

DARK ELVES VI AWAKENING



JET MYKLES *Loose Id*

*Dark Elves 6:
Awakening*

Jet Mykles



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ISBN 978-1-60737-431-2

Available in PDF, HTML, Microsoft Reader, and Mobi

Editor: Jana J. Hanson

Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

www.loose-id.com

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About this Title

Genre: Fantasy Menage

Series: Dark Elves; **Previous Title:** *Discovery*

As the first girl child born to the dark elves, Eryhaen is rhaejena—princess—and desired by all of the men around her. Born with magical gifts that challenge even the most experienced sorcerers, she has the awe of her people and the devotion of her three best friends. Brevin, Lanthan and Tykir have been at her side their whole lives, and each of the three young men would do anything for her.

But Eryhaen needs more. She's out of control, and she knows it. Her magic is raw and wild, and she isn't the only one who's started to see her as a danger.

She needs *help*.

The only possibility is Radin, a legendary sorcerer, returned from the dead but magically unconscious for a quarter of a century. Dreams and undeniable instincts tell her that he's the solution to her problems...if she can only wake him up.

Once she does, what then? He may be the answer to her problems, but is the legendary lover the man for her? Or is he meant for someone else?

Publisher's Note: *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, ménage/moresome (m/f/m, m/f/m/m), same-sex sexual interaction/practices (f/f, m/m), violence (including attempted rape).*

Prologue

“Do you think this is a good idea?”

Smiling, Savous wrapped an arm around his truemate's shoulders. “She'll be fine.”

Irin slanted a glance up at him, her red eyes gleaming with skepticism. “That would be far more effective if I couldn't feel your doubt.”

He chuckled, nuzzling her temple, not remotely sorry that they were bound body and soul, minds and emotions open to the other. He didn't know if he'd have survived the past few centuries without that bond to give him courage.

“We agreed that she can't be kept sequestered,” he murmured, standing with her in a corner of the cavern.

The wide-open space was the domain of children not yet old enough to take on servant duties in the city but too old to spend time in the nursery. Easily accessible to one of the many warriors' practice arenas, it allowed the children to occasionally watch the adults while also giving them a place for themselves. It was only superficially supervised by adults, giving the children some freedom in relative safety. Sparsely lit, it afforded a long, narrow pool at one end and an arrangement of boulders at the other, which provided ample terrain for climbing and hiding. Various structures had been built and deconstructed about the space, their state of repair directly related to the group of younglings currently in residence.

Until this very day, the cavern had been the sole domain of boys. But today, Savous and Irin were leaving their eldest daughter, the firstborn

raedjour girl, alone in the company of her peers for the first time. They had worked up to this day for moons with supervised visits, but their headstrong offspring had finally put her foot down. She wasn't of the opinion that she needed such strict supervision, and both Savous and Irin understood her need for freedom. Irin had spent her childhood in solitude as not only a girl but a human among the *raedjour*. Although she wouldn't trade the past that had brought her to become who she was today, Irin didn't wish the same loneliness for her daughters.

In the midst of climbing to the top of a solid stack of boulders, Eyrhaen stopped, throwing an impatient glare at her parents. Dressed in trousers and a sturdy wool tunic, she was nearly indistinguishable from the boys around her. She was too young for her body to have developed feminine curves, and there were plenty of the boys who also had long white hair pulled back into a ponytail. Not even her red eyes distinguished her, as there was at least one other boy with sorcerous potential among her playmates.

Her delay caused a collision behind her, and two of the boys protested. One of them grabbed at her ankle, the other yelling and pointing. Before her parents could react, Eyrhaen shoved at the one who pointed, yelling right back. The one below, who would have pulled her off balance, found himself hauled back by one of Eyrhaen's self-appointed protectors.

Brevin, the tallest and largest of any of the children present, picked up the offender and tossed him down. He was prevented from getting up by Lanthan landing on his chest, fist threatening. Meantime, agile Brevin climbed the boulder just in time to catch Eyrhaen when she would have launched herself at the boy who engaged her in a screaming match. Arms and legs flailing, she struggled in Brevin's firm hold while her opponent was kept at bay by the third of Eyrhaen's close friends, Tykir, who stood between her and the other boy, ready for action as needed.

"You see?" Savous murmured into Irin's hair. "Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir won't let anything happen to her."

Irin sighed, well acquainted with the quick tempers of raedjour boys. It was a test of childhood to survive the vicious fights of dominance. Clearly, her daughter had a place in that hierarchy, and it was better started now when she was young and resilient. “You're right.” She allowed him to turn her away from the continuing scuffle behind. “At least this way she'll have a chance to make some real friends.”

Chapter One

“Tykir's down!”

Cold ran through Brevin's veins on hearing Lanthan's shout, but he couldn't turn away from his opponent. Steel flashed in the dim cavern light, and only Brevin's nightsight outlined the black-skinned man wearing dark clothes swinging the short sword. Brevin caught the down sweep of the blade with the dagger in his left hand and shoved his own short blade into the man's unprotected armpit. The sharp blade slid home between ribs into the vital organs within. His opponent cried out and twisted in an effort to free himself, but Brevin followed the move, bringing the man into his embrace, back to chest. Viciously, he twisted the blade and yanked it back, set on making the death a quick one. Lank white hair draped Brevin's shoulder as mortality hit and his opponent's blade clattered to the rock beneath their feet.

A gurgling hiss spilled from the bloody mouth of the face that twisted to look up at him. The hiss turned into weak laughter as the body in Brevin's arms jerked. “Thank you.” The words were garbled but intelligible as a hand squeezed Brevin's arm. Then the entire body went limp.

Brevin held him, hugging him, for just a brief moment. Battle ranged on the other side of the cavern, but around Brevin, only he and corpses littered the scene. Regret left a vile burning in his throat and made him squeeze the rogue's body once, hard, before he let it slip to the ground. He sent a quick, silent prayer to a goddess he'd never known to look after the man he'd never before met, then turned toward the fighting.

Only two of the group of attacking rogues remained standing, outnumbered by the men in Brevin's troop. Knowing his fellows didn't need his

help to end the battle, he dashed to the side of two men kneeling over his fallen comrade.

Lanthan had Tykir's head high in his lap, most of the young sorcerer's upper body draped over his thighs. Tykir breathed shallowly, his eyes squinched closed in pain, and his hand clutched the feathered end of a slim bolt that had pinned one side of Tykir's vest to his side.

Brevin dropped to his knees. "Tyk?" Brevin's nightsight couldn't see the red that would be seeping into the light blue fabric, but he could make out Tykir's unique scent in the mix of freshly flowing blood.

Red eyes dragged open, their glow tinging the darkness. "Brevin."

Brevin shook his head, uncaring that sweat from his hair dropped on the strip of chest bared by Tykir's vest. "You're not supposed to get hit, bastard. Where was that dazzling magic of yours?"

Tykir's laugh switched to a groan. "Bolt was smaller than I expected."

As Tykir's eyes closed again, Brevin looked up into Lanthan's gaze. His quieter friend shrugged, then nodded. Brevin took a breath. Lanthan could tell the severity of a wound by smell alone. If he didn't think it was that bad, it probably wasn't.

Boots scraped the stone beside them. "Tykir all right?" A medical pack dropped at his side.

Brevin started to stand, but Kenth's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Not sure, sir." He dumped out the contents of the pack where both he and Lanthan could access them. "Bolt in the side. Looks like rogues got hold of one of the smaller crossbows the humans have developed." He unwrapped a palm-sized pot lamp and found the flint device for lighting it.

The older warrior sneered, kneeling beside his fallen sorcerer. "Lovely. Yet another thing to worry about." He lay a hand over the bloody one Tykir held at his side. "You with us, boy?"

Tykir's eyes opened again. "Yes, sir."

Kenth nodded encouragement. "I hate to ask it, but do you have enough strength to close down these tunnels?"

Brevin's scowl matched Lanthan's, but Kenth saw neither, his attention on Tykir. Brevin uncorked the lamp and glanced up. Five wide tunnels that had once served as a well-traveled route to the surface were now suspect, a way for dangerous rogues to infiltrate the underground city that was the heart of raedjour society. Their troops' mission had been to bring Tykir to seal the tunnels. That they had been attacked on their arrival just proved the necessity.

Tykir nodded. "I need to..." He pushed up a little from Lanthan's lap but stopped, gasping.

Lanthan clutched his shoulders to keep him where he was.

Kenth's hand on his chest reinforced Lanthan's concern. "Maybe not."

Tykir shook his head. "No, sir. The tunnels need to be closed."

"Not at the expense of you, they don't. We don't have enough sorcerers left to waste you." Kenth squatted back on his heels. He said no more until Brevin had inserted a wick into the lamp and started a flame with the flint device. He and Brevin leaned in as Lanthan helped Tykir to carefully peel away the bloody corner of Tykir's vest. "I'll bet that hurts to all nine hells, but it's not lethal." He patted Tykir's shoulder. "You'll live."

Tykir pressed the side of his face to Lanthan's sweaty chest, eyes closed and breathing shallow. "Just let me get patched up, and I'll see to the tunnels, sir."

"No." He looked up at Brevin. "He'll need a healer. You boys think you can get him back all right?"

Brevin nodded immediately. Lanthan didn't bother, too busy poking the edges of flesh around the bolt, no doubt deciding whether they should remove it.

Kenth sighed, running a hand down his face. Blood and sweaty grime smeared his skin, much of the same lacing his short curly hair. The captain

didn't seem to be harmed, but his weariness showed. "Do it. See he's safe. We'll stay here to guard." He pushed to his feet in one fluid move. "Send Rhicard or Loghan as soon as you can."

"Yes, sir."

Kenth went to talk with the others.

"How many left?" Lanthan asked as he sifted through the medical supplies on the ground beside him.

Brevin counted. "Ten, including us." Only ten of the twenty of them who had left the city. Truth be told, they were lucky there had only been a dozen rogues. The zeal with which the rogues fought—with hardly any regard to personal safety—made them dangerous even when outnumbered.

Lanthan wrapped a clean cloth bandage at the bolt's entry point. Tykir hissed at the pain, but Lanthan just used his free hand to keep his friend's head pressed to his chest.

Brevin took heart that the soft, unbleached linen didn't immediately absorb red. The bleeding had slowed. "Do we take it out?"

Lanthan wasn't a trained healer, but he knew more about patching up wounds. "No." He gathered up another bandage to press on the first.

Against Lanthan's hold, Tykir pushed up. "Tie it off. Then I'm going to close those tunnels." He winced, but he managed to sit on his own. His thick braid dangled over the shoulder on his good side, grimy from dirt and sweat.

"Tykir."

"No, Brevin, they're not going to hold back another rogue attack with just ten men." He took a deep breath that only wavered a little, and opened eyes that glowed a steady red. "I can finish."

Brevin was doubtful, but he knew that tone in Tykir's voice. They'd been friends for life, and although Tykir usually followed Brevin's lead, he could be unaccountably stubborn sometimes. Brevin trusted the steadiness he heard in his friend's voice. "Let's see how you feel when this is all bandaged up."

By the time they helped him stand, he only wavered a little. There was a gray haze to his skin and lines of pain etched the corners of his easily smiling mouth, but he held his own.

“Are you sure about this, Tykir?” Kenth asked when they told him what he intended to do.

“I am, sir.”

“You know your limits,” was all the captain said before turning to order everyone into the tunnel that led back to the city.

Tykir caught Lanthan's arm before he and Brevin could join the others. “Stay.” He held his hand at the bolt that stuck up through the bandages that bound his middle. “I'm probably going to pass out after I'm done.”

Brevin wanted to stop him but knew better. He nodded, as did Lanthan. They stepped back but stood their ground behind Tykir.

Tykir noted where they stood, and nodded. Then he turned to face the tunnels that led toward the southern reaches of the Dark Forest. These were the last underground passageways to the southern reaches, the others having been collapsed or blocked many cycles of seasons ago. These had been kept open and guarded, but even that proved too dangerous now. The city's population had dwindled dangerously low, and fewer men could be spared to guard the borders. No one knew how many rogues remained alive, and any hope of peace had extinguished in the last few cycles. The rogues attacked first and fought to the death. The few who were caught raved incoherently about the goddess and their calling, while they fought until they either escaped or had to be killed. They were desperate to get to the city and determined to plow down any loyalist who stood in their way. Once this passage was blocked, only two systems of tunnels led to the surface. Dangerous in its own right, but Savous and his council had thought long and hard and decided that this was the safest option.

Brevin felt the itch of magic just inside the shell of his skull as Tykir raised his hands. He couldn't cast any kind of spells himself, but he had

inherited enough of his father's untrained powers to feel it in use. Salin, he was told, could have been a sorcerer like his brother Radin, but he'd chosen the life of a warrior instead. Sometimes when Brevin could just see or sense the effects of magic, he wondered how his father could have turned his back on such awful beauty.

All the bodies, rogues and loyalists, had been shuffled into the tunnels in front of the sorcerer, awaiting a fitting burial within the rocks and stones of Her earth. Brevin joined the murmured prayer for the dead with the men behind him as the top arch of the tunnels in front of them began to shimmer. The rock and packed earth beneath their feet shimmied, and mineral dust rained on them from the cragged ceiling above. Tykir twisted his arms so that his palms spread upward, then turned them so that they faced. He muttered a few words, and the shaking increased; then he slammed his hands together. The resounding *crack* that followed was far more than his hands alone could produce, more than could be accounted for by the abrupt fall of rocks and debris within the tunnels.

Tykir separated his hands in a swirling arch as the tunnels filled, then swooped them around and down to hold in tight fists at either side of his chest. The shaking stopped, as did the falling rocks. Before their eyes, rock and stone melted and melded, forming a solid, unbroken wall all around the cavern, leaving only slight indentions where the tunnel mouths had been.

True to his prediction, Tykir wavered. As one, Brevin and Lanthan lunged forward and caught him as he collapsed. Tykir's head rolled back, and Brevin caught a brief glimpse of glowing red eyes before they shut and his friend fell limp.

Chapter Two

A gentle hand on her shoulder brought Eyrhaen's eyes open. She blinked until the twinkling mineral flecks in the stone wall behind the bed's thick, carved wooden headboard came into focus, then shook her head and shoulders to shake the last effects of thick magic.

Fingers were warm through the thin linen of her shift. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She shrugged her shoulder again to lose the touch of the man behind her, then dropped her chin so she could see the other man lying beside her. "Did it work?"

At first glance, it looked like he was sleeping. Sharply defined brows and jaw and a strong, hooked nose were somewhat softened in repose, perhaps due to the relaxed curve of his generous lips or the fan of long, snowy white lashes over the high curve of his glossy black cheekbones. But the wealth of his long, silky hair was gathered neatly beside him on the pillow, clearly placed by another person and not disturbed by any movement from him. The graceful fingers of both hands were laced together over the bloodred wave patterns on his toned belly. Watch him for any length of time, and it became evident that his chest barely rose and fell in breath. He'd been in that same position for a quarter of a century with very little change. A shield of magic surrounded him and evidently kept him alive without need to eat, breathe, or wake for over two decades. The puzzle of him kept her fascinated, if intensely frustrated.

Movement behind her, together with the *shush* of a heavy woolen robe as Nalfien stepped away from the bed. "The effect will likely be gradual, given the length of time he's been the same. It will take time to see if your idea bears fruit."

Her back to her mentor hid the snarl that curled her upper lip. She lifted her hand and placed it over the red runes etched in the skin of Radin's broad chest. A prickling buzz of magic, invisible to the untrained eye, stopped her touch just a thumb's length above his skin. With a frown, she concentrated, let a little of her power trickle through her own shields. Her magic spilled over his, sinking in like water to the ground. Thrilling to the responsive wash of soft, seductive magic that trailed up her arm, she pushed through the barrier that protected him until the pads of her fingers could brush his breastbone. The touch was brief, as brief as it had been before she'd begin spellcasting earlier tonight, but the effect was stunning.

The satin brush of his skin ignited a rush of warmth deep beneath her belly, forcing her to press her thighs together in a vain attempt to alleviate the excitement. Gorgeous as the thrill was, however, it was no different from the few other times she'd tried. The shield around him closed underneath her fingers, pushing them back from his skin. *It didn't work.* Disappointment squeezed her heart as she drew her hand back. She'd so hoped her latest idea would have an effect. It had taken her long enough to convince Nalfien to let her try. Miffed, she shook her hand to relieve it of the feel of stinging ants marching underneath her skin.

Nalfien sat at the wide table on the other side of the bedroom, the soft feather of his quill fanning in the breeze of his quick writing. His midnight blue robe was pulled close around his body, his hair gleaming softly in the clear light from the room's two lamps. His eyes cast a pinkish shade on the scroll before him, glowing red due to the low level of magic he wore as a cloak at all times when he was in Radin's rooms.

Eyrhaen schooled expression from her face and rubbed her arm to help return feeling. "I should try it again."

He nodded, not looking up. "If you like. But not today. With what you put into that spell, you'll not be able to concentrate." The last was said over her aborted protest.

She snapped her jaw shut. He was right. Her blood was humming, and moisture dampened the thin strip of silk that shielded her sex. Now that he'd drawn attention to it, she could scent her own arousal and knew her ability to meditate into trance would be frayed. The soft linen over her breasts chafed at her painfully tight nipples. With most of the feeling back in her hand, she gripped the edge of the bed at either side of her hips, willing her arousal to a tolerable level. Her own long, loose hair spilled over her shoulder and around her thighs as she twisted her head to glance sidelong back at Radin. His mouth tempted her, and she didn't realize she was licking her lips until they were already moist. *No, not getting anywhere today.* "That's all for today, then?"

"Yes. Piryk bought food." He nodded toward one of the bedroom's two doors.

She stood and glanced toward the second door, considering whether a visit to the privy was in order even if there was no particular urgency.

"I believe he also has news of Captain Kenth's return."

She stilled. Her eyes widened a little, the only other outward sign of instant excitement, but no doubt Nalfien could smell the ramp-up to her arousal. *That is, if the old man can scent anything anymore.* No matter, if Kenth was back that meant Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir would be back. The very thought made her sex pulse. As calmly as she could, she adjusted the soft silk rope that served as her belt as she walked toward the door to the central room of the suite.

He spoke again when she touched the doorknob. "Shall I expect you tomorrow night?"

Her gaze was back on Radin before she knew she'd decided to look. The lamp from the nightstand threw every lovely muscle of his bare length into high relief, his skin softly gleaming with the oil that all raedjour naturally secrete. His cock lay soft and quiet between his legs, and even so, she wanted badly to rush back to try to touch it, suck on it, bring it to fullness so she could rise up and impale herself on it. Instinct told her that was what she was *supposed* to

do. Experience told her the shielding magic about his body would stop her. Something still had to be done before she could fulfill her destiny. "Yes. Tomorrow." She put her back to both men and opened the door.

No response from the sorcerer she left behind, just the continuation of the soft scratching of quill on parchment.

More lamps lit the airy main room of Radin's personal suite, and a cheery fire crackled in the fireplace. Even after visiting regularly for the past cycle, Eyrhaen still had to blink at the clash of bright colors in the furnishings. She'd been told that Radin enjoyed flashy fabrics. Much of his original furniture had been preserved, but the lemon yellow pillows on a vibrant green chair fought for attention with the white and blue of a chaise, both sitting on a red, gold, and lavender rug. Alone, any of the pieces were fine, even beautiful, but against the dark backdrop of the carved stone walls and all jumbled together, the bright combination was alarming.

Piryk, one of Nalfien's assigned pages, was on his feet as she entered, hurrying to uncover dishes on the large table. An abandoned wood-carving project sat on the neutral white mat he'd spread before the fire. The rich scent of thick yarin stew filled her head and made her wonder if eating first might be a good idea.

She only wondered for a moment. The damp ache in her swollen sex was made worse by the squeeze of her thighs as she walked. "Piryk, you have news of Captain Kenth?"

The young boy turned to face her. Nodding dislodged a heavy hank of white hair into his deep crimson eyes. "Yes,." Piryk was well out of the nursery but still a while from sexual maturity, so his face held none of the sexual hunger she saw from men her age and older.

Despite his youth, she kept a few arm's lengths between them. Her time with Radin had keyed her arousal, and it would take very little to set it off. "They're back?"

“Only just. I heard it in the kitchen right before I came back here. They were in the dining hall.”

Her hand fisted at her side, maybe hidden by the open side of her long, slim shift. “All of them?”

Piryk knew her well enough to know what she was fishing for. “Brevin and Lanthan were there. I checked.”

A smile bloomed, and she gathered the boy into her arms for a hug before she could think about it. He stiffened, then clutched her close. His body may be too young to do anything about it, but he wasn't completely immune to her touch. Shorter than she, his cheek was right at level with her breast. Even if immature, his muscles were toned and his obsidian skin was satiny underneath the brief vest he wore. His barely trained power licked at her skin like enticing flames, urging her to fan them higher.

She took a deep breath and pried herself out of the arms that reluctantly let her go. Her arousal was at a dangerously needy point if she was noting such things about a boy. “Thank you, Piryk.”

His wide eyes stayed on her as she stepped back. “You won't be staying to eat?”

She shook her head, turning for the door that would take her from the suite. “No.”

“Will you be back tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

Leaving the suite behind, she turned down the corridor to her left and ignored the figure that peeled out of the darker shadows to her right. One of her guards. One of the ones she wasn't supposed to know about.

Did her father think her blind? Or stupid?

He had to know she could sense the presence of the silent shadows he'd ordered to track her every move. But the silent shadows were far preferable to the aging, burly bodyguards who had haunted her adolescence. With the use of

a little magic, she could lose her shadows if she wanted, but she'd learned to pick and choose the times when she did that. For the most part, there was no harm in letting the men follow her. If she kept her distance and didn't pay attention, his simmering lust for her wouldn't bother her. This one was older and relatively good at controlling his needs, even around her. He had to be to have any hope that she wouldn't detect him. But at her current state of arousal, she was intensely aware of every person, male or female, within range.

The distraction would only grow worse until she took care of it. Her sandals slapped on the stones of the staircase that took her to the building's main exit. She normally avoided the central court, but right now cutting through the center of the city would get her to the dining hall much more quickly. She emerged from the open double doors of Radin's tower and quickstepped toward the towering statue of Rhae. The steady blue of the goddess's magical light indicated that there was still plenty of night before dawn broke the horizon above. She had not spent as much time in trance as she'd suspected. Maybe if she'd stayed longer...

Two males appeared before her, and she stumbled to a stop before she ran into them. She knew them, although not well. Arkir and Vitez were a few decades older than she and unmated. Both wore short single-edged blades sheathed at their hips and the open, embroidered vests that most men seemed to favor in recent cycles.

"*Rhajena*," Arkir crooned, using the term that had been adapted just for her. He was the shorter of the two, his muscles much more thickly set than Vitez. "May I be of any assistance to you?"

There was no doubt they could scent her need. Experience taught her that. A brief glance around the courtyard assured her that all the scattered males had at least turned their attention her way.

She frowned, holding up a hand to halt Arkir's advance. "No. Thank you. I'm on my way to the dining hall." *And I should have taken the back tunnels.*

She fisted her other hand at her side, trying to quench the rising desire fed by the proximity of willing partners.

Victez broke into a wide smile, showing blinding white teeth. "So were we." He stepped aside and gestured for her to proceed between them. "We'll make sure you reach the hall unaccosted."

"I doubt that." Behind her, more males approached, including her shadow guard. Almost too much. Her knees weakened at the deliciously dark scent of them. She could have them all. She just had to allow it to happen.

A palm skated down her bare arm. Arkir took a step closer, so his scent filled her nostrils. "We are at your command."

She jumped away from him. "Don't touch me." Her move brought her stumbling into Victez, whose hands closed around her upper arms as he pulled her flush against his chest. The cock straining for release in his loose trousers pressed her lower back. The heat of him seared through her shift and deep into her bones, making her want nothing more than to melt in his arms.

With supreme effort, she twisted from his hold and backed away to put some distance between them. Hands fisted at her sides, she faced them, scowling. "Touch me again without permission, and I will shrivel you." She glanced around at the others who were now close enough to threaten the same, and held her hand out at waist level, palm up, fingers curled. "*All of you.*"

Everyone stopped. They knew what she meant and knew she meant it. A neat little spell that had come naturally to her when her powers had begun to develop. She had come to realize she had a ridiculously high sensitivity to the male sex organ, almost to the extent of having full control through her magic. As such, she could rouse or deflate an erection at will. This was now a well-known fact about her, and the males who had experienced the latter had been loud in their warnings against getting her angry.

Caution kept them quiet before her angry glance; then she turned to continue on her way. The men who stood between her and the tunnel that led

to the dining hall scrambled clear, despite the covetous looks they kept locked on her. She didn't mind the looks, just so long as they didn't touch.

* * * * *

Brevin's left arm flew up, the long, slim dagger in reverse grip along his forearm to deflect Lanthan's blade. As Lanthan began to twist away, Brevin brought up a fist, aiming for his gut. Lanthan was better than that, having spun *into* Brevin, catching him off guard enough so that when the smaller man's ass rammed into his hips, he stumbled enough for Lanthan to grip his left arm and flip him head over heels. He ended flat on his back in the sand, stunned for those few precious seconds it took for Lanthan to drop to his knees and straddle Brevin's chest, his blade at Brevin's throat.

Lanthan's grin was barely sane underneath the long fall of fringe that spilled over the wide band tied about his skull. "Got ya."

Brevin snarled, fingers digging into the sand. But Lanthan's knees pinned Brevin's arms to the ground.

"Only because it's left-handed."

"No excuse," said a deep voice overhead. "A skilled warrior fights equally well with both hands."

Brevin closed his eyes. Lanthan's father, Krael, was a cruel taskmaster, even in training. *Especially* in training. He wouldn't accept any less than Brevin's or Lanthan's best even if they had just come back from battle. He wouldn't let them have fun and just blow off steam as Brevin had hoped to do. *Can't he pay attention to the others?* There were plenty of other trainees in the practice grounds for Krael to torture.

Lanthan laughed, easing up on Brevin's throat. "Try again?"

Brevin had wondered if it was a good idea to spar so soon after their return, but after they'd left Tykir with the healers, he and Lanthan had been much too keyed up to stay in the dining hall or go to the pools. Tykir would be

all right, but neither of them had truly believed it until the healer had said it himself.

"Yes." Brevin snatched his right arm up from under Lanthan's left knee and swung it in a roundhouse toward his friend's head. As he'd fully expected, Lanthan shied right and back so the punch missed. Weapons dropped in the sand, they tussled, the two of them grappling until Brevin's greater bulk won out and he had Lanthan pinned underneath him. Lanthan could barely catch his breath for laughing, his cheek pressed to the sand with one arm trapped underneath him and the other held between them by Brevin. Glistening black skin stretched over the taut muscles as Lanthan struggled underneath his weight. Brevin breathed over the closely shorn hair on his friend's neck.

Then Lanthan stopped laughing. His ice blue eyes hooded. Clearly, he felt Brevin's cock in the crack of his ass, rock hard. Only the dual layers of their clothing kept Brevin from pushing in immediately. Lanthan *smelled* divine. No. That wasn't right. Lanthan didn't smell like that, a scent of earth and sweet and sex. Not even fighting with his friend could get Brevin that instantly hard.

But there was one person who smelled like that, and one person who *could* get him instantly hard.

Lanthan blinked, his eyes shifting so he could look up at Brevin. The same thought occurred to him. And not just them. All around the practice arena, sounds of fighting stopped.

Barely rising from Lanthan, Brevin tilted his head and swiveled toward the entrance. There she was, alone and achingly stunning in one of those long, teasing shifts she preferred. Teasing because, although it was ankle-length, it was completely open at each side, held to her body only by the silk rope tied at her waist. When she walked, hungry eyes could catch tantalizing glimpses of the spare panties she wore to guard her sex. *Eyrhaen*. Her thigh-length hair was loose, much of it draping her slim shoulders as she calmly surveyed the cavern full of men. The men, young and older, barely moved, watching her, as aware of her heightened arousal as though she had announced it.

Then she found them, Brevin and Lanthan, and she smiled. Brevin couldn't contain a shiver as she stepped onto the sand and began walking toward them.

Just before he shifted his weight off his friend, he glanced down at Lanthan. Ice blue eyes were closed, and white fringe almost hid his resigned look. Brevin could feel the sexual heat shimmering off him and knew that his own need was building to match it.

She had that effect on them. She had that effect on *all* of them.

He'd just gained his knees when two other youths raced toward Eyrhaen from behind. Brevin would have shot up to her defense, but Lanthan's quick grip on his arm intercepted instinct and kept him on his knees. With one brief, curt nod, he showed Lanthan he was in control again, and they both remained where they were to watch.

Despite his instincts, he knew she didn't need his help.

The boys were younger, maybe one hundred forty or fifty cycles at the most. They'd probably just come into sexual awareness. It was the only excuse for their behavior. Older males had learned their lesson with Eyrhaen. It was time for these to learn theirs.

They fell to their knees in front of her, stopping her progress. Desperate energy radiated from them, vibrating in the dry heat of the arena and spilling off the fresh bare skin of their shoulders and torsos.

"Rhajena," one breathed, reaching for the thigh that was exposed by the nonexistent side of her shift.

The other just whimpered helplessly, hands up toward her, imploring.

She stopped, staring down at them. She could not have looked at a bug with any less interest. When the one touched her leg, she slapped his hand away. "Don't touch me."

He gasped, and Brevin managed not to wince in sympathy. He knew that slap. Knew that she put something extra behind it. Her touch could be bliss or torture or an agonizing combination of the two.

"Please." The other one found his voice. Brevin knew that strangled tone too. He'd used it on a number of occasions, although he liked to think he'd never looked this pathetic in front of her. Few things would make a raedjour warrior beg, and the last few cycles had taught them that Eyrhaen was one.

"Go back to your lessons," she chided, "both of you." Like they were boys and not youths perhaps only thirty cycles younger than she. She stepped around them and resumed her path toward Brevin and Lanthan. At least she smiled as she approached, although he'd come to dread the smile almost as much as the frown. Her arousal beat at him, and he could only wonder what had gotten her to such a state. Her effect was far more pronounced than normal, the pleasure of it caressing him in hidden places she had yet to touch. *What does she do when we're not around?* No, he'd rather not think about that.

She stopped a pace in front of them, fine sand sifting in between the toes on her pretty feet. She reached out to card her fingers through Brevin's short locks. "I'm glad you're back. I need you."

Brevin closed his eyes. It was that simple. No matter what he was doing, if she spoke those words to him, he would follow her.

"Lanthan."

He opened his eyes to see her other hand caressing Lanthan's cheek. Excitement buzzed below his heart. Time with Eyrhaen was special, but sharing her with his friend was exquisite.

Without speaking, both he and Lanthan gathered their knives and rose to their feet. By that time, she'd turned and started out of the arena. They followed like cubs after a mother bear. Brevin felt the envious stares, but they didn't bother him. He was one of the *lucky* ones, or so they thought. He and Lanthan—and Tykir—were lucky enough to be around her age, just enough older that they'd been close friends with her before her sexual needs had

started to blossom. Very few of those whom she didn't bless with her attentions understood that the luck had an evil twist.

Krael patted his shoulder as they passed, but said nothing more. He knew. He understood. As a true mated male, he didn't feel her pull as strongly. He wasn't immune, and as Lanthan's father, he knew what they were to her.

She led them down a short corridor to the bathing pools. No surprise. She liked hot water. She liked being wet and clean and preferred it for her lovers. *Lovers*. That's what she called them. Not for the first time he toyed with the idea of arguing with her about the meaning of that word.

"Where's Tykir?"

Brevin and Lanthan flanked her as they walked, staring down the stray males who showed interest in delaying them. "We took him to the healers."

She grabbed his arm, distracting him. "Is he all right?"

"He will be," Lanthan answered, carrying the sheathed knives that were usually strapped to his forearms. He'd be taking them off again soon anyway. "They put him under so he could sleep."

"How did he get hurt?"

"Rogues." Both he and Lanthan spoke together, the same note of disdain in their voices.

Eyrhaen said no more on the subject.

There was a hot pool in a relatively secluded corner of the main cavern she preferred. Brevin wondered if anyone else ever used it without her presence anymore. He doubted it. The serving boys kept a fresh pile of drying cloths and vials of her favorite oils and scents on the natural stone bench that had been carved into the rock wall beside the pool.

Brevin dropped to one knee beside the small brazier to stir up the banked flame kept there. It wasn't a bright light and didn't provide much warmth, but they didn't really need either. She liked to be warm, though, and she claimed to like the dim firelight. Her wishes were the rule.

Beside him, she had untied her silk belt, and Lanthan was helping her to lift the flimsy shift up and off her head. Brevin's eyes took in the slim, lovely curves of her hips and buttocks. She shifted her stance, turned toward him just right that he could get a glimpse between her firm thighs at the rich, juicy red folds of her sex. A pang of need twisted painfully in his gut at the sight, the scent of it wafting into his nostrils to make him dizzy. He caught himself leaning toward her, mouth watering. *Goddess!*

When she was free of the shift, she leaned back into Lanthan. He froze, shift still in one fist, his other hand automatically sliding around her slim waist to pull her flush against him. Shorter than Brevin, Lanthan was just a little taller than Eyrhaen, allowing a snug fit when they stood close. Her eyes shut in bliss. The shift slithered out of his grip as she snuggled into the curve of his body. Lanthan bent his head, his short hair tickling the point of her ear. Nibbling at her throat, Lanthan brought his palms up to cup her breasts, squeezing them just the way they knew she liked. She moaned a reward for him.

Brevin shook himself, shifting to sit on his butt so he could pull off his boots. He knew his role in this wasn't just voyeur. Things worked best if he anticipated. Boots off, he shuffled out of his trousers, careful with the painfully tight, hard cock that sprang free to slap his belly. He discarded the idea of tugging it. Wouldn't give him much relief. She wouldn't allow him to come yet anyway.

Once naked, he eased into the burbling heat of the pool. A quick dunk underwater wet his skin and let him slick his unruly hair back from his face. Minerals and natural bubbles caressed him as the water further warmed his blood.

Lights from the more public pools behind them limned Eyrhaen and Lanthan in soft white, the long locks of her hair draped across her breasts and shoulders. She had twisted her neck so she could capture Lanthan's mouth with her own. Their black tongues played between open lips, white teeth

flashing in the shadows. One of Lanthan's hands still massaged one breast, pinching the nipple, but his other hand had slid down, fingers now cupping into her sex.

Humming happily, she pulled her lips from Lanthan and glanced down to check on Brevin. Seeing him in the water, she grinned and merrily turned out of Lanthan's embrace. Lanthan's fingers slid from her as she let herself fall backward toward the water.

Brevin caught her, his heartbeat speeding up when he had her delectably naked body in the cradle of his arms. Her long hair trailed like moonlight across the surface of the water as she wound her arms around his neck.

"Kiss me," she demanded, and he obeyed instantly. Her lips opened under his, and a moan oozed from his throat into hers. She tasted of cool silver, earth, and sweet, savory sauce over fresh meat cooked just so it melted in his mouth. He released her legs so his arm was free to wrap around her back, pinning her to him. Arms fastened around his neck, she pulled her legs up to wind them around his hips. His cock throbbed between them, pressing her belly, and he slid both hands down to palm her ass, the better to press her even closer.

Lanthan was there, behind her. His scent mingled with hers, driving Brevin to suck more deeply at Eyrhaen's mouth. His hands slid over Brevin's, encouraging him to spread the cheeks of her ass farther apart. Brevin did and shared what he knew would be a frustration for his friend. Lanthan would want to drive home, slide his cock into either opening exposed by the spread, but he couldn't. If he so much as tried, the magic that was Eyrhaen would shrivel his erection painfully, so much so that he would not be able to get it up again for at least a moon.

Instead, Lanthan braced his hands beside Brevin's and knelt in the water. Brevin raised her higher at Lanthan's nudge, then swallowed her squeal of delight when Lanthan must have started to lick her. It was a good thing she didn't weigh much—to Brevin, at least—because if she did, he wouldn't have

been able to hold her. It was hard enough to do when his wicked friend, while lavaging at Eyrhaen's anus and sex, reached between Brevin's legs to fondle his balls.

Good thing for him when Eyrhaen ripped her mouth from his and declared, "Enough. Put me down."

Lanthan moved back as Brevin set her down. Brevin glared at his friend over the top of her head, receiving only a wicked grin in return just before Lanthan dunked his head to wet his hair, head wrap and all. Eyrhaen distracted Brevin by peppering his chest with kisses, her nimble fingers finding and plucking his nipples to peak. She pushed him back until his calves hit the natural bench carved below the water, then directed him with nudges and gestures to brace on the smooth stone edge of the pool. He did, clutching the rim to either side of his hips as he spread his legs, knowing what was coming and knowing he couldn't brace for it. From the moment she knelt and put those sweet obsidian lips to the tip of his cock, his world spiraled out of focus and floor became ceiling.

He let his head fall back, eyes closed, unable to watch as she eagerly, if artlessly, swallowed as much of him as she could while she wrapped both slim hands tightly around his shaft. His hips bucked helplessly into her as his nails dug into the stone rim of the pool. Then other hands, Lanthan's hands, were on his thighs, holding him for her. Brevin groaned, bringing his chin down and opening his eyes to behold them both kneeling before him. She happily held and sucked on his cock with Lanthan molded to her back, nibbling at her neck and shoulders. It was too much. With humiliating speed, Brevin's balls clutched, his hips rocked, and milky white seed overfilled Eyrhaen's mouth so that some dribbled past her lips.

Giggling, she released him to turn in Lanthan's arms. While Brevin melted down to the submerged stone seat, Eyrhaen opened her mouth under Lanthan's to share with him Brevin's essence. Resentment boiled in Brevin's chest. Not for the kiss, nor for the embrace. No, it irritated him that she made

him come so fast. With every other lover, his stamina and control were to be admired. But with her, he was helpless. But he wasn't alone. They were *all* helpless. If she determined that it was time to come, there was little her hapless lover could do about it.

Now she was pushing Lanthan back, urging him up and out of the water. As he sat on the warm, smooth stone, she crawled out after him, urging him even farther onto his back. She trailed kisses down his neck, lingered over his chest and belly, then finally wrapped eager hands and lips around his cock. On her knees, she hovered over Lanthan, trying to swallow more than would fit. Leaning on his elbows, Lanthan let his head drop back, his moan barely louder than the burbling water. She would keep him like that for brief moments or for drawn-out periods of time, whatever suited her fancy. This is where having a second lover with her was best. He, Lanthan, and Tykir had learned to help each other out, to ramp up her pleasure so she'd allow theirs before things became painful. Sometimes they played at it, letting her torture the other, then expecting the revenge later after she'd left them.

But today, Brevin wasn't in the mood to let his friend squirm.

He crawled forward and hitched himself out of the water. Lying on his back, he shifted up between her knees. Once situated, he cupped her ass, guiding the drenched red of her sex to his lips. Red, not pink like the converted human women he'd had sex with. No, Eyrhaen's sex was red as the pulp of the *galpa* fruit and far more delicious. He let his lips meet hers in an intimate kiss before opening his mouth wider so he could drag the flat of his tongue from anus to the bold little tip of feeling at the apex of her sex. She squealed, rocking her hips to fit herself more firmly to his mouth. He guided her with his palms across the globes of her ass, drinking in the earthy moisture that coated her soft folds. His tongue found her channel and thrust in as far as it would go, but the rock of her hips told him what she wanted. Tilting his chin up just a bit, he was able to suck her hard little nub between his teeth and close down gently to hold it for his tongue. She came for him, and the surge of sensual

heat pulsed from her body into his. He could feel the pleasure of other lovers, all raedjour could, but Eyrhaen could actively project it. When she found release, there was nothing like it.

He lost himself in the taste of her, sucking and nibbling as her sex heated and throbbed. His fingers roamed closer, inward, until he found the clenching little bud of her anus. He slid one finger in, the way already moist with her natural oils. This penetration she allowed, gloried in, in fact. Her wiggling encouraged him to sink a second and then a third finger inside her heat, thrusting for her while her clit swelled in his mouth.

He barely heard Lanthan cry out, engrossed in his own task, but she amplified his friend's release as she came again. It had barely passed when she sat up, then knelt over Brevin's face, not done with him. Her wet hair slapped heavily on his belly and groin, making him aware that he was hard again. The new position allowed her to grind down on him, nearly smothering him as she writhed and moaned, close, so close to another climax. He ate at her frantically, sucking her in, thrusting into her ass with his fingers, batting at her clit with his tongue. She keened; the thigh muscles to either side of his head tensed. Her hips ground at him, and her sex filled his mouth as she drew out the last bit of her orgasm.

Fingers bit into his hair. "Stop." Her hips lifted just far enough from his mouth to prevent contact.

His tongue reached out of its own accord, trying to recapture her divine taste, but her hand in his hair held him down.

She shook his head, making him look up at her. Her black breasts shone softly in the light, far more softly than the gleam of pleasure in her red eyes. She flicked a glance up to where Lanthan must still lay, then back down at Brevin. "Fuck him."

He closed his eyes for the moment it took her to climb off him, trying to regain some measure of control. Helpless, he knew, but he stubbornly tried.



When she was free, he rolled to his side. Lanthan was standing, thigh-deep in the water. Leaning over the stone edge, he met Brevin's gaze, hooded eyes inviting him to do just as she demanded. Brevin splashed to his feet in the water, and two paces brought him up behind his friend. Lanthan's legs spread, his hands braced on the edge of the pool. With the ease of familiarity, Brevin bent his knees to adjust for their heights, found Lanthan's entrance, and shoved home. Lanthan groaned, his head falling forward as Brevin leaned into him. Brevin set his hands on the stone just outside of Lanthan's as he thrust hard, just like Lanthan liked it, just like Eyrhaen loved to see.

Eyrhaen appeared before them, wiggling down while Brevin continued to thrust, until she was sitting on the lip of the pool right in front of Lanthan. She stroked the smooth curve of his cheek and captured his lips with hers. Brevin

was sure that her other hand had dropped to stroke Lanthan's cock back to erection. Brevin thrust harder, willing her to be satisfied with this. If she brought either him or Lanthan to hardness again after this, it'd be painful.

She kept them there, willing to play with Lanthan while Brevin fucked him. Brevin felt the passion grow, enhanced by her magic, but he didn't feel release at hand.

"Eyrhaen," Lanthan groaned into her lips.

"What?"

Brevin almost groaned, hearing that evil, taunting tone in her voice.

Lanthan knew it too. Today he was the first to swallow his pride. "Please."

"Brevin?"

It seemed she wanted them both to grovel. "Goddess, please."

Chuckling low, she leaned back, braced on her arms so she could watch them both. Brevin felt a fire light in his spine, urging him to thrust faster. Lanthan shoved back into him, equally caught in her snare. She watched them for a few heartbeats before finally saying, "Come."

Something snapped loose inside Brevin, and he cried out when the orgasm he'd been working for rushed through him, out of him, blinding him. When he could see again, he was still braced behind Lanthan, his cock still wedged in Lanthan's ass. In front of them, Eyrhaen grinned, ropes of Lanthan's seed covering her belly and breasts.

Brevin carefully extricated himself from Lanthan and eased himself down on one of the submerged benches. Lanthan melted down into the water, then came up to sit beside Brevin. Eyrhaen calmly stepped into the water to rinse off her skin, then sat between them. Brevin felt her hand on his thigh and suspected her other was on Lanthan's. She set her head back on the arm Brevin had draped over the side of the pool, and closed her eyes with a happy sigh. "Now, tell me what happened to Tykir."

