



MYCHAEL BLACK

THE LOST
SON

SECRETS OF SOCENDOR

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One warrior, one sorcerer, and a legacy that will change their lives forever...

Secrets of Socendor, Book 1

In the world of Socendor, humans are forbidden from using magic and elves keep their distance.

Kalen Ysindroc has risen far from his humble beginnings as a blacksmith's adopted son. Now the king's general, he investigates reports of magic-wielding half-human, half-elven lithings sighted along the kingdom's borders. It would be a lonely life, if not for the company of his best friend and long-time elven lover, Micheil Theirauf, the king's sorcerer.

An attempt on Kalen's life makes it clear to Micheil that there's more afoot than random breaks in the land's defenses. His lover is plagued by dreams no human should endure, and Micheil's probe into Kalen's subconscious reveals a past neither of them expected. And a future Kalen can't escape.

Suddenly, everything Kalen never knew about his life is laid bare. A father possessed of terrible magical power. A half-brother who could be the family Kalen never had—or the catalyst that will rip Micheil out of his life forever...

This title was previously published but has been revised.

Warning: Explicit gay sex (on a horse, even!), men in armor, swords (not just THAT kind!), sorcery, betrayal, and at least one conniving ghost.

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The Lost Son

Mychael Black

Dedication

For my readers and their continued support.
For Linda, my editor, and her help in polishing it.
And most importantly, for Zathyn, for his love and cheerleading, in this and everything.

Prologue

“You have created an abomination!”

“I have created a *god*.”

“How dare you toy with fate!” Furia stumbled and cried out, the sting sharp where Breasal’s palm struck her cheek. Tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to give the devil the satisfaction of seeing them. She flinched when he reached out once more, but this time, the touch was deceptively gentle.

“You will give birth to my son.” Breasal’s ebony fingers traced the line of the elven queen’s jaw, down to the vital pulse point of her throat. His red eyes held her captive. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, my lord,” she whispered.

Breasal smiled. Long ago, she had thought the sorcerer beautiful—deadly, but beautiful. Now she was older, wiser. Breasal was a monster—a being that never should have been. The knowledge that she carried his child—conceived not only by passion, but by forbidden magic—broke Furia’s heart. Should the child survive, he would be hunted simply for who he was. Furia wanted no part in it.

“Leave me to my work,” Breasal commanded with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I will summon you if I wish your presence.”

Furia bowed and backed out of the room. Several paces from the door, she turned and hurried down the dim corridor. At one point in her life, she’d welcomed the sorcerer into her heart and her body. Now she knew never to turn her back to him.

Chapter One

“You realize, of course, that this is anything but a fair match.” Kalen chuckled as he turned slowly, never taking his eye off of the man who circled him.

Pale blue eyes watched Kalen like a cat stalking its prey. And, like a cornered animal with nowhere to run, Kalen knew better than to let his attention become diverted, even when a stiff breeze blew over the curtain wall, whisking his opponent’s hair away from a youthful, handsome face. The distraction was long enough.

Kalen went down the moment the curse slipped from his lips. They both fell to the ground amid a tangle of arms, legs and hair. Grunts quickly turned to softer sounds as a soft tongue stole Kalen’s breath. Somehow, he was relieved of both his sword and his tunic, leaving the bare skin of his chest exposed to a blazing trail of kisses that traveled from his lips and over his throat. A soft hiss of breath escaped him as the hot brand of a tongue touched his nipple. A knee found its place between his thighs, pressing into him. Kalen groaned and tangled his fingers in golden hair.

“Micheil.”

The name was no more than a whisper, but the blonde head lifted in answer. An impish smile met Kalen’s gaze moments before a hand slipped between them to grip Kalen through his pants.

“Gods, I want you,” Micheil murmured.

Kalen could only nod, incapable of speech when all he could focus on was that strong hand stroking him, teasing him.

“General Ysindroc.”

Both men groaned, and Kalen peered through a mass of golden hair at the man standing near them. Brushing the hair from his face, Kalen glared at the page. “What is it?”

The young man cleared his throat and seemed to find difficulty in tearing his gaze from the two men before him. “King Andrion wishes to see you at once.”

“Sprawled out on his bed,” Micheil muttered near Kalen’s ear.

Kalen bit back the laugh before it could escape. “Very well,” he said with a sigh.

Extricating himself, Kalen stood. He extended a hand down to Micheil, who took it with an annoyed grumble and stood. Kalen leaned forward and stole a quick kiss.

“I’ll join you soon. I should have already been at Marilee’s,” Micheil said as he handed Kalen his tunic.

“So we might finish our sparring?” Kalen quipped as a smile began to break through. A shiver slid through him as a heated blue gaze caressed his body.

“Of a sort.” Micheil winked before turning and walking away.

Kalen watched him go, watched the way Micheil’s body moved under the thin brown fabric of his pants, the soft white material of his shirt. His black boots, dusty from their sparring match, were now a dull, darkened brown. His golden hair, which shimmered in the brilliant sunlight, barely touched the middle of his back. Kalen tore his gaze away from the entrancing sight and turned back to the page.

He sheathed his sword and nodded. The page turned and led the way back to the keep, although Kalen knew the way blindfolded. He shook his head at the pomp and circumstance and waited with only the slightest hint of impatience as the page announced his arrival to the court. With a nod from the king at the other end of the hall, Kalen started down the thin strip of purple velvet carpet, which stretched from the enormous double doors to the foot of the carved oak throne on the dais.

Kalen knelt down on one knee and bowed his head respectfully. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the king’s daughter, Princess Sherie. The cloud over the young woman’s face was almost palpable, yet no one but Kalen seemed to notice it. And how could he not notice? He had put it there only three days ago, although quite unintentionally.

“You may rise,” Andrion said with a wave of his hand. The movement was precise—tight and practiced after nearly forty years on the throne.

Kalen righted himself, standing tall and straight with his hands behind his back and his head held high. “You wished to see me, Your Highness?”

“Yes, General. I have recently received reports of a disturbance just east of Sonana.”

“Midland Pass,” Kalen responded quietly, noting the slightest hint of unease on the king’s face.

Andrion pursed his lips and absently tapped a finger against them. He seemed lost in thought for a moment before he spoke again. “I want you to take a small group of men and see what’s going on. The borders have not seen trouble in quite some time, so I’m curious as to why things are stirring now.”

Kalen bowed his head. “Yes, Your Highness. We will leave at dawn.”

The king nodded and turned his attention to his queen. Taking that as his dismissal, Kalen backed away from the dais then turned and started out of the throne room. Before he could reach the door, however, a firm grip caught his shoulder. He didn’t have to look up to see who had him in such a strong hold.

“You’re running out of here awfully fast.”

Kalen tilted his head toward the doors. Micheil stood to one side, his sparring clothes replaced by a seer’s robe of dark blue satin. Trimmed in gold ribbons, with a gold corded belt around the waist, the robe made Micheil’s station within the court clear without the need for announcement. He stood, silent and watchful, his hands clasped behind his back, as he observed the attendees of King Andrion’s court closely.

“Ah, I see,” the young man beside Kalen said. “My sister will never forgive you, you realize.”

Despite being twins, the princes, Andreas and Philip, could not have been more different. Where Philip was cold and calculating like his father, Andreas was warm and jovial. He cared nothing for the rigors of court life, much preferring to spend his time with friends and other good company. Kalen had known both princes for their entire lives, and Andreas had always been a close friend.

“Sherie has never liked me,” Kalen reminded him.

Andreas opened his mouth to respond, but shut it as Micheil walked over to them.

Kalen wanted nothing more than to steal another kiss, but the mere presence of the princess was enough to keep him from doing so. He could feel the iciness of her stare even with his back to her.

“And what is on for this evening, gentlemen?” Micheil asked them.

“A night of drinking and debauchery,” Andreas exclaimed, garnering the attention of several nobles around them. Most of them watched the trio with nothing short of disdain, but the prince seemed to care little. “They are simply jealous.” He moved between Micheil and Kalen, throwing his arms over their shoulders. “So, where to this evening? The Warrior’s Barrel? Or maybe The King’s Way?”

Kalen gazed at the prince out of the corner of his eye. “I think I’ll settle for The Joker’s Ballad.”

“Bah, you’re no fun,” Andreas said, pushing Kalen forward toward the doors. “And what of you, Micheil? What does the king’s seer wish for tonight?”

Kalen chuckled and shook his head. He could feel Micheil’s gaze slide over his body, just as his hands would do soon enough, if Kalen had his way. He pushed open the doors and walked out.

Once they were all out of sight of the princess, Kalen felt a tug on his arm. Before he could react, Micheil pulled him close, his tongue sliding between Kalen’s lips. The sorcerer’s hand slipped between their bodies to brush over Kalen’s crotch.

Kalen craved that touch, and much more. He knew every inch of Micheil’s body, from the golden hair on his head to the soles of his feet. And he knew every nuance of the sorcerer’s moods. Tonight, Micheil wanted to play. The fluid stroke of his tongue was only a hint at what lay beneath his casual exterior. The man was pure seduction, and in King Andrion’s court, seduction was power.

“Shall I just have Lukas build a bedroom around the two of you?”

The question was met with a muffled chuckle from Micheil, and it was with considerable effort that Kalen pulled away from the sorcerer’s lips. They both turned to look at the prince, then back at each other.

“It’s a tempting thought,” Micheil mused. He patted Kalen’s shoulder. “Come.”

The word held a thousand implications, and coming from the mouth of a sorcerer, it had undeniable effects. Kalen knew those sensations well—a brush of lips in a ghost of a kiss; a single stroke from an enchanted tongue. Delights that held the ability to drive a man insane and had, should one simply remember Micheil’s mother.

The three of them started down the dusty road leading away from the main keep. Kalen caught glimpses of his men as they went by. None of them wholly agreed with his involvement with the king's seer, despite the fact that Kalen had known Micheil for nearly their entire lives, or twenty-six years at the least. It wasn't Micheil the men didn't like so much as it was the power he held, both within himself and over the king. A single word from Micheil could change the course of an entire campaign, if he saw the need. It wasn't a weakness on Andrion's part; it was simply Micheil.

Outside the inner wall, peasants bustled through the city, towing wagons laden with goods. Children played in the streets and under foot, dodging wheels and hooves as they chased each other. Shopkeepers swept their storefronts and hawked their wares, while peddlers drove their carts through the streets, shouting at the children who annoyed them. Somewhere in the vicinity of the tanner's shop, a hound howled and barked. Chickens ran into the street, wings flapping and feathers flying, as their keeper chased the hound out, swatting at its rear with a broom. Pushing a swath of wiry gray hair behind her ear, the old woman huffed and turned, disappearing around the tanner's workshop once more.

Akuron Heights was a thriving city of trade and commerce, where shipments of goods throughout all of Socendor ended up eventually. Prices were better here, as were the gentry, for the most part, much better off than in other cities and towns. The main keep sat upon a hill overlooking the city below. The inner wall surrounded the keep and the upper bailey, while the outer curtainwall enclosed the city proper. Outside the walls, well-tended fields gave way to verdant hills and valleys, stretching all the way from the Southland Mountains in the east to the Garocha Sea, which crashed upon the beach and rocks below the keep. It was the perfect defense with mountains on one side and the sea surrounding the rest.

Kalen had seen every square mile of this half of the continent and much of the second half. He had led his men from one end to the other only four years before in an attempt to rid King Andrion's lands of unwanted occupants. During that campaign, the king had accompanied him, as had his advisors and his seer. It was during that march across the sheltered countryside that Kalen's friendship with Micheil had grown into something much more, much stronger.

The Joker's Ballad was Akuron Heights's prime stop for traveling musicians and merchants. Unlike The Warrior's Barrel, which boasted a rather high-spirited crowd, The Joker's Ballad was more subdued. Its clientele consisted of not only travelers, but some of the less rowdy citizens of Akuron Heights. It stood in the middle of the market district of the city, fitting in well with the other buildings of wood and stone.

Once inside, Kalen followed Andreas to an unoccupied table while Micheil went up to the barkeep to order their first round of drinks. No sooner had he returned to the table with three mugs in his hands than his younger sister Marilee appeared at his side.

"I was beginning to wonder if I might see you gentlemen this evening," she said with a smile. She wiped her hands on her apron and leaned down to hug each one of them in turn.

“You should know we’d be here eventually, Mari.” Andreas grinned and took a healthy swallow of ale, his gaze never leaving the young blonde woman.

Kalen caught Micheil’s curious gaze as it shifted from Marilee to Andreas, and he gave the sorcerer a quick wink. A slight tilt of Kalen’s head toward the stairs leading up to the rooms for rent made it clear what went on between the prince and Marilee. Micheil’s gaze widened considerably. If the king and queen knew about the prince’s dalliances with a barmaid, there would be hell to pay. As soon as Marilee went to wait on another customer, Micheil turned and narrowed his gaze at the prince.

“Just how long have you been seeing my sister?”

Andreas nearly choked on his drink, shooting Kalen a quick, albeit playful, scowl. “A while,” he said. “Why? You’re not her keeper, Micheil.”

“No,” Micheil said, “but I’m all she has.”

“I know, I know.” Andreas sighed and set down his mug, peering into the murky depths of the ale. “I want to marry her.”

Kalen nearly dropped his own mug. “What?”

Andreas ignored Kalen’s question altogether. “Do I have your permission?”

Micheil remained silent for several minutes and Kalen wondered if he was going to deny their friend. “It is not my place to make that decision,” he finally said, turning back to the prince. “Mari is a grown woman, Andreas. Only she can say if that’s what she wants. But rest assured that the queen and king won’t take to it kindly.”

“My father does not care whom I choose,” Andreas said with a noticeable hint of annoyance toward the monarch. “I do not have the head for politics like Philip. He is more suited to rule once Father is gone. I prefer battle to diplomacy, a saddle to a throne.”

Micheil nodded slowly. “Have you talked to Mari about this? About your intentions?”

“Not yet.” Andreas looked over at her as she moved back to the bar. “But I will soon. I’m not quite ready yet.”

Kalen simply remained silent, unsure of how to respond to the prince’s rather startling revelation. He had known Andreas and Mari were seeing one another on a regular basis, as the prince had told him not long ago, but he had not realized that the relationship went any further than the bedroom.

Kalen finished off his ale and caught Micheil staring at him. The playful seduction was back, and Kalen knew Micheil had plans on his mind that did not include ale and idle chatter.

With no more than a nod, Micheil stood and slid his chair back under the table. He patted Andreas on the shoulder before turning and starting for the stairs. Micheil cast a single glance back over his shoulder at Kalen. An unspoken thought passed between them, one Kalen knew well.

He smiled and stood, leaving Andreas to toy with the sorcerer’s sister in relative privacy.

Kalen followed Micheil up the first flight of steps, then down the hall to another, smaller set of stairs. As they ascended them, the robe brushed across Micheil's body, the rustle of the fabric the only sound aside from their footsteps. When they reached the first doorway along the third floor hallway, Kalen reached out to stop Micheil.

"What do you really think of Andreas and Mari?"

Micheil sighed. "Honestly? I don't think Andreas has any idea what he's getting himself into. Mari may not utilize her...*gifts*, but she does have them. I only hope they know what they're doing, Kalen."

Kalen reached up and slipped a hand under Micheil's chin, turning his head to face him. "As do I. And what of us, Micheil?"

A slow smile settled over Micheil's lips. As he reached down to trigger the latch on the door, he leaned forward to draw his tongue over Kalen's lips. "As for me," he whispered as he pushed the door open, "I want to bury myself so deep inside you that heat remains the only thing between us."

Kalen swallowed hard and followed Micheil into the room. As Micheil closed the door and locked it, Kalen sat down on the edge of the bed. He watched, utterly entranced, as Micheil pulled his robe over his head, leaving him bare from head to toe. With the robe on, no one ever assumed anything about the man who wore it, until they had seen that same man wield a sword. Despite his smaller frame, Micheil was death incarnate when he had to be, whether it was by sword or sorcery. He moved slowly toward the bed, as if he were a cat slowly stalking its prey. He knew he had Kalen wrapped around his finger, just as he was wrapped around Kalen's. When he reached the bed, Micheil dropped to his knees, sliding his hands over Kalen's thighs. With every inch of their ascent, those hands left a trail of heat, seeping through Kalen's pants to the flesh beneath.

"I want," Micheil murmured as he began placing light kisses over Kalen's cloth-covered thigh, "to taste you. I want to hear you when you come, to feel the heat of your release as it slips down my throat."

Sweet gods! Kalen felt every nerve in his body, every inch of his flesh, react to those words. *Enchanted tongue, indeed.* Had he the inclination, Micheil could make a man come without touching him, simply by uttering a few choice words at just the right moment. As it was, Kalen wasn't too far from that moment now—and the motion of Micheil's hands was anything but helpful.

As Micheil's hands moved up Kalen's stomach, Kalen's shirt went with them. A moment later, the thin white garment settled onto the wooden floor and the sorcerer's tongue circled one of Kalen's nipples, causing Kalen to draw in a quick breath. Kalen threaded his fingers through Micheil's hair, offering no resistance as the sorcerer pushed him onto his back. One of Micheil's knees lodged itself between Kalen's thighs and pressed into him, sending bolts of sensation through Kalen's body. When Micheil raised his head, he slipped his hand between them to unlace Kalen's pants. Within seconds, the sorcerer's fingers wrapped tightly around Kalen's shaft, sending his back up into an arch as Micheil began to stroke him.

"Please," Kalen breathed.

Micheil chuckled softly and licked Kalen's lips. "I love to hear you plead."

With every upward stroke, he rubbed his thumb gently over the tip. Kalen shivered and leaned his head back, trying to arch his body into Micheil's touch.

"I need you, Micheil."

Kalen lowered his gaze and Micheil released him long enough to pull his pants down and off. He tossed them onto the floor and slid an arm under Kalen, pulling him farther up the bed as he settled between his legs. Kalen drew his legs up and Micheil's hand dipped down to tease him, those enchanted fingers playing over his entrance. Micheil brought his hand to his mouth and sucked two fingers in, wetting them. Then he lowered it once more and eased them inside Kalen with a soft exhale of breath. Kalen's hands tightened in the sorcerer's hair as he bore down on those fingers, wanting more than a simple tease.

"Micheil, please..."

"So open for me," Micheil purred, licking the line of Kalen's jaw as his fingers stroked slowly in and out of Kalen's body. "All for me."

"Aye," Kalen whispered. "No one but you."

Micheil pulled his fingers away and reached to the bedside table. He shifted to kneel between Kalen's legs as he slicked his length with the golden oil, then leaned forward, teasing Kalen with the mere tip. Kalen groaned and tried to move down, wanting every inch of Micheil inside him, filling him, stretching him. As Micheil lowered himself to take Kalen in a searing kiss, he pushed inside. Kalen gasped into the sorcerer's mouth and released Micheil's hair to grip his shoulders tightly. His body arched and he rolled his hips downward, driving the seer deeper inside.

"Blessed Malin." Micheil murmured the name of the Mother Goddess as he rested his forehead against Kalen's.

Kalen slid his hands down the smooth skin of Micheil's shoulders and back, and down farther to grip his hips, pulling him closer. A groan escaped the sorcerer, and Kalen smiled. Despite all the power, Micheil was still his, and Kalen adored hearing those sighs, the sharp intake of breath when he moved just the right way. The feeling of Micheil inside him settled within Kalen's mind, and deeper still, into his soul.

When Micheil began to move, Kalen held him close, awash with every sensation. Kalen had no magic within himself, no special gifts, but with Micheil, that didn't matter. With Micheil, Kalen felt alive and powerful—and the sorcerer loved him, just as Kalen loved the sorcerer. The word had never been uttered between them, but then, it didn't need to be. It was there, in the way they kissed, the way they watched one another from across the throne room during court sessions, the way they toyed with each other when they sparred out on the training grounds.

"Sweet gods, Micheil," Kalen whispered. "It feels so good."

"Aye." Micheil kissed him again, his tongue slipping between Kalen's lips as his hips began moving slowly, pushing him deeper and pulling him out.

Kalen met every slow stroke, rocking his hips and gasping as the friction of their bodies danced over his own hard length. Micheil was always slow and gentle at first, taking his time, kissing every inch of Kalen that he could. Then his strokes increased, and his kisses grew harder, more desperate. Kalen's fingers dug into the sorcerer's hips as his own body pushed up, meeting every thrust from Micheil with an equal one. As Micheil's tongue probed Kalen's mouth, hungry in its claiming, one of the sorcerer's hands slipped between them, wrapping tightly around Kalen's cock. The rush shot through Kalen like quicksilver, drawing his body tight, then releasing it. He cried out, the sound drowned by Micheil's kiss, and moments later, Micheil followed, growling into Kalen's mouth as he came.

For several minutes, neither of them moved. Micheil's kiss softened and he released Kalen to wipe his hand on the blanket. Kalen felt limp, his energy drained completely. Micheil kissed him and rolled off, settling beside him. He slipped an arm around Kalen's middle and drew him close.

No words were said. None needed to be said. As Kalen drifted off to sleep, wrapped tightly in the arms of his lover and best friend, he knew the truth of it. Here was love eternal.

Chapter Two

Micheil stood against the stable door and watched Kalen saddle his horse. The stallion stamped his front hooves in the dirt, anxious to be off even though it was obvious his rider was not. Kalen's mail shirt draped over the wall of the horse's stall, reflecting the scant rays of sunlight as they filtered in through the roof slats. Despite Micheil's misgivings about this little venture, Kalen had stubbornly refused his armor. Micheil didn't know why he was uneasy; he just was.

