

ELLORA'S CAVE XANADU



MAD,
BAD &
Dangerous
CAT MARSTERS

Mad, Bad & Dangerous

Cat Marsters

Baelvar is gorgeous, charming, insane, childish and mildly psychotic. He's also mated to Kett, who's brilliant, bitchy, violent and more than a little psychotic herself. It's a match made in heaven, except for one tiny detail...

Kett doesn't want to be mated to anyone.

The Curse of Kett has befallen everyone she's ever cared about, but impressing this fact upon Bael is a little difficult, what with all the terrifically explosive sex getting in the way. Oh, and the repeated attempts on Kett's life from persons unknown are a bit distracting too.

Still, if they can just stop shagging and fighting for their lives for two seconds, surely she can convince Bael they're actually a match made in hell. Can't she?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Mad, Bad & Dangerous

ISBN 9781419926594

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Mad, Bad & Dangerous Copyright © 2010 Cat Marsters

Edited by Kelli Collins

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication February 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

MAD, BAD & DANGEROUS

Cat Marsters

Dedication

To all at the Romantic Novelists Association, for actually believing I know what I'm talking about (even when I don't). For the wine. For the shoe compliments. And for not thinking it's weird to hear those voices in my head. I'm picking out shoes for next year's conference already.

And to Lexxie Couper, for writing really kickass heroines and for loving this book even when it was about a snarky bitch and a feckless psychopath. Oh, wait...

Prologue

About twenty years ago

"Look," said Chalia Vance, "just come and meet him. He's your father. He'll want to know you exist."

Kett, who had spent most of her sixteen years with people who wished she didn't exist, didn't believe this for a second.

"If he wanted to know whether I existed or not," she said, "he should have thought about it before he tumbled my mother."

Chalia rolled her eyes. "Thinking ahead isn't really his strong suit. I know he can be a bit of an arse. Nevertheless, he is your father. You...belong to each other. You even have his eyes," she added, peering at Kett's silvery irises.

"Well, then he can have 'em back," Kett scowled.

"Just come and say hello," said Chalia. "You don't even need to tell him who you are."

I'm his daughter. According to the faery stories, that should be enough to make him love her. But Kett had seen enough carelessness, enough casual cruelty, enough deliberate meanness in her life so far to know this wasn't the case.

And yet...

Maybe he will love you, said a pernicious little voice in the back of her mind.

She shrugged her shoulders and said carelessly to the older woman, "Okay, whatever."

Chalia's face lit up and she grabbed Kett's hand, towing her forward. They approached the door of one of the palace's many salons, and heard the voice of a man talking into his scryer.

"That's him! That's your father," Chalia said, clutching Kett's hand excitedly.

"Whoop-di-fucking-do," said Kett with all the ennui she could muster. But inside, hope was beating an excited tattoo on her heart.

"Striker said he would call and tell him you were coming," Chalia whispered. "We'll just wait until they've..."

But her voice faded out as Kett tuned her keen hearing to the conversation. She recognized Striker's voice filtered through the tinny quality of the scryer, which must mean her father was on the other side of the door. Her actual father.

"...don't lay any claim to her, Striker."

"Yeah, but —"

"Look," said her father. "When women think I'm a highwayman or a mercenary or a fucking army deserter or whatever, all they want's a quick tumble, and that's fine by me, because you know what? As soon as they find out my daddy's an earl and I'm actually the Honorable Tyrnan of Emreland, they suddenly discover all these poor relations who need sponsoring and you'd be amazed at how many of them suddenly come up with kids who just have to be mine. I've heard it all before, Striker. If a quarter of those women were telling the truth, I'd be setting some sort of paternal record. The kid is no more my daughter than you are."

"Believe me, mate, she's your kid," said the tinny voice. "I've met her. She's just like you."

Tyrnan of Emreland laughed. "Then gods help her," he said.

She felt it like a punch in the stomach. *Stupid, stupid girl for letting yourself believe anything else*, she berated silently. *You learned it years ago; no one cares about you. Try to remember it in future.*

Kett turned to the silent woman beside her. Chalia's pretty face looked fixed and uncomfortable, but she attempted a smile.

"I'm sure—" she began, but Kett cut her off with a sneer that came far too easily.

"He'll want to know I exist, huh?" she asked, and walked away, her footsteps getting faster as the tears began to flow.

Chapter One

About twenty years later

Kett's rational brain knew there was no way in hell she was waking up chained to a naked hottie, hanging from the roof of a cave by her wrist. Her rational brain told her it must be a dream.

Her rational brain was usually wrong.

"Hey." The hottie's voice sounded very close to her ear. "Wake up."

She decided not to. His body was all warm and hard. And naked. And hot. And naked. All in all, a pretty nice dream, apart from the screaming pain in her right arm. She'd have to work on getting rid of that.

"Wake up," he insisted, his voice all warm and husky. Then he paused. "Are you even alive?"

"I'm asleep," she mumbled, snuggling a little closer. The bedclothes were trapping her other arm behind her back. "G'way."

"You know, I'd love to," he said, his voice rough, as if he hadn't used it in a while. "Sadly that's not an option." He moved, and there was a jangling sound.

Dread stole through Kett as her rational brain gave up the fight and the possibility occurred to her that she wasn't actually dreaming at all. She peeled open one eye.

"Hi," he said. He had green eyes and shaggy dark hair and he was still all warm and hard and naked.

"Mmm," Kett sighed. And then she blushed. Which she hadn't done since...ever.

He grinned, which made him a little more delicious. "Nice of you to join us." His smile faded a little. "Are you all right?"

She took stock. The entire front of her body was pressed tight against his—shoulder to shoulder, breasts to chest, crotch to crotch. They were both completely naked. Even the feet that brushed against hers were bare.

Kett shifted against him, and it was an entirely pleasant thing to do.

A chain bound them together at the waist. Her right arm stretched way above her head, supporting her full weight from the chain that was suspended from the roof of what she suspected to be a cave. Her new friend's arm was bound to hers, wrist to wrist, and while the chain that held their weight was of the heavy regular kind, the one that bound them together about their waists appeared to be silver.

There was a trickle of blood between their bound wrists.

Kett began to get a really bad feeling.

"Five by five," she murmured, rattling the chains experimentally. Her left arm was twisted behind her back by the waist chain—not by bedclothes, dammit—and caught tight enough that she couldn't move it. From the looks of her handsome although irritatingly calm friend, his was too.

"What?" he asked.

Okay, Kett, stay calm. This probably isn't as bad as it seems. Someone playing a joke on you, perhaps. Someone at Koskwim who still thinks it's funny to torment Mad Kett. At least they chained you to someone really hot. You've been in worse situations. At least you're not actually dead this time.

For all her luck this was probably some screwy marriage ceremony. She'd probably met this guy at the Maharaja's party and had too much to drink and forgotten that marriage was the worst idea ever invented. Even after years of fuckwits she could still be a sucker for a pretty face.

"I'm okay," she said, trying to see over his distressingly broad shoulder. "Apart from the fact that I have no idea how I got here, or who you are, my arm feels like it's gonna pop out of its socket and, oh yeah, I appear to be naked and bloody and *chained to a complete fucking stranger*. What else could I be but *fine*?"

"Whoa," he said, "keep your knickers on."

"I'm not wearing any."

His grin said he'd noticed. "I mean calm down."

"Calm?"

"Opposite of what you're doing. I'm as much in the dark as you are. I haven't a clue what's going on."

She brought her eyes back to his—it wasn't hard, they were about four inches away—and saw honesty in their warm green depths. Aware that her bosom was heaving against a complete stranger's chest, she tried to take his advice and calm herself. If only because she'd never thought of herself as having a "bosom", and it made her feel old.

Only she wasn't so good at being calm. She preferred totally and utterly freaking out.

Right, Kett. What's going on? A cave, silver chains, amnesia. She didn't recall there being all that many caves in the Maharaja's palace. Had she offended someone there? Possibly—Kett was good at being offensive—but the Maharaja's court was into more public punishments.

See, this is what happens when you extend the hand of friendship. Some bugger bites it.

She went through a list of enemies in her head, but most of them were dead. Those Federación bastards were at the top of the list of the living, but she still couldn't fathom why they might have left her here. A slow death, maybe. Pain and starvation.

Maybe Striker was playing a joke on her. She couldn't work out why, but then she'd never wanted to understand the innermost workings of his mind.

"You have no idea where we are?" she asked, trying the calm thing.

"A cave."

"You think?"

"Ooh, tetchy. Don't think there's anyone else here. I called out but no one answered."

A hundred ideas came to her, none of them pleasant. They'd been strung up here to die, that much was clear—but were they being left as meat for hungry bears or dragons, or to wait for the tide to rush in or what?

No, this place didn't smell damp. If anything, it smelled like something had recently been burning here.

Great. They were going to be barbecued. Back to the dragon theory. Well, at least Kett understood dragons, although unfortunately what she understood was that they liked fresh meat.

And the blood. Didn't seem like an accidental cut—wrist to wrist, that looked a lot like something ritualistic. She hated bloody rituals.

Still. Kett had a trick or two up her— Well, she had a trick or two.

She concentrated on thinning out her wrist and escaping the chains stringing them up to the ceiling.

Nothing.

She tried a little harder. Granted, it was harder to change a little bit of your shape than a lot, but she'd had a lot of practice. Kett shook herself and tried to wake up a bit.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Shh. I'm concentrating."

He frowned but said nothing. She still wasn't getting anything from her wrist, so she decided to go for broke.

"Don't freak out," she warned him, and changed her form to that of a snake.

He didn't freak. Probably because she didn't change.

"Uh, I'm not freaking," he said. "Should I be?"

Real panic was setting in now. "This ain't working."

"What ain't?"

"I—" She looked at him, and knew she couldn't tell him. Not yet. She had no idea who he really was or why he was here with her. Chances were he had something to do with this setup, and she wasn't about to give him any reason why he should keep her chained.

"I was trying to get free," she said. "Not working."

"Yeah," he said. "I think that's the point." He glanced around the cave a moment. There was a faint glow from somewhere in the distance, but she couldn't make out any details. Couldn't even see the floor.

"Bael," he said eventually.

She blinked at him.

"My name," he prompted. "It's Bael. And you are...?"

"Kett," she said vaguely.

He grinned. "Nice to meet you, Kett."

"Yeah. Real nice."

She tugged on the chains again, harder this time, then harder again. Every movement rubbed her body against Bael's, which was damn distracting. He was pretty nicely shaped. Warm skin, hard muscles, his biceps bulging against her arm.

She swallowed and tried to concentrate her mind. Why couldn't she change her shape? Apart from those unfortunate stone years in her childhood, she'd always been able to change her form however and whenever she wanted.

Only severe injury, enchantment or death had ever stopped her. And Kett wasn't entirely sure which one of those was the most likely right now.

"Look, Bael. Do you have any idea how to get out of here?"

He glanced up at the chain as if he hadn't really thought about it before and gave it an experimental tug. He frowned, tugged again, then gave her a sort of facial shrug.

She gave him a facial slow-hand clap.

"Well, I don't see you coming up with anything," he said defensively.

Kett looked up again. "Maybe if we both pull together," she said.

He looked up at the chain again. It disappeared into darkness, the ceiling of the cave totally hidden. At least, she still assumed it was a cave. The echo suggested bare stone.

Bael nodded, and she shifted herself against him to get a better grip. This proved to be a bad move, since it involved rubbing her naked self all over his. Which, ordinarily, would be a great thing. But right now she didn't really need the distraction.

Her nipples puckered against his chest and she knew he felt it. She licked her lips, tried to lean back a little, and succeeded in pressing her hips tighter against his.

Oh yeah. He'd felt it.

Stop, Kett, stop. Focus. Chain, cave, blood. This is all of the bad. Focus on getting out of here, then you can do as much rubbing of your naked self all over his as you like.

He cleared his throat and gripped the chain suspending them. She wrapped her hand around his wrist, tried not to think about the warm pulse beating there and made her eyes meet his.

He gave a tiny nod and they both yanked down on the chain. The movement jolted her against him, rubbing her already-sensitive nipples against the light hair on his chest and nudging his cock against her.

A shock of heat rippled through her. Bael's body was hot, *really* hot. The roughness of his thighs abraded the soft skin of her legs. His chest rose and fell, rubbing her nipples delightfully. His penis swelled between her legs.

"Again," she said, and her voice came out breathier than she'd anticipated.

He gripped the chain again, his eyes never leaving hers, and she grabbed his wrist and pulled. Again her body quaked against his.

"Again," he murmured, even huskier than before, and she shifted a little more against him, lifting herself up, resting one thigh on his hip—for a better grip, of course.

Her face was a fraction of an inch from his. His breath was hot on her cheek as they tugged sharply on the chain and shuddered against each other. His hot cock slipped between her legs, rubbing against her suddenly slick folds, and she bit her lip, hard.

"Again," he said in her ear, and they pulled, rubbing against each other. "Again. Again."

She squirmed against him until she was making no pretense about it. His cock slid between her legs in strong strokes that could never have been accidental and she closed her eyes, the strength in her right arm fading out completely, forgetting all about escape. His hot, hard flesh stroked hers, nearly entering but not quite, and she moved harder against him.

It had been so long. Too long.

The chain around their waists was constricting and it might have even chafed a little but she hardly noticed. Completely senseless with desire, she bucked against this total stranger, unable to touch him with her hands, or be touched, but connected so intimately it made her gasp and shudder.

Their bodies rocked together, thrusting and convulsing, and then suddenly there was an almighty crack and groan and with a jolt, they both fell several inches, to be jerked to a halt so quickly it made her eyes water.

"What the—?"

She peered up into the darkness. "I think we fucked it loose."

Bael grinned at her, tugging with his left arm. "Oh sweetheart, we haven't even gotten started with the fuck— *Fuck!*"

His tugging yanked free whatever had pulled them up short, and then there was nothing holding them—and they plummeted through the air.

Kett had been in caves that were several hundred feet from floor to ceiling. Caves that had lakes at the bottom. Not poncy little streams or puddles, but great big fathoms-deep lakes.

Thankfully, this wasn't one of them.

They probably fell three or four feet in total. No more than five, for sure, which was just as well. It had only occurred to her in that endless second of weightlessness that she hadn't considered how far down they'd have to go.

She'd never been very good at forward planning.

The ground was cold stone, uneven but not jagged or gravelly. Not that it made much of a difference to the pain factor of landing. If she survived this she'd be black and blue.

But she'd been black and blue before, and she'd survived it.

She hoped to hell Bael was a survivor too, especially since he'd landed on top of her.

Kett stilled, trying to see if he was breathing. Then she gave up and kicked him. "Get off me, you great lubbock!"

He nuzzled her neck. "But you're so comfy."

"And you're so heavy." She wiggled her right arm, which protested the movement, and managed to work her wrist out of the now-loose chain binding it to Bael's. Result. There was a cut on her wrist, enough to bleed but not enough to kill her. A ritual cut, Kett thought with her hindbrain, but the rest of her took little notice.

Swinging her hand down to tug at the chain around their waists was absolute agony since her shoulder didn't seem to want to move at all, but she managed it, and tugged at the length binding them.

"Lower," Bael murmured.

"I'm trying to get us untied here," she said.

"Maybe we can fuck that loose too."

"I prefer to have a little more freedom in my fucking, thank you," she said, and he grinned in the darkness and brought his own arm down to help her.

"Shit, that hurts!"

"Yep," she said. "Least means it's not dislocated."

"Bloody feels like it," he grumbled, but between them they got the chain off, both arms free, and he rolled them over so she was on top of him.

She sat up, his hard belly between her thighs, and he ran his hands over her hips.

"Much better," he said.

"Told you." His hand slipped between her legs and she gasped. "Freedom is a good thing."

What she should have been doing was getting to her feet and finding a way out. There was every possibility he was the bad guy in this situation. But he was fondling her clit with clever, clever fingers, and she didn't feel terrifically inclined to stop him. It had been quite a while since anybody had their hand between her legs, and it felt damn good.

Bael slipped his other hand behind her back and pulled her down to kiss him. His lips were dry, his jaw rough with stubble, but that didn't matter. She didn't reckon her lips were going to be in a perfectly soft, moisturized state either, especially since they never had been before. It didn't stop Bael from investigating, thoroughly, every corner of her mouth with his hot, quick tongue. His arms around her, he rolled them to their

sides, and then she got dizzy from all the kissing—or possibly the blood loss—and fell to her back.

And then she stiffened and leapt to her feet, sending Bael flying.

“Ow?” he said pointedly.

She shoved him out of the way with her foot, lust evaporating. She’d rolled onto something sticky, something crumbling...something *warm*. Something that wasn’t plain rock.

She hunkered down to look.

“Ugh,” Bael said from behind her.

“I hear you,” she said, peering through the dimness at the charred, blackened thing on the floor. If she used her imagination—and she instantly wished she hadn’t—she suspected it had once been human.

“I think this might have been a person,” she said, breathing hard, trying to keep the meager contents of her stomach in their rightful place. *You’ve seen more disgusting things, Kett. Don’t throw up now.*

“I think *this* might too,” Bael said. He moved, and there was a crunching sound. “And, uh, this...”

Kett peered farther into the gloom. More shapes oozed and fluttered, some of them incinerated and some of them still almost recognizable as bits of people.

“They were...” She swallowed down the bile in her throat. “They were burned.”

“They were incinerated.”

“Uh-huh. How...er, how many, do you think?” She shook herself. She’d seen bodies before. She’d even seen burned bodies. There was no need to be so squeamish.

“I couldn’t begin to imagine.” A warm touch on her elbow made her flinch, but it was just Bael. “You okay?”

“Five by five,” she said, and looked at him. “We need to get out of here.”

He nodded and took her arm, and they picked their way carefully over the remains to the light source at one end of the cave. It turned out to be the night sky, stars and moon shining high up. There was a small clearing outside the cave, and a path leading downward. The rest was trees, sloping away into darkness. A mountain. Impossible to tell how big.

By the scant light, Kett could see symbols scorched into the walls of the cave. They didn’t resemble any language she knew, but they made her shudder nonetheless.

They stood for a second, breathing in the clean air.

And then there was a sound from behind them, inside the cave, a shuffling sort of sound, which was probably made by a small animal or a stray munta but which to her ears was certainly one of their captors, not quite incinerated and definitely coming after them.

Kett shared a split-second glance with Bael, and then they were running, straight into the trees, leaping over logs and ducking under branches, hauling each other upright when they tripped, whipped and scratched by the trees and the rocks, until the ground was flat and the woods so dense they couldn't see the sky anymore. She tripped, her right thigh throbbing, the muscles on fire after such hard use with no warm-up, and it finally just refused to work anymore.

She collapsed on the cold, damp ground and, as she went over, Bael fell with her, rolling to take the fall, and then she was sprawled on top of him, naked and panting, adrenaline pumping through her.

His hands touched her back, the scars there, and she recoiled for a second because no lover had ever seen those scars before, but then his fingers skimmed over her buttocks and she caught her breath because it felt good.

He felt *really* good. Kett lifted her head and his dark green eyes met hers, and then his mouth met hers too, and she grabbed his head by the hair and kissed him, hard, relieved and grateful they were both still alive. Kissing him made the fear and the bruises and the confusion fade away, so she kissed him harder. He tasted good, even better than before, and when he shifted beneath her and she felt his cock growing between them, hard and hot, she rubbed against it.

Bael tore away from her mouth to groan and she nipped his throat with her teeth. His hand slipped between her buttocks and delved lower, finding her pussy lips swollen and wet. Her face buried against his neck, Kett moaned and rubbed her breasts against his chest. His body was hot, damp with sweat, heaving, delicious.

She sat up, slid forward and sank down on his cock. His head back, Bael gasped, and then his hands were clutching at her hips, urging her on. She moved, faster and faster as the heat built inside her, this stranger filling her up, her skin prickling, her blood rushing. He pulled her down and kissed her mouth, her neck, her breasts, sucking one nipple into his mouth and rolling it between his teeth until she came in a sudden, bucking orgasm, crying out, her back arching.

Moments later his cock jerked inside her and he came too, and she fell against him, exhausted, shaking, his hands stroking her back, his arms holding her. Within seconds she was asleep.

Chapter Two

Morning sunlight stabbed Bael's eyes but he didn't open them. He felt like hell, his back and his arms aching even before he moved them. Which he did, just to confirm it, and immediately wished he hadn't. Pain shot down his left arm, his wrist, his shoulder, straight to his spine. His feet were killing him too.

But the movement brought something much more interesting than pain. Warm skin, not his. Someone lying in his arms. A woman.

Well, this was always interesting. Bael grinned and cracked an eye open as he tried to remember who she was and what he'd been doing to end up with her.

Long, snaky dark hair spilled across his chest. Her eyes were closed and there was a small, pale scar on her cheek. Oh yes, he remembered her now. Remembered waking up with her tight, muscular body pressed against his as they dangled from the roof of that cave. Remembered the flash in her weird silver eyes as she rode him into the ground last night.

His cock stirred. Hell, she'd been fun.

She looked a lot less fierce, lying there still and quiet. Awake, she'd vibrated with angry energy, but now she looked more peaceful, younger even, despite the slight frown on her forehead.

He ran his hand down her back and paused at the scar tissue there. He'd discovered the whip marks crisscrossing her spine last night. But, what with her mouth on his and her breasts rubbing against his chest, he'd had other things to think about.

Now he was intrigued. The marks were old, healed, but he could feel the intensity of the lashes, the jumble of scar tissue that said she'd been flogged again and again.

What had happened to result in those scars?

She stirred, her skin sliding very pleasantly against his, and mumbled something in her sleep. He stroked her hair, tangling his fingers in the thick, unruly curls. His fingers found the warm skin at the nape of her neck and stroked.

Her eyes fluttered and she smacked her lips, stretching out her arm across his chest.

Then she froze, and her eyes slammed open, already flashing with silver fire.

"That's very impressive," Bael said, still playing with her hair. "How'd you get them to do that?"

"What?"

"Your eyes. They're all sort of...sparkly." He stole a quick kiss. "Very sexy."

She blinked at him. Then she levered herself upright, sitting on his stomach, and stared at him.

"Mmm." He placed his hands on her hips. "Even sexier."

She opened her mouth to speak but Bael pulled her down and kissed her. Gods, she was fantastic, all tightly coiled power and fierce energy. He ran his tongue over her teeth and sucked her lip into his mouth, making her moan. Happily he rolled her onto her back, all the better to lick and bite her all over, but he'd only gotten as far as nipping at her throat when a tiny sound made them both freeze.

Bael looked up and saw an arrow. A bow. They pretty much occupied his attention until Kett said, "Why is that kelf aiming an arrow at us?"

Bael refocused. Behind the bow and arrow was a small green figure, three fingers on each hand, skin hairless, eyes huge. It stood immobile, impassive. Inhuman. Bael's lip curled. He bloody hated kelfs, and this was precisely why.

"Look, I don't interrupt you guys when you do...whatever it is you do in bed," he said, rolling Kett away and getting to his feet.

The kelf said something in its own language, which irritated the hell out of Bael. It knew he couldn't understand it. Kelfs never taught their language to anyone.

"You don't—" Kett began, stepping toward the creature, and it turned its bow on her.

"Oh no you bloody don't," Bael said, lunging for the little green bugger, but it was too fast for him. There was a sudden zip and whine, and then a furious pain in his left arm.

Bael stared at the arrow sticking out of it and whirled on the kelf, murder in his eyes. "Hey! What the fuck was that for?"

"You *are* trespassing," said a sweet, feminine voice in accented English.

Before the voice had even died away, Kett had whirled to face it, her hands curled into fists, muscles tight, body low in a defensive crouch.

Bael stared at the dozen or so kelfs that had emerged from the trees, each holding a bow trained on him. Maybe they could smell the blood. Little bastards.

"This is their land," said the woman's voice, and he tore his eyes to her. "They graciously allow me to hunt with them, but they don't like trespassers."

She wore bright silken robes and perched elegantly sidesaddle on a handsome white horse. A crossbow rested on her lap. She was tiny, with long, glossy dark hair and tilted eyes, and she was smiling. Bael figured that was probably because the armed kelfs were on her side. Oh, and the fact that both he and Kett were totally bollock naked. Literally, in his case.

Kett scowled up at the woman. "Miho?"

The tiny woman smiled wider. "Kett. I didn't know you were in the country."

"Well, funny thing." She relaxed a little, stood up straight. "Neither did I."

"You know her?" Bael looked between the two women, his tall, scarred warrior and the tiny, delicate creature on the horse. His arm throbbed, blood oozing from the wound.

"Yes. Miho and I...go way back."

"Well, that's great." Bael waggled the arrow in his arm. "Reckon she could lend us some clothes? Get some food? Dunno about you, but I'm starving." He glanced at the kelfs surrounding them, bows still drawn. Bloody kelfs. No smiles. They wound him up beyond belief. "Maybe we could eat one of them."

Kett didn't smile.

"Apologies for your injury," said Miho, nodding regally at Bael. "There are medical supplies at my house."

Bael nodded and considered grabbing the kelf's bow to shoot back at it. Not that it would have done much good.

Could have been this kelf who killed your mother. Could have been any of them.

The kelf looked up at him, its pointed face impassive. *So charming and helpful, so long as you're not faced with a Nasc.*

How can humans love them so much?

Kett poked at the arrow, ignoring his flinches.

"Flesh wound," she said. "You'll live."

He glowered at her then at the kelf, who stared impassively back. Bloody *kelfs*. You could beat them, but they never bruised. You could shoot and slash at them, but they never bled. Their colorful, hairless skin was like iron.

They bowed and scraped to every human in the five Realms, but became deaf the minute he uttered a polite request.

Well, a request, at any rate. Bael wasn't good at being polite.

"Oh, piss off," he snarled halfheartedly, and turned his attention to the arrow in his arm. It hurt like buggery but it didn't seem to have hit anything major. "Stupid fucking kelfs," he growled, working the arrow back and forth and eventually gritting his teeth and yanking it out.

He made a pointed yelp of pain. Kett and Miho, who'd been quietly conversing, both glanced over. Bael pressed down on the bleeding injury, giving them a wounded look.

"Shouldn't've gone after it, should you," Kett said, as a munta was led out from the trees. Four-legged and a little like a camel without the hump, the creature was covered in shaggy dark green fur and looked at him with huge eyes as the kelfs started unloading game carcasses from its back.

"Oh sure," Bael said. "This is what I get for being chivalrous?"

"It wasn't really going to shoot me," Kett said patiently.

"Yeah? They're not as nice as people think," Bael said, lifting his fingers from the wound on his arm and showing her the blood.

Kett just rolled her eyes. "Come on," she said, mounting the creature and holding out her hand. She had moved slightly awkwardly, limping a little, and indeed Bael could see an ugly puckered scar on her right thigh.

But Kett never said a word or asked for help. After a moment, Bael swung up behind her. She didn't seem remotely perturbed to be sitting there completely naked, all the girlie bits he'd been so enjoying last night on view for anyone to see.

Her back was warm against his chest, her neat little butt smooth and round where it nestled against his groin. His groin, which was definitely enjoying the close contact. Maybe the day was looking up.

"I'm afraid I only have one cloak," Miho said, as a kelf handed it up – passing it to Kett, he noticed.

"Well, that means we'll just have to share," Bael said, wrapping it around them both, grinning as Kett leaned right back against him. "Hard life, ain't it?"

"Certainly seems to be for you," she said, shifting against his growing erection.

* * * * *

By the time they made it to Miho's elegant house with its flamboyantly curved roof, Kett was in agony. Sleeping outside in the cold hadn't done her leg any good at all, and jolting it into sudden exercise this morning had been the kiss of death. Every movement of the munta as it trotted along happily after Miho's horse jolted fresh pain through her leg until she could hardly breathe.

Bael, of course, had no idea she was in pain. He seemed to be enjoying the bumpy ride, rubbing his big cock against her with every sway of the munta. Kett wasn't turned on. She might have been, had her leg not been causing her such agony, but pain had never been arousing for her. This sort of pain was threatening to kill her.

But she didn't let on. She never let on.

Miho slid elegantly from her horse in the pristine stable yard. "The kelfs went on ahead and prepared a room for you," she said. "There is food and a hot bath." She frowned and shouted something in Xinjiangese to a kelf, who nodded and scurried away. "And medical supplies. Come. It is cold out here." She glided away toward the door of the house.

Kett couldn't move. Bael didn't seem inclined to. She supposed that was because he was sporting a massive hard-on that he didn't particularly want to display.

"You get down first," she managed through gritted teeth. "Keep the cloak."

He hesitated. "You sure?"

She nodded, tears in her eyes as his movements jolted her leg just the tiniest bit. How the hell she was ever going to make it inside, she had no idea. She didn't even know how she was going to get off the munta.

"You coming?" Bael asked, looking up, and she managed a nod but didn't move. He frowned, then his eyes slid down to her bare thigh where the mangled, twisted scar

glowed, pink and vicious. Kett ignored him and, with a monumental effort of will, swung her left leg across the munta's back. If she could slide her weight onto her left side, she might just –

She squawked in sudden pain and surprise as Bael scooped one arm under her knees and wrapped the other around her shoulders, cradling her against him. A trickle of fresh blood slid down his arm, but the arrow wound didn't seem to be causing him any extra distress as he supported her full weight.

Breathless and astonished, she stared up at him. He grinned back.

"I know you have your pride, my sweet, but I have mine too, and I just can't allow you to walk barefoot a moment longer."

Kett opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"No no, don't protest," Bael said, adjusting her weight in his arms as he carried her across the courtyard, following an obviously amused Miho. "Nothing's too good for my angel."

Kett finally recovered her voice as they entered the warmth of the house. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Saving my lady the exhaustion of walking a step farther," Bael said grandly. Then added in a whisper, "And the embarrassment of admitting she can't walk at all."

"I can –"

"Sweetheart, you couldn't even dismount."

Miho led them down vast hallways before opening a door and ushering them inside a room with a large bed and lacquered furniture. The low window looked out over an exquisitely designed garden. There was a large table covered with food and steam flowing from a second door. To Kett, it looked a lot like heaven.

"There are clothes in the closet," Miho said, "and the bath is hot. If you need anything, call for the kelfs." She indicated a bell pull. "And try not to pick a fight with any of them." She gave them a bow then left, closing the door.

"Will you put me down now?" Kett asked.

"And watch you lying there all naked and helpless? Actually..." Bael seemed to be considering this.

"Knock it off."

He grinned and strode through to the bathroom, dumping her in a huge sunken bath filled with scalding water that steamed fragrantly and shocked her into silence.

Feeling a little like a lobster plunged into the pot, she could only stare up at Bael, but he was already leaving the room. Feeling returned gradually, her skin throbbing in the mad heat, her muscles forced to relax. Her leg seemed to have given up the fight, faced with such indomitable heat, and she managed to move it an inch or two.

Bael came back in with several plates of food, plonked them by her elbow then went back out again. Still speechless, Kett stared at the piles of sandwiches, noodles, vegetables, kebabs – and then Bael came back in again. He put down more food, a

couple pitchers and a tray of medical supplies, then dropped the cloak and stepped into the bath.

Then he leaped like a cat on drugs and yelped, "Fucking hell, that's hot!"

"Yes, isn't it?" Kett asked, recovering her voice. She picked up a pitcher, sniffed at it and ascertained that it was beer. Which she proceeded to drink.

"Bleeding hell," Bael swore, bravely going back in. He gingerly dunked his arm under the water, flinching as heat seared the arrow wound.

"Yep." She grabbed a sandwich and devoured it whole. Unable to remember the last time she'd eaten anything, she was suddenly ravenous.

Bael picked through the bottles on the food tray, sniffing at a few until he found one he liked the smell of. But instead of drinking, he poured it all over the wound on his arm, stiffening in pain. Kett frowned; he was wasting good saki.

"Food good?" Bael asked as he took a pair of tweezers from the tray and started picking at the hole in his arm. He watched Kett as she demolished the sandwiches and started on the noodles, eating them with her fingers.

"Right now I'd eat a raw kelf," she said, raising her eyebrows at him.

"Kelfs really annoy me." He paused, apparently realizing she wasn't impressed by that. "You do know I was joking, right?"

"You do know that kelfs aren't known for their sense of humor, right?" She grabbed a kebab and ripped the meat off with her teeth.

"Well, I do now." He extracted something from his arm and dropped it on the tray. "How's your leg?"

"Five by five." The empty kebab stick clattered on the plate.

"What does that mean?"

"Fine."

"Well, clearly it's not, since five minutes ago you couldn't even move. What happened?"

She swallowed a handful of noodles and washed it down with beer. "Just an accident."

"An accident involving something with big teeth?"

She gave him a sharp look, not easy to do with a mouthful of tomato. Swallowing the food, she said, "Really big."

"What was it? A dog?"

"Bigger."

"Are we going to play that game where I ask questions and you answer with single words? 'Cos we could be here for some time."

Her mouth once again full, Kett held her hands about ten inches apart. Bael raised his eyebrows. She chewed and swallowed and said through half a mouthful, "Sabertooth. *Really* big teeth."

He whistled. "You got bitten by a sabertooth tiger?"

She shrugged and quaffed some more beer. "Yeah. Piece of advice? If a sabertooth tiger 'really annoys' you, don't pick a fight with it. Don't taunt it. Just get the fuck out of there."

Bael opened his mouth, then closed it and nodded. He gestured at the tray of medical supplies. "I think the pills in the brown bottle are painkillers."

"Think?"

He picked up the bottle and squinted at the unfamiliar alphabet. "Well, take one and find out."

Rolling her eyes, Kett took the bottle. Her Xinjiangese was rusty, but she'd learned the important words. And sadly, an important word for her was "painkiller". She recognized it on the label and slugged a couple of the tablets.

"Brave," Bael said. "I like that in a girl."

"Read the label," she said.

"I like that in a girl too."

"What? Literacy?" She rested her head back against the edge of the bath.

He frowned at the symbols on the bottle. "It's more like deciphering a code," he said.

"If you think of it that way, all language is," Kett said, closing her eyes, an image of the strange symbols around the cave mouth coming to mind. She suddenly felt sleepy. No telling what was in those bloody pills.

"Very profound for someone who's naked."

"I've always found nakedness a great excuse for profanity."

Bael laughed. "Yeah, me too." She felt him inch closer. "Kett?"

She yawned. "Yeah?"

"What really happened to your leg?"

"Told you. Pissed off a tiger."

"Really?"

"Mmm. It came off worse though. Have one of its teeth somewhere."

His hand touched her shoulder, caressing her slick skin. "What about your back?"

"It didn't bite me there." It was getting harder and harder to stay awake.

"No, I mean these." His hand edged between her back and the wall of the bath, and traced the scars on her skin.

"Mmm. Tell you later." Kett curled toward him, his body big and solid and comforting. "Sleepy now."

"Those must be some pills."

"Mmm," Kett said, and slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

* * * * *

It was a testimony to the power of the pills that Kett woke slowly, groggily, instead of ricocheting awake on full alert, as she usually did. One by one, ideas trundled into place in her brain. The room was dark. The bed was soft and warm, and the sheets smelled sweet and clean.

Nuala's house? She sniffed at some other scent that drifted over the bed, something slightly cloying, like jasmine or some other flower. But Nuala wasn't inclined to leave flowers in Kett's room, which usually only smelled of leather and wood polish. Besides, she hadn't been to Elvyrn in ages.

The mattress dipped with someone else's weight. Kett's eyebrows rose in the dark. Someone big. Someone male. Well, it was nice to know she hadn't switched sides. Someone —

Oh yeah. Now she remembered. Bael. The silver chain. The cave. The burnt remains.

Kett lay still for a while, frowning. What the fuck had that whole thing been about? She had woken in some pretty interesting circumstances in her life — once, memorably, to find that she'd recently been dead — but they'd generally been reasonably traceable. Last thing she remembered before the cave was performing for the Maharaja and his family, then going to bed in the modest suite provided for her in his palace. She'd been thinking about the journey home and planning to get up reasonably early to make a head start.

She sure as hell didn't remember crossing the Realm, taking off her clothes and wandering into a cave, chaining herself to a naked hottie and suspending herself from the ceiling. That was the sort of thing, Kett figured, that ought to stick in your mind.

She shifted, her leg aching. Probably she ought to get up and see if there was any liniment on that tray of medical supplies. Did Miho know about her leg? Well, she must have seen the scar earlier. It was hard to miss.

The bed was warm and soft, and she didn't really feel inclined to move. On the other hand, the longer she just lay there without sorting her leg out, the worse it would get. It was like an old cartwheel, she thought grumpily as she pushed the covers back. Keep it well oiled or it'd rust over.

This was proven when she swung her leg out of bed, tested its strength and found it to be totally useless. With a flash of sudden pain, it crumpled beneath her and she toppled to the floor, crying out as she hit the cold wood.

Her leg hurt so much she almost blacked out for a second, sound and vision dimming, her breath snatched away. Then sound returned and she heard someone scrambling from the bed, calling her name.

"Kett? What the — Are you okay?"

Five by five, she tried to say, but the words wouldn't come. Breathless, trying hard to keep her leg still so it wouldn't hurt any more than it already did, she nodded, blinking as her vision cleared and Bael appeared, hovering worriedly at her side.

Hmm. He was kind of adorable when he was worried. Or maybe pain was making her delirious.

"Don't," she cried as his hand moved to touch her leg. "Just don't touch it."

He snatched his hand back, and instead touched her shoulder as she rose up on her elbows and surveyed her leg with dismay.

"What happened?"

She took a deep breath and let it out shakily. "I just fell," she said. "It's not very strong. I mean, usually it's fine, but I haven't been taking medication or anything, and it's just seized up. Give me a minute."

"What medication? Maybe your friend Miho has something that will help."

"Maybe," said Kett, thinking it was unlikely anyone at all would have the stuff she took. "Could you go see if there's any liniment on that tray?" Bael hesitated, so she added, "Just bring the tray."

He bit his lip, looking uneasy, then nodded and rose gracefully to his feet. Kett, cursing the day she ever decided to fight a hungry sabertooth tiger instead of either shooting it or running the fuck away, tried to follow suit and ended up back on her backside on the floor.

Bael put the tray down on the bed then his hands on his hips and looked at her. There was a bandage wrapped around his arm where the kelf's arrow had hit, the fabric very white against his skin.

"If you want help, you just have to say so."

"I'm fine." Stubbornly, she tried again, but her leg pulsed with pain and refused to cooperate.

"I mean, I have a great view here. I'm perfectly happy to see you stay right where you are."

"Pervert."

He grinned.

"Could you pass me the liniment, please?"

"What, down there on the floor? Come on, you'll freeze."

"I'm *fine*."

"You blatantly are not."

Kett glared at him. He grinned back. Eventually she sighed, gritted her teeth and said, "Oh, all right. Could you please help me up?"

"I'm sorry?" Bael cupped his ear exaggeratedly. "What was that?"

"Fuck off."

"Thought so." He scooped her up and dumped her on the bed so fast her leg hardly had time to protest. "You want a hand rubbing that stuff in?"

"No."

"Tough. Payment for helping you out—I get to feel you up."

"Perv—"

"You said that already." He picked up a couple of jars, opened them and sniffed the contents. "Eurgh."

"It's not meant to smell nice." She pointed out the right jar and Bael made another face.

"What's it meant to do?"

She sighed. Evidently there was no way of getting out of this without Bael being involved in every detail. "Loosen up the muscles."

"Right. Why are they tight?"

"Because a tiger bit through them."

He started examining her leg. "Actually through them?"

"Hamstrung me."

He visibly flinched. "Youch. You must have had a hell of a surgeon."

Kett thought about Striker and nearly laughed. "Yeah, sure," she said.

Bael scooped out some of the smelly liniment and spread it over her leg. The scar ran mostly down the side of her thigh, but both ends of it curled round to the back where the tiger's massive canines had ripped right through.

"Come on, roll over," he said, nudging her hip. "Give me access."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"No need to sound so accusing." He smoothed a warm hand over the back of her leg as she moved. "I'm doing this purely for your benefit, out of the goodness of my heart, the milk of human kindness that runs—"

"So it's not payment for helping me?"

He grinned at her. "Call it more of a reward."

She was silent for a moment as he stroked the warming ointment into her skin. He had good hands, strong and gentle hands, and a careful touch. He never pressed too hard or skimmed too lightly.

After a minute or two she asked, "Is that why you're massaging bits of me that don't need a massage?"

His fingers caressed her buttocks. "I'd say they're crying out for it."

She smiled despite herself. "Tell me you never trained to be a doctor."

"Well, I do have an excellent bedside manner."

His fingers stroked the sensitive skin inside her thighs, which Kett was pretty sure didn't need any massaging at all, and she let out her breath. Okay, maybe she was

enjoying it a bit. It had been a long time since anyone else had stroked her legs, that was for sure. In fact, there hadn't been anyone since before the tiger had taken a chunk out of her. Three years! No wonder she'd jumped him last night. No wonder his magic hands were making her muscles turn to liquid and her heart flutter in her chest. It had been awhile and she was horny and he was hot as all hell.

Kett looked back over her shoulder at him. He was clean, but he still looked scruffy as hell. A day or two of stubble and hair that went all over the place, eyes bracketed by lines that said he laughed a lot. A good mouth. A *great* mouth. Kett had a minor fantasy of that mouth on her pussy, that stubble scraping her inner thighs, and lost her breath.

"You okay?" Bael asked, his voice low and husky. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," Kett breathed, and his eyes met hers. A slow smile came over that great mouth of his.

"Maybe," his thumb drew circles on the back of her thigh, "I should kiss it all better."

"Not unless you like the taste of liniment," Kett said, but otherwise the thought had great appeal.

"That's a good point. Perhaps if I kiss other places instead it might take your mind off it?"

A roll of heat surged over her and she nodded, unable to speak. Bael grinned, dropped his head and licked her hip, and she let out a hard breath.

Then the door burst open. Kett's head came up so fast her neck made a snapping sound, and her cousin was standing in the doorway, hand to her mouth.

"Oh, sorry," she exclaimed, but she didn't sound it.

Once again, Kett couldn't quite manage to speak. She could feel the heat of Bael's breath on her hip and thought about his tongue licking her somewhere else and nearly sobbed because she wanted it so much.

She swallowed and found her voice. "Chance," she managed. "Don't you knock?"

Chance grinned. "It's more fun this way."

"Oh, you are so your father's daughter."

Chance rolled her eyes, and Kett wondered if her cousin had undergone a lobotomy. Being reminded she was the daughter of the Realms' most evil man wasn't usually something Chance enjoyed.

Kett frequently thanked whichever gods might be listening that she wasn't related to him by blood.

Then the doorway was filled from top to bottom, side to side, with the imposing frame of Chance's—boyfriend? Lover? Fuck-buddy? Kett decided lobotomy was definitely the answer. It seemed to have the same sort of effect as falling in love.

And what a man she'd chosen to fall in love with. Kett wasn't given to fits of jealousy, but surely it wasn't fair that Chance had found a man who was not only potently delicious, handsome, strong and kind, but also bona fide royalty, the king of

his people. The Nasc, who were born with an animal twin with whom to share their soul, worshipped their ruler.

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" Chance asked as Bael moved away from Kett's hip. He was staring at Chance, but that was only to be expected. Her cousin was the most beautiful woman Kett had ever seen, all ash-blond hair and cheekbones, her perfect figure caressed by a green silk kimono. It should have looked stupid on someone with her coloring, but Kett had never known Chance to look stupid in her whole life.

She sighed. "Yeah," she grumbled, pulling the sheet over herself. "This is Bael. Bael, this is my cousin Chance, and Dark, her...er—"

"Majesty," Bael said, bowing his head, and for the third time in as many minutes, Kett was lost for words.

Chance giggled. "You got yourself a Nasc lover," she said, and Kett stared at Bael. Nasc? Well, why not? This was shaping up to be one of the weirdest days in her considerably weird life.

"Right," she said. "Uh, Chance, what are you doing here?"

"I came to see you. Of course, I wasn't expecting to see so much of you."

Kett scowled. "Well then, you should have knocked. How did you know I was here?"

"I know everything," Chance said airily. "Plus Miho called me."

Bael was still staring at her. Kett reached over and closed his mouth, and he blinked.

"Yes, she's beautiful," Kett said. "She's also boffing your king."

"I forgot what a charming turn of phrase you have," Dark said in his rumbling, deep voice, reminding Kett that at any moment he could switch forms with his animal twin, an eight-foot, dark-maned lion.

"The correct term is 'mate'," Chance said, leaning against Dark and looking up at him with a smile. Kett figured the correct term for it was "soppy". "Which does actually make me the queen."

"Well, whatever," Kett said. "Why did Miho call you?"

"Said you might need my help. Naked in the woods and all that."

"My being naked in the woods is cause for concern now?" Kett asked, and Chance grinned before her face sobered.

"No, but that cut on your wrist is. She said you were having trouble walking too."

So much for hiding it. "I'm fine," Kett said automatically. "Five by five."

"Yes. Well, I don't believe you." Detaching herself from her "mate", Chance walked over to the bed. "Dark, could you go tell Miho to hold off supper for a bit, please?"

Dark nodded, verbose as ever, and left the room, closing the door behind him. Chance picked through the tray of medical supplies. "So what happened?"

"Fuck if I know," Kett said. *A cave in the mountains. Symbols on the walls. Burnt bodies.* The sad thing was that on Kett's scale of weird shit, this barely rated a five.

"Right. Excellent. How long have you two been together?"

She snorted at that. "About five minutes."

"Wonderful." Chance, wisely, stopped asking personal questions as she picked up Kett's wrist to look closer at the jagged cut there.

Then she dropped it, Kett's hand thudding on the mattress, and recoiled. "Bloody hell!"

"What?"

Chance peered at Kett's eyes, visibly shaken. "What kind of mojo are you under?"

A prickle ran up Kett's spine. The sort of mojo that repressed her shape-changing abilities, she'd bet. Ritual magic. They'd wanted her alive when they strung her up.

She shook her head wordlessly.

Chance transferred her attention to Bael. "Did you do it?"

He shook his head, clearly still under her spell. Kett clicked her tongue in irritation. She was used to watching grown men reduced to quivering teenage boys by Chance's phenomenal beauty, charm and grace, but that didn't mean she particularly enjoyed it.

Bael was looking at her as if she was coated in whipped cream and dispensed beer from her nipples. Five minutes ago he'd been about to lick Kett's pussy and now she might as well be part of the furniture.

I was desirable until she walked in.

"You mentioned supper?" she asked, beyond irritation.

"Er, yes – Miho said it was just about ready..." Chance was regarding Bael with a slight frown.

"Right. Good. I'm fucking starving." She shoved back the covers and tested her leg. Hurt like hell, but it was holding. "And can I get some bloody clothes?"

Chapter Three

Dinner was a minor ordeal. Aside from his inattentive, absentee parents, Bael had never met any other Nasc before, but he knew his monarch when he saw him. King Talvéan—Dark—rippled with power and authority, and Bael was totally, unexpectedly in awe. Usually authority figures pissed the hell out of him, but he seemed to have some sort of inbuilt subservience switch when it came to his king.

Maybe this was what it was like being a kelf and driven to serve humans. Bael actually *wanted* the king to approve of him. *Wanted* to serve him. Weird.

The king's consort wasn't Nasc—she was something not entirely human, but he couldn't tell what. Regal of bearing, warm and unutterably beautiful, she was a perfect foil for the king's majestic stillness.

And she was Kett's cousin! His mind reeled. His queen was Kett's cousin. They were nothing alike. Quite apart from the differences in their coloring, Kett was all wiry strength, flashing fury and surly, dangerous sexuality. She was like thunder and lightning, fascinating but deadly. Chance, on the other hand, was grace personified. She exuded warmth and charm that only seemed to make Kett look more bad-tempered.

He glanced over to where Kett was poking at her noodles, scowling. She had a great line in scowling. Those wonderful silver eyes of hers blazed and sparked at him across the table. She didn't seem to be talking to him, didn't seem to be talking to anybody.

Which made conversation all the harder. Several times Chance enquired of him what his animal twin might be, and each time he fudged the answer, changed the subject. If he told them the truth—if they knew—every Nasc would know. News would spread. The Federación would surely find out.

And then he'd be dead.

"I haven't met very many Nasc," Chance was saying brightly now. "Might I know your parents?"

"I doubt it." Bael tore his eyes from Kett to address his queen. "They died when I was young."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

Another silence. Bael watched Kett stab at her food, apparently angry with it. She tangled up some noodles and shoved them into her mouth with a total lack of grace he found weirdly charming.

"Dark is touring 'round, introducing me to all the Nasc we can find," Chance said. "Sometimes I feel like an exhibit at a freak show."

"You are a freak," the king muttered.

"Thank you, darling."

"In the nicest possible way."

She glanced sideways at him then flicked her gaze quickly away again. But she was smiling.

"It's not freakish for me to be non-Nasc," she said.

"Of course it isn't."

With that was the unspoken coda it was something else that made her freakish. Chance shifted and the king flinched, and Bael realized she'd kicked him under the table. He held his breath, but the king just grinned at her. And she grinned back.

"Will you still be here tomorrow?" Miho asked. "The Emperor is coming for tea. It would be fitting for him to meet the Nasc king."

The Emperor. What kind of people did Kett know?

"It's been awhile since I saw the Emperor," Chance said. "If we're still here," she glanced at Kett, who shrugged sullenly and said nothing, "then it would be lovely." She beamed at them all. Miho smiled back. Bael tried to remember if he'd ever gotten into trouble in Xinjiang—the sort of trouble the Emperor might care about, anyway.

To redress the balance, he pulled on one of the few pieces of Nasc news he actually had heard. "Your Majesty," he enquired of his king, "how is her Highness, your sister?" To Kett, he explained, "She was kidnapped and imprisoned, but the king and his mate freed her."

"The king, his mate and *me*, actually," Kett said, and Bael stared at her, dumb with admiration.

Amused, Dark said, "She is well. Thank you for asking."

"Do you have a mate, Bael?" Chance asked.

"Uh, no," he said, his eyes sliding back to Kett, who was sucking a noodle between her lips. His mouth went dry. "I don't—er, I, uh—no, no mate," he stammered, watching her lips move, pink and soft and supple.

"Oh, of course. You and Kett."

"There's no 'and'," Kett snapped. "We've only just met."

"Well, yes, but if he had a mate then he couldn't be, er, you two couldn't..."

"What makes you think we have?"

There was silence. Bael thought he heard Miho suppressing a giggle, but he couldn't be sure he'd actually heard anything through the fog of memories of Kett this morning, Kett last night, hot and strong and naked, her mouth and her breasts and her tight, sweet pussy.

He was glad he was sitting down, because to get a hard-on in front of his king would be pretty damn embarrassing.

"Sweetheart," Chance said, "I *know*."

"Oh, piss off," Kett snarled halfheartedly, stabbing at her plate again, and the table was silent a moment more before Miho cleared her throat and tried to start another conversation.

"How long have you been in the Realm?" she asked Chance and Dark.

"Oh, not very long. A few weeks. We'll be going back to Peneggan soon, of course, to Elvyrn for Yule. Kett, are you coming?"

Kett shrugged. Her breasts moved interestingly beneath the thin tunic she had on under her open kimono. Chance had spent a futile few minutes trying to get Kett into an obi and then given up and let her wear the kimono open like a long robe. Bael could hardly object. Fastened up, the kimono concealed all those attributes of hers that he so enjoyed looking at.

"Well, it'll be nice if you do. Bring Bael."

Kett shot her a venomous look. It made her eyes sparkle and flash.

Chance grinned at her. "It'll be fun," she said provocatively. "I don't think you've ever brought a date to the Yule party."

"So why start now?" Kett muttered.

"Bael." Chance reached over and placed her hand on his, and he looked away from Kett for a moment. His queen was pretty compelling. "You must come. Tell Kett to bring you."

He looked back at Kett, who was scowling harder. She licked a drop of sauce from her lips and he tried not to moan. "Sure," he said. "I'd love to."

Kett shoved back her seat abruptly, standing up, the kimono swirling around her, the tunic clinging to her body. Bael lost his breath again. "I'm done eating," she said when they all stared at her. "Good night," she added as a sort of afterthought.

Then she stomped from the room in a swirl of silk and annoyance. Bael started rising to his feet.

"I'll go," Chance said, moving faster than seemed possible. "You stay here. Dark, be nice to Miho."

"I'm always nice," he said, and she just laughed as she left. The king fixed Bael with his dark stare. "The women in that family are crazy," he said. "Have you met her family?"

"I've hardly even met *her*," Bael said honestly.

"Hah. Well, if you do, take body armor. I'm not kidding."

"Right," Bael said, liking Kett more and more.

* * * * *

Chance caught up with Kett as she stomped around trying to find her room again. Not that there was anything personal in it to mark it as hers. She should probably just find a bed somewhere else and sleep in it. Might get Bael off her back.

Bloody Bael! Rationally, she knew it wasn't his fault. He didn't know Chance was going to interrupt them, and he couldn't help his reaction to her. It was almost genetic. She'd known men who fell into swoons after a mere smile from the beautiful Chance.

"Kett, wait."

"Speak of the devil." Kett narrowed her eyes and carried on walking. Well, limping. Fucking leg.

"Are you all right?"

"Five by five."

"No, you're about two by three. And the three's for your leg."

Kett scowled at her. Chance remained unmoved.

"He's cute," she said.

Kett shrugged.

"What are you so pissed off about?"

She stopped, squeezed her eyes shut. Nothing she had any reason to be pissed off about. "Nothing," she said. "I'm just...cranky."

Chance touched her arm, and Kett knew she was trying to weigh up the spell. Well, that wasn't helping with the crankiness. Being trapped in one skin was maddening. How did other people manage it their whole lives?

"Can you lift it?" she asked.

Chance frowned. "No. I...you know I'm still learning. Striker might be able to."

Kett snorted.

"Okay, he *will* be able to. Whether or not you can talk him into it, I don't know."

"I owe him enough already. I'll think of something else," Kett said.

Chance started to say something, hesitated, then said, "It's suppressing your shifting powers, isn't it?"

Kett nodded and started walking again. She didn't ask how Chance knew—for one thing, Chance knew a lot of things without being told, and for another, it had been a long time since she'd appeared in public with all her scars showing.

Of course, the nakedness hadn't helped with that.

"And you don't have any idea who did it?"

"Nope."

"Or why?"

"No, I think I have a handle on the why. You want to keep a shapeshifter in chains, you stop her shifting."

"Chains? We're not talking the fun, kinky kind of chains here, are we?"

"No." Kett chewed her own lip. "I need a smoke."

"Thought you'd given up?"

"I gave up cigarettes. I need a cigar."

Chance was quiet as they walked a little farther, then she said, "Kett, what the fuck happened?"

Kett sighed. "I don't know. I really don't."

Chance frowned, but she didn't press it. "How's your leg?"

"Five by –" She saw Chance's face and amended, "Better."

"You need anything, give me a yell," Chance said. She pointed to a door. "Think this is yours."

"Cheers."

Chance nodded and backed down the corridor. "And Bael really is cute. Fancies the pants off you too."

"Right," Kett said, knowing when she was being consoled.

"Have some sex. Really. It's good for you." Chance winked as she disappeared around a corner.

"I had no idea," Kett said sourly, pushing the door open and coming face-to-face with Bael. Well, face to chest, really. He was lounging on the bed, magnificently bare-chested, wearing only the loose pants he'd had on under his robe.

Kett bit her lip to keep her mouth closed as she took him in. Good heavens. Sweet, merciful fuck.

Clearly, she hadn't been paying attention before.

Bael had wonderful golden skin, a light dusting of hair and the most marvelous musculature she'd seen outside of the army. Or in it, come to think. Really beautifully defined chest, narrow waist, the sort of tight stomach that came from hours of hard exercise. Fabulous arms. Strong biceps and, even better, wonderful forearms. Sword-fighting, bow-pulling forearms.

Last night's frantic sex in the woods had been too hurried, and too dark, to make out any details. This afternoon she'd been too preoccupied with the throbbing pain in her leg to notice anything. But now she could see old, small scars on his skin. Maybe he was more of a warrior than she'd thought.

"Kett," he said cheerfully.

Of course, a warrior would have better survival instincts.

"How did you get here?"

He looked nonplussed. "Er, I walked."

"I mean, before me."

"I walked faster?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. Of course, she'd been limping around getting lost. Without being able to turn into something with superior tracking abilities, she felt half-blind.

"Kett, Kett, Kett," he said, swinging to his feet as she shrugged off her kimono. "I know you're crazy for my body but I didn't expect you to start taking your clothes off

so soon. However, I can't possibly deny you," he said, and started unfastening his trousers.

"I'm going to bed," she snapped.

"Great. Bed is excellent. One of my favorite places to have sex."

"Not for sex," she said, because despite his big hard chest and delicious forearms, she was still a little mad at him. "To sleep."

"Oh." He looked disappointed, standing there with his clothes half-off. "You've been sleeping all day."

"So?"

"Er. Are you really still tired?"

"Yes," she said. And because that really wasn't true and he could tell, added, "And my leg really hurts."

"Oh," he said again, looking really disappointed this time. "Really hurts?"

Another exaggeration. But it wasn't pain-free.

"I could always rub it better," he offered, brightening. "With some liniment."

"No. It's fine." She shucked the shift she'd been wearing under the kimono and crawled into bed. Bael stood right next to her, all big and muscular and irritating and wrong.

"Or kiss it better?"

"It probably still tastes of liniment," she said, pulling the covers up to her chin and closing her eyes so she didn't have to look at his hot body anymore.

"Well, then, I'll kiss somewhere else better. Take your mind off it."

Kett swallowed. Beneath the sheets, her nipples puckered. Picking up where they'd left off did sound tempting.

"Because, you know, it doesn't have to be sweaty, athletic sex."

And why was she really mad at him, anyway? She was just overreacting. Frustrated.

"It could be gentle, tender sex. Probably still sweaty though. But we could always take a bath together afterward."

Hadn't she vowed to try to be more rational? Being mad at Bael for no reason clearly wasn't rational.

"But if it really hurts," Bael said, sounding regretful, "then I guess —"

"It's not that bad," Kett heard herself saying.

"It isn't?"

"Uh." She opened her eyes. He'd turned down the lamp and the room was sultry and dark. The scent of jasmine washed over her again from the blossoms outside. Bael stood by the bed, all big and hard and naked.

"You could try kissing it better," she whispered, and he grinned and leapt into bed beside her. The mattress bounced and he laughed, and Kett forgot that she was mad and frustrated and laughed with him.

"You're pretty gorgeous when you laugh," he told her, wriggling under the covers and pinning her beneath him.

"That's such a line."

"No, it's true," Bael protested, nuzzling her neck and kissing her jaw. "You're pretty gorgeous most of the time, actually."

"Most. Boy, you really know how to compliment a girl," Kett said. She knew he was flattering her and she didn't care, because his big, hard body felt really good pressed against her. She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, felt the muscles tensing in his back. Yeah, really very good.

"Well, the rest of the time you're absolutely gorgeous," Bael said, his stubble scraping against her collarbone.

"You don't half talk rubbish," Kett said, and he looked up, surprised.

"No, I mean it!"

"You don't have to flatter me."

"It's not flattery." He kissed her lightly on the lips. "I like everything about you."

"Now I know you're lying." Time to put his mouth to better uses. "Didn't you say something about kissing me better?"

Bael didn't argue with that. He dropped his head and obediently nuzzled her breast, licking the underside of it but not touching her nipple, and she closed her eyes. When he wasn't talking bollocks, he had a great mouth.

His hand was lightly stroking her leg, lifting it gently to rest against his hip as he kissed the curve of her breast. Kett wanted to tell him to hurry up and get to the good stuff, but then it occurred to her that what he was doing was pretty good. Clearly it had been too long since she'd had sex with anyone who had the faintest clue what they were doing.

His fingers were tracing featherlight patterns on her scarred leg. Some of it she couldn't feel—the skin was numb in places—but some of it she could, and it felt damn good. When he ran his tongue over her nipple she jolted off the bed a little, and forgot completely about any pain in her leg at all.

Bael laughed softly against her breast and swirled his tongue around her nipple. *Wow*, Kett thought, *if his tongue is this talented why does he waste so much time using it to talk rubbish?*

He shifted between her legs, and those wonderful bumpy muscles on his stomach pressed against her crotch. She was still wearing underwear—a rather skimpy number Chance had rustled up for her, far more impractical and revealing than anything she'd have chosen for herself.

Bael seemed impressed with it, however. He was sucking one nipple now, his hand stroking the other, caressing with soft, teasing motions. She found herself wriggling closer to him, enjoying the press of his hard muscles against the hot, needy flesh between her legs.

Actually, damn Chance for finding her underwear! She wanted to be naked. Wanted to rub herself all over Bael's lovely body, feel his hot skin against her wet pussy lips. The hot skin of his stomach, his fingers, his cock.

She thought about how his cock had felt sliding inside her last night and a wave of heat swamped her.

"Bael," she said, and it came out as a husky gasp.

"Mmm." His voice vibrated through her.

"I want you inside me."

His fingers tightened momentarily on her breast. "'I want' doesn't get," he said, and ran his tongue in a lazy circle around her nipple. "I promised I'd kiss you better and I mean to stick to that promise."

"Kiss me better later," she said desperately.