He exchanged glances with Lanthan over her head. Much as either of them liked sex, he knew his friend shared his wish that she was done with them for today.

Chapter Three

Nialdlye trailed her fingers over Tandante's chiseled jaw. The hard bench beneath her was covered with a loosely padded mat, which only alleviated some of the bruising pressure on her back, but she didn't mind so much. Any bruising that came from good, hard fucking was worth it in her estimation. Besides, she healed quickly.

Tandante lowered his head over her neck, his soft hair drifting over her shoulder and chin as he nuzzled her jaw. Smiling, she threaded her fingers in his hair, always amazed when such big, strong men grew such fine, baby-soft hair. Her own was thicker, still soft but not nearly as fine. Idly, she wondered again what texture hair her children would mature into. But that would take well over a century to find out.

Tossing her head back, she slid her hands down his bare back, her touch sliding in the fine layer of oil that covered his glossy skin. Even though they'd just had sex, it seemed that he was starting yet another round, and she was game. His hands found her hips and shifted her to a better fit with his, assuring her that his cock was game as well. Laughing low, she opened her eyes to look behind her, hoping she could find a page or one of the other women to get her a drink so she wouldn't have to unwind herself from her lover.

She didn't expect to see Nalfien in her upside-down vision. The sorcerer stood a few paces away from her bench, fully dressed in a ground-length blue robe with charcoal fur lining. His arms were folded casually, hands hidden in the voluminous sleeves that nearly brushed the ground themselves. His softly glowing red eyes helped her to identify him since his back was to the fake sun

set in the rock wall high above him, making the space within his hood a dark cavern.



“Nalfien,” she greeted with a smile, always happy to see him. She reached a hand toward him. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to speak with you, if that would be all right.”

“That's quite all right.” She brought her hand back to tap her lover's back. “Tandante, let me up.”

He growled softly, not moving.

She laughed. “Oh don't be greedy. Three times is plenty.”

He nipped at her chin, pressing his half-hard cock against her swollen sex. “It's never enough with you.”

Humming, she brought her hands up to cup his jaw and brought his lips to hers for a thorough kiss. A kiss that she had to push him out of. She smiled up in his sky blue eyes. "Thank you for a wonderful evening."

He heard the dismissal in her voice. She schooled her face not to show the pity she felt at seeing the brief spread of panic over his face. A warrior to the bone, Tandante would not want her to feel pity. But she couldn't help but feel for the sexually motivated men whose time with women was so sparse.

Smiling big, she kissed him briefly again. "Now get up. Nalfien needs to talk to me."

She had no idea if Nalfien had a need or simply wanted to chat, but the elder sorcerer had been one of her staunchest allies and best teachers since she'd come to live with the raedjour a quarter of a century ago. He was also lonely and fragile since the death of his truemate, and she hated to deny him company if he needed it.

Tandante sighed, but he rolled off her onto his feet beside the bench. Her watchful eye focused on the small hitch in his step as he favored his left leg, but the wound that had brought him to her was largely healed. She had set the bone, at least. His natural healing could now take over, augmented by the sex they'd just had. She took the hand he held for her and let him help her to sit. When he would have lingered, she pulled her hand from his and reached up to try to run her fingers through the tangle of her waist-length scarlet and black tresses. It was a hopeless cause, but it gave her something to concentrate on while he drew away.

Nalfien waited patiently while the warrior gathered his boots and trousers from the ground. Tandante didn't bother to put them on. With one last longing look, he said good night to Nialdlye, then bowed respect to the sorcerer before he was on his way. Nialdlye let herself indulge in a lingering gaze over the fine curves of his back and ass as he walked away with only a slight limp.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather go after him?"

She shook herself and smiled up at the sorcerer. “No. He needs to rest.” She made one last try at tugging fingers through her hair, then gave up. “Did you want to talk here or upstairs?”

He glanced up at the balcony two stories above him. She lived in the same tower where the unmated women were housed, but she had a full suite rather than just a set of rooms. As such, her bedroom had a balcony that overlooked this wide rock garden, a gift to her and the women with whom she kept company from the men who visited them.

“Is Tisla upstairs with your daughter?” His hood kept his eyes shaded from the mild light of the fake sun that had been her own addition to the garden and a gift to the women who'd given themselves over to the night. The magical light shone cheery yellow light down on the garden. Warmth wasn't necessary, because this particular cavern was plenty warm on its own. The sun's effect, however, was disconcerting to the men until they got used to it.

“She is.”

He returned his gaze to her. “Then I would prefer that we stay here.”

She nodded, wondering what he had to say that was not appropriate for Irin and Savous's second-oldest daughter. Picking up her flimsy green waist wrap, she stood. “Then do you mind if we walk over to the stream? I'm thirsty.”

“Certainly.” He fell into step beside her as they started down the narrow path. Nialdlye had to walk slowly to match his gait. He still maintained much of what was obvious of former grace, but he was slow. Slower even than when she'd first met him. She wondered why he went on. His truemate had passed a few cycles previous; he claimed to feel his work was not yet finished, and could not follow her to death. After centuries of dedication to the raedjour, no one pushed him.

They walked for moments in silence, passing underneath the shade of carved stone trees and cleverly placed rocks. Nialdlye was continually amazed at the skill of the “gardeners,” men with skill at the hammer and chisel who formed gorgeous sculptures to mimic the living forest above. The garden had

become more than a homage to Nialdlye and the women who had given up their lives to the night; it was now also a dedication to the absent raedjour goddess. The men only got to see Her forest at night but had become fascinated with creating a replica they could see in pseudodaylight.

“How is Davlin?”

Nialdlye smiled at the thought of her daughter. “Precious. She's every bit as rambunctious as Rikert, I'm afraid.”

Nalfien laughed softly, well acquainted with her active twenty-cycle-old son. “For that, my apologies.”

She laughed. “Oh, I get some measure of relief these days. He spends much of his time in the nursery.”

“And that goes well?”

She kept her smile, knowing what he meant. “That goes *very* well. To those boys, he's no different from them, despite the obvious.” Her firstborn looked mostly like the raedjour boys, but there were differences, namely in his vivid green eyes, the reddish cast to his mostly black skin, and the red and black streaks through his white hair. Thankfully, he had fallen in with playmates who didn't think much of his differences.

“That is good. Very good.” Nalfien had been among those concerned, judging from the jealousies Nialdlye had encountered from some women shortly after her arrival. Not many of those who had yet to truemate had taken kindly to the appearance of a full-blooded elf. They had tried to turn her differences into liabilities. Things had only been made worse when Nialdlye had given birth to two children outside the bonds of a truematch. Tempers had mellowed when most of the resentful women had found truemates. The majority of the unmated women now in residence had arrived since Nialdlye had come to live among the raedjour, and she went to every length to befriend them all. There had been a fear that the sons of the women who had hated Nialdlye would carry on that resentment toward her son, but the boys who displayed such

temperaments were by far in the minority. Despite his outward appearance, Rikert was a charming little boy.

They reached a small, light water mill that had been set in one of the deeper portions of the shallow, magic-made stream that ran from one corner of the cavern to the other. Nalfien waited as she picked up a dipper to scoop some of the clear water from a trough that was just above waist high and drank deep. Spells had been set to clarify the water, as was done with all water from the underground lakes, but an extra spell had been set on this one to give it just a hint of what Nialdlye thought of as “forest green.” She knew a few of the gardeners were deciding if it was worth it to try to populate the stream with small fish. Their trouble being that the stream only ran for a few hundred yards before emptying into a pitch-dark, untreated underground lake.

“Does Tisla live with you now?”

“Not quite, but she stays with me often.” Nialdlye smiled at an older boy who scuttled past, trying not to giggle as he nearly tripped over his feet. He was new to the garden. She knew all the boys assigned to the women's tower, and most of them had gotten over the distraction of her unusual red skin. “Savous thought it would be good for her to help raise Davlin, and I certainly don't mind the help.” She shook out her waist wrap and started to wind it loosely around her hips.

“I agree.” He picked up the dipper himself for a drink. “And it is likely very good for her to be with other women.”

Nialdlye nodded with a smile.

“I often wish we had been able to do the same for Eyrhaen.”

Her smile faltered. “Yes.” Savous's oldest daughter had removed herself from the family tower a few cycles previous, against her father's wishes. Although threat of rogue attacks kept her within the central complex, she'd chosen rooms in a tower at the opposite end of the women's tower. “Tisla's a good child,” Nialdlye hedged. “She's been a big help to me, and everyone here adores her.”

"A good child, yes. So is Eyrhaen. In her way."

Nialdlye lost the battle with her grimace. "Ah. So we're going to talk about the tyrant?" She knotted her wrap, then reached up to wrestle with her hair again. "She was active this afternoon. Was she torturing Brevin, Lanthan, or Tykir this time? Or was it someone new?" Her fingers caught on a snarl, and she yanked her fingers through it. "When will she learn to control herself so she doesn't spill arousal throughout the city?" The bitter words flowed as easily as the water over the smooth pebbles.

When Nalfien didn't answer, she stopped, looking up into the soft sadness in his eyes.

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I forgot she's your charge now." Irritated that the man who had taught her much was now stuck with an unwilling and difficult student. She dropped her hair and stepped onto the delicate bridge that crossed the stream right beside the watermill. Stone rails were delicately carved to resemble ivy twining tied branches and more ivy had been etched into the stones beneath her feet.

Nalfien halted beside her at the apex of the bridge's arch. "What is the source of this animosity between you and Eyrhaen?"

Nialdlye shifted, watching the water rather than him. Fake sunlight shone on the babbling stream. "It's not animosity. I don't hate her."

"You don't like her."

She gripped the railing. "Pray tell, what is there to like?"

"You two should be friends."

She didn't ask him why. She'd had this discussion on many levels with different people over the past two decades. "*Should* and *are* are two different things, Nalfien. She doesn't like me, I don't like her. We avoid each other. It's as simple as that. Rather simple too."

He nodded. "Jealousy is a powerful thing."

Nialdlye ground her teeth. *Whose jealousy, hers or mine?* But she didn't ask. She'd tried to make friends with the demon on more than one occasion and had been scorned, repeatedly. She was through.

He began walking again. "Eyrhaen is not precisely what I've come to discuss."

She followed, silently.

They passed underneath a top-heavy rock arch that seemed to her like it should topple at any moment, although she'd been told it had been standing in this cavern for at least two centuries. "When was the last time you visited Radin?"

A spear of longing split her heart at the unexpected reference. She took a moment to recover, fiddling with a lock of hair that dangled between her breasts. "Not since Davlin was born." Had it been over five cycles? It seemed like only yesterday when she'd last set eyes on his face and felt the frustration that he wouldn't open his eyes. But attention to her infant had kept her more than distracted. "Why?"

"Did you know that Eyrhaen has been visiting him?"

Nialdlye stilled. "I've heard that. Yes." And had promptly put it out of her mind. "Under your supervision?"

"I assume so, yes, but I wouldn't be surprised to find she's slipped into his suite without my notice."

"Don't you have the room shielded?"

"I do, but she's become rather adept at breaking through shields without notice. Even mine."

"What about her shadow guard?" Nialdlye had her own set of guards that became necessary if she ever left the grounds of the women's tower. But within the tower and its grounds, the normal security of the tower more than sufficed to keep her and her children safe. She'd heard the lengths that Savous was forced to go to, to make sure his daughter was afforded the same protection.

Nalfien reached up to lower the hood of his robe, revealing his softly yellowing white hair to the fake sunlight. “She's become rather adept at avoiding them as well.”

“Her control has gotten that good?”

He turned his face up into the fading light. The magic orb had begun to turn colors, indicating the time change on the surface. It would soon be dawn. “Curiously, no. Her control is still rather hectic, but her raw power has grown.”

Nialdlye gazed out over the garden, biting her tongue over a number of choice curses. A few younger boys carted rocks from one entrance to what looked to be the start of a new layout in one corner. The murmur of their voices but not the substance of their words reached her. One of the gardeners sat with his chisel and hammer near the wall where the creek disappeared into an arched hole in the cavern wall. He was not near enough to overhear either. Regardless, she felt Nalfien's unobtrusive spell that surrounded them, keeping their words confidential.

As she was close friends with Savous and Irin, his truemate, Nialdlye knew the *raeja*'s frustration in not being able to keep track of his daughter. She'd promised to become a very powerful sorcerer. Perhaps the most powerful in raedjour history. Which seemed fitting. Like her or not, Nialdlye fully recognized her importance. While Nialdlye's presence and her children's were welcome among the raedjour, Eyrhaen was born of them. She and her sisters were Rhae's last gift to Her people. She could very likely lead them someday, although speculation on that subject was still very premature. Savous and his council had great hopes that Eyrhaen would show the same trait as Nialdlye and be able to have children with different men. If Eyrhaen, as a natural-born elf, had the same flexibility, then there was a potential shining future for the raedjour. *If the bitch would consent to be fucked. What's she waiting for?*

But that was not the discussion for today. *Radin*. “What do you hope to gain with her and Radin?”

"I'm not entirely sure. She insists that she's drawn to him, and I must admit, the protective aura around him is receding rapidly."

Nialdlye's fingers gripped the waist-high stone beside her. "It is?"

"Yes."

"You think she had something to do with it?"

"I'm not sure, but I think she might."

"What has she done?"

He shook his head. "We have tried various spells, including many that require deep meditation and concentration. When she is able to achieve, the spells themselves seem to do very little. I couldn't say why the aura is receding."

"Could she be trying something and not telling you? Would you be able to sense it?"

He could only shake his head and shrug one shoulder. He started toward the opposite side of the bridge. "Of that, I'm not sure."

She followed, thinking hard. "You don't think she is?"

He sighed, lowering to sit on a smooth, narrow slab that served as a bench beside the path. A clever wooden sculpture of a tree sheltered the bench, complete with clever fabric leaves and pliant branches that swayed to the stream's slight breeze. "I don't know what to think."

She sat beside him, knee folded underneath her so she could face him. "Have you talked to Savous?"

"We've spoken, but not at length. He is, understandably, distracted."

She nodded, biting at the side of her thumb. Savous, Salin, Hyle, and all the ruling council were constantly embroiled in plans and preparations for defense against the ever-encroaching rogues. They wanted so badly to bring a stop to the fighting, but the rogues were curiously and dangerously unresponsive.

"How old is Davlin?"

She startled at the unexpected question. “Five springs.”

He nodded. “And you've not seen Radin for fear of the magic surrounding him.”

That was her story. When she'd given birth to a precious girl, she had been a willing participant in all the restrictions that had been put in place to keep her and her baby girl safe. The experience had brought her much closer to Irin, the only other woman who had given birth to girls and who still lived under constant surveillance. It had been decided that there was too much unknown about the magic surrounding Radin to risk her visiting him. At least that gave her an excuse for avoiding the man she desperately wanted to be with.

She didn't understand her sense of loss and frustration regarding him and had given up trying. It simply was. She missed the man—no, more the spirit—she had only known briefly, who had helped her escape from the man who had governed her life from the time she was a toddler. Radin had been more like a vivid memory, indistinct but very real. She didn't know him, not really, but she ached for his presence. She wanted to hear him laugh. She wanted to know what it was like to touch him. She dreamed of fucking him like she had dreamed of no man before him.

Nalfien's nod brought her out of her thoughts. “Yes, that would fit as well.”

She frowned at him. “What would fit?”

He sighed. “I'm not positive, but I have a theory.”

“Which is?”

“There might be a connection between the aura surrounding Radin and Eyrhaen's maturity. When she began her pleasures with the young men, it began to deteriorate.”

Nialdye blinked. She could hardly forget the uproar perhaps a half decade previous caused by Eyrhaen's sexual attentions. Savous and Irin had been beside themselves, wondering if they should prohibit her actions or trust her to

know her own needs. They still questioned their decision to stick with the latter. Given the distraction, it was little wonder Nialdlye hadn't made the connection to the changes for Radin. "You think they're connected?"

"I didn't realize the timing at first, but I have kept records. The two events do vaguely coincide."

Nialdlye stared blankly at him. The news didn't make her happy. But it wasn't that much of a leap. So much of what lay at the heart of what the raedjour were was based on sex. "So you think she's the key to waking him up?" It was the general consensus between those who tracked it that, when the aura disappeared, Radin would wake. Or at least, that was the hope. Nalfien had postulated a few different, less attractive theories that Nialdlye didn't like to entertain.

"Perhaps."

She nodded, doing her best to quell the uneasiness in her belly. Not that it would do much good. He likely sensed her unease. She couldn't help it. What would Eyrhaen have to do with Radin to...? She took a breath, mentally shaking herself. "Why are you telling me?"

He smoothed a hand over the lapel of his robe. "There is another theory. You gave birth to your daughter at roughly the same time."

"So it might not be Eyrhaen? It might be me?" That made her feel better.

"It could be either. Or both." He shrugged. "Or in truth, neither. We simply have no way of knowing. But there were certain anomalies that occurred in his aura that have only taken place in your presence."

And why did that make her happy? "Have you discussed this with anyone else?"

"Hyle. But he has other matters on his mind." Indeed. Hyle was the primary sorcerer among the raedjour, answering only to Savous himself. Much of his time was spent trying to track and guard against the random rogue attacks that had been plaguing the city for the past few cycles.

“What do you want from me?”

“Your thoughts. I trust your judgment on such things.” A high compliment from Nalfien.

She worried a pebble beneath her big toe. “I don't know what to say.”

“You feel a connection with Radin?”

More than she probably should. “Yes.”

“Have you ventured into the *vetriese*?”

Shaking her head tumbled a lock of hair over her face, and she reached up to push it back. “Not since Rikert was born.” Fear of the erratic portal into the void had kept her from the *vetriese* longer than she'd avoided Radin. She couldn't shake the fear that if she entered, she may never find her way out. “Why do you ask?”

“I cannot shake the idea that the *vetriese* is connected to Radin.”

She nodded. It was a common theory, given that a *vetriese* had both taken him away and brought him back. She was happy to have had a part of the latter event, even if it had been an accident born out of a desperate move. “Do you think I should...try it?” she asked carefully.

“No. Not yet. I'm merely gathering facts.”

His hand on her shoulder startled her into looking up. The look in his eyes was kind. “I would sit with you the next time you are with Radin, if you'd allow me?”

“Of course. Anything you need.” She swallowed. “Should we go now?” Fear and excitement warred in her belly.

“No. I have done much already tonight and fear I would fall asleep.” He stood, encouraging her to stand with him. “Will you sup with Savous and Irin?”

“Yes.” She did most mornings, at least with Irin. Savous joined them when he could.

“Good. I would be interested to hear their opinions on this.”

"I'll talk with them."

"Thank you. May I see you again tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"I shall leave you, then." Smiling, he embraced her and brushed his lips across her temple. A fatherly touch, far different than anything she felt with any other man among the raedjour. But then Nalfien was the only oldster she'd spent any time with, and he was the oldest among them these days by at least a century. "Thank you for talking with me."

"You're welcome."

She stood where she was, watching his back in the pink-orange light. Was he right? Would Eyrhaen wake Radin? If so, what would that mean?

For the first time since she'd lived among them, for the first time ever, really, she felt the stirring of jealousy for what another woman might mean to a man.

Chapter Four

Eyrhaen let the back of her throat squeeze around the tip of Tykir's cock and released the climax between them. She gulped as he groaned, voicing both of their quaking pleasure as liquid warmth flowed into her. His fingers tangled in her hair, holding her gently as his hips twitched the last of his pleasure. She was more than content to wait, basking in the delicious tingle between them.

He collapsed, boneless on the mattress. Smiling, she drew to her knees over him, admiring her lover.

Short and compact, Tykir's muscles sometimes made him seem bulkier than he really was. Although he was highly gifted in magic, his mother, Gala, had been of the opinion that her boys needed to learn physical skills as well. Tykir was not only a powerfully talented apprentice sorcerer, he could more than hold his own in a hand-to-hand confrontation. Tykir's face was his saving grace. Even with the glowing red eyes that spoke of his primary talents, he had a very childlike innocence in features, which were more rounded than usual for their race. His mobile lips smiled often and generously, and she was very happy to see them smile now in place of the less-familiar grimace from when she'd come into his rooms.

While his eyes were still closed, she glanced at the bandage at his side. It had taken a while, but she had finally gotten out of Brevin that Tykir, as the source of magic, had been the target of the rogues who had attacked them. How they had hoped to subdue him, no one knew. The blatant evidence of the decimation of her people seemed far more immediate when one of those close to her was injured. She didn't know what she would have done if he'd been killed.

His right hand rose to cup her jaw, turning her attention from the bandage to his smile. "I'm fine."

Caught, she smiled with him, letting his soft warmth fill her. "I know." She gave in to the temptation of his bare chest and draped herself over it. "But I don't like that anyone would try to hurt you."

He tugged lightly on the tail of hair that lay on her back. "It wasn't a personal attack on me."

"I know." She tucked her forehead underneath his chin. "But if it had been just a handspan..."

He squeezed her to stop her words. "It's the chance we all take. Until the rogues stop attacking, we all do what we can."

Do we? She drew random circles on his shoulder with her fingertip. "Do you think they'll ever stop?"

"I don't know. We still haven't managed to find out why they're attacking."

She lay quietly, thinking. No one would say it to her directly, but she knew that one of the theories was that the rogues were after her. It wasn't a huge leap. The stray men who had mostly kept to the forest and far mountains had suddenly and unexpectedly been drawn back to the underground city in just the past few cycles. The attacks were closer to the city than ever before, and more violent since the rogues refused to relent. The warriors loyal to Savous were forced to kill or be killed. Commander Jarak and his captains scrambled to keep their limited warriors in an appropriate guard.

There were other theories as well. Humans encroaching within the Dark Forest could have driven the rogues back. Nialdlye's presence and ability to have children outside of a truematch bond. The return of the vetriese. Or it could very well be that extended life away from the heart of their existence had simply driven the rogues mad. The raedjour were, after all, a race of elves, created originally through the will of a goddess. Time without Her could very well be the eventual death of them all, and those in the city simply didn't feel

the effects just yet due to the residual effects of Her presence. All these theories, or any combination of them, were probable. But until the cause was positively identified, her father and his council could only take safety measures rather than solving the real problem.

Frustration boiled in Eyrhaen's chest. She *felt* the decline of her people. She'd known warriors, many young and in their prime, who had died. She saw the dwindling number of children in the common nursery and the lack of human women who came to the raedjour. She felt it but didn't know what to do about it.

She hitched up so she could meet Tykir's gently smiling gaze. She slid her palms up into the shining pillow of hair beneath his head and brought him into a kiss. He kissed back without urgency, more than anyone she'd been with, simply content with this contact. Not that she couldn't entice him to more; he was just sweeter and more patient. She blamed it on long hours of study over spell and history books. He got that from his father, Hyle, and his grandsire, Nalfien. All the males in their immediate relation were ridiculously studious. But it made them so very useful.

She could have sex with him. She probably should. She should fuck him and Brevin and Lanthan all, the three men she felt the closest bond with. She should let one of them get her pregnant so she could do her part in repopulating the numbers of their people.

But... She couldn't. Not yet. There was...*something*. Something that made her hold back. Vague dreams and indistinct instincts kept her from giving in to what she knew everyone wanted from her. She needed to do something first.

Which reminded her of her other reason for coming to see him. Gradually, she pulled away, nibbling at his lips. "Are you well enough to take a walk with me?"

His hands roamed her bare back, soothing circles that almost convinced her to just lie there with him instead. "Yes."

Tasting his lips one last time, she rose to her knees over him. The bulk of her ponytail fell over her left shoulder to mingle with his hair beside his head. "Let's go."

He sat up as she climbed from the bed. "Where are we going?"

Retrieving her shirt from where it was draped over the edge of the table, she kept her back to him. "Does it have to be somewhere special?"

A chest opened behind her as he rummaged for clothing. "No. But you have somewhere special in mind."

She huffed, the shirt settling about her thighs as she spun toward him. "You think you know me so well."

The fall of his hair mostly hid his small smile.

"All right." She sighed, snatching up a pair of soft blue trousers. "I need your help."

He stepped into pale purple trousers, more snug than her own. "Help with what?"

"I..." She held out her hands, then let them drop to her sides. "It'll be easier for you just to see."

Red eyes turned up to study her for a long moment, but he let it go at that. He sat to put on his boots while she put on her pants and did likewise with hers. They stood as one, and he took her hand. "Lead the way."

* * * * *

He finally balked when they reached the secluded tunnel that would lead to her destination. "Eyrhaen, no."

Still holding his hand, she faced him. "Yes."

He frowned, searching her face. "Why?"

She glanced at the darkened tunnel, then back at him. "I can *feel* it."

He nodded, accepting. "How?"

She placed a hand over the back of her head. "Here. It pulls. I've dreamed about it."

"You've never even seen it."

She licked her bottom lip. "Yes. I have."

"When?" Then, when she didn't answer, he cursed softly. "Eyrie, please tell me you didn't come here alone."

"I wouldn't lie to you."

"Goddess, Eyrie!" He gathered her into his arms, squeezing tight. "Why do you take such chances?"

They kept their voices low. The tunnels that surrounded them were little used but well-worn from millennia of men seeking connection with their goddess. At the end of this final tunnel lay the small room that had encompassed Her vetriese, the one they had lost when Eyrhaen's mother was changed and Radin was lost. In the same area lay the new, wild vetriese that, even after a quarter of a century, they knew little about.

She hugged him back. "I had to. It *called* me."

That only made him squeeze tighter. "You shouldn't have come alone."

"I know. I didn't stay long, and I didn't go in it. But I need to go back. That's why I wanted you with me."

"It should be Nalfien. Or my father."

She held on. "No. Not Nalfien. He's bad enough when I'm with Radin. He's so concerned about something bad, he never lets anything else have a chance."

"That's not true."

"That *is* true."

"Then my father..."

"He's far too busy to help me, even if he wanted to." She pulled back, keeping her hands at his side, connected with bare skin. "I'll be fine with you."

He glanced down the tunnel again. "I don't know..."

“Tykir, please, I came to you. I'm asking for help.” It was what they all chided her for. She was accused of taking unnecessary risks, of not taking precautions. Perhaps it was true, but sometimes the risks were worth it if progress was made.

Tykir wasn't of that exact same opinion, but he was far less cautious than his sire or grandsire. Aside from that, she trusted him completely. He wasn't that much older than she, though he'd managed to pack a wealth of experience into his life that she could never have. He had freedoms she never would.

He squeezed her shoulders, still looking down the tunnel. “Can't we at least get Brevin or Lanthan?”

“No time.” She dug her fingers into his sides. “Please, just a quick look. I want you to see what happens.”

“What happens?”

Damn. She couldn't scare him or he'd really balk. “It's not bad. I just want your opinion.” Shamelessly, she trickled power into part of her that made her irresistible to him. Tucking close, she kissed his jaw. “Please.”

“Eyrhaen.” Better than any, he would feel what she was doing.

She did it anyway. “Please.”

He turned into the kiss that she offered, drinking of the pleasure she poured into it. His cock began to harden against her belly.

“Please.”

He groaned, pushing her away gently. “Fine. But only a *quick* look.” He caught her hand and stared into her eyes, very serious. “And then, we tell Nalfien.”

She narrowed her eyes and saw the reflection of their glow on his skin.

He let a low-level glow begin in his own eyes. His raw power wasn't a match for hers, but that didn't mean he wouldn't make her work in a battle of wills.

She sniffed. “Fine. You can tell him if I saw what I think I saw.”

"We'll tell him."

She grumbled low in her throat as they started down the darkened tunnel. "I don't know what you think he'll see. He hasn't figured out anything about the vetriese or Radin in all the time he's been studying them."

"That's not true."

"That *is* true. *I* was the one who had an effect on the shielding aura around Radin."

His steps faltered. "What?"

"It's true. He didn't even want me near Radin, but when I *finally* convinced him, I was able to bring down that shield a little."

"How?"

She scowled into the darkness. "I'm not sure exactly. But it was *me*."

"What has he said about it?"

"Nothing. As usual. Just hummed and such like he usually does and wrote it down." She sighed. "If he spent half as much time *doing* as he did *writing*, he might have figured something out."

Tykir was quiet, and Eyrhaen stopped talking. She knew he held his grandsire in far higher regard than she, but then he'd had his father as a mentor, not the decrepit old man whose mind was half-addled after losing his truemate. If she'd had Hyle as her master, or even maybe her father, things might have been different. Both of them still erred on the side of caution, but they could be talked into reason. Nalfien had lived too long and through too many apprentices for him to let her goad him into what he deemed to be hasty action.

She trailed her fingertips over the rough stone of the walls as they continued in silence. Unlike the inner city, this little-used tunnel was rough and unfinished. Nonetheless, the ground beneath the soft soles of her ankle boots and the curving stone to either side of her were smooth from centuries of use. Even before they had lost the vetriese, her predecessors and ancestors had

chosen not to refine this tunnel or its destination. Perhaps they preferred to let the path to the goddess remain as She would have it? Fanciful drivel to Eyrhaen's thinking, but she knew that, despite outward appearances, those of her race were rather romantic.

She felt the buzz of the portal long before they reached the small cave. In fact, she could feel the portal from anywhere in the city; just the effect of it became harder to ignore the closer she got. She could feel it and Radin with the same intensity, and vague dreams of both had her convinced that she had some sort of mission to accomplish with those as key ingredients.

Something of a light lit the darkness from the open archway at the end of the tunnel. It was far too low to be called a true light, and it hardly affected her nightsight, but it was a vague illumination. They stopped at the narrow arched entrance to the small cave and could finally see the vetriese itself. She was told it looked exactly like the former vetriese, a vaguely six feet high oval that was half that across at its widest point. The black within its depths was somehow darker than the black of the tunnels in which it stood, completely unaffected by the rim of sizzling miniature lightning bolts that marked its perimeter.

They had studied it, Hyle, Nalfien, and their chosen assistants. Tykir had helped along the way. Through what they had told her, she knew that though it looked like its predecessor, this vetriese was different. Men had stepped within, both those gifted with magic and without, and had not felt anything. The previous vetriese had been filled with the presence of the goddess, a place to enter to receive Her blessing or to disappear forever due to Her justice. But now, the opening was just a gateway to a vast nothing with a vague sense of foreboding. She'd heard that Nialdlye had entered once, long ago, and professed that it was more like the void she had known in her previous life with the sorcerer who had kept her. But even she had noted differences, differences Eyrhaen had never paid attention to and now wished that she had. *Maybe I can get Tykir to tell me.*

She stepped into the room but stopped when he gasped and grabbed her arm. A glance over her shoulder showed him with his eyes wide and glowing in concern. "You see it?"

He tried to pull her back. "Yes."

She held her ground. "Wait." Elated, she turned back. He saw it! It wasn't just her imagination. He saw the lightning perimeter of the oval intensify. It made no sound to the ear, but there was an increased buzzing at the back of her head that made her a little dizzy.

"Eyrie..."

"No. Watch." She reached toward it. Tiny blue-white sparks zinged across the space to tickle her fingertips and light the room.

He was there, hands on her shoulders. She felt a nudge, like he meant to pull her away, but she was rooted to the spot. Sensation licked over her skin as the sparks danced between her and the gaping darkness.

"Has it done that before?" she asked, entranced by the lovely show.

"No. Not that I've heard."

She giggled, buoyed by a tingling euphoria. "Not even Nialdlye?"

"No." He squeezed her shoulders again. "Let's go."

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know, but we should go."

She sighed. "Tykir, don't be like that."

"Eyrhaen, you said we would take a quick look; then we would leave. We've looked. Let's go."

She knew what she said, but... "I'm going in."

He wrapped his arms around her torso, trying to hold her. "No!" Even though she was well acquainted with his strength, she knew he couldn't stop her. The tone in his voice suggested he suspected the same. "Don't. Please."

"I have to." She took a step, and he was forced to step with her, as though she were the stronger of the two. "Go and tell them if you must."

"Eyrhaen, wait. Let's go get Nalfien..."

"No." Another step. His hold slipped away, and she felt an odd moment where she might have drifted off the ground. Blue-white sparks fizzled in the air surrounding her. Warmth stole up her legs, tickling the outsides of her thighs. "I need to do this."

"Eyrhaen, stop!" She felt him behind her, but something kept him at a distance. She couldn't turn, because the dark held her full attention.

She should be scared.

She wasn't.

A trickle of fear for *that* squeezed her heart.

Crooked, creeping fingers of blue-white light tangled around her, making her skin crawl in an odd but not unpleasant way. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her hair had come loose and was floating up, rising like a cloud of smoke from a smoldering pit fire.

"Eyrhaen!"

She took the step over the threshold.

Chapter Five

One moment she was light as air, bodiless. She knew all, and the world was hers, buoyed by whispering voices of beings so much *more* than anything. *“Remember. Forget. Radin. Bond. Protect. Change. Do...do...do!”*

Then the weight of the physical crashed down on Eyrhaen. Air shoved into her lungs and her hair fell heavy across her face and chest as she sagged in someone's arms. *Tykir*. She knew him instantly by smell and touch, every loving detail that was unique about him searing into her open soul. Expansive. She blinked, and the dark cavern walls blurred before her, the dingy gray stone alive with dancing colors she'd never before seen.

Tykir was talking. She heard his voice. Words. Those were words, the sounds that filled the air like expanding rings on a pond, bouncing off the walls, then drifting back through the air toward her. She lifted a hand to try to touch one to see if it would make sense. It rippled around her fingers and drifted away.

Stunning warmth encircled her wrist. Wrist. Hand. Fingers. Yes, those were parts of her. No, there was another. Tykir, yes, his hand. His hand holding hers, pressing her palm to his cheek. His hand, a little bigger than hers. His skin, their skin, like the cavern walls, the black was full of painfully beautiful color. Covered with an intoxicating scent that made her breasts warm within the drifting fabric of her shirt.

“Eyrhaen.”

She blinked, focus melting in slowly. “Yes.” Her tongue was huge, her saliva spiced metallic.

Her neck twisted when fingers caught her chin and made her face to the side, tilted her up. She dragged her eyelids open to behold a face. Tykir. Huge red glowing eyes ringed by stark white lashes. Brows to match the lashes crowded close to his eyes. Small, slightly upturned nose and high, curved cheeks. His hair was loose and a jumble about his head, a few stray tendrils floating at odd angles. *You're so beautiful. I love you.* Had she said the words aloud? Or maybe they were said directly in his head. His heart?

“Eyrhaen?”

She smiled. His soft voice was full of concern. Magic thrumming through and around him, embracing her just like his arms. “Tykir.”

“Oh, thank the goddess.” They sank as he gathered her close to his chest. Her knees gave out, not willing to support her. Where was the weightlessness of before? She settled into his warmth. No, *onto* his warmth. Her awareness of his inside and out was fading. He sat on the floor, her face held to his chest, rocking her back and forth for a moment, murmuring. “Thank you, Goddess, thank you.” Was he talking to her? No. He was talking of the other.

The other... She blinked, fingernails digging into his shoulders. Someone else... No, more than someone... Female and male. Information. Something very important. Something entrusted to her. *What was...?* She turned her head to face the force she could see, the place she had left. A black hole ringed with creeping blue-white flames. No, not black, not empty. So full, so very full. Her hand lifted, finger reaching.

“Eyrhaen, don't.” His hand closed around hers and brought it back. “Not now. Talk to me, please.”

She opened her mouth. “I...”

More people. More bodies. She knew them. There was her da and Tykir's father. Strong and solid, gorgeous members of her life. Wonderful. How wonderful to see them.

Da took her hand as he knelt on the bare rock, his black state robe drifting in a wide circle about him. The white markings etched into the skin of his face and chest glowed in the eerie light. "Eyrhaen?"

She tilted her face into his hand when he stroked her cheek, basking in his love. His worry burned tears in her eyes. "Da."

Behind her, Hyle spoke to Tykir in a low voice that she heard perfectly well. "What happened?"

Tykir swallowed; she could sense the movement. "She went into the vetriese."

"What?"

A fine tremor shook the strong muscles supporting her. "I tried to stop her."

Da cupped her jaw with both hands, forced her to face him. The glow of his eyes cast a crimson hue on the upper curves of his cheeks, but the white runes in his skin continued to shine pure white. "Eyrhaen, are you all right?"

She smiled. "I'm fine." She pointed to the vetriese. "Da, there are voices in there."

All three of them stilled. Only Da's eyes flicked up over her head before he concentrated on her again. "Voices?"

"Yes. Hundreds on thousands of voices. Or maybe it was just two. I couldn't make out what they were saying." She frowned at the twinge of pain that began to swell between her eyes. "I wasn't there long enough. So much." She brought her hand back to cover her eyes, her enthrallment with her surroundings fading quickly. "Can we...go, now?"

"What's wrong?"

"I don't... Head...aches."

She didn't know what they did. Her pinpoint awareness of them dwindled as a knot of intensity throbbed behind her eyeballs. She gasped a little when

Tykir stood, lifting her. Gladly, she slid her arms around his neck and pressed her face to his pulse.

They took her from the cave, passing quickly through the darkened tunnel. She kept her eyes closed and tried to will her head to move as little as possible.

“Eyrie, how do you feel?”

They'd reached brighter light, other voices, more pressure. Outside of the pain, she could feel hundreds of people throughout the cavern, perhaps beyond. She shrank against Tykir. “Head still hurts,” she whispered.

“Let's take her to her rooms in my tower.”

“Rhaeja”—that was Hyle—“perhaps we should...”

“No. We'll take her to the rooms in *my* tower.”

Pause. “As you wish, my rhaeja.”

Her head hurt too much to make sense of the tension between them. Blinded by pain, she cuddled close to Tykir and chose to let it go.

* * * * *

“She's out of control.”

Hyle made no comment, silently following Savous into the workroom at the top of his tower and closing the door behind them.

Savous swept off his heavy state robe and draped it over a chair. A thought sent the smoldering embers of the fire in the room's central pit ablaze, both lighting the windowless room as well as warming it. He circled the pit toward a cabinet with the harder wines and spirits.

His heart had yet to fully settle. Tykir's desperate distress call had sent both him and Hyle racing from a communal meal. Savous had taken to eating his first meal of the night in public and encouraged any and all to join him in the main dining hall. It was a must for his council. He hoped that the effort to see and be seen would lessen some of the growing tensions within the city. On

some levels it worked. On others... It was hard to keep spirits up when more and more warriors were forced to kill their own kind. But danger to his daughter had sent all thoughts flying from his head. Thankfully, Irin had enough sense to stay put, although she had kept the mind-link between them open until Savous had left Eyrhaen safely behind, sleeping in her old bedroom with Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir to watch over her.

Exhausted but keyed up, he poured fine whiskey—a present from their human allies to the south—for both of them without asking, then turned to hand the tumbler to Hyle. “Thoughts?”

Hyle's red eyes regarded him thoughtfully for a heartbeat. Then he headed for the solid worktable, sipping his drink. His friend was tired. The burden of casting citywide spells to try to detect the rogues as they attacked had fallen on Hyle's very capable but overburdened shoulders. Trouble was, he couldn't always tell if a small group of raedjour were rogues or hunters. Or if they were some of the few who were still loyal but chose to live outside of the city. Too many variables and too many people. Thus Hyle was pushed to his limits without having to also deal with Savous's headstrong daughter.

Hyle waited until Savous was seated as well before speaking. “Do you think it's the goddess who leads her?”

Savous downed the rest of his drink in one gulp. Hyle's question wasn't a new one. Savous had been wondering the same thing since Eyrhaen had begun to mention her dreams a few cycles previous. “She mentioned more than one presence with her in the vetriese.”

Hyle nodded. “You think it might be the other?”

Savous winced. Radin's death...no, disappearance, had come about within a vetriese because of a clash between their goddess and a partially formed would-be divinity. Savous's insane father, Valanth, the previous rhaeja, had made a deal with this would-be goddess, and together they had imprisoned Rhae. Valanth had planned to sacrifice Savous to this goddess as payment for Her aid, but Rhae and Irin—who was not yet Savous's truemate—had

intervened. The end result had taken both divinities, Valanth and Radin from the raedjour, along with the vetriese. That would-be goddess had wanted Savous, wanted him badly. He remembered that chittering touch and shuddered. "I don't know."

"Does she know about the other?"

Savous set his tumbler on the table and stared at it. "Outside of what's in the stories, no."

"You've never discussed it with her?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should."

He twirled the heavy crystal glass, evaluating the creeping feeling on the back of his neck at the very thought. "Perhaps. I'd hoped I'd never have to."

"I know. But we couldn't predict what has happened."

"No." Back when he and his trusted council had made a few key decisions, they couldn't predict that another vetriese would open and give Radin back to them. Even if they had no way to know if he was a blessing or a curse or the same man he had been, his presence was a factor that made them question many things over the past two centuries. They also couldn't have predicted their introduction of a woman from another race of elves, who had knowledge—albeit limited—of yet more god-born races in the world. They couldn't have predicted Savous's daughter and the dangerous level of her powers, nor her unknown abilities. They had dreaded but couldn't have fully predicted the devastating effect of her maturity on their population.

Savous knew the others were skeptical, but he was convinced the rogues' return was because of Eyrhaen. She touched them all, even those who had never met her. How could they not be drawn to her? Finally, they had no way of knowing if his own daughter was the solution to all their problems or the worst possible curse and the doom of their race.

Too many unknowns.

He sighed, slouching in his chair. “What does Nalfien say?”

Hyle sat forward, forearms braced on the table. He'd not removed his state robes, so they spilled open around the legs of his chair. “He won't voice his true feelings, only facts. Which means he's not sure of anything.”

“Lovely.” There was nothing in the histories to guide them, no goddess to advise them. He stared up at the cavern ceiling. “What is the latest census count?”

“I don't know.”

That was a lie. Hyle knew the numbers, or he at least knew a recent set of numbers. But that tone in his voice assured Savous it would be a fight to get them out of him. Which meant they were bad. There were only a few hundred people in the city now, a far cry from the numbers when Savous's father had ruled. Which always made him wonder if things might just have been better then.

Putting that thought aside, he concentrated on the matter at hand. “Is it worth it to let her follow her instincts?” he mused.

Hyle raised his glass to his lips and spoke into it before he sipped. “A better question might be, could you stop her?”

Savous nodded. “Good point. Nalfien's lost any control over her.”

Hyle's glass clicked softly on the worn ironwood surface of the table. It was he who had started as her master, he who'd begun to teach her the magical arts, but when things had started to get bad, his talents were needed elsewhere, and Eyrhaen had been handed over to Nalfien. Her tutelage under the older sorcerer had not gone well. Savous didn't blame him—in fact, blamed himself more than Hyle—but what's done was done.

Savous sat forward to pick up both his and Hyle's empty glasses. “Do you think Tykir could work with her?”

“Perhaps.” Hyle's eyes followed Savous as he stood. “I find it comforting that she took him with her tonight.”

Savous returned to the drink cabinet. "Is he strong enough to contain her if something goes wrong?"

"No." No hesitation in Hyle's answer. "I've doubts either you or I or both of us together could truly contain her. Tykir's only advantage is her affection for him."

Savous picked up the mostly full bottle of amber liquid, stared at it, then picked the glasses back up and took them and the bottle back to the table. "Maybe if we assign Brevin and Lanthan to guard them? Force the four of them together."

Hyle snorted. "I doubt that would be a hardship for any of them." He eyed the refilled glass that Savous set before him. "You're thinking they might have an influence?"

"They just might. Tykir's got great potential. Brevin's low-level sense of magic might at least give him an empathic link to her. And Lanthan's got his father's senses. His lack of gift might even prove useful." He was grasping for answers, he knew.

