

ELLORA'S CAVE XANADU

REBECCA AIRIES

In Sorcery's  
Hold

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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In Sorcery's Hold

ISBN 9781419922145

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley

Electronic book Publication May 2009

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# *IN SORCERY'S HOLD*

Rebecca Airies

## *Dedication*

To Carla and Ricky, the best older sister and brother anyone could ever have. I love you both.

## Chapter One

*Anseri Region, city of Ramgen*

Keira strolled down the clean street, keeping watch for the little thief. She didn't have much hope that Verite was here but she might just get lucky. In truth, the girl was probably already on her way to the temple. When she did finally catch Verite, she intended to teach the greedy little witch a lesson about keeping her sticky little hands off other people's property.

She tried not to stare or gape. Everything was so different here. She'd seen dragons before but until she'd gotten here, she'd never seen so many of them together. Although she hadn't seen any in this city, she'd seen three of them in the air yesterday.

This entire area was different from what she'd expected, much different from the Beserl region. If it wasn't for the large wall circling the city, she'd never have guessed they had problems here too. The people here seemed relaxed and cheerful.

A roar tore through the early morning air. Her heart slammed against her chest wall and then began racing. Fear surged through her. Her head jerked up and swung toward the east end of the city. A lantern hanging on a pole at the edge of the cobbled street swung on its hook as the roar came again. She stood tensely, her hands hanging at her sides as she tried to figure out what had made that noise.

In spite of the fact that this was a protected city, her first thought was that *merdanons* were attacking the city. Then she really listened and knew that that wasn't a *merdanon* howl. She'd heard enough of those huge fiends' screams to know the difference. That echoing bellow belonged to a dragon in pain. Even as she wondered what had the dragon so upset, she began running toward the sound.

*Cytari* relations with dragons were far from cordial but they were allies in the fight against the Dark Sorcerers and the *merdanons*. She'd take a dragon over a *merdanon* any day. Dragons had a tendency toward arrogance but they were sentient, independent beings. *Merdanons* were the magical creations of Dark Sorcerers.

She dodged the men and women running away from the sound. Before she even reached the edge of the city, she saw the dragon's black head swing up above the rooftops as well as the tips of his wings as they spread and folded. Another ear-piercing bellow sounded just as she cleared the last of the buildings and passed through the gates of the wall surrounding the city.

Keira skidded to a stop. A huge black dragon stood in the grassy field beyond the last light gray stone building. Her eyes ran over the beast's glossy black-scaled body. Red stripes crossed his back and lined the top of his triangular head. She frowned as his tail whipped close to the thick defense wall. If that muscular tail hit it, the wall would probably collapse.

*Why didn't he just change form?* Large dark scales glimmered in the sun as she slowly approached the dragon.

Rubbing her damp palms down her black pants, she considered ways to announce herself without getting herself bitten. Messing with a dragon in any kind of mood really wasn't recommended. They were acquisitive and domineering and often considered wandering witches fair game.

*Why was he just standing there?* Then the beast turned toward the city. His large head swung toward her.

She caught a glimpse of his rear flank. A silver trap clamped around his back hind leg. Blood trickled down the huge black limb. She could see gashes on the thick muscled leg where the skin had torn. She grimaced in sympathy. That had to hurt. The tearing had probably happened when he'd ripped the trap free of its anchor. Obviously, it had been meant for something smaller and hadn't been strong enough to hold him.

*Ah Vellos!* Her shoulders slumped. There was probably no one else in the city who could help him with this. That trap was intricately spelled. She could sense it even from a light probe. It would take high magic to release it. She hadn't seen any other dragon or even a vampire today. They'd have come to his aid if they were in the city.

Once she got it off him, he'd be fine. He could change form and the wound would be healed during the transformation. First, he had to get free of the sharp metal clamping on his leg. The trap was too big for him to change while held by it. Those metal jaws would easily take off a man's thigh.

She moved forward, making sure the dragon saw her approaching him. Dragons had a mouthful of teeth. Most of them were longer than carving knives. But she wasn't worried about him taking a chunk out of her. There was even more reason to be wary of a dragon bite than those huge teeth. On top of the rows and rows of sharp teeth, a dragon injected venom every time he bit something.

"Hello, I'm Keira A'Darcin. Since I don't see anyone else around who can help you, I'm going to free you. Don't bite me." She held her hands out in front of her as she walked toward him.

His head lowered and she found herself looking straight down the huge muzzle into golden eyes. She swallowed hard. He inhaled and tilted his head before it rose away from her. A smile tilted her lips as she exhaled the breath she only now realized she'd held. Apparently, she'd passed inspection. She moved slowly toward his back leg. His head turned and his eyes followed her every move. She raised her hands, holding them just above the gleaming metal of the silver trap.

Taking a deep breath, she began slowly channeling power into the trap, reversing the spell. The metal creaked. The curved, sharp-edged teeth slowly began pulling out of his skin. When the metal maw had opened wide enough, the dragon stepped out of it. As soon as he was out of the way, she let the metal jaws slam back together.

Turning her eyes to the dragon, she saw the skin on his leg shimmer. The wounds closed and disappeared. Gray and black mist swirled, rising around the huge beast

towering over her. It enclosed the dragon, forming a dense round cloud around him. The giant ball of swirling magic shrunk and tightened into an oval. With a last glittering pulse it disappeared.

A tall, broad-shouldered man stood right in front of her. Even if she hadn't just seen him change forms, she'd have known that this intimidating muscular male was a dragon.

His hair was the first thing that caught her attention. It would have given him away immediately. Short, deep red hair crowned his head but on both sides of his head a stark black streak set him apart from normal men. Then there were his ears. Pointed ears weren't exclusive to dragons but the brilliant green gem dangling from his lobe did mark him as a dragon warrior.

He'd magically clothed himself as he transformed. Not that she would have minded seeing the man naked. From what she could tell by the way his clothes fitted, he had a gorgeous, muscular body. A loose gold shirt covered that broad chest. She wouldn't have minded getting a glimpse of it. Black pants molded to his strong thighs.

He took a gliding step closer to her. His sun-burnished skin gleamed in the bright light. She could see the black slits of his pupils as his eyes ran over her body. A scar trailed from his left temple across his cheek. Apparently, she'd just given aid to a seasoned dragon.

"Thank you for helping me, Keira." He grasped her hand, enclosing it between his large hands. "It's been a while since I've even felt *Cytari* magic in this area. Witches from your sect usually stay in the north." A frown turned gorgeous lips downward. "You're not dressed in your sect's uniform."

She looked up at him. With the unknowns in this situation, she couldn't trust anyone here. Especially not a too-chummy dragon. "I'm here looking for something."

That part was true enough. She had to tell him something. Like most of the High Sorcerers, he was annoyingly alpha. She already had his attention just because she was a High Witch. Dragons, vampires and other High Sorcerers were always looking for a complementary mate. He certainly wouldn't accept an "it's none of your business".

The last decades hadn't been peaceful. All those with the power to fight had had to make a stand against a growing number of Dark Sorcerers. Dragons, vampires, sorcerers and witches had all stepped forward to fight for their world. Most of the softness had been battered out of those who fought the Dark Sorcerers and their beasts.

"Something? What something?" He raised a red eyebrow in an arrogant query.

"How did you get caught in that? Even in dragon form, you should have been able to see something that big." Keira put a hand on her hip. She didn't have much hope for the distraction gambit but it was worth a try.

"Thick, tall grass. Now try answering my question." He leaned forward. The muscles along his jaw tightened.

"An amulet. I have reason to believe that it's in this region." She smiled and shrugged. It really wasn't his concern that that amulet had been last seen around the

neck of a thieving *Cytari* witch. And there was no way she was going to tell him about the history behind that amulet. She didn't need him following her around the region. Catching up to Verite was going to be difficult enough. "I have to go begin my search. Maybe I'll see you again."

"I'll be in the area." His lips curved into a smile, revealing flashing white teeth. His eyes ran down her body and his interest was obvious.

She swallowed heavily. She really didn't need this kind of complication.

Rath watched the witch lick her full pink lips. Those lips just invited kisses. Her magic had sizzled around his leg. It had felt so good as it washed over and around the trap. Even with the pain from the steel trap biting into his leg, his cock had hardened. Arousal still burned through him.

She was a pretty witch with long golden hair. Her skin was a very pale creamy white with only the slightest hint of gold. His eyes traced over the fine lines of her face. Gold brows arched over tilted brown eyes.

He wished Damon was in the area. The tingling burn of her magic had felt so right. The vampire would be able to tell if she was their mate just by the feel of her magic. Rath couldn't do that. He'd have to taste the sorcery in her blood. He was fairly certain she wouldn't volunteer for that. For now, he'd keep an eye on her and would wait for his bond partner to get to the city.

He wouldn't wait to get close to the witch. By *Grimlan*, she was a sexy woman. He wanted to feel her tall, slender body moving against his. His mouth watered as he thought about tasting those nipples he could see pressing against the thin black material of her long-sleeved shirt.

"Be careful and don't confront any *merdanons*." He didn't want her taking any chances.

Power radiated from the witch. The ease with which she'd used it told him she had fought before. The woman had already proven herself to be uncommonly bold. Most *Cytari* wouldn't have come to the aid of a dragon under any circumstances. All witches were aware that both dragons and vampires searched for mates. Most witches tended to keep their distance from even normal sorcerers.

"I'm not about to become a breeder for a dragon, much less one of the Dark Sorcerers. I'm not an apprentice and I know what I'm doing." She tossed her head, making her shining waist-length mane of hair swing back over her shoulder.

"We'll see. If you get into trouble, scream. If I don't hear you, one of the other dragons will. They should arrive before sunset." He brushed a finger over the soft curve of her cheek.

She blinked and her mouth dropped open. She took a step back. Her head slowly shook. The look of horror spreading across her face was almost funny.



"Don't worry. We don't really eat witches in a single gulp." He let his gaze travel down her body over the slight rise of her belly to the juncture of her thighs. "We like to savor the sweet essence of a witch, sometimes for days."

She swallowed as a wave of red rose up her cheeks. She bit her lip and turned to leave. "I have to go."

"Keira!" He took a step forward, unwilling to let her get away just yet. "Stay out of trouble."

She looked at him and her mouth worked.

"If you need help, Keira, you call for Rath." He pointed a finger at her.

"I won't need any help." She whirled and stalked into the city walls.

Rath watched the fast sexy swish of her hips as she walked down the street. He'd make sure he found her again soon. And he'd get word to Damon. He had a feeling that Ramgen was just a starting point for Keira.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keira sat at the table in the inn's common room. She stirred the soup in the bowl in front of her, letting it cool a bit before she ate. She had plenty on her mind even without the three dragons she'd seen flying over the city this evening.

Verite had been in the city. The young witch had rented a room in a smaller inn in the center of the city but hadn't been there in days. Verite had made an impression on two young witches of the local sect. They'd remembered her arrogant attitude and the way she'd acted when she'd visited the sect house.

Keira sighed. She was tired and wanted only to rest for a week but she'd have to leave the city tomorrow, preferably without a dragon escort. Dealing with that girl's mistaken beliefs was going to be hard enough. Adding dragons to this situation would make it impossible.

A hush fell over the room. She turned her head and saw the redheaded dragon, Rath, strolling toward her. The man's smile stretched wide as he moved the chair from another table to her table. He placed it next to hers and sat.

"Have you been here long?" He smiled and raised a hand for the woman moving among the tables.

She shook her head and just managed to keep from rolling her eyes. He certainly had an ego. He acted as if she'd been waiting on him. "What do you want?"

"Just your company." He captured her free hand.

"I'm not in the mood to find out how sharp your teeth are." She tugged at her hand. "I've heard about the effects of dragon bites. Why would I want to experience it?"

"And if I promise not to bite you..." He raised an eyebrow and his eyes lowered to her breasts. "You'd like to feel my mouth on you."

"I'd like to be at home, lazing in a hot bath. That's not going to happen until I finish what I came here to do. Not having everything you want is just a fact of life." She leaned back in the chair and pursed her lips.

She had to admit that he was tempting and not only because his body was everything that she admired in the male form. The thrill of tasting something almost forbidden intensified her interest. All witches knew the danger of playing with dragons and vampires. A smart witch just didn't do it. Keira didn't know if she'd be able to do the smart thing and walk away this time. Her nerves had been stretched to the limit for weeks and she needed a release of some kind.

"If you had been the type to play things safe, you wouldn't be here." He lifted her hand to his mouth, nipping at the ends of her fingers.

The man didn't know what he was talking about. She wasn't here for adventure. By the Great Lady, she'd be hunting *merdanons* if she didn't have to chase after Verite. That amulet had been in her family for generations and she had a responsibility to get it back.

The serving woman placed a bowl of soup in front of him as well as a large hunk of bread and a mug of ale. He waited until the woman had left before turning his attention back to her.

"Are you that afraid of me?" He smiled, releasing her hand.

"I'm not afraid of you. I just don't want to do something stupid. I have things to do and I don't really have time to make trouble for myself." She tore off a piece of her own bread.

"I'm not asking you to join me in my cave for the next month. All I'm asking is for a night that we'll both enjoy." His golden eyes traced over her face.

He seemed to know just what to say, what would most tempt her. She knew she needed to tell him "no", but she wanted him. The urge to take the chance grew with each breath. The warring desires tumbled through her mind. He'd promised not to bite, but could she trust him to keep his word? If she let him into her room, sneaking away in the early morning would be harder than it should be. She grimaced. The risks were huge but it was just one night.

She ate a few spoonfuls of her soup as she mulled over the problem. Raising her head, she met his eyes. "One night. If you bite me, I'll cut you. And don't get the idea that this will give you any kind of hold on me."

"I wouldn't think that I had any hold on you after a single night, Keira." Rath leaned toward her. "And I promise you again. I won't bite you this night."

"Just this night, then we part." Even as she said the words, her mind reeled.

This wasn't how she normally behaved. She worked at being as normal as she could be. Hunting *merdanons* involved a certain amount of risk but for the most part she had learned to blend in with everyone else. Protecting the family secret and that amulet had been drummed into her since she'd been told of her family's heritage.

"We'll have this night. Tomorrow will come soon enough." He smiled.

She nodded. This one night, she'd explore, be wild. Tomorrow, she'd find Verite and go back to her real life, her responsibilities.

When they both finished eating, Rath drew her to her feet. "Do you have a room in this inn?"

"Yes, it's upstairs." She took his hand and led him to her room.

## Chapter Two

Opening the door, she stepped into the dim interior. Someone had lit one of the *sel-oil* lamps on the mantle. The flickering light cast dancing shadows around the room. She walked over and turned it up, moving around the room to light two more. She wanted to see that gorgeous golden body. Turning away from the small table, she looked back to where Rath stood just inside the door and to the bed. Covered with a soft brown blanket, the bed was more than large enough for her but for a man of his height...

"No, I won't fit on that." He caught her appraising glance, before turning to secure the door.

His lips tilted into a wicked grin and a mischievous look crossed his predatory face. She wouldn't have believed that someone who looked so dangerous could manage that lighthearted look. Still marveling at the transformation, she turned to the bed. They'd have to do something about it.

She shook her head, almost doubting her eyes for a moment. The bed was gone. At least, the one the innkeeper had furnished had disappeared. In its place, a rich green and gold fabric stretched across a huge thick mattress in an ornate black frame.

Rath stepped up behind her, his hands sliding around and slipping beneath her shirt. "Are you ready, Keira?"

She leaned back against him. "Yes, I'm ready."

She wanted this even though it was crazy. He was so sexy. His muscular body excited her imagination. She definitely needed to find out what he looked like beneath that shirt. And then there was the thrill of playing with danger.

His nostrils flared and he inhaled deeply. "You smell so good. It's a little like *esana* flowers, *cida* melon and strong feminine arousal. Let's get you out of these clothes."

He gently turned her to face him. His hands skimmed over her shoulders and down to the carved buttons. He slipped the black ovals free of the fabric. With gentle hands, he pushed the black shirt off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

She could easily have made the fabric disappear but she wanted to touch him. Taking off his clothing gave her the perfect excuse to do some exploring. His muscled chest and arms did appeal but she wanted to discover what he looked like without those pants.

Her fingers bypassed the row of buttons on his shirt and fell to the buckle of his belt. Tugging, she was frustrated when the leather stuck on the metal prong. Finally freeing it, she pulled the strap out of the loops on his pants and dropped it to the floor. The laces on his pants knotted when she tried to untie them. Groaning, she doubled her efforts, trying to free the rigid flesh she could feel pressing against the sturdy cloth.

He drew in a quick breath and his fingers circled her wrists, stilling her efforts. Pulling her hands away, he went to work on the fastening. "Let me finish this for us, this time."

With galling ease, he unknotted the strips. He stood there for a moment. Looking up at him, she frowned. *What was he waiting for?* He arched a brow and his eyes slid down her body. She realized then that when he'd said "let me finish it", he'd meant more than his pants. And he was waiting for a response.

"Just hurry. I want to touch you." She licked her lips and drew in a deep breath. The dragon's scent swirled around her, rich, spicy.

She felt magic shimmer over her. Rath stood naked, gorgeous in front of her. The man's entire body gleamed a sun-burnished gold in the lamplight. His thick, erect cock thrust up from a completely hairless groin. Running her eyes back up his body, she saw that she wasn't the only one leering. His eyes were locked on a point somewhere below her chin. Looking down, she saw that the spell had rid her of all of her clothes, even her underclothes.

"Now give me that sassy mouth." He glided close to her, his arms closing around her.

His head lowered and his lips brushed over hers. He nibbled and sucked at them, coaxing her to open for him. She didn't even try to fight the temptation. Her mouth eagerly opened beneath his. His tongue stroked into her mouth, tangling, mating. The kiss changed, deepened. His arms tightened, pulling her against his body.

She fell into the kiss. He tasted spicy, hot and so addictive. His lips slid away from her mouth, skimmed across her cheek and down her neck. He inhaled deeply and a shiver rolled through his large frame.

"I can't wait any longer for you, Keira. Let's go to bed." He nibbled at her neck.

The rumble of his voice seemed to ripple through her. By the Lady, just his deep voice sparked a surge of arousal. Of course, it didn't hurt that he had a body that inspired lust.

He scooped her into his arms. Catching her breath at the sudden change of position, her hands flew to his shoulders and she held on tightly. With long strides, he carried her to the bed. Placing her on the mattress, he knelt beside her for a few moments, just staring.

She watched as his eyes roamed over her. She could see the hunger burning in his gaze. On the return trip up her body, those slitted orbs locked on her breasts. Her nipples hardened under the scrutiny, thrusting up as if demanding attention. A wide smile spread across his lips, showing four very prominent canines.

She tensed. Her heart slammed against her chest and her breathing suddenly came hard and fast. Fear trickled through her. The sight of those teeth effectively reminded her that this wasn't just a sorcerer she was playing with tonight. She'd invited a fully grown, likely very powerful, dragon into her bed.

He must have seen some of the near-panic in her eyes. His hands stroked over her in slow, soft sweeps. They ran down her ribs and over hips in calm, soothing caresses. She slowly relaxed beneath his hands.

Rath's head dipped and he dropped kisses on her shoulder. His mouth moved down to the small mounds of her breasts. He brushed a kiss in the slight valley between her breasts, inhaling and nuzzling. His tongue lapped and glided up the gentle slope of one breast, lashing the tight, puckered tip repeatedly. She wriggled as the heat sent electric tingles dancing over her skin. He grazed the nipple with his teeth. She gasped and felt his laughter against her breast.

"Such beautiful red nipples." His hot breath fanned over the sensitive, aching crest.

Keira closed her eyes as a dagger of sensation shot straight to her pussy. She felt the walls of her channel clench and warm, slick moisture on her thighs. As his mouth closed over the darkened nipple, he plucked at the hard tip of the neglected breast. He rolled and tugged the needy peak between calloused fingers. Each movement of his fingers and lips sent a sharp thrill of need shooting through her. She writhed beneath his touch, wanting more. He lifted his mouth and she clutched at his head, trying to urge him back to her breast. Didn't the man know that this wasn't the time to be playing? He moved to the side, dropping kisses and nipping her soft flesh. His lips fastened onto her other nipple. He licked and lapped at the red tip before he settled in to feast.

She drew in a shaky breath as she felt his hand slide over her rib cage. It trailed down her stomach over the shield-shaped patch of hair on her otherwise shaven mound. Her fingers clenched, trying to get a good grip on his short hair as she drew him closer. Every pulling draw sent lancing sensation slicing through her. The ache built, intensified with each hard tug of his lips.

Rath lifted his head. His tongue circled her nipple. "Do you want me, Keira? Are you ready?"

She saw the anticipation glowing in his golden eyes. She blinked. He had to know she wanted him. His fingers were stroking her clit. He could feel the slick flood of fluid caused by her need.

"You know I want you." She arched as two of his big fingers slipped into her pussy.

"Are you ready?" His thumb grazed her clit.

She had no idea what he was really asking and didn't care. Her body tightened. She pulled at his arm, trying get him where she needed him. "Yes! Come to me."

Satisfaction flared in his intent eyes. He glided up her body and his lips slanted over hers. His mouth devoured and claimed. His fingers stroked over her clit and then glided down to her slick entrance. A single digit plunged into her, swirling in the juices spilling from her.

"You're wet, tight, squeezing and pulling at my finger." He nipped at her lips.

Keira arched, taking his finger as deep as she could but was frustrated. She wanted that thick, hard cock prodding against her hip inside her. His hands and chest felt so

warm, almost hot and she wanted to feel more. Inhaling, she drew in his scent and she found it even headier now.

He smiled and moved back a little, urging her legs wider. The rounded head of his cock brushed against her inner thigh, then probed at her slick opening. His hips rocked forward and his shaft slid into her snug channel. Eager to take more, she arched up into him. His lips brushed hers as his thick rod sank into her pussy. He tugged at her lips with his teeth. She gasped and trembled beneath him as erotic heat boiled inside her. Sharp tingles danced along the walls of her pussy as he slowly withdrew.

"Move with me, Keira." Rath pressed forward, his cock sliding deep.

Her hips rose to meet every stroke. Pleasure coiled into a tight ball as he nipped her lips. His large body surged against hers. His chest brushed over her breasts. He pumped into her, a slow, tormenting rhythm. She writhed beneath him, loving the feel of his heavy, muscled body moving against her. Her fingernails sank into his buttocks as his hips rolled against hers. She needed more than this gentle fuck.

She trembled with the need churning inside her. Panting, she thrust against him as each rocking lunge urged her desire to an even higher peak. Each driving surge seemed to find an unbearably sensitive area deep within her pussy. A streak of fierce heat stabbed into her with every stroke. Her nails sank deeper as need screamed through her.

"By the Lady..." Her hips arched against his, straining for the bliss hanging just out of reach.

"Come for me," Rath grated as his strokes became more forceful, urgent.

His cock thrust deep into her clasp channel. He rotated his hips, grinding his pelvis against her, before he withdrew and drove into her again. Her body trembled beneath his, every muscle tightening as a powerful orgasm rushed toward her. Lights exploded behind her eyelids. Hot, sweet, intense pleasure hit her as he continued to surge into her.

A growl rolled through him as he tensed over her. His hips drove against her. His seed sprayed into her. When the last jet of semen pulsed into her, he collapsed to the side, dragging her with him. After a few moments, he slowly pulled out of her. She closed her eyes, sated and a little sleepy.

"Don't go to sleep yet. I haven't finished with you. I want to taste those breasts again and I've got a distinct urge to make you scream my name." His fingers traced a pattern around her breasts.

For a moment, she wondered if she was hearing things. When his fingers tugged on her nipple, she drew in a shaky breath, relaxed and decided to enjoy. It was going to be a deliciously long night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keira buttoned her shirt with shaky fingers. Chancing a glance back over her shoulder, she smiled as she saw the large male sprawled on the bed. The green and gold of the bedclothes only enhanced the rich tone of his sun-burnished skin. Lady, he was gorgeous and thankfully still asleep. Shouldering her bag, she bent to grab her boots. He hadn't even stirred when she'd edged out of the bed. She didn't want him waking up before she'd left. He'd kept his word not to bite her last night but the night was over and she thought he would take advantage of it. Although the night had been everything she could have hoped for and more, she didn't need the mess of getting entangled with a dragon.

She opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. As she quietly closed the door, she took one last look at him, still blissfully slumbering. Pulling on her boots, she grimaced as an aching twinge shot through her thighs. That ache was just something that she was going to have to live with. Verite had too much of a lead to delay any longer.

Feeling a little hunted, she rushed down the stairs. She walked over to the gray-haired innkeeper. He worked behind the bar, running a cloth over the dark, scarred surface. As her shadow fell across his hand, he looked up and smiled.

"I need someone to saddle my *chitan*. I'm leaving." She slid a coin onto the bar and waited. Well, not technically *her chitan* but she'd hired his use for the trip.

The short innkeeper frowned, his hand clenching around the brown cloth he held. He eyed the gold piece on the bar. "Does the dragon you were with know you're leaving?"

She raised her brows. So dragons did hold power here as she'd suspected or at least a high degree of respect. The city must be under their protection. "Would I be down here if he didn't know? Of course, he knows."

The man's tense muscles relaxed and he smiled widely at her as he scooped up the coin. "I'll have your animal brought to the front."

She nodded and turned away, her eyes sliding to the stairs. The last thing she needed was for the dragon to come down those stairs and prove her lie. The lie had been necessary. She wasn't going to stand here arguing about the dragon's right to say when or if she could leave the city. It wouldn't do any good. To these people, the dragons stood between them and death at the hands of the *merdanons*. The people would do whatever it took to keep them happy.

Keira walked out of the inn and found the large male *chitan* called Gamma waiting for her. The gray-green beast snorted, pulling his lips back to reveal two very sharp upper canines. His scaled skin shimmered in the early morning light. The animal jerked against the reins, his front paws leaving the ground as he reared.

She sighed. *Just great*. Gamma seemed lively this morning. Riding him wasn't going to be easy until he calmed. The claws on Gamma's paws clacked as they hit the cobbled stones. Lean and built for speed and endurance, the *chitan* would eat almost anything,



plant or animal. Because of that adaptability, they flourished in every part of Berdat. They also had an affinity for magic users and loved to be around them.

"Calm down, Gamma. Neither one of us is going to get back to our cushy home until we find that idiot woman." Keira took the reins from the boy trying to keep the stubborn animal from racing down the street.

Gamma stepped forward and butted his large round head into Keira's chest. She stroked her hands over the animal's forehead, smoothing her fingers down between the eyes to the supple skin of the wide muzzle.

She patted the *chitan* one last time on his neck before securing her bag to the saddle. Mounting, she urged the *chitan* toward the road out of the city. After she left the last of the buildings behind her, she urged Gamma into a ground-eating lope toward the hills to the east.

Verite might stop at the next city in this direction but Keira wouldn't bother making the small detour. The woman's ultimate destination was only a day's ride away from that village. She intended to get there and get her amulet back from the thieving fool.

## Chapter Three

Rath barreled down the inn's steps at a run. A scowl curled his lips. He'd slept so deeply that Keira had managed to slip away from him this morning. That was something he hadn't intended to let happen. He'd had plans for this morning.

He'd woken relaxed, refreshed and ready to go for another round. At first, he hadn't thought that she was gone. He'd just thought that her getting out of bed had been what had drawn him from sleep. Then he'd seen that her bag wasn't on the small table where he'd noticed it last night. He gritted his teeth. That had been proof enough that she'd slipped away while he slept.

He'd sprung out of bed angry and embarrassed. Inside he raged. He should have been prepared for something like this. She'd shown a strong determination to keep him at a distance. Leaving before he could stop her would do that and more. He'd find the innkeeper and see if she'd told him anything about her plans for the day. Determined to track her, he cleared the last of the steps in a bound and looked around the room. Any hope that he'd catch sight of her was immediately crushed by the faint traces of her scent. Too old – she was gone.

The gray-haired innkeeper stood to one side of the large room as three young women swept and mopped the floors. Rath strode over to stand in front of him. The man tore his eyes away from the women and gave Rath his full attention.

"I'm looking for the golden-haired witch who rented a room from you. Do you know what she planned to do today?" Rath struggled to hold his impatience. He didn't want to lose track of the woman. Damon should arrive today and he would like to have at least a general idea of where to look for the woman.

The innkeeper's mouth dropped open and a slow look of horror crossed his face. "She said you knew. She had us saddle her *chitan* and left the city. I asked her..."

"And she lied." Rath turned and left the inn.

It was hardly the innkeeper's fault that Keira had managed to get away from him. Even though he was angry that she'd managed it, a smile curved his lips. He had to admire her courage as well as her cunning. She might not know it but she'd just thrown a challenge at him. He'd make sure he saw the woman again. Even if she wasn't his mate, she would be a very worthy mate to some dragon or vampire.

Walking down the street, he looked up at the pale green sky. He wanted to change forms and begin searching for her immediately. The urge was gnawing at him. Just letting her put more distance between them went against all of his instincts.

But he had to wait for Damon to arrive. Since dragons couldn't communicate telepathically like vampires, he'd had to search the city for a vampire to send the

message to his bond mate. He'd finally found one late yesterday afternoon and that vampire had contacted Damon. Damon had left the lair to help free a city from a Dark Sorcerer's grip while Rath had been gone. Rath could have gone to him, using the strength of their bond to find him but hadn't wanted to chance losing Keira. As the other part of the vampire-dragon bond, if she did happen to be their match, Damon would want to be present when he identified her.

Rath wanted to find his witch-mate, the one who would turn their pair into a *tri'inal*, a mated triad. For a long time, he'd been searching for the woman who would complement his and Damon's magic. His bond with Damon was strong and secure. The sex couldn't have been better but sometimes, he felt as if something—someone—was missing.

Rath clenched his hands and kept his focus. Annoyance and impatience boiled through him. The sun had already risen to its peak and would soon begin its descent toward the horizon. Damon still hadn't arrived in the city. The delay irritated him. On any other day the vampire would be here before Rath expected him to arrive.

While he waited for Damon to arrive, he went back to the inn for another talk with the innkeeper. The man hadn't been able to tell him anything more but the boy who'd saddled her *chitan* had noticed which direction she'd taken as she'd left the walls. The boy had added that as she was leaving she'd said something about finding someone and then going home.

Leaving the inn, Rath made another trip to the small square at the center of the city. He stalked into the bustling area ringed by stalls and tables selling wares. His eyes went to a group of women clustered around a black-haired man. The tall broad-shouldered man had his back to Rath but he knew that that had to be Damon. It never failed. Women flocked to Damon's side the moment he appeared. Unfortunately, no high-level witches had ever been in any of the groups that tended to migrate to the vampire.

One woman twirled her fingers in Damon's shoulder-length black hair as she plastered her body to his side. Rath smiled as the vamp's large hand cupped the woman's ass. He took an immense amount of satisfaction in clearing his throat. The vampire wasn't going to get to play tonight. They had things to do.

"What took you so long? I've been waiting all day." Rath cocked a hand on his hip and raised an expectant eyebrow.

Damon turned, frowning, brows lowering over brilliant blue eyes. "Marc said that the woman was in the city hunting for something. He didn't say there was any reason to hurry. I finished the battle."

As the vamp disengaged himself from the clinging women, Rath noticed the dark shadow of an evening beard against the vamp's dark brown skin. He couldn't blame the women for being attracted. That dark stubble made Damon look even sexier than normal.

"There's a reason now. She left this morning and I couldn't find a vamp in the city so that I could get word to you." Rath grimaced and suppressed a growl. The only good

news was that he knew which direction she'd taken. There weren't many places she could go to in the near east.

"We'll find her. Marc said you were going to search for her last night after you left him. Did you find her? Is she our mate?" Damon stepped up beside him.

"I found her last night but I still don't know if she's our mate." Rath grinned as he remembered Keira's uncertainty and the desire in her eyes as she'd looked at him across the table last night. "Before she'd even consider a night with me, I had to promise not to bite her. She slipped out of the room this morning before I woke and left the city."

"You were that afraid she'd reject you? She wouldn't agree to be with you without the words?" Damon's brows raised and he laughed.

"She was going to turn me away even though she wanted me. After feeling her magic burning over me, I wasn't about to miss the opportunity to be with her." Rath shook his head even as he felt his lips curve in a satisfied smile. He'd known even as he'd approached her that that might be the only chance he ever had to be with her.

"Let's go find this witch. She sounds too interesting to let roam free." Damon started walking toward the stables at the edge of the city. "Do you know which direction she took?"

"East." Rath quickly caught up with Damon and began to lead the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keira crested the grassy hill and looked down the gentle slope into the small valley. A black *chitan* grazed on the tall grass near the light brown columns of the small stone temple which housed the vault. That sealed vault held the ancestral weapons of one of the ancient kings of Berdat. Verite had already arrived and was probably learning that she couldn't open the vault.

Keira gritted her teeth and nudged Gamma down the hill. Time to get her amulet and go home. After meeting that dragon – not to mention having sex with him – leaving the area seemed like the only sane course to take.

Dismounting near the entrance, she secured the reins to a small bush. It wouldn't hold the animal if it became too panicked but the slight pull would keep it from just wandering away. If something panicked the *chitan*, then it was probably a larger predator or some form of sorcery. She didn't want the animal to be trapped in either case.

She stalked up the cream-colored stairs between the ornately carved pillars. Feeling a little nervous, she pushed the shining metal double doors open wide and walked into the dark building. She created a ball of light and tossed it into the air, illuminating the beautifully painted and gilded vaulted ceiling.

The ball floated in front of her as she paced down the long chamber. The building was empty save for a large altar at the end of the room. Vividly colored murals lined the

walls, telling of ancient battles and of the rise of this family of kings. She wanted to walk over and look at all of them but focused on what had to be done.

When she reached the end of the room, she went straight for the altar. Placing her hand on the flat top of the carved gray and black stone, she gathered her power to open the secret entrance. The altar slid to the side before she released the pulse of magic.

A small dark-haired woman trudged up the stairs with her head down, paying little attention to her surroundings. Keira stepped in front of her and waited. Verite stopped as soon as she saw Keira's boots. Her head lifted, her eyes widened and a flush flamed over her cheeks. The young witch stopped on the third step and licked her lips.

"Wouldn't open for you, would it? Give it to me, you thief." Keira extended her hand and looked pointedly at Verite. Her jaw clenched. No member of her family had ever come to these vaults. It was believed that destiny would lead them here if a *Tiria* was ever needed again. Keira was certain that a fool witch stealing an amulet didn't qualify as an act of destiny.

"But I'm of the king's bloodline." Verite tightly clutched at a pouch hanging at her side and took a slow step back.

"You're related to the wrong king, you idiot. You found the information on a scroll at least two hundred years old and you knew that it was a copy of a much older scroll. Did you actually expect the information on it to apply to the line of a very recent, very minor royal family?" Keira stepped forward and took the pouch out of Verite's limp hand. She opened it and smiled when her amulet fell into her palm.

"Wrong king?"

"There has been more than one king in Berdat's history. There were nine at one time and it's one of those nine ancient kings who built this temple and whose weapons are housed in the vault. Only one of their bloodline can open it." She slipped her amulet onto a sturdy chain and hung it around her neck.

Fisting her hand, she fought the urge to teach the woman a lesson. The thought was all too tempting. The only thing that held her back was that it wouldn't be a fair contest. She took a deep breath and turned, marching toward the doors. Flinging open the right door, she took a single step outside and stopped dead.

She blinked and slowly took a step back. Her eyes never left the mass of trouble in front of her. Gray skin gleamed as the huge armor-bodied *merdanons* gathered in front of the temple.

Muscles bulged under the pale skin and vacant black eyes stared seemingly into nothingness. They weren't very smart or even sentient but Dark Sorcerers mainly used them for brute strength and destructive force. They looked like very large men—if normal men had blades at the ends of their fingers and toes. Five of the creatures gathered just beyond the temple's columns.

Outside a pitched battle for a city, she'd never heard of so many in one place. They usually roamed alone, protecting territory the Dark Sorcerer considered his or merely to act as an antagonist. With a steady breath, she gathered her power and threw up a

shield. She had no doubt that they'd break through that but it should give her time to come up with some kind of plan. Spinning on her heel, she ran back inside the temple, sealing the door with magic as an added barrier.

She looked around the temple, searching desperately for something that would help fight five *merdanons*. She was no minor sorcerer but even a dragon would have problems with five at one time. Her eyes fell on the altar. Her only hope was to battle the *merdanons* one at a time by luring them into the narrow corridor where they'd have to enter single file.

She ran past Verite, who was trudging toward the door. The young witch's mouth dropped open and her eyes widened when she raced past her. Keira didn't bother exploring. She ran straight to the altar.

"What's wrong with you now?" Verite's voice held a very definite sneer.

Keira looked up as she sent the pulse of magic into the altar. Verite stood there, a hand on her hips and a look of disdain on her face. Keira opened her mouth to blast the little twit but closed it. She didn't have time to yell at the girl.

"*Merdanons*." She started down the staircase hidden beneath the altar. After this was over, if they were both still alive, she'd put some fear into the girl.

She walked down the narrow, steep staircase. Her ball of light bobbed in front of her, lighting the way. She bit her lip as she looked at the cream-walled corridor in front of her. It didn't seem long enough. The short hallway ended in front of a carved, gray stone door. Ancient Berdashi had been inscribed on the door with a single hollow circle below the writing. Pacing to the end of the hallway, she eyed the door blocking her way.

*Only a daughter of the Terrae kings may enter.* She read the words automatically. Frowning she shook her head. The copy she'd read had specified "only the first daughter".

Slam! The sound echoed even down in the passage as the *merdanons* pounded on the door. A shrill scream filtered down into the corridor. Verite scrambled down the steps.

Keira took off her amulet. She looked at it and then the door. *Maybe...* She needed some help, some advantage. Even with Verite's added magic, the *merdanons* could win. She lifted the chain off her neck and slipped the amulet off it. With a silent prayer to the Great Lady, she pressed the amulet into the hollow.

The writing on the door began to glow silver and she could feel the heat rolling off it. The stone slowly swung inward, scraping over the floor as it moved. She stepped into the room and her magic light followed. Weapons abounded in the room, covering the great stone slabs and the walls. These weren't the mere swords and knives they appeared. These were the magical weapons created for her ancestors, to enhance their abilities. When the family had ruled, they'd built the vaults and the temple over them to protect the weapons for a time when they would be needed again.

She jumped as another bang rang through the building. Even with this extra space the battle would be too risky. She had to take the chance of picking up one of those weapons. Walking over to the large stone platform, she looked at the array of weapons. Her eyes kept returning a curved silver sword and a dagger with matching hilts. Those two—they were the ones for her. She felt pulled to them.

She knew that picking them up could change her life. Another blow slammed against her shields. She grabbed the weapons. There wasn't time now to worry about how this would change her future. She had to get ready to face the *merdanons*.

The weight of the swords felt strange in her hands. A moment later, she felt power pulse from the swords straight to the magic centered in her abdomen and back into the weapons. A rush of confidence poured into her. With these, she could handle an army of *merdanons*.

Verite scuttled into the room. Her eyes rounded as she looked at the weapons scattered throughout the vault. A smile curved her lips and she walked over to the table. Her hands hovered over the swords and daggers there.

"Don't try to touch them." Keira didn't wait to see if the woman listened. She turned back to the door. The shield at the main door should give way soon.

"Yeeow!" Verite's shrill scream echoed in the confines of the room.

Keira rolled her eyes. She'd warned the woman. And Verite had read the scroll. She should have remembered that only a woman of the bloodline could touch the weapons. Keira took a defensive stance as she heard the click of claws on the floor just above the stairway. She swung the curved sword back and forth in front of her. Her mouth fell open and she froze when she felt her power gathering inside her, channeling into the blade. She'd known that her power and the blades would work together but she hadn't been prepared for this.

The first gray-skinned *merdanon* crept down the stairs. His body was crouched, the large form as compact as possible as he ventured into the small confines. The beast's eyes seemed to be solid white except for the thin black slit of its pupils. She saw the muscles beneath the gray skin tense to spring at her. Following her instincts, she drew the blade back and swung.

An arc of glittering silver and white magic formed at the tip of the blade as it sliced through the air. The crackling shimmering pulse flew down the hallway and slammed into the *merdanon*. A gurgling cry ripped from the creature's throat. It jerked and twisted before falling to the floor at the bottom of the stairs.

Her hand tightened around the hilt of the sword. *Very nice*. She liked these weapons. Tingles ran up her arms and through her body.

A second *merdanon* began to lumber down the stairs. Taking a few steps, it threw back his head and roared. The noise reverberated off the stone walls. Her ears ached and her head pounded as the sound echoed.

Thankfully, *merdanons* were rather stupid. It didn't even make an attempt to use the one on the floor as a shield. Big, mean and well-armed for causing massive destruction

and severe wounds, they simply followed orders. Dark Sorcerers counted on the beasts' strength and the destruction to intimidate any who stood in their way.

She waited until it nearly stepped on the first beast. She didn't want them piling up on the stairs and blocking the others. She did *not* want to have to go after any of them. Her plan was to keep the advantage by having them come to her. Swinging her sword back and forth, she gathered her power. When it started to step over the body, she swung her sword. A moment later, the beast lay twitching on the floor.

When the last *merdanon* fell, she crept forward. An urge burned inside her, drawing her closer to the gray-skinned beasts. She held the knife in one hand and the sword in the other. She felt she had to do something.

Standing by the first beast, she knelt and acting only on instinct plunged the knife into its shoulder. Energy rushed into her, burning through her. The *merdanon* dissolved into dust at her feet. Only when the last gray creature had been disintegrated did the urge to act vanish.

She turned back to the vault door. Magic pulsed and zinged through her at a much higher level than normal. She was going to get her amulet and see if she could put these things back.

In spite of the fact that she had picked up the weapons, she didn't think she was really meant to keep them. Keeping these things permanently came with responsibility and a lot of ties. The responsibilities she could handle but a few of the ties, she didn't want to take. *A dragon and a vampire as consorts...* Not going to happen if she could help it.

She walked into the vault and saw Verite standing near the wall. The woman's mouth was compressed into a stiff line and her body seemed rigid. After raising a brow at the anger in the other witch's eyes, Keira paid her very little attention. She turned to take the amulet out of the door, wanting to get that done and put the weapons back so she could leave.

A burning flash sizzled across her back. White light burst in front of her eyes and she felt a vague sense of disorientation. Her knees buckled a moment later and the ground rushed toward her. She tried to break her fall with her hands but her arms wouldn't seem to move. All-consuming blackness washed over her.



## Chapter Four

Damon rested his hand on the sleek black neck of Rath's dragon form as they flew over the plains. They'd stopped at the small city located to the east but they hadn't been able to find anyone who'd remembered seeing the witch Rath described in the city. There was only one other place she was likely to be, the old temple. Beyond that, there were only a few scattered fortified villages which didn't appear on any map.

Rath swept in low and settled to the ground in front of the very light brown stone temple. Damon swung his leg over Rath's neck and slid to the ground. He patted the dragon's side before he stepped away from the large body. The triangular dragon's head swung around and one side of the black muzzle lifted, revealing dagger-sharp pointed white teeth.

The dragon's temper was definitely showing. Damon smiled. Rath didn't like anyone to ride on his back. Damon insisted on doing it precisely for that reason. Most people did everything any dragon asked. In general, the huge fire-breathing lizards intimidated almost everyone they met. Having someone defy him kept Rath from getting too arrogant.

Damon walked away, leaving Rath to shift into human form. He made it halfway to the stairs when a faint scent caught his attention. He inhaled deeply. Although it was faint, he smelled the distinctive odor of *merdanons*. He tensed and slowly scanned the area but didn't see any sign of the lumbering beasts.

Rath caught up to Damon just as he began climbing the stairs to the temple. They walked side by side to the metal door. Pushing it open, they stepped into the dark temple. Damon's lips curled into a snarl. The stench of *merdanon* hung heavily in the enclosed space. He could feel strong magic lingering, just beginning to fade. He knew there had been a battle here very recently. Someone had definitely been here. He didn't see anyone in the open room at first glance.

A small curvy figure detached from the shadows near the altar. Damon watched and waited for her to realize she wasn't alone. She turned toward them and took a few steps forward before she noticed them. Stopping suddenly, her gasp carried easily to their ears.

"Well, that's not Keira." Rath stood tensely, his eyes searching the empty building.

Damon frowned. The smell of the *merdanons* was fresh but there wasn't even a single body on the floor. What had happened here? Where were the *merdanons*? His mind raced. Could this be a trap?

When he looked at the black-haired woman again, he noticed she was holding a sword at her side. The metal reflected the black color of her pants and almost seemed camouflaged. She stood tensely and brought the weapon in front of her. The tip of the

blade wavered first toward him and then to Rath. A slow smile tilted his lips. A *Tiria*. Finally, one of the women from the old royal lines had stepped forward to claim her destiny.

That sword did explain the absence of the *merdanons*. She must have killed them and then destroyed the bodies. He'd wondered if he'd ever even see one of the warrior-witches fated to aid in the fight against the Dark Sorcerers since he'd learned of the *Tiria*. Now that she was here, he wondered which dragon-vamp pair she'd match.

The petite woman's startled look changed to a mixture of fear and determination. She drew the sword back. He looked over his shoulder and then back at her. Nothing. It took him a moment to realize that she was going to try to use her blade against them. He tried to hide his amusement. She didn't seem to know very much about the weapons she'd just taken. Shrugging, he pushed aside those thoughts. What she didn't know, she could be taught. The only thing that mattered that she was the *Tiria*.

"That weapon won't work on us. It only works on dark magic. You should know that." Rath strode forward and grasped the woman's wrist.

"Was there another woman here?" Damon tilted his head and inhaled. He tried to pick through the scents in the room but the stench of *merdanon* overpowered everything else.

She blinked and looked to the side. "Not that I know of. Did you see my *chitan* outside the temple?"

"No, there wasn't a *chitan* outside the temple when we arrived. What is your name?" Damon tilted his head and watched her.

"Verite. I guess I'll have to find it so I can leave." She grimaced.

Damon shook his head. She didn't even seem to know the basics that she should have learned when she was a child. "How can you know so little about what holding that sword means?"

"You're now a *Tiria*, a warrior-witch. All warrior-witches are fated to mate with a dragon-vampire pair." Rath pushed the door open and led the way out of temple. "All that remains to be seen is which dragon-vamp pair you'll match."

At the base of the stairs, Damon took her hand as Rath paced away from them. "You can put that away now. We'll be leaving in a few moments."

He frowned when she created a scabbard and belt and slipped the blade into it. She should have known almost instinctively that that wasn't necessary. Something didn't seem right about her. Every story he'd heard about *Tirias* had them going to the mating screaming and fighting. This woman just calmly accepted everything he said.

She seemed absolutely oblivious of his stare. He reminded himself of her earlier actions, her lack of knowledge. She hadn't even known that the blade wouldn't work on them. For whatever reason, she'd taken one of the blades of her ancestors without knowing anything about the weapon.

Rath changed forms. Gray and black mist swirled around him. The spinning haze grew to dragon size. For a moment, the giant cloud of magic trembled. It disappeared, revealing Rath's large red-striped black dragon form.

Damon took Verite into his arms as Rath took a step toward him. Her eyes widened and she drew in a sharp breath. She tensed as the dragon lifted them in his paws and clutched them to his chest. Her scream rang in his ears as Rath leapt into the sky, powerful wings catching the wind and lifting them away from the ground.

As soon as Rath had taken them away from the temple and the strong magic surrounding it, he noticed something odd about the feel of the magic clinging to the woman in his arms. It was too new and felt weak. That sword's magic shouldn't feel as light as it did. Just the magic from the weapon hanging at her side should be equal to that of most witches. This woman's magic felt like nothing more than that held by a very average witch.