"This isn't a simple trek to straighten out a border dispute."

Kalen rested his head against the saddle and sighed. "Not this again," he muttered.

"Kalen, listen to me."

"Micheil." Kalen straightened to toss his pack over the saddle, securing it with one of the leather straps. "This is not up for debate. There is nothing to be worried about. I'll be back in two weeks." The simple fact that he didn't bother to even look up annoyed Micheil even more.

"I hold my position for my abilities," Micheil said calmly, "yet you doubt them."

"I don't doubt them. You have your job. I have mine."

"I'm not asking you to stay." Micheil walked over and rested his hand on Kalen's shoulder. "I only ask that you take your armor."

"Would it really make you stop worrying?"

Micheil knew he couldn't answer that question truthfully. He worried every time Kalen left the safety of the city, even when he was by Kalen's side for some of those ventures. He reached up and stroked a fingertip slowly down Kalen's jaw. "I cannot promise you that. However, I can say that I will worry less. Trust me, Kalen. Please."

"I do trust you," Kalen said, covering Micheil's hand with his. "I trust you, not only with my life, but with my soul." He smiled slowly. "If it will ease your fears, then I will wear it." He nodded toward the mail shirt.

Micheil fussed with one of the metal rings, working it off of a nail, and finally returned to Kalen's side. He helped the general put the mail shirt on then handed Kalen his sword belt. He stepped back and waited, feeling a little better knowing Kalen had some sort of protection on. It wasn't quite as sturdy as his full armor, but Kalen reserved such cumbersome wear for battles only. The mail would have to do.

"Thank you."

Kalen laughed and shook his head before pulling Micheil to him. "Stop your worrying," he whispered. "Everything will be fine."

"Just return to me," Micheil said. "That's all I ask, Kalen."

Kalen smiled and slipped an arm around Micheil's waist, holding him close as he kissed Micheil's lips softly. "Always."

Micheil stepped back when Kalen released him, and as soon as Kalen was settled in the saddle, Micheil laid his hand on the general's leg. "Be careful, Kalen. I must return to Andrion. He sent a summons this morning."

Kalen smiled and squeezed Micheil's hand. "I will."

With that, he turned his horse and started out of the stables. His men waited near the gatehouse and once he joined them, he looked back to Micheil. With a nod, Kalen and his men disappeared through the gatehouse. Micheil sighed and turned toward the main keep, unable to shake the lingering touch of unease.

The moment he stepped into the throne room, Micheil knew something was amiss. With his entrance, all others left, leaving him alone with the king. Even Queen Lavina took her leave. Micheil walked along the purple carpet and when he reached the dais, he bowed his head.

"You summoned me, Your Highness?"

"Yes," Andrion said, the sound drawn out enough to tell Micheil this was a matter to be kept between them. "I wish you to use your...*gifts*."

Ah, yes, his gifts. Micheil raised his hand, locking all doors leading into the throne room. This was most certainly a matter to be kept between them. Once he was assured they would be uninterrupted, Micheil drew a chair to him with a lift of his hand and a silent thought.

"What is it you wish to divine, Your Highness?"

"The borders have not seen trouble in some time," the king said. "If there is indeed trouble, I trust General Ysindroc to deal with it. However, I wish to know now what goes on. If it's only a minor issue, then I have no need to be concerned."

Micheil nodded and stood once more. The king, knowing well what he asked for, remained silent. Micheil closed his eyes as the chair moved back into its original place beneath one of the tables. He raised his arms, stretching above his head in supplication as he began to chant.

"Servier, God of the Unseen, I invoke thee. Bring your wisdom to me now, so that we may see what others cannot. Show us that which is unseen. This I command, in the name of Anthor!"

An ethereal fire formed before him and he stared into its flames. As his gaze softened, images began to materialize.

"Yes," the king whispered. "Lord Erian. His lands border the Southlind Mountains."

Micheil remained silent as the image changed from that of the lord's keep to a group of men. They seemed to be searching for something within the depths of a forest.

“Interesting. Perhaps Erian searches for a way into the mountains themselves,” Andrion mused quietly. “Legends tell of riches beyond imagining beneath the mountains.”

“Legends also tell of dragons,” Micheil cautioned. “I sense...”

“Yes?”

“I sense something more,” Micheil said.

The image in the fire shimmered and focused once more, this time on Kalen’s small contingent of men. The general rode in front, talking to one of them.

“And why would the general appear to you?” Andrion asked.

“Because he is now involved in whatever Lord Erian has planned,” Micheil said coolly. “When you ask for something like this, be prepared to see everything related, whether directly or not.”

“I see.” Andrion sat back in his throne. “But what is Erian truly searching for? Is he indeed searching for a way into the mountains?”

The image flickered back to the group of the lord’s men in the forest. It did appear as if they were searching for something, but it was unclear as to what. Micheil shook his head and the image faded. The fire died out as well.

“I cannot see what he truly searches for,” Micheil said. “But rest assured that I will keep watch until the general has returned. Perhaps he will bring further information.”

“Perhaps.” Andrion sighed and waved his hand. “Leave me. I have much to think on. I will summon you if you are needed.”

With a low bow, Micheil backed away from the throne then turned and walked away. With a lift of his hand, the doors of the throne room unlocked and as he walked out, others walked in. He paid them all little mind, his own thoughts spinning too rapidly. He had lied to the king. Kalen had not come to him as an indirect relation to whatever was brewing; he had appeared as directly related. But why? How?

“A word?”

The soft voice pulled Micheil quickly out of his internal ramblings. A young woman stepped out of a darkened doorway, her small hands clasped at her waist. A diadem of sparkling jewels sat atop her golden curls, which lay piled on her head and left to hang in tendrils around her face. The red silk of her gown rustled as she walked toward him.

“Good morning, Princess Sherie.”

“Please, Micheil. How many times do I have to ask that you just call me Sherie?” Her smile was sweet, but not wholly as innocent as most would be led to believe. Her blue eyes had the ability to hold any man spellbound—any man but the one she really wanted.

Micheil sighed, attempting to remain at least genial. “I do apologize,” he said with a bow of his head. “How are you this morning, Sherie?”

The use of her name brought a smile to the princess’s lips. “Very well. And you?”

“Well,” Micheil said as they began to walk. He had much work to do this morning and little time for idle chatter. He hoped his short response would make that clear. He was wrong.

“And what of your sister?” Sherie asked casually. “How is Marilee?”

“Mari is doing well. She keeps watch over The Joker’s Ballad in the evenings...since Liette found that she was with child.”

“Liette,” Sherie repeated, as if she was trying to place the name. “Liette...”

Micheil gave her a glance out of the corner of his eye, effectively hiding any sense of annoyance. “Liette Givens. Her husband, Pier Givens, owns The Joker’s Ballad.”

“Ah, I remember now,” the princess said with a sage nod.

Micheil fought the urge to roll his eyes at her. *Of course she remembered.* He swallowed the groan as they stopped at a braced wooden door. “I must apologize,” he said, “but I have work that needs tending this morning.”

“Work for my father?” Sherie asked. She reached up and traced her fingers slowly and softly over Micheil’s shoulder. He shuddered, which brought a smile to her lips once more.

“Aye, and work for others,” Micheil said. He triggered the latch on the door in hopes that she would take the hint. “It has been a pleasure talking with you, Sherie. Perhaps we will see one another during the evening meal.”

He didn’t wait for her answer and stepped into the small room, closing the door between them without so much as another glance in her direction. As he climbed the circular stone staircase that led to his workshop and bedchambers, Micheil didn’t bother to stifle the sigh of relief at having escaped the princess’s advances. She was becoming more direct, especially after learning that his heart belonged only to her father’s general.

The moment Micheil stepped into his chambers, he felt an old, familiar presence. He went about gathering the necessary ingredients from the rows of jars on the shelves lining one wall, taking little notice of the form standing near the window by his bed. As he worked, he felt the figure draw closer, until the touch of her milky-white hand settled within him, drawing a slow shudder through his body.

“You haven’t been here for quite some time,” he said without looking up from his mortar and pestle. He sprinkled a pinch of rosemary into the marble bowl then reached for the jar of yew bark. “What do you want?”

“My sweet son,” the woman purred softly, “you are troubled. Come, sit and talk with me.”

“I have nothing to talk with you about,” Micheil said. He began crushing the herbs together, grinding them into a fine powder.

“Nonsense.”

He felt that touch again.

“Micheil, speak to me.”

Micheil set the bowl to the side with a sigh. “Why? So you can listen and not tell me a damned thing?” He turned and leaned back against the table, crossing his arms over his chest. “How about you talk to me, Vala?”

The wispy form glided across the room to stand before the window. “You still hate me.”

“I don’t hate you,” Micheil said, “but I do hold you responsible for quite a bit. It is because of you that the queen does not trust me. Her glare is as icy toward me as the princess’s is to Kalen.”

“Yes,” Vala whispered, “Lavina holds me responsible for her husband’s actions.”

“And you had nothing to do with it,” Micheil added dryly. “Yes, you’ve told me this many times, and every time it becomes less believable. Why are you here?”

Vala turned and fixed pale blue-gray eyes on him. When he was a child, that gaze had enraptured Micheil, held him spellbound. Now, it simply annoyed him—much like everything else did when it brought back memories of her.

“How is Kalen?”

The question brought Micheil’s full attention to his mother’s spirit. “Why?”

“I am just curious,” the spirit said in a distinctly motherly tone.

Micheil didn’t believe that for a second. His powers had come down from Vala to him. There was nothing “curious” about her question. “What is it?” he asked without moving.

His gaze followed her as she glided along the wooden floor, stopping to finger a sprig of herbs drying on a shelf.

“You care for him greatly,” she said.

“You know I do.”

She opened one of his books, turning page after page without touching the paper itself. “Then take heed, my son.” She turned to face him. “Your general is in danger. He rides into what could possibly be the start of a war.”

Every nerve in Micheil’s body tightened, but he didn’t move an inch. “A war? Between whom?”

“Humans,” Vala said, “and the lithings.”

Micheil laughed. “Lithings? No one has even seen a lithing for several hundred years. I seriously doubt there’s anything that serious to be concerned with.”

“If you are certain,” Vala said with a shrug.

Before Micheil could respond, the spirit faded away. He stood still for several minutes before he even allowed himself to think on what she had said. *A war? Surely not. And why would the lithings even think to venture into these lands?* Shaking his head as his brow knitted together in confusion, Micheil knew he had to find out more. He couldn’t very well go to the king without further proof to back such a weighty claim. Yet again, Micheil wished more than anything to have Kalen back home.

Returning to his work, Micheil attempted to immerse himself in it. All the while, his thoughts raced, trying to formulate a plan to gather more information without the king knowing. He couldn't leave. He thought momentarily about trying to contact Kalen through dreams, and finding that the only plausible way, he made the decision to have his evening meal brought up to him.

He finished crushing the herbs then mixed them with the base oil. The final product was for one of the young noble women, although for what purpose he had no idea. He didn't ask questions, he only filled the orders sent to him. When he heard the door in the lower chamber open, he glanced up. Only then did he realize that the sun had begun to set. He had worked straight through the evening meal. He wiped the residue from the powder on a cloth hanging from the table corner then started for his chamber door. Before he could touch the handle, the door swung open.

"Now how did I know to find you cloistered in here?" Andreas swept inside. Behind him, two servants followed, each one carrying a tray. One of them had a bottle tucked under his left arm as well.

"Lucky guess," Micheil said as he made room on another table. "Thank you." He nodded to the servants and waited until they had left once more before turning to the prince. "I was going to send word to have my meal brought to me."

"Or you would just forget to eat altogether," Andreas said. He pulled up a chair and settled into it. He lifted the lid off of the nearest tray and inhaled deeply. "Ah, roast. I haven't had this in some time." Micheil still stood beside the table. "Oh, for the love of Anthon, sit down."

Micheil sat and remained silent for several minutes. He had managed to forget the conversation with his mother's spirit, having gotten lost in his work, but now it came back to him. "Within this keep, you are the only one I trust, Andreas."

The prince stopped with a carrot halfway to his mouth. "What's wrong?"

The smell of a delicious roast taunted and teased Micheil from under the cover of his own tray, but he felt this to be more important just now. Ignoring the aroma, he opted for the bottle of wine. "I believe things may be worse than your father is inclined to think," he admitted as he popped the cork out.

Andreas reached over to the small shelf beside him and picked up two silver goblets. "Why do you say that? Have you had another vision?" He held the goblets upright as Micheil filled them.

"Of a sort. Your father wished to see what is going on outside Sonana, so I showed him. He's convinced Lord Erian is searching for a way into the mountains." Micheil chuckled as the prince's eyes widened. "I was inclined to believe that myself," Micheil said, "that is until my mother put another thought forward."

Andreas groaned. "Your mother again?"

"Aye," Micheil said with a nod. "She's convinced a war is brewing."

"Between whom?"

"Humans and lithings."

Andreas nearly choked on a swallow of wine. “What?”

Micheil nodded. “That’s damn close to the response she received from me,” he said as he finally gave in and lifted the cover from his tray. He couldn’t help but close his eyes as the most delicious smell in all of Socendor greeted him. Well, not quite the most delicious—Kalen Ysindroc held that distinction, especially after a night of drinking, when his breath was a sweet combination of ale and lust and love. The smell of his arousal was a potent elixir, more drugging than anything Micheil had ever conjured in his lifetime.

Micheil shook his head to rid it of such thoughts. Kalen would be gone for two weeks at the least, enough time for Micheil to drive himself insane if he wasn’t careful. “She seems to think this is the start of a war,” he continued. “But I cannot go to the king, touting a war cry, without irrefutable evidence to support the claim.”

“True, very true,” Andreas said. He took several bites of roast before speaking again. “But how will you gather such evidence, especially without my father knowing?”

“Dreams,” Micheil said absently, almost to himself. Catching the confusion on the prince’s face, he smiled wryly. “I plan on paying Kalen a visit through dreams.”

“Does Kalen even know how to contact you in such a way?”

“Not yet,” Micheil said, “but it’s fairly easy to do.”

The two hours of talking with Andreas had settled Micheil’s thoughts to a degree, but once he closed the chamber door, Micheil’s fears came back full force. He drew his hands down over his face and looked around the room. As his gaze settled on the bed—the bed he had shared so many times with Kalen—he felt the truth of his mother’s words. Even so, he could not go to the king—not yet.

Micheil pulled his robe over his head and draped it on the back of the nearest chair. As soon as his boots were off and his belt joined them on the floor, he blew out his candle then lay down in bed. He knew Kalen would be asleep; he knew the general’s routine just as well as he knew his own. As he closed his eyes, Micheil focused his thoughts on Kalen and willed himself to relax completely until his body felt heavy.

Micheil watched Kalen’s chest rise and fall with every breath. Kalen slept deeply, possibly already dreaming. Micheil smiled. Perhaps this would be easier than he had expected. He moved closer to Kalen and felt himself settle within the general’s mind. Snippets of Kalen’s dream came to Micheil then.

Fire. And smoke. Deep crimson red. The brilliance of a newly struck fire. And death.

“From the depths of the earth and the sea,

From the endless skies and the mists of time,

I call thee, beasts of fire...”

An unseen force threw Micheil to the ground. When he rolled over, the sight that greeted him nearly stopped his heart.

Kalen stood on a hilltop, his arms raised to the swirling forms above him. In and out of the voluminous clouds, great beasts flew. Fiery plumes of red and orange surrounded the behemoths, and their obsidian scales glimmered in the silver moonlight as it cascaded down onto the valleys and hills below.

Then Kalen turned. The green depths of his eyes blazed with an internal fire as his gaze settled on Micheil.

“You are in danger,” Micheil warned after several moments of silence.

“Aye,” Kalen said with a slow nod. “As are you. You are mine. And for that very reason, you will be hunted.”

Micheil sat bolt upright in his bed. Sweat beaded on his skin and trickled slowly over his face. The chill of the room pierced him, yet it did nothing to cool the fire within. *Kalen’s fire*. But how? Kalen Ysindroc had no such magic within him.

“Sweet Malin, save us.”

Chapter Three

Kalen woke with a start, drawing his knife as he scanned his darkened tent. Seeing nothing amiss, he collapsed onto his bedroll and stared up at the low canvas roof above him. It had only been a dream.

“General Ysindroc!”

Kalen shifted his gaze to the closed flap of his tent, the tent which doubled as his command center. “Come in.”

The flap lifted and his senior captain, Josiah Petiet, stepped in, letting the flap drop down behind him. “Sir, our scouts have reported suspicious activity over the hills to the west. I’ve sent Kears and his men to investigate.”

Kalen nodded and sat up. “Very good, Captain.” He leaned on his hands and closed his eyes, letting his head fall backward as he sighed. “Still five days from Sonana and the trouble has already begun.”

“Shall I send word to King Andrion?”

“No. I need more information to determine whether this new development is a threat or not.”

The captain sat and eyed Kalen curiously for a moment. “Permission to speak freely?” Kalen nodded and Josiah sighed. “Kalen, what is it? Something’s troubling you.”

Kalen fell back and stretched out. “I had a dream that greatly disturbed me.”

Josiah lifted a graying eyebrow at him. “A dream? Not much disturbs you. Must have been quite a dream.”

“Micheil came to me in it,” Kalen said. He closed his eyes slowly as he tried to focus on Micheil and not the creatures he had seen in his dream.

“A dream with Micheil disturbed you?”

Kalen could almost hear the chuckle that his captain held back. The notion itself was an amusing one, but Kalen shook his head. “It wasn’t *his* presence that disturbed me—it was the presence of dragons.”

Josiah remained silent for several minutes. Kalen noted the furrowing of the man’s silvery eyebrows. Pale blue eyes peered at him, a quiet unease within their almost gray depths. Josiah opened his mouth to speak then closed it once more as if thinking better of it.

“Yes?” Kalen asked him quietly.

“I just wonder if perhaps the tales of the mountains might have played a part in your dream,” Josiah ventured.

“Perhaps. I haven’t been near the mountains in some time.”

“Have you had such dreams before?”

Kalen shook his head. “No. I suppose you’re right, however. The rumors and legends must be to blame.”

Josiah nodded and started to speak, but stopped as one of the scouts entered. “Yes? What is it, Riley?”

The scout saluted the two men and bowed his head briefly. “We have a prisoner, sirs. We captured him just over the hill. He was alone.”

Kalen narrowed his gaze. “Who is he?”

The scout seemed nervous for a moment. “He would not give us his name, sir, but he is...a lithing.”

Josiah and Kalen glanced at each other, and Kalen’s thoughts echoed those he saw within the captain’s eyes. When he turned his attention back to the scout, Kalen nodded.

“Very well,” he said as he stood. “Bring him here.”

“Sir, are you sure that is wise?” Josiah asked him.

“Are you questioning me?” Kalen gave him a stern glare and the captain lowered his gaze immediately.

“No, sir,” Josiah said quietly. “You heard the general,” he told the scout. “Bring the prisoner.”

The scout disappeared out of the tent and returned a moment later. Behind him, two men dragged the limp body of a lithing between them. They dropped the creature and backed away. Kalen stood before the lithing and lifted its head with the blade of his dagger. Black eyes full of hate stared up at him from under ropes of braided black hair.

“Who are you?” Kalen asked.

“At least I know who *I* am.”

Kalen pressed the blade to the lithing’s throat. “I have no time for riddles. Why are you here? How did you get here?”

The lithing laughed. It was a sound that sent a chill straight through to one’s bones. “I have come with others,” the lithing said, “to search.”

“Search for what?”

A slow smile spread across the lithing’s mouth, baring sharpened teeth. “For the true king’s lost son.”

Kalen froze as his blood ran cold. “Breasal,” he whispered.

“Aye, you know of this king,” the lithing said. He seemed unmoved by the dagger’s precarious position.

“King?” Kalen said, bringing his attention back to the lithing. “Andrion is the true king. Breasal was a murderer. Nothing more.”

“Perhaps.”

Kalen started to speak, but a quick movement from the lithing stopped him cold. Kalen dropped to his knees, blood seeping through his shirt. A single sword stroke from one of the guards beheaded the lithing. Josiah caught Kalen before he could fall.

“Medic!”

Kalen squeezed his eyes shut as Josiah ripped open his shirt. Kalen hadn’t felt the touch of a lithing blade in ages, but he remembered enough to know this one was different. His skin burned where the lithing stabbed him, but, deeper still, Kalen sensed the blackness of the creature’s magic seeping into his body.

“Micheil. I need...Micheil,” he gasped between breaths.

“Send word for the king’s seer at once!” Josiah shouted. “Why Micheil?”

Kalen fought to steady his breathing. The black shadow moved slowly over his side, tightening his lungs as he struggled for air. “Dark magic,” he panted. “Micheil...is an elf.”

“What?” Josiah started to jump to his feet, but Kalen grabbed his tunic and held him.

“Tell no one. Micheil Thierauf is everything to me.”

“Make way for the king’s seer!”

Kalen barely heard the shouting, but he knew Micheil had arrived. What would take a man a full day to cover, the sorcerer could travel in only a few hours. Some claimed Micheil used his magic, but Kalen knew the truth of it. Only an elf’s horse could move at such speed, and perhaps, when word of Kalen’s steadily declining health reached the keep, it simply aided Micheil in testing his horse’s limits.

“I want everyone out. Get me some water and clean, dry cloths.”

Kalen managed a smile. He knew that voice. “Micheil.”

“Shh,” Micheil murmured.

Kalen felt the blanket slip down to his waist and then Micheil pulled away the bandage Josiah had placed on the wound. Kalen opened his eyes and met Micheil’s gaze. Despite the appearance of calm, there was worry within those blue eyes.