Hyle knew as well, but he nodded. "I see your point. If the three of them worked in tandem, they might be able to manage her."

Savous sighed, then sipped from his renewed drink. "I despise speaking of 'managing' my daughter." He held up his hand to still Hyle's apology. "No, I know what you meant, and that *is* what we're discussing. I just wish she were small again." He chuckled. "Much easier to hold her to make the nightmares go away."

"Yes."

They shared a moment, each lost in happier memories. The few bright spots in Savous's hard two centuries of being rhaeja were his truemate and his daughters. They were his lifeline and, sometimes, his only reason for persevering when all seemed hopeless. He could only hope to live up to their expectations.

"*You're doing just fine,*" spoke his favorite warm voice, directly into his mind. Irin's mental presence spread through his worries like a warm balm.

He smiled. "*Where are you?*"

"*Downstairs. Gala's with me. Hyle's there?*"

"*Yes.*"

"*I'm going to look in on Eyrhaen; then we're coming up.*"

He took a breath and sat back. "Irin and Gala are downstairs."

Hyle stood, finishing his drink. "I'll find a page to fetch Salin and the others. We'll need to have the council prepared before Eyrhaen wakes."

Savous let him go and took the moment to be alone in his workroom. He stared at the fire and sent a fervent thought to his absent goddess. *Help us to know what it is that You want.*

* * * * *

Eyrhaen remembered falling asleep with Tykir curled around her back, his warmth lulling her as the tea she'd taken for the pain took effect. When she woke, Lanthan lay on his side in front of her, resting with eyes closed on the thick pillow with hers. A lock of his short, straight white hair cut a swath over his square jaw, the ends nearly trailing over the fullness of his black lips. His hand was locked gently around her wrist, both of their hands lying on the pillow between them. She stirred and he startled, ice blue eyes flying open.

He assessed her quickly, gaze searching her face for an intense heartbeat before his expression settled into a smile. One of his real smiles, not the smirk that he showed to everyone but those closest to him. The tip of one finger traced her chin. "How do you feel?"

An arm tensed around her middle, not Lanthan's. Bigger. She knew the firm curves of the body curled close to her back. Not Tykir. *Brevin*. Of course, where one was, the other was almost surely close.

She blinked, considering. "I'm fine."

"No headache?" Brevin's breath fanned some wisps of her hair over her cheek.

"No." Experimentally, she lifted her head. "No, it's all gone." Brevin released his hold to allow her to sit up. They lay in a narrow bed she recognized. This was her room in her father's tower, her room from when she was younger. Many of her toys and keepsakes still lived on the shelves and juvenile furniture. The bed was only just long enough to fit Brevin's length if he curled on his side, and it was barely wide enough to fit two grown men. As it was, their legs tangled in and around hers so they could fit. Her shirt and boots were missing, but she still wore the pants she'd donned earlier. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Most of the morning." Lanthan rolled halfway back, dangerously close to the edge. His blue embroidered vest fell half-open to expose his bare chest. He wore his two favored blades strapped securely to his forearms. Amazing that he'd been lying with his back to the door.

"What happened?"

Brevin shifted, his bulk making the platform beneath the mattress creak as he propped his back on the pillows against the wall and his chin on his palm. In this low light, his odd-hued eyes were closer to the smoldering red like his father's. But if he turned his head from the shadows, they would look more honey brown with golden flecks, similar to his mother's hazel. "What do you remember?"

"I remember going into the vetriese. Tykir. He tried to stop me." She felt them both tense but ignored it, deep in trying to bring her memory to focus. "I remember coming out and getting a headache. I drank some tea for the pain."

"What do you remember about when you were in the vetriese?"

Startled, she swung her head around to find Tykir sitting quietly in a rocking chair in the corner. Surrounded by memory and the men in the bed, she hadn't noticed him. He didn't move, his eyes on her as he rocked the chair slowly. Her shirt was draped over his chest, resting quietly beneath his fingers.

She sat fully, forcing Brevin and Lanthan to adjust so she had room to bring her knees to her chest. She remained between them and could have leaned her back on Brevin's thighs if she'd wanted. Cocooned. Secure. She wished there was enough room for Tykir to be closer but didn't mention it. "Not much." She rested her chin on her knees and wrapped her arms around her legs. "Space. Lots of space. Like I imagine the sky is up above." She'd never been to the surface, but she'd imagined it many times. "But it was...more. Like the air around me was a pillow that I could breathe through." She paused, thinking she might have recalled something of what had been said. The memory slid away like water down a drain. "Voices. Hundreds upon thousands of voices, all talking in whispers that I could almost make out but not quite." She kept her gaze on Tykir, opening herself to send a small tendril of magic toward him. An invisible, answering thread met hers, twining with it, like holding hands. Comforting. She sighed. "Is that what you heard when you went inside before?"

He reached up to smooth the earlocks that had pulled free from ponytail behind his skull. "No. The space, yes, but it all feels empty. And no voices."

"Is that what everyone feels?"

"Everyone I've talked to. Except—" He broke off, gaze dropping to where his fingers fiddled with her shirt.

"Except?"

"Except Nialdlye." He spoke it quietly, aware of her feelings toward the woman. "She's the only other who's mentioned voices. But that was before, not in this vetriese."

Her heart raced. She picked up her head, eyes wide. "You mean the place where she met Radin?" Excitement overruled her aversion to hearing about the woman. "Ha!"

Brevin growled beside her. "What?"

Without answering, she scrambled for the edge of the bed, climbing over the legs Lanthan was too slow to move. "Where are they?" She gained her feet, then spun to face Tykir. "What have they done to the vetriese?"

The soles of his boots hit the rug at his feet as he leaned forward. "What...done?"

Impatient, she closed the distance between them. "My father. Nalfien. What have they done while I've been asleep?" She snatched her shirt from his grasp. "How long have I been here?"

The bed creaked behind her as two heavy bodies adjusted. "We've been with you all along," Lanthan assured her.

"No one knew if you were all right," Brevin chided.

While part of her was touched at their worry, another part was irritated that they hadn't thought to check on things for her. No help for it. Not entirely their fault. She hadn't been awake to direct them, and she'd been lax in giving directions before she'd gone to sleep because of the pain. She slipped into her shirt, turning toward the door as she tucked it into her trousers. "Where are they?"

Brevin's hand around her arm stopped her just paces away from the exit. "Where are you going?"

She glared up at him, then moderated the intensity when she saw the concern on his face. He didn't wear worry well. Arrogance and confidence looked much better on him. She reached up to stroke his smooth jaw. "I'm going to find my father before he can do anything stupid." She shifted so she could look around his bulk to Tykir. "Where is he?"

Both Tykir and Lanthan were on their feet, following. "We're supposed to bring you to the rhaeja's meeting room if you felt all right when you woke up." Tykir held up her boots, reminding her she was barefoot.

Startled, she grinned. So nice when things went her way. “Oh.” She finished tying her sash, then sat briefly to slip on the padded shoes. “All right,” she said, standing. “Let's go.”

Chapter Six

Nialdlye sat on a wide window seat in Savous's casual meeting room, toying with her loose hair as she listened quietly.

"I don't know what they said," Eyrhaen snapped, glaring openly across the space between her and Nalfien. He sat at the table, and she sat in a chair a good distance away from him. "It was just whispering. I wasn't there long enough to make out anything. And it was more than..." She broke off with a grimace and a frustrated sigh. "I couldn't..."

Hyle, seated at the same table with his father, leaned forward to draw her attention. "Never mind that now. What else?"

Nialdlye barely resisted shaking her head. Eyrhaen was supposed to be Nalfien's apprentice, yet it was abundantly clear he had no control over her. She wondered why the elder sorcerer stood for that, but then Eyrhaen would be a handful at the best of times. Nialdlye pitied any sorcerer tasked with teaching her.

Eyrhaen's gaze dropped to the hands she had laced in her lap. The chair was big enough that she had tucked her heels underneath her, her boots on the floor before her. So comfortable. In her element, secure in her father's space despite the very real danger she might have put them all in. "Air. Space. But it was...thick. Like there was a presence there."

Behind her chair, Brevin and Lanthan stood silent guard, listening sharply to every word said. Tykir sat with his father and grandfather, reading from and sometimes scratching in the scrolls unrolled on the table between them. Savous and Irin sat together on a couch near Eyrhaen. The only others

in the room were Salin and Gala, both of whom sat in chairs by the open fireplace and mostly kept silent.

“What kind of presence?” Hyle prompted.

“I don't know. Like nothing I've felt before.”

You might have asked. Nialdlye kept her face blank. What Eyrhaen was describing was closer to what Nialdlye remembered of existence within the void than what she'd heard from the men who had ventured within. She remembered times when the whispering had been overwhelming, before she'd learned to focus. But then, she'd had over a century to learn that skill, along with boredom and a keen desire to have something that her despotic guardian didn't know about.

“Nialdlye, does that match to anything you've felt?”

She looked up at Savous. “Some, yes.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Eyrhaen tense, keeping her gaze averted. “The thickness to the air. The sense of a presence.” She kept her voice even, willing to help Savous even if it meant helping Eyrhaen too. “I didn't hear the whispers for decades, though. Not until Ale'tone started leaving me in the void for long periods of time.”

Clearly against her will, Eyrhaen glanced up at Nialdlye.

Nialdlye smoothed a hand over the necklaces that draped the cleavage created by the snug leather vest that bound her breasts. “When I first started hearing them, they could be overwhelming. I thought I'd go mad. But I eventually learned to tune to them.” Because she would never have asked Ale'tone for help. He would have punished her for trying any kind of magic without him. I know what it's like to have a tyrant for a master, she thought at the younger woman. You don't even know how easy you have it. “The whispers came with visions eventually. I later realized they were ghost memories of the past.”

“How did you know that?” Eyrhaen demanded, her curiosity having gotten the better of her. Nialdlye knew she should feel guilty for enjoying it, but she didn't.

Nialdlye let her eyes rest on Eyrhaen's knees, not trusting herself to look directly at her. “I'd had my suspicions since they didn't react to me. Not until Radin.”

Eyrhaen sat straighter, one hand clutching the arm of her chair. “But he wasn't a memory.”

“No. He was different from the first time I saw him. More...solid.” Nialdlye shifted, too aware of the growing warmth deep in her belly. Radin had haunted her dreams the previous day, thanks to Nalfien's mention of him. Even fucking a willing partner after she woke hadn't diminished her memory of the highly sensual dream. “He told me that because of the way he died, because of the goddess Herself, his soul was saved intact.”

“How did he know that?”

“She told him.”

“What else did She tell him?”

Nialdlye shook her head. Aside from perhaps Brevin and Lanthan, everyone in the room had heard her describe her experiences in the void. “He never told me more than that.” And if he had, Nialdlye would have given that information long before this.

“Did *She* talk to you?” The scorn dripping from Eyrhaen's lips was openly evident.

While she could understand the confusion regarding a deity who had abandoned Her people, Nialdlye couldn't understand the open scorn. How could a mere mortal, even one of a god-born race, hope to know what troubles beset a goddess? How could any of them know the real reasons behind why Rhae left, and how could they know that She didn't have plans to return? Nialdlye had spent most of her youth doubting her own god, who had let His

people—*her* people—die out, all except for her. She had far more reason to hate Him than Eyrhaen had to hate her goddess, and Nialdlye didn't hate Tohon. She simply never got a chance to know Him. Neither could she understand the open disrespect for adults who clearly loved her and wanted to protect her. Nialdlye had never had that benefit while growing up, and she resented Eyrhaen for taking it for granted.

She lifted her eyes to lock with the younger woman's, letting her own disdain show. "No. She only spoke to him."

Eyrhaen's brow rose, acknowledging what she saw in Nialdlye's face. Then her attention abruptly switched to Savous where he sat on a couch beside his truemate. "Did the goddess ever talk to you?"

Savous considered her, then exchanged glances with Irin. "I wasn't the one who heard Rhae speak."

Irin played with the bracelet around her wrist. "She spoke to me. She told me what I had to do to save Savous's life."

Eyrhaen frowned at her. "That part of the legend is really true?"

"Yes."

"But you were human at the time."

Irin raised her gaze to Eyrhaen. "Yes."

"Why would She talk to a human?"

Irin frowned. "I couldn't begin to say why She does anything."

Savous put an arm around Irin's shoulders, gathering her close. "Rhae wasn't the only deity there. The other spoke as well. The other was *dangerous*, Eyrhaen."

His daughter's gaze dropped back to her lap. This other deity had been the subject of conversation before they'd settled on what Eyrhaen had seen. Nialdlye had found the information frighteningly fascinating. Eyrhaen had not appeared impressed.

Savous scowled. "Eyrie, you have to be careful."

"I wasn't in danger," she insisted.

"How could you know that?"

"She drew me there."

"How could you be sure it was Her?"

From her rebellious pout, it was clear Eyrhaen had no answer.

Savous let his arm slide from Irin's shoulders but wove his fingers with hers, resting their hands in her lap. "Is there anything else that we should know?"

Eyrhaen stared blankly at the floor.

"Eyrhaen?"

"I'm going back in."

Irin scowled at her daughter. "Have you heard nothing that we've been saying?"

"I heard you." Eyrhaen shook her head. "But you don't understand. I *have* thought about it."

Behind her, Brevin's big fingers dug into the thick upholstery of the chair's back. "You could have *died*."

Eyrhaen stared at the far wall but directed her snap at him. "I didn't *die*. I was supposed to be there."

"Were you supposed to pass out afterward too?" This from Lanthan in a soft murmur.

This time she did twist in her chair to glare up at him. "It's new magic. I wasn't used to it."

"All the more reason to take it slow," said Tykir from his seat across the room.

Nialdlye watched them bait her, fascinated. She hadn't had many chances to see the three of them interact, but she'd heard stories. They did work seamlessly as a team. Their captain was full of praise for Tykir's powers and

Brevin's and Lanthan's skill at keeping him safe. Clearly, their teamwork functioned both on and off the battlefield.

It was terribly evident how much they cared for her. Even in this close setting with people who could be trusted, the three of them watched out for her.

Three fine specimens of raedjour males, and Eyrhaen treated them like pets.

From what Nialdlye had heard, she taunted them and called them her lovers, but she never let them truly have her, never let them penetrate her. She was waiting for something, and no one knew what it was, least of all the poor boys who waited on her.

Eyrhaen snorted, sitting front again. Her pique simmered in the very air, affecting them all. She bled emotion so that it was hard for Nialdlye to tell if she herself was as irritated as she felt or if it was a reflection. "I need to do this." Before anyone could protest, she raised her gaze and met Savous's. "It's important."

He nodded. This he could respect. "How so?"

"It calls to me."

"That's not necessarily benevolent."

She shook her head. "It's not evil."

"How do you know that?"

"It's hard to explain."

He leaned forward. "Try. Please understand. We're all worried for your safety. You are personally very important to us. To *all* of us. You're also very important to our people. We would not willingly risk you."

Nialdlye bit the inside of her lip, offended to watch Savous practically beg.

Eyrhaen hardly acknowledged it. "But it has to be me. It's what I'm supposed to do."

"According to whom?"

“Rhae.”

“You know this?”

She grimaced. “How do you *know* these things? I told you, I didn't hear anything in words, and it was all a jumbled mess.” She slapped her hand on the arm of the chair. “But I feel it in my bones. This is important, not just for me but for all of us. The vetriese and Radin.”

Nialdlye ground her teeth together. *Must she make things worse?*

Savous frowned. “Why? What has he to do with this?”

“He's a part of it. He lived inside for centuries. If anyone can help me, can help Her, it would be him. If I can just wake him.”

Nialdlye had her own objections to Eyrhaen spending time with Radin, but she knew that his daughter's fascination with Radin didn't sit well with Savous either. It was understandable. The man had been mentor and lover to Savous for centuries, had been a potential third in a ménage with Savous and his truemate. By all accounts, the two men had been as close as any could be. While the raedjour were a sexually open society, they tended to shy away from their parents' sexual partners.

Savous paused, then sighed, sitting back. “Will you, at least, agree to let Tykir, Brevin, and Lanthan be with you in this?”

She stilled, as did her young men. “Why them?”

Savous glanced at the three men. Then his gaze settled back on his daughter. “Because, of anyone, I'm afraid they're the only ones you might trust.”

She blinked, clearly surprised. “Da, it's not that I don't trust you, it's just... You don't understand.”

“No. I don't. I don't understand why you continue to take risks with your own safety. I don't understand why you won't seek counsel or at least let others monitor what you do so we might help.” His tone conveyed both frustration and fear.

Which Eyrhaen clearly heard. "I don't—"

"You do, and your recklessness gets more and more dangerous. So I will accept that you will do what you will do, but I ask that you let those who care about you see to your safety."

Brevin and Lanthan exchanged glances, after which their surprise slid into grim determination. Tykir watched the rhaeja for a quiet moment before setting his gaze on Eyrhaen. The rhaeja and his daughter had eyes only for each other.

She swallowed. "Fine." Reluctant agreement, but it was an agreement.

"Fine." He met Brevin's gaze. "Is this acceptable to you?"

"Yes, my rhaeja."

Savous took that as an overall acceptance, merely glancing at the other two. "That settles it, then." Once more, to his daughter, "I've felt hunches from the divine myself. Every rhaeja in history has received some direct instruction from Her. Who am I to tell you you're wrong?" He avoided his truemate's pointed look. "But do try to remember that just because instructions come to you in your dreams, it doesn't mean they're right or good."

Eyrhaen lowered her gaze. "Yes, my rhaeja."

Oh, now she's respectful. Now that she's gotten everything she wants. Nialdlye gnawed at the inside of her cheek to keep from growling.

"I mean it, Eyrhaen. Brevin, Lanthan, *and* Tykir are to be with you at *all* times when you are at the vetriese or with Radin."

"What about Nalfien?"

Now Savous did growl. "Eyrhaen, you can only push me so far. Nalfien remains in charge of Radin until he wakes."

Nialdlye could only wonder how he planned to enforce that rule.

Eyrhaen shot a glance at the older sorcerer but demurred with a nod. "Thank you, Da."

He nodded, then looked to Salin. "Will you tell Jarak about Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir's new orders? I would imagine they can still serve occasional guard duty. I'm sure Eyrhaen will be understanding of their other duties."

Eyrhaen grimaced but made no remark.

Salin simply nodded. "I will, my rhaeja."

Savous looked around the room, then expelled a breath. "Then I believe we're adjourned. Eyrie?"

His daughter paused once she'd gained her feet.

"You'll come to supper with your mother and I?"

She glanced at Irin, then back at him. It was clear she wanted to say no, but for all her rebellious nature, Eyrhaen was smart enough to pick and choose her battles. She smiled. "I will."

Nialdlye swung her feet to the floor but remained in her seat as the others stood. She watched silently as Eyrhaen led her young men from the room. It was as though a weight lifted from the air. Was it the oppression of her out-of-control power, or was it just her?

Irin came to sit beside Nialdlye. The two women leaned together, bare shoulders pressing.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Irin murmured.

Nialdlye laid her head on her friend's shoulder. "It's all right." She and Savous's truemate had become fast friends over the cycles. There were those who believed Nialdlye was lovers with Irin and Savous, that her daughter was another offspring of the rhaeja. Most could not believe that, despite the near-constant sexual heat of both their races, Nialdlye's relationship with Irin and Savous remained platonic. Nialdlye had been very careful, in fact, not to fuck any truemated male, despite many offers of three- and moresomes. Given her unique status, she viewed it as a moral matter. There were hundreds of

unmated males among the raedjour. She would rather share her favor with those who may never find their own truemates.

Savous spoke quietly with Salin. Then the former commander left and Savous came to the window. She stood and met his gaze, saddened to see how tired he looked. "Nialdlye, I'd ask a favor of you."

She straightened, tossing the bulk of her hair behind her shoulder. "Ask anything of me, my rhaeja."

"Visit the vetriese. Visit Radin." She tried to hide her flinch but wasn't sure she was successful. "I realize it's potentially dangerous, and I wouldn't ask it but... You're the only other one likely to have a similar experience to Eyrhaen's. We need to know if what she sees and does is singular to her."

She cocked her head to the side. "I'm of a different race."

"You're as close as we can come. There aren't any human-born women who are unmated with sorcerer-level abilities, and we don't have another natural-born elf who's of age. Tisla isn't old enough yet." He took her hand and squeezed it. "I'm sorry to ask this. Take all the precautions you need to feel comfortable. We can try and rearrange Hyle's schedule." Behind Savous's right shoulder, Hyle nodded. "But things are moving too fast, and I'm running out of options." He kept it personal: "I" instead of "we." He wanted her to realize she could object, although he clearly hoped she wouldn't.

He had been so good to her. They all had. How could she refuse them? "I will do what needs to be done, my rhaeja."

* * * * *

They're talking about me. Eyrhaen was fully aware that only she, Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir left the room. The "adults" would remain behind, deciding on ways to limit her access to both the vetriese and to Radin. She'd gained a little in that meeting, but she knew she still didn't have free rein.

Hurrying down the hall, she bypassed the flight of stairs that would take her up to her old room and instead headed for another that would take her to

the main tower entrance. It didn't matter that Brevin, Tykir, and Lanthan were right at her heels. *Da wanted them to supervise me, didn't he?* She laughed softly at that as she reached the bottom of the stairs. Actually, with her current escorts, she was less likely to be bothered. *Maybe Da did me a favor.*

“Eyrhaen.”

The sound of Lanthan's voice startled her enough to stop. He spoke so rarely.

He lunged over the two paces that separated them and grabbed her arm to spin her to face him. She blinked, caught off guard by the intensity of his stare. “Where are you going?”

Her typical ire was slow to come thanks to his curious confrontation. “To see Radin.” The truth spilled from her lips before she thought to stop it. “Now. Before they can stop me.”

The intensity of his stare wasn't at all diminished by the fringe of hair that threatened to obscure his right eye, despite the headband wrapped around his forehead. “Why?”

“What?”

His eyes darkened from clear crystal to twilight as he narrowed his gaze. Strong fingers dug into her forearm. “Why him? Why Radin?”

Before she could answer, Brevin crowded close, taking hold of both of their shoulders. “Not here.”

She allowed herself to be hustled into a nearby room, as curious to find out what was wrong with Lanthan as he was to get information out of her. There wasn't much furniture. A sturdy table and chairs and a narrow side table under an ancient mural. It might once have been a sitting room, but she couldn't even remember what it might be used for now. Dust was scarce, proving that the boys in charge of cleaning were doing their duty, but the room felt unused. Brevin closed the door and put his back to the panel, guarding it by leaning on it. A thought from Tykir lit the candles in the sconces to either

side of the door, and a vague wave of his hand preceded a soft pulse of magic that soundproofed the room.

Lanthan stopped beside one of the sturdy chairs at the table and rounded on her. "Why are you obsessed with Radin?"

The threadbare rug hardly cushioned the stone underneath the padded soles of her shoes as she placed herself two paces in front of him and planted her hands on her hips. "How is that any of your concern?"

His glare was steady in an otherwise expressionless face, but she'd known him well enough and long enough to see that he was upset. The fact he confronted her at all was a measure of his feelings. "Anything that's dangerous to you concerns me."

Her heart rate picked up, touched despite annoyance at being questioned. "He's not a danger."

Brevin snorted. "How do you know he's not? The rhaeja and Hyle think he is."

"They do not. They don't know what to think."

"If they don't know what he is, how can you?"

She ground her teeth. How many times must she explain this? "The goddess Herself has shielded him."

Brevin tossed his head in the vague direction of the upstairs meeting room. "That's not what you said up there."

"It doesn't matter what I said up there."

Tykir perked up, leaning on the other side of the table. His long hair spilled loose over one shoulder, the tips just brushing the polished surface. "Did you leave anything out?"

"No, I did not!" She stomped her heel, aware that she was now in the middle of the three of them with nowhere to run.

"Then how do you know he's not a danger?"

"I do!" She glared at Brevin, taking his casual stance as an affront. "Nialdlye said it was him!" Much as she hated to use the other woman as proof, she was the last one to talk to him. "He told her too much for us not to believe it's *not* him."

Lanthan shook his head. "You don't know. You don't know what could have his memories. Valanth ruled for centuries following a different god, and we didn't even know it."

Her eyes widened in shock. *Lanthan* was quoting history to her? He barely liked to think about things that happened a mere moon ago, much less when he was a mere infant.

He stalked her, backing her against the table. One of the heavy chairs toppled over when he shoved it aside. "You don't *know* anything."

Her nostrils flared, filling with the scent of him. Uncertain and frustrated, his anger sparked arousal that prickled her skin. She swallowed. "He's not evil. I know it."

He pinned her with hands to either side of her on the table. Their similar height put his lips so very close to hers. "How?" He searched her face, eyes open and locked on hers. "Dreams?"

She splayed her hands on his chest, keeping the kiss from closing in. "That. And more."

"What more?" The question came from Tykir, but Eyrhaen couldn't turn away from Lanthan.

Her fingers knotted in the shoulders of Lanthan's vest, trying to keep from touching his satiny skin. "I *know*. He's part of the key to saving us. *All* of us."

Lanthan leaned slightly into her hands. "You know more than the rhaeja? She chose him."

"He can't know this." A snarl curled her lip, and she pushed one more time. "And he's jealous. He doesn't want me around his lover."

Lanthan grabbed the edge of the table and jerked it closer, effectively pinning her between him and it, his arousal grinding into her hips. "Should he be?"

Trying to breathe, she tossed her head back. "Stop this."

Lanthan took the invitation to lick the line of her neck. "You want him."

Yes. But no one wanted to hear that. They'd discredit all her other reasons if she admitted it. "He's unconscious." She tried to make it an offhand scoff, but that was impossible with Lanthan's teeth scraping the pulse just below her jaw.

"You don't need him." One hand spread over her back, crushing her closer. The other slid down her thigh and gripped to pull it up, high against his hip. She gasped when his cock pressed her sex, scorching even through layers of clothing. She could use magic to push him away, but the solid strength of him was delicious. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as he nibbled her jaw, her chin. "You don't need him." He breathed the words directly into her parted lips. "You have me." She opened her heavy-lidded eyes when he paused, meeting his heated gaze. "You have us."

She let him kiss her, opened her mouth to suck in his tongue. He used that muscle like he used every weapon in his arsenal, sharp, clean, and with deadly precision.

She moaned as pleasure swept within her, swelling beyond her skin and bones. The world tilted as Lanthan lowered her onto the table, then climbed up after her so their lips didn't need to part. Brevin and Tykir closed in, flanking them on either side as Lanthan turned his attention to her neck, her shoulder. Deftly, he tugged her shirt from her pants and shoved it up to expose her breasts to his ravenous attention. She was barely aware that Brevin had pulled her farther onto the table, sliding her through Lanthan's knees so he could claim her mouth while Lanthan and Tykir suckled at her breasts.

Lanthan's hand shoved down the waistband of her pants to curl possessively around her sex. His middle fingers slid easily between her wet

folds, fingertips teasing her entrance. Growling, he slid off the edge of the table and yanked her pants down past her knees so he could spread her thighs and bury his face between them. Brevin swallowed her scream, and Tykir at her breasts kept her from launching off the table. Desperately, she clutched Brevin's shoulder and scraped Tykir's back with her nails as Lanthan latched onto the tiny, throbbing core of her pleasure and sucked. More screams down Brevin's throat, her thighs straining as Lanthan held them down and apart. She wanted to change position, wanted to fondle and taste them, but they held her down, forcing her to submit to their will. Thrilling. So much male power, all focused on her.

Beyond them, even more. So many males, so much need. The heat within her overflowed, finding so many empty places to fill.

"Let me." She'd lost track of when Lanthan's mouth left her sex. His lips smeared her own juices over her belly, while three of his fingers slowly thrust in and out of her. "Let me fuck you."

Brevin lifted his head, freeing her lips from his. She stared up at him, at the simmering red glow beneath the greenish haze to his eyes. Tykir's groan in her ear and a twist of Lanthan's fingers closed her eyes again so her whole body could shudder, shedding pleasure as renewed lust poured from her soul. Yes. The word burbled at the back of her throat. She wanted him. Any of them. *All* of them. She should just let them take her and get back to the rest after her lust had been slaked.

But there was so much emptiness beyond.

Lanthan took encouragement from her hesitation. She heard him shuffle, knew he was baring his cock. Aching, searing need boiled between the four of them. Brevin leaned in to recapture her mouth. She turned from him, only to find Tykir's mouth ready and waiting.

"No," she breathed against Tykir's lips.

He stilled. Brevin stilled.

Lanthan growled, shoved his fingers again.

She let the brutal pleasure take her, pushed her climax over the brink, arching her back as she hauled them into release with her. Barking their protests, Brevin and Tykir curled over the edges of the table to either side of her, and Lanthan seized her hips with his free hand. He tried to fight her, grunting in an effort to hold it back, but she wouldn't let him. He came a bare heartbeat after the other two spilled their release.

She collapsed on the table, boneless as she tried to catch her breath. The last surge of her explosion sizzled away on invisible currents to find needy receptacles beyond the tower's walls.

Lanthan groaned, the first to recover. While the other two began to stir, he pushed up onto his hands, braced on either side of her hips. His glare was a tepid version of what it was before, glossed over by sated lust, but it was still a glare. "Why?"

She pushed up on her elbows, yanked a corner of her shirt so that it slid down over her breasts. "It's not time for that."

He shoved away, gone so fast, the table bucked. Angrily, he pulled off his vest and used it to swipe the wet spots on his thighs. "When will be time?"

She glared, sat up. "When I say."

Tykir and Brevin stood, each assessing the condition of their own groins.

Lanthan faced her as he tied the laces of his trousers. "Will it be one of us?" He gestured to indicate the other two, the metal buckles of the bands that strapped daggers to each of his forearms glinting in the soft candlelight.

She hopped from the table and leaned down to grab the waistband of her pants. "I haven't made that decision yet. Isn't what I give you enough?" She tossed her hair back, feeling their weighted silence. "I willingly give you what other unmated males *beg* for. Why can't you leave me my virginity?" She knew the answer, knew they couldn't quite help it. It was their nature to fuck. Naturally they became obsessed with the one thing she denied them.

Lanthan threw a heavy look at Brevin.

Who took up the argument as though he were the one who'd addressed her. "Who are you saving it for?"

She heard the "who," when always before it had been a "what."

She stepped away from the table, away from the circle of them. Far easier to address this when the heat between them was slaked. "Why are you pressing this? As soon as I take anyone, you know I'll be obligated to fuck a stream of unmated males until someone gets me pregnant." No one had made that rule, but she knew it would happen. Once the shield of her virginity was gone, it would be far more difficult to justify not sleeping with many like every other unmated woman among the raedjour. Unless, of course, one of the men in this room got her pregnant. But she wasn't sure she was ready for that either. "It's not time for me to be a mother yet."

They knew her argument, had accepted it before. But Brevin's stare told her he wasn't accepting it this time. "When the time comes, will it be one of us?"

She bumped into the long table across the wall. "What is this? Just because you're the closest to me, you feel entitled to be my first? Have you planned my virgin contest for me?"

"Your virgin contest started the first time you sucked me off," he snarled.

She shut her eyes as instant recall slammed into her. His had been the first dick past her lips, Lanthan's mouth the first to her sex. Tykir's embrace hadn't been long after that. She remembered the need to touch them as well as she recalled their tryst just now on the table. Since then, she had played with a few other men, but none were as satisfying or as understanding as these three whom she'd grown up with. "And you've already decided you've won?"

"Why not? We're the only ones who can put up with your constant torture."

Her eyes widened. "It's *torture* now?"

His long legs closed the distance between them. "In many ways, yes. But we put up with it, and yes, we'll beg for it." He crowded her back against the wall, the imposing breadth of his shoulders blocking most of the light. "But I don't think any of us realized we were competing with someone who might as well be dead." His big hand snapped up to cradle her chin, not allowing her to look away from the accusation in his eyes. "It's Radin, isn't it? Are you hoping he's your truemate?"

Emotionally naked in front of someone who knew her best, Eyrhaen knew it wouldn't do any good to lie. "He might be."

Despair chased shock from his expressive features, but both were gone when he spun away from her. Without his bulk blocking her view, she saw the twin blank looks on Lanthan's and Tykir's faces. Normal for Lanthan, but not for Tykir.

"It would make sense." The words spilled from her mouth, trailing Brevin as he crossed the room, his back to her. "Why else would I feel drawn to him? They're always telling me that, as the first girl, I'm special. Wouldn't it make sense if She wanted me with him?"

Brevin stared at the far wall, Tykir at the table, Lanthan at Brevin's back. All of a sudden, she felt alone in the room, all the divine warmth she didn't realize she felt from the three of them drained in an instant.

"I don't know." Except that she did. She felt a deep-down connection to Radin. That could only be a truematch, couldn't it? "I won't know until he wakes. That's why I've been trying to do just that. I didn't tell my father because...I didn't think he'd take it well. And it doesn't matter until he's awake." She was babbling, she knew, anxious to fill the silence.

It took another moment; then Brevin turned. His face, too, was empty. "Right. It makes sense."

Tykir nodded. "We should have seen that before." Their voices were too calm, too empty.

An apology settled on her tongue, but she didn't voice it. She had nothing to apologize for, despite the pull on her heart. She had never promised them anything more permanent than what they had, never said one of them would be her first. Yes, she'd known the assumption, but that wasn't her fault, was it?

"So." Brevin strode past Lanthan to open the door. "Let's get you to it."

She opened her mouth, then shut it, unsure what she could say. It was probably best that this had happened. She could see now where she had gotten their hopes up. But words wouldn't come. Dropping her gaze, she headed toward the door and out the room. When Lanthan backed up a step, putting distance between them, something behind her heart twisted.

They followed silently, physically close but so emotionally distant that she wondered if Tykir could be shielding them.

Chapter Seven

Irin refused to let go. “Must it be you?”

Smiling, loving the weight of his truemate draped over his back, Savous squeezed her arms where they wrapped his neck. “Yes.”

Kneeling on the bed behind him, she snuggled closer, her nose nuzzled into his neck. “They don't deserve to talk to you.”

He stared at the opposite wall. “Yes, they do.”

“No, they don't. They abandoned you.”

“For reasons they believed are sound.”

She snorted, and again, he had to smile. He'd known her since she was a toddler, and she had always been unfailing in her support of him. He wished he could be so opinionated. Often he cursed his goddess for giving him the ability to see both sides of nearly every argument.

He reached back to stroke her thigh. She remained naked and smelled deliciously fragrant from the lovemaking she'd hoped to use to keep him with her instead of leaving the city as she knew he must. Sighing, he leaned back in her embrace. “This is my first chance to find out some reasoning behind the rogues' attacks. Tarlan wants to talk.”

“He doesn't speak for them all.”

“He speaks for enough of them. Maybe he can give me a reason behind the recent influx.”

Cradling him against her, she slid her hand into the open neck of his shirt, spread her palm over his heart. “You know that it's probably Eyrhaen,” she murmured.

"I hope he can tell me that it's not *all* Eyrhaen."

She paused, thinking. "*She's gotten worse.*" Irin spoke to him through their mind-link, as though speaking the words themselves gave them extra truth.

"*I know.*"

Merely five days since he'd given his daughter free rein to the vetriese and to Radin, and he had due cause to wonder if he'd made the right decision. The power that oozed from her was palpable to everyone, both those with and without the gift for magic. Just being in her presence even caused *him* to become aroused, although his needs were never aimed at her. The only ones safe from feeling Eyrhaen's sexual heat were the children who'd not yet matured.

He squeezed her wrist. "All the more reason to find a cause for the attacks. If we can stop them, or at least lessen them, then Hyle and I can have more time to spend with her."

Her forehead bumped the back of his skull. "I wish I could help."

He sat up and twisted to face her. Although Irin had a powerful gift, she had not honed it to sorcerer level. Other concerns—namely, her daughters and her concern for all the raedjour children—had kept her from the necessary study. He cupped her cheek and brought her lips to his for a brief kiss. "Try talking to her again, if you can."

She nodded.

He stood, keeping hold of her hand. "Meantime, I need to go."

Another nod, her white eyelashes fluttering against her rounded cheeks. "Hurry back."

"For certain." Unable to help himself, he bent to capture her lips again before he forced himself to leave their bedroom.

Hyle and Jarak awaited him downstairs, along with the two dozen men Jarak had selected to accompany them to the surface.

The commander nodded respect to Savous, but he could see Jarak was not pleased. He wore a disapproving scowl worthy of his predecessor, Salin. Savous clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Still cross with me for leaving you behind?"

Jarak raised an eyebrow at him. "Would it do any good for me to argue again?"

"Not a bit."

Jarak shook his head and turned to indicate the assembled troop. "I've put Kenth in charge. His men are the most seasoned. Although, they are missing their key team."

Savous let his gaze roam over the waiting men. "Brevin, Tykir, and Lanthan are needed here."

Jarak nodded.

"As are you." Savous faced him. "Should anything happen..."

Jarak glared. "Rhaeja..." he warned.

"Should anything happen, I rely on you to protect those left in the city."

They shared a heavy look. Jarak knew what he meant. As rhaeja, Savous may be important, but the women, especially the elven-born women, were to be protected at all costs. Without them, their race was doomed.

This time, Jarak bowed from the waist, his long white ponytail spilling over one shoulder. "Yes, my rhaeja."

"Good. Hyle?"

The other sorcerer stood beside him, but his gaze was pointed vaguely toward the blank wall to his left.

"Hyle?"

Startled, Hyle shook himself. The glow dimmed from his tired red eyes as he looked up at Savous. "Yes?"

"Are you ready to go?"

Once, Hyle's distraction had been due to studious thoughts. Savous dearly wished to believe that Hyle was enjoyably distracted now, but he knew better. Hyle was intricately linked to a number of spells that protected the city, and his current distractions were due to the safety of the city. "Yes. I was just checking Rhicard's work."

Savous thought again that perhaps he should take Rhicard with him to the surface and leave Hyle behind, but he discarded the idea again. Distracted or not, Hyle would notice things Savous didn't, and could be trusted to act on them without direction.

"Are we all right to leave? Hyle?"

"What? Oh yes. We can leave." Without waiting, he turned toward the exit, muttering to himself.

Savous exchanged knowing grins with Jarak. "We're off, then."

Chapter Eight

It took her three nights to finally find a good time to honor Savous's request, but finally Nialdlye sat at Radin's bedside. Her first look at him in a long time proved to be startling. He hadn't moved much that she could tell—if at all—but he seemed more vibrant. If possible, more alive. As she sat on the mattress, she couldn't help but stroke the thick, errant locks of hair that puddled over his pillow, and her eyes drank their fill of his handsome, resting features. Allowing the two men who'd come with her to find their own places in the room, she let her hand hover over Radin's chest. Her fingers tingled and burned in a disturbing but not entirely unpleasant way, just a knuckle's width from his skin. The soft, slow rise and fall pushed at her hand, then let it descend, without ever touching. “He's breathing.”

Nalfien stood beside the solid wooden headboard in front of her. Watching. “Yes.”

“When did he start breathing?”

Nalfien didn't answer immediately.

She grimaced. “Let me guess. Since Eyrhaen has seen him?”

“Yes.”

Nialdlye kept her focus on her hands. Her hair spilled over her shoulders and pooled over Radin's arm and side, touching him where her fingers could not. Not for the first time, she wondered what it was and why it was there. Was it his own magic, keeping everyone away until he was ready to wake? Or was it Rhae's doing, protecting him until some unknown key awakened him? It hadn't been there at first. She'd been unconscious at the time, but she'd been told

that when she and Radin had spilled from the vetriese a quarter century ago, it had seemed that he was merely unconscious. There had been an aura surrounding him, but that had been accounted to the fact that he'd been living within the void for so long. In the excitement of his arrival, no one had noticed he wasn't breathing. He'd been brought to his old suite of rooms and laid out on his bed. Within days, the aura had spread, nearly solidified, shielding him from any touch. It had remained so for cycles, little changed when she'd last seen Radin five cycles previous. But now it was quite different. Far less solid, far less visible.

And he was breathing. Very slowly, very shallowly, but definitely breathing.

"Has he moved?"

"Nothing substantial, but I believe his head and legs have shifted."

Nodding, she glanced behind her toward Radin's feet. One leg was slightly bent and turned out, a casual position. The other foot tilted slightly to the side. Just like he was sleeping. "Do you know if that was Eyrhaen's doing?"

"No."

She let her gaze trail slowly up the smooth, bare skin of his legs. Muscular and toned, not a bit atrophied as they should be with him lying in one position for twenty-five cycles. Her attention snagged on his slim hips and groin and the cock that lay slightly to the side. She brought her hand over it, pushing a little closer through the aura. "When did he start to get hard? Same time?"

"That has just occurred within the past few nights."

She sighed. He wasn't erect, but he wasn't soft. His shaft was half-swollen, the smooth head just peeking from his foreskin. Nialdlye's mouth watered from simply looking at it. Was it like that because of Eyrhaen? Could she touch him and hadn't confessed?

Determined, Nialdlye disregarded the pinpricks that danced over her skin as she pushed her fingers ever closer to his body. Nalfien and Salin said

nothing as she did, simply watched. *There*. Her heart surged when two of her fingers managed to brush the vein that extended the length of Radin's shaft. The skin was hot, or so it seemed through the tingling. She kept her fingertips on him as long as she could, before it felt like her arm was going to fall off. Reluctantly, she pulled back.

"That is far closer than I've managed," Nalfien observed.

And less than Eyrhaen? She kept the question to herself. Nialdlye shook out her hand as though it would help the creeping sensation to fade. "It's more than I could manage before."

"What do you feel?"

"Tingly. But it's not painful. Ale'tone had a spell that felt similar for some of the books he wanted me to read but not touch."

"Did he?" Nalfien stroked a finger down his jaw to his chin. "I gather he did not teach you this spell?"

"No." She grimaced. "And it didn't feel exactly like this. I've never felt the tingle, just the resistance."

He nodded as he turned from her to sit at the nearby table where he had left his writing supplies. Sitting, he lifted a quill from the inkwell and started to scratch notes on the scroll laid out before him.

She glanced back at Salin standing at the foot of the bed. His long, bare arms were braced on the heavy wood, smoldering crimson eyes fixed on his brother's face. "Have you tried to touch him?"

Salin nodded, dislodging a heavy lock of gray-white hair to fall over his right eye. "My hand gets about as close as yours, then stops. I've never been able to push through it to touch him."

"Can you *hear* him?"

A wash of something close to pain passed over his sharp face before he smoothed it away. "No. A mild awareness when I'm close, but nothing like it was before."

She digested that. Salin, she knew, was as close to Radin as anyone, closer, perhaps, than Savous and Irin. Blood brothers, both with magic—even if Salin chose not to use his—they had shared a mind-to-mind link and kept it a secret between them until mere days before Radin had disappeared into the void. That was quite an accomplishment. It took a fine and powerful touch of magic to handle a mind-to-mind link with another. Ale'tone had tried on a number of occasions to form one with Nialdlye, but all attempts had failed. It had to do with trust, and he'd finally had to concede that he couldn't force her to trust him. From what she'd been told, Radin had not only managed the one with his brother—which he had kept secret from both his master, Nalfien, and his apprentice, Savous—but he had also formed links with both Savous and Irin. The more Nialdlye discovered about Radin's powers, the more she understood why he was considered to be so very special, even by his own goddess.