Rath flew them back to Ramgen. When he landed in the middle of the city square, several dragons and vampires came forward to meet them. They'd obviously been waiting. People passing through the area lingered to watch the proceedings. Rath released them and stepped back. Damon let Verite jerk away from him. He needed to think and she wasn't going anywhere. The other dragons and vampires had formed a circle around them.

"Are you sure she's a *Tiria*, Damon?" Jaeson tilted his head. His long silver-blond hair swung forward over his right shoulder.

Damon knew the other vampire could feel some of the magic lingering on the woman and he could understand the other man's doubt. With every moment, he was becoming more convinced that they'd made a mistake in their belief that this woman was the *Tiria*.

"No, I'm not. I've been wondering about it since we left the temple. The power in that temple was undeniably that of a *Cytari* who'd taken up the ancient weapons but the power of the weapon was so strong I couldn't even feel Verite's magic until we'd left the temple. The magic in the temple was too old to know if her magic was the *Tiria's* magic." Damon shrugged.

"Is something wrong?" Rath joined them, his fingers combing through his short hair.

"Something feels wrong about her, Rath." He ran his eyes over Verite, stopping at her the sword at her hip.

"The magic around her is too light." Gaellon nodded. The dark-skinned vampire stepped forward. He let his hand hover over her shoulder. "She carries a sword that closely resembles a weapon of the ancients but it's not one. She created it."

"So, we only need to know where and who the woman who actually claimed the weapon is." Samiel put a hand on his hip and narrowed his eyes on Verite. His hair was pulled back tightly and the green gem dangling from his ear caught the flashes of sunlight.

There were fully grown, battle-hardened dragons who couldn't maintain the stare of the fierce man with golden hair shot with streaks of blue. Damon just smiled when the witch's gaze fell to the ground. She wouldn't hold on to the lie long. He could already smell her fear.

"What happened to the other witch?" Rath stepped forward and simply stood in front of the witch.

Damon knew that stance. Rath might seem relaxed but tension boiled through him. The dragon's normally volatile temper would be even shorter now. Not that he'd physically hurt the woman but he could scare her badly. Especially if she pushed him.

"I *am* the *Tiria*, the warrior-witch! You're wrong. This weapon is one of the ancient weapons. Just because you're a dragon, you think you know everything." Her jaw clenched and she turned away from Rath.

She couldn't escape the hard stares of the men surrounding her.

"You're not even a good liar. Even without your scent, I know you're lying. And your power is much too weak. Anything more than mid-level witchcraft is out of your range." Gaellon shook his head.

"Where is the real *Tiria*?" Samiel leaned in and bared his teeth, showing lengthened fangs.

Verite took several quick steps back and bumped into Damon. Damon smiled as she gasped and whirled to face him. She slowly turned in a circle, her eyes darting from one man to the next, obviously searching for a way out of the group of men.

"What happened to the woman who took up the weapons? Who is she?" Damon crossed his arms over his chest and watched her.

"I'm the one. I'm the first daughter of the king's line." Her eyes widened and her hands clenched into tight fists.

"You thought you were one of the chosen women but you aren't. We know it. There's no use lying anymore. Who is the woman who opened the vault?" Rath's low growl startled the woman and several people walking slowly past the group.

Verite's face reddened and she drew in a sharp breath and swung away wildly.

"Who?" Gaellon's eyes narrowed as he caught her eyes.

"It should have been me. She's a nobody. Her family has no power!" Verite stomped her foot.

In a sudden burst of desperation, she tried to dash between a gap between Gaellon and Samiel. They caught her easily and she stumbled back to the middle of the circle. She glared and fumed, stubbornly remaining silent.

"Enough of the tantrum!" Samiel's hand slashed through the air and his deep voice almost seemed to echo in the open area. "Tell us what we want to know. Who is the warrior-witch and where is she?"

"She's nobody. I told you. She's a witch who sometimes drops in to teach in my local coven. She's normally out dealing with *merdanons*." The witch tossed her head, sending waves of black hair over her shoulder.

"I respect any witch who fights the *merdanons* and Dark Sorcerers far more than I do one who stays back in the safety of the coven letting others fight for them." Samiel leveled a pointed look at the witch.

"I'd have everybody's respect if that vault had opened for me. I recognized the symbol on her amulet. She always called it a family piece. It was easy to steal it but she came after me." The witch snorted.

Damon saw Rath smile. The dragon looked smug, gloating. His muscles loosened and his stance relaxed. He obviously thought he knew everything he needed to know.

"And then the *merdanons* showed up right after she did. I tried for a long time to get that vault open. She barely puts the amulet on the door and it swings wide." Verite paced. Her hands fisted at her sides and she looked furious.

"You stole that amulet from a woman named Keira." Rath raised his eyebrows and waited for the woman's response.

Verite gasped. "How could you know?"

"I met Keira just yesterday. We talked a little and she told me she was searching for an amulet. There can't be too many witches in this area searching for amulets right now." He shrugged and smiled widely.

"Where is she?" Gaellon stepped forward, glaring at the woman.

"She's still in the vault. I left her there." Verite swallowed loudly and took a slow step back.

"Left her there? What did you do to her?" Jaeson growled menacingly. His eyes narrowed and he pinned her with his gaze. His lips curled, making his disgust very evident.

"I just stunned her. She's safe, nothing can get to her. How could a coward like her be a *Tiria*? Even with the *merdanons* coming after us, she hesitated after she got into the vault. She didn't want to pick up the weapons." Verite's lips twisted and she shook her head.

"The power she has now comes with a heavy responsibility and some strong ties. Most witches think for a while before they pick up the ancient weapons," Samiel explained.

Damon almost laughed at the pained look on the dragon's face. He was clearly frustrated at the woman's stubborn blindness.

"We'll go back to get her," Rath volunteered.

Damon's head snapped up and his jaw dropped open in surprise. He didn't object to the return trip to the temple even though the day was fading. He wanted to see what this Keira looked like. Anyone who caught the interest of his dragon mate had to be remarkable.

"She knows me so at least she won't mistake either of us for a Dark Sorcerer." Rath took a few steps and then looked back at Damon. "Are you coming?"

"I wouldn't miss it." Damon looked up at the sky and sighed. *Bossy dragon.*

"We'll hand this witch over to the local vampire fold. They can watch her until someone claims her as mate." Samiel frowned at them. "Make certain you bring back the right witch this time."

Damon watched a red flush rise on Rath's cheeks. The dragon's dark skin hid most of the blush but just seeing it was stunning. Rath was seldom embarrassed but then again he almost never made mistakes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keira felt something coarse and grainy against the side of her cheek and along her bare arms. That small discomfort barely registered compared to her other aches. Her head throbbed so much that she didn't want to move. That pain would only intensify if she even rolled over onto her back. But she couldn't stay this way. Her stomach tightened and churned threateningly.

Her mind was a little foggy right now but that would clear. Even without a perfect memory, she knew something was wrong. Never in her life had she fallen asleep in a bed this hard. Then there was the tightening in her gut. She didn't doubt that she'd landed in trouble somehow. Not wanting to give even the slightest indication that she was awake if she was being watched, she remained still and took silent inventory of what she knew. There was no sound, not even of the wind or water dripping.

Opening her eyes, she saw nothing. Complete darkness surrounded her. She could hear the soft sounds of her breathing echoing back at her. Where was she? Was it just a small room or was she in a cell? Her heart thudded into a faster rhythm. Fear rose. She grabbed for control before her fear took away all her options.

She focused. A tiny room didn't mean that she'd been captured. Darkness could just mean that it was night and the shutters were closed. The sounds echoing back to her – that meant only that the room was small. She could have just stumbled into a closet instead of her room if she'd had too much to drink. Even as she was rationalizing, she knew that wasn't likely. She didn't get drunk often and definitely not when she was in an unknown situation.

As her breathing slowed and her heartbeat returned to normal, her mind cleared. Memory returned. She'd picked up one of the ancient swords. Remembering the rush of power, she swallowed loudly. Her heart pounded. She'd destroyed the *merdanons*, absorbed their power. She'd defeated all of them and returned to the vault to put the swords back if she could. Verite had been glaring at her.

Realization struck. Verite. This wasn't a hangover. She'd been slammed by a stunning spell. The younger witch had wanted the power and the perceived position of a *Tiria*. The girl must have attacked while her back was turned. Keira created an orb of light. The ball of golden light rose from her palm to hover above her in the hallway.

She recognized the vivid murals on the walls and the light-colored stone of the floor. As she sat, her vision blurred. Sharp pain spiked from her temples to the back of her head. She froze, remaining perfectly still until the worst of the searing agony faded. When she could see clearly, she saw the gray carved surface of the open vault doorway just in front of her.

She tried to get up but dropped back to the cool stone floor almost immediately. Dizziness swamped her. Leaning back against the wall, she waited for the last effects of the stunning to fade. A strange magic bubbled inside her, a light presence, but foreign and too strange to discount. It had to be the remnants of the battle, the energy she'd pulled into her. By the Great Lady, she hoped it was just a few lingering effects. She didn't want to think about the possibility of her magic melding with those ancient weapons. She didn't want that kind of power, those ties.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Keira lifted her hands and rubbed at her temples. She couldn't believe the little witch had actually stunned her. For a few moments, she thought about meeting up with Verite again and exacting a little revenge. The fool at least deserved a taste of stunning. Keira doubted the woman had ever had a taste of it.

When she could move her head without making the room blur in front of her eyes, she looked on the ground, searching for the sword and dagger. She couldn't see either of the weapons. She frowned and tried to get a good view of the top of the table without standing. Even from here, she could see the vacant spot on the table.

*By Vellos, I don't need this.* She closed her eyes tightly, hoping that she'd missed them in a dark area near the stairs or maybe behind the door. She just wanted to find those damn blades and get them back onto the table.

Verite wouldn't have been able to take them. The weapons should still be on the floor, somewhere nearby. She thought about all the stories she'd read or heard from her family about the ancient weapons. She could only think of one other reason that the sword and knife wouldn't be on the floor where she'd dropped them. It wasn't comforting. If the magic in the weapons had melded with her magic, after a small time out of her hands the blades would have automatically been sent to a *Fa'ed*, a magical store place.

She wouldn't be able to go back to her simple life if that had happened. If the ancient arms had gone to a *Fa'ed*, then replacing them and walking away wasn't an option any longer. She'd be stuck with them until her death. She grimaced and licked her dry lips. Blessed Lady, she didn't want that. Being a *Tiria* wasn't something a witch could just leave behind after the magic had been joined.

Keira stood, bracing her feet wide just in case another wave of dizziness hit her. She flexed her hands. She hoped that the weapons had just gotten kicked somewhere. Taking a deep breath, she thought about the sword and the dagger. The image of those silver weapons appeared in her mind, clear and detailed down to the carving on the end of the hilt.

Magic flashed through her veins, hot, sizzling and not entirely hers. The weapons appeared in her palms. The solid weight of weapons already felt familiar in her hands. The magic pulsing off the weapons was another matter entirely. She felt the power mingling with hers. She didn't doubt it anymore. The ancient magic had entwined with hers, enhancing her powers. She grimaced. Complicating her life.

Her head fell forward. No. She shook her head as the blades fell from her fingers. This wasn't supposed to happen. She'd only followed Verite to get her amulet back. Keira hadn't even thought she'd be able to open the vault, much less be able to use any of the weapons inside it.

She shook her head, deliberately pushing away all the frantic thoughts. Panic wasn't getting her anywhere. She couldn't think about what picking up those weapons meant to her future, not now. She needed to get away from this temple before more *merdanons* came. Turning, she took her amulet out of the indentation on the stone door and stepped back as it swung closed. After she'd gotten back to some kind of normal life, then she'd think about what this little expedition had done to her plans.

Pacing up the steps, she sent a pulse of magic into the altar. The stone above her slid away. She wasn't surprised to find the temple empty. Verite wouldn't be anywhere near here if she was smart. In spite of a burning desire to teach the witch a lesson, Keira wasn't going to chase after Verite. Now if she happened to meet her on the way home...

The sun hung low in the sky over the grass-covered hills above the valley as she pushed the door open. Shadows lengthened and the pale green sky darkened to a beautiful blue in the west. Standing on the stone steps, she couldn't see any sign of her *chitan*. Unworried, she walked down the steps, looking around the area. The stable master had assured her Gamma had been well-trained. He wouldn't just bolt back for the comforts of his stable at the first sign of trouble. He should be somewhere in the area.

The *merdanons* had probably scared him. She sighed and began scanning the ground for *chitan* tracks. She saw the torn grass and clods of dirt the panicked animal had left when he tore free from the bush. Her eyes followed the trail. She stopped abruptly when she noticed a huge print in a patch of dirt.

A dragon print. Drawing in a shaky breath, she glanced quickly to the left and right as a rush of fear hit her. They couldn't know this soon. She slowly shook her head as she realized how foolish she was being. If a dragon had still been here, he wouldn't be hiding and watching.

She walked away from the temple. Whistling a soft call, she searched for the *chitan*. She finally spotted the beast munching on some bushes near the base of a hill. Approaching the animal slowly, she didn't make any sudden moves. A relieved sigh slipped from her lips as she grasped the reins. She stroked her hand over the animal's neck.

Keira mounted in smooth move. She knew she probably wouldn't make it back to a village tonight. Roughing it on the trail certainly wasn't her favorite activity but she'd



do it. On top of the threat of *merdanons*, that dragon multiplied the reasons to put some distance between herself and this temple.

With a light nudge of her heels, she urged the *chitan* away from the building. Her eyes constantly scanned the area. She occasionally tossed a glance over her shoulder. After fighting five *merdanons* and finding a dragon print, she took nothing for granted. Five of those beasts was an unusually larger number to be together but she knew there could be more. Her weapons wouldn't do her any good if she was ambushed from behind.

She didn't get far before the sun set but kept traveling until the light became almost too dim to see beyond the *chitan's* head. Stopping near a tree-lined stream, she secured the animal to a bush next the water. She began gathering wood for a fire. A shadow moving in the sky caught her attention. Following it with her eyes, she could just make out the shape of a dragon flying across the darkening sky.

Slowly exhaling a shaky breath, she tore her eyes away from that menacing shape. She had no idea where the dragon was going but there wasn't much except for the temple in that direction. Without hesitation, she dropped the wood and moved to her mount. Untying the reins, she began leading the animal along the river. That dragon did change things. She didn't want to be out in the open with him in the area. More importantly, she didn't want anyone to know she'd been near that temple. She had too much to hide.

Turning the *chitan* away from the river, she walked into the small group of trees. She'd stay under their leafy cover tonight. After unsaddling and settling the *chitan* for the night with some feed, Keira created a small tent. With a sigh, she crawled inside it and tried to get some sleep.

## Chapter Five

Keira rode into Ramgen just after the sun reached its zenith the next day. Leaving the *chitan* in the capable hands of the stable owner, she headed for the docks. She needed to find a good ride back to the Beserl region. Traveling by river boat would save her weeks of hard riding. Creating a portal was out of the question. She knew there were dragons in the region.

She hoped she'd be able to find a boat leaving soon. As she approached the city, she'd noticed dragons circling above the area. She'd be more than willing to ride home but she couldn't leave the city with the dragons circling. A lone rider leaving the city would be too suspicious. It was obvious that they were looking for someone or something. She didn't think anyone knew that a *Tiria* had taken the weapons but she didn't want to take the chance. When she finally did get home, she didn't know what she was going to do. The only certainty was that things wouldn't go back to the way they were. She was a *Tiria* now. Something would obviously have to change.

She stepped onto the wooden planking of the wide dock. Weaving a path around the people buying fish right from the boats, she made her way down to the very end where the passenger boats docked. A few of the ships were gone, the vessels that were there were unmanned. An older man with a weathered face and a grizzled beard sat on a stool at the end of the dock working on a knotted line.

She wondered if he knew anything about the boats going downriver. Shrugging, she decided to trust in the fact that most of those who worked the ships knew about other ships and their crews. He looked up at her when her shadow fell across the rope he was untangling.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" She stopped a few paces away from him and smiled.

"You can ask. Can't guarantee I'll know." He let his work fall to his lap and grinned at her.

"I just need to know when a good boat will be leaving for the Beserl region." She glanced toward the mountains and back at the man.

"That I don't know. The best captain who travels there should be coming back this way soon. Come back in a few days. I'll know more then." He shrugged and returned to his work.

"Thank you. I'll be back in a few days." Keira smiled and headed back down the dock.

She'd be stuck here until she knew how long she'd have to wait for a boat. Leaving the city again wouldn't be a good idea. Within the walls, she should be able to make it

through the next few days without having to use any magic. She'd settle for walking through the markets and people watching. She briefly thought of Verite. Finding the twit wasn't at the top of her list. Revenge might taste sweet but seriously looking for the witch would take too much effort.

She'd have to make sure she avoided dragons and vampires as much as she could. Although she couldn't be certain, she was almost certain that vampires and dragons would be able tell just from a small spell that she'd taken up the ancient weapons. The old legends and myths weren't much help about that part. No one had used any of the weapons in thousands of years and information about them was sketchy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later Keira wandered through a market near the edge of the walled city. The boat hadn't arrived and the old man still knew nothing about any reliable ship to the Beserl region. The only reason she was still in the city was the dragons' continuing patrol above her. She knew she couldn't stay much longer. Just walking the streets became more dangerous every day. The city seemed to be teeming with dragons and where there were dragons, vampires usually soon followed.

A little hungry, she strolled toward a stall selling fruit. A loud roar erupted at the same moment as a high-pitched scream ripped through the market.

Keira spun around just in time to see a wall of people running toward her. Someone's hand thrust against her shoulder, shoving her. She stumbled back and landed across a box just inside an alley between shops. Her shoulder hit a rough stone wall, sending a shaft of pain through her.

She levered up off the box. Rotating her arm gingerly, she wondered what had caused the panic. It could be a dragon throwing a temper tantrum. They were known for their fierce disposition but she doubted it would send all the people running. She could see a few visitors maybe but these people were accustomed to dragons and vampires among them.

Leaning forward, she peeked around the corner. Her heart slammed against her chest and fear slashed through her as she took in the scene in front of her. Her muscles tensed. She tried to slow her racing heart and think.

Three *merdanons* stood in the center of the deserted market. She could see the bottom half of a man standing to one side of the *merdanons*, probably an emissary, a minor sorcerer, from one of the Dark Sorcerers. He faced away from her. She was pretty sure that there were a few dragons beyond him that she couldn't see. One of the *merdanons* held a child in one of its big meaty fists.

The sorcerer's minion wouldn't hesitate to use that boy as leverage for whatever he wanted. She wished she could see exactly who was facing the *merdanons*. She had to put the boy's safety first. If she knew strong sorcerers or dragons faced that minion, she wouldn't worry but she couldn't wait with the little information she had.

"We know you've found one of the warrior-witches. Hand her over. If you don't, we'll find her on our own and kill whoever gets in the way," the emissary shouted. "The first to die will be this boy."

Silence met the minor sorcerer's demands.

Keira's jaw tensed. No, the child wouldn't die, not because of her. She focused and cast a spell, encasing the boy in a shield. The *merdanon* wouldn't be able to hurt him. She flexed her fingers. The man wanted the warrior-witch. He'd get her but he wouldn't be leaving the city alive.

Arms came around her. She tensed and drew in a startled breath. A palm covered her mouth as one of the arms slipped down to her waist, tightening as he urged her deeper into the alley's dark shelter. Warm breath brushed across her cheek as the man pulled her against a hard body. She struggled and kicked back at him, screaming against his palm.

"Shhh. We're not going to let them know just what you are yet, little *Cytari*. The sorcerer is just guessing because his *merdanons* didn't return to him." The man kept his hand over her mouth.

"Mmph..." Keira strained to put more distance between them. She wanted him to release her. His spicy scent sent a rush of tingling arousal pulsing through her body. Her reaction to that enticing scent told her that the man behind her was a vampire.

She struggled, trying to slip free of his hold. She tried not to let the panic rising inside her gain control. A vampire. She wanted to kill that minion now more than ever. If he hadn't shown up she could have stayed hidden in the city until the next boat for the Beserl region left.

"I'm going to take you somewhere safe. Just relax. This will feel a bit different from normal spatial transport." The hand at her waist gently patted.

She grimaced. If he was going for reassuring, he missed it. She wriggled in his arms, hoping for a moment of inattention. She could transport herself out of here if she could just get loose.

Most people used *chitans* for travel because transport spells could be draining. With the threat of *merdanons* and Dark Sorcerers, being in a weakened condition just wasn't advisable. Only those people with a partner or a huge amount of power traveled by spatial tunnel on a regular basis.

"Settle down. Just a few more moments and we'll leave." His hand roved up her midriff to the swell of her breasts.

She fumed, her fists clenching. The least the man could do was introduce himself before he started groping. She had no idea what he was waiting on or how he would know anything since they were so far back in the alley. She couldn't even see the *merdanons*.

"Now we can go. They freed the boy." The vampire lifted her off her feet.

She expected to see a spatial tunnel form in front of them but it didn't. The tunnel folded around them, enclosing them in shimmering black. She tensed, startled. Warmth surrounded her and her skin tingled. Streaks of white and multicolored light flashed in front of her. Everything seemed different in this tunnel. There wasn't a strong sense of movement like she felt in a normal tunnel and when the tunnel opened there was a soft dip as it put them on the ground. Far different from being almost thrown out of a normal tunnel.

She blinked once as her eyes adjusted to the sudden return of light. She focused on a solid, rough, black rock wall. Looking up, she saw the rough texture of the cave's curved ceiling. She frowned. This place definitely wasn't what she expected. He was a vampire. No other creature had a scent capable of calming or arousing someone close to them. He shouldn't have brought her here.

Vampires didn't use caves for strongholds. They built large stone fortresses. Dragons preferred caves. Although they often worked together in groups, dragons usually lived alone in isolated mountain caves.

The man's hand slipped off her mouth and he let both his arms fall away from her. She leaped away from him and spun to face him. Although a huge part of her was screaming for her to form a tunnel and get far away from him, she didn't. He was too close. She had to wait. He'd be able to follow immediately if she was this close to him. She didn't think she'd win if it came to a contest of whose power was strongest.

She slowly turned her head and looked at the area around her. The room was actually a large cavern. Two long green couches had been positioned on opposite sides of a circular fire pit. A huge box bed with a black frame occupied the far end of the cave. Intense green sheets stretched across the mattress.

The vampire stood there, a hand cocked on his hip and smile curving his lips. Brilliant gem-blue eyes blazed at her. Tall and broad-shouldered, he seemed very different from the few other vampires she'd encountered. This black-haired man looked every bit the rough warrior even in a fine white shirt and gray pants. Shoulder-length hair hinted at a wildness within him. With rugged features and a muscular body, he seemed very dangerous. An impression only emphasized by the dagger at his hip.

"This isn't a vampire stronghold." She clenched her fists as she stood tensely.

"No, I don't live within the vampire stronghold." He turned and walked over to the long, dark green couch. He sat and waved at the identical couch opposite his.

Keira walked over to the couch and sat in the middle of it. As tense as she was, it took her a moment to decipher what he meant when he said that he didn't live within a stronghold. Her eyes widened and she became more determined to leave than ever. The only vampires who didn't live in a stronghold were the ones who'd formed a bond with a dragon.

She felt a little lightheaded as the truth hit her. If he'd just wanted to get her to a safe place, he wouldn't have brought her here. He'd have taken her to one of those strongholds. She shook her head. He couldn't be saying he thought she was his mate.

"It's true. Your magic is perfect. It feels erotic, strong. It matches with ours almost exactly." He smiled, flashing a pair of descended fangs.

"No, no way. I'm not on the menu for you or a dragon." She leaned back, wondering if she could escape if she flipped off the couch and made it to the far end of the room. Would that give her enough distance between them so that he couldn't follow her easily?

"It will be a vampire and a dragon eventually but we'll give you time to get used to the idea." He sat relaxed and absolutely still but his eyes were locked on her.

"You'll give me time..." She took a deep breath. Years wouldn't be long enough to adjust to that. "Look, vampire. I'm just getting used to being tied to those weapons. I'm not ready to deal with a bond with two strange men."

"Call me Damon. As to the two strange men part, one of us isn't so strange to you. In fact, you spent a night with him." He raised an eyebrow and grinned at her. "We've been looking for you, Keira."

She felt the blood drain from her face. Rath... She'd been afraid of running into him in the city. "Why were you looking for me?"

"When you used your magic on Rath, he thought you just might be our mate. Then you wrangled that promise from him that he wouldn't bite you during the night you slept with him. He couldn't be certain that you were our mate but I am." He stretched his feet out in front of him.

"Aren't you needed to help fight the *merdanons*?" Keira tried to keep her eagerness for him to leave out of her voice. She couldn't escape with him acting as chaperon, not when he was watching her so intently.

"No. They'll just be taking care of the bodies by now. Do you know of any reason that a Dark Sorcerer would believe that a witch might have taken up the old weapons? Other than his *merdanons* being destroyed." He sat forward, his hands braced on his thighs.

"No. Not unless Verite said something while she was in a city." Keira frowned as she thought about it. The appearance of those beasts had been too coincidental. The little twit had to have said something.

"Verite? She was the woman you were looking for? She had your amulet?" he asked.

Damon stood and walked over to her. He sat beside her on the wide couch. Keira scooted to the side, determined to keep some distance between them.

From the look on his face when she'd said Verite's name, he'd met the woman. "Yes, she'd stolen it. You've met her?"

"She tried to convince us that she was the *Tiria*." He smiled.

Keira looked up at the ceiling and sighed. Only Verite would have tried something like that. The little witch had been so infatuated with the power of a *Tiria* that she

hadn't given a thought to the reality. The reality of the ties that came with being a warrior-witch scared Keira down to her toes.

"Aren't you supposed to be giving me time to get used to the idea of being a warrior-witch bonded to a dragon-vampire pair?" She glanced pointedly down to where his thigh brushed against hers.

He laughed, good-humored and all too confident. "How are you supposed to get to know me when we're sitting across from each other?"

Considering that she wasn't really interested in getting to know him, that wasn't one of her top concerns. "Um... By talking?"

"You did more than talk with Rath." He slid his hand over hers.

"Only because I made sure he wouldn't bite me and I was certain that I'd be leaving the next day." She turned so that she could look at the aggravating vamp. His idea of giving someone time definitely didn't mesh with hers. She'd like it if he'd give her time from across the room while he wanted to cuddle.

"And you know that won't be happening now, *chatana*. There's no way you can walk away free this time." He nodded as if she'd confirmed his beliefs.

Keira's mouth firmed. She wasn't his "darling witch". She shook her head. It might not be easy to walk away this time but she intended to give it a good try. She didn't need a mate right now.

"You know plotting and scheming might get you free for a short time but we would find you. Rath is a grumpy dragon on normal days. When he's really angry, he can be impossible to live with." Damon tilted his head and held out his hand.

"Telling tales about me to our witch, I see. You could have sent back word that she was ours. I went looking for you at Daegus Hold." Rath strolled into the cave through a dark fissure on the wall. As soon as he'd cleared the opening, the hole closed, forming a solid rock wall.

Her eyes locked on that wall. If they could get in through it, she could get out of it. If she had a moment when they weren't looking. The only problem would be finding an opportunity to do it without one of them immediately blocking her.

"Do you think we'll let you escape so easily?" Rath strolled over and ruffled her hair. Wearing a blue shirt and tight black pants, he seemed even sexier now than when she'd last seen him.

That indulgent, patronizing gesture made her want to hit him. They may be powerful but so was she. She'd never intended to take or keep that sword and dagger. Now that she had, she intended to make her own destiny. She didn't want to be a *Tiria*. Leaving the weapons had become impossible. Leaving the men wasn't only possible but she planned to make sure that it happened soon.

"I don't intend to let you stop me." She lifted her chin. There was no use lying and acting as if she didn't mean to make a run for it at the first opportunity. They weren't stupid. They knew she didn't want to be here.

“Stubborn—I think you’ll fit right in with us.” Damon stood.

“Have you been in the city the last few days or did you just arrive?” Rath’s fingers wrapped around her wrist, drawing her to her feet.

“I’ve been in the city.” She tried to tug her hand free of his hold.

Rath’s brows rose but his grip remained firm. “And we missed finding you until now.”

“Are you hungry, Keira?” Damon waved his hand and a table appeared.

She turned her attention from the dragon to the vampire. Both of them were very tall men but the vampire was taller than the dragon. In spite of that, she found Rath much more intimidating.

“Yes, I was going to get something to eat when the *merdanons* appeared. I was almost trampled by the crowd.” She tried a smile. Sharing a meal wouldn’t change anything. They knew she wanted to leave.



## Chapter Six

The two men were true to Damon's word. They hadn't pressed her. When she'd told them she wouldn't be sleeping in that bed with them, they hadn't even said a word. They hadn't been cooperative enough to let her make a private area for her bed. Rath had created a bed near a wall across the room from theirs. The distance between them did give her some hope of sneaking away undetected.

Even though they'd have a clear view of her from their bed, she might have a chance to escape while they were asleep. It would take some preparation and a lot of luck. Their overconfidence helped. They didn't seem at all worried that she'd slip out of the cave. She counted on their belief that they could handle her easily to give her the edge she needed.

"I want a bath. Is there a place here?" She crossed her arms. She honestly didn't know what to expect. They lived in a cave. Maybe they bathed in a river.

"Yes." Rath waved his hand and a hole appeared on the wall near their bed.

She began walking over to it but Damon stepped in front of her. She stopped two paces away from him. Looking up, she caught a smirk curving his lips and he looked much too confident.

"Don't try to form a tunnel in there. You won't like the results," he cautioned. His eyes slid over her with obvious enjoyment.

She nodded and walked around him into the room. They sealed the opening after her, giving her privacy. That threat was clear enough. It had to be some form of shield spell. She'd expected something like that and she'd use it for her own purposes. As much as she'd like to wipe that smirk off their faces by leaving now, she wouldn't be testing that spell. She had no desire to be slammed into a wall by a tunnel that couldn't leave the room.

Lamps hung from hooks on the wall, giving a soft light. Glittering red and blue gems dotted the walls and the domed ceiling, picking glints of light from the soft flame. The jewels almost seemed to glow. Except for a large inset round tub, the room was bare of furnishings. There wasn't even a bench or hooks for clothing.

The bathing pool would easily accommodate seven or eight people. She stared at the huge tub and then shook her head. She'd better get started before they became too suspicious. Stepping into the tub, she gasped at the sting of hot water. She cast a spell to cool it and create a sponge and her favorite soap. Washing quickly, she wanted to get finished so she could get to the rest of her plan.

As she was getting dressed in a long nightshirt, she opened her right hand and summoned the dagger. She just hoped this worked. The dagger's abilities were still a

mystery to her. She didn't know if it would absorb any energy other than a Dark Sorcerer's magic. But she was going to try.

Wrapping the dagger in her clothes, she placed her boots on top of the pile of fabric. She took a deep breath. Time to face them again. With any luck, the pulse of their own magic would have hidden exactly what she'd done or at least most of it.

She walked over to the wall and touched where she thought the opening would be. She felt solid rock against her hand. Deciding that she might be in the wrong place, she moved down the wall, pressing her palms against the stone. Nothing but rock. This wasn't just an illusion.

"You can unseal the opening now. I want out." She slapped her hand against the rock.

A rounded opening appeared directly in front of her. She stepped out into the main room and made her way around the large bed to her smaller one. She put her pile of clothes down and set her boots near the foot.

"Are you ready for bed now?" Rath stood near the large bed.

She nodded and slipped beneath the blankets. The lights dimmed but didn't go out completely. That was her first clue that they were plotting something. Then she caught Rath's glance over at her.

What were they doing? She narrowed her eyes, watching the two men warily. Just by that one glance, she knew that they were planning something.

Rath was facing away from her. Stripping off his blue shirt, he tossed it to the ground. She watched the flex of muscle across his broad back as his hands fell to the fastenings of his black pants. Her fingers tingled and flexed with the need to touch him. He pushed the fabric down and stepped out of them.

Keira's mouth watered as his taut buttocks flexed and tightened. By the Lady, he had a gorgeous ass. Not too full but with enough to grab and hold during the ride.

A soft *chink* drew her attention. She turned her eyes to Damon. He tossed his silky white shirt to the ground and strolled over to Rath. Both men were gorgeous and she enjoyed seeing every bit of exposed flesh. A low, throaty growl sounded as Rath's hand curled around the back of Damon's neck. The vampire's dark skin gleamed in the soft light. Damon turned into the dragon's embrace. Their lips met in a kiss.

By the Sacred Springs, it hadn't even occurred to her that they were lovers. It should have been obvious. She'd known that the vampire-dragon pairs were bonded but she'd never thought too much about the details. Apparently, they were bonded as much to each other as they were to the witch who became their third. She couldn't tear her eyes away from them. She'd never seen anything sexier than the two men across the room so obviously enjoying each other.

She saw Rath's hand slide down over Damon's gray pants.

"Don't play, Rath," Damon growled. His hips arched, rubbing against Rath's leg.

"But you're not ready." Rath's mouth trailed down the vamp's cheek, moving lower to nibble on his neck. "You're still wearing clothes. You know what happens when I take off your clothing."

Keira's mind spun with possibilities. *What happened when Rath took off clothing?* She squirmed as heat flared higher within her, felt hot, slick moisture on her thighs.

Damon moved from the other man. His fingers ripped at the laces of his pants. He pushed the gray cloth down his legs, stepping out of it. Gliding forward, he pressed his body against the dragon's golden skin. His hands slid around to cup Rath's buttocks.

Every one of her senses seemed to sharpen. She could hear the wet joining of their lips, could swear she smelled a spicy musk in the air. Even though she knew this should be a private moment, she couldn't rip her eyes away from the two males across the room. They seemed totally unaware of her presence. Her hands clenched at her sides.

Rath's hand slid down Damon's side, pushing between their bodies. His fingers closed around Damon's cock. "I'm going to have you tonight and you're going to scream to come."

Said in that deep voice, it should have sounded like a threat but all she heard was the sheer sensual promise in his tone. She shivered as her imagination ran wild. An image flashed through her mind, the dragon stood over her, growling those words, heated intensity burning in his eyes. *Vellos*, she wanted that. Clenching her legs together, she fought the urge to slip her hand beneath the sheet. She had more control than this. She wasn't a slave to her needs.

Damon's hand grasped Rath's chin, tilting his face up. His lips slanted down over the dragon's mouth in a demanding kiss. Keira lost track of who was supposed to be the aggressor as she watched them move against each other.

"Time for bed," Rath rasped.

Damon's hand closed around Rath's cock and stroked. The dragon's head tipped back and his hips rocked forward as he enjoyed the other man's touch. A moment later, Rath grabbed Damon's wrist and tugged his hand away from his erect shaft.

The two men moved onto the bed, their lips and bodies brushing. A low moan rolled through the room. Keira couldn't be sure which man had made the sound. It didn't change the effect it had on her. The sexy rumble rolled through her. Heat churned in her core.

Rath moved back, breaking the kiss. Damon rolled onto his stomach, coming up on his hands and knees. Keira blinked as a small jar appeared in the dragon's hands. He leaned close and began preparing his vampire lover.

*I really should turn to the wall.* She couldn't stop staring, although a part of her insisted watching them was wrong. They deserved their privacy. They hadn't asked her to watch. Another part insisted that if they hadn't wanted her to see them having sex, they'd have made sure she didn't see it.

A tremor coursed through her, echoed within the empty sheath of her pussy. She knew just how good the dragon's hands felt as they smoothed over her body. The sight

of the large, tough-looking vamp waiting to be fucked by Rath excited her. Damon's skin gleamed and she could see the ripple of muscle beneath his dark brown skin. The heat she felt as she watched amazed her.

Rath positioned his cock and slowly rolled his hips forward until his hips pressed against Damon's buttocks. They began moving together, pressing and retreating. Rath leaned closer, his hand reaching around and grasping the vampire's cock.

Keira closed her eyes, drawing in choppy breaths. A ragged moan drew her attention back to the men.

They were close to coming. She could tell by the intensity on their faces, the corded, tense muscles. Damon's head tipped back and a strangled shout ripped from his throat. Rath kept surging against Damon. He tensed as his hips thrust forward. His roar of pleasure echoed in the cavern. The two men slowly separated and tumbled down onto the bed.

"Sleep well, *chatana*." Damon's voice sounded just as the light in the cavern faded, leaving only the light from the embers in the circular pit.

Keira's eyelids snapped open. She'd just closed her eyes, trying to will away the need boiling through her veins. Blood heated her cheeks as a wave of embarrassment hit her. She knew there was no way she could have missed their lovemaking. Even if she'd been asleep, she'd have woken at some point during their tussle. She'd have had to be deaf and blind to remain unaware and unaffected by it. All those fine thoughts made no difference. She pressed her hot face into her pillow and tried to rest. She'd need all the energy she could get later.

Keira blinked, staring up at the rough ceiling. This was probably the only time in her life that she was actually thankful to have been sexually frustrated. The ache of need pulsing through her made staying awake much easier. She didn't want to fall asleep and miss her chance.

She had to be sure they were asleep. After that round of sex, she should be able to leave without a problem. They should sleep deeply through the night even if she stomped on her way out of their lair. She couldn't tell if they were asleep and that was holding her back. Their breathing sounded deep and even but she'd wait. She'd probably only get this one easy opportunity. She wasn't going to ruin it by being impatient.

When she was relatively sure they'd fallen asleep, she decided it was time. Rolling to the edge of her bed, she slipped her hand into the pile of clothing and pulled out her dagger. She left everything else as it was. If she needed anything, she could create it after she escaped. She stood and walked toward the wall where Rath had entered.

About three paces away from the wall, she stopped. She relaxed, focusing her attention inward on the sensations she felt from the blade. It was time to discover how much truth lay in those bedtime stories told to children. She just hoped that the part about being able to find magic with the blades was true.

She felt tugging sensations on the dagger. There were two sources of the power. One large pool of magic surrounded the men and the other a lighter emanation from the wall three steps to her right. She exhaled softly as relief and exhilaration swept over her. It had worked. Smiling, she walked over to stand in front of the wall where the magic pulsed. She lifted the blade and slammed the point into the illusion shield. She felt a slight resistance as the tip hit something and then sank in to the hilt.

A jolt of energy ricocheted through her. The shield's power poured into her. Her fingers and toes prickled, the uncomfortable feeling growing and spreading. The magic dancing inside her felt strange, alien. The hair on her arms rose as the unfamiliar magic mixed with hers.

She didn't waste any time thinking about the discomfort. She didn't bother to glance over her shoulder. If they'd been woken up by that, she'd find out soon enough. They'd chase her. She walked into the dark tunnel. After taking a few steps, she stopped, she couldn't see anything.

With a shrug, she formed a small orb of light. She'd rather take the risk that they'd feel the spell than go back and look for a lantern or candle. It was all too likely that she'd wake them just walking into the cavern or bumping into one of those couches. The ball hovered just above her shoulder as she held the dagger in front of her, trying to focus on the magic she felt. The pull coming from in front of her was faint, so she knew that she wasn't close to the other shield.

Moving down the tunnel, she paused every so often to focus on the shield magic she was sensing. The tunnel curved and she kept walking. Finally the dagger pulled toward the rock wall to her left. The tunnel continued on but there was a shield there. Hopefully, it was the main entrance, not an opening into another cavern or tunnel.

She raised the dagger and plunged it into the shield. The illusion vanished and power poured into her. More of the strange magic pulsed through her. She doubted that she'd ever get used to that sensation. Not only did it feel weird and uncomfortable but she was beginning to notice some strange reactions in her body. Her heart pounded. The arousal that had almost faded returned with a vengeance. Her nipples were hard and too sensitive. So much so that the soft cloth of the nightshirt felt abrasive. The need twisted and grew. She could feel the hot, slick juices on her thighs.

It was definitely time to leave. She could deal with the arousal later.

Moonlight streamed down on a rocky slope outside the wide entrance. She stepped forward, intending to get just beyond their lair and transport herself to Ramgen, the first place that popped into her mind.

A hand landed on her shoulder and she was tugged back into the tunnel. The shield popped back into place and the illusion shimmered as it and the shield formed. She drew in a sharp breath. Her body tensed with fright and surprise at his sudden appearance.

"I wondered how you slipped past the first shield." Damon turned her around and frowned down at her. "Where did you think you could go that we wouldn't follow and find you?"

She glanced at him and flushed. He was naked. After one glance below his waist, she jerked her eyes back to his face.

"Just away. I don't like my life being planned for me." She felt her jaw tighten.

His head tilted and his eyes ran over her face for a few moments. "You might as well send your dagger away. You won't need it again tonight. You did answer something I couldn't quite figure out about a *Tiria*."

She tried to jerk out of his seemingly light hold. "What was that?"

"The legends never told how a *Tiria* began pulling power into her. I knew she mostly drew her mates' power but not how. It makes sense that it would first start through her weapons." He pulled her close and slipped an arm around her waist.

"And how you can be sure I pulled any magic into me?" She turned her head to glare up at him as he guided her back through the passage.

He stopped and his gazes dropped significantly to her breasts and the hard peaks clearly visible through the fabric of her gown. "Your body's crying out for a little of the power to be siphoned off. It's practically begging for it."

She blinked. Her mind supplied an image of his mouth working at her neck, taking her blood and with it the power boiling through her. Both dragons and vampires could do that. Any power they took would rebuild either on its own or it could be hurried with arousal. He was right. She did need some of that power taken.

"I don't think so. No one's biting me. I may have picked up the weapons but I didn't choose you." She took a deep breath.

"You'll feel my teeth, Keira. Maybe not tonight. I'm just angry enough to let you feel the need for the rest of the night. I was told that it's a vicious circle for a *Tiria*. Arousal builds more power and the power heightens arousal." He raised his brows and watched her as if waiting for a reaction.

"Ooh, stop it. Please, please don't scare me." She fisted her hands but delivered that in a singsong voice.

He shook his head at her. "Stubborn female."

She pointedly looked straight ahead as they neared the entrance to the cavern. What did he expect? An immediate plea for relief? Total surrender just because he'd caught her trying to escape? The power would have to be much higher than this before she'd ask him to bite her.

"Just a piece of advice for future reference. Don't wake the dragon. He's not very tolerant when he's cranky and when he's angry, he eats little witches for dinner." He looked toward the opening and then back at her.

She just smiled and shook her head. "You're not going to scare me with any tall tale about the dragon swallowing me whole."

"Ah, you're taking my wording too seriously. I didn't mean that he'd eat you, although I'm sure he would like to eat you. I meant that when he's angry, you'll definitely know it. He doesn't hide it." Damon stopped and the look he leveled at her was utterly serious.

What did she care if the dragon was grumpy? She wasn't happy. All the man could really do was growl and snap. She'd have no problem responding in kind.

She walked through the entrance and turned to go to her bed. She stopped abruptly and her eyes widened. It was all gone. The bed, her clothes and boots. Everything had disappeared.

"We've learned our lesson with you, *chatana*. We gave you a chance and you tried to run the first moment you had an opportunity." Damon's hand settled at the small of her back.

She took a step away from him and swallowed heavily. She tried to keep her expression calm and unfazed. Inside her head, fascination and alarm mixed in a confusing swirl of emotion. Sleeping between them was just impossible. Her body already thrummed with arousal. Being near them would only make it worse. That vampire's scent seemed to shoot straight to her libido.

"We're not giving you an option. Get in the damn bed. In the middle." Rath sat up and his yellow eyes seemed to glow in the dim light.

"No." She waved her hand, creating a bed in the exact spot hers had been before she'd left. They might try to keep her here but she didn't have to take their orders. She took a step toward her new bed.

A low growl rumbled through the room. Before she could get near it, the bed disappeared.

She sighed, focused. Another bed popped into existence. "We can do this for the rest of the night if you insist. I'm not sleeping with you."

She could see only one good side to this confrontation. She was burning off a little of the extra magic with the small creation spells. Not nearly enough to make much of a difference though. She could still feel so much of the strange magic pinging around inside her, mixing with her magic.

The bed disappeared. Damon's arms wrapped around her and he lifted her off her feet. She kicked, her heels striking his bare shins. She didn't catch the first word he mumbled but was fairly certain that it wasn't a compliment. He hitched her a little to the side and began striding to the bed.

"You might as well quit fighting now. It's not going to get you anywhere," Damon growled. He stopped at the side of the bed.

"I'm not sleeping with you." She sank her nails into his arm, trying to get free.

"You will." He set her on her feet but didn't release his grip around her waist.

"You've already shown that we can't trust you to stay if you're left in a bed of your own. We're not going to let you try to run again." Rath turned over on his side and his golden eyes burned with determination.

Keira rolled her eyes. They acted as if they hadn't expected her to want to escape. Of course, she'd tried to run. She'd told them that she didn't want this. She hadn't made them any promises to stay with them. They shouldn't have been surprised when she'd tried to leave.

"Get in bed and go to sleep. We're not going to touch you tonight. We're both too angry." Damon smiled tightly and she caught the flash of sharp fangs. "Don't make me pick you up and put you there. I already have a strong urge to redden your ass for tonight's stunt."

She took a deep breath and immediately felt her muscles loosen a bit. *Vellos, he was using his scent again.* This time his purpose wasn't to arouse. Each breath she took relaxed her a little more.

She couldn't beat both of them. Talking them out of this mood wasn't likely. Not when her actions had put them in it. She grimaced. She'd rather get in bed on her own than be put there. If she pushed them, they might use magic to bind her in place. That was definitely not what she wanted. She wanted to be able to get up and leave the moment she woke.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she dusted her feet before moving to the middle. Damon knelt for a moment on the mattress as he reached for the sheet that had been tossed to the bottom of the bed. Pulling it over all of them, he settled beside her. Neither of the men touched her but she definitely knew they were there. Furious and unsettled, she was certain she wouldn't get any sleep at all that night. She hadn't counted on Damon's scent. It pulled all of the tension from her. Her eyelids became heavy and she drifted into a deep sleep.



## Chapter Seven

Keira opened her eyes, slowly rousing from a very heavy sleep. Lying on her side, she tried to go back to sleep. Surrounded by warmth, she snuggled a bit deeper into the comfortable mattress. She tried to ignore the niggling sense of unease pushing at her but couldn't. Something was wrong. Because she was so tired, it took her a moment to realize what was jangling her nerves.

An arm draped across her waist and the palm warmed her stomach. Another arm rested on her hip and that hand cupped her ass. But that wasn't what caused embarrassment and tension to tighten her muscles. Her right hand was caught between Rath's thighs. She could feel the length of his cock against her palm and arm. If she slid her hand a little higher, she'd be cupping his balls.

Both men were curled around her. With every breath, she felt Rath's chest brushing against her breasts. The heat of his body seared through the material of her nightgown. Behind her, she could feel Damon's entire length plastered against her back.

A bad situation had just gotten more complicated.

She knew there was no way that she could have gotten out of sleeping with them. They hadn't been in the mood to negotiate. Of all the consequences of sharing a bed with them, she'd never thought she'd wake up practically holding one of their cocks. By *Vellos*, she'd never really considered the details of sleeping with them. She hadn't expected it to happen. Last night, she'd been too angry to think about it.

Any move she made would probably wake one of them. She considered using her magic but after a little more thought decided against it. The surge of her magic would probably wake Damon. She didn't want them awake until she at least maneuvered her hand out from between Rath's thighs.

She slowly pulled her hand out of the warm clasp of his legs, careful not to stroke or bump the rising ridge of his cock. As she tried to figure out what to do with her free arm, Damon's fingers flexed against her stomach and then he pulled her back against him.

"How do you feel this morning?" His hot breath brushed over her ear.