“Well?”

Micheil sighed and Kalen winced as the sorcerer rolled him the slightest bit to pull the bloodied bandage out from under him. “The magic has spread,” he said. “And there will be a scar.”

“Can you stop it from spreading any further?” Kalen coughed then groaned when the act proved rather painful. He turned his head into Micheil’s touch when he felt the sorcerer’s palm cover his forehead. He felt so cold, a sharp contrast to the warmth of Micheil’s hand, yet he was sweating. He could feel the dampness as his clothes clung to his skin.

“Fever has already set in,” Micheil announced. He turned and took the bucket of water and handful of cloths from Josiah. “Leave us.”

Micheil closed his eyes and placed his hand in the water. Having seen Micheil do this before, it did not startle Kalen to see a green glow emanate from the bucket. Micheil removed his hand and dipped the first rag into the water, soaking it completely. He wrung out the excess water and leaned down to kiss Kalen softly.

“This is going to hurt,” he whispered. He didn’t give Kalen time to answer before placing the rag on the wound.

Kalen sucked in a quick, sharp breath, hissing through his teeth as the unmistakable smell of burning flesh filled the air around them. The pain spread deep within him, and he forced himself to remain flat, despite the almost overwhelming urge to pull away. The burn was not from the water itself, but from the effects of elven magic against the shadows. Gods, it hurt like hell!

“Close your eyes,” Micheil whispered. “Follow the thread of my magic. Allow it to fill you completely as it neutralizes the shadows.”

Kalen did as he was told. Micheil’s magic was green, a brilliant emerald like the purest gem and the newest spring grass. Kalen followed it as it spread through him. He felt a sense of peace as the green swallowed the shadows until there was nothing left of them. He breathed a slow sigh of relief as the last of the shadows faded away, leaving him with nothing but Micheil’s elven magic to fill him.

Micheil sat back and pulled the rag away. He tossed it onto the ground and it burst into emerald flames. The fire consumed the cloth entirely, leaving nothing but a black spot on the ground to mark where the rag had been.

“Thank you.”

Micheil smiled as he wet another cloth to clean the dried blood from Kalen’s side and stomach. “You are very welcome,” he said. “You know that.”

Kalen caught his hand.

“I’m sorry,” Kalen said.

“For what?”

Kalen pulled him down. “For doubting your abilities, Micheil.”

He started to say more, but Micheil’s lips on his silenced him. He slipped his fingers beneath Micheil’s hair, pulling him closer to deepen their kiss. Micheil’s kiss was always sweet. He tasted like the rains of spring, like the green of his magic. It was a mélange of flavors Kalen could never live without.

“I’ll forgive you for your stubbornness,” Micheil teased softly as he pulled away from Kalen’s lips.

“I suppose I should thank you for that as well,” Kalen said.

When Micheil tried to sit up, Kalen tightened his grip on the sorcerer and pulled him back down.

“It is dawn,” Micheil chuckled. “We must be moving.”

“We?” Kalen stopped just before stealing another kiss.

“Aye,” Micheil said with a nod. “I’m going with you.”

Kalen slid out from under Micheil to see him better. "You have to return to Akuron Heights."

"You would order a sorcerer?" Micheil asked. He lifted a golden eyebrow in a hint of dark amusement.

"It was not an order," Kalen countered as he began to dress. "It was a request."

Micheil stood, crossing his arms over his chest. "I will not leave you."

"Your place is by the king."

Darkness descended over Micheil's face. "My place is by your side," he said. "And it is not for you to determine."

Kalen stopped with his hand poised over the buckle for his sword belt. "I never made that distinction, Micheil. I only wish you to return to the keep where you will be safe."

"And I will say it again: my place is by your side. That lithing could have attempted to kill anyone, but it was obvious that his intended target was you."

"Why do you say that?"

Micheil picked up Kalen's mail coat and helped him slide it on. "Because lithings do not use their magic for such things as enchanting their weapons," he said, "unless they have a specific target in mind."

"Why me?" Kalen asked him. He could not fathom what would have garnered the lithings' attentions now, four years after the last excursion to push them out of Andrion's lands. "Why now? Why have they waited so long after the last battle?"

"That I do not know," Micheil said with a sigh. "But rest assured, I will find out, even if it means returning home for a time."

"Home? Would they even remember you in Seriete?"

A slow, teasing smile edged across Micheil's lips. "Are you suggesting I am easy to forget?"

Kalen couldn't miss the touch of arrogance in the sorcerer's eyes. "You..." His words trailed off as he tried to think of something to say. "You are just you, Micheil. No man in existence could forget you."

Micheil moved closer to Kalen. "I only wish to be in the thoughts of one man in this world."

Kalen swallowed and found himself short of breath. "Then have no fear, sorcerer. You are always in my thoughts." It was the full truth. Every waking moment, every dream, was dominated by thoughts of the enigmatic elven sorcerer. Kalen wondered how many others held such dreams about Micheil Thierauf, as the elf's eyes alone were windows that hinted at the power within him. He was a mystery.

Micheil smiled and leaned forward to steal a kiss before leaving the tent. Kalen followed him and caught Josiah's curious stare. As Micheil helped the others break camp, Kalen pulled his senior captain aside.

"He's riding with us."

Josiah's eyes widened. "He's going with us? What of the king?"

"Micheil is here under King Andrion's direct orders," Kalen said as he saddled his horse.

“Do you think it is wise for him to join us?” Josiah asked as he glanced over at Micheil.

Kalen followed his captain’s gaze. Micheil was busy breaking down the tent. “Do you think it wise to argue with Micheil Thierauf?”

Josiah shook his head quickly. “No, sir.”

“We await your order to ride, General.” Micheil stopped before Kalen, holding the reins of his own white stallion. Josiah nodded to Kalen then to Micheil before walking away. Micheil lifted an eyebrow in question.

“He questions the accompaniment of the king’s seer,” Kalen explained as he swung up into the saddle.

Micheil followed suit and laughed. “Don’t they all?”

“Perhaps some more than others.” Kalen turned his horse around to address the small group of men. “We are only a day’s ride from Junely. While he owes allegiance to the king, I do not expect much in the way of hospitality from Lord Merchia. Master Thierauf and I will most likely make use of one of the town’s two inns. I suggest the rest of you do the same, unless you have other arrangements. Any questions?” After a moment of silence, Kalen turned toward the mountains. “Then we ride.”

Kalen hoped the calm weather would hold out for their day’s ride. Although it was nearly harvest time, the weather tended to remain temperate, with only light rain showers and brisk breezes. Near the mountains, however, the climate changed, abruptly, in some places. The chill of the wind could bite through almost anything, and the light showers turned to freezing rain. Snow was a common sight, even this early.

Just as he thought they would be spared, the clouds above opened and chilled raindrops pelted down on them, soaking everyone. The men began to grumble as they rode along, and for a time, Kalen hunched in his cloak and kept quiet. But as the chill grew too much to bear any longer, he muttered a harsh curse to the gods under his breath. He glanced at Micheil and found the sorcerer watching him. Seconds later, the rain stopped just as quickly as it had begun. Kalen did not miss the almost stunned expression on Micheil’s face, nor did he miss the flicker of deep curiosity within those pale eyes.

Micheil drew closer until their horses were nearly nose to nose. “I’m not going to ask how you did that.”

“Did what?”

“Have you had any strange dreams?”

Now that did surprise Kalen. He stared straight ahead, unable to meet Micheil’s piercing gaze. “Why?”

The mountains loomed on the horizon, towering above the land like a dark, jagged wall. Snow-capped tips disappeared under blankets of white and gray clouds, and halfway up the sides, trees became scarce.

Creatures of legend dwelt within those mountains, deep within the earth. Whether they were real or not was a matter of intense debate.

“Kalen.”

Kalen shook his head to free it of the images from last night’s dream. Yes, he’d had a strange dream, but to admit what he had seen would make him appear foolish at best and a heretic at worst.

“Yes,” he finally admitted, “I have.”

“And what of it? What did you see?”

“Can a dream simply be a dream, Micheil?” Kalen asked in exasperation. “Can a man not dream of random images and such without it meaning something?”

“Not if he dreams of dragons,” Micheil said.

“How do you know?”

“You know the answer to that. It was you, in fact, who warned me.”

Kalen closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He hated when Micheil got like this. The sorcerer had a habit of slipping into riddle-speak, expecting mere men to work things out for themselves. It was a damned annoying habit.

“I cannot control my dreams, Micheil.”

“No, but you most certainly controlled that one.”

Kalen gritted his teeth then forced himself to relax. After a deep breath to calm down, he opened his eyes. “You are the sorcerer. If you witnessed such things in my dream, what do *you* make of them?”

Micheil seemed unmoved by the touch of annoyance in Kalen’s voice. “Touchy, aren’t we?”

“You have a damnable habit of poking and prying when things are best left alone,” Kalen grumbled. He noticed the sorcerer’s wry grin.

“There isn’t an inch of your body I do not know, Kalen Ysindroc. Do you really think you can hide your mind from me?”

A shiver stole through Kalen with those words, if only because of their undeniable truth. To Micheil, he was an open book, in every sense of the word. “No,” he said quietly.

“Then let me awaken what lies within you, Kalen,” Micheil said. “Let me help you tap into that.”

Kalen shook his head. “No. It’s bad enough that rumors abound regarding you and your influence over a king; the last thing I need is for someone to think I have magic within me, which I don’t.”

“Are you so certain of that?”

Kalen fell silent, unsure of how to answer. To see dragons, even within a dream, spoke of abilities far beyond those any mere mortal possessed. The dream itself was disconcerting enough. The thought of any magic within him was enough to firm Kalen’s convictions against the notion entirely.

“You are afraid,” Micheil said calmly.

How could he remain so calm? Kalen shook his head, confused beyond any reasonable comprehension. It simply did not make any sense whatsoever. Was he afraid? Was it fear that truly stayed him? Or was it the possibility of finding out Micheil was yet again right?

“Perhaps both?”

Kalen groaned. “You’ve got to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Don’t play coy with me, sorcerer. You know damn well what I’m talking about—you and your mind reading.”

Micheil chuckled and leaned over slightly. “I only do it with you, love. Only with you.”

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered,” Kalen said, “or worried.” A sudden shiver snaked up his spine as Micheil’s thoughts brushed through his mind. Nothing coherent as speech, but sensations—touches, kisses, caresses. “Gods, Micheil, that could be dangerous.”

“Aye, but it is such fun.”

Kalen simply shook his head, and they both fell silent as they continued to ride. The only sounds were the scrape and crunch of hooves on crushed rock, although the occasional bird flew overhead, leaving the forest to the south. Kalen did his best to avoid those woods. According to his mother—his adoptive mother—he had been found in the forest when he was less than a year old. He often wondered about his birth parents: who they were, if he even resembled them at all.

In the distance, a great flock of birds, sunning themselves on a hilltop, suddenly took flight. A single swish of a slender, sleek tail was the only evidence of the reason why such large, predatory birds would take flight at once.

“A feralaan.”

The dark form retreated into the forest amid a cloud of black and white feathers. “A bit small for one, isn’t it?”

“A young one,” Micheil said. “It is a cub, no doubt on its first hunt. The mother will not be far.”

“Have you ever owned one?”

Micheil chuckled. “One does not own a feralaan. The feralaan chooses its rider and remains loyal to the death.”

Kalen swallowed hard. “And if someone else were to attempt to ride one?”

Micheil gave him a wry grin. “The unfortunate fool would never make it onto the creature’s back.”

“I see.”

Chapter Four

“Are you certain you want to go in there with me?”

Micheil gave Kalen an expression that would have sent most grown men running. Kalen, however, answered it with an equally stubborn one of his own. Micheil sighed and glanced back at the massive carved doors before them. A page stood nearby, nervously toying with the hem of his tunic and taking great care not to make eye contact with either of them.

“I belong by your side,” Micheil said resolutely.

“Very well.”

Kalen nodded to the page. The young man quickly moved to open the doors.

The main hall was a far cry from Andrion’s keep in Akuron Heights. Lord Merchia’s keep was made of timber and bricks of mud, reinforced with smooth, rounded stones in more strategic points. Heavy wooden furniture dominated the main hall in the form of tables and benches. At the far end of the room, set on a stone dais, was a throne of carved wood and in it, a man of Andrion’s age, perhaps a few years younger.

Lord Merchia sat with his elbow resting on an arm of the throne, bent to the side, listening to a haggard man. A moment later, the lord’s dark brown gaze settled on the page.

“My lord,” the young man announced, “General Kalen Ysindroc and Master Micheil Thierauf are here to see you.”

“I can see that,” the aging lord said with annoyance. With a lift of his hand, the page stepped to the side. As Micheil and Kalen walked toward the dais, the lord’s eyes narrowed. “Ah, yes. Two men for whom an introduction is not needed. What brings you to my keep?”

“My lord,” Kalen said with a bow, “I come on order of His Highness, King Andrion. It is a matter of border control.”

Those words seemed to signal a shift in the lord’s countenance. He waved the man beside him away and then, with nothing more than a raise of his hand, all others left the room. Once they were alone, the lord leaned forward in his throne, resting his arms on the sides of the chair.

“What precisely is going on? I have rumors flying rampant from here to Sonana about lithings in these lands once again. I sincerely hope the king has sent you here to deal with these matters.”

Kalen nodded. “Yes, my lord, that is why we are here.”

“We? So the king’s seer does indeed travel with you and is not just a coincidental visitor?”

“Aye, my lord,” Micheil said. “I ride with General Ysindroc and his men.”

“I see.” Lord Merchia sat back in the throne and tugged absently at the graying beard on his chin. “There have been no sightings here in Junely, although some have reported strange activity along the border between my lands and the forest to the south.”

“As if they were searching for something,” Micheil mused quietly.

“That is my assumption,” the lord said. “Although just what that something is remains a mystery. What do you need from me?”

“Accommodations for my men and supplies,” Kalen requested.

“How many men ride with you?”

“Only a small group—twenty-two including Master Thierauf and myself.”

The lord nodded. “I will send ten of my men with you in the morning. You will need them, I fear.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Kalen said with a bow of his head. “That is most gracious of you.”

“Yes, yes.”

The lord reached for a braided length of black rope hanging from the wall near his chair. With a strong tug, a dull bell rang from somewhere above. A moment later, a young woman stepped through the narrow doorway to the left of the lord’s chair. She curtsied before him.

“Show these gentlemen to their room.”

The young woman curtsied again. “Yes, my lord.” She then turned to Kalen and Micheil. “This way, please.”

Micheil stifled a chuckle when she blushed in response to Kalen’s smile. They followed her out of the main hall and down a dark corridor.

“I did not do or say anything,” Kalen protested.

“Maybe not, but I can’t exactly blame her,” Micheil whispered.

“Micheil Thierauf, the most powerful sorcerer in Socendor, blushing?” he laughed. “Now that’s rich.”

“Hush,” Micheil admonished him, “or I will find something to occupy your mouth.”

Kalen waited until the young woman continued without them, then he turned and pinned Micheil against the wall. “Perhaps you should do that, sorcerer.”

A slow smile edged across Micheil’s lips. “I plan on it.”

Kalen leaned in for a kiss, but stopped at the sound of a man clearing his throat.

“Somehow, I am not surprised to see you in such a situation.”

Micheil tore his gaze from Kalen. The young woman was nowhere to be seen. “A fine trick.”

Kalen stepped back. “And you are?”

The man bowed his head and a lock of coal black hair slipped free to reveal the faintest hint of a pointed ear. “I do apologize, my lord. My name is Sorien Alette.”

“You’re an elf,” Kalen whispered.

Sorien nodded slowly. "I am. I trained under Vala Thierauf for some time."

Micheil smiled and pulled Sorien into an embrace. "I wondered what became of you," he said as he tucked the strand of hair behind Sorien's ear, which transformed into a human ear once more. "But a young woman?" Micheil cocked a teasing eyebrow.

Sorien smiled and Micheil was surprised to see a touch of rose coloring the young elf's cheeks. "Yes, well, let's just say that I felt it necessary to leave Seriete for a time. Who would think anything untoward of a young serving woman?"

"Or perhaps it is your own unrelenting wish to experience all aspects of life?" Micheil teased. Much to his amusement, Sorien blushed even more.

"Well, I won't be keeping you gentlemen from your...pursuits." Sorien bowed low to both of them and winked at Micheil before changing back his form to that of the young woman.

Micheil shook his head. Kalen's expression was comical. Micheil slid his hand down Kalen's arm and tugged him down the hall. He stopped in front of the last door on the left and opened it. The room was sparsely furnished, but it at least had a bed. Micheil pulled Kalen in and closed the door. With a raise of his hand, he locked it and turned to the general.

"Now, about that promise of keeping my mouth busy?" Kalen reminded Micheil as he dropped to his knees.

He pushed Micheil back against the door and unlaced his pants, tugging them down to his feet. Micheil's cock sprang free and Kalen licked his lips. Kalen wrapped his fingers around Micheil's length and rubbed the tip over his mouth, all the while keeping Micheil locked in a heated gaze. The sight took Micheil's breath away.

"What do you want, Micheil?" Kalen asked. He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, rolling it over the tip.

"I want you to love me."

"Love you?" Kalen licked a slow, torturous path from the tip of Micheil's cock to the base, then back up. "Now that is a word I haven't heard from you before."

Micheil remained silent for several minutes, unable to speak while Kalen bathed his cock with his tongue. When he finally found his voice, it wavered. "I want you to love me," he repeated, "as I love nothing more in this world than you."

Kalen smiled and held Micheil's gaze as he slid his mouth down his length, swallowing Micheil entirely. Micheil's head fell back against the door with an audible thump.

Sweet gods. A hand touched his thigh and Micheil opened his eyes once more. Kalen's hand nudged between Micheil's legs, parting them slowly. Pressing himself against the door for support, Micheil gave in. Kalen slid two fingers into his mouth to wet them, then pressed them to Micheil's entrance. With

agonizing gentleness, Kalen pushed them inside. Micheil's legs grew weak, and he fought to remain standing.

"Kalen. Please."

Kalen pulled away and stroked his hand along Micheil's length. "Lie down on the bed."

Micheil struggled to regain his footing and, with shaking legs, made his way to the bed. He collapsed onto it, kicking his boots and pants off before stretching out. Kalen approached him languorously, teasing him by taking his clothing off slowly. As each article of clothing was removed, Micheil marveled at the feast set out before him. He was always in awe of Kalen, even after so many years of seeing the man in varying states of dress and undress.

He adored the way Kalen's body was slightly bronzed from long hours spent training the newest recruits to Andrion's army. His raven-colored hair appeared almost blue when the light reflected off of it at just the right angle. From the soles of his feet to his broad shoulders, Kalen was built like a warrior—muscular, hard and agile. So agile at times that Micheil wondered if perhaps, somewhere down the line, Kalen had elven blood within him. And his eyes. Gods, Kalen's eyes could hold even the most stoic sorcerer spellbound—dark, glittering sapphires that could see into a person's soul, deeper than Micheil had ever dared to search even within himself.

Kalen stilled by the bed, staring down at him in silence. Micheil didn't need words to know what was going through the general's mind. It was the same thought that remained with him every time they were together and every moment they were apart. He held out a hand and Kalen took it, sliding onto the bed beside him.

"Would it be foolish and trite for me to tell you that I love you?"

Micheil smiled and linked their hands together, bringing them up to kiss the back of Kalen's hand. "In the elven world, we do not say 'I love you'."

"Then what do you say?"

Micheil reached up and touched Kalen's lips with his fingertips. "'You are sacred to me.'"

Kalen smiled and caught Micheil's fingers, sucking them into his mouth. Micheil's heart skipped a beat as the wet warmth of Kalen's tongue rolled over his fingers, reminding him of Kalen's own brand of magic. Kalen grasped his wrist and pulled his hand away before lowering his head for a kiss. A soft sigh escaped Micheil as their lips met, and Kalen's tongue slipped inside.

Kalen released Micheil's hand and trailed his fingers down his side, ending at his hip. He flexed his fingers, digging them into Micheil's skin. Micheil groaned into their kiss, lifting his hips into that touch, wanting more. Kalen pulled away from their kiss slowly and traced a feather-light trail over Micheil's hip until he reached his cock.

As he circled Micheil's length with his fingers, Kalen settled between Micheil's legs, parting them with his own. Micheil thrust up, driving his cock through Kalen's fist. Kalen stroked him slowly, then

reached down and slicked himself with spit. Micheil would have opted for oil, but he had come unprepared this time. When Kalen lowered his body to press against his, all other thoughts left Micheil's mind. He arched his back as Kalen pushed forward, impaling him slowly. Micheil closed his eyes and let out a throaty groan as Kalen's full length filled him.

"Gods," Kalen whispered. "It's been too long, Micheil."

"Aye." Micheil slid his hands over Kalen's arms, then across his shoulders to cup his neck. He pulled Kalen down to kiss him softly. "Please," he murmured, "love me."

Instead of saying anything in response, Kalen caught Micheil in a gentle but thorough kiss and began moving his hips. Micheil caressed his hands down Kalen's back, finally to rest on his buttocks, pulling him deeper with every thrust. It had been entirely too long since he had been the one to receive this, and he realized now how much he truly missed it. The sensations of Kalen withdrawing then entering him again, radiated through him, from the soles of his feet to the tips of his fingers.

"Kalen...don't stop."