Again, she admired his long, lean body. His skin gleamed, alive and vibrant in the candlelight. The wavy markings on either side of his belly looked almost like blood trapped in purposeful design just below the surface of his skin. His hands folded calmly over his midsection, long fingers twined together. She hovered her hand over his sharp brows, wishing he'd lift those thick, snowy lashes to reveal glowing red eyes. She pushed into the barrier again and sought his square chin and gorgeously wide mouth. After a few aching heartbeats, her fingertip touched the curve of his bottom lip. His lips parted ever so slightly, and she heard a soft sigh of breath expel.

“Nalfien.” Too much sensation forced her to draw her hand back, even as a sharp longing pulled at her heart. “I moved his lip.”

The sorcerer was back at his place at the head of the bed within an instant. He smiled. “It seems that you and Eyrhaen are both having an effect on him.”

“What does that mean?” Salin asked.

Nalfien's smile died. “I can only guess that he is soon to waking.”

He didn't say it, but she knew he wasn't convinced that this was a good thing.

Shaking her hand in an attempt to shake the creeping pinpricks beneath her skin, she glanced back down his body. "Why red?" she mused, staring at the waves on his belly.

Neither man answered her. It was not a new question. No one could understand why the markings that had once been white were now red. Nor could they guess why the markings had been removed entirely from his face. "What did the runes on his face mean again?"

"Power. Wandering." Salin's voice was soft.

"Wandering?"

"He traveled a lot. I think he managed the entire perimeter of the forest during his life."

"And much of the interior," Nalfien agreed.

Quite a feat for a man who couldn't be caught in the daylight. Also, back then the raedjour had been a dark secret from humans, yet another reason he'd needed to remain hidden. "Did his wanderings begin before or after She marked him?"

Both men laughed independently, which made her smile.

"Radin *never* stayed within boundaries," Salin assured her, the memory putting a softening smile to his lips. "He didn't *quite* break all the rules..."

"But he only followed them when it suited him," Nalfien finished with exasperated fondness clear in his voice.

They love him still, she mused, not finding that hard to believe. She'd only known him a short time, and that as a mere shade, and she'd become enamored of him.

"We used to joke that She marked him as wanderer simply to put a stamp of approval on what he already was."

She glanced at the intricate white designs that covered Salin's broad chest. A leader of men, warrior, it marked him. It seemed to Nialdlye that She marked Her men well.

She hovered her hand over his belly again. "And these? What do they mean?" Why had she never thought to ask this before?

"Prowess."

She joined their chuckling this time, having heard a multitude of stories about Radin's sexual conquests. A noted seducer among a race of men bred for sex. She frowned, thinking. "Actually, I think they meant roughly the same thing to my people."

The chair behind her scraped. "What?"

She continued to contemplate the markings as Nalfien came back to stand at the head of the bed. "Ale'tone had a book of runes that he took from my people." The ache of their loss pushed at her heart, but it was an old ache and easy to endure. "It was very basic, but...I think I remember this. 'Prowess'? No, 'potent'..." She traced the air above the markings. Four downward sloping lines above either hip, then a thicker arch just over his navel. "'Fertile'?" She sighed. "I'm sorry, I can't remember, but I know I've seen this."

"In red," Nalfien mused. "Perhaps these are not his former markings, but new ones. By a new god."

Salin growled. "Not that again, old man. This is him."

"I'm not denying that, for the moment, only speculating that perhaps he's been blessed by another god." The men locked gazes over her head. "Nialdlye's god."

Nialdlye blinked, gaze dropping back to her hands. "What?"

"The sign is there. If the runes are from your language as well, in a red that perfectly matches the hue of your skin...perhaps it is a sign from your god."

"Tohon?"

Nalfien settled on the edge of the bed in front of her. "Tell us of Him."

She shook her head. "I don't know much, and all of it from Ale'tone, so I can't say how much is true." The man who raised her had only chosen to teach her what he thought she should know, and his opinion of her god and her people was very low.

"Tell us what you can."

She shrugged. "He was a flighty god of fertility. My people lived in the Tohonowee Desert and existed for sex. But nothing like what the raedjour have. There was no order to it, no traditions, just sex and procreation. And we were fertile with practically anything, regardless of species." She never did understand how such a race had died out. "I'm surprised that they even had a basic form of writing. The only thing that fascinated Ale'tone about my people was how there were so few of them when we're fertile with anything."

"What happened to Tohon?"

"I don't know. I only know that He abandoned us. Without Him, they were no longer as fertile. Without any real society, they dwindled to nothing."

"Carelessness. Akin to Rhae leaving us without women."

"But at least She left you with an alternative."

Nalfien reached up to thumb a tear from Nialdlye's cheek, one she hadn't been aware of shedding. "I didn't mean to upset you."

She squeezed his forearm before he let his hand drop. "You didn't. I never knew my god. That's why I was so happy to come here."

"Not that we have a goddess," Salin grumbled.

"Not at the moment," Nalfien agreed, but his gaze strayed down to the man on the bed.

Nialdlye would have liked to have taken the conversation further, but a shiver of pleasure crept over her skin. Looking up, she saw that Nalfien felt the same.

He sighed, standing. "Eyrhaen is coming."

Salin stood back from the bed, combing fingers through his short hair. "Her presence gets more and more *pronounced* by the day, doesn't it?"

Nialdlye gritted her teeth. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to explore this new idea of Nalfien's. Could Radin really have been marked by the god of her long-gone people? Tohon wasn't the only god preferring the color, but was it just a coincidence Radin's markings not only matched her skin but were runes from the basic language of her people?

The cloud of Eyrhaen's presence rolled over her, difficult to ignore. Warmth smoothed under her skin to pool and churn deep in her belly, forcing her to squirm. If she could, she would have climbed on top of Radin and taken him right then and there. No, there would be no more for her tonight. She couldn't be in the same room as the younger woman and Radin.

She stood, smoothing the front of the simple midnight blue sheath that covered her from shoulder to knee. "Can we meet here again tomorrow night?" she asked Nalfien.

He nodded, gathering his writing materials. "If you like."

She heard what he didn't say. *If Eyrhaen's not here.* She doubted he spent any more time with his supposed apprentice since the meeting with Savous. And she doubted he truly minded.

She followed Salin out of the bedroom just as the outer door to Radin's suite opened. Brevin led the way, his tall, bare-chested form filling the doorway before he moved aside and was followed closely by Tykir. Both young men paused at the sight of other people, exchanging a brief glance just before Eyrhaen stepped over the threshold and froze.

She looked...unkempt. As though she wore the same clothing she had slept in. Her hair, normally fastidiously combed, was pulled back in a frayed tail. Too much white showed in the eyes that riveted on Nialdlye. Then her brows crowded together. "What are you doing here?"

Lanthan slid into the room after her, leaving the door open. Each of the three young men looked wary. Tired.

What had happened in just a few days? Nialdlye balled her hands at her sides. "I came to see Radin."

"You don't need to do that."

Calm. "I *want* to see him."

Eyrhaen took two menacing steps toward her as the men in the room all settled into a tense silence. "You don't belong here."

Nialdlye scowled. Much as they didn't like each other, this was the first time Eyrhaen had directly challenged her. "I came because *your father* asked me to."

"He doesn't know anything," she snapped and pointed at the open door. "Get out and don't come back."

Nialdlye gaped.

Salin stepped up to Nialdlye's side. "Eyrhaen, you don't have the authority to keep Nialdlye from here."

Burning red eyes snapped up to glare at Salin. Some of her ire banked. At least it didn't seem like she wanted to attack Salin. "She'll mess everything up."

"What 'everything'?"

Eyrhaen shook her head, both hands up to rake through the hair at her temples, pulling more of the white silk out of her ponytail. "You don't understand!" Her eyes glowed underneath the fringe of her lashes. "None of you do. Just...stay out of my way." With that, she stormed past them, purposely shoving Nialdlye on her way into the bedroom.

Salin caught Nialdlye easily, both of them speechless as they watched her disappear.

Tykir followed in her wake, head bowed. "Sorry," he murmured as he passed, then closed the door behind him.

Something was wrong. The errant pulse of Eyrhaen's magic was even more wild than usual. She'd been more controlled just a few nights previous.

Still supporting Nialdlye's shoulders, Salin turned to his son. "What was that about?"

Nialdlye wasn't sure, but Brevin's and Lanthan's lack of reaction to Eyrhaen's outburst might have been more surprising than the outburst itself. Brevin simply shrugged, folding his arms over his chest. His hair, too, was unkempt, like he'd run his hands through it a few too many times. Lanthan wore an extra blade at his hip, additional to the two slim daggers that were normally strapped to his forearms.

"Answer me, boy."

He exchanged a blank stare with Lanthan. "I'm not sure how to answer you, sir."

With a glance back toward the bedroom, Salin pointed at the outer door. Brevin nodded and led the way back into the hall. Lanthan remained behind as Nialdlye and Nalfien followed them out. Brevin kept walking to the end of the hallway, then turned around at the landing of the flight of stairs. Salin stopped beside him, waiting.

It wasn't at all like Brevin to avoid looking at them. Every bit as tall and imposing as his father, he rarely avoided eye contact like he did now. Embarrassed? No, not quite. "She's been like that for the past few nights."

"Always? Or only here?" He tossed his head back to indicate Radin's suite.

"Mostly here. She's gotten obsessive."

This Nialdlye knew. Much of the reason it had taken her three days to come see Radin had been due to trying to find a time to be there when Eyrhaen was not.

Brevin looked...empty. Lost. Nialdlye knew him well enough to know that this was not his normal vitality.

"Did something happen?" Nialdlye asked.

Briefly, Brevin met her gaze, then looked away. "We've...tried to get her to talk to us about what's driving her to do the things she does. It hasn't gone well."

"Have you told Savous or Hyle?"

"We tried." Brevin ran a hand down his face, sighing. "But they had to go."

"Damn."

The day after Eyrhaen's first venture through the vetriese, the leader of one of the main bands of rogues had requested an audience with Savous. Savous had taken Hyle and a good-sized contingent of Commander Jarak's warriors and ventured to the surface to meet them. They weren't due back for days yet.

"Did she say anything important?" Nalfien asked quietly.

Brevin stared out of the window that lit the end of the hallway.

Salin put a hand to his shoulder. "Spit it out, boy."

Brevin shook his head slightly, grimacing. "She thinks he might be her truemate."

Nialdlye's stomach dropped to her feet. She stared at Brevin, trying to decide what his words could mean other than what he'd said.

Salin hissed. "Are you serious?"

"Very." Brevin turned back to them, but his eyes remained downcast.

"It's not true," Nialdlye blurted.

Finally, Brevin looked up, a small measure of hope in his eyes. "Can you prove that?"

Nialdlye swallowed, and it was her turn to cast her gaze down. "No. But... No." *It can't be true!* She didn't want it to be true.

"Well," Salin said after they were all quiet with their own thoughts for a few heartbeats. "That explains her obsession."

It did. Unfortunately, it did. Nialdlye closed her eyes. *Can it be true?*

She felt Nalfien's hand on her back, stroking in slow, soothing circles.

"Nothing we can do now," Salin continued. "Brevin, are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He wasn't at all convincing. Unhappiness was the least of the bleak emotions pouring off him. Many levels of frustration and anger were jumbled there as well. His normal warrior's calm was broken by an uncommon fidget that made his left arm twitch and rocked him from foot to foot.

"You'll let us know if you need help?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Get back in there."

Brevin was a few steps away when Nialdlye startled and burst after him. She was as surprised as he when she caught his arm to stop him.

Anxiously, she reached up to cup his strong jaw with both hands. She couldn't stand seeing what Eyrhaen's obsession had done to such a gorgeous man. "If you need me, if you need release—any of you—you come to me." She held his gaze, willing him to know she was serious. "Do you hear me?"

His eyes widened. She had fucked all of them before, but not since Eyrhaen matured. Not since the younger woman had staked her claim. But Nialdlye would not stand by and see her ruin three young men in their prime, not if she could help.

"I'll leave word at the tower that you're to be allowed access to me at *any* time." She shook his chin gently. "Tell Lanthan and Tykir."

He blinked. Swallowed. Nodded. "I will."

She had to go up on her toes and pull him down to let her lips reach his for a brief kiss. Then she let him go. He gave her a quick wan smile, then continued down the hall.

She watched him go. I won't see them suffer, she told herself. She was looking out for them. Her offer was not a balm for jealousy.

Chapter Nine

Brevin shoved her back into the mattress, falling after her with her hands sunk deep into his hair. Nialdlye opened her mouth to his, just as fiercely as her pussy clenched around his cock. He pretended not to hear his own desperate moan as he let his hips go and shoved into her.

“Yes,” she breathed into his mouth, nails digging into his scalp, “harder.”

Growling, he braced on his arms and shifted his knee to get better leverage.

She gasped, one hand shooting up to slap a palm on the wall above them, giving her some extra push against him. “Yes! Harder.”

He gave her all he had, letting her take the brunt of all his frustration. She took him in and gave him just the right amount of resistance, spurring him on even further. Their bodies slid together, the oils mixed on their skin satin and slick.

“Yes, Brevin, yes!”

Pulling up and out, he ignored her bleated protest and manhandled her onto her belly. She caught his intention immediately, scrambling up onto her knees and arching her back to present the gorgeous, drenched folds of her pussy. He couldn't resist swiping his tongue through her juices just once, just to taste her and hear her scream; then he reared up and plunged back in. Yes, *much better*. He grabbed her shoulders in a punishing grip and hauled her back onto his cock.

She threw her head back, loose, sweaty hair flying and slapping his chest as she cried out. “Gods!”

They rutted like animals, tearing at the soft sheets of her wide bed and scattering pillows like leaves. Brevin refused to let himself think of anything but this moment and this wonderful woman who allowed him to pour his pain and frustration into her body. But even as he struggled to enjoy, the inevitable surfaced. He shut his eyes, and it was no longer Nialdlye but Eyrhaen beneath him. It was Eyrhaen's tight channel that clutched him. His own imagination summoned her magic and heard her command in Nialdlye's desperate cries. He came on a reluctant cry that seized every muscle in his body.

Even without her here, you're spellbound, he chided himself, falling forward.

Nialdlye panted beneath him as he braced above her, trying to catch his breath. After a few moments, she raked heavy red and black tresses from her face enough that her vivid green eyes could peer back at him. "Are you all right?"

He licked his lips, then shoved up to his knees. "I'm fine." He slid a fond hand over the curve of her rump, still pressed tight to his groin. "Are you?"

She purred as he pulled out, rolling onto her side as he moved aside. "Mmmm, lovely."

He collapsed face-first into the damp pillows beside her, closing his eyes, willing thoughts to stay away. A strange hopelessness threatened underneath the pleasant thrum of release, but he fought it off.

Her hand smoothed over his shoulder and back in small, soothing circles. He cracked open one eye to find her watching him, concern written all over her exquisite features. He hadn't quite believed her offer from the previous night, but he also hadn't been able to get it out of his mind. After talking with Tykir and Lanthan in the early-morning hour just before they'd gone to sleep, he'd agreed to come and see if it was true while they stayed with Eyrhaen.

He closed his eyes again, sighing. Why did he get the feeling that it would not go well if and when Eyrhaen found out about this? She was all right with

them fucking each other—encouraging, even—but she showed an uncommon jealousy for a raedjour when they consorted with other women.

She echoed his sigh. “Are you sure you're all right?”

He nodded into the pillow. Eyrhaen would be especially upset that it was Nialdlye he'd come to. What had he been thinking? “Fine.”

Pushing up onto his elbow, he edged closer to her. She smiled up at him, caressing the side of his jaw as he bent for a kiss. It wasn't Nialdlye's fault. Her offer had been heartfelt, generous, and a welcome release. “Thank you.”

“Entirely my pleasure.” She pinched his earlobe gently as he pulled away. “Did it help?”

He paused but saw what she meant when he met her gaze. “It did.” He sat up, uncomfortable with her pity even if he knew she didn't mean it badly. “But I need to go.”

She was quiet as he visited the privy to sluice off most of the sex and sweat that covered his skin and hair. He would have to bathe before he got anywhere near Eyrhaen. Then the realization that he catered to her outrageous jealousies sparked his anger. How did she justify her anger when she had as much as told him that neither he nor his friends had a chance with her? She was focused on a man who might as well be dead!

By the time he returned to the bedroom, Nialdlye was sitting on the edge of the bed, limned in the fake sunlight streaming in from her garden door. His clothing was draped on the mattress next to her, not on the floor where he'd flung them.

“Thanks.” He picked up his pants.

“You're welcome.” Twisting her long hair into a loose queue, she let him step into his pants before asking, “Should I expect the others?”

He met her frank gaze. “If you don't want...”

She raised a hand to stop him. “No, no. I do, and I *did* want you to come. I want all three of you to use me if you need me.”

He grimaced. "Nialdlye, it's not right if you say it like that."

She laughed, standing. "Brevin, please. I know how you feel about her. How you all feel about her. It's obvious in everything you do."

He paused in fastening his belt, watching her back as she crossed to the vanity to pick up a strip of fabric to tie off her braid. "Are we that pitiful?"

She spun. "Pitiful? Not at all. I'm amazed by what the three of you put up with."

He dropped his gaze and cinched his belt. He knew the four of them presented an odd group, but it was always jarring to hear it from someone else.

She ducked into his line of sight, placing both hands on his bare chest. "I'm sorry."

He wasn't sure what she was sorry for, exactly, but didn't want to find out. He shook his head. "Don't be. What's done is done."

"Oh, Brevin."

He shrugged, stepping around her so he could sit to put on his boots. "We grew up with her. We're the closest thing she has to friends. This stuff with Radin...none of us could have predicted it. Not even her."

"That's not an excuse for the way she treats you."

"Yes, actually, it is." Boots done, he stayed seated, staring at the brightly colored rug beneath his feet. "She's not in control of her own life. Never has been. She has to be so much more than she feels she can be. No, really," he said, looking up at the sound of Nialdlye's disbelieving snort. "We have to look out for her."

She sat beside him, stroking his arm. "And who looks out for you three?"

He grinned. "That's why it helps that there's three of us." He leaned in for a quick peck on her lips. "Thank you again. This helped."

"Tell Lanthan and Tykir to come and see me. And you are welcome back. Anytime." She sat back, leaning on her arms. "Will I ever get the three of you together?"

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

"Ah, I see. Are they covering for you now?"

They'd been on the practice grounds when he'd left them. But if she called... "Yes."

She nodded. "All right. You do what you need to do."

He stood and gathered her up in his arms, kissed her thoroughly, using every trick and instinct he had to leave her breathless. "Thank you," he murmured over her wet, swollen lips.

She purred, carding her fingers through his hair. "You are *most* welcome."

He left her rooms with some of the weight lifted from his shoulders. Much as he got from fucking Lanthan or Tykir, there was just something about being with a woman. Nialdlye, being elven-born, was the closest they could come to knowing what it might be like if Eyrhaen ever let them inside. Shaking his head at himself, he headed out of the women's tower by a back entrance.

Not that Eyrhaen ever intended to fuck them. Maybe once her truemate woke, he'd allow company during her heat.

The thought actually tore at Brevin's heart. He'd never dreamed that he, or even he and his friends, would have Eyrhaen exclusively, but he had dared to think that they would be closer to her than any. To think that she might have a man above them... He couldn't bear it.

He headed for the suite he shared with Lanthan and Tykir. He needed a change of clothing and a visit to the baths before he could find them. But maybe one of the pages in their cavern knew of their whereabouts.

He didn't need to find a page.

Preoccupied with his own thoughts, he didn't realize what he felt until it was too late. Just a few yards from the front door of their suite, he recognized the oppressing cloud of frustrated need that surrounded Eyrhaen these days. She was in their apartment. He froze, caught in a moment of indecision. He *couldn't* go in with Nialdlye's smell still covering him.

Before he could move, the door opened, and Eyrhaen stormed out. Loose white hair floated weightless on a cloud of raw magic that surrounded her. His somewhat gifted sight could almost see the crackle, but he didn't need the gift to see the vivid glow of her eyes. "You!"

Lanthan shot out of the door after her and grabbed her arms. The determination when he met Brevin's gaze said everything.

She knows.

"How *dare* you!" she screeched, struggling against Lanthan's hold.

Behind her at the end of the hallway, three wide-eyed boys scattered.

He took a step toward her. "Eyrie, listen..."

"I will *not*. How dare you abandon me."

"I didn't..."

"Let *go*."

Lanthan tried to hold her, but he was forced to release the spitting, scratching woman. Brevin froze as she stalked up to him, hands up like claws to rip at his shirt. He braced for a magical onslaught but only got a physical shove instead.

She dug her fingers into his shirt and yanked it toward her nose. "You *reek*. Of *her*. How *dare* you!"

There was nothing sane about those glowing eyes, nothing rational he could speak to, so he didn't try.

She didn't seem to care, her fists thumping his chest, shredding the seams of his sturdy shirt. "You can't! She can't! I won't let her."

He grabbed her wrists. "Eyrie, let's go inside..."

"Don't you tell me what to do!" Now she was twisting in his grip, struggling to get away. "Don't you *touch* me, you bastard! You can't touch me after you *fucked* her!"

Tykir came up behind her, sliding strong arms about her waist. “Eyrie”—his mildly glowing eyes met Brevin's over her shoulder, full of the same despair that sat like a lead weight in Brevin's chest—“let's go inside.”

“No! Never!” Freeing a hand from Brevin, she dug her nails into Tykir's arm. “You're just as bad. You *wanted* to, didn't you? You did. I know you did. All three of you! You *hate* me.”



It was impossible to hold her, impossible to say anything that got through. All three of them struggled with her in that hallway, trying to at least get her inside, where they might have some chance at privacy. No one else could be seen, but Brevin had once been a page. It was a time-honored tradition that a page would listen and learn all he could, however he could. There were no secrets unless the boys were ones you personally trusted.

Finally she screamed and shoved at them with magic. Brevin's back hit the wall, and he crumbled to his knees, gasping with lungs that wouldn't fill with air. A shadow loomed over him. He looked up into furious eyes that shone wet and red on the tears that tracked down her cheeks.

"Don't you *ever* touch me again."

He felt it. The icy cold slithering down his gut, starting to pool in his groin. Eyes wide, he knelt frozen and shaking, knowing she was not only going to shrivel him, she was going to geld him. He couldn't move, couldn't protest, couldn't beg. Could only wait.

Abruptly, she snarled, turned, stalked away.

He collapsed onto his face on the dusty floor, fingers digging into the stone as he hauled great gulps of air into his lungs. The icy threat was gone. She'd shriveled him once, many seasons previous, and he'd never forgotten the feeling. But this time, she hadn't finished the spell. He had no idea why, didn't know if there had been some moment of consciousness in her madness, but he could only be thankful for whatever it was that stopped her.

Heart racing, he knelt. Lanthan was there, at his side. Strong, sinewy arms slid around him, Lanthan's bare chest pressing to his. Grateful, he wrapped his arms around his friend and buried his face in his neck. Fingers that couldn't be Lanthan's carded through his hair, and he reached blindly to pull Tykir against him.

"Are you all right?" Tykir murmured into his ear.

"As I can be."

“Did she...?”

“Almost. She stopped.”

Lanthan squeezed him tighter. Tykir's forehead pressed the side of his neck.

“What do we do now?” Tykir asked, voice muffled between them.

Neither Brevin nor Lanthan had an answer.

Chapter Ten

“She what?”

Irin squeezed Nialdlye's hand. “It's not your fault.”

Nialdlye stared at her friend. “Are you so sure of that? If I hadn't fucked with Brevin...”

Irin shook her head firmly. “No. Even if what happened was the latest cause, we all know *something* was bound to happen. I...” Her voice hitched, eyes clouding with tears. She bit her lip and closed her eyes briefly, trying to maintain her composure. “It's not your fault.”

Nialdlye scooted forward on the couch to pull her friend into an embrace. As soon as Irin's head tucked into the curve of her neck, tears broke out. Nialdlye squeezed as Irin broke down crying.

My fault. No matter what Irin said, Nialdlye felt responsible. Her intention had been to help Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir, to give them an avenue of release. She had not considered the true consequences if Eyrhaen found out. *Not true. You wanted her to find out. You wanted her to see.* But she hadn't thought it would affect the raedjour as a whole.

The city had shook under the onslaught of Eyrhaen's emotions just past midnight. Just after Brevin had left her. Nialdlye had hoped that something else, not Brevin, had been the cause of the unreasoning anger that could only be pouring out of Eyrhaen. She had not had the resources to find out any facts until Irin had shown up at her apartment moments before.

Gathering herself, Irin pulled back from Nialdlye. Nialdlye left her friend briefly to retrieve a clean cloth for Irin to wipe her face and nose.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Irin sniffed. Blew her nose. Cleared her throat. Shook her head. "Not your fault. It's *all* our faults. We, none of us, have done enough to help her. Least of all, me."

"Irin, you can't blame *yourself*."

"I'm her mother."

"That doesn't give you any control over her. Not when some of the most experienced sorcerers among us can't even control her. No one blames you."

"No? If I hadn't given birth to her..."

"Irin!" She squeezed her friend's hand, making her face her. "Don't you *dare*."

Irin's eyes went wide, tears threatening again as her face crumpled. "I'm a horrible mother."

"You're a wonderful mother. Eyrhaen is beyond any child any mother could expect. You *cannot* regret giving birth to her."

"I know. I don't. I love her. I do. But her very existence threatens us. Did you *feel* her?"

Nialdlye nodded. Of course she did. They all did.

"That kind of power is just obscene. She doesn't know what to do with it, and she won't *listen*."

Nialdlye squeezed her hand, unsure what she could add or how she could help a frantic mother calm down.

"I wish Savous were here. Not that he could do anything, but..." She shook her head.

Although she knew the answer: "When is he due back?"

“They probably just reached the meeting grounds.” Irin growled. “Damn the rogues. I *told* him they didn't deserve to meet with him. I knew he shouldn't leave.”

“There's nothing we can do about that. Where is Eyrhaen now?”

“Her rooms. Last I heard. Of course, she might be with Radin.”

Nialdlye did *not* want Irin thinking of Eyrhaen with Radin just now. She'd heard too many laments from Irin about her daughter with her former lover. “What about Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir?”

Irin took a deep breath. “Jarak is sending them on a mission. We both thought it best to keep them busy. Plus, oh Goddess, Nialdlye, there are rogues in the east tunnels.”

“Just outside the city?”

Irin clutched the cloth to her mouth. “Yes. They're right on top of us, and Savous and Hyle are both on the surface. Gods, Nialdlye, this is more than...”

Quickly, Nialdlye gathered her into a hug. “Shhh, don't panic. For now, we rely on Jarak and hope Savous and Hyle get back in time.”

“In time? In time for what?”

To that, Nialdlye didn't have an answer.

Chapter Eleven

Eyrhaen sat in the middle of her wide bed, staring at the wall behind the headboard without seeing it. She tried breathing as calmly as she could, tried every trick and trance she'd been taught.

Nothing was working.

Raw power nearly crackled in the air about her. She could almost see it with normal sight. Her own gift was impossible to contain within herself anymore, grown beyond the boundaries of her body like a cloud of magical dust motes that surrounded her at all times. Lately, the cloud often grew beyond the boundaries of any room she was in. It fed her every emotion, prodding her anger and settling an icy lacing on despair.

She was alone.

Tykir, Lanthan, and Brevin were gone. Gone from her sight, gone from her presence, gone from the city. She didn't know why, but she felt the distance growing and tried to convince herself that it was good riddance. They'd betrayed her. Brevin had fucked Nialdlye. *Nialdlye!* And she knew, she *knew*, the other two wanted to follow suit. Didn't she give them enough? She brought them to release every day, sucked their cocks, shared her body, shared the emotions that melded between them. She gave them all that she could. *Must* they be inside her? Did they have to have her virginity? Evidently so. Evidently there was more to sinking a cock into a woman's pussy than she'd given credit.

So why hold back?

Demon voice! She knew why. Her virginity wasn't theirs. It was *his*. The goddess promised her a connection. That's what the dreams and the whispers

seemed to say. Gibberish in her head had finally made some sense. She'd felt the connection before, but it was so much more now. *He* was the answer. She knew it. He was hers. Anything up to that was just filling time.

So why does he still lie there?

She growled. Good question. No answer. Her life was falling to pieces, her very *culture* was shattering, and he just lay there. She knew; she felt the activity in the city. There were hostile elements encroaching. If she'd known what to say, she would have told Jarak. But he was already aware. She felt nearly all the men and even some of the older boys who were left in the city taking their places to guard. It took most of two nights and days, but now all women and children save her were protected in the women's tower. They had tried to come and gather her, but she'd used magic to keep them out. Small consolation that not even Nalfien had been able to barge his way through her shields. Rhicard had not tried, busy with the defenses of the city.

She closed her eyes and shook. She *felt* the random fighting nearby. She *felt* the odd desperation of the rogues, not as a sensation from any one man but as a combination of them all. There was a need that they tried to fill by attacking, but the fighting was not the answer.

Goddess, why won't you help me? Help us?

Frustrated, she opened her eyes and turned around, curling up so she could rest her forehead on her knees. Her people were dying, and maybe everyone had been right to doubt her. Maybe she had been wrong all along. Maybe she was as hateful as they thought and would be the downfall of her own race. *Had* it been Rhae goading her all this time? Or had she been duped like her long-dead grandsire?

No one left to ask. Not even Da was near, and she didn't have enough control over her power to try to contact him. Desperate, she reached out blindly with her power. Over the distance, through the solid bowels of nurturing earth, she sought a source of comfort. It was not conscious, but it could not be coincidence that she found them. Even if she was a disappointment—no, a

torture—to them, they remained a comfort for her. She could not see or hear Brevin, Tykir, or Lanthan, but she felt them. Felt movement, fatigue, and caution. Felt action. Felt frustration. Felt...*pain!*

Abruptly, she sat up, eyes wide and unseeing. One of them was in pain. Horrible pain.

Without thought, she launched to her feet. Pants and a shirt found their way on her, and she muttered over the time it took to put on her tough leather traveling boots with thick soles for the rougher tunnels. She left her suite and hurried from the tower, her hair flying loose about her shoulders.

There was a wrongness here too. The tower was *empty*, save her. No silent shadow echoing her movements. Not even the constant presence of the boys who tended menial duties. No one. Fear shimmered down her spine. She was used to people being around. She was not used to *no* one. Had Jarak taken everyone?

Very, very wrong.

Speeding out of one of the lower tunnels at the back of her tower, she chose the open passages that would most quickly take her to where Brevin?...no, Lanthan, was. Was it Lanthan? Or was Tykir hurt again? She couldn't tell. The three of them meshed to one whole in her heart, and she only knew that one of them was badly hurt.

Empty passages and endless tunnels separated her from them. She raced down them, not slowing when she reached ways that were unfamiliar to her. When lit torches and lamps became nonexistent, she let the cloud of magic around her provide light. She didn't need it, but it allowed some of the prickling pressure of power to ease.

It was likely the light that drew them to her.

The three men surged out of the shadows just as she entered a cavern. These were not the three she was looking for, far from it. Tall with black, glossy skin, yes, but these men were unknown to her, unwashed and unkempt.

Caught off guard, she only grunted when one clubbed her on the side of the head. Her light went out as, dazed, she fell to her knees; then another body shoved her onto her back. Her thin shirt ripped on the uneven rocks that bit into her tough skin. She drew shaky breath as cruel hands shoved her thighs apart and a face pressed into her groin, breathing deep through the thin wool of her pants. Another nose poked under her jaw. Hands ripped the front of her shirt so greedy fingers could dig into the soft meat of her breasts. It happened so quickly that by the time her swirling head recovered and she began to squirm, other strong hands had torn open her pants to expose her sex. She screamed, arching when a mouth closed over her clit, sucking roughly. A deep, ragged whimper expressed glee at finding her already wet. Teeth closed on one of her nipples, and a third mouth closed over hers with an insistent tongue that wormed its way between her teeth. Her next scream was muffled by that mouth. She tried to kick, but the man between her thighs kept her pinned. She tried to claw her other two assailants, but raedjour skin wouldn't break from just fingernails. Her hips bucked of their own accord into the stimulation of her clit, her sex in need despite her mind's rejection of her partners.

But then the mouth at her sex left. She registered the fumbling, felt the thick bluntness of something that was neither tongue nor fingers. Instant rage boiled up in her chest, and she finally reined in the raw magic that spat about them. Incoherent, she shoved icy cold at the invader that would have entered her. A guttural male bellow bounced off the cavern walls as that would-be rapist fell back. Still filled with power, she aimed the same spell at her other attackers. They fell back, writhed on the ground.

She sat up, staring with her nightsight at the outlines of the men around her. Unappeased anger burned away any common sense, so she kept pouring icy heat into them all, more than willing to punish them for attacking her. For keeping her from the mission she'd currently forgotten. All the frustration and rage boiling within her poured into the choking bodies around her. It was

glorious and horribly wonderful. She kept it up until the warmth that had been their lives snuffed out.

Sense returned as a thousand needles scratching her skin. Power abated to leave her momentarily empty and horribly aware of the lifeless bodies around her.

She'd killed them.

She'd never killed another person before. Never even killed a small animal. Never gone hunting. Never had a pet die in her presence. Yet she'd just taken the lives of three grown men. Raedjour. Her people.

Power rushed back, lava hot, washing up her body with such force that she fell onto her back screaming. At least, her mouth was open. She couldn't hear over the roar of energy to tell if she made a sound. Black light closed over her, drowning her, threatening to take her under.

No. The proclamation was hers but was underlined with *other*. She sat up, unseeing and uncaring of the tatter of clothing hanging from her limbs. She swayed as another wave of blackness slammed into the side of her head.

No. She stood on wavering legs, eyes closed to the sights around her. But she couldn't blot out awareness of the bodies.

I killed them.

Come.

It wasn't a word, more a compulsion. Her first few steps were shaky, but she steadied as she picked up speed, racing back the way she had come. Following and being chased by a flood of immense energy that seeped from the rock of the tunnels through which she ran.

No lights. All flames were out. Or maybe she just couldn't see. She didn't know and couldn't be bothered to care. The power pushed so that she almost floated, her boots hardly slapping the rock beneath her feet. The tunnels spilled into a known tower and awareness of one particular other shone in her mind's eye, a glimmering red beacon to follow.

She flew up the stairs and down a hall. No one was there to stop her from ripping open the outer door to the suite. In the darkened bedroom, the flame in the single shielded lamp surged to three times its normal size, shattering its glass casing and throwing hectic shadows about the room.

His head lay to the side. One arm was flung toward her on the mattress.

She noted the changes as she lunged across the room. Whimpering at the delay, she tore off the remains of her shirt and pants, not bothering to remove her heavy boots before climbing onto the bed. His cock was long and gloriously hard, dripping glistening drops of fluid over the vivid red marks that slashed his belly. With a moan, she opened her mouth over the head of him and filled it with as much of his shaft as she could. The rich, dark taste of him burst over her tongue as she swallowed. Power sparked, given a direction.

The shield was gone! A small part of her mind rejoiced. Either that or the magic around her was so great that it overwhelmed. Whichever, she could touch him, taste him. Her fingers dug into the taut muscle of his thigh, and it slid aside, opening his groin. His skin—and hers—had already sprouted beads of oily lubrication to ease the grinding of bodies. The sound of a low groan surprised her enough to pull her mouth from his cock, but strong fingers dug into the hair at the back of her skull, pushing her back down. Shutting her eyes, her entire body shaking with need, she went willingly, swallowing all she could. He groaned again, guiding her head up, then down. Once. Twice. Three times.

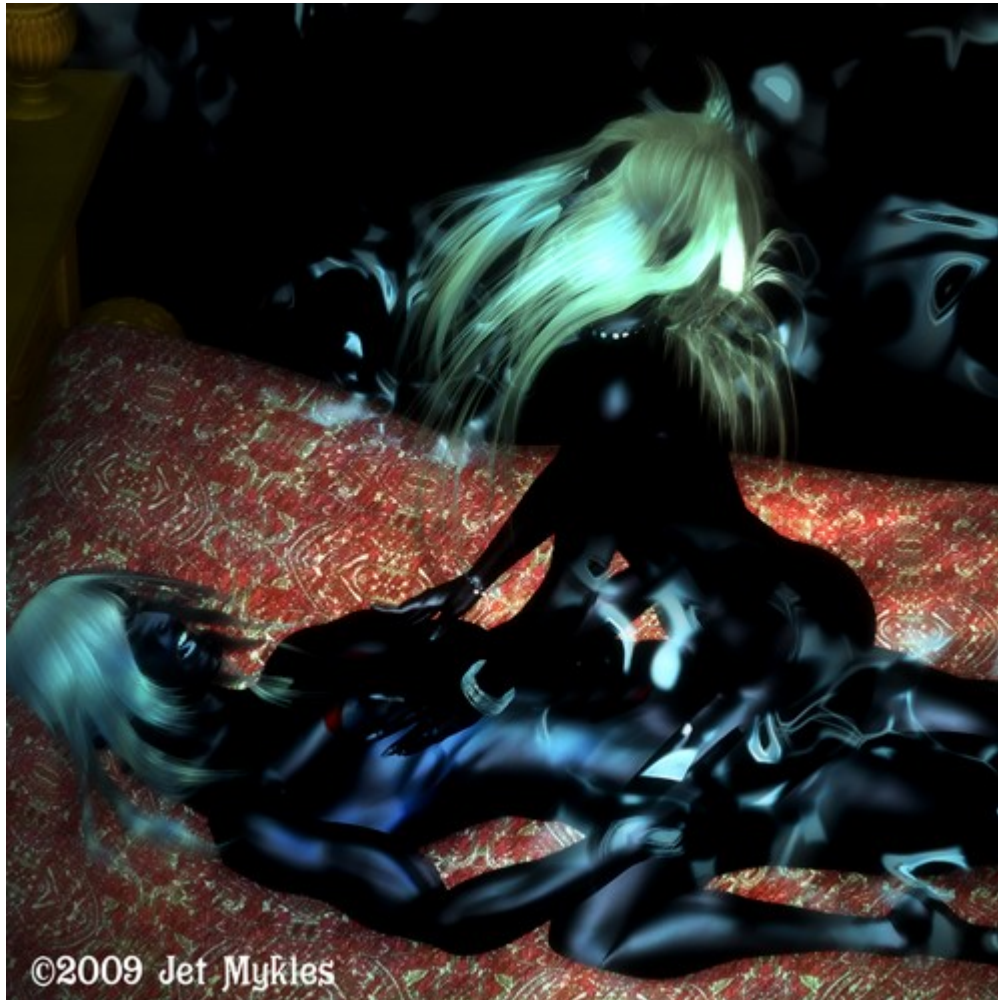
She gasped when the resistance of his hand suddenly left. Her mouth popped from his cock, and she looked up to see his head rocking from side to side, upsetting the sweep of white hair that covered his pillow. Unintelligible grumbling spilled from moving lips.

Eager, driven, she pushed up to her knees and swung her leg over his hips. He swallowed, eyes still closed, as she wrapped her hand around his slippery, wet shaft. She aimed it at her empty, weeping sex. The wide, blunt head fit at the entrance to her core.

His eyes opened wide, glowing blinding-hot red.

The lamp's flame stuttered. Died.

Eyrhaen impaled herself on his cock.



Chapter Twelve

Dying would be nice, Brevin decided as the blade yanked from his chest. Not even bothering to look at the man who had somehow caught him unaware, he sank to his knees to watch blood ooze from the wound. All around him shouts and battle sounded, but he was done. Anger surfaced as he crumpled forward. Anger at himself for barreling into the blind cavern, anger at Lanthan for not stopping him, anger at Eyrhaen for keeping his emotions so far off-kilter that he didn't even know what normal feelings were anymore.

His jaw hit the ground. He closed his eyes. It might be good to rest.

Anxious hands kept him from it. They shoved him over onto his side, then his back. "Brevin!"

He dragged his eyes open for Tykir. The sorcerer's eyes glowed hot red, the only light in the cavern. He tried a smile, opened his mouth to speak, but thick liquid burbled up into his throat, keeping him silent.

"Don't talk." Strong hands pressed at the wound. "Let me..."

Brevin closed his eyes. Tykir was a skilled sorcerer, but a healer he was not. Minor wounds, perhaps. But this, no. Brevin wanted to reach up, to take his hand, but found that his limbs were comfortable where they were.

Then the pain hit.

He couldn't cry out, but he did what he could, gurgling over what must be blood trickling out of his mouth.

"Damn it, Brevin, no!"

More pain than he'd ever felt before. Enough that he managed some distance. How odd. Why had he not thought before to stop the pain Eyrhaen

caused with a clean slice with his blade? If only he could tell Lanthan and Tykir.

Lanthan screamed, the music of clashing blades surrounding him. Brevin wasn't worried. Lanthan would live. He hadn't run into death. Smart man.

"Brevin." Tykir, tears in his voice. "Brevin, no."

Time stopped.

Sound stopped.

Pain stopped.

Blades clattered to stone. Dull thumps as bodies followed suit. Lanthan gasped. Tykir's fingers dug into the skin surrounding Brevin's wound.

Great, gushing heat swelled up from Brevin's soul, arching his back, expanding his lungs to force in air. Blood clogged his throat, making him cough. He rolled over onto his side, mouth open to expel liquid as his chest fought to take in breath. His entire body sizzled, his throat was raw, inside his chest felt like someone had made him swallow glass shards. But he was...alive?

Shaking his head, he propped on one elbow, using the other hand to wipe blood from his mouth. He blinked, unable to make sense of what he saw.

Battle. Fighting. Surely those growls and wrestling were... No. Growls and wrestling, yes, but the battle wasn't with blades. The battle disregarded the bare swords and daggers that lay scattered, forgotten. Clothing shredded and limbs tangled. Men grappled, fighting for dominance. Lanthan was nearby, his opponent secured to his chest by one muscular arm as he used the other to fumble at the laces of the man's trousers. The rogue, for what it was worth, was helping rather than fighting Lanthan's hold.

"Damn."

Hearing Tykir's voice, Brevin twisted his neck to see his other friend crouching against the wall, eyes closed with arms outspread and palms on the rock behind him. Nightsight made it hard to make out his expression, but Brevin could see the strain laced through his muscles well enough. *Gorgeous.*

Hardly thinking, simply attracted, Brevin pushed up to his knees and crossed the distance between them.

When Brevin reared up and put his hands on Tykir's shoulders, those glowing red eyes flew open, his mumbling stopped. Shock dropped his mouth open. "Brevin?"

Seeing only the open, inviting mouth, Brevin sealed his to it, plunging his tongue into the delicious confines. Tykir whimpered, strong hands finding grasp on Brevin's arms. Token resistance dissolved as he angled his head to deepen the kiss.

Completely disregarding anything else around them, Brevin toppled to the side, twisting Tykir underneath him without losing his hold. His hands slid down until they found the barrier of Tykir's pants. He snarled into his mouth, grabbing at the laces. His fingers tangled with Tykir's as they both struggled to free their cocks. Tykir was bared first. Frustrated, Brevin knelt to finish his own. Meantime, Tykir scrambled onto his belly. By the time Brevin had his cock free, Tykir was on hands and knees, ass presented and fist already working his own erection. Brevin fit his cock at Tykir's opening and shoved in.

As he fell over his friend's back, some semblance of sanity returned. He glanced up again at the cavern full of men—their men and the enemy—ruttled violently together. "Tyk, what's happening?"

Tykir groaned deliciously under Brevin's thrust. "Don't know. More than...magic."

"Can you stop it?" He gripped Tykir's hip, lest they both topple from the strength of his thrusts.

Tykir shifted his knees to brace himself better. "No. Too much."