"No no." He gave her nipple a little flick with his tongue. "I'm not done yet." His hand strayed from her thigh down to the strip of fabric over her hip. Well, that was more promising. Kett tried desperately hard not to wriggle and writhe against him, and failed utterly.

Bael gave a soft laugh and kissed her stomach. He found the little round scar by her bellybutton and licked it, and she wrapped her legs around his back, squeezing him tightly enough to get his attention.

"You're killing me," she said.

"Can't have that," Bael said, and scooted down a little farther to nuzzle the inside of her thigh. He licked, nibbled and made a thoughtful noise. "You know, this does taste somewhat like liniment."

"You eat liniment a lot?"

"Mmm, no. But it doesn't taste like the rest of you. Not salty," he licked higher, where she knew no liniment had gone, "or sweet," he blew on her wet skin and she shivered, "or delicious in any way. However," he said, apropos of nothing, and sat up.

"What? However what?" Kett wriggled madly. He wasn't going to just leave her like this, was he?

But Bael laughed and reached for her underwear again, sliding the lace down her hips. She relaxed a little—but only a little, because her body was wound up tight, needing him to touch her again. To taste her.

"However," he murmured, dropping the knickers on the floor. "I'm wondering if this might taste better."

And with that, he put his head between her legs and gave her pussy one long lick. Kett shuddered and nearly came, her legs shaking as she moved them wider apart to give him better access.

Bael parted her with his fingers, stuck his tongue inside her and then she *did* come, a wave of release crashing over her as her body snapped like a spring wound up too tight.

"Mmm," he said, and the vibrations made her shudder a little more. "That was delicious."

"Flatterer," she said, and was appalled to hear her voice shaking.

"I'm sincere! However can I convince you?" He gave her labia a thoughtful nibble.

By doing that, Kett thought, but couldn't quite manage to get her voice working enough to say it.

"I'll just have another taste while I think about it," Bael decided, and sucked her labia between his lips. She gasped, her hips bucking as his tongue teased her delicate flesh. He stilled her with his hands, dipped his tongue back inside where she was dripping wet then circled her clit.

Kett hadn't really recovered from her first orgasm yet, and she felt the waves building in her again as he licked and sucked her most sensitive flesh. Her heels dug into his back. Her hands clenched the sheets. Her breath came in gasps.

Bael slipped his finger into her cunt and she came again, tightening around him, loving the feel of it inside her. Wanting more. Wanting something bigger, longer, thicker inside her.

"More," she gasped, her body twisting as he licked and sucked her relentlessly. "Inside me, more!"

Obligingly, he added another finger. Then another. He twisted them inside her and her hips came right up off the bed. But it still wasn't what she wanted.

"Fuck me," she panted. "For the love of the gods, fuck me!"

Bael bit the inside of her thigh. "I think I've kissed you better enough for now," he murmured, his voice just a little ragged, and flipped her over onto her stomach. All Kett really registered was that he wasn't licking her anymore, that her cunt was empty of his fingers, and she was just about to protest when he pulled her up to her knees and slid that big, hard cock of his deep inside her from behind.

"Oh gods," she choked, shaking as he pushed home as far as he could go, his balls brushing her clit. Her legs wouldn't hold her anymore, and she had the fleeting thought that this was the first time since the accident that it had been pleasure making her muscles ineffective, not pain.

Then Bael withdrew from her, sliding out with wonderful friction, his hands sure on her hips as he pulled out so far the head of his cock slid against her pussy lips and her brain became useless. He plunged back in again, and Kett's arms collapsed beneath her, her body falling to the mattress. Her legs would surely have given way too, but

Bael held tight to her hips as he thrust into her and back out again, in and out until she was completely mindless with pleasure.

She came again, a series of rolling orgasms that nearly made her black out, and only came to when the friction stopped and she realized Bael was no longer moving inside her. He'd rolled her to her side, and although he was still inside her, his penis was soft. Her thighs were sticky with come. She hadn't even felt it, her orgasms had been so overwhelming.

Lazily, he nuzzled the back of her neck, pushing strands of sweaty hair away from her skin. "Better?"

She could hardly breathe, let alone speak. She managed a nod and felt his body shake a little with laughter. "Let me know if it starts hurting again. I'll be glad to treat it."

Kett smiled, and then she gave an exhausted laugh. "Sure," she panted. "I like your kind of...treatment."

He slid out of her, rolling her in his arms so she was facing him. Kett wasn't usually much of a snuggler, but when Bael pulled her close she curled into him, liking the lazy way he held her as her heartbeat slowed back down, the heat of his body warming her. He smelled good, clean sweat and hot skin, and when his lips brushed hers, he tasted good too.

"Mmm," he said. "You taste like Xinjiangese food."

"That's interesting," she said, tucking her head under his chin. "We were eating Nihonese."

"Were we?"

"Yes. We're in Nihon, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Er..." Bael began.

She lifted her head. "You *hadn't* noticed?"

"Well, Miho was speaking Xinjiangese! Wasn't she?" he added suspiciously.

"Yes, but then she *is* Xinjiangese. She just lives in Nihon."

"Oh," Bael said, his body slightly tenser than it had been.

"What, don't you like Nihon?" Kett asked sleepily, snuggling back down.

"Oh no, I like it fine. They just, er, don't like me much."

"They don't?"

"No. Chucked me out a couple of times."

Kett felt herself mildly amused by this. "Out of the country?"

"Yep."

"What for?"

He seemed to think about it. "Can't remember."

Well, that was kind of adorable. Kett figured it was a sign of her misspent youth that she thought it was cute when a guy couldn't remember why he'd been deported. It certainly explained much about her taste in men.

"Well, I won't tell anyone," she murmured, and closed her eyes, falling asleep in Bael's arms.

When she woke up, he was gone.

Chapter Four

"Miho says he seduced the Emperor's daughter," Chance said as they approached the cave high on the mountainside.

Kett pulled on the reins of her munta. "So they chunked him out?"

"She was supposed to be pure for marriage. It's considered an act of treason."

"Isn't it usually a death sentence for treason?" Dark rumbled.

"Yeah, but he has friends in high places, Miho says."

Kett gave her a sideways glance. "You don't believe her?"

"Well...come on, do you? *Bael*? He looks like he just rolled out of prison."

"So?"

"So, do jailbirds usually have friends in high—" Chance broke off as Kett raised an eyebrow. Dark hid a smile. "Oh all right. Well, that just means you two are perfect for each other."

"Oh sure. Apart from the fact that he's a lunatic."

"Well, you're a lunatic."

Kett opened her mouth to protest, then briefly considered her life history and let it go. "And he buggered off without another word this morning." The Curse of Kett strikes again.

"Because the proviso on his escaping the death sentence first time around was that they wouldn't be so lenient if he ever came back."

Kett made a face and grumbled under her breath. She didn't know why she was complaining about it. It wasn't as if she was bothered. *Bael* had been fun—in the sack, he'd been a lot of fun—but he was a nutball and she just didn't need that.

It was better this way.

She dismounted outside the cave, which looked entirely unthreatening in the bright sunshine, and moved forward. The entrance was just high enough for a grown man to pass under without concussing himself, and inside the ceiling rose to maybe fifteen or sixteen feet at the highest point.

A broken chain still dangled from a hook wedged into the rock. Directly below it was a perfect circle, etched into the ground by some immense source of heat.

A sound of disgust came from the cave's entrance, and Kett glanced around to see Dark looking like he could smell something bad. All Kett could smell was the scent of burned meat, but then she didn't have the refined nose of a lion Nasc.

"Burned flesh," he said to Kett.

"Human flesh," Chance clarified. She too was making a face as she poked at the charred remains on the floor. Flakes of ash drifted away on the cool morning breeze.

"It was like that when I got here," Kett said, which made her cousin smile.

"What are these?" Dark asked, examining the symbols burned into the wall. Now that the sunlight was filtering in, Kett could see the walls of the entire cavern were covered with them. "It looks like a language, but not one I recognize."

"Thought you spoke everything going?" Kett asked.

"Exactly," he said, frowning.

Chance moved closer to investigate but could offer no more clues. "It looks almost like kelfish, but...not," she said.

"Helpful, thanks."

Chance rolled her eyes and took out a notebook and pencil. "Here. Maybe someone at Koskwim will know."

Kett pictured the vast library of the Order and nodded. If the answer was anywhere, it would be there.

She copied down as many of the symbols, in the correct order, as she could, and the three of them left the macabre place, riding down the mountain and turning north toward the Bridge compound near Tonshi. Chance handed Kett a few folded sheets of paper bearing the king of Peneggan's signature and personal seal. Emergency travel documents.

Kett gave her cousin a sidelong look.

"He's your uncle, not mine," Chance said.

"Step-uncle," Kett muttered. "How did you know I'd need them?"

"Darling, you always need them."

The Wall shimmered before them, violet and beautiful. Mesmerizing, never still, and beautiful.

Beautiful and deadly.

Rather like a lot of people she knew.

The Bridge official waved them forward to be enchanted, and Kett prepared herself as she had a hundred times before. A grown human could pass through the Wall only under heavy enchantment. Children, animals and kelfs couldn't pass through at all.

When she thought about it, the idea of being broken down into thousands of tiny pieces and reassembled on the other side made Kett feel vaguely sick. No wonder she was surrounded by green-faced travelers when she materialized on the Peneggan side of the Wall.

Dark came next, looking a little pale but otherwise healthy. Chance flowed into existence after him, looking no rockier than if she'd just stepped from a luxurious carriage ride.

"And yet we're related," Kett muttered in disgust, her hand on her queasy stomach. She followed her cousin out of the heavily fortified Bridge compound and up the hill, stepping around scorched areas of grass and breathing in deeply of the smoky air.

"Home scary home," Chance said as they crested the rise, passed through a small wood and paused, looking down on the home of the Order.

"Really, I'm not sure I'm flattered that you keep bringing me here," Dark said.

"I grew up here," Chance protested mildly. "Most of the people here are lovely."

"Darling, most of them could invent five new ways to kill a man before breakfast."

"Only five? You haven't been paying attention."

Kett said nothing, looking down at the twisted red pillars of stone, the gleaming white tower, the glint of sunshine on the courtyard's fountains. She could see small figures leaping and playing in the water, younger students not yet burdened with the full understanding of what they'd come to learn from the Order.

Thirty years ago...

Unlike everyone else in the Realm of Peneggan, Kett had never heard the rumor that the Wallside island of Koskwim was inhabited by dangerous dragons.

Unlike everyone else on the island itself, she hadn't therefore laughed when she discovered the truth.

Dragons did roam the island, making their nests among the weird volcanic columns of rock, flying screeching overhead, terrifying the inhabitants of the mainland city of Port Jaret, just across the water.

But they weren't the dangerous ones.

Hidden from the Bridge compound by trees and belief, a tall white tower gleamed in the sunlight. Seamless, the pale marble seemed to have grown out of the earth. And the Dragons who lived in it were indeed deadly. They just didn't have wings.

At least, very few of them did.

On being brought to the island, Kett was tattooed with a number. Eight years later, her training completed, a pair of crossed swords was added to the design. They denoted that she, like all the other graduates of the Order's elite training program, had attained the rank of Dragon Knight.

While the other kids had been learning to change their sword hand, Kett had been learning to change her shape. While they learned to pilot the carefully trained dragons, she'd been turning herself into one. While they learned the main languages of the other four Realms, she taught herself to speak.

She'd had to teach herself a lot of things.

"Kett?" Chance asked. "You still with us?"

Kett shook herself and started down the hill toward the white tower. "Sure," she said. "Just thinking."

"About Bael?" Chance asked slyly.

"Only how I'll clock him one next time I see him," Kett muttered.

"Will you be staying on the island?" Dark asked, and she shook her head.

"No. I'm going to look in the library for those cave symbols and unless the answer immediately presents itself, I'm going home."

"Elvyrn?"

"No," Kett said patiently. "*Home* home. In the mountains, with the dragons. They don't ask annoying questions," she added in an undertone.

"They don't speak at all," Chance said, rolling her exquisite eyes.

"Thus the basis of their appeal."

As they grew closer to the beautiful tower, to the still rocks, to the chattering water of the courtyard's fountains, Kett heard the clash of steel, the thunder of hooves and the cries of unsuccessful opponents.

"You know, if you wanted us to track down Bael," Chance began, and Kett shot her a venomous look.

"I'd honestly be quite happy never seeing him again. Besides, given his penchant for princesses, he'd probably go after Eithne or Beyla, and then Tyrnan would kill him. Actually..." She trailed off, considering.

"Have you considered that he might have something to do with why you were strung up in that cave?" Dark asked, and Kett shook her head.

"No. Well, I mean yes, I considered it, but I just don't expect he's got the brain power for it."

"Harsh," Chance said.

"Or the motivation. He don't know me."

"He could be an agent for someone else."

"Someone else stupid," Kett opined. "He was strung up with me too." She chewed her lip, wishing she had a cigar handy. "The only starting point I've got is the Federación."

Thunder crossed Dark's face. Even Chance's radiant countenance dimmed a little.

"And there ain't a lot of information on them," Kett said. "And frankly, right now I've half a mind to just forget about it."

"You could have been killed," Dark said, and Chance nodded vigorously.

"The Kett I used to know would never —"

"The Kett you used to know got herself whipped and beaten and divorced and jailed and killed," Kett snapped.

Silence blew about them. Kett stomped ahead down the hill, her voice nearly lost in the wind.

"I just want a quiet life."

* * * * *

"So what I want to know is, how good are your girls?"

It wasn't a question Bael had ever figured he'd be asking. He'd never actually had to pay a woman to sleep with him before. Well, not with actual money. And yet here he sat, discussing terms with a woman who amounted to a pimp.

A very ladylike, elegant and well-spoken pimp, but a pimp nonetheless. Although she probably called herself a booking agent or something.

"I assure you, Monsieur Var, that each and every Associée is well schooled in the arts of pleasuring a man."

"Right," Bael said, not correcting her on his name. Var wasn't his surname, it was his animal twin. But he really didn't need to get into that with her now. "Well, so is BonBon LeSalle, and she could get an erection out of a stone. And yet..."

And yet busty, cute, giggly BonBon had been faced with a limp-dicked Bael. And it wasn't just her, either. She was simply the latest in a long line of unsuccessful girls. After he'd gotten home from Nihon—narrowly avoiding the Emperor and his entourage—he'd gone for a quick pint or two at a local bar and, feeling a little crappy over stealing away from Kett with not so much as a goodbye, he'd tried to distract himself with some female company.

And got nowhere. It had never happened to Bael before, but he'd shrugged it off as the result of too much alcohol or not really fancying the girl enough. But it nagged at his mind, and the next night he'd found himself with another girl. And the same problem. Then another and another. And no matter how much stroking, licking, stripteasing, breast-wanking or deep-throating they tried, his uncooperative penis hadn't even twitched.

Bael was so alarmed he'd asked his father's old friend, Albhar, a man with a library full of magical knowledge inside his head, if he could find any problems. But all Albhar had done was wave a few crystals at him, tell him he was fine and mutter on about Bael's lack of magical ability.

"Your father could have done this for himself," he said, and Bael, as he always did when his sainted father's research was mentioned, stopped listening.

After that he visited a doctor, who gave him a totally clean bill of health.

Which meant there was really only one answer. And that terrified him even more than the thought of a useless penis.

"Do not worry, Monsieur. You have assured me there are no medical grounds for your," the tiniest pause, "condition, and I am confident that any one of our girls can help you."

"One? No no, I want two. Or three. At least. The more the merrier. The best you've got."

"Monsieur, that will be quite an undertaking—"

"I can pay," Bael said.

"Oh yes, I am sure of it. However, I mean that an assignation of this type will take time to coordinate."

"No," Bael said, desperation rising. "I don't have time. I need to know now. I need to *know*."

The lady took off her spectacles and regarded him. "Monsieur, have you considered that this could perhaps be the result of...anxiety?"

"I am not anxious," Bael said through gritted teeth.

"Forgive me, but you seem a little...desperate."

"Well, I *am* fucking desperate! I have to be able to fuck another woman." His fingernails were digging into his palms. "It can't be her."

"Who?"

The last woman he'd slept with. His mate.

Kett.

He shoved that thought away. He couldn't take a mate. Just couldn't. What the hell was he supposed to say to his men? To his advisors? That he just felt like getting married?

Not for the first time, Bael cursed his heritage. All the secrets. All the conspiracies. All the fucking rituals and prophecies. He couldn't bring a woman into that. Even a woman like Kett, who'd never be intimidated by a bunch of spooky old men with beards.

Especially a woman like Kett, who knew he was Nasc. Putting her together with the men who knew he was a Mage...well, hell, he trusted his men, he trusted Albhar and the other advisors, but news like that surely wouldn't stay secret for long. If the Federación knew there was a Nasc Mage out there, they'd be on him like vultures on a carcass.

And he really would be a carcass.

Someone had already strung him up in a cave to die. It sounded like one of the Federación's rituals to him. Which meant he needed to keep a really low profile, forget about the cave and try to live as normal a life as possible.

Which ought to involve sex at some point.

"Look," he said in a quiet, desperate tone. "If all your girls are so damn skilled, there's got to be one available who can help me. I just need to prove this. It's not a psychological thing," he held up his hand to stave off her protests, "it's not performance anxiety or stage fright or whatever the fuck you're going to politely call it. I need the best girl you've got, someone who makes men come in their pants just by *breathing*. I don't even need to actually have sex with her. *I just need to get a hard-on.*"

The booking agent blinked at him, then put her spectacles back on. "Don't need to actually have sex?"

"No. Not really." He just needed to know if he was *able* to.

"Hmm." She turned in her chair and extracted a file from the cupboard behind her. "Well, strictly speaking she is retired, but..."

"But?"

"But if you're not actually going to...engage with her, then perhaps an arrangement can be made. Are you willing to travel?"

"Sure." He felt a surge of hope.

"Excellent." She read the file then smiled. "You will need to cross the Wall into Peneggan."

"Great." Bael found a smile for her. "No problem. Love Peneggan." He frowned, trying to remember if he'd been thrown out of there any time recently. No, he didn't think so.

"I will make the arrangements."

* * * * *

Which was how he found himself in a plush hotel room, quivering like a nervous teenager, waiting for this avatar of sexuality to burst into his life and make him normal again. He even found himself praying, which was an interesting experience since he couldn't remember the names of any gods.

Someone came along the hall, a woman, a young woman, and he concentrated on hearing her.

"...really, Dark, he's not even going to touch me."

Wait, she sounded familiar.

"I don't care." A male voice, deep and angry and...yes, horribly familiar.

Oh hell.

"It's not like I'm cheating on you. Hello, you know I couldn't do anything anyway."

"I'm not finding that a comfort."

"Dark, *relax*. I'll be five minutes."

"I'm coming with you."

"The hell you are. This poor guy has enough problems without you scowling at him."

"Remember me not caring?"

"Remember me telling you to relax? Go wait in the lobby for me. Go on, go. Or I won't have sex with you for a month."

There was a moment's silence then the male footsteps retreated. They sounded like they were stomping. Outside the door, the woman paused. Her scent wafted toward Bael.

He put his head in his hands. He was so screwed.

There was a gentle knock on the door. "Yeah," he called dispiritedly, and the door opened and shut almost silently. He didn't look up. He knew who he'd see. The most beautiful woman in all the Realms, no doubt wearing something stunningly elegant, moving like a goddess and smelling like an angel.

"Mr. Var?" she said in a soft, wonderful, melodic voice.

"Baelvar, your majesty," he said, and looked up at her miserably.

Shock flashed across her perfect features. "Bael?"

"Yeah," he said wretchedly, and flopped back on the bed.

Chance stared at him, her perfect elegance all gone. "Bael? I—I—I must have gotten the wrong room."

"Nope."

She stared some more. She gaped. "But—Bael?"

"Yep. Well, Baelvar if we're being picky. Your majesty," he added.

"I was told...you were having problems..." Slowly, it seemed to sink in. And when it did, her face changed. "Oh Bael," she said, deep sympathy in her words. He wanted to cry. Especially since her perfect, lust-inducing presence had done absolutely nothing for his libido. "I suppose this means...who is she?"

He buried his head under the pillow with a moan.

Chance's footsteps retreated from the bed. Bael stayed where he was. Well, now he was royally fucked. Except that he wasn't. He'd have laughed if it wasn't all so hideous.

A couple minutes later he heard the door open again, felt the strong, powerful presence of his king and lifted his head from the bed.

"Baelvar." Dark stood there with his arm possessively around Chance. "I suppose I should offer congratulations."

"I didn't know it would be..." Bael gestured helplessly at Chance. As if things weren't bad enough, he'd gone and hired the king's mate as a fluffer. Well, maybe this could work to his advantage. The king would kill him and the whole mess would be over.

"You requested the most desirable woman in all the Realms," Dark said, his quiet voice like a distant rumble of thunder.

"Yes, but I didn't, uh..."

"Dark, stop torturing him," Chance said. "I take it from this you've tried...er...being with other women?"

Bael nodded miserably.

"And I take it you're not happy with this turn of events," Dark said.

He was going to die. Who'd be happy with that?

"Who is she, Bael?" Chance asked. "Who was the last woman you were with?"

He closed his eyes. The last woman he'd been with—and the only woman he ever could be with again.

"Kett," he said, and heard their combined intake of breath.

"Oh," Dark said.

"You're so screwed," Chance said.

"No," Bael flopped back down again, "that's part of the problem." He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Any tips on how to tell her?"

Chance and Dark were silent a moment. Then Dark wordlessly handed Chance her suitcase, from which she withdrew a piece of chainmail.

"You might need this," she said.

* * * * *

The annoying thing, Kett thought as she adjusted her chinstrap, was the dreams. Damn fantasies, attacking her every night since she'd gotten home. She was amazed Jarven hadn't said anything, because she'd woken herself once or twice with moaning and he was only upstairs.

One night, when she'd been dreaming most pleasantly of Bael stroking her clit with one hand and the inside of her pussy with the other, while his tongue dipped inside her ass, she'd actually been woken by the force of her own orgasm. An orgasm induced by a dream lover. It was insane.

Maybe she should get Chance to track Bael down. Her cousin could probably do it. After all, Kett had drawn a total blank on the cave symbols, and if the Koskwim library didn't have the info, then no place would. She'd even asked the Order if anyone had taken out a contract on her or Bael, but the response had been negative.

Maybe Bael might know. Maybe he'd been off investigating what happened while she'd been trying to forget.

Or maybe he'd just been shagging around and he'd completely forgotten about it. And her.

She squeezed her eyes shut. No more Bael. He damaged her calm, and she'd only just settled into it. No more fights with tigers, no more psychopaths coming after her family, no more jail sentences.

I just want a quiet life.

She eyed up the dragon tethered in the paddock, a snowy valley at the foot of the mountains. The sensible thing to do would be to get Jarven to help her drug it, but Kett felt the need for a punishing physical workout. Again. Since she was still entirely unable to change her shape and just fly up there and pop the pill in Fira's mouth, she'd have to resort to ropes, chains and her own physical skill.

A fleeting thought of Bael, some ropes, chains and physical skill came to mind, but she pushed it firmly away and prepared to exhaust herself.

Again.

Kett brushed a few flakes of snow from her face and sighed. This whole thing would be a lot easier if she could just change her damn shape and fly up there. But no matter how hard she tried, she was stuck as a bloody human. She'd have to ask Striker about it when she saw him, which didn't add to her general store of happiness. Being indebted to anyone made her furious.

Being indebted to Striker made her very afraid.

Fira was tethered to five steel pegs set in concrete deep into the snowy ground. The tethers were chains as thick as Kett's biceps, and they were linked to the dragon's metal collar and harness. It had taken Kett all morning to tie the beast down—how in hell Jarven used to do this before she turned up, able to fly, she'd no idea—and now all she had to do was attach the sixth chain to the ground, lasso Fira's head, get out of firing range and aim the tablet into her mouth.

Fira needed to have her wing mended, but that wasn't something Kett was likely to try while the dragon was still moving around. Not anymore. So a huge dose of tranquillizer was needed.

She approached the sixth chain, snowflakes blowing idly around as she went. Fira was usually a fairly placid dragon, but most creatures tended to get kind of cranky when people started trying to force things down their throats.

"Now then, girl. Be good, stay nice and still, and we'll get this done in no time. There's a good girl. There's a good girl now."

She kept up the mindless patter, trying to distract Fira. It had worked for the last five chains, and this one seemed to be going the same way.

"Good dragon. Good, scaly fire-breather. You behave, I'll give you a villager for tea."

"Is that why they're all scared of you then?"

Kett was so startled she stumbled as she turned, tripping and yanking hard on the chain to keep her balance. That sounded like Bael's voice! Great, now she was hallucinating as well as horny.

Then she looked up, and there he was, coming over the rise with his eyes sparkling and his cheeks pink from the cold. Kett lost her balance and fell flat on her ass into the snow, and the chain went taut.

Fira, not happy at having her collar yanked sideways around her neck, gave a bellow—and when a dragon bellowed, fire usually followed.

It followed.

"Get down!" Kett screamed, scrambling to her feet and launching herself at Bael just as Fira sent a huge jet of fire over their heads. His body was hard beneath the layers of winter clothing he wore, and as he thudded to the ground she was pushed heavily against him by the force of the fall.

The heat of the dragon flame burned through her protective clothing. The stuff would stop her from turning into a crispy-fried Kett, but it didn't stop her from feeling

as if she'd been roasted alive. She curled into Bael's body, tense and breathless until the dragon reared back with a cry.

Then she raised her head, and Bael was grinning at her.

"You fucking idiot!" she yelped. "You could have gotten us both killed!"

"It's nice to see you too," he said, cupping the back of her neck.

"What the fuck did you think you were doing?"

"You look really great in armor." His fingers wiggled into the gap between her helmet and jerkin, and just for a second she shuddered at the feel of being touched by someone else.

Then she remembered who was doing the touching, and what a twat he'd just been. She catapulted to her feet, her skin so hot it felt sunburned, and clenched her fists to keep from kicking him.

Then she kicked him anyway.

"Ow! Look, we're both okay, so what does it matter?"

Kett glanced back at the dragon, steaming with fury. He was right, her rational brain told her. He hadn't done anything inherently dangerous—aside from walking into a freaking dragon paddock unprotected—and they were both okay. Although she'd kill for a roll in the snow right now.

It was just that she'd barely gotten over being mad at him for bugging off like that in the middle of the night, and then he turns up looking far cuter than any grown man in a bobble hat had a right to, and her hormones surged to the surface screaming *more, more!*

And that made her angry.

She focused on Fira, who was thrashing around, excited and heavy, arching her long, scaly neck and roaring fire at the sky.

Wait. Arching her neck? She wasn't supposed to be able to move that much. The short chains on the collar should have—

Oh holy fuck.

"I already knew you were mildly insane," Bael said, standing beside her and regarding the extremely large and only half-tethered dragon. "But I have to say, major respect for the dragon-working." He frowned. "You know, if you wanted to keep it on the ground, you should have put, like, a collar on it or something."

"I did," Kett said, staring in mounting horror at the piece of broken metal and leather on the ground.

Bael followed her gaze. "Oh," he said.

Slowly, methodically, Kett picked up the rope she'd had coiled over her shoulder. "You see that mountain?" she asked, jerking her head to the frozen peaks in the distance.

"Which one?"

"Pick one."

"Uh, okay."

"I am going to tranquilize this dragon. And then I'm going to go to the high paddock and saddle up another one. And then I'm going to put you on its back, fly it to the top of that mountain you just picked out and kick you off."

Bael swallowed. "I'll, er, I'll just, uh—"

"Fuck off?"

"Yeah," he said, and backed away.

Chapter Five

Bael retreated down the hill, not because he was scared of the dragon—well, okay, he was a bit—but because he was terrified of that glint in Kett's eye. This was not precisely how he'd planned breaking the news to her. He'd figured he'd go in and compliment her on her hair, or her dragon-roping skills or something, and buy her a drink or two—there'd been a ramshackle pub in the tiny village he'd passed through, or maybe they could retire to wherever she lived—and sit with her by the fire and coax her to bed. Then after he'd had head-banging sex with her, he'd carefully introduce the subject.

He hadn't really planned on nearly getting them both killed. Still, he lived on the edge.

He watched as she grabbed her leather bag and strode determinedly to the dragon, still tethered from four points on its harness. The creature watched her warily from one red eye. Kett unwound the rope from her shoulder and weighed it in her hands, never taking her eyes off the dragon. Bael peered closer, frowning. A lasso? She was going to lasso the dragon? With *rope*? She must be crazy. It'd be incinerated in seconds!

He started to move forward then stopped. Kett knew what she was doing. Surely she did. It was bravery, not insanity.

Maybe a little of both.

Kett and the dragon eyeballed each other awhile. The dragon snorted. Kett pulled her visor down over her face.

She stepped to the side, still watching the dragon. Damn, she had a sexy walk. He'd never noticed before because she'd either been running—and jiggling in much more interesting places—or limping. Her leg seemed to be better now, and she was moving with grace, like a predator. Careful and slow, each movement precise.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad being mated to her.

He leaned against a rock, arms folded, and watched her work.

Moving smoothly the whole time, she distracted the dragon with the swinging lasso then flung a hunk of meat high in the air. When the dragon snapped its fearsome jaws on it, Kett whipped the rope around its muzzle, hauled its head down to the ground and leapt onto the back of its neck.

Bael closed his eyes, heart pounding. If it came to the worst, he could probably catch her when the dragon flung her off. Because it *would* fling her off.

He opened his eyes again, ready to move, and watched with his heart in his mouth as Kett rode the furious dragon as if it was a fairground ride.

A minute or two later—it felt like hours to Bael, whose heart was hammering—the dragon’s head sank to the ground. Its eyes were closing. *She’d drugged the meat.* Kett tapped its nose, got no reaction then rummaged in her bag again for a syringe, which she stuck inside the dragon’s nostril.

Then she hopped down, wincing just a little as her weight fell on her right leg, grabbed the broken collar and strode back to him.

Bael started breathing when she started walking. Hell, those long strides, strong shoulders, even her scowl turned him on. She ripped off her leather helmet as she approached, shaking out curls that were damp with sweat and flattened by the headgear, and shoved it at him.

“You,” she said. “Follow. Now.”

He grabbed the helmet and stumbled after her, powerless to resist.

She led him down the hill to a large stone barn. Tacked on the side of it was a smaller building with smoke coming from the stone chimney. The roof, Bael noticed, was tiled. With all those dragons around, he guessed it made sense not to build from wood and thatch. The walls seemed to be several feet thick, the door plated with steel.

Kett slammed the heavy door open as if it was made from cardboard and yelled, “Jarven!”

“Yeah?” a male voice called back, and Bael’s hackles instantly rose.

“Fira snapped her collar. We got any spares?”

A man emerged from the steep ladder to Bael’s right. Tall, his dark hair tied back with a leather thong, hard years etched into his face, he gave Bael an inscrutable look before gesturing back toward the barn. “Should have. What happened?”

Kett dealt Bael a filthy look and threw the damaged collar at the worktable on the far side of the room. On the other side, backed against the barn, was a forge, its fire billowing out heat into the stone room. “*Someone* distracted me,” she said. “Didn’t get all the chains down, she spooked, broke the collar.”

He frowned. “Fira spooked?”

“Yes,” Kett said, glaring at Bael again. She strode over to the trough of water by the forge, stripped off her gloves and plunged her hands in. There was a sizzling sound and something like relief came over her face. “She’s out now, though. Got the needle in.”

Jarven inclined his head. “I’ll do her wing now.”

“Let me fix her collar first. She’s dosed, but I’d rather not take the chance.”

Jarven nodded and Kett stuck her gloves back on and walked to the door. Bael started to follow her but without even looking back, she barked, “Stay.”

Meekly, he obeyed. Right now, he had the feeling badgering her would be suicidal.

The door slammed and he was left in the welcome heat of the forge with the tall, muscular man she’d called Jarven. Jealousy flared madly in Bael. She was *his* mate! What was she doing living with another man?

Come to think of it—was she sleeping with him? Did that mean she wasn't his mate? He ought to be relieved. Especially since that meant she'd been cheating on Jarven in Nihon. Which meant she wasn't the sort of woman he wanted for a mate.

He swallowed. He'd never allowed himself to think about what sort of woman he did want for a mate, but in the last few days he'd reconciled himself to it being Kett—and had weirdly rather welcomed the idea. She might be an angry, scarred, twisted, bitter lunatic, but she had fire and passion and when her eyes sparkled with silver, he lost his breath and forgot how to finish a sentence.

She was the sort of woman he wouldn't mind spending the rest of his life being surprised by.

He glanced over at Jarven, who'd picked up the broken collar and was examining it.

"So, er," Bael said, and Jarven glanced up but didn't give any other hint he'd heard. "You're..." Kett's lover. Her husband? Oh hell!

"Jarven Tenvale," came the reply. He went over to the forge and started pumping up the fire.

"Baelvar," Bael said, scrutinizing the other man. His straight dark hair was graying slightly at the temples and there were deep lines in his face. Frown lines, not the brackets around the eyes and mouth that came from smiling. He had a slightly grim look to him, although he didn't seem to be the sort of man who showed much emotion. Or, apparently, the sort who talked.

"You're, uh..." *Boinking my woman.* No. "I didn't know Kett, er..." *Was shagging someone else.* No! "We met in Asiatica," he finished lamely.

Jarven grunted.

"About a, uh, month ago." *Chained to the ceiling, naked, her hot body rubbing all over mine, those lean thighs and firm breasts and hard nipples...*

And then he felt it. A twitch in his pants. He was getting hard over Kett. Thinking about Kett! Kett was making him hard!

Bael would have sung a hymn of joy there and then that his penis was working once more, were it not for the fact that Jarven might perform an exorcism on him for it. Also, there was the small matter of him living with Kett.

"How long have you known her?" he asked.

Jarven scratched his whiskered jaw. "Thirty years."

Bael's eyebrows shot up. "Wow. So you must know her pretty well?"

Jarven shrugged.

This was like getting blood from a stone. Bael gritted his teeth and debated whether or not to be honest about it.

Better not. Honesty always got him into trouble.

"What—um. She never told me what she was doing in Asiatica."

"Didn't she?"

Bael waited for more, but didn't get it. Okay. No more leading questions.

"Did she tell you how we met?"

"Nope." Jarven sounded like he didn't care, and a thought occurred to Bael.

"Did she *tell* you that we had met?"

Jarven sighed. He waved his hand over the forge as if to test the heat. "No."

"Right, then. Well, the truth is we were both sort of captured. I don't know who by. They seemed to want us for some sort of ritual. There was blood and silver chains..."

Jarven was heating up some sort of poker in the forge and didn't seem to be listening.

"Anyway, we escaped. Ran into a friend of Kett's. Miho? Little Xinjiangese woman, lives in Nihon?"

Jarven gave another grunt.

"And, uh. Her cousin was there. Kett's cousin, I mean. Chance. Do you know her?"

Jarven gave a shrug that implied he might.

Bael swallowed a little nervously. Here he was, about to explain to a big man with a piece of hot metal in his hands that he'd shagged the woman who was quite possibly his wife. And that he intended to carry on shagging her.

He didn't want to. Tell Jarven, that was—he definitely wanted to shag Kett again—but he couldn't think of another way to get around the subject.

"I slept with Kett," he said, and immediately afterward it occurred to him that he could have just *asked* Jarven if they were involved. Fuck it. Well, he knew he wasn't very bright. Albhar was always telling him that his inability to think first, speak second was going to be the death of him.

He watched Jarven carefully, anxiously. The other man was concentrating on the poker thing he was heating up in the fire. Had he not heard?

"I said, er—"

"I heard," Jarven said. Then he added, as if it was an afterthought, "Makes no never mind to me."

Bael blinked. "It doesn't?"

"Nope. Who she sleeps with is her business."

"So you're not...er..."

What looked like the faintest smile crossed Jarven's face as he turned back to glance at Bael. "Nope."

He sagged against the ladder. "Oh, thank gods."

Jarven snorted.

Crisis averted, Bael glanced around the small room for somewhere to sit. As far as he could tell, it was a working room and nothing else. There was the big forge, a large

tub of water and an anvil, and a table or two holding various items that all looked like torture instruments. There were no chairs.

Did Kett live here, he wondered, or somewhere else? Maybe in the village. Maybe this was just a workplace.

Maybe he'd live here with her. Let Albhar run his other lands and estates, buy a house up here. He frowned as he thought of the tiny, gloomy stone cottages he'd passed on the way to the forge, then grimaced. Maybe *build* a place here. Nice house with large rooms, big fires lit all the time to keep the chill off, because he strongly suspected without the heat of the forge, this tiny, dark cottage would be as freezing as the outside temperature.

He was just opening his mouth to ask where Kett lived when a buzzing sound caught his attention. It also caught Jarven's, which Bael figured was a minor miracle.

Jarven put down the hot metal he'd been messing with and reached for something hanging on a leather strap from a peg on the wall. A hemisphere of rock, the flat, polished surface of which seemed to be glowing red.

Well, that was interesting.

Even more interesting was that when Jarven picked it up and looked at the flat surface, it stopped glowing and Kett's voice came out of it.

Bael started. Now that wasn't *normal*.

"Collar's done," Kett's disembodied voice said. "She's still out, but do you want the syringe?"

Bael stared at Jarven, who wasn't looking remotely surprised or stunned or bewildered. Well, Bael conceded, it didn't look as if he ever would.

"No, I'll bring one," Jarven said.

"Right. I'm dying for a drink. See ya." Jarven nodded and put the thing back on its peg. Then he turned back to what he'd been doing at the forge.

Bael stared at the thing, which now just looked like an inanimate geode. How had it been responsible for conveying Kett's voice? Had she been poking her head through the window and he hadn't noticed?

He looked around. There didn't seem to be any windows.

Maybe Jarven was a Mage. Bael went cold despite the heat as he watched the other man poking at the fire. Maybe Jarven was with the Federación.

"What..." His voice was all broken, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

"That, er, thing. You were talking to Kett, but she's not here."

"No," Jarven agreed.

"But – how – ?"

Jarven sighed again, turned with the hot metal still in his hands and said, "It's called a scryer. It's a kelfish device, powered by kelfish magic. They act as conduits for thoughts. If you want to talk to someone else who has one of them, you hold the scryer and concentrate on that person, and it makes a connection with theirs. Then the face of the scryer turns into a sort of window so you can see each other as you talk."

A kelfish device. Okay. The kelfs had nothing to do with the Federación.

Bael shook his head, relieved. "Wow."

"Yeah." Jarven turned back to the forge.

"So is that like the longest speech you've ever uttered?" Bael asked, and Jarven stabbed the metal into the fire with a little more force than before.

"There are chairs upstairs," he said. "Go and sit."

Bael grinned. Hey, he'd rattled the emotionless man! In retrospect, being that Jarven was clearly close to Kett, not a good choice. But Bael had never much cared for consequences.

"Those drinks she mentioned," he said, figuring Kett should be back around now. "Where are they? I'll get one for Kett. You thirsty?"

"They're in the village," Jarven said.

"Oh. So she's going to fetch them?"

"No," Jarven said in slow, patient tones. "She's going to go to the pub, order a beer, drink it there, repeat the process several times and come back when she's done."

Bael opened his mouth then shut it again. "She's avoiding me!"

Jarven muttered something that sounded like, "Can't imagine why."

"Where's the pub?"

Jarven was silent a moment or two, as if deliberating whether or not to tell him, then evidently decided it was worth it to get Bael out of his hair, and gave him directions.

"Avoid me!" Bael said indignantly, pulling his gloves back on. "What did I do?"

Wisely, Jarven said nothing.

* * * * *

"Beer me," Kett said before she'd even taken off her coat.

Across the bar, Bill, the grizzled old landlord, filled a tankard. "Bad day?"

"Fucking horrible." Kett ripped off one glove, strode over and downed the beer in one go. "More."

Bill laughed. "Dragons been giving you the runaround?"

"No, the dragons have been fluffy little kittens. It's a different species entirely that's pissing me off."

"Men?" suggested Angie, Bill's pale, skinny daughter.

"Close enough," Kett growled, and stomped off to the back reaches of the dingy pub to see if anyone wanted a game of darts. They didn't, because even drunk men knew it was a bad plan to get near Kett when she was angry and had a fistful of sharp objects, but a couple of them ventured to offer the snooker table as an alternative.

They'd been playing for five minutes when Kett realized there were three of them and only ten balls. Still, variety was the spice of life.

"Is it Jarven, then?" Bill asked as he watched.

Kett banged a ball into the pocket. "Nope."

"Jarven's incapable of annoying anyone," Angie said. Kett suspected she harbored a crush on her silent roommate.

"Yeah, he'd have to speak for that."

"Well, who is it?" Angie asked. "Can't be anyone in the village or we'd have heard."

"It's—" Kett began, but then the door banged open and she turned her head, distracted, to see who was coming in amidst the flurry of snow. Up in the mountains of the Northern Province, winter lasted for months and Kett couldn't remember how long it had been since they'd had a snow-free day. For the newcomer to stand there with the door open, letting in billowing gusts of freezing cold air, marked him as an outsider. Or an idiot.

Or both. She ducked behind the snooker table.

The door finally closed and conversation dimmed as all the locals watched the newcomer walk across the stained wooden floor to the bar.

"I'm looking for someone," he said, and Kett rolled her eyes, because if she hadn't guessed already, now she knew it was Bael.

"Who would that be then, sir?" Bill asked.

"A woman."

Kett stifled a snort. She'd been here six months before the locals caught sight of her in a t-shirt and spied her breasts. Before that, they'd assumed the new dragon trainer was a man. Most of them still thought of her that way.

"Only woman here's my daughter," Bill said now, with an overlay of heavy protectiveness.

"No—I mean, a specific woman. Tall, dark curly hair, scar on her cheek, limps slightly. Very hot. And angry."

Angie stifled a giggle.

"Her name is Kett."

One of the snooker players snorted. "Kett's not a woman."

"Er," Bael said, "I'm pretty sure she is."

Kett felt her face get hot.

"Is she here?" Bael asked, and from behind the snooker table, Kett shook her head frantically at Angie, who gave a small shake of her head to her father.

"Sure, she's hiding behind the snooker table," Bill said cheerfully, and Kett shot him a filthy look as she stood up. "Drink?"

"Whatever she's having," Bael said, beaming at Kett, who pinched the bridge of her nose and reminded herself that if she got thrown in prison for killing Bael the week before Yule, her father would disown her.

Actually, maybe that would be a good idea.

Then Bael winked, and despite herself Kett felt something go *twing* in the region of her underwear.

"Is there a reason you're here, or are you just stalking me?" she asked, trying to dispel the feeling.

"I need to talk to you," Bael said.

"I hate those words," Kett muttered. Louder, she asked, "What about? You know who strung us up in that cave?"

The pub suddenly got a lot quieter.

"Er, no," Bael said.

"Then what could you possibly have to tell me that I'd be interested in?"

"Uh." Bill put Bael's beer on the bar and he picked it up, suddenly looking nervous. "Is there somewhere quieter we can go?"

"No," Kett said. If they went somewhere quieter, she might forget that he'd almost gotten her killed earlier and jump him. Which would just be stupid.

"Outside, maybe?"

"You did just come from outside, I take it?" Kett asked incredulously. "It's below freezing and it's been snowing nonstop for weeks."

"I really would rather talk to you in private," Bael said.

"Well, tough."

He sighed, drank some of his beer then tugged her over to a quieter corner of the pub. Since every single person there was silently listening, it didn't make a whole lot of difference.

"Okay," he said.

Kett waited.

"Okay." He drank some more beer.

Wow, he really was nervous.

"Okay –"

"Bael?"

"Yeah?"

"Stop saying 'okay' or I'll punch you."

"Ok—" He swallowed. "Right."

She rolled her eyes.

"You know your cousin, right?"

"Chance? I'm acquainted with her."

"Well. You know how she's sort of our queen?"

"Sort of?"

"Well, is. Because she's the king's mate."

"Yes." Kett folded her arms and leaned against the wall.

"Right." Bael drank some more. "Uh. You're not sleeping with Jarven, are you?"

Kett blinked at this mad conversational segue. "Why is that any of your business?"

Bael looked miserable. "It just is. Are you sleeping with anyone?"

She narrowed her eyes. "No. Happy now?"

"Have you, er, slept with anyone? Since me, I mean?"

"I really don't see—"

"Just answer me. Please," Bael said, and Kett saw the desperation in his eyes.

She blew out a sigh. "No," she said. "I live in the middle of fucking nowhere and there are no eligible men here between the ages of eighteen and eighty. Except for Jarven, and he don't count."

Something flared in Bael's eyes but it was hard to tell what. He drank the rest of his beer all in one go then held it out to Bill. "More, please."

Bill silently refilled it, watching them intently, and Kett sighed. Bael was clearly really uncomfortable talking about this in public, but equally as clearly he wasn't going to go away until he'd said it.

Maybe he did know something about the cave. She ought to hear him out.

"Bill," she asked, "mind if we go upstairs?"

Amusement flared in the landlord's face before he nodded. "Go ahead," he said, and Kett picked up her mug of beer and led Bael to the door behind the bar that separated the pub's private and public sections.

Upstairs was a small parlor, away from the sounds and smells of the bar. But Kett wasn't used to drinking in such a clean atmosphere, so she lit up a cigar while Bael looked around nervously.

"Talk," she said.

He sat down opposite her and ran a hand through his hair. "You're not making this very easy," he said.

"Wasn't aware I was supposed to."

He sighed. "Okay. Here's the thing. I'm Nasc, right?"

"Right. What's your animal?"

"Don't distract me. I'm Nasc. Do you...know very much about us?"

Kett waved her hand to say she didn't.

"Right. Well. Your cousin is mated to one."

"We covered this already."

"Yes, but do you know what that means? Mated?"

"I figure it's like being married, only more...animally. More sex, maybe." She blew out a smoke ring.

At the mention of sex, Bael's eyes darkened. Well, she couldn't blame him. If it had been half as good for him as it had for her, he'd be desperate for more.

"Well, yes. Sort of. It has a lot to do with sex."

"What a surprise."

"Once a Nasc is mated, they can't have sex with anyone else."

"Like marriage, then."

"No, I mean literally can't. It's physically impossible."

Kett blinked, an image of the insanely virile Dark being unable to get it up suddenly flashing into her mind. "Seriously?"

"Yep. And we can only have children with our mates too."

"So...once you're mated, that's it? No get-out clause? No divorce? No shagging around on the side?"

"Nope. Once you've found your mate, that's it."

"Huh. Well, I suppose it's a better system than ours." Her fingers curled into a fist, remembering. "So long as you're really, *really* sure you want to be mated to that person."

Bael cleared his throat, drank some more beer then cleared it again. "Um. Well. That's the thing."

She narrowed her eyes. "That can't be the thing; you already said 'the thing'."

"Well, this is another thing. Or part of the same thing. Um. You don't actually get to decide if you want to be mated or not."

"You don't?" Kett scowled. It reeked of arranged marriages to her, and in Kett's mind, an arranged marriage was like executing a random person when a crime had been committed. You might get lucky and get the right person, but chances were you'd just condemned someone innocent.

"No. It's sort of a fate thing. Once you find each other, that's sort of it."

"Fate," Kett said skeptically.

"Well, yes."

"That's bollocks," she said.

"I thought you'd say that," he sighed.

"No, it is. The whole fate thing. Written in the stars and all that. There's not a thing written down can't be changed."

"It's not written anywhere," Bael said, looking miserable. "It's just true. Once you find your mate, that's it."

He looked at her then, and those green eyes connected with something inside her. A nasty suspicion started in Kett's mind.

"Please don't be telling me what I think you're telling me," she said.

"What do you think I'm telling you?" Bael asked warily.

"That you think we're these fated mate things."

He swallowed. "Well, yes."

Kett looked at him. He appeared to be serious. And not particularly cheerful about it, either. Well, fuck this.

She picked up her beer and drank some. Then some more. Then some more, until the mug was empty. Then she went to the stairs and yelled, "Bill, I need more," and handed down her mug for a refill.

His bushy eyebrows waggled at her as he filled it. "How's it going up there? Don't you two stain my rugs."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kett snapped, and took her beer back.

Bael was sitting where she'd left him, gnawing on one fingernail. She hadn't seen him look so uncertain since she'd met him – but then, she reminded herself sternly, she hadn't met him very long before he'd buggered off again.

They hardly knew each other. This was insane.

"Look," she said, sitting down again. "This is stupid. We can't be those mate things because I'm not Nasc."

"Neither is the queen."

Dammit, he had a point. "Well, are you sure *they're* these fated mates?"

Bael nodded morosely. "Yes. They even gave me details."

A piece slotted into place in Kett's head. "You talked to them about this?"

"Had to talk to someone! I haven't been able to have sex with anyone since you!"

A small touch of pride warmed Kett. Then irritation squashed it. "Is that how you found out where I live? Chance told you?"

Warily, he nodded.

"She is *so* dead."

"Don't you threaten my queen."

He said it mildly, and Kett snorted. "She's my cousin. And I could definitely kick her ass."

"Look, we're not talking about her."

"No, we're talking about your recent fit of insanity. I say recent, because based on the evidence so far, they seem to hit with the same regularity as the sunrise. Bael, I'm not your mate. We hardly know each other!"

"Chance and Dark hardly knew each other. In fact, he tried to kill her several times, but they still —"

"Still not talking about them," Kett said, glaring at him.

He was a loon. Well, she already knew that, but he was twice a loon now. If he thought she was going to jump for joy at his mad proposal — because that's what it was, a proposal, horribly mixed in with a *fait accompli* — then he wasn't just insane, he was also stupid.

Why her? She was a divorced ex-con with a crippled leg and a mad family. She wasn't young, she wasn't beautiful and she did nothing but yell at him. All she had in her favor was that she was great in the sack, and frankly Bael could probably get that anywhere.

Kett didn't like fate. She didn't like the idea that things were meant to happen and there wasn't any way to change them, and she really didn't like the idea that there was a preordained destiny out there for everyone. Especially for herself.

She'd heard enough predictions about how she was going to either go insane, get locked up in jail or die young — or all three — to be completely sick of it.

Even if two out of three *had* come true already. And sitting here listening to Bael, she wasn't entirely sure about the third.

Added to which, she didn't *want* a mate. Husband. Boyfriend. Whatever. Other people got in the way — they always had, they always would. Other people got you hurt, or they got hurt because of you.

Alone was best. It always had been.

Kett ran her hands over her face. It was just as well she couldn't currently change her shape, or Bael would probably think it was a sign they really were meant to be together. She needed to make it clear to Jarven that Bael wasn't to be told — in the unlikely chance that Jarven actually decided to speak to anyone, that was.

"Well, look," Bael said. "There is one way to be sure."

"What's that?"

He cocked his head. "Actually, two."

Kett stubbed out her cigar. "Go on, then."

"Well, you could have sex with someone else. If you're my mate, that should be impossible."

Kett opened her mouth to tell him there wasn't anyone within a fifty-mile radius she'd even consider having sex with, but then it occurred to her the idea had merit.

She had to pick up Striker and Chalia tomorrow and take them to Elvyrn. She hadn't planned on staying, but maybe if she did, she might find someone to hook up with. Nuala was always trying to set her up with someone. The idea of a single woman in her thirties seemed to be completely unnatural to her stepmother.

Yeah. She'd go to Elvyrn, endure the family Yule gathering and shag some stranger. Then she could prove to Bael that this was all bollocks.

Shag a stranger. She used to do it all the time when she was younger. Why in the Realm had she stopped? It was always so —

Empty.

Exciting!

Sordid.

Liberating.

Sad.

Cool.

Childish.

Adult.

Pathetic.

She sighed. "Okay, what's the other option?"

"Well, you could have sex with me."

Kett snorted. But Bael seemed to be serious.

She tried to ignore the stab of heat that came from the idea. "What would that prove?"

"That I'm your mate."

"Er, no. It wouldn't."

Although, it would be an excuse for more of those fireworks Bael had given her last time... *No. Bad Kett.*

"Well, it would to me."

"You're not the one who needs convincing!" She hoped her hard nipples weren't visible through her shirt.

"Yes, I am. I need to be convinced my penis isn't broken," Bael said plaintively.

Kett laughed. She couldn't help it. She clinked her mug against his and stood up. "Well, you try, I'll give you that."

"This isn't funny," Bael said, standing too.

"Is to me. And look at it this way. If I didn't think it was funny, I'd probably be beating you up. Bael, you're a nutball. I'm not sleeping with you. End of story."

Chapter Six

"This doesn't mean anything," Kett moaned as his mouth closed around her nipple.

"Mmm," Bael agreed, a rather wonderful vibration.

"I'm just horny. And like I said, there are no other men around here. Or I'd be letting one of *them* suck my tits."

His hand slid around her waist, under her shirt, and his fingers dipped under the edge of her dragonskin jeans. The cold wind bit against her skin and she gasped.

"Whose idea was it to have sex outside?" she demanded breathlessly, her head falling back against the cold stone of the pub wall.

Bael raised his head and the wind chilled her wet nipple.

"Yours," he said, his voice husky. "Still, it's one way to ward off the chill."

"Speaking of," she said, "I'm about to get frostbite to the nipples." And she pushed his head back down to her breast. Bael laughed and ran his hot tongue around her cold flesh, making her see stars. His gloved fingers started unfastening her fly.

I must be mad, she thought. Having sex outside in the snow with a man who is clinically insane and thinks I'm his destined mate. This is totally – ooh, that's nice.

That's very nice.

Bael had taken his glove off, which in other circumstances might have engendered frostbite, but he was keeping his fingers warm by burying them between her legs. His thumb caressed her clit while his fingers slid inside, stroking her slick pussy.

Kett wasn't even really aware her own hands were moving to his fly until she felt his cock thud heavily against her fingers, thick and hard. She ripped off her glove and wrapped her hand around it. *Gotta keep it warm, she thought vaguely as Bael's fingers did wonderful things to her, or it'll get cold and drop off, and I want it fucking me.*

"Sweet fuck, Kett, that's good," Bael moaned, even though all she was doing was holding his cock. "Gods, I want to be inside you."

His teeth scraped her nipple, and Kett yelped, "Yes, me too. Inside me. Now!"

Bael didn't waste any time. He shoved her jeans down, pulled her bare right leg around his waist under his coat and pressed his hot cock against her wet, desperate pussy.

"It's you," he breathed, and surged into her. "It has to be you."

Kett wasn't really listening. He filled her up, all the way in, so thick and long and so damn good. Maybe this mate thing wouldn't be so bad. She'd get fucked by Bael every night. Get that wonderful big cock ramming up inside her whenever she wanted it. Those magic fingers working her clit, just like they were doing now, oh dear gods...

With each thrust he pushed her back against the wall, nearly shoving her off her feet. Well, foot. Her right leg was wrapped tight around his waist, pulling him deeper inside her with every stroke.

She braced her hands on his shoulders and hopped her other leg up, clenched tight against his hip so she was being supported solely by his cock.

"Oh gods," she moaned, as Bael's hands gripped her hips tight. "Oh fuck, yes. Harder!"

Bael obliged. Every slide of that huge, thick penis inside her was wonderful, so slick and hot, filling her up and stroking pleasure into her. It was getting unbearable now, heat spiraling up inside her, consuming her, and her body started to shake. Someone was crying out and it sounded like her, but Kett wasn't really sure and she didn't really care either, because she was coming, coming hard out in the snowy yard behind the pub with Bael's cock plowing deep into her.

She felt him come too, the wetness and heat inside her, and then they were both slumped against the wall with the snow coming down on them.

"That was great," Kett said breathlessly. "Thanks."

"Great?" Bael lifted his head. "It was fucking awesome."

"Ego much?"

They were both silent for a minute or two, breathing hard. Then Bael pulled out of her, fastened his jeans and helped her get dressed again without landing in the snow. They started up the hill toward the forge and Bael took her hand.

"Just so you know," she said, her skin still tingling, "that was a one-off."

"It was?"

"Yeah. I'm still not subscribing to this mate thing."

"Right."

Silence. The snow fell some more.

"So, when we get back to the forge, you're going to make me sleep on the floor?"

She lifted her chin and ignored her body's cry of dismay. "Yes. It's what you deserve for all this bullshit."

"Well, okay. You have your own room, right?"

"Of course." Hastily, she added, "Too small for you to sleep on the floor there."

"Right. So I'll sleep in the forge."

"Right."

Bael nodded thoughtfully. "Well, that's good."

Good? "Why good?"

"Well, because it'll keep me warm. I don't have any pajamas, you see. Packed in a hurry. Well, didn't pack at all. Really only have what I stand up in. Besides, I hate pajamas. I always sleep nude if I can."

Kett swallowed at the memory of what he'd looked like nude. *No, Kett, stop it. You do not want to encourage him.* Having sex up against the wall of the pub was bad enough, but continuing to shag him senseless would only compound the problem. Encouraging his delusions would be a bad idea.

"I wouldn't think it'd bother Jarven, would you?" Bael went on, and Kett tried not to think about how many pieces Jarven would carve Bael into before he fed him to the dragons if he found him lying naked by the forge.

Besides, what if a spark jumped out and burned him? What if it burned his cock? She might not be sleeping with him anymore, but she wasn't evil, and she didn't want to ruin that body for other women.

"Okay," she said. "You can sleep in my room, but I ain't having sex with you. I have to get up early and...and...and besides, the sex would be bad. A bad idea, I mean. Because I don't...I'm not...we're not having sex again, all right?"

"Right," Bael said, his eyes sparkling.

"Oh, shut up," Kett said, and unlocked the door to the forge. It was quiet and dark but for the glow of the dormant fire, and she ushered Bael across the floor to her small room on the other side of the cottage.

As she'd told him, it was small, and there really wasn't enough room for him on the floor.

Bael looked at the bed, looked at her, and his mouth twitched.

"No," she said. "Look, maybe I should go sleep in Jarven's room, so you can—"

She was cut off by Bael grabbing her and sliding his tongue inside her mouth.

"Okay," she said breathlessly. "Maybe I'll stay."

* * * * *

When morning woke Bael, pale cracks of light filtering in through the gaps in the heavy metal shutters, the bed was empty of Kett. He stretched, smiling, and looked around the small room. It wasn't what could ever be called pretty—it wasn't even cozy. There were rugs on the stone floor, a couple of plain wooden trunks and some hooks on the wall for clothes, and that was about it. No mirror or any girlie accoutrements of any kind.

He couldn't even see a hairbrush.

Noises from the outside room caught his attention and he pulled on his clothes to go investigate. Maybe his mate was making him breakfast!

Bael snorted. The idea of Kett making anything but trouble for him was pretty funny.

Jarven stood at the forge, pulling on heavy leather armor like Kett had been wearing. Bael smiled in greeting and got a nod in reply.

"Kett out with the dragons?" he asked, and could have sworn he saw the quirk of a smile on Jarven's face.

"She's out with *a* dragon," he said.

Bael nodded and opened his mouth to say he'd go out to find her. Then, remembering her reaction to that yesterday, changed his mind and said, "I guess I'll just wait here for her then."

"Could be awhile," Jarven advised.

Encouraged by this entirely voluntary input from the other man, Bael said, "How long? Couple of hours?" Maybe he could make her something to eat. It'd show willing, even if he was a crappy cook.

"More like weeks," Jarven said.

"What? Where is she?"

"Elvyrn."

Bael blinked. Elvyrn was a couple hundred miles to the south.

"Well, shit," he said. "Why?"

"Family. Yule."

Memories of Chance telling Bael he must come to the family Yule party came back to him. Of course. Kett hadn't seemed wildly keen on the idea, and he'd wondered why. Dark had warned him the family might be tempestuous...

Which sounded like fun to him.

"Of course," he said out loud, and smiled. "Are you going?"

Jarven shook his head.

"Are you invited?"

That earned him a sharp glance. "Yes," Jarven said. "But Kett's family is...a lot to take."

"Are they like her?"

Jarven seemed to consider this as he fastened his gloves. "No," he said eventually. "They're worse."

* * * * *

Kett chucked her kitbag on the ground and slapped the dragon's hide, watching it rise into the air and head home. It, like all the others, was trained from birth to return to the mountains, several hundred miles away from Elvyrn, but just a few hours flight for a dragon.

She patted her damp shirt, throwing a filthy glare at her traveling companions. It was all very well and good having an aunt who'd shacked up with the Realms' most evil man, but he tended to have a detrimental effect on, well, everyone. Including dragons. She'd had a fight on her hands ever since she'd picked up Striker and Chalia at

the Bridge, and when they'd finally landed outside Elvyrn in the early twilight, the young dragon had thrown a hissy fit and tried to incinerate them.

Striker had remained totally impervious, as had his lover. Kett remained slightly scorched and, after Striker had laughingly conjured a bucket of icy water to douse the flames, she was also soaked through and utterly frozen.

As she pulled a blanket from her kitbag and wrapped it around her shoulders, Striker stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled twice. A minute later a horse thundered into the clearing at breakneck speed. It skidded to a halt when it saw Striker, flanks quivering. A second after that, another horse did the same thing.

Kett shook her head. She'd seen women react in much the same way. Striker—six feet of menace wrapped up in muscle and perfect bone structure—could make a happily married woman orgasm on the spot just by fixing her with his blue, blue eyes.

He'd passed the talent on to Chance. Magical ability and sexual magnetism. Kett had heard her cousin say she'd have preferred to inherit a house and some money, but she played the cards she'd been dealt.

