reasonable man would have cut my throat first and asked questions later. You would have been tracked down, prosecuted, hanged—or conveniently killed while awaiting trial—and no one would ever discover the people who were really behind it all.”

“If that’s the case,” Gil said, an invisible fist clenching around his throat, “my wife is in more danger than I thought. The moment I kill you, she’s dead.”

The chancellor grimly met his glance. “And if you give them reason to think you won’t kill me, she’s just as dead.”

“This is all conjecture,” Gil muttered, not sure who he was trying to convince. “It could as easily be the family of one of her victims, or mine, wanting to settle accounts.”

“I should think that would make her position more dangerous, not less. I’ll have my men nose around a bit—don’t worry, I’ll make sure they know to be subtle. And my resources will be available to you until this matter is resolved. If anyone approaches you concerning your wife, I would appreciate if you inform me.”

“I will. My thanks, chancellor.”

“Harral will ring for someone to show you to the door. I’m afraid I must beg your indulgence. It’s late, and I’ve yet to sample the wine. It’s not chilled, I understand,” he added with a warm smile for his lover, “but it will have to do.”

Harral flashed him a meaningful look and went to the bell-pull. He rang, then disappeared into the sitting room. A few moments later, a guard stuck his head in.

“Something amiss, sir?” he asked, his eyes lighting on Gil and narrowing in suspicion.

“If you would see Master Gil to the door, Povar,” Collin said, rising and holding out his hand for Gil to clasp. “And then if you would find Gaerhart and send him up? I have a matter I need to discuss with him.”

“Yes, sir.”

The guard’s manner was a tad stiff as he escorted Gil from the premises—it would have galled him to realize there had been a breach of security, and the fact that Gil faced no consequences for breaking in would only irk him the more. As Gil stepped outside, he offered the fellow his widest grin, just to piss him off. It was gone from his face before his feet even hit the cobbles of the street.

As he walked, he passed a small chapel of Salgrim that boasted a shrine to Davnia within. He rarely set foot in such places—his communion with the goddess was not

something he usually had to go out of his way to find—but tonight was different. He ducked inside long enough to light a candle at the foot of the god's altar, leave a few drops of his blood in the offering bowl before Davnia's shrine and slip five falcons in the box.

He didn't pray. "Do not take her yet," was all he said, not caring that the goddess might think him demanding or arrogant. Davnia may be the embodiment of death, but she was as forgiving as Salgrim in her way.

A quarter of an hour later the chancellor shut the door behind Gaerhart, who had received some very explicit instructions concerning Gil al-Moirae. Collin only hoped the unassuming little man was equal to the task of tailing an Emissary without getting caught.

He turned, sighing, to see Harral standing in the sitting room doorway, his chest heaving with emotion. Collin's heart twisted. As frightening as it was having Gil al-Moirae's blade pressed against his throat, it would have been infinitely worse for Harral, seeing it. His lover was a man of intense passions. It was one of the things Collin adored about him, but it could be difficult to deal with sometimes.

"Increase the household guard," Harral said, his lips thin and his eyes burning.

Collin spread his hands, crossing the carpeted floor to stand in front of him. "You know why we can't do that. The more men we have stationed here, the more likely someone will find out about us."

"If he could get in, anyone could. One of your enemies. Someone less reasonable." Harral's fists were clenching and unclenching at his sides, his emotions held in check, but just barely. Collin felt the first stirrings of excitement take hold in his loins. Carefully, he raised his hand and drew his fingers down the other man's cheek, loving the way the muscles of his jaw jumped beneath his touch. Harral's eyes fell shut as he fought to maintain his calm. "Col..."

"If someone discovers what we do at night, we're done anyway. Everything we've achieved here will be for naught." He ran his fingers into the thick blond hair at Harral's nape, trying to work some of the tension from the tendons there.

“Better disgraced and shunned than dead, Col,” Harral ground out, even as his pupils dilated. “If he’d killed you...”

“But he didn’t,” Collin murmured, leaning in so that the heat from his lover’s skin bathed him in warmth.

“But if he had—”

“*But he didn’t.*” Collin took the man’s face between his hands and pressed their foreheads together, his own breath starting to quicken, but not from fear or the aftereffects of fear. “I’m safe. ’Tis but a little cut. You can kiss it better.”

Harral’s arms were like steel bands coming around him, pulling him tight against taut muscles and hot skin. Their lips met without tenderness, almost clashing. Harral was still angry, but Collin knew that anger could be turned to different purpose. With a groan, he relaxed in Harral’s embrace and let his lover take control.

Collin wasn’t usually interested in being dominated, but the incident with the Emissary had put an edge on his mood. He stripped down quickly as Harral’s hands roved over his eager flesh. When Harral turned him around and shoved him face down on the bed, he couldn’t help the thrill of anticipation that shot through his limbs and along the length of his cock. His breath hissing in, he felt a wet finger slip inside him, stretching the tight ring of muscle. Then the finger was gone, replaced by the thing he wanted most, and with a groan, Collin surrendered himself to the pleasure he’d only ever been able to find with this man, his lover.

Only Harral.

Lianon squirmed, wincing. The urge to move was uncontrollable, even though the smallest motion stabbed at her overwrought bladder. In the last half hour or so, as the moon rose outside the colored window, her need to purge her urine had ventured from uncomfortable to urgent to excruciating.

“Not that I would particularly mind ruining my host’s bed,” she said to the Kurgan by the door, “but I have no desire to lie indefinitely in my own filth.”

He stared at her, a slight crease between his brows. "Something tells me I can't trust you enough to let you use the chamber pot."

She grinned. "What if I promise to behave?"

He snorted and stomped out of the room, then returned a moment later carrying a bedpan.

Lianon rolled her eyes. "Salgrim's blood, the indignity."

He crossed to the bed and lifted the edge of the blankets, setting the pan on the mattress. "It's this or piss the bed. You decide which is less dignified."

Pressing her lips together, Lianon lifted her hips and let him slide the thing under her. What felt like an ocean trickled into the bedpan and the pain in her lower abdomen slowly subsided.

The Kurgan pulled the pan out and emptied it into the pot that sat behind a privacy screen. When he emerged again, Lianon smiled sweetly. "My hero."

He stood there, visibly torn between chuckling and scowling. Not a handsome man except when he smiled, he reminded her of Samulo. She knew he liked her. And she knew that wouldn't make a damn bit of difference in the end. He would do what he was paid to do. Entirely mercenary, but honorable enough in its way.

He shook his head. "I keep trying to figure you out, girl, and it keeps not working."

"How so?" she asked, surreptitiously tugging and flexing against her restraints to keep her muscles fresh. If an opportunity presented itself, she wanted to be able to take advantage.

"I spoke to a lot of people about you when I was tracking you. None of them gave me the impression you were stupid. But now I'm forced to wonder."

Her grin widened. "I'm not sure I follow you."

"There you are, tied to a bed. You may not know this family's name, but you can see how wealthy they are to be able to own a house like this, even to afford me. I'm a fucking Kurgan. Do you have any idea how much one of us costs?"

"Actually, I do. I was trained by Samulo-*shahar*."

He raised his brows. Clearly she'd surprised him. "Then you'll know I won't be swayed by emotion. I shot you. I put you over my saddle and brought you here. If my employer wants, I'll snap your neck like a twig and there's nothing you can do to stop me. And you make jokes like we're sharing a tankard at the pub. Either you don't know they're going to kill you or you don't care. Either you're stupid or you're fearless. I can't figure out which is the more likely."

She shook her head. "It's not that I don't care. I just can't do a whole lot to prevent it, so why drive myself crazy thinking about it?"

"She's going to kill you," he growled, her composure seeming to irritate him all the more.

"As soon as my husband takes care of the chancellor, I know." His brows went up another notch and she smiled at him. "What's your name?"

"Karek. Why?"

"I'd rather go to the goddess knowing the name of the man who sent me to her."

His eyes flicked away from her and his cheeks filled with color.

"No matter, Karek," she said, feeling oddly light. It was refreshing to have it all out in the open. To acknowledge what she already knew deep down was going to happen. And she didn't want him to think she hated him. "You seem a decent sort," she said. "Whatever comes, I won't hold it against you."

His eyes returned to her, burning with resentment. "Fuck you. I don't need your fucking forgiveness."

Her throat tightened, her easy mood slipping. She understood his anger. She knew it meant her time in this bed would soon be coming to an end. "No, you don't," she agreed. "I give it all the same."

His glare darkened. "Shut your mouth, girl, or I'll gag you."

She looked away from him and stared at the ceiling, studying the frescoes painted there. A meadow in the full flower of early summer, painted in hues so vibrant they retained their color even in the dimness of moon and candle-light. Birds in silhouette



against fat, white clouds, a brilliant yellow sun shining down on a doe and her two fawns grazing below. Lianon thought she would like to be buried in such a place.

While the Kurgan's attention was determinedly fixed anywhere but on her, she continued her exercises, testing the tension of the strips of cloth that bound her wrists and ankles. The one around her left wrist had a fair amount of give, and she concentrated on working it looser. It was one thing to acknowledge the possibility—the certainty, really, if she was going to be realistic—of her death, quite another to simply lie back and let it happen.

Gil sat on the hard chair by the window and tried to ignore the woman in his bed. Rat's snores emanated from the main room and Kaela's breathing had deepened in slumber but Gil wasn't ready to climb in beside her yet. He reached up and rubbed at the painful ball of muscle at his nape, trying to massage away his tension, but it was no use. When he thought of Lianon, his stomach clenched until he felt like puking. When he thought of Kaela, his prick leapt to attention like an overeager soldier.

He was starting to pity Anthoril of Harrowsfail.

Salgrim's teeth, he could use a half a bottle of brandy right now. But arriving home from his bizarre encounter in Chancellor Collin's bedchamber, he'd found Kaela and Rat playing drak and laughing like childhood friends. They'd left nothing but fumes in the brandy bottle, and Aliannet's was closed up for the night. Just as well, he'd thought then. The last thing he needed on an empty stomach was a drink.

Now, he'd gladly sell his soul for a jug of halfpenny gin.

Kaela's humor had curdled the moment he walked into the apartment, the laughter in her eyes dying like a snuffed candle.

"What happened?" she'd asked, rising unsteadily. "Did you find her?" She had the same look as last night—gods, was it just last night?—after their supper in Fenmore, rosy and soft with drink.

"It wasn't the chancellor."

"Then who?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

Her chin began to wobble and he cursed inwardly, taking her hand and pulling her into his arms. "We'll just have to look harder. Someone has to know something. Rat will keep his ears open."

She buried her face in his shirt-front. "But who else could have taken her? Who else would even want to?"

"Someone who wants something from her," he said, running his hands up and down her back. "Someone who wants something from me. We just have to trust that if it's the first one, she'll find her own way out of this mess, and if it's the second, they'll come to me and negotiate."

He didn't tell her that if it was the second, there could be no actual negotiations, that he couldn't afford to let someone coerce him by threatening those he loved. No Emissary could afford to set that kind of precedent. He was sick with worry about Lianon, but if he let them use her against him, there was nothing to stop someone from doing it again, or from using Kaela the same way. And Kaela was not Lianon. She needed him in a way Lianon never would. He couldn't put her in jeopardy, could not endanger one of his women to save the other.

"It's late," he whispered, pressing his lips to the top of her head, ignoring the way Rat looked askance at him. "Come to bed. Things will look better in the morning."

She nodded and pulled away, turning to Rat. "Thank you for keeping me company."

He waved her thanks away. "It's nice to win at drak for a change. Even if you were just being gentle with me."

"Where will you sleep?"

"I'll be fine out here. Won't be the first time I've slept on this settee."

"Good night then," she said and headed into the bedroom.

Gil pulled the door mostly closed, then turned to look at Rat. His friend's face was dark with angry disapproval.

"What?"

Rat shook his head. “You don’t even know if she’s dead or alive, and you’re already fucking Kaela?” he hissed.

Gil felt his lips pull back from his teeth in annoyance, but what could he say? He wasn’t quite ready to tell Rat it was his wife who was fucking Kaela, that at this point he was mostly still a spectator.

He clamped his lips together and counted silently to ten. “I would never, ever betray Lianon.”

Rat stared at him for a long moment. “I care for her a great deal, Gil. If I get the feeling anything funny’s going on, I won’t let our friendship stop me from doing the right thing.”

Gil found himself smiling. His wife sure had a way of winning people over. He clapped Rat on the shoulder. “Get some sleep, my friend. I’ll need you out on the street tomorrow. Early.”

Rat made a moue—Gil knew he was almost never presentable before midday. “Good night, Rat.” He stepped into his bedroom and shut the door, turning the key in the lock.

Straightening, he looked up to see Kaela in just her shift, standing uncertainly next to the bed. Her hands were clenched before her, her face pale.

He thought about how easy he and Lianon were together as they readied themselves for sleep, how they moved between chest and bed and washstand as if it were a choreographed dance they had performed for ages. There was never any nervousness or discomfiture.

Now his fingers trembled on the laces of his shirt and his stomach was in knots. “Go to bed, my dear,” he told Kaela softly.

Obedient, she pulled the blankets back and slipped under them, gingerly settling herself on her side, facing him. Giving up on his laces, he went to the chair by the window and sat.

“Gil?” she whispered, propping herself on one elbow. Her eyes were bright with drink and her cheeks pink. Was she thinking about what they had done right here in this

bed earlier that evening? Gil could hardly make himself think of anything else, and when he could, his thoughts of Lianon loomed, a greater torment by far.

“Go to sleep,” he said.

As always, she obeyed him, rolling onto her other side so she could hide her face from him. He wondered if she was crying, and he felt like a whoreson for letting her lie there alone, but he knew himself. He knew his cock. He wouldn’t be able to lie beside her, to hold her or offer her any comfort without taking some of his own.

He waited until her breathing told him she slept. Then he slipped out of his shirt and slid into the bed beside her, careful not to wake her. He lay there for a long time, too tense to sleep. At last he gave up and reached for the buttons of his trousers. Closing his eyes, he pictured Kaela and Lianon together, their mouths on his cock, on each other, their limbs twined with his. His hand began a slow, deliberate dance up the length of his shaft.

“Why do you do that?”

His hand stilled and his cheeks filled with heat. “What?” he croaked, mortified that she had caught him masturbating, hoping against hope that she hadn’t.

She rolled over to face him, rising onto one elbow and propping her chin on her hand. Her eyes met his in the sparse light of the candles and the moon penetrating the tattered curtains. “Why do you touch yourself and not me?”

Her tone was neutral, but the accusation was there in the words. “You feign sleep with skill,” he said, cursing himself for hurting her. When she only looked at him expectantly, he relented. “I don’t know.”

“Is it because Lianon isn’t here?”

He thought about it for a moment. “Yes.”

“You believe she would object?”

He shook his head, reaching to twirl a lock of her hair around one finger. “It’s not that. I just...I’m not sure I can trust myself to be gentle or considerate. If Lianon were here, she could guide us. She could help put you at ease. After what those men did to you...”

She drew her fingers down the side of his face, his throat, his chest. “You are not those men.”

“Kaela—” Gil began, his cock aching.

She leaned in and pressed her lips to his, her tongue darting out to stroke along the seam. That was all he needed. His breath left him in a rush, and his mouth slanted over hers, his tongue pushing inside, plundering the moist recesses. He tightened his hand in her hair, rolling her onto her back on the bed until he lay atop her, holding her head still on the pillow as he plunged his tongue again and again into her mouth. Her own hands slid across his shoulders and back, playing along the contours of muscle and bone, learning the feel of him.

Awash with heat, he kissed a trail along the scar that marred her cheek, then down her throat to the longer one that disappeared under the scooped neckline of her shift. He dragged his tongue across that brutal ridge, telling her with the motions of his mouth that even this part of her was beautiful to him. He cupped her breast in his hand, crushing its heavy softness and plucking at the nipple. Her cry was quiet and plaintive, not a cry of fear or dismay, but one of yearning. Encouraged, he tugged at the neck of her shift, baring her breasts.

*You are not those men.*

It was no less than the truth. When those men at Flaxton’s had touched her, she had felt only terror and revulsion. This...this was frightening, too, but in a way altogether different.

Gil’s kiss was different from Lianon’s, too, firmer and more demanding, the scrape of his beard on her skin adding another dimension to the sensation. Gil bent his head and took her nipple in his mouth, sending a shiver of fire from her breast to her sex, as if the two parts of her were joined by an invisible thread of heat. The more his lips tugged and toyed with her breast, the tighter the thread pulled, until it was all she could do not to reach between her legs and ease herself with her own hands.

And then Gil's hand was there, rucking up the hem of her shift, probing through the thatch that protected her female flesh, wriggling between her swollen labia. As his fingers slipped into her slit, she could feel how plump and wet she was there, how her folds seemed to embrace his questing fingers. She was hot and cold at once, eager and fearful. She wanted him, more than anything. She wanted this.

Grabbing fistfuls of his hair, she drew his head from her breasts and looked him in the eye. Arched up off the bed and pressed against him. Spread her legs wide open. His fingers stroked her sex, circling her clitoris. His eyes were dark and filled with heat, his limbs trembling and his skin glowing with the sweat of his restraint.

Breathless, she reached with one hand and grasped him, and his whole body jerked. She ran her fingertips all along his length, amazed once again at how hot his male flesh was, how hard and how soft.

"Kaela..." he whispered, barely audible. "Are you sure?"

She stroked him with her hand as she had done only that morning under Lianon's instruction, loving how taut and still his face grew at her touch. "I'm sure. I trust you. I want this."

He closed his eyes. First one finger slid into her, then a second, thrusting gently, stretching her opening. His thumb rubbed her clit, round and round, building heat and pressure in her sex. A second later, his hand nudged hers away from his shaft and he positioned himself at her entrance. She held him at either side of his waist, clutching the hard ridge of muscle above his hipbones.

The tip of him slid along her furrow, spreading her wet, teasing the hard bud of her clit. Then he pressed it against her opening, limbs shuddering as his hips pushed slowly forward. It didn't hurt, not exactly. It ached, but it was a good ache, like the ache of desire in her clitoris, the ache of emotion in her throat. She watched his face, the frown between his eyes as he held himself in check, the sweat that beaded at his temples.

When the head of him was seated inside her, he paused, leaning down to kiss her. She kissed him back, deeply, fervently, and angled her hips upward to urge him further in.

He made a small, tender noise in his throat and with a slow, deliberate stroke thrust the rest of the way inside her. Her walls stretched around him, gripping him tight.

He buried his face in her neck. "You all right?" he whispered next to her ear.

In answer, she let her hands glide under the waist of his trousers to grasp the muscled firmness of his buttocks, and wrapped her legs around him.

He began to shudder under her hands, every muscle in his body drawn taut. Pulling back, he nearly left her and she swallowed a cry of dismay. Then he plunged back in, hard, his pubic bone hammering down on the swollen nub of her clit. She closed her eyes, letting images of Lianon play across her mind, images of the three of them together. Thought of how the other woman's come tasted on her tongue, how her cries tore through her soul like a sharp knife through silk, how Gil's cock had felt in her hand as she'd pleased him under Lianon's guidance.

Gil increased his rhythm, each thrust drawing the spring tighter inside Kaela, until she thought she would snap in two. His gasps blasted against her neck. She felt herself nearing that place inside where her own personal heaven was. Then he reached between them and flicked his fingers across her clit, back and forth and back and forth, and she was undone. She could hear her own cries as if from far off as she broke into pieces under Gil's pinning bulk.

And then he pulled out of her, cursing, groaning, and spilled a flood of seed over her belly.

She lay there for a long time, letting her senses return. After a few moments, he rolled off of her and lay sprawled on his back so the dry summer air could drink the sweat from his skin. Frowning, she drew her fingertips up through the puddles of his come that flecked her belly.

"Why did you do that?"

"To prevent a baby." He made a moue. "I hope. Fool's hope, really, as it is often known to fail."

Her throat tightened and her eyes stung. His actions felt like a rejection. "You don't do this with Lianon."

He grew still despite how she tried to hide her hurt. He slid the back of his hand down her torso until it found her own. Lacing their fingers together, he brought them to his lips.

“Lianon is barren,” he said, rolling onto his side to look at her across the pillow. “It’s a side effect of Aru’s healing. Her womb will not recover until this winter at the earliest. Then we shall have to start being careful, I suppose.”

She let that comfort her a little. “So you don’t want children?”

He smiled. “Do *you* want children?”

“I don’t know.”

His smile widened. “Best to know before you go about getting them.”

She tried to let his smile cheer her, but her throat would not stop aching. “If I were to have children, I would want them to be yours, Gil. Ours. Yours and mine and Lianon’s.”

He blinked rapidly, leaning back to stare up at the ceiling. When he spoke his voice was gruff. “Did you miss her tonight?”

She tugged their joined hands to her own lips and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “Yes. I know you missed her too—you don’t have to hide it. I...I love her.”

He reached for her, pulling her into the circle of his arms. “In that we are the same, my dear.”

*I love her.*

Gil wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Perhaps he would feel more at ease had she declared her love for him, as well.

*Ask him how content he would be if his wives liked each other better than they did him.* As churlish as the thought now seemed, there was truth in it. Especially considering the fact that he was in love with Kaela. With both of them.

She wriggled against him, snuggling into the crook of his arm. He ran his fingers through her hair, spreading it out like a blanket across his chest. It was like black silk, long and smooth.

“Gil?”



“Hmm?”

“You’ll get her back, right?”

He tightened his arms around her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. The pall of dread that had diminished briefly while he made love to Kaela now reasserted itself. “I can’t promise you that. If there is any possibility at all, I will find her and bring her home.”

She lifted her head to look at him. “What if you can’t?”

“Then I will find whoever did it and make them pay. That’s a promise I can make.”

Her eyes shone in the dim candlelight, filled with trust.

Tugging her hand, he rolled her over and pulled the blankets up over them. Settling himself behind her, he pressed his face into the tangled cloud of her hair and wrapped his arms around her waist. She wiggled her bottom against him, fitting her curves into his hollows. He fell asleep like that, with Kaela’s warmth against his front, and nothing but cold air at his back.

## Chapter Twelve

Lianon forced her mouth open for the spoonful of porridge the woman offered her. Though it galled to be spoon-fed by her captor, it would be foolish to go hungry out of pride, or to let her strength wane while she still had breath.

It had been a surprise to see the blonde enter the room this morning—she hadn't made an appearance since Lianon had first come to yesterday afternoon. The Kurgan who had been a fixture since her waking was gone—the room was empty but for the two of them.

The woman was dressed this morning in acres of coral-colored lawn woven through with butter-yellow ribbons. Her gold hair was loose, hanging to the middle of her back. Curling tendrils of it seemed to caress her breasts as she leaned forward to feed Lianon. Her hands were smooth and delicate, her throat long and pale, her lips like a pink bow.

*A pearl, this one, but with a black and rotted core.*

The woman scraped the last bit from the bottom of the bowl and Lianon made herself eat it. Rising, the woman looked Lianon up and down. “Do you need the bedpan?”

“Not yet,” Lianon said, feeling her cheeks go hot. “Don't you have servants to see to such unpleasant duties?”

The beautiful blonde smiled pleasantly. “The fewer people know you’re here, the better. I’m sure you understand.”

“If I may ask, just what is it that you have against the chancellor?”

The woman seemed momentarily nonplused, then her smile widened. “Why, nothing at all, my dear. In fact, I have much to thank him for.”

Lianon frowned.

“Chancellor Collin is the one who put my husband in that wheeled chair. Life is so much easier now that I can enjoy all this—” the woman swept her arm in a gesture that encompassed the finely appointed room, “—without paying for it each night in my marriage bed.” She sat back down on the edge of the mattress, reached over and smoothed the hair back from Lianon’s forehead, her touch almost affectionate. “I know he doesn’t look like much now, but three years ago my husband was as healthy as any man, physically. His carnal appetites, on the other hand, could only be described as depraved.”

Against her will, Lianon felt a pang of sympathy. How could she not, having watched such men in action, having seen her loved ones bear the consequences of their brutality? “Why didn’t you divorce him?”

The woman laughed. “And give up all this? A woman’s life is an exercise in conciliation, my dear Lianon. As unpleasant as it was, I was entirely prepared to purchase this luxury with my body. I submitted myself to his vile attentions as willingly as any husband could wish.” Her face hardened, her lips pressing into a thin line. “But my dutiful submission wasn’t enough for him. And as much as I hated his touch, it was...galling to watch him dally with other women. Still, I could have borne even his infidelity, had he exhibited some standards. But the woman he wanted, the woman he left my bed to pursue, was nothing but a commoner, the daughter of a tradesman, the sister of a mid-level judicial bureaucrat.”

Lianon closed her eyes as it all came together. “Collin’s sister.”