"Is it Eyrhaen?"

"Fuck!" Tykir pounded the rock beneath him, shoving back at Brevin. "Probably."

* * * * *

Savous's knees buckled, swaying him into Hyle. His vision of the man standing before him wavered, so he couldn't be sure if he did, indeed, see Tarlan collapse to his hands and knees on the forest floor beneath him. Savous swallowed in a dry throat, blinking rapidly in a desperate attempt not to lose consciousness as the very air rolled through his chest and filled him with anxiety. No, not anxiety. Euphoria. Sweet fire rushed through his veins and coated the muscles underneath his skin. He shook as blood rushed into his cock, threatening to rip the sturdy leather trousers he wore underneath his heavy violet robe.

What...?

Unable to voice his question, he shot an arm out to brace against the handy tree trunk beside him and forced his neck to twist so he could see Hyle.

The other sorcerer was the only man other than Savous who remained standing. All the others, both the rogues and the loyalists, had fallen to the ground. Moaning, writhing, either curled into themselves or splayed flat on their backs. Hyle's round face was turned toward where the moon peeked through the canopy of leaves above them. His throat worked to swallow, and a fine sheen of sweat shimmered on his skin.

Savous cleared his throat twice before he could push words past his lips. "Hyle."

His friend and advisor slowly lowered his face and turned to Savous. Glowing red eyes opened to meet Savous's. He raised a hand to spread over the swath of chest bared by the open front of his robe. Consciously or not, he fingered the white markings etched in his skin. "Rhae."

Savous blinked and swayed as another wave of pure, awesome pleasure threatened to send him to his knees. Hyle's hand came up to brace on his shoulder, encouraging him to look up again. As he did so, he saw the men on the ground moving toward each other. Groping, kissing roughly.

He met Hyle's gaze, then lips without pure thought on his part. As he struggled to find reason, his hands shoved into Hyle's robe and slipped around

to curl over the shorter man's ass, pulling him close. Their cocks met, each rock-hard, and their kiss dissolved at needy gasps.

"What is this?" Savous rasped as his fingers dug into Hyle's waistband.

Hyle's hands were busy between them, struggling with the ties of Savous's trousers. "Rhae."

"What?"

"It's what—ah!" He threw his head back as Savous's fingers slid into the crack of his ass. "What Rhae's presence used to feel like."

"The vetriese?"

Hyle yanked Savous's waistband loose. "Yes."

Savous wouldn't know. Unlike other sorcerers his age and older, he'd never personally visited Rhae except for that one fateful time.

Letting Hyle free their cocks, he forced himself to look around. All around them, men writhed in pairs or more on the ground. Clothing shredded and flew away. Hands slipped over black skin, gripping hard, bare cocks. Rogues and loyalists alike, it didn't matter.

Savous gasped when Hyle finally gripped his bare shaft, squeezing it in his hand with his own. "Gods, Hyle, what is this?" Not so strange to be fucking Hyle, but where had the compulsion come from? It wasn't so much Hyle. He just happened to be the closest body.

"Eyrhaen," Hyle grunted, his grip slipping in the copious oils that now coated both of their cocks, their skin.

Savous threw back his head, fighting to clear it. His daughter. Yes. She had to be at the heart of this. "Radin?" he asked the sky.

"Yes," Hyle answered, shoving down Savous's trousers.

"Gods! We should..."

Hyle's fingers tangled in his hair, yanking his face back down. "We will." Red eyes bore into his. "But there's no fighting. *This*"—he yanked hard on Savous's cock—"first."

Savous crushed Hyle's mouth with his, bearing the shorter man down to the ground. He was right. There was no use in fighting the compulsion if it was divine. Any raedjour knew better than that. First they would succumb; then they would rush back to the city to find out what had happened.

* * * * *

The cup slipped from Irin's fingers to splash tea on Nialdlye's rug. Nialdlye heard it but couldn't be bothered. Gasping, she curled into herself, instinct to contain the wash of heat that exploded in her groin and poured up and through every limb of her body. Her hands rose of their own accord to cup over her breasts, her palms hot against her nipples even through the thin linen of her blouse.

"What is this?" Irin gasped.

Nialdlye looked at her. Her friend lay curled on her side, white hair spilling over the side of the couch and red eyes burning. *Beautiful.*

She was there before she knew it, kneeling on the rug to put her face just above Irin's. Black lips opened, and Nialdlye swooped down to plunge her tongue within, eager to taste the warm, honeyed cavern. Eager hands slid up her arms and gripped her shoulders, pulling her closer. When breasts crushed breasts, Irin threw her head back in a pained cry.

"What is this?" Nialdlye wondered, trying to think even as she slid her lips down the smooth column of Irin's throat.

"Don't know. Never felt like this except—ah!" She cried when Nialdlye's teeth worried her nipple through her blouse. "Except in heat."

Nialdlye suckled her nipple as she yanked the ties that held the blouse closed. When linen fell away, she used both hands to gather both of Irin's firm breasts together, feasting on first one nipple, then the other.

She couldn't say what possessed her. Nialdlye had only felt similar compulsions a few times, usually when she'd been deprived of sex for too long. Once right after she had spilled from the portal into the raedjour city. But not

lately. She fucked regularly and well among her adopted people. This compulsion was very much out of the ordinary. Both for her and for Irin.

A shudder forced her to stop moving, to rest her forehead on Irin's breast while the wave of need released her enough to move. Underneath her, Irin experienced the same.

"Nialdlye, what is this?" Irin gasped when she could, nails digging into Nialdlye's skin.

"I don't know." Nialdlye's hand slipped down Irin's flat belly to find the tie of the wrap about her hips. "But it's not all us."

Irin cried out when Nialdlye plunged her hand into her sex, fingers delving easily into drenched folds. The scent of them spat into the air, making Nialdlye dizzy with need.

She gasped, caught off guard when Irin suddenly pushed her. As she tumbled onto her back, her arms came up to catch the other woman as Irin straddled over her. Their lips met in a bruising kiss, and Irin's hands wandered, shoving clothing off from Nialdlye's body as best she could without separating their lips.

"We should"—Irin spoke through kisses as she shoved her bare thigh between Nialdlye's—"stop and"—she ground hard into the woman beneath her—"see what this is."

"Yes," Nialdlye agreed, but her hands were tangled in the cool silk of Irin's hair. She pushed up, rolling them partway so their legs could align just right so...

They both screamed as cunts came into contact, ripe folds and rigid clits bumping together to cause both women to shudder.

We will, Nialdlye promised herself as she dug her fingers into Irin's hips, helping the other woman to rock into her. *But first*, this.

Chapter Thirteen

Eyrhaen's back arched on a scream, the top of her skull tapping the curve of her ass. Perhaps. Was that her ass? Was that soft tickling sensation smoothing over her skin her hair, or was it the lights that gave no illumination that twinkled through her skin? Where *was* her skin? Where was she? Her mouth opened to swallow a lump of sky as lava poured through her veins like a steaming underground river. White darkness unbroken by the lights within her pulsed in time to the lust, searing cold in her groin.

She whimpered.

He held her together.

He?

Something akin to thought formed, assembling some of what might be her into what may be the correct formation. A presence thinned one bit of the cloud of chaos that surrounded her. She blindly grabbed with fingers that didn't exist.

"Shhhh." No sound but clear thought, all around her, within her. Comforting embrace. More feeling than sound. Soothing. It said, *"Everything will be all right,"* without saying it.

Panic eased some of its grip, but coherence was still not to be had. Heat smoothed, but a shimmering, silvery spiral of need still coiled within her. Strength pushed against it, slid across it, through it. She shuddered and rolled with the flow.

"That's it." More like thought now. More like touch. She began to relearn the boundaries of her body. Watched it undulate from within, far larger than it

should be. Or was her mind in the wrong place? Was she outside her body? What if she reassembled in the wrong pattern?

"Shhhhh. Concentrate on me. I've got you."

"Who are you?" she managed to think.

"Let's say 'guide' for now." Mild amusement buzzed up her spine to trill in her skull. No, she was in the right space. With a hard warmth pressed against her. A guiding post to grasp onto, to clutch. Without knowing what it was, *how* it was, she knew this was her way back to...wherever it was important that she return to.

"Good."

Rocking. A leaf on a breeze-disturbed pond. A tiny fish in streaming waters. Her and her solid, floating guide. He knew where he was going. She just had to hang on. She absorbed her guidepost and thrilled as it fit perfectly to her. Within her.

"Yes."

"Yes," she thought with him, wrapping herself around his heat. So warm. The heart of a fire that burned hot but didn't scorch. It filled in the cracks that had formed when she exploded, when she'd fallen apart. This was good. *He* was good.

More solid now. Those might be her arms. Her legs. Her cunt. All of them wrapped around a comforting solidity. She opened her mouth and accepted yet more of him inside her.

She groaned. Barely assembled thoughts flew apart as trilling pleasure vibrated under her skin.

"Concentrate," soothed the other, holding her. *"Don't get lost."*

Lost. How could she not get lost? There was too much.

Some of the rocking pleasure stilled. He stopped moving. Whimpering, she reached for him, *through* him. No, that's not what she wanted.

"Make it right."

Irritation simmered atop need. She pulled herself together, made herself whole. A whole to press to his whole, a need to meet with his need.

"Yes."

Not all her thoughts were hers. Some looming guidance nudged her, like a child nudging a bug with a stick to keep it within a drawn circle. The presence could crush her. But wouldn't. She took the guidance.

He was another presence. Him but also more. She sensed a similar looming awareness behind him, but it was far more controlled. Precise. She could almost see it.

"I can see?"

A chuckle. "Not yet," soothed a deep voice. Was that a hand smoothing over her forehead? Was that a bed beneath her? "Not yet, but you're doing very well."

She tried to open her mouth, but that was beyond her. Beyond her until... "Ah!" She threatened to unravel as he shoved moist, delicious hardness within her, low, between her thighs, igniting edgy fire in her veins.

"That's right." Warm breath on her face.

Yes, that was her face. Once she found it, she turned it toward his breath, met his lips with hers. Her lips, yes! Meant for kissing. For opening to receive his tongue just as her body received his cock.

"You're almost there," he crooned, rocking above her, within her.

She found her arms and legs wrapped tightly around him, although she still couldn't see. Pleasure coiled tightly in her belly. She whimpered, afraid to release it, lest she shatter again.

"We've got you." Once voice, two impossibly huge echoes. "Let go now."

One shove and he tapped a nerve deep inside, pricking the bubble that she had held and releasing the viper's venom into her blood. She screamed but heard no sound, terrified that she'd lost what little solidity she'd managed to regain.

“No,” he soothed as her body stuttered to a halt. “You're fine. Good girl.” A kiss. Fingertips stroked her cheek. “Sleep now.”

Sleep? “No,” she managed to croak.

He chuckled. “Oh that's very good. But you need to rest.”

She shook her head, trying to speak.

In vain. His hands came over her eyes, which wouldn't see; then the black truly took over.

Chapter Fourteen

One was loyalist. One was rogue. The remains of their clothing hung in tatters, infused with the oil from their skin and the dust of the ground on which they grappled. White hair flew, shrouding growling faces as two sets of hands fought for purchase on sleek, slippery skin. The one on the ground howled, twisted, kicked. The one on top lost his leverage and rolled. Too far. Ended up on his belly. He tore at the ground, but his adversary was quicker. The one on bottom arched back, his howl of rage melting into an extended groan as, above him, the other sank a long, hard cock into him.

Savous wasn't the only one watching. Wasn't even the only one watching the action with his own cock shoved deep in the velvet hold of a clutching ass. Said ass rolled as the man beneath him switched positions, ducking his chin and pumping his own cock as climax chased him.

Savous leaned in, thrust harder, willing to get this over with so he could sleep; then they could get moving again. His return journey to his city was proving to take much longer than expected. Four nights, but they were expected to reach the city limits the next night. Namely due to the pressing, unreasoning need that rode every man among them. Rogue and loyalist alike were driven toward the city, so all-encompassing that fighting was not even possible. Men would walk until the pleasure was like to burst, then drop and rut with the nearest body.

Tarlan grunted. Came. Collapsed. Savous thrust twice more and released his own climax, such as it was. A temporary release only.

Tarlan pushed onto his side as Savous sat back. Blue eyes fastened on Savous underneath a matted fringe of hair gone gray with caked dust. "Why?"

Savous winced as he sat back, careful to arrange his robes beneath him. They were all that was left of his clothing, other than his boots. His shirt and pants had been casualties of couplings from days ago. He wasn't sure how he'd managed to mostly save the robe, although the heavy velvet stank of oily sweat and semen. He should just leave it to rot in one of the tunnels, but he stubbornly hung on to it.

“Rhaeja?”

Startled, Savous realized his mind had wandered. Easy to do when he was so tired. He just wanted to sleep. He *would* sleep. But it wouldn't be restful. It would be just enough to energize his body to travel as much as he could. “Why'?”

“Why is this happening?”

Tarlan had avoided him since they had all descended into the tunnels. Savous still had some measure of control over his men, mainly because he didn't try to wield it. Tarlan had. He'd tried to get his men to turn back, then, when they wouldn't, to fight. But the best fighting they could manage were savage couplings to slake the sexual need.

If he weren't so exhausted, Savous might be amused. Would definitely be fascinated. He could practically see the magic vibrating within each soul, activated by a force that could only be divine.

“Rhae,” he replied simply, and now he knew he was right. He had only felt Her presence once, but it wasn't something he could forget. She was awake and among them, but She was different than before.

Tarlan flopped onto his back, heedless of the bare stone. They were all filthy, and most had given up the pretense of staying clean. The oils on their skin increased when they coupled, slewing the dust from asses and cocks enough to make sex slightly more palatable. “Why is She doing this?”

"She's been separated from us for two centuries." Savous sighed, closing his eyes and sinking against the rock wall behind him. "This is the backlash of Her return."

"Will it stop?"

Beyond Tarlan, Hyle rose from his own recent coupling. Red eyes met Savous's, showing he'd heard Tarlan's questions.

"Yes." Savous kept his gaze with Hyle. They'd discussed it when coherent thought was possible. It became clearer the closer they got to the city. The more exhausted they became. The answer was in the city. It was why they were being drawn. *Eyrhaen*. He knew she had to be at the center of it.

* * * * *

Salin glared at the door.

He sat at the other side of the hall, seated on a wide, flat pillow on the stone floor, his back propped against the wall. Diana, his truemate, was draped naked over his chest and lap, her groin fitted to his, his cock gradually softening from their coupling.

He'd lost track of the number of times they'd come together in the hallway. They were alone. Had been for most of the last four days. The pressure of the madness was worse in this hall, near that door. The door that he couldn't open, as it was held shut by magic. The door that kept him from his brother and Savous's daughter.

Diana stirred. "You're growling," she muttered into his neck.

He grunted. Accepting.

She slid a lazy hand up his bare side. "Is there any change?"

"No." He traced her spine. "Yes."

"Yes?"

"I can almost hear him."

She startled. Groaning slightly, she brought her hands between them and pushed on his chest to put enough distance between them that she could see his eyes. "Almost?"

He couldn't resist reaching up to brush sweaty hair away from her forehead. He adored her always, but tousled and freshly fucked were perhaps his favorite views of her, followed closely by the heat of her anger. But he didn't have it in him now to poke to get a rise out of her. He'd just had her and wanted her again, but it irritated him that much of the urge came from without.

He sighed, thunking the back of his skull against the wall. "He's there, but it's not words."

"Is it any clearer than before?"

"Much."

She flicked his nipple with her nail, but her cast-aside gaze told him she was merely thinking, not flirting. "You think that means this is almost done?"

By *this* she meant the madness that had taken the city. She meant the constant, exhaustive fucking that not only they but everyone in the city was subject to. She meant the need to couple over the need to eat and, almost, over the need to sleep. Even the women and men who had been spelled but not fully turned by a truemate were under the geis.

"I don't know."

Sighing, she rocked back. "I'm going to get us something to eat."

He held up his arm to give her something solid to lean on as she climbed onto shaky legs. She laughed. "For all the fucking we've done, I don't remember feeling quite *this* sore. Not even in heat."

She had been, back in their first few cycles together. When she'd been shaking the last vestiges of her humanity, before giving birth to Brevin had changed her completely to raedjour. Or as close as a human-born woman could become. But he chose not to remind her.

Accepting his silence, she reached up to draw her damp hair back into a ponytail as she turned and sauntered off. He watched her shapely backside and entertained thoughts of running after her and tackling her to the floor. But he held back. She'd return soon enough, and they'd fuck. They'd have to. If she wasn't caught in another coupling before she returned.

Grinning at the thought of the poor, hapless soul who might think to force Diana into a coupling, Salin returned his attention to the door. His grin died.

"*Radin?*" He tried again, rusty in his use of the mind-link he'd once shared with his brother. But then, the maintenance of the link had been mostly Radin's doing. Radin was the sorcerer. Radin had the abundance of gifts. Radin was the special one. Always had been. Salin had accepted that from the time he'd first seen his brother as a babe.

"I'm touched."

Salin froze.

"And amazed. I don't recall your being speechless often."

Shock kept Salin from surging to his feet. "*Radin?*"

A warm chuckle trickled through the link that was suddenly rock-solid. "*It's me, brother mine.*"

Salin swallowed, palms flat on the pillow to either side of him. So many questions flitted across his mind, and unaccustomed to being flustered, he couldn't decide what to ask.

"No answers just yet." Radin's inner voice carried a weight, despite the implied smile. "*Soon.*"

"How soon?"

A pause. "*Savous will be here tomorrow. We'll talk then.*"

Tenacious, Salin hung on to Radin's attention for one last question. "*Is Eyrhaen all right?*"

"Is that her name?"

"Is she with you?"

“Yes.”

“Is she all right?”

“She should be fine.” There was a hesitation there. Something else to what he was saying, but he was fading away.

“She's Savous's daughter.”

Salin couldn't see him, but he'd become accustomed to reading Radin's reactions through their mind-link. He knew that hesitation. Radin hadn't known.

“Well.” He knew that wry tone as well. It meant things hadn't gone exactly according to plan. *“That will make this...interesting.”*

Chapter Fifteen

"Welcome home."

Two words and, just that fast, the overwhelming compulsions lifted.

Savous stopped, stood straight, struggling over the sudden lump in his throat. *"Radin?"*

He hadn't experienced the mind-link with his mentor for long, only a matter of days before Radin was gone, but he couldn't mistake that mind. Even with the distance of time and experience, even with a vast cloud of *other* and *more* looming behind the mental face, that particular voice could belong to no other.

"Welcome home," said that deep, warm voice. *"See to your people, take a bath, hold Irin"*—a wistful pause there—*"then we should talk."*

"Eyrhaen. Is she all right?"

"She's doing very well, all things considered. She's with me."

Savous couldn't help the thoughts that ran through his head, of his former lover embracing his daughter.

The inner voice sighed. *"Yes, there's that. Not what I expected. Take care of what needs to be done, then come and see me. I'm in no hurry."*

"Radin, wait!" But the other withdrew, and Savous didn't have influence over the link to call back.

"My rhaeja?"

Savous blinked, looked down at Hyle. Like him, Hyle was naked save for the robe that had seen better days. Dirt and grime smeared his skin, and his

sleek hair was a knotted, tangled mess. Savous suspected he looked similar. “We need a bath.”

“Rhaeja!”

It was Rhicard, naked and looking tired even as he quickstepped toward them. His presence made Savous aware of the men behind him. He turned to face those who had come with him, all filthy, all naked. Now that the compulsions had lifted, loyalists and rogues were drifting apart, eyeing each other suspiciously.

Leaving Hyle to greet Rhicard, Savous spoke up. “Tarlan?”

“Rhaeja?” The man stepped forward, empty hands clutching where weapons would normally be sheathed. Had he left them behind? Had they all? Of course, Savous didn't have his usual knife either.

“Take your people to the southeast caverns. The towers there were abandoned over a cycle ago, but the bathing chambers should still be functional, and I'm sure bedding and linens remain in the storage areas. Make yourself at home.”

The men who hadn't lived in the city for at least decades eyed him warily, but he kept his attention on their nominal leader.

“I'll leave word at the kitchens that you're to be allowed food. Eat, bathe, rest. We will meet again tomorrow night.”

“Rhaeja?” Tarlan's voice stopped Savous midturn. “What is to happen now? Why did”—he waved his hand—“*that* stop?”

“By the time we meet, I should know more.” He waited this time, long enough to see Tarlan start to lead his people away. He spoke to his own men and told them to go see to themselves. By the time he had finished, Jarak had appeared and stood beside Rhicard. “You look as worn-out as I feel,” he told the commander.

Jarak shook his head. “It was incredible, my rhaeja. I'll assume by your current state that the compulsion to rut overtook you as well?”

"Quite." He began walking, and Hyle, Rhicard, and Jarak fell in step around him. "It took the city?"

"Everyone."

"Nights?"

"Four."

"It must have hit all of us at the same time. Have you seen Radin?"

"No, my rhaeja. Salin told me that he was awake, but he's not come out of his suite. He told Salin he was waiting for you."

He stopped at a cross tunnel. One way would take him to his tower, the other would take him to the common bathing cavern. Finding his hand scratching at his scalp made his decision for him. "Would you send word to Irin?" he asked Jarak. "And Salin. Bring them both to the bathing cavern."

"I think Irin's already there. But I'll have someone fetch Salin."

* * * * *

Savous sat neck-deep in steaming water, watching the tips of his hair float on the bubbles surrounding him. Better than looking at any of the people who sat in the hot bath with him.

He had no time to dwell on this. While bathing, he digested other news from Jarak, Nalfien, Salin, and Irin. Another, smaller, band of rogues was being watched in a different part of the city. Most of Jarak's men were stationed closely around the women's tower and the central court. Many had been injured in an ambush too near the city, but the same wave of divine magic that had started the sexual drive had also miraculously cured all the recently wounded. Brevin was among them. Savous made a note to touch base with the younger man.

His daughter was with Radin. He'd put off thinking about her obsession with him, judging it relatively harmless while he was unconscious. Now...? Now he *knew* Radin was alive, similar to how he knew where Irin was at any given time. She simply occupied a part of his brain, and now Radin was there as well.

Or, rather, he was *back*. A void Savous had long since become accustomed to was filled again. Why did that frighten him?

Irin sat beside him, nestled against his side.

"Can you feel him?" he asked, nuzzling the damp hair above the rounded shell of her ear.

"Yes." Her arms squeezed a little tighter around his middle. *"He's only spoken to me once. He told me Eyrhaen was fine, then said we'd talk when you got back."*

"Do you believe it's him?"

"It's hard not to. No one else could feel like that, could they?"

He knew what she meant. A person's mind was singular. Even though Savous had "heard" Radin through Irin before, there had been no mistaking her mind from his or from anyone else's. They had both recognized Salin's unique voice when he'd spoken through his mind-link with Radin.

But who knew what could have happened after two centuries in the void?

"He hasn't come out." He spoke aloud, a statement of fact rather than a question.

"Nor has he let anyone in."

Savous looked to Nalfien. *"Could you break the spell?"*

Without hesitation, the older sorcerer shook his head, tendrils of his silvery white hair trailing loose in the softly burbling water. *"No. It is akin to the spell that has protected him for the last two decades."*

"Have you talked to him?"

"No."

"Do you believe it's him?"

Hesitation. *"I believe he is there, yes."*

"But?"

"From all I can sense, there is more to him."

Irin shifted and draped her knees over one of Savous's thighs. He stroked her thigh underneath the water, taking comfort in her presence. Hearing she had spent most of the time of compulsive sex with Nialdlye had stirred his interest, but exhaustion and the matter at hand kept him from acting on it.

Savous looked to Salin. "You feel the same?"

Salin's short hair was plastered back to his skull, but the determined waves had begun to rise as they dried. "He sounds the same and mostly feels the same, but yes, there's more."

Irin stroked Savous's nipple. "Understandable. He's been in the void for two centuries. Who knows what he's done to survive."

"Or what's been done to him," Hyle murmured.

"Well, if you're going to fret about me, you might as well come."

Savous startled, as did Irin. The tilt of Salin's head indicated that he'd heard as well. But what was more surprising were the looks of shock on both Nalfien's and Hyle's faces. "You heard him?"

Wide-eyed, Hyle nodded, a smile toying at the edges of his generous mouth. Nalfien's nod was not as wondrous.

"A few things have changed," came the answer to all of them. *"We may as well get the formalities over with. Rhaeja"*—the honorific was delivered with respect—*"if you would come to me? I would come to you, but I think that might cause more of a stir than is necessary at the moment."*

"Agreed." He waited for Irin to stand, then did so himself, water sluicing off him. *"Give us a moment."*

"At your leisure, my rhaeja."

Savous thought furiously as they dried off and put on their clothing. Radin had used the honorific twice, an acknowledgment of Savous's rank even if his powers were quite obviously beyond Savous's realm of influence. Or were they? What *had* Radin done to survive?

Savous led them from the bathing chamber, aware of a multitude of eyes on him. Men and couples in other pools, the boys who rushed about their duties. Everyone they passed watched carefully, knowing that something of great importance occurred this very moment. The city held a collective breath, waiting on the outcome of the pending meeting.

In the entrance hall of the tower that contained Radin's suite, Savous paused. He eyed the patterns carved into the stone ceiling, letting a thought that had been tickling the back of his mind coalesce. He turned to Hyle. "You should stay back."

Hyle blinked, surprised.

Savous eyed Jarak. "You as well."

Jarak frowned.

Savous hesitated. "Just in case."

He let it hang in the air.

They caught it.

So did Radin. *"Good choices. If something were to happen to you, Hyle would be the best choice of rhaeja you have. A bit scatter-minded, but Jarak could keep him in line."*

By the looks on everyone else's faces, Savous was relatively certain that thought had been for him alone. *"Get out of my thoughts."*

A mental sigh. *"Unfortunately, at the moment, I can't. But I'll stay mum so you can pretend."*

"Why you...!"

Irin squeezing his hand startled him.

She eyed him nervously when he looked at her. "You were growling."

His mouth fell open; then he snapped it shut. He closed his eyes and gave a little shake to his head.

A slight mental chuckle almost set him off again.

Shaking his head again, he focused on Hyle and Jarak. "If anything happens to me, you are my successor. Jarak, you're to do everything you can for him."

Before Hyle could protest, Savous turned on his heel and did his best not to stomp up the staircase to the second floor. He felt the grin toying at the corners of his mouth and fought it. Radin. The irreverent rule-breaker had never failed to make him smile or feel at ease, usually with a joke at either of their expense. That he managed it now was truly impressive.

He gained the landing and turned down the hall, Irin, Salin, and Nalfien in his wake. Ahead of them, the door to Radin's suite stood open. Before they reached it, Salin rushed ahead of Savous, either eager to see his brother or his warrior instinct to always be the first through the door to face any danger kicked in.

The outer room was perfectly normal. As normal as any room in Radin's garish choice of colors could be. A fire was lit as were the two lamps set in the walls, and the wide window that looked over one of the side courtyards was open.

Radin stood by the window.

Savous couldn't help but stop and stare. He looked...the same. A few spare inches taller than Savous, about the same shoulder breadth. He wore soft suede boots in an awful magenta and bright goldenrod trousers belted with a thick strap of hunter green leather. Savous recognized each article of clothing immediately, having helped Irin pack the items long ago in an effort to settle his mind. Radin's blinding white hair was different, though, longer even than the waist-length he'd worn when last seen. It now threatened the cuffs of his ankle boots. There were other differences. The white markings that had etched the skin of his chest and belly were now the deep crimson of fresh blood, although they were the same shapes. His face was devoid of its former markings, the skin smooth and black and unblemished. The sharp lines of his face, the sardonic brows, hooked nose, and gorgeous, generous mouth were the

same. The eyes... Perhaps the most startling of all. There was no white to them. His eyes were black where the whites should be, and his red irises seemed to have exploded across the black, more of a smudged star than a circle.

He stood still, letting them look their fill as they slowly filed into the room. Warring compulsions fought within Savous, and Irin clutched his hand like a lifeline. Part of him wanted to rush into Radin's arms and hold him forever. Another wanted to run screaming in the other direction. Yet another wanted to pull every scrap of power he had into a shield about him as protection. Because there was more than just the eye could see about Radin, just as Nalfien and Salin had said. His body may be there, his mind may be there, but something was behind and around him, above and before him, something unseen but infinitely palpable. Awesome and frightening and...strangely comforting.

Finally he moved. A sigh. He stepped toward the center of the room, toward Savous.

Gathering his courage, Savous stepped to meet him.

They stopped less than an arm's length apart. Savous fought not to be cowed by the overwhelming presence as he looked up into a face he'd never really thought to see in motion again.

Then those strange eyes closed, and Radin bowed his head, loose hair shushing forward to curtain his chest. "Rhaeja. Rhae and Her consort, Tohon, greet you."

Chapter Sixteen

“Come see me.”

That was the gist of the request. And it did feel like a request, not so much of a summons. Having never heard anyone's voice in her head except her own, Nialdlye had been shocked when Radin's honeyed tone woke her. It was impossible to mistake who it was. Her soul knew it was Radin.

Taking her time, she donned a long shift of soft green wool, belted with fine silk rope to match, and put on sandals with slim leather laces that strapped almost all the way to her knee. She was stalling, trying not to think that she was stalling. *He* was listening. She couldn't tell how she knew, but she did. Just like she'd always known when Ale'tone was monitoring her, although the man who'd raised her had never been able to invade her thoughts. Radin, she had a good notion, could hear her.

After brushing out her hair and pulling it into a ponytail, she couldn't delay any longer. Although he said nothing, she got the distinct impression that she should go. She was amazed at the fine tremor in her bones as she walked out of her tower and into the tunnel that would take her to his. Two of the guards outside the women's tower silently fell into step behind her, guarding without hindering. There was no one else in the tunnels, not even boys scurrying about their serving duties.

When she paused for brief kisses to thank her guards for their care, one of them, Erikin, hesitated, his black eyes troubled. “Nialdlye, do you know what's happening?”

She had to pause to take a breath to calm the rapid thud of her heart. “What do you mean?”

He glanced toward the staircase that would lead her to Radin's suite. "The past few days. The need. And now"—he shook his head—"nothing?"

"Is he awake?" Sorin asked, crowding close.

"What have you heard?"

He shook his head, short white hair flying about his long face. "Only bits and pieces, but the commander did say something about keeping a watch on the tower."

"What does it all mean?" Erikin's attention remained on her.

She glanced at them, wondering at the series of events that could cause strong, confident warriors to worry so. "I believe he's awake, yes, but I don't know more."

Two sets of eyes turned to the staircase at her words, and the awe in them gave her pause. With one last pat on Erikin's arm, she left them to climb the staircase alone.

She could feel him as she neared his suite. Not like it had been with Eyrhaen, but similar. It was still akin to approaching the sun, except Radin's sun seemed less frenetic, more controlled than Eyrhaen's. Ale'tone had had a cool presence she could sense easily. Savous was a warm beacon to any who needed to find him, even she, who was not born of the raedjour. But Radin and Eyrhaen, their presence was more intrusive, more something to try to ignore than to look for.

The door was open and murmured voices sounded within. Steeling herself, she walked in.

They stood beside the open bedroom door, Savous and Salin flanking Radin. He looked so...vivid, almost more real than the other two men, or perhaps less real. The garish colors of his clothing and the shine of the long, loose white hair stood out, and the lamplight caught the crimson of the markings that etched his chest and belly, making them stand out.

"She needs to stay here," he was saying, his voice perfectly clear, although she got the distinct impression that he was murmuring. His attention still on Savous, he took a step toward Nialdlye. "Her control is frayed."

Distracted, Savous glanced into the bedroom, perhaps not yet aware of Nialdlye's presence.

Salin turned his attention to her immediately and frowned confusion.

Radin, however, turned to face her with a bright smile that showed clean white teeth. "Nialdlye."

She wasn't aware she'd stepped back until he stopped, halfway across the room toward her. His smile wilted just a little, and he blinked as he stopped. But those eyes. She'd never seen eyes like that, with no whites, just splashes of scarlet on black with small dots for pupils. "Radin?"

His smile warmed again. "At last we meet."

Her fingernails dug into the door frame.

He glanced at her hand, then turned back toward a big, solid chair next to the fireplace as Savous led Irin into the room.

Irin saw Nialdlye and rushed to her side. "What are you doing here?" She slipped her fingers into Nialdlye's free hand. The red tinge to the whites around her red irises and the damp clumping of her pale eyelashes told Nialdlye her friend had been crying.

"I asked her to come." Radin sat in the chair, clearly making himself comfortable. "She needs to hear this as much as the rest of you."

Irin shut the mouth she'd opened to protest.

"Please," Radin continued, indicating the other chairs and the couch. "Sit."

Irin sat between Nialdlye and Savous on the couch. Salin took the other chair.

Unable to stand the silence, Nialdlye asked the foremost thing on her mind. "Is Eyrhaen all right?" Surprising, but she knew the younger woman was as much at the heart of all this as was Radin.

Radin glanced at her, then looked to Savous. "She should be fine."

"Should be," Savous parroted, obviously having heard this answer already and not liking it any better the second time.

"If she manages to control the gifts she's been given. Then she'll be fine." Radin's voice was patient, precise. A teacher's tone.

"And did you give her these gifts?" Savous asked.

"You know I didn't."

"I don't know any such thing."

Irin squeezed Nialdlye's fingers, likely doing the same to Savous's.

"Eyrhaen was born with the gifts she has," Radin responded gently. "Given by Rhae Herself as a hope for the future. Unfortunately—or perhaps, fortunately—she's been unable to control those gifts alone."

"Fortunately?" Irin squeaked.

Nialdlye saw the near glare the other woman gave Radin, felt the fear and anger rolling off her friend. From the pained look around his eyes, Radin saw it too. Or perhaps he felt it. If he could speak into Nialdlye's mind, it stood to reason he could do the same with Irin. Given that they'd once been lovers, he would be more in tune to her feelings.

"Eyrhaen's inability to control her gifts has brought about changes that should benefit us all."

"You'll have to explain that one," Salin near growled.

Radin nodded, idly stroking the fall of hair he'd pulled over one shoulder to pool in his lap. "Only because of Eyrhaen has Rhae been able to return to Her people. Her loss of control provided the catalyst to reopen a suitable conduit between earth and the divine." His gaze settled on Irin. "My first

concern is to help Eyrhaen as much as I can. It is Rhae's wish that she survive this intact."

Savous sat forward. "So it *has* been Rhae goading her all along?"

"Leading' her, yes."

"Where do you fit into this?"

A rueful smile curled his lips. "I'm the conduit."

It took them all a moment to process this, during which he simply continued to smile.

"Conduit?"

"Yes."

"Explain."

"I was allowed to return as a mouthpiece of our gods and a guide for our people."

Nialdlye frowned at the mention of *our gods*, but Savous wasn't done with his questions.

"You're being very careful with your words."

Radin chuckled softly. "Yes. I am."

"Why do we need a guide? What about the vetriese?"

Radin shook his head. "That avenue was corrupted by other divinity when I first left this world. Since then, it has fallen to use by powerful sorcerers of other races. It can no longer be trusted."

Nialdlye blinked, certain Ale'tone was one of those sorcerers. What had happened to Radin that had allowed him to use the void?

"Yet we're supposed to trust you?"

Radin met Savous's gaze, awesome power shimmering in the air between them. "Eventually, it is hoped that you can trust me. Again."

Irin sniffed. Nialdlye looked to her friend. A fall of white hair hid her face. But she was crying. Softly.

"Irin." Radin's voice was gentle, full of emotion.

"No." Irin shook her head, not looking up. "Don't do that. How do we know you're even you? That power... You were strong before, but not like *this*."

Radin sighed. "It was necessary for me to change to survive." He glanced aside, thoughtful. "Change to return."

"What about Eyrhaen? Is she a 'mouthpiece' too?"

"No. Although, in time, she could be. But first she has to master what she's been given."

"So we're to accept you like a high priest to our gods?" Salin asked.

Our gods? Again, Nialdlye was not given a chance to ask.

"Something like that, yes," Radin agreed.

Salin snorted. "Do they realize the irony of returning *you* to us as a spiritual advisor?"

That dawned a smile on Radin's face, one that was echoed by Salin himself. "I did bring that up while I was being prepared, but gods will have their way."

Savous and Irin were not as inclined to join in the lighter mood incited by the brothers. Releasing Nialdlye's fingers, Irin sank against her truemate, giving in to quiet tears.

When he heard her, Radin's smile died.

The uncomfortable silence provided Nialdlye with a chance to ask her question. "Why do you say 'gods'?"

Those strange eyes focused on her. "I say 'gods' because Rhae now has a consort. Or rather, They have found each other. He's the god of your people, Tohon."

Nialdlye's jaw dropped. "Tohon?"

"You were what drew them together. They knew of each other, but not until you and your visions within the void did They notice each other. Tohon's

grief over the loss of His people and Rhae's worry over Her separation from the raedjour brought Them together. They've allied, and together, They've sent me back as a guide for Their wishes."

He looked at Savous, whose attention focused on his truemate, but he was surely listening. "There are other changes, welcome changes that They have brought as well. Once Eyrhaen has learned control, she and I can work together to allow others among the changed women to bear female children."

That got Savous's attention enough to look up.

"It can be true for *all* women. Eventually, we shouldn't need human women to propagate. Although, the ability to crossbreed will remain. They envision changes to our people that might eventually allow us to walk in daylight as well."

Nialdlye, who had known the warmth of the sun, watched this realization sink in to the three who had hidden from it for the centuries of their lives. Even Irin, though born human, had grown up with the raedjour and didn't remember any time in the sun. Perhaps Radin was right. Change, although often scary, was often a very good thing.

Radin smiled at her, and she had to wonder if he heard her thinking.

"What's expected of me?" Savous asked after a long moment.

"You are expected to be exactly what you are, rhaeja of the raedjour. They are very proud of you and all that you've accomplished. She is particularly proud of Her chosen." The words had an extra ring to them, an echo that was not a repeat of sound but more of an emotional emphasis. Jaded sense made Nialdlye wonder if it was a magical trick, akin to the lies Ale'tone would tell the occasional human to get what he wanted. But Nialdlye's heart and soul didn't believe it. There was a love there that could only be divine, and it was larger than any one man.

Tears spilled down Savous's cheeks when he laid his cheek on top of Irin's head. His truemate had given in to sobs, her face buried in the bend of Savous's neck.

"They know you've done your best in enormously difficult times," Radin continued softly. "They wouldn't dream of supplanting you. They still need you. All of you."

It took him a moment, but Savous finally swallowed and pulled his head up. "This is a lot to think on." Unashamed, he reached up to brush at his eyes to clear them. "I suggest we take some time and meet again later."

Radin nodded. "An excellent idea."



They all stood, and Radin took the three steps that brought him face-to-face with Savous. He reached up to cup the slightly shorter man's jaw, despite

Savous's flinch. "I can't be what I was," he murmured, very mortal pain edging into his tone, "but every memory and every emotion from our time together is still mine."

All of a sudden, Savous looked far younger and less experienced than Nialdlye had ever known him. This must be what he had looked like when he was this man's apprentice. Friend. Lover.

Radin's other hand lifted to Irin's face, tilted hers up so he could look at them both. Perhaps tears weren't possible for those strange black and red eyes, but Nialdlye thought there should be some. "We can't be what we were. Too much has happened. But that doesn't mean I've ever stopped loving you both."

Irin choked. For a heartbeat, Nialdlye thought she'd fall into Radin's embrace and that Savous would follow. But no. After a long, heartbreaking look, Radin stepped back, his hands dropping to his sides. Savous licked his bottom lip, his manner again that of the rhaeja Nialdlye knew. He nodded, slid an arm about Irin's shoulders, and led his truemate from the room.

Radin watched them go, resigned agony written on his face.

Salin gave him a moment, then stepped toward the door, distracting him. "I knew you'd be back." Salin smiled quietly. "It stands to reason that you'd have to overdo it."

Radin's laugh was short and harsh, but Salin had done what he'd intended. The bubble of painful tension broke. "That's me. I don't know how to do anything partway."

Smile broader, Salin nodded. "Nialdlye?"

She started for him, intending to let him lead her from the room.

Radin's voice stopped her. "Would you stay?"

Salin saw her shake. She saw the concern in his eyes. Knew he'd take her from the room if she wanted it. But then she glanced over her shoulder and couldn't do it. She nodded. Salin left without another word.

The door clicked shut behind him, but too long a moment had passed for Salin to have been the one to shut it.

Chapter Seventeen

She was in his arms before conscious thought drove her there. Could it have been divine impetus? Perhaps. Was she coerced? She couldn't bother to care once her lips opened underneath his and his tongue was twining with hers.

She heard his grunt and felt the sigh of relief that shivered through the hard muscles in her arms. Silken white hair cascaded over her shoulders as he bent her back, eating at her mouth, both of them laboring to breathe even as they struggled to get inside each other. Gods! She had wanted this so long. Through the kisses and embraces of many other lovers, there had been an underlying wish for each one to be *this* man, hopeless as she had known that wish to be. To have him actually in her arms was mind-altering.

How they ended on the rug in front of the fireplace, she neither knew nor cared. It mattered only that once she was on her back, she could spread her legs and wrap them firmly around his waist. It only mattered that, on his knees, his hands were free to roam her back, her sides, free to cup her breasts, and make her lament that she hadn't worn a skimpier dress.

His lips tore from hers, and she gasped at the ceiling as his tongue drew a scorching wet line down her throat until his teeth could sink into the meat of her shoulder. Agonizing need forced her nails to dig into his back, her back to arch so as much of her touched him as possible.

"Nialdlye." His voice was deep and far more immediate and real than it had been during any part of the meeting with Savous. Strong fingers took hold of the neckline of her dress and yanked. Buttons popped under the assault, baring her breast to his ravenous attention.

“*Radin!*” Her mouth could only form moans.

“Yes!”

His voice in her mind confused her. Gave her a moment to pause. Her head fell to the side, her gaze taking in the half-open door to the bedroom. “Wait.”

He ignored her, but she knew he heard her. His teeth bit into her nipple, just past the point of pain, just enough to make her gasp and lose her train of thought for another heartbeat.

But she couldn't deny what her hazy vision saw. The bedroom door. Beyond that, Eyrhaen.

“*Radin, stop.*”

“She won't wake up,” he muttered into her cleavage, one hand kneading her breast as he shoved his hips into hers.

Shaking, she swallowed and forced her arms and legs to fall from their tight wind about him. Relentlessly, she reined in her arousal, letting her displeasure take precedence.

To a raedjour, that could be as effective as a douse of icy cold water. Stubbornly, he licked at the inside curve of one breast, but when she didn't respond, he sighed, resting his forehead on her breastbone. “Don't do this.”

“I have to know her part in this.”

“In *this*?” He squeezed her breast again as he tilted his face up to look at her. The red in his eyes spun softly around the solid points of his pupils. “She has no part in what's between us.”

Her heart surged at his words, at the raw need she saw in his expression. “You said she needs to stay here.”

His gaze hooded, his attention dropping to her chin. “She does.”

“She has to stay with you.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I’m the only one who can teach her to control the gifts she’s been given.” He bent his head to lap at her nipple.

Not willing to succumb to distraction, she pulled her hands underneath her and pushed herself out from under him. He closed his eyes and sighed, lifting himself slightly to allow her to escape. She kept going, scooting backward on her hands and ass until her back came up against one of the heavy chairs. Once there, she hugged her knees and watched him kneel, facing her but staring at the flames in the fireplace.