"If you're asking if I can still feel the strange magic inside me, yes, it's still there. It's not as intense as it was but I do feel it." Keira shrugged.

"It will grow throughout the day or until you perform a spell large enough to use the extra power." His hand stroked across her stomach.

"Don't tell me you're always this chatty in the mornings. I may just have to gag you." Rath's hand tightened on her buttocks.

She looked up and found him frowning down at her. "I don't know. I haven't slept with very many people for an entire night."

"Don't mind him. He's naturally bad-tempered in the mornings." Damon nuzzled aside her hair and kissed her neck.

She blinked up at Rath. He wasn't smiling but she didn't think he was angry. His tone had been even and she couldn't see any heat in those eyes. His eyes moved over her face. He seemed to be waiting and watching.

"You'll get used to sleeping with us. It should have the added benefit of cutting down on your nighttime wanderings." Damon nibbled on her neck.

His teeth scraped against her neck. She drew in a sharp breath as heat danced through her. This was getting out of control. The warmth and closeness of their bodies was stirring her interest. She had to stop it before it went too far. Her body was loosening, readying for an early morning romp but she knew they'd see it as more than sex. She wasn't ready for the commitment they wanted, expected.

"We have to get up." She pressed her hands against Rath's shoulders.

Rath's hand lifted and his fingers traced down the side of her cheek. "I know you're afraid of being with us. We'll do everything we can to make you happy."

Well, he was right and he was wrong. If it was just being with them for a few days, she'd enjoy it thoroughly. What scared her was the permanence of the situation. That and the thought of the physical changes caused by bonding with a vampire or a dragon were enough to cause her heart to beat faster. With both of them, the changes would be enhanced and far more pronounced.

Her body would react to their bites, change. She wouldn't be completely human anymore. She'd have a much longer life. Her powers would grow. But she was also a *Tiria*. She'd need their bite at times to draw off power, because eventually, she'd begin drawing magic at will without the dagger. As her mates, they would be able to take and use the extra power she held.

Rath sat up and magic formed in his palm. The silver mass writhed and pulsed in his palm. Damon reached across Keira and put his hand over Rath's. His magic blended with Rath's. Power glowed below his palm, mixing with the ball of Rath's magic.

Keira pushed herself up onto her elbow and looked at the magic they were creating. She had a bad feeling about this. Her eyes slid to the miniscule gap under Damon's arm. She couldn't squeeze through that space. Going over either of them was out of the question. She didn't think she'd get a leg across one of their backs before they stopped her. Trapped between them, she couldn't do more than watch as the dread built inside her.

The magic formed and solidified. A silver band rested in Rath's palm. She edged back slowly. Panic flooded her. She had no doubt about what they were going to do with that. They were going to put that on her. She didn't even need them to tell her what kind of spell it had on it. She was fairly sure she knew. Made from the magic of

both the men, they'd be able to track her anywhere she went as long as she was wearing that band.

She had no idea if they were putting any conditions on their spell and didn't really care. She just wanted to keep that thing off her wrist. They were already making her sleep with them. Even if they put that on her, she didn't think that that would change.

She slowly pushed herself back, drawing her body up the bed. With her back pressing to the wall, she drew her feet under her. Her muscles tensed as she prepared to try to make a move. She wouldn't simply let them put that bracelet on her.

Diving, she lunged over Rath. Her feet touched the mattress on the other side of him and she scrambled to put some distance between them. A hand gripped her ankle just as her feet touched the cold floor. He tugged her back. His hand released and before she could bolt, his large, strong fingers clasped around her waist, lifting her back between them.

She swung her fist and it landed with a smack against Damon's arm. His arms encircled her and held her arms at her sides. Rath grasped her arm and clasped the band around her wrist. The metal tightened just to the point she couldn't slip it over her hand.

They released her. She lunged away from them, clothing and cleaning herself with a quick spell. Her fingers ran over the metal of the band. The magic was complex. Breaking it wouldn't be easy. She spun to face them, glaring.

"Making me sleep with you wasn't enough? You don't think that that will be enough to keep me with you?" Keira whirled away and paced to the far side of the room.

"If we were always going to be here, I wouldn't see the need for it. Unfortunately, we get called to battle regularly. You're not slipping away from us while we have our attention focused on other things." Rath's voice contained no compromise.

"You can only keep me here by force for so long. Eventually, I'll be able to break whatever spell you have on this band." She swung around and put her hands on her hips.

"We only want some time for you to get to know us. You aren't willing to give us that time right now. We know that with time you'll realize you belong with us." Damon stood and stretched, obviously very comfortable with showing off his body.

"Because I'm a *Tiria*. Has anyone ever given a *Tiria* a chance to live on her own? She might be able to live quite easily without dragon or vampire assistance." Keira threw out her hand and began pacing again.

"You can feel the power inside you. How much of a major spell would you have to create to get rid of it? How much more would you be able to handle if you were in a battle?" Damon asked quietly. "The spells and shields would help but I'm betting you'd take more power than you used."

She fumed. The muscles in her jaw felt too tight and she couldn't make them relax. The worst part of it was that she suspected he was right. There were ways to draw

power slowly over a long period of time but that wouldn't help her in a battle when she would probably take more magic than she knew how to handle.

"Just relax. You have time to work through your problem," Rath offered.

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Keira looked over at Damon as he suddenly sat up straight on the long green couch, his entire body going taut. His black shirt hid the tightening of the muscles in his chest and arms but she easily made out the tensing of his thighs encased in tight black pants. She frowned and slowly levered up off the couch she'd taken earlier. His head tilted to the side and he seemed to be listening intently to something only he could hear.

"Is something wrong?" Rath asked.

He walked across the room and stopped beside the couch she'd taken. He looked very relaxed in sandy brown shirt and pants. Holding a bottle of wine in one hand, he clutched the handles of three mugs in his other hand. The scent of a bubbling stew filled the cavern.

"We have to go." Damon sighed and stood. "Another dragon has disappeared."

She was confused. Since dragons lived alone, how would anyone know if they were gone? And why the rush? Rath didn't seem to need any more explanation than that. He put everything down on the end of the couch. Waving his hand, the fire beneath the pot faded to nothing. In moments, he was ready to go.

Keira's eyes narrowed as she watched them. Their bodies had tensed and they were totally focused. Something had to be very wrong for them to just leave. There had to be more to it than a missing dragon. Rath and Damon both took a few steps toward the cavern's entrance but Rath stopped and grabbed Damon's arm, tugging him to a stop.

Rath looked back at her. "Come on, Keira. You're coming with us."

She sighed heavily, rolling to her feet. As if she'd have minded being left behind. She smoothed her hands down the dark material of her black shirt and pants. She felt a rush of enchantment run through her. Energy began to pump through her as her body readied for battle. With a small effort, she changed her slippers to sturdy boots. She had no idea what kind of terrain they'd find but she wanted to be prepared.

"So why are you rushing off after a missing dragon? I always thought that dragons preferred to be alone." She strolled over to join them, her muscles tightening.

"We're searching for a young dragon. We've been keeping watch over the younger, less powerful dragons because someone's been setting traps for them." Rath's hand wrapped around her wrist and led her into the tunnel.

She blinked. The trap on his leg. "You were hunting for a dragon the day I met you. That's how you got that thing on your leg."

He nodded. "That dragon was found safe shortly before you freed me. Fortunately, no one was close enough to give me aid before you stepped forward."

"So you're just going to fly around looking for him?" She raised an eyebrow. It didn't sound like the best way to find someone.

"We know the general area he's claimed. You and Damon will look around on the ground in the section we've been given. I'll take to the air and look from the sky." Rath waved his hand, dispelling the shield to the outside cave entrance. He led the way out onto the rocky slope, walking to a relatively flat portion covered with lush, thick patches of grasses.

"It must be a large area." She tilted her head, trying to get a good look at the area beyond the mountain. All she could see was trees and more trees. Nothing that could identify the area.

"Even young dragons stake out a fairly large territory. They tend to stay in one lair for a long time. That can make lone dragons very vulnerable." Damon put his hand on her arm, stopping her.

"Hold on to Damon, Keira. We're going to travel by normal spatial tunnel to the area we need to be at." Rath walked a good distance away from them.

"So why are we outside?" She put a hand on her hip and looked at Damon. They could have easily formed the spatial tunnel in the cavern.

Damon smiled and pointed. "The cave's big but he'd have a bit of trouble moving around in it."

She turned her head and gaped as she saw Rath's huge dragon form looming only a few steps away from them. *Why would he change here?*

"When we're going into an unknown situation, we don't take chances. Would you attack that?" Damon slanted a glance toward the large black dragon.

She looked over just as Rath spread his black wings and swung his head toward them. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head. No, she definitely wouldn't attack him. She'd almost forgotten how large he was in that form.

Damon stepped closer, his arms wrapped loosely around her. She lifted her arms to his shoulders. Rath walked over to them, rose onto his back legs and took both of them into his arms. He lifted them as a huge tunnel formed in front of him.

The ride through the tunnel was a little different from usual. Held against the dragon's large warm body the sense of movement and disorientation seemed far less than it normally did. When the tunnel opened, they seemed to glide out of it rather than being thrown forward by the tunnel's momentum. There was only a small jolt as they landed.

Rath put them down in a grassy field. Tall yellow and green grasses brushed her thighs as she slowly scanned the area. A small group of trees broke the flat expanse of the plain in front of them. Keira frowned. She'd been expecting another mountainous area. She'd never thought of areas like this as dragon country.

Damon drew her away from Rath. "You thought all dragons lived in the mountains?"

"Well..." She blushed.

"There are too many dragons for that and not enough mountainous areas. They still live in caves. The only difference is that most of the caves in areas like this are created instead of natural." Damon's fingers circled her wrist as he led her farther across the open area.

Rath leapt into the air. Wind beat down on them as his wings pumped, carrying him up into the sky. He flew higher and began a wide circling search pattern.

"Does anyone know where this young dragon's lair is? Maybe he's there." Keira looked over at Damon.

"He's not there. The first dragon here found the young dragon's lair and checked. No sign of him. We're going to walk around the area, look for signs of a struggle. And, Keira... Don't make me chase after you." He raised a brow and looked pointedly down at the bracelet on her wrist.

"When I leave, you won't be able to follow me." She spun on her heel and stalked across the field.

His laugh rang in the air. Her fists clenched. She'd known he didn't take her threats seriously but hearing him laugh enraged her. Both men were so confident in their power that they had no worries about keeping her with them.

Just as soon as she managed to get this damn bracelet off her wrist, she'd get as far away from those two as she could. The only problem was that accomplishing that feat wasn't going to be easy. Their magic had interwoven to form that band and breaking the spell would take time and care. Time she hadn't found just yet.

She stomped through the high grass, not really paying attention to where she was putting her feet. Still angry, she crossed her arms over her chest and looked for signs of a struggle in the tall grass in front of her. She certain didn't see any. She didn't see any areas of broken or flattened grass. Stepping forward, her boot struck something hard and metallic. Looking down, she saw the jagged, gray metal teeth of a huge trap. Her heart thumped wildly as she thought about what those metal jaws could have done to her.

Waving her hand, she sprang the trap with a spell. The metal jaws slammed shut with a loud clang. The sound was still ringing in her ears when she felt the ground shifting beneath her feet. She backed away, keeping her eyes on the rising mound of dirt. The earth and grass bulged. Fear trickled through her and she slammed a shield into place. She called her weapons to her. The cool metal materialized in her palms.

"What did you just do, Keira?" Damon asked.

"We have trouble, Damon!" Keira shouted back to him.

She didn't turn to see where he was or what he was doing. She took a few more slow steps away from the growing mound. The grass quaked and the moist, dark soil cracked, falling away from the rising mass in chunks. A gray head cleared the mound. A moment later, the *merdanon* erupted out of the dirt.

Pulling back her arm, she tracked the *merdanon* with her eyes. Swinging the blade, she unleashed an arc of energy. The rolling silver and gray mass hit just after the gray beast landed on the ground. It jerked and fell but she didn't have time to take its energy. A rush of relief poured through her as she saw that the beast wasn't shielded. Then she noticed that the battle wasn't finished. Several more bulges grew on the ground just before two *merdanons* leapt from the earth. Tossing a glance over her shoulder, she saw Damon taking on one of the huge clawed beasts.

Keira pulled back her sword, felt her power focusing and swung the weapon. The magic arc flew from the tip of the blade. Even before the large wave hit the *merdanons*, she was gathering energy for another because she didn't know if one arc would kill two of the monsters.

The *merdanons* screamed in rage and ran at her. The second arc hit them both. She saw their bodies jerk and tense. Forward momentum carried them another two steps before both bodies collapsed.

She turned to check on Damon when she couldn't see any more enemies coming for her. Damon slammed magic into the three *merdanons* in front of him. He didn't know that danger lurked behind him. Without thinking, she sent a focused energy arc rolling toward that fourth beast. The glittering magic hit the creature with a distinct sizzle just as Damon finished off the last *merdanon*.

He looked behind him to the still-twitching gray body and then back to her. "Thank you, *chatana*."

Keira narrowed her eyes and clenched her teeth. "I'd have done the same for almost anyone. Don't make too much of it."

He smiled. She just knew he was going to think there was more to her actions. She hadn't even thought about it, she'd just acted. It wasn't anything she hadn't done in other battles.

She ran a frustrated hand through her hair and spun on her heel. Marching over to the closest *merdanon*, she methodically stabbed the dagger into its shoulder. As the big beast disintegrated into a pile of dust, a rush of energy poured into her. Drawing in a shuddering breath, she looked around the field at all the bodies. *Oh, Lady, this was not good*. Magic pulsed and writhed inside her. Arousal rose within her. She didn't know if she could do this. There were too many of the beasts. Taking a breath, she focused on what she had to do. She knew there really wasn't a choice. She couldn't leave the Dark Sorcerer's creations here. She couldn't let them be used to hurt someone—not when she had the ability to destroy them easily.

She took a deep breath and moved on to the next *merdanon*. By the time the last beast dissolved into dust, raw magic pounded through her. The intense sensation blocked almost everything else. She could feel it, writhing just beneath her skin. By *Vellos*, she needed to get rid of some of it.

Damon strolled over to stand in front of her and just stood watching her. Keira took one glance at his satisfied smirk and focused her eyes beyond him. She drew in a deep

breath, trying to douse a bit of the arousal within her. She grimaced as the muscles in her pussy clenched. Her skin tingled and prickled. She rubbed a hand across the back of her neck. If she didn't use some of this soon, she'd be begging him to bite her.



## Chapter Eight

"What did you do just before the *merdanons* appeared?" Damon crossed his arms over his chest and tapped his foot, clearly expecting an answer.

"There was a huge dragon trap in the grass. I sprang it. Leaving it would have been dangerous." Keira knew now the *merdanons* had been linked to the trap. At the time, she thought she was only doing the sensible thing.

"Don't do it again. We wait to do that until we have at least four people to deal with the *merdanons*. Usually there are more of the beasts than we faced this time." He scowled.

That fit with what had happened. The traps had been set for a lone dragon. Six or seven *merdanons* could do a lot of damage to even a dragon with a high level of magic. It also explained why they had been unshielded.

"How could I have known that it was a trap within a trap? I've never even seen traps aimed at dragons. Well, other than the one I got off Rath and I thought he might have gotten too close to the sorcerer's lair. Most Dark Sorcerers prey on the weak." She swept her hand out in a wild gesture.

"As far as we know there's only one sorcerer who does attack dragons. A very impudent enemy. He not only targets dragons but vampires as well." He smiled and captured her hand.

Twisting her wrist, she tugged, trying to free her hand from his loose grip. She didn't need him touching her. The warmth of his fingers on her skin only made it harder to focus. It was difficult enough to think of anything other than his hard body without feeling his fingers on her.

"Why haven't you found him and sent him to the next realm if he's giving you that much trouble?" She pulled back as he drew her closer to him.

"Because we haven't been able to catch him or track him to his lair. He lays traps and hardly ever shows himself. Now he's surrounded himself with lesser sorcerers who've chosen his path." He slid an arm around her waist. "We fight them but are no closer to finding the leader."

She tried to move away from him. The heat of his body made her want to get closer to feel it against her. His arm tightened and pulled her snug against him. She drew in a deep breath. Almost immediately, she regretted it. His scent only enhanced the desire pounding through her.

"It sounds to me like you've been letting him make all of the moves. You should go hunting." She rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the tension and the clawing need to get rid of some of this power.

"And you know how easy that is to do." His hand slipped beneath her shirt.

The warmth of his palm against her back seared her. The muscles in her stomach tightened. By the Blessed Lady, she didn't know how much more she could take before she attacked him.

She stifled a groan. "Please let me go. You're making it worse."

"It's not going to get easier until some of that is taken away. Your body is screaming for it. Do you know what your scent is doing to me? I can smell your need and can tell just by that rich, delicious aroma that you're wet and slick already." His hips rolled into hers.

She felt the hard, thick ridge of his cock pressing against her stomach. Her hands flattened against his chest. The heat of his body seemed to radiate through the fine black fabric of his shirt.

"We have to search. The dragon..." she said desperately. She was too close to pushing him to the ground.

"He's been found. I'll take you to join them in a moment." He held her against his body. His palms cupped her ass, lifting her.

She swallowed hard. "Why don't I take you to join them?"

"You don't know where they are or have any connection to find them." He frowned down at her.

"I'm sure I could eventually get us there. I wouldn't mind a few detours." She tried a small smile. It wasn't easy considering she wanted to jump him.

He smiled at her. His hand smoothed over her back. "I know you wouldn't mind burning the energy. I'd consider letting you but for one thing – Rath. He's not a patient man and by now, he'll have heard about our little fight with the *merdanons*."

"Old women don't gossip as much as you men." She rolled her eyes.

"A simple exchange of information. If I wanted to gossip, I would have told them how adorable you are when you're grumpy." His breath ruffled her hair.

"Adorable... Men have been killed for less." She wanted to hit him. No woman wanted to be seen as adorable. That was a word for a cute pet or a doll. If he was going to think of her, she wanted to him to think she was sexy, irresistible.

Keira shook her head and tried to drag her thoughts away from all areas sexual. The burning need inside her was obviously bad for her sanity. At this moment, she couldn't remember any of the reasons she should stay away from him.

She felt a surge of magic and realized that Damon had decided it was time to leave. The tunnel formed and rose. Darkness surrounded them. She felt the slight tugging sensation as they moved through the corridor. Streaks of white, silver and gold flashed around them. The tunnel opened and set them gently on the stone floor of a large brightly lit room. The gray stone walls glittered in the light from the glowing orbs floating in the room. Four men, likely vampires, had gathered in a corner and talked

quietly. Across the large room, six dragons in human form stood around a bed. She spotted Rath's red head among them a moment before he turned.

His eyes narrowed and he broke away from the group without a word to the others. He stalked over to them and pulled her away from Damon. His hands settled on her shoulders and held her at arm's length. His eyes ran over her from her head to her booted feet. Releasing her shoulders, he circled behind her. When he once again stood in front of her, his face was set in stony lines.

"She's fine. Not a scratch on her." Damon stepped forward just as Rath finished his inspection.

"I don't need a grouchy nursemaid. I can take care of myself. They weren't even shielded *merdanons*." She glared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. Gasping as tingles shot through the swollen, sensitive flesh, she lowered her arms, removing the pressure.

"She didn't need any help. In fact, she finished the *merdanon* coming at my back before I even knew he was there." Damon put his hand on her shoulder.

Rath just raised his eyebrow, seemingly unimpressed.

"I have fought *merdanons* before, even without the aid of the ancient weapons." She frowned. The annoying dragon acted as if she'd just been released from training.

"But you did trigger the spell that released them," he pointed out with a smile.

He looked so arrogant that she wanted to knock him onto his ass. Since he was standing in front of her, he'd be an easy target.

"Because I'd never have thought anyone would lay that kind of trap for dragons. When I saw it, I thought it was just meant to injure. I've never even heard of a Dark Sorcerer insane enough to target his strongest enemies. You should tell people about these things." She shook her head and pressed her finger against his chest with every word. If she'd thought a trap was even possible, she'd have left it alone and asked Damon.

"We should tell people about the Dark Sorcerer's actions?" Rath stepped forward and leaned down until they were eye to eye. "Why should we do that?"

"Because if I'd simply been on patrol with some witches, I would have done just as I did today—sprung the trap so that it couldn't hurt anyone who stumbled onto it. Every witch I know would have done the same." She tilted her head and shut her mouth. He could work out the details. "Think about it. One witch and all those *merdanons*."

She saw his eyes widen.

"Apparently, we're going to have to talk with a few of the covens about it. No one wants any witches to falling into the hands of Dark Sorcerers." A man with golden hair streaked with brilliant blue stripes walked over to join them. He stepped forward and smiled at her.

"Keira, this is Samiel. According to my friend Jaeson, he rivals Rath for sheer stubbornness." Damon's hand slipped down her back as he stepped closer to her.

She didn't know what shocked her more—the easy agreement of the big dragon or Damon suddenly going all protective and supporting. "Hello, it's nice to see that someone here can be rational about it."

Samiel laughed and his brown eyes glittered. "I can be rational because you're not my witch."

She rolled her eyes. Apparently, all dragons thought of witches as in need of protection. She just hoped someone would step forward to teach them the lesson they deserved.

"When I get back to the lair, we're going to have a long talk about your safety." Rath's hand cupped the back of her neck. He seemed and sounded utterly serious.

"That should be interesting. I don't think I've been lectured since I finished my training." She raised a brow and smirked. If he thought he could get away with giving her orders, he'd be in for a surprise. She knew what she was doing in battle.

"When you get back? You're not returning to the lair with us?" Damon's arm slid around her waist and his hand tightened at her hip, pulling her against his side.

"No, I'm going to stay and watch over Taron and then we'll move him to a safer lair." Rath looked over his shoulder to the men around the bed.

Keira peered past Rath and caught a glimpse of a young dragon on the bed. He looked as if he'd come out on the losing side of more than one battle. His body was covered with bruises but that wasn't the worst of it. Just on his chest, arms and face, she saw deep gashes.

"Take her home and see to her needs." He stepped forward and his mouth slanted over her lips in a quick kiss.

Keira barely had time for a taste of him, before his lips were gone. She stood blinking at him for a moment, torn between going after him for a longer kiss and knowing that wouldn't be a wise decision.

"I'll make sure she's relaxed and content." Damon nodded and waited until Rath had stepped back.

"I don't need anything." She put a hand on her hip and dug her other elbow into his ribs. She wasn't going to let him push her into anything.

"Yes, you do need. Your sweet scent grows stronger with every pulse of your heart. How long do you think you can deny what your body craves? You're shaking now from the desire." He turned toward her and wrapped his free arm around her.

His question swirled inside her head as her next breath brought his scent to her again. She admitted the truth. *Not much longer.* Arousal clawed and raged inside her, building. Soon, she'd need to have sex with him. Even if she could get rid of some of the power on her own, it wouldn't solve her problem. It would take multiple huge spells to

drain enough power for her to be comfortable. She wasn't about to tell him any of that. He seemed too confident, too sure of her as it was.

"No answer?" Damon leaned back and raised a brow.

"Are we going or are we going to stay here and talk? I want a bath." She put a hand flat against his chest, putting a little distance between their upper bodies. Unfortunately the move made her too aware of the hard shaft nudging against her stomach. A cold bath might just gain her enough time to think of something—a way to get rid of all that power that didn't involve biting and sex.

"We're going." He chuckled.

His arms tightened around her, pulling her flush against him from shoulder to toe. The tunnel folded around them. White and silver light streaked through the inky blackness of the tunnel. Again she didn't feel much movement. She wondered if only a vampire could create a tunnel like that.

The tunnel opened inside the cavern, right in front of the bed. Damon's preferences were clear. He leaned down and nuzzled the hair away from her ear. His tongue traced the shell in a teasing, lazy pattern. She shivered, fire and lightning shooting straight to her core. He was pushing her to her limits and seemed content to hold and torment her. She wriggled in his embrace, desperate to put some distance between them.

"You can go take your bath but no shield is going up today. As long as you don't do any magic in there, I'll leave you in peace." His teeth tugged at her earlobe.

"What if I want to change the temperature of the water?" She leaned back, pulling her ear away from his wicked mouth. If she didn't get away from him soon, she was going to throw him to the ground and rip his clothes off him.

"Better do it before you get undressed. Your plan isn't going to work but I want to let you see it for yourself. A cold dip might clear your head while you're in the water. The moment you step out of it, the need is going to hit you just as strongly as when you got into it. The power inside you is too high to fade on its own and small spells won't help much," he said as he slowly released her.

Keira practically jumped out of his arms and dashed for the opening to the bathing room. Even a few moments without this need pounding through her body sounded like bliss right now. She had to be able to think. If she couldn't find some way to purge this power on her own, she'd have no other choice but to go to him. She couldn't take the intense level of arousal slamming through her body much longer. At this moment, she couldn't find much about being a *Tiria* that she liked.

Rath and Damon hadn't pressed her before. Both of them were too confident in their ability to keep her with them. She knew just from their attitude that they were certain that she'd come to them on her own. In normal circumstances, she'd doubt it. This wasn't normal, at least for her. Much more of this level of arousal and she'd probably beg them to have sex with her if that's what it took.

The bathing pool was already filled when she entered the room. She knelt beside it and stuck her hand into the water. Too warm for what she wanted. She cast a spell to

make the comfortably warm water chilly. Damon stepped into the doorway. He had a robe and a large towel.

He smiled and held them out to her. "I'll just be outside in the main cavern. If you need anything, call for me, because if you use magic, I'll be in here before you can blink."

She nodded and licked her lips. He wasn't a handsome man. The sheer ruggedness of his features made that tame description impossible. Right now, she couldn't recall ever seeing someone who looked sexier. Biting her lip, she held herself still, resisting the urges surging inside her. His very presence was a temptation. The desire to touch, to taste was almost irresistible.

Taking the robe and towel, she watched as he turned and walked out of the room, pulling a screen in front of the opening. Her eyes locked on the water and the promise of clarity that chilly liquid could give her, even if it was temporary.

In a rush to get into the water, she dropped the robe and towel to the stone floor, well away from the water. She slipped out of her clothes, letting them fall. Her focus only on the icy water, she walked away from her discarded clothing. Stepping slowly into the chilly liquid, she shivered as the cold water rose to her calves and then her thighs. Her muscles tightened but she didn't stop. She sat on the submerged bench. Her nipples tightened as the frigid water rose over them.

The sharp bite of the cold did ease some of the arousal but she could still feel it simmering in her belly. She ran her hands over her arms. Now she just had to think of a way to disperse the huge mass of magical energy. It wasn't as if there was actually something here for her to destroy. She'd have to do three or four large spells just to make a noticeable effect on the level of power. Even that wouldn't solve her problem. The power would just build again if she became aroused. And just being near Rath and Damon usually accomplished that.

Gritting her teeth, she tried to think of a way of purging the magic from her body. There wasn't much written about it in any text. Arousal built power in all witches. Minor spells usually took care of any overload before it became much of a problem. Only *Tiria* had the ability to draw power into them and there had been very few of them. It didn't help that few *Tiria* dealt with the arousal alone for long. Most *Tiria* were quickly claimed by dragon-vampire pairs and contact with the coven lost.

Her teeth started chattering. She couldn't think of single spell that would make a noticeable difference in her power level. Not right now. Maybe later, she could think of a spell that would use a major amount of power. At this moment, her choice was simple.

Shivering, Keira levered herself out of the water and sat on the edge of the large bathing pool. She looked toward the door. By the Great Lady, she really didn't want to be bitten at all. She readily admitted that she was a little scared of being bitten, not to mention having someone suck her blood. Just from the few times she'd seen Damon's fangs, she knew that those things could do some damage if he chose.

Getting to her feet, she walked over to the pile of clothes on the floor. She grabbed the large towel off the top of the pile of clothes. Rubbing at her arms and legs, she tried to work some feeling back in her extremities. The icy bath had given her some time to think but her frozen limbs hadn't changed anything.

Slipping her arms into the silky fabric of the robe, she pulled it around her and tied the belt. She took a deep breath and silently admitted defeat. She was going to have to ask him to take some of the power. At the level her magic was at now, she probably wouldn't be able to sit down comfortably, much less rest.

Keira quelled a flare of nervousness as an image of Damon's sharp white fangs flashed through her mind. She moved the screen and walked out into the main room. Taking a deep breath, she centered her thoughts. This didn't change anything. She'd still find a way to leave. Just as soon as she could get that bracelet off her wrist.

"Made any decisions, *chatana*?" Damon lounged on the long low couch.

He'd taken off his shirt and boots. Her eyes locked on his broad chest. A hum of pure feminine appreciation passed her lips before she could stop it. By the Great Lady, she wanted to run her hands over the muscles on his chest. A light sprinkling of dark hair covered his chest and arched down across his abdomen, disappearing beneath the waistband of his black pants. She licked her lips and couldn't take her eyes off his tall, muscular body.

"Don't call me *chatana*. But yes, I've made a decision. It won't change anything. I'm still not staying here." She crossed her arms over her chest but immediately dropped them as sharp prickles lanced through her just from that slight contact.

A wide smile spread across his lips. She knew he wouldn't need to hear any more to know the truth. Waiting for his reply, she tried to prepare herself. She just knew that whatever he had to say would probably infuriate her. If he acted smug...

"Come kiss me." He stood and held out his hand to her.

For a moment, she just stared at him, nervousness holding her in place. "Wouldn't you rather be on the bed?"

"If that's what you want." His shoulders lifted in an easy shrug but his smile held anticipation. His eyes locked on her with predatory intent. He wasn't as easygoing as he seemed right now.

He didn't move. She watched him, waiting but he didn't straighten or swing his legs off the couch. Confused, she opened her mouth but between one blink and the next he was gone. Gasping, she squinted, not believing her eyes. He wouldn't leave just when she'd decided to have sex with him. *What kind of game was he playing?* She turned slowly, looking around the cavern. She found him sprawled on the bed, his smile wide and his shoulders shaking. He had his chin propped on his palm as he waited for her to notice him.

"Come here, Keira." He patted the mattress beside him.

She shook her head, resisting the urge to look back at the lounging couch. Later, she'd figure out how he did that. That hadn't been a spell. Her body was so sensitized

right now that she could feel the pulse of magic when a spell was cast. Not a good thing but she hadn't felt even a ripple of power. Before she asked any questions, she needed to get rid of some of this magic she'd absorbed.

She paced over to the bed, placing a knee on the edge of it as she bent over him. He rolled over onto his back and made no move to touch her. For someone who'd said he wanted her, he certainly didn't show it. Lowering her head a bit more, she traced her tongue over his warm lips. She smoothed her hand over his wide chest. The slight prickle of his chest hair against her palm thrilled her. She drew back. Her fingers trailed across his heavily muscled arm. She felt the muscle flex just beneath his skin.

"Are you finished petting me?" Dark brows arched above his glittering blue eyes. His spicy scent seemed to become stronger. His fingers slipped between the robe's opening and curled around her thigh. "I want a real kiss."

Keira couldn't stop the smile from spreading across her lips. He sounded as if he'd waited for years instead of a few moments. As if she'd believe that he'd wait much longer if she decided to torture him. She leaned closer to him, felt the warm puff of his breath across her cheeks. Wanting it just as much as he did, she brushed her lips across his. His mouth opened under hers but he remained passive, letting her lead.

She was stunned for a moment but curiosity and hunger soon drove her back to his lips. The novelty of having someone of his size and power virtually at her command fired her interest. She deepened the kiss, stroking her tongue against his. Her palm smoothed up his chest, sliding under his neck as she sucked at his lower lip.

His groan rumbled against her lips as broke the kiss. "That's exactly what I wanted. What do you want?"

She shook her head frowning. What was he talking about? He knew what she wanted. "I want you to take some of this power."

He chuckled. His slightly calloused fingers brushed briefly against her heated skin as he untied the belt and pushed the robe off her shoulders. "It's a lovers' game. Tell me what you want me to do."

She nibbled at her lip, trying to think of what she wanted. "Your mouth, anywhere you want to use it."

His teeth scraped across her shoulder. He lifted his head and smiled. She clearly saw the sharp points of his fangs as his lips parted.

"You surprise me, *chatana*. Let's get this off. There are places I want to taste." He placed a kiss on her throbbing pulse point.

Damon skimmed the robe off her, tossing it away. He looked an arm around her waist and reversed their positions. Keira looked up at him as he loomed over her. The passive man had disappeared as if he'd never existed. At the moment, he seemed to be the consummate predator. Her eyes followed the descent of his dark head.

His breath feathered over the tips of her nipples and she gasped as sharp prickles shot straight to her core. She expected the wet heat of his mouth on one of her breasts but his lips instead found the soft flesh of her belly. Anticipation and imagination fired



her arousal. Where would he put his mouth next? His tongue flicked over her skin, tasting her. He nipped at her, scraping those sharp teeth just above her bellybutton. A tingling sensation fluttered up her spine.

"You taste so good, Keira." His head lifted and his eyes met hers briefly.

She gulped. *Vellos*, she wanted him to taste her. He began moving up her body again. She held her breath. Waiting for his mouth to find her breasts, she squirmed as anticipation sizzled. She could feel the slick moisture on her pussy lips. She couldn't believe it when he dropped a kiss on her breastbone and then began nibbling on her neck. Exhaling sharply, she frowned and resisted the urge to grab his head and put it where she wanted it. He chuckled and nuzzled her neck. She wanted to scream.

He kissed his way up to her ear. "You shouldn't break the rules, little *Cytari*."

She clenched her teeth. "You teasing vampire. How am I supposed to know the rules to a game I never knew existed?"

"Your education has been sorely neglected. Every woman should know this game. We'll have to do something about it. Now it's my turn. Kiss me, Keira." He nipped lightly at her earlobe.

She wasn't about to argue with him. The level of power within her rose with every touch. She raised her head, brushing her lips across his. She got a glimpse of laughing blue eyes before she let hers drift closed. His mouth opened and her tongue stroked into the warm depths. He tasted spicy and the longer the kiss lasted, the more she craved. She reached out for him, her hands sliding over his chest down to his muscled stomach. She traced her fingers up his ribs, trailing inward until she found the flat discs of his nipples. She plucked at both of them. He tensed and his breath escaped on a sharp hiss as he tore his mouth from hers.

She opened her eyes and found him staring down at her. She grinned and again tugged at those hard little nubs. His eyes closed. She tangled her fingers in his dark chest hair and tugged, pulling him down for another kiss.

His teeth nibbled at her lips. Slanting his mouth over hers, his tongue drove deep. This time he took control. He captured her wrists and pulled her hands away from his chest. He drew her tongue into his mouth, sucking on it.

When he drew back, she blinked at him. *Lady, he could kiss*. He pulled her arms up above her head as his body came down over hers. She felt his legs brush against hers. Widening her thighs, she raised her legs, making a place for him as his weight settled onto her.

"You'll have to pay a forfeit this time." He nipped at her lips.

"You told me to kiss you." She grinned and winked at him. She pulled twisting her wrists just to see how much he wanted to hold on to her arms.

His fingers tightened just enough to prevent her from slipping free. He pinned her arms above her head. "No, you're going to lie there and like everything I do to you."

"I don't think so. I have very exacting tastes and you're already a bit too pushy. Your game is boring me." She wriggled beneath him. She could feel the long ridge of his cock pressing against her mound and was more than ready to feel it inside her.

Damon narrowed his eyes. His long, thick lashes almost veiled his gleaming eyes as he watched her. "I'm going to release your hands. If you move them, I'll tie you down."

She smiled at the warning, not intimidated in the least but more than willing to play the game. If he gave her what she needed. She gripped the silky sheets in her hands and waited. Her body hummed with arousal, promising an intense release. She wanted the pleasure. Needed it.

He nipped at her neck. She gasped and shivered at the sting but arched her neck, baring it and without words asking for more. His tongue swirled over the tingling spot, soothing it. His hands swept up the sides of her rib cage. She swallowed hard and tried to get her breathing under control. He seemed to be settling into play. She didn't know if she'd be able to control the urge to grab him if he played for too long. His thumbs began to rub in circles on the underside of her breast.

When his mouth brushed over her collarbone and moved lower, she held her breath. She ached to feel his mouth on her breast. His lips hovered just over the slope of her right breast. Hot, damp air puffed over her sensitized skin. She arched her back in silent plea, moaning when his lips brushed the reddened crest.

"Damon, please, come to me. Fuck me." She just barely resisted the urge to lace her hands in his hair. Holding on to that sheet became her focus as desire raged through her body.

His mouth opened and his tongue flicked over her nipple. His head lowered and his lips opened over her breast. He didn't suck at her nipple as she'd expected. His sharp fangs scraped over the rounded flesh. She shivered and her body arched. His teeth tugged at her nipple. Heat speared through her, tightening the coil of hunger low in her abdomen.

His rich, deep chuckle echoed in the cavern. He stood and took off his pants. "Not yet, Keira. You don't want it enough."

Her breath exploded from her. She felt like screaming and throwing him to the ground but he thought she didn't want it enough. She was tempted to grab his head and put his mouth where she needed it, regardless of the consequences. If he kept teasing her, she was going to do something desperate. Glaring at him, she tightened her fingers on the silky fabric of the sheets.

His mouth moved lower to the small mound of her belly. She groaned in frustration. She didn't need his mouth there.

His hand smoothed up her thigh. Pressing kisses along a meandering path, his mouth moved even lower. Her hips twisted, seeking his attention. A sharp sting on her inner right thigh drew a startled yelp from her. The lancing sensation shot straight to her pussy. His tongue lapped at the prickling area.

She levered up and glared down at him. He certainly was fond of biting. She'd expected a bite at her neck and some sucking, not playful nips.

"Why did you leave this patch of hair at the top of your pussy, *chatana*?" His hot breath feathered over the plump pink lips as his fingers traced the small oval of trimmed hair. "I'll admit that this little patch is silky and soft but I don't see the point."

Keira gulped and drew in a shuddering breath, trying to gather her thoughts. His mouth hovered over her cunt. His spicy scent swirled around her, seeming to enhance every sensation. *How could he expect her to hold a rational conversation at this point?* His teasing along with the magic had the arousal burning and flaring inside her.

"All-All warrior witches of my coven have it." She closed her eyes and tried to focus beyond the riot of physical sensations. She wanted to feel his tongue, his mouth on her.

His moist heated breath fanned across her bare wet lips. She raised her head and watched as he lifted one of her legs onto his shoulder. His fingers rubbed across the mark of wizardry on her right thigh. She couldn't tear her eyes away from him. His deep brown skin seemed even darker against her creamy white skin. She held her breath as he lowered his head, praying he wouldn't continue his teasing play.

His tongue skimmed over the wet lips, lapping at her juices. His tongue flicked across the exposed tip of her clit. A spike of raw pleasure shot through her. She arched, her body tensing. His lips closed over the sensitive nub and he began sucking. Scorching-sweet hunger sizzled across her skin, curling and building within her body.

"I have to taste you, my *Cytari*." His deep, smooth voice rumbling against those sensitive tissues sent a cascade of shivers tearing up her spine.

She was beyond responding verbally. His tongue swirled around her clit a few more times. His mouth moved lower until his tongue found the juices pooling in her pussy. He lapped at the creamy liquid. Her hips pumped up as her body grew taut with need. His tongue probed the sensitive rim before it thrust into her slick channel. She cried out as his tongue pressed against the inner walls. Each cry only seemed to incite him more.

Her body screamed for release, her muscles trembling. Before she could grab that beckoning pleasure, he drew back, allowing her leg to slide off his shoulder. Slowly deliberately, he rose over her. His hard chest brushed over her belly, against the tips of her breasts. His chest hair rasped and tickled as it glided over her skin. She eagerly widened her thighs to make a place for him.

His blue eyes locked with hers as he reached between their bodies and positioned himself. The blunt head of his cock probed, then slid into her pussy. She arched beneath him as her tissues stretched to accommodate his girth. She sighed in satisfaction. This was what she needed.

He pressed forward until she'd taken his entire length. "I've waited so many years to find you, *chatana*."

His lips opened over hers and his kiss drove all thought from her head. Unable to resist, she released the sheet and ran her hands over Damon's back. Her nails sank into his skin when he began to rock slowly against her. She trembled as the pleasure built within her.

She writhed, twisting beneath him. His shaft pumped into her in a steady, maddening rhythm. Tension gripped her, stretching her to near breaking point.

"Please!" She arched her hips, grinding against him.

Her fingers gripped his buttocks, her nails sinking deep. His weight settled on her and she saw his control break. He pulled back and then surged into her. Desperate to grasp that elusive pleasure, her heels pressed into the bed, lifting her hips into each strong stroke. She gasped as the first ripples of climax hit her.

Suddenly he rolled with her until he lay beneath her. She didn't have time to wonder what he was doing. His lips skimmed across her cheek and down her neck. Pulling her to him, his lips found the muscle at the base of her throat and sank into the tender flesh just as she came.

The slash of pain mixed with the roaring wall of pleasure pouring through her. His fingers gripped her buttocks as he continued to move her against him. Her entire body trembled with the force of the bliss. She felt him stiffen underneath her. His semen spurted into her and his groan rumbled against her neck as he found satisfaction.

She lay panting, savoring the lingering pleasure rippling through her body. Slowly, she became aware of his mouth working at her neck, sucking, drawing both magic and blood from her. His head lifted and his warm tongue stroked over her throat. He lapped at the four small holes before he pulled back and smiled at her.

"By the blood, that's strong. I didn't realize how much magic you were holding." His fingers tangled in her hair and his thumb brushed over her cheek. His tongue slicked over his lips, gathering the last lingering traces of blood.

She slid her hand over his chest and frowned. Concentrating on the magic, she tried to assess how much he'd taken. She could still feel the pulse of the strange magic inside her. She inhaled and his scent stirred her arousal again. Oh Lady, that was the last thing she needed. She didn't want to rebuild the power he'd just taken.

"Is something wrong?" The fingers in her hair kept her from turning away from his intense gaze.

"You didn't take it all." She looked down at him.

"There was too much for one taking. I don't wonder that you were so grumpy. If you need, we can do it again in a little while." His hand stroked her hair.

She shook her head. "I think I'll be able to relax with what I have if you'll let me go. Your scent is arousing me."

He smiled and lifted her up and off him. "Why don't you go relax in another bath? The smell of sex and you is delicious, very inspiring, but if you truly don't want to make love again yet, you'd better wash away the smell."

Slowly, she pushed away from him. The urge to linger and explore was definitely there but she really needed to think. Thinking and being in his arms just didn't go together, at least not when her mind was already flooded with memories of just how exciting sex with him could be. Walking toward the bathing room, she firmly took control of her impulses. She was already aroused and it would be too easy to give in to the desire to climb right back into bed with him. Just lying there, he oozed temptation.

After she finished bathing, she dressed in a comfortable dark blue shirt and black pants. She slipped her feet into soft slippers and walked out into the main room. Damon had dressed in black pants and a black shirt. He stood in front of the table, pouring wine into two goblets. He must have heard her walk into the room, because he glanced over his shoulder. A smile curved his lips and his eyes roved down her body. With the dark shadow of a beard at his cheeks, he looked even more like a warrior than usual. And entirely too attractive for her peace of mind.

She rubbed her hands over the cloth at her hips. "When will Rath be coming back?"

"It could be a few days. They'll want to make sure the young dragon is safe." Damon shrugged.

He seemed completely unconcerned. She wondered if this or something like this had happened before. Just by his actions and his general attitude, she'd guess that it had. But it didn't make sense to her. *What kind of fool wizard would attack a vampire or a dragon?* Even a young dragon. Everyone knew that they took care of their own. An attack on one dragon usually drew at least four or five dragons to help.

Not that she was complaining. She couldn't stop the smile that kicked up the corners of her mouth. One watcher was so much easier to lose than two. All she had to do was find a way to destroy this damn bracelet so they couldn't follow her. Then she'd be free.

Damon's chuckle drew her attention to him just as he stopped in front of her. He pressed the long-stemmed glass into her hands. She looked up to find him shaking his head. A small smile curled his lips and he had that I-know-something look.

"You are in for a hard lesson, *chatana*. Soon, you're going to have to face the truth." He took a sip of his wine and just watched her.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She gave him her best curious look. He couldn't really know what she'd been thinking a few moments ago.

"You think that you'll be able to just walk away while Rath's gone. You'd have already tried it but I don't think you've discovered a way to take off your bracelet. Even if I was so careless as to give you the opportunity, you wouldn't be free for long." He brushed his fingers across her arm.

She gave him a narrow-eyed glare but managed to bite back the angry retort that sprang to her lips. He could be as arrogant as he wanted. She'd just find it easier to leave if he didn't believe it could be done.

"You'd come back to us on your own if you managed to get away. You'll see that you belong with us." His fingers brushed against the curve of her breast before falling back to his side.

She hated that superior all-knowing expression. "I don't have to face any truth. Leaving will certainly free me from your version of reality. Do you think I can't see your motives? You'd say almost anything to get your way."

A large smile curved his lips. "Yes, I would. But I don't have to lie in this case, because the truth is also what I want most."

Keira groaned. She didn't want to think too much about the point he was trying to make. She took a deep breath. His truth wasn't hers. No one really knew much about being a *Tiria*. She'd discover ways to live on her own.

"Come sit down. We don't have to talk. In fact, I think it would be a good idea if you'd think—about the difference between a *Tiria* and a normal mate to a vampire and dragon." He went over to one of the couches and sat.

He just wouldn't quit. She walked over to the other couch and flopped onto it. He wanted her to think and she would—just not about what he wanted. She'd think about which spells would be most effective in helping her to get that bracelet off her wrist.

## Chapter Nine

Keira woke as she felt the bed dip at her side. She rolled over onto her back and blinked up at the dark ceiling. It took her a moment to remember why the ceiling would look so irregular and rough. Turning her head, she focused her eyes in the dark room. She saw the shadowy silhouette of a man sitting next to her. Recognizing the muscular shape of Damon, she relaxed and closed her eyes.

"Don't go back to sleep, *chatana*. We have work to do." His fingers curled over her thigh and gently shook.

She felt the bed shift again and snuggled down to go back to sleep. It had to be the middle of the night. She didn't want to get out of the warm bed right now. She was so tired. Bright light flared, drawing her even further from sleep. She squinted her eyes against the glaring light.

*What now?* The thought floated through her head even as she groaned and opened her eyes. "What's wrong, Damon?"

"The Dark Sorcerer has sent *merdanons* to several cities known to be protected by dragons and vampires. They need help." He looked over his shoulder at her.

"Your enemy doesn't take loss very well." She stood and created sturdy pants, boots and shirt.

All thoughts of sleep evaporated. *Merdanons* attacking a city was serious. Her heartbeat quickened as she thought about the dangers they'd be facing. Anger burned through her.

"It's probably more about you. The *Tiria* is in our hands, not his, and you destroyed his minions. He had to create more." Damon said.

She looked around and found Damon standing at the end of the bed. Dressed entirely in black, he looked dangerous. A tension radiated from him. His muscles flexed and his lips thinned into a taut line. Rolling her shoulders, she took a deep breath and licked her lips. She frowned as her upper canines scraped her tongue. She tested them. They were sharper, longer than they'd been only days ago. Shaking her head, she pushed the thought out of her head. She'd think about that later. *Time to go face the sorcerer's minions.*

"I'm ready." She walked over to join him.

"The *merdanons* will probably be shielded this time. They won't be as easy to kill. Don't get yourself hurt." He frowned at her.

Keira rolled her eyes. The only thing missing from that lecturing tone was the wagging finger.

She took a deep breath. "Don't start coddling me. I can handle myself. Let's go."