The woman laughed once more. “And she refused him! A baseborn chit with no prospects, no future beyond the pathetic drudgery of the middle class, turned down the only opportunity she would ever have to rise above her station.”

“Being the mistress of a depraved brute hardly seems preferable to a boring middle class life.”

The woman smiled indulgently, patting Lianon’s shoulder. “Conciliation, remember? She could have been kept in the lap of luxury and never worked a day in her life, had she only submitted to his advances. But even after he ruined her chances for any kind of respectable marriage, she wouldn’t have him.”

Ruined her chances? Lianon swallowed hard. “He raped her.”

The woman clucked her tongue. “Of course he raped her. That’s the only kind of sex he ever enjoyed. I almost pitied her, if you want to know the truth. But then she went to her brother and started making all kinds of accusations, and Collin was high enough in the judiciary by then to influence those with the power to lay charges. You understand how I couldn’t let that happen. If my husband were convicted of rape, he’d go to prison, his assets would be seized. The house, the furniture, my gowns and jewelry, all of it would be sold off to pay legal expenses, reparations to the victim, and fines to fatten the Reeve’s coffers. I would be permitted a few hundred falcons a month to live on—barely a pittance! I had bought this life on my back, and I was going to lose everything.”

Lianon felt the blood drain from her face. “You had her killed.”

She shrugged. “What else could I do? It was nothing personal.”

Lianon’s mouth twisted. “Of course.”

“Collin assumed it was my husband who ordered her death, and he wasn’t interested in legal channels anymore. One afternoon I came home to find my husband lying on the floor with a dart in the back of his neck. There was poison on the tip—Kurgan ingenuity at its finest. It killed the nerves in his spine, left him paralyzed, unable to control his bladder or bowels, incapable of speech. He can’t even swallow without assistance.” She grinned, and for the first time it reached her eyes. “But his mind is entirely intact. I can’t

begin to tell you how much that pleases me. The indignity he suffers every day, as I suffered *him* night after night for more than five years...”

“I should think you would be grateful to Collin, not bent on his death.”

“Oh, I am grateful, never doubt that, dear Lianon. But I can’t afford to have him discover that my husband is paying for a crime I committed. All this time I have been content to let Collin live. I was even pleased by his successful rise in government, as I would be pleased at the good fortune of a dear friend. But now he’s let the power of office go to his head. He has this notion of bringing the Emissaries under his control, and if he succeeds, the man I hired to kill Collin’s sister will be under his direct employ.”

“You fear the Emissary will not keep your secret.”

“Why would he? An Emissary’s loyalty belongs to the man who holds the purse, and soon enough, that man will be Collin. Having seen his vengeance enacted upon my husband, you will understand how reluctant I am to incur his wrath. It seemed my entire life would be undone, but then, as if by providence, Collin himself provided me the perfect means to rectify this entire situation.” She smiled warmly down at Lianon. “Anyone with ears for the gossip knows what you did in Sylphae. The fact that you have escaped justice thus far is a topic of much speculation, you can be sure. I’m certain there are those in this city who are righteously indignant at the very notion of a common Emissary slaying a man on her own behalf. All I needed to do was take you, and leave your husband to draw his own conclusions. He was bound to think it was the chancellor’s office finally seeking justice for your victims, and he would do what Emissaries do best. And if anything went wrong and he found his way here to me, well, everyone knows Gil al-Moirae doesn’t kill women.”

As misguided as this woman’s motives might be, Lianon had to admire her resourcefulness.

The woman’s lips thinned and her eyes went cold. “Except he didn’t conform to my expectations. He broke into Collin’s house last night, but when he left it was by the front door, and the chancellor was very much alive.”

A burst of pride filled Lianon at the fact that Gil had seen the set-up for what it was. But it wouldn't do either of them any good, she knew. This woman wanted what she wanted. She held Lianon hostage to her goals, but Lianon knew she couldn't afford to leave either of them alive. Whether Gil killed the chancellor or not, he couldn't save her. Or himself.

"So what now? If Gil kills the chancellor, there's no way now to make it look like he acted alone."

"I'm reasonably certain you won't like the answer to that question."

Lianon smiled with half her mouth. "Nothing personal, right?"

The woman returned her smile with chilling sympathy. "I'm so glad you understand, my dear."

Judith's was bustling before the sun was its own width into the sky, filled with the aromas of baking bread, Kahlian tea and *jaffha*. Gil sat at the window, his hands wrapped around a steaming cup, making himself as visible as possible. Rat was stationed at a table tucked into a corner by the kitchen door, keeping a bleary eye on the room. The thief was in a state this morning, suffering all the predictable effects of brandy and a late night, and unutterable annoyed with his best friend.

The son of a bitch was cheating on his wife. This in itself would not normally faze Rat, but he was fond of Lianon and he knew how much she loved Gil.

*I would never, ever betray Lianon.*

Rat wanted to believe it. Really he did. But judging by the way Gil and Kaela were looking at each other last night, the ease of their embrace, if Gil hadn't already slept with her, he would soon. And then Rat would be forced to tell Lianon. She was his friend. How could he do otherwise?

Scowling, he forced his gaze away from Gil and swept the room once more. His eyes lit for the third time on a man who stood at the counter, a cup in one hand and a half-eaten biscuit in the other. The same biscuit he'd ordered half an hour ago. The fellow seemed in no hurry to leave, yet disinclined to eat. He leaned back on the counter with

exaggerated casualness, his expression one of sublime disinterest, and not once did Rat see him so much as glance Gil's way. In fact, he seemed quite careful to avoid doing so.

Rat shook his head. Fucking tail. And from the plainness of his clothing, probably working for the law rather than against it.

The door opened and a man entered. Rat didn't recognize him, but the fellow at the counter seemed to. His face went clenched and cold and the hand with the biscuit dropped to his hip as if he was accustomed to wearing a sword.

The newcomer walked right to Gil's table, pulled out the empty chair and sat down uninvited.

Rat got up and went to the counter. The tail dragged his attention away from the men by the window and faced Rat.

Rat smiled companionably. "Biscuit not to your liking?"

"It's fine," the fellow said in a tone that implied the exact opposite.

Rat smiled even wider. "I thought you might be able to tell me who that fellow is that just walked in."

The tail's lips pressed together in displeasure. "What fellow is that?"

"The one who just joined the man you've been instructed to follow."

Silence.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. I've always been good at sniffing out the law. It's a gift."

The man glowered at him, heedlessly crushing his biscuit into fine crumbs. "And what, if I may ask, is your interest in this?"

Rat's grin was replaced by a look of cool, professional detachment and he leaned in closer so his voice wouldn't carry. "I'm a friend of Gil al-Moirae. And though I am not a friend of Chancellor Collin, I have no wish to earn his enmity. I am very, very interested in the identity of that man who is now in deep conversation with my good friend."

"I don't know his name," the tail said, his eyes narrowed. "I do know who he works for."

Rat smiled. "Please, do tell."

“Gil al-Moirae?”

Gil studied the man who sat across from him, took in the unmemorable yet oddly ageless face, the lean, sinewy limbs, the relaxed posture and air of utter confidence. That the man carried no visible weapon did not make Gil feel more at ease. If this man was what he seemed, he could probably take an armed and trained Emissary apart with one hand tied behind his back.

Gil frowned, making a list in his mind of those families in Belthalas wealthy enough to employ Kurgan servants. He came up with more names than he would have liked.

“What do you want?”

“I hear you’re looking for someone.”

Gil felt his lips pull back, but he knew his expression resembled a smile in only the most technical sense. “I want my wife back. Tell me what I have to do.”

The Kurgan’s smile was equally bloodless. “I think you know. My employer was most dismayed to discover this morning that a certain high-ranking civil servant was still lamentably alive.”

*Fuck me.* Collin was right. This whole thing was about him.

“And if I refuse to kill him? Or if I try and do not succeed?”

The Kurgan scowled down at his hands where they rested on the table, inspecting his fingernails as if for lint. “I think you know the answer to that, as well.”

“If I do as your employer wants, what guarantee do I have that my wife will be released without harm?”

The Kurgan’s eyes bored into him and his voice dropped to a low rumble. “No guarantee at all.”

Gil felt his blood go cold. “Your employer realizes that if my wife is harmed, I will find a way to make him answer for it.”

The Kurgan nodded. “I will convey your sentiments, though I doubt it will change anything. My employer is...not known for an excess of self-restraint or integrity. But you



and I are both honorable men, Gil al-Moirae. We will do what we must, as honor demands, no matter how we might wish it otherwise.”

Gil could only stare. What the fuck was this man saying? That he shouldn’t kill Collin? That he should?

Or was he simply expressing his regret for what he would inevitably be made to do? Was this the man whose job it would be to kill Lianon? Was he looking for absolution?

Gil shook his head. He wasn’t letting this bastard off that easy. “The mark is already aware that his life may be in danger. He will have increased his security. The job won’t be as simple today as it would have been last night.”

The Kurgan shook his head, chuckling. “Please don’t think for one second that I’m a fool. If he let you leave his house last night, it’s because he trusts you. And if he trusts you, you’ll be able to get in to see him. In fact, I think he will make himself more accessible to you than to anyone else.”

*Fuck me.* They’d been watching him from the moment he’d entered the chancellor’s residence. Had they posted surveillance on his apartment as well? Did they know Kaela was with him in the city, that she waited in his bedroom right now? Did they have any inkling how important she was to him? God help him, as if he didn’t have enough to worry about. Kaela was just one more person who would be hurt, whether he killed Collin or not.

“How long do I have?”

The Kurgan shrugged. “My employer did not specify. If I were you, I wouldn’t wait for nightfall.” He made to rise, then hesitated. “I...wish to express my regret to you, Gil al-Moirae. The contract between myself and my employer expires in two months. Would that this could have happened then, that I should not be involved. Your wife is a charming woman who does not deserve to be used so.”

Fucking Kurgae’in—like nails on the surface, but dig a little and they were as soft as over-proofed dough. What kind of assholes were they that they could take away everything you had, and then didn’t even have the decency to let you hate them?

But, “Sir. If you would...convey a message to her.”

The Kurgan blinked, clearly surprised. “Perhaps. What would you have me say?”

Gil swallowed around a sudden tightness in his throat. “Only that I love her. And that I’m sorry.”

The Kurgan pushed to his feet. “I expect she already knows that.”

As Gil watched him walk out the door, it occurred to him that the Kurgan’s cryptic commentary on honor could be construed as a warning—not to kill Collin, but to find Lianon before it was too late. Before the Kurgan was ordered to kill her.

“Have you anywhere to go?” Gil asked from where he sat at the tiny escritorio in his apartment. “Friends or family who can put you up for a day or two?”

Kaela shook her head. “Financial ruin has a way of ridding a person of friends. I might be able to impose upon my stepmother, but her parents will certainly disapprove.”

Gil scowled, continuing with his letter. “They sound like lovely people.”

She thought about defending them, but then wondered why she should bother. “They never liked my father. They thought he wasn’t good enough for their daughter.”

He gave a wordless grunt that was perfectly evocative of his feelings. “I’ll have Gaerhart take you to the chancellery. Collin will keep you safe for the time being.”

Kaela thought of the small, wiry man who waited on the street below, a tail who worked for the chancellor. He’d been in an ill temper through the whole of their brief meeting in the alley, his eyes darkest whenever they lit on Rat. She didn’t like him, but he was the chancellor’s man and a lawman, and duty-bound to protect her. “Where will you go?”

He glanced up at her. “I’ll be going there, too, but the place will be watched and I don’t want them to see us arrive together. If they’re unaware of our...relationship, I’m not about to enlighten them. They don’t need anything else to use against me.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked quietly. “You’re not going to actually kill him?” She tried not to let her conflicting emotions show. Part of her cringed at the thought of an innocent man dying at Gil’s hands. Another part would have him do whatever it took, no matter how horrible, to save Lianon.

His lips quirked up in a hard smile that did not reach his eyes. “I haven’t decided yet.”

He turned back to his papers, the end of his quill shuddering with his quick, efficient scrawl. “What are you writing?”

He finished, signing the paper with a flourish. “My will.”

Her hand flew to her mouth as her stomach churned. “What?” She could hardly hear her own voice over the hiss of blood in her ears. The possibility of his death had been there in the back of her mind from the moment Lianon was taken, but to hear it stated so bluntly...

He sprinkled sand on the sheet, then tapped it back in the bowl. Rolling the paper, he tipped a few drops of wax from the candle to seal it. It was a moment before he realized how distraught she was.

One look at her face and he jumped out of his chair, pulling her against his chest. She hugged him, soothed by the vibrant thud of his heart under her cheek. “Don’t worry, love,” he said, his hands massaging the tension from her shoulders as his lips pressed the top of her head. “It’s a precaution, nothing more. I just want to see you well-situated if anything happens.”

“Me?” she blurted, leaning back to look at him.

“Who else?” he said with a tender smile. “Lianon has plenty of money without getting her hands on mine.”

“But—”

He leaned down and kissed her. “You are as much my wife now as she is.”

Her chest hurt, her heart expanding until it pushed the breath from her lungs. Holding him tight, she kissed him back with everything she had, absorbing the truth of his words and giving it back to him. When he finally pulled away, her cheeks were wet with tears.

He held her face between his hands, brushing the wetness away with his thumbs.

“Come back to me,” she said, her heart twisting. “Both of you.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead, then set her away from him. “Let’s go.”

Gaerhart was none too pleased to abandon the task Collin had given him, but the chancellor had promised Gil the assistance of all his people, and eventually the little man capitulated. Gil gave Kaela one last hug and watched the two of them walk away in the direction of the government district.

Gil himself headed for Lawyer's Row at the edge of the merchant district. A wide street festooned with the signage of attorneys, moneylenders, hiring offices and real estate brokers, it was already busy at midmorning. Gil ducked into the front office of his factor, lingering only long enough to have his document witnessed and filed, then departed, heading for the chancellery.

Harral answered the door, his lips thinning when he saw Gil standing on the steps.

Gil grinned, taking a perverse pleasure in how much the man seemed to dislike him. "Your boss in?"

Harral stood to one side, gesturing Gil indoors. "He is. As is your wife."

For a second, Gil's stomach leapt into his throat. "Lianon?"

Harral's lips pulled back in an unpleasant smile. "Your...other wife. They are taking refreshment in the salon, if you would follow me."

Collin and Kaela were seated in the well-appointed room where Gil had been left to stew for hours but a few days ago, a tray of tea and cakes between them. Her eyes lit up when he entered.

Collin rose and shook Gil's hand. "Master Gil, I'm pleased to hear you have made some headway in finding your, ah...wife."

Gil's glance flicked to Kaela to find her blushing, her expression uncertain. Was she regretting her claim of spousal status? Or was she worried he might be angry or offended by it? He crossed to her and set his hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze of reassurance. Her hand came up to clasp his, the gesture as natural as breathing now.

"I have discovered who took her, though I'm not certain where she is being held."

Collin nodded and sat, motioning for Gil to take the chair opposite. "Savilaen sur-Thienn. Gaerhart recognized his Kurgan servant."

Gil remained standing, reaching to pluck a cake from the stack on the tray. “I have a friend following the Kurgan.” His eyes flicked to the door where Harral stood, cold and hyper-alert. Whatever Collin might think, it was clear that his lover did not trust Gil. The weight of his sword tugged at Gil’s hip, reminding him it was there and ready to be of use. He turned back to Collin. “My wife is in danger because you made an enemy of this man sur-Thienn.”

From the corner of his eye, Gil saw the quality of tension in the steward’s limbs change, the air around him seeming to focus. Harral understood the threat in that statement, even if Collin was oblivious.

“Our enmity was not of my making.” Collin leaned back, linking his hands loosely before him. “Sur-Thienn is the man who had my sister killed.” But Gil had misjudged the chancellor—his composure was about confidence, not ignorance. Collin smiled at his lover. “Seems you were correct in wanting to remove Master Gil’s sword. I do hope you won’t have cause to rub my face in it.”

Gil took a bite of the cake, the fingers of his left hand lightly stroking his sword hilt. Almonds, lemon and cardamom—he was in heaven. He let his eyes drift shut for a moment and just savored it.

“You really must give my compliments to your cook.”

Collin chuckled, still apparently at his ease. Harral’s hands were clasping and unclasping at his sides, preparing for a fight.

Gil offered the steward a bloodless smile. “It occurs to me how unpleasant it would be to have to kill someone whom I respect and admire.” He reached for a napkin and wiped the stickiness from his fingers. “Especially at the behest of the underhanded vermin who kidnapped my wife, and who will likely put her to death no matter what I do.”

Kaela made a small, frightened noise at his words, and he reached for her hand. She gripped his fingers so hard they ached.

Collin leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “I will be pleased to assist you and your wife—*wives*—in any way I can.”

Gil looked down at Kaela, at her thick, black hair and pale skin, at the scars that did not have the power to mar her in his eyes. "I have one request, and then I will see to the entire matter. You need not involve yourself any further."

"You have but to name it."

Gil smiled tightly. "It is no small favor."

"Even so."

"I want Kaela's father released from prison and his debts forgiven. I want him to be offered a position of respect within the chancellery, with incomes enough to support his family, and a house purchased for them by the government, the mortgage to be paid back by him interest free."

Kaela's hand was squeezing his until he thought his fingers might break. He looked down at her. Tears were streaming down her face. She swiped them away, but more came.

Collin studied her for a moment, then met Gil's eye. "It will be as you say."

Gil smiled. "Is there a way out of this house that cannot be seen from the street?"

Collin rose. "The Hall of Justice abuts the back garden. There's a gate I use at times, when business takes me there."

"I ought to go now. The agents of Savilaen will report back that I entered here."

The chancellor ushered Gil out of the room. "Harral will show you to the gate. From the hall, it's but three blocks to the man's town house. Do not dawdle."

Gil clasped his hand for a moment. "Never fear." His gaze met Kaela's over the chancellor's shoulder. She sat, her eyes still glistening, one hand at her throat and her heart all over her face. It...pleased him to know that she would be taken care of, even if he and Lianon did not return.

Harral cleared his throat. Gil followed him through the house and out into the garden in the back.

## Chapter Thirteen

Lianon was doing surreptitious stretches when Karek returned.

“Well?” the blonde snapped, setting her embroidery aside. Lianon could see how puckered and uneven her stitches were. The woman was worried. That meant Lianon needed to worry too.

“Well what?” the Kurgan growled, crossing to the table by the window, where a tray of fruit and bread sat. He reached for a grape, popped it in his mouth.

“Is he going to do it, you stupid clod?”

Karek shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

The woman leapt up from her chair and began to pace, her cheeks flushed and her lips a thin, pale line. “Where is he now?”

The Kurgan poured a cup from the ewer and drank it down. “Headed for the merchant district. Lawyer’s Row, it looks.”

Lianon’s stomach rose until it nudged at the back of her throat. Lawyer’s Row? No reason to go there except to tie up loose ends. God in Antuine, Gil wasn’t going to do it, was he? Didn’t he realize he couldn’t let himself be used this way? Even if he survived, the moment he did this, they would own him. And Lianon knew they were going to kill her anyway.

The blonde stopped in her tracks, her eyes flicking to Lianon as if reading her thoughts. “We need to deal with this, one way or the other.”

Karek scowled, slamming his cup down.

“Do it now,” the woman said, her voice dripping icicles.

Lianon’s heart began to pound. To slow it, she counted in her head, one, two, three...

The Kurgan pulled the dagger from his belt.

Lianon closed her eyes. Thought of Gil. Kaela. Rhianna. Thought of what she had found in half a year that she would not have found if things had gone differently last winter.

“Not like that, you idiot!” the woman snarled. “Those linens are expensive.”

Lianon stared dry-eyed at the ceiling. Gods, to have to listen to them bicker at a time like this...

The Kurgan jammed his dagger back in its sheath. “How, then?”

Lianon frowned. How...?

Understanding dawned. As quietly as possible, she began to take long, deep, deliberate breaths.

“*You’re* supposed to be the expert.” The woman’s voice had gone ugly and shrill, all pretensions toward charm long gone. Lianon risked a glance at them. From Karek’s expression, he would as soon split the woman as look at her.

In... Out... In... Deep, deep breaths, filling Lianon’s lungs with air until they burned, until she was dizzy with it.

“My lady—” His tone turned that courtesy into an epithet.

The woman gave a wordless cry of exasperation. “Smother her with a pillow and be done with it, you fool!”

He stood there, clenching and unclenching his fists. He hadn’t even looked at Lianon yet. “You want her dead,” he finally said, “why don’t you do it?”

Silence.

In... Out... Tiny lights began to swarm before Lianon’s eyes as her body overdosed on the thing it needed.



A long, low, rich chuckle, echoing as if from far off. “Perhaps you’re right, dear Karek. Perhaps you’re right.”

Lianon could hardly hear over the boom of her pulse against her eardrums.

The face of the woman hovered over her, obscured by a swirling cloud of minuscule dots. Her smile was cold as a glacier. “Nothing personal,” she said.

“Of course,” Lianon replied before the pillow came down over her face.

“Kurgan’s been back for maybe ten minutes,” Rat said, detaching himself from the heaps of detritus and rotting garbage strewn against the garden wall. The thief was well-practiced at hiding in plain sight.

Gil slipped into the alley to clasp his friend’s hand in thanks. His breath was ragged—he’d run the three blocks from the chancellery at an all-out sprint.

“Where’d he go in?”

“Servant’s entrance, back of the house.”

“My thanks.”

“Just go. Get her back.”

Rat leaned forward and cupped his hands together near the ground. Gil put his foot in them and let the wiry little man boost him up.

Gil lay on the cool stone at the top of the wall, searching the colorful garden for signs of humanity. Off in a far corner, a young man trimmed elaborate topiaries while a woman with white hair weeded among the snapdragons.

There were no guards to be seen, but that didn’t mean they weren’t there.

Rolling off the edge, Gil dropped the short distance to the ground, trampling a patch of daisies. Not bothering about stealth, he walked purposefully toward the house, pulling his dagger from his belt. As he approached the kitchen door, a girl of maybe eighteen emerged with an empty basket on her arm. She spotted him and froze.

He grabbed her arm, pressing the tip of his knife to her ribs. She squealed and dropped her basket, her eyes round and terrified.

Crushing his sympathy, he put his mouth to her ear. "Please, no noise, miss," he said softly. "Where did the Kurgan go?"

"Upstairs," she squeaked, tears hovering on her lashes.

"Take me there."

She nodded, taking stilted steps back into the kitchen. The air inside was hot and close, filled with delicious smells. At an enormous hearth a bored-looking boy turned a spit while two older youths chopped and mixed at a worktable under the direction of a gray-bearded man too thin, surely, to be a cook. All eyes flew to Gil as he entered with the girl.

"No need for alarm, gentlemen," Gil said calmly, aware of the plethora of ready weapons arrayed next to the meat block. "The young lady and I are just passing through. No one need be concerned."

Her breaths harsh in the silence, the girl sidled across the kitchen and through a pair of doors into a luxuriously decorated dining hall. As the doors swung shut once more, an uproar ensued behind them as the cook and his helpers threw down their implements and all began shouting at once.

"You might want to hurry, my dear," Gil told the girl, loosening his grip on her arm. "Truly, I have no wish to harm you, but I am in a bit of a rush."

She relaxed a little and quickened her steps, leading him through an anteroom, a salon, across a wide hall, up a curved staircase carpeted in a fortune in Kahlian wool and across a gallery with lovely floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the back gardens. Gil glanced outside to see the head cook standing next to a frog pond relaying events to a man at arms, who looked increasingly peeved the more he heard.

"Did I mention I'm in a hurry?" Gil muttered.

"Over there—" She pointed down a corridor. "Third door on the right, that's where he's been spending his time since yesterday."

"My thanks," he said, smiling down at her. "I don't suppose if I let you go I could trust you to be quiet?"

She stared at him, nonplused. "I—"

Shouts and heavy footfalls downstairs made the question moot. With a muttered curse, he pulled her down the hall, trying for stealth even knowing it was little use now. Outside the room, he pressed his ear to the closed door. Silence. Gingerly, he tried the knob. It wasn't locked. When he opened the door and slipped inside, he realized why.

It was all over.

Her heartbeat was going to give her away, surely. Its heavy thud pounded on her eardrums, kicked against her burning lungs so hard she thought they must be able to see her ribcage jump with each beat.

She'd struggled when the pillow came down. It wasn't entirely an act. Though she'd had no need at that point for breath, the darkness and the pressure of the pillow over her face spoke to some fear, visceral and primeval, that lurked in the souls of all mortals. After a slow count of sixty, she'd made herself stop thrashing, stiffen briefly, then go limp. A few moments later the pressure on the pillow eased and the mattress shifted under her as the woman rose.