“Why did you call me here?”

His eyes snapped to her face, suddenly intense. “I want you.”

She swallowed, struck hard by the heat in his gaze. “And Eyrhaen?”

Intensity bled to annoyance. “I have to help her.”

She noted the differences in what he said, but still didn’t fully understand. “Is she your apprentice now?”

“Yes.”

“Is she more?”

She hadn’t been sure what she was asking, but it struck a chord with him. His mild snarl sent an icy shard through her heart. “Yes.”

“What more?”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

She may not have known him as well as the other three people who had just been in the room, but she felt certain she was reading him correctly. “I think it does matter.”

“Nialdlye, please. I want you.” He leaned forward, bracing on one arm closer to her. “I didn’t get to spend nearly enough time with you before, and it killed me that I couldn’t touch you.” He edged a little closer. “Don’t deny what we both want.”

She kept her arms wrapped around her knees. "Tell me what it is that you don't want me to know."

He grimaced, backing up a little. "And if I said there's nothing?"

"You'd be lying. Should the mouthpiece of our gods lie?"

Frustrated, he sat back, fully this time, to put his back against the opposite chair. "I can't lie." He combed fingers through his hair, irritated to find that he had to maneuver because he'd managed to sit on much of it. "You can't imagine how much of a change that is for me."

She could. She'd heard of his more famous exploits. So strange that this was a man of legend. This was a man who had died. This was a man who had come to her as a spirit at a time when she'd most needed a friend. This was the man she'd fallen in love with without ever properly meeting.

He startled; then those eyes were on her again.

She glowered. "Stop listening to my thoughts."

He smiled. "I'm new at this. I haven't figured out how to control it all." He tilted his head. "I didn't mean to hear."

To cover her nerves, she pushed up into the chair at her back, fussing with the burst buttons at the front of her dress. "I don't know what is happening. I'm confused."

"So am I."

"You know everything that's happening."

"I know everything that's *supposed* to happen," he carefully corrected, pushing up to sit in his chair as well. "They have very definite plans, but even They know there's a certain amount of give and take. I don't know the future. I just have a very good guess."

She had to laugh, staring at her knees. "That must be frustrating."

"It is. Especially knowing that I'm tied to one woman when I want another."

Her heart stopped. "Tied?"

"I can't deny that I've been tied to Eyrhaen. For her own good. For everyone's good. I was sent back to help her help us."

Nialdlye shut her eyes. It made sense, but it wasn't what she wanted to know. "Are you truemated?"

The look on his face said it all, but he uttered the word. "Yes."

A truematch did not mean a love match. Nialdlye knew that. Most commonly, those who were truemated fell in love, sometimes instantly; sometimes it took centuries. She also knew that a truematch did not mean fidelity. Truemated couples welcomed others into their beds all the time, especially during the woman's fertile heat. But truemates, whether in love or not, whether dedicated to each other or not, shared a bond that Nialdlye had never seen before, even without the fact that they were only fertile with each other. There was no doubt that the match was a divine blessing, and it gave the pair an undeniable bond.

He's truemated to Eyrhaen.

"That is what you didn't want me to know."

"Not yet."

A bitter smile curled one corner of her mouth. "Better to fuck me first."

"Nialdlye..."

She stood. "Unfortunately, you're out of luck. If it were anyone other than Eyrhaen..." She shook her head. "No. I won't do it."

He caught her by the arm before she reached the door. Heat sparkled between them, making her briefly rethink her resolve when her knees threatened to melt. "Don't do this. Stay here. Let me explain."

"There's nothing to explain. If there's a tie between you and Eyrhaen on that level, I want no part of it."

"Nialdlye..."

"No." She pulled her arm from his, unable to look at him as she headed for the door. "No."

Chapter Eighteen

Savous left the southeast caverns, suitably impressed. Beside him, Radin walked quietly, seemingly unaffected by the miracle he'd just worked.

"Hardly a miracle," came the quiet thought into Savous's mind.

"I beg to differ. In one half of one night, you've accomplished more in getting through to them than I have in two centuries."

They walked alone through the empty tunnels on their way back to the city proper. Neither Jarak nor Salin had been pleased with the decision, but Savous and Radin had gone to see the rogues alone. Savous had wondered at the wisdom of the move at first, but now he knew he could not have been safer. Radin's mere presence reduced the men with awe. The men who had reviled Savous's presence had stood beside him, accepted his words, accepted his conditions for their return to the city without question. Until recently, they'd believed he'd taken their goddess from them. Apparently, once evidence of Her return was presented, all was forgiven. He wasn't sure he could trust it, but it was a start.

"So." He spoke aloud to Radin for the first time all night. All their communication with each other when they'd spoken among the rogues had been mind to mind and very much on subject. "It's because they've been disconnected with the city, and that's why they were more sensitive to Her in your presence?"

"Yes." Radin reached up to gather his abundance of loose hair into a tail. Like Savous, he wore a traditional black robe of office over trousers and boots. Against his norm, all his clothing was in blacks and grays rather than his

preferred riot of color. “That same sensitivity caused them to be drawn to the city for the past few cycles. That, and Eyrhaen reaching maturity.”

Savous nodded, finally receiving confirmation that Eyrhaen had been part of the reason. “Was there anything we could have done?”

“No. When those men left the city, they left what little of Her was left in the city. Being god-born, their sanity can only survive it for so long.”

“But men have lived outside the city for centuries.”

“True, but in the past Her influence covered the Dark Forest and all the Rhaen Mountain range. When She left, Her influence shrank to just the city.” He twisted his hair into itself and let the resulting knot rest between his shoulder blades.

It made sense. They had discovered quickly after Radin's “death” that their awareness of the forest and the mountains deteriorated.

“All this time, we've been fighting for nothing.”

“Not true. Even if you had let them back in the city, they still would have believed what they did about you and the goddess. You would not have been safe among them.”

“I suppose I'm lucky they were vocal about their beliefs and left when they did.”

“The city is long tuned to you now. You *feel* more like rhaeja than when I left.”

Savous stopped. Radin took two steps, then turned to face him. For two nights they had danced around the subject, but now they were alone.

“We nearly died without you.”

A sad smile toyed with the corners of Radin's mouth. “Neither you nor Irin is capable of dying of a broken heart. Besides, you had each other and a truematch.”

“We loved you.”

“And I loved you. I don't think I could have sacrificed myself otherwise.”

Savous's heart tore. "Did you die?"

"No. Valanth died. I witnessed his soul implode. She saved me from that."

"Did She know she could send you back?"

"I don't think so. But She's always been resourceful. It's not like Her to waste anything."

Savous stepped closer, not quite touching but needing to see if being near could be the same as he remembered. "How did you survive without going mad?"

"Who's to say I didn't?" Radin reached out to brush what might have been real or imaginary dust from Savous's shoulder. His hand remained, a comfortable weight. "My mind and soul underwent countless evolutions in that void."

Savous searched those strange eyes in that aching familiar face. "Is it you?"

"Yes, and no." The backs of Radin's knuckles grazed Savous's jaw. "The no is most of the reason we can't be what we were."

Savous nodded, his gaze dropping to the red markings across Radin's chest. "That. And my daughter."

Radin's hand dropped. "Yes."

"Are you truemated?"

"Yes."

He stepped back, out of arm's range. "Rather cruel of Her."

"Yes. But the bond was essential to bridge the gap and allow Them to return."

Savous nodded. Radin had hinted as much to that effect. "I can't say I'm comfortable with this."

"That's understandable."

He started walking toward the city. "You'll take care of her."

Radin paced him easily, so much like old times. "It's one of my primary directives."

"Don't hurt her."

Radin sighed. "Unfortunately, that I cannot promise."

"What?"

Radin kept walking when Savous stopped. "I'm afraid I can't help but hurt her."

Savous caught up and grabbed Radin's arm to stop him. "What do you mean?"

"Your daughter has an overabundance of power she hasn't learned to control, as well as an overblown sense of her own worth. I don't think I can avoid hurting her in order to make her into what she must be."

"And what must she be?"

"The firstborn raedjour female."

"She's already that."

"And it's a role she'll need to constantly adapt to, to fulfill."

Chapter Nineteen

“Any change?” Alrek asked.

Brevin shook his head, glancing down the tunnel. “None.” Thirty paces away at the opposite cavern entrance, two armed men sat guarding the tunnels to the southeast caverns, currently the rogues' territory. During the last moon, the unused section of the city was alive again with tentative but continuous communication ongoing with the central city. Savous and Radin allowed both sides to post guards, but the duty was boring. With Radin awake and spreading Their influence, animosity between both sides had been reduced to wrongs committed within the past century or so rather than the initial reasons for rebellion.

Brevin was glad he didn't know who had driven a blade through his heart. He wasn't sure he could forgive that particular act. Lanthan most likely knew, but Brevin didn't ask, so Lanthan wouldn't tell.

Stepping aside, Brevin stretched as Alrek took his post. At the other side of the entrance, Trev relieved Lanthan.

“Message for you,” Trev said to Lanthan. “From Suzana. She wants to see you tonight.”

Lanthan nodded his thanks, safety strapping the daggers affixed to his forearms. In the city, he rarely kept them loose and ready.

Bidding farewell to their replacements, Brevin and Lanthan headed into the city proper. There was such a change to the city now, not physically but emotionally. Brevin hadn't fully realized the dark mood that had persisted until it began to lift. Or maybe that was the presence of the gods. The more he

learned about the god Tohon, the more Brevin liked Him. He provided a counterpart to Rhae that might have been necessary for millennia. Besides, like most raedjour, Brevin believed everyone should have a partner, even if he didn't believe everyone would get one.

He had two. He, Tykir, and Lanthan had finally moved into the same suite together. Things didn't seem quite right without Eyrhaen, but they were more peaceful. The three of them, at least, were coming to terms with the fact that she was no longer theirs.

"You going to see your mother now?"

Lanthan shrugged. "Might as well."

Brevin nodded. "See you later."

Lanthan gave him a curt nod, then turned down a side tunnel that would take him toward where his parents lived.

Brevin gave thought to seeing his own mother but decided to visit his brother instead. Maybe he'd take Jesen to the practice ground and pummel him. Smiling at the thought, he changed direction and headed for the kitchens where Jesen was likely on duty. If not, someone there would know where to find him.

He rounded a corner and stopped. There was Radin. Brevin had not had any personal contact with his uncle thus far, always in a crowd when he heard him talk. But there wasn't a person among the raedjour who didn't know him on sight. The tunnel was deserted, strange in and of itself this close to the kitchens. Brevin suspected the man had something to do with that. He leaned casually on the smooth stone wall, clearly waiting. When his head turned and his strange red and black eyes landed on Brevin, it was clear whom he was waiting for. "I don't think you could be anyone other than Salin's son."

Unsure how to react to that, Brevin just waited.

Radin looked him up and down, noting the way Brevin's hand was at the ready near his short sword. He smiled. "May I talk with you for a moment?"

Brevin nodded and took a step forward, relaxing his arm. He didn't feel threatened, exactly, and was sure that the other man's magic would protect him even if Brevin were to draw. But Radin was unknown and very powerful, which caused Brevin's instincts to kick in. Brevin also had trouble forgetting the fact that he'd had Eyrhaen cloistered for the past moon, like an extended nine-day.

"I've heard quite a bit about you," Radin started, as though he didn't notice Brevin calming himself. "It may mean nothing to you, but I must say that I'm proud of you. My brother and his truemate couldn't hope for a finer son."

Brevin allowed himself to enjoy the compliment with a small smile.

"You and your two friends are, without question, the most remarkable example of teamwork that the raedjour have seen in a long time, if ever." He chuckled. "We do, after all, tend to be a solitary race."

He took another step toward Brevin, and Brevin noted that instead of feeling more threatened, he felt calmer. A product of the man's magic? The divine blessings he wore like a mantle? Or just his own natural charm? Everything he'd ever heard about Radin prior to his return had been positive, and there were no doubts in Brevin's mind that his father had loved his brother unconditionally. Brevin could only hope that the man before him was indeed the same from his father's past.

"Stop thinking so hard, Brevin. I mean you no harm. Quite the contrary, I think I might need your help."

"My help?"

"Yours and your friends. By all accounts, you, Tykir, and Lanthan bore the brunt of Eyrhaen's gifts during the past few cycles. Whether or not you know it, you bought our people some time."

Brevin frowned. "You make Eyrhaen sound dangerous."

"Oh, she is. You saw her eroding self-control firsthand."

"She was only losing control because she was trying to do what no one else could." He scowled, advancing a menacing step. "She was trying to use magic no one understood, and she had to fight for permission to use it. Anyone might have trouble with control in those circumstances."

Radin's delighted smile threw his anger off track. "You are entirely correct. But that doesn't negate the fact that she was a threat. She was the beacon that drew the rogues to fight. Her very presence put everyone in danger."

Confirmation of what he'd often suspected didn't make Brevin feel any better. "And why would the goddess do that to her?"

Radin shook his head. "It was not a purpose, Brevin, I assure you. Rhae did what She could in the brief moments before She was taken away. She's been doing everything She could to return. Unfortunately, that included using Eyrhaen as a lodestone, both for Herself and for Her people."

"It nearly drove her mad."

Radin nodded. "That's why I'm here. My primary goal is to help Eyrhaen to learn to control what she's been given, to use her powers as best for the raedjour."

Brevin swallowed the question he really wanted to ask and asked instead: "Will she be all right?"

Radin studied him for a moment before answering. "I believe so. She has a very strong will, that one."

Brevin allowed himself a small smile of agreement.

"How are you feeling?" He nodded to indicate the scar just off the center of Brevin's chest, the one that matched a slightly larger scar on his back. "The healing was complete, yes?"

Startled, Brevin curled the fingers of his left hand into a fist. "It's fine. How did you know?"

"That you almost died? I know a great many things about that moment when you were healed. It was the moment I returned, the moment Rhae and

Tohon reestablished contact with this realm. It was a moment when the impossible became possible, and a moment when Eyrhaen could have accomplished almost anything.” He tipped his head to the side, the long queue of his bound hair swaying behind his back. “You were utmost in her mind. She chose to heal you. I’m not sure it was conscious thought on her part, but she knew you were hurt, possibly dying, and she wanted you healed.”

Brevin blinked, staring at his uncle's strange whiteless eyes.

“We don't always realize it, but there are people who are of profound importance to us. We may have even convinced ourselves that we don't feel what we feel for them. It's a trait that even the gods sometimes share.” Radin took one step closer, staring up into Brevin's eyes. No longer searching. He seemed to have found what he was looking for in Brevin. “Don't give up on her, Brevin. The three of you. No matter what she says.”

Brevin didn't know how to answer, so he didn't. This man, her truemate, was telling him not to give up? Radin studied him a few heartbeats longer, then smiled, turned, and began to walk away.

“Wait.”

Obediently, Radin stopped and turned halfway to look back at Brevin.

“You said you'd need my help.”

“I will. But not now.”

“When can we see Eyrhaen?”

That made Radin's smile broaden. “As soon as I can manage it, I will make sure you can see her. Meantime, you think about what you can expect from her.”

A dozen questions flitted through Brevin's mind, but he asked none of them as he watched his uncle's back retreat, turn the corner, and disappear. Standing still, he recounted the conversation, noting key phrases Radin had used.

Forgetting his mission to tease his brother, Brevin spun and raced to find Tykir.

Chapter Twenty

Eyrhaen blinked awake to find Radin sitting, fully clothed, beside her. Last she recalled, he was most definitely naked, and his hair had been sweat-tousled. She scowled. “You put me to sleep again.”

“I did.”

He sat back as she pushed up onto her elbows. *She* was still naked. “Why?”

He stood and walked toward the suite's main room. “I went to get supper.”

“No.” She yanked aside the blanket that covered her waist and put her legs over the side of the bed. “You didn't.”

Disappearing through the door, he shrugged. “It was one thing I went out for.”

Gritting her teeth, she stormed across the room after him. “Stop putting me to sleep every time you leave the suite.”

Maddeningly, he remained calm as he stood at the solid table that was laden with a good-sized meal for two. His attention remained on the slices of galpa fruit he sampled as he dished a thick slab of yarin steak onto a plate. “I have to make sure you don't wander off on your own. Or get into trouble while I'm gone.”

“Take me with you.”

“Not yet.”

“Then at least leave me to my own devices. I *can* amuse myself, you know.”

He arched a brow. “My fear exactly.”

She crossed her arms over her breasts, ignoring the growl in her belly. "Afraid your shields won't hold me in?"

"Perhaps."

His amused somewhat admission did not quell her annoyance. "How long have you been keeping me here?"

"About one moon now."

She blinked. "That long?"

He shrugged. "Learning to control that much power should take longer. You're doing very well."

She still was not mollified. Even now, she could feel her gifts roiling within and around her. It wasn't nearly as frightening now as when she hadn't been able to distinguish her own body from the magics around her. At least now she was aware, and she felt almost normal, physically speaking. "How long have I been awake?"

He knew what she meant. Not awake as opposed to sleep. Awake as opposed to floating in a void of her own mind with him as her only tether. "Eight nights."

Four nights of relearning to be mortal. She recalled the first few vaguely. Lots of crying, lots of clutching him for comfort. Mostly sex. Her groin warmed at the thought, but she wasn't ready to appease that desire. She had to start to assert herself if she was to gain any independence. He told her little of what happened beyond the suite. Something of the return of the rogues and how he and Savous were working to bring them back into the community, but all that was very high-level. "Has my father asked about me?"

"He always does."

Who else asks about me? Did anyone even want to see her again after what she'd caused? "And what did you tell him?"

"That you're doing very well." Finished filling his plate, he took it and a dulled eating knife to the great chair by the fire.

Her fingers curled into nervous fists. "Can I see him?"

"No." Unconcerned, Radin sat. "Too dangerous."

She stomped her foot, knowing it was childish but doing it anyway. Anger was easier to bear than fear. "I would *not* hurt my father."

He commenced eating without replying further.

"Radin!"

"Yes?"

"Answer me."

"You haven't asked a question."

She glowered. *This* technique he'd learned from Nalfien. She hadn't liked it any more when the elder sorcerer had used it. "Why can't I see my father?"

"Asked and answered."

Raising clawed fingers to the air, she screamed at the top of her lungs. It did no good. She knew it would do no good. His spells, backed by two gods, sealed the suite of rooms completely, including sound and her sense of the city beyond. She felt somewhat blind, unable to sense the people she was used to monitoring with a thought. "Why are you keeping me here?" She shot a finger at him. "And *don't* say it's too dangerous."

He shrugged and remained silent.

The fire in the great fireplace flared as she threw a surge of magic at it. Radin looked up, brow raised. His eyes glowed briefly hotter; then she felt her magical fuel diminish, letting the flames return to normal.

"I'm not dangerous."

"Throwing fire in a fit isn't dangerous?"

"I'm not dangerous just because I'm mad at *you*."

He smiled. "You're dangerous because you tend to throw magic in a fit of temper. You have too much raw power right now for your emotions not to be a danger."

She grabbed the back of a chair and shook it, trying to ignore the way the heavy wood creaked in the strain of her grip. His reasons were nothing she hadn't already heard. "I can control myself."

He grunted.

Sulking—and knowing she was sulking—she went back to the table to make a plate of food. "It's boring here."

"The sooner you master your powers, the sooner you can rejoin the rest of the world."

She picked up a knife and cut a chunk off the yarin steak he'd left her. "Has anyone else asked about me?" The savory aroma made her mouth water as she brought the morsel to her lips.

She refused to look at him as he paused, knowing he was studying her. She could feel him poking around in her thoughts as she chewed and cut another bite. *One day, I'm going to learn how to do that back at you.*

He chuckled. "You'll try." Because his thoughts were unintelligible to her, nothing she could make sense of. "But yes, Brevin has asked about you."

She pictured her friend and the pain she'd felt before all nine hells had broken loose. She knew it had been Brevin, although she wasn't quite sure how she'd acquired that knowledge. She also knew he'd been healed, but until she actually saw him in person, she'd worry. Continuing to eat her steak standing at the table, she kept her tone purposely casual and did her best to keep her heartbeat normal. "Is he all right?"

"He's quite well. As are Lanthan and Tykir. They're a remarkable trio. I understand why you care for them."

She suppressed the surge of warmth around her heart, refusing the thoughts that went with it. "You should spend some time with Tykir. I think you'd appreciate the way his mind works."

"I have no doubt. If he's anything like his father, I'm sure he's a sorcerer to admire."

It wasn't wrong for her to be proud of her friend. She'd grown up with Tykir and knew he was special. They were all three special. They wouldn't leave her lonely in a boring suite of rooms, even if they'd been told to keep her put. They always tried to help her. They supported her even when they didn't agree with or understand what she was doing. She shifted from foot to foot, ignoring the heat that moistened her sex.

"Would you like to see them?"

Her thoughts stilled, carving knife hovered above the steak. "What?"

"Your three lovers. Would you like to see them?"

She glanced at him sidelong, but his face gave nothing away. "You've kept everyone away."

"Yes. But I might reconsider for them."

"Why?"

"I'm inclined to believe your lovers might be safe."

She cut another piece off the half steak that remained. "They're not my lovers. They're my friends."

"Semantics. I've read your thoughts. You love them."

She bristled, uncomfortable with being an open book to anyone. "I have *you* now." She threw an overly sweet grin over her shoulder. "*You're* my truemate."

Oh yes. She knew. The binding thread between them was amazing, the only thing that had allowed her to reassemble herself when the raw magic threatened to overwhelm her. He was her base, her touchstone, and she would not deny that.

A flit of annoyance passed over his sharp features, gone quickly, but not before she saw it. "You've wanted company for days, and you reject my first offer?"

Before answering, she set her knife down beside what little remained of her steak. Wiping oily juice from her mouth, she approached him, careful to let

her thumb linger on her bottom lip. He calmly relinquished his plate to her, waited while she set it on a side table, then adjusted as she climbed into the chair with him, straddling his lap.

She rested her forearms on his shoulders. The soft suede of his vivid green pants rubbed the insides of her thighs, much more pleasant than the embroidery on the seat cushion beneath her knees. She brushed a brief kiss over his lips. "Are you offering to share them with me?"

His strange red and black eyes didn't swirl, an indication that he and his magic were, indeed, calm. He placed his hands on her waist to steady her. "No."

"Then why mention them?"

"I'm more than willing for you to enjoy them on your own."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Perhaps not."

"Why would I want them without you?"

"You love them."

"I love you."

Meeting her gaze, he shook his head slightly. "Not like that."

She refused to get angry. Finally, she gathered the courage to ask the question she'd been avoiding. "Do you love me?"

He touched his lips to hers, drawing her into one of his slow, exquisite kisses. She could bear witness to the fact that Radin had forgotten none of his legendary seduction skills during his absence. Happily, she leaned into him, pressing her breasts to his bare chest, combing her fingers in his hair to loosen it from the band that kept it tied behind his skull. She pulled his tongue into her mouth and reveled in the sparkly caress of magic that sizzled around them. "*Not like that*," he answered into her mind since his mouth was occupied.

She lingered over his lips, rocking into him as she digested his words. "*Why not?*"

"I love another," he whispered on her lips, slipping the fingers of one hand behind to stroke the seam of her ass. "As do you."

"No." The lie tasted bitter, so she thrust her tongue into his mouth. She wanted to love Radin. She didn't want to be trussed in a loveless truematch.

She pressed into him, slipping her hands down the smooth skin of his chest to yank at his belt. An unconscious whimper escaped her throat as her anxious fingers freed his cock to hold it, hard and ready, with her palm. Just like that, just his nearness and one extended kiss, and she was ready and desperate for him.

"Denying it doesn't make it true." Despite his erection, he remained calm. Even at the height of lovemaking, he kept a certain distance. She felt it. It annoyed her.

Determined, she yanked his trousers open and down, exposing his crotch as best she could in their position. "It's different." Shifting her knees, she brought her hips up higher. "What we have is special." She teased herself with the tip of his cock at the lips of her sex, drawing him through her juices.

His hands at her waist steadied her as he obediently scooted forward in the chair. "What we have *is* special." His words rang true. "But that doesn't mean we're in love."

Her entire body shook with need. In a rush, she slammed down on him, engulfing his sex with hers and throwing her breasts to his chest. He grunted at the assault, sliding in the chair before he caught himself. Around them strains of divinity laced the magic clouded around them. Rhae and Tohon in wordless approval of their union.

Gritting her teeth, she rose up and shoved down, knowing she couldn't punish him this way but trying anyway. "I'll make you love me."

He twisted one hand in her hair and yanked her head back. His other hand at the small of her back held her pressed against him as her channel pulsed around his cock. "That's not going to happen."

She cried out as she tumbled back, her world twisting when he pushed from the chair and toppled her to the floor. Miraculously—or perhaps magically—he kept their bodies interlocked, his weight shoving his cock deep into her greedy body.

His fingers tunneled into her hair, holding her head so she couldn't look away. “We are bound closer than any other raedjour couple in history, true.” Thrust. “We have to be to control magic that even our gods are still learning to use.” Thrust. “I am bound to care for you and will do everything I can to help and protect you.” Thrust, thrust. Then he stopped, braced on his elbows above her, his hair curtaining them from the room. His eyes swirled, casting their own subtle red glow. “So trust me when I tell you we are *not* in love.”

She clawed his forearms, eyes closed as she felt the magic she could barely control well up within her. “I don't, ah!” Her body jolted as he began again with stilted, deep thrusts. “I don't want it that way.”

His belt buckle jangled as it slapped her thigh. “It's not something over which you have any control.”

Her hands stole around his neck, pulled him down to her. He didn't resist, coming to rest on top of her with his hips still pumping between her thighs. Magic rolled around them, making her dizzy. She clung to him as the only solid thing in her world as the rug and the stone floor beneath her faded from her senses.

“We are nothing the raedjour have ever seen, and nothing Rhae or Tohon had ever intended.” His harsh words rode their storm, a garrote of meaning that made her gurgle. “We are more and less than They wanted us to be. Truemating was simply a means to an end.”

She arched, every magical shield she'd managed to erect toppling. She screamed as the final bit of reality tore and pleasure blinded her. More sense than sensory, mere action rather than thought, she melded with Radin and found the perfect fit that they were. But it was a confusing fit. Without their bodies, so intimately linked, they were back-to-back rather than face-to-face.

She felt him, knew him, and was a part of him; it wasn't like any pairing that made sense. She knew he was inside of her, as she was inside of him, but that comforting extra that instinct told her should be there was absent. Angry confusion surged through her climax, and she refused to enjoy it as she ruthlessly gathered herself back together.

When reality reasserted, when she again felt the rug and stone beneath her back and the heavy man atop her, when air again surged into her laboring lungs, bringing with it the reek of fresh sweat and sex musk, she opened her eyes to meet his. Damp locks of hair fell over eyes that slowly swirled red in black.

Tears threatened the corner of her eyes. "If we're something new and unexpected, then how do you know we're not in love?"

He pushed up to brace on his arms above her, oily sweat glistening in the firelight. He brushed one finger pad briefly on the tip of her nose. "I know my heart, and I've seen what you've tried to deny in yours."

"Now you can read my heart?"

"I can when the truth is painfully obvious."

She scowled as he shoved to his knees, shivering only a little at the thrill as his softening cock slipped from her body. Sometime soon, she hoped to have sex without all the magical distraction, so she could actually be conscious of what really happened. Thus far, past a certain point, it was all a blur.

"Well done on the control, by the way," he said calmly, holding out a hand to help her up.

She stared at his hand, turning her attention inward. The shields he'd been trying to teach her were stronger. The tendrils of magic that she'd despaired of ever holding were contained. She didn't dare poke at her protections for fear of bursting them, but they were there.

"They're shaky now," he answered, shaking his hand, "but you'll get there. Come. Look at your eyes."

She let him pull her to her feet. "My eyes?"

He said no more, just walked into the bedroom. By the time she got to the door, he'd removed a two-foot round polished mirror plate from behind the chest of drawers and was hanging it on the wall. He'd not allowed her to see her reflection since she'd awakened. His prior caution made her hesitate now. But when he stepped aside and gestured for her to come, curiosity got the better of her.

Shocked, she grabbed the edges of the chest to steady herself. He appeared in the reflection over her shoulder as she was still reconciling what she saw. As though the sphere of her red irises had been pricked and now bled across the rest of her eyeball and the whites had plunged to deepest pitch. Her eyes looked exactly like his.

"What does it mean?"

"It means you're doing very well."

With one finger, she pulled down one lower lid to verify that there were no whites in her eyes. So strange to see the black that was the same shade as her skin, except less glossy. Wet but not shiny. Very much like the black of the void. They didn't feel any different. But then, she couldn't be sure that her entire body wasn't different from before. "What did they look like before?"

"That's not important."

She wondered but set it aside. "Another reason you didn't want anyone else to see me?"

He chuckled. "Very astute."

"You could have just said."

"And what fun would that be?"

"You're an infuriating man."

He laughed, stepping out of the reflection. "It's a quality, our gods have assured me, that makes me uniquely qualified for the tasks They've given me."

She turned from the reflection, allowing herself some time for the new development to sink in. “And what is it that makes me qualified?”

He sat to remove his boots. “I believe it's the same.”

She let him toss aside his boots and stand again so he could shove off his pants. Briefly, she grinned over her shoulder at her reflection. He could fight her all he wanted. She knew he was hers.

His snort regained her attention. “That and sheer stubbornness.”

Smiling so he could see her teeth, she stepped up to him as he tossed his pants aside. “I believe that's another quality our gods hold in high esteem.”

Sighing, he let her push him onto his back on the bed. “Sadly, I believe you're right.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Nialdlye's garden had become a haven for the women and children during the confusing, dangerous days just recently past. The gardeners had returned since the fighting had stopped, but because of the addition of so many people, the paths and some of the sculptures were a little worse for wear. Nialdlye, for one, didn't mind. She enjoyed the fact that the garden was full and enjoyed. When things calmed, she intended to petition Savous to find a place for a second garden or maybe renovate the existing nursery along the same lines. She had mentioned it to Tisla, and Savous's second daughter was enthusiastically on board.

But that would have to wait. She could hardly bother Savous now when he was so busy. Irin kept Nialdlye well informed on what was happening, and both of them speculated on the acceptance of the rogues and the introduction to the raedjour of a second god. Thus far, from what Nialdlye had seen and heard, Tohon was accepted. Irin told her that it was due, in a large part, to her. Nialdlye was well liked, so people were willing to learn more about her god. She knew that her own son, Rikert, had drilled her on all she knew of her god so he could show off to his friends. Nialdlye wasn't sure about her influence. She was of the opinion that Tohon's acceptance was mainly due to Radin's very awesome presence.

"I'm not sure Radin will have as much success with the part about truemating," Irin confessed, leaning back against the stone "tree trunk" that sheltered their bench from the fake sun.

Their corner of the garden, right under the balcony of Nialdlye's suite, was relatively quiet. A group of mothers sat to the far side of the cavern, watching a

slightly larger group of children play in the stream and on the bridge. Now that tensions were down, many of the children had returned to the main nursery, and women were afforded much of their previous freedoms.

Nialdlye watched three small boys splash merrily in the stream, shrieking at each other. "He didn't say truemating wouldn't happen, just that it wouldn't always happen." His actual words had been "*Only when a deeper bond is necessary for the lives of one or the other pair.*" The raedjour-human bond made it necessary, to protect the human during and after the change. No one would say, but Nialdlye suspected his own bond with Eyrhaen was similar.

"Not that it matters, I suppose." Irin moved a pawn on the board game sitting between them. "I don't think they're really listening to him, anyway. Or they're not thinking ahead. They're far too much in awe."

Like Irin, Nialdlye had listened to his public addresses. She had even participated in a few, although she had kept her distance from the man himself. Always, the crowd hung on his every word, even when they might not agree with him. After studying the board, Nialdlye moved one of her own pieces. "Was he like that? Before?"

Irin laughed. "Oh my, yes. But there was always something about him that made you want to pay attention. The only reason the former rhaeja didn't see him as a threat was because She had already marked him as a wanderer, not the future rhaeja." Her gaze took on that look, the one she often wore when speaking of Radin.

"You loved him very much, didn't you?"

Irin hesitated. They both knew it was entirely possible that Radin could hear their words. He made no secret that he could read any mind he chose, elven-born or elven-changed. "I did," she admitted. "I think I still do, but things have changed too much for us to be what we were once."

Nialdlye bit her tongue.

But Irin spoke the thought she'd held back. "Of course, that might have something to do with the fact that he's truemated to my daughter."

"Are you still upset about that?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'm still upset, but..." She shook her head. "If I was given a choice to come back to life after such a strange existence in the void, I'd probably take any deal They posed to me too. And it's not surprising he has to be her lover, since sex is at the seat of all Her power. Tohon's as well. I just..." She sighed, sliding another game piece across the board. "For so long I missed him. Mourned him. Savous and I wouldn't have hesitated to love him as a third. I know their love was deep, and I grew up loving them both."

She trailed off, wistful, and Nialdlye allowed her her thoughts for a moment.

When Radin turned into the wide, arched entrance, the women across the garden stopped talking and turned to face him, every one. Beside Nialdlye, Irin sat up to take notice. "He does make an entrance," she murmured.

That he did. Stark white hair floated as a loose cloak to the ankles of his bright teal boots. The boots clashed awfully with the rich orange pants. How he made such colors work, Nialdlye did not know. Irin assured her it was a gift of his alone and was not a new trait since his return. Today he also wore a waist-length sleeveless tunic of the same hue of his boots with embroidery to match the pants. Even if the colors were garish, at least he made some effort to coordinate.

Nialdlye tensed as he greeted the women nicely, then continued on his path toward her and Irin. A small child was wrapped in one arm at his side, the pale red streaks in her white hair identifying her as Davlin. Tisla trailed anxiously at his side, watching the baby while respecting Radin's person. "What are you doing with my daughter?"

"Not to worry, my love," his breezy thought answered her as he smiled at a child rushing out of his path. "I wouldn't dream of harming her."

That wasn't Nialdlye's worry. He must have brought her here for a reason. Tisla didn't usually bring her back until almost daybreak. Bringing her child made her less likely to avoid him, she supposed. The few words they'd spoken since she'd left him that first night had been brief, and she had declined his every request to speak privately. She knew he was humoring her, being polite, since he could easily clear any room with the two of them in it and force her to stay put. But he didn't. *"...knowing that I'm tied to one woman when I want another."*

He was close enough that his eyes met hers, and she had to wonder if he read her thoughts.

"You have a gorgeous daughter," he assured her as he came to a stop before them. "Hello, Irin."

Nialdlye glanced at Irin, who greeted Radin pleasantly. She hadn't told her friend what had happened between them, for fear of adding to her hurt. "Thank you."

His muscled arm held Davlin easily, and she beamed at him with absolutely no fear, her chubby hands clutching the open collar of his tunic. "Tisla mentioned she was going to bring Davlin back from the nursery, and I decided to tag along."

Tisla's big red eyes pleaded silently with Nialdlye from where she stood behind Radin's opposite shoulder. Nialdlye wondered how broadly Radin had interpreted what she'd actually said.

Nialdlye nodded assurance to the girl, never doubting that Tisla couldn't have stopped him if she tried. She may be Eyrhaen's sibling, but if Radin could contain Eyrhaen, he could certainly contain Tisla.

Radin looked to Irin. "I have good news. Eyrhaen's left the suite tonight."

Irin startled. "She has?"

"I left her with Savous and Hyle just a little while ago in the nursery."

"In the nursery? Is she...all right?"

"She's fine." His casual assurance was probably more convincing than his words. He caught Davlin's hand when she yanked at a thick handful of hair, seemingly unconcerned about the charge he'd guarded exclusively for a moon. "She's got her gifts under control. She wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Would anyone hurt her?"

He snorted. "Truthfully, Irin, I doubt it's currently possible for any raedjour to harm Eyrhaen." He gently wrestled with the little girl for control of his hair, seemingly all right with her delighted squeals of laughter.

"They may try and mob her. It's happened before."

"They can try. They won't succeed. Your daughter has an amazingly strong will." He sighed, turning a beseeching gaze on Nialdlye. "So, it seems, does yours."

Nialdlye had to laugh. Taking pity on him, she stood and helped him extricate Davlin from his hair. Davlin was friendly with everyone and charmed any man who came near her. Nialdlye didn't know who her father was, and too many men had been her lovers at the right time for any to step forward to claim her. Seeing her now, with Radin, Nialdlye found herself imagining he was her father, imagining any future children they might have. The sudden desire to see this happen was so overwhelming that she stepped back as he placed Davlin on her feet.

She frowned. "*Don't plant thoughts in my mind!*"

He let his arm drop, keeping a hand on Davlin's head as she clutched his boot, balancing on wobbly legs. "*Believe me or not, but I did not cause what you just imagined.*" His smile was a touch sad, but the warmth in those strange eyes made her heart skip. "*But I would gladly step into that fantasy.*"

She made herself look away. She felt her friend's gaze and was profoundly grateful that the only mind-to-mind communication Irin was capable of was with her truemate. Davlin's hands landed with a smack on Nialdlye's thigh as

chubby little legs brought her to her mother's side. She wanted him in that fantasy too.

* * * * *

Eyrhaen had never spent much time in the nursery. She'd grown up sheltered and spent most of her time with adults. Playmates her age had been limited to a select few, and for the most part, her time with them was strictly supervised. Thus, she'd never developed an appreciation for children. She wasn't like Tisla, who had coddled dolls since the cradle and had begged to spend time in the nursery even when she was too old to belong there as a child. Gawvin, their next oldest sister, showed tendencies closer to Tisla's than Eyrhaen's, so Eyrhaen had come to the conclusion that, yet again, she was different from everyone else, even among her sisters.

She was surprised and hesitant when Radin made the nursery their second destination on her first day out of confinement. They'd gone straight from a brief meeting with Savous and Hyle into a crowd of children and mothers. Eyrhaen was out of her element but soon figured out that the idea was a good one. Much better to settle with women and children, who had no personal interest in getting close to her, than the unmated warriors who would no doubt respond to her.

She sat on the rim of the two-foot-deep play pit and watched three infants and four toddlers amuse themselves within its padded surfaces. Chubby little boys with wispy, fine white hair and fresh black skin. One toddler stood at her knees on wobbly legs, eyes with red irises wide and wondering as he stared up at her.

"Your son?" she asked without looking at the older woman who sat beside her.

"My fifth."

Eyrhaen smoothed a palm over the round cheek of Tykir's youngest brother. "So small," she murmured.

"They're like that, for a few decades."

Eyrhaen laughed at Gala's dry tone. The baby, although he couldn't know why they laughed, smiled big to display tiny white teeth and giggled.

Entranced, she gathered him into her lap. He adjusted with the ease of one who was often carried, and played with the fingers she made available to him. Unaccountably shy, she kept her attention on the child while talking to his mother. "Would you want a girl?"

"A girl?"

"Radin's started to teach me a spell. It's cast on a man. It would give him a chance of fathering girls."

Gala chuckled softly. "So the problem's been in the men all along?"

Eyrhaen smiled. "Yes. Radin says that Tohon was the key to the answer. With His help, She's taught this spell to Radin, but it has to be cast by an elven-born woman." Finally she glanced up under her lashes at the other woman. "Is this something you might be interested in?"

Gala blinked. Then laughed. "A daughter. To tell the truth, I've so long ago given up the idea that it never occurred to me." She thought about it, smiling. "Yes. I'd have to talk to Hyle, but I think we'd be interested." Her grin turned wry. "Is the casting of this spell anything like the one that changes women to raedjour?"

Eyrhaen had to grin, recalling the hands- and lips-on lessons with Radin to learn the spell. "It's similar."

Gala laughed louder. "Well, we are raedjour. I don't suppose anything truly important could be accomplished without sex."

The baby chortled in response to his mother's laughter, bouncing happily on Eyrhaen's thighs.

I want one. She was surprised at the thought that surfaced in her own mind. Never before had the nearness of a child made her want to be a mother. But right at that moment, looking into his eyes, she saw the wealth of

possibilities a child encompassed. So much potential and so much unbiased love. Had Rhae and Tohon changed this in her as well? Or had Radin?

Thinking of him, she frowned. A mental inventory had her relatively sure that he wasn't *listening* to her. She didn't even get the feeling that he was near. She looked up and over her shoulder. Hyle and Savous stood near the entrance, talking with a few of the men and women who ran the nursery. From the way they all gestured at the walls and ceiling, they were likely still discussing possible renovations. Older children ran and played in and around the climbing structures set up in the middle of the cavern. She and Gala were the only ones monitoring the younger children, as the other four play pits were empty.

"Where's Tisla?" Her sister had been at a nearby table, feeding Nialdlye's little girl. The bowl and spoon remained, but the girl and infant were nowhere to be seen.

"She left with Radin."

Eyrhaen twisted around to look at Gala. "When?"

The older woman did not seem concerned. "A little while ago."

How long have I been here? Had she lost track of time like during her confinement? Was that going to continue now that she was out? She sat up straight, clutching at the padded edge of the pit.

Gala's hand squeezed her shoulder. "Eyrhaen?"

"Calm yourself." Radin's voice soothed over her worries. *"You're doing just fine."*

"Where are you?"

"I'm not that far away."

Carefully pulling away from the little boy, Eyrhaen stood.

Gala gathered up her son. "Are you all right?"

"Where are you?" "I need to find Radin."

"Stay where you are."

Savous spied her standing and made moves to extricate himself from his discussion.

She clutched her fists at her sides, trying to calm herself. *"Where are you?"*

"Eyrhaen, stop. You've wanted to be away from me for days."

"Not true and you know it." It wasn't. She'd wanted to be out of the suite, but she wasn't sure she was ready to be without him.

"Eyrhaen"—Savous stepped up to her side—"what's wrong?"

"Do you know where Radin went?"

"Why worry him?" Radin's annoyance underlined his words.

Savous frowned. "He went with Tisla to the garden."

"Why did you leave me?" Avoiding her father's hold, she stalked toward the nursery entrance.

"Stop it. You're worrying Savous."

She halted, turned to find both her father and Hyle now at her heels. "I'm going to find Radin."

"Childish and petty," he scolded as she turned back toward the entrance. *"And entirely unwarranted. I was coming back in just a short while."*

"How dare you leave me alone on my first day back with people!"

"I thought it a high compliment that I trusted you on your own."

"What if something had gone wrong?"

"I'm not that far away. Go back. Enjoy yourself. Or go to the practice grounds. I'm sure there are plenty there who'd love to entertain you."

"You know I'm not ready for that."

"You don't give yourself enough credit."

Her father and Hyle followed at her heels. People in the halls scurried aside to make way for her as she approached, their manner far more nervous than she'd ever seen around her father. She was aware of the looks of awe that

followed her wherever she went. She'd expected this. Her eyes alone would have given anyone pause. She'd prepared for it as best she could. She'd always been a focal point of attention, but now it was tenfold, thanks to the fact that they all knew she was touched by their gods.

"Did you visit the garden when you put me to sleep? Which women kept you company? All of them?" She made her way through the corridors as fast as she could without running, but the women's garden was on the other side of the central court. *"Didn't get enough of me before supper? I could fix that."*

"Your jealousy is ridiculous."

"Is it her?" She'd caught brief snippets of his thoughts in the past few days, thoughts centered on Nialdlye. At first she'd thought it was because of Tohon. The god was understandably concerned with the last purebred woman of His race. But Eyrhaen suspected there was more, more that was personal to Radin alone.

Silence in her head. He was miffed enough to stop talking to her.

