



Changeling Press

Temple of Luna 4

savage healing

Moira Rogers

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Temple of Luna 4: Savage Healing

Moira Rogers

For years, Celine has ruled the Savage Temple as the high priestess of Luna, one of the most powerful women in their world. She gave up everything for her position, including the only man she's ever loved. Free now of her duties, she's ready for a second chance -- until she stumbles into a trap guaranteed to wake Karim's dark side.

Karim gave up on love the day Celine chose her goddess over him, but a bruised ego can't keep him from coming to her aid when she calls for help. Rescuing Celine from her captors might be easy, but controlling his slide into protective, feral warrior is not. Capable of breaking her body as surely as she broke his heart, his only chance is to trust her to tame his beast, even if it means falling in love with her all over again.

Chapter One

Karim let another arrow fly from his bow and turned to his cousin's pregnant wife. "Avani, you should know better than to worry about me. No matter what sorts of torments our king has in store for me, I'm sure I'll be all right."

Avani lifted her own bow, and the healer hovering a few paces away made his disapproval known by clearing his throat loudly. The young queen ignored him as she drew the bowstring back with a graceful ease that credited the warrior reputation of her family.

Except for the fact that her arrow, when released, flew several yards wide of the target.

She sighed and lowered her arms. "Oh well. At least I can blame it on being pregnant now."

"Believably?" Karim didn't bother to hide his affectionate smile. "You were just as terrible before the child."

"Yes, but you're the only one who dares say so to my face." She set the bow aside and reached out a hand to him. "Why don't you escort me back to the nice shaded bench before my hovering guardian calls your sister? If Zahra shows up and fusses about me, Rais will try to lock me into our room again and I might murder the father of my child."

"Goddess, no." It was the threat of his sister's presence that spurred Karim to offer Avani his arm. "Present company excluded, of course, but I despise the happily married. Zahra won't give me a moment's peace these days. She's after me to find a *wife*."

"Oh, the horror." She leaned on him just enough that he knew she was more tired than she'd let on. "You should know that she's been conspiring with Rais. I don't understand this business about the Temple, but it only seems fair to warn you."

Karim's blood chilled, but he kept his easy smile. "Rais has been threatening to appoint me to the Temple as a trainer. He'd never really do it, though."

Color rose in her cheeks, a charming pink that couldn't be blamed on the sun. "Forgive me, Karim, but if memory serves that's not the sort of position a man can take if he's not... enthusiastic about it."

He laughed. "There's enthusiasm, and then there's *enthusiasm*. I might be capable, but that doesn't mean I'm thrilled about it."

Avani peered up at him. "Are you going to tell me why he'd do such a thing? I *do* worry about you, Karim, even if you think I shouldn't. I've grown rather fond of you."

Why, indeed? "He'd do it because my cousin is a big believer in confronting your demons." And Karim's demons were very specific, very female... and still, for the time being, very much in charge of the Temple of Luna.

The queen's eyes narrowed. "You told me once that a priestess of Luna had taken your heart. Are you saying she's still there?"

Karim merely smiled and led her through the courtyard.

Two steps from the door she stopped walking. "It was never the king, was it? It was you. You're the one they whisper about."

He avoided her gaze. "I haven't seen Celine in years. I doubt I'd even recognize her now." *Liar*.

"I always thought..." Her fingers tightened on his arm. "It explains so much. It explains everything."

"So much you shouldn't be worrying over, Avani."

"I thought she hated me, you know. That I'd disappointed her somehow. She couldn't even look at me when your aunt summoned me to court because she knew I was being summoned for you. If Rais hadn't come to his senses and come back for me, I rather think she would have hated me in truth."

Only a few years ago, the words would have elicited hope. Now, he shook his head. "A romantic fancy, little one. I doubt Celine even remembers me."

"If that's what you wish to believe..." Her tone was more than a little irritated. "I was speaking out of concern."

Avani's temper was legendary, and pregnancy hadn't dulled it. Karim patted her hand. "I know that, and I appreciate it. But, like I said, you shouldn't worry yourself."

"I'll worry myself over what I like --" Her voice cut off as Rais appeared on the other side of the courtyard. "Oh, damn. If you tell him I picked up a bow, I'll encourage him to send you to the Temple."

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "And if you tell him how badly I don't want to go, I'll spill the beans about the horseback riding."

"Unforgivable bully."

"I'm ruthless, darling. Don't forget it."

Rais strolled up to them and arched one eyebrow. "You both look guilty as hell. What have you been plotting?"

"What's going to happen to you if you try to confine me to my bedroom again," Avani replied. But as tart as her tone was, she slipped her hand from Karim's arm and moved to embrace her mate with an eagerness impossible to hide.

"Mm-hmm." The king spared a smile for his queen as he slid his arm around her. "Karim, I thought you had better sense than that."

"I do, cousin." He smiled lazily in spite of the emptiness that yawned inside him. Watching the pair indulge their seemingly effortless happiness always left him feeling lonely. "Did you need me?"

"We've just received a messenger." Rais's expression was carefully neutral as he held out a sealed envelope. "This was delivered for you."

Karim took it, instantly recognizing both the seal and the scrawled loops of his name, and it suddenly made sense that Rais would hand it over himself. "It's from Celine."

"Celine?" Avani's brow furrowed. "That's not the Temple seal. Has Lexa taken over the Temple? Surely not so abruptly, without a ceremony or banquet. Celine was high priestess for *years*."

Something was wrong. Karim almost fumbled the letter as he opened it and quickly scanned the small, neat script. "She's gone back to her hometown. She says there's some sort of unrest there."

Rais frowned. "Unrest?"

The letter was vague. "I don't know. She only asks if I know of someone trustworthy who might come to help."

The king snorted. "I do. Pack for travel. Go see what's wrong and report back. I don't have any available troops, but I can send my personal guards, if need be."

"Perhaps she just wants to see you," Avani ventured. "Celine has favor with dozens of powerful men. And she wouldn't hesitate to make demands of Rais himself, if she thought she had reason."

"I doubt it." It might have been years since he'd last seen her, but he still knew Celine. If she wanted nothing more than to see him, she'd simply ask. "I'll leave at once."

"Be careful." Avani reached out to touch his arm. "And take care of Celine. I owe her a great deal."

"As do I." Rais clapped him on the back. "Send word as soon as you arrive."

"I will." If he caught a shuttle, he could be there in just under two days. His heart thumped painfully as he considered it.

Perhaps it was as Avani said -- everything was fine, and Celine only desired his presence.

Even as he hoped it was true, he didn't dare believe it.

* * *

Sending a call for help had been her first mistake. Celine could only hope it wouldn't be her last.