He shook his head at her and put his hands up in front of him. "I'm not coddling you, just warning. That trap you triggered had been set for a dragon or a vampire. The Dark Sorcerer almost certainly knows now that a witch has taken up the ancient weapons. These *merdanons* will probably try to take any witch they encounter."

"I've dealt with *merdanons* whose only purpose is to acquire witches. I've done it even without the powers of a *Tiria*. Now I'm much more formidable." Since he seemed intent on lecturing her, she took the time to braid her hair.

He stepped forward and hooked an arm around her waist. "Just pay attention and don't get hurt. You saw how Rath was when we went to him after the trap incident. How do you think he'll be if you actually get injured?"

Keira groaned at the thought. If she'd planned on staying with them, something would have to be done about that dragon's overprotectiveness. That kind of watchfulness could drive her insane. She summoned her weapons, ready to face battle immediately if needed.

The tunnel folded around them, enclosing them in darkness, broken only by streaks of white and silver. The tunnel opened, leaving them in the streets of an unfamiliar city. Looking around her, she quietly assessed the area. She'd expected the streets to be completely dark but fires blazed in a few areas. Reddish light painted the walls around them. The flickering lights made it hard to identify any threats. She didn't see any *merdanons*. That didn't mean that they'd all been defeated.

She edged away from Damon. Her hands tightened on the grips of her weapons. *Time to go hunting*. Her eyes slid over the shadows, looking for anything out of place. Something felt very wrong here.

"Give us some lights, Keira. We're about to need them." Damon stood loose-limbed and ready just a few steps away from her.

"You had to transport us right into a trap." She shook her head and created light orbs, sending them flying around the area. Almost automatically, she put up a shield around her body.

A large open area stood to one side of them. Buildings surrounded them, separated by wide streets. Even without the tables and stalls which normally lined the streets, she recognized the area as a market square.

"The whole city is a trap right now. We'll just have to clear it, because the Dark Sorcerer isn't keeping this city." He looked toward the street directly in front of them.

Two more men appeared near them. Keira tensed her eyes on their every move. She couldn't see any kind of identifying mark on them. The only thing she knew was that they weren't dragons. They called a greeting to Damon who smiled and returned it. She relaxed but kept her eyes on them. The two men nodded and moved toward streets on the other side of the square.

"Let's go. You take that street. I'll take this one. And don't run on me right now. If I have to chase you..." He left the rest of the threat unsaid. Two of the orbs bobbed ahead of him as he walked toward the street he'd chosen.



She glared at his back. His attitude irritated her. She was an experienced witch. She wasn't about to run out in the middle of a battle. Leaving him might be one of her top priorities but there were innocent people in this city. She wouldn't walk away and leave them in danger when she could help get them out of it.

Spinning on her heel, she headed for the street he'd indicated. As she entered the corridor, she stopped just long enough to set a shield behind her. She'd learned in her first days as a warrior that she had to guard her back. Dark Sorcerers and their minions liked to swarm their enemies.

Two orbs floated in the air ahead of her, brightly lighting the cobbled street. She advanced slowly, taking small, careful steps. Her eyes moved constantly from side to side. A few of the buildings along the street had been destroyed. Fire flickered among the debris but nothing else moved. Her eyes fell on a gaping hole in the wall of a stone house. She sealed the opening. If there was something in there, it was going to have to find another way out.

Ahead of her the shadows moved near one of the walls about halfway down the street. A gray-skinned *merdanon* lumbered into the light. It smiled, showing a mouthful of jagged teeth and roared, an ear-piercing, off-pitch bellow. Keira slowly pulled her sword back and slammed a ball of energy toward it.

She saw the white mass of energy hit. The magic flared in front of the beast, almost creating a glittering silver-white curtain. *Vellos, that wasn't just a shield.* The Dark Sorcerer had practically encased the beast in armor.

She'd come across a few *merdanons* with shields that strong but not many. Usually sorcerers didn't waste the energy on a being that was mainly used for its brute strength. Focusing her energy, she threw a more powerful arc of magic toward the creature just as he took a step forward. The shield disintegrated in a glittering flash.

Relieved, she gathered another bolt of energy and hurled it at the beast. Magic flared brightly but didn't hit the *merdanon*. She couldn't believe it. Another damn shield. She swung her sword, sending a wave of magic rolling toward the large being. The energy hit the shield, flaring, and then fell to the ground. The *merdanon's* shield still held. It took another giant step toward her.

She cast a spell to push the huge creature back. No way was she letting that thing close enough to take a swipe at her. It was more than strong enough to kill her with a single blow. She watched until the *merdanon* was pushed beyond her sight.

The wall of a house near where the *merdanon* had first appeared seemed to explode. Chunks of stone flew through the air, clattering onto the stone pavement. A dark hulking shape rose out of the shadows.

Keira swung her sword, sending two blasts of energy rolling down the street even before it turned to face her. The magic flashed in front of the beast as the shield disintegrated.

She gritted her teeth. She didn't know what that Dark Sorcerer had against dragons and vampires. It could be something or it could be an imagined slight but this

destruction infuriated her. The people in this city weren't vampires or dragons. He shouldn't have brought his battle here.

Her sword sliced through the air, sending pulses of focused magic at the *merdanon*. She felt the pull on her magic as it was channeled and mixed with that of the sword. Another shield sizzled then broke. She swung her blade one more time. The bolt hit it as it took a step forward and fell to one of its huge knees.

*Finally...* She hurled another arc of magic and the *merdanon* toppled to the ground.

A little farther down the street two walls crumbled. Stones skittered across the street. Huge gray forms hobbled into the light.

Keira shook her head. She already felt the drain on her power and now there were two more as well as the one she'd encountered first. She had a feeling that every time she killed one another would appear to take its place. This she couldn't do alone. She was going to need some help before her energy was entirely drained.

"Damon!" She drew back her blade even as her scream echoed off the walls of the buildings around her.

The *merdanons* roared and backed up a step. Keira blinked, stunned and a little confused. *What were they doing?* She'd never had a *merdanon* back away from her. They feared almost nothing.

A deep rolling growl rumbled down the street. Keira tensed, biting back a startled yelp. Tossing a glance behind her, she saw the huge shape of a black dragon settling into the street. She saw the hint of a bright red slash just before the gray and black mist surrounded the huge form.

"It looks as if you're the Dark Sorcerer's goal tonight, Keira," Rath offered as he strolled out of the lingering mist.

She lowered her shield just before he walked into it, snapping it back into place around both of them. "Well, are you going to help or just stand behind me commenting on the obvious?"

"A *tri'inal* is strongest when we work together. I'll take care of the beasts' shields. You hold them back, put them down and destroy them. When necessary, you can give me power. Damon will get here when he can." His large hand settled on her shoulder.

"Okay, but... What about the effects of your bite?" She created a wall of magic and herded the *merdanons* back. As much as she needed help, his bite really worried her.

His hand lifted and extended. A vial appeared in his palm. "Take this and drink it. You won't feel the worst effects of the bite."

She grabbed the vial, popped the cork off and upended the contents into her mouth. The thick liquid tasted slightly fruity. She swallowed the last bit and gave him the vial. He waved his hand and the vial disappeared.

"Now let's get to work. They've done enough damage to this city." Rath stepped up beside her. A fireball hovered just above his palm.

She could feel the heat rolling off that fiery orb. He threw the fireball and quickly tossed three more down the street. The flaming missiles hit the shield in front of the advancing *merdanons* and flared. Fire rushed over the shields and then disappeared as the barrier in front of the beasts fell.

Keira's sword slashed through the air and two waves of magic rolled toward the *merdanons*. She stepped forward even before the two bodies dropped to the ground. Rath kept pace with her, a large, very reassuring presence at her side.

"I know of one more *merdanon* alive on this street but there's probably more in hiding." She glanced over at Rath just long enough to see him nod.

Picking their way around the debris, they made their way to the first of the huge gray forms on the ground. She knelt beside it and drove her dagger into the beast's thigh. The *merdanon* dissolved and energy rushed into her.

Her head swam for a moment as the energy swirled inside her. Taking a deep breath, she slowly stood. She stepped up beside Rath just in time to see a *merdanon* stomp out of the shadows. It swung a huge clawed fist, taking off a chunk of stone off the building.

Keira tensed as the rock clattered and tumbled over the stone streets. Roaring, the *merdanon* bent to lift a huge piece of fallen wall. Fire flashed as Rath threw a flaming orb. She swung her sword, felt again the mix of her magic with that of the sword. A wave of power rolled down the street. Rath's fireball hit it a moment before Keira's magic slammed into it. The beast fell to the ground.

They made it to the end of the street without any more *merdanons* crashing out of the walls at them. Keira looked at the streets to the left, right and in front of them. She sighed. Three choices and they were probably all bad.

She closed her eyes and focused on her dagger. She could feel the magical energy but couldn't tell just which magic was that of a dragon, a vampire, an ally wizard or a Dark Sorcerer. There were magical creatures all around them.

"I'm pretty sure we're going to face more *merdanons* any way we go. I can't really tell if the magic is dragon magic or Dark Sorcerer magic." She slid a glance over at Rath.

"There aren't any dragons or vampires near here. Those are all *merdanons* and Dark Sorcerers you feel. Seal up both sides of the street and the one behind us. We'll take the street ahead of us." His hand caught and squeezed hers.

She nodded. It was going to be a long fight. She was glad she had someone at her side. She might have been able to do it on her own but it felt good to have someone to stand with her.

She sealed the side streets and then closed off the lane behind them. Turning her attention to the street ahead of them, she knew that they wouldn't be getting a break from the fight. A *merdanon* plodded into the light cast by the hovering orbs. It swung its arm. His clawed fist slammed into a metal street post. The pole fell to the ground. Rath stepped forward, hurling balls of fire at its shield. When the shield flickered and dissolved, she finished the beast.

The battle didn't get any easier. *Merdanons* seemed drawn to them. Before they even reached the end of the street, they had to handle six of the beasts. Magic and arousal boiled through Keira. Destroying the magical creations had flooded her with energy.

She stepped forward, ready to move onto the next street. Rath's fingers curled around her arm. He pulled her back against his body. His arms curled around her. She felt him take in a ragged breath. Turning a little in his loose hold, she looked up at him.

"I need..." His eyes dropped to her neck.

Nodding, she thickened the shield around them. She turned back to face the street and tilted her head to the side. Her stomach churned and her heart pounded in her chest. This wasn't easy, even when she knew it was necessary. With Damon, she'd been too aroused to think much about it but that wasn't the case here.

Giving Rath power wasn't what worried her. She'd aided others during battles, just never in this way. The dragon bite was what gave her chills. She'd taken a potion for it but she didn't know just how effective it would be.

When Rath's teeth pierced her skin, dragon venom would be injected into her body. If the elixir had worked, she probably wouldn't suffer any bad side affects. If it didn't, dizziness and nausea would be the first of the symptoms to hit her. It would progress to muscle tremors and pain very quickly. Delirium and loss of most motor control would follow. It wouldn't be fatal but it would last for days. That was one nightmare she didn't want to live. She'd just have to trust that his potion worked.

His hand slipped around her waist, pulling her closer. "Thank you. This is going to sting a little."

His hot breath fanned over her neck as his head lowered. His tongue swiped across her throat. A low groan rumbled from him and he pulled her even closer. His teeth sank into her neck. Sharp pain slashed into her. She gasped and tensed, just managing to quell an urge to bolt away from him.

That was more than a little sting. His arm tightened and his mouth worked at her neck. He wasn't sucking at her neck. She doubted he was getting much blood at all. Frowning, she tried to figure out what he was doing exactly. She knew he was drawing power out of her. She could feel the intensity inside her lessen just a bit.

Warmth gradually spread outward from the spot where he'd bitten her. She focused on the feelings. The pain faded. Arousal wiped away any lingering traces of the sting. Her eyes closed and she relaxed back against him.

"Get your mouth off that witch and hand her over. She belongs to the great sorcerer Gelain." The shout rang in the quiet streets.

## Chapter Ten

Keira's eyes snapped open and she jerked forward. She winced as she felt pain slice through her neck where Rath's teeth were still sunk into her flesh. She saw a man standing at the end of the street. A huge *merdanon* stood beside him.

Unless that *merdanon* was taller than all the others she'd seen, the sorcerer wasn't a tall man. He had golden skin and looked much younger than she expected. He wore a long, flowing silver cloak, a deep red shirt and red pants. His long dark hair hung in a straight shining fall to his waist. She shook her head. Young and good-looking but he'd already turned to Dark Sorcery, to killing for greed and power.

This man wasn't a creation of magic like the beast at his side. She also knew he wasn't the sorcerer Gelain. More than likely, this man was only a minion, a lesser sorcerer who served this Gelain, presumably a Master Dark Sorcerer.

Rath remained as he was for a few moments. She heard him swallow but still couldn't feel any kind of drawing pull as she had with Damon. Then his tongue laved over the four punctures. She shivered and swallowed hard as the heat of her arousal hit another high and not from magic this time. He tugged her back against his chest as she tried to step away from him.

"I'd never give you up to him." His lips brushed against the shell of her ear.

"As if I'd just walk over to him even if you did. Let's deal with this minion and get on with clearing the city. I would like to eventually get back to sleep tonight." She frowned at the black-haired sorcerer just standing at the end of the street waiting as if he expected Rath to simply urge her to go to him.

She didn't know who he'd been dealing with that he had such expectations. Since he seemed so positive that she'd be trotting over to him, someone had probably handed a witch to him at some time. Keira's hands tightened into fists. That meant that the Master Dark Sorcerer Gelain had at least one witch in his stronghold. He couldn't take power like a dragon or vampire would but there were spells which would leech power from a witch into a crystal. Any sorcerer could then use the crystal to power large spells. The more she learned about this sorcerer, the more she wanted to find him and make sure he couldn't hurt anyone else.

"We have to stop him." She wasn't really talking about the sorcerer at the end of the street.

He was merely a follower. He'd be taken care of before the night was finished. They needed to stop the master. Her thoughts broke off as Damon appeared in front of them. She knew he was outside her shield and thought to extend it around him but before she could he began walking forward.

"I agree. He definitely won't be going back to his master." Damon didn't even hesitate as he neared her shield. He just seemingly walked right through it and stopped beside them.

Keira blinked. How had he gotten through her shields? No magic should have been able to pass through them. Shaking her head, she pushed that aside. She'd definitely have to ask him how he did it later.

"I called for you over five *merdanons* ago." Keira narrowed her eyes at him. She wasn't really angry, just feeling the need to provoke him a little. "Where were you?"

"I knew Rath had arrived. The feel of his magic is unmistakable. Since he was here, I stayed where I was needed until others arrived to help." His hand brushed over her cheek.

She shook her head at him and smiled. Turning her eyes to the end of the street, she focused on the sorcerer. The man was looking more than a little nervous but drew himself to his full height.

Flipping his cloak back over his shoulder, the sorcerer created an energy orb between his palms. "If you don't give the witch to me, I'll take her from you after you're dead. It won't matter if she's a little singed."

Damon stepped forward, moving so that his body partially blocked Keira's. "Even if you managed to take us down, she's more than capable of sending you to your next life. You think that one minor sorcerer will be enough to take down a *Tiria*?"

The sorcerer threw the orb. It hurtled down the street and hit a shield. The magic flared and showered to the ground in a rain of silver and white sparks. The shield shimmered well in front of the strong barrier Keira had erected. She pushed at Damon's shoulder to get him out of her way.

"Another shield wasn't necessary. I already have one around us," she muttered under her breath. As if she and Rath would have just been walking around without one.

Damon and Rath hurled a barrage of energy balls down the street. The *merdanon* stepped in front of the sorcerer before the magic hit. The orbs slammed into the shield in front of the beast. The magic flared and exploded into sparks. The *merdanon* roared and took a huge step forward.

Rath and Damon continued lobbing magic at the shield but it didn't even seem to weaken. The sorcerer had to be feeding energy into it for it to remain so strong. Keira frowned. Wondering if they were going to have to beat at that shield until the sorcerer used all of his magic, she tried to think of a way to take it down before that happened. Suddenly, an idea raced through her head. She wasn't entirely sure it would work but it was worth a try. It was better than wasting power, beating at it.

She pushed at Damon, trying to edge to the side. She didn't need him to act as a living shield. "Move, you overgrown bloodsucker. I'm going to help even if you don't want me to."

Damon turned and arched an eyebrow at her. "Insults?"

"Let me do something. If it works, I'll deal with the *merdanon* and you can take the sorcerer with my blessing." She propped a hand on her hip and glared at him.

The sorcerer threw two magic orbs. Light flared and sparks exploded and cascaded to the ground. She had to give the man points for stubbornness. He hadn't backed down even when he knew he was out of his depth.

"You can deal with the *merdanon* even while the sorcerer is reinforcing its shields?" he asked. His mouth quirked into a grin and his teeth flashed.

She rolled her eyes. "Doubting vampire. Try to remember what I am now. I might not want it but since being a *Tiria* is fact and unchangeable, I'm going to use it. Now throw some energy at the beast, it doesn't have to be too strong."

Keira raised the dagger. She just hoped this worked. Casting a spell, she tossed the dagger up into the air. It spun, pointed toward the *merdanon* and zipped down the street. It hit the shield with an audible thud, sinking into the magical barrier. Light flashed as the shield failed, its power absorbed into the knife. The blade lunged forward and slammed into the *merdanon* before the sorcerer could raise another barrier.

The *merdanon* simply dissolved in front of them. She turned her palm up as she saw the blade begin to fall. The silver weapon shimmered and disappeared a moment before it hit the dirt. It appeared in the palm of her hand. A huge wave of energy poured into her. She stiffened and stood perfectly still as the power rolled through her body. Swallowing loudly, she closed her eyes and took deep breaths. Power and arousal mixed, making it hard to concentrate.

"Now it's our turn." Rath stepped forward, a ball of energy in his hand.

They tossed bolt after bolt of magic at the shield in front of the sorcerer. Finally, it failed. When given the choice to surrender and lose his magic or die, the sorcerer turned an energy orb on himself. The sight disturbed Keira but there was no time to think about it. They still had too much to do to linger.

The sun had risen high overhead by the time the city had finally been cleared of the last *merdanon* and sorcerer. Only the destruction and the symbol of this Gelain burned into the walls remained to attest to the attack but even that would soon be gone. The buildings were being repaired and the massive cleanup had begun.

Keira leaned against a wall, trying to stay awake. Damon lounged at her side, looking almost as tired as she felt. The market they'd come to after defeating the last *merdanon* looked absolutely deserted without the usual stalls and booths lining the square. A few groups of people had clustered together and were talking quietly. She saw a few groups of dragons and vampires as well as some people who were obviously citizens of this city.

Thanks to Rath and Damon, she could relax a little. The power within her was still above a normal level, but it wasn't anywhere near the huge amount she'd held only two days ago. Aiding the dragon and the vampire had kept it at a comfortable level. Now lack of sleep and sheer exhaustion were making it hard to stay conscious and on her feet while Rath talked with the other dragons.

"Is she the *Tiria*?" a female voice whispered.

It barely registered with Keira. As the only witch here, she'd known she'd attract attention.

"I don't know," another woman replied.

"Would they let a *Tiria* stay in the city with normal people this long? She'd drain everyone of power without a thought." A third higher-pitched voice joined the conversation.

Keira snapped wide awake. They thought she'd... She glanced to her right, where she knew the owners of the voices had to be. Four women were clustered together near one of the buildings. All the women wore dresses and none of them had so much as coven insignia on any piece of clothing. They didn't even have the excuse of being young. The women had to be at least her age, maybe even older.

Where did they get their ideas?

"Maybe she's just a normal High Witch. She looks exhausted," the second woman whispered.

"High Witches don't usually work with vampires and dragons. And if you haven't noticed that vampire is practically glued to her side," the fourth woman said.

"She doesn't look like a monster. Don't *Tirias* look different from normal witches?" the third woman offered.

Keira didn't know whether to laugh or start screaming. She'd known that many people wouldn't know exactly what a *Tiria* was or did. There had always been a lot of mystery about it and the covens did nothing to enlighten the public. She still hadn't thought that anyone would think that a *Tiria* could suck all the power from anyone who came close to them. She'd expected to be seen as strange, an oddity, not feared or named a monster. It hurt but what scared her more was the rush of anger that flowed through her. She wanted to scare a little respect into those twits.

After the long night, it was too much. She didn't know how long she could resist the urge to teach them what a *Tiria* was if she stayed in their vicinity. If they said even a few more comments along the lines they'd been treading, she wouldn't even want to stop herself.

She created a portal and stepped forward. She wanted out of that city and nothing else mattered. The gate opened, hurling her out of the black tunnel. She stumbled on the grassy slope outside the city of Ramgen, almost landing flat on her face amid the lush, light green stalks.

She looked toward the city and turned away from the path leading to it. Right now, she needed rest and plenty of time to think. The crowded streets held no appeal. She didn't want to be near anyone.

"What do you think you're doing, Keira?" Damon's hand landed on her shoulder, stopping her from going any farther.



She looked back at him and then looked at the expanse of fields in front of her. "I had to get out of that city. I couldn't take it anymore."

He turned her back to face him. The dark shadow of the stubble on his jaw emphasized the tightening of the muscles there. Silver flared in his blue eyes. Oh, he was angry. From the look on his face, he didn't think she was telling him the truth.

"The city? You're saying you only wanted out of the city?" His hand cupped her chin and tipped her head up so that she had to look him in the eyes.

"Whether you believe me or not, I wasn't trying to leave you. Not this time. Credit me with a little intelligence. Leaving you when you're standing right beside me doesn't have a good chance of succeeding. I only wanted some space." She exhaled heavily.

She grimaced. She'd gotten her space but she'd really made a mess of her plans to leave. This little flit would only make it harder for her to escape them. They'd watch her more closely now.

"If you weren't trying to leave us, then why did you leave without even a word?" His hand dropped away from her chin and gently circled her right wrist.

She dropped her gaze to the ground. He was either not going to believe her or he'd laugh. If she hadn't been so tired and angry, she'd have laughed at those women. Even thinking about it made the heat rise in her cheeks. She'd been too tempted to give those women a real taste of her power.

"Well, do you want some time to think about your answer or are you going to tell me? Why did you leave?" His thumb stroked along the soft skin of her inner wrist.

"I don't need time to think. There was a group of women talking near us. I don't know if you heard them." She looked up into his face. She just wished she hadn't heard them. When she saw the thin line of his lips and the narrowed slits of his eyes, she grimaced. He didn't look like he was in a very understanding mood.

"I heard them. As you pointed out, I was standing right beside you. You... This isn't because they called you a monster, is it? You know no one who knows what a *Tiria* is thinks you're a monster." His mouth dropped open and he looked absolutely stunned.

"Normally, it wouldn't bother me. I've had people think that I was dangerous just because I had a high level of power or because I fought *merdanons*. When I heard them say that..." She shook her head. The rush of emotions still pulsed through her.

"So what did you want to do to them?" A smile curved his lips and his teeth flashed brightly. He released her wrist.

"I didn't get as far as specifics but I definitely wanted to teach them a little respect. Maybe even wring an apology out of the women." She pursed her lips. The idea still held too much appeal. "How did you know I wanted to do something to them?"

He laughed and curved his arm around her shoulders. "If you'd just wanted to yell or even laugh at their ignorance, you would have done it there. You don't seem to have

a problem yelling or expressing your feelings in public. So you had to have wanted to do something to them."

She frowned. He seemed to really be getting to know her. That wasn't a good thing. It would make fooling him much harder. Running a hand through her hair, she drew in a deep breath. It had been a long night.

"We should get back." She touched his arm.

Damon seemed to believe her. Not that it would change the way he watched her. She'd slipped away from them and that would raise their awareness.

"Rath will be wondering what's taking me so long. He'll want an explanation too." Damon's arms wrapped around her in a hug.

Keira groaned. Going through the scene once was bad enough. Now she had to run through it with Rath, who didn't seem as understanding as Damon.

## Chapter Eleven

Keira leaned back against the cushion of the lounging couch. Her fingers idly worried the soft fabric of her green shirt. She stared up at the ceiling, not seeing anything. Her mind wouldn't stop circling. Her tie with the weapons seemed to be getting stronger every time she used them. She didn't know how but she knew more now about the blades, what they could do. That didn't really worry her but the sudden knowledge did make her curious. The sheer level of power that flowed through her at times amazed her.

"What's troubling you, Keira?" Damon strolled over and lifted her legs. He slid onto the end of the couch and then lowered her legs onto his lap.

"Nothing." She hadn't even finished working through her troubles yet. Talking wouldn't help her solve her problem.

"Then what's causing this frown?" His finger stroked across her forehead and traced her lips.

She looked into his brilliant blue eyes. His hand stroked up her bare ankle, slipping beneath the cuffs of her pants to stroke her calf. Her toes flexed. She closed her eyes. His interrogation technique had definite benefits but she wasn't going to talk about it. She'd need to put some distance between her and the curious vampire.

"I feel like going for a walk. Anyone want to go with me?" She lifted her legs off Damon's lap and stood. A change of scenery couldn't hurt and it would get her away from those hands. Maybe it would even help clear her mind.

Damon remained on the couch for a moment and then looked up at her. "I can't go with you this time. I have to go to the Sandren Hold. I'm needed there but it shouldn't take too long. I'll be back before nightfall."

He stood and was gone only a moment later. She looked at the fire pit where Rath had been occupied for the last few moments. He stood and wiped his hands on a towel.

"Are we going to actually walk or are you going to try a sneaky trick to escape?" Rath turned away from the piece of meat he'd just put on a spit to roast over the fire.

Keira closed her eyes. She didn't know if he'd really believed her when she'd told him what had happened. He hadn't said anything the day it had happened but the way he sometimes looked at her did make her wonder. She'd only been alone a few times in the bathing chamber since that night.

"I won't try any sneaky tricks to get away today. You have my word." She smiled and held up her hands.

Rath nodded. "It might do you good to get out into the forest. You've been quiet for the last few days."

Life-changing revelations tended to do that to her. It wasn't only the fact that she'd probably wrecked her chances to escape them with that flit she'd done. That night and everything that had happened had also been constantly in her thoughts. She'd been thinking about the way giving energy to them had felt so right. Even more than that scary thought, her mind had been locked on what holding the blades, using them, actually meant. Until now, she hadn't thought about what being a *Tiria* involved, even in the short term. She'd been too focused on getting away from Rath and Damon. The relationship they represented had frightened her more than her new abilities.

Keira put on a pair of sturdy boots and waited by the shielded opening. "Are you and Damon usually this busy? Do you usually have to fight this much?"

She knew it wasn't normal for her to be called to fight this often. Before she'd had to chase Verite to that temple, she'd never encountered so many *merdanons* in such a short period of time. This Dark Sorcerer, Gelain, was so brazen, so confrontational. It was impossible to miss the fact that this was a very personal attack on dragons and vampires. She didn't think that it marked him as the smartest sorcerer but he certainly got the prize for his boldness.

Rath smiled. "Well, this particular Dark Sorcerer isn't quiet by any means. He's been around a little while but his attacks are usually spaced out over months instead of the days of the last few attacks. It's your presence that's caused the escalation."

She grimaced. After that last battle, she had to admit he did have a point. She had very definitely been a focus there. "Well, he knows of me now and tried to get me. I can't figure out what he wants. He should know that trying to hold a *Tiria* is a risky move. Does he just want to take me from you or does he think he can use me?"

"I'm not going to try to work out why he's doing this. My only problem is stopping him. Don't think you've distracted me with your question. We'll get to what's bothering you in a few moments." He smiled and dispelled the shield.

"My mind, my troubles." She narrowed her eyes at him. She wasn't going to be telling him anything just yet.

His smile widened and she saw the humor lighten his eyes. That dragon could be annoyingly persistent. She'd have to find some way to distract him.

"Sharing them will ease your mind." His fingers laced with hers and he led her down the tunnel.

"And you're so free with your troubles." She shot him a disbelieving glance and crossed her arms over her chest as she marched along beside him.

If he wanted someone to believe that, he was going to have to find someone else. He didn't share his problems with everyone. She usually knew what he was feeling, if he was angry, happy or sad. His actions and facial expressions gave her enough clues to know that. Rath's emotions were vibrant and strong, definitely not hidden. He had a temper and he didn't bother to hiding it. But she usually had no clue about the specifics of what made him angry or happy.

"The only real trouble I've had lately is with a certain stubborn witch. You know about that. If you want to know something about me, just ask." He tugged her against his side as they continued down the tunnel.

They walked out into the bright sunshine and a beautiful warm day. Picking their way over the rocks to a grassy slope, they headed for the forest. A gentle breeze ruffled the leaves on the trees, carrying the scent of ripe sweet fruit to them.

"Now since you don't seem to have any questions about me, what have you been thinking about? 'Nothing' wouldn't make you this quiet." Rath's hand slipped free of hers and he curved his arm around her waist.

"I have plenty of questions. Most of what I'm thinking is nothing more than frustration and a little curiosity. I don't know a woman alive who wouldn't feel frustrated after dealing with you." She rolled her shoulders to ease a bit of the tension making them ache.

"What are you curious about?" His head tilted and his eyes softened.

"Quite a lot, you and Damon, the changes happening to me." She licked her lips. Those were probably the easiest of her problems and all she was really ready to talk about today.

"What about the changes happening to you? Do you mean in your life or to you specifically?" He stroked his hand over the hair on the right side of her head.

She knew he was looking at the red streak beginning to appear in her golden hair. She'd just noticed it this morning. On top of everything else, that had almost been enough to send her running. *How far would these changes go?*

"To me. I mean, I know I won't ever be a full vampire or dragon. That much was explained during my training, but I thought pretty much a little extra strength and a longer life were all that would happen to me. I have sharp canines now and I've felt the urge to bite. Now my hair is changing. What next? Am I going to get a few scales and a sudden urge for blood?" She threw up her hands. She really hoped it didn't go as far as the blood. The thought turned her stomach.

"You won't ever take blood like Damon does, but you will bite. One day, you might be able to draw power in as I do when I bite. Some do, some don't. Since you're a *Tiria*, that's an ability you probably won't need. And your strength will probably increase more than it already has and that goes for your magic as well. No scales, although you'd look beautiful with a few, the stripe in your hair is as far as that change goes." His fingers stroked the back of her neck.

She sighed and looked at the trees surrounding them. She felt a little relief when he said there wouldn't be any blood drinking, but along with everything else it was almost too much.

"That's not all you've been thinking about." His finger tilted her chin upward so she had to meet his eyes.

"I'll tell you what I've been thinking about when I'm ready. That's not now. As you seem in the mood to talk, you can tell me about you and Damon. Start at the

beginning." She waited to see if he'd actually do it. He'd said he would but offering and delivering were two different things.

He stopped and looked at her. Slipping out of his loose hold, she turned and raised her brows. He clearly hadn't expected her to ask him anything. She sighed. *The dragon was too accustomed to getting his own way.*

He laughed, shaking his head and hugging her. "You have some definite bossy tendencies. It's a good thing I have more of them."

"Are you going to try to tell me what to do or are you going to tell me what I want to know?" She put a hand on her hip. As if she was insane enough to believe that he followed orders unless it suited him. He liked giving them too much.

"I'll take your curiosity as an encouraging sign." He urged her forward onto a trail that led into the forest.

Rays of soft dappled light streamed through gaps in the thick, leafy branches above them. Soft shadows surrounded them in the dim light. Grass and wildflowers pushed their way through the rich soil. Deep shades of green seemed to be everywhere, broken only by patches of dark brown or vivid splashes of red and yellow. Everything was so beautiful, so bright that it almost stole her breath. Even the smells seemed intense. She could smell the sharp resin of the trees around them and the soft sweet fragrance of the flowers as well as the underlying rich smell of the earth.

"From the beginning, you said. Well, I was born to a loving mother and father." His voice was all innocence but his smile curved in a wicked teasing tilt.

She narrowed her eyes at him. He knew she didn't mean that far back but he was deliberately baiting her. The man had no fear of her. He had nothing to fear as far as being hurt but she would even the score for his teasing. He couldn't think that he'd be the only one teasing.

"I see you're in a good mood today. Stop teasing and tell me about how you and Damon came together." She tugged at his hand as she stepped over a fallen branch.

"You know you're skipping a lot of good stuff by not letting me tell the whole story. I was an absolutely adorable child. I could tell you all about it." He chuckled and curled his arm around her waist again.

"You were probably a terror. Any man who can intimidate as well as you can has probably been doing it since before he could walk." She smiled at him and waited to see how he'd handle being teased.

"Not nice, *chatana*. I'll have to be sure to tell you all about my childhood so that you can see just how wrong you are." His eyes flashed with humor and his smile widened.

"Since you're having such a hard time getting started – maybe it's your age – I'll be specific. How did you find out you were going to be part of a dragon-vamp bond? Did you want to be part of it?" She patted his hand and smirked. Dragon-baiting might be a little chancy but she liked doing it.

A tide of red washed up his cheeks and he narrowed his eyes on her. "It's becoming clear that you're going to need careful handling and maybe the firm application of the flat of my palm on your ass."

Keira laughed, totally unworried by the threat. "You think you could do that and I wouldn't make you pay?"

"I'd make sure you enjoyed it, little witch. You can trust me to see to your needs. By the time I finished, you wouldn't want to do anything more than kiss me." His hand slipped down from her waist and his palm settled over one cheek of her ass. She could feel the heat through the fabric of her pants.

She blinked as that remark brought her back to the matter that had been behind her solemn mood. The energy. She was very much afraid that she did need them. Not sexually, although she admitted she wanted them. She was beginning to think that even if she did find a way to remove the bracelet without their knowledge and leave them that it wouldn't matter. The power she drew into her body every time she fought would keep her at their sides.

"Uh-oh, there's that look again. You do need a distraction but eventually you'll tell us about what's bothering you." The feel of Rath's fingers tightening briefly on her buttock brought her attention back to him.

"Then talk to me about when you learned you were part of a dragon-vamp pair and how you felt about it." She had the sudden desire to turn toward him and kiss him. Then there was an even stronger urge to push him to the ground and attack him.

"I was very young, still a child, not even in training when I found that I was to be part of a bonded pair. I hadn't even thought of life other than what I knew. I expected to live the life of a single dragon until I found a witch to be my mate." He guided her through the forest, finally stopping in a grassy clearing surrounded by trees.

Holding out his hands, he created a cloud of magic. The hazy mass solidified into a thick brown blanket resting in his palms. He shook it out and spread it over the grass.

Keira sat down on the soft fabric and waited until he'd settled across from her. "How did you know? Did someone come and tell you that you were part of a pair? If you were that young, you couldn't have met Damon yet."

Rath stretched his legs out in front of him. "You're right, I hadn't met him and no one told me. One night I woke to burning pain on my inside thigh. It probably didn't last long but it felt like an eternity at the time. When my father saw the mark, he knew what it meant."

She leaned forward, wanting to know just what this marking meant anything other than he'd been chosen to be part of a pair. Looking down at his thighs, she wondered just where it was. She'd never noticed it but she hadn't been looking for it. She waited but he didn't say anything.

"Well, what did it mean?" she asked.

"That a bonded pair was preparing to step aside and that I had been chosen and matched to a vampire. From that moment, my life changed." His fingers circled her wrist and tugged her forward for a kiss.

His lips brushed back and forth across hers. She couldn't resist the temptation and opened her mouth. She loved the way he kissed.

"Did you like being part of a pair? Well, at that point, the idea of being one of a pair. When did you meet Damon?" Her lips tingled as they rushed against his.

"At first, I was excited and a little awed. There are only nine pairs. So being part of a pair is a very rare honor. I didn't meet Damon until we were brought together to train with one of the old dragon-vamp pairs." Rath drew back and feathered his fingers through her hair.

"Did you like him?" She remained poised on one knee, leaning forward. The almost irresistible urge to crawl into his lap and kiss him pulsed inside her but she focused on getting her answers. She really wanted to know more about them.

Rath grimaced. "For a while, we both had a rough adjustment to the arrangement. We clashed. Damon was different from what I expected. He was too cheerful and he didn't listen to anything I told him. He still doesn't listen to me but we've both adjusted."

His hands curved around her hips and he lifted her onto his lap. She stiffened at first, a little surprised, but relaxed against him. She wanted to be there too much to fight.

"So you were a tyrant even before you had been trained," she teased, drawing her finger up the side of his cheek.

"Do you even realize how vulnerable you are? You tease me without thought of the repercussions. I'm stronger than you are and much more intent on getting my way." His teeth scraped the sensitive skin of her throat.

A thrill streaked down her spine and warm heat tightened in her stomach. She smiled, suddenly in the mood to show him just what teasing really was. Her tongue slicked over her lips as wicked ideas danced through her head. She glanced up at him through her lashes. Supremely confident, he seemed to be waiting for her to back down from the challenge. An eyebrow arched over his glittering golden eyes. She could see the arrogance in the small quirk of his lips. Just for that he deserved a lesson.

She turned in his arms. Her palms flattened against his chest, pushing him back. Both of his brows rose and he laughed as he tumbled back onto the soft blanket. She knelt over him and noticed his indulgent smile. The dragon didn't even know enough about her to look worried.

"I think you're underestimating me." She grasped his wrists and pushed them down onto the blanket.



## Chapter Twelve

Rath smiled up at her and watched the expressions fly across her face. The little witch was going to try to tease him. She had to know he could easily reverse their positions if he chose but she didn't show even the slightest bit of caution. Her brown eyes sparkled and a pink tint highlighted her cheeks. It was her luscious mouth that held his attention. Her full lips curved into a wicked grin. His cock throbbed in the confines of his pants. Maybe he'd let her play for a while.

He relaxed against the blanket as she straddled him. "If you want to test my limits, you can try. Just remember I'm not the kind of person who'll just lie there and let you do as you want. I'll touch and push you to the edge of your control just as you do to me."

Her eyes narrowed and a soft laugh rolled through her. Absolute confidence blazed in her eyes. She dropped a kiss on his cheek. He wondered what wicked thoughts were rolling through her beautiful head. Her lips glided over his skin and she nuzzled a few strands of hair away from his ear. Her tongue batted the green gem dangling from his ear.

"We'll have to do something about that. I'm really in the mood to play," she whispered just before her teeth closed over the pointed tip of his ear and Rath felt a wave of heat move over his body.

The magic sizzled and sensitized his skin before moving to his arms and legs. It gathered and circled around his wrists and ankles. He tensed and strained, trying to lift his arms. His hands didn't even make it off the blanket. He could turn his hands and feet a little but couldn't grab her. Her assertive move sent a surge of arousal through him. *Grimlan's* balls, he wanted to roll her beneath him. With a little time, he could dispel the magic bonds but he decided to wait and see what she'd do.

She stood. A hand cocked on her hip, she looked down at him. "I think this position has some definite possibilities."

She waved her hand with a negligent air. Magic sizzled across him again. The tight, confining pressure of leather against his cock disappeared. He felt his cock rise. A soft warm breeze brushed over the sensitive shaft. He looked down. All his clothing had disappeared. When he looked up, he noticed she was still dressed. He was all for losing his clothing but he wanted hers gone too. Blood surged through him, seeming to flood straight to his aching shaft. He wanted to feel the wet heat of her pussy wrapped around his cock.

"You're a little overdressed for this, aren't you?" He eyed her bright green shirt and tight black pants.

"Not for what I intend to do to you but I think I can do without one thing." She smiled as she glided a step closer to him.

He'd expected her shirt or those hip-hugging breeches to disappear. It took him a moment to realize what she'd done. Her clothing remained on her body, concealing the pale creamy skin from his hungry gaze. His eyes swept down her body and stopped abruptly at her feet, now bare.

"What do you think you're going to do to me, little witch?" He licked his lips as he eyed the way her breasts moved beneath her shirt with each step forward. He wanted to see those gorgeous mounds bare.

"I'm going to taste my dragon. I'm going to taunt him and tease him until he can only remember my name." She knelt beside him, her lips feathering kisses on his neck and jaw.

"You play a dangerous game, *chatana*," he growled. Swallowing, he wondered if he'd make it through her little game without losing his control. In this case, she didn't know what chances she took.

Her hand skimmed down his stomach. He drew in a sharp, hissing breath as her nails traced over the skin. Tingling heat followed the path of those roaming fingers. His hands tightened into fists as her hand moved slowly lower. Her fingernail skimmed up the shaft of his cock, circling the tip.

"I think you're the one in danger, dragon. Here you are—staked out like an offering to a goddess, totally at my mercy. And poor you, I don't feel nice today." She looked up at him. Her lips curved into a small smile.

That smile held a wealth of wicked intent. Rath swallowed hard as her hand slowly stroked up his shaft. His muscles tensed. He felt the blood rushing into his cock, hardening it even more. The ache increased to a searing need to be inside her.

His hands flexed above his head. He wanted to grab her and show her exactly what he needed but those magic bands didn't budge. Barely able to think beyond the warmth of her hand around his shaft, he didn't have a prayer of unraveling her spell.

Her head rose and she met his eyes. She leaned forward and brushed her lips across his in a soft, tormenting caress. Her tongue traced his lips but didn't try to take the kiss any farther. His head lifted following hers when she drew back for a moment. That teasing touch wasn't nearly enough. His lips opened over hers and his tongue drove into her mouth.

She returned the kiss and stroked her tongue over his hungrily. Her aggression, coupled with the firm grip of her hand on his cock, sent a spike of need slamming through him. His hips lifted into her touch. He wanted more than the feel of her hand on him. He needed to feel the tight, wet grip of her pussy or mouth on his cock soon.

"Fuck me, Keira." He tore his mouth free and locked his eyes with hers.

He knew he was in trouble when he saw the eager, delighted look in her eyes. She licked his lips once more.

"I don't think I'm ready for that yet but I will give you something to think about," she whispered into his ear.

She pressed her body against his briefly. Skin met skin. He felt the hot press of her nipples against his rib cage. He lifted his head and looked down. Her slender body was delightfully naked. He jerked against the bonds but they held. A frustrated growl rumbled through his chest. He could feel the dragon within him stirring, demanding its mate.

Her lips fluttered over his jaw. The soft kisses only made him want more. Her head angled as she opened her mouth over the cord of muscle at the side of his neck. She licked at the skin just over his pulse point. Her teeth scraped and then nipped at the muscle at the base of his neck and a shudder ripped through his body. He tensed as her tongue lapped at the stinging spot.

"You like to bite. I've had firsthand proof of that. Do you like to be bitten?" She dropped a final kiss on the tingling skin.

Rath couldn't have formed a coherent reply if he'd wanted. Her thumb circled the head of his cock, rubbing the beads of pre-cum into the skin. His balls tightened and he almost came. Her fingers wrapped around his shaft again and began stroking.

Her free hand plucked at the hard brown nub of his right nipple. She seemed determined to torture him. Much more of her touch and he'd erupt right in her hands. Her lips trailed kisses across his chest. He tensed arching beneath her as her tongue swirled across one flat disc. Again, she didn't give him what he wanted – the feel of her mouth on him. She traced a searing path to the other brown disc. Her teeth closed around the hardened nub, tugging. Lancing heat speared through him, going straight to his already throbbing cock.

"*Grimlan's balls, Keira...*" His hips punched up in an instinctive demand. He wanted nothing more than to grab her and sink into her hot pussy but he couldn't even lift his arms off the blanket.

His snarl tore her attention away from her teasing. Her little game had sparked a deep need to dominate. The dragon roared and stomped inside his head, clawing to get out and claim his woman. She looked up and her eyes widened. Satisfaction curled through him. Maybe the woman finally managed to see just how far she'd pushed him.

"I'd say I definitely have your attention. Don't worry. You're going to like everything I do." She licked her lips slowly.

His eyes followed that pink tongue. He could see the anticipation in her eyes and smell the scent of her arousal. From that delicious scent, he knew she was more than ready for him. Her thighs were probably slick with her own juices. If she was determined to play the aggressor, she could do it on top of him with his cock buried deep in her pussy.

She licked her way down his stomach. Her hot breath brushed over his shaft and his muscles locked. *Oh, yes...* His breath hissed from between his teeth. The thought of

her mouth on his cock had his balls tightening and his shaft jerking. Every touch took him closer to losing control of the dragon and the need to come.

Her tongue swirled around the head of his cock. She lapped at the slit, teased the underside relentlessly. Her lips closed around the rounded head. She sucked at it, not moving to take him any deeper. He clenched his fists and his jaw. He wanted to feel her mouth around his entire shaft, not just the head.

Frustration tightened his muscles. She was still teasing. Her fingers stroked and fondled the length. Finally, she drew his cock deeper into her hot, wet mouth. She cupped his balls, squeezing and caressing as her head lowered.

Her soft hum of enjoyment nearly ripped away the last of his control. His hips punched up, driving his cock deeper into her mouth. He strained against the magic bonds holding him.

"I want you under me." He ached with the need to come but scrambled to keep control. He wanted, needed, to be buried deep inside her when he came.

"That's nice to hear, Rath, but I'm in the mood for something else." She drew her tongue along the underside of his shaft.

He jerked at his wrists and felt the spell give. Without questioning how or why he'd been released, he took advantage of his sudden freedom. Lunging up, he grabbed her shoulders. Her head snapped up and her eyes locked with his. She froze. Her jaw dropped and she just stared as he pounced. He tumbled her back onto the blanket and moved between her thighs. His dragon howled in satisfaction at the change in position. He grinned as saw her eyes widen.

He bent and flicked at the hard, reddened nipple. The scent of her arousal surrounded him but he made no move to join their bodies. The dragon wanted more than to fuck her. After her teasing, he wanted to make her burn.

"Um... Rath..." Her hands tangled in his hair as his lips closed over her nipple.

He loved the catch in her breath and the way her body arched into his. Looking up, he gently untangled her fingers from his hair and pressed her hands to the blanket.

"Keep them there. I want you to scream for me," he ordered.

He returned his attention to the dark, pebbled nipple just below his lips. He sucked at the distended nub, drawing it deep inside his mouth. His fingers closed over her other nipple, plucking, teasing. She writhed, arching her upper body, offering her breasts to him. Oh, yes, that's exactly what he wanted.

He lifted his mouth and switched breasts. His fingers tugged at the hard, wet bead. She whimpered and the strained sound thrilled him. His hand slipped down her abdomen. He traced the shape of the small patch of hair atop her mons before slipping between the swollen folds. Her slick juices coated his fingers. He loved her eager response but he wanted more.

"Stop play..." She tensed beneath him.

He felt her jerk against him a little and she wriggled. He glanced up, just to make sure she was still following his orders. Her arms were still pressed to the ground but she looked a little stunned. Her muscles tightened and he enjoyed the image of her helpless and at his mercy.

He stroked her clit. She moaned. Her hips twisted and lifted into his touch. She bit at her lower lip and the scent of her desire increased. He wanted to her to burn for him. Small whimpers escaped her as he slipped two fingers into her tight, wet slit. The muscles clenched around the digits as if to keep them inside her as he slowly withdrew them. He pushed them back into her creamy channel, tormenting her with a slow, gentle rhythm. He watched her reactions. Sweat gleamed on her body. When he saw and felt her near climax, he pulled his fingers out of her.

He positioned the head of his cock at her glistening slit. His hips rolled forward and his cock sank into her tight pussy. He threw back his head and gritted his teeth as he struggled against the urge to drive deep into her heat and find his release. The grip of her inner muscles grasping and pulling at his shaft didn't make the battle any easier.

He groaned as he withdrew and slowly pushed back into her. Wanting to hear her scream, his hips rolled against hers. Her hard nipples brushed against his chest with each inward stroke. Balancing on one elbow, he reached between them and tweaked her nipple.

"Rath!" Her body arched up beneath his and her thighs tightened around his hips.

