



Changeling Press

Temple of Luna 2

savage need

Moira Rogers

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Zahra has devoted her life to serving Luna. The savage needs of the werewolf warriors can take their toll, and she serves as a healer, treating not only her fellow priestesses but anyone in need. Still, she's never seen anyone so wounded as Jarek, an old friend who's been through hell -- and who doesn't seem to remember her.

Jarek was always considered the most civilized wolf in his unit, a rare healer trained in werewolf magic as well as the medicine of their human enemies. When an injury shatters his self-control, the beast inside him takes over, leaving only the wolf. A wolf who remembers the scent of the mate he always needed... and is determined to claim her at any cost.

Chapter One

He doesn't remember his name.

He remembers blood, and the men who spilled it. Dozens, hundreds, a river of life flowing into death. He remembers the screams, hardened men with mangled limbs and the sure knowledge of their own mortality in their voices. He remembers guns and bombs and the ways men kill, cold metal tearing through flesh and machines crushing their bones.

He remembers pain. He remembers death. But he doesn't remember his name.

He doesn't remember her name, either. Words are jumbles of sounds that hurt his throat anyway, but her name... Her name would taste like peace. Would feel as good on his tongue as the pleasure that heats his body every time he catches her scent. Soft. Female. Familiar.

Mine.

* * *

Even if Balthasar hadn't been standing guard by the wall, Zahra would have known better than to go near the man in the corner. His eyes were more animal than anything else, and she shivered, remembering the intelligence that had once shone from their ice-blue depths. "Hello, Jarek."

He didn't speak, but his gaze stayed fixed on her face as a flash of *something* flickered across his features.

"It's been a long time." She moved slowly to sit in the chair in the center of the room. "That research elective, yes? With Dr. Bautista?"

His lips parted. When he spoke, the words were hoarse. Gravelly. "I'm a medic."

"Yes, Jarek." She leaned forward a little. "We went to school together. Do you remember me? My name is Zahra."

He lunged so fast the stool he'd been seated on crashed against the far wall at the same time his hands curled around the back of her chair. Strong arms formed a cage, trapping her within a circle of masculine power and heat. She choked back the shriek that welled in her throat and steeled herself for an attack.

But none came. He inhaled deeply, drawing in her scent. In a mere moment, Balthasar dragged him away. Then Jarek grew violent, twisting to attack with an angry snarl and a blow strong enough to send the guard reeling. He turned and backed toward her, putting his body squarely between her and the guard. "*Mine.*"

Hot, possessive magic filled the space between them. He might not have remembered her, but something about her was familiar enough to draw him close, and she could use that to reach him.

Zahra signaled to Balthasar to stand down, and eased up beside Jarek. Magic flared again, chafing her nerve endings and heating her skin. "Do you need me?" she asked quietly.

She was the King's cousin. It was the guard's duty to keep her safe, and he knew it. "Out of the question. He's feral, Zahra. If he needs relief, he needs a senior priestess."

Jarek growled and edged to the side, placing his body in front of hers again. "Stay away."

"He doesn't need a senior priestess." She raised one hand to his face. "You need a healer, don't you, Jarek?"

He turned his head and caught the tip of one finger between his teeth, a gesture of dominance and claiming. On the other side of the room, Balthasar hissed out a curse and reached for the com unit clipped to his belt. "I'm calling the high priestess. Your uncle will snap my neck if I let you do this."

"Call her," Zahra urged. "Will you wait, Jarek, if I promise to return soon?"

"I don't want another woman." Jarek turned to face her, one hand coming up to trap her fingers against his cheek. There was no hint of recognition in those frozen eyes, nothing of the brilliant, civilized healer she'd known. He was as wild as any warrior and twice as hungry.

And all his attention, all his *magic*, was focused on her. He'd take her, sate that wild hunger in the depths of her body. Zahra could barely breathe, and her cunt tingled in reaction. "No other woman," she swore, ignoring the guard's incoherent protest. "You have my vow as a priestess of Luna."

"Priestess." He seemed to be testing the word. He shook his head. "What's your name?"

"Zahra." Doubt almost made her falter. She couldn't lie to herself and think that he knew her deep down, under the trauma that had left his psyche in jagged shards. He didn't know her. "My name is Zahra."

His hand came up and his fingers touched her lips, traced their shape as if trying to memorize it. "You'll come back."

"Yes. Balthasar will take you to my room. Please go with him and wait for me there. Can you do that for me?"

Balthasar protested again. "Zahra, I can't --"

Fury seized her. "I am a royal daughter, and you will do as I say!" She fixed him with a glare and took a deep breath. "I know my duties and my place. Do you know yours?"

Balthasar's face closed off as brittle resentment filled the room. But he nodded. "Yes, priestess."

The tension in Jarek's body eased a tiny bit. His fingers ghosted over her cheek, over her hair and the line of her throat. "Zahra." From his lips, her name sounded like a benediction, a prayer.

"Yes." She backed away slowly, keeping her gaze on his. "I won't be long."

* * *

Zahra.

It echoes inside him, a whisper like silk over skin too used to rough pain. Maybe he remembers it, maybe it's a dream. But it suits her beauty, the softness of her skin and her scent.

In the quiet of her room he rolls it over his tongue and lets his mouth give it form. His voice is scratchy and raw, too ugly for a word that makes his heart pound and his cock ache. But it doesn't stop him from saying it again and again, as if it's a spell that can ward off the madness licking at the shattered edges of his mind.

He wants to lick her. Shape her body with his mouth and hands until she cries *his* name, and if she does it enough times maybe he'll remember what it is. Maybe he'll remember the way her pale green eyes look when she comes, the way her full lips look parted on a gasp, the way her dusky skin flushes with pleasure.

Zahra. He's surrounded by her scent and it isn't enough, isn't nearly enough because the beast is hungry for her ecstasy and nothing else will satisfy the craving.

Zahra.

* * *

Zahra paced in front of the plush chair where the high priestess was seated. "He's a brilliant doctor, Celine. And he's always been intense, but something -- something broke him. Now, I know what the rules are, but I got through to him. I won't abandon him."

Celine drummed her fingers against the arm of her chair. "And your solution is to take a feral wolf to your bed? A man so wild no one who hasn't earned her silver robes could hope to handle him?"

If she told Celine the truth about their history, the priestess would most certainly bar Jarek from Zahra's bed. "He knows me. It isn't about rutting. He needs more than that, and that *is* something I'm trained for."

"It doesn't matter if he knows you, my dear. He may not be a warrior, but right now he's reacting like one. One who won't get on his knees and obey your every command based on the strength of your royal connections."

Zahra groaned. "I don't think I'm indestructible, if that's what you're implying."

"I'm not implying anything." Celine leaned forward suddenly, her green eyes hard. "I'm telling you flat out that if you try to control a feral wolf you could end up dead."

"I understand that." She would *not* shiver. Zahra clenched her hands into fists. "I promised him I would be back, and that he'd have no woman but me. I made a vow, Celine."

"If you're determined to do this..." The high priestess pointed to a chair. "Sit."

She held her head high as she followed the instruction.

Celine nodded and crossed her legs. "Tell me what you know of the most important rules for dealing with a feral wolf."

There was only one, as far as she knew. "Submission. I have to be ready and willing to submit to him, one hundred percent. If I struggle, his instinct will be to use force to dominate."

"He won't be able to help himself even if he wants to. Not everyone can earn a silver robe, Zahra. It's not about skill or experience or even patience. Those who submit because they have no choice will never get one. You need strength to deal with the wildest men. I know you're strong, but you're also used to being in control of your own domain."

She'd never aspired to the silver robes, had always known her first and greatest value to Luna was as a healer. "I don't plan on making a habit of this, but it's a special case, Celine. I've known Jarek for years. If I have any hope at all of helping him, I have to try."

The high priestess nodded. "All right. But you'll do it with a guard standing outside your door with a tranq gun or not at all. Your modesty is less important to me than your life, and I *will* have to answer to your cousin for the care I've taken with his blood relative."

Zahra wasted no time in rising. "Agreed. Thank you, Celine."

"Don't thank me. I'm doing this against my better judgment, Zahra. You promise me you'll take care, and that you'll call for help if you need it."

"Of course." So many promises for one day. She only hoped she could keep them all.

* * *

The interior of her room was dim compared to the sunlit main hall, and Zahra shut the door behind her and blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. "Jarek?"

He sat perched on the edge of her bed, his shoulders tense and his gaze fixed on the wall ahead of him. "You came back."

"I told you I would." She hesitated by the door and unfastened her outer robe. It dropped away, leaving her clad in only the sheer white robe she wore next to her skin and the jeweled leather cuffs around her wrists and ankles. "I wanted to come back."

"I tried to remember you." His voice sounded rusty with disuse, but he seemed more willing to speak now that they were alone. "I tried to remember why you feel like you're mine. I can't."

Zahra knelt at his feet, her hands clenched to hide their shaking. "You kissed me once. At a party, the last time I saw you."