Lianon's head was spinning, her lungs on fire, but she could not afford to draw breath yet. She strained to hear over the rush of blood in her ears. Her pulse was speeding up, carrying what little air she had left to the places she needed it, but she was not at her limit just yet.

"Dispose of that, would you, Karek dear?" the woman said lightly, her pleasant façade back in place. Part of Lianon couldn't help but admire her—with detachment like that she'd have made a fabulous Emissary.

The door opened, then closed. Lianon heard the Kurgan's heavy footfalls take him toward the table by the window. Silver rattled against glass as he poured himself more wine. Evidently, he was not as emotionally detached as the woman. Taking a risk, Lianon slowly let out her breath, careful not to gasp, then took in a fresh lungful. If anything, the brief taste of air made it even harder to resist taking another, but she ruthlessly pushed the need aside. Phosphors began to surge and swarm like fireflies before her eyes, but she

waited until the rattle of ewer and cup returned to take a second noiseless breath of the stale air beneath the pillow.

He slammed his cup down. His heavy footfalls neared the bed. She could feel his eyes on her and was unutterably grateful for the fact that the blankets and pillow still covered her, masking her heartbeat and the involuntary tightening of her nipples, concealing the flutter of her pulse at her throat.

The mattress shifted as he sat on its edge to her left. His hand closed around her left one, and she willed herself not to react. Felt the saw and tug of his blade on the binding at her wrist as he cut through the band of fabric. She lay absolutely limp as he leaned across her body, reaching for her other hand, his weight crushing her. Time seemed to slow, the dots before her eyes winking out one by one.

He took her right wrist in one hand and brought the knife against the binding. Damn, her wrist. No way to hide the pulse that pushed against his fingers.

Nothing for it now.

Her belly tightening in sudden urgency, she clamped her bound hand around the wrist of his knife hand. He tried to jerk away and sit up, but his position leaning sideways across her while she held him by the opposite hand ruined his balance. Knowing this was her only chance, she brought her free arm across her body and then slammed it back, driving her elbow into the side of his head. The noise of it was awful—like ripe fruit hitting the floor—but she closed her mind to it.

Again she hit him, and again, again, again, until he finally collapsed on top of her.

His weight crushed her, but after the last few minutes, even that could not interfere with the bliss of being free to draw breath. With jerks of her head, she jostled the pillow from her face and felt fresh air wash across her skin. For a minute, she just breathed, relishing the luxury of it, waiting for her vision to clear and her head to stop spinning.

Her limbs thrummed with reaction, her heart gradually slowing now that the immediate danger was past. She still held Karek's wrist in her right hand. Twisting under his pinning bulk, she reached with her free hand only to discover he'd dropped his knife. She felt around on the mattress, but it must have fallen to the floor during their struggle.

“Shit!” she muttered. For a moment, she lay back, resting her limbs while she tried to think of what to do, how to get out of this. It would take forever to pick apart the knot at her other wrist. On top of her, Karek’s breath came heavy and slow, bubbling with blood—she was glad she hadn’t killed him, but the fact did limit the amount of time she had to get out of her predicament.

Gingerly, she groped around his belt, searching for a second blade, but all she found was the empty sheath.

Just perfect. All she’d done was prolong her own death. And when Karek finally awoke, she didn’t expect him to be feeling so tender about her anymore.

Shouts erupted downstairs, and the noise of running feet. She glanced around the room, but it was empty, the door still shut. Her mind raced—her altercation with the Kurgan had been mostly silent, only the harsh smack of her elbow on his skull betraying what she’d done. No one outside the room could have heard it, surely. The uproar downstairs couldn’t have anything to do with her...

And then the door opened.

*Salgrim’s blood.*

She held her breath and lay absolutely still, playing dead—again. Just Karek’s snores and the breath of two others near the entrance. Whoever it was quietly shut the door and threw the bolt home.

“You can stop faking now, Lianon.”

God, *Gil*...

The rush of relief that swept through her body left her weak. Tears sprang to her lashes and she swallowed a sob as he stepped into view. He gazed at her, bemused, his lip curled up at one corner, and shook his head.

“Unbelievable,” he said. “The moment I turn my back, you’re naked in bed with another man...”

“Haha.” She arched, trying to heave the Kurgan off of her, but he was too heavy. “A little help, if you don’t mind...”

Gil could feel his control start to slip, despite his best intentions. From the pillow that still lay half across her face, he thought he could guess what had happened. Fucking Kurgae'in and their fucking mercenary honor. He could understand it, even forgive it, but there was no fucking way he was going to let the son of a bitch get away with it.

Gil dragged him off of her, lifting him by the hair and putting his dagger against the Kurgan's throat. She shook her head. "*Don't.*"

Gil stared at her, trying to contain his anger. That she would protect this...*thing*...

Her eyes hardened. "I mean it."

His hand gripped his dagger so hard it trembled. Outside in the hall, footsteps pounded their way, then passed by the door. Toward the lord's bedchamber?

"He didn't do it," she said softly. "He was just supposed to clean up the mess afterwards."

It shouldn't have made a difference, but it did. Gil nodded, dragging the Kurgan the rest of the way off of her.

The kitchen maid took a nervous step closer to the bed, her wide eyes falling on Lianon, taking in her nakedness only partly concealed under the skewed blankets, the strap that still bound one of her wrists to the bed.

Lianon smiled at her. "Hullo."

The girl's expression went from horrified to stymied.

Gil glanced over at the girl as he hauled the unconscious Kurgan to the floor beside the bed. "Oh, right, silly me. Introductions. Lianon, this is..."

"Um...Biata," the girl said hollowly.

"Right. Biata, my wife Lianon."

"Your...your wife?"

Gil moved to Lianon's side, cutting the strap from her wrist and working loose the knot that secured it to the bed-frame while Lianon sat up and rolled her shoulders. "Yes, my wife. I'm sure she's been enjoying your employer's wonderful hospitality, but it really is time for her to come home."

"Oh. I..."

Gil handed Lianon his dagger so she could cut her legs free, then stooped to lash the Kurgan's hands behind his back. When they were secure, he slapped the fellow hard on the unbruised side of his face.

Lianon slipped off the bed, heedless of her nakedness, and went rifling through wardrobes and chests of drawers in search of her clothes. Locating them in the trunk at the foot of the bed, she shook her shirt out and frowned at the bloodstain around a hole in the shoulder. "Another shirt ruined because of you," she muttered in Gil's direction as she pulled it on over her head.

"Sorry, I'll buy you a new one," he replied absently, slapping the Kurgan harder. It felt so satisfying he did it again. It was almost a disappointment when the man began to rouse.

Out in the hall, the noise had begun to approach their door again. Footsteps, voices, doors opening and closing as the men at arms searched the house.

The Kurgan's eyes quickly assessed the situation. He met Gil's glance, the undamaged side of his mouth quirking up. "You going to kill me?"

"No."

"Mmph. Almost wish you would. Bested by a girl tied to a bed—I'll never live it down."

"Well, you're out of luck. My wife appears to have a soft spot for you," Gil growled.

"Not on her elbow, I'll venture to say," the Kurgan replied ruefully.

Gil grinned in spite of himself.

The footsteps stopped outside their door. Someone tried the knob. When it wouldn't turn, they started pounding.

"They're in here!" the Kurgan shouted.

*Son of a bitch!* Gil stared at him, incredulous. He only shrugged an apology. "Had to do it. I'm under contract."

The pounding ceased, replaced by a heavy thud as someone threw his shoulder against the door. The maid Biata backed away, not knowing who she ought to be afraid of now.

Gil turned to his wife. “You ready, darling?”

Lianon pulled her boots on and stood. “Not quite dressed for a fete, but I won’t get arrested for indecency.”

Another thud. “The window, love.”

She crossed to the expanse of stained glass and flipped the latch. The casement opened outward onto a narrow ledge. “Gods, nothing can be easy, can it?”

Gil stuck his head out beside hers, took in the long drop to the neatly trimmed lawn below. “No convenient drain pipe, eh?”

She shook her head, then flashed him a grin. “Well, quickest way to the ground is straight down.” And before he could suspend his disbelief, she vaulted over the sill and dropped fifteen feet to the grass. She rolled as she hit the ground, letting her whole body absorb the impact.

Fucking unbelievable. If she thought he was going to do that, she was even crazier than he suspected.

Another thud. The snap of splintering wood resounded as the doorframe began to split.

Gil climbed with considerably more caution than Lianon out onto the sill, sat on the ledge, twisted and lowered his legs over the edge. Inside the room, Biata gave a frightened squeal as the door finally crashed in. Muttering imprecations, Gil let go of the ledge and dropped.

His knees screamed with the impact, one ankle sending a lance of pain all the way to the center of his chest. He ended up on his ass, looking up at the men who now glowered down at him from the window.

Lianon grabbed him under one arm and hauled him to his feet. “Come on, time to go.”

His legs were wobbly and so, he could see, were Lianon’s. Limping, leaning on each other, they headed as quickly as they could for the gate that led to the front of the house and the relative safety of the public street. A hack sat waiting at the curb, with a grinning Rat standing alongside.



“Thought you might like a ride,” he explained, practically shoving Gil and Lianon inside, then he leapt onto the foot-rail and shouted for the driver to move. The hack jolted into motion.

Gil craned his neck, peering out the rear window in time to see Rat make a rude gesture at the four men at arms who came barreling down the walk from the front door of the house. Then the hack rounded the corner and left them behind.

Gil turned to his wife, the urgency of the last hour seeping out of him, leaving him weak and shaky. Her gaze met his and for a moment he couldn't even breathe. He lifted a trembling hand to her face, trailed his fingers down her cheek to her jaw, her throat, her collarbone.

Her mouth lifted at one corner, her eyes going soft. His own vision went blurry, light haloing through the tears that gathered.

“If I'd lost you...”

“Ah, my love,” she said, hugging him close. Cursing his weakness, he buried his face against her neck and just held her, letting the motions of her hands up and down his back soothe him. “You're not getting off that easy.”

He let out a breathless laugh. “Are you very angry with me?”

“Only tell me you weren't stupid enough to kill the chancellor.”

Gil grinned. “He's alive and well, no small thanks to my brilliance.”

“Glad to see your ego hasn't suffered,” Lianon murmured, her fingers toying with the hair at his nape.

“I'm starting to rather like the man, actually,” he said, leaning back to drink in the sight of her. Hands tunneling through her hair, he kissed her hard. “Can't wait to introduce you.”

The hack lurched to a halt and Rat jumped down, playing footman. Reaching up, he helped Lianon descend, then engulfed her in a huge hug. A little taken aback by his exuberance, she laughed up at him.

“You don’t know how good it is to see you safe and sound,” he said, his face unwontedly serious.

She grinned. “I’m at least as pleased as you at the fact,” she murmured. Glancing over his shoulder, she took in the grand house with its pair of uniformed guards flanking the front door and realized where they were.

Gil stepped gingerly from the hack, holding tight to the handgrips and wincing. He aimed a glare at Rat. “No thanks, old boy,” he muttered. “I can manage.”

Rat smiled back, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Lianon frowned at him, wondering what the problem was.

Gil took her elbow and they started through the gate, Rat following with an unusually grim face. “Come on. There’s someone inside who can’t wait to see you.”

Lianon’s heart did a flop in her chest. “Kaela’s here?”

Gil limped up the steps and rang the bell. A rather intense-looking, gold-haired servant answered, moving to the side to let them pass. The hall was dim after the brightness of the outdoors. Lianon blinked to accustom her eyes, and then she spotted Kaela standing in a sun-filled doorway.

Their eyes met. Kaela’s face was wet with tears—they streamed down her cheeks even now as her chest began to heave. “Oh thank the gods,” she whispered, crossing the hall in a flurry of skirts and wrapping her arms tight around Lianon.

The woman was trembling, shuddering, wracked with sobs of relief. Running her hands up and down Kaela’s back, Lianon buried her face in a cascade of black hair and just breathed in her scent. After a moment, she pulled back, her hands framing Kaela’s face, her thumbs brushing the tears from her cheeks. “Oh, love,” she said. “Don’t cry.” And leaning in, she pressed her lips to Kaela’s and kissed her tears away.

Over the heads of the two women, Gil studied Rat’s stunned visage. The kiss was not one of seduction, but it was clearly more than a peck between friends. It was a lovers’ kiss, sensual and sweet. After a long, uncomfortable moment of staring, the thief raised his flabbergasted gaze to Gil’s.

Gil only grinned, not bothering to hide his smugness while his friend's face went carmine. Served Rat right for thinking Gil would ever hurt the woman he loved.

"I...um...well, uh...hmm..."

With a laugh, Gil let the poor bastard off the hook. "That's exactly what I've been saying for the last few days, old boy." Clasp ing his friend's hand, he clapped him on the shoulder and leaned in closer. "Pray for me."

## Chapter Fourteen

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lianon,” the chancellor said, shaking Lianon’s hand. She was both surprised and gratified that he didn’t bow over her hand or kiss it, that he took his cues from her clothes and bearing rather than something as insignificant as gender.

“Likewise, your honor,” she replied, taking a seat beside Kaela on the settee.

“Please, call me Collin.”

Lianon smiled and nodded. “I’ve heard a great deal about you in the last day or so, Collin.”

The man’s lips thinned, turning his lean, handsome face grim as he sat opposite her in an overstuffed chair. “Nothing flattering, I would expect, considering the source.”

“Not so,” she said, taking the cup of tea the steward handed her and sipping. “Savilaen’s wife happens to be an admirer of yours. Unfortunately, she’s not about to let that interfere with what she wants.”

The man leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his knees, hands loosely clasped before him, ignoring the cup his steward offered. His eyes pinned her, and she was suddenly made aware of what it was that had carried such a seemingly mild man up

through the rank and file of the bureaucracy. There was steel in him, hidden most of the time, but honed and tempered all the same.

“I don’t understand,” he said flatly.

Gil’s presence at her shoulder was more reassuring than it should have been. She was a fucking Emissary, damn it, trained by a Kurgan *shahar*. She could take the chancellor apart piece by piece if she wished. His steward, on the other hand, looked like he could handle himself, but still...

“Savilaen didn’t set this up. His wife did.”

She didn’t know how the chancellor’s expression could get any colder, but somehow it did. “Kessande.” His eyes flicked to the steward’s face, a telling glance, if brief. Lianon studied the servant as she sipped her tea. The man’s blue eyes were like a glacier—clearly his function in this household involved more personal duties than serving refreshments to guests. “I know she had no love for her husband, so why would she avenge him?”

“It’s nothing to do with vengeance. She’s the one who had your sister killed.”

If she hadn’t been watching closely, she might have missed the spasm of pain that flashed across his face. “Why?”

“She couldn’t allow charges to be laid against Savilaen for your sister’s rape. She stood to lose everything. What she had of her husband’s wealth and luxury was dearly bought. You know the kind of man he was. Why would he have treated his wife any better than he did your sister?”

*And why in Salgrim’s name am I defending her?*

The chancellor put his face in his hands. “So she let that whoreson take the punishment for her crime.”

Lianon set her cup back in its saucer. “You can hardly hold him blameless.”

“Oh, I don’t, I assure you. But pray, what grudge does Kessande sin-Savilaen have against me now?”

“You seek to bring the Emissaries under the thumb of the government. When that happens, the man she hired to kill your sister will answer directly to you. You can imagine how anxious she was to hide what she’d done.”

“Gods,” the chancellor muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose. The steward set the untouched cup of tea on the tray table and went to the liquor cabinet. He poured a generous measure of brandy into a cut-crystal tumbler and set it in his employer’s hand. As he did, their fingers brushed ever so briefly, a gesture that spoke for itself.

Collin took a long, strengthening sip. “It seems I owe you an apology, Lianon. Had I been more thorough investigating my sister’s death, none of this recent unpleasantness would have happened.”

She dismissed his apology as unnecessary and irrelevant. “What will you do?”

He studied her, his expression carefully neutral. “There are really only two options—a trial and prison or...something more permanent. You have arguably been harmed by this woman as deeply as I have. What would you have me do?”

Lianon thought of the woman’s words just before the pillow came down. *Nothing personal*. The sentiment described Kessande perfectly. Lianon thought about her hours tied to that bed, hours that might rather have been spent in a dark, damp hole somewhere, starving and thirsty and trampled in her own filth. Hours that might have been spent enduring all manner of torture, beatings or rape. Though kept bound and naked and utterly helpless, other than the tiny wound on her shoulder, Lianon had not been harmed.

Kessande sin-Savilaen was a villainess, certainly, but she’d been neither heedlessly cruel nor evil, only ruthless in her instinct for self-preservation.

Lianon was about to speak in favor of clemency when the bell rang. The steward left to answer the door, and a moment later ushered in Karek. The Kurgan stood as if perfectly relaxed, despite his swollen and discolored face and the fact that everyone in the room had cause to hate him.

“Lady Kessande is gone,” he announced without preamble. “She returned to the house to discover what had happened, then packed her bags and left.” His mouth twisted into an angry line. “But not before she had the maid Biata whipped for aiding you.”

“That fucking bitch.” Gil muttered under his breath.

Lianon studied Karek, noted the grim set to his mouth, the dark self-loathing in his eyes. “She had you do it, didn’t she?” she asked quietly and without reproach.

He nodded, letting out a harsh laugh. “Of course she did. She knew a Kurgan wouldn’t balk at striping the back of an innocent girl. When it was done, she tore up our contract and dismissed me from service. I came directly here.”

Lianon felt something go cold inside her. She turned back to Chancellor Collin. “By your leave, I think I would like to resolve this matter on my own, your honor.”

He frowned at her for a moment, then nodded. “I will leave the business entirely in your hands.” He turned to regard the Kurgan. “And what shall we do with you, Master Karek?”

Karek shrugged and offered a bloodless smile, made all the more unnerving by the swelling on his face. “Whatever you see fit, your honor. I am entirely at your mercy.”

“Smug bastard,” Gil murmured almost soundlessly—not realizing, Lianon knew, how sharp a Kurgan’s ears could be. Karek’s smile only widened.

Chancellor Collin sighed, waving his hand wearily at the Kurgan. “Get out.”

Karek grinned and executed a mocking bow. “You’re welcome.” He turned to Lianon, who couldn’t help but grin back at him. “I can’t say I’m unhappy with how things have come out, Emissary. The *shahar* who trained you did an exceptional job of it.”

She inclined her head, his compliment bringing a rush of heat to her cheeks. “Thank you.”

“I had them take Biata to the Kurgan hospital. Will you check on her in a few days? I’m fairly certain she has no wish to see me again...”

Lianon nodded. “I will.”

He made to leave, but turned once more in the salon doorway to offer Lianon a wry half-smile. “If we ever meet again, I hope it will be under better circumstances.”

Lianon could practically taste Gil’s irritation at the Kurgan’s gall. She flashed Karek a brief smile but said nothing. He nodded and left.

“Will you stay for dinner?” the chancellor inquired.

“Gladly,” Gil answered with comical alacrity. Lianon hid a grin behind her hand—Collin’s table must be something, indeed.

“You are all welcome to spend the night too.”

“We would be pleased to do so, thank you,” Lianon said. At Gil’s start of surprise, she smiled up at him. “No offense, my dear, but your old apartment isn’t exactly the height of luxury. I find my stay with Lady Kessande has spoiled me somewhat for finer things.” She winked. “And I hate to put Rat from his bed...”

He raised a brow, his eyes filling with heat, and she felt her belly tighten. She glanced at Kaela to find her cheeks pink and her own gaze unwontedly warm. To Lianon’s astonishment, Kaela rose, saying, “I find myself rather fatigued. Perhaps a pre-supper nap is in order.”

Lianon’s heart began to thud with excitement. She let her gaze wander down across Kaela’s bodice, where her nipples pressed against the fine lawn. “Perhaps you’re right, dear Kaela. A nap and maybe a hot bath will set all to rights, if our host will oblige.”

Chancellor Collin rose, straightening his jacket, his expression perfectly bland. “Harral will show you to your room and see to your needs. Let him know if there is anything at all that you require.”

Lianon rose and held her hand out to Kaela, reveling in the tingles that danced across her skin as their fingers interlaced. From where he stood behind the settee, Gil laid his hand on her shoulder, heat pouring from his palm through the layers of cloth and into her flesh.

“Thank you, chancellor,” she replied, her voice soft with emotion, “but I don’t think I require anything more.”

Harral left them in a comfortable but not ostentatious guest room with the promise to send the maids up with a tub, some hot water and a bottle of wine. Gil collapsed into a deep chair before the fire and flung one arm over his eyes. Lianon stretched out on the



bed to await the bath—after spending a day and a night tied up and forced to use a bedpan, she could hardly stand to be in her own skin.

It was a few moments before she noticed how nervous Kaela was, standing to one side of the door.

“What is it, my dear?” Lianon asked, sitting up.

“I, um...” Kaela began, approaching to sit gingerly on the edge of the mattress beside her. “I just thought I should tell you that Gil and I...well, last night we... That is, I wasn’t sure I would ever see either of you again, and I just...”

Lianon bit her lip to prevent a grin. “You just what?” she asked gently.

“We made...that is, we, um...consummated...” The woman’s cheeks were aflame, her eyes downcast, her hands twisted together in her lap.

Lianon forced her features to a semblance of gravity. “I see.”

Kaela’s gaze flew pleading to her face. “Please, don’t blame Gil, it wasn’t his fault at all. I talked him into it.”

Lianon turned fully toward her, and away from Gil where he sat by the fire watching them. When she was sure he couldn’t see, she flicked her eyes in his direction then winked at Kaela. “You let me be the judge of who should be held in blame, my dear,” she said, injecting as much coldness as she could into the words.

Kaela’s eyes widened, then dropped to her lap to hide her reaction to Lianon’s meaningful look. If anything, her face went even redder. “But I insisted,” the clever girl said meekly, playing along with the theatrical timing of a seasoned actress. Lianon felt a surge of heat flood her sex just looking at her. “He tried to talk me out of it...”

“He’s a worldly older man and you an innocent girl. Yet you would hold him blameless and take all responsibility for his lack of restraint?” She finally turned to Gil to find him scowling over at her in indignation. She sighed sadly, sticking out her bottom lip. “I so wanted to be there when you finally took her, my love. I think you will have to work extra hard to help me get over my disappointment...”

“Oh cruel, Lianon,” he said, his voice like rustling velvet, his lips curving upward in a wicked smile. “What a mean streak you have. One day it might get you something you didn’t bargain for.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed, too handsome by a mile, and fully aware of it.

A knock announced the arrival of the bathtub and its accouterments. The maids made an efficient job of filling the tub and setting out towels. Harral uncorked a bottle of wine and poured three glasses, glowering eloquently at Gil the entire time. In no time, the servants were gone and Lianon was naked and immersed past her waist in blessedly hot water.

Kaela knelt beside the tub. “Here,” she said, taking up the ewer, “let me help you with your hair.”

Lianon wasn’t about to argue, not with the heat of the water creeping into all the parts of her that resented her leap from that window. Sitting up, she leaned her head back, closed her eyes and let Kaela wash her hair, reveling in the sensation of the woman’s fingertips firmly massaging her scalp. A few moments later, she felt another pair of hands, callused and hard, smooth slick, soapy lather across her shoulders and chest. Her cunt tightened, the tissues swelling with desire.

Kaela poured an ewer of water over Lianon’s hair, her fingers smoothing the clean tresses, caressing her nape then moving around to her front to toy with one nipple. With a moan, Lianon reclined fully against the high back of the tub and let them have their way with her. From either side of the tub, two hands, one rough one soft, plucked at her nipples, twisting them into hard, straining pebbles. Two sets of lips alit on the heated flesh of her throat, kissing their way down to her shoulders, her collarbones, her breasts. As those mouths fastened on her aching nipples, the two hands moved in tandem beneath the water, down her torso and between her thighs. She shifted and opened her legs wider to allow them access, her clit throbbing, her cunt spilling its slickness into the bathwater.

Ten fingers probed her swollen slit, tangling together as they tugged and stroked her hot flesh. The muscles of her belly coiled tighter as she was assailed above and below,

greedy mouths devouring her breasts, questing fingers circling her clit, pushing up into her channel. Her hips tilted up of their own volition, urging Gil's thick fingers deeper into her cunt while Kaela's more delicate ones tormented her pulsing clit. He began to fuck her in earnest with three fingers, long, slow strokes that had her writhing, sloshing bathwater out onto the carpet. Thrusting high up inside her, he stroked the concentration of nerve endings on the upper wall of her channel while Kaela worked the same bundle of sensation from the outside.

A thread of pleasure stretched like a bowstring from her sex to her nipples, pulling ever tighter as the tension built. Kaela's lips abandoned her breast and Lianon almost screamed for the loss of it. Then those lips descended on hers, tongue plunging and plundering, swallowing her cries as her hips started to buck and her cunt melted all over their hands.