Her basement cell was dark, so dark not even her heightened senses could overcome the blackness. Shackles hung heavily around her wrists, chafing after two days, and some magic twisted into the steel made them impossible to break. She was well and truly trapped, by chains and darkness and her own stubborn pride.

Then a sliver of light broke the darkness as the door opened. The man who pushed through and tromped down the stairs carried a bucket with a rough-hewn wooden dipper on the side. "Brought more water."

Through the open door she could hear the rest of her captors. Quiet, tense voices, as well they should be. They'd taken hostage the former high priestess of the Temple of Luna, and she would be missed.

Eventually.

Not for the first time she considered escape. It might not be so hard to incapacitate the man standing before her, but she was no fighter. Rage would carry her through one enemy, maybe two, but the shackles binding her wrists made her vulnerable, and the number of men upstairs was prohibitive.

So instead she kept her voice calm. "Thank you."

He snorted. "Polite manners for a --" A hoarse shout from upstairs interrupted his words, and he cursed and turned toward the door. "What the fuck?"

Instinct took over. Instinct, or a soul-deep trust that the man she'd sent for had arrived, had found her. She lunged before she knew she intended to move, werewolf reflexes giving the move a grace it shouldn't have had. One shackled hand closed around the bucket he'd set on the floor, and water splashed in a violent arc as she swung it, crashing it against the man's head.

He went down, but he didn't stay there. He came to his hands and knees with a roar, one arm sweeping out to knock her off her feet. "Stupid fucking --" She hit the ground, and he struck her with a closed fist.

She'd been sixteen the last time a man had dared hit her. Then she'd been a girl still growing into her strength, terrified and uncertain. Decades of power lay between

then and now, and Celine absorbed the pain and shuffled it aside as she twisted onto her back and drove one heel into the man's balls as hard as she could.

He choked, but it had more to do with the arm around his neck than with her kick. Someone jerked the man up in silence and drew a viciously sharp blade across his throat, ear to ear.

Blood splashed her, and in that moment she knew true panic. No sounds drifted down from above now, and familiar, furious power rose in the small cellar. The body of her captor seemed to fall toward the floor in slow motion, slow enough for her to consider what she had unleashed when she'd called for help.

Karim. Nephew to one king, cousin to another. The man who'd been her lover for a decade. A warrior of the highest caliber. One who'd lay eyes on her in another breath, who'd find her shackled and bruised and covered in blood.

No one would be able to contain his protective fury. Perhaps not even the former high priestess of the Savage Temple.

His eyes met hers, already alight with fury, and he trembled but didn't move. "Celine."

The magic in the chains had been too much for her strength, but something told her Karim wouldn't suffer the same problem. Not with that queer look in his eyes. She lifted her hands in silence.

The shackles fell apart under his iron grip, but his hands gentled as they touched the tender, abraded flesh of her wrists. "You're hurt," he rasped.

Every movement, every word mattered. Above them lay a town full of innocents, unless the entire community was complicit in the treachery that had ended with her imprisonment. If she didn't redirect his rage, Karim was fully capable of rampaging through the town unchecked, killing any he thought to be a threat.

"I'm hurt," she acknowledged, her voice a whisper in the semi-darkness. "Can you take me away from here?"

A shudder trembled through his entire body. "Who put you here?"

Dangerous territory. If she could get him clear of the village she could contact his cousin, have Rais send troops to deal with whatever trouble she'd stirred up. "Please, Karim. I want to leave. Please take me to --" Not the city, where the press of people could snap his tenuous control, and certainly not to the army, where he'd look on warriors and wonder if they'd ever graced her bed during her time in the Temple, soothing soldiers. Only one place might make him feel secure long enough for her to bring him back to reason. "Your country house. I'll feel safe there."

After one long, interminable moment, he nodded and reached for her, his hands as careful as they'd been stroking her wrists. With his focus on her, she needn't worry for anyone's safety now, no matter how mad with rage he was... unless someone tried to take her from him.

She could only hope no one would be stupid enough, or the villagers of New Haven wouldn't survive long enough for the king to judge their loyalty. Karim would slaughter them all.

* * *

He hadn't sent ahead word for his small staff to ready the house. It was cold, with no dinner laid out and no fire in the hearth.

No matter. Karim clutched Celine tighter to his chest and bypassed the great room altogether, heading for the stone stairs. "Have you eaten?" If not, he would need to bring food to her.

"Food would be welcome, as long as you'll share it with me." Her voice held a slight edge, probably because she still hadn't forgiven him for refusing to let her walk.

"Yes." It wouldn't be fancy fare, but he could bring her food. Feed her.

Her fingers brushed along his jaw, soft and soothing. "Remember, first you must call your cousin and tell him I'm safe." She hesitated a heartbeat. "You do have a comlink out here, don't you?"

Shit, he'd forgotten. "No. There's nothing."

"Servants to send a message?"

Yes, he had those. "As soon as you're safe."

She stroked his cheek again, then slid long, strong fingers up to drag through his hair. "I am safe. Here with you, Karim."

She was *trying* too hard to soothe him, and he opened his mouth to tell her he was fine. He hadn't lost his mind like some battle-scarred warrior who'd gone bestial.

Except the words came on a harsh growl. "I'm fine, Celine."

That earned him a stern look and a tart retort that took him back decades. "Don't lie to a priestess, Karim."

He forced himself to set her down. "If I weren't fine, I'd be prowling every corner, snarling and looking for danger." As it was, he had to hold himself back from just that.

She saw through him. "You're not going to do that once you've stashed me in a bed?"

"No." Because he wasn't stashing her in a bed. He took her arm instead and dragged her down the hall. "There's a room here, with a bath chamber. You can get cleaned up."

"I would appreciate that." From the wistful tone of her voice, it was the truth and then some.

"You're hungry." If he busied himself with something else that would satisfy her, he could fight the need to bathe her himself.

"Yes, Karim." She rocked up on her toes and pressed a soft kiss to his jaw. "Thank you."

Entirely of its own volition, his hand slid into her hair and clenched tight. "Celine."

The strong beat of her heart stuttered, came back faster, though not from fear. Her eyes held no terror, just understanding and acceptance. "Yes?"

"I'll be back soon."

Blood pounded in his ears and his body protested, but he descended the stairs anyway. He had to get away before he proved her right.

Before he took her like a beast.

Chapter Two

A servant arrived not long after Karim's departure, her arms full of what had to be hastily aired out clothing. Celine even recognized the robe at the top of the stack, a deep bronze-colored silk only a few shades darker than her skin with intricate patterns embroidered in black along the sleeves and hems. Karim had given it to her himself, the only time she'd ever visited his country home.