The memory was vivid, clearer than it should have been. A classmate of theirs had thrown a graduation party, and she'd sought refuge from the noisy festivities in a deserted room. Only instead of solitude, she'd found Jarek. A conversation and too much wine had led to a single long kiss. Zahra remembered their tongues mingling, heat and pleasure and need.

The only other thing she remembered was that it had ended too soon.

His gaze dropped from the wall to her face, then lower. A look of possessive need filled his face as he lifted both hands to cup her cheeks, heartbreakingly gentle in spite of the violence raging just beneath the surface. "Are you scared of me?"

She was scared of what had happened to age him, to harden the intense blue eyes she remembered so well. She was scared that she might not be strong enough to drag him back from the edge. "I'm scared of a lot of things, Jarek, but not of you."

"Zahra." He whispered her name as his fingers tunneled into the long strands of her hair. "I want to taste you. Your mouth."

Yes. She rose on her knees and eased between his legs. Her hands slid up his thighs, and she marveled at the heat and hardness of his muscles through the thin ceremonial pants he wore. "Taste me."

Long fingers curved around the vulnerable back of her neck, the grip just tight enough to show strength. To show dominance. Her heartbeat thundered in her ears as he licked her lower lip and growled softly. "Open."

Zahra opened her mouth on a gasp, surprised by the way the simple brush of his tongue stoked the fire inside her. His kiss was slow and demanding, claiming her mouth with every hard thrust of his tongue, every rough scrape of his teeth.

He didn't stop, not until her head was spinning and her hands were clenched on his legs. "Jarek." It was too soon for her skin to feel too tight, for her to shiver at the slightest touch.

Too soon for her to be so ready.

He bit her lip hard and growled into her mouth, his fingers fisting in her hair. "Do you want me to stop?"

The thought almost hurt. "No, don't stop. Please."

His hand urged her head back until her throat was bared to him. He nuzzled the edge of her chin and inhaled. "I'm in Luna's Temple. I remember that. But you don't feel like a priestess."

"I'm a healer as well as a priestess, Jarek." Zahra moved her hands to his chest, barely touching him. "A doctor, like you."

Jarek snarled and caught one wrist, his fingers closing over the thin leather cuff so hard the jewels surely bruised his hand. "Doctors can't heal me. Sedated the body, confused the mind. I don't need a doctor."

Her wrist ached, but she didn't move. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"I know." The fingers in her hair gentled as he licked a hot path up her throat. "You want me. I can smell it."

"Not just that." She squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated on the fierce confusion inside him -- desire and pain and even fear. "I need you."

"I want to taste you." His teeth closed over her pulse for one heart-stopping moment, just hard enough to draw a whimper from her throat. "Not your mouth. Your cunt."

Lust made her dizzy, and she had to remind herself not to move too suddenly as she rose. "I can lie on the bed. You can lift my robe, or I can take it off." She stood and looked down at him. "*You* can take it off."

A noise rumbled out of him, something so broken it took her a moment to recognize it as laughter. "I'm crazy, not twelve." Large, strong hands found her hips and smoothed over the flimsy fabric, rubbing it against her skin. "Some things are instinct, little healer."

"I know you're not twelve," she retorted, her cheeks heating. "You're not crazy, either. Don't say that."

"Then don't tell me how to pleasure you." His hands fisted without warning, gathering up the fabric on either side of her body in a punishing grip. One jerk and the thin robe tore, the sound eclipsed by his snarl of satisfaction as he ripped it free of her body.

Zahra's arms jerked up reflexively to cover herself, and she froze when he caught her wrists and tugged them back down.

She'd been prideful, assuming the best way to help Jarek was to be everything at once. But if she tried to play two roles with him, the healer and the seductress, neither would be enough. Right now, they were in a bedroom, not the healing rooms, and he needed one thing above all else. She could gentle his beast first. Then, with his physical hunger sated, she could help heal the man.

Zahra relaxed in his grip. "I like your tongue when you kiss my mouth." She rubbed her thighs together, trying to quell the ache between them. "Will you do the same things with it when you kiss my cunt?"

"Maybe." He released her wrists and moved his hands to her hips again. "Don't try to hide your body from me again."

"All right." She left her hands by her sides and bent her head back, baring her throat to him along with the long line of her naked torso. "Here it is. Do you like it?"

Jarek smoothed his hands over her abdomen and up until his fingers molded her breasts. "Perfect. Step closer."

Zahra took a single small step. The action pressed her breasts more fully into his hands, and his palms chafed her taut nipples. Pleasure arced through her, and she bit her lip.

His low, masculine chuckle was pure male wolf. He lowered his mouth and caught her nipple between his lips before flicking his tongue over it.

Her head swam with desperate desire, and Zahra lifted her hands to his head, holding his mouth to her skin. Another teasing swipe of his tongue drove the air from her lungs, and she gasped his name. "Jarek..."

He growled and bit her -- not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make her knees go weak. Only sheer force of will had been keeping her upright anyway, and she sagged against him. "Oh --"

Strong hands closed on her waist and jerked her from her feet. The world spun and she ended up in his lap with her back tucked tight against his bare chest. He tugged on her legs until her knees rested on either side of his, spreading her open.

She felt his breath against the back of her neck as he nuzzled her hair aside. "You have a mirror on your dresser," he whispered, stroking his hands up the inside of her thighs and easing them farther apart. "We can both watch you come."

She was completely exposed to his sight and touch. His cock was hard, and Zahra arched her back, grinding her ass down against the full length of his erection through his pants. "Then will I feel you inside me?"

His fingers continued up her thigh until they brushed her cunt. He teased a finger over her and dipped it just inside. "You can have my fingers for now." His gaze locked on hers in the mirror and he jerked her legs wider with a feral smile. "Touch yourself. Make yourself come."

She moved slowly, her gaze still fixed on his. As soon as her fingertips touched her cunt, slipping a little over her wet flesh, Jarek growled and closed his teeth hard on the back of her shoulder. Zahra cried out and went rigid from the sheer sensual shock of it. Only her hips moved, bucking against her hand and then back against him.

"Too slow." The words ripped free of him as he rose with her in his arms. He whipped her body around as if she weighed nothing, dropping her in the middle of the bed on her hands and knees. His hands rubbed over her ass a second before she felt his breath against the backs of her thighs. "Spread your legs."

Her knees slid too far over the slippery satin sheets, and he had to haul her back up a little. She couldn't breathe, anticipation tightening to a hard knot in her midsection. "Your mouth?" she asked. She knew Jarek would understand.

He touched her with his fingers first, slicked them against her cunt before rubbing her clit with maddening gentleness. He bit the back of her thigh and higher, closing his teeth on the curve of her ass. Then she felt his mouth, hot and wet and determined, and he groaned as he dragged his tongue over her.

He licked her eagerly, and Zahra moaned. The tension in her belly went beyond anticipation now, all the way to something painfully like need. "Fuck." His tongue circled her clit and she cursed again. "Oh, fuck --"

Another growl vibrated against her as he thrust his tongue into her cunt. Rough fingers landed on her clit, rubbing in a quick, jerky circle before he caught it between his thumb and forefinger.

Pleasure rose up and crashed over her in a sudden wave, startling a scream from her. It happened again and again, each rush of sensation more intense than the last. She shook under Jarek's hands and mouth, and her hands slipped from under her. She wound up with her chest and cheek against the smooth satin, crying out through the last shocks of orgasm wracking her.

Jarek wasn't talking anymore. The feral energy inside him curled around her, overpowering and demanding submission. He stroked her until she quieted, then rose and slid his hands up her back and over her shoulders. His fingers closed around her wrists and tugged, urging her to shift toward the head of the bed, toward the delicate, bespelled chains designed to clip on to the cuffs around her wrists.

Zahra was shaking, and she could barely hold her arms steady while he fastened the chains to her wrists. The pale green jewels set into the leather glinted in the low light, and she had to lick her lips to speak. "Jarek?"

"Zahra?"

She looked up at him, aching. Empty. "I want you."

His eyes glinted icy blue. He traced the line of her spine with one hand, following it down to graze her ass. Then he reached for the drawstring on his pants.

He disrobed in silence, letting the linen fall to the floor as he wrapped a hand around his cock and stroked it, his gaze still locked on her face. "I want to take you."

Her cunt spasmed again as she looked at him standing there by the bed, tall and strong and solid. "Please," she whimpered. "I'm ready. I'm so ready."

The surge of magic was the only warning before he moved. His hands hit the bed on either side of her arms and his chest pressed down against her back, covering her. He rubbed his cock against her cunt but didn't take her. Instead he bit the back of her shoulder again and growled. "Say it again."

"I want you. I'm ready." His breath blew across her neck and back, hot and fast. "Jarek."

This time his growl made his chest rumble against her back. She felt his hand curl in her hair a second before he tugged her head back. "Again."

"I want you. I'm --" The words died in her throat, replaced by a hoarse shriek as he drove into her. It was fast and rough and too good for words. Zahra moaned and rocked as much as she could, the delicate chains clinking against her cuffs.

"Zahra." He whispered her name against the back of her shoulder, his voice shaking. His entire body shook, the muscled arm braced next to her head tensing as he withdrew inch by torturous inch.