Micheil closed his eyes and the rhythm of Kalen's movements settled inside him. He could feel Kalen's body begin to tighten, just as strongly as if it had been his own. As Kalen's thrusts intensified, Micheil's heart raced. His own body began to tighten, and every stroke Kalen made drove him closer to the edge. He rocked his hips to meet Kalen, his mind reeling with the force behind Kalen's strokes.

"Oh, gods," Kalen groaned. "Micheil!"

At the moment of Kalen's release, it began. It started as a ghost of a touch within Micheil's mind. As the feeling grew, Micheil's breath left his body in a sudden sharp exhale as a rush of pure heat blazed through him. Too shocked to question its source, Micheil could only cry out as the blinding brilliance tripped him over the edge. He clung to Kalen as if his life depended on him, his body shaking uncontrollably. The surge radiated through him to the core of his being, leaving him dazed and breathless.

"Micheil?"

Micheil opened his eyes and had to blink several times to regain his bearings. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Kalen said. He stroked Micheil's cheek softly. His voice was full of worry. "You just..." He shook his head. "You cried out then seemed to black out."

Micheil licked his lips and shook his head. "I don't know what happened either. It felt as if..." He couldn't quite believe what he was going to say. "It was a power transfer."

Kalen lifted an eyebrow quizzically. "A power transfer? Did I miss something? I thought that happens only between sorcerers."

Micheil nodded slowly. "It does."

Kalen stared at him in silence for a moment before rolling to the side. He stared unblinking at the ceiling. "What's happening to me, Micheil?"

Micheil rolled over and propped himself up on his forearm. He tipped Kalen's head toward him and lingered over his jaw, stroking it with his fingers. He honestly had no idea what to say. A power exchange happened only between sorcerers, and they were never as strong as the one they had just shared. The experience left him bewildered.

"I don't know," he admitted finally.

"How did you know I had a dream about dragons?"

Micheil wasn't expecting such a question and he was unsure of how to answer. He studied Kalen's eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse of something—anything—that would explain what was going on within the general. No answers came.

"I came to you in your dream, in hopes of asking you to contact me as soon as you had information regarding the border issues. Yet when I entered your dream, you were on a hilltop, commanding the dragons that live beneath the mountains. I told you that you were in danger."

"As are you. You are mine, and for that very reason, you will be hunted," Kalen said, reciting what he had said in the dream. "Oh, gods. Micheil, this is the last thing I need right now."

"Shh," Micheil coaxed softly. "No one else knows, Kalen. For now, I suggest we keep this between ourselves."

"What are we going to do about it? I can't keep stopping the rain like I did before, or crying out in a dream. Or, gods forbid, overload the man I love with powers I don't even know how to control." Kalen drew his hands down over his face. His eyes filled with uncertainty and fear. Neither emotion was synonymous with Kalen Ysindroc, yet both were there.

Micheil leaned forward and kissed him softly. "It's all right," he whispered. "We will get to the heart of this matter."

"How?"

"I have no idea," Micheil admitted with a sigh. He fell onto his back and closed his eyes. "I simply do not know."

The next morning, Micheil's doubts weighed heavily on him. He couldn't shake the lingering suspicions about Kalen, and last night's experience only reaffirmed his convictions that there was more to the general than anyone ever knew. Lost in thought, he barely heard someone whisper his name as he walked down the otherwise silent corridor.

"Micheil."

Upon seeing no one, Micheil started to walk away, but a hand reached out to catch at his cloak. He turned and saw a form retreating into the shadows. He followed and found himself in a small nook beneath a stone staircase. A hood dropped to fully reveal Sorien. The elf peered around Micheil's shoulder, then back at Micheil.

“Your general,” Sorien whispered, “is in danger.”

Micheil narrowed his gaze and remained silent for a moment, working through his mind the possibilities of Kalen’s newfound abilities having been sensed all the way into Seriete. It was highly unlikely.

“What do you mean?”

“Word has reached Lord Merchia of lithings growing closer. He sent out scouts while you were sleeping. They returned this morning with news from a messenger of Lord Erian’s. The messenger was on his way here.”

“What does this have to do with Kalen?”

“They, the lithings, seek to kill him.”

“Why?” Micheil knew Kalen had enemies within the lithing society, but they had never dared to venture into Andrion’s lands since Kalen’s army drove them out years ago.

“A band of them was hired to murder the general,” Sorien explained. “For what purpose, I do not know.”

Micheil opened his mouth to reassure Sorien that Kalen was safe, but Sorien shook his head quickly.

“Micheil, listen to me. They were hired by someone in King Andrion’s court.”

Micheil blinked several times, unsure if he had heard the elf correctly. “How do you know this?”

Sorien reached into the folds of his robe and pulled out a scrap of parchment. Micheil opened it and read the finely written note with scrutiny. Only when he reached the mention of Kalen by name did he realize Sorien was serious.

Master Braen—

I am sure that you will find my offer to your liking. Your request for information is beyond what I can provide. However, I can give you a wealthy amount from the king’s treasury, provided I have proof of the deed done.

As of this writing, Kalen Ysindroc is on his way to Sonana with twenty men. I want his head as proof of his death. I await your response.

S.

Micheil folded the note. “Who else knows about this?”

“Lord Merchia and Lord Erian. The messenger who delivered it from Sonana had no knowledge of its contents. He said it was delivered by a shrouded figure to the outpost, and from there, it was taken by messenger, straight to Lord Erian.”

“And if Merchia finds this missing?” Micheil asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Sorien seemed to have neglected the consequences of stealing from a lord. Micheil shook his head with a sigh. “Pack light. Meet us outside the city proper. I highly suggest illusion of a different sort.”

“Thank you,” Sorien said before shrinking to the form of a mouse. He scurried under Micheil’s feet and disappeared through a crack in the wall.

Micheil turned and nearly ran headlong into Kalen.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes,” Micheil said with an absent nod. “I’m fine. Just ready to be out of here, I suppose.”

The general crossed his arms over his chest. “I know you better than that, sorcerer.”

With a sigh, Micheil pulled Kalen into the nook. “I can’t talk about it here. Only the gods know who would be listening now. There is much to discuss, but it will have to wait until we’ve left the city. We’ve acquired a traveling companion.”

“Why do I have the feeling there will be an extra elf along for the ride?”

Micheil nodded. “Yes. Sorien has managed to bring to my attention a matter of dire importance, but in doing so, he has risked his life here. I told him to meet us outside the city, packed and ready to ride.”

“Does he have a horse?”

“No. He’s going to ride Aserion.”

A slow, teasing smile crept across the general’s lips then. “Which means you will be riding...”

Giving Kalen a wry grin, Micheil said, “Behind the general.”

Kalen backed him up against the wall as they disappeared into the shadows. “Now that,” he whispered close to Micheil’s lips, “could be interesting.”

The general’s breath caressed his lips, and the heat from Kalen’s body seeped through Micheil’s clothes. They didn’t need light for this. Having little time to spare, Micheil was anxious to leave, but not without a kiss. He slid his arms around Kalen’s neck, pulling him closer until their bodies were pressed tightly together. Kalen’s mouth opened on his, and Micheil moaned softly as their tongues met. Kalen’s hands drifted down to grip his hips, holding him close. Every move took Micheil’s breath away, but anything more would have to wait. As Kalen pulled away, Micheil could see the hint of smoldering flames within the general’s eyes.

“You’ve changed,” he said quietly. He reached up to cup Kalen’s cheek with the palm of his hand.

Kalen turned his head and brought Micheil’s hand down to kiss his fingertips. “How?”

Micheil shook his head. “Only a sorcerer can do what you did last night, Kalen. And only a sorcerer can harness the elements.”

“Harness the elements?”

“Stop the rain.”

Kalen chuckled and backed out into the hallway, tugging Micheil with him. “You scare me sometimes.”

Micheil stopped walking, causing Kalen to come to a stop as well. “Let me teach you,” he offered as Kalen turned.

“Micheil...”

“Please, Kalen, if only to help you learn how to control it before it is discovered.”

The general sighed and glanced back down the hall, toward the door that led outside to the stables.

“Very well.”

As they made their way out to the stables, Josiah was waiting, holding three sets of reins in his hands. He handed the reins of their horses to them then mounted his own. Kalen nodded, giving him leave to head out.

“Sorien is outside the city?”

“Yes. He will drop the illusion and appear as himself, but not until he’s left the walls.”

Kalen swung up into his saddle then held a hand down to Micheil. Taking his hand, Micheil climbed up behind him and held Aserion’s reins tightly as they left the city. Once outside the walls, a hooded figure approached them. Josiah reached for his sword, but a lift of Micheil’s hand stilled him. Micheil handed Sorien Aserion’s reins as the hood fell back, revealing his identity. Josiah looked to Kalen, and the general shook his head.

“Thank you,” Sorien said as he took the reins and mounted. He drew up beside Kalen and Micheil, remaining silent until they were well away from Junely. Only then did he speak again. “Have you told him?”

“Yes,” Micheil said. “Although I have not told him everything.”

“Don’t you think you should?” Kalen asked, directing a glance over at Micheil. “Now what’s this about?”

Micheil reached into the pouch at his waist and pulled out the parchment. He handed the note to Kalen. “That is why I wanted to wait.”

“I see,” Kalen said quietly. “Any idea who might be behind it?”

Micheil took the parchment and slid it back into hiding. “I have an idea.”

“And?”

He leaned closer and brushed Kalen’s hair from his ear. “My not-so-secret admirer.”

“The princess?”

Micheil nodded.

“How can you be sure of this?”

“Can you think of anyone else in Andrion’s court who might want you dead? And whose name begins with S?”

Kalen fell silent for a moment. “You have a point.”

Chapter Five

By the time they made camp for the night, Kalen's thoughts were scattered at best. He helped the others set up the camp then retired to his own tent. He knew he had a map of this region somewhere in his saddlebags, and a few moments later, Micheil stepped into the tent, map in hand. Kalen gave him a sheepish grin, thanked him and pored over the fading parchment.

"I know there's a body of water not far from here," he muttered, "but damned if I can find it now."

Micheil pulled the map away and turned him around, placing both hands on Kalen's shoulders. "Come with me. I saw a small river leading into the woods, just over the next hill, when I was scouting. I've already told Josiah we're escaping for a bit."

Kalen pulled him closer and rested his head on Micheil's shoulder. "What am I going to do, Micheil? First the magic, and now the princess."

"Shh. Relax first then we'll talk. You're not thinking clearly right now."

"Where is Sorien?"

A soft chuckle vibrated from deep within Micheil's chest. "Having a bit of fun, I think."

"Should I be worried?" Kalen asked.

Micheil grinned. "Only if you value the chastity of your captain."

Kalen stared wide-eyed at him. "But Josiah doesn't..." He shook his head. "Josiah doesn't bed with men."

A wry, knowing smile crept across Micheil's full lips and his eyes sparkled with mischief. "Ah, but Sorien is unique, even for an elf." He leaned forward and brushed a kiss to Kalen's ear. "He has an obsession with switching genders."

"Oh, gods," Kalen groaned. "If Josiah finds out the truth, I'll never hear the end of it."

Threading a hand through his hair, Micheil pulled Kalen's head back and descended on his mouth. Kalen groaned, hooked his fingers in the waistband of the sorcerer's pants and jerked him close. What he really needed right now was to bury himself so deep inside Micheil that he forgot everything else.

"Inside me," Micheil whispered on Kalen's lips. "River...come with me to the river, and take me there."

Kalen licked the sorcerer's lips slowly then stepped back, releasing him. "I'm right behind you."

He followed Micheil out of the tent and down the road, glancing back only when they started over a hill to the right. He saw Josiah and what appeared to be a woman, heading into the captain's small tent.

With a chuckle, he turned his attention back to the sorcerer before him, immediately becoming mesmerized by the way Micheil's pants hugged every muscle of his legs. When Micheil started down the hill, Kalen saw the river, flowing into the dark woods before them.

"Aren't these woods haunted?" he asked, trying to maintain a casual tone despite the slight touch of trepidation.

Micheil stopped at the bottom of the hill and reached out, pulling Kalen hard against him. "They are," he said as they tumbled to the ground, Kalen landing on top of him. Micheil spread his legs then wrapped them around Kalen's thighs. Arching his back, he ground his body against Kalen's, overriding everything in Kalen's mind but him.

"Micheil..." Kalen groaned and trapped Micheil in a kiss as one of his hands worked to unlace the sorcerer's pants. He gripped Micheil's cock and gave it a firm stroke.

"Kalen!" Micheil thrust up as he broke the kiss abruptly, gasping as Kalen's hold tightened around him.

As Kalen continued his strokes, Micheil's pleas degenerated into sounds of frustration and need. Kalen chuckled against the sorcerer's throat, enjoying the way Micheil responded so completely to him. He released Micheil long enough to unlace his own pants then wrapped his fingers around them both. Micheil shook beneath him, breathless as Kalen stroked them both, their cocks sliding together in the tight grip of his fist.

"Oh, gods..." Micheil panted. "Kalen, don't stop...don't stop..."

Kalen covered Micheil's mouth with his, swallowing the sorcerer's cries as his body trembled beneath him. The hard pulse of Micheil's cock against his own sent Kalen spiraling over the edge and he growled into Micheil's mouth as his own orgasm rushed over him. Breathless and shaking, he released them both. Micheil gripped his hand then, bringing it to his lips. Kalen watched, utterly entranced, as the sorcerer's enchanted tongue cleaned his fingers and palm.

"Keep that up," he said with a slow grind of his hips against Micheil, "and I'll be ready to go again quicker than usual."

Micheil smiled slowly then sucked two of Kalen's fingers into his mouth, rolling his tongue around them. "Race you to the river." Without giving Kalen a chance to respond, Micheil slid out from under him, kicked off his pants and boots then tossed his shirt to the side before he ran the short distance to the river.

Kalen chuckled and took his time undressing, content to watch Micheil's sleek form slide into gentle flow of the river. He stood and walked over to him, surprised at the depth of the river itself. It was small in width, but deeper than it appeared, nearly coming to his shoulders. He dove under and found Micheil's legs, came up behind him and slipped his arms around the sorcerer's waist.

"I love it when you drop the illusion," he murmured before sliding his tongue over the pointed tip of Micheil's ear. His other hand dropped lower to cup Micheil gently. Micheil's elven beauty was always a

sight to behold, and Kalen loved nothing more than to see the elf behind the human façade. Micheil gasped and pressed back against him, threading a hand back through Kalen's wet hair. When a shudder ran through the sorcerer, Kalen smiled.

"Come with me to Seriete," Micheil pleaded. "Once the investigation in Sonana is finished, come with me."

Kalen sighed and let go of Micheil's ear to rest his chin on the sorcerer's shoulder. "I don't know if I can, Micheil. Andrion will most likely—"

"I'll tell Andrion you're going with me," Micheil interrupted.

Kalen groaned, knowing he was defeated before the argument even started. "Micheil," he sighed. "Andrion would jump into the Garocha Sea at your word. How, in the names of the gods, do you have so much control over people?"

Micheil turned slowly in his arms, pinning him with a crystal blue gaze. "You've known me nearly all your life and you still wonder at that?"

"I do. Marilee does not hold the influence that you do."

"Ah, but my sister does not actively use her gifts, Kalen." Micheil brought up a hand and drew his fingertips down the side of Kalen's face. "Nor do you."

Kalen gripped his hand. "I have no gifts, Micheil. None magical, anyway."

"Oh?" Micheil smiled cryptically and pulled away, putting several inches between them. When Micheil closed his eyes, Kalen knew the sorcerer was up to something. "*Find me, Kalen.*"

"No games, Micheil. I can't see you."

"Yes, you can. Look inward. Close your eyes. Use what's inside of you to find me."

Kalen grumbled but did as he was told. "This isn't working," he said after a few minutes.

"You're trying too hard, and yet, not hard enough."

"You and your damned riddles." He sighed and closed his eyes again, this time giving it a serious attempt.

The world shimmered behind his eyelids, sparkling in brilliant colors. He opened his eyes and felt something akin to awe. The world was brighter, thrown into near-blinding relief by an unseen light. Across the water, he saw the sorcerer, sitting on the riverbank with a proud smile. A blue-white haze shimmered around Micheil's body, marking the boundary of his invisibility.

"I knew you could do it."

"But how?" Kalen shook his head, not quite believing.

"I was right. There is elven blood in your veins, Kalen Ysindroc."

Kalen remained silent, too shocked to say a word.

Micheil put a finger to his lips, then his body shimmered. Seconds later, he appeared in front of Kalen. He reached out and took Kalen's hand, curling his fingers around Kalen's as he tugged him forward.

“Your turn, love.”

Kalen laughed. “I don’t have your abilities, Micheil.”

“I think,” Micheil said with a curious tilt of his head, “that your ‘abilities’ far exceed even mine.”

Before he could say a word in response, an image shimmered in the water where Micheil had stood only a moment before. Kalen peered into the depths of the water. The image seemed familiar, as if it was a memory locked away in his mind.

A battle unfolded, destroying lithing and human alike. When the smoke of the fires cleared, not a soul was left alive...except a baby boy, tucked away in the hollow of a tree. When the baby’s face turned, Kalen’s blood ran cold. “Oh, gods...” he whispered as he stared into his own eyes.

“You were found here, Kalen, tucked safely away in the hollow of a tree in Ronu Wood.”

“And my parents?”

“Died in the raid, no doubt. Has no one ever told you this?”

Kalen shook his head slowly. “No.” The image shimmered away, and he was left staring into the formless water. The world returned to normal. Kalen backed up, bumped against the bank of the river and stilled. He shook his head again as Micheil appeared before him. “It was all a lie.”

“Kalen...”

Kalen shook his head quickly, brushing Micheil’s hand away. “It’s a damn lie. Who am I, Micheil?” he asked. “You say I have elven blood and then you show me this!” He waved his hand over the water where the image had appeared. “I can’t do this.”

“Kalen, I’m sorry,” Micheil whispered. He cupped Kalen’s face in his hands, forcing Kalen to look at him. “What can I do?”

Kalen held Micheil’s gaze for several minutes and swallowed his anger. The sorcerer had been the calm in the storm, the rock of support whenever he had needed it—and now he needed Micheil more than ever. He reached up and gripped the back of Micheil’s neck, bringing him closer. “Teach me, Micheil. Show me how to control whatever is within me. Teach me how to tap into it if I need to.”

Micheil blinked several times. “Are you serious?”

Kalen closed the distance between them, brushing a soft kiss to the sorcerer’s lips. “Teach me,” he repeated in a whisper. He heard the small catch of Micheil’s breath then Micheil nodded slowly.

“I will teach you.”

“What do I do first?” Kalen asked as he lifted Micheil’s left leg up. He brushed his fingers over the back of the sorcerer’s thigh, smiling when Micheil’s eyes fluttered closed. “Is there anything in the books about student-teacher relationships?”

Micheil shook his head quickly, grinding his body against Kalen’s. “No. A teacher can love...” He sucked in a sharp breath as Kalen brushed a fingertip over his entrance.

“Love?” Kalen asked with a lift of an eyebrow. “Is the infamous wizard in...*love*?” Micheil’s eyes opened and the love and passion within them made Kalen’s chest tighten. “Do you?”

Micheil smiled and nodded. Cupping Kalen’s face in his hands, Micheil brushed a kiss to his lips. “I do,” the sorcerer whispered. “I love you so much, Kalen.”

A soft sound escaped Kalen’s lips and then they were open, his tongue slipping into Micheil’s mouth, needing to taste him. Micheil’s kiss was warm and soft, yet hungry. Tenderness soon gave way to need; sensual exploration gave way to desperation. He turned them both and found good footing on the bed of the river. He walked up the small incline and they both tumbled to the ground, mouths devouring each other, hands searching for hard flesh. When Kalen found what he wanted, Micheil’s body arched beneath him.

“Kalen...need you...please, Kalen.”

Stroking Micheil’s cock slowly, Kalen kissed the curve of the sorcerer’s throat, his tongue teasing at the soft skin. “Want you,” he whispered. Micheil nodded, his fingers gripping Kalen’s arms. Kalen shifted and spit in his hand, then reached down to slick himself. “Want to feel you come all over me.”

“Yes...” Micheil strained toward his touch, body shaking, voice low with need. His legs parted farther, giving Kalen more room.

Kalen rubbed the tip of his cock over Micheil’s entrance, pressing in the slightest bit but never enough to fully penetrate. He loved this moment. He loved seeing the most feared sorcerer in Socendor come undone in a moment of sheer desire. Micheil’s eyes were both brilliant and dark, contrasts within them as strong as Micheil himself.

“Kalen, please,” Micheil pleaded. “I need you.”

Dropping a kiss to Micheil’s lips, teasing him with the tip of his tongue, the tip of his cock, Kalen chuckled softly. “I love hearing you beg,” he said as he sank himself deep inside Micheil’s body. Micheil’s growl drowned in Kalen’s kiss.

The sorcerer’s fingers dug into Kalen’s shoulders, legs wrapping tight around his waist. Kalen kept his movements slow, not wanting either of them slipping over the edge too soon. Micheil’s mouth was hot and rich, the sounds emerging from his throat desperate. Kalen pulled away from the kiss and stared down at the sorcerer, Micheil’s blue gaze turning to the color of the darkened sky above them. Every stroke inside Micheil left Kalen shaking and breathless, just as it always had. One particularly deep thrust and Micheil’s back arched as he cried out. Kalen thrust again and Micheil’s body tightened around him seconds before Micheil jerked him down into a hard kiss as he came.

It was enough to quickly send Kalen over the edge as well. He drove his cock deep inside the sorcerer and groaned. Micheil clung to him, a hand wrapped in Kalen’s hair as they kissed. Short, but always sweet.