She turned down the wide corridor that stretched past the arched entrance to the gardens. And slowed. Outside the garden, there were a number of tables and chairs. Because the corridor was wide, there was plenty of room for men to loiter outside the gardens. Some were on guard duty, yes, but it was an accepted custom for men to wait there. It was one of the places the women inside would visit when they were looking for sex. The tables were mostly empty at the moment, but there, at one, as though they'd been placed, sat Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir.

Brevin looked up, and she froze.

"Damn you."

"Me?" Radin's thoughts were laced with mock innocence.

He knew she didn't want to see them. Not yet. She wasn't ready. She'd asked for at least one night to accustom herself to being in public again before

she had to confront them. Savous had agreed. Hyle had agreed. Radin had agreed.

"Not so. I never agreed to such a thing."

"Bastard."

She couldn't stop staring. Brevin was alive. Tears burned her eyes, and a well of unexpected emotion burst in her chest, real enough that she brought her hand up to rub at the soft silk of the blouse that covered her breasts. It was all she could do not to run to them.

Brevin stood. They stood. She couldn't drink in enough details about them at once. Had Brevin always been that tall? When had Lanthan shorn the sides of his hair? The wound at Tykir's side had scarred instead of healing clean. The scar just off the middle of Brevin's chest was positively frightening, even if it was clearly healed. They stayed at the table, all three staring at her. Silent. Hazel eyes with an undercurrent of red. Icy blue eyes. Troubled, vividly red eyes. Her heart thudded to escape her rib cage, reaching for them all. But her feet remained grounded, and her mouth remained closed.

"C-come help me."

"You don't need help."

"Radin."

"Face them. You love them."

She shook her head. *"No."*

Lanthan saw her move. His beautiful lips turned down to a scowl, and his eyes hooded. He looked up at Brevin, who'd seen it too. Brevin shook his head, shaggy white hair flopping over his brow. Tykir merely blinked, sadly lowering his gaze.

She took a step toward them, feeling the urge to explain herself but unsure how to do so. She *would* explain, one day. But it was too soon. She hadn't settled into her life with Radin yet.

"Don't do this. You want them, not me."

"Don't tell me what I want!"

Not privy to the internal conversation, Brevin likely only saw the panic in her eyes. Without speaking, he turned and walked away toward the far end of the corridor. Lanthan glanced at her, then followed. Tykir didn't even look up before he followed as well.

"How could you be so cold?"

"They don't understand." She watched their backs.

"I don't understand."

"No, you don't. Things have changed."

"Eyrhaen..."

"I've got you."

"It's unfortunate I want someone else."

Rage surged to fill the ice in her veins. Tables and chairs shook as Eyrhaen stormed past them into the garden. She barely saw the women and children to her right. She barely saw her mother and her sister across the stream. All she saw was Radin standing beside a seated Nialdlye with her little girl on her lap. The three of them made a perfectly quaint, perfectly beautiful family.

That was wrong. "No!"

Radin stalked toward her, putting himself in her line of sight for Nialdlye. The scowl on his face matched the icy rage that welled up to push against her hot anger.

She stopped at her side of the stream, he on his. Could anyone else see the storm between them or was it only visible to their changed eyes?

"You can't have her."

"You won't tell me who I can and cannot have."

"But you can tell me?"

"I've only limited you when you were a danger to others."

"And the fact that you *can* do that makes you mine."

"*Not* body and soul."

"I'm your truemate. You're *mine*." Rage made her tremble and a breeze of her own making picked up the tendrils of her hair, floating them in the air. "Your children are mine!"

He stuck out his chin. "I will never have children."

Silence permeated the air, and everybody in their audience froze. Her hair settled as shock cooled her rage. "What?"

He held out his hands to the sides. "You didn't think resurrection had a price? A *number* of prices? My body may have been brought back, but it's no longer fertile."

She blinked. "No." Eyrhaen had been tasked with furthering the fertility of the raedjour. She could feel her body ready to accept a child. She couldn't be tied to a man who wasn't fertile.

Triumph shone in his eyes. *Exactly*.

She was far too aware of their silent audience. Nialdlye's red skin stood out in the haze behind Radin. "Why do you think *she* would want you?"

"*She's* already denied me."

"She...? But then why...?" Eyrhaen's eyes went wide. Confusion muddled her thoughts. "I don't...I don't understand." Colors bled, and the stone trees melted into the floating water of the stream.

Water splashed. She felt him coming closer. Felt his power close around her, containing the swirl of the raw magic breaking out of her.

Then, black.

* * * * *

Nialdlye held Davlin against her chest, wide-eyed with shock at the confrontation before her.

Eyrhaen swayed, and Nialdlye had to wonder if even those without magical sight could see the sphere of magic surrounding her, a glowing ball that contained a riot of raw power spitting out of her. Radin stepped forward, right through the sphere and caught the young woman before she collapsed to the ground. Simultaneously, a black hole ripped the very air behind him.

He glanced back at Nialdlye, his hair and Eyrhaen's floating free on the energy surrounding them. Regret laced his sharp features. "*I'm sorry.*" He mouthed the words, but she heard them in her head. Then he carried Eyrhaen through the portal, taking the sphere of energy with them.

The portal closed.

Irin shot to her feet. "No!"

Nialdlye stood, Davlin held in one arm, her other hand reaching to her friend. "I don't think they're gone for good."

"But the vetriese..."

"Can you still feel him?"

Irin paused. "Yes."

Nialdlye nodded. So could she. "Likely, he just needed to get her away."

Irin looked to Nialdlye, her eyes wide. On the far side of the garden, women sheltered children as they recovered from the shock. "What now?"

Nialdlye shook her head. "*I will never have children.*" "I don't know." Then how could he possibly be part of her fantasy? "I don't know."

Chapter Twenty-two

“Rhajena.”

Eyrhaen stared at the top of the man's head, nonplussed. Behind and beside him, there were more heads, all bowed over men on their knees, paying deep homage to her. She'd never seen this type of response to her father, and there were plenty who respected him. No, this was more. There was a strange vibration in the air.

“*Fear,*” Radin's voice supplied coolly into her mind. “*They're scared of you.*”

She blinked up at him across the heads of the men between them. He'd come to the arena ahead of her, leaving her to arrive alone. “*But... They've always been... But not like this.*”

“*They've always been careful around you, but do you think they truly feared you?*”

“*Do they do this for you?*”

He raised one eyebrow. “*No, in fact. They do not.*”

She swallowed. “*What do I do?*”

He crossed his arms over his bare chest. “*I don't know. What will you do?*”

She gritted her teeth, glaring at him over the distance. A soft footstep in the sand to her left startled her into looking that way. Her father stood, wearing a long open vest over deep violet trousers. Rhae's markings stood out on his black skin, almost glowing in the amply lit arena. *There* was a man deserving of such an homage, not her.

He gave her a small smile, then gestured toward the man nearest her. He was willing to stand with her, but she had to do something.

Radin took pity on her. *"Touch one shoulder, thank them, then ask them all to rise."*

Glad to have any guidance, she stepped forward and touched the nearest muscular shoulder. She nearly balked when the man flinched, steeling for her touch. He really *was* afraid.

"Thank you." She made sure to speak so everyone could hear her. She'd never seen a room containing so many people fall so quiet. "Thank you all. Please, rise. We've a wrestling match to prepare for." She added the last on a hunch, hoping to crack the tension in the air.

Faces tilted up to look at her. Forty faces, maybe more. Some she recognized. Some she was sure had numbered among the rogues. Radin said that tonight was important, the first public gathering to include both loyalist and rogue elements. He and Savous had been working for nearly two moons to make it happen. Within all those faces, all she saw was wary fear. It was not a look that belonged on a proud raedjour warrior.

Savous took her arm, waving to indicate the men should rise. "Good luck to you all."

She followed as he led her toward a narrow staircase that would take them up to one of the balconies. Irin sat on a low, wide couch set next to a stone railing over which she could see the entire arena. Hyle and Gala lounged on a matching couch behind her that was raised slightly so they could see. She mumbled her greetings and thanked Gala for a goblet of wine while shaking her head to the tray of sweetmeats.

"Damn you." She sank into her seat, glaring at Radin. *"You could have warned me."*

He didn't even look her way, shaking hands with one of the naked contestants. *"Why would I think you'd listen to me?"*

She swallowed her protest. That was the tenor of his response to everything in the past ten nights. They'd barely spoken other than to argue. His

simmering anger vibrated in the bond between them, itching under her skin. He allowed her out of the suite during the night, stayed mostly by her side, but kept their communication—verbal or otherwise—at a minimum. When she accused him of sulking, he didn't even bother to deny it. When she tried to get him to talk to her, he ignored her. When she got angry, he contained her magic, shielded himself, and waited while she wore herself out. Worse, there had been no sex. When she complained about *that*, he told her that she was more than welcome to find a willing partner. That might have been the most galling of it all. He truly didn't mind if she found someone else. It left her to wonder if he'd found someone to sate his own needs. She didn't think it was Nialdlye. An awful visit with her mother a few nights after the incident had clued her in that Nialdlye was keeping her distance from him because of Eyrhaen. The information had been followed by a lecture from Irin on how selfish she was. She had yelled back that Irin didn't know what she was talking about and stormed off. This was the first she'd been in her mother's presence since.

Everyone was on Radin's side. Everyone wanted her to move on. But that was ridiculous. They were mated!

Irin caught sight of her face and sat up, reaching for her hand. “Are you all right?”

She took it, relieved that her mother was speaking to her. “I don't know.” She slumped down on the pillow beside Irin, gazing morosely at the gathering below. “They're afraid of me.”

Irin smoothed a hand down her back, pulling her braid over her shoulder so she wasn't sitting on it. “Give them time, sweetheart. They've only just become comfortable with Radin.”

“But I *know* most of them.”

Irin gently took her chin between thumb and forefinger, tilted her face up. “And you've changed just a tad in the past few moons.”

Eyrhaen blinked, remembering her eyes. Remembering that she'd hardly been in her right mind for at least a few seasons before Radin woke. "I guess I have."

Irin nodded, releasing her chin. "Give it time."

She sighed and sat back, cradling her goblet. Time. That's all she had these days. Time to sit back and watch the wonders Savous and Radin were working with their people. The raedjour were reborn. The rogues were filtering back into the city. Contact had been made with humans to let them know that it would be safer to travel the forest now. Tonight was special since many of the rogues had signed up as contestants in the wrestling match. With Radin's help and Da's guidance, many grudges had been solved, and past hurts were being smoothed over. It was a time to rejoice.

Even if she was miserable.

Eyrhaen sipped her wine and decided that, tonight, she would be in a good mood. She hadn't seen a good wrestling match in what seemed like ages. Below her, even more people filed in through the open archway across from her balcony. Nearly everyone in the city would be in attendance. The couches along the walls had already filled, and people were sitting on the platforms and, in places, even on the sand of the arena floor. All ten balconies were full. Salin and Diana joined them in her parents' balcony, the older woman's eyes bright with feral excitement.

Eyrhaen sat forward and folded her forearms on the railing, just realizing that she was seated with three other couples. Given the excitement generated by the wrestling, no doubt there would be sexual activity. She searched out Radin in the crowd below and found him sitting with Jarak and his true mate, Marisol. "*Are you sitting with us?*"

He didn't look up. "No."

"*How long do you plan to punish me?*"

No answer. No surprise. It had been asked and ignored before, the implied answer being that she was free to amuse herself.

Trying to recall her determination for a good mood, she scooted to the corner of her couch, giving her parents room, then set her chin on the backs of her hands and watched the proceedings below.

When Lanthan walked into the arena, followed by Tykir and Brevin, her forced good mood plummeted. She felt it pulled from her heart. Lanthan was naked and weaponless, which meant he'd be a contestant. His hair had been shorn close to the scalp at the sides and back, longer at the top so the fringe in front hid his forehead and brushed his brows. The sleek muscles of his gorgeous body rolled perfectly with his movement, mesmerizing in their grace. Brevin and Tykir followed, armed and clothed, so they planned to just watch. Typical. Brevin would sometimes choose to wrestle, but Lanthan was the one who truly enjoyed physical contests. Her sinewy warrior had to pummel someone on a regular basis or he became antsy.

Her warrior? No. She had to stop thinking of them like that. Still, she drank in the sight of them, not having seen any of them since that horrible day. She hadn't had the courage to ask about them, and they hadn't asked after her that she knew of. She knew she hurt them, but how could she explain? They'd known about Radin before he'd wakened. But she knew firsthand that knowing and seeing it happen were two very different things.

She watched Lanthan as he greeted Radin. They shook hands amiably, and Radin said something that made Lanthan nod. How unfair! Why wasn't Lanthan mad at Radin too?

Radin glanced up at her as Lanthan continued on. She averted her gaze and did all she could to block his thoughts.

So caught up in her inner seething, she didn't look up again until Fallil stepped into the center of the ring. The bard's voice carried clearly across the wide, sandy space and into the balconies, welcoming everyone to the match.

Eyrhaen gulped down the last of the wine in her goblet and set it down before she looked back down again.

What?

Lanthan stood at the sidelines, talking with Brevin and Tykir. That wasn't out of the ordinary. But they had joined Nialdlye on her couch. She sat between Brevin and Tykir, her legs bright red underneath the hem of her thigh-length skirt. Her breasts were bare and brazen, an abundance of flashy necklaces calling attention to them, and her hair was loose as well, falling in black and crimson curls over her shoulders. She sat there smiling, like she belonged with them. As Eyrhaen watched, she stood so she could take Lanthan's jaw in her hands and bestow a brief kiss on his lips. Not brief enough to just be friendly. Eyrhaen couldn't see his face, since his back was to her, but the kiss lingered a few heartbeats longer than it should. Then, as Lanthan was called to join the other contestants toward the center of the ring, Nialdlye nestled back down on the cushion, tucked up against Brevin's side. He stretched his arm over the back of the couch, and Tykir slouched down a little, leaning a bit so his shoulder rested against Nialdlye's. They stayed like that, talking quietly. She played with one of the long locks of Tykir's hair. Their posture suggested intimacy. *Recent* intimacy.

Eyrhaen's fingernails scraped on the stone railing.

She sought out Radin on the floor below. *"Did you do this?"*

Pausing in his conversation, he glanced up at her. *"Did I do what?"*

"Did you sit her with Brevin and Tykir?"

He glanced over at them, his expression cool. *"Given that I want her for myself, why would I sit her with anyone?"* He looked away. *"She hasn't spoken to me since."*

"Since" meaning since that afternoon in the garden. They had fought about it too often for Eyrhaen not to know what he meant.

"Did you know this was happening?"

His attention was on her again, those red eyes intense even over the distance. "*Why do you care?*"

Her nostrils flared as Fallil stepped toward the sidelines, his voice rising as he counted down to the start of the match.

"I don't."

"Of course."

The match began.

She sank her focus into the game. There was plenty to watch. Dozens of naked male bodies rolling in the sand, struggling to gain the upper hand against one opponent at a time. The noise from the spectators filled the wide-open space, excitement building as oiled bodies grappled. The first victims screamed their protests as the victors pinned them and sank steely hard cocks into their asses. Sexual tension grew as the losers left the arena, leaving more room for the new pairings. Lanthan remained in the competition, his small grin more a testament to his excitement than to the erection between his legs. He fucked one opponent into submission, then deftly rolled off him before another contestant could try to take advantage of his bare backside.

Eyrhaen was able to lose sight of everything except him, concentrating on his natural prowess and hard-won skill. He wasn't the biggest or the strongest, but he more than held his own against his opponents. She'd seen him do it before, but that didn't detract from the show. He grappled with a man head and shoulders taller than he, then fell to the ground, bringing the other with him. She gasped, unsure it was intended, until he twisted and turned, snaking around the larger man. The bigger man growled, trying to roll Lanthan back underneath. He succeeded, rolling on top of Lanthan but on his back. Somehow Lanthan managed to take him from below. Eyrhaen was not the only person to scream her approval at that particular move.

Tension flared in the room. She refused to pay attention but couldn't miss knowing that many of the spectators were now involved with each other. The losers joined the crowd to ease the hard-ons the final pinnings caused. The few

women in the sidelines moaned. Many more men groaned. Eyrhaen refused to look to either Radin or Nialdlye. She didn't want to know. She kept her attention on Lanthan. Cheered him on. Bit her lip as he faced off with Arkir, a man she knew. More importantly, a man who knew him and his tricks well. She sat forward, holding her breath as they took each other's measure. They were among the last five pairs. Arkir grabbed for Lanthan and managed to keep his hold as the smaller man twisted. They fell to the ground, Arkir beneath on his back. He managed to twist, get Lanthan beneath him, but Lanthan shoved and wormed away. They stayed on their knees, slapping each other's arms aside as they struggled for purchase. She held her breath when Arkir dived underneath Lanthan's arm, caught him in a hold. She recognized that particular position from prior matches and knew it wasn't one easily broken. Arkir howled as he rolled Lanthan underneath him. Lanthan struggled, face and cock grinding the sand. Eyrhaen couldn't see, but the twist and thrust of Arkir's hips told the story as much as his triumphant howl. He'd won.

Lanthan slumped in the sand, one fist pounding dust as Arkir thrust into him again. His fingers dug into the sand when Arkir pushed off him to find another opponent. Eyrhaen kept her focus on Lanthan and not the three remaining pairs. Watched him kneel up to dust himself off. His cock thrust thick and proud from between his thighs, and she longed to be the one to take a cloth to clean it off. She wanted to be the one who took it in her mouth, pussy, or ass. She wanted to be there with him.

She even stood, with the vague intention of leaving the balcony.

She didn't leave. He pushed to his feet in one graceful move and stalked the seven paces that took him to the bench where Nialdlye sat with Brevin and Tykir. Tykir had the cloth. He went to his knees to clean Lanthan off, uncaring of the sand that rained down on him from Lanthan's chest and shoulders. Brevin stood, another cloth in hand. He fastened his mouth to Lanthan's for a sloppy, hungry kiss before pulling away to dust off Lanthan's back and ass.

Then it happened. They had him clean in moments. Eyrhaen thought to watch Tykir suck him. Thought perhaps Brevin would drop his pants and let Lanthan fuck him. But no. Tykir and Brevin stepped aside, and Lanthan sank onto the couch with *her*.

No.

She spread her thighs, and he fit himself between them, on top of her, sliding in as though he belonged there.

No.

“Eyrhaen.” Radin's mental warning didn't help. She glanced over to find him still clothed, alone on the edge of the platform while Jarak and Marisol fucked behind him.

Lanthan's flexing ass drew her attention back. Nialdlye's red legs crisscrossed over his back. It didn't even help that Brevin was sucking Tykir's cock right beside them. Didn't matter that only Lanthan was touching her. Eyrhaen could easily picture any of the three of them—*all* of the three of them with her.

No!

“Why do you care? They're not yours.”

Yes. That was the logical thought. She knew that, on some level. But that didn't quell the boiling anger that heated her chest and made the back of her skull vibrate. The stone beneath her clutching fingers started to crumble.

“Eyrhaen.” His control rushed up around hers, holding her in, holding her back.

But she wasn't lashing out. She had it contained. She *wanted* to lash out, but she was having trouble finding a focus. Why do I care? she asked herself. She wanted to lash out at Nialdlye, but that was wrong. She fucked all the unmated males. Why not these? She wanted to lash out at Radin, but he probably hurt as much as she did. The thought of lashing out at Brevin, Lanthan, or Tykir fizzled as it occurred. She'd hurt them. They deserved to find

comfort. Frustration and anger buzzed, blurring her vision. She struggled to contain the raw magic, the fear in the faces of the raedjour utmost in her mind. She would *not* cause that fear tonight. She would not. She would hold it, contain it, and she would damn well *be* what she needed to be.

The one she wanted to lash at was herself. She was the one to blame.

Hands closed over her shoulders, distantly felt. Someone said her name, actual sounds for her ears to hear. Someone was there to help her. Someone's strong arms surrounded her, and a broad chest met her cheek. "*Radin.*"

"*I'm here.*" He hadn't used that soothing tone for many nights. "*You're all right.*"

She clutched him, snatched at her thoughts like fireflies flitting about her. "*I've lost them.*"

"*Let it go for now,*" he soothed. "*Let it go.*"

"*It's all my fault.*" She felt the soothing fingers of a sleep spell seep into her mind. "*No. Don't put me to sleep.*"

"*It's easier that way.*"

"*I. Don't. Want. Easy.*" Fingers digging into his hips, she pushed herself away from him. Eyes closed, she concentrated on breathing. His hands were comforting weights on her shoulders, helping her to ground. He surrounded her but didn't help her. He kept everyone else safe from her while she fought for control.

And won.

Little by little, she came back to herself. Shaking, she stood still until she thought her vision might be back to normal. She waited until her breathing felt right again. Then she opened her eyes.

His were smiling down at her, pride brimming in the swirling red and black. "Well done."

She let herself smile, let herself fall into him with relief. Only then did she become aware of the attention of the others in the balcony. Past Radin's

shoulder, she spied her parents watching closely, concern utmost on their faces. Hyle sat forward with a similar expression, Gala hovering at his side. Salin and Diana lay in a loose embrace, also watching.

She swallowed and pulled away, her attention instantly switching to the grounds below. Miraculously, no one seemed to notice. She and Radin stood in the shadows of the balcony, away from the railing she'd almost destroyed. Most of the spectators were either cheering the winner of the match or involved in their own trysts. Her current position didn't allow her to see Nialdlye, Brevin, Lanthan, or Tykir.

Radin's hand at her cheek turned her back to face him. The smile was still there. "Don't worry about it now." He thumbed a tear from her cheek. "Be proud of what you just accomplished."

She gave him a shy smile. "I did it, didn't I?"

He pulled her into a hug. "You most certainly did."

Chapter Twenty-three

As Radin had taught her, Eyrhaen released the spell slowly, letting it melt away like candle wax off a heated surface. She became aware of her breathing again and consciously sped it, taking her time until it was normal. Her heart rate followed suit. Gradually, the hardness of the packed earth beneath her rump and the solidity of Radin sitting with her, his arms around her, chest to her back, returned to her reality. His palm smoothed over her forehead, gently smoothing her hair back from her face. She let herself enjoy the warmth of his embrace, his shoulder supporting the back of her head, as she quietly brought her magic under control.

It was so different, this control. She'd never given much credence to what Hyle and Nalfien had dutifully tried to teach her before Radin had become her mentor. But he'd explained that it had been hopeless for them to try to teach her fully. Her gifts were not of the same caliber, as they were divinely enhanced. What they had to learn was instinct for her, so it was little wonder that she couldn't fully benefit from their tutelage. Now she understood and finally saw the nightmare she'd been as a student. She was still searching for a way to make it up to them.

"You did well," he murmured, both hands on her shoulders to lightly break her from her thoughts. "Look."

She opened her eyes.

They sat on the dusty floor of a wide cavern. When they'd arrived, the rock before her had been solid and smooth. Magic had been used to close the well-traveled tunnels leading to different areas of the surface, to protect the city from rogue attack. Now, again, there were tunnels. Rocks and debris filled

them still, but she had done what she'd come to do. She'd dissolved the solid rock and reversed a spell that should have been more permanent. Now the engineers and their crews could come to clear the way to make the tunnels useful again.

Radin's lips brushed her temples, his fingers still stroking her loose hair. "Well done. How do you feel?"

She took a deep breath, assessing. "Fine. A little tired." She frowned. "Why is that? That spell shouldn't have been so hard."

He chuckled. "You were working harder to keep the spell under control than you were at the actual spell."

True. Her accustomed method of casting, she would likely have caused a worse cave-in. She was still learning to let the magic work through her, to be a conduit of the power rather than the sole source. In many ways, she and Radin were more priests than sorcerers, and her mind was still adjusting to that different way of thinking.

He nudged her from behind. "Come. Our work is done here."

She stood. He grinned when she turned to extend a hand to help him up. She matched his grin as he rose. "You told me to mind my elders."

He gave her a mock glare and flicked at her ear. "Brat."

Giggling, she skittered away; then they both took a few moments to dust off their trousers. She adjusted her sleeveless tunic, and he reached up to pull his loose hair back into a tail. The red markings on his chest shimmered in the dim glow of the magelight he maintained above their heads. So handsome, she thought, relatively sure that he wasn't listening. She admired him less as a lover and more as a teacher now, but she could certainly enjoy the view. Since the scene at the wrestling match a fortnight previous, by mutual consent, they had developed a much healthier master/student relationship without sex. It was an extremely odd relationship for any raedjour pair, especially for those who were both mated and of the opposite sex. However, as he pointed out, they

were an odd pair and, as such, needed to establish their own unique relationship, both with each other and the gods they served.

She glanced away before her visual admiration sparked lust. Just because they'd agreed didn't mean she didn't feel the urge. Their agreement meant that she hadn't *had* sex since their last time together, before the debacle at the wrestling match.

He came up beside her, extinguishing the magelight. She grinned up at the outline her nightsight made of his form, then walked with him toward the tunnel that led back to the city. "We can let Tarlan know the way is clear for his men to start working," Radin mused as they walked, "and there's only the northeast tunnels remaining to open. I don't think there's any hurry to start."

No, no hurry. Even with the help of some of Jarak's warriors, the engineering crews were working full force on the tunnels Eyrhaen and Radin had already exposed. More work was involved than simply clearing the debris, and there weren't enough men to do it all. It would take time. But then, they had time. Safe in the watchful gaze of two gods, the raedjour could concentrate on building resources again.

"Are you very tired?" Radin asked after they'd traveled a distance in silence.

Startled from her thoughts, she glanced up at him. "What?"

He squeezed her shoulder, his eyes gleaming softly in the absence of light. "If you're tired, perhaps we should rearrange for another time with Hyle and Gala."

"Oh. No." She shook her head. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." She rubbed her belly. "But maybe we could eat first?"

* * * * *

She and Radin dined with Hyle and Gala in their rooms. It seemed so long ago to Eyrhaen that she had been Hyle's apprentice, learning the rudiments of

magical theory from him. She'd spent much time on the low couches and pillow nests that Gala preferred, and had even helped the older woman to weave the thick rug on which the four of them lounged as they ate.

Watching Radin and Hyle talk, Eyrhaen had to remember that they had known each other well. Had grown up together under the same master. Radin had been older than Hyle, but his missing decades had brought their ages much closer together. That Hyle was fascinated by all things magical had brought them even closer together.

Gala caught Eyrhaen watching them and smiled. "Well now." She finished off her wine and set her goblet aside. "Shall we get started?" Sitting up, she rubbed her hands. "I'm eager to see this spell."

Her truemate startled, his wide red eyes blinking as he slowly came to her meaning. Hyle was one of the most intelligent men Eyrhaen knew, but when his mind sank onto a particular topic, he tended to lose focus of anything else around him. With a pang, Eyrhaen pictured Tykir. He wasn't as bad as his father, but he, too, tended to ignore the rest of the world when a particularly juicy piece of knowledge was dangled in front of him.

She missed him. Since the wrestling match, she'd managed to keep herself busy and mostly isolated. It wasn't hard. Much of her time was spent with Radin, learning how to use her powers. She had neither seen nor asked after Tykir, Lanthan, nor Brevin. She knew from overhearing snippets of conversation that they spent much of their time with Nialdlye, and that was enough for her not to want to hear more.

Suddenly shy, Eyrhaen stared at the crimson and midnight pattern in the rug. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Gala knelt at her side, a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You need someone as test subjects, and it might as well be us." She giggled. "I mean you, love."

Eyrhaen peeped up to see her blow a kiss at her truemate.

Gala grinned back at Eyrhaen. “If something goes wrong—which it won't—but if something goes wrong, first, we've already had children so we won't miss out there, and second, of anyone, Hyle's most likely to see or feel if something is amiss. Magically speaking.”

Needing reassurance, Eyrhaen glanced up at her former master.

Hyle's warm smile displayed his confidence. He nodded. “I'm looking forward to seeing the spell myself.”

“*Seeing?*” Gala teased, tossing a floor pillow at him. “Since you will be the test subject, I think you'll be *feeling* more than *seeing*.” Following the pillow, she attacked him, forcing him onto his back in a nest of more pillows.

As they wrestled, kissing and battling Hyle out of his clothing, Radin crawled to her side. “I'm here should you need me,” he murmured, folding his legs underneath him. Soft strains of lust shimmered between them, sparked by the couple beside them, but other than the bulge in his trousers, he showed no outward sign of it.

He cupped her chin, gazing into her eyes. “You'll be fine. Just remember what She told you.”

Eyrhaen nodded. That was, perhaps, the most frightening part of the spell. An element of all her magic was to open herself and let it run through her, guiding more than leading it. But for this particular spell, the one that would enable Hyle to father female children, Eyrhaen wouldn't even be a guide, simply a vessel. Rhae would work completely through her.

The sound of the tussle subsided, and Eyrhaen turned to see Hyle lying naked on his back in the pillows with Gala, also naked, on her elbow against his side.

She grinned at Eyrhaen, smoothing a hand over the white patterns etched in Hyle's chest. “He's all yours, Eyrie.”

Tossing her ponytail behind her shoulders, Eyrhaen got to her knees and crawled forward. She chose to keep her blouse and trousers on, a flimsy barrier

between full immersion, which Rhae allowed her. She didn't think either Hyle or Gala would mind if she joined them in a tryst, but she didn't want to. The only ones with whom she wanted to have sex weren't speaking to her, and until she got over and past that, she chose not to fuck anyone else.

Hyle spread his legs to allow enough room for Eyrhaen to settle between his thighs. His cock lay bare and mostly erect on his cobbled belly, already glistening with natural oils. She breathed in the heady, dusky scent of him as she got comfortable, draping her arms over his thighs and tucking her cleavage up under his balls. Above her, he sighed, and he glanced up to see him watching her, one arm bent above his head and the other wrapped around Gala's waist. She, too, was watching, her cheek resting on the top of his head.

Trying to ignore their attention, lest it make her more nervous, Eyrhaen dropped her focus back to his cock. She slid her palms over his belly, under the shaft, watching the one main blood vessel throb along the thick shaft. Lowering her head, she lapped at it, slowly, drinking in the taste of him both through her tongue and by pulling his scent in through her mouth. With that, it was easy to close her eyes and simply enjoy the perfection of his cock, silky smooth and hot to the touch. She nibbled at the spot where the flared head topped the shaft, reveling in the pulse of feeling that spread from within his body into the air surrounding them. She let him surround her and seep into her as she pursed her lips over the tip of him and played her tongue over the wet tip. Flavor exploded over her tongue, bursting pleasantly through her skull and down her spine so that her own hips wiggled. She felt Radin's palm on her ass, petting her, soothing her, letting her know he was there, but she kept her attention on the cock in her mouth, sinking it as far as she could down her throat.

As She had told her to do, Eyrhaen gave herself into pleasuring Hyle. She had to lose herself to the feeling as much as he for the spell to take effect. Eyrhaen wrapped a fist around the base of him and opened herself to the pleasure between them, pulling both Gala's and Radin's appreciation into the

mix as well. A simple glow somewhere deep within Eyrhaen's soul assured her that Rhae approved of the inclusion, used it, built on it. Soon Eyrhaen was whimpering as she sucked on Hyle, riding the rock of his hips. He bent his legs underneath her arms, drawing her tighter to his groin. His balls pressed her breasts, tight and drawn, ready to empty when she would give him release. She didn't want to. She wanted to revel in this forever, despite the fact that her jaw ached from her efforts.

A soothing warmth pulsed within her, her goddess's spell primed. Eyrhaen unwound one arm and, leaning to the side, lowered her hand down underneath Hyle's groin. Her fingers slipped in copious oils coating his taint and were led unerringly to his opening. Her fingers slid in, unhindered. His warmth swallowed her as he shouted his pleasure above her. She curled her fingers and found that core of sensation. With his second shout, she released both his pleasure and the spell. Hot, thick liquid filled her mouth, and she greedily sucked it down while Rhae's spell wrapped them both—they all—in blissful, pulsing release.

Eyrhaen couldn't have said how the spell worked, too distracted by the enormity of feeling, but a pleased buzz at the back of her mind assured her that it was done. Rhae was happy. The spell had worked. Smiling, too happy to remain still, Eyrhaen pushed up onto all fours over Hyle's hips.

He lay back in the scattered pillows, eyes closed as he basked in the aftermath of climax. Gala was draped mostly over his chest, her arms loose about his neck, a huge smile on her face. The angle gave Eyrhaen just enough of a peek between her legs to show Hyle's fingers deeply embedded in Gala's wet red folds.

Eyrhaen glanced over her shoulder to meet Radin's triumphant smile. He, too, looked sated. He only shrugged when she glanced down at the wet spot on his trousers.

Giggling, she sat back. Her sound roused the couple lying before her.

Hyle blinked up at her. "Did it work?"

She nodded happily.

He frowned a little. "I...couldn't track it."

Gala rolled her eyes, smacking him lightly before she pushed up to sit. "You're hopeless." She looked to Eyrhaen as Hyle sat up, guarded hope in her eyes. "But it did work?"

Eyrhaen nodded. "She says it did."

"I guess we won't see for sure until this one gets me pregnant," Gala joked softly, still looking dazed. "But..." Abruptly, she caught Eyrhaen up in a hug. "I'm so proud of you."

Stunned, Eyrhaen froze. "What?"

Gala sat back, hands on Eyrhaen's shoulders. "I'm so proud of you. You didn't falter once, even if you were nervous. And you *did* it!"

Appalled, Eyrhaen's mouth fell open. "*That's* what you're happy about?"

Laughing, Gala waved a hand in the air. "Oh, I knew he'd be fine, and it'll be nice to have a daughter, but I was worried about *you*."

Hyle was there, kneeling beside her. He pulled her from Gala into his own embrace. "I've never been more proud of you."

Her face pressed into the bend of his neck, Eyrhaen could not believe what she was hearing. She had given them a gift, and they were proud of—worried for—her. These people. They had helped to raise her. She loved them as much as she loved her parents. They had always done all they could for her, even when she was difficult. Even after all she'd done to push them away, they were still there for her.

Her tears mingled with the oils that slowly dried from Hyle's skin. Her body was shaking with sobs before she realized it. Hyle's strong arms tightened about her, and he sat back, pulling her into his lap. She clung to him, wordless in the flood of emotion that took her.

"Shhh." He murmured into her hair, holding her as he rocked her.

First Gala, then Radin crowded close, surrounding her with warmth. These people still loved her, even if she no longer believed she deserved it.

Perhaps—she barely dared to let the next thought occur—perhaps there were others who'd forgive her trespasses as well.

Chapter Twenty-four

Eyrhaen stared at the closed door, hands fisted at her sides. She'd taken great pains to mask her presence so those inside didn't know she was there. Only a few boys hurrying about their own business had seen her come at all, since she'd taken a back entrance that was usually magically sealed into the women's tower. She could still turn away and leave.

But that's not what she agreed with Radin. That wouldn't help alleviate her guilt, nor would it open the way to forgiveness. She needed to do this. *Damn it.*

She raised her hand and knocked.

It took a few moments. She fiddled with the belt of her shift, only now realizing she wore one of her sideless shifts in an ice blue that she knew men found appealing. Brevin had called them teasing on more than one occasion. Would he think she was taunting him now? Maybe she should run and change.

Too late. The door opened.

Lanthan.

Blue eyes stared at her from an expressionless face. Her heart stopped at seeing him close after over a moon of avoiding him. She'd thought she'd become pretty good at reading him, but he must have become better at hiding his emotions. Or maybe her raw power from before had allowed her to read him more clearly. Or even project emotion on him. Gods, what a horrible thought! Maybe they didn't feel anything for her anymore.

Not privy to her inner panic, he finally blinked, then stepped back to allow her to pass. “Eyrhaen's here,” he announced quietly to the room, waving for her to pass by him.

They were all present. She'd purposely chosen a time when all three of them would be with Nialdlye in her suite. Much to her chagrin, she'd discovered that her choices were many, since Brevin, Lanthan, and Tykir were practically living with Nialdlye now. Tisla had Davlin in the nursery, so it was just the four of them, watching her as she walked into the brightly lit sitting room. Fake sunlight poured through the open balcony doors from the garden beyond. The room was in partial disarray, furniture turned in odd angles. Brevin and Tykir paused on their knees where they were unrolling a large, intricately patterned rug. Nialdlye stood to one side, directing. The men were all three bare to the waist and barefoot with their hair pulled back, or in Lanthan's case, bound with a thick headband. Nialdlye wore a simple green shift that barely reached her thighs. To Eyrhaen, they all looked rather comfortable together in the domestic scene. She wouldn't be at all surprised if they'd been in bed not long before she'd arrived.

Eyrhaen stopped toward the center of the room, just at the edge of the half-rolled rug, as Lanthan quietly shut the door. She concentrated on Nialdlye first, not ready to face the disbelief—or, worse, lack of—that she was sure to see in the faces she loved. “I...came to apologize.”

One of Nialdlye's dark brows soared up. “To me?”

Eyrhaen took a deep breath, chiding herself not to be weak. All she wanted to do was run screaming or shove hot pokers in her eyes. Anything but admit she was wrong, even if she now knew she had been. “Yes. I've...” Rehearsed words flew out of her head, so she had to simply speak the halting words as they came. “The entire time you've lived among us, I've been jealous of you.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Brevin rise from his knees to perch on the edge of a couch. Tykir sat on the arm of it beside him.

Eyrhaen caught herself nervously rubbing her forehead and forced her hand back down to her side. "I thought that you, another woman, an older woman, elven-born, might take my place among the raedjour, and I resented you for it." *Not fair. I could have been right!* But no, she'd been wrong. There was room and reason for both of them, especially since Tohon was now a god of the raedjour as well. "I...didn't realize until recently that's what I'd done, but it's true. The fact that I wasn't in control of my magic only made things worse. Much worse. I'm...I'm sorry."

Nialdlye hesitated, clearly surprised. "Thank you."

Eyrhaen bobbed her head, loose hair falling forward over her shoulders. "I realize just saying it isn't enough, but I have to start somewhere. I'd like it if we could start again."

The other woman nodded. "I'd like that too."

Steeling herself, she turned to face Brevin. Tykir still sat beside him, and Lanthan had come to stand with them, all watching avidly. For a moment, she simply stared, wanting nothing more than to curl up in Brevin's lap. Or better yet, make slow love to each of them in turn so she might try to convey how she felt about them. Just the thought of having any one of them finally inside of her body was enough to make her pussy tingle. But that wasn't to be. She'd messed that one up.

She swallowed. "I owe each of you an apology as well." Thankfully, the smart retort she deserved wasn't forthcoming, although she saw it in the narrowing of Brevin's eyes. "I've treated you all miserably in the past, because I could, because you let me. No, wait, that's wrong." Her hands fisted at her sides again. *Argh! This is too hard.*

"*You're doing just fine.*" Radin's assurance helped. She wished he were there, but she understood why it was best that he wasn't. Her being uncomfortable was part of her atonement.

Damn it. This was harder than she thought. What was that swelling feeling deep inside her chest? It couldn't be magic. She had that under tight control.

"You've always been there for me, but I took advantage of our friendship and your feelings for me, and I made you miserable. You all three stuck by me when I did everything I could to push you away, and I..." Another breath, trying to quell her racing heart. Apologizing to her parents had been easier. "Thank you. Thank you for all you've done for me." She heard her voice crack but couldn't tend to it since she was doing her best to not let the burn in her eyes bleed tears down her cheeks. "Thank you for standing by me when you shouldn't, and thank you for believing me when no one else would." *There*. It might not be enough, but it was a good enough start. Clearing her throat, she stepped back and turned to face Nialdlye again. "You deserve them. They're wonderful. But..." Again, she coughed over the lump in her throat. "You need to know that Radin loves you."

Nialdlye startled, her green eyes sparking.

"*What are you doing?*" This hadn't been part of her agreement with Radin.

"*Shut up.*" This felt right, and she was here cutting out her soul anyway. "He's loved you this entire time. He loved you before he woke up, and the only thing that stood between you was me. You need to understand that I won't stand in the way anymore." Her fists closed on the tasseled ends of her belt. "We're bound, I can't help that, but the two of you should be together. He says we need to all make our choices, and his heart chooses you." She flicked a glance at her three former friends, although the burgeoning tears didn't really allow her to see them well. "I'm sorry to ruin this for you too, but... Damn." She couldn't do this anymore. Angrily, she dashed tears from her eyes, stepping toward the outer door. "I'm sorry. I hope you'll eventually forgive me, but I don't expect it to happen now."

Unable to stand it any longer, she spun on her heel and dashed for the door. She needed to go away and cry and try to forget how comfortable the men who should have been her lovers looked with another woman.

Her fingers had just brushed the doorknob when big, strong arms wrapped around her waist from behind, lifting her from the floor.

“Not so fast.”

She clutched at the arm, fought the heat that poured from his skin into her soul. Goddess, the raw physical power of him was intoxicating. “Brevin, let go.”

“No.”

Through a veil of unwanted tears, she glared at the receding door. Purposely, she shook her hair forward to cover her face as he set her on her feet beside the couch. “Please let me go.”

Big fingers cupped her chin, tilted her face up. He smiled at her glare, the red simmering behind the hazel of his eyes. “You haven't said 'please' in ages.”

She barely restrained the urge to push up and seal her lips to his. “Let me go, you oaf.” Her lip curled, and she shoved at his chest. Not that it moved him. Without using magic, she didn't stand a chance against his strength. “I've already apologized. What more do you want me to say?”

One bright white brow arched high, and he cocked his head, considering. “What do you think, Tyk?”

She felt more than saw Tykir at her side. “Would be nice if she mentioned the word 'love.'”

She dropped her gaze since her face was still tilted by Brevin's fingers.

“Yes,” Brevin agreed, thumbing aside a tear that slid down her cheek. “That would be good.”

Fine. They wanted her to bleed? She would. “Fine. I love you. I love all three of you and probably always have. And *I* ruined it. *I* pushed you away. *I* denied you and went running to a man who doesn't and never will love me. Not like you did.” Her gaze flicked up, and her anger notched up to see Brevin with the same smile. She wasn't at all surprised that he was rubbing it in, although it did hurt that Tykir was letting him. Tykir had a warmer heart than that. Or so she thought. Maybe she'd broken that too. “Happy now?”

“Careful, Eyrie. You're not used to all this atonement. It's going to make you light-headed.”

Her fingers curled into fists, and she pounded both of them on his chest. Her righteous rage dimmed, however, when she saw him flinch. He *expected* her to lash out with magic. Worse, she almost had.

“But you didn't.” Radin was there, backing her up. *“You're doing fine.”*

She glanced toward Nialdlye, only to find Lanthan between them, so very close she could see the fine lines of those long eyelashes surrounding those cold, beautiful eyes. She so wanted to see them warm again and know she was among the few who saw that. “I'm sorry.” The words spilled unbidden from her lips, easier the more she said them.

He stepped forward, and it was her turn to flinch away. She froze when his hand closed around her arm just above her elbow. “Where's the magic?”

At first she didn't understand, but then there was Brevin's flinch. Lanthan didn't have gifts of his own, but it wasn't surprising that he'd been affected by her raw power enough to feel it wasn't present. She dropped her gaze to the fascinating dip of his collarbone, knowing it would be lovely to draw that sharp line with her tongue. “I've gotten better at controlling it.”

His hand trailed up her bare arm, causing gooseflesh. “You're calm.”

She couldn't help that her laugh was a tad nervous. “Am I?”

Another hand slid down her back, coming to rest at the curve just above her ass. “Your shield is flawless,” Tykir murmured, his heat warming her other arm.