They all did.

Striker looked smug as he slung his saddlebag over the first horse's back. "Just a little move I've been messing with," he said.

"Whose horses are they?" Kett asked.

"Who gives a fuck?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Does Kett get one?" Chalia asked, looking around. Striker shrugged a negative and Chalia sighed. "Okay then, you take one, Kett, and we'll share."

Kett didn't argue. Chalia would probably lean on Striker for the return of the horses later, and if she didn't, then Kett guessed she could probably send them back to the general vicinity and someone would claim them.

It seemed to be the way their relationship worked. Striker had no internal conscience of his own, and Chalia had none of the magical power that crackled around Striker, but they'd evolved to share what they had with each other. It had been Chalia who'd persuaded Striker to help Kett after the sabertooth-tiger incident, for which Striker had been extracting favors ever since. Favors such as picking him and Chalia up and flying them to Elvyrn for Yule.

It seemed impossible to consider, but once upon a time Striker had been a child, and a fairly normal one at that. He'd been school friends with Kett's father, Tyrnan, which Kett figured probably explained a few things. Chalia, herself a childhood troublemaker, had turned out to be Tyrnan's illegitimate sister. She'd been the one to track Kett down and force her brother to meet his teenaged daughter.

Kett still wasn't sure she forgave Chalia for it.

She scowled at them as they rode on ahead. Despite being nearly twenty years older than Kett, they appeared years younger, which she considered to be monstrously

unfair. Not for Chalia, the fear of getting older and older and the dread of dying alone...

Not that Kett suffered such a fear, because if she did then she'd have happily taken Bael up on his ridiculous suggestion that they were mates. But she hadn't, because she wasn't some pathetic creature who needed that sort of validation in her life, which was why she was feeling guilty. Because she'd had hot sex with him last night, twice, instead of just walking away...

Not because she felt bad about sneaking away and leaving him there with no explanation. Well, with Jarven, which was worse than no explanation.

They rode into Elvyrn, the Realm's second city, picturesque in the early twilight as people bustled around getting ready for Yule. There was a light dusting of snow on the pink buildings, although the streets had been swept clean, and everywhere Kett looked seemed to have sprung straight from a Yule card.

Chalia and Striker veered off to visit other friends and Kett continued up the hill. Her uncle's Winter Palace stood tall and beautiful at the summit, illuminated by flickering torches. A few streets away stood her stepmother's massive house, every light blazing.

Kett hesitated outside the gates of her parents' mansion, where a young garda waited patiently to admit her. On the one hand, Yule with her parents, who would almost certainly try to get her to attend their high-toned, fancy shindig, for which she'd have to wear a dress and be polite to people. On the other, going back to the mountains and facing Bael, on whom she'd so suddenly run out.

Well, it was about time he learned what that felt like.

And her parents were never stingy with the alcohol.

Kett sighed and nudged the horse onward, hooves crunching over the snow. She let herself in through the kitchen door, snagged a hot meat pie from the counter and juggled it as she wove past the servants.

"Your ladyship!" the butler cried as she was halfway up the stairs from the kitchen to the public part of the house, and Kett winced. She turned to face him. What was his name? Willis? Wilson? Willikins?

"Hey, Wills. Didn't I ask you not to call me that?"

He made a courteous bow. "My apologies...miss."

"Miss"...well, better than "your ladyship". She waved a hand, taking a bite of the meat pie and shucking the blanket from her shoulders. "Whatever," she said through a mouthful. "Can someone make my room up?"

"As always, it is ready for you, miss."

"Great," Kett said indistinctly, and swallowed. "This is a great pie. I'm so bloody hungry."

"I shall pass your compliments on to Cook," the butler said politely, despite Cook standing a dozen feet away. "Dinner shall be served in five minutes in the Gold Salon."

Gold Salon? "Which one's that?"

The butler gave an almost imperceptible sigh. "Formerly the Rose Room, my...miss."

"Gotcha," Kett said, and continued up the stairs, the butler following. Shoving open the heavy door at the top of the steps, she took another bite. "Cheers, Wills."

"Wilden, miss."

She waved her hand at him as the door swung shut. Then she shoved it back open again and handed her bag to him. Through a mouthful of pie she said, "Can you chuck this in my room?"

"Certainly, miss," Wilden replied, not missing a beat.

"Ta," Kett said, and went to try to find the Gold Salon.

* * * * *

"How interesting, Lady Kett," said the duke of...oh hell, wherever. "And how exactly does one train a dragon?"

Across the table, Nuala mouthed, "Sorry!" Kett grimaced. Her stepmother was so unfailingly charming toward everyone that she'd been unable to turn away the very boring duke and his unbearably pompous wife when they'd "dropped by" that afternoon and invited themselves for dinner.

In the thirty seconds before it became impolite not to introduce them, Nuala had whispered to Kett that she'd tried every trick in her not-inconsiderable arsenal to get them to leave, but being Nuala, she was unable to be outright rude.

However, once her stepdaughter had walked in, that hadn't been a problem. Unfortunately, by then the first course had been served and the duke and duchess were well entrenched.

"You feed it some villagers then chain it up when it's sleepy," Kett said, and her father let out a shout of laughter. From the corner of her eye, Kett caught her brother sniggering, but when she looked around he was politely enquiring of the duchess whether she was enjoying her dodo breast.

"Villagers?" the duchess honked. "Surely you must be joking!"

"Nope," Kett said, picking up a roast potato with her fingers and taking a bite. "They like the fat ones best."

The duke gave a nervous laugh. Kett ignored him and licked her fingers.

"And is this dragon-taming garb?" asked the duchess, looking Kett over as if she was daubed in pig shit.

"Nope, actually this is giving-a-lift-to-a-man-so-evil-he's-invented-new-crimes garb," Kett said, aware her shirt was thin, dirty and nearly transparent with dampness. "Is yours?"

The duchess looked outraged. Nuala was managing to keep a straight face. Kett's brother was shaking silently.

Kett lit up a cigar and wafted the pungent smoke toward the duchess. "Which reminds me, Dad, Striker says hi."

Her father, the infamous Tyrnan of Emreland, laughed out loud and reached past her for the gravy. "Damn, Kett," he said, "you need to come home more often."

Kett wasn't so sure about that. Sure, it was entertaining, but she wished to hell the duke and duchess would get the hint and leave. How much more obnoxious did she have to be?

How much more obnoxious *could* she be?

"I say, my dear, isn't it awfully cold up in the Northern Province this time of year?" the duke brayed.

"Freezes your tits off," Kett told him cheerfully. "Well, not yours. Maybe your ladyship's, over there. Amount on display, she'd get frostbite to the nipples in no time." She picked up the dodo breast and ripped a piece off with her teeth.

The duchess went purple.

Happily, before she could say anything, Wilden entered the room and said something quietly to Nuala. Her eyes grew wide and she stared at Kett.

"Boyfriend?" she cried. "Kett, you never told us you had a boyfriend!"

Kett was fairly sure she looked like a deer caught in the beam of a coach lamp.

"Er, I haven't," she said, and attempted a smile. "Wills, stop flirting with me. I can't be your girlfriend. I ain't posh enough."

Wilden bowed and said, "A Mr. Bael Var is here to see you, miss. He says he is your boyfriend."

Kett's stomach performed a somersault. She actually felt the smile fall from her face.

"Here?" she asked stupidly. "Now?"

"Yes, miss," Wilden said. His eyes sparkled a little. "Both here and now."

Everyone was staring at Kett. Nuala looked amazed; her father, brother and sisters disbelieving. The duke and duchess looked annoyed.

And the thought occurred to Kett that if anyone was obnoxious enough to get rid of these two uninvited guests, it was Bael.

"Sure," she said to Wilden. "Send him in."

Wilden looked a little surprised but bowed and went off to do just that.

Kett found herself wishing she'd changed out of the dirty, scorched shirt and washed her face. Which was stupid, she thought immediately, because a) Bael had seen her looking a hell of a lot worse; and b) she wasn't trying to impress him. Not at all.

"You have a *boyfriend*?" her half-sister Eithne breathed.

"How is it possible I did not know this?" Eithne's twin, Beyla, shook her head.

"Which asylum did he come from?" their brother Tane asked.

"What's he *like*?" Nuala begged, and Kett, mildly shocked at her own behavior, answered without thinking.

"Big," she said. "And mad. And loud. And..." She frowned, formed a mental picture of Bael and described what she saw. "He shouts at kelfs, 'cos he's scared of them, I think. And he picks fights with them when he's angry. And he gets thrown in jail sometimes. And he doesn't think in straight lines. But he can be sort of kind when he wants to. And he's very persistent. No, stubborn. He's sort of..." She scrunched up her face, trying to describe him. "About eleven, really, inside. Well, maybe sixteen," she amended, thinking of his unstoppable interest in sex.

A small silence followed.

"Well, he sounds...charming," Nuala said.

"He sounds like a lunatic," Tyrnan replied.

"He sounds perfect for you, Kett," Tane offered.

The duke and duchess, for once, were silent.

"Would anyone like more wine?" Nuala asked to fill the silence.

"Yes," Kett said. She had a definite feeling she was going to need it. Glugging a large amount, she wiped her mouth and said, "Listen. He doesn't know about the whole shapeshifting thing, so don't tell him, all right?"

"Why not?" Nuala asked.

"Because..." Kett said, scrabbling for an excuse that wasn't *because I don't want him to have any reasons for us to be together*. "Because I haven't mentioned it yet, and I'm looking for the right moment so I don't, you know, freak him out."

Nuala nodded. "Very sensible. All right, we won't say anything."

The footmen opened the double doors again and Wilden opened his mouth to announce Bael, who walked straight past him, threw his arms wide, dropped his bag on the floor and cried delightedly, "Kett!"

And Kett's hormones performed a standing ovation. *Gods' pieces*, she thought as her body straightened up and her feet carried her over to him without her brain intervening. *It's only been a few hours since I saw him. And he's a certified lunatic. I just told my family so.*

Which was why, for sure, she walked right up to him and kissed him hard on the mouth, her arms going around his hot body, her legs trembling as he licked into her mouth and ran his fingers through her tangled, smoky hair.

"I'm pleased to see you too," he said, grinning.

Kett's heart was thumping so loudly she almost couldn't hear the rest of the room.

He's here. He's hot. You forgot to ask him about the cave and the symbols.

Yes, that was why she was clinging to him like a limpet and breathing in his scent with her eyes closed. Because she wanted Bael for *information*.

"Sure you don't have a boyfriend," her brother said. One of the girls giggled. The duchess muttered something under her breath about impropriety.

Kett decided something. Curling her arm around Bael's neck, she murmured in his ear, "If you can get Duke and Duchess of Fuck-off out of here," she indicated them with a flick of her head, "I will go down on you the minute we're in private."

Bael didn't hesitate. Swinging around, he presented his hand to the duchess.

"Howdy," he said cheerfully. "Wow, what a wig. I didn't know dead cats were in fashion."

* * * * *

There was silence until they heard the front door slam behind the duke and duchess.

Her father broke it. "I don't know who the hell you are," he said to Bael, "but I like you."

"Amen," Tane chimed in. "Why were they still here?"

"Short of calling the guards, I'd run out of ideas," Nuala apologized.

"Question still stands," Beyla said.

"Big, mad and loud, eh?" Eithne gave Bael an up-and-down. She grinned.

Kett scowled.

"Bael, this is my family." She faltered in the face of their delighted smiles. "Family, this is Bael."

He beamed at them all. "Hiya, folks."

"It's *wonderful* to meet you," Nuala said with a little more fervor than Kett might have liked.

"It's even more wonderful to meet you," he replied, bestowing on Nuala a smile that actually seemed to be genuine.

"Kett's never brought a boyfriend home before," Beyla told him.

"Usually for understandable reasons," Tane said.

"Am I your boyfriend?" Bael asked Kett brightly, and she groaned.

"Hey, anyone who gets rid of a pair like that is okay by me," Tyrnan said, which Kett considered rather rich considering his almost-allergic reaction to Eithne's boyfriend—who was a garda, a fine, upstanding pillar of the community, and who had the honorable intention of marrying her.

Unlike Bael, who'd just been described as a lunatic, snogged Tyrnan's daughter until her body turned to liquid then been so insulting that the thickest-skinned duchess in the Realm had nearly vomited in disgust.

Yet her father liked him. Well, he *was* Tyrnan of Emreland.

"Come to think of it," Kett enquired of her famously indelicate father, "why didn't you tell them to fuck off?"

"Your father has refined his manners of late," Nuala said.

Kett blinked.

"I know, we were shocked too," Beyla said.

All five of them regarded Bael, to whom Kett realized she was still clinging. Crap. Well, it wasn't as if they thought she was still a virgin, she thought glumly. And at least Bael looked good—far too good, considering the journey he must have had, sans dragon.

Really good, actually.

She cleared her throat and tried to disentangle herself from him. He held on, grinning like a maniac.

"So, you're Kett's family," he said. "Nice to meet you. This is a great house. Sorry I was so insulting but Kett promised me filthy things if I got rid of them. And hey, you don't look too upset so I guess it's all okay, right?"

Kett covered her eyes.

"Hey, your dad likes me," Bael said, hugging her to him. "Right? Sorry, Kett didn't give me anyone's names. It's almost like she's ashamed of me or something."

"Not 'almost like'," Kett muttered. She opened her eyes to see Nuala beaming at Bael. Ah, crap. Nuala's greatest mission in life was to make people happy. Since getting married and having babies had made her so blissful, she was determined that it would work for everyone else too.

There was a light in her eyes that Kett didn't like one bit.

"All right," she sighed. "This is my dad, Tyrnan of Emreland. He used to be a highwayman and owns a sword that can kill kelfs."

Bael looked like a little boy at Yule. "Really? The Naimlà? You're kidding." He gave Kett a delighted look. "You didn't tell me your dad was a kelf-killer!"

"He's not," Kett said.

At the same time her father said dangerously, "I'm not."

"Tyrnan has a sort of informal treaty with the kelfs," Nuala put in quickly. "He holds the sword in safety and promises not to let anyone else use it."

"Oh," said Bael, deflated. "Why?"

"Because he's normal," Kett said, in the face of overwhelming evidence. One of her father's best friends was a kelf. Tyrnan had grown up in the sort of house where the serving kelfs were considered affectionately, as sort of pets. Not real people, but nice to have around and quite useful, like horses.

Quietly thanking the gods that kelfs were not indigenous to the Realm of Peneggan, she continued, "And this is my stepmother, Nuala."

She didn't add that Nuala was a princess. That sort of thing was only useful for impressing people, and she really didn't want to impress Bael.

Bael kissed Nuala's hand and she dimpled prettily at him. "You hardly look older than Kett," he said gallantly, and Tyrnan snorted.

"She isn't," Kett said drily.

"Just as well then," Bael grinned. "And you must be twins," he said to Beyla and Eithne, who giggled in harmony.

"Triplets," they chorused.

"There's another one of you?" Bael asked happily.

"Yep," Tane said. "Me."

Bael put his head to one side and regarded the petite blonde girls, just like their mother, and the dark, stocky boy, much more like his father.

"Right," he said. "You look like Kett."

"I do not," he and Kett yelled at the same time.

Bael grinned. "You have this two-part harmony thing going on here," he said. "It's cute. Well, folks," he picked up the duffel bag he'd slung on the floor earlier, "not that it hasn't been wonderful to meet my darling girl's family," here he gave Kett a squeeze, which made her scowl and Nuala beam, "but I really need some private time with her. Shall we retire, sweetheart?"

"I, er..." Kett panicked, remembering her earlier promise to him. "I haven't finished eating."

"I'll have a tray sent up," Nuala said.

"And Bael will need a room," she attempted, because she knew if they shared one, she'd end up sleeping with him again. And while sleeping with Bael was always going to be wonderful, she really didn't want to deal with the whole mate issue anymore. Best to make it clear to him that—

"Oh come on, Kett, don't be coy," Tyrnan said, and she glared at him.

"Yes, darling, we don't mind at all," Nuala said happily. "You're an adult now, and you can have whomever you like to stay."

"I'm an adult," Eithne piped up. "Why can't I?"

"You're an adult when I say so," her father said, making Eithne scowl.

"That shirt is really transparent," Bael said to Kett, who winced and gave in.

"Okay," she said. "Night, everyone."

They wished her good night, Nuala even going so far as to give Bael a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She was absolutely glowing with happiness, Kett thought glumly as they left the Gold Salon. She'd be so disappointed when Kett broke the news that Bael wasn't really her boyfriend.

"So," Bael said as the doors closed behind them and they stood in the grand lobby. "Does this count as private?"

"There are six footmen within sight," Kett said. "What do you think?"

"I think you promised to go down on me, and I can't wait," he said happily, as Kett turned red and tugged him toward the stairs.

Her bedroom hadn't changed since the last time she saw it, which made it unique in Nuala's house. Wisely, her stepmother had eschewed her usual decorating taste and furnished Kett's room in neutral shades with plenty of texture coming from warm woods, rugs and leather upholstery. Kett, against all her expectations, felt more comfortable in this room than in any other.

Bael strode in like he owned the place, tossed his duffel on a wingback chair and threw himself at the bed.

"I am *knackered*," he announced.

"So you'll just want to go to sleep?" Kett asked, not sure if she was hopeful or disappointed.

He cracked open one eye. "Eventually," he said, and grinned.

Chapter Seven

He watched the heat come into her face. Damn, she really was pretty, even if she took pains not to be. He had the feeling Kett would bite the head off anyone who dared her to be pretty.

He sat up and pulled his sweater off. Outside it was freezing, but since he'd only gotten dressed just outside the door, he hadn't bothered to put a lot on.

"How did you get here?" Kett asked as he stood and toed off his boots.

"Same way you did."

"Dragon?"

If only she knew. Bael just smiled at her and unfastened his fly. Kett's gaze flickered down to it and she swallowed, which made him smile even more. Pretty much the instant she'd whispered in his ear he'd gotten hard as a rock and his erection hadn't gone down since. Just the thought of those lips wrapped around it was making him cross-eyed.

She folded her arms across her chest, but not before he'd seen the way her nipples had gone hard.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked as he stripped off his shirt.

"Nope. Right now I'm very hot," he said. He glanced at the fire, which had been smoldering away quietly, and it suddenly flared into life.

Bael paused. That had never happened before.

But right now he had other things on his mind. "Aren't you hot?"

"No," she said.

"You look pretty hot to me."

Kett swallowed again. "Look, Bael, we need to talk about the—"

"Not backing out, are you?" He kicked away the last of his clothes and looked her up and down. In the subdued light cast by the fire and the single low-burning gas lamp, her skin gleamed and her eyes shone, glittering like starlight. Her brows were drawn down, her jaw was stiff and she wore her usual look of tight, barely controlled anger.

Maybe it was the mate in him talking, but Bael had never seen a more desirable woman.

"I never back out," she said. Then, as if it had just occurred to her, "But do you really want me to suck your cock just because I made a promise?"

"I don't care *why* you suck my cock," Bael said. "*Why* doesn't interest me at all." He took a step forward. She backed against the door and seemed surprised to find it there. "I'm all about the sucking. The licking. The thrusting. I can't wait to feel your lips

swallow me down," he said, and she licked said lips, her eyes darting down again to where his cock bobbed, hard and swollen for her.

"I—"

He closed the distance between them and ran his hands lightly over her shoulders. "You really ought to get out of these wet things," he said, the back of his hand brushing her breast. She shivered, but he didn't think it was because of the temperature.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice tight, her eyes mutinous.

"You know," he leaned closer just to breathe in her scent, which right now contained a lot of smoke, "you really shouldn't make promises you don't intend to keep."

"I don't. Didn't," she amended, lifting her chin.

The leather over her thigh brushed the desperately sensitive skin of his cock and he exhaled sharply.

So did she.

Her eyes were glittering, challenging him to force her to go through with it. Her chest was heaving ever so subtly. She was breathing fast and practically quivering. She was wound up like a spring, he realized. And she was being incredibly defiant. Being Kett, if she really didn't want to suck his cock then she'd most likely have just kneed him in the groin and thrown him out the window.

She wouldn't have wasted time arguing about it.

A smile threatened Bael's mouth. She *wanted* to suck his cock. She just didn't want to *admit* she wanted to. To herself or to him.

"Fine," he said abruptly. "It's okay. I don't expect you to. Wouldn't make you do something you didn't want to."

There was a moment of silence while Kett regarded him warily. Then relief came over her face, but she was a rotten actress and he caught the definite undertone of disappointment.

"You sure?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yep," he said, stepping back as if he didn't care. "No fun if your heart's not in it. Ah well." He ruffled her hair and watched her scowl instantly return.

"Right then," Kett said, her voice faltering a little. "Well, good. I'm...glad we've sorted that out." She tugged on her shirt as if to straighten it, then realized it was damp and filthy and sighed irritably. "Right," she said again.

Bael turned away so she wouldn't see him smiling. He pulled back the wonderfully soft, clean-scented covers from the bed, leaving them turned down as he stretched out. Damn, this was a comfortable bed. Way more comfortable than that lumpy mattress he'd slept on last night. Not that he'd minded much at the time, what with Kett there, naked in his arms.

His cock throbbed at the thought and he slid one hand down his stomach toward it.

"Are you going to stay there?" Kett asked suddenly, and Bael stilled his hand, pausing a beat before he looked up at her.

"Did you want me to sleep on the floor?" He looked dolefully at the bare boards, then back at her.

"There are dozens of other rooms," Kett said, her eyes lingering on his body. On his cock, to be precise. Bael couldn't really blame her; as dark and hard as it was, it did rather draw the attention. "I'll just go and find —"

"No no," Bael sat up, "I'll do it."

He moved toward the door and had his hand on the knob before she rushed to stop him.

"Ain't you gonna get dressed?" she hissed.

He shrugged. "I'm not sure my clothes would even fit over this," he said, pointing at his enormous erection.

He watched the panic flit over her face at the thought of him wandering her stepmother's house completely naked with a huge hard-on, and almost laughed. He'd do it too. Nasc didn't have the same issues about nudity that humans did.

Plus, it was hella fun annoying her.

Her eyes narrowed. "You bloody would, as well," she said, stepping back, relenting. "Okay, you can stay here."

Bael smiled. He knew as well as she did that they'd be unable to share a bed without touching.

"But you sleep there." She pointed to the studded leather chesterfield.

It looked uncomfortable.

Well, he didn't actually have any intentions of sleeping there, so it didn't matter all that much. Bael smiled and sauntered over to stretch out on it. It was, however, too short to stretch, so he lay with his knees bent and open, and reached down to adjust his cock.

"Right," Kett said, standing frozen by the door as if totally unable to move.

"Night then," Bael said, smiling encouragingly.

She swallowed, then nodded as if shaking herself out of it and moved mechanically toward the bed. She pulled her clothes off with jerky, defiant movements and Bael watched unashamedly as each new bit of fascinating flesh was revealed.

His cock throbbed when she turned her back and presented her fantastic ass to him. He patted his uncomfortable member soothingly, and when she turned around again, stroked it with deliberate movements.

"Do you mind?" Kett asked, her voice taut.

"Not at all," Bael replied, moving his fingers up his shaft. Her eyes flashed at him. "I can't sleep like this," he said — fairly, he thought.

Her nostrils flared and she grabbed a blanket from the bed, throwing it at him. "Here."

"Thanks," he caught it with his free hand, "but I'm really too hot for that." He rolled his head back and arched his spine, thrusting gently into his hand. He wasn't really working it, but then the point of the exercise was *not* to get off. Not by himself.

Kett growled and threw herself into bed. Her breasts jiggled wonderfully as she moved, and Bael's cock twitched and jerked in response. He couldn't help a little gasp of pleasure. Damn, what he wouldn't give to have those breasts in his hands instead of his own flesh. To suck a tight little nipple into his mouth. To rub that firm flesh all over his cock.

He closed his eyes, trying to block that image. It'd have him coming in seconds if he thought about it much more.

He heard the mattress move as Kett shifted in bed. What if she was touching herself? His breath quickened. What if she was even now sliding her own hands over her breasts, pinching at her own nipples, skimming her flat stomach, dipping her fingers between her legs?

Bael realized he was panting and opened his eyes, because closing them clearly hadn't worked.

Then he sucked in a hard breath again because Kett was standing over him, gloriously naked, her hands on her hips and her breasts, her wonderful breasts, rising and falling.

"You know, I did promise," she said, as if she was convincing herself.

"It's okay," Bael assured her. "I won't think any less of you." He smoothed away a drop of pre-cum. Kett licked her lips and he'd swear she wasn't aware of it.

"I mean," she said a little breathlessly, her eyes locked on his cock, "you can't, you know, just whack yourself off like this. Not when there's someone else in the room. It's just...just..."

She licked her lips again. Bael tried very hard not to smile.

"I mean, I could help you out," she said. "Return the favor."

"Right," Bael said. He cupped his own balls. "Very kind of you."

"I'm not kind," Kett snapped, but without any force whatsoever. Her silvery eyes were glittering. She leaned closer and closer, falling to her knees and reaching for his hips. Her breath feathered his cock. Her breasts brushed his thigh.

"Of course you're not, sweetheart," he said breathlessly.

"Call me sweetheart again and I'll bite it off," Kett said mildly, and then she finally, finally lowered her head and brushed her lips over his cock.

"Oh *gods*," Bael said.

"Damn right," Kett mumbled, before opening her mouth and taking him inside.

Bael lost track of what happened after that. All he was aware of was pure sensation, pleasure slamming through him, her hot, wet mouth doing amazing, wonderful, incredible things to his aching penis.

When he came he cried out her name, and she swallowed it all down.

"Okay," she said, her voice a little thick. "Better?"

She stood up, a little wobbly, then her leg gave way and she fell onto him. Bael didn't mind one bit and gathered her closer, fitting her body against his.

"Much better," he agreed. "Any time you need me to insult someone, you just let me know. More than happy."

"I'll bet," Kett said, wriggling. "Let me go."

"And ruin my afterglow? Tell you what," he let her sit up and was delighted to feel her pussy sopping wet against his stomach, "you go back to bed..." She started to get off him and he let her. "And I'll come with you and then we'll both be happy."

Kett paused, on her knees astride him.

"I promise I'll be good," he said, grinning and slipping one hand between her legs. She was so wet, puffy and swollen for him. Her eyelids fluttered as he stroked her.

"You better be," she said, and Bael followed her happily to that big, soft bed.

One day, Kett, he thought as she stretched out, all naked and incredibly desirable, one day you'll stop fighting yourself on this.

But I hope to all the gods you'll never stop fighting me.

* * * * *

Kett woke in the morning with Bael's arms around her and his warm chest pillowing her cheek.

It was a damn pleasant way to wake up, and something Kett was getting cozily used to. Which made her scowl, because getting used to anything with Bael was not a good idea.

She mulled idly over the previous day's events, absently stroking his shoulder as she did. Striker irritating the dragon. The hideous duke and duchess. Giving head to Bael.

Mmm.

But hard on the heels of that thought was the one that said, *You introduced him to your family as your boyfriend. And it's Yule. There is absolutely no way you can tell them you were just joking around, not today.* And anyway, after that huge snog yesterday in the dining room in front of them, they'd never believe it.

She sighed. Looked like she was going to have to carry on pretending while she was here. Pretend Bael really was her boyfriend. Eat dinner with him. Share a room with him. Have lots of scorching sex with him.

Well, it had its upside.

And then after Yule she could leave, tell her family she and Bael had broken up, and go back to normal. Go back to the cabin in the mountains with Jarven and the dragons, and avoid human contact for the rest of her –

Oh piss. Except for that damn cave. She really had to talk to Bael about that.

Bael stirred beneath her, his green eyes opening and smiling at her. “Morning,” he said, sleepy and unshaven and disheveled, and Kett’s brain switched off completely for a moment.

“Hi,” she breathed. Then, still trying to connect her brain to the rest of her body, she added, “Happy Yule.”

He frowned. “That’s today?”

“Yep.” Kett pushed her hair out of her eyes. “Same day every year.”

“Oh. I saw the signs in the shops and stuff on my way in. I figured it was soon. Uh, happy Yule.”

Kett frowned. “Nasc don’t celebrate Yule?”

“No, not really. It’s a human thing.”

Kett supposed it was. Still, it was strange—Yule was a huge winter festival in Peneggan and Angeland, and in large parts of Euskara too. Surely he must be aware of what went on?

“What do you, er, do?” Bael asked. “To celebrate?”

“Uh,” Kett said. Usually she went down to the pub for a few beers and tried to persuade Jarven to join her for a proper meal. After that, she went home and did what she did every other day. But then, Kett was aware she wasn’t exactly normal. Her family had proper Yule traditions that she didn’t usually join in with.

“We, er, exchange presents,” she said, realizing she should have brought some. “And cook a...feast. And, er...I think people go to temple.”

“Isn’t Yule some winter solstice celebration?” Bael asked.

“Probably. Oh, and there’s the Yule Ball,” Kett added, on safer ground now. “It’s the triplets’ birthday, so there’s always this big party for it.”

“Here?”

“Yep.”

“Are you going?”

“Probably,” Kett said morosely. Usually she liked to think she was in charge of her own life, but there was no way in the Realm Nuala was ever going to let her escape the party now that she was here.

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s full of people like those from yesterday,” Kett said. Nuala always ended up inviting people for diplomatic purposes whom no one else could stand. The good news was that it was a big party, so they were usually avoidable. The bad news was the *really* irritating ones were everywhere.

"Oh. Well, cheer up. I'll come with you and we can insult all the really hideous ones, and for every one that leaves you can give me another blowjob. In fact," Bael was running his hands down her back, "let's make a game of it. For every one I run out of the party, you go down on me, and for every one *you* run out of the party, I'll go down on you. Deal?"

In spite of herself, Kett smiled. Yesterday notwithstanding, she was pretty sure she could be way more unbearable than Bael. After all, she'd spent her whole life practicing.

"Deal," she said.

"Excellent." Bael kissed her and she relaxed into his body, warm and sleepy but becoming less so by the second. Especially when his fingers started tracing patterns farther down her back to her buttocks, and slipping in between.

"In fact," Bael said against her mouth, "theoretically I got rid of two of them last night. So don't you owe me?"

Kett rolled her eyes, privately thinking the same thing. Going down on Bael was no hardship. Not at all. His thick, heavy cock had felt so damn good in her mouth. It had been ages since anyone had come down her throat—ages since she'd let anyone—but he'd tasted delicious.

However. "Not until you shower, mate," she said, sitting up. She was feeling pretty grubby herself, and now that she looked at the bed she could see dirt all over it. Whoops. Well, it was a good thing Nuala's staff was so diligent.

"Mmm," Bael said, sitting up with her and nuzzling her throat. "You're all dirty too. What were you doing, cleaning chimneys yesterday?"

"Dragons," Kett said, her voice squeaking a little as he found a sensitive spot on her throat. "Occupational hazard."

"Mmm," Bael said again. "Well, in that case, maybe we should both shower. I'll clean you if you clean me."

Kett thought for a second about Bael all naked and wet and found herself nodding vigorously. But she'd no sooner pushed back the covers than someone hammered on the door and two identical voices yelled, "Happy Yule, Kett!"

She winced. Her sisters, who didn't seem to have grown up at all since they were old enough to talk.

"Wake up," cried one of them.

"Or we'll come in and wake you up!"

"I'm awake," Kett called grumpily.

"Good, 'cos we didn't really want to come in and see what you're doing with Bael."

One of them giggled. "Daddy'd probably disown us."

"Yeah, 'cos we don't know what any of that stuff is."

"I mean, honestly, how old does he think we are?"

"He was younger than us when you were born!"

"He so can't lecture us about this."

Sighing, Kett reached for her shirt, tugged it down over her thighs and wriggled away from Bael to open the door.

"Was there a point to this?"

Beyla and Eithne beamed up at her, blonde and ringletted in their perfectly tailored, full-length, structured and petticoated dressing gowns. They looked like cake decorations.

"Happy Yule!" they chorused.

"Happy Yule. And happy birthday."

"Happy Yule, Bael!"

Kett glanced back. He had the covers pooled around his waist and was looking delightfully sleepy, scruffy and sexy.

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Right back atcha."

They giggled in tandem.

"Come on and get dressed," Beyla said.

"We're having breakfast in Mama's suite."

Kett looked at their bright, eager faces, then back at Bael again. The bedcovers were tented over his lap.

"Guys, I was kind of busy," she said.

"Kett!" Eithne's eyes widened with mock surprise.

"We're not supposed to know about things like that," Beyla admonished.

"Well, *you're* not," Eithne said, a touch smugly.

"I could know!" Beyla cried.

"Girls," Kett interrupted before they went any further.

"Come and have breakfast," Eithne said.

"Mama won't let us start until everyone's there, and I'm *starving*," Beyla turned pleading eyes on Kett.

"No, you just want to open your presents," Eithne said.

"Yes, and Daddy won't let us do that until we've had breakfast!"

They looked so woeful, Kett nearly laughed.

"All right," she said, and they both cheered and hugged her. She backed away, making a face. "Look, just give me five minutes for a shower, okay?"

"Oh, like that's what you're going to use it for," Eithne giggled.

"I'm dirty," Kett protested, grabbing a handful of her filthy hair.

"You certainly are," Bael interjected, which made the girls giggle again.

"Five minutes," Beyla said. "And then we're coming back!"

"And this time, we won't knock!" Eithne warned.

They retreated and Kett closed the door, leaning against it, her eyes closed. When she opened them, Bael was grinning at her.

"A shower, huh?"

"Yes," she said, pushing off from the door. "Which I shall be taking alone."

"Oh," he pouted. "No fair."

"Yes fair," she said. "I need to get clean. I ain't having breakfast with my family covered in soot and smelling of sex."

He grabbed her as she passed him and nuzzled her neck. "I think you smell good," he said.

"Then you're weird." Kett broke away and made for the bathroom. She paused. "I think the room next door is empty if you want to use the bathroom."

"Are you sure I can't share yours?"

For a second, Kett allowed herself the fantasy of Bael in the shower, wet and soapy, steam rising from his skin as he pushed her back against the wall and kissed her hard as he slid his cock against her. Moisture dampened her thighs.

They could go on for hours...

"Sure," she said firmly, and shut the bathroom door.

Chapter Eight

Bael stepped out of the shower to find clean clothes lain out on the bed. They fit pretty well, leaving him to wonder just whose they were. He wasn't as broad as Kett's father and he was a good deal taller than her brother. The clothes looked too fine to belong to a servant. For a moment he considered the possibility that they'd belonged to an ex of Kett's, but judging by the reaction of her family last night, she wasn't in the habit of bringing men home.

Weird.

He dressed and went next door to Kett's room, hoping to surprise her before she'd finished getting dressed. He was out of luck. She was just pulling on her boots, dressed in a cleaner version of the clothes she'd had on yesterday. Her damp hair was slung back in a thick braid and she smelled of something fresh and lemony.

"Are you sure we have to go for breakfast?" he asked.

"Yeah." She hesitated. "Listen, Bael. I need to ask you something and whenever I try, you keep distracting me."

He grinned, remembering the distractions.

"That cave," she said. "There were symbols on the walls, and all those burned bodies, the silver chain...that was some sort of ritual."

His smile slipped. Disappeared.

She knows you're Nasc. You can't let her know you're a Mage.

Could he keep the secret for the rest of his life?

Did he need to?

"Maybe," he said. "I don't know."

"Well, it clearly was. What I wanted to ask was, can you think of anyone who might have done it? Any enemies?"

Bael shrugged. "I don't have any enemies," he said lightly. At Kett's frankly disbelieving look, he forced a laugh and said, "Oh, maybe a disgruntled lover or two..."

"Any of them know magic?"

"Nope. No one I know knows magic. No one knows. I know no one who knows," he babbled.

Kett looked skeptical. "And those symbols? On the walls?"

"Didn't see any symbols. It was dark," he protested. "Look, Kett, why is this even important? We're here, we're both safe and, well, it's Yule, it's —"

"It's a ritual that could have gotten us both killed!" Kett said. "Whoever strung us up there clearly wasn't intending to give us tea and cakes afterward. That was something dark, and I've researched but I can't find anything, not even —"

"Not even what?" Bael asked, alarmed. What did she know about magic? The Federación recruited from all over the place. Strong, young men and women to fight for them. To kidnap magical creatures and take them apart, like dissecting a clock to find the tick. They'd taken the Nasc princess once, the king's sister, and held her for months before she'd been rescued.

The Federación had operatives everywhere.

But not Kett. Surely not his Kett. She'd helped to rescue the princess from the Federación. Or so she'd said.

She glared at him, her chest heaving, looking like she wanted to say something, to glower and shout and accuse, but in the end she just shook her head and said, "Never mind. Maybe it's normal for you to wake up in a cave with a stranger."

"Kett," he began, and she waved him away. He sighed. "Are we going to breakfast?"

"I'm going," she said. "You can do whatever the hell you like."

She left the room and Bael followed, once more cursing his heritage. Of course he didn't like being left in the dark about the cave, but didn't she know there were much more dangerous things out there than some made-up symbols and a silver chain?

Kett led him down wide corridors lined with portraits of handsome, dark-haired men and charming blonde women. They all looked vaguely familiar—Tyrnan's and Nuala's families, he guessed.

He shook himself and tried to make conversation.

"Hey, were you born here?"

"No."

"Where were you born?" he asked as they sidestepped a large, hairy dog of the kind usually found decorating a hearthrug.

"In the south."

"Whereabouts?"

"Little village, middle of nowhere."

She didn't seem inclined to give much more information. Bael thought for a moment, then said, "Emreland's not local, is it?"

"Nope."

"Isn't it across the Wall in Angeland somewhere?"

"Yep."

"So...your dad's Anglish?"

"Yep."

"But you were born in Peneggan?"

"Yep."

He was starting to enjoy this. It was like the game where you could only answer with a yes or no.

"So, your mother. She live near here?"

"No."

"Where's she from?"

"Peneggan."

Ah, broke the pattern. "Where's she now?"

"Cemetery."

He flinched. "Sorry."

"Ain't your fault. I barely knew her."

"My parents are both dead," he said. "When I was a teenager." *And the bloody bastards came to the attention of the Federación and now they know there's another one of us out there.*

She glanced at him. "D'you miss 'em?"

Bael hesitated. That was an odd question. "I didn't know them well," he said. "Apparently they were brilliant."

Kett snorted. "So says every orphan."

"No, I mean, brilliant mentally. My dad was some sort of genius."

"That's nice."

"Rich too." He watched to see her reaction.

"Yippee." Was that sarcasm?

"But I guess your family is too."

"Looks like it."

She pushed open a set of double doors and they were immediately greeted with cries of "Happy Yule!" and hugs from everyone. Kett tolerated the physical contact like he tolerated visits from the dentist.

Her stepmother and sisters were wearing dressing gowns of such elaborate construction they were more complex than the average ball gown. Kett, in her plain shirt and boots, looked totally out of place.

He liked that.

Bael beamed and told them all how delighted he was to be there.

"I ain't got presents for any of you," Kett muttered. "Didn't know I was coming."

"Must've been a surprise when you turned up then," her father said, and earned a scowl for it.

"Your presence is the only present we need," Nuala said, and looked like she actually meant it.

"I'd rather have a present," Beyla said. And when Nuala frowned at her, added, "Well, I mean, I'd rather have Kett here *and* a present."

For the next few hours, Bael's world was choked with ribbons, candles and patterned paper. There was a living pine tree in the corner of Nuala's private sitting room, festooned with candy canes and big satin bows, while every present was draped with ribbons and flowers.

He watched Kett's face as her sisters unwrapped kid gloves and pretty jewelry, and wondered if she'd be gracious in defeat when Nuala handed over similar gifts. But her gloves were heavy leather, and the nearest thing to jewelry in one of her parcels was a handsomely tooled sword belt.

"I am so sorry, Bael," Nuala turned to him, "we hardly got you anything."

He stared. "You didn't even know I was coming." He glanced at Kett. "Did they?"

She shook her head. "No. No one invited you," she said, rather pointedly.

"Chance mentioned you might be bringing someone," Nuala said apologetically.

"Is that where the clothes came from?" Kett asked.

"Yes. But we did get you this." She passed him a small box. Bael opened it to find a flat-faced rock, a geode like the one Jarven had used when he'd spoken to Kett. What had he called it?

"A scryer?" Kett asked, leaning over. "Where did you get that?"

"Oh, I called Tanner, and he had a few spare at the ngardaí. I thought Bael might like it. Then next time, he can call to tell you he's coming."

Kett scowled. Bael grinned. "Thank you," he said. "That's very thoughtful of you."

"And there's this too." Nuala handed over a large parcel, which Bael opened to find a rather beautiful suit. Ordinarily he wasn't really one for fancy clothes, but he figured it was probably for the Yule Ball Kett had mentioned.

"Chance tell you his sizes too?" Kett asked sourly.

"Only vaguely. Marston made some quick alterations last night."

"Marston?"

"Your father's valet."

"I can't believe you got me a whole suit of clothes." Bael shook his head. "Two suits, in fact, including what I'm wearing. This is amazing. Thank you so much, your Highness."

A small silence. Tyrnan looked like he might start laughing.

Nuala's cheeks went pink. "Kett mentioned that, did she?"

"The family portraits," he said, grinning. "They looked familiar."

"They're on every coin in the Realm," Eithne said.

"I can't believe you didn't mention your stepmother is the king's sister," Bael said to Kett, who shrugged.

"Didn't seem important."

All right, she was still mad at him.

"You get used to it with Kett," her father said, and Kett rounded on him.

"Actually, never mind that," she said. "You have a valet?"

He immediately looked defensive. "So?"

"You? Tyrnan of Emreland?"

"Who is also the Earl of Nirya," he reminded her.

"Only because you married a princess."

"Tyrnan of Emreland," Bael said. "I've heard it before..."

"Last night, when I introduced him?" Kett asked sarcastically.

"No, before that."

"He probably robbed you at some point."

"He used to be a highwayman," Nuala explained earnestly, and Bael found himself breaking into laughter.

"What?" Kett demanded.

"Your father used to be a highwayman, who is now an earl with a valet, since he married the king's sister, and they give you gauntlets for Yule? And you don't find any of this funny?"

Her mouth twitched, but she still said, "No."

Bael slung his arm around her shoulders and hugged her to him, still laughing. "Liar," he said fondly.

* * * * *

Kett seemed to spend a large portion of the rest of the day purposefully ignoring him. Bael, annoyed by this, ignored her when she turned up for lunch, which seemed to greatly irritate her.

This pleased him enormously.

Maybe he could explain a few things to her. Like why she couldn't tell anyone he was Nasc, and why he didn't want to go poking around looking for whoever had tried to turn them into a piñata.

Maybe, after he'd gotten his brain in order, but to do that he'd have to get her naked again, because right now all he could think about was her hot, tight body and how damn good she'd felt in his arms last night.

Kett glared at him surreptitiously through the entire meal, snapping her gaze away whenever it looked like Bael might see her. By the end of the meal she couldn't keep her eyes off him.

Bael continued to talk pleasantly to Tane about Treegan scores, and then when the meal was over and Kett still hadn't left the room, he excused himself, walked out, and

waited for five seconds in the pretty blue room adjoining the green one where they'd eaten lunch.

The door slammed and Kett glowered at him.

"Hi," he said, and backed her against the wall to kiss her hard.

Damn, she had a hot mouth. He could kiss her forever. He half expected her to shove him away, but after a tense second her hand slid to the back of his neck, her fingers curled in his shirt and she melted fluidly against him.

Having been thwarted in his attempts to get inside her this morning, Bael couldn't stop his hands sliding down her arms, over her hips, up to her waist, feeling the lean curves under her clothes. Her shirt was loose and his fingers touched bare skin, hot and smooth, gliding up over her stomach to cup her breast. She was wearing a bra, which was extremely frustrating because he wanted to touch her bare breast, roll her nipple between his fingers, pull up her shirt and taste her.

In fact...

"What're you doing?" Kett gasped as he pushed her shirt up and pulled her bra cup down.

Bael didn't answer, since it was pretty self-evident and besides, his mouth was engaged in other activities. She had lovely nipples, did Kett, plump and delicious. He swirled his tongue around one and her breath came out in a sharp hiss.

Next to them, the door rattled and Bael suddenly found himself thrust away from Kett's wonderful breast. For a second, confusion reigned, then he saw the door handle turn and Kett bolted, trying to tuck her breast back inside her bra as she ran.

Bael followed, a little blood pounding in his head and the rest rushing elsewhere, as Kett ran for a small door half concealed in the paneling. She skidded inside just as the main door to the room opened and her father came through.

"What—?"

Bael didn't wait to reply, but followed Kett through the small door and slammed it behind him. She was disappearing down a corridor, stark and plain compared to the opulence of the other rooms he'd seen. Servants' access, Bael realized, not really caring, taking off after Kett.

She careened down a short flight of stairs and he caught up to her in a sort of scullery. Her cheeks were flushed, her chest was heaving and all the blood in Bael's body went south so fast he stumbled, crashing into her and falling against the big, scrubbed table in the middle of the room.

If a part of him wondered why the scullery, adjoining kitchen and servants' corridor were completely empty, it was soon drowned out by the waves of lust swamping him as his body touched Kett's again. Adrenaline surged through him and he tugged at her shirt, bit down on her lip, scrambled to touch as much of her as he could.

Kett shoved him away and for a second he faltered, but then he realized she was just pulling her shirt off over her head, and that meant her bra was exposed to him—it was lacy! She was wearing lace!—which meant her breasts were nearly exposed to him again.

Wriggling backward on the table, Kett grabbed his shirt and pulled him between her thighs, kissing him hard and deep, her hands shoving his jacket away, jerking his shirt loose, reaching for the fly on his trousers. Her nipples were hard against his chest, even through the layers of clothing between them, and the skin of her back was smooth between the thick scars crisscrossing it.

Bael bit down on her neck, ran his tongue along her collarbone, yanked the lace of her bra aside and sucked her nipple into his mouth. He wanted it all, wanted to suck her and lick her and thrust inside her.

When his hands moved to unfasten her trousers, hers were already there. He worked his hand inside, found her slick and hot and stroked into her, making her moan.

“Door,” Kett gasped, the first thing either of them had said since they’d fled the blue room, and Bael stared blindly at it for a second. “They’ll come down to clear lunch, close the door!”

He did, tearing himself reluctantly away to shove it closed and turn the key in the lock. When he turned back, Kett was throwing her boots across the room and struggling to get her tight leathers off. Bael helped her, chucking them and her underwear on the floor and then looking at her, very nearly naked, her legs spread wide and her nipples peeking out over the cups of her bra. Between her legs her pussy lips were slippery wet, pink and puffy, and he stroked them with one finger, sliding it inside to feel how wet she was.

Very wet. Her hands were busy freeing his cock, stroking him, guiding him into her and then he was there, pushing inside her, and both of them moaned. Bael withdrew then thrust again, harder, his eyes on Kett’s. They glittered, hard and bright, and her mouth found his as she wrapped her legs high around his waist and pulled him in deeper.

He didn’t take his time. He didn’t whisper soft caresses against her skin. He didn’t do anything except fuck her, hard and fast, losing himself in her slick heat, slamming into her so hard the table rattled. She clutched at him, shoving back with each thrust, fucking his mouth with her tongue.

With any other woman, Bael might have felt bad about being so brutal. But Kett took it all and gave it back, wild and fierce, spurring him on. He felt her orgasm rip through her, her pussy tight around him, yanking him into freefall, and he came inside her with a roar she took into her own mouth.

The rippling aftershocks of Kett’s orgasm milked him dry, and even as he came back down to earth, holding her trembling in his arms, he felt her shudder one last time.

* * * * *

"I ain't wearing that," Kett said flatly.

Nuala's eyes widened a little. Her pretty lips curved upward. She even flashed her dimples. Kett recognized this look—Nuala had been using it on her since the day they met. It was her stepmother's most charming, helpless, I-desperately-want-to-please-you look.

"It didn't work on me twenty years ago and it ain't working now," Kett said.

"Will you at least try it on?" Nuala beseeched, holding out a slithery bundle of silver fabric.

"Nu, I don't *do* dresses. And I really don't do silk and lace and whatever the hell else it is."

"You wear lace underwear," Nuala pointed out.

"Yeah, but that's because it's all you buy me. And you know I ain't going shopping for it."

"Well, there's no lace on this dress," Nuala said. "Really. It's very, very simple, unadorned, it's not fussy at all. I knew you'd never wear anything fussy."

"Then you should've known I'd never wear a dress!"

"Please, Kett." Nuala gave her the big-eyed look again. "At least try it on."

Kett glared at her stepmother but she couldn't work up any real malice. Being angry with Nuala was like kicking a puppy.

"All right," she snapped, and snatched the dress. Being that Nuala, like half the inhabitants of Elvryn, had seen her naked on countless occasions when she changed shape, she didn't bother to go into the bathroom or hide behind the curtained bed as she dropped her bathrobe. Nuala, who was way sneakier than anybody so nice had a right to be, had slunk in and ambushed Kett as she was coming out of the shower. Bael, thank the gods, was off irritating someone else.

The silk whispered over her skin, and Kett had to admit it did feel wonderful. Ridiculously impractical, but wonderful all the same.

Still. Ball gowns weren't meant to be practical. They were meant to be pretty. And Kett just didn't do pretty.

"I knew I had to make something for you from that silk the minute Madame Debusser showed me the bolt," Nuala said as Kett fought her way through the miles of fabric.

"Is that old trout still alive?"

"Of course she is. People as terrifying as her don't just fade away," Nuala said. "It's the exact color of your eyes, Kett. I had to have something for you or your father from it."

"Then why didn't you make something for him?"

"I did. He has a shirt of the same material," Nuala said happily.

"Tell me he's not wearing it tonight," Kett groaned. "If we matched it'd be revolting."

Nuala's eyes lit up. "Then you will wear it?"

Kett winced. "Bollocks."

"Oh Kett!" Nuala actually danced on the spot, beaming with delight. She rushed over to adjust the dress, which was giving Kett some trouble. She'd gotten the skirt settled around her hips but there didn't seem to be much of the top half.

"Here," Nuala said, taking the two pieces of silver silk and drawing them up Kett's body, over her breasts, and fastening them behind her neck. The arrangement left her back totally bare, and a good deal of her front too. The two wide strips of silk were attached only to the skirt, not to each other, and when she moved they revealed not only a lot of Kett's cleavage, but a strip of her stomach, right down to her bellybutton.

"Kett, you look wonderful!"

Kett regarded herself dubiously in the mirror. Apart from her exposed bellybutton, she had the feeling if she moved too much the silk would slip away at the front or the sides and show everyone her breasts.

"Doesn't the skirt hang beautifully? I told Madame D. knife-pleats and the narrowest of waistbands. She wasn't happy, it's quite fiddly, but of course it wasn't her doing the sewing, it was one of her minions..."

Knife-pleats, were they? The folds of the skirt floated like rays of moonlight, billowing around her ankles with every movement. The silk caressed Kett's bare legs, which was a strange sensation. And not an unpleasant one.

"Now, shoes..." Nuala said, and Kett snapped to attention.

"I'll sort them out," she said, and Nuala, who was holding a pair of tiny, strappy things that looked like they belonged in a rather specialized torture chamber, looked crestfallen.

"But they match the dress perfectly —"

"And I'll go A over T within about five seconds," Kett said.

"Nonsense, I know you're perfectly graceful —"

"And I can't wear heels, not with my leg," Kett said in a sudden flash of inspiration. She gave a slight limp for emphasis and Nuala's face really fell.

"Oh...no...I suppose not. Oh it's such a shame!"

"Yeah," Kett said, turning away. "I'll —"

"Oh my gosh!"

Kett winced, wondering what it was now. And how the hell her stepmother could have remained married to Tyrnan of Emreland for twenty years and still have uttered something as sweet and childish as "gosh" when she was excited.

"What?"

"Kett, your back!"

Kett flinched. Ah. Yes. That was the other thing about being a shapeshifter. Covering up surface imperfections was a cinch. It wasn't that she was ashamed of all the scars she carried, but it did cut out a lot of questions when she concealed them.

"You've seen it before," she said.

"Yes, but..." Nuala was shaking her head in disbelief. "I'd forgotten. Does...does it still hurt?"

Kett shrugged. "Nah. In fact, lumps of it are numb. Scar tissue."

"Goodness," Nuala murmured faintly.

"Goodness," Kett said, "had bugger all to do with it."

"It's as well you can cover them up," Nuala said, and there was a sticky sort of silence.

"Yeah. Funny story," Kett said.

Nuala looked almost fearful. "What?"

Kett debated how much to tell her, then figured, what with the ball and the servants having the day off and the outside caterers and wasting this much time with this stupid dress anyway, Nuala really didn't need another thing to worry about.

"I...uh. Um. Can't change at the moment. It's a...uh...shapeshifter thing. Because I was...feeling a bit ill recently. I'm fine now," she reassured her stepmother. "Five by five."

"Well...perhaps you ought to wear something else," Nuala said, chewing her lip. "I'm sure Chalia...or maybe Chance..."

She looked so disappointed. Kett had kicked the puppy.

"No," Kett said, looking over her shoulder at the way the dress highlighted the ugly, knotted lines crisscrossing her back. "You know what, no. These are my damn scars and I ain't ashamed of them, and besides, look at me. It's not like I'm gonna fit in with the rest of the crowd anyway."

Nuala blinked. "You'll wear it?"

"I'll wear it. But not the shoes," she added quickly.

Nuala looked at them, sad for a moment, and nodded. "Well, I did think they might be pushing it," she said. "Would you like to borrow some makeup?"

Kett stared at her. Another shapeshifter advantage—or maybe it was a disadvantage now—was that she could alter her features without cosmetics. "Wouldn't know what to do with it," she said.

"Beyla and Eithne would absolutely love to—"

"No," Kett said, a little more forcefully than she'd intended. "No. Thanks. I'm fine."

Of course Nuala couldn't possibly leave it at that, and eventually Kett gave in and allowed her stepmother to dab some goop at her face, do something fancy with her hair and try to persuade her to wear some jewelry.

"Didn't we talk about pushing it?" she snapped eventually.

Nuala raised her hands in defeat. "All right," she said, and for some reason she was smiling. She backed away. "I'll see you downstairs. People are already arriving."

Kett stared at her. "You haven't even changed yet!"

"I can be remarkably quick."

"And your maid –"

"Laid everything out for me before she went. Your father will help me."

Kett's mind boggled at the thought of her dissolute father helping to put a woman's clothes *on*. "But the guests –"

"Your sisters are taking care of them. They have done so the last few years." Nuala grinned. "Despite what your father thinks, they're quite grown-up now." She gave Kett one last look, glanced wistfully at the silver shoes and smiled. "You look lovely."

"I've never looked lovely in my life," Kett grumped.

"Well, you do now." Nuala stood up on tiptoe and kissed Kett's cheek. "I'll see you downstairs."

Kett stared after her, stunned. No one had ever kissed her cheek. Not her sisters, not her father, not any friends and certainly not any lovers.

Great gods in heaven, she put on a dress and people started treating her like a...like a lady or something.

She'd have to put the balance right.

Chapter Nine

Walking with all this silk billowing around her was kind of annoying. But at the same time, it did feel nice against her skin. Kett made a face as she stomped down the corridor. Any minute now she was going to start wearing things with bows.

One of the elegant dogs that usually followed her sisters around trotted toward her and she halted it, checking the tag on its collar.

"Kett II," she read. They'd started calling their pets Kett years ago, after Kett had changed her shape to match that of Eithne's pony in an ill-conceived attempt to impress her infant siblings. Since then, there'd always been at least one pet named after her. "You poor sod," she told the dog, who gave her the sort of big-eyed, mournful look only dogs can and slunk away.

There was music coming from the ballroom at the rear of the house and people spilling out into the lobby. Last night the servants had put up huge wreaths of yew and vitalweed, and the semi-sentient flowers swayed gently to the music. Huge candles and gas lamps were everywhere, making the lobby and everyone within it glow beautifully with a sort of kaleidoscope of color —

Kett peered closer. Bobbing around the living flower arrangements were an assortment of faeries, their bright auras glowing, making little rainbows as they danced. It figured that her stepmother had actually invited the little buggers. She probably had faery-sized food and drink laid out for them.

She recognized a few faces, tried to avoid them as she descended the stairs in a flurry of silk. But she couldn't avoid Beyla, who rushed over to her at the foot of the steps, exclaiming, "Kett, you look *beautiful!*"

People turned to look. Kett winced.

"Cheers," she said. Beyla was wearing something satiny in dark green, surprisingly sophisticated, reminding Kett again that her half-sisters were not little girls anymore.

"Kett, I wanted to catch you before you went in. Eithne's invited Verrick — her boyfriend," she clarified, when Kett gave her a blank look. "And you know Papa has some ridiculous problem with him."

"And yet he likes Bael," Kett said. "The mind boggles."

"Bael is lovely," Beyla said, and Kett started to wonder if insanity was hereditary. "And Papa seems to think we're both little girls who can't take care of ourselves." For a moment, her pretty face clouded with the sort of scowl her father had perfected. Then it cleared as she spotted someone over Kett's shoulder. "Oh, doesn't Lucidia look lovely? She so suits being a blonde. But listen, Kett, if you see Eithne and Verrick together, try to keep Papa away from them."

"I don't even know what this Verrick looks like," Kett said, but her sister was already moving away to greet the lovely Lucidia and her newly blonde hair.

"Whatever," Kett said, and started toward the crowded ballroom. It was thick with people and scents, candles and perfume and flowers, and for a moment she reeled, because she hadn't been in such a crowd for a long time.

Then she squared her shoulders. *Don't be pathetic, Kett. You've faced less pleasant things than this.*

Not many, though.

"Lady Kett Almet-Cooper of Nirya," announced the hired emcee, to whom Kett delivered a look that made him shrink about four inches. Lady was bad enough, but Cooper?

"I divorced that twat years ago," she muttered, and stalked onward.

The noise was overwhelming, a babble of voices and music and people laughing, and everywhere she looked there were unfamiliar faces topping ridiculous confections of silk and velvet. There appeared to be, in some corners of society, a fashion for powdered wigs, feathers and beads in the hair. The people wearing them looked ridiculous, but it was Kett's opinion that most people following fashion did.

She scanned the crowd for a familiar face. Beyla was still in the lobby, being a hostess. Eithne was doing the same with a group of bewigged women who looked like they had cobwebs on their heads.

She spotted Tane, being a terrible host but a great flirt, talking to a very pretty girl over by the windows. No help there.

There was Nuala's brother, the king, looking very regal, but what the hell did she have to say to him? A few feet away stood his daughter and heir, Jalen, looking as bored as Kett was and as beautiful as she wasn't. If all else failed, she could always go over and ask Jalen what sharp pointy things she'd been given for Yule.

Besides, she had a bottle of wine in one hand.

But before she got there, Jalen's miscreant boyfriend slunk up to her and kissed the back of her neck, making the princess jump and spill her wine. Kett backed away, having absolutely no desire to get in the middle of a domestic.

The noise, the heat, the clashing perfumes and all the deeply unpleasant people were giving her a hell of a headache. *This is why I never come*, she reminded herself, pushing through the crowds, more irritated with each step.

As she passed the small door leading to the minstrel's gallery, it opened and a dozen men and women in clothes much too expensive for them trooped out. *Nuala strikes again*, Kett thought. She probably saw their regular performance outfits and cried. How her stepmother had any money left was beyond Kett.

Oh yes. Her brother was the king. And it wouldn't really surprise Kett if her father was doing a little light highwaymanning on the side for fun.

Making a quick decision, she ducked through the little door and up the stairs to the rather spacious balcony, now filled with cellos and drums and other things she didn't really understand.

Up here it was cooler, which made no sense until she saw the open window high in the corner. It was also quieter and, praise gods, significantly emptier. Kett leaned against the wall, far back in the alcove, and massaged her temples.

How did I do this? she wondered. *How did I deal with the crowds, the people, the noise?* Time was, she'd spent every night in taverns far busier and smellier than this ballroom, and she'd loved it.

Hadn't she?

I need a smoke, she thought, depressed, and wondered if Nuala would have her shot for lighting up in the ballroom. Then she remembered her cigars were in her room, and scowled.

Moving forward, she leaned over the balustrade to survey the room below. If she didn't see someone she knew and liked in the next five minutes, she was returning to her room. Since she only knew about a dozen people likely to be invited, and liked less than half of them, Kett didn't figure she was going to have to stay long.

Then footsteps sounded behind her and she turned, expecting to see the musicians but finding Bael instead, wearing something dark and tailored that made him look far more civilized than she knew he was.

"That," he said, staring at her, "is a *great* dress."

Kett looked down at it doubtfully. "It's not really..." She waved her hand. "Me."

"No, it isn't." Bael stepped toward her, and he smelled fantastic. "It doesn't do you justice."

Kett opened her mouth to tell him he was talking bullshit, but he ran his finger along her exposed collarbone and she lost her breath.

"Lady Kett Almet-Cooper of Nirya?" he asked, and she scowled. "That's a lot of names."

Actually, the emcee had — mercifully — missed a couple. "Kett Almet does me fine," she said.

"Does me fine too," Bael said, stroking the pulse in her neck.

"Funny," she tried to snap, but it came out as a squeak.