"Jarek." She was trembling just as much as he was, and she turned her face to his. "Please."

His next thrust was even rougher. A desperate growl worked up out of him, and she felt the sting of his teeth against her jaw.

She thought she was ready, but nothing could have prepared her for the overload of sensation that flooded her, leaving her breathless and panting as he pounded into her. It was rutting, pure and simple, the feral magic inside him sparking over her skin as each driving thrust fed the hungry need inside him.

And he *was* hungry. His free hand flowed over her skin, never stopping, as if he wanted to touch all of her at once, and the only way to come close was to keep moving. He kissed and bit her neck and shoulder, every wet caress leaving her shuddering as much as the hard pressure of his cock inside her.

His fingers lingered finally on her breast, molding the flesh before his fingers caught her nipple and tugged at it while his mouth moved to her ear. "Too hard?"

Zahra needed more, but she couldn't speak at first, so she shook her head. Finally, she managed to whisper, "Harder."

He pinched her nipple harder and bit her earlobe with a low laugh. His next thrust slammed their hips together and he groaned. "Your cunt is so hot. Be hotter when you come around me."

She tried to answer, but all that came out was a rough moan. Pleasure had built too quickly for her to have anything but a hard, quick orgasm, and she wanted it desperately. It made her dizzy, the thought of clamping tight around his cock, of drawing the same sort of pleasure from him.

Zahra could barely move, but she caught the chains that held her and wrapped them around her hands. She used the leverage to stretch her back and lower her upper body to the bed. It shifted her hips, changing the angle of their coupling, and his next thrust made her scream.

He reared up with a satisfied snarl, and his hands landed on her hips. He rode her through the pleasure, stroking deep and hard with rough, panting growls that accompanied flares in his power. He didn't stop, not when she came again, or even when her body began to clench a third time. An open hand landed on her ass in a stinging slap. "Keep coming."

It was far from the quick peak she'd expected. Even if she'd wanted to stop, he kept driving her higher. Zahra bucked under him, moving to meet his cock even as he drove into her, and she was vaguely aware of speaking, but she had no idea what she was saying. She only knew she needed it to go on forever, the maddening twist of ecstasy that Jarek brought with every touch.

He pulled from her without warning and tore at the chain holding her right wrist. The magic in the chain didn't extend to the headboard, and iron snapped as he ripped it free. In the next second, Zahra landed on her back with her left hand still restrained and her calves on Jarek's shoulders. He slammed into her again and watched her face as he worked his cock deeper. "Touch yourself. *Now.*"

The chain draped across her body, cool and tingling with magic, as she reached down to obey him. She was shaking so hard the chain rattled, and she jerked against him when she touched her clit.

"Good." His gaze stayed fixed on her face as he gripped her legs and resumed his hard, demanding thrusts. His blue eyes were wild, but under the surface she could feel his beast gathering. "Mine."

Zahra was beyond the rise and fall of pleasure, and she didn't trust her voice. So she nodded, squeezed her eyes shut and dug her head back into the soft pillows. All that existed was the way Jarek touched her, the way he fucked her, and she could only hold on and wait for him to join her in the maelstrom of neverending bliss they'd created.

She felt his breath against her calf a moment before the power swelled to dangerous levels. He bit her and the world shattered, the explosion of magic accompanied by a low, ragged growl.

As quickly as it had swelled, the magic retreated. She could feel it inside him, shattered pieces of it locking into place, reordering what had been broken, and the room calmed. They were silent except for their short, panting breaths, and Zahra lay under Jarek, trying to calm her own heart and mind.

Finally, he lifted his head. Cool blue eyes studied her, the wildness receding as intelligence returned. He drew in a slow, careful breath and withdrew from her with heart-stopping gentleness. When she was settled back on the bed he dropped to his side next to her and reached for the cuff around her wrist. "Are you all right?"

"You didn't hurt me." She raised her unbound hand to stroke his cheek. "What about you? Are you... better?"

He freed her and sank back to the bed, his eyes drifting closed. "I know who I am," he said finally, his voice still ragged. "But I don't know how I got to the Temple. Or what happened to push me over the edge."

He was barely conscious, and Zahra's chest ached. "Sleep. It will wait."

But he didn't drift off, even though his weariness was tangible. His arm lifted, then hesitated. "Will you stay with me?"

He needed her, now perhaps even more than before. She curled against his side and rested her cheek on the hard wall of his chest. "I'll stay with you."

His arm settled across her waist. His fingers rubbed slow circles against her lower back as the tense muscles in his body began to relax. "Thank you, Zahra."

She smiled in spite of herself. "You remember my name now too, I see."

Jarek's chuckle sounded rusty. "I seem to remember it being one of the few things I could say today."

"You said enough to get your point across." It came out all wrong, and Zahra blushed, her cheeks hot. "Get some rest, Jarek."

His hand stilled on her back, fingers spread possessively over her skin. His breathing slowed and he sighed quietly. "Good night."

Zahra closed her eyes and listened to his soft breathing and the steady beat of his heart. She'd forgotten, too -- the way she'd felt years ago when Jarek had looked at her with those bright blue eyes of his. The thrill of excitement and the promise of pleasure, the butterflies in the pit of her stomach. And now...

Later, Zahra. She'd think about it later.

Chapter Two

Jarek settled his feet on the floor and stared at himself in the mirror on Zahra's dresser. He caught a glimpse of her in the reflection, of her smooth, dark skin hidden in shadows as she slept. She was every bit as beautiful as the student he remembered, but time had refined her features, turned a soft, gorgeous girl into a striking woman.

He forced his attention back to his own reflection and winced at what he saw. Wild, unshaven, he looked like his patients sometimes did after a hard month on the front lines. He recognized the brittleness in his own eyes as the result of trauma.

As for what that trauma was... His memory held a frightening gap that made his heart hammer even though he *knew* the medical explanation. They'd co-opted the humans' term for it, but post-traumatic stress seemed a poor description of what happened to a wolf when his beast tried to protect him from something his mind couldn't handle. Madness was more like it.

Something had happened. Something so terrible it had shattered his mind and let the wolf inside him take control. It was rare for someone who wasn't a warrior, but not unheard of. Provisions would have been in place to bring him to the Temple and assign him to a senior priestess, one trained in handling feral men.

And none of it explained how he'd ended up curled around Zahra, a healer whose skills were rarely plied in the bedchamber. But he had, and she was the only memory he had of the past few days. Her scent, her skin, the way she tasted and the way she came for him...

His cock stirred, and he swore and closed his eyes. *No.*

The bed moved, and she spoke, her voice husky from sleep. "Jarek?"

He hardened so fast he had to bite back a groan. "Yes?"

One soft hand skimmed over his back, and he felt her lips on the back of his shoulder. "Do you need anything?"

She'd be able to see him in the mirror, everything from his clenched jaw to his closed eyes to the erection that probably wouldn't subside as long as she was in the room with him. "My beast isn't in control anymore, but it's not quiet yet."

Satin rustled as Zahra climbed from the bed. He heard her kneel in front of him even before she rested her hands on his thighs. "I trust your beast more than most men. You were very gentle."

He'd seen the marks of his teeth along her shoulders and back. He'd seen the bruises on his hand, the ones that meant he'd closed his hand around her wrist or ankle hard enough to grind the jeweled cuffs into his skin. He opened his eyes and touched her cheek. "Didn't seem that way to me."

She looked debauched. Her dark hair fell in disheveled waves around her bare shoulders, and an amused smile curved lush lips still swollen from his kisses. "Don't I get to be the judge of your relative tenderness?"

He moved his fingers to her lips because he couldn't stop himself. "I hate the idea of hurting you. And I'm scared that I could have. Why did you take that risk, Zahra?"

Doubt flashed in her eyes, and she looked away. "When they told me you were here, I went to see you. They were ready to send you to another priestess, one with silver robes, but you said you wanted me."

"Of course I did." No point pretending surprise, not when his hazy memories included marking her with words as well as his body. He smoothed his fingers over the loose strands of her hair and sighed. "I wanted you. I still want you. But it would have killed me to hurt you by mistake."

"I think you might have hurt another priestess. You --" She bit her lip. "You attacked a Temple guard who tried to get between us. He's fine, but you were... insistent."

Another memory blessedly out of reach. Jarek reached for her. "Come up here so I can hold you. Please."

"Is that what you need?" Her fingertips feathered over his erection as she spoke.

Jarek fisted the blankets in his free hand as his body tensed. With Zahra on her knees in front of him, it was impossible to banish the fantasy, the image of her lips around his cock. But in his fantasy she hadn't been a priestess tending to a warrior, just a woman who needed him as desperately as he needed her.

He slid his fingers through her hair again, this time wrapping the strands around his hand. "Who's asking? A priestess or a woman?"

She stared up at him, desire etched on her delicate features. "A woman," she whispered, her hand closing around his shaft, "finishing what began a long time ago."

Jarek moaned and grasped her wrist, holding her hand still. "A long time ago, I was a man with fifteen years of service ahead of me. And you were too precious to become one of the brides of silence."

"I would have taken that chance." Her eyes grew bright with tears. "I could easily have loved you then. Maybe I did."