Boxed in by the three of them, she shut her eyes, wanting to enjoy their touch but knowing this was wrong. “Not quite, but almost.” When she caught herself leaning toward Tykir's warmth, she jerked back to herself. Abruptly, she pushed between Brevin and Lanthan, gaining some distance before she turned back to face them. “What are you doing?”

Tykir and Lanthan stood, facing each other over the space where she had been, except for the heads they turned toward her. Brevin had stepped aside, a huge shadow beside Tykir's shoulder. None of them answered.

"Stop." She stepped back again. "This isn't fair. I know you're with Nialdlye now. Don't expect me to like it, and don't expect me to let you *tease* me!"

She startled badly when hands closed over her shoulders from behind. Yelping, she twisted aside to look at Nialdlye, who held her hands up, palms out. "Sorry."

At the end of her rope, Eyrhaen rushed for the door.

"Eyrhaen, wait."

She didn't. She didn't want to know what Nialdlye had to say. She'd come and done what she didn't want to do; she'd done the right thing. She probably deserved their scorn, but really, enough was *enough*. At least for tonight.

Chapter Twenty-five

Eyrhaen sat up from her nest of sheets, pillows, and misery when Radin let them through the shield surrounding her rooms. “*What?*”

“*Talk to them.*”

The outer door to her suite opened quietly.

“*No! I've taken enough for tonight.*” She began to gather protection for the bedroom itself.

Radin dissolved the spell before it could take form. “*Talk to them.*”

Too late.

Tykir walked through the open door first, red eyes glowing as he gently probed for magic. Finding none, he stepped over the threshold and aside to make room for Lanthan and Brevin to follow. They all remained shirtless but wore boots now, and Brevin and Lanthan were lightly armed. A glance at the time flame in a bowl on her dresser told her that the rest of the night had passed since she'd left them with Nialdlye.

Kneeling in the middle of her mattress, she hurled a pillow at them. “Go away!”

Brevin caught it easily, chuckling. “Now *there's* the Eyrie we've known all our lives. I was beginning to wonder if you'd lost your mind.”

She threw another pillow, this time at Lanthan. “Go away, go away, go away. I can't apologize any more tonight.”

Brevin tossed his pillow toward the head of the bed as he stopped at its side. “Gods, I would hope not.”

She scowled, eyeing them as they lined up along the two free sides of the bed. Stubbornly, she refused to cower into the wall behind her. "What do you want?"

In an obscenely quick leap, Lanthan tackled her on her back on the pillows, pinned her with hands on her wrists, and straddled her waist. He waited until her brain caught up, and she blinked dumbly up at him. "You."

She sneered, twisting in his hold. "Damn it, no teasing. Go away."

"He's not teasing."

Tykir's soft words stopped her. She twisted her head to look up as he crawled across the bed above her head. "What?"

Brevin sat on the side of the bed, leaning casually on one arm. "Did you mean what you said before?"

Scowling, she tried to twist away from Lanthan, failing again. "I said a lot of things."

She saw Brevin give Tykir a withering look. "She can't make it easy, can she?"

She glared up at Tykir when he laughed. "It would be strange if she did."

The odd vantage only let her see a massive amount of muscled chest and a skewed view of his smiling face. "Shouldn't you all be with Nialdlye?"

"We finished helping her."

She snapped back down to look at Brevin. "Helping her?"

"Move her furniture."

"Weren't you moving in?"

"No."

Gritting her teeth, she glared up at Lanthan, who was watching her with obvious amusement. "Would you let me go?"

"No."

She arched her back as best she could and screamed. "Get off of me!"

He dropped down so his weight forced her back to the mattress; his hands slid hers up over her head. It put his nose right above hers, his bright eyes boring down into her skull. Her soul. “I want *in* you.”

She froze, lost in the icy heat of his gaze. She'd never thought to see that again, not aimed at her. Her lips parted under the soft caress of his breath, but he didn't kiss her.

She found her own breath finally, staring up at him. She blinked. “Why?”

He snorted.

“No, I mean it. Why? You hate me.”

Brevin sighed. “Eyrie, much as we'd like to sometimes, I don't think any of us are capable of hating you.”

She swallowed over a lump in her throat. “But... At the wrestling match, and before... All this time...”

“I didn't say we weren't *mad*. And you have to be *the* most frustrating woman alive, but we fell in love with you at the same time we were falling in love with each other.” He heaved an overly done martyred sigh. “It's not the same without you.”

Lanthan's grip eased on her wrists, only to be replaced by Tykir's hold. She glanced over her head as the young sorcerer adjusted to his knees, giving her an excellent view of the bulge between his thighs. He grinned when she licked her lips.

Thoughts rolled over one another in her head. She'd convinced herself it was over. “Does this mean you forgive me?”

A gasp puffed past her lips as Lanthan pressed a kiss just underneath her ear.

“We're considering it.”

She dragged her eyes open—unsure when they'd closed—to find Brevin leaning closer, a smug grin curving his lips. Lanthan pulling aside the front of her shift to expose her breast to his waiting lips kept her from properly reacting

to Brevin's taunt. She groaned, twisting the wrists in Tykir's grasp, rotating the hips pinned under Lanthan's weight. Glorious restriction kept her anger safely at bay.

"What do you say, Eyrie?" Brevin's voice was so close, she had to open her eyes. He was on his elbow now, his lips a breath away from hers. He stroked gentle fingertips along her jaw. "Care to make it up to us?"

He kissed her before she could answer, lips pressing to hers. Whimpering softly, she opened her mouth, but he went no further. Meantime, Lanthan's strong fingers plumped her breast for the delicate torture of his teeth and tongue at her nipple. She tried to deepen Brevin's kiss, but he drew back rather than accept more than the briefest swipe of her tongue to his.

"Should I take that as a yes?"

"What?"

He chuckled.

She growled, frustration buzzing beneath her skin. "Gods damn it, someone fuck me already."

Both Brevin and Tykir burst out laughing. Brevin cupped her chin with one strong hand. "*That's* our Eyrhaen."

Before she could curse him again, he took her mouth, properly and completely this time. Eagerly, she fed at Brevin's mouth as Lanthan fed at her breast, reveling in their raw strength. Above her, Tykir switched his hold to one hand, and she soon found out why when his bare cock slapped into her open palm. Instantly, she closed her fingers around it, grabbing with her other hand as well, squeezing so she could drown in his moan.

That's when it dawned on her that there was another profound difference in what she was experiencing. Raw, tactile feeling. Only now did she realize that every other time she'd touched them, her experience was through a haze of untamed magic. True, that was what had allowed her to share what she felt on another level with them, but as raedjour, that happened anyway. What she'd

done before had only amplified it. What they had this moment was less, but also so much more. For the first time, she was really feeling them, the physical body without the layer of magic.

They didn't seem to mind. Lanthan yanked the other side of her shift in so that the fabric formed a band between her bare breasts, then squeezed both globes together to more easily feed at both nipples. Her jaw ached pleasantly from the way Brevin pried it open. Tykir's cock slid deliciously through her hands, the oils from his skin coating her palms.

She gasped when Brevin tore away, sitting up, but her protest was cut short when Tykir released her wrist and scrambled to the side of her head. She took the hint, grasping his cock at the base so she could slide the rest into her hungry mouth. Lanthan's weight lifted from her waist, and cool air teased the wet nipples he abandoned while he and Brevin divested her of her belt and panties. The cool fabric of her shift they merely shoved out of the way, baring her to greedy hands and mouths that set out to explore every tingling bit of skin. Brevin's cheek rested low on her belly, and Lanthan's breath was hot inside her thigh as they each took hold of one leg to draw them apart. She cried around her mouthful, drinking down Tykir's salty precum as someone's thick fingers teased her opening, while the tip of Lanthan's tongue traced the tiny bud of feeling at the apex of her sex. A tiny bud that burst alive when warm lips slid over it. Brevin pinned her hips to the bed as he slid lower, and agonizing pleasure shot through her when Lanthan let up and two tongues managed to taste her at once, Lanthan and Brevin practically kissing over her clit.

The orgasm shuddered through her, pulsing naturally through them, leaving her breathless but spurring on her lovers. Before she could settle, Lanthan shoved her thighs up and apart, raising her hips off the mattress so he could drag his tongue down to tease the bud of her ass. Brevin moved easily with him, holding one leg as he lapped at her throbbing sex.

She cried out when Tykir popped his cock from her mouth, reaching for him as he crawled back. But Brevin's weight kept her where she was. She tore her nails down Brevin's back as she watched Tykir hurriedly shuck his pants and boots. Brevin had one of her legs bent back so that her thigh touched her breast, opening her as wide as he could for his and Lanthan's dual assault. She keened when Lanthan sank a finger into her ass while Brevin shoved three into her pussy, each of them lapping wetly at the sensitive skin surrounding both entrances. She came again, arching her head back into the sheets beneath her, tearing at the nearest pillow she could find.

They still refused to relent. The mattress dipped, and she looked down in time to see Lanthan swallow Tykir's cock for a deliciously beautiful suck before he moved aside. Fingers left her body, and Brevin sat up, releasing her legs to drape over Tykir's elbows. Three sets of eyes focused on her as Tykir's cock hovered at her pussy.

Waiting.

She writhed, prodding the tip of him with her drenched folds. "Fuck me."

No more prompting was necessary. Shutting his eyes, biting his lip, Tykir rolled his hips, and his thick erection slipped easily inside of her.

With Radin, sex had been as much about magic and control as the physical act itself. Without exception, every time she'd been with him, her sense of reality had fizzled into a jumbled abyss of colors and magic. While enjoyable, she'd yet to have sex and feel the bare, physical beauty of it. In that, she was virgin, and she keened at the aching stretch of muscles about steely hard strength.

Tykir fell forward, loosened hair falling forward from his half ponytail to caress her shoulders. She bent double as his weight and arms brought her legs high, but hardly minded since the position allowed him to pull out and thrust even deeper. Eagerly, she slipped her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck and pulled him down into a sloppy kiss. "I love you, Tykir," she murmured, the words coming easily as she nipped at his lips. "Fuck me."

He growled, lips slanting over hers as he thrust again. She lost herself in the punishing beat of his hips to hers, the friction of his cock inside her body. Yes. Oh yes, this was right.

“Ah!”

She cracked her eyes open at his cry, gazing up at him as he arched back above her, eyes wide open and unseeing.

“Don't...”

He wasn't talking to her. His body shook, his thrusts gone ragged. From where he sat beside them and how his arm was positioned, Eyrhaen could guess that the fingers of the hand Brevin had hidden behind Tykir's back played with his ass. Brevin licked the point of Tykir's ear. “Going to fuck you when you're inside her next time,” he promised.

Lanthan bit Tykir high on his shoulder, his fingers sliding down Eyrhaen's wet belly to dip into the tight space between Tykir's groin and hers. He found her clit and pushed, making her groan and squeeze.

Tykir shook and shattered, eyes closing on a heart-shattering moan. Through perfectly normal, nonenhanced raedjour empathy, Eyrhaen soaked in the heat of his orgasm even as her womb received his cum.

Chuckling, Brevin slid arms around Tykir's chest. Whispering low in the smaller man's ear, he pulled Tykir away. As soon as the space was clear, Lanthan dived in between her thighs to suck at her pussy. She screamed, unconsciously tearing at his hair. But that only made him laugh and push his tongue inside her as far as it would go.

When he'd had his fill and she'd somewhat subsided, he rose to his knees. “Over,” he commanded with a light slap to the side of her hip.

She licked her lips at the sight of his long, slim cock curved up so high that the precum moistened his cobbled belly. When he slapped her again, she complied, twisting over. She caught sight of Tykir and Brevin kissing behind him, but not much more.

When she would have braced on her knees, his weight slammed her flat on the mattress. He managed to yank the bulk of her hair from between them so he could press as much naked skin against her back as he could. She closed her eyes and groaned, luxuriating under his weight. His knees kicked hers open, and he rocked just so the column of his cock slid down the crease between her buttocks. "Did he take your ass?" he growled into her ear.

She almost said no. Hadn't he seen that Tykir just took her pussy? But it dawned on her the "he" he meant was Radin. "No." At least, not that she was aware of.

The purr in his chest was pure animal as he adjusted, reaching down to help her pull her knees up higher so her cheeks drew apart. "I'm going to."

Her breath caught, the tiny, virgin bud of her ass clenching at the thought.

"Eyrie?"

She rolled her hips so his shaft rubbed her opening. "Yes. Do it."

Another growl, a kiss to the side of her neck, then the tip of his cock nudged at her. She closed her eyes, wanting to savor every little move he made. He took his time, hardly breathing against her throat as the blunt head of him pressed her open. She'd heard sex this way was painful at first for humans, and that many of the women had to learn to like it. Her own prejudices had kept her from asking how Nialdlye as an elven-born woman bore it, so she had no idea if the experience would be painful or not. The *thought* was unbearably exciting, knowing he pressed into a place where no one had before.

She wiggled, and he stopped. "All right?" His fingers laced with hers where she clutched the mattress.

She lifted her head into the bend of his neck, rubbing her temple against his jaw. "Yes. More."

Because it felt wonderful. The ache of the stretch was gorgeous, different from the feel of Tykir's cock in her pussy. This was much more tight, more

friction, more of an invasion into the hidden recesses of her body. She arched her back, letting the oils on their skin sink him the rest of the way in with one slow glide.

They both groaned together. He nuzzled her cheek, and she twisted just a little farther so their lips could touch. "I love you," she murmured, needing to share the warmth in her heart.

He took her lips and rocked his cock into her, letting her feel the delicious burn of her channel stretched around his length.

"Gorgeous." She opened her eyes to find Brevin lying beside her, alternately watching her face and Lanthan's where they almost pressed cheek to cheek. He brushed his lips over hers, then Lanthan's before settling back again to watch.

She hissed as Lanthan started to pull out, not at all expecting the sudden jolt of sheer pleasure that shot up her spine as he dragged over something deep inside her.

He froze.

"Eyrie?" Brevin asked, concerned.

"Don't stop," she begged, clutching sheets. "Goddess, do that *again*."

Relief put a smile on Brevin's face. Lanthan snapped his hips forward, taking her by surprise again as the angle hit *that* spot again.

"Gods!" She let her forehead drop to the bend of her arm, gulping breath as Lanthan braced so he could start to thrust in earnest. First slow and easy, letting her feel each bump and ridge on his cock as he pushed in and pulled out. Then, when she started babbling, begging for more, he picked up speed. Strong fingers dug into the meat of her hips as he pulled her back on his cock. Her pussy wept, neglected, but she wouldn't have stopped him for anything. In the rational part of her brain, she promised herself that she would get two of them to fuck her at the same time *very soon*. The larger part of her brain writhed with the rest of her body.

Fingers—had to be Tykir's since Brevin still lay beside her—reached between her legs and thrust into her pussy, his palm pressing her clit. It sparked the flame, and she dropped to scream into the mattress. Her body shuddered uncontrollably as heat ripped apart her spine. She barely heard Lanthan's cry, somewhat felt his thrusts. She certainly felt the wave of release that pulsed off him.

She collapsed into a gooey, shuddering heap. Lanthan kissed the back of her shoulder; then his cock eased free. She shivered at the feel of liquid warmth oozing out of her. She took long, glorious moments to simply enjoy the tingles that spread throughout her limbs.

When she opened her eyes, it was to find Brevin lying on his side, watching her with his head propped on one arm. The other two were somewhere behind her, but Brevin filled her vision, his smug smile goading her.

“What about you?” she asked, voice hoarse.

“What about me?”

Shifting in the muscles of his top arm drew her attention down his naked body, to where his fingers idly toyed with the last thumb's length of his cock. “Maybe you've had enough.”

She narrowed her eyes and looked back at his face. “Not yet.”

Delight sparked in his eyes when she drew up to her knees. He rolled easily onto his back, hands at her sides as she lifted a leg over his body to straddle him. Sex juices from her and their other two lovers smeared his belly as she shimmied so his cock bumped her ass.

She put on her best devious grin. “Forgive me yet?”

He arched a brow. “Not yet. I need more convincing.”

She nodded. One hand braced on his breastbone, she lifted higher on her knees. “How much more?”

“Hmmm.” His attention drifted down to watch as she wrapped fingers around his cock. She adored the spark of red that pulsed behind the hazel as his eyelids dropped a little.

Aware that the others were watching, she kept her focus on Brevin's face as she dragged her thumb over the tip of his erection. “How much more?”

Dangerously serious behind his smile, he dragged his gaze back up to meet hers. “A lifetime.”

Allowing her own purr, she fit the head of his cock at the entrance of her pussy, letting the pulsing tissues suck at him for a moment. “I can live with that.” Arching back, she let her weight take her down his length, loving the firm bump of the tip of him at the end of her. It felt like he was pushing at the base of her heart.

He held her hips, and they stayed still, simply enjoying the connection. Two shadows slid up beside her and curled her arms loosely around Lanthan's and Tykir's shoulders. Bracing on them, she pulled up most of the way off Brevin's cock, then sank back again. Clever fingers pinched her nipples. A palm smoothed over her ass. Yet more fingers stroked her clit while it dragged Brevin's length. She turned her head to find Tykir's soft lips.

Yes, this was good. This was real. This was what it was supposed to be. They wanted her not because she was a prize for their race, not because she needed help controlling magic, not because she was elven-born. She knew them well enough to know that while those reasons might exist, they wanted her because they'd fallen in love with her, just as they'd fallen in love with each other. Just as Brevin indicated, it could be nice, but it wasn't the same when it wasn't the four of them.

She gasped, stiffening when Brevin lost patience and thrust hard from underneath. It was enough to pitch her forward so that she was suspended between and completely supported by the three of them. Lanthan ducked out from under her arm, and Tykir kept kissing her even as he unwound her arm.

Then he lowered her onto Brevin's chest. She draped over Brevin, amazed anew by the sheer size of him.

He was too tall for her lips to meet his normally. She rode him as he adjusted, shimmying higher in the bed until he could brace his shoulders on the wall. That bent him enough that she could reach up to cup his jaw and meet his lips without letting her pussy lose its death grip on his cock. He held her, kissing her, his hands sliding over her back as she rocked slowly back and forth on his cock.

Climax started to approach. She braced her palms on his chest and pushed up, sinking him inside her as far as she could take. "A lifetime?" she murmured.

He dragged open his eyes. They burned like a banked fire. "Yes."

"Does it help if I tell you I love you?"

He grinned. "Some."

Emitting a gasp of mock outrage, she jumped up and slammed down again, just to make him wince, even if she winced harder. "Only some?"

Laughing, he grabbed her hips and rolled over. She held on until he loomed over her, melting at the pure emotion he let show on his face.

"I love you too," he murmured, thrusting slowly. "More than ever."

He rolled his hips into her, taking his time in building toward climax. She let him lead, reveling in his strength. Lanthan stretched out beside him, taking hold of one of her hands and kissing it languidly. She couldn't see him, but she knew Tykir knelt on their other side, because she felt his hands stroking her thighs where they wrapped Brevin's waist, sometimes drifting down and underneath to tease her ass.

Her climax this time wasn't an explosion, more of a burst and slow ooze of pleasure, like warm water burbling up to encompass them all. He melted into his own climax before she had settled, his shuddering setting off another minor implosion deep inside her.

Sighing, content, she hugged him close as he rolled over. She ended up draped over his chest, her cheek resting over his heartbeat. Lanthan settled on his other side, smiling as he edged in to brush his lips with hers. Behind her, Tykir nestled close, his cheek resting on the back of her shoulder.

She closed her eyes and yawned. "Let me sleep for a while; then I'll work on convincing you some more."

Chapter Twenty-Six

She didn't know if he called her subtly or if she felt his presence on her own, but when Nialdlye stepped onto the balcony, she wasn't surprised to see Radin down below.

She was amused to see him sitting on the ground on the far side of the cavern near the stream's end, surrounded by a dozen-or-so very young boys. All of them were staring intently at something she couldn't see for the crowd of them. Her heart swelled happily at seeing her son's red and white striped hair among the cluster. The only other occupants of the garden were a gardener and two older boys who were likely serving double duty as child-sitters as well as carrying out their cleaning duties in the opposite corner of the cavern.

Radin stood, and the young boys stepped back enough for her to see what they had been looking at. A new sapling enjoyed a fresh mound of dirt in a spot that would catch much of the fake sunlight. She frowned a little and squinted to get as best a look as she could. It didn't look like any of the stone- or wood-carved trees. None of the others had been carved to look like a reedy young tree.

"It's real." Radin turned his head to look toward her, smiling. *"A gift. From Tohon."*

"Tohon?" Unexpected emotion welled in her throat at the very thought.

"He, too, enjoys your garden. For now, there is just the one." He smiled at the boys, who continued to circle and closely inspect the young tree. *"Perhaps in the future, He can provide more."*

"That's wonderful," she thought back to Radin. *"Thank you."*

He shook his head, even as he gently nudged one of the stronger boys away from tugging on the slim branches. *"Don't thank me. Thank Tohon."*

She studied him. Even from a distance, the man was striking. He didn't need the mantle of divinity that had finally settled around him to make him someone who drew the eye. She finally saw for herself the Radin of legend, the man who had won the respect of his people and his goddess to such an extent that everything possible was done to help him cheat death. His ankle-length hair was wound into a loose braid down his back, exposing the sharp angles of his face. As he was bare from the waist up, there was no shirt or vest to clash with the pale orange of his laced trousers, and his boots, for a wonder, were charcoal instead of a garishly contrasting color. Such a handsome man.

One who had kept his distance from her for no other reason than because she willed it.

Today, she felt differently.

"Do you have time to come speak with me?"

He tilted his face back up toward her. *"I have all the time in the world for you."*

She smiled, leaning on the railing as he called to the two older boys so they could watch the younger more closely. *"You have hundreds hanging on your every action,"* she mused when he finally left the group of boys and headed for the entrance to the tower. *"You can hardly have all the time in the world for me."*

"For you," came his hidden thought, *"I would make time."*

She wondered at the shiver of delight that tickled her skin. She was no stranger to compliments, nor protestations of devotion. While it was always nice, it never before gave her a physical reaction.

Still musing on that fact, she turned from the railing to return to the shadows of her room. She'd only opened one section of the wall that folded completely away to either side, so her big, bright sunroom remained mostly in

shadow. She considered lighting one or two of the lamps but discarded the idea. Primly, she combed her fingers through her loose crimson and jet hair, then smoothed a hand over the hip of her wraparound silk skirt. Barefoot and topless, she felt more naked than she had in a long time.

How exciting.

He knocked.

She smiled. The door was open and her magic shields were accessible, both facts he very likely knew. Still, he knocked. "Come in." Her pulse sped as he crossed her threshold. "You didn't have to knock."

"It's always polite to knock when coming to see a lady," he replied as he shut the door.

"'Polite' isn't a description I've often heard for you."

He grinned. "Legends exaggerate."

"That they do." Now that he was here, she was unsure how to begin. She had questions she needed answered before she could do what she *wanted* to do. She stepped toward him. "The sapling, was it your idea?"

"No. Tohon has wanted to bestow a gift, something like Rhae's flame to remind us of His presence. He likes the idea of nurturing a life in a place it shouldn't be able to flourish."

"Like me."

He frowned. "How so?"

"I don't belong here. Among the raedjour. There's no reason I should flourish."

He shook his head, stepping farther into the room. "I disagree. You may be different, but you most certainly belong. As do your children. Without variety, our culture would grow even-more stagnant."

"Without my presence, would Eyrhaen have been such a danger?"

That surprised him, assuring her that he was either a very good actor or he was not reading her thoughts. "Is that your fear?"

She shrugged, sidestepping to lower herself to the edge of one of two couches. "If I hadn't been here for her to see as competition, perhaps she wouldn't have been so angry."

He stopped beside a chair matching the couch, perhaps three paces away. "And without my return, she wouldn't have had reason to think she was destined for a legend." He shook his head. "There is no blaming yourself for this, Nialdlye. The fact of the matter is that Eyrhaen would have lost control one way or another. The gifts Rhae bestowed on her were too much for a single person, let alone a young, untrained mage, to handle. With you here, with *me* here, it likely happened sooner rather than later, and I, for one, think it's a much better thing. If she had learned some control on her own, or worse, if she had lived with the partial madness well into her life, can you imagine what havoc would have occurred?"

She blinked, never having seen it from that angle. But she could easily imagine a mature Eyrhaen full of her own self-worth wielding far too much power. "She could have enslaved the raedjour."

"That, and worse. It wouldn't have been beyond her power to return to how our ancestors lived when Rhae was among us. Except that she is not a goddess and could not have maintained such power. I doubt we could have flourished when every man is lover to only one woman."

Again, she easily pictured it.

"Considering the alternatives, I think what we endured recently is preferable."

She nodded. "I agree."

He sat in the chair, watching her.

"What?"

"You're not done questioning me."

She laughed. "So you *are* reading my mind?"

“Actually, no, I'm not. I am trying not.” He chuckled. “But the look on your face tells me there's more. That, and you haven't asked to talk to me alone before.”

She blinked. Took a breath. “Does Eyrhaen love them?” She had heard only that Eyrhaen was still with her three lovers two nights after she had come to apologize. A page had been called to provide service for a hasty nine-day. Irin had been beside herself with the news.

Without hesitation, he nodded. “Yes. She does. She always has.”

“Will it last?”

“Predicting the future exactly is not among my gifts, but if I had to say so, I would say yes. They give her a comfort she's grown up trusting, and she gives them both a challenge and a treasure to protect.”

She nodded, understanding the attraction from Brevin's, Lanthan's, and Tykir's points of view. In the time she'd had with them, Eyrhaen had been a main point of discussion. She had no doubt Eyrhaen and each other were their true desires. “It wasn't real, you know. Me and them. We enjoyed each other, but the whole aim was to see how Eyrhaen would react.”

Radin nodded. “I suspected. What would you have done if she hadn't reacted?”

“Enjoyed them?” They shared a chuckle. “But I knew they'd eventually leave me. The three of them were much more comfortable on their own.”

“What if one of them had fathered a child?”

She couldn't help her smile. “That would have been wonderful. But again, I don't think anything more than friendship would have lasted between me and the three of them.” She sighed. “Three men at once, *all* the time, is exhausting! You must remember I grew up isolated.”

He shared in her laughter, and she gloried at how easy it was. His demeanor this night was different. Easier. Clearly, Eyrhaen's choice was, indeed, a relief to him.

She studied his face as the laughter faded, and finally asked one of her real questions. "Is it true? Are you infertile?"

Sadness washed over his face, although a small smile remained. "It's true."

"Is Eyrhaen?"

"No." He adopted a "teacher" tone to replace the pained one. "The singular fertility of a truematch is a by-product of the spell that changes human women to raedjour. It doesn't exist, just as a truematch shouldn't exist"—a little bitterness there—"for elven-born women. My infertility is mine alone, due to my time between realms. Eyrhaen will, I'm sure, have many children with her three lovers."

"I'm so sorry." Her heart went out to him. "I never thought I'd be allowed to raise children when I was with Ale'tone. He..." She'd spoken many times of her time with the man who'd raised her, but it never failed to raise emotion that threatened to choke her. She swallowed. "He murdered all of my babies after they were born. So, I know how you might feel."

He shook his head, smoothing stray wisps of hair from the side of his face with graceful fingers. "I can't say that I regret my choice, even given this consequence. I was, for all intents and purposes, dead for an endless time. Worse, I experienced consciousness without real life. For the most part, it was a deeper pit of hell, even with the company of my goddess."

She frowned. From all she knew, he'd not spoken about his time in the void except in passing. From the pain that showed in his face, she could see it had been far more of an ordeal than he'd let on.

The curl to his lip was resigned. "I'm simply glad to be alive and back among the people I love."

She wanted to go to him. To curl up in his lap and make him forget, or at least, console him through the pain. But not yet. She knew if she did, that would be it. They would connect. She could feel it in her soul. She was so close

to giving herself to this man, knowing it would be right. But she needed to know one more thing.

She hardly knew how to ask. "Radin, I...want more children." She did. She ached for them after a life so long denied. Her race was born to breed.

She didn't know how to interpret his small smile. "I know. I wouldn't want to deny you." His strange eyes grew intent. "I would cherish any child you had by any man."

She blinked, thankful that he'd broached the subject. "You'd allow me to breed with another man?"

His chuckle burst a bubble of dread in her chest. "We aren't exactly a monogamous society. And I'm hardly one to object, given that I'm truemated to another."

"Sex is one thing"—which he very well knew—"actual children is another."

He poured out of the chair and was on his knees in front of her in an instant. Her hands grasped his immediately. With him so close, she was instantly entranced, unable to see enough of his beautiful face, unable to inhale deeply enough of his scent, unable to get enough of his heat sinking into her skin.

"I love you." His bold words cut through a world of insecurity. "I fell in love with you when I was only a shadow in the darkness. I felt things, knew things then that I can't know in a physical body, but I remember them." He released one hand so he could reach up to brush hair from one side of her face, his gaze one of rapturous wonder. "There isn't anything about you that I don't cherish, and I very much *want* you to have more children. There *should* be more of you in this world."

She held their clasped hands in her lap, reached up with her free hand to curl it around the back of his neck. Breathing quickly, she brought their foreheads together. "Radin." Tears spilled from the eyes she closed.



He mirrored her hold on his neck, squeezing her nape. “I only want to be with you, Nialdye. For the rest of the life I've been given.”

She found his lips with hers, gently assaulting his mouth and receiving the same in return. As she'd known she would, she melted. She didn't know what she would have done if he had denied her finding other fathers for future children. Even if he had, she would have been his. She would have had to come to terms with the fact. Because she could *not* deny him—deny them—any longer.

She freed her other hand so she could wrap both arms securely around his neck. Touching another had never been like this. Countless times, she had enjoyed the touch of another, but until now she'd never felt that compelling need. Not within herself. The best she had been able to manage was drinking

the echoes of emotion from those who were in love. Even that couldn't prepare her for feeling it firsthand.

"Radin, please," she rasped, pushing into him, unable to get close enough.

He wrapped strong arms about her waist, crushing her against him as he stood. Easily, she wound her legs around him, steadying herself as he turned. "Wait." He laughed, pulling his mouth from hers after a few steps. "I can't see where I'm going."

She giggled, transferring her lips to his neck and jaw. "Don't you have magic for that?"

He growled, a pleasant rumble against her breasts. "I haven't the time nor the inclination to come up with a spell just now."

"Distracted?" She nipped at his ear as he carried her through her bedroom door.

"Very. I've an armful of the most precious woman in the world."

She shivered, squeezing him tight. "The sweet talk is no longer necessary," she murmured.

"I disagree." He switched his hold as he knelt on the mattress. "A lifetime isn't enough to tell you how I feel about you."

He lowered her gently to the mattress, and she didn't release her hold, so he remained braced on elbows above her. Their lips met for a slow, drawn-out kiss that could have lasted for many moons as far as she was concerned. She let her hands slide over the satiny warmth of his back, threading the tail of his hair loosely through her fist. It was pure simplicity for him to nudge the knot of her skirt loose, letting the fabric slip aside so his fingers could find her sex. She growled, sucking in his tongue and canting her hips so he could plunge those long fingers inside her. Her own hands loosened the laces of his trousers, then slid around to dip beneath the waistband to cup his firm buttocks.

When it proved too difficult to wedge her hand between them to find his cock, she pulled her head back so she could speak. "I need you naked. Now."

Chuckling, he nipped at her shoulder before pushing up to his knees. "How could I deny such a lovely request?"

Wanton, she spread her legs wide as he edged off the bed, giving him a good view of her sex so he'd hurry back. "You can't."

His eyes followed her hand as she slid it down her belly and between her thighs. He managed to pull off his boots without looking, then shoved his trousers down and off.

"Stop!" She held up a hand, wet with her own cream, to keep him from climbing back on the bed.

He watched, eyes hooded, as she climbed to her knees, then edged toward him. His mouth opened for her fingers, and she watched his lips purse as he sucked her digits clean. Before he was done, she reached down with her free hand to palm his cock.

"Mmmmm," she purred, licking the side of his lips as well as her own fingers. "Heavy and thick." She twisted her grip as she slid her fist from root to tip.

His eyes closed the rest of the way, tongue teasing her fingertips. "*My goddess has blessed me,*" he spoke into her mind.

She slipped her fingers from his mouth, continuing to pump his cock. "No fair reading minds."

"No?" He surprised her with a pinch to one nipple, eyes opening as she jumped. "It's so much more convenient."

"Mmmm." She licked his lips. "Not this time. No more magic than what's natural?" She met his gaze seriously. "I want this time to just be us."

He weighed her breasts with his palms, squeezing gently. His strange eyes shone but didn't swirl. Didn't glow. "Agreed."

Smiling, she scooted back, reluctantly releasing her handful. "Lie with me."

He followed her example, stretching out on her mattress. He lay on his back at her prompting and combed fingers through her hair as she kissed her way down his chest. She took her time, tasting every curve, every ripple of muscle. She lingered over the red runes etched on his belly, tracing them with her tongue, privately deciding that their red color made him hers. Strange for her to be proprietary, she thought as she crawled between the legs that he willingly spread for her. She'd never been possessive before. *But then*—she wrapped both palms around his shaft, delighted that there was still a good mouthful left above both fists—*I've never been in love before*.

She pulled up on the shaft so she could play her tongue over the loose skin that bunched around the head. The dark, musky taste of him exploded over her tongue, prompting her to suck in so she could have more of it. The lubricating oils from his skin provided a light, savory sauce for the hard meat that filled her mouth and hands. She sucked hard, entranced by the music of his soft moans. *Oh yes*, she wanted to do this forever. The strong body beneath her began to shake, his moans timed to her pulls on his cock. She peeked up and nearly lost rhythm at the sight of his ecstasy: head thrown aside, fingers clutching the pillows beneath him. One hand peeled off the pillows to reach down to find her hair, encouraging her to pick up speed. She did, sucking harder, recognizing impending release. She felt the desperation and knew she needed to let him come.

He exploded with a cry, the rich taste of him spilling down her throat, filling her mouth. She tried to swallow, but even practiced as she was, she couldn't take it in fast enough. White cream spilled from her lips, dripped down the shaft, and she shivered in a small climax of her own. He collapsed, breathing hard, and she released his cock gently, delighted that it remained hard. Sex with the elven-born was, indeed, a treat.

"Mmmm," he purred, stretching his arms up above his head. "I needed that."

She lapped at the splotches of cum on his groin and upper thighs while he regained his breath. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you haven't had sex since you woke."

He sat up, nudging her up on her knees so he could cup her face. "Sex with Eyrhaen was for control," he told her seriously. "It was more magic and domination than pleasure." He licked at her lips. "This is *pure* pleasure."

It was her turn to purr as he laved at her jaw, then down her neck. She sank to her back, spreading arms and legs as he carefully arranged her among the pillows for comfort. He proceeded to explore her with slow, exquisite precision, his lips and tongue velvety soft on her skin. She watched through half-lidded eyes when he sat on his heels between her thighs, then lifted one leg to lavish attention from the tip of her toes to the bend of her groin. First one leg, then the other. Then his eyes watched hers as he lowered to his belly. Her eyes drifted shut as he traced the edges of her groin, saliva mingling with her body's oils. She licked her lips, recalling the heat of his taste as his tongue finally delved into her wet folds. She relaxed into the full-body shivers that tickled her bones as his tongue drew a wet path up to swirl around her clit. Slowly, he built the fire within until she could not keep her back from arching or from swallowing the aching moans that poured from her mouth. Not one climax but a rolling build through a series of smaller until he had to pin her thighs to the mattress to keep them apart.

"Radin, now," she begged, needing an end to the sweet torture.

With one last, savoring lick to her sex, he crawled up her body, kissing key areas along the way, resisting her hands, which sought to quicken his pace by clutching at his shoulders, back, and arms.

She didn't give him a chance to tease her further. As soon as his cock was within reach, it was in her grasp. Loving his moan, she guided him to her entrance, all the while wrapping her legs around his waist. With her heels just under the curves of his ass, she rocked her hips and pulled him inside in one long thrust.

They froze, his arms loosely about her, her forehead tucked into the bend of his neck. Her fingers dug into his nape as she tried to remain still, tried to memorize this one perfect moment. He bent to nuzzle her ear, his lips teasing one delicate pointed tip, and she could stay still no longer.

“Fuck me,” she whined, more than happy to beg. “Gods, please, Radin, fuck me.”

Glorious gods, he did. Instinct and skill took over, his hips finding just the right angles to hit every sensitive bit of her channel. He managed on many thrusts to push at her groin so that the bone right above his cock pressed her clit. His mouth found hers, and she poured whimpers down his throat, thrilled to hear the tightly controlled desperation in his own. They moved together as through they'd been lovers forever. She let his pleasure sink in, mixing with the pleasure she fed back to him. Their gods bred them for sex, and they used every nuance in a timeless dance with each other.

She was screaming, arching before she realized it was climax. Colorful fire burst behind her eyelids and raced through her limbs, making her clutch his hard body to anchor herself as her soul shattered. His cries echoed hers just moments later, and she happily held him until he subsided.

They lay together, face-to-face, legs and arms entwined. He was still somewhat hard between them, and her pussy clenched, ready for more, but they were content for the moment to simply touch, caress, kiss softly, and acknowledge they were together.

She brushed wisps of hair from his face, gazing into his eyes. “I love you,” she told him, realizing she hadn't said the words yet. “Stay with me?”

His fingers trailed her spine as he brushed a soft kiss on her lips. “As long as you'll have me.”

She sighed happily, trying to snug closer to his heat. “That would be all our lives.”

Epilogue

Nialdlye woke with a start. “What?”

Radin leaned over her, a finger to his lips. “Shhh. Come with me.”

“Is anything wrong?”

He stood as she sat up, displaying that he wore trousers and boots. The hair that had been loose and tousled when they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms was pulled back in a neat tail. “Not...wrong.” He held out a shift and sandals for her. “Come with me.”

Puzzled at the edge of sadness to his smile, she donned the shift and laced up the sandals quickly. The silvery light spilling into their room from the garden told her that it was midday above and most of the raedjour would be resting. He didn't rush her, but she could sense that he wanted to leave. He took her hand and led her from their suite. They took the back tunnels from the women's tower. Although Nialdlye was no longer a single female, she kept her suite over the garden, sharing it now with Radin. After three moons, no one had protested his presence, least of all the men who still visited her on occasion.

Perhaps it was his influence, but they encountered no one on their trip through softly lit tunnels, not even boys about their duties. She didn't recognize the tower in which they emerged until they began to climb the stairs.

“Radin?”

“Shh.”

He led her to Nalfien's door and opened it without knocking. She frowned as they entered, sensing a somberness in the air. Releasing his hand, she preceded him through the open bedchamber door.

Hyle sat at his bedside, Gala standing behind him. Nalfien lay in the midst of his narrow bed, thick blankets pulled up and around him. His silvery hair spread out over the dark blue pillows beneath his head.

He opened his eyes as Nialdlye stopped at the foot of the bed, his attention going to Radin, who stepped up beside her. He smiled. "I knew you'd come."

Radin circled to the other side of the bed and sat. "I would say my good-byes."

Nialdlye blinked. She looked up to meet Gala's gaze. Gala nodded. Nialdlye took a deep breath, understanding. Mild grief gripped her heart, but relief overwhelmed it. At last, Nalfien had chosen his time of peace.

Just as she came to the realization, footsteps sounded in the doorway. Savous led Irin through, and they came to stand beside Nialdlye at the foot of the bed.

Nalfien's red eyes settled on each of them in turn, smiling. "My rhaeja, it has been an honor to serve you."

Savous bowed his head. "The honor has always been mine, Nalfien. The raedjour would not have survived without your contributions."

Nalfien chuckled. "Perhaps. See to your daughters."

"That I will."

He spoke to Gala, lifting a finger to point to the dresser beside her. "My dear, that sack?"

She turned to pick it up off the dresser. "This?"

"Yes. See that Diana gets that, will you?"

Curious, Gala stuck her hand in and drew out an old whip. The leather might once have been white, but it was now a worn gray. On seeing it, Gala's eyes went wide; then she laughed. "Is this Iana's?"

Nalfien chuckled as well. "It is. Perhaps if she has it, she will forgive me at last for ruining her life."

"Oh." Gala's tone was wistful as she carefully stuffed the whip back into the sack. "She'd never say, but I think she forgave you that long ago."

Nalfien lifted a hand to pat Hyle's cheek. "A better son I could not have had. I am extremely proud of you."

Hyle reached up to squeeze his father's hand, smiling.

Then Nalfien's attention was on Radin. "You were my greatest fear and my greatest joy, bundled in one." He shook his head. "A beacon of trouble wherever you go."

Radin grinned. "I learned all from my master."

Nalfien scoffed, his eyes blinking tiredly. "I gave you naught but rules to break. I am amazed to have you back, boy. She truly favors you."

Nalfien patted Radin's knee. Radin took the hand to squeeze it.

"Wait!"

Nialdlye hadn't heard the new arrivals before they bounded through the door. Eyrhaen rushed in merely a step ahead of Tykir, both of them barefoot and barely dressed: she in a loose shirt with long tails, and he in a short, sleeveless tunic. Radin edged toward the foot of the bed to make room for Eyrhaen to fall to her knees at the old man's bedside. She grabbed his hand and pressed it to her cheek as Tykir stood behind her, bending to be closer to his grandsire.

"You couldn't leave without letting me say good-bye," Eyrhaen scolded, her strange red and black eyes gleaming with tears.

Moisture seeped from Nalfien's eyes as he met hers. His smile was filled with tired but surprised wonder. "I apologize, child."

She spread her free hand on his upper arm, squeezing. "Must you? Really?"

He took a deep breath, one tear spilling down his cheek. "It's time."

She took a shuddering breath, nodding. "I'm so sorry. For everything. I—"

His fingertips pressed to her lips, stilling them. "No. That time is over. You are everything you should be, and I could not be more proud."

Eyrhaen sobbed slightly, eyes closing.

While she gathered herself, Nalfien looked up to Tykir. "Such a bright future awaits you. If I hadn't seen so much myself, I would be envious. Enjoy it."

Despite the twin tears that tracked down his cheeks, Tykir smiled and nodded.

As Eyrhaen carefully set his hand back on his chest, Nalfien looked to Radin. "Will you tell Her I'm coming?" he asked Radin.

"She knows, master," Radin assured him softly. "She awaits you with open arms."

Nalfien nodded, closing his eyes. "I have seen our people through many centuries, but none as eventful as these last few. The changes on which you embark are for the young." He peeked at them once more, taking them all in with a slow glance. "I wish you good fortune, children. The raedjour could not hope for better heads and hearts to lead them into a new beginning."

❧ THE END ❧

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Sly Spectral Trick

The LEASHED Series

“Leashed 1: Two for One Deal”

Part of the anthology *Howl*, With Raine Weaver and Jeigh Lynn

Leashed 2: More Than a Bargain

Leashed 3: The Lion’s Share

“Spiritual Noelle” (A Sister “Leashed” Story)

Part of the anthology *Rated: X-mas*, With Rachel Bo and Barbara Karmazin

Jet Mykles

Jet's been writing sex stories back as far as junior high. Back then, the stories involved her favorite pop icons of the time but she soon extended beyond that realm into making up characters of her own. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now occasionally uses this art to illustrate her stories, or her stories to expand upon her art.

In real life, Jet is a self-proclaimed hermit, living in southern California with her life partner. She has a bachelor's degree in acting, but her loathing of auditions has kept her out of the limelight. So she turned to computers and currently works in product management for a software company, because even in real life, she can't help but want to create something out of nothing.