Nearly fifteen years ago, and the time showed. She'd been voluptuous then, pampered and carefree and so very alive. Her years as high priestess had hardened her, and stress had left its mark. The robe fit too loosely, but she tightened the belt and submitted to the determined attentions of the maid, who seemed horrified by her intention to comb her own hair.

The girl was young but skilled, and an uncomfortable tendril of jealousy stirred as Celine considered the reasons Karim might need to keep a lady's maid in his country home. The stories of his varied sexual exploits had reached even the Temple, but somehow it was harder to see the possible proof standing before her in flesh and blood.

Such hesitation would be deadly when he returned, so she satisfied her curiosity. "Does your master entertain many female guests?"

The girl frowned, more in thought than consternation. "There are a few. His sister visits, and the queen, of course."

Of course. "I have not seen the queen recently. How is she?"

The maid's frown melted into a smile. "Glowing, when she was here last. I imagine now she is quite heavy with child."

"I'm sure she is." Rais had certainly wasted no time in getting his new wife pregnant, but Celine supposed it was unsurprising. The last time she'd visited Avani,

the former novice *had* been glowing, and incapable of keeping her hands off her husband. Nature had clearly taken its course there.

"You would know her so much better than I, but... she seems very nice."

"She always was." Avani's sweetness had made her a poor choice for a priestess of Luna, though. Warriors had to be handled carefully. Deftly. She hadn't been fooled by Karim's attempts at control. Violence still lurked beneath the surface, waiting to be unleashed unless she could work her art and refocus it, turn rage to lust and pain to pleasure.

In the darkest, most shameful part of her heart she could even admit that she wanted the excuse to touch him. No one had ever excited her like Karim. No one had mastered her passion and her body as easily as he could with the wicked, too-skilled touch of his hands.

"But you worked with Zahra, as well." The girl looked down, blushing. "She has been advising me. I -- I wish to become a priestess."

New interest sparked, and Celine studied the maid's reflection in the mirror. She was a pretty little thing, with golden skin and thick black hair, and sturdy enough to be strong. Of course, the exterior was irrelevant if the heart wasn't willing -- Avani had been proof of that. "Why do you aspire to the Savage Temple, child?"

She contemplated the question. "I think there must be no greater gift to be given than pleasure. Relief."

Celine found herself smiling. "No, there is not. Our goddess calls us to a very unique service. To give our own pleasure as a gift, to remind our men that there is a world outside of the pain and death of endless war."

"I think it would be an honor."

"Then you deserve your chance to petition. I'll speak to Zahra, and see it done."

The girl's eyes widened, and she dropped a quick bow. "I don't know what to say..."

"Say thank you," Celine replied, amused. "And I'd appreciate it if you would braid my hair. I'd like it out of the way for now."

"No." Karim stood in the doorway, a tray resting on one arm. "Leave it loose." He met Celine's stare in the mirror, daring her to contradict him.

If the maid hadn't stood between them she might have, just to bring the violence to the surface, as sure as lancing a wound. She could withstand the fury of his need, but the girl standing behind her would become a threat, and that would not do. "Yes, loose is better. Thank you for your assistance."

The maid bowed again and left through a door on the opposite side of the room. When she'd gone, Karim relaxed a little. "I prefer it unbound. Your hair, that is."

He'd always loved to wind it around his hands. "I know. But it's not as glorious as it was. I suspect being high priestess has given me gray hairs I don't have the courage to look for."

"You look the same."

"Impossible." She turned on the bench to find him still hovering near the door as if afraid to come closer. "But it's kind of you to say so."

"No, not kind." Karim closed the door and set the tray on a stand beside the bed. "Barely hanging on to reason. Turns out, you were right."

Her heart ached for him, knowing she was the cause of his madness. In one smooth movement she rose to her feet and tugged at the belt on her robe. "You don't need reason with me, Karim."

"Not you." A growl wreathed the denial. "Me. This is -- is not a good idea."

She paused with her hand curled around the silken belt. "You're not taking anything I'm not desperate to give you. I am always at your mercy."

A visible shudder rippled through him, and he stepped back. "Eat. You should eat."

She probably needed to. Her hands trembled as she retied the belt, but she made it to the bed without wobbling. "Will you eat with me?"

From the look on his face, it hadn't occurred to him to leave. "Of course."

He sat on the edge of the bed, pulled the tray stand closer and handed her a silver goblet. "Fruit or cheese first?"

The man was going to feed her. By hand. Her fingers tightened around the goblet as she reined in a temper that had grown too sharp in the years since she'd become high priestess. If feeding her would help him regain control, she should allow it.

She wouldn't even bite him. Probably. "Fruit."

Karim sliced into an apple and held a crisp wedge to her lips. "Eat."

Celine parted her lips and bit off piece of it without taking her gaze from his. It was fresh and tart, the sort of apple she knew grew in the orchards behind his home because she'd visited them once. They'd made love beneath the spanning branches, and he'd fed her teasing bites in between kisses.

His eyes heated even as something fierce in them eased. "Good?"

"Very good." She accepted the remaining slice and teased her tongue over the tip of his finger.

His sudden, hissed breath told her more clearly than anything how affected he was by that bare caress. "How's the wine?"

She lifted the goblet and drank deeply, more to steady her nerves than to savor the expensive vintage. After draining half of it she held the cup out to him. "Share it with me?"

Instead of drinking, he pushed her hand aside and kissed her with a growl, his hand curving around the back of her neck, fingers burrowing through her loose hair.

The cup slipped through her fingers and she let it, ignoring the way it clattered to the floor. Wine would be everywhere, and she ignored that, too, focusing instead on the heat of his mouth and the way his fingers almost trembled. Still restrained.

Still fighting.

Celine parted her lips under his and swept his lower lip with her tongue, a teasing invitation. He met it haltingly, groaning against her mouth.

And then he pulled away, just far enough for her to see the struggle plainly on his face. "I *cannot* do this."

His pain hurt her. Perhaps the history lying jagged between them meant he would find no solace in her touch, in her arms. In her body. "Shall I leave?"

He exploded into motion, spilling her back onto the bed and looming over her. "Leave?"

Stupid, stupid woman. She was behaving like a novice, nervous and uncertain. Her own desire made her a fool, and it would hurt them both if she didn't stop. So she lifted her hands slowly above her head and gazed up at him with all the calm she could muster as she gave him the traditional words, the words that might set him free. "I am at your mercy, warrior."

"Stop it, Celine." Even as he spoke, his hands closed around her wrists. "Don't you understand? We're beyond this. You can't be a priestess to me. You never can again."

"Then let me be a woman." Arching her hips rubbed her body against the unyielding strength of his. "Do you find me wanting?"

"Never." His eyes glazed, and he ground against her once before easing back and holding himself rigidly above her. "Not once have I ever found you wanting."