She couldn't stay still. The sight of her writhing and twisting drew a satisfied growl from him. He drove into her, rotating his hips against hers. A high-pitched, loud scream ripped from her throat. She came, her body trembling beneath his. Her cunt gripped and spasmed around his cock.

Those pulling contractions stole the last bit of his control. He thrust into her, desperate to reach his own pleasure. His hips pistoned against hers. Each brush against her skin added to his pleasure. Sensation piled on top of sensation, becoming too intense too sharp.

His balls tightened. Semen spurted from his cock as fiery pleasure slammed through him. His teeth sank into the muscle at her neck. His arms trembled and he let his weight settle onto her. He released his hold on her shoulder and lapped at the trickle of blood. A smile curved his lips. She was such a teasing witch. He liked knowing that she'd push, just as she was pushed.

## Chapter Thirteen

Keira drew in a shaky breath and tried to gather her thoughts. Her body still tingled, exquisite sparks of sensation rippled through her even at the slight brush of the wind against her skin. And the pressure of his body against hers—sheer heaven. Teasing a dragon had led to some interesting results but they weren't quite what she'd had planned when she'd started this.

Arching her neck, she looked up at her wrists. She twisted her arms. They were still locked to the ground. They had been since a few moments after Rath had pressed them there. It couldn't have been done by the dragon above her. He'd been too involved to cast such a strong spell. That left only one person who would free him and then restrain her. The damn vampire must have returned from Sandren Hold early.

"Damon, you interfering, voyeuristic bloodsucker, get out here and let me go. Now!" She looked to her right and then left but saw no sign of him. If she had to undo this spell on her own, she'd make sure he paid.

Rath's tongue swirled over her neck once more before he lifted his head. His lips were dark and wet. She felt a slight soreness at her neck. Only then did she realize that he'd bitten her. And she hadn't taken the antidote. Great Lady, she hadn't even expected him to get near her neck, much less be bitten. She'd planned to ride him to both of their satisfaction after a little more playtime.

"By the Lady, Rath, I didn't take the serum and you sank your fangs into me." Her fists doubled and she would have been tempted to smack him if she could have moved her arms.

He withdrew and moved to sit beside her. A vial materialized in his palm. He tipped it to her lips and she swallowed the thick, sweet-tasting purple liquid. Getting bitten was a hazard of playing with a dragon. She just wished the effects of the bite weren't quite so severe.

A wide, satisfied smile spread across Rath's face. "As hot as you had me, *chatana*, I couldn't have stopped from biting you if I wanted to. You had the dragon inside me raging and roaring. Claiming you was the only thing that mattered."

Okay, she didn't know how to respond to that assertion. She loved that he'd been out of control but he'd bitten her. That was something she hadn't expected. She focused on getting out of those bonds.

"Damon, release my arms!" she yelled and looked around again.

"Now why would I do that when you've called me such rude names and haven't asked me nicely? I enjoy seeing you stretched out and ready for me. On top of that, I did you a favor and you haven't even thanked me for it." Damon strolled over and dropped

down onto the blanket beside her. His blue eyes glittered with good humor. Brushing a strand of hair off her cheek, he dropped a quick kiss on her lips.

"You did me a favor by spoiling my plans for a lovely seduction. I don't see it that way. Release me now." She narrowed her eyes and thought about ways to get even with the smug, dark-haired vamp.

Rath snorted. "Seduction? Are you sure you want to call it that, little witch?"

Damon shook his head and laughed softly. "You were *teasing* the dragon. In fact, you had him wild for you. Just watching you kiss and stroke him had me wild but my wild is much different from his. I don't turn into a half-dragon, half-man creature when I'm driven to the limit by lust and don't get what I need."

"I would have given him what he needed. We would have both been sated and happy when I finished. Now stop pushing me. Release my wrists." She wriggled her fingers just to remind him that she was still held by his spell. It would take her longer to unwind the spell than it probably would to talk him into releasing it.

"A simple fuck wouldn't have satisfied him at that point. You'd pushed him too far. In essence, you'd roused the beast. If you'd done it your way, you'd have found out what he looks like when the dragon's in control. And after you released him..." He whistled through his teeth.

Keira felt the spell give. She sat up, rubbing at her wrists. They didn't hurt. Her skin just tingled. Damon sounded so sure of himself. She looked at Rath. He still looked too arrogant and pleased. She didn't see the threat.

"And you know this just by watching us?" She sat up and clothed herself at the same time.

She narrowed her eyes on the vampire at her side. He couldn't have been too close. She'd have noticed him before Rath had taken over if he'd been in sight. All of the thick bushes and trees were far enough away that he couldn't have seen Rath's every expression.

"I knew by his smell. I recognized it." He smiled. His hand cupped her elbow and he helped her to her feet. He leaned toward her and his lips brushed against her ear. "Don't think I'm satisfied, *chatana*. Watching you, hearing you... I have definite plans for you but I want the comfort of our lair, not the hard-packed ground."

She raised her eyebrows. He had plans. Her eyes traveled down his muscular body. Ideas swirled in her head but she firmly pushed them back. She was more interested in knowing what he thought Rath would have done.

"Recognized it? Does that mean that you've teased the dragon before? Did you discover what he does?" Her voice took on a lilting, sweet tone but she couldn't hold back a taunting grin that curved her lips.

"Of course I've teased him. We weren't out of training before I decided that Rath could use a little lesson in patience, maybe even taking a few orders and someone else being in control for once." Damon laughed.

"I don't suppose anyone intervened on your behalf as you did for me. Did the big, bad dragon scare you?" She patted his hand, amused by the thought and enjoying the opportunity to tease him.

Rath flashed a very toothy grin. "Yes, I did."

Keira chuckled as Damon's brown cheeks darkened and he frowned for a moment but then relaxed. His lips lifted in a smile. His eyes weren't focused on anything she could see and he seemed to be thinking. From the smile and the lack of tension in his body, she'd guess that they were happy memories.

"We'd both just come hard and long. I was expecting to talk with him when I released him, maybe an argument about what I did. Not what happened. The only reason I didn't immediately end up pinned to the floor was because I'd walked away from him before I'd dissolved the bonds. I wanted to give him a little space if he was really angry."

"And for your trouble, for satisfying him, you found yourself facing an irate dragon. Poor, mistreated vampire. I knew he'd probably growl at me. He's too much of a leader to lose control like that and not demand something in kind," she explained and shrugged. She'd been willing to face it if it showed him that she could tease as well as be teased.

She knew that Rath wouldn't hurt her, no matter how much she teased him. The dragon was part of him and she wasn't afraid of it. What was there to fear? He might be a very alpha man and like wild, hot sex but she enjoyed that too. She loved it when he restrained her. She loved everything he did to her. All she wanted was a little reciprocation.

"You just wait. You'll see the two-legged, half-human, not even civilized dragon form someday. I'm going to enjoy seeing your expression when you do. Rath will, at least occasionally, listen to explanations. The dragon just swoops and grabs." Damon's eyes ran over her face and then down her body.

From that sizzling look, she knew that he wouldn't be long in making his plans reality. She licked her lips. Memories swam through her mind. His fingers plucking at her nipples, the feel of his mouth on hers. Oh, yes, she'd be more than ready to go along with any plan he had.

Looking over at Damon, she intended to tell him what she thought, wanting to hurry his plans along but Damon wasn't all she saw. Two men stood on the other side of the clearing. They didn't look threatening and if she wasn't wrong, she saw streaks in their hair.

"Ah, Damon, I think your plans are going to have to wait although they did sound interesting. We have visitors," she said.

Damon spun on his heel and glided in front of her almost in the same motion. His body tensed. He was ready for battle in the blink of an eye. The moment he saw the men standing across the clearing he relaxed.



"Let's go talk to them. Maybe we can get back to our playtime after we find out why they're here." Rath looked over at Damon and then back to the two men waiting for them.

Keira paced over to the two dragons, just a step behind Damon. That was only because he had longer legs. Stepping around the waiting vamp, she stood on his left and looked over the two messengers.

Both dragons had dark hair. The one on the right had gold streaks through stark black hair, the green earring barely visible through his hair. His foot tapped impatiently on the grass as they approached. Rath growled low and menacingly as he took an aggressive step forward. The man froze and his foot slowly lowered to the ground. The dragon on the left had brown hair shot with bolts of pure white. The way his hair was pulled back highlighted his square, pugnacious face and the gem at his ear. Deep brown lines creased his skin as he smiled in greeting.

"It's good to see you again, Axel. What brings you here?" Rath reached forward and clasped the brown-haired man's forearm.

"I wish I brought you better news, Rath, but she is the focus of the Dark Sorcerer Gelain's attempts now. Someone's been trying to buy information about her location." Axel's eyes turned briefly to Keira.

"After that last battle, we knew she was a target." Damon wrapped an arm around her, drawing her in front of him.

"We thought you should know so that you can be more cautious when you take her anywhere. There will be those willing to sell information." Axel shrugged. "Until we stop this Gelain and his minions, she won't be safe."

"We'll watch over her. We're not about to lose our *Tiria*. Thank you for the warning." Rath reached over and tangled his fingers with hers.

The two men left a moment later. Damon's hands tightened around her, holding her against him for a moment.

"Now I think we have a definite need for a bed." His hand slid down her stomach and cupped her pussy through her pants.

## Chapter Fourteen

Keira shot a narrow-eyed look toward the two men standing opposite her. She couldn't believe the way they were acting. They didn't even seem to notice that she wasn't happy.

"Again, Keira, and pay attention." Rath folded his arms across his chest and raised one of those red eyebrows.

She wanted to kick him. The man didn't realize just how close he was coming to the edge of her control. She *had* been paying attention and she'd taken too much of being treated like a novice already. If they kept doing it, they were going to lose a pupil. They could run through their practice on their own.

"From this moment, you have to learn to learn to work with us. Now tell me the rules." Damon's eyes swept over the course they'd created.

They'd created a large area of fake buildings and streets. She couldn't see any of the "*merdanons*" at the moment but she knew that the constructs would pop out when the course was triggered. With many intersecting streets, it was a veritable maze. Because they didn't want her using much of her power, they'd decided she should use low-power light orbs and a very light shield.

Keira had just rolled her eyes at that concern. She hadn't had a problem of running low on power, not with them anywhere close to her. In fact, it had built more than she'd expected.

Heaving a big sigh, she looked at the deserted street in front of her and decided to try humoring them one more time. *Give them time*, she told herself. They hadn't ever fought with a witch before. On top of that, both men had been protecting others for a long time. It would take them time to learn to trust in her abilities.

She cocked a hand on her hip and focused her eyes on the street in front of her and tried her best not to pour on the sarcasm. "Your rules... Don't go off by myself. Stay with either you or Rath or another dragon-vamp pair if you've been called away."

Damon nodded, apparently satisfied with her recall of that rule.

She didn't point out that that was only common sense. Neither man seemed to have a sense of humor at this point. She'd tried once or twice to lighten the mood. They'd scowled at her and immediately started in on another lecture.

"No foolish moves or sacrifices. We defeat the enemies slowly. Oh, and no putting myself in a vulnerable or dangerous situation for any reason," she said with a loud sigh.

They moved to stand beside her. She felt a pulse of magic as the course activated. At first, the street in front of them remained exactly as it had before. The gray buildings

along the side of the paved street seemed deserted but normal-looking, definitely not eerie, menacing or dangerous.

They walked down the quiet street. A "*merdanon*" burst through the wall of one of the houses and began stomping down the street. Rath took a step forward and threw an orb at the enemy. As they moved forward, he stepped in front of her. She took a deep breath and moved to the side, stepping up beside him as another *merdanon* lumbered onto the street. Well, they'd said they were going to make it realistic. *Merdanons* often came in groups of twos or threes. She tossed a light orb toward the new target.

"Stay between us." Rath reached out and gently urged her between them.

"Then stop stepping in front of me. I only went around you because you were in my way." She pushed at his shoulder.

He moved a step to the side and then nodded. Damon tossed another orb and glanced over at them.

"Are you two finished talking?" Damon asked.

Keira tossed an orb at the closer target. She focused on the exercise. They were infuriating and arrogant. That wouldn't change. She had to just get through this so that they would be sure she could work with them.

They advanced through the course, turning onto another street after the two *merdanons* had dissolved in a flash of light. One of the magical enemies lobbed a bolt of light toward them. It hit the shield and flared in a dazzling flash of bright gold light. Even before her eyes cleared, she hurled an energy ball down the street. Two bolts zipped through the air toward them. Damon stepped in front of her just as the bolts hit the shield.

She pushed him to the side and stepped forward. "I don't need you putting your body between me and danger. That shield is mine. If it was stressed, which it won't be during this exercise, I'd tell you."

He nodded and turned back to the task at hand. She knew it would happen again. He probably didn't even think about it when he did it.

Only moments later another arc of energy sizzled on the shield in front of them. Rath's hand pushed her back as Damon stepped in front of her, shielding her with his body. Her patience and understanding disintegrated as the sparks fell to the ground. She tossed her hands up and turned, stalking away from them. Leaving the course, she headed for the forest. She needed some time away from them to regain her calm. At that moment, she didn't care if they noticed she'd walked away from them.

"What... Where do you think you're going?" Rath's voice boomed a moment before a rope of magic circled her waist, stopping her in her tracks.

"Get it off me. You can bet I won't walk away if I leave you." She whipped around and glared at them. Fury heightened the color in her cheeks and quickened her heartbeat.

A smug smile curved Rath's lips. He didn't even look angry. "Then where are you going? We were practicing."

"For a walk before I give in to the almost irresistible urge to turn you to into something for a while." She put her hand over the glittering band of magic. The spell was strong, she could tell that. She could disperse it herself but they could just as easily cast another before she got the first one off her.

"And you didn't want to hurt us. That's sweet, *chatana*, but we wouldn't stay in whatever form you put us in for long." Damon strolled forward and took her hands in his.

"Don't be so sure. You've given me enough incentive." She folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot. "You still haven't removed this damn chain."

"Why are you so angry? You've had an attitude for most of the day." His thumbs slid in slow circles on her wrists.

"*I've had an attitude!*" Her voice erupted in a near shout. Incredulous fury pumped through her. "I've had to deal with the two of you all day. You talk but you haven't listened to me at all."

"What haven't we listened to? What have we ignored?" Rath's brows lowered as he paced over to join them. He seemed genuinely puzzled. With a wave of his hand the spelled rope disappeared.

She took a deep breath as he stopped beside her. Rath's musky scent and Damon's subtle spicy scent filled her senses. The closeness of their hard bodies increased her awareness of them. Her thoughts turned distinctly sexual.

"I've said it at least three times today and twice the day before." She tugged at her hands. Concentrating and maintaining her anger would be so much easier if he wasn't touching her.

"What exactly did you say?" Damon released her left hand but kept her right hand in his.

"I told you not to step in front of me, that I didn't need you moving between me and some dangerous situation." She poked a finger against his chest.

"That's not something that's going to change." Rath's hand lifted and cupped her against the right side of her face. His thumb brushed over her cheek. "We'll always protect you."

Her mouth dropped open in shock. He didn't even hesitate saying this.

"Arghh!" The frustrated shout exploded from her. "I'm not some apprentice who needs to be watched over by two, big, tough sorcerers. I've fought the *merdanons* and even helped defeat two Dark Sorcerers without the assistance or protection of dragons or vampires."

"It's you who doesn't understand the situation. This isn't about your skill, power or experience. It's about our instincts." His eyes locked on her lips and his fingers moved to them, tracing the full shape.

Without thought, her tongue slipped out and lapped at the teasing digit. The slightly salty tang of his skin only heightened her awareness and growing arousal. It was becoming hard to think past it. She drew away from the temptation.

"I'm not some cosseted little minor witch and I refuse to be treated like one. I'm not going to step back and stay out of the fray. I don't belong on the side of the action. I can make a difference in these battles even more so as a *Tiria* than just as a High *Cytari* Witch." She reached up and grabbed Rath's wrist, moving it away from her chin.

"We're not going to try to stop you from going into the battles. It's not the fighting. When we see danger coming, we *will* be there to meet it, even if you have a shield already in place." Rath smiled as his fingers threaded into her hair, brushing it back away from her face.

"We need to protect you but we also know that your place is at our side even in battle." Damon's body pressed against her side. He guided her right hand around his waist and slid his arm over her shoulder.

Keira grimaced. She had to respect their honesty. They could have cajoled and sidestepped the issue, possibly even diverted her attention with sex. But they hadn't. They could have even lied, said they would let her face the danger and dealt with her anger when it happened again. Not that she would have believed it. They were too protective to simply step back after stepping in front of her so many times. She still didn't like what they were saying.

"Now that we have that settled, you can tell us about what else is bothering you." Damon raised his brows and waited.

"Nothing else is bothering me," Keira said with a reinforcing shake of her head. She wasn't in the mood to tell all. They might have switched moods in the blink of an eye but she hadn't.

"You think we haven't noticed the way you go silent and stare into the darkness at times during the last three days. I'd say that it's the same thing that was bothering you the day you tried your hand at bondage." Rath's arm curled around her waist. He looked over her shoulder and nodded.

She only had a moment to wonder what that nod meant. A dark tunnel folded around them. It opened abruptly and left them in the cave, right in front of the bed. She looked around the room.

"I said I'm still not ready to talk about it." She slipped free of their hold.

"At least you've stopped pretending that nothing's wrong. You've been turning it over in your mind for days. If you haven't found a solution on your own, talking might help." Rath walked over to the couch and sat.

Noticing the expression on his face, she groaned. They weren't going to give up or let her push them away with an "it's my problem" this time. Looking up at the ceiling, she wondered what to tell them without telling them everything.

"What I was thinking about doesn't need a solution," she said and sighed.

Damon smiled, flashing shining white teeth. "Come on. Tell us what you've been turning over in your mind."

"Don't be so nosy. If it was about you, I wouldn't hesitate to tell you about it." She waved a hand and a cushioned chair appeared opposite Rath's couch. She definitely didn't need to be sitting anywhere with one of them. And one of those couches seemed to offer too much temptation to them. "Especially since you're bugging me right now."

"Which means this is about you. And there's only one thing I know of that would cause you to brood. Come to some uncomfortable conclusions, *chatana*?" He walked over and lifted her out of the chair, before sitting down and settling her across his lap.

"Oh, you're just so sympathetic. Such a great way to make me want to be with you." She ladled on the sarcasm.

Squirming in his lap, she pushed at his hands. She tried to get off his lap but he held her in place with very little effort at all. Her wriggling did have an effect. She felt his cock harden against the curve of her hip.

"I can be sympathetic." Rath sat up and patted the plush cushions beside him.

Her eyebrows rose. He seemed more eager than sympathetic and that smile was just wicked. Damon lifted her and carried her over to the green couch. Putting her between them, he sat down on the couch.

Rath's arms curved around her shoulders and urged her to lean against him. "Now what scares you so much about being a *Tiria*?"

Keira shoved against him but froze as she heard the last of his question. He really did know what had been disturbing even her sleep for the last few days.

"It's not hard to realize that adjusting to what it means to be a *Tiria*, to the changes it would create would take some time." His hand glided up and down her back.

"I didn't expect... When I realized that the weapons were tied to me, I knew about the power I'd gain and some of the abilities." She relaxed in their arms. Talking about it wouldn't change anything but she did feel a little more relaxed already.

"The power is the most obvious of the things a *Tiria* gains. But as you've said, there's more to be a *Tiria* than just the power. Tell us what's bothering you." Damon's hand curved over her thigh.

"It's the ties. I never wanted this, any of it." She looked down at the floor. Her fingers tugged at her shirt, worrying over the stitched hem.

"What do you mean ties?" He frowned and captured one of her hands, tugging it away from her shirt.

"That taking power into me thing. If I'd just been mated to you two, I could have walked away without looking back." She grimaced and wriggled her fingers.

"You think it would be that easy to leave us." His grip tightened a little and he pulled her closer to him.

"Don't start with the growling at me, you grumpy dragon. I wasn't saying that I was going to leave you. I just said I could have. It's the truth. Leaving wouldn't have

affected me that much if I wasn't a *Tiria*." She shook her head. No use going into too many details. An argumentative dragon wouldn't make things any easier.

"If by not affecting you that much, you mean we would have hunted you until we'd finally found you, then you're right. I'm sure your life would have been very normal with two mates chasing you." His eyes narrowed and he glared down at her.

"Can you focus beyond that possessive streak?" She shook her head. Sometimes even talking to him was impossible but right now she was enjoying teasing him.

He released her hand and both his arms curved around her, hugging her tightly against him. "You enjoy taunting me entirely too much."

"Well, you are fairly predictable on that one subject. But then Damon is too. He's just not as quick with his response. He glares and smolders for a bit before exploding." She smiled at him. Both men were very possessive.

"And you're trying to change the subject." Damon leaned forward and brushed his lips across her cheek.

"He's the one—" She blinked. His lips settled across hers, cutting off her protest.

"Explain these ties that you can't walk away from." Rath's warm hand slid in slow, tight circles on her stomach.

"It's the power. Without the extra powers and abilities of a *Tiria*, the only thing that would tie me to you was my feelings for you. Because I can pull power into me, I need someone to take the extra when it gets to a certain level. The thought of any other dragon or vampire doing it on a steady basis isn't appealing." Her mouth twisted into a wry grimace. She wouldn't mind giving aid to other dragons or vampires and letting them drink from her wrist. However, Rath and Damon were the only ones she could even think about allowing near her neck. There was no one else that she trusted that much.

"You have feelings for us." Damon dropped another light kiss on her lips. "We have feelings for you too."

Keira rolled her eyes. He would latch on to that one part of her statement. "Damon."

Rath chuckled. "You can't blame him for being excited at hearing that your feelings for us have grown and that you admit it."

She groaned. "Did I say what I felt for you? Other than the occasional urge to strangle both of you."

"Ooh, the sweet witch is showing her claws." Damon's tongue traced her lips. "It scares you that you need us."

"You wouldn't like it either. If I was on my own, I don't know how long I could have held the power before looking for some help, someone to take the edge off it," she admitted. She reached up and slid her hand around Damon's neck.

"No, I don't think I'd like it. I know that you can't fight what you are. You have to accept and move forward. The first step is to stop whining." He patted her hand and just smiled at her.

"I'm not whining. I could show you whining. I did a stint at the *Cytari* training house, teaching some young witches." She poked her finger against his muscled chest. She tugged at Rath's hand, pulling free of his hold and leaned forward.

Keira narrowed her eyes at the arrogant vampire. She wasn't whining and he would apologize. Damon leaned back as she came up to her knees. Glowering down at him, she pushed against his chest until he flopped onto his back. Crawling up his body, she planted a hand next to his shoulder and surveyed him through narrowed eyes.

"Now do I have to get rough or are you going to take that back?" She bared her teeth, lowered her face to his, nipping at his full lower lip.

"I like an aggressive woman." He smiled and flashed the sharp tips of his fangs.

"I like this view." Rath's hand slid over the full curves of her buttocks.

Keira turned her head and looked back at him. His hands smoothed up her thighs and inward, briefly molding his palms over her butt cheeks before pushing under her shirt. The fabric bunched as his warm hands slid up her back. Heat and hunger smoldered in his golden eyes.

"I'll deal with you later. This vampire needs to learn a lesson." She turned back and smiled at Damon.

"But I want to play now." Rath's palms stroked over her ribs and he palmed her breasts. He clasped her nipples between the thumb and forefinger of each hand. He tugged at the distended bud.

She gasped. A sharp, sweet sensation shot straight to her core. Slick moisture gathered between her thighs.

"I'm definitely in the mood to watch you explode." Damon lifted his head and ran his tongue over her lips.

She felt Rath's thighs brushing against the back of hers. His hips pressed against her buttocks. She gasped as she felt not the cloth of her pants but the warm slide of his skin as it met hers. The hard length of his cock rubbed against her as he rolled his pelvis.

Her eyes snapped down and collided with Damon's. He smiled widely. A glance between them confirmed that he was just as naked as she was.

"Let's move this to the bed, Damon." Rath's chest pressed against her back. He brushed her hair over one shoulder and nibbled at the bare column of her neck.

She felt a cool breeze sweep up her body. A tingle rippled across her skin and then a strange sense of disorientation swirled through her. Her stomach clenched and her vision blurred a bit. She looked down at Damon. At first, she didn't notice anything different. Then her eyes focused beyond him and widened as she saw green fabric beneath him instead of the green of the couch.



Her mouth dropped open. How had he done that? That wasn't a normal transport spell.

Damon's hand rose and slipped around the back of her neck. Tugging her down to him, his lips closed over hers in a heated kiss. His tongue drove deep, demanding a response and she gave it. She sank into his kiss, pushing aside her questions. She slipped her hands up his arms to his shoulders as she lowered her body against his.

"Umm, you're eager, *chatana*. We have time. And now we have room." Rath's lips brushed against her ear as his arms locked around her waist. He tumbled them onto the blankets.

She groaned at the loss of the kiss. Rolling back toward Damon, she was determined to reclaim those lips. This was just like those two—get her hot and involved and then decide it's time to play.

Rath laughed and flipped her onto her back. His fingers gently brushed the hair off her face, managing to stroke across her lips at least three times. Leaning down, he inhaled deeply and then his tongue traced along her jawline.

"I can smell your desire but I want more tonight." His fingers tugged at one of her nipples. "I want you screaming for our touch, begging for it."

"Rath, now is not the time to be playing games. I want..." She gripped his arm.

"You don't want us enough." Damon's lips brushed across her stomach. His hot breath sent a searing pulse straight to her pussy. "But you will."

She drew in a shaky breath. Her thighs widened in invitation as his lips brushed over her navel. Swallowing, she settled in to enjoy. She loved the feel of their lips and hands too much and they knew just how to use them. Such sweet torture.

"You're right. I should be tasting these." Rath's hands molded over her breasts.

She drew in a sharp breath. His fingers brushed back and forth across the sensitive nipples in a light teasing touch. Electric prickles sizzled through her and she felt the tissue swell and tighten. His hands drew away and he looked down at the tight, reddened tips.

His tongue slicked over his lips. Hot breath fanned across the crest of her right breast as his head lowered. His tongue extended and painted a slick trail around the areola. She arched, lifting her body, wanting his mouth on her breast. His tongue left a path of tingling warmth.

"You like that, don't you?" Rath's tongue flicked at the nipple.

"Great Lady, you're making me insane!" She twisted and grabbed for his head, trying to get him to put his mouth where she needed it.

His mouth hovered over the reddened nipple. As he drew the stiff peak inside the moist warmth of his mouth, she felt the sharp tips of one of his canines graze it. Sensation arced over her body. The muscles in her pussy clenched. Hunger and need built, promising a shattering climax.

She trembled and dragged in a fast panting breath. Just as she felt a pulling draw on her breast, a stinging nip to her inner thigh sent a bolt of fire pinging through her. The sharp sensation only fueled the churning need. Warm hands widened her thighs even further. She barely had the capacity to realize that Damon was lying between her spread legs and why.

"No, Damon, it will be too much." Her right hand brushed across his hair.

"Then come for me, Keira. I want to hear you scream and then I want to watch you burn again," he coaxed.

His breath brushed over the swollen lips. She shivered and moved her leg restlessly. He hooked it over his shoulder. His tongue stroked over her clit, swirling and flicking. Her hips jerked upward. *Vellos*, she needed more.

The tightening desire rose and flared and she felt as if her entire body would explode at any moment. Each light caress only lifted her higher.

Damon's tongue licked and stroked at the hard bundle of nerves. Her fists tightened and she lifted into his touch. It was all too much. The feel of his mouth on her pussy and Rath's mouth at her breasts pushed her past the limits of her control. Her thighs tightened on his shoulders as she tried for a firmer touch.

She moaned in disappointment as his mouth left her aching clit and traveled lower. He lapped, gathering the juices spilling from her pussy. When the tip of his tongue probed at her slick entrance, everything fractured.

A scream tore from her throat and her body tightened. Fiery pleasure slammed through her. Her vaginal muscles clenched and rippled. For a few moments, all she knew was the trembling of her body and the searing pleasure.

Rath's fingertips brushed across her neglected breast, drawing her attention. Her body responded instantly, need building at an amazing rate. His lips drew on her breast with a slow, lazy rhythm. She'd swear she could feel the pulling tug of Rath's lips echoing deep in her pussy.

Damon's lips closed over the hood of her clit. He drew on the sensitized nub. Keira's hips rose against his lips eagerly as the need rose even higher.

"I want you." Her fingers tangled in Rath's hair.

"And you'll have both of us." Damon's head rose and he met her eyes. "Now relax and enjoy."

He dropped a kiss on her thigh. She blinked, confused for a moment. Both of their faces were etched into tense lines. They waited, simply watching as if needing to know her decision. She drew in a deep breath. This meant more to them than just sex. For some reason, they considered this choice very important.

Rath's deep musky scent mingled with the enticing spice of Damon's, exciting her. Just what decision they wanted her to make became clear as Rath abruptly stood and turned away. She could see the frown on Damon's face, the disappointment in his eyes.

## Chapter Fifteen

Her trust. They needed her trust that even together, they wouldn't hurt her. That possibility had never crossed her mind. They'd always been so attentive to her needs. Even when she could see the hunger burning in every tense line of their body, they hadn't done anything that she didn't want.

Keira rolled to her feet and went after the dragon. Reaching out, her fingers brushed over his arm.

"Rath, stop! I want you. Both of you. It just took me a little while to realize why you were waiting." Her hand stroked up his arm and she stepped closer to his large body.

He turned and cupped her chin in his palm. His yellow-gold eyes bored into hers. "You want both of us...together?"

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. He was determined to pull the words from her. "Both of you together."

She rose onto her tiptoes to curl an arm around his neck. He remained stiff and distant as if he didn't quite believe her. She'd just have to convince him. Her arms tightened, bringing his mouth close to hers. She nipped at his lips and then slicked her tongue over them. He moaned and his arms curved around her, pulling her tightly against him. His mouth opened over hers and she eagerly met the thrust of his tongue.

"Feel how wet I am for you." She drew his hand down her body to her pussy.

His fingers pressed between the slick folds. Dipping down, they swirled in the creamy juices slipping from her entrance. The fingers pushed into her. She felt her muscles clench around them and tingles rush up her spine. His thumb brushed over her clit.

Keira shivered and her arm tightened around his neck. Pulses of sweet sensation rolled through her. Her hips rocked into the slow strokes of his fingers. He pulled his hand free and lifted it. Raising it to his lips, he licked his fingers clean.

She gulped as a rush of heat rocketed over her. Damn, the man was sexy. He seemed to know just what to do to make her body go wild. His hands fell to her waist and he pulled her hips snug to his. He looked down at her and a wicked smile curved his lips as he held her still when she tried to wrap her legs around his waist. His thigh pushed between her legs and he moved her on the hard, muscled column in a slow, grinding rhythm.

"You want this — us?" he asked. His head tilted and he raised an eyebrow.

She had the almost irresistible urge to kick him. He was still testing her.

"Both of you anytime, anywhere. It had better be now or I'm going to finish this myself." She bared her teeth at him.

Damon chuckled. "We definitely can't have that."

His hands slipped around her and began playing with her nipples. The muscled warmth of his chest pressed against her back. She felt his cock nestle between the cleft of her buttocks. She pressed back against the thick, erect rod. She smiled as she heard him drag in a sharp, harsh breath. That reaction sent a thrill through her. She wanted to see, to know that they wanted her as much as she wanted them.

"Take me to bed. I need you." She nipped at Rath's chin.

"Now why would we need to go to bed?" Damon's lips wandered across her shoulder. He nuzzled her hair aside and licked her neck before his mouth fastened onto it.

She felt the scrape of his fangs against the tender flesh as he sucked. A wave of heated desire spread as her skin became more and more sensitive. He didn't bite although she ached for it. His teeth scraped and teased. His tongue swirled over the tingling spot just before he lifted his head.

"I'm not willing to wait for bed, *chatana*. I want to be in you now." Rath's hands tightened and he lifted her.

She hooked her legs around his hips. Her fingers played with the strands of his hair at his neck. Holding her with one hand, he reached between them and positioned the head of his cock at her wet, clutching entrance. She shivered as he slowly pushed into her. It felt so good. A low groan rumbled through Rath. She felt the vibrations against her chest as his shaft slowly pushed into her pussy.

Her nails sank into his back and she arched against him, urging him to move. He stepped back. Each step jolted her, driving her against him. She moaned and moved against him, desperate for more.

A snarl rolled from him and he bared his teeth. "No, wait."

He leaned back against the wall. Not intimidated at all, she glared at him and rocked her hips. She couldn't wait forever for this. His eyes narrowed and he drew in a rasping breath. Sliding his hands around her hips, he cupped her butt cheeks and then spread them.

Keira blinked, suddenly aware that he'd been waiting for Damon. She looked over her shoulder. Damon stood only a step away from them. His head was lowered as he poured oil from a bottle into the palm of one of his hands. Glistening fingers wrapped around the length of his shaft. He stroked his cock, coating it from tip to base with the lubricant. After he finished, he poured more oil into his palm and then magically sent the bottle away with little more than a wave of his fingers.

He dipped his fingers into the oil and rubbed the warm, slick liquid around her tight, puckered back entrance. Pressing with a single finger, he probed at the ring of curved muscles. His finger slipped into her and stroked. He withdrew his finger and pressed again with two, stretching her. The lubricant coated the grasping tissue.

She gasped. Sharp tingling sensation shot through her. That keen pang only enhanced every other feeling boiling through her. Her teeth scraped over her lips.

Tremors shook her body as she fought to remain still when every nerve ending was screaming at her to move, to grab the satisfaction.

His fingers withdrew. A moment later, she felt the brush of his cock against her. Damon's shaft slowly pressed into her. She squirmed as the tissue stretched. The slight sting, combined with the delicious feeling of having him inside her, pushed her arousal to a higher peak. He groaned and his hips arched, driving his rod deeper into her rectum.

She moaned. Her nails scraped across Rath's shoulders, trying to pull her body up. She wanted them to move. Rath's lips brushed across her cheek and opened over her mouth just as a rumbling growl rolled through his chest. His fingers tightened on her hips. Rotating his hips, he ground against her. The friction shot through her but wasn't nearly enough.

Finally, she felt Damon's hips pressing against her buttocks. His hot breath brushed against her neck as he nuzzled her hair out of the way. Damon pulled her hips back and she felt Rath's cock sliding out of her. Her inner muscles clenched involuntarily, trying to hold on to the fullness of his thick shaft. Rath's hands tightened a little and he groaned. His hips jerked forward and his cock pushed back into her pussy. She felt a shiver shaking Damon's body as he pressed against her.

"So tight, hot and wet. Your pussy pulls at me as if it doesn't want to me to move." Rath's hot breath filtered through her hair and brushed over her ear. "But you want me to move, don't you? You need me to move."

"If you don't move, I'm going to move." Her teeth clenched. Her body sizzled with desire.

"How are you going to move? He's got your hips and I don't think he's going to let you go until he's come inside you at least once." Damon scraped his teeth over her neck.

She shivered. "You're driving me insane!"

"And we love it." Damon withdrew and rocked his hips back into her.

Held between them, she couldn't even move her hips. They surged against her, driving her higher with every stroke. She brushed her lips over Rath's cheek and mouth. His lips opened beneath hers and his tongue slipped between her lips. Their tongues met and dueled. Desperate, she sank into the kiss, pouring every bit of her passion into it. One of her hands lifted and tangled in his hair, holding his head still as she returned his ardor.

Her muscles tightened as a raging climax built. Feeling as if she'd be torn apart at any moment, her arms tightened. Heat and need built into a roiling storm. She tore her mouth away from Rath's and drew in gasping breaths. She teetered on the edge but couldn't go over. Her inner muscles clenched desperately around their cocks, grasping, reaching for just that extra bit of sensation.

"Please," she groaned. Her head tipped back against his shoulder as she tried to move. She rubbed her breasts against Rath's chest but fulfillment remained just out of reach.

Damon groaned and she felt his teeth graze the side of her neck. As Rath pulled back, Damon slipped his hand around to her front. His hand slid over her stomach and down to her pussy. A bolt of pleasure arched through her as his fingers brushed her clit. He flicked the bundle of nerves.

"Let go, *chatana*. We'll be right behind you. Come for us." Rath nipped at her full lower lip.

His hips fucked into her. Golden eyes burned and never left her face. She could feel the tension in his body as he moved against her. His lips compressed into a thin line as he continued driving into her.

The pulsing sensation tautened and then exploded. She screamed. Her nails sank into his shoulders as her legs tightened around his hips. Fire and bliss rolled over her. For a moment, the sheer intensity of the raging pleasure blocked out everything else.

Rath and Damon continued to thrust into her. Their grinding strokes grew frenzied as they both drew closer to their climax. Damon came first. His hands pulled her back against him as he drove deep one final time. His hot cum spurted into her as he jerked against her.

Rath's hips rocked into her. His lips pulled back, baring his lengthened canines. The sight of those teeth excited her. She tilted her head to the side, exposing her neck, asking for his bite. He pumped into her. She saw his head lower toward her shoulder but he jerked his head away from the exposed flesh. A low growl rumbled in his chest as he came. His eyes closed and his head tilted back. Jets of semen splashed into her as his hips pressed into hers. She clung to him, sated and little awed by the fact that both men were still standing after that orgasm. Her muscles felt like paste and she hadn't actually moved.

Damon slowly withdrew from her. His hand trailed over her buttocks before he stepped away from her. Rath didn't make any move to lower her to her feet. His arm hooked under her buttocks, holding her tight against him. He smiled down at her, the picture of arrogant male satisfaction.

"Let's go take a bath," Rath suggested, already turning toward the entrance to the bathing room.

His eyes wandered over her face. He seemed to be very relaxed and in an excellent mood now. Her lips lifted into a small smile. *Well, great sex would do that.* She was certainly happy.

Magic hummed inside her, just above a comfortable level. Not a surprise when she considered how hot they'd made her. Neither of them had bitten her, although it had been a close thing with Rath at the very last. The magic stirred her arousal, building the power even more. She could already feel her muscles loosening, preparing for another explosive round.

The thought of a bath with them and the sex that would follow immediately ignited a spark of interest. Oh, yes, that was just what she wanted. She tightened her legs around Rath's hips.

"What are you waiting for, my dragon? I'm ready for a bath now. Somehow, I've gotten all sweaty and you two could certainly use a dip." She drew a finger up the side of his neck.

Rath leaned down and drew his tongue along the right side of her neck. "I like making you sweaty. We'll have to see if we can do it again."

## Chapter Sixteen

Keira rubbed at the corner of her right eye. She stared at the dark shadows of what looked like a warehouse. She saw a row of casks to her right just behind a large wooden support beam holding a lantern. In front of her, a large number of huge crates had been stacked almost to the ceiling. The building was quiet and she didn't see any disturbance or destruction. It wasn't what she'd expected when she'd been pulled from bed with the words "There's been another attack". This just didn't fit with the last few attacks on cities.

Because she'd thought they could face immediate danger, she'd had her shield in place even before they'd left the cave. She didn't lower it. In spite of the lack of destruction, something didn't feel right about this scene. She felt her heartbeat kick into a higher rate. It was too perfect, too quiet. Awareness tingled through her.

Two dragons in human form came running around the corner but stopped when they saw who was standing there. The one slightly in front had blond hair with red streaks running through it. The other man was also blond but the streaks in his hair were blue. Both men probably hadn't even been released from training, but they'd received the earrings. They were very young. Their bodies didn't have the musculature of a mature dragon.

Balls of fire burned in their palms. Their hands slowly lowered to their side and the fire flickered and died. They had clearly expected to find something else when they came around that row of boxes.

Keira's suspicions rose higher. Now she was almost certain they weren't alone in this warehouse. She just had to find the dark wizard hiding here.

"Where are the *merdanons*?" Rath stepped forward and frowned as he loomed over the two young dragons. "We were told there were some near here."

"I don't know. Multiple malevolent pulses were felt and there is some destruction on the east side of the city but no *merdanons* or even minions have been found since the first engagement," the young dragon with the blue streaks explained. He looked around the storehouse as if trying to find something out of place.

Tingles ran up the palms of her hands, continuing up her arms, raising the hairs. She couldn't see anything to cause the reaction but she didn't question the cautioning instinct. It had saved her life too often in the past. Something was very wrong here. She knew without a doubt that she shouldn't leave this place without finding out what hid here.

"There doesn't seem to be any Dark Sorcery here now." Damon walked slowly around the warehouse.



Keira followed Damon and Rath followed her. She still didn't see anything but she could almost feel the weight of someone staring at her. She looked at her two men but they seemed totally unaware of the oppressive weight. If this was just her imagination working too much, she didn't want them to know.

"There will be other dragons and vampires here to help. We should go talk to them. They'll probably have more information." Rath's nostrils flared as he inhaled.

She smiled. The man and the dragon sometimes blended so seamlessly that she forgot that there was a big, fear-inspiring animal within him. That quick inhalation was a very potent reminder. He obviously didn't smell anything, because his muscles relaxed.

"I'm staying here." She put her hand on her hip, set her mouth in a straight line and prepared for a fight about it. They hadn't walked away from her since the sorcerer had revealed his intention to take her.

"You think so?" Rath raised a brow. "Just what are you planning to do here? It doesn't look like you'll get much fighting done."

She knew exactly what he thought she planned to do. Regardless of what he thought, she didn't plan to use the time away from them to escape from them. She didn't think saying it would convince him but there wasn't much else she could do.

"I'm not going to try to leave you. I...want to stay here." She shook her head and heaved a huge sigh of exasperation. *Vellos*, they were suspicious.

"And what are you going to do here without any *merdanons* to kill or wizards to battle?" Damon stepped forward and ran a hand up her arm.

"Just be here, stay here for a while. It's not like I'd be doing much while you're talking with the other dragons and vampires. I wouldn't be any help there. This is where I should be." She shrugged.

"Why should you be here? What do you think is going to happen here?" The vampire's eyes gleamed with challenge.

"I don't know what's going to happen, if anything will even happen. I'm just following my instincts." She grimaced and swept her hand wide. She had the feeling that if she left here it would be a very bad mistake and it could cost someone their life. "But you know this isn't normal, even for the wizard Gelain's attacks."

"You're right about it not being normal." Rath took a deep breath and his gold eyes locked on hers. He nodded slowly. "You can stay here but you'd better take care of yourself while we're gone, because I'm going to be a very upset dragon if you manage to get hurt."

She rolled her eyes. "Stop treating me as if this is my first battle."

"You're important to us. We're not going to let you pretend that you're just a comrade in battle." Rath's fingers gently touched her cheek.

"Go talk to your friends before the temptation to show you just how well I can take care of myself becomes too powerful to resist." She narrowed her eyes and made a shooing gesture with her right hand.

"Threats? Do you think you can back them up with action, *chatana*?" Damon dropped a kiss on her cheek and stepped over to stand beside Rath. His eyes flicked to the two dragons behind her. "Keep an eye on our lady."

She watched as a hazy black mist rose and surrounded them. A moment later, the black fog dissipated and Rath and Damon were gone. So that's what it looked like when Damon transported someone. She'd only ever seen it from the inside.

She turned and started to step forward to do a slow, solitary walkthrough of the building. The two young dragons stood in her way, just looking at her. She didn't know if they were waiting on her to do something or if they planned to just stand there for the rest of the day.

"Don't you two have something to do?" She paced over to a crate and leaned her hip against it. The last thing she needed was two overeager, inexperienced dragons on her heels.

"We were told to watch you. We won't let anything happen to you." The man with the blue-streaked hair folded his arms across his chest and kept his eyes on her as if he expected her to try to leave at that moment.

Great, just what she needed. Two suspicious men who didn't even seem to realize that she thought there was really something wrong. Heaving a big sigh, she pushed away from the crate. She'd never find out what had her instincts screaming if she stayed and argued with them. A slow walk through the warehouse should still draw out any enemies hiding inside the building. A wizard certainly wouldn't consider the two young dragons a threat. She hoped that arrogant supposition would carry over to her. It would make dealing with him much easier.

The two dragons fell into step behind her. In a way, having these two men trail after her was worse than being escorted by Rath or Damon. She never worried about Rath and Damon. They could take care of themselves. As for the two young dragons behind her, she had no idea what they could do or what limitations they had. Because of that, she was very aware of where they were at all times.

Nearing the end of one row, she slowly rounded the corner. The hair on her arms and the back of her neck rose again. Her palms tingled and this time she called her weapons to her. Something was here. She no longer had any doubt about that.

"What are you doing? There's no reason for you to have your swords now." One of the men touched her shoulder.

She didn't bother looking to see which one of them had spoken to her. "There's going to be a battle here. You'd better prepare yourself."

"Battle..." The blue-haired dragon moved up beside her, a puzzled look on his face. "How can you say there's going to be a battle? No one is here."

Cold laughter rang through the building. Keira tensed but waited. She didn't want to scare the man away by showing her power too early. The minion would show himself. She had no doubts that this was a lesser Dark Sorcerer. The attempt at ambush was part of the reason. That was a maneuver more likely to be used by a sorcerer of lower power. Most Dark Sorcerers had a high level of arrogance and were usually overconfident. It could be a more powerful sorcerer trying to end his mission quickly but she was ready should that be happening. What really convinced her that he wasn't a strong sorcerer was that he was still hiding even when there was no advantage to it.

"The latest battles must have really hurt your master. He must be terribly low on minions to send you here. Or maybe he wants to test the defenses. I can understand why he'd consider you expendable. You just don't make much of an impression." She ran her eyes up the narrow aisle created by the rows of boxes and barrels stacked nearly to the ceiling. *Where was that cowardly sorcerer?*

The boxes just in front of her exploded as a white bolt of energy slammed into them. The pieces of wood passed through the shield and fell to the floor but the magic hit and flared in a white curtain of energy. She shook her head and sighed. That had been easy. Usually it took some time to discover a Dark Sorcerer's flash point. All the Dark Sorcerers she'd faced had carried a grudge of some sort, felt slighted in some way.

"He sent me because I'm the one who's going to bring you back to him, witch. He knows my power and soon you will too." The sorcerer shimmered into visibility.

Keira felt her eyes widen. The silver cloak and red shirt and pants he wore marked him as one of Gelain's minions. He was younger than she'd expected, probably only a year or so out of training. Were all of Gelain's minions boys? She couldn't help wondering what had put a man of his age onto such a destructive path. With light skin and silver blond hair, he looked boyish and almost ethereal.

"You don't have even a hope of succeeding against me. These two near-fledglings could probably beat you. A high-powered vampire and dragon will be on their way here after that bolt of energy you just threw. Unless you escape now, your fate is sealed." She tapped her dagger against her thigh. A plan began to take form. If she could get him to do what she wanted, there might be a chance to finally end Gelain's destruction.

A red tide rushed up his pale face. "Your men are busy and will be for a while. These two weaklings won't be a problem for me. I'll get rid of them and then I'll be taking you with me in a very short time."

"You're forgetting one important factor." She smiled and shook her head. His inexperience was showing but she wasn't going to point it out to him again. The longer he ranted at her, the less time she had to fight him alone. She definitely didn't want Rath and Damon to get here before she was finished.

"I've forgotten nothing. The *merdanons* roaming the city will cause enough destruction to make my name legend. When I take you away, everyone will know who

has the real power.” He took a step forward and threw a ball of magic meant to sizzle anyone it hit.

Keira could actually hear the energy crackling on that orb. It slammed into her shield. A shower of silver and white sparks fell to the floor in front of her. She exhaled slowly and held on to her temper. *Why did they always make this hard?* And why did every wizard she met seem to believe she’d be easy to capture or kill? His conceit astounded her.

“You forget that I’m not some toy to be picked up and hauled to whoever wants me. I’m powerful even without my abilities as a *Tiria*.” She formed an arc of energy and hurled it toward the sorcerer.