"You look incredible," he said, his eyes dark on hers.

"I thought I looked very credible," she breathed.

"Nope. I'm finding you hard to believe," Bael said, skimming his hand down her arm, over her bare back and pulling her closer to him. "I think I need to check that you're real."

"Okay, that's a terrible line," Kett said, and he grinned.

"Did it work?"

"No." Yes.

His lips brushed hers. "Liar."

The soft, silky fabric of his suit whispered against her skin, and Kett found herself winding her arms around his neck just to feel more of it. *What have I been missing?* she wondered, as Bael leaned in and licked her collarbone. *All this silk, it's amazing. I've never been turned on by fabric before.*

But then, she'd never necked with someone while wearing a ball gown before, either.

He backed her against the balustrade and kissed her, running his hands over her bare back, and Kett experienced for the first time the whisper of silk over hardened nipples. She thrust out her breasts, trying to get more of that lovely soft slide of fabric, pushing herself against Bael and loving the pressure of his hard chest through the delicate silk.

"I could fuck you right here," Bael said against her mouth, and Kett was hit with a rush of lust so strong she had to hold on to him to keep from toppling backward over the balustrade.

"I could let you," she whispered back, and he pulled back half an inch and looked at her, his eyes really dark.

"Don't say that unless you mean it," he said, his hand covering her breast, and the heat of it felt so good Kett closed her eyes.

"I mean it," she said, and Bael groaned and turned her around in his arms, pressed her against the balustrade and leaned into her from behind. The rail was waist-high, standing on struts so thickly woven with ivy and ribbons and moving flowers that from the ballroom floor, no one could see through it.

So no one could see as Bael slid his hand under the silk at her side and caressed her stomach, dipping lower with each stroke but not quite touching the curls Kett knew were already wet. His lips were hot on her neck, his free hand brushing aside tendrils of hair as he found the spot below her jaw that made her gasp and arch her back. And as she did, she felt his erection pressing against her, thick and hard between her buttocks.

Her breath came faster. "Bael," she gasped, and tried to move his hand lower, where she needed it.

But he pushed her fingers back to the balustrade, murmuring in her ear, "Hold on, sweetheart. If anyone looks up they'll just see us enjoying the view."

All those people down there. For some reason that made Kett even hotter, and she sucked in a breath, her hands clutching the marble of the balcony. When Bael's fingers finally slipped between her legs, she bit her lip to stifle a cry.

"If anyone looks up," she panted, "they're going to see me *really* enjoying the view."

Bael's chuckle vibrated through her, and her head rolled back to give him better access to her neck. His clever fingers slid between her slippery folds, stroking and

rubbing, just the right kind of pressure to make her gasp and push her hips back against him. His other hand rested on hers, fingers entwined as she gripped the cool marble and writhed, eyes half-closed. His fingers circled her clit, stroked gently on either side then pressed down on it, and Kett whimpered.

"That's it," Bael whispered. "Come for me, Kett."

Her fingers curled into her palm, nails digging in. Stars danced before her eyes and her breath caught in her throat as the pressure built higher and higher...

"I'm going to fuck you so hard," Bael said, and she broke, convulsing in his arms, letting out a cry he stifled with his own mouth. His fingers kept on caressing her, his free arm wrapping around her waist to hold her steady as she fell apart, and Kett abandoned the balustrade to cling to him, his body rock-solid against her back.

When she finally came back down to earth, she felt him moving behind her, lifting her skirt, freeing himself, and she braced her hands on the balcony again, waiting for him to fill her up, wanting to be taken hard and fast up here, in public, where anyone could see—

Someone screamed outside, the sound coming in through the high window, and Kett's head snapped in that direction.

"Your parents keep peacocks?" Bael asked, his voice tense.

"No," Kett said, and she glanced back at him. He was staring at the window too. Not for the first time since she'd woken up in that cave, Kett wished she could tune into the supersonic hearing or night vision her various shapes allowed her.

"It'll just be—" Bael began, and then the scream came again, a woman crying "No!", and Kett wanted to kill someone.

* * * * *

The ballroom below was so thick with noise, no one else would have heard the scream.

"Hell," Kett said, and twisted away from Bael, yanking down her skirt and turning to the stairs. But the minstrels, gods damn them, chose that minute to come back up, all of them, choking the staircase. "Damn and bloody fuck," Kett snapped, as a rather cruel male laugh sounded from outside.

"What are you—" Bael began, as Kett grabbed the railing, fighting off the moving vitalweed, and judged the distance to the ground. "There are plenty of people here who could help."

"Yeah? Then why aren't they?"

With that, she leapt over the balustrade, swung out into the air and grabbed the tottering decorations as they started to fall. With a tear, the entwined boughs and ribbons gave way, and Kett jumped the last few feet to the floor, her boots thudding on the polished wood, faeries scattering around her in a blinding arc of color.

People stared, and Kett remembered belatedly that she was naked under her dress. And also that ancient leather work boots didn't exactly go with ball gowns.

The hell with it. "Get out of my way!" she snarled, and people moved, because people generally tended to move when Kett was in a bad mood.

Wrenching open one of the tall doors to the terrace, she strode out and saw nothing. But then that taunting snigger came again from the lawn below the terrace, and she took a running leap over the low wall onto the grass, freefalling a dozen feet as the ground dropped away. She ducked into a shoulder roll as she hit the ground, coming up facing the three youths who had one pretty girl cornered in the darkness.

"What the fuck?" one of them cursed, staring at her. The girl, tears glistening in the moonlight, gave Kett a pleading look, and she realized it was the girl Tane had been chatting up earlier.

"I don't think she wants to play," Kett said, cursing her lack of weaponry.

"Oh, I think she does," said the tallest of the boys, grabbing the girl's breast. Her dress was torn and, as Kett's eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw scratches on her flesh, and then the glint of metal as a second boy drew his sword.

"And you're gonna play too," he said.

Right then, Kett would have given anything to turn herself into a big cat and play with them, but she contented herself with a snarl instead.

"Run," said the girl, her voice shaky with tears. "Don't let them—"

The tall boy slapped her and Kett saw red. Grabbing his upraised arm, she twisted hard and it snapped. The kid let out a scream, his friends froze and Kett felt her lips curl in a smile.

She'd heard those taunts and sniggers before. Maybe not from these boys, but she'd heard them.

It hadn't ended well then either.

"You will shut up," she said, "and you will listen to me. What's your name?"

"I don't have to—" Kett twisted his arm and his face went white. "Willifus—the Honorable Willifus Flherik Lochmarne-Lochmarne-d'Athinisha."

"What a fucking stupid name," Kett said, trying not to snort at "honorable".

"You broke my arm!"

"Yep, and I'll break a lot more if you don't do what I say."

"My father will hear of this!"

"I bloody hope so."

The boy with the sword rounded on her, and she tensed to ward him off—this was going to hurt—when he suddenly stopped dead, sword in the air.

And Kett became aware of a low growl.

"Nice doggy," said the third boy, who was holding the girl's hands behind her back. Using her as a shield, Kett realized, the bloody coward. She turned to snap at Kett

It to get the hell out of there when she realized it wasn't her sisters' dog, but a rather large wolf. Growling.

Her mind raced. It couldn't be Bael. He just wasn't wolf material. Were there any other shifters at the party? Another Nasc? She knew the Empress of Zemlya turned into a wolf when it got dark, but she didn't think any of the Zemlyan contingent were present –

"You can't keep a dog like that untethered," said Willifus, who clearly had the brains of a dead flower. "My father –"

"Look, kid, your father named you Willifus, clearly he hates you," Kett said. "And that ain't a dog."

The wolf bared its teeth. It looked like it was grinning.

"What the hell?" Kett said to it, and the kid with the sword chose that moment to become a hero, launching himself at the wolf. But the wolf, moving with such easy grace he looked as if he wasn't really bothered, rolled to one side, swiped at the boy's leg and brought him down. Pinning him with his front paws, he took the whimpering boy's sword arm in his teeth and shook it.

The boy screamed and dropped the sword. Kett kicked smartly at the hilt, making the blade jump into the air and spin over. She caught it by the hilt, pleased she could still pull off that maneuver.

In the sudden silence, the third boy stared at Kett and the wolf.

"*Please* give me a reason," she said, aching to cause him pain.

"Don't hurt me," he whispered.

"Why not? You hurt her."

"I didn't! That was Will!"

Kett shook her head. "And now you're ratting out your friends. Seriously, kid, you're a waste of space." A movement to her left caught her attention, and the gleam of amber eyes flashed in the darkness. A lion, nearly five feet tall at the withers. Dark's Nasc twin.

Kett smiled. "Relax, kid. I ain't gonna hurt you," she said.

The kid relaxed.

"But he might," Kett added, and Dark stepped into vision.

Willifus peed his pants.

"Excellent," Kett said. "Let her go."

The kid did as he was told, and the girl ran to hide behind Kett as Dark swatted the boy with one huge paw, knocking him to the ground and holding him there as footsteps sounded on the terrace.

"Kett, Kett, Kett," Bael said, surveying the scene as he sauntered down the nearest set of steps toward her. "You really know how to make a party go off."

"Yes, and thanks for your backup," she snapped, as guests crowded onto the terrace, all of them looking down at her and whispering.

"What do you call that?" Bael gestured to the wolf, who was sprawled across the apparently unconscious body of the swordsman. He gave her a doggy grin.

"That's you?"

"That's Var. My twin. You didn't think I was going to rush off for help and leave you without backup, did you?"

Baelvar. Man and wolf. Somehow, that didn't seem quite right.

On the terrace stood Kett's father, shaking his head at her, and then Tane was pushing his way through. When he caught sight of the shivering girl trying to hold her dress together, he cried, "Giselle!" and leapt to the grass.

Of course she has a name like Giselle, Kett thought sourly as the girl moved out from behind her, into Tane's arms. Beautiful, lissome girls like her were never called Agnes or Doris.

She even cried prettily, clinging to Tane as he draped his jacket around her and stroked her glossy hair.

"Are you all right?" he asked tenderly, looking down at her, and she nodded tearfully. Kett bit her lip, because her brother had clearly seen the scratches on Giselle's exposed breast and now appeared to be trying to work out whether mentioning it would be helpful, or if he was going to get a slap for noticing her bare breast in the first place.

"Go and take her to Nuala," Kett said, because her unflappable stepmother was, in addition to being a princess, a qualified doctor, and Tane nodded and steered the fragile Giselle away.

"Thank you," he called back to Kett, who nodded, surprised to be on the receiving end of anyone's gratitude, and Giselle stopped, ran back to Kett and threw her arms around her.

"Thank you," she sobbed. "You saved my life."

Kett, who still had hold of the whimpering Willifus, looked down at the girl with slight distaste, which made Bael and her father laugh.

"Yeah, well, get Tane to teach you some self-defense, yeah?"

Giselle nodded and went back to Tane, who received her as if she was something precious, and Kett felt a pang because no one had ever looked at her like that, and nor were they likely to if she was the one standing there holding a youth who'd just pissed himself.

"Ain't ever dull with you around," Tyrnar called down, and she scowled at him as Willifus looked up and recognized his host.

"Sir!" he cried, and Kett rolled her eyes. Was it inbreeding, she wondered, or was the kid just destined to be thick? "My lord, this...*harpy* assaulted me!"

"No she didn't," Bael said. "She kicked your ass."

"And that harpy," Tyrnan said, hands in his pockets, "happens to be my daughter." This time Kett swore the wolf laughed.

"Where the hell is Tanner?" Tyrnan said, looking around. "I swear to gods, why the hell do I bother to invite the captain of the guard?"

"He got called back to the ngardaí," said a young man with a garda badge, muscling his way through the crowd. Kett figured he was Eithne's boyfriend Verrick. "I'll take them."

Tyrnan wavered. On the one hand, he didn't approve of Eithne having a boyfriend, even if he was a garda. On the other, he clearly didn't approve of Willifus being present at his party.

He pulled a set of handcuffs from his pocket and handed them to the young garda, who took them wordlessly and leapt down to cuff Willifus' wrists, ignoring his protests that it was inhumane to cuff an injured man.

"Should have thought about that before you ripped her dress," Kett said. "Your mate with the sword, he got a permit for it?"

"He doesn't need one," Willifus said. "His father is Lord —"

"Don't give a fuck who his father is," Kett said. "He still needs a permit."

"I'm going to need a coach or a cart, and some rope, unless anyone has any more handcuffs on them," said Verrick.

"Sure," Bael said, taking a set out of his pocket, and Kett tried not to stare. "I guess we'll have to improvise later, sweetheart."

Kett was glad it was dark, because she didn't think she'd ever live it down if she blushed.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, her headache back again, and thought wistfully about the screaming hot sex she should have been having. Catching Bael's eye, she wished, just for a split second, that she could fold herself into his arms and be held, like Tane had held Giselle, but that was stupid because no one had ever held Kett like that in her life. And anyway, it was pathetic, needing to be rescued like that. She could take care of herself.

And besides. She didn't want Bael to hold her. She was supposed to be distancing herself from him.

"Oh now, this just isn't fair," came Chance's voice from the terrace. She appeared with the light behind her, lending her lovely features an angelic glow, and withdrew from her bag a set of handcuffs. "Nobody told me the real party was out here."

Kett caught the handcuffs and stared at them. "Am I the only person here who doesn't carry these around with me?"

Wisely, no one responded. Kett cuffed the last of the boys and handed him into the carriage that had been brought 'round as Verrick climbed up into the driver's seat.

Chance, her pretty nose wrinkling as she regarded the boys who'd attacked Giselle, glided to Kett's side and murmured, "Can I have a word, darling? In the house. Private business."

Kett nodded wearily and started toward the house, then stopped, swore and turned back to Bael. "Private business" was probably going to involve talking about Koskwim, and she couldn't let him in on that. There were heads of state who didn't know about the Order — she couldn't tell one feckless Nasc about it.

"Bael," she said, and he turned to her, handsome in the darkness. "Will you go with Verrick to the Free Hospital and keep an eye on these three until he gets someone else in to chaperone them?"

Bael narrowed his eyes and she was sure he was going to protest, but then he surprised her by nodding easily. "Sure, sweetheart. I'll see you later. Are you okay?"

"Five by five," she said automatically.

He kissed her cheek, which stunned her into silence, and hopped up onto the seat beside Verrick. Var leapt into the coach, Bael reached back and shut the door, and a whimper came from inside.

"Don't, you know, kill anyone," Kett said, and he just laughed.

Feeling suddenly very tired, Kett trekked back up to the terrace, cutting 'round past the ballroom and entering one of the salons flanking it. Chance caught up to her, Dark padding along beside her with his tail swishing.

"Tane's girlfriend's very pretty," she said, and Kett tried to remind herself that this was no reason to hate the girl. "Pity she doesn't seem to have a clue about defending herself. Perhaps you and I can give her a few lessons?"

Kett shrugged and led them into what Nuala was probably calling the Slightly Purple Drawing Room. As she was closing the door behind herself, it swung open again and she spun to see Striker, striding into the room and sneering at everyone.

"Oh good," she said flatly. Nothing like a psychopath to make a party go with a swing.

"Kett!" Chalia cried, wandering into the room. "Look at you!"

"Yes, I'm wearing a dress, I have breasts, get over it," Kett said, slamming the door and debating whether to lock it. Her parents and siblings knew about Koskwim, and several of the guests were members of the Order, but she couldn't risk an innocent member of Elvyrn society wandering in.

Assuming there was such a thing as an innocent member of society.

"What?" asked Chalia. "No, not the dress. You got *laid*."

"Recently," Striker said, looking her over.

"In the minstrel's gallery," Chance added, and when Kett stared, she clarified. "I swear to gods, I just happened to glance up."

"Great," Kett said. "Now that we've discussed my sex life —"

"Sweetheart, I'm just glad you've finally got a sex life," Chalia said.

"You wanted to talk about –"

"I know, three *years*," Chance said, appalled. "Which reminds me." She turned her beautiful eyes on Striker.

"No," he said warily.

"I haven't even asked you yet!"

"Still no."

"Striker," Chance said, pleadingly. "Dad, please."

Kett and Chalia gaped at her. Even Dark, still in his lion form, looked stunned.

"You *never* call me that," Striker said, staring at his daughter.

"It's true," Chalia said, seating herself prettily on a chaise. "Since she was a baby, she called him Striker." She grinned. "Except she couldn't pronounce her T's or R's very well, so it sounded more like psycho."

"Always said she was smart," Kett muttered.

"*Striker*," Chance said, scowling beautifully and burying her fingers in Dark's long mane. "Have you seen the enchantment on Kett?"

All eyes turned toward Kett, who squared her shoulders and glared back at them all. Striker sauntered over, ran his fingers half an inch above her skin and frowned.

"Like a net," he said. "Dense. Tough. Interesting."

Kett waited for someone to say that sounded just like her, but no one did.

"It's been on her since Nihon," Chance said.

"What's it do?"

"You can't tell?" Kett asked, surprised as much as anything.

Striker gave her a narrow-eyed look and closed the distance between his hand and her shoulder.

Then he jerked it away as if he'd been burned and stared at her.

"What?" Kett asked.

"That –" He touched her again, shook his head. "Bad mojo, pet. And you've had it on you before."

"No I haven't," said Kett, pretty sure she'd remember.

"Yes, you have. For eight years."

His pale eyes were steady on hers as she tried to figure out what the hell he meant. Eight years of being unable to change her shape? Ever since she could remember, she'd been able to –

Ever since she could remember.

Memories that only started when she was eight years old.

Chapter Ten

"Heavy net," Striker said. "Locks you in one shape. One form. Like your normal human form or —"

"A stone statue," Chalia said. Chance and Dark exchanged glances, and Kett realized they'd probably never been told the story. Hell, Chance hadn't even been born at the time.

But Striker had been the one who'd discovered Kett festering in her own anger on Koskwim. He and Chalia had uncovered the whole story of what happened to her as a child.

"This — this is the same thing that trapped me as a kid?"

Striker nodded slowly. "Penny-a-word enchantment."

An enchantment. The kind of thing anyone could do if they knew the words. Enchantments nearly always came with an "undo" clause. But you had to know the right words for that too.

"So...the reason I couldn't lift it is because I didn't know the words?" Chance asked.

"No, the reason you couldn't lift it is because you're an ungrateful, self-denying idiot who never learned how to use her magic," Striker said.

"So how do we remove it then?" Chance asked, but no one replied because Striker made a sudden movement, as if pulling something off Kett.

For a second she thought he was going to take her skin with him, and then...

Then she was free.

If Kett had ever worn a corset, she'd have compared the experience to shedding the restricting garment and being able to breathe freely. As it was, it felt to her like climbing out of a vault and breathing fresh oxygen, or curing a long-standing injury.

"Gods," she gasped, almost moaning as blood seemed to flow properly through her veins for the first time in a month. "How do you stand it?"

"What?" Chance asked, and then blinked as Kett's skin sprouted fur, then scales, turned blue and then green, grew feathers and rippled with change.

"Being stuck in the same shape all the time, it's like suffocating." Her mind reeling with relief, Kett moved to unfasten her dress, then thought better of it and just changed her shape to undulate out of the silk, watching it flutter to the floor as she stretched her naked body. Her bones snapped, her muscles stretched, her blood roared, and then she dropped to all fours and watched her hands become paws, felt thick fur grow, flexed her claws and swished her tail.

She paced, stretched, then backed up and went into a running leap, changing mid-air into a horse, landing on unshod hooves and whinnying with joy.

"Show-off," Striker said, lighting a cigarette. Kett narrowed her eyes, took another leap and this time turned into an eagle, snatching the cigarette from his lips and wheeling round the room with it in one clawed foot.

"Bring that back," he said, a rather bored threat in his voice, "or I'll shoot you."

Kett circled lazily then turned herself into a gryphon and landed on the card table by the window. She flowed to the ground as a snake, gripping the cigarette in her tail, then rose up and turned herself human again.

Unselfconscious, feeling invincible now she was back to her old self, she crossed the room and put the cigarette back between Striker's lips.

"Don't get cocky," he said.

"Me?" Briefly, Kett entertained herself with the idea of morphing a cock, but dismissed it as an idea best explored in private. Now she could change her shape again, could shift into anything, could look like—

"Are you done now?" Striker asked, and Kett smiled as she stepped back into her dress, feeling invigorated, feeling like herself, feeling better than she had since before that damn tiger ripped her leg open.

"Thanks, by the way," she said to Striker, who just shrugged. To Chance she added, "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"About the enchantment on you," Chance said. "I thought Striker might be able to lift it. And now," her lovely eyes sparkled, "you and Bael have something in common."

Abruptly, Kett's happiness morphed into a mallet and smacked her on the head. Her smile vanished.

"Don't you want to have something in common with him?" Chalia asked. "He's gorgeous, Kett. And he clearly adores you."

"No, he doesn't," Kett said automatically.

"He's your mate," Chance pointed out.

"No, he's not. There's no such thing as mates. Not for me."

"But—"

"He's confused. That's all. He thinks I'm—"

Her words snapped themselves off. *He thinks I'm his mate. Someone I'm not.*

What if he thinks I'm someone else?

She could change her shape again. She could make herself look like anything she wanted. It took practice, of course, and if she wanted to make herself an exact replica of something new or someone in particular, it was incredibly difficult.

But it was possible, with practice, to change her human appearance. To look like someone else. Bael's words came back to her...

Well, you could have sex with someone else. If you're my mate, that should be impossible.

"Kett," Chalia said warningly, exchanging a look with her daughter.

"You're right," Kett said. "We do have something in common now. I think..." They'd need to be somewhere else, somewhere she wouldn't run the risk of meeting someone she knew who might blow her cover. "Keep this quiet, yeah? I'll tell him myself."

And then they'd go away. Back to the ranch, maybe, or to wherever Bael lived. Yes. Where he had friends or whatever. The more witnesses the better.

She smiled suddenly. "You know what?" she said to her aunt and cousin. "This changes everything."

* * * * *

The Free Hospital was crowded and noisy, the staff sullen under their jolly Yuletide hats. Bael didn't blame them. The place was depressing as hell. After the third person snapped at him that animals were simply not allowed in the hospital, he merged Var with himself, helped the young garda frogmarch the three miscreants through the hospital and waited with them until a couple of gardaí who were actually on duty could come to take watch.

When the one called Willifus complained, Bael broke his other arm.

It wasn't that he wanted to spend his evening in a disease-ridden hellhole with three sullen, braying teenagers, but he figured it might earn him some points with Kett. And her family would definitely think he was wonderful.

And he got to legitimately beat the shit out of someone, which was always stress-relieving.

When the pale green light of a faery lit up the ward, Sergeant Verrick looked up expectantly, but the tiny winged creature flew to Bael and handed him a small scroll.

"I'm to wait for your reply," he said in his shrill faery voice, and Bael nodded, unrolling the paper.

"Bael, stop haring off like that. Where the hell are you? What are you doing?"

Bael sighed. Bloody Albhar never let him have any fun. Usually he'd skim such a letter, but right now, with nothing else to do, he might as well read it.

"You do have responsibilities here, you know. We had a shapeshifter almost within our grasp and now it's escaped."

Any second now he was going to read the phrase "your father's research", and that other personal favorite, "disrespecting your heritage".

"Quite apart from being necessary to continue your father's research," yep, there it was, "the creature also owes you a debt, you know."

Bael tried to remember who owed him money, or if he'd ever gambled with a shapeshifter.

"I know your father believed otherwise, but I am sure the shapeshifter was instrumental in the death of your mother. It is my belief it killed her to escape your father's research. Such a creature cannot be allowed to roam free, Bael."

A shapeshifter? No, a kelf had killed his mother. His father had told him so repeatedly. "Don't trust kelfs, boy, they're a lot more treacherous than humans think."

This stupid damn ritual, the background noise of Bael's youth. Find the shapeshifter. Do the ritual. Bael didn't know what it was for, and he didn't care either. Albhar had been wittering on about the stupid thing for years...

In letters that Bael had barely read. Gods dammit. The old man nagged so much that Bael had stopped listening years ago. As far as he was concerned, if Albhar spent his time obsessing over a shapeshifter, it just made it less likely that he'd spend his time noticing Bael was actually Nasc.

Because if he knew...if anyone knew what he was —

Bael shook himself. He hadn't been bothered by the Federación so far. Chances were, they had no idea Nasc Magi even existed. They'd never come after his parents, for one thing. And Albhar...well, Albhar knew a lot about magic, but he had very little innate skill. He was clearly below the interest of the Federación.

He had some mad idea about a shapeshifter, always muttering on about it. Some ritual Bael's father had been working on. Something he'd tried to get Bael to help him with, but despite his heritage Bael had never even been able to light a fire without using a match. His parents had been disgusted with him.

But why was Albhar suddenly telling him it was this shapeshifter who'd killed his mother? Was it just some ploy to get him to look for it, or had his father, blinded by hatred of kelfs, lied to him?

The story had always been that it was the kelf who killed his mother, that ungrateful kelf who escaped his parents then came back to get revenge for its servitude. The only kelf ever known to have killed a human.

Bael tried to work up some anger over it, tried to even picture his mother, but his parents had been so distant, always haring off on some trip or another, that he couldn't really remember what she looked like.

He remembered his father more clearly, especially in that last year after his mother had died. An old man, suddenly older than he should have been, stomping about the place muttering like a lunatic. He'd brought in Albhar then, a human Mage with a minor talent, to assist him, but the guy had nowhere near the power Bael's mother had.

Bael shook his head. If Albhar thought he could pull some emotional blackmail on him, then he'd gone about it the wrong way. It was hard to get sentimental about parents who barely seemed to know you existed. The only time Bael ever remembered his father showing him any attention was when he'd first realized his son was a Mage too.

But that hadn't been attention Bael had particularly enjoyed. His father had never said so, but he gave the distinct impression he was trying to work out a way to exploit

his son's talents. A way to increase his own power. Because apart from Albhar, whose talents were negligible, there was no one else around whose power he could steal.

Bael read through the rest of the letter, mostly full of Albhar's fussing about responsibilities and duties, and scribbled a note on the back to the effect that he was busy and the estates could run themselves. Hell, they always had before. He paid plenty of people plenty of money so he didn't have to worry about them.

In fact, he paid Albhar plenty of money to worry about them.

"Anything interesting?" asked Verrick, as Bael sent the faery away with the note.

"Nah. Just business stuff. Speaking of – well, not really speaking of, but I can't think of a segue and I'm nosy – why doesn't Kett's dad like you?"

Verrick's cheeks colored. "You noticed?"

"I'm good at noticing."

The young garda shrugged. "He doesn't think Eithne's old enough to get married."

"Married? You're engaged?"

"Well. I asked, and she said yes, but her father won't give permission so..."

Bael made a face. "Right." This didn't bode particularly well for him.

"Oh, *you'll* be all right," said Verrick, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Eithne says he's always moaning about how Kett ought to find someone."

"Really? He wants her to settle down?"

"Well, she's –" Verrick blushed again. "She's not getting any younger."

"Apart from men of legend, none of us are," Bael agreed gravely.

"Eithne says it's not fair, and I think she's right."

Well, of course you do, Bael thought, *you lovesick dollop*, but out loud he said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, it can't be about age, because Eithne's older than her mother was when she got married. And she's much older than her father was when Kett was born."

"Yeah? He was pretty young?"

"Only a teenager. A misdemeanor when he was in the army," Verrick confided. "And by all accounts –" He broke off.

"By all accounts what?" Bael asked.

"Well, Kett was a bit of a wild child. I suppose he just doesn't want Eithne growing up like that."

In the middle of the busy hospital ward, there was silence.

"Like what?" Bael asked pleasantly.

"Well...well, like, er, well," Verrick stammered. "Like, um, well, she got attacked by that tiger," he said. "That was, um, bad. Could have killed her."

"Sure," Bael said, "but it was three years ago. Hardly when she was a 'wild child'. And what does that mean, exactly? She shagged around a bit when she was younger? Who didn't? Her father's a damn hypocrite."

"Yes," Verrick agreed weakly.

"He's a jumped-up highwayman," chipped in Willifus, just begging for another beating.

"Been a while since I turned anyone into a smudge on the floor," Bael snapped at him, "but if you don't shut up, I'll be glad to begin practicing again."

Willifus turned green.

"Now," Bael said, fixing his gaze on Verrick. "Tell me everything about Kett."

* * * * *

It was well after midnight when Kett made her way back to her room, tired and aching more than a little. She'd been showing off, pressing into service muscles she hadn't used since the last time she'd required wings, or legs that could leap five feet into the air.

She had a loose plan in her head. And it was a good plan; it would work. But if her Koskwim training had taught her anything, it was that a plan should never be put into practice until all the kinks had been worked out.

Her right leg in particular was killing her. She draped the slightly grass-stained dress over a chair, hoping guiltily that Nuala wouldn't be too annoyed by the state it was in, kicked off her boots and rubbed some liniment into her thigh. Then she fell into bed and wondered, as her eyes closed, where the hell Bael was.

Five minutes later her eyes slammed open as she heard the window slide up, and a pair of feet thudded on the floorboards.

Her hand was already a claw as the figure righted itself and came toward the bed, and she tensed to attack. In the dark room she couldn't see clearly, and any intruder was a threat.

Then she breathed in, and a scent she hadn't even realized was familiar came to her, reassured her.

"Bael?"

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

Kett turned her hand back to human again as he shed his clothes. "You could have used the door."

"Why be dull?"

He slid into bed beside her, pulled her into his arms and Kett relaxed there for a moment, enjoying the feel of his body, his face and hands cold from being outside, his heart thumping against her chest.

Then she pulled away, annoyed with herself for liking it too much.

"I'm really tired," she said.

"Me too. Dear gods, I wanted to kill those three little fuckers."

She smiled despite herself and Bael rolled against her, his body warm and hard against her back, and his lips brushed her neck.

"I said —"

"I heard. I'm not trying to shag you, Kett, that was a goodnight kiss." He wrapped his arm around her waist and snuggled her against him, and she told herself she could enjoy it for one more night.

* * * * *

She woke for the third morning running with Bael's arms around her. He was solid, warm, his breathing even. And he didn't snore.

On his body there were small scars, some fine and neat like surgical cuts, others curved, jagged and messy. One or two looked like arrow or crossbow-bolt scars, and she remembered how he'd been shot in Xinjiang by the kelf he'd attacked.

Stupid man. Why attack a kelf? They couldn't be harmed and they lived to serve anyway. It was like shooting at a horse wearing armor. Cruel and pointless. All right, so Nasc and kelfs didn't get on, but did he really hate them that much?

She moved away from him carefully, quietly, not especially pleased that this had become one of her talents. Of course, it was easier when you were a shapeshifter, but bloody depressing to realize she'd woken up next to so many men she wanted to get away from.

Pulling on her clothes, old jeans and a clean shirt, she looked back at Bael, sleeping there so peacefully. He looked really beautiful with those dark lashes and the stubble dusting his jaw. Great jaw, she thought, great cheekbones. Great shoulders, great chest...hell, everything about him was great.

Except that he was a complete nutcase. He beat up kelfs and he scared the dragons, and he thought she was his fucking mate, for gods' sake. He'd been thrown out of Nihon for something he couldn't even remember, which wasn't a great sign. How many indiscretions had he committed if he forgot the details?

No. He might be great in bed, but Kett had had "great in bed" before, and it hadn't been good enough for a lasting relationship. And she didn't want a lasting relationship, dammit!

I am happy with my life as it is, she told herself, not for the first time. I like where I live and what I do, and I don't need a man. Men screw things up. Men get you flogged or thrown in jail or cheat on and divorce you. I can live without head-banging sex.

Probably.

If he knew what she could do, he'd take it as a sign they should be together. That it was fate. And Kett believed in signs and fate like she believed in leprechauns.

If you hadn't gotten married, he couldn't have cheated on you. If he hadn't cheated on you, you wouldn't have stabbed him. Probably. If you hadn't stabbed him, you wouldn't have gone to jail. And if you hadn't gone to jail, you wouldn't have been so mad for freedom that the second you got out, you ran into a bloody tiger that ripped your leg open.

If Chance hadn't fallen for Dark, she'd never had ended up with a sword through her back, fighting to free his sister last year. If King Talis and his wife hadn't been so in love, the queen wouldn't have sacrificed herself to save the people he loved all those years ago. If Striker hadn't fallen for Chalia—well, thousands of people would still be alive and the city of Vaticano wouldn't still be half-ruined.

Kett regarded the man sleeping in her bed. *Love hurts*, she thought, *and I've had quite enough of that already*. The Curse of Kett would inevitably fall upon him.

Her leg felt stiff, in need of exercise, so she headed toward the gardens, intending to change her shape and go for a run. It was still early and the only people up and about were the servants, an annoying number of whom curtsied and bowed to her.

As she passed Tane's room, one of the maids left with a basket of wood and fire-lighting materials. Kett paused. "Is he awake?"

The maid nodded and curtsied. "Yes, my lady."

Kett tapped on Tane's door, intending to ask if he'd escorted Giselle home last night, and planning to rip him a new one if he hadn't. She knocked then pushed the door open.

"Are you— *Oh*."

A sudden flurry of movement didn't quite manage to disguise Giselle as she ducked under the covers, and Tane tried to look innocent despite the girl-shaped bump next to him.

"Morning," Kett said, and while her mouth was still, she knew Tane could see the laughter in her eyes. "Morning, Giselle."

Sheepishly, the girl peeped out, her face pink, and gave a rather unconvincing smile.

"Look, I just wanted to check Giselle got home okay last night," Kett said, trying not to smile, "but clearly it's a moot point. See you at breakfast."

She nodded to them both and turned to go, and Tane said, "Wait."

She turned back, brows raised.

"Listen, Willifus is a cock and we all hate him, but his father's really important in Elvyrn politics and—"

"Tane, you know nothing bores me as much as politics," Kett said. "Well, maybe shopping."

Giselle looked aghast but Tane patted her hand and said, "The thing is, we had to invite him. And now Lord d'Athinisha's going to be absolutely incandescent that someone beat up his beloved son..."

Someone, Kett noted.

"But I'm going to talk to Dad and to Uncle Talis, tell them why you did it."

"I don't reckon Talis is particularly on my side," Kett said, wincing as she recalled a couple of instances in her youth when she'd set out to humiliate the king just because she could. Her father hadn't protected her then. No one had.

"Are you kidding? Kett, you remember the queen, right? She was a bloody lunatic, everyone says, but he adored her. Can't stand vapid women, Dad always says. He thinks you're brilliant."

"The king thinks I'm brilliant," Kett said flatly, not believing it for a second.

"He'll think you're even more brilliant when I tell him you saved Giselle's life."

"I really don't think they were gonna kill her," Kett said, flustered.

"They weren't inviting me to a tea party either," Giselle said. Her eyes were huge and solemn as she regarded Kett. "Kett, I..."

Kett shrugged, embarrassed.

"I wish I was as brave as you," Giselle said.

"Yeah, well. There's a thin line between being brave and being a bloody idiot," Kett said. "Get Tane to teach you how to defend yourself, yeah?"

She backed out, feeling awkward, and walked past Eithne's room. Her sharp hearing picked up a male voice from within.

Kett smiled, wondering if her father knew that only one of his offspring had spent the night alone.

Although she wouldn't put it past Beyla to have hidden a man in the wardrobe.

Passing a window, she caught sight of the snowy garden and decided to change her shape inside, before the cold air froze her bare skin. She rolled her clothes into a bundle and changed into a large dog with thick fur, and was almost to the stairs when Bael's scent came to her. It was an intriguing mix of candied fruits, molten metal and winter ice. Hurriedly, she dropped her clothes and shoved them under a nearby table, then wagged her tail cheerfully as he rounded the corner.

Bael made that clicking noise people make with dogs, and she trotted over happily.

"Hey, Kett," he said, and she froze for a second, horrified. How did he *know*? Could he *smell* her? Who'd told him?

But then he reached out and scratched her ears, saying, "Oh, you've lost your collar. I'll tell the girls, shall I?"

He thought she was Kett II. Relief flooded Kett and she wagged her tail harder. Bael chuckled and stroked the top of her head, which felt way better than it ought to have.

"You're a beauty, aren't you, sweetheart? Not that you'd be anything else with a name like that."

So saying, he chuckled her under the chin and walked away, leaving Kett mildly stunned.

Chapter Eleven

Bael had woken alone, which was annoying, but he figured it was about time for breakfast so he got dressed and made his way downstairs in the hopes of finding someone who could tell him which of the many, many rooms of Nuala's house breakfast might be served in.

Stopping to say hello to the leggy black hound Eithne had introduced him to last night as Kett II, he loped down the stairs, smiling to himself. He wondered if the real Kett knew she had a bitch named after her, and whether she cared. She probably didn't. Kett didn't seem to care much what people thought of her.

Except that she did, really. She cared very much that people saw her as someone who didn't care. That they thought she was reckless, angry, violent, insane—but not smart, warm and vulnerable.

Her family saw it, or at least some of it. It was one of the reasons Bael liked them. Her siblings might be in awe of her—as they should, because she's awesome—but they were proud of her. Last night he'd heard Beyla telling her friends about Kett's dragons, huge pride in her voice.

He trailed around the house for a while, checking out the now-spotless ballroom and looking out fondly over the terrace where Kett had completely nailed those three asshole kids. What a gorgeous girl she really was. Strong, brave, loyal, smart and impossible to break. She rescued silly girls from stupid boys and wrestled dragons with equal aplomb. She was an absolute miracle in bed. And she looked really, really hot in a dress.

He had absolutely no idea how he was going to explain her presence to Albhar—or vice versa—but right then he didn't really care.

The sun was up, the air was clear, he'd found his mate and she was really, truly perfect for him.

Inside, his nose led him to a salon decorated with roses and full of people serving themselves breakfast, only about half of whom he recognized. Kett was there, looking delicious and smelling—different, slightly, although he couldn't put his finger on it.

No, it wasn't her scent, it was something else. There was something different about her. Last night Verrick had told him a few things about Kett, but they'd been whispered like legends. That once Kett had been married, but her husband cheated on her so she stabbed him with a kitchen knife. That she'd been flogged in the army, hard enough to kill a normal person, but she'd survived. That she had once been killed and brought back to life again.

Verrick had even, wide-eyed, related the story of the sabertooth tiger, which had given Bael pause. If that one was true, what about the rest? Had his mate really done all those things?

Those scars on her back. Someone had flogged her, hard enough to kill.

Her prickly self-defensiveness. Someone had hurt her, badly enough for it to still smart.

If she hadn't already stabbed the bastard, I'd do it myself.

He smiled at her and she scowled at him.

"Morning, gorgeous," he said, sweeping her to him by the waist and planting a big kiss on her mouth.

"Bugger off," she said, yanking herself away and grabbing the coffeepot, her expression telling him that if he tried that again she'd pour its contents all over him.

Bael grinned and turned away to get his own breakfast.

Kett picked a seat between Beyla and Nuala, deliberately it seemed, so Bael sat down opposite her, all the better to enjoy the view. Unlike her elegant stepmother and sister, she attacked her food, stabbing it with her fork and hacking away with her knife. She attacked everything, he realized—food, men, opinions, life in general. It was as if she had a grudge against the entire world. It wasn't something he expected to find sexy, but with Kett, he was finding everything sexy.

Chance and Dark came in and, as she stood pouring some pink juice into a glass, he touched her waist and said something in her ear that made her smile, sparkling up at him with love and affection. It was sweet, touching and totally the opposite of the way Kett had reacted to him.

And yet, he found himself preferring her that way.

"I'm sorry you missed so much of the ball," Nuala said to Bael. "But it was so very sweet of you to accompany Verrick like that."

He smiled back, unsure what to say to someone who was actively trying to approve of him, and was grateful when Eithne came in, her eyes bright and her cheeks pink.

"Nice walk, sweetheart?" Tyrnan asked, and she smiled prettily and nodded.

This time Bael snorted. It sure as hell hadn't been walking that had put that sparkle into her eyes. "Somebody got some last night," he said, and immediately both Kett and Beyla snapped their heads up, eyes wide with warning.

Bael was too busy being struck for the first time by how similar they were to actually pay attention to what they were trying to tell him, but when Tane loudly cleared his throat and said, "I don't think what Giselle and I got up to last night is any of your business," Bael actually laughed.

Then he realized they were serious.

Tane was sitting there with his arm around Giselle and Bael didn't need Nasc senses or Mage powers to know they hadn't been playing tiddlywinks all night. But

there was Eithne, looking like a frightened rabbit, and Kett and Beyla were shaking their heads frantically at him, and it made no sense.

He doesn't want her turning out like Kett.

Kett, who had panic in her eyes as she tried to warn him off. Tried to protect her sister. Brave, beautiful, incredible Kett.

The man was a moron.

"Eithne," Tyrnan said, warning in his voice. "Where were you last night?"

"Here, Daddy," she said, smiling in the most unconvincing manner Bael had ever seen.

"Because that soldier boy was hanging around you like flies on honey last night, and I—"

"He's a garda, Daddy, not a soldier," Eithne said quietly. "And he's a good —"

"I don't care," Tyrnan said, and he put down the toast he was buttering. "Eithne, we've had this conversation before—and this goes for you too, Beyla. You're too young—"

Bael lost his patience. "Hold on a minute," he said, and Tyrnan gave him a look he was sure might have incinerated a lesser man. But there was being polite to his prospective father-in-law, and there was letting him get away with being an ass. "You three are triplets, right?"

"Bael," Kett muttered, her tone pained.

"This don't concern you," Tyrnan said, his voice tight.

"Yes, but they are triplets? Tane and Beyla and Eithne? All exactly the same age?"

"You know we are," Tane said, not looking happy. Beside him, Giselle appeared to be trying to disappear into her chair.

"So how come you're more than happy to let your son bring his girlfriend to breakfast, but you won't let your daughter stay the night with her boyfriend? I mean, he's a garda, a sergeant in fact—fine, upstanding citizen, helped us all out last night when he didn't have to, and I can vouch he's a good kid. It's not like he's a highwayman or something."

A sudden intake of breath at the table reminded Bael that Tyrnan of Emreland had made his name infamous by the ignoble trade of highway robbery.

Then someone at the end of the table laughed. She was brunette and looked vaguely familiar, and she said, "He's right, Prowler. You can't set one standard for Tane and another for the girls. Besides, you know as well as I do that Kett was screwing around when she was years younger than the triplets, and you never batted an eyelid."

"Cheers," Kett said, taking a swig of coffee.

"That's different," Tyrnan said, his face like thunder. And before anyone could ask why it was different, he added, "Look, I don't need parenting advice from someone whose daughter grew up to be a whore and an assassin."

"I'm sitting *right here*," Chance said, and Bael opened his mouth then shut it again, because there was no way the brunette could have been Chance's mother. They looked alike—which was why she seemed familiar, he guessed—but she couldn't have been more than ten years Chance's senior.

"Those were entirely her own choices," the brunette said, unruffled. "And besides, I reckon she turned out pretty well, considering."

"If you think I'm going to let my daughter—"

"What the bloody hell is all this noise?" snapped a voice as the door slammed open—and the devil walked in.

The devil, a tall man dressed in black with pale blond hair and eyes like holes in ice. He moved like a predator, sneered at the assembled company, and had an aura of power and death that strangled the breath in Bael's throat.

This man...

Flashes of red-hot anger and brilliant purple lust shot through the darkness blanketing the man, and the air was full of screams, the scent of charred flesh, rivers of blood and pain and fear.

This man...

The devil stalked up to the brunette, caressed her face, and Bael actually *did* choke, because he was standing between the brunette and Chance and *he was the link between them*. Those eyes and that hair and the aura of power, lust and death. There were answering sparks from his queen and he knew—

The devil was Chance's father.

"Bael?" someone said, a faraway voice, and he scrambled to his feet, knocking over his chair, tripping over the legs and racing from the room, slamming through the door and hiding, sliding down the wall with his hands on his face against the horror.

"Bael?" said that voice again, and there was comfort in it but not enough.

"He killed them," he said, his voice shaking, his eyes seeing nothing but blood and death. "He slaughtered them, my people, Nasc, he did it for fun, he massacred them—"

"I know," Kett said, and her hand touched his shoulder.

"He killed so many of them," Bael said, the awfulness of it burning his eyes. "*And he's her father.*"

"I know," Kett said again, and he felt her sitting beside him on the floor. Her hand moved across his chest tentatively and he turned to her, pressing his face against her neck and holding her to him. Her skin was soft and her body was strong and she was warm, and she was his, and gradually his heart rate and his breathing slowed.

"You knew," he said, looking up at her, still shaking.

"I thought everyone knew," she said, concern in her silver eyes. "I thought everyone had heard of Striker."

"Yes, but I didn't think he was real," Bael said. "He's like a story to scare small children."

"And why should that mean he's not real?"

Bael closed his eyes, but mutilated flesh reared in his vision and he snapped them open again, gasping.

"What?" Kett asked, alarmed as he clung to her tighter.

"I can see it," he said. "What he did, he didn't just kill them, he — he —"

"Yeah," Kett said. "He did."

"No, you don't understand, he —"

"Bael, I've known Striker since I was a teenager. Believe me, I understand."

He looked back up at her, disbelieving.

"He's a friend of my father's," she said. "He and my dad and Chalia went to school together."

"Chalia?"

"Chance's mother — my dad's sister. Sitting next to Chance in there? She stood up for you. That's why she called him Prowler, it's a school nickname."

Bael nodded numbly. Then he said, "*School? Striker was a child?*"

"So they tell me. Can't see it myself, but there you go."

She held him for a while, not saying anything, just being there, being close, being what he needed. *And she doubts she's my mate*, Bael thought, tracing the line of her jaw with his fingers. Her gaze searched his face, her mouth moving in what might have been a reassuring smile on someone who was more used to being kind.

"Is that how — They said my queen was dead, that the Federación had killed her. Is that how she came back? Striker?"

Kett's mouth tightened into a grim line at the mention of the Federación, and she nodded. Had she heard of their atrocities too? The things they did to Nasc, to shapeshifters and psychics. The things they'd do to *him* if they ever found out who he was. What he was.

He shuddered. What he was. Kett was surely going to find out sooner or later — and what if she didn't know to keep it secret? What if she let it slip and they came for him? What if they took her too, and hurt her, and —

Bael took a deep breath and let it out before he collapsed into hysterics again. "I have to tell you something." Kett raised her eyebrows questioningly, and he swallowed. "And you can't tell anyone else."

"I won't tell anyone you had a nervous breakdown," she said, and her eyes sparkled a bit as she said it.

Bael smiled, which he guessed had been her intention, and shifted to lean back against the wall.

"I'm a Nasc Mage," he said.

Her face showed a total lack of comprehension.

"I— My animal isn't fixed. It can be pretty much anything," he explained.

"So?"

"So, every adult Nasc has a fixed animal twin. It can be anything when you're a child, but as you get older it settles, and then one day you realize it can't change and that's when you know you're an adult."

"Explains why you act like a child sometimes," Kett muttered.

"Only my animal never settled," he went on. "And that's the sign of a Mage."

She was silent a moment, then asked, "It can really be anything?"

"Pretty much. And I have power — magical power, but it's not...I was never trained, so most of it's useless." He rolled his head to look at her. "There was no one to train me. My parents were dead and Striker..."

This time understanding dawned in her eyes. "Striker stole his power from other people," she said. "He went rampaging and sucked magic from everyone he found with any talent."

Bael nodded. "And I was just a kid, I didn't have much, so he didn't notice me. The only people left now with any power have so little of it they can't teach me anything." He thought bitterly of Albhar, unable to do more than the simplest spells, barely possessing enough power to light a candle. "But sometimes...recently...I feel things or see things —"

"Like Striker killing all those Nasc?"

He shuddered and nodded.

"I'm sorry," Kett said, and there was sincerity in her voice.

"And — is it true, about him bringing Chance back to life?" She nodded again. "The people who killed her..."

"The Federación. Euskaran group. Lunatics. I've had a couple of run-ins with them myself."

His fingers tightened around hers. "They're...well, they're worse than Striker."

"No one's worse than Striker," Kett said.

"Yeah? They kidnapped the king's sister. They've taken Nasc before. Were-creatures too. Psychics. Magi. They do terrible things to them. So you can't tell anyone I'm a Mage. Please, Kett. No one. They killed my queen —"

"But Striker brought her back. He's not with the Federación. Believe me."

It's not him I'm worried about. Well, mostly not.

"Why did he do it?" Bael asked. "All those Nasc. You know him, why did he — why didn't anyone stop him?"

"No one can," Kett said simply. "As for the why...he did it because it was fun."

Bael felt sick. "Torturing and killing innocent people — children, even — that's *fun*?"

"It is to him." Kett shrugged. "You have to understand, Striker isn't like normal people."

"No shit."

"But look. He's formed a sort of...well, treaty, I suppose, with Dark. He won't harm any more Nasc. He gave his word."

"Oh, and he'll keep it?"

"Yeah," Kett said. "He will. He might be a psychopath, but he doesn't lie and he doesn't break his promises. Weird but true. Besides, if he did it'd upset Chance, and that would upset her mother, and when she's upset she withholds sex, and Striker will do anything for sex."

"I'm sure he could find someone else."

"No," Kett said with certainty. "Believe me when I say he'll do anything to keep her."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I've seen what happens when he loses her." Kett looked like she was going to say something else, then thought better of it and stood. "Come on. Eat breakfast. Ignore Striker."

"I'm not sure I can." Those eyes, that power, it was like barbed wire —

"Don't be a wimp," Kett said, and the scorn in her voice brought him back to normality.

He smiled.

Chapter Twelve

Since Kett couldn't see her father welcoming Bael back into the room, and she just didn't want the hassle with Striker, she took him out for breakfast. There was a greasy spoon perched high above the city on the viaduct bringing the river through Elvyrn, out of the way of most tourists but in a prime spot for the men bringing their cargo along the river to the west docks.

While the cold wind whipped snow along the viaduct, the inside of the café was warm, the windows steamed over, the air thick with the smell of fried food.

"Eat," Kett said to Bael, in the mood to be kind since he'd had a fairly large shock. She ordered him a large plate of everything, then another for herself since she'd left her food congealing on Nuala's breakfast table.

"What is this?" he asked, poking at something big and yellow with his fork.

"Dodo egg."

"Oh." Experimentally, he dipped a finger of toast in the yolk. "Var was a dodo once. They're pretty boring."

They are. I've been one too. Kett got stuck into her fried venroots. "I didn't figure you for a wolf." At his look, she explained, "Last night. You were a wolf. It didn't seem...you."

Bael raised his eyebrows. "What is 'me'?"

"I don't bloody know, do I?" Kett said, annoyed. "A toad or something."

He grinned. "Ah, see, right there. I thought you were being too nice."

"All right, next time you throw a hissy fit, I'll point and laugh." She downed some coffee. "I know what effect Striker has on people. I've seen it before."

"Have you seen what he's done?" Bael asked, staring at his plate, his mouth grim.

"Firsthand." His head shot up and her eyes met his. "I've known him since I was sixteen, Bael. He's the one who brought me to my father in the first place. I've seen him make a sword out of fire and cut a man in half with it. I've seen him send a whole castle into flames, incinerating everyone inside. I've seen him laugh while he slaughtered people, like a child playing. I've smelled the charred flesh. I've seen him take life and occasionally, when it suits him, I've seen him give it. Believe me when I say I know exactly what Striker's done."

She started eating again but Bael was looking at her, rather disconcertingly. Kett shoved a large piece of bacon into her mouth and chewed, but he was still watching.

"What?" she asked through the food.

"Who flogged you?"

She narrowed her eyes and kept on eating.

"Come on, Kett. I can't see you being the type to enjoy being whipped, and anyway, those scars are way too deep for anything fun."

Kett swallowed. "Know a lot about whipping, do you?"

Bael gave her a grin that, annoyingly, made certain bits of her rather warm. "A little bit." His grin faded. "And those are serious flogging marks. Must have hurt like hell."

"It did."

"Who did it?"

"Nosy bastard, ain'tcha?"

Bael's hand covered hers. "Kett—I know you don't believe me, and you don't want this and you're fighting it, but you *are* my mate. And if anyone ever hurts you, I will rip out his innards and shove them down his throat."

His eyes were burning, fiercer than she'd ever seen, and for the first time in a long time, Kett was a little afraid.

"Thanks," she said, pulling her hand back. "Good to know."

Bael looked down at his food, then said, "I heard a rumor you were in the army."

Her brows went up. "From?"

"Your sister's boyfriend. Lot of rumors about you, Kett."

"Discount any of them that say I'm sane."

Bael grinned, and Kett wished she'd said something else. "Sergeant Almet, Royal First of Foot."

Bael tilted his head to one side. "Sergeant?"

"Yeah, and that didn't come easy, I can tell you. Peneggan's got equality laws, but it also has a fuckload of fossils running the place." She dipped some bacon in her egg. "You know, there were only two other women in the army at the time, and one of them was the Lyonette."

"The...?"

"Lyonette. Heir to the throne. Mostly a figurehead. They're too scared to let her fight." Remembering her fierce step-cousin, Kett snorted. "More fool them. The other woman was in logistics or something. Of course, that's not counting nurses. Nursing is a *proper* job for women."

"Right." Bael watched her eat, his own food apparently forgotten. "So what did you do?"

"Marched, dug trenches, you know."

"No," he laughed, "I mean to get flogged."

"Oh." Kett narrowed her eyes again. "I...assaulted a superior officer." Bael raised his eyebrows and she clarified, "I ripped his balls off."

Bael flinched visibly. "Ripped...?"

Kett made a tearing motion with her free hand. Of course, at the time she'd used claws, but he didn't need to know that.

"He deserved it," she said, shrugging. "He did try to rape me." She looked up at Bael to see if that dark look was back in his eyes again, but instead he was shaking his head.

"What the fuck was wrong with him? I mean—hell, Kett, when was this?"

"About ten years ago."

"I can't see you being a weakling then. You were the only woman in a combat role in the Peneggan army, right? Bet they were merciless with you. And you're hardly a pushover at the best of times. What the fuck was wrong with that guy that he thought he could rape you? Did he at least have a weapon?"

"Briefly," Kett said, and they shared a smile. It warmed her more than it should have. If Bael had gone all possessive on her, she might have been able to dismiss him. But this?

He seemed proud of her. It wasn't something Kett was particularly used to.

This was actually...kind of nice.

She shook herself. Kind of nice was not something she wanted from Bael. She didn't want anything from Bael. In point of fact—

"I said I wanted three eggs, over easy, and four sausages, you fucking numbskull, not three sausages and four fried fucking eggs!"

The loud voice was accompanied by a crash, and a woman's sharp gasp. Kett met Bael's eyes.

"I've never seen a fried fucking egg," he said easily. "Possibly we should investigate."

Kett gave him a smile that had little to do with kindness and rolled to her feet, fork in hand, turning to face the table behind her own.

Four large men sat there, burly with fat and muscle, unshaven, grimy, stinking of fish. Traders from the river. They were all laughing at the waitress, a dumpy girl with a red face, who was now wearing the fried eggs all over her dress and half apron. The shattered pieces of the plate rocked at her feet.

"Y-you said four eggs and three sausages," she whispered.

"Don't think I fucking did." The main bully had a shaven head covered with a tattoo of a leering fish. Kett was impressed—she didn't think fish could leer.

"I think you did," Bael said from beside Kett. He offered the trader a friendly smile, but Kett could feel the tension in his body. There was a miniature crossbow hanging from her belt, a present from Tane, and she casually rested her hand on it.

The trader rose to his feet, his smile fading. He was built like a mountain, tall and broad, his neck about the same width as Kett's waist. He towered over Bael, who wasn't precisely tiny himself.

The café went completely silent. A couple near the door slipped outside, and for a moment the howling wind was the only sound in the room.

"What did you say?" the trader grunted.

"I think she brought you what you ordered," Bael said, smiling at the terrified waitress.

The trader's three friends rose to their feet.

"Where's your boss, love?" Kett asked the waitress, and the woman pointed to a skinny man with a pencil moustache, cowering by the kitchen door. He didn't look like he'd be a lot of help.

"Okay," Kett sighed. She turned to the trader, who was glowering at a still-smiling Bael. "Here's how it's going to happen. You're going to apologize to her, pay for your meal and walk out. All right?"

The trader turned his squinty eyes on her. "Don't you fucking tell me what to do, *woman*," he spat, making the word an insult, and Kett ached to jam her fork into his crotch.

"Not smart," Bael said. "Really not smart. You don't know who she is, do you?"

Kett flicked her eyes at him in sudden panic. No one ever believed she was her father's daughter, and even if this monkey did, she didn't expect it would do much but make him laugh.

"She is *my* woman," Bael said, pride in his voice, "and if you insult *her*, you insult *me*."

The trader peered down at Bael, breathed through his nose for a moment then roared with laughter. His big friends joined in.

Bael continued to smile pleasantly but Kett saw his outline shimmer slightly. Then, like water flowing to fill a shape, Var separated from Bael and took the form of a smallish tiger.

A tiger with canines the length of Kett's forearm.

As if someone had stolen his voice, the trader stopped laughing, and under the laughter of his friends came the low growl of the sabertooth. It rose in pitch as the traders fell silent.

"And Var probably wouldn't be very happy about it either," Bael added conversationally.

"Don't let him kill anyone," Kett murmured, but she knew the traders could hear her. "The ngardaí cells are bloody freezing this time of year and my dad's probably not inclined to get us out immediately."

She let that sink in then turned to the waitress, who was doing a decent impression of a statue. "How much do they owe, love?"

"Seven and six," the woman whispered.

"And a decent tip. Couple of sovereigns should do it," Kett added to the trader, who was staring in horror at Var and the drool dripping from his fangs. Kett was pretty sure he was drooling over the sausages under the table, but she wasn't about to let on.

"Pay," Bael said, and the man fumbled for coins, scattering a handful on the table. Much more than he owed.

"Leave," Kett said, but the door was already opening, and two broad-shouldered young gardaí stood there.

"Now then," said the taller of them. "We've been told there was a disturbance going on here."

"They got a wild animal," said one of the traders quickly, pointing at Var, who leaned against Bael's legs and purred.

"City ordinances state—" began the shorter of the guards.

"He's not going to hurt anyone," Kett said, and shot a warning glance at Bael. "Is he?"

"Not unless he has a reason to," Bael said insolently, watching the traders edging toward the door.

"What's been going on here?" asked the taller garda, eyeing Kett's crossbow. "You got a permit for that?"

The other one said, "I'm going to call for backup."

"Call Captain Tanner," Kett said, because he was a friend of her family and a reasonable man. He also had a sense of humor.

"Call the captain out for this?" asked the taller garda as his companion took out his scryer. "On his day off? More'n my life's worth."

"Well, then who's the duty sergeant?" she asked, hoping and praying he wasn't going to say Lya.

"DS Lya," he said, and Kett figured she might as well hold her wrists out to be cuffed straight away. Lya was a great garda and her father's best friend, but as soon as Bael saw her, she knew he'd give up being reasonable.

Lya was a kelf.

* * * * *

Bael wasn't sure who this Lya person was to make Kett suddenly look so dejected. He was enjoying himself immensely, and he hadn't even had to hit anyone yet. The four traders had taken their seats again and were refusing to look at either him or Kett or the gardaí or the waitress. This meant they could only look at each other, which Bael figured was punishment enough.

One of the gardaí took out a scryer, like the little rock device Jarven had used, to call his superior and complain about "that bloody Almet girl again".

Bael laughed so hard he had to sit down.

But when the superior turned up, he stopped laughing. Var, who'd been sitting quietly while Bael fed him sausages, suddenly started growling.

It was a kelf.

Bael stared, but there was no mistaking it. Four feet tall, with bright blue skin and green hair, it wore human clothes but that was its only nod to fitting in. The creature had bare feet—because who would make shoes to fit feet with three long frog toes? Its huge eyes were all iris with no whites, like those of a cat.

It carried a short sword in one three-fingered hand and a garda badge in the other.

How did something that tiny kill my mother?

"Uh, Kett," Bael said, nudging her, and she turned from arguing quietly with the café's owner. She saw the kelf and groaned.

"Look, I'm not *actually* going to shoot anybody," she said.

"Aye, but the threat's enough," the kelf replied. It had an accent like a Zemlyan kelf, but that was impossible. Kelfs couldn't cross the Wall. They just couldn't. It was why there were no kelfs in Peneggan. Why he *liked* Peneggan. No kelfs lived here indigenously and they couldn't migrate.

It was impossible.

"Kett," he said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Did I eat something funky, or is that a kelf?"

"She's a kelf," she said, as if he'd asked her what a particular kind of sausage was called.

"And...we're still in Elvyrn?"

She sighed, her patience clearly short. "It's a long story," she said, and flicked her eyes irritably at Var, who continued to emit a low, rolling growl. "Can you shut him up?"

"It's a kelf."

"Yes, well done." She turned back to the owner. "Look, you got big guys like that coming in here, straight off the river, ain't seen a woman for weeks, of course they're gonna cause trouble. You need to start standing up for your staff."

The kelf watched her with a smile. "Giving legal advice, Kett?"

"Hardly. I've just had it with stupid men attacking stupid women. Do you need to be here?"

"You're causing a breach of the peace."

"Kett is a breach of the peace," Bael muttered, and the kelf gave him a sharp look. He'd forgotten how acute their hearing was.

"And you are?"

"I am," he replied.