And the king wouldn't have been pleased to find his cousin had promised to wait for a healer of no lineage -- one who might not ever return -- when every rich warrior freshly released from the army dreamt of wooing her. It hadn't stopped him from wanting her, or from kissing her the week before he'd been sent to the front lines. It had been a foolish, reckless decision, one that had branded the taste of her lips on his goddamn psyche and left him wanting her for years.

"Fuck." He curled his hand around the back of her neck and leaned down, kissing her with all the hard desperation that had built inside him since that day.

She released his cock and slipped her arms around his waist as she rose to meet his kiss, her own ardor evident in the way she bit his lip and moaned into his mouth. The wildness inside him stirred, attracted by her pleasure and the need to possess her.

He pulled back just enough to bite her lower lip with a soft growl. "I may want the woman, but something inside me still needs the priestess."

"I'll give you everything," she whispered against his mouth. "Everything you need."

It was what he feared -- Zahra losing herself in a man so broken he couldn't even remember the tragedy that had shattered his mind.

And, damn him for a selfish bastard, he couldn't turn down what she offered.

Jarek lifted his hands and curled them in her hair, using the grip to tilt her head back. "I want to play with you. Discover all the things that make you scream."

She smiled and relaxed into his touch, baring even more of the soft line of her throat. "We have time for a little exploration, as long as I get my turn."

He indulged himself and kissed the smooth skin over her pulse. "And what would you like to do with your turn?"

Her pulse sped under his lips, and a blush darkened her cheeks. "I want your cock in my mouth. I want to taste you. Make you come."

A few more hot, open-mouthed kisses along her neck got his lips to her ear. "Maybe we should try that first."

She laughed. "That was the plan before you distracted me, Jarek."

He straightened, leaving one hand wrapped in her hair and dropping the other to the bed behind him. "Stupid of me. Take me in your mouth." But he had too many plans to let her drive him over the edge quickly.

Her hands trembled on him, and she licked her lips a moment before licking him, drawing her tongue slowly around the head of his cock. The hot wetness of her mouth made him ache with the need to thrust up against her lips, but he held himself still and indulged only in tightening his fingers a tiny bit in her hair. "Like that, sweetheart. Just like that."

Zahra's eyes met his. She paused with her open mouth hovering over the tip of his cock, then closed her lips around him with a low moan.

It was better than any of the dreams. Better than the most wicked fantasy. His imagination hadn't provided the scent of her or the heat of her tongue, hadn't conjured

the sounds she'd make as she licked him with an enthusiasm he would never have believed possible.

It was hot enough to burn him up, and the very heat of it eased some of the crushing pressure inside him.

She gripped him again, her hand tiny around the base of his shaft. The metal loops on the cuff around her wrist jingled as she jerked her fist over him, and she braced her other hand on the edge of the bed, her polished nails digging into the sheets.

Pleasure sank its claws into him, making it impossible to keep from tightening his fingers in the soft fall of her hair. "Slower," he whispered, tugging her head back until her mouth barely covered the head of his cock. "I'm not ready to come yet. Not until I'm inside your cunt again."

Zahra released him and leaned closer, until his shaft nestled between her breasts. Her tongue skimmed over the head of his cock again, and she looked up at him. "We have time to do both."

Not nearly time enough. Jarek dropped his fingers to the curve of her breast and pinched her nipple until she gasped and shuddered. "Has it been so long since the last time you served Luna in a bed? Only one thing soothes a wolf on the edge, and it isn't his own pleasure."

Her cheeks reddened. "I know I ask too much. I want too much."

And he'd give it to her because he didn't know how to stop. "Then we'll have to take turns."

She hesitated before rising and climbing past him, onto the bed. "I forgot the most important part of your visit."

"What part's that?"

Zahra rolled onto her side, a plush pillow tucked under her head and one graceful hand draped over the swell of her hip. She spoke the traditional words in a voice edged with breathless excitement. "I'm at your mercy, warrior."

The breath left him in a rush. He admired her for a moment, letting his gaze trace the bronzed skin covering sleek curves. "I'm not a warrior," he whispered, but the

reminder seemed false. He might not be a warrior, but he could feel the scars of one on his heart.

Touching her would heal them.

"Not a warrior?" A crease formed on her brow. "Because you spend your time healing? Then I suppose I'm not a priestess, since I do the same."

Jarek reached up a finger to smooth over her forehead. "I fight in my way, and you serve Luna in yours. I'm just... not used to this. The violence doesn't build in me. I've been to the Temple once before in my life."

"But we do more than offer release." The frown disappeared. "We're also here to remind you that there is as much pleasure in the world as pain. Don't you need that, Jarek?"

The gaping hole in his memory suggested he did. He stroked his fingers down her cheek and over her mouth and felt a smile tug at his lips. "Maybe."

She leaned up. "Then I am at... your... mercy." She punctuated every word with a kiss.

He caught her lower lip between his teeth and growled as he urged her back to the bed. The words seemed more than mere ritual, especially when he felt her power wind around him. It smoothed the roughest edges off his pain even as it lured the beast, taunting with the promise of pleasure.

And Zahra began to fulfill that promise with a slow, sweet kiss. Her fingers threaded through his hair, and her legs tangled with his. "You haven't changed so much," she whispered against his cheek. "You feel the same to me."

He tasted her skin and reveled in the way she shivered when he dragged his tongue over her throat. "How do I feel?"

"Intense, but gentle." She shivered again. "Strong."

It made him smile as he nipped at her collarbone before indulging himself with a careful exploration of her full breasts. He loved the way she arched toward him as he cupped warm flesh and teased at her tight nipple, loved it even more when he gave her a hint of teeth and she whimpered softly.

She writhed under him, responding to each lick and nip with ever louder moans. Finally, she dug her nails into his shoulders and panted his name. "Is this what being at your mercy means?"

He'd barely touched her in a fraction of the ways he'd dreamed about. "Yes." He whispered the word against her hip as he stroked his fingers up her thighs, teasing caresses that stopped just short of her cunt. "Do you want me to touch you?"

"Yes," she hissed, twisting as she tried to angle her hips under his hands. He curled his fingers around her thigh and held her still as he nipped his way back up her side. His hand tightened in the mass of disheveled hair cascading over the pillow, and he lifted his head so he could watch her face as he finally brushed his fingers along her wet folds.

She cursed and lifted her hips to his touch. "Jarek, yes -- please --"

He wanted to see the look in her eyes when she came this time. "I could listen to you beg for hours." He found her clit and teased at it with his fingertips.

Heat flashed in her eyes. "You wouldn't."

"Are you sure?"

Her laugh sounded more like a groan. "You probably would, just to see how loudly I'd scream."

"And how loudly would you scream?" He slicked his fingers down and pushed two inside her before bringing his thumb back up to rub her clit.

Zahra jerked and trembled as her cheeks and chest flushed red. "I wouldn't, not until I couldn't take it anymore."

He had the patience to discover just how long that took. His cock might be hard and aching, but the temptation to sheathe himself inside her was nothing compared to the enchanting idea of having her truly at his mercy.

He crooked his fingers inside her and watched her face as he started a careful exploration. It didn't take him long to find a spot inside her that brought her shoulders off the bed and made her cry out in intense pleasure.

She bit her lip to choke off her cries and stared up at him "Fuck," she panted. "If I start screaming, will you stop?"

Jarek tightened his fingers in her hair and found that spot again, determined to drive her over the edge. "Not even if you beg."

A low, tortured moan slipped free of her, and she tugged him closer. Her teeth closed on his jaw, the bite just short of savage. "I don't beg."

A challenge. The wildness inside him rose to the surface in a heartbeat. He bared his teeth and growled. "You will before I'm done with you."

She was breathing hard, her hips bucking against his hand, and her mouth skimmed over to his ear. "Make me."

"Oh sweetheart..." He bit her ear and eased a third finger into her, careful to avoid the spot that had made her arch. He brought his thumb back to her clit, slow and taunting. "First, I'll make you beg for me to let you come. Then I'll make you beg for the pleasure to stop."

* * *

She'd pushed him, and now he was pushing back. Zahra tried to move her hips, to angle them so that Jarek's caresses brought her closer to orgasm, but he held her still. She couldn't stop the soft moan of protest that slipped free before she bit her lip.

As quickly as that his hands were gone. She felt his fingers curl around her wrist, and he guided her hand up toward the bed frame. "I think I'll make sure you can't move too much before I really get started."

He was chaining her again. She rolled her body up against his and moaned again. "Jarek --"

He secured one wrist, then paused to bite the swell of her breast hard enough to mark her. A low chuckle rumbled out of him as he moved to her other wrist. "I broke the clasp on the chain. Thoughtful of them to have extras right here on the headboard."

He'd do it. He'd drag out the pleasure, taunting her with every touch until she *did* break. Until she begged him to stop or for more. Bound to the bed, there was only one thing she could do to tease him in return. "I thought about fucking you."

"Did you?" When he had both hands restrained, he sat back between her legs and stared down at her, a dark, dangerous edge to his smile. "When did you think about that?"

"Every day for damn near three years."