The old wound stood between them. "But you think I have found you lacking."

His whispered answer carried years of pain. "I think I was never enough."

Celine closed her eyes so he wouldn't see her tears. His pain was her fault, had always been her fault, all the more so because his words held the uncomfortable bite of truth. As a man he had been everything, but no man should have meant as much to her as her goddess.

That he very nearly had meant nothing to him. Karim had never realized how close he'd come to upsetting her world.

He'd never realized how empty he'd left her life with his absence.

"Too many years." His breath stirred the hair at her temple. "Too much hurt."

"You were enough, Karim. You were always enough. I wasn't. What am I, now that I'm not the high priestess?"

"Who are you?" He smiled, sad and sure. "The same woman you've always been."

He'd bared his pain; he deserved the honesty of her own in return. "Have you ever known me as a woman?"

"No," Karim admitted. "Perhaps I have not."

"Then how can you know you won't find me wanting?"

He let go of one wrist and dropped his hand to her face, his thumb gliding over the curve of her cheek. "I never have, but I suppose anything is... possible."

She turned her head and kissed his fingers, tasting the salt of the tears that had slipped free unbidden. "I'm afraid to find out. I always have been."

The words had a visible effect, trembling through him. "I'll take care of you, Celine."

It was all wrong. She'd done everything backwards, putting her insecurities above his needs. A warrior pushed past the edge needed strength and confidence, a woman strong enough to meet his every desire. She couldn't be weak. She shouldn't be the one in need.

But when she found his gaze he looked gentle, almost pleased. "Yes." His lips brushed hers. "Tell me what you need."

"You, Karim. I need you."

He pressed her close to the bed and caught her mouth again, his hand still on her face. "Open, darling. Let me in."

Yes. Obeying was second nature, but only with him. It didn't matter how many years had passed, her body remembered the particular pleasure only he had given her, and she parted her lips and welcomed him.

He moved the arm he still held, so gradually that she only noticed when he folded his fingers around her free wrist as well, pinning them both in his grasp. An experimental tug made it clear he wasn't letting go any time soon, but she didn't want him to.

She *was* at his mercy.

Karim trailed kisses over her jaw, soft nips that aroused and soothed in equal measure. "Do you understand yet?"

Clearly not. "Understand what?"

"That you never stopped being mine."

His need still boiled under the surface, and she wanted to feel it. Soothe it. "Show me."

This time, his kiss plundered instead of coaxing, and he tilted her head back to deepen his possession. His hips rocked against hers, slow and sure, finally easing between her parted legs.

And then he groaned and thrust against her once, hard and needy.

It would be fast, this first time. Wild and savage. Arousal pooled low in her belly, and she wasn't ashamed of the depth of her craving. It had been too long since she'd taken a lover and far, far too long since a lover had taken her. She was primed already, so wet she wanted his cock inside her now.

She bit his lip and rocked up, shuddering as the movement rubbed the silk of her robe against her clit with taunting friction. "More."

But Karim didn't move, didn't lift up to shift their clothes so he could take her. He focused on her mouth and the rough rock of his erection between her thighs.

Maybe he wasn't in control at all. Celine wrapped her legs around his hips and nearly moaned when it only increased the twist of pleasure. She tore her lips from his and gasped his name. "You can take me. I'm ready. I'm wet."

"I know." He growled the words against her neck. His free hand skated down to tangle in her gown, twisting the fabric up her thighs. "I want you desperate. Pleading for my cock."

She'd done many things in her years as a priestess, had been taken in every way imaginable, but pleading... "I don't beg."

He laughed, low and knowing. "But you will, for me. Just for me."

"You think so?" She twisted her head and bit his chin. "Maybe *you'll* be the one who pleads. Or have you forgotten what I can do with my tongue?"

"I have not forgotten." He intercepted her mouth as she moved to bite him again, stroking his tongue over hers. "And I never denied you a single plea."

No, he'd never felt the need to hold back when his hands were tangled in her hair. She'd listened to him beg as she sucked him deep and reveled in every twitch of his hips. "You have no bespelled chains here, Karim. No magic to hold me still long enough to tease me to insanity. Or do you?"

"I've no need." He flipped her over beneath him, putting her on her stomach, his cock grinding against her ass. "Or *have* I?"

She didn't answer, mostly because the image was far too intoxicating. She'd wear chains for him... or take fierce pleasure in turning them against him, just to see him tear free. "Is this how you'll take me? A fist in my hair while you ride me?"

"Your fantasy," he surmised as he released her. Fabric rustled, and when his hands landed on her hips again, hot, naked flesh pressed against her. "Mine is simpler."

Her fingers fisted around the sheets, anticipation slicing through her. "What?"

"My name on a scream." The head of his cock bumped against her, enough to tease but not to sate.

"Karim..." A gasp, not a scream, and she'd forgotten all the reasons she was supposedly doing this. "Take me, for the love of Luna. *Take me.*"

A ripple of unsteady magic zipped through the air, and he drove into her with a ragged moan.

He was large and she was too long celibate. His cock stretched her, the pleasure of his possession dancing the knife's edge of pain as she struggled to adjust to the intrusion.

Karim froze, his muscles shaking, and bent his forehead to rest on her back. "How long has it been, Celine?"

Not so long, for a woman. A lifetime for a priestess. "Months."

She heard his teeth grind, and -- somehow -- he remained still. "I am sorry."

"For what?" She arched, rocking back against him. "I'll do worse to your back with my nails before we're finished. And you'll do worse with your teeth."

"Lovely Celine." He gave her one short thrust. "Always so sure."

"Never sure with you." And wasn't that why he'd always intoxicated her, even more than his body and the way he fucked her?

"But you make a good show of it." His fingers drifted down over her hip, slid under her and found her clit.

He hadn't forgotten what she liked. Slow at first, teasing touches until her breath came in pants and she fought to chase his hand with her hips, desperate for the roughness that would unleash the tension building inside.

He whispered in her ear, dark and harsh. "I remember what you need." Longer thrusts, harder, his fingers rubbing firm circles against her.

And his teeth on her skin. With the first bite her cunt clenched and release tore through her in a desperate, overwhelming wave tinged with panic at her total loss of control.

He must have felt it, because he cursed and pulled away, rolling to his back on the bed. "Fuck. *Fuck.*"

Disorientation seized her, caught as she was in the trembling aftermath of release. "Karim, what --"

"Nothing has changed, and it never will," he growled, his fists clenched in the sheets. "You want all of me, everything there is, and I can have none of you!"

All the lessons she'd learned, all of her experience plying men in the bed -- all of it had left her unprepared to offer the one thing he needed. "I don't know how. Help me."