"Bael, stop pissing around," Kett snapped.

"It's a kelf," Bael said. "What the hell is it doing dressed as a garda?"

For the second time that day, the café went totally silent.

"She *is* a garda," Kett said. "Moreover, she's a sergeant."

"And I could put you in the cells for that," said the kelf.

"Just you fucking try," Bael snarled, and Kett threw out her arm to hold him back.

The kelf continued to regard him calmly, its huge eyes unblinking. Bael swore at it and Kett's expression grew stonier.

They avoided being arrested, mostly because the kelf seemed to be a friend of hers. Bael vaguely remembered Kett saying her father was a great friend of the kelfs, so maybe that was why.

But even after the traders had been sent on their way, the gardaí had dispersed and he and Kett released, he still couldn't get an answer out of her about the kelf. Halfway up the hill toward Nuala's, she snapped, "Look, you'll have to ask Lya, all right?"

"Lya?"

"Detective Sergeant Lya. The kelf."

"But how is it —"

"*She*."

"All right, she. How is *she* here?"

"Ask her."

"You know I hate kelfs."

"Yeah, but why? And don't give me that crap about them not liking Nasc. That's no excuse to not like them back."

"Bloody is."

"Bloody *isn't*, Bael." She stopped to glare at him in the middle of the street. "Look, I've had enough of this. I knew you were going to react like this when she turned up. This morning you told me you're a Nasc Mage. Well, you don't fucking *act* like a Mage, you act like a child. And you wonder why I don't want to be your mate. I don't do children."

With that, she spun on her heel and stalked off, leaving Bael slightly bewildered, not to mention a little turned on, because Kett stalking was a damn sexy sight.

But self-preservation kicked in and he realized that saying so would probably earn him a kick somewhere sensitive, so he walked after her at a slower pace, thinking.

* * * * *

He found her in her room, packing a kitbag with a few clothes and a lot of weapons. "Going somewhere?"

"Home."

Okay. He sat down on the bed and watched. “Kett,” he said after a while. “Listen. I know you like kelfs, and your father is this great friend of theirs, but they just don’t like Nasc. Ask your cousin. They hate us.”

“What, every kelf hates every Nasc?”

“As far as I can tell, yes. They think we’re unnatural, that we mess with the natural order of things.”

“*You* mess with any kind of order,” Kett grumbled.

“You know what I mean. They serve humans, but they consider themselves better than animals. And we’re halfway between the two.”

“Shouldn’t that make you their equals?”

“You wanna sit down with a kelf and debate this? They cross the street to avoid us. They deliberately ignore our requests. And you saw that kelf in Nihon, it shot me —”

“You tried to pounce on it!”

“Yeah, but tell me this, if you or your friend Miho had pounced on it, would it have shot you?”

Kett just glared at him.

“They might not be violent toward humans —”

“A kelf would never hurt a human,” Kett said, as simply as if she was stating that grass was green.

“But they’d hurt a Nasc.”

“Only if provoked. Severely provoked.”

“One of them killed my mother,” Bael said — and Kett went very still for a moment.

“Impossible,” she said. “They don’t hurt —”

“Humans, yes, I know. But my mother wasn’t human, was she? She was Nasc.”

Kett folded a shirt, unfolded and refolded it, and then threw it down on the bed and stared at him.

Of course, Albhar had come up with a new theory, but Bael was having trouble believing him. Albhar wanted the shapeshifter for his own ends; if it really had killed Bael’s mother, he’d have said so years ago.

No, it had been the kelf. Bael was sure of it.

“It was serving my parents,” he said. “I never met it. I rarely spent much time with them when they were away — and they spent a lot of time away. All I knew was that my father sent word my mother had been killed in an accident. When he came home, he told me it had been their serving kelf. I believed him — hell, I’m a Nasc, kelfs have never been exactly kind to me — but no one else did.”

Kett sat down on the bed beside him and Bael reached for her hand. How could he explain this to her? She thought he had the emotional maturity of a child. Well, maybe he did, because he’d only been a child when his father had confided this bombshell

news to him. And Bael had accepted, had believed, and a bond had been forged between them. The only bond they'd ever really had.

"My father and I were never close. I told you my parents were brilliant, always haring off all over the Realm, all over all the Realms, to investigate some phenomenon or other. They were both Magi, but since I didn't demonstrate much talent they weren't all that interested in me. When I told my father I believed him, it was the first thing we'd ever had in common. The first time he'd taken an interest in me. He used to sit there and go on about this treacherous kelf, and how stupid humans were to believe their innocent, friendly act. And I was just a kid, I didn't even know any kelfs, so I agreed with him because..."

"Because you were a kid who wanted his father's approval," Kett said dully, and Bael shrugged.

"The thing was, I didn't even like my father all that much. I barely knew him. Or my mother. But then...I don't know, then I started to show some magical power and then he got really interested in me and...well, it was nice to have someone pay some attention to me, you know?"

"Bael, everyone pays attention to you. You're like an inferno."

"Thank you," he said, choosing to believe this meant she thought he was extremely hot, not extremely unpredictable and destructive. "I think. But listen. I know everyone else thinks kelfs are great and friendly and helpful and everything, but you go and ask my king. They just don't like us. And if you've spent your life being told that kelfs don't like you, to the extent that one of them murdered your mother, then it's hard to see them as nice, sweet little helpmates. Especially when they don't do anything to persuade you otherwise."

Kett sighed.

"Look," he said. "I'm sorry I behaved like a child. I'll try, all right? I'll try to be nice to them."

"To kelfs?"

He nodded. It was clearly important to her, so he could at least try.

Kett, her right hand still held by Bael, rubbed her face with her left. "I just can't get a handle on you," she said. "You're like mercury. You keep changing."

"I'm a Mage," Bael said. "My animal's never fixed. And Nasc tend to become animals that represent them—"

"Are you saying you're a schizophrenic because you're a Mage, or a Mage because you're schizophrenic?"

He gave her a half smile. "A little from column A and a little from column B."

She gave him a half smile back, and when he put his arm around her and rested his head on her shoulder, she didn't resist.

"Bael," she said after a little while. "I have to get away from here. If not home then somewhere else. Can't spend that much time with my family. They do my head in."

And yet she kept coming back to them. Kett wasn't as immune to the pull of family as she thought she was.

"Isn't that what families are for?"

"I dunno." She scratched her nose. "You may have noticed I don't exactly blend in with them."

"You couldn't blend in anywhere," Bael said. And when she scowled at him, he grinned and clarified, "You're like silver and gold in a heap of scrap metal."

"Are you saying my family is scrap —"

"I'm paying you a compliment, woman." He kissed her softly. "Pay attention." Kett frowned but didn't contradict him. "Now listen. If you really want to get away from here, we can go somewhere. Did I tell you I have lots of money?"

"Did I tell you my stepmother's a princess?"

He grinned. "No, you didn't, I had to work it out for myself. What I meant was, I've got houses in all the Realms. We could go visit one of them. Where d'you fancy? Somewhere warm? I have a gorgeous villa in Qarat. Or somewhere cooler? I have a chalet in the Aegeani Mountains, just south of Vigazza. Think about it—snow swirling outside, lovely warm fire inside, hot spiced wine, you and me naked on a fur rug..."

Kett's eyes dropped. She shrugged. "If you'd like."

Bael raised his eyebrows. She wasn't fighting him? Well, maybe this was progress.

Or maybe she was up to something.

"Cool," he said, and kissed her again. She didn't fight it, so he chanced it and ran his hand down her back, feeling the ridges of her scars—*I'll kill the bastard who tried to rape her, I'll fucking murder him*—then slid around to cup her breast.

He kissed her neck and she let him. He slid his hand under her shirt, pulled down the cup of her bra and fondled her nipple, and she let him. He pushed her back on the bed, tugged off her shirt and buried his face in her breasts, and she cradled his head to her.

"Okay," he looked up, "what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're not fighting me."

She gave him an uncomprehending look.

"You're just lying there and...letting me do whatever I want."

"It's not unpleasant," she said.

"Well, that's the idea, but...you don't seem to be exactly...with me."

She sighed, looking tired. "Bael, I don't want to fight. I'm tired, I had a late night, I nearly got arrested and I'm just...tired of fighting with you. Can we just once..."

"What?" he asked softly.

"Can we act like grown-ups?"

He looked down at her, this woman who did nothing but fight and fuck, the scars of her life displayed on her body. His fingers traced the curve of her breast. "What do you think we're doing?"

She looked up at him as if she wanted to say something, but instead curled her hand around his neck and pulled him down to kiss her.

Confused, but enjoying this softer side of Kett nonetheless, Bael kissed her back and let his hands roam over her body. She tugged at his shirt and he pulled it off, rolling to his back and taking her with him, skin against skin. Her body was taut, muscular and the skin on her back was ridged with scar tissue, but her breasts were soft, something feminine she couldn't hide.

She kissed his neck, his chest, his stomach, her fingers unfastening his fly as she went. She palmed his cock even as she headed south, following the line of hair down his belly to his erection, semi-hard already.

After she'd wrapped her lips around it, licked up and down the length and sucked it deep into her mouth, it was quickly very hard.

"Gods, you're good at that," Bael gasped, and she raised her head, her eyes dancing, before she moved away to shuck the rest of her clothes. Bael followed suit, but had only gotten as far as kicking off his boots before she was back, straddling him and sinking down onto his cock.

"You're good at that too," he moaned, running his hands over her hips, up her rib cage, thumbing her nipples and pulling her down to him. He kissed her, long and deep, as she moved on him, her cunt slick and tight.

It was different, so different, to all the other times. There was no urgency, no pushing and fighting. The anger that seemed to pulse in Kett day and night felt banked, leashed, as she rose and fell, her eyes closed, her body soft and yielding.

Her pussy squeezed him tight and Bael came, gasping her name, gripping her shoulders. She fell against him, her skin damp, her breathing tight, and he held her for a moment, almost indescribably glad to have her.

He kissed her neck, brushed her tangled hair aside and licked the sweat from her skin. Kett shuddered, her pussy tightening around him for a second. Bael slid his hands down her back, stroked her buttocks and delved down to caress the folds of her pussy where they were stretched around his girth.

He kissed her mouth then slid from her, pushing her gently to her back and kissing her stomach. Kett tensed but they both knew where this was going, and when he dipped his head between her legs and ran his tongue around her engorged clit, her breathing quickened.

He could taste himself on her. In fact she was full of his come, dripping with it. Bael lapped it up, the mixture both tart and salty on his tongue. When he'd licked every last drop of his own come, she was still dripping wet, her pussy throbbing with heat as he drove his fingers inside and lapped at her clit.

She came with a gasp, gripping him with her thighs, and he stayed there, licking her until she relaxed.

Then he held her until she drifted into sleep, warm and soft in his arms, a different woman from the one he knew.

Chapter Thirteen

Jarven had sent one of the smaller dragons down to fly Kett and Bael to the Third Bridge between Peneggan and Euskara. She'd agreed to the chalet in the southern Aegeani Mountains, which would be a two-day trip including an overnight stop before they reached southern Sisilia. Not that Kett was planning on getting that far. Wherever they stopped for the first night, there ought to be a tavern or a whorehouse or something she could use to her advantage.

She piloted the dragon in silence, and Bael seemed to understand she didn't want to be distracted.

The thing was, now that she'd thought of a plan and had an opportunity to set it in motion, Bael had...changed. All right, his attitude toward kelfs was still unacceptable, but...well, maybe it was at least understandable.

This morning when he'd told her that he was a Nasc Mage—whatever the hell that meant—it had revealed a vulnerability she hadn't seen before. His anger over the men who'd kidnapped her, his admiration for the way she'd dealt with the slimy bastard who'd tried to rape her and his account of his father's treatment made Kett wonder if she'd misjudged him.

Or if he was tying it on to gain her sympathy.

Either way, neither of them said much as they flew south and passed through the Bridge to Euskara. The dragon had to be left behind, and all that awaited them in Euskara was a series of rickety-looking wooden coaches, manned by kelfs giving Bael shifty looks. The cold wind howled 'round them and Kett shivered as she tried to get a price for the trip south.

"Okay, this is impossible," she said after the third polite refusal. "None of these kelfs'll even make eye contact with you, and we've got to go way too far south to make it by boat." Maybe she should have chosen the villa in Qarat. At least that way she could have checked out the Nihon caves on her way home.

Bael nodded sympathetically then added as if it wasn't much of an idea, "Or we could fly."

"Yeah, but I ain't got wings," said Kett, and for the moment at least that was true.

Bael was scratching his chin. "You're right," he said. "You know, it's a shame you don't know anyone with, say, a gryphon."

"They ain't got 'em here," Kett said. "Crappy Realm, I hate this place."

"Really?" Bael asked. "So what's that then?"

Something made a clacking noise behind her and Kett froze. The extra animal senses she'd regained with her fluidity told her there was a large creature behind her where there'd been none a second ago.

She turned—and there was a full-sized gryphon standing there, pawing the ground. It nodded its eagle head at her.

She looked back to Bael, who winked, and felt a smile break out.

"All right, you've made your point," she said, and he laughed and swung his arm around her waist to kiss her. "But we can't go by gryphon, it'd raise too many eyebrows."

"Dragon then."

"Ain't got them here either."

"Well, what do you want to fly on?" Hooves stamped the ground behind Kett, and she turned to see a winged horse there, tall and black and beautiful. "I saw one of these in a zoo once."

"Where?"

"I don't bloody know, you want me to search my pockets for the ticket? Just get on."

Kett did, expecting Bael to join her, but he stood by Var, closed his eyes and touched the horse's neck.

The two of them shimmered, which was not altogether unpleasant with the horse between her thighs, and then Bael disappeared.

She *felt* him as part of the horse. It was eerie.

"Right then, Baelvar," she said. "Off we go."

The wingspan of the flying horse was more than ten feet. Up high in the air it was freezing cold, especially as they went over the mountains, and Kett crouched close against Var's neck, shivering, trying to absorb the heat of his body. He was rarely cold, she realized, even in human form, always a few degrees warmer than everyone else.

Well, maybe that was because he was just so damn hot.

He came down to land on a snowy peak, and separated into human and beast once again.

"Why've we stopped?" Kett asked, still on Var's back. Bael, she noticed, by some Nasc trick, was still clothed in the things he'd been wearing before.

"Because you're freezing," Bael said. He indicated the rucksack Kett wore. "Put more clothes on."

"I'm fine," she lied, her face so cold she almost couldn't speak.

"No, you're not." He came closer, rubbed her arms with his hands. Kett was wearing the leather jacket she'd left Elvyrn in, a scarf tied around her neck.

"Did you bring your fur parka?" Bael asked, and Kett nodded. She was too cold to unsling the pack and get it out, but Bael did it for her, his movements surprisingly gentle as he wrapped it around her and fastened it up as if he was dressing a child.

"Better?"

She nodded, her teeth chattering, and Bael took her hands in his. "You need more than fingerless gloves," he said.

"They do me all right at home."

"But you're not at home, darling, you're on top of a fucking mountain." He dug in the kitbag slung around Var's neck and brought out a pair of mittens.

"Sexy," Kett said.

"You know what else is sexy?" Bael asked, putting them on her hands. "Frostbite."

"Hah."

He grinned and kissed her cold nose. "When we get down from here I'll warm you up properly," he promised, heat in his eyes, and if Kett hadn't been afraid of frostbitten nipples she'd have suggested a quick shag there and then.

They touched down in the foothills of northern Sisilia as it was turning dark, and Var folded away his wings to become a normal horse for Kett to ride into town. She found an inn, cheekily sent him to the stables for a rubdown and ordered hot water to be sent to her room. Her leg was aching, protesting the extreme cold and stiffness from sitting too long in one position.

Bael found her twenty minutes later, massaging life back into her leg as she sat in the tub by the fire.

There was straw in his hair.

"I fly you across the Realm," he complained, "and this is the thanks I get."

Kett looked him up and down. He was rumpled, tired and dirty, and in the low light he looked sexy as hell.

"The thanks you get," she said, "are here in this tub."

This time Bael looked *her* over. He smiled slowly. "You bet they are," he said, taking off his coat and kicking off his shoes. Kett watched him undress at the speed of sound, licking her lips, grateful the hot water had warmed up the parts of her that had been too cold to feel anything.

"These thanks, how many of them are there?"

"Multiple," Kett said, eyeing his bare chest.

"That's what I like to hear."

"Yes, I thought you might."

Clothes thrown all over the room, Bael stepped into the tub, which wasn't particularly big, and sloshed water all over the floor.

"Hey!" Kett protested, and he pulled her against him.

"Gonna be a lot more of that spilled by the time I've had my multiples," Bael said, nuzzling her neck.

"Can men have multiples?" Kett asked, because in all her vast experience she'd never known it to be true.

"I don't know. Want to find out?"

He kissed her, shifting her more comfortably in his arms, and Kett moved her legs to straddle him, wincing slightly as her right thigh twinged.

"Your leg okay?" asked Bael.

"Five by five," Kett lied. "Just need to get some movement back into it."

"Ah." He grinned. "I can help with that."

"I thought you'd say that."

The small tub was restrictive and discomfort soon outweighed arousal for Kett. She leaned back, frustrated, and said, "Okay, we need more space."

"Sure," Bael said, starting to move.

"But first, you need to get cleaner."

He didn't argue, but let her soap his arms and chest. Then his stomach. Then, teasing him, Kett smoothed her hands down his thighs, stroking and caressing all the way down to his feet.

"You have nice feet," she told him.

"Thank you," he said, voice slightly strained.

"And calves."

"Uh-huh."

"And thighs. I really like your thighs."

Bael just nodded, because she was stroking back up said body parts as she spoke, moving closer and closer to his groin. Under the soapy water she couldn't really see where her hands were going, so she had to feel her way.

Her wrist brushed the hot tip of his erection and Bael sucked in a breath.

"And I really," Kett said, letting her fingers trail up the insides of his thighs, "like this bit of you."

Bael bit his lip, nodding tightly, and Kett had to smile.

"I think you're clean enough," she said, standing up, and he moaned. Suddenly grabbing her by the hips, he buried his face between her legs and slid his tongue between her pussy lips. Kett's leg buckled and Bael held her up, grinning.

"Gods alive, don't do that!" she gasped.

"Well, if you insist," he said, eyes sparkling.

"Well, not without warning, anyway."

Bael stood up, helped her out of the tub and picked up a towel, but Kett was fired up and didn't want a towel rubbing her off. She wanted Bael. Wrapping her arms

around him, she pressed her wet body against his and kissed him long and deep, her tongue sliding against his, her fingers tangling in his damp hair.

His whole body was hard and so hot. Rubbing her breasts against the light hair on his chest, she ground her belly against his throbbing erection. Bael growled, she nipped his lip and he cupped her ass with both hands, lifting her up so she stood on her toes and fitting her pussy against the length of his cock.

Kett lifted her leg to rub against his but lost her balance, pulling Bael with her and falling against the wall. The plaster was cold and rough against her back, but Bael was hot against her front, kissing her neck and palming her breasts. His hips thrust against hers, rubbing his cock against her wet folds but not entering her.

"Here," she murmured, her voice thick. "Fuck me right here."

"Gods, yes," Bael grunted, and slid the head of his cock down, so slowly it made Kett moan, until he pushed against her entrance.

Then he shoved inside her, and she cried out.

Lifting her up, he settled her against the wall to thrust into her, his movements steady, his eyes hot on hers.

"Gods, Kett," he ground out. "I could fuck you forever."

Breathless, Kett just nodded.

"And I will," he told her, licking and biting her neck. "Because you're my mate, and I'm so damn glad you are, because I don't want to fuck anyone else. Not ever."

Like a slap from a wet flannel, that killed Kett's lust. *I don't want a mate. I don't want to be tied to anyone. I don't want anyone forever.*

He captured her mouth, kissing her sweetly as he drove into her hard, and Kett let him seduce her. *One last time*, she told herself, as he came inside her and she drew him over to the bed. Bael settled down to lick her pussy and she held him to her, determined to enjoy it.

* * * * *

"I need to go out after breakfast," she told Bael in the morning. He lay there looking sleepy, tousled and warm, and so fuckable she almost backed out of her plan.

"I'll come with you."

"No. It's—" Shit, she'd spent all night trying to think of an excuse he wouldn't muscle in on, and all she could think of was, "It's a, uh, female stuff."

As far as Kett was concerned, it was as bad as playing the helpless female, but she'd never known it to fail. Bael nodded quickly and said, "Sure, whatever you need. I'll wait here, shall I? Will you be long?"

"I don't know. I also need to do a favor for Chance," Kett improvised.

Her instructors at Koskwim had always told her that one day she'd find herself in a situation where wit and intelligence were required, rather than snarling at someone and threatening to bite their bollocks off. This appeared to be such a day.

When Bael looked expectant, she added, "Striker stuff. You don't want to know. I'll be gone all day."

Bael made a face. "I'll come with you."

"You? And how will you help? You're terrified of anything to do with Striker and you'll probably just get into trouble beating up someone's kelfs."

"You said they treat them horribly here anyway. They'd probably like me for it."

"Well, you're still not coming. Stay here."

Bael saluted. "Sir, yes sir!"

It has to be like this, she told herself as she got dressed. *It's better for us both*. Last night had been beautiful, but she couldn't risk the rest of her life on "beautiful". Sooner or later Bael would screw her over, like all her other lovers had.

And if he didn't, then the inevitable Curse of Kett would fall on him and get him hurt or killed or whatever else the gods could think of.

End it now, before it's too late.

She ordered a massive breakfast and Bael did the same, whispering across the table what he wanted to do to her as soon as the meal was over. Forking up a slice of sautéed drac, a flying sea serpent that tasted vaguely like dodo meat, he slid his other hand under the table and caressed her thigh.

"I'm going to lick you until you scream, and then lick you some more," he murmured. "I love licking you out. Love the taste of your cream on my tongue."

Kett gritted her teeth and forced herself to think of Treegan scores.

"I'm going to find a mirror and fuck you in front of it so we can both watch," Bael said, his finger edging up her thigh, perilously close to where Kett was doing a very bad job of keeping her arousal in check. "Stand behind you and slide in and out of that delicious little pussy of yours."

"Stop," Kett said, fixing him with a cold glare. "I'm trying to eat my breakfast and you're putting me off."

Bael looked a little taken aback, but he removed his hand and changed the subject.

As soon as she'd finished eating, Kett stood up, scraping her chair back, and said, "I'm going. Try to stay out of trouble."

"Sure I can't come with you?" Bael asked, catching her hand. "I'd really like to. Come," he added, looking up at her with molten green eyes. Kett snatched her hand back before she could succumb.

"I don't want you to," she snapped. And added, "Come."

She turned and stalked away, ducking and weaving through the streets in case Bael tried to follow. When she failed to pick up his scent, she headed toward the flea market and made some purchases.

Ducking out of sight behind a commercial stable, she took out her scryer and concentrated on Tyra, the Order's librarian.

"I need something to knock a man out," she said without preamble.

"Right hook should do it," Tyra replied, barely looking up from her paperwork.

"No, I mean something I can slip into his drink. Something to make him think he's drunk."

"Try alcohol," Tyra said. "Kett, I'm very busy —"

"And something that will make him lose his sense of smell," Kett added. "Just temporarily, when he wakes up." She didn't want to do Bael any lasting damage. "I'm in northern Sisilia."

Tyra frowned at her. She crossed to a filing cabinet in the massive, cave-like library and flicked through its contents.

"Anosmia," she murmured, taking out a card. "Cadmium is rather damaging in the long term —"

"No," Kett said firmly. "He needs to be fine. Just knocked out for a little while and have no sense of smell when he wakes up."

"And it must be something you can find in northern Sisilia?" Tyra asked. "Really, Kett. I do wish you'd do your own research."

"I do wish you'd develop a sense of humor," Kett snapped. "We've all got impossible dreams."

Tyra gave her a disapproving look but finally came up with a drug Kett could buy from an apothecary.

"And you're sure it won't really harm him?" Kett persisted. "The damage will only be temporary?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Tyra took off her spectacles. "Just what sort of mission are you on?"

"A personal one," Kett said, and in light of Tyra's helpfulness, neglected to add "bugger off" before she ended the call.

A short time later, she changed her shape to match her new clothes, plumping up her breasts to fall out of the slutty corset, making her feet smaller to fit into the battered heeled boots, filling out her hips to make the flounced skirts sway. She erased all her scars, changed her face enough to look like a different person and added a beauty mark for good luck.

One of her purchases had been a hand mirror, and she peered into it. Dammit, but she could never change the color of her eyes, and her hair was damn stubborn about staying curly. Well, maybe that was to her advantage.

Rolling her clothes into a bundle, she stowed them under a trough and tucked her last purchase, the packet of gray powder recommended by Tyra, into her skirt pocket.

"Showtime," she muttered to herself, and went back to the inn.

* * * * *

Bored within minutes, Bael wandered out to the stable yard to harass the kelfs a bit, then remembered Kett didn't like it and headed to the inn's tavern to sulk instead.

Maybe it wasn't a kelf who killed my mother. Kett seemed so surprised by the idea, and Bael had to admit he'd never heard of another Nasc being seriously hurt by a kelf. But had his father—his brilliant, infallible father—really been wrong? Or had he been lying? And why?

Now Albhar seemed adamant it had really been this shapeshifter he was after. His former mentor had been rattling on about the poor creature for years, the one that got away, but he'd never accused it of murder before.

Idly, Bael wondered what he really wanted the creature for.

In his pocket, something vibrated. It was not an unpleasant sensation but it startled the hell out of him until he remembered the scryer Nuala had given him. He pulled it out and saw Albhar's face.

The two of them stared at each other. His former tutor looked older, more grizzled than Bael remembered. His eyebrows appeared to have been singed in one of his endless, futile magical experiments. The man barely had the power to light a candle, but still he tried.

"Bael?" asked the old man eventually. "What the devil—how did you get one of these things?"

"It was a present," Bael said defensively. Albhar always made him feel defensive, like a little boy still getting into trouble.

"From who?"

My mate's stepmother. "Just a friend," he said. "Did you want something?"

"No, I was just...well, I suppose I must have been thinking of you." Bael began to smile at this admission, then abruptly scowled when Albhar continued, "Wondering when you were going to stop gallivanting around and show some damn responsibility for once. One of your houses burned down last year, boy, and you didn't even notice."

"I was just—look, I'm busy," Bael snapped. "Don't you have a shapeshifter to catch?"

"Oh, we do," Albhar said. His faded eyes sparkled a bit. "Boy, when we find it, you'll need to come home. You'll need to see it."

"Why?" Bael asked. "Because it killed my mother? My father always said a kelf did that."

"Yes, well. You never liked kelfs anyway," Albhar said vaguely. "Your father never did either."

"No, I don't suppose he did." Bael ducked under a low door to the tavern's dark interior, frowning. Nasc and kelfs, eternal enemies.

"But it was the shapeshifter, boy. I'm sure of that. If you find it you'll bring it to us, won't you?"

"How am I even supposed to know what I'm looking for?" Bael began, but Albhar cut him off.

"It'll be the perfect revenge. Sacrificing it for your father's ritual."

"Sacrificing it? The ritual will kill it?"

"Oh yes." Bael didn't like the gleam in Albhar's eyes. "Very much so. Everything will be better once we've caught it, boy."

Unease tugged at Bael. "Don't call me boy," he said, and shoved the scryer back in his pocket. Albhar's voice faded as the connection was lost.

"You look sad."

He glanced up into the face of a young serving maid. She was wearing a corset laced obscenely tight, pushing her breasts up and out and right into his face. With a jug of beer in one hand and a damp cloth in the other, she smiled sympathetically at him as he took a seat.

"Want to talk about it?"

Bael shook his head. "No."

"Oh, come on. A problem shared is a problem halved." She started to wipe the table.

"I don't think you'd understand."

She cocked her head. "Why not? I'm a good listener, try me."

Bael shoved a hand through his hair. "I'd rather wait until my mate gets back."

"Your mate? Where'd he go?"

"He?" Bael stared at her a moment, then realized her mistake. "No, I don't mean mate as in friend, I mean as in girlfriend. Wife."

"You're married?" She glanced at his hand, and he remembered the human custom of wearing rings to denote marriage.

"Yeah—well, it's complicated," he said, and she slid into the seat next to him.

"My name's Marisa," she said. "Tell me."

Bael tried to put her off, but she kept topping up his beer and eventually he gave in. A little lightheaded from the unknown quantity of alcohol she'd been plying him with, he told her about being Nasc, and what having a mate really meant. It was incredibly unlikely she'd know anyone even remotely connected to Albhar or tell him Bael was Nasc. Albhar wasn't stupid, he'd put two and two together.

Not that Bael didn't trust Albhar, but sometimes things slipped out, and if those shady bastards with the Federación knew there was a Nasc Mage about, his days would be numbered.

"So you really can't have sex with anyone else?" Marisa asked, her eyes widening. Funny, she had silver eyes, like Kett's. He'd thought they were unique to Kett and her father.

"Do you know Kett Almet?" he asked.

Marisa shrugged. "Don't think so. Sounds foreign. Off-Realm?"

"Peneggan," Bael agreed. "You have the same eyes as her."

"Lots of people have gray eyes," Marisa said.

"No, they're silver."

"No, they're gray," she said, her smile slipping a little. Then it returned. "Why, do you like silver eyes?"

"I do," Bael said, thinking of the way Kett's flashed and sparked.

Marisa placed her hand on his arm and a flash of heat zapped through Bael.

He nearly jumped off his chair.

"Hey, calm down," she said, laughing. "I only touched your arm." Leaning in close, she whispered, "Imagine what might happen if I touched you elsewhere."

Bael reeled back. "No," he said. "Nothing's going to happen. I have a mate. I can't have sex with anyone else."

"Can't?" Marisa pouted. "Or won't?"

"Can't," he snapped.

Her fingers caressed his arm, sending sparks through him again. "I've never believed in 'can't'," she purred, and before Bael could entirely realize what she was doing, she'd snaked one hand under the table and cupped his crotch, which responded enthusiastically.

"Mmm," she said, fluttering her lashes at him. "Feels to me an awful lot like you can."

Bael leapt to his feet so fast his chair fell over. People stared.

"Get off me," he muttered, and fled the room. The walls rocked and swayed—how much had he had to drink?—and the stairs danced, uneven and badly laid. He stumbled along the wonky floor to his room and staggered inside.

Locking the bedroom door, he hurled himself at the bed, shaking. What the hell had that been? She touched his arm and arousal spiked through him. She cupped his cock and it jumped up to say hello.

Who the hell was she?

Bael's brain was distinctly fuzzy now. He tried to remember how much he'd had, but that damn Marisa had never let his mug get empty. How big had that pitcher been? Endless...

The room spun around him and Bael closed his eyes, just for a minute.

* * * * *

Maybe hours later, maybe minutes, he awoke to the soft, wet touch of a woman's mouth on his cock. Head still fuzzy, he lay there, trying to work out if he was dreaming or not. But even his hottest dreams hadn't felt this good. A hot, wet tongue slid up and down his cock in long strokes, smooth and practiced. Soft hair caressed his hips, his thighs.

Bael opened his eyes but the curtains were drawn, the room dark, and all he saw was a head of dark, curly hair, bent over his groin.

He smiled. Kett had come back and decided to wake him up by giving him a blowjob. Well, that was damn nice of her. He made an appreciative noise and slid his hand into her hair. She rewarded him by sucking him into her mouth.

"Oh gods, yes," he moaned, eyes fluttering closed again. "Shit, that feels good. You're so good at that."

She moved her head and he began to thrust in time. His cock was incredibly hard, so full it felt like it might burst, but then it always did when he was with Kett. He'd never felt like this with anyone else before. Never had such incredible, mind-blowing sex with anyone.

Her fingers caressed his balls, which tightened and drew up, ready to come.

"Kett, I'm gonna – I'm gonna –"

"Mmm," she said, and the vibration had come shooting out his cock, right down her throat. She took it, swallowing hard, and continued to lick him. Bael lay back, his head still fuzzy but in a much more pleasant way, and stroked her head. He was getting hard again, the pressure of Kett's mouth and the sway of her breasts against his thighs making him incredibly hot even after his orgasm had drained him.

"I want to lick you," he said. "Come up here, I want to lick that delicious pussy of yours."

Without lifting her head from his cock, she maneuvered herself around so she straddled his face, and Bael eagerly pulled her down to him. Her cunt was dripping wet, the folds swollen and pink, and he dipped his tongue inside happily. He loved her taste, could lick her for hours.

Her hand stroked roughly up and down his shaft as she teased and tormented the head. Burying his face in her pussy, he flicked her clit with his tongue and reached down to cup her breasts and stroke her nipples.

She gasped, brought her head up and moaned. "Good," she choked. "So good."

"I could lick you forever," Bael said, and drove his tongue deep into her pussy. Kett writhed, then sat up and slid down his body until her pussy rubbed his cock. Holding his throbbing length in one hand, she rubbed it against her sopping-wet folds, the tight nub of her clit, and rocked her hips.

"Do you want me inside you?" Bael asked, sitting up and pressing her smooth back against his chest.

She nodded, and as he brushed her hair away from the back of her neck, kissing the damp skin there, she fed his cock into her hungry pussy, taking him in all the way and squeezing tight around his whole length. Bael cupped her breast with one hand, slid the other down to stroke her clit and rocked his hips against hers. He couldn't thrust into her properly like this, but it was a great position for slow, glorious fucking.

"I only wish we had a mirror," he whispered, and she squeezed her internal muscles around him.

"Your cock feels so good inside me," she moaned. "Just like I knew it would."

"Mmm," he said – then frowned as he realized what she'd said.

"You're so big. I felt it, under the table, but I didn't realize it was this big." Her fingers joined his between her legs, but while his rubbed her clit, hers stroked his balls and the base of his cock, slippery with her own juices.

"You –"

She writhed against him, her back rubbing his hard nipples, and Bael suddenly went cold as he realized what was wrong. Her back was completely smooth.

Not scarred.

"Kett," he said, and she giggled.

Bael went completely still.

"You can call me Kett if you'd like," she said, "but it's actually Marisa, remember?"

He breathed in, trying to capture Kett's scent, but smelled nothing. Panic swamped him and for a moment he couldn't move.

Still bouncing happily on his cock, she said, "You passed out, poor baby, but I couldn't wait to see what that big juicy dick of yours felt like in my mouth."

"Get off me," Bael said, shoving her away and scrambling backward. Horror consumed him as the girl with the dark curly hair turned and looked at him with a face that wasn't Kett's.

The barmaid from downstairs was sprawled there on the bed, legs open wide, pussy slick and swollen, and his cock leapt at the sight. She arched her back, her bountiful breasts aimed right at him, and stroked her own pussy.

"Come on in, lover," she purred, and Bael leapt backward so far he fell off the bed.

"Get out," he said. "Get out!"

Her face fell. "But we were having such a good time," she pouted. "Is this because I sucked your dick before you were awake? Well, I'm sorry, babe, but I couldn't resist, and you did enjoy it." She licked her lips. "I can still taste your come."

"No," Bael said, pulling himself shakily to his feet. "No – I – this was a mistake –"

"She doesn't need to find out," said Marisa, crawling toward him and reaching for his cock, which twitched eagerly.

"I thought you were her," he said desperately.

"I can pretend to be her, if you'd like," she purred.

"No! You're not her. I can't—I can't have sex with you," he said, his voice trailing off as he realized what he'd just been doing. "I can't," he repeated.

"Oh, you can," Marisa said, her hands encircling his cock and pumping gently. "You definitely can. Mmm, you felt good inside me. Want to finish it off? I want to feel you come inside me."

"No," Bael said, his voice weak as she started kissing his chest. "It was just because I thought you were her," he repeated.

"Well, now you know I'm not," she said, looking up at him with those strange silver eyes that so reminded him of Kett's. But the coy look on her face wasn't like his mate's.

His mate. *What if she isn't?*

Trying hard to silence the voices in his head that told him it was a really bad idea, Bael pulled Marisa up into his arms and kissed her, hard. His cock leapt, and lust flooded through him as her body pressed against his.

He hadn't even managed to get hard with any of the other women he'd tried. He'd been so sure it was Kett.

"If I can fuck you, and I know who you are," he told Marisa, "then she's not my mate."

"If you say so," she said, nibbling on his ear.

Bael threw her down on the bed, lifted her ankles over his shoulders and plunged into her, his eyes on her face the whole time. And while Marisa closed her eyes and stroked herself and moaned and writhed, Bael kept on grimly pounding into her until he came.

He came inside a strange woman, a *barmaid*—and wanted to cry.

"Get out of here," he said, withdrawing from her and turning away.

"But—"

"Get out!" Bael snarled, turning back, Var shining through, and she fled.

Bael fell back on the bed where he'd betrayed Kett, and cried for the first time in years.

Chapter Fourteen

Middle of the afternoon, and the bar of the up-market hotel was deserted but for a few wealthy-looking older women and their suspiciously young and handsome escorts. Every so often a pair of them would disappear in the direction of the rooms upstairs. The place was a shiny-fronted brothel, but Kett didn't particularly care.

Her stomach churned with the knowledge of what she'd just done. Of how she'd been offered something wonderful and deliberately turned it into something horrible. The Curse of Kett had come upon them both.

It was better this way. Hurt him now and let him go on with his life.

But she couldn't get his face out of her sight. The hurt, the anger, the betrayal on Bael's face. She'd made him betray her, and now she couldn't forgive herself.

"Another drink, *signora*?" asked the handsome bartender. His name was Giacomo and he had pronounced himself dedicated to cheering her up.

Kett pinched the bridge of her nose and blinked at the man, trying to focus. All she wanted to do was get incredibly drunk and forget what she'd just done—to Bael, and to herself.

Actually, all she really wanted to do was curl up somewhere and cry, but she'd never let herself do that before in her life and she wasn't about to start now.

"Sure," she said. "Keep 'em coming."

* * * * *

Don't tell her.

It was the first thought in Bael's mind after Marisa had shut the door behind herself and fled, clutching her clothes. If he didn't tell Kett, then she'd never know and she'd believe she was his mate—

He closed his eyes. She didn't believe it now.

She'd never wanted to be his mate, she'd spent every second fighting him. And Kett fighting was damn hot, so he'd never minded, but now...

Now he'd be lying to her, and not just some small lie of omission but a huge, fundamental lie. How did you go from *We were meant to be together* to *I shagged a barmaid*?

He paced. He punched the wall. He turned himself into an eagle and went flying around the city, but it didn't help. None of it helped.

He'd betrayed Kett. He wasn't her mate, and she should know. *Imagine twenty years down the line, he thought, she's been with you, resenting being tied to you, hating you and all the time she could have been free.*

Did he want her to be so unhappy?

At least give her the choice. Tell her you made a mistake, and let her decide whether or not to stay with you.

He turned himself human again and set out to track her across the city. He'd gotten halfway there when it occurred to him that Kett was almost certainly going to ask him how he knew he'd made a mistake, and sooner or later Marisa was going to come up in conversation. He cringed, automatically covering his groin. Well, maybe if he told it carefully...

She drugged me, right, and I woke up in bed and she was sucking my cock—

She'd still never believe it, even if it was the truth. Maybe if he took Kett back to the inn and introduced her to Marisa, then...then Kett could threaten Marisa and the truth would come out. Kett loved threatening people. Happy ending for everyone.

He found her at a brothel—which slightly confused him, but then she'd said she was on business for Chance, who had once been a courtesan—and followed his nose past the scents of sex, cigarettes and alcohol to a room on the upper floor. Squaring his shoulders, taking a deep breath and preparing to look as sorry as he damn well felt, he opened the door.

* * * * *

The place was filling up now, more and more beautiful men and women negotiating the price of their affection with a crowd who seemed to treat prostitution with the same casual attitude as an after-work drink.

Kett had been in the bar for several hours, her glass never emptying. *Like Bael's tankard*, she thought miserably, only this time no one was pouring sleeping powder into it. Currently she was drinking a highly toxic local spirit that had once, apparently, been introduced to a lemon, and then corrupted it horribly into a drink so potently alcoholic that a single drop made the bar surface steam.

Kett knocked it back in one and rested her head on the bar. She still didn't feel drunk enough yet. Depressed as hell, yes, but not actually drunk.

"Signora," said the bartender, and she lifted her head. "Something else?"

She focused on him. "You're not Giacomo," she said.

"No, signora. He takes clients in the evenings. I am Rocco."

"Fill 'er up, Rocco," Kett said, holding out her glass. "Whatever's next."

What was next was a horribly sickly concoction, also apparently made from lemons (how did they do it? They were halfway up a mountain, it was freezing, how did they possibly grow lemons here?). Kett took a sip and made a face, but the bartender had

already moved on to serve a large group of men in business wear, apparently fresh from work and ready to make trouble.

Time was, Kett might have joined them. The first thing she used to do on arriving in a new town was check out the bars, and who frequented them. She rarely went home alone. A different man every night.

She didn't even know how many there'd been.

Now she looked at them with some revulsion. Loud, brash, rude. One of them pinched the backside of a waitress and they all guffawed. Kett rolled her eyes. They were in a fucking brothel, and pinching a woman's butt made them giggle like schoolboys.

Turning her attention away, she saw Giacomo, shirtless and cool, sitting at a table with a composed older woman. Kett knew her type, the neglected wife looking for some thrills.

Standing up, Kett picked up the glass of vile sugary lemon and carried it to Giacomo's table. Her footsteps were steady. She didn't waver once. Kett didn't know whether she'd inherited the ability to hold her drink from her father or whether it had just come of long practice, but she should have realized that even two hours of drinking spirits wouldn't have gotten her drunk.

Setting down the small glass, she caught Giacomo's eye then walked away. Five minutes later, Giacomo got up, let himself behind the bar and set out a bottle of wine and a large glass in front of Kett. He left, saying nothing.

Kett tried a glass of the wine. It was good, at least by her low standards. Probably not local.

She drank it all, watched Giacomo leave with the well-dressed woman then poured another large glass.

It warmed her in a way the spirits hadn't. Maybe the Sisilians were on to something here. But it still didn't make the hurt go away. Kett wasn't a stranger to pain, but she'd never felt guilt like this before.

When the bartender caught her attention and said, "*Signora*, *Signor* Giacomo has finished with his client," Kett nodded, gulped the rest of the wine and got up before she changed her mind.

Giacomo was waiting for her in a large, pleasantly decorated room upstairs. He was naked, handsome in the low lighting, and Kett wordlessly stripped as he stood still, watching her.

"*Signora*," he began, as she moved to the bed.

"Kett," she said.

"Kett." He inclined his head formally. "Are you sure?"

She looked up into his dark eyes, calm and utterly foreign. He was nothing like Bael.

"Make it go away," she said.

Giacomo nodded, joining her on the bed and taking her into his arms. He kissed her, stroking her arms and her back, making no comments about the thick scars he encountered. Kett supposed he must have seen much worse than a few scars.

His body was hot and hard, and smelled pleasantly of some woody scent. He touched her with strong, assured hands, stroking and caressing with expert skill. He kissed a hot, wet trail down her body, tongue tracing erotic patterns on her skin.

Kett had felt more aroused during medical exams.

She was just about to suggest he give it up as a lost cause when the door opened – and her eyes slammed open to see Bael standing there.

In about a second, his expression went from tortured and sorry, to disbelieving, to shocked, and then cycled up through the stages of anger until he got to absolute fury.

And Kett had nothing to say.

Bael didn't shout. He didn't fight. He didn't even say a word. He just turned and walked away, the door slamming shut behind him, and Kett lay there with a stranger, tears burning her eyes like acid.

* * * * *

Night fell. Bael stormed back through the city, intending to find Marisa and beat the shit out of her, but she was nowhere to be found and no one at the tavern had even heard of her. Bael threatened the bartender for five minutes solid, but it didn't help.

Even if he never found her, even if he'd just imagined it, he couldn't possibly have imagined Kett and that – that man-whore, for gods' sakes! She was fucking a damn whore! Shallow, meaningless sex; not even an affair, not even a relationship – no, she was *paying* for sex with someone else.

If that wasn't a rejection, he didn't know what was.

Bael flew west to his house in Galatea, intending to get very, very drunk.

* * * * *

He was gone when she got back to the tavern. She'd slunk in disguised as a cat, just in case, but the only trace of Bael in the room they'd shared was his faint, lingering scent.

A scent laced with tears and anger.

He'd left her things exactly as they were. Hadn't thrown them around or torn them or even touched them. His scent was nowhere near them.

Kett wanted to cry, to scream, to howl. She needed to do something constructive or she'd end up doing something destructive instead. She'd go back to the cave in Nihon and look around, use some of her animal senses to see if she could figure out anything else. She'd talk to the local kelfs and see if they knew anything. She'd run all the way

there, exhaust herself, because maybe if her body was aching and tired she wouldn't notice the pain in her heart as much.

* * * * *

"My lord!"

The guard saluted and Bael snarled at him, understanding why Kett hated being called "my lady" so much. He wasn't a lord, hadn't done anything to deserve being a lord, and —

And he was thinking about Kett again.

He punched the guard in the face but it didn't make him feel much better.

The courtyard was cold and damp, small drifts of dirty snow piled up in the corners. His house in Galatea on the other side of the mountains was at a high altitude and suffered from the cold during the winter months. In his absence, the staff clearly hadn't bothered to do much about clearing the ice and snow from the stone courtyard. Someone would probably slip and fall and hurt themselves if it wasn't done.

Bael was feeling so savagely angry that he hoped they would.

"Albhar!" he roared as he neared the crumbling stone edifice. "Old man! You there?"

A steward came dashing up, half-dressed, trying to fasten his sword belt as he ran. "My lord —"

"Can it," Bael snarled. "I want a hot bath and a change of clothes. Now."

"Yes, my lord. My lord —"

"I *said* don't call me that."

"Uh, yes sir. Lord Albhar isn't here, sir. He's in Vyiskagrad."

Bael stared for a second, puzzled, since Albhar vastly preferred Euskara to Asiatica. "Right," he said. "Didn't I say I wanted a hot bath? I'm leaving as soon as I've had something to eat. Go cook something!" he snapped, and the man ran off.

The courtyard was suddenly full of people who recognized Bael's mood and were desperate to avoid it. He ignored them and grabbed the scryer Kett's stepmother had given him.

"Albhar? Where the hell are you?"

"Vyiskagrad." The old man peered through the scryer at the buildings behind Bael. "Where are you? Galatea?"

"Yeah," Bael said surveying the usual level of chaos as animals and people milled around the courtyard. "Not for long. I'm going west. Feel like killing something."

"Not the house in the Bascano mountains? Bael, that's the one that burned down last year."

"Burned down?" Bael asked. "No one told me this."

"I did, but you didn't listen. I know you have a lot of houses, Bael, but really —"

"Look, I don't care," Bael said. No wonder Albhar thought he was an idiot. "I'll stay here and hunt. I just need to kill something."

He narrowed his eyes. Var could change into any one of several lethal creatures, but Bael liked firing weapons. He yelled to a page for his hunting bow.

"You're going hunting? Wonderful!" Albhar said. "Take some of the knights with you. Bael," he leaned in close, as if imparting a wonderful secret, "the shapeshifter is nearby."

"Wow," Bael said flatly.

"Aren't you excited?"

"Sure. Maybe I'll come to Vyiskagrad and eviscerate it," Bael said. "Where's my fucking bow? I want arrows too."

"No, don't kill it," Albhar said. "We need it alive. You will be coming back, won't you? To see the ritual?"

"The fabulous power one?" Bael asked, as the page scurried back with a hunting bow Bael didn't recognize. "What the hell is this? This isn't my bow. Bring me *mine*," he snapped. "And my crossbow too. And get me some fucking knights too!" he yelled after the kid. "What does it look like?" he asked Albhar, who gave him a dead look. "I mean — does it have a base state? Does it look human? Male, female?"

"Female, we believe," said Albhar. "I don't know whether it will have aged, but your father said it appeared to be a woman of about forty."

"That was twenty-odd years ago," Bael said. "Do I go around shooting every old woman I see?"

"Bael, you're a Mage," Albhar scolded. "Use your senses."

"I'm too fucking mad to use my senses," Bael spat, because the anger, the rage, the hideous humiliation inside him was so murderously powerful he could barely see.

"Why?" Albhar asked curiously, as if he hadn't noticed. Or as if Bael's anger was an interesting research subject.

"A fucking *woman*."

"Ah," Albhar said, and Bael wondered if the old man had ever even had a fucking woman. "You should find a mate, Bael." Bael looked at him sharply, but the man he regarded as his godfather went on, "A good woman, a wife. Children. Settle down."

"It's on my To Do list," Bael said, as the page scurried back carrying so much weaponry he kept dropping bits of it. Snatching up his crossbow, he discovered he couldn't load it with the scryer in one hand.

"Remember, if you see the shapeshifter, don't kill it," Albhar said as Bael started to sign off.

"I will if I fucking want to," Bael replied, and cut the call dead.

* * * * *

Kett flew until she thought her wings would drop off, and came to land somewhere in the Vyishka mountains. The range was full of violent peaks, steep drops and gorges hundreds of feet deep. Kett turned herself into a mountain lion to cross the jagged collection of mountains, padding over rock and snow on weary paws.

It hurt, but not as much as the hurt inside her. *You did the right thing*, she told herself for the hundredth time. *You don't want a mate, you don't need a mate. You'd have ended up being hurt by him, just like you have whenever you've become involved with anyone else.*

If she'd never gotten married, he'd never have cheated on her and she'd never have gone to jail for nearly killing him. If she'd never joined the army and tried to channel her anger into something constructive, she'd never have come to the attention of Captain Cuntface and ended up getting flogged to within an inch of her life.

If she'd never met her father, she wouldn't have tried to save him from that sorceress, and Kett wouldn't have been killed. Neither would Tyrnan.

The Curse of Kett fell on everyone. Love caused pain and death and misery and anger. She was better off without it.

She was.

* * * * *

Bael flew, his dragon wings beating the air because the air itself offended him. His blood sang, every cell in his body screaming with rage.

He couldn't remember ever being so angry but the worst part was, he didn't know what he was really angry about. His own stupidity and humiliation? Or Kett's hideous betrayal, at the same time carelessly impersonal and terribly, pointedly specific?

Howling with rage and misery, he incinerated a small wood and watched with feral enjoyment as the living trees crackled and burned. A village nestled in a valley nearby, and he considered it with detached cruelty. He could destroy the whole lot, burn houses, people and livestock. Let them fry in their own skin, watch flesh heat up until it boiled, bathe in their screams. He was miserable to the point of pain, why shouldn't everyone else be?

The air full of screams, the scent of charred flesh, rivers of blood and pain and fear. He slaughtered them, he did it for fun, he massacred them...

With a jolt of revulsion, he shook himself out of it. Was this how Striker had become so terrible, so powerful and so dangerous? Was this why he'd rampaged through Euskara twenty years ago, murdering Magi and stealing their power, flattening cities, roasting people alive—just to mirror his own pain?

What the hell could have hurt such an inhuman man so badly?

He found himself on the ground, back in his human body, staring at the scryer in his palm. It glowed red then the face resolved into Striker's visage.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asked.

The same shock of fear and disgust ran through Bael, but far less powerfully than it had before. "Why did you do it?" he asked.

"Do what? Who are you?"

"Kett's — I'm...a friend of Kett's," Bael said through the bad taste in his mouth.

"Oh yeah." Striker's mouth twisted cruelly. "You ran away."

"You murdered hundreds of my people."

Striker shrugged, as if he couldn't see what the two things had to do with each other.

"Why did you do it? You flattened the city of Vaticano twenty years ago. You stole power and tortured innocent people. Why did you do it?"

Striker shrugged again. "What are you, a groupie? I did it 'cos I wanted to, kid. I enjoyed it. I'd do it again —"

"No, you bloody wouldn't," came a female voice, the voice of the brunette at Nuala's house. Chalia. Chance's mother...

Understanding stabbed Bael in the heart.

"You did it for her," he said slowly. "Because she hurt you." With every word he became more certain, the knowledge creeping into him like fog.

Striker's face turned to granite.

"Because she did something to you," Bael went on. "Because she hurt you so badly it screamed inside you, and all you wanted to do was make everyone else feel as much pain as you. To hurt and maim and burn and slash and kill, because that's what she did to you. And she never stopped you. She stops you now but she didn't then. And you went on sucking power out of people so you could destroy more and more, bigger and bigger, until you'd destroyed a city and killed thousands —"

A jolt of power suddenly surged through the scryer, like the shock from ungrounded metal, making Bael flinch and lose his thread.

The view on his scryer tilted, as if someone else had taken hold of the device, and Chalia's face appeared, pale and shocked.

"It was you," Bael said, and her lovely dark eyes swam with fear and guilt and pain.

"What did you *do*?" Bael asked her.

Her hand went to her throat, lovely and unlined even twenty years after Striker had burned and destroyed cities in her name.

"I got engaged to someone else," she said distantly. "Who *are* you?"

"Baelvar." The world had narrowed to the scryer in his hand and the anger pulsing through him.

Chalia regarded him through the scryer. "You're Kett's mate, yes? The Nasc. With power."

Bael clenched his fist and looked away.

Striker laughed softly. "What did *she* do?"

"Someone else," Bael said.

"Ah," he said, but Chalia looked shocked.

"Kett? She's not the cheating type. Is she? Why would she—you must have been mistaken," she told Bael, who bristled.

"I saw her with him," he said, "and unless she sat on a snake and he was sucking the poison out, then I don't think I was mistaken about what they were doing."

Striker started laughing.

"It's not funny," Bael said, and to his horror his throat swelled as if he was going to cry. "Look, she was just making a point. She doesn't want to be mated to me. She never did."

"Ain't the sort of thing you can break, kid," Striker said.

"Well, it is. She broke it," Bael said. The tears were still threatening, so he added, "That's all. I just wanted to know. Sorry to disturb you," and let the scryer fall from his grasp, breaking the connection.

Striker's laughter faded on the evening breeze.

All for the love of a woman. Striker had stolen power and killed thousands in anger because his woman had betrayed him. He'd become this vicious killer who gleefully committed genocide because he felt like it, and all because a woman had broken his heart.

Bael shook himself, trying to escape the specter of his own future, and flew on.

Chapter Fifteen

The lion had been a bad choice. Kett knew it, but she still kept on in the same shape, climbing over sheer, slippery rocks to cross the mountains.

She'd broken Bael's heart and destroyed perhaps forever her own chance of happiness. Not to mention ever having sex again. And for what? To prove her own independence? To make a damn point?

You never learn, Kett Almet, she cursed herself as rough rocks tore at her paws. *Ever stop to think maybe you're the one cursing yourself?*

When are you going to stop fighting?

For a long moment she paused, tired and hurt, resting on her haunches on a rare piece of flat ground. Maybe she should give in, go back to Bael, explain and apologize and settle down to...what? Not ordinariness. Life with Bael might be infuriating, maddening and humiliating, but it would also be exciting, passionate and stimulating. It would be...fun.

Maybe —

Something whined past her ear, too fast and too straight to be an insect. Instinct had her on the ground instantly, her feline ears twitching and swiveling, her head whipping around to see where it might have come from.

She didn't see the shapes at first, but she heard the voices.

"A lion? Up here?"

Hell. She knew this had been the wrong shape. *Too conspicuous.*

The hunter's voice was oddly familiar, although she couldn't place why. She tried to scent him, but then heard the bark of half a dozen dogs, hunting hounds, their scents coming sharp on the wind. If she hadn't been so preoccupied she'd have noticed them before. *Dammit!*

She ducked and changed into a gryphon, a quick shift, changing only half her body, claws and wings and beak —

A second shot zipped toward her, so close it ruffled her feathers, and she leapt into the air.

"A gryphon!"

"Hiding with a lion? Not likely!"

"It's the shapeshifter! We found it!"

Panicked, Kett darted, trying to gain speed, but while a gryphon was graceful and swift in the air, takeoff was a problem. *Should have gone for an eagle*, she thought as she darted under a hail of crossbow bolts.

One ripped into her flank, making her falter, and she lost height. The hunters whooped—*why are they looking for a shapeshifter? Who are they?*—and the dogs bayed. They were close, their scents strong in her nostrils, their claws scrabbling on the bare rocks below her. Kett flapped desperately, pain swamping her, twisting away from the dogs.

She didn't see the scrawny tree in her path until it was too late, and its branches slammed into her ribs, scraping through the fur and feathers. She fell, breathless, into the tiny, rocky gully from which the sorry tree grew.

The dogs yelped in excitement and raced over, snapping and swiping at her, trying to reach into the crack in the rock that both protected and trapped her.

"Sir!" someone yelled. It was a man in hunting gear, his face twisted by an ugly scar running from temple to jaw. "Lord Albhar!"

Kett's gut twisted, because she recognized this man. She'd given him that scar.

These people were Federación.

A dog lunged at Kett, snarling, spittle flying at her, and she snarled back, snapping with a beak that was turning into a mouth. She needed to get airborne again, and if she could just get away from these dogs—

"Are you sure?" asked a male voice, out of breath and elderly.

"It can't hold its shape, sir, look! It's definitely changing! Either it's the shapeshifter or it's Nasc."

"Well, either will do," said the voice she supposed to be Lord Albhar's, and she looked up to see a bearded man staring down at her from behind the dogs, a cruel light in his eyes. He took out a scryer from a pouch on his belt, and while the dogs whined and scraped at her with their paws, he calmly concentrated on the little rock.

"Bael," he said. "Where are you, dear boy?"

* * * * *

Determined not to turn into the sort of Mage who destroyed things just because he could—determined not to turn into Striker—Bael kept his murderous rage confined to the reaches of ordinary hunting. All right, so there'd be a few villagers feasting extraordinarily well on the dead creatures he'd left behind—some of them ready-roasted—but at least he wasn't running around murdering people, and that had to be something.

He was in split forms when his scryer buzzed. Var, loping along as a hunting hound, trotted over as Bael answered the scryer. He'd have been a better hunting companion if he'd been able to fly, but a vicious brawl with a surprisingly violent wolf had left him with a rip across the back that would have been agony with wings. Bael himself wasn't faring hugely better, his ribs aching from getting too close to the death throes of a stag with giant antlers.

He was tired, aching and bruised, but the fights had made him feel a whole lot better.

"Bael," Albhar greeted him, looking oddly excited. Bael felt a twinge of unease, as inexplicable as the knowledge he'd felt for certain earlier. Was this part of his long-elusive Mage power? Did it only manifest once he'd found – and lost – his mate?

No, she was never your mate, she was never –

"Where are you, dear boy?"

"Not sure. Galatea, Iberia maybe. Somewhere around the border."

"Ah, such a shame you're not closer. You'll never guess what we've just found."

"A cure for the common cold?" Bael muttered, not really caring.

"Much better. We've found the shapeshifter who killed your mother."

Bael stilled. Here was a creature he could vent his rage on. Legitimately.

But did the shapeshifter really kill her? asked his conscience. *What if it really was the kelf?*

Which is more likely? he challenged, and got no answer.

Besides, he really wanted to destroy something.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice sounding distant.

"Oh, quite sure," Albhar said. "It's tried to change its shape already, but we caught it anyway. The dogs are trying to take chunks out of it now. No, *drop!* Leave! *Leave!* Good dog. We need it alive."

"Do you?" Bael asked. "Shame. I feel like killing something."

"Well, if it's any consolation, it will be dead by the end of the – *no!* I said *leave!* LEAVE!" Albhar strode forward, and the scryer's picture wobbled as the old man bent forward and grabbed a dog, hurling it bodily out of the way. Bael heard the creature whine and whimper as it hit the rocks. "Hells, it's taken a chunk out of the thing's shoulder. Won't bleed to death, will it, do you think?"

He seemed to be addressing someone else – one of the knights stationed at the Vyiskagrad castle, Bael supposed. He really ought to keep track of how many knights he had, and where. But not right now.

"No sir, shouldn't think so," the knight was saying.

"We need its blood. Needs to be flowing."

"Oh, we can keep it alive that long, sir. Not until the new moon, isn't it? Still need the second creature, don't you?"

"A second creature?" Bael asked, frowning. "There's more than one shapeshifter?"

"Well, of course, boy," Albhar said, turning the scryer back to his face. "There can't be only one creature in all the Realms that can change its shape!"

Some of the knights chuckled. Var nudged Bael's thigh with his nose.

"You never mentioned a second –" Bael began, but Albhar cut him off.

"Don't you worry about it, boy."

"Don't call me boy," Bael snapped.

"Oh come on, Bael, this is a great day. We've been searching for this creature for twenty-four years, ever since —"

"It killed my mother, yes, I know. But my father always said —"

"Don't you want to come see it? Face it?" Albhar's expression was sly. "We need it alive for the rest of the week, but you can rough it up as much as you'd like."

"Sure," Bael said, attention diverted effectively. "I could do with beating the shit out of something."

"Well then. Just as long as it's left alive."

It killed your mother. Familial loyalty be damned, he just wanted to hurt something. "Highest cell, tallest tower," he said. "Let it freeze. Let it *starve*. Keep it alive just enough for it to be awake to feel the pain."

Behind Albhar, his men cheered. The old man grinned with a glint in his eye Bael had never seen before. But he didn't care. Here was a chance to vent his anger, his misery, his pain.

"I'm going to make that thing suffer," he said, and Albhar smiled.