He curled his fingers under her thighs and pulled them wide. "And how did I fuck you in your fantasies?"

She licked her lips slowly. "I have a good imagination, Jarek. There aren't many things I didn't think of. But my favorite... was against the wall."

"Hard and fast?" He slid two fingers into her again as he hooked his other hand under her knee and lifted her leg. "Is that what you like?"

"Yes. Not always, but..." She closed her eyes and choked back a moan. "I used to fantasize that you'd walk me home after study group. But instead of leaving, you'd start kissing me, and -- and all we could manage was to get through the door before you had to be inside me."

"I would have." He pushed her leg toward her chest, leaving her spread wide open for him. His fingers crooked inside her, finding that spot again for just long enough to make her arch as a streak of heat shot through her.

Frustration made her grind her teeth. "But you didn't. I thought you might when you finally kissed me..."

"I had to go to the front lines." He added a third finger again, stretching her, thrusting slowly in and out. "But I had dreams that night too."

She forgot that she was supposed to be tormenting him with her words, forgot everything but his maddening touch and the words that set fire to her. "Dreams? Tell me."

He laughed and skated his thumb over her clit. "Beg."

Zahra shook her head. "No."

"Stubborn?" He eased his hand away from her body and lifted it to his lips. His gaze never wavered from her face as he licked his fingers clean. "Too bad. You taste good."

The ache he left behind sharpened to the point of pain, and she whimpered as something inside her twisted and then relaxed. Surrendered. "Please," she whispered, her voice raw and needy. "Jarek, please."

He rewarded her with a low growl of pleasure as he lifted her hips and thrust into her. It wrenched a scream from her along with a sweet, hot burst of pleasure that curled her toes. The chains rattled as she jerked against them, and she felt as though she couldn't get enough air into her lungs.

Jarek didn't move, just stayed deep inside her and stroked her through the orgasm with soft touches. When her body stilled he smiled down at her and smoothed his hand up her leg. "I love listening to you scream."

She could barely speak. "It must do wonders for your manly ego."

"It's not about my ego," he whispered. "It's about your pleasure."

Simple. Direct. Zahra shuddered and rocked up against him. "Tell me you wanted me as much as I wanted you."

"More." He pulled back a tiny bit before thrusting back in. "I wanted you more. But you weren't mine to have."

"That doesn't matter now." She gripped the chains and lifted into his next thrust. "This is what matters."

Jarek hissed out a breath and dropped both hands to hold her hips. "Then stop rushing me. I need..." His fingers tightened, lifting her a little, and the head of his cock bumped her G-spot. She cried out his name and fell back to the bed as pleasure streaked through her. Satisfaction filled his eyes as he began a rocking grind, his cock never losing contact with that sensitive spot. "Come."

She was beyond power games, beyond trying to maintain some semblance of control. Her body was his to command, and she let go. "Yes. Yes, please -- Jarek --"

The power was blinding. It snapped through the room and through Zahra, releasing in a rush of spine-tingling magic that echoed as he roared his release and sent her spiraling over the edge again.

By the time she'd begun to drift down, he was bent over her, one trembling arm holding up his weight as he used the other hand to free her wrists. Then he collapsed, his weight still half on her, and Zahra slid her arms around his neck.

Jarek's lips brushed her shoulder. "You're amazing."

Her limbs felt heavy, and sleep tugged at her, but she laughed a little. "That's much better than 'adequate.'"

"Who would ever call you merely adequate at anything?"

"My trainer." He'd been less than impressed, and had told her she'd be better off healing.

He propped himself up on one elbow and stared down at her with a slight frown. "You wouldn't let me say I wasn't a warrior."

"And I didn't say I wasn't a priestess." His eyes were fascinating. Sometimes they were sharp and assessing, the blue almost like ice, and other times they were warm, like the sea. Like now. "I do my part, but no one would ever say I was skilled at this, Jarek."

"I would." He cupped her cheek and rubbed his thumb along her lower lip. "Without reservation."

She found herself smiling despite the tiny chill that unfurled inside her. He was calm, and that meant he'd soon be leaving. "You're biased."

"Mmm, maybe. A little."

Zahra stroked the side of his face and tried to memorize its lines and angles. "I'm sorry you had to come here the way you did, but I'm glad I got to see you again."

Something flashed in his eyes, and he lowered himself down to the bed. "I still don't... I feel better. The beast is calm. But I don't remember anything."

When -- or even whether -- his memories would return was anyone's guess. She rolled over to rest her head on his shoulder. "Sleep. You need the rest."

She felt his lips brush over her hair. "You don't mind if I stay?"

Her chest tightened. *Don't go.* "Just for a little while."

"Just for a little while," he agreed quietly.

They both had duties, responsibilities, and he would have to go soon. Zahra knew it was useless to want him, but it didn't matter. Futility had never stopped her from wanting Jarek, and she knew now that it never would. "A little while," she whispered again, and drifted to sleep.

* * *

In dreams, everything belongs to warm embraces and happy endings. His hands on her skin and cries from her lips, only better in dreams because their passion has no expiration date. Just a man and a woman and bliss unfolding into months that become years that become forever.

He knows the dreams aren't real, but the nightmares are. The warm skin of the woman is gone. In nightmares, skin is covered in blood, rent and torn, and magic isn't enough and science isn't enough and the bleeding never stops.

But the body before him isn't a warrior, isn't even a man. The boy cries for his mother, weaker and weaker as the blood pools under the makeshift table, and on the other side of the grimy tent his mother stares up at nothing. Twenty-two years old, at most. A girl, a human girl torn apart by human explosives, and her silence is a judgment.

He isn't enough.

Outside the tent isn't silence, it's screams. Screams as three warriors are executed for turning the humans' weapons on their women and children, but the screams can't save the boy. Magic isn't enough. Science isn't enough. Vengeance isn't enough.

He isn't enough.

Blood runs from the table. Drips from the table. Tiny little splashes, farther and farther apart, and louder because the boy's not crying anymore. Not breathing anymore. Not living anymore.

Eight children died under his hands. The ninth might take him along for the ride. Death could be enough.

* * *

Jarek woke her with his screaming.

Zahra slid off the bed, instinctively moving away to protect them both. He sprang off the bed in the opposite direction, taking the slippery sheets with him. His back hit the wall, and magic rippled through the room as he howled and began to shift.

The change came easily to wolves under the power of the moon or warriors in the heat of bloodlust, but nothing seemed easy about Jarek's transformation. His scream turned to agony, and he hit the floor on his hands and knees with bones twisting and fur rippling over skin.

Outside in the hallway, someone pounded on the door and called her name. Zahra hesitated, torn. If she answered the guard, they'd take Jarek away, and he wouldn't be allowed in her bedchamber again. Instead, she stayed low on the floor and crawled to the end of the bed. "Jarek."

He snarled and came to his feet, a dark wolf with pale eyes and the power to tear out her throat.

Zahra started to reach out and froze. If he'd slipped back into darkness, there was no guarantee he'd still remember her. And approaching a snarling wolf was madness.

But she still bore his scent, if nothing else. His marks. So she pulled back her hand and waited.

The noises in the hallway had grown more frantic. Soon someone would find an override and unlock her door, but for now she was alone. The wolf studied her in silence before stepping forward to nuzzle her shoulder, and she slid her fingers through his fur.

He was warm under her cheek, and Zahra made a soft, soothing noise even as her heart twisted with pain and sympathy. "It's all right," she whispered as she stroked him. "Whatever happened, you're all right now. I'll help you, no matter what it takes."

He whined, the sound vulnerable and full of pain. But the gentleness in his body disappeared when the door behind them whispered open.

"Zahra!" Balthasar's voice came from behind her. "Move away."

The wolf bared his teeth and snarled.

"If you come closer, Balthasar, he'll attack." She didn't budge from the spot, didn't look up or stop petting Jarek. "Leave us."

"Sorry, Zahra. The high priestess outranks everyone within the walls of the Temple, even you. And my orders were clear." Boots scraped against the floor, and Jarek lunged, diving between her and the intruder with an angry growl.

"No!" She came to her knees and pounded the floor with her fist. "Damn it, wait outside. Leave the door open if you must, but *go away*."

Balthasar had a dart gun aimed at the wolf. For several endless moments there was no sound but the low, angry rumbling from the wolf and the harsh breathing of the guard. Then he sighed and lowered his hand. "By the Goddess, girl, you're going to get me killed." But he backed away until his footsteps took him out through the doorway.

She breathed a sigh of relief and held out a hand to Jarek. "Please."

He trembled but he came to her, inching across the intervening space with most of his attention still fixed on the door. Only when Balthasar stayed safely outside did he bump his nose against her hand.

Sadness welled in her again, and her hands trembled on his fur. "My Goddess, Jarek. What did you see?"

Terror. Desperation. *I'll never be enough.*

The thoughts echoed in her head, and she started as she realized they'd formed a bond, a telepathic link. Images flashed in her mind, memories that must have belonged to him, and she covered her face with her hands. "No."

Blood, so much blood. Disjointed cries, pleas. Screams. A sob tore free of Zahra when she realized the memories were of children, wounded and dying.