When Micheil’s hold on his hair relaxed, Kalen peered down at him. Micheil’s eyes were back to their usual pristine blue and his smile relaxed. Kalen dipped his head for a kiss. Just before he reached Micheil’s

mouth, however, he stopped. A feeling of not quite being alone sent a rough shiver through him and he stared toward the forest beyond.

“Kalen?”

“Shh. I thought...” Kalen shook his head. “It felt like someone was watching us.”

“Our relationship is no secret.”

“It’s not that,” Kalen said as he eased out of Micheil and sat back on his knees. He stared into the woods, wondering if it had just been his imagination. Sex with an elf—with Micheil—was always full of surprises. “I suppose it was nothing.” He stood and as he held out a hand to help Micheil up, he froze, his gaze riveted to a small patch of darkness amid a cluster of trees.

“What?” Micheil asked, turning quickly.

At that moment, Kalen wasn’t certain which sight was more disturbing: the figure in the trees, or the fact that Micheil Thierauf’s face had lost all its color.

“General Ysindroc!”

Kalen and Micheil both turned from their meal to see one of the scouts nearly tripping over his own feet in his haste. Josiah was not far behind the young man, appearing bedraggled and not at all happy. Micheil noted the beginning of a frown on Kalen’s face. The scout practically skidded to a stop at the small fire outside the general’s tent.

“Yes?” Kalen asked, his voice holding a calm that his eyes did not reflect.

As the scout fought to catch his breath, Josiah stood off to the side. A minute later, Sorien appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Micheil caught the other elf’s gaze.

“A small band of men, six total, headed this way. They’re under cover of their cloaks, but they don’t seem friendly,” Sorien said silently to Micheil.

Micheil nodded, then returned his attention to Kalen and the scout.

“General Ysindroc,” the scout said after finally catching his breath. “There is a group of men half a day’s ride from here. They come well-armed. They are not from Akuron Heights or Junely.”

After a moment of silent contemplation, Kalen nodded. “Very well. Step up security. Half a day and they will be here to surprise us in our sleep. I want several guards posted in four-hour rotations around the perimeter of the camp. Defense only.” When the young man did not move, Kalen narrowed his gaze at him. “Something else?”

“Yes, sir. They dress in lithing style, sir. But they are human.”

The silence that followed the statement was almost painful. Micheil’s gaze slid from the scout to Kalen then to Josiah. The captain turned away from Micheil’s stare.

“I do not trust him, Micheil.”

Micheil glanced over at Sorien. *“Is that why you slept with him? To determine anything he might be hiding?”*

“No, but I’m beginning to wonder if I should have looked while I had the chance.”

Micheil nodded. When he returned his attention to the matter at hand, he realized Kalen was staring intently at him, practically ignoring the scout’s banter altogether.

“Thank you,” Kalen said to the young man. His gaze held a sternness he reserved only for his men. Micheil had never been the recipient before now.

The scout saluted him and left.

“Leave us,” Kalen commanded the remaining men.

Micheil waited until both Sorien and Josiah left, then he stood and walked into the tent. This wasn’t going to go well; he could feel it in his bones. Silence reigned in the tent when Kalen stepped in, and Micheil began to pace. He could feel Kalen’s gaze, sharp as a razor and hard as steel. He couldn’t stand it and stopped, opening his mouth to speak.

“What were you talking with Sorien about?”

Snapping his mouth shut, Micheil wasn’t sure how to answer without angering Kalen. He never stepped in the way of the general’s command, and Josiah was one of Kalen’s most trusted men. When he didn’t answer, Kalen stood. Micheil watched him, feeling a tightness beginning to knot in his stomach.

“I fear you may have a traitor in your camp.” The knot in Micheil’s stomach inched into his throat as Kalen’s expression turned as unreadable as stone.

“Whom do you suspect?”

Micheil started to turn away, but a firm, almost crushing grip on his arm stopped him cold. He glanced down at his arm, then up at Kalen. “Josiah Petiet.”

Sheer fury descended over the general’s face. Micheil thought to step back and was grateful when Kalen let him. Kalen’s jaw clenched tightly shut. His hands balled into fists at his side. Micheil had never had to defend himself from Kalen physically and he wasn’t eager for the prospect now.

“Why would you suspect my senior captain, with whom I have worked for countless years, of betrayal?” The words were spoken with distinct venom, the hardness of them surprising Micheil greatly. Kalen’s gaze was suddenly cold.

“Because I have the ability to sense things others do not,” Micheil said calmly. In truth, he felt no calm to back the words. “He can’t even meet my gaze, Kalen.”

“Because he knows what you truly are,” Kalen shot back, the tone of his voice growing stronger and louder.

“Even more reason not to trust him,” Micheil shouted. He closed his eyes then, trying to rein in his quickening temper. “You are being unreasonable, Kalen.”

“I am being unreasonable?”

Kalen took two steps forward, and Micheil backed up. He was no match for the muscular general, a man bred for wielding a sword.

“You dare question the integrity of my top man and you tell me that I am the one being unreasonable? All because he would not meet your gaze?”

Micheil glanced toward the tent flap, gauging the distance should this get out of hand. He prayed to the gods it would not. “Do you not trust *me*? I have been by your side much longer than your captain, or anyone else, for that matter. If anything, I should be the one whose word you trust above *all* others.”

Kalen didn’t say a word. He simply pivoted on the heel of his boot and stormed out, thrusting the tent flap up so hard that the entire tent threatened to fall down around Micheil.

“That didn’t go well.”

Micheil shook his head as Sorien walked into the tent. “No,” he said dryly.

“What happened?” Sorien sat on the bedroll and Micheil sat beside him.

“I told him that I suspected his senior captain. He didn’t take it very well.”

Sorien rested a hand on Micheil’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “What are you going to do?”

“I’ve been summoned,” Micheil said as he stood once more.

“You’re going to Seriete?”

“We are going to Seriete.”

“We?”

Micheil nodded without turning around. “Yes. I’m not leaving you here,” he said as he began packing his belongings.

“When are we leaving?” Sorien asked him quietly.

“As soon as possible.” Micheil tied his pack and slung it over his shoulder. “Are you ready? Or do you need to gather anything to take with you?”

Before Sorien could answer, the flap on the tent lifted and Kalen walked in. He turned from Micheil to Sorien. “Leave us.”

Sorien stood and started for the exit. He didn’t get very far before a single word from Micheil halted him.

“Stay.”

“I would speak with you alone,” Kalen said, almost growled.

“Sorien is not under your command,” Micheil countered with equal conviction. “He is under mine.”

It was then that Kalen seemed to notice the pack on Micheil’s shoulder. “Where are you going?”

“Seriete. The queen has summoned me, so I must go.”

“I thought we were going together after we finished in Sonana.” Kalen’s voice revealed none of the hurt Micheil saw in his eyes.

“Yes, well, I am only in the way here.” Micheil fought the urge to pull Kalen into his arms. It was not the first fight between them. It certainly would not be the last. He glanced over at Sorien and saw only sympathy in the other elf’s eyes.

“You are never in the way, Micheil,” Kalen said quietly, reaching for him.

Micheil closed his eyes and drew in a slow, deep breath. “You have your duty, Kalen, and I have mine.” He met the general’s gaze for a moment then ducked under the tent flap. “Sorien,” he called over his shoulder.

Chapter Six

“Damned arrogant son of a bitch!”

Another metal cup sailed through the air and hit a tree stump. The impact flattened one side of the already dented metal. The men around the fire moved farther away from their raging general, but Kalen was too angry to care how his rampage appeared anymore. Micheil had accused Josiah Petiet of a crime akin to treason. Aside from Andreas and Micheil, Josiah was the only other man in Socendor Kalen trusted with his life. To accuse him of something so severe was unforgivable.

“Sir?”

Kalen whirled around and came close to hitting his senior captain square in the jaw. As he lowered his hand, he gave Josiah an apologetic smile. The captain didn’t seem to be too disturbed, but the young soldier beside him certainly did. Kalen took the flask the young man offered him then waved him away. He closed his eyes as the ale burned its way down his throat.

“That must have been one hell of a fight.”

Kalen nodded and sat. Josiah sat beside him. “Yes, it was. It’s been a while since we’ve had one, but that was by far the worst, I think.”

Josiah gazed into the distance and nodded. “I’d believe it. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you two at each other’s throats—at least not to the point where one of you leaves. Where did he go?”

“Seriete,” Kalen said. “He was summoned by Queen Lerian.”

“I hope no one finds out about his heritage, Kalen. You know it’s forbidden to mate with elves.”

Kalen nearly choked on his ale. “Gods, Josiah, it’s not like we can have children.”

“True, but it’s still an unaccepted union,” Josiah reminded him. “You could be stripped of your rank should Andrion find out that his seer is an elf.”

“No one will find out, Josiah. Those who know, I trust with my life.”

“I know.” Josiah smiled and grasped Kalen’s shoulder. “I just want you to be careful.”

Kalen watched him stand and walk away. Admitting the captain was right wasn’t easy, but Kalen knew damn well his life and Micheil’s would both be forfeit if Micheil’s heritage became known. Gods, what had he done? He had essentially driven away the man he loved, all because Micheil had expressed a concern for his safety. Kalen resolved himself to go to Seriete once he was done in Sonana, provided he could make it through the pass without meeting an elven arrow or ten.

He finished off his ale and stood, making his way to his tent. Scouts were posted; they were well-defended. No one could breach the camp and survive. He ducked under the tent flap and as he started to remove his shirt, his heart nearly stopped.

Outside, shouts broke the silence of the night and the sounds of battle—of swords clanging and men dying—made Kalen's blood run cold. Then, a hand wrapped painfully tight in his hair and jerked his head back as a knife pressed to his throat. He could feel a man's body behind him, both of them tense and ready to snap. He felt the man's breath against his neck and then his ear.

"Perhaps you should listen to your elven sorcerer more often."

Rage shot through Kalen and he twisted his body, breaking free but not without a deep scratch to his neck. The hard, traitorous glare of his senior captain met his own. Micheil had been right all along.

Josiah lunged at him and Kalen sidestepped quickly, reaching for his sheathed sword as the captain spun around. He drew the sword and met Josiah, blocking a strike meant to sever his head from his shoulders.

"I trusted you," he shouted as they circled each other. His heart felt like it was ready to burst through his chest and his eyes never left the gleaming length of steel in Josiah's hands.

"You misplace your trust," Josiah said calmly. "And those you should trust, you ignore."

The truth of his captain's words stung. Kalen gritted his teeth and lunged forward. Josiah twisted around, blocking the strike and thrusting his sword. With a quick dodge, Kalen missed the thrust by less than an inch. The tip caught his shirt and pulled, tearing a jagged hole through the thin material. That one was much too close for comfort. Another thrust and their bodies slammed together. Josiah's eyes widened and Kalen stared down. Blood poured over his fist as the hilt of his sword pressed against his captain's stomach. He didn't have to see the bloody mess on the other side. It was over.

Kalen gripped Josiah's shoulder and pushed the captain away, stepping back as Josiah's body collapsed to the ground. Blood continued to drip from the end of Kalen's sword and, instead of wiping it off, he stormed out of his tent. His heart leapt to his throat as he surveyed the grisly scene. The enemy bodies lay in a heap. Several of Kalen's men lit fires to incinerate the corpses. When Kalen stopped just outside his tent, everyone turned to him.

"General?"

Kalen felt sick. He nodded and motioned for several men to follow him. He ducked into his tent and stepped to the side. The ashen faces of his men echoed the scattered, disbelieving thoughts in his own mind.

"He was behind it," Kalen said before anything could be said. "You are now captain, J  an. Take the body and burn it with the others. The last thing I need is disease running rampant."

Without waiting for a response, Kalen turned on his heel and walked out. He snatched up a bit of shredded cloth and wiped his sword clean. Then he sheathed it and kept on walking, needing to get away

before he lost it in front of the men. Rage and pain burned inside, almost stifling an act as simple as breathing. Before he realized how far he'd gone, Kalen found himself standing at the edge of Ronu Wood.

Dropping to his knees, he let out a scream, releasing the rage and pain in one sharp burst. Exhausted and his throat sore, he collapsed to the ground, his body feeling heavy as he shook. Gods, he needed Micheil, needed the arrogant sorcerer more than anything now.

Micheil doubled over, his stomach clenching as he lost his meal to the weeds along the side of the road. He went down on his knees hard, wincing with every sharp, twisting contraction of his body. Though the pain was intense, it left his mind clear. This was no ordinary bout of illness. Another sharp flux of pain, and he dry-heaved. When he fell back, a pair of gentle but strong hands caught him.

"Micheil, what's wrong?"

Micheil shook his head as a dull ache began to set in. "I don't know. Something's happened." He closed his eyes.

"I don't understand," Sorien said finally.

"Kalen." Micheil groaned as he tried to sit up. He clutched his head, hoping the world would stop spinning soon. "Something's happened to Kalen."

"How can you tell?"

Micheil stared at the line where the dark dust of the road met the lush green grass. The comparison to the general and himself was clear as day: the war-hardened warrior and the ageless sorcerer. But now a new question begged to be answered. Who was the real sorcerer?

"Micheil?"

"It's not important how I know, Sorien," he said as he stood. Aserion stomped the ground, head lowering. Micheil wrapped a hand in the reins and let the horse's strength help him to stand. "Point is, I know."

Once he was steady on his feet, he met Sorien's gaze. Something in the elf's eyes begged for understanding, for Micheil to trust him. But could he? He had been away from his own people for so long, that aside from Marilee, he no longer knew anyone. Sorien, however, had always been more of an outcast in his own right. Perhaps it would be enough. If anything, Sorien had been Vala's student. That alone had its own brand of integrity, however shaky it might be.

Micheil climbed into his saddle and waited until Sorien was seated behind him before finally conceding with himself. "There's more to the general than meets the eye," he said quietly. He turned Aserion around in the direction of Sonana.

Sorien offered no protest. "I gathered that. But how do you know that something has happened to him?"

After a few minutes of silence, Micheil sighed. "Because there was a power exchange."

“From you to him?”

“From him to me.” When Sorien said nothing, Micheil turned his head slightly, peering at the younger elf over his shoulder. “Say nothing of this to anyone.”

“No.” Sorien shook his head quickly. “No, no. I won’t. I swear it.” A few minutes of silence followed then Sorien leaned closer, resting his chin on Micheil’s shoulder. “I suppose it’s pointless to ask where we’re going.”

Micheil nodded. “It is.”

With Sonana only a day away, Micheil knew he’d find Kalen there. But in what state? The incident on the roadside shocked him to the core. It was an expected effect of the power exchange, but he hadn’t counted on the strength behind it. *Gods, Kalen Ysindroc was strength incarnate behind a sword, but with magic?* The thought sent a dark, foreboding chill sliding up Micheil’s spine.

“I thought you two had a fight.”

Micheil nearly jumped. He had been lost in his thoughts, remembering the last kiss Kalen had given him on the bank of the river, the strength of Kalen’s body over his. He nodded. “Yes, we did. I know Kalen Ysindroc better than all others, however, and he will welcome me once more.”

“Are you always so sure of yourself?” Sorien laughed.

“Not always.”

That seemed to satisfy Sorien, which left Micheil to his own troubled thoughts. He should be continuing onto Seriete. He should be answering the queen’s summons, however leery he might be of her intentions. But was he? No. He had more pressing matters to deal with just now. Everyone who knew him knew where his loyalties lay. For Akuron’s general, he would die if need be; Kalen came first, above all others.

The remainder of the ride was pleasantly quiet, the silence broken periodically by the calls of birds or the wind rustling the tall grasses further out in the fields. By the time they reached Sonana, it was midday and Micheil was thankful once more for the legendary speed of elven horses. Even at a trot, Aserion could outrun the king’s best.

Once through the outpost city’s gates, Sorien slid off, scanning their surroundings as he untied his pack from the saddle. Micheil prayed there was nothing for the wayward elf to get into. “I’m getting rooms at The Crossing,” he said as he gathered the reins once more.

“Rooms?”

“Yes, *rooms*,” Micheil repeated. “One for myself and the general, and one for you.”

“But I—”

“I will brook no arguments, Sorien.” Micheil gave the elf a stern glare.

“Yes. Thank you,” Sorien muttered. “Since when do you claim title anyway?”

Micheil sighed and turned Aserion toward the small market district. "I do it when it's necessary. My exile is self-imposed. I am still Master of High Arts."

Sorien nodded and Micheil left him, grateful to be out of that situation. He hated playing the Master card, but at times, it was needed.

Dodging children, animals and carts, Micheil made his way to The Crossing, Sonana's largest, and by far the nicest, inn. Gold passed over the counter, the innkeeper's eyebrow raised at the presence of a seer, and Micheil had two rusted, worn keys in hand.

"Please send word for General Kalen Ysindroc that his room is available."

The innkeeper nodded without batting an eye. "Yes, sir. Anything else I can help you with?"

Micheil thought for a moment. "Yes. A washtub and the accompanying necessities. The general will need them, I fear."

"Yes, sir. I have many fine young ladies willing to—"

"They will not be needed," Micheil interrupted him.

The man blinked then nodded.

Micheil grinned and started up the steps when the inn door opened. The voice greeting the innkeeper stopped Micheil dead in his tracks.

"Ah, General. Yes, your room is ready," the innkeeper said.

"My room?"

Staying out of sight, Micheil smiled.

"Yes, sir. A young man, 'bout your age or so, said you'd be needin' a bath and all."

Micheil heard shuffling and turned. He met Kalen's gaze. Gods, but the general looked awful. Micheil held up one of the keys.

"The other is for Sorien. The washtub should be up soon." Micheil remained where he stood as Kalen climbed the steps.

"I'm sorry," Kalen whispered. "I'm so sorry, Micheil."

Micheil nodded. "As am I. Come, let us get you cleaned up. I want to see that scratch."

"Scratch? How did you know?"

Lifting an eyebrow, Micheil leaned against the railing. "Do you honestly have to ask me that?"

He grabbed Kalen's hand and tugged him up the steps and down the hall to their room. Once inside, he shoved Kalen against the door, attacking the general's mouth with his own, letting the pain and anger rush out in the desperate kiss. Kalen put up no struggle, wrapping his arms around Micheil's waist. When Micheil broke the kiss, he rested his forehead to Kalen's and sighed.

"I will never doubt you again," Kalen said quietly. "I should have never doubted you to begin with. You were right."

"I was out of place," Micheil said as he stepped back. Lacing his fingers through Kalen's, he tugged the general across the room. He sat down on the bed and pulled Kalen to stand between his legs as he undressed him. "I apologize."

Kalen slipped a hand under Micheil's chin, tilting his head up. "You have every right to say such things to me. There is no hierarchy, no pecking order, in this relationship. You are not one of my men. You are my lover, my best friend."

Micheil stopped short of tugging down the general's pants. He closed his eyes and swallowed then let out a slow breath. "You could have been killed," he said finally. "That was the intent, Kalen."

"But I was not killed." Kalen crouched, bringing his face level with Micheil's.

Micheil glanced down and grimaced. "You're bleeding again. Who patched you up?"

"I did," Kalen said. Micheil winced. "I'm no medic, but I did the best I could."

"I noticed," Micheil chuckled. "Come on, let's get you out of those clothes." When Kalen laughed, Micheil glared at him. "I do have my priorities, General."

As Kalen stood, Micheil pulled the general's pants to the floor. He forced himself to ignore the length of flesh just inches from his face. He resisted the temptation to slide his tongue out to lick at the glistening tip. Kalen was hard, wanting. Micheil tried to focus his attention on the scratch lurking just beneath the bloodied bandage. As he peeled away the cloth, fingers slid through his hair, massaging his scalp, toying with the pointed tips of his ears. Kalen was not making this very easy.

Micheil touched the scratch gently, washing it with green light. "Does it hurt too much?"

"No. Why? Are you offering?"

Micheil raised an eyebrow. "Really..." He lifted a hand and slid it beneath the general's shirt, giving one of Kalen's nipples a sharp tweak. Kalen sucked in a breath and his cock jumped. "Who would have thought," he whispered, placing a kiss to the head of Kalen's cock, "Akuron's general likes pain."

"Only at your hand," Kalen said, his voice thick and deep. Control and need warred in those eyes as they stared down at Micheil, leaving him breathless.

"At my hand," Micheil echoed. Holding Kalen's gaze, he pressed a soft kiss to the scratch, which was now healing, and inched his way over Kalen's hip. He traced a path along the tender flesh, from the general's hip to his cock, with his tongue.

"Micheil..." Kalen's fingers tightened in Micheil's hair, urging him closer. Micheil chuckled and resisted. "Touch me."

Micheil blew across Kalen's skin, warming it. Kalen shivered and pushed his hips forward. His cock slid across Micheil's cheek and Micheil turned his head, licking a line up the side of the shaft. A groan sounded from above and then the general was pulling Micheil's hair back as Micheil slid his lips along the hardened flesh, nipping as he went. When he reached the tip, he wrapped his fingers around the base and

probed the slit with his tongue, drinking in the sharp, sweet taste. Closing his mouth around the head, he swallowed Kalen down, his face burrowing into the soft tuft of black hair at the base.

“Micheil. Oh, gods. Don’t stop...”

As he slowly pulled back off, Micheil grazed Kalen’s shaft with his teeth, adding a hint of pain to the pressure. Kalen bucked forward, driving his cock back down Micheil’s throat, fingers tensing in his hair. With his free hand, Micheil cupped the general’s balls, rolling them roughly in his palm as he scraped his teeth up and down Kalen’s cock. Kalen shuddered hard in his hands, gasping and thrusting, gripping Micheil’s hair tightly.