Gil's mouth worked its way up to hers, and she let those two worshipping tongues lap at each other and at her own as her breath slowly returned to normal and her vision cleared.

"Am I forgiven?" Gil asked with a smug grin.

She tried to glower at him, but her twitching lips ruined the effect. "Ask me again later."

The water was getting cold. With a sigh of contentment, Lianon sat up, pressing a quick kiss to Kaela's lips and one to Gil's. Gil grasped her by the elbow and helped her to her feet while Kaela wrapped a thick towel around her shoulders. As Lianon patted herself dry, Kaela went to the little table between the two chairs and fetched her a glass of wine. Lianon took it and sipped, clutching the towel around her. Sitting on the edge of the bed she closed her eyes as the dryness of the white danced across her taste buds. Apparently the chancellor's wine cellar was as refined and extravagant as his larder.

"Take off your clothes, Kaela," she instructed without opening her eyes. She kept them shut, listening to the rustle of fabric and Kaela's increasingly ragged breaths as her command was carried out. After a few moments, there was only silence, punctuated by the rasp of air in and out of Kaela's lungs.

“Are you looking at her, Gil?” Lianon asked between sips of wine.

From the chairs near the fire: “Yes.”

“What do you think of her?”

A pause, a rustle of movement as he shifted in his seat. “She’s fucking beautiful.”

Lianon opened her eyes. A haze of wine and happiness and afternoon sunlight surrounded her vision. At the center of it stood Kaela, gloriously naked, her eyes downcast and her hair falling forward to hide most of her face as a flush of arousal and embarrassment spread across her upper chest. Her legs were pressed demurely together, hiding her secrets behind a triangle of black curls. Her nipples jutted from between her tresses, begging for attention.

Lianon flicked a glance at Gil to see him sprawled in one of the chairs, his legs thrust out, his eyes fixed on Kaela. A glass of wine, half-drained, dangled from his fingers. She didn’t have to see through the arm of the chair to know his cock was hard. After stroking Lianon to orgasm, and now faced with Kaela on display like a virgin at a slave market, he was probably about to explode.

“Are you wet, Kaela?” Lianon asked, smiling at the stifled groan Gil made at the question.

Kaela’s eyes met hers then fell back to her feet. “Yes.” It was hardly a whisper, no more than a breath of sound.

“Show me,” Lianon said. “Touch yourself.”

“*Gods,*” Gil muttered under his breath. From the corner of her eye, Lianon saw him press his free hand to his cock.

Kaela was nothing if not obedient. Looking Lianon right in the eye, she slid one hand down her belly and through the hair of her mound, and slipped two fingers into her slit. She pushed them deep into her wetness then withdrew them, shiny and slick, and showed them to Lianon.

“Taste yourself,” Lianon said, her cunt so full of pressure she thought she could come just by grinding her hips against the mattress.

“Salgrim help me,” Gil groaned as Kaela lifted her fingers to her mouth and sucked them clean.

Lianon took another sip of her wine, letting it warm on her tongue before swallowing it. “Kaela my dear, I think we had better do something about Gil before he makes a mess of himself.”

Kaela returned her fingers to her cunt, circling them around her clit while Gil’s breathing became more and more ragged. “What shall I do, Lianon?”

Lianon smiled, rubbing the rim of her glass across her lips. The cool glass was like ice against her hot flesh, the sharpness of the wine’s bouquet filled her nostrils. “Go to him.”

Kaela walked gracefully across the room, her shoulders back now, her head higher as she gained confidence in her own beauty and allure. She didn’t stop until she stood between Gil’s outthrust legs, her cunt even with his eye.

“Kneel, my love,” Lianon instructed gently.

Kaela sank to her knees, resting her forearms on Gil’s thighs. She gazed up at him, her eyes huge and trusting, her lips parted in excitement and uncertainty.

Lianon stood and let her towel fall, moving to stand behind the other woman. “Unbutton his trousers, Kaela my lamb.”

With shaking hands, Kaela worked the buttons loose, then untied the drawstring of Gil’s linen. Folding back the panels, she bared his cock. Gil’s breath gusted in and out of his flared nostrils and he bucked his hips up toward her hands, but she paused, unnerved, unsure of what to do next.

Lianon knelt behind her, her knees spread wide so Kaela’s bottom fitted snugly in the hollow of her crotch. Encircling Kaela with her arms she began to pluck at her nipples, twisting them into tight peaks. Gil’s eyes were like hot coals watching what she did. Resting her chin on Kaela’s shoulder, rubbing her own hard nipples against the smooth expanse of Kaela’s back, Lianon ran her tongue along the shell of her ear then bit the lobe. “Take him in your hand, my dear.”

“*Gods...*” Gil hissed, his cock trickling come as Kaela grasped it. Immediately she began to pump him, up and down, just like she’d done before—god, was it only yesterday morning? Gil groaned, his hips beginning to wriggle as she found her rhythm, thrusting his shaft up into her fist.

Lianon let one hand slide down Kaela’s soft belly and between her legs. “Mmm, Kaela, you’re so wet.” Lifting her hand, she held out two fingers coated with slick cream, showed them to Gil. Then she rubbed that fragrant wetness onto the head of his cock.

She brought her fingers to her mouth and licked them. “You taste so good, my love,” she whispered into Kaela’s ear as her hand crept back into the woman’s soaking pussy. Her other hand still toying with Kaela’s nipple, Lianon pushed two fingers up into her cunt, her thumb circling the firm hill of her clit.

“Ahhh!” Kaela cried, tilting her hips forward to pull Lianon’s fingers deeper. “God, *Lianon...*”

“She makes a lot of noise, doesn’t she, Gil?” Lianon said with a smile, her clit pulsating with every beat of her heart. “I think you should give her something else to do with her mouth.”

“Perhaps you’re right, love,” Gil replied, his voice a thick rasp. Reaching out, he grabbed a handful of Kaela’s hair and gently pulled her toward him. Lianon kept up the pressure on Kaela’s clit, distracting her from her fears. Even as she sank deeper into their pool of desire, Lianon understood how difficult this act could be for Kaela after the things she had been forced to do half a year ago.

Kaela took the very tip of him between her lips and delicately sucked, stroking him with her tongue. Tilting to one side, Lianon leaned forward over Kaela’s shoulder and added her own mouth to the task, alternating between kissing Kaela’s lips and Gil’s cock. Seeking a better angle, she shifted, pulling her hand from Kaela’s pussy.

A moan of loss escaped the other woman as her lips wrapped around the thickness of Gil’s prick. It turned to one of pleasure as Lianon slid her wet fingers between Kaela’s buttocks and probed her cunt from behind. With her other hand, she braced herself on Gil’s thigh as she dipped her head and started to suckle his balls. Kaela’s head bobbed

over his prick, her mouth taking him ever deeper as she warmed to her task. He leaned his head back, his glass of wine falling from his nerveless fingers to spill on the carpet, his breath hissing in.

Gil's balls pulled tight, as if trying to crawl back inside his body. Lianon released them with a wet slurp. "Kaela, my darling, he's going to come any moment, perhaps you should let me..."

Apparently recalling all too well the acquired taste that was Gil's semen, Kaela promptly surrendered his cock. Lianon gladly took up where she left off, sucking him in, pushing her mouth down the length of him until he was seated deep in her throat. Kaela lapped at his balls, mewling like a kitten until Gil gave a hoarse cry and stiffened, shooting streams of come down Lianon's throat. At last he stilled, his breath gusting in and out of his gaping mouth.

Lianon licked him clean then sat back on her haunches and winked at Kaela. "Look at him," she said, clucking her tongue in disgust. "Hasn't even got his boots off and he's already finished."

"Hey!" Gil protested with a breathless laugh, leaning forward in his seat.

"No, no, don't bother getting up," Lianon said airily, rising and drawing Kaela to her feet. "As usual the women will take care of everything while the man enjoys his well-earned rest..."

Kaela giggled delightfully, practically prancing over to the bed and leaping onto it. Lianon crawled up after her and shoved her onto her back, one hand in her hair pinning her in place while she kissed her mouth hard. She was vaguely aware of Gil's movements across the room, kicking his boots off and stripping. With a burgeoning sense of anticipation, she kissed and nibbled her way down Kaela's neck to her breasts, pressing the two mounds together so she could lave both nipples at once. Kaela moaned her approval, wriggling under Lianon's worshiping mouth. Shinnying lower, Lianon tongued Kaela's navel, at the same time thrusting her bottom in the air to tease Gil with glimpses of her sex.

Kaela's legs were wide open. In answer to that invitation, Lianon slipped her fingers into the other woman's folds and kissed a path the rest of the way down her abdomen. Two fingers stroking high up inside Kaela's channel, Lianon took the straining nub of her clit between her lips and sucked. Kaela's response was immediate and gratifying, her whole body arching off the bed as she keened with delight.

Grinning, Lianon dragged her tongue up and down the woman's furrow, now plying that swollen clit, now prodding alongside her thrusting fingers into Kaela's pussy. Clutching hands tunneled through Lianon's damp hair and pressed her mouth harder onto that mound of hungry flesh.

The mattress dipped as Gil climbed up behind Lianon, his fingers parting her nether lips. Something icy struck her right between her cheeks and she squealed at the shivery sensation. Cold liquid dripped down between her labia and Gil tossed the empty wine glass aside. He rubbed the wine into her hot flesh, adding it to the flood of woman's wet that poured from her pussy. As her clit began to throb anew, Lianon kept up her ministrations on Kaela's swollen sex, lashing her over and over until the woman's whole body shuddered and her cunt went into glorious spasm. Kaela pressed a fisted hand against her own mouth to smother her cries—even so, Lianon couldn't imagine there was anyone in the chancellor's residence or its surrounding environs unaware of what the three of them were doing in this room.

As Kaela lay limp, recovering from her exertions, Gil continued to fuck Lianon with clever fingers. Sighing in growing arousal, she laid her cheek on Kaela's soft belly and tilted her bottom higher in the air, offering more of herself to him.

"Getting your second wind, darling?" she asked smugly.

He slapped her ass with his cock. "Don't be cheeky."

"Mmm, or what?"

In answer, his slick fingers slid from her cunt and up to her anus, prodding gently. Her breath caught as he pushed one fingertip past the first ring of muscle, then the second. Reaming her, he added another finger, then a third. His free hand glided across her buttocks and around beneath her belly to descend between her legs. As his wicked



fingers stretched her tiny hole, his other hand plied her clit, alternately tugging and pressing until her hips were grinding back against him. Her breath caught in her lungs, her whole torso aching and taut from the motions of his fingers front and aft.

Beneath her, Kaela stirred, her hands toying with Lianon's hair. Gently lifting Lianon's head, Kaela scooted down the bed until their faces were even. Tenderly they kissed, lips brushing lightly, tongues lapping as Gil continued to prepare Lianon's rear entrance.

He shifted behind her, positioning himself. His fingers still tormenting her clit, he took his cock in his other hand and put the tip against her opening. They had only ever done this a few times, but Lianon knew what to do. As he pushed inexorably forward, she relaxed her muscles and pushed back, bearing down with her eyes squeezed shut. Her breath left her in an agonized rush as she felt the bulbous head of his cock slip past the snug circle of muscle.

"What is it?" Kaela whispered.

Lianon opened her eyes and gazed down at Kaela's worried face. Gil was motionless, allowing her to get used to the ache and burn of his thickness seated in her bottom. With his free hand, he gathered the slick wetness dripping from her cunt and spread it around her other opening.

"Gil is inside me..." Lianon said softly, pressing a swift kiss to Kaela's lips. She skimmed one hand down the other woman's torso and between her parted thighs. Kaela's hips angled upward of their own accord, a response that had become reflex over the last few days. But Lianon bypassed her clit and her wet channel, probing further downward between Kaela's cheeks. Carefully, she inserted the moistened tip of one finger into the other woman's anus. Kaela's breath hissed in and her eyes fluttered closed, but she didn't protest. Encouraged, Lianon pushed further in, sinking her finger to the second knuckle, feeling that perfectly smooth, slick flesh grasp at her. "He's inside me here."

Kaela's eyes flew open, staring into Lianon's in shock. Lianon smiled back, still working that one finger inside Kaela's snug anus. Behind her, Gil began to push forward once more, embedding himself inch by inch in her willing flesh, one hand working her

clit, the other grabbing her buttock, fingers digging in. Lianon relaxed into it, reveling in the sensation of being filled to bursting, of engulfing him. Soon he was seated all the way inside her, his balls pressed tight to her cunt. She could feel the throb of his pulse in the super-sensitive skin lining her back passage. It was as if his heart beat inside her.

He stayed like that for a long, shivering moment then began to move. As he thrust into her, she took up his rhythm, plunging her own finger in and out of Kaela's exquisitely tight anus in time with his movements. One of Kaela's hands pushed into Lianon's hair and pulled her head down. They kissed, mouths devouring each other as their need built. With a sense of exultation, Lianon realized Kaela's other hand was between them, strumming her own clit even as Gil strummed Lianon's. The three of them moved as one, writhing in a mindless dance of sensation until Lianon could not have remembered their names or her own, could not have said where their bodies ended and hers began.

She came first, her muscles clenching around Gil's pounding cock as Kaela's eager mouth consumed her frantic screams, drinking them down like wine. When awareness returned, Lianon realized her finger was sheathed to the last knuckle in Kaela's grasping anus. Barely aware of what she was doing, she pulled it out and shoved it back in, burying it over and over in Kaela's tight, virgin hole.

Gil hammered into Lianon, faster and faster, mercilessly pounding the tender flesh of her bottom until he finally roared his release, spilling a flood of hot semen inside her. At the sound of his pleasure, Kaela's orgasm overtook her and she exploded, muscles spasming around Lianon's plunging finger, so overcome that the only noise to escape her was a hoarse and wheezing rasp.

Pulling her finger from Kaela's body, Lianon fell weakly to one side of her. Gil collapsed on the other, his flaccid cock slipping free. The smell of female musk and white wine surrounded them in a cloud of satiation and contentment.

Kaela lay with eyes closed, a smug smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Lianon's gaze met Gil's over her profile and her nose prickled with the beginnings of tears. She offered him a wobbly smile, and his own was like a sun rising across his face.

“I love you, my dear,” Lianon said to him.

“I love you too,” Gil and Kaela said as one.

Lianon and Gil both stared down at her in astonishment. It seemed to take a moment for Kaela to realize what she’d said. Her eyes flew open, a deep red flush spreading across her whole face and down her chest. She met Lianon’s gaze with a frown of consternation and shy defiance.

“Well I do, you know,” she said softly but firmly, as if daring them to refute her. She turned to regard Gil with the same impartial frown. “I love you both.”

Gil grinned like a fool, and then his face was obscured by a halo of moisture as Lianon’s eyes filled.

“All right,” Gil said stolidly. “That’s enough sniveling, Lianon. You’re the one who suggested this whole arrangement, you’re just going to have to live with the consequences, no matter how horrible.”

Between them, Kaela giggled, the sound filling Lianon with warmth.

Lianon swiped the tears from her eyes and smiled down at Kaela. The other woman’s beautiful brown eyes met hers, warm and soft and full of wonder.

“I think I can live with these consequences,” Lianon said quietly, and bent to kiss her. “I do love you, pet,” she whispered against Kaela’s lips.

She lifted her head to find Gil gazing down at Kaela, everything he felt written on his face. Reaching for his hand, she laced their fingers together over Kaela’s belly and put her head on the pillow. No, it wouldn’t be hard to live with this at all.

Kaela snuggled between Lianon and Gil, fitting perfectly in the space they made. Lianon’s eyelids were starting to droop. Her stomach was beginning to feel the lack of luncheon, but she hardly had the energy to care. Perhaps a nap would be just the thing...

## Chapter Fifteen

“I’ve had my men check for Kessande at all the city gates,” Collin said as Harral poured wine and the kitchen maid served out tiny fried lobster cakes and a salad of watercress and melon. His guests looked little refreshed for a bath and a nap—if the noises emanating from their room this afternoon were any indication, they had spent most of their hiatus in enjoyable but exhausting diversion.

“I can’t imagine she made things so easy as to linger...” Gil murmured, his nose deep in his glass of Fjorn red, appreciatively inhaling the bouquet.

Collin nodded, sipping his own wine. “Long gone by the time my men got there. She left by the east gate. Just the lady, her husband and two servants. Last anyone saw, they were on the Andutheren road.”

Lianon frowned, a forkful of watercress half-raised to her lips. “She brought her husband?”

Collin smirked. “A dutiful wife to the end.” He studied the two women where they sat, side by side, opposite their...husband. Two wives. Not precisely unheard of, but this wasn’t Qaranica, and Gil al-Moirae wasn’t Anthoril of Harrowsfail. Collin found himself wondering just how the dynamic worked, both in bed and outside of it. Looking at Lianon now in her bloodstained shirt and trousers, he could almost imagine she was more

husband than wife. Collin's eyes flicked to Harral to find his lover's eyes steady on his face, his thoughts hidden as always behind a façade of cold intensity.

Lianon frowned. "Almost pity the man. She hates him. Any restraint she might have felt in Savilaen's home under society's scrutiny will be long abandoned. How fast are they traveling?"

Collin leaned back in his chair, popping a lobster cake in his mouth. "Fast enough. I'm sure she has money and to spare. The men I sent to interview Savilaen's factor reported that she'd been seen in his offices yesterday afternoon. Savilaen was hardly a pauper. Kessande made a large withdrawal from his accounts as insurance against this very contingency. Enough to get her set up nicely in Andutheren, or wherever else she might wish to go."

Lianon's eyes met Gil's across the table. "Well, my love, I suppose we're for Andutheren then." Husband regarded wife for a long moment, then nodded acquiescence.

"I'll provide horses and provisions, of course," Collin offered. "And whatever funds you feel you might require."

"You're both going?" Kaela asked softly, her face pale.

Lianon smiled and took the other woman's hand, bringing it to her lips. Collin watched the easy affection between them, the intimacy of their touch even in a public place, and knew Harral's eyes would be hard with mingled envy and reproach. In truth, Collin himself couldn't help but covet what these three had. Emissaries of Davnia lived on the boundary between the criminal and the respectable—they enjoyed the privileges of one world and the freedoms of the other. Those freedoms would never be Collin's to enjoy.

"It won't be more than a week or ten days," Lianon told her.

"You can stay here, if you like," Collin suggested. "And your father and siblings should be set up in a new house in a day or two. I'm sure you'd like to spend some time with them."

If anything, Kaela's face went even paler. "Yes, well..." She pushed her watercress around on the plate until it was bruised beyond recognition.

The maid came and collected plates then brought the second course. As Collin had anticipated, Gil was effusive in his praise of beef tenderloin wrapped in buttery pastry and baked to perfect redness. Watching him, Collin wondered if a man could have an orgasm just from a meal. He was so enraptured with the food that he seemed oblivious to Kaela's dismay, but Collin caught the brief, worried glance Gil sent her way and it was clear he cared deeply for her happiness. Whatever these three felt for each other, it was genuine. Collin found himself having to resist the urge to send his own meaning-laden glance Harral's way.

With a few whispers and a kiss, Lianon managed to coax a smile from the other woman, but Collin could tell it was less than sincere. He wondered if it was just the prospect of Gil and Lianon leaving, or if Kaela was perhaps troubled by her imminent reunion with her family. He studied her face, his eyes on the scar that marred her beauty. He wasn't certain of all that had transpired in that room at Flaxton's six months ago, but he thought he could reasonably guess what had led to those wounds. What woman would not be ashamed to tell her family she'd been raped?

And she could not be looking forward to explaining this...unconventional relationship to her father, either.

Collin steered the conversation to less grim matters and they passed the meal in easy small talk. When Harral poured brandy, Kaela was the only one to eschew. She was already flushed from too much wine and not enough dinner. As soon as Lianon finished her brandy, the two women excused themselves and retired.

Gil held out his own glass for a refill, smiling his thanks. Harral glared back, refusing to be charmed. Collin wondered what exactly it was about Gil al-Moirae that irked him so. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen his lover quite so vexed.

"Her father has been released. He's lodging at an inn for now, but I found a suitable house and it should be ready by tomorrow night."

"My thanks," Gil said, swirling his glass so the brandy could warm to his fingers. From his expression, the news was not as well-received as one might assume.

"What would you have me say to him?"

Gil's mouth twisted and he frowned into the rich, amber liquor in his glass. "You know what happened to her?"

"Is it anything I cannot guess?"

Gil's eyes met his, grim and hard. "I suppose not. I'm amazed she can even suffer a man to touch her."

"She loves you."

One corner of Gil's mouth turned up, ever so slightly. "No accounting for taste."

Collin chuckled despite himself.

"Tell him what happened," Gil said very quietly. "Don't gloss it over."

Collin closed his eyes, letting the brandy burn his tongue. "You're sure?"

"Best to have it out. It will spare Kaela the pain of telling him."

"All right then." Collin drained his glass and stood.

Gil rose and extended a hand. Collin shook it, grinning. He couldn't help it. He liked this man.

"Thank you for everything, chancellor," Gil said. "Anytime you want to call in the favor..."

"That position is still open if you want it."

Gil made a face. "I'll think about it. Really, I will. Thanks again."

"Good night, Master Gil."

Gil shut the door quickly, then leaned back against it and stared, incredulous. Bloody women, leave them alone for ten minutes...

Kaela sprawled naked on her back on top of the coverlet, hair fanned out about her head and shoulders, legs spread wide. Lianon, also naked, lay stretched out beside her, propped on one elbow facing the door, her free hand probing Kaela's female flesh. As he watched, she leaned in and took one of Kaela's nipples in her mouth, nibbling and lapping at it, rolling it on her tongue. Her eyes never moved from his.

Kaela arched and angled her hips, telling Lianon with her movements that she wanted a firmer hand. Smiling, Lianon continued to tease her with delicate strokes of fingers and tongue.

Gil thought he had never seen anything so beautiful or so erotic as these two women together. His cock was hard as a steel spike, his throat dry, his eyes burning at the understanding that they were his. That he was theirs.

“Lianon...” Kaela murmured, wriggling in growing need. *“Please.”*

In answer, Lianon drew her hand away from Kaela’s tortured flesh, evoking a whimper of dismay. She brought her fingers to her lips and licked the wet from them. Desperate, Kaela’s hands went to her sex.

Lianon chuckled. “Look at her, my love. She’s on fire. Come and make her burn hotter.”

Gil pushed away from the door and slipped his clothes off. His gaze locked with Lianon’s, he approached the bed. Kaela’s legs eased further apart as he neared, her eyes on his face, pleading and dark.

Climbing up onto the foot of the bed, he crawled between her spread thighs and dipped his head. Her hands separated, parting her furrow for him, and the scent of her arousal poured into his nostrils. Slowly, deliberately, he dragged his tongue up her wet valley, loving the small sound she made then, half whimper half shout.

Glancing up, he watched Lianon return her attention to Kaela’s breasts, hands kneading the soft mounds, mouth gobbling at those pointed nipples. Kaela was half-mad already, not caring what clamor she made, clutching Lianon’s head to her breasts and angling her hips to push her cunt harder onto Gil’s mouth.

He thought of the Kaela of a few days ago, the broken girl reduced to tears and sobbing because a man had looked at her askance. He would never have imagined she could become this sensual tigress who snarled and mewled and purred with desire under his touch and his wife’s.

Stretching out, he took her hips in his hands to hold her still and licked the length of her slit, over and over, lashing her clit at the end of each agonizing stroke. She bucked



and thrashed, but he kept up the slow torture, listening with satisfaction as her cries grew louder and more insistent. With chagrin, he realized he was grinding down onto the mattress, but it wasn't in him to make himself stop. His cock demanded the friction, and he wasn't the type to deny it what it wanted.

"I think you need to take her, my dear," Lianon whispered, her gaze drilling into his.

She was right. There was nothing in the world Gil needed more at this moment than to fuck Kaela. And from the increasingly eager noises Kaela was making, she was in complete agreement.

He pulled away and knelt. His wife straddled Kaela, and for a moment he was treated to the enchanting vision of their charms nestled one atop the other. Then she grabbed Kaela and rolled, flipping them the other way round so Kaela lay on top of her.

Hands threaded through long, loose black hair, their fingertips poking out of the dark masses of it as the two women kissed. Reaching, Gil slid two fingers into Kaela's pussy, relishing the tiny spasms he could already feel rippling the walls of her channel. Gently he applied an upward pressure and her bottom lifted until she was propped on her widely splayed knees. Lianon's legs forked out from beneath her, Gil kneeling between them. Gil could see Kaela's fingers sliding up and down Lianon's furrow, alternately circling her clit and plunging up into her cunt.

Gil sidled closer, positioning himself, put his cock against her entrance. Kaela stiffened and as understanding dawned, Gil cursed Lianon. Didn't she remember this was how sur-Marus had taken Kaela? She was there when it happened, she'd seen the man's brutality. Why would she have orchestrated this so that Gil took Kaela in the exact same way as the man who had raped her?