His body trembled, still on the verge of climax, and he shook his head. "I don't know that I can. I tried, once, and it almost killed me."

To touch him now would be to force herself on him, no matter how willing his body might seem. Celine closed her eyes and tried to find words.

None came.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, sitting up. Her robe settled around her thighs and she wrapped her arms around her body. "I'm so sorry, Karim. I shouldn't have done this to you. I was selfish to call you."

He carefully eased his pants back into place and sat. "Tomorrow, I'll send for -- we'll --" He rose. "I must go."

Her hands trembled, and she fisted them in the expensive silk to hide it. "Will you come back?"

Karim rubbed both hands over his face. "What do you *want*, Celine? Why didn't you send for Rais?"

"I panicked. Something was wrong and --" She'd had a split second to send the note with the only person she knew she could trust, and in that second she'd only thought of him.

His dark gaze fixed on her face. "And what?"

"And I sent for the person I trusted."

His tension didn't subside. "If you trust me with your life, why can't you trust me with more than your body when I fuck you?"

"Because I've seen what happens when a priestess forgets herself. I've seen warriors drowning in guilt at the things they've done when the beast takes hold. I learned about sex in a world where my lack of control could destroy my lover." She rocked to her feet, meeting his glare with her own rising temper. "And I wasn't the only one holding back."

"Yes, Celine," he said wearily. "It's my fault. It's always been my fault."

"How did you take *fault* from that? Why are you holding back?"

He laughed harshly. "It's my fault because I forget you aren't a woman. You've always been a priestess, and you always will, I don't care who's running the Temple."

It hurt, because it resonated with her own secret fear. Celine stepped to the side and moved past him, back toward the seat in front of the mirror. "Maybe you're right. And that would be my failure."

After too many long, silent moments, he stepped up behind her. "Do you want me?"

She reached for the brush and jerked it through her tousled hair hard enough to bring tears to her eyes. "Does it matter? I'll never be a woman, even if I want to be."

His hand fell over hers, stilling the brush. "Do you need me? Really *need* me?"

If she told the truth, he'd stay. He'd take her to bed and give her what she needed until it broke him. "I don't deserve you." She freed her wrist and dragged her hair over her shoulder to make it easier to braid. "I didn't give up everything for you. That's what love is, isn't it?"

He reached out again, this time grasping her wrist to hold it still. "I didn't ask whether you love me or not."

Celine closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see his reflection. "I've always needed you. But I'm used to doing without the things I need."

Karim released her with a ragged sigh. "Turn around."

For the first time in her life she had no idea what she'd see when she looked at him. She turned slowly and opened her eyes, fixing her gaze on his bare chest.

"Take me in your mouth." The words fell just shy of a command. "Suck my cock."

Blunt words, out of nowhere. She jerked her gaze to his face and found him watching her with a look she knew too well, one she'd seen in the mirror every time she'd prepared to take a man to her bed to soothe his pain. It was an offering to let them resume the awkward shell of their relationship, even if the roles of priestess and warrior no longer fit.

Maybe she wasn't strong at all, because she wanted to accept it. They could drown their troubles in lust and pleasure and pretend they weren't still broken inside.

She lifted her hands and pressed them to the warm flesh of his stomach before sliding them up to his chest. "If you want my obedience, you'll have to demand it as if you deserve it."

Something hot sparked in his eyes, and he clenched one fist in her hair. "I haven't come yet, and I want to. I want to find my pleasure in you."

It was reckless and weak to fall into the easy, familiar pattern, but at least with this she knew where she stood. She shoved away doubt and confusion and scratched her nails down his chest until she could rub her palm against his cock through his

pants. "You know what I can do with my mouth. What are you going to do with yours?"

He jerked her closer. "Tell you exactly how to make me come."

Celine laughed and bit his stomach. "Does that still make you hot? Whispering dirty words?"

His fingers tightened, pulling her hair. "Only if you'll listen."

She curled her fingers into the waistband of his pants and jerked hard enough that the fabric tore, freeing his erection. Fisting the shaft, she stroked up to the tip before lifting her gaze to his. "And how will you soothe me, when I'm hot and needy from watching you come?"

His eyelids dropped, and he sucked in a sharp breath. "Pull you to me, your back against my chest, and stroke my fingers inside you -- slowly, so slowly, and talk to you the whole time."

It had always been his favorite thing to do, to drive her slowly mad. "That had better be a promise," she whispered, then lowered her mouth to take him inside.

His whole body tensed, and he groaned his pleasure as her lips slid down his cock. "Yes, Celine. Slow, like that."

She went faster.

His fist yanked at her hair. "*Slow.*"

He was getting rougher. Wilder. Maybe her feral warrior wasn't entirely tamed. Satisfaction warred with heat as she tightened her grip and slowed her pace, teasing his shaft with slow, wet laps of her tongue.

Then he began to guide her head, slow and fast in turn, moaning when she licked him with every bob of her head. "I dream about fucking you."

She groaned and scratched his stomach again, hard enough to leave thin red lines, and he jerked in her mouth.

"Just like that," he encouraged again. "I could close my eyes and see this, darling, all the time. You, your lips around me, fucking me with your mouth."

It was so easy to fall into him. Her body heated as his words washed over her, bringing with them memories of a hundred trysts. He'd come to her bed a warrior, steeped in pain and blood, and she'd give him peace as he stole another bit of her heart.

Time after time after time.

Karim touched her cheek. "I remember too."

How had she forgotten the magic in the royal family? Rais, who sometimes glimpsed the future, and Karim's sister, Zahra, who could see into the hearts and minds of men.

She closed her eyes and took his cock deeper. *I dream of you, too.*

A shudder rippled through him. "The past... doesn't matter. All that matters is this. Now."

One last surge forward and she'd taken his entire length. Arousal pulsed and she dug her fingers into his hips and let her thoughts drift to the surface, where he'd be sure to hear them. *I want to hear how you plan to take me.*

"I don't, not at first." His voice deepened, and his hips began to thrust against her mouth. "Not until you're shaking, wild. Then slow, just enough of my cock to drive you wilder."

She wanted to touch herself now, drive her own fingers into her cunt until she came with him. He chuckled and pulled her hair. "Yes, darling. Hurry."

It wouldn't take much. His scent and power curled around her, and she slipped one hand down her body, trying to imagine the fingers wider, rougher. His. With his taste on her tongue and his fingers in her hair, everything was magic. She sucked hard and rubbed her fingers across her clit, frustrated by the smoothness of her own skin.

"Celine." He tensed and moved faster, almost thrusting into her throat now. "I'll make you come. So hard --"

She moaned and let go. Let her hand fall away and concentrated on his body, his pleasure. Her own would come, a thousand times more satisfying, because Karim would focus all of that concentration, all of his strength, and unleash it with her ecstasy as his only goal.