Seconds later, Kalen jerked forward with a shout, his cock pulsing in Micheil’s mouth. Micheil swallowed quickly, moaning as the salty-sweet thickness shot down his throat. When the general’s body stopped shaking, Micheil pulled away, cleaning Kalen with his tongue.

“Gods, you’re unbelievable,” Kalen said breathlessly.

Micheil chuckled and stood, running his hands up Kalen’s arms. “And you are not?”

Before Kalen could answer, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Micheil answered, giving Kalen a wink before stepping around him. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see Sorien standing with a washtub beside him.

“Someone ordered a bath?” Sorien asked with a grin.

Micheil just shook his head and helped Sorien get the tub into the room. Kalen had managed, in the interim, to get at least his pants back up before several young women came and went, pouring steaming water into the copper tub. When the tub was full, Sorien handed Micheil a basket full of bathing necessities. Micheil gave him his room key in return.

“Stay out of trouble.”

Sorien grinned and pocketed the key. “Always.” With a wink, he left.

Micheil laughed and closed the door.

When he turned back around, Kalen was already easing down into the steaming water, sighing as he settled. He splashed his hands a few times and peered over at Micheil.

“Join me?”

A smile and a shake of his head was Micheil’s answer. “We’d never get any washing done, and you know it.”

Kneeling beside the tub, he picked up a cup and dipped it into the water. Kalen sat up and scooted forward, gripping the edge as he tilted his head back. Micheil poured the water over the general’s head and combed his fingers through Kalen’s hair. The black tresses were tangled from riding and, no doubt, from the foray the night before. Micheil immediately pushed those thoughts away, however, wanting to concentrate on Kalen—safe, sound and by his side. All other matters could wait.

"Feels good," Kalen sighed. His eyes opened and Micheil stopped, caught in that moment. "When this is all over, come stay with me. We can have a cottage built—a home of our own."

Micheil smiled and leaned down, taking a kiss. A soft sound, perhaps a moan, passed between them, but he really didn't know which of them had made it. "I'd like that," he whispered, brushing another kiss to Kalen's lips.

He leaned over and reached for the soap. As he dipped it in the water and worked up a lather, Kalen slid back. Micheil started at Kalen's feet, lifting one leg, massaging the muscles as he went. Kalen groaned and sank more into water, and Micheil felt the tension ease slowly from the general's body. How Kalen did it, he would never know. But then, Kalen was bred for war, for fighting. Even as a young boy, during his youth as a blacksmith's apprentice, Kalen had demonstrated prowess that left even the most hardened soldier bewildered.

But for himself? All Micheil knew were books and arcane spells, healing and the ability to divine the future, or to see current events, far removed. He even had the ability, though he never used it, to see into a person's soul. But when it came to heavy swordplay, everything he knew, he had learned from this man.

When he was done with one leg, he set it gently back down and lifted the other, repeating everything, massaging the soap into Kalen's skin, washing away the tension as much as the dirt. As he reached Kalen's thighs, he met the general's gaze and began working Kalen's muscles. Kalen shifted, his body tensing under Micheil's hands. Hardening flesh brushed Micheil's wrist, but he ignored it for now, working his hands slowly over Kalen's stomach. Micheil stood and pulled Kalen up. He soaped his hands again and washed Kalen's stomach, tracing each muscle with his fingertips.

With Kalen so close, it was difficult to keep to the task, but Micheil was determined. He continued, soaping and stroking Kalen's chest, smiling at the hiss of breath when his palms grazed over the general's hardened nipples. Unable to resist any longer, he leaned in and touched his tongue to one. A hand cupped the back of his head, pressing him close. He sucked the small bit of flesh into his mouth, rolling it between his teeth.

"Oh, gods," Kalen breathed. He was fully hard now. Micheil pulled away. A groan of frustration met him, and he grinned.

"We have a bath to finish, General."

Without giving Kalen a chance to respond, Micheil turned him around. Now there was a sight to behold. Micheil bit his lip and stepped forward, pressing his still-clothed body to Kalen's. He leaned to the side and grabbed the soap, stopping just long enough to kiss Kalen's left hip before righting himself. He started at Kalen's shoulders, drawing out the tension as he worked the muscles firmly but slowly.

"Feel good?" he whispered. Kalen nodded. "Bend over."

Micheil slid a hand down Kalen's spine, forcing himself not to attack the general right then. Kalen's breathing had become heavy, his knuckles already whitening as he gripped the far edge of the tub. Micheil

chuckled and lathered his hands again, watching the movements of the general's body with every intake of breath.

"I thought I was having a bath," Kalen said, meeting Micheil's gaze over his right shoulder.

"And you are." Micheil started kneading the general's buttocks, spreading them just enough to torment them both. Then he slipped two fingers down the crease and circled them over Kalen's entrance. "We must make certain that everything is clean," he said, rubbing the soft, puckered skin. His fingers slid in effortlessly, Kalen's body closing around them, hot and tight, like heated silk.

"Micheil..."

Kalen rocked back, driving Micheil's fingers deeper. When Micheil curled his fingers and stroked the small spot in Kalen's body, Kalen cried out, body shaking.

Micheil sucked in a sharp breath as tight heat surrounded his fingers, burning through his skin as Kalen rocked. Every slide into the general was like sliding through velvet. Micheil pulled his fingers out and squeezed his cock to stop the sudden urge for release. *Gods.* Kalen slumped, panting and shaking.

"You're cruel, sorcerer."

Micheil licked his suddenly dry lips. "I'm not done." He bent over and spread Kalen open, diving into the general with his tongue. Kalen gasped and pushed back, the ring of muscle tightening and releasing on Micheil's tongue.

Sweet gods! Micheil lapped at Kalen's entrance, moaning hungrily, circling the pucker before plunging back inside. He dropped a hand to his pants and quickly unlaced them, shoving them to the floor. Baths be damned. He wanted to bury himself deep inside Kalen now. With a last swipe of his tongue, he straightened himself and thrust in, fingers gripping Kalen's hips as the heat overtook him.

"Micheil!" Kalen pushed back, hard and quick, breathless.

Stroke after stroke, Micheil slid back into heat—slick, tight, velvet heat. His cock was so hard it ached, the motions sending jolts through Micheil's body. Wrapping a hand in the damp length of hair, Micheil tugged Kalen up, buried deep inside him as he peppered the general's shoulder with kisses and sharp bites.

"Don't stop," Kalen pleaded.

Micheil felt Kalen shaking and knew the general was stroking himself, nearing the edge. He waited until Kalen was right there, then he bit down hard on the general's neck. Kalen shook in his arms, crying out as he came. His body clenched Micheil tightly, milking him, coaxing his release. Micheil gave in, jerking Kalen hard against him as he filled the general's body with his seed.

When it was over, Micheil couldn't move. He remained plastered to Kalen's back, Kalen's fingers stroking over his own where they were still curled around Kalen's hip. Micheil let out a ragged sigh and pulled out slowly. When Kalen turned around, Micheil leaned in for a kiss, this one warm and gentle, slow, as if time would stand still for them. Right here, right now.

Chapter Seven

“General Ysindroc!”

Kalen pulled abruptly away from Micheil’s lips, his own glare reflecting the sorcerer’s scowl. “Gods! Don’t you men ever knock?”

The soldier’s mouth dropped open then snapped shut. “I-I’m sorry, sir.”

With a groan, Kalen rolled off of Micheil and glanced over at him. “I swear. We will finish this.” Micheil chuckled and propped himself on his arm. For a brief moment, Kalen forgot about the man at the door.

“General Ysindroc?” the man uttered, clearing his throat.

“Yes, yes.” Kalen waved the man out and waited until the door was closed before throwing off the blankets. “Tell me again why I do this?” he grumbled, raking a hand through mussed hair.

Lips teased across his shoulder then his hair was brushed aside and another kiss drifted across his neck. “Because you were born to do it. You are a warrior.”

Kalen lifted a hand and curled his fingers around Micheil’s. He gave the sorcerer’s hand a squeeze then stood. “Sometimes,” he sighed, “I wish I was not.” As he dressed, he noticed Micheil watching him curiously. “What?”

“There is more to you, Kalen—much more than a simple thread of magic or elven blood.”

Something about that, about the way Micheil said it, gave Kalen chills. “Then we will find out together,” he said, tightening his belt. He leaned over and kissed Micheil. “Are you coming?”

Micheil laughed and slid out of bed, letting the blankets fall away to reveal his lithe, muscular form. “I think I did,” he chuckled. “Several times, I might add.”

Kalen rolled his eyes and rummaged through the sorcerer’s pack, tossing clothes at him. “Then I suggest dressing. I do not think the innkeeper will take kindly to you wandering around unclothed, no matter how irresistibly desirable you are. I’ll be at the city’s main gate.”

“I’ll be there shortly,” Micheil said as he dressed.

Just before walking out the door, Kalen stopped. “What of Sorien?”

“He will be with me. His carelessness is endearing at times, but I can’t afford to lose another of my sorcerers.”

“*Your* sorcerers? Are you reclaiming your place in the Council?”

Micheil stopped in the doorway, pressing Kalen back against the doorframe. “No. If I do, I must remain in Seriete, and there is a particular general I have my sights on.”

“Sounds promising.”

“Oh, he is.” Micheil licked Kalen’s lips, exhaling softly on them. “And if we don’t get out of here right now, I’m dragging him back into bed.”

Kalen groaned. “Good point.”

Sliding away from his rather comfortable position, Kalen started down the steps. A moment later, Micheil and Sorien were behind him, and all three of them stepped out into the early morning sun. Kalen squinted and shielded his eyes from the brilliant light as one of his men rode up.

“General, there’s been—”

Kalen held up a hand, silencing any further comments. “Not here. Send word to Captain Liords that we are on our way.” The soldier nodded and Kalen watched him ride through the streets. “Micheil, I will need you,” he said as he swung into the saddle.

“I’ll be there. Anything in particular I need to know?”

Kalen sighed. “I’ll let you know as soon as I know.” Then he headed out toward the city gate.

Behind him, he could hear the lightning-quick click of a horse’s hooves on the stone street. Every rider in the world would kill to have a stallion like Aserion to carry them into battle, and as Micheil reined in beside him, Kalen couldn’t blame them. The pure white stallion possessed stamina and strength unmatched by any other horse in all of Socendor. Many speculated that perhaps Micheil’s sorcery played a part in Aserion’s performance. Had he not heard the stories from Micheil and Marilee about other elven horses, Kalen would have believed the rumors himself.

The moment they reached the city’s gate, Kalen knew something was terribly wrong. Several of his men stood guard, joined by the few remaining Sonana soldiers. Townsfolk were kept at bay, but curious onlookers strained to see over or around the barriers created by leather-armored bodies. Kalen dismounted and looped the reins around a post. A few minutes later, Sorien was at his side. Kalen found Micheil already coaxing the villagers away from the gate. For that, Kalen was beyond grateful.

“Captain,” Kalen said as he headed toward Jéan, who stood to the side, talking with one of the other men. “What do you have for me?”

“This way, General.” Jéan led him out of the gate and around the left corner, the side nearest the mountains. “We found him just this morning.”

Kalen stared down at the badly mangled body of a young man, unnervingly close to his own age. “Who was he?”

“A farmer’s hand. His employer reported him missing last night and this morning, the body was discovered when the city guards opened the gate. Do you think a wild animal might have been responsible?”

Crouching down, Kalen lifted the man's tunic, noting the lengthy slit to the man's gut and another to his throat. "No. This was man-made. Or..." He stared at the mountains and the myriad of caves he knew twisted through them. "Or something else entirely."

"Lithing, do you think?" J  an asked, crouching beside him, voice lowering considerably.

"I would bet my life on it," Micheil said when he joined them.

The sorcerer knelt, his eyes closing as he moved his hands over the young man's body. J  an gazed at Kalen, eyebrow lifting curiously. Kalen just shook his head.

"He is a seer," Kalen said. "He knows what he is doing."

"What *is* he doing?" J  an whispered.

Kalen opened his mouth to answer then realized he really had no idea himself. "I...don't quite know."

Micheil sat back on his heels. "J  an, leave us, please."

The captain nodded and stood, patting Kalen's shoulder before leaving them.

"What is it?" Kalen asked.

Micheil stared at him for a moment. "This should have been you."

"What?" Kalen felt his blood begin to run cold at the thought of someone losing their life in his place. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Micheil said as he lifted the tunic to examine the wounds, "the target was you. These cuts were not made with a human's weapon, Kalen."

"But there is no evidence of dark magic," Kalen pointed out.

"No. I told you before. Lithings use such enchanted weapons only on those they intend to *assassinate*. This young man was thought to be you, but death was not the intention."

"So you're telling me that the lithings thought this man to be me, but their intent was not to kill me?" Kalen frowned. "I'm not following you, Micheil. I've already been targeted by the lithings."

"This was for an entirely different purpose, I fear," Micheil said. "If they had intended to kill you, this body would not be here, and they would have succeeded. They are looking for someone in particular, and my gut instincts tell me that person is you."

"Why me?"

Micheil stood and held out a hand to Kalen. "That, I do not know. Perhaps we will learn more in Seriete. They are searching blindly for someone, but for what purpose, I do not know."

"How do you know it's for me?"

"Intuition, Kalen. We need to get you out of here and to Seriete, as quickly as possible."

"Thank you."

Kalen closed the door and set the tray of food and wine on the table. Micheil would be back soon and then they would have the entire evening to themselves, locked away to enjoy each other's company. It had

been a long, trying day, for them both. He had never seen Micheil do what he had done with the young farmhand's body, but those were questions best left for another time. Right now, all Kalen wanted was his sorcerer.

As if in answer to a silent prayer, the door opened and Kalen smiled as Micheil walked inside. Once the door was closed and locked, the sorcerer reached out, pulling Kalen close. Kalen opened immediately, swallowing the hungry sounds escaping Micheil's throat as Micheil backed them across the room toward the bed.

When the backs of his legs hit the bed frame, Kalen fell back, tugging Micheil down with him. He spread his legs, allowing Micheil to settle between them, and slid his fingers through the sorcerer's golden hair, holding it away from their faces as the kiss deepened.

"What do you want?" Micheil murmured on Kalen's lips. Fingers curling around Kalen's wrists, he pinned Kalen's arms to the bed.

"You." Kalen arched, grinding his body against Micheil's, needing the friction, the contact. "Make me forget everything, even if it's just for a little while." He felt Micheil smile against his mouth.

"That can be arranged."

Micheil's kisses moved over Kalen's throat, his teeth nipping and grazing the smooth skin. When Micheil bit down on the tender flesh where shoulder and neck met, Kalen sucked in a sharp breath and his back arched.

"Micheil..."

Another bite and Kalen's breath left him completely. Whatever the hell Micheil was doing, it was seeping into Kalen's body. Slow tendrils, like shimmering green threads, wound through him, curling to every nerve, drawing tight. Kalen shivered and swore he heard himself beg for more, but as the ribbons pulsed and slithered through him, he wasn't sure what was real anymore. All he could do was feel.

Flickers of light passed before his closed eyes then bled into him, filling him completely. When he felt warmth surround his cock, he tried to remember when he had undressed. Lips and tongue moved over him, swallowing him, bathing his length in silken heat. Fingers probed him then slipped inside. Kalen gasped and spread his legs, willing his body to open for Micheil, letting him in and giving him everything.

"All mine," the sorcerer purred somewhere close to Kalen's ear. Gods, how did the man do that, move so quickly, but without moving at all? "All...mine."

The last word was driven home in Kalen's mind by the sudden thrust inside him, the stretching of his body around Micheil, drawing him in deeper. Kalen opened his mouth, trying to speak, but instead of words coming out, Micheil's tongue slid in. Kalen moaned softly, the tenor growing stronger as Micheil's grip on his wrists tightened, thrusts becoming hard and quick. A growl slipped from Micheil's mouth into his and Kalen cried out, cock pulsing painfully between them. Seconds later, Micheil made several hard

strokes and groaned. Kalen shuddered as the cock inside him throbbed, filling his body with the sorcerer's release.

"Kalen?"

Kalen groaned and blinked several times, trying to clear away the fog in his brain. "Gods, what did you do to me?"

Micheil chuckled and kissed him softly. Only then did Kalen realize they were both still *clothed*.

"What the...?" Micheil hovered over him. "What did you do? I thought we..."

"Elven sex magic. We haven't actually done anything, although I highly recommend you getting out of those pants, as I imagine they will become quite uncomfortable soon."

Kalen angled his head and glanced down, grimacing at the dark stain seeping through the brown cloth. "That...was interesting."

Giving him another quick kiss, Micheil got out of bed. Kalen watched him move, loved the unassuming way Micheil walked, as if he were as harmless as a kitten. But even kittens could bite and scratch. Soft demeanor or no, Micheil Thierauf was much more than he appeared to be, and the powers he possessed were beyond all understanding. Kalen sat up and stared for a moment.

"What did you do to that young man's body?"

Micheil stopped abruptly, hand poised over the edge of the tray, just before lifting it. Kalen could see the conflict warring within Micheil, just by the expression on the sorcerer's face. Several minutes passed before Micheil answered.

"There are some abilities I possess that I am loath to use on a living person," Micheil said as he set the tray on the bed between them.

"Like...?" Kalen prodded. He picked up the wine bottle and pulled his knife from his boot, popping the cork in one swift motion.

Micheil met his gaze. "Like reading souls."

"Reading...souls?"

"Yes. I can see into a person's soul and know things even they are not wholly aware of. As in the case of the farmhand, if little time has passed between the time of death and my reading, I can catch the last threads of the person's soul before it leaves the body completely."

"Why would you never do it on a living person?" Kalen asked him quietly.

"Because my own morals will not allow it. It is an invasion of someone's free will for me to delve into their soul in such a way. I would only ever consider it if it meant life or death for the person, or someone else so involved."

Kalen smiled slowly. "Yet another thing to love about you, sorcerer." Micheil tilted his head in confusion. Kalen laughed and leaned forward, slipping a hand around the back of Micheil's neck to pull him closer. "Because you *have* morals, where most others would not."

“Micheil?”

Kalen walked blindly through the blackness surrounding him, feeling along the smooth dampness of the tunnel walls. He had followed the sorcerer down here, although why Micheil would deign to lead him into the bowels of the mountains was beyond him.

“Micheil Thierauf! I am not playing games with you, sorcerer.”

He stopped and listened, but heard nothing. With a muttered curse, he continued. Micheil was down here and when Kalen found him, he would drag the sorcerer out. This was ridiculous. He had more important things to do than follow Micheil on a bizarre whim.

Before he realized it, Kalen found himself in a cavern. The ceiling opened onto the sky and below, a veritable sea crashed upon a rocky shore. At that moment, he was convinced he had completely lost his mind.

“Call them.”

Kalen spun around as Micheil emerged from the darkness. Instead of his usual tunic and pants, Micheil wore the robes of a seer. His hair fell over his shoulders and his hands were clasped before him.

“‘Call them.’ Micheil, I am not in the mood for your games.”

“A game?” The sorcerer stepped forward, but made no move to fully close the distance between them. “You think this a game, Kalen?”

The question alone left Kalen feeling quite uncertain. He swallowed and looked out over the vast sea stretching into darkness. “Where are we?”

“The Shadowed Sea. It is where they come—out of the darkness and up through there.” Micheil pointed to the opening above. “I know you can call them, Kalen.”

A shrill cry echoed from deep within the caverns below and smoke billowed from the darkness. Winds began to sweep around them, stirring the waters of the sea into violent waves.

“They are coming, Kalen!”

An inferno poured from the black caverns and the beasts emerged, circling and screeching overhead. Before he realized what he was doing, the words began to flow from Kalen’s lips...as if he were born to them.

“Kalen!”

Kalen jerked awake, nearly jumping out of the bed. Beads of sweat covered his skin, and his heart raced in his chest. When recognition began to set in and he remembered he was still in The Crossing, he closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. A hand touched his shoulder, startling him anew.

“What happened?”

Micheil shook his head. “You were dreaming,” he said. “And you began chanting.”

“Chanting? Gods, Micheil, what’s happening to me?”

A hand raked through his hair slowly, fingers massaging him. “I don’t know, but I promise we will find out—together.”

“You said I was chanting. What was I saying?”

Micheil remained silent for a long moment then sighed. “Dragon spells. You were calling the dragons.”

“Dragons... Like in the dream before?”

Micheil nodded.

“How can I work spells—let alone, call dragons—without having a clue how to do it?”

“I don’t know,” Micheil said. “My question is, why now?”

“Why now?”

“Why are you getting these dreams now?” Micheil stood and began to pace. “Magical abilities present themselves in early childhood, yet I don’t recall you ever having them when we were children.”

“Is it possible for such things to lie dormant?” Kalen asked him. Micheil’s pacing grew quicker, a sure sign of deep thinking on the sorcerer’s part. Then Micheil stopped abruptly and spun around to face him. “What?”

“You were adopted.”

Kalen lifted an eyebrow. “That is no secret, Micheil. What of it?”

“Do you remember me telling you that you have elven blood within you?”

Kalen nodded slowly. “Yes...”

The sorcerer dropped to his knees in front of Kalen. “Don’t you find it a bit odd that the lithings are looking for you, for a purpose outside of the princess’s death warrant?”

“Well, yes, but I’ve not given it much thought. I’ve been too concerned with getting Sonana’s defenses stepped up.”

“Kalen, listen to me,” Micheil said, taking Kalen’s hands in his. “There is something within you that they obviously value highly. Come with me to Seriete. There, you will be safe and we can figure out what it is that the lithings seem to think you possess—because I can assure you, it has nothing to do with *elven* blood.”