But clearly Lianon understood what she was doing. Her hands glided up and down Kaela's back, gentling her. "Shh, all is well," Lianon whispered in Kaela's ear. "It's Gil, my love. It's only Gil. He loves you. I love you. Kiss me."

Adding his own soothing touch to Lianon's, Gil stroked Kaela's back with his free hand, bending to press a kiss to one perfect, pale cheek of her bottom. He let his lips work their way to the base of her spine and higher, pausing to give special attention to

each crescent-shaped scar that interrupted the smooth skin of her back. His fingers still probed her sopping cunt, delving deep while his thumb rubbed her clit, coaxing her with the tenderness of his caresses.

*You are not those men.* Kaela had said it just last night, and Gil could only hope she still believed it.

Gradually, as Gil gently fondled her, and Lianon teased Kaela's lips with her own, the woman relaxed. Gil kept up the slow rhythm of his fingers thrusting into her heat and soon her hips were tilting back toward him in anticipation.

He withdrew his fingers, held his cock at her opening. Eased inside, holding his breath as her tight walls stretched to accommodate him. She shivered, but pushed back, seeking more. He watched as she engulfed him, his shaft steadily disappearing into her until his abdomen was pressed against her bottom. Her inner muscles wrapped him tight as a virgin's, twitching from sensory overload.

He lifted his gaze. Met Lianon's. She looked at him and everything in her heart was there in her eyes. As he began to thrust, she took Kaela's face in her hands and locked gazes with her. Then her hands slid down that sinuous back to cup the other woman's buttocks, spreading them wider so Gil could sink his cock even deeper into Kaela's gorgeous pussy.

He could see Kaela's right arm wedged between her and Lianon, muscles working in her shoulder as she fondled the other woman. Soon, Lianon's eyes were drifting shut, her fingers digging into Kaela's soft, rounded flesh as her need built.

He tried to keep to a slow, undemanding rhythm, but Kaela had other ideas. As he thrust forward, she shoved back into him and soon she was dictating the tempo, grinding back against him with increasing urgency. Air burst from her open mouth in breathy little cries. Gil slammed into her, hard and fast, and felt Lianon's fingers nudge against his balls as she plied Kaela's clit. A moment more and Kaela was coming, her whole body shuddering as her cunt clamped down on his cock, wringing it until his seed exploded out of him on wave after wave of pure bliss.

He could hardly hear Lianon's cries, echoing his own, over the thrum of blood in his ears.

Drained, sated, he collapsed to one side of them and hoped with everything left in him that the women required no more of him tonight.

It wasn't until some time later, hovering on the edge of sleep with Kaela's warm body stretched out along his and Lianon's hand clasped tight in his own, that it occurred to him he hadn't pulled out before spilling his seed. Odd, how little the realization troubled him.

"Come to bed, love," Collin chuckled, pressing his forehead to the back of Harral's shoulder and wrapping his arms around his waist.

Harral stared at the wall as if he could drive a hole through it with the force of his gaze, and took a sizable gulp of brandy. "In a moment."

Collin slid his hands lower, running them over a taut abdomen encased in linen to an erection that seemed to leap to his touch. Gods, the man was hard as a rock. From the other side of the wall, the cries of three people mingled in ecstatic crescendo then fell silent.

Collin grinned, running his palm up and down that glorious length of cock. "I'm starting to wonder if you want to fuck him."

Harral nearly choked on his brandy. "What?"

"You've hardly stopped staring at Gil all evening, and now here you are with an enormous cockstand, listening while he pleasures his women. What else am I to think?"

"Col—"

"Come to bed," Collin said, a familiar devil rearing up inside him, bent on mischief and mayhem. "If you like, you can think of him while I fuck you. I'll even let you call me 'Gil'. Or better yet... 'Emissary'."

Harral spun, his face a gorgeous portrait of outrage. "What are you talking about?" Blue eyes flashed at him, angry and accusing.

Collin laughed, pulling Harral's shirt off over his head and leaving his hair delightfully mussed. Leaning in, he kissed a path across that muscular chest. "Oh Gil, oh Emissary... *Emissary*...!"

"It never occurred to you that we could still be playing Kessande's game?" Harral snapped. "That she might have escaped by his design and that he could be here in this house to finish the task she set before him?"

Collin stopped cold. That hadn't occurred to him, actually, and it peeved him to have Harral point it out to him. But even as Harral made the suggestion, Collin dismissed it. "Even if he were that stupid, Lianon isn't. Just think. If he let Kessande manipulate him by threatening his woman, he'd be inviting others to do the same. Now that he has two wives to protect, he has all the more cause to put Kessande in her place."

Harral's scowl eased as he acknowledged the sense in that. Collin reached for the man's beaded nipples, twisting them firmly, relishing his swift hiss of indrawn breath. "And where is Kessande's place?" Harral said through gritted teeth.

*Where is yours?* Collin thought, envisioning all the delicious ways he could remind Harral of it. "I believe it is Lianon who will decide that. I trust her judgment." He stepped up to Harral, close enough to feel the heat pouring off of his skin. Leaning his head forward, Collin licked a wet trail up the center of his chest. "*Now* will you come to bed?"

Harral pressed close, pushing forward with his hips so his cock nudged against Collin's. With a smile, Collin tilted his face up for a kiss. Harral's lips came down, but gently. They tentatively explored Collin's, tender and worshipful. Mmm, it seemed that Harral knew his place after all. Basking in the heat that rolled off of his lover's skin, Collin tunneled his fingers through that mane of blond hair and increased the pressure, took control. The small, acquiescent sound Harral made at this initial display of authority had Collin's cock filling with blood.

"On your knees, my love," he whispered into Harral's panting mouth.

And there Harral was without a moment's hesitation, on his knees in front of Collin. With fingers that shook from excitement, Harral unfastened the buttons of Collin's trousers and tugged his drawstring loose. Collin watched as Harral took his cock in hand,

pumping it deliberately, his grip firm but not rough. A drop of come formed in the slit at the tip. Harral eagerly licked it off then took the shaft into his mouth and sucked it in deep. Nothing compared to it, to the image of Collin's dark, veined thickness disappearing into that gorgeous golden face. The moment stretched like slow honey pouring from a jar as Collin drank up the sight of it.

Then he stopped watching, his eyes drifting shut as he lost himself in sensation. Harral could work magic with that mouth, and he applied all his talent to the task. To Collin it always seemed that Harral burned hotter than anyone else—his mouth was like an inferno, setting Collin on fire. It wasn't long before Collin's balls drew up tight in preparation, a fiery tongue of pleasure licking its way from his groin straight up his torso to drive the breath from his lungs.

Hands fisting in blond hair he jerked Harral's face away. Blue eyes gazed up at him in adoration. Salgrim help him—that this golden god could find anything to worship in Collin's small, wiry body never ceased to astonish him. Trying to steady his breathing, Collin brushed a thumb across those lips that had just been wrapped around his shaft. "As delightful as that mouth is, my love, it isn't where I want to come. To bed with you."

Harral stood slowly, hands working the buttons of his trousers. His gaze held Collin's, never wavering, as he slid them down his legs and stepped free of them.

"On your back," Collin said, his voice thick. "So I can see you."

As Harral stretched out on the bed, Collin slipped from his own clothes. When he was naked, he climbed up between Harral's long, muscular legs and reached for the bottle of extract of *Eltharra* they kept on the nightstand.

He coated his fingers, slid them along Harral's crease, pushed one fingertip inside. Harral's chest heaved in anticipation, his cock trickling fluid, his eyes hot on Collin's face. Drawing in a ragged breath at the invasion of a second fingertip, Harral lifted his legs, pulled his knees to his chest, opening himself. Collin knew exactly what Harral wanted when he whispered, "Please..."

“Not yet,” Collin muttered, his stomach aching with tight-coiled lust. Leaning forward on one trembling arm, he watched Harral’s eyes and let his fingers probe, pushing deeper, stroking slick, tight walls, seeking that one sweet spot.

“God...” Harral groaned, his face contorting as his whole body jerked.

Collin grinned, prodded with his fingertips. “You like that?” Dipping his head down, he caught one taut nipple between his lips, sucking firmly despite Harral’s increasingly violent writhing. Harral’s hands were in his hair, holding tight as the man’s normally rigid control over his own body came undone.

“Good?” Collin muttered against Harral’s neck as his teeth bit in, tongue testing the rasp of stubble along Harral’s jaw. Three fingers now, all focused on that one perfect spot, the spot that could unravel a man’s mastery of himself in a single moment of unrepentant release.

“God yes...”

“Want to come?”

Harral arched, arms tightening around Collin’s back. “Col! God...”

Collin pulled back to watch the play of agony and bliss across that beautiful face. “Not yet,” he whispered, shifting closer on his knees, taking himself in hand. “Not yet...”

Harral’s whimper of dismay as Collin slipped his fingers out transformed into a long, shuddering groan of relief as he replaced them with his cock. Collin sank in all the way, feeling that hot, tight flesh enclose him, delighting in the tiny spasms that tugged at his shaft. Harral’s eyes were squeezed shut, his bottom lip caught hard between his teeth, his hands fisted in the blankets.

“Col—” he hissed, his whole body one rigid line of merciless restraint, holding himself on the precipice, refusing to leap.

Relenting, Collin pulled out all the way, relishing how the slick skin of Harral’s anus dragged at his cock. Slammed back in right to the hilt. Built up a slow rhythm that had Harral’s head thrashing on the pillow. A dozen thrusts and Harral was coming, a long, low groan escaping him as his cock erupted, filling the space between them with the bitter scent of seed. Between that scent and the muscles in glorious spasm around his own

prick, it wasn't long before Collin's own need reared up to master him, the coil drawing tighter and tighter until it finally snapped. His jaw clenched so hard he thought his teeth might shatter, he poured himself deep into that welcoming heat.

For a moment, everything went white. When Collin could see again, he was on his knees between Harral's sprawling legs, covered in sweat, muscles quivering. Harral's body was glowing golden in the candlelight, the chiseled perfection of his form even more apparent for the sheen of exertion on his skin. Collin ran his hands through his damp, tousled hair and offered his lover a wry half-smile.

With customary severity, Harral looked him right in the eye and said, "Oh, oh, *Emissary!*"

Barking laughter, Collin collapsed on top of him, capturing that stern mouth in a tender kiss. When he pulled back, Harral was smiling. A rare thing, and precious because of that.

"Oh, god help me, Harral, I love you."

Harral hugged him close, pressing his mouth against Collin's neck. "There's no help for this, Col..."

## Chapter Sixteen

Her stomach in knots, Kaela knocked.

A few moments later, the door opened. The man who stood on the other side of it seemed a vaguely familiar stranger. It wasn't until his eyes softened and filled with moisture that she recognized this gaunt old man in front of her for her father.

He stood and stared at her with eyes that poured tears, his chin wobbling, hands clutched together at his waist.

"Papa?" she whispered.

As if that single word broke some spell that had held him immobile, he let out a choked sob and pulled her into his arms.

"Oh, my Kaela, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She hugged him back, burying her face in his shoulder, trying not to notice how bony it was under her cheek. Half a year in prison had wasted him, melted the flesh from his bones, leached the color and luster out of what was left of his mane of dark hair. In the six months he'd spent in a cell he seemed to have aged ten years.

He pulled back, scrubbing at his wet cheeks, to look at her. His eyes alit on her scar and then flinched away. Remembering what Lianon had told her not so long ago, Kaela squared her shoulders and tucked her lock behind her ear. Surviving wasn't something to



be ashamed of. She was no longer interested in hiding what had happened to her. “It’s all right, Papa.”

His gaze dropped to her chest for the barest moment, then fled back up to her face. He dragged in a ragged breath. “The chancellor told me... Oh, *Kaela*. What have they done to you?”

She smiled, amazed that she could do so, amazed that she could be the strong one for him now that he needed it, returning a million such favors from her childhood. “It’s something horrible that happened to me, Papa,” she said, echoing words Lianon had said to her only a week ago. “It isn’t who I am. Not anymore.”

He nodded, drawing himself to his full height. It was only then that she realized how hunched he’d been, how drop-shouldered and beaten. “All right,” he said firmly. “All right. That’s my girl.”

He took her hand and drew her inside. The house was nothing special, but it was spacious and clean and the furnishings functional. It wouldn’t take long for it to fill with personal touches—especially if Lilis had her way. Kaela’s little sister was a great admirer of lace-edged pillows, embroidery, flowers and knickknacks.

Kaela’s father ushered her into a small salon and steered her to the settee. A pot of tea perched beside a platter of raisin bread on a little, three-legged table. He poured her a cup and handed it to her. “You have no baggage, m’dear?”

“I brought a satchel with me from the farm, but it’s at the chancellor’s residence. Chancellor Collin has been kind enough to let me stay there for as long as I have need.”

“I shall send Dael round to get your things this afternoon.”

Kaela’s cup hovered just below her mouth as her stomach tied up in knots once more. She’d rehearsed this a dozen times, playing it out in her head, desperately trying to decide how much to tell him about her relationship with Gil and Lianon. In the end, though, she really only had to say one thing. “Papa—”

“Of course, we’ll get you some new clothes once you’re settled back home with us,” he hastened to assure her, mistaking her stricken expression. “None of us has much in the way of belongings left, but that will change, don’t you worry.”

She shook her head, her eyes beginning to sting. “It’s not that, Papa. It’s just...” She took a deep breath and jumped in with both feet. “My home is with Gil and Lianon now.”

He blinked as if he’d just been slapped by his best friend. “What?”

God, this was hard...

“I’m going to stay with Gil and Lianon.”

He scowled. “As their housekeeper. Their servant.”

She closed her eyes, thinking of all the worse things she could have been than Gil and Lianon’s housekeeper. She opened them again, set her tea down so her shaking hands wouldn’t fumble it, and faced him square. “Not as their servant.”

He stared at her, aghast, and she could practically hear the wheels turning in his mind as he weighed the possibilities inherent in her words. She couldn’t imagine a universe in which he would approve of any of them.

He opened his mouth, shut it again. Carefully considered his response. “My girl, even taking into account what...happened to you, you have a future to think of. Certainly, it will not be easy to...*explain* your past to potential suitors, but you deserve something better than to be a...a kept woman.”

Kaela felt her back stiffen. *Kept woman*? She supposed it was a kinder term than “whore”, which was clearly what he believed her to be. But even worse than the label from her own father’s mouth was the idea that she ought to feel contrite about what had been done to her, that she needed to hide it or gloss it over or fucking apologize for it. That she ought to be grateful to any decent man who might condescend to court her now. And worst of all was that she had put herself in harm’s way for him, for this man—her *father*—who looked at her now with eyes full of judgment and reproach, who called her a kept woman.

“I’ve put my past behind me,” she said, keeping her voice carefully level. “I’m looking to my future.”

“Kaela,” he said, that remembered thread of disapproval woven into his gentle tone. “I’m grateful for all Gil al-Moirae and his wife have done for you—for all of us—but I

would not have you be beholden to them. If it comes to that, I'll give back the house and return to prison. I won't have you pay my debt by sacrificing your future."

"You think Gil and Lianon did this to make me stay with them?" She shook her head, her throat tight. "They did it because they love me and want me to be happy."

"I'm sure that's what they told you—"

"It's the truth!" she snapped, her fists clenched in her lap.

"Please," he said, raising his hands. "Don't let's quarrel. The chancellor told me that Master al-Moirae and his wife are abroad on a job at the moment? Surely you can stay here with us, at least until they return..."

Kaela stared, torn. As much as she was beginning to want to refuse, there was clearly no good reason to do so. And the matter was taken entirely out of her hands when her sister appeared in the salon doorway.

"Kaela? Kaela!"

With genuine joy, Kaela leapt to her feet just in time for her sister to pounce on her. "Lilis," she laughed, hugging the girl back. "Glad to see you, too!"

Grinning, she set Lilis away from her and looked her up and down. The workhouse was no prison, but it had taken its toll. Lilis' once plump cheeks were clean-carved, her collarbones standing in sharp relief above her bodice. In six months she'd gone from a soft-featured girl to a beautiful woman. Those vibrant, cheerful brown eyes were the same as Kaela remembered, though, and Lilis' smile was all the more stunning for her pallor.

"Oh, do say you'll stay, sis," she said now, hugging Kaela once more. "We'll be sharing a room, just like old times."

Kaela shot her father a warning glance, then turned back to her sister. "All right. Like old times. Where is Dael?"

Lilis wrinkled her nose. "Upstairs having a much-needed bath. You ought to have smelled him. I burned the clothes he was wearing."

Kaela giggled in spite of herself. "Not much has changed then," she said, winking.

“What was it like?” Lilis asked later as the two of them lay in the dark beneath the blankets of the bed they shared.

Kaela’s stomach lurched, but she forced her voice to a semblance of calm. “What?”

“Papa told me what happened. That you were...forced.”

“It was terrible. The worst thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Worse than when mama died?”

“Yes.”

Lilis’ arms came around her and squeezed her tight. “Oh, Kaela, I’m so sorry!”

“It’s all right. I sold myself to help you all, but what happened was no one’s fault save the monster who did it.”

“Papa says it doesn’t matter. He says he’ll find a man willing to wed you, no matter what.”

Kaela felt the resentment rising in her, but ruthlessly smothered it. As angry as she was with her father, she wasn’t about to sour his relationship with his other daughter. “I’m already wed.”

“What?” Lilis cried, torn between outrage and sisterly elation.

“I am Kaela sin-Gil now.”

A long pause. “Oh. Gil al-Moirae? But I thought he was already wed...”

Her belly churning with nerves, Kaela made herself say what needed to be said. “He is. To Lianon. So am I. To both of them.”

Another pause. “Oh.” Kaela could picture the frown between her sister’s eyes as she pondered this news. “Have you...you have spoken vows in the Temple?”

Kaela reached blindly for her sister’s hand, took it, laced their fingers together. “Such vows mean little compared to the vows spoken in one’s heart. Gil loves me. Lianon loves me. I love them both. Nothing more need be said.”

Lilis was silent for a long time. Finally: “I don’t understand any of this...”

Kaela chuckled, hugging her sister close and pressing a kiss to her cheek. “What’s so hard to understand?”

“You love...Lianon?”

“I do. She gave me back my life.”

“But—”

“You can’t know, not unless you’ve experienced it, what it is to be raped. To have everything you are simply...disregarded. To be used like a thing for someone else’s pleasure. The man who raped me...it was more than just sex to him. It was about pain and degradation, about taking away every ounce of trust I had in the world. After, I thought I would never want to be touched again by anyone.”

She pressed her forehead against Lilis’ shoulder, giving her a squeeze. “Lianon did more than save my life that night. She taught me to trust again. Taught me that my body didn’t have to be the enemy of my soul. It’s amazing how very different the same physical act can be, when you’re willing and when you’re not. What once brought me only pain and humiliation...with Lianon and Gil it’s as if I’m finally free. They don’t expect me to feel ashamed or guilty over what happened. With them, there is nothing but pleasure and giving. I love them. They love me. There’s nothing more beautiful than that. It’s as they say in the Temple: Of all virtues, the greatest is love.”

“So you...have given yourself...to them both?”

Kaela smiled, her belly coiling, but not with reluctance anymore. In her mind, she was back in the guest room at the chancellor’s, Gil’s cock inside her and Lianon’s hands and lips roaming her body. “To Lianon and to Gil, yes, and to both of them together. Our marriage is no different from anyone else’s, save only the number of people involved.”

“Oh.”

Kaela smiled into the dark, feeling rather indulgent toward her little sister. “Some day, if you’re lucky, you will understand. Love does not beg forgiveness. It is. It takes what it will. It gives all it has and it refuses to be denied.”

Lilis was silent for a long time. Finally, she turned on the pillow to face Kaela. In the charcoal dark, her eyes were like black hollows in the paler oval of her face. “If you’re happy, Kaela, then I’m happy for you. Truly. But...I don’t think Papa...oh, Kaela, he can’t possibly approve of this marriage.”

“It’s not his choice, anymore,” Kaela whispered, her happiness guttering like a candle. She gave her sister a squeeze and pressed a kiss to her cheek, trying to pretend that all was still wonderful. “Go to sleep, now, love.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Lianon stood hidden in a niche between the edge of the privacy screen concealing the privy and the floor-length curtain that covered the mullioned window. She'd been standing here for hours, long enough to begin to feel a certain physiological imperative—she really oughtn't have had that third cup of *jaffha* with luncheon.

They'd been four days on the road, longer than expected. Kessande had traveled as if Gorgorn himself were at her heels, setting out at first light and stopping only to eat and take shelter after dark. But despite their exquisite breeding, the four horses that pulled her carriage could not sustain the pace forever. This afternoon she had halted for lunch at this pleasant country inn and opted to stay the night. As if by providence, the room she was given had a window overlooking a little-used corner of the courtyard. Gil had asked directions of the hostler to distract him while Lianon climbed up and inside.

The maid had wheeled Savilaen into the room about half an hour ago, as the sun hovered red and gold over the horizon, slanting in the window. She'd drawn the curtains, never even noticing Lianon standing perfectly still behind the edge of the brocade. After lighting some candles and building up the fire, she had fed Savilaen, spooning watery gruel into his gaping mouth, tipping his chin up and stroking his throat to help him swallow it. She had also cleaned him and exchanged the receptacle that hung beneath the

seat of his wheeled chair—a bed-pan of sorts—with an empty one. Then, incomprehensibly, she had nudged his head back against the padded headrest and tied it in place with a strip of fabric across his forehead.

Leaving his chair positioned facing the bed, she lit more candles, collected the full receptacle and let herself out.

Lianon’s bladder really was beginning to protest. The chamber pot, not a foot away from her, seemed to grow ever larger in the periphery of her vision, mocking her. She was almost ready to succumb to the temptation it presented when the door opened once more.

Kessande sin-Savilaen entered, stumbling across the threshold, giggling like a girl. Her color was high, a flush of giddiness and wine. She’d been drinking heavily since midday, Lianon knew. A young man followed her inside—the groom from the inn’s stable—muttering half-hearted curses and grabbing at her skirts. When he noticed Savilaen, his curses gained a degree of sincerity.

“What the fuck is this?” he growled, glaring at Savilaen. The paralyzed man stared back, his eyes glittering with hate.

“Oh, don’t mind him, Taron,” Kessande laughed, sidling up to him, rubbing her breasts against his arm and reaching for his crotch. “He likes to watch.”

Taron frowned irritably at Savilaen’s wasted body strapped tight in the chair, undecided. A few more seconds of Kessande’s attentions on his groin made his mind up for him. With a groan, he reached for her, shoving one hand into her bodice and squeezing her breast. She arched into the caress, moaning extravagantly, but Lianon saw her eyes were on Savilaen.

Jerking from Taron’s grasp, Kessande worked loose the laces of her bodice and her dress slid to the floor, swiftly followed by her underskirts. Beneath, she wore a snug corset of pale pink silk with matching garters and stockings. Her blonde bush peeked out from under the lace trim. Taron’s eyes fastened on it, the bulge in his trousers growing even bigger.



Lianon felt heat creeping up into her cheeks, and down to regions southward. She'd come here on business, but had to admit this was interesting, too...

With a grin, Kessande dropped to her knees in front of Taron and unbuttoned his trousers. His cock fell free, huge and stiff. Without preamble, she wrapped her lips around it, sucking it deep. Taron fisted his hands in her pale hair, dislodging the pins and combs that held it up, pulling her face harder onto his shaft until it was buried in her throat. Her hands grasped his buttocks, fingertips digging in as she bobbed up and down his cock.

"Just like that..." Taron hissed, thrusting into her mouth. "You highborn ladies like to put on airs, but deep down you're all just whores."

Kessande didn't take offense at his words—indeed, they only made her suck the harder.

Savilaen watched, unable to do otherwise, his eyes like windows on hell's torments.

Releasing Taron's prick with a wet pop, Kessande smiled smugly over at her husband, then tugged Taron's trousers all the way down. As he toed off his boots, she licked at his sac and eagerly sucked his balls into her mouth. One of her hands descended between her legs to toy with herself. Lianon could see the glistening of her woman's moisture on her fingers as she probed her own flesh.

Clearly, the woman was enjoying this.

Just as clearly, Savilaen was not.

Taron finally kicked off his boots and stepped free of his trousers. "Get on the bed," he said thickly.

With a sly smile Kessande complied, rising and backing up until the backs of her legs hit the mattress. Giggling, she fell back onto the coverlet, flinging her arms over her head. Her distended nipples peeked over the top of her corset.

Taron's hand slowly pumped his cock. His gaze traveled deliberately from Kessande's breasts to the apex of her thighs. "Open your legs."