Just this once, she didn't need to orchestrate their bodies and their actions. She didn't need to time her release to his, to hold strictly to control.

This once, she could trust pleasure to take its own course.

* * *

Celine had opened a door, he was sure of it, and he'd have to think about that more when helpless pleasure wasn't dancing up his spine, threatening him with an explosive orgasm.

Karim drew her head closer, seating his cock deep in her mouth and throat. "Look at me."

Dark eyes drifted open and she stared up at him, her usual teasing faux-submission replaced with a wild, needy hunger.

Mine. Control vanished in the face of the sudden thought, and he had no idea if it was his or hers. It didn't matter. All that mattered was the pleasure building in his balls.

She moaned her encouragement, and her thought curled around him. *Come for me.*

That was all it took after all, a simple, heartfelt plea. Pleasure ripped through him, a thunderous release that weakened his knees. *Yes. My love.*

Celine worked him until he could barely stand, then pulled back with a satisfied noise, her hands shaking as she lifted them to his hips. "You're magnificent."

He hit his knees. "No, I'm not. I'm just... the same man, the same *wolf* I've always been."

"I know." Her fingers framed his face. "Magnificent."

His chest ached, and he caught her hands in his. "On the bed."

"Put me there," she whispered, the words holding a wild, reckless challenge she never would have issued as a priestess.

He had his hands on her before he realized he'd moved, and feral satisfaction blazed through him. This was what he wanted -- Celine, giving no thought to what she should do. Just what she wanted.

He spilled her to the bed and loomed over her. "Touch yourself again."

Dark eyes watched him with undisguised need as she slid one hand down her body, until her fingers slicked over her clit and her hips lifted restlessly.

Karim trailed his own hand after hers, watching her face as he pressed her fingers down more firmly. Her lips parted, a soft moan escaping, and her eyes fluttered shut. "I want to feel *your* fingers."

"Shh." He eased two of her fingers into her pussy and pushed them deep.

"*Karim!*" The muscles of her forearm tensed, and she shuddered and twisted, frustration bubbling up in her thoughts. "I've had nothing but my own fingers for five months."

There it was again, the fierce, primal satisfaction that she'd wanted him. Needed him. He whispered another soothing noise and slipped his fingers against her, thrusting one in to join hers.

She made a low noise as her cunt clenched around their fingers, tight and hot. She was so wet that their fingers moved easily as she thrust her hips up, one thought rising to the surface. *Make me come.*

"I will. Like this..." He urged her fingers to curl, to brush against the swollen, sensitive spot that would send her over the edge.

Her body went taut. She arched, gasping, and he felt her orgasm start deep inside her. She cried out as her body spasmed, her voice shaking with honest, uninhibited release.

He'd just come, and still the sight stiffened his cock, made him ache. "Don't stop there. Do it again."

"I can't..." A moan, and she twisted, one heel coming up to dig into the mattress. "Not so fast."

He held her still with his free hand. "You can. I remember."

Panting gasps lifted her breasts as she shook under his touch. "Karim, please --" *Hold me.*

If only she knew how much he'd wanted to. Karim slipped his arm under her and drew her closer to his chest, his fingers still inside her. "I'm right here."

Celine eased her fingers free from her body and lifted her slick fingers. "This is what you do to me."

He guided them into his mouth and laved them gently with his tongue before releasing her. "I know."

"Every time." She sank her fingers into his hair and dragged his mouth to hers, kissing him so desperately her teeth dug into his lower lip.

Karim had spent entire restless nights dreaming of the taste of her, and his memory had still fallen short of how *good* she was. He groaned and kissed her harder.

He felt her response in her pussy, muscles fluttering around his fingers. A second later her hand bumped into his, and she moaned as her fingers slipped over her clit. She tore her mouth away and pressed it to his cheek. "For you. I'll come for you. As many times as you want me to."

It was the submission he needed. He kissed her cheek and chin and mouth, his own lips parted and questing, as he rocked his hand against her. He wanted her to collapse in his arms, exhausted and sated, and he'd do whatever it took.

My love.

Chapter Three

Karim awoke to a knock at the door. He carefully untangled himself from Celine and padded naked to disengage the lock.

Simon, his trusted valet, stood on the other side. "This has just arrived, sir. Bearing the royal seal." He flipped it over for Karim to see.

"Thank you, Simon."

The scant moonlight filtering through the window was inadequate for reading, so Karim flipped on the bedside lamp as he dropped to the edge of the bed and broke the letter's seal.

Celine stirred, rolling away from the light with a soft murmur of protest. "Too early."

"It's a letter from Rais."

"He moves quickly."

Karim scanned the words, written in his cousin's own hand. No doubt he'd known that a missive generated by dictation or comlink would not be trusted. "He sent his guards to your hometown. Turns out, the council there was collaborating with humans."

So close to the border, it was to be expected. There were those who felt the wolves would eventually lose this war against humans. They were all too often willing to go against their own kind, providing the enemy with support and intelligence in order to ensure their survival after the last battle had been fought.

Rais would deal with them. Perhaps he already had. Normally, Karim would have left for the palace immediately, but Rais had better advisors than he. His cousin did not need him.

Not for this.

Celine stretched her arms over her head, her eyes still closed. "The woman who raised me, did she reach the palace safely? They captured me while I was seeing to her interests."

"She's there. Zahra and Jarek are caring for her."

A subtle tension eased as she rolled onto her side, her hand drifting up his back. "She's in good hands, then. I'm so relieved."

"They'll take care of her." The rest was done, and Celine was safe. "There's no one after you now."

"I hadn't realized I'd be a target at all. Perhaps I should remember that next time I want to venture too close to the border."

She seemed to have missed his meaning -- she could go now. Nothing held her by his side. "You couldn't have known you'd run into something like that."

"Still, it was reckless." Her fingers skated down his spine, then slid around his waist. "Come back to bed?"

He wanted to. All he had to do was spill her back onto the pillows and ride her until she forgot everything but the sensation of his cock deep inside her. "Celine."

Her fingers tensed. "If you wish for me to leave, I can go back to the palace with the messenger."

It wasn't what he wished at all. "You could if you wanted. You realize that, right?"

She curled her fingers until the nails scored his abdomen. "When have I not been capable of doing what I wanted?"

He caught her wrist. "When you're trying not to hurt me."

The easy openness of her mind faded, replaced with prickly defensiveness. "I hurt you. I hurt you by choosing my duty over my love. But did I truly treat you so poorly that you think I'd use you like this and discard you when I was finished?"

"No," he said quickly, "but this wasn't exactly a planned reunion. And perhaps you were only trying to help a warrior last night."