A question plagued Kalen’s mind, but a part of him was almost afraid to hear the answer. “Do you think I might have lithing blood within me as well? Is it possible that there is nothing human about me?”

Micheil nodded.

“Oh, gods,” Kalen groaned. “Micheil, I don’t need this.”

“I know, love. I know.” Micheil leaned forward and kissed him softly. “We will get to the bottom of this. That, I swear.”

Chapter Eight

Black smoke billowed out of the iron cauldron and those who valued their souls stayed their distance. Very few dared the sort of dark arts Braen surrounded himself with, and those who did rarely had little to lose anyway, should things go wrong. Braen cared not for those weak-willed fools. He stirred the brackish liquid within the cauldron, taking care to envision a strong sphere of protection around his person. Calling the dead was a dangerous, but hardly exact, science. Horror stories still made the rounds—tales of sorcerers gone stark-raving mad.

A figure began forming in the smoke and a ripple of whispers drifted through the darkened room. With a simple lift of his hand, Braen ordered silence. The noise ceased and he dropped to his knees before the apparition.

“Master.”

“Faithful Braen,” the spirit said. “Have you found him?”

The man’s ethereal body swirled with milky-gray smoke and his eyes were still as deep red as they had been in life. Braen’s eyes mirrored them—exact copies said to drive fear through the strongest soul.

“We have narrowed our search to Sonana,” Braen said.

“Do you know who he is?”

Braen shook his head. “Not yet, Master, but we are near to discovering his identity.”

“Very good.” The spirit smiled then faded, white smoke mixing with black.

With a snap of Braen’s fingers, fires lit once more in the Great Hall. Servants came and lifted the cauldron onto a flat cart then rolled it away. Braen returned to his throne, mulling over the latest reports from the scouts. The small raiding party sent to destroy General Kalen Ysindroc had failed...miserably. Braen drummed his fingers on the arm of his throne. Carved from ages-old darkwood, it had once held King Breasal Vondrasek and, if Braen had his way, it would hold the rightful king once again.

Kalen.

Braen knew, beyond all doubt, that he would have to find a way to rid himself of Akuron’s general. The man was a menace, always showing up, always stopping plans before they could grow to fruition. *Gods, no wonder Andrion’s princess wanted the general out of her way.* Braen cared nothing of her intentions or reasons, only that they shared the same damned thorn.

“Elia!”

From the darkness to the right of the throne, a woman emerged. Ebony skin sleek as silk and eyes the color of fresh blood, she was as beautiful as she was deadly. As his top assassin, she was Braen's best hope. He had tried to keep her near, unwilling to waste her talents on menial tasks, but he was running out of time. He needed Kalen Ysindroc dead, and he needed it done now.

"Yes, my lord?"

Braen smiled. "I had hoped to save your talents for something more lucrative, but it seems that a particular thorn in my side is proving to be a difficult one to remove."

"Who, my lord?" Elia slung her bow onto her shoulder and rested a hand on the pommel of her sword. "I will do as you bid."

"General Kalen Ysindroc. I want him dead."

Elia bowed low. "Do you require proof of the deed?"

"His head," Braen said. "Go now. Return to me only when the general is dead."

"Yes, my lord." Elia bowed once more, then turned on her booted heel and left.

As he watched her go, Braen prayed to all the gods he knew of that she could do away with the general as swiftly as possible.

Micheil stopped at the edge of the creek. Through the trees on the other side, rose the stone walls of the Midland Pass fortress. Just beyond those walls—the lands of the elves. Kalen drew rein beside him, silent and watchful.

"Trouble?" Kalen asked.

Micheil shook his head. "It's been so long. I don't know who is in charge here any longer. Perhaps—"

A whistle cut through the trees, and Kalen shouted suddenly, drawing his sword before Micheil even realized what had happened. A jagged tear exposed a small bit of scratched flesh on the top of Kalen's left thigh. Blood quickly soaked the dark brown cloth where the arrow had grazed the general's leg.

"Who dares to fire without provocation?" Kalen shouted, glaring into the woods on the other side of the water.

"Kalen, I do not think—" Micheil groaned as Kalen started across the creek.

Before the general got halfway, however, another arrow flew past Kalen's head, lodging itself in the tree he had been beside only moments before.

"You missed," Kalen growled, coming to a stop in the middle of the water.

"The intention was to warn," Micheil said calmly, "not to kill...yet."

"Smart man," came an answer from a tree directly in front of Kalen.

"Show yourself," Kalen demanded. "I will fight a man, but not a shadow."

Micheil's gaze shifted from Kalen to the rock just below the tree. A figure dropped onto the rock then stood straight, another arrow notched and aimed at Kalen's throat. The steel tip sparkled in the sunlight,

and this one was not a warning. The archer's face was hidden by a dark green cowl, but the shape of the body was enough, as were the two long fighting knives which hung at either hip.

"Vanya."

The arrow dipped slightly as the cowl fell back, revealing blazing red hair and deep green eyes. The archer stared at Micheil then looked back to Kalen. Her gaze was sharp, wary, and she retained a defensive stance on her rock.

"What brings you here, sorcerer?"

Micheil rode forward cautiously, coming to a stop beside Kalen. "General Ysindroc is with me," Micheil said. "We make our way to Seriete. I've been summoned."

"And you?" Vanya asked, cutting a leery stare in Kalen's direction.

"I am his companion," Kalen said.

"His lover," Vanya said. Kalen nodded. "Very well."

The archer jumped from her rock and onto the back of a feralaan. The beast was the size of a horse, but it was of the cat family. Its massive head hung low to the ground, sniffing as if it were hungry and looking for food. Its sleek coat was brilliant white with small patches of black. Its paws were twice as large as Micheil's outstretched palm, with claws as long as his index finger. Razor sharp teeth filled the feralaan's mouth, with upper canines that protruded down past the lower jaw by the length of a man's forearm. When it raised its head, it threw them all a most predatory glare, its yellow eyes narrowed to tiny slits in its skull. It was by far the largest feralaan Micheil had ever seen.

On the feralaan's back, Vanya sat without the aid of a saddle. She was dressed in the colors of the woods—green and brown. Her bow was slung across her back, along with her quiver, and a thick braid of blazing red hair disappeared beneath her cowl. Micheil hadn't seen her in ages and wondered how she had come into the queen's service instead of taking the throne herself when her mother, the former Queen Furia, had been murdered.

They followed Vanya into the fortress guarding the mountain pass. "I'd suggest stabling Destrier here," Micheil said. "He's strong but not fast enough to take us to Seriete swiftly. Aserion can bear us both."

They stopped just inside the stone fortress. It had been quite a long time since Micheil had seen Midland Pass. Things had not changed.

Kalen dismounted and led Destrier to the stables, and Micheil followed behind. Once both horses were well into their feed, Vanya appeared almost out of nowhere.

"Are you to Seriete, then?"

"We are," Micheil said. "I assume we have been granted access with no escort?"

"Yes." Short, sharp. He'd expected nothing less in her answer. "Your men must stay here, however." Micheil nodded. "Good day to you." With that, she turned on her heel and left.

“Something tells me she doesn’t like you much.”

Micheil snorted and stroked his fingers through Aserion’s mane. “She’s never forgiven me for leaving Seriete after her mother’s death.”

“And her mother was...?”

“The former queen, Furia. Vanya should have been crowned after Furia’s death, though why she has not been is beyond me.” He met Kalen’s gaze over Aserion’s back. “She was the closest to a best friend I had before Vala took us away from Seriete. Vanya is still angry, I fear.”

“But that was beyond your control,” Kalen said as he rested a hand on Aserion’s rump to keep from spooking the stallion as he walked around to stand beside Micheil.

“It was,” Micheil said with a nod, “but she thinks I should have returned after Vala’s death. She objects to my acting as court seer for a human.”

“Is there more than that?”

Micheil laughed and shook his head. “No. Despite what many believed, there was nothing between us but friendship. Vanya prefers elven women.”

“Ah. Now that explains why she doesn’t desire you,” Kalen whispered in Micheil’s ear. Micheil shivered. “You know, there is much we can do while on horseback, especially if we are to ride alone.”

“You are positively mad.” Micheil turned and slid his arms around Kalen’s neck.

“Maybe,” Kalen leaned in, nipping at Micheil’s bottom lip, “but I also know that you’d be mad to think I’m going to keep my hands to myself when we’re alone.”

“Food first, General,” Micheil chuckled. “And then we will tend to your leg before we leave.”

“I’ll live. It’s only a scratch. One of the men will have something to stop any potential infection.”

“As you wish.” Micheil released him. “I must speak with Vanya.”

“You go, and I will see where my men wandered off to.”

As Kalen started for the barracks where the others were staying, Micheil caught sight of Vanya staring out of a window in the southeast tower. The woman couldn’t stay angry at him forever, surely.

Upon reaching the tower, he met her in the ground-floor doorway.

“Can we talk?”

Vanya stepped to the side and waved him in without a word. Only when the door closed did she speak.

“How could you do it? How could you leave like that and never return?”

“Vanya, please,” Micheil sighed. “You’ve always been a part of me. You know that. I had no more control over Vala’s actions than I do over the queen’s. I’m sorry.”

“But you left me! You swore you’d never leave, you swore you’d always be with me!” Rage and pain warred in those green eyes, and Micheil could only watch helplessly as the warrior-archer cracked and tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Vanya.” He pulled her to him, kissing Vanya’s hair as she broke down, wetting his tunic with tears she’d kept to herself for far too long. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’re like a brother to me,” Vanya murmured, “and I hated you for leaving.”

“I know, but I’ve never really left you. I’ve always been there.”

Vanya nodded then stood up straight, giving her eyes a brisk wipe with the edge of her tunic. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. “It’s just been so long...”

Micheil smiled and touched her cheek. “Don’t be. Are you sure you won’t return to Seriete with us?”

“I can’t,” she sighed. “I really must stay here, Micheil. With all of the troubles going on, I can’t afford to leave. Besides, you have your general to keep you company. I think you’ll appreciate the lack of others.”

“You know me too well.”

Vanya laughed and started packing several days worth of food. “I know you—period.” She handed him the pack. “There’s enough there for four days, although I don’t think you’ll need it all.”

“Aserion will have us there soon enough. Thank you, Vanya.”

“Off with you, sorcerer, before I send Sorien with you. He’s going to keep me busy enough as it is.”

Micheil just laughed and nodded, giving her a last hug before leaving the tower. Unsurprisingly, he found Kalen in heavy debate in the barracks, the general’s food untouched as he essentially drilled his point home, punctuating each stern comment with a jab of a knife in the air. Micheil had to give the other men credit—none of them were, at that moment, arguing with their leader. Smart men.

Content for the moment to simply watch and wait, Micheil leaned against the door-frame, basking in the sun shining through the open door. When Kalen finally finished his rather one-sided discourse on the best military formations during battle, the general stabbed a chunk of meat with his knife and grinned as he ate it.

As much as he loved watching Kalen work, however, Micheil knew they needed to be on their way. He cleared his throat, immediately feeling every single bit of poorly hidden disdain from the other men.

“General, we must be leaving.”

Kalen drank the last of his mead, then stood. “I expect to hear nothing but good reports when I return,” he said, eyeing every man in the room. No one dared say a word, and Kalen took hold of Micheil’s shirt, pulling him out of the barracks.

“They still don’t like me,” Micheil grumbled as they walked to the stables.

“They don’t trust you because you’re a seer, Micheil.”

Micheil’s eyebrow rose. “They don’t trust me at all—no matter what I might be.”

He swung up onto Aserion’s back and, a minute later, Kalen settled behind him. Micheil made a conscious effort to ignore the press of the general’s hard body up against him...at least until they were well away from the fortress. Giving Vanya a wave, he led Aserion out of the fortress’ east gate.

Midland Pass was a six-mile stretch of narrow dirt road cutting through the Midland Range, a massive mountain range separating the land of the elves from the land of the humans. Sun poured down into the pass, reflecting off of the exposed pockets of gold just near the tops of the mountains. No one dared to mine that gold, however, for fear of the dragons said to guard the mountains. Hardly a plant grew in the pass, and only the barest number of animals inhabited the otherwise barren expanse of rock.

“Want you,” Kalen murmured, lips brushing Micheil’s neck as he pulled Micheil’s hair to the side. “I want to fill you, sorcerer.”

Any words Micheil might have said simply refused to come out. A shiver ran through him and his pants tightened considerably as Kalen’s left hand slid over his thigh. Micheil leaned back against the general, his eyes closing. He knew Aserion didn’t need the guidance. The stallion knew this road. All elven horses did.

“Kalen...” Micheil drew in a breath, his words catching as Kalen leaned him forward. A part of him couldn’t quite believe they were doing this on the back of a horse. The rest of him simply didn’t give a damn. All he wanted at that moment was to feel Kalen inside him.

“Yes.” Kalen pushed Micheil’s pants down just enough and then a finger—*slick with oil?*—slid inside Micheil.

“Oh, gods.” Micheil groaned and rocked back, wanting more than just a finger. The sly bastard had been planning this, he realized, when another finger pushed in alongside the first.

“Come on, love,” Kalen said behind him.

The fingers left and Micheil gasped as Kalen pulled him up and back, Kalen’s cock sliding deep inside him with the motion.

“Kalen.” Micheil’s knuckles turned white as he held the reins in an iron grip. Every step Aserion took over the rocky road caused them both to shift, resulting in the inevitable slide of Kalen’s cock in and out of Micheil’s body. Micheil’s head fell back onto Kalen’s shoulder, nothing getting through but the sensation of Kalen deep inside him.

“Love you, sorcerer,” Kalen whispered. He rocked his hips up slightly, and Micheil’s breath left him in a rush. “Come on, Micheil, ride me.”

Letting go of the reins with one hand, Micheil turned his head just enough to get a kiss. He moaned into Kalen’s mouth, fingers sliding through the general’s hair as Kalen’s thrusts continued—slow and easy and so damned torturous.

“Faster.”

The word was breathed over Micheil’s lips and with a nod, he squeezed his thighs to Aserion’s sides. The stallion picked up the pace, falling into a slow trot that left Micheil positively breathless as Kalen held him tight, cock piercing him over and over again with every movement of the horse beneath them.

“Kalen, please...”

Claiming his mouth in another kiss, Kalen circled Micheil's cock with his hand and started to pull, thumb grazing over the tip with every stroke. Coupled with the driving force under them, Micheil lost all hope of holding back. With a muffled cry, he came, heat spilling over Kalen's fist as he rocked hard and quick. Kalen was quick to follow, filling his mouth with a harsh growl as he filled Micheil's body with his release.

Breathless and dazed, Micheil simply couldn't move. He let his head rest back against Kalen's shoulder again and relished the fullness inside him, the heat and love surrounding him. There were definite advantages to sharing a horse.

They made good time, crossing into the elven lands just as the sun set. By the time they stopped for a rest, the sun had already dipped well behind the mountains.

Kalen set up a makeshift camp while Micheil released Aserion. The stallion stayed nearby, snorting his annoyance with the lack of anything green. Digging into his pack, Micheil produced a small leather pouch. He sprinkled a pinch of the dark green powder onto the lackluster patch of grass Aserion found and the horse tapped his hoof as the grass grew longer and spread outward.

Kalen sat against a boulder, content to watch the elven sorcerer work his magic on the land. It was times like this that he remembered what Micheil was. The horse content, Micheil put the pouch away and settled between Kalen's legs, leaning back against him.

"How much farther?"

"About a day. Aserion knows this land well, so his footing is much better here."

"What do you think the queen will have to say?" Kalen asked quietly.

Micheil remained silent for several minutes. "I don't know. Larian is...devious, for an elf."

"I don't sense a lot of trust there."

Micheil chuckled, though there was little humor to it. "No, there really isn't. There are political issues that go back farther than I care to think about, and I have a distinct feeling you play a very strong part in all of it."

"Why do you say that?"

Micheil turned around in Kalen's arms and studied him for a moment. "Because there is elven blood in your veins."

"Sweet gods, it's him."

Elia lowered her bow, letting the tip touch the mossy stone on which she knelt. Just beyond the foliage providing her coverage, General Kalen Ysindroc and his sorcerer companion were making camp. She had orders to kill the general and was determined to carry them out...until she overheard them talking.

She backed away slowly, careful to not make a single sound, and then scrambled back into her hole beneath a small ledge of rock. She dug into her pack and brought out a small pouch of purple powder. She tossed a pinch into the fire she'd started a few minutes before she set watch.

"Yes?" Braen's image flickered in the flames, a poor visage of the most beautiful man she'd ever known.

"I've found him, my lord."

Braen smiled. "Very good. Kill him."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," Elia said cautiously. Braen scowled and Elia held up a hand. "Wait, my lord, please hear me out."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Braen eyed her warily. "On with it."

"The general's sorcerer seems to think the general has elven blood within him."

"Elven blood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Are you certain of this?"

"I heard it from the sorcerer's lips," Elia said, feeling just a bit more relaxed than before.

Braen remained silent for a moment, his face showing signs of thought. "Very well. Where are they going?"

"Seriete."

"Damn. Follow them, Elia. I want indisputable proof that Kalen Ysindroc is Breasal's lost son. I don't care how you get it. Return home only when you are certain—beyond a shadow of a doubt—that he is the one I seek."

With that, Braen's image flickered once more and faded away. Elia slumped against the rough rock wall of her shelter and stared at the fire.

Out of all the men in this world, why did Breasal's son have to be the most decorated war general?

Elia sighed and tossed handfuls of dirt and rocks onto the fire, snuffing it out. Time to move out.

Chapter Nine

Cypravion had not changed. Ages passed since Micheil had been back in these lands, but somehow, it still felt like home. The journey to Seriete was uneventful and quick, and now Micheil found himself staring at the pristine white doors of the queen's palace. Just beyond them, Queen Lorian sat, waiting for him. Gods, he didn't want this.

Taking a deep breath, Micheil pushed the doors open and, when the queen beckoned him, he strode toward the dais. Upon reaching it, he bowed low.

"Oh, do stop it, Micheil," Lorian said with the slightest hint of annoyance. "I summoned you here for a reason."

Micheil righted himself and met her gaze. "I know."

"Your general is...unique." The way she said it made Micheil's stomach clench into a knot. "I want to know why. You have the power to see into his soul."

"No," Micheil stated with stern conviction.

"No?" Lorian raised an eyebrow at him. "You disobey me?"

"It is against everything I believe in."

"I do not care for your beliefs, sorcerer," Lorian said, her tone dry, bordering on impatience.

"You cannot ask me to do this," Micheil answered, squaring his jaw. "Will you have me thrown into your dungeon?"

Lorian sighed. "Must you always be so difficult?"

Micheil didn't reply. He just turned abruptly and started to walk away.

"You know I am right, Daeron."

He stilled. No one had called him *Daeron* since Vala died. And no one but Kalen and Marilee knew his true name...or so he thought. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, swallowing the anger as it started to surface. He tightened his hands into fists, barely aware of the sharp pain as his fingernails dug into his palms.

"I will not do it," he ground out, accentuating each word through clenched teeth. How the elven queen knew his true name was beyond him. What angered him more, however, was her attempt to use it on him as a means of control. Only one person in existence now held that power, and control was the last thing Micheil had to worry about with him.

Micheil stormed out of the throne room and all but ran right into Kalen. He met the general's gaze, felt it rake over him—hot but concerned. Micheil knew he seemed like he was ready to bring the palace down. Forcing the dark mood to some place less visible than his eyes, he managed a smile.

Kalen saw through him anyway. "That did not go well."

Running his fingers through his hair, Micheil laughed, although there was little humor to it. "You could say that." He closed his eyes as Kalen's fingers kneaded into knotted muscles along his shoulders.

"What's wrong, Micheil? Talk to me."

Micheil shook his head. "Not here."

"Then where? Would you rather get a room at an inn?"

"No. Let's..." Micheil sighed again, feeling more defeated by the second. "How about a walk?"

Kalen turned Micheil's head and the general's thumb grazed Micheil's bottom lip. "We can walk," he said quietly, "as soon as I get a kiss."

A kiss. Micheil smiled, if only for a moment, lost in the eyes of the man he adored. Kalen made the first move, taking Micheil's breath away with a slow, soul-stealing kiss.

"Who are you?"

Kalen breathed his answer into Micheil. "Yours."

Yes. Yes, his—his heart, his soul.

Pulling back slightly, Micheil studied Kalen's face, fingers and gaze following every line, every faded scar. When he glanced up into the general's eyes, he knew he owed this to them both.

"Let me see into you. Let me find your past, Kalen."

Kalen remained quiet for a moment then he nodded. "Only you."

"Only me. Always."

Somehow, they made it to their room in the palace, a good distance from the queen's chambers, but still too close, in Micheil's opinion. All those thoughts scattered, however, when Kalen pinned him to the doorframe, their lips and tongues devouring one another. Micheil fumbled for the door latch as Kalen's hands moved under his shirt, fingers skimming over his chest.

"In."

Kalen nodded in agreement, pushing Micheil into the room with his body. The general whisked off Micheil's shirt then started on his pants, all the while working them back toward the bed.

"Yes, Micheil," Kalen murmured, "in." He bent and wrapped his lips around Micheil's left nipple, teeth tugging.

Micheil arched, panted, shoving Kalen's pants down just before the general pushed him onto the bed. After stepping out of his pants, Kalen followed him down, catching Micheil's lips in another kiss as they both tugged the general's shirt over his head. Micheil's pants went quickly and then they were skin on skin, cocks hard, sliding as they rocked their hips.