She did. Wide.

A trickle of semen emerged from the tip of Taron's cock and dripped down his shaft.

“Spread your cunt.”

Reaching down with one hand, Kessande parted her labia, baring her intimate flesh to his gaze. And to Savilaen’s.

And to Lianon’s. She squeezed her legs together as her nether parts filled with pressure.

With a snarl of arousal, Taron pounced, grabbing Kessande beneath the arms and dragging her further onto the bed, then positioning himself on his knees between her thighs. He took his cock in his hand and slapped her mound with it. “Beg, whore.”

“Please,” she moaned, writhing as he struck her cunt with his prick again and again. “Please...”

“Please what?” he laughed, pushing two fingers up her channel.

“Please fuck me.” Her hips bucked with his thrusting fingers. “Please make me come.”

With a hiss of indrawn breath, he obliged her, slamming his cock into her eager pussy. He pounded her for a long time, reaching down to pinch her nipples and tweak her clit. In no time at all she was coming, her back lifting right off the bed, her cries bringing a wave of heat and moisture to Lianon’s sex.

Savilaen sat and watched with murder in his eyes.

Kessande managed to climax twice more before Taron found his own bliss. Hammering into her, he stiffened, cursing under his breath as he pumped his seed into her greedy cunt.

Ragged gasps filled the room—from the couple on the bed and the helpless man who’d had no choice but to watch what they did.

Taron had hardly caught his breath before Kessande shoved him aside.

“You may go,” she said haughtily, one arm flung over her eyes.

He stared down at her satisfied face. “What?”

“You may go.” When he only gaped at her, stunned, she frowned up at him in annoyance. “Get out.”

He pulled his limp cock out of her and stood. His mouth was pressed into a thin line of anger, his movements jerky with leashed violence. In a few moments he was dressed and out the door. Poor bastard, Lianon thought. Even now, he had no idea how little a man like him meant to Kessande sin-Savilaen.

The woman sat up on the bed, stretching like a kitten, then rose. Hips swaying, she paraded in front of her husband's baleful gaze, sliding her hands up and down her torso, twisting and pinching her nipples where they jutted above the edge of her corset. Finally she stood right in front of him, one hip cocked, her woman's triangle hovering almost at his eye level. Her smile was filled with cruel pleasure. As Lianon watched, Kessande slid her fingers between her legs, into her dripping slit, coating them with her come and Taron's.

She held those slick fingers under Savilaen's nose. He made a noise then, the noise a wounded animal makes when it's beaten and knows there's nothing in the world that can save it.

"You smell that, my darling?" Kessande asked, her voice thick with triumph and arousal. "That's the smell of another man's seed in your wife's cunt."

Her expression turned briefly ugly, a hard twist to her normally soft lips, and she wiped the wetness from her fingers onto his face.

The breath wheezed in and out of Savilaen's lungs as he glared at his wife. All the vicarious titillation Lianon had felt watching Kessande and Taron fuck shriveled with the look that passed between husband and wife.

"I've been very bad, haven't I, my husband?" Kessande said on a laugh. Her fingers returned to her sex, probing and playing between her nether lips. "A bad, bad girl. Pity there's no one here who's man enough to punish me like I deserve." Her fingertips began to circle her clit, her breaths deepening as her excitement built anew. "Hmm, a good whipping is just what I need, isn't it? Oh, if only you weren't such a useless waste of skin, husband, you could show me who's boss, couldn't you? You could make me scream. You could make me bleed."

The man was nearly strangling on his rage, but he couldn't even move his head. He tried to squeeze his eyes shut, but the temptation to watch what she did was too great to resist. He stared at the hand that strummed her clit as if he wanted nothing more than to rip it from her arm.

Lianon pressed one hand to her mound, holding to the heaviness there. She couldn't help it, she was soaking, as aroused by Kessande's masturbation as Savilaen was enraged by it. As she hid and watched, Kessande caressed herself to another climax, screaming her victory over her husband. Then she turned and went to the washstand to remove her corset.

As the pretty pink confection fell away, Lianon had to stifle a gasp. Across the middle of the woman's back were dozens of stripes gleaming silver in the candlelight. Scars from a lash.

*You could make me scream. You could make me bleed.*

And he had, evidently. Often.

Kessande washed her hands, cleaned the semen from her inner thighs and scrubbed her teeth with menthol and soda. Naked, she walked to the small refreshment table and poured herself a glass of wine. Leaning back on the table, she sipped, studying her husband. "I'm going to enjoy traveling with you, my husband," she said at last. "A new man in every inn, a different entertainment each night for you. What fun we'll have! Good night, darling Savilaen."

She drained her wine and took a blanket from the foot of the bed. Cooing like a doting lover, she settled it around Savilaen's shoulders. "Can't have you catch your death, can we?" Then she climbed naked into bed and closed her eyes, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Lianon waited until Kessande's deep, even breathing told her she slept. On the balls of her feet, she silently emerged from behind the privacy screen and crossed to the bed. She glanced over at Savilaen to find him watching her from the corner of his eye. His gaze was alight with a strange, vengeful desperation. She knew he still had a voice, if not

the power of speech, but after Kessande's earlier display Lianon knew he would make no sound to alert his wife.

Kessande lay on her back, one arm tucked behind her head. Her blonde hair spilled like a river of gold across the pillow, her face was soft and innocent in sleep. Her breasts rose and fell in an easy, relaxed rhythm, one nipple poking above the edge of the sheet, furled tight in the chill. Seeing her like this, Lianon could almost imagine her as the sweet and innocent girl she might have once been before she'd been wed to a man who lived to inflict pain. Before those lash marks had found a home on the pale skin of her back.

A cruel and bitter woman, but no more than what the man in the wheeled chair had made her. Knowing this made what Lianon had come to do more difficult, but no less necessary.

Gingerly, she picked up one of the pillows. Easing herself down, she perched on the edge of the mattress. Kessande sin-Savilaen stirred in her sleep and let out a sigh. Reaching out, Lianon brushed the tousled hair back from Kessande's forehead.

The beautiful blue eyes fluttered open, stared up into Lianon's face. Slowly filled with the grim acknowledgment of what was about to happen.

"I'm sorry," Lianon said. "It's nothing personal."

Kessande smiled ruefully. "Of course."

It didn't take long. Kessande didn't struggle at first, as if she considered herself too dignified to make a fuss, but as the seconds went by and her lungs began to burn, she started thrashing and twisting, her hands clawing at Lianon's where she held the pillow down. Lianon kept the pillow in place for a slow count of ninety after Kessande's struggles finally ceased, then set it aside.

Kessande lay gorgeous in death, her bow lips parted, her lashes like smudges of charcoal on her cheeks. Lianon smoothed her hair back from her face, straightened her limbs. It was a moment before she realized her own cheeks were wet. She wiped the tears away on her sleeve and rose.

Savilaen watched her with cold satisfaction in his gaze. She forced herself to look at him, taking in his frailty and helplessness and bitterness. A thin web of drool hung from his chin to puddle on the blanket his wife had so solicitously wrapped around him.

Lianon thought about killing him. It would be the easiest thing in the world to do, both physically and philosophically. But looking at him now, she had a better idea.

She smiled at him, moving away from the bed. Walked up to him and bent at the waist until she was nose to nose with him. She could smell the salty sweetness of Kessande's musk and the bitterness of Taron's seed on the man's cheeks.

"You," she whispered, "I'll leave as you are."

His eyes flashed malice at her while his mouth poured drool.

"Farewell, Savilaen sur-Thienn. I hope you live a long, long life."

She went to the window and looked out. The courtyard was still and quiet, the only noise a muffled clamor of music and voices coming from the common room at the front of the inn. Lianon opened the casement and swung her leg out, lowering herself carefully onto the stack of crates that were heaped beneath. The tower wobbled slightly under her weight, but she managed to cling to the side of the building and pick her way down to the ground.

She didn't sneak across the courtyard. If anyone saw her, they would see a young man walking openly toward the front of the inn, as if he belonged there.

The doors stood open to the cool of the evening, purging the accumulated heat of the day. About twenty people sat eating and drinking in the common room. Gil nursed a tankard at a table in the corner, half-hidden in shadow. She wanted more than anything to slide onto the bench beside him and burrow into his embrace, but this was not the Whore's Crown. The company here, a mix of local townsfolk and well-to-do travelers, would certainly look askance at two men snuggling in public.

She sat across from him, grabbed his tankard and took a long, much-needed quaff. He signaled to the serving girl and she brought two fresh ones. "Supper, if you please, miss," he ordered.

The girl nodded and left. Gil frowned at Lianon as she set the empty tankard down and wrapped her hands around the new one.

“How did it go?”

“It’s done,” she said, feeling her throat go tight. Gods, between the wetness and heat in her sex and the tears stinging at the backs of her eyes, she could hardly decide what to feel.

His gaze softened. “Lianon—”

She held up a hand and shook her head. “Please. It’s done. I just want to go home. I want to see Kaela. I just want to be under my own roof again with the two of you.”

His booted foot bumped up against hers under the table, anchoring her. He nodded, visibly swallowing a retort. “All right. All right.”

They spoke no more that night, save to cry one another’s names as they came together in the dark of the clearing where they made their camp.

## Chapter Eighteen

Gil glanced down to check his appearance, even as he shook his head at this unwonted fit of nerves. Salgrim's teeth, he didn't get this anxious before carrying out a lethal contract, yet the prospect of facing Kaela's father had his stomach lurching with dread. Of course, he couldn't imagine the man would be overjoyed to have his daughter courted by a married couple. It was next to impossible to envision any kind of amicable conclusion to this meeting.

Beside him, Lianon was the very picture of calm, her head high, shoulders straight. Her hair was lustrously clean and tied back, rather than tucked under a rag, her cheeks flushed, her soft lips curved in a smile of anticipation. She wore the fine suit of clothes he'd bought for her in the spring. The tan trousers hugged her bottom and the darker jacket nipped in at the waist, emphasizing her few curves. No one with eyes to see would think her a man today. No one would think her anything but beautiful.

Adjusting the cumbersome package he held under one arm, he lifted his hand to knock again just as the door swung open. A girl of perhaps sixteen answered, her welcoming smile wilting a little as she took in their faces.



“Hullo, I’m Gil al-Moirae, and this is my wife Lianon.” The introduction was clearly unnecessary. From her expression, this girl knew exactly who they were. “You must be Kaela’s sister...”

The girl glanced nervously over her shoulder. “You’ve come for Kaela.”

“Yes,” Lianon said. “Is she home?”

“She’s at the dressmaker’s.”

Gil swallowed a sigh of disappointment. He still couldn’t quite credit how much he’d missed her these last eight days. He knew how sorely Lianon felt her lack as well, not only when they made love, but during quiet moments during the day. At the inn where they had broken their fast this morning, he’d kept glancing up from his food, expecting to see Kaela there next to Lianon, his eyes drawn over and over to the empty spot on the bench. It was amazing how important she had become to him—to them both—in so short a time.

“Perhaps, if we could...” He cleared his throat. “Is your father home?”

The girl nodded and moved to let them pass. Lianon stepped inside just as a man of about fifty emerged from an inner room into the foyer. He frowned at them in curiosity. “Who is it, Lilis?”

The girl flushed to the roots of her hair. “Gil al-Moirae and his wife Lianon.”

Though there was no outward change in his benign expression, the man’s entire bearing seemed to infuse with displeasure. “I’ve been expecting you,” he said politely. “I’m Jeston sur-Parsifal, Kaela’s father. Please, come in.” He turned to Lilis. “Would you bring us some tea, my dear?”

Hefting his parcel onto his other arm, Gil offered his hand. Jeston shook it, his grip firm, meeting Gil glance for glance, then turned to nod at Lianon.

“Come in, come in,” the man said, leading the way into a small salon. The furniture was out of fashion, but sturdy and serviceable, and the room bright and cheery. Though the house itself had appeared tiny from the outside, by some strange quirk of architecture, it felt quite spacious indoors. Gil reminded himself to write Collin a note of thanks for finding so nice a place on such short notice.

Jeston's eyes flicked to the package Gil held. "What have you there, Master Gil?"

Gil set the long, cloth-wrapped case down against the settee and took a seat. "A gift for Kaela. A gittern. She told me she played."

"That's very generous of you," Jeston said, though the tone seemed at odds with the words. "We were forced to sell her old one last year, and I know it saddens her not to be able to play. I want to thank you for everything you've done for her. And for me. My debts were...not insignificant."

Gil studied the man's thin face with its folds of loose skin, the clothes that seemed to hang from his slender frame, the graying hair that fell in sickly wisps to his collar. Six more months in prison, and there would have been nothing left of Jeston sur-Parsifal.

"I was pleased to do it for Kaela," Gil said softly. "She means a very great deal to me." He looked at Lianon where she sat beside him, and took her hand. Drawing in a deep breath, he cursed the nervousness that had his voice trembling. "To us both. We would like her to come home."

Jeston's eyes narrowed for a moment on their joined hands. "I'm sorry. Her home is right here, and here is where she will stay." He couched his words in a tone of regret, but Gil could feel animosity pouring off the man.

"With respect, sir," Lianon said, her smile gone, "is that her decision, or yours?"

Jeston frowned apologetically. "I won't lie to you. When Kaela told me about your...unusual friendship—well, you *must* realize there's no father in the world who would approve of such an arrangement for his daughter. I have tried to impress upon her the...impossibility of what you are suggesting. After discussing it at length, we decided that her best chance for a normal life, for a decent future, lies here with her family."

Gil felt his heart drop into his stomach, grief and anger closing cruel hands around his throat, no less cruelly for being entirely expected. He let go Lianon's hand and clenched his fists against the sudden urge to smash something.

"*We're* her family." Lianon's voice was quiet, like a blade sliding from a scabbard.

"And what can you offer her?" Jeston asked. "Can you give her legal standing as your wife, Master Gil? Can you give her respectability? Acceptance in society?"

Lianon opened her mouth to argue, but Lilis chose that moment to return with a tray of tea and cakes. The girl's face was crimson as she set about pouring, but her father went on, heedless of her embarrassment.

"It may be routine for an Emissary to disregard the bounds of convention and society's mores, but Kaela has been gently bred. Surely you must realize there will come a day when she wishes to become a part of larger society, to cease living on the fringes." He lifted his hands in a helpless gesture, his expression more pleading than displeased now. "Ask yourselves, how will the 'second wife' of a hired killer be received in the drawing rooms of Belthalas? Or even in the towns and villages near your home? Will she be known as your wife, or as a kept woman?"

Lianon sat like a statue beside Gil, her face betraying nothing. Gil had no idea how she could be so stoic. For himself, he wanted nothing more than to grab the teapot and cups and fling them across the room. He wanted to rant, rage, rampage, rail. He wanted to pour a gallon of brandy down his aching throat until the ache went away.

Jeston sighed, smoothing a hand over his face, his regret finally taking on a hint of sincerity. "Please understand. I only want what's best for my daughter. Despite all that has happened, she has a chance now for a normal life. For a respectable marriage, children, happiness. It's not that I'm not grateful for everything you've done. You saved her life. You gave her a home and helped her face what happened to her. But, please, if you truly love her, if you care anything for her at all, you'll do what's best for her. You'll let her go."

Without a word, Lianon stood and walked out of the room. A second later, they heard the front door open then slam shut. Gil's heart broke for her, but no more than it was breaking for his own loss.

He turned to regard Kaela's father. Forcing himself to look at the matter from the other side of it, Gil had to admit that, were Kaela his daughter, he might not have handled this conversation as diplomatically as Jeston sur-Parsifal had. The man clearly had no love for Gil or Lianon, but he hadn't been cruel or scornful, either. And he could not deny anything the man had said. If Kaela came back to the cottage with Gil and Lianon, she

would be giving up all pretense of respectability in the eyes of the public. As Emissaries, Gil and Lianon already lived on the border between decent society and the criminal underclass. In truth, that was no kind of life for a gently bred girl.

“Is this truly what Kaela wishes?” Gil hardly recognized his own voice, rasping past the knot of pain in his throat.

“It is.”

Gil wished he could see her, if only to say goodbye, but if this was her decision, he didn’t want to make it more difficult for her to live with. Best for everyone if he and Lianon just slipped quietly from her life.

Gil pushed to his feet, his insides feeling raw and quivery. “With your permission, Master Jeston, I would leave the gittern. As a token of our affection. A memento.”

“Of course.” Jeston stood and held out his hand. Gil made himself shake it, when all he wanted was to shove the man out of his way and find Kaela, beg her to come back to them, kiss and caress her and spear her with his cock until she had no breath or will left to argue.

“Would you...” He stopped for a moment, taking himself in hand. “Would you give her our best regards?”

“I will. I wish...” Jeston shrugged helplessly, giving a harsh laugh. “I don’t know what I wish, Master Gil. I’m sorry to have caused you pain when you have done nothing but help me and mine.”

Gil swallowed hard. “If Kaela ever has need of us, if there is anything at all we can do for her, please do not hesitate to ask.”

Jeston nodded and saw him to the door. “Good bye, Master Gil.”

Lilis stood at the salon window, looking out onto the street. On the cobbles, the woman Lianon stood hugging herself. Though her face was turned away, Lilis could tell by the shaking of her shoulders that she wept.

Presently, Gil al-Moirae walked woodenly down the front steps and went to stand behind her. Hesitantly, he touched her shoulder, speaking. She shrugged off his hand,

wheeling on him, her fists clenched at her sides. Lilis remembered the look on her father's face when mama died. That same look twisted Lianon's pretty features, turning them into a harsh mask of grief. She shouted at Gil, her face red and tear-streaked. Part of Lilis wished she could hear the words, and another part was relieved she couldn't.

As Lilis watched, Gil grabbed Lianon's upper arms, tried to draw her into an embrace. She fought him, thrashing in his grasp before finally collapsing against his chest and sobbing. His arms came around her, stroking up and down her back, his cheek pressed to the top of her head. His face, Lilis saw, was dark with the same pain as his wife's.

She thought about going to them. About telling them her father had lied, that Kaela loved them, wanted a life with them. But he was her father. And as painful as it might be for everyone, Lilis believed he was right. There was no future for Kaela with these two people. No matter how they might value her, no matter how much they all might love one another, to outsiders, Kaela would never be considered anything more than a bed-servant to Gil and Lianon. A kept woman, as her father had said.

Lilis might be young, but she knew enough about the world to understand there was no way it could work. Better it end now, before Kaela put more of her heart into an impossible dream.

Turning away from the window, Lilis scrubbed the wetness from her cheeks and went to clear away the untouched tea.

## Chapter Nineteen

Kaela stared at her reflection in the mirror. A strange, pale girl stared back, dour and sullen. Kaela wondered if that girl was even capable of smiling anymore.

Nearly three weeks had passed since she learned Gil and Lianon didn't want her anymore. Her father had couched the news in the most gentle of terms, so as not to hurt her, but the truth had shattered her all the same. Gil and Lianon had come to realize how unfair it was to offer her the illusion of a future where there could be none, that Kaela's best chance for happiness lay in a normal, respectable, decent life. That once she got over her heartbreak, she would come to understand there was no way to live openly as a "second wife", not in this world.

It hurt to be put aside, even if it was for her own good. It hurt to realize that they needed her so much less than she did them. But the part that hurt most—worse even than the ache of being without them—was that they had made the decision without her. All the protestations of "what's best for Kaela" were as nothing compared to their disregard of her right to choose her own future.

It was nineteen days since her father had told her. Nineteen days of anger and tears, of feeling empty and betrayed, nineteen days of hating her father for being right.

Nineteen nights spent sleepless from the memory of Lianon's touch and Gil's, with only her own hands in the dark to ease the ache while Lilis snored softly beside her.

During those nineteen days, she'd stumbled through a half-waking world, going through the motions of living, hiding in her imagination. And what haven those reveries were, balm for her hurt. She fantasized about running away, running to them, her homecoming playing out in her mind as if on a mummer's stage: She would see Lianon first, out in the fields with the sheep, and the woman would run to her, engulf her in a hug, shower her with kisses and endearments. Then Gil would take her face in his hands and devour her mouth with his until she was dizzy from it. The three of them would fall to the grass and make love under the open sky.

She'd fantasized about Lianon coming for her, charging through the front door and holding a sword to her father's throat, demanding to see her. Getting on her knees to beg Kaela's forgiveness for abandoning her, coaxing her with kisses and caresses and sweet words.

She'd fantasized about Gil stealing in her window at night to carry her away to some secluded place and press her down to the ground, reaching beneath her skirts and stroking her until the world exploded around them both.

She'd even fantasized about being with child, about using the baby as leverage to make them take her back, a fantasy that had died an abrupt and bloody death last week when her monthly flood arrived right on time.

Eventually the other fantasies began to die, as well, a slow, weary withering born of despair and loss and loneliness.

It was time, her father said, that Kaela return to the land of the living, and a part of her had to admit he was right. She couldn't wallow forever. She did have a future to think of, however bleak it might now seem. Her father had made friends among his coworkers in the chancellery. Some of those friends had sons of marriageable age. One of them had invited the family of Jeston sur-Parsifal to sup with him and his tonight.

Kaela inspected her eyes minutely in the wavery glass of the mirror and was pleased to see the swelling had mostly gone. It was almost two days since her last bout of

weeping. But though her tears had finally seemed to dry up, she still felt hollow and fragile, ready to shatter at the smallest thing.

Lilis, standing behind her chair, drew the brush through Kaela's hair. Kaela closed her eyes and was immediately assailed by a memory of Lianon brushing her hair on the couch in the cottage, their moods softened by a meal and several glasses of wine. Her eyes flew open. She wouldn't think about that. If she did, she would break again. She felt no joy at the prospect of this evening's dinner, but she intended to present herself in as flattering a light as possible. Fresh tears would not help matters.

Her sister pulled and twisted Kaela's hair into a long rope, then wrapped it around her crown. "How's that?" she asked, tilting her head to one side in appraisal. She held the coil of hair in one hand and with the other, began to tug wisps and tendrils loose to frame Kaela's face. She pulled considerably more of them loose on the right side.

Feeling suddenly resentful, Kaela reached up and tucked her hair back behind her ear, exposing her scar. She lifted her chin and met Lilis' eyes in the mirror, daring her to object.

Lilis sighed and drew her hands away. Kaela's hair fell like a sluice of dark water down her back. "Come on," Lilis said. "We'll do your hair after your gown's on."

"All right."

Kaela rose, her good silk shift whispering around her hips. Lilis held up a beautifully fitted gown made of pale green muslin. Kaela eyed it with bitterness—she was being measured for this gown at the very moment Gil, Lianon and her father had decided her fate on her behalf. As a result, Kaela had come to quite detest this particular shade of green.

She stood dutifully while her sister helped her into the garment, cinched the laces tight at the sides and shook out the skirts. Kaela glanced down at her chest. A panel of heavy lace had been sewn in across the low, scooped neckline, obscuring her scar.

Her fists clenched at her sides as she fought the sudden need to hit something. Gods, she wished the dummy Marwic stood in front of her right now. By the time she was done



with him, he'd be nothing but a pile of shredded leather and stuffing on the cow-shed floor.

Lilis took her hands and held them out from her sides, inspecting her from head to toe. If she noticed that Kaela's hands were tightly fisted or her lips pressed together in annoyance, she chose to ignore it. "Beautiful!" she exclaimed with forced enthusiasm. "Or you would be if you'd only smile."

"Give her some time," their father said from where he stood with Dael in the doorway, looking in. Kaela turned to find him beaming proudly at her. "You'll see, my dear," he told her. "You'll be back to your old self in no time. A dinner party is just the thing to put some color in your cheeks."

There'd been no lack of color in her cheeks when she'd been with Gil and Lianon, Kaela thought, plopping back down on her seat. Her father came further inside, standing at her shoulder and leaving Dael to hover uncertainly in the doorway. Lilis took up the hairbrush once more, pulling Kaela's mane into a smooth, shining mass. She coiled it as she had earlier, twisting it about her crown, securing it this time with combs and pins. Once again, she began tugging tendrils loose at the sides of Kaela's face.

"Lovely," her father said with approval, his eyes in the mirror narrowed on her right cheek. "Just add a little powder, and no one will even notice it."

*Oh, it was enough!*

"Why don't you just put a sack over my head?" Kaela asked, glaring up at his reflection, her face flooded with heat.

He gaped at her, taken aback, his eyes flicking briefly to Dael. "Kaela—"

She turned in her chair to face her father, raising one brow. "Or perhaps you'd rather I simply apologize to everyone? 'Please excuse the scars I got when I was raped and almost murdered. Terribly sorry to make you feel uncomfortable having to look at them.'"

"Kaela—"

His expression of wounded outrage only made it worse. Salgrim's teeth, he truly had no idea why she was upset! Counting backwards from ten, she let the red haze dissipate

from her vision and gathered herself. If he needed to be told, she'd tell him. "I'm not ashamed of what happened, Father, but you clearly are."