* * * * *

By the time he arrived in Vyiskagrad, Bael's thoughts had turned from the shapeshifter's suffering to his own.

His ribs and back ached like the devil, so he'd decided not to fly to Vyiskagrad. It took three days to get to the First Bridge to Asiatica, and then a further day and a half to cross the vastly hot, empty deserts of Ægyptus to the Vyiskagradian border and the Vyishka mountains. The constant sway and jolt of the carriage sent pulses of pain through his body.

He'd never much liked the castle in the mountains, huddled like a vulture above precipitous drops and vicious peaks. Perpetually cold and icy, it never seemed to be touched by sunlight. The dark gray stones loomed above the high, twisting pass, along which he now rode on a hired mount. To either side of the narrow shoulder of rock that was the castle's only approach by land was a gorge several hundred feet deep on one side, and so low on the other that the bottom couldn't even be seen. The distant roar of rushing water gave the only clue that it didn't drop into infinity.

Bael rode on, his back and his ribs aching. He'd twinned with Var, the better to heal, but despite the disciplines his father had tried again and again to teach him, he'd never been any good at conquering pain. His father had insisted it was all in his head. Bael was pretty sure it was mostly in his ribs and his back.

His head ached too. He put it down to the altitude and the days of uncomfortable traveling. Anger still throbbed dully through him, a background pain he wasn't fully rid of, but it wasn't the bright, burning flame it had been a couple days ago.

He rode into the courtyard, his headache worsening, and dismounted from the horse. As ever, despite the forbidding cold, the courtyard was full of people but to Bael it looked horribly bleak. The mountains loomed behind the castle, itself a hulking, dark gray brute of a building. The tallest tower stood out against the bruised yellow sky and Bael tried to summon some enthusiasm for beating the shit out of the shapeshifter within, but all he really wanted was a hot bath and a soft bed.

And a warm woman. He'd sampled the female company at every inn along the way, but not one of the girls he'd tried had solicited a reaction from him. Anger, tiredness and alcohol were hell on a man's libido.

"Bael!" cried Albhar as he strode into the high, dark Great Hall. Overhead, the dusty remains of tapestries fluttered in the constant howling draught. Bael wondered if the place had always been so dismal, or if it just seemed so because of his mood. "You took your time! I thought you'd miss the moon tonight and we'd have to wait a month!"

"You could've proceeded without me," Bael pointed out, and Albhar's smile shifted just the tiniest fraction.

"Oh no, of course not. Culmination of your father's life work. Couldn't do it without you. Do you want to see the creature? It's truly pathetic. Hardly eaten a thing in days. I think it's sulking. Hideous thing — it's all infected where the dogs bit it on the shoulder, stinks like hell."

"You know what, I'm really knackered," Bael said. "Think I'll just —"

"No, boy, come and see it. Don't you want your revenge?"

Personally, Bael wanted to sleep more than he wanted revenge, but he didn't expect Albhar would appreciate that. Besides, the men were crowding 'round, excitement evident on their faces. They wanted to see more blood spilled.

"Just keep it alive," Albhar reminded him as they ascended the many, many stairs to the top of the tower.

"Yeah. I might go for a nap first," Bael said. "You know, so I can have a proper go at it."

"Have two goes," Albhar said, a vicious, excited light in his eyes at the prospect. Bael realized the old man really wanted to see the creature suffer, and he wasn't sure that want was entirely motivated by revenge. This shapeshifter business was bringing out a malicious side to his former mentor he hadn't seen before.

"Here," said Albhar eventually, gesturing to a thick oak door so old and heavy it had the consistency of granite. There was a small hatch in it, opening inward, stained with the remains of many slimy meals. "Here's your shapeshifter."

He opened the door and Bael peered through the gloom. At first he didn't see the creature lying on the floor, naked and gray with cold and malnutrition. The cell was icy cold and stank of many things he didn't want to name, not least the infection in the creature's hideously swollen shoulder.

"Starved and frozen, sir, just as you said," sniggered one of the guards.

"Yeah," Bael said, now appalled at what his offhanded words had led to. *Maybe you are as stupid as Albhar thinks.*

The figure was female, huddled in the shadows with its back to the wall, arms wrapped around itself. A tangle of dark hair obscured its face. "Are you sure it's a shapeshifter? It looks like an ordinary woman to me." An ordinary, badly injured, half-starved woman.

"Oh yes," Albhar said. "I saw it change myself. It's been netted though, it can't change now."

"Netted?"

"A containment spell. It won't manifest claws or anything. Can't escape. It'll be quite defenseless against a beating."

Bael rounded on him to demand what sort of man Albhar thought he was to enjoy beating such a pathetic, defenseless creature, when the creature itself stirred.

And looked at him with silver eyes.

* * * * *

Kett had spent most of the first day in the cell loudly cursing Bael. Not a word of his conversation with his mentor had escaped her. He'd ordered her into the cell, he'd ordered her to freeze and starve, and when he finally turned up she'd planned to beat so many kinds of hell out of him that theologians would have a field day naming them all.

She'd spent the second day cursing him somewhat more quietly, her throat burning dry. Some time after sunup, the serving hatch halfway up the thick door opened inward to a ninety-degree angle and a ladle shot in. It tipped a few ounces of grayish gruel onto the hatch. A second ladle tipped water after it. Then the hatch snapped shut, leaving Kett with no more sustenance than she could scrape off the ancient, stained wood.

She spent the third day waiting with the wooden bowls she'd found stacked in the corner of the small cell, but when the hatch fell open she moved too fast for her battered body and dropped the bowls, crying out in agony as her crippled leg gave way.

On the fourth day, she couldn't manage to lift the bowls up to the hatch when it opened. Her shoulder throbbed incessantly where the dog's teeth had ripped into it. Red streaks shot down her arm, under her skin. Her tongue swollen in her mouth, she huddled by the door, lapping up what drips she could manage.

By the fifth day, she couldn't even lift her head that far. Barely able to find a single part of her body that didn't throb with agony, she lay on the floor and waited for death to claim her.

* * * * *

Bael lost his breath.

It's a trick, he told himself, even as he stared at Kett's pale, thin face, twisted with pain and hatred. It's a shapeshifter. It can look like anyone it wants.

But why would it choose to look like the woman I thought was my mate? How did it know?

Cautiously he breathed in, and used Var's senses to separate out the scents in the room. Somewhere here had to be the shapeshifter's scent, and when he'd caught that, he could rest assured that it wasn't—

"Bael," grated the creature on the floor.

It wasn't Kett. It couldn't be. Its voice was dry and scratchy, like fingernails on a blackboard.

The shapeshifter smiled with cracked lips. "Come to beat me up?" it rasped. "Come to kill me?"

The guards cheered but Bael just stared.

The shapeshifter moved, its face contorted with pain, and flopped back onto the hard stone floor. "You could just wait a day," it scratched out, "I'll be dead by then. Rituals, Bael. Bleeding a shapeshifter. Silver chain."

"I didn't say you could talk," Bael said, panic thrumming through him. If it wasn't Kett then how did it know? Had she spilled his secrets?

His heart pounded so loudly he could barely hear her next words.

"A shapeshifter," she croaked, "and a bleeding Nas—"

"I said shut up!" Bael yelled, and two of the guards rushed forward, kicking viciously at the creature. As a heavily booted foot connected with its ribs, he heard a snap—

Snap, as the links in his head connected. Kett *was* the shapeshifter.

A shapeshifter and a Nasc bound by a silver chain.

They needed a second creature.

Albhar's sly smile.

Couldn't do it without you.

The old man *knew*.

Kett was curled into a ball, coughing in pain, her body spasming pathetically as the guards stood laughing and jeering. Albhar stood there, smiling as if he wasn't planning to string Bael up and kill him in some mad power ritual.

He stared down at Kett's broken body. *They're going to kill us both.*

"I'm sorry," Bael whispered to Kett, horrified, but he didn't think she heard him. To his men, he babbled, "Leave it. Don't kill it. Leave some for me, I mean. I'll come back later. When I've rested. Later. Lock it up, it's talking rubbish. I need to get *out* of here." He barged past the guards. "There's no fucking air. It *stinks*. *Move!*"

They let him pass, and then he heard the heavy door scrape shut.

Underneath the sound was the dry wheeze of Kett's laughter.

* * * * *

The hot bath and soft bed held no appeal for Bael now. Pacing his locked chamber, cold with horror, panic and guilt, he clutched at Var, who pressed close to him as an anxious, angry little cat.

Kett was a shapeshifter. She'd kept that from him the whole time! How could she have done that, especially after he'd told her that he was a Mage? The one thing that might unite them, and she'd kept it to herself.

Because she doesn't want to be united with you, his conscience said. She went off fucking a whore the first chance she got. She clearly doesn't want you.

Thoughts reeled around Bael's head. Could Kett have killed his mother? No, she'd been a teenager. Not that Kett as a teenager wouldn't have been lethal, but still. Albhar said she'd been an older woman. Kett's mother? Maybe. Maybe Kett had been wearing age as a disguise. He wouldn't put it past her.

And that wasn't even the worst thing.

He set down Var and picked up his scryer, distractedly trying to remember what he'd been told about using it. *Concentrate on the person you want.*

The rock got warm in his hands. It vibrated. And then a voice was saying, "Bael? Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes to see Chance looking up at him from the face of the scryer, and nearly wept with relief.

"Your majesty," he said, and she laughed prettily.

"You don't need to go through all those formalities, Bael," she said. "You're practically family."

"Yeah," Bael said doubtfully. "Listen. This is really important. I think the Nasc are in danger. Can you warn them?"

Chance instantly snapped into business mode. "What is it?"

"There's a ritual," he began. "It involves a Nasc and a shapeshifter. And death. I think."

"Hell," she said when he'd finished explaining what he'd worked out about Albhar. "Do you think they're allied with the Federación?"

Cold sweat bathed Bael anew. "Well, *now* I do," he said. "I thought you and—and your father had killed them all?"

"They're like vermin," Chance said venomously. "There're always a few you miss, and that's enough to start again. We'll warn as many as we can. Thank you, Baelvar."

With that she signed off and Bael was left in his remote castle, surrounded by the enemy and feeling like a giant bruise, inside and out. The tear on his back meant that manifesting wings would hurt like hell, and if he was going to carry Kett he'd have to turn into a big creature like a dragon, which required a hell of a lot of energy he just didn't have.

Var looked up at him, feline eyes narrowed, and Bael laughed suddenly.

"What was that my old dad used to say?" he asked, picking up his twin and pressing his face against Var's soft fur. "It's not a problem, it's a challenge."

Var started to purr.

"Exactly," Bael said, and felt invigorated for the first time in days.

Chapter Sixteen

Night fell over the Vyishka mountains. Here in the northern part of the Realm of Asiatica, darkness came swift, cold and impenetrable.

Var rose from the black mountains as a dragon twenty feet long, and glided silently toward Kett's turret. Bael, dressed in a swirling long cloak, strode up the tower and made loud comments to each guard he saw about alternately beating the shit out of the shapeshifter and raping it to hell. They guffawed and cheered him on, and Bael wanted to kill all of them.

He reached the top, demanded entry and, right on cue, someone outside yelled, "Take cover! A dragon!"

The guard with Bael hesitated, and Bael pushed him at the stairs. "Go," he said. "Go shoot at it or something."

He shoved the door open before the man had even gotten around the corner, and stopped, taking a mental breath.

Kett lay huddled on the floor, still naked, her skin gray and caked with blood. Her ribs, clearly visible through her thin flesh, rose and fell shallowly with each breath. The wound on her shoulder was horribly swollen, streaks of red running down her arm, the skin cracked and oozing.

She looked a minute away from death, and murderous rage rose up within Bael.

"Kett," he said, falling to his knees by her. "Kett, can you hear me?"

"G'way," she mumbled, her voice barely a rattle. "F'koff."

"Not gonna do that, sweetheart." As Var landed on the roof of the turret with a heavy thud, Bael carefully lifted Kett from the floor and wrapped her in the warm clothes he'd hidden under his cloak.

"No," she rasped. "'M dead. Useless. Can't use me."

"You're never useless, darling. Now shush a minute."

He covered her with his body as Var began to rip the roof of the turret away. From outside came the sounds of shouting, the order to fire, but Bael knew that was useless since a dragon was covered in scales almost everywhere. Men were running up the steps of the tower toward them, but they hadn't even gotten close by the time Var tore through the roof and picked Bael and Kett up in his claws.

Roaring, he began to flap away, breathing a satisfying jet of fire down into the turret and incinerating all the guards who'd cheered Bael on when he'd said he was going to rape Kett.

It would have been a perfect getaway, were it not for the arrow that struck Var's wing, the only significant part of a dragon not covered by scales.

Buffeted backward for a second, Var screamed and rained fire down on the archers in the courtyard.

We don't have time for this to hurt now, Bael told his twin. *It can hurt later, but not now.*

And for the first time, perhaps because it was the first time he'd truly needed it, the magic worked. His wing painless, Var righted himself, his grip so tight on Bael that even through his thick cloak and doublet he was breathless.

He could have merged with his twin for strength, but Var's claws were too big, too sharp, to hold Kett without hurting her more. So he stayed human and held her as closely and tightly as he could.

Her shoulder wound oozed through her clothes. She didn't move.

She barely breathed.

He grabbed her close, desperate, not knowing what to do.

"I'm so sorry, Kett," he whispered, sobs breaking his voice. "Please get well again. You can beat me up as much as you'd like. Just stay alive, sweetheart. Just stay alive."

Sobbing, tears freezing on his lashes, he pleaded with every god he could think of to heal Kett.

But the gods, as ever, remained silent.

* * * * *

Kett wasn't entirely sure what she was imagining and what was real.

She was fairly sure she imagined the dragon picking her up and flying off with her in its claws. After all, she knew dragons pretty well and they rarely picked up anything they didn't intend to later eat. The dragon holding her, however, did so gently, as if recognizing she was hurt.

The cold seemed realistic. And the pain. The terrible throb of her shoulder that made it almost impossible to move...she couldn't have imagined that. It was worse than when the tiger had ripped open her leg, because then she'd only been alone for less than an hour before the Maharaja and his hunting party had found her, taken her in and cared for her.

Hmm, the Maharaja. She'd been entertaining his court just before the whole cave incident. Had he been Albhar in disguise? Her delirious brain superimposed the Maharaja's dark, plump face over Albhar's pale, lined one, and dismissed the thought as ridiculous.

Then again, she appeared to be flying about in the clutches of a dragon, so who was she to say what was ridiculous?

Swimming in and out of consciousness, occasionally darting close to what seemed to be the surface but couldn't possibly be, Kett dreamed of burning deserts and cool

oases. Bael was there, hot and lovely, his skin like water on her fevered flesh. His mouth traced soothing kisses over her body. His fingers swept away the pain.

Symbols danced over his body, moving, living tattoos on his skin. Whenever she tried to focus on them, they slipped away.

She thought she might have woken up as she felt hands on her body, heard a whispered voice urging her to get better, to heal, to just stay alive. A voice whispering desperate words of love.

She giggled. Her brain was supplying her with some wonderful fantasies as she drifted toward death.

Sliding away from the false realities of the healer's touch, sinking into the blissful release of unconscious delirium, Kett allowed herself to dream about Bael again. The rotten bastard had ordered her to be beaten and starved, he'd let his men kick her around and bragged about raping her, but her tortuous brain still supplied her with memories and fantasies of his lovemaking.

She remembered every touch of his fingers, sweeping fire along her skin. The way his lips caressed her, hot and wet, his teeth nipping her collarbone, his tongue swirling around her nipple. The way his fingers delved into her hot, melting pussy, stroking her into incandescence. The fevered touch of his mouth ignited her, her whole body bursting into flame as he licked and sucked and stoked the fire until she burned to ashes.

The acrid scent of smoke filled her nostrils. Where Bael's fingers touched, her skin simmered as if scalded. His tongue licked against her like the flicker of flames.

Kett opened her eyes to smoky darkness, heat burning her eyes. Flakes of snow danced in the air, incongruous against the heat, and she frowned. Strange dream indeed.

But so vivid. She smelled burning meat and the stink of hastily doused fires. Turning her head, her neck muscles creaking, she came face-to-face with the burned, crispy shell of what looked very much like a human head.

Cold, wet horror slammed into her like a slap in the face, and she realized this wasn't a dream at all.

The tortured corpse a few feet away was unidentifiable, no shreds of clothing or even skin remaining to give any clue. Head thrown back, limbs mangled, every line of its pose telling her it had suffered a sudden, unimaginably painful death.

She tried to sit up but failed, and instead flopped onto her side, turning away from the charred body and focusing through the heavy, lung-clogging smoke on the fires still burning. Behind them, she saw mountains rising against the black sky. Their outline was familiar.

They were the mountains of the Northern Province of Peneggan. *Her* mountains.

The battered shell of a stone building stood silhouetted against the flames. A roofless barn with a shattered cottage built on the side. Jarven's house.

This was *home*.

Bile rose in her. There was nothing in her stomach to be brought up but she retched anyway, and when a dark shadow loomed through the fog she drew back, her weak body unable to rouse itself to fight.

"Kett? Oh hell, sweetheart, of all the times to wake up."

It sounded like Bael, and he carefully draped something large and heavy on the ground beside her. A person, wrapped in tattered fabric.

"Drink, Kett," said Bael's voice, and something was pressed to her lips. A flask of water. It was stale and warm, but to Kett it was the coolest, most delicious thing she'd ever tasted.

A few sips, and then it was taken from her.

"What happened?" she croaked, trying to focus on Bael's face through smoky eyes. He had a fold of fabric wrapped around the lower half of his face, muffling his voice a little.

"I don't know. Fire. The dragons got loose, I guess. I—" He broke off, pressing a hand to his face. "I stopped for a bit, sweetheart, tried to heal you. If I'd just kept going, if I hadn't delayed, we'd have gotten here and..."

And we'd have been killed too. He didn't say it. He didn't have to.

Bael cleared his throat. "There are bodies. The villagers, I think. Not all of them. And some of them weren't killed by fire. They were attacked—"

"Jarven," Kett rasped, appalled.

"He's alive, but he's hurt pretty badly." He indicated the body wrapped in cloth. She could see it move slightly as it breathed. Jarven was alive, even if he might not be for long.

Her gaze skittered past Jarven, trying to make out the shapes visible in the smoky gloom. A row of what she'd at first assumed to be chopped logs was revealed to be a row of bodies, laid out neatly side by side. Some were badly disfigured, but others she recognized. Villagers. Friends.

Lying a little way from them were a few more corpses. Unfamiliar ones. Men in armor.

A cold sliminess crawled through her as she made out hunting gear and a scarred face. *Albhar's man*. Smoke clouded her vision, tears stinging until she was lying in that rocky gully again and the dogs were snapping as Bael's voice rang out from the scribe. "*Highest cell, tallest tower. Let it freeze. Let it starve. Keep it alive just enough for it to be awake to feel the pain.*"

Agony burned through her and she couldn't breathe. The nightmare hammered at her brain. The man with the scarred face opened his mouth and breathed fire at her. Her dragons escaped and burned Bael to a crisp. Twisting, flickering shapes, pictograms, blood, torchlight on rocky walls and the gleam of lust in her lover's eye. Kett writhed away from the delirious images but they wouldn't let her go.

“...to your stepmother, I think. Kett? Can you hear me? Var will take you,” Bael said, and the smoke shifted as a green dragon hovered above her, wings beating away some of the heat and heavy, oppressive smog.

She shook her head. She wanted to stay, to help—this was her home and the villagers had been hurt because of her dragons and—

“You have to go,” Bael insisted. He kissed her lips very gently then said, “I’m staying here.”

With that, Var picked her up gently in one claw and Jarven in the other. His wings began to beat, and the dragon rose into the air, leaving Bael behind, surrounded by smoke and fire and death. Kett screamed and screamed, even after unconsciousness had claimed her again.

* * * * *

When she opened her eyes she was in a bed, drenched in sweat and with one of her sisters shaking her by the arm, calling her name urgently.

“Kett? Can you hear me?” It was Eithne, and she left Kett for a moment to rush to the door and shout, “Mama! She’s having some sort of fit!”

Kett lay there, breathing hard, staring up at the pale canopy of her bed. Her own bed in Nuala’s house. The room smelled the same as it always had, the damp linen was soft against her skin. The lamp burned low, casting a dull glow over familiar furniture.

The scent of smoke had vanished.

Nuala rushed in dressed in nightclothes, Tyrnan behind her. She felt at Kett’s forehead, shone a light into her eyes and repeated her name over and over until Kett snapped, “Of course I can bloody hear you. I’m not deaf.”

Eithne put her hand to her mouth.

“I was having a—a dream,” Kett said, her voice rusty. “That’s all.”

Nuala didn’t look convinced but after she’d checked Kett’s wounds, stuck a thermometer in her mouth and checked her eyes again, she was forced to conclude there was nothing terribly amiss.

“How long have I been here?” Kett asked. The clock over the fireplace showed it wasn’t far off morning.

“A few hours. Drink this,” Nuala said, holding out a glass into which she’d just tipped some powder. “Eithne, have you been giving her drinks every half hour?”

Eithne indicated a small hourglass by the bed. “Small sips of water, just as you said.”

“Maybe a little more from now on. You’ll be even more dehydrated now,” Nuala said to Kett, then turned to her husband. “Lift her up so I can change the sheets.”

"For gods' sakes, Nuala, I'm fine," Kett said, but her father picked her up anyway, as if she weighed absolutely nothing. Kett considered what she'd had to eat and drink in the last five days and figured that was probably about right.

"I can stand," she said.

"No, you can't," said Tyrnan. "I haven't seen you this bad since you came back to life."

"Yeah, well, you didn't look so hot then either," Kett snapped. She attempted to fold her arms, which didn't go very well. Her right shoulder was heavily bandaged. "Look, at the risk of asking a very trite question, how the hell did I get here?"

Her father smiled, although it was too tense to be convincing. "A dragon dropped you off in the garden," he said. "Quite literally. You and Jarven. Who, incidentally, is in even worse shape than you are."

Kett opened her mouth then closed it again. The smoke. The fire. Gods, had that actually been real? "Jarven? But—I was in Asiatica. With...Bael."

Come to think of it, where the hell was Bael?

"Well, now you're here. With Jarven. And both of you look like you've been set on fire."

Fire.

Fear gripped her. "Is he—will he be okay?"

"Eventually," Nuala said. "But I wouldn't advise any dragon training for either of you for a while."

Bed made—who knew her princess stepmother could do something so menial?—Kett was allowed to lie down again. "And Bael?" she asked.

Her parents and sister looked at each other. Cold dread spread through Kett's body.

"We haven't seen him, sweetheart," Nuala said.

I'm staying here.

"Kett, what happened?" Tyrnan asked, and she closed her eyes, images of fire and smoke and strange pictograms dancing across her vision.

She'd been nearly dead from starvation, dehydration, infection, blood loss...

And yet she was still alive, and as healthy as if she'd had weeks of medical care.

"I have no idea," she said honestly.

* * * * *

Two days later, close to fully healed but no closer to figuring out what her increasingly vivid dreams meant, so bored she contemplated going down to the gryphon paddocks and picking a fight just to see what would happen, Kett woke in an armchair in one of Nuala's many drawing rooms. A fire flickered in the grate and someone had covered her with a blanket, but she was stiff from sleeping curled up and when she stretched, she hurt everywhere.

She'd been feeling better, much better than she ought to given only two days of rest. Nuala was so confused she'd even called Striker to see if he'd had a hand in Kett's healing, but he denied all knowledge of it.

He was fairly interested in the fire at the dragon ranch, however. "Sounds like nice work," he'd said, and laughed when Kett swore a blue streak at him.

She sat up straighter and ran her hand through her hair.

"Good morning," her father said, and Kett looked at the clock in mild alarm.

Then she caught the sarcasm in his voice, realized it was past midnight and said, "Hah."

It came out as a croak. Tyrnan grinned and went back to his newspaper.

Kett cleared her throat. "What are you still doing up?"

He shrugged. "I'm reading a very interesting editorial about the king's views on immigration."

Kett stared at him.

"Well, I could be," he said defensively.

"Alternately, you could just ask him," she said. "Him being your best friend and all."

"That was the conclusion I came to," Tyrnan said, and Kett peered closer to see he was reading the sports pages.

She smiled and rearranged her blanket, then looked up and realized her father was watching her.

"You looked cold," he said, dropping his gaze. "And I remember when you got here, you were frozen solid. Nuala thought you were going to have frostbite. She thought you might lose your fingers."

"I could always grow some more," said Kett, wondering what, exactly, would happen to a shapeshifter who lost a limb or two.

"But someone had already patched you up."

Just stay alive, sweetheart, just stay alive. "Yeah. Well." She tugged at a fold of the blanket. "I don't exactly remember."

Tyrnan sighed. "You don't remember, Jarven hasn't regained consciousness long enough to be coherent—Kett, what the hell is going on? What happened in the mountains?"

Fire. Death. Pain.

And Bael is still there and if he hasn't contacted anyone by now he's probably dead.

And if he is dead, I don't know whether I should cry or cheer because he ordered me to be locked up and starved and said he wanted to kill me.

Her father was watching her. She gave a shrug. "I really ain't got a clue."

Tyrnan gave her a shrewd look. "Did it happen in the mountains?"

"Is it any of your business?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because I'm your father, and I've seen you die once and I don't want to do it again."

"Fine, then I'll die somewhere else next time."

She glared at him, but he didn't even have the grace to glare back. "Kett—" he began, then stopped. He rubbed his face, looking older than Kett remembered, and said, "I saw Lya earlier. She looked at those symbols you copied down from the cave. She says they're kelfish pictograms but they don't make sense. Like random words thrown together."

Kett frowned. "I know I copied 'em down right. And..." She hesitated, unsure how much to tell him when she wasn't very sure how much she'd imagined in the first place. *And I saw them crawling all over Bael's naked body in my dreams* didn't sound like the musings of a sane person.

"Chance called me while you were asleep," her father said. "She said Bael had contacted her a couple days ago, said he knew some mage or wizard who was conducting a ritual involving a Nasc and a shapeshifter, and he wanted to warn Dark and as many other Nasc as he could."

"Kind of him," Kett said. The scarred man. Bael's eagerness to destroy the shapeshifter. Fire, dragons, blood, smoke. Her brain felt like soup. How much had she imagined?

A Nasc and a shapeshifter, strung up together in a cave. Symbols, fire, angry words and broken rituals.

How much had Bael been involved with his mentor's plans?

"Kett," Tyrnan began then stopped again, chewing his lip. "Was it the mage who did this to you?"

"Hah," Kett said again, curling down farther under her blanket. "You could say that."

"Could you?"

He was giving her that shrewd look again, and Kett wondered exactly when he'd started to give a crap about who did what to her.

"Look," she said. Not that she cared about this, but she needed to change the subject. "Bael told me his mother was killed by a kelf. He said he'd been told this all his life. But then I heard his—his—" Her mouth twisted at the memory of Albhar, and she swallowed. "Then he was told it was a shapeshifter who'd killed her. Now, I reckon that was just a ploy to get him to bring me in, but—"

"He didn't know you were a shapeshifter," Tyrnan finished. "Did you kill his mother?"

"No! I'd never even met any Nasc before Chance brought Dark home."

"But I don't reckon it was a kelf, either," Tyrnan said. "Only kelf who ever killed a human was Lya, and that was her old master."

"Bael's mother wasn't human and — Wait a second." Something was tapping on her brain, trying to get her attention. "Lya killed her old master?"

"Yeah. Come on, you've heard this a million times. He was beating on his kelfs, she snapped and beat him back and killed him. The rest of the kelfs threw her out, she couldn't get a job with anyone else, so she ended up working for a wizard of some kind, and that's how she got sent through the Wall."

"A wizard," Kett breathed, because that was the thought her tired brain was trying to hold on to. "A wizard...or a Mage?"

"Same thing, ain't it?"

"The Nasc," Kett said slowly, still working it out. "The Nasc..."

Tyrnan watched her, for once silent.

"A Nasc Mage is a...he's a sort of...well, I don't know what he's supposed to be able to do, because as far as I can tell he can't do anything useful, but Bael said his dad could, and his mum too, he said they were brilliant. He said..."

"Bael's parents were magi?"

"Capital M. Like a title or something." A title they'd done nothing to deserve. "And his mother died when he was a kid, his father not long after, and he said...he said he was told it was a kelf who killed his mother. And what if it was Lya?"

"She'd have said," Tyrnan said firmly. Lya had been one of his closest friends for years. "She'd have said if she'd killed another human."

"But Nasc aren't human. Kelfs hate Nasc. They just don't like 'em. Bael said it's something to do with them upsetting the natural order of things, being half animal and half human."

"But you get on all right with them," her father pointed out.

"I ain't part animal," Kett said. "I can just look like one if I want." She closed her eyes, trying to concentrate. "Prowler, listen. What if Lya was the kelf who killed Bael's mother?"

"Or what if it really was a shapeshifter?" Tyrnan countered. "This happened — when? Twenty, thirty years ago?"

"Something like that. He didn't say. Look, why would his dad lie to him about it?"

"Maybe he was mistaken. Or maybe a kelf was an easy target. You just said they don't get on well with Nasc." He hesitated. "Or maybe it was a shapeshifter pretending to be a kelf. Kett, it could have been your mother."

She frowned. Galena Almet had, by all accounts, been a total lunatic. Even Tyrnan, a teenager so problematic he'd been kicked out of his own Realm's army for blowing up too many things, had been a little apprehensive about her.

Not that he'd let it stop him.

"Well, if it was," Kett said, "we'll never know."

"Lya might," Tyrnan said, and she met his eyes. "She'll still be awake, I'll call —"

The house shook as if some giant hand had just punched it.

"The fuck?" Tyrnan shouted, leaping to his feet and reaching for a sword that wasn't there. "Fucking bloody valet! 'No sir, a sword belt would ruin the line of that suit, sir'. I'll fucking *murder* him —"

The thump came again, something incredibly heavy smashing into the roof.

"Shut up and go see," Kett said, trying to untangle herself from her blanket and summon the strength to stand up. Her father ran to the glass doors leading to the terrace and had just opened one when the door from the hallway opened and Beyla rushed in. She had a robe thrown on over her nightdress and a crossbow in her hand.

"Something hit the roof," she said. "I couldn't see what."

The thump came again and this time was followed by a scraping sound. Something let out a terrible cry that tore through Kett's hearing.

"Sounds like a dragon," she said, and her heart clutched. A dragon, come to burn them just as it had burned Jarven's ranch.

Var could be a dragon. Oh Gods, what if it was him? What if the whole mate thing had been an elaborate charade to get her to the castle? What if Bael's involvement in the ritual wouldn't kill him as it would her? What if —

"A wild dragon? This far north, in winter?" Beyla asked, forcing Kett to concentrate.

"Well, maybe someone from Koskwim's riding one and they got into trouble," said Kett, finally getting to her feet as her brother came in, also carrying a crossbow. Behind him came Eithne with two swords, and Nuala, slightly more sensibly accessorized with her medical bag.

Behind them trailed Tane's girlfriend Giselle, looking terrified but hefting a candlestick, and Eithne's boyfriend Verrick, who bore a sheepish expression and a garda-issue sword.

"Dad," Eithne said, and tossed Tyrnan his sword. He caught it singlehandedly, twirling it with ease, and went out onto the terrace, followed by Beyla with her bow.

Kett stared at them all with astonishment. Tane she wasn't surprised at — although she was impressed — but Beyla and Eithne were carrying weapons like they knew how to use them, and Tyrnan hadn't batted an eyelid.

Something else hit the house, something heavier, and the scraping went on longer. Another thud, a smash, and then Tyrnan and Beyla darted back inside as something large dropped onto the lawn. It landed with a crash and someone screamed.

Someone outside.

"The servants," Nuala gasped, because many of them had quarters at the end of the garden.

Tyrnan glanced back at them, a light in his eyes, and Kett caught a glimpse of the mad highwayman her father had been before he'd married a princess and started wearing suits.

"Bels, Tane, you're with me. Eithne, stay here and guard the house. You," he barked at Verrick, gesturing to his sword. "You know how to use that?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. You're with me too." He ran his eyes over Giselle, clutching her candlestick and trembling, and dismissed her. To Verrick he added, "Bring that lamp."

"I'll come," Kett said, but Nuala and Eithne held her back without much effort.

"Kett, you can hardly bloody stand, stay where you damn well are," Tyrnan said as he strode out into the garden, followed by the other three. The darkness swallowed them almost immediately.

"Shouldn't we send for the gardaí?" asked a trembling Giselle.

"Verrick *is* a garda," Eithne snapped.

The dragon bellowed again. Its claws scraped on the roof.

"It's in pain," Kett said. She started toward the door, caught Nuala's disapproving look and said, "I'm only going to look."

But she didn't get far before Beyla shouted, "Mama, come quick, people are hurt."

Nuala dashed outside, and without her restraining influence, Kett followed. Out in the garden she could just make out a big shape, a box perhaps, in the glow of the lantern. Nuala and the others were kneeling over a couple of fallen figures. A dragon cabin, Kett surmised. Someone from Koskwim with a sick dragon.

The problem with sick dragons was that sometimes they exploded.

She shuffled to the edge of the terrace, her leg aching like mad, the blanket still clutched around her shoulders, and peered up at the roof. The dark shape of the dragon crouched there, moonlight glinting off ragged scales seeming to shimmer in the darkness.

It let out a mournful cry.

"Wait," said someone, and Kett looked down to see Eithne by her elbow. "See those gashes in its side? That's the dragon that was here before."

"Gashes?" Kett asked, distracted. "You can't gash a dragon, it's coated in scales that are — Before? What before?"

"It brought *you*," Eithne said, and Kett stared up at the dragon. "See? Its wing is all ragged, no wonder it crashed into the house."

The dragon shimmered again. Its shape wavered.

"What's wrong with it?" Eithne asked.

"Get back," Kett said, her voice hoarse. "Get back —"

The dragon let out a moan, shuddering, and lost its grip on the roof. Pantiles slid, smashing down onto the ground, and Kett began to tug her sister out of the way, giving

up and letting the much faster Eithne drag *her* back as tiles and bricks cascaded onto the terrace.

The dragon fell too, and Eithne threw Kett to the ground as it crashed onto the terrace. The stones beneath Kett's bruised body shook with the impact but her head came up immediately and she shoved her sister away, staggering over to the fallen body sprawled on the rubble.

It wasn't a dragon anymore. It was a man, bruised and bleeding, his clothes ragged and his skin burnt.

It was Bael, and without thinking about what she was doing, Kett threw herself on him and wrapped her arms around him, sobbing in relief. He was alive. He was alive, not burnt to death or stabbed or shot, he was alive, still breathing—

"Kett?" Eithne asked doubtfully. "Who's that?"

Ket looked down at the unconscious man in her arms, his clothes tattered and his skin smeared with blood, ash and dirt.

She pressed a gentle kiss to his temple. "The man who nearly killed me," she said.

Chapter Seventeen

"It was an ambush," Angie said, her pale hands wrapped around a cup of hot tea as she sat at the breakfast table. Small and white, wearing Beyla's clothes and a blanket around her shoulders, she looked utterly lost in Nuala's grand salon.

It was far too late for breakfast but none of them had risen much before noon. Angie had been the only one of their midnight visitors strong enough to get out of bed. Her father, Bill the landlord, had suffered severe burns but he was still alive, which was more than she could say for several of the other villagers Bael had brought south in the dragon cabin.

"A man came into the pub. An off-Realmer. Had an accent but I couldn't tell you what. Long scar down his face, like this." She traced a finger down her face. Kett forced herself to stay still.

"He said he was looking for the ranch, so Durgan and Olaf said they'd walk him up there. And then we...we heard this screaming..."

Her knuckles were white. Angie had witnessed her fair share of pub brawls, had even helped break up a few, but right now she looked as if she'd seen hell.

"We went up there...some of the regulars and me, we thought maybe Olaf and Durgan'd had one too many, or maybe he was trying to rob them or something, we didn't know. But then these men appeared...we didn't even see where from..."

She dragged in a harsh breath. Kett couldn't manage to look at anyone. Neither Olaf nor Durgan had been among the survivors.

"It was so instant. One minute they were running and the next they weren't. Fast shots, right to the head. Must have been professionals. They seemed really determined to get up the road to the ranch. We all tried to hold them off, everyone in the pub came out to help, but there were too many of them and there were only five of us by then, and Jarven." She looked up at Kett. "Bael said he'd brought Jarven here, is he...?"

"He'll be okay," Kett said. "Eventually."

"He was amazing," Angie said. "He can really fight. Was he a soldier once?"

Kett purposefully didn't look at her parents or siblings, who all knew about the Order's elite company of Knights. "A Knight," she said truthfully.

"He fought them, but they really laid into him. And then—" She screwed her face up, her eyes closed. "Then I think one of them released the dragons. They kept saying..."

Angie opened her eyes and looked at Kett. "They kept saying they wanted you. That if we told them where the shapeshifter was they'd go. And by then everything was

on fire, the dragons had blasted one of the cottages and it was spreading...and people were screaming..."

Nuala touched Angie's arm and the younger woman sucked in a breath that was more of a sob. Kett nodded automatically but her brain was racing.

Bael's men. She couldn't deny it; the man with the scarred face haunted her. How had they moved so fast? How had they known where to go?

The Federación. Realization hit her like an arrow in the back. Who else would have the training, the manpower, the resources and, let's face it, the determined interest in nonhuman abilities?

Bael's men were Federación.

But he'd seemed so terrified of the organization...

"...must have hit me because I don't remember anything else after that, until I woke up in their wagon, all tied up with the others. They kept demanding to know which one of us was the shapeshifter, but when we said you weren't there they didn't believe us."

And now Olaf and Durgan were dead, and countless villagers too—*thank the gods it was only a tiny hamlet*—and Angie, bruised and battered, was the healthiest of the remaining survivors. The others had been burnt, cut, stabbed and slashed, and Nuala had been white-faced as she'd dealt with them.

Jarven was badly hurt. And Bael...

He'd been breathing softly and evenly when she'd left him that morning. Having spent the night alternately cursing and praying, she'd woken to spend about ten minutes just staring at him. He was beautiful in sleep, his hair dark against his white skin, a livid bruise across his cheek the only color in his face.

He's hurt because of me.

But then I'm hurt because of him.

She wiped her hands across her face. "Right. And then what happened?"

"How did you escape?" Tane asked.

Angie took in a deep breath and let it out. "We didn't, sir," she said. "We were rescued. I was dozing, and I heard this absolutely maddened roar, like a dragon, and I thought, oh hell, it's one of the ones from the ranch."

"Just a sec," Kett interrupted. "The only dragons we have loose are the ones we trust not to go loopy. What happened?"

"I don't know. Maybe all the fighting unsettled them," Angie said. "Or maybe the others were let loose by the men who attacked us."

"What sort of numpty lets an untrained dragon loose?" Kett scowled.

"A desperate one," Tyrnan said. "What happened after that, Angie?"

"Well, sir, then the wagon was suddenly lifted up into the air and we all went tumbling over, and I'm afraid I passed out again," Angie said, looking embarrassed. "And the next thing I knew, this man was standing there, looking like he'd just come

straight from hell, telling me it would all be all right and that he'd come to help us. And I thought he looked like your young man," she turned to Kett, who grimaced while all the others grinned, "but he was so covered with soot and ash and it was dark, and I wasn't quite sure. And, well, by then my pa had woken up and he, er, didn't realize we were being rescued, so he, well...gave him a piece of his mind."

Kett winced.

"That would explain Bael's bruises," Nuala murmured.

"Yes, your highness. And he looked like he'd been fighting previously, too, he had a sword and he was bleeding. Anyway, I eventually recognized him, so he untied me and I saw – well, what was left of the men who'd attacked us."

"What was left?" Tyrnan asked.

"He'd brought a dragon with him, sir," Angie said, evidently unaware of Var's shape-changing abilities. "And it, er," she glanced at Nuala and the girls, apparently trying to protect their delicate sensibilities. Kett snorted. Half an hour in a room with Tyrnan of Emreland and most ladies quickly adjusted such sensibilities.

"I'm guessing he didn't sit them down and explain to them the errors of their ways," Nuala said.

"I'm guessing he turned them into barbecue," Tyrnan said.

"You guess correctly, sir." Angie swallowed. "He untied everyone else then and got his dragon to pick up the wagon and...well. Then he brought us here. Is he all right?"

"Five by five," Kett said distantly. Bael had rescued them all? Deliberately? Well, maybe he'd just happened upon them, but she didn't suppose it was very likely.

Why? If it had been *his* men who'd attacked the village, why had he rescued them?

Still completely disgusted with herself for spending half the night crying over a man who was possibly – well, probably – involved with the Federación, she reached for more coffee and wondered whether Nuala would allow her to raid the sideboard for something to add to it.

She looked up and caught her father's expression. "No," he said.

"What?"

"No brandy, no rum, no gin or whatever you want to put in it."

Kett scowled.

"Kett, you're still very fragile," Nuala scolded.

"I've never been fucking fragile in my life," Kett said, shoving back her chair and getting to her feet, suddenly monstrously irritated. "I'm going to go check on Jarven."

"I looked in on him five minutes ago," Angie said, ducking her gaze shyly. "He's fast asleep."

"Well then, I'm going to go check on the others."

"They're being taken care of," Nuala assured her.

"Well—I'm just going to go and—be somewhere else," Kett snapped, stalking off as fast as her bad leg and her woozy head would let her.

Her father caught up to her outside the breakfast room door. "Kett, she's only looking out for your best interests."

"I know."

"Don't be rude to her."

"Oh fuck off. If I ever stopped being rude I'd probably be dead."

"If you don't get some rest you may well be," Tyrnan shot back.

"Fuck off."

"Now there's my little girl."

She glared at him. "I was never your little girl."

Tyrnan raised his eyebrows. "Sure you were, I just didn't know about you."

"Great father you were." She started toward the stairs, her leg aching abominably. The tiny sensible part of Kett, buried deep inside, told her she should probably borrow a cane to lean on. The rest of her said she'd have to lose a leg to be so desperate.

Tyrnan followed at the same slow pace. "Come on, Kett, what's brought this on?"

"Nothing. I'm just...look, I'm sorry, but I've been having a pretty shitty few days, in case you hadn't noticed, and...oh hell, say sorry to Nuala for me, will you?" she added guiltily.

"She won't mind. You wanna talk about it?"

Kett shot him an incredulous look. Her father looked horribly embarrassed, but at least he was trying.

"No," she said, and he visibly relaxed. "But you know what I do want to talk about? How Bels and Eithne have swords and crossbows and stuff, and know how to use them."

He shrugged. "It's a tough old world. They should be able to defend themselves."

"Against what? They never leave the house without bodyguards."

Tyrnan drummed his fingers on the stair rail as Kett started her slow ascent. "Look, if you really want to know, they asked to learn. They said they wanted to be like you."

Kett stumbled and would have fallen if he hadn't caught her. "Don't say shit like that when I'm halfway up a flight of stairs," she grumbled.

"Sorry. It's true though."

She stared blindly at the neat edge of the carpet covering the marble steps. Beyla and Eithne wanted to be like her? "But—why?"

"Well," Tyrnan took her arm and started helping her up the stairs, "I don't recall exactly, but it was sometime after you beat up your husband. Apparently they found that impressive."

"He deserved it," Kett said vaguely.

"Yeah. That's what they found impressive." He sighed. "Look, Kett...I know I treat them differently than how I treated you, but...well, finding out he has a teenage daughter can bloody terrify a man. I didn't do things very right with you, did I? I wanted to do better with them. Wanted to stop them making mistakes like – uh –"

"Like I did?" Kett supplied dryly.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I'm proud of you and all, but I really wish you'd stop nearly getting yourself killed. And while I think you dealt with the cheating husband admirably, I'd kind have liked it better if you hadn't married the bastard in the first place. You deserved better."

"Thanks for telling me so at the time," Kett said, still mulling over the "proud" bit with some astonishment.

"Would you have listened?"

She glanced at him, saw his half smile and returned it. "Look, just go easy on them, okay? They're grown-ups now. Let Eithne marry her garda. He's a good kid."

"But he *is* just a kid."

"Do I have to remind you how old you were when I was born?"

"Yes, but that was –" He saw her expression and said quickly, "Er, unplanned. I just want her to be safe and happy."

"And not thrown in jail for nearly killing her cheating, lying, scum-sucking weasel of a husband," Kett said.

"Exactly."

"Well, if he cheats, I'll kill him for her. How's that?"

"I'd really rather prefer it if all my kids could stay out of jail in the future," Tyrnan said despairingly.

"In that case, I'll make it look like an accident."

He smiled at that, and she smiled back and patted his arm, releasing herself from his grip as they got to the top of the stairs. "Dad, she'll be fine. And yes, I did just call you Dad. Try not to faint and fall down the stairs, I ain't coming after you."

Tyrnan laughed, shaking his head. "Where are you going?" he asked as Kett turned to go.

"Really ought to talk to Bael."

"Should be fun."

She grimaced.

"Want me to come with you?"

She stared.

"All right, okay, I just thought I'd ask," her father said, holding up his hands defensively.

"He's probably still asleep. But if you hear anyone screaming, then you can intervene."

"Never a dull moment, eh Kett?"

"No," she sighed. "I like dull moments. They're peaceful and quiet and people aren't trying to kill me."

He moved to ruffle her hair, she ducked and started away.

"Hey, now your sisters are trying to be like you, does this mean you'll start being like them?" Tyrnan called after her.

Kett flipped him the finger and walked away to the sound of his laughter.

As she rounded the corner, the scribe at her belt vibrated. She picked it up and the shiny face resolved to show Chance, beautiful as ever, riding through the snowy Peneggan countryside. Her cheeks were pink and her hair streamed pale and glossy from beneath a fur-trimmed hat.

Just looking at her made Kett feel fresh from that tower cell.

"Kett! Should you be out of bed?"

Kett scowled. "I'm fine," she said. And before her cousin could chastise her, added, "Where are you?"

"A few hours away. How's your young man?"

"Will everyone stop calling him my young man? He's at least the same age as me," Kett snarled.

"He's alive, at least," Chance said calmly.

"How do you know?"

"Darling, I always know." Before Kett could tell her how damn annoying that was, Chance added, "We'll be there tonight. Striker's coming in too."

Kett groaned. "Why?"

"I asked him to."

"Why?"

"He can be very useful, darling. He probably knows exactly what's going on, if we can get him to spill the details."

"Fan-fucking-tastic," Kett said. On top of everything else, she had to deal with Striker.

* * * * *

Bael dreamt of Kett in a cell, bloody and emaciated. Her head lolled, her eyes dull, and her bones protruded through her skin. Her flesh seemed to shrink as he watched, turning gray and then green, rotting away from her bones. Her eyeballs popped. Her lips peeled back in a fleshless grin.

"Kett..." He reached for her but as his fingers touched the stone-cold flesh of her shoulder, it crumbled like ancient brick.

Horried, Bael leapt back, but her whole body had turned to stone now, a statue lying on the floor. "Kett!" he cried, and reached out to her again, but the statue crumbled, turned to dust and scattered.

Symbols danced on the edge of his vision, flickered and faded, but when he turned his head to see them they flitted away.

"Kett," he mourned, and the dust on the floor blew away in a sudden breeze. "Kett!"

Bael woke sharply in Kett's bed, alone. The sheets smelled of her, but the room was empty and dark.

Night had fallen, and the last thing he remembered was crashing into the pantiled roof of Nuala's house, unable to keep flying or gripping the tattered wagon any longer.

...flesh shrinking, rotting, turning to stone, crumbling...

But she was alive. He could feel her, out there in the city somewhere. His whole body was tuned in to her.

His whole body, which ached in a thousand ways.

He sat up, wincing, and peered through the gloom at the clock on the mantel. Just after eight in the evening—he'd been asleep all day.

For all he knew, he could have been here for weeks.

He stretched—no, definitely not weeks. His body felt as battered and bruised as it had when he'd collided with the roof. Maybe a little worse. What he really needed was to see Kett, wrap her in his arms, kiss her and stroke her and, well, basically shag her rotten. That always made him feel better.

Except the last he'd seen of Kett, she was half-dead and not inclined to even talk to him, let alone touch him.

She fucked another man.

But he still wanted to see her. Needed to see her. To make things right between them, or at least as right as possible.

Slowly, carefully, he picked up the clothes Nuala had given him for Yule and let Var's wings take him silently—and painfully—from the house. He flew as far as he could manage toward the south of the city, an unknown instinct guiding him toward Kett, then came down in an alley and walked the rest of the way as a human.

The city of Elvyrn was noted for its gentility, and yet Kett seemed to have found the seediest part of it. He found her in a tavern whose sign was so faded and dirty as to be unintelligible, its clientele mostly large tattooed men and weary women in gaudy outfits.

Kett was slumped at a table in the corner, her back to the wall. She saw him come in, turned her head and ignored him.

Bael bit his lip. Well, he hadn't expected it would be easy.

Her tankard was empty but since Bael was standing at the bar, Kett didn't want to go over and get a refill. Not just yet. She saw him talk to the grizzled bartender, gesture to her and buy a bottle of the stout she'd been drinking. She figured stout was practically food anyway, so didn't count as alcohol. At least, that was her excuse if Nuala smelled the fumes on her breath when she got home.

She half wished she'd sat with her back to the room, all the better to ignore him, but years of habit were hard to break. No Knight worth her tattoo would ever turn her back on a bar room.

She lit up a cigar and allowed her gaze to settle on the couple at the next table. The woman was probably Kett's age but looked ten years older, her skin tired and thin under its layers of powder. Her hair was badly dyed, there was a sore on her lip and her breasts spilled out of her tight, patched-up dress. The sailor on whose lap she was sitting had his hand up her skirt.

The woman was staring into nothingness with such a bleak expression on her face it chilled Kett.

Through the smoke of her cigar she saw a figure approaching. By his scent, by the way he moved and by her body's total attunement to his, she knew it was Bael.

He poured stout into her tankard without looking at her, without saying a word, then walked on past her into the next room, where she saw him take a cue from the rack by the snooker table.

Kett took a thoughtful pull on her cigar. She watched the doxy at the next table turn and kiss her sailor with plenty of tongue, all the while never losing the desolate expression clouding her eyes.

Kett stood up, steadying herself on the table. The sailor jeered, probably assuming she was drunk. She wasn't even nearly there. But her leg was paining her as she limped across the stained rushes soaking up beer spills on the floor of the public bar.

She took a cue from the wall and watched Bael rack the balls.

"One drink?" she asked, when he didn't say anything.

"More if you want."

His eyes were on the table as he gestured to her to take the first shot. She did, sighting down the cue to the dirty white ball, breaking the neat triangle of reds and pocketing a couple.

"Going to take more than stout, you know."

"Even Tennison's Famous Milk Stout?"

Kett potted the black. "Even that."

He retrieved the black and watched her pocket another red.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Kett paused before lining up another shot at the black. She potted it, retrieved it, and took aim at the next red without lifting her gaze from the table.

"I didn't know you were the shapeshifter."

Kett said nothing.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged, which hurt, and bent to the table again. "Why didn't you tell me you work for the Federación?"

Another silence, while the noise of the pub swirled around them.

"Firstly, I don't," Bael said, "and secondly – why would you think I do?"

Kett straightened up and looked Bael in the eye for the first time since he'd walked in. She put down her cue, loosened the neck of her shirt then pulled it off over her head.

The other patrons of the public bar whooped. Bael stared at her upper body, naked but for the plain bra she wore and the stitches in her shoulder. Kett knew she looked like hell, that the recently infected dog bite on her shoulder stood out in livid relief, that her ribs were multicolored, the gash on her hip visible above her low-riding jeans. She knew she was still a little too thin, too pale, too unhealthy-looking.

She wanted Bael to know it too.

She pointed to a faded scar on her side. "Federación did this," she said, and tapped her upper arm. "And this. And I think there's one on my leg."

Bael stared.

"I gave out a few scars too," she said. "Sliced open one guy's face. He returned the favor by locking me in a tower. *Your* tower. And attacking a village. *My* village. Same man, Bael."

"I don't –"

"They kidnapped your king's sister," she said, "and several – several people I know." She still couldn't tell him about the Order. Not quite yet. "Chance, Striker and I went in after them. A castle in the Bascano Mountains. Euskara."

"I know where the Bascan – Oh," Bael said, shock and pain clouding his expression. "I had a house there," he said, his face ashen.

"The Castillo de la Montaña?" Kett asked, and he nodded, seemingly anguished.

"Albhar told me it had burned down. He said... I had no idea that's what they were using it for. I swear I didn't!"

Kett said nothing.

"Listen, they're my enemies too. They kidnapped the king's sister, they nearly killed my queen – your cousin!"

No "nearly" about it, Kett thought, but kept that to herself too. "Nice patriotic sentiments from someone who'd never even met another of his species until recently."

"They're still my people." Bael looked aggrieved and Kett grabbed her shirt, pulling it on and ignoring the pain the movement caused.

"No, *your people* are the ones who killed *my people* at the dragon ranch," Kett said viciously, leaning over the table and miscuing so badly she nearly ripped the felt.

"I swear I didn't know —"

"Didn't know, Bael? Didn't *know*?" She threw the cue at the table. "That doesn't stop them being dead!"

He flinched, but Kett was on a roll now.

"And what was that you said? About stopping to help me? If you hadn't stopped, they'd still be alive!" she yelled.

"If I hadn't stopped, you'd be dead!" Bael yelled back.

"So?" Kett shouted, but couldn't think of anything to add to it. Bael looked as if he might be about to smile, for which she'd have had to kill him, but he was saved from further attack by Kett's scryer, which buzzed at her belt. She snatched it up, snarling, "What?" and realizing too late it was probably her father or Nuala, ready to disapprove of her location.

But it was Chance. "We're about twenty minutes away, darling. Where are you? Looks like a dive."

"It is," Kett said. She made herself take a deep breath to calm down. "I know who attacked the ranch."

"Who?" Chance asked, all business.

"The Federación." She dug her nails into her palm and, not sure if she was correcting or clarifying, added, "Bael's men."

For a second, Chance's lovely face was frozen in shock. Then she shook herself. "Oh darling," she said. "We'll be there in five."

Chapter Eighteen

"They were my men," said Bael. "All of them."

Tyrnan snarled at him but it was Chance who spoke. "You told me they belonged to this 'Albhar'," she said, letting the quotes drop neatly around the name.

"No—well, they were my men, but they were acting on his orders," he said emphatically. "I swear, not mine."

"Swear on what?" asked Kett idly. She turned her head and looked down the table at him for the first time since they'd entered, and put steel in her voice. "Swear on what?"

She'd called the meeting at Nuala's house, rendezvousing with Chance and Dark at the gate and summoning Lya from the guardhouse. Kett wasn't entirely sure why she wanted the kelf there, but she couldn't shake the idea that the symbols she'd seen scrawled in that cave were still important.

A shapeshifter, a Nasc and a ritual. It had to be related.

Her head throbbed with conflicting details. Bael had been strung up in the cave, but to what end? Was the ritual to benefit him—or to kill him? Were those men acting on his orders or Albhar's?

He saved your life. But he also put it in danger.

A lifetime of distrust swirled around inside her head.

They'd ended up in what the butler had called the Second Breakfast Room, although Kett wasn't sure if this was because Nuala habitually ate two breakfasts, or just liked to have a choice of rooms in which to eat one meal.

Her father, protesting that she was his bloody daughter and this was his bloody house, had invited himself. Kett, who knew full well it was really Nuala's house, had let him. She'd have preferred to have Jarven present, if only to up the quota of People Who Weren't Bael, but while her friend was conscious he was still very weak, and even if Nuala had let him out of bed, Kett didn't want to risk it. Angie had come instead, wrapped in thick socks and a sweater, looking pale and tired. She'd gone white with shock on seeing her first kelf when Lya entered, but adjusted to her presence much more quickly than Kett had expected.

Striker had put in a not wholly unexpected appearance, being his usual unhelpful self. She could tell his presence made Bael uncomfortable, and was perversely glad.

"I'd swear it on my own life," Bael said. His eyes met hers but she quickly looked away.

"Your life don't mean much right here, right now," Kett said. "Are any of those men still alive?"

He shook his head. "Var took care of them," he said, and Angie's knuckles went white. "But there are more of them. I had about twenty knights and probably a hundred more men who could be called to arms, and that's just at the Vyiskagrad house."

"How many houses do you have?" asked Chance.

"About a dozen. One less than this time last year," he said with a tight smile. "Not all of them are so well staffed, but if Albhar wanted, he could probably pull together...maybe a hundred knights, and five times as many indentured men."

"Why do you need so many armed men?" Tyrnan asked. His expression was hostile, and had been ever since Kett had announced to them that Bael's men had been the ones to attack Jarven's ranch.

A stab of guilt plagued her. She probably shouldn't have said it with such certainty, but she was so hurt, so angry and so upset she couldn't think straight.

"Man's got to defend what's his," Bael said, his eyes on Kett. She could feel his gaze, even if she wasn't looking at him. "My parents were rich. My mother especially. I have no brothers or sisters, everything came to me." He was silent a moment, then said, "I was raised by a man named Albhar Danziran. He's a human Mage of relatively small talent, but he was a friend of my father's, and brought in to try to tutor me in magic."

"You *got* any skill in magic?" asked Tyrnan critically.

"No," said Striker, before Bael could answer. He was staring right at Bael, and Kett was annoyed to see Bael wasn't even squirming. "He's got potential but no skill. No practice. A blunt instrument."

"Surprised you didn't suck power from him," Chance said.

Striker shrugged. "I would have, if he'd had any."

"I didn't come into any power until I was a teenager," Bael said.

Dark was frowning. "You have magical power? What is your animal?"

Bael took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's everything," he said. "Var changes with my mood. He can be whatever I need."

Bael closed his eyes, tensed, and his shape blurred. From it flowed another creature, a small domestic cat who sat on the table.

It was perhaps a measure of the weirdness of the people in Kett's life that not one of them seemed to think this was odd.

The cat blurred and became a rabbit. Then a small dog. Nothing big, Kett realized. Nothing threatening. Maybe Var was too weak and tired to be anything bigger. Or maybe he was doing it on purpose.

"You really are a Mage," Chance breathed. Bael gave a bare nod. He reached out to stroke Var, who climbed into his lap and pressed close like a frightened puppy.

Tyrnan didn't look impressed. "I thought being able to change your animal was something only Nasc children could do," he said.

"Children and Magi," Dark rumbled.

"It's really the only Mage power I have," Bael said.

"I didn't think there were any," Dark said. "After the death of...they were your parents, weren't they?"

Bael nodded again. He glanced in Kett's direction. "Albhar told me a shapeshifter killed my mother," he said.

"Can't make his mind up, can he?" Kett replied tonelessly, determined not to lose her cool like she had in the bar. "I'd never even met your mother."

"Yes, I know that now, but then, I didn't—"

"It doesn't matter," she cut in. "It ain't important. What's important is that your men killed half my villagers."

Here Angie flinched, and Chance touched her hand reassuringly.

Kett went on relentlessly. "And they hurt plenty more. And Jarven." Her fingers curled into her palm. Jarven might be a taciturn old bugger, but he was family. She'd known him longer than she'd known anyone else at this table.

"Did you know they were going to attack?" Chance asked Bael.

"No. I swear I had no idea. I thought we'd lose them once we got off-Realm. I didn't honestly think they'd be able to trace me much farther than they could see me. I only stopped to heal Kett. Apart from that, I was moving pretty fast and leaving no tracks."

"Then maybe this Albhar's got more talent than you give him credit for," said Striker.

"Or maybe you were lying," Chance said, looking very much like her father. "You told us to warn as many Nasc as we could find. You knew we'd be a long way away from the mountain ranch, that the only person there capable of defending himself was Jarven who, let's face it, is not in the first flush of youth anymore."

"I didn't attack anyone!"

His queen's eyes were glacial. "No, you sent someone else to do it, like a coward."

"I didn't send *anyone*," Bael cried. "Your majesty—you believed me before!"

"Before," Chance said, her beautiful face hard and cold as a statue. "Before you violated the bond between you and your mate."

Bael's eyes closed and his lashes looked damp. "She's not my mate," he said quietly.

"Too right," growled Tyrnan.

"What was it even for?" Chance demanded ruthlessly. "Gain Kett's sympathy? Play the hero? Or were you just out for revenge?"

"Was it Jarven?" Kett asked, before Bael could answer.

His eyes flew open. "No! Why would I attack Jarven?"

"Jealousy," Tyrnan said.

"What? No! For fuck's sake, I didn't know they were going to attack the village. I had no idea. Thingy, you," he pointed wildly to Angie as Var growled anxiously on his lap, "you said they were looking for Kett."

"They said they were looking for a shapeshifter," Angie whispered.

"Why did they want Kett?" Tyrnan asked.

"For this ritual of my father's," Bael said wearily. Var licked his fingers comfortingly. "Albhar's obsessed with it. That's why he told me a shapeshifter had killed my mother," he added, "so that I'd bring one in."

"The ritual demands a shapeshifter?" asked Chance.

"A shapeshifter and a Nasc." Bael looked at Kett again. Again she looked away. "That's what he was trying to do when...when we first met."

Kett's head snapped round. "The ritual that killed everyone but you and me?" she scoffed. "Bit of a shitty ritual."

"Well, maybe it went wrong. He's not that great a Mage."