“Ride me.” Kalen flipped them and drew Micheil up to straddle his hips.

Micheil peppered the general’s chest with kisses, and when two slick fingers entered him, he pushed back, groaning as Kalen opened him. Then the fingers were gone and Kalen’s cock replaced them, sliding deep. Micheil sat up and back, both of them gasping as his weight drove Kalen even deeper.

“Micheil.” Kalen’s eyes closed and his hands curled to Micheil’s hips, pushing and pulling as his body arched.

Closing his own eyes, Micheil traced the thread connecting them, binding their souls to one another. Movements never ceasing, he rode Kalen’s thrusts, fingers digging into the general’s chest as his body quickly spun out of control.

“Come for me. Let me in, Kalen.”

“Micheil!” Kalen jerked and shuddered, clutching Micheil as his orgasm tore apart the last barriers in his mind.

What Micheil saw in his mind took his breath away. As his body drank in Kalen’s release, his thoughts were filled with the truth of the general’s heritage. Images flashed one after another. Screams, a female elf, the cloying scent of soil, the sensation of bark surrounding him. Before he could register much more, Kalen flipped them again and Micheil suddenly stared up into eyes he’d only seen in a dream.

All he could do was hold on as Kalen thrust him over the edge.

“Breasal’s son.” Kalen shook his head, kept on pacing. If he sat, he’d go crazy. He simply could not wrap his brain around it all.

“Yes,” Micheil said quietly. The sorcerer sat on the edge of the bed, having done nothing but pull his pants back on. Yet even that wasn’t enough of a distraction.

Kalen finally stopped pacing and just stood in the middle of the room, staring at the wall. “Gods, Micheil, I’m lost.”

Micheil stood and wrapped both arms tightly around Kalen’s waist, pressing against his back, chin on Kalen’s shoulder. “But you’re not alone.”

“I know.” Reaching back, Kalen stroked the elf’s hair. “Where does this leave me, Micheil? If Andrion were to find out...gods, if anyone were to find out, I’d be a dead man.”

“Not necessarily.” Micheil turned him slowly. “You are the son of the greatest sorcerer this world has ever seen, Kalen. You can bring things back together—the humans, the elves, the lithings.”

“They were never meant to be in peace,” Kalen grumbled. “Breasal was a murderer. What if the world just wants to seek its revenge out on me? An army, I can face. An entire world, I can’t.”

“You won’t have to. Trust me, Kalen.” Micheil’s smile did more to ease the apprehension seething in Kalen than the sorcerer’s words ever could at this point. “Let us help you. Let *me* help you.”

“To do what? Breasal’s name is a curse.”

“But yours is not.”

“And Braen?”

Micheil’s smile faltered. “He is another matter. He is the one who called up Breasal’s spirit, which in turn sparked the magic in your blood.”

“He,” Kalen added, “is also my brother.”

Micheil nodded. “Half-brother, but a brother nonetheless.”

Kalen groaned. “Where do we start?”

“A little lesson in magical self-defense.”

“One question. Why me? Braen is his son, too.”

“Braen had a different mother, Kalen. Your mother...” Micheil paused for a moment. “Your mother was Queen Furia. That is where your elven blood comes from. You are royalty, Kalen. You should’ve been king.”

Chapter Ten

Twenty-six years.

For twenty-six years, Kalen thought himself like everyone else. He'd grown up with the tales of Socendor's darkest era. Every soul in the kingdom knew of Breasal Vondrasek and his insatiable hunger for power. Stories of the elven queen's murder, of her restless and heartbroken spirit haunting the ruins of Breasal's once-opulent palace, had always been told by minstrels to entertain the court. Now those same tales pieced together Kalen's fragmented life.

"I thought I might find you out here."

"My entire life I listened to the stories of how Breasal murdered Queen Furia," Kalen said, staring out at the deceptively calm waters of Lake Seriete. "He butchered the people and encouraged those loyal to him to create more of his kind."

"Breasal's life and crimes are beyond your control."

Kalen spun around, furious. "I shouldn't exist, Micheil!"

"You cannot change the past." Micheil's calm demeanor only angered Kalen even more.

"His poisonous blood flows through *my* veins!"

Micheil seized Kalen's shoulders and gave him a hard shake. "Kalen. You can't escape who you are or where you came from, but you *can* alter what happens as a result."

"How?"

Before Micheil had a chance to answer, Kalen spotted movement on the opposite side of the lake. He narrowed his gaze and peered harder into the darkness. "Micheil."

"What?"

"How well are the borders protected?"

Micheil didn't reply, and Kalen glanced over at him.

"They aren't, are they?"

"Not since Vala took us and fled to the human cities."

"Where is your queen?"

"Kalen..."

Kalen shoved past Micheil and stormed into the palace. "Lerian!"

The few elves who worked for the queen scattered, eyes wide as he stalked down the long corridor. When he reached the throne room, he flung open the doors. Queen Lorian's advisors jumped at the crash of the doors hitting the walls, but Kalen ignored the men and went straight for the queen.

"You aren't surprised to see me," Kalen snapped.

The elven queen maintained a composed expression. "Should I be? I knew you were here with..." Her words trailed off for a moment and she gazed at something over Kalen's shoulder before continuing. "...Micheil."

Kalen didn't need to turn to know his sorcerer stood at his back. "Who are you working with, Lorian? Princess Sherie? Braen himself?"

The advisors gasped, but the queen waved them into silence. She rose slowly from her throne, her silver gown shimmering with every graceful movement. If she'd been anyone else, Kalen would've thought her beautiful. Lorian's reputation for questionable practices, however, eclipsed all else.

"You have no proof of such things," she said as she came to a stop before Kalen.

"No? Then perhaps explain to your advisors and your people why lithings are free to enter your lands."

"How dare you," she hissed. "You know nothing. You are nothing. These lands are mine to control, and I will die before I see an abomination take my place."

Though he kept his gaze on the treacherous queen, Kalen noticed guards moving toward her from behind. "What did Braen offer you, Lorian? What prize is worth putting your own people in danger?"

"Enough!"

Lorian lunged for him, her blue eyes dark with fury. Kalen drew his sword the second guards seized Lorian's arms. She screeched and fought them, the madness taking its toll as her face twisted in rage.

"He will bring war to your doorstep," she screamed, kicking and struggling.

The guards hauled her away, her advisors staring in shock as their queen shrieked and spat out elvish curses. Kalen lowered his sword and felt Micheil's hand on his shoulder.

"Your people will catch wind of this quickly," Kalen said.

"Then we will deal with it." Micheil turned Kalen to face him. "Vanya was the rightful queen. Lorian stole that birthright from her."

"Why did your people let her?"

"Fear. Lorian promised them an end to the war with the lithings. She promised them safety and peace."

"And Vanya?"

"She was too young to lead at the time. Lorian became a regent and, over time, the queen."

"There are lithings in the elven lands, Micheil."

"I fear they aren't here randomly."

“Did you suspect Larian of working with Braen?”

“No, but then, I’ve been gone so long. A lot has changed.”

“We have to know what she’s done,” Kalen said. He sheathed his sword and scanned the remaining advisors and guards in the throne room, all of whom watched him closely. “They don’t trust me. Will they trust you?”

Micheil sighed. “They either trust their highest sorcerer...or a mad queen.”

Kalen nodded. “First order of business then...” He started for the still-open doors. “We bring Vanya home.”

“Kalen.”

He stopped, looking at Micheil over his shoulder.

“You can’t run from this.”

“I’m not. My sister—half or no—will rule. I will fight.”

A growing crowd of elves gathered outside the throne room and spilled into the halls and down the entry steps. As Kalen approached, they parted to let him pass. Whispers followed him, and for a brief moment, he wondered if they knew who his father had been.

He stopped once more and half-turned. Micheil descended the steps, advisors in tow, each of them nodding. When the sorcerer neared Kalen, the crowd fell into a deafening silence.

“Go get Vanya,” Micheil said. “I will maintain order here until your return.”

“Then what?”

Micheil stepped closer and rested his forehead to Kalen’s, staring into his eyes. His voice lowered to a whisper only for Kalen’s ears. “Then, General, we ride to Sunderlind—to confront Braen.”

“Will the elves follow us into battle?”

“Not many cared for Larian.”

“Will they follow me?”

Micheil fell silent, then answered. “When they learn their queen willingly allowed their enemies to enter our lands? I think they would follow you to their deaths if you promised them an end to this.”

“Larian promised them an end as well.”

“Larian also dethroned the rightful queen.”

Kalen closed his eyes. “Help me, Micheil,” he whispered.

“I would never let you do this alone.”

“You know more about the lithings. You were alive when Breasal murdered my mother.”

Micheil nodded.

“Teach me everything you know about Breasal and his magic. If Braen is his son as well, then Braen has had longer to learn what I have not. Show me how to defeat my brother before he destroys us all.”

“I will.” Micheil kissed Kalen’s lips softly. “I promise.”

“Can we win this?”

Micheil’s eyes opened and Kalen met the sorcerer’s calm, blue gaze. “We can...and we will.”

Kalen managed a slight smile and met Micheil in a kiss. Having discovered Lerian’s treachery, they were one step closer to putting an end to the constant wars. Kalen didn’t know how things would turn out when all was said and done, nor could he readily see an end in sight. But one thing he did know was that, with his sorcerer by his side, he could face anything—an army and even a world.

About the Author

To learn more about Mychael Black, please visit www.mychaelblack.net. Send an email to Mychael at mychaelblack@gmail.com or join his Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Mychael! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/theprincesangel>

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Warning: This title contains explicit gay sex, graphic language, violence, angels, demons, a little sorcery, and a lot of angst.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Realms of Fantasy:

“It is impossible.” Lev stood abruptly, the twinge of pain in his wing no more than an echoing reminder, a ghost sensation to his senses. He went into the bathroom and stripped out of his clothing. He did waste a small amount of energy mending the ripped fabric. After turning on the faucet in the shower, he stepped under the hot spray. Half hoping to relieve the sudden tension that had sprung up in him, Lev stood beneath the water, eyes closed. He wasn’t surprised when he felt Alael step behind him.

“You can’t run from the inevitable.” Alael’s words drifted over Lev’s slick skin; his tongue licked away the water along the top of Lev’s shoulder. Sliding a hand around Lev’s waist, he brought them together, Lev’s back to his bare chest. The strength of his hold wasn’t easily escapable.

Shock rippled through Lev and desire followed in its wake. The heat of the demon's internal fire drew Lev like nothing else could. "How did you... Why?" Closing his eyes, he fought against the urge to give in, to taste at least once what he'd begun to crave.

"Perhaps you should make a habit of locking the door," Alael whispered gruffly, his tongue snaking out to trace the curve of Lev's ear. One hand slipped between them, tracing a slow line down Lev's spine, just barely skimming the crease of his ass. Alael slid his other hand up Lev's stomach to his chest, grazing one of Lev's nipples with his fingertips.

Lev could force Alael to stop touching him with a simple expenditure of energy, yet he didn't. The betraying shift of his body gave lie to the small noise of protest he made. Pressing back, he wanted far more than the feathering tease of the demon's hand on his ass. He reached for Alael's hip, his nails digging slightly as he covered the demon's hand on his chest with his other.

"Yes," Alael murmured. "You want this. You *need* this."

Moving them forward, Alael bent Lev over, bracing him against the shower wall. Then he stepped back, letting both hands slide slowly down Lev's sides, over his spine, and finally to his ass, fingers spreading Lev open. In one motion, Alael was on his knees and his tongue was pushing into the angel's body, the length of pure muscle sliding deep.

Lev started to argue, but the demon's touch short-circuited his brain. As Alael's tongue entered him, Lev cried out. "Yes, Alael." He clawed at the slick surface of the wall, silently begging for more. The fire spread swiftly through him, igniting an undeniable need. Lev dropped a hand to his cock and stroked it as he moaned.

Alael slipped in two fingers alongside his tongue, stretching Lev open. As he pulled away and stood, he licked a slow path up Lev's spine to the base of his neck. Alael leaned over Lev and plunged his fingers in and out of Lev's body.

The very thing that had crept into his dreams was happening to him, and Lev was powerless to stop it. Heat engulfed him from every touch of the demon's tongue and hands, promising more to come. "Need you, need more. Please, Alael." Each word came with a gasp as he rocked between Alael's hands.

Growling, Alael pulled out his fingers, lined himself up and thrust hard, driving his cock deep inside Lev. Keeping one hand tight on Lev's cock, Alael wrapped the other in the angel's hair, pulling him up and back as he thrust again.

"Yes. Mine." The words were part groan, part growl. Alael's teeth grazed Lev's neck as he slammed into him.

The swift penetration and invasive heat burned through Lev. Shaking his head wildly, he tried to speak, but the words refused to come. Only soft noises rose in his throat, urging the demon to take him completely. He strained toward the demon's touch, the sensations threatening to drag him under.

“Come for me, Lev.” His thrusts never relenting, Alael drove them hard, his hand working Lev’s cock in time to the movements of his own as it pierced the angel’s body. “Come on my cock. I want to hear you scream my name.” Turning Lev’s head until he could see the angel’s eyes, Alael grazed his thumb over the tip of Lev’s cock, pressing into the slit. “Know I’m the one doing this to you.” Before Lev had a chance to respond, Alael’s tongue pushed into his mouth, tasting and devouring.

Each word echoed in Lev’s mind, as relentless as the drive of Alael’s hips. As his own pleasure rolled him under, his seed spilled over the demon’s hand and a guttural cry forced its way from Lev’s throat. Lev drowned under the assault, the demon’s name torn from his lips. “Alael!”

Alael roared, ramming hard as he came. Heat poured out of him and deep into Lev. Lev could smell the demon’s seed, his sweat. In the aftermath, he closed his eyes, letting his mind follow the heat of Alael’s essence. As the waves pervaded him at the deepest levels, he limply fell back against Alael. Barely able to support himself, he shook his head as if to stop the flood. His thoughts scrambled to catch up, to ask what Alael was doing to him, but he couldn’t talk. All he could do was drown beneath the flames scorching his very soul.

“*Mine.*” The word drifted from Alael’s mind to Lev’s, burning the truth of it into both of their souls, sealing them.

Two men on trajectory for an explosive collision.

Star Flyer

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Still mourning the loss of his lover to invading forces, Marr Hingo operates his farm under a dictatorship while keeping his mind—and feet—planted firmly on the ground. Spring arrives right on schedule, bringing with it something completely unexpected—an unconscious pilot from a downed star jet. Unable to bring himself to give up the handsome aviator to searching troops, Marr hides him in the barn's cellar.

The last thing Davan Siedel remembers before ejecting is getting in a couple of good blasts against a Galactic Forces F150. He wakes to find his vague memory of being carried by an angel wasn't far off the mark. A tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed farmer has brought him to safety and is tending his injured leg.

The attraction between solid, earthy Marr and clever, quicksilver Davan catches them off guard—and their sexual union is as sweet as it is powerful. Yet the longer Davan lingers, the tighter the enemy's web grows, threatening their love, their freedom...and their lives.

Warning: Contains hot male/male loving, sweet sexual healing, a down-to-earth farmer who knows how to wield a...plow, a smart-mouthed pilot with fast...jets.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Star Flyer:

Marr descended the narrow steps, tripped and caught himself with a stumbling leap to the ground. He cursed his clumsiness as he held up the glow stick and peered into the darkness. The rumpled pile of sacking was empty. His guest was nowhere in sight. "Are you all right?"

"Still here." Davan's voice floated quietly through the still air. He crawled out from behind one of the wooden vegetable bins, dragging his injured leg. He had a mag-blaster in his hand and a quizzical expression on his face. "I heard a lot of activity up there. What happened?"

"Tandus soldiers searching the area. I sent them into the forest in the opposite direction from where you came down. Had to wait for them to leave before I could come back."

Davan holstered his weapon and blew a long breath. "Thought I was going to have to shoot my way out." His frown returned as he cursed in Antian. "Ob-coms! They've probably got the place bugged."

"I checked and didn't find any."

"I've got a scanner in my flight suit if you want to sweep the area." Davan reached into the bin behind him and pulled out the folded suit. He handed Marr a small device and showed him how to turn on the beam.

For a moment their hands touched and Marr was shocked by the effect the brief touch had on him. His cock grew rigid as if it imagined what the other man's hand would feel like touching it. Marr had stripped

Davan practically naked and wrapped his leg from thigh to heel without feeling a jolt of lust like this. He pushed the feeling away and turned to climb back up the stairs.

“I’ll be back with some dinner,” he promised.

After sweeping the barn from rafters to floor and finding it clean, he hurried to the house and did the same. The sun had set by the time he emerged from the house and crossed the yard.

He moved awkwardly down the steps to the cellar with his arms full of the box of supplies. The glow stick illuminated the cellar, the empty vegetable bins, the dirt floor and Davan. The pilot’s skin was so white he practically glowed, creating illumination of his own. Marr wondered if he was pale from trauma or if it was his natural color.

“I’ve brought more medication for you if you’re in pain.” He set down the box and unpacked it, tossing the water bottle to Davan, who caught it in one hand. “I have clothes, blankets, pillows and a camp bed. I didn’t have time to make dinner, but there’s leftover stew. If you don’t like the stew, I can make something else.”

Marr realized he hadn’t strung that many words together in weeks. Solitude had become such a part of his life without Sasch that he remained quiet even when he was with people. But now it was as if a dam had burst. He wanted to talk. He wanted to find out everything about the young pilot and to tell him things about himself.

Davan accepted the T-shirt he offered and slipped it over his head. It was big for him and the long-sleeved shirt he added on top of it was even bigger. Marr thought it was a shame to cover such a beautiful body. The man’s muscles were taut and toned, making him look like a white marble statue. He imagined sliding his hands over that smooth, perfect skin, warm and alive—not like marble or glass at all. But the young flier also looked really good in Marr’s old clothes. There was something erotic about having a shirt he’d worn against his own body so many times now intimately touching Davan’s.

“I can help you into the pants,” Marr offered, then remembered the splint on Davan’s leg. “Or maybe just cover you with blankets for now.”

“That would be good. I’m a little cold.” From the way his jaw clenched to keep his teeth from chattering, he was more than a little cold. Perhaps he was in shock from the trauma of his injury.

Marr quickly inflated the insta-mattress with a flick of the switch, glad he hadn’t gotten rid of it along with the rest of Sasch’s stuff. He’d never expected to go camping again and certainly didn’t want to be reminded of the times they’d used it together, but instead of giving it to charity he’d left it up in the attic.

After spreading a blanket over it, he helped Davan to lie on top, gently positioning his hurt leg. The younger man suppressed a groan.

“Sorry.”

“No problem. I owe you my life. All I can do is keep thanking you for taking such a risk.” He placed his mag-gun close at hand on the floor beside the mattress.

Marr covered him with one of the blankets and propped a pillow behind his head. He added a quick-dissolving pain tablet to his water bottle and handed it back. Davan took a long drink while Marr pulled the container of leftover stew from the box and apologized for not having warmed it.

“I don’t care. I’ll eat the stew and the container, too. I’m starving.”

It was a pleasure to watch him enjoy the food Marr had made, reminding him of how many solitary meals he’d had in the past two years. His appetite had dulled after Sasch left and he’d lost weight. Neighbors and friends kept inviting him over for dinner as if he might not eat if they didn’t feed him. Maybe he wouldn’t have.

Davan didn’t speak until the bowl was empty then he belched, sighed and handed Marr the empty bowl. “Best stew I ever tasted. You’re a good cook.”

“Or you’re really hungry. It’s nothing special.”

Davan raised an eyebrow. “Not used to compliments, are you? You’re supposed to say, ‘thanks’.” His gaze traveled around the cellar then back to Marr. “Do you live here alone or is there someone else I’m putting in danger?”

“Just me. No family or anything.” He paused, but felt compelled to explain. “There was someone, my partner, Sasch, but he’s gone now.”

Sky blue turned to silver as Davan turned his head and the light reflected from a different facet of his diamond eyes. “Gone where?”

Marr hesitated again. He hadn’t spoken about Sasch to anyone and didn’t know why he felt compelled to tell this stranger. “When Theon was invaded, Sasch went to fight the Tandus. I didn’t want him to go, but he felt he had to. And I stayed behind.”

He shrugged, unable to express the guilt he felt for not going with his lover and trying to keep him safe. But he was no freedom fighter. He was a farmer and someone needed to grow the crops and feed the people no matter what else was going on in the world. He couldn’t persuade Sasch to stay and Sasch would never have asked him to go.

“The resistance was crushed in a few months. He was killed.” The words fell like pebbles from his mouth and Marr realized it was the first time he’d ever said them aloud.

“I’m sorry.” Davan’s silver eyes shifted back to a soft blue. Marr couldn’t take his sympathy and didn’t want to talk about Sasch anymore. He began unpacking the last of the items from his box.

“You’ll need this.” He handed Davan the empty jar he’d brought for him to piss in and set a palm reader on the ground. “Do you like Gindre adventures?”

“I don’t need to read ’em. I live ’em.” Davan winked and a cocky grin twisted his lips. But the shadows under his eyes and sheen of sweat on his brow belied his teasing manner. He looked like he was in pain.

Marr leaned forward and rested a hand on his forehead, a little hot, but not too feverish. He stroked Davan's hair back from his face. It was an absurd gesture of comfort to offer a man he barely knew, but he couldn't resist touching that shiny, white-blond hair. It slid like silk between his fingers and the color shifted from white to burnished gold to a kind of toffee-brown depending on how the light reflected from the fine strands.

Davan didn't pull away. Instead, he closed his eyes and his grin softened to a faint smile.



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