"I was trying to help *my* warrior last night, Karim."

The words wove together the lingering threads of hope inside him... but he couldn't risk it. Not again. "I don't want to be your warrior. I never did. I wanted to be your mate."

Her thoughts were too carefully guarded, but he tasted sadness in the touch of her mind. "I don't know how long it will take me to learn to be a woman before a priestess. You've already made it clear you don't think I can. So I ask again -- do you want me to leave?"

He should, but his instincts railed against the notion. He'd waited too long to let go just yet. "One more day. One more night. Will you give me that?"

"Yes." Her breath fell hot on his hip. "One more day. One more night."

"Come here." He drew her around his body, sheets and all, to lie on his lap. "What shall we do now, Celine?"

A slow smile curled her lips. "Do your servants keep that delectable soaking pool in your basement prepared when you're not around?"

"Mmm, of course. It's fed by a spring."

"I could use a nice, long soak." Wicked intent shone from her eyes. "With company."

He rose, keeping her in his arms, but the sheet slid free as he stepped away from the bed. "Feel like walking down there naked?"

"I don't care." Her arms slipped around his neck. "Maybe we can go for a run today. It's been so long since I had the chance to really run."

"Whatever you want." She looked right in his home, as if she belonged there. As if it was hers, as well.

She tugged at his hair. "You're being terribly accommodating. What about what you want?"

He had what he wanted -- or as close as he was going to get for now. "I want for nothing, and *you* are the guest."

"So we'll bathe. And we'll run." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "And I'll take shameless, endless advantage of your body, if you persist on being naked in my presence."

Karim arched an eyebrow at her. "Do you expect me to bathe in the pools with my clothes on?"

"No." She settled her cheek back against his chest with a soft sigh. "One day, one night... anything we want."

The dreamy note in her voice made him feel just as wistful, which was ridiculous -- they were still there, still together. He bounced her a little and cleared his throat. "Bathing pool," he said sternly.

Then he shouldered open the door and headed down the hall.

* * *

The polished stone that formed the basement pools should have been cold, and would have been, if it had not been for the thermal heat from the hot springs that fed it from the far end of the room. The water cooled as it flowed down to the near end of the room, allowing one to choose the most desired temperature.

The floor warmed as he walked midway down the length of the room, and Karim set Celine on her feet near the middle of the system of pools. Her tousled hair fell around her body, but it didn't hide the mark of his teeth on her throat. She smiled lazily at him and dipped her toes into the water. "Perfect," she whispered, then slid in.

"Not warmer?" he asked as he stepped in after her.

"Soon enough." She lifted a hand and beckoned to him. "Come here."

He dipped his head under the surface first and enjoyed the heat in her gaze as water sluiced down his chest and shoulders. "Where? Here?" He eased into the deepest part of the pool and treaded water.

A smile curled her lips as she floated after him. Her fingers brushed his hip, then curled around his cock. "I wonder how long I could hold my breath for..."

"Hmm. If memory serves... a minute, to be on the safe side."

Her touch skated away, and she slid both hands up his chest until her fingers brushed his nipples. "We may drown here in the deep end."

It was classic Celine, living this night as if it would be her last. Karim drifted back to the edge of the pool and braced his arms on the wet stone. "Just hold on to me. I won't let you sink."

Mischief glinted in her eyes. "Don't move your arms," she whispered, then vanished under the water. Fingers dug into his hips, and her mouth encased the head of his cock, so much hotter than the water surrounding them.

Words flashed, tumbling one over the other, her memories of the last time they'd been in this pool. It aroused him almost as much as the hot tug of her mouth, and he let his head fall back on a groan. *Deeper.*

As clearly as he'd always been able to read her thoughts, she'd never let him close enough to share his own with her. It could have been coincidence that she moved her mouth lower -- she'd always taken pleasure in the power of having his cock in her throat -- but her thoughts crystallized a heartbeat later. *You feel so good in my head. Say something else.*

There was only one thing to say. *Stay with me.*

Her touch disappeared and she surfaced in a sudden splash, her long hair plastered wildly to her face. "Say it again."

He moved his arms, reaching out to frame her face with his hands. "Stay with me. Here, or at court. Wherever."

"At court I'll always be a priestess," she whispered. "I want to learn to be my own woman, but I can't promise you it will be quick."

"Rais has been threatening me with all sorts of occupations lately," he admitted. "Perhaps if I'm busy here in the country, he'll leave me the hell alone."

"Tell Rais to take his occupations and --" Her teeth dug into her lower lip. "See? A woman can't speak that way of our king. Perhaps you should keep me here for my own good. I can't scold him like I used to."

"Of course you can." His next words were reckless, insane, and he told himself to bite them back. It didn't work. "You can talk to him any way you please if you're family."

Something gentle and tender filled her eyes as she pressed both hands to his chest. "You would trust me with your heart again?"

The truth was stark and undeniable, and he knew that now she was beyond taking it the wrong way. "Despite my best efforts, darling, you have never *not* held my heart."

"You stole mine, when it wasn't my own to give." She smoothed her hands up to curl behind his neck, one falling to the stone edge behind him as she pressed close. "I need time. A month. A month to prove to myself I can be trusted with your heart. And maybe you can steal mine again."

He pulled her closer and, in one smooth, hard movement, slid inside her. "I can do that. I'm quite good with the ladies, you know."

Her head fell back, her body arched just enough to give him a perfect view of her breasts, barely breaking the water. "Shallow water," she managed, the words shaking. "Get us to shallower water because I am going to drown us both with all the dirty ways I'm about to fuck you."

The closest shallow area was a barely submerged dividing wall between two pools. Karim wound one arm around Celine's waist and used the other to lever himself to sit on the wide stone surface. "Ride me."

She was Celine, which meant obedience always came with her own twist. Her knees splashed in the water on either side of his hips as she rocked down, taking him deep. Only when he was buried in her body did she lift her hands, tugging at his head as she bent backwards and guided his mouth to her breasts.

He closed his mouth around one nipple, the fire of arousal flaring inside him, burning away everything but the taste of her wet skin and the sweet, tight clamp of her body around his cock.

"Yes... *more*, Karim --" Her grip on his hair was almost too tight, but he barely felt it. He was too focused on being inside her, taking her.

He needed to take her.

He pulled away, flipped her onto her stomach and moved behind her in the water. "Is this what you want?" he rasped, one hand easing her legs wide.

"I want you every way." A soft whisper, shaky and desperate. "Inside me, on me, beneath me... Every way until there's nothing left but you."

His cock bumped against her cunt, and he held still, not thrusting forward. "Tell me you need it."

She snarled and drove back, her leverage foiled by the grip of his hands and the resistance of the water. "Karim. Please."