She’d need a little luck to make her plan work. The battles and destruction caused by Gelain’s minions had begun to wear on Keira. To end it totally, they had to find the damn sorcerer but as far as she knew he never did any of the destruction himself. Discovering where he hid could take years if they didn’t make it happen.

This overconfident minor sorcerer might be just what they needed to finally end it. He could lead them to the source of all of the trouble. All she had to do was let him escape and tag him with a tracking spell.

Not that either plan would be easy. His overconfidence in his ability and his attitude could easily get him killed before he saw that there was no way he could win this battle. Especially when Rath and Damon arrived. The two younger dragons she could probably manage for a while as long as they didn’t think she was in danger. Rath and Damon would be different. They wouldn’t wait for an explanation. They’d just kill the foolish wizard.

“He wants you unharmed but he won’t mind if you’re a little hurt in the process. Make this easy and you won’t be in any pain. Give up now.” The sorcerer paced forward, gathering power in the palm of his hand.

Keira frowned and tried think of a way to end this quickly. She had to scare him without killing him. Hopefully, the wizard would see the truth before he used too much of his power. Once he turned to flee, she’d put the tracking spell on him. The magic pulse from the tunnel would mask her magic and he wouldn’t know he’d been tagged until it was too late.

She measured the distance between them even as he hurled the pulsing orb toward her. The Dark Sorcerer’s magic hit her shield and exploded into a blinding curtain of white. She grinned and drew her blade back. Before she could throw it, one of the dragons stepped up beside her and hurled a flaming ball of fire. It hit the Dark Sorcerer’s shield and he stumbled back. She swung her sword and magic flew from the tip. It landed just in front of the sorcerer and exploded, throwing him into the air and back. He sprawled on the floor near a stack of boxes.

She felt heat near her arm and looked over at the dragon. The blond with blue streaks had a flaming orb close enough to singe the hair on her arm. She frowned. “I

think Rath and Damon might mind if I get burned. Stick to straight magic. It won't burn the building down around us."

The Dark Sorcerer got to his feet and stumbled to the side. He leaned against a nearby box and put a hand to his head. Straightening away from the support, he took a slow step forward. He glared at her and slowly formed a bolt of energy.

"You'll pay for that. I'll make sure you howl with pain for months. You won't find any peace." He hurled the energy ball.

It crashed against her shield. She focused on her shield for a moment and was satisfied that it was strong enough to hold against more of that type of bolt. She could put more energy into it if needed.

The blue-haired dragon again stepped forward and this time he actually stepped in front of her shield. Cursing under her breath, she threw up a shield in front of the eager fool. She went around him and took the lead again. He tried to move in front again but this time she was ready and stepped to the side to block him. She waved him back and tossed a quick glare at him. He frowned at her, obviously unsure of what he should do when a witch wouldn't let him take the lead.

*Did they give lessons in arrogance to dragons from birth?* Pushing her irritation aside, she focused on the annoying sorcerer.

"I'd say you'll be dead in a few moments so I really doubt I have anything to worry about." She struggled to keep a smile pasted to her face. *When would this fool see that he should run?*

She tossed another stronger energy arc toward him. It hit the sorcerer's shield and knocked him back four steps. From the panicked look in his eyes, she knew that his shield was almost gone. He looked around and began edging back along the corridor of boxes and barrels.

Excitement bubbled through her. Finally. He was going to run. She summoned a bolt of energy just to give him a convincing send-off. She didn't want the annoying sorcerer wondering if he'd escaped too easily. After all of this aggravation, she didn't want to lose him by making him suspicious.

Hurling the roiling white-gold energy from the tip of her sword, she saw his shield fall in a flash of silver light. He spun as he summoned a portal. An energy bolt flew just over her shoulder and hit the Dark Sorcerer just before he took the last step forward and into the glowing oval.

"Vello, that went right past my head!" She whirled and narrowed her eyes at the two dragons behind her. She didn't know which one of them did it but if she knew for certain, she'd be tempted to fry his scaly hide. "What in the name of the Great Lady did you think you were doing?"

"Killing a Dark Sorcerer. That's what we do to them, you know, and dragons are the best at it in the land." A cocky smile curved the lips of the young man with blue streaks in his hair.

She wondered how much sorcerer-killing he'd do as a furry woodland creature.

"I had plans for that Dark Sorcerer. I wouldn't have waved you behind me if I wanted him dead. I would have just let you kill that annoying imbecile earlier." She clenched her fists. The muscles of her throat felt tight as she fought the urge to scream at him.

"And what were your plans for that sorcerer, Keira?" Rath's voice came from just behind her.

Hearing that soft warning tone surprised her even though she'd half expected them to arrive soon. Cursing, she closed her eyes. Opening them, she glared at the grinning men in front of her. This was their fault.

"It doesn't matter what they were now. He ruined them." She eyed the man with blue streaks in his hair. He didn't even have the sense to look scared. She wanted to blast him.

A large hand cupped her shoulder and turned her to face a very angry dragon and a quietly furious vampire.

"It matters if you were playing with that Dark Sorcerer instead of getting the job done and moving on." Damon ground out from between clenched teeth.

"Don't even start trying to lecture me about how to fight. He was so weak even those fledglings could have taken care of him. I was in no danger." She rolled her eyes.

She knew that one would be coming. The two men were overprotective in the extreme.

Rath glowered at her, a growl rolling in the back of his throat. "If the sorcerer was so minor, you could have helped others fight elsewhere. Who held the shields?" His eyes cut to the two young dragons when she remained silent.

"She held the shields. Even when he stepped in front of her, she threw up a shield to protect him. She did most of the work." The blond man with red streaks in his hair stepped forward and stood only an arm's length away from her.

She glared at him but the man just smiled.

"How many times did the sorcerer's magic hit her shield before the sorcerer was killed?" Rath's eyes didn't leave her as he waited for his answer.

She crossed her arms over her chest and decided to glare at him. At least he knew she was capable of doing some damage. The little lizards at her side didn't seem to be at all fazed by the possibility of any retaliation by her.

"Her shield was hit maybe three times, not many. She kept him talking for a while, telling him he was going to die." The blond with blue streaks stepped a little ahead of the blond next to her.

A rumbling growl rolled through the warehouse. Keira found it sexy even as she knew that it was a sign of Rath's anger.

"Why were you playing with the man? You could have taken him out before he'd even leveled two orbs at you. What was your plan?" The muscles along Rath's jaw clenched and his hands landed on his hips.

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't act like I'm some raw recruit who needs to be reprimanded. I didn't put myself at risk. I had everything under control."

He growled again and this time she saw a few of the barrels shake from the low reverberating noise. She saw a flash of silver and gold in his eyes and frowned. *What was that?*

"There's still work to be done here. That minor sorcerer isn't the only one in the city and we still have plenty of *merdanons* to take down. This will have to wait." Damon stepped just in front of Rath.

"We'll get to that after I hear her plan." Rath stepped up beside Damon and folded his arms across his chest. Very obviously, he wasn't moving until he got his way.

"I wanted to find the Master Dark Sorcerer. You know, Gelain, who's been causing all this misery. I was going to let the minor sorcerer escape and tag him with a tracking spell," she said as she looked into his eyes. She didn't try to lie or soften the truth. The dragon wasn't going to let the matter rest.

Rath closed his eyes and took a long, slow, deep breath. For a moment, she could practically see the tension pulsing off him. When he opened his eyes, he had himself under control again but still wasn't happy.

"Let's go." Damon stepped forward and wrapped his hand around her upper arm. Leaning close to her, he whispered, "You came close to drawing the beast with that stunt."

It would have been worth it if she'd managed to tag that sorcerer. But she didn't say that out loud. Not with that grim-eyed dragon still staring at her. Arguing wouldn't get them anywhere and they still had work to do.

"No more playing with the Dark Sorcerers. If you get a chance to stop him, you take it. There won't be any gambling on any plans." Rath's hand sliced through the air.

She clenched her jaw and drew in a few calming breaths. That hadn't been a game of any sort. How could he think that she'd just been amusing herself? Once this was finished, she'd explain her plan until he understood what she'd been trying to do. Damon was just as bad. His reference to a "stunt" still infuriated her. As if she'd tried some reckless ploy in a bid to grab a huge amount of glory.

"The sorcerers are on the other side of the city. We have a huge number of *merdanons* to thin." Damon tugged her out of the warehouse.

Keira forced away the urge to continue the argument with Rath. Damon was right. They did have work to do and that had to come before making Rath understand why she'd tried to tag that Dark Sorcerer. It was time to join the battle.

## Chapter Seventeen

For a while, everything almost seemed normal. Almost being the key word. Rath and Damon kept a watchful eye on her and generally sent her hard looks if she even hesitated to join in the battle. That only reignited the flames of her anger over their assumptions and their lack of faith. Not only did they constantly watch her, one of them was always at her side. Since they were still in the middle of battle, this wasn't the time to deal with those two arrogant men.

When Rath left to aid another dragon, she breathed a sigh of relief. She could handle one man much more easily than she could both of them. She paced slowly beside Damon as they moved down the street.

She could see the eerie flicker of flames in the shell of what had once been a home just ahead of them. One cream-colored wall had a gaping hole in it and another had been completely demolished. The tiled roof had buckled inward and part of it had completely fallen into the ruined building. Chunks of rock and dark red tile littered the brown stone-paved street.

Just on this street, they'd faced two *merdanons* but more were in the area somewhere. Damon sensed them and Keira felt again that strange sensation in her hands that traveled up her arms. She was coming to recognize that it was a warning of sorts that there was danger in the area. Now they just had to find the beast.

Keira strengthened the shield around them. She had no idea if the creature was in front of them or behind them but she wouldn't leave any area vulnerable to attack. Her eyes swept the street. Nothing moved. The dark shadows remained still. Only the slight crackle of flames and the soft crunch of their steps on the street reached her ears. Where were the *merdanons* and why were they waiting? Unless they were in close contact with a Dark Sorcerer, *merdanons* tended to be very brute-like. She couldn't tell if even a minor sorcerer was in the area.

"Do you want to see Rath's second form? You really pushed him close to the edge this time. I think this time you came even closer than when you played your little bondage game." Damon glanced over at her.

She rolled her eyes. He obviously couldn't resist pressing the issue. She'd thought that he'd at least wait until the battle was finished.

"You make it sound as if I intended to anger him, as if that was my one purpose. I didn't even think about it," she told him through teeth clenched so tight her jaw ached.

Their reactions hadn't been important at the time. She'd only wanted to find a way to stop the destruction.



"Then you should have. When you place yourself in danger, we're definitely going to react." Damon's voice hardened but he didn't look at her.

"I was only trying to find a way to end our battles with this Master Sorcerer. You know he's caused us more than enough trouble. Look at what his minions do now." She swept her hand in a wide arc, indicating the destruction all around them.

"We'll find him but you don't take foolish chances while we're doing it. If you got hurt..." His mouth tightened and he slowly shook his head.

"This way is too slow. He's destroying too many lives while we wait and search for some clue to his location." She shifted her shoulders, trying to ease away some of the gathering tension.

"Why are you letting your impatience rule you now? It hasn't happened before. You've fought Dark Sorcerers before." He frowned and shot a puzzled look toward her.

"I've fought them before but I've never been so...involved before. I moved around too much to see the cost of waiting and watching. I didn't see all the destruction." She grimaced as she thought about the death and destruction wrought in Gelain's name. So many lives ruined because of a greedy man. She wanted this to end before any others were hurt.

"Ah, I understand now but rushing in can get just as many people hurt." He reached out and brushed his fingers against hers.

An easy thing for him to say but finding the patience was almost impossible especially when she had proof of the damage the Dark Sorcerers caused right in front of her. She knew that this destruction wasn't the extent of Gelain's destruction. He probably held witches captive, using their magic to fuel his schemes.

"If my way is too dangerous for you two, then you think of a plan," she offered in a tight, very controlled voice. He could either be helpful or give her plan a chance.

She turned her head to look at him, just for a moment to see his reaction. A cracking sound just to her right brought her head back around in time to see the wall tumbling toward her. She gasped and lurched to the left, trying to get out of the way.

She didn't quite make it. Her shield only deflected magic. It didn't even slow the falling stones. Her eyes rounded. Terror tightened her muscles and her senses heightened. She managed only a horrified "No!" before a chunk of stone hit her. Blinding agony seared through her arm and then darkness rushed over her.

Damon's eyes swung toward Keira as he heard a loud splintering crackle. Her scream echoed in his ears as the stone hit her. He dived toward the pile of rubble where he'd last seen her. She couldn't die. Fear and desperation twisted through him. A sick feeling tightened his gut and he tasted metal in his mouth. He couldn't lose her. Not now. Keira was his witch, their *Tiria*. No one, not even death, would take her away from them.

He tore the stones away from her fallen form even as he threw up a shield to protect them both. Although the intensity of his emotion surprised him, he couldn't think beyond finding her alive. The hope, the prayer, repeated in his mind as he began searching. He could only see a bit of her hair. The golden strands spilled across the dark stone pavement and rocks covered her. He heaved the rocks away from her, clearing her head in only a few moments. A bleeding gash slashed across her forehead and some scrapes trailed down her cheeks. He brushed his fingers over her lips. Relief flowed through him and his tense muscles relaxed when he felt the warm gust of her breath against her skin. *She is alive.*

He moved the rest of the rocks off her quickly. Her arm lay at an odd angle, broken by the falling stone. He didn't know the full extent of her injuries yet. She'd probably be covered in bruises. All that mattered was that she was alive and he could heal her. She'd live.

A flash of light and a loud sizzling sound drew his attention to the right. Beyond his shield, a *merdanon* roared in rage. It threw itself at the shield. Sparks flew off the barrier as the beast hit. The *merdanon* flew backward and sprawled on the cobbled street. It rolled to its feet and yelled again.

The shield would hold but he'd need help for a little while. Healing Keira would take time and he couldn't focus on the beast and her at the same time. As well, he didn't want the *merdanon* drawing the attention of the remaining Dark Sorcerer while Keira was injured. He tried contacting the vampires within the city first but all of them were actively engaged in battle. He knew that there was a dragon in the sky, trying to locate the final minion within the city. He tossed a ball of magic into the air. It soared straight up and exploded in the sky directly above him. The lingering traces glittered as they floated downward in sparkling silver trails, marking his location.

He heard a low trumpeting call, the dragon's acknowledgement that he'd seen the signal. A moment later, a blast of fire seared the *merdanon* still testing the shield. Only after the *merdanon* stopped moving did the dragon land in front of them. Damon glanced up just as the brown dragon with green stripes transformed into human form. A brown-haired man stood just outside the shield.

"Grimlan's balls, is she all right? She's alive?" The dragon's jaw dropped and a frown of concern crossed his face.

"She's alive. I'm going to heal her and she'll be fine." Damon pressed a hand to her stomach and chest. That was where most of the damage had occurred. He could feel the heat as her own magic tried to repair the injury. The rocks had struck her hard here. They'd broken some ribs and caused some internal damage.

The dragon exhaled noisily. "That's wonderful. She really means a lot to Rath. I don't know what he'd do if she..."

"She's essential to both of us. We're not going to lose her." Damon kept his attention on healing Keira. The dragon could take care of any *merdanons* that attacked them.

A loud roar brought Damon's head up sharply. His already fast heartbeat slammed into a racing pace. He had to clamp his hands over his ears as the dragon continued to bellow. When the booming call finally stopped echoing through the narrow street, Damon pulled his hands away from his ears and glared at the dragon.

"What are you doing? Why did you just make all of that noise?" Damon took a deep breath. He'd never been able to tell much from the various growls and roars of a dragon, although he knew each sound had a clear meaning.

"I was calling Rath. He should be here with his lady. He'll want to be here to make sure she'll be okay." The dragon looked skyward. "He'll be pissed if he finds out she was hurt and you didn't call him immediately."

Damon silently cursed the interfering dragon. He'd been going to call Rath after he'd woken Keira and cleaned away all of the blood from her body. Rath's mood had been chancy enough when he'd left them. This would probably put him over the edge. Rath would never hurt either him or Keira even when he was absolutely furious. That didn't mean that either of them would be comfortable in the near future. It would take the dragon a while to get over this close call. And Rath's first reaction would probably be anger that she'd gotten hurt in the first place. Damon shook his head and a wry grin twisted his lips. The dragon wasn't alone. It would take him some time to recover from nearly losing her too. Calming the dragon would take even more time.

Damon kept healing Keira. He wanted the worst of the injuries gone before their dragon arrived and saw them. That might help a little. He heard the flapping of large wings overhead and knew that his time was running out. Rath had arrived. The dragon outside the shield cleared a path and moved out of the way.

Rath's large black body swept into the almost too-narrow, building-lined street. He changed forms and turned toward them. The moment he saw Keira's still body on the ground, he tensed and sprang forward. Damon barely had time to dissolve the shield before Rath barreled into it. He saw Rath's concern and the anger in the hard lines of his face.

"What happened?" Rath knelt beside him. The fingers he touched lightly to Keira's neck shook with the strength of the emotion running through him.

"The wall collapsed and she was hit by it as it fell." Damon finished the last of the healing and set about slowly waking her up.

"More than hit by the amount of healing you had to do." Rath stroked her cheek. "And the amount of blood in her hair and on the ground."

Damon was relieved to see him touching her. It would settle the beast a bit, reassure him. He might be angry but the concern would stop the dragon from taking over and appearing.

Damon shrugged. Now was not the time to give Rath a complete list of Keira's injuries. After the battle was finished, after Rath had calmed from the battle and this incident, Damon would tell him about her injuries. He didn't need the beast ruling Rath at the moment.

Keira opened her eyes slowly and blinked quickly a few times. A frown pulled her lips down. "Ugh...am I hurt badly? I remember the wall coming at me and I couldn't get out of the way."

"I healed you. You're not hurt anymore. If you're finished lazing around for the night, we still have work to do in this city." Damon smiled down at her, relieved to see her eyes open again.

She sat up and slowly shook her head at him. A small smile pulled at the corners of her lips. "A wall falls on me and I don't even get the night off battling. Great Lady, you two are merciless taskmasters."

Damon threaded a hand into her golden hair and tugged lightly as he felt a smile curve his lips in response to her good humor. "Now don't whine. I thought you were above that sort of thing."

Her brows lowered and she glared at him. She started to get up and Rath's arm slipped around her, drawing her to her feet as he stood. She leaned into Rath and lowered her head to his hard chest. For a moment she stroked her fingers up his side and seemed to be reveling in the closeness and the comfort of his arms. She reluctantly pushed away from him and straightened.

"Well, since we have so much to do tonight, let's get this battle finished." Her expression turned serious. "Maybe we can get this done without anyone charring another *merdanon*. That stink is awful."

Rath took position on her right and Damon walked over to her left. Other than a sharp look at both of them, she didn't say a word or do anything. From that non-reaction on an issue that she'd previously raged about, Damon suspected that she'd seen the tension in Rath's body.

## Chapter Eighteen

Keira stalked away from the two men the moment they were safe in their cavern home. Anger pulsed within her but she tried to keep it contained. After building throughout the night, it wasn't easy. The wild emotion swirled and grew inside her and controlling it had only grown more difficult as arousal flooded her body with each addition of power.

They'd only encountered *merdanons* as they walked through the streets. She had taken the energy of those they'd encountered. But that was all she'd done. She hadn't been involved in any way with the battles. It certainly hadn't been her choice. She hadn't gotten the chance to throw even a single energy arc. Rath had kept her firmly in back of him whenever the large magical constructs had appeared.

She hadn't argued or pushed her way to the front, although she'd wanted to do it. But this time, she held back. She'd almost been able to feel the feral menace rolling off Rath. His yellow eyes had glittered, shot with silver and gold during the battle. He didn't seem as tense now. She knew his anger had lessened a bit but she didn't know how long she could hold hers. As angry as she was, she really didn't want to see Rath in the ultra-dominant mode that Damon had described that day in the forest. Not yet. Rath's normal moods still gave her a few problems.

He'd started lecturing her around the time they'd met their fourth *merdanon*. She'd done her best to appear as if she was paying attention to the long list of rules he'd rattled off. Most of the time she'd tuned him out and tried to think about something else. Luckily, his attention had been on the street in front of him and not on her. He wouldn't have been so calm if he'd seen her roll her eyes and stare off into space during his rant. Tomorrow, she'd tell him exactly what she thought about his rules and where he could shove them. One accident didn't mean that she couldn't take care of herself. She didn't intend to let him get away with ordering her around like that on a regular basis.

"Didn't I tell you? She hasn't been listening at all." Rath's growl broke into her furious plans.

Her head snapped up and she found him standing across from her with his hands planted on his hips. She frowned when she thought she saw a smile curving his lips. She blinked and his face was once more an expressionless mask. Keira shook her head and decided that she'd imagined it. He couldn't have been smiling. He was still angry. The growl in his voice was proof of that.

Taking a deep breath, she reached for her patience. "What wasn't I listening to? Lady, Rath, I need a bath and some rest, in that order. It's been a long night. We're home and I can relax. Of course my mind wandered."

"You might need a bath. You're a little dusty and you need to rinse out your hair but I don't think sleep is going to come as easily as you expect. Before you sleep, you're going to need to be fucked and some of that power drained. I imagine the arousal is playing hell with your concentration." He stepped forward and brushed a hand over a strand of blonde hair on her cheek.

She looked up, surprised by the amusement lurking in his voice. He seemed a little more relaxed. She vaguely wondered when that transformation had happened. All through the battle, his face had been carved in lines of tension. The scar on his left cheek had been white, standing out in glaring relief against his golden tanned skin.

"I'm going to take a bath." She needed some distance. Now. She had no idea how to deal with him and this sudden change in mood. A little time alone might even settle the bubbling emotions warring inside her.

She whirled and stalked to the large bathing chamber. Throwing up a privacy shield after she entered, she began tearing off her clothing, eager to get into the tub. She took a moment and looked at the reflective surface of the water. She really wanted her bottle of scented oil but she wasn't going out there to get it. A brief thought and a small amount of power brought it to her hand. She poured a little of the sweetly scented stuff into the water. She lowered herself into the warm water just as the privacy shield across the door dissolved in a single flash of light.

"Now that was rude of you, *chatana*. We want a bath too," Damon admonished with a wide smile on his face.

He strolled into the room. Rath followed a step behind him. The dragon raised an arrogant eyebrow at her. She rolled her eyes, sank beneath the water and scrubbed at her hair to remove the lingering traces of blood. Surfacing, she ran her hands through her wet hair and pushed it back away from her face. She relaxed back against the rim of the tub. The water rose to her shoulders as she let her body sink a little deeper. She cut her eyes over to where they were undressing.

"Be my guest but I scented the water with *esana* oil. You two will smell really sweet if you get into this water with me." She smiled at the thought of both men smelling like that delicate blue flower.

Her eyes roved appreciatively over the hard bodies displayed in front of her as she waited for their move. Rath's golden skin gleamed in the light. As she watched she saw the muscles on his chest lift and ripple. His forearms tightened, the bulges from the muscles become even more pronounced. She looked up and saw him watching her. The man was flexing and preening for her. His hand clasped his cock and stroked the already erect shaft. Her mouth went dry and desire clawed at her.

He walked over to the edge of the tub. Kneeling at the edge just to her right, he drew his fingers across her lips. The urge to open her mouth and suck at those fingers was almost overwhelming.

"And you think that a simple dose of fragrant oil is going to stop us from joining you in that water? Removing it is a child's spell," he boasted.

"Perhaps I want the water scented." She tilted her head to the side and watched with interest as Damon stretched his arms above his head. The muscles in his abdomen tightened and moved. His thick cock bobbed a little with the movement. She loved watching him, the way his body moved.

They stood at the edge of the water. With a wave of his hand, Damon cast a spell. The water rippled. As sensitive as she was right now, she felt that magic all over her body. Both men stepped down into the water and moved to sit beside her.

"You know, this is a huge tub. There's more than enough room for all of us to have some space. We don't have to be crowded together." She tossed a narrow-eyed look at Rath when his hand slid up her thigh.

"Shh, just lean back against the edge of the tub and relax. You know an excess of power always makes you grumpy. We'll take care of that for you." Damon's fingers stroked along her neck.

That remark almost ignited her chancy temper. She frowned and shot a pointed look at them. "A quiet, uninterrupted bath would have done wonders for my mood."

"This will do even more for it." Rath's lips slid over hers in a brief caress. She felt the slight scrape of his teeth against her lower lip.

Now that she was very interested in. Her hand slid up his chest to his shoulder. Her mouth opened hungrily under his. Tugging him closer, she eagerly tangled her tongue with his, savoring his flavor.

Damon's fingers flicked across her nipples. He leaned close and nipped at her shoulder. When he tugged at her nipples, she moaned. Her back arched, thrusting the swollen mounds into his hands. She wanted more than that playful tug. Her mind readily supplied memories of the feel of his mouth on her, drawing her flesh deep into his mouth.

Rath's hand slid down her stomach to her pussy. She widened her thighs when she felt his fingers against her labia. His fingers parted the plump lips and stroked over her clit. Moving in slow, maddening circles, his touch drove her need higher. Desperate to touch and be touched, she reached out and curled her fingers around his cock.

He pulled back and shook his head. "No, you're in no shape to have either of us, not to mention both of us, heaving over you."

"Then you can heave under me." She nipped at the tender flesh just under his jaw. They thought she was in a bad mood now. Just let them try to slither out of making love to her tonight and she'd show them just how bad her attitude could get. They'd gotten her interested. Now they could pay the price.

"You could still be bruised from the wall landing on you." Damon's hand stroked soothingly up her ribs.

"I'm not bruised. Don't you think I would know? I don't have any aches and pains." She rose and straddled Rath's hips. Even if she did have a few minor aches, at this point, they wouldn't hold her back. She grabbed one of his wrists and settled his palm on her breast.

His fingers closed over the nipple. She could feel his shaft pressing against her swollen labia. Sweet sensation arrowed straight to her pussy. The inner walls clenched, emphasizing the emptiness when what she craved was so close. She reached between them and positioned his cock at her aching entrance.

"Give me what I want, Rath." She feathered kisses over his lips as she slowly lowered herself onto his thick shaft.

His hands slid down and cupped her buttocks but he didn't lift her off him. His lips tightened as her pussy clenched around his cock. A moan tore from his lips as she slowly rose over him. His hands flexed and kneaded the rounded flesh as she descended again. Nipping at his lips, she slowly rose until only the rounded head remained inside her.

"You're really not hurting?" he asked in a harsh, gravelly tone. His hands firmed and held her just as she was, not letting her descend again.

She frowned. Arrogant men. She knew what she was feeling. She didn't need them to watch over her every moment. There wasn't any pain or any reason for them to hold back.

"No, you stubborn dragon. Are you going to cooperate or am I going to have to try my luck with the vampire?" She shot a significant glance to where Damon waited a small distance away from them.

"You can have him after I have you." Rath's head lowered and nuzzled the hair away from her neck. "I want you to show me how much you need me."

A slow smile pulled at her lips as his grip relaxed and she sank down onto his cock. Her inner muscles contracted and the sense of fullness increased. It felt so good and she wanted him so much.

She rode him slowly at first, enjoying the gradual tightening of her muscles inside her. Hands suddenly covered her breasts. Slightly calloused fingers brushed over her hard nipples. Her eyes closed as she continued to move on Rath. Sharp pleasure pierced through her as those strong male fingers plucked at the tight nubs. A cry of need tore from her lips and her hips slammed downward.

She barely had the ability to figure out where the extra pair of hands came from. Rath's big palms still cupped her ass, moving her on his hard length. It took her mind a moment to realize that Damon had tired of just watching. She shivered as Rath's hips pumped up against hers.

"Lady!" Her head arched back as she rocked against him.

"Faster," Rath growled. His lips pulled back, revealing his sharp fangs. His hands moved to her waist and urged her hips up again.

Keira was in agreement with that demand. She plunged down and his hips met hers. One of his hands left her buttocks and tangled in her hair. He tugged her close. Angling her head to expose her neck, he drew his tongue across the strong muscle at the base.



A tremor rolled through her body. It was too much. Anticipation mixed with rioting desire. The orgasm burst inside her, hot and intense. It consumed her, blinding her to everything except pure sharp sensation.

He rocked her body against him, his hips punching up against hers. His teeth sank into the muscle where her neck met her shoulder. A flash of pain mixed with the pleasure still rolling over her. His semen splashed into her in hot pulses and a growl rumbled against her skin.

She sprawled against his chest as she felt him drawing the power from her. His tongue and lips moved over the bite and power continued to flow from her. She heard him swallowing and she knew that he wasn't taking blood. Too soon, his lips left her neck. Magic still rioted through her at an uncomfortably high level.

Keira moaned in disapproval as he lifted her away from him. She barely got her feet under her before he released her. Just catching herself before she went underwater in the deeper area away from the sitting ledge, she glared at him. Rising to her full height, she planted her hands on her hips.

"That deserves..." She took a threatening step toward him.

Before she could finish her threat, Damon stepped between them.

"You're still grumpy. Your power must still be much too high." Damon's arms swept around her and pulled her into his arms. "Good, because I'm very hungry." His teeth scraped over her neck, before he stepped around her. His muscled body pressed against her back.

A shiver ripped through her body. Her mind immediately supplied memories of the exquisite sensations of his lovemaking. Her body softened and she leaned back against him. She smiled and focused on him, letting Rath's offenses slip to the back of her mind.

"But first, you should drink this. Someone forgot to give it to you before he bit you." One of Damon's hands lifted and opened just in front of her. He held a small vial.

She didn't have to ask what the vial was for. The moment she saw it she remembered that a dragon bite carried side effects if not treated. Narrowing her eyes on the grinning dragon in front of her, she gulped the thick liquid. At least, the taste wasn't gag-inducing. She tossed the empty container to Rath. Slowly and lightly using her nails, she slid her hand along Damon's thigh.

"That feels good. Feel free to let your hands roam. Do you want to ride me or can I play this time?" Damon's tongue traced over her collarbone.

"Are you going to tease or please? If you're going to play one of your long teasing games then I'll ride you. I'm not in the mood for delayed satisfaction tonight. If you're ready to give us both pleasure, then I'll put myself in your hands." She leaned into him and slowly arched into his touch. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw him smile.

"I'll please you, Keira," he assured her.

Something about the tilt of his mouth made her suspect that he was planning something very wicked. A thrill of anticipation curled through her body. She was more than ready for wicked.

His hand smoothed over her stomach and down between her thighs. "Do you know how beautiful you looked as you rode him?"

She drew in a rasping breath as his fingers parted her labia. They slid down brushing over her clit. He stroked back and forth tormenting her with the slow, light touch.

"And your expression—by the blood, you looked fierce and eager." He nibbled his way up the column of her throat and drew her earlobe between his lips.

She moaned and tipped her head to the side to give him better access.

"Watching you made me ache and I need to see you as you come." His hips rolled against hers and his cock rubbed against her ass.

"Going to be a little hard in our present position, isn't it?" She couldn't resist teasing him a little.

Deliberately, she pressed back into him and rotated her hips. Her buttocks rubbed against his shaft. She felt Damon's growl against the side of her neck. His arms tightened around her, holding her to him. She smiled and laughed softly with triumph.

"I know a perfect position for you, you tease. That will have to wait until after I've had you. The heat of your body, the soft slide of your skin against mine is driving me slowly insane." His fangs scraped over her neck.

He lifted her and carried her two steps. As he lowered her to her feet, her toes brushed against the seating ledge ringing the tub. She turned to face him and looped her arms around his waist. She felt a wave of magic behind her. He urged her back. Instead of bumping against the seating ledge, she found nothing but more water. He stepped forward, crowding her back.

Her buttocks brushed against the edge of the tub. His hands fastened around her waist and lifted her onto the cool rim. She arched as the cold stone pressed against her buttocks. He stepped forward widening her thighs and hampering her efforts to slide off that chilly edging.

"Lie back, *chatana*." His hands traced up her sides, following every curve.

She leaned back, slowly lowering her body to the smooth stone. She tensed. Her breath hissed through her teeth as the chill of the rock sent prickles racing over her skin. Her thighs tightened around his hips. One of her hands slid up and tangled in his hair. The other slid across his back, relishing the shift of his muscles beneath his skin.

"That's beautiful," he said. His eyes were locked on her breasts. He fitted his shaft to her slit and slowly pushed into her.

Her channel stretched around his rigid length. He leaned down and his mouth closed around her nipple. His hips pumped against her in a slow rhythm. The fiery heat flared, growing hotter with each drawing pull of his lips and every stroke of his cock.

Dragging in a panting breath, she arched. Her nails sank into his back. Her magic boiled inside her, responding to the high arousal, growing even more.

His mouth worked on her breast. Her body tightened. Her fingers clenched in his hair, trying to hold his lips to her aching breast as he drew back. She didn't want to lose that delicious tugging sensation. Her hips lifted against his. One of his hands slipped under her and lifted her hips higher against him.

The change in position sent flaring pleasure ripping through her. The intense sensation flooded her. Her body bowed, arching into his. She screamed his name, clinging to him as his hips drove against hers.

His head lowered and his teeth scraped over her neck a moment before they sank into her flesh. He drank deep as he came. His hot semen pumped into her as he continued to move against her. Tremors shook his body.

## Chapter Nineteen

It was much later before they finally managed to get around to any serious talking. As much as she hated to admit it, she had been in a better mood after they'd taken some of the power. They'd had a long leisurely bath. Now all of three of them lounged comfortably in front of the fire.

Keira leaned against Rath's chest, her head nestled on his shoulder. She could feel the heat from his body even through the thin blue thigh-length shirt she'd pulled on after her bath. Her legs draped over Damon's lap. His talented fingers massaged her feet. She felt relaxed and just a little sleepy. All in all, it had been a very long day.

Her eyes went to Damon's bare chest. Just like Rath, he hadn't put any clothes on after getting out of the water. Both men had given her a considering look when she'd pulled on a shirt, as if she'd just thrown a challenge at them.

"You appear calm now and very happy." Damon's thumb worked in circles on her instep.

She just smiled.

"And didn't you just love how demanding she was?" Rath's fingers traced tiny circles over her stomach through the light cloth.

Damon nodded. "We'll have to make sure she gets that way again."

*Make sure.* Keira narrowed her eyes as she stared down the length of the couch at him. She stiffened, trying to pull away from them. They couldn't be saying that they'd planned to make her angry. She'd already been that way during the battle. Her mood hadn't changed because of some devious plot of theirs. They'd been overprotective and arrogant for most of the night and the lecturing had infuriated her.

"What's the matter, Keira? Is the magic still too high?" Damon asked.

"No, my magic is not too high." At this moment, she wouldn't have told them if it was. She tried to wriggle free of Rath's hold but his arms just tightened around her. "It's you two. You're talking as if you planned the whole night."

"Not planned actually but we did take advantage of the fact that you were aroused and in a reckless, angry mood." Rath rumbled in a distinctly smug tone.

"Took advantage..." She pushed a hand against the cushion and levered up enough to turn and look at him.

"Umhmm and you ignited with only a little incitement. I love it when you're fierce." He tugged her back against him and his chin brushed against her hair as he held her close.

"This from the man who got upset when I tried a little bondage." She shook her head slowly.

"You pushed too far. If you'd played and then satisfied me, there would have been no problem but you stirred the dragon and there are consequences, *chatana*." Rath ruffled her hair, all contented, playful male at the moment.

"And so why did you push me tonight? And I'm still not convinced that this was part of some male plan to make me angrier and have sex with you." She folded her arms across her chest and waited for the answer.

"So that you'd know that we didn't mind it when you did want to get aggressive, of course. Whether you remember our limits or not is up to you," Damon said. He drew his finger up her instep.

She giggled and tried to pull her foot away from that tickling finger. He held on and laughed at her wriggling efforts. With a smile, he went back to massaging her feet.

"Now you can explain your plans to let that sorcerer escape." Damon's fingers rubbed in circles on the pad of her foot.

She felt Rath tense behind her and his arms tightened around her. Even though she'd known they would talk about it, she hadn't expected to do this with them so close. Damn vampire, he could at least have let her do this from across the room.

"He's more likely to stay calm while you tell your story if you're in his arms." Damon raised his brows.

Her eyes widened. At times, she was almost certain that he could read her mind. That wasn't a vamp ability but sometimes, his guesses were uncannily accurate. Rath's palm slipped under the long blue shirt. His hand settled on her stomach and remained there as if he just wanted to feel the warmth of her skin.

"I already told you about it. You both nearly exploded when I did." She exhaled loudly and put her hand over Rath's. It wouldn't prevent him from exploring but she might be able to limit his range.

"We were in the middle of a battle. We weren't exactly calm in the first place. Finding out you'd endangered your life for some scheme you hadn't even bothered to discuss with us..." Rath's breath feathered over the top of her head.

"I didn't risk my life." She lunged upward and away from his body but he hauled her back. Gritting her teeth, she sat tensely against him. "That was a minor sorcerer. Dealing with him solves nothing. The Master Dark Sorcerer, this Gelain, will find others to replace him. Killing him gained us no reprieve."

"So your plan was to track the minor sorcerer to the Dark Sorcerer's lair and then kill him all by yourself." Damon's fingers rubbed along the tight muscles of her inner calf.

"You're not even crediting me with having a little intelligence. Yes, I was going to track the sorcerer when he left but I would never have taken on an unknown dangerous situation alone if I had a choice." She glared at him.

"So what would you have done?" Rath's hand brushed against her neck as he pushed her hair to the side.

Keira took a deep breath. She knew he wouldn't hurt her but she couldn't help feeling just a little vulnerable. She remembered just how angry he'd been.

"I would have called to you, told you of his location. Then we could have gathered others to help us take the sorcerer. When we went after him, we'd have the advantage. He's not going to face you unless you confront him." She rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the tension in the bunched muscles.

"Why are you so determined to defeat this Dark Sorcerer now, not waiting to catch him when he makes a mistake?" Rath captured her hand and held it between his.

"He's targeting you." Her jaw clenched. She wasn't going to lose them to any Dark Sorcerer.

"No, he's not. He's after you." Rath leaned to the side so that he could see her face and she could see his.

From the frown and the doubt she could read in his eyes, she could tell he didn't believe her.

"Those traps are set specifically to catch and harm dragons. He's attacking cities affiliated with dragons and vampires, sending *merdanons* to cause as much destruction as possible. You can't deny that." She frowned and drew in a deep breath. Somehow she'd make them see the truth.

"That is nothing new. This Dark Sorcerer has set traps and attacked cities for a long time." Rath shook his head and leaned back against the couch.

"Because he's been succeeding in terrorizing this region for a long time. Other Dark Sorcerers don't do that. They don't challenge their strongest enemies. This wizard has grown so confident that he'll never be caught. He even attacks cities with numerous dragons and vampires in residence." She slammed her palm down on the couch, narrowly missing Rath's thigh. Their blindness infuriated her.

"We'll catch him." Damon said and shrugged with apparent unconcern.

"Arghh!" She threw out her hands. She didn't know how to make them see that they were in danger. Every time they went into battle, the sorcerer threw new tricks at them. The threat only grew as the days passed, it didn't lessen.

"Don't worry. Nothing's going to happen to you." Damon's fingers tickled the back of her knee.

She drew in a sharp breath and wriggled but stayed focused on the issue. He missed the point or maybe he just refused to see it. She blinked as realization struck her suddenly. Just as she wasn't worried about her safety they weren't worried about theirs. It was her safety that concerned them. Maybe she could gain their attention.

"Will I be safe? For how long? He seems determined to get me but he's not going to come after me himself. How long will it be before he finds something that works? I don't want to lose either of you." She bit her lip as emotion welled inside her.

"He's not going to touch you." Rath's arms tightened sharply.

"He's not going to stop until we stop him. More *merdanons* will be sent to attack cities. We'll have to go fight him. If either of you even gets injured, life around here isn't going to be pleasant for a long time." She glared at Damon because he was right in front of her.

"We're not going to get hurt." Rath captured one of her hands and gave it a squeeze.

She was not reassured.

"How did you feel tonight when that wall fell on me? I know both of you care for me but I love the two of you. If anything happened to you..." She shook her head, taking a deep breath. Just the thought of them getting hurt or worse sent a shaft of pain spearing into her.

"I..." Damon's eyes widened and his jaw dropped open. His voice was a little higher than normal. "You're mixing the way you need us and the good sex with your true feelings. It's too soon."

Slashing pain ripped through her at the denial of her feelings. She swung her legs off Damon's lap and stood quickly. She didn't know if she'd surprised Rath with the move or if he'd just decided to release her. The moment she was free, she sprang away from them. She heard movement and found Rath standing, facing her. She backed away from the two men. Damon's words left her feeling raw.

"Don't tell me what I feel." She put a hand on her hip and lifted her chin. "You'd also better think of a way to get rid of that Dark Sorcerer. His focus on dragons and vampires makes both of you a target. Whatever I have to do, I will keep you safe. I won't lose you."

She spun on her heel and walked toward a wall. Waving a hand, she created an opening and a tunnel. Stepping inside, she sealed it behind her using a complicated spell. She needed some time alone. She couldn't be near them right now.

Rath turned to Damon and raised an eyebrow. He'd seen the shimmer of tears in her brown eyes. She'd been hurt by Damon's dismissal of her feelings. He'd wanted to go to her and hold her but he held back. That step back and the pain in her eyes told him she might need time.

"It's too soon. It wasn't long ago that she was seriously talking about leaving us. On top of that, the bracelet is still on her wrist. She hasn't accepted us." Damon stood and walked over to the wall where she'd disappeared.

Rath had no idea about the depth of her feelings for them but he trusted her to know them. She wouldn't lie to them just to get them to relax their watch on her, not about that. Damon's reaction had been out of proportion even if he did think she might be lying. The vampire might be fighting his own feelings.

"You've never felt conflicting emotions?" Rath stood and began pacing. "She hasn't tried to leave. She hasn't even really tried to get the bracelet off. If she really wanted it off, it would be off and she would be gone. We'd have a hard time finding her."

"We'd know if she did. That could be holding her back." Damon's hands moved over the shield she'd created.

"Leave that alone. Give her some time alone. You hurt her with your last remark." Rath tossed a look over his shoulder to make sure Damon had stopped.

Damon glared but stalked back to the couch. Dropping onto the cushion, he drummed his fingers on the fabric and looked back at the wall. "What do you suggest we do while we give her time?"

"Well, you can think of a way to make what you just did right, because if she stays angry, I'm taking it out on you." Rath smiled slowly, menacingly. He wasn't joking. Damon had better find a way to make Keira happy again.

"And what are you going to do?" Damon asked.

"Just what she suggested. I'm going to think of a way to get to that Dark Sorcerer. I don't want her resorting to any more traps." Rath rubbed at the back of his neck. And he didn't doubt that she would. The woman was stubborn and dared to do almost anything.

Because the attacks lately had been intense and frequent, Keira saw this Dark Sorcerer as a serious threat. Rath had to admit the escalation in the attacks did worry him. Up until now, he'd seen the sorcerer as the nuisance he'd been before Keira had been found.

"I'd rather help you." Damon frowned and looked back toward the wall.

"Your mouth landed you with your assignment. While you're at it, think about why you reacted like you did. She wasn't expecting a vow of love from either of us. She was just telling us what she felt." Rath narrowed his eyes. He did love that woman. That fact had slammed through him with stunning force earlier tonight. Somehow, he'd make her believe it.

Damon's mouth opened and then he snapped it closed.

Rath paced, thinking, turning and shaping Keira's basic plan. On the whole, it had been a good idea. The only problem had been her level of magic. Very few people would believe that such a low-level sorcerer would be able to escape from a *Tiria*. This Dark Sorcerer, Gelain, had never acted stupidly. If he had, they would have caught him long before now.

After a while, he looked over at Damon. "Are you finished thinking?"

"Yes, I know what I'm going to say." Damon nodded and rose to his feet.

Rath nodded and they both walked over to the barrier she'd put up when she'd wanted some time alone. They unwove the spells and walked into a wide corridor. Pacing down the hallway, they moved slowly, cautious of other shields she might have thrown into place. The corridor opened into a large chamber. A bed occupied the center of the domed room. Keira was sprawled on the bed asleep, covered only by a golden sheet. Rath knelt beside her and slipped an arm underneath her. Her eyes fluttered, then opened. She blinked and frowned.



"Hello, I thought you'd be in here only moments after I threw that spell into place." A corner of her mouth tilted into a small smile. "What kept you?"

"We had some thinking to do." Rath gently lifted her out of the bed she'd created. "And he has something to say to you."

Keira's head turned and she looked over at Damon. Rath saw the caution on her face and felt the tension in her body as he held her.

"I'm sorry that I said you didn't know what you were feeling." Damon's arms folded across his chest.

Rath glared at Damon. All of that time to think and all he could say was a bare "I'm sorry" that along with his attitude didn't sound like an apology at all.

"I'm not going to pout because you don't believe me. I was angry and needed some time alone. Save your apologies," she said in a clipped, hard tone. Squirming in Rath's arms, she tried to push out of his hold.

Rath held on to her, not letting her wriggle out of his arms. He carried her back to the main room.

"Let me go, Rath. I can walk. It's time we were all in bed. Which reminds me. There was a perfectly good bed in the room I was in." She glared up at him. One of her hands gripped a handful of his shirt, the other was fisted in her lap.

"Calm down. I'm taking you to bed. You're right. We're all tired and need some rest." He leaned down and rested his chin on the top of hers for a moment. Inhaling, he drew in her familiar enticing scent.

Lowering her onto the blankets, he watched as she scooted to the middle of the bed. She turned onto her side to face him. He slipped in beside her and pulled her close. She stiffened a bit when Damon's arm curled around her but she didn't say anything.

"Before you drift off again, I wanted to tell you that I've come up with a plan. We'll put it before the other pairs and see if they can help refine it. As soon as that's done, we'll make it happen." Rath traced her lips with his finger. He wasn't waiting to tell her. They could easily be called to help fight. He knew that she'd do whatever she thought was necessary to ensure their safety.

She nodded and closed her eyes.

Rath hooked one of her ankles with his foot and closed his eyes. Moments later, he fell into a deep relaxing sleep.

## Chapter Twenty

Keira sat back in the chair and listened to the dragons and vampires toss around ideas. They'd arrived at the dragon Lissan's lair much earlier that day. After introducing her to those she hadn't met before, Rath and Damon had gotten down to the issue at hand. The other dragons and vampires had been much more receptive to ending this Dark Sorcerer's reign than Rath and Damon had been at first.

"You're right that it can't be any of us to place the spell or fight the minor wizard. The Master Sorcerer would never believe a minor sorcerer had escaped from one of us." Samiel lounged in a cushioned chair. The blond-haired man's eyes focused on the ceiling. Sharp, angular features gave him a very fierce, predatory appearance.

"So two of our younger dragons or vampires should do it. One fighting, the other hidden to attach the tracker spell as the Dark Sorcerer flees." Gaellon paced down the length of the room, looking very much like a dark moving shadow with the exception his eyes which were a vivid green. His long dark hair hung down his back confined by leather bands.

Her eyes looked from him to Lissan, the dragon half of that pair. She'd been a little startled when she'd first met him. Dressed in a bright blue shirt and black pants, he'd had a smile on his face and had been so friendly. The green earring glittering at his ear had only seemed to reflect his good mood. The man with gold-streaked silver hair had definitely not been the brooding temperamental dragon that she'd expected.

Keira went back to her thoughts. They obviously didn't need her input. She glanced down at her wrist. Her fingers ran over the silver band around her wrist. She hadn't thought seriously about walking away from them in weeks. When she did, she didn't want to leave them permanently. Usually, she just needed time alone. Those two could be very arrogant and there had been some adjustments.