Dying.

I'll never be enough.

Magic swelled, along with the pained sound of another transformation. Too soon to be smart, too soon to be safe, but when she opened her eyes she saw Jarek through her tears, kneeling on the floor and panting for breath.

He looked up at her with eyes shot through with pain, and struggled to speak. "Don't look -- you shouldn't see --"

"I'm sorry." She threw her arms around his neck. "No one should. I'm so sorry."

His shoulders shook. He curled in on himself as if he hurt -- and he had to hurt with two transformations so close together -- and bent until his forehead rested against her thighs.

Zahra bent over him, barely noticing when the door closed quietly and Balthasar's footsteps receded. She cried with Jarek -- for the things he'd endured, for the women and children who had died. For the atrocities he hadn't been able to stop or change. "It wasn't your fault."

The connection between them hadn't closed, and she felt the wave of revulsion that threatened to drown him. "My fault twice over. My fault every way that matters."

Because the men who had lost their grip on sanity had been under his care. "Even the priestesses can't always stop the animal from taking control, darling. No one can, not with so much bloodshed. It isn't possible."

"If I'd forced them out of combat earlier..." His voice broke on a ragged growl. "I was tired. I was tired, and two dozen people died for it."

No one was perfect. Unfortunately, as healers, their imperfections all too often led to death. "You're not infallible, Jarek. Not one of us is."

The sharp ache inside him wouldn't be easily soothed by words, not when the black depths of it threatened to swallow her whole. Jarek shuddered under her hands, and one thing became clear.

He wasn't headed back to the front lines anytime soon. He needed help, the kind she couldn't offer as a priestess of the Temple of Luna. The kind she couldn't even offer as a healer.

"We'll find someone to help you," she whispered against his hair. "It will be all right. Someday, it'll be all right."

She only hoped her words were true.

Chapter Three

Sanctuary.

To the east, Jarek could see the Temple of Luna, set up on its hill as if the priestesses who lived there needed to be just a bit closer to the Goddess they served.

As a healer, he'd always found the duality fitting. The House of Sanctuary and the Savage Temple, built on the same earth and serving the same purpose. But only the strong made the trip up the mountain to heal their souls.

The broken stayed with their feet firmly on the ground.

Having the Temple looming over him was its own brand of torture. Jarek tried. He went through his daily routine, met with the therapist who picked at his emotional scabs until they bled.

He even allowed himself to be manipulated. The healers attempted to draw him into complicated cases, prodding him to consult on patients who required little personal interaction. As deft as the attempts were, Jarek was no fool. They were rebuilding his confidence, one brick at a time.

Or so they thought. They had little way of knowing they were building on a foundation of sand. Something inside him had snapped, had shattered so completely he doubted anyone could find enough of the pieces to put him back together.

But he tried. He tried because every few days he'd glance up at the Temple, and the reminder was enough. Zahra's duties as a priestess and the traditions of Sanctuary kept her away, but she'd made it clear during their last brief conversation that if he needed her, she'd come to him.

He needed her. He needed her with an intensity that terrified him, especially when he knew he had nothing to give in return. No brilliant career, no warrior strength...

And no money. No position. His status in their world had come from the sharpness of his mind and the skill of his hands, from the healing magic inside him that he could no longer bring himself to use. Without it he was nothing more than a lone wolf, the poor son of a farmer who had never been strong enough to fight with tooth and claw.

Jarek had promised himself he wouldn't call for her. But they were sending him home in the morning, back to the quiet of his family's territory, where no one needed his skills for anything more serious than accident or illness. A place to heal his soul.

A place where he'd never be good enough for her.

He was leaving, and he was too weak to go without seeing her one last time.

Her shoes made no sound on the stone path, but he heard the whisper of her robes even before he caught her scent on the breeze. "Good afternoon, Jarek."

"Zahra." He loved the way her name sounded. Hated that he might not get to speak it again after today. He turned and found himself smiling as he caught sight of her. "Thank you for coming."

"You're welcome." She stopped in front of him, her hands on his arms in lieu of an embrace. Her smile was friendly, but something warmer burned in her eyes. "How have you been?"

"Better. Better every day." He lifted a hand to cup her cheek because he couldn't stop himself, and he didn't care what rules he broke. It wouldn't matter tomorrow. "But they don't think my mind can heal here. They want me to go home for a while, and I didn't want to leave without seeing you."

Her smile didn't waver, but her eyes darkened. "That should be very relaxing. I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself."

"It's a farm, Zahra." And the fact that she thought it would be relaxing emphasized the stark differences in their upbringing. "I imagine I'll work very hard and be tired at the end of the day, but no one will need me to save them."

"I suppose I don't know much about farm life." A bit of rueful self-consciousness crept into her smile, but she tensed as she spoke again. "Can I keep in touch? Write or call?"

He needed to tell her no. He needed to cut all ties, because the leading healer in their world might have had the slimmest of chances, but a poor farmer too scared to use his gifts had none. In a few short days she'd be as out of reach as Luna herself.

And his beast didn't care. His beast had claimed, so he groaned and did the same. The fingers brushing her cheek dropped, slid around the back of her neck until he could fist his hand in her silky hair. He dropped his mouth to hers and kissed her, plying her lips with his tongue until she slid her arms around his neck and opened her mouth with a moan.

Zahra clung to him, kissing him desperately, her body pressed close to his. Finally, she dragged her lips to his ear with a soft cry. "One word," she whispered. "Say it, and there will never be anyone else for me, no matter what happens."

A bride of silence. Fully half the men in their world went to war until they were forty. Those fortunate -- or unfortunate -- enough to fall in love before their twentieth year had two choices: take a mate he'd spend the next twenty years separated from, or break all ties and let her find happiness with someone who could be there.

Ten years ago, he'd left Zahra behind. He'd let her go without saying a word, without planting false hopes that might prompt her to wait for a man who might never come home. She'd had men. He'd had women. They'd moved forward.

He knew in his heart neither of them had moved on.

Jarek drew in a deep breath and curled his arms more tightly around her. "Six months," he whispered, already hating himself for his selfishness. "I can't handle forever, but... I need six months. Six months where I know you're still mine." *Six months to become a man who dares ask a King for his cousin.*

"Yes." She didn't argue or offer him more, though she trembled in his arms and he knew she wanted to. "Six months."

"Trust me." It was foolish to ask when he barely trusted himself.

Her lips feathered over his cheek. "I do."

"And call me?"

"Every day."

"Zahra." He turned his head and caught her mouth again, kissing her hard enough to fall into her, to brand her taste in his memory.

She molded to him, her feminine softness the perfect counterpoint to the hard planes of his own body. He smelled the salt of the tears tracking down her face before he tasted them, and he groaned and pulled back. "Don't cry."

She nodded and bit her lip. "I have to go."

And he had to let her. He smoothed the tears from her cheeks with his thumb and smiled. "I'll talk to you soon."

"As soon as you're settled." She caught his hand and kissed his palm. "Goodbye, Jarek."

If he didn't let her go now, he'd forget how. So he lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles in return, then released her. "Be safe, Zahra."

She nodded and turned away. "You too." Her shoes whispered over the path as she hurried off, leaving him wrapped in her scent and aching for her.

Six months. If he wanted to be worthy of a King's cousin in that time, he had work to do.

* * *

Zahra laid her napkin over her plate and rose from the King's table. "I need a favor, cousin."

Rais arched an eyebrow from his seat at the head of the table. "So that's why you finally came to dinner after all my invitations."

"Your summons, you mean."

He waved a hand. "Same thing."

"Rais." The young blonde seated at her cousin's side had the same easy smile and open friendliness Zahra remembered from her days at the Temple, but Avani also

seemed possessed of a short patience for her new mate's ego. "We're all very impressed that you're the King now, I promise. So stop being an ass."

Zahra's own nervousness kept her from sharing her new Queen's smile. "It's about Jarek."

He finished his wine and nodded. "The healer? The one you went to school with?"

"Yes."

He stared at her for several long moments before a small smile began to play at the corners of his mouth. "And what about Jarek the healer?"

"*Rais*." Zahra's cheeks burned at the teasing, but that wasn't what made her hesitate. Suppose he said no? "I've promised myself to him, and I want your blessing."

He said nothing.

After several tense moments, Avani sighed and gestured impatiently at the chair Zahra had vacated. "Sit down. That's his stubborn face, which means you might as well be comfortable."

Her cousin's jaw was tight. "When did this happen, Zahra? When he visited the Temple?"

"Then," she admitted carefully, still standing. "And -- and a long time ago. I've always..." She clenched her hands into fists. "You don't have to be all right with it, *Rais*. I'll stay away from him if it's my King's wish. But I'll be alone."

Rais rose and walked over to stand in front of her. He grasped her upper arms and bent until they were eye to eye. "I didn't say no. I only wanted to make sure this wasn't too fast for you."

It had been so many things, but not fast. "I've loved him for years."

He glanced at his wife, who smiled gently. "If she went to school with him, she's loved him longer than you've known me."

"Indeed, she has." His eyes softened, and he kissed Zahra's cheek. "You have my blessing."