"No wonder he never taught you anything," Kett sniped.

"Agreed," said Bael, with a faint smile. "But —"

"A shapeshifter and a Nasc?" piped up Lya, her kelfish voice high and melodious. Everyone looked at her. "Is it a ritual for absolute power?"

There was silence.

"How do *you*," Bael asked, his voice low, "know about the ritual?"

"Your mother was obsessed with it. Well, I assume she was your mother, unless there were other female Nasc Magi around about twenty years ago." She glanced at Dark, who shook his head. "And she was mated to a male Nasc Mage too. He had a lot more power than her. She wanted more. So she found this ritual, an ancient ritual. Part of the prophecies about our god. It was written in kelfish runes. That's why they hired me, to translate it."

A terrible suspicion formed in Kett's mind. *A kelf killed my mother.* "Can you remember it?"

Lya nodded. "You're going to ask me to write it down, aren't you?" She made a face, sighed and took a notepad from her pocket. With a sideways glance at Striker, she added, "But please destroy it afterward. Words have power to kelfs, especially words like this. If they're left written, even if no one reads them, they have power. They...they warp and control."

"Did you destroy the copy my parents had?" Bael asked, his voice hoarse.

"No. They'd already sent me through the Wall by then."

"*His* parents sent you through the wall?" Tyrnan asked, amazed. "You said it was a wizard."

"Wizard, Mage...what's the difference?"

Bael rolled his eyes.

"You never told me you worked for a Nasc!" Tyrnan said.

"Well, who else would have me? I killed a human."

"Did you kill my mother?" Bael asked sharply.

"No. I killed a man named Grevlick, who owned a forge in Skavsta, and who beat and starved his kelfs." She fixed Bael with a steely look. "You can't break the skin of a kelf, but beatings hurt all the same."

Bael glanced at Kett, then down at the table.

Lya frowned at the piece of paper she'd been drawing on then looked up. "Here. This describes the ritual. There's a chant to be said, but I haven't written it." She paused, glancing at Striker.

"Oh please," he said. "I got more power in my eyelashes than I could get from any bollocky kelf ritual."

Kett held out her hand for the pad and when she got it, stared in shock.

"These symbols," she began, and looked up at Lya.

"Tyrnan asked me about some of them. But not in the right order, not with the right...context."

"They were on the walls of the cave. In Nihon. And..." Kett paused, and Var climbed off Bael's lap and trotted down the table toward her, his claws clicking on the polished wood.

"And?" Bael urged.

"They were in my dream too. Recurring dream." *Crawling over Bael's naked body.* Maybe she didn't need to add that part.

He said nothing to that, but he did get up and move to lean over Kett's shoulder. He was very close, reading the pictograms Lya had drawn. Very close, very hot and very wrong.

Var sat in front of Kett, a small mongrel dog, tail wagging and eyes hopeful. Kett ignored him.

Bael straightened up.

"Kett," he said softly. She kept her eyes fixed on the paper. "Kett, look at me." Var nudged her hand with his soft, whiskery nose.

"Why?"

"I dreamed those symbols too. I dreamed you were with me, and those symbols appeared on your skin."

Kett felt herself go very still. There was no possible way he could have known what she'd dreamt. She'd mentioned the symbols to her father but she'd told no one they'd appeared on Bael's face and body.

Everyone was silent for a while then Striker, sitting opposite Kett, shoved Var to one side and looked at the symbols.

He laughed.

"Oh, I suppose a ritual involving painful death is funny to you, is it?" Kett snapped as Var, whimpering, leapt into Bael's arms.

"Of course it is, pet. But what's funny about *this* is how no one's read it right." He looked at Bael, who was holding Var, now in cat form, and stroking him soothingly. "Did your mother ever achieve this ultimate power?"

"If she had, she'd probably still be alive," Bael said coldly.

"Right. Peck," he addressed Lya, who scowled. "You said she was using shapeshifters and Nasc, right?"

The kelf nodded. "She got it wrong."

This time they all stared at Lya.

"This symbol here," she said, tapping the paper. "The Nasc interpreted it as 'shape' or 'form'. But I told you—context. It has a looser meaning. They asked me to read it in Leaclii, which is the language of my tribe, but it was meant to be spoken in the ancient language. The meaning is subtly different."

"How different?" Bael asked. Kett's heart was thudding in her chest.

Lya chewed her lip. "In Leaclii, *tvåskriova maskin krydda mittefiende formabyta*."

"Two creatures," Tyrnan translated slowly, "two opposite creatures...who can...change?"

Lya nodded unhappily and went on. "And in the ancient language, *na varda duan chimeron salasth sa fierna*."

Tyrnan gave her a blank look. The kelfs had never taught anyone their ancient language.

"Two creatures who are enemies," Striker said, and Kett wasn't really surprised he'd understood. "Enemies who can change their appearance."

There was another silence.

"I don't see the difference," said Tyrnan.

"I do," Bael said. He looked right at Lya, who looked right back at him.

"Kelfs and Nasc," Chance said.

"But a kelf can only change its color when it's a child," Tyrnan said. "As an adult, it's fixed."

"Unless you're a kelf who's been ensorcelled by a Nasc Mage," Lya said, her eyes still on Bael. "Your father experimented on me. Precisely what he thought he was doing when he sent me through the Wall is anyone's guess, but I was still really only a kelfing at the time. I could still change my color."

"The way a young Nasc can still change his shape," Dark said.

"Whatever he did to me, it left me a mutable creature. I'm old enough to have grown kelfings of my own now, but..." Lya changed her skin color from blue to red, her hair from green to yellow, and her eyes through a spectrum of colors that made Kett feel slightly nauseous. "I can still change my color."

"Do you think he knew?" Bael asked. "About the ritual, about needing *you*?"

Lya frowned and eventually shook her head. "He wasn't terribly interested in the ritual. He said he would participate in it, because she couldn't, not if she was the one performing it. But while she hunted down a shapeshifter, he experimented on how to send a kelf through the Wall."

"No one else has managed it," said Tyrnan. "Even Striker can't do it."

Striker snorted and lit up a cigarette in a manner that suggested such a thing wasn't even worth bothering about.

"But no one else who's tried it was a Nasc Mage," Bael said. "That's the thing. A kelf and a Nasc have never teamed up like that before." He turned to Kett. "Do you know what this means?"

"You're going to stop beating up kelfs?"

"No. Well, yes, but I mean — they don't need you anymore."

"Aye, but *they* don't know that," her father put in.

Kett rubbed her aching shoulder. "A great comfort. Thank you."

She paused for a moment and looked around the table. She was tired. She was depressed. She was in pain. And she wasn't needed.

She shoved back her chair, knocking it into Bael, and stood up.

"Right then," she said. "I'll be off."

She hadn't gotten three paces outside the room before Bael caught up to her.

"Kett, wait."

"Fuck off."

"No, listen."

"Fuck off."

"Kett —"

"Fuck."

"Please."

"Off."

Var, all of a sudden a full-grown tiger, leapt in front of her. He filled the wide corridor, his eyes like solid amber, his tail swishing.

"I've fought tigers before," Kett said.

"Yeah, and see how that worked out?" Bael moved to stand in front of her. "Kett, just listen to me a minute."

"No. Your ritual doesn't need me. You can't possibly have anything to say to me."

"My ritual —" Bael began, teeth gritted, but he calmed himself. "Look, you and I know the ritual doesn't need you, but Albhar doesn't. He'll still be after you."

"I can take care of —"

"No one, in this state." When she started to protest, he interrupted again. "Have you even been able to change your shape since you got here?"

She folded her arms and glared at the floor. "I haven't tried."

"Try."

"Fuck —"

"Albhar put an enchantment on you so you couldn't. I can lift it."

"I could get Striker to do that."

"For what price? Just stand still a minute."

Kett narrowed her eyes. "You could be putting a mojo on me."

Bael looked at her with terrible sadness in his eyes. "You don't—" he began, and broke off, sighing. "You *never* trusted me, did you?"

"I never trust anyone."

"Why, Kett?"

"I don't have to explain myself to you," Kett snapped, and attempted to push past him, but Bael caught her arm and yanked her against the wall, pinning her there with his body.

"Get off me or I'll rip your throat out with or without the help of fangs," she spat.

But Bael spoke in some other language, something lyrical, and Kett felt the same sensation she had when Striker had freed her from the spell the first time.

No, not the first time. She'd been freed from this spell once before that. She'd heard those words once before.

Her skin rippled, changing to fur, feathers, scales, her fingertips growing claws, shrinking again, her whole body reveling in its flexibility. Bael, never letting up, watched her from a distance of about six inches.

"I've heard those words before," she said, holding up one hand and slowly turning it into a tiger's paw.

"The spell was on you that first time," Bael said, "when we were in the cave. There was one on me too but I shook it off. Who did it for you?"

"Striker," Kett said. "But he didn't use words. And that wasn't the first time I've been under that spell."

Bael had hold of one of her wrists and one of her arms. Her free hand turned into a gryphon's claw and she considered using it on him. But instead, she held it in front of his face and turned it to stone.

Kett had always found it more difficult to change one part of her body than to mimic an entire shape. Turning every inch of skin to the texture of stone was easier than changing just her hand, and she still wasn't feeling a hundred percent well, so she did her whole body.

Bael was still holding her against the wall, but as the crackle of stone spread over her skin, his hands flew away from her as if she'd burnt him. His face twisted with

horror, his whole body flinched. His eyes were wide with revulsion, shock and fear. Var shrunk against him, once more a small dog, whimpering with fear.

"Kett," Bael croaked, like a man witnessing a massacre. "Gods, no. Please!"

Kett turned herself back, blinking. "For gods' sakes, Bael, you look like you've seen a corpse."

He touched her, tentatively, as if he was terrified she might break. When she failed to shatter into a million pieces, he grabbed her and hugged her to him, breathing hard, burying his face in her neck. Kett thought he might be crying.

He was strong and warm and close, and for a moment she let herself relax into the pleasure of his arms. But only for a moment. He might not have been the one to lock her in the tower, but he'd hardly protested Albhar's intentions.

"Get a grip," she hissed. "I was only trying to show you – look, it doesn't matter."

"It does," Bael said, looking up. "Believe me, Kett, it does. In my dream you were made of stone, and you crumbled to pieces. I thought –"

"You dreamed of me made of stone?" Kett asked sharply, and Bael nodded, looking wretched.

"I dreamed of you made of stone, and you turned into a – you looked like you'd been..."

"What?" Kett asked sarcastically, trying to disentangle herself from him. "Left in a tower cell for five days with no food and water?"

Bael flinched. "Left in a tower cell for five *months* with no food and water." His eyes met hers, and they were tortured. "I didn't know it was you."

"And that makes it all right, does it? If you thought I was some anonymous stranger that you'd left to die? That's sexy, Bael. That's really hot."

He flinched. "I was angry. I was hurt. You might have some memory of why."

Kett felt her face burn.

"You have no idea of the agonies I've been through since I saw you there," Bael said softly. "Day and night, visions of you. Nightmares. Your body just rotting away as I watched. Like the dead grown old. I thought – it was telling me you were going to die, and then when you turned to stone..."

He buried his head in her neck again, and Kett, frowning, let him. It was only when the door from the breakfast room opened and Tyrnan looked out, eyebrows raised, that she made Bael move.

"We need to talk," she said, gesturing to her father that it was all right. A direct lie. Kett couldn't really remember any instances in her life when things had been less right, but she really didn't need Tyrnan's interference.

Tugging Bael upstairs to her bedroom, she shut the door and leaned against it, shoving her hands through her hair. Funny, but it was one of the hardest things to change.

"Sit," she said to Bael, gesturing to the bed, and he did. "Stay. Good dog."

Var, still a dog but rather larger, gave her a reproachful look and leapt onto the bed to rest his head in Bael's lap.

They were both silent a while. Kett, her leg aching, limped over to the dresser for a jar of liniment then hesitated. What the hell. Bael could see her naked without jumping on her. He thought she consorted with whores.

The fact that she actually had didn't make her feel any better.

She kicked off her boots, tugged off her trousers and dealt Bael a severe look. "My leg hurts," she said. "Don't go getting any ideas."

"I wouldn't anyway." He hesitated, watching her sit at the other end of the bed and start to rub liniment into her thigh. "How's your shoulder?"

"Hurts like buggery. Well, not actually like buggery, that's not really so bad. But, you know. Hurts. A lot."

"I tried to fix it."

"How?"

Bael frowned. "I don't know. I just...wanted you to be better. To stay alive."

Please get well again. Just stay alive.

"Sure, and I'm the Maharaja of Pradesh," Kett said, shaken.

"Actually, funny story," Bael said. "I used to know the Maharaja of Pradesh."

"No you didn't," Kett said wearily.

"Did too. Fat man. Smelled of curry."

"Harem of concubines younger than his daughter," Kett said absently.

"You know him?"

"We've met."

She poked at her leg a while, trying to think of what to say. All this bullshit between them. Maybe if she'd just been honest in the first place, none of this would have happened.

Yeah, like she believed that. But maybe it was worth a try anyway.

"The thing is..."

Bael looked at her encouragingly. Var nuzzled her hand and she found herself scratching the soft fur at the top of his head.

"The thing is..."

Var licked her fingers encouragingly.

Tell him you were the barmaid. Tell him you didn't fuck Giacomo. Tell him he's probably right and you are his mate.

Tell him...

He left you to die.

Bael touched her hand and she looked up, her eyes meeting his. His eyes were so green, impossibly green, shining like emeralds.

"The thing is," her voice came out as a whisper, "there's so much you don't know."

"Then tell me," Bael said.

"I don't know where to start."

"Start anywhere."

Var, cat-shaped again, slid onto her lap, his fur silky against her bare skin. He looked up at her, eyes as green as Bael's, and purred.

Kett dug her fingers into his fur, and started talking.

Chapter Nineteen

Once upon a time, Bael learned, there had been a little girl who was made of stone. One day, she was turned into a real girl, but because she'd been a statue for eight years she didn't know how to talk or move or eat. She babbled like a baby and nearly choked on ordinary foods. She crawled, shouted and hit people, because she didn't know it wasn't acceptable to do so.

She also didn't know that it wasn't usual for other people to change their shapes at will. She frequently turned into a dog or a horse without notice, since those were the animals she'd seen most when she was a statue. Later, when she was educated a little more, and learned about tigers and gryphons, she started trying to emulate them. On the island where she lived, there were dragons, but it wasn't until her teens that she managed such a shape—

"Hold on," Bael said. "Dragon island? The only one in Peneggan is Koskwim."

Kett nodded. "I'll tell you about it later." She paused. "It's—well, it's not entirely my secret to tell."

"But it might prove important?"

Her fingers dug into Var's fur. "Yeah. It probably will."

"Who undid the spell? Striker?"

She gave a half smile. "No. Striker was still imprisoned in the kelfs' mythical hell dimension—don't ask—pickling in his own madness. It was a couple of kids who'd nicked a magic book and went on some kind of spree, trying to turn inanimate objects into real things. And with me they just...got lucky. Or unlucky, depending on how you look at it." Her gaze slid in his direction. "You've met one of them."

Bael gestured with his hand for more. He was too tired to think which of Kett's many bizarre acquaintances it might have been.

"Jarven. He's the one who took me to Koskwim, didn't know what else to do with me. He was pretty much the only one on the whole island who didn't treat me like a freak."

Bael opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. Jarven, silent and unemotional, quietly lending Kett the support she needed. A surrogate brother for an orphan child.

She told him how, when she was sixteen, a tall, lean man with chilling blue eyes, dressed all in black, had turned up and said he knew her father. Kett hadn't believed him—in fact, up until then she'd rarely thought about her father. She'd discovered her mother had been a shapeshifter, but absolutely nothing of her father.

"He said he was taking me home," she said, "and I told him I already was home. I'd never known anywhere else. I didn't leave that island until I was sixteen."

Bael frowned, because all he knew of Koskwim was that it was inhabited by a colony of wild dragons. But then, given Kett's day job, he wasn't that surprised.

"Who was he?" he asked, although he figured he already knew the answer.

"Striker. He and my dad go way back. He brought me here."

She told him how she'd met her father for the first time, and he'd been distinctly underwhelmed, more interested in chasing pretty girls and separating wealthy people from their money than being a father. He'd sent her on to his own father, an English earl, from whom Kett had been kidnapped by men who tried to sell her as a slave.

"Reckon he'd probably have left me there if they hadn't gone after Nuala too," she said without rancor.

"Don't you *mind*?" Bael asked.

"What, that he prefers her to me? He's known her longer. He was best mates with her brother—now the king—in their army days, saved his life once or twice. Nuala was like his kid sister—until she grew up, that is." She smiled. "Funny, everyone thought she was still such a kid, but they treated me like an adult and I'm six years younger than her."

Bael frowned, and she said gently, "It's okay. You don't need to go calling him out or anything. We actually get on okay now." She gave a faint smile and added, "Apparently, finding out he has a teenage daughter can bloody terrify a man."

The lamp grew dim as she told him about meeting her father's exotic, glamorous and sometimes just insane friends. Striker was the tip of the iceberg, just one of many mad, bad and dangerous individuals Tyrnan of Emreland consorted with. Somewhere in between being the son of an earl and marrying a princess, he'd developed an infamous career in highway robbery. Perpetually pardoned by the king in Peneggan, and thrown in jail everywhere else, he spent his days with whom Kett called madmen and freaks.

"Most of them have settled down like my dad," she said, "and the ones who didn't are dead. Chalia and my dad knew each other at school. And then, turns out her mother and his father'd had a little...indiscretion. Like father, like son, I guess. Striker was the one who figured out Chalia was my dad's sister. Lya...of course he made best friends with a kelf, why not? And Striker, they knew each other from their schooldays too."

"I still can't believe he was a child."

"Well, of course he was. You don't think he just hatched out fully formed, do you?"

"I thought he was something hell spat out."

Kett smiled at that, stroking Var's fur in a way that was quite distracting. "Hah," she said quietly. "Some day I'll tell you about how Striker got to be Striker. He used to be normal, apparently."

"I can't imagine it."

"No, neither can I. He was a normal kid, a teenager, he joined the army, fell in love with a girl, and then got whisked away to a sort of hell dimension for twelve years.

Enough to drive anyone mad. But he came back, mostly I think because he missed his woman."

"Chalia?"

"Yeah. Funny what love does."

Bael said nothing, watching her stroke Var. Funny indeed.

"Cos it was love that got me killed," Kett said, and looked up at him, as if judging his reaction.

"Killed," Bael said steadily. Somehow, he wasn't all that surprised.

"Love's a curse. Falls on everyone. Everyone I know, anyway. You dreamed I was dead," Kett said, "and I was, although not as old and moldy as you saw."

"But—how? I mean...what...?"

She smiled at his confusion and pulled up her shirt to show him a small, jagged scar on her stomach. Bael knew that scar, had kissed and caressed it and wondered where it came from.

"The sorceress who freed Striker from the hell dimension fell in love with him," she said, "but he left her there, swapped her freedom for his. When she escaped, she came after him and Chalia. And since Striker was impervious to harm, she started bumping off his and Chalia's friends. Including her brother."

"Your father."

"Yep." She snorted. "Last time I ever try to save his life."

Bael touched the scar. "It's an odd shape."

"I was a tiger at the time. And it was magic. I don't really remember. How she did it, I mean. I died almost instantly. And I don't remember that either, before you ask. Everyone always wants to know what it's like to be dead."

"I'm happy not finding out," said Bael honestly, and she smiled again. It was good to see her smile. His hand was still on her stomach, still tracing the length of the scar. Her skin was hot, smooth where it wasn't scarred, and he could feel the muscles move as she breathed.

Well, it was her fault he was still touching her. She'd been cuddling Var like a favorite pet, stroking his fur, fondling his ears. Bael didn't feel everything his twin did, but he felt enough, and what she was doing was killing him.

He looked up and she was watching him. Her eyes flashed.

"How did you come back to life?" he asked, not moving his hand.

"Striker," she said, her voice hoarse. "He—" She cleared her throat. "He undid her magic. She killed my dad and Chalia and a whole load of others, but she did it with magic, not with real weapons. He just...undid it."

"And you woke up alive?"

She nodded. Bael's hand flattened on her abdomen, feeling the heat and the strength of her body. Such a body, to have survived what it had. His fingers stroked around to the curve of her waist and Kett let out half a breath.

"Bael—"

"It's your fault," he said, gesturing to the black cat still on her lap. "You've sent Var almost into a trance."

She looked down guiltily. "Uh—crap. I'm sorry."

"No, don't apologize. He likes it. I like it."

His eyes met hers, and there was heat in them. Bael hadn't even realized how close he'd gotten to her, but all he needed to do was move an inch and his lips would be brushing hers.

His hand tightened on her waist and Kett's palm rested on his shoulder. He thought she was going to try to push him away, but she didn't seem to know what to do, holding him away from her at a tiny distance.

It was torture.

"Kett," he whispered, almost a plea, and her lips touched his. Sitting beside her on the bed, in the near dark, he kissed her gently, sweetly, his hands careful on her bruised, fragile body. Var, purring madly, merged with Bael and he swore he felt himself purr. Kett was kissing him, and nothing could be wrong while she was kissing him.

But she pulled away, her face shuttered.

"We shouldn't do this," she said, and Bael's heart plummeted. "Bael, look. You're hurt, I'm hurt. Between us we have more stitches than one of Nuala's party frocks. I don't think I'm even capable of sex right now."

He stroked her cheek, where a bruise was still fading. She wasn't his mate, not anymore. She never had been.

He should tell her he'd slept with Marisa.

"It's late," Kett said, moving back. "I'm tired."

He stood, nodding reluctantly, and let her move away. She tugged off her shirt, wincing when she moved her shoulder, but Bael knew better than to interfere. Naked, she crawled into bed and looked at him standing there.

"Well?" she said. "You staying?"

"I can sleep somewhere else," he said despondently.

And was amazed when Kett, her gaze dropping, said, "No, you can stay here."

He didn't need to be asked twice. Kicking away his clothes, he slid in beside her and managed not to say a single word when she curled into his arms and fell asleep with her head on his chest.

He left you to die. He told his men to beat and starve you. He cheated on you – he thinks he cheated on you – and never said a word about it.

And yet Kett still wanted him. She'd always known she was pretty screwed up, but this was just ridiculous.

How was it possible she still wanted to be here with him? That she was deriving so much comfort just from the proximity of his body? When her cheating ex had been revealed for the slimy bucket of maggots he really was, she hadn't once wished for the comfort of his arms to make everything all right again.

Maybe, said an insidious little voice inside her, it's because he actually is your mate.

Bollocks, she told it.

So why are you lying with your head on his chest? Naked?

She was half-asleep, or thought she was at any rate. When she opened her eyes to see white sand and a black sky, she realized she was dreaming.

Either that or she'd developed an interesting new talent for sleepwalking hundreds of miles.

A man stood by the shore of an inky sea, its waves breaking gently on his bare feet. He was naked, his skin kissed by moonlight. His black hair ruffled in the slight breeze. His back was sculpted muscle, but Kett saw a glimpse of an ugly wound there.

She stepped closer and the wound was gone.

Her body moved easily, not hindered by pain or injury. *Score one for dreams.*

"How's the water?" she asked.

"Deep," he replied.

Great, another cryptic dream. "Bael?"

He turned then and was suddenly right in front of her, arms around her, his skin cool but his body hard, strong.

"I missed you," he breathed, and kissed her, another slow, melting kiss like he'd given her earlier in the evening. The sort of kiss that reminded her why she'd let him follow her across the Realms, why she'd put up with his bullshit about mates, why she'd felt so bad about tricking him. Why she'd reacted the way she had when he fell off the roof, unconscious and broken.

"It's just sex," she said, and he frowned.

"It's never just sex," he said. "Not with you and me." His fingers curled in her hair. "It's more than that. Don't you feel it?"

The thing was, she did, and it terrified her. "I don't need anything more," she insisted. "I never did, and I still don't. Just sex."

That was a lie and she knew it, and she half expected him to fade away, slip under the waves or just shoot her in the head, but he stayed right where he was, holding her against him. And Kett hated herself for the admission, but she felt safe there.

"If sex is all you want, then that's what we'll do," he said, and kissed her again, his hands roaming her back. Cupping her buttocks, he pulled her hips against his and she felt the strength of his erection, hot and hard against her stomach. His body was so strong, almost invincible. Kett had never wanted anyone to take care of her...

(Except sometimes, in the deepest, darkest hours of the night, when she was bone-tired, her body aching after her latest confrontation and her mind numb with loneliness.)

...but it felt nice to be held all the same.

She found herself lying on the soft sand – softer than sand had ever been in her own experience – her body cradling Bael's as he kissed her, wave after wave of beautiful kisses. And while her body responded, felt every lick of his agile tongue, every sweep of his clever fingers, she seemed to be floating above the beach, watching him make love to her.

None of this makes sense.

Was she becoming one of those women who fell in love with abusive men? Kett had known some absolute stinkers in her time, but no one had ever locked her in a cell and left her to rot.

But then, he did rescue her.

Eventually.

"Kett," Bael murmured, and then she was back in her own body, lying under him, feeling his weight on her. He was warmer now, skin heating up as he got more energetic. The rough hairs on his chest tickled her sensitized breasts.

"Where did you go?" he asked, nuzzling her neck, her ear.

"None of this makes sense," she said.

"What doesn't? I want you, you want me, ergo, we have lots of explosive sex. It makes perfect sense."

"Yes, I want you," Kett said, "but I don't actually like you."

He lifted his head, his eyes very green in the moonlight. "I like you," he said. "I like everything about you, Kett Almet."

His voice shone with such honesty it almost embarrassed her. "Everything?" she asked. "Bael, I'm angry and rude, I swear at you all the time, I kept the biggest, most important things from you –"

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"I'm a bitter, scarred freak of nature," she said, "whose closest friends are sociopaths and lunatics."

Bael gave a crooked smile. "Those are precisely the things I like about you," he said.

Kett gave up. "You're very weird."

He kissed her nose. "Yes, I am. Now, I was trying to make love to you. If you're done with the self-loathing, may I continue?"

That brought a smile from her, and she threaded her fingers in his hair to bring him down and kiss him. He bit gently on her lower lip then licked it, and Kett felt her body arch against him involuntarily, her breasts flattening against his chest and her hips rising off the ground.

Bael's hand traced over her collarbone, her shoulder, her arm, then swept across to her breast. He stroked her, every caress making her shiver until she couldn't take it anymore and thrust her nipple against his palm. He smiled against her mouth, rolling the sensitive nub between his finger and thumb and making her writhe.

"I love it when you do that," he breathed. "I love the way you react." Dipping his head, he kissed her breast, which elicited a small moan from Kett. "You're so responsive. I could make love to you forever."

"No complaints here," Kett gasped as he sucked her nipple into his mouth. "Sweet merciful gods, Bael!"

He laughed against her breast and continued to suckle her, his hand sweeping down her left side, cupping the arch of her hipbone as if memorizing it. With his other hand he wrapped her right leg around his waist, opening her to him, pressing her wet flesh against his hard stomach.

"Do you want me?" he asked, fingers edging round her hips to stroke the soft, responsive skin of her inner thighs.

"You know I do."

"Say it. Tell me."

"I want you, Bael."

He transferred his attentions to her other breast, leaving the first wet and sensitive to the cool air. "Tell me what you want."

"Pretty much what you're doing," she moaned.

"A little more specific," he laughed.

"I want you to stop arsing around teasing me and get your hands between my legs," she snapped.

That made Bael laugh even more. He slid one hand between her legs and cupped her pussy – but didn't do anything else.

"That's not fair!" wailed Kett, who had never knowingly wailed before in her life.

"It's what you asked for."

"Bastard," she said, and slid her own hand between them to cover his. Using her own fingers, she guided his between her folds, almost moaning with the bliss of being touched. She was slippery wet, puffy and swollen, desperate for relief, and she moved his index finger to her clit.

With her other hand she grabbed a handful of his hair and lifted his head.

"I want you to stroke me," she said in his ear.

Bael smiled, a slow, melting smile that made Kett's pulse kick up. "My pleasure," he said, doing just that. "Believe me, my pleasure."

She was so wet his fingers slid around effortlessly, first one hand and then both as he knelt between her thighs, circling and rubbing her clit, plunging inside her, stroking her labia and making her gasp, her fingers digging into his flesh.

His thumb pressed against her clit and she came, a wonderful release that had her clinging to him as the world spun around her.

"Like that?" Bael murmured against her breast.

"No. Hated it. Try harder next time."

He chuckled and nudged her with his cock. "Do you want this?"

"Gods, yes. Fuck me, Bael."

His mouth found hers as he slid inside her with agonizing slowness, so thick he filled her completely. Kett's hands clenched his buttocks, pulling him deeper inside her until he could go no farther, and then she found herself holding him, cradling him, both arms wrapped around his back.

He felt so real, so big and hard and wonderful, so right.

"Bael," she whispered, and he kissed her cheek, her jaw. "This isn't a dream, is it?"

He pulled back an inch or two to look at her. "I thought it was."

"Your dream or mine?"

"Well, I didn't think it was yours."

"It's too real."

He rocked his hips against hers. "Feels real." Frowning for a second, he said, "Wait, let me try something."

She thought he was going to introduce her to some new kink—or at least attempt to, because there were few kinks a shapeshifter couldn't discover—but he closed his eyes as if concentrating and Kett felt the ground underneath her change, sand to grass, and the sky lightened.

They were lying in a meadow dotted with flowers. The grass tickled Kett's back.

"This is near my house in Angeland," Bael said. "It's my dream."

Kett closed her eyes and thought about Koskwim, and when she opened them it was to find herself lying on the bed in her room there, the canopy supported by marble angels, the sheets soft beneath her back.

"This is my room on Koskwim," she said, figuring she was going to have to tell him eventually anyway. "It's not your dream."

"But I took us to the meadow."

"And I brought us here. Does this look familiar to you?"

Bael admitted that it didn't. As he twisted to look around, his cock slid out of her a little, and Kett wriggled against him.

"Look. This isn't important. Weren't you going to fuck me?"

He turned back to her and smiled. "I was."

She flipped him onto his back and sank down on him fully, rubbing her breasts against his chest and kissing his face. His jaw was rough with stubble, abrasive against her skin.

"This," she said, sitting up and riding him, "is Koskwim. Home of the Order. An elite group of highly trained mercenaries for hire."

Bael put his hands on her hips and urged her on faster.

"Are you listening to me?" she admonished.

"Yeah. 'Course. Order. Hire. Elite. Uh, what do you do?"

She shoved his shoulder, squeezed him with her internal muscles, and he grinned.

"Mercenaries," she said. "We spy, rob, fight, kill. Train armies. Run police forces."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Captain Tanner in Elvyrn, he's one of us. A Knight. And Striker. And Chance."

"You're a Knight?" He slid his hands up her stomach to cup her breasts.

"Yep. No armor though."

"Shame. Bet you look hot in armor."

Kett smiled, leaning down to kiss him. She'd no idea how real any of this was, but it would surely be easier to repeat herself once she was awake. Once something had been done, it usually got easier to do.

Her smile faded as she realized the last thing she had to tell him.

Got to be done, her brain told her. *You got yourself into this mess, you're the only one can get you out.*

Closing her eyes, she rose and fell on Bael's thick, delicious cock, and concentrated on the memory of Marisa. It came easily, the dream assisting her, and she knew when she'd gotten there by Bael's sharp intake of breath.

"What the hell?" he shouted. "Okay, now I *know* this is my dream."

"No," Kett said, opening her eyes. "You're not imagining this. Bael, does it feel like a dream?"

He shook his head rapidly, scrambling off the bed and away from her, pushing her off him just like he had in the tavern.

"This is not funny," he said. "This—I was going to tell her, you know, I was going to own up. She still thinks she's tied to me, even after what I did to her. I was going to bloody tell her!"

Kett knelt on the bed, her body feeling oddly empty without him. "Bael, it's me," she said. "It's Kett."

He stared wildly at her, pacing back and forth, running his hands through tousled hair.

"Shapeshifter," she reminded him, and turned herself back. "See?"

"But—" Bael looked like she'd just slapped him. "I— I—

"I think I'm going to wake up now," he mumbled, and suddenly vanished.

Kett swore but a second later someone was shaking her by the shoulder, and she opened eyes that she didn't think had been closed to find herself back in her bedroom at Nuala's house, Bael peering worriedly at her in the moonlight.

Chapter Twenty

"I know all about Marisa," Kett said, and Bael wanted to die.

"I was going to – Wait, how do you know?"

"You're not paying attention," she said impatiently. She was sitting up in bed, her arms folded across her bare breasts, the room in darkness. Bael could see her just fine, thanks to Var's enhanced night vision, and Kett wasn't complaining, so he guessed she could see in the dark too.

"That wasn't your dream. Or rather, it was yours, but it was mine too," she said. "How else do you think we got to Koskwim? In point of fact, Bael, how else do you think I know what happened in your dream?"

He ran his hands through his hair. "You ever shared a dream with anyone else before?" She shook her head. "Me neither. Maybe it's my latent Mage powers finally making themselves known." A bloody shitty power, but anyway. "Look. I was going to tell you about her, but then I found you with that – that –"

"Very hot, skilled man who did absolutely nothing for me," Kett said.

"I don't want to hear about how hot and skilled he was!"

"You're still not listening," she said, and grabbed hold of his arm to dig her nails into it. Bael flinched, because her nails were damn sharp.

He looked down. She'd manifested claws.

"I'm a shapeshifter," she said. "I can change my shape."

"Yes, all right." He tried to extract his arm but she held on to it.

"Mostly I imitate things, it's easier that way. Like drawing a picture of something that's in front of you. I mostly do animals, things with the same sort of mass as a human body. And occasionally, I change my appearance."

"Like when you turned to stone?"

"Yes. And like when I turned into a floozy barmaid who drugged you, dragged you to bed and woke you up by sucking on your cock."

Bael gaped at her.

His first thought was, *How did she know? How did she know I slept with Marisa, and how did she know all those details?*

His second thought was, *Is she serious? I've seen her change shapes. Just because Var is limited to animals doesn't mean Kett is. She could change her eyes, hair, skin – she could look like anybody.*

His third thought was, *Does this mean I didn't cheat on her?*

His fourth thought was, *Damn, even bruised and sulky she's gorgeous.*

"It was me, Bael. I was trying to prove I wasn't your mate. I didn't know if you'd go for another woman, so I figured..."

Bael tried to shake off the fog of lust and confusion clouding him. "Why?"

She let go of his arm and plucked grumpily at the bedcovers. "I don't want to be tied to anyone. I never did."

"You got married once."

"Yes, when I was very, very drunk, and it ended very, very badly. I don't like fate, Bael. It tells you what to do—"

"And you don't like being told what to do," Bael finished, incredulous. She was dumping him because of a problem with authority?

"I don't expect you to understand," she said.

"Try me."

Kett heaved a sigh then said, "All right. You want to count these? First up, my natural disaster of a marriage."

"Lots of people have failed relationships."

"Do they end up in jail as a result of them? All right, when I was about seventeen I was sleeping with this pro-Treegan player. He did some aerial stunts to impress me, fell off the gryphon, broke his back. And it's not just sexual relationships. Look at my dad, he ended up dead."

"Temporarily." Bael still couldn't quite process this.

"Look, even my friends get hurt. Jarven, there's a nice, recent example. And my army buddies, they tried to stand up for me, and not one of them ever got promoted because of it."

"So bad things have happened to you—" Bael began, but she cut him off, her eyes steely and defensive.

"It's not just me. It bites everyone in the ass."

"What does?" Bael asked, frustrated.

"Love. Whatever shape it comes in. Look at Chance—she sacrificed herself for Dark."

"But she's fine now. She survived."

"Striker's been killed for love at least three times that I know of. Chalia even shot him herself once."

"Can't entirely blame her for that," Bael muttered.

"Captain Tanner—did you meet him? Got his finger cut off trying to defend his fiancée. The king? You know he's a widower? His wife was killed protecting her children. And then there's me—again. I tried to protect my dad from the sorceress who was bumping off Striker's friends. Remember how that one ended up?"

He touched the scar on her stomach and she flinched away.

"And finally we come to you. Deliberate or not, Bael, because of you, I ended up almost dead in that cell. Maybe it *is* just me. The Curse of Kett, Bael. Falls on everyone. I've hurt more people than I can remember, and you can be damn sure they've hurt me."

She rubbed her shoulder and Bael ached with the effort of not touching her, soothing her—contradicting her.

"So I gave up. Went to live with Jarven, who's a total sociopath. Figured I couldn't do any damage there, to me or anyone else. Don't you see, Bael, I'm not like other people. I can't do the relationship thing. I can't do the *normal* thing."

"You're not normal."

"Cheers."

"No—I mean, why would you want to be? Kett, you're amazing. You're glorious."

"Stop," she said quietly.

"No. Kett, I love everything about you. Don't ever be like other people, they're boring. You're—"

"No, stop. Don't do this. Don't praise me, don't tell me I'm wonderful and for the love of the gods, don't pretend you love me."

"But—"

"You don't love me, Bael. You just think you ought to because you're stuck with me." She touched his shoulder, stroked over the skin until she found a sore spot then dug in. Bael sucked in a sharp breath of pain.

"See? You're hurt this bad already. Imagine what'd happen if you actually were in love with me."

There wasn't anything he could think to say to that.

* * * * *

"How's that bruise on your face?" Nuala asked as Kett took a bite of toast at breakfast.

"Five by five," Kett said through her mouthful.

"Are you sure you're not having any problem with movement?"

She swallowed her toast and shook her head. "No, it's fine, see? Else I'd be eating through a straw."

"Oh," said Nuala, frowning in a way that made Kett wave her hand for more information. "Well, if it doesn't hurt that much, try smiling."

Her father guffawed. Realizing she was being made fun of, Kett snarled at her stepmother and grabbed three bread rolls as she stood up to leave. She rolled them into a napkin and added some fruit.

"Oh Kett, I didn't mean it like that," Nuala said, looking like a kicked puppy.

"I don't exactly see how I've got a lot to smile about," Kett said, tucking the coffeepot under her arm, taking two cups and leaving the room.

Going back up the stairs was agonizing. With her arms full, she couldn't lean on the banister to spare her aching leg or hop without losing her balance. The main staircase at Nuala's house was enormous, as tall as it was wide, stretching into infinity.

She was halfway up and considering dumping the food when someone came up behind her and started taking bread rolls from her arms.

"Gerroff," she said, because it was Bael, and she'd been avoiding him all morning.

"I've been thinking," he said, ignoring her.

"Novelty." She forced herself up another step.

"Yeah. Look, Kett. If you and I had just met, say in a bar or something, and hit it off and gone back to your place or mine—"

"You mean your castle with the turret cell? Cozy."

"Or anywhere. And we'd felt the same kind of sparks we had from the start," Bael went on, prizing the coffeepot from her arms, which left her with one hand free to hold the banister.

Kett stubbornly folded her arms, clinging to the two coffee cups, and trudged up another step.

"Would we have had something? If I'd never mentioned this whole mate thing? If we'd just...gotten together and had fun and shagged each other rotten—"

Kett lost her balance at the mention of that and Bael steadied her, his arm around her shoulders. She wondered where the hell he'd put the things he'd taken from her, then saw Var, dog-shaped, patiently standing there with the napkin held in his mouth.

"Great, now there's dog slobber all over that."

"He hasn't touched the food. Kett, listen. Forget about all the mate stuff. Just think about how it'd be if you and I got together normally."

"Weren't you listening?" Kett asked, shrugging him off and grabbing the railing to haul herself up another two steps. "I ain't normal."

"And weren't *you* listening?" Bael replied. "That's why I like you."

She made a very unladylike snort and climbed up the rest of the steps, ignoring Bael even though he was never more than a few feet away. He kept following her, Var trotting along beside him like a good little pet, until she got to Jarven's door and stopped.

"You following me?"

"I think I am." He gave her a charming smile, which almost failed to do anything to Kett.

"I'm going to see Jarven."

"I'll come with you."

"Bael—"

"Let me, Kett." There was guilt in his eyes. "I need to."

She hesitated, but relented. Let him see what his men had done to her friend.

She opened the door and was mildly surprised to see Angie sitting by the bed, looking slightly guilty, a book in her hand.

"I was just—I thought I'd wait until he woke up," she said, "and, um. See if he wanted anything."

Kett kept her face straight and just nodded. "Sure. How's he been?"

They regarded Jarven, asleep, probably sedated. There were bandages on his chest and arms and around his head. Here and there his skin crackled with ugly red patches, burns from his own dragons.

"He's been quiet," Angie said, her lip quivering slightly. She attempted a smile. "But then this is Jarven, and he's always quiet, isn't he?"

"He is," Kett said, her heart going out to both Angie and Jarven, who no doubt was totally oblivious to Angie's crush.

Bael moved over toward the bed, reaching out to Jarven, and Angie said sharply, "Be careful!"

But Bael just touched Jarven's forehead, closed his eyes for a moment and murmured, "He'll get better. He'll be fine."

Kett watched, uneasy. "Come on now. Leave him alone."

She gave the coffee and food to Angie and left the sickroom to find Chance outside.

"I was just coming to see if there was anything I could do," she said. She peered at Kett. "Maybe for you too. How are you feeling?"

"Five by five."

"Liar," Bael said, "you're more like two by three."

She scowled at him for that but Chance took her hand, frowning. "He's right," she said.

"You hear that, I'm right," Bael crowed.

"And that's why we'd never have had something," Kett said.

Chance shook her head. "You're the one who caused this," she said to Bael, and his smile slipped. "You're the one who has to fix it."

"I would if I could," he said, and she handed him a clay pot.

"You can," she said. "Atonement is its own sort of magic."

* * * * *

Which was how Kett found herself lying naked on her bed, the door firmly locked, as Bael spread some thick white paste over the scratches on her stomach.

"Strictly speaking, it was one of the dogs that did this," he said.

"I ain't having one of your hunting dogs slobbering all over me," Kett said. "I ain't even having Var doing it. I'm not into bestiality."

"Good, neither am I," Bael said.

Kett made a face, folding her arms over her breasts. She'd argued that there was no reason for her to be naked, but Bael had pointed out that one of the worst cuts was on her hip, and any clothes would just get in the way. Kett, irritated, was forced to agree—the wound there had been tormented by whatever clothes she wore.

"You're enjoying this," she accused as he took his time stroking the white stuff into her skin.

"So are you."

"No, I'm n—"

"Kett, I can smell your arousal."

Her face flooded with heat, but then so did the rest of her. Okay, so it was hot to have a big, buff guy stroking her abdomen. So what?

"It's not—" she began, but was cut off again.

"I've never met anyone as deeply in denial as you," he said, moving on to the big bruise on her ribs.

"Oh, fuck off."

Bael just smiled and carried on, and Kett realized she was losing her touch. After all, if she really didn't want him there, she could get rid of him. And yet here she was, lying naked and allowing him to stroke her in a way that wasn't entirely medical.

Kett Almet, you're so fucked up.

"Does it feel any better?"

"No," she lied.

"Maybe I'll just have to spend more time on it then," he said, carefully smoothing his fingers over her ribs, perilously close to her breasts. "And be very thorough."

"Pervert."

He grinned. "That's what you said that first time, remember?"

Kett remembered. She was remembering a lot. Like how good Bael's hands had felt on her then, and how wonderful they'd been in her dreams. Like how he looked when he smiled, his green eyes sparkling, and how he made her laugh.

So he fucked up. It's not like he has the monopoly on it.

He'd moved onto her hip now, stroking very carefully along the healing wound. The skin around it was still pink and very painful, swollen and tender, and Bael's fingers were like water on burnt skin, bringing her wonderful relief.

"Better?" he asked, his voice husky, and Kett nodded. There wasn't any point denying how turned-on she was now. She was pretty sure he was doing it on purpose, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to mind. The arrow had torn through her flank when she was gryphon-shaped, which was now her buttock, hip and upper thigh.

Bael stroked her gently, his fingers featherlight, and with each sweep across the front of her thigh Kett found herself wishing he'd go a little farther.

"Just so you know," she said, and her voice cracked, "I still violently dislike you."

Bael said nothing, his eyes on her.

"And I know you're doing this on purpose."

His face remained a picture of innocence.

"But if you wanted to touch me somewhere that didn't need medical attention, I wouldn't complain."

Still he remained silent, although his lips quirked a little.

"And if you did it sooner rather than later, I might actually be grateful to you."

Bael leaned over and brushed his lips over hers, before his fingers slipped across the uninjured part of her thigh and parted her legs a little. Kett held her breath but the bastard didn't go where she wanted him to.

"I need you to move," he said, his voice low and husky, and rolled her gently onto one side so he could tend to the gash that tore over her hip to her buttock. His eyes on hers, he stroked her carefully, his touch light, massaging the ointment into her abused flesh.

It was incredibly arousing, and at the same time hideously frustrating. All she wanted was for him to slip his hand between her thighs and touch her swollen, sensitive pussy lips. To touch her where she needed to be touched—where he *knew* she needed to be touched, dammit! If he touched her clit right now she'd probably explode instantly.

But while his fingers strayed over her hip and buttock, they never went any farther. Kett was ready to scream when he suddenly kissed her mouth, a long, deep, drugging kiss, rolling her onto her back and finally, finally moving his hand between her legs.

Kett tensed and Bael's fingertip brushed her clit.

She came with a gasp, surprising herself and him. As his fingers continued to move over her slippery, wet flesh, his lips burned a trail down her neck and his other hand moved to stroke her injured shoulder. Kett winced, but Bael started to smear the healing paste on the wound, his touch soothing.

Her shoulder had been the most painful of the wounds, torn and discolored with some hideous infection that she now realized could have killed her. But under Bael's gentle fingers, the pain receded, the soreness faded, and the extremely pleasant sensations he was creating between her legs overwhelmed her instead.

For the first time since she'd met Albhar and his pack of hunting dogs, she felt more pleasure than pain.

Bael kissed down one side of her neck, nibbled along the length of her collarbone and back again, then he started on her injured shoulder. Very, very gently, he kissed the torn, bruised flesh, and where his lips touched, the pain vanished.

Kett's fingers slid through his hair, holding him to her, almost delirious, and it took her a few seconds to realize he'd lifted his head and was speaking to her.

"Kett, look."

She focused blearily on her shoulder, squinting to see from the wrong angle.

"It's gone away," Bael said. "Where I've been kissing it. Look."

Kett couldn't see where he was pointing, so she moved one hand up to feel. And where she'd previously encountered sore, half-healed skin, now she was touching flesh that felt smooth, barely hurt at all.

"It looks like it's been healing for weeks," Bael said in wonder. "Months."

"Did you know you could do this?"

"Me?" he said. "It's that stuff Chance gave—"

"No," Kett said. She smoothed away some of the paste on her hip. The wound, although less inflamed, was still there. "It's you."

They stared at each other for a moment, then Bael grinned at her and bent his head to her shoulder again. He kissed it all over, stroked, caressed and soothed it with his lips and tongue. Kett wondered vaguely if the healing paste tasted bad, but Bael never complained.

His fingers were still busy between her legs, rubbing her labia between his fingers, running his thumb around her clit, delving deep into her pussy. Kett arched against him, her hips moving in time with his thrusting fingers. She wanted more, but at the same time she never wanted him to stop what he was doing.

Stop he did, but only to lay a kiss on each of her tight nipples before moving south and starting to lick the wounds on her stomach. Kett peered at her own shoulder, and what she could see did indeed look as if it had been healing for weeks.

"Must be some kind of magic," she murmured, and Bael looked up, grinning.

"My mouth has been called that before," he said, and Kett began to correct him but his hands moved up and tweaked her nipples, distracting her into blissful silence.

He left her stomach, the wounds healing almost as Kett watched, and started on the painful gash across her hip. By now Kett was feverish with desire, her body bucking against his hands, her pussy so wet his fingers were slipping around. He turned her on her side again, and Kett pressed her legs together to keep his hand there. Bael, chuckling, pushed her over onto her stomach, trapping his hand under her, and she ground against it as he licked and kissed the cuts on her buttock. The sheets, tangled from all her writhing, caught against her puckered, sensitized nipples, and Kett's fingers made fists in the crumpled linen as another orgasm rose inside her, ready to break.

But it didn't come, because Bael raised his head, moved his hand and left her lying on her stomach, legs spread, panting with need.

"What—?" she began, but then he moved, pushing her legs farther apart, tilting her hips and pressing the head of his cock against her sodden entrance.

"I wanted to wait," he rasped, pushing inside her, making her shudder, "but I couldn't. Gods, I need to be inside you, Kett."

Kett, incapable of words, just moaned as he filled her.

"I wanted to lick you all over," Bael said in her ear, his body hot and hard against her back, the rough hairs on his chest tickling the skin between her scars. "Not just where you're hurt. I wanted to make you better so I could fuck you ragged."

"Yes," Kett gasped as he withdrew and thrust deep.

"I wanted to stick my head between your legs and lick you until you screamed," he said. "I wanted to make you come over and over, so hard you blacked out. And then I wanted to put your legs over my shoulders and ram myself so deep into you that my balls were coated in your sweet, hot pussy juices from the very first stroke."

Kett could only moan. Bael grasped her hips and pulled her to her knees, yanking her back against his groin and shoving inside her as deep as he could possibly go. His balls slapped against her clit and she shuddered, on the brink of orgasm again.

"And I wanted to fuck you from behind," Bael went on, his voice ragged, "like I'm doing now. You are so hot and tight, Kett, I love fucking you like this."

Kett buried her face in the sheets, panting, so nearly there she could hardly breathe.

"And I was thinking about doing you here," he said, running a hand that was coated with her juices down the crease of her ass to the sensitive, puckered hole there. "Slipping my cock into your tight little hole. What do you think, Kett?"

Kett orgasmed, her whole body flying into spasms, her teeth closing on a fold of the bed sheets, stifling the screams she couldn't hold back. Bael continued to thrust into her and before her climax had even subsided, she felt him coming inside her, roaring out his pleasure as his come spurted into her, his fingers digging into her hips.

It didn't hurt. He was gripping flesh that had previously been too sore to touch, but now it didn't hurt at all.

Breathing hard, Bael withdrew and collapsed on his side next to her. He pulled her into his arms, holding her against his chest, slick with sweat and heaving with uneven breaths.

"Gods, I've missed you," he said, and Kett let out a shaky laugh.

"Likewise," she said, and they shared a smile.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bael looked at the woman sleeping in his arms, his chest tight with an unfamiliar emotion. He thought it might be love, but he wasn't entirely sure. He'd never been in love with anyone before.

Well, he'd thought he might be once or twice, with girls who'd been particularly amazing in bed, but out of bed he'd realized he wasn't really interested in them. But with Kett, he cared about everything she did. The way she walked, the throaty tone of her voice, the flashing silver of her eyes all turned him on, but it was more than that.

He loved her defiance, her courage, her stubbornness. He loved the way she behaved like a wild animal but thought like an intelligent human. He loved how she cared for people she pretended she had no time for, respected and trusted them.

He loved her resilience, her complete refusal to back down or give in. How she'd fought her way into the world, a frightened, backward child with no friends or family, and clawed herself a place. How fearless she was when faced with pain and misery that would overwhelm anyone else.

She was scarred, bitter and more than a little insane, and Bael loved her.

After an hour or two of lying there watching her sleep, he felt her stir and idly stroked her shoulder, which was now as healed as if the injury had occurred months ago. As Bael was wondering whether this newfound healing power might erase some of the scars on her back or ease the mangled muscles of her leg, Kett opened her eyes and silver flashed at him.

Bael's heart swelled in his chest and he felt himself smiling without even intending to. Kett smiled back, her face sleepy, and she rolled her shoulders, frowning a little in confusion.

"Better?" Bael asked as she shoved aside the covers to check the wounds on her stomach and hip. They too were healed.

You think love hurts. Looks to me like it heals.

"Much." She looked up at him. "Did you know this was going to happen?"

That I'd fall madly in love with you? "No," he answered honestly.

"It's not a Nasc Mage power?"

"Kett, I don't know what Nasc Mage powers are. I only know what my parents didn't bother to hide from me, which wasn't much. No one ever taught me how to use what I've got. I never thought I had any power, except Var changing his shape."

Kett ran her fingers over the scars on her hip. "Somehow I don't think this was Chance's ointment." She suddenly rolled to her feet. "Wait."

She left the room, totally naked, and Bael watched her go. He doubted Kett had forgotten to get dressed. It was more like she didn't care.

A moment later she was back, closing the door and leaning against it. Her brow was creased.

"What?"

"Jarven's not healed. I mean, he's getting better, but it's not like this." She gestured to her body.

A flash of jealousy stabbed Bael. "You went to see Jarven completely naked?"

"He was asleep," Kett said dismissively, walking over to the bathroom.

"What if he wasn't?"

"Bael, he's seen me naked before."

That had him on his feet and in the bathroom before he knew what he was doing. "Naked?" he repeated.

Kett gave a slow sort of smile, which had his cock stirring, as she leaned over to turn the shower on. Had he not been naked with the woman of his dreams, Bael might have taken a moment to appreciate the beauty and modernity of the bathrooms in Nuala's house, but right now he had more pressing things on his mind.

"Jealous?" she asked.

"No," Bael said sulkily, and Kett rolled her eyes. "Let me rephrase that." He grabbed her waist. "Yes."

"You are?"

"Hell yes. How come he's seen you naked? He said he'd never slept with you."

"No, but he has seen me change shape and he's cared for me when I've been injured...and Bael? You can't possibly pretend that's your sword pressing against my hip."

He grinned. "I could, but I didn't think you'd appreciate the pun."

She slid her fingers into his hair and kissed him, long and slow, a soft morning kiss despite that it was the middle of the day.

"I need to take a shower," she said, "because I'm still covered in that ointment, among other things."

Bael grinned, because he'd been responsible for those other things. "I'll help."

"I'm a big girl. I can wash myself."

"Yeah, but I want to. Besides, I'm dirty too. I need to wash."

It didn't take much to convince her. Stepping under the warm water, he beckoned her into the tub and picked up a bar of soap. It smelled warm and woody, not what he'd usually call a feminine scent, but it suited Kett perfectly.

Kissing her again, he ran the soap over her back, her shoulder, taking care on the newly healed skin.

"Does it hurt at all?" he asked.

"Hardly. Feels like it's been healing weeks. Months."

He kissed the pink skin then moved down to kiss her breast as he ran the soap over her hip.

"See, I knew you didn't really want to get me clean," Kett said, but he heard the smile in her voice.

"I do," he protested, "but then I want to get you dirty again."

He washed the remains of the ointment from her skin then kissed the scars it had healed. Well, maybe they were scars *he'd* healed. He still didn't entirely understand how it had happened.

Kett shifted, restless, and Bael breathed in the scent of her arousal. Smiling, he slipped the soap between her legs and massaged it back and forth over her pussy lips. She widened her stance to accommodate him, and Bael lifted one of her feet to rest on the edge of the tub. Kett tensed, but instead of moving his head between her legs, he ducked to the side and kissed the outside of her thigh.

Kett went utterly still, because his tongue was darting over the rip of pink flesh where the tiger had crippled her.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, looking up, and she shook her head in tiny jerks. Smiling, Bael resumed kissing and licking the length of the terrible scar, dropping the soap as he did and letting his fingers take over between her legs.

"What are you doing?" Kett gasped as the water poured down on them both.

Bael flicked her clit with his fingertip. "What's it feel like?"

"Like you're licking my scar, you sick man."

Bael rolled his eyes. "Last time I licked your scars, what did it do?"

Kett said nothing.

"You mad woman," he added, and her foot lightly kicked his back. Smiling, he carried on, but when he'd kissed and licked his way along her thigh half a dozen times, he figured it was time to stop. He lowered her foot to the ground, brought up the hand he'd been stroking her with and sucked her moisture off his fingers.

Her eyes never left his face.

"Turn around," he said, his voice low, and she did. Bael pressed against her back, feeling her body twitch as her bare breasts touched the cold, wet tiles. He brushed her hair from the back of her neck and kissed her there. She shuddered delightfully.

He started kissing and licking over the crosshatch of scars on her back, his fingers once more delving between her legs and finding her even hotter and wetter than he'd left her. And while she writhed and his cock ached, he concentrated on covering every inch of her scarred back with his mouth, healing her bit by bit.

Some other asshole had created these marks. But maybe Bael could ease them.

He was using both hands now, one curving around between her belly and the wall to stroke her clit, rub up and down, make circles around it, and the other delving into her hot, wet pussy to find that sweet spot inside that made her convulse.

She came to one shuddering orgasm like that, his fingers inside her and his mouth on her back, and then he slipped his hand back a little, probing at the tight ring of her ass.

She tensed, and he murmured against her skin, "Do you want me to?"

"Sure," she said, her tone almost nonchalant. Almost. "If you want."

Smiling, he stroked her there and she gave a low moan. His fingers were slick from her orgasm and he slipped inside easily, his other hand still stroking her clit and her swollen, puffy labia. When he'd pushed one finger all the way into her ass, he did the same with her pussy and finger-fucked her, feeling how close his fingers were inside her. Wondering if she'd ever done this before—she doubtless had. Had she ever done it with two men? Felt one thick cock push into her pussy while another filled her from behind?

He decided he didn't care. His cock was full to bursting and he'd kissed all the way down her spine to the white lines crossing the top of her buttocks. He needed to be inside her, now, before he came all over the bathroom tiles.

He hadn't prepared her enough for a rear entry and he wasn't brutal enough to try. So he kept his hand where it was between her buttocks, his finger pressed inside her, and angled her hips to line his cock up against her hot, wet folds.

"We'll do it this way later," he promised, flexing his finger inside her, and a moan was his reply.

Bael pushed inside Kett's hot, tight pussy, loving the way her slick flesh fit around him so well. He stayed motionless for a long moment, until she writhed against him, then reluctantly he withdrew his hand from her ass. He couldn't move properly that way, and he wanted to thrust into her.

The water, by now running cold, pounded down on them both. Bael slid his hands around to cup her breasts, knead her firm flesh and pinch her nipples as he rocked inside her, but that wasn't enough. He needed to thrust, hard, and he grabbed her hips to plunge into her relentlessly, driven by a fierce need to possess her.

She moaned as he pounded into her, biting the back of her neck and quickly going mindless. How did she do this to him? How did she affect him this way? No one else ever had. Only Kett could turn him into a total animal, desperate to brand her as his, to hold her and keep her and pleasure her until they were both senseless with it.

The pleasure inside him built to a crescendo, spurred on by Kett's moans and cries, and as he succumbed to his massive orgasm, he heard himself gasp her name.

"I love you," he murmured, as the water cascaded onto them and her body trembled in his arms.

Driven to distraction by his mouth and hands and fierce, pounding cock, Kett felt herself tip over into orgasm at the same time Bael gasped her name and emptied himself into her. He gripped her tight, his body tense and hard against her back, his arms gradually sliding around her body to hold her close.

His breath was harsh in her ear. She thought she heard him murmur something but the sound of the water drowned it out.

They stayed still and close for a while, until the chill of the water negated the heat from Bael's body and Kett shifted away. Silently, she soaped and rinsed herself, and was about to step out of the bathtub when Bael slid his arm around her waist and kissed her with infinite sweetness.

"Kett," he said, his face earnest and his eyes serious, as if he wanted to tell her something, but then he closed his eyes, fingers tensing at her waist, and shook his head. "You're cold," he said lamely.

She nodded, disconcerted, and wrapped herself in a towel. "I have to talk to Nuala," she said, "and make some calls. You should get some rest. Nu said you were exhausted."

He gave her a cocky grin, much more like the Bael she knew. "You should know."

She rolled her eyes but she was smiling as she went to get dressed.

Leaving Bael to take a post-coital nap, she took herself downstairs in search of some coffee and solitude. Despite the immense size of Nuala's house, it proved difficult. Family members prowled in every room. Rain hammered on the windows, which always made her father moody like a little boy.

"Does it on purpose," her father accused.

"But you weren't going to go anywhere anyway," Kett said.

"I might," he said mulishly.

"So get wet. You ain't made of sugar."

He scowled at that, and Kett shook her head and took her leave of him. She found Beyla with some of her extremely giggly, extremely young and extremely annoying friends, occupying one of the sitting rooms.

She backed out fast.

"Kett!" Beyla called.

Not fast enough.

"What?" Kett asked sharply, in no mood to put up with anything girly.

"Dierdra's having problems with her crochet. Can you help?"

Kett blinked, trapped. Dammit, of all the secrets to confess to her sisters.

"I—ain't got a needle," she fudged, unwilling to show anything that looked like a softer side to these girls. All of them were wearing frills and hairstyles that must have taken a pointless age to finesse.

One of the girls, presumably Dierdra, since she was the one holding a ball of wool, giggled. "You can borrow mine," she said, a slight smirk on her face. "I'm afraid the wool is very soft though. No wire in it."

She wanted to humiliate Kett.

Beyla caught her eye. Her eyelid flickered in what might have been a wink.

Beyla wanted to humiliate Dierdra.

Kett fantasized briefly about just stabbing the irritating bubblehead with her own crochet needle, shook her head and strode forward. Her leather jeans creaked as she moved. Her damp hair brushed wet circles on her shirt. Her boots thudded.

She held out her hands, took the needle and wool—which was pink, what else—and briskly made the stitch. "Move the needle, not the wool, and keep it tight, don't let it go slack. Got it?"