"Keira!" Damon put his hand over hers.

She looked up at him and wondered if she'd missed something important. The last time she'd noticed them, Damon had been sitting and Rath had been leaning against a wall. The fact that they were both standing in front of her told her that she'd at least missed the ending of the meeting.

"What were you thinking about? You've been focused inward for some time." Damon's head tilted.

She shrugged and smiled. "So who are you going to send to bait this trap?"

"Now you'd know that if you weren't daydreaming." Rath lifted an eyebrow.

"Arrogant dragon. Did you finish with the planning?" She shook her head at him. Exactly who they chose didn't really matter to her as long as it was done. She wouldn't risk losing those two men to that Dark Sorcerer.

"All except for the specifics of choosing who. We'll leave that to the leaders of the hold. They'll know which two men will be able to work best together." Damon pulled her out of the chair.

From that remark, she gathered that they'd decided to use vampires, which did make sense. Vampires could communicate psychically with each other. They could also transport themselves just where they needed to be without the usual pulse of a tunnel.

"Ready to go home?" Rath asked as he held out his hand to her.

She nodded and slipped her hand out from under Damon's before placing it in Rath's large palm. With a tug, he pulled her against him. Curving an arm around her waist, he smiled down at her.

"Are you really not curious at all or are you going to wait until we get home to ask questions?" His head tilted and he looked genuinely perplexed.

"As long as it's getting done, I don't care how you do it. I'll stand back and let you take care of the trap." She leaned into him.

"You'll let us?" Damon asked with a pointed glance. He reached out and circled her wrist with his fingers.

"You were a little slow to take up the mission and even had to be convinced of its necessity. Now that you are, you can handle it." She pulled her hand back. A smile curved her lips as she saw him frown. He apparently didn't know what to think.

"I thought you weren't going to pout." He leveled a measuring look at her.

"I didn't say I wouldn't make you pay," she said and laughed softly.

He reached out and very deliberately grasped her wrist. Lifting it, he lowered his mouth and kissed the soft skin on the inside of her arm, just above the band of silver.

"How would you like me to pay? In kisses or caresses?" He trailed the sharp tips of his fangs over the sensitive flesh.

A shiver of desire shook her. She forced herself to focus on her anger. "Umm...neither. I have other plans." Frustrated vampire plans and they were working perfectly. She looked down to hide her wide smile.

"So do I. It involves a certain witch, a sweet pudding and no bowls." Damon trailed his finger up her inner arm.

Images of him and Rath licking sweet pudding off her flashed through her head. She felt slick liquid against her thighs and her shirt suddenly felt too tight.

"As interesting as that sounds, it doesn't fit with my plans." She took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. His spicy scent filled her senses, heightening her arousal.

"Plans change." Rath's body angled against hers.

She smiled as she put her hand on Damon's chest. She skimmed her fingertips over the silky fabric of his shirt down to his abdomen. For a long moment, she traced the waistband of his pants before venturing lower to cup his cock through the fabric.

"Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. I'm going home," she whispered with a small smile.

She just managed to transport herself out of the room. Even as she'd stepped into the tunnel, she'd felt their magic brush her. The main room of the cavern seemed a little cool after the toasty room at Lissan's lair but it felt good. Walking over to the couch, she dropped onto the soft cushions to wait.

Looking toward the large bed, she magically changed the sheets from green to gold. *Where were they?* They shouldn't have been more than a few moments behind her. It shouldn't take them this long to catch up with her. In truth, she'd expected them to be right behind her.

As she waited, she idly traced her finger over the silver band. She liked wearing it. It was a clear sign of their claim and their caring. She'd love it if they wore something like it that marked them as hers. A smile curved her lips as she realized she was just as possessive as her men.

The bracelet warmed against her skin and she felt a pulse of magic. She frowned. She'd sensed that light burst of magic before but had no idea what exactly it did. Deciding that it must have been a minor maintenance spell, she brushed her curiosity aside.

They arrived just as she was starting to worry. Both of them seemed stunned to see her. They stood there staring at her for a few moments as if expecting some answers. She said nothing. She didn't even know the questions.

"Is something wrong?" She tilted her head as she lounged against the reclining back of the couch.

"We thought you'd left us." Damon ran his eyes over her face.

"Well, I know you don't believe I love you. You should know that I need you as a *Tiria*. I've already acknowledged that. I'm not that blind or stubborn. I might want some time alone occasionally but I'll be staying with you." Keira narrowed her eyes.

Those two men were going to drive her insane. She'd never met anyone even nearly as blind as them. They refused to see the truth when it was right in front of them.

"We know that now." Rath took a step forward as a smile spread slowly across his face.

"So what did you do? Did you use the band on my wrist to find out where I'd gone?" She looked away from them. Her jaw ached from the tension in the muscles there. She'd expected them to arrive just after her, aggressive and aroused. Now all thoughts of the afternoon of lovemaking she'd planned had flown from her mind.

"We tried that and couldn't find you. Then just as we were wondering how you'd broken our spell without our knowledge, these appeared on our wrists." Damon pushed back the long sleeve of his blue shirt to reveal a wide band circling his wrist.

"After that, there was no question about where you were." Rath took another step forward.

"And why is that?" She narrowed her eyes, rolled off the other side of the couch and paced away when he got too close. So they'd eventually discovered that she hadn't left them. They'd doubted her. After everything she'd said, they'd doubted her.

"This would only happen if you accepted the bond. I don't know how we missed it." He stopped on the other side of the couch, frowning as she again moved away from him.

"I'm not surprised. Both of you can be amazingly blind." She ran a hand through her hair and exhaled loudly.

"We never thought you'd like the bracelet. We expected it to disappear when you accepted that you belonged with us. And we never expected you to want us to wear one as well." Damon stepped up beside Rath.

"If I wear your mark, you wear mine." Her hands clenched and unclenched. She drew in a deep breath. The anger boiling within her grew a little higher. In all this time, through the battles and loving, they hadn't grown to trust her.

"I like that you're possessive about us." Damon smiled smugly.

That arrogant smile nearly destroyed her control.

"You're mine. That doesn't mean that I want to be with you right now," she grated through clenched teeth. She whirled and stomped toward the wall. "A perfectly good plan ruined by two stubborn blind men."

She opened a passage just before she hit the wall. Closing the door behind her, she stalked down the hallway. She needed to burn off some of the anger pulsing inside her. She wouldn't be able to rest until she did. What she need was either a long run or a swim. She'd have loved a run but decided against it. After their reaction tonight, she wasn't going to try leaving the lair. They'd probably think she was trying to leave on foot. That left only swimming.

She sighed as she began walking back the way she'd come. She opened the door into the room, walked out and across it without saying a word to either of them. She went into the bathing room and sealed it. With a little alteration, it would work. They'd better leave her alone tonight. She wasn't in the mood to play with them.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How long are you going to stay in this mood?" Rath leaned against the wall of the main room.

His arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed. His clothes suited his dark mood. A black sleeveless shirt molded to his chest and black leather pants hugged his thighs. He looked very sexy and dangerous.

She shrugged her shoulders and tossed her head, sending her hair flying over her shoulder. His glare and frown didn't intimidate her at all. She'd only been in this mood for one night and part of the morning. He was acting as if she'd been stomping around for weeks. She wasn't even nearly ready to talk and make nice with them.

"You're pushing your luck, *chatana*." Rath's growl reverberated through the cavern lair.

"I'm pushing my luck? Do you know how close you and Damon are? Do you think I go tossing around words like 'I love you' to anyone I have sex with more than once?" Her hands landed on the silky, green fabric at her hips and she glared at him.

"Mmm... No?" Damon rose from the couch where he'd been brooding.

He'd been watching her all morning. She'd seen the predatory speculation in those blue eyes. His chest was bare, the skin gleaming in the soft light and the black pants he wore were indecently tight. He'd obviously decided to use their sexual attraction to soothe her temper. The idea seemed very attractive at the moment.

"Definitely no. I used the words and meant them only with you two. I know the difference between even great sex and genuine feelings." She lifted her chin and shook her head at the two men. "You two are the ones who can't see what's right in front of you."

"I admit we apparently missed some things. Your acceptance of the bond for one." He shrugged.

"Arghh!" Keira kept her hands clenched at her sides. "I accepted the bond...ha! I accepted you two stubborn idiots, not the bond, because I love you."

Rath's lips twitched and then he sobered. "So why are you still so angry?"

"You should be able to figure that out on your own." She folded her arms across her chest. How did they do that? They'd gotten her to talk when she would have sworn that she wasn't ready for anything but yelling at them.

"We thought about it most of the night." Damon's lips twisted and he shook his head. "We couldn't think of a reason other than the fact that we thought you'd left us had hurt you."

"That's part of it but it's more basic. You didn't trust me. I've fought with you, lived with you and loved you both but it didn't matter. The moment I was out of your sight and you didn't know exactly where I was, you thought the worst. You automatically leapt to the conclusion that I'd left you." She sighed and looked down at the floor. What could she do to get them to trust her?

Rath frowned and took a step forward. "How were we supposed to know you'd come here? The last thing we knew, you were angry with us."

"I could have gone anywhere. I'm sure that I could easily find someone to take the extra power when I needed it." She clenched her teeth and shook her head. Sarcasm wasn't helping but she couldn't stop herself.

Damon's eyes narrowed to angry slits and his lips thinned to a tense straight line. "Damn it. One moment, you were talking about lovemaking not fitting your plans, seeming angry and the next you say you're going home. How were we supposed to know you meant here?"

She thought about it and she could see his point. "I'll allow that at first you might have had a reason to think I left you but you had time to think. You had time to see the truth."

Rath closed his eyes. "Yes, we did and we didn't trust you. We were too focused on the fact that our band was still on your wrist. We thought you still wanted to leave us."

Damon stepped forward. "So what are you going to do?"

She sighed. "We'll work through it. Somehow, I'll make you see you can trust me."

They both frowned. Damon reached out and took her hand in his.

"I'm sorry. Rath didn't think you'd left us until I reminded him that you still wore the band. I didn't believe you could come to love us so soon. I thought it would take years. You weren't looking for a sorcerer as a mate. If you had been, you wouldn't have chosen a vampire or a dragon, much less both of us," Damon said.

"I chose to have sex with Rath even when I knew the risks. I didn't want a dragon or a vampire for life but I was willing to take the chance. I wouldn't change anything now. I'm where I want to be." She smiled softly. Well, not exactly where she wanted to be but this was good. In an ideal world, they would love her and have admitted it. There also wouldn't be a question of their trust but overall she was happy.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Damon looked over at Keira. Behind her and Rath, he could see the sun beginning its descent. Already he could see the sky darkening to a deep green as the shadows lengthened. While Rath had instantly released Damon when they'd landed outside the city of Gires, he'd held on to Keira, cuddling her body against his large dragon form. Her hands stroked over his chest, stroking until a sound that was almost a purr rolled from him. The dragon finally released her.

She walked over to stand beside Damon, curving an arm around his waist. Rath waited until they'd both moved away from his large form. He sent Damon a sharp look. Interpreting that as a you'd-better-watch-over-her glare, Damon nodded. Rath spread his wings and leapt into the sky.

She'd been a little quiet for the last few days but finally she seemed to be regaining some of her natural cheerfulness. Her mood hadn't quite returned to normal. It certainly wasn't like it was before the day they'd thought she'd left them.

There was a caution, a distance she kept between herself and them now. He didn't like it. That emotional distance was a shield, a way of protecting herself from being rejected again. It hurt that she felt the need for it. Now he knew what he'd destroyed. She'd lost faith in them. Somehow, they'd have to regain it.

If he just hadn't jumped to the conclusion that she'd left, she wouldn't even want the distance between them. At the time, he hadn't been able to think beyond her leaving. When she'd disappeared, horror and panic had flooded his mind. One moment she'd been arguing with him, a teasing smile on her lips, the next she'd been gone.

Damon curved an arm around Keira and guided her into the city. The destruction was worse than usual this time. While the chosen vampires had been doing their duty, *merdanons* had created havoc in the city. Entire buildings had been reduced to little more than rubble.

The dragons and vampires within the city had held off calling them so that the plan could be put into motion. One of the Dark Sorcerers had been tagged with a tracking spell but he was still in the city. He would be kept busy while the others were dealt with in a more permanent manner.

Keira stepped over some rocks and strode forward. "Which way do we go?"

Her mouth was compressed into a thin line and her body was tense. He put his hand at the small of her back. She turned her head and raised her brows.

"We go this way. Let's get this city cleared," Damon said and pointed down the street to the left.



"Did the residents get a chance to run?" She looked around the area, her eyes resting on the crumbled remains of a house to her right.

"Some of them fled. Others have hidden in the shelters beneath their homes. Most of those who didn't make it to shelter or out before the battle began were portalled to safety when it was attacked." He lifted his hand to the back of her neck and massaged the tight muscles there.

She nodded and moved down the street slowly.

Their battles soon began. Near the end of the street, the first two *merdanons* lumbered amid the rubble of two destroyed buildings. Keira paced forward, a fierce frown on her face as she swung her blade. An arc of energy swept out from the weapon but the rolling wave of silver and white magic didn't fan out as it had once done.

Damon watched with surprise. Her control was growing. Just lately, he'd also noticed that she was gaining the ability to draw energy into her without the blade. She didn't even seem to be aware that she sometimes pulled a little energy into her with just skin-to-skin contact.

As the wave of power hit, the shields around the beasts flashed but didn't fall.

"Conserve your energy, Keira. We have a long day of fighting ahead of us." He stepped up beside her.

"Then start helping. We're not going to get this finished if all we do is stand here talking." She narrowed her eyes and tapped her foot.

"Impatient." He couldn't be angry with her. He knew how much she wanted this destruction to end.

She just glared at him. He smiled and created an orb, throwing it at the *merdanons*. The orb hit the shield. Again the shield flared but held. She turned her attention back to the beasts trudging slowly toward them.

Her blade sliced through the air, sending a wave of magic at the *merdanons*. The shield flared and failed. Keira immediately swept her sword back, forming a powerful energy arc. A rolling wave of glittering silver and white magic hit the *merdanons*. With a gurgle, the two huge gray-skinned beings fell to the ground. She stalked forward and destroyed the two magical creations.

Straightening, she rolled her shoulders, moving her head from side to side. He recognized the movement. The power in her was high. How high, he didn't quite know.

"Do you need me to take some power?" He gently turned her to face him.

She frowned and tilted her head. "Not unless you need to feed or are low on power. After a few more *merdanons*, I'll definitely need it."

"I don't need to feed. You just looked a bit uncomfortable." He stroked his fingers across her cheek.

They walked down the street, beginning the hunt for more enemies. He slowly swept his eyes from building to building. Nothing moved. He knew there were *merdanons* ahead of him. He could feel the magic as well as the magic of Dark Sorcerers

a little farther away. Without word from the dragons overhead, he knew that the Dark Sorcerers and a bevy of *merdanons* worked their way toward them. They'd come toward any witch magic in the city. And Keira's magic was a very strong beacon.

The *merdanons* lumbered into sight, plodding slowly toward them. The gray beast on the right swung his large hand, slamming it into the wall near him. The other beast roared and charged forward. He hit the shield in front of them and staggered backward, shaking his head. Keira formed a bolt of magic at the end of her sword and hurled it toward the monsters.

The arc of bright magic hit the shields surrounding the *merdanons* and flashed brightly. She didn't wait for another attack. Swinging her arm in a wide arc, she sent two quick waves of silver-white magic rolling down the street. The shield withstood the first wave of power but flared and failed with the second. Before she could form another bolt of magic, Damon threw two quick arcs of energy. The *merdanons* jerked as the magic sizzled over them and dropped to the ground.

He could understand her impatience. He'd just have to watch over her until she settled a bit. He wasn't really afraid that she'd risk her life but he did worry that she'd deplete her power in her rush to defeat their enemies. Making sure nothing happened to her ranked at the top of his priorities.

She paced forward and he stepped up beside her. As she knelt by the *merdanons*, he stood at her side, keeping watch. He wasn't going to let anyone sneak up on them. In spite of the power within her, she could still be hurt. An image of the wall toppling onto her flashed through his head. That couldn't happen again. She meant too much to him.

His eyes surveyed the street again. For now, it was clear of enemies. He knew it wouldn't last long. There would be more.

*Damon, we need you and Keira to move. The sorcerer we tagged is coming toward you. Also, I just wanted to warn you that a few of the merdanons we've encountered have been throwing anything they can get their hands on.* Jaeson's thoughts burst into his mind, startling him.

*Do you have a specific location in mind?* He reached out and wrapped his hand around Keira's wrist as she took a step away from him.

*Can you feel Gaellon's magic? He's across the city and he's making the area safe for you and Keira,* Jaeson told him.

*I can feel it. I'll take her over to him at once.* Damon tugged her into his arms and transported them both over to Gaellon's location.

She stepped away from him and gave him a hard look. "An explanation wouldn't have taken that much time. Even a 'we have to move' would have sufficed."

He chuckled and looked around. Gaellon had an entire block cleared. The bodies of two *merdanons* lay on the ground almost directly in front of them. Keira walked over and destroyed them without another word.

"Which way has been cleared?" Damon asked as he looked up and down the street.

Gaellon pointed behind him. "Watch her well. They're all hunting her."

"I will. Thank you." Damon curled an arm around Keira as she moved over to him.

He could see the tension in every taut line of her body, the stiffness of her gait and the pounding beat of the pulse at her throat. He stepped up beside her. His hand stroked her arm and he angled his body toward hers.

He strengthened the shields around them. Watching for any sign of movement, he swept his eyes over the gray stone buildings. Only when he was certain that no danger was near did he again focus his attention on her.

She looked up at him questioningly, her eyes already fixed on the street in front of her. "What's wrong?"

"You need a little of that power taken. You pull much more into you without it and you'll get distracted," Damon told her as he slipped an arm around her.

He nuzzled her hair out of the way. His lips brushed against her neck and just to tease her, he scraped his fangs over the sensitive skin. She moaned and her head tilted to the side, exposing more of her neck for his bite.

"I do need it," she admitted on a soft sigh.

He smiled. The power had to be high for her to admit it that easily. She usually waited until they needed power or until the end of the battle. This battle would be far from normal.

He licked her neck and then sank his teeth into her soft flesh. He drank deep and felt her magic burning a path down his throat as he swallowed. From the intensity of the magic in just the few swallows he'd taken, he knew that he had barely changed the level of power she held. She'd need to have more taken if they faced more *merdanons*.

"Thank you. That feels better." She leaned against him and rested her hands on his arms.

"Time to move." He reluctantly released her. Holding her felt so good, he wanted to find some place private and just be with her but this wasn't the time.

She stepped away from him and looked down the street. "You're right. We need to get to work. Do you know if Rath is still flying overhead or if he's in the city fighting?"

"I haven't heard anything about him joining the battles. That does remind me. You need to strengthen your shields, create it to repel solid objects as well as magic." Damon frowned as he looked at the darkening sky. Soon they'd need light as well.

Gaellon gave a final nod and then portalled himself out of the area. Damon and Keira moved slowly down the street, not wanting to walk into a trap. He'd rather have the *merdanons* come out in front of them than have them burst through the walls of a building next to them.

A *merdanon* lumbered out of the shadows. He marched steadily toward them. Keira tossed a flaring silver arc at the advancing beast. The magic exploded against a shield. Damon joined the battle, lobbing two orbs at the *merdanon*. Her next bolt of magic took

down the shield protecting it. Damon threw a final bolt that put the creature on the ground. She moved forward at his side, stopping only to destroy the *merdanon*.

Near the end of the street, Damon stopped and his head tilted. His sober expression grew darker. She guessed that he didn't like whatever he was hearing. He turned to her and put his hands on her shoulders as he looked down at her.

"I'm needed to aid a few younger vampires across the city. The other vampires all have their hands full at right now. A dragon is on the way here. He'll be with you while I'm gone," Damon instructed.

"Is it Rath?" Keira asked. She didn't really see the need to have someone with her but she'd be more than happy to have Rath at her side.

"No, he's still busy." Damon shook his head and smiled at her. "You haven't met this dragon before. His name is Avoan and he'll stay with you until Rath or I can return to you."

She grimaced and couldn't resist telling him how she felt about having someone with her. "I really don't need anyone with me. I can take care of myself. From what you've said, he could be more useful somewhere else."

"He's going to be with you. Do not try to go off on your own and stay out of trouble," Damon ordered as the sound of wings reverberated overhead.

A brown dragon with green stripes landed on the street in front of them. Mist enfolded the dragon as he changed forms. The haze faded, revealing a tall man with dark brown hair and suntanned skin. He smiled as he approached the shield. He wasn't as muscular as many of the dragons she'd seen but he definitely wasn't a fledgling. The green crystal dangling from his ear confirmed he was a dragon warrior, but she had no idea how many battles he'd fought.

She folded her arms across her chest and glared at Damon. Just what trouble did he think she could find here? She had too much to do to think about causing trouble.

"Avoan, this Keira. Keira, this is Avoan. He'll help you. I have to go now." Damon dropped a quick kiss on her lips, stepped back and a moment later was gone.

"Hi, we should get to work." Keira looked down the street. She'd rather confront her enemies than let them come after her.

"Hello, don't worry. I'll be with you." Avoan smiled and glanced down the street.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at that reassuring tone. She wasn't sure just how she should work with him. Most of the time, she created and held the shield when she worked with Rath and Damon. Would he consider it an insult or would he expect her to do it? She grimaced. The only way to find out was to ask.

"Do you want me to create a shield for you?" She glanced over at him.

"I can hold my own shield. Thank you." Avoan's clipped tone and narrow-eyed glare clearly conveyed his annoyance.

She sighed and began moving forward. From his stiff posture and set expression, she knew he felt insulted by her offer. She couldn't do anything about his injured pride. He didn't seem to want to talk. She focused on the task before them.

At first, the street ahead of them seemed deserted. She began to wonder if they'd found an area that had already been cleared. She was looking ahead, trying to decide if she should go to the next street or go back and take one of the connecting streets when a loud cracking sound broke the silence. A brick tumbled from the top of a house just ahead of them. It clattered loudly as it landed on stone cobbles.

Keira's eyes followed the brick until it stopped bouncing and then she turned them to the building. The wall bulged a bit, mortar crumbling in small bits. The wall exploded outward. Chunks of brick flew in all directions. Even before the last brick had settled, a *merdanon* stepped out of the massive hole in the house.

She slammed a bolt of energy into it even before the beast cleared the rubble. The magic flashed as it hit the shield in front of the *merdanon*. She slung two more orbs and watched the shield fall. Power gathered as she drew back her sword. The energy crackled as it flew off her blade. The *merdanon* roared just before the sizzling bolt hit him. It stumbled and fell to ground.

She advanced slowly down the street. Even as she watched the street for further danger, she stole quick glances at Avoan. He hadn't thrown one bolt. When Damon had said Avoan would help, she'd thought that he'd be actively helping, not just standing guard at her side. She wondered about Avoan's behavior but she had to trust that he knew what he was doing.

Dark shadows gathered between the buildings as the sun sank lower. She tossed a few light orbs into the air to light their way. One zipped down the street ahead of her, lighting the area brightly. She wanted to see any threats before they were right in front of her.

The floating light bobbed along the dark street. As it moved, she caught a glimpse of something near a wall. She directed the light over to the area. A young man leaned against the wall of a house. He was dressed in a light blue shirt and black pants. She stopped and looked at him. He definitely seemed out of place and as young as he looked, he should still be training to be sorcerer. He wouldn't have been alone. What was he doing here? He couldn't have missed the fact that there was a battle being fought in the city. He just seemed wrong and something about him made her nervous.

The man came away from the wall and walked into the street. He stopped and turned away from them. Keira had no idea what he was doing but she wasn't going to approach him.

He spun and she saw a glowing orb in his hand a moment before he threw it. The sizzling ball streaked down the street and exploded across the shield in front of Avoan. Avoan tossed a flaming ball of magic toward the sorcerer.

Keira felt the familiar pull as her power mixed with her weapon's magic and channeled through the sword. Pulsing energy formed on the sword and hurtled through the air, exploding against the sorcerer's shield.

The minor sorcerer laughed and flashed a confident smile. "Let's see how you do without your weak protector."

"More than well enough to deal with you." She rolled her eyes, not worried at all. The dragon wouldn't be here if he didn't know what he was doing.

The Dark Sorcerer glared and began hurling balls of magic toward the dragon's shield. Keira saw the first of the orbs hit the dragon's shield just before she swung her sword. She saw her magic hit the sorcerer's shield a moment before one of the dragon's bolts hit.

For a while, the battle seemed to be going normally. When she saw a wobbling uncontrolled orb fly toward the sorcerer, she whipped around to see if that had actually come from Avoan. The dragon was creating an orb but even before it fully formed, it fizzled in his hand.

"By the Lady!" She rushed over to the edge of his shield. Raising her hands, she pressed as close to it as possible but didn't touch it. "Let me in!"

Avoan looked at her and hesitated. For a moment, she wondered if he was going to refuse to let her through his shield. The stubborn dragon had to be exhausted or had used too much of his power. Either way he was in trouble.

Finally he nodded. She rushed forward, extending her hand. He needed help and she was determined to do whatever was necessary.

"Take the power you need, Avoan. Then we'll deal with this sorcerer," Keira urged. She raised her hand a bit higher.

"Yes, Avoan, take the power. That will make it so much easier for me to defeat her," the sorcerer mocked in an almost singsong tone.

Avoan took a step back from her and turned his head away from her. "I don't need any help."

"Yes, you do. Don't let the sorcerer play with your mind. I wouldn't offer if I didn't have more than enough to spare." She took a step forward.

This dragon was getting on her nerves. She'd had no idea he'd had so little power. The last thing he should be doing was fighting. His stubborn attitude wasn't helping. He could get himself killed if didn't listen to reason.

He looked over at her. He clearly wanted to believe her but he didn't know if he could. She exhaled slowly and shook her head. What would it take to convince him? She didn't think the sorcerer would play his mind games much longer. He'd begin hammering at Avoan's shield.

"I'm a *Tiria*. Any power I give to you I can get back easily." She decided to go for bravado. A simple assurance hadn't worked.

He licked his lips and looked at her wrist. Stepping forward, he grasped her wrist. She barely had time to realize he'd finally been convinced when his fangs sunk into her wrist. Sharp pain slashed through her arm. She tensed and kept her arm still with difficulty. He took a few gulps and then practically tore his mouth away from her arm.

She looked at him as he took a few steps back from her. His eyes were on her arm as if he was still in need. She had to wonder if he'd taken enough to sustain him. She didn't feel any noticeable difference in her power level. Deciding that her only recourse was to continue the battle and watch over him. If he had trouble again, she was signaling for help.

She nodded and moved away from him. Because he'd been so adamant earlier, she didn't put a shield up in front of him. He'd know if she did it.

A ball of energy zipped down the street and slammed into Avoan's shield. Keira swung her sword and sent two bolts of energy toward the sorcerer. She saw them explode against the shield but she was already forming another before the magic exploded against the barrier.

Avoan tossed an orb. She was relieved to see that it looked stable and controlled. Turning her attention to the Dark Sorcerer, she sent three quick waves of magic down the street, pounding at his shield. The Dark Sorcerer continued to focus his magic on Avoan, directing orb after orb into his shield.

Keira threw another arc of energy down the street. Her gaze was locked on that sorcerer. She saw a wide smile spread across his face and knew it couldn't be good. She threw a shield across the width of the street just before he hurled a large ball of energy toward Avoan.

She turned and saw Avoan on his knees, his head down. He was breathing heavily and he looked a little pale. She wasn't going to try to convince him to take any of her power this time. He obviously hadn't taken what he needed last time.

"I'm getting help for you." She didn't wait for him to respond in any way before she acted.

She launched a ball of magic straight into the air. As it exploded above them, she looked down the street to the sorcerer. He obviously knew that she had help on the way. He'd backed off and decided to try another tactic. A *merdanon* marched down the street toward them.

Keira smiled. *Merdanons* she could handle easily. Dragon pride was another matter. She was just glad that Rath hadn't exhibited that kind of tendency.

She slashed her sword and sent a controlled surge of energy at the *merdanon*. The magic hit a shield in front of the *merdanon* and flared over it. The sorcerer was probably feeding that shield so she wasn't going to go at it too hard. She had no idea when help would arrive but knew that she'd have to push the beast and its master back to clear a landing area.

"They're going to kill me," Avoan muttered.

She guessed that he was referring to Rath and Damon or maybe some of the other dragons. "I wouldn't have had to signal for them if you'd have taken enough to last. We could have already have finished with this sorcerer."

He groaned.

She tossed an orb at the *merdanon*. She heard a single flap of wings before a roar echoed right over her head. She clapped her hands over her ringing ears and watched a fire blast over the *merdanon's* shield. The barrier failed in moments and the odor of burnt flesh rose in the air. She put her hand over her nose and mouth but there was no blocking that stench.

She sent a wave of magic out, pushing the Dark Sorcerer down the street. Shielding the cleared area, she waited for the dragon to land. When she saw the black body with red stripes, she gulped. She comforted herself with the fact that it might not be Rath. He wasn't the only dragon with those markings.

Black mist rose around the large body and the dragon changed into his human form. Rath stepped out of the swirling black mist and stalked down the street toward them. His long, fast stride covered the distance quickly. Keira lowered her shield just before he reached it, letting him in and the popping the protective barrier back in place.

"What happened?" Rath wasn't looking at her when he growled the question, his eyes were on Avoan.

"I'm low on power." The dragon looked at Rath and then cut his eyes to the side.

"Did you offer him some power before you signaled me?" Rath asked.

"This isn't the first time he's been low on power. The first time, I offered him energy. He took some but we didn't even get through this Dark Sorcerer before he needed more. I wasn't going to chance him only taking enough for a few energy bolts again. I might not get the shield up in front of him next time." She glared at Avoan.

She knew that Rath was furious. His golden eyes almost burned with the emotion. Color rose on his cheeks and she knew it wasn't from embarrassment.

"Could you get me that bite antidote potion?" she asked Rath. It had been a while since Avoan had bitten her.

Rath created the potion and handed it to her before he turned his attention to Avoan. He walked over to him and helped him to his feet. Without hesitation, he brought the young man over to Keira.

"Take what you need and then return to your lair. I'll stay with my witch," Rath ordered.

Keira didn't say another word. She extended her hand and waited.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Keira frowned and suppressed a growl as she stalked into the main room of their cavern home. She headed straight for one of the long couches. Flopping onto the cushions, she swung her legs up onto it and used her magic to get rid of her boots.

She put her hands across her eyes. Exhausted both mentally and physically, she badly needed some rest but sleep had never seemed so far away. Anger and a high level of magic boiled within her, making a nice, long snooze impossible.

Rath and Damon hadn't said much to her since after they'd arrived to help but she knew they were angry. Their hard stares and grim expressions hadn't lightened with the battle's end. Now she was the sole focus of that male anger. That was just great. She wasn't happy with them either.

"Don't even try to go to sleep. We're going to talk about this now." Damon's voice had a distinct growl to it.

She lifted her arm and frowned to him. He planted his hands on slim hips. Rath's yellow-gold eyes almost seemed to glow as he stared at her. He had nothing to be growling about. She was the one with plenty of reason to be furious with both of them.

"Don't snarl at me. I haven't done anything wrong and you know it. I'm not going to get into a pointless argument over the situation when we all know that jealousy plays a big part in what angers you." She sat up and folded her arms across her chest.

"We'll get to that. What we're going to talk about now is your reckless behavior." Rath leaned against the wall a few steps away from the couch.

Keira got the distinct impression that he was keeping his hands off her only by sheer force of will. She remembered his roar as he'd flown over her and saw that she'd been facing a Dark Sorcerer for all purposes alone. Of course, she hadn't known it was him until he'd landed. She wrinkled her nose as she recalled the flames. If she wasn't imagining it, she could still smell the stink of charred *merdanon*. Lifting her shirt to her nose, she inhaled and wrinkled her nose as her suspicion was confirmed.

She'd been both relieved and a little appalled that it had been him who'd answered her signal for aid. She'd known how he'd react. He'd been one very angry dragon. And the dragon with her hadn't been able to leave fast enough.

"I wasn't reckless. When I learned that he'd nearly exhausted his power, I offered him aid. He barely took any power and then he nearly got himself killed with his stubbornness. I signaled for help. Nothing reckless about that at all." She pushed herself to her feet and began pacing.

It wasn't the angry glances or their attitude that had sparked her anger. It was the realization that they still didn't trust her that infuriated her. She didn't know what held them back.

"Not reckless. The moment he showed that he was too exhausted to fight, you should have called for help and stopped." Rath came away from the wall but stopped at just one step.

"If he hadn't been such a stubborn idiot of a dragon, there wouldn't have been any need for help." She swung around and paced the other way.

"He was stubborn?" Damon crossed his arms over his wide chest.

"Yes he was and I hope never to meet a man with more male pride than that dragon. He didn't admit there was anything wrong until he couldn't hide it. Although I did suspect. Then he didn't take enough power to allow him to go home, much less fight." She rolled her eyes and sighed.

"So why didn't you stop and signal for help then?" Rath's fingers drummed against his thighs.

"It wasn't long after that that I did signal for help. I told him to get to safety, to change forms and send another dragon to me. He wouldn't budge. He insisted on staying. I guess I have that delicate, can't-take-care-of-myself look, because no one trusts my abilities." She swung around and planted her hands on her hips. Glowering at them, she waited for the denial she expected.

They both stood there for a moment with their mouths hanging open. They seemed genuinely surprised by her words. She knew they hadn't forgotten what had just happened.

"You think we don't trust you." Damon straightened, every muscle tensing.

"I know you don't. I've had ample proof of it." She gestured to the band on her wrist. She could feel a wave of heat in her cheeks as her anger rose with the memory of their belief that she'd just walk away from someone she loved.

"How long are you going to hold that against us?" He took a quick step forward.

"I'm not holding it against you. It's just more proof that you don't trust me." She closed her eyes briefly, taking a deep breath. By the Blessed Lady, how was she supposed to make them trust her? They knew she could fight, yet they didn't seem to remember that in battle.

Rath took a deep breath and seemed to be searching for patience. "The reason we didn't want you alone isn't because we don't trust you. By the fires, woman, your powers with that sword are stronger than most sorcerers could dream of."

She shook her head, not really believing that denial. "Then why should I constantly have someone to escort me?"

Damon stepped up and brushed her hair back behind her ear. "When I was fighting at your side, do you remember how every time we'd find and destroy one *merdanon*,

three or four more would arrive only moments later? You're the one that the sorcerer wants."

"That hasn't changed since it became common knowledge that someone had taken up the ancient weapons." Keira grimaced.

In some ways, she'd always be a target. Most of the time, it wouldn't be because she was a *Tiria*. Dark Sorcerers did occasionally hunt the mates of dragons and vampires. It was a widely held belief that if the bond between mates was severed by death, the dragon's or vampire's power was weakened.

"A few things have changed since then. The minions sent by Gelain have been trying different strategies. He keeps sending more of his minions. When they feel only your magic, all the lesser Dark Sorcerers start toward you and the *merdanons* pull back." Rath paced over and took her hand in his.

"Rath and the other dragons who've taken a turn flying over the city noticed the action even before this battle but thought it might have just been a strategy of the sorcerers we were fighting at the time." Damon brushed his hand up and down her arm.

"Then why didn't you say anything to me? Your story seems a little too convenient." She tugged her hand away from Rath and stepped back from both of them. They could easily distract her and had done it before. She wasn't letting it happen again.

"We just became certain that there really was a pattern." Damon frowned and closed the distance between them.

Rath wasn't as restrained.

"*Grimlan's* balls, woman, we didn't have someone with you because we doubted your ability to take care of yourself. We had someone with you for two reasons." His hands gripped her hips and lifted her to eye level.

The unexpected move surprised her. Keira drew in a sharp breath and gripped his shoulders. Looking into his eyes, she could see determination and anger burning there. The sight of his anger had the strange effect of calming hers.

"What are the reasons?" She took a deep breath and could smell Rath's heated musk swirling around her.

"First, we had someone with you – actively using their magic – to keep the sorcerers to their normal plan. There are only so many sorcerers one person can handle at the same time. If they attacked together, you'd run out of energy after a while. They wouldn't supply you with energy if they found you alone and without someone to help you." Rath raised an arrogant eyebrow as he held her well above the stone floor.

If she'd known about what they'd learned before the battle, she might have thought of that reason herself. But they hadn't even hinted that there might be more danger than usual in this battle. That was something she'd mention later but now she wanted to know the second reason.

"And the second reason?" she asked.

"We had a plan, remember? We didn't want to take a chance that you'd kill the chosen sorcerer before he could get desperate enough to escape to safety," Damon explained as he brushed his fingers across the back of her neck.

The heat of a blush rose on her neck and face. Well, that made sense. Lady, she hadn't expected that answer and she should have. It was the most obvious reason. She felt like an idiot.

But they could have told her. They hadn't explained why they didn't mention it, even if it had only been a possibility. She might not have thought they didn't trust her if they'd just said something. As to that, she still wasn't sure if they truly trusted her. How could she be certain? She bit at her inner lip as she thought about it. What could they do to actually convince her they did trust her? That they respected her as an equal?

Rath slowly lowered her feet to the ground. She walked over to the couch and sat down as realization settled heavily into place. They may or may not trust her. That was something she'd have to think about later but until she trusted them, she wouldn't believe in their trust.

"You're awfully quiet over there. Are you still angry with us?" Damon smiled.

He dissolved into a mist and then appeared beside her on the couch. She tensed in surprise, lurching backward, nearly falling off the couch. Damon's arm swept around her, catching her and tugging her close.

Rath shook his head as he walked over to join them. "He does that all the time when he wants to show off and impress. You'll get used to it."

"Not all the time, just on those who aren't impressed by a set of flashing fangs." Damon reached out and patted Rath's butt.

Rath growled. "Hands off until we settle everything with our witch."

Keira looked from one man to the other. She'd let fear rule her for too long. It was time to end this fight.

"I'm going to try very hard to overcome my own fears and stop seeing normal protective gestures as signs of mistrust. If you two will try to remember to tell me about any new developments or information, even if it's just a vague idea, I think we'll be able to put this behind us." She licked her lips and reached out to touch Rath's thigh.

"Your fears... What do you fear?" Rath sat and lifted her into his lap. A look of concern drew his brows together and changed his smile into a frown.

She lowered her head and stared at the floor, suddenly a little embarrassed. "Being taken over and being nothing but a breeder and a blood supply."

Rath's and Damon's jaws dropped open and then they burst into laughter.

"You're afraid of losing yourself in us." Damon sat down and lifted her feet into his lap.

She poked her finger into his chest. "Stop hauling me around. I'm not a toy or a chair."

"I can't think of anything less likely to happen than you losing your identity in us. You aren't a weak woman," he said.

"It wasn't about weak or strong." She just couldn't get the thought out of her head. At every level of her training, she'd heard the warnings about women who'd gotten involved with vampires or dragons. Taken over and never seen again.

"Women who are downtrodden don't argue and give ultimatums." Rath frowned and settled a hand over her stomach. "They don't fight and tease and get aggressive with their men."

"I know it's not logical. I first heard about how a vampire's or dragon's woman was never given any choices when I was learning magic. The tales didn't stop with training. My first year out of training, I worked with another witch as a sort of apprentice. She told me that one of the women she trained with had been taken and never seen again by any in her coven." Keira grimaced.

Just saying the words made her feel even more embarrassed. She knew the reason that women weren't seen by their coven. She didn't need Damon's arrogantly raised brow or his smirk to spark her memory. Dragons and vamps, especially dragons, didn't usually live in the same area as their mate. Since dragons and vampires usually guarded a specific territory, the chosen woman probably wouldn't return to the area near her coven again.

Damon began kneading the soles of her feet. His fingers moved in firm circles. Great Lady, that felt good. Her head fell back against Rath's shoulder. Her toes curled and she relaxed back against Rath's arm.

Rath curled his arm around her while he moved his other hand up her body. "You're not the only one who's been at fault. You were right. We didn't trust you at first."

"As long as that's changed or changing, I'm not going to dwell on it anymore." She smiled.

They cared for her. She was certain of that. After thinking about tonight, knowing what they had known, she knew that they had told the truth. Their actions were based more in a need to protect, not doubt of her ability.

"It's changed. We'll always be a little protective of you but we know you can fight." His hand stopped just below her breast.

"I'm not expecting you to stand by as I fight. Well, not anymore." That was what she'd expected at first but she knew that it would be impossible for them to just watch. If they were the ones being hunted, she wouldn't leave them.

"I wasn't finished telling you my mistakes." His thumb rubbed in slow light circles on her sternum.

"You're admitting to more?" She turned her head and looked up at him. She'd really been surprised when he'd admitted that they hadn't trusted her. Neither of them had talked about how they felt since she'd first confronted them about it.

He nodded but leveled a stern look down at her. "I should have told you the night you gave us that ultimatum that I loved you. I waited because I wanted to get the fighting finished. I'm not waiting anymore."

"You love me?" She drew in a shaky breath. Almost afraid to believe it, she stared up into his golden eyes, searching for some clue to the truth.

His hand cupped the side of her face. "If I hadn't been so worried you were going to try to disappear on us, I would have seen it sooner. I would have recognized that what I felt for you was stronger than mere lust."

Pure joy burst through her. She laughed and threw her arms around his neck, fastening her lips to his in an exuberant kiss. She felt the rumble of his chuckle against her lips. His arms closed around her and he came to his feet in a powerful surge. She simply held on and enjoyed the feel of his lips against hers.

Thoughts of the coming battle faded from her mind. Excitement began to turn to passion as his teeth nipped at her lips. She cupped the back of his neck and pulled him closer, wanting his kiss. His tongue lapped over the full lower lip before stroking into her mouth. She eagerly met the teasing foray. Sucking at his tongue, she slid her hand down his chest. She didn't want to play. She wanted him out of his clothes and as wild for her as she was for him.

He growled and the sound thrilled her. She loved that she could affect him so intensely. His cock pressed against her stomach, hard and ready, but trapped in his pants. She wriggled and rubbed against him. His hands slid down to her buttocks, lifting her off her feet. She hooked her leg around his hip. The hard ridge rocked against the mound of her pussy.

His lips brushed over her cheek as he trailed nibbling kisses down her neck. Unwilling to let him set the pace, she tugged at his shirt. A button flew. She slid her hand into the open space while she continued to work at the other buttons. His skin was so warm. She could almost be content just to snuggle up against him, but desire pulsed inside her.

His tongue trailed over her neck. She shivered. The last button finally slid free of the hole and she pushed his shirt wide. She scraped her nails lightly over his chest. His muscles tensed beneath her hand. Encouraged, she flicked at both nipples. She wanted to get her mouth on those, to see just how strongly he'd react to that. She kissed the spot where his neck and shoulder met, grazing the skin with her teeth. He groaned loudly and cupped the back of her neck, preventing her from moving any lower.

"Rath." She frowned at him. If he thought he could kiss her, touch her like that and not fuck her, he was in for a surprise.

"The bed," he growled.

She didn't care about the bed. He could take her against the wall or on the floor as long as he did it soon.

He carried her to the bed, lowering her to the soft sheets. When she felt the coolness of the fabric against bare skin she tensed, surprised. How did he have the presence of

mind to use magic? She looked up as he knelt on the bed beside her, naked. He was absolutely gorgeous.

His tongue slicked slowly across his lips as his eyes ran over her body. His fingers traced over her stomach, lightly circling her bellybutton. She swallowed as tingles followed the path of his fingers. She recognized that look, that soft touch. He was going to taste and play. A long, slow tease wasn't what she needed right now. She wasn't going to let him have total control although she loved how he made her feel.

She lifted her hand and traced the muscle on the outside of his thigh. His fingers circled her wrist and pressed it back to the sheet beside her hip. His eyes met hers as his hand smoothed over her hip. She didn't resist his hold. She had a plan. His fingers trailed inward, skimming over her mound. She widened her thighs in invitation. His hand cupped her for just a moment. A heartbeat later, she felt his fingertip graze her clit. Her breath locked in her throat and a bolt of sensation shot straight up her spine. She just hoped she'd be able to think by the time she was ready to put her plan into action.

He leaned down and his lips brushed over her ribs. His tongue trailed over the underside of her breast. She waited, her entire body a mass of searing need. Her hips pressed up, needing more than just the slight pressure of his fingers against her clit. His teeth grazed the tip of her nipple and hot moist breath feathered over the sensitive skin. The muscles in her pussy clenched and released. She needed him inside her. She shivered and her hands balled into fists. When his lips closed over the peak, she moved.

She couldn't wait any longer. She reached between his legs and grasped his cock. He froze. She took advantage of that moment of hesitation. Her fingers stroked down the length of his shaft and back up again. She felt a tremor run through his large body as his hips rocked forward. He pried her fingers loose and in a rush of movement, slid between her thighs.

She laughed in triumph. The rounded head of his cock brushed against her pussy. She arched off the bed, eager to get him inside her. His lips slashed across hers fiercely. She met the heat and hunger in that kiss, her tongue darting into his mouth. With a single hand, he lifted her hips off the bed. His cock nudged against her slick opening before pushing inside the tight, clasp flesh.

She twisted in his grip, wanting, needing to move. He growled low in his throat. The sound vibrated through her body, driving her wild. He withdrew and surged forward again. Her mouth trailed down his neck and she sucked and licked before nipping. His hips ground against hers, pressing her onto the sheets. She gasped and shivered. Her nails scraped over his back as she lifted into his thrusts. Tension spiraled tighter inside her.

"Move." She gripped the back of his neck and brushed her lips against his.

His cock drove deep as her hips bucked. Her hands slid down to his buttocks. Her inner muscles clenched again. Fire raced over her body. She pulled him even closer as she trembled, orgasm washing over her.

His body surged against her. His lips left hers and his head tilted back as he drove into her again and again. A hoarse roar ripped from his throat as he came. He remained poised over her, his hips jerking. He collapsed onto her, but almost immediately rolled onto his side, taking her with him.

His hand stroked lightly over her hair. "I could never give you up."

"I'd never let you." She brushed her lips over his throat and inhaled, savoring his musky scent.

Damon cleared his throat. "Sorry to interrupt but it's time. They've found the Dark Sorcerer Gelain's lair. Everyone is gathering to go to battle."

The happiness faded quickly as a heavy weight settled in the pit of her stomach. She'd wanted this, wanted to end the destruction and death. Still, she hadn't been prepared for the almost immediate results. Nervousness flared high and she couldn't stop the tension and fear for Rath and Damon gathering inside her.

"Come on. Let's go stop this sorcerer." Rath lifted her to her feet.

Looking around the room, she tried to find her boots but couldn't see them anywhere. She gave up the search and created a pair. The sooner they started this fight, the quicker this would end.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

The dragons and vampires gathered in a massive gray-walled hall in one of the vampire strongholds. Keira felt a little out of place among all of those males. The only witch, she'd be an obvious target.

Damon led the way through the mass of milling men. She followed just a few paces behind him. Rath's hand pressed against her lower back as he trailed only a step or two behind her.

She kept pace even as her mind flew to the battle ahead. This sorcerer's lair wouldn't be unguarded. The fight to take it would be fierce. She could very well lose one or both of them during this conflict. Fear pulsed and writhed inside her. It couldn't happen. She wouldn't lose them now. Her mouth felt as dry as the desert and her heart pounded.

Pushing the fear back, she focused. Rath and Damon both held a high level of magic. They could take care of themselves. She had to keep her mind on what was happening and not on any worries about them. This Dark Sorcerer had to be stopped.