Relief made her weak, and she sank back into the chair after all. "That's all? You don't have questions?"

He laughed a little as he refilled his goblet. "You've never been the type to need to answer to anyone, cousin. I lay my trust in your judgment, as always."

He offered her more wine, and she didn't refuse. Now that her impossible question had been answered, she didn't quite know what to do.

But Avani did. She lifted her glass with a laugh. "You'll forgive me if I wish your intended all the luck in the world. Your family has more in the way of good looks and charm than is entirely fair."

Zahra smiled. "Jarek still has some healing to do. But when he's ready for me..."

She'd be more than ready for him.

* * *

Zahra pulled her rental car to a stop on the gravel drive outside the plain farmhouse, but there was no one in sight. She gathered the tin of cookies from the passenger seat and headed for the front door, but the sharp ring of an axe cleaving through wood stopped her.

She followed the sound behind the house and found Jarek, bared to the waist, chopping wood. His muscles tensed and flexed as he swung, and she had to suck in a sharp breath. Though they'd gone no longer than a few days without a video call over the last few months, she'd still forgotten his sheer magnetism.

She had to shake herself from her reverie as he swung the axe again. "Hello, Jarek."

His back went tense. He lifted the axe and embedded it three inches in the stump in front of him and then turned, his face wary, as if he didn't quite trust his eyesight. For several moments he simply stared at her while the breeze tugged at her hair. His nostrils flared slightly and his gaze dropped to her hands, and a smile curled his lips. "I know I'm capable of hallucinating you, but I doubt I'd conjure up your mother's cookies, as enchanting as they are."

His smile gave her the courage to cross the space between them. "When my mother found out I was coming to see you, she wanted to send her regards. I told her this was the best way."

"I was just..." He gestured to the axe, and to the ramshackle farmhouse. "My brother-in-law took my sister and the kids into town to run errands, so I was trying to pitch in. The barn's high tech, but the house still has fireplaces."

She nodded, her hands trembling. "It's a beautiful place. And it's -- it's good to see you again."

His gaze flicked to the farmhouse again, and something in his eyes tightened. "It's not much. But it was home, I suppose."

It was clear he hadn't wanted her to see where he lived, and a surprising pain splintered through her. "Should I not have come?"

He started and covered the space between them in a heartbeat. Strong arms closed around her, pulling her against a solid, warm chest. "I'm sorry. I'm glad to see you, sweetheart. I am."

Zahra didn't want to let go. She dropped the tin and clung to him, her face buried against his shoulder. "I should have called, but I missed you. I needed to see you."

"My house isn't fit for the King's cousin," he whispered, the words muffled against her hair. "He told me once to stay away from you. That I wasn't good enough."

It sounded like the sort of thing Rais would say -- a casual, offhand comment delivered without a thought to how Jarek might take it. "He must have changed his mind."

Jarek went stiff against her. "He knows?"

He sounded almost scared, and Zahra pulled back to look up at him, her own heart pounding. "Yes, and he's given us his blessing."

Strong fingers fisted in her hair. He groaned and crushed his mouth to hers, kissing her with the heat and need that had kept her awake at night, wanting.

It was the first time since speaking to Rais that she allowed herself to really understand what had happened. "I can have you," she whispered against Jarek's mouth. "You're mine."

"And you're --"

"Jarek?" It was a woman's voice, followed by the sound of a slamming door. "I thought I heard a -- oh." The woman -- his mother, if age and family resemblance were any indication -- stopped at the corner of the house and stared at them with wide, shocked blue eyes.

Jarek kept one arm tight around her body, but he let out a tiny, resigned little sigh and whispered an apology against her hair before lifting his head and smiling. "Zahra, I'd like you to meet my mother, Chandis. Mother, this is --"

"I have eyes." Jarek's mother rushed forward and reached for Zahra's hands. "Oh, it's such an honor to have you here. But Jarek didn't tell me --" A slashing look at Jarek, who sighed again. "-- and nothing's prepared."

Zahra's hands began to tremble again. "I was insufferably rude," she confessed. "I didn't tell Jarek I was coming. I wanted it to be a surprise."

"A wonderful surprise." Chandis squeezed her hands in a hearty grip, and it looked like only sheer force of will kept her from dragging Zahra into a hug. "You just keep her out here for a few minutes, Jarek, so I can tidy up the kitchen and heat up the kettle. And make sure you bring in enough wood to build up a good fire. Can't have the King's cousin catching cold just because your father can't stir himself to pay for modern conveniences."

Jarek's arm tightened around her shoulder. "Yes, Mother."

Zahra kept her nervous smile in place until Chandis disappeared into the house again. Then she reached for her hair, smoothing it anxiously. "I've been traveling for hours. I didn't even think --"

"Shh." He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "You're in for it now."

She hadn't given a thought to meeting Jarek's parents, hadn't even brought a gift. She knelt and retrieved the fallen tin. "I hope they like cookies. And me."

"They'll love you," he assured her quietly before taking the tin from her hands. "But not a one of them has been more than fifty miles from this farm in their lives, and they certainly haven't been meeting members of the royal family. You're not going to get a second's peace as long as you're here."

"I'm used to it." Though, admittedly, she'd never had future members of her family fussing over her.

Jarek's chuckle was low and naughty. "Well, I'm not. I wanted to do a lot more than kiss you."

She blushed, mostly because she'd thought of little else over the last months. "We can't hide in the barn like a couple of teenagers."

"How would you like to go for a run tonight?"

The image rose of them entangled in an embrace, out in a clearing with the moon and stars bathing their skin in silver light. Zahra cleared her throat as her arousal spiked again. "I would like that."

A truck engine rumbled in the distance, and Jarek tilted his head and then groaned. "Rein it in," he muttered, though it sounded as if he was talking to himself. He straightened and turned them both around to face the long road that led to the farm. At the far end, an ancient truck rattled toward them, the kind that was so out of date not even humans bought them anymore, and no one without mechanical expertise could keep them running.

"That," Jarek murmured, "is our inevitable doom. My sister, my brother-in-law, a surly fourteen-year-old nephew who will probably fall in love with you, and twin girls who will be trying to play dress up with you within the hour. Are you sure you wouldn't like to go find a nice, safe orphan to love?"

She could make it through an evening with his family, even if everything he said was true. It would be worth it. "Too late. I already love you."

* * *

In the end it was his brother-in-law who saved them.

After two hours with Jarek's nieces climbing all over her and his mother hovering, Zahra was starting to look a little frayed around the edges. She held her composure with respectable determination, but Jarek had to wonder if she was reconsidering her declaration of love after all.

His sister had taken a strong, steady man as a mate, one who understood the earth and the seasons in a way some of their people had forgotten as they rushed to embrace human technology. When one of the twins suggested Zahra could have a royal slumber party in their room, Rothan gathered up his wife, children and mother-in-law and herded them out the door for a spontaneous visit to a neighboring farm. His parting look said more clearly than words that Jarek had best get them both safely out of sight before the family returned.

Jarek listened to the truck door slam and reached out to smooth a lock of Zahra's hair back into place. "You look a little wide-eyed."

"I'm a little dizzy," she admitted with a laugh. "Your family is very... boisterous."

"A diplomatic word." He rose and held out a hand to her. "Come on. If we don't escape now, we might not get a chance to."

"Yes." She took his hand and came gracefully to her feet, then kept rising on her toes until her mouth touched his. "I had a lovely time. But I need you."

He nipped her lower lip and felt possessive heat rise up inside him. Here on the farm there were no reminders of war, no reminders of *anything*. He'd been half afraid that the feel of her would bring back the terror of his trauma, but there was nothing but warm need and the urge to claim.

So he lifted his hands to her shoulders and turned her to face the door. "There's an open stall in the barn. A place to leave your clothes when we change. And I know the perfect place to run..."

Zahra took off through the back door like a shot. She ran across the back yard, laughing, her legs covering the distance to the barn in long strides. He could have overtaken her, could have caught her and tumbled her to the ground, but his wolf was

already far too interested. Catching her now could mean giving his family an eyeful when they returned.

So he checked his pace and stayed just behind her until they reached the barn. Then he dragged her through it to the very back, into the tiny room stacked with blankets and spare clothing.

She was already unbuttoning her shirt, the dark silk falling away to reveal skimpy lace the same color as her skin. "I agonized over what to wear under my clothes," she whispered as she kicked off her shoes.

"Good choice." His voice sounded low and rough, but he couldn't help it. He dragged his shirt over his head and tried to tear his gaze from the curve of her breasts, barely encased in fabric. "Damn. Really good choice."

Zahra's gaze was soft and hot as she reached for her pants. "That's what I wanted to see. That look."

He couldn't get his fingers to work. "The look that means I'm about to fulfill that fantasy of yours and fuck you against a wall?"

She almost stumbled. "Yes." Her hands flew as she shuddered out of her underwear and reached for him. "Yes."

Jarek caught her hair in his hand, fisted his fingers in the silky, tangled mass and dragged her head back. "We're not in the Temple anymore," he whispered, no longer caring that need made his voice shake. "Did you like the way I took you, or were you just submitting to help me?"