He threw up his hands. "Kaela, I'm not ashamed of you."

"Really," she said flatly. "Then I assume you'll have no trouble informing Darred, his wife and his marriage-aged sons how I got these scars. You'll be perfectly fine telling them I am not a virgin, and why."

He stared at her, aghast.

Kaela was vaguely aware of Dael watching them from the doorway, his eyes wide and confused. He was only fourteen, and tenderhearted at that, but she couldn't worry about sparing him right now.

"Or were you planning to dupe Darred into promising one of his sons, and then leave me to explain all on our wedding night?"

Her father's glance flicked to Dael, then returned to her, narrowed in annoyance. "Kaela, now is not the time—"

"To what? To let it be known that your daughter is ruined?"

"You're not ruined!" he shouted, his face flushed with defensive anger.

"You're right about that, Father!" she shouted back, her eyes stinging, damn it all. "But I won't hide what happened to me, and if you weren't ashamed of me you wouldn't want me to. Gil and Lianon have never asked me to hide or forget what was done to me. They never expected me to pretend that everything was wonderful and normal when it wasn't. They didn't love me in *spite* of my scars, because they don't see them only as horrible reminders. My scars show I'm a survivor. They tell the world I'm strong."

He stared at her, stymied. Pressing her lips together, she rose. With shaking hands she took hold of the lace panel and tore it from the neckline of her dress. "This is a lie," she said, throwing it to the floor in disgust. "I won't be made to lie, Father."

"I'm not asking you to lie," he said, his gaze taking on a desperate cast.

Her eyes filled and she muttered a curse, scrubbing at them with the heels of her hands. "You are. You're asking me to pretend I'm like every other girl, when I'm not. You want me to withhold my past from those who would certainly consider it of

importance. You would have me be the innocent girl I was last year, but I'll never be her again. Don't you understand? There are things you can never come back from. Things that mark you forever. You can't close your eyes and make them go away. And if you don't find a way to live with them, they destroy you."

"Kaela, you're being difficult."

"Then let me make it easy for you. I'm not going to the dinner party tonight. I'm not interested in being courted. I might never be."

His lips thinned, two spots of color appearing high on his cheekbones. "Kaela, this stubbornness is unbecoming."

She shook her head and stared, not quite able to fathom his selfishness. But then, she had always been the dutiful daughter, obedient in every way. He would have no idea how to deal with who she was now, how to accept her refusal to fall in step with his plans for her.

"I put myself in harm's way to help you, to help Lilis and Dael. What happened wasn't your fault, but that doesn't mean you can just ignore it. And you can't simply order me to get over it, no matter how much you want to. I'm not ready to think about being courted. I'm not ready to put myself in harm's way again. I've lost my innocence, lost my trust in the basic goodness of humanity, and what Gil and Lianon helped me regain is lost once more now that I've lost them. The only thing I have left is my right to decide what I want, what I will do and what I won't."

Her eyes began to pour—damn it, *damn it*—but her voice was steady. "I love them. I miss them. And if you loved me, you'd let me heal in my own way, instead of forcing me to get over them before I'm ready."

He stared at her as if she'd grown a second head. Dael's bewildered gaze swung back and forth between her and her father, while Lilis frowned at her own hands clenched together at her waist.

Her father's eyes dropped to the floor, his shoulders slumping. "All right. All right. But we will discuss this further when I get home."

Kaela turned away, hating that she'd brought that air of defeat to his bearing, but not prepared to grant him any kind of victory or mercy. Her eyes still poured, but the tears had a different feel than before, hot and bitter rather than hopeless or melancholy. She felt better, actually. Stronger. Better than she had since the day she'd come home from the dressmaker's to find him waiting with tidings in the salon.

Her father left, taking Dael with him. The boy followed as if in a stupor, visibly trying to assign meaning to all he had heard. He was at a hard age already, not a child anymore, but not yet a man. Half a year in the workhouse would have matured him, but Kaela didn't imagine he had understood half of what they'd said.

She drew in a long, ragged breath and let it out slowly. Stooped to retrieve the bit of lace she'd thrown on the floor so she could dry her eyes with it.

It was a moment before she realized Lilis was still standing there next to the bed, her hands clutching each other at her midriff, her expression one of agonized indecision.

Kaela forced a smile. "You should go, or you'll be late. No sense in you missing out on a fun evening because of me. When you get back, you can tell me all about it."

Lilis only stared at her, more miserable than ever. "Kaela..."

"It's all right. I don't mind being alone."

Lilis spread her hands helplessly. "It's not that. I... Oh, Kaela, I—" She abruptly put her face in her hands.

Kaela's heart began to pound, fast and hard. "What is it?"

"He lied." Lilis' voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper, but somehow Kaela heard it even over the rush of blood in her ears.

Kaela's throat was so tight, she could hardly speak. "What?"

"Papa. He lied."

"What?" God, was that the only word she knew now?

"To you. To them. He told them you didn't want them anymore. And he told you..." Lilis hugged herself, her shoulders hunched, her eyes beginning to glisten as she stared beseechingly at Kaela. "It wasn't true. Not any of it. They came back for you, but he told

them you *wanted* to stay with us. He said you wanted a normal life. Oh, *Kaela*, you should have seen them...”

Kaela blindly reached behind her until her hand found the back of her chair. Her legs wobbling, she sank down onto it. She couldn’t understand how a single heart could feel so many things at once—anger, betrayal, disappointment, regret, and like a candle’s flame banishing them all to the far corners of her soul, hope. Because they wanted her.

*They wanted her.*

“You know this?” she made herself ask, not wanting to let the candle flare too bright. “You’re sure?”

Lilis nodded, looking like she might puke, her eyes returning to the door again and again as if she feared being overheard. “I was there,” she whispered. “I heard what he told them. I saw how they reacted. Lianon—she just...” Lilis shook her head, unable to continue. “Oh, Kaela, I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you. I just—I wanted Papa to be right. I wanted us all to be together. I wanted everything to be normal and sane again. But now... You’re right. It’s not his place or mine to decide for you. You should be able to choose for yourself what you want.”

Kaela stared, her heart swelling. She should be furious. She ought to scream at her sister, rant and flail, charge through the house until she found her father and beat at him with her fists until he begged for mercy. But all she felt now was this glimmer of warmth inside her, tiny, but growing.

“It’s all right, Lilis,” she said. “It’s all right. I understand why you did it. I even understand why Papa did it.”

Lilis scrubbed at her eyes and sniffed. “Can you ever forgive me?”

Kaela was amazed at how easily the smile came. Then again, in her heart, she was already gone. “Of course I forgive you. We’re sisters. I love you.”

Lilis visibly brightened, her back straightening. “Really?”

“Of course, you ninny. Now get you gone, before you make Papa late to the party.”

Lilis took her hand and pulled her to her feet, hugging her tight. A part of Kaela was heartbroken at the thought of leaving. They were sisters, confidantes. Best friends.

Kaela pulled back to look at her, at the face that so closely resembled her own. “Go. Have fun.”

Lilis nodded. “I love you.” Her tone said “goodbye” more eloquently than words.

Kaela kissed her cheek and gave her an extra squeeze. “Love you too, sis. I’ll see you when you get back.”

She could tell by Lilis’ expression that her sister knew that for the lie it was.

## Chapter Twenty

With a grunt, Gil hefted a rock twice the size of his head from the bed of the cart and hugged it against his torso. The grainy texture biting into his fingertips, he hobbled over to the wall and heaved the hunk of granite onto a low spot, narrowly avoiding crushing his thumb.

With a sigh, he straightened, pressing his fists into his lower back. This manual labor thing was hardly new to him—he'd grown up on a farm, after all—but he thought he'd left it behind when he moved away from home at sixteen. Yet here he was, surrounded by rolling, grassy foothills and wooded mountains, walling in grazing land stone by stone. The unwallled section of pastureland stretched off into the distance and disappeared over a rise to the northwest. Only seven billion more rocks and it would be properly enclosed.

His back ached. Gods, they treated felons in prison better than this. Indeed, prison seemed entirely preferable to returning to the cottage at the end of his day's hard labor to whatever cruel and unusual punishment Lianon had in store.

At the thought of her cooking, his stomach lurched. It wasn't as quite bad as Heffie's, but that wasn't for lack of trying. Last night's offering had been tough, overcooked lamb shank, burnt gravy and bread that was scorched on the outside but still dough in the middle. God only knew what horror awaited him tonight. He rubbed his

complaining belly, feeling how thin he'd gotten in the last three weeks. Salgrim help him, another month of this and he'd starve.

Shaking his head, he went to fetch another rock. Perhaps he ought to just skip supper and head straight to bed. There were some hungers his wife had no problems satisfying. Nausea was gradually eclipsed by a pleasant burn low in his abdomen. Since they'd returned home Lianon had become insatiable in bed, taking charge of things in a decidedly refreshing manner. Gil realized it was her way of avoiding dealing with her feelings about Kaela, but he knew not to push her to face them, and was prepared to take full advantage of this new role she wanted to play in the interim. He'd seen a glimpse of it when watching her interact with Kaela, this dominant side of her personality. And as much as Gil loved to have the upper hand, there was something altogether freeing in letting Lianon take control of their bed-play.

He set a stone down and wiggled it to seat it securely. Closing his eyes, he let his mind drift back to that last afternoon at the chancellor's residence, to the cool, quiet command in Lianon's voice as she'd instructed Kaela to undress, to go to him, to kneel before his chair, to suck his cock...

Gods, he missed that! Missed being with them both, watching them together, joining them on a shared journey from affection to arousal to bliss. Missed the easy warmth and tenderness between the two women, and the burgeoning love he saw in Kaela's eyes whenever she looked at him, right up until the morning he and Lianon had left Belthalas in pursuit of Kessande sin-Savilaen. Eight days, between leaving and returning. Not long at all. But those eight days apart had given Kaela's father ample opportunity to remind her of all the difficulties of their arrangement, and convince her to disregard all the benefits.

Gil wished now that he that he had taken Kaela home that morning and left the entire matter of Kessande to Lianon.

His stomach would have preferred it, as well, he thought, shaking himself and reaching for another stone. If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. It was time to stop pointlessly longing for things he couldn't have, time to just get over it. He ought to



have followed his own advice—hadn't he cautioned Lianon that this scheme of hers was all too likely to end in heartache? Yet like a fool, he'd fallen, as hard and fast as Lianon had.

Sensing his mood, Biso trotted over and nudged Gil's hip with his heavy head, leaving a revolting sticky patch of drool on his trousers, before wandering off to eat some grass.

"Balls," Gil muttered, uprooting a handful of weeds and using it to swab ineffectually at himself. Off southward in a gap between copses a short stretch of the road was visible, and the mastiff lifted his head briefly as an oxcart rolled into view and then back out. Biso let out a long, low moan of disgruntlement, then curled up in the grass and put his head on his paws.

Gil felt his throat go tight. Even the damn dog missed her.

Cursing, he turned his full attention to his work, hefting rocks and slamming them down on the wall, building bit by bit onto the end of the low structure. As the section he was working on took shape, he was forced to hobble further and further before setting the stones in place. He was working up quite a sweat when Biso scrambled to his feet and took off southward at a veritable prance. No barking, so it wasn't a stranger. Gil muttered under his breath. Bloody Lianon, coming to make sure he was working, he thought, groaning under the weight of a particularly cumbersome chunk of granite. The dog seemed happy enough to see her, but then the dog had no work to do other than to eat grass, drool and shit.

Without turning, Gil wobbled and staggered toward the end of the wall. "Salgrim's balls, you could lift a finger to help, you know," he muttered as the tip of her shadow fell across his path.

He heard the scrape of stone on wood as she took a rock from the cart. "Where do you want it?"

His heart actually stopped. For a moment, he wondered if his mind was playing tricks, that the voice he heard should be the one he'd just now been pining for. The

muscles of his stomach clenched so hard, he forgot what he was doing and the rock slipped from his numb grasp.

“*Fuck me!*” he hissed, jumping backward before his toes could be crushed.

“Well, if you insist,” she said, a smile in her voice. “But wouldn’t you rather wait for Lianon to join us?”

Heart racing, throat aching with the need to believe she was real, that his sun-addled brain hadn’t simply conjured her image from his own stupid longings, he made himself turn and look.

She stood there next to the cart, her dark hair loose and lifting in the breeze, her lips curled up at one corner in a tender half-smile. She held a smallish, dirt-crusted stone between her hands. In the grass at her feet sat a traveling satchel and the gittern he’d bought her, in its wooden case. Biso stood not far away, panting and drooling with canine joy, his thick body wiggling like mad from the force of his wagging tail.

A breath of wind blew a strand of hair across Kaela’s face and she reached with one hand to tuck it behind her ear, leaving a dirty smudge on her cheek. Her chest rose and fell like a forge bellows. When his senses finally returned enough to notice, Gil realized his own was doing the same.

“Hullo,” he said, his voice cracking like an adolescent’s.

The other side of her mouth curved up. She set the stone back on the cart bed and walked slowly toward him, the grass hissing about her skirts. He didn’t even realize he was moving, too, but then suddenly he was halfway back to the cart and she was in his arms, warm and solid and real. Eyes burning, he pressed his face into her hair and just breathed in the scent of it, the scent of her.

“He lied,” she said, her lips moving against the side of his neck.

He pulled back to frown down into her face. Her eyes were dry though her smile was nowhere to be seen now.

“My father. He lied to all of us. I never stopped wanting to be with you and Lianon.”

He lifted a hand to her face, ran the backs of his fingers down her cheek, ignoring the streak of dirt he left there, and bent to kiss her. Her tongue slipped into his mouth, teasing his, and he felt his cock stir. Very quickly they were both breathing hard.

With a monumental force of will, he resisted the urge to drag her into the tall grass and broke the kiss. There was Lianon to consider, after all. She smiled up at him, her lips puffy and pink, her cheeks rosy, her eyes shining with love.

“Oh, Kaela,” he said, a kernel of warmth flowering within him. “Thank god you’ve come. It’s been horrid, truly horrid without you. Lianon’s a slave driver. She’s been making *me* do all the tough, sweaty jobs, and even worse, *she’s taken over the cooking.*”

Kaela grinned up at him, her eyes sparkling, and rubbed her thumb across his bottom lip. “Salgrim help us all.”

Lianon stared down at her puckered, uneven stitches and bit back a curse. Lips pressed together, eyes narrowed, she held the shirt up for inspection. The tear looked worse now than before she’d mended it, even ignoring the fact three of her stitches had inadvertently caught the back of the shirt and attached it to the front. With a groan she started plucking out the stitches one by one. Careful as she was, she still managed to bugger it up and make the tear even bigger.

How on earth did women do these things? Salgrim help her, she could sink a knife into a moving target at twenty paces, or cut a man’s jugular so fast and clean he wouldn’t even know he was dead until he hit the ground, but give her a sewing kit and her hands might as well be hams.

Sighing, she gave up and tossed the hapless garment aside. If Gil was so in love with that particular shirt, he could send it to Rat for mending—the thief was a genius with needle and thread. She squinted at the window, judging the light outside. It was time to start thinking about supper, anyway.

Luckily, they had the sausages Gil had just purchased in Fenmore this morning—hard, fat coils redolent of garlic and peppers and not requiring of any kind of preparation beyond slicing. Likewise the stale bread from last night. A little toasting and it would be

better than fresh—literally. Some cheese and a salad, and that would serve nicely. Not a single, solitary thing Lianon could possibly fuck up.

And still, she faced the task with dread.

She hadn't truly appreciated how much she had come to rely on Kaela for these duties until getting stuck with them herself. And to be honest, when she and Gil had first returned home, her feelings of grief had been so strong and so centered on losing her lover Lianon had hardly noticed how inept a housekeeper she was, how much more suited she'd been to the heavy, physical work of running a farm. Now, as the sharpness of that pain diminished into a vague, continual ache, as her awareness of day to day things returned, she couldn't help but realize she possessed none of the skills and talents valued in a wife.

Except one. For all that Kaela was gone, Lianon was determined that Gil not suffer in that regard for lack of her. It was all Lianon's fault, after all. She had suggested the arrangement, against all his reasoned arguments and cautioning. She was the one who had seduced Kaela, drawn her into a triangle of desire that had too quickly turned into one of devotion and love. She was responsible for this hideous mess.

Each night in their bedroom, Lianon put aside her pain and set herself the task of making him forget there might possibly be something missing. As long as she kept him from longing for Kaela in their bed, it didn't matter that he missed her cooking or her skill with needle and thread, or her gentle manner and tender, obedient nature. As long as Lianon was enough to quench his fire, she didn't feel quite so guilty.

Lianon stood and pressed a hand to her coiling belly, letting desire wash over her, mingle briefly with her pain and then subside. In the last week, their lovemaking had taken on an edge of desperation, as if they both felt the need to hide inside their own pleasure. Lianon knew what they were hiding from, even if Gil did not. It was time to put it in the past. To let it go. To carry on.

She scrubbed at her eyes, cursing. Gods, she hadn't cried this much since Rhianna died. Part of her berated herself for a fool for letting this affect her so deeply, but another

part had to acknowledge that grief was grief, loss was loss, no matter what force or circumstance took the ones you loved away from you.

Taking herself in hand, she went to get supper ready, fetching the sausages and a crock of soft cheese from the cold room and carrying them to the worktable in the kitchen. Half a loaf of bread from yesterday sat there, abandoned. Lianon had to smile at the memory of Gil choking the stuff down last night, desperately trying to hide his revulsion at the burnt crust and doughy middle. “Delicious,” he’d said without a trace of sarcasm or criticism. She loved him for it.

The sound of toenails on wood announced Biso’s arrival on the stoop. A second later the door opened and eight stone of dogflesh charged in, feet skidding on the floorboards as he cavorted like a puppy. Lianon stared, wondering what on earth could have excited him so.

And then the answer was there, standing in the doorway.

Lianon’s hand went to her throat, pressing against the aching tightness there. Kaela’s face blurred like a ghost’s within a sudden halo of moisture, but then Lianon’s tears slipped free and, oh, *oh*, she was still there.

Swallowing hard, Lianon forced herself to control her breathing before she could hyperventilate. Told herself to calm down, that Kaela being here didn’t necessarily mean anything, that she might only have come for the few belongings she’d left here.

Kaela smiled, her chin wobbling a little. “Hullo, Lianon. I’m home.”

Lianon couldn’t prevent the tiny, choked cry from escaping her. The slicing knife fell from her fingers to clatter to the tabletop. Her heart so huge it hurt her chest, she came around the table and threw herself at Kaela, grabbed hold as tight as she could.

“Oh, Kaela,” she said, her voice thick with tears. “Oh, love.”

Biso pranced around them, bumping their legs with his huge head, howling his delight. Lianon understood how he felt. She could hardly contain her own joy.

Kaela’s body pressed all along hers, a cloud of soft, dark hair against her cheek, Lianon looked up to see Gil grinning at them from the stoop. Lianon let go of Kaela only long enough to reach for his hand and pull him into their embrace.

Kaela leaned back, gazed into those beautiful, tender gray eyes and pressed her mouth to Lianon's. Heat instantly flared between them, and Lianon's hands came up to frame Kaela's face, holding her head still as she deepened the kiss. The salt of Lianon's tears mingled with the unique taste of her lips as Kaela slipped her tongue between them, and her heart wrenched as she realized the other woman had grieved as much as she while they were parted.

Gil's warm length against her back and Lianon's at her front enveloped her in a cocoon of comfort and burgeoning desire. There was so much she had wanted to say to them, but as Lianon continued to kiss her, as Gil's hands slid up her ribcage and brushed against the sides of her breasts, she realized none of it needed to be said. They knew how she felt. And there was no doubt left in her of their love for her.

She let her head sag back against Gil's chest, letting out a helpless moan as Lianon kissed a path down one side of her throat. Gil's hands came around to cup her breasts, toying with her nipples through the muslin of her dress. Lianon's clever fingers tugged on the laces at the front of her bodice and soon Gil's hands were pushing the loosened neckline down to bare her breasts. Kaela shuddered at the sensation of his work-roughened fingertips scraping across that super-sensitive flesh, and then the contrast of slick, soft heat as Lianon's mouth closed over one nipple, licking, nibbling, sucking. Lianon's hands roamed across Kaela's hungry body, touching everywhere, until at last one of them cupped her between her legs.

"God," Kaela groaned as Lianon pushed up hard, her palm pressing deliciously on the place Kaela ached most.

Gil was tugging the sleeves of her dress down her arms, pressing tender little kisses to her nape and shoulders. Kaela could only lean on him, eyes closed, as their caresses washed over her like a languid wave of hot bathwater. She clutched Lianon's head, pulling that suckling mouth more firmly onto her breast, and angled her hips forward against the woman's questing hand. Unable to contain the small, desperate noises she

made, Kaela leaned her head to one side, offering up her neck to Gil's lips and tongue and teeth.

Then Lianon was on her knees, gathering up Kaela's hem. Cool air kissed Kaela's saliva-moistened breast and Gil's hands returned to their previous torments, twisting her nipples into aching peaks, tugging and pinching them until the sensation bordered on pain. She opened her mouth to cry out, but his lips closed over hers, his tongue plunging inside, the scrape of his beard against her skin sending shivers of gooseflesh all along her limbs.

Lianon had rucked her skirts high, and now slid her thumb inside the leg of Kaela's drawers to probe her slit. That sweet, skilful mouth closed over the linen, pressing hard kisses all over Kaela's mound.

"God, Lianon, *please*," she moaned against Gil's mouth, shoving her hips forward, needing more, needing that horrid layer of cloth to be gone.

Lianon's hands made short work of the drawstring and yanked the offending garment down. Then, thank god, her mouth was there, right where Kaela needed it, flesh to flesh. That darting tongue seemed to be everywhere at once, lashing her clit, stroking up and down her wet valley, pushing up high inside her. At last Lianon fastened her lips around Kaela's nub and sucked rhythmically, pushing two fingers up into her channel.

Kaela tore her mouth from Gil's. Through a haze of pleasure, she gazed down past his working hands to find Lianon staring back up into her eyes, her mouth fastened on Kaela's cunt as if she would devour it whole. Kaela reached down and grabbed a handful of Lianon's hair, pulling her closer, wanting to be devoured.

Gil continued to torment Kaela's breasts, grinding his hardness against her buttocks. An arc of fire stretched through Kaela's torso between Lianon's mouth and Gil's fingers, flaring hotter and hotter until finally it engulfed her, consumed her. She felt her cries vibrating in her voice box, but could hear nothing over the boom of her own pulse against her eardrums as she convulsed in their embrace.

When she could see once more, Lianon was on her feet again, the woman's eyes raking her from head to toe, her gaze like a hot brand searing already overheated flesh.

“Shall we go in the bedroom, Gil darling?” she said softly.

In answer, Gil bent and scooped Kaela into his arms, and carried her across the threshold into the bedchamber that was to be hers—theirs—from now on.

Lianon had always loved undressing a woman, loved peeling back layers of fabric like the colored paper wrapping of a birthday present to expose what treasure lay beneath. As she finished freeing the laces of Kaela’s bodice and her dress fell away, Lianon realized there was no gift in the world more beautiful, more precious, more cherished than the woman who stood before her.

The taste of female flesh still lingered on Lianon’s tongue, adding heat to her own fire. Kaela stood in just her shift. The laces were loose and the panel at her neckline lay open, her breasts bare above the parted linen. Her cheeks and chest were flushed pink from arousal, her eyes glassy as they watched Lianon.

Lianon looked to Gil, standing behind Kaela once more, met his burning gaze. Slowly, deliberately, he drew the linen shift down Kaela’s torso and pushed it past her hips to pool at her feet.

Lianon’s hands went to her own fastenings, at throat and fly. “Touch her, Gil.”

Eyes still locked on Lianon’s, Gil slid his hands around Kaela’s waist, one reaching to cup a breast, the other descending between her legs. Kaela gave a tiny whimper as Gil’s fingers probed deep into her slit. Lianon couldn’t help it—her eyes were drawn as if by a lodestone to the triangle of curls where Gil’s hand explored her woman’s flesh. The lips of Kaela’s sex were puffy and swollen, and seemed to hug Gil’s fingers, urging them further in.

Lianon yanked her shirt off, shoved her trousers and drawers down and stepped free of them. Then she was pulling Kaela from Gil’s hold, her lips fastening onto a nipple, even as she forced the other woman back toward the bed. The backs of Kaela’s legs hit the mattress and she sprawled across the coverlet.

“Open your legs, my love,” she ordered, her voice little more than a rasp.



Kaela obeyed immediately, spreading her legs wide to expose her pussy. Lianon stared at that gorgeous, engorged flesh, so wet and flushed, the lips like swollen petals, clit like a red bead, and wet her lips. Her own cunt was so hot and filled with pressure she thought she would explode.