When they reached the front of the group, Rath moved forward. His hand guided her between himself and Damon. He seemed determined not to lose track of her among the men.

"Is everyone here? Are we ready to go?" Rath asked.

"Now we are." Samiel clasped Rath's arm. "You're the last to get here."

"Let's go. It's past time this threat was removed." Damon slid an arm around her shoulder.

Two dragons created a huge gate. The portal nearly spanned the width of the large hall. The group moved forward slowly. Rath's and Damon's arms curved around her as they stepped into the dark portal. They held on to her as they hurtled through the tunnel. She could feel the pull, the momentum of the tunnel and expected to crash into the other men as they were flung free. Rath and Damon took a single step forward as they were propelled out of the portal.

A huge gray stronghold loomed in front of them. Thick forest surrounded the isolated bastion. The whole area seemed dark and forbidding. The air felt heavy, pressing in on the intruders.

This was as close as they could get to the lair without breaking through shields first. A few dragons took to the sky and began a circling watch over the gathered group of people. They'd have to fight their way to the Master Dark Sorcerer. Already, they could hear *merdanons* gathering as well as the shouts of sorcerers within the walls.

A thick strong shield pulsed in front of them. They could feel the magic emanating from it. Keira stepped forward, calling her weapons into her hands. She let the vibration of the shield's magic roll over her for a few moments, trying to get an idea of how strong the spell was. She swallowed. That shield alone held more magic than she'd ever taken in at one time.

"I'll need someone to take some of the power after I do this." She looked back at Damon.

"We'll take care of you." Damon massaged her shoulders briefly. "Just get us in there without us having to batter that thing down first."

A corner of her lips tilted and she leaned back into him. She enjoyed those circling fingers for a moment before she pulled away from his touch. Raising the dagger, she stabbed it into the shield. Raw power slammed into her. Her body jerked as the energy poured into her and kept coming.

She was barely aware that a hand gripped her arm, lifting it. Teeth sank into her wrist. She stiffened at the sharp, stinging pain. Strong drawing suction pulled power from her. Not nearly enough though. Power still screamed through her at a level that was much too high for comfort.

The lips at her wrist left but another pair replaced it almost immediately. Teeth sank into her wrist. This time there wasn't the suction but she felt the power being taken. Glancing over, she saw a dark head with silver stripes bent over her wrist.

"I'm going to take some too, *chatana*." Rath's moist breath brushed against her ear. "If necessary so will Damon."

He pulled her hair back, brushing a few stray strands off her neck. She angled her head, giving him more access to her neck. His teeth sank deep even as the last of the shield's power flowed into her.

She heard him take a few gulps but felt no suction as he drew the power into him. When the mouth at her wrist finally released, the magic swirling inside her was at a more manageable level. Rath stepped away from her. She felt far more relaxed. Most of the rushing power had been taken.

"Is that better now?" Rath asked. He smoothed his hand down her arm as he lapped the blood trickling from the punctures in her skin.

"Yes, thank you." She smiled over her shoulder at him.

"Then you'd better drink this. You've been bitten twice and this is no time for you to be feeling the effects of two dragon bites." Damon stepped forward, pressing a vial into her hands.

Keira downed the liquid. She'd have to learn the spell for that potion. Rath or Damon always remembered to give it to her but she'd like to know it.

She focused on the battle. Dragons and vampires strode forward and began working on the door that blocked their way. She watched the silver flash of magic hit the door. It shuddered and finally splintered under the barrage of magic. Even before

the last bolt completely destroyed the door, she saw the gray fleshy leg of at least one *merdanon* waiting inside the walls.

She knew the real battle would begin soon. Once inside the fortress walls, they'd have to face everything the sorcerer had. He knew exactly what he had to lose and would defend his territory with every bit of magic he had.

The doors fell. *Merdanons* spilled out, trying to drive the mass of dragons and vampires back. Keira watched from the back of the group as the dragons met the surge. The gray beasts were pressed back into the open area beyond the wall. She saw a red flash and then the smell of charred flesh reached her. Standing on her tiptoes, she tried to get a clear view of the battle through the shifting mass of men. A bit of nervousness crept through her. She knew that it was because she was just standing around and waiting. It would disappear if she was actually on the front lines fighting.

Finally, the group began moving forward as the first wave of *merdanons* fell. As they headed for the doors to the inner fortress, the dragons and vampires broke into smaller groups to search the hallways and rooms of this stronghold.

Keira moved forward eagerly, throwing up a strong shield around Rath, Damon and herself. She wanted this battle finished, the Dark Sorcerer, Gelain, stopped. She wanted her men safe.

As they reached the charred remains of the defeated *merdanons*, she knelt beside them. She thrust the dagger into the magic creations and tensed as more power flowed into her. She continued to destroy the beasts. The magic inside her built again, churning and boiling to a painful peak. Even with the high level, she wouldn't leave even one of those large creatures to be used against them again.

When they entered the fortress, Keira stopped abruptly and stared. In front of her, a floor-to-ceiling mirror reflected their images. She looked left and right and saw that the halls were lined with mirrors. Some of them were huge, from floor to ceiling, others smaller surrounded by ornate frames.

Damon took the lead as they moved into the hallway to the left. Keira strengthened the shield. A tingle of unease crept down her spine. It was too quiet here. A group of dragons and vampires had passed through the hall moments before them but there was no sign of the group and no sign of battle. No *merdanons* had been defeated here.

Something was very wrong. There should have been evidence of the other men's passing. She should still be able to hear their footsteps. Concentrating on her blades, she felt the pulse of magic in the area. Even that was off. She didn't feel much magic. Definitely not enough for even a small battle.

She stopped and looked around the hall. Concentrating, she tried to track the traces of magic she could feel. It wasn't recent. She knew that immediately from the very weakness of the trace. To linger this long, it had to be anchored.

Rath's hand settled on her shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"There's a spell anchored here. I think it's a trap." She looked down the corridor. The question was what exactly activated it.

Damon smiled and turned away. His head tilted to the side as he concentrated on the magic in the hallway. "Yes, there is a spell. There are probably spells throughout the fortress. I warned the others."

"What about those who walked into this hallway before us?" Rath looked down the hallway.

"They're all right. They were transported out of the fortress and still have to deal with some *merdanons*. They'll get back here as soon as they can." Damon reached over to the mirrored wall and lightly touched it.

"What triggers the spell? Were they able to tell?" Keira ran a hand through her hair.

"Dragon and vampire magic are the triggers but it only happened after they'd entered the next hall. Luckily, there aren't a bunch of small spells doing this. The entire fortress is covered by this one spell. Well, one of this type of spell." Damon smiled and rubbed his thumb over the beating pulse in her wrist.

Keira cursed under her breath. "I can't sense anything but the light presence of magic. The details of the spell are beyond my abilities."

"I can sense the details. It's not that complicated. We'll do this together." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

He told her exactly what to do. Keira followed his instructions and the spell broke.

She tamped down the surge of excitement. There was still too much to be done and the fight had just begun. This simple trap would probably only be the first. She had to admit the Dark Sorcerer had planned well. Different types of spells confronted them around every corner.

They knew they were getting close to Gelain when they found themselves entering a hallway identical to the one they'd just left. At first, they barely noticed the repetition. After three times, Keira couldn't deny the truth. Stopping in the middle of the hallway that they'd just entered for the fourth time, she put her hands on her hips. This was the same mirror-lined corridor they'd been through before. A few of the mirrors and frames on the wall had distinctive frames.

"This is getting old," Keira sighed. She looked around, trying to spot the real door out of this corridor. It had to be somewhere along one of the mirrored walls.

"We'll find it." Damon put a hand on her shoulder.

Keira rolled her eyes. She didn't need to be reassured. True, she wanted to find that door but she didn't doubt that they would. She just wanted to find the sorcerer Gelain before he lost faith in all of his traps or his ability to defeat them. She didn't want him running.

Damon tracked the spell to part of the wall covered by a sheet of mirror from floor to ceiling. He worked slowly and carefully on the spell. The mirror cracked as he broke the last of the spell. The middle of the reflective surface swung open.

Rath pushed the door wide open. Light spilled into the hallway. They edged slowly into the room. At first glance, Keira knew they'd found Gelain's haven. This room was

mirror-lined just like the hall but it was a large open room. Her eyes fell on a woman leaning weakly against the wall. Her hands and feet were bound with chains to a pillar. A crystal sat at the top of the pillar.

Anger flared as she saw the gaunt skin and the thin, frail condition of the witch. She could almost see the strength being drained from the woman. Gelain was killing her slowly. Turning her head, Keira saw another woman chained to a pillar. Searching for the sorcerer, she spotted two other women.

At first she didn't see him. A single, large padded throne had been placed at the back of the room, centered between the white pillars holding the women. She caught movement just to the right side of the huge chair. A thin man with brown hair stepped out from behind the chair.

Tugging at the sleeve of his gold silk cuff with a slim hand, he glided forward. There wasn't a wrinkle on his shirt or the flowing pants. The elegant clothing looked almost obscene in contrast to the ragged torn fabric barely covering the women.

"Well, I wasn't expecting your two escorts but no matter. They're easily handled." His silver-blue eyes flicked over Rath dismissively and thin red lips curled.

She was shocked that this man was the sorcerer who had wanted to challenge the dragons and vampires. Physically, he'd stand no chance against even a young dragon. His slim face was formed of almost feminine features and he had milk-white skin.

"Oh, I've got more than two men escorting me." Keira put a hand on her hip. She was counting on Damon's link with the other vampires to get help to them. They might not need it but she wasn't going to underestimate Gelain.

"If there were more dragons and vampires with you, they'd already be here," the Dark Sorcerer Gelain sneered.

Keira wasn't surprised by how normal he looked. She'd seen enough Dark Sorcerers to know that a pretty face could hide an evil soul. What surprised her was how young he looked. Just like most of his minions, he didn't seem old enough to be a Dark Sorcerer. If she'd seen him on the street, she'd have thought that he should still have been locked in the ideals of youth, maybe even still learning the craft. What had caused him to choose this path?

"They're just late. They always are." Keira shrugged.

"Don't waste my time with lies. You'll soon be providing me with power just like these other witches." He brushed a strand of shining brown hair over his shoulder.

"That won't be happening and you've drawn your last bit of magic from them." She swung her sword in a wide, angled sweep.

Silver and white magic rolled in a wide arc from her sword. It didn't touch the sorcerer. The magic broke into four bolts and went straight for the crystals at the top of the pillars. It surrounded the crystals in a glittering haze. From within one of the dense clouds, a distinct crack sounded before shards of crystal cascaded to the floor. One after the other, each of the remaining gems broke.

The Dark Sorcerer tensed, straightening to his full height which she'd guess was a little shorter than hers. "You'll pay for that."

"You won't have time to make her pay for anything." Damon stepped up beside her.

Gelain laughed. He threw his hands wide. Energy crackled in the room and a tunnel opened up directly in front of him. Three *merdanons* stepped out of the dark maw. The *merdanons* straightened to their full height as they stepped clear of the tunnel. The middle *merdanon* roared.

Rath stepped up beside Damon and Keira and tossed a bolt of magic. It flared in a silver-white cloud as it hit a shield in front of the *merdanons*.

Keira frowned. Something wasn't right here. The Dark Sorcerer Gelain knew exactly what she could do to a shield. He shouldn't have put up a shield around the *merdanons*. Why would he just give her power right from the start?

Rath's hand settled on her shoulder. "It's too easy."

"Let's take it the usual way. There's no rush. We have help if we need it," Damon offered.

Keira nodded and sent a wave of magic slamming at the shield. The magic flared and spread across it in a silver wave. She frowned as the shield held strong. Impatience boiled within her. She wanted that shield down and those *merdanons* out of the way. Pushing the feeling down, she focused on the *merdanons* behind the shield. The beast on the right turned and picked up a stone pedestal and threw it.

The flying column passed through the sorcerer's shield and hit the shield directly in front of Keira. She flinched instinctively. Sparks flashed as Rath threw bolts of magic at the shield in front of the *merdanons*. A rush of fear slammed into her and her heart pounded even as the stone broke into pieces and dropped to the ground.

She tried to calm her racing pulse. It was so irrational. That shield was solid. She knew it. She'd created it. Seeing that large pedestal hurtling toward her had driven away all logic for a moment.

Damon's hand rose and brushed across her back in small soothing circles. The warmth of his palm felt so reassuring. Her muscles relaxed. Looking over at him, she nodded her thanks.

She swept her sword in a short arc, sending a rolling wave of magic toward the shield. Her lips thinned. Urgency built within her. They had to break that shield and get past the *merdanons* before the Dark Sorcerer decided to run.

Rath and Damon threw a barrage of strong bolts at the Dark Sorcerer's shield. The magic flared over the shield and then a ball of energy zipped past as the shield fell. The left *merdanon* screamed as the energy hit it. All three of the *merdanons* roared and charged forward. The beasts crashed into the shield and stumbled back. Keira sliced her blade through the air. A wide wedge of power drove the creatures back, away from their shield.

"No! You won't defeat me! I'm better than any dragon or vampire," Gelain yelled.

A sizzling orb of magic formed on Rath's hand. He hurled it at the *merdanon* in the middle. As Keira drew her sword back, she saw movement to the far left. She tensed. Her head whipped around for a better view. She saw Gaellon waiting near the doorway. He pointed to one of the women chained to the wall. Keira stepped forward, pressing the shield ahead of her until the two closest women were within the shield's protection. Gaellon's boots pounded against the white stone floor as he rushed over to one of the women. She saw Jaeson go to the second woman.

Keira swept her blade wide. The silvery wave hit all three *merdanons*. The middle beast fell, crashing heavily to the floor. She could see the Dark Sorcerer standing tensely in front of his seat. His hands were fisted at his side, his body almost vibrating with anger. The two remaining creatures roared and lumbered forward.

They hit the shield and were driven back. The Dark Sorcerer raised his hands. Bolts of magic flashed and grew over his head. He swept his hands down to his side. The mass hurtled toward them, sizzling as it hit the shield. Light exploded in front of them.

Keira blinked, trying to clear the bright spots out of her vision. She concentrated on the shield for a moment, checking its strength. She pushed more power into it. Finally she could see clearly again. The sorcerer had vanished. Horror and frustration hit her. He *couldn't* escape, not now when they were so close to finishing this.

"Blessed Lady, he's gone!" Keira's hands fisted and landed on her hips.

"Don't worry. He's not going anywhere." Damon's hand rested on her shoulder.

"Remember? We're not alone. Our friends made sure he couldn't leave. When he gets back, he's going to be one angry sorcerer. Press the shield ahead of us again. Let's get the other two women," Rath said and looked toward the two shackled women.

She nodded. Pushing the shield forward, she drove the *merdanons* back. The moment the women were on the safe side of the shield Jaeson and Gaellon rushed over to free the women from the chains.

She turned her attention to the two *merdanons*. Letting those beasts linger didn't help finish this. Gelain probably wouldn't even come back here. He might be dealt with by some of the other dragons and vampires. These two beasts needed to be destroyed.

She threw an orb at the *merdanon* on the left. The ball of energy hit. The gray-skinned creature staggered. She formed another bolt of magic even before the sparks of the first had fallen to the ground.

Rath chuckled and tossed a ball of energy. "Is the energy still high?"

She glared at him. He didn't have to sound so cheerful. The magic still burned at a higher than normal level. Her nipples were hard and the fabric of her shirt felt abrasive. A tight coil of need pulsed low in her stomach. The high magic heightened her arousal which increased the power within her. A vicious cycle. She'd need to perform a major spell to break it without power being taken.

She swung her sword, sending a ball of energy slamming into the *merdanon*. It fell just as a flash of light blinded her for a moment. White spots flashed in front of her eyes. She blinked, trying to clear her vision again.

"Do you really think your pathetic shield will hold me here?" Gelain asked. His long brown hair swung as he whirled and began to pace. "I'll get out of here and your woman will be with me."

"It's not my shield but I'd say from the pull of the magic that you won't be going anywhere soon." Keira slung an arc of energy toward the last *merdanon*, fully expecting the power to hit a shield.

The flashing silver magic drove into the beast, crackling as it sizzled over the *merdanon*. The creature roared and charged straight into the shield. Stumbling back, it again rushed forward. Damon lobbed a ball of energy at the raging creature. The bolt of power crashed over the beast. The last *merdanon* tumbled to the floor.

"Dragons and vampires won't win this time. I'll be the one who holds the *Tiria*." Gelain's hand slashed through the air and he tossed his head, sending his hair flying.

Keira frowned. The man was obsessed. She'd expected it before this but confirmation still surprised her. He'd attacked too many times against dragons and vampires for it to be a coincidence. Then there was the way he always claimed the attacks. He'd wanted everyone to know that the destruction had been done in his name. His fixation had been apparent. Fanatical anger gleamed in his eyes and hatred coated each word he said.

"You wouldn't last long with her. She isn't a normal sorceress that you can weaken with a crystal." Rath's mouth tilted into a confident smile. He seemed prepared to just talk to the madman.

"I'd have her begging like all of the others. I will have her begging after I finish with the dragons and vampires contaminating my fortress." He shot a dismissive glare toward Keira.

Keira's hand's tightened around the hilts of her weapons. There was no way of knowing how many witches he'd drained or killed during his quest to hurt the vampires and dragons. She was tired of being seen as an accessory to Rath and Damon. To Gelain and others, she was incidental, only a prize to be gained by defeating Rath and Damon. Definitely not something he'd need to fear. She slowly lifted the sword. He wouldn't be hurting any more witches.

"Your power sources are gone. You want to prove you're better than vampires and dragons? Try it. They'll kill you. If you surrender now, I'll make sure you only lose your magic," she offered.

The sorcerer just sneered. She watched as he hurled an orb toward Rath. The ball of power hit the shield and fell to the ground in a shower of sparks. She'd expected that kind of reaction. Men like him would sooner lose their life than lose their power. He'd had his chance.



She could take down his shield in the blink of an eye but the fact remained that he knew of that ability. Did he really think he was invincible or was he trying to lure her into a trap? She wouldn't take the chance. She drew her arm back and slung an arc of energy toward the sorcerer.

"You're so smug, so sure. You have the *Tiria* and you think you'll keep her. Let's see how you do without her and her power. How brave will you be then?" The sorcerer's eyes locked on Keira.

Keira felt a sudden flutter in her stomach as the floor beneath her disappeared. She tried to lurch forward, to grab on to something but her searching hands found nothing. Just as she passed the floor, she heard Rath roar her name.

She felt the pull of a transport tunnel and saw streaks of light flash past her. A moment later, she was thrust out into open air. She dropped, screaming as she fell. She hit the water feet first and went under before she could draw in a breath. Pushing off the sandy bottom, she struggled to the surface, desperate for air. Coughing and choking, she gulped air as she looked around the area. A grating noise above her drew her eyes to the ceiling. She saw a large stone being moved into place over a round hole.

Soft, flickering lamplight drew her toward the shore. Still holding her weapons, she stumbled onto the rocky cave floor. Her jaw clenched as she eyed the black walls of the cave. It looked like *vancren* rock. She hoped that it wasn't and comforted herself with the fact that *vancren* was extremely rare. The Dark Sorcerer couldn't have possibly found a whole cavern of the magic-repelling rock.

A slightly acrid smell filled the low-ceilinged room. It felt even smaller than it was. Taking a deep breath, she tried to send her weapons away. The magic flared and then slammed back into her. Her weapons fell to the floor. She gasped and stumbled back. Her head pounded and her entire body ached.

Keira looked at the spot on the ceiling where the hole had been. That was the entrance but it couldn't be the exit. There had to be a way for Gelain to get his victims out of his little prison easily. He couldn't send *merdanons* into this place. They'd be destroyed by the *vancren*. A group of lesser sorcerers would probably be delegated to get anyone sent here. They'd need a way to get in and out of the room. She just had to find the opening they used and get out of this cave.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Rage swept over Rath. He barely controlled the urge to change forms and broil the sorcerer in front of him. He fully expected Keira to pop back into the room at any moment. There wasn't much that would even slow her from doing anything she wanted.

"Now that she's gone, let's see how long you can last against me." Gelain smiled and brushed his hair back over his shoulder.

Rath wanted to crush the prissy sorcerer. The sorcerer actually thought he could win just because Keira was gone. Rath's eyes narrowed.

"Are you ready to admit your cowardice now that the *Tiria* is gone and you can't feed from her? You're just like all the other dragons and vampires. So ready to step forward and fight when they have the number advantage but they never chance what might be a losing battle." The sorcerer folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against the wall.

"What have you done to Keira?" Damon stepped forward aggressively.

Rath had the impression that Damon wanted to rip the man's throat out. Damon stood tensely, his hands clenched and his fangs bared. Rath was in total agreement with that thought. The man needed to die.

"She's safe but somewhere that she can't get out. You two will have to fight fair. This time you won't be able to take the honor for something you didn't do." Gelain came away from the wall in a rush and hurled an energy arc at them.

Silver sparks showered to the floor as it hit the shield Damon had put up as soon as Keira had disappeared.

The man had to be crazy. Nothing he said made any sense. He clearly carried a grudge against dragons and vampires but at times he spoke as if he wasn't just spouting generalities. Some of the remarks had been specifically directed at Rath and Damon. Rath knew that he'd never met the man. He wouldn't have forgotten meeting a man like the one standing across from him.

Rath snarled. If he had to take the man apart limb by limb, the sorcerer would tell him where Keira had been sent. Until then, he had to keep the man alive. Rath wouldn't risk her being trapped wherever Gelain had sent her.

Rath formed a ball of magic and threw it toward the sorcerer. He focused on taking down the shield protecting the man. Only when the sorcerer actually feared for his life would he talk. That was going to take time and patience, because he didn't want to take the chance of accidentally killing him.

The orb hit the sorcerer's shield, flaring, sparks flying and falling to the ground. Gelain laughed and flung two orbs at the shield. Damon stepped forward. His mouth was set in a straight line and the muscles in his arms were taut with tension. Rath could see the anger in every move the vampire made.

Damon hurled a sizzling ball toward the sorcerer. Before it even hit, he was forming another. Rath waited until Damon's magic had hit the shield. The sorcerer's shield held. The sorcerer's bolts continued to hit their shield steadily. Rath threw a flaring fireball at the sorcerer.

"The other vampires haven't found a trace of her yet," Damon grated. He flung another orb at the shield. It slammed into the shield. Magic flashed over the barrier but it held.

"They won't find her. Only I know where she is." The sorcerer gloated and threw three quick blasts of energy.

The sorcerer's magic didn't have nearly as much power as the bolts he'd thrown earlier. He had to be putting more of his magic into keeping his shield intact. Rath lobbed another ball of energy at the sorcerer's shield. He watched the way the magic washed over the surface of the shield. It wouldn't hold much longer. Then when the man realized that he'd lose this battle, he'd talk. Rath wouldn't accept anything else. No matter what they had to do, the sorcerer would give them answers.

Rath threw a flaming bolt of energy. It hit and sizzled across Gelain's shield. The slow pace frustrated him. He wanted to slam bolts of energy into that shield until the sorcerer was too weak to maintain it. One errant blast of magic after the shield fell and they wouldn't be able to get any information from the sorcerer.

"Do you think I'll ever tell you where she is? She's mine now whether I'm alive or dead." The sorcerer formed a large magic ball and hurled it right at Rath.

A growl rumbled out of Rath. An immediate denial of the sorcerer's claim on Keira. He didn't answer verbally. He threw a powerful arc of magic, waiting only long enough to be sure that his opponent's shield held before launching another sizzling orb.

Damon threw a sizzling ball at the shield before the flash of Rath's magic had even faded. The magic hit the shield, flared and the shield disappeared.

The sorcerer's eyes widened and he took a step back. "It takes two of you to beat me. Go on, kill me but you'll never find her."

Rath's eyes narrowed as he strode forward. "There are far worse things than dying. You won't escape that easily."

The sorcerer looked from Rath to Damon. "You can torture me all you want. I won't tell you where she is. If I can't have the *Tiria*, no one will. I certainly won't let her go to dragons and vampires."

\* \* \* \* \*

Keira moved the lantern closer as she looked at the carved indentation. Kneeling, Keira grimaced as she ran her hands over the bottom of the opening. She hadn't expected leaving to be simple. A huge slab of *vancren* blocked the entrance to the room. She'd pushed and shoved on the rock, even tried moving it to the side. Her fingers bled from cuts made by the sharp edges.

She could still feel her powers boiling inside her but after that one attempt didn't try using them again. Since she'd come into her powers in her teens, she'd been able to rely on them. Not being able to use them frustrated her and made her feel even more trapped. She wanted to blast that stone out of her way.

For the first time, she began to have some doubts about her ability to get herself out of this situation. She looked around the dim chamber and took a deep breath. Waiting for rescue wasn't an option. They wouldn't be able to find her, not in here. She'd tried to use her sword as a lever but she couldn't get enough leverage.

Then there was the danger Rath and Damon would be facing now. She knew they wouldn't kill the sorcerer until they knew where she was. That man would remain a threat until he either had no power or was killed.

She stood and looked around the room again, hoping that she could find some kind of sturdy pole or a metal bar to use as a lever. As she turned, she bumped against the slab. The stone rocked backward. She heard a thud even as she felt the stone settle back into place.

Her eyes widened. If she couldn't move the stone to the side, maybe she could knock it over. As far as she could tell, it wasn't anchored to anything. Hope surged through her.

Bracing her hands near the top of the stone, she pushed. It rocked back with only the slightest pressure. The feel of the stone moving and the soft clunk as the uneven stone hit the floor sent a surge of energy through her. She shoved and the stone tipped outward. She saw light stream in through the growing gap. Just as she thought the stone would fall outward, her foot slipped and she stumbled. The gap closed as the stone rocked back into place with a loud slam of stone against stone again.

Frustrated, she glared at the stone. She *would* move it. That rock wasn't going to keep her here. Not after she'd seen that beam of light beyond it. She surged forward, throwing her entire body into the shove. It tipped outward. Light filled the gap around the stone. For a moment, the stone seemed to hang in midair. Her thigh muscles burned as she strained to push it. It toppled over and crashed against a wall, leaving a v-shaped gap.

Keira smiled and let out a triumphant whoop. She ran over to her weapons and grabbed them. It was time to find her way back to Rath and Damon. She wouldn't just transport herself into the room, possibly right into the middle of a battle. It would be too dangerous. She didn't have any way of knowing where in the room they were now. She didn't want to bounce off someone's shield.

She climbed over the leaning stone and stepped into a brown-walled hallway. Lanterns lined the walls, providing the bright light that had given her hope. No one waited in the hallway. She'd expected to see an apprentice or minion, left as a guard to the exit. As she stood there, she felt the magic in the castle through her connection with the sword and dagger. It seemed to be all around her, especially above her. Forming a strong shield around her, she went toward the strongest magic on this level. She moved forward, cautious of activating a trap.

The roar of a *merdanon* echoed down the hallway. Keira's fingers tightened around her weapons as she edged back against the wall. She swept her eyes from one direction to the other. The echoing effect made it impossible to tell where the noise had been made. Although she was fairly sure she'd hear one of those beasts before it got too close to her, she didn't want to chance it sneaking up on her.

Creeping down the hallway, she kept glancing warily over her shoulder. Nothing moved and there was hardly any noise now. The silence made her more nervous than the roar had. Reaching a corner, she cautiously peered around it. She couldn't see anyone in this section of the corridor. Maybe the *merdanon* had been in that other direction. She wasn't going to turn around and go looking for the beast.

Keira paced down the deserted hallway. It connected to a dark staircase, spiraling up to the next level. Creating an orb of light, she walked up the stairs. At the top, she gazed down the hallway and frowned as she saw something large and lumpy on the floor. She crept slowly down the dim hall.

She recognized that shape even from this distance. That was a *merdanon*. Was it a trap or had some taken it down? She walked slowly and as quietly as possible toward it. The whisper of her soft-soled boots on the stone floor seemed unbearably loud and every step drew her muscles a bit tighter.

The beast could have been defeated by one of the dragons or vampires. What held her back was the possibility that it could have been left by one of the sorcerers to attack anyone who ventured close to it. She'd seen those beasts destroy stone walls with one blow. It could easily kill someone of her size.

She tossed a ball of magic at it. It didn't even twitch. That roar she'd heard must have been near the last of the battle to defeat it. Looking at the gray-skinned beast, she knew that leaving it would be irresponsible. The sorcerer had enough weapons without giving him one she could take away permanently.

She walked over to it and plunged the dagger into its shoulder. The *merdanon* dissolved in a silver-gray mist. Power rushed into her, taking the already uncomfortably high level up another notch.

Keira looked down at her hands and saw the fine tremor in them. She took a deep breath and started down the hallway. Where were the dragons and vampires when they were really needed? By the Great Lady, she needed to get rid of some of this power. She'd never been more tempted to just throw some magic at the wall. Wasting power

went against her training and she just couldn't make herself do it. Not in a hostile situation.

Keira looked down the hallway. None of this area looked familiar. Her spirits sank just a little. She'd hoped to come out close to the section where the wizard's lair was. This seemed to be a working section of the stronghold. It lacked the finery and most obviously the mirrors of the section she knew.

She didn't know how many hallways she'd investigated before she heard the distinctive sound of a dragon growl. Quickening her step, she hurried down the hall. She didn't want to miss the dragon if he was just walking through the hallway.

She slowed as she got a little closer and could hear more. A man's cursing reverberated off the walls. She knew it wasn't the dragon, because one of the curses defamed dragons and all of their ancestors. Her pace slowed even more. She didn't want to somehow get between the dragon and the minion he was facing.

Approaching the end of the hallway with caution, she moved closer to the wall. Peering out, she saw three men. Two men stood on one side of the room, the other on the opposite side, facing them. Just at that glance, she knew the minion was outmatched and really had no chance. She recognized the two men he was facing, Samiel and Jaeson. She almost felt sorry for the sorcerer. He couldn't flee. He was trapped by the spell set to keep Gelain from running. In only moments, the two men had defeated him.

Keira stepped slowly out of the hallway. Jaeson and Samiel whirled, magic ready to hurl at an enemy. Their eyes widened when they saw her but they gave no other sign of surprise.

"Where have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you. Rath and Damon are worried. They've been trying to force an answer out of that sorcerer about where he sent you but haven't had any luck." Samiel folded his arms across his broad chest and leveled a hard stare at her. Light shone on his golden hair, highlighting the blue streaks and his green earring.

"If I could have gotten out any sooner I would have." She gritted her teeth. The arrogant dragon's disapproving stare made her angry. She wasn't some errant child.

"Where were you?" Jaeson tilted his head to the side.

"I don't know if you'd believe me. I could barely believe it myself. Could you tell Damon that I'm safe and that they should just take care of the sorcerer? I don't want to tunnel myself right into the middle of their battle." She took a deep breath and let the anger fall away from her. Even when the battle with Gelain had been finished, there would be things they needed to do.

"I'll tell them but they're going to have to see you before they'll do anything." Jaeson nodded. "I'll take you to them."

Keira shook her head and sighed. She didn't entirely believe that. Rath and Damon would believe what Jaeson said. She did want to see them. After falling through that floor, she wanted to make sure that they were safe.

"Now if you'll just let me through your shield, we'll go." He stepped forward and smiled.

It was that wide smile that set her nerves on edge and caused a surge of fear. As she thought about it, he should have been able to pop through her shield. Damon did it all the time. *Why wouldn't he be able to do it?*

She took a step back and made no move to lower her shield. Her mind raced to think of a way to know if they were truly who they seemed to be. Suddenly she wasn't so sure if what she was seeing was reality. She'd accepted that they were what they seemed, because she'd walked into a battle. *Could it all be an illusion?*

"I'm not going to take any chances. Show me..." She bit her lip, still thinking. "Feed from him."

Jaeson's jaw dropped. He stared at her for a moment as if he couldn't believe that she had any doubts. She didn't withdraw her demand. As she waited and watched, he tilted his head a little to the side.

"Damon says for you to stop being difficult and let me bring you to them." Jaeson put a hand on his hip and his lips tightened.

She kept her lips in a straight line with effort. Impatience and frustration coated the sizzling look he'd sent her. He seemed confident that his pronouncement would encourage her to do as he said. The man didn't know her at all.

She slowly shook her head. "Damon should have informed you that I don't follow his orders all that often. I certainly won't be going along with supposed secondhand commands."

She edged around the two men toward a passage opposite the one she'd just left. Keeping her eyes on them, she saw their surprise and annoyance. Jaeson strode toward her. She was becoming more certain that they weren't who they said they were. As annoyed as that vampire looked, if he'd have been able, he'd probably passed through her shield just to end the argument.

"Where do you think you're going?" Samiel growled.

"Since I can't trust you, I'm going to find them on my own. If you actually can communicate with them, tell them I'll be there as soon as I can." Keira didn't look over at him and she didn't stop walking.

"Stop, Keira." Jaeson finally leapt directly in front of the doorway. "You win. I'll feed."

She didn't know what his problem was. She'd seen other vampires taking blood from dragons. It wasn't taboo for it to be seen. Folding her arms across her chest, she turned away from the entrance to the next passage.

Keira waited but Jaeson just stood there. Casting a significant look to the doorway, she looked at him again. Jaeson walked stiffly across the room. He glanced over at her, then back at the man in front of him. She almost took pity on him and told him to stop but this could be a life-or-death decision. Samiel looked just as uncomfortable as Jaeson

but the dragon also looked furious. The vampire grasped Samiel's hand in his and lifted it to his lips.

Keira blinked. He actually expected her to believe that was the way a vampire fed from his bond partner and lover. She exhaled harshly, whirled and stalked through the doorway and down the hall. Listening to them was obviously a waste of time. She had no idea if they were actually who they said they were but she needed to get to Rath and Damon.

"Where are you going?" Samiel called.

She could hear them following her down the hallway. They didn't get too close but they kept moving.

"I'm going to find Rath and Damon the hard way since I can't be sure who you are." She walked faster, hoping that soon she'd find some area that seemed familiar. Once she found somewhere that she'd been earlier with Rath and Damon, she should be able to get to her two men quickly.

"Why don't you believe that's the way I feed from him?" Jaeson asked.

"I'll tell you after we defeat the sorcerer and the last of his minions," she said. She turned the corner without glancing back at them. Her shields were solid. If they wanted to follow her, they could do that all day long.

A low growl rumbled down the hallway. She recognized the annoyance in that sound. Dragons weren't used to being ignored. If he was really a dragon, this would really irritate him. She felt a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. It would be a learning experience for them. Their word wasn't law.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she found an area she recognized. Hurrying through the twisting hallways, she rushed toward the inner sanctum and her men. In her rush, she almost passed the door into the sorcerer Gelain's chambers. Caution surfaced as her fingers touched the door. She pushed the door open, walking slowly into the room.

Rath and Damon both swung around to face her at the sound of the door. Relief relaxed the tension in their muscles and wide smiles spread across their faces.

"Why, when you have a vampire and a dragon actually following you, did you walk to us?" Rath's brows lowered over his golden eyes as he faced her. He didn't do more than glance over his shoulder when the sorcerer moved away from the wall.

"You won't fool me with your illusions. I know she can't escape my prison. I'm not just going to blurt out where I've put her." The Dark Sorcerer stepped into Keira's view.

He smiled smugly and put a hand on his hip. From just that expression, she knew that he truly believed that his trap was inescapable. She couldn't help but be amazed at his confidence when he'd been caged inside his own fortress.

Dropping her shield, she put her trust in Rath and Damon's. She walked straight to her two men and put away all thoughts of the sorcerer.



"I couldn't be sure who they were. I may be able to feel magic but I can't tell whose it is. After what happened, I wasn't going to take any chance of falling back into his trap," she whispered.

They pulled her close, each curving an arm around her. She leaned into them. While she'd been trapped in that chamber, she'd wondered if she'd ever see them again. Just holding them felt like heaven.

"I think it's time to end this now. We have more to do after the battle than we normally do." Keira stepped away from them reluctantly. She wanted to curl up in their arms and lose her worries in their touch but knew that they had to get rid of that sorcerer. He'd done enough damage.

"You can stop trying to fool me. I know she's not here. You have no idea where I put her." The sorcerer folded his arms across his chest. "I'll never tell. If you kill me, she'll die a slow, lingering death."

She shook her head slowly, taking a few steps closer to the disbelieving man. She wanted to see his face when he realized that it was her. "Your *vancren*-lined prison isn't as inescapable as you believe. You underestimated me."

The Dark Sorcerer Gelain gasped sharply. He stumbled back a step.

"Your time is done. Surrender." Damon stepped up beside her.

Gelain created an arc of energy and threw it. All Keira saw was that bolt streaking toward Damon. She reacted before she had time to think. Slamming a shield up, she flung an arc of energy. Her jaw dropped when it hit him. She'd expected him to have a shield up for protection. The silver and white magic sizzled over him and his body jerked reflexively.

Horrorified, she watched as he fell to the floor. "Great Lady, why'd he do that?"

"He wanted to die. To a man like him, anything would be better than living without power." Damon put his arm around her.

The sorcerer's magic had hit the shield and rebounded before falling in sparks to the floor. It hadn't even hit her shield. She'd known that Rath and Damon had a shield up but she was so used to holding one that it had been natural to throw one in place.

Rath walked over to the sorcerer Gelain to check to see if he was alive. Keira knew that it was a useless task. She hadn't held anything back when she'd thrown that. It would be almost impossible for an unshielded human to survive that blast.

"He's dead. Now we just have the cleanup and the destruction of this hold and that *vancren* room you visited." Rath looked over at Keira. "Are you all right?"

No, she wasn't all right. She'd killed in battle before but this was different. He'd deliberately thrown that arc when he hadn't had a shield. Taking his life didn't seem the same as the other times. He'd been virtually defenseless.

"You didn't know he didn't have a shield and it happened too fast for us to tell you." Damon leaned down and his arms tightened as he held her.

"It will just take me a little time to adjust. I can't help feeling a little guilty about killing him like that." She looked away from him and slowly swallowed.

Keira couldn't get her mind around the fact that he hadn't been a real threat. Ever since they'd found him, she'd considered him a very real danger to her and anyone else who came close to him. Every time she'd looked at him, she'd remembered all the death and destruction that had been done at his order, in his name.

Taking a deep breath, she turned away from the dead sorcerer and forced her thoughts onto what had to be done. Rath was right. They had plenty to do before they could go home. It looked like the first task would be explaining her actions to Samiel and Jaeson. The two men stood across the room with their arms crossed over their broad chests.

"The sorcerer is dead now. Why didn't you trust Jaeson?" Samiel's eyes narrowed.

"Because he didn't come through my shield and he fed wrong. You're bonded with him. It's supposed to be a trusting, intimate relationship. He fed from your wrist like he would from someone he just met." Keira glanced from Jaeson to Samiel and shook her head in exasperation. What was she supposed to think when they behaved like strangers?

Damon laughed. "I can't blame her for that. Most people would probably think that. She couldn't have known that you're fighting."

"So when a pair fights they keep their distance from each other?" She turned and frowned at Rath and Damon. She'd seen at least one argument between them and they hadn't avoided each other.

"No, that's what they do. When Rath and I fight it can get loud and sometimes physical at times. We work out our problems." Damon guided her toward the door.

"While Jaeson isn't small, he is shorter than Samiel. Samiel is afraid he'll hurt him." Rath confided.

Keira glanced at Samiel and Jaeson. Really there wasn't that much difference between the two men. There had to be something more behind that fear.

"As we have our answer, we'll start cleaning up an area." Samiel nodded to Keira, turned and left.

Jaeson smiled. "Don't be too hard on yourself. If you hadn't fallen for his trick, he would have killed himself."

Keira closed her eyes for a moment but managed a nod.

"Come on. We have a lot to do and you're just standing there." Damon grasped her hand and tugged her out of the room.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Damon glanced over at Keira. Her low-cut, sleeveless red shirt molded to her breasts and the curve of her waist. The black fabric of her skirt swayed as she idly swung one of her feet. She sat on the green couch with Rath, laughing and smiling. A bowl had been placed between them and they busily worked, cutting the *derria* berries they'd picked earlier that day.

She seemed to be finally returning to normal again. Killing the sorcerer in that way had hit her harder than Damon thought it would when it happened. She'd lost sleep and been much quieter than usual for nearly a month. At times, he'd catch her just staring at nothing, frowning, her shoulders slumped. She'd never admit that she'd been thinking of the Dark Sorcerer. When they asked, she'd smile and change the topic. In the past few days, she hadn't done that even once. He thought she might have finally worked through her problems.

He knew that it didn't hold her back in a battle. They'd been called to aid a small group of vampires against two Dark Sorcerers and too many *merdanons*. Other than a little nervousness at first before they'd faced their enemy, she hadn't had any trouble. She'd done what she needed to do.

"You're staring." Keira's voice broke into his thoughts.

"I like what I see." He ran his eyes over her gorgeous body. Just looking at her excited him. His cock hardened and for a moment, he considered waiting until later to talk to her.

"Well, if you don't like me, you're one of the most perverse creatures I've ever met, because you spend a lot of time kissing me." She tossed a ripe purple berry into the air and caught it in her mouth.

She threw another berry in the air. A dark hand flashed out and caught the juicy fruit just above her lips. She turned to scowl at the smiling dragon next to her.

"Those are for our dessert," Rath said. He reached out and tousled her hair.

"Hey, I helped pick those. I can eat some of them." She grabbed a berry from the bowl, popping it into her mouth.

"No more. I have plans for those." He looked down at the bowl and a smile curved his lips.

"Plans for dessert." She laughed and her eyes gleamed. "Maybe I do too."

Damon had plans. They involved convincing Keira that he loved her. He didn't fool himself. It wouldn't be easy. He'd done an excellent job of convincing her that he believed that what was between them was entirely sexual. Convincing her that he now

knew what he felt would probably take days. She wouldn't open herself to more hurt. Not after he'd told her not to confuse need for love.

When he'd said it, he should have known better. His reaction had been too strong. Rath was right. There had been more to his outburst than disbelief. He'd been afraid, because even then his feelings for her had been intense. He hadn't wanted to acknowledge how much power that gave her.

Keira looked up and caught him staring at her. She frowned and stood, walking over to him. Reaching up, she stroked her hand along his jaw. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the spontaneous touch.

"You look serious. Is something wrong?" She asked.

"Nothing is wrong. I just have something to say and I'm thinking about how to say it." He leaned down and dropped a kiss on her lips. The truth was he was delaying it as long as he could, because he didn't want to fight with her.

"Well, starting at the beginning usually works." Rath looked up and smiled a very smug smile.

The dragon was enjoying this. He could either help or stay out of it. Damon frowned at him before turning his attention back to Keira. She stood waiting, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"I know after what I did you probably won't believe me, that I'll have to prove myself to you." He smoothed his hand across her cheek and then into her soft, thick golden hair.

"Damon..." Her hands pressed against his chest, sliding up the soft fabric of his blue shirt to his shoulders.

"Shh... Let me say this." He took a deep breath, trying to find the words that would make her believe that he was telling the truth. His palm slid around to cup the back of her neck.

Her eyes narrowed but she lowered her head once in a very regal nod. She stood calmly in front of him but he knew she wasn't as calm as she looked. He could feel the tension in her muscles and see the fast beating of the pulse at her neck.

"When you said you loved us, I just reacted. I didn't even stop to think about why I did it." Damon shook his head and looked down into her eyes.

She remained silent. He could feel the slight tremor of her body beneath his fingers. He wrapped his free arm around her and pulled her close.

"The feelings were too intense. It was easier to hide behind the physical side of our relationship. By the blood, even that didn't last long. With all of the battles and threats, I wasn't able to hold that belief for more than a few days." Damon stroked his hand up her back, the movement as much to calm his own nerves as it was to soothe her.

"What do you feel?" she asked. Her fingers played with the ends of his hair.

Damon smiled and felt a little of the tension ease out of him. He'd thought she might be a little defensive or even openly dismissive. While he wouldn't have blamed her for that attitude, she seemed open and eager to hear what he had to say.

He wished he knew words to make this beautiful for her but he wasn't a poet. "I love you."

"I love you too." Her arms tightened around him.

He looked down at her. It seemed too good to be true. She just accepted his love. There wasn't even a hint of doubt in her voice or in her bright eyes.

"You still look worried," Keira said.

"You don't have any doubts about what I said?" he asked.

Her smile widened and her body relaxed against his. "I trust you to know what you feel."

He closed his eyes and lowered his chin to her hair. With those words, she almost brought him to his knees. His arms tightened around her.

"You absolutely amaze me." He leaned back to look down at her upturned face.

"Well, I am pretty good." She grinned and winked.

Rath's arms brushed over Damon's as he stepped up behind Keira. She gasped and wriggled in between them. Her surprise at feeling Rath behind her was obvious. Damon smiled and pressed close to her, enfolding her in their arms. Her hands slipped around his waist and tightened in a hug. Damon felt Rath's hand slide against his chest as he cupped Keira's breast. She wriggled a little, allowing the hard fingers to tease and torment. Far from being passive, her hands slipped down Damon's back and cupped his buttocks. Hunger speared through Damon.

"Let's take our witch to bed." Rath leaned down and nuzzled the hair away from Keira's ear.

She shivered and pressed closer.

Damon looked down at her. Their witch... She'd never intended to take up those weapons or to become involved with a dragon or a vampire. Her acceptance of the bond had come slowly. It wasn't any surprise that she'd fought them or her desire for them. The gift of her love had at first frightened him. Now her love just amazed and delighted him. He wanted to give her everything she needed, every part of him.

"I think she needs to be shown just how special she really is." Damon inhaled deeply. He could smell Rath's deep rich musk, heightened by arousal as well as Keira's sweet scent. The underlying scent of her desire rose, teasing and tormenting him. He wanted to taste those slick juices, to watch her come again and again.

"She needs to be licked and kissed until she's begging to come." Rath nodded. His arm curled around Keira's waist.

Damon smiled as he heard her breath catch. "I'm going to lay her back on the bed, spread her legs and feast until she's writhing beneath my tongue."

There was no denying that she liked the idea. The scent of her arousal increased noticeably. Her hard nipples pressed against his chest. He'd bet that her thighs were slick with her cream.

Keira looked up at him and then at the bed. "Do I get any say in these plans?"

Rath turned her to him and dropped a quick fierce kiss on her lips. "If you like."

She stepped away from them and took off her shirt, letting it fall to the floor. "Stop talking and do it."

Rath laughed. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. Damon followed at a slower pace, a broad smile curving his lips. Anticipation burned and pulsed inside him. By the blood, he loved her attitude. They might have used sorcery to bind her to them but in the end her love and passion had tied them to her with unbreakable bonds.

Damon climbed into bed beside her. She wriggled, pushing her skirt down her legs. Grabbing the fabric, he tugged it free of her feet and flung it across the room. He pulled her into his lap. Nuzzling her neck, he scraped his teeth across the sensitive skin. She shivered and a moan ripped from her throat.

"It's time to make a certain witch scream with pleasure." Damon enjoyed her unrestrained reaction.

"And then she can show us just how good she is." Rath's hands grabbed Damon's shoulders and tumbled him down onto the soft mattress.

She laughed as she came to rest between them. Tangling her fingers in Damon's hair, she slanted her lips across his. Passionate and eager, she sometimes pushed the limits but she was always their witch.

## About the Author

Rebecca Airies has always loved to read. Futuristic, the classics, mystery or horror, the genre doesn't matter as long as the stories capture her interest and take her on an adventure. She soon discovered a love for writing and characters just waiting to tell their stories. Since that time, writing has become an obsession.

Rebecca lives in the heart of Texas. She loves the outdoors, growing things, and working on crafts when she's not lost in the worlds of her characters. Please feel free to write and tell her what you think; she'd love to hear from you.

Rebecca welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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