"I loved every second of it." She clutched his shoulders, her nails biting into his skin. "I love you."

The words thrummed inside him. His beast howled. He crowded her back against the wall with two steps and coaxed her arms up until her hands brushed the wooden pegs positioned for hanging blankets. "Hold on."

She wrapped her hands around two of the pegs, and her nipples tightened as she shivered. Jarek chuckled and dragged his fingers back down her arms as slowly as he could manage.

He cupped her breasts first, teased his thumbs over her nipples and watched her rock her head against the wall and arch her back. "This is what I dreamt about," she whispered. "You told me you had dreams too."

The old fantasies were hazy now, replaced with memories of the way she looked, wracked by orgasm. He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers as he pinched her nipples lightly. "You want to hear about my dreams?"

Her sigh feathered over his lips. "Yes. Tell me."

He dropped one hand, let it skim over the swell of her hip before sliding it between her legs. "Open for me, darling."

She bit her lip and obeyed with a low moan. "You don't want to tell me?"

"In good time." She was wet for him, and she arched and shuddered when he slicked his fingers against her. "Though this is a good dream. Getting to watch your face while I touch you."

Zahra began to pant, and her voice was husky when she spoke again. "This isn't a dream."

"I know." He shifted his lips to her ear. "Dreams are never this good."

"No," she whispered. She rolled her hips against his hand and moaned again. "No, they're not."

He found her clit and teased at it, not ready to give her the release she wanted. Not yet. "In my dreams, you beg me to take you."

Her laugh was soft and deep. "I'm always begging you for something."

It was true, so he bit her ear and thrust two fingers into her. "In my dreams I beg you to be mine forever."

Her body went rigid, and her head hit the wall with a thud. "Forever. Yes."

All his thoughts of a slow seduction fled. Forever would give him plenty of time to tease, to taunt and explore and take in all the ways he'd imagined. Now he needed. Her body, her cries, her pleasure.

He jerked his pants open and took a step back. "You sure you want it like this? Hard, fast. Against the damn wall?"

Zahra looked at him, her pale eyes blazing. "Let me have this. Please."

Her legs were smooth under his hands as he hefted her up. "Mine."

"I always have been." She gripped the wooden pegs even tighter, lifting her body against his. "Always yours, Jarek."

The words short-circuited something in his brain. His beast rose up, hungry and intent, and it took all the self-control he possessed to press into her slowly.

Still, she arched off the wall to meet his slow entry, an impatient curse falling from her lips. "Now. Please, now --"

A groan ripped free of him and he buried himself in the hot depths of her body. She cried out and bucked into his movement, grinding closer.

She was too perfect. Too tight, too supple under his hands as he tightened his grip on her thighs. Fucking her hard and dirty was less than she deserved --

But she wanted it. There was no room for doubt, not when she dropped her face to his neck, bit him and whispered, "Harder."

He groaned in protest even as his hips obeyed, slamming into her. "Don't want to hurt you, damn it."

"Not hurting." She gasped and growled, her breath hot on his skin. "You feel good, so good."

It was enough. Enough to let go, and he did with another desperate groan. He slammed his open hand against the wall next to her head and kissed her as he began to move, quick rough thrusts that ground her into the wall.

Zahra's cries came faster, louder. She gripped his shoulders, her nails piercing his skin as she shuddered against him. "Yes, Jarek -- darling --"

The man wanted to slow down. The beast wanted to howl. She felt like a gift from Luna, hot and close against him, around him. There was magic in the royal line, power that he felt inside him, smoothing over the rough, ragged edges pain had left in its wake.

She gave him everything, and in the end he only had one thing to offer in return. The words came out on a rough, panting moan, but they came from his heart. "Love you."

"Love --" The word cut off in a scream as she squeezed around his cock. She threw back her head, eyes clenched shut, and choked off another scream by digging her teeth into her full lower lip.

He wanted to watch her come. Watch her face, listen to her whimpers, know that he'd given her the pleasure that bound her to him. *Mine*.

The thought pushed him past reason. Pleasure tightened like a vise, and he sank into her one final time and came. Zahra pulled him closer, her mouth on his ear, her hands in his hair, as release rode them both.

They hit the floor, his knees slamming into the rough wood and her body still wrapped around his. Jarek clutched her to his chest and panted against her shoulder. "Zahra. Fuck. Are you all right?"

She made a small noise and then another, and it took him a moment to realize she was laughing. "I love you, Jarek. So much."

Relief welled inside him as he kissed the side of her neck. "Me too, sweetheart."

After a moment, she raised her head and looked down at him, happiness shining in her eyes. "Where will we live? Here?"

The fact that she'd offer was too overwhelming to think about. He shook his head. "This isn't --"

The faint roar of an engine cut him off. Jarek groaned and rose, bringing her with him. "I should have known Rothan couldn't keep them away for long. If we don't run now, we'll be trapped until morning."

"Up to you," she whispered. "Stay or go?"

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this much peace. A smile tugged at his lips, and he leaned down to kiss her, brief but hard. "We're running like hell, because the plans I have for you, my beautiful healer, would be severely hampered by the presence of my family."

"Then I hope, my beautiful healer, that you can keep up with me." She shoved at his chest and grinned when he stepped back.

Magic swirled and crashed between them, and it took only moments for her to transform into a sleek white wolf. The same pale green eyes stared up at him, and she lunged playfully and yipped.

It took him longer to change, maybe because he was still a little frightened. The beast inside had taken over to protect his mind, but the lack of control had terrified his rational side. Giving up that control again...

But he didn't have to. The change rose up, uncomfortable as always, but this time wolf and man shared his body. When the magic faded he stood on four paws, whole in a way he hadn't been in months. Maybe even years, because the woman he'd always yearned for was finally his.

Now, she leapt past him and out the door, the way she had earlier in the house. There was a freedom to her movements, a sheer joy that allowed him no doubts. She wanted to be here with him.

He didn't have to know what the future would hold or where he'd go. She'd be with him, and that would be enough, whether he spent his life as one of their people's top healers or a simple farmer. She'd be with him.

Mine, whispered the beast. For the first time, the man agreed.

* * *

The smallest sounds echoed in the quiet hallway, and Zahra tapped her foot as she waited for the door across the hall to open. When it finally did, she jumped to her feet. Her husband walked through it, a little ruffled and nervous but also excited.

She couldn't contain her questions. "How did it go? Do you love it?"

Jarek laughed and dropped an absent kiss on her cheek before taking her hand. "Come on. I've finally gotten my office. They gave me the one Theron had when we were here."

"Jarek." She tried -- and failed -- to give him a stern look. "If you hate it, tell me. We can both arrange sabbaticals. Your mother and sister are dying for us to visit again."

"Mmm." He tugged her toward the end of the hall. "Less scolding, more walking."

She walked faster to keep up with his long strides and stopped in front of the familiar office. A plate bearing Jarek's name had been mounted beside the door, and he pulled her inside.

A solid mahogany desk dominated one side of the room, fully one half of its surface given over to one of the largest built-in computer display screens she'd ever seen. Jarek closed the office door and dragged her against him. "It was terrifying as hell. And wonderful."

It was the one thing that had worried her, that he wouldn't be able to adjust to his new position. Not because she wanted him to teach, but because he'd been at such loose ends, looking for a way to use his training. Now, relief left her weak, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him. "I'm glad, honey."

For a moment he simply stood there, his nose buried in her hair as he held her. The tension in his shoulders slowly relaxed, the tight nervousness fading. "I didn't know if I could do it," he said finally, his voice a whisper. "They're so young. And some of those boys could be on the front lines in a year or two. Was I really that young when I left?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" She found his hand with hers and held it tightly. "They couldn't ask for a better teacher. You're going to help so many students here."

"Ten years. And we're right back where we started."

Not quite. This time, they were instructors instead of students, husband and wife instead of two people whose circumstances of birth meant they could never be together. "I'd wait another ten if it meant being with you."

Jarek lifted their hands and kissed her fingers. "No wonder your cousin rolls his royal eyes at us. As if we have the market cornered on grand, undying romance."

"Rais still hasn't forgiven us for depriving him of the chance to play mother hen and throw us together for our own good."

“He does like to arrange people’s lives, doesn’t he? I suppose kings can’t help themselves.”

Which was Jarek’s way of acknowledging he’d been awarded his position by virtue of being married to the King’s cousin. It may have been partially true, but even Rais’s influence only extended so far. “You’re brilliant, Jarek.” She laid her hand on his cheek. “Come on. We can pick up something special on the way home. Your favorite.”

“Already have that.” His arms tightened around her and her feet left the ground as he spun her, his laughter almost joyous. “I have a beautiful office, access to the finest in werewolf magic and human medicine, unlimited license to study whatever takes my fancy... and the woman of my dreams to go home to every night.”

“Flatterer.” But she knew the words weren’t meant to be pretty or gratifying. She felt the truth of them in his embrace, saw it when he looked at her. He reflected her own happiness, the satisfaction and contentment she’d feared would never be hers.

Except that it was. He was.

Mine.

His cheek was warm under her lips. “Come. Let’s go home.”

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.

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