They stared at her. Dierdra said, "But—but how—you can *crochet*?"

"That's what I just did." Kett made another few stitches without looking.

"But—" Dierdra stared at Kett's ancient leathers, her nearly transparent shirt, the scar on her face, her heavy boots.

"Where did you learn to do that?" asked one of the other girls, awe in her voice.

"Prison," Kett said, and thrust the wool back at Dierdra. She strode from the room, hearing as she did Beyla informing her friends with a touch of pride that Kett had beaten up the man who cheated on her. "I think it should be a mandatory punishment, actually," she said, as Kett shut the door.

She found herself smiling.

The next room she tried in search of solitude contained Nuala and many bolts of fabric in almost identical shades of mauve. "Kett! Come and help me choose new curtains," she cried, but Kett had already escaped before the words died out.

She found Chance and Dark canoodling on a sofa. In the next room, someone was murdering a sonata on the pianoforte while a male voice murmured encouragement. She shuddered. Giselle, no doubt. Thank the gods she was pretty.

Moving on, she spied Eithne and Verrick snogging in what she had to dub the Cream with Hints of Dark Gold Drawing Room, and was hurrying to leave when her sister leapt up, crying her name.

Kett sighed. "What?"

Eithne came rushing over, her eyes gleaming. "I don't know what you said to Papa, but I absolutely love you for it!"

She threw her arms around Kett, who attempted to extract herself with little success.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The wedding!"

"What wedding? Your wedding?" Hadn't Tyrnan forbidden Eithne to marry her garda?

"Yes! Earlier, Giselle was playing a piece on the pianoforte—she's absolutely terrible at it, by the way, but Tane still thinks she's an angel, must be love—and I was trying to be polite, and said what a pretty piece and that my friend Aliana had it played at her wedding. And Papa said, 'Just so long as you don't play it at yours'."

Her eyes were bright as she stared eagerly at Kett, waiting for her to make the connection.

"Uh," Kett said.

"Well, then I said I thought the *Queen's Wedding March* was a much nicer piece to walk down the aisle to, and he said that was much more appropriate for a princess."

She was beaming now, her whole face alight. Kett waited.

"Don't you see? That's the first time I've brought up a wedding and he hasn't gone off into a tirade about how I'm not getting married to any garda and I'm far too young and all the rest of it. He actually seemed interested in my actual wedding!"

"Um," said Kett, who hadn't read the same thing into it. "Did he?"

"Yes! And it's all thanks to you!"

"But—what do you mean, me?" Kett asked, trying to work out exactly what Eithne's thought processes might have been.

"You're the only one whose opinion he ever listens to."

Kett stared at her. She started to laugh. "Okay, is this some sort of outrageous flattery designed to lead in to you asking me to wear pink as a bridesmaid?"

"No, don't be silly."

Kett relaxed.

"I'd put you in silver, like that dress you had for the ball. Beyla would wear pink."

Kett began to back away.

"Kett, you have to be my bridesmaid, you're my sister!"

"Half-sister," Kett reminded her, "and most definitely not a maid."

This only sent Eithne into peals of laughter. Kett backed toward the door and made a run for it.

Her whole family was mad. Completely insane. What the hell was Bael thinking, getting involved with her after he'd met them all? It ought to send any sane man running.

Of course, Bael wasn't sane. That was probably the answer. He probably thought her family was *normal*.

She ended up in the summerhouse, which in the middle of winter was freezing cold and smelled of dampness. But it was silent, and the view across the rainy gardens was incredibly peaceful. She found a blanket, packed in a chest with dried oranges keeping it sweet-scented, and wrapped herself up on one of the sofas.

She made lists first, then got out her scryer and started calling. First up was Striker, who answered looking sleepy, smug and shirtless. Kett suspected he was probably naked, but for once in her life the prospect didn't excite her even a tiny bit.

"Pet," he said, his intonation somehow implying that it was less of an endearment and more of a description.

"Striker. I need a favor."

He shrugged. "Nah. Don't fancy it."

"You haven't heard what it is yet. It comes with an aftermath of death and destruction."

He smiled. "I'm listening."

After Striker, she called Tyra, the librarian of the Order. "I've got a handle on the Federación. A ringleader, although I suspect he's just one of many."

"Perhaps we can torture him for information," Tyra said, as if she was just suggesting a polite conversation.

"Yeah. Well, Striker's on board, so that's a strong possibility," Kett said. "But this Albhar's got a lot of followers. We're going to need some muscle."

"Leave it to me," Tyra said.

She was hesitating over the third call when a shadow outside the summerhouse caught her attention. The sky had turned dark, and the single lamp Kett had brought with her didn't illuminate anything beyond the summerhouse walls.

But she didn't need to see to know who it was. "Bael?"

The door opened and he stood there, hands in pockets, shivering slightly.

"Close the bloody door, fathead." Kett drew the blanket closer around herself. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged, clicking the door closed behind him. "Looking for you. Well, actually, looking for somewhere I wasn't going to get pulled into discussions about curtains or weddings or terrible, terrible pianoforte-playing skills."

Kett grimaced. "Giselle?"

"How can someone so graceful play so badly?" She smiled and Bael came closer. "You look frozen."

"Yeah." Kett glanced at the small fireplace, which was cold and empty. The summerhouse was set up like a little rustic cottage—or at least, Nuala's idea of what a rustic cottage should look like. It at least came equipped with a stone fireplace and thick, woven blankets for chillier days. But the fireplace had been swept clean and not re-laid.

"I could warm you up." His eyes were hot.

"Nice of you to offer, but I'm kinda busy."

Bael raised one eyebrow and glanced at the fireplace.

A ball of flame whooshed into life, hovering above the empty grate. Kett stared at it, feeling the heat starting to seep toward her.

"How — how did — ? What the *fuck*, Bael?"

He frowned slightly. "Don't ask me."

"You just created a ball of flame."

"Yeah. Looks like I did."

"But — you said you had no training or power or —"

"Evidently you're good for me." He held out a hand. "Come here, I want to check something."

Kett stood up warily and Bael took the blanket from her shoulders. He turned her around and lifted her shirt, staring at her back for several long seconds.

"Huh," he said.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"What?" Kett asked.

He touched her back. "You know how you can change your appearance? Did you fade out these scars?"

"No. Why would I? They're covered up."

"Yeah." Bael took her hand, moved it to her back, and ran it up and down where her scars should have been.

The skin was disturbed by a few faint ridges, and nothing more.

"What the *hell*?"

"I kissed them better," Bael said, still stroking her back. "They're still there, just faded a lot."

"But...how, Bael?" She turned to face him. "Where the hell has this power suddenly come from?"

He cupped her face in his hands. His green eyes were intense, honest, powerful. "You," he said.

"I don't understand," Kett whispered, although she feared she did.

"My parents mated young," he said. "Perhaps they found their powers at the same time. I'll never know. But I'm wondering," he stroked her face, "if Mage powers are linked to mates. If I'm only realizing my full potential now that I'm with you."

Kett stared.

"It's the only explanation I can think of," he said.

"Maybe," Kett began. "Maybe it's..."

But she couldn't think of anything else to say. Her mouth felt very dry.

Bael kissed her, very soft and sweet, his hands framing her face, and her body melted into his. Oh hell. Seeing Striker naked earlier hadn't elicited the tiniest response from her, and she'd known women to fall into orgasmic swoons just at the sight of him fully clothed. But Bael's arms around her, his lips on hers, his tongue gently playing with hers, made her weak-kneed and dizzy and sent a pulse of heat through her whole body.

"I'm your mate," she said shakily, and Bael's eyes were warm.

"Yes, you are."

"That's it. Final. We can't change it."

He shook his head, smiling gently.

"I ain't having kids," she said, trying desperately to dissuade him, even though she knew there was no point.

"You don't have to."

"And – and – I'm not getting involved in Nasc crap. I'm staying with Jarven at the ranch. He needs someone to take care of him."

"Sure. I wouldn't try to stop you."

Panic fluttered in her veins. "I – I don't want..."

Bael smoothed her hair and waited. Kett let out a shaky breath. "Bael, I – you – I'm not normal."

"It's one of the things I love about you."

"And I don't – I can't – every time I try to get involved with anyone, when I get close, with my family or with the Order, when I try to do what I'm supposed to, it all ends up...really bad."

"What you're supposed to do? Who says what you're supposed to do?"

"Well – well, you're saying I'm supposed to be your mate –"

"I'm saying you *are* my mate. What you do after that is up to you."

His tone was gentle, his expression warm, but there was a flicker of insecurity behind his eyes.

"Kett, it'll be okay. I'm not asking anything of you. I don't expect anything of you. I love who you are, right now, scars and everything. I love how brave you are, how kind you are even when you don't want to be, how you're frightened and angry and vulnerable and spiky and brilliant. I love everything about you."

Kett gazed at him, stunned. Bael slowly twirled a curl of her hair around his finger and spoke carefully, as if he was still thinking through what he was saying.

"I'm not here because of this mate thing. I mean, I think it's real and true, but that's not why I'm here." His voice gathered speed. "I came for you when I thought you weren't my mate. I came for you when I thought you'd cheated on me and killed my mother. And if you proved to me right now conclusively that I'm not your mate and never will be, I would still come for you. I'd still want you and love you. I love you, Kett. I –"

He broke off, as if he'd run on too far, too fast, and his intense gaze dipped, darted away.

Kett grabbed his face and kissed him.

She'd never expected to hear something like that from anybody. She'd never even allowed herself to think of it. Romance and pretty words weren't for scarred, damaged people like her. Eithne and Beyla and Giselle, delicate feminine girls, inspired speeches like that.

Part of her said it was just Bael talking bollocks again, but it was only a small part, and being drowned out by the big, loud, desperate need inside her to believe him. And

that scared Kett more than anything else. She'd never wanted to believe anyone so badly.

She let Bael go and both of them were breathing hard. His eyes blazed green fire at her.

"I love everything about you, Kett Almet," he said again, and Kett tugged him toward the sofa, tumbling and smiling and even laughing. It felt so damn good to laugh. She'd forgotten the last time she really laughed hard at anything.

Bael kissed her neck, her shoulder, pushing her shirt open and then tugging it off over her head when it got in the way. In a grand gesture, he threw her shirt into the fireplace, where his fireball gobbled it up.

"Uh," Kett began to protest, but Bael just smiled wickedly and said, "Sweetheart, you're not going to need it," and smoothed back her hair to kiss her extravagantly, pulling her body against his until she was almost in his lap.

He kissed her so magnificently, Kett might not have minded if they didn't do anything else. There was something so wonderfully liberating about giving in and knowing she couldn't fight against him anymore. She was stuck with him, and she might as well take advantage of that.

She slid her hand inside his shirt, over the smooth skin of his stomach, feeling the muscles jump at her touch. Smiling against his mouth, she slid one leg over his, wrapped it around his waist and kissed him on and on as he worked his thumb over her nipple, through her bra.

The lace created a wonderful friction against her extremely sensitive flesh. For once, Kett was grateful to Nuala for buying her fancy underwear.

Impatient to touch more of him, she tugged at his shirt, and when Bael gave her a smoldering look she ripped the fabric off him and tossed it on the floor.

"Nice," he growled, and rewarded her by sucking her nipple into his mouth through the fabric of her bra.

The hot wetness of his mouth through the softly abrading lace made Kett's head swim. Her fingers dug into his hair and a moan escaped her lips. His tongue tortured her through the bra, until her hips were bucking and her back arching as she tried to get more of the glorious heat and pleasure. Digging her fingers into his arms, she moved one of his hands to her other breast and fumbled behind her own back to unfasten the bra.

When the fabric went slack, Bael looked up and grinned at her, then yanked it off and tossed it away. This time it didn't go in the fire, but Kett wouldn't have cared if it had. Bael's mouth was back on her breast, this time with no barrier between them, and she thought she might come just from that.

His hand slid down her stomach, caressing her and making her muscles tense. His bare skin was heaven against hers, hot and smooth and dusted with just enough soft hair to tease her flesh. Every inch of her felt extra sensitized, especially where he

touched her. Even the brush of her own hair against her shoulders was driving her wild.

Bael's fingers unfastened her fly and slid inside, just a little bit, teasing her dark curls but not darting any lower. Maddened, Kett tried to wriggle out of her unyielding leathers but was tangled up in Bael so much it was impossible.

His teeth scraped her nipple and she realized he was laughing. "Want a hand, sweetheart?"

"Yours seem to be otherwise occupied," Kett panted, but Bael withdrew them to help her peel off her leather trousers, underwear and boots. Naked, she curled against him, loving the rough denim abrading her bare thighs.

Then she stopped, because the thigh she had curled around Bael's waist was her right one – and the scar on it seemed to have faded dramatically.

She jerked her head up to stare at Bael. "Did you do that?"

"Reckon so," he said, stroking it. "I can do it again if you'd like, see if it fades more." She shivered as his fingers tickled a sensuous path up her thigh. "How does it feel?"

"Wonderful," Kett moaned, and he laughed.

"I meant the scar. The muscle. Inside. Has it eased?"

But the only muscle Kett could think of inside her was the big one threatening to burst out of Bael's fly. She rubbed her hand over it and he shuddered. She unfastened the top button and felt his whole body tense.

Kett swung herself over him completely, straddling his thighs and pressing her bare body against his. His chest was broad and firm against her breasts, tiny crisp hairs tickling her into distraction as she slid her hand up his neck to his cheek and kissed him, hard.

Her other hand delved between them, freeing his cock and palming it, feeling its thickness and its strength, smearing the drop of liquid from the head all over. Bael's fingers gripped her hard, his hand tightening on her breast almost to the point of pain, and he bit down on her lip.

"Kett," he said, kissing her face madly, "I wanted to take this slow, and stroke you and lick you, I wanted –"

"I want you to fuck me," Kett said, ravenous for him, and when she rubbed the sticky head of his cock against the slick, wet folds of her pussy, he groaned and pushed inside her.

She sank down, taking as much of him as she could, reaching down to free his balls from the confines of his clothes and pressing herself against them. He felt so damn good inside her, filling her up completely. She rose and fell, arching her back, pressing her breasts into his hands. Bael went one better and dipped his head to suck and bite on her nipple.

Afraid she was going to orgasm immediately and end it too soon, Kett tried to slow down, but Bael was pounding into her, sliding deep into her slick heat, his hands everywhere, guiding and stroking and driving her mad.

She couldn't sustain it. Gripping his shoulders with both hands, she abandoned herself to the driving pleasure building in her and rode him to a hot, screaming climax.

She was barely aware he'd come, trembling and shaking as she was, breathing hard, her body heavy against him. Bael held her, stroked her back, kissed her hair. She thought he might be trembling too.

"You never, ever disappoint me," he said softly against her temple, and Kett looked up at the simplest and fullest praise she'd ever received.

She kissed him, safe and loved and more content than she could ever remember being.

Kett cuddled against him, warm and quiet, and Bael tugged at the blanket she'd been wearing, draping it over her bare back and smiling at her murmur of thanks. She was delicious like this, boneless and lazy, her body soft and sated, snuggling up to him like a sleepy kitten.

She dozed for a while but he stayed awake, watching the flicker of the floating ball of fire he'd created. Rain spattered against the windows, blown in fits and jerks, and a draught came in under the door.

Bael manifested another fireball just by thinking about it, lengthened it out into a narrow shape about a yard long and floated it down to the gap under the door. A draught-excluder made of flames.

He was astonished he could do such a thing. No matter how much his father and Albhar had tried to tutor him, he'd never been able to master the simplest of spells. But then, this didn't seem to be about spells. This was about power, innate magic. The sort Albhar had so little of.

His former mentor had made up for his lack of power by learning every spell there had ever been. Including, apparently, one that involved the death of his pupil, his friend's son, and in fact the man who kept him in such luxurious style.

The fireballs warming the room grew a little brighter with his anger and he quickly tried to calm himself. He didn't want to set the place on fire.

In his arms, Kett stirred, cuddling closer, her face tucked into the crook of his neck. Overwhelmed with love, he clasped her tighter to him.

Albhar had tried to kill her. Twice.

Maybe three times.

Because who else could have turned her to stone when she was a baby? Who else would have?

He would *burn*.

The buzz of Kett's scryer startled her awake, jolting her against him. Bael smiled at her as she opened her eyes, the silver fire in them banked by sleep. He brushed his lips gently against hers, eliciting a drowsy smile from her before she picked up the scryer and yawned, "Yeah?"

"Did I wake you, pet?"

It was Striker. Bael felt that prickle of unease run through him, like an animal sensing a predator. Annoyed that the last vestiges of his warm, satisfied stupor had been blasted away, he scowled at the handsome face smirking out from Kett's scryer.

"Yes, you did wake me, actually," Kett said, apparently unafraid.

"I'd pretend I'm sorry, but I ain't. We all set for tomorrow?"

"Think so, yeah. Have you spoken to Chance?"

Striker grinned. "She wants to come."

"Did you tell her she couldn't?"

"Yep."

"Did you tell her why?"

Striker grinned wider. "Nope. Stupid girl ought to be able to figure it out herself."

"Yes, well." Kett shrugged her beautiful shoulders. "These things are often more apparent to other people. Is Dark coming?"

"Yeah. Apparently he can't get enough of fighting the bastards."

"A man after your own heart. I'll see you tomorrow then."

She ended the call, letting the little hemisphere of rock thud onto the sofa, and curled back against Bael's body, nuzzling his shoulder. Her back shook with a small laugh.

"What?" he asked.

"Chance. I bet she's livid to be left out."

"Left out of what?"

"A good fight."

Bael couldn't help smiling, wondering who she was going to fight. Then he frowned, tilted her face up to his. "Now, I know why she shouldn't fight, but what do you know?"

"I know she's pregnant." Kett shrugged. "Animal senses."

"She smells different," Bael agreed. "And her fa— Striker knows?" He couldn't think of that hideously evil man as being anybody's father—let alone his queen's.

"He *always* knows," Kett said. "He knew Nuala was pregnant before she did. And he knew they were going to be triplets. And he knew there'd be two girls and a boy. He even knew the birth order."

Bael whistled.

"Of course, being Striker, he wrote it down somewhere and didn't tell her. Hey," she said, sitting up and pushing her springy hair back, "will Chance and Dark's kids be Nasc? I mean, she's human. Well, almost human."

Bael shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know any Nasc who've mated with non-Nasc. Hell, I don't know any other Nasc at all, except for them."

"None at all?"

"No." He idly stroked her back. "I was always too frightened of being discovered. I listened for news about the king and his sister, but I never tried to find anyone. My father put the fear of the gods into me about the Federación. I heard news about the Nasc, kept my ears open, and I heard about what the Federación did to freaks like me."

She gave a half smile and lightly punched his shoulder. "If you're a freak, what does that make me?"

"Gorgeous," Bael replied promptly. "Sexy." He kissed one side of her jaw, just under her ear. "Perfect."

"Give over," she protested.

"Nope. I love you, Kett," he said sincerely, not allowing her to duck away from him. "I'll do anything for you."

"Kill Albhar," she said tonelessly, and he straightened.

"Seriously?"

"That's where we're going tomorrow. Striker's good at finding people. Plus he likes exploding things. I'm going to find him, I'm going to give him a chance to repent, and then I'm going to —"

"Move away while I incinerate him," Bael finished for her.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Kett, quite apart from the fact that Albhar is the closest thing I've had to family for twenty years and he intended to sacrifice me in a ritual, don't you think I'd go after him for what he did to you?"

"I can take care of myself," she said stiffly.

"I know you can, sweetheart, it's one of my favorite things about you." He kissed her lightly on the lips. "But you're going to have to put up with me trying to protect you now, I'm afraid. That's just the way it's going to be."

"You are so full of —"

"Love and admiration for you," Bael said, kissing her mouth again. "Seriously, Kett. He tried to kill you, three times by my count. He had you turned into a statue for eight years! What sort of person does that to a baby?"

"A ruthless one," Kett said. She frowned. "How do you know Albhar did it?"

"Who else would? He beat and starved you," Bael said, his fingers tightening on her arms. *He will burn.*

"On your orders."

Bael winced. "Yes. Well. Have I mentioned many, many apologies for that?" He gathered her in close.

"Bael," she interrupted. "Look. You said he's the closest thing you have to family. You shouldn't be the one to kill him."

"Yes," Bael said grimly, "I should. Not just because of what he did to you, but because he's supposed to be my family and he tried to kill me."

"Don't kill him for revenge," Kett said, her eyes flashing. "Kill him because it's the right thing to do."

Bael, who'd never bothered hugely with what was wrong and what was right, frowned, but he nodded.

They were both silent for a while, then Kett said, "Anyway, it's academic. Striker'll probably get there first."

"What grudge does he have against Albhar?" Bael asked, thinking of his mentor's extremely minor talents.

"Oh, none really. Well, apart from Albhar being involved with the Federación, who are responsible for that huge scar on Chance's back. But really he just likes killing people. Chalia doesn't let him do it very often."

"Lovely," Bael said. "How—and I realize I may regret asking—how does Striker know where Albhar will be? He's probably left the Vyiskagrad house by now."

Kett nodded. "Yeah. Striker reckons he's gone south. He'll know better once we've crossed the Wall, but his guess was Pra—"

She froze.

"Pradesh?" Bael asked, and Kett gave a mechanical nod. She breathed jerkily for a few seconds, and when she spoke her voice came out very calm.

"Bael, when you said you used to know the Maharaja of Pradesh, you were just bragging, right?"

"Sure," he said, and she relaxed. "But it was true all the same."

Her eyes went distant, panicked. Her fingers traced the faded scar on her thigh.

"Kett?" Bael prompted.

"Does Albhar know him?"

"Probably. He used to brag about being friends with the Governor, when Pradesh was still a colony. Now it's been handed back to the—"

"Maharaja," Kett said, "who I was performing for the night before I found myself strung up in that cave with you."

"Performing what?" Bael asked, terrible jealousy ripping through him.

"Shape-changing. As an entertainment. I don't do it often. I just did that as a favor. Shape-changing, Bael, *the day before the cave.*"

A terrible silence followed.

"Albhar knows him," Bael said.

"I know him," Kett said. "He took me in when my leg was hurt. He was kind to me. He helped me get hold of my parents and Striker. I went back there to perform at his daughter's wedding as a *favor*."

"It could just be a coincidence," Bael said without much confidence, and Kett gave him a disbelieving look. "No, I didn't think so either."

"I am going to *eviscerate* him," she said, clambering off Bael and resisting his efforts to hold her in place. "I'm going to find that damn tiger and feed him to it!"

"And I'll be right behind you," he said, watching her pace naked. "But —"

"The sneaky rotten conniving backstabbing shit of a bastard!"

"Absolutely," Bael said, "but the thing is —"

"I'm going to get his fat, slimy entrails and wrap them around his neck. I'm —"

"Yes," Bael said, "but *the thing is*, the Maharaja of Pradesh has one of the biggest standing armies in Asiatica. He's famous for it. Determined not to let anyone colonize his country again."

"I'll kill them all too," Kett vowed carelessly.

"You and whose army?" Bael asked.

And Kett smiled.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Oh," Bael said. "*That* army."

The five of them stood on a small hill overlooking a valley. It was filled with tents, cooking fires and people sharpening swords.

"I made some calls," Kett said. "Could have gotten more if we'd had more notice, but...well, really they're just for backup."

"But that's a *whole* army," Bael said. "Who do you know with a whole army?"

"Well, her step-uncle, for one," said Lya. "Technically, he's head of the whole Peneggan army."

"But we're not in Peneggan," Bael said. They'd crossed the Wall late last night—him, Kett, Striker, Dark and Lya the kelf—and endured a hair-raising journey on the back of a terrifying and completely untamed Xinjiangese dragon. "I thought the Peneggan army had pulled out of Pradesh years ago. Handed control back to the locals."

"The colony was handed back," Kett said. "But a battalion or two stayed behind with the handover. It's not a *whole* army," she mimicked Bael's tone, "but it's probably enough to attack the Maharaja's palace."

"Which is probably why he keeps such a big army of his own," Lya murmured.

"Checks and balances," Kett said. "Come on. I know the colonel."

They walked down into the camp, Striker striding on ahead, Kett discussing strategy with Dark, leaving Bael to walk with Lya. Her bare, three-toed feet pattered silently on the ground. The air was full of sound, but all Bael could hear was the kelf's silence.

"Look," he said eventually. "I'm sorry about— I was really rude to you. That day in the café."

"I've had worse," she said. "It's all right." She paused. Dust rose around them. "A kelf didn't kill your mother, you know."

"Neither did a shapeshifter," Bael said.

"No. It was her own ritual. Her own hunger for power. She got the details wrong, and it killed her." Lya's huge purple eyes looked up at him. "You know that, don't you?"

Bael took in a breath and blew it out. "My father knew that," he said.

"My guess is he thought you'd prefer to be told it was someone you already hated," Lya said.

"Or he didn't want to admit the truth."

"Perhaps. He was a very proud man." She hesitated. "But not a bad one, in the scheme of things."

"Yes, well, the 'scheme of things' includes Striker, doesn't it?"

Lya gave him a pointy-toothed grin, and they followed Kett and Dark into the army camp.

The colonel was not, as Bael had assumed, an army buddy of Kett's, but a fellow Knight from this mysterious Order she'd told him about. He'd been amazed to learn that not only were Kett, Striker, Chance and Jarven all fully qualified Knights, but so were a good deal of Nuala and Tyrnan's friends.

"Tane's going to be so pissed off," Kett commented as they entered the camp and she saluted the guards. "He's due to join the army next year. Officer training. He'd love to come down here and fight."

"Why didn't he?"

"Politics. Can't get the king's nephew involved. If he were to be killed by Pradeshi troops, it could turn into an international incident. We'd probably go to war."

"But it's okay for a battalion of the Peneggan army to fight?" Bael asked.

Kett made a wavering gesture with her hands. "They're not technically part of the Peneggan army," she said. "It's some bureaucratic bollocks. Don't ask me the details."

"Is that why you didn't let your dad come?" Bael asked.

Kett snorted. "My dad *is* an international incident. And he's far too old for all this."

"Technically, he's younger than me," said Striker.

"Technically, you're a psychotic freak," Kett responded, lightning fast, "so it doesn't matter."

Bael tried not to laugh too hard.

The colonel, an intelligent and hardy man by the name of Darson, gave them food and drink and a tent in which to rest. Striker lay down on one of the bunks, closed his eyes and immediately appeared to be asleep. The other four exchanged glances. None of them were fooled.

"So," Dark said. "Is there a plan?"

* * * * *

"Second time in a bleeding month I've been in a dress," Kett said in disgust, looking at herself in the smallish, wobbly mirror Darson had provided.

"You look charming," Lya said, trying to keep a straight face. Kelfs were usually good at this, but apparently not when something was as hilarious as Kett in sequins. "Very...pretty."

"I look like a Pradeshi whore," Kett said, and Lya giggled. Kett had never heard Lya giggle before. It wasn't encouraging.

"You're supposed to look like one," Lya said. "That's your cover story, remember?"

"Yeah." She sighed gloomily and tweaked at the very low, very short, beaded bodice Chance had given her. Her own charms didn't quite fill it, but one of the advantages of being a shapeshifter was that you could alter yourself to fit clothes, instead of the other way around.

She'd erased all signs of scars on her body, not that there were many left after Bael had spent the previous night licking her all over and making her scream. Her nipples puckered at the memory and she tried to banish it.

The tiny bodice was matched by a full skirt, also embellished with enough beads and mirrors to dazzle an army. Her feet were bare but for a couple of decorative rings and anklets. Bangles clanked on her arm. Necklaces, earrings and a sort of jeweled headpiece completed the look.

Kett felt like a Yule tree.

She'd altered her appearance to that of a young Pradeshi woman, kohled her eyes and made an effort with her hair. With a lot of concentration, she could make the curls straighten themselves out.

"Ready?" Bael asked, pushing back the tent flap.

"No." Kett plucked at her clothing in disgust.

He stared. "Is that really you, Kett?"

"I wish it bloody wasn't. How do people walk with these skirts? They get tangled up. And the whole thing weighs a ton. I've worn armor more comfortable. It—"

Bael had her in his arms, kissing her hard, his hands roaming over her bare waist. His body pressed against hers, and even through the heavy skirts she could feel the hardness of his arousal.

"But then again..." Kett swallowed when he let her go. Behind him, the tent flap was closing. Lya had vanished.

"I'd never have recognized you," Bael said, nuzzling her neck, "until you opened your mouth."

"I could be another tavern whore."

He stiffened for a moment then said, "And if you were, I'd know you weren't, because if you were then how would you know that I wouldn't know?"

"Um," said Kett.

He grinned. "Can I see *your* face?"

She let the shape slip away and the look that came over Bael's face was her reward. His eyes softened, his lips curved in a smile. He looked like a man in love.

"I prefer you this way."

"You don't think they'd recognize me?"

"Mmm." He nuzzled her neck again. "No. I think they'll be distracted," his hand slipped to her breast, "and unable to even look at your face."

She let him feel her breasts before telling him, "You know those aren't real, right?"

"They're real enough. Their reaction certainly is."

She couldn't argue with that. Her nipples were hard, her breath was coming faster, and her breasts were rising and falling in a way that seemed to absolutely fascinate Bael.

"Hey," he said breathlessly, "are you wearing anything under that skirt?"

"I—" Kett began, but his fingers brushed her stomach, making her shiver. She found herself whispering, "Why don't you find out?"

He looked up, grinning, and started gathering folds of embellished fabric.

"Just don't tear anything," Kett said. "I need this costume."

"I won't even take it off," Bael promised, and disappointment swept through Kett.

Disappointment that fled when he dropped to his knees, stuck his head under her skirt and licked up the inside of her thigh, past the leather straps holding a knife to her thigh.

"No underwear," he said, his breath hot against her pussy lips.

"I hadn't gotten around to it," Kett breathed, trying to keep steady on her feet.

She needn't have bothered. Bael wrapped his arms around her legs, holding her steady, and buried his face between her thighs. His tongue burrowed between her folds, seeking out all the places she was most sensitive and licking them relentlessly until she came with a gasp, shuddering and nearly falling.

It was all over in a few minutes, Bael's tongue so expert that she didn't need any more. He rose to his feet, leaned her back against the heavy pole supporting the tent and kissed her.

He still had her skirts bunched up around her thighs. His hand slipped between and caressed her wet folds.

"Yes," Kett murmured, her eyes closed, floating on a sea of bliss, and she heard a rustle of clothing before Bael's thick cock was pressing at her entrance. "Yes," she said again, opening her eyes, and he pushed inside.

"I love you," he told her as he began to thrust. "I love fucking you. I love *you*."

When they went outside, Lya and Dark kept their eyes averted, both of them hiding smiles.

Striker leered. "Made the tent shake," he said.

"I know," Kett replied smugly. She slipped her arm around Bael's neck, kissed him softly and sighed. "Time to get to work."

* * * * *

The Maharaja's palace looked like a child's drawing of a castle onto which someone had dumped a lot of cake decorations. Every wall, turret and curved roof glistened with colored tiles, jewels and gaudy adornments. In the shimmering heat and ever-present

clouds of dust and sand, it looked like a mirage. Or perhaps a hallucination caused by eating moldy dodo meat.

"Tasteful," Kett murmured, shielding her eyes against the gaudiness.

"Even Nuala's not that bad," Lya agreed.

Bael snorted. He was in Var's body, a magnificent black stallion, his muscles bunching between Kett's thighs as she rode him. Beside her sat Lya on a borrowed munta and Dark on Colonel Darson's mount. Striker was nowhere to be seen—which in no way meant he wasn't around.

Dark's regal bearing, his kelfish slave and youthful courtesan were enough to convince the guards of the Maharaja's palace that they should be admitted.

Inside, Var was taken to the stables, making Kett's stomach constrict even though she knew he'd be fine, and the rest of the party was led through a series of small courtyards and piazzas, green with plants and trees, but never quite escaping the ever-present sand blowing on the breeze. Fountains tinkled. Somewhere, someone played music.

Eventually they were taken to a grand, high-ceilinged room where kelfs operated ceiling fans and a man lounged on a throne, watching a girl play the sitar terribly badly. He was the Maharaja, and she his beloved only daughter.

Kett winced. She didn't want to kill the daughter. Hell, she didn't really want to kill the Maharaja, but justice was justice, and he'd broken the terms of their friendship by betraying her to a man who wanted to kill her.

"Your Serene Highness, may I present the High Lord Talvéan," Lya said, her eyes cast deferentially low.

"*Hukm*, Maharaja," Dark said in perfect Pradeshi, with a regal nod. "It's good of you to receive me."

They exchanged pleasantries while Kett took note of as many details about the room as she could. The dozen or so kelfs. The tall doors, guarded not by kelfs but by men with curved swords. The high windows, letting in shafts of light in which dust motes danced. The handmaidens swarming around the princess.

She couldn't see Albhar anywhere.

"And who is this charming young woman?" asked the Maharaja.

Kett kept her eyes averted as Dark drew her forward. In truth she wanted to laugh, because here was an immensely powerful, sexual, magnetic man with his arm around her bare waist, and his touch felt about as enjoyable as a pelvic exam.

"She is," Dark paused for exactly the right length of time, "a very dear friend of mine."

The Maharaja's smile widened. "I *see*," he said. "Well, you must be in need of rest and refreshment after your journey. Please, follow the kelfs to the guest quarters."

Every inch of the palace interior was as embellished as the outside. By the time they shut the door on the giant guest suite, Kett was starting to feel dizzy from the mad,

bright patterns. The suite was just as heavily decorated, with large open windows and a monkey on a perch. It screeched when it saw them, and Kett frowned at it.

"That went well," Lya said, giving Kett a look. "'Very dear friend'."

"Shut up. How the hell did Chance wear this stuff all the time when she was a courtesan?" Kett asked, hitching up the low bodice of her outfit.

"She didn't wear it for long," Dark said, in a tone that didn't invite discussion. "Do you think you can track this Albhar?"

"Dunno, but I can," said Bael, materializing behind them. The monkey scampered onto his shoulder and Kett realized it was Var. "He has plenty of pet monkeys. I can find Albhar, change into something bigger and fly him out."

"No," Kett said. "If it was that simple, we'd have flown in and wouldn't have had to piss about with costumes."

"I like your costume," he said, with a look that reminded her how much he'd liked it earlier.

Kett felt her cheeks burn but went on, "He has guards on the roof. That's why Lya is going with you – and taking this." She pointed down.

They all looked at the carpet.

"To roll him up in and carry him out," Kett explained. "Can Var be a donkey?"

"I've repeatedly been told so," Bael said, straight-faced.

"Funny. We'll meet you back at the –"

The doors to the suite suddenly flew open, and all four of them whirled around.

"My dear boy!" Albhar cried. "I didn't know you were coming."

His eyes said otherwise. As did the contingent of armed men behind him.

"Albhar," Bael said, smiling just as easily as his former mentor. "Good to see you. That dragon dragged me away when it took the shapeshifter."

"Did it?" Albhar asked, without quite enough sympathy on his face. "And where is the shapeshifter now?"

Kett realized she was still wearing her disguise. "A shapeshifter!" she squeaked. "How exciting!"

Albhar cast her an irritated look. "It's very dangerous," he said. "It killed –"

"No one," Bael said softly, and Albhar's attention whipped back to him.

"Ah. I know you don't believe me, but –"

"That's because it's not true," Bael said.

"Your father believed a kelf –"

"Didn't kill her. She died in her own stupid ritual. The same stupid ritual you've been researching for so many years."

There was a dreadful silence.

"First rule of lying, Albhar. You get your story straight."

"Bael—" Albhar began, but then stopped.

"No, please." Bael glanced at Kett before turning back to the old man. "Explain."

Albhar looked at him, and then at Kett. He raised his hands and let them drop in a gesture of failure.

"What can I say?" he asked. "I wanted the power."

"You knew it would kill me."

"You stupid boy," Albhar sneered. "Did you ever believe I cared for you?"

Var suddenly leapt from Bael's shoulder, changing fluidly in mid-flight to a tiger, heavy and lethal. His weight shoved Albhar to the ground, snarling and clawing, his huge jaws ripping at the old man's throat.

The half-dozen armed men with Albhar all turned to shoot at Var.

Lya threw herself on the tiger's back.

Kett ripped her skirts open and snatched her knife from its sheath, wishing to hell she'd been able to carry a bigger weapon. With her other hand she grabbed her scryer from its hiding place under the skirt's embellished layers, and while she lunged forward to stab one of the men who was even at that moment loosing an arrow at Var, she tried to focus her mind on calling Darson.

Bael let out a bellow and turned on the soldiers with a sword that had come out of nowhere. Kett slashed at the arm of the man nearest to her, making him falter in his aim. Another cut to the wrist made him drop his bow, and then she stabbed under his ribs, pushing the knife in as far as it would go.

Lya's body covered as much of Var as it could, and her kelfish skin was impervious to the arrows raining on her from such a short distance. But she couldn't cover all of the tiger and the soldiers were beginning to discard their bows for short swords, slashing and stabbing at Var through his thick fur.

"Kett?" shouted a voice from the scryer in her hand. She'd gotten through.

"Now," Kett said. "Send them *now*!"

She yanked her knife back, shoving at the dying man with her foot and thrusting her scryer into her bodice so her hand was free to grab his sword as he fell. Whirling on the next man, she cut him across the chest. None of the men were properly armored, and the sword cut through his clothing enough to leave a line of blood. The man turned on her, but she used the momentum of her swing to whirl and slam the sword into his head.

But not before he'd yelled, "Guards! We're under attack! Gua—"

His head split open, spraying blood, and Kett twirled to the next man.

But there were no more. The other four men lay on the floor in various states of dismemberment, Bael and Dark standing over them, breathing hard. Bael stepped forward in the sudden silence and picked up Lya, whose eyes were closed tight.

"Are you all right?" he asked, and she opened her eyes, nodding. They both looked down at Var, whose striped fur was dark with blood. Lya's body had shielded him from a lot of blows, but not all of them.

"Is he?" asked Kett.

"He's okay. Nothing serious." Bael set Lya on her feet and knelt by his twin, placing his hand on the tiger's back. "Tigers have incredibly thick fur, helps repel blades."

"I know," she said, and he smiled at her. She smiled back, tremendously relieved he was all right. The fight had only lasted a minute or two. How could she possibly have been worried enough to call for backup?

Var got to his feet, leaving behind the bloody, mauled mess that had once been Albhar. The tiger's legs, belly and face were smeared with the old man's blood, and Bael regarded it with his jaw tight.

There was silence for a long moment.

"We should go," Dark said, and they all nodded, moving toward the huge windows and the little courtyard beyond. Kett was already working out the best escape routes in her head. Take to the skies? She and Bael could each carry a passenger, but she was fairly sure the Maharaja had snipers on his rooftop, alive to the possibility of an aerial invasion.

Maybe if she and Bael disguised themselves again, they could just walk out. No; someone would check their quarters long before they got to the outside wall. And they were all sprayed with blood.

Maybe —

"My gods!" cried someone from outside the guest quarters, and without even sharing a glance, the four of them, plus Var, broke into a run, through the windows and toward the archway at one side of the courtyard. "After them!"

"Thought that went too easy," Bael said, his hand brushing her arm as they ran. "Are you okay?"

"Five by five." She grinned. "Nothing like a good fight to get the blood pumping."

"Just as long as it only pumps *inside* you," he said, and they shared a smile.

They'd left the little courtyard attached to the guest quarters by the time the guards found the bodies. They ran through another little piazza, then another, each one hung with vines and trellises, the sound of heavy boots on stone echoing behind them.

"It all looks the same," Lya cursed. "How do we get out?"

"I follow my nose," Bael said, flashing her a grin. "This way!"

But "this way" led them into a bigger courtyard, one with many exits. Soldiers entered through three of them.

"Nice one," Lya snapped. She ran with a sword in one three-fingered hand and a crossbow in the other, both apparently stolen from Albhar's guards. She raised the bow as she ran and felled one soldier, but a hail of arrows were returned.

They ducked behind a fountain. "There are four of us," Kett said.

"Five." Bael pointed to Var, still tiger-shaped.

"Six." With a shimmer, Dark separated into two forms. Véan, a lion eight feet from nose to tail, tossed his long, dark mane and pawed the ground, leaving behind long gouges. An undulating growl rose in his throat.

"Still. There are hundreds of them. Within a minute or two there could be thousands. And they're *good*. Have any of you ever faced troops in battle?"

"Yes," said Dark, his face grim.

"Yes," said Lya.

"No," sighed Bael, "but I've been in a hell of a lot of bar fights."

Kett passed her hands over her face in despair. Six against even one hundred was terrible odds. Six against several hundred, maybe even a thousand, was such terrible odds she couldn't believe any of them were contemplating it.

"Where the fuck is Striker?" she asked, looking around as if he might reveal himself, a shape silhouetted in the ever-present dust clouds.

"Not here," Bael said. "Not since we entered the palace."

"Great," Kett said, and hauled out her scryer. But Striker didn't answer.

"He's probably busy roasting babies or something," Lya said.

The sun beat down on them. Sand drummed up by the marching soldiers filling the courtyard clogged the air.

Kett started looking around for cover. "Okay, we need to hide. Barricade ourselves somewhere until the battalion shows up."

"Will they?" Lya asked. "Show up?"

"They'd bloody better," Kett growled, pointing toward the nearest part of the building. "In there. Get as deep into the palace as we can. Find somewhere defensible. Everyone ready?"

"No," said Bael. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, hard. "Now I am."

"You're a lunatic," she told him.

"So are you."

He grinned, and then so did she, and they both took off running.

* * * * *

By chance they ended up in the throne room, its high doors slammed shut and barricaded with furniture. It had been empty but for the Maharaja and one pretty concubine, who both fell silent when Var and Véan bounded into the room.

"Are there any other entrances?" Kett demanded, and the terrified, gibbering man pointed to a small door no doubt used by the servants. She smashed a table with the hilt of her sword and used one of the legs to barricade the door.

Outside, someone yelled a command, and a hail of arrows came in through the high windows. Annoyed, Kett manifested a pair of wings, grabbed the Maharaja and flew up there.

The big courtyard was full of soldiers. Rank upon rank of them filled the space, crammed into every corner, jammed up against the walls. Weaponry glinted in the sunlight.

The silence was intense.

Kett held the Maharaja in front of her, leaning away from his wriggling body and kicking legs. "Shoot again and you might hit him," she shouted.

"Kill them!" he squealed to his soldiers. "Kill them all!"

"If we die, *you* die," she told him, and dropped him the ten or so feet to the tiled floor of the throne room. He landed with a crack and howl, at which the concubine let out a cry.

Kett landed by the fallen ruler and aimed her stolen sword at him.

She let her disguise slide away.

"You were the one who handed me over to Albhar, weren't you?" she asked. "You told him where I lived."

"I'm sorry!" he cried, sobbing like a child.

"Yeah, me too. I should do to you what Var did to him."

The Maharaja looked up, fear and tears staining his face. Kett gestured to Var, who padded over and rested one bloody paw on the Maharaja's chest.

The Maharaja fainted. The concubine whimpered.

"I'm not going to kill him," Kett said in disgust.

"You're not?" asked Bael, looking disappointed.

"No. I just want to do this." She kicked the man over onto his stomach and slashed the back of his thigh, hamstringing him.

"Poetic," said Bael.

"I thought so."

Something heavy hit the main doors, its thud reverberating throughout the throne room. Dust shimmered from the rafters.

"How long, do you think?" Dark asked.

The ram hit again. *Thud*.

"Long enough for the army to get here?" Bael ventured.

Thud. The furniture piled up in front of the doors started to wobble.

"Better be," Kett said. She picked up the fallen ruler and placed him on the floor by his own throne, where the concubine cowered. "Make yourself useful."

Thud.

"Are we going to die?" the girl whimpered.

"Yes," Kett said, and the girl burst into tears.

"I didn't say *today*," Kett sighed. "Stop his bleeding, will you? Use that sari, girl, there're acres of it. Stop being so stupid."

"But—"

Thud.

"I don't want him to die," Kett said. She looked at the face of the man who'd once been so kind to her. "He saved my leg but tried to sacrifice my life. Well, I'm sparing his life but sacrificing his leg. I think you'll find that's a better deal."

Five minutes passed with little sound except the steady thud of the battering ram. The concubine, sobbing uselessly, tried ineffectually to bandage the Maharaja's leg. Kett, irritated beyond belief, shoved her aside and did it herself, trying not to think about the irony.

Ten minutes went by and the door remained unbreached. The ram continued to batter it.

Fifteen minutes. The door began to splinter. A footstool, then a small chest, then a table toppled from the barricade. Bael readied his sword and with his free hand reached for Kett, twining his fingers wordlessly with hers.

They faced the doors in silence.

A shout came from outside, then another, and then the noise swelled to a deafening pitch. Men yelled orders to fire. To advance. To defend.

"They're here," Lya said.

The door burst open.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Flying splinters of wood shot toward the group in the throne room, and they all ducked. To her credit, the concubine covered the Maharaja's body with her own.

Kett spun quickly, pressed the briefest of kisses on Bael's lips, then her hand left his and grabbed the nearest piece of wood. She hurled it at the breached door. It was a token gesture, but it stopped one man in his tracks.

Behind the rushing onslaught of soldiers, a battle raged. Darson's battalion had gotten here in time.

The trick now would be escaping.

Soldiers surged forward like the tide into a suddenly wide channel. Spilling through the door they charged, swords raised, toward the short line of two big cats, three humans and a kelf.

The first men reached the six defenders and the tide broke with a clash. Var and Véan leapt forward, roaring in a spray of blood. Dark swung his sword in a high arc, bringing it down and then sideways to take out two men at once. Lya ducked, getting in close and using her shorter blades with the confidence of someone whose skin couldn't be cut.

Kett leapt forward, relishing the fierce rush of battle, but even as she moved, her body taking over automatically, she became aware of the man beside her.

Bael fought like a dervish.

A blade in each hand, he whirled and spun, slicing out low to cut down a soldier with one hand then swinging the other over to take out another. The momentum of the first cut took his sword around and up, into a third man. As a fourth swung his blade at chest height, Bael dipped backward, graceful as a dancer, and plunged his sword into the man's chest.

He took down four men in as many seconds.

He moved in a never-ending ballet of death, the swords in his hands like extensions of his own body, fluid as water, and Kett's heart picked that moment to tell her she was in love.

She heartily concurred.

Swinging away, fresh determination singing in her veins, she cut and swung and slashed, taking few hits and delivering many. All the time, the six of them moved backward, toward the throne where the Maharaja lay cradled in the arms of his concubine. She cowered away from the fighting, tears staining her beautiful face.

Kett ignored her and shoved her sword into the belly of an oncoming soldier. He twisted as he fell, taking her sword with him. Another man rushed at Kett and she

ducked, deflecting him but losing her chance to regain her blade. Left with only her knife, she cut and slashed three more men to create a space before crouching and leaping into the air, spinning over and over as she changed her shape.

Lion's paws, eagle's beak and claws, one of her favorite shapes for fighting.

The sight of a gryphon where a woman had previously been startled several soldiers, gaining Kett the seconds she'd lost in changing her shape. She went into a dive, slashing with her front claws and swinging her head around, her beak cutting through the carotid artery of one man while her back foot kicked out, ripping the face off another.

Leaping, flying, twirling, Kett danced in the air the way Bael danced on the ground. Var, still tiger-shaped, rolled and leapt, his huge paws tipped with claws that could kill with a single blow.

They passed the throne. The small door was in sight. Kett knew timing was critical. If she opened it too early, someone could come through from the other side or get around behind them. Too late, and they'd be backed into a corner.

Fifteen feet away. Twelve. Nine.

At six feet, Kett soared through the air, grabbed the wooden barricade and yanked it free with her back paws. Dark, man and beast, was closest, and both his forms rushed through it. Lya darted after him. In the corridor ahead, someone screamed. On the far side of the room, Darson's red-coated men flooded in, the tide rapidly turning in their favor.

They were winning. They'd *won*.

"Bael!" Kett yelled to her mate, who was about ten feet away, but it came out as an eagle's screech.

Bael spun, one sword high and one low, taking out three men at the same time, then swung both swords in front of him in flashing circles, clearing his path to her. His eyes gleamed.

"Fun, huh?" he said – and then froze, doubled over in sudden pain.

No one had touched him. His head snapped around to where a soldier was yanking his sword free of Var's flank. The tiger roared, trapped against the throne, and another sword slashed into him.

Kett stared, her elation quickly souring into dread.

Bael turned and ran to Var, whose ears were flattened to his head, one foreleg hanging limply. Bael moved as if suddenly each limb weighed a hundred pounds.

Kett swooped down on the men attacking Var and slashed open the throat of one before turning to the other. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the concubine, her silk sari drenched with blood, clutching the Maharaja's arm in one hand and a length of splintered wood in the other.

As she turned, the girl raised her arm. The shard she held was sharp and bloody. Kett twisted back, but not fast enough. The slashing point came down on her.

And something thudded into her, knocking her into the ground.

It was Bael, the piece of wood embedded in his chest.

His breath came in jerks. His mouth gaped. Blood fountained from his chest. A few feet away, Var rolled heavy against the throne, his great body heaving, blood pouring from a dozen wounds.

An invisible circle suddenly swept out from the throne, culling all the Maharaja's men with an unseen power, throwing the concubine into the air and letting her body fall onto the upturned sword of a dying man.

But Kett barely noticed, her entire world condensed into the space by the throne where Bael's arm stretched desperately to touch the bloodied fur of his twin. Gulping in horrible, terrifying panic, Kett wriggled from under him and grabbed his arm with her beak to yank it closer.

Bael's human fingers touched Var's tiger fur, and both their eyes closed.

Kett screamed, and the sound wasn't the cry of an eagle but the wail of a soul in pain. As she watched, winded, Var and Bael began to merge until there was just a man lying there, his body torn and bleeding in a dozen places. The shard of wood stuck out of a bloody, revolting gash on his chest.

He was barely breathing.

She needed to get him out of here. Desperately Kett roused herself, grasping Bael's shoulders in her claws and rising ponderously into the air. The fight was all but over now, the throne room eerily silent as she flapped urgently toward the high doors.

Her eagle eyes took in flashes of detail. Darsen's men fighting the Maharaja's legions, and winning. Pradeshi soldiers huddled in small defensive groups, hiding. Kells tending to the injured. Women and children fleeing into the desert's all-consuming clouds of dust.

Kett flew on, away from the palace, her wings finally failing her a few hundred yards away. The clash of steel on steel rang in the air as she eased Bael's body down on the sparse, sandy grass of a small hill.

He was breathing, but only just. His clothes were saturated with blood. Kett turned herself human again to rip his shirt open and check his wounds, trying to find the worst so she could stop it, but her eyes were blurry with tears and her hands shook.

"Bael," she whispered. "Please don't die. I love you. Please don't die."

His eyelids fluttered.

"Can you hear me?"

"No," said a man's voice behind her. "He's dying."

It was Striker, his eyes alight with bloodlust. Behind him, the Maharaja's palace burned.

"Do something!" Kett begged, appalled to hear her own voice breaking.

Striker shrugged. "Any one of these wounds could kill him. He has dozens —"

"So do them one by one! The worst first. Like a...a...a triage or something."

"By the time I've cured one mortal wound, pet, another will have killed him. You can't delay that sort of thing."

"*You*," Kett said, leaping up and launching herself at him. "You came with us to fight, you came and you did *nothing*, and if it wasn't for you, he —"

"He'd have died there in that throne room," Striker said calmly, holding her back as if she were no bigger or scarier than a kitten. "But I cleared it for you to get out, pet. Thank me for that, at least."

She stared at him, eyes burning with dust and tears that blurred her vision.

"Now, if you don't mind, I've a whole swarm of soldiers to kill in interesting ways." He chuckled her under the chin. "Have fun, kids."

"No," Kett bellowed. "Striker, please!"

But he was already gone, vanished into the dust and the smoke, and Kett was left standing there with blood all over her and no hope left.

She stared out at the fires erupting all over the palace, no doubt Striker's handiwork. Behind her, Bael was dying and there was nothing she could do.

She'd never felt so angry in her life. Angry because she was helpless, and she hated it.

She fell to her knees by Bael, took his hand in hers, wiped the blood and sweat from his face with her palm. If only she had more time, if she could get him to Chance or even Nuala —

Wait.

Delay.

"Bael!" She grasped his hand. "Can you hear me?"

His lips moved a tiny fraction. His head lolled. Sweat trickled down his face, mingling with the blood there.

Kett grabbed his other hand and put her mouth close to his ear. "Bael, listen to me. If you die, I'll bloody kill you, you hear?"

The faintest smile touched his lips.

"Listen. When I was hurt, you got me to Nuala. Crossed the Wall. How did you do it? I was nearly dead."

"Little bit of magic," he mumbled.

"Magic? Healing magic?"

Bael made an indistinct sound. His breathing was harsh, shallow. Kett felt panic rising higher inside her and could barely keep it down. Tears burned her eyes, stung her cheeks.

"You were hurt too. Your wings. Your ribs. How did you fly?"

Bael licked his lips. "Postponed them," he mumbled. "Had more important things to do."

Her heart pounded so hard she thought it would break her chest right open.

"You delayed them?" He nodded. "Well, do it now! Until I can get you back to the camp, at least. Until I can persuade Striker to help you. Use those shiny new Mage powers of yours for something besides showing off, would you?" She gripped his hand tighter, her voice ragged. "Bael, do this for me. Please!"

His fingers squeezed hers faintly. "For you," he whispered – and the blood from the wound in his chest stopped flowing.

Kett prayed to every god she could think of, invented a couple more and rose into the air on desperate wings.

* * * * *

Six months later

"A dress," Kett said in disgust. "Another fucking *dress*."

"Kett," Nuala protested mildly.

"I'm sorry. Another fucking *gown*."

Her stepmother smiled despite herself. "You look beautiful, Kett."

"No, I don't. I never look beautiful. I ain't beautiful."

"Don't be silly, of course you are. Now, will you be all right if I leave you for a while? Since your father fired his valet, he can't even fasten a cravat by himself."

"He fired his valet? Why?"

Nuala sighed, but there was a smile behind it. "Because he's a Real Man, and Real Men don't have Poncy Valets."

Kett covered her mouth.

"I know," Nuala giggled. "I think this whole thing has done him a world of good. Now, you're not going to sneak away to see Bael, are you?"

"He's not even here yet."

"Well, he'd better be soon. Do you have your bouquet? Good." She sighed. "You do look so lovely, you know." A tear gleamed in her eye. "I never thought I'd see this day."

Kett scowled. "Don't you have cravats to tie?"

Nuala nodded, beaming, and took her leave, which meant Kett was alone with her reflection.

Ugh. This creation even had *bows*. There were frills and lace and things. Served her right, she supposed glumly, for letting Nuala and her sisters have free rein.

Poking at the elaborate knots Nuala's maid had twirled her hair into, she looked around the room for something to do that wouldn't involve crushing her dress. Or The Dress, as Eithne had taken to calling it. But there was nothing in the room apart from her old, comfortable clothes and weapons.

Outside, a bell tolled. The royal temple, telling everyone who didn't know that something important was about to go down. Kett didn't know who in Elvyrn could possibly be unaware. Even blind, deaf mutes knew there was a royal wedding going on.

She sighed, poked at her hair again and tried to avoid her reflection. It was no good; the mirror Nuala had brought in was far too big and had sort of wings that folded around to reflect her from different angles.

She really had to get out.

Striding down the corridor, she ducked into a doorway as a couple of Eithne's irritating friends giggled their way past. From inside a room, she heard a woman wail, "I look so fat!"

It was Chance, who to Kett's knowledge had never worn a spare pound in her life.

"You're not fat," Dark said, his voice a soothing rumble. "You're pregnant."

"But I look fat! Everyone will think I'm fat. And I have a reputation, you know! I used to be a Lady of the Association!"

"Yes, I know," Dark said patiently, "but you're not any —"

"I could have lost rank over this!"

"By becoming pregnant?"

"Yes! No! Daa-ark, look at me, I'm a whale!"

"You're not a whale. You're still the most beautiful woman in the Realm. You'll even outshine the bride."

Kett rolled her eyes and moved on. She began to duck again when she heard footsteps coming closer but paused when she recognized the tread.

King Talis of Peneggan rounded the corner and stopped dead when he saw her.

"Oh my," he said, taking in her dress.

"Don't," Kett warned.

"I don't think I've seen so much decoration since...well, I've never seen so much decoration."

"Blame your sister," Kett told him, "and nieces."

"Oh, I fully do," he said. He brushed lint from his embroidered velvet doublet, which would have looked ridiculous in any other company, but compared to her crenellated dress looked positively restrained.

"Oh, and by the way," he said, before passing her, "next time you attack a head of state, Kett, could you do it without a battalion of my army in tow?"

"Hey, he sold me down the river," Kett said.

"Be that as it may, you could at least have gotten them to march under other colors." Talis winced. "I'm spending a fortune in Order fees, hiring the best diplomats to smooth things over."

"Do they know he intended to send the king's step-niece to her death?" Kett asked mulishly, because that was the only thing she could think of that might help.

"That's the angle we're taking." He shook his head. "Did you really hamstring him?"

"Poetic justice," Kett said.

"Yes." He glanced at his watch, very nearly smiling. "Look, I need to get to the temple. Promised Nuala I'd get your father there on time."

"Good luck," Kett said, because punctuality had never been Tyrnan's strong point.

"I'll need it. You know, I'm sure this sort of thing isn't usually required of kings."

"Maybe it is when they're the uncle of the bride."

"Maybe." He started past her, tossing over his shoulder, "By the way, love the dress."

Kett made an obscene gesture that could on some counts be construed as treasonous. The king just laughed.

She continued toward the stairs, hoping to find her brother or maybe Jalen or someone else who wasn't expecting her to enjoy being dressed in frills and ruffles, but then a familiar scent came to her.

She broke into a smile and started running, picking up her skirts and flying down the stairs, into a drawing room that had been redecorated so recently she had no idea what it was supposed to be called.

"Bael!"

His face lit up and he grabbed her as she crashed into him, kissing her soundly before breaking away.

"Whoa, am I smudging important makeup?"

"Don't care," Kett said, going back for more.

"Kett." He held her at arm's length and looked down at her dress. A slow smile began. "Kett, Kett, Kett."

"Watch it," she warned.

"You look..."

"Don't."

"It's *crenellated*."

She folded her arms and glared at him.

Bael grinned. "You look like my gorgeous girl in a fucking ridiculous dress. Nuala's handiwork?"

Disarmed, Kett nodded. "Apparently taste just goes out of the window where weddings are concerned."

"Well, I think the most sensible thing to do would be to get you out of it," he said, smoothing his hands over her back in search of fastenings.

"Well, I would," she said, "but we have to be at the temple in half an hour. And you're already supposed to be there."

"Who cares about me," Bael said, nuzzling her neck.

"Well, I do," Kett said, and he looked up, beaming at her.

"I love you."

"I know. But Bael, this is —"

He pouted like a little boy. "You're not going to say it back?"

"Why? You know how I feel."

"But I like to hear it." He settled his hands around her waist and backed her against a table, nestling his hips against hers. "Say it," he murmured, brushing his lips against hers, "or I'll tell everyone you cried when you thought I was dying."

"Tell anyone," Kett replied, "and you really will be dying."

He laughed, his hands already gathering up the folds of her endless skirt. "Gods, there are just acres of it, aren't there?"

"Yes," Kett said, "but we really don't have time to —"

"We always have time," Bael said, kissing her neck and making her shudder. His fingers finally reached the end of the beaded silk and slid underneath, over the stockings Nuala had insisted on. "Oh Kett. You're killing me."

"I have to go to the temple," Kett protested weakly as he stroked her bare upper thigh.

"You'll be there on time," Bael assured her, his fingers sliding higher and finding her lacy underwear damp. "I'll come with you."

The innuendo wasn't lost on Kett, who nonetheless gave it one last try. "We're not supposed to arrive after the bride. Eithne will kill me if I ruin her big day."

"Eithne will be delighted you're as blissfully in love as she is. Now, tell me you love me, stop resisting, and we'll get there on time. I promise."

His fingers slipped inside her knickers and Kett lost her breath. "All right, I love you. You bloody idiot, you know I do."

Bael gave her that dazzling smile and kissed her lips with infinite sweetness. And ten minutes later, Kett screamed that she loved him loud enough for the whole Realm to hear.

About the Author

Cat Marsters lives in a fairytale cottage with a Prince Charming husband who helpfully brings her delicious treats while she writes, and is more than happy to inspire a steamy love scene at a moment's notice. In fact, he walks around half-naked for this very purpose.

And then she wakes up. In actual fact, Cat lives in a village in southeast England which, while not quite a fairytale setting, is nonetheless very pretty and was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. Cat doesn't have children but she is the adoring keeper of a small pride of cats, and slavemaster to one Demon Puppy.

Cat has been writing all her life, but in order to keep herself rich in shoes and chocolate, she's also worked as an airline check-in agent, video rental clerk, stationery shop assistant and laboratory technician. She's still aiming for the fairytale cottage and asks all potential Prince Charmings to apply in writing with pictures of themselves and their Aston Martins.

Cat welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Cat Marsters

Almost Human



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer ebooks or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com