“Gil,” she said, her voice trembling. His hands slipped around her, plucking her nipples as he pressed his bare length against her back. His cock prodded between her cheeks, seeking the place it wanted to bury itself. Kaela smiled up at them, then sat up and slid off the bed to kneel before Lianon.

A single swipe of Kaela’s tongue had Lianon biting her lip to contain her cries. And then the woman was reaching between Lianon’s legs to grasp Gil’s hard cock and rub it along Lianon’s soaking furrow. Dipping low, Kaela dragged her tongue back and forth between Gil’s head and Lianon’s aching sex, now suckling the tip of him, now lashing the rigid hill of Lianon’s clit.

“God, Kaela,” Lianon whispered, shoving her hands into Kaela’s hair and forcing her face away. “You’re so fucking beautiful...” Eyes locked with the other woman’s, she drew a finger along Kaela’s lips, pink and slick with woman’s wet. “Gil, get on the bed.”

Gil obeyed with amusing promptness, scrambling onto the bed and stretching out on his back. His cock lay against the ridged muscles of his abdomen, pointing straight up his torso, leaking a trickle of pearly fluid. He grinned up at Lianon, rubbing his hands together with glee.

She looked down at Kaela, grabbing a lock of her hair and twirling it around and around her wrist until Kaela had no choice but to rise. Leaning in, Lianon slanted her lips across Kaela’s, loving the taste of herself on the other woman’s tongue. “Straddle him, my love,” she murmured into Kaela’s mouth, then breathed in the sigh she gave in response.

Kaela climbed up on the bed and knelt astride Gil, her hands on his chest. His grin was beginning to look a little strained as she rubbed her wet slit up and down his cock. Growling, he reached for her breasts, squeezing the full mounds, tweaking the nipples, drawing a ragged gasp from her. Kaela glanced at Lianon. Lianon dropped her gaze

toward the place where their bodies pressed together, the place where they were joined, but not. She watched as Kaela rose and took Gil's shaft in her hand, held it poised. Watched as the woman lowered herself onto that gorgeous length of cock.

"God, god, god," Gil muttered under his breath as she sank all the way down. His hands dropped to her buttocks, his fingers digging into her skin as he pushed up with his hips, seating himself even deeper. Lianon could almost wish she was a man, that she might experience what Gil was feeling now, that hot, moist flesh hugging the most sensitive part of his body. She reached down and circled her fingers slowly around her own clit, building heat as Kaela and Gil began to rock.

For a few moments, she was content to simply watch them, content to see them at their pleasure, but as the ache between her legs grew, she couldn't resist joining them. Scrambling onto the bed, she crawled up near Gil's head. He reached for her, pulling one of her legs across him so she straddled him, facing Kaela. Her gaze locked with the other woman's, she gave a whole-body shudder as Gil's tongue began to probe through her folds. His mouth never lingered very long in one place—he suckled her clit until she hovered on the verge, then moved on to thrust deep into her tunnel. Then—god help her—he slid his tongue across the puckered skin of her anus, again and again.

His hands guiding her hips, he pulled her back until he could work her clit once more, and slipped his thumb into her wet bottom. A knife of pleasure-pain shooting through her torso, she leaned forward and covered Kaela's lips with hers, reaching for the woman's clit. Her universe narrowed until all that existed was Gil's mouth and Kaela's, and the incredible, unbearable things they were doing to her. The knife twisted, driving the breath from her lungs in a shrill cry and she was coming all over Gil's face.

Only moments later, Kaela followed, her ragged wails pouring into Lianon's mouth, and as she spasmed around him, Gil let himself go, filling her with seed.

With a sigh of contentment, Lianon flopped to one side. Kaela collapsed on Gil's chest, burying her face in his neck. Lianon was lying the wrong way round, her hips next to Gil's head. She didn't care. It was all good. She'd happily sleep upside down on the bed every night for the rest of her life as long as they were beside her.

“Anyone hungry?” Gil wondered, shifting Kaela to his other side and rubbing his stomach.

Lianon laughed. “Food and sex, is that all you think about?”

He grinned. “When at all possible, yes. Everything else is rather a lot of trouble, most of the time. And I’m bloody starved. No offense, you’re a tasty morsel, Lianon, but not so filling, if you get my drift.”

Kaela giggled, lifting her head to look him up and down. “You’re so skinny,” she said.

He sniffed. “Lianon starves me, and works me to death. You have no idea, Kaela. A cruel mistress is our wife.”

Lianon rolled her eyes and laughed, rolling out of bed. “All right, all right, you can stop milking me for guilt now,” she muttered over her shoulder as she headed for the kitchen.

When she saw the worktable, she stopped cold, incredulous. Her eyes darted from the liberally slimed wood surface over to Biso, lying on his back on the rug with his tongue lolling, belly well-rounded, then back to the ample evidence of his crime.

“Biso!” she hissed, and he scrambled to his feet, ungainly for the weight of his recent meal. She went to the door and opened it. “Out!”

His huge head hanging low, tail drooping, he slunk out the door.

“What is it?” Kaela asked as she and Gil entered the main room.

“Supper is cancelled,” Lianon announced.

Gil gaped at the table. “My sausages,” he moaned, his face crumpling. Crossing to the table, he inspected the entire area, looking for any leavings. All he found was the half loaf of burnt bread, a little gnawed on but largely intact. He showed it to Kaela and raised a brow. “Well, the dog’s got a discriminating palate, I’ll give him that...”

Lianon snatched the loaf from his hand and threw it at him. He tried to dodge, but it struck his shoulder with a solid thunk then skittered under the couch. She was grinning like a fool the whole time, too happy to be insulted. “What are we going to do about supper?”

“Why don’t we go out?” Kaela suggested, wrapping her arms around Lianon and pressing a quick kiss to her lips.

Gil threw an arm around both of them and dropped a kiss onto each woman’s head. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard in a while.”

## 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 [www.kirstensaell.com](http://www.kirstensaell.com), or send an email to [kirstensaell@yahoo.com](mailto:kirstensaell@yahoo.com). She'd be delighted to hear from you.

Look for these titles by Kirsten Saell

*Now Available:*

Crossing Swords

Healer's Touch

*She's determined to break his eight centuries of celibacy—at any cost!*

## Healer's Touch

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Darjhian healer Aru has been in exile for eight hundred years, barred from the Deathless Land and parted from his wife. Now fallen from grace and no longer immortal, he can never return to her.

Yet he cleaves to his marriage vow and holds himself apart from everyone—especially Viera, the former prostitute whose sexual energy provides the power needed for his healing work. She presents a temptation he must constantly hold at bay if he's to keep to his vow.

Viera isn't interested in fighting temptation. She wants Aru. He wants her. What could be simpler? After three frustrating months working with him, her need for him has reached the breaking point. He claims he can never touch a woman again, but Viera isn't the type to take no for an answer.

Over four glorious nights, she shows Aru everything he's denied himself for eight centuries. But a shadow hangs over their passion. Aru is keeping secrets about the nature of his mortality. And now he faces a terrible choice...

Break Viera's heart, or risk destroying her with the knowledge of what he truly is.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Healer's Touch:*

Gods, it was hot up here. With a muttered curse, he opened the window, jerking at the ties of his shirt. He tugged it off over his head and leaned on the window frame to let the chill spring breeze caress his bare torso. Across the street, a pair of whores plied their trade, calling offers to passers by, flashing their breasts at those who showed interest. There was a time when Aru would have watched their games, but he had no stomach for it anymore. His erection was like a steel rod, but it had nothing to do with any woman outside.

Crossing to the bed, he reached for the buttons of his trousers, but his straining cock reacted with a bolt of pain and a wet surge of fluid.

“Paldir help me,” he muttered, flopping facedown on the mattress. He closed his eyes, but she was there waiting for him, her pale skin dotted with freckles, her auburn hair like a river of silk pouring over his white hands, her breasts peaked with the dusky pearls of her nipples. Gods, he had seen her naked in all her glory, had sat beside her, one hand on her belly as she writhed and screamed in the extremity of her arousal. He had seen it. He had caused it! It was but a tiny step further down the road to madness to imagine her breasts filling his hands, her nipples pressed between his lips as he suckled her, his cream-slicked fingers sliding high up inside her heat. He groaned at the thought of that pink tongue of hers lapping at his chest, licking a wet trail across his belly and down to his shaft. Her face, smiling up at him as she took him between her sweet lips and sucked him in, hard and deep, her hair spilling across his torso and between his legs.

Damn. With a start, he realized he was grinding his cock into the mattress. Sitting up, he rubbed his hands up and down his face, hard enough to chafe his skin. He’d never be able to sleep. Downstairs in the kitchen, he had a large cask of mead—the closest thing to *hennath* he could find in Anduni lands—but he couldn’t fetch himself any without risking waking Inella or her family. And to be honest, he doubted even a river of drink would soften his cock tonight.

Damn, damn, *damn*. Rising, he tiptoed to the door and peeked across the landing to Viera’s room. Her door stood ajar, a bar of candlelight slanting across the floorboards. She always left one burning next to the bed, in case a patient needed her in the night. Before Aru realized what he was doing, he was standing just outside her door, peeking in.

She slept, her hair like a dark cloud against the stark white of the sheets. She wore no shift—the dusky tip of one breast peeked at him over the edge of the blanket, and one long, curvy leg thrust out from the covers. Her bare toes enthralled him—so mundane, yet so delicate. He thought about taking them in his mouth, one by one. She stirred, shifting so that her other breast emerged from under the blanket, and he felt his shaft thicken in response, hardening until he thought his trouser buttons might end up permanently imprinted along its underside.

Heat flowered from the root of his member to spread its licking fingers all along his limbs. He pressed a hand to it, closing his eyes on a wave of need that left him dizzy.



When he opened them, he was somehow standing right beside her bed, looking down on her face.

And she was looking back up at him, confusion etching a delightful crease between her brows. Her eyes flicked down to his crotch, widening as she took in the state of him. Her gaze might as well have been her fingers—his organ leapt in response and he let out a long, shaky breath.

*So you can never touch a woman again?* Gil's earlier words resounded in his mind as he stared down at Viera in an agony of longing.

But what if he didn't touch her? What if he didn't touch her at all?

Gods.

His hand pressed against his shaft through the wool of his trousers, stroking upward the way he wanted her to do. He stared into her eyes, willing her to understand what he needed.

As if she read his mind, she drew the blanket slowly down, baring herself for him. Her nipples tightened as his gaze raked them, and she drew her fingertips across them, plucking them gently as her breath quickened and deepened. With shaking fingers, he slipped his buttons loose and his cock fell free. He moved to encircle it with his hand, but she shook her head.

"I want to see it."

Trembling, he clenched his hands at his sides and let her look her fill, her gaze like hot liquid bathing the skin of his prick. She stroked him with her gaze until, unable to stop himself, he wrapped his hand tight around his thickness. The slit at the tip released a steady stream of fluid. He caught it on the pad of his thumb and spread it all along his shaft, slicking himself, wishing it was her own sweet honey.

"Let me see you," he said, taken aback by the hoarseness of his voice.

Her lips curled upward, that sly little smile that never failed to make his belly flip over inside him. She slid her hands lovingly down her own torso and onto her inner thighs. As if they were a lover's hands, they pulled her legs wide apart, until all her secrets were there for him to see. He stared at the undulating hollows where the tops of her thighs met her abdomen, at the tightly curled, glistening wet hair that lined her

womanhood, at the engorged flesh of her labia, puffy and pink. At the pink bead of her clit, the center of her pleasure, standing stiff and straining to be touched. The entrance to her tunnel beckoned, its walls sealed against each other, seeping translucent white fluid even as he watched. That was the place he wanted to touch her, more than anything in the world. He wanted to bury himself there, to sink into her honeyed depths and lose himself, and never be found again.

His hand worked his cock, stroking up and down in a steadily increasing rhythm. The scent of her arousal, a rich, earthy musk, filled the small space they inhabited, mingling with the bittersweet redolence of his seed. Her hands stroked and skimmed back up the softness of her belly and over her ribs to cup her breasts. She palmed the heavy mounds, massaging from the outside inward, finishing at the rigid points of her nipples. With deft fingertips, she drew them into longer, firmer peaks, teasing them until he wondered how she didn't go mad from it.

His eyes met hers.

"Put your fingers inside yourself," he rasped, quivering as his cock released another surge of fluid.

She wet her lips, and he imagined her tongue dipping into the slit of his cock, exploring the tiny opening. Her fingers crept slowly, torturously toward her open cunt. As he watched, she slid the forefingers of both hands into her furrow and spread it wider, showing him her engorged inner lips. Slowly, as if moving through water, she pushed one finger into her hole, then drew it out again. A second finger joined the first for the next thrust, and her back arched up to meet it.

"Is that where you want them?" she asked, sliding them in and out while he watched, mesmerized.

He glanced at her face, not understanding. "Where else?"

She laughed, low and throaty. "Ah, Aru, for such an old man, you don't know much at all." And as he looked on, transfixed, a single finger of her other hand crept down toward her other hole, tiny and puckered, a place he hadn't ever conceived could be put to such a use.

*Two mates. One sacrifice. It's a challenge that could save them all...  
or destroy everything.*

## **Lux in Shadow**

© 2008 R. G. Alexander

A Children of the Goddess story.

Because of his own carelessness, Lux Sariel lost his lover at the hands of the shaman Gray Wolf, and put his Trueblood family in grave danger. Now he's been sent on a mission to find and protect his mortal enemy's sister. His companion is Arygon, a sexy Alpha who won't take no for an answer.

When the two men find Sylvain, a sheltered and innocent beauty with power beyond imagining, passions ignite—and suddenly none of them are certain of the future.

No one but the Goddess.

She has a plan that will change everything for Her children, Were and Vampire alike. A challenge that will fulfill the promise of what this unusual threesome have found together...or destroy them all.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Lux in Shadow:*

“No.”

A hand tightened in her hair and then she was gasping. Lux gripped her hips, raising her to the small pool's edge. His features were tight, lips swollen and fangs extended with desire.

He grabbed her wrist, pulling the forgotten hand from between her thighs to place it behind her back. She loved it. The aggression, the passion she could see in his eyes. All of it.

A haze had clouded her vision, wild frenzied feelings that seemed to be his and hers all at once. It scared her, excited her and embraced her like a lover. She lifted her face eagerly to his.

“Don’t think I forgot about you. Tempting as your hot little mouth is—your price was a kiss *from me*.” He nodded and a new set of hands slid over her shoulders.

Arygon. He caught her gaze as he lowered her to the ground, smiling tightly at her confusion. “You’re new at this type of bargaining, rabbit. Next time remember to be more specific about *where* you’d like to be kissed.”

A cool breeze hit her clit as his words sunk in, her head swiveling back toward Lux just as his lowered between her spread thighs.

Damp strands of wine-colored hair clung to her skin. His mouth brushed against her, just grazing the bare lips of her sex. She whimpered and she could feel him smile at the sound. Was he teasing her?

Those impossibly blue eyes narrowed on the man beside her, watching as Arygon’s fingers brushed against the curve of her breast. A thrill shot through her at the touch, knowing both men were focused on her, wanting her.

The Were had paused in his caress at Lux’s glance. But only for an instant. She moaned, arching in surprised arousal when he cupped one breast in his palm, squeezing a hard, tingling nipple between his fingers.

They stared at each other in silence for one, breathless moment. It felt like forever. Some battle of wills was going on between the two Alphas—and that’s exactly how they were behaving, like two stubborn, posturing Alphas—but she couldn’t focus enough to sort it out. Every inch of her skin was on fire. Inside her, she could feel the spirit of her beast roaring for her mate.

Her hands speared through Lux’s mane, tugging until she got his attention. And boy did she get it. Fire flared to life in the deep blue. There was a challenge in his eyes. And maybe a hint of erotic warning. But she was beyond caring. “You promised me a kiss.”

At her words he inhaled sharply, hands tightening on her thighs. His mouth opened in a silent snarl, fangs fully extended toward Arygon. “Only her breasts, Dydarren.”

That cryptic command was all the warning she got. His head disappeared between her thighs, Arygon’s fingers twisting and plucking at her nipple more aggressively as she felt the first broad swipe of Lux’s tongue.

“Oh my Shining Mother.”

Arygon laughed at her gasped words. “Feel good, rabbit?” He lowered his mouth, closing his teeth on her nipple for a small teasing bite before wrapping his rough tongue around the peaked bud. His hand slid across her chest to stroke her neglected breast and she arched off the cool stone floor.

Lightning flashes of sensation flayed her. The hot mouth on her breast causing her womb to clench. The tongue thrusting inside her pussy, gathering the heated arousal that coated her sex. It was too much. She’d never imagined it would be this powerful. This all consuming.

Then there were *his* emotions. Lux. His need was a tidal wave. A hunger so strong she wasn’t sure how he could contain it. He groaned low as he pressed deeper, eating at her, consuming her as if he’d never get enough.

Arygon lifted his mouth from her breast. “Fuck, that is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. He loves it, rabbit. It’s enough to make me wish he’d kissed you first, just so I could get a taste.”

Lux growled a warning, continuing to drive her to distraction with his tongue. She cried out at the vibration, unable to still her movements as her hips thrust against his mouth. Tears streamed down her cheeks, the boiling wave crashing around her as she came with his name on her lips. “Lux. Oh Goddess, *Lux*.”

He rose up from the water, climbing over her, his lips panting against her own. Arygon’s mouth and hands disappeared and all she could see, all she could feel was Lux.

His cock slid against her sex and she trembled. The feel of his skin pressed against hers renewed her need for him. The need for her mate.

His jaw was clenched tight. She could feel his restraint. His gaze dropped to her neck, at the pulse she felt pounding there. “I could take you right now. You’re so ready for me. So wet. I could take you and drink your blood down. Then I would know all your secrets. Know why the male Weres fear the women. Know if I should fear you. If I can trust you.”

He nipped at her lips, leaning down to nuzzle her neck, lapping at the pulse point. “Let me, Sylvain. Let me taste you in everyway there is. Let me sink my cock inside you like I’m dying to. Invite me in.”

Her blood cooled at his words, panic replacing desire. She wanted to. If only he knew how much she wanted to. But her brother's ghost was too strong a presence. Voicing her own insecurities.

*He'll know. If he bites you he'll know. If they find out what you are—this lifetime of hiding will mean nothing. They will kill you. No one can know, little sister. No one can ever know.*

He must have seen the answer in her eyes, his own growing cold, shutting her out. In one fluid motion he left her, towering above her with a humorless smile. "Forgive me for offending you, Shadow. I forgot myself for a moment. It won't happen again."

She flinched at his words. He'd called her Shadow again. Did he think she was like her brother? That she hated him because he was Vampire? She caught a glimmer of what might be regret in his expression before it went hard once more. As hard and impenetrable as the rock around them.

"I'll take first watch. Get some sleep, both of you. Maybe tomorrow the old woman will wake and tell me why you are in hiding, what danger stalks you. If there is a way to resolve this, perhaps my sister-in-law will be satisfied—and I can leave you in peace."

He turned without another word. She felt her heart breaking with each step he took away from her. No matter what choice she made, it seemed, he would be lost to her.

"Why would you deny your mate?" Arygon's somber voice broke the oppressive silence that had descended on the small, warm room. Her pulse stuttered as she glanced over at Arygon.

"It's an undeniable aroma. You've begun emitting the pheromone that precedes the mating cycle. Since we're not in mating season that can only mean one thing."

"Yo-you won't tell him?" He tilted his head, studying her for long, silent moments as she held her breath.

"You won't tell him he is your mate and you wouldn't let him bite you. A female who has found her mate is usually compelled by an instinct she cannot control to tie her mate to her—and yet you resist. You are not the average Were, even for a Shadow Wolf, are you?"

"Neither are you."

Arygon grimaced as he stood, heedless of his nudity and still flagrant erection, walking over to where his clothes had been folded neatly by Lux and his interesting abilities. “I won’t deny the obvious, rabbit.”

He laughed as he pulled his shirt over his head. “Aren’t we a pair? Both far from our packs, from our families. Both of us holding tight to our secrets.”

He knelt down beside her, looking into her eyes and giving her a quick kiss on the forehead. Before he stood he repeated the formal words usually reserved for the males during season. “Thank you for honoring me with your body, little sister. I hold you in the highest respect.”

Before he left he smiled over his shoulder with a wink, making her smile in return. “And I hope you will honor me again.”

*A troll's missing head could cause Markhat to lose his own.*

## The Mister Trophy

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All the finder Markhat wanted was a beer at Eddie's. Instead he gets a case that will bring him face to fang with crazed, blood-craving halfdead, a trio of vengeful Troll warriors, and Mama Hog's backstreet magic. Plus, the possible resurgence of the Troll War.

All right in his own none-too-quiet neighborhood.

Through the town of Rannit's narrow alleys and mean streets, Markhat tries to stay one step ahead of disaster. And ignore Mama Hog's dire warnings that this time, the head that rolls could be his own.

*Warning: This book contains well-dressed vampires, extremely polite Trolls, and occasional bursts of humor. Avoid reading it when landing aircraft, welding in the nude or taunting grumpy jackals while wearing pork chop earmuffs.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Mister Trophy:*

Eddie the barkeep stared at the Troll and then at the "Dead Troll Tavern" emblem carved into the bar-top and then back at the Troll. The Troll grinned. Forty-eight finger-long incisors popped out, sharper and shinier than anything Eddie might have hidden behind the bar and dripping with poisonous Troll saliva to boot.

Eddie deftly dropped his drying rag on the Dead Troll carving, wiped his grubby hands on his equally grubby apron and donned a shaky tough-guy scowl. "Yeah?" he said to the Troll. "You want something?"

The Troll boomed something back. A second later, Kingdom words rang out in a flat male human voice. "I come for the finder Markhat."

I choked on my beer. The Troll's neckless head swiveled, owl-fashion, to face me. It gargled more words in Troll, and its translator spell spoke again. "You are the finder named Markhat."



“Nope,” I said quickly. “Not me. Not Markhat. Never met the gent.”

The Troll glided over, flashing me that mouthful of nightmares smile. “I was told you would deny your name,” it said. “Shameful. I am—” The Troll spoke its name, and the translator gave up, leaving me with the sound of dishwater gurgling down a sink-drain.

“Honored to meet you, Walking Stone,” I said, as the Troll reached my table. “May your shadow fall tall and your soul grow to meet it.” I rose, my knowledge of Troll etiquette nearly exhausted. “I am not he that you seek, though, and anyway I hear he married a centaur and retired to the Fiti Coast. Why don’t you finish my ale and—”

The Troll’s grin split wider. It made a very human gesture for silence, finger at lips, and then it pulled back its greatcloak just far enough to reveal three fist-sized chunks of shiny solid gold on a fat wrought silver chain. Trolls don’t value gold themselves, but they do use it to barter with the other races. Word is that Trolls don’t haggle; they just stack money in big piles until someone says “yes”.

I sat down. Hard. The Troll shoved a rickety chair aside and squatted on the floor across from me.

“I walked fifty sunsets to see you, Finder,” it said. “I wade wide swamps, swim deep rivers, sleep on brother stones.”

“I live three blocks from here,” I replied. “So, I suppose, I walked fifteen minutes and drank two beers and sat on cousin chair.”

The Troll’s translator choked my words slowly out. The bar cleared, except Eddie, whose right eye—the blue one—hovered unsteadily behind a wide crack in the storeroom door.

The Troll barked and gurgled. My hackles rose, though I recognized booming Trollish laughter. “You jest with me, Finder Markhat,” it said. “You are brave. I admire bravery.” It leaned closer, yellow slitted owl-eyes narrowing. “I pay well for bravery.”

I shook my head. “Someone usually does, Walking Stone,” I said. “Just how much bravery are you wanting to buy?”

“You will go to a place I shall name,” said the Troll. “You will contrive to be admitted therein, and you shall determine if a certain object is displayed there. If so, you shall communicate my message to the masters of the place.”

Boots scuffed at the door, but hushed voices warned them off and Eddie lost another customer.

“This isn’t very private, Walking Stone,” I said. “And before I say yes or no, I need names. What place, what masters and what object?”

The Troll leaned close. My hair tried to stand on end. I’d been that close to a Troll only once before, twenty years ago. If a fat Marine sergeant hadn’t put a harpoon through its skull, I’d be laid out with the other war heroes up on the Hill.

“The place is called Haverlock, Finder,” whispered the Troll’s translator. “Its masters bear the same name. The object is a trophy taken during the War. A head, stuffed and mounted. A Walking Stone head.”

I finished my beer. “What’s the message, Walking Stone?”

The Troll grinned again. “You have what is ours,” he said. “Return it. With apologies. At once.”

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