He gave in, just enough to push a few inches inside her. "Tell me you need it."

"I need it." Water surged as she rocked back again, this time taking another inch of him with a low moan. "I need you. I've always needed you."

It soothed the wolf as much as the man, and he buried his cock in her with one driving thrust. "You have me, Celine. Always."

"Yes?" Every movement seemed slower, sharper with the water's resistance. She edged back and reached for his hand, dragging it around until their fingers twined together and pressed against her clit. "I don't want slow. I want it all. Now."

He'd give her anything, so he set a hard, quick rhythm of thrusts, each one deeper than the last, and rubbed firm circles over her clit. Water cascaded over her back every time he surged forward, and she arched sharply, tilting her head back.

Unbidden came a whisper from her mind, a fractured memory of his hand curled in her hair, the image painted with hot need, a need he was perfectly willing to fulfill.

Her dark hair was plastered to her back, but the curls floated free under the water. He gathered the locks there and twisted them up in his hand. "Like this?"

A throaty moan echoed off the walls. "No wonder I could never control you like I controlled the rest. You used to drive me *wild* because I couldn't do my job when you reached inside and pulled out the things I needed. You always made it about me --"

Karim stopped, fully joined with her but unmoving, and bent until his mouth was close to her ear. "I made it about *us*, darling. Everything I do to drive you wild makes me insane."

She shuddered and turned her head to seek his lips with her own. "I love you."

I love you too. A silent declaration with his mouth fused to hers, but no less earth-shattering. *Love.*

The last of her defenses fell as her body tightened, her climax starting deep inside her. Tickles of pleasure played at the edges of his senses as her heart finally lay bare to him, a jumbled mix of desire and strength and fear and underneath it all a love she'd struggled against for so many years, never really escaping it.

He'd never felt closer to her, because her confused emotions matched his own. The sheer need that had held him bound to her all these years was a shared one --

One they no longer had to fight.

Karim let go, driving her against the stone as pleasure roared through him. Her body gripped him, prolonging his orgasm as his cock pulsed inside her. *Celine.*

She bit his lip so hard the taste of copper slid across his tongue, but her moan was pure pleasure and throbbing release. As the spasms faded she slumped forward, her elbows resting on the stone wall. "I think... I think we have a lot of pent up need to work through."

It would take years. "When do you want to leave for the palace?"

"Tomorrow." A soft laugh. "Or the next day. I want you all to myself for a while."

"There is always the journey." No reason they couldn't take their time, provided everything was fine. "As for the rest, we'll simply take it one day at a time."

Day by day. It was how he'd survived her loss and her continued absence from his life, so it was fitting that they should rebuild exactly that way, with no expectations but that they were both exactly where they wanted to be.

Slowly but surely, they would build a life.

Epilogue

It was supposed to be a small ceremony.

Celine studied the garden full of friends, family and priestesses and wondered if she'd been foolish to imagine such a thing possible. It *was* a small ceremony, for the wedding of a high priestess. But for a woman who'd wanted a quiet acknowledgement of her acceptance of a mate, it was anything but.

They'd moved the ceremony outside when gossip had resulted in a good portion of the Temple arriving along with the new High Priestess and her personal guard. Rais had come, of course, along with his young bride and their new daughter, an adorable little thing with Rais's dark looks and Avani's big eyes.

Celine sat in the spot of honor and leaned back against her mate's side, warmth bubbling up inside her. "So much for small. Your servants are going to quit in a fit of pique."

"If my ill humor hasn't driven them away by now, nothing ever will." He sounded anything but bad-tempered, almost jovial as he caught his sister's smile and lifted his glass to match her salute. "Zahra is pregnant."

"I'm not surprised. Only that it took so long." Though she imagined Karim didn't want to know just how enthusiastically his sister enjoyed her husband.

He closed his hand around hers. "Are you happy? The new High Priestess says you look like you are."

"She would know." Lexa had grown into her new position, and Celine felt not even the slightest twinge of jealousy. She'd been the most powerful woman in their world for enough years. It was someone else's turn.

Lexa's turn. Celine had wealth and her share of influence, judging by the way the king still flinched when she glared at him. And she had Karim. She lifted his hand to

her lips and kissed his knuckles softly. "Are *you* happy? You've gained an ornery mate who is going to hire workers to update your house with a few technological amenities it is sorely lacking."

He groaned. "You used to like the house well enough without things like comlinks and video feeds."

"Yes, when it was a house. Now it's my *home*, and my home needs comlinks and video feeds."

"Point conceded. How else are we going to excuse the fact that we never leave it?"

Celine laughed and turned to kiss his cheek. "I was planning to claim the privilege of age. We've earned a few placid years of peace, haven't we?"

"Placid?" Karim pinched her ass under the table. "Bite your tongue. How soon can they all be gone? I plan to chase you around the dinner table tonight."

"Pinch me again and I'll be biting something, but it won't be my tongue. And we can't send them home until we all go for a run. You know tradition, the new mates have to lead the chase."

"Yes, yes." He waved a hand and grinned. "Not the sort of instinctive animal revelry I was looking forward to... but it will have to do."

Karim's property was large enough that there were plenty of secluded little clearings and caves to be found, if one felt properly motivated. "I think tradition also allows for us to get lost along the way... if we can outrun them."

His smile turned seductive. "I know just the spot."

She'd taken him a hundred times as a warrior, but nothing compared to the quiet satisfaction of having Karim as a man. A dangerous man, perhaps, but one she could love. Did love. Maybe had always loved.

Celine rose to her feet and held out her hand to him. "The sooner we run, the sooner we can hide."

He took her hand with a laugh, then turned to address their guests. "Now, if everyone is amenable, my mate and I would like to run."

Mate. She'd been called many things -- flattering and insulting -- but none had ever resonated so completely with her heart. "We'll run," she murmured as the assembled guests started toward the open field. "But you'll still have to catch me."

"We'll see." He closed his hand in her hair suddenly, shocking a gasp out of her with one firm tug. "Something tells me you like to be caught."

"Almost as much as you like catching." Ignoring their audience, she rocked up on her toes and dug her teeth into his lower lip in clear challenge -- one that would stir his body as surely as he heated hers. "Let's run, my love. We'll see who ends up on top."

Moira Rogers

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. Toss in a dash of whimsy and a lot of caffeine, and enjoy with a side of chocolate by the light of the full moon.

By day, Bree and Donna are mild-mannered ladies who reside in the Deep South. At night, when their husbands and children are asleep, they combine forces to unleash the product of their fevered imaginations upon the page. To learn more about this romance writing, crime fighting duo, visit their webpage at www.moirarogers.com. (Disclaimer